

Lazy Taekos by Geoffrey A. Landis

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This may look like a fairytale for lawyers, but it *is* science fiction, too!

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Once there was a boy named Taekos who lived on a heart farm.

His parents were hardworking people: they grew new hearts for old men, and tiny hearts for babies; they grew strong hearts to plant into young men who had crashed their air-scooters and needed replacements; and they grew rugged working hearts for androids who were grown in a vat.

But Taekos didn't want to live on the farm. He was lazy, and wanted to do something that was more fun and less like work.

One day he slung his pack over his shoulder and told his parents he was off to seek his fortune in the big city. He hitched a ride with a passing businessman driving an old-fashioned one-wheeled gyro-car, and in a few minutes he was in the big city.

In the big city, he apprenticed himself to a robot builder, but his robots were built all askew, and didn't want to work, but just sat and wrote poetry all day. No one would pay to buy a robot to sit around and write poetry, and so after a week, he was let go.

He apprenticed himself to a bioengineer, but he was too lazy to sculpt DNA, and spent the day programming the microrobots to play croquet with each other, using xenon atoms as balls. And then, when he was bored with that, he programmed them to gather all the atoms of one kind together--copper, he decided, he would make them gather copper atoms--and link them together in a sheet, until the floor shone with a molecule-thick plating of copper. But no one would pay to hire a bioengineer who would not splice even a single DNA strand, and so after a week he was let go.

He apprenticed himself to a spaceship pilot, but he just flew his ship in great lazy swirls around the sky. The businessmen who were to be ferried to the seven moons refused to pay him, and so after a week he was let go.

And thus it was, when he had used up all his prospects, and no one in the city would take him on as an apprentice, he sat in the park. He sat by the river of floating flowers, singing nonsense songs to himself and giving names to each of the clouds that passed in the sky. He was braiding together great kjill blossoms to make kites, and releasing them one by one to drift in the sky, when he saw a girl watching him.

After a while he saw one of his blossom kites float through her, and he knew she was a projection. Ah, he thought. If she didn't eat and didn't need to pay to enter an entertainment, it would cost nothing to take her out. She was the perfect girlfriend for him.

"Will you be my girlfriend?" he asked.

"Certainly," she answered. As they talked together, he discovered that she had a dowry of ten trillion pretty rocks from her grandfather, but until the day she married, she told him, her stepfather controlled it, and she could not spend any of it, not even a single rock, except what her stepfather allowed.

Her stepfather was crafty, and did not want her to wed, and take away his fortune. He had locked her away in a titanium crystal castle, and the robots that controlled it would only let in the man who would marry her. Her stepfather could not forbid her to marry outright, but he had sworn an oath.

"She will marry a man who has never been born, who is wearing a cloak that has never been worn, whose shadow is silver and nothing of gold, who can sleep in a fire and never get cold," the girl (whose name was Phoebus) quoted to him. "And that is the only way I shall marry."

"That," Taekos observed (as he knotted together the stems of a hundred kjill blossoms into a great braid in the shape of a Moebius strip) "doesn't make any sense at all."

"No," she said sadly. "I will never marry. But he can't prevent me from projecting."

Yet I myself was never born, he thought to himself; I was grown from a seed, like all of the sons of farmers he knew. And he wondered at the silly ways of the city people, who never heard of growing a child from a seed, like any sensible farmer would.

"Can you not weave me a cloak that has never been worn?" he asked her.

"Indeed," she said. "I will instruct my robots to weave a cloak. But if you wear it, it has been worn, surely you know that."

"Leave that to me," he said.

And so he made an appointment to come to marry the girl, and on the appointed day, he arrived at the titanium crystal castle and presented himself.

"My stepdaughter is very beautiful," the stepfather told him, "and I love her very much. She is so beautiful that she can only marry a man who has never been born, and so you must leave and go away, for you cannot marry her."

"But I myself was never born," Taekos observed. "I was grown from a seed, and here are my identity papers to show it." And indeed, when he showed the sheet of molecule-thin poly-ply that was his identity papers, the word "BORN:" on the sheet of poly-ply was followed by a simple "NO."

The stepfather's face darkened as he saw this, and Taekos thought that his face was like a storm cloud, but the stepfather merely said, "My stepdaughter is very delicate, and I love her very much. Because she is so delicate she must only marry a man who wears a cloak that has never been worn, and so you must leave and go away, for you can never marry her."

"But I myself am wearing a cloak that has never been worn," Taekos observed, "for it was woven by your daughter's robots this very morning, and you can verify that, if you like, by asking any one of them."

But the stepfather only smiled wickedly, and said, "You are yourself wearing it, and so how can you say it has never been worn?"

"This?" Taekos asked, and passed his hand through it. "This is only a projection. The cloak itself is in your daughter's room, and has surely never been worn."

The stepfather's face darkened further as he saw that he had been tricked, and Taekos thought that his face was like a storm cloud that is all swollen up with lightning, ready to burst into electrical fury, but the stepfather only said, "My stepdaughter is very intelligent, and I love her very much. Because she is so intelligent, she must only marry a man who has a shadow of silver, and nothing of gold, and so you must leave and go away, for you cannot marry her."

But at this, Taekos said nothing at all, only gestured with his hand down at the floor. And the stepfather looked down, and with great surprise noticed that Taekos' shadow in fact reflected with a silvery sheen. The stepfather brought out a light, and moved it from side to side, but to whichever side he moved, the

silvery sheen appeared on the opposite side, a shadow of silver.

"Robot!" he called out, and a robot appeared at his side. "Robot, what color is that?" he said, and pointed at the shadow.

"Master, that color is silver," the robot answered, and Taekos smiled.

Taekos' smile was a smile of relief, for robots are very literal, and the robot answered the question that was asked. Had the stepfather asked what the shadow was made of, the robot would surely have answered aluminum. He had tried to instruct the handful of microrobots that he had spread behind him to gather silver atoms, but there were not enough silver atoms in the molecules of the ground, and instead he had to settle for telling them to gather aluminum atoms, which were also shiny and silver.

But the stepfather called his robots together, and had them go into his vast treasury and fetch gold dust by the handful. The stepfather's robots sprinkled gold dust on the shadow, but as fast as they sprinkled gold dust, the microrobots (which Taekos had borrowed from the DNA engineer before he'd left his apprenticeship) plated them over with a thin veneer of aluminum atoms, so that they shined silver and nothing of gold, and the stepfather knew that he had again been tricked.

The stepfather's face darkened, and Taekos thought it was like a great storm of a gas giant, ready to expand out across the planet until the whole surface was engulfed in turbulence, but the stepfather only said, "My stepdaughter is very rich, and I love her very much. Because she is so rich, she will only marry a man who can sleep in a fire and never get cold, so you must leave and go away, for you can never marry her."

But Taekos only laughed, and said, "Why, certainly I can do that, and so indeed can any man, for if one sleeps in a fire, surely he will get hot, and not cold. And so, sir, please step aside, for I wish to go inside to marry your stepdaughter, and you are in my way."

But the stepfather only smiled now, a wicked and triumphant smile, and he said softly, "No, Sir Trickster, clever you are, but indeed you may not pass. For you may say you can sleep in a fire, but indeed, I will not credit your boasting until I see it myself. Come back, sir, in seven days. I will make a fire, and you will sleep in the fire I have made myself, with none of your trickery, and when I have seen that, then you will marry my stepdaughter.

"But until then, you must go away, and not come back."

"I will go away," said Taekos, "and not come back for seven days."

And when he had gone away, and sat in the park by the river of drifting blossoms, the projection of his girlfriend came to him, and said sadly, "Oh, Taekos, how will you meet the challenge of my stepfather?"

And Taekos had no answer. He had expected to pass based on clever words and brazen courage, but he had never really had a plan. Nor, for all that he wracked his brains for ideas, could he think of one.

But then, he had seven days. And he was, after all, a very clever lad. Surely he would think of something.

And indeed, the next day, as he slept in the shade of the tijiell trees in the park (it was necessary to sleep in the shade, because the seven moons beamed down light in a wonderful, but not at all restful, array of colors), a most remarkable thing happened to him. The old stepfather came up to him. It took him a moment to realize that this, too, was a projection, and not the real man, but still, it surprised him.

"Sir Trickster," said the projection of the stepfather. "You are a cheat, and a thief, and I wish you to have nothing to do with my stepdaughter. I will offer you a thousand pretty rocks, and with those pretty rocks

you may go as you please, wherever you like, as long as you never again come back to ask for the hand of my stepdaughter in marriage."

This is very interesting, thought Taekos, very interesting indeed, but all he said was, "I think not."

And the next day, the same projection came to him, and said the same thing, but this time offered him two thousand pretty rocks. And again, Taekos thought, this is very interesting, but replied only, "I think not."

Each day of the seven, the stepfather offered a higher price, and each day, Taekos thought, this is very interesting, but replied only, "I think not."

For this was the thought that Taekos found most interesting: why would the stepfather offer him a bribe to give up a suit that he could not win?

And so he sat in contemplation, braiding his flower kites, and planning.

On the seventh day, the very image of Taekos showed up at the castle of titanium, all resplendent in the finest of feathers and braided spider-silk. And the stepfather, surrounded by his robots, did not seem surprised to see him, but Taekos said only, "I am here to claim the hand of your stepdaughter in marriage, for she is very beautiful, and I love her."

The stepfather said, "Well indeed, but I do not believe that you are here at all." Turning to the robot on his left side, he said, "Robot!" and the robot aimed a counter-projection projector and turned it on. With that Taekos vanished--for of course it was only a projection--and the stepfather said, loudly so all the robots could hear, "Since the suitor has not shown up, he has forfeited the challenge, and shall not marry my stepdaughter."

But Taekos stepped out from behind one of the robots, and said, "Not so, for here I am." He was no longer so resplendent (for he could afford only the projection of finery), but now only dressed in an ordinary working-class cloak, such as a heart-farmer's son might wear, and he thought to himself, it was a pity that the projection trick would not fool him twice.

"Well indeed, then," the stepfather said. "I have here a fire, and I will very much enjoy watching you sleep in it." And he turned to the robot on his right side, and said, "Robot!" and the robot opened a door. Through the door was a room, and inside the room was a nuclear furnace, with a door just large enough for a man to crawl through. Taekos noted with some interest (for he had once been a spaceship pilot's apprentice, and knew what the engine for a spaceship looked like) that the inside of the chamber would be at an even, cheerful heat of one million degrees.

"I apologize," Taekos said. "But I have brought with me a dictionary," and he rubbed the activation of the dictionary, and murmured to it, "fire." At his word, the dictionary said, in its clear, cool voice, "FIRE is a form of combustion, releasing heat by the combination of a fuel with oxygen."

"This chamber of yours is certainly a fine engine," Taekos said, "but it is not a fire. Shall I call a magistrate, and we shall see if he, too, has a dictionary?"

"Very well, Sir Trickster," said the stepfather, "there is no need for a magistrate." He bid the robot close the door, but at the same time gestured another robot to open a different door. Through this door there was a chamber, and in the chamber was a very large pile of wood. The robot entered and set the wood to burning. "I believe even your dictionary will accept this as a fire."

"Indeed, this is a fire," Taekos said, and walked into the room, swirling his cloak.

"One moment first, Sir Trickster," the stepfather said. "With your pardon?" And with a word from the stepfather two robots stepped to him, and sprayed him with a light mist, one spraying his left side, one his right. "It appears that your skin had been infested with a swarm of microrobots," the stepfather said.

Taekos was taken aback, for indeed he had his microrobots with him, several trillion of them or so (he did not know exactly, for he was too lazy to count them all) and he had carefully instructed each of them in how to turn infrared photons away from his skin. For of course heat is nothing except infrared photons, and if the robots caught each photon by its tail and turned it around to run the other direction--well then! Well indeed! But the mist had set the microrobots into sleep mode, and it would take him many hours to reboot each one of them.

But Taekos had one more trick to play, and this he did. He had a few of his robots left, this time just very simple and stupid ones, and they sprayed water onto the fire, just enough to put it out. He then pulled a sack from his cloak, and from the sack he poured iron dust into the empty fireplace, and then stepped in and went to sleep in the dust. His laziness was indeed famous, but yet he had this one skill, to go to sleep anywhere and at any time.

After some time sleeping, he yawned, and stretched, and rose, saying, "I'm not cold at all. I win, I slept in a fire. And I'm not cold."

"You have to sleep in the fire while it's burning," said the stepfather.

"Really?" said Taekos, wide-eyed as if this though had never occurred to him. "Who says?"

"I say this, and in this castle my word is law," said the stepfather.

"Well, fine enough," Taekos said. He produced his dictionary again. "A fire is combustion," he said.

"Even as I was sleeping, the iron was slowly rusting, and rust, of course, is nothing but oxidation, or, as we can call it, combustion."

"But it is not hot," said the stepfather, scowling.

"And who is it who says that fire has to be hot?"

"I do."

"And I don't," said Taekos. "Here is a dictionary. I win. I claim my prize, and if you do not agree, I shall call a magistrate."

"No, not a magistrate!" the stepfather said. "I will concede to you half of my stepdaughter's wealth. Do not call a magistrate, and we shall both be rich!"

Why is he afraid of magistrates? Taekos asked himself, and with that thought, he called one.

The magistrate robot arrived. "Your dictionary, sir," the magistrate said to him, "is evidently quite faulty. I have consulted the archive of dictionaries, and the compact (although low-cost) model you own should tell you, fire is a form of combustion resulting in visible flames."

"Humph," said the stepfather. "As I said."

"And who are you?" the magistrate asked.

"I," stated the stepfather, "am the legal guardian of this girl, Phoevus, and the trustee of her fortune and of her person."

"No," said the magistrate, "you are not. You are a projection of a recording of a certain Phineas Nator Zond, a sapient personage whose existence has been discontinued seventeen years, seven months, three weeks, two days, eleven hours, and thirteen seconds before this moment. A projection cannot be a guardian, nor a trustee, of a sapient person."

"But this is my stepdaughter, and I love her very much," the projection of the former sapient personage known once as Phineas Nator Zond said. "And if I am not to guard her, and be the trustee of her fortune and her person, then who is to protect her from fortune hunters, and from the evils of the world?"

"She is a sapient personage," the magistrate said. "If she wishes to be guarded, she must see to it herself." And with that, the magistrate robot turned the projection off.

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After a while, when the magistrate had left, and the robots that the stepfather (or his projection) had brought to guard the titanium crystal castle showed themselves to be unresponsive, Taekos said, "Phoevus, my love, your stepfather no longer is in our way, and so we may marry."

And the projection of Phoevus came down, and said, "Taekos, you are charming, and amusing, and clever, but only a foolish girl would marry such a lazy rogue and schemer, and such a foolish girl certainly would come to no good end."

Taekos contemplated this. "What will you do?" he asked.

"I have been here in this titanium castle for long enough. I will be off on my own adventures." And as her parting words to him, she added, "but thank you for dealing with my stepfather."

And with that she was gone. The robots, left behind, began to disassemble the titanium crystal castle, and in very little more than no time at all, it, too, was gone.

And so, Taekos thought, here I am, and left no better than I was.

But then again, no worse, he observed, and went forth to seek his fortune.

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