

The air was trembling under the light of the afternoon sun, and the greenery in the backyard was wilting thirstily. The bold man was lifting mechanically his lemonade glass, entirely engulfed in his book. The electricity was being interrupted more and more often. The air conditioner was turning on with a roar, then suddenly died like a drugged predator.

Suddenly sirens scorched the incandescent air of the city. A stern voice drifted up from invisible loudspeakers: "Go home! Keep calm!". Fighter jets grumbled in the sky. The cars, which were passing by the house stopped and honked like a flock of bleating sheep. The man stood up, filled with anxiety. He dabbed the beads of sweat on his high forehead with a handkerchief.



He looked at the pictures of his loved ones - their carefree faces and happy smiles. Everyone had drifted somewhere - brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren. He wished to see them again. So many warm words were left unspoken. For how many hugs there was never enough time.

The house shook. The walls groaned and a thick web of cracks slid across the window panes. One of the ceiling's beams cracked ominously, and plaster fell over the pages of the book. The ground shook as hard as if Godzilla was jumping rope in the neighborhood. The sky sparkled in strange lights, and then the world faded into milky whiteness.



Rusty woke up. He had dreamed of people for so many times and he still couldn't figure out what exactly he was dreaming about. He himself was a tiny creature of battered metal—no bigger than the outstretched palm of a man's hand. Strange stuff. Why was he so concerned about the fate of the missing giants? He was like that too - nothing could break his proverbial curiosity.

He got up. Sunbeams lit up the makeshift house he shared with his friends. And they were still sleeping. Red was tossing and turning in bed, his nose shining like a Christmas tree light. Golden snored rhythmically. Junior's face was stretched into a blissful smile.





Rusty came out and stretched with a soft squeak. He looked around to see Artimer crouching nearby. He looked like a metal grapefruit covered with four silver plates – actually secret drawers for spare parts. When he wobbled on his tube-like steps, he always jingled slightly - like a child's piggy bank.

Artimer saw him too. He stood up and waved. Instead of fingers, one hand ended with a screwdriver and the other with a soldering iron. He changed them regularly - he had a rich collection of spare hands, for which he made all sorts of attachments and tools for himself.



Unlike the others, Artimer didn't sleep. Day and night he was tinkering and making something. Rusty was about to tell him his dream when Red appeared.

"Good morning," Artimer greeted him.

"Good morning," Rusty replied.

"Morning like morning," Red grunted sourly and yawned stiffly. "You should have woken me up earlier." That power cord...

"I fixed it," said Artimer.

"Hmm... is that so? Well, ok then... But there is a long to-do list. I noticed holes in the folding canopy. If acid rain falls, sensitive plants will suffer. The binocular eyepiece is cracked. We have to change it. Yesterday, a huge lizard was snapping between the Big and Little Hill. If he surprises us, he will swallow Junior in one bite..."

"Let's not provoke fate," Rusty called meekly. "What is written will happen!"

"Your wisdom again!" Red shivered. "Shouldn't we be prepared?"

"You do not even have to ask?" Rusty spread his hands. "A scientist once said, 'Any idiot with a plan can beat a genius without a plan'..."

"People are said to have been very wise, but how far have they taken it? Have you seen them around?" Red demonstratively looked around.

"Who knows how long they've been gone..."

"What noise from the morning?" Golden approached with a springy step. "Please comply if you like! When I don't get enough sleep, there are spots under my eyes and..."

“What stains?” Red patted him on the shoulder and Golden lost his balance. “Hold on, princess! Well, you are made of scrap metal - just like everything around you.”

“Cold-rolled, finely galvanized steel, your honor,” Golden corrected him.

“Your grandmother is galvanized...”

“If I had a grandmother, she was certainly galvanized...”

Junior also appeared. He was smaller than the others, but filled with so much energy and enthusiasm that they could barely keep up with him:

“Hello! Good morning everyone! If only you knew what dream I had...”





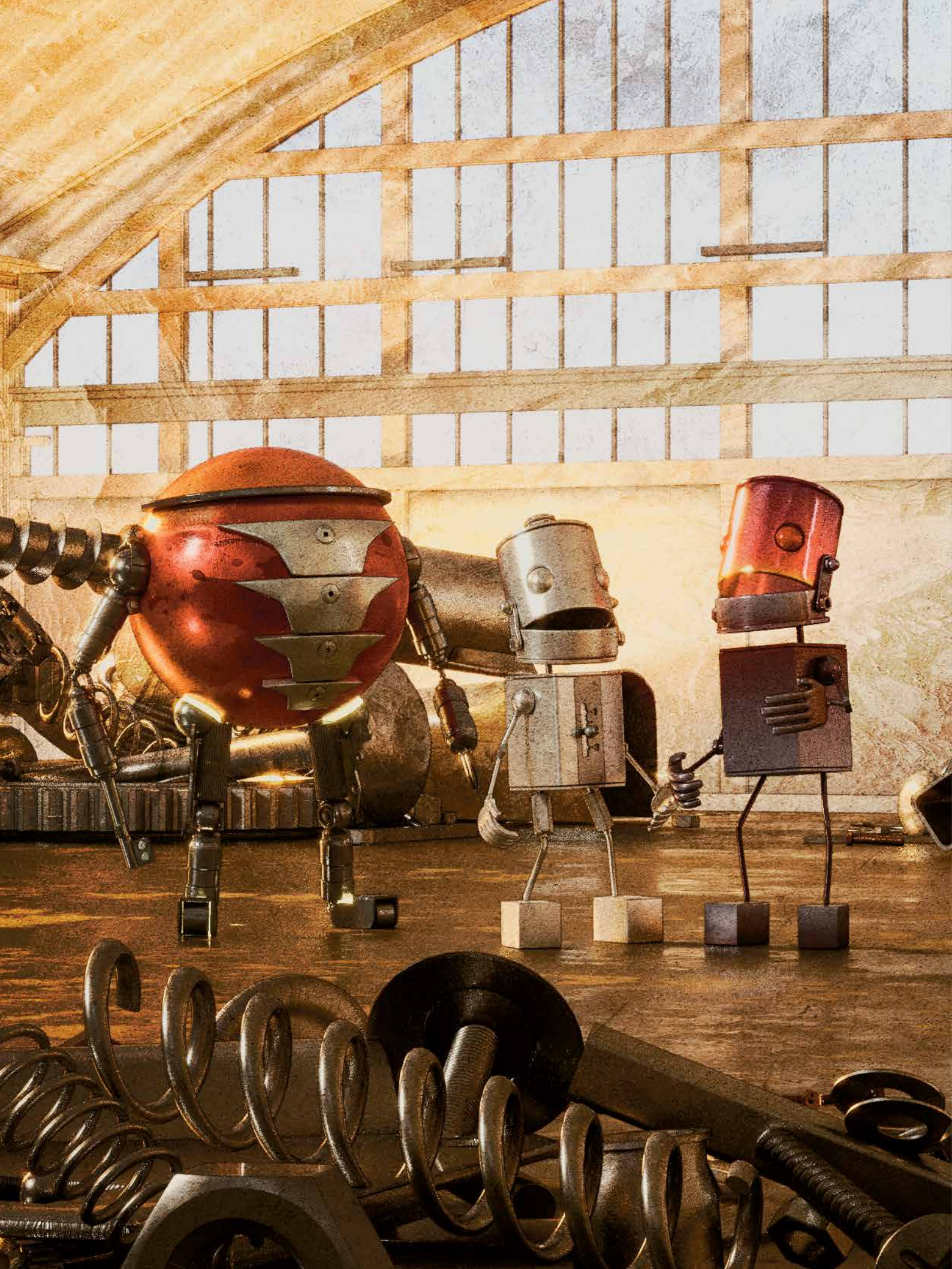
Junior didn't need an invitation to continue. He slipped in between the others and continued telling them in his cheerful, excited voice:

"I was in a... forest... park... something like that. A place with lots of greenery. It was cool, fresh and so peaceful. I could smell the scents of flowering plants. I was standing in a meadow, under the shade of tall trees. With me was one of those creatures - big, hairy, shaggy, with a wet muzzle and a hanging tongue..."

"It's called a 'dog'," Rusty explained.

"Yes, exactly... And what sounds he was making. I would throw him a stick and he would run after it. He would hold it between his teeth and run back to give it back to me. And again, and again, and again... I think it was some kind of dog-human ritual... or game..."

"I have told you many times that the dog was man's best friend," Rusty was impatient.



“Wasn’t it the robots?” Artimer informed himself.

“Dogs, robots... same thing...” Red puffed out.

“Ah, no, how so ‘same thing’!” Rusty was indignant. “Dogs are a living organism - other dogs give birth to them. And robots are machines - they are made in a factory. Also, there were robot dogs, so...”

“Well, let me tell you, I’m tired of your lessons!” Red stomped his foot. “Do we have a few worries on our heads?”

“Everything is written in the books,” Rusty explained. “There were deep forests and endless steppes where knights, witches and dinosaurs roamed...”

“Are there no such forests left somewhere in the world?” Junior narrowed his eyes.

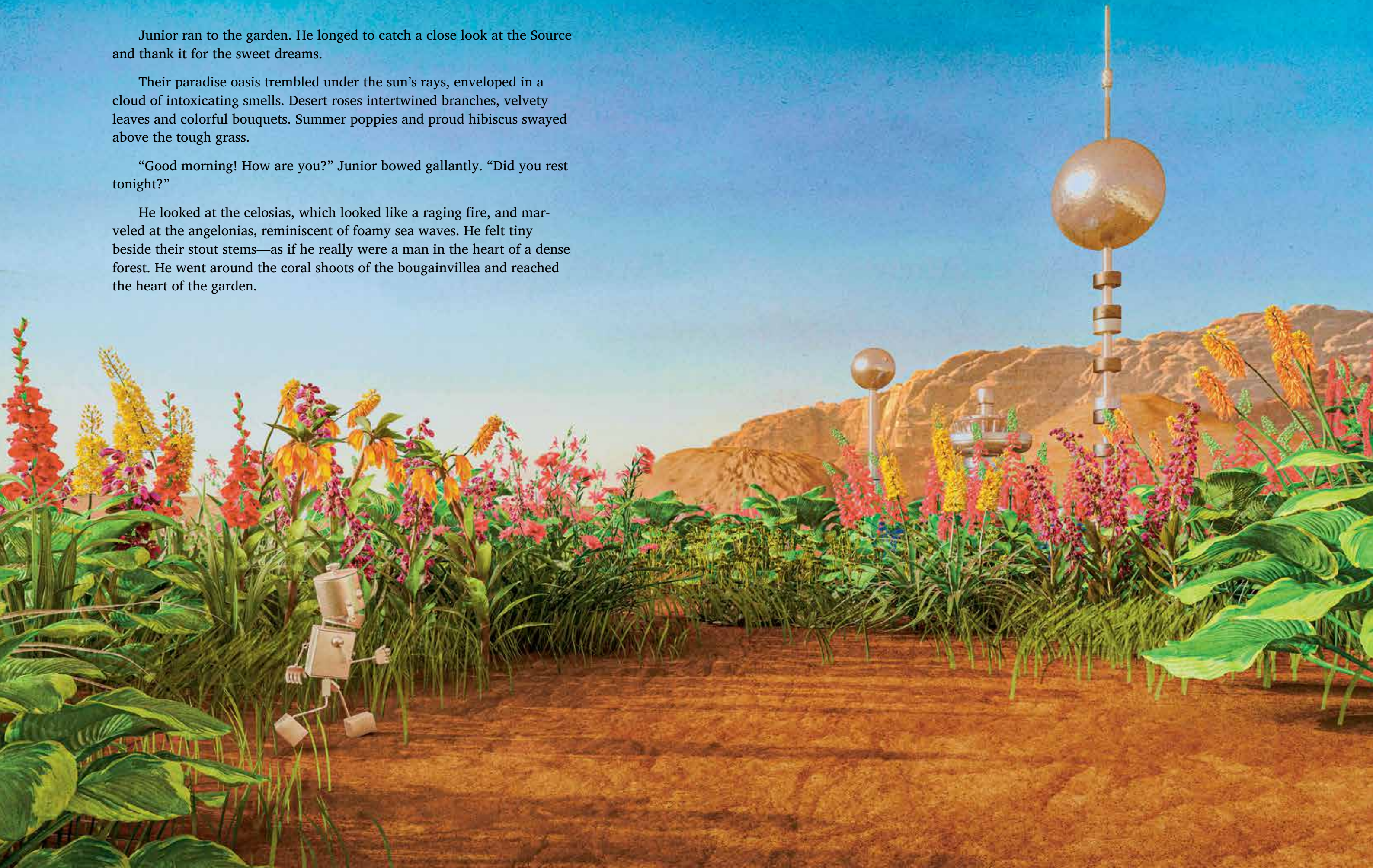
“Rusty only fills your head with nonsense,” Red sulked. “Swans, goblins, lawyers, dinosaurs... In my opinion, it has always been a wasteland - just like that - grey-orange and seedy... from end to end... with cheeky flies and hungry lizards. The only greenery is in our garden. But if we don’t stop spouting nonsense and get down to business, it will dry up too. Remember my word!”

Junior ran to the garden. He longed to catch a close look at the Source and thank it for the sweet dreams.

Their paradise oasis trembled under the sun's rays, enveloped in a cloud of intoxicating smells. Desert roses intertwined branches, velvety leaves and colorful bouquets. Summer poppies and proud hibiscus swayed above the tough grass.

"Good morning! How are you?" Junior bowed gallantly. "Did you rest tonight?"

He looked at the celosias, which looked like a raging fire, and marveled at the angelonias, reminiscent of foamy sea waves. He felt tiny beside their stout stems—as if he really were a man in the heart of a dense forest. He went around the coral shoots of the bougainvillea and reached the heart of the garden.



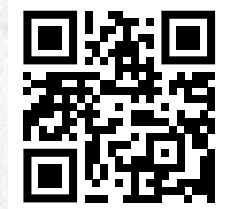


In the very center of the greenery, towering above everything else, was the Source, a pointed tower with a broad base dug into the ground. It was crowned by a sphere emitting a soft light.

“Thank you for the beautiful dream!”

The friends knew one thing - the Source loved plants and gifted its hardworking gardeners with energy and magical dreams. When the flowers molted, he suffered too. His glow was fading and his power was melting. At such times the nights were torturous and tedious, and the dreams either did not come at all or came as hideous nightmares. In the morning, everyone felt drained and could barely move.

Artimer alone seemed to have inexhaustible energy and hardly rested. But because he missed dreams, he often questioned the others about their midnight reveries. They still hadn't figured out the reasons for all this. Rusty's books were silent on the matter.



“Shall we get to work?” Golder urged them.
“Of course!” Red said. “But squatting and posing for hours in front of that cracked mirror is not work.”
“I know you like your appearance and your mentality of an iron left in the socket, but allow others to have higher requirements for themselves...”
“I’ll give you an iron, galvanized candlestick like that!”
“Guys, stop it!” Artimer intervened. “If you fight like little children, we won’t get anything done.”
“He started,” Golden returned. “Mr. Toadstool.”
“Childishness,” Rusty scolded them. “Saint Francis of Assisi said: ‘Be patient above all with yourself.’ ”
“Who is Saint Francis?” Junior was puzzled.
“It’s not important who he is, but what he said.”
“Where is Assisi?” Junior did not calm down. “I guess you haven’t mentioned such a place until now.”
“Uh-oh-oh, who knows... Somewhere around Guatemala... or maybe Australia... Certainly over the Big Hill.”
“Eha-ah-ah!” Junior sighed dreamily. “Will we ever get that far...”
“Let’s get cracking, guys!” Artimer scolded them. “We talked again.”
Before lunch they split into two groups. Junior and Rusty plowed the soil in the northern part of the garden. They wanted to plant more flowers and extend the reach of the irrigation system. Golden kept explaining how the plants should be placed from an aesthetic point of view.
“It’s all about symmetry and the combination of colors,” he muttered.





Meanwhile, Red and Artimer changed the eyepiece of the telescope and set about some repairs on the cottage. Golden suddenly appeared there too - he gave a lecture on how to choose the right elements of the interior to achieve perfect harmony and home comfort.

“Get out, you chatterbox!” Red scolded him and threw a steel bolt at him. “Don’t forget the harmony! Get another job, you’re just making mine more difficult!”

“You are such a barbarian!” Golden shouted. “Can you ignore my pursuit of perfection like that?! A solid dustbin lid would have more of a sense of the beautiful...”

They had built their modest home inside the remains of a human factory. Brick debris, crumbling concrete, bent rebars, split struts and pieces of glass served as building materials for them. Various parts were taken from the cobwebbed machines. Mysterious batteries and generators, which only Artimer allowed himself to tinker with, provided them with electricity.

The factory consisted of several buildings in varying degrees of ruin. The five still hadn't gone through all the levels and secret cracks.

Countless dangers awaited them. In a hollow shaft they had come across a wild rat. Beneath his sparse, shedding fur was rough, veined and scabbed skin. His eyes blazed like blazing furnaces, and yellow foam bubbled between his bared incisors. Red grabbed his work hammer and fought the monster like an ancient hero from Rusty's stories. The Scarecrow retreated wounded, embittered and with one less tooth. They knew that a snake lived in the kitchens behind the huge dining room, so they carefully avoided the place.





In the afternoon Artimer retired to his little workshop. He set about constructing improvements to his spare arms. Red and Junior headed to one of the dark workshops in search of parts. Golden had found a nearly working powder coating unit and was trying to get a new layer of anti-corrosion coating.