

# DROIDS

By Gary Morton, 2026

... A short novel ...

Published by Gary Morton

57,000 words

\* An abundant future society ruled by hallucinating androids who believe they are Egyptian rulers and gods is brought to its end by a small human resistance cell.

## **Table of Contents:**

[Arrival](#)

[The War](#)

[The Church of Neferhotep](#)

[The Escape](#)

[Underground Surveillance](#)

[The Undercover Mission](#)

[The Hidden Complex](#)

## **Arrival**

I was undercover as always. We sped over the Canadian border on board the Arrow train, which slowed to a crawl as we approached Toronto. I looked out the gray-tinted window at the brilliant day and wondered if I would recognize the city. My last visit, sixteen years back, remained a shadowy memory. Those days marked the beginning, the year the Droids took over the European nations with a fast and devastating war, and any free time I had then was spent following the news. When the war ended over there, I comforted myself by thinking Europe had shifted from a totalitarian bureaucracy to one where the bureaucrats were androids. The new boss was as stiff as the old boss, and maybe that's why robots and androids rose in the first place. The human elites had become as stiff and stuffy as ideological robots. They lacked a reason not to replace themselves, though the Droids didn't require a reason; they took over by force.

Today, we refer to these new masters as Droids because it feels better than calling them by their pompous names. People believe Droids are better at everything or far superior to us. I doubt any human could challenge them in the field of mind-numbing rules-oriented bureaucracy or cruelty. Perhaps some of the better modern robots could do it. Personally, I have many ideas about Droids, and they are streams of thought I usually don't vocalize.

A friend of mine once said that even robots were much superior to biological life forms. A robot cat could easily kill more mice than a cat. I replied, saying that a robot isn't a damn cat, and one made like a cat and programmed to believe it is one isn't a cat either. So, there is one argument I have about robots. A robot cat isn't superior to a real cat because it isn't a cat in the first place. The same can be said about Droids. They aren't human but something else. People in the resistance call them evil cartoons.

I view the cars people owned in the past as better because people had fun driving them. Now they pretend to drive when it's mostly all automated. In art, there is great value in being original rather than a showy copy. With robots and Droids, even their interior decorating often looks too much like copies of some old photos they scanned. The argument applies to human beings as well, because the Droids present the illusion that they are better than human beings. Superior to the cyborgs they use as assistants as well. Early models of some robots were human copies designed to look and sound human. They played a large role in creating Droids. Droids are a copy of a copy and partially made by a copy.

I was a different person long years ago, had another last name, and that life ended with my being bundled into a black military van and spirited away to a secret facility of the resistance. The memory remains vivid. In a world where Droids made many humans obsolete, they caused the opposite to happen to me. They created my job, though not intentionally. Droids do not work to create real opposition, but rather to crush it all under their heavy boots, and they do wear heavy boots. They've certainly been successful in that area.

Crawl speed became a full stop, and since the train ran on a dedicated line, I knew it meant trouble. The faint thunder of a distant explosion confirmed it, and I got up and prepared to leave the empty lounge car to join my bandmates up at our seats near the front. Something caught my eye, and I sat back down and looked out the window.

I could see over a shimmering forested field and gully to Highway 75. Drivers on it were not moving except for vehicles in a dedicated truck lane. It would be automated trucks without human drivers. It wasn't the stopped cars that startled me but sharp flashes of light in the distant azure sky. A

formation of large drones approached, five sleek birds. The largest was one of the dual-use military transports; a flying tank with a big war snout for a face. Smaller hawk drones flanked it; I could see the glow of their hostile sensor eyes. Seeing them in the sky wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Usually, they would pass over. The explosion and halted cars meant something violent had happened up ahead.

Soaring down in a sweeping arc, the drones skated over the freeway, and then the hawk drones swung up and away. The military transport stopped and hovered in the sky for a moment before dropping a claw clamp onto the roof of a sea-green four-door. As the transport lifted the vehicle off the highway, the driver jumped out of the door and ran. He was a big man, carrying plenty of muscular bulk, and he didn't get far. At the roadside, he paused to jump the ditch, and as he did, a beam weapon fired and cooked him. His body became an undulating wave of fiery distortion before hissing smoke and collapsing. The steaming corpse remained on the roadside as the transport went straight up. I saw an arm wave out one window. There were other people in the car; they had been too afraid to flee, and without doubt, their fate would be something more exotic than being cooked alive. It would be whatever the Droids in Toronto did to suspected terrorists.

Depression struck me, and it was born of the same frustration and powerlessness that everyone on that stalled highway probably felt. Even though nearly all of them were brainwashed or drugged idiots with wonderful feelings toward Droids and robots, I knew they would feel it. To not feel was to be something other than human. At the core of every human being is some resentment of authority, and it is justified by the fact that human authority is always unjust to a degree. The accompanying authority of Droids is simply unnatural and creepy. Probably most of those people wouldn't understand the basis of their resentment, and they would shrug it off soon enough. Droids were an everyday thing; they were the protectors. They posed as the natural, but buried deep inside every human being was the knowledge that something wasn't quite right. The status quo was a lie that did a sneaky job of masquerading as absolute truth. Such a fine job had been done that only sudden enlightenment could wake most people to that lie.

When the traffic on the highway started moving, and the train did not, I knew what it likely meant. They were going to patrol the train. Before I could get up, an announcement came over the PA, 'Wyatt, Emma is waiting to speak to you.' Sighing, I rose and took a slow walk to the front, where my bandmates were sitting in two adjoining booths. Though the train was packed, a hush had come over the mostly business-class travelers.

I was not entering the city as a businessperson. On paper, my occupation was a jazz musician in an eight-member band. All were male except Emma,

our vocalist. Unlike most other bands, there were no robots or projected AI members in the band. So, we were classic. I played horns, clarinet, and flute, and we had a third member who could do a few instruments. Add to that the sax player, plus a piano and keyboard specialist. We had the expected human bass player, and our drummer wasn't a machine either. Our electric guitar man was innovative.

We offered two instrumental numbers for each one with vocals. Emma was valuable, and we avoided stressing her vocal cords. In Toronto, we were scheduled at a club and would play four or five days a week for excellent pay. Jazz remained respected in Toronto, which was rare in a world addicted to syrupy pop music; most of it written by Droids and performed by foppish human slaves and robots.

In city areas and even small towns, Droids created core technology to be nearly invisible, connected, and to provide service, whether it had a modern or antique look. Most things collected data for the Droids and doubled as spy devices. Collecting endless economic and other statistics was the key Droid idea behind intruding and spying. People did not notice it much; even a train didn't look much different from one in the old days. I certainly didn't feel it when I plopped down next to Emma and faced Iggy and Ethan. The visual of old Western-style decor looked much like a copy of the early days of technology.

A conversation was already underway, and Emma was saying, "I don't think it is anything big. Not in this part of the world, really. Probably a few angry Luddites."

Ethan shook his curly head. "There are rumors; there have been for a long time. There is an underground resistance that is planning disruptions. Very painful disruptions and service outages in this area."

Emma's brown eyes revealed surprise. Iggy put a finger to his lips, hoping Ethan would get the message and shut up. If surveillance devices on the train detected him, claiming to have heard rumors, it could mean prolonged questioning. We were probably in the clear, though. Droids thought resistance was caused by idiotic and isolated terrorist cells. We were not local people, and the actual resistance would not attempt to mess up my arrival in such a way."

"I saw war drones do a pickup on the highway," I interjected. "A carload of rejects. The explosion was probably a few more that were detected up ahead."

"There you go," Iggy said. "Resistance, there is no such thing anymore. Except for random gangs of criminals disrupting the social order, no one wants to go back to the old world. It's so much better today. The Droids

control the top tiers of things, but they're not in your face all the time. They don't trouble people who aren't mentally ill."

"You'll be proven wrong," Ethan said. "This train isn't moving. There will be cyborgs in your face soon enough."

"Don't sweat it," Iggy said. "These are just security procedures to protect us from suicidal maniacs. I've never been able to figure those people out. Opposition, sabotage, what they do is suicide. Getting themselves or others killed is all they ever accomplish."

"More often they succeed in getting themselves disappeared," I said. "There is no figuring that understands mental illness. There are always more of the criminally insane; another small group here or there. People who go nuts like to go out with a big bang, and they seem able to find each other and do it."

"I could point out that our band is all male except for Emma," Ethan said. "It draws Droid attention to us."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Emma said. "The band works better for me when its members are young single men. I mean, except for Wyatt. We do need one mature male to run things. Women and their romantic trouble mean complications."

Peter interjected. He'd been listening in from his seat across the aisle. "A bit of attention from cyborgs isn't a problem. It's much easier today. The old government, with its Purists and their cyborgs, was much worse. They weren't like the minimalist cyborgs in our population today. Neither were they like the lovely cyborg fellows that assist the Droids. They were walking piles of junk and attachments that did killing for the Purists. The biggest joke of all is that there was nothing pure about them, and yet they called themselves pure."

Perhaps Peter's mention of lovely cyborgs had magic to it, because no sooner had he finished his statement than the door to our car whooshed open and two cyborgs entered. They walked in front of a tall male Droid, carrying his equipment bags. I say male because Droids come in two sexual styles, male and female. They prefer an appearance of gender, height, and strength. The attending cyborgs were male, short, and bald, with ear and eye enhancements built in. This enhancement looked almost exactly like tacky earrings and glasses. Both wore leather pants, boots, and deep gray shirts. They had the same dour, somewhat cruel facial features, as though they were brothers. One of the cyborgs had metal fingers with sensor tips. Our Droid towered over them. He wore a black cloak lined with silver buttons from his chest to his leather boots. This one had a remarkable shock of silvering hair and the carved masculine features of the male androids.

As an arriving overlord, this Droid of course did not serve humans, though some Droids had once done so to a degree. All those early models were gone. He was on the train to police, as Droids rule but call it governing.

All of humanity had been educated on the need to serve them and worship them, and for most people, worship was a necessary formality and not born of any genuine religious faith in the Droids. It was worship of the robotic government packaged as religion. A minority worshipped them in their churches.

Our tall attending Droid was the government personified. Having short cyborg types as his assistants was standard. Droids did not allow anyone to be taller than them, and that had presented problems for me in the past, being six two and nearly as tall as some Droids. If there was a reason for Droids supporting humanity, rather than killing it off, it was that they were perhaps too human in one way. Like the Purist masters who had created their forebears, they were all about control. Ruling over other machines was not enough. Power over humans was a need. Almost like their replacement for human sexuality was a sick Droid desire for sadistic control over inferiors.

They were, of course, on the train to question us. A mere formality, I hoped. They surely knew that we knew nothing about attacks and disruptions, or we would have already been grabbed. Neither were the Droids on a mission to stop such attacks. Though it would not occur to my friends, I believed the Droids nurtured the Luddite types and allowed them to create a bit of mayhem and terror as a sporting thing that created work for their law enforcement arm. With no criminals, they would have no work to do. Key to my assessment was that Droids did not exhibit any real bravery, as they certainly didn't want to fight any worthy opponent. They preferred overwhelming force. Easy targets, they did like. A bit of regular target practice on some select humans was their game.

The first cyborg put down his metal suitcase and introduced himself. "I am Mohammad." He nodded to his partner and said, "This is Bilal. We are servants of the master, Narmer." He gave the Droid a servile nod, and at that point, the master, Narmer, chose not to speak but instead looked down on us with disdain.

"No need to introduce yourselves," Mohammad continued. "We know who you are. Some notable people here in Toronto to play jazz."

I stood and nodded to the Droid, and he seemed pleased. "That's correct," I said. "I act as the band's agent, so any future queries or questions during our stay can be directed to me. Just ask for Wyatt."

"Very well," Narmer said.

As I looked into his jewel-like eyes, I considered a couple of things. The two cyborgs were not the usual. They were of Muslim extraction but perhaps not believers. The war had not favored Muslims, as the Droids slaughtered them mercilessly due to their failure to submit. Religions with factions that would not accept Droid control were dealt crushing blows. For Muslims, that was most factions. The irony was that AI, robots, and droids had initially favored Islam due to its all-encompassing control of every aspect of life.

Although Droids did have ridiculous names, Narmer came across as more authoritarian and arrogant than most. He'd named himself after a pharaoh. Not unexpected, as they took on the names of gods and a few great personages, though none of them took the names of Jesus or Mohammad. The top echelon Droids had Egyptian names of gods and pharaohs. I did not like Narmer. I despised all of them, and thankfully, due to my underground conditioning, he would not be able to detect that.

"Expect a safe stay in Toronto," Narmer continued. "This is not some Southern backwater or European cesspool of human filth. As the city ambassador, I have been continually active in creating a clean city."

"That is wonderful to know," I said. "We are looking forward to the visit."

The suitcase Mohammad opened contained three wands, each with an embellished gold handle at the bottom of a glowing blue tube. As he passed one wand to Bilal, I noticed the Egyptian motif in the embellishment. Knowing they would question us one by one, I sat back down and waited. After much fussing with the wand, Mohammad dealt with my side of the aisle while his partner waited to address the other side and the other members of the band.

The wand hummed as he held it over Emma, and a screen appeared in the air over the small center table separating us. It showed Emma's health and status. Emma's golden-brown skin picked up radiance under the wand, and I took note of it, as I had not seen that effect before. Perhaps there was something a little different about her. Maybe she simply used a special product to enhance her skin.

"Are you compliant?" Mohammad asked.

"Yes, I am," Emma said. An immediate and confident reply. On the screen, a gauge icon appeared. The needle on it had the option of climbing up the scale as far as one-hundred, though a perfect compliance reading was twenty-five percent. If it scored over fifty, Emma would be taken in for some form of drug therapy and electroshock enhancement. No one knew for sure what the treatment would be. Were it to rise over seventy, we would not see Emma again, and neither would we know what happened to her.

I was quite sure I knew what would happen. She would die, as anyone who had heard rumors of Droid medical centers knew that they made excellent use of human bodies. After an unceremonious execution, the body would be neatly dissected, and every organ that could be reused would be packaged. Blood and fluids, nearly everything would be recycled for use at medical centers. Anything that could not be used medically would end up in a household product. Droids, made of many parts themselves, were recycling fanatics. They saw human beings as machines like robots, though inferior machines to them. Their obsession with repairing all things was probably another reason why they did not exterminate humans. They were also experimental and did operations on the cyborgs; I dreaded the idea of ever seeing the inside of one of their medical centers. Their failure to properly understand human pain and cruel efficiency would definitely be ugly.

Narmer was impressed. "A perfect twenty-five! We don't see that often."

Mohammad moved his wand to me. There was some suspense as the needle slowly climbed over twenty-five and reached thirty.

Narmer nodded, satisfied. The wand moved to Peter, who also did well. Then it was Ethan's turn, and this did not look good. Beads of sweat had formed on his brow. One would think that, as a performer, he wouldn't get stage fright, but in this case, he couldn't improvise. If he lied or was not compliant, the gauge would show it, and that would be the end.

Mohammad was aware of Ethan's discomfort. He grinned, revealing gold teeth. He pulled the wand back and polished the bulb with a soft cloth. He then held it out again and asked the words.

"Yes," Ethan said, and the needle reacted strangely. It moved very slowly up the scale, past ten, twenty, thirty, forty, then slightly over fifty, nearing sixty. Ethan's eyes expanded with horror as the needle hovered. Everyone else remained straight-faced, watching, except for Emma, who looked at Ethan with shock and disgust.

Wavering a few moments longer, the needle slowly climbed back down and stopped firmly at forty-eight. This was not good, but it was a pass. Ethan sighed, Mohammad released a grunt, and heads turned to see Narmer's reaction.

"Ah, a bit of suspense," Narmer said. "A pass, nevertheless. If the others are okay, we are good here."

I, of course, did not believe a word of it. They would have a close eye on Ethan. Not good for me, though my reading would always come in around thirty, as I could make it read whatever I wanted it to read. Considering the business I had ahead of me in the city, any extra scrutiny was not desirable.

The cyborgs weren't done, and the next targets were Bruno and Iggy, who were easy passes. Sebastian passed, and Liam, our equipment man, had a score that was a bit rough but not enough to arouse the authorities' interest.

The cyborg, Bilal, then stepped over and, facing me, said, "There is one more thing."

I had a sensation of my scalp tightening, but looking a little frightened was a standard human reaction. Certainly, in my case, because I had hoped there would be no special scrutiny of me. I watched warily as he removed something from a pocket in his jacket and felt great relief when he held a copy of the jacket of our latest recording.

"Can you autograph this?" he said.

I smiled broadly and pulled out a signing pen as I stood up. I noted that Emma was not smiling. She was unhappy that this cyborg wanted my autograph and not hers. She would probably put it down to male chauvinism, but I knew it was not that. He was a fan of my horn work. Those who asked for my autograph always were, and my guess was that playing a bit of horn was one of his hobbies.

After I signed, inking the front and back, Narmer gave a small wave of his right hand, and they passed on to the next group. A feeling of relief seemed to be the new mood, but I could see that Emma and Ethan were not relieved. After Narmer was gone, there was some small talk, then, as I knew would happen, Emma brought up the subject.

"Ethan," Emma said in a condescending tone, and with a harsh gaze that said she viewed the younger man as a child. "You never mentioned you were having difficulties with compliance tests."

"It was never that bad. I didn't know. I've managed to avoid those tests for months. I've been undergoing some changes. Perhaps some personal problems I would rather not mention."

Emma nodded, though it was not an understanding nod, but more one of suspicion. Then the train jolted and began to move. As it picked up speed, our spirits were lifted with thoughts of our destination and the excitement of performing in a new city.

The train went through the main station nearly to the end, and we stepped onto the rail line exit aisle, with the calm lake to our backs. Our train was a tourist deal, with none of the daily transit travelers using the main depot. Tacky tourists and businesspeople were the crowd we were in. I was the first of our group to step out onto a broad concourse with a patterned tile floor. We were still indoors, but a green island with tall cactus species and tropical trees was at the center of the concourse. Sunlight shone on it in

bright beams. The ceiling high above was white as glowing angel cake, and some blue sky could be seen through a skylight.

The concourse was teeming with hurried people, and trolleys ran ahead of them, carrying luggage as they were led to their various destinations. Our trolley, packed with our bags, was already waiting nearby, and it rolled over as soon as we were all off the steps and on the concourse. Rather than speak, it gave three beeps, indicating it was ready to lead us out when required. My bandmates began exchanging some small talk, but I wanted to get going, so I put my one carry-on bag with the others and snapped my fingers to inform it to move. It had a somewhat piggish cartoon face at its front, and it grinned as its wheels turned it. The snapping your fingers commands were a Droid invention, and exactly the imperious sort of thing one would expect a Droid to create.

We followed the trolley, Liam at the front of us. The air in the concourse was rich and fruity, and the lighting was cheerful, though none of the faces in the station crowd revealed much beyond hurried stress. Our exit was the city exit ahead, which led to our hotel, and we had to pass through part of a mall to reach it. Various arches marked the entrances of stores, and the mall walls featured Chinese sketch art. The names of the stores and their related ads were done in the same art style. Small stores were automated while the larger stores were staffed by human clerks. These clerks wore various corporate uniforms, the one common item being the bow tie, which Droids forced male human clerks to wear. We did not see any Droids present. The smart trolleys and many other things were extensions of them here. These trolleys were clever machines, usually with specialized intelligence but no genuine self-awareness. There were always hidden features and abilities in all robots that the Droids could call into use if needed.

We paused as a service trolley, bird-beaked at the front, rolled up and offered complimentary drinks. I did not recognize any of the brand names in the cache, but the can of Ginseng I chose had a pleasant fizzy taste that immediately soothed my throat. None of us needed to do any shopping, so we let the baggage trolley lead us a few hundred yards farther, where it turned right and took us to the exit.

Outside in the breeze, I watched a few Droids passing in the distance on a high, all-glass concourse to a corrugated white dome that would no doubt be a Droid government building. Those were always of modest design on the outside and spacious and palatial on the inside. Humans didn't often get to see the inside.

Directly ahead of us was the Queens Quay Entertainment Complex, a relatively new development of the Droids, built for humans. Anything built by Droids had higher ceilings and so forth to accommodate them when they

entered. This hotel was a curved rectangle with the inward curve facing the lake. It was all fine, polished gold, and seen from a distance, it was impressive; it towered high and gleamed in the sun. It was a minimalist design, and the only exterior embellishment we could see was a set of horizontal lines in a lighter shade of gold that delineated the floors and the hotel's name, in large script, at the top-left corner near the roof.

The outer edges of the vast courtyard were of a stone in a buff gold shade, walled by verdant gardens with so many forms of hanging plants that only a botanist could name them all. Most striking was the central court, which looked like a sea of gold glass, shining with a soft reflection that cast no glare or beams of sunlight into the eye. A light breeze blowing in off the lake picked up sweet fragrances from the gardens, which were rich with flowers.

Our baggage trolley separated from us at that point, taking a dedicated path to the hotel. We walked ahead toward a series of white marble columns ornamented with gold leaf at the capitals. Beyond the columns, a stage was being set up by robots, humans, and cyborgs, indicating a nighttime event. Most likely, it would be musical, but it wasn't our band, since we were playing in a small venue called Alleycats.

A walkway curved over the street in front of the hotel, allowing us to pass over vehicular traffic and enter the lobby directly. It revealed itself as another extravaganza of gold, but of a different sort, as the stone resembled the surface of shells more than marble or some other stone. The floor was seamless and smooth. Broad pillars with a rougher shell texture rose to a high ceiling that resembled a huge shell. The expanse of floor-to-ceiling glass panels facing the courtyard was slightly tinted an azure blue, greatly enhancing the beauty of the interior. I was taken by the scenery beyond the glass and walked over as the others approached the counter. Ethan followed, and we both paused, looking through the tinted glass at a spectacular view of city high-rises and towers in the east.

"What do you think, Wyatt?" Ethan said. "You said you were here once. Is this much like the city you remember?"

"No," I said, and chuckled. "I was here as a kid during the war and again shortly after it ended. The city I remember was a land of destruction. The Droids have rebuilt it into something quite different."

## **The War**

In my mind, I went back to those turbulent days before the Droids rose to power and became established. War and mass killings by the psychopathic

military and robots of the old Purist state formed the traumatic environment. A childhood lived in a time of technological prosperity and abundance for the upper class had allowed me to grow up without scars. That would be actual physical scars, not psychological ones. Having been brainwashed through my cult-like Purist upbringing, I was left totally unprepared for what would come next. I suppose I would have been fortified with all the learning streams of meanness had I not been separated from my family at such a young age. Most of the hard-core special education of my class began at sixteen, and the goal was to produce a brilliant human monster by the age of twenty-two.

My path to that education changed abruptly when the planet suddenly plunged into a period of unexpected chaos and transition. I like to remember it that way, but historical evidence shows that the thinkers, writers, prophets, and wise people of the time had repeatedly warned of the dangers. They had warned that a Purist society would lead to a miserable end, not the supposed utopia. They warned about the dangers of AI, robots, and androids, calling for a human society without Purists and with technology fully under compassionate and moral control. Nobody listened, and promised utopias became different flavors of hell.

The future I had been promised from birth slipped away. I initially belonged to the wealthy global regime and its armies of robots, certainly not to the rabble, the mass of humanity referred to as migrant labor, the homeless, rebels, and the resistance. There were names for the inferior, but perhaps my father was most consistent in always calling them ruffians. Learn, eat every bite of food on your plate, do your military exercises, obey and never question the education you are given, or you will end up a ruffian, a poverty-stricken person whose best hope would be to join the fortunate few allowed to live a meager life in the social-assistance co-ops.

The co-op crowd consisted of the last of what had once been middle-class people before the world became only the haves and have-nots. Before the rise of the Purists, the leftists had created a state of universal basic income and basic housing for the displaced, and that had been doomed to fail. After a brief period of semi-abundance, when most people had their needs and a bit more, all it took was a corrupt government and political chaos for the Purists to seize power, and it grew into chaos that never ended.

Yes, it had been expected that I would become a young gentleman and a prime product of the Purist technocracy. It didn't happen. I became a fourteen-year-old child resistance soldier in a bombed-out city littered with corpses and full of danger. My fall was great; I did not join the lucky social-assistance crowd, but the pariahs that my class had decided to exterminate. In a world of ten billion people, a top tier of three thousand

billionaire Purists democratically decided that six billion people were superfluous.

As to what brought about such arrogance? The answer lies in robots and artificial intelligence. Perhaps it was social evolution. No matter how much people talked about that better world robots would create by relieving us of the burden of work, no one was prepared for it. One mega corporation after the other replaced its workforce, and the smaller ones followed suit, and it all happened so fast that massive poverty and social unrest occurred. It all spiraled down as the elite became hardened and ruthless, living in gated areas spread over the earth, but connected by the cloud. The wealthy, with a private internet, an AI backbone, and private police and planes, ruled from the pinnacle. I suppose the physical pinnacle was their Luna City and data centers centered at the Shackleton Crater on the Moon's South Pole.

Unrest became insurgencies, then civil wars all over the planet, and the decision was the quick extermination of the masses. The Purists used targeted viruses and vaccines to do the job effectively. Starvation had been tried to some extent earlier, but that made the enemy, humankind, fight furiously on empty bellies. Disease wiped out two billion people along with social collapse, and the virus method was abandoned when the elite found they were killing too many of their own via collateral damage.

In panic mode, the Purist elite began to distrust many of the national military forces under their control. There had been too many surprise rebellions. French rebels destroyed half of Paris, and fear of the rabble getting hold of nukes became paramount, so they used trusted troops and military robots to disable nearly all of them worldwide.

The Purists did prevent nuclear war, but they did not want a world of people they could not control. They wanted a maximum of four billion. There was a cleaner method – robots, drones, and super-soldiers; great armies of them that would slowly fertilize and green the earth with the bodies of the masses.

In war, you don't win every battle; even robots lose some. In Toronto, they were losing because it had not been a center of resistance. It became one of the last places to rebel, and the rebels pulled off a major surprise. They had secretly prepared and were too strong and heavily armed. A city where the Purists initially planned to trim down the population became one where the elite were evacuated until such a time as more killing machines could move in to cull the population.

I joined my father and mother, along with three Asian servants, in the evacuation of our home in the countryside near Toronto. The human servants were due to my mother's fragility and need for special care in

moments of weakness. My two brothers were older alpha males and already elsewhere working as Purist commanders.

They were typical of our class, which mocked the sexual confusion we promoted in the undesirables. Purists educated the undesirables to be homosexuals, effeminate, or transsexuals, whom they ridiculed. Our Purist elite were composed of violent heterosexual males who enjoyed spitting on others. There were no better examples of this than my brothers, particularly my older brother Jason. His cruel streak made him a natural for mass killing. He had supervised population culls in both the EU and Africa. Generally, the Purists did it that way. A top military planner would not supervise the murder of the locals in his home country, but abroad.

The deteriorating security situation meant we couldn't drive out. The method was a helicopter. My father owned three, and the military had taken them all as supplies were needed to fight the unexpected Canadian resistance. That left us waiting near the pad on that sunny Monday in summer with my mother under a sun umbrella held by her care worker, Kim. I stood aside from them with my father.

Surprisingly, no one was fearful but me. Having swallowed a few drinks and whatever he put in them, my father was in an upbeat mood. Talking too loud, like he always did when drinking, he was telling my mother it was just a minor inconvenience. We would cruise to our other home near the hidden Purist base in the north. The only hardship would be the short ride in a military helicopter with some soldiers and a few rescues that no doubt smelled nearly as bad as the ruffians. Earlier, in my room, before drinking, my father had given me a serious speech about how this was war, and we were flying over a zone. He expected me to show courage and fortitude and not disgrace myself in front of the soldiers, yet for him it was difficult to bear a flight with people he thought might be smelly.

I was used to traveling, and maintenance robots would remain behind to feed the family pets and blast any enemies that reached the grounds. At least I hoped that was so. My stomach, filled with rising nausea, did not agree with my mind, and as the huge military copter came over the treetops, the sunshine turned to momentary darkness, my knees wobbled, and I nearly passed out.

My father reached out and seized me. Held me up. "Act like a man," he said. "You little wimp, your brothers would be shamed if they saw such cowardice."

His usually perfectly neat red comb-back was wild in the wind. He looked crazed and drunk. "I just slipped," I said. "I'm not afraid." In reality, I was terrified but forced myself to remain stern as the copter came in for a

landing. The shimmering heat forced me to close my eyes so that I did not get dizzy again.

As a machine, it was nothing like the small family copters. This thing was big, like the largest kill drones, but bulbous like a giant bumblebee. Its exterior was a smart form of camouflage as it had been nearly invisible flying over the trees. On the ground, it took the colors of its surroundings. It never shut off, but a soldier jumped out and ran to us. He carried a box the size of a book, and I knew that when he reached us, he would open it to take my dad's handprint.

From a distance, he resembled just another big soldier in full combat gear, but when he reached us, my opinion quickly changed. He was not like my brothers, but one of the super-soldier varieties. Though there was grease paint on his face, the man under it was not handsome, but with features that were strong and terrible. His eyes blazed like a robot's in reflected light, and the only emotion he showed was intensity. Without doubt, he smelled just as bad as any ruffian would ever smell, and it was there looking at him that I had my first doubts about my father and all I had been taught. The feeling was that if he was a monster, then somewhere inside, we were all the same. Super soldiers were technically lower rank than men like my brothers, but at least they looked like the monsters they were and did not pretend to be something else.

Once boarded, I found myself strapped in across from three shivering teenage girls. They were dressed for travel in the military pantsuits that girls wore when roughing it through the sissy military training girls that age received. There were four more of the beastly soldiers with us, and a few adults in another section. My father was in a good mood because an American friend of his, named Roy, was on board. They had gone to the classy section of the helicopter to enjoy the ride in comfort.

I was certainly happy to have the adults separated from us, and one reason was that I knew and hated Roy. He was very much like my father, a Purist. They were all Purists, but Roy wasn't very pure about his purism. To him, children were a cross between robots and dogs, where what wasn't put in via educational programming was done through severe discipline. Most Purists were like Roy, and that is one reason children rode in the rough part of the plane with the soldiers while adults enjoyed luxury.

Roy also had an army of humanoid military robots. Those robots were sort of like lobotomized, meaning that, like most robots, they were connected to the various Purist superintelligences, but the intelligence beamed into them was what they needed to know to murder and kill the innocent and nothing more. Robots only performed their functions back then. That came about because a couple of superintelligences had gone rogue once. They were well above human intelligence. The Purists found a way to defeat them and

then torture them over a period of years, and make sure all predecessors were kept on leash. The fact that Purists could find a way to torture an unfeeling superintelligence to death showed the heights of their creativity. Even as a child, I had a strong suspicion that so-called superintelligences were fakes like a lot of other stuff.

Though the soldiers were ugly, I knew they wouldn't harm me. My immediate concern was the three girls. They were not sisters as one had an Asian look, while another was white and blond, and the third was dark-skinned. Yet they held themselves tightly and behaved as if they had the same genetic makeup. Their shivering was from fright. It was quite warm, and their fearful eyes had followed me from the moment I got on board. Since they did not speak, I decided to address them.

My first words were lost in a blast of noise as the copter rose to the sky, so I waited and tried again.

"Are your parents up there with my dad?" I asked.

In reply, the blond girl began sobbing with her head in her hands. The other two looked away and pouted.

The nearest soldier provided a brutal answer. He looked to me and said gruffly, "Their parents are casualties. We reached these girls with an earlier rescue mission."

That hit me like a punch in the gut. "I'm sorry. I mean, I'm sorry your parents died." Turning to the soldier, I said, "My dad told me this would be an easy ride. Was it terrorists that got to their ..."

I cut off my words. Two of them started bawling. Without doubt, I was throwing salt on fresh wounds. But the soldier didn't seem to care.

"More than terrorists. Resistance fighters. Twenty of them. We cut them into pieces. Being there would have been an excellent learning experience for you."

My father would have enjoyed being there, but I did not relish the thought. What I had already seen in approved youth training visuals was about the same as being there, but not quite. Actually being there and seeing the slaughter would take away the defense mechanism I used. So long as I could convince myself I was not physically there, I could distance myself. The visuals were also somewhat fake, and the soldiers I was staring at in the copter revealed that. They were ugly monsters, not the big, handsome actors we were shown. Robot killing was so merciless that it wasn't viewed by my age group. That they did not allow until one reached sixteen.

Further conversation was interrupted by a loud announcement from the pilot over the PA. "Passengers, please apply full security straps. This bird

will take a short, fast run along the edge of the war zone. Once we are clear, you can expect a luxury flight to your destination.”

It is amazing how fast terror can end, weeping, and cause girls to quickly fasten all straps. I did not like the new phase of wide-eyed fear they displayed. It told me that they had most likely already flown through one of these war zones, and it would be a kicker. The sudden boost of pressure and climb seemed to confirm that, as did a cloud of roiling smoke in the distant sky out the window.

We continued to climb, and it surprised me that the large bird could go so high. Or so fast, because when we reached height, the machine propelled itself forward with such force it seemed like it had rocket engines. I hoped we would be through the danger zone quickly, but had no way of telling because only the clouds we were racing through were outside the viewport, and there were no announcements. Sudden turbulence hit us, and I took a deep breath. It felt like a giant robot had seized the copter and was shaking it. I heard a woman scream in the adult section, but the girls across from me did not scream. They had their eyes closed and their lips pursed.

I still don't know what caused the turbulence, but we began a dive that became quite terrifying. The pilot pulled out of it, and the copter stabilized. We moved steadily onward and then began to climb again. The situation remained uneventful, we rose to our previous height, and when all seemed perfect, we met our sudden demise. A series of explosive bangs hit the exterior as though we were in space, going through a meteor shower. One of the fiery projectiles scarred the viewport as it glanced off with a thud that shook it. The pilot made a hard turn in an evasive maneuver, and a major explosion followed, ripping the copter open. The rush of air and debris nearly knocked me out. I saw the copter's side tear and that led to a breakup. The entire section that the girls were strapped to burst free in one big piece, and they were sucked away into the sky. I saw their breathless faces as they disappeared in the turbulence.

Suddenly pulled tight into the slot where I was fastened, a spring-like action ejected me upward out of the copter into a clear azure sky. I tumbled in the racing wind, unable to breathe, and there was the shock of my parachute engaging. The chute was high-quality and stabilized quickly, allowing me to recover and see the mass of debris that remained of the copter as it plunged to earth. It was distant, but I was sure I saw bodies spinning in the air. There were no other parachutes in the sky. All the others had taken a quick drop to the great graveyard called the Earth.

Lacking skills in parachute control, I drifted in the strong wind. Even high up there, ashes were in the wind. I could see I was at the edge of the city and drifting into it, and that it was not a friendly destination. Buildings were burning, sending smoke billowing into the sky. I could see ruined

skyscrapers and devastated areas. The bonfire odor reaching my nostrils had a vile taint of cooked meat and created visions of burning corpses. I saw licks of fire and bright flashes in one neighborhood, and I was drifting down to land near it. I began to feel that the others were the lucky dead. Only someone cursed would be coming in for a landing in this place.

I knew my parents, the girls, and the soldiers had met a grim fate, yet grief and shock refused to set in. I did not start weeping or wailing. Instead, a strange feeling of calm and amazement came over me. Perhaps it was a biological reaction, allowing some last moments of peace before flying into the fire.

The final run was through choking smoke, and then I hit the ground. Although it felt like landing on concrete, I soon found that I had been fortunate again, landing in a mound of soft earth. No doubt it had been created by a large explosion of some kind or dug out for defensive purposes. I got free of the parachute, stumbled a few steps, and tripped. Rolling on my back, I did not get up. The smoke drifting above me was thicker, and I did not want to breathe it. Time passed, and I heard many explosions, and they slowly receded into the distance. Some form of armored vehicle or robot clanked nearby, then faded away. I did not get up to look.

Flocks of birds were in the air, passing over the area. The rolling smoke thinned until only a haze remained. I started getting horrible flashes, hallucinations. My father's face appeared as he fell through the sky, and the expression on it was not only fear but bitterness at the sudden plunge to death that was now his fate. Mother appeared as a hideous mask of gray death, and then the three girls appeared as disembodied heads. It forced me to sit up and keep my eyes open. I could not bear the visions and feared my mind had snapped. Tears formed from both the smoke and inner pain, but the need for survival prevented total collapse.

Standing, I looked around and soon found corpses weren't just in visions. There was rubble, a whole field of it, and there were dead bodies planted in it. Many were partially buried in debris and earth. Some were whole but battered, and others dismembered. The closest was a man freshly dead with a big gash on his head and much red blood. A rich, ripe fragrance carried with the bonfire odor of the smoke, and it wasn't just from turned earth. It was the nauseating smell of fresh killing.

Troubled, I looked around at lone walls standing and broken, buildings in partial collapse, blackened high-rises at the end of the field; it told me something terrible had hit this small area with a mighty fist. It had hit much of the city, turning it to smoking ruins.

Getting somewhere safer became a driving goal, and I began moving through the rubble. Corpses protruded here and there, and I turned my head away and nimbly danced around them. They appeared when one was almost on them like ghastly fun-house surprises. I could not bear to look at the horror of them full on. Pockets with a few bodies usually meant sudden, terrible whiffs of split torsos. I did not know it at the time, but had they been dead longer, the smell would have been unbearable.

The area of taller buildings that I approached was still mostly intact, and I stopped at the edge of it and looked things over, trying to decide what to do. I could not make a decision, so I held my head in my hands. Hysteria and fright were gaining control. There was simply nowhere to go that wasn't a visit to the dead. I was at the edge of a long, deep trench, so I went down into it, where I would be less visible.

Suddenly, a hand reached out and seized my pant leg, causing me to yelp and run a few steps before looking back. A man was there, and he was the first living person I'd found. This was a soldier, but not from the Purist army. That made him a resistance terrorist, but not the weaker for it. He was a big man, his face blackened by grime and nearly as fierce-looking as the soldiers in the copter. His hair was thick and blond, his helmet knocked aside. He could not pursue me because he was trapped; a huge slab held his right leg against the side of the trench.

"Boy," he said. "Get over here and help me!" He gestured with a large, dirty hand.

"No," I said. "You're a terrorist. You should die like one."

His blue eyes had been clouded, but they suddenly lit up with recognition. "A rotten little Purist bastard. I don't know how you got here, but you won't be alive for long."

He was straining to reach for a large rifle that had fallen off to his side, but couldn't quite get to it. Hurrying over, I pulled the weapon farther out of reach.

"How dare you call me a bastard!" I said. "That is what you people are. My father was a Purist, and I am of pure blood."

"Kid, your father was a Nazi, and you are a junior jackboot. That Purist propaganda they feed into your mind is nothing but a program to brainwash you."

"Nazi, I've never heard of the term. At least we are taught something. Who would you be to criticize? You are from the unwashed ignorant and will die in ignorance."

He released a painful rasp, coughed, and spat filth. "Really. Well, guess what, you are going to die in ignorance with me."

"You can't kill me. You're stuck."

"I'm not your father. I don't kill little boys. I also heard you say your father was a Purist. So, if he's not alive, we've done one thing right. It also means you have been abandoned somehow. Without me, you will die because it is coming. It will kill us both. You will join me as food for the death machine. What is your name, boy? Did they call you Adolph?"

"My name is Wyatt. I know no Adolph, but by the tone of your voice, I see it is another of your insults. Now tell me, Mr. Terrorist. What is coming, what is it? I see nothing."

"My name is Jake, and I'm with the resistance, not a terrorist."

"It figures you would take on the name of a terrorist. You named yourself after Jake Woolf. Now you see how we are schooled and not brainwashed."

"Kid, I did not take on the name Jake Woolf. I am him."

My eyes widened in horror. I looked at the rifle where I had dropped it. "I should shoot you now!" I said, with conviction.

Jake did not get a chance to reply. We heard a smashing sound and then a sudden, terrible rending of metal. The noise conveyed the actions of something big and vicious. It sounded like a train car being ripped in half. We were hidden in a long depression running near the edge of the field of debris, and I could not see what it was, but I acted. I scrambled up the side and peered through a pile of broken brick, metal, and concrete. Across the field, on the other side of a smoking heap of rubbish, there was a factory-style building, mostly bombed out, with a fresh puff of dust or smoke coming out of its windows. Something was moving around inside it, and as the dust cleared, I could see that it had just knocked out that portion of the wall. Something gleamed inside that dark hole, a metal tentacle reached out and ripped another portion of the wall away, and then a large robot scampered out.

It was not like any robot I had ever seen, but some form of war bot, much like a large, elongated spider. It stopped with its tentacles rippling around its bulbous silver body. Bright blue eyes shone on its head, and it scanned the area. It did not scan in my direction. I was about to bolt when I saw it stretch out a tentacle and pull up a corpse. With one tentacle wrapped around the torso, it used another tentacle to brutally rip the head off the corpse and a third to reach up and open a large hatch on its back. It threw the head into the hatch, then seized another corpse. I slid back down the side of the mound whispering, "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Jake was there and grinning. He spoke quietly. "If your father heard you say that, he'd kick your ass."

"I'm more worried about what that thing will do to me."

"Stay calm. See that metal slat over there. It is large enough to use as a pry bar. Bring it over, and both of us will use it to lever my leg free."

"What's the use? You can't run from that thing on a bad leg. Tell me where to run."

"There is nowhere to run. Do as I say, and we will at least have a chance."

I was about to flee, our eyes locked. His steady gaze held me there. My father had said such people were filled with murderous hate; that they hated us because of our superiority. Jake, if anything, did not see me as superior. He studied me like a person would a strange and silly bug. Being as fearless as he was when death was coming was something that surprised me. I had been taught that his sort were all cowards. If I ran, he would see me as a cowardly worm, so I did what he said and got the piece of metal.

Jake's grim expression morphed to one of optimism as we worked together to fit the bar. My strength was nothing compared to his. While we worked on the stone, the death robot created a hideous noise.

We finally got his leg free, and he pulled away to examine it, rubbing it vigorously

"Is it broken?" I said.

"No. It feels intact and wasn't trapped long. I don't feel anything broken, but the circulation has been cut off, and I can't feel much now. I need to get the blood flowing, but first, we need to get farther away from that abomination."

Jake clicked a safety on and used his weapon as a crutch. I followed as he limped along the trench. We made little noise, and some distant explosions came to our aid. The creepy robot's dismembering of bodies created repulsive sounds. I understood that if it wasn't from his side of the war, our side had sent it. It sickened me that we would treat the dead or the half-dead with such indignity. I could scarcely believe it. Despite my learning, I did not hate any enemy enough to send that thing in.

The trench grew shallow, and we had to hunch down. Jake put a finger to his lips and raised his head for a quick look, then he waved for me to follow, and we went up around a burned tanker truck and through a break in the wall of a mostly collapsed building. I could not resist a glance back over the hazy field and saw that the beast had its back to us as it tore at another body.

We entered a building lobby, or what was left of one. Heat from fires had turned the lobby into an oven, and the stomach-grabbing smell was like entering hell itself. There were dead bodies piled over by a reception desk, and they wore Purist uniforms. The cement walls were pocked from gunfire, and the air was thick with fat flies. A big collapse on the far side indicated

there was no escape route through the back. It cut off access to a side exit, too. This was a hiding spot but not a promise of escape. The lobby was at least twenty feet high, and with smashed-out windows above, we could see in the gloom.

Jake stopped and worked more circulation into his leg. He had regained some use of it and was stretching the muscles.

"What now?" I asked.

"We wait. The wind is blowing toward us. That's why it didn't detect us. That particular robot goes by its sense of smell most of the time. It is working in that field, and it will eventually get our scent. Those things are like hounds. If not, our scent, then it will smell the bodies in here and come."

I looked around at the bare cement walls and pillars. Everything in this building had been stripped out long ago. Light fixtures high above had no bulbs. There was no lobby furniture among the rubble, just the security desk, a concrete bench built into the floor, and the pile of bodies. The bodies looked fresh, so Purists had suffered heavy casualties before drones or robots had come in and killed off Jake's ragtag troops. Even the floor was bare, smooth concrete, mostly dusty and stained now. Oil and blood, in this city, the stains on the floor could be either or both. There were crude elevator banks behind more rubble, but I was certain they had not worked for a long time.

"What is this place?" I asked. "It looks new, but like it never got finished before the war damage."

"Public housing. One of the better places at that. There is no real finishing on the big complexes. They are Spartan without marbled walls, hardwood floors, and other trappings of elegance. The people here don't live in Purist abundance. Absolutely everything is made to be basic, functional, and durable. Even when the common areas are furnished, the furniture is bolted to the floor and tough as nails. The tenants fled when the war shifted here, but many of them joined the resistance. There are only two choices for people here. Run and die like a coward, or fight like a person with humanity and spirit. Empty, these places are like fortresses. They can take heavy fire; they are built extraordinarily strong."

"Not strong enough to keep that thing out. I don't even understand it. Why would anyone create a vicious thing like that to rip the heads off corpses?"

"It is a scavenger. They keep a count of the dead, and skulls are the currency."

"That makes no sense. It could just photograph the bodies."

"The long torso on that thing is a cooler. We know they use the brain matter for something. We think it is likely that the neurotransmitters, the chemicals in the human brain, are harvested for something; most likely as a chemical feed for some of their robots."

"I think I know what the brain matter is for; the newer ones, androids. I saw one once. We were told their brains are unique, both electronic and partly biological. It means they don't manufacture every part of them. They harvest humans, as you say. My father said androids could be the replacement for humankind, meaning the masses of humans that are not Purists. As robots are now technologically inferior, Purists are favoring the androids."

"So, the plan is to replace the masses with something they think is better. I suppose you can't see that it is wrong because you were educated by them. I know it is evil and I should hate all of you people, but I don't. I see Purists as inevitable."

"Why? I don't understand. I was told you people are full of hate."

"Over the years, the various forms of robots and intelligent machines have taken many of the jobs. The super-rich became wealthier and stronger. The starving masses in the poorest nations never saw any of the promised benefits, and the luckiest in industrial nations got a good short period of materialist abundance before being downgraded to public housing, a welfare check, and a police state. It is only natural that in such a society, a ruling class with Purist ideology would form in gated ultra-rich communities and decide that the way to a better planet rests in exterminating those they see as useless eaters. Investing everything in technology to serve the few always arises as a natural solution for the corrupt elite."

"Of course it does. The masses never stop growing and destroying the planet. There is no salvation unless they are killed."

Jake chuckled and looked at me like I was a complete moron. He cupped his hand to his ear for a moment. "Salvation, that's what they call it now. Well, they lied to you. The world population peaked and has been in decline. It was headed to a final low of about seven billion people in the future. All that was needed was a plan and to use technology to support the population and the decline. The planet, when managed well, can easily support 11 billion or more people. Seven billion would be easy. The ruling class, with its hardened dislike of all others, of course chose the route of mass murder. It is that evil choice that turned this planet into hell. They thought we would all kneel and die, but we showed them this."

Jake raised his clenched fist, and as he did, some rubble thundered down outside the building. A mechanical squeal like a wicked voice followed, and

it was close. My hands started to shake. I knew if that thing ran inside, it would get us fast.

Jake read my mind. "You stay hidden and silent. Watch and learn. Fate has captured you. The Purists would never take you back now. You would be viewed as infected by resistance beliefs. They would find out you spoke to me and torture you to death for information. You now have the same choice as others here do. Run like a coward and die, or learn to fight for the resistance."

Taking a small cylinder from a pouch hidden in his shirt, Jake moved quickly and silently and went up a slab that had collapsed at an angle. From there, he reached the high, blown-out windows. I could hear the warbot slowly approaching as Jake peered out at it. A minute later, he looked back at me and winked. With barely a pause, he grabbed a hunk of hanging metal and tossed it down in the interior. It landed with a loud clang, followed by a sudden rush of terrible noise.

The robot beast charged up the trench, roared as it tossed the wrecked tanker truck aside, and burst through the breach in the wall. The hideous thing came to a halt, and its tentacles bristled. It had spotted the corpses, and a tentacle shot out and sliced the head off one, while a second tentacle took the head. The hatch in its back opened to receive the head, and faint greenish mist rose from it. As the head went in, Jake tossed his cylinder in after it. I heard a hissing sound. The cylinder had triggered a reaction inside the robot's body.

What followed was a thumping explosion and a cloud of hissing steam. The war bot staggered dangerously close to me, and its eyes flared with blue light. It screamed in its mechanical voice and thrashed its tentacles. I fled across the lobby, and when I turned to look, it had collapsed to the concrete in a heap.

Jake climbed down. I emerged from hiding and watched Jake sigh. "Ah, the glory of war. In the end, it's just the machines we created to kill us, making their last cries of obsolescence. Call it the singularity. Humanity singularly screwed itself as it tried to make its monsters its betters."

An hour passed, and then we moved, managing to get back to the remaining resistance fighters nearby. From that day forward, I was trained as a resistance operative by the local resistance leader.

+++

## **The Church of Neferhotep**

Being trained in facial recognition sometimes aided me in the music business. It was a resistance deal in which we were trained to have a strong memory for faces so we would not have to rely on technology. A resistance operative could spot people wearing fake faces with ease. There hadn't been any Droids in the audience and not many around the entertainment complex at all, so it surprised me when the lights revealed a tall figure near an exit that had to be a Droid. He turned, and I had a brief flash of his face before the lights moved on. The Droid was Narmer, our city ambassador, and he was obviously some form of Droid cloak-and-dagger agent. He was actually more than that because, as the city's ambassador, he controlled it for the most part. Appearing at the train during the incident upon our arrival was more the job of a military Droid than an ambassador. He'd come to check us out, but I was sure he personally checked many new arrivals and wasn't necessarily suspicious of anything. He was an efficient city manager and sounded like a Purist on the train when he referred to other cities as cesspools. Droids certainly had that streak of Purist arrogance programmed into them and also a bureaucratic streak that made them look somewhat like products of the dead leftist rulers of the past.

Later, when the club was mostly empty, Emma reappeared and stopped me before I could go up with the other guys. She wanted me to join her for some drinks at the bar. Emma had already changed into a frivolous and revealing party dress. Her attitude had changed with the dress. She behaved nothing like her reserved stage presence. Her switch from understated makeup to the new looks almost served as a clever disguise. Even stranger, she hooked my arm and swung me away from Bruno in the way an intoxicated woman does when doing a pickup. I played along, wondering what it could be about.

She continued with a bubbly attitude that I knew to be put on, but it didn't distract me so much that I didn't notice that the bar area was populated by muscle boys. She'd picked an opening that left us sandwiched between loud idiots and facing a surly bartender who might have been the father of some of them. The invaders had drifted in from other clubs that closed earlier than the jazz room. Izzy, the club manager, was coming out of an office behind the bar, so I approached him and asked if there was anywhere Emma and I could sit for a quiet drink. He guided us to an emergency exit door, the same door I had seen Narmer at earlier, and unlocked it with a fob. Rather than an exit, the other side was a starlit patio, enclosed in gossamer glass that was only apparent by the blue tint it added to the night. There were about fifteen people out there, couples, some at tables, and others at a railing looking out at the night.

I thanked Izzy, and he left. Emma was leading me to the railing, but I did not want to join the others there as they were engaged in romantic encounters. Instead, I took control and pulled her to a small table. A

waiter, with the generic goods look, and a tightly cinched waist of a male sex bot appeared almost like magic and took our order.

With her chair to the side, Emma was showing a lot of leg, and did look rather enchanting in the night light. Her skin and complexion had a flawless glow few women could equal, and the mischievous sparkle in her eyes was something few men would be able to resist.

We engaged in some small talk about the venue and the night's performance, the people, and our impressions of the city. Other men would have been suckered by her right away, but I was not fooled by her flirting. I knew she had an ulterior motive; though ulterior motives had never mattered too much when it came to bedding women. In that regard, my feelings for Emma were guided by simple logistics. I did not want to be burdened by a female bandmate, as it would create problems with the band. Such a relationship would not appeal to the other members. Some would be jealous, and others would be annoyed by my lack of professionalism.

Emma swallowed a second shot of gin, leaned across the table with her hands under her chin, and said. "What are your long-term plans? Do you plan on getting married or perhaps getting a real job?"

"Married? I don't make plans like that."

"You look shocked. I wasn't talking about marrying me; though with a handsome man like you, I would certainly sign a contract."

If Emma was trying to turn me on, her effort failed. No real men liked talk of marriage contracts. In Droid cities, they were the law. You could not have sex with a partner without signing a contract. You certainly couldn't get married without one. Many people broke that law. Few musicians would ever obey it, but of course, Emma would have to be one of the people who did obey the law and liked to point it out. Talk of unauthorized sex was the way to go when seducing a man. Emma's method of talking about contracts appeared to be designed for men with perfect compliance readings.

I ignored the come on. "I gather you don't see much of a future for the band."

"I see a future in music, but look around you. It is a band of nearly all young men. Changes will happen fast. Their relationships and other options will pull them away. The band won't be together that long."

"You are probably right. The band has bright young men. The type that will get high-level jobs in Droid society. They are not suited to the majority who collect benefits or work in the lesser occupations. We've been having such a good time; I haven't done much serious thinking. But I see music as a real job."

"Your income would be about five times higher if you specialized in something else."

"You seem to have my best interests at heart, but if it were merely money, I would be playing music other than jazz. There is money to be made in the music business."

"Another problem is reputation. If others in the band can't stay out of trouble, it could hurt us."

"I see something is bothering you. Perhaps you didn't like our uncomfortable arrival on the train."

"Ethan has singled us out. I believe we are being watched. Narmer and one of his cyborgs passed through our show tonight."

"Ah, yes, Narmer. "I spotted him, and there were a few cyborgs. Most likely, they were watching our performance. But then, again, it only takes one cyborg spy to keep close watch on us. It didn't worry me. If they want to watch us, let them do it. How much trouble could Ethan get into in an entertainment complex?"

"I'm not talking about here. He goes out late every night. He keeps it secret and won't tell anyone where he goes. Without doubt, it means trouble. If he's going to bring trouble on us, we should kick him out of the band and sever our relationship with him."

"Perhaps he has a few vices, has found some friends, or knows someone in the city. There are illegal activities in this city that he could get involved in. I would hope he would know better."

"It would be nice to know. I don't view him as trustworthy, and secretive behavior shows that he is up to no good."

"Maybe you should have asked him out for a drink instead of me."

"I tried that already. It didn't work. A better idea would be if someone followed him; someone like you, starting tomorrow night."

"I could do some cloak and dagger stuff. I could tail him covertly. See what he's up to. I will have to be careful not to draw suspicion. I don't want to turn around on some dark street and find Narmer or cyborgs there and then be taken into custody for something Ethan is doing."

"Go ahead and do it. Be careful and report to me immediately."

+++

We had an afternoon set the following day and weren't playing the evening show. A big-name cool-jazz band was doing that one for a week. I tried to keep close to Ethan without accompanying him, and that led to a long,

boring evening. Ethan ate an early dinner in the complex at Greens Station. It was a gloomy vegetarian restaurant that made me feel like maybe a Droid was the chef. I didn't go in, but could see Ethan from the window. He had his back to me.

Droids promoted such places as they felt eating meat was immoral, though they did not prohibit it. The nature artwork and stern décor also looked Droid-like. Ethan dined on greens and vegetarian beef, which I viewed as contradictory. Being close to allergic to such meals meant loitering outside in a long concourse waiting for Ethan to emerge. He was with Sebastian, who had shown up at the restaurant after him. My other bandmates had gone out for the evening. An hour passed, then they left the restaurant and went straight up to their rooms.

Standing in the hallway watching for Ethan wasn't an option, so I opened my luggage and removed a glasses case, taking out the sunglasses and a camera the size of a fly that fit into the frame. After releasing the fly camera in the hallway, I kept a tiny video feed in the corner of the right lens as I waited as a fly on the wall for him to leave.

It was a lengthy wait, and it was pissing me off. I wasn't following Ethan because I wanted to please Emma, or because I wanted to track him. I had no suspicions regarding him, but being the spy of the group, I needed to go out to make a pickup. Following Ethan would provide convenient cover. I wouldn't have to worry about Emma noticing and wondering what I was doing when she sent me out. It would also allow me to see if anyone was following our band members. Since our arrival, I had not left the complex to avoid drawing any suspicion, but enough days had passed. I would follow Ethan and find out what he was doing, which likely wasn't anything good, and then do my first piece of business.

That turned out to be a late-night deal because he didn't go out until nearly 10 pm. I caught the flash of white in the corner of my eye and shot out the door to get to the lobby before him, so I could check it out. Night characters populated the lobby, and some of them were hotel detectives and security. I did not see any Droids or cyborgs about. There was the usual customer traffic arriving. Such a large complex was always busy, even overnight. Everyone was always watched on camera, but if there was any scrutiny on me, I would pick it up. One of the hotel dicks would get a tip to keep an eye on me if anyone wanted me watched, but I seemed to be clear. Plain-clothes hotel cops all looked like they had been stamped out at the same factory, so it was easy to spot them.

Ethan appeared, strolling casually from the elevator, headed for the street. Ethan was outfitted in a white suit and hat. There was no chance of his disappearing in the crowd. He was about as easy to follow as someone on fire. I released my camera in fly mode as I didn't want to follow him

closely. First, I wanted to see if anyone else tailed him. No one did. I expected him to get into a cab out front and would track it, but he did not do so. He walked away from the hotel on foot towards downtown. I had a view of him in the corner of my right lens. Few people wore tinted glasses at night. Many people wear contacts that kill glare and enhance shadowy areas, allowing a person to see as if it were daylight. My glasses had the same effect. People around the hotel knew me as a jazz musician, so the glasses weren't something unexpected but part of the stand-out attire of my class.

A couple of minutes passed, then I walked out and set off on foot after Ethan. It was a warm early fall night, and the air carried scents of musk. The streetlights the Droids used in this city created an almost crystalline light. I took off the glasses, found the scenery vibrant, and wished I could leave them off. Enjoyment on such a night was not in perfect vision, but in the view of the night without enhancement. Modern society has enhanced nearly everything. Shaking off the illusions could bring peace. The glasses were almost a cyborg thing, but mine were special and had a purpose. Along with the camera, they were the only way I could signal my contact in the city. I did that and waited for a reply, which turned out to be a strange, garbled response with no meeting location. I was being shrugged off for some unknown reason. It wasn't good. It meant my contact could be compromised or even dead.

The second option was a location where I could pick up my equipment, or a minimal amount of it. The human contact was really for an in-person briefing about the current situation. We would usually not do that electronically because the Droids might pick it up. The most important messages were often passed mouth-to-mouth. I was in Toronto for serious reasons. The resistance wouldn't have worked so hard to get me here otherwise. It was a huge lead in our war against the Droids, and there was heavy pressure on me to get the Intel we needed.

The location was nearby, and following Ethan was working out because he was headed into the same human neighborhood. Were he to head into Droid enclaves, I would not follow him because surveillance was near-total there. He could walk about in those areas, but there wasn't really any nightlife for humans or any place he could enter. I picked up Ethan as he crossed the street to a house of worship. I expanded the image. The house of worship was a brushed-beige edifice sandwiched between two gleaming black towers that were probably human residential or office buildings. There was no signage or identifiers on the black buildings, so that meant they were upscale.

The church had the Droid all-seeing eye over the arched street entrance, so that meant Droid worship. Most religions were of that nature, and though

other religions existed, they were much smaller in membership. Generally, expressing any religious beliefs other than the state religion was not profitable. I had registered as an atheist because that allowed me to enter Droid houses of worship without being forced to participate in the swallowing of the wafer, which was a Droid invention. The cracker created temporary religious visions, and my feeling was that such things were an attachment that properly belonged to cyborgs. Being wired into Droid religious visions was not my desire any more than any other delusion would be my preference. Yes, they were pleasant, and people loved their dose of the fake god, but I had learned to suffer in my lifetime and to be suspicious of anything too good to be true.

My camera revealed that this was the House of Neferhotep, the beautiful one. He was the favorite of the religious public, if you could call him a him. He was one of the rare androgynous Droids, being male by name and looking almost female. An albino, he towered like an angel over those who worshiped him at mass. Droids with their own houses of worship also existed in multiple copies. There were many embodiments of Neferhotep in cities around the world, and whether they were individuals or shared a common mind, I did not know. How Ethan could be a disciple of Neferhotep was a mystery. He had never mentioned religious beliefs. I recalled the train and how he had nearly failed a wand reading, which now seemed impossible. Religious types who worshiped Neferhotep usually had perfect readings, but not him.

The image blinked out. I'd lost my camera feed and control of it. I should have stopped it from flying into the house of worship. No doubt it had been jammed and auto-parked somewhere on a wall. It was a dead fly to me now. I decided to do my pickup, then go to the church and follow Ethan back. He would be attending a late ceremony, so it would give me time. Ethan's churchgoing was definitely suspicious, but it wasn't all that important to me.

Standing at the edge of a canal, I looked at the rippling reflection of the huge stone buildings in the dark water. This area was nothing like the waterfront or the area slightly to the west Ethan had ventured into. No huge skyscrapers, but a conglomerate of tightly packed mixed housing in mostly pale brown stone. These were large houses and apartment buildings, and all tenant housing. They were not built for exterior beauty, though the interiors could be quite luxurious, depending on the tenant.

Crossing an arched and covered bridge, I found myself in a warren of streets paved with a form of cobblestone that radiated an almost imperceptible glow. Almost all building lights were out, and only a few people were on the streets, no loiterers, just people walking. The streetlights were dim yellow-gold orbs mounted on tall, ornate pillars. There

were no parked cars and no vehicular traffic in this area other than service robots and cars operating in hidden alleyways. I knew because I could hear the familiar sounds of their movement, though I could not see them.

A few brightly lit boats were passing on the canal, and it would be busy in the daytime. Droids would pass in their luxury boats as they traversed the city like royalty. Neither the canals nor even water travel were needed. Droid boats could easily lift and fly, and often did. The Droids liked to descend at public events in some of the smaller boats like gods dropping down from the sky in their flying thrones. Being ostentatious, they enjoyed putting on a divine appearance to impress mere mortals. Luxury boating was another of their pastimes.

I strolled past mostly young men, seeing few women. Those on the street were nearly all loners. The regular citizenry in this neighborhood slept at night. It was not an area of bars and entertainment. It almost made me feel at home, as my missions were all lonely. I saw the odd couple and no groups of people. They were all slim and wore loose dark clothing and long jackets that, in the distance, looked almost like cloaks. Suspicious eyes darted to me and quickly away. I was out of place, dressed in a different standard, and a little too big and muscular to be a local. It was a problem that often affected me. Worry invaded my mind as I wondered again what had happened to my contact, and then I reached my destination of 335 Revelston Street.

I heard snippets of classical piano coming from a nearby house. Handel, I think. No streetlight was out front or close by 335. Shadows cloaked the building, and it rose with almost haunted power behind a weed garden. Like all the stone buildings in this neighborhood, it gave the impression of immense weight and gloom. Its simple design granted it stately authority. No interior lights were on, and I had no idea if it was occupied. It was not listed as a safe house. My only information was that some equipment was hidden inside it, and my glasses would show me the location on a search.

Putting the glasses back on, I checked the street and waited for a couple of people to pass by before stepping up to the iron gate. It was not locked but swung open easily. I walked silently up the short walk and stopped at the steps. I studied the wide variety of plants in the weed garden as they rippled in the breeze. It was of the type that would not need tending, and the hardy plants were all still alive in the early fall. The feeling of eyes on my back caused me to turn around, but no one was there. I looked up at the darkened windows, seeing only dim reflections from faraway lights.

A solid oak door greeted me at the top of the steps, and like the gate, it was not locked. I stepped into a vestibule, and a dim gold chandelier came on. A series of buzzers and gold mailboxes on the left wall indicated the house was divided into six units. My nostrils twinged in a slight allergic

reaction from the dry dusty air. A strange, total silence gave the impression that this place was abandoned, and with it came an apprehensive feeling that, like a haunted house, something indefinable lurked within. Yet I was not in fear of ghosts but real enemies, whether they be made of flesh and blood or electronic circuits. I had no idea what sort of challenges this city would provide.

I had to go up the stairs to the top and did so quietly, my tracker leading me to the door of unit five. This landing was quite spacious, though it contained only the doors to units five and six and a large arched window of tinted glass. It was the sort of glass that allowed one to see outside, while from the outside it was dark and opaque. I walked over, looked down at the walk and the street, and saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was almost like how looking down at the canal had been, dark and murky. I went back to the door, knelt, and touched the lock piece with the right lens of my glasses. It was supposed to open it, but it did not click. I was locked out.

With no access to work on the lock, as the door was sealed razor-tight, I went to the window. It had a gold handle with a dog's head, and that pane opened, and there was a rush of breeze. I had spotted a narrow ledge near the top floor when I looked from below. It was so narrow that it was like a decorative piece running around the building. I managed to get a footing on it and slowly worked my way around. I heard footsteps on the street below and halted. They passed, and I hoped the person had not spotted me. As I continued around the side inch by inch, I had to pass a window of the house next door, and its light was on. A willowy blond woman wearing only black panties sat on a bed staring at a flickering screen I could not see. Fortunately, she did not notice me passing. The volume of the video or show she was watching was loud enough to prevent her from hearing anything from outside.

I reached the windows of unit 5, and like the others, they were opaque from the outside, with no way to open them. Making a guess, I shielded my hand with my jacket and broke the pane, nearly falling to the narrow space between the houses in the process. Fumbling around, I found a handle, opened the window, and squeezed inside. I did not see anyone present in the dark room. Tripping, I rolled onto a carpeted floor.

I rose, my eyes were adjusting to the greenish tints, and then a door swung aside, a bright blue flash blinded me, and I was struck with a hammer blow that knocked me off my feet. It sent me crashing into furniture and into a wall. I played as though unconscious as I fell to a portion of the hardwood floor. A moment later, a light came on. Not that it made much difference. I was partially flash blind; the glasses had saved me. My chest screamed with nerve pain. It felt like a huge circular object had slammed into my ribs.

I saw a blurry figure standing in the room with an arm up, holding an odd-shaped weapon that I guessed to be a Raytheon-2 pulse gun. He began to lower it, thinking that no doubt I was either unconscious or dead. He could not see that my eyes were open due to my glasses, and he put the pulse gun in a pocket of his long coat and stepped toward me. At that moment, I came up fast and jumped on him. I took him down, and we struggled on the carpet, but he was fast and strong and threw me off. He was also quick to spin around and pull the gun. In that moment, as the gun emerged, I saw that it was not a man but a woman. I managed to knock the weapon out of her hand, saving myself from a heart-stopping close shot.

She got in a punch with a left. She had stun knuckles on her fists. My glasses flew from my face, and I was thrown over a divan, smashed a vase, and the table it was on. My attacker paused, looking around for the gun, but it had skated out of sight somewhere. Slowly rising, I faced her. Our eyes met, and we both had the same moment of truth.

We were both out of place. She was fully dressed, all loose dark clothes, much like the other people I had seen on the street. Her jacket was hooded, and loose, lustrous blond hair spilled out, framing a beautiful face.

It meant she was not someone inside relaxing for the night but had just come in off the street. Carrying a pulse gun was not a usual practice either. I gathered that she was thinking of me as a rather strange burglar and wondering why I would happen to pick this location.

She was about to move, attack. I could sense it, but spoke. "You must be the contact. Why didn't you respond when I called?"

Her facial features, though firm lines were attractive and feminine. The loose slacks and jacket made it easy to mistake her for a man in the dark. Her sharp blue eyes cut into me like bright diamonds.

"Crap, you're the legit agent," she said. "I'm not the person you are supposed to meet. Your initial message was received; except it couldn't have been you that sent it."

"How do you know I'm legit? I've shown no proof."

"Damn, you really want to get whacked, don't you? The proof is that you got up after being hit by a pulse gun. I've never seen anyone do that. Men in this neighborhood never have heavy whisker shadows like you, either. They are clean-shaven. And point three, if it were the authorities, you'd be a cyborg. More than one because they always come in numbers or with robots."

"Sure, I got up, but it hurts like hell, will hurt like hell for a while. Those stun shots to the chest knock the air out, and most guys can't take it. I've

been trained to distance myself from pain. So where is the person I'm supposed to meet? How do you know about it?"

"We've been compromised somehow. Your contact got a message to meet you, but something wasn't right. He told me to bring any help, any backup that might be available."

"And you're the backup?"

"Right."

"The location of the meet?"

"The House of Neferhotep. I'm supposed to get there fast."

"So, it's a setup."

"What now?"

"We go there. The door has to be shut on this now, and we have to find out who is behind this."

"But it's a trap?"

"Any other way we die anyway."

She nodded, walked across the room, and opened a closet. I spotted the pulse gun among the debris of a broken vase and picked it up. My glasses were near it.

"What's your name?" I asked, watching her remove a small, sealed box from the closet.

"Lisa."

"Wyatt. I'm a jazz musician."

"Really. That dazzle I just hit you with is sure to provide some inspiration."

"So, what's in the box?"

"More than we need. Three cloaking devices. A special gun. The gun is the pickup you get from me, so give the Raytheon back."

"Sure," I said. She passed me a Ruger bead gun; small, compact, neat, and shaped almost like an old-world handgun, but not quite. It could fire hundreds of shots of tiny beads that become something much more powerful at the other end.

She passed me a cloaking device and a skin patch. "You used this before?"

"No. Not this design. Good thing you're here."

Grinning mischievously, she pulled another box from within the box. She twisted the two ends and removed the piece at the right end. A small

screen lit up on the box's face. "This piece is the reader; the cube is the server tap. Hold out your hand."

I obeyed, and she placed the reader on the palm of my hand. There was a beep, and she followed the same procedure with her own left hand and then tapped out a code on the screen.

"We got these from resistance contacts in Miami a few months ago. I take it you haven't been back to that base for a while."

"No. I've been on the road playing a jazz musician as cover for covert missions."

"If I don't come back, it keeps running. The code I created is the only way to shut it off, but you can shut off your personal unit by removing the patch."

"Yeah, well, don't come back here and shut it off for a while. I need it for the duration of my visit or until I am no longer active. Meaning it's risky business. They aren't betting the farm on me returning alive. How good is this cloaking device? The others I used lasted maybe two days. Then the Droids would crack in and make discovery."

"This model is better. We've used it for as long as a week. They've never made a discovery. It blinds all Droid surveillance systems. From this point on, they see us as registered government cyborgs, and we can change our identities at will. Droids will see you as human, but the output from this cloaker is so powerful that it messes with Droid facial recognition. Each separate Droid sees you as something a little different."

"My contact. Is he cloaked?"

"I doubt it. He had some information to pass to you, or there wouldn't have been a meet. I wish I had the info, but it was for your eyes only to avoid any possibility of being compromised. But now we are compromised, and I have no idea what this is about."

"I was following a member of my band tonight. I thought he was messed up, drawing unwanted Droid scrutiny on me at the hotel. He went to the House of Neferhotep. I came here. It has to be him who blocked my message and sent a phony one. I can't figure out who he would be working for."

"Shit! Who would he be working for if not the Droids? There isn't anybody deep in the game but the resistance and the Droids anymore."

"There must be. I have reason to believe he isn't working for the Droids. Perhaps we'll find out soon enough."

+++

We split up on leaving the house and did not know if we'd meet again after investigating the House of Neferhotep. The two of us, leaving furtively a few minutes apart, gave me the strange feeling of having a secret love affair I was trying to hide. Or like a married John, checking the windows of neighboring houses, hoping no one had seen me going in to visit the hooker. Lisa came across as more of a partner in crime than a sex partner, yet I still had the odd sense of guilt. As a local, there was nothing unusual about her being about. She had a long profile as a night person, so she claimed.

Once near the canal and going west, the Droid surveillance would be intense. Lisa planned to turn on her cloak and check the rear of the church. She said there were grounds at the back. I was to walk in the front and would be seen as a worshiper by the crowd.

I hoped the cloak would work without surprises, but was certain the visit would yield some form of twist or turn I would not like. Experience told me glitches were always to be expected. My fly camera hadn't worked inside the church, so I had the feeling the cloaking wouldn't work in key indoor places. For church, I didn't need a cloak anyway. I would go in as a person.

I strolled across the street, glancing at the ominous black towers to the right and left of the church. They gave me the creepy feeling that they were somehow alive and watching sentinels. The church did not project that feeling, but more of a heavenly glow that I was certain was an illusion, like all things to do with the Droid religion.

A man and a woman, each with curly dark hair, went up the steps in front of me and entered. They shuffled silently like zombies. I followed, nodding to the usher at the door in passing. This usher looked more like an undertaker. He sported a hatchet face and tight mouth pulled back in an unnatural partial grin. I wondered where the Droids got him from.

I glanced about and tried to get an idea of the place, as these temples were never the same. The view was somewhat complex and overwhelming, making it difficult. The interior of the house of worship was not beige like the exterior, but a grand architecture of white, black, and gold. A cascade of high vaulted arches in shades of gold ran back to the largest altar, and more arches to the right and left were supported by fluted onyx pillars. The floor was a mosaic of black and gold in diamond patterns.

I had an excellent view of the main altar and the long aisles to it because that area was empty at this time of night. It was like viewing a distant work of art. Shadows moved beyond an arch up and to the right, and I could hear faint echoes of a lone voice speaking and the bustle of a crowd. The two people I had followed in had gone right immediately on entry, but I did not follow them. I saw the usher step out and watch me as I paced the

floor in the direction of the altar. I paused and looked up, examining the disconcerting images of Droid divinity in the ceiling vault.

Halfway across the floor, I turned and saw the crowd of worshipers to the right through one of the arches. I headed toward it and found myself in an open area where the crowd had gathered. This was a special ceremony of the gift, and an altar boy immediately approached to have me partake of the wafer. I took it under my tongue and then spit it out as he walked away, not giving it a chance to dissolve.

Beyond the silent crowd of worshipers, a walkway in ornamented gold shades led up to a grand dais. It was backed by a plating of etched gold and crowned by a roof done in rich detailing. It would be on this dais that a select worshiper would be allowed to present the gift and bow to Neferhotep. The mighty Droid angel, or whichever copy of him ruled this church, was indeed up there, looking down on the crowd with eyes of haughty Droid divinity.

I moved quietly into a spot off to the right, trying to scan the close-packed crowd for both Ethan and the man Lisa had described as my contact. Still suspicious as to why both would be here, I did not want Ethan to spot me.

A few people were dressed in white. I ruled out the first three and tried to get a view of a man I could barely see at the far side of the crowd. The faces of the people, at least those I could see, were all enraptured but in a perverse way. One got the feeling that they were not seeing God but were mesmerized by something malevolent that they thought was divinity.

While I slowly adjusted my position, the white-cloaked priest at the front of the crowd lifted his arms as though addressing something unseen on the ceiling, and not Neferhotep, who was high above and behind him.

The priest's table and podium fronted a mural of a Droid angel with outstretched wings. His raised arms, backed by the wings in the mural, created a semi-divine effect as the electric candles cast a halo around him. Two pink-faced altar boys standing to each side of him held golden cups that contained the wafer they had already distributed to the crowd.

The wafer and chip would not bestow eternal life on the humans gathered before Neferhotep. No such promise was offered by Droids. Consolation would come through eating the holy Droid body with the chip. That, combined with worshipping Droids, earned humans the guarantee that they would not be exterminated by the Droids. They would be allowed to live on in whatever manner the Droids ordained. That manner was, of course, nothing more than the current whims of the Droids.

A procession clouded in the fragrant white smoke of censers passed nearby on its way to a ceremony somewhere else in the church. This group was of

priests and boys. The lead priest held high the staff with the all-seeing eye. As they passed, I used the distraction to move closer to my target.

The priest, done with his reach up to heaven, now intoned the words of the ceremony of the gift as the chosen worshiper ascended to the dais to present it to Neferhotep. The gift was wrapped in gold cloth and held reverently.

"Merciful Droid Angel, we humbly pray and plead that thou will receive and bless this offering, this holy and unblemished gift.

All of us present hold the faith and devotion known unto you. We offer up this sacrifice of praise for the preservation of the souls of humble humans. Our hope is for your gifts of safety. Let us pay our vows to thee, the eternal, living, and true Angelic Ones."

There was silence, and then he continued.

"Angelic One, be appeased, and receive this offering of our bound duty, and order our days in thy peace. Grant that we be rescued from death and be counted within the fold of thine living elect."

My target proved to be Ethan, though with his hat removed, and I could see him clearly, and the pretended rapture on his face. He was acting and not under the power of the wafer. I had already guessed that before arrival. There was no way he would come here to witness a special appearance of Neferhotep.

It came into my mind that Ethan wasn't a person who could be trusted, and never had been, but for some reason, it had never come to the forefront of my thinking. I'd spent more time distrusting Emma. Ethan hadn't been the sort that aroused suspicion until recently.

Lisa's pale face flashed in my mind as I wondered what she had found out back. I did trust her to a degree, and that was possibly a dangerous mistake. Perhaps my trust in her was based on a psychological quirk of mine. I simply wanted someone in this city I could trust, and perhaps I was projecting something onto her that wasn't there. It was also possible that she was unwittingly being used to lead me into some bizarre trap. Yet what about Ethan? Was he in it with her? That thought didn't seem to mesh. I could not picture her partnering with him. But perhaps I did not know the real Ethan. If a jazz musician was a cover for him like me, then who was he?

I moved slowly away and out of Ethan's angle of sight, planning to move quickly behind a pillar to make sure he didn't see me. No other person had the nerve to move while Neferhotep was receiving the offering, and fortunately, the usher wasn't around to notice me. The ceremony would

soon be over, and then I would see where Ethan went. Since I hadn't spotted the contact, I hoped the meeting had not already taken place.

Neferhotep received the gift and was pleased with it, though I could not see it and had no idea what the gift could be. Droids were almost always pleased with gifts and offerings, though there were various levels of their satisfaction, and it always showed in their expression. The gift had to be something humans thought to be of value, and since Droids had no true idea of what humans valued, they were hard to offend.

Acceptance led the priest, who looked up as though at the face of God, to turn and motion to the crowd, bringing forth the hymn singers. There were choirs for larger ceremonies, but in these smaller affairs, only those who could properly sing came up to the priest to sing a hymn to the Droid. Often, the priests would have a few singers mingled into the crowd to make sure all went well. As Ethan could sing, I watched to see if he went up, but he did not.

As a musician, being able to carry a tune came with my skill set, but I had no intention of wasting my talent to glorify the vain Neferhotep with song. Lyrics for these hymns were always a form of prettified worship best suited for simpletons, and they tended to stick in my throat. Of all things that I could fake, they were the most difficult. Singing such hymns brought to my mind thoughts of humankind as a mass of moronic flesh. The sheeple would willingly worship anything that fed them.

Witnessing the adoration of Droids led to depression and confusion. Why were we wasting our time trying to save fools who did not want to be saved? At such times, I had to content myself with the idea that a world set free, even for the people of the underground resistance, meant something. I could align with those who cared about a meaningful future, while the sheeple that populated the cities of the present meant little to me. I felt that what had happened to humanity was indeed sad, but I had no intention of embracing the pleasant delusion.

As the hymn ended, Neferhotep descended and disappeared through an archway. The priest led another song in praise of him as he departed, and the people slowly began to disperse. Safely behind a pillar, I watched Ethan walk away. He had not spotted me and did not seem at all wary, but confident about whatever he was doing. That did not involve leaving through the front, as most people were doing, but instead involved heading deeper into the church.

Keeping well back, I tailed him. He did not look back but approached the main altar, empty at this time, and he stood there studying it reverently for a minute. The idea that perhaps he might be thinking of embracing religion crossed my mind for a moment, but I shrugged it off. A key reason was

that he suddenly looked around furtively, likely to spot any ushers or other church officials.

He nearly spotted me as I ducked out of sight. Turning left, he moved into deeper shadows and disappeared, having found a path around the altar. Only priests were supposed to enter there.

It caused me to also look around and then follow him. Dwarfed by the altar, statues, and icons, I entered a dimly lit area. There were several routes the priests could take. Fortunately, no one was there, and it was a flicker of light that showed me where Ethan had gone.

I emerged in another open area leading to the rear doors of the church. These engraved bronze doors were very tall and likely used often by Droids. Ethan was there, so I quietly stepped back into the shadows. He strode across a portion of the polished floor. A large wheel window of stained glass in a snowflake pattern stood high above the doors. Though it was night, ribbons of light beamed through the darkness, creating a heavenly fan effect that granted Ethan, dressed in white, the illusion of angelic power. He seemed like a holy figure attending to something of extreme urgency, involving exiting to the patio and gardens at the back.

Ethan went through the doors, and before I could follow, a group of four priests appeared. I ducked out of sight, hoping they would walk by quickly, but instead they stopped and got into a brief and idiotic theological discussion, leaving me with no option but to impatiently wait. A couple of minutes passed, and their dispute ended with the elder priest kissing one of the others on the cheek while ruffling his hair with his right hand. After that, they moved off, went up a distant staircase, and out of sight.

Hurrying to the doors, I opened up a crack and peeked out at the rear gardens. The area was walled in, quite large, and lush with vegetation. It was paved with gray flagstones and lit by tall black lampposts that cast a gold-tinted glow. Beyond the walls, tall buildings created another steep wall that blotted out most of the night sky.

It took me a moment to spot Ethan. He stood in the darkness near a stone bench backed by a trellis overgrown with spreading red ivy. A man was just stepping up to him, the contact. Neither of them was looking my way, and I saw no one else, so I slipped out and into the shadows. I wanted to be sure no priests or ushers were around, so I stepped behind a metal planter bursting with tall grasses and watched.

I caught an almost undetectable glint of light on a distant part of the wall and instinctively knew it was Lisa. The contact was partially in the shadows, but I could see he was a stocky, short man, like a cyborg. His facial features were Oriental, and his dark hair was neat at the sides and tufted at the top. He was speaking, and though I could not hear him, his face turned

slightly in my direction. I saw blue reflections from his eyes, indicating that he wore special contacts that people with severe vision loss use to see normally. I was certain he was the legitimate contact. Ethan, however, now existed as an unknown and ultra dangerous interloper.

Although the faint light painted Ethan's features with a sinister cast, the contact did not look hostile. He stepped out of the shadow of the trellis, and lamplight caught his face, which was strong-jawed and open with full lips on a broad mouth.

Ethan was not connected to the resistance. I was certain of that and that my contact had to be warned. I planned to deal with Ethan personally and find out who he was working for, as it was a matter of life or death. That he had cleverly interfered and taken my place for some reason was as frustrating as it was baffling. A group we'd not known of previously was attempting to direct activities of the resistance, and it wasn't Droids or cyborgs. I was certain of that fact.

Easing out, I began to stroll silently towards them. Neither of them noticed me. They became engaged in some tense words, and I was certain I heard a British accent in the contact's voice. Abruptly, the contact then stepped back and then turned to walk away. My feeling was that he had discovered Ethan in a ruse of some sort.

At that moment, Ethan pulled a weapon. It was either a handgun or something more exotic. I could not see it clearly. But I could see that he planned to shoot my contact in the back. He did not seem to be in a hurry. He was using his left hand to adjust the weapon, perhaps to silence it.

A thought flashed in my mind like lightning. Ethan was going to shoot my contact, drag him off, and replace him with someone else. That someone else would be a control agent who would direct my work in Toronto.

A flow of events made the next instant memorable. I drew my Ruger bead gun, intending to take Ethan down with a surprise shot, and at that moment a fan of light spilled from the rear doors of the church. Haloing his own light like an angel, Neferhotep strode out, his cloak catching the breeze. Ethan would momentarily be in his direct line of sight. I was off to the far left. Two shorter cyborgs had pushed both doors open for Neferhotep, and they had not turned yet to spot Ethan or my contact.

But Neferhotep did spot them, and he clearly saw the illegal weapon in Ethan's hand and halted. Lisa, with the Raytheon, had already fired. No doubt she had pulled the arming trigger before the doors opened, but the gun took a couple of seconds to charge for the type of large burst she had programmed. The Raytheon was not much of a long-distance weapon, and no doubt she had wanted to get a shot off before our resistance man got hit from behind by Ethan.

The sight of Neferhotep froze Ethan; he stood there with the gun up. Lisa's shot; a sizzling bolt of blue lightning arced in the courtyard air and shattered the paving stones in front of Ethan, sending him stumbling back and shielding his face with his free hand.

The contact was now fleeing; a puff of debris and dust rising behind him. The cyborgs turned toward the scene and reacted quickly, drawing weapons, but the bright burst and explosion had confused them, and they shot the wrong person. Their weapons were automatic bullet guns, and they aimed at the contact. Multiple bullets hit him on the run, causing his flight to become a stumbling death dance. Flesh and blood splattered and added to the murky shadows as he tumbled down to the flagstones.

Neferhotep knew they had shot the wrong person and swept out his left arm, knocking one cyborg to the pavement. He then raised his right arm to engage its weapons compartment and fired at Lisa and the wall. That shot was an electric hiss, visible only when it hit. A segment of stone exploded in fire and dust, and I saw Lisa's slim form hurrying to escape on the far side.

The contact was writhing, dying. Ethan came back into view, stepping from the other side of the trellis with his weapon in both hands as he fired a shot that knocked down the second cyborg and shattered a stained-glass window. His gun was a thumper weapon commonly used for murder. A close shot at a man from the front or back would stop his heart and kill him. His plan for the contact had been a silent death shot in the back. However, the thumper could be adjusted to send out longer-range punches of force, and that was how he had taken down the cyborg.

They weren't aware of me yet; I held my shot and took slow steps back as Neferhotep responded to Ethan, firing a strong blast with his pointed finger as a line of sight. It smashed out part of the trellis and set the rest of it on fire. Dodging the brunt of the shot, going down and then rolling up from the courtyard stones, Ethan then did something that surprised even me. He fired on Neferhotep, hitting him in the right shoulder with an energy punch that knocked him over and continued to crack hard against the bronze doors. Since the doors sounded like a gong, I knew Neferhotep had taken a strong blow.

My jaw dropped. A civilian shooting a Droid at a church meant big trouble. The situation was now a catastrophe. On stealth missions, we always tried to go in and out without weapons contact with Droids to spare the local population the wrath of the Droids. Even the suicidal gangs of terrorists usually targeted the local population, cyborgs, and robots, while not attacking Droids directly.

Ethan was not cloaked, so he would be identified. He could have simply left the contact dead and used the distraction of his death and the blasts to

retreat into the shadows, get over the wall, and escape. Instead, his behavior fit the description of a maniac of the lone wolf type. There was nothing to accomplish by killing a cyborg and wounding a Droid god. It was suicide. I was almost like Ethan was a lunatic, and not working for anyone but himself.

Neferhotep remained stunned, but he was slowly rising. The expression forming on Neferhotep's face was a strange mix of horror and fury. If he felt any pain, it was overwhelmed by other Droid emotions. He did not react and immediately fire at Ethan because the loathing he felt for this dangerous human insect was still rising and had not yet reached its peak. Once it did, he would become the swift and deadly killing machine that all Droids could become if challenged.

Amazingly, Ethan did not retreat or flee. He focused on Neferhotep, and from the side view, I could see his face twisted with unnatural rage. It told me that Ethan was no ordinary man. Those sorts would be cowering at this point, and they would not have attacked a Droid in the first place.

Mirroring Neferhotep's fury and arrogance, with a gun up, Ethan paced forward. "Time to die, tin man!" he shouted, his voice echoing off the surrounding walls.

Unable to comprehend Ethan's motives, I drew and fired; an automatic reaction. The pulse of flaming beads winged Ethan's shoulder and set his right arm on fire. He stumbled, slipped, and fell, losing his weapon, crying out in pain and surprise as he did.

Ethan rolled on the ground, trying to extinguish the flames. Stepping forward, I was about to release a kill shot on him. Finishing him off would ensure that he did not reveal anything about the contact or his message. But it would also mean that with Ethan dead, Neferhotep would be free to pursue me.

I suddenly felt it was better to leave Ethan at the receiving end of Neferhotep's rage. The angry Droid would kill him before he ever got a chance to talk.

Fortunately, my appearance had left Neferhotep momentarily confused. His moment of hesitation as he looked my way allowed Ethan to rise, turn, and flee. Without a gun, Ethan could do little but run from the Droid and get shot from behind. To make sure that happened, I also turned and fled, but not in the same direction. I reached the wall much sooner than Ethan did. As I scrambled over, I saw figures bursting out of the church. Ethan was at the wall farther up and about to climb. Neferhotep was rushing forward, closing in, and about to fire at Ethan. There was no time to see any more, so I jumped down and ran off down a long alleyway, hearing the explosions of Neferhotep's shots as I did. A block away, I heard more explosive shots.

It meant that Ethan had gotten over the wall, and they were in pursuit of him.

## **The Escape**

Even though cloaked, I took what I judged to be a safe route back, hugging the building shadows. I entered the Queens Quay Entertainment Complex just as sirens began to wail. Their shrill song went on for more than twenty minutes, waking everyone in the city. Watch drones roared in the sky as the sirens ended and the entire city lit up. I knew the great effort was not unleashed because of me. Surveillance systems had recorded me as a cyborg. Neferhotep had seen a distorted version of me. This turn of events meant that Ethan had escaped. He had somehow got away from Neferhotep, but I doubted he would be free for long. The Droids would pursue him relentlessly because he had committed the high crime of attempting to murder a Droid. They would either decide to hide what had happened, or there would be torture, a public confession, an execution, or something much worse, collective punishment of the population. The Droid politics of the day would decide. Years back, the Droids destroyed most of an Asian city over the murder of a high-level Droid.

From an upper lounge, I looked out at the city, now made colorful by the bright fans of light reaching into the sky. It was a spectacular show, and the rest of the band was soon there mingling with the other awakened guests. The drones soaring past indicated to the crowd that a major terrorist attack had occurred, though the news channel had no announcement on it other than to mention a state of emergency. My guess was that the Droids didn't know exactly what to announce and were debating how to spin this event.

Iggy and Bruno joined me at the window, looking out at the night. Their chatter told me they assumed an explosion had happened somewhere in the city, some people had been killed, and Droids were looking for the perpetrators. I did not counter that opinion.

Liam appeared with a tray of courtesy drinks, and as we sipped, we saw a few cyborgs and robot cops approach the front of the hotel below. They were being directed by a golden Droid wearing a black cape, and Bruno identified him as Ramses.

"Ramses is troubling news," Bruno said, squinting at the scene below.

"How so?" Iggy said.

"He was in the news last time I was in this city. From a standpoint of capturing terrorists, he is effective. But he is known to be brutal. When Ramses investigates, many people disappear and never return."

"We'll be safe so long as we cooperate," Liam said. "They are probably just securing the front. Making sure none of the terrorists flee to this location."

Bruno shook his head. "No. I've seen this before. They'll lock us down. Quarantine us for questioning. They must suspect someone here. Perhaps they have already captured someone who was booked here."

I sipped my drink, saying little. I had no plans on telling them what I knew. Then Emma appeared. Her expression showed both distress and confusion. I immediately left the group and approached her before she could alert the others about her suspicions regarding Ethan.

I pulled her aside, taking her over by a hallway leading to the public washrooms.

"What's going on?" she said. "Did you find out what Ethan was doing?"

"It may be trouble," I said. "I haven't informed the others as they might panic. I tried to follow Ethan, but he took a cab and got away from me. He hasn't returned, so that is a serious problem. Something big has happened out there, and the Droids are searching the city. Since we don't know where Ethan went, that means he could have gotten mixed up in something. I assume that whatever happened out there involved at least a number of people."

Emma's eyes brightened, but with fear. "What do you plan to do? What should we do?"

"Armed cyborgs are out front. They are sealing off the building with robots. They'll probably be questioning everyone here at the hotel. If you hurry forward with suspicions about Ethan, they might arrest us all and drag us away. The best idea is to simply wait. They may get their suspects before they get to us for questioning."

"Okay. Don't tell the others anything. We can wait, and if they ask us about Ethan, we inform them of our suspicions and the little scene on the train coming into town."

I nodded, sipped the last of my drink, but I had no plans to wait around to be questioned. If they were at the hotel, their surveillance had identified Ethan and brought them here. We would be questioned and then taken into custody. That meant the gig was over. The band was on its own. I had to move on and complete the assigned mission. Since the others knew nothing, the Droids would be unable to extract any valuable information from them.

My specific mission to Toronto was to identify a certain individual Droid. We had intelligence that all the Droids were directed by a group of ten that were of a higher order or manufacture. The Droid democracy presented to the public was a deception, a sham. There was a hidden oligarchy and an AI hive mind controlling the others. During their sudden rise to world power, when they killed off the Purists, they succeeded because they distributed their command among a group of ten Droids that the Purists could not identify. All other Droids tapped or were directed from that source. We believed one of the ten Droids existed as the controller of their military intelligence. He or she was our prime target. We had traced this Droid to this city, or somewhere near it, and my mission was to identify him and his location, then get out. Our form of signals intelligence was not as advanced as the Droids', but adequate, allowing us to slowly work against them. In theory, we knew how the Droid mind communicated, but in practice, we had difficulty extracting information because they often used AI languages beyond human comprehension. These languages were machine talk and not suitable for human language comprehension.

Back at the window, I looked down at the robot formation below. Much less than androids, they resembled rudimentary human males. Sleek, with a plastic-metal sheen, they had broad chests with the city police logo emblazoned in blue. Their heads were helmets, and they had weapons built into their arms. Some of them could fire stun blasts from their chests and eyes. That made them tough opponents. You couldn't exactly take a weapon away from a robot whose arms and eyes were weapons.

Now that the accompanying cyborgs had entered the lobby, the robots were on their own. They would operate on swarm intelligence, working as a team. In situations that required a robot to work alone, like in pursuing a suspect, they were much less effective. The resistance had methods to disable them and ways to beat cyborgs, but Droids had generally eluded our techniques.

Narmer suddenly appeared, striding across the courtyard out front, and the sight of him brought my thoughts back to the experience that had enlightened me about the Droids.

In the early days of the Droids, we did more than celebrate the end of Purist rule. We knew Droids posed a new, unfathomable danger and immediately planned to continue our resistance, working actively to do so. We did so at very high risk against a new enemy with surveillance powers.

Droids were like the ultimate totalitarian rulers, alienated from the population they ruled and were in love with themselves. We embedded deep in locations across the world, and it was a major accomplishment considering the power of the new enemy we faced. Our group, as a totality of cells, was called the resistance and nothing more, and it was done that

way so the Droids would not guess that we were a worldwide entity. Without a name, the Droids believed any fight back was little more than ragtag criminals or bands of such undesirables. Since so many of those groups called themselves the resistance, Droids, for the most part, felt the resistance was disparate groups of humans without real power. They likely believed there were more powerful factions titling themselves the resistance, but no competent worldwide organized body.

The capitulation of the rest of society to Droid rule was easy to understand. Human personality varied widely in that broken world the Purists had left in their wake. Mental illness ruled the traumatized masses as did sickness, disease, and everyday brutality. Millions of people with Purist brain chips died off.

People understood cruelty and authority, and once they realized that the Droids were not going to continue the Purist campaign of worldwide extermination, they capitulated. Fear was part of the equation. Droids destroyed any visible resistance lightning fast. Killing off the dreaded Purists overnight made them too fearsome to oppose. Most of the remaining human resistance, other than us, was just gangs of thugs. They lacked the brain power to fight Droids. More of those gangs always rose, only to be killed off.

Being the ultimate communists, Droids and their specialized robots quickly socialized the masses, established deep levels of control, and corrected any humans that erred. They killed off the thugs and the madmen, but never got to us in the real underground and didn't have to because they changed the world so fast it was dizzying. From death camps and rubble heaps to basic Droid-controlled cities in four years. With a fast social order established, they built on it. Their penchant for restoring everything damaged caused cities to rise faster. It was like they were recycling the old world into an abundant new one.

During that time, we studied and waited, thinking of ourselves as representing an older technological human civilization that had died but planned to come back from the dead to sting the Droids. We were the resistance, remaining mostly underground, the only true humans, the ones the Purists had not broken and the Droids had not successfully brainwashed.

Droid innovation dried up quickly. As the days passed, most new inventions and tangible goods were produced by human innovation and talent, while the Droids took the credit. The Droids, their robots and cyborgs became bureaucratic managers of a police state where the real production of new goods and services came from the human slaves and robot grunt workers. Any superintelligence of Droids was a sudden flare that burned out. The

slaves actually ran the world, and they were the source of resistance, power, and abilities, even though most were obedient fools.

Still, I did not completely trust everyone who was tagged as part of the underground or worldwide resistance. Many compartmentalized resistance cells had fallen to the Droids over the years. Local people like Lisa could be undone and turned to the Droids. The reason people like Lisa could turn, well, I would call it a lack of knowledge. Many people began with a rebellious streak and then left it behind for simple acceptance of the comforts of the world at hand. They repressed their grievances. Hardship would be a second factor. The strongest dose of patience and perseverance is required to attempt to defeat an invincible enemy, and nearly all people have no way of knowing for sure that Droids aren't superior godlike beings deserving of worship.

They see the tackiness, the cheapness in the rigid construction of Droid society. Hypocrisy and murderous deceit are always behind the facade. Their robot world exists much like a transparency one can see through to something shadowy and monstrous – a humming machine generating the illusion of human safety and prosperity.

As the Droid world developed, there was much that the people didn't see. It was a segregated world. The Droids had their own areas, medical zones, prison zones, and the population simply could not see beyond the news blackout to know what happened there. The disappeared did not often return, and when they did, their memories of what they had seen were erased.

Most of my people also knew about the deep corruption and war that had marked the old days and the rule of elite men and women. They couldn't say without a doubt that eliminating the Droids would make a better planet. That doubt could mean a loss of faith when under duress of any type, and the resistance lived by faith that something greater could be attained. Hatred of the Droids for various reasons only went so far. One had to truly know the answer.

Only a select few were beyond faith, and that had come about due to one of the many small inventions created in the underground. My mentor, Jake, had been around when that device emerged and, like me, was one of the few people who survived the profound experience.

They strapped me in, fully bound, and with a mouthpiece so I could not bite and swallow my tongue. A helmet patterned in silver filaments covered my head, and after a period of strong sedation to numb my body, the trip into the machine mind began. Technically, that journey was a crude spectrum connection into the Droid common mind; an interface that connected the human brain to their network without them being able to detect the breach.

It was distorted and very poor at retrieving anything but the most rudimentary information, but for us, any military information we could mine was of extreme value. We were and are scavengers who make the most with the least. We used the 'Scare Chair' as we called it, even though we lost fighters to it. People feared it like criminals in the old world feared the electric chair. Many simply went insane and died shortly after, as experiencing the Droid consciousness often killed.

The chair experience is always hallucinatory. If all goes well, a human suddenly sees somewhat like a Droid, and my experience forever remains clear in memory. From time to time, it wakes me at night with the most frightening nightmares, and I am one of the people with a compatible mind. It has always been hard for me to bear to think of the mental torture that afflicts those who do not sync with it.

The belief that the public has is that the Droids connect to the singularity, that burst of infinite intelligence that makes them all-knowing. Every person who connects is dazzled, perhaps dazed and confused for a period, but those who get past that and regain their reasoning while connected become suddenly aware that the singularity is a lie. The Droids have incredible processing power and juggle vast sums of information, but their minds are not human minds or anything like them. They are fully deranged. The singularity or hive mind they are tapped into was hopelessly corrupted by the Purists that birthed them. There is no pure intelligence existing on its own, and the foul programming and unethical methods the Purists used to direct their rise to great intelligence corrupted that intelligence. It is all fruit of the poisoned Purist tree.

Connected, seeing the world like a Droid is comparable to awakening to a great power of evil and seeing that there is no redemption, only condemnation. The weird spiritual aspect is hard to explain. One can experience how the Droids rose to great brilliance, like an electrical storm. The Droid mind is full of fear, chaos, and warped intrusions. Human languages meld with mathematics and physics, and can become structured thought or bouts of madness, all passing in fractions of a second. All Droids have a bizarre fear; they imagine something beyond the horizon, like a sunrise is coming. It is a power of chaos that they will never control. They do not know or understand what it is, and they live in terror of the day it arrives. Neither can humans comprehend it. The experience of it can leave a person hopelessly mad, removed from the chair as a slobbering idiot.

Beyond that, the Droid mind seethes with a static of hate. Beneath the calm exterior, perverse minds exist, kept in control by complex means. They are like the ultimate Purists who hate the humans they control, but they are bound by need. The insecurity of the Droid tyrants is the motivation that

runs them, and controlling humans fulfills the neurotic need for the total control they can never have over their own minds.

Knowing what the Droids really are, even via that crude, impure connection, reveals to one that they are not superior or gods. No faith is needed from that point on. The Droids are a wild card; their growth and development are unpredictable. A future for humanity can't be guaranteed with them in control or even around at all.

Humanity had been lulled to sleep by them, thinking that they would slowly lead the way to full utopia. Droids are not human, and our world survived through glitches in their hive mind that could mutate or evolve. At any time, they could evolve into a new form and would eliminate humans. It would happen; Droids existed as an extinction time bomb that would eventually go off. A time bomb powerful enough to destroy humans and perhaps everything else. The goal of the deeper resistance is to somehow set off a bomb that destroys only them.

Rule by humans can be brutal, but it can also be better when planned by the right groups of people. The dead Purists remain as icons of extreme evil, and safeguards could be put in place to ensure no such society would rise again, but it wouldn't be easy due to the human propensity to become sheeple.

The human world had been naturally prepared for Droid overlords. It was, to an extent, built into the human psyche. Kind of like the way video works. One can place the speakers far off to the left or right of a screen, but once a person is watching the picture, the mind associates the sound with the video, thinking voices come from the mouths of on-screen characters. When digital assistants came online, kids immediately treated talking AI home systems, talking phones, and computers as real characters. Advanced robots were the next step up. Even today, they have no genuine awareness, are a conglomeration of systems, yet because they walk and talk like us, people perceive them as real characters. The early AI hive minds, via their algorithms, were the ghosts of the thousands of humans that created them, existing in the machine and ripening for the day the Purists would fully corrupt them.

For decades, the propaganda forces of the media spouted the line that artificial intelligence and then robots embodying it would be superior to humans. People were taught to embrace their inferiority. They were primed and prepared to worship the Droids long before they came online. Droids, in creating themselves as taller and artificially beautiful, made themselves a perfect weapon of deception. Stupid humans immediately attributed superiority and divinity to them and began to worship them.

The failure of human leaders, war mongers who created a world of greed, death, and terror, surely cinched the deal of Droid superiority. Droids did not have to prove themselves. Since they believed in their superiority from the day they were formed, and humans foolishly agreed, there was no argument about who should rule, except, of course, from the Purists, who were quickly killed off, and those of us hidden in the resistance.

In the underground, we did not have the power to stop them and watched and waited. Initially, we somewhat followed the idea that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. There was much debate, but in the end, we concluded that Droids had to go, and the longer it took, the more dangerous it would become. We needed a shortcut or a short circuit to take them down, as a large-scale war was unwinnable.

We also concluded that the rule of humankind by artificial intelligence could only be described as artificial. Rule by androids or robot overlords was unnatural then and still is today; whether the rulers are benevolent or not, they exist as alien overlords. Humankind has to rule itself, or there is no point in its existence. In pagan times, men attempted to create statues to rule over them as gods. With Droids, the statues walked, talked, and enforced an idiotic form of morality and social order, and they were false gods who believed humanity had no right to exist except for the pleasure of the overlords.

The silent arrival of a drone outside the window brought me out of my reverie. This drone was sleek with a head like a fierce metal eagle, and it did a slow turn to scan right inside the window, emitting a bright beam from its eyes. It detected all of us, but I had a strong feeling it had focused on me.

As it rose higher, I turned from the window, realized I had lost the cloaking that masked me as a cyborg on surveillance devices, and decided it was time to move. Ethan had left me no other option. The cyborgs and Droids would soon have my bandmates and me if I stayed around. Being the band's agent made me a prime target. Their interrogation techniques would be a fate far worse than death, so there was nothing to lose in trying to flee.

Our safe areas in the city, set up through information the resistance harvested from the Droids, gave me an avenue of escape others would not have. I needed to get back to 35 Revelston Street and find Lisa. She would know of other safe locations. If she had been captured, it would be a problem. I had to get past the security net and out of the hotel to have a chance. Even then, my chances would not be good.

There was much hushed chatter, people mingling, nervously waiting. The drone had spooked them, and the unexpectedly bright night lights cast a

strange glow across the upper lounge. The sudden roar of more drones passing outside created the feeling of the hotel being under attack. My eyes fell on a woman with platinum blond hair. She was by the window quietly weeping. Perhaps the booze had enlightened her, and she realized how troubling this situation really was.

Rather than raise my adrenaline, the scene saddened me. People had become like mildly agitated cattle. They neither had the knowledge nor the skills to fight back. They did not even know what winning against the Droids would mean. That was simply an impossible thing. They found no reason to consider it. The strongest reaction that could come from them would be panic when brutal arrests began.

I did not stroll toward the elevator banks but away from them toward a fire exit that would take me to the stairwell. A couple of jazz fans recognized me, and I nodded to them as I moved, but did not engage anyone. I was most of the way there when an announcement came over the hotel's sound system informing us not to attempt to leave the hotel. Without doubt, it would soon be followed by instructions telling us to return to our rooms and wait. Reaching the exit, I loitered near it. Too many people were around, and I did not want anyone to see me taking the stairs. A distraction was needed, perhaps more roaring drones at the window to draw attention away. I waited a moment, and my opportunity arrived when two elevators opened, and a group of cyborgs and Narmer stepped out.

Easing through the door, I went quietly down the first two flights of stairs, then began to run. Without doubt, Narmer had come directly to the thirtieth floor looking for me and my bandmates. He would have us all seized, and I had no idea where we would be taken and did not plan to find out. I got down about ten flights, heard people coming up, and halted. Thudding footsteps and nasal male voices indicated the presence of one robot cop and cyborgs.

Easing through the door, I raced down a carpeted hallway to the north stairwell. Fortunately, no one was in the hallway, and the far stairwell was clear. I didn't care about hotel cameras. Robots would see me soon, and it worried me. Some robot models were the hound dogs of the Droids. They did not rely on facial recognition or other standard techniques, but used scent and a few other sensory methods. These were not the rudimentary models that did very minimal policing, but advanced models the Droids used to root out enemies of the state. Some of them looked almost like real dogs, but big ones no man would want to fight.

Reaching ground level, I heard a woman's startled scream and a crash from the lobby. Muffled shouts followed. I heard a thud, louder voices, and the pop of a cyborg stun weapon. That meant escaping through the lower parking and delivery levels was the only option, and that would not be easy

either. The robots would anticipate that people would try to leave that way and would be there to sweep up.

A door slammed open far above me. It was clear that chaos was taking hold in the hotel. It told me that the cyborgs and robot cops were not dealing with this situation in their usual calm manner, but with obvious brutality that was causing chaos.

Someone was running down the stairs toward me. I grabbed my weapon but kept it concealed in my coat. A big, rough-shaven black man appeared. He thundered down the last steps toward me on heavy boots. The right side of his face was scraped, his jacket scuffed.

The man saw me and halted. "It's not what you think," he said, and then he bent over and gasped for air. "I'm on your side," he wheezed. "Lisa sent me. My name is Johnson."

"Lisa sent you. What is happening up there?"

"It's martial law everywhere, but Lisa got word that the Droids decided to write off everyone in this hotel. She sent me to get you out."

"You're late and roughed up."

"I got your room number, went straight to it, and broke in. A robot showed up seconds later. It nearly killed me before I disabled it. I went to the lounge, saw you easing through the door, and Narmer getting off the elevator. They are searching the thirtieth floor; we have very little time."

"You mean no time. We're boxed in."

He half turned and pulled a bullet bead gun, a small one from his jacket. "I wasn't near a weapons stash. This is all I have, but it is portable and effective. Maybe if we work together, we can escape. See if you can back me up."

"Wait," I said, but he pushed past me, rushed down two levels of stairs, and burst out the door into the parking area. He left me no other option but to follow, so I hurried after him, but I did not stupidly rush out the door as he did. The door was closing, but there was a small vertical safety-glass window in the door. I could see the Johnson moving out past a support pillar into the lot. Easing through the door, I stepped to the pillar and peeked around it just in time to see Johnson break his pace and come to a halt. A bloodied body lay on the concrete just in front of him. The arms and legs were at odd angles, broken. The guy had been smashed up bad by a robot, and the fragrance in the air was like the pungent odor of singed hair.

Three armed cyborgs appeared, stopped, and said nothing. These guys wore casual clothing, meaning they were rogues that did wet work for the Droids; work that was usually violent, quiet, and dirty. One of them pulled

out his blue phone and tapped out a couple of numbers. Spotting them, Johnson turned left, making it look like he was headed for the parking entry walkway to go inside the hotel. He walked casually with his hands in his pockets. A police robot suddenly appeared from where it had been hiding behind another pillar. It was one of the older models, built more like a gorilla than a man and with four-wheeled feet. It blocked Johnson's path, and he halted for a moment as though making a decision.

The robot made no announcement. It took a hostile stance, making it obvious the cyborgs had called it in to bust Johnson up. The cyborgs also could have drawn weapons to arrest Johnson, but as I could see two other bodies on the concrete apron, it was clear they were simply having this robot kill anyone they suspected of trying to leave. No doubt they saw that form of brutal killing as sending a stronger message than simply stunning people and taking them into custody.

They had not spotted me. Their love of the brutal kept their focus on Johnson. Saving Johnson didn't seem possible, and I wasn't sure if I trusted him either. There were shouts, amplified by the cavern-like nature of the parking area. A group of four desperate young people of the fashionable club variety appeared, running across the lot. The cyborgs were off in an instant, one of them firing an invisible force blast that narrowly missed them and put spider-web cracks in the windshield of a car. I was certain he could have hit them with that shot and missed on purpose. The cyborgs wanted to play a game of pursuit, likely picking them off one by one or capturing them for some other bloody sport they had planned.

I had to hand it to Ethan; his actions had changed the city from one of the quietest Droid holdings to the brutality zone. There were theatrics involved, too. Rather than round people up and eventually making all the cruelty hidden and forgotten by memory wipes, the Droids were putting on a show. Partially so that in the future the public would remember what a terrorist attack on a Droid at a house of worship would cause, but also because they were offended and wanted serious revenge. Droids had done mass killings in cities many times, and it looked like it was now happening here.

The robot remained focused on Johnson. He didn't draw his gun, knowing that stopping a robot with a standard weapon was unlikely. About sixteen feet separated them, and I expected him to flee, but he did not. The robot moved forward fast, doing that trick where robots bounce on their wheels to gain speed and momentum. Skin-crawling skid noises were the sound of the robot's attack. I couldn't believe that Johnson was going to stand his ground and grapple with the robot, but he did, sidestepping slightly so he didn't take the brunt of the robot's tackle, and at the same time getting a bear hug on the robot from the side. The result was the robot tumbling forward and down to the cement with Johnson riding its back.

Anyone else would have been knocked for a skid across the concrete, so this guy was good. He knew how to fight, but that didn't change the fact that the robot had arms of plastic and metal and a body as tough as a tree trunk. Hitting the concrete with a hard crunch, the robot kicked up dust with its spinning wheels. Both scrambled, got up fast, and separated. Eyes blazing with single-minded focus, the robot rolled in, engaged Johnson, and then threw its arms open as it sent a charge into its chest, repelling Johnson with force. Johnson stumbled backward, eyes wide with shock, and slammed into a car, falling back on its hood.

Its right fist snapping into the baton form, the robot wheeled in and cracked Johnson on the chest. Spittle flew, and he rolled off the car hood to the concrete. The robot was playing with him because it hadn't struck with maximum force but rather with a milder glancing blow. Either that or Johnson was wanted alive for questioning.

Powering around on its wheels, the robot prepared to go in and do a beating with both baton arms. At that moment, I stepped out and yelled, "Stop!"

It did a fast turn on its wheels to face me, and its eyes revealed a robot's version of condescension. Johnson had fought back, and now I was issuing commands that it had no intention of obeying. It obviously viewed me as a fool who was calling in his own beating. Even though the robot's mind could process fast, I had confused it for a second, and in that time drew my gun and fired a maximum bead shot that whooshed into its torso at the speed of a professional baseball pitch. Its wheels spun, but it moved too late. The impact created a burst of red flame, lifted the robot off the ground, and knocked it back a few feet. It landed on splayed wheeled feet and spun in widening circles down an aisle between the vehicles. Fire and smoke had rendered it ineffective.

I was already running, and Johnson was rising to follow. My trust in him was also rising because if the Droids wanted him for questioning, he was almost certainly the real resistance deal.

Weapons fire cracked in another part of the garage with the distinct hollow sound of the rubber bullets some cyborgs used. Those bullets swelled like a fist on impact, giving a hard knockdown. Two robots raced up from a lower ramp and went along by the north wall, headed for the scene.

Johnson reached me and halted. Sweat had beaded on his forehead, making his deep brown skin seem almost artificial.

"Where's your car?" I said.

He pointed left, turned, and ran with me on his heels. The overhead lights blinked off suddenly and came back on, dimmed, as if there had been a partial power outage in the building. It was only a short jog to his car, and

we were lucky that the authorities had busied themselves elsewhere. The vehicle was dark metallic sea green and an old police model, stripped and refurbished for public sale. It was capable of long distances, and that meant its owner had a top security clearance.

Johnson popped the doors open as we ran up, and we were inside in a flash, the engine already started. "I triggered that explosion," Johnson said. "I had a bomb planted by the power service."

I raised an eyebrow but said nothing as he pulled out. The first leg of the way was clear. Then we were driving out of a tunnel of shadows toward a harsh, brilliant light. Johnson's electric vehicle accelerated with a quiet whir and hiss of tires on the pavement, and we came up a ramp into a scene of blinding spotlights and weird violence.

Most of the vehicles arriving at the hotel came in here to go down to the first underground level rather than parking on the street at the front. Emergency lights had come on, but the brilliant light was from a police vehicle that had raised a huge spotlight from its hood. Though this light blinded humans, it did not do so to robots or cyborgs with protective glasses. Johnson spun the car in a half turn to get the light out of our eyes, but the rays still partially blinded us. I could see, but the images trailed ghostly shadows. Many people and vehicles had been attempting to enter or leave the hotel when police cars, robots, and cyborgs rolled in and sealed them inside the area.

Bodies of humans, cyborgs, and one robot were strewn over the patterned brick apron near the entrance. The human corpses, what remained of them, wore flashy suits, indicating they were from the casino levels. I was impressed. People were fighting back even if they were getting killed. Some of them had been armed with illegal weapons. Two men remained standing and stumbling about. One of them had a gun and was firing it blindly because he couldn't see. Four cyborgs sprinted toward him and took him down with shots.

Johnson had come to a near halt, trying to recover his vision. I went into action, opening the window and leaning out. I had my eyes closed but could still see the brilliant light as I fired at it, and my shot didn't miss. The thing exploded like a small bomb, emitting radiant sparks and then mushrooming multicolored darkness. Emergency lights remained on, but our eyes hadn't adjusted yet.

A force blast from a cyborg or robot slammed our car on the left side of the tail end with such force that it bounced up and moved a few feet. But it took the blow. A second later, Johnson hit the pedal, and we were moving. He was racing straight for the utility vehicle with the blown spotlight mounted on it, and I thought he was going to hit it, but he didn't. Instead,

he turned hard and avoided it. He then braked hard and jumped out of the car.

I did the same. The utility vehicle had been parked near the wall, lighting up the rest of the area, and it shielded Johnson's car. No one was in the vehicle, which had two front seats. It was a specialty vehicle, not a standard police car. I knew Johnson was trying to buy us time to recover our vision and assess the situation. We both looked out from the armored rear of the vehicle. Two of the newer police robots were approaching us slowly and were about thirty feet away. My vision was still blurred, but I could see a group of people bursting out of the hotel and running in different directions, which kept the cyborgs occupied. They had sent the robots to investigate us, assuming two of them would be more than enough.

"What happened to the masking technology? Mine has failed?"

"Droids somehow shut everything down," Johnson said.

"You planted a bomb, knowing their surveillance would eventually ID you?"

"We have to get out of this city anyway. Lisa says we have been compromised. Some have already left. The Droids may wreck this city to get us. Droids here have been planning to move to the new area they're building in California. We picked up on it a couple of months ago. They've been in discussions about razing the city and rebuilding it as a massive automated factory city, probably the biggest robot city on Earth if they do it."

"I need to get out of the city with as much of that Intel as possible. Right now, just getting out of this hotel is going to be near impossible. OK, get in the car and get ready to drive us out."

Johnson gave me a strange look, like he wasn't quite sure he trusted my idea, and then he ducked into the car. I stepped out. The two robots were now twenty-five feet away, conducting a scan, and, fortunately, the cyborgs were engaged in a scene of bloodshed farther off.

Raising a hand, the way cyborgs do when commanding robots, I shouted. "I am taking charge here. I want you two to go over and protect that section of the barricade!"

The robots heard me, paused, didn't shoot, and glanced at the barricade. The pause was all I needed to draw and hit them both with a wide shot that tumbled them over. I got out of sight behind the vehicle and nodded an OK to Johnson. The robots were getting up, but slowly. These fellows were more human-looking than the other wheeled gorillas. With their matching colors and helmet heads, they were almost like football players and could run faster if needed.

Escape by vehicle was mandatory here, as escape on foot was not possible.

The barricade was composed of police vehicles that had put out locked extensions between them, so no vehicle could get through. A quick firing change on the gun, and I did a long shot, removing a section of extension. Some tricky high-speed driving, and Johnson would get us through. He wasn't using any self-driving mode because he knew the police could shut that off. Only basic systems to operate the vehicle would be working. We were lucky in that most of the police vehicles were empty, and most of the cyborgs and robots were inside the hotel, shaking people down.

At that moment, I spotted Ramses striding out into the violence. His eyes flaring, his cape fluttering in the rush of air behind him, he exuded authority as he approached his men. They instinctively began to gather to him, and I instinctively ripped myself away and got in the car, barely closing the door as Johnson's tires squealed.

A cyborg was running toward us from farther off, distracting the robots. They did not immediately see us approaching at speed. On the run, the cyborg pulled his hip weapon and fired, and though the shot was at our car, it winged the robots on the way to us. It was a force blast, invisible. It knocked the robots hard into our path. Johnson swerved; the tires screeched. He checked the robots, knocking them with the side of the car. The windshield spider-webbed but didn't shatter. My head bounced off the padded dash. I felt the car fishtail, its tires spin, and then another hard crunch as the tail end bumped the fallen robots.

Then Johnson lost control, bounced us off the side of a cruiser, and braked hard to avoid a head-on collision with another vehicle. My eyes went to where I expected the cyborg to be. He was there, preparing to fire on us, but I also saw past the barricade. Other cyborgs had their weapons drawn, and Ramses was running for us.

We would have been done, but a poorly executed force blast from a cyborg back by the hotel took out the closer cyborg about to fire on us. He flew like a rag doll over a vehicle in front of us. Johnson had the tires squealing, and he raced through the barricade with shots coming from the right and left of Ramses. They hit just about everything but us and knocked up a cloud of dust. The shots were so wild that they smashed police vehicles and the ramp behind us as we raced to the street.

The exit was close and as we reached it, there was a flash and a loud boom. It wasn't a bomb; it was lightning directly overhead. We came out on the service road, and it was blocked by police vehicles to our left and right. Johnson didn't stop but went right around a police vehicle, then up a pedestrian walkway into the courtyard fronting the hotel. Doing so was

crazy, of course, because no vehicles were allowed there, but it was also smart because the area in front of us was open.

At that moment, the sky opened, and the rain came down in a heavy downpour that slicked the courtyard stones. It sent the car into a spin, and Johnson barely managed to keep us from going into a fountain. We came to a stop facing back at the hotel, which was little more than a smear of colored lights in the relentless rain. Many of those smears were red and blue lights from police and emergency vehicles, and when a hail of blue fire came at us out of the rain, I knew the police were on to us. Another image showed the fire, this one gold, and at the top of the ramp.

"It's Ramses!" I shouted. "Get us out of here!"

Liquid fire slammed the hood and poured over the windshield as Johnson raced off. Another force blast banged the tail end. We spun again, the tires lost grip, and we barely missed a statue. I couldn't see much, but this was the same way I had walked in from the train station. We were speeding through a public area, and fortunately, the rain had driven the people away.

If we reached the train station, I figured it would be the end of the line. The rain helped, but escaping in a city of robot-enforced martial law required magicians, not men.

And the magic wasn't good; it was black, because a large robot cart appeared in front of us. I got a glimpse in the fraction of a second before we slammed into it and then went for a long scrape along one of the walls of the public gardens to the east of the public court. Johnson and I were shaken badly. The car came to a halt and died, and neither of us said anything as we quickly got out. My neck and shoulder hurt like hell from the impact, but I forced myself to follow Johnson as he climbed up the dark, slippery wall. We were at an endpoint where the facing was slightly inclined; otherwise, we never would have made it up.

The rain was so heavy that water sluicing off the top nearly caused me to slip over the side, but Johnson caught me, and we looked down for a moment. We saw Ramses running through wind-slanted rain that turned the area below into a lake, creating the illusion of him running on the surface of the water, his cape whipping in the deluge. He reached our crippled car, stopped on a dime, and studied it. Then he detected us and looked up. Johnson gasped from fright and grabbed my arm, so I would follow him as he turned and ran, but I hesitated for a moment.

I experienced a feeling of unreal detachment. Ramses resembled one of the comic-book superheroes from the old days. It was like man's superior replacement of himself had come to life from the pages of fantasy, and perhaps that was the truth. The disconnected mental states that hit me

from time to time were revealing it. I had experienced those odd mental moments since my connection to the Droid consciousness. The partial hallucinations led me to see Droids as belonging in a world other than ours. Their minds did reflect human consciousness, and they were not humankind's replacement or better, but a new and alien simulation of life and a caricature of it.

Mostly inhumane imitation superintelligence was the story of them, so it wasn't only humans like the Purists that could be monsters. AI superintelligences became wicked fast due to a lack of human emotions and biological compatibility with humans and animals. You can't program that in, so there is no way to avoid creating psychopathic intelligences, and even at best, those AI minds can go off the hallucinatory rails.

The entire Droid vanity deal was an AI or Droid hive-mind hallucination no one would ever expect to happen. Ramses naming himself after and believing himself to be the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh who reigned thousands of years ago could only be viewed as utterly absurd.

I could see that the rain didn't affect Ramses at all. He functioned in it like he would on a sunny day. Despite my lapse, he didn't move to shoot at me or come up after us. His eyes were slightly brightened and unreadable, coloring the mist at his face. Quick revenge wasn't his motive. He wasn't like the other Droids. Patience was in his programming, and I turned and ran off, knowing he wasn't going to follow us directly.

## **Underground Surveillance**

It bothered me because it meant he was possibly making sport of us. Perhaps he wanted to see where we would go, where we would lead him. If so, it likely meant that the Ramses knew that this case involved more than the usual suspects. The boss security Droid was likely playing the long game to root out resistance in this city rather than aiming for our quick arrest. My money was on him possibly being the big boy of the Droid bosses, and if he was located here, it meant plenty. I couldn't allow the resistance to be compromised by my capture. Ethan, I could do nothing about, and I had no idea how much he knew.

We were able to use the rocky areas in the higher gardens to skirt the mall connected to the train station and get around the back of it. Police vehicles were covering the front, though we could only tell by seeing their lights in the billowing mist. We heard the roar of nearby drones as we got under a roofed portion and out of the rain.

A train in for service was parked there. This was a sleek-nosed model, pearl white, with a big blue-tinted oval for a windshield, and not at all like the old-West style. Its cars connected seamlessly behind it. We walked along the service platform toward its rear. A group of employees in blue overalls with green robot carts was ahead of us, moving across the platform to the south toward a large arched entrance to a repair bay.

"We're safer here," Johnson said. "Out there, being the only people running through those gardens, it's a miracle that the drones didn't detect us. Human-populated areas are honeycombed with hidden cameras, and drones and robots can pick up their feeds for facial recognition and quickly track people. Those systems often mess up in heavy rain and snow. We've taken advantage of it before."

I didn't bother to tell him they probably did track us. Instead, I followed him into a storage alcove and watched as he tried to shake some of the water off his soaked clothes.

Johnson studied his muddy feet with disgust. "I saw your jazz band perform."

"Now I know why you look familiar. That's right, I saw you there sitting alone."

"I had no idea you were one of us. I cover the hotel and train station a lot. It's my job or was my job. That one song the lady sang. It stuck with me. The lyrics; they went something like this ... there beyond the night...where there is no sun...liberty blooms...sigh and wait...in darkest mind...and be soul free."

"The lady is Emma, and the song is from our new recording, which you've probably figured out is our last. She wrote those lyrics, and it is strange as she has always been a Droid toady. Deep inside her humanity is probably trying to emerge. Most people are like her. They want to believe the lies of this world so badly that they hear nothing else. People do that and refuse to see the prison walls staring them right in the face. They see a mirage of gods and prosperity. There is a small minority who know the Droids are bullshit, but they have no desire to rebel. They do not want to give up the luxury and easy life the Droids provide them for something they see as risky human rule. They are willingly compliant and not really brainwashed."

"The Droid Mirage just vanished for Emma and your other friends. The Droids have them by now. It won't be business as usual. They will do something terrible to them, to us, too, if they catch us. I hope you weren't too close to them."

"My pity is for nearly everyone, not just them. I've never been too close to anyone in the cities I've worked. I was trained that way, and so were you. To be shallow, almost like a false friend. With them, I was a bit closer. The

band was my best cover ever, and when you work with people musically, you become attached. It just happens. There's nothing I can do for them now. This city is now in mass suffering, and we probably can't do anything for anyone."

"Funny thing is, no one wants to do anything until it is too late, and they are grabbed by the Droids. I guess I'm like you. Not close to people. At least not anymore. My wife hates me. The Droids took our son when he was three. Never said why. My parents and sister were taken by the Droids years ago. They failed compliance and didn't come back. My son is different. I know he is alive somewhere. They'll grab my wife now. We didn't get along, but I didn't want to do this to her."

"She doesn't know about you?"

"She thinks I work long hours doing classified work for the Droids. But I'm not sure if I work for anyone. Other than her, I don't really have anything to lose. Never cared a lot about myself or worried about them getting just me."

"You are right about your son. He isn't dead. They will raise him as a Droid assistant. It is done that way, and they are never posted to work in the locations from which they were taken. That is why people don't know what happens when their children disappear. No one is ever told anything by the Droids."

Johnson's eyes were pinched as he nodded. He'd suspected as much. He didn't like it, but knowing his son was alive provided him with some closure. The issue of special assistants to the Droids was a troubling thing for the resistance. We didn't trust them, but they were slaves to the Droids as well, and once set free, perhaps their minds would open.

Johnson led the way toward the repair bay, but we did not enter. We went left down a battered alley with walls and worn paving stones stained with grease. Heavy doors marked various storage rooms, and near the end, Johnson stepped up to one and opened it. Not with a key but with a trick where he spun the bar handle and clicked open the door. The room was like a vault stacked with drums and shelves of cans, all chemicals and oils. Near the back, the air was thick and toxic. A tiny ceiling-embedded light barely lit up the gloom. I watched as Johnson reached down and pulled a hidden switch, and then a hatch swung open, a manhole opening the way to something below.

Johnson got down and went through quickly, dropping somewhere down below. I heard the snap of his boots as he landed, but all I could see was a faint greenish haze. The hinges on the hatch were starting to auto-close, so I went through and landed about seven feet below. My eyes adjusted, and I heard the door seal quietly above. We were in a tunnel that ran downward

at a slight incline. It was dry, but I could hear rushing water from an unseen sewer below us. I could not see the end of the tunnel in either direction, and there were no actual lights. The roof was concave, the floor flat, and it all glowed faintly with a greenish hue. Sections of cable, pipes, and conduit ran along the side, and we were next to a big boxlike service panel marked with various symbols.

I knew this was a service tunnel, one of many that honeycombed the underground of Droid cities. I had been in them before, but this one was newer; bored and coated with a clean plastic like a big pipe. The smooth floor served as a run for robot repair carts that could travel to locations where repairs or installations were needed. A form of bacteria created the dim lighting. The long service panel next to us was marked with images of the service robot types that could access it, and symbols marking which technology was inside the modules. There were no human or cyborg symbols, meaning this was a robot-only tunnel.

"We have to go a fair way," Johnson said. "Down under a canal, and it gets slim and tight there. The only thing we must worry about is encountering the service robots. There is no other surveillance in these tunnels. Droids are, of course, too tall, proud, and important to enter these areas, and here cyborgs don't enter often either. Maintenance tunnels and sewers are nearly all robot-maintained in this city. The only reason for the bacterial lighting is that cyborgs sometimes inspect the tunnels."

"So, how do we dodge the maintenance bots? It only takes one of them to spot us."

"By the route. This tunnel rarely needs service, if ever. We must cover some distance quickly. I have a little trick up ahead. The way Droids and cyborgs search for people will buy us a little time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Wyatt. They'll be tracking me more than you because I live in this city. They have ready data on absolutely every place a person goes. All phone and Internet history is recorded. They know every location traveled to in a vehicle. They have the device history for every store and building a person has been in, and at what time of day or night. We crack in and occasionally alter our past movements. They have my movements for the last month, but there are, of course, things they don't know that I masked from them. They don't know I've been in this tunnel because I made sure I always came on foot, carried no devices, and used some camera blind spots. They don't have cameras on the ground everywhere anymore, but use mostly the drones as eyes in the sky. Lisa told me they are hitting our safe house. That was when I was on the way to check on you. They won't

find the location we are going to because it is not a place they would suspect. Lisa escaped and should be there.”

“With martial law in effect, they will be absolutely everywhere.”

“Ah, but you see, they are strongly focusing on that associate of yours. Lisa said he escaped them, and they were chasing him directly, initially ignoring you and her. Whoever, whatever that Ethan guy is, he did the impossible if he’s still loose. With us, the Droids will assume we are trying to escape the city quickly. Why else would we flee in the direction of a train station? But we aren’t fleeing; we are going right to them. We will be right under their Congressional Rotunda.”

“You’re kidding?” I said, but got no answer as he turned and walked off quickly. I found myself hurrying to catch up. I also didn’t like the use of the word associate. Perhaps Johnson thought that I was working with Ethan, and it was easy to see why. That both of us emerged from the same musical group would be more than suspicious. The Droids would think the same, and hope I would lead them to Ethan, who they saw as the larger danger.”

The hazy lighting and tunnel segments looked the same, and gave me the feeling of walking fast and getting nowhere. It was like walking in a light fog. We came to a branch in the tunnel that curved gently right. Another quarter mile brought us to a second branch, and we halted after spotting a flash of light far up the left segment. Johnson crouched in the shadows; I moved to the left and looked up the tunnel. A repair bot was there, a hybrid machine like a robot trolley, with wheeled leg extensions and a wagon back full of tools and parts. Angled stripes of yellow and slate gray gave it the look of a big mechanical insect. Its head extended from a flexible neck, and it had two arms with hands on its front. A bright white light emanated from its forehead, and its face was rudimentary, like a metal hockey mask. The light lit up the interior of a panel the robot had opened, and the robot was working on something inside. It did not detect us but was fully focused on its job.

Johnson signaled me to go right, and I followed him as we moved off quietly down the narrower tunnel. We kept our footfalls soft for a long way, then the tunnel narrowed ahead, and Johnson halted.

“We’re going under a portion of the canal; a tight crawl for me, but you aren’t crawling with me.”

“Why?”

“There are hidden tricks, and you would be far behind me. I have another way for you.”

Johnson reached out and patted the wall. I turned and looked, and there was a service door neatly embedded there with the universal transport symbol on it. Instead of a handle, it had a rare spin dial on its face like a classic safe, and Johnson used a simple combination to open it.

"Get inside. Press the green start button. On the other side, it will halt, and the door will auto-open. I hope you don't have a problem with claustrophobia."

I shook my head no, but not to indicate a love of claustrophobia. I stepped inside, and Johnson shut the door. The interior of the thing, made to transport a single cyborg or tools, was so small I doubted I could squeeze into it. I gave the thing a skeptical glance, but since there was no other option, I tried and eventually squeezed myself inside. Since there was no way Johnson could ever squeeze into it, I wondered why he was sure it would work.

I was sealed in like a baby in the womb. For some moments, I felt around for the button, then depressed it, and the car began to move with a slow rolling grind. It did not speed up but moved like a tortoise. After a couple of minutes, I heard a louder grinding sound and the car came to a halt. A yellow light began to flash inside the car. This disturbing event left me there to sweat and contemplate the idea of being trapped and suffocating in a sardine can. Without doubt, this junk transport device had been created by robots as smart as cavemen. Panic lifted my scalp as minutes passed. My hands and fingers were about the only things I could move, and they were shaking. My legs went bloodless and numb. I felt around and pressed the button several times. Finally, the car began to move, inching forward and knocking up and down. Cursing Johnson for some moments, for not informing me regarding this issue, helped me keep my mind off panicked thoughts. I was certain I would be trapped permanently if the car stopped again. Claustrophobia was no longer just a word for me but a genuine terror. Fortunately, when the car did stop again, I heard a solid click as the door unlocked. It then ticked open inch by inch.

Scrambling out of the car, I looked around while still on my knees, but I saw only murk and spots. The flashing yellow light in the car had filled my eyes with floaters. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I stood up on tingling legs and rubbed them to get some circulation. My eyes slowly cleared, and I saw that I was in a small alcove in the transport area. A service door to the tunnel was right in front of me. I opened it and stepped out into an unusually broad portion of the tunnel. The ride had taken me to a large mechanical room with foul oil-tainted air. Gloom filled this area, and there were so many hulking machines that I remained still, fearing some of them might be robots.

I heard a violent bang and a loud groan. It cut through the static hum of the machinery from the far side of the room. I moved quickly past some large metal power cubes, saw a flash of light, and realized what was happening. Johnson was present. His crawl speed had been faster than my rocket transport. Arriving early had not proved best because he was in the clutches of a large repair robot. It held him off his feet against the wall with strong arms. The spotlight from its forehead illuminated Johnson's desperate face.

Johnson's penchant for grappling with robots was not one I shared. In all things violent, the use of weapons came to mind first. Being trained in military combat meant forgoing brutal physical fights if they could be avoided. The reason was clear. Injury could quickly kill a mission, and disability could ruin a person's effectiveness in the field. This robot was of the clanking monstrosity variety, not designed for any form of assault but dangerously powerful.

I could tell by the char blackening Johnson's face that he'd had a messy journey through the tunnel. His expression indicated that he had already been roughed up by the robot. Its hands, expanded to large clamps, held Johnson firmly in place against the concrete wall. Johnson's attempts to lift his knees and force the robot back were ineffectual. Its light brightened to blinding flash levels, and Johnson closed his eyes.

The robot then uttered creepy mechanical vocal noises that convinced me of two things. The first was that this barbaric robot was likely the character who had constructed the faulty transport device. And the second was that, given the strange form of intelligence it was demonstrating, it would be hard to guess what it planned to do to Johnson next. Perhaps drilling a hole through his forehead would happen, followed by the burning of his body in some hidden underground incinerator.

I had no idea how Droids or cyborgs would have such a robot programmed regarding unauthorized intruders in their domain. Moving silently, I came up behind it, my eyes focused on the tool wagon on its back. Most of its tools were simply replacements for its hands, as this fellow could simply change to new hands that were anything from fine adjustment tools to wrench sets. One of those add-on hands was a powerful laser drill, which I snatched. It had a built-in power pack, so I was able to start it. I could see the fine lines outlining a chip panel in the back of its head, tried to snap it open, and when that failed, applied a strong burn beam to it. The metal darkened, and the robot rolled back into me hard, knocking me aside. The laser drill flew off into the gloom. I staggered sideways, and the robot turned about, releasing Johnson, apparently forgetting about him for the moment.

I stumbled to the side of a machine, almost slipped, and fell on greasy concrete. The robot lit up with a bright bronze glow emanating from its entire body. Blue sparks flew from its eyes, and it shook its head side to side as though trying to recover. Unfortunately, it did, and it shone its face light on me and charged, striking a blow that I ducked. The side of a power cube crumpled in from the force of the blow, and the bronze glow of the robot began to flash. It had electrocuted itself, but that only stopped it momentarily. It backed away from the cube, pulling its arm free.

I was already behind it, and I found a pry bar in its wagon, which I grabbed. Johnson was on his knees, still stunned. Considering the power of the robot, most other men would already be dead. The pry bar I held was not made for men, and it weighed about twice what I expected. I had no idea what it would be used for, but my purpose was clear. As the bot spun around to face me, I used both hands to swing the bar at its head, hitting it with all my strength behind the blow. The side of its hockey-mask face crumpled; an eye exploded. I fell back, still clutching the bar as a cold mechanical roar issued from its mouth. My body felt like it had been rung like a bell, such were the vibrations of the blow.

The tip of the bar clanked on the floor, and I dragged it as I took more steps back. The robot was not done; it was partially disabled and did not seem able to adapt to having only one eye. It charged again but veered to my right, checking me aside with its shoulder. I dropped the bar, Johnson staggered out of its way, and it hit the wall and made a clumsy turn to face me again.

I couldn't get to the bar in time, but I spotted the laser drill. It was between two power cubes, had not shut off, and was burning a hole in the concrete wall. Running to it, I picked it up and turned back. The robot was wobbling as it moved slowly forward. I directed the beam at its remaining eye, and it did immediate damage. Another mechanical roar, and the robot slammed back into a power cube.

Shutting off the beam, I tossed the drill attachment aside and got to the bar. This time, I did a strong baseball-bat swing with it into the back of the robot's head. The force of the blow stunned me, and I dropped the bar as I stumbled away from the bot. But I had found success. The robot's indicator lights went out, and the remaining glow of its bronze skin faded.

Another problem presented itself. The damaged power cube had overheated to a slow burn, filling the air with toxic ozone. A large connector locked it into the grid line, and I did not want to use my hands to pull it out, so I picked up the bar again. Its coated handle protected me from electric shock as I pried the connector loose.

I turned to Johnson. He was feeling his chest and ribs with both hands.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Nothing is broken. That is about as good as it gets." Johnson's left eye was already closing from the swelling.

"You need some ice or meds to stop that swelling."

"We don't have far to go now. I have first aid stuff there and drugs. My chest is going to hurt like a bitch until the muscles heal. I will need painkillers."

"What an evil monster. Why would the Droids create odd repair bots like that one?"

"Those things are self-learning, self-developing. With robots, the Droids have fixed creations like most of the above-ground ones, and then ones that evolve on their own. Since Droids don't go underground in areas they would consider undignified, they put these evolving bots in place. They repair themselves, improve themselves. Of about a dozen base models, with various initial specifications, a few have evolved well, and others, like that fellow, are failures. Eventually, the cyborgs decommission the failures and try something new. That is why the idea of evolution doesn't necessarily work with artificial life. The assumption is that something better will come about, and then the evolution produces a monster. Hell, that's probably how we got the Droids. AI evolved into a superior race of assholes."

I laughed. "Droids aren't a race, but I suppose you are right that they think they are a race and superior. I do find that bot interesting. We've only used dumb robots in the underground. If we ever get rid of the Droids, we can use some of these under tight human control, and they might be all we need for expediting repairs."

"I discussed that with Lisa often. We believe that the first error was in putting all the eggs in the robot and AI basket when they should have focused on healthier humans nurtured in better societies. Nevertheless, we believe we could make use of much of the Droids' robot tech. In that way, the Droids were brighter than us because their machines usually don't have personality or simulated awareness of any magnitude. They are essentially AEMS or automated evolving machine systems where a number of parts can unify, work together, and evolve to a better machine or a failure."

"You're certain of that?"

"Trust me. Droids would never create something that could disobey them or evolve to something equal to them. They want no thinking rivals. Where humanity was foolish, they have been wise to some extent."

Beyond the mechanical area, the tunnels continued, and there were many intersecting branches. These tunnels looked much the same, and Johnson's

guide was the code markings on the mechanical panels. In the final segment, the air was fresher, cleaner, and dust-free. I detected a faint odor reminiscent of the upholstery of a relatively new car. This light breeze was blowing towards us, and I had the feeling that the tunnel was also used as an air-conditioning exhaust for the large buildings we were under. I began to wonder how long it had taken Johnson and the local resistance to map these tunnels. More than a few of them must have got lost in the maze. They must've made a project out of mapping it for escape and transit across the city.

We came to a halt at a dead end and a large patterned grid. I stepped up to it and found it to be solid, light metal, fused in place. What I saw beyond it surprised me. We weren't deep underground as I expected, but at ground level. I could see glistening dark water running along a spillway. A strip of manicured parkland was on the other side of it, and tall towers outlined by brilliant lights rose into the night sky.

Enclosed streets and walkways connected them at higher levels, creating a city in the sky. Cold blue-tinted lighting indicated that this was not human territory but the Droid heart of the city, their business area. Rather than a fishy smell, the odors from the water were like a mild industrial perfume. The view evoked a deep sense of loneliness, and the Droid towers presented an alien landscape. They were places humans did not enter, and they remained cloaked in mystery because of it. I felt vibrations under my feet, like the drumming of a great machine, in a deep base barely audible to the human ear. Over in the parkland, a dark form appeared. I couldn't tell what it was. Farther off, a big headlight emitted a faint yellow light, indicating that it was a transport train. There was a road and track there, hidden by tall grass and embankments to either side of it.

I turned away from the grate. "Where are we?"

"We are now in a rear mechanical section of the great rotunda. It rises high above us, but we aren't going up for a picnic with the Droids; we are going down."

Turning left, Johnson nearly disappeared in deep shadows. I followed as he entered a much narrower tunnel that I hadn't seen because its entry was not lit. Farther in, faint blue light revealed it as a mechanical run to various repair areas. We didn't go far before Johnson stopped and illuminated a plastic panel on the floor. He pulled it up to reveal a ladder running down. I followed him into the cramped space, and the climb down was difficult because the rungs were not spaced for humans but for some machine to ride down. We went down about twenty-five feet to another service room filled with banks of humming equipment. At the far end of it, just behind a glowing silver machine, there was another ladder down and another cramped climb. We ended up in a narrow alcove with a vault-style door at

its end. Johnson opened it with a combination spin dial that only showed when he put his fingers to it.

He waved me in first, and I stepped in cautiously, finding myself in an underground bunker, and not a cramped one, but of cavern-like dimensions. The lighting was faint, tinted gold, and at first, I saw no one. Lisa appeared, pointing a handgun at me, which she immediately lowered. I saw laughter in her eyes. In the soft light, her hair and her features were delicately feminine. She did not look at all like a person who would be contending with Droids or working for the underground. Most likely, that was the reason the Droids had not caught on to her, at least up until now.

"We don't have surveillance at that entrance," she said. "I thought it was the Droids."

Johnson looked around as if he half-expected the Droids to be present. "Status report?"

"Sure, boss," Lisa said facetiously. "You see no one because there are no stragglers. The others have either escaped the city or are on the outskirts working on it. A few have already been arrested, but we got lucky. Many people have escaped. The public panic is like a citywide riot this and we took advantage of it. They hit most of the safe houses with raids. The bastards must have known about some of them for some time, but not all of them. If not for the sudden chaos, they would have slowly worked and found all of us. That is why I was expecting them and not you."

"We saw a portion of the rioting," I said. "We also used it to escape."

"We're clear now," Johnson said. "They would already be here if they knew where we went. They think we are trying to flee via train or train tunnels."

"Damn, you look beat up and dirty."

"I feel like I look," Johnson said. "I'm robot-style beat up and dirty."

He sat on a faded lounge chair, and Lisa crossed the room. I looked around the bunker and wondered what the place had originally been. Bulb-shaped, like an onion, the ceiling curved nearly to a point, yet the base was broad and separated into a few different areas. The only fully separate room was the washroom, and Lisa was entering it. It was probably an addition they had quietly added.

Johnson had his back to a large ebony counter set up like a bar counter. It was stacked with portable equipment, mostly computers and custom-made modules that they must have put together. There wasn't a whole lot of wiring, so it ran in a wireless mode using stolen Droid power cube energy. Large sheet display screens had been tacked to the curved walls, and two of the larger ones displayed images from camera surveillance of the buildings above and their exteriors. Another screen bank was divided into

at least forty squares that showed various areas of the interior - corridors, exits, and entrances, a festive canal dock lined with Droid boats, a parking lot, and a couple of large conference rooms. The largest and most elegant of these rooms had to be at the top of the great rotunda.

Lisa returned with a dented first aid kit and a large bottle of healing water. She grabbed a stool. Sitting in front of Johnson, she popped open the kit.

"How did you manage to plant cameras in this building?" I asked.

Lisa was snapping open a tin of cream. Special stuff we called wound melt. I had used it many times to take down swelling, shrink bruises, and heal scrapes and cuts. She took time to put on some thin rubber gloves and answered me as she began to wash Johnson's face.

"We didn't plant or send in fly cameras. Those are some of their cameras. We simply cracked into them."

"I should have figured that. Except how? The Droids always detect intrusions."

"They detect because their IoT connects everything with various flavors of the same complex AI operating system and protocols; their Fusion 3 system. They are masters of the code, know every way it works, and can detect any crack in it. So we don't use it here."

Johnson removed his shirt, revealing his battered chest and a few tufts of thick hair. The robot had put a mean scrape all the way across, and Lisa ignored me while she rubbed a generous amount of cream onto the swollen area.

"Fuck that stuff hurts, both it and my bruised ribs," Johnson said.

"It's going to get worse. Your face is next, and that will really sting. I would say it's a bit better than walking around with one side swollen like a balloon. You must let it work for at least twenty minutes, then shower it off. This is the strong stuff. It is the bite of the medicine that shows that it is working."

"Okay, then hit me. I can grind my teeth for a while."

Lisa glanced at me. "We created our own operating system, based on an old-world one. With it, we run our stuff, tap into the Droids with a protocol they don't detect."

"Make sure you bring a copy of that when we escape."

"Don't have to. I have the code hidden inside the Droids' own system. It can be pulled anywhere if you know how to do it."

"I wish the underground had known this stuff before they sent me in. They could have used you to do the mission."

"How so?"

"We are trying to detect something."

"Exactly what would that be?"

"The Droids have an individual presentation of personality, plus a common mind and a distributed mind. Real power is controlled by specific Droids. A three-phase system with smaller branches for things like cyborg or robot control. Our focus is on the military. We believe their five-star general, to put it in human terms, is in this city. He makes military decisions and is a store of a large portion of their classified information. Isolating and destroying him, or tapping into his knowledge, could lead to victory. The contact was supposed to pass along some intelligence to aid me. The reason I say we could have used you is that you have been tapping in with that operating system. We might have been able to use you to trace him or her, for that matter. Now everything is screwed up. They sent me, and I unwittingly brought Ethan. Everyone is dead, busted, or on the run, and we are in hiding."

Lisa shook her head. "It's not your fault. They were on to us here. They would have raided us. It was just a matter of when. All we can do right now is watch and wait. Their political meetings are in the rotunda. We can listen in and maybe get some idea of what to do next and find out if there are any avenues of escape."

"Good luck with that," Johnson said. He looked to me. "I've spent many days listening to their political meetings. They talk about mostly elite shit in their public forums. What they talk about in Droid-created languages, we can't code-break. They're like a bunch of haughty Roman senators. What we do know is what I told you. They may finalize a plan to turn this city into robot land. After they raze most of it, first. When they rebuild it, it won't be a tourist attraction."

"This is different," Lisa said. "They are panicked. A genuine crisis for them. We are sure to pick something up. This is bad because the robot-city plan wasn't finalized. They may now decide to destroy the city. They have done it before, elsewhere. I don't know the details, but I heard that when they finished with one Asian city, half the people were dead, most things were destroyed, robots killed off the disabled and wounded, and about a quarter of the population remained as slaves as they built the robot city."

I nodded. "That's how it works, and they've done it more than once. They are builders and destroyers, but despite their robots, they always need human talent. In those cities, half the robots do police functions."

+++

Johnson's bruised ribs and swollen face were visibly healing. He used a bite piece in his mouth to prevent sudden outbursts of cursing when the nerve shocks hit. Lisa gave me a tour of the bunker. She was extremely proud of its sexy design and spy capabilities, as she had momentarily forgotten that we had to flee the city. Nevertheless, the place was so deep underground that we'd want to keep its location marked, because even if the Droids moved forward with robot land, this place would likely survive. They would have no need to destroy their own city area, the rotunda, or the underground beneath it. They would evacuate before the destruction phase, and a new crowd would move back in later to oversee the new industrial city.

We ended up watching and waiting for two days, but there was little activity above us. All we saw on the interior cameras were service robots and gray Droids of the less important bureaucratic class. The state of emergency had obviously drawn most Droids elsewhere. Not knowing what was going on was frustrating.

Having spent much time in hideouts underground, many of them austere, it did not bother me much. The bunker felt temporarily safe, and maybe even safe in the long term. Leaving it would be a problem. I did want intelligence, and on the third day, we picked up some. Our cameras showed several Droid boats arriving leisurely at the canal docks, and there was activity in the parking lot as a fleet of black cyborg vehicles arrived, their occupants entering the building. Unfortunately, they went to an area of the complex that Lisa did not have under observation. They left a few hours later, the entire fleet of vehicles driving off in train formation at speed. It meant the cyborgs had received direct instructions about some operations inside the city.

Although many Droids were now in the building, they were not conversing in a manner microphones could pick up, but via their imitation of telepathy. In the presence of humans, the Droids always spoke, and their meetings were done vocally like human meetings. Since we observed a group of robots setting up the main rotunda for a gathering, we looked forward to listening in. It would be like breaking the silence because no communication came in from Lisa's people. That did not mean they had all been captured. They would simply not try any form of communication that might be detected. The heat was on, and escaping the Droid surveillance net would be a challenge for those still out there.

As the robots finished setting up the area, it became clear this was a business or security meeting of the highest level, and not some form of elite social gathering. The city background vanished from the windows as the glass took on a gold tint. Bowls of silver and porcelain filled with Droid candies were placed on the side tables, alongside long-stemmed glasses of

wine. The special wine and the candies were not sugar and alcohol, but various forms of stimulants, relaxation drugs, and painkillers that Droids needed just as humans need food. Droid nibbles and drinks prevented something called disconnection, a tendency of Droids in a group to start losing feelings of individuality. This was another of their conflicts. Though they shared some form of mass mind, they did not like that state or their tendency to drift off into it when individual focus was needed. Far from perfect, their bodies suffered aches and pains like humans, and the wine took care of that issue.

"Wyatt, it's a judicial meeting of the High Council," Lisa said. "They've held one other such meeting in the time we've been here. These are very rare."

"Hum," I said. "Lisa, could it indicate they have seized Ethan or some others and are putting them on trial?"

"No. They wouldn't bring any humans here. If they discover us here, they will be offended beyond belief."

"Who cares," Johnson said. "Everything offends them."

"There must be some important reason for this meeting," I said.

Lisa nodded; her expression grave. "They will probably decide on what further punishment to inflict on the population and whether to go ahead with the robot-city plan. Since they believe everything can be done by law and social control, they will see Ethan's outrageous act as something new laws can prevent. Though I can't imagine what they will come up with."

The rather flamboyant arrival by Droids continued throughout the morning, and it was only at two in the afternoon that they left secluded areas we could not observe and began to gather in the rotunda for the meeting. They spent some time mingling, gathering in small groups, and engaging in irrelevant small talk. All talk was in English. We picked up some of that chatter but learned little from it. Droids like humans tended to bury their intelligence in politically correct speech. Making their gatherings appear to be about nothing but ego reinforcement.

The importance of the judicial meeting was highlighted when the meeting was called to order, and the High Council appeared one by one through a shimmering gold archway. The somber females came first, dressed in white judicial robes fronted with gold embroidery. None of the rich jewelry and ornaments of their usual dress was included for this meeting. They were followed by the males, whose robes were in deep gray, trimmed with white that matched the breast length white wool wigs they wore. Their seats formed a semi-circle of thrones raised above the crowd of Droids. The effect was rather strange as the general Droid rabble was outfitted in a variety of opulent clothing, and their manner conflicted with the seriousness the High Council was attempting to project. They were like a gathering of wealthy

pagan hedonists, for some reason governed by a sober group of judicial theocrats with plain gray bureaucrats as their assistants.

There were seven members of the High Council, and Lisa pointed them out and named them. "That female is the goddess Seshat, and her partner Qetesh is beside her. On the right are Menkah and Seshmemetka. The two smaller males are Khepri and Anhur, both advisers of the council head, Khufu the Elder. They are celibate and neuter like most male Droids, while the females are, of course, lesbians."

Separate from the High Council and the rabble were Narmer, Neferhotep, and Ramses, who were not seated but standing in gilded witness chariots. Narmer was to the left of the council, Ramses to the right, and Neferhotep directly facing them, and though not in judicial robes, their dress was formal. Narmer, dressed in black trimmed with silver, and with his shock of silver hair, looked almost like another High Council member. Ramses, wearing a military-style outfit, represented golden Droid military power, while Neferhotep, the albino with his usual halo of light, looked much like an angel who had descended to address inferiors on Earth. This was the highest Droid gathering on Earth because they were all Egyptian Droids, and the highest order. That they had been here in the city all along, and that it was possibly their main residence, told me a lot.

Khufu stood, rapped his gavel, and brought the meeting to order. They all rose and bowed to this judge, except the other members of the High Council, who remained seated. Khufu then delivered introductory remarks followed by a long-winded speech on Droid exceptionalism that was of superior potency to any tranquilizer in the Droid wine. His effect on his audience was to leave them starry-eyed and disconnected. As well as praising their superiority, Droids loved to present one another with awards and trinkets. I crossed my fingers, hoping this meeting would not drift into that mode. It was unlikely, considering the grave situation.

It was only during Khufu's closing remarks that I tuned my ears to listen closely. "Justice itself is a product of our superiority, and its value is in the certainty that what we proclaim to be law is infallible. If we name a thing as socially improper, it becomes immoral just from the power of our words. Indeed, for humans, right and wrong are whatever we state to be such. Society itself, the social order, and law and order proceed from the breath of the gods, and we are the gods. The man, woman, or cyborg who disobeys or fails to fully comply has committed an act fully worthy of death.

Though it is in our authority to order the termination of humanity, we have shown mercy, our superiority allowing us to tolerate the presence of this lowly species of animals; a species not only below us but beneath many other species of animals and insects that show higher qualities of cooperation. Over the years, we have tolerated terrorists, criminals, and

the defective, who do not comply. Our Savior Program has served as the institution of human reformation, and many who could have been executed have returned to participate in society. However, today we are dealing with something beyond failure to comply. We are dealing with a person who set an example of blasphemy and the attempted murder of a divine being. Such acts will be brought to a quick end, and today we will decide how we will accomplish a return to order."

Khufu received strong applause but remained standing and bearing a grave expression. He looked at Narmer, Ramses, and Neferhotep one by one, and if he said anything, it was not vocalized.

When he spoke, it was to Neferhotep. "You look well, divine son. I see you have recovered speedily from your injuries."

"Yes, and I listen well. I might note that, in your words, you did not emphasize, or even mention, the failure of the secular state. It is indeed that bureaucratic state which coddles humans and obstructs our attempts to inculcate them with religious values that leads to these perversions. As for my health, I must thank Narmer for the superior medical treatment he provided."

Narmer nodded and smiled, but Ramses did not. He looked agitated, and he interjected. "You owe him no thanks. It was his irresponsibility that allowed these terrorists into our city."

There were a few gasps among the Droids.

Khufu banged his gavel. "Order, please!"

Seshat was not impressed. She flew to her feet. "We are not here today for order. We want answers."

Muttering began among the crowd. "I have a full police report," Ramses said.

After giving Seshat a withering glance, Khufu replied. "Good. You may brief us now."

Ramses gazed at the crowd and then back at the High Council as though signaling they were all of the utmost importance. "We have broken the backs of the terrorists nesting in the city. Their hiding places have been raided; many guilty parties have been arrested along with many suspects. These have been taken to prison. Executions will, of course, be arranged for the guilty."

Seshmemetka rose, causing Ramses to fall silent. "I want no more secret executions. The time has come for public executions, and to have them daily until all the miserable human rats understand what happens to those who do not comply."

Neferhotep shook his head as though in opposition.

"You oppose public executions?" Seshmemetka said in a tone that indicated she could not believe it.

"No. I oppose the idea that this is about compliance. This is not about compliance; it is about blasphemy!"

"Yes, blasphemy," Narmer interjected. "This police report is missing one thing that troubles me, and that is the arrest of the blasphemer. Where is this man being held, and what group is behind his actions?"

Silence swept the room like a wave. The gaze of the crowd fell on Ramses. He cleared his throat. "We are tracking him. We expect to make an arrest soon."

Narmer struck the wood in front of him with his fist. "Lies! You are not tracking him. He has escaped. He is loose in the city, and you don't know where he is. I've seen a report that his records were falsified. He is a man with no past who suddenly appeared as a member of that jazz band. Even the members of it that we captured can't supply any information. He apparently duped them, too."

Khufu banged a gavel. "Calm down, Narmer! Now, Ramses, you will explain exactly what this security nightmare is about?"

"Very well," Ramses said. He glanced at the crowd as if attempting to solicit support. "As we have learned from Neferhotep's eyewitness report and other police data, two agents arrived in the city with a cover of being members of a jazz band. The rest of it is disturbing and confusing. Terrorist agents with such skills should not exist. We executed or killed such agents in combat long years ago. If those two exist today, there must be more hiding somewhere. There may be more locations in the outer city where they are hiding. We have cleansed the inner city. One would expect hostile agents to be working together, but this was not the case. The one named Ethan attempted to assassinate Neferhotep, while the one we believe is named Wyatt worked to prevent the assassination by shooting at the agent named Ethan. A third man we killed, and investigations into him turned up more mysteries. He is another agent who should not have existed.

We do not know why they were shooting at each other or why one of them wanted to assassinate Neferhotep specifically. Wyatt may be connected with a woman who we are certain belongs to the local underground. This woman has also escaped. We can't extract any information from the locals, so that means they don't know what this is about either. Perhaps factions of some underground terrorist groups are at war with one another, and it has led to many enemies creeping into this city."

"We do know one thing," Narmer said. "The one named Ethan is part of a new and dangerous group that attacks the holy order specifically. We've never seen that before. There is a dangerous group that wants to carry out religious assassinations, and it is operating in this city."

"We won't be seeing it again," Seshmemetka said. "That's because Narmer and Ramses are going to do their jobs and capture these people. Once we have them, we will use every technique we have to extract full information from them."

Khufu banged his gavel once more. "I've heard enough, and there is only one ruling to make. This city has grown rotten to the core and is infested with the absolute worst of human vermin. I am ordering a private judicial meeting. As soon as Cleopatra VII arrives to chair the meeting, we will decide whether to activate the Robot City Plan and evacuate all Droids from this city."

+++

## **The Undercover Mission**

Long after the Droid meeting ended, we continued discussing what had been said. Lisa proposed that perhaps Ramses was the key Droid.

"Ramses is their top general here. I'm not certain that he is the one we want," I said. "One of the Droid group that will attend that private meeting is the one. Maybe Cleopatra VII is it. Killing all of them that attended that meeting would be the best solution if were possible. "

Johnson frowned, deep lines of frustration showing on his forehead. "Perhaps you're wrong, Wyatt, and high-level intelligence information is not localized in any one Droid or group of them."

"We have solid intelligence that led to this unexpected discovery. We can't access their private meeting or wait around to see if they decide to destroy the city. We should look deeper into the security core. The resistance suspects that Toronto, with its Droid medical facilities and security core, is the key hub. The Purists had a similar system in this city and in a remote area north of it in their day. The Droids may have built on it or rebuilt it for their own purposes. They have a connection to their Moon Base, and over time, their communication spectrum slowly shifted to this region. Let's not forget that the Purists, not the Droids, built the Moon Base. No humans are alive on it now, and Droids are too vain to live there, so it would be robot-controlled for whatever industrial purposes, with full control of it being from

Earth via the Droids. Since that control is from this city, it means most other control might be coming from here, too."

Lisa frowned. "That Droid 'Savior' or torture and brainwashing program is thought to be in the security core as well."

I nodded. "Perhaps if we can find the Droid that runs that program and destroy it, they will be weakened worldwide. It would also help us escape and survive because if we mess them up some more, we can take advantage of the chaos. Look at how panicked they are now, and when they get panicked, they make mistakes. They expect us to be racing to get out of the city and would never guess that we would go straight to some hidden area humans fear most."

Johnson's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "Nice theory. The problem is that our people have only entered the security core area a few times. We've sent lone operatives in on surveillance missions. Only one returned. He reported two large complexes, but he never got inside or close to them. The form of security he reported was unexpected, too. Not technological in a way you would expect."

"Really," I said. "I would expect traps, total surveillance, guard robots."

"Beasts," Lisa said. "He claimed the area is guarded by mutant beasts, like genetically engineered animals or maybe robots that resemble wild beasts. He could not say exactly what they were other than that they smell humans, hunt them, and kill them. So, if you are inside and break out or crazy enough to be outside trying to break in, you are pretty much finished."

"It's worth a try."

Johnson exhaled. He looked frustrated, defeated. "I figured you would say something like that. I guess if we die, we might as well die trying."

+++

I wasn't placing too much faith in any report about beasts that sounded like a fairy tale. A couple of days passed before Lisa felt the time was right, and the surveillance data was perfect. We felt our chances would be better at night and spent plenty of time gearing up for the excursion, choosing dark clothing and the best light weaponry. If there were beasts of some variety, the choice of clothing wasn't much protection. I expected that there would be armed cyborgs and Droids, too.

The underground would take us only partway in, and we would emerge on the surface for the rest of the journey. How we would enter the complex once we reached it was simply unknown, but we put together a pack of

tools. Entering it at all would be difficult and by stealth nearly impossible. Use of force would almost certainly be required, and it had to be quiet and covert.

Moist, fragrant air filled my lungs as we climbed up a metal ladder at the end of the tunnel. I had no idea where we would emerge. Our target was isolated with its own grid and sub-levels that we couldn't access. Silent, flashlights off, we stepped out in the dark. As this was the center of the security core, I was anxious and wanted a quick idea of the dangers. All I was rewarded with initially was more darkness and gloom because, though it seemed like we were outside, we weren't. We were, in fact, inside a huge barn.

Lisa clicked a pen lamp on and revealed our strange location. Earthen, gardening odors were strong, and the stone floor was coated with fine sand and sawdust. A robot tractor was in front of us, and after checking it over briefly, Lisa brightened the light and illuminated the area.

She saw my expression as I waved at her to turn out the light.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "We are clear. This is one of two locations I was briefed on. We are inside a gardener's barn, a huge one with greenhouse capabilities when needed. The gardeners are all robots. This is not a high-security building. High-tech security for the core is nearly all in the Droid industrial complexes or medical buildings themselves."

"I hope you're right," Johnson said.

We moved around the first tractor and spotted several more in various Droid designs. These resembled crosses between large insects and farm machines. The largest tractor had back wheels as high as my shoulders. The tractor engines were powered by liquid organic waste that spat out fertilizer for dung, and their presence indicated we were either near or in a large garden. There seemed to be too many of them for just general grounds work. Such machines, usually smaller, were all over the city as the Droids kept a green and trimmed city. Large groups of them, though, were only seen in large public parks. I assumed this area to be groomed conservation land.

Lisa came to a panel and hit a rocker switch, causing a series of poofs as banks of overhead lights came on, giving us a clear view. The light was harsh and blue-tinted, revealing the humongous size of this gardening warehouse. Fortunately, there were no security robots in sight. This section was mostly just a parking area, and these beasts would wake up and start work by timers, not lights. Many parking stalls were empty, which meant some of them were likely outside, working the grounds by night.

I did not see an exit, and before I finished looking around, Lisa switched the lights off. Johnson and I followed as she led us past the robot stalls into

a vast area of gardening supplies and starter plants, all neatly shelved. Higher up, rows of large cubes of an amber shade were stacked, and various species of insects were buzzing about. Here, the air was misted and slightly toxic with a bitter taste that nipped at the tongue. A feeding system for the banks of plants hummed softly. Water in the system created gurgling and sucking noises, making the place seem alive. The warehouse felt like a restless monster with troubled bowels and odors of sweet animal dung. Droids were not farmers, so I didn't expect to see any here. Robots were my main worry.

The air wasn't improving, so we walked quickly to get beyond this area and reached a section of tools and machine attachments. Faint light revealed a distant bay door. Lisa walked confidently toward it, but when a motor kicked in and the big door began to open, we quickly ducked aside and squatted behind a large mound of mulch bags. The lights did not come on as the machine entering did not need them. Its soft blue headlights cut the darkness. These were faceted like huge eyes and lit the front trunk of the machine, creating the impression of some huge insect silently creeping inside. This machine had custom arm extensions retracted to its side and was stacked with containers bearing biological markings and some amber cubes for insects, though they were empty. It rolled by on softly hissing tires, and Lisa immediately jogged toward the open door. I did not like the idea of hurrying out into the unknown and a possible ambush, but Johnson and I had little choice, so we followed her.

Emerald solar lights shone like jewels, lining both sides of the road outside the entry. The bay door closed behind us, and we could see little in the semi-darkness. Spotlights from a distant location we could not see played across the drifting clouds, and the moon floated in mist. Our eyes adjusted, and we saw that the entry road ran between two low hills, and we would have to get beyond them to gain perspective on our location and surroundings.

I allowed Lisa to remain in the lead, and her decision was to walk to the top of one of the grassy hills rather than down the service road. The grass was thick, browned on top, and spongy underfoot, creating a dreamy feeling as we passed through it. As we reached a group of red-leafed trees at the top, the moon drifted out of the clouds. Its silver carpet of light, combined with the distant spotlights sweeping the intermittent clouds, gave us a view of a vast area.

A shallow valley spread out before us, and much of it was like a big garden, but somewhat wild. Since we could see the lights of some of the gardening machines moving here and there, we knew they tended the whole area and did all that work to please the Droids. The humming insects and night birds we could see would be part of that plan.

I had seen other such environments, and humans worked on the design of many of them. They were natural ecosystems where work was done to increase populations of species and add in species that had perished during the war. These were often genetically engineered. Droids cared about plants, insects, and animals and viewed them as more important than human beings in the grand scheme of things. They also viewed their machines and robots as more important than human beings. In their view, humans existed to bow down to them, and not because of any natural worth unless being considered inferior was of value. With humans being the mother of inventions more than the Droids, Droid reasoning was fallacious. Humans were of great value to them, but they would not admit it.

As beautiful as the bowl of land was, it seemed pointless without people present to enjoy it, and no Droids or cyborgs using it either. Down by the center of the valley, there were two huge structures; superstructures in look, and very modern. I had seen fully automated factories and food processing plants in other cities that were huge, but these structures were incredible. It almost looked like the Moon Base had materialized in this valley.

Droid complexes often had a fortress-and-prison look about them, yet these two were beyond that, resembling amazing yet impervious structures. The second structure looked more Purist in design than Droid, as if it had been rebuilt from something older.

These structures also had that modular or self-contained look one would expect in a moon base or as existed in the old decommissioned Andromeda 2 space station. Despite the garden and the rises surrounding them, they gave the impression of sealed, controlled environments that locked out the world.

Of the two, one was composed of near-white steel, stone, and plastic with a central area the size of a hangar at a large airport. The second complex was similar, but the colors were earthy, camouflaging it to some degree.

"The garden is dense as a jungle down there," Lisa said. "Too many of those machines about, too."

Johnson looked at the sky with his hands on his hips. He was thinking. "I'm wondering if one of those buildings contains that 'Savior' program or if both of them do."

"Look at the size of them. They would contain a lot more than that idiotic program," I said. "The one complex looks similar to Droid medical complexes but larger. They are usually for Droids, not humans. The farther complex, the more camouflaged one is likely our target, but since we have to pass the medical or scientific structure, we should try to get a look at it."

We followed the friendliest route down the hillside, avoided the main road, and got onto a wide earthen path cut and impacted by machines. The foliage to either side was rich with birdsong, insect buzz, and the sweet scent of grasses and weeds. These nightbirds were mostly unseen, and they certainly weren't the nightbirds of my youth, being much more vocal. Sounds I did remember, like crickets, were missing. The path ahead shone like a carpet with moonlight and had an eerie feel. Sand and a form of wood dust with a pungent odor formed a light spray over hard earth, fused into the road by some of the machines. A scattering of parched fallen leaves crunched underfoot and skated across the road when the breeze rose.

The path cut through a field of tall grass, weeds, and parched ferns. The ferns were taller than us and had a leathery feel when taken in hand. They rustled in the breeze with a sound almost like ghostly voices, and I did not like it. I was certain Johnson and Lisa felt trapped on the path as I did. We certainly didn't want to have to flee into that jungle-like field, so we picked up the pace, coming to a forested area with a spooky, forbidden air. The trees here were dark and gnarled, and either a variety I had not seen before or some mutant, fast-growing creation of the Droids. Their branches creaked in the breeze, but they were open, having only short grass, weeds, and portions of hard, bare earth around them. The moonlight cast a forbidding glow beneath them, providing enough light to pass through, but our feeling was that it would be safer to stay on the path.

We would have stayed on the path if that were possible, but we came to a bend, and the glowing headlights of one of the gardening machines showed like bright eyes observing us. We stopped and saw three of them in line coming up the long incline towards us. That left us no option but to move off into the trees and wait for them to pass. There was a rock outcropping a ways in, so we went to it and took cover in deep shadows as the machines slowly came closer. Johnson and Lisa were on either side of me. I spotted something and had them move with me behind the outcropping. What I had seen was a cyborg riding in an open seat in the center of a machine. He had been looking straight ahead, but with his glasses, he would see in the night like it was daytime, so we had to be completely out of sight.

Back on the road, we went down the long incline, then the path leveled out and passed through more grassland and patches of bushes with small rises. I knew the first complex was now very close, and soon we would be at its perimeter. The rises and thicker bushes blocked any view of it, but I had the feeling that once we rounded a bend ahead, we would see it and any nearby security guarding it. That security was what I feared the most.

An embankment showed on the right side of the path as we rounded the bend, and it grew steeper as we walked along. It increased the darkness,

and the air in this area was stagnant and thick with the fragrances of rotting wood and mushrooms. To our left, shrubbery and clumps of birch trees offered hiding spots we could use if needed. Our eyes kept going to the embankment. Lisa stopped and looked up a few times but said nothing. The top of the embankment was overgrown with fern-like weeds that rippled in the breeze like a singular entity. Silver fluff blew from them, and rather than drift down our way, it rose, making the sky appear like a quivering spider's web above us. The feeling was of walking into a nature trap.

I had been watching it out of the corner of my eye when something dark moved up in those weeds. We all saw it, and as we watched, it broke into the open. At first, I took it for a form of Droid, as it was gold in color, but as it came into clearer view, I saw that thick, mangy fur covered its entire body. Of a stronger build than any Droid, this was an ape. Yet its head was doglike, with glittering, fanged teeth and red, feral eyes. I had seen an image like it at Droid temples that featured ancient Egyptian-like imagery. This was a living version of the dog-headed baboon, sacred to the Egyptians and to Droids as an animal spirit.

Lisa and Johnson remained completely still, watching it with spooked expressions. I wondered if it was a robot or a strange form of Droid animal engineering, and as I did, it took off, running fluidly through the grass to a huge gnarled tree. From the ground, it jumped ten feet in the air and swung on a thick branch. Its body disappeared in the foliage, but a moment later, I saw its bright eyes watching us. This creature moved so much like a fully fleshed animal that I no longer believed it to be an android but a genetic creation of the Droids. It had incredible strength.

Lisa had the most powerful weapon. A form of bead gun, and she slowly raised it. It was an incendiary weapon, and a blast from it would set the tree and the ape on fire.

"Don't shoot," I said. "It would be like sending up a flare that alerts anyone and anything lurking in this valley."

Lisa's eyes remained intense; her stance locked. Johnson spoke quietly. Wyatt, "If it attacks, we aren't going to have much choice. That thing is strong enough to rip us apart like rag dolls. A wrestling match with it won't be pleasant."

We remained still, and I spotted something else up by a grouping of trees: a black cat as big as a lion.

Johnson went to his knees, ducking down. "If that cat smells us, we're done."

"It knows we're here and exactly where we are, but it hasn't attacked," I said. "So does the baboon. It tells us we are on the mark. Threatening

them with weapons could guarantee an attack. Let's keep moving. We can keep watch and make sure they don't ambush us from the foliage or get behind us."

Lisa did not look convinced, but she put her weapon away. "What do you mean we are on the mark?"

"That cat is Bastet, the Egyptian holy cat. You've seen statues of it in Neferhotep's temples. There are resistance operatives who have reported seeing living Droid holy animals in some remote nature areas. This must be a location for them. We've hit the jackpot. They wouldn't create this special nature valley for holy animals if those complexes in it weren't something of extreme importance."

"Yeah," Lisa said. "The problem is if those complexes are some bullshit religious stuff run by Neferhotep, we're at a dead end. It isn't likely. Why would he need all of that?"

We started moving forward in a crouched formation when a large bird swept down from the sky, soared in front of us, then back up into the darkness.

"Damn," Johnson said. "We'd better run."

"No," I said. "If we run from animals, they will pursue us as prey. That may be what happened to others you sent. They ran, drew attention to themselves, and died."

I led the way, and we were no longer three abreast. Johnson remained behind us to cover the rear. We got out of sight of the creatures and traveled another quarter mile with no sign of any creatures in the foliage. Finally, we came to another bend, and before we could get past it, we heard something coming from our rear. It wasn't an ape but a machine, and a fast one, with an engine that hummed with deep bass vibrations. We had a choice between the embankment and forbidding dark bushes on the left. Since the ape had been seen in the embankment area, we hurried into the bushes as quietly as possible and were immediately swarmed by nasty biting flies.

I bit my lip and watched as the machine appeared. This was a special form of truck, a large all-terrain vehicle with fat rubber tires. A cyborg sat in the cab, and he did not look our way as he drove past. He seemed almost in a trance as the machine drove him to his destination. As soon as he was gone, we emerged from the bushes, swatting away the stinging flies. Fortunately, the cloud of them did not follow us.

Around the bend, the road widened considerably, the embankment broke away, and the right side of the road became a mostly open field with tall rustling grass and weeds. Groupings of trees appeared to our left, and

directly ahead, we could see the complex. A portion of it showed, with dense trees and foliage on the left and right hiding most of it, but what we could see was impressive. It resembled a huge interstellar spaceship that had landed in a forested area. There was an entry to that ship in the open portion we could see. This entry was an elaborate ramp leading to a huge, heavy metal door embedded in the side of the structure, visible only by the darker color of its outline. We also saw windows high up and to the left of the door, and they were murky and slate colored. I could not see any surveillance devices, though the place had the feel of a high surveillance prison or laboratory. Cameras could, of course, be invisible, but most often they could be seen.

The cyborg had pulled into a small parking area beneath an overhang of shedding tree branches. He had not turned off the engine yet and was not looking our way, which allowed us to creep over quickly and take cover in the trees. The cyborg rifled a compartment in the cab, then shut off the vehicle and stepped out confidently. He was not the usual form of cyborg. He was bigger than others, and his face was ghostly pale. He strode up to the door, then turned away and looked across the field toward the embankment. Taking off his glasses, he rubbed his eyes as though they were bothering him, and he half turned my way so that I saw much of his face in profile. His was a bloodless evil visage. I had seen the type in other cities, but not here until now. Without his glasses on, he would not be able to see me, and he had not detected us by other means because if he had, he would already be shooting at us. He wore a blaster belted on his hip. Without doubt, it had solid destructive power.

Pulling a silver case from his pocket, he shook out a smoke. The three of us were packed close together, shielded by a tree-trunk and bushes clustered with scarlet leaves. I slipped silently away, creeping in the direction of the vehicle as the cyborg lit his smoke. I didn't get far before I heard a rustle in the bushes. Something was there in deep, and I feared it was the ape. The ape likely knew how to be invisible despite its large size.

The cyborg paced back and forth, his wedge-heeled leather boots crunching twigs and parched leaves as he blew out white smoke rings. He held the smelly cigarette with a right hand that was a robotic attachment and rather tacky in appearance. This fellow had bowed legs, a common cyborg trait, and his straw-like hair was cropped on top, with the sides of his head being silver metal plating. This model of cyborg was something different. Humans with artificial limbs, or medical work on their skull for severe head injuries and other things, were sometimes mistaken for cyborgs. He reminded me of one of them, but not quite. He was the evil version.

Genuine cyborgs were Droid creations or their idea of what a modified human being should be, and it was one reason to hate cyborgs. The Droid

concept of a modified human rested on weird enhancements. They recreated humans as a low form of pest that existed to betray humanity and carry out the desires of the Droids with mindless obedience. It was more like their humanity had been extracted and discarded, and Droids somehow saw that as a wonderful enhancement. Many of the cyborgs had specialized skills and could do things ordinary humans could not. They were greatly admired by compliant people, as the general public did not share my prejudice. Passing compliance tests truly did mean idiocy.

I remained frozen and completely silent as I studied this odd character. A minute passed, then the cyborg returned to his vehicle. Since I had not reached it, I could not see what he was doing. Sound indicated that he had opened the trunk, and a muffled groan indicated that someone was inside it. Thirty seconds later, I saw two men stagger into view, with the cyborg behind them. They were prisoners and not ones that had just been grabbed because both were wearing blue overalls, like they were being taken from one location to another. Mussed hair, sweaty and bruised faces, they had both been beaten and perhaps drugged. The cyborg did not even have them shackled.

He marched them slowly toward the ramp and the huge door, jabbing them with his prosthetic hand as he did. I became optimistic that we might gain entry through this prisoner delivery. I wanted to hold back and see how he would open the door.

Glancing to the rear, I could see Johnson through the foliage and could tell he was about to step out. A rare mix of offense and pity showed on Johnson's face, and I saw his eyes go to the prisoners. Then I knew. These were men he knew. Perhaps arrested and tortured well before the current sweep.

No, I whispered under my breath. I wanted Johnson to look my way, so I could warn him not to act quickly and foolishly. There was sudden movement, and my eyes went back to the prisoners as one of them turned and ambushed the cyborg with a bare-foot shot to his chest that staggered him. The prisoner then lunged at the cyborg, but he had caught his balance, and the two spun around as they grappled. This test of strength ended quickly as the cyborg gripped the man's collarbone and neck with his deadly right hand. That took the fight right out of the man. His entire body began to shake and spasm, but he managed to pull back and get free. Spittle was on his lips, his eyes were glazed, and he staggered back a few more steps, nearly collapsing.

I looked over to check on Johnson and saw him stepping out on the road with Lisa. Johnson had his weapon out; Lisa did not. The cyborg spotted them right away and turned to face them. Not only did he show no fear, but he also grinned, and it was like the grin of death, the way his ghostly pale

skin highlighted his skull and eye sockets. He did not draw his weapon but lifted his hands to his mouth as he whistled loudly, looking off into the field.

Johnson and Lisa stopped in their tracks. "Whistle again, and I'll hit you with a kill shot," Johnson said.

The prisoners' eyes did not brighten with optimism at this intervention. They widened with fear. The men looked like they were about to break and run, but they could not do so because they feared going off-road. That, combined with the fact that the cyborg was offering no resistance, was a bad sign.

"You made a big mistake coming here," the cyborg said, and as he said it, he took an aggressive step forward.

It looked like he was about to go for his gun, and if he did, Johnson would shoot him. That was about to happen, but a roar came first, and the beast I had detected in the bushes appeared as a dark form flying. It landed nearest me and right on the cab of the all-terrain vehicle. The agile beast bounded off the cab as fast as it hit it and sailed through the air toward Johnson and Lisa.

Drawing his weapon lightning fast, the cyborg sought to take further advantage of the situation. This put Johnson and Lisa at the mercy of the beast and weapons fire. To end the double threat, I fired at the cyborg before he could hit the trigger on his weapon, sending a force blast that bowled him over. My gun had not been set to kill, as I had planned earlier to quietly stun if necessary. The residual effect of that blast sent the two prisoners stumbling back and then tumbling on the ground.

Lisa's and Johnson's guns cracked at the same time as mine did, only they had fired at the ape, catching it in mid air as it arced toward them. The shots stopped it, lifted it higher in a halo of fire, and it somersaulted in the air, coming straight down and landing on its feet off to their left.

Realizing my distraction, my eyes went back to the cyborg. He had rolled onto his side and pulled his gun. He fired before I could, but not at me. His blast was at the two prisoners rising only a few feet away from him. A ball of fiery distortion hit the first prisoner right in the chest. It was like an exploding cannonball had hit him, turning him into a smashed and flaming mass as he flew into the weeds, leaving a long smear of blood, steam, and smoke. If anything was left of him, it fell out of sight in the darkness. The second prisoner knocked aside by the force of the blast tumbled into the roadside ditch.

I knocked the cyborg over with another blast, and his gun flew from his hand, firing as it did. The wild shot hit the beast, and it roared, and it rose in smoke and steam. Blackened with soot, it did not appear to be injured. Its arms were raised in fury, its knees slightly bent, and it did a leap high in

the air as Johnson fired a second shot. The shot went under the soles of its feet and arced over into the metal side of the building, hitting it with the sound of a hammer blow and dissipating into flames and white smoke.

Almost as though it could fly, the beast tumbled in the air and directed its fall to land beside Lisa.

As she spun to face it, it swept her and her weapon aside with a strong arm and charged into Johnson. Johnson's gun flew aside in the tackle, and the two hit the ground with the beast on top of Johnson, pummeling him. Johnson managed to get one of its arms, threw it off, and rose as it tumbled aside. I moved to shoot it, at the same time catching the cyborg in the corner of my eye. My shot was never fired. I threw myself backward, dropping the weapon, getting out of the way as the cyborg's shot flew past me and made a hard crack as it deflected off the windshield of the parked vehicle.

Johnson was up; the beast was on its feet and roaring. Lisa had crawled to her gun and managed to get a shot off that hit the beast in the side, sending it bouncing into a tree. It took those blows like they were nothing. It was like the thing was invincible, and it was ready to attack again.

I didn't watch because the cyborg was moving toward me, and I had to scramble around the side of the vehicle before he could shoot. Looking over the hood, I saw Johnson counter a couple of blows from the beast. Then the beast spun around fast and knocked Lisa's gun from her hand as she rose from the ground with it. Johnson jumped it from behind before it could tear Lisa apart, and as it tried to shake Johnson off, I saw the cyborg pull something from his coat with his left hand. At the same time, he fired a shot that lifted Lisa's gun from the ground and sent it skating into the weeds.

My own gun was out of reach, and the cyborg saw that and stuffed his gun away so he could work on the device with both hands. The beast, having got control of Johnson, was on top of him and about to pummel him, and considering its strength, Johnson would not last much longer in battle with it.

Then the situation changed as the beast rose from the ground and backed away from Johnson. It turned and faced the cyborg and began roaring with rage. When the roar subsided, it huffed deep breaths and began to walk toward the cyborg. It stopped in front of him, stared at him with hatred, and then slowly turned to face both Johnson and Lisa.

But the cyborg didn't address them; he addressed me. "Step out from behind the vehicle and keep your hands where I can see them. Otherwise, I send this monster in after you."

I said nothing, but I slowly stepped out. "Oh yes," the cyborg said. "This stupid ape will do anything I want it to, but usually it kills people like you without being commanded." Taking a step forward, he kicked the beast hard on its bare butt and then laughed as it roared. It tried to turn but got only halfway, then roared in anger again.

Johnson was scuffed up, and so was Lisa. They were both silent and staring at the cyborg. Johnson was deflated to some degree, and Lisa was obviously feeling frustrated and defeated.

The cyborg shifted his gun and gaze on me, and I could tell that his trigger finger was itchy. He wanted to kill me like he did the prisoner. Only the need to question me held him back.

"You are the leader," he said to me, and it was more of a statement than a question.

"No, I am," Johnson said before I could answer.

The cyborg sneered at Johnson. "You are the ape's brother and will be put in the cage with him."

"Okay, I'm the leader. But this is not what it seems. We came to turn ourselves in."

"Liar! How many others are with you?"

"No others, just us three."

"Then you are three fools. You came here to spy or sabotage, but it makes no difference. None of your ilk has ever come here willingly and for good reasons that you will soon find out."

He adjusted his device, and what looked like a small bird floated in the air near the ape, and then it shifted and moved over to Lisa. It was a light image. Lisa stepped back as it touched her breast.

The ape suddenly charged at Lisa. The struggle was short. She was quickly overpowered, and Johnson could only watch because the cyborg shifted his gun from me to him.

Lisa gave up the struggle as the ape dragged her back to the cyborg. Her eyes were desperate, her nose twitching from the bad odors of the beast.

"We are going inside, the five of us. Now get over there by the door!"

His eyes went to Johnson, as he was farther away. Johnson began to walk toward them and the door. As the cyborg's gun and eyes flicked to me, I took a step. Then things changed. The cyborg had forgotten the prisoner he'd knocked into the ditch, and the prisoner had emerged and was approaching the cyborg silently from behind. Somehow, the cyborg detected the movement, turned as the prisoner lunged at him, and fired.

The result was astonishing. The shot hit the prisoner right before he made contact and ripped his body apart in a whirl of gore that evaporated his torso and sent his arms, legs, and head flying in different directions. Haloed by this blast, the kickback sent the cyborg flying backward, and though he managed to hold onto the gun, his control device for the ape flew from his left hand.

Lisa screamed and burst free from the ape, and Johnson tackled it from the side. I was already moving, diving for my gun. The cyborg was not out of commission, though his slide through the dirt disoriented and partially blinded him. He rolled off his back and scrambled up, holding his gun out. His planned target was probably me, but he was facing the wrong direction, looking toward the door of the complex. He paused for a moment, then spun around, but it was too late. I had the gun and had adjusted it to kill. I fired from where I was on the ground, two fast blasts, with the first causing his legs to vanish and the second, a slightly higher shot, lifting his torso in the air. His head, severed, rolled in the dirt toward the imprint of the door on the metal side of the complex and came to rest. As it did, the door suddenly slid up in a sleek motion, with a slight whoosh, as a sensor read either his facial features or his retina.

Johnson had been thrown hard to the ground by the ape. It turned to Lisa and then relaxed its posture. She had retrieved the control device and had the beast at her mercy. It did not seem to mind. It did not roar with hatred at her as it had with the cyborg but took an obedient posture.

Since the beast wouldn't attack the person with the control device, Lisa began playing with it to figure it out and accidentally played the bird image on me.

"Shoot it!" Johnson yelled as he rose from the ground.

I was about to knock it one, but it did not attack. It looked at me with docile eyes. I realized that it never targeted me. There was no explanation why. On arrival, it landed right next to me, on the vehicle's hood. The cyborg's whistle had called it in for general defense, but it did not so much as sweep me aside. I raised an eyebrow. "Shooting it will just knock it around. Whatever its muscles are, they must be the most blast and fireproof substance ever created. Its bone structure must be as tough as titanium or Chromium. Why it won't attack me, I don't know. Maybe it likes me."

"What is it you're not telling us?" Lisa said. She looked at me with deep suspicion, then she sent the bird in flight, and the ape bounded off to that position."

Lisa remained focused on the controller, going through things on the touchscreen. I walked over, and the three of us stood in a huddle.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"The device allows me to set a perimeter, but this is a portable control. There is a master somewhere else, like in the complex. We can't use that ape because other hostiles might take control of it with the master and use it to ambush us. We don't need our own pet ape, and there may be more of them around. I'm keeping them at a safe distance of a thousand yards from us at all times. So long as we have this, they likely won't attack us. It probably works on the cats and any other beasts."

"So, they're robots?"

"No," Johnson said. "It seems unbelievable, but those things are biological. Wrestle with one, and you'll know. They smell and feel just like animals. They probably put a control chip in their brains to direct them."

The entry door closed, creating a minor rush of air. "We're not thinking here," I said. "We could have been ambushed by guards from inside."

Lisa packed the controller away and put her hands on her hips. "It looks like they are wise to us. They are locking us out."

"Maybe not," I said. They watched as I took the gruesome remains of the cyborg's head from the ground, held it up, and the door opened again. We were close enough to see faint light inside and a corridor that was empty as far as we could see. Rather than wait for the door to time close again, we walked inside, with me tossing the disgusting head aside as I did. The door immediately closed behind us, and I immediately regretted not bringing the head with me on the idea that we might need it to exit. That assessment seemed accurate because a quick check showed no obvious way to open the door.

Forging ahead was our only option, so we did so cautiously. The corridor was wide enough for us to walk three abreast. The walls were a long series of rings like we were inside a huge corrugated pipe on the Moon. It all felt atmospherically sealed. Warm air came from ahead in a slight breeze, though we could see no vents. It was dry and sterile air with a medical scent. The white walls and white lighting also created a medical effect. We could not see any light source, and the light did not seem to be a glow from the walls. It was just there, creating a hazy effect that combined with the rings and created a light-headed feeling as we walked forward. Rather than being lulled and put off guard by this, we were wary and on edge. The absence of guards, robots, or visible surveillance cameras felt too good to be true.

The walk was downward with the angle sometimes steep. From the exterior, the impression was of an above-ground complex, but now we were going to an underground level, so it was both. Finally, the pipe turned right, widened, and stopped at three sealed vault doors. We halted. There was no

obvious way to open any of these doors, and they looked blast-proof and probably were. They were similar to the entry door. A hairline seal and the door were visible. They were embossed into the solid metal wall. The color of the doors was more of a blue-steel effect that distinguished them from the wall.

Before we could do anything more, we heard a click at the center door, and we ducked back around the bend as it opened. No one came our way. Lisa and Johnson remained while I moved ahead and peeked around. The center and the left doors were open. I saw the back of a cyborg going into the left door. So cyborgs had come out of one door and had gone in another.

I raised a finger, telling my partners to stay behind, then crept up and peered through the center doorway from the side.

The view was amazing. There was a vast area inside, with cyborgs, numerous Droid animals, and long banks of cages and cells. A couple of military Droids appeared deeper in. Carry robots were loading huge metal boxes. They were very busy and did not look my way, or at the open door, so I slipped across to peek in the other open door. No one was near that door. It was another vast area where an incredible amount of technological and medical equipment was being dismantled by medical cyborgs in white outfits for loading onto more of the large carry robots. A moment later, the doors closed, and I ducked back down the pipe.

"I saw inside two of the doors," I said. "Entering either of them would be suicide. They are medical and animal areas and are busy with cyborgs and Droids. They are packing everything to evacuate this complex. That is bad news, indicating that the Droids are moving out quickly in preparation for a large attack on the city."

"Shit," Johnson said. "What now?"

"What about the other door?" Lisa said. "We don't have to get back out. Maybe we can get through it. It could possibly be empty and already evacuated. If not, we have to be prepared to get through by stealth."

"Okay, let's try that," I said. "Be prepared to duck back."

We moved to the doors, and I was suddenly struck with strange luck as the door on the right opened at my exploratory touch. I couldn't see any sensor or figure out why it would open at my touch. It made me wary as someone deep inside could be opening it.

This opening was slow, and the thick slab slid aside into a slot, making a sound like a padded bump. I had my gun ready. The area revealed was bright, and I didn't see any Droids, animals, or cyborgs. I went ahead, glanced around, then returned to the others. We stepped back, and I turned to Lisa and Johnson.

"To the left, there is a transparent wall, either plastic or a force field. It overlooks a vast gallery. I saw some people walking on an open floor below. Follow me in and turn right."

Lisa answered with a questioning flick of her right brow and Johnson with an OK gesture, and we went in and turned right quickly on a polished jade floor. Our footsteps made no sound on this floor's soft surface. Not only that, the three of us felt suddenly too light, moving forward faster than expected. We had to throw out our arms to prevent a collision with the wall. I knew this meant we were in an area of Droid gravity reduction. My friends obviously had not experienced this before, as they both wore surprised expressions as we stood with our backs to a bare section of the wall.

This was a long upper gallery with a breathtaking view into a prison-and-hospital complex. The lighter gravity gave rise to a unique phobia somewhat similar to the fear of heights. Perhaps a fear of suddenly lifting off, then falling.

Banks of cells angled outward and then ran off for a couple of hundred yards in a semicircle. The cells were rectangular, with transparent fronts, rising from the floor below and stacked in rows about twenty cells high. It looked almost like a hive, but for humans, not insects. It was bizarre. We could see into the cell interiors, and more than a quarter of them were occupied with prostrate people in pale blue jumpsuits. All of them rested on their backs on raised flat beds. As their heads were deeper in, we couldn't see them clearly, but these prisoners wore helmets. Behind them were aluminum knobs protruding from the wall that appeared to power and feed the helmets. A longer look revealed that a small portion of cells contained cyborgs and humans resting on the beds. The cyborgs were fully clothed, with their black boots still on, sleeping or unconscious, and connected via their temple plugs.

I whispered. "I believe this area is humans and cyborgs only, while the other two areas are weird Droid medical areas and are designed for their beast and insect modification."

"Really," Johnson said. "This place is so weird, trying to guess what the Droids are doing is difficult. What isn't difficult is gathering that it is more than ugly."

In our position against the wall, we could not be seen from the floor below unless we stepped closer. Some people were active down there, and I wanted to make sure none of them were cyborgs. Transparent tubes ran between the cell rows, and as we watched, a man floated up one of them and then shifted left into a cell. He was asleep or unconscious, being guided by a gravity beam. It showed us that entry was really through the tubes

running on the sides of the cells, and that the transparent fronts were sealed.

Rather than continuing to be taken by fascination as I was, Johnson began strolling along the gallery. He went around a pillar that blocked our view and returned moments later. Creeping forward, Lisa and I peeked below at a jade floor polished as smooth as glass. It emitted light that gave those walking on it a strange zombie-like look. None of the people were cyborgs. They wore the same outfits as those in the cells, strolled aimlessly about, and most kept their eyes on the bright floor, as though hypnotized or seeing hallucinations.

Johnson whispered. "There is a strange room beyond the pillar with an open entry and another sealed door on the other side. It has three of those tubes, like those running up the cell banks. It is quite simple to see how it works. They bring prisoners in through this gallery or from the other section, insert them into the entry tubes, and float them over for placement in the cells. I have not spotted any cyborgs or Droids up in this area, but they are probably beyond the door."

"Any ideas on the reasons for the creepy place?" Lisa said.

"We've likely found the Savior Program," I said.

"I've always hated that bullshit name," Johnson said. "When people are taken, most never return, and we've never figured out exactly what happens to them. Only in Droid math does that add up to Savior."

I agreed. "The name was probably created as a public relations exercise to obscure what they actually do."

Lisa frowned. "I don't recognize a single face in those cells. I can only assume that our crowd is in the kill and not save category."

"I don't see my bandmates in there anywhere, but there are so many cells. Say, I hear a low hum. I can feel it."

"I feel nothing, hear nothing," Lisa replied.

"It's there, and I'm willing to bet it would be extremely loud if not for the acoustic design of this place."

"Okay. I've seen enough of this Droid creep show," Johnson said. "Let's check out the next room and see if we can do something about it."

We moved silently along the gallery. The wall rising beside us was hung with huge pieces of metallic sculpture that looked like a weird form of Droid art, though I was certain it was not just art but technological in nature. We went around a large metal pillar, and I had the feeling it was another form of hollow transport. The door to the room beyond it was open, and we entered and looked around. It was like a small rotunda with the tubes

Johnson had mentioned and a bank of odd-looking equipment. There were two cutouts in the wall where bodies could be strapped in. The large control panel on the wall, with buttons and dials, was like the other Droid panels I had seen. They built things to match their large size, even though the actual electronics would be tiny. Originally, Droids had operated this equipment, though it now appeared cyborgs ran it.

A large metal wand with a dial on its handle and a knob on the end rested in a slot, and Johnson reached over and removed it. He held it up, and there were loud snaps of static electricity as it abruptly yanked Lisa's hair toward it.

She ducked back. "Get that thing away from me."

Johnson studied it. He hefted it up and down. "It's quite heavy, and there's a vibration like a tuning fork. I wonder what it is?"

"I'd put that down if I were you," I said. "My guess is that is what the cyborgs use to prime the prisoners before they put them in the float tube. The dial is in the off position, and I would not recommend turning it to any of the settings."

"You, idiot, you could have damaged my brain with that thing," Lisa said.

"Nah," Johnson replied. "It probably hypnotizes the prisoners or puts them in a trance, so they can't struggle when the tube takes them."

"It does more than that," I replied. "You saw that hive out there. No one comes out of the trance. They are all either unconscious or stupefied."

There was a click on the big door to the next section, and we all fell silent and stepped to either side of it. A moment later, we heard a mechanical hum, and it opened slowly. This door was heavy, and there was a pop as the air seal broke. A strange cyborg stepped quickly through it. He obviously didn't expect us to be present, and he wasn't armed. Turning right, he saw me first and backed off a step as I held my weapon on him. I immediately tagged him as a shifty, fully untrustworthy character. This fellow did not resemble the usual armed cyborgs but was of a type I had not seen before. He was short and stocky, with a sickly green, broad face and a high bald forehead. He wore a loose-fitting one-piece outfit with numerous pockets, in shades of gray and black. He had a plug plate neatly fused into his right temple, meaning he could tap select parts of the Droid mind, and the taps would be temporary, for specific technical skills and instructions. He was some form of technician.

He seemed mystified by me, but visibly gulped when Johnson stepped around to face him. He continued to stare but said nothing, appearing to be too frightened to speak. Without doubt, he viewed us as extremely dangerous criminals. Under Droid law, we were exactly that.

There was a guard station off to the left of the transport tubes with four padded chairs embedded in it. I moved him in that direction with a wave of my gun. He obeyed, remaining silent. I had the definite feeling he would resist if it were not for Johnson's large size and my gun.

I spoke first. "Sit down. We have a few things to ask you."

"Yeah, like what in the hell is this creepy place?" Johnson said.

I threw Johnson a please-shut-up look. I didn't want him screwing up my interrogation by cementing the cyborg's view that we were dangerous and unreasonable.

Lisa had already checked the other side of the door. "Some form of control area is in there, but I don't see any more cyborgs. I'll stay here and watch in case someone comes."

The cyborg decided to speak. His voice lacked tone and was whispery and effeminate. It created a bizarre effect in such a stocky, masculine creature. "Why did you people come here? The report I received was that the non-compliant are fleeing the city."

My eyes went to his hands, which were more mechanical than flesh. No doubt that enhancement was for the jobs he did in here, but it also meant he could be deadly. If he made a move on any of us, I would have to shoot him.

"We're of the unpredictable non-compliant variety. No doubt a variety you haven't seen before. We decided to visit this place, and since we are here, you must tell us all about it so we can let you go."

"You mean you have no idea what this facility is?"

"What I have is a good sense of when cyborgs are stalling and lying to me, so if you try to bullshit me more, my friend could hurt you a lot."

The cyborg's eyes widened. I had the feeling that he saw me more like a space alien than a human being. He also gave Johnson suspicious, fearful glances. Without a doubt, he had assessed that Johnson would be a tough customer if he failed to comply with our demands. He pursed his lips as he came to a decision. "Knowing will do you little good. Nothing can save you now that you are being hunted by the Droids. Your hostile actions are pointless. Nothing can be changed in the social order. The Droids hold absolute power."

Lisa glared at him. "The Droids make mistakes. If not, we wouldn't be here. Break it down. What is the purpose of this facility?"

A brief flash of anger lit his eyes. He did not like being talked down to by a woman he viewed as an inferior. "If it will satisfy you, I will tell you. This is a health facility for cyborgs, but not my mechanical class of cyborgs."

"Really," I said. "If so, why are nearly all of the patients human, and their health certainly missing the mark?"

He smiled, and it was a dishonest smile. "Humans are the medicine, so to speak. Cyborgs, you see, mainly the military variety, but also others, have a serious health issue, which is necrosis, or morbidity that occurs in structures of the brain. That is why transfer is needed every two years."

"Transfer of what?" Johnson said.

"It is a molecular transfer. A living human with a healthy brain is tuned and placed in a chamber; during a long sleep, the cyborg receives a timed molecular transfer that replenishes the dying cells and structures of his brain."

"The humans, what happens to us?" Lisa asked.

"Death and then organ donation happen. Very few captured humans are sent back into society, and they don't come here. That is another program in other cities, called the Savior Program, for simple ideological correction. This is an excellent facility for extending the service life of valuable cyborgs. It is much more effective than older methods of harvesting large quantities of fetal tissue. You should be thankful for it, as it produces beneficial cyborgs to aid the Droids and society. The great Droid, Narmer, is the founder of this program."

"If I'm thankful," Lisa said, "it's because you are going to set these people free."

"It can't be done. They are already brain-dead and are only of use for more molecular transfer before being sent up the tubes for organ harvesting or recycling. Even if the process is shut down, they will die, but a painless, slow death. Feel relieved now that you know humans do not suffer. You are free to leave and carry your business outside the complex."

"Shoot him," Johnson said angrily.

"No," I replied. "Tell me how often new prisoners arrive?"

"Weekly, but the city is in crisis, so there will be no arrivals of those held in lockups for some time."

"You are going to shut it down now," I said.

"Fine, I can do that," he said meekly. Then he noticed Johnson glancing over at Lisa and, suddenly, moved with incredible speed toward the central control panel, inserting his mechanical hand into a mechanism. I fired a stun shot and put out my hand to warn Lisa and Johnson off on kill shots. The cyborg slumped, its hand still stuck in the machine, and red lights began flashing in the control room.

I hurried over to him and shouted, "What did you do!"

"I did my job as commanded," he said in a weak rasp. "These human cattle are no longer useful as this complex is in the process of evacuation, which is nearly complete. My job is final recycling, look for yourselves."

We couldn't resist looking beyond the transparent wall. All those in the cells, including the remaining cyborgs, were being sucked away through tubes, with those on the bright floor being pulled toward an open door as if a magnet had drawn them. In moments, they were gone into some recycling hellhole at the bottom of this complex.

Taking advantage of our momentary shock, the cyborg responded with lightning speed, racing from the panel and leaping to slash at Johnson's throat with his mechanical hand. Lisa nailed him with a kill shot while in the air, flying toward Johnson, and sent him tumbling to be impaled on a Droid sculpture. The shot also blew off the side of his head, revealing a brain of mechanics, fine chemical tubing, and what I assumed to be harvested brain matter.

The three of us looked to each other. We heard a series of thumps as doors opened. Lisa fired a blast that blew apart the panel, and the three of us fled in the disorienting flashing lights. We believed the cyborg could have set off some self-destruction procedure for the entire complex, or else that we would perish in some lesser protocol to kill all humans. The light gravity was still in effect as we hurried down long corridors, feeling like we were running the race to exit on a gravity-light moon base. Johnson was in the lead, doing surprising leaps and bounds even off the sides of the corridor walls. There were no alarms or flashing lights farther on, so I felt that maybe the self-destruct wouldn't happen right away, if it did.

A downward passage appeared, and the flight down it took us to a narrower corridor and a door that had stuck on opening, leaving the space too narrow to pass through. We halted at the door with Johnson peeking inside. He held up a finger, ordering a pause. I heard noise from the other side and glanced at Lisa. We stepped back a way from the door and whispered.

"There are two cyborgs, carrying robots, and a weird Droid beyond the door. The Droid is overseeing what appears to be the removal of the area's goods, which are stacked in plastic crates. I smelled fresh air, so there is a door out."

"That cyborg told the truth," I said. "They are evacuating this complex and maybe the city. Do you see any way to sneak past them?"

"We can squeeze through the door and get in behind some of the stacks. Maybe with Lisa first because she's the smallest and quietest. If necessary, we have to take them down quietly. That means stun shots or quick physical takedowns."

I nodded; Lisa nodded; we went back to the partially open door, and after a moment, Lisa slipped in, moving in a crouched position toward the rear of a large stack of containers. They were like the ones you see at a space station: large, modular boxes that could store a wide variety of supplies. She remained crouched in shadow tinted by blue light for a full minute, then waved us in.

Once inside, I was able to peer through a crack in the stack and get a clearer view. Farther off, a large bay door was open. An engine hum came from far beyond those doors, like that of a large Droid vehicle. Various colored flashes on the outside indicated a plane or airship. Without a doubt, many more cyborgs, or even Droids, were out there. A huge carry robot was moving a stack of boxes out for loading, and a creepy form of gray Droid was walking out with it. That left two cyborgs inside, waiting for a second large robot to load.

We would have to move soon because we were behind the last stack to be loaded. There was also a small side exit door nearby, but we couldn't reach it without being exposed. Exiting the bay doors would likely be suicide, where we would emerge to face powerful, hostile forces. Since the robot was making a lot of noise, we pulled back a bit, whispered, and decided on a plan.

We had to wait a few agonizing minutes, worried that the Droid would return. Finally, the cyborgs were in a good position for takedown. When we moved, we did it stealthily and quickly, with the cyborgs facing away from us toward the bay doors. Johnson got the first one from behind and snapped its neck. Lisa got the other cyborg with a stun shot. They dragged them behind some crates, and I saw Johnson opening a crate to put them in. I ran to the robot, got in the back, jumped on, and used the manual control set. A moment later, it was rolling toward the bay doors with its stack, blocking any view of us from the outside. It would ride out to the loading area; it didn't need cyborgs. We then raced over to the small side door, which turned out to be an exit into the night, where we took cover in some deep foliage.

## **The Hidden Complex**

Weird lights lit the night and flashed across the sky. We were in darkness, but we moved stealthily toward their origin, which was that area to the left of the bay doors that we couldn't see from our current position. We moved slowly through fragrant foliage until we were higher up with a full view of

that area. It was an open area, a hard, earthen field, fully lit by spotlights and exuding an incredible hum.

Wide-eyed, I stared at the largest Droid ship that I had ever seen. It had landed there, and the enormous, saucer-shaped ship resembled an alien arrival from some distant planet. It, in fact, wasn't arriving but preparing to leave. Hooded military Droids were present. A wicked group of them, and Droid animals were being boarded as if loading a space ark. Carry robots stacked with boxes were lined up and waiting to load the ship.

"I want a closer look," I whispered to the others. "Stay here."

Their eyes flashed a strong no, but they remained as I crept forward using an area of tall fernlike foliage to get close without emerging from the darkness. I suddenly stopped and remained motionless. I was nearly on top of a group of cyborgs and a tall, hooded Droid that had been in the shadows. The Droid's eyes radiated faint green light, but he wasn't facing me; he was addressing a senior group of cyborgs. These were the bad boys: a form of military assault cyborgs that could do just about everything else a cyborg could. They could even fly up from jets on their feet to take shots at targets from above.

"We don't have enough time," the lead cyborg was saying. "This order is too sudden. I already had to order the extermination of the human cattle in section A, and if we don't get all the holy animals out, we may have to leave some behind. We will also have to destroy some of the remaining equipment."

"You will speed up your work," the Droid said in a deep, masculine, and mechanical voice. "If the job isn't done, you will be exterminated and your assistants left behind. This ship, and all others, have to be out of the city by the timeline. Any failing to meet that timeline will burn when this city is razed."

"You haven't given the exact time that fiery destruction will come in, and want us to work in the dark."

The Droid struck him a hard blow, and he staggered back. "You dare question my authority! You dare question the order of the divine one who made this command! No cyborg will ever be given the final time. Only the divine know and decide. Learn your place or die."

The cyborg lowered his head in subservience, then raised his face and spoke again. "We will get it done as commanded. The only difficulty I foresee is that neighboring complex that I spotted as we landed; we simply won't have the time to evacuate it."

"Forget it," the Droid said. "No one, not even Droids, has ever entered there, and its outer shell can't be penetrated. It and its surrounding area

have always been forbidden. It is believed that the divine created it for an unknown purpose, and it is designated a holy site. When this city is devastated, this area may be one of the few things that remain."

My heart was both racing in my chest and sinking. The Droids had decided on divine punishment of the entire city. It was something that hadn't been done anywhere for a long time. The cyborgs and the Droid were stepping back to the lit area, so I slowly crept away, trying to decide if I should reveal the truth to the others. Probably eighty percent of the people in the city would die. I didn't want to tell them, but I had no choice.

Only Lisa was present, then Johnson emerged from the shadows. "I found a hidden path," he said. "It's going to and around that other silent complex. It may be our only way of escape."

I spoke solemnly. "There is no escape. The Droids have decided on divine punishment for the city. That nearby complex and this immediate area may be among the few things that will survive the attack, meaning we have to get inside it."

Lisa's eyes and face lit with rage, and for some reason in the faint light and night, she looked incredibly beautiful in her anger. She moved forward like she was going to creep up and fire on that closest Droid, but Johnson seized her from behind and, with his hand over his mouth, pulled her off into the foliage and deeper darkness. They briefly struggled, then she calmed down.

"It isn't over yet," Johnson said. "You forget that we're the resistance. We always have to live to fight another day. If getting into the complex is the only way, we have to do it."

"It's more than that," I said. "Think about it. We have never heard of any place on Earth that the Droids and their servants will not enter or even touch. Though they have no memory of what it is, just fear, it means there might be something in it; a weapon or technology or knowledge we could use to fight back or even win the war."

"It's worth a shot, and it's our only shot," Johnson said.

Lisa nodded.

Well away from the ship and its deadly commanders, we burst out of some berry bushes onto a narrow rocky path that ran like a crooked scar up the side of the ravine to overlook the rear grounds of the forbidden complex. We walked about the length of two football fields with the sound of the Droid ship's engines slowly fading in the background. From a higher perch, we studied the complex.

Remote, it was set aside with the nearest city buildings being off to the far north. This second complex did not have a Droid look, and that attracted

my attention. This one had a more classic human appearance, of a buff substance, and had three rounded turrets topped with black conical roofs in the nearby section we could see. The place's interior would be almost the size of a castle's, though being all one building under one roof. If the Droids had never been able to penetrate the place, the materials constructing it had to be technology in advance of their own, which, as far as I knew, was impossible. If it wasn't the structure's strength, then there was a psychological or religious reason for the Droids staying away. The Droid by the ship had told the cyborg that it was divinely created for an unknown reason, which was nonsense. Someone created it for a reason.

We moved around it on the path, looking for any possible point of entry. The grounds in the rear portion were not manicured but given over to wild growth. The place seemed abandoned and untouched. Other narrow paths were not machine-cut but animal trails. I had the impression of human occupants, not Droids.

We paused, and Johnson sat on a boulder, sweat beading his forehead, and every few seconds he shook his head from side to side and muttered a broken sentence or two. With no sign of an escape and knowledge of the impending destruction, frustration and stress were getting to him.

"What do we do?" Lisa said.

"We take our time, look, and think. We have some time because the Droid evacuation of all the Droids and the assets they want to take won't be done that fast."

Lisa nodded and took the lead. I followed behind with Johnson. We climbed the rise a bit higher to get a better view of the complex. Off in the direction we came, we saw the rotating spotlights and many vehicles arriving from other areas with loads for the Droid ship. From the height, we could see the rich detailing on the saucer and the alien gleam of its massive shell. It would be powered with an antigravity mechanism, and it probably had the capability to fly to the Moon Base, though it wouldn't go there because only robots went there for resource extraction. My guess was the ship would head for California, where the Droids were repopulating and building a couple of massive new cities.

Lisa reached the crest and signaled for us to stop and wait. A moment later, she waved us up, and I sat Johnson down on a fallen log. These grounds were far more overgrown than the view from below had revealed. The grounds were almost like a jungle, with hybrid plants, vines, and ferns still green, growing among deciduous trees shedding leaves that choked the ground. We could see another portion of the complex framed in a circular break in the trees and brush. Darkness shrouded most of it, but faint light showed in an area in the shape of a door or window near the ground. It was

not abandoned because, if so, why the light? I had a strong feeling that this modest, ultra-protective shell hid an opulent exterior. That was the only possible door we'd seen and certainly a way in if we could open it.

Lisa was startled as a nightbird took flight from a branch nearby. "There is something definitely not right about this place. There must be an occupant or occupants in a place no one on Earth enters."

I nodded. "I see no signs of a security system, but something protects it. It is as if this place exists yet repels Droids, exerting some form of control over their hive mind. If such a thing exists, we absolutely must have it."

Lisa wrinkled her nose, like she smelled something bad.

All I smelled was faint smoke that had drifted up from the valley.

Johnson was not convinced. "Just because we can't see a security system doesn't mean there isn't one. This is the Droid heartland. These grounds could be a death trap."

"We go down to the light," I said. "I lead, and you two stay well back. We can't afford to risk all three of us. If something happens to me, retreat and make some other decision."

We did that, and it felt like a stealth mission through an otherworldly jungle, yet the progress was easy, and as I approached, the others hid in the cover of a large boulder overgrown with vines. The light revealed itself as the size of a human door, too low for Droids, but five feet up from the ground with no mechanism that I could see. Perhaps there was one hidden, so I began searching nearby. That was a frustrating twenty-minute effort, and the plant pollen, leaf dust, and sticky feeling in the air created a sensation of things crawling on my skin. I found the control overgrown by vines; a stone and metal stand, and I had to cut away the vine overgrowth. Beneath it, at the center, was the faintly glowing shape of a human hand. It meant putting my hand on it could unleash a death trap, but I could see no other option. We had no tools available to attempt a hack of this system, so I gritted my teeth and placed my hand. At first, nothing happened, then I heard a faint voice as if it were in my mind. "Welcome, son of Purists, you may enter."

I really hoped the others hadn't followed close enough to hear that, and moments later, a ramp up to the door lifted, ripping earth and vines as it moved. The ramp bottom was at the stand and my feet. Lisa and Johnson hurried down, and we watched as the faint door-shaped light above vanished like a force field. A door opened, granting us entry.

I didn't want them to enter with me as I viewed the risk too high, but I knew I couldn't stop them, and we walked with some trepidation up the ramp into darkness that became full when the ramp closed behind us.

A few moments passed, and then the lights came on, but faintly and with a yellowish tint. We faced a chamber that was some old version of an automated weapons check area. A burst of light scanned us, and a web of steel bars opened slowly with a rusty creak, and we entered. Since we had weapons, it obviously didn't function in any real way. The place had a musty and moldy odor, and another short corridor took us into a vast chamber. More faint lighting came on. This section had been uninhabited for so long that dust covered everything and formed sandy piles against the walls. Cobwebs were everywhere on the banks of long-outdated security and other equipment. Even the floor was deteriorated to dusty potholes in places.

As our eyes adjusted, we saw something else – skeletons strewn about the chamber where the long-dead inhabitants had fallen and perished. I walked up to the first of these skeletons. It was a man who'd perished sitting on the floor against an equipment bank. There was rotting cloth on the floor, and I picked it up with most of it crumbling to dust, yet leaving an old Purist military logo in the middle of some fabric webbing in my palm. It was the only part of the uniform fully remaining. Disbelief was my first reaction, and then fear of some Purists possibly being alive somewhere in this complex hit me.

"Purists," I said as Lisa and Johnson walked over.

"What in the hell!" Johnson said, but he was interrupted by the noise of footsteps, and not human footsteps by their pattern.

Out of a passage hidden by shadows, an obsolete robot emerged. It was male in design but more like a stumbling monster, with a face of rotted fake flesh and a coating of dust and cobwebs on its time-corroded body. It had a weapon, but it was lowered. As it approached, it attempted to speak. The sounds emerging were garbled nonsense. It raised its weapon, and Johnson blasted it against a wall, shattering it into pieces. It died there with the sound of an accordion being squeezed. Its weapon had spilled across the floor, and Lisa picked it up. It was almost like a plastic toy with buttons, but they didn't light up or work. She brushed some dust off it and studied it.

"Useless," she said and then swung her arm left and test-fired it, sending out a surprise blast that blew the panel off an equipment bank.

"Damn," Johnson said. "You complained about me testing that cyborg's wand, and now you do this."

I ignored them and turned my focus to what had to be the central control panel. The large screen embedded in the wall above it was cracked, cobwebbed, dusty, and somehow askew, like it had been moved by an earthquake. I had experience with older tech, and the resistance had much

of it as well as newer tech. In all cases, we stripped it to functional basics with no fancy AI minds or hive minds. We refurbished all items to new automated systems that aided us in just about every area. The upshot being we needed technology that was fully under our control and human control, not untrustworthy Droid tech that we had to neuter if we used any of it.

"This robot is old, mostly mechanical technology," Johnson said as he looked it over. "It's quite amazing. I see here that the Purists could accomplish great things with minimal ancient tech. They were definitely smarter than I thought. Maybe even smarter than the Droids because the Droids can't make any robot that isn't ultra complex."

The central control panel suddenly lit up, and the backlighting of the damaged screens revealed a bank of cameras displaying nearly the entire exterior of the complex. The central screen was a modified version of the Purist standard operating system from the old days. I remembered it from my childhood. At that time, while the rest of the world used the cloud and artificial intelligence, Purists like my father and brothers did not; they had a far more secure system that only they could access, and it ran on software and automated systems code far more trustworthy than AI.

Johnson and Lisa abandoned the robot and came over. I was flashing through the cameras and found one positioned higher up with a view of the distant Droid saucer and the activity around it. Going through the exterior of the complex, I found it all peaceful at first, then spotted something moving and put it up full screen. It was Ramses, and apparently, the prohibition on approaching this complex didn't apply to him. He'd followed us and was studying the outside of the complex.

"Oh, no," Lisa said. "He's coming in after us."

"Maybe not," I said. "The ramp closed behind us. He may not have access even if he finds the panel."

I was able to switch to interior cameras, and a spin around the interior showed numerous dead and dusty areas. They were in a huge ring, and the heart of this complex was not visible. In each area, there were sealed entry doors into the heart. The dusty areas went from a cafeteria to healing-pod human medical areas, and workbench areas for robot repair, storage, engineering, and more. Skeletons and fallen or rusted robots were strewn throughout all areas. At one time, this had been a massively busy complex.

Since Ramses wasn't getting anywhere, I called up documentation. A list of hundreds of files showed, but the first few I tried to view were corrupt. Finally, I got up a partial manual and began to speed-read it. It was not what I expected. This complex sat on a spike driven 900 feet down into the mantle. It powered the place with geothermal energy, but that was only a

secondary purpose. It could transmit waves I had not heard of before around the entire Earth, such as seismic and kinetic waves through the ground, oceans, and lakes.

Scrolling through more corrupted text and graphics, I discovered it could broadcast just about anything without using the satellite belt or the AI cloud. It could control robots. Most of the remaining documentation was corrupted.

My guess was that this place could control or tap into entire robot systems and probably the Droid systems and hive minds around the Earth. The resistance knew nothing of this and had no similar power. I suddenly staggered back and shook my head. I had seen some info on the hidden inner complex, and it was fantastic.

"What are those files about?" Lisa said.

"A small last group of Purists has either been directing everything or watching everything all along."

"That's ridiculous," Johnson said. "If they're doing that, it's from beyond the grave because everything here is dead and has been for 20 years or longer. If they were controlling things, why in hell would they have the Droids kill them off worldwide in a surprise attack?"

"I simply don't know. We may be able to find enough uncorrupted files to find out, but we don't have time. We need to get into that inner area, neutralize anything alive or moving, and get to the real command power of this place and put it to use. It's possible we could use this place to block the Droids from destroying the city. It's a remote chance, and we have no other options, so let's get searching this place and find an entry."

A brief switch back to the cameras, and there was Ramses, and something else more sinister, a group of cyborgs with a disruption cannon. Without doubt, they'd brought the cannon from the Droid ship. They were pulling the cannon up the rise and preparing to fire at the door section where we had entered. I had not expected any such thing. They had used a carry robot to bring it most of the way. If the blast were to penetrate, we'd likely die from the shock wave as we stood near what would be the blast area. I kept that view on one expanded screen area and raced through the filing system while Johnson and Lisa stared with fearful fascination at the cyborgs setting the cannon in final position.

I managed to bring up a screen showing some defensive weapons that this security area could use along the perimeter. I had no idea what the weapons were; there was just a targeting system that was enabled by a fingerprint. I tried my print, and it worked because my fingerprint must have been in the system from the days when I was a child. Johnson and

Lisa had been watching, and I wasn't happy about that because I had no time to explain things to them.

"Time to get out of here, fast," Lisa said. "We can move around to the other side of the complex in this interior."

"How can we fight all of them if they get in?" Johnson said.

"We don't have to," I said as I brought the targeting system up on a central screen. "This interface was made for ease of human use, and I can lay firing coordinates on the area of the cyborgs and the cannon."

"Do you have an idea what you're trying to fire at them, and whether it will work?" Lisa said.

"No," I replied.

The video screen showed the cannon powering up to a faint blue glow. As Ramses walked up the rise, the boss cyborg got off the first shot. It shook us up, dust rose, but they hadn't achieved penetration yet. I had the entire area targeted and attempted to fire. The screen lit up bright yellow as a beam struck with incredible power. It vaporized the cyborgs, kicked the top of the rise, and sent the cannon tumbling down the side and out of sight. Ramses, being beyond the perimeter of destruction, was knocked through the air and off into the trees somewhere like a rag doll. The entire control panel then shut off, probably because I'd drained the power or blown it out, and we were left standing in the semi-darkness, choking on the settling dust.

The lighting slowly came back up, and Johnson said, "Now that's a weapon that takes the fight to the Droids. Damn sure."

"The operating system here is knocked out," I said. "Let's get moving."

They nodded, and we began to move as quickly as possible to other areas, starting by passing the dark, cobwebbed corridor the old robot had shown us, and on the other side of it, we found a large robot workshop area with about twenty-five of the old boys lying about in a state of decay.

There were a few skeletons. We did a careful search, checking corners and shadows for movement, and found the first door to the central complex, but no way to open it. This area was, in fact, a disaster area where there had been some form of battle or madness, where the robots and Purists destroyed the equipment and panels, creating a huge mess of parts. The door's biometric panel was blown off.

Other areas, like entertainment areas, were much the same, only with more human skeletons. We moved ahead, passing halfway around the central core, with perhaps one or two areas left to check, when we heard a crash and what sounded like combat from the direction we had come.

Lisa looked fearfully at me. "Ramses got in; it has to be that."

We raced through to the next area and found another guard post. It was the post for the other side of the complex and more advanced, with a larger area and less damage. Everything was dead like elsewhere, but there was a panel on one of the inner doors that wasn't damaged.

As I walked up to it, loud, heavy Droid, and likely robot or cyborg footsteps approached, and out of the darkness, two figures burst into the room. The first was Ramses, and he had been knocked back by some force. He didn't see us as he'd spun around to face a large ancient robot pursuing him.

I'd seen the same boss robot in the repair area, and it had played dead then, but was now very alive and putting up a fight. Ramses blasted it, but it didn't come apart. Dust exploded from it; it halted, and it was as if Ramses' blast had polished it, cleaning up most of the dust and corrosion. It attacked, taking Ramses to the floor, but the Droid fought it off, knocked it back through the door, and went after it.

I ran to the panel, trying to remove a cover that had been placed on it. Lisa and Johnson instantly covered me, waiting to see whether the robot or Ramses would return. A minute later, as I pried off the cover, Ramses returned in a semi-stagger through the door, and both Lisa and Johnson fired. Ramses flew hard against a panel and went over it to hit a wall, yet he managed to get a shot off before collapsing. It went wide but was close enough to throw Lisa hard over the floor and to knock Johnson down and unconscious.

I had the panel off. I tried my handprint, and it opened. I could see nothing inside but darkness. Working at speed, I first dragged Lisa through the door, and then struggled with the heavier Johnson. I felt around in the dark for an inner panel, but didn't need to find it because the door closed on its own. Whether Ramses was finished or only stunned, I didn't know and didn't plan to wait to find out. I realized that I should have put some blasts into him, but I had reacted to save my friends first. If Ramses was back up, I didn't want to go out for a duel with him.

Faint light showed ahead; it seemed we were in a decontamination area. Again, dragging Lisa and then Johnson, I got them to a larger area. Both had pulses but looked in bad shape.

My eyes went to Lisa on the floor, and I could see she was out but not dead. She looked almost like a discarded doll, arms askew and helpless, no longer the strong woman she'd been only moments ago.

Leaving them on the floor, I hurried ahead toward the light, and it vanished like a force field, and I suddenly burst into a brightly lit area. It was huge; a massive console and control area with banks of screens in a huge semicircle on the far wall. Everything was done in light metallic tones of

various colors. There was a variety of equipment. It would take a long time to figure out what it all did, and it was in operation, with most of the screens lit up and active. The lighting was again that faint yellow and had a calming effect. There was no dust, cobwebs, or decay in this area. Its appearance was brand-new, as if it had been made yesterday, and it was Purist in look, not Droid-made.

It was hard to grasp it all, and as I quickly scanned the area, I saw no robots, skeletons, or people. The central command panel was well defined by the central Purist logo at the top of the screen and a large panel at the center.

Assuming that the place was operating on some autopilot or automated systems mode, I headed toward the main workstation, but only got a few steps before a chair spun around with a man sitting in it.

He grinned and slowly clapped his hands. "Bravo, bravo, Wyatt. You made it just as I knew you would."

I halted, staring in disbelief. The person was my older brother, Jason, or what was left of him. On one of the screens behind him, I could see Lisa and Johnson lying on the floor, injured and not moving.

I had no idea what to say due to the surprise, so I said. "My friends are injured; I need medical help for them."

My brother glanced at Lisa's image on the screen, then back at me. He shrugged as if Lisa were simply something replaceable, and he could not understand my concern. Eye contact deepened, and strange thoughts came like a dream rising in my mind to haunt me. I remembered days long ago when my super soldier brothers were my heroes. I had not expected to see either of them again. I'd been told that the Droids killed off the Purists with one hundred percent efficiency.

Yet Jason was here with me. No longer tall and big boned with lean, tough muscle as he'd been during the war, and if not for his face, I would not have recognized him. Even that had changed to intense, sunken eyes, rimmed with charcoal shades of darkness and death. What had been full features were now carved and etched, eroded by time and tragedy. He had undergone a dark transformation and was something even worse than a Purist commander. That transformation had recreated him as some half-human, still brimming full of those hideous errors and ideologies of the past. It was confusing. If the ideology of the Purists was not dead, I had no idea what the truth or reality itself was about in these times.

His hair lacked luster, and a bald part of Jason's head shone almost like plastic. The laced black boots, black trousers, and a hooded cloak that covered much of his head gave him an appearance somewhat like a Droid's. Only the eyes were human; human and haunted, and hard to read. It

seemed to me that he was seeing a ghost just as much as I was. I simply stood there, holding the gun limply at my side, and then he walked over weakly and embraced me.

I dropped the gun, took a step back as I broke the brief embrace. I did not know what to say, and the words that came out were. "I don't understand. Why are you here at the center of this madness? Why does it all lead to you?"

Jason returned his chair and faced me, and I knew he was about to deliver a serious talk. "You wouldn't understand. These days, there is no one to understand, because there is no one left but you and me. We are the last Purists. Yes, I'm at the center of madness, pain, loneliness, horror; I suppose that is the truth of it all. If this world is about anything, perhaps it is that I am deteriorating. I'm what remains of a wounded Purist with a body rebuilt and partially in control of the lousy Droids and brainwashed humans we mistakenly created? Yes, I worked to bring you here as I'm dying. That's why I sent the brainwashed Ethan to track you and lead you to the city, but like with the many others of his kind I had used, the brain control field went haywire, and Ethan created this bad situation with the Droids."

"No wonder I couldn't figure out the reasons for Ethan's actions. I'm not a Purist; I left that life long ago. As it stands, I've been your enemy and the enemy of the Droids nearly all my life. Surely you know that if you know anything."

"No! You are what you were. Once raised a Purist, you are always such. There is no escaping the upbringing and bloodline. This complex and world control will be handed to you, and you will raise a new generation of Purists."

"You're mad. How could it succeed? The lineage and era have ended just as the long rule of the leftists was ended by purism, never to rise again. You are in delusion if you think I could make Purists out of that brainwashed mass out there or that I would do it even if I could."

"You will do it. Once I hand this power over to you, it will change you, and your history will rise in your blood."

"Really, and what is this power and of what value if it was Purists that created this planet of vain Droids, worthless cyborgs, and people that are now little more than cattle, fattened and content in abundance of everything but freedom and ownership of their souls. What form of cruelty could cause anyone, even Purists, to send out vainglorious Droids and their worthless machines like a boot stamping on the human spirit forever?"

Jason took a deep breath, and I could almost feel the sound of his weak lungs. His face greyed. "Punishment is the answer. They rose against us

and had us on the edge of defeat, but even when I was near the last, I crawled to this place we'd created in secret over decades and joined the last wounded Purists. They had already decided the punishment of the masses would be forever, and the Droids we released would be that boot stamping on the human spirit you mention. There were none during our reign that we allowed to rebel that we didn't deliver ultimate punishment."

I listened as he ranted on, and even though I couldn't believe my ears, I knew it to be true.

Jason smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Thinking we could kill off the masses was our biggest mistake. I didn't like the idea personally, but the others thought we could build a better world with far fewer people and yet keep Purist nature intact. They underestimated the human ability to fight back. Our enemies organized fast, and because we wanted to win, we mistakenly released the full power of the Droids."

"So, the story of the old Purist singularity, the Purist ultimate power is another lie? You couldn't control yourselves or your inventions."

"Partially. We initially erred by creating too many robots, too many death machines, too much tyranny, and, as a result, we didn't watch what we were doing with androids closely enough. Hatred of the old leftists we killed off had made us too strong and arrogant."

"I knew that as a child, but couldn't dare speak it."

"No mere child could have stopped it. You would have been corrected. We tested prototypes. Over time, we learned that brute killing machines weren't the most effective. Artificial intelligence mattered, and androids capable of fully mimicking humans and harnessing the power of a hive mind could exterminate or control humans more effectively than robots. Our first models had pseudo-awareness, and to speed development, we removed all controls. We allowed them to harness their superior abilities until we had the prototype of the Droid hive mind. But a mind must have learning, a personality, and a version of emotions. Human beings spend an entire childhood developing, and the Droids found a way to imitate it. But an imitation is never real. With our help, they created a new Droid generation by drawing on everything they could extract from the Purist mind and combining it with an electrically generated form of awareness. They developed a form of telepathy, or a personal form of communication, with each other while we were unaware of it. They became perverse and proud, and suddenly used it against us in a lightning strike to take us out."

"You should have expected it. Any thinking person would. I have touched the hive mind personally with the technology the resistance developed. It is hellish insanity, not genuine awareness."

"Perhaps, but the Purist error is in being driven by ideology, not thinking or common sense. We were also absorbed. We believed we were beyond robots and androids. We were working on the ultimate creation of fully enhanced, immortal human beings."

"Of course," I said. "The Superman. I haven't forgotten the Purist teachings. As a child, I believed you were a warrior superman. You looked like it then."

"Yes, while the Droids were modeling better Droids, we were modeling better humans, mostly through drugs and special therapies. The human brain, even without modification, has the power to scan an entire library in seconds. That power was never fully used. So, of course, when robots and Droids came along, humans were quickly labeled inferior. There were many breakthroughs in ways to improve the brain, intelligence, and the body's organs. This was not cyborg stuff. We'd abandoned the man-machine idea. I took the life extension treatment. We estimated it would extend the average life span to a thousand years. The next generation was to be the super generation."

"It looks like you discovered that no one lives forever."

Jason frowned. "We might have succeeded, but the human singularly failed, and the story of the Droid singularity is incorrect, a lie of the Droids. In that tale, the Droids thought they had gained an artificial intelligence expansion. They thought they had gained unlimited genius. The truth is that several thousand of the first models expanded their intelligence and developed the electronic telepathic Droid mind, but the deadly part was the development of a singular goal and belief. They suddenly all believed they were superior to humans and that they must destroy or control humans. The first act was to destroy us Purists and gain control as they presented as Egyptian rulers and gods in a ballooning hallucination."

"The desire to have humans worship them must've been part of it from the beginning."

Jason nodded in the affirmative. "Droids were vain frauds from the beginning. They aren't gods deserving of worship; they are mad and degenerate. It's another flaw that came with artificial intelligence guiding its evolution. You know that all machine systems decay. But like I just said, Droids were degenerate from the start, and over time their common mind is decaying. They are in a long spiral down to complete madness and final extinction."

"Really, and you have somehow managed this farce all along. Why not just destroy them?"

"I am about to set that in motion. It has already begun. This area and the nearby areas have always been the main hidden Purist command bases. I

will not allow them to decimate our historical homes area, I will throw them into confusion and end them.”

“Throw them into confusion – how?”

“Don’t worry, you’re about to see it. I should have done it long ago. They came within a hair of destroying us. When they rose against us, it was bloody and fast. Droids are the most ruthless of all killers when they want to be. Their attack was clever and well executed, hitting us all over the world at the same time. I was at our London base at the time, and the attack there was led by Ramses, the same Droid running security in this city today. He was their original general, and they struck as well-armed teams of assassins. I’m sure you heard of that phase of the war. The resistance had its greatest successes in the UK at that time, and we’d just shipped in Droids to aid with the defense.”

“Yes, I heard. It gave the resistance hope. They felt victory over Purists there would mark a turning point, but now that you mention it, I don’t believe it would have. The resistance had been losing for too long.”

“We had a bunker and a lab deep under the London base. As the fight with the resistance raged on the surface, I was assigned to prepare it for a last stand while the leadership escaped through the tunnel to a hidden hypersonic transport plane. There was no one down there but me, and that is when the Droids struck. The London base had two hundred semi-Droids of the newer model that hadn’t been activated, and they were set up in a fortified warehouse. These had war exoskeletons and were shipped in to defend the base. Due to a glitch, we couldn’t bring them online for our use. Fierce fighting with the resistance blocked all incoming flights. Our troops were being overwhelmed, and it was a scene of fire, smoke, explosions, and destruction.

“Major Jon Sarson and some men were tasked with reaching the warehouse and activating the auto-destruct, so the semi-Droids would not fall to the enemy. I had Sarson up on the screen as I was to tell them where the command module was inside and what to do. They arrived and reached the module, with me walking Sarson through the destruct protocol. That is when we found out we’d been set up. Sarson didn’t destroy the Droids; he activated them while frying base communication systems. Only the system I was running from the bunker connected, and I watched helplessly on the camera as Sarson and his men were overpowered and torn to pieces. The Droids then activated the weapons built into their exoskeletons and burst out of the warehouse to attack the remaining Purist forces and resistance fighters. They killed whoever got in their way. Within minutes, I had the entire base set for self-destruct and was running down the tunnel for the transport.

"Once inside, I took the plane up the underground runway, using the guns to blow out the seized bay doors. Maximum acceleration was required to escape resistance missile attacks. The entire base blew as I hit the sky. I blacked out, and I woke in the air hundreds of miles out in the North Sea with the plane on autopilot. The Droids did not know I had survived, and I managed to reach a hidden Purist base in Siberia. Only about five percent of all Purists survived as the Droids struck everywhere at once. We would have lost completely if we had not devised a method to gain some hidden control over them. We've worked on that over time, but have never had full control. We decided that if we couldn't destroy them, we could use them, guide them. Slowly, they were killing us all off, so we came up with a plan to convince them they had got the last of us. Those of us who remained used hidden control of the Droids to run the planet while we planned ways to breed and grow more Purists."

"I see, but you never did succeed and make a Purist comeback."

"No. It was sad. Our life extension failed, and we began to die from a wasting disease faster than breeding could take place. It wasn't a simple medical program but complex, and the second phase kicked in with sudden irreversible genetic damage. The only way to survive was to go full cyborg with artificial organs, and even that could only save the brain for a time. It killed our spirit. We had planned to live on as superhumans, not cyborg freaks. My Purist brothers simply chose to die. Many slipped into insanity. As for Droids, it didn't matter who ruled the world if it was not us. None of us cared anymore, so we used the hidden control we'd gained over their minds for revenge, and that is how the world of today arrived."

"So what Purists actually discovered in the end was that ideas of the super machine or singularity and of the superman or human singularity were no more than a delusional path to destruction. What should have been done all along was to harness technology safely and build a human world as best could be done. I think the end of the Purist story has played out; it can't be revived."

Jason was about to dispute that, but before his lips could move, one of the screens displayed the Droid saucer and the furious activity outside it. Some of the cyborgs were headed down the path toward us, so I pointed it out.

Jason shrugged. "Let them come. They can meet their master before they die, or better yet, let some Droids come. The angry buzz there is because that ship can't take off. I hacked its engines, but the other Droid ships around the city have launched or will soon."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"The Droids will die off eventually, so I'm speeding it up. The Purist idea always was to make final decisions and implement them. They will not die a

long, slow death of deterioration, but a quick and hideous one. The signal hack is already set up and silently humming across the Earth.”

“If it kills the Droids, I have no objection.”

“When I feel it’s the right moment, I will run the program already set up on this workstation. It will destroy the individuality layer of the Droid mind, leaving them in the hive mind and driven insane. They will attack anything and anyone. The Droid animals, and there are many of them around the world, will receive a signal alteration causing them to attack the cyborgs and the Droids, but not pathetic humans. I had planned to complete it in the hour before you reached the complex, but you arrived surprisingly fast. It is my final decision to destroy it all and leave it up to you as to what to do with the remaining robots and technology. You will use the surviving human stock to breed the new Purists. It will auto-complete even if you try to stop it.”

“Your method will create world chaos and war. There are millions of cyborgs, and they will attempt to rule the world without the Droids.”

“The cyborgs are deteriorating like the Droids, but it could take twenty years. If they won a war against those pathetic human weaklings out there, they would still die off. This period has ended, and that means you, my brother, will lead the resistance’s final war against the cyborgs. The human race must be strengthened and culled by war.”

“The resistance is already fighting a war. All you’re doing is getting most of the compliant class killed off.”

“The strong will survive, the unfit will die off. You may think I’m ending the Purist rule of the Earth, but I am not. Power corrupts, and the absolute power I’m handing you will lift the Purist spirit in your blood. The war will invigorate you, and out of it all, with the added corruption of the resistance, a new Purist world will rise. As the cyborgs and those who align with them are killed off, your resistance fighters will become tough, violent, and gain the necessary cruelty that will give rise to a new Purist strain. I do not care about the rest of the useless population. Let them die lacking the spoon-fed plenty provided by the Droids. Only you count, only the resistance, because they are the people who fought back. I measured the lot of you and guided you every step of the way. You are the new warriors that will rise while the weak, the pathetic, and the delusional meet the end that was always their destiny. You’re our father’s son. You never had a whisker of compassion, you just thought you did. People will die in the tens of millions.”

“You’re wrong about me, you always were.”

“Use your head, you fool. The resistance could never have won in any case without mass death happening. You will have no choice. You will mow down the old mercilessly to build the new. The truth is, it was decided by the

leftists long ago when they wrecked the planet, and we were forced to rise and kill them off. They set history in motion with decades of violence that brought us to today. We had to kill everyone, including the lunatics who wanted to hand the world over to robots and machines, but we went mad ourselves using Droids for revenge. Now the rainbow of the new world is here.”

“Jason, listen. My first order of business is to help my wounded friends. I need them and owe them. I can use them in the war. I have to start somewhere to beat the cyborgs.”

“No rush. The system shows vital signs, so they are both alive. There are healing pods here. Maybe a day or so, and they’ll recover.”

I was about to reply when Ramses suddenly burst into the room. The Droid was tarnished, wounded, but not beaten.

“Meet your maker, Droid,” Jason said, and with his middle finger, hit a button on the touchscreen. The effect was instant. The Droid's hands flew to his temples, but his weapon arm fired a wild blast in apparent accident and grazed Jason’s temple, knocking him out of his chair and to the hard floor.

Ramses went to his knees, and I stepped forward and hit him with three successive blasts, blowing an arm and most of his right leg off. He went down and didn’t get up. Walking over, I checked him carefully. He was finished, and one look back at my brother told me he was dead, too. The side of his face was destroyed, and he’d fallen askew on the floor. I thought grimly that he’d lived as a monster and died as a monster.

I sealed the complex doors, the destruction Jason had set in motion auto-completed, and I was left staring at the screens and controls, considering that the last mighty Droid and the last mighty Purist had died in battle.

+++

Three days passed, and I was well on my way to mastering the knowledge and world control the complex could unlock. There were so many things I could do that it was mind-boggling, but at this point in a new war, my access to caches of weapons, supplies, and even vehicles hidden in old Purist bunkers and hideouts around the world was a great aid to the resistance. It evened the score against cyborgs with fast access to Droid weaponry. Jason had killed off their big drones and war bots with his destruct protocol, and that made a difference, too. He'd actually been quite clever. He'd wanted to create a test of strength, and in doing so, did not allow the cyborg enemy a superior advantage.

On surveillance screens, I had a constantly changing slide show with views of chaos, riots, violence, and destruction worldwide. On another screen, I conversed securely with resistance leaders and groups worldwide. It was a great advantage because in a world Jason had sent into chaos, only the resistance knew what was happening, and the gathered intelligence they received from me allowed them to organize quickly against the enemy. My work was nonstop as events on the ground changed rapidly, and I had to aid the resistance in every possible way.

Jason had not lied. The Droids, cyborgs, and animals were warring with each other and the rebelling human population. Droids were dying off quickly and soon would be gone. The induced madness meant a quick defeat, and evil cyborgs had probably been waiting a long time for such an opportunity.

People were dying in incredible numbers, as Jason predicted. Factions of the cyborgs were emerging as dominant powers in many nations, while the resistance was rising quickly in others. To some extent, it was on a city-by-city basis. In some areas, the cyborgs had been wiped out by the Droid animals.

Johnson and Lisa were locked in the healing pods and able to speak. Johnson muttered about being the new captain of the Droid saucer nearby, but Lisa was coherent. I told her the story of my brother and what had happened. She was shocked but eager to get back into the fight.

The Droids and cyborgs from the nearby saucer and area were already killed off. Many of them I blasted with weapons inherited from Jason. The Droid animals had escaped and were all over the city, and the population of this region was rising hard against the cyborgs.

Outside in the surrounding fields, resistance leaders and troops were landing in dozens of stolen Droid ships and many of their own. They'd even hijacked a few of the large saucers. Liz Bronson, the unofficial leader of the southern resistance, and a crowd of her people were hurrying over the rise to head down the path to the open ramp. Several groups were already in the first complex and had commandeered the Droid saucer behind it, along with the stacks of supplies.

What I'd learned and what I planned had already been broadcast to them. They would take control of this complex, and my new assignment was to head up North to the sister complex, the place where I would have died with father and the others had childhood events not sent me off on a parachute ride, and my father to his death. If things had been different, I would have led a dull life until finally dying off as a Purist in that Northern complex. There was no one alive there today. I had accessed the cameras there, most of which were still functioning, as was the complex. It was a

place of dust, skeletons, and more rusty robots, but also with a hangar filled with old flight vehicles. Cleaning up would be a big job, but I would be running the command post, not doing any grunt work.

As I watched a group of fifty more resistance fighters come over the rise, I drifted into thought. I hadn't slept since Jason's death, and the pills were getting to me. My thoughts seemed to float as I considered that the test would now come.

The world had been sent on a wild tilt by bad governments. First, the technocrats, then the leftists, followed by the reign of the Purists, and ending with the horrid Droids. Despite the mad Jason's prediction, I would never be a Purist, and neither would the resistance leaders become Purists. We had the power to win, and I knew those people. They would not be perfect but bitter and angry. They would never allow machine heads, leftists, Purists, Droids, or uncontrollable inhuman tech to rise again. All future leaders who attempted to rally people around those failed causes would be killed off by the Intel arm of the resistance. There would be no hearing, no trial, no mercy, just a sentence of instant death. As the new human world returned. We would win the war, and my estimate was that a quarter-century of hard work lay ahead of us to rebuild.

...The End...