

Vance Meteor and the “Dangerous” Robot

By Tom Cantrell

Somewhere in deep space.

Narb Nisair was once a thriving planet. Over time, the reliance on technology had led to the decimation of this civilization. Now, centuries after the inhabitants had fled, Captain Vance Meteor, Dieter Quark and Flash Photon stood in the ruins of what was once a flourishing metropolis.

Dieter, of average height, short dark hair, and thin build, furiously pressed the buttons on his wrist computer. “Captain.”

Standing heroically, Vance, pivoted toward his Science Officer, yet kept his feet planted firm on the ground. “Yes?”

Beads of sweat formed on the Science Officer’s forehead. “It would seem that something is approaching from the northwest. Based on best data, it is technology-based. Most likely a robot.”

Navigationally challenged, Vance pivoted facing a direction he hoped was vaguely northwest. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied Dieter gazing to his left, so he continued pivoting until he faced that direction. Doing so hurt his waist but he felt it more important to maintain his image as a heroic space captain, then it was to admit he couldn’t pick “northwest” out of a bag. “Does it appear dangerous?”

“I am unable to ascertain the threat level associated with the technological entity forthcoming at this juncture.”

First Officer Flash Photon muscular of build, thick blond hair and big chin scratched his head and redundantly asked the immortal question “What?”

Standing a good inch or so taller than his crew mates, Vance had a thick head of dark hair and lively eyes. Grunting Vance stopped with all the pivoting. “Dieter doesn’t know.”

“Dieter doesn’t know what?”

“What the robot looks like?”

Eyes-widening, Flash glanced about in a furtive manner. The writer smiled, proud of having used the word furtive. “There’s a robot?”

“Yes.” Dieter indicated his wrist computer. “And it is coming this way.”

“Good golly.”

Unsure of who said, “Good Golly”, the writer left is unattributed because it’s unimportant. Vance surveyed the scene. They were located in the ruins of a grand pavilion in what was once Narb Nisair’s capitol city of Golkel. Broken concrete stretched out around them. Several ruined buildings located nearby could potentially provide cover, but what fun is that? To emphasize the point, the writer moved all the buildings back about 200 yards which is wholly implausible because that would make this pavilion like 400 yards across which is not how things were done on Narb Nisair. This is all based on writer’s prerogative so deal with it. After patiently waiting for all that digression to end, Vance still surveyed the scene. “Men, we are at a strategic disadvantage here.”

Nodding, Flash also looked around. “This is a bad place to stage a fight too.”

Dieter furiously pressed the buttons on his wrist computer and came to the same conclusion. Thankfully for all of us, he kept that information to himself since it had been well-established that they were in a bad spot and that the Flash joke was tropey and dumb. From one of the buildings, to make this more interactive, you pick which one, a robot emerged. As it rolled into view, the mechanical monstrosity cast an ominous shadow in the light of Narb Nisair’s reddish sun. As the robot approached, the trio of UGH explores unleashed a chorus of gasps.

In a single word, the robot appeared: pathetic.

Vance gazed with admonishment at the writer. "Seriously?"

Tarnished and worn, the robot was simply a rectangular boxy thing with eight arms and small rollers for legs. It had a row of sensors across the top and a circular speaker box for communication. The arms were ~~spindly~~ flexible and waved about like ~~wet spaghetti~~ deadly dancing cobras with clutching pincers on each end snapping open and closed like the mouth of a ~~hungry baby bird~~ deadly venomous cobra.

With a sigh, Vance took up a defensive position. The robot moved forward as Vance checked his chronometer because that sounds more sci-fi than a watch or timepiece. Thirty minutes later, when the robot had completed its 200 or so yard trek to where the trio stood, Vance shook his head. "Listen, robot. There is little chance for you to succeed. I am the protagonist; you are the antagonist and a minor one at best. You might as well lay down right now."

Computing the validity of Vance's statement, the robot let out a plaintive little beep. Its eight arms drooped down at its side. Turning away, it shut itself down. With a noticeable shudder, it collapsed into a pile of scrap.

Stepping by Vance, Dieter leaned over to admire the newly created collection of spare parts. "Superior reasoning, captain." Vance smiled but Dieter wasn't done. "However, I am sure the reader would have enjoyed watching you engage the robot in ferocious combat." Vance's smile faded.

"Firgap." Vance swore. (Firgap is a swear word in this universe. Sorry for those that hate the damn swear words). The space captain's shoulder's slumped. "The reader. It's always about the reader." He rubbed his chin. "Of course, you're right. Bring him back."

The robot reassembled and sprang back into action. Its eight arms swinging wildly in Vance's direction. In a squawky static burst, the robot's speaker blared a warning siren. "Invader. You have invaded. You will be destroyed."

"Unlikely." Diving forward, Vance rolled into a summersault, leapt to his feet, and kicked the robot. Upon impact, the mechanism keeled over and crashed to the ground. With a slight popping sound, the robot shut down and fulfilled its destiny of becoming, once again, a pile of scrap. Vance stood up and dusted off his hands. He began walking across the pavilion. "Let's go."

After a few steps, he turned around. Flash, no longer needed in this scene, was inexplicably gone. Dieter, who remains necessary, stood with his arms folded across his chest which is redundant because there is really no other good way to fold your arms. So really, he just stood there with his arms folded. Vance rubbed his chin again because that's what he does. "What?"

Dieter scoffed. Don't exactly know what that sounds like, but either way. "Gee, that sure raised the hairs on the back of my neck."

Perplexed, Vance turned to face his science officer. "What do you mean by that?"

"That was nothing. There was no fight. You took him out in like a paragraph."

Vance rolled his eyes. "And that wasn't enough? Look at him. It's not my fault he's so pitiful."

"Excuses, excuses."

With a sideways glance, Vance threw shade at the writer. Not shades. The writer doesn't wear sunglasses.

Gesturing at the pile of scrap, Dieter gave Vance a puppy dog look. "Please. For the readers. At least give him a chance."

Pondering, Vance pondered. "Alright. After all, it is for the reader." The two of them reassembled the robot, even fixing the one previously unmentioned broken arm. Dieter dusted it off, giving it a nice shine, while Vance opened the back panel and reconnected a few loose wires. When finished, he snapped the panel shut. A small reverberating hum let them know the robot was warming up. Dieter moved over to the side and Vance took up a half-hearted defensive posture. Once the robot has properly rebooted, it wheeled around to face the space captain.

Trying his best to appear grim, Vance forgoed his laser and balled up his fists. “C’mon robot. I’m ready for you.”

Off to the side, Dieter glanced up from his wrist computer. “I am sorry, Captain. But that is not a word.”

Vance turned toward his science officer. “What isn’t a word.”

“Forgoed.”

“Then how the firlgap do you say forgo past tense?”

“Apparently you are supposed to say, ‘forewent.’”

“Forewent? I’m not saying that. That sounds ridiculous. Are you serious?”

Double-checking his wrist computer, Dieter nodded. “Think about it, captain. One would not say I goed to the store now, would they?”

Vance had to concede on that one. “I’m still not saying forewent.”

Dieter’s face brightened. “Perhaps the writer could start the sentence with “forgoing” to allow for subject/verb variation and thus bypassing the issue.”

Vance nodded. “Let’s try this again.”

Forgoing his laser gun, Vance tried to appear grim as he balled up his fists.

Perhaps awkwardly phrased, but still usable.

In response, the robot rolled forward. Vance moved to defend himself. Reaching out, the robot pinched Vance on the arm. Mildly perturbed, Vance prepared to unleash one of his famed Astro-kicks.

“Now Captain...” With admonishment, Dieter gestured again at the robot and then the reader. Vance halted in mid-kick and stared at his first officer. Slowly he lowered his leg.

“Oh, right, the reader.” Vance clutched his arm. “Um, ow?”

The robot reached out and pinched him on the thigh.

“Ooh.” Feigning a wince, Vance grabbed his thigh. The robot slapped him across the face. The space captain didn’t even flinch noting with internal dialog that it felt like getting hit with wet spaghetti. One of the pincers shakily latched on to Vance’s mustache and yanked on it— hard.

“Ow!” Vance’s hand flew to his mouth. “Now *that* smarts.” He wrenched the clutching claw away from his face and glared at Dieter. “Now that hurt.” Holding the robot back with his foot, he pointed at his upper lip. “And where did this mustache come from?”

Shrugging, Dieter checked his wrist computer. Vance grimaced. “Can I take it out now.”

Dieter’s expression preached patience. “Just give it a few more sentences. Make it exciting.”

As Vance rubbed his face, a tentacle arm reached out and wrapped itself around his leg and tried to pull him over. The robot yanked and jerked before Vance even noticed. “Uh, oh.” It managed to budge him a few centimeters when, stretched to the max, the arm popped out of the robot’s body and flopped to the ground like a dirty sock. Unsure that analogy worked, Vance picked up the disconnected arm and bent over to screw it back into the robot’s body. As he leaned in, the robot wrapped all seven of its remaining tentacle-like arms around the space captain and awkwardly hoisted him into the air.

Astonished, Vance cried out what one cries out in times like these. “Hey!”

The arms quivered under Vance’s weight. The space captain flailed his arms as the robot tried to turn. Swinging wildly to his left, Vance steadied himself with a hand against the robot’s head. Then, he almost lost his lunch, which was a nice egg salad sandwich, when he swayed in a great swooping motion to his left. Finally, buckling under its load, the robot’s arms popped out one by one and Vance fell down on top of the might-less machine. Again, the robot fell over, landing in a heap on the ground. A soft crackle emitted from the machine and it deactivated. Then, with a tremendous shake and a puff of smoke, it fell apart.

From his position on the ground, Vance looked at Dieter. “It was the best I could do. I think I gave it a lot of opportunity.”

Nodding, Dieter helped the space captain to his feet. “I suppose that will have to do.” They took the pieces of the robot and made a neat pile out of them. “Maybe later we can rebuild it and make it a more credible threat.”

“Sure, that might be fun.” Although the tone isn’t implicit in the writing, Vance said this in such a way to convey that he had no intention of ever going back and rebuilding the robot. With a grunt, Vance gave up trying to stack up the spaghetti cobra-like arms and pushed them together in a pile. “That’s that. Now let’s get moving.”

Dieter checked his wrist computer. “Where are we going?”

Vance gestured at the now-absent Flash.

“To find Flash.”

Frowning, Dieter furiously pushed the buttons on his wrist computer. “He is indeed missing.”

The two ran off the page to the next scene.