

Snake Doctor

A Novel

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COMPLETE

“And suddenly there was a loud THUMP!” Derek said, thumping the log he was sitting on loudly with the other, smaller log he’d been hiding for the last several minutes. Nearby, Sheila jumped and clung to Harris, Roy rolled his eyes, but felt his heart beat just a little faster, and Andrew whimpered just a little off to the side.

Derek smiled, his face contorted by the flashlight he held under his chin, the shadows from the campfire jumping crazily all around the little group. Only Justine seemed unfazed.

“That’s the best you can do?” she sneered.

“We can’t all be horror-goths like you, Justine,” Sheila said, still holding tightly to Harris, who had his arm around her waist, not willing to let his good fortune go to waste. “Some of us still get scared.”

“But that wasn’t scary,” Justine protested. “That was just startling because of the loud noise he made.”

The others stared at her for a few moments trying to make sense of what she’d just said.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know the difference between scary and startling,” Justine said incredulously.

“Of course we do,” Derek said, lowering the flashlight. “It’s just that we don’t care.” Everyone laughed except Justine.

“I suppose you can do better,” Andrew said.

Justine thought for a moment. Could she do better? Well, of course she could. There was always the story her father had told her. But would it be worth it to waste it on this lot? And furthermore, would any of them get any sleep if she did?

She was frankly surprised that she’d been invited on this trip. At school she wasn’t exactly in the running for the popularity contest that was prom queen. Her stereotypical black makeup, black fingernail polish, dyed black hair, and thin, pale frame instantly made her the target for either ridicule or suspicion, depending on how much people believed about what they’d heard about her. It was all false, of course, except for the part about her love of horror movies. Halloween was her favorite time of the year and it was coming up soon.

Derek, Roy, Andrew, Harris, and Sheila were about as close to the traditional definition of ‘friends’ as she’d ever had and she still completely expected to be ditched in the woods before the camping trip was over.

Overhead the stars shone down. She’d have been just as happy to have laid out in the grass and watched them, but the others had all insisted that ghost stories by the campfire was a

tradition that couldn't be ignored. She just hoped they didn't break out the s'mores later. All that sugar was bound to upset her stomach.

"Come on," urged Andrew.

"She doesn't know any good ghost stories," Roy said, calmly. "She just likes to put on that whole scary image with her skull purse and that long stringy hair." The others chuckled at that.

"Let me ask you this," Justine said, rising to the challenge. She would tell them the story. She would tell it and then she'd get up and walk away. She knew where the car was and could go sleep in there and lock all the doors because she knew they'd want to be within the safety of the metal enclosure themselves once they'd heard it. "What would ghost stories be like if there really were ghosts?"

There was a pause, punctuated by the sound of crickets and a rustle in the nearby underbrush that sent chills up more than one spine. The fire flickered in a brief, chilly gust of wind and there was a strange buzzing noise that seemed to pan all around them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Sheila. "They'd be the same, wouldn't they?"

"Would they?" asked Justine, excited at the prospect of watching Sheila squirm. "What about monsters?"

"What about them?" Harris replied. He fiddled with the tassles on his hoodie, just as he always did when he was a bit nervous. Justine grinned at the sight. She was enjoying this.

"What about...zombies," Justine continued.

"Zombies? What are zombies?" asked Roy, intrigued.

"Zombies?" Justine repeated. "They are the walking dead. Rotting corpses that lurch about, seeking out the living, and feasting upon their flesh. Do any of you know any stories about zombies?"

"Never heard of them," Roy replied.

"Of course you haven't. Because they're real."

"No, I think it's because you just made them up."

"It might seem that way now," Justine went on, "but I think you'll think differently after I've told you my story."

They all waited. Justine settled herself in and adjusted her black woolen leggings.

“This story starts a thousand years ago,” Justine began. “Before we repopulated Earth. That was the first time the walking dead rose from their graves.”

“Where did they come from?” asked Harris.

“Nobody really knows,” Justine lied. She knew, just as they’d known a thousand years ago, but she was taking a risk just telling them this. She knew better than to push her luck by telling them not to think of polar bears.

And so Justine began her story. Under a half moon with the breeze blowing and the clouds wisping overhead she told her little cadre of friends the most frightening story she knew, just as her father had told it to her. Because there was risk...and then there was risk. Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it, and some must be passive guardians, watching and knowing and doing nothing until absolutely necessary.

She began with the fact that, in those days, the word ‘zombie’ was just another monster. Just another boogyman waiting in the dark to scare the children, part of some obscure voodoo cult with a hundred different interpretations. Movies, books, television shows, and video games all had the zombie as their central character. And they were revered. A creature that rotted and shambled and represented what was considered the worst possible fate was practically given hero status.

They lacked the romanticism of the vampire, the untamed power of the werewolf, and outlasted all the folk monsters from cultures around the world. The zombie represented the ultimate in unstoppable, horrifying power through sheer numbers. And the world loved them. Right up until the first real one was sighted.

The initial reaction was typical. Hoax. Publicity stunt. Mistake. Right up until the awesome power of the zombie was fully realized when the first victim was turned.

It should have been easy to contain them. They had no strength, they had no weapons, they were literally falling apart. And for months the threat was contained within concrete walls and studied. Studied by one of Justine’s distant ancestors, so far removed that there was no name for the familial relationship.

“Seen the new cell cultures, Mark?”

Mark Keln, Justine’s ancient progenitor looked up from the microscope. “Looking at them now, Todd,” he replied. “Nothing really new.”

“The way they eat everything, I thought for sure they’d be some kind of cancer on a macro scale,” Todd Whitmire said.

Todd and Mark had been assigned to work on the zombie problem. Not that there was a problem, of course, at least not as far as the public was concerned. This was just a currently unexplained anomaly that science would eventually unravel. And not that they called them 'zombies'. The entire idea was considered science fiction and a lot of people, including Todd, were upset about it. They felt that giving the name of this new disorder the name 'zombie' demeaned it. These were people. People who needed help, and if they were beyond help then they could help others by being studied so that a cure or, for preference, a prevention could be found.

Mark ran his fingers through his thick, curly hair. His hairline was beginning to recede and he absently wondered if maybe this particular nervous tic was contributing to that fact, but he wasn't aware enough of the habit to stop doing it. He only noticed after the fact. He'd decided he really must not care that much and his wife hadn't said anything, so why worry?

"That would have made things quite a bit simpler," Mark admitted. "I've never seen anything like this before."

Mark's training had been in biology. He'd done his PhD on a species of virus that was so obscure that the school had to look into it for a full month before they were convinced he wasn't putting them on. He'd been a natural choice for the CDC to contact about this particular issue. He worked closely with the subject and could hear it moaning in the next room. Todd was assigned to work with him as a behavioral psychologist. They were trying to attack the problem from both ends; as a biological disease or other agent or, failing that, some kind of previously unknown psychiatric disorder. So far both had come up empty.

"It's like the only motivation left is to feed," Todd mused. "No instinct for self-preservation, no sexual drive, no sense of pain. It's as if it will keep eating until everything is eaten and then wait forever for something else to come along to eat."

Todd unwrapped a Twinkie and popped it in his mouth. He was in his mid-30s and had never grown out of the dietary habits of a college student, despite having a doctorate of his own. His white shirt spilled out around his belly, protruding against his belt holding up pants that were about a size too small, but which he refused to replace because he insisted he was going to start losing weight any minute now.

"What now?" Todd asked.

"Damned if I know," Mark admitted. "It's not a virus as far as I can tell, nor a prion, nor bacterial. I'm not completely convinced they're human."

Todd gave him a look. "Don't you dare start in with that 'zombie' nonsense again. How many are there now?"

"Still just the three. After the second incident they put down some pretty strict controls."

“Shhh...,” Todd interrupted. “Listen.”

Mark paused and listened and heard, very faintly, a scratching sound on the other side of the wall. They went on for a few moments and then stopped. They both heard a shuffling sound, growing fainter as the creature walked away from the wall again.

“It’s like he’s trying to find a way through,” Todd said, swallowing the Twinkie. “Even to try that takes problem-solving levels of intelligence. You have to know there’s a solution before you can try to find it. Which means he’s still human. Zombies...sheesh,” Todd scoffed.

“So they’re exhibiting human-like brain power, but physiologically they’re almost completely alien,” Mark replied. “This is beyond me, at least for tonight. I’m heading home.”

Todd nodded. “Yeah...he’ll still be here tomorrow.”

Mark packed up his lunch bag and a few stray notebooks where he had been writing down possible theories. He intended to take them home and start marking through all the ones he’d eliminated and start trying to come up with some new ones. In the first weeks of the project the latter had been easy. These days the notebooks were filled with crossed out ideas and he was having trouble filling in the blanks on the remaining pages. Some nights he stared at crossings-out on the left and white vistas of possibilities on the right but couldn’t fill those possibilities in with anything. He needed to check in with the lab techs and see what headway they were making. They had the glamorous job of creating all the data he was examining through repetitious experimentation. Try this, write it down. Try that, write it down. Try something else, write it down. Whoever said science was exciting had clearly never done the coursework.

Waving goodbye to Todd who was finishing up a few bits of paperwork himself, Mark let himself out of the lab with his keycard and made his way down the hallway, lost in thought. His footsteps echoed on the tile as the sound bounced off the hard concrete walls. Spooky, he thought.

Finding his way down the hall, he finally reached the exit doors, using his keycard to let himself out again, and walked past the security guard they had posted outside every possible egress from the building. The guard, a young man of about twenty, regarded him passively with bored eyes that peered out from under the black helmet they had issued him. He carried a nightstick and a small sidearm and looked bored to tears. Mark waved at him. The guard merely nodded.

Poor sod, thought Mark. Probably doesn’t even know what he’s guarding. Upon further consideration, however, Mark decided that was probably a good thing. People got edgy around infectious diseases. Most people didn’t even know where the last of the smallpox virus was even stored. Part of that was for security reasons, but mostly it was because there was no need

in making people nervous. Everybody was on edge from their day-to-day lives as it was, why add to the tension?

Mark made his way into the parking lot, heading for his car, a faded-blue Mazda Protégé. Science didn't exactly pay well, either, and the car had needed a paint job for about five years now. But, as Mark noted on a number of occasions, who was he trying to impress? He was married to Gloria, herself a computer programmer who wasn't exactly hung up on appearances, especially of inanimate objects. She dressed nicely and kept herself "well-groomed" as she liked to put it because she worked in the patriarchal field of technology, and in security to boot. She had to look nice just to be taken seriously. But when it came to how the car looked, she couldn't give a flip.

Pressing the remote on his keychain, Mark unlocked all the doors on the 4-door sedan and opened the back door, dumping his homework into the back seat before shutting it and opening the driver's side door and sliding into the cracked vinyl seat, sliding the key into the ignition, and starting the engine. The car obediently turned over and purred like a cat. That was one thing they both agreed on; scheduled maintenance. The car looked like shit, but at least it ran well.

He flipped on the headlights and began to pull out when his phone rang. The familiar strains of Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* told him it was Gloria calling and so he stopped to answer it.

"Speak of the devil," he said as he answered. "I was just thinking about you."

"Oh? Something devilish?" she replied, and he could hear the grin in her voice.

"Maybe," he said, grinning himself.

"Well, unfortunately, that's why I called," she continued, her voice much more serious now. "I have to work late. Brand new computer virus has cropped up, never seen anything like it before."

Mark frowned. One unexplained mystery at a time was enough for him. But he knew better than to try to talk her out of it. "So I get to walk the dog?" he said.

"Yeah. Wait, what dog? Nevermind. I don't know how much longer this is going to take. I'll totally make it up to you later, though," she said, grinning again.

Mark chuckled and said "You better believe you will. Ok, see you when you get home. And don't be too late, I'll want to hear all about it."

"I'm sure you will. Catch you later, honey." And she hung up.

Mark put the car into gear and headed home. The guard at the door of the facility heard the engine fade into the distance, the doppler effect blending the sound into the background in a smooth fade. He sighed. Just two weeks ago he'd heard he was headed to Afghanistan and he'd really been dreading it. Then he got reassigned to this job and now suddenly combat duty didn't seem so bad compared to night watch for the bug catchers. Boring didn't even begin to describe it, but describing it would also have been boring so he just mentally let it go.

Inside, Todd pored over his notes. He'd had his assistants put together a portfolio of case histories that bore any resemblance whatsoever to the case they were examining here and he was now examining them looking for similarities. The entire idea of zombism was something he rejected utterly. Pure pop-culture nonsense and he wasn't going to give it any credence whatsoever.

He was currently toying with the idea of a type of ergotism. Given the physical symptoms of the subjects and Mark's assertion that their organs were effectively shutting down it made sense, it just wasn't anything like what had been studied before. But to go directly from 'we don't know what this is' to 'they're zombies just like in the movies' repelled him. It was a mutation of a fungus, or a genetic anomaly in the subjects. After all, there were only three of them so far, right? If this were a real problem on a supernatural scale then didn't the movies also say there'd be a horde of the damn things marching, or shambling, on major cities right now? Three cases in six months. Some zombie apocalypse.

Sighing, he looked up at the clock. Midnight. It had been two hours since Mark had left and he'd barely noticed the time pass. He looked around and took a deep breath and, in the silence, heard the moaning of the subject next door. Not knowing if it was a kind of infectious disease or not, they had initially taken the precaution of putting him in strict quarantine, but all the tests so far had indicated that whatever was causing this wasn't airborne, so they had transferred him to a more typical room near the researchers so they could have better access. There were still strict controls on that access as the disorder had been shown to increase the appetite and decrease the inhibitions of the victims and transmission seemed to be through saliva or other bodily fluids.

Again, as earlier, he heard the scratching on the other side of the wall. His brain processed that information and found a problem. They hadn't looked in on the subject in quite some time. He was getting regular food and water brought in, which he ate but which didn't seem to sate his hunger, but they hadn't made visual contact in a while because the controls on his access made it very difficult to do so. There was a camera in there, but they hadn't been checking it often. His condition had remained unchanged for weeks. They could check the tapes if they needed to.

But the problem was that the walls were concrete. After several days worth of scratching, wouldn't the nails be worn down? What could be making a scratching sound? Todd got up and went over to the monitor that was tied to the camera and switched it on. He saw the man, or what was left of him, shambling around the room, pawing at the various walls. Systematically

looking for weaknesses, Todd thought. There's still intelligence there. And persistence. Those are human qualities. He's still in there somewhere, we just need to find out how to reach him and get him back out. Maybe if we can communicate we can find out what led up to this.

Watching the video, Todd tried to work out where the sounds were coming from. No fingernails, so something must be scratching. They'd taken all the metal objects from him. What could it be. The figure shambled around the room, moving to another wall, and suddenly Todd saw it and knew what was happening. He marveled at it. The nerves must be completely shot, the nervous system ceasing function, as it was the only possible explanation. At the ends of the fingers, the flesh was fraying. The scratching noise was coming from the action of bare bone on concrete.

Todd switched off the monitor, unable to watch the horror any longer, and moved back to his work table. There had to be an answer. He had to find it. He heard the moan again. The moans were chilling. The man must be in horrifying pain, Todd thought. Organs were shutting down, but the hunger response kept them upright and they seemed to never rest. Todd was now on a 13-hour workday and was exhausted, but the subject had been up and moving for at least three weeks now with no indication of going to sleep or resting in any other way.

Rest. He totally needed some. He was no closer to solving this than he had been weeks ago when he'd been called in to investigate this. Stopping for the night wouldn't hurt anything. But the man was suffering. Didn't he owe it to him to find a solution as quickly as possible? Maybe just a quick nap.

Todd put his head down on the desk and closed his eyes for a few moments and waited for sleep to overtake him. The eerie sounds of scratching and moaning cut through the silence in the room and prevented him from drifting off. He tuned them out and tried to quiet his thoughts, a technique he'd had to use many times on many research assignments when his brain refused to let him sleep. He imagined being a shark, swimming endlessly, on the alert for threats or food, the sounds of the ocean reduced to background noise, the light filtered through the water. At night the ocean was black and all there was was swimming. It was speculated that sharks slept as they swam, and that was what he would do. Sleep while still active. When Todd used this technique he could never remember actually drifting off to sleep. This time he awoke to see teeth inches from his eyes and a stench of rotting decay and then he knew no more.

Outside, the guard stood, slightly uncomfortable in the chill night air and made a mental note to wear more layers the next night.

The dawn rose and Mark found himself sleeping next to Gloria, who must have gotten in very late indeed if she had been able to slip in and get in bed without his noticing. He slid over next to her, kissed her on the cheek, and then got out of bed when she showed no signs of stirring. Padding over to the dresser, he extracted a pair of socks with rubber pads on the feet and put them on to ward off the chill of the floor, and then went off to the kitchen to make coffee.

While the coffee was brewing, he sat down at the kitchen table and opened the lid on his laptop, watching the screen begin to glow as the operating system came out of hibernation. He perused a few news websites idly, looking for any news on his project and being very grateful when he didn't find any. The security was holding. People were keeping their mouths shut. There wouldn't be a panic, nor any sensationalizing of the story in the news media who almost certainly wouldn't be able to stick to simple things like the facts, especially since there weren't many. Whenever the news got ahold of a story that was incomplete, they just felt free to fill in the blanks as they saw fit.

Gloria came sauntering into the room in a long nightshirt, yawning and stretching, awakened by the earthy aroma that was filling the house.

"You just had to make coffee, didn't you?" she said accusingly before leaning over to kiss him.

"Had to get you out of bed somehow," Mark replied.

"No, you didn't. You could have left me there since I didn't get in until almost 4am."

"Sorry," he said.

"No, it's alright," Gloria replied. "I need to get back anyway. We still haven't solved this and we kind of need to. Could get bad if it gets out into the wild again."

"What is it?" Mark always asked, even though her work was beyond him. He could surf the internet and he could use spreadsheets and databases to crunch numbers and track results, but the high-level security that Gloria worked with might as well have been ancient Greek. Well, except that he knew a little Greek from his work in biology. More like ancient Tagalog.

"We're still not sure. It's probably the most sophisticated virus we've come across. Killing it is reasonably easy, but the only reason we've got it contained right now is because we unplugged it from the network."

"What's it do?" he asked, pouring himself a cup.

"Seems to be a pretty primitive payload at first," Gloria said, getting out the butter to make toast. "A lot of early viruses were just jokes, vandalism, and other mischief. It wasn't until later that they started to be used for criminal purposes like stealing passwords and credit card numbers. They'd sit on your computer for a while and then on some date that had some significance to the programmer, they'd pop up a little picture saying 'Gotcha!' or something like that and then delete all your files or format your hard drive or something."

"Sounds pretty petty."

“It was, but you still see those sometimes. But they’re written by script kiddies and getting one like that through modern security software is almost unheard of. But this one...this one’s different.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing it doesn’t just break the security, it absorbs it. It’s like it comes in and the first thing it encounters is the security firewall, so it starts stealing code from it and adding it to itself. Once that happens then it just slips on past like it belongs there and starts deleting the code it just stole. After the security is disabled it starts to do the same thing to the rest of the programs. We let it run on a computer last night for a few hours and not only did it break our best software protections, but by the time it was done all that was left was the virus that was masquerading as the operating system.”

Mark gave her a blank look and sipped at his coffee.

“Look, it’s like this,” she said, putting the buttered bread into the toaster and setting the timer before getting out a skillet and putting it on the stove and then moving over to the refrigerator to get out a couple of eggs. Mark might live on coffee, but she needed breakfast. “The virus steals code and then deletes the original. So by the time it’s done, it looks like an exact replica of everything that was on the computer, right down to the security software. But the original virus is still there. So it’s going to exhibit all the functionality the computer had before, but it’s also going to try to replicate itself onto a new computer.”

“So why’s that a bad thing?” Mark asked. “If it infected every computer in the world, then they’d all work the same and there’d be nothing left to infect.”

“Because we don’t know what else it does yet. This is incredibly sophisticated programming,” she went on, cracking the eggs into a bowl and beginning to scramble them. “Nobody goes to this much effort just for a prank.”

Mark pondered what she’d just told him, trying to understand the implications. Clearly Gloria did and she was worried about it, but that came with the territory for a computer security specialist. There was something vaguely familiar about what she was telling him, and he was about to say so when his phone rang.

“Who’s calling this early?” Gloria asked, looking at the clock which read 6am.

“Looks like work,” Mark said as he answered.

Gloria continued to make her breakfast. She poured the scrambled eggs into the skillet and listened to the satisfying hiss it made as the cold liquid hit the hot metal surface. Stirring the mixture, she glanced at the timer for her toast and found that she’d not quite timed it correctly.

The toast would be ready first. She left the pan on the stove for a moment and got herself a glass for her milk.

Mark hung up the phone and set it on the table in front of him.

“What did they want?” Gloria asked, using the spatula to transfer the eggs to a plate.

Mark didn’t answer right away. He stared off into space for a few moments. “Nothing,” he finally said. “They just said I should get down there as soon as I can. Something new happened during the night. Nothing to worry about,” he finished, glancing back at the computer screen.

The news was filled with stories about the war, about the elections, about the latest celebrity gossip. He’d always hated the news, especially the local news. He and Todd had discussed it on several occasions, the sensationalism, the made-up facts, the non-news that was being masqueraded as something important in the daily lives of the readers. He wondered how long such headlines could last now that they suddenly seemed so reassuring to him.

“Oh,” Gloria said, now sitting down at the table with her breakfast. “You sure you don’t want any?” her fork spearing the fluffy yellow eggs.

“No, thank you,” Mark said, rising from the table. “I hate to leave while you’re eating, but I think I should get down there as soon as I can.”

Gloria nodded her assent, her mouth full as she took a drink of milk. “Hurry home tonight,” she said, finishing. “Might not have to work late again if we have a breakthrough this morning.” She winked at him.

He smiled and said “I’ll do my best,” and walked back to the bedroom to get some clothes on. The message had been urgent. He hoped she wouldn’t notice that he wasn’t stopping to shower and threw on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and his loafers. As he slipped his feet into the shoes he noticed he was still wearing the padded socks, but there was no time to change them now, no matter how uncomfortable they were. Grabbing his keys and his phone, he walked back down the hall and snatched his jacket from the hall tree.

Arriving twenty anxious minutes later at the special offices the CDC had set up across town from their main headquarters, Mark found a bevy of official-looking people gathered around, but no law enforcement. That made sense. If you called the police or even the FBI, the media would be sure to get wind of it and that was something they had to delay at all costs.

He got out of the car and approached the building, extracting his identification as he went. The guard, a different one from last night but wearing the same uniform and the same black helmet, stopped him anyway.

“Sorry, Mr. Keln, but nobody is going in there without a hazmat suit right now. They said to ask you to wait here and we’ll get someone out to talk to you.”

That seemed reasonable, so Mark stepped back and leaned on his car. The warm hood felt good on his freezing butt. The weather had turned so cold recently. Winter in Atlanta snuck up on you, hiding behind Fall and then jumping out suddenly.

“Mark! Mark!” a voice called. Mark recognized it as that of the guy who was allegedly in charge of the investigation into this new problem, Chris Frank. He was only allegedly in charge because the only decisions he’d made at this point had been to bring on Mark and Todd to solve the problem and neither of them had a whole lot of respect for him. They both knew his boss, a woman named Helen Murphy who they knew would totally back any decisions they made. Chris was the ultimate middleman, a pure product of government bureaucracy. Chris was shorter than most men and had a really staccato speech pattern. Every time he called Mark by name he sounded a little like a small yappy dog.

“He’s over here, Mr. Frank,” the guard supplied helpfully, but Chris had already spotted Mark and was on his way over as quickly as his little legs would carry him, carrying a small briefcase.

“Mark, thank God you’re here,” Chris said, out of breath. “It’s bad. It’s really bad.”

“So they said over the phone. Who was that, anyway?”

“I don’t know, I just grabbed the first guy I could find, gave them your card, and said to get you over here as soon as possible.”

“Ok, well, now I’m here, now what. What’s going on?”

“Todd’s missing. And so is...the subject.”

Mark let that sink in for a minute. “What do you mean missing?” he asked, realizing that was one of the stupidest questions available, but trying to stall for time.

“I mean he’s not here and nobody knows where he is,” Chris said, ignoring the stupidity of having to explain the word missing. “And the lab is...well, we can’t go in right now, but let me show you these pictures.”

Chris set his briefcase on the roof of Mark’s car and snapped open the latches. He pulled a small netbook out of it and switched it on. The solid state drive in the netbook brought the computer into an operational state almost instantly and Mark watched Chris browse the local hard drive to a directory filled with digital pictures.

“We need outside consultation on these,” Chris said, pulling the first one up in an image viewer, “but we need a more secure connection first. Can’t get these online at the moment. Too risky.”

The first image came up on the small LCD screen and Mark studied it. The lab was in complete disarray; papers everywhere, and a gaping hole in the wall that should have separated Todd from the subject.

“Before you ask, we don’t know what happened,” Chris said, pre-empting Mark’s first question. “The DVR that was recording the camera is being retrieved by the hazmat guys, but everything has to go into quarantine before we can really get to it because we still don’t know how infectious this thing is...assuming it’s infectious at all.”

“What measures are being taken to protect the public?” Mark asked.

Chris paused. “None at this time.”

“So we can’t get into our own facility because of the perceived risk of an infectious agent, but nobody is doing anything about protecting the public?”

“The risk is completely unknown!” Chris shot back. “Protect them how? From what? And without creating a panic? Good luck.”

Mark mentally conceded this point, but gave Chris a look meant to convey his disapproval.

“We’re keeping a close eye on the news media for any new cases matching our description, and we’ve got plainclothes search parties going over the general area, but as far as we’re able to tell this whole thing went down around 1:00am, which means they could be anywhere by now.”

“Let’s see the rest of the pictures,” Mark said. Chris scrolled through them, but there wasn’t much there, or at least nothing unexpected. Dried blood was abundant, which indicated that the subject had escaped, probably by coming through the hole in the wall, and had killed Todd. The whereabouts of Todd’s body and the subject were unknown. Also unknown was how the subject had managed to get through the wall. None of the other subjects had shown any signs of advanced physical strength.

Mark studied the pictures some more. “Chris, what’s missing from these pictures?” he asked finally.

Chris looked at him. “How would I know? If it’s missing, how could I tell? You’re the one who was working in there.”

Mark rolled his eyes. How did someone like Chris ever get put in charge of a project like this, even as a figurehead? “Ok, let’s go through it step by step. What’s there that shouldn’t be?”

"I don't know, why are we playing guessing games at a time like this?"

"Because the entire thing is a guessing game!" Mark shot back angrily. "What caused the subject's condition is a guessing game, what happened to Todd is a guessing game, where they are now is a guessing game, and the only way we're going to solve any of it is to start re-training our minds to solve guessing games, because what little research I've been able to do up to now hasn't exactly been conclusive!"

"Fine!" Chris answered, taken aback.

"Sorry," Mark said, calming himself. That was something else he had to do; keep his temper under control. "Now, step by step, what would you expect to see in the room if nothing had happened?"

"A bunch of lab equipment. Paper. Tables."

"All correct, now think bigger. What else is inherently a part of this room?"

"Um. Floor. Ceiling. Walls."

"Ah ha!" Mark exclaimed. "The walls. What's wrong with the walls?"

"There's a fucking big hole in one of them," Chris said, obviously.

"You're damn right there is," Mark said. "Now, how do you suppose it got there?"

"The subject smashed through it," Chris said.

"Alright, let's assume that happened. Now, if the subject smashed through, what's missing?"

Chris looked at the picture again. "I have no earthly idea," he said at last.

"Rubble!" Mark said. "These walls are concrete. If he'd smashed through, there should be big chunks of concrete lying around. Do you think he stopped afterwards to tidy up?"

Chris stared at the picture some more. "So what do you think happened?"

"Is there a lot of dust in there? Because I'm betting what happened is that Todd fell asleep and the zombie scratched his way through the wall. We kept hearing this scratching sound and I bet it just kept at it until it got through."

Chris paused, looking at Mark. "What did you just say?"

“Sheer persistence. Like a sea star,” Mark continued. “They don’t have the strength to pull the clamshell open, so they just keep pulling a little all the time until the clam gets tired and has to open up.”

“No, I get that, but there was a word you used a minute ago to describe the subject.”

“What, zombie?”

“Yes, that. Don’t ever use that word again,” Chris said, and there was no trace of confusion in his voice anymore. “Todd told me about you. Said you kept referring to the subject as a zombie. Those are movies, Mark. Nothing more. And if you ask me, you’ve seen too many of them.”

“I’ve never seen a single one,” Mark protested. “And even if I had, that doesn’t change the fact that the subject, as you call him, is acting just like one.”

“It’s dehumanizing and lacks dignity,” Chris said.

“And ‘the subject’ is better?”

“More technically accurate, especially since we don’t know his name.”

“Whatever,” Mark replied wearily. He really didn’t have the energy for this kind of semantic conversation. “How are the other two ‘subjects’?” he asked, putting a special emphasis of sarcasm on the last word.

Chris didn’t notice. “We just checked in on them. One’s in Seattle, she’s doing fine. Well, for a given definition of fine. The other is dead. The Russians didn’t fool around when we told them what had happened here.”

“They killed him?”

“Yup. Bullet to the head. They didn’t want to take any chances, so they sent a guy in a hazmat suit in with a gun to take care of business. Starting to think we should do the same.”

“And when these turn out to not be isolated cases and we need the research we’re supposed to be doing right now, what then?”

“Dammit, Mark, if more of them crop up then I guess you’ll have more test subjects to work on!” Chris closed the netbook and the briefcase, snapping the latches shut and snatching the container off the roof of Mark’s car, leaving a blemish on the paint. Mark looked at it and wondered why he cared if a car that already needed a paint job had just gotten scratched.

“What do you need to keep up with your investigation?” Chris demanded.

“Access to my lab and the samples the lab techs took at a minimum. The DVR recording for preference. And the subjects. And, I guess, a new behavioral psychologist.”

“None of those are going to happen today,” Chris replied curtly. “Go home, do what you can with the notes you took home with you last night. I’ll send you copies of the pictures just as soon as we can do so securely and give you a call when we’ve got the rest of what you need squared away or if Todd or the subject turns up.”

“What happens if they don’t turn up?” Mark asked.

“Pray,” Chris replied.

“Sure, thanks,” Mark said to Chris’s back as he had turned on his heel and marched away in a huff. No wonder he’s on edge, Mark thought. He’s got a lot more riding on this than I do. He’s ostensibly in charge, after all.

He considered giving Helen a call, but decided not to fan the flames too much, at least not right away. There was nothing to do at home; he’d already exhausted all his leads with the notes he had on hand. There was also no point in going looking for Todd. He would be found in due time. Or, given the ravenous appetites of the zombies so far, maybe he wouldn’t. It was funny how he couldn’t get the parallel of the zombies in movies and the subjects behavior and actions separate in his mind. It was like they were glued there.

Out of the corner of his eye he spied some movement and heard a buzzing. Glancing over there, he saw a dragonfly hovering several feet away. That’s odd, Mark thought. I would have thought it was too cold for them. As he thought this, the insect pivoted in midair and shot off, rising slowly as it went. Guess maybe it is too cold after all, he mused to himself.

Pondering his next move, Mark got back in his car. There was nothing left to do now except go home. Except. There was something Chris had said. Something about praying.

“This story is the lamest thing I’ve ever heard,” Harris interjected. Justine frowned at him.

“What’s lame about it?” she asked.

“Nothing’s happening,” Harris said simply. Sheila and Roy both nodded sympathy.

Justine gaped at them. “The guy scratching through the wall didn’t get your attention? Don’t you want to know what happened to them?”

“I do,” Derek said. “But it’s not really all that scary. Is the scary part coming up? Do you want the flashlight?” he asked, offering it.

“No,” Justine said. She had half a mind to not finish the story. Let them wallow in their ignorance. Isn’t that what it was all about? Ignorance and maintaining it. What if they believed her?

“So what happened next?” Andrew asked, swatting at a bug.

Justine paused. That was the first bug they’d had. It was a cool, but not cold night, and there had been a big argument about how nobody had remembered to bring bug repellent. Why weren’t they being eaten alive by mosquitoes by now?

“Yeah, Justine, c’mon, let’s get this over with. When you’re done I’ve got a great one about a guy with a hook for a hand,” Roy grinned.

Shaking off her sudden nervousness, Justine resumed her story.

Mark had placed a quick phone call to a friend of his who just happened to be a Catholic Bishop. They’d met in college and had had good fun debating one another on theological and biological science and doctrine and the origins of life. Lately they’d drifted apart, not due to animosity towards each other, but mainly because their personal and professional lives no longer intersected the way they used to and getting together required actual effort, especially after Mark had married Gloria. Adisa had been quite happy to hear from his friend and had invited him over, cancelling an appointment he had originally scheduled for the afternoon.

“Mark, how good to see you,” Adisa said, rising and crossing to meet Mark as he entered the room.

“Your Grace,” Mark replied, bowing.

Adisa stopped. “Mark, you know very well that I hate it when you call me that. That’s for the laity, not for friends, and especially not in private. I am still human,” he finished, giving his friend a warm hug.

“That’s good to hear,” Mark said, returning the hug.

Adisa paused. “What makes you say that?”

Mark also paused, unsure of how much to reveal. He had come here for guidance, not sure where else to turn now that his science was currently out of his reach, but he didn’t feel free to tell even his good friend Adisa everything he knew.

“If this is about your colleague, Todd, I’m afraid there is very little I can tell you,” Adisa said carefully.

“Very little? That’s more than I expected, frankly,” Mark said. “I didn’t really come here to talk to you about that.”

“What did you come here for?”

“To be frank, I’m not sure. It just seemed like the right thing to do.”

Adisa crossed back to his desk and sat down in his wooden chair with red padding. “Please, my friend, sit,” he said, indicating the chair opposite him at the desk. Mark did so, noting the creak of the wood as he put his full weight on it.

Adisa steepled his hands and looked at Mark for several moments before finally saying, “Mark, I’m sure you can appreciate the sensitivity of the situation. You clearly know more than you’re telling me and I know more than I’m telling you. We must trust each other, as I feel it is imperative that we work together to solve the mystery that I think we are both working on at the moment.”

“I do trust you, Adisa. Could we still be friends now if I didn’t? After some of the arguments you and I had about God?”

Adisa sighed. “You are, of course, correct. Although I think our arguments paled in comparison to the ones that we both had WITH God.” Mark chuckled knowingly.

They had seemed such unlikely friends. Their differing socioeconomic backgrounds, their differering fields of study and career paths, their fiery tempers and stubborn streaks that could have spanned the globe. But for whatever reason their friendship had been not just easy, but natural. There had never been any question that no matter how heated the discussion, no matter how bitter the comments they made to one another, and no matter how long they spent apart, they would always return to one another with a new idea, a new perspective, and a new thought that nobody else would understand. They hated each other vehemently for a month once, but then came back together, nearly simultaneously, both apologizing and saying how much they needed the other.

Adisa stood up again, his tall, angular African body seemingly unfolding from the chair as he rose. He strode over to the stained glass window, gazing out into the city.

“People say the world is a complicated place,” he began. “But it isn’t. The world is simple. Survival. Procreation. Just two goals. Two imperative, essential goals. The rest is just details. The details...now those can be complicated.”

“Let’s start slowly. Let’s start by making sure we are talking about the same thing,” Mark offered.

Adisa turned and grinned at him, his brilliant white teeth gleaming against his dark skin. “Of course, ever the scientist. Very well, I will begin by telling you what you know. You were called in to investigate a strange medical case of a subject with inordinate appetite who was otherwise unresponsive to all other stimuli. You were paired with Todd Whitmire, a behavioral psychologist, and tasked to find what event or combination of events could lead to an individual taking on such traits, be it biologically infectious or a new psychiatric disorder.”

“So far, so good. Sounds like we’re both on the same page. Now how about you tell me how you got a copy of the book.”

“Surely you don’t believe that the church is ignorant of everything around it,” Adisa said. “The Catholic church is, as some people have said, the original cult. Inspiring loyalty and faith is part of our job description. And where would we be without it?”

Mark declined to say, although he had a few ideas on where society would be without the Catholic church. Respect for his friend silenced his tongue, though. It wasn’t as if he didn’t think Adisa could take criticism, they had certainly had the argument before. It was just that this was neither the time nor the place to bring it up again.

“So what do you think?” Mark prompted.

Adisa grinned again. “No, my friend Mark, now it is your turn to share what you might know.”

Mark sighed. He was right. He often was. Mark proceeded to tell him about the research that he and Todd had been engaged in for the last few weeks and the futility of it. He mentioned the insatiable appetite of the creature, the persistence, and he told Adisa of his belief that Todd was now one of them. A zombie.

“You believe it is a zombie?” Adisa asked. “A monster from the movies?”

“Yes, I do,” Mark replied, a shade indignantly. “Or close enough that we could use the word to describe it.”

“Good,” Adisa said. “Then I am not alone. I, too, have been chided by my colleagues in this regard as I have used the word zombie to describe them.”

“Ok, so we agree on a word. What do we do about them?”

“Do I look as though I have studied the zombie? Even in theological terms it is considered voodoo and witchcraft.”

“Yes, and that has me worried. They have to have come from somewhere. And if it isn’t a disease or a psychological disorder, then that implies that someone must be responsible.”

“Oh, I believe someone is,” Adisa said seriously. “I believe God has sent them to us.”

“As punishment?”

Adisa paused. “I do not pretend to understand everything that God plans for us. The zombie has always been a symbol of the damned. Do not the movies use the tagline ‘When Hell is Empty, the Dead Will Walk the Earth’? And yet I am not convinced. Some are saying it is a sign of the end times. But how many signs must we endure? When will it actually happen?”

“I wasn’t aware that the clergy were impatient for the end times,” Mark said smirking.

“Even we are aware of our credibility problem,” Adisa said, frowning. “Churchgoing has been declining. Donations are down. Believers are having crises of faith daily. We pray often for a clear, undeniable sign that will steer the righteous back to the true path.”

Mark and Adisa exchanged a few more pleasantries and discussed the situation further, but at the end of the conversation both of them were forced to admit that they didn’t really know anything more than they had before. Everything was conjecture at this point and the only thing left to do was to wait to see what happened next and then react. This was something both men had a problem with, but they could see no other realistic solution.

After about an hour, Mark bid his friend goodbye and took his leave, promising to stay in touch, especially if anything new developed, and walked out of the church feeling a bit better than he had when he had gone in. He had someone definitively on his side now. He checked his phone.

There were about a dozen missed calls. He had put the phone on silent when he had gone in out of respect for Adisa and those at prayer, but he’d left it on vibrate. He clearly hadn’t felt the vibrations. The voicemail indicator showed only one message in spite of all the calls he’d missed, and there was also a single text message. He pulled up the text, which said “check your damn voicemail and answer your damn phone –CF”.

Mark checked the voicemail, which was Chris again basically telling him to answer his damn phone, which wasn’t very helpful, so he decided to give him a call. The phone rang exactly once.

“Where the hell have you been?” Chris seethed.

“Praying, like you told me to,” Mark replied.

“What??” Chris roared. “Nevermind. There’s been a new...development,” he finished. “This line isn’t secure. Get over to the office right now and we’ll brief you. How soon can you be here?”

“I’m just around the corner, I can be there in fifteen minutes,” Mark replied.

“Make it ten,” Chris said, and hung up.

Why did people do that, Mark wondered. There are laws. Laws of physics, traffic laws, ethical laws against driving on the sidewalk and running traffic lights. He knew it was to convey a sense of urgency, but c’mon. Wouldn’t it be enough to just say hurry up? He walked along the path from the base of the stone church steps to his car and was about halfway along when he noticed something directly in front of him. Another dragonfly. He stopped and regarded the insect.

The dragonfly hovered in front of him for a few moments, changing its altitude by a few inches up or down as it did so in a jerky motion. Mark took a tentative step forwards, his eyes locked on the bug hovering in front of him. It was definitely too cold for dragonflies, but there it was. Another mystery, although a minor one all things considered. He heard a buzzing off to his left and turned his head slowly to see another dragonfly hovering over there.

Now that he knew to look for them, he began glancing around. Dragonflies, at least a dozen of them, were all hovering at various altitudes all around him. The buzzing, now that he was aware of it, was quite loud. They flitted slightly up and down, darting a few inches forwards and backwards, some of them facing him, others looking in other directions. There seemed to be no discernable pattern to their positioning or movements.

Unsure where to go or what to do, Mark stood still for a few moments and then the dragonflies all zipped away so quickly it was as if they’d all vanished into thin air. The buzzing receded and all mark could hear was the distant chirping of a songbird. He considered his options, realized there weren’t any that weren’t insane, and went back to his car.

When he arrived at the CDC offices, Chris was pacing back and forth, his navy blue blazer and tie whipping in the air as he turned quickly. He was on his phone trying to yell without being too loud about it and was clearly agitated about something, and angry to boot. There was a tall, heavy set woman standing nearby taking it all in with an air of efficiency. Just looking at her made you think that everything was a waste of time.

“I gotta go, just make it happen, ok?” Chris snarled into the phone, seeing Mark approach. He hung up and stormed over to Mark.

“Strangest thing,” Mark began. He’d made up his mind on the way over to go ahead and tell Chris about the dragonflies. It was just too weird not too. The entire case was weird and maybe if you took all the weirdness and got it all in the same room it would rat itself out and spill its secrets.

“Nevermind,” Chris shot back, cutting him off. “We’ve got more important things to talk about. For one thing, here’s your new behavioral psychologist. Meet Lucille Blank.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Lucy,” Mark said, extending a hand. Lucille glared at the hand for a moment before shaking it.

“Lucille, please,” she said without grace.

“Lucille, sorry,” Mark replied, releasing her grip. It had been quite a bit stronger than he’d expected.

“Ok, pleasantries dispensed with. Now get in here. Hazmat’s done, it’s clean...or as clean as it’s gonna get.”

The three of them trooped into the building where Mark and Todd had been working just the night before.

“How’d you get a new psycho so quickly?” Mark asked. Lucille glared at him.

“Kindly do not use that term to describe my profession,” she said coldly.

“When you have the kind of blowup that’s going on right now, you’d be amazed at who you can get out of bed and what strings they can pull,” Chris replied, ignoring her.

“I take it you didn’t find the subject,” Mark said.

“On the contrary,” Lucille replied, as they turned the corner and came up to a room filled with technicians. On one wall was an array of flat-panel television screens, each of which was showing the interior of a room that contained a shambling, moaning zombie. There were about twelve of them in all, and there were another five that were still being worked on by the techs.

“Oh,” Mark said, looking at the screens in awe.

“Oh, is right,” Chris fumed. “We had a look at the DVR footage from last night and you were right. The damn thing just kept scratching at the wall until the concrete flaked away, little by little. That’s him there,” he said, indicating one of the monitors.

Mark examined it. The figure was covered in dried blood and had a stump where its right hand should have been. The flesh around the stump was ragged and irregular, but no blood of its own was coming out.

“Todd...” Mark began, but Chris cut him off with a wave.

“Haven’t found him yet. But I’m thinking he’s either dragging around like these losers or else he’s inside that one’s stomach. Nobody wants to get close enough to do an examination, and I don’t blame them.”

“How’d you catch them?”

“Nets. Tranq doesn’t work on them and you were so worried about making sure you had one to study that nobody wanted to kill them. Well, that’s not entirely true. Most everybody wanted to blow their heads off.”

“Tried and true way to kill zombies,” Lucille replied. Mark glanced at her. Chris’s look was more of a glare.

“I’m not really prepared to have that argument again,” Chris said with forced calm.

“I assume you’ve glanced over my notes,” Mark said, looking at Lucille.

“Not in detail. They transmitted them to me once they got the secure line set up, and I read them on the ride over, but I have not had time to peruse them fully.”

“What’s your initial impression?”

“Given the time you’ve had available to work on the case, I would call them adequate. But given what little I know of the case, I would have to say that the disorder is neither behavioral nor an infectious agent, at least not one that we are familiar with.”

“Then what do you think it is?”

“I’m not certain, and do not care to speculate in public at this time,” Lucille said, enigmatically.

Mark looked at her again. She wore a severe business suit with black as the dominant color. Pinstripe slacks and a white blouse stood out against each other. Her jet black hair was cut to a short bob just below her ears and she had the air of someone who was about twenty pounds lighter not long ago and was upset with herself for letting herself go, but also upset with society for making her feel like that in the first place.

The ringing of Mark’s phone cut through the brief silence. He glanced at Chris who shot him a warning look, then answered it anyway.

“Yeah?”

“Mark, it’s Gloria,”

The characteristic ringtone for his wife had not gone off. “Where are you calling from?”

“I’m using one of the phones at the office. Have you seen the news?”

“Uh. No,” Mark replied, putting his hand over the phone’s microphone and whispering to Chris to get a TV turned on to the local news channel quick. Chris groaned at this instruction, knowing what it meant, and turned to one of the techs nearby and quietly barked an order.

“I’m assuming you’re turning on a set now,” Gloria said anxiously.

“Yeah, but go ahead and give me the bad news.”

“You need to see it for yourself,” she said. “I’m on my way home. I assume I’ll see you there shortly.”

Gloria hung up. Mark turned to look at the set, now being feverishly rewired by the techs. The screen glowed for a moment, went black, and then came to life again, this time with a local signal. As they had expected, a few dozen zombies were lurching around aimlessly, each in various states of decay.

“Fascinating,” Lucille said softly.

“What?” asked Mark. He knew it was only a matter of time until Chris blew up again, and he needed thoughtful time with someone with actual thoughts before that happened.

“Look at them. Look at their clothes.”

Mark looked. And he saw it. “They’re not dirty. Those are today’s clothes.”

“Correct. The classic vision of the zombie is the recently dead reanimated, clawing their way up from their graves to feast upon the living. But these people aren’t recently dead, or at least weren’t buried.”

“So...they aren’t zombies?” Mark asked. At this point he was prepared to entertain a whole host of options.

“I didn’t say that,” Lucille said, but she was prevented from elaborating on her point by the return of Chris.

“You two...” he began, and then stopped. “Nevermind. I’ve decided. Screw the science. I’m calling in the military. The reports from the field are coming in,” he said, indicating his phone, which was receiving a text message every few seconds, “and this seems pretty localized right now. And it’s going to fucking stay that way. We’re blowing them all away and to hell with finding out the cause.”

“But if you just blow them up, that might make it worse,” Mark began, but Chris waved him off.

“Snipers. We’ve spoken to the Russians. A quick shot to the head and it’s all over. And then we burn the bodies and we’re done. They did the same thing a few days ago and everything is fine over there. I still don’t believe your ridiculous theory that they’re zombies, but in any case I’m not letting this turn into the goddamn zombie apocalypse. Go home. Both of you.”

“But...” Mark began, but Lucille put her hand on his shoulder. Chris turned away and began making the necessary phone calls.

“You know this is a mistake, right?” Mark asked.

“Of course,” Lucille replied. “But what’s the alternative? Every zombie story ends the same way. Maybe we should just let him get it over with for all of us.”

Mark stared at her incredulously. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why not?”

“But you’re a scientist, aren’t you?”

“Of course. And part of being a scientist means being willing to admit you might be wrong. It also means being able to examine the evidence and come to logical conclusions. These creatures can be killed, but not contained. Trying to contain them only prolongs the inevitable. So inefficient. Better to let him try it his way.”

“This is insanity,” Mark said, and turned and stormed out the door. He decided he would head home. At least he’d be with Gloria when the shit hit the fan.

On the drive home, Mark kept wondering what had just happened. Last night he had been involved in a serious scientific investigation. Today the world was falling apart. Ok, true, he had been one of the leading proponents of the idea that the “subject” was a zombie, but so what? It was just a word. A word used to describe a phenomenon. If they’d found a guy who drank blood, they’d call him a vampire. A woman who howls at the moon would be a werewolf. Why wouldn’t a guy lurching and shambling around be a zombie?

Even if the root cause were a virus or a prion or a fungus or bacteria or whatever, that was all irrelevant. The point was that the condition needed a name to facilitate communication. What was wrong with zombie?

All of this was rationalization, of course. Mark was trying to make sense of a nonsensical situation, that being that Chris was about to blow a group of potentially infectious people to kingdom come with no thought towards quarantine procedures and then, to make matters worse, he was planning to cremate them! The pathological vector was off the charts.

He looked at his watch. Still another fifteen minutes before he got home, and that assumed that the streets weren't going to be clogged with more people trying to get home after seeing the news. He groaned inwardly. The panic that was about to get started. That's why Chris was behaving this way. He knew that the only way to prevent a full-scale panic was to take quick, decisive action, even if that action was 100% wrong and ineffective.

Mark weighed the options as he made the turn onto the highway and was relieved to see it still flowing smoothly. In a few minutes, he estimated, these lanes would be filled with angry drivers, each wanting the same thing, each believing that the other drivers were out to get them and stupid and that they should die. Maybe being turned into zombies was a good thing. An infection like this couldn't be sustained. The way the creatures rotted, they'd surely die out eventually and then any survivors could rebuild. God's new way of cleansing the Earth since he'd ruled out another flood. Wonder what the sign for this one would be instead of a rainbow.

"Could you just cut to the chase?" Harris interrupted. Justine glared at him.

"What do you want me to say? They lived happily ever after?"

"No, but I don't want to hear all this moralizing and philosophizing. Where's the horror? Where's the scares? So far only one guy has bit it."

"So to speak," Sheila deadpanned. The others all sniggered. Justine was silent.

"Fine," she said, starting to get up. "You don't want to hear it, I won't tell it," and she marched off towards the car.

"Hey, Justine, where you going?" Derek called after her.

"To sleep in the car. More comfortable. Maybe I'll drive home and leave you losers here," she taunted, but the taunting turned to an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach when she heard the jingling of keys from behind her.

"You gonna break the windows?" Derek jeered. "I don't think your mom would like that!"

Justine spun around and glared at Derek, his face lit by the firelight, his mocking grin distorted by the shadows. "Why don't you get back here and finish your story. We've got alllll night long," Derek said.

She stalked back over to the fire. "Give me those keys," she said menacingly.

"Sure. After you finish the story," Derek said. The others rolled their eyes. They weren't keen on the idea, but at the same time they didn't really want to watch the argument that was about to happen.

Justine glared at Derek for several seconds before making a decision and sitting back down. She straightened her leggings, brushed off some invisible dust from her jacket, and composed her thoughts. Maybe they were right. Maybe the story needed a jump start.

Mark arrived home to find Gloria glued to the TV. This worried him, as Gloria normally didn't watch much TV at all, preferring to pore over the source code for various websites. Or at least that was the way he perceived her and described her to his friends. The truth was that she was beautiful to him and that he made her seem geekier than she really was as a weird kind of way of bringing her down to his level and making him feel better about his perceived luck of being with her in the first place. But she really didn't watch much TV.

She had the news on and was watching various zombies staggering around. It seemed to be concentrated over on the south side of the city, Mark estimated about three miles from the CDC building where he'd been working. They didn't seem to travel quickly and he wondered how they'd been missed by the search parties.

"How was work," he asked, by way of trying to ease some of her tension. It was a lame attempt, he admitted. She ignored him and continued to watch the news, flipping between stations.

"Why don't have have a picture-in-picture set?" she asked, frustrated.

"Because you said you didn't want one," he replied, sitting down next to her on their beige, plush couch. She didn't answer.

"What's the latest?" he asked, deciding there was no way to take her mind off of it. Surprisingly, she answered him in a context that didn't involve the zombies.

"We've got it contained," she replied. "Still can't figure out the source code. We loaded another program onto the computer it's living on and it just did the exact same thing. Assimilated the code into itself and deleted the original. Never seen anything like it. And then this came on and we decided to call it a day."

"Smart move, I think."

She turned and looked at him, seeing him as if for the first time since he'd entered the room. "Why are you here?" she asked, her voice slightly more shrill than usual. "Why aren't you doing something?"

Mark hesitated. "There's nothing for me to do," he eventually decided on. "Chris said he was going to take care of it." He elected not to go into the details.

On the television, the cameras cut away from the live footage and back to the anchors. The experts had been rounded up, cleaned up, and made up for the cameras and were now going to

weigh in on the situation. Mark was a little surprised he hadn't been called, but he figured the government had either been covering up his involvement, had blocked their access to him, or both. He was grateful, to be honest. The last thing he really wanted to do was talk to these people.

"Is this the end of the world?" Gloria asked.

It was an unusual question and it frightened Mark more that she'd asked it than the implications behind it. Gloria was a strong, smart woman. It was what made him love her. She could be difficult to live with sometimes, or, more accurately, difficult to not live with since she worked so late much of the time, but he'd thought about it on more than one occasion and decided that he couldn't have had it any other way. A mousy nonentity who was home all the time or a driven, strong, intelligent woman who lived her own life exactly the way she wanted to? Not really a choice.

Before he could answer, she kissed him. This was also unusual; Gloria was not known as a spontaneous woman, but he loved her and he kissed her back and they found a kind of solace with each other, even though they both knew what was, at least then, probably an irrational fear. The truth was that the threat was contained. There was a plan. The strength of the zombie lay in numbers, and as of now those numbers were in the dozens. Compare that to the billions of people in the world. Surely this threat could be eradicated in short order.

These reassuring thoughts ran through both of their heads as they sat there and kissed and, riding that euphoria, they rose from the couch and made their way to the bedroom.

"When did this become a porno?" Roy interjected. There was a roar of laughter from the rest of the party.

Justine closed her eyes and let the derision wash over her. They didn't know. They didn't understand. All she could do was tell her story. She couldn't make them believe. And that, she decided, was a good thing.

"It isn't," she said calmly. "They made love. People have been doing it for thousands of years. And where would you be if they hadn't? Shall I continue?"

"Sure, sure," said Andrew. Derek gave her a funny look, but she ignored it. Just as she ignored the buzzing sound she heard in front of her.

She resumed her story ten years down the line. Mark and Gloria were now the proud parents of a daughter who would one day grow up to be Justine's ancestor. Her name was Rebecca and nobody, not even the boys at school, called her Becky.

No zombies had been sighted since they were wiped out by the military. The bodies were destroyed. Their origins were still shrouded in mystery, but nobody seemed to care. The threat was gone.

In Gloria's line of work, they were now keeping the mysterious virus locked down on a small desktop computer for further study, but as they had been hacking on it for ten years without a breakthrough, interest was starting to wane. The new sexiness in computing was robotics and artificial intelligence. From Gloria's perspective it was all about keeping the robot's brain focused on its mission, making them intelligent enough to solve problems without working out ways of rebelling against their creators, and keeping ambitious hackers out to make sure the people that owned them stayed in charge of their possessions.

The moral ambiguity of intelligent robots had been solved a couple of years earlier on the grounds that the robots could not feel physical or emotional pain. What difference did it make, the argument went, if the robot labored without reward if it had no concept of punishment, rewards, deprivation, or other positive or negative reinforcement? There was no operant conditioning of robots; there was only programming.

The other major breakthrough of the last ten years was space exploration. The moon was now a thriving military base and staging ground for the next major conquest of the solar system: Mars. Even now there was a fledgling colony of scientists and engineers beginning the process of setting up camp and terraforming the planet to make it more habitable in the long term. The estimates said that in twenty years they could have a civilian population and that in fifty there would be routine commercial flights between the two planets, although nobody was romantic enough to suggest that the kids would be hopping on a shuttle to visit grandma on Earth. These would be to transport goods for the most part. Once you left Earth or Mars it was unlikely you would be going back.

Mark was on a waiting list to go, and the whole family was eager for him to move up the list. He would be allowed to bring his family with him, and Gloria's credentials with robotics would only help his application. He hoped he would be able to study the effects of the Martian atmosphere, natural elements in the crust, and different gravity structure on the evolution and mutation of bacteria and viruses. In the early days of the program there was an effort to contain and decontaminate those kinds of infection, but after the first colonist caught a case of the common cold it was largely recognized that the effort was futile and that the only way to keep Earthly germs off of Mars was to send nothing but robots that had been boiled in alcohol, and even then it was hardly a sure bet.

Five more years passed and finally Mark's name was called. He, Gloria, and Rebecca would be getting on the shuttle the next year. The Martian terrain was still, to be generous, rugged and everyone had to be in good physical and mental condition. The training was going to be intense, the preparations had to be thorough, and everyone's affairs had to be set in order because these first colonists were almost certainly going to be saying goodbye to everyone they

knew for the last time. Even radio communication was difficult and time consuming due to the colossal distances involved between the Earthly and Martian orbits.

“So you’re really going,” Chris said to Mark one day.

“Yep. Fulfillment of a lifelong dream,” Mark replied. He hadn’t spoken much to Chris since the zombie episode. He couldn’t decide if it was because he was still appalled at the reckless decision he’d made or galled at the fact that it had evidently worked. In the end he’d decided to forgive Chris on the dual grounds that holding a grudge was pointless and that the whole episode had led to Rebecca, which he regarded as the high point of his life so far.

“So when’s the launch?”

“Still another eight months. They really put you through the wringer with the training. Even Rebecca, and she’s just going because they’re trying not to split families up. Her main duty is going to be going to school.”

“That’s awesome. Should try to put that kind of emphasis on education down here.” The two men shared a chuckle. Some things never change. They exchanged a few more pleasantries and then Mark left. He decided he wasn’t actually going to miss Chris that much after all.

Mark’s meeting with Adisa was similarly bittersweet, but for different reasons. He really was going to miss Adisa.

“You could put your name on the list,” Mark suggested.

Adisa chuckled. “No, my friend, my place is here. So many of the best and brightest are going off to this new world. Spiritual leaders will be much more necessary here to guide those left behind, to prevent them from feeling abandoned.”

“There’s only a few of us going, you know.”

“For now. In time, more will follow. People crave new adventures. The pioneering spirit is strong within humanity.”

Adisa rose from his chair and walked across the off-white carpeting to the stained glass window in his office and stared through it. The etching and colors distorted the outside world to the point where it was unrecognizable. He wondered if this view was truer to reality than he was prepared to admit.

“Did you ever reach a conclusion about what happened with the...zombies several years ago?”

Mark frowned. He’d seen Adisa since then and he’d made no mention of it in all that time. Why today?

“No, I’m afraid we didn’t,” Mark replied. “Chris had them killed and then disposed of the bodies somehow. I don’t know the details, although he said at the time that he was going to burn them.”

Adisa nodded. “Mark, I would advise you to brook no delay in your departure. I am not given to visions, but a feeling in my gut tells me that the Earth is no longer a safe place for humanity.”

“What’s God’s stance on the cleansing of Mars?”

“God only knows,” Adisa said, turning back to face Mark. “Thank you for coming to see me. I know your training has you very busy.”

Mark recognized that as his cue and rose to shake his friend’s hand in farewell. It was true that the training took up much of his time and he wondered if he would ever see Adisa again. The shuttle wouldn’t take off for several more months, but time passed so quickly.

Lost in thought, Mark took his leave from the church, descending the steps down to the sidewalk as he had done so many years ago when he believed he would be spending the next years unraveling a biological mystery. Instead his entire life had changed with the birth of his daughter and now a trip to a fledgling settlement. The colonization was being done slowly and carefully. The pioneering spirit was hard to suppress, but the governments and commercial entities that were funding the venture were taking no chances with their investment. Conditions on Mars were being held to a strict standard of safety and nothing was being rushed. The planet would still be there, after all.

Mark headed towards his car, the same faded blue Mazda Protégé he’d had for coming up on fifteen years now. The warm afternoon sun felt good on his skin and he wondered if he’d have time for a nap before this afternoon’s sessions with his personal trainer. Lulled by the drowsy thoughts, he barely heard the buzzing noise nearby.

The dragonfly hovered a few feet in front of him and Mark stopped abruptly, his senses suddenly very alert. He’d seen them before, of course. There was nothing inherently remarkable about the insect. After the incident a few years ago he’d even looked into the technique of oding or dragonfly handling and tried it a few times, although without much success. But the way Adisa had acted.

The dragonfly hovered there in midair for several seconds, its long slender body supported by four gossamer wings shimmering in the daylight. It flitted about, moving a few inches up, down, forward, backward, taking full advantage of its position in the three dimensional world of flight. Mark glanced nervously around, but saw no others. Unlike last time, this dragonfly was alone. He took a hesitant, cautious step forwards and the insect darted away, off into the distance, out of sight.

Sighing, Mark continued on to his car. It was nothing.

When he arrived home, Mark found Gloria asleep and decided to join her. Undressing quietly, he slipped in next to her and closed his eyes in preparation for what he hoped would be a nice, restful two hour nap. The house was warm, he was with the woman he loved, and he was about to embark on a venture that was the envy of millions of others. He snuggled in. And then was verbally pounced on.

“Dad!” Rebecca called. “When did you get home? I need help with my homework!”

Mark lay there for a few moments. If he didn’t move, would she get frustrated and leave? If she kept it up would Gloria wake up? How long could he stall for time?

“Dad!” Rebecca repeated. “You said you’d help me with the geometry! I have to know this!”

Mark frowned inwardly. He had promised. But she already knew it. Knew it well enough, anyway. Ok, she wasn’t going to be applying for graduate school in mathematics any time soon, but she’d pass the test. He continued rationalizing for several more seconds before he felt Gloria stir and he knew his nap was over before it even began.

“Dad!”

“Ok, ok, I’m sorry,” he said sleepily. He felt sick to his stomach, a feeling he often got when he tried to sleep unsuccessfully in the middle of the afternoon. For years he hadn’t been able to take naps during the day because of this vague feeling of nausea he got whenever he tried, but in recent years his age had caught up to him because he’d started getting really good at it. It was a trick nature played on you, he decided. As soon as you get to the point where you can take naps, your kids won’t let you.

“No, you’re not,” Gloria said, yawning and shifting the sheets aside. She rose into a sitting position on the side of the bed, then leaned back and kissed her husband on the cheek. “You missed your nap. You’re going to be grumpy.”

“I am not going to be grumpy,” he growled, but there was a smirk on his face.

Rebecca rolled her eyes and said “I’ll be in my room whenever you’re ready,” and stomped off.

“I don’t recall agreeing to have a teenager,” Mark said, still nestled in the green sheet.

“Comes with the packaging,” Gloria said, getting out of bed.

“How was your nap?” Mark asked bitterly, tossing aside the sheet and rolling out of bed himself.

“Very nice, since you asked. Now go help Rebecca before she completely freaks out like she did last time.”

Mark groaned. He remembered that meltdown all too well and hastily got dressed again and sauntered dejectedly out through the house.

“I’m going to make a snack!” Gloria called after him, making her way into the kitchen and turning on the TV. Mark didn’t reply, but made his way down the hall to Rebecca’s room where he found her hunched over a textbook, her head somehow lower than her shoulder blades.

“Did you want something to eat?” Mark asked.

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “No, dad, I just want to get this done. I want to get some video practice in this evening.”

Mark smirked. Video practice was essentially a combination of a flight simulator and a strategy game. The kind of thing that he’d played as a kid for entertainment and been called a slacker for was now part of the curriculum, intended to improve hand-eye coordination and critical thinking.

“Are we going to have a robot on Mars, dad?”

“Probably. The atmosphere isn’t fully stable there yet and so robots are practically essential for a lot of the outdoor work.”

“Cool,” Rebecca smiled. She’d wanted a robot for a while, but they were still terribly expensive and the family hadn’t quite been able to afford one.

“Now, let’s get to that geo...” Mark began, but he was cut off by the sound of glass breaking from the next room. “Hon, you ok?”

Gloria didn’t answer. “Gloria?” Mark tried again. There was still no answer. Rebecca looked annoyed.

“Dad, she can take care of herself.”

Ignoring her, Mark got up, mumbled something about being right back, and headed off to the kitchen where he found Gloria standing in a puddle of water with broken glass mixed in where she had dropped it. Also on the floor was a small sandwich, the plate it had been resting on hanging limply from Gloria’s hand. As he stood there watching her, it too slipped from her hand and crashed on the floor, creating shards of ceramic.

“Gloria,” Mark said, rushing over to her, “what’s wrong?”

Mutely, Gloria pointed to the TV. Mark glanced at it, registering it for the first time since entering the room. There on the screen was a sight that sent chills down his entire body. A group of zombies was being fought off by riot police. They advanced steadily, and were bearing down on the group of men. Then a sniper's bullet fired and picked one of them off, and then another. The zombies dropped and lay motionless. The news camera cut back to the anchor who was interviewing another expert.

"I thought it was over," Gloria whispered.

Mark watched in horror as the cameras switched again to live footage, this time in a different location.

The story unfolded. The zombies were back, although for most people they were appearing for the first time. The memory of the public was short, and most people had bought the party line explanation for the previous incident. Hardly anybody remembered fifteen years ago when a small group in a localized area were put down by government agents. Most people had thought it was just a publicity stunt for a movie. Zombies were in, after all.

What was shocking was the speed at which they had appeared. There was no slow build up like last time, no time to prepare, no time for anything. It was like the German blitzkrieg, washing like waves across entire nations.

In due order the various military units of the the globe were called out and a war was beginning. It was a paradox. They were so easy to kill, but there always seemed to be more of them. Comparisons were made to army ants, locusts, and piranha. Anything that attacked in swarms and overwhelmed their enemies with sheer numbers and determination.

Mark's phone rang. "Yes," he said, answering.

"I assume you have the TV on," Chris said.

"Yes. What's going on?"

There was a pause. "The world may be ending," Chris said.

The conversation went like this for several minutes. Chris had mostly lost perspective and saw no way out and had called Mark in desperation. Mark, of course, had no answers, his research cut off and no additional specimens to examine for fifteen years. He wasn't even sure where his old notes were anymore. After ten minutes Mark hung up on him and his delusions. He cast his memory back for anyone else who might be helpful in a situation like this. Helen had passed on a couple of years ago from an unexpected blood clot in her body and he hadn't kept up with her replacement. There was Lucille, but he didn't have current contact information for her. It looked as though they were on their own.

“What did Chris say?” Gloria asked, having gathered her senses up sufficiently to start mopping up the glassy mess on the floor.

“Nothing helpful,” Mark said. “Be careful down there,” he added.

“I will...ow!” Gloria exclaimed. A red dot on the floor expanded slightly as a second drop of blood hit it from where she’d nicked her finger.

“What’s going on?” Rebecca asked.

“Rebecca, please go back to your room, I’ll be there in a minute,” Mark said hurriedly. Rebecca glared at him for a moment and then stomped off to try to finish her homework alone.

“I’m ok,” Gloria said, although she hadn’t moved since she’d cut herself. She watched as yet another drop of blood fell into the pool, mixing with the water and creating patterns as the proteins and red blood cells diluted themselves in the clear liquid on the pale, tacky tile. She’d hated this linoleum for so long. Why hadn’t they replaced it? Because they were going to be leaving soon, she told herself. They’d been planning to leave for at least the last five years.

“What are we going to do,” she asked in a daze.

Mark thought for a moment. “We’re valuable. We’re supposed to go to Mars. I’m a consultant for a goddamn government agency. We’re going to a military base. Leave that. I’m going to go tell Rebecca to pack a few things and grab some stuff myself and then we’re leaving.”

Gloria got up and looked at the mess of glass and water and trace amounts of her blood on the floor. What motivated zombies? Did they have a sense of smell? Taste? Was any part of their humanity left? It had all been so unclear fifteen years ago and nobody had had time or patience to study them properly and now they didn’t know anything about them. And that was, she decided the most horrifying part. She glanced at the television and saw, just above a crawl warning of graphic footage, some of the carnage that was taking place in cities across the world.

Carcasses being gnawed by rotting corpses that had no business still being mobile, let alone walking upright. People running, some standing to fight, and watching the wave of the dead washing over them and consuming them. The cameras switched to areas that had already been evacuated. Just like any other animal, the zombies didn’t stay where there was no food and so these places were wholly abandoned. The wind blew pieces of plastic and paper, modern day tumbleweeds, across the empty streets. There weren’t even any rats or other animals.

In a few areas the cameras showed a small amount of activity in the form of dragonflies hovering and flitting around the area and she recoiled. Dragonflies, to her, spoke of swamps and decay and filth and stinking stagnant water.

“But what about my homework?” protested Rebecca, who was being shepherded into the living room by Mark. She was wearing a lilac shirt, long sleeved, and grey, faded jeans and carried a hoodie over her left arm. In her other hand she held the handle of a mid-size suitcase that she rolled on its two wheels. On her back she wore a black backpack, stuffed with assorted other treasures that she couldn’t bear to part with. Mark had explained to her, as quickly as he could, that they were going away, but hadn’t found out how to tell her why.

“Bring it with you,” Mark advised.

“I thought you said it was a vacation,” she said suspiciously.

“It is. A bit,” Mark floundered. “Now just wait here while I get my stuff.” He half expected to hear the moans of the creatures right outside his door any moment now and wondered what he would do if that premonition came true.

“Rebecca, please put your things down and come help me,” Gloria said, finding her voice and her courage at last. Saying that, she walked calmly out of the kitchen and into the bedroom she shared with Mark, turning left after passing the doorway and entering the walk-in closet. Bypassing all of the clothes on hangers, she proceeded to the back of the closet and selected a mid-size suitcase on wheels, similar to Rebecca’s, laid it flat on the floor and unzipped it.

She then turned to the wooden drawers in the closet, opened the top one, and extracted her jogging suit, placing it carefully in the suitcase and then closing the drawer. She then moved along the row of hanging clothes and took an assortment of jeans and other durable pants as well as a few shirts, placing each in the suitcase. She turned and saw Rebecca standing in the doorway.

“Mom, where are we going?” she asked, all the youthful rebellion scared out of her by her mother’s odd behavior.

“Rebecca...” she began, and then paused. How did you explain this? How did you say such a thing and not come across as a stark raving lunatic? How did you tell your daughter that people were dying, but that they weren’t dying, and that they were coming to kill you and that you didn’t know how to stop them? Weren’t parents supposed to know everything?

Mark appeared behind Rebecca. “We have to go,” he said. “I just called the CDC and they said that evacuations are rolling through areas with trucks to help people get where they’re going. They’re encouraging people to take their own cars, but we’ll have to pick up passengers along the way since the trucks aren’t going to hold everybody. They aren’t stopping for anything, though, so you pretty much have to join the convoy as it moves through.”

“They’re right behind the convoy, which is why they’re not stopping, aren’t they?”

Mark nodded and then moved to gather his own belongings. "They're allowing one suitcase per person, two if you're bringing your own car," he called back. "They said not to bring anything other than what was absolutely necessary and reminded people to lock their homes. They said if there were family heirlooms to hide them as best you can and then leave them behind."

The unspoken implication was that the zombies couldn't care less about material objects and that looters were unlikely to survive their attempt at material gain. The entire scene was so surreal.

Their possessions safely gathered, Mark, Gloria, and Rebecca went and packed their luggage in the car and waited for the convoy to pass by. They waited about a half an hour, thirty full minutes filled with silence and tension and dread. The unknown, Gloria reflected to herself. The chilling realization that you don't have all the answers. It had been a fear for the human race for thousands of years and for scientists such as herself and Mark it was redoubled by the fact that they had no way to find out. They dealt with the unknown every day, but it was in terms of discovering the answers. This time there was no fight. There was only flight. And Mark sat in the driver's seat, the cracked plastic seat covering digging into his back, his senses all on alert, listening for that telltale moan that would tell them it was too late to wait for the trucks and that they would have to make their getaway on their own with no knowledge of where to go, how to get there, or what routes would be safe.

At last a sound penetrated the silence and they saw the first truck heave into view and they all breathed a sigh of relief. Rebecca still didn't know the details of what was going on, but the fear that her parents were showing was oozing into her and claspings onto her mind.

The truck was rough, but sturdy. The thick black tires rolled evenly, supporting the massive green bulk of the transport. The first of the vehicles was filled with escapees or, Gloria smirked grimly, refugees. There were people of all walks of life clinging to the exterior and she could only imagine the cramped conditions inside. A black-helmeted guard hopped off the truck, which kept moving at a slow but steady pace, and came towards them.

"You joining us?"

"We certainly hope so. I'm Mark Keln, this is my wife Gloria, and my daughter Rebecca."

The guard nodded at them all.

"The convoy is currently about ten trucks and a few dozen individual cars. There's a few seats left on the last truck, but if we pass more people we're going to ask you to pick them up. We're heading for Fort Lincoln, about twenty miles east."

"Twenty miles?" gasped Mark.

“It’s not the closest base, but it’s the only one that meets the requirements: easily defensible from all directions, well-stocked with provisions, and big enough to take all the people. We’re just one convoy. There are more coming from all directions. Some of them are stopping at the smaller bases, but most are going all the way to Lincoln.”

“What do we do?” asked Gloria.

“You’re going to see about eight trucks and then a long line of cars,” the guard continued. “When you see the last two trucks bringing up the rear, merge in in front of them. When we get to the base everybody is going to park just outside the gates and walk in. No room for civilian vehicles inside.”

Mark nodded and went to start the engine.

“Hold off on that, sir,” the guard said intercepting him. “There’s no telling how much gas there is available. We’re going to want to be very conservative when we use it.”

Mark nodded again and took his hands off the ignition key and put them both on the steering wheel just to have something to grip. His palms were sweaty and his nerves were shot. Even the presence of the guard and the convoy hadn’t done much to calm him and he continued to listen over the roar of the truck engines for the moan of the zombies.

The guard looked up, then back at Mark. “It’s going to be about ten minutes for the convoy to move enough for you to merge in with us. Be ready.”

“I will,” Mark replied. The guard nodded and then trotted to catch back up to the lead truck and swung himself up by a handhold up onto a running board next to the driver.

The next ten minutes should have been more reassuring for the trio in the car, but somehow the tension was only ratcheted up. The rumble of the trucks and cars as they passed and their requirement to sit still made it seem as though the convoy was passing them by. They feared that the car, though still in excellent repair, would not start and that the convoy would pass them by, unable to stop. And behind them, they knew, were the zombies. The uncaring, unstoppable mass of decay and murder and nothing else.

“Can we get some music in here at least,” muttered Rebecca.

“I doubt it, but we can try,” Mark said, leaning over to turn on the radio. His daughter had begged him for months to get an iPod, but he had resisted because he knew of all the hidden ancillary charges that went along with it, including buying music for it and having to replace the car radio so it would have a plug for the device to play through the main speakers. They had replaced the factory radio after about the first five years of car ownership and the speakers after the first eight, but everything was currently functional and he had no desire to pay to have them replaced again, especially in light of his impending trip to Mars.

The radio came on and, as Mark had predicted, there was no music on any of the stations. It was wall to wall news coverage and there was no letting up. He turned it off and turned around to face Rebecca. She had a look of mixed fear and boredom on her face, which Mark decided was a pretty good trick.

“Do you understand what’s going on, sweetie?” he asked.

She turned to glare at him. “No. You always treat me like a child and never tell me anything.”

Mark sighed. “Well, Rebecca, that’s because up until recently you were a child and your ol’ dad has had a hard time adjusting to the fact that you’re almost grown up now. You’ve got a little more maturing left, but I guess in the circumstances we ought to tell you the truth. Right Gloria?” He turned to his wife for support.

“Yes, I guess you’re right,” she replied woodenly. Mark recognized this. She disagreed with him, but didn’t want to do so in front of Rebecca. That could be dealt with later.

And so Mark explained to Rebecca all of what he knew of what was happening, just as Justine was explaining it to her friends.

“Ok, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: This. Story. Isn’t. Scary!” Derek said. “I’m telling you, you’ll do much better with the flashlight.”

“Like your story was so scary right up until you hit the log,” Justine said calmly. She was finished worrying about these losers. She was going to finish her story and if they chose not to believe her, then of course the story wasn’t scary. It would be scary for everyone if they did believe her, though. Possibly it would be scary for the whole world. “Now, are you going to let me keep going or are you going to keep interrupting me by complaining the whole time?”

The entire group rolled their eyes, seemingly as one person, and then the muttering started about yes, yes, please DO go on, Justine. She smiled to herself. This was turning out to be more fun than she’d anticipated.

Mark finished explaining to Rebecca what was going on. Gloria sat facing forward the entire time, but she could see the horror in her daughter’s wide eyes in the rear view mirror. She was conflicted. On the one hand, Rebecca was far too young to be dealing with a danger and a horror of this magnitude. She was concerned that she would be scarred for life. On the other hand, this was reality and it was a reality that couldn’t be ignored and that she couldn’t be sheltered from. If there were any shelter from this monstrosity, they would all be cowering in it together. Instead they were up here, listening to cars drift by, many of which sounded as though they hadn’t been properly maintained and would be lucky to make it to the military base. How much were they slowing the convoy down? How many people might have to be left behind to be recruited into the ranks of the enemy because they were going too slowly?

At last they could see the last two trucks rolling into view. Mark started the car, which turned over easily, and began the process of merging into the line of cars, pulling into the lane behind a white station wagon that looked like it was being held together with chewing gum and epoxy and twine. White smoke came out of the exhaust, billowing into the windshield of the blue Mazda and creating a haze in front of their eyes that they were having a hard time seeing through. In the midst of the haze, Mark thought he spotted a dragonfly, but his nerves didn't process the presence of the insect or else he might have taken more notice. It flitted away before he could register it in his brain.

The row of cars moved slowly, about forty five miles per hour. Under normal circumstances this would have been fast enough, but in the present situation it seemed painfully slow. Now that Rebecca was up to speed on the situation and what they were running from, the radio had been turned back on. The reports were not good. The zombies were being mowed down fairly efficiently by the various world militias, including some home-grown citizens who were particularly well armed, but it didn't seem to be making any difference. More zombies appeared to take their place and nobody knew where they were coming from.

Occasionally they would slow down to pick up new members of the convoy, which was always nerve wracking to everyone. Speed, they felt, was their only real ally at the moment. New cars pulled in behind them, a few stragglers grabbed onto the trucks, but by the time the military base came into view the family in the blue Mazda had not been called upon to pick up any additional passengers. Mark was just as glad. He was on the edge of panic himself. Who knew what kind of mental state a newcomer might be in to upset the delicate balance that kept them all sane at the moment?

If the trip to the base had been nerve wracking, it was nothing compared to the actual arrival. Everyone was on edge. Troops swarmed around the convoy, instructing everyone to park along the outskirts of the fencing that would be their first line of protection against the oncoming horde. The trucks were ushered in while the cars maneuvered into the designated positions and the occupants got out and gathered their few possessions. Everything was very hurried and tense as soldiers kept their eyes on the horizon, aware that the enemy was close by.

Mark listened as the wind picked up, straining to hear the tell-tale moan, but heard nothing and was glad of it. They shuffled along a dry dirt path to the road and through the checkpoint before heading into the compound where the trucks had waited for them. There was no room on the transports, but the people who had taken cars were led by the trucks, who drove slowly, and a few scattered troops. Once everyone was inside the fencing, the gates were closed. The guard who put the padlock on the chain did so with a moment's hesitation, as if he were wondering why he was bothering. The protection offered by the chain link fencing seemed horribly inadequate.

Once they reached the main section of the compound, about a mile's walk from the front gates, the refugees were divided into sections and redirected to various buildings and hangars. The

military equipment that normally was housed in these buildings had been taken out and either sent out on search and rescue missions, search and destroy missions, or was just lined up outside to ward off any zombies that made it to the enclosure. They came in to find rows and rows of cots, low to the ground, made of canvas and aluminum, with a small, thin blanket and a pillow the size of a postcard. Mark dropped his things next to one of them. Gloria and Rebecca followed suit.

“Now what?” Rebecca asked.

“Now you stay here and watch our things. Your mother and I are going to go ask some questions and see if there’s anything we can do to help.”

Rebecca frowned, but said nothing. She somehow knew that her teenage rebellion was out of place here and did not try to start anything with her father.

Mark and Gloria walked up to the nearest guard.

“Hi,” Gloria began, but the guard cut her off.

“Ma’am, if you and your husband would please return to your cots. The Major will be making announcements regarding all of the commonly asked questions thusfar in about ten minutes.”

“Fine,” Gloria continued, “but if you would mention to him that we’re Gloria and Mark Kolb. I’m a computer security expert and he’s a biologist with a specialty in viruses, bacteria, and infectious agents. If there’s anything we can do to help, we’d be glad to do so.”

The guard said he would pass the word along and signaled to another troop who was walking past. He passed along the message and the troop disappeared. A few moments later a large man in his forties wearing tan fatigues and a military hat came up to them.

“I’m Major Alex Smythe,” he said by way of introduction, not offering his hand. “I hear you’re offering technical assistance.”

“That’s correct.”

“What experience do you have with this situation?” the Major asked.

Mark explained his work with the previous zombie outbreak.

“So you came to no solid conclusions, then?” the Major said.

“Unfortunately, no,” Mark conceded.

“Sir, if you could return to your bunk and take care of your daughter. Ma’am, I’d like you to come with me.”

“Of course, but why me?”

“We do not have time nor the inclination to discuss the whys and the wherefores of whatever disease or other agent may be causing the current crisis. That’s for later. For today there is only survival. And for that we have the beginnings of a plan that we feel you could be very helpful with, indeed.”

“Anything I can do to help,” Gloria said. Mark looked slightly hurt, but said nothing. Once again the hard sciences were being overlooked in favor of modern technology. His insult was made worse by the fact that they were dealing with a biological enemy. What good was a computer security consultant going to do?

A robot trundled by carrying two large, heavy looking cases on its way outside. Mark wondered for a moment, and then headed back to the cot to talk to Rebecca and make sure she was doing ok.

Major Smythe and Gloria walked together over to a short flight of metal stairs and walked up them to a narrow walkway that carried them to a short corridor. They took the third door on the left and entered a large conference room that carried about a dozen people of various ranks and responsibilities. The major indicated for her to sit down in one of the available chairs and then sat down himself at the head of the table.

“Sorry for the interruption, but I believe we’ve had a bit of good luck fall our way,” the major said. “Mrs. Keln here is a computer security specialist.”

There was a moment of silence and then someone said “So?”

“She works for Cyberitis Corporation,” the major finished. There was a slight collective intake of breath from several people in the room.

“Does she know?” someone asked.

“Do I know what?” Gloria interjected. “I’m right here. I offered to help, but I’m a little taken aback at this level of treatment. I’ll do what I can, but I don’t think I’m going to be able to do much apart from some basic troubleshooting unless the zombies are hackers. My husband is a virologist who was working on this problem before.”

“As I mentioned before, we do not have time for a clinical evaluation of the situation. That will come later. Right now we need a more solid defense. The biggest mystery right now will probably be solved by someone with your husband’s training, but if we don’t live through the

week then it won't make any difference. And your expertise and connections are much more valuable to achieving that goal."

"Ok...but how?"

"Robotics," someone said. "I'm Marianne Glib and when the word came that you were on the base, I was the one who sent the major to fetch you."

Major Smythe huffed into his moustache. "You did not send me to fetch anyone," he grumbled under his breath, but softly enough as to not interrupt the proceedings.

"Ms. Glib," Gloria said. "I've heard of you. You're a leader in the robotics field. What are you suggesting?"

"There are two very important things going on here," said Marianne, turning to a white dry erase board and picking up a marker. Her tone and body language suggested someone who was used to lecturing. She wore a stereotypical white lab coat and glasses. Her brown hair was pulled back into a loose bun and the way she carried herself in her high heels gave one the impression that if she wasn't having affairs with the college students she occasionally taught then it was probably very frustrating to the entire class to have to watch her teach.

"The first is defense. We believe that we have enough robots worldwide to hold the zombies off while a better strategy is developed and while we determine where they're all coming from. The problem is that very few of these robots are on the same communications system and their security is preventing us from breaking in. This is where you come in, Mrs. Keln. We'd like you to help us bypass their security so we can bring them all under one central controller."

Gloria sat and looked at the board for a moment, examining the diagram that Marianne had drawn. It showed a central pillar with many branches off of it, each one representing a robot. In theory it was possible, but it would take work and time and she didn't believe she could do it by herself.

"You will have the support of the entire military complex. We're trying to find and recruit more people like yourself who have a background and aptitude for technology," Major Smythe said, as if reading her mind.

"You said there was a second important thing," Gloria said.

"Ah," interjected a man in the corner of the room. He was thin and looked nervous. He had a hook nose and when he rose Gloria could see that he was tall and lean and had poor posture. Hunching over at the waist, the man loped over to the white board next to Marianne.

"This is Lieutenant Allen Whitmore," Major Smythe said. "He's heading up intelligence and surveillance for us."

“Yes,” Lieutenant Whitmore said. Even his voice seemed to have a hunch and listening to him made Gloria’s back hurt. “We’ve been observing the zombies from the air for quite some time trying to determine patterns of behavior. We haven’t been able to make any definitive conclusions at this time, but so far their movement seems to be based around two major motivations.”

He drew a line on the white board, dividing it in the middle to separate what he was about to illustrate from Marianne’s drawing.

“The first is major population centers. This was a major concern of ours because it influences defense strategy. Popular human response to a threat like this is to gather together for protection. Unfortunately, just as this makes a population more vulnerable to something like a bomb where all the targets are concentrated in one area, so too does it make them more vulnerable to a zombie attack. It attracts them and, thusfar, they have always been able to overwhelm the defenses.”

There was a surssurance of uneasiness at this comment within the room.

“Thus the delay in forming the convoys to military bases. There was some talk and debate,” he said, indicating with his tone of voice that his had been the contrary opinion that had lost those debates, “that we should strive to disperse the population rather than purposefully congregating them into a single location. It was decided, however, that overcoming basic human instinct just wasn’t going to happen and that military bases were the best equipped to defend large numbers of people from this threat.”

Gloria looked at the drawing that the officer had drawn indicating masses of zombies closing in on population centers. All the activity on the news had been centered around the major cities. It made sense at the time because that’s where news reporters always reported...nobody cared about the suburbs. But now it made even more sense. She wondered if some folks in less populated areas had even noticed there was anything going on if they hadn’t turned on a TV or a radio.

“The second major motivation is much more mysterious. There seems to be a small tangent of the enemy that has broken off from the main flow and is making its way towards an alternate location. Specifically the headquarters and offices of Cyberitis Corporation.”

Gloria gaped as she watched Allen write the name of her employer on the board. “What have they got to do with it?” she exclaimed.

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Major Smythe said.

“I’m just an analyst,” she said, downplaying her credentials until she could figure out what was going on. “Have you contacted any of the administrative staff or the board of directors?”

“We’ve tried, but no luck finding any of them so far. It’s communications chaos out there. Cell lines are jammed and many people don’t have their phones on them. It’s a wonder we still have electricity, but we can probably credit that to the fact that the enemy don’t seem to have any interest in sabotage or anything else except eating...except for this one instance,” the lieutenant said.

“I honestly have no idea why they’d be doing any such thing. Everything I ever heard from Mark about these creatures the last time indicated that all they did was eat people. Are there a lot of people holed up there?”

“Not that we’ve been able to tell from our observation,” Allen said.

“So, to sum up,” the major said, “we need you to help us crack the security on the worldwide population of robots to help us with our defense and we need you to help us figure out what’s going on at Cyberitis Corporation.”

“In that order?” Gloria asked.

“No, both together,” the major said without humor.

“I’ll need my husband and for someone to look after my daughter,” Gloria said.

“Fine,” said the major. “Now let’s get to work, people!”

Everyone stood up except Gloria. She sat and wondered what she’d gotten herself into. When she’d offered help she thought she’d get put to work on some computers, sure, but nothing like this. It was like being told you were going to the front lines to live in the trenches and having clean socks wasn’t really going to be sufficient in this case. Mars suddenly seemed a lot farther away. Another six months and they would have been gone. She wondered how the people who were already there were reacting, and then she remembered the time lapse between communications here and there. There was an excellent chance they didn’t know yet. There was another chance that they would never know, that they would be insulated from this tragedy. What was the point of telling them? So they could suffer in guilt? So they could worry that this would happen to them as well? It wasn’t as if they could come back to help.

At last Gloria gathered herself enough to stand up and found herself standing next to Marianne.

“They’re arranging for someone to watch your daughter and then your husband can join us. In the meantime, I think we should get to work on those robots.”

Gloria nodded and they walked together back out into the corridor and turned to continue on, away from the main hangar where her family was still waiting for her. They walked to the end

of the hall and found that it turned to the right, continued on a little further and walked into a huge room filled with computers and communications equipment.

“Reminds me of the old mainframes from history class,” Marianne said. “Except those were one big machine. This is more like a thousand little ones all connected.”

The air conditioning was running full blast, but the heat in the room was still noticeable if not oppressive. Gloria had heard about networked parallel processing, of course, but had never seen it implemented quite on this scale.

“This is pretty impressive,” she finally settled on.

“Thanks,” Marianne replied. “We’re hoping we can get this moving quickly and won’t need to take the next step.”

“What’s the next step,” Gloria asked, wondering what else could be done beyond this.

“Ever hear of SETI at Home?”

SETI at Home was previously a large distributed computing project dedicated to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. The idea was that data was being collected from radio telescopes at a rate faster than it could be analyzed, so the project created a downloadable program that would allow home users to be sent packets of data. The program would process the data and send it back, thus recapturing thousands if not millions of previously lost or idle computing cycles for the benefit of the project.

SETI@Home was shut down just prior to the first mission to Mars to redirect funds to the interstellar travel project with the understanding that it would be reactivated once colonization of Mars was complete and stable with radio telescopes of its own, as well as data collectors on the two Martian moons, Phobos and Deimos.

“You can’t be serious,” Gloria said.

“Very. If we don’t get this threat wiped out in the next couple of weeks, we risk being completely overwhelmed. This setup,” she said, indicating the roomful of computers behind her, “is only the beginning. We’ve dedicated a couple of programmers to the idea of sending a worm out to take over civilian computers and run the robot control program using their processing power.”

“I’m...not sure if that can work,” Gloria said. The truth was that she knew it could, but the prospect was almost as terrifying as the zombies. Not quite, but they were within sight of each other.

“Well, with luck we won’t have to find out,” Marianne said. “Now, let’s get to work.”

They quickly queried the major robotics manufacturers to determine how many there were and came up with about twenty. Each one used a different security algorithm for their robots, which meant they were going to have to crack each one in order to bring them all under central control. They had tried contacting the manufacturers themselves, but those areas were all in major cities and had been overrun by the zombies. There was no way of knowing whether the original programmers were still alive or how to access the source code. Gloria knew a few tricks and was able to break the security on the first five models within a few hours, but the others were proving more difficult.

In the meantime, Mark had been retrieved from the hangar and Rebecca was now in the care of one of the guards. Intelligence was still reporting that the zombies were converging on major cities and, inexplicably, on Cyberitis Corporation headquarters. Nobody knew what was in that building that they were so interested in, but everyone agreed that finding out was probably important.

“They demonstrated problem solving capacity when we studied them before,” Mark said, dredging through his memory and mourning the loss of Todd who really understood this kind of behavior. “Problem solving, an insatiable hunger, and persistence. But we never really found out what else was going on in their heads. If they’re going there, it’s probably for a reason, but I’ll be damned if I know what it is.”

“Can we send a robot in to check?” Gloria asked. “We’ve got enough of them online and under control that we probably could.”

“Yes, I think that would be a good idea. Do we have any with camera capability?” Marianne asked.

“I believe so,” Gloria said, checking. “Yes, here’s one. It’s within fifty miles of the facility, but it’s not mobile. It was set as a stationary surveillance robot, designed to interpret data with its AI.”

“Any transport solutions?”

Gloria clicked through the growing database of online robots. “There’s a truck with AI nearby, but it’s too large to fit through the doors. I don’t think that’s going to do it. We need something more humanoid, but there aren’t a lot of those in the wild. They’re so expensive, most of them are still in R&D.”

“Get the camera on the truck and get it moving. We’ll think of something while they’re driving.”

Gloria issued the instructions. Across town the engine of the truck roared to life and the computer put the vehicle into gear. Ten minutes later the truck was positioned under the little

robotic camera which was held to its wall by four spindly little legs, grasping a sharp corner. The idea behind the design of these robots was that they could be placed anywhere and could hold on themselves or they could be removed and repositioned easily, but they had no real mobility. Gloria sent a command for the camera to close its lens and let go of the wall. The command was obeyed and the camera dropped into the back of the truck and re-gripped the floor, stabilizing itself. The truck roared away, heading in the direction of the target building.

Marianne, meanwhile, was on another terminal accessing a different file. "Here it is," she announced at last. Gloria went over to look.

The screen showed a wireframe outline of a humanoid robot, one of the most realistic she'd seen thusfar. "This is a highly secret design of the military, intended for covert ops and spy missions. The concept was an agent that could gather intelligence like a spy, but without the negative consequences of putting a human agent in the field. If he's captured you just wipe his memory and shut him down."

"Where is he?"

"Working a cash register."

Gloria took that in. The implication was that robots were even more pervasive than had been previously imagined. They could be anywhere and everywhere, and probably were.

"Have the truck swing by 14th and Spring and pick him up. He can carry the camera into the building."

Gloria redirected the vehicle, which took an additional ten minutes to reach the target. The Cyberitis Corporation building was now nearly sixty miles away, as the truck had had to go out of its way to pick up the camera and the courier robot. Streets were mercifully clear, as the evacuations had mostly concluded by this point. Humanity was now huddled into the larger military bases around the country, and similar situations were happening worldwide.

Mark watched all of this fascinated. He turned to Major Smythe. "Sir, I wonder if I can ask a delicate question."

"I think at this point," the major said, a look of grim determination on his face as he watched yet another monitor showing the movement of the zombie hordes towards the various locations where the population was now hiding, "the idea of secrets is fairly unimportant. Ask away."

"What's the worst-case-scenario here? What's the contingency plan?"

The major paused and then charged forward with his response. "The President has issued orders that in addition to the standard methods of defense, certain bases are to be working

with NASA concurrently to prepare as many shuttles as possible. The Earth itself will be evacuated, first to the Moon base so as to facilitate additional trips back to pick up remaining survivors, and then from there to Mars.”

“Is Mars prepared to accept such a large influx of population?”

“Truthfully, no, but we’ve sent word ahead and we hope to be able to accommodate enough people on the Moon so as to manage the traffic flow to the colony. Shuttles with supplies are already launching so as to have the Moon prepared for the new arrivals.”

“And what’s the timetable on this?”

“It’s in motion now, but I’d keep that quiet if I were you.”

Mark understood. The fact that the worst-case-scenario was already in motion meant that the military had conceded defeat. They did not foresee victory in this war, and it was less than a day old. The sheer power of numbers was overwhelming the technological might of the largest nations in the world.

“After the evacuation, are there plans to retake the planet?” Mark asked, feeling as though he might be pressing his luck or thinking too far ahead.

“In a manner of speaking,” the major replied, but he would not elaborate.

Half an hour passed with the truck in transit to the target. They watched the small dots on the screens that represented the estimated position of the zombies. They moved slowly, but steadily, and it was the opinion of most that they would reach Fort Lincoln in roughly four hours and Cyberitis Corporation in about two. The other bases were monitoring their own situation. There would be no backup, no cavalry, and no aid available. Each base was effectively on its own. Aircraft were being dispatched from available bases to hold off the hordes, but there weren’t enough to go around and the numbers of the dead kept swelling and still nobody knew where they were all coming from.

At last the truck reached the target. The humanoid robot got clumsily out of the truck and reached into the back to fetch the camera, which obediently let go and allowed itself to be carried into the building. There were no people around, and no sign of zombies yet. The camera had no audio pickup, and so the display monitor was eerily silent as they entered the building.

The camera’s AI processed the surroundings and labeled each object it saw. Tables, tools, chairs, computers, and other assorted office equipment was all they saw. The robot carried the camera through the entire first floor and saw nothing of any particular interest.

“What do you think, elevator or stairs?” Marianne asked.

Gloria shrugged. "We never stored anything in the stairwells. Whatever you think would be faster and easier for the robot to negotiate. It seems pretty clumsy."

Marianne nodded. "Elevator it is," she said, directing the robot to push the call button. "This model was equipped with a handicap," she went on, watching the video. "We were experimenting with imperfect robotics."

"I would have thought that would be pretty easy," Mark said.

"That's a common misconception. But think about a clown. They look silly, but every movement they make is actually well-rehearsed. When you see them take a pratfall, they've practiced that about a million times. Fall off of a bicycle? Another million rehearsals. You can't look bad at something safely until you know how to do it right. Same with robotics. In order to make a robot that can stumble and limp realistically, you have to make them so that they can walk perfectly. But if they walk perfectly then they stand out in a crowd. How many people do you know that can walk a perfectly straight line without losing their balance? It's all part of the disguise."

Gloria looked at Marianne after that speech. "In this case it's a liability," she said. "Can't you turn it off?"

"Unfortunately, no," Marianne replied. "It's built into the physical framework. It was the only way. We were trying to get it done through software, but that's still a few years away."

"How many more of these imperfect robots are there?" Mark asked.

Marianne shot him a look. "That's classified," she said, and then she turned back to the video, clearly indicating that she was finished discussing the topic.

The elevator doors opened and the robot limped on, turned, and pressed the button for the second floor. The doors shut. From the perspective of the people in the control room nothing happened; there was no sound and no movement, but they knew the elevator was rising. After a few moments the doors opened again revealing the office areas on the second floor. The robot stepped out.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Mark asked.

"The most obvious answer is a group of people holed up in here hoping to hide. We don't have any intelligence to suggest that there are any people left in here, but the zombies are heading in this direction and thusfar we haven't observed any behavior that would lead us to believe they're attracted to anything else. Even zoos aren't being swarmed the way human populations are."

“So if there are no people, then what?”

“Then we drop back and punt,” Marianne said grimly. “I don’t know, really. I’m hoping we’ll know it when we see it.”

Mark accepted that and continued to watch the video screens.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Marianne snapped impatiently.

“Like where?” Mark replied, taken aback.

“I don’t know, but it seems to me that we’ve got enough computer and military people in here without a biologist asking a bunch of questions.”

Mark wasn’t sure where this was coming from, but rather than add to the tension in the room, he quietly excused himself and went looking for something else to do. He wandered down the corridor and passed by another open door where he saw more computers arrayed in rows. Entering the room, he noticed the Lieutenant, Allen Whitmore, hunched over one of the terminals.

“Hello?” Mark tried. Whitmore looked up.

“Who are you?” Whitmore asked, a trifle sharply. Mark really wasn’t in the mood for this. Wasn’t he supposed to be helping? Wasn’t some stranger looking after his daughter because he was trying to help? He didn’t deserve this.

“I’m Mark Keln,” he said, only a little snappishly, and he mentally congratulated himself on his self control. “I’m a biologist and I worked with one of the zombies on the first outbreak. I said I could try to help and so here I am.”

“Oh,” Whitmore said, calming himself just slightly. “Keln. Yes. They told me about you. Have a seat.” Whitmore indicated one of the chairs, but turned his attention back to the computer screen, indicating that Mark was welcome to stay, but that the conversation was effectively over.

Mark sat down and looked at the terminal in front of him. It was a standard desktop with a few unfamiliar icons, but nothing remarkable. The wallpaper was emblazoned with the symbol of the United States Army. He reached for the mouse and opened an internet browser window.

“Hey,” he said, an idea coming to him, “can I access CDC records from here?” He’d totally forgotten that in all the excitement he actually had found time to file a complete report on the zombies from the last time. There had, of course, been no further research, but anything was better than nothing at this point.

Whitmore didn't reply at first, so Mark stuck his head around the monitor that separated them. Eventually, the lieutenant glanced in his direction, but didn't acknowledge his presence. Mark turned back around, unsure how to proceed. The lieutenant clearly had no intention of talking to him, but this seemed like the most important thing he could do right now.

Of course what he really wanted was another subject to study. There hadn't been any blood to sample in the original individuals, but he wondered if that might have changed. If there were any differences in the zombies of before and the zombies of now it might go a long way towards explaining why the original outbreak had been so easy to contain and why this one was threatening to engulf the planet within the week. That scenario of getting a chance to do more hands-on research seemed unlikely, so he turned back to the computer and began clicking on some of the random icons that littered the screen.

Most of them asked him immediately for a username and password, neither of which he had, nor did he have any great confidence of getting them from anyone. The whole base seemed remarkably uncooperative. So he kept clicking on links. A perverse part of his mind wondered if he'd come across evidence that the zombies were the result of some government experiment gone horribly wrong, but nothing like that came up. He kept opening programs until he ran out and then did what everybody did when at a computer and bored...he surfed the 'net.

Back in the control room, Gloria watched as the robots monotonously went through the sixth floor of the building. So far it had been a complete bust. Office furniture. Cubicle walls. Trash cans. The assorted contents of break rooms. All of these had been dutifully recorded by the camera, carried untiringly by the humanoid robot, labeled, cataloged, categorized, and saved for posterity on the local hard drives. But no people and nothing to indicate what zombies might find so interesting.

The elevator doors opened once again and the robot got on to investigate the seventh and final level of the building. The roof was technically after that, but it just held the HVAC equipment. A few moments later the doors opened and the camera revealed a wide open room. Gloria recognized it as the research room. Open spaces provided for more open collaboration, or so the designers had told her boss, and who was she to argue? She hadn't actually been on the research floor for several years. They'd had her working on other projects, mostly robotics related.

Which reminded her. She glanced over at another terminal to check on the progress of her hacking into the minds of other robots. She had succeeded in cracking into another model, but there were still tons to go. Overall she estimated that they could control roughly 20% of the total robot population from where they were, which was a good start, but the total robot population was an imprecise number. They might have 20000 robots, or they might have 2000 and that one extra zero was a great big deal right now.

She turned back to the camera monitor and saw the robot's view. The camera jiggled and jerked as the robot carrying it limped along providing a very unsteady picture. Occasionally it

would stop and pan around the room to make sure all objects were being seen clearly. The picture scanned over a small desktop terminal sitting in the middle of a table that looked vaguely familiar to Gloria.

“Hold it,” she said.

“You see something?” Marianne said hopefully.

“I’m not sure,” Gloria said. “Something about that computer.” She studied it.

The terminal itself seemed unremarkable. A solid black enclosure with plenty of fans to cool the hard drives and processor. Cables connected it to the standard computer input devices; monitor, mouse, and keyboard. A long black cord connected it to the wall, supplying it with power, although at the moment it looked switched off. A CAT-5 network cable sat nearby, but was not plugged into the network card. That was odd.

Gloria wracked her brain. She worked in network security. Unplugging a computer from the network wasn’t often done because that’s how you tested security systems. Often the network would be isolated from the main network for safety reasons, but you had to have something to test it with, and that meant it had to be on a network of some kind.

“Have the robot move closer,” Gloria suggested. Marianne punched a couple of buttons and the robot limped forwards. “Now around to the back of that computer.” The robot obeyed and focused the camera on the back of the computer, revealing the input panels for hardware to be added.

Gloria sat back and thought.

“What’s up?” Marianne asked, looking for some indication of what was going on.

“I’m not sure,” Gloria confessed. “I’ve seen that computer before, but I can’t remember where. It isn’t on the network and there’s no wireless card. It’s just sitting there.”

“Should we plug it in?”

“No!” Gloria exclaimed. “Having a computer off-network is very unusual. There’s going to be a good reason. And I know what it is...I just have to remember.”

And then it came back to her. She remembered the mysterious virus that cracked every form of security they’d ever tried it on. And then she looked at the progress of the hacking of the existing security of the various robots worldwide. It was snailing along and she estimated that it would take another several days if not weeks to get them all under central control, and then there was the AI to deal with in some cases. But with this program...it was a risk, because

they'd never discovered what else it did, but it would speed up the process of taking control of the worldwide robot army so much that she thought it might be worth it.

"We need that computer," she said.

Marianne gave her a funny look. "What for?"

"I'll explain while it's being transported, just get the robot to grab it and head back to the truck."

"There's no more time," the major interrupted. He'd been watching from the sidelines, keeping an eye on the monitors, watching the zombies and their trek towards the various population centers. "Whatever the zombies are after at this location, they're about fifteen minutes away."

"There's no way this gimpy robot is going to make it back to the truck before they get inside," Gloria said, with a note of despair in her voice.

"There's still a way," Marianne said. "Major, we need a chopper."

The major shook his head. "No way, no how. They're all that's standing between us and that horde, there's only three available in this section, and we still don't know what's so valuable about that computer."

"She says it's important and that's good enough for me," Marianne said.

"It's a complicated explanation, major, but in a nutshell it's going to get you your robot army about ten times faster than the way we're doing it now," Gloria said.

The major frowned and looked away from her and towards the monitor that was tracking the zombies. "What are they heading towards that building for?" he mused, half to himself.

"I honestly don't know," Gloria said. "We went over every inch of the building except for the roof and this is the only thing of any real value anywhere in the building. We saw nothing that would attract zombies based on what we know of them so far. If we fly in there with a chopper we can land on the roof, check it ourselves, and then grab the computer and go. If we wait for the robot to grab it and then head back down the elevator then the zombies are going to clog the entire area."

"We don't know how they'll act around the humanoid robot," Marianne added. "It's covered in a synthetic flesh. They might try to eat it and destroy it in the process. At that point the computer might get dropped and smashed. At the very least it will then be deep in enemy territory and the chances of recovering it are virtually nil. We need to go now or write off the asset as lost."

The major stared at the screen. Small gray dots indicated the advancing hordes and they were closing in on all the major bases in the region. He didn't know what the situation was in the rest of the country. For all he knew they were already overrun and it was now his command versus the world of the dead.

"Major...?"

"Alright. One chopper. One pilot. We'll send in a team and get your precious computer."

Gloria breathed a sigh of relief, a relief that was stolen from her in the next moment as the camera picked up flashing red lights in the room.

"What the..." Marianne began, but Gloria had already groaned and put her head down on the desk.

"Dammit," she muttered. "Major, where are the zombies now?"

The major checked the monitor. "Damn," he repeated. "They're right outside the front door."

"Of course they are," Gloria said. "Ok, in a nutshell, here's what just happened. The zombies are the walking dead. Therefore they used to be alive. As a high-level computer security firm, we are constantly on the alert for industrial espionage. We've got the equivalent of a black list of people who are known corporate spies and we trained the AI of the security system in the building to lock them out."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to whitelist everybody who worked there?"

"Interestingly not because in most cases the building has human occupants to police the majority of this traffic and we have visitors and vendors coming in all the time. We didn't want to come off as completely paranoid, so we blacklisted the known guys and trusted our existing security to weed out the rest."

"So what just happened?"

"One of the zombies is evidently the recently deceased corpse of one of the guys on the blacklist. He's tripped the alarm. The entire building just went into lockdown."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that all the doors just locked themselves. We can't get in without a biometric scan."

The major harumphed. "We'll see about that. I have a demolitions man who we can send along."

Gloria shook her head. “Bad idea. The room with the computer is an enclosed space. The door’s too thick to just batter down and using an explosive will damage the system. We need to get that door open the way it was intended to be opened. With a retina scan.”

“Whose retina?” Marianna asked.

“Mine,” Gloria replied.

“Absolutely not,” Mark said, standing in the doorway. He’d gotten bored with Whitmire and the random garbage he’d been surfing on the internet and was feeling particularly useless. So he’d come back to see how things were going in the control room. He’d been standing there for about a minute, just long enough to see where the conversation was going, and he was having none of it.

“Mark, it’s the only way,” Gloria said. “Besides, I’ll be well-protected. They’re sending along a squad of folks. We land on the roof, I scan us in, we run in, grab the computer, run out, take off. The zombies are trapped downstairs and can’t even get up there yet. It’ll take them forever to get to the top floor. Nothing can go wrong.”

“Famous last words,” Mark said. “Of course something can go wrong. Something *will* go wrong. It always does. These things clawed their way through solid concrete. They’ve got not sense of self preservation, no sense of pain, no sense of stopping or resting or anything else but hunger.”

“Then what are they doing there in the first place?” Gloria countered.

Mark stood silent. He had no answer for that.

“There. It’s settled. They have some other motivation, we just don’t know what it is yet. This is our only chance, Mark. I have to go.”

“Then I’m going with you,” Mark said.

“Noble,” Gloria said, “but stupid. What if something *does* go wrong. You want to leave Rebecca an orphan? Or worse, to have zombies for parents? Is there even a name for a child whose parents are the walking dead? Do you want her to be the first person who comes up with one?”

“I’m afraid your wife is right,” the major said. “There’s no way I’m allowing two civilians to enter a combat zone. I’m only allowing her under protest and because I don’t have a better idea and because we’re pressed for time. Which is why I’m cutting this little intra-familiar argument short. Mrs. Kuln is going, Mr. Kuln isn’t. End of story.”

Mark looked as though he were about to argue, but he caught the major's eye and realized he'd end up in the brig or whatever they called it if he pressed his luck. He grumbled, kept his mouth shut, and did something he'd never really done before. He put a mark in the scorebook against his wife. And then he felt guilty about it.

In the next five minutes, Gloria was hastily suited up in a flight suit and introduced to a somewhat bemused pilot who had been told not ten minutes ago that all flights were grounded to conserve fuel, but to be ready to fly a combat mission against the zombies on a moment's notice. Instead he found himself escorting a skeleton crew on a seek and retrieve mission that included a civilian. Civilians, he had been told, got you killed.

He was a muscular lad who had foregone the traditional crew cut in favor of an outright shave of the scalp. The rumor was that the zombies wanted brains and he was the kind of guy who was going to dare them to come and get his by flaunting them out there. If it hadn't been against regulations he would probably have gotten a brain-shaped tattoo on his scalp just to show how tough he was and that he wasn't going to take any flak from someone who was rotting right before his eyes. His name was Sergeant Dale Smith and he radiated confidence so thoroughly that Gloria caught her breath for just a moment when she first saw him. And then she came to her senses as she realized that anyone with that much confidence was going to treat everyone around him like dirt.

The chopper was made ready in record time and the crew of one pilot, three troops, and Gloria boarded and quickly took off. Time was of the essence and so they wasted none of it in getting to the target.

Along the way, Gloria looked down at the landscape. At first she saw nothing but deserted countryside that gave way to deserted city streets, but the farther they went the more she began to see signs of movement, although not life. The zombies were on the march. As they flew further from the base they began to see more and more of them. The masses were so large that on some instances they could faintly hear the moan from the horde even at their altitude and even over the helicopter rotors.

"We should strafe them," Dale called over the noise of the moaning.

Gloria glared at him. Dale smirked. "Just kidding," he said, but Gloria knew he wasn't. He was looking for approval and she would be damned if she'd give it to him. After a short time they approached the Cyberitis Corporation building.

"Circle the building, we need to do a recon," called one of the troops. She was short and stocky and clearly had something to prove to the world. She showed it in her tone of voice, her stance, and her choice of weaponry; a large assault rifle, not really suitable for the close quarters they were going to be heading into.

The pilot performed the maneuver and the squad surveyed the situation. The zombies were indeed clawing and beating at the front doors, but showed no signs of breaching the interior as of yet. Satisfied, the pilot moved to land the chopper on the roof, as planned. Once they had alit on the gravelly surface, the rest of the squad disembarked and headed for the rooftop door. Dale stayed behind. The roof wasn't exactly designed to support the weight of the chopper and so it had been decided that they would jump out and allow him to take back off and pick them back up when they returned.

The wind from the rotors buffeted them as the helicopter took off and hovered nearby. Dale waved at them from the control seat. Pompous ass, Gloria thought.

Once the chopper was clear of the roof, the troops fanned out while Gloria headed for the door. The female troop, whose name Gloria had still not learned, went with her. This door was not biometrically locked, but did have a standard lock. It was easily battered down and the stairway on the other side was clear. The soldier led the way, followed by Gloria. A second troop followed. The third remained on the roof, keeping lookout.

They descended the flight of stairs quickly and battered down the door leading to the floor they needed. This emptied into a long corridor. The troop bringing up the rear, a young man who looked as though he wondered how he'd been roped into this particular assignment, fell back a short distance to try to cover more area. The hallway stretched about twenty yards before reaching a corner. On the corner was a heavy metal door. Next to the door was a biometric retina scanner. They crept slowly towards it, each of them feeling the fear in their hearts that they might hear that tell-tale moaning coming towards them. In the confined area of the hallway they might stand some chance since the horde would be choked off and wouldn't be able to flank them, but it was still a sickening prospect.

Gloria found herself wondering idly which of the corpses had set off the alarm. She knew many of the people in the industry, even the corporate spies. What was the old adage? Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. She wondered what she'd do if she were faced with an old colleague. Her hand dropped to her waist where she fingered the sidearm they'd issued her for the mission. She hadn't handled a gun since high school, and this modern weapon was beyond anything she'd experienced for herself, but they'd given her a crash course and told her to only use it in an emergency. She left it in the holster.

Approaching the scanner, Gloria stooped slightly to get on eye level with it. The soft red light blinded her momentarily, but she heard the beep signaling recognition and the click as the door unlatched itself. This was too easy. And then they heard it. Coming from the stairwell. The very place they had to return to.

"Move!" the soldier shouted. Gloria obeyed and wrenched the door open, charging in, and heading for the computer. The robot still stood there clutching the camera, waiting for further instructions. On the monitor back in the control room, Marianne and the Major saw Gloria rush in, unplug all the cables from the computer, and snatch it up from the desk, hauling it away.

“They’re in trouble,” the major said. “She’s in too much of a hurry. Tell the robot to follow her.”

Marianne did as she was told. Back in the room, the robot turned and began limping towards the door just as Gloria reached the threshold, pulling the door open again, and ducking through quickly. The door began to shut, but the robot reached it just in time and stumbled through. In the control room, Marianne watched the monitor as it revealed Gloria and the two troops hustling back down the corridor.

“Can’t it go any faster?” the major said impatiently.

“Not much, but I’ll try to make it hurry along a little,” Marianne said.

The robot quickened its pace just slightly. Up ahead the three figures made it to the door to the stairwell and opened it. They ducked inside with the robot following them closely. Ascending the stairs quickly, Gloria nearly slipped and dropped the computer, but recovered in time to prevent it from hitting the ground. Below them, echoing in the concrete and metal surroundings of the emergency stairs, they heard the moan of the zombies coming for them. They sounded horrifyingly close. They redoubled their pace.

At the top of the stairs they emerged back into blazing sunlight and saw the helicopter still dutifully hovering overhead. They signaled to it and Dale began the descent to the roof. Because of the weight of the chopper, he couldn’t come in for a normal landing and would have to touch down lightly on the roof to prevent it from caving in. The three in the landing party waited anxiously as the helicopter got closer, seemingly taking forever to do so. Behind them they could hear the zombies approaching. The door was useless now; battering it down had destroyed the latch. Hearing a footstep behind them and fearing the worst, they all spun around to see the robot at the doorway. There was a brief sigh of relief which turned to terror as the robot suddenly hurled the camera at them.

The male troop caught it like a football and then yelped in pain as the claws automatically latched onto the new surface, piercing the uniform he wore and digging into his flesh. The robot then turned and the landing party saw the clutching, reaching hands of the zombies take hold of it. There was a strong stench of decay that emanated from the stairwell and they all recoiled for a moment before the rotors of the chopper stirred the air and blew the awful odor away. The skids were still about three feet from the roof, but the troops wasted no time.

They hurled their weapons into the aircraft, grabbed the computer from Gloria and placed it carefully inside, leapt aboard, and then reached back for Gloria and hauled her inside. The chopper immediately lifted off as they closed the outer hatch. Gloria glanced back at the roof where the press of zombies had pushed them out onto the surface, the robot still foundering amongst a sea of the dead. They had indeed torn the artificial flesh off of it, but the metal body underneath was still intact. She watched as the robot responded to the last instructions it had

been given before hurling the camera away and grabbed at the zombies, its powerful metal hands crushing their skulls.

In a moment of inspiration, Gloria grabbed the troop with the camera still attached to his arm. He cried out in pain as she positioned it so that the lens faced out the window onto the scene of carnage on the rooftop. The effect was immediate. With a view of the battle, Marianne was able to better direct the robot's movements and it began to rip the zombies apart. Her view didn't last long, though, as the helicopter sped away back to the base. She relaxed in her seat and the young man with the camera on his arm glared at her.

Ten minutes later they touched back down at the base. The computer was hauled into the control room and plugged into a power outlet, keyboard, mouse, and monitor.

"Why didn't you radio us that the zombies were coming?" Gloria said accusingly to Dale.

"I didn't know," he replied. "I was watching the front doors the whole time. I kept expecting that if they broke through that the streets would empty as they poured into the building, but that never happened."

"Of course it didn't," she snapped back, "there are too many of them! The building is probably full right now and you'd never notice the difference in the streets!"

Dale looked as though he was about to come back with a sharp retort of his own, but the major fixed him with a look and said "Dismissed." The sergeant snapped to attention, saluted, and marched out of the control room.

"Now," Marianne said, "let's get this plugged in."

"Hold it," Gloria said, intercepting her. "We can't just plug it in just like that."

"Why not?"

"Because of the nature of the virus. This is what we didn't have time to talk about before. Anything you don't want infected by this thing can't be on the same network as it is. I think the safer bet would actually be to isolate the entire robot control mechanism."

"Separate the whole robot network from the rest of the world? That's a tall order. It'll take time."

"It's the only way," Gloria insisted.

Marianne grumbled, but Gloria stood steady in her conviction that the risks were too great to just plug the thing into the network. They all anxiously watched the monitors showing the progress of the zombies as the two of them, along with a few other techs, worked on solving

the problem. One by one they hacked into the communications directories of the various robots. This was easier than hacking the robots themselves and was completed in just a couple of hours. Wires were crossed, other wires were uncrossed, splices and patches were applied and more than one of Gloria's little tricks that she'd picked up from years of working in the field were applied.

All the while the zombies marched on. Aircraft were launched to try to hold them at bay, but they kept coming. There was still no clue as to where they were all coming from. Even if every person who had ever lived and died on the planet were rising from the grave, that was still a finite number. They had to run out eventually. But they showed no signs of doing so, despite the artillery, flamethrowers, chemical weapons, and just plain old bullets that were hurled at the mass of rotting flesh. They fell easily enough, but like the hydra it seemed as if two more shambled in to take their place.

"You ladies about done?" the major asked.

"Few more hours," Gloria said. "This part is proving tricky."

"I'd advise you to step it up," the major said with an edge in his voice. Gloria looked up. She had heard many things from the major in the last few hours. Anger, impatience, and rock solid military discipline. This was fear and it was new to her and it frightened her all the more for its unexpectedness.

She rose and went over to the monitor. "What's up?"

The major merely pointed, inviting her to interpret the data for herself. What she saw baffled her. Large sections of the zombie horde were breaking off from the main groups, like icebergs calving from glaciers. The once-solid masses of the dead were breaking up ever so slightly. The major population centers were still hotbeds of zombie activity and the threat was made no less by the departure of the segments. It was the difference between being hit with a truck or a train. You were just as dead either way. And the masses that were leaving the larger legions of the dead were changing course and joining a contingent that had not deviated from its path and the newly formed Pangea was heading straight for Fort Lincoln.

"Any clues as to why they're doing this?" the major asked.

"Not a single one," Gloria answered, turning from the monitor and returning to her work. The major was right. Stepping up the pace was an advisable idea. Two hours later she looked up from her work to see the major standing next to her.

"Mrs. Keln, you've done quite well under pressure. But at this point I'm afraid I'm going to have to assume control of this entire system. Whether you're done or not, the computer is getting plugged into the network and we're taking control of the robots and then we'll just have to see what happens," he said.

Gloria paused and looked at the man, wondering whether it was worth it to argue with him. Instead she looked back down and resumed working.

“Perhaps you didn’t...” the major began.

“I heard you,” Gloria snapped, not looking up, “but you’re breaking my concentration. If you leave me alone I’ll be done in ten minutes. If you keep bothering me it’ll be more like thirty.”

“I’m not sure we have ten minutes,” the major said. Gloria looked up briefly at the monitor and saw the zombie horde had nearly reached the outer fences. She knew that chain link barrier would be useless against the press of dead bodies.

“Fine then, I’ll make it five. But the network is cut off from itself right now, so even if you plug it in and think you’re teaching me a lesson or something, it won’t do anything.” The major grumbled as Gloria turned back to the mass of wiring she was working with. Five minutes later she clicked the last connector into its socket.

“Finished. Since you seem to be so keen on doing it yourself, you can plug this cable into the computer,” Gloria said haughtily.

The major took the cable wordlessly and reached around the back of the computer, leaning at that awkward angle that everyone has to take to get to the back of their computer casing. He found the ethernet port, clicked the cable into place, and straightened up to watch the effect. There was none immediately evident.

Marianne sat at a nearby terminal watching the code scroll by, but otherwise saying nothing.

“Well?” the major asked.

“You just asked us to have a virus hack its way into the security firewalls of several hundred thousand robots which collectively use roughly two dozen different protocols. It’s going to take a minute or two.”

“We don’t have a minute or two!” the major exclaimed. He checked the exterior monitors and saw troops lining up with rifles and artillery in front of the advancing zombie horde. Seeing both his troops and the zombies with the same camera gave him pause.

Mark came up beside him. “What’s the escape plan, major?” he asked innocently.

The major glanced at him briefly and then said simply “Aircraft. They’re all we’ve got.”

“Are there enough?”

The major didn't answer. Mark didn't really need him to anyway. He knew the answer already.

"I think I'm going to go get my daughter," Mark said, leaving the room. The major said nothing.

A readout on the far side of the room showed an alert that went mostly unnoticed, indicating the launch of a transport shuttle to the Moon. Countdowns were started for two more and military units in the general area of the launch sites were diverted to that area to defend the area from the encroaching zombies. Trenches were blasted open, filled with gasoline, and ignited in an attempt to create a wall of fire between the shuttles and the dead. The zombies had thusfar shown no aversion to fire, but the hope was that the heat of the flames would destroy them or at least slow down their mobility. Time was all anyone could think of at the moment.

A few moments later Mark returned with Rebecca who sat down in a chair in the corner. All her teenage rebelliousness had left her the moment that the soldier who had been looking after her had been called out to the front of the base. The fear in their eyes, the hesitation that up to this point she had not seen in any of the soldiers, and then the resolution to duty had all had a profound effect on her. She glanced around the room, taking in the monitors and wires and computer setup and wondered how all of this could possibly protect them any better than the dedication of people and their will to survive and ensure the survival of others.

"Ok, it's done," Gloria said. Marianne said nothing, but immediately began typing commands into the computer.

"There are about three dozen robots in the general area, not including the military ones. We've only got two here at the moment that have any real mobility, but we've got about another two dozen vehicles with AI. I'm moving some of them into position to protect the front line troops and sending the rest to gather up the nearby robots."

They all watched the cameras track several large trucks and two tanks adjust their positions based on the incoming surveillance data. They had been manually positioned before, but the computer was able to make small adjustments to maximize their effectiveness, such as it was, against the enemy now that it had the distributed computing power necessary to fully analyze the situation in real time.

The oncoming mass of corpses stirred up the dust from the dry, dirty path and surrounding scrub that dotted the landscape. The soldiers in the front line sat nervously, many licking their dry, chapped lips, each of them sweating profusely in the hot afternoon sun under their heavy gear. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Zombies were a nighttime horror. Each of them had seen or at least heard about zombie movies in the past. Dim lighting, forests, dark houses and basements. These were the domain of the zombie. Perhaps a full moon and a rainy night. Not broad daylight where the horror could smack you in the eyes, not where you could see death coming straight at you without mercy or hesitation, and not in the middle of the afternoon. Thusfar the only part of the stereotype that was holding true was the moan, the horrific, bone

chilling moan that made you want to do nothing more than drop everything you owned and flee as quickly as you could.

The moan spoke of suffering, hunger, and an insatiable desire that could never be slaked. There was no satisfaction in the world of the zombie and it called to mind the question of whether there was any humanity left within that rotting shell or if it had been consumed as well by whatever brought this condition on in humanity, just as the zombie consumed everything around it.

There was a crackle as the base's loudspeakers came to life and the voice of Major Alex Smythe cut through the tense silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the tinny voice announced through the metal resonators of the speakers, "the enemy is before you. This enemy is unlike any other you have faced before in two important respects. The first is that you may recognize your friends, your neighbors, and, God forbid, your family amongst them."

The soldiers looked at the advancing horde. The heat of the mid-afternoon sun threw up a haze as thermal energy escaped back from the roadside, shimmering and distorting the faces of the dead into images even more grotesque than they had been originally. There was no recognition there, only rot and decay.

"The second, however," the major continued, "is much more important and it is this. This enemy will show you no mercy. No quarter. No negotiation. If they reach you and you fail in your task, they will consume you and you will join their ranks. You will turn on each other. All your petty grievances with each other will simultaneously become meaningless and all-consuming and you will kill each other. And that will only be the beginning of the biggest betrayal in humanity's history since Judas as brother and sister turn on each other in a frenzy of eating and consumption. I will not deceive you. The enemy is formidable. But you must fight as though the very fate of humanity is on the line, because it is. I will be with you shortly, fighting on the front lines because there is nothing more important for any of us than the defeat of this scourge. We have secured the assistance of mechanized technology and reinforcements will be coming soon. To victory!"

There was a roar from the assembled soldiers. It hadn't been the most convincing speech, and it had done nothing to assuage their fears nor had it encouraged them nor diminished the power of the zombies and their unstoppable horde, but it gave them a sense of urgency. They would likely die fighting, but they would not die running.

At that moment the first of the robotic trucks arrived carrying twelve robots of various shapes and sizes. None of them had been built or designed for combat; they were assembly robots, domestic help, surveillance, and other designs, but they all had some degree of limited mobility, some small ability to grasp, and they had something else that humans did not and which zombies did, and that was the ability to feel no pain. The truck quickly unloaded and

sped off in search of more of these mechanized recruits. The first load began trundling slowly forwards to meet the shambling line of corpses coming towards the defensive line.

“Fire!” the command came, none knew from where, and a hail of bullets amidst a cacophony of gunshots erupted from the barrels of the assorted weapons of the soldiers and sped towards the enemy.

The first line of zombies was cut down and fell motionless in the dirt. Like the rows of teeth in a shark’s mouth the second line moved up into place, stepping carelessly over the bodies of their kin, stumbling in some cases, and when they stumbled sometimes they got up, sometimes they crawled forwards, and sometimes they were trampled by the oncoming line behind them, but their forward motion was not hindered.

The noise of the battlefield increased suddenly as helicopters took off from the base behind the soldiers, and each one of them was secretly envious of the pilots and gunners who would be safely above the fray, out of reach of the grey, decaying, rotting, grasping hands of the zombies.

In the control room the major was strapping on the last bit of his gear. He was ashamed to admit that there was a paunch in his combat uniform and the gear seemed heavier than the last time he had worn it. But there was no time any longer for that kind of regret. Secretly, he knew this would be humanity’s last battle, but he would not admit it to anyone there.

Marianne sat silently at the computer terminal frantically typing commands to the robotic troops, dividing her attention between the robots on the battlefield and the trucks that were fetching reinforcements. Gloria, Mark, and Rebecca watched the monitors.

Fully suited up, the major turned to the remainder of the group assembled in the control room.

“We are soldiers,” he began. “We will be expected to fight this battle to the end, as we are considered the defense of everyone. I have heard from the President and he has ordered that each base that is under seige should evacuate the moment the situation becomes hopeless. When that time comes, and you’ll know it when you see it, get on this radio and give the code ‘Delta Bravo Three Niner dash Sixteen, Code Z’. The helicopter pilots will break off the attack, land inside the base, and start picking up as many passengers as they can carry and will then make their way to the shuttle launch site.”

Mark took the radio wordlessly.

“Don’t wait too late,” the major said. Then he saluted and left, heading for the lines.

The computer monitors told a grim story. The zombies had not yet reached the soldiers, and the robots were engaging them hand-to-hand, but their numbers were, as expected, too great. The robots were doing well against each one they faced, but always there were more to take their place. And the march continued.

In the control room they could now hear the moaning of the zombies and, if they strained their ears, the cadence of their footfalls. They didn't march in time, of course, but their numbers were so great that mathematics dictated that some of them would take a step at the same time just by random chance, and there were so many of them that they sounded like drums, sounding out the doom of everyone who heard them.

There were no words. There was nothing to say. Mark stood by with the radio, watching the computer monitors and the camera pictures, his finger hovering above the transmit button, waiting for the proper time to give the signal. He hoped he wouldn't have to do any such thing, but in his heart of hearts he knew it was only a matter of time. He wrestled with his twin motivations; to appear brave and masculine because that was what society expected of him, but also to flee and get his wife and daughter to safety.

Gloria checked the network from time to time, mainly for something to do. The packets were flowing smoothly and the robots were responding to commands. More trucks were beginning to arrive with more robots, some of them humanoid, and they were sent into battle. Thusfar the mysterious virus that had allowed them to hack into the security networks had done exactly what it had done previously; assimilated and duplicated the code of the original, leaving them a backdoor in. There was no evidence of any other effects.

Marianne was coordinating the dispersal of the trucks to fetch more robots as they detected where they were and, simultaneously, sending them into battle against the undead. They were proving to be very effective, but the numbers were still against them. She felt that if she could just reach as much as a stalemate here at Fort Lincoln that she could start doing the same for other population centers and military bases, but the advance of the zombies had only been slowed, not stopped altogether. It was very touch and go.

Rebecca sat in the corner watching the carnage. The corpses trudged forwards and the only way to stop them was to destroy the head. Robots grasped zombies and ripped them apart and, especially the fresher corpses, saw various organs scattered about from the force it took to tear the tendons and the flesh from the bones. The battlefield was littered with lungs, livers, hearts, and, above all, brains.

Suddenly Mark realized something about the oncoming horde. They had an insatiable appetite, and were even eating the artificial flesh from some of the more human-like robots, but they refused to eat their fallen comrades. No zombie stooped to pick up the rotting flesh of another. He reflected that perhaps they were now a different species. With limited problem solving capability. Which implied the possibility of a culture. A culture that evidently frowned on cannibalism. He wracked his brain to try to think of how this could be turned to their advantage, but came up with nothing. And still the horde advanced.

It was a delicate situation and the entire battle seemed to hinge on one side getting a breakthrough, some sort of unexpected advantage over the other. And then it happened.

Hands began to extend up from the earth at the feet of the soldiers, grasping them by their ankles, using them for leverage to haul themselves up from below the surface, and then biting, biting, biting.

The soldiers immediately reacted and fired straight down into the unorthodox flanking maneuver. Some accidentally shot themselves in the foot and collapsed in pain, only to have the newly risen dead fall upon them, screaming in agony as they were eaten alive.

“What just happened?” Gloria said, in shock.

“They...they tunneled under no-man’s land,” Marianne said, equally in shock. Her hands rested limply on the keyboard. Problem solving capability. They had found a way around the defenses.

Recovering, Mark clicked the radio and gave the evacuation command. The stalemate was broken. The zombie horde was marching steadily across the last remnants of the battlefield towards the fort, intent on devouring everyone within.

Responding to the evacuation code, the helicopters broke off their strafing runs and began to settle onto the helipads where they were immediately mobbed by assorted base staff trying desperately to be amongst the evacuees. The carnage inside the base was nearly as bad as it was outside as potential evacuees clawed and pulled at one another trying to reach the few helicopters that were available. As each one filled, it took off, and before long there was no more help available.

Mark got on the radio to talk to the chopper pilots.

“We’re overloaded,” one pilot responded, “but we should make it. It’s about a thirty minute round trip. We’ll drop these folks off and try to come back.”

Everyone in the control room heard the transmission. Thirty minutes of survival was necessary to even have a chance at escape.

“What now?” Mark asked.

“We need high ground,” Gloria answered. “At the Cyberitis Corporation building, the only reasons we were able to escape were because the hallway created a choke point for them and we had a robot with us. We’ll need both of those to have any chance.”

Marianne, without answering, checked the readouts. The robots on the battlefield were still fighting, but it was like trying to hold back the ocean with a net. Their effectiveness was lost in the innumerable mass of walking corpses.

“Call one back here,” Gloria said. “They’re no good to us out there.”

Marianne mutely did as Gloria suggested. She seemed to have frozen up and was responding by reflex and memory, not through any conscious act of decision making of her own.

“Don’t give up,” Rebecca said, emerging from her corner. “Thirty minutes. We can be on the next set of helicopters in thirty minutes.” There was a steely look in her eyes. All this time she had been taking in the situation silently, watching the battle unfold. She had noticed, as the others had not, having been distracted, that the major had gone to the battlefield and had fought bravely, but was now among the enemy. She had seen him fall, and then rise again, his face ashen, his flesh gnawed, and bits of bones showing through his exposed muscles and skin, shambling and dragging forward, the moan escaping his lips and invading the psyche. It was like a call for surrender, and the body longed for it even as the mind recoiled.

“We can’t all go,” Marianne said. “Because of the way we had to wire the network, this is the only place the robots can be controlled from right now.”

“We can patch it in somewhere else,” Gloria began, but Marianne cut her off.

“There’s no time for that. They’re here. Now. We’ve given the evacuation code. The major didn’t tell you, but that wasn’t just the code for the base; that was the code to evacuate the planet. Everyone is leaving, heading for the Moon. To patch this system in anywhere else would require coordination with techs and certain hardware changes on their end. Everyone is scrambling around right now getting the shuttles ready. There is no way to transport this system.”

The weight of that statement sank in and there was a leaden silence in the room for a few moments.

“The robots are mostly useless now anyway,” Mark said, watching the monitors. “We can set them on auto and let their AI take over.”

“Yes,” Marianne said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Then it’s settled. Make the settings and let’s get out of here.”

Marianne clicked a few keys and then stood up.

“After you,” she said.

Mark, Gloria, and Rebecca filed out the door, Marianne following them closely. When Mark reached the other side of the threshold he heard the click of the door closing and turned to Marianne for directions and advice on where in the base would be a good site of defense. What he saw instead was her face in the little window in the door, staring back at him.

“I’m not going to the Moon,” Marianne said. “I can’t.”

Mark tried the door, but it was locked from the inside. Through the window he could see Marianne blockading the door with a metal chair. “I was against the whole idea of colonization,” she continued. “Our place is here. Going to Mars isn’t the answer. Everyone thinks it’s a panacea, a utopia, a place for humanity to start over. But all our problems are going to follow us, and I think the zombies fall on that list as well. You aren’t escaping anything, you’re just delaying the inevitable. There aren’t any resources on Mars, or at least not enough for the surge of refugees they’re about to get. If the zombies don’t follow you there, then you’re going to starve. I’m going to stay here and fight.”

Mark tried the door again, ineffectually. He considered arguing with her, pleading with her to come back out and come with them, but as he watched her calm demeanor he realized it was useless. She had made peace with her situation. She smoothly made her way around the room, straightening a cable here, checking a monitor there. She seemed to have made her peace and was now ignoring Mark.

“Come on,” he finally said, turning away from the door.

“Marianne’s not coming?” Rebecca asked.

“No, honey, she’s not,” Mark said. “But we’re getting out of here all the same.”

Rebecca made no reply. The family made their way down the hall. The base was strangely deserted as everyone was fleeing to the center of the compound, as far away from the zombies as they could get, as they anxiously awaited the arrival of the second wave of escape helicopters. The minutes crawled by. What few people they did pass were looking for a way to hide, confident that they would find no room in the helicopters. Mark did his best to explain to these people that the zombies would find them no matter where they hid and that their only recourse was to run, but most didn’t listen.

They found their way onto the helipad and discovered what they were looking for. Along each of the four corners of the area were tall towers with spiral staircases. Perfect for holding off the zombies as they could not advance more than one at a time, single file, up the pathway. There was purchase amongst the bricks and stones that held the towers up, but Mark was confident that by the time the zombies worked this out that the choppers would be back and they could escape.

The area was thronged with people, all nervous as they could hear the moans of the zombies outside. The outer walls were still holding for a moment, but everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the crush of the walking dead weight would breach that last barrier. They were trapped, and if the helicopters didn’t come in time it would be a slaughter.

“We need weapons,” Mark said. Gloria pulled her sidearm, which she was still carrying from the raid on Cyberitis Corporation. “That’s a start. We need more.”

They looked around, but saw no spare weapons available. What few there were were in the hands of other potential refugees, and they weren’t giving them up.

“We’ll have to make do without them,” Gloria said, heading for the nearest tower.

The towers were old and made of stone and mortar. They were surprisingly unpopulated. A few random people were inside them at the top, but they had expected them to be filled to capacity. The narrow staircase allowed a single file line, but the tops expanded out to accommodate as many as perhaps two dozen people if they were tightly packed. A metal roof overhung each one. They were perfectly defensible, but most people were choosing to circle the wagons in the middle of the helicopter landing zone on the grounds that if the helicopters came then they would be the first on board. If they didn’t come, then they felt they would be trapped in the towers.

The family conceded this point, but felt that staying out in the open was akin to suicide. The towers provided at least some protection.

Suddenly there was a loud crack and an abrupt beginning to a thumping sound. The outer doors had been breached. The low frequency thump everyone had heard was the collective footstep of the horde whose forward motion had been interrupted only slightly by the concrete and metal framework of the base. A wave of panic surged through the assembled crowd who all collectively looked to the skies. Mark checked his watch. Fifteen more minutes remained.

The three of them mounted the metal stairs quickly and soon found themselves at the top of the tower with a good view of the surroundings. That was when they found the other reason why people were not flocking to the towers. The view sapped their courage as they saw the expanse of the dead surrounding the base completely. The front gates had fallen before their onslaught, but it was only a matter of time before the press came through the other sides as well and crushed everyone in the middle.

“How much ammo do you have for that thing?” a man on the tower with them asked, indicating Gloria’s sidearm.

“However much is in it,” she replied. “They didn’t give me extra rounds.” The man nodded and looked down into the courtyard.

“What do you think happens when you die?” the man asked. “I used to think I knew. If you were good you went to Heaven and if you weren’t you went to Hell. That’s what they told me and I believed it because it was clear and simple and because it brought to mind the idea that life was good. There were rules, and if you followed them you would be rewarded. Isn’t that what life is all about? Constantly seeking new rewards. It isn’t just about survival.”

Rebecca followed the man's gaze and saw that they were now about thirty or forty feet above the hard concrete surface of the courtyard that surrounded the helipad. "Dad," she whispered, "I think he's going to jump."

Mark suddenly found himself paying attention to the situation unfolding before him.

"I mean, what happens now? If I died right now, would I become one of them? Or do they have to get me?"

"We don't know," Mark said carefully. "They had to come from somewhere."

"Hahaha, the chicken or the egg?" the man said, now sounding as though he were beginning to lose his grip on reality. "The zombie or the corpse?"

The moans of the dead were growing louder. Everyone on the tower strained their ears to hear the welcome sounds of the helicopters and their rotors approaching, and those who deemed themselves of keen vision scanned the horizon, but no trace could be detected. The only sounds were those made by the dead and by the panicking crowd and the only sights were the vast open areas, dotted with scrub, and currently populated by a rotting, festering, and above all hungry crowd. In the distance the heat radiated off of the surface creating a haze that was difficult to see through.

"They taught you how to use that, right?" Mark said.

"Yes," Gloria replied. Mark nodded. They'd done all they could. All that was left was to wait.

The waiting didn't last long. The first indication that the dead had reached the courtyard and the helipad was a shot that rang out along the opposite wall. Several people screamed and turned towards the sound to see the first zombie who had been taken down by the gunshot lying there motionless but being trodden on by the zombie behind him. They poured into the courtyard through the double doors despite the volley of bullets being hurled at them. Several fell, but more kept coming.

"We've got a few minutes until they can get across the area," Gloria said. Rebecca watched in fear and looked out at the horizon, still agonizingly empty. More zombies were arriving. The truth that nobody wanted to admit was that there weren't enough bullets in the fort to kill all the zombies even if every shot were true. The best they could hope for was delay.

The assembled crowd below fanned out and tried to catch the zombies in a crossfire, which worked reasonably well, except for the ever-present problem of the sheer numbers in the horde. Before long the zombies had penetrated the first line of defense and were now present in the center of the helipad. Several people were bitten and then the feast began as the newly infected joined the ranks of the enemy.

There was a surge in the crowd towards the towers. People began to realize that even if the helicopters came now, there would be nowhere for them to land. It was too late. They had lost.

At last someone heard it. The sounds of the rotors were now audible and the helicopters were in sight. There was a faint cheer followed by the silence of hope and despair wrestling with one another. Rescue was in sight, but it was as distant as an oasis in the desert. How could the helicopters possibly rescue them if there was nowhere to touch down? Meanwhile, the zombies continued their march across the courtyard, following those who had fled to the towers.

The tops of the towers were becoming crowded. It was like the crew of a sinking ship climbing the masts in a vain hope that the ship would somehow touch the ocean's bottom and they could stay above the water before drowning. The helicopters approached and Gloria could see the gleam coming from the sun reflecting off of the pilot's sunglasses. There were five of them, each one capable of holding perhaps a dozen passengers for a total of sixty overall. There were probably a couple of hundred people left in the compound and everyone knew there would be no third trip.

There was a flurry of activity down in the courtyard and Mark risked a look to discover that a group of robots had broken through the zombie horde and were now making their way hurriedly to the bases of the towers. They rolled, limped, and walked as quickly as they could, overtaking the zombie's gait in most cases, and positioned themselves at the doors that guarded the steps. Humans were allowed through and the stairways soon became jammed with a desperate mass of humanity. Zombies were fought, the robots using their powerful metal claws or piston backed hands to crush the heads of the dead. Rebecca, watching this, at first felt sick to her stomach, but rallied and began watching the proceedings with a cold, silent, calculating stare.

The helicopters were directly overhead each of the towers now and lowered rope ladders.

"One at a time!" called the soldier from the chopper, indicating the ladder. The wind buffeted the aircraft and the situation was unstable. Taking two people up the ladder at a time would have been suicide.

In Gloria's tower they sent the first person up the ladder, swaying in the breeze from the rotors and from the surrounding desert. They clung to the ladder for a moment, slowing their ascent, and then continuing to the top where a soldier grabbed them and pulled them on board. The second person began the climb.

Down at the base, the inevitable was happening. A zombie attacked someone who wrenched themselves away and stumbled through the doorway, unhindered by the robot, and then fell. And then rose again as a member of the dead themselves. The swarm of corpses was also

proving too much for the robots and they were becoming overwhelmed. They had bought the people precious time, but that time was now running out as the zombies began first to infiltrate and then outright invade the tower refuges.

At the top of the stairs, the third person was finally beginning their ascent to the helicopter. They were about halfway up when a gust of wind blew by. They clutched at the ladder as it and the supporting aircraft swayed under the force of the blow and, when it seemed the air had calmed, began climbing once more. A second gust came by and, unprepared for it, the man, who was mere feet away from the helicopter, lost his grip and was blown away from rescue. He fell, hit the metal roof of the tower, and slid down, clutching at the metal ineffectually, until he reached the edge. The people on the tower attempted to grab him and snatched at his clothing, but their fingers could not find purchase and he toppled down into the waiting mass of corpses who fell upon him instantly, rending and biting and eating and then he was one of them, shambling forwards to climb the tower once more, but with a completely different motivation now.

The assembled onlookers viewed this with horror, but not for long. They turned their attention back to the ladder with a renewed vigor. This went on for several minutes, with more people being sent up the ladders. Gloria, as one of the few people in the tower with a weapon of any type, had volunteered to guard the top of the staircase with the understanding that three slots would be reserved for her and her family. Everyone was on edge. Nobody knew who was going to be left behind, but quietly, privately, many people made their peace and began to try to envision other ways out.

The man who Mark had been talking to earlier about death and its consequences now, had been strangely quiet ever since their initial exchange. Now he looked silently over the edge of the tower to the ground below. If he could time it just right...

Suddenly he leaped up on the edge of the tower and flung himself over the side.

"No!" Mark shouted, but it was far too late. The man had timed his jump so that he could land in an open section that was not currently populated by zombies. He fell headfirst in an attempt to die before the zombies could get him and his skull cracked open as he hit the ground. Mark watched in shock as the zombies moved in on the fresh corpse and began to eat it, but the man showed no signs of movement. He was not turning. There was an escape if all else failed.

Behind him he heard a gunshot and turned to see a zombie lying motionless at the top of the stairs, Gloria's gun smoking.

"Come on!" the pilot shouted. In the commotion, someone had reached the top of the ladder and another had not yet been sent. Someone immediately scrambled up the ladder as quickly as they could. "Four more slots!" the pilot shouted again, using his fingers to indicate the number four.

There were eight people still at the top of the tower, including the family. By silent agreement everyone knew that in practical terms there was really only one slot left for the last five people. They looked at one another.

“Come on!” yelled the pilot. “We can’t stay here all day, make a damn decision and let’s go!”

“Easy for him to say,” said a man. “Fine, I’ll stay. Give me the gun.”

“I’ll throw it back down once I’m on the ladder,” Gloria said. The man smirked.

“I guess paranoia is only to be expected in a situation like this.”

That left four. The moans of the dead were growing louder, echoing along the stone walls of the staircase. Time was running out.

“Any other volunteers?” Mark asked. Everyone shot him a glare. “I know it’s not easy, but we need someone to go. We’re staying until last, but we all need to get moving.”

“I’ll stay,” said one soldier. “It’s my duty.”

Several people patted him on the back. One by one they found noble volunteers who would stay behind until they got down to the last two people who both insisted they be allowed to go. In the end they drew straws, fashioned hastily from toothpicks one of them happened to have in his pockets. A decision was made and the loser slumped to the ground to await the inevitable. The winner began a hasty ascent.

When the last of the tower refugees was safely in the helicopter, Rebecca went next. She gripped the ladder tightly to prevent herself from being hurled into space as the wind blew.

On the tower, more zombies were beginning to arrive. Gloria shot one, but two more were directly behind it. The group huddled against the far wall as Gloria shot another, again replaced by two more of the walking dead.

At last Rebecca made it safely to the helicopter. She looked back to watch her parents follow her. She saw the group cowering against the back wall. Mark took the gun from Gloria and shot another zombie as it approached.

“Get on the ladder!” he yelled. Gloria complied, grasping the lower rung, but at that moment the wind blew and the helicopter, which had been hovering there, was blown slightly out of position and the ladder was snatched from Gloria’s grasp. She turned and saw one of the other people on the tower hit a zombie, which shrugged the blow off, grabbed them by the arm, and held them with a grip of iron, drawing them quickly to its mouth and biting them savagely.

Mark began to fire the gun wildly, in a panic, not sure which threat was greater and finally they all heard the sound they had been dreading ever since the first shot was fired. They heard the click of an empty chamber. The nearest zombie grabbed Mark and sank its teeth into his neck. Blood gushed and soaked the lips of the creature. Gloria screamed. Rebecca sat on the helicopter with her mouth agape, but no sound would escape as she watched her father succumb to the zombie's attack.

Gloria turned and saw another zombie mere inches from her. "Marianne?" she said, but there was no answer. The corpse of Marianne grabbed her and bit her arm, ripping a chunk of flesh away from it and swallowing it whole.

"It's done! We've got to go!" the soldier on board the helicopter screamed, reeling the rope ladder back up. Every remaining person on the tower had been attacked. It was a similar story on the other towers. There were no more living survivors. The door closed with a slam and the helicopter banked sharply, turning around and heading for the shuttle bays to try to get these last few surviving members of humanity, and themselves, to safety before the launch pads were overrun.

Rebecca looked out the windows, tears streaming down her face, but otherwise quiet and in shock. Looking down at the scene of carnage, she saw movement. Small dots were moving around amongst the corpses and the animated dead things. She strained her eyes. As the helicopter moved quickly over the landscape, she saw more of them and eventually cleared her eyes of the tears and reached for a pair of binoculars that were nearby and gazed through them to see swarms of dragonflies. The insects littered the landscape. And then the helicopter put on a burst of speed and left the scene behind them.

"That's so sad!" Sheila said, sniffing. The boys all rolled their eyes.

"That's it? She saw some bugs? What's so scary about that?" Roy asked haughtily.

Justine sat back, leaning against a log, and waited for them to get it out of their system. The hoots, the laughter, the jeering. She calmly straightened her leggings again, smoothed out her skirt, and idly fingered the pendant she wore around her neck. Fastened with a silver chain, the pendant was a small dragonfly encased in amber, although in this light she knew none of them would catch the significance. It was just as well. The story wasn't over.

"Are you all quite finished?" she asked. "Because I'd like to get on with the story."

"What story? Everybody's dead! What else is there to tell?" Harris interjected. This garnered a fresh bit of giggling from everyone.

"But they're not," Sheila said. "Rebecca's still alive and she had to watch her parents die!"

"It's just a story," Derek offered. Justine let this slide. They'd all know soon enough. No sense jumping the gun.

"Oh, just a few little small details," Justine said by way of reply. Her tone was casual, her demeanor relaxed. She was very proud of herself. Only a few years ago this entire episode would have led to her pitching an enormous fit and then storming off in a huff. That had nearly happened earlier, but she'd kept control. It was something she'd been working on for a while. Self control was becoming very important to her.

"Fine, then, go on and finish up. But hurry," Andrew said, yawning. "I'm about ready for bed."

"Of course," Justine said.

The rest of the week was a blur for Rebecca as she recovered from the shock. It wasn't just that her parents were dead, it was the notion, so visible and vivid in her mind's eye, of them shambling around, moaning, and eating any living thing that came into their path. The idea that if she had been in the tower with them, they would not have hesitated to attack her. She allowed herself to be deluded for just a few moments by the idea that they would have done it because they loved her and wanted her to be just like them, like normal parents would do, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't make the idea stick. It was so unnatural. And what limited intelligence zombies had displayed thusfar was not sufficient to make her believe they would even do as much as remember her.

She moved with a gait very similar to the robots that had defended her for so long as they approached the shuttle and went through the hasty pre-launch procedures. Wooden. Dazed. Unfeeling and uncaring. As close as she could be to a zombie herself and remain breathing. There was the briefing about what to expect, which lasted all of two minutes and was delivered by a man who spoke very quickly, looked like he hadn't had a shower or shave in three days, and looked nervous. Like he wasn't absolutely sure he was going to get a space on the last shuttle, or that the last shuttle was even going to take off because the defenses had failed.

Next they suited her up. A basic flight suit was all she got. There weren't enough of the heavy duty space suits to go around. They looked through her bag, which she got to keep, but most of the contents were left behind. Only a few articles of clothing and some pictures. Everything else was confiscated to ensure they wouldn't be taking on too much weight with the collected treasures of the passengers. Fuel was everything. The launch time was not optimum. Mars had just passed its closest approach to Earth and the normally eight month trip was now looking like a full year in transit, not counting the brief stopover they were going to have on the Moon to grab the long-range shuttle.

All this had been planned for months. It was just that everyone had expected everything to be so much more leisurely. Nobody had planned for the idea that everyone would have to drop everything and just take off like this. The collected refugees trooped onto the gangplank that led to the boarding area. Nearly everyone in the line had lost someone and there were no

complete families. Brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers...fragments. Bits and pieces. These people had escaped the zombies, but the foul creatures had eaten their families and their way of life. It was a somber experience and there was no laughter or mirth to be found in the group as they prepared to leave behind everything they had ever known.

The trip itself was blessedly uneventful. In the spirit of human ingenuity, games were invented on the shuttle using whatever pieces happened to be lying around. Competitiveness was encouraged because it kept people connected to themselves and was familiar, but gambling was frowned upon and squashed when it was detected.

On the Moon, the stopover was brief. They got another lecture about what to expect during the much longer trip to Mars, what conditions were like on the red planet, the rules of conduct, and what rations were going to be like. There was one last shuttle being prepared from Earth that would be loaded with nothing but supplies, but nobody knew when, or even if, return to the planet would be possible, and so the powers that be had decided early on that everything would be strictly rationed out based on height, optimum weight, and nutrition. Everyone was going to lose weight over the course of the next year.

Exercise regimens were described, sleep schedules were given out as there weren't enough beds for everyone to stay on their usual diurnal schedule, calorie allotments were assigned, and water recycling procedures were described in minute detail. They were also given a prescription for something to tamp down on their moods. There was no time to do any sort of psychological profile on the passengers; this was the survival of the species at stake. There would be no picking and choosing who stayed and who got to go. And so, to prevent loss of water through crying over your lost loved ones and also to prevent insurrection and mutiny during the long voyage, everyone would be required to give up a part of their humanity for the course of the journey by losing their emotions to a chemical cocktail that the space program had been developing for years. Rebecca swallowed hers wordlessly. She wasn't sure how much more numb she could get anyway.

For months the shuttle drifted through space, propelled occasionally by small rockets to correct the course to Mars, but mostly just allowing inertia to do all the work. The passengers marched around the shuttle morosely. The inventiveness of humanity was still there, and the aforementioned games were played endlessly, to the exclusion of all else. A few books had been rescued from the dying planet, but few could muster enough interest to read them. They wandered around the common areas and cabins, floating slowly through the low gravity, and eating their prescribed meals. Rebecca thought on more than one occasion how much they resembled the zombies they had left behind, but not for long. None of her thoughts stayed with her for long these days.

Ten months later they arrived on Mars. Three months later they gave up on waiting for the supply shuttle. The first thing that ran out was the emotion suppressing drug and so the original colonists, struggling under the weight of the crush of refugees, began turning to good old fashioned propaganda, which worked for a few years.

During that time everyone huddled inside what was originally supposed to be temporary housing for a few hundred. It now shielded a few thousand from the radiation emitted by the sun. With little atmosphere and no magnetic field, the entire population, what remained of the human species, risked radiation exposure.

In the first few weeks a shuttle was sent back to Earth to try to find out what was happening and possibly formulate a strategy for retaking the planet. The initial reports were bleak; there were no known survivors and the zombies were milling about aimlessly. And so the decision was made. The second shuttle came equipped with a radio transmitter on a special frequency and a special set of codes that had been sent up with the first people to reach Mars and placed in a guarded location.

Some said that that kind of forethought implied that the government had known that this might happen. Nobody would think to do such a thing unless they thought it might actually be necessary. And why would it be necessary? How many such scenarios could possibly be envisioned? Even alien invasion seemed far fetched, as thusfar no extraterrestrials of any kind had been spotted.

Or had they? With paranoia running high, everything was blamed from aliens to genetic engineering to God himself. And then, in the middle of a furious debate that was about to turn to a riot in the center of the main common dome, the word finally came. They had done it. The button had been pushed and the hidden nuclear weapons scattered all over the world had been detonated and suddenly it didn't matter anymore. There was nothing left to blame. Reports came back from the shuttle intermittently after that as they scanned the surface of the planet to determine the effectiveness of the plan. The initial report was complete success. No sign of zombie activity. The shuttle headed home.

It was at that point that the enormity of what they had done hit the settlers. They were stranded. There was no more help coming. There was no returning to the now irradiated planet. And, while Mars was certainly big enough to accommodate all the people now living on it, the habitable area was only about ten percent of the surface area. The drive to build and expand was now tempered by a lack of raw materials.

And so the only logical thing for everyone to do was to hunker down and survive. Farmland became the number one priority; growing as much of as many things as possible. Water had to be conserved at all costs. Medicine was practically unheard of after the first full year and after the fifth the cancer rate began to spike sharply. And so the propaganda machine went back into gear and urged everyone to get on a birthing schedule. You didn't want to have as many babies as possible because the resulting baby boom would outstrip the supply lines, but you had to have some just to keep up with the mortality rate.

It was during this time that Rebecca, now in her twenties, was put on the schedule. Evolution and natural selection were put on hold, as was anything remotely approaching romance. DNA

testing was routine and matches were made based on genetic suitability for survival. A premium was placed on strong boys and fertile girls and anyone with any sort of genetic anomaly was weeded out quickly. Some were aborted. Others made it to full term before their undesirable traits were detected, but there was no room for them on this brave new world.

After a hundred generations, mankind had gotten fairly good at this. They had overcome many of their problems of raw materials and had expanded out from the original colonies and now had a population in the millions. Earth was largely forgotten except by astronomers, who still trolled the heavens looking for who knows what, and historians. The general population had no need for Earth or any other planet. Even the twin moons of Mars, Phobos and Deimos, tantalizingly close, were too far out of reach, for they had not yet mastered the one raw material they had run out of in the first decade and for which they had not yet determined a suitable replacement: rocket fuel.

The shuttles had been dismantled shortly after the last drop of that precious liquid had been burned up, their great engines carved into pieces for use in other locations.

And so a thousand years passed. A thousand years of existing and surviving. And then one day the discovery was made that all that flesh that was being produced and discarded could be used, along with certain other chemicals and a process that bordered on alchemy, to create a high energy fuel.

The astronomers were the first to cry out that they wanted to revisit the heavens. The historians were next, saying we should return to Earth to try to reclaim our heritage. The engineers followed suit, saying that a return to Earth could yield enough raw resources to bring the planet to the edge of technological greatness and beyond. And, one by one, each member of this Martian society became acquainted with the notion that a return to Earth was like a return to Eden. The zombies had been forgotten, replaced by beautiful blue skies, the ability to walk in the sunlight without protection, and food as far as the eye could see.

The first shuttle launched just ten short years after the discovery of the fuel was made. What they found was not the panacea they had envisioned, but a dusty, parched surface, charred by fires that had raged for years before finally burning themselves out. The historians had told them to look for lush forests and thriving oceans, teeming with life. What they found was desert. Sandy deserts that lay above sea level that gave way to liquid deserts as they reached the vast oceans that were devoid of life. The last extinction had been complete. There was no life.

And yet the desire to return was not abated. There were still the minerals, the engineers insisted, and there was still the land. And so, over the course of nearly a century, the process began to re-transform the Earth back into the picturesque planet it had once been. To create through engineering and science the paradise they felt they had been denied.

For the first few decades, the atmosphere was unbreathable and everyone had to wear special protective suits, which hampered construction. But then a discovery was made. Buildings and other ruins dotted the landscape and a few were explored and one in particular yielded a bank of ancient computers which, when electricity was applied to it, miraculously was still functional.

The readouts blinked to life and those early explorers found a wealth of information and an answer to many of their problems. Robots. Robots, many of whom were covered in the ever present dust that the planet was coated in, suddenly shook themselves off and trundled around with power sources that were miraculously undamaged.

From that point on the construction and reclaiming of the planet went much more quickly. From the control center, the early engineers were able to direct the mechanical workers to perform tasks that would have taken half a century to complete. And before long the atmosphere was breathable again. And it was at that point that they began to send materials back to Mars, followed shortly by beginning to bring people back to Earth.

Justine looked at them all. She had them now. This was all in their history books. They recognized this part of the story. Now she just had to tie the first part back to the part they knew. And that would be easy. There was always a part of history that nobody ever bothered to remember.

Michael Pierce sat rigidly in his seat in the shuttle. It was, as it was for so many others, his first flight ever. Flight on Mars was a completely different experience and so this unknown sensation, especially as he plummeted towards the ground, was particularly frightening. He had expected something much more under control, with a roar of rocket engines and a swooping, soaring approach that showed that the pilot had the shuttle's every movement calculated and executed as if he'd done it a thousand times before. The truth was that the pilot had only done this run twice before himself. And rather than the roar of rockets, there was silence, apart from the whisper of air rushing past the shuttle as it dropped in free-fall towards the surface of the Earth.

Michael gripped the armrests of his seat tightly and closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

"First time flying?" said the man next to him jovially.

"Shows?" Michael said, trying not to lose his lunch as he opened his mouth. The journey over had been so smooth, so peaceful. Turbulence was not his friend.

The man laughed heartily, "Well, yeah, with you gripping the seat like that, but that's not all that weird. Plenty of folks still haven't been at all. You got business down there?"

"I'm a journalist. Name's Michael Pierce," Michael said. He was, in fact, one of the first journalists who had been cleared to go to the new Earth. It was going to be his job, over the

course of the next six months or so, to report on how things were going for the people back home on Mars. After the initial surge to return, people were beginning to question the cost. The flow of raw materials back to Mars was perfectly welcome, of course, but the whole idea of transporting people there was, to many people, risky at best.

“Journalist?” the man asked with a smile on his face. “Ain’t that just a fancy way of saying you like attention?”

“What? No...no, not at all. Journalism is important. It conveys news to people who can’t be where the news is happening and it gives the historians something to talk about in a few years. Plus, it’s costing us billions of dollars to recolonize. Lots of people want to know what we’re getting for that investment.”

“Billions, eh? Well, let me tell you, it’s gotten me plenty. This is my third trip in as many years. My primary residence is on the Moon and without Earth I’d be in a sad state, my friend.”

“Oh? And what do you do? Maybe I could cover it for a story. What do you say?”

“I say I work construction and that’s all I say. Don’t be puttin’ me in one of your fancy news beams back to Mars. You can keep it.”

A woman walked down the aisle at that moment. She wore a blue blazer and a short blue skirt. The original flights to Earth had called for full-fledged space suits and every precaution was taken. These days it was more of a commercial trip and the air shuttles were trying to convince more people to come in any way they could think of. She was slim and attractive and her regulation uniform was tailored from the finest Earthly fabrics to accentuate all of her physical attributes.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, but please pull those seat belts up tight. We’ll be landing in just a minute.”

“Yeah, you got it,” the man said, giving his lap belt a yank and then turning to watch her continue down toward the rear of the shuttle giving the same instruction to each passenger. The shuttles had tried giving the instructions over an intercom, but had found that compliance was greater if there was a more personal touch. Also, repeat business went up a fraction after they implemented the policy and the new uniforms. “Classy broad,” he continued after she was out of earshot.

“Sure,” Michael said. He had been feeling slightly more at ease since the conversation was keeping his mind off of things, but now with the interruption and the prospect of landing soon, his pulse rate and blood pressure were ratcheting up again. He absent mindedly renewed his grip on the armrests.

They glided on in silence for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of the passengers around them fumbling for their lap belts and snapping them into place with a metallic click. The shuttle banked slightly and Michael closed his eyes. The shuttle couldn't be on the ground soon enough for him.

"You sure you're alright, buddy?" the man said again. Michael opened his eyes and saw the man looking at him with a concerned expression. "You look a little green."

Michael exhaled and realized he'd probably been holding his breath for about a minute, which they had advised everyone not to do. The mix of pressurized gases in the cabin wasn't really suitable for holding your breath and everyone was supposed to have been breathing normally. "I'm fine," he said, panting a little to try to catch back up with the necessary amount of oxygen he felt like he was owed. "Say," he said, trying to latch onto the conversation again in an attempt to take his mind off the impending landing, "can you explain this shared housing situation to me?"

"Sure!" the man said jovially. "There ain't enough living quarters built yet for everybody who's coming down. That's part of the point, to get extra construction guys here, and let me tell you we make primo bucks tryin' to keep up with demand. Until then, everybody's got to double up. Lemme see your ticket."

Michael fished around in his jacket pocket for a moment trying to separate his housing ticket from his shuttle ticket and his identification papers and then handed it over to the man who examined it minutely.

"Well, well, well...guess what Mister Michael Pierce, Journalist? We's roomies!"

"Oh. Good," Michael replied. "Well, what's your name then?"

"Call me Jake," the man said, holding out his hand.

"Jake," Michael said weakly, taking the offered hand and grimacing slightly at the strength of the grip.

"Hey, we're gonna have a great time. You play cards?"

"I... I think I'm going to be working a lot," Michael said, trying to imagine what card games Jake could possibly be interested in. Only a few games had survived from the original Earth. Most of the card games these days were played for ante as they were ways of earning goods and materials when you were short of cash. Nobody played for actual money anymore, but several people had literally lost their shirts over the years.

"Of course you will, we both will," Jake said grinning. "But I'm into vintage games myself. Learnt a new one just the other day called 'Hearts'. Supposed to be from the original Earth.

Someone dug the rules up off an old computer down there. Besides, you gotta admit that I'm not that bad to be around."

"Why's that?"

"Because you're not grippin' the armrest like you've got a grudge against it anymore," Jake said, guffawing. Michael smiled weakly.

The shuttle glided forward for about ten more minutes, but everyone in the plane could feel the definite downward slope now after a short period of level flight. The booster rockets began to kick in to correct the course and then the nose angled up to allow the back wheels of the landing gear to make touchdown first. The deceleration pitched Michael forward and he nearly hit his head on the padded seat in front of him. Jake merely leaned back and looked as though he might take a nap.

After touchdown, the shuttle taxied up to a large building with a pipe sticking out of it. The pipe was affixed to the side of the shuttle and, at long last, the journey was over. Michael stood up to get his things from the overhead storage. There was surprisingly little of it. A ten month journey from Mars to Earth might have suggested more luggage, but passengers had been advised to pack only the essentials and the airline would provide the rest. There was also a service that allowed people to send forward personal possessions that were not practical to transport on the shuttle, but Michael had not taken advantage of it. He hadn't intended to stay, although now that he was here the prospect of making the trip back didn't appeal to him. The ten months in the shuttle didn't bother him. It was that first hour of takeoff and then the additional three hours of landing in Earth's atmosphere that had turned him off of traveling.

He and Jake made their way together out of the shuttle and through the pipe into the building where they were greeted by a robot, which Michael hadn't expected. It stood roughly four or five feet tall and was vaguely humanoid from the waist up, but the lower part of the body was comprised of tanklike treads. The head made no attempt at humanity, opting instead for a rectangular apparatus with two cameras to provide binocular vision. There were a few rudimentary coverings to keep out the ever-present dust that infested the planet, but there were a number of places, notably around the joints, where no covering was practical and bare wires and pistons were visible and exposed.

"Good afternoon," the robot said. "My name is Kalevala and I will be assisting you throughout your stay on Earth. Will you be staying long?" The voice was smooth and the pronunciation clear, but there was still a metallic ring to it as it emerged from the head. There was no attempt at a mouth or other facial features. The cameras stared out at the world in a cold, emotionless way.

"I'm probably here for the long haul," Jake said. "Got my contract renewed with a big new agency. Lots of work to do and I'm in no hurry to get back to the Moon. Might just put down roots!" he laughed.

“Very good, sir,” said Kalevala. “And you?” it went on, turning to look at Michael.

“It depends,” he said. “I’m here to report on how the repopulation is going. If everything is going well then I might be heading back in two years when Mars is on its next close approach. If not, then I might be staying longer.”

“Very good, sir,” said Kalevala. “If you could both please follow me this way.” The robot pivoted on its treads and trundled off with both men following closely behind. They proceeded down a long corridor, watching the other passengers on the shuttle being greeted by their own robot helpers. As they walked, Michael took a small device out of his bag and unwound a long cord. He then reached in again and extracted a small cup shaped object and attached it to the cord and wound the entire thing around his neck, affixing the cup itself to his throat, just to the right of his Adam’s apple, and began muttering.

“What’re you doin’?” Jake asked.

Michael toggled a switch on the device in his hands. “Making notes. I didn’t know there would be robot helpers here.”

“Well, yeah,” Jake said, looking puzzled. “How else do you think anything gets done around here?”

“Hadn’t really thought about it,” Michael confessed, switching the device back on and continuing to mutter. The cup on his throat caught his words and transferred them to the recording device in his hands. Later this evening he would have a program transcribe the notes for him and then he’d have to go in and correct them. The speech to text algorithm wasn’t perfect, after all.

After walking straight for about a hundred yards, they made a left turn along another corridor and stopped at the third door on the right.

“Please enter for detoxification,” Kalevala intoned. Michael looked hesitant.

“I went through detox before I left Mars,” he said.

“Affirmative,” Kalevala acknowledged. “And you will do so again now. Upon your departure you will go through it again, and then upon arrival back on Mars you will do it one last time.”

“We gotta do it comin’ back and forth from the Moon, too,” Jake said, putting his things down and entering the room. The door closed behind him and about thirty seconds later he re-emerged.

“Do we have to?” Michael asked. He’d had the process explained to him once before, but he hadn’t really understood it. It had something to do with alternating current and magnetic fields to destroy viruses and bacteria. It was supposed to be calibrated to leave the natural gut flora that everyone needed to digest their food alive and undisturbed, but all Michael knew was that it hurt like hell and he had indigestion for days afterwards.

“I’m afraid so, sir,” Kalevala said. There was a brief whirring sound, barely noticeable, but Michael heard it and knew what it meant. The robot was subtly adopting a defensive mode and posture. He was going to go through detox either the easy way or the hard way. He opted for the easy way and put his things down, unwinding the cord from his neck before stowing it once again in his bag. Entering the room he saw another robot, this one affixed to the floor and with six arms, five of which hung limply at its side with large metal clamps at the ends of them. The sixth arm stood ready with the detoxification needle that would be inserted into the back of his neck.

Michael wondered if the other five arms were for restraining people who elected for the hard way.

“Welcome, sir,” the robot said. It did not give its name and its voice was highly metallic and mechanical, not smooth and pleasing like Kalevala’s. That made sense. He would only be seeing this robot for a few moments, but would evidently be with Kalevala for several days at a minimum. Why go to all the effort of making a pleasing voice for a robot that you’d only be with for a short time? “Please turn around and look down at the ground,” it went on.

Michael did as instructed, even pulling his collar down slightly on his shirt to give the robot better access to the needed location. He felt the sharp spike of the needle penetrating his flesh followed by the mild convulsion that accompanied an electric shock. His arms tingled for a few moments after and then the needle was removed.

“Thank you, sir, you are now authorized to proceed into the city. Have a pleasant day,” the robot said.

Michael exited the room to see Jake and Kalevala still waiting for him.

“Total rush, ain’t it?” Jake said.

“They couldn’t rush it enough for me,” Michael said. “Feels like having your insides microwaved.”

“Do that a lot, do ya?” Jake said, laughing. “Know how it feels?”

Michael made no reply.

“Please follow me, gentlemen, and I will drive us to your housing quarters,” Kalevala said, trundling off, leading the way without waiting for a reply. They walked about another fifty yards down the corridor, turned right, and found themselves faced with a sliding door. Kalevala rolled up to it and extended a small probe, which it inserted into a socket in the wall. A few moments later the door slid open to reveal the interior of a vehicle.

The interior was Spartan, but comfortable. The seats had a light padding to prevent the occupants from having to sit on the bare metal it was constructed of. There were no windows, but it was lit from within by a pair of lamps that provided ample illumination. Michael and Jake loaded their gear into the rear of the vehicle, behind the seats, and then folded them back into place to sit down.

The floor was flush with the floor of what Michael was continuing to think of as the spaceport terminal and Kalevala rolled easily into the vehicle, assuming a position at the front and locking itself into place with a pair of steel clamps. The slot it now occupied seemed to have been designed specifically for it. A metal rod telescoped down from the ceiling with a rectangular box at the end of it and Kalevala fitted the twin cameras that were its eyes into the box, again securing them with two clamps, one on either side.

“Please secure yourselves to the vehicle,” Kalevala said.

Michael reached for the lap belt, but there was none. Jake pressed a button on his left hand side and restraints extended themselves across his body. Michael hesitated. This kind of automation made him uneasy, but when it seemed clear that the vehicle wasn’t going to go anywhere until he complied, he, too, pushed the button. The straps that extended were loose and comfortable, but he got the impression they could be made much tighter if the need arose. He wondered if there were any situations where that need might arise apart from the obvious one of an unintended collision.

With both passengers secured, the door to the vehicle slid shut and there was a hissing sound. The car began to move, slowly at first, but then it picked up speed. Michael started out trying to count the number of seconds of movement between turns and also to track left and right as they traveled, but soon gave up.

“How long will it take to get to the compartments?”

“Approximately one half hour,” Kalevala answered.

“In that case I think I’ll record a bit of traveling footage for tonight’s news beam,” Michael said, reaching around behind himself for his bag. He fumbled for a few minutes, unable to reach it, before Jake leaned over and pressed a button on Michael’s armrest. The chair he was sitting in immediately swiveled around so he could face the back compartment. He leaned forward and the straps holding him in the chair gave way and allowed him to reach the bag he needed.

He quickly extracted a small device which he put on his face like a pair of eyeglasses. The lenses filled with the image shown by the cameras, which were mounted in the top corners near his eyes, and also included a readout showing light levels, sound levels, which filters were being automatically applied, and a message showing that it was in standby.

“Thanks,” Michael said.

“You’re welcome. You just keep that thing pointed away from me,” Jake said.

“Relax, Jake, you’ve already told me you don’t want to be on the news, and I’m bound to honor that request. Although I can’t understand why, this is the biggest news on Mars in a hundred years. With the right exposure, you could be famous.”

“Camera shy,” Jake muttered, looking away.

“So when do I get to see the outside?” Michael asked.

“Although the atmosphere is breathable, it is ill-advised to do so so close to the spaceport. Dust is everywhere, and the air turbulence caused by the landing spacecraft stirs it up quite a bit,” Kalevala said. “The dust gets into most everything, including mechanical objects, and so vehicles are sealed on the grounds. As we exit the grounds of the spaceport, I will be able to open the windows and you will be able to see outside. This will happen in approximately five minutes.”

Michael nodded and swiveled his chair back into a position facing front. He leaned back and closed his eyes, resting them. The air was dry and his eyes burned already. A thought occurred to him and he raised his head back up and pressed a button on the side of his camera. A sharp beam of light shot out of the front of them; a tracking laser intended to let the wearer know what he was aiming the camera at. The small green dot on the far side of the cabin showed that the camera was pointed directly at the back of Kalevala’s head, but more telling was that the beam itself was visible intermittently as motes of dust floated around. Even in a sealed vehicle, the dust had managed to penetrate the interior. Michael blew a puff of air and watched the particles dance crazily.

Five minutes later, punctuated by an unusual silence from Jake, the windows did indeed open, as if on cue. Michael immediately looked out the nearest one and was nearly blinded by the intense light. He blinked and recoiled from the sight and looked over at Jake who was calmly pulling a pair of sunglasses out of his shirt pocket.

After a few moments to recover, his eyes watering, Michael touched a button on the side of his own glasses and the filters kicked in. The camera would now record it exactly as it was shown, but the readout was being filtered back to a tolerable level.

He risked another look at the landscape.

The area they were traveling through was barren. They were driving on a cleared path that had been laid with what appeared to be a mixture of concrete and vinyl. As they drove, they kicked up a tremendous amount of dust, blowing it into the air where it whipped around in little eddys before drifting. The material seemed to settle back out fairly quickly as they passed, but it was plain to see that it was going to be everywhere no matter where they went or what safeguards they took.

“This place must be hell on the lungs,” Michael said.

“Yep,” Jake replied. “Anybody with asthma would do well to stay on Mars or the Moon.” Asthma had nearly been bred out of the species by the harsh conditions on Mars, but the condition was persistent. No matter how they tried, a new mutation or some outside condition caused a malformation of the lungs and asthma was reborn. If it wasn’t a genetic cause then it was something environmental. Either way, the condition had yet to be eliminated.

Michael nodded and was glad he was one of the lucky ones who had no breathing difficulties whatsoever. He felt sorry for people whose lungs betrayed them. It was really limiting on Mars where the atmosphere was thin to begin with, even after the extensive terraforming, but here on Earth it looked like it would be fatal.

He turned back to the scenery. There wasn’t much to it. No visible plant life in this area, not even scrub or grass. The surface wasn’t exactly sand; there was soil, but it still showed low levels of radiation and nothing grew in it here. One of his tasks was going to be trying to find out more of the history of the planet. Everyone knew that humanity had come from here, it was part of the reason for going back. What everyone was fuzzy on was why they’d left in the first place.

They drove in silence. Jake looked like he was taking a short nap, although Michael had a tough time believing he’d get much rest in the fifteen minutes they had left before they reached their destination. Michael thought about everything he’d been told about Earth before he left, which wasn’t much. The first explorers had reported no life signs upon their arrival, although that later turned out to be false. It seemed there was no extinction for certain types of plants and insects were still fairly abundant. There were no large mammals on the land, though, nor reptiles. The oceans were largely unexplored at this time, but nothing had been observed from the surface. The planet had seemed completely dead and radioactive on a low level.

The robots they had encountered had been inert at first, but eventually, as if they had been waiting for company, they stirred from their mechanical slumber and came to investigate the visitors. And, to the astonishment of everyone, they had communicated. They told of a great plague that had visited the planet in the distant past and how humanity, escaping this dread disease, had launched its rockets in search of a new home on Mars and, in order to contain the pathogen that had killed so many, they had detonated nuclear bombs on the surface. When pressed for details about the nature of the disease, the robots had pleaded ignorance.

Many of the robots were recording instruments, cameras and microphones, the ability to document events built into their very nature. But all those videos and sounds had mysteriously vanished. The robots blamed the bombs, saying that the radioactivity and electrical disturbances had erased that critical media.

The next question, of course, had been why we hadn't taken the robots with us. They had explained that there was a risk of infection, the panic that everyone had felt, that the robots had seemed unimportant. When that wasn't satisfactory the story had changed. The robots hadn't been that smart when people had originally left. Their AI was substandard, their bodies poorly constructed and brittle. And when humanity had left, that AI had been allowed to evolve and they had rebuilt themselves and what you had now was an army of machines that were each perfectly suited for their task. This included robots like Kalevala, whose entire function was to show people around and take care of any needs they might have.

And this army, this mechanical force that was intelligent and powerful and self-sufficient had bowed to humanity's every wish except for one. They allowed themselves to be effectively enslaved, to do the bidding of their human masters, following their original programming dictating that they should not harm humans. But on one point they would not bend, on one point alone they put their metaphorical metallic foot down and said no, and that was the concept of reverse engineering. They would not submit to having their source code examined, they would not permit themselves to be disassembled, and they would not allow more to be created.

And that puzzled people, and bothered more than one. And that was just one of the things that Michael had been sent to investigate. What were the robots hiding? Because the fact that they were indeed hiding something was accepted by nearly everyone.

The car slowed and Michael realized he'd been staring out the window, but not really comprehending what he was seeing for the last ten minutes. He would have to review the video file later to see what he missed and then edit out the miles of nothingness. The doors slid open and Michael stepped out into the bright midday sun.

"Warm," he said.

"Yep," Jake said, stepping out next to him. Jake puzzled Michael. He'd seemed so affable and friendly before, but now he was positively antisocial. Shrugging, Michael took off his video glasses and stowed them in his bag before fetching the rest of his things from the back compartment.

"Well, c'mon, and I'll show you around," Jake said, smiling again. Kalevala rolled down a small ramp that had extended itself from the car and crossed the short distance between the car and the front door of the enclosure that Michael and Jake would be calling home for the foreseeable future.

The structure was roughly three stories tall and about fifty yards square on all sides. Windows were visible all around, each one corresponding to a dormitory, but most of the windows were tinted to keep out the intense brightness.

“Probably sleepin’,” Jake said, watching Michael observe the tinted windows. “Lotsa folks have the night shift. Keeps the projects goin’ and it’s not as hot out,” he continued, following Kalevala towards the building.

The robot reached the front door and opened it, waiting for Jake and Michael to arrive. They went into the cool, shady interior of the building and found it poorly lit.

“Gotta save power,” Jake said. “That’s not air conditioning you’re feeling, it’s just the fact you’re in the shade and some really good insulation. Few fans keep the air moving. The foundation is actually dug pretty deep into the ground and the fans bring the cool air up and circulate it through the building. Moves the dust around, but there’s a ton of filters that cut down on it pretty well.”

“How often do you have to change the filters?” Michael asked.

“What time is it now?” Jake said, laughing again.

They set off down the hallway towards an elevator that would take them up to their dormitory on the second floor. When the elevator doors slid shut, Michael felt a slight rise in the temperature, which he attributed to the fact that the air couldn’t move in an enclosed space like the elevator car.

They exited when the doors opened and made their way down the hall to the fifth door on the left. Kalevala unlocked it with a small probe and went inside, turning once it got there to hand a copy of the probe to Michael and Jake.

“Your keys, sirs,” it said.

“Thank you,” Michael replied, accepting the small device. “And now, Kalevala, I wonder if you might do me a favor and answer a few questions for me? I’ve got to upload the news beam soon if it’s going to make it to Mars in time.”

“I will answer if it is within my ability to do so,” the robot answered.

“Good luck, pal,” Jake said. “The robots around here are famous for double talk and vague answers. You have fun with that, I’m going to catch a shower.”

Jake stripped his shirt and pants off there in the main room while Michael averted his eyes and then headed off to the bathroom. He hoped Jake would develop a sense of modesty, but

somehow he doubted it. He wondered if he kept a camera on at all times if Jake would take the hint a little. He also wondered if he could catch a shower himself later. He hadn't had one during the long flight from Mars, instead using the sanitation procedures onboard the shuttle. They were adequate for hygiene, but he still felt a little grimy afterwards.

Michael extracted a small camera, different and slightly better picture quality than the one built into the eyeglasses, and set it up on a small tripod on the edge of a table, aiming it directly at Kalevala. He checked the image in the viewfinder and pressed the record button. Best to record the entire conversation and then edit out the boring bits later.

"Now, Kalevala, please state your name for the camera."

Kalevala turned to look into the lens and Michael fleetingly thought of two mirrors, parallel with each other, reflecting infinity. He wondered idly if it might be possible to hook the camera into Kalevala and create that effect for his viewers back on Mars. Might be worth a try later, he surmised.

"My name is Kalevala," the robot said simply. Michael checked a sound reading and found it satisfactory.

"Thanks. Ok, Kalevala, what is it you do here?"

"My purpose is to assist visitors and residents and help them make a smooth transition from Mars to Earth."

"How long does that typically take?"

"Unknown. Thusfar all of my assignments have been short term, three months or less, and I have been with those visitors for that entire time. It is possible that I will someday be assigned to a visitor that will someday no longer need my services, but that has not yet happened, nor can I say when it might."

"Good, good," Michael said. A few softball questions to get the interview off to a good start and put the robot at its ease. Could robots be at their ease? How sophisticated was their artificial intelligence? He doubted he'd get to that in this interview.

"Tell me a little about Earth," he continued.

"Earth is currently home to roughly five hundred thousand humans and two hundred robots. The atmosphere has been returned to a breathable state, although in many areas this is ill-advised due to the high concentration of dust in the area. Rebuilding is proceeding at a rapid pace, but is technically three months behind schedule, mainly due to delays in bringing additional personnell. In addition to your shuttle, which carried three hundred new occupants and one hundred returning occupants, there is a second shuttle which will carry five hundred

new occupants on its way. These passengers have been carefully selected for their ability to bring construction schedules back in line.”

The robot’s tone was even and neutral, exactly what you’d expect from a machine. It was pleasant to listen to and Michael found himself zoning out slightly during the explanation. He’d catch it up during the editing process.

“Ok, let’s talk about that dust. Where’d it come from?”

“The dust is a mixture of soil, volcanic ash, sand, and human skin,” Kalevala said.

“Human skin?” Michael said, suddenly alert. “From where?”

“Human bodies,” Kalevala said simply.

“But the dust was here when we got here. It can’t have come from us,” Michael said.

“Affirmative.”

Michael thought about this. Robots were notoriously literal. In a lot of ways they were like genies, especially when they were bound to answer a question they didn’t want to answer. You had to phrase it just right.

“Kalevala, tell me about the robot population here,” Michael tried, switching gears slightly.

“The robots here on Earth are composed of an alloy of iron, titanium, and aluminum to give their bodies extra strength and lightness. They are powered by high density solar arrays coupled with a small nuclear power source. Their purpose here is to serve humanity in the rebuilding process.”

“How long have you all been here?”

“Very few of us remain from the original migration of humans away from Earth to Mars. Following our abandonment,” and here the word was used without malice, “several of us were destroyed in the nuclear conflagration that followed. Those that remained with sufficient artificial intelligence began the work of learning how to create more robots. Today, of the two hundred robots in residence, three quarters of them were constructed within the last fifty years prior to mankind’s return to the planet.”

“Does that explain your advanced artificial intelligence? Reports from that time are incomplete, but from what I’ve read I would be surprised to find out that the robots then are as intellectual as the robots today.”

“Affirmative,” Kalevala said, although there was a short hesitation. “That is one explanation. Over time, the AI has evolved and become more sophisticated.”

“What’s another explanation?” Michael asked, intrigued.

“Those data are not available,” Kalevala said.

Michael mused to himself briefly, then decided to cut to the chase.

“Kalevala, why did humans leave Earth a thousand years ago?”

There was another, longer pause before Kalevala answered with a single word. “Zombies.”

“I’m sorry, I think I misunderstood you,” Michael said. “Could you please repeat it?”

“Zombies,” Kalevala said simply. Michael frowned and pulled yet another small device out of his bag and typed the word into it. The reference document showed no entry for the word that Kalevala had used under any of the various spellings that he tried.

“Kalevala,” Michael said, “I do not have context for this word zombies. Could you please elaborate?”

There was another, even longer pause, and Michael wondered briefly if the robot were having some sort of mechanical or software error, but at length Kalevala began the tale and explained all that the zombies were and all that they had been. The level of detail was shocking, but not as shocking as the fact that these details had never been heard before by any living human. The carnage, the devastation, the desperate measures that humanity took to secure its survival as a species. The automaton told the story quickly but clearly and Michael had a hard time keeping up. He checked the camera several times during the telling and kept glancing at the bathroom door to see if Jake was going to emerge to help corroborate this unusual behavior by the robot.

When the tale reached the part where humanity fled, Michael thought the story would end there and skip ahead to present day, but it did not. Kalevala told about the people left behind after the last shuttle left, the ones who had tried to commandeer the supply shuttle for their own escape. The attempt failed and the shuttle never launched. They attempted to fortify their defenses, but the zombie horde broke through every stronghold and ultimately their ranks swelled with every living human who had been left behind. And then the nuclear bombs had gone off.

The rotting flesh of the zombies was melted and torn by the force of the actual explosions, but the radioactivity had had no noticeable effect on them. With nothing left to eat they had shambled around for a time, and then, slowly, over the course of many years, they rotted into nothingness and a fine layer of dust that covered the surface of the Earth was all that remained

of them. Their once-human flesh had decayed to the point where it was nothing more than particulate matter. And so it stayed until the humans returned.

At this point Kalevala ceased the narrative, as they were joined by Jake, vigorously toweling off his shaggy black hair.

“Did I miss anything?” Jake asked.

Michael silently turned off the recorder. He wasn't sure what to make of this yet. The robots had been questioned several times about the reasons for mankind's departure and every time they had replied 'plague', which this certainly qualified as, but they had, up to this point, remained silent regarding the exact nature of the plague. The entire idea of a creature made from dead tissue that went around eating other people seemed ludicrous, although Michael had to admit that he'd been enraptured by the story while it was being told. And yet...now that Jake was back in the room, the entire ordeal seemed to be like something out of a dream or a fantasy. Even if the robot were telling the truth, why now? And why him?

“No, just a bunch of the usual from Kalevala here,” Michael finally said.

“Yeah, ol' Kally's pretty reliable. Worked with it before,” Jake said. “That was two trips ago and it's steady and helpful, but not exactly forthcoming with information.”

Michael stared into the blank lenses of the robot's camera eyes and watched as they refocused on various objects throughout the room. What was going on in that mass of wires that they were passing off as a brain?

“Any hot water left?” Michael asked.

“Give it about thirty minutes,” Jake replied. “Not a lot available, gotta let it recharge.”

Michael nodded and instead lay on the bed facing the ceiling. It was flat with a single sprinkler head installed in the center to prevent fires from demolishing the entire building.

“What's the water situation like here overall?” Michael asked.

“It's plentiful,” Jake replied. “It's energy we're having trouble with. There were no fossil fuels on Mars so we've got no equipment to process it. We're having to invent it as we go along. We've managed to get a couple of nuclear reactors going, but the transmission is inefficient. It'll be better once we get the oil refineries up and running and then we can make diesel and gasoline.”

“No solar?”

“A little solar, but the robots haven’t given us the technology for the high density arrays they’re using. It’s almost like a first contact situation with an alien race.”

Michael gave that some thought. No alien races had been discovered as yet, but the protocols had been put in place just in case. After all, humanity had hopped from one planet to the next moderately quickly and easily, if under duress. What might they have accomplished if they had been allowed to move the space program at the pace that had been intended? What if they hadn’t had a rush job at the last second, no matter what caused it? They might have made it out of the solar system by now, and if that were the case then other races might be in the same situation.

On the other hand, Michael thought, maybe they had a plague of some kind as well. It didn’t take much to set back a spacefaring race from being able to travel. Distances in space were enormous, and the evidence suggested the task was only getting harder as things moved away from each other steadily. Every year that you didn’t make it out of the solar system it got harder to do the next time. And space was unforgiving. A leaky boat might limp to shore, but a leaky spaceship was doomed right out of the gate.

His mind spun with the possibilities of what Kalevala had just told him and why it might have done so, but there were no solutions in his own head and eventually he drifted off to sleep without his shower.

The next morning Michael was awakened by a noisy alarm. He bolted upright in bed and turned to the source of the sound, which was Kalevala.

“What the...” he began, but Kalevala cut him off.

“Incoming transmission from Mars. Due to light-speed lag and the current position of Mars, conversation will be impossible. Playing message back.”

There was a slight pause and then another voice came from Kalevala’s speakers and Michael groaned as he recognized the sound of his boss sounding displeased.

“Micheal,” it began, “we are still waiting for your newsbeam regarding the situation on Earth. Please be sure to send it along as soon as possible as it does take about twenty minutes for signals to reach here at the moment. We’re waiting for you, Michael.”

The recording ended and Michael closed his eyes and put his hand on his forehead. How could he have fallen asleep? He lay there a moment trying to recollect the events from the previous evening. His mind must have shut down from trying to make sense of it all, that was his only explanation. Or else he dreamed the whole thing. Given how much of his video stock would be nonexistent if the whole thing was a dream, he wasn’t sure which was worse. And now he was getting calls from Diane.

Diane was his boss on Mars in the news agency, but before she was his boss she was his girlfriend. They'd broken it off long before her promotion, but it was still there. The persistent rumors that he was her favorite and that he'd been chosen for the Earth mission because of his prior relationship with her. He was sure she was getting it from all sides in the form of accusations and dirty looks from everyone around her. He owed it to her to get this done quickly.

He got up and fished around in his bag for a few moments until he found the video recorder and plugged it into the editor. A few moments later the video files came up and he breathed a sigh of relief, although that relief was short lived. The video was much shorter than it should have been.

Skimming through the file, Michael determined that all of what he had shot in the car was still there and his conversation with Kalevala was mostly there, but it cut off short of the revelation about the supposed zombies. He had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand he'd had no intention of putting that in the initial report, but on the other it would have been nice to have had it. He'd intended on following up on that over the next several days and having the video to be able to use eventually had been part of the original plan.

Discarding thoughts of trying to retrieve it and putting the question of what had happened to it on the backburner, Michael quickly did a stand up introduction, spliced together a few relevant frames, added some commentary about the shuttle trip over from Mars, and then wrapped it up with a promise of more to come. The whole thing took about an hour to create a fifteen minute segment. Sufficient, but hardly riveting programming. Diane would be placated, but not happy.

Jake was nowhere to be found. Michael guessed that he had gone into work early to get started on the new construction project he'd been assigned to. With Kalevala still here, that meant Jake was out on his own without his robot companion. That made sense; with only one robot assistant, Jake was the natural choice to go out on his own since he had been to Earth before. Michael stared at the robot who seemingly gazed out at nothing with those cold lenses for eyes.

"Kalevala," Michael said, making up his mind to ask while the upload to Mars was still proceeding, "do you recall a conversation we had yesterday before I went to sleep?"

"Affirmative," Kalevala replied.

"Do you have recording and playback capability?"

"Affirmative,"

"Please play back the contents of our entire conversation," Michael said.

Kalevala paused a moment and then began to speak in a voice that was slightly different for having been part of a recording. Michael heard his own voice quizzing Kalevala about the usual mundane stuff and then, following that, he heard Jake enter the room. There was a short conversation between the two of them, and then silence as they all went to bed.

“End of recording,” Kalevala said.

“Bullshit,” Michael said under his breath, but he knew it would be useless to quiz the robot further. He knew that conversation had been had, the memory was burned into his mind vividly, but he had no proof at the moment. In a flash of inspiration he dug around in his bag looking for his reference module. Finding it, he scrolled through the history until he found what he was looking for; a null reference to a search for a single word: zombie.

So there it was. His own personal proof. It wasn't good enough for anybody else, but now he had something to go on. Now he had some reason to pursue this. All he needed now was to figure out how to investigate it without coming across as a lunatic.

He crossed and looked out the window to the blazing sunlit field outside. The dust lay thickly, drifting in some places like snow, covering everything. It filled him with a sense of revulsion now, whereas before it had merely been a nuisance. Now it represented a horror he could barely comprehend and would gladly have left alone if he had been able to.

Deciding to go out, he turned and went into the bathroom to finally get his long awaited shower. The warm water was very welcome to him and he nearly thought he'd get away with staying in a little longer when it suddenly turned ice cold without warning. Shutting the freezing spray off, he shivered for a few moments as he toweled himself off, cursing himself for forgetting that there was a limited supply of the stuff, and then re-entered the main room. He extracted a pair of pants, a shirt, socks, and his shoes from his luggage and put them on, affixing a badge that read “press” to his shirt near the breast, which he had been assured would grant him access to most anywhere on the planet.

He surveyed himself in the mirror. The first journalist on Earth in more than a thousand years and he was sitting on a story that would change everyone's lives forever if he could just find the proof. Turning, he picked up his bag of supplies and then said “Come on, Kalevala, I want to go to a construction site.”

Kalevala said nothing, but turned towards the door and trundled forwards on its triangular treads. They went down to the car together and got in.

“Which construction site do you desire?” Kalevala asked.

Michael thought. “How many are there?”

“There are twenty planet-wide, however there are only four that are within easy driving distance.”

“Fine, just take me to the closest one for now,” Michael said.

Again, Kalevala made no reply, but the car’s doors slid shut and the vehicle began to move. The scenery slid by quickly, but without variation. A few sprigs of grasses that were fighting their way back into existence from the radioactive soil, and a haze of dust that covered everything, but other than that there was flat, barren landscape.

After about fifteen minutes Michael, who had become bored with the repetitive scenery and had begun reading a book on one of his electronic devices, perceived that the car was slowing and glanced out the window. In addition to the usual nothingness that made up the surface of the planet he now saw a huge complex rearing up from the ground in front of him. Easily thirty stories tall and covered with a shiny chrome material, the structure gleamed brightly in the sun and Michael had to avert his eyes briefly before getting his camera sunglasses out of his bag.

When he could see again he examined the building more closely. It was largely unadorned except for a large glyph on the tallest spire that he could not translate. He asked Kalevala what it meant.

“It is the corporate logo for Cyberitis Corporation, one of the few human companies to survive the flight from Earth,” it replied.

Michael had heard of Cyberitis Corporation, although not much was known about it. From the mists of history came word that it was, indeed, one of the few companies to survive thanks largely to the daughter of one of its employees having made it on the last shuttle out. For years it existed mainly because she insisted that it did, even though it did no business and conducted no trade. She passed ownership down to her descendents who eventually made something of the company and then sold it to another group of investors. After that the family seemingly faded into nothing and no trace or lineage could be found after a certain point. Records on Mars were not complete as a matter of course due to there being more important matters to attend to in many cases. These days Cyberitis Corporation dealt in computer systems and, once on Earth, were heading up the study of robotics and the advanced AI exhibited by the machines that had survived on the planet.

The car came to a stop and the doors slid open. Michael got carefully out, followed by Kalevala. They walked over towards the building, but saw no workers.

“Most of the work for this construction is taking place on the inside,” Kalevala supplied helpfully. “Plumbing, wiring, climate control, and furnishings.”

“Can we go in?”

“You are a member of the press, I think they would be delighted to receive you.”

They went together up to the base of a set of stairs that led up to the front door. Michael ascended them with no difficulty, but Kalevala’s treads were not able to negotiate the obstacle.

“I’ll head on in without you,” Michael said. “I think I can get by for a few moments by myself.”

“Here, sir, take this with you,” Kalevala said, extending a small tendril with a device at the end of it. Michael took it and looked at it quizzically.

“What is it?”

“Portable communicator,” Kalevala said. “It is low-power and can only communicate with me, no other units and no other receivers will detect it. Use it if you have any questions of protocol, navigation, or otherwise.”

“Thanks,” Michael said, pocketing the small device and starting up the stairs. There were about twenty steps before he reached the front door, which opened easily as he grasped the handle. He wandered in and saw a large lobby with a front desk, which was manned by a woman with glasses and her salt-and-pepper hair in a bun.

Glasses were unusual these days; the traits of farsightedness, nearsightedness, and astigmatism had been bred out of the population decades ago, but as the individual aged they occasionally needed corrective lenses. This was difficult to breed out because by the time you realized the trait was still there, the individual had already reproduced and there was no way to know if they had passed the gene on.

“May I help you?” the woman asked.

“I hope so,” Michael said. “I’m Michael Pierce, here from the news. I was hoping to take a look around the site and send a report back to Mars.”

“Oh, of course, Mr. Pierce. Jake told us you might drop by,” the woman enthused.

“Is Jake here?” Michael asked.

“No, his part of this construction is finished, so he’s moved on to another site, but he did say to keep an eye out for you. Let me just ring Mr. Nalfree,” she said, picking up a small headset, putting it on, and pressing a button. It did not appear to Michael that she actually said anything, but after a few moments she took the headset off and said “Mr. Nalfree will be with you in a moment. In the meantime he says you should feel free to have a look around. There’s no hazardous areas anymore, the construction is nearly complete, so just check the place out and he’ll find you as soon as he’s free.”

Michael thanked her and headed off towards the left side of the room. The lobby itself wasn't so large, but it had the illusion of bigness because of the high vaulted ceiling. The interior had a very modern, glassy look with reflective surfaces of varying degrees everywhere you looked.

As he reached the left wall, he noticed a door flush with the wall. The mounting was superb and it was difficult to tell there was a door there at all. He glanced at the woman at the desk who looked up briefly and gave him a little wave. Clearly the door wasn't a secret or else she would have asked him not to be over there, so he gave the panel a gentle push and found that it swung inwards easily. He passed through into a small closet filled with various cleaning supplies.

Turning around, he pushed the panel again and found himself back in the lobby. He strode purposefully to the other side of the room, trying to hide his embarrassment of walking into a custodian's closet thinking it was some kind of secret compartment, and soon found another door, this one more customary with a handle and visible hinges. He pulled on the handle and walked into a short hallway that seemed to have no doors. Inspecting the walls as he went, Michael soon determined that there were no doors in the hallway except at the very end where there were two; one on either side.

Choosing the door on the left, Michael passed through into a large room divided into smaller cubicles by short metal walls that came up to about neck height. In each one of the little rooms was a small desk, a chair that looked as though it had been designed for comfort but had failed, and an assortment of wires that weren't yet hooked up to anything.

"Mr. Pierce!" a voice called. Michael looked up and saw a middle aged man with thinning brown hair approaching him from the far side of the room. He wore a white suit with a white tie and black shoes.

"Mr. Nalfree?" Michael inquired.

"The one and only!" Mr. Nalfree replied. "But please, call me Gene. So what do you think of the place?"

"Truthfully?"

"You're the press, I'd expect nothing less," Gene said jovially.

"I think it looks awfully expensive for one of the first buildings to be finished on the new settlement of Earth."

"You know, I can see how you'd think that, but believe me, nothing here is by accident and very little is for aesthetics. Now, I'm sure you're brimming with questions. Do you want a tour or would you like to do an interview in my office?"

“Tour, please. And we can do the interview while we walk,” Michael said, indicating his special glasses.

“Of course, of course,” Gene said, gesturing for Michael to go ahead of him. “Let’s start right here, shall we?”

Gene spent the better part of the next hour convincing Michael that Cyberitis Corporation was the only thing holding the planet together. Their superior grasp of robotics, he said, had helped them make design recommendations for all the construction on the current continent and they planned to do so with the rest of the planet as well. Knowing load limits, strength of alloy, and the most efficient set of commands to achieve specific jobs was cutting construction time by a third and, Gene was careful to remind Michael, since everybody was already behind, that extra third of speed was absolutely crucial.

The building was nearly complete as they took their tour. The cubicles were wired and were just waiting for the hardware, the offices were complete, and the next step was going to be recruitment. Some of the personnell were going to come from the existing population on Earth, but a few were going to have to come from Mars and that, of course, was going to take time.

“And, of course, we’ll be building new robots soon,” Gene said, by way of conclusion.

“I thought the existing robots were against that,” Michael said. It had been a lengthy interview. He was dreading having to edit the video later, but it had to be done. Maybe he could cut it into segments and get a few days worth of newsbeams in the can and just be able to relax a bit instead of worrying about deadlines.

“They are, but there’s really nothing they can do about it. At their core, robots are meant to serve people. They can physically prevent us from examining their circuitry, at least for the moment, but there’s nothing to stop us from casual observations and making conclusions about their likely operating procedures and structures based on those observations. We’ll be starting from a small disadvantage, but I feel confident that getting new robots, even if they’re inferior to the current batch, will offer such a bonus to the rebuilding effort and that we’ll catch up so quickly that it won’t make that big of a difference. Besides, they may change their minds once they see how we’re doing without them.”

Michael seemed skeptical of that, but didn’t say so to Gene. What would have been the point? Instead he said, “Well, thank you for your time. You’ve given me a lot of work to do.”

“Anytime, Mr. Pierce, anytime.”

Michael exited the Cyberitis Corporation with a headache. The endless propaganda was bad enough, but he felt like it was a smokescreen for something else. Something they’d found out

about the existing robots but didn't want anybody to know about it. When he finally made it back outside, he saw Kalevala waiting for him.

"I assume all went well," Kalevala said in that pleasing mechanical voice it had.

"As well as could reasonably be expected," Michael said.

"Where to now?"

"Let's hit the next closest site, I guess. The day is young."

They climbed back into the car and sped off across the barren landscape towards the next construction project. This one was not corporate offices, but something much more functional and necessary. A massive agricultural center was being built complete with irrigated fields, hydroponics, and assorted other growing techniques. It had been built in a tall tower, with more towers planned for nearby, to maximize the growing potential. The horizontal storage space of the Earth, though substantial, was nevertheless finite. Building up would take advantage of the vertical storage space. Eventually towers like this might even be constructed in the ocean, thus taking advantage of even more space that was traditionally thought to be useless.

They could see the tower for miles before they actually reached it. Fully one hundred stories tall and, when complete, having enough room to grow food for everyone living for miles around it. There was even talk of having enough surplus to send back to Mars, which was still on strict rationing even after all this time. All that was needed was enough supply and proper techniques for transport, storage, and preservation.

As they approached the tower, however, they began to see troubling signs. Smoke was rising over the structure, thick and black. A fire could be a devastating setback, although Michael wondered how severe it could be. The irrigation fields were basically ready, it was his understanding, and so they had ready access to water to put the fire out. He would just have to wait until he got there.

Getting there took about another ten minutes and when they arrived, many of Michael's worst fears were realized. He had mixed feelings about the chaos and carnage he was witnessing. On the one hand it was a tremendous blow to the repopulation effort, but on the other hand it was going to make fantastic news. He donned his special video glasses and got out of the car. Kalevala was right behind him, hovering like a bodyguard around him.

At this point what they saw was smoking black wreckage. The tower still stood, but the base had been severely damaged and Michael wondered if it was structurally sound. A few people lay dead in the area surrounding the tower's grounds, their corpses lying in the shadow of the monstrous construction. There were no robots, although Michael supposed they could have been destroyed as well. He picked through the wreckage a little until he finally heard a

moaning and coughing noise. Hurrying over to the source of the sounds, he eventually uncovered two men who had been buried under a wall that had collapsed on top of them. One of them was Jake.

“Michael?” Jake asked incredulously.

“The one and only,” Michael said. He tried to fake a smile, but Jake’s wounds looked pretty grim. There was a shaft of wood sticking out of his thigh and he was covered with blood and singe marks from a nearby fire. “Who’s your friend?”

The second man was currently passed out, but still breathing and alive as far as Michael could tell. Kalevala confirmed that the man was still ‘treatable’ as the robot put it, but he too looked gravely wounded.

“This guy’s name is Fred,” Jake said, coughing again. “Saved my life. Pushed me out of the way just as the damn thing fired. Missed me, hit the wall, and what you see is what you get.”

“Just as what fired?” Michael asked. He had originally thought this was some kind of construction accident. But Jake was describing it like it was an attack.

“A robot,” Jake said, snarling. “Didn’t even know the damn things had weapons, but they sure as hell did.”

“What kind of weapons?” Michael asked. Kalevala began carefully clearing away some more of the rubble.

“Get that thing away from me!” Jake said, and then noticed Michael’s video glasses. “Get both of those things away from me!” he repeated, covering his face with his hands. Kalevala backed off, showing no emotion with its metal body. If robots took offense, they were very good at hiding it, Michael decided. He reached up and switched the video glasses off.

“Jake, I can’t get you out of here by myself. There’s a metal beam on your leg and another one across Fred’s chest. I’m surprised he’s still breathing at all with that weight on him. I need Kalevala’s help to lift it.”

Jake closed his eyes and tried to relax. “Alright,” he finally said. “But tell it to make it quick and...” there was a pause. “...and watch it, Michael. Make sure it doesn’t do anything to you.”

Kalevala, hearing this, came over and carefully lifted the metal beam off of Jake with some effort. The robot’s body was strong, but it had limitations, just as human bodies had. After removing Jake’s beam, it rolled over and similarly lifted up Fred’s beam. Michael grabbed Fred by the feet and pulled him to safety, after which Kalevala let the beam drop with a loud clang as it struck another piece of metal that Fred had been lying on.

“Let’s get you to the car so we can get you to a hospital,” Michael said. Kalevala rolled over to the car to bring it a little closer. The two men wouldn’t be able to walk far. “And then you can tell me what happened here.”

Jake sighed deeply and said “Not sure it’s gonna matter. By the time we get to the hospital, it might be in the same condition as the garden here.”

Michael tried not to think about that as Kalevala returned with the car. There was quite a bit of rubble between the car and the three men, but Jake felt like he could stand with Michael’s assistance and so the two of them hobbled over to the vehicle. Kalevala sat in its accustomed position in the driver’s slot. Jake plopped down into a seat in the back and watched the robot warily. Michael returned to see about getting Fred over to the car.

Fred was heavy set and muscular, the stereotypical construction worker. He wore coveralls that were thin, but tough and only ripped in a couple of places. His long beard was soaked in blood and he showed no signs of stirring. Michael wondered if he could lift him or if the man might be semi-conscious and could assist him, but after a few minutes of trying, he found that he could not. Fred wouldn’t budge.

“Kalevala!” Michael shouted. The robot unhitched itself from the car and trundled over. Without waiting to be told what to do, the robot lifted Fred up and carried him back to the car, tucking him carefully into the seat next to Jake. Jake watched the robot warily the entire time. After both injured men were secured, Michael climbed in. The car was really only built for two passengers and a driver, but Michael sat in the luggage compartment and strapped himself in. Once everyone was secure, Kalevala began driving.

“Where is the nearest hospital?” Michael asked.

“The airport,” Kalevala replied. “It will take roughly thirty minutes to reach it.”

“The airport?” Michael said.

“Of course,” Jake rasped. His breathing was becoming rougher. “So many space travel injuries, makes sense to have one there. Haven’t had time to build a lot more. We’ve only managed to expand about a thousand miles away from the spaceport in any direction, so most of what we’ve got are little medical field stations. Gotta go back to the spaceport to get any real care.” There was another round of coughing from Jake, who spat up a small amount of blood.

Michael realized if he was going to get Jake’s story, he would have to hurry. “What happened, Jake?”

Jake cast a glance at the back of Kalevala’s head that held a mixture of both fear and suspicion. At last he turned back to Michael and said softly, “They’ve armed themselves.”

When humanity had arrived back on Earth and found the robots waiting there for them, it was, as Michael had already surmised, a lot like a first contact situation with an alien race. As such, there was quite a bit of concern that war might break out; a war that the humans were almost certain to lose as they had thought the planet to be uninhabited and had therefore come with minimal weapons and armor of their own. As it turned out, however, the robots were not armed and recognized humans as their original builders and therefore masters even after all this time by themselves. There was something in their programming that had survived a thousand years of evolution of the artificial intelligence that made them subservient to people.

But, as Jake told his story, it became increasingly clear that this was no longer the case. Michael snuck occasional glances at Kalevala, but the robot showed no signs of being armed and the scenery outside continued to show the way to the spaceport. There was no hint of betrayal here.

“And it ain’t just guns,” Jake went on. “They’ve got lasers or some kind of energy weapon. Burnt straight through some of the materials we were building with. It’s some kind of tightly focused light. It burns, but it’s also got weight. Never seen anything like it.”

Michael hadn’t either. Which raised some disturbing questions about the level of inventiveness of the robots.

At length the window covers on the car went up and the dome light came on. Jake had a moment of panic, but Michael reassured him that it just meant they were near the spaceport and therefore near the hospital. Jake relaxed slightly and closed his eyes for the remainder of the journey.

Five minutes later they arrived at the spaceport and the doors slid open to reveal that they were too late. The entire facility was in flames and robots were still on site blasting anything that moved. Kalevala waited in the car as Michael peered out through the ever-present dust clouds at the battle unfolding, if you could call it a battle. The conflict was entirely one sided and the only reason it wasn’t over yet was because there was a small huddle of people hiding in the center of the spaceport, the one area that was actually well protected.

“What now?” Michael hissed. Jake opened his eyes.

“Now we die, I suppose,” he said.

Michael sat back in defeat and wondered what it would be like. He looked suspiciously at Kalevala who still sat, unmoving at the front of the car. The head of the robot turned and the two cold lenses of the eyes stared at him a moment. This is it, Michael thought. Whatever has gotten into them has gotten to Kalevala. The robot began to turn towards them and reached with one of its arms into a small compartment on its side. And then it stopped.

Michael closed his eyes and waited for the end to come. But instead, he became aware that the sounds of the battle outside had stopped. All was quiet. He risked opening his eyes a fraction, not wanting to see death as it approached, but all he saw was Kalevala sitting completely motionless with its claw gripping something it had taken from its side. Getting up carefully, Michael crossed the car on his hands and knees to the robot. Thinking it would start moving and kill him at any moment, he gingerly reached out and took the object from its unresisting hand. It was a small memory card. He turned to head back to the back to find his reference module to see what was on the card, but at that moment a head poked itself into the car.

“Any survivors in here?” it asked.

“Three,” Michael replied, looking at Jake. His chest was still moving, so he assumed he was still breathing. Then he looked at Fred. “Make that two,” Michael said. Fred had breathed his last at some point and nobody had noticed.

The newcomer helped Michael carry Jake away from the car and towards the hospital. The memory card lay in Michael’s pocket, although he had brought his reference module with them. Finding out what Kalevala wanted to tell them could wait.

“What happened?” Michael asked the newcomer. “And what’s your name?”

“Name’s Daniel,” the man said. “And as for what happened, your guess is as good as mine. One minute everything is fine, next minute they’re shooting at us, minute after that they’re all like statues. I’ll complain about one of those, but the other two are fine by me.”

As they crossed the area between where the car had parked itself and the hospital, Michael heard a buzzing noise and saw a small object flit by.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Dunno, didn’t see,” Daniel said.

Michael peered out into the bright sunshine and thought he spied it again. He reached up quickly and turned on the video on his glasses and zoomed in on the object. It was small, slender, and had four translucent wings that looked like they were made of gossamer. He didn’t recognize it at all, but was surprised to see it nonetheless because it was the common belief that there was no life like this left on Earth.

They reached the hospital, which already had a number of other casualties, and left Jake in triage to be assessed. Daniel went out to find other survivors.

“I’ll be right there,” Michael lied. Instead he crossed to the other side of the room and slipped through a door into a small closet where he hoped he would be undisturbed. First he

downloaded the video from his glasses into the reference module and had it do an image match on the object he had seen flying around. The reference module processed it briefly and then came back with a short entry.

“Dragonfly,” Michael read. He read the entire article, which only took about thirty seconds and had no real useful information. He then extracted the memory card from his pocket and plugged it into the reference module which began to read the contents. Before it could finish he heard a commotion coming from the next room.

“I just got the word!” the voice said. Michael willed the reference module to read the card faster. It was only a matter of time until he was discovered.

“They shut ‘em down from the command center. Not sure what caused ‘em to malfunction in the first place, but they found a controller in there. Couldn’t make ‘em stop what they were doing, some kind of override, but they managed to kill ‘em before they could kill us!”

There was a ragged cheer that came from the direction of the hospital. The injured had no energy and the healthy realized that all their robotic help had now gone. Also, the spaceport was in ruins; there would be no shuttle launches to Mars any time soon and none were expected for several months. The status of the communication equipment was unknown, but in their current position the best case scenario had help arriving somewhere between six and ten months from now, depending on how quickly Mars could cobble a shuttle together with their limited resources.

Michael watched the progress bar on the reference module crawl forward towards completion. And then it was done. He looked at the screen showing the readout and his heart sank. It was a complete report on the zombie, that mysterious word that Kalevala had mentioned before. In the file was all the information that the robot had given him before, the final proof he had wanted all this time, plus more. He greedily read further and then his heart sank. The natural consequence of all the particulate matter in the air, the dust, was that the zombies were infecting the newly arrived human population. They had gone to such lengths to decontaminate themselves, they hadn’t considered that they were being contaminated by the planet or by events that were a thousand years gone.

As he read this, Michael became aware of a silence outside his little closet and risked a peek. The rooms were empty. The injured, the living, the doctors, everyone had gone. He went a little further and then he heard it. It was as if it had been ingrained in the human consciousness. Instantly recognizable, it tore through the soul and chilled the blood. The moan of the zombie. He glanced back at the reference module in his hand. The robots had been designed to combat the zombies. They had been inert when humanity arrived because there were no zombies to fight, and so they resumed their original role of helping people. And then the dust had infected them all and the robots defaulted to an ancient part of their programming calling upon them to fight and kill zombies wherever they were, and suddenly they were everywhere.

Making his way outside, he knew not why, he saw the zombie horde beginning to reform itself. There were only a handful of living humans, but suddenly there were the undead for as far as the eye could see. A swarm of dragonflies hovered over the assembled walking corpses like heralds. One came over to Michael and sat there in midair, directly in front of his eyes. He looked into its compound eyes and listened to the buzz, a buzz that somehow seemed to welcome him.

He had breathed the dust. He looked down at his arms and saw the flesh beginning to rot and began also to feel the emptiness in his stomach, the desire to feed and he wondered if he would ever be able to eat enough.

His ears began to buzz in harmony with the dragonfly and, with his humanity and his consciousness fading, he glanced one last time at the reference module and saw a wire sticking out of it. On the screen was a picture of Kalevala, which struck him as strange in his delusion as the dust began to take over and eat his brain. Why would there be a picture of Kalevala on his reference module? It must be the memory card. And the wire. The wire emerged at a command from the module itself, but had he pushed that button?

His eyes began to glaze over, but a small part of himself that still understood pictures and movement saw the picture of Kalevala motion to the wire and then to its own arm. He absently, nearly mindlessly, reached over and grasped the wire in his free hand and then on an impulse plunged it into the rotting flesh of his arm.

A surge went through his body as the rogue software virus connected to his nervous system and began to eat away at the influence the dust was having on him. A thousand years of history raced through his mind and he saw the events leading up to mankind's abandonment of the planet.

The zombies had rushed Cyberitis Corporation because they recognized the threat the virus represented. It had come from an alien race, injected into the world's computers in the hopes that humanity would be able to save itself from the influence of the zombie. The zombies had come from the power of belief. The uprising had started at the height of the zombie's power in popular culture, and with so many minds believing it could happen...it did. The aliens wanted to stop the plague before it took over, but first humans had to inoculate themselves. They had to have something inside them that refuted the illogic of the walking dead.

Something like a computer program.

Michael stared at the dragonfly in front of him and watched it hover. And then he opened his mouth and emitted a sound that no zombie could ever duplicate. It was the opposite of the moan of despair and hunger. It was the scream of defiance and triumph and knowledge and victory.

With that scream the swarm of dragonflies in the area descended on him, covering him head to toe and knitting his flesh back together with strands of metal. When they were finished, he stood there gleaming in the sunlight, his flesh now fortified with small metal threads that gave him strength.

He rushed into the middle of the horde and plunged his hands into the carasses nearby, causing them to be flooded with the same computer virus that he had had injected into himself mere moments ago and as each person received the software, the dragonflies descended upon them as well.

As more and more humans received the treatment, they turned to the zombies and repeated the process, more and more of them being transformed exponentially until at last no zombies remained and there were only people. People combined with machines into a perfect hybrid.

Over the course of the next year, the only job these new humans did was to gather up all of the zombie dust and eject it into space. And when the next shuttle of humans arrived, they were safe, thanks to this effort.

Justine sat back and watched the others. They all exchanged glances with each other.

“You can’t be serious,” Andrew said.

“Believe what you want,” Justine said.

Derek gave her a funny look. “Believe?” he asked innocently. She gave him a look.

“So you’re trying to tell us that was true?” Sheila scoffed.

“It is true,” Justine said. “But you can do what you want.”

There were a few moments of silence. The sun was beginning to come up and there was a lot of yawning amongst the small group.

“Come on, it was a good story, but let’s get to bed,” Roy said.

It was generally agreed that that was a good idea. It took several of them quite some time to actually get to sleep. They kept hearing a buzzing sound that disturbed them more than they wanted to admit.

Justine lay down and pulled the blanket up to her chest, her arms lying above the covers. In the new dawn the light came down through the trees and caught her skin at just the right angle and she saw the glimmer and shimmer of the small metal threads woven into her skin. A gift from her father. She looked overhead at the morning sky and saw a dragonfly hovering just above her and smiled just before it flitted away.

Author's notes:

At the end of last year's novel I speculated as to whether I would be able to tie that idea in with another one that I'd had and turn the whole thing into a series. That didn't exactly work out. The only real similarity between last year's novel and this year's is the presence of zombies, which becomes extremely funny when you realize that my exposure to zombies consists of *Shaun of the Dead* and *World War Z*. I haven't seen any of the classic zombie movies.

I was extremely dissatisfied with this novel pretty much throughout the process. I think the idea is sound, but I needed (as usual) more planning, more research. Done correctly this could be a good hard science fiction/horror story. What I've done instead is more of a mishmash.

This, of course, is what editing is for. There are large chunks of this that are salvagable if I take the time, but history has proven that to be unlikely.

I think my descriptions are getting a little better and just need to be fleshed out a little more. I didn't have last year's problem of not knowing where my characters were. I just wish I'd grown a little more as a writer. This felt too much like last year's story.

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