

Burial Detail

by

Karl Dandenell

(Heard on The Word Count Podcast)

Lucien struggled to disentangle a corpse from the icy pile as GOFR watched.

“I could help,” said the bot to the old general.

“Have you finished their coffins, GOFR?” Lucien said.

“Task completed.” The General Operations Flexible Robot extended a multi-tool limb toward a neat stack of boxes. The rough planks of native wood were brown and shiny with sap. “Are they satisfactory?”

“Affirmative,” said Lucien. He took off his wool cap and wiped sweat from his forehead.

GOFR wasn’t qualified as a med tech, though it had downloaded the colony’s medical database to assist Lucien in identifying the dead. With this new data, GOFR could now differentiate between functional and non-functional humans.

Lucien was functional, somewhat.

As a general-purpose bot, GOFR possessed more extensive learning protocols than the colony’s dedicated function bots. When Lucien took GOFR on a month-long camping trip,

GOFR had learned to ice fish, to sing dirty limericks, and to apply *The Art of War* in modern combat theatres. Lucien was a retired academy instructor who liked to talk, and GOFR was an excellent listener.

Lucien wheezed as he worked. GOFR observed that his body temperature was four degrees too high, and his skin was flushed. Even the modest effort of shuffling over to his water bottle tired him. GOFR deduced that Lucien had an infection and told him so.

“Yeah, I figured,” he replied, and coughed wetly. “Whatever pathogen the Bloody Brigade used ripped through my immune boosters. These poor civilians didn’t know what hit them.”

“You should rest,” observed GOFR.

“Soon enough,” wheezed Lucien and pulled harder. A smaller body separated from the others. “Ah, there we go.”

They had found the dead family huddled together in a housing module: A botanist, a systems analyst, and their children. All Christian, according to their ID tags.

Lucien wrapped the corpses in shrouds GOFR had fashioned from bed sheets. Then he placed the remains in separate coffins and read from Corinthians:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

Following his reading, Lucien sealed the coffins, and GOFR carried them to their respective graves, covering them with gravel and rocks. Lucien hammered four small crosses into the icy ground.

That night, while Lucien slept fitfully, GOFR took inventory. There were insufficient trees to make coffins for the entire colony. At dawn, it told Lucien this as it heated coffee.

“That’s okay,” Lucien said, blowing on his cup. “We’ve got a fair number of Hindus and atheists. We’ll cremate them all and scatter their ashes on the river. It’s not the Ganges, but I think it will do.”

So GOFR separated those bodies onto a platform of heat shield tiles ripped from the shuttle, then cremated them with emergency generator fuel and a welding torch. Lucien tried to help but the smoke sent him into a coughing fit. Finally, he retreated to his module to rest.

Later, GOFR tipped the ashes into the nearby river. Lucien read from the *Bhagavad-gita*:

As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.

He stood for several minutes, watching the ashes swirl away, until GOFR eased next to him. "Task completed."

Lucien turned. "I'm tired, GOFR."

"You need rest."

"I know. But we have to finish before the Brigade comes back."

"When is that?"

"Soon." said Lucien. "When they invaded Mars, they seeded viruses in the air systems. A week later, they sent in troops to mop up." He shook his head. "We barely held them." He spit bloody phlegm. "Based on decomposition, I'd say we have two days at most."

"You need rest," GOFR said, more emphatically. "At least sit down for a few minutes."

"All right." He eased himself to the ground. "You know, when I was a ground pounder, I always volunteered for burial detail. My father taught me that it's a sacred duty to care for the dead. Whatever your relationship with the universe, it's our duty to respect it.

"Even the enemy deserves to have a proper sendoff."

GOFR observed the human. He would not function much longer. "You are not strong enough to bury all these corpses," it said. "However, I could do it. The workflow is straightforward. Would you like me to finish?"

Lucien nodded. "Help me inside, GOFR. I'll get some shuteye. And maybe some soup."

Once the human was propped up in bed with reconstituted chicken soup, GOFR returned to work. It quickly measured out a grid, then set two mining bots to excavate the remaining graves.

Three construction bots sawed and planed planks, while a fourth assembled them into coffins. GOFR collected more bed linens and set up an assembly line to wrap and stow the corpses.

When it passed near Lucien's module, it heard weeping.

Three hours later, GOFR spoke the appropriate words over each grave while a pair of farming bots trailed it, planting crosses like seedlings. Then it reported back. "Task completed."

The human was breathing shallowly, his skin now pale and ashen. "Good," Lucien whispered. "One more thing." He beckoned the bot closer. "Do you remember Sun Tze?"

"Yes," answered the bot.

"Good." Lucien raised a data chip with trembling fingers. "These are my notes on guerilla warfare. You'll need them." Then, he whispered the codes to override GOFR's safety protocols. "It's up to you now, soldier. Good hunting."

The bot accepted the data chip, noting a series of new and complex thought pathways opening: improvisation, tactics, deception, and force multipliers.

"One further question."

"Yes, GOFR?"

"What is your relationship with the universe?"

There was a long period of silence, then. "I once read something from a very wise man who said his religion was kindness. I wish I could have studied with such a man." His voice was so faint it might have been a trick of the wind. "But my life didn't turn out that way."

Shortly thereafter, GOFR determined Lucien was not functional. It cremated the body, scattered the ashes, and played a recording of "Taps."

Then it quickly gathered up the colony's small weapon supply, chemicals, fuel, and tools. It worked through the night, programming and outfitting the other bots. By dawn, the makeshift army crouched in the hills.

New snowfall covered their tracks.

When the enemy returned, the bots would kill as many as they could, and whenever feasible, bury them according to their faiths.

It was, after all, a sacred duty.

THE END