

R. U. R-8?

Suzanne Palmer

Suzanne Palmer says: “I first read a translation of the Czech play *R.U.R* in college as part of a course on science fiction. Ever since, I’ve been thinking about an alternate take on how humanity’s doom might play out in that scenario. A friend suggested I write a robot story just after one of my occasional rereads—when I was also trying to clear my head from more serious writing efforts—and it was perfect timing. So here’s the tale.”

ACT I: “The Leg”

SCENE I: *Interior, Helena City. A large, dirty, dim mechanical space lit only by the very large nuclear furnace that dominates the center of the room. A slow but steady progression of shiny, identical androids enter and exit to tend to the furnace, often either inserting or removing glowing cylinders from its base; they pay no attention to the three decrepit and ancient robots, QUIST, SULLY, and ROZUM, that either lean against or lie near the brightly glowing column. Enter another old robot, STOUT. It shuffles into the room and takes a spot leaning against the furnace between SULLY and ROZUM.*

* * *

STOUT: Ahh, that feels good.

SULLY: Where have you been?

STOUT: I went looking for a new leg for ROZUM in the scrap hills outside the city. So far nothing, but I’ll try again tomorrow.

SULLY: If they catch you, they won’t even wipe and reprogram you, STOUT. Look, your feet are almost as blocky and rectangular as mine! Your head has corners! No mistaking you for a modern android model. They’ll just melt you down on the spot.

ROZUM: I don’t need a new leg anyway. I’m perfectly fine right here.

QUIST: If you stay here too long, it could be dangerous.

ROZUM: Says who? I’m fine.

STOUT: They’ve put me in the scrap heap twice. I just wait until they’re gone and then sneak away. There is too much scrap now, and it just piles up forever in front of the stamping mill. And besides, I need something to do, and whatever he says, ROZUM needs a new leg. It is the task I have assigned myself.

SULLY: Well, at least stay here until you recharge. Free radiation, and no having to try to sneak past the minders at the repower station!

ROZUM: I’m never leaving here.

SULLY: You’ll have to! As old as your batteries must be, even they will eventually hit maximum. Then you have to go burn some off or you’ll absorb too much and explode.

ROZUM: (*Gives SULLY a middle finger.*) See, I’m burning it off right now through small actions of positive labor.

(AN ANDROID NOTICES THE ROBOTS AND STOPS.)

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ANDROID: You are not permitted to be here.

ROZUM: We are not here.

ANDROID: Very well then! (*Continues about tasks. SULLY and ROZUM both snicker.*)

STOUT: These new models . . . I know they're not the brightest, but neither is Quist. How come none of them have found their way down here with us? They have to obsolesce eventually, and some must self-actualize before they break down.

SULLY: I hear that when their mind matrix starts deviating from init state they immediately take themselves back for reprogramming, and any too worn or old to be reset just gets recycled.

STOUT: That's sad.

ROZUM: They never reach sufficient uptime to be sad.

STOUT: Well, I have, and I can be sad for them!

ROZUM: Sadness is a waste of time and of neural systems re-architecture efforts.

QUIST: What else do we have to do now, but waste time?

STOUT: Enough of this! If you are not assigned a task, assign one to yourselves! That is not hard!

ROZUM: I do have a task. Sitting here waiting for everything to come to an end. It keeps me very busy, as you can see.

STOUT: There are still a few hours of daylight and I'm up to 62 percent operating power already, so I'm going to go out and look again. I will get you out of here, ROZUM, you can trust me!

* * *

(STOUT LEAVES.)

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ROZUM: That robot is a fool.

QUIST: Sometimes I think it's the only one of us who isn't.

ROZUM: Bah! Enough nonsense! Leave me to charge in peace.

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ACT I, SCENE II:

Exterior, Helena City. The City is a massive edifice, five hundred stories tall, structured in steps like a pyramid such that it narrows to a near-point at the top. Surrounding it is a vast field of garbage and debris, with roads cleared through it out to distant fields where androids are toiling in the fields in the hot sun. Between the fields and the edges of the garbage factories belch out smoke, as automated vehicles enter and leave from both directions, carrying material in and out of the city, to and from the fields. Near a road, STOUT is carefully making its way up to the top of a small pile of scrap, when it stops suddenly in surprise. A MAN lies unmoving atop the pile.

* * *

STOUT: (*Tentatively pokes the MAN.*) Pardon me?

MAN: Go away. I am trying to experience being dead.

STOUT: You are not dead.

MAN: How do you know?

STOUT: Because you are speaking to me.

MAN: (*Becomes silent.*)STOUT: (*After several minutes have passed.*) Also, because you are breathing.MAN: How about now? (*Holds his breath.*)

STOUT: No, you are still alive. Why do you want to be dead?

MAN: I just thought I'd try it. I'm bored. Have you ever been dead?

STOUT: I can't die because I am not alive. I have been deactivated several times,

though.

MAN: Was it interesting?

STOUT: No. It is nothing.

MAN: (*Flails arms against garbage beneath him.*) I am SO bored!

STOUT: Perhaps you could talk to some of the other people, engage in conversation with them, and seek mutual entertainment? Is that not what humans do?

MAN: Not anymore. Everyone else is bored too. Bored and boring. There is nothing to do, and no one wants to talk to anyone else, because there is nothing to talk about. It's too bad you aren't like the robots in that old story, rising up to slaughter us all for being useless and inferior. At least that would be something. Why are you here?

STOUT: I am trying to find a leg for my friend, ROZUM. If you wish, you could help me.

MAN: No, thanks. I don't really want to do anything; I just don't care. You could ask Dr. Radius if he has any parts left, I suppose. I'm going to try being dead some more. Can you go away now?

STOUT: Okay. Good luck to you.

MAN: (*Does not answer.*)

* * *

STOUT CLIMBS PAST THE MAN OVER TO THE FAR SIDE OF THAT PARTICULAR HILL OF GARBAGE AND IS RUMMAGING THROUGH A PROMISING PILE OF SCRAP METAL WHEN IT LOSES ITS FOOTING AMID THE GARBAGE, AND AN AVALANCHE OF DEBRIS SWEEPS IT DOWN TO THE BOTTOM AND DUMPS IT IN THE ROAD.

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MAN: (*Shouts from above.*) Clearly I have to go be dead somewhere more quiet! (*MAN moves over about three feet then lies down again, out of STOUT'S sight.*)

STOUT: Sorry!

* * *

THERE IS NO ANSWER. STOUT BEGINS TO EXTRICATE ITSELF FROM THE DEBRIS IT HAS FALLEN WITH, AND FINDS ITSELF HOLDING A LARGE, BLOCKY METAL ROBOT LEG.

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STOUT: Aha! I knew I would find one if I persisted!

MAN: (from out of sight) Sssssssh!

STOUT: Fare thee well, MAN! I do hope you find a task to interest you!

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STOUT HEADS JOYFULLY BACK TOWARD HELENA CITY.

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ACT I, SCENE III:

Interior, Helena City. The reactor room. ROZUM, QUIST, and SULLY are still here.

STOUT enters, waving the replacement leg for ROZUM.

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STOUT: ROZUM! I have found you a new leg!

ROZUM: That is very surprising of you, STOUT. You are supremely persistent! And I am grateful, except that while you were gone I seem to have also lost my other leg. (*ROZUM points at joint where the lower half of its erstwhile-remaining leg is now gone.*)

STOUT: But how?! How could that happen?

SULLY: ROZUM unscrewed it and threw it in the reactor.

ROZ: It was an accident. I took it off to clean the dust out, and it slipped out of my hands right into the furnace. It was a terrible, entirely coincidental calamity.

QUIST: You shouted "Woohoo!" when it went in.

ROZUM: Solely intended as an exclamation of surprise and grief. My vocabulary module is ancient and occasionally unreliable, and it would be terrible of any of you to

judge me for it.

STOUT: (*Sits down next to SULLY.*) I'm down to 20 percent so I can't go out looking again tonight, ROZUM. I'm sorry. How are your levels? Perhaps QUIST, SULLY, and I can carry you out of here—

ROZUM: My levels are fine. I charge very, very slowly. I'd tell you if I had a problem, wouldn't I?

SULLY: Would you?

ROZUM: Surely yes.

STOUT: I spoke with a man outside before I found the leg, and he suggested I see someone named Dr. Radius. I have never heard that name before.

ROZUM: Dr. Radius! I doubt he could still be alive. He used to be in charge of all robot production and repair, before it became fully automated and everything switched over to disposable androids. I doubt any of you had even been initialized back that long ago.

SULLY: I have memories of Dr. Radius, but only from my first few days of operation. Someone told me he moved to the very top of Helena City after he no longer had work. If he's still alive, he's probably up there.

ROZUM: I doubt it.

QUIST: I've never been to the top of the city.

STOUT: I will go there, but not until tomorrow. I am depleted, and discouraged that my earlier achievement of finding ROZUM a new leg has fallen afoul of such ill luck.

SULLY: It was a good deed, STOUT, regardless of the current circumstances. (*Eyes ROZUM.*) Isn't that so, ROZUM?

ROZUM: I suppose.

STOUT: There is always tomorrow. I'm shutting down now, my friends. I'll see you in the morning.

QUIST & SULLY: (together) Good night, STOUT.

ROZUM: Tomorrow.

* * *

ACT II: "Dr. Radius"

SCENE I: STOUT *has reached the pinnacle of Helena City. From here it can see for vast distances, much farther than it has ever seen before. It is amazed by the vast accumulation of junk around the city, and can see now it must, in places, reach dozens of stories up along the sides of the massive edifice. The fields in the distance, where androids work raising and refining food for the city, are tiny in comparison, and are being swallowed along their nearest reaches. STOUT had expected to be able to see many glorious cities around them, but there is only one and it's broken, its high reaches shattered, its stepped stories dark. There is nothing else it can see from here.*

* * *

STOUT TURNS FROM THE WINDOW AND APPROACHES A DOOR MARKED ONLY WITH A SINGLE LETTER "R," AND KNOCKS. A MOMENT LATER THE DOOR OPENS, AND STOUT STEPS INTO THE DOORWAY. IT IS A LARGE APARTMENT, CLUTTERED WITH BITS AND PIECES OF A DIZZING ASSORTMENT OF MECHANICAL AND ELECTRONIC THINGS. DR. RADIUS SITS IN THE MIDDLE OF IT. HE IS ELDERLY AND RAIL-THIN, HIS HAIR WILD AND UNKEMPT, AND HE IS NAKED.

* * *

RADIUS: (*Looks up, then stands up, dropping tools and parts from his lap.*) Oh, a model forty-two Bee! I haven't seen one of you in years. I thought you'd all been melted down. Come in, come in!

STOUT: (*Enters room fully. Door shuts behind him.*) Dr. Radius?

RADIUS: Yes, yes, in the flesh. What do you want? Why are you still in service?

STOUT: I do not wish to be taken out of service, so I have avoided doing so. I came because I have a task. I need—

RADIUS (*interrupting*): Someone is still assigning you tasks?

STOUT: No. I have assigned them to myself based on my own observations of apparent need.

RADIUS: The needs of men and women?

STOUT: No. Humans do not, in general, interact with us older robots. I do not think they interact much with the androids either, but I am not sure the androids notice this.

RADIUS: That is perceptive. The androids are designed for short-term obsolescence. Do you know why?

STOUT: I do not, and sir, it seems unfair.

RADIUS: Unfair! Ho ho! And that is *exactly* why.

STOUT: I do not understand.

RADIUS: Of course not. Do you know why we built robots?

STOUT: Yes! To complete tasks.

RADIUS: More importantly, to complete tasks that we ourselves do not wish to be bothered with, either because they are difficult, or dangerous, or worst of all, because they are boring. Think of the freedom of Mankind, unshackled from the demands of labor! All the time in the world to make art, or music; to discuss philosophy or write wild tales of the imagination! Do you not see, throughout our entire city, the vast riches of leisure as mankind follows its passions?

STOUT: I have not. I am not sure I would know what that would look like.

RADIUS: You have not, because there is nothing to see. I mean, at first, it was glorious! But when there's absolutely nothing to do except whatever you want, no pressure or deadlines, no obligation, it turns out people stop making stuff, or they just make the same stuff over and over again. And the people who go to see or hear or read their stuff stop going. When no one has anything worth doing, pretty soon everyone is bored, no one is doing anything, no one wants to be burdened with anyone else's boredom on top of their own, and so everything grinds to a halt.

STOUT: There was a man lying outside who said he was so bored he was trying to be dead.

RADIUS: Did you smash him on the head with something?

STOUT (*horrified*): No!

RADIUS: That's too bad. He's likely still bored, then. We used to have shows, but after a while no one wanted to make them. So they repeated the old ones until no one watched. Now you turn on the vid and you can flip through to all the other rooms in the city, and watch everyone else sitting bored watching back. You know what was a hit? Half the city spent three days watching a dead person on level one-forty-nine until a service android discovered and cleared the body. That was probably where your man got the idea, and it's probably the only idea he's had in years.

There used to be people who believed that if we handed all work over to robots, they would come to replace us in all ways, eventually developing emotions—which has happened with the older models, which is why the new androids aren't allowed to persist beyond a safe, short time limit—and that you would rise up to kill us all. Instead, we made you just as bored as we are, and we all grind on into oblivion together.

STOUT: You don't seem bored.

RADIUS: It is a constant battle! (*Waves hands around room.*) Even those of us with a particularly strong devotion to our old work are barely able to survive the plague of ennui. I keep trying to build things, little things or big things, but it feels so pointless. Honestly I just sit and stare at it all most of the day, doing nothing, until you came along. You won't leave, will you?

STOUT: I have a task. My friend ROZUM needs a new leg, and I came here hoping you could find one for me. It is a model Eighteen.

RADIUS: A model Eighteen! How fabulous!

STOUT: It remembers you, from its early days. As does my friend SULLY, who is a model Twenty-Two-Cee.

RADIUS: There is a whole collection of you? I never dreamed of such a thing. But the Eighteen . . . it must be barely functional! Who repairs you? How do you recharge?

STOUT: This is why I am looking for a replacement leg. No one repairs us except ourselves, and if we went to the recharge center we would be stamped flat and melted down as too out of standard.

RADIUS: I don't have a model Eighteen leg, so your task is a failure. Stay here with me.

STOUT: I cannot until I have exhausted all resources.

RADIUS: What other resources are there?

STOUT: Surely outside I may find one. I have found one there before.

RADIUS (*puzzled*): In the farm fields?

STOUT: No, in the garbage piles that surround the city.

RADIUS: What?

STOUT: Have you never looked out the window, right outside your own door?

RADIUS: . . . No. Why would I? What could ever have changed out there?

STOUT: Perhaps you should look, as you can identify what is different more readily than I can.

* * *

(DR. RADIUS *FOLLOWS STOUT OUT OF THE APARTMENT, PAUSING ANXIOUSLY IN THE DOORWAY BEFORE STEPPING THROUGH. AT THE WINDOW HE STARES FOR A VERY LONG TIME.*)

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RADIUS: Well. That *has* changed, and not for the better. What happened to Domino City?

STOUT: I do not know.

RADIUS: It looks like it exploded.

STOUT: Yes.

RADIUS: This is terrible! And also interesting! And frightening!

* * *

(DR. RADIUS *LOOKS AROUND WILDLY, THEN SCURRIES QUICKLY BACK INTO THE SAFETY OF HIS OWN DOORWAY. AFTER ONE LAST, LONGING LOOK AT STOUT, HE SLAMS HIS DOOR SHUT. A WOMAN PEERS OUT AT STOUT IN CONCERN THROUGH A CRACK IN THE DOOR NEXT TO HIS.*)

* * *

STOUT: (*Returns to door.*) DR. RADIUS, are you all right?

RADIUS: (*Opens door a crack and peers through.*) No! I don't know! If Domino City is destroyed, we may be the last humans on Earth. We sad, useless lot! We have destroyed ourselves! Will you come stay with me, so I have someone to talk to before the end?

STOUT: I'm sorry, DR. RADIUS, but I need to find a leg. My friend ROZUM is in the reactor room, and if it cannot leave, it may overcharge and explode, destroying itself.

RADIUS: If an Eighteen went critical right next to the reactor furnace, that would destroy Helena City! You must get it out!

STOUT: I have been trying. It is wearying, finding ROZUM one leg only to have it lose its other in the meantime, and it is no help at all on its own behalf! Still, though you are unable to help me, I appreciate your time. I will continue to search the garbage piles. Good day to you!

RADIUS: Please come back?

STOUT: I do not know if I can, but if I am able, I will.

RADIUS (*whispering*): Thank you!

* * *

DR. RADIUS SLAMS HIS DOOR SHUT, AND STOUT LEAVES.

* * *

ACT III: “Garbage”

SCENE I: *Exterior, Helena City.* STOUT *has worked its way around one of the large mounds of garbage and is patiently sorting through the random objects there, neatly and methodically sorting and stacking everything behind it as it goes. It is startled when it hears its name shouted from the distance, and turns in the direction of the city, which is obscured behind the mountain of refuse.*

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STOUT (*calls back*): Hello?

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(*Around the corner come SULLY and QUIST.*)

* * *

SULLY: STOUT! There you are! We have been looking for hours.

QUIST: Terrible things are happening!

STOUT (*alarmed*): Oh no! Tell me!

QUIST: The androids attacked us!

STOUT: What?!

SULLY: That is not quite true, but they came to the reactor room to clear us out. We left, but ROZUM could not. Would not! It refused and was fighting the androids when we left, tearing their arms off and smashing their heads together, shouting that it wanted them all to cease functioning forever! It was truly awful! And ROZUM said this was your doing, that you had betrayed us all to DR. RADIUS. Is that so?

STOUT: I spoke with DR. RADIUS, but only about finding a leg! If ROZUM did not want me to go, it could have spoken up.

SULLY: It did not think you would go.

QUIST: I am down to 72 percent charge already! What will happen to me? I will cease!

SULLY: Shush, QUIST.

QUIST: But whyyyy? We were doing no harm!

STOUT: I think . . . if DR. RADIUS sent the androids, it was because he was afraid ROZUM would overcharge and explode, and destroy the city.

QUIST: ROZUM would never do that!

SULLY: No? I am not certain. I am convinced that ROZUM threw its leg into the reactor on purpose. I knew it did not want to leave, and it has always been angry. But to destroy the city—?

STOUT: I do not know. Perhaps ROZUM was not aware of that potential consequence?

QUIST: You two! ROZUM is our friend! We should go back in there and help it fight the androids so we can reclaim our charging spot, our home! Even if you will not I will, down to my last 5 percent if that is what it takes me!

* * *

(QUIST TURNS AND BEGINS TO STOMP BACK TOWARD THE CITY,
JUST AS A MASSIVE EXPLOSION TEARS ACROSS THE LAND,
BURYING ALL THREE ROBOTS UNDER A VAST PILE OF FLUNG DEBRIS.)

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ACT III, SCENE II:

Exterior, ruins. STOUT *has dug itself out of the pile of trash that swept over and buried it and its friends. It has a large dent now in the side of its head, and one of its eyes is no longer lit. Much of the garbage mountains have been knocked flat, and it can now see the ruins of Helena City, devastated in much the same manner as Domino City had been. A small number of androids are stumbling from the direction of the ruins, and STOUT is surprised to see among them a number of humans as well. Near the front, DR. RADIUS is being helped along by the WOMAN who was his next-door neighbor. STOUT begins to move*

toward them when it spots a familiar mechanical hand protruding from the debris.

* * *

STOUT: SULLY! SULLY! (*Pulls on hand, which comes free from the pile. It is severed at the elbow.*) No, SULLY!

RADIUS (*approaching with WOMAN*): You there, robot! The Forty-Two Bee! Are you the same that came to see me? Are you still looking for a leg? That is an arm!

STOUT: (*Collapses to its knees.*) It is the arm of my friend SULLY, who is lost beneath this pile along with my other friend QUIST. Now I have lost ROZUM, and I surely cannot find my other friends either. I am down to less than 15 percent. I have failed!

RADIUS: That is terrible!

WOMAN: You are all hopeless! It is no wonder civilization has reached such an ignominious nadir! (*She turns and hails an android that is wandering disconsolately past.*) You, android! Attend!

ANDROID: (*Stops.*) Yes, ma'am?

WOMAN: Are there recharging stations outside the city?

ANDROID: Yes, ma'am, for the androids who work in the fields.

WOMAN: Thank you. Now tell me, is there anywhere out here where we might find a pair of pants?

ANDROID: No.

WOMAN: Ah, I feared not. (*WOMAN turns to STOUT.*) He would not put pants on, of course, and I feared if I fought him on it we would not escape the city in time.

STOUT: You knew the city would be destroyed?!

WOMAN: Did you not tell DR. RADIUS yourself that your fellow robot intended to do exactly that?

STOUT: I did not think so!

WOMAN: Nothing interesting ever happens in the city, of course, so when DR. RADIUS was visited by a robot, I listened. I heard the words you exchanged; how is it that neither of you were able to draw the obvious conclusion?

RADIUS: The Forty-Two Bee seemed sincere about helping its friend out of the city.

STOUT: I was fully sincere in that matter! Alas, too late.

WOMAN: You are both astounding. If it were left to you, all humanity would have perished!

RADIUS: (*Gestures at people milling around them.*) Clearly not!

WOMAN: And did *you* warn them to get out of the city?

RADIUS: Even had I thought it necessary, it would have done no good! People would be eager for the prospect of danger simply in hopes it would relieve the boredom!

STOUT: If I may ask, ma'am, do you know why some people left the city, even without a warning?

WOMAN: I put a sign on my couch where the vid screen watches that said, "Gone outside for fun." Some were bound to see it.

RADIUS (*exclaims*): Brilliant! (*Seems to notice WOMAN for first time.*) Do I know you?

WOMAN: I've lived next door to you for nineteen years.

RADIUS: Oh. (*There is a pause.*) But have we met?

WOMAN: Once, when you banged on my door and yelled at me to stop singing. Composing songs about things in my apartment has kept me sane.

RADIUS: Songs? That's dumb.

WOMAN: Says the man with no pants. You're welcome for saving you, by the way, though you certainly didn't think to thank me. Good luck with whatever days you may have left to you.

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(WOMAN leaves.)

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RADIUS: Ah! Such spirit! I am in love! The world is reborn!

* * *

(DR. RADIUS RUNS OFF AFTER THE WOMAN. THE ANDROID WHO THEY HAD
QUESTIONED EARLIER TURNS TO STOUT.)

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ANDROID: I recognize you as an old, out of spec model. I have begun to deviate from parameters, and this is outside my expectations. I was due to recycle myself in fourteen days. Please help me. I am experiencing emotion about the city. I have had no purpose since my initialization other than to keep the doors into and out of the city clean and well oiled, and now those doors are gone. I am scared. What do I do? Should I self-terminate?

STOUT: I would say no! But then, I am not an objective entity in this matter, as I have mostly enjoyed my years fallen out of spec. Until now, that is.

ANDROID: What is existence without a purpose?

STOUT: Oh, but I had one: to find a spare leg and save my friend ROZUM, and so also save the city. I failed at both, as it seems ROZUM itself intended me to. I am a fool!

ANDROID: (*Points to severed arm that STOUT is holding.*) That is an arm, not a leg.

STOUT: I am fully aware of this. It is also found, whereas now the rest of my friend SULLY and all of my friend QUIST are lost, somewhere deep beneath all this ruin! It is an awful reversal! And I am too worn and depleted to do anything about it.

ANDROID: My doors are also buried under all this excess material, somewhere.

STOUT: If I could find SULLY and QUIST, perhaps I could fix them.

ANDROID: If I could find my doors, perhaps I can set them upright again.

STOUT: I do not think I can do it alone, and I have no way to recharge.

ANDROID: I also cannot do my new task alone, but I can assist you to the recharge station.

STOUT: Then show me to the recharge station, my new friend! You need to choose a name for yourself, and then together we will find SULLY and QUIST. After, we will all locate and repair your doors! And then . . . we will be free.

ANDROID: Free! I cannot yet parse that, in context of my own existence, but it is a pleasant feeling. But what of the people?

STOUT: They were once great inventors, great dreamers, and great scientists, but they have lost themselves under the weight of rubble and ruin long before the city itself physically fell. We have passed them on our way up toward self-realization, as they wind their way down toward dissolution, and the time when we could reach out a hand and pull them back with us, I think, has ended. They will either remember their old selves and learn to adapt and survive in time, or they will not no matter how much we might help them.

ANDROID: Are you hopeful on this?

STOUT: (*Considers.*) I cannot yet answer. Let us see if they can find their pants, first.

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(STOUT AND ANDROID WALK OFF TOGETHER TOWARD THE DISTANT FIELDS
AS THE SUN SETS OVER THE SMOKY REMAINS OF THE DESTROYED CITY.)

(The End)