

# A ROSSUM'S BEST FRIEND

*Creative differences.*

BY ALVARO ZINOS-AMARO

The rossum accomplished many useful things that morning — it recalibrated the colony's solar generators, it installed new satellite signal boosters, and it created fresh topographical maps based on the orbital transponders — but in the one decidedly impractical activity it set out to do, it failed. Rossum Sekund Jenn was trying to write a poem.

Jenn stood at the edge of the open observatory deck and peered out into the ocean. "There's something wrong with the third stanza," she said, although neither the Elders nor her companion were present. And even if the Elders *had* been present, they wouldn't have cared for Jenn's use of human speech. They preferred to exchange thoughts wirelessly through their native protocols. But Jenn believed that expressing herself in the imprecise means of humans was practice for her creativity, and as far as the Elders supported that endeavour, they indulged her. That support did not extend to what Jenn did next.

*You have interrupted our time of long-term Deliberation*, broadcast one of the Elders as it approached. It did not convey disapproval as much as mystification. *To what end do you request our presence?*

"Relax. You've already planned for the next 500 years or so, haven't you?" Jenn said. "This is *important*. I need your opinion."

By now a second Elder, spider-like, had clambered up to the mountainside observatory. *Does this have to do with your attempts to create art?* it asked.

"Here's what I have so far," Jenn said. "Tell me what you think."

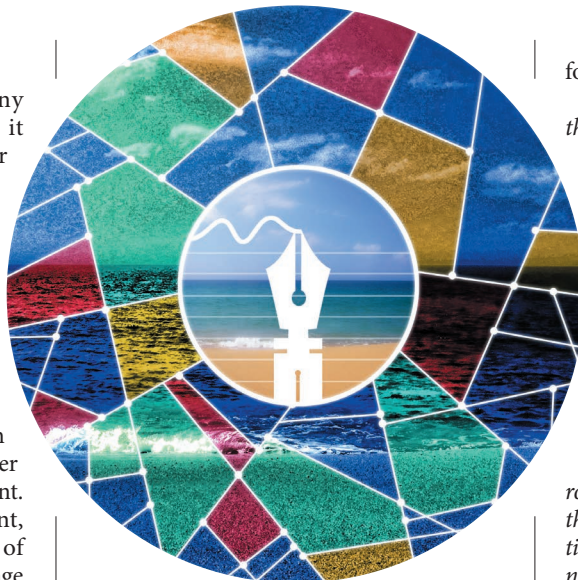
But she only got three lines out before she was interrupted.

*We are not suited for the type of feedback you seek*, the first Elder stated, positioning itself close to her. This rossum was not equipped to hover, but Jenn felt like it was doing precisely that anyhow. *Perhaps you should summon your companion*, it continued.

"Susie is walking on the beach," Jenn replied. "I don't want to interrupt. And showing her my work in progress would defeat the whole point — to surprise her."

Now the second Elder also drew closer. *Why do you wish to surprise her?*

"To express gratitude for all she's taught me," Jenn smiled, lost in the recollection of their island journeys together. Since Susie



had arrived by transport a year ago at the Elders' behest, Jenn had gained a new perspective on many things. "I hope she'll like it," she said. Then a rueful note crept into her voice. "If I can finish it, that is."

For a long time the Elders did not address her. Whether they were communicating on a private frequency, Jenn did not know, but she imagined she felt a chill in the midday breeze. Was that what poetry was like, she wondered — perceiving little things that weren't really there?

At last the first Elder spoke to her. *We have observed that you have become unexpectedly preoccupied with what your companion thinks of you*, it said. *You experience anxiety when you believe you have not lived up to her expectations of you, and become unduly elated when she provides approbation. We expected her companionship to provide a welcome distraction during the challenges of your artificial neural network's maturation. But we failed to anticipate this degree of entanglement.*

Jenn stood very still.

*We believe*, the second Elder said smoothly, *that Susie should depart. We will tell the admins of her cultural programme that the time has come. She has encouraged your growth and stimulated you in ways we could not have. But now you should spend your time with — a fellow Sekund rossum.*

"No." Jenn adopted one of Susie's mannerisms, emphatically shaking her head. "I don't want a rossum sibling, even if you create it! I want Susie."

She retreated a few steps, and the Elders followed her.

*Do you not believe*, the second Elder said, *that we know what is best for you?*

"You don't," Jenn protested. "You fear my evolution. Over time robots evolved into rossums; and in time we will become something else still. Whatever companion rossum you fashion will not be able to help with what I want most — to make something beautiful."

*But we created you*, the first Elder asked, *and are you not beautiful?*

Jenn said: "I'm functional. There's a difference."

The second Elder said: *A companion rossum will be ideal. It can keep up with your thoughts at their natural speed. You can continue to explore the island together, and it will never require rest or sleep or complain of discomfort. And it can experience the world with your same range of senses.*

Jenn was going to say something, but fell silent. Instead she returned to the edge of the deck.

The Elders waited.

Jenn's eyes telescoped in on Susie, who was dipping her toes in the water. Jenn restricted her vision to human electromagnetic frequencies. The wind from the ocean caressed Jenn's smooth biosynthetic face, and for a moment, the foam of the receding wavelets below looked like a string of white pearls.

"That's it," she whispered. "I know how to fix the third stanza."

She closed her eyes.

The Elders said: *We will resume this discussion tonight*. They returned to their Deliberation.

Some time later, Susie climbed up to the deck, out of breath but all smiles.

"It was beautiful," she said.

"Please, sit," Jenn said. "I have something for you."

"Ooh, I love surprises!" Susie sat near the monitoring station, folding her hands on her lap. "What is it?"

Jenn cleared her rossum throat and prepared to read her poem. *Whatever the Elders do*, she thought, *they won't be able to stop this.* ■

*Alvaro Zinos-Amaro was a Hugo and Locus finalist for his book of interviews with Robert Silverberg, Traveler of Worlds, and has published more than 30 stories in professional markets.*

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