

Much-Needed Troubleshooting

A Robot Engineer (TF2) TF/MC/RC story

By ponky-kong

Arti grunted, straining against the rusted clasp and edges of the box so hard his fingers went white.

All he'd wanted was to run to the closet and grab some tools to replace the batteries in his PDA, since the darn thing had a screw he didn't recognize he needed to get rid of to open it- but the only toolbox he could find around was rusted shut. He didn't know if it even *had* the screwdriver shape he needed, but it was his best shot at finding one without calling and bringing it to an expert... meaning it was also his only option, for now. There was no way he was going out today, not in this chill.

But their resolve was waning, though, the longer they scabbled at the edges. He'd already ruined a butter knife he'd tried to pry open the box and bust open the clasp on the front with, and even flecks of the yellow paint on the toolbox were rubbing off and getting all over their hands. *Gross*, those were always a pain to scrape off...

Arti sat back to take a break from the struggle, arching his back in a much needed stretch, swearing at the crack of pain when he did- not the best position to keep it in for over an hour, clearly. He shivered, rubbing his arms in the hopes of bringing back some semblance of warmth to them after being wrapped around cold metal all morning.

This toolbox is really giving me a run for my money, Arti sighed, glaring down at the lock he'd briefly attempted to file off before giving up and going back to prying. "Suppose we're at a stalemate for now, *box...*" Arti demanded with a flourish before his voice trailed off, now that he got a good look at his hands- and arms, for that matter.

There was... a *lot* more yellow on his hands than he thought. He grimaced, looking back at the toolbox to find his fears confirmed- large swathes of yellow paint had been sloppily wiped off the old box and onto his cramped, grubby hands. Even worse, he'd left dirty smudges and smears all over the box with his sweaty hands, the surface also marred with flecks of yellow paint that had stubbornly remained on the box, despite the glue that was Arti's sweat and grime picking up nearly all of their neighbors. Arti's hands were almost completely caked in the yellow paint at this point, outside of his fingertips, and it was only spreading... further..

Arti sat up with a jolt- both a figurative and literal one, as some static electricity sparked in his haste to snatch his hands away from the box, shocking his fingers with a tangible crackle. He clutched at his hands, the hot flash of pain quickly numbing yet sending his fingers into an uncomfortable state of soft unfeeling. Arti winced as they struggled to flex their digits and palms, the dissonance between seeing his own fingers move but not *feeling* them bothering him while he recovered. That was a *much* stronger shock than any little snap of static electricity should have been, Arti would've thought... maybe the paint that had rubbed off onto his fingers was making it worse? Was it some kind of magnetic, or something?

The yellow magnetic paint, if Arti supposed that was what it was, had already coated his wrists and even his forearms, from what he could feel in the nerves numbing and the space in his sleeves constricting. He shrugged an arm out of its sleeve on his thick jacket, hoping to get a clearer idea of what, exactly, had this paint done to his body while he couldn't see it.

His hands and forearms seemed a bit... bulkier, than they had been before, that much was clear. A pair of stiff, cold mitts hung heavily at the end of Arti's arms, something feeling off- he could limply waggle them around in front of them, but the more intricate processes of fine motor movement were now lost on him altogether. The unfeeling temperature felt like it had sunk its claws even deeper than solely the surface- the numbness very, *very* quick to spread further up his arms, and with it came the clink of metal on metal as they moved.

Now that they were looking, Arti could identify the heavy metal yellow over their old hands had arranged in the shape of thick, heavy gloves, while the plates overtaking their arms and pushing their shoulders and frame into something more rigid and angular were colored a muted cyan, instead. A visual design resembling clothes- that Arti had no idea how they would ever be able to remove- was being embedded into his very physical form, the short sleeves of a cyan 'shirt' being looped over by yet another layer of plates, the darker blue spilling over their torso and hardening in material the way bullet-resistant overalls built into their very design only could. Indeed, Arti could feel nothing under the spreading plating that had far superseded their original yellow color- simply the cool numbness of machine.

The good news, though, was that movement was starting to return to Arti's hands and digits as more of his inner bodily functions changed from biological to mechanical. Arti flexed their thick, heavy 'gloved' hands- which *were* just their hands now, they supposed- and touched them to feel up his changing shoulders, and then torso, metal sliding upon metal in curiosity despite not... feeling anything. He shivered, feeling the microscopic pressure of the simple contact, but otherwise

seemingly no other tactile sensations. It wasn't bad- just strange, though the numbness creeping down his body was starting to get to him a little bit...

The metal and blue paint marched on down his legs, pausing for a moment for a gray-metaled utility belt to form, boxy pouches and compartments full of batteries and electric extension cables and the like taking shape around it, before continuing its inevitable march. Bones and muscle chilled and hardened to stiff, mechanical parts, nuts and bolts oiled to optimize movement around their knee joints- vulnerable joints protected by a pair of flat yellow safety kneecaps just over them.

Arti's shoes were swallowed up by the metal after the blue had enveloped the rest of his legs in its mimicry of sturdy work overalls, constricting his ankles to simply a pair of stiff support rods. The lengths of his feet were snapped in two once the metal had overtaken them, leaving sole utilitarian support braces attached to the upper 'ankles' in place of their toe caps. They mechanically, automatically adjusted to keep balanced when Arti shifted stance, internal balance mechanisms keeping them from falling over as they stumbled back, dizzy.

Arti made a bit of a strangled sound as the metal touched their head, throat closing up as the biological tissue compressed and hardened, segmenting to give their new neck design functions of flexibility. His jaw dropped- and then he felt the lower half of his mouth fully dislodge from his face, which would have made his jaw drop in surprise if it hadn't already done so on its own. He reached up a 'gloved' hand to catch it, but thankfully didn't need to...? Mystified, Arti felt up the side of their face, and found a sturdy nut and bolt keeping it tight in place. They flapped their wide swinging mouth open and closed, finding it had grown just a bit longer and wider in size and more pronounced in shape- fitting over the hardened metal of their boxy upper mouth, somewhat resembling a stiff overbite that a human might have. The metal inevitably surged over Arti's eyes, clapping a pair of blue lensed goggles over his eyes... eyes that rapidly deteriorated into the mechanical components functioning to enhance his 'goggles' as their own ocular modules. Shutters over the new goggles 'blinked' as vision returned to him sharper than ever, the only means of sight in his rapidly roboticizing body.

The curly fluff on their head began to smooth over and disappear, Arti's hair tufting off and falling away in the face of the impassive steel. His scalp and skull pressed into each other so tightly they *fused*, becoming the smooth, metal frame of the immutable, immovable shape of a yellow hard hat. The hard brim jutted just over the ocular lenses built into their new goggles, casting a bit of shade over their eyes- an aspect of his *design*, a part of him *built* to *optimize* the clarity of vision. Arti brought up a mechanical hand to clutch at his forehead, going to let out a groan as

a wave of dizziness racked his mind- before he realized the muscles he was trying to pull in order to verbalize words out of air from his windpipe no longer existed.

Metal seeped deeper and deeper into the new robot's head, his spinning thoughts locking onto clear, logical tracks as the neurons converted to circuitry underneath the sturdy metal frame. The restructuring of their thoughts brought no small amount of panic and fear to appeal to the remaining biological functions of his head, as they suddenly realized how distinctly un-person-like his thoughts were changing to be.

This was not acceptable, however- the rapid activity of the remaining brain and core functions were sending an alarming rise in temperature through his body, the tension significantly impeding his processing power, as well as both his fine and gross motor capabilities. Something must be done. Something must be done. But what could be done?

The Troubleshooting functions were launched in his panic as the solid, iron metal finally replaced every atom of flesh. His thoughts were all but haywire, overflowing the rigid bounds and too easily spilling loose over his circuit boards, cluttering and clogging down his unsophisticated processing units, desperately looking for a solution to resolve his panic and set things back to proper functionality.

A solution was presented- and Arti's scattered thoughts latched onto it like claws gripping the safety trigger of a weapon in security, subconsciously initiating a reboot.

Their movements began to slow, vision fading, the chaotic buzz in their head beginning to settle down and relax. The relief was real, felt even through their mechanical components and processors, lulling them further into rest- sleep mode, even.

Not even the last line of code to flash across Arti's calming, sleepy processing units, just before the soothing darkness of sleep mode claimed him, wasn't enough to rouse him to motion.

Creating backup data...

When the robot booted up, its shutters blinked open to... a very limited view of the scenery around it.

A thick, yellow gloved hand pulled away quick from somewhere to the side of its ocular viewports, and its vision opened back up to its full breadth, shutters absently tilting and sharpening to adjust for the low lighting. The robot had been booted up in a ruined, abandoned warehouse, it appeared- likely the 2Fort, given the layout and architecture of what he could see. It had been in a sitting position when it had been booting up- optimal for rest and longevity by keeping from putting pressure on too many joints and hinges along its frame, suboptimal for reaction time to any potential oncoming threats.

Its shutters blinked open blue lenses, craning its head up to view the figure standing above it, gauging the level of immediate threat they posed to its physical functions. They hadn't made any sudden movements other than the sudden drawing away from it as it booted up, leading its limited processors to calculate a high probability that this figure was the one to initiate its bootup, whether intentionally or not.

Standing above the sitting robot was a thick, heavysset man, wearing a set of clothes not all too dissimilar from the model the robot's own design was intended to mimic- a large hoodie, hard hat and goggles, and a pair of rough, weathered overalls doing its best to hold in the man's girth. The shutters over a pair of yellow lenses on the man's goggles crinkled down at him, his faced creased in an odd direction- displaying a facial expression signaling concern, the robot concluded after a moment.

"Howdy, ah, partner... how you feelin'? You doin' alright?" The masculine, rich Texan drawl rolling out of his mouth seemed to convey genuine concern for the bot, catching it outside its parameters of expected outcome.

The question struck the robot as odd. For one, the human mercenaries were not likely to display concern or worry towards the android substitute models, as they were robots and often pitted against them to intervene with their assigned duties, and such- even if the Engineer in front of him was of the same color. Shutters blinked as the robotic merc gave itself a brief visual once over, and ran some internal diagnostics that concluded in but an instant on its relatively sophisticated hardware- or as sophisticated as could be mass produced on profit- and returned null results.

"I am 'doing' acceptable- or as to say, my systems and motor operations are at normal function," It replied through the seldom-used voicebox and speakers installed on the roof of its metallic upper jaw- an optimal position to maintain audible clarity and minimize the risk of damaging it in some other vulnerable part of

its frame. The robot had answered clearly and informatively, so it tilted its head uncomprehendingly when the BLU Engineer in front of him seemed unconvinced.

"I'unno, are you... are ya sure? Feel's like all sorts a' crazy things are happenin' around today..." The BLU Engie lifted his hard hat a bit to wipe the sweat off his balding head. "Like- ah looked a whole lot different before ah put on this here hoodie, full-on transmogrified into *this* hunk a' Texan meat. Found mahself here in this abandoned warehouse, too- so ah just thought ah'd ask, seein' as you're the only other one around ah feel like ah could call a *person*, y'know? Maybe some'n like that happened to you, too." Engie explained, looking to the robot in hope-wondering if it had answers, most likely. The robot blinked its shutters in response, processors quickly running the calculations for the probability of such an event occurring.

"I... find it doubtful that such a 'transmogrification' could have occurred to you, Engineer- much less the idea that such a change could have happened to me, as I have no memory of any sort of drastic change like that happening." It paused, checking something else at the speed of a few human microseconds. "I have nothing stored on my memory drive aside from the typical backup data for android mercenaries of my class, so I can only assume your booting me up was the first time I had been activated since my initial construction and creation."

It broke away from watching the puzzled, pondering gaze its fellow engineer wore, looking back and forth between their clothes in order to verify the authority the man in front of him might have over him. Casual as it was, the BLU Engineer was indeed wearing a hoodie of a similar blue to the robot's colored frame- marking them as on the same team. The standard robo-merc protocol written into its programming dictated that any human mercenaries on the same colored team held higher status and authority over robo-mercs, and had clearance to command them when need be... except for those of the Scout class, of course. But this Engie class merc was not a Scout, confirming the relation of authority between the two.

"However, if you are in need of my assistance to investigate whatever strange phenomena you believe to have observed, then I am at your full disposal." The Robo-Engie hid its calculated misgivings in deference to its superior, and angled its robot limbs in a strange manner- an imitation of a polite 'Engineer pose', as was identified in its code.

Resting its left fist on its robotic hip and pinching the brim of its 'hard hat' between two of its digits on the other hand in a motion of 'tipping' it, as though it were an actual hat it wore and not an immovable part of its external frame. The motion was written into its code, called to imply politeness or gratitude, but the robot wouldn't

call it 'natural' in the same way members of the class of merc it was modeled after might. It still had its intended effect, though, regardless of what the Robo-Engie thought of it- the real Engie in front of him relaxed, and 'tipped' his hard hat in return.

"Glad t' have ya, then, partner." The bearded Engineer clapped a hand on the robot's shoulder frame, making it stumble a bit to regain its balance. "Don't have much of an idea a' where to go next, exactly, but I get the feelin' that findin' a certain *medically* trained merc could help us get a better idea a' what to make of the real pickle we've found ourselves in here..." He rubbed his beard in contemplation, nodding to himself. "Yeah, I think that'd be right- at the very least, the two 'a us puttin' our heads together should mean *somethin'* comes of it."

The Engie slung his robotic arm over the robotic frame of the robot, giving it an eager grin that it could see even through his goggles. "Sounds like a plan, eh? So how about we get a move on, skedaddle soon as we can."

The robot stooped down to pick up the toolbox left at its side, a slightly rusting stainless steel in its preparation. If the Robo-Engie had the capacity to feel dread or annoyance, or the facial components to show it, it most certainly would have- but it couldn't complain, really. Not allowed to. No matter how odd this Engineer who claimed to not be an Engineer acted, he was still its superior, and orders were orders.

"Affirmative. We will be off shortly."

A phantom pit in the robot's distinct lack of stomach or gastric organs told it that this was going to be a long, long day.