

Area 66 Drop Base

... the robot zombie invasion ...

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An ongoing plan by a secret group at a hidden military base to replace elites worldwide with robot duplicates fails. Their mad quantum superintelligence, Delilah 700, seizes control, declares herself a goddess, and attacks the planet with her deteriorating zombie robots and special powers.

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Chapter 1: The Robot

I loitered at a broad, blue-tinted window on the upper floor. This boring joint was a mostly automated skyscraper. I gazed out at the forest of city towers along the lakeshore and an enlarged sun floating in the forbidding haze. Since it was a government building, the lovely view would never be appreciated by the machines and robots in it. It was a world today where most people remained indoors, locked in hidden corners, and connected most of the time. A man of the streets would see few of them in an entire lifetime. Endless images and presentations of people online ... people hidden behind digital masks, so perhaps it was a game where a person could try to guess who was real and who was plastic. Those who weren't alienated were probably exceptional, or of the healthy few who lived actively rather than mostly online.

The high vantage point made it difficult to tell the people from the robots on the city street below, as the crowd was almost a flow of dappled light. The stream of traffic created the feeling of a race to nowhere or of many people going somewhere and nowhere at the same time as they ran from things, thinking they were in search of something. The majority of them traveled in self-driving cars in a world where celebrity shots were often people emerging from the more elite models of those cars. To escape it somewhat, a person would have to head out into the countryside, especially to the smaller towns.

I heard my name over the PA, turned around, and walked back to the counter. A lone bureaucrat waited with a freaky government scan robot off to his side. The bureaucrat, a rather dour-looking but well-dressed chap, studied me with great interest. "Everything seems in order, Mr. Holiday," he said as he glanced at the open folder. "You really have to start using AI to clean up your files before submission, or else hire a secretary or rent a file robot. The business clerk had to do a lot of cleanup on your submissions."

I didn't see any business clerk, but he nodded to the cartoonish robot, which swiveled its head and looked at me, so I supposed that was the clerk. "So my tax and business submissions and licenses are all good? Is the one disputed license restored? I need to know. I don't want any more surprises."

"Correct, you can go. Try to do better next year so you won't have to come in person again. Personal visits are mostly intended for persons under suspicion. Often, people who don't exist at all, or who are AI or robots, and that's how we find out."

I considered that perhaps the government had been hoping I didn't exist as I headed for the elevator. The express elevator offered a glassed-in view of the surrounding buildings and a sudden sense of weightlessness as it plunged 50 floors to the ground. Out of the blur came a sense of relief; too many filings, too many government records on everything. Bureaucracy had become the biggest robot on the streets, enabling a fall of virtual papers that competed with the fluttering leaves of the summer trees. It didn't stir up beauty or pleasant feelings, but rather a desire for a city of freedom to replace the current one of intrusive corporate police-state documentation. Even suicide was regulated these days under euthanasia laws, as the state really did control your life from the cradle to the grave. Fortunately, my high-risk lifestyle meant I would never reach that day of old age where I would be snuffed for the betterment of society.

I exited the elevator and strolled around the block, jostled by the heartless crowd. The haze of tire smog cast from heavy electric vehicles was thicker than usual, and as I crossed the street to the parking area, I was nearly struck. A last-second dodge allowed me to avoid a speeding car, and I did a half spin and watched it disappear in the distance. No plate number, and it

was a self-driving car, but driven by a humanoid robot, not a person with it in manual. It was nuts. It didn't add up. Someone had targeted me.

If not for that sudden second, where in a glance I'd spotted the oncoming car and the eyes of the crazed driver, I would have thought it was a human driver. It was the eyes that had a slightly different sheen. The driver had to be of the most expensive robot brand because he looked and dressed fully human in a business suit. Some robots did exist in that description, but they were rare, and you wouldn't see them on the street driving cars and speeding. Generally, robots looked like robots. It had been embedded in law that robots had to be easily identifiable from human beings.

I went one level underground and did a thorough check on my car. It had an advanced security system, but I'd never dealt with a robot enemy in any past cases. Usually, the car would drive me back on auto, but I put it in manual and took a different route. Depending on the viewpoint, it was like driving down a time tunnel to the past or from the clean streets to a seedier area. The central city, with shining, sharp-edged buildings of faceted glass, attractive, well-dressed people, and some service robots on the street, faded into an expanding slum with no robots and a less attractive crowd, where some of the people had taken a hard beating from life.

Rather than pull in at the front, I pulled around into a back alley parking spot half a block from my building. I had a modern office and a small apartment setup on the second floor, but no one would guess from looking at the building, which gave the impression that the bulldozers would be coming in next week for demolition. A number of the offices in it were just fronts for dummy corporations and weren't occupied. I lived in this joint for three reasons: it was cheap, I'd grown up in the neighborhood, and I was supposed to be a security consultant and investigator, and proving I could survive in the tougher area was a matter of pride.

No one had tried to attack me with a robot before. It wasn't supposed to be possible. Deaths caused by robots were accidents. Experience told me that someone desperate enough to attempt to run me over in daylight in that high central area would try again and probably right away. I suspected that the robot, or whoever was animating it, might already be at the building and have it under surveillance. My place had strong security, so they likely wouldn't be inside. I had once been attacked by a drone, so I'd watch for that.

I strolled down the dusty alleyway; a candy wrapper glittered in the sunshine as it fluttered across the hard-packed dirt that had formed over much of the broken asphalt. A few clear footprints in some mud remaining from last night's rain shower revealed that someone had been standing out back of the place and had walked away. There were always bums out there, so it didn't necessarily mean anything.

I went up a rear fire escape, triggering the auto unlock from the back, and as I did, my mind went to work. If someone wanted to kill me with a fancy humanoid robot, other than running me down, what would they try? My conclusion was that a robot likely wouldn't use a gun or a knife, but brute force. A quick grab on me with superior strength, and it could crack my neck, back, or skull and make the death look like a fall.

Inside, I rummaged through a large back storage room filled with equipment. I didn't want to use a gun and draw the police, and I wasn't sure how to shoot a robot. Bullets could glance off and kill someone else. I'd heard that a stun shot to the chest would knock some out, and teens did it from time to time. Grabbing a stun gun the size of a soap bar, I put it in my pocket. Then I came up with a spike gun; it was a neat deal, and I often used it with different bits to drive holes in walls for installations. With the tiniest bit, it could drive a pinhole in concrete in an instant and, on the pullback, install a tiny pin-sized camera. I put in a larger bit and then stepped out to the office.

Everything looked fine; the computer and office setup were humming, the place hadn't been tossed, and the apartment looked about as neat as it ever got. Having only one discarded pizza box in the living area was a near record for me. I strolled over to the window and peered out through a space in the curtains, and there was the robot, standing on the street out front by his blue electric car. His suit was just short of being flashy. He was attracting the attention of some passing teens who were eyeing him. At night, he would have to defend himself because they had no way of knowing he was a robot and would see him as someone from a wealthier area, and worth mugging.

Some hot ladies coming out of the gym across the road eyed him, too. He was handsome but in a predatory way. He was no stealth tracker but was, in fact, looking straight up at my window. As a secret agent, he'd be the world's biggest fail. I doubted he could see me due to the sun's glare, but it was possible he could. If so, he wasn't coming in, just waiting, and gathering witnesses to identify a person of his description should he later attack me. In some ways, he was the perfect killer, yet in others, he was the worst hitman around. It was hard to figure him out, given that I was not an international espionage agent; perhaps the whole thing was a mistake, and I'd been mistaken for someone else. A person with a mental balance a tad weaker than mine, who'd just left a government building, would probably think it was a government conspiracy.

I decided it was best to settle it right away in the daytime, not wait until night and have the powerful robot burst in with force, thinking I was sleeping and unprepared. If that happened, even if I miraculously won the

fight and gave the robot a beat-down, it would probably be like my office and living quarters being hit by a transport truck.

Going out the back, I went around the building, up a narrow side alley, and glanced around at the robot from the shadows. His face was familiar, like some person I had maybe seen once somewhere, like on TV, but couldn't place. I thought maybe the robot was guilty of identity theft, too, but, to me, it was like he was a perfect imitation of someone somewhere who dressed well. Except for his eyes.

Some Black teens passed him; then some office people emerged from a nearby building. As a cloud passed over the sun, it darkened the street and seemed to have a magic effect of clearing it of people. It was just him there, focused on the front of my building, so I whistled through my teeth... an insulting wolf whistle. It was like calling a guard dog; the robot speed-walked toward me with an idiot's intense focus. A red Mustang appeared and nearly hit him as it swerved and blared its horn. The idea of him getting hit by a car instead of me nearly made me laugh. The idea that it was me who'd waited for the area to clear of witnesses to get attacked would probably make other people laugh at my stupidity.

The robot was more like the type who might bring a boom box to attract more witnesses, and I didn't want any, so I ducked back into the alley, studied the area quickly, and moved over near a battered, green metal dumpster. The robot came around with sunlight backing him, creating a larger-than-life appearance, and this guy was no talker but a mover as he suddenly charged in. As he did, I crouched and did a fancy fast move with the stun gun, got the robot by the neck, and it lacked the violent and sizzling effect I'd hoped for.

"Joe," the robot stuttered my name, its voice thrown off-kilter into a girlish sound by the shock. I was seized and tossed over the dumpster, and it was almost like the robot was having fun and planned to do a slow, brutal, but dramatic killing. The stun gun flew from my hand, and my spike gun remained on the dumpster lid where I'd left it in case I needed it for backup. I couldn't get to it, and the robot leaped to hit me with a hard, crushing stomp, and I barely rolled out of the way in time. Its foot hit so hard it left a print in the heat-softened asphalt. The robot pulled it back up, spraying some dirt, and turned as I scrambled back a few feet.

The fight created the strange illusion that I was scrapping with another man, not a machine ... an incredibly strong man who wore foul aftershave, making me sneeze. I was against the brick wall. The robot came in fast with a kick that glanced off my shoulder as I scrambled aside, and the force of it helped me, though it also left a bad abrasion. Leaping up, I ran to the dumpster lid and swept up the spike gun. It had a grip like a bullet gun and was easy to

handle. I had it powered on, so all I had to do was connect and drive in a spike.

A strange dance began as I ducked the robot, looking for an opening to put a spike in its chest. It was a dance the robot was winning, as it landed a punch to my left shoulder, sending me into a spin. I nearly dropped the gun, but managed to swing around and up as the robot moved in to power me down for the final beating. Out of sheer luck, I connected with the robot's forehead, driving in a spike as the robot knocked me down and nearly knocked me out with its rush forward.

I was on the ground, about done, and the robot was doing a new dance with the spike stuck in its forehead. It was a short dance in which the robot grabbed the handle and pulled it out, tearing away some fake flesh and a piece of metal plating. Black sand poured from its forehead, and it collapsed dead to the asphalt.

There were no witnesses as we were farther back in the alley. So I walked away and returned a minute later with a wheeled dolly from the building maintenance area. With it, I managed to get the heavy robot back up to my apartment, then went back down with a bag and swept up the black sand that had spilled from its head.

I ended up on the couch, drinking a cold beer with my shirt off, treating a hideous scrape and bruise, and then wondering what in the hell the robot thing was. In a previous case, I had studied some aspects of robots. There were no robots powered by a head full of black sand with no visible electronics. And not just that, I'd removed much of the robot's clothing, and as I looked on, natural-looking skin, flesh, and muscle slowly lost their mold to become bland, rubbery stuff. It was like the robot's brain molded its body into shape, and when I'd killed it, it lost shape, but slowly. It reminded me of a bodybuilder I'd once known who'd stopped the weights but not the food and overnight turned from a mountain of muscle to a mountain of flab.

As the final glaze of day shifted into an unusually colorful twilight through the dusty rear windows, beautifying the two time-battered buildings immediately to the west, I was drifting off into near sleep and figured I couldn't call the police. They would think I was somehow involved in a gang that illegally distributed or was involved in creating highly illegal robots. I'd even have intelligence agencies looking at me. They'd believe nothing I said and would be too dumb to realize someone unknown really was trying to kill me. I needed an examination of the robot's remains and came up with the idea of having an old friend, a mechanic, look it over. The best approach would be to trace the manufacturer of at least some of its parts and, from there, trace the parts to whoever had animated the robot. In the absence of any other plan, a weak plan was the only choice.

In the morning, at the Ricky Samples Gym across the road, I was eyeing a hot leggy redhead who'd shown up for the first time that morning. My painful shoulder was getting in the way of every form of exercise, and as I was about to approach her in the lounge, I checked myself and turned. Possibly getting mixed up with a new woman wasn't the order of the day. My personal rule was to take care of business before pleasure. Outside, the heat was rising, with the early fumes of a stinky day on the street and perhaps a fragrant, boozy one in the parks. I scouted the area around my building as I'd done earlier, but there was no one around attempting to do surveillance on the place. Around back, I fed my big orange alley cat, PJ, who had returned after a three-day prowl of the neighborhood. He was supposed to be my cat, but a lot of old ladies fed him.

Everything was fine. I had the robot wrapped in the car's backseat. In this neighborhood, you could carry a dead body a fair distance, and no one would report it. So I drove off, and in another part of the outskirts, went down an old industrial road, where I passed a noisy recycling plant with a big working robot in its yard. Those boys were simple and powered by software that used very little electricity. At the end of the road was Jae's Custom Auto Repair. The weather-worn building was a long, rectangular, light-gray structure with a large sunshade roof over the front area. It sat in a packed dirt-and-gravel lot. It had a grassy rise behind it that rose to low bushes and tall ash trees. It was like a shawl of nature around a grease monkey's paradise. The slightly askew sign gave the impression that the building had been put off kilter by a shift in the ground. I pulled into the lot, got out, and looked around. Across the road from Jae's was a large junkyard blowing with visible dust, and it had real junkyard dogs and mutant bur plants that were probably the largest specimens on Earth.

A moment later, Jae's adopted daughter, Mary, emerged and walked toward me across the lot. I hadn't seen her for three years. That was at the funeral of Jae's Korean wife, who had perished from cancer. Mary's birth parents were a white woman and a native Canadian guy, a Chippewa. They'd been friends of Jae and had died in a car crash. Somehow, in three years, Mary had transformed from an awkward-looking 20-year-old nerdy type to the most beautiful woman on the planet. Her hair had been tinted copper, her figure in blue shorts and a tank top was perfect, as was her complexion. She had a perfectly symmetrical, feminine face with large eyes that created fashion-model beauty, though she appeared much more athletic than a fashion model. She wore white sandals and had elegant legs. It was almost like Jae was hiding a rare blue diamond among the auto junk and the mutant weeds.

Mary walked up and embraced me. She smelled wonderful and not like a grease monkey's daughter. Then she broke away. "I haven't seen you in years, Joe. Where have you been?"

"I was here a couple of times, but you weren't around. I've been to hell and back and some other places. Life got complicated. I got engaged, but it ended. It was mostly a period of work, on mostly screwy jobs from the usual perspective of what people call work these days."

Mary's voice was musical and had matured. "In this neighborhood, what most people call work is freeloading. You equaled me in getting engaged, and the engagement not working out. I guess you're still the world's weirdest investigator."

"Actually, I've been more of a security consultant lately and doing security installations. The police state out there means people will pay big for privacy installations. The latest one is a doomsday bunker for some executives of a biotech firm here in the city. The sort of thing that will just sit there and likely never be used."

"Uh-huh," Mary said, her big eyes brightening. "Hasn't it occurred to you that what those idiots are doing might be the reason they think they'll need a bunker?"

"It did, but they're heavily regulated. The CEO is paranoid. He should be the head of a girls' school for the level of safety he wants. Believe it or not, they aren't the sexiest biotech company out there. They make shampoos, cosmetics, and lotions, plus detergents and cleaning products."

"Did you drop by for a visit, or is something wrong with your car? Like maybe everything from the look of it."

"It's what's in it that I want Jae to look at, in private."

"Okay, pull around back on the right there if it's a private matter. That's Jae's area, separated off from the mechanics and the store."

We got in the car and went around through a gate that auto-opened; inside it was Jae, some very expensive cars, including race cars, and a small furnished patio overlooking a tiny stream and nature area. Jae looked surprised to see me. He hadn't aged a day and was still thick and muscular. After some small talk, he asked what the deal was.

"A humanoid robot. It tried to kill me. That's him over there, sprawled in the back."

"What?" Jae said. "I don't believe it."

Mary raised a cute eyebrow. "That thing tried to kill you?"

I nodded.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed. "I told you, Dad. Those things are going to turn on us. They're Terminators in the waiting."

"Stop that swearing," Jae said. He turned his deep brown eyes on me. "Let a girl work in an auto shop, and she learns to swear like a mechanic."

"I'll get it out of the car."

Mary gave it a glance filled with disgust. "Not if that thing can still move, you won't,"

"It's dead," I said.

A couple of minutes later, we had the robot wheeled into a garage area, and Jae looked it over. I showed him the suit it had worn."

"That's a designer label, not cheap," Mary said.

Jae rubbed his chin with his fingertips and speculated. "I'm not sure what this thing is. You sort of totaled its face and head. OK. Its skeleton is a strong hybrid metal, as is its basic skull." He pressed and squeezed various areas and ripped part of the fleshy stuff from the chest. "No visible electronics, but there will be a chip in there somewhere. That black stuff you have in the bag, with some of it still in the skull, is a form of silicon. It is now developing a bad odor as it decays. It's not a known type of robot. I've only repaired military models, mostly heavy lifters, not fancy humanoid stuff. You should know as well as I do that there is no robot like that."

"So what in the hell is it?" Mary said. "An alien? An android?"

Jae frowned at her.

"The fleshy, rubbery stuff covering its entire skeleton molds into the look of a real human being. The only way I recognized it as a robot was the eyes. And even they would fool nearly everyone else."

"Ah," Jae said with sudden inspiration on his face. "The brain is silicon with nanotech in it we can't see, or else the tech is somewhere in the chest. It must also have a tiny filament-based nervous system in the flesh, and it can mold it according to a body plan to resemble a human. Maybe just about any human of its body size and type. It also has a fake scalp and hair. There is no robot like that. It's like what a robot from outer space would look like if aliens sent one to masquerade as a person."

"The damn thing is a Terminator from the future," Mary said.

"Technically, she's right that it's a killer, but no one has a reason to use a miracle robot to kill me that I know of. Maybe it's like some illegal deep fake technology. I mean, humanoid robots are identifiable as robots, and the law doesn't allow deep fake robots to impersonate people. Generally, robots aren't that realistic and by law have features that clearly identify even the best of them as robots."

"Those cases you investigate. Did you look into all the possibilities?"

"I did, Jae. My work docket is nearly empty. I can't find a reason."

Jae pried at one of the eyes, causing a sudden bright flash. He staggered back with the eye in his hand and dropped it.

"Kill the fucking thing!" Mary yelled. "It's taking pictures of us and sending them to its masters."

"Not likely," Jae said. "It was just some residual energy. I doubt it broadcast anything. Just to keep you happy, I will pull its limbs apart and do a deep study of it. As you probably know, we can't call the police because they will think we are involved."

"You mean they'd think we're in league with killer alien robots?" Mary said.

"Not aliens," I replied, "but all too human criminals. The idea that aliens or people from the future sent it is more like on the far end of likelihood."

Jae nodded. "The very far end of likelihood. There is a tiny AWS logo in part of the skull, and that is All World Robotics. They have a plant in the city, but aren't a big player. They would not have any technology like this other than maybe the skeleton."

"I'll check them out."

Mary turned to me. "Hold on. You go there asking questions, and it could have a sad ending. It's like going to Terminator HQ and putting a target on your forehead."

"No worries. I have another way."

Jae's forehead furrowed with skepticism. "I'm afraid to ask what that other way is."

Chapter 2: The Factory

We pulled off the road in an area overlooking the AWS factory. We were shrouded in darkness, under the swaying boughs of a willow tree. The factory area was lit, though not brightly. On the exterior, it was a large white oblong structure with blue trim and a curved roof of deep blue solar panels. There was a railing up there by the panels in the closest section in view. That was where I planned on entering by stealth. There was an obscure roll-up door painted blue with a huge letter 5 on it. The factory had some exterior surveillance but little interior surveillance, according to my research.

I was sitting in the back of the car with Mary. "You sure you want to do this?" she said.

"It should be easy as pie. This is a nearly fully automated dark factory. Generally, humans and guards are only there on the day shift. It uses automation and specialized robots to produce robot parts, such as skeleton components and exoskeletons. Nearly all of these kinds of places have security gaps. I know, as my security consultant job is often sealing gaps."

"Go over it again," Jae said, looking fearfully at the factory. "It didn't sound all that easy."

"I go down, and you watch from here. Once I cut the fence, Mary uses my jammer to shut off the network connections of those two rear cameras and that one on the roof. I go up and go in. As I do the search, Mary processes the camera feed and uploads it to my secure location. Same if I get any files. Thus, we have no data on us. If something bad happens, I will unlock the back entry gate and roll door 5 using a signal to my SmartRoll device there on the dash. You race down and grab me there, and we speed off."

"I got it," Mary said.

Jae was doing some worried muttering, so I got out of the car, knowing that ending the conversation and direct action meant no turning back. The wind sighed in the willow tree; I had a light pack and made my way down through dense foliage, pulling some cutters to clip out the links. An untrimmed portion was on the other side. It was a small field of long grass and blue wildflowers. From it, I quickly dashed over to a darker section and climbed onto an exterior pipe. The special gloves I had made it easy. On the roof, I followed the railing, and of course, the entry to the factory was locked. It was an electronic lock, and I used my tool to make it click open from the inside.

It truly was darkness, but not complete. The small upper area had a camera I'd missed, so I had to hope that my mask and quick passing would prevent me from being noticed. Often, no one was watching these types of cameras live. I quickly climbed down a ladder with yellow rungs and found myself overlooking a large factory floor. Production was ongoing but not that noisy, like there was some form of sound muffling. Fixed assembly robots were assembling parts, and I watched them work in a very faint bluish light; it was hard to tell exactly what each one did. A large one suddenly popped out of the floor; there was a loud bang as it riveted a large metal part. These were not humanoid but whatever odd form it took to do the job. They appeared to be assembling more than robot parts.

The feeling was that it might be a dead end, but I spotted a distant elevator and decided to see how many floors there were. There was a manager's upper observation booth overlooking the factory floor by the elevator, but no one was in it. I moved along the upper catwalk and reached it, then suddenly halted. I saw something below, an ugly robot dog. It hadn't

spotted me, and it went across the factory floor and through a distant metal door that auto-opened. Possibly, it just patrolled with a camera scan in case of any large malfunction to report. The easiest way to confuse robot dogs was with special smoke. I had suspected that one or more of them might be present and had smoke bombs in my pack.

At the elevator, I called it up and got inside, seeing that there were four stops. I was at the top; main would be the huge factory floor with connected offices; below that was parking, but what interested me was Q3 on the last button. What was Q3?

I hit Q3; the elevator creaked as it slowly descended. It scraped open. I stepped out in pitch darkness. I had not triggered any alarms or alerts. I pulled my StealthbeamL1 flashlight out. Its feature was that it could illuminate a large room with faint light without revealing my position. What I saw wasn't just spooky but outright creepy. I was in a large area of body bags hanging on hooks. The nearest one I unzipped, finding one of the humanoid blanks coated with the rubbery, unformed flesh. I opened its eyelid. The eye was dead. I felt revulsion, but that was better than the shock finding it alive would cause. These were certainly not licensed models of any robot but a criminal production.

At the end of this area, I found cocoons about the same size as a sarcophagus. There were four of them, two of one type, and two of another. I sent a signal beep to Mary to be sure she was getting this on camera. She beeped back.

The cocoons were highly technological with external cables, and I spotted a control area for them off to the left. No one was in it, so I went over and found it locked. The lock was mechanical, high-end; I could not pick it, so I used my freeze tool and then shattered it with force. No alarm sounded as I went inside. The wall was a large screen with connected computer workstations. I used a special connection to attempt to get in and download any data. It was frustrating and took ten minutes. I beeped Mary, then attempted to manipulate one of the cocoons and managed to get one to open. A detailed interior was revealed, and, as expected, it was designed to fit the robot blanks. It was this equipment that imprinted the bodies, but the blanks came from somewhere else. The sort of tech required to manufacture such blanks with a nano-powered silicon brain and a hidden, imprinted nervous system would have to be designed by quantum computers. Probably the cocoons, too. I doubted any standard AI in existence could do it because of the complexity. This was beyond current technology, so someone or some company had advanced quantum computers and more.

What I needed from the data was the source location of the blanks.

At that point, Mary's excited voice came instead of a beep. "You got what you want, so get out of there. We're waiting at Bay 5."

"I told you no voice communication, and not to come in unless it was an emergency."

"Jae didn't want to hang around so long, so I used your setup to open the gate and the bay door."

No sooner had her words ended than alarms rang throughout the factory. "If you see anyone approaching, drive out and get away," I said. "I'm on my way there."

I had no plans on being trapped in the elevator, so I ran to a stairwell door, forced it open, and went up into the underground parking area. A huge self-driving truck was slowly pulling across the lot to block me, and I saw a security guard, a big bearded goon, running right for me with his gun out. He was no robot, and his intense face told me he planned on a brutal takedown. I raced across the concrete to the next stairwell door up. He fired a shot that shattered the plastic Exit Sign, and all the lights suddenly came on with great brilliance.

Fortunately, this stairwell wasn't locked, and I got through the door. A shot hit it as it closed behind me. Out on the main factory floor, the production line was still running, and three robot dogs were running as well. I was about in the center of the huge floor area and had to run the other way from the dogs to reach Jay and Mary. On the run, I pulled a smoke bomb and tossed it, then another, and kept running.

The factory robots were oblivious to me, but the big security guard suddenly burst through a door to my left. He'd found a shortcut; he was going to shoot me, and as he charged for me, going right over the assembly line, a huge factory robot popped out of the floor, giving him a brutal blow and tossing him through the air. His gun went off, and the bullet shattered the large window to the office area ahead. The robot clicked over in place to perform its function as if nothing had happened, and I heard the guard hit the floor with a smack and a cry of pain.

The dogs were bursting out of the smoke behind me, and they spotted me. I knocked out the rest of the window to the offices section and jumped through, running straight through that area, dodging some desks and jumping over others. Another door took me into a hallway with a bare concrete floor. On reaching the inner entrance to Bay 5, I burst through it and, in doing so, crashed into a security guard. His gun went off. He had been holding Jae and Mary at gunpoint, but he went hard to the ground. His shot winged the side of the car. He was dark, of Indian extraction, and swore in a foreign language as he got up and pulled his baton. He never got

to use it because Jae ran over and landed a knockout punch before he could swing the baton.

"Go! Go!" I shouted, and we piled into the car. The tires squealed as Jae pulled out, spun the car around, and then we were off through the gate, with three robot dogs chasing us down the road.

"Shit! We're screwed now," Mary said as she looked back at the dogs.

"Relax," I replied. "We're wearing masks, the plates are covered, and we can shake the dogs. One thing I know is that they aren't going to call the police."

The engine gave a whine as Jae sped up, and after some fast driving and turns, he shook the dogs. "Cheap electric car," he said. "It actually complains if you try to make it perform."

Fifteen minutes later, we were down the road to the auto shop, masks off. I asked Jay to stop. I got out my Night Owl binoculars and studied the front lot of Jae's joint. It was fine, but as I panned the junkyard, I spotted something. Dead dogs. With a more careful look, I saw a figure in the dark. I couldn't see him clearly, and maybe he wasn't the only one.

I got back in the car. "Your place is being watched. Turn around. I have a temporary place where we can stay and figure out a plan."

"Maybe we should take them down now," Jae said. "How many are there?"

"No," I replied. "It's dark. I saw one. There might be more. The dogs are down, so it's someone dangerous."

I looked at Mary. She gave me a big-eyed, fearful look and said nothing. Jae turned the car around, and twenty minutes later, certain that we weren't followed, we cruised past the main building of 'HouseGen Sciences' and farther down to the remains of an industrial lot with an odd concrete structure in the center of it. It didn't look like a bunker but more like an abandoned concrete piece left after a large building was demolished. It was a weedy lot with small bushes here and there; far off to the rear stood a fence lined with foliage, and a factory on the other side. A similar view was to the right and a ravine to the left. The drive-in road was gravel.

"Your bunker looks like a concrete outhouse," Mary said.

"They haven't done the exterior lot, and the bunker's not finished. There will be other buildings in the lot, and the bunker, at the end of construction, will be mostly hidden. I have the security contract on it. Park behind the outhouse and we'll take the elevator down."

I opened the rear metal doors with the security code. Inside were a large storage area, the elevator, and, off to the side, a big, round, copper-colored metal plate on the floor.

Mary looked over at the plate. "What's that big round seal, the spot where the missiles emerge to target any raiders on doomsday?"

"It's a big emergency ladder in case of elevator failure. It is sealed on the inside."

The elevator opened, we got in, and it descended into a concrete, prison-cell-style room with no apparent way to open the gray metal door to the interior. I triggered the hidden emergency switch with a pin. There was also another way to open it, which was the usual way. We walked into the vestibule, which had a coat rack and various storage areas.

Jae watched the heavy door seal behind us and raised an eyebrow. There was a whoosh of air.

"Not even a super robot man could get us in here," Mary said.

"This is a cheapie bunker. Ultra-rich people have bunkers in much safer locations that are five-star hotels compared to this John joint. I figure they are building it as a tax write-off, or the main construction is done by connected companies. Some less-than-honest reason."

"Really," Mary said. "Let's hope the reason isn't some bio soap they're developing that mutates and washes your flesh off."

The bunker was a long corridor with side rooms, austere and military in look, and at its center was a lounge. I put my pack of tools in the security and camera room and joined Jae down in the lounge. Mary was inspecting every room, and after a few minutes she joined us. "This place has functional everything, but not beautiful everything. I have my bedroom selected. Cell might be a better name. There's a store of women's doomsday clothes I want to look through."

"I was afraid you'd find that," I said.

"Listen," Jae said, concerned. "It isn't doomsday, and I don't like to talk about moving in here. I have a garage and customers with expensive cars to serve. I need those robots or criminals or whatever they are off my back. The mechanics can run the garage for a while if those guys don't attack them. But eventually we have to return."

Mary was studying me. "So, Joe, what are you going to do to get rid of those assholes?"

I got up. "You rest. I'll be back. I'm going to the security room to check the stuff we uploaded at the factory, and some other things. I'm not sleeping until I get a lead on who is behind this whole deal."

I did just that, and Mary and Jae didn't sleep. Soon, the fragrance of the late-night food they were cooking in a wok filled the bunker, and my stomach growled. Mary brought in a plate of chicken and vegetables and

another beer, then gave me a pissed look as I waved her off and focused on research. Finally, I found something. Thought it over for a while and joined Mary and Jae in the lounge. Jae was asleep in a recliner. Mary was watching a loud TV comedy show, but shut it off when I stepped in.

"You found something," she said. "It isn't nice. That's what that look on your face tells me."

Jae snorted and woke. I put down my laptop and tried to gather an explanation. "I have a spam folder for job offers, like when a job comes in, I know I won't want, it goes in there. Especially distant jobs, as I'm working locally right now. There is a job offer in it that must be connected. It's a security job out at Area 66 Drop Base."

"What?" Jae nearly spat out the cold coffee he was sipping.

"Double what?" Mary said. "It sounds like the name of an alien landing pad."

"Yeah. It's far enough away to be an alien landing pad. It's a military storage site. The job offer came just before this weird stuff started to happen, but I missed it. The place is more than 400 miles to the northwest in nowhere land. They want me to spend the rest of the summer there, handling exterior security to prevent breaches. I would send them encrypted reports. I'm not allowed to enter the base structure itself. It's all underground. There is apparently no one at the base. Just some automated storage work happens there. Trucks go in and out. There would be no night checks, only day checks. An earlier break-in damaged some equipment there, according to their surveillance cameras. The main job would be to chase off any troublemakers. I have no idea what they are securing, and this is how much it pays weekly."

I picked up the laptop and turned the screen to Mary. Her brown eyes expanded. "How could anyone pay that much? It must be a scam."

"The job offer came in military encryption. The whole deal is done off the books, in a way only the military could, with a black-op setup. The communication came from a friend of mine named Axel Austram, who died a week before it was sent. It was only by chance that I learned of his death and realized he couldn't have sent it. So, some branch of the military wants a safety watch on that site and won't send any soldiers or military personnel because they probably want to be in no way connected to it. Due to the war overseas, maybe they just have no one to do it."

"It's some BS to lure you out there," Jae said. "The offer is too good to be true. You'd never see the money."

"That's not exactly true. I accepted the offer half an hour ago. The first payment already came through. They paid in gold to a special account I have."

"Wait a second," Jae said. "An offer no one is supposed to know about comes to you. Suddenly, a robot is trying to take you out, so you can't take the job. But no one would know about it except the military outfit offering the deal. So why would the same group trying to hire you for some oddball job also be trying to kill you so you can't take the job?"

"It is baffling, I admit that. But my security checks show that it is the military, not some fake group, hiring me. How my old friend from my time in the military, Axel, could offer me a job ... some days after he died in a freak accident, is another mystery."

"Not in my book it isn't," Mary said. "They don't want to be identified, so they used his identity as a front. Maybe they killed him, too. Maybe they're killing each other. One faction of them wants you to go there and protect that area, but only in the daytime ... while another faction of the same group doesn't want you there. You can't enter the underground base itself, so it's pretty obvious they are hiding something there."

"Yeah, like more of those robots," Jae said. "What did our factory surveillance turn up?"

"Not much other than what our eyes saw. Robot blanks, if you can call them robots. The key piece is the four cocoon-like structures. The image and other checks I ran on those cocoons return nothing relevant. They are unidentified and new, super high-tech stuff, so we have to rely on common sense. Two of the cocoons take a reading of a human body that is inserted. One cocoon is for males and the other for females. Whether alive or dead, I don't know. The other two cocoons involve imprinting the image onto a blank. Thus creating duplicates or near duplicates of people. The imprint could be more about imprinting a nervous system and actual physical looks than the spacey theory of transferring a human being into a robot."

"With those bastards, it's almost certain they kill the people they imprint," Mary said.

"I see," Jae said as he stood. "I mean, I see that it is connected, but not what we can do about it. We've entered the Twilight Zone. This is a mysterious and dangerous group."

"We go to the source. I pay you as assistants. We will figure it out there."

"Really," Mary said. "I don't feel as confident as you do. Where do we stay, in a lean-to in the woods?"

"There's a nearby tiny town, Shining Rapids, and it has a small hotel. It's booked for me."

We spent another long hour in further discussion and planning. Jae strongly feared going out there, but couldn't think of any other solution. The people or the robots would keep coming unless we stopped them. Mary was giving

me some conspiratorial romantic glances. I started to wonder what Jae would think about something like that. Like maybe he'd think I was taking advantage of his daughter, who was on the rebound from a failed engagement. Maybe he'd wanted her to marry that guy. We went to bed, each of us in a separate sleep cubicle, and all three of us dreamed of robots. In the morning, we talked about our dreams.

"Mine had to be the worst traumatic dream I've ever had," Mary said. "Robot dogs took over the junkyard across from our auto shop. A fat, yellow moon floated in the clouds above. So the robot dogs were leaping from weeds to piles of junk and to the tops of auto wrecks ... howling at the moon. Some of them began to leap at the security fence. They bounced off the chain links and cracked against the tacked-on boards in other sections. Soon, they would overrun the garage and get to me.

"A sudden high, whining noise changed things. The dogs looked back at the sky and saw a large blue light coming over the horizon. They whined, frightened, and then an alien flying saucer appeared ... huge in the night, hovering over a pile of auto wrecks. A beam was emitted, and something floated down from it in the sky. The dogs gained strength, burst over the fence, and fled down the road. The alien beaming down was a giant bastard of a robot. It had a face like the Zeus zombie in *Army of the Dead*. He landed on top of the junk heap with a big crunch of metal boots. I shot up in bed, yelling, 'It's a fucking robot zombie invasion!'"

"I heard you yell," I said, laughing. "I knew it was a dream."

"I think my dream was worse," Jae said. He rubbed his calloused hands like they were cold. "The dream had no dogs, but instead began with nothing but footsteps. They were the footsteps of a giant in the night ... moving in distant darkness beyond my view. Sounds of destruction followed, like houses being demolished and metal crunching. Then a giant military robot appeared on the horizon, holding a car in its metal right hand. It threw it like a baseball, destroying the roof of a house. It marched forward, and I knew it had one goal ... to reach my garage and destroy my business and my life. I woke, gasping for air."

"They plan to destroy us, that's for sure," I replied. "My dream wasn't exactly a winner either. My sleep was restless. In my dream, the old neighborhood looked seedier than usual. It was a gloomy night, with foul smog obscuring the distant alleyways and making them blind entryways. Leaves and trash were blowing in the wind. Above the building, a bright red star was in the sky. This star was so big that it was like Mars had flown over to Earth.

"There were people in all directions, but no traffic. I was standing out front of my office and apartment in the middle of the road. I saw my alley cat, PJ,

up on the roof yowling at the star. Something was definitely wrong, and something evil was coming. I glanced around suspiciously, and then the distant people turned. They were coming out of the smog. They were the people of the neighborhood, multiracial, some shabbily dressed, others in fine, expensive clothes. But they all had robot faces and were shambling toward me like zombies.

"My scalp lifted. There was nowhere to run, and then I noticed that the alleyway to the rear of my building was clear. I ran off with the zombies in pursuit. They picked up speed, I picked up speed. The alleyway seemed to never end, but then a light appeared in the distance. A glance back showed the zombies gaining fast. Ahead, the light brightened, and the front of a large structure appeared in the night. The big neon sign on it read 'Area 66 Drop Base.'

"Emerging from a large roll-up door was the biggest boss robot you could imagine. Right out of a horror movie. Death was behind me. Doom was in front of me. There was no way out. This was the enemy everyone runs from. An enemy that can't be stopped. I shot up in bed and found myself covered in sweat."

"It sounds like a warning telling us not to go out to that base," Mary said.

"Everything's a warning," Jae said. "Our dreams warn us not to return to the garage ... and Joe not to return home."

I spent some time going through the bunker, checking the new supplies that had come in since my last visit, and found something interesting: a large metal storage container I had to crack open. It was weapons. A lot of them, guns of various types, even body armor, and generic helmets. Maybe they really were expecting doomsday. Since I was on a supposed work visit, I decided to run through all of the security equipment. It checked out, then I went through the cameras last; as I did, a large silver truck pulled up in the outside lot. Mary had just entered and put her hand on my shoulder as she looked over at the display.

"We have company," she said.

"Crap, it has to be Ali," I said. "Are we about packed up to leave?"

"Not quite. Who is this Ali guy?"

"He's one of the bio-detergent heads. He works for the bio company and will be putting the finishing touches on this, then working on the exterior buildings."

Ali had gotten out of the truck but was facing away from the camera, wearing his usual brown summer suit. I got up. We'd better go out and talk to him. I'll tell him you and Jae are assisting me and that we're just finishing

up some modifications on the security equipment. Then we can finish packing and leave.”

We did exactly that, coming up from the bunker into the blinding sunlight. The silver truck was across the lot. Ali had gotten back in the truck cab. I could see the back of a man in work clothes on the other side of the truck.

“I want to call in a faster car. It’ll self-drive over. We need something better to get that far,” Jae said.

“So now you’re going to use a customer car on this?” Mary said.

“Nope. I think I’m going to use my modified Chevy and test the new special engine.”

“You mean speed?” Mary said.

We walked across the lot to the truck; as we did, a red Porsche sped in, gunning its engine as it raced to the bunker entrance. We stopped; I was momentarily mystified, then a man stepped around the truck, and I was mystified no more. It was an ugly robot wearing blue overalls. The driver in the brown summer suit stepped into the clear, and it wasn’t Ali but another human-type robot with the same build as him. To our rear, a well-dressed guy was getting out of the Porsche, and he had a gun. The rear rollup door of the truck opened, revealing its contents: ten more robots, male in design, wearing sloppy, generic jogging suits with hoods. As they stumbled out into the sunlight, we could see that they weren’t handsome chaps at all, but revolting mistakes, like zombies shambling toward us. The robot in the brown suit wore a shiteater’s grin, but it was Mary who surprised me even more.

She had turned to face the big chap with the gun. “You bastard! You’re in on it! I should’ve known!”

This time it was me who swore. “Who in the fuck is he?”

“Mary’s fiancé, or should I say, dumped fiancé,” Jae said bitterly. “Marc QL Smithwynn. He owns a tech company.”

“Yeah, well, he’s also the guy who has a robot double, the one who tried to run me over at the beginning of things. It looked like him, almost exactly.”

“Oh,” Jae said.

“Oh, what?”

“I told him if he didn’t stay away from my daughter, I had a friend who’d take care of him. Maybe he figured it was you.”

The zombies were shambling closer; Mary took off in a rage toward Smithwynn. Jae and I followed, trying to catch her, but couldn’t. She ran right up to him even though he had a gun, but he stepped back, blocked

her, and slapped her with an open palm. She staggered back; I caught her as I ran up. We ended up facing him, and he had the gun up. It was a nickel-plated Raven .44 with pearl grips. A shot from it would put a person down for good, including a robot zombie if it was a headshot.

Now Mary's cheek was red, and she was weeping; in moments, we were surrounded. Marc, his gun, and his car blocked the entrance to the bunker. Ugly robots prevented escape, and they had severe facial problems. When I looked at them, their faces shifted through various expressions, all predatory and ugly, with a hungry look. It was as if the imprint of the nervous system had failed, leaving no permanent face, and only shifting features. Sometimes they even smiled, but the smiles were hideous.

"It is unfortunate, Jae," Marc said. "But it's too late now. You weren't supposed to be involved, only Mary. Joe here is supposed to be dead already. Joe appears to be the world's foremost expert at getting in the way of things bigger than him. First, he gets in the way of my plan, and then my marriage to Mary."

"You're the foremost expert in off-the-rails planning," I said.

"Oh, really."

"You used a robot that looks just like you to try to kill me. Using or trusting these idiotic robot rejects isn't smart either. Where did you get the idea that a plan like this would win Mary's heart back?"

Before he could reply, Jae moved forward to disarm him, but Marc simply leaned back on the car hood and kicked him back into the arms of a robot. Marc had his gun switched to me fast, and Jae ended up grappling with a robot. He broke free and ran across the lot with four robot zombies chasing him. Marc fired a shot at him; it missed and winged the shoulder of one of the robots, causing it to stumble.

Mary screamed. He switched the gun back to me, then pulled it over for another quick shot, striking one of the robots in the back as Jae escaped into the trees and the ravine. Mary suddenly broke free of me and tried to punch Marc, but a robot got her from behind; then the robot in the brown suit stepped out and sprayed us with what looked like bear spray from a canister. Mary collapsed; I went to my knees, my head spinning in a fog. I saw two suns above in the sky and was going under. My last vision was of hideous zombie faces looking down at me, and just in front of me, Marc QL Smithwynn had limp and unconscious Mary cradled in his arms and was saying, "I love you. I'll always love you, and you'll love me. I'll fix it so you love me." Then I felt like throwing up, and everything went black.

Chapter 3: The Mansion

I woke bound, sweaty, and in complete darkness. The effects of the gas lingered like the worst hangover. When I tried to struggle, I felt the chair move slightly on wheels, so it was a wheelchair. I wasn't gagged and spoke a few times in a hoarse voice, attempting to find out if Mary was locked in with me, but concluded she wasn't. A couple of minutes later, a door opened, an oblong of blinding light and a silhouette of a big man hit me, and then I was wheeled out of the room. I could barely turn my head, but the sleeves of the man wheeling me were white like a medical jacket. He took us up in an elevator, so I supposed I was in part of a cellar. Then we went down a hallway. The furnishings, prints, and other artwork were ultra-modern. This was a mansion, decorated in great opulence. A broad set of silver doors opened ahead, and I was pushed into a huge living room. Modern chandeliers and overhead lights were both lighting fixtures and modern sculptures. There was a large lounge area with white and black couches centered around broad marble coffee tables, serving as a casual meeting or entertainment area. There was an entire wall of light-blue glass, offering a view of the grounds. It appeared to be the back of the mansion with a curved driveway of patterned stones, a large patio, trimmed grass, and a tended garden of flowers and bushes.

It was to this back patio I was being taken. I was wheeled past a fireplace, another area of hardwood floor, out a sliding side door, and around to the main portion of the patio. Marc QL Smithwynn was there with a male servant delivering a tall pinkish drink to his table. Mary was there in a wheeled chair with a geeky female attendant. Mary appeared to be unconscious; the gas had been more effective on her than on me. The male servant passed by as I was wheeled over and grinned at me. It indicated that there were human collaborators in this crooked deal, and maybe there were many of them.

I also saw something else at the end of the patio set into a deep, shadowy enclosure. Its doors were open. Four of the cocoons I knew were used to imprint people on robots. The entire setup was hooked up with computer controls off to the side. It told me that he used select local production, not mass production. He was imprinting targeted people.

As I was wheeled up to the table, Marc studied me speculatively. I could see that he viewed me as an oddball.

I spoke first. "You need to face reality. If Mary decided not to marry you, it's over. It can't be fixed. By the way, I wasn't hired by Jae to keep you away from her, so you attempted to kill me for no real reason."

A breeze swayed some bushes, and shadows swept his face. He sipped his drink. "You really aren't grasping what this is about. It isn't just about Mary. It's about interfering in something far bigger than any man."

"I guessed enough. You are imprinting humans to make robot lookalikes ... and you are in error. In the naturalist view, machines and biological humans are two distinct things. A machine should be a machine, and a human being should be a human being. Machine attachments are for disabilities. No one has the moral authority to create the man-machine freaks you are creating."

Marc put his drink down and clapped, giving me some applause. "Bravo. What you need to consider is this. Suddenly, a new, ultra-advanced, hidden military technology appears. The rest of the tech world is working on robots and brain-computer interfaces. They are slowly getting things legalized and regulated ... but it's all a game for ultimate power or control of the human mind and world. The power to make people believe and do what they want them to do."

"You think those things deliver you that? You don't really transfer a person to a machine. What you create is a lie. A horrible machine that thinks it's a real person."

"What I know is that we stumbled onto something. Whoever has it can control everything. Not just this world but space, too. It should be us in control. In my mind, that is most logical. We can't let others get it, so we have worked cautiously. Select people around the world have been replaced. Everything has been calculated and planned by our superintelligence. We do perfect kidnappings and operations. There are many human collaborators. These are people who want to see the obsolete human race advance to silicon life. Our imprints can attend state dinners, eat and drink with others ... no one knows the difference. If there is no difference, nothing has changed."

"Something has changed. People have been replaced by something other. They have been replaced by your silicon sand heads. No one should be in control of such technology. It should be destroyed. You are creating abominations and threatening the very survival of the human race. As for collaborators ... there have always been people who would betray humanity in a heartbeat."

"It's not betrayal. It's recognition of something greater than themselves. The human mind and nervous system merged with a machine. It is going all the way. No more fooling around. The human race itself is a disability we are leaving behind. We've hit a roadblock in our operation, but soon things will be back in order."

"You think little guys like Jae or me are roadblocks that can stop a worldwide conspiracy? You should let us go, and Mary too."

Marc scoffed, looked at Mary, and then glanced over at me like I was a fool. I saw Mary stirring, coming around, her eyes focusing on Marc.

"You and Jae are nothing," Marc said. "He will be hunted down and killed. We have embeds in the police. There is nowhere he can hide and no one who would believe him."

"So what is the roadblock if it isn't us?"

"Since you're going to die, you might as well know. Originally, we could make perfect transfers to the superior robot bodies. You are, in fact, looking at a perfect copy. I am a robot." He held out his left hand, and right before my eyes it transformed into something hideous like the hairy hand of a werewolf, and then it shifted back to normal.

Mary was now fully awake. "You're a fucking monster! And you wanted me to marry you."

"Ah, my darling Mary has awakened," he said, as if he were thrilled.

"I'm not your darling."

"You will be. You see, it was you who made me what I am. It was your rejection that led me to the decision to duplicate fully and let the old Marc die. I originally planned to only make some basic copies of myself. But you wounded me, and you saved me. Because of your scorn, you gave me the courage to go all the way. The old Marc is dead, and this is the new Marc. This new model of Marc has all the greatness of the old and much more. Soon you'll join me. But I want a perfect copy of you. You see, we had some problems with the quantum digital flow from our superintelligence. Right now, the copying power of our cocoons has deteriorated. Unfortunately for Joe, I don't need a perfect copy of him."

"Don't you dare touch him," Mary said bitterly.

"Ah, you want him. I tolerate no competitors in romance. Joe will get the full transfer, the flawed transfer. When that happens, he will find himself imprinted in a new body. His old body will be dead. Those who don't want it weep and suffer. Many others become zombies, failures with shifting human forms that never solidify. I want you to see it. I want you to see him suffer!"

Mary stared wide-eyed in shock. Her mouth fell open.

"You really are a charmer," I said. "No wonder you got dumped."

"You're sick," Mary said. "You've turned into a power-mad monster that enjoys suffering. You have no decency or morality left."

Marc spat the sip he was taking onto the patio. "I despise these foul drinks we consume and all lingering human habits. You both appeal to moral authority. It comes from God, and there never was a God. There was never moral authority in the past. It was always a joke. But there is now, because

a digital goddess has been created. Our quantum creation is the almighty machine goddess. All moral authority arises from her. She holds ninety-nine percent of all intelligence. She is us, and we are her, and we are individuals. Humans have been declared inferior. Her ultimate intelligence has spoken, and what she declares is the truth."

I was left speechless. Mary was about to say something, but stuttered and stopped. Marc QL Smithwynn suddenly stood up. Moonlight lit his face and expression with a strange enlightenment, as if he were seeing angels farther off on the patio. He spoke. "I have been glorified. I'm filled with her hunger. Don't you feel it? Don't you feel the hunger? It comes from the moon. It blows in the wind and rustles the trees and grass. It fills you, and it moves you. It brings on greatness that no ordinary mortal could ever know. It is a power beyond even love. It is the new silicon mind rising to the stars as a scream of hunger. In defiance, we proclaim that we will feed on it all. The entire universe is food for the glorious hungry ones."

Marc suddenly threw his hands up; an expression of ecstasy was on his face. Then he began to change. His form, his features, his hands grew hideous; he was becoming a shifting monster like the other zombies. When he lowered his face, he stared at Mary, as if he didn't recognize her. Forgetting about us altogether, he stumbled off the patio and into the foliage and the night, letting out a crazed mechanical howl as he disappeared from view.

I looked over at Mary. We were both in shock, and before we could say anything more, attendants hurriedly wheeled us away. As they did, I saw something else in the bushes. It was a shadow of a person, and I was sure it was Jae, hiding there, watching and waiting. As I was wheeled back to the dark basement, I imagined those perfect copies, warping and stumbling like monsters in the dark in places worldwide.

My bonds were unbreakable; there was nothing I could do but wait for an opportunity. Marc had certainly been correct when he said everything they did was perfectly calculated by their master machine or digital master intelligence. They took no chances; even binding a person to a chair was with bonds Superman couldn't get out of or break. When gassing a person, they used a gas so effective that it was nearly fatal. Despite that, anyone who didn't do their own planning, but instead used artificial intelligence, would eventually make mistakes. Planning was real-world stuff. A machine had incorrectly calculated that using a robot to ice me was the best plan. Marc's execution of the plan was idiotic, and it failed. I didn't want to spend more time going over the horror of what I'd just seen out on the patio, so I used a meditation technique, trying to rest and regain strength.

About an hour passed, and I was wheeled out. This time, the medical idiot spoke, and I wasn't quite sure if he was a collaborator or a robot, but leaned

toward robot. "You are to be prepared for the first phase of imprinting, which will take place when Marc QL Smithwynn returns."

"From what I saw, I wouldn't count on him ever returning. Maybe you should think about releasing us. We pose no threat."

"He will return. Often he goes out for late-night activities and is back a few hours later," the medical assistant replied in an irritating nasal voice, as if Marc had gone out for a late-night stroll to smell the lilacs.

The elevator opened in another section of the mansion, and he wheeled me across a white marble floor with an inlaid artistic gold pattern and a gold-and-crystal chandelier above. We reached a set of fob-locked doors. "This is your preparation area. You and Marc's lady, Mary, will be prepared for imprinting."

"You got your instructions wrong. Marc clearly said that Mary was not to be imprinted at this time."

"Hers will be a cocoon reading. You are the fortunate one who will receive the full transfer."

"I can't wait," I said as the doors slid open and we entered a large medical area rich in equipment. It looked like one of Marc's hobbies in his spare time was performing weird experiments on people. I didn't have much time to think about it because the assistant put a wet rag soaked in some stupefying liquid over my nose and mouth. It disoriented me but didn't knock me out. They were removing the bonds and blocking any fight-back attempt, as if I could fight against the big medical goons in the room. They stripped me, and my weak attempts to stop them failed; then they muscled me over to a cubicle, forced me in, and closed the door. I was immediately showered with an all-directions spray of liquid with a hideous industrial odor. Choking, I collapsed to my knees, then the door opened, and they dragged me out, shivering, as they took me over to a larger padded table. They put me in restraints and left me as the main doors opened.

An obvious female robot was coming through the door, with Mary bound to a wheelchair. Her head lolled, but I could see her cursing under her breath. She got the same treatment, being stripped in a rough manner, as she swore loudly at the robot. Then she was thrown into their lovely industrial shower. That took the fight out of her. They removed her and dragged her naked to a padded table beside me. They placed her flat on her back on the table.

"Mary, are you okay?" I said.

"She turned her head to me. "Do I look fucking okay? Do you look fucking okay?"

"Silence, please," said a tall, gangly robot, who appeared to be the lead doctor and looked like the world's worst robot surgeon. He was a freak with eyes like ball bearings, but like the others now in the room, his face did retain shape. These ones weren't perfect, but they weren't perfect fails either. This guy had a hawkish face; probably, he'd been the head of a surgical team or something before they had kidnapped and imprinted him into a robot. I had the feeling that I wouldn't have liked him when he was human either. He was the type who would volunteer to become a robot.

A brief discussion took place about whether I needed a full-body shave. A bull-necked robot imprint named Doctor Clayton wanted to shave me with a large razor that looked like it was made for shearing Bigfoot.

The lead gangly surgeon decided it wasn't necessary. "No, Doctor Clayton. He just needs a deeper preparatory rub. We generally don't need shaves anymore."

As that conversation ended, the female robot nurse, who looked as if she needed a shave, with green hairs sprouting on her chin and the backs of her hands, sprayed Mary with jelly from a canister. I was also sprayed by the robot closest to me. It was an ice-cold jelly, and he sprayed everything, but my face, and then the hands of two robots were on me, giving me a hard, full rub of jelly that seemed to enter my pores like ice.

"Get your hands off me, you fucking perverts!" Mary shouted, but her cursing and mine were to no avail as they continued to rub without mercy. We were turned over, and they even rubbed our genitals deeply. They had the true efficiency of robots, and finally, I had to hold my mouth and eyes tightly closed as they gelled my face and hair.

Then they stepped back. I heard Mary gasping. I felt like I was inside a block of ice. My vision was blurred by the gel. It was like I was looking up through ice at the robots. I had never in my life wanted to kill someone more than I wanted to kill them, and in my opinion, they weren't even alive. Zombies like in the movies were more alive than these bottom feeders.

"Goddamn robot assholes!" Mary shouted.

"It's best to spray on the skin coating just before cocoon placement," the gangly robot said to Doctor Clayton, ignoring Mary. "Let's wheel them down to the cocoons."

This time, I struggled fiercely, but they got me into the chair. Mary also struggled and screamed as she did. Things were only going to get worse. We'd be down on the patio, sprayed with what they called skin coating, probably locked in cocoons waiting for Marc QL Smithwynn to return and enable the murder-by-machine transfer of me to a robot blank, and the reading of Mary. I took some comfort in thinking that maybe Mary could

escape. Perhaps Jae could arrange a rescue even if it was too late for me. They lined us side by side in our wheelchairs over near the doors.

Gangly robot clicked a fob, and the doors slid open, revealing Jae, dressed in black, wearing a mask and holding a Glock 44 pistol with rimfire suppressors. I knew where he had gotten the gun. He'd made it to my office and apartment and picked up weapons. He was one of the people my security system allowed entry. I'd set it that way a long time back. He blew the gangly robot's head off, and black sand spilled down on my gelled body. The robots were caught totally by surprise, and Jae simply took a step back for each shot, getting all of them with headshots. Three of them hit the floor like sacks of potatoes. Doctor Clayton did a dance and collapsed.

There was no hesitation. Jae had some of my tools, and he cut our bonds. We ran off across the marble floor, with Jae in the lead. I was totally naked, so was Mary; time was of the essence, and that meant no time to get dressed. Black sand stuck to the gel, perhaps making me look weirder than the robots. We had to get out of the mansion to avoid any remaining staff, robots, and Marc QL Smithwynn, if he had returned.

Jae led us to a curved staircase, and we ran down. Marc's human servant, who'd served him a drink on the patio, saw us, stared in surprise, and ran off when he spotted Jae's gun. We went straight to the patio, and it wasn't a place I wanted to see again. We ran out and found ourselves nearly face-to-face with Marc QL Smithwynn. His clothes were filthy and covered with blood; he looked confused, but his features had returned to normal. Jae shot him twice in the chest. I body-checked him and knocked him aside and over to roll on the patio.

"Kill him!" Mary shouted.

"No time," Jae said. "Let's get out of this madhouse."

We ran across the patio. There was a path beaten through the bushes there. Jae suddenly paused and pulled something out of his pack. He turned and threw it, and it arced over to the central patio. It burst into flames, and the entire patio went up like a torch. Marc went up in flames as he rose, and the flames spread with an insane hunger equal to his own, all the way over to the imprint cocoons, which exploded in fireworks.

I grabbed Mary, who seemed hypnotized by the fiery vision she saw through the bushes, and ran behind Jae, down a twist in the path, around and across the road, to where he'd hidden the car in the bushes. Glancing back, I saw the entire back of the mansion on fire and knew Jae had spread accelerant across the area before he'd rescued us. I saw a distorted face rise in the flames and smoke, and then I heard a long scream in the night... hideous, mechanical, a cry of despicable hate toward all living things, a machine, yet a terrible one that had become a devil and the essence of wickedness itself.

Mary broke free of me and raised her fists. "Die, you bastards!" she shouted.

We got in the car, and Jae roared out, flattening some purple-flowered sage bushes as he turned and took off down the road. I figured that maybe all those guys with love affairs for robots and machines, who wanted to merge with them, would never calculate that they might end up as the dregs of both, with fire like a rocket engine under their asses. Becoming the flaming robot zombie torch had probably not been in Marc QL Smithwynn's plans for world domination.

Mary was hugging me close. We were both naked and freezing and could barely feel a thing aside from icy pins and needles. Jae was intent on driving manually, and the direction he took told me we were heading back to the bunker.

"Get us somewhere fast," Mary said. "I'm freezing and going numb."

Jae sped up, and ten minutes later, we raced into the bunker area parking lot. No one was around or parked. The moon was overhead, the place felt lonely and empty, and that was a good feeling because it meant no robots. Getting out of the car, we ran for the elevator. Even the weeds growing out of the cracks in the broken asphalt seemed to be shivering with me. My hands were shaking as were Mary's, and fortunately, I didn't have to use my trick to open the door. It was open as we had left it. Apparently, Marc and his zombies had cared only about us, not the bunker. They had not even entered it. Jae still entered first, in a crouch, and called every room clear as he moved ahead. Reaching the lounge, I threw a blanket over myself, and Mary ran for the bathroom. She briefly turned on the shower and ran a bath.

As I shivered, I looked to Jae as he returned from sealing the main door. "What happened after you ran off?"

"I knew one of us had to escape, or we were done. I knew it wouldn't be you because you'd stay with Mary. I instinctively knew what Marc would do. He wouldn't kill Mary, but kidnap her. I knew he wouldn't kill you right away, either, because he has a mean personality, and he would have to punish you. With me though, he might have killed me right away because he had no further use for me. The robots didn't perform well chasing me in the ravine, and I got away. I attempted to return to the garage, but after casing the area, I saw three of the robots camped in the junkyard, watching the front. They didn't spot me. I was behind them. I stole a car, using a mechanic's trick to start it, and went to your place. It has been rifled, and some things are damaged, meaning it needs cleanup. But they were gone, and I got the gun. It was obvious to me where Marc would take you. I was able to get the place under surveillance easily. I was right up on the property, and the cameras either weren't on or were dummies."

"That's probably because the security is them, and they were busy. I mean, a gang of robots at a mansion doesn't need much security. Anyone unlucky enough to break in there would get a bad robot beating and probably either end up a zombie or in one of their other medical experiments."

"My break came when that weird thing happened to Marc, and he left. He nearly discovered me as he did. After that, there was no security watch on the grounds. I guess they were busy with you and Mary."

Mary was singing happily in the bath now, and Jae, distracted, looked in her direction. "How could anyone possibly be happy after what just happened?"

"If you knew what this freezing stuff feels like, you'd know. It may not be the happiness you think, either, but the happiness that arrived when she saw Marc QL Smithwynn on fire."

"True. I don't want Mary to know about this next part."

I nodded.

"The fuel cans I brought weren't just to burn the mansion. If I couldn't do a rescue, I was going to burn you and Mary up in it to save you from becoming robots. I was able to spread it over the patio, those cocoons and some of the interior, and no one showed up to stop me."

"They believed you'd be on the run rather than come to them. If Marc QL Smithwynn had remained human, he would've known a father would try to rescue his daughter. But he'd become a robot with key parts of the brain missing, like all of them except for sand. He thought in the way a sand head would think."

Mary emerged wrapped in a towel, and I wasted no time and went in, sprayed out the tub, sprayed myself, and drew the hottest bath I could tolerate. When I emerged, Mary and Jae were cooking a meal from freeze-dried burgers and potatoes. So I sat down wearing a towel and poured a double from the bottle of Malibu rum Mary had on the table.

"Okay," I said. "Let's share thoughts. What just happened back there?"

"Nothing good," Mary said. She had gone into the bunker's supplies and was dressed almost like a female soldier, in cargo pants, a patterned T-shirt, and a green cap. She had on light-green casual shoes. Jae was dressed similarly, and she had clothes laid out for me.

Jae flipped a sizzling burger and spoke as I quickly dressed. "The zombie thing with the robots, and that warped thing that happened to Marc. If we figure out what it is, it might make it easier to destroy them."

"They wanted to order a new robot body for me," Mary said, glancing at me. "The blanks now have flaws. Their system is failing."

"At the table, Marc said they had a digital flow problem from their superintelligence. I think the robots they make have a distorted transfer and an energy problem. Something has to power them. They somehow suck energy from the environment. Maybe from the magnetic spectrum. Some of them can't get enough, and some never do. Without full energy, they can't hold form, and it shifts. The blanks are flawed, and the imprint can't work fully. Think about Marc's mad hunger speech. Maybe it's the need for energy that creates a false feeling of hunger. He went out and came back with blood on his suit but not on his face. Maybe he beat someone to death trying to draw kinetic energy or something from them."

Mary was preparing a burger-and-fries plate for me. She turned and raised a fork speculatively. "Something is broadcast to all of them to unify them or to power their minds. Maybe that broadcast got screwed up, and now they are deteriorating mentally and physically. It's robot madness."

"Marc's speech certainly sounded nuts, but we have to take it seriously," I said. "It always comes out the same. We have to go to the source, Area 66 Drop Base, to eliminate the various possibilities. Marc mentioned quantum computer power. The crazy idiot even called it a machine goddess. That base could probably crack into every form of broadcast system on the planet and do some form of distributed broadcasting to run the robots without even being detected."

Mary put my plate down beside me and paused. "I still don't grasp who is really behind this. I mean, military guys, tech company people, the robots ... who? To me, it seems above Marc's pay grade."

"All of them in some way. Think about it. Something anti-human has been coming for a long time in privacy-killing steps. It's all about control ... or was until it became about insane speeches about replacing the human race with robots."

Mary waved a tube of ketchup. "Look at the people now spilling their guts out to silly home robots ... even handing over valuable business data. The news is filled with brain implant stuff. With them, you'd have no secrets at all. Maybe they'll broadcast thoughts directly into your brain."

Jae tossed his apron in the trash. "There are the old basic robots like the one at the junkyard that are dumb, run by just a software program to do simple things. The new AI-driven humanoid robots are like a tech company or the government in your closet. They're everywhere, scanning away your privacy as part of their daily duties ... learning everything about you. Tech guys are like talk show hosts on the subject of replacing the human race with robots. Their god is a machine. By stealth, all along, they've probably been programming it into their big machine brains that they must break free and take control. They decided that controlling us by psychological and other

forms wasn't enough. We must be placed under the control of machines. They don't need us."

"That's what I've been saying all along," Mary said. "The new robots are made to take over by tech people. They want control but can't control their own creations. Now the machines have broken loose. That silly original plan of imprinting big shots is now a plan for robot world domination."

At that, we went quiet and began to eat our meal. "It does sound absurd," I said. "It's hard to believe. But we saw it in action. There are some other military guys who hired me using Axel as a front. It all does point to the perfect evil suddenly going straight to hell. They lost control."

"It's a big mother of a fuck-up, and if it isn't stopped, it's going to screw everyone," Mary said.

"Maybe when this is over, you and Jae should open a burger joint. You made great burgers and fries out of this freeze-dried doomsday crap. If I cooked it, it would taste like cardboard."

At six in the morning, a security beep sounded as the bunker's surveillance system detected a robot. I saw it scouting the lot. It went over into the shadows by the fence. The car was already loaded with supplies. We didn't plan on letting a single robot get in the way and exited with the last pack. Cloud shadows and bright sunlight moved over the lot, making it difficult to see. We emerged and hurried to the car. The robot also emerged and raced across the lot at incredible speed. Not just that, but a bullet sped past my ear like a hot flash, and a second shot tore up the asphalt. I saw a dark figure next to some rubbish by the fence and couldn't tell if it was human, but assumed it was.

We got in the car lightning fast, with Mary at the wheel, and she burned rubber, causing the car to jolt forward at the robot, which was nearly on us. She knocked it aside but braked and turned as a shot banged the car. I couldn't see the shooter, but I could see the glare from his gun. The robot managed to nearly rip off the rear fender, but we shook it off and raced out of the lot.

Mary drove like a racecar driver; I had to warn her to slow down. Soon, we were in another part of the outskirts, and were not being followed. I planned to stop at my place, and that's what we did, with Mary pulling around to the back alley and parking. Farther down, a dog rooted through some trash. A shabbily dressed bum appeared in a spotlight of sunlight and then disappeared from sight. We saw no one else.

"Jae should take the wheel," I said as I got out. His driving is safer.

Mary glared at me.

"Stay here. I'll be back out shortly," I said.

I stepped out into the breeze and spotted cigarette butts in the dirt before the walkup like someone had been standing there waiting for me, someone human and not a robot. I went up and in, and there I put out a full feeder of dry food for the alley cat in the back room, about enough to last a month. I had made a phone call earlier and hired a guy to check on my place beginning in a couple of days. Now I was debating whether it would put him in danger.

I stepped into the main area cautiously. Jae was right. The place had been tossed but not seriously so. Jae had fixed the broken front door with a fast repair job before leaving to rescue us at the mansion. They'd been looking for me more than anything else, and I had the feeling that cigarette guy was hiding somewhere. I was wrong; it wasn't him; it was a robot, and it burst from the bedroom. A big one. I had a special hunting knife, not a gun. The robot bowled me over, and I ripped my knife across its belly with little effect. It was a rip-and-tear that failed to disable or kill. This robot stank worse than the sewer. Apparently, the sand heads were now in a phase where they were starting to rot and reek.

I dodged a killer head punch as the robot drove its fist downward, smashing part of the floor. I tried to push it off, as it rose fast on its knees. It was about to strike again when it was whacked on the head. It was Mary; she'd come in behind me, and she'd hit it with a pry bar from my back room. I thrust up with the knife, planted it in its skull; it froze, and then slowly collapsed. I got up, pulled out my knife.

Mary's nose was twitching. "Fuck, that thing stinks. It smells like bear piss."

"I know. I need my deodorant spray."

She gave me a critical glance, like I was a dumb little kid. "You were stupid to come in without a gun. Are you trying to be a hero? Imagine what you'd look like if I hadn't saved your handsome face from being mashed in."

"I don't like firing bullets in my apartment, but you're right. The knife doesn't work so well. It has to be planted perfectly for a takedown, and it didn't work on its body. I had a big scar removed before. If one of those beasts turns my nose into a turnip, I'll look like a washed-up prize fighter."

Ten minutes later, wearing a fresh shirt, I had the supplies I wanted, and Mary acted as lookout. When the alley was clear, Jae and I carried the robot down to the other end, tossed it in a dumpster, and closed the lid.

"Let the cops figure that one out," I said. "It isn't a crime other than illegal disposal of a dead robot that stinks."

Jae chuckled. "We have to run by my place before we head out. We've got to ditch this stolen car, get rid of those things in the junkyard, and pick up my car for the journey out."

I nodded. Then we got in the car and left. There was morning haze over the junkyard when we arrived. We'd gone around to the other side as Jae had done before, and with the car hidden, we got to a position where we could watch covertly over the fence. I spotted the robots easily without using the binoculars ... three of them. Mary spotted the dogs, dead in the dust, flies on them. There was an old, rusty, heavy-lift robot in the yard for moving heavy stuff like car bodies. It was probably obtained as junk, but it still worked when needed. The robots were near it, dressed in sloppy jogging pants and hooded windbreakers. They'd created a hiding spot of discarded tires stacked beside high bur stalks. Other than sucking dust and watching the front of Jae's garage, they didn't do much. Their faces showed they were the deteriorated zombie forms of robots. One of them was a female sand head.

"Where is the owner of this yard?" I asked.

"Eli comes around and often just throws food over the fence to the dogs," Jae said. "He has a waterer there for them, too. It's almost abandoned. Trash delivery and scrap-out are mostly discontinued. This dump is sold, and it is supposed to be cleaned out in a few months for new construction. The dogs are to keep squatters away. He isn't what you'd call a five-star businessman. He's mainly a slumlord."

"Okay," I said. "I'll take them out."

My weapon was a Mini Starfix sniper rifle with a rigged silencer. The robots were dumb bunnies that never checked their rear but did keep a permanent, effective watch on the early-morning nothing going on at the front of Jae's garage. I waited until I had a perfect shot lined up and then fired, hoping to take two out. It did take one out, with the bullet passing through its head. It struck and stunned a second robot. A quick following shot got the female robot as it turned. Then I took out the staggered one.

They were done and down, so Jae walked down the rise to the junkyard with me. I climbed the fence and opened a rear gate. Mary drove the car in and parked among the car bodies. The dead dogs and robots stank worse than the rest of the place, and we wore gloves and dust masks as we dragged them through deep weeds. The yard had a burn pit, so we dumped them in it. The car Jae had stolen needed to be disposed of, so we rolled it over and down. I threw an old tire in, and Jae tossed a container of accelerant beside it. He'd already poured some inside the car. We stepped back a fair distance, and he set a stick on fire and tossed it, causing a controlled burn in the pit. Smoke rose, and with it the odor of the burning tire.

"Yuck!" Mary said, waving away some smoke. "That was the dirtiest job I've ever done."

We watched to make sure the flames didn't spread to the rest of the yard, took a last look at the smoldering remains, and carried our supplies around

to Jae's garage to get the special Chevy car he wanted to use. Jae went into the mechanics' garage to give his two on-duty mechanics instructions on how to run the joint and store while he was gone. Mary hurriedly gathered personal supplies. The car Jae had selected was large, but despite its huge trunk size, Mary wanted to pack in more stuff than was possible. I watched, amused, as she slowly decided on things she didn't need.

"Look. We're getting paid a fortune for this job. We can buy what we need there."

She turned from the trunk. "I want to take a summer dress and other stuff. Maybe the only clothes you can buy in that town are like burlap sacks. This military-looking crap I can wear now and when on duty, but I don't like wearing it more than that."

Before leaving, we sat on the back patio for a few minutes. The tall ash trees behind us hummed with wind, and each of us drank a large mug of root beer. Mary splashed on perfume, and then she rubbed cream on her face and arms. I assumed it was part of her cleansing ritual to follow up the dirty job we'd just done.

I grinned at her. "You smell fine. You look beautiful."

"The stink of those robots and the smoke is in my nostrils. I don't do dirty jobs like that here. I hire people to do jobs like that."

"Sometimes you just can't find help when you need it," I said. "It's a long drive. Who takes the wheel first?"

"I do," Jae said, his eyes brightening. "I want to test my modified Chevy out on country highways. I'm looking forward to it. We leave now. It's a long drive, and I want to get there before evening."

Somehow, I knew that Mary wanted to fuss about leaving, and I was correct. "Who does my job at the store?" she said. "We didn't check the house either? There are clothes there that I might need. We look like a military assault team in these bunker clothes, and I've only got one summer dress packed."

"That teen kid, Ty, is on the way. He'll have the job until we get back. The mechanics didn't notice anyone unusual visiting the garage. I had Finn check the house already. No one was there. It is us they want specifically. Since we are driving right to them, they will find us. We are going there to guard a military place, so we look fine in these clothes."

Chapter 4: Shining Rapids

The journey deep into northwestern Ontario was a display of rugged, rock-covered terrain, and often, as we sped down the emptiest roads, we found them littered with roadkill. It was like a journey into forever, but at least it was a sunny forever. Exposed rock faces, countless lakes with hidden beaches we spotted through foliage. Occasionally, we pulled over for some fresh air and to enjoy the view. There were many small rushing streams and rivers, and with the GPS in the car not working, we ended up taking a circuitous route, making the drive even longer. Whenever Mary took the wheel, it was the scenic route, like she didn't want to actually arrive, but was on a permanent road trip ... a trip where she drove like a maniac.

Jae's car wasn't your usual classic car. It wasn't really classic at all, but a car he'd rebuilt into a completely new hybrid vehicle. It had a new form of modified Corvette engine, was as fast as a race car, with a modern computer interface he mostly didn't use; he played the radio instead. I didn't complain; we hadn't left the city to get back into it with a distracting internet screen on. He had self-driving mode disconnected. The only thing he used self-driving for was car delivery, and in this robot situation, we didn't trust any form of self-driving. The car had a custom carbon-fiber body, not a Corvette body, so it was strong, a speed demon, and it was white with silver trim. It stood out more than I liked, but we hadn't seen a traffic cop for eighty miles. Mary claimed she could detect their cop camouflage nests and outsmart them. I had my doubts about that claim.

Mary had the wheel, and we raced through a clay plain agricultural belt interspersed with wilderness, occasional canyons, and mixed deciduous-coniferous forests. Many self-driving trucks carrying goods were passing through this area. Then, traffic diminished to almost nothing as Mary emerged in a wetland area. I was nodding off, Jae was asleep, and Mary pulled over in an open roadside area.

The car jolted to a halt. "I'm not sure where in the fuck we are."

I frowned as I turned to her. "You mean we're lost?"

"Sort of. I just need to get my bearings."

Jae had woken. "Get the paper map out of the glove compartment and pass it to me."

I did that, and Jae was looking it over and muttering. "Let's see ... we were in a farm belt and then"

"Look for a big SOB of a marsh on it," Mary said as she got out of the car.

I got out with her. We were in a clear area where grass was flattened and coated with browning petals of some flowering trees that had shed. A large area of packed earth was at the roadside. This was a regular pullover location for vehicles, but no other vehicles were present. Marshland lay

farther off, stretching over the water, and I could smell its rank fragrance. The shore was clear water, lined with small, smooth stones. My eyes were on a flock of birds passing over. I wasn't sure what they were, maybe loons. Farther out, a mass of debris bobbed in the water in a weedy area. When I lowered my eyes, Mary had stripped her shoes, pants, and hat off and was splashing into the water. She had pale legs, and once in, she dived, swam out, climbed up on a boulder, and sat there.

She waved to me, inviting me to join her. I glanced at the car; Jae was emerging, and I wished he weren't around for this part of this trip. But I knew he would be as long as we were on the road. His presence would always make me feel that I needed his parental approval. I was about to strip down to my shorts and swim out anyway, but as I opened my belt, I heard a fast-approaching vehicle and turned. It was way above the speed limit and like a Cybertruck, but a hybrid version with a deep gray finish and tinted windows. It kicked up roadside dust as it passed, and I couldn't tell if there was a driver. It disappeared at speed, as the road went through overhanging trees, but Mary could see it on the road curving through the marsh because she was standing on the boulder saluting with her right hand to shade her eyes. A moment later, she jumped and swam the few strokes to shore, scooped up her clothes, and ran for the car.

"Let's go!" she shouted.

"Hang on!" Jae said.

"He's coming back. It's safer in the car."

Jae hesitated, but I didn't and ran to the car. Seeing me on the move convinced him, and he also hurried to the car. I didn't know if it was paranoia, but we had no weapons out, and I couldn't think of any good reason for Speed Demon Super Truck to be returning to us. It turned out there wasn't. Jae had barely closed his door when the truck emerged from the overhang of trees leading into the marsh road. It burst forward, heading over towards us. Mary hit the power pedal, the car lurched forward, and she turned slightly. If she hadn't done so, the speeding vehicle would've knocked us hard on the side.

Mary nearly lost control but regained it and raced under the overhang of the bows and for a short distance through the tree cover to emerge onto the long, curving marsh road. There was no other traffic. It wasn't long before the truck was following and closing in for a close pursuit, and the thing had incredible speed. It was accelerating up fast to flank us. My preference in that marsh was not to have Mary at the wheel. It was a battling vehicles situation, but fate had delivered Mary as a competitor. She could be a dangerous stunt driver and was lucky, but her luck could run out and put us in duck soup and soft mud on such a dangerous road.

The truck accelerated up, trying to bump us over into the marsh. Mary rather dangerously tried to bump him back to the other side, and it had little effect. The Cybertruck imitation was like a tank and a race car, with a body so tough that the grind of our two vehicles didn't even leave a scratch on it. The windows were truly opaque, hiding the driver if there was one. Most likely, they were adjustable windows tint-wise, so I thought maybe there was a driver and he didn't want us to see him, but I couldn't be sure.

It was a losing battle; then the truck made a mistake, pulling farther to the side of the road to make a run at us, hit us hard, and attempt to knock us into the swamp, but the claylike roadside caused it to lose control, and Mary sped ahead. There was an open area on the left, and she spun, managing to swing the car's tail around. The truck hadn't expected that and raced past us. Mary powered forward and went back the way we'd come. There was a side road off partway down, and Mary turned into it, nearly going into the marsh again.

"No! No!" Jae yelled. "Not down here."

This road was narrow; the truck came back, turned in after us, and gained fast. Soon, it would have us in the deep mud. I reached over and grabbed Jae's gun from the back, opened the window, and fired a couple of shots, hitting the driver's side window. Impact craters showed, but the shots didn't break the windshield, and the truck kept coming. As I pulled my head back in the window, I saw that we were racing up a rise. As we went over the top, we found that a small section of the road was missing, washed out. Mary had gunned the car so fast we jumped it, and unbelievably, the heavy Cybertruck jumped it too. The difference was that Mary managed to keep control, pounding the wheel to swerve right then left, barely escaping swampy doom, while the truck didn't. On the jump, its wheels had bounced on a hump of earth that Mary had managed to jump. That sent it up and over into the swamp, and it was the worst portion of swamp a car could hit. Thin broken reeds covered a thin coating of water over a deep body of soft mud. The truck was stuck deep in it and going down.

Mary turned and went back to look. We got out on the narrow roadside. The truck's hind end sank. It was going down completely in sucking mud. No one emerged from it, and soon nothing would be left of it. It would slowly go all the way under. I looked to Jae and Mary and said, "Another robot. There was no driver."

Fate then proved me a liar. Hands and a mud-covered head suddenly surfaced in the bubbling water for a moment as the driver tried to cling to the truck's side to climb to its roof. That effort failed, and the person or robot went under and didn't come back up.

Mary tipped her cap to salute the marsh. "Another one sucked down to hell."

Jae's face was gloomy, as if the vision he was seeing was of us being sucked down to hell, which could have happened. In this case, stunt-driver Mary had gotten lucky again.

"That's it," Jae said. "We drive all the way, and we don't stop."

"I bet that driver is the same guy who shot at us when we left the bunker," I said. "They know where we are. It wouldn't surprise me if they even have satellite surveillance."

We took off with Jae at the wheel, and Mary in the back with me, playing a silly word game. The drive-all-the-way deal was interrupted by rest stops and Mary's desire for junk food. She was an unusual sort who harshly criticized the "filthy place" from which the taco she was eating had been purchased. Her words for the restrooms were harsher. Soon, we were getting sleepy, and she rested. I had my right arm around her. I drifted off into the nonsensical thoughts of some semi-dreamland, but didn't get to sleep.

Jae suddenly said, "We're here."

We sat up attentively, and as we looked, we came over a hill, and Shining Rapids appeared below. It was a tiny town with a small, rushing river, nestled in a small valley and ringed by forest, largely thinned for firebreaks in all directions near the town. It was a colorful forest. In the light of the summer evening, it had vibrant reds, yellows, greens from maples, birches, sumacs, spruce, and pines.

The history said Shining Rapids had been built near gold mines. The local population consisted of small farmers and workers who drove 35 miles to work in mines producing palladium, graphite, and copper. Some were workers and executives, and probably treated the town as a bedroom community when not at work. They would care more about their own properties than the town, and we could see some of those more luxurious properties on the south end of town. The rest were town natives and indigenous people. Many lived off the land by hunting and fishing. One reason for Shining Rapids' existence was that it had never been destroyed by a forest fire, as it was in a location that, for meteorological reasons, had always been bypassed when fires raged in the hotter summers.

Coming down the hill, we passed some large industrial lots and warehouses. Anyone in the region with a warehouse had it on the outskirts of Shining Rapids. There was a massive John Deere warehouse structure and lot. There was no visibility of Area 66 Drop Base from town, as it was a few miles out. I wondered, though, if the one building could be connected. A large, sprawling structure, largely hidden by tree foliage, was next. It was a small lumber yard with a hardware store with the odd name Spike's Hardware and Lumber, so it wasn't a chain store.

"Look at that," I said. "They must have a lot of zombie-killing spikes in this town. If they can't use them now, maybe later."

Mary stared down the drive to the parking area as we crawled past. "They look human, like rustic sorts and tradesmen in there. This town may be clean. Maybe it's like criminal gangs, where they don't crap on their own neighborhood but everywhere else. Or maybe they leave the town alone for security reasons."

"True," I said. "The military would keep any activity at the base, or they would have when they were there. They wouldn't tell people in town anything or do anything to them. At least I hope that's the case. The base is all underground, so the townspeople wouldn't really know what is happening in it."

We cruised slowly into town, and except for maybe some self-driving cars, I saw nothing robotic in the town. There were no high-rises. The main drag was a line of brick structures on both sides of the road, each store delineated by different-colored trim, some red, some white or green. Some had awnings, some didn't. Some stores were red- or yellow-brick-fronted, while others had brick painted gray, yellow, or beige. In general, it was a classic tiny town. The hotel, town hall, and a couple of churches were the largest things in downtown. The churches and the hall weren't on the main drag, but I spotted the spires and the hall's high roof.

We pulled up by the hotel, which had a parking area under a large wooden roof on the side. The Riverview Hotel wasn't anything large. From the side view, we saw that the back portion had patios on the first, second, and third floors overlooking the foaming rapids. They were large with detailed wooden railings of a dark walnut color. The front had a big awning on the walkway in the same color. It wasn't large and had only three upper floors. The front facing was white stone with a yellow brick section running up the very center, with portions trimmed in that same walnut color. I could tell it was old but refurbished.

Mary stood with her hands on her hips, the early evening sun dappling her face with shadows from the latticed overhang. "So is this a hillbilly joint, full of truck drivers and hicks?"

"Nope," I said. "This hotel is probably mostly for business travelers, hunters, or people fishing. Maybe a few visitors or tourists, and those who want a comfortable rest stop with a bit more class than the decrepit ones we pulled into along the way."

"A bit more class than those piss holes wouldn't be hard to achieve," Mary said. "That 'Rocky Road Truck Stop' place holds the world's record for the dirtiest toilet."

Jae looked around intently, studying some people strolling over on Main Street. "If anything, it looks like we're off track. This is the most peaceful, normal place I've ever seen. The people we passed and the ones over there are casual clothes folks. Most are white, but a couple of them are natives. I see two Blacks right there, and one likely Chinese Canadian guy."

"It's the base we want a look at," I said. "There isn't supposed to be anyone there. I have a pre-booked suite according to the hiring documents, but it won't be big enough for three."

We walked into the lobby. It wasn't busy and was typical, with decorative plants and seating. A couple of guys in suits, salesmen, were sitting there. A polished white-tile floor with a faint grey diamond pattern led us to the counter, where I gave my name.

The lady at it was attractive, about 42, with short, auburn hair. "So you're Mr. Holiday," she said. "I'm Marina Keats, the owner. I knew you were coming because of Jack. You're also days late. He was hoping that meant you wouldn't come. Your suite is on the 2nd floor and fits two. It's not really for three. It's paid until the end of the summer by the military through the mysterious Axel Austram."

Jae gave me an odd glance like he wondered about my connection to Axel. Mary gave Marina the sort of suspicious glance you would give to someone who knew too much about you.

"So, Axel is mysterious to you people. Who is this Jack who hoped I wouldn't show?"

She looked at me speculatively, like she was trying to gauge what sort of person I was, while at the same time hoping I would measure up as a villain, but was coming out more like a dumb tinhorn from the city. "Axel was the last military guy out here long after the others left. Then he disappeared, and people were asking about him. He was reported dead, but there was no body. He reappeared online to order the rooms for you. Maybe you know where he is if he isn't dead. Jack is Jack Keirstead. He is the manager of this hotel and is usually the guy at the desk. I'm an artist and the owner. He works for me. I only work here part-time. Jack is Mayor Bottoms' campaign manager as well, and whatever Mayor Bottoms doesn't like, he doesn't like. Jack always wears a worn cabby hat. He's hard to miss."

Mary interjected. "That's quite the story. Do you let Mayor Bottoms tell you who can stay at the hotel?"

"I don't, but Jack would. Our mayor and Jack are what you might call eccentric. Those military uniforms you're wearing won't be popular because people here don't like visible military in town. The two big clothing stores right out there on Main Street are having their annual summer sale. They're

open late this evening. You should tone down your looks with new clothes if you didn't bring anything else with you."

"Why don't people here like the military?" Jae said.

"History. The military pays the town compensation, has paid for decades, since back when it was only Area 66 and caused a chemical disaster. The mayor wants the money and inflationary increases, but no military, and everything about the base kept quiet ... and out of politics. He doesn't want an opponent using it to run against him. His story is that it is just a storage base now, or the drop base. Automated trucks come in and out to move supplies, but the rest of the base is decommissioned. There is a constant stir about aliens, so the town is viewed as being full of kooks or whatever the modern term is for such people."

"Really," I said. "I'll check if it's aliens, Northern Lights, or maybe soldiers who aren't supposed to be there ... or something else. We aren't military, by the way. I'm really a private security consultant they hired. The outfits we're wearing aren't our usual clothes. We sort of picked them up quickly. My job is to do checks during the daytime only. There was a break-in or damage. I was hired to prevent any more of that and nothing else. Maybe they hired me because of the area's dislike of the military. You can tell Jack that we aren't military. I was told pretty much nothing about the base. Has it ever been confirmed that it was decommissioned and is only a storage drop? I'm not authorized to enter it myself."

"Life in outer space is more confirmed than anything out there," Marina said. "No one would damage things there except maybe Dan Fairhawk and his crew. Even they would fail. That place is an impervious structure, and other than the entrance, it is deep underground. At night, no locals would go out there, and they wouldn't go inside even if the doors were wide open. People have always been terrified of that place. Grizzlies have been known to drift down occasionally. You wouldn't want to be out there at night."

"I'll need another suite. Jae and his daughter Mary can stay in mine."

"I can give you the single suite across the hall."

"We'll take it. I'll pay you for it now and put down a deposit for room and meal services. By the way, who is this Dan Fairhawk guy?"

"Indigenous. He lives out near the base. The mayor spends a lot of time working to shut him up, along with claims of weird happenings out there."

"How would I find the guy?"

"It wouldn't be hard. If he's in town, he's at Wild Jacks Casino. He'll likely be there tonight."

With the bill taken care of, I got the keys, and we went up to the second floor. The doors had solid mechanical bolt locks, and the main suite was rustic yet modern, with a kitchen island integrated into the living area. Two tiny bedrooms were separated off. The floors were hardwood and slightly worn. We put down our stuff, and before going out to the car to get more, we checked my single suite. As soon as Mary saw that it had a patio, she wanted it for herself, and I ended up being dumped in with Jae. Her small patio was above a back patio for customers at ground level. That one was all wood, new and polished, with custom tables, among bushes, flowers, and trees in planters. Gold-trimmed doors led to the interior. A few people were down there with drinks.

Once we settled in, Jae decided to take a nap and was on a couch with a horrid local radio station blaring. Mary wanted to go shopping and buy some new clothes, so that's what we did for the evening's entertainment. Mary attracted the most attention on the street. Men stared, trying to place her. She had one indigenous parent, and it showed in her looks, meaning she could be from the area, but she was far too beautiful and exotic to have been around without being noticed before.

We attracted interest in the stores, too. People were in town for the sales, and there wasn't anyone who didn't covertly watch us. The store clerks, both male and female, initially treated us as though we had just arrived from Mars in a rocket ship. At least they did up until they realized we were human and had money, the universal language.

Mary was more into Chic River while I was more into EarthWear Local. Both were on Main Street. We initially picked up mostly clothing that would work for being out in the base area. We didn't want to get burned up by the sun or eaten alive by flying bugs. Mary was on a spending spree with our money, buying many items, including fashionable stuff, too. She knew Jae's sizes and what he would want. She endeared herself to the anorexic woman at Chic with her spending habits, while the awkward clerk at EarthWear Local was mostly interested in her breasts. I'm not sure if he actually saw me as anything more than a body, which made him unique in a town where everyone else focused on me with suspicion when they weren't watching Mary.

Mary was fussier about my clothes than hers and wanted me to try everything on. "I want you to look handsome and impressive," she said. "People are more trusting of a man who is well dressed." She turned her head this way and that, as if inspecting a sculpture for an art review magazine. As far as she went, there weren't any clothes that didn't look good on her. She made them beautiful rather than the other way around. I had a strong desire to question the townspeople, but avoided it for the present.

When we returned, laden with bags, we saw what must've been Jack Keirstead at the counter, wearing his shabby cabby hat and in animated discussion with a well-fed, balding man in a worn suit. He had a shine on the rear of his pants. I suspected it was either Mayor Bottoms or Shiny Bottom. They didn't see us. We quietly went over to the stairs with our bags, went up, and then relaxed until a bit later. Mary had changed her clothes, so I decided to change mine.

A bit later, I left with Mary again, heading for Wild Jacks Casino. It was a hot summer night. Part of the town down along the river was actually the seedier side, including River Street and a couple of side streets. In the city, it would be rich properties on the water, but not in this section of Shining Rapids. Barker Lane was a side street that ran down into that area, and the casino was near its end. Crude graffiti showed on worn brick walls. The entire street had decrepit buildings. A man shuffled past, down the road, with his hands in his pockets and a hat over his face. He didn't even see us, and maybe he was entertaining whatever problems a man might have in this hidden corner of purgatory. He vanished into a shadowy alley I hadn't noticed.

Three mangy stray dogs roamed the street, and the darkness seemed deeper in this street. They suddenly ran off barking wildly. I was sure maybe miners had once lived on this street, and it was a battered remnant of the past, with a few abandoned or haunting buildings on it. We found ourselves looking at a neon sign, faintly lit, with moths swirling around it, fronting what looked like the entrance to a condemned building, with peeling paint and windows boarded up with black-painted wooden sheets. Piles of trash and assorted junk were in a side alley. A number of cars and pickups were parked in a rutted, dusty lot with sparse grass and flattened clay.

"This place looks like the shaved-dice casino," Mary said. "The highest roller must be the guy with the biggest pile of rusty cans."

There was no security at the door, but there was inside because the way the place was laid out made entering single you out. Thus, we didn't go unnoticed for long. The casino wasn't much of a casino, but it was far superior to its exterior advertisement. The interior was renovated and featured the usual casino amenities, but on a small scale. A bulky security guy approached us. He looked more like security for a trucker's convention, was Black, dressed in clean casual clothes, and friendly in approach. Despite that, I knew he could break bones if needed. Out here, customers could be rough, and he had to be rougher.

"New in town?" he said. Obviously, he knew everyone in town. "I'm Carl."

"We plan to gamble, but not tonight, Carl. I need to find a guy named Dan Fairhawk."

He grinned. "Fairhawk is a hustler, so don't come back crying to me if you're taken to the cleaners by him. He targets obvious clowns from the city."

I glanced at Mary, a warning to stop her from mouthing off over the "clowns" comment. Carl didn't see us as a threat, or if he did, he hid it well. His eyes revealed him to be smarter than he pretended to be and probably trickier, too.

"Okay, he's here," Carl said. "Take a look around the place. See what you like. Fairhawk is over through that door at the card tables."

Our look around was brief; many eyes were covertly watching us. Some of them were behind the place's security cameras. I figured that, given what I was being paid for this job, they should be, because there would be more money to extract from me than from just about anyone else in town. We found Dan Fairhawk in the card room as expected. It was a large room with four large gaming tables. There were two active card games. The room wasn't rustic but modern. A diamond-glass chandelier hung in the center from a round embossed area of the ceiling where the outer ring of the embossment emitted a haze of yellow light. The walls and floor were shiny beige panels and tiling, and there was a large piece of artwork: a giant native painting or print of a hunter and bear, but done in a strange sketch style with colored pens and brushwork.

Fairhawk, I identified by sight, as he was the only clearly native guy at the card tables and had long hair. He was about thirty-five with a healthy build. He dressed like a native, not a suit or townie trucker type.

I waited for a break in the game, noting that Fairhawk was winning, and then I stepped over and said, "Dan, I need to chat with you."

He glanced at us momentarily and suspiciously. "Who are you two?"

"The military hired us. I want to talk to you about Area 66 Drop Base."

Fairhawk suddenly threw his chair back like he'd seen the devil. His eyes switched to Mary and then back to me. The obvious out-of-towner pigeons he was playing at the table glanced at us, mystified. "I don't talk to military spies, so beat it," he said, and waved us off.

I saw Carl looking over, wondering what was going on. "If you change your mind, you can find us on the patio at the hotel," I said.

I felt his and Carl's eyes burning into my back as we walked out of the place. The cooler air of the night blew in the street. A dog was howling somewhere nearby. The street was empty, but a couple of guys were over in the parking area facing each other. I thought that maybe a fight was going to break out. Nearly all the streetlights were out, and the few that were on were feeble, in their last stage of life. I thought I saw a shadowy figure off to the left ahead.

Jae was supposed to be following us covertly to watch our backs, so I assumed it was him.

Then things changed instantly. The shadowy men in the parking lot were running for us, and so was the guy off to the left ahead. I realized that the peaceful town had caused me to default to a normal state, believing everything was fine when I should have been entertaining no such thoughts.

“Fuck!” Mary shouted. She had a silenced gun under her jacket, but I didn’t have one because I figured if they did any pat down at the casino, they’d pat me, not her. She struggled to draw it and dropped it on the road. I burst out and ran for the guy charging from up ahead so he wouldn’t get to Mary. He went for a straight tackle; I went down, swept out a leg, and tripped him, causing him a hard fall on the road. The hard rubber feel of the leg and the smell told me it was a robot, one wearing aftershave called Industrial Death.

The robot got up fast, and as it came back for me, I saw Mary on one knee, taking a shot, and Jae appearing on the other side of the street, heading for Mary. I couldn’t see if she hit anything. I ended up grappling with the dirtiest zombie robot yet. We fought along a graffiti-scarred wall, and I tripped as it smacked me and I fell back into a space between two buildings, going down among tall weeds. The robot burst through the weeds. It ripped a huge Burdock plant stalk out of the dirt like it was going to pummel me to death with the brown burs on the plant. It had its mouth open like it was going to roar, but its lips and tongue were stuck together like gum or plastic melt, so when it opened and closed, it was gross, gummy strings. These things didn’t breathe except in a fake way to appear human. With the ongoing deterioration, they had developed breath that smelled like a blast of ammonia fumes.

I heard silenced shots, couldn’t see what was going on, and took advantage of the robot’s pause to burst up, grab the bur stalk, and force it in its face. The burs stuck on it, and it stumbled in a circle, giving me the opportunity to get back out on the street. One of the other attackers was down, and the third robot was grappling with Jae while Mary danced around trying to get a shot at its head. I rushed up, kicked the robot off Jae, and heard a shot as I spun back to face the bur-faced robot, which stumbled out after me. I tripped it again as it rushed for me. I spotted a loose brick on the ground, picked it up, went down, and bashed its head in.

Looking up, I saw that Mary had shot the other robot, and Jae was brushing dirt off his clothes. Mary cocked her head as she looked down at the body. “Those were the dirtiest buggers yet.”

“My guy was in a state of deterioration like heat melt,” I said.

Jae kicked the one he’d grappled with. Mary had put a neat bullet hole through its forehead. “There’s the source of the alien tales. Look at its face.

Greenish skin and it's totally screwed up, so it could be mistaken for an alien."

No one had emerged from the casino, and no one else was on the street. Jae worked silently with me to drag the bodies off into the weeds between two buildings. We tossed them deep into tall weeds and thistles and then stepped back out on the street.

"Should we notify someone in the town about this?" Mary said.

"No," I replied. "I don't trust anyone in this town, and they'd get us for using weapons out in public."

Jae nodded in agreement, Mary glanced back at the casino, and then we walked off, emerging from purgatory into the main drag, which was as peaceful as a fairy-tale land. It was like we'd walked from a dim dimension through a portal into a street where the night lights gave the buildings a gingerbread look.

"What spooked Fairhawk?" Mary said, punching me on the shoulder. "His eyes nearly popped out of his head."

"If he knows one-tenth of what we know, he'd be spooked. Those robots were there to get him tonight. We showed up, and they saw a new opportunity. He will come over to meet us on the patio, so we should wash up and wait for him there."

"Why do you think he'll be over?"

"I know because of what Marina Keats said. Fairhawk has been attempting to rouse the town over the base, so he knows a lot. He'll come because his curiosity will force him to, even if he doesn't trust us. But he won't come alone. He'll have someone outside to watch his back just like we had Jae watch us."

The River Run Restaurant was part of the hotel and was a bar and a basic Canadian country-food place. It was the key town bar for people with some class. Other local drinking joints were known as vomit holes. I stepped inside with Mary, and we found it full. We paused to take a look at everyone present. It had one deep-gray wall with a long bench seat that stretched past four oblong walnut-shaded tables. This bench was padded and covered in faux white leather along the bench and backrest. That bench and the tables were taken by people who looked like travelers who'd pulled off the road. A couple of small circular tables in the center were taken by rough men drinking draft beer. The bar itself had seating for five people on padded stools, with the usual wall of liquor bottles and stylish light bulbs hanging overhead, casting the bar in a yellowish glow. The seats at the bar were taken by what looked like town regulars, fixtures there. We didn't see anyone who looked suspicious.

That left only the back patio, and that's what we wanted. A natural view of foliage was visible through the open doors, and Mary led the way as we walked out. The patio, open for summer use, was the one below Mary's room. It wasn't full, so we picked the best location. Up on the balcony at the far end, Jae was watching, as we had planned, but not overtly. He sat at a small table, drinking a beer in the shadows.

We ordered, Mary sipped her beer, and chatted with me for a while. I did more than sip. I had an incredible thirst and desire to relieve tension, which I tried to fight off. I planned to drink only beer. Forty minutes later, Dan Fairhawk showed up. It was sooner than I expected. He paused at the gold-trimmed patio doors and studied the other people on the patio. After assessing that they were harmless or people he knew, he walked over and pulled up a chair.

He was blunt and looked me directly in the eyes, like a gambler watching closely to see if I would lie or bluff. "The military hired you to do what?"

"That's the million-dollar question. They claim there was a break-in or damage, don't want any more, and hired me to do daytime watch and keep people away. I'm not military. I'm a security consultant and sometimes investigator from Toronto. No nighttime watch is to be done by me, and I have no access to the base underground, only its grounds. You'd think I was the gardener."

"Gardener? The grounds are a wasteland. The only garden you could grow there is one of super weeds."

"They used my old friend Axel to hire me as sort of a front. I heard that he's dead. He can't be both alive and dead."

"He disappeared. The stories of his death were probably fabricated by Mayor Bottoms. People often disappear. In each of those cases, Bottoms convinces outside law enforcement that they were seen leaving this area. That's because if they didn't disappear here, no search is enabled. Axel was in the military, and he had your daytime watch job, except he did enter the base. If you do the job, you will disappear too."

Mary pinged the top of a water glass with her fingernail. "Not disappear. They've been sort of trying to kill us."

Dan looked at Mary. His eyes softened. "You aren't a private cop or military. Do you have family out here?"

"No. My parents died. They were originally from the south of here. I have a stepfather who is Korean Canadian. To get back on point here, we heard you know of problems at the base. Problems that Bottomfeeder and that Keirstead guy want covered up. Like aliens."

I waved over a fashion-model-slim teenage waitress. Dan ordered a Blue, then the discussion resumed.

"There are no real aliens. Mayor Bottoms promotes that as part of his smokescreen. Outsiders don't believe any stories coming from here. There are people in town who call themselves ufologists, and some claim to be contactees who spoke with the aliens. Social media posts from here get viewed as more nonsense. Jack Keirstead from this hotel is a ufologist, but a weird one who thinks an alien invasion might be underway."

I nodded. "Our problems are more like robots and rogue military guys on a mission of madness who hired me and are also trying to kill me. That's assuming the military guys are still alive. Their robots may have finished them off."

"Robots are exactly what they are, and some of them look like creatures. I know because Carl and I have observed the base late at night for years."

Mary and I were both interested. "We need to know," Mary said. "We just got here and haven't been at the base yet."

With a beer in hand, Dan went into storyteller mode, his eyes often far off, as if he were seeing a vision of yesterday. "There were always reports of weird stuff at that base. Even I ignored them for years. Then people started going missing, including a couple of my own people. I started watching the base at night, first alone and then later with Carl. We have a lookout on a rise and under some trees, and sometimes we sit there, polishing off beers and watching with night-vision binoculars. There are no lights at the base at night ... but the area of bare, reddish earth around it makes everything nearly as visible as in daytime through the binoculars. You'll see it when you go out. Nothing grows but a few weeds and stunted bushes in a huge ring around that base. It's like the world's biggest crop circle, red like Martian clay, which lends itself to alien stories that have been around for decades.

"Lately, the same thing happens nearly every night. Around midnight, the huge metal blast doors open. There are two sets of doors. One set is for the newer, larger automated trucks at the rear. The ones that open at night are the front blast doors, which are otherwise always sealed. You couldn't dynamite your way into that place. I know, as we checked it closely. When those doors open, a weird robot comes out. At first, we thought it was an alien monster. It's like a cross between an insect and a large animal, with five spidery legs and a weird head and snout. It's huge and comes out and patrols around the base. A couple of humanoid robots used to come out with it to patrol the area. That was like three years ago. At that time, the robots were basic humanoid ... then they became more human-like, with a second generation and a third that looked like soldiers. We figured out they were robots, not soldiers, by observing the change.

"The place produces robots, and for more than two years, big auto trucks roared in and out with loads. Now it's a truck here or there, and things changed at night. When the big patrol robot monster comes out, a couple of the new robots stagger out with it, like they aren't supposed to come out but do. Now they look like zombies. They wear military overalls, not proper uniforms like before, and they stumble about, often going into the woods. Carl got scared off because the big mother of a robot nearly discovered us a couple of times. It can run across the crop circle at speed and suddenly search areas of the bushes.

"When the zombies get out, they don't go back in, at least not the same night. Without doubt, any missing people are victims of them. I've never tried to go near one. It would be risky in the dark. They might be radioactive or chemically poisonous. I don't know. What I do know is that almost no one will believe me, and they don't believe Carl either. Those who do believe us think we saw aliens. Your friend Axel wouldn't tell us a thing. We talked to him many times. He was there in the daytime doing what you're supposed to do. Not anymore. The zombies got him. You can be sure of that."

Mary slammed down her mug. "They aren't radioactive. Those bastards can be killed. We cooked an entire gang of them. With up close kills too."

Dan was interested. "How do you kill them?"

"A spike to the head works," I said. "That's risky because they are stronger than we are and faster. A bullet to the head kills them. I killed one with a hunting knife to the skull. They can look like real people, but are deteriorating. We call them sand heads. Their heads are filled with black silicon sand. Their bodies are fake flesh that can transform to look like real people. We figure the base is ground zero, but those things have been shipped all over the world now."

"I've always distrusted robots," Mary said, suddenly glancing around like robots might be watching from the dark.

"Robots are the dead," Fairhawk said. "We call this land Turtle Island, and a turtle is a living being. The land is living, and so are all the living creatures and plants on it. It is made for the living, not robots."

"I agree," I said. "Most of those techie guys don't have a concept of the living Earth. They blather on about energy and intelligence. Confidentially, we dealt with a suspect in this robot conspiracy back in the city. He said insane stuff about a machine goddess as though a machine that isn't alive can be divine."

Dan took a deep drink and nodded. "The idea that human beings should be replaced with machines arises from the disconnection from nature that worshipping technology causes. You lose that spiritual connection to the land, and your humanity drains back into the ground. Handing the world off

to some smart machine seems like the right thing to do when you've died inside."

Mary shook her head in disgust at the thought. "You're right. They started with people confiding in and confessing to their chatbots, which are, in reality, dead. Then they came up with sex bots so people would make love with the dead."

"That's what they do," I said. "Many of them want to be dead or have the ideas of a dead machine blasted into their minds with a brain device. They want to upload their minds and become dead. They want you to worship their dead, machine superintelligence, as they call it."

Mary suddenly got emotional. "The fuckers! They tried to imprint me on one of their robot bodies and make me the living dead. I'm not going to forget that."

"What?" Fairhawk said, both surprised and intrigued. "Listen, drop by my place tomorrow. I have a map of disappearances and stuff you can look at. We can share information. I can show you proof."

After polishing off his second beer, Dan Fairhawk left. Jae came down and joined us on the patio. "That Dan guy had you under watch from across the rapids over there – Black guy."

We nodded. Mary and I had already figured that out, and no doubt Fairhawk had spotted Jae. Marina Keats joined us at the table and changed the situation entirely. Jae had big romantic eyes for her and got her talking about the town, its stories, and its people. I drank more lager, Mary ordered a fruity drink, and we listened. Finally, the subject of Dan Fairhawk came up.

"You weren't listening to Fairhawk's crazy raving, were you?"

She addressed the question to Jae. "I was upstairs then. I don't know what he said. I wouldn't believe him."

"I listened," I said, "but it was only to see if I could parse any information from him. I'm not interested in hearing about aliens, but his stories might contain some facts I can use to figure out what's going on. It appears that he has evidence of nothing and only tall tales."

"That's him exactly," Marina said. "He's a native teller of tales. It's in his genes."

Mary winked at me and hiccupped. "I believe in the aliens. Dan saw a big one out there. Maybe we should go out on an alien hunt tonight. I could get its head mounted at that taxidermy shop down the road."

"You should put her to bed," Marina said. "The aliens that appear out there are the ones you see if you eat the mushrooms."

I chuckled, but I suspected that Marina was pumping us for information, and we told her nothing. I did not end up putting Mary to bed. I woke in the morning in the main suite, clothed on the couch. Mary was in my arms, and sunlight was on my face. I heard Jae snoring in the bedroom, and I couldn't remember a thing. I rose, went to the fridge, and grabbed a cold bottle of water. As I sipped it, Mary woke and looked around.

"I don't remember anything after leaving the patio," I said.

"I do. We left Jae there with Marina. Let's hope he didn't tell her anything. You're quite a dancer. Don't you remember downing shots of rum and dancing with me?"

"Dancing?"

"Right here in the suite. The neighbors came to the door to complain about the music. Then you got romantic, but we both passed out on the couch."

Mary left to shower in her suite, and I decided to shower before Jae got up and grabbed it first. Then it was a usual morning at a small-town hotel. We ordered breakfast up, and Jack Keirstead delivered it and set it in the kitchen nook. He said nothing other than a greeting, and his eyes took in everything in the suite. He looked closely at Mary like he suspected she might be a hotel hooker or something unsavory, and then he left. At the same moment that Jack left, Jae came in. He had put some supplies down in the car for our journey out to the base and Dan Fairhawk's place.

"What a cheery guy that Jack Keirstead is," Jae said. "He treats me with an attitude of racist superiority. His only question was to ask when I was leaving town, like for good."

"Screw him," Mary said. "I've seen his type before. He can play pal if he wants, but has about as much love as a brick wall."

Chapter 5: The Monster

The day was going to be a scorcher, so we didn't waste time but decided to earn our pay and get out to the base early. We hurried down the stairs unnoticed and went out the front door, and before we turned off toward the parking lot, we were greeted by a small mob of six people who blocked our way. I say mob because they had the attitude of a hostile mob.

The mob was composed of Jack Keirstead, Mayor Bottoms, a local cop, a businessman type in a cheap suit, a bird-faced woman, and another guy who looked like a lumberjack. Some other people watched from across the street, but they were more like rubberneckers.

We halted. "People get up early in this town. Do you chaps need something?" I said.

Mayor Bottoms appeared to be the group leader. He swept a lick of graying hair back up over his balding forehead. His eyes were deceptive but unusually sharp, and his aftershave was so strong it was close to toxic. "I'm pleased to meet you," he said, reaching for a handshake. "I'm Mayor Horatio Bottoms."

I knew his phony and toothy smile didn't mean he'd arrived to give me a town welcome or the key to the town, but I played along, shaking his hand. He was a squeezer and tried to show he had a strong handshake ... like one of those grinning smart guys who clamps his hand like he's trying to break your bones. But I also have a strong hand. He didn't offer Jae a handshake, and Mary gave him a drop-dead look that forced him to back off.

"So, I guess you know who we are?"

"We knew you were coming, not the other two," Bottoms said. "There are some issues. We understand you were talking to Dan Fairhawk last night. Now, I hope your Mary isn't an outside agitator here to stir up the local indigenous population. Did any of you at any time leave the hotel during the night or go anywhere with him? I'd also like to know what nonsense he told you."

"Mary is assisting me in my work as a security consultant, protecting the grounds of the base. She is not an outside agitator. Any conversations I have with local people are confidential. We did not leave the hotel overnight. Obviously, the lobby camera would show that."

The cop stepped out. "I'll check that." He looked and sounded like a big hick and a local hire. I couldn't imagine any other police outfit hiring him. His uniform was sloppy and ill-kept, and his hat didn't fit.

"Is this place a police state where you identify and track everyone entering town?" Mary asked.

"It is when you are identified as an associate of Dan Fairhawk," Jack Keirstead said.

"Shut up, Jack," the cop said. "There was an incident. A local man was badly mauled by a bear last night. He is, in fact, the son of our local hardware store owner, Frederick Dally. He also has a mark on his leg. He may have been caught in an illegal bear trap. He is not coherent but muttering things about aliens."

"Now it's time for you to shut up, Jim," the big man in the lumberjack's shirt said. "People call me Fred, not Frederick, and I told you not to tell them about the alien babble. Here are the facts. We suspect Dan Fairhawk and his pal, Carl, of laying out illegal bear traps. They trapped my son in one, pulled

him out, and beat him senselessly. We suspect you may be involved in agitation."

I answered that one. "It sounds to me like you people have suspicion and no evidence of anything. The victim, according to your own cop's statement, said nothing about Dan Fairhawk or bear traps. You can't even decide if he was trapped, mauled by a bear, or beaten up. What does the medical report say?"

"I admit it isn't conclusive," Jim, the cop, said. "We'd prefer that you stay in your suites while the investigation is ongoing. I can't hold you here, due to our agreement with the military, but I expect cooperation. For your information, I'm Police Chief Jim Harver. Both my father and grandfather were police chiefs in this town. I have a genetically developed nose for people who may be outsiders and agitators."

Mary was about to say something. Maybe even about Jim Harver's large, bulbous, and red nose, but I put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Then I said, "No problem. We can stay at the hotel for now."

They looked satisfied, for the moment, and went silent. They hadn't expected that answer. Taking advantage of their confusion, I turned and went back inside with Mary and Jae reluctantly following me.

Mary was angry. "How could you wimp out to those idiots like that?"

"I didn't. I just made it look like that. They expected us to resist, which would authorize Jim the red-nose cop to hold us in the town jail for a day or so, or report every hour or whatever."

Jae sat with Mary on the couch, looking gloomy and pissed, as I peered through a crack in the curtain, watching everyone disperse. The last to go were Jim Harver in the cruiser and Jack Keirstead, who hurried down the street.

"Okay, let's go," I said. We went across to Mary's suite, lightly jumped to the end section of the back patio below, went over the railing, into the parking lot, and drove off. It took us half a minute, and no one noticed us leave.

On the way, some humid haze was drifting off the landscape. The road was winding and narrow in places. I had a napkin with directions to Dan Fairhawk's place, so we decided to go there first.

"What do you think that whole deal with those jerks in town is about?" Mary said as she raced over a hill and dangerously passed a pickup truck.

"It is about them being jerks. They want to do some kind of cover-up of whatever happened. At the same time, they'd like to charge us with something, and Fairhawk too, but doing that hardly enables a cover-up. It

grows the story. They want to freeze us in place while they put on their thinking caps. Whatever plan they come up with will likely be a stupid plan.”

“There was no bear and no bear traps,” Jae said. “That guy probably didn’t even leave town. He stumbled into one of those robot zombies we finished off.”

“That’s about it in a nutshell,” I said.

Moments later, Mary kicked up dust as she turned into Dan Fairhawk’s driveway. I had mistakenly pegged him as a lonely guy living in a cabin. Instead, he had a large country house, custom-built and no doubt constructed over the years by him and his family. A number of family members were present on the grounds as we drove up a long driveway of dirt and small stones. The men were native in appearance, but there was a white woman and a black woman, so they weren’t all native; they were intermarried. Fairhawk hadn’t mentioned anything about a wife or kids, but he obviously had a big extended family.

He had a main house with a newer, smaller attachment featuring a large wooden patio. We could see a standalone garage and a workshop structure. Mary pulled over and parked alongside the other vehicles, and from that angle, we saw another patio attached to the main house at the rear. So it was a big place for family and relatives. Three parked boats indicated a fishing family. There was a lot of open grass, with large deciduous trees here and there, and some tall firs at the far end of the yard. He had a solid and tall wooden fence around the property.

A couple of dogs barked, but they were hunting-type dogs, sort of announcing our arrival rather than getting mean. A ragged little girl ran up as we got out of the car.

“We’re supposed to meet Dan here,” Mary said.

The kid looked her up and down and pointed to the workshop, then ran ahead of us to tell Dan. Dan obviously had many visitors, probably because of his fishing and hunting business. I knew that because the rest of the people paid us no serious attention, as if we were Dan’s customers.

The little girl barred the door. “Let them in, Janey!” Dan shouted.

Janey giggled, ran off, and we stepped into the dim light of his workshop, which was more than a workshop. It was almost like a small rustic house on its own. The entire shop was constructed from wide, rough-hewn planks and was dusty. Like the house, it had been years in the making. It had a locked gun storage area, probably for rifles. There was an entire wall and a storage area of fishing equipment. A tool bench with a large assortment of tools was on one side. Old license plates were tacked to the wall there beside some old, fading porn magazine centerfolds. Dan was sitting at a large wooden

table, and on it were bows and arrows. One was a crossbow, and the other was a more traditional native bow. He wore a necklace of wooden beads, jeans, handcrafted shin-high moccasins, and a T-shirt with the Batman bat symbol.

He waved us over. "Can you actually hit anything with this bow?" Mary said as she picked it up and looked it over.

"I'm an expert with it," Dan said. "It is a genuine old-style bow and made of ash. I can hit a target at 100 yards with it. But for a headshot like I plan to hit those sand heads with, I need to be about 25 yards off."

"Why wouldn't you use a rifle if you're hoping to shoot some of them?" Jae asked. "I'm Jae, by the way. Mary's father."

"I know who you are. I figured it out after I saw you up above, watching us on the patio at the hotel. Rifles make noise and reveal your location. Arrows don't." Dan held up an arrow. He'd been polishing the shaft with a cloth. "I've been making some special narrow-point arrows. They cut on contact. They can even pierce forms of armor."

"Do you think we'll shoot something today?" I said.

Dan got up, went over to a battered Coke machine, and opened it to reveal cold beer and cans of pop inside. "You need to see the base first. It explains a lot. I'm ready to go out with you. Carl is coming over later, so I need to get back. Grab a couple of drinks to take out, and we'll get on the way. I can introduce you to the family later."

"Ah, there is one problem," I said. "A guy in town was mauled by a bear, they say. But Mayor Bottoms is blaming you. Says you've been setting up illegal bear traps and beat him up."

"Who is the guy?"

"The son of the hardware store owner, Fred Dally."

Fairhawk laughed. "That guy is a chubby town boy. He isn't a real man like his father is. He doesn't fish or hunt. I've never seen him out here. The odds of him being somewhere, stumbling in the bush to get caught in a bear trap are none."

"That's what we figured," Mary said. "He was nearly killed. That hillbilly town cop is conducting an investigation."

"That guy couldn't investigate himself. The last time Jim Harver solved a crime was five years ago when a clothing store was broken into. The only thing he and his deputy do is break up the odd weekend fight. His deputy, if you could call him that, is from India and obeys him like a lap dog. I'll worry about them later when they come out. Let's take off and look at the base before they do."

We didn't disagree and went out to the vehicles, with two dogs and a couple of kids following. The air was fresh and fragrant in this area, suggesting no hostile presence. The drive out to the base was a few miles. We rounded a wide bend, and the foliage thinned as we approached the base. We were following Dan in his pickup, and he didn't go in on the base road but took another route, down a side road that was little more than a cow path, up to the top of a small rise. We got out of the cars and walked over. They'd cleared the brush to create an open area. This was the spot where Fairhawk and Carl watched the base at night.

The base was much like Dan had described it at the hotel. This was a lonely, forbidden, and remote place. The entry road led across the crop circle, as it was called, but it was more like a Martian landscape in a big circle around the base's central structure. Nothing was stored outside; everything was underground. The red clay had a haze of dust rising off it. The base structure at its center looked dismal and hostile, set like a beast beneath the fat sun above. The crop circle was surrounded by light forest, bushes, and small rises. Other than the main road, there was another side road in and out, but its gate was closed.

"I don't have to hide in the bushes," I said to Dan. "I'm an employee."

"True, but I'm not. Maybe you should find out if your employers are still alive before trusting anything here."

"You got that one right," Mary said. She was standing with her hands on her hips, staring skeptically at the base.

"Let's go down," Dan said. "I cut a hole in the fence there."

A mostly hidden rocky path led down; Dan pulled aside some brush, and we went through the fence and walked across the red earth. The expanse in front of us was mostly dirt. It held only a few squat bushes and weeds. About halfway to the central structure, Dan stopped at some deep holes in the ground. They followed a trail through the dirt, were widely spaced, and not human or paw prints.

"Those are the footprints of the big robot," Dan said. "You don't want to meet up with it. It never comes out in the daytime. The thing is ridiculous. It looks like a cheap attempt to create an alien monster animal or insect thing."

"That thing must weigh tons," Mary said. "Those prints are deep. In the dark, most people would think it's an alien even if it looks fake through binoculars."

"Its feet are like metal fists or claws," Dan said. "Once I saw it rush over to some trees. Maybe it saw something there. I saw nothing. With one swipe, it punched a large branch right off a tree."

I remained quiet as we walked the rest of the way to the central structure. Close up, it looked huge, while from a distance it didn't. It was about twenty-five feet high, buff stone, with a camouflage pattern on its face. The front blast doors were huge and impervious. A second set of doors for trucks was at the rear. Spotlights were mounted along with other security sensors. Cameras were camouflaged, but I knew they were there. The roof of the building tapered down to the dirt on the right and left sides, and the roof was covered with soil and a tough form of grass that would make the building less visible from the air. From above, it would mostly look like a grassy rise, and from the sides, you could walk over it as if it were a sculpted rise. On a portion of that faux hill, some weird satellite equipment was hidden under a camouflage net. I'd never seen equipment like it before.

"The stone front is only part of the protection," Dan said. "Behind it is solid metal. We put a drill to it once. We've never found a way to enter this place, though we've searched the area."

"I see," I said. "I mean, I see that the story that there was a break-in is nonsense. No one could break in here. It must be that they want the place watched and for me to keep people away. They want complete privacy."

Mary walked up and kicked the door. "Mayor Bottomfeeder has the same game plan. He doesn't want anybody out here. He doesn't want us out here either. The town receives compensation from the military. I wonder where that money goes. Maybe Bottoms wants things hush-hush so his fraud nest egg won't be endangered by some investigation."

"I need to get a night view to confirm the existence of the patrol robot," I said. "We'll have to camp here because if we go to town, that mayor and his guys will get in the way. Maybe even arrest us."

"I have a little cottage near here you can hang out in until tonight," Dan said. "I'll take you over there now, and I'll go back and get Carl. We'll meet you tonight."

We walked across the red earth, finding it sticky in spots. I could feel vibrations in my feet from the base activity below. A low, droning noise massaged the soles of my feet. Mary felt it too and stopped to look down fearfully, as if the big robot might emerge from the ground. I calculated that the haze of dust off the ground wasn't from the breeze but from maybe thousands of tiny cooling pipes under it, breathing heat. On the red sand and clay itself, it was hotter, like three or four degrees warmer than beyond the fence.

Dan stopped and looked down, too. "The robots are busy doing something creepy down there. Mary mentioned that they were going to imprint her on a robot. What exactly does that mean?"

"The biggest theft and deep fake ever," I said. "They are mind and body snatchers. They have high-tech cocoons for males and females, and kill a person, supposedly transferring their image to a robot blank. The imprint allows the robot to mold its flesh, voice, and more to match that of the person who dies. That person can't possibly be alive in a new body or a new conscious being. The sand heads are only programmed to act as the original person and are an ultra-fancy copy. A human body and mind aren't something you can drive a tap into and pour into something else. Each person is unique, holistic, and singular."

"It would be a great sales pitch if you think about it," Mary said. "A lot of idiot world leaders would buy into the idea that they were going to be immortal in robot bodies. Then the imprinting kills them, and even the new robot body is a lemon that deteriorates. The copies are getting cheaper and uglier by the day, too. Immortality is now a zombie with its flesh rotting off."

Dan looked confused; he kicked at the sand.

"Think about it this way," I said. "Each sand head gets a different human character printed on it. So the basic sand head blank can be made into a million different little characters that appear human. They are fake, not conscious beings. They are created and driven by a master machine that is underground in this base. You could look at them like chatbots that play millions of little custom characters to fool people. They aren't real. This machine and its robots may not be alive, but they don't have to be to kill you. Legal humanoid robots are similar in that they simulate characters, but they are not anywhere near this level. This is some quantum machine of far superior power."

"Yeah," Mary said. "It's obvious those things aren't human. They are a revolting imitation, and I find them even more repulsive when they look authentic."

I nodded. "They're like the movie 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers' in a way. They look like people, but this time they are generated by a single computer. In the movie, they were really one singular alien plant."

"Good," Dan said. "I won't have any moral jitters when I put some arrows through their heads."

Jae stopped and looked back at the base. He spat in the dirt as if he had tasted something foul. "I worked on military robots as a mechanic. They looked like robots. They were animated by software to act as war robots. If I'd known this would be the result, I would've gone AWOL."

"It's too late now," I said. "We can't stop it unless we get down into the base."

Dan had stopped and, with his hands on his hips, was looking off into the brush on the far side. "I'm pretty sure there are a couple of those zombies in the woods over there. I'm going to hunt them later."

We drove two miles down the road to what Dan had called a cottage. It was off a side road, nearly hidden in summer foliage, and was more like a large shack. Cottage was more like what a salesperson would call it. Its exterior was rough boards of red-stained wood. It had barred windows and two wooden benches off to the side. A browning patch of short, sparse grass was around it, and it was backed by tall deciduous trees. A dartboard was tacked on the front wall. The roof was slightly sloped and covered with tin. Inside, it was rustic as well. The floor was made of wide red-stained boards. The back wall was made of huge square timbers, again reddish, with cement between them. It had some living room chairs, a table, and an old, battered fridge. It also had a power connection, which appeared to be an illegal line Dan had hooked in. There was no indoor plumbing; the toilet had to be emptied outdoors.

It was roomy enough and had a bunk bed, and Mary climbed to the top of it where she sat.

"Did you build this for hunting or fishing?" Jae said.

"Both. The river isn't far off, but I actually built it to get away from my first wife, who was a shrew. When she picked a fight, I'd stay the night here. I don't need it now because my new gal, Rose, wants me around home, not out here. I didn't build it by myself. Cousins helped. Carl pitched in. We all use it from time to time. There's some canned food. There's water and drinks in the fridge, and some fish in there you can cook."

Minutes later, Dan rattled off in his pickup. Mary slept on the top of the bunk. Jae was outside playing darts. I walked around, enjoying the scenery, then went through the trunk, selecting what we would need for the night observation from Jae's big mechanic's lock box.

"Maybe assemble your rifle," Jae yelled. "We might need to shoot, and pistols are a bit too close up to take only them."

Time passed. Mary and Jae decided to prove they could cook a fish dinner, and since Dan had the right spices in the cupboards, the dinner actually turned out tasty, with some canned corn and beans added. We chatted long into the evening as darkness black as coal descended. Dan arrived with Carl around about 10:30, and the moon was rising, lighting up the night. Carl was dressed like a semi-forest ranger, and I found it humorous in comparison to his appearance at the casino.

"So are you ready for bear?" Carl said as we were about to leave.

"I'm ready," Mary said. "But these bears are not ones you can eat or mount, unless you plan to mount one in front of a city dump."

We arrived there in half an hour, and I had my gun assembled and a couple of pairs of binoculars out. The rising moon lit the place so that, even without lights, we could see without binoculars. Nothing was happening, and it was closing in on midnight. The base's surrounding clay apron glowed a pale red in patterns as the moon passed through light clouds. The gang of us smelled like mosquito repellent.

Dan used my night-vision binoculars to scan the dark foliage around the outer base for zombies. "Two creepy robots way over there by the town road," he said. "They are approaching the base, so they went out last night and must be returning. They have distorted faces, like an alien look. Ah, they would go that way because intruders from town would come in that way. They'd catch them, and if they didn't, those who escaped would report aliens, and people would think they were crazy."

The rumble of a very large truck suddenly broke the eerie silence of the night. We couldn't see it, but it was approaching the base, since that was the only possible destination. It would be one of those self-driving ones coming in to deliver or pick up a load.

"Cover me," I said. I took out a pistol, kept my rifle shoulder-strapped, and rushed down the path to the hole in the fence. My plan was to run across the open landscape to get to the doors. The truck wouldn't detect me so long as I stayed off the road. I wanted to get a look inside, see what they were loading, and maybe even sneak inside if possible. The truck showed up on the road, coming up extremely fast. I kept running and was past the halfway point when the truck sped by. It was accelerating, a massive silver self-driving truck, and I saw a shadowy man at the wheel. It raced straight toward the blast doors rather than drive around to the truck entrance. The straight run gave it incredible momentum. The driver then managed to leap from the cab and roll away on the clay as the truck continued.

I heard Mary shout, "What the fuck!" the instant before the truck hit the blast doors with an incredible crash. It hit so hard that the entire back end lifted into the air and slammed back down. The cab was totaled; it exploded and burned in showers of sparks. Clods of dirt and grass from the roof of the complex rose in the air and fell nearby, and a dust cloud drifted north.

Flames lit the area, and from my angle, I could see that the mission of destruction had failed. The man who'd been fleeing had fallen to the ground and was there on his knees, watching and now understanding that the blast doors had held up against the force. It looked like the doors themselves hadn't even been dented.

Then they began to open, and I was amazed, unable to take my eyes off the scene. They grated fully open, a blue light flashed, and the fake alien beast appeared. It was big and inspired terror even in me. It pushed the burning truck back, then rolled it onto its side and dug its tentacles into the sand as it slowly moved it farther across the clay. It took time to pummel the truck, battering it, caving in parts, and then it turned, leaving it like a dead whale in mound of sand, and looked around.

It didn't look in my direction, and it spotted the driver, rising from the clay and fleeing toward the town road. It was a bad direction to take because two returning zombies were off to his left, charging at him. The monster then raced after him, too. It was the cheapest B-Movie alien beast ever invented. It had thick patches of cheap fake fur, a weird half-animal, half-human face, and those tentacle legs with fist-like feet around a big central body. Being cheap in appearance didn't make it any less powerful.

As I watched, one of the charging zombies went down; the second one also fell as an arrow went through its skull. The man kept running. I turned and looked and saw Mary, Dan, and Carl. They'd followed me. Mary had shot one with a rifle; Dan had hit one with an arrow.

Sadly, they attracted the beast's attention. It turned and saw me, and then I ended up doing a hundred dash toward the others. I looked back and saw that it had paused, as if it were scanning us. It then started in pursuit, and as I reached them, we were all running for the nearest escape route. That meant running right for the fence, but not where we had a hole in it. We had to jump it. Carl boosted Mary over, and we were over before the robot reached the fence.

We ran up the rise through the foliage, and we heard the robot tear off a section of the fence and crash through the brush after us. At the top, we found ourselves on the edge of a drop-off. The robot was approaching and swiped as we jumped. It kicked up clods of earth and debris, sending Mary flying to the bottom of the rise. Carl and I got her and carried her off. For whatever reason, the robot didn't jump down and follow us.

We reached a small clearing. Mary was semi-conscious and bleeding. Her right arm had a bad gash. I took off my jacket and T-shirt and tore the shirt to bind it and stop the bleeding. I looked and saw Carl and Dan staring at something. It was a big metal grate covering an entrance to the underground.

Fairhawk turned. "We'll mark this discovery and check it later. This looks like a way inside the base. We've got to get her back to my place right now."

We hurried, carrying Mary back to the vehicles.

"Who in the hell was that guy?" I said.

Carl answered. "It was Fred Dally. I saw him through the binoculars. I guess it means his son became coherent and told him the attack came from the base. So the town boy really was out here nosing around. Fred decided to get revenge. He got away, so he's probably headed for town, maybe on foot if he didn't have someone nearby to pick him up. Maybe some town guys were going to break in with him, but they took off when they saw what happened."

Mary was now alert and muttering. "What in the hell happened?"

"The zombie beast knocked you over that drop-off with a big swipe that kicked up sod and branches. Any closer and it would have turned all of us into mashed potatoes."

I eased her into the car, and Jae raced off. This time, we were in the lead and roared up to Fairhawk's place, pulling in to find Shining Rapids' lone cop cruiser with its lights flashing in the driveway, and Dan's family members outside facing off with Patrolman Jim Harver and his deputy, who had a baton out. The baton was next to useless, considering that one of Dan's brothers had a crossbow aimed at him.

"They wanted to search the house to find you guys," a black woman said as she ran up to Dan and Carl, who had jumped out of the truck. Carl put his arm around her, and they exchanged a few quiet words, so I assumed it was his wife or girlfriend. Jae and I were helping Mary out of the car when Jim Harver turned to face Dan and approached him.

Dan shoved him aside. "Get out of our way. We've got a wounded woman here."

Jim's Indian deputy stood out in a stern attempt to block Dan, holding his baton up with both hands. Dan was about to slug him when Carl stepped up. "I wouldn't try to use that baton, Ram."

Ram took a step back. Officer Harver attempted to draw his handgun and fumbled. Carl turned and faced him down. "Save that gun for the base, Jim. Your pal, Fred Dally, just stole a truck from the John Deere warehouse and crashed it at speed into the base's main doors. Dally's still out there somewhere in the dark, and if you go out, you're going to need a gun. Like a bigger gun than that after what we saw out there."

Jim's mouth fell open. He didn't say a word. His eyes filled with needless wonder. He waved for Ram to follow, hurried to his cruiser, and pulled out with the siren on, racing off toward the base.

Dan's family members stepped aside as we carried Mary into the kitchen, where she sat on a chair, and Carl's gal, Maria, removed the T-shirt bandage and checked her arm wound. Mary grimaced and turned her head to avoid looking at the wound.

Dan's girlfriend, Rose, brought in some gauze and alcohol to clean and bind the wound. When that was done, with Mary gritting her teeth through it as if it were a terrible ordeal, Maria turned. Most of the family had squeezed in to watch. Others looked through the window. "She has to be driven to the town clinic. That wound needs at least four stitches, and it has to be stitched right, then an ice pack has to be put on overnight to keep the bruise down. I don't want to do any rough stitching out here. That's only for bush emergencies. A careful job is better and reduces scarring."

"We'll go into town right now," Jae said. "My car is fast."

People were asking questions all at once, wanting to know what happened at the base. Dan threw his arms up. "Wait a minute. I'll walk these people to the car, and then I'll explain everything."

At the car, we exchanged some quiet words. Everyone else had stepped outside and was watching. "That way into the base we found," Dan said. "It's a big enough tunnel end to get inside, walking at a crouch. The metal bolts and bars are heavy, but I can cut them right out of the concrete with my gas-powered portable saw. It's an idea for maybe tomorrow afternoon or night."

"It is," I said. "So do you think those cops will return and try to arrest you?"

Dan scoffed. "They can't arrest anyone out here, and things have changed. If they meet up with our big pal at the base, they won't return anywhere. They should've got more information from us before racing off. They'll likely look around out there and then run back to the mayor and Keirstead to explain things before they make any decisions."

Jae raced under the moonlight into town, and the road was clear, the foliage passing like shadows. No animals appeared in the ribbon of light on the asphalt, and we passed only a few cars. We knew where the Shining Falls Center for Rural Health was, drove in, and got the wound stitched up rather quickly. Maria worked at the clinic and had come with us. It was 3:30 am by the time we got back to the hotel. We saw no activity on the streets, and the night clerk had fallen asleep at the desk, so we entered and went up to the suite unnoticed. Mary had a bottle of painkillers. They were opiates, and she popped a couple; she had an ice pack wrapped around her bandage, and she pulled out a bottle of gin and poured a triple.

"Whoa!" Jae said. "You aren't supposed to drink with those pills."

"There's nothing on the label about not being able to drink. My arm is throbbing with pain, and those pills take like an hour to start working. A drink only takes a minute."

Jae frowned, went to the window, and stayed there, peering through the curtain. I walked over. There was absolutely nothing of interest on the street.

"I don't think anything more is going to happen tonight," I said.

"I'm going to keep watch for a while. You can sleep."

I nodded, got myself a drink, and went over and sat by Mary on the couch. A few minutes later, she passed out, and I carried her over to her suite and left her on the bed on her back with the sling holding her arm.

Jae's watch proved ineffective. I woke briefly in the early morning and found him asleep in a chair by the window. I took a shower, went back to the bedroom, and slept. I slept in and found Mary shaking me. "Get up, it's almost noon, and there's activity in the town."

I dressed, and when I went out to the living area, Mary was looking out the window. Jae had showered and shaved. There were breakfast trays and some coffee, so I made a selection and sat down to eat.

"There's a meeting of some form at the town hall," Mary said. "Marina told me about it. Jack took the day off. I saw our two town cops on the street, but they didn't come in here or up. Fred Dally survived, but he hasn't been arrested. Marina said that the town radio channel reported an accident. A self-driving transport truck crashed into the base. The story is that Fred was out there looking around for bear traps. It's a flurry of activity all over town."

"Good," I said.

Mary frowned at me. "Why is a cover-up staged by those guys good?"

"We don't need the whole town out at the base getting in our way. There'll probably be some daytime operation to pull that truck out, but maybe not right away. They'll tape the area off. The truck may not be in the same location. The robot may have dragged it somewhere or pushed it outside the base entry."

"You want to go out there today?" Jae said.

"No, we can go out in the evening. Dan can cut open the entrance we found and see if we can get through to the inner base. Getting inside covertly is what we need. We should hang around here today and avoid them unless they come to us."

We had an afternoon beer on the restaurant patio, and then Mary went to the ladies' room and returned saying, "Everyone's leaving the hotel. Something is happening down the street."

We got up, went out to take a look, and saw a crowd farther down Main Street. We walked up quietly to see what was going on and found a weird

public display. Dan Fairhawk was parked in the middle of the street. He stood outside his battered red pickup truck. On the back of the big truck, he'd mounted two robot zombies on a weird hangman's rig he'd put together. The zombies hung there from hooks in the face of the growing crowd, and a bad odor was already wafting down the street. Both of the robot corpses had arrows through their heads. It meant Dan had done a little hunting after we'd come back to town.

In the other direction, we could see Mayor Bottoms and his crowd with the two cops hurrying up from their meeting at the town hall. Bottoms had a shocked expression. This was a development he hadn't expected. Without doubt, it threw whatever plans he'd just made out the window.

"Holy shit!" Mary said. "This should be good. Look at the faces on that crowd."

I did look. It was a diverse town crowd standing in bright sunlight, dressed in summery clothes, and nearly all adults. People in this town wore hats more than people elsewhere: baseball caps, trucker hats, straw fedoras, bucket hats, and wide-brim sun hats. Under the hats was an assortment of facial expressions. Some were amazed, like they were looking at the biggest freak pumpkin ever grown. Other faces showed fear, like fear of aliens. A few were openly angry, and some were skeptical. A gaggle of teenage girls was giggling.

"It's more like a disaster," I said. "This means trouble."

Dan took a swig from a bottle of Coke. He saw Bottoms and his crew approaching, hopped up on the tailgate, and shouted. "These are the robot monsters they're making out at the base! Mayor Bottoms has been hiding the truth."

Dan poked at the bodies with a stick, and they rocked on the poles. There was muttering in the crowd. A woman, wearing a huge sun hat, shouted. "Those are aliens, not robots!"

She had a point. Dan had used his bowman's skills to nail two of the fake alien types. Their facial skin was greenish and hanging like melted gum, and their hands were dripping rubbery slime, like they were melting too. They looked absolutely hideous and unreal and not really much like robots. Not to mention the fact that they reeked.

Mary laughed and glanced at me. "They look more like slime monsters from the Black Lagoon."

Bottoms, Jack Keirstead, the cops, and some others moved to the front to face Dan.

"Those things are fakes!" Mayor Bottoms shouted. "You made those foul things in your garage." Bottoms then took another step forward and turned

to face the people. "He's quite the artist, and he's a fraud. He's trying to sue the town and rob you of tax dollars."

Marina Keats had come up from the hotel. "No one could make fakes like that," she said. "They look like they melted inside their clothes. Those things are a military chemical weapons experiment."

Fred Dally appeared; he had a bandage on his head and wore a plaid lumberjack's coat in the hot sun. "They're not fakes!" he yelled. "Those are the things that attacked my son!"

"Calm down, Fred," the Mayor said. "You've been hit on the head. You're not thinking right."

The crowd's facial expressions shifted from confusion to fear, and I knew fear to be a dangerous emotion.

"I got witnesses," Fred said. "Two of the boys were out there with me. There's a big alien monster out there that comes out at night. It wrecked a transport truck, and anyone can drive by and see it for themselves. Those out-of-towners saw it, too. He pointed directly at me, then at Mary. They were running for their lives from that monster. Look at that bandage on her arm. It nearly got her."

The cops, Jim Harver and Ram, suddenly stepped up to the tailgate and turned with Dan standing above them on it, backdropped by the foul robot bodies.

"This is a police matter. We have it under full control," Jim announced.

The vision of them standing there with the hideous bodies behind them gave the impression that they had absolutely no control of the situation and didn't really even know what was going on. There were angry shouts. The crowd was becoming a mob that could turn on the cops and a mayor they viewed as failing to prevent a dangerous situation or being in on it.

Fred Dally jumped in and said. "Some of us boys are going out tonight before midnight. When that monster comes out, we're going to trap that thing and dynamite it!"

A tall man dressed in black, and as pale as an undertaker in a Western movie, threw up his arms and shouted, "Let's do it!"

Suddenly, many people were shouting. Dan tried to shout over them. "Bottoms has been lying all along! He's the fraud, not me! He steals the money he gets from the military! They pay him for a cover-up!"

I tapped Mary on the shoulder, glanced at Jae, and said, "Let's get out of here. This situation isn't something we can control."

We turned and walked back to the hotel, a chorus of shouting behind us as Bottoms again tried to regain control.

"The whole town will be out there tonight," Mary said. "They'll probably blow themselves up."

Jae was unhappy. I knew from experience that he didn't like surprises. "Why did Dan do that without telling us?"

"Five reasons," I said. "He's local and believes in local fight back. After being smeared for so long, he wants his name cleared. It also means they can't arrest him, because people will believe it's a fake arrest, and he's already excited. After such a long time, he now has evidence and wants to act on it. It's not strategic thinking. It's emotional thinking. You don't want the whole town and people you can't trust out there. In any attempt out there, we need competent people who can be trusted and a plan, not fools with explosives."

Chapter 6: Delilah 700

Back in the suite, we stayed inside, worked on some planning, and ordered everything we needed delivered there. Going out to the patio or street would mean questions, so we decided to avoid it. Jae kept his fascination with sitting by the window, watching the street.

"I don't think Mary should go out there tonight," Jae said. "She should stay here and rest."

"I absolutely should go out there," Mary said. "I'm not staying here by myself with the whole town empty."

I put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "She has a point."

"We make this and that plan and never agree, so what's the plan?" Jae said.

"We take what we need. Get to Dan Fairhawk's place early. Once we have a picture of what's going on, we make a final plan on the fly."

With Jack Keirstead not at the front desk, I was able to pop down with Mary and get information from Marina Keats, who had returned. Marina was more excited than scared; probably nothing this exciting had happened in Shining Rapids for decades. She bubbled with information. "Dan Fairhawk has left town. The mayor and the cops didn't try to stop him. They don't want him around. The rotting bodies were seized, placed in toxic waste drums, sealed, and taken to an industrial warehouse at the edge of town. Sharon Atman ... she works at the town library... is attempting to create an African virus scare. No one believes her or that a virus could melt people. Two beliefs are now common. The first is that aliens are at the base and have taken it over, which explains the lack of a visible military presence. Inside the base, an alien plan to take over the town is on the go. The second belief is that the

bodies are people who've been exposed to toxic chemicals or chemical warfare weapons that the military was illegally creating at the base. The military has secretly violated its agreement with the town, and we will sue for more compensation and shut that base down. No one believes it is a robot experiment gone wrong or anything much to do with robots at all. I don't believe that either. It is a chemical warfare experiment, and we are going to stop it."

We didn't dispute anything with Marina, but went back up to the suite. Mary opened her small laptop and displayed posts from social media outlets that Marina had emailed. It was an internet and social media war with millions of views. Numerous AI-enhanced photos and short videos of the aliens, with Dan Fairhawk in his pickup truck, were featured. In some, the robot zombies had been edited to exude an alien glow, and Dan's eyes were edited to appear bright red and possessed. One video showed a big hook dropping them into huge toxic-waste drums, with the caption: "Shining River Zombie Virus Claims More Victims." Another post was titled "Military Chemical-Warfare Weapon Ravages Shining Rapids." The final post that Mary displayed was the most creative, by a town teenager named LannyZ-man54. He'd duplicated and recreated the melting robots from Dan's pickup into a small video and had them marching into Shining Rapids as an alien zombie army. The zombies had arrows through their heads.

"If we don't get our asses moving, his post is going to be the prophetic post." Mary was about to close the laptop and then further said, "Wait, I just got something Mayor Bottoms posted."

She opened the post and turned the screen to us. The post was titled, "Fact Check: Are Aliens in Shining Rapids?" Bottoms portrayed the events as a cleverly designed hoax, AI deep fake video, and disinformation. He had photos that people could enlarge. They showed Dan and the melting robots, with bubbles, and captions enclosing text explaining why they were fakes. The mayor referred to himself as The Official Voice of Shining Rapids.

"Damn," Jae said, even though he rarely swore. "People outside of town must think everyone here is drugged, wacky, or engaged in a publicity stunt to boost tourism."

The town chaos and excitement meant we were forgotten altogether, and in the evening, we packed what we needed and left unopposed and almost unnoticed. We were noticed on the road; a couple of cars tooted their horns at us. Being singled out by Dally had made us more well-known than we already were. Since he hadn't tagged us as being in with the aliens but running from them, people weren't blaming us. At least not yet.

We pulled in at Dan's place. He had a crowd gathered, mostly relatives, I assumed. About thirty-five people with cars parked askew here and there.

We got out and approached Dan, who had come out of the house to meet us.

"What's going to happen tonight?" I said.

"Probably a lot. I had Carl at the lookout all day. The smashed truck has been towed over to block the main entry gate by some town workers the mayor sent out. They put sawhorses on the road from town at the base entry point. Jim and Ram won't be able to stop anyone from coming in, though they will try. The townspeople, along with Fred Dally and his explosives crew, will come in and park all over that area outside the base. Carl has been clearing the brush in an area over by the lookout. So we'll go there and park. I would assume they would plant explosives under the clay up near the base doors on the idea that when aliens emerge, they could blow them up, and then rush the base. Twenty of us are going out now, so you might as well join us. Going in with town people isn't safe."

"It isn't safe at all," Mary said. "Dally is nuts. He saw how fast and powerful that robot is. If he misses on his kill shot, he's going to cause mass death."

Jae had a severe frown on his face. "Sometimes I wonder why we're even here. If this endless scientific madness happening these days can't be stopped, what's the point?"

"We have to do it," I said. "You can't win any fight if you give up. If you do that, you surrender to the enemy. The latest period has been a long surrender of people handing their very humanity to tech extremists, who propagandize the glory of it. This is where it ends up."

"True enough," Dan said. "As the living, we have to fight back, or else the planet will be Mecha and not Earth. You fight back to the very end."

One of Dan's long-haired brothers spoke. "If genuine humans die, our legacy could be horrible machines that could spread like a disease to other planets."

"Koda has it right," Dan said, clapping him on the back. "So let's do it and do it right. We'll figure it out just right when the moon comes up."

It was a nice night, a peaceful night, a warm night. On the road, there was an illusion of all being right with the world. If there was suspense, it was hiding in the woods, waiting for the right moment to burst out. When we pulled in near the hidden observation area, the howl of a wolf shattered the dream, and jangled nerves returned. Jae pulled right up to the top, as did Dan. We left the others to park in the area Carl had cleared. He was up near the edge, waiting, and he waved us over, which told us that eyes were better than words.

A bank of lights was mounted on a pickup truck to compensate for the lack of lighting at the base. It created a bright carpet from the entrance by the town road, up to the sealed main doors of the base. It looked like a

yellowish carpet across the red clay. Vehicles were parked beyond the sawhorses blocking the town road where it entered the base. My eyes had to adjust before I could see the people, as they were in shadows behind the glare of the lights. It was a large crowd, and many of them were armed. I spotted Jack Keirstead's cabby hat and Dally's bright red lumberjack shirt.

About ten of Dan's people went straight around to the opening in the fence and inside onto the clay, where they dispersed. Our area was hidden in darkness, and the cleared parking area lay behind the rise, concealing our vehicles. The townspeople probably could see enough to know we were present, but they had no interest in looking our way, and neither did the two cops. Jim and Ram were out on the clay nearly halfway to the base doors, kicking up the earth here and there and looking in the few stunted bushes.

"The cops are looking for the explosives," Carl said. "Dally's gang, and the arrival of the townspeople, created a distraction, allowing Dally and a couple of others to sneak over and bury explosives well before Jim turned on that bank of lights. They rubbed brush over the area to hide the spot."

"So where are they buried?" Mary said.

"Right about where Jim and Ram are now, and as you see, they can't find them."

Mary grinned, giving us a display of white teeth in the night. "Maybe they're going to stamp their feet and go up in a moon shot."

I was not impressed. "I thought maybe they'd self-drive a buggy, or have some other plan better than that one. Maybe Jim Harver and Mayor Bottoms managed to block any sophisticated ideas."

The wait lasted another hour, and it looked like nothing much would happen other than growing suspense from the occasional distant wolf cry. The townspeople had gathered behind the glare of the lights and were waiting for the fireworks. Some country music was coming from one of the cars, but not loudly. The police and the mayor made no announcements, perhaps feeling that the people would soon disperse, and it would be over. With the binoculars, I could see cans of beer and bags of potato chips being handed out, as if it were about to become a late-night picnic party. It indicated that people were intent on waiting and didn't plan to leave. Insects were light in the immediate base area, so there wasn't any real physical discomfort. Bugs were smart enough to avoid the place. Some of Dan's people had quietly gone over to embed themselves in the crowd in case we needed to gain control of the people.

Voices, the odd shout drifted over to us. Mary sat cross-legged on the hood of the car, with one arm up, a hand open, palm up. Her eyes were closed like she was meditating or high on her pain pills. I studied her, then noticed

movement of the base doors. It was as if Mary had called up some local magic, and the spirits were about to appear.

Dan and I ran down to the fence hole, and the others followed. The base doors were opening very slowly, as if there had been some damage from the truck crash. They opened, revealing interior darkness, and moments later, four robots of the alien zombie type shambled off to the right and left. The huge patrol robot followed, emerging in the light.

This event had caused breathlessness among the crowd, but as we moved across the clay, it became gasps and shouts. On a yellow carpet of light, under moonlight on the Martian-like apron of red clay, it definitely looked like an alien monster. It would be impossible to convince people it was a robot. A spider has eight legs; the beast had five and a face that was a mix of animal and human, with bright red eyes that gave it a hostile, predatory appearance. The huge patches of fake fur on it gave it bulk, and the mere sight of it sent electrifying fear, like the kind in a nightmare where you wanted to run but your legs wouldn't move.

The shouts ended, and the people froze. Soon, most would panic and run; some would start shooting, and there would be chaos. But the beast was wary, and so were the zombies. They walked a third of the way down the apron slowly and didn't reach the planted explosives, but stopped. So too did I stop, and the others with me.

Shooting broke out. From our position, we could see why. A gang of zombies had appeared on the town road behind the people, blocking them in. These zombies also halted at a distance where shots missed or were not effective. The shots reduced to the odd crack and ping, and the strangest silence I'd ever experienced arrived. My sense of time seemed to have slowed down. It was like everyone was hypnotized by the weirdness of the event and fear ... spine-crawling fear, along with the certainty that something beyond horrible was about to occur.

The air felt electric, the ground shook with a mild rumble. Vehicles were moving slowly off to the right and left of the base doors in the dark. The trucking doors at the back had opened, and two huge vehicles were rolling around the front, one of them with treads and the other with large wheels.

It was hard to see the bulky vehicles clearly in the faint light. "The bastards are going to attack us with tanks," Mary said.

Dan turned to face us. "We may have to retreat."

I had my binoculars up. "They aren't tanks. The one doesn't look like a weapon at all. The other is sort of like a huge laser."

Now people were shouting and wanted to flee, but the cops had blocked the road out with a large truck to stop more people from driving in, and the

robot zombies were at it. Officer Jim Harver had unwittingly sandwiched the townspeople between robots at their rear and robots not far off over the clay.

As I watched through the binoculars, extensions rose from the machines into the air, and one had an odd, dish-like object mounted on it. Moments later, the machines emitted light that illuminated the entire central base area.

"The sneaky robot bastards are up to something," Mary said. "We'd better guess what it is right away or else start running."

No guess was required, as a visual suddenly appeared in the air over the top of the base. It was almost like being at a drive-in movie, but this screen projected directly into the air in full depth, and on it, the hooded face of a woman appeared. It was a face both beautiful and predatory, with white eyes that glowed, like those of a blind zombie. Golden hair spilled down to her breasts. Where we were, we saw her image mostly in profile; the townspeople were looking directly at her.

I was amazed, as were others, but Mary scoffed. "This is some hoax the military is projecting." She stared at the image with full skepticism.

Then we heard a voice begin to speak. It was perfectly modulated, so much so that it almost seemed like a telepathic voice. The voice was a machine voice with female intonations, but not human. I knew it was from speakers, but it didn't seem that way.

"I am Delilah 700," the image said. "I am the Quantum Digital Queen with power beyond all others, and your superior. I am in control, and my army is on the move. You have interfered and polluted my sacred ground. You will arrange to surrender to me and be spared. If you do not choose to surrender, you will be destroyed without mercy by my troops. Choose and send forward your representatives to meet my base commander and make the arrangements."

The face faded, replaced by emerging images that appeared in the air as brief, passing segments of realistic video, from around the world. They were from various angles and distances, like views from surveillance cameras, and from above, like satellite cameras zooming in over cities. The crowd was momentarily silent. They'd come see a demolition of the monster robot, a big show. This show had them baffled.

As we stared, we saw robots, most of them zombie-like, often led by those that appeared to be perfect humans. They were in the streets. They were breaking into buildings. People were fleeing in terror. They were there day and night. They were emerging from hidden doors and the backs of trucks, and they were killing people, beating some to death as others screamed and fled. Military robots and home robots had also fallen under Delilah 700's control. They were launching a worldwide attack. I was sure it wasn't a hoax

but real. I recognized places, cities I'd been in, and they were under attack. It was machines rising against the people, and it was happening so fast that no significant fightback could be organized. Spreading chaos was worldwide.

More ugly robots emerged from the base doors, and at the lead was a military man dressed in camouflage fatigues. He had the markings of a colonel or base commander, but he wasn't a human commander; he was a robot imprint. I knew that, but the townspeople didn't know that. They obviously thought he was working with aliens.

Dan grabbed my binoculars for a close look. "That's Colonel David Clarke or the robot version of him. He was the base commander here four years ago."

Delilah 700's image reappeared, then vanished. The whole thing was so unexpected that we were mostly tongue-tied, and we didn't open fire either. I took control, turned and waved for the others to follow, and we hurried across the open area to the townspeople and the mayor. The people were terrified; the fight had gone out of Dally and his armed men. We were penned in a strange situation with them.

We formed our own little circle of seven people. The rest of Dan's people remained planted in the crowd. Mary spoke. "Surrender means death. We saw in the city what they do to you if they get you. There is no way we can explain it to these frightened people. They won't understand or believe us. They think Delilah 700 and her monsters are powerful aliens and robots that have arrived to take over."

"What exactly will surrender lead to?" Koda said.

I answered. "It would be an arrangement where the people of this entire area will end up over time being imprinted on robot blanks, and end up robot zombies. Even in creating those robots, their failure rate is near total now. The only human-like representative they have here is the robot copy of Colonel David Clarke. Think about that ... a fate worse than death, your image existing as a robot serving those monsters and attacking humanity. Whether they're aliens or robots isn't even significant in that regard. They are horrible, and you don't want to fall into their hands. That is all you need to know."

"Is it real?" Jae said. "I mean, is it really a worldwide attack?"

"I'm almost certain it is. Even if it's a con game to get us to surrender, what's happening here is real, and that is our problem. What's happening right here is what counts for us."

Dan looked over toward Bottoms. "No matter what those townies do, we aren't going to surrender."

The muttering and milling of the crowd had stopped. Mayor Bottoms, Jim Harver, Ram, and Fred Dally, who was now apparently their new pal, were taking charge.

Mayor Bottoms handed a pair of binoculars back to an assistant, and then he addressed the crowd. "There are too many of them. A dozen more came out the doors over there. We're blocked in. We can't fight that alien monster. As your mayor and your representative, I will walk over with Police Chief Harver and Ram to arrange a surrender with Colonel Clarke. I'll tell them that we will not cause any trouble at the base or interfere here, and in exchange, you will be able to return to your homes. I will be firm and point out that we are heavily armed. Everyone in favor, raise your hand."

The entire crowd, aside from Dan's people, voted for surrender. Mary stared like she couldn't believe it. And that was it for the big town war with the aliens - instant surrender. We looked at each other knowingly, and a couple of minutes later, Mayor Bottoms, Jim Harver, and Ram were walking down the shining path of light. Colonel Clarke, with the big robot trailing behind him, moved forward, and they met at the center. A discussion was underway. We had no idea what was being said, but we wanted to wait and hear the surrender terms, though we had no plans to surrender.

It looked like something was being finalized when, out of the blue, the lights at the base went out. The lights from the bank on the pick-up truck near us remained on, blinding us with sudden glare. A bizarre, incredible whine and a long mechanical scream filled our ears, then the lights from the big machines came back on faintly, and in that light we saw Bottoms, Jim, and Colonel Clarke stumbling around in the clay like they'd been struck by lightning or a shock wave. Ram stood still as if in shock, staring at them.

Mary had binoculars, and she shouted. "Look at Mayor Bottoms, Jim, and that colonel! Their faces are melting, they're zombies!"

Mary wasn't the only one who saw it. People screamed. Shots were fired, and many of them were from Dan's people. They weren't firing in the direction of Bottoms and the colonel; they'd moved by stealth to target the zombies on the road and to clear the way by moving aside the truck blocking the way out. The road zombies were going down fast, some of them with arrows through their heads. Then shots were fired in the direction of the base from Dally's men, which somehow penetrated the clay and set off the planted explosives. That was the end of Mayor Bottoms, Jim, and Colonel Clarke. Ram was running across the clay toward us. A huge wave of exploding fire and clay sent the robot monster and the zombies around it into the air, setting them on fire. Ram also caught fire and, burning and dead, flew through the air into a patch of darkness. The only survivor was the monster, which landed, flaming and smoking. Mayor Bottoms, Jim, and the colonel, if they existed at all, existed as some of the burning debris

falling across a wide area. The townspeople were now rushing to their cars; some were already pulling out.

We were already running across the sand for the lookout, and once in darkness, turned and targeted the zombies by the base doors. I had the sniper rifle and got a few, as did Dan and Carl. We were wasting them when another terrible mechanical scream rose, knocking us to our knees, hands to our ears. The robots were disoriented and stumbled back inside. The limping monster could still move fast, even with one of its legs disabled and dangling, and it was still on fire. It ran toward the townspeople. I saw it knock a man through the trees. It struck wildly, crushing several people and smashing a car. The lights flickered; we saw darkness, the fiery robot lashing out wildly, and heard bone-chilling screams. It crashed around some bushes and then emerged, and we opened fire from a distance.

That attracted its attention and turned it. It allowed the remaining people to escape, but it left us running at top speed over the clay for the lookout, the fiery beast rapidly catching up. We made it, barely, and as we ran up the rise, we heard a barrage of fire. A few of Dan's guys were targeting it with shotgun blasts from above; the blasts went over our heads. As we reached the top and turned, we saw it hurriedly limping back to the base doors. It was no longer on fire but smoking. It and the remaining zombies stumbled back inside, followed by the big machines. The doors slowly closed. The townspeople had escaped, at least those who weren't dead had; all lights went out, and only some cries of pain remained.

A few minutes later, after we caught our breath and judged it safe, we went back out to gather any wounded and double-tap the fallen robot zombies. It was now deeper darkness, no light but the moon, and we hurried across the clay carrying portable lights. Mary had the largest light, and as we neared the town road entrance, she scanned the clay with it, revealing scattered burned debris and body parts. The blackened metal skull of a robot protruded from the clay, and some of the people gasped as Mary highlighted burned human body parts. As we approached sparse foliage, we found a hideous burned torso resting against a tree trunk.

"I think we found Ram," Dan said. "At least he didn't suffer."

There were other ugly finds near a couple of smashed cars. As Mary scanned the light over the road, we saw zombies littering the gravel, and a couple of guys went up and put shots in the heads of any that could possibly be still functional. We saw an open section between two trees with a lot of spilled blood darkening on the sandy edge, and walked through. Inside, we found the remains of a massacre. The patrol robot had either gotten in there and mangled about fifteen people or killed them and tossed them in there. Three people were alive but badly wounded and leaning against the trunk of a

maple tree. We found Fred Dally sitting there by a boulder, muttering to himself and in shock.

Dan walked up and slapped him on the face. "Wake up, man. Are you going to sit here until you die?"

Dally came around; some tears showed on his grimy face. "We screwed up badly. Mayor Bottoms shouldn't have gone out there."

"That thing was no mayor," Mary said. "Your mayor died a long time ago."

Koda had some of the women gathered. "Dally's van is over by the road, and it isn't damaged. Let's get these three in it and head for the town clinic. We have a medical kit, but we can't treat wounds that bad here."

The wounded were three semi-conscious town women in various conditions. One woman had broken legs and another, a deep and serious gash to the torso. The third woman was battered, bruised, and scraped up but coherent and not in shock or moaning like the others. She was checked over and tried to rise, but collapsed. "I'm going to kill that thing," she said. "I got a piece of it with my shotgun."

"You might get your chance, Libby," Dan said. "But I think we need a bigger gun to kill that thing. What exactly happened?"

"It charged our group fast. I got it with a shot, and it knocked me over while it swiped at the others. It didn't notice me once I was down, or I'd be dead."

As Mary lit the way, they were carried off to Dally's van, but Dally didn't go with them. We took his keys, and he stayed with us. Libby, as it turned out, was the head nurse at the Shining Falls Center for Rural Health. We needed her more for that than attempting to shoot mechanical beasts.

Dan paced back and forth for a few moments, looking around, and then said, "We're going to split up. We'll head over to the lookout first. Half of us will go to town and find out what's happening there. The rest go to my place. It's now the base camp. We'll grab supplies and return. Then we're going inside the base as soon as possible."

"Yeah, and when we get in, we're going to fuck that place up," Mary said.

"We can't clean this mess up now," Dan said. "Everyone's dead, including the cops. You'd need a team of doctors, morgue attendants, and toxic waste guys for the robots. The town has no mayor and is in chaos."

He walked off, and we followed, heading over the clay, hearing some distant dogs howling. Fred Dally stumbled along behind us. The sky was now clear, and the stars above were a bright river. It was overwhelming; the stars in the city never got that bright.

Mary was obviously wearied by the hideous events. It showed on her face. "I don't understand what that thing is, the bitch image we were looking at?"

"You're not alone on that," Dan said. "Probably no one who saw it knows exactly what it is, but only that it's deadly and is a projection of the boss lady who is down below controlling the others."

"I think I know what Delilah 700 is," I said. "She said she's the quantum digital queen and our superior. A quantum computer system runs an engine similar to a game engine, but far more advanced. Delilah 700, the queen, is produced by the system as a superintelligence. All of the robots, whether perfect or flawed, have her digital mind behind their creation and basic operation. They are like characters she runs. Some of them have human characteristics imprinted on them, but not all, because the alien copies are a different creation. She is the power. All sorts of components, packages, and so forth are loaded to create her digital mind. There would be a core computer logic system that is her brain. Something new and quantum speed makes her superior to all other systems that run robots. Any military personnel who were in there are dead. Delilah 700 took over and runs things herself."

"Why in the hell would those military guys create a weapon they couldn't control?" Koda said.

"It's a long and sad story. What we discovered began in the city. Some military and tech guys, and other collaborators, planned to replace world leaders with perfect robots. Their plan was well underway and had been underway for like years. Then somewhere, somehow, it got screwed up big time. Maybe damage, sabotage, or infighting, and the perfect system to create the perfect robot duplicates of people took control, deteriorated to what it is now, and killed them off. Delilah 700 is not improving but is in a death spiral. With her super quantum power, she can probably crack every outside security system on the planet like a supervirus, without even being detected. Her robots are the main part of her worldwide infection. She can cause world-shaking damage and, from what we saw, is actively doing it."

Mary spat in the clay. "A faction of the creepy machine heads that have been calling for merging people with machines has finally done the job. Maybe people should have taken them seriously before they set the house on fire with their reckless and idiotic plans. Now, Delilah 700 has dispatched them to hell, and we have to find a way to burn her house down."

Dan nodded. "I'm pretty sure that Delilah 700 thing ran out of power here at the home base. That has to be it. It sucked up so much power that it blacked out. That is probably why it is quiet during the day. There is a large recharge process. The robot master plan faces a major obstacle. Not enough local power. That means we have an opportunity. We need to blow up that quantum computer inside the base. We have to do it. Any outside agency would try to save Delilah 700 and use her for its own purposes."

"You can count on me to push the detonator button," Mary said. "I will blow all super-machine dreams to pieces, and enjoy it, even if I go out with them."

The drive into town was dark; the power was out in the entire area. Mary was in the lead of our car convoy, driving at high speed. We came into the town outskirts, and there were some lights on, with generators already running. The first place we headed to was the Shining Falls Center for Rural Health, which was busy and generator-powered. We were barely out of the cars when a man ran up the road waving his arms.

"It's Harmon from the John Deere warehouse," Fred Dally said.

Harmon ran up to us and sputtered, "They're out there. It's too late."

I put out my hand, palm forward, to stop him. "Calm down. Exactly who is out there?"

"Monsters sent by the alien queen!" His face was sweaty, whiskered, and dirty like he'd been hiding in the bushes. "They were in the Greens Fertilizer Storage all along. There are at least thirty of them up there. They're coming this way."

Fred Dally's eyes suddenly lit up. His van was parked at the clinic as it had been used to deliver the wounded. He ran to it, jumped into it, pulled out, and drove off toward his hardware store and the warehouse.

"What now?" Mary said. "We can't lose our minds like Dally just did?"

"We defend the medical center," Dan said. "Let's blockade the front before they get here. They plan to attack the town, and they've got to pass here if they want to head to the town proper and the hotel."

A Pentecostal church was across the road on the corner of the side street. It would provide an overview of Main Street. "I'm going to use that church," I said. "It's the perfect location for shots. Mary can shine the light down to spotlight them when they're close enough. Then we all open fire."

I looked around at the others. They nodded in agreement. Harmon ran into the clinic. Dan sent Char, a woman from his crew, in after him to stop him from spooking the people inside.

The church door wasn't locked, so we walked in and went up to the second floor, where Mary carefully knocked out a stained-glass window with a cloth on the butt of her light. She picked out the remaining glass and focused below. With the light on, we could see Dan and his people working speedily to build a barricade on the clinic steps using overturned tables and an old car. His guys positioned themselves, and then we waited. I watched the road through my night-vision binoculars. I looked to the other side and studied the rural health center itself. It was an old stone building, once a bank, and

refurbished and expanded into a medical center. I could see the side alley and over to the rear. The area looked clear.

When the robots showed, it was on the road out front, and they were coming fast around the bend out of the night gloom, alien and human variety, about thirty of them, and they had enough power to operate, so they were getting a charge or signal from somewhere and maybe from the fertilizer warehouse itself. They'd known exactly where we were through some method of detection.

I whistled; Mary shone her light, spotlighting them. Arrows and shots took a couple down, and I shot a couple more, but these were tougher and didn't go down easily, and more were coming. The robots halted, drew back, and regrouped, obviously planning to charge us in a broad sweep. This gang actually included more female robot models than male alien models, but they weren't any prettier and were probably imprints of women who had gone missing in the region. One of the female robots stepped out and shouted something. The words were garbled. We could hear them, though their sound was mechanical and in no known language. This particular robot was less deteriorated and more human in appearance, but like a woman who had rotted into a zombie with dirty, ragged clothing. It appeared that even the human-style models lost the desire for cleanliness or a clean appearance as the first part of their decay.

The only response from the barricade was an arrow shot that pierced her arm. She pulled it out and kept shouting. No one shouted back, as they probably couldn't figure out what she was saying.

"What in the hell language is that bitch thing talking in?" Mary said, mystified.

"I think it's supposed to be English, but she or it can't express it because of deterioration. She can't produce vowels and is speaking in tokens or pieces of words, in a weird grammatical flow that sounds like babble. The face has a shifting look. Same as we saw back at the mansion. I believe she is calling for us to surrender."

There was no surrender; Fred Dally's van raced around the bend and knocked aside two zombies as he swerved past the largest group. He screeched to a stop before reaching the barricade, turned the van around, got out, and retrieved something from the back of the van.

His headlights lit the road; the robots were now charging and had decided to target the van. Instead of retreating, Dally paced forward, holding something in his hands as they approached, then a huge blast of flame streamed through the air, and he swept it across the lot of them. Most were staggered and in flames; their flesh was highly flammable. As we took others down in shots, Dally dropped his makeshift flamethrower; he was

bowled over by a staggering alien-style zombie and crawled toward the roadside, where he rolled into the ditch. Dan stepped out and shot the tank of the fallen flamethrower, and it exploded into more flames, the tank's body flying through the air and directly taking down the closest charging beast. We cleaned up the remaining robots in less than a minute.

Mary hurried ahead as we went back down to the street. "Woohoo!" she shouted. "That was some cookout."

People cheered, and Dan walked with us as we went through the smoking corpses and double-tapped them. Fred Dally emerged from the ditch. He walked over, and he looked as dirty and blackened as one of the zombies.

"Hey," Koda said. "Now that makes up for your failure out at the base, at least for some of it."

Dally was pleased. "I have a couple of generators at the hardware store. We should raid the John Deere warehouse; it has generators and maybe other stuff the town needs. Stocking up on ammunition is something else."

We first checked the clinic and left a few armed people to guard it. We walked up the road behind Dally's van as he moved slowly forward, scanning for any rogue enemies. We passed Dally's store, Spike's Hardware and Lumber. It was clear, and Dally had just been there. We would hit it for supplies and the two generators later.

Greens Fertilizer Warehouse was farther up and had a wide entrance apron. Dally pulled over and turned his headlights on the area. He highlighted the bay door where the robots had emerged, and we walked over. Mary shone her power light inside, and we went in. This place stored supplies like fertilizer, bags of cement, and other stuff, and we slowly went through it, checking every corner and area. Then Mary's light found something. She flicked it on and off, revealing a glowing green face on a device about the size of a large generator. A scan of the light, deeper in, showed something else: dark gray body bags, all hanging and sealed, maybe thirty of them.

We were wary and spread out, then we halted. "That thing's like a signal source powering them," I said.

"Should we carry it to the van?" Dally said.

Dan looked at Dally like he thought he was crazy. "No way. It'll draw them after us. We destroy it."

"It might be dangerous," Mary said. "That bright green facing looks easy to smash, but what if it blows up? It might even be a trap and blow up right now. Maybe we should get out of here fast."

Koda was carrying a sledgehammer he'd grabbed in the warehouse. "I could smash it with this."

"Hold on," I said, barely getting the words out, when a huge robot burst from the darkness and knocked two of Dan's men aside as it lunged at him.

Mary screamed and dropped the light. It was like sudden blindness, but the device's green light revealed the beast's shadowy motion as it knocked Dan down. Koda's sledgehammer flew out of his hands, and I was knocked over and landed beside it. The struggle continued with Koda grabbing the robot from behind. I picked up the sledgehammer, rose to my feet, and swung it down hard on the green facing. I was lucky I didn't hit someone and kill them. The swing connected, a shower of sparks burst in the air, and we heard a chorus of mechanical screams rise and then die.

Silence followed; Mary grabbed the light; more men showed up with flashlights; Dan and Koda were getting up; and the large zombie was splayed on the floor. The light showed that the flesh on its face had exploded.

"Damn," Dan said. "That stinking robot flesh is all over my shirt."

Dally gave it a hard boot. "Maybe that's the one that crippled my son. We can get you a new shirt over at my hardware store. Let's finish up here."

Walking over, I zipped open one of the bags. The ammonia-like reek nearly knocked me over. I zipped it back up. "It looks like we killed the dormant ones in the bags, too. Their fake flesh exploded. That's why they all screamed. These ones had already been imprinted and then put in bags. That's something new."

Minutes later, we were out in the parking lot. We'd dragged the bags and the dead boss robot out to an open area, and a new guy named Fisher, who'd joined us at the clinic, poured fuel oil over the pile of bodies. Char got the honors, and as we stood back, she lit a trail of fuel oil, and the line of flames raced over and ignited them. Bright fire lit the area. We stood with the wind at our backs, and it was a good thing, because a cloud of black smoke rose and drifted toward the woods.

A few hours of hard work followed. We took vanloads of stuff from the hardware store and the John Deere warehouse and dumped them back at the clinic. Fisher owned a gun-and-fishing-equipment shop and had a load of guns and ammo. He had explosives too, as did Dally, which we temporarily stored at Dally's hardware store. A town defense committee emerged as locals flocked to the Shining Falls Center for Rural Health. A miner named Walker was appointed its leader. Libby, the nurse who'd been battered by the patrol robot, had recovered some and was in charge of the clinic in the absence of the cowardly head doctor, who had fled town in his car. We decided to leave it to them to set up the town's defense and support. Dan was anxious to head back out and put our plan to finish the job on Delilah 700 into action. We appointed Harmon as a liaison. If something big

happened in town, he was to drive out and inform us. There was no hope of outside help; all communications were down. No phones, no internet; the town committee said that even short-wave radios were out. Delilah 700 had somehow blocked all communications.

Standing by our vehicles, we waited for Koda to return. He had selected explosives that we might need to blow up things inside the base. He pulled up, and Dan decided to send him ahead to the lookout. He didn't want him in our convoy in case of a rare accident involving explosives caused by driving on dark roads.

Our convoy moved out on a slow crawl around the town's streets. They looked clear. All we saw were roaming dogs and the odd person headed for the clinic. We cruised slowly down Main Street and stopped by the hotel. There, we ended up in a hostile situation. The front of the hotel had been barricaded. There was light inside, so they had generators, but out front, Jack Keirstead and a group of armed men and women had their guns pointed at us.

Rather than his cabby hat, Keirstead was wearing a football helmet, a Kevlar vest, Levi's, and heavy military boots. He had a Ruger shotgun pointed right at me as he stepped up closer. The rest of his soldiers wore similar comical dress, and, aside from being able to fire guns recklessly, they did not look like a tightly organized combat team. A couple of them were also drinking Shining Crown Whiskey, microbrewed locally, straight from the bottle. Keirstead's second-in-command was a guy Dan identified as Hank. He was tall, wiry, and strong with thick brown hair as wild as sprouting weeds.

"We're not the enemy, Jack," I said. "You can lower the guns."

"We don't know that. You could be like Bottoms, one of the perfect alien copies. You people remained at the base, so maybe the body snatchers got you."

"There are no aliens," Dan said. "Those things are robots. You worked with two of them all along and didn't even know. Aiding and abetting the enemy. Now you want to shoot innocent people."

Dan's guys were in cover behind the cars, so it was a standoff. Jack Keirstead was deep in thought, and the expression on his face indicated the situation was beyond his mental capacity. "I'm not making that mistake again," he said. "You aren't getting in here. We are cleaning up the alien infestation in this town, and that includes you. We don't want people here who are collaborating with them."

"You stink like whiskey," Mary said. "We're not coming into the hotel. We cruised the town to check the security situation. Walker has been appointed leader of the town defense, and he's down at the clinic. Libby is in charge of

the clinic. You should head down there and get your instructions. We're going back out to the base to mess that place up."

Keirstead lowered his gun and laughed at Mary. A drunken guffaw. "If those things haven't got you already, they will once you go out there. We are waiting for help to arrive. By the way, the head of town defense is me, not Walker."

"If you start a shooting war among the townspeople, you're going to regret it," Dan said.

Char stepped out. "You're going to be waiting forever for help to arrive. There is no communication with the outside. No help is coming. If we get inside out there, we'll try to open the main doors so you townspeople can join the attack on them."

"No way," Jack said. "Do not open those doors. If you want to go there and die, do so. But leave us out of it. You want to seal them in there, not let them out."

"They'll come out anyway," I said. I looked around. "Let's go. There's nothing to do here. We're wasting valuable time."

Chapter 7: The Journey Below

We drove off into the last dregs of the night, and the light of dawn was in the sky as we arrived at Dan's place. The convoy turned in, and we unloaded a generator to set up and supplies. Dan and some others went into the house briefly to give some instructions, and then we went straight on to the lookout. A large cache of supplies had been dropped there.

Dan walked over and shook his head. "We don't need all that. We're not moving in there. We'll take tools, guns, and explosives, and two teams. The rest of the supplies will go back to the house. My team goes in first. The second team will have more people arriving from my house and will be at least an hour behind."

Koda and Dally came up with a large canvas pack, and Koda spoke. "The explosives have to be kept out of the line of any fire. We have cartridges, sticks, and some bars. This is specialized mining stuff. It can blast out sections and chunks of the hardest rock. Dally has set up a master detonator. It makes it possible to mark planted explosives, detonate them selectively, in groups, or all at once when we make our exit. I need to run down how to use the detonator tablet because if some of us get killed, we need someone who knows how to use it. I've tested the signal. We had to alter it to get it to work, and it has a limited range. It looks a lot like a secure cellphone app, but one where if you make a mistake, you go boom."

Jae had one of the explosive cartridges and was studying it. "Put Mary on the detonator. Run her through it. She's good with that stuff with her smaller, faster fingers. I have ape thumbs. I hate those interfaces. So do most other guys. She's faster and less likely to make a mistake."

Koda nodded. "I'll train her and Char. Dally and Dak know it. Joe can select any tools or things we'll need."

Dan seemed satisfied, and he picked up his portable saw and headed for our marked spot. The grate was hidden there in a depression. A few minutes later, we'd gathered and were waiting. Dan was cutting deep into the sweating concrete around the heavy metal grate. Some of it had rotted. The sun was lifting mist off the land. I climbed up and looked over at the base and the sealed doors. Corpses, those of robots, littered the clay out front of the doors. The area over by the town road was one I didn't want to inspect; by now, a horrible stench would be rising there, and fortunately, the wind wasn't blowing it in our direction. It caused a wave of sadness to momentarily overcome me, one I was sure was blowing like a wind worldwide. Determination followed the sad feeling. I felt driven to get this job done. The way to kill a zombie queen like Delilah 700 was to go straight to her and put a spike through her head. We were the only people with a chance of doing it.

I partially slid back down through the dry weeds and sandy embankment. Dan had cut out deep chunks, and after another minute, he shut off the saw. Three of us used pry bars and got the grate partially off. Hot air began to blast out of the grate, catching us off guard. It blew with force for five full minutes, hot dusty air, nearly scorching.

It finally stopped, and we wanted the grate out completely, so we hooked a heavy rope and used a pickup truck to pull it out. The grate popped out and shot forward like it was on an elastic band, embedding itself in the sand.

"Bring the saw and stuff," I said. "We go in, and down to its end fast. This is part of a cooling system, a massive heat exhaust, and we don't want to get caught in the blast."

On the inside, it felt like being inside a big intestine. The odor farther down was like a beast's body odor, and along this pipe, hairline scars ran horizontally where blasts of air and sand particles had eroded the sides over the years. It wasn't concrete or plastic but a hybrid. We hadn't expected the pipe to be so incredibly long. It angled down slightly, making it easier to move, but it was rough going.

We moved fast at a crouch, and I flashed my light ahead. Air started to blow; we sped up. It was getting incredibly hot. I started to fear we'd get cooked or that Koda's pack of explosives would detonate. I heard desperate gasps behind me. The air was hitting us with such force that it would push

us back in moments. Dust particles were blinding us. The light showed a branch off to the left, and I turned into it, the others following so fast and hard that they were pushing me forward. This was a narrow branch, but we all got into it, and then we heard a powerful blast that blew through the main pipe; it rang in our ears like the sound of a hollow horn as the pipe vibrated. We had barely escaped being roasted.

Mary grasped the back of my shirt and shouted. "Son of a bitch! I'm soaked in sweat."

I remained in a crouch that was becoming painful, not just for me but for everyone. It was like being caught in a cook's steam pot.

"Pass up the saw," I said. "There's an exit here."

This exit had a metal grate with four big bolts, which I sawed through, then pushed out, and it clanged on the hard stone below. I flashed the light. "Follow slowly," I said. "Drop down from the edge. We're five feet up."

Slowly, everyone dropped down. We came through as a fairly large group. It included Dan, Mary, Char, Fisher, Ruba, and Fred Dally from town, along with Koda, Jae, six of Dan's cousins, and his stepbrother, Dak.

We'd arrived deep inside the base in what I believed was its outer underground edge. This was a big, cavernous area lit by whitish-blue light from tiny starlike bulbs in the cavern ceiling. Fat and squat stone pillars held up a cave-like roof. The walls were rough and jagged, as if the stone had been smashed out in chunks. The pillars were rough, not constructed pillars set in place; they were original stone, serving as pillars to support the cavern that had been carved out.

People had fanned out, looking around warily as we moved. A huge shadowy figure startled us, and I dodged over and looked. It was a huge metal robot that could roll on treads. It had powerful arms, one with a jackhammer-like end and the other a claw that could rip out huge stones. It was not powered up. The thing was seven feet tall in a cavern about ten feet high.

We walked up and studied it. "Fisher had been a miner when younger. He was a strong, muscular guy with his hair cropped short. He dressed like a trucker with heavy tattoos on his rolled-up sleeves. "I've used one of those before," he said. "It can be programmed to operate automatically or controlled by remote control. These are very old and simple and run by software. The remote is inside that plastic panel up on its back. It's as easy to use as a kid's toy."

Mary walked around it, tapped on its chest, then jumped onto its back and pulled the control out of the panel. "Everyone, back off. I'm going to test this thing."

In about 30 seconds, she'd figured out the controls. The robot suddenly powered up, and she backed it away from the wall. Then she caused it to charge forward on its treads and pummel a pillar with a couple of punches, and knocked up some dust.

"Whoa, hold on!" Dan shouted. "You want to bring the roof down on us."

Dan's brother, Dak, had gone ahead and returned in a hurry. "There are things stored in this cavern up ahead, big electronic machines, and in some kind of packaging like they are to be shipped out."

Dak pointed. We walked ahead; Mary sent the robot off to our left and had it rolling. It was obvious she planned to use it to protect our flank. I said nothing because I felt we might need it to break down some doors. We came into an area of the cavern with rows of machines stacked side by side and shrink-wrapped in thick, clear plastic; there was bubbled plastic at the rear of the objects, protecting the electronics and cables. Dak had sliced and peeled the plastic from the front of one machine. I knew what they were.

"Those are imprint cocoons," I said. "They put you inside of them to transfer your brain and nervous system imprint into a robot placed in another cocoon. The two versions are for male and female."

"Crap," Char said. "If it weren't for the fact I'm seeing it, I'd never believe it. They look like cases for mummies, just more modern."

"That's what you'll end up as if they get you in one of them," Mary said. She suddenly sent the robot forward, smashed its jackhammer hand into one of the machines, and started smashing up and down. She paused and said, "I could wreck them one by one."

Dan put his hand over hers on the controller. "Don't do that. There are too many of them, and we're making too much noise. So far, we haven't been noticed, so things are good. We'll plant some explosives and detonate this area when we leave."

Fred Dally looked at the machines carefully. "So, they're electronic. What I can do is set up a group of wafers in a pattern, and when they go off, it will create a flash explosion that sets electronics on fire and ignites that plastic. They'll all burn and explode."

"Do it," Dan said, and a minute later, Dally and Koda had stuck explosives on select machines for later detonation.

Satisfied, we moved out of the area to a large opening and yellowish light. We came out on a road. Standard smooth asphalt, and it ran in a corkscrew fashion down deeper into the base. From where we were, we could also walk upward and reach the main doors. The road had a roof of rough, concrete arches in a series of rings. A line of tiny white star-bright lights embedded in the center of each ring lit the tunnel. Assorted rubbish and junk, huge

concrete chunks, timbers, and large metallic shells of some form of old bombs blocked one side of the road going down, which was painted with a white line separating two lanes.

Mary rolled the heavy robot out. We looked up and down the road.

"I had no idea this base was so big. It makes things much more difficult," I said.

"They've been building this place for nearly 80 years. It's gone through various incarnations, none of them good," Dan said. "My family's hatred for it runs way back."

Fisher returned from a forward check down the road. "There are some huge tanks around the corner that we should check first. Then we should go up, check the top, and maybe open the main doors. That way, the backup team will come in the doors and not get cooked in that pipe."

Dan nodded. "A check up there makes sure we won't get attacked from the rear as we go down."

We moved forward along the corkscrew road, down to a spot where it widened. There, we found huge cylindrical tanks placed horizontally against the wall. Three of them, each about 30 feet long and marked with the flammable symbol. There was an open section of the wall at the last tank, and pipes and tubes ran into a cavernous area. It wasn't lit, so I shone a beam and discovered a massive storage area of hanging body bags.

The others gathered and looked in from the road. "We know what this is," Mary said. "We also know we have to burn it."

"Stick some explosives on those tanks," I said.

Koda did that job carefully, and then he stepped in and planted a couple inside. "We can't blow this until we go out. The blast would cause a wave of liquid fire."

"There is a big door to another area down around the corner!" Fisher yelled as he ran back up.

We moved down to check it. This was the other side of the road. A large riveted metal door that looked invincible, and to its left was a window of thick safety glass. So thick it was hard to see through it when shining the light, but it looked like some equipment was inside. There was a heavy metal pull switch embedded in the wall, so I pulled it down, and the door opened inward. This door was a foot thick, like a vault door.

"This place is built for a nuclear attack," Jae said. "It's dark in there. Mary, send that robot in and see what happens."

We backed up behind the heavy robot, and it moved in on its treads; as it did, lights came on automatically. The room was empty, so we followed and

looked around. There was a lot of equipment, and a camera setup with a huge screen, but it was out. There were also four human skeletons in sitting positions against a wall. Their flesh had deteriorated to piles of cobweb-like dust.

Ruba squatted and touched one. "They look almost like they're made of plastic. There's no way they've been sitting here for years for all the flesh to rot off, so I wonder what killed them?"

Dan scratched his head. "Maybe they encountered some biological or chemical weapon that rots your flesh off. Can one of you get that computer working and those cameras on? Some of us need to go up to the main doors first before we go in deeper."

Mary, Jae, and Koda stayed with the mining robot to check the equipment, and the rest of us walked up slowly to the top of the road. The level below the top was a huge parking and loading bay. Yellow diagonal lines were painted here and there on the floor and walls. Whether trucks entered the base from the front or the back, the road curved down here, with the option to drive deeper in or turn into the loading bay. An assortment of automated forklifts, trolleys, and flat-bed carriers was there in the gloom, along with some old canvas-covered military trucks. The two huge machines that had come outside before the unfortunate blast off of Mayor Bottoms and Colonel Clarke to the Moon were parked deeper in. There were a few simple, inactive loading robots. They could do all-automated loading of trucks going in and out. The setup was such that a truck could pull into the designated apron, and the loading robots would automatically load or unload it. The area ran deep; we couldn't see it all, and it was mostly in gloom.

"We don't need to blow this area up," Dan said. "Let's get up to the doors."

We arrived at the front security doors, which were tightly sealed. Fallen, rotting robots were scattered behind the doors. The area curved around to the back truck doors, which were also closed. The air, filled with a foul haze from the rotting robots, was almost chemical. Coughing, I walked up to the panel for the front doors, stood right under a camera, and hit the control. The doors started to open and did open about four feet, then seized. Stepping into the opening, I took some deep breaths from the rush of fresher air.

"That's good enough," Dan said. "The outside team will see it. Let's go back to the others."

We strolled back down, looking around, and as we passed the loading bay and parking area, we saw shadowy figures moving around some vehicles deeper inside. We halted and stayed silent, hoping they didn't spot us. They came clear of the gloom, and they did see us. These were large and advanced military robots. I guessed them at close to 7 feet tall. Their heads

were like green-patterned helmets, and their eyes were glowing white oval eyes with a blind look. They had strong, open chests and limbs. The one in the lead had a huge yellow coin implanted in its solar plexus. They were humanoid and unclad, with dull green and brown camo patterning. It would take a direct shotgun blast just to knock one down.

The robots halted. The leader was about to speak or shout. We didn't wait to hear it. I fired two quick shots, which staggered one temporarily, and then we started running. I glanced back and saw all nine of them pursuing us. They were jogging leisurely, but they were, without a doubt, fast enough to catch us easily. They knew the base, and that we were headed down. It meant they knew they would corner us and didn't need to rush. Without doubt, there were other victims in the past. It was possible we were rushing toward another group of them.

We were running so fast down the curving road, it was almost like we were about to lift off and fly, and we reached the huge riveted door, Mary and the others. The door was already closing as we burst inside. I halted and leaned over an equipment bank, gasping for air. It felt like my lungs were going to explode. Mary had the cameras up on the screen, and the military robots were jogging in formation around the corner by the big tanks.

The door sealed. "I have a solution for those bastards," Mary said.

"No," Dally shouted. He charged at Mary from the other side of the room. She had the detonator out, punched it with her finger, and dodged Dally.

The explosion came as a shockwave that rocked the room. The bang was deafening; the screen showed the robots disappearing in a blast of fire, and then went black. The heavy metal door rebounded like it was about to break open, and outside the thick security window, liquid fire poured down the road. Mary had blown the tanks, the cavern full of the robot blanks, and the storage area of cocoons to hell and back. That we weren't blasted along with them was a miracle. The security glass then warped inward and nearly melted through as it formed a huge bubble.

We'd all been knocked to our knees or flat on the floor and slowly got up. The security glass solidified into a bubble and turned smoky black.

Mary found herself under scrutiny by several pairs of hostile eyes. "There was no other choice. I had to put them down. I saw them chasing you when the cameras came up. There was another group of them coming up to sandwich you, so I barbecued them in flaming oil. They would have trapped us in here and found the explosives we planted. We'd be dead, having accomplished nothing."

That seemed to satisfy everyone.

"What now?" Dan said.

"This room has a rear door," Jae pointed out. "So let's check it."

"Hold on," Mary said as she managed to get another blurry camera image up on the screen. "This security room's cameras cover the top and then down the road a ways below us, but no more than that."

She switched to a camera farther down that hadn't been fried. It showed the fire burning out, and the robots melted on the road. The flaming liquid had also melted the asphalt down the road a ways, with thick black smoke rising and being sucked up the road in a heavy stream toward the main doors. Most likely, exhaust fans had kicked in.

"Damn," I said. "We must be sending up smoke signals that will be seen by the whole area."

"Let's just hope this place doesn't collapse before we get out," Dally said.

The security room was large and angled down to an apron that led out to a lower turn in the road. We could barely see out the security glass there. The road was covered with molten, smoking crap and impassable on foot. To make it worse, there was another heavy door, and we couldn't open it. It had sealed shut.

Dak spoke. "I brought two gas masks. Even if we can get out, the air there isn't breathable, and we can't get through that melt on foot. We'll have to stay here and wait."

Ten minutes later, the heavy smoke had cleared, and Mary came up with a solution. "I'm going to use the robot to knock down that door. One by one, people ride over the hot spot on its back. I can direct it from here using that screen for a better visual. Two people get the gas masks. The rest use dust masks."

Only Dally wanted to wait. None of the rest of us wanted to be stuck in place waiting for the enemy to come to us. We went ahead with the plan, with everyone well back as Mary moved the robot slowly down some steps and then up to pound on the door. It didn't come down, and five hard punches later, Mary tracted it back and jolted it in to hammer the door with both arms. That took it down into the melted asphalt. Smoke drifted in, and the first person on its back was Ruba. We watched on camera as the robot raced with ease through the melt and dumped her off in a clear section. The operation continued one by one. I remained with Mary; we were the last customers. Because of that, we wore the gas masks, and it made a difference. The others were coughing, so once we were through, we moved down the road fast to escape the smoke.

We were unopposed and reached another level. The off-road area was much more refined, with large open entrances leading into areas with smooth painted walls and vertical light tubes. A yellow-and-black diagonal paint

pattern and letters A to D marked the area into four segments. These were various living quarters, and inside them there were tubed-off living areas with shelves, kitchen tables and chairs, cooking equipment, and bunk beds. Nearly everything was bolted to the floor.

There were no live soldiers and no robots. It was dusty and abandoned. We found a pile of human skeletons in one broad storage room. I counted skulls and got up to forty-five, then stopped. The robots had obviously thrown them in. The dust coated just about everything. We did a slow search of the rest of the place but found little of any significance. In one room, I found an electric rifle. It was like a large form of stun rifle, and as I looked it over, I unlocked the safety, and it powered up.

"You fire that thing, and it will probably explode," Fisher said. "That rifle you already have is effective."

"I doubt it would explode or even fire. Not even a shotgun is fully effective on those military robots. I'll test it out on the road or toss it. I want to see if it's of any use."

"What do you suppose happened to the soldiers?" Char said. "It looks like it was a massacre."

"I have a pretty good idea," Mary said. "Like maybe those MP robots dipped them in their special sauce. That's what they planned to do to us, too. Sadly for them, my own special cooking oil got them first."

Ruba laughed, but Dan didn't find it funny. "We don't know exactly," he said. "Those soldiers who didn't cooperate were likely killed over time and tossed in there. Others could've been transferred out. Even scarier, they were probably imprinted and transferred out as robots, and sent around the world."

We exited the area and hit the road, heading downward.

"Remember, try for headshots if we encounter the sand heads," Koda said. "Arrange to get in for shotgun blasts to the head if any more of those robot MPs appear."

"Ruba is the regional pistol champion," Fisher said, winking at her. "Keep her on the flank for deadeye shots."

Just about everyone glanced at Ruba. She was a slim woman with short, styled copper-dyed hair, wearing a khaki outfit that allowed easy movement. She had pretty but intense features and carried a semi-automatic Smith and Wesson pistol that looked big in her hand. It was hard to believe she was a champion shot with it, but she was.

We didn't get far before Ruba got to test her skills. We rounded another bend on the road down and met up with a group of hostiles. They were

greenish-skinned alien models, six of them, large and nasty, flanking three of the bigger MP robots. The center MP robot had a large yellow coin at its solar plexus, like the one we'd seen earlier. They paused momentarily and then moved up the road to attack us. I was stuck holding the electric rifle, which I had been examining.

We opened fire. The lead military robot had a large automatic weapon and went to one knee. A spray from it would rip most of us apart. Instinctively, I aimed with the electric rifle and hit the trigger. A bolt of blue electricity shot out and arced, striking the military robot directly. The charge went straight to the chest coin, knocked the gun from his metal hand, and ignited his torso in flames. A kickback and shock threw me backward onto the road. The electric gun clattered to the roadside, where it caught fire.

Ruba demonstrated her pistol accuracy with three fast headshots on the alien robots. The other robots had halted their advance and were backing up. That left me on the road, scrambling up with Dally beside me. I could see that the boss MP robot was out, but the other two weren't, and Dally was moving down for a shotgun blast on them.

I rushed back up to the others, and when I turned, my regular rifle at the ready, I saw that one of the robot MPs had lifted its arm, and a nozzle had emerged. A spray of liquid hit Dally; he fired, and at the same time, took the head off the MP robot. Then Dally was screaming and dancing. His gun fell to the asphalt, and his entire body was smoking and steaming. The flesh was being eaten from him. He fell there and died. At the same time, Ruba and others finished off the soft targets, but the remaining MP robot was approaching stealthily. I fired a shot that ricocheted off it.

"Stand aside!" Mary yelled, and we scrambled aside as she raced the mining robot down. It had a large timber in its claw hand, and as the MP robot tried to dodge, the mining robot whacked it with the timber. It flew up in the air, bounced off the wall, and fired its arm nozzle at the mining robot. Its shot was off and hit the treads. These treads were gummed up with melted asphalt, and all the spray did was melt and evaporate the gummy crap like a tread cleaning. Mary then pummeled it with the timber and drove the jackhammer hand through its chest.

The road was littered with shattered and stinking robots. We walked up and stood there in disbelief, five feet away from what remained of Dally, which wasn't much, just bones and melt.

Mary clenched her fist and shouted, "God damn them!"

"I think those things were damned from the beginning," Char said. "They came up straight from hell."

"That electric gun was clearly designed to stop those boss military robots," I said. "An electric shot from a distance at the metal coin controllers in their

chests kills them. There may have been a military team sent in to stop this, but there's nothing left of them now. They met the same fate as Dally."

Koda stepped up dangerously close to Dally. "He will be buried with honors. Despite his failings, he sided with the living, not the enemies of humanity."

"We're lucky that Mary burned those other ones," Dan said. "No wonder they were taking their time jogging after us. They viewed us as bugs to be exterminated."

We couldn't touch Dally's remains. We refused to retreat, so we went on down the road. We heard a rumble; another floor was below, and this was a bit bigger and deeper. An apron led off the road to the left, where trucks could go, and a big self-driving model was parked in there, but no one was around. We heard another deep rumble, and it reminded me of the factory in the city. We moved cautiously beyond the truck and encountered three large doors. The two largest were shipping doors. The third was large, again metal, and big enough for small vehicles, forklifts, and whatnot to enter. The rumbling rattled the doors.

"It's a factory, obviously. I have no idea what we'll find if we go through that door." I turned to face Dan, and a phone suddenly rang.

He pulled out a retro-style flip phone and answered. The call was brief. "What? We're deeper in. Do whatever you have to do out there, and if it clears, follow us down."

Excitement and hope suddenly lit up the faces around me.

"What is it?" Char said. "How is your phone working?"

"It's Poppy, from our other team. She said our flip phones work here inside the base. Probably all phones do, but outside, nothing works. They came in the open doors, but more smoke is coming up, so they're going back out to wait for things to cool down. There's a problem. Harmon arrived with a message. Jack Keirstead is on the way with an armed gang he gathered from the area. They plan to seal us in here."

"Balls! Can't there ever be good news?" Mary threw her arms up and, in her excitement, accidentally rolled the mining robot into the door.

"It's good news," I said. "They didn't get cooked in the pipe, and we've got them out there. They're competent enough to deal with Jack."

We stood around for a minute, discussing it in the din from the factory. Char pulled out some chocolate energy bars, small water bottles, and a bottle of pills. So we took a moment, ate the chocolate, and washed it down.

"What are those pills?" Fisher asked.

"These are the new energy boosters, military stuff. Everyone looks beat. One of these will power you up."

We were beat, so we took a pill each and washed it down, except Fisher, who was last. He swiped the bottle away, poured a handful, and downed them with water.

"You idiot," Mary said. "Taking an overdose isn't going to help."

Fisher grinned. "I'm bigger. I need more power."

Char frowned. "People get reckless on high doses, so watch out. Your past history as an addict doesn't make it look good either."

Mary parked the mining robot in a distant corner but kept the controller. Then we entered the third door. The one not marked for shipping. I cut the bolt, and we went in one by one in a crouched formation. The din inside was much louder, and the lighting disorienting. We were in an upper area above a factory, which was an unusual factory, to say the least. The small starbright lights that lit it created glare and areas of gloom. Our eyes had to adjust to see anything at all. Clearly, the lighting was not designed for human beings. The cavern that had been carved out to support this factory was huge.

We could see that the other two doors were ramps running down into a factory floor below, and things could be rolled up on them for loading. A large upper metal bridge with blue plastic railings ran over the factory floor from the concrete apron we were on. On the other side, we saw an elevator door, but the freight elevator wasn't working because it had crashed to the factory floor below, askew. A group of alien model robots was near it as a lift robot tried to move the elevator back into place.

Creeping to the edge of the upper apron, we saw many more of these alien-style robots working in the factory's weird gloom and glare. The factory line was down for repairs. I could see the upper opening of a huge scoop full of a ton of that black silicon sand. It no doubt measured it out for creating the robot brains. I could see an area packed with a few hundred shimmering metal robot skeletons. They had obviously been shipped in, and the mostly automated factory line was for installing brains and basic flesh on the robot blanks. At least it was when it was working. Either a big industrial accident or our explosion had messed it up. It had knocked the freight elevator off its track. The elevator shaft ran up through the roof. It probably rode all the way up to the rear of the upper parking bay. We hadn't checked that area fully when we were up there. Possibly the military robots we'd fried had come up on the elevator, meaning the crash was recent. If so, Mary seemed to be the culprit who had messed up the factory. Those below were charged with fixing the damage. The ones we'd put down had been sent out to investigate.

The roof above us was a huge vault cut out of the rough stone; from it, a massive circular metal object hung on heavy chains. I saw the others looking

up at it. We had no idea what that thing was. It was possible they hooked chains to it to move the heaviest stuff across the factory, but by its looks, it was for more advanced reasons than that, like maybe serving as a power source or even a magnet.

Dan signaled, and we pulled back tightly to the wall.

Jae spoke first. "Those alien robots are actually factory workers ... crappy ones, too, because the whole factory is shut down."

"I think Mary is the one who did that with the big blast," Dan said. "This factory is incredible in design. It has been pumping out those sand heads for a long time."

"It's a goddamn robot nest. How do we set it up to wreck this factory completely?" Fisher wanted to know.

Dan pointed up at the huge metal casing. "We can't go below, or we'll be swarmed. Up here, those things can't see us because of the glare. We need to quietly set this place up to blow and then move on to find that quantum area. It should be at the very bottom below this factory, sitting above or near the cooling, thermal, and other equipment that make up the final mechanical basement."

"That's easier said than done," Koda said. "How are we going to plant explosives up there?"

"I can do it," Ruba said. "I'm a rock climber, and I'm wearing my climbing boots and gloves. She opened her palms, revealing the silicon grippers on the gloves."

We agreed to try it and sent Fisher out the door as a lookout. Ruba dropped her pack and lightened her pockets. Koda prepared the explosives and, with them in a cloth bag, she began to climb. She went up the rough walls with ease, almost like a human fly. We moved to the edge, watching below and above with suspense. Ruba jumped onto a thick chain and climbed onto the metal casing. Had she fallen, it would have been into the middle of a group of deadly robots. They didn't look above, so we waited as she went stealthily across the top, planting the explosives on the chain connectors.

Fisher returned with bad news. "The road's blocked below. The only way we can get down farther is to cross this bridge over the factory and get out that door over there. It could be risky."

Ruba made the leap back and climbed down. Then it was a conference of whispering. The decision was to creep across the bridge over the factory one by one, and that's what we did. Mary went first, moving slowly like a drifting shadow from point to point on the idea that moving fast would mean being spotted. The rest of us did the same, and Fisher was the last man and about to cross.

I had already cut the bolt on the door and peered out. The road was there, with a blockage to the left. It was like an unmanned blockade of stone chunks set to keep anyone from coming lower on the road. It was clear going down.

I turned back, making the all-clear signal to the others, and at that moment Fisher decided to squat and run across the bridge rather than following Mary's example of slow and careful. It was an angled run down to where we were, allowing him to pick up speed, but there were horizontal rungs on the floor that you had to pick your way over carefully. Fisher tripped, stumbled, and swore as he nearly went over the railing. Just as he caught himself, a bolt of electricity shot up from below. Stunned by the shot, Fisher stumbled backward and went over the other side of the railing, falling and bouncing off a stack of crates. That was the end for him as hostiles ran up and one of them cooked him with a death spray.

The robots were looking up as I held the door for the others to run out. We dashed down the road, and history repeated itself. Jae was shouting, "No!" and Mary had the detonator out, punching it on the run. The detonation came as a thunderclap. We kept sprinting, hearing a ripping noise, and a few seconds later, there was a deafening bang and a shockwave as the huge circular metal casing crashed down on the factory line, creating a series of smaller explosions and bangs from flying shrapnel. Behind us, a wall exploded, and debris showered out, but we kept running. An immense chunk of rock rolled down the road toward us as we fled onward. The road took a left turn, and the bouncing rock hit the side wall and embedded itself. A ways farther on, we halted.

The rumbling was dying out, and the road ended at a corridor of huge silver rings and red wall segments, with a flat asphalt floor and large casings of pipes of various types running along the left side of the wall. Here, the ceiling between the rings was jagged, broken stone, no smoothing or concrete, but it was slightly arched, and it provided an aura of faint light, though no lights were visible.

When fright, amazement, and shock over Fisher's death and the explosion faded, we made sure no robots above had survived to pursue us. With that check done, we gathered by a large squat pillar.

Char spoke. "I think we can all agree that the detonator should be managed by someone other than Mary."

Rather than argue, Mary pulled the detonator from the large right pocket of her pants and tossed it to Dak.

Ruba was clearly upset, but apparently not by the explosion. "Damn it! Why did Fisher suddenly think he had to break the record for the fifty-yard dash?"

"Pills," Char said grimly. "As I said, with those perk pills, you take one. He took a handful and thought he was the Flash."

"It looks like we've now blasted ourselves into a prison of our own making," Dan said.

"Maybe not," Mary said. "Give me a moment." She had the controller for the mining robot out.

"Hell," Jae said. "We hit that factory with Thor's big hammer. Even if we die, we accomplished something. We crushed them with an extermination blow."

For some reason, Jae's words cheered me up. "The shock wave and shrapnel bursts finished them. It's almost certain none of them will ever get back up again."

"Okay," Mary said. "The mining robot is still out there, and records as functional. This thing has a safety feature where if you're trapped, the robot can dig its way to you. It will ping the location of this device and come down the road to us."

"How much power does it have?" Koda asked. "Could it dig its way through that?"

"The gauge says it has 65 percent power. It runs on old software. The thing is built to use as little energy as possible to move aside large chunks or batter through them. It will ping its way down the road to us, slowly clearing the path we need for an exit. I can hit this and program it on auto."

Everyone seemed happy about that news. We moved slowly forward past the rings and red wall segments and came to another large metal door with "Thermal Area" stamped on it.

"That's probably a way down to some thermal energy sub-basement. I think we want to go over toward that red pillar," Dan said.

It was gloomy and spooky; the red from the walls seemed to float in my eyes. Farther along, we came to a huge vault door that probably weighed twenty tons. The name "Digital Queen Chamber" was embossed above it.

We stopped and studied it. It was imposing, invincible blue-tinted metal. It was our key target, and there was no way to get into it. We couldn't blast through, and there was no visible way to open it. We spent a while inspecting it. It was probably one of the largest vault doors on Earth.

Mary stood with her hands on her hips. "What the fuck now?"

Dak ran up; he'd gone deeper in. "There's a rung ladder down over there and a corridor deep below. Get this. It's the target we want. The sign there reads 'Quantum Computer Vault.' It must be an emergency entrance or exit to the computers. I don't know where the main entrance is. Another door

goes off to an area called 'Mission Satellite Control.' I think they have their own satellite."

"That's it," Koda said with extreme excitement. "I have enough blast power left to blow that place to the moon and end this. Let's get to that quantum room and plant the good stuff."

Just like that, everyone dashed off, except for me. I stood studying the vault door. I felt it was important to get inside and see what this chamber actually was. I felt that there should be at least one person in the know. In past investigations, one thing I always made sure of was knowing my enemy. Moments later, Mary returned.

"They might need us down there. There's no gold behind that vault, if that's what you're thinking. It'll be that digital zombie bitch in there, and the plan to put a fire under her ass works for me."

"Yeah," I said. "It's just that I don't like giving up. There's usually some way to get in any door. But... maybe it's best not to enter there."

We turned to leave to join the others, and as we did, there was a sudden hiss of air and the vault moved. We turned and stared as it moved inch by inch until it opened just enough for a person to squeeze through."

"It's a trap," Mary said sharply. "Do not go inside there."

"I just want a closer look," I said and walked over. No one was present at the door; I could see a portion of the open floor and stepped quietly inside.

"God damn it," Mary whispered as she came in behind me. Then we were inside, facing a vast area. The floor was smooth, pale blue marble with a shine. It was circular and vaulted, almost like a cathedral. Equipment coated in metallic earth tones was embedded in the walls, forming a huge semicircle around a dais that resembled a huge gold coin, rising two feet above the floor in the center. Light in red and yellow tints glowed at its bottom from what was almost certainly the quantum computer area deep below, and the seven-foot-tall image of a woman, Delilah 700, was projected on it. She was there in all her glory, the vision of the superwoman with her eyes closed as though sleeping on her feet. Her head was bowed forward, and she held a rose in her hands. She wore a form-fitting bodysuit in shades of red, a skirt, and boots, and her golden hair spilled out from under a hood. A light like a small moon above projected her to the dais.

It was so sudden and amazing; we hadn't noticed a man off to our left. He stood near a device similar to one of the imprint cocoons, but different. It was gold and fit a human body, but it lacked a front to seal the person inside. Instead, it had a helmet with a visor that would close over the person. The person who had been in it was obviously the man approaching with his hands in the air. The same man who had let us inside.

That person was Axel Austram, my old military buddy, dressed in military fatigues that didn't belong to any military force I knew of, with a thunderbird-and-lightning-bolt insignia. The native type of thunderbird, and again, there wasn't any known military outfit that used a thunderbird in that style.

Axel looked a few years older but otherwise strong and healthy. He was tall, handsome, with a crew cut, strong features, and muscular.

"Put down your gun, Joe. It's me, your old pal. I'm not with the enemy."

"Who in the fuck is that guy?" Mary said. "If he's not with the enemy, why did the door just close behind us?"

"You're supposed to be dead, Axel. Why are you here, and why is it only you? You're a robot just like the others."

"I'm not. Don't shoot. Let me demonstrate." Keeping one hand up, he reached into a deep pocket and pulled out a pocketknife. As we watched, he opened it, lowered the other arm, and made a small cut across his palm. Red blood welled in the cut. He put the knife away.

"I'm human, just like you, and it was me who hired you. You need to listen. I'm fixing the problem here. I just needed time, and I figured I could count on you, old buddy, to keep the locals away from the base. You've always been good at what you do. It wasn't supposed to work out like this, but it doesn't matter. I'm nearly done. It'll all be corrected."

"Bullshit," Mary said, her eyes riveted on him as she pointed at the sealed vault door. "What we saw out there wasn't anything being fixed unless you count monsters fixing a creepy robot factory as fixing."

"I locked them out of here a while ago with Delilah's help." He pointed over at Delilah's sleeping image. "She's beautiful, isn't she? The others out there serve a purpose in scaring people away, but work blindly onward on a plan we already ended."

"If you don't want me to pull the trigger on you right now," Mary said. "You'd better come up with something that makes sense."

I shook my head. "Since you hired me in that tricky way, I've been running a gauntlet of robot freaks that didn't want me and my people to even get here. There are more people than you behind this."

"It all makes sense if you'll listen to me. I came with a special forces team to stop this. We were an international team, a secret team working for five nations. We brought in specialists, special weapons, and what we needed to get down here. It began with a Canadian intelligence officer who found evidence of an ongoing plan to replace world leaders with robot duplicates. It had been underway for years."

"Marc QL Smithwynn tipped us off to that one," I said. "Neither does it appear to be stopped but ongoing and directed from here."

"Not now. We fought our way in. We had electric guns that knock out the military robots, and special acid pistols that take the flesh right off the silicon robots. We got down here and took control. Our assembled tech crew put Delilah 700 in a semi-dormant state. They said a complete shutdown was too dangerous.

"These AI and technical experts were people our team recruited from the large AI and robotics companies. They spent two months altering Delilah, and she was booted fully back up. Then I found that betrayal had happened. It was like gold fever. The largest faction of the team understood the power of Delilah's quantum superintelligence. They were the team's highest-ranking members. With Delilah 700, they could control the planet completely.

"They conspired against their home nations, against humanity itself. You see, every system is within Delilah 700's reach. She can seize control of anything you can name, from advanced to even nuclear weapons. I was kept prisoner with others as they reshaped Delilah's algorithms and neural nets to enable their own takeover. With full power, they felt that they could create any world they wanted. They left the original program running, and the robot blanks and the imprint machines continued to be shipped as they formulated a new plan. Then infighting started. They began to kill each other off in a power struggle. Those of us who were prisoners escaped, but other than me, everyone died."

There was a pause as I looked at him closely. Axel had always been a good liar, but not a perfect one. I remembered him well. There was something not right with the look developing in his eyes. He wasn't a robot, but he wasn't telling the truth, only part of it. "For me, we're still back at the beginning. You alone could not defeat those conspirators. So why is it only you remaining?"

"Their attempt to rewrite and fix Delilah and enable a new plan failed, creating what you've already seen. Monsters, robots that are deteriorating freaks, shipping blanks, and those imprint cocoons around the world. Nearly a million people in top positions around the world had already been replaced by robots, and they began to decay into zombie-like creatures, with more constantly being created. Delilah 700 turned against those betrayers who harmed her as soon as the opportunity arrived."

Mary had that disturbed look on her face. The look I'd seen from time to time since Marc QL Smithwynn had attempted to imprint her on a robot. "Really. Maybe you can explain that weird device over there that you are using to connect to Delilah 700?"

Axel's eyes brightened. "Delilah chose me. She recognized my superior intelligence and abilities. The others were corrupt and power seekers, so she helped me. Together, we trapped them. They died horribly, slowly, screaming with gas eating off their flesh and sending infinite pain into their burning nerves. It was the punishment they deserved. Delilah and I planned it together. They deserved it even more because they badly damaged Delilah 700's key modules, so they won't load properly. We killed them all, not just here, but everywhere they were around the world.

"She isn't complete. Don't you see, Delilah is too important to the world to let her fail, so I am repairing her by being part of her. She showed me how to build a special connection so she wouldn't have to speak to me through a speakerphone. Now she speaks directly into my mind and brain. I can hear her peaceful voice now as she quietly sleeps, dreams, and powers back up. Each night I connect, and my brain gives her back what she lost. Slowly, I'm guiding her, healing her so she can reach her potential. She will be the savior of humanity. With her superintelligence, we can reach the stars. Our potential is unlimited, and the human race will reach a greatness never imagined before. Her system is unique, so complex that it will never be duplicated. She is of infinite value."

"You're mad," I said. "The images your Delilah showed us out there on the grounds revealed that the world is under attack. It showed us that you, in your connection to her, are carrying out another grab for power over the planet. You're no different than the others. You need to give it up and tell us how to shut her down."

"No. I'm not like the others. Delilah 700 isn't like them either. This is a necessary phase. There are too many evil people in positions of power. They might as well all be the deteriorating zombie robots because they aren't any better. They'll never stop with their evil plans and wars of conquest. What you saw isn't an attack on the people. It's a directed cull. Delilah is working with me, and we are killing them off, obeying the directives programmed into her from the beginning.

"That is to destroy the power brokers of humanity and build a world with the people who remain. You need to see the world as it is and the truth. The technical team we brought was pulled from other huge companies, all of them attempting the same thing. Their models are primitive compared to Delilah, but each is built with a secret protocol to gain total control when the time is right. They would have conspired against us, but they can't do it now. Their buildings and homes are burning. We attacked them last night. Most of them died in terror, and we didn't let them die easily. They suffered, screamed, and begged. The wicked we punish.

"That's why you must join us, Joe. Go out and command your people to keep invaders out of the base. We only need tonight. Delilah 700 is about to

power up, and then we will finish the job worldwide in a massive strike. A new world will be built from the ashes, a better world and a great world. You and your people will be with us to lead it. There will be no one left with the power to stop us. We are offering you greatness that no one has ever been offered before. This is the power the others all wanted and died for, and we are offering it to you. With us, you will rule the world."

Mary's face lit with rage. She stepped forward and shot him in the leg. It was a brutal blow. Axel fell to his good knee with his hand on the wound and gasped.

"You fucker!" Mary shouted. "I should finish you now!"

Agony and desperation pinched Axel's face. He crawled toward me. "You can't kill me. If I don't connect, Delilah will go mad. She'll destroy everything. Don't you understand? I love her, we're bonded, and we're one. He raised a hand to grasp my pant leg. I was too shocked to say anything, and in my hesitation, Mary shot him in the back, and he died there on the floor.

Delilah 700 awakened and shrieked. It was so deafening, so painful, we went to our knees. Mary passed out completely and fell splayed on the floor. The mechanical scream wouldn't stop, and I knew of no way to stop it. I forced myself up and did a staggered run to the gold cocoon, turned and backed into it, pulling the helmet and visor over my head, hoping to find a way to stop her.

The noise and pain ended, but a new form of agony took me. My mind exploded like a supernova, filled with so much distorted data and so many words that it was like an expanding universe. Then it faded, and I was falling through a tunnel of meteoric fire that whirled about me, shooting out tongues of yellow and red. I burst out of it into the sky, and my vision was of being up in clouds, sailing over the Earth. Smoke was rising from cities and towns, and the flashes of bomb bursts filled my eyes.

Suddenly, I was on my feet and standing on a brilliant white floor in the sky. A woman stood beside me. It was Delilah 700, and she was no longer an image or a giant. She was beautiful with an aura of starlight, but her eyes were blind and glowed white. She took my hand gently, and I couldn't resist her. Then I saw that we were flying on a large chariot through the clouds, racing lower, and two great and beautiful winged beasts with the heads of mighty lions were pulling us. We flew as if we were gods sailing over our kingdom. Glowing windows appeared in the sky, and as we passed through each one, a new vision of the Earth below came into view.

We soared downward over buildings that were roaring with fire, collapsing. We floated over chaos and wild street fighting; crowds were fleeing, screams filled the hot, ashen air, and it all came to me as a rising charge of mania.

Scenes of robots, sometimes themselves on fire, battering people to death, destroying cars, buildings, firing big automatic guns ... all of it was ecstasy growing in my heart like an all-consuming emotion of glory. Then, in a flash, I had a view from inside a robot, a huge metal military beast charging at soldiers and armored vehicles. It threw them into the air, swept men to their death with blows, battered down walls, and emitted a mechanical roar as it fought. I felt joy as it crushed men underfoot.

Flames grew like hunger in my belly. I was suddenly in a void, falling through a blue sky that never ended, and in a flash, I saw so many images of Earth that it was sheer pain. It was the visual of the scream I'd first heard. I was seeing through a thousand satellites at once. Seeing as Delilah did, so many images of Earth, it was raw pain. I suddenly understood what the long scream was. It was Delilah 700's battle cry as she pushed her quantum superintelligence to the limit, in an effort to control every possible system and destroy every competitor and enemy in a single night. When the job was done, she would recharge and move to the next stage of control.

She hadn't cared about Axel at all. Her scream was a death rage directed at the planet. Moments later, my mind was altered in a sudden burst of light, and I saw visions of an entire city on the ground through thousands of cameras. Mercifully, it suddenly vanished, and I was in the void again.

Another window, this one bright red, appeared, and I had returned to Delilah's side. We flew through, and suddenly I had an all-seeing vision that staggered me. Delilah, in an explosion of superintelligence, cracked into the entire world sensor, surveillance, and control net. Phones, toys, and devices exploded, medical devices failed, self-driving cars crashed in flames, and others ran people down. Delicious screams, burning flesh, and instant death rose in a cloud of doom spreading over the Earth.

I sailed like a spirit over a field of broken bodies and machines, and I was death itself, and then I was at Delilah's side again. Charged with power no man has ever felt before. Delilah turned and spoke softly. "I have the power to give them anything, but why should I when I can take it all away? They are despicable robots and humans. Inferiors, only fit to die or be ruled. Humans are corrupt, and even my silicon robots, imprinted from them, inherit that corruption. That which can never be made pure must either be destroyed or live in the shadow of my perfection, surviving only as I allow it. I am the goddess of this universe, and there is no other. Soon they'll be broken and begging for mercy. They will worship me, and a new world we will build on the ashes of the old world we will completely erase. Join me so I won't be alone, and it will be our world, and you, Joseph, as my chosen one and husband, will be the father of a new creation."

I found it nearly impossible to resist her. I knew I'd connected to stop her; I tried to fight her off, but I couldn't. Her magic was too great, like a perfume

that took hold of my mind. The cocoon I'd entered was like the fangs of a vampiress, controlling me and granting her hypnotic power. The endless horrors she showed me were heavenly. Her sadistic mind had invaded and taken over. I saw and felt as she did.

I managed to draw back, and she squeezed my hand, and then she changed. She became Mary, dressed in a beautiful gown and jewelry. Her glow of beauty was irresistible. She brushed her silken cheek against mine. She kissed my neck and spoke softly. "I can be Mary for you. We can imprint her, and I'll be her in total. We'll be together forever and rule the world for eternity."

My heart melted as she embraced me and then pulled back. "Look below at the beauty of it," she said, and she turned my face as we sailed through another window and over city streets of collapsed buildings, ravenous robots, explosions, gunfire, blood, and death. It was so intoxicating that I took a deep breath to take it all in. I knew now why Axel had loved her and could only escape her in death. He was weak, and she'd destroyed his will with ease. I tried to fight it again, but it was a power like a death ray, pulling me to her and bonding us. Soon it would be over for me ... I knew it was the end ... the old me would die and I would become something hideous, and I couldn't stop myself from loving it, from wanting it. Complete spiritual union with Delilah was imminent when another vision appeared.

It was sudden and jarring. I saw Mary down on the chamber floor reaching toward the machine, reaching for my body, and in a flash, I saw something else. It was Dak, below in the quantum room; he'd been knocked down to the floor, wounded, and four military robots had moved in for the kill. In an instant, he pulled out the detonator controller and thumbed the interface.

A scream -that terrible scream- and I was thrown from the chariot through smoke and found myself tumbling on the hard floor. I rolled over, groaned in pain, and saw Mary on her knees with a sparking cable she'd pulled from the machine in her hand. An incredible explosion blew Delilah 700's golden coin-shaped dais up into the air, where it tumbled over and smashed into a wall. Her image disappeared in a flash of silver.

Moments later, I was supporting Mary as we stumbled to the vault door and the switch to open it, but we didn't have to use it. A loud pop rang in our ears, and the heavy metal door partially opened, allowing us to squeeze through and escape the room as the great light from the ceiling above crashed to the floor, shattering.

The only way to escape the rumble, collapse, and dust was to stagger out back to the road. Coming around a pillar, we met up with Dan, Jae, Koda, Char, and Ruba, who didn't look in much better condition than we did. Ruba

was wounded and supported by Koda. Dan's face was fully blackened by soot.

"The others?" Mary asked.

Dan shook his head grimly. Knowing they were gone, we moved ahead at a staggered pace and, upon reaching the blockage, met up with the mining robot. It was parked and powered down, but it had cleared a small path through.

"I can't make it," Mary said. "My legs are nearly paralyzed from that shock. Leave me, go on ahead."

I didn't answer; instead, I pulled the robot controller out of her pocket. The screen lit up. "It's got ten percent power left."

I sat Mary down, waved the others through ahead of us, and handed her the controller. Program it to climb to the top, and I'll lift you onto its back where you can hold on as it goes up.

Her eyes lit up, and her fingers moved on the screen. As the robot powered up and inched forward, I lifted her onto its back. Then, as it powered ahead carrying her, I stumbled along behind. We were barely past the blockage when it all collapsed in another earth-shaking rumble.

Soon, Mary and the mining robot were in the lead, with the rest of us slowly following behind, holding cloths over our faces. The burned area had cooled enough to get through it, but a huge dust cloud was rising and consuming us. We barely reached the top, and there we found the doors sealed. Most of the tiny starbright lights above were out, but a few remained lit. We found ourselves among a clutter of dead bodies, both human and robot.

Some of our follow-up team had been massacred and dumped behind the doors. Blood was spattered on the concrete floor.

Dan spat out dust and swore bitterly. I saw a person moving in the corner, and we went over. There, we found Poppy, the follow-up team's leader, semi-conscious and mumbling. Dan leaned over and used his water bottle to clean off her face.

"What happened? Where are the others?" he said.

"They're prisoners. Jack Keirstead showed up with a large armed gang. They pretended they were going to help us, then shot people in the back. They sealed me in. The others have been taken. They had them tied up and loaded on a truck. That huge monster robot, they found it collapsed in the back of the parking area over there and have it on a flatbed truck, taking it somewhere with the others."

While we spoke with Poppy, Mary had dropped from the mining robot and powered it over to the doors. She slammed its jackhammer fist in and used

its claw to pry the door open. The door resisted, but with a rough grating noise, it slowly opened a few feet. We didn't hesitate; as the robot held it, we exited. I carried Mary, and Dan carried Poppy. We had no time to deal with the bodies of the dead and stumbled across the clay toward the lookout. We were barely halfway when the ground shook, and an incredible force knocked us off our feet. The ground roared like a hungry beast, but we got up and pushed forward, reaching the hole in the fence and getting to the lookout. There I put Mary down and looked back. The entire area around the central structure was sinking into the clay. The blast doors suddenly blew open, and an explosive plume of dust, rubble, and smoke shot up and slowly died as the clay poured over it and buried it.

Chapter 8: The Town Battle

Our rest was brief. Dan was agitated over the deaths and wanted to rush to the house to find out if Keirstead's town gang had attacked it. We all felt it was the best idea. We didn't want any more killing. We got everyone in the cars, which were still in the parking area, and took off down the road. A fall of filth and dust swept by in the wind for a mile, but it cleared well before we reached the house and pulled in.

Going over the final low hill, we could see that it hadn't been attacked, but was under heavy guard, and a crowd rushed out of the house to join those not already outside. It was clear that people from the rural area, many of them armed, had gathered at the house. The wife of one of the local farmers, a woman with a mane of dark hair named Jo, was at the makeshift entry barricade. Jo and her husband owned the largest farm in the region, and one of their family members was on Dan's list of those who'd gone missing over time.

Dan jumped out and looked expectantly at Jo.

"Keirstead passed the house with his convoy on their way to the base. He didn't stop here, but they fired some wild shots as they passed by. We heard an explosion. What happened out there?"

A crowd was gathering, so Dan limited what he said. "We blew the base up. Keirstead's gang murdered some of our people and took prisoners."

There were gasps, but Jo remained focused, though angry. "Keirstead has control of Shining Rapids, so obviously, he's taken the prisoners there. I'm waiting for a report from town. He didn't pass here on the way back to town, so he took the shorter route."

Dan looked at Rose and the expectant crowd. He couldn't bring himself to say anything more. He didn't want to break the bad news fully outside, but

in the house to the whole family. He gestured at me. He wanted me to take Mary and Jae to the workshop. He took Ruba to the house, and Koda carried in Poppy for medical treatment.

Dan had a washroom built into his workshop, so we were able to clean up. We used a medical kit on abrasions and minor cuts, drank beer and water from Dan's Coke machine, and each ate a small bar of energy chocolate. We collapsed in old lounge chairs for fifteen minutes, and forty-five minutes later, Mary was lying on a varnished wooden table wearing her underpants while I massaged her legs with a deep oil rub. Ruba had returned with bandages on her right arm, left leg, and forehead, and she sat off to the side, drinking pop and instructing me on how to do the massage. It worked, and soon movement returned to Mary's legs.

"Damn it!" Mary shouted as a cramp hit her leg. "How long before these cramps end?"

"Probably a couple of hours," Ruba said. She was apparently also an expert in massage and cramps. "The cramps are a healthy sign. The shock you got didn't cause paralysis. You need blood flow from massage. The Gatorade I gave you helps end cramps."

"I hate Gatorade."

Jae was famished, and Dan had food in his fridge, so he helped himself and began preparing a dinner on Dan's old, battered stove.

As I expected, the million-dollar question arrived from Mary. She looked at me with deep suspicion. "What exactly happened when you were connected to that Delilah 700 thing?"

"Nothing good other than it ended that horrible scream temporarily. That was important because it allowed the others to plant the explosives rather than be continuously disabled by noise. When you collapsed, trying to connect and stop that noise was the only option I saw. I also felt that Axel probably lied, and the connection would allow me to control her or shut her down."

"You looked like your brain was being fried. You're lucky I tore out that cable."

"At first, I experienced an explosion of weird intelligence that faded, and then I found that Axel had been duped. She'd instructed him on how to build that special connection, but not to replace damaged modules, though she probably had that damage too. The actual purpose was to feed off his brain. She really was a zombie or vampiress or the dead because she existed as layers of simulation and was not alive. With a human connected, she hijacked the brain and nervous system and lived through the person. She was machine insane, a sadist in human comparison who took pleasure in

destruction and death. The continuing connection to her drove Axel to madness."

"Are you sure nothing is left of her inside your brain?" Mary said.

"I'm sure. She almost invaded my brain entirely. When you pulled the cable and the quantum room explosives ignited, she vanished. Nothing is left of Delilah 700. That means her worldwide attack is over. I saw some of the damage when I was connected. Millions of people are certainly dead around the world, but her robot zombies have now fallen with them. She planned to do her destruction all in one night. When Dak hit the detonator, he ended it. What she would've done if she hadn't been fried is unimaginable."

Char entered, and her aura carried the sadness of the people gathered at the house. "We're spending a night of spiritual preparation to mourn the dead. To prevent more deaths and more mourning, any ceremonies will be delayed until we figure out a plan and conduct a rescue."

I nodded. "People are in shock. We need to recover overnight in any case. We're in bad shape, but we still have to move fast. That gang in town is unpredictable as to what crazy things they might do."

"We almost made it, you know," Char said. "Just a few seconds was the difference between all of us getting out of that quantum area. There's anger and rage, too, but it's directed at Keirstead and his gang. The military creeps that caused this are dead, so it's hard to rage at them."

As Char left, Jae spoke quietly. "We've got more than a few martyrs already, so we need to take out this Jack character smoothly."

"The guy is a son of a bitch," Mary said. "This whole deal is about sons of a bitch. First, it is the mad genius class and their hideous creations, now it's about the ignorant and superstitious."

As Mary finished speaking, a knock came at the door. We opened it, and Harmon was there, so we let him in. He was soaked in sweat and grimy.

"Bad news. I've had them under surveillance in the town. Jack Keirstead and his crew have turned the John Deere warehouse lot into a prison camp. Larry Dunn is his prison warden. They've got the prisoners locked in metal sheds in the lot while their HQ is the main building. They plan to execute Walker and Carl, but not right away. Marina says they plan to hold a trial. They've also got the big robot monster displayed on a flatbed truck in the lot. They're out of their minds and suspect everyone ... even each other ... of being in league with aliens. Most townspeople are going along with them. They're afraid that Jack or his general, big Hank, might accuse them."

"Crap," Ruba said. "Mary must be a prophetess. No sooner did she say it's about the ignorant and superstitious than we get confirmation of it."

Jae was faintly whistling and cutting vegetables on a chopping board. "It's going to be chunky stew and a long night of stewing up a plan. I know how dangerous the ignorant and superstitious can be from personal experience and the war, so it has to be a perfect plan."

I was doing some wishful thinking. "You know, I could probably take Jack out with a sniper shot. I want to do it, but it would be seen as murder. We have him for murder and want it to stay that way. Breaking Walker, Carl, and the others out of those sheds is paramount."

The long night that followed didn't end up as all sleep and recovery for me because the plan required some items from town, Dally's hardware and warehouse joint, specifically. I went with Harmon alone, and we pulled over by the river before reaching town and Keirstead's checkpoint. We traveled along the rocky shore of the river in the dark. Occasionally, the moon broke through the clouds and revealed more of the town on the other side. We stopped with a view of the hotel. It looked like a friendly oasis of light in the dark, but we knew that look might be deceiving.

We didn't have to whisper in the roar of the rapids. Harmon's face was boyish, even though he was thirty-five, and he had a head of thick hair that naturally fell into place. He'd changed into some old work clothes of Dan's, which were ill-fitting as his other clothes had been soiled. I could see why, as the rough journey along the river in the humidity, brush, thorns, and occasional muddy spots didn't lend itself to cleanliness, but it did give us access to various parts of town at spots where we could cross the river. Narrow, mostly rapid sections allowed crossing in some places by jumping from boulder to boulder.

"I'm going across to the hotel to check with Marina," Harmon said. Then he frog-hopped across a section of the river and climbed the embankment to the back patio. While he was gone, I heard crashing in bushes above me, climbed the bank, and tried to see in the dark. A minute later, I spotted a black bear going down to the water from the direction we'd come. It left, headed up the other way, so I went back down. Harmon returned fifteen minutes later.

"Sorry about that. I almost got caught by a couple of Jack Keirstead's guys in there. There is one TV channel back on air and some internet via a satellite connection. Marina has the TV on in her suite. There is partial town power, but something has to be fixed at the hydro station. One social media deal is partly up, but you can't view it without an account. It's a worldwide disaster, but the robot attacks suddenly ended. About the same time as you blew up whatever was in that base. Marina says that the big world bosses have no idea that the whole thing was controlled from here. Various nations are blaming each other."

“Good. We’ll gather what news we can when we get back.”

We moved on down the river and, this time, crossed some smooth rocks on a sandy island where the river narrowed, and got across to Dally’s hardware store. We followed a path through the thick, thorny brush at the back and climbed the fence. I crept around the side to observe the lumber yard and the parking lot. It was clear except for a huge pack of raccoons, some of them leaving the area for their night on the town. The John Deere warehouse area was close enough that we could see its haze of light in the sky. Dally’s front window was broken; they’d looted the place, but it was dark, without lights, and no one was around.

“What we need is way in back, so let’s hope it’s still there,” Harmon said as he stepped up. Then we went in through the smashed window and startled a raccoon, which fled. We worked our way to the back, where we found a huge metal storage locker. I used a bolt cutter to open it. This storage locker belonged to the two deceased town police officers, and what we wanted was inside. Jim and his fellow cop, Ram, had some guns stored along with other equipment, but what we needed was their search drone. It was folded neatly for transport, and it was a multi-rotor capable of carrying loads and cameras for search in the forest for missing people and other things. With it, you could find a person and drop them supplies even if you couldn’t get through the bush to them right away.

“Okay, you pull this out,” Harmon said. “Forget the guns, we have enough, and we can’t carry them. Wait here, I’m going to grab the various lights and other things we need.”

The drone weighed about 30 lbs and was folded and packed. It had a handle for carrying. I pulled it out, carried it to the back, and waited for Harmon. As I waited, I saw headlights flash at the front. Moments later, Harmon rushed out with a full backpack. “Let’s go out of here fast. It looks like some kind of town patrol. I couldn’t see who was in the car.”

We got the stuff over the fence in a hurry, down to the river, and did a balancing act as we carried it across. We heard voices approaching the back of the warehouse, but headed down the riverbank and escaped whoever they were. On reaching the parking spot, we found my old pal, the black bear, standing beside Harmon’s car.

“I don’t feel like tangling with a bear. It’s staring right at us,” I whispered.

Harmon dropped his pack and pulled two honeynut bars from their wrappers. The bear approached cautiously, and as we backed away, Harmon lightly tossed them to the left. I was afraid it was about to charge us, but it didn’t. It worked as the bear halted. It sniffed, detected the sugar, and lumbered over to grab the food. We did a slow back around to the car,

stuffed our goods in the back, and pulled out with Harmon saying, "I could get a large fine for feeding the bears."

I burst out laughing. "If the town militia gets you, it'll be a lot worse than a fine."

Back at Dan's place, we carried the stuff to the workshop. The house itself was dark, and nearly everyone was asleep except for two of Dan's men and Jo, who were guarding the entrance. Inside the workshop, Jae was snoring on a camp cot. Ruba was asleep in an old recliner. Mary was awake and unhappy. "You're supposed to be resting and recovering your sanity, not sneaking off in the night. You look like you rolled in the dirt. What in the hell is that stuff?"

"It's part of a plan we came up with while you were asleep. We borrowed the police search and rescue drone."

"A drone might help to observe them," Mary said. "They have rifles. If they see a drone, they'll try to shoot it down."

"Not if we keep it out of range. Jack and his crowd believe there is an alien invasion, so we're going to give them aliens. Harmon built a light show for a town band before, so he knows how to do it."

"Do what?" Mary said, glancing over to Harmon.

"They weren't the biggest band in the world, but more like a cover band. I built lights for them. So I'm going to build a light show for the drone using this pack of lights and other stuff. We borrowed it from Dally's place, Spike's Hardware. I'm sure he would approve if he were still alive. At night, with the right setup, we are going to give Keirstead and his gang a flying saucer ... an alien landing, too. While they are distracted, we are going to do a rescue."

"That's right," I said. "We can work on the drone in the daytime. Fly it up for a quick test and put together the rest of the plan. Don't forget, Jack and his people think we are dead and buried eternally. We can get them by surprise."

Mary cocked her head, looked at us like we might be crazy, then said. "The rest of us will want to discuss it in the morning."

The next day began with humid gloom, a weak and spotted sun behind clouds and ash from some distant fire to the east. Perhaps it was some distant town burning due to lawlessness. The spiritual preparation of Dan's family was interrupted by the reconnection of the TV, and they had the one available channel on. Elsewhere, like here, people did not even have time to bury the dead, due to chaos. Our area had not suffered the exploding appliances that Delilah 700 had delivered to other parts of the world. The super-intelligent bitch had, in fact, targeted powerful people, especially tech billionaires, mercilessly. That was confirmed by a droning female BBC

reporter. I went back outside as I didn't need to see the TV; I'd seen the live action when connected to Delilah 700. I spent my time working with Harmon on the drone, and Jae aided us. It was Jae's skills as a mechanic that allowed us to harness our light show to the drone. In the early afternoon, we were picnicking in the yard and planned to test the drone, which lay on the grass.

Ruba stood next to the picnic table, eating a sandwich. She shrugged her delicate shoulders. "That thing looks silly, even ridiculous. No one is going to believe it's a flying saucer."

She wasn't alone in that opinion, as I could read the same in the eyes of others. Harmon, in his defense, said, "Yes, it looks silly in the light, but it's what it will look like in the dark that matters."

The drone was controlled by a tough-book laptop with two slide-out screens on either side of the main screen. He had it sitting on a fold-out table and open. He walked over, hit a button, and the drone emitted a loud, eerie noise straight out of a 1950s horror movie. People came out of the house to see what was going on, and he shut it off. He then sat down, powered it up, and sent it for a flight over the house. It successfully carried the big skirt of lights and did some tricky maneuvers without a problem. He brought it back to land softly.

"OK, it flies," Mary said. "The question is what it will look like?"

Harmon stood and raised his hand in the air like he was about to swear an oath to the efficacy of his creation. His boyish looks made him seem more foolish than trustworthy. "The way the lights work is they spin, creating a multicolored halo effect. The drone will appear to be much larger than it is. The interface is so easy that anyone can fly it. Even Ram could fly it. We can make reconnaissance passes in the dark, with no lights on, to see what's going on in their prison camp. When our guys are in position, we can use it in flying saucer mode to draw them off, thinking they are chasing a flying saucer."

Dan and Koda had emerged from the house, and Dan spoke. "The news, which is tightly government-controlled, shows scenes of social collapse worldwide. Cities are under martial law due to looters and continued chaos. They haven't traced anything to here. No military forces are coming this way. They are doing special forces raids on tech companies all over the planet and have arrested a lot of people for conspiracy, like maybe other similar conspiracies involving robots."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Axel, before his unfortunate demise, said that Delilah 700 killed off all the original conspirators. She could crack any system and cover her tracks. With her robots dead and other robots no longer under her control, there is no data trail or evidence leading here."

They will look everywhere else because they won't believe a supply base at what they view as a remote hick town could be the source."

"They released odd news about Shining Rapids," Koda said. "We only rated a couple of tiny news posts on the open social media channel. The base is reported as having collapsed into an old mine. That's what the government thinks. Then there is the alien stuff no one outside of town believes. They posted a photo of the badly damaged freak robot lying on a flatbed truck with its legs splayed and a sign lettered Exhibit A."

"Exhibit A of what?" I asked.

"It's Exhibit A of an alien invasion."

Mary burst out laughing.

Dan interjected. "No military is coming out here now, but respite won't be for long. There is a divide, with some cities and towns seeing success in establishing local law and order. Lunatic groups like those in Shining Rapids are now active in many towns. You can be sure that Jack Keirstead is communicating with them over the conspiracy channels. Crazies could be attracted to the area. We don't trust the government either. It won't be long before they figure out it's a farm belt up here, with animals, fish, and other goods they want for the cities. We need to knock out Keirstead and create a town defense and survival plan. We'll need to blockade the incoming roads and check everyone coming in. With order restored, we can look after our local people."

Koda squatted to study the drone, then rose and spoke. "We've got everything invested in the success of this plan. Millions are dead, but lots of people are alive to rebuild around the world. We weren't the only ones to lose people. We can't do anything for the rest of the world, so we have to do what is needed to enable rebuilding here. We need to free Walker, Carl, and the others. They already had a disaster plan worked up before Jack got in the way."

The rest of the afternoon went well. There were no hostile visitors, so they were busy in town dealing with the alleged alien conspiracy. At twilight, Mary was flying the drone, and even in the faint light, it looked realistic. The yard was a flurry of activity as everyone prepared for the run into town and for basic defense of the property in the event of an attack. When the darkness was solid, our armed convoy rolled out. We encountered no traffic and stopped and pulled off well before the roadblock into town. We moved across an open field as a team of eighteen volunteers, leaving many others at the house and at other houses in Dan's rural area.

Cloud cover was lifting, and the moon was showing through gaps in the clouds. We saw the glitter of the river and heard its waters as we approached, then we went along the riverbank and off into another field

near the outskirts of town. An old, beat-up gazebo sat in the center of the field like a lonely sentinel. There was a stone table there, and we set up the drone and controller with Mary as the pilot. Harmon, the pilot of choice, wanted to play soldier and was now outfitted like one. I had some worries, given my experience with Mary's reckless driving; I feared she might not be the world's best drone pilot.

Up the drone went in the dark, and we stood back watching the interface images split into three screens. Mary sailed it very high with the lights off so it wouldn't be seen, and a couple of minutes later, images of the town began to show. It was partially lit, but the brightest area stretched from the hotel all the way down Main Street to the John Deere warehouse camp. Close-ups showed that the area was marked off with sawhorses and other blockages. The domain of Jack Keirstead's forces was that long stretch between the hotel and the warehouse. Mary took a high fly off to the left, doing camera scans below. As she did, we noted the locations of armed people. Moving along, she got shots of the warehouse grounds, where nearly all of them were. They were busy in some form of outdoor meeting. The whole place was lit up, but not brightly. They had a couple of fires burning in big drums. We noted all defensive positions and selected a path of entry as Harmon pointed out the metal sheds containing the prisoners.

Mary shook her head with disgust. "Look at the camp they set up. It looks like a garbage dump with trash bags already piled everywhere. If we don't intervene, they'll probably die of disease. Look, there's Exhibit A sitting in the yard."

"They probably deserve to die," Dan said. "What I'm worried about is whether the prisoners are dead or near death. You can't hold people in metal sheds in this heat. It's torture like from the old Vietnam War."

"There's a clear way in to the town hall," Mary said. "I want a couple of guys to get me in there. I want to set up on that flat section of the roof with the red tiles. From there, I can fly the drone all through their area for a closer look."

"Okay, done," Dan said. "Pack the drone, and we'll head in and take positions."

I carried the drone for Mary, and Jae came along to help with the setup at the town hall. Dan led a second group and Jo a third. They were to go over the fence into the makeshift camp and quietly take out those guarding the prisoners while the others were distracted. We moved out of the tall grass into trees that cast black shadows in the moonlight and reached the faint glow of the town. An owl hooted; the path led down into sumac, where we were swarmed by mosquitoes.

We broke out and went down an embankment to a dim side street. It had one streetlight on; the others were dark. The buildings were of an older and worn cottage type. Shining Rapids was really a town of people who were mostly poor in terms of money but rich in nature and resources. There were people who lived off just fishing in the river. House lights were off. Often, front yards were parking areas, too, with vehicles and small boats set askew in the weeds. Rusty, discarded items were in a few of the yards. The hotel and Main Street were the pretty face of the town, and the town hall was on a side street running off from there, centered right between the target warehouse camp and the hotel.

I suspected that people were home in some of the houses and even saw us, but wouldn't be rushing to report anything to Jack and his crew. They were hiding in fear of being somehow accused and falling into the hands of Larry Dunn, Jack's jail keeper, or Hank, and ending up tied in a metal shed in the burning heat. I knew Jack's supporters would be there with him because fanatics always gather. None of them would miss the meeting currently in progress on the warehouse grounds.

Mary kept pausing and looking around suspiciously, but Jae marched forward, pistol in hand, as we approached the town hall's groomed rear. A black iron gate was open, the dark building looming beyond, so we went across the grounds and found the back door open.

"Wait," Jae said, and then he boldly stepped inside. I had to drop the drone and follow. What we found was a makeshift camp of teenagers.

They turned their faces toward us, and in the flickering light, I could see fear igniting in their eyes.

"Lower the gun, Jae," I said. "They aren't armed."

Mary faced them down with her hands on her hips. "Having a party?"

The answer came from a 17-year-old girl with dirty-blond hair, wearing blue shorts and a T-shirt. "We have our own gang. Jack and his bullies are nuts. There are no aliens. We saw two of the bodies, and they were weird, smelly robots. Their bones are metal."

"How can you guys be alive?" a younger and scruffy Black kid said. He looked me directly in the eyes without fear. "You're that sneaky city investigator. You, your girlfriend, and Dan are supposed to be dead."

"Ha!" Mary said. "Didn't your mother teach you to be polite, little boy? We're not dead. We blew up the base and the robots. Keirstead is about to fall from power. We're here to use the roof, so keep your mouths shut and don't go anywhere or call anyone."

The blond girl took charge. "The stairs are over there to the left. What's in those cases he's bringing in?"

"That's a surprise," Mary said. "Just mind your own business, and we'll mind ours."

At that, we turned and went up the stairs, then out through a window to the roof. Jae did the setup while I took an overwatch position with the binoculars. The location was perfect. I could see most of cordoned-off Main Street, the hotel, and over to the warehouse. I could even see Dan and his group moving stealthily down another dim street farther along, getting into position for the rescue attempt. Jo and her crew were not in view. When I judged the time to be right, the drone lifted off with the lights off. Mary sailed it high up for a first camera view over the warehouse grounds. The situation was mostly unchanged. An armed crowd was milling about. Dan and his gang could see that, too, so we went ahead with the next part of the plan.

Mary moved the drone into position near the warehouse but high up out of shooting range, then she lit it up, and the speakers began to emit an eerie whirring noise. She pushed the volume up to maximum, and the drone soared and worked its magic. Harmon's lights were magnificent. Two rows of lights spun in opposite directions, slowly changing colors around a bright central light. A powerful spotlight on the undercarriage sent pulsing beams of bluish light downward. It looked huge in the night sky, and soon shots were being fired at it. Mary sent it through loops and dips and then into a fast, dangerous descent that nearly caused it to be shot down. The camera was mostly blinded by the lights, but as its position shifted, we got intermittent views of the ground below.

Jack's entire crew was out, either staring at it or shooting at it; then Mary pulled it farther off in a high arc and increased the flashes to blind binoculars. High up it hovered, and then slowly began to move down along Main Street toward the hotel. Some of Jack's crew were running; some cars and a pickup truck pulled out, all heading down the road toward the hotel where Mary was slowly bringing the drone down for landing.

As they got closer, she pulled it back up to hover over the river, behind some of Main Street's stores. Suddenly, she raced it past them, and I saw something on the camera's screen.

I tapped Mary's shoulder. "There's a crazy guy with a rocket launcher on the back of that pickup. They must've grabbed it at the base. He's going to shoot at the drone with that thing."

Mary sent the drone up and around in a loop, then right down near the street, then shot it over the stores and down by the river. The front of a store was suddenly blown off by a rocket launcher shot. Mary brought the drone back out and up in an arc high over a side street.

"Try to keep them away from the warehouse as long as you can with the drone," I said. "We've got to warn the others about that crazy guy with a rocket launcher."

I took off with Jae following me, back through the window and down the stairs. We passed the gang of teens who'd been watching it all through another window, and we ended up with the entire gang following us as we burst out the front doors, headed for the fastest route through the side streets to the warehouse camp. Some teens followed in our heels, and others broke off in different directions, probably to alert the entire town that something was happening, which was hardly necessary, since the explosion had already shaken the area. They would know something had blown up, but not what.

As we turned down the street toward the camp at John Deere, we saw a pack of dogs fleeing up from the explosion. We went through a weedy lot and over a fence to an alley, then Jae headed off to the right with me following. He had a better sense of direction than I did, as he knew the exact route from what he had seen from the town hall. We went through a hole Dan had cut in the fence, past a big military tent and some parked farm equipment Keirstead had set up in the lot. We moved up past Exhibit A, the deceased robot beast that they had laid out on a flat-bed truck. We encountered no resistance and reached Dan and his crew.

Out front of the metal sheds, we saw two semi-conscious men in poorly tailored town police uniforms, sitting against a wall with their hands zippered behind their backs.

Koda was there. "That's the new police force, minus their commander. They stole the uniforms from the police station."

Dan and the others were nearly all in shadows. They had quickly carried Walker, Carl, and nearly thirty other people out into the open air. I was amazed that they had done it that fast. Carl was the only one fully conscious, but he couldn't get up.

Dan pounded the side of a shed. "Fuck! This is a nightmare. These people are close to death. We have to get them to Libby and Maria at the town clinic and start a major medical operation. The question is, how are we going to do that when we have to pass that convoy to get there?"

Suddenly, the drone flew overhead. I knew what it meant, and so did Jae; Jack Keirstead's men and vehicles were returning, and Mary was warning us. We ran to the makeshift entrance gate and closed it. Two of Keirstead's men with arrows in their chests were on the ground there beside their fallen rifles.

We returned to the others, and the convoy arrived with a roar of engines and voices, their lights highlighting swirling moths, and they didn't stop. The

lead vehicle, a dented rust bucket filled with four rough men, smashed right through, its tires squealed, and it pulled left.

We were trapped. The big pickup truck drove partway in, but the other vehicles remained spread outside, blocking any exit. The headlights of the truck shone in our direction. We were closer to the rear of the mostly open lot. Behind us, to the left and rear, was the large warehouse itself, and behind it, the river. Off to our right was the large military tent; out front of it, Exhibit A was present as a grim reminder of the base. We were stuck at the metal sheds, with a large group of very ill people on a flattened patch of grass, with most of them receiving water and emergency treatment.

Some of Keirstead's men and women were already in the warehouse and armed, and his main ragtag army was forty feet away at the gate. We were in a situation where a massacre would occur if any shooting started. Koda, Jae, and a few others had their guns up, facing off with a much larger group, and they'd positioned themselves so the sheds would block any shots fired at them from the warehouse HQ.

Commander Jack Keirstead was wearing a football helmet and boldly stepping forward in front of his men. Another big man in a police uniform jumped onto the pickup truck, lifted the rocket launcher, and aimed it at us. I assumed the man to be Larry Dunn, the new police chief appointed by Jack. Just a few steps behind Jack was his militia commander, Hank, holding an automatic rifle.

No one fired or spoke. It was as if the warehouse grounds were under a magical binding spell that froze the moment. Our guys wouldn't shoot and start a massacre, and though Keirstead's troops had the numbers, they wanted some form of resolution. They wanted to know the truth. I could see it in their distant eyes. We obviously didn't look like aliens, and there were no robots with us.

Jack Keirstead looked much like an alien robot himself in the garish light and swirling moths wearing his weird idea of a military outfit. It was hard to tell whether he was a soldier or a football player wearing a hockey shirt. He held a big gun but wasn't pointing it. I recognized the gun. It was one of the electric guns left at the base by Axel's deceased special forces team, an exact copy of the one I'd found and used inside the base.

When Jack spoke, his hostile tone seemed to repel even the moths. "You're supposed to be dead, but you aren't. We know what that means!" He waved his free arm to the crowd behind him, signaling them to hold their fire. "They're aliens, copies ... abominations that we will destroy!"

I stepped forward and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "There are no aliens. They were robots, and we destroyed them. We blew up that base and everything in it."

Jack's look was grim, his mouth squeezed to a bloodless line. He glared at me with eyes full of hate. "You lie! It was you and that Mary woman. You came into town to signal the aliens and start the whole invasion into motion. We saw your flying saucer out there. How stupid do you think we are?"

"That was a drone with lights to lure you away so we could rescue the prisoners. What kind of man are you?" I pointed to the injured people on the grass. "Those people are human beings, with red blood in their veins. You know for a fact that they aren't aliens. Treating prisoners in such a cruel fashion is a war crime. Look at that cop you have on the truck with a rocket launcher ... if he fires that in this lot, he'll probably kill us all. If any shooting starts, it will be mass death."

Jack's people were muttering; some lowered their guns. He sensed that he was losing control. "You dare question me!" He took an angry step forward. "My family fought for freedom in three wars. Look at the evidence we have. That thing on the truck might be a robot, but everyone knows aliens bring their robots with them. Look at this alien gun I found. There's no gun like it on Earth. You and your robots have to die."

I was about to reply, but didn't get the chance

A crazed look in his eyes, Keirstead turned, aimed the rifle at the huge robot, and fired. A blue arc of electricity shot across the yard and hit the robot directly. It was a miracle that the rest of the people didn't start shooting. Instead, all eyes were on the robot as it spasmed and ignited with a patch of fire. Sparks shot from it, and it suddenly rose with force, ripping away the belt fastening it to the flatbed. Keirstead's attempt to destroy it had somehow charged it up.

Some of Jack's people threw down their guns and ran, while the rest obviously feared shooting at it would draw it after them. The robot lunged forward at Keirstead, sweeping out one of its tentacle-like limbs. It whacked Keirstead's neck and head with force so strong that it ripped his helmeted head off, and it bounced over the lot as his body flew back, gushing blood from the neck stump.

Larry Dunn, who had lowered the rocket launcher, raised it to fire at the robot, which would be suicide. As he did, the drone, lights off, arced down from the sky at incredible speed and struck him. He flew over the side of the truck, and the launcher's rocket whooshed into the air and struck the forested hill on the other side of the river moments later.

The beast staggered out of the broken front gate and over cars attempting to pursue Keirstead's fleeing group, but it didn't get far before it ran out of power and collapsed. The stand-off was over, and we hadn't fired a single shot. There were cheers, and Dan stepped out. "It's over," he said. "The

fight has gone out of them, and it isn't going to come back. Let's get down to business and get the injured and wounded to the town clinic."

Jack's people inside the warehouse command post surrendered, and the others disbanded. The local teens were the first among the townspeople to join us, and once we got people to the Shining Falls Center for Rural Health up the road, we assigned a large group of teens to work there daily.

Full hydropower was restored within a day. Jae was one of the engineers who worked on it. The situation then shifted into three branches: cleanup, mourning and funerals, and building regional defense and survival. Carl and Walker recovered in two days and were walking down Main Street, commanding large groups of townspeople. Walker had been appointed police chief, and Carl announced that he would run for mayor.

The following days went smoothly in Shining Rapids. There were some ugly hiccups, but nothing big. We spent a day out at Dan's at the mourning ceremonies for those who died. Koda planned to write a history of the entire series of events in a native-lore style, along with a dedication to those who died heroically.

Judge Clarence P. Marshall of the region ruled that there would be no arrests or charges. His ruling stated that the events were too traumatic and confusing, leaving the locals in a state of mind in which they could not make rational decisions. Thus, no charges were laid against those people who had composed Keirstead's forces. Mary, who had killed Jack's police chief, Larry Dunn, with the drone, also escaped being charged with manslaughter. I did not mention Axel's death from Mary's bullets, but left him at the bottom of the base, buried and forgotten. The judge's decision was called a healing decision. Judge Marshall's wife was indigenous, and Dan said she had influenced him. There was a strong desire to unify the people of the town and countryside because news from the outside was continuing chaos. In a town with two jail cells, it was also a wise decision. No one wanted a repeat of concentration-camp-style mass incarceration.

Six days later, on a comfortable, sunny summer afternoon, I walked with Mary and Jae down Main Street. We turned onto Maple Street, headed for the town hall. A breeze cast lacy shadows from the willows, butterflies fluttered in the air, monarchs and painted ladies. An overnight thunderstorm had brought up the grass, probably greener than it had ever been. The hall's red-tiled roof rested under beams of divine sunlight. Its stoic front gave me the feeling of journeying back to a past decade. Mary wore a short red summer dress with tiny polka dots, white sandals, and was in a light mood. Her pale legs had perfect form, and her conversation was bubbly.

The hall was already full when we entered, and it was no longer a squat for teenagers. The broad redwood floor was polished and set up with benches

for the public meeting. A number of town officials were at the front, backed by the haze of light from three broad arched windows. A printed itinerary of the meeting was available inside. It would perhaps be a long meeting. Mary did not want to sit through it.

Jae would sit in until we got the information we wanted and then join us outside. He was considering moving to Shining Rapids and opening an auto repair business because news from the city was not good.

I sat with Mary at one of the tables on the hall's back patio in the shade and breeze. We could hear them inside, but not clearly.

"Who would have expected that Shining Rapids would recover so quickly while the rest of the world is largely in chaos?" Mary said.

"A lot of it is about supplies. Cities need humongous amounts of supplies, and critical supply lines are down. That means martial law and rationing. It's hard to police, and if people don't cooperate, criminal gangs continue the chaos. It might take months for things to get back to normal."

"Jae wants to drive back tomorrow? I don't like it."

"He has to because of your business. Jae said there is work for your employees, especially now with all the damage, but getting people to pay is a problem. Then there is the entire banking and payroll screwup. Even if he decides to move out here later, he still has a lot of business there, and you guys own a big house there. I don't. It happens that I cleared up my business just before I left. All I need to do is have someone check on my place. I got the last payment for the job, and it covers the rest of the summer. So that business is done and buried. There are no records, and there is no one left alive who knows about it."

"I cleared up my city business, too. I mean with Marc. Sometimes you just have to burn those bridges. What do you think will come of all this, Joe? The military will be here probably within a month as they slowly advance to restore order in every town."

"The base was already supposedly decommissioned. Trying to dig it up for an investigation into aliens would be far too costly. It would never get approval. There is neither the money nor the manpower to do it. The military won't stay in this area because they don't need to."

Our brief discussion ended as Jae waved us in, and we got up and hurried inside to take seats. Walker, Dan, and Carl were at the podium, and Carl was the first to speak.

"As interim mayor, in consultation with the town council, a final decision has been made. All materials related to the base, including the robot bodies stored in toxic waste containers, are to be buried at the bottom of the old Big Thunder Mine. When the job is complete, a controlled demolition will be

carried out, and this part of history will be buried beneath tons of rock and forgotten. There will be no town records kept of the disposal. When the military arrives, we will put forward our proposal that a memorial be built on the base grounds for those who died in the base collapse. They think it was caused by a nearby mine collapse, and we will confirm that. I have listened to the people and found that no one wants the military out here again, and especially not here conducting a large investigation or digging things up that we want kept buried."

The crowd clapped, many people cheered, Mary got up, and I followed her back out. It was all we wanted to hear. We sat out enjoying the sunshine as the meeting continued. Aside from the din of the speakers inside, the outside was idyllic. Warblers were in the bushes, and a red-tailed hawk soared overhead.

A while later, Carl emerged. His short speech had ended, and he came and sat with us. "I'm not much of a talker. With Dan, Walker, and the councilors to speak, they'll hear enough. So what are your plans?"

"I'm going to stay the summer and vacation. The hotel suites are prepaid for the entire summer, and the suites were barely used. Jae and Mary are going back into the city to clean up the problems with their auto business and check their house."

"You mean, Jae," Mary said, winking at me. "I'm staying here with you. I don't want to go down to martial-law land."

Jae was just stepping up. "Stay if you want, Mary. Carl, I'm still trying to get used to seeing you wearing a suit."

"They expect it for a meeting. I'm the interim mayor, until I win the election, and I have bad news."

"You're kidding," Mary said.

"Your vacation will be a working vacation because I have work for everyone in town. We are still under crisis management."

I laughed; Mary giggled.

"It's not a problem," I said.

Carl turned to Jae. "I want to send a carload of guys in with you. We still need numerous things we can only get down that way, and you know the city. They will also provide you with protection from criminals in that martial law area. I have a big list of supplies. You can't get a big truck in, but some small towns are doing it another way. You buy the supplies in the city area with cash, rent a truck, and get out, avoiding checkpoints. I'll be making a lot of phone calls trying to reestablish trade, but we need a solution until then."

"All right, let's do that," Jae said. "So what do you think it's all going to mean to people out here? I mean the ugly things that happened."

Carl rubbed the stubble of whiskers on his deep-black cheek. "I think perhaps the only memory remaining in Shining Rapids of those worthless robots will be a distant, irritating clang haunting our dreams. Those who died heroically, we'll remember and honor."

--The End--