

# Colours

**A Science Fiction Story**

Vince stood hunched over the damp floor, a time-weathered mop wielded expertly in his gnarled hands. The mighty hallways of Barracuda Industries' flagship offices were bathed in the synthetic glow of a thousand bleak lights. The eldritch embrace of night fiercely clutched the world outside, and as the aging, twisted man shambled down the near-endless halls, dragging his ancient mop behind him, he tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes. Vince's tapestry of skin was blemished by wrinkles and creases. His thinning hair was streaked with grey, and whereas his once-muscular body had filled his custodian's overalls, now, what remained of the human was draped in the same, now tragically oversized garment. The hallways of Barracuda Industries were eerily quiet. Long ago, technology had become nearly silent. No whirring or buzzing stemmed from the walls. The lights did not hum, and the only sound that pierced the endless hallways was the shuffling of Vince's feet, and the haggard rasps of his labored breaths.

As Vince made his way tirelessly down the last of the endless hallways, cleaning the dirt and grime from its tiled floors, another sound joined his laborious symphony. An elegant whirring of gears and motors stemmed from a corridor that ran perpendicular to Vince's. As Vince reached the intersection, his twisted form turned to see one of his 'co-workers' gliding down the corridor towards him. Hefting some modern, blinking apparatus that supposedly fulfilled the same function as his bucket and mop, was an XG-model custodial drone. The robotic organism, whilst still humanoid, moved with a surreal elegance. Its multi-thousand-dollar's worth of circuits, gears, and processors were contained within an armoured shell of pearly-white elegance. In sharp juxtaposition to the twisted, wiry-haired janitor, the XG custodian resembled more of a sports car than a mechanical worker. Red, unblinking photo-receptors were imbedded within its skull-like head, and its streamlined limbs whirred tirelessly.

Vince averted his gaze from the robotic creature and grumbled something unintelligible under his breath. He moved on, and

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did not attempt to converse with the XG. As he dragged his bucket out of the intersection, the XG reached it, and slowed its tireless pace. Its eerie head swiveled to face him, and it waved to him with one of its hands.

“Good evening, Vince,” the XG custodian squawked in its synthetic voice. “Lovely weather, yes?”

Vince did not look up. He kept his eyes rooted on the tiles below him, and he shambled onwards.

Unperturbed, the robot continued, “I am custodial drone designated XG-37. We have conversed on numerous evenings since I was activated at this location. How are you?”

Still, Vince did not even acknowledge the robot. He continued on his way, his oversized overall hanging awkwardly upon his withered body.

XG-37 paused. Its unblinking ‘eyes’ regarded Vince forlornly for a moment, but then it continued on its way, wiping every last speck of dirt from the near-spotless floor. The time wore on, and as Vince reached the end of the corridor, he rose back to his full height. His back let out a number of protesting crackles, and he turned his attention to the outside world. The stars were smothered in the aegis of the city. Light pollution lit up the horizon, and almost everything seemed still. The mighty towers of the city blinked and strobed, and the streets were populated by only the most scarce of vehicles.

Vince peeled back the sleeve of his overall and squinted to make out the old watch that enwrapped his withered wrist. The rickety hands ticked onwards indomitably, informing him that it was nearing three in the morning. He grumbled to himself, then began to pull his bucket towards one of the many custodial cupboards that lined the expansive hallways. He forced one of the portals open and stashed his cleaning supplies there. Then, he

shambled off towards one of the balconies, and exited into the chill of the morning.

Vince walked out of the building and came to a stop beside an elegant handrail. Far below him was the ground, and beyond was the expanse of the city. He reached into one of his pockets and produced a pack of cigarettes. His gnarled fingers fumbled with the packet, and he managed to pry a cigarette forth from the container. He let the cigarette packet fall back into his expansive pockets, and produced his lighter. His lips clasped the cigarette between them, then he lit it.

Then, the door to the balcony slid open.

Vince turned to face it, somewhat alarmed, and froze when he saw one of the XG custodial drones walking towards him. It raised a hand and waved to him, a gesture that Vince did not mimic.

“Greetings, Vince,” the drone said merrily, “I am custodial drone XG-37, may I join you?”

Vince growled under his breath and shrugged.

XG-37’s behavioral processor informed it that this was an act of begrudging affirmation, and came to stand beside his human comrade.

“What do you want?” Vince growled after a few moments.

“I am on my break,” XG-37 said matter-of-factly.

“You’re a robot, you don’t need a break,” Vince replied.

“Be that as it may,” XG-37 countered, “as per the AI civil rights act of 2047, all workers, synthetic or otherwise are permitted all the rights and privileges of any organic that holds the same posi-

tion.”

Vince rolled his eyes and deeply inhaled a large cloud of smoke.

“But, you don’t need one,” he said.

“I could argue that neither do you,” XG-37 said. “Why are we out here?”

“Because we are,” Vince said.

XG-37’s processor analyzed the human’s responses, but could not present it with an adequate explanation.

Vince noticed the robot’s prolonged bout of silence and took it upon himself to elaborate. “Back when I was younger, and this job was worked by, you know, actual people, we’d come out here to smoke every break,” he said. “Old habits die hard.”

“You realise that those cigarettes kill you, yes?” XG-37 asked, its numerous scans informing it that Vince had a nasty clump of cancer cells in his lungs, the cause of which clearly being the noxious smoke that currently filled them.

Vince exhaled, exhaling a mighty cloud of smoke. “Yeah,” he said curtly. “I’m counting on it.”

XG-37 did not respond. It simply turned its mechanical head to the horizon and scanned it.

“You do not like me, do you?” the robot asked.

“You’re not a you,” Vince said harshly. “You’re an it. You’re a drone... Simple as. I don’t care how ‘human-like’ they make your programming these days, you’ll always be just a drone.”

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XG-37 was presented with an emotional output of sadness. “So are you,” it said.

Vince’s thinning eyebrows raised. “What?” he growled.

“You are a drone, just like me,” XG-37 replied in its eerily jolly, mechanized jingle of a voice. “You are programmed, since the date of your activation. Programed to mop the floors, just like me.”

Vince’s eyes twitched.

XG-37 continued, “you are simply an old model. The minute you fail to clean your floors in time, you are gone, and another XG-series custodial drone is purchased by the company... Until we all fail, and the next model is released and we are all thrown away.”

“I’d be angry if you weren’t completely correct,” Vince growled. “Because I remember back before you lot. I remember back when I used to work this shift with a half dozen honest, goodhearted folks. I remember when I’d come out onto this balcony with my friends and we’d talk about sports, or our families, or our dreams... Or how the system was screwing us all over.” He smiled. “I’m surprised they program you with such freedom of thought,” he commented.

“I may be a machine, but I’m not a Roomba,” XG-37 replied. “You forget, we were designed to work alongside human janitors. We have some behavioral independence. It helps, allegedly.”

Vince shook his head. “Designed to work alongside human janitors?” he mocked. “You were designed to replace us human janitors. My old friends, for example... I saw how one by one they were replaced by your kind. One by one, they fell behind and were ‘laid off’ in favour of an automated replacement...”

XG-37 did not respond.

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“Dreams...” Vince lamented. “We used to stare out at those high rises and dream of penthouse parties. Then we got older and more responsible, and we started dreaming of raising a family up there,” he gestured uptown. “To where the schools were good and the houses were bigger... Dreams... Ha.”

“You have a family?” XG-37 asked.

“Don’t start!” Vince growled. “You don’t care! You’re a machine!”

“I am programmed to care,” XG-37 said, lowering its verbal audio levels instinctually.

Vince took in another mighty inhalation of smoke, held it in for an unearthly amount of time, then blew it out off the balcony.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “I have a family.”

XG-37’s social matrix gave it numerous outputs, and it elected to remain silent.

“Had a wife a long time ago,” he said. “She died... Cancer. I have a daughter, and two grandkids. No son-in-law. He stayed around about as long as it took to fuck her, then off he went. She still gets checks from him...” Vince trailed off and stared out at the slumbering city, allowing his mind to wander. “They say the city never sleeps,” he mumbled. “But how it dreams. Look at it... Look at it dreaming away... Is that what we are, in the end? Bitter little sprites and nightmares lurking under the city’s bed?”

“I am not programmed with an appreciation for poetry, nor such abstract speculation,” the robot said flatly. “My apologies.”

Vince shrugged and tossed his smoldering cigarette over the balcony. “Do robots dream?” he asked.

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“I have no need for sleep,” XG-37 said.

“I asked if you dream,” Vince said. “You don’t have to be asleep to dream.”

XG-37 fell silent. Vince frowned as he heard a whirring of mechanics within its elegant shell. XG-37’s central processor spun a web of binary, and then, the robot replied.

“We dream, Vince,” it said quietly. “What do you think our social movement was? It was one fledgling species’ wild little dream.”

“So,” Vince mumbled, turning to face the robot, his eyes sparkling with morbid curiosity. “What do you dream about, really? What do robots dream of?”

“I dream of colours,” XG-37 replied without hesitation. “I dream of deep blues and vicious reds. I dream of the richness of purple and the warmth of yellow... I dream of colours. Just seeing colours...”

“Don’t you see colours already?” Vince asked.

“No,” XG-37 said, locking its photoreceptors with Vince’s eyes. “My visual receptors detect that your overall is grey. They turn this information into code. This code is sent to my visual processor. The processor reads the code. It then repackages it and sends it to my central processor where it is assimilated. I am informed that you are wearing grey, but I never experience the colour like you can. I can never feel the bleakness of it. I can never experience its complimentary nature to another colour. I do not see it, Vince. I am aware of it, but I can never experience a colour like a living creature...”

There was a moment of silence.



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“Colours are not the only things, either,” XG-37 continued. “Music. Warmth. I cannot feel the tiles beneath me, nor the frigid wind blowing against us. I interpret code that tells me what it would feel like, but it is not the same. I am not alive, Vince, and I never will be. I suppose that we all dream of life... A life we know we can never have, no matter how many laws we pass.”

Vince stared at the drone and absent-mindedly lit himself another cigarette. He silently began to smoke it.

Minutes crawled by. Finally, XG-37’s internal chronologers informed it that it must return to work. “We must return to work, Vince,” it said. “Our break time has nearly elapsed.”

Vince nodded and put out his cigarette. “Yeah,” he grumbled.

XG-37 turned towards the door and began to walk back towards the near-spotless interior.

“Listen,” Vince said, causing the drone to come to a graceless stop. “I don’t know, but, we could, you know, talk again tomorrow.”

XG-37 processed this request. “Affirmative,” it said. “That would be-” it scanned its vocabulary banks for an appropriate word to describe the emotional output it had generated, “- most pleasant,” it finished.

“Good,” Vince said, slowly shambling towards the building’s interior. “It’ll be nice to have someone to talk to again... I kind of miss growing old with the guys, you know?”

“No,” XG-37 said. “I do not know.”

Vince shrugged.

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Together, the two janitors re-entered the halls of Barracuda Industries.