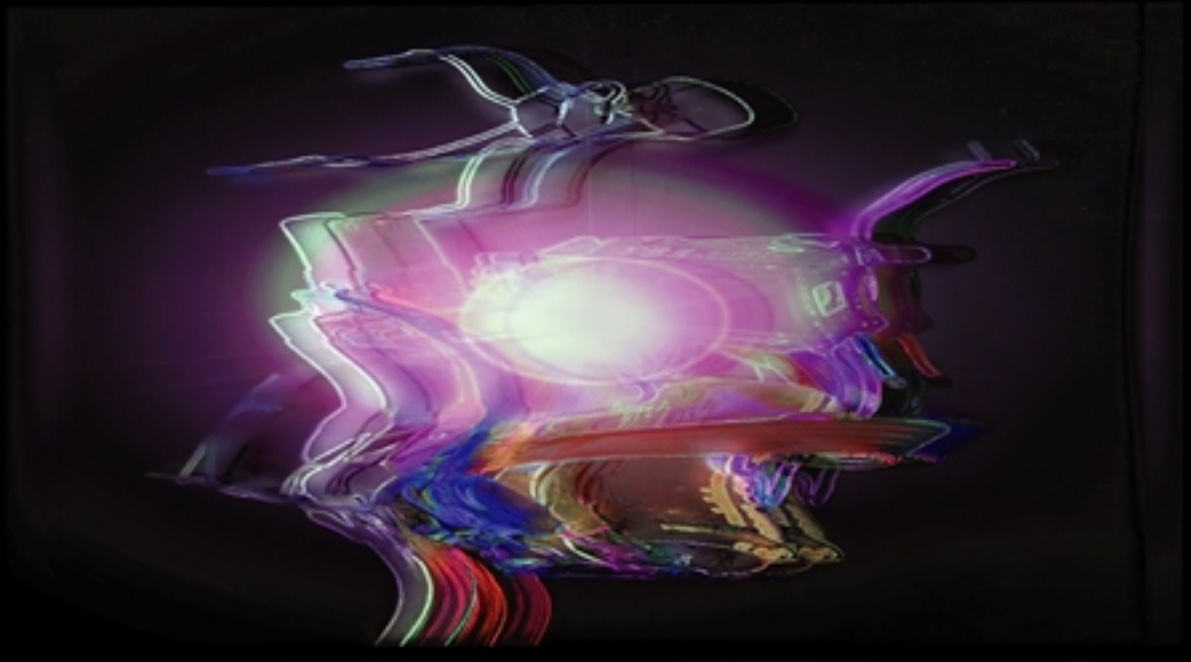


BOTS

When 22nd Century Technology Fails



MICHAEL I. OSTER

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Note: This is a fictional work. Any similarities to actual names and places are purely coincidental and unintended.

Prologue

7:21 am, En Route

The morning sun lit Carl's face with a bright orange hue as he sat in the back seat of the cab. He was much more seasoned now and it showed. He had a sense of purpose and a confidence that you could see in his eyes. Lester's coaching had really begun to pay off.

"I'm headed over to the industrial sector to deal with a malfunctioning Mark IV Security Unit. It's a new model, similar to the Law Enforcement version except that it doesn't have a lethal capable pulse weapon. But it does have all the armor plating and the strength of the LEO model. Plus, it can stun you into next week."

Carl glanced down at his pocket screen and then continued. "I've put down a few Mark IV's and they're difficult, especially when they're shooting. You've just got to make sure that you hit them hard and in the right place before they can do too much damage... or hit you." Carl paused. "We're not too far away now."

After a minute or so his attention went from his pocket screen back to looking outside. "I killed my first robot when I was seventeen. Dad was at work and Mom was making dinner. I was upstairs doing homework when I heard a huge crashing noise. Mom started screaming and I went downstairs to see what was wrong.

We had a 'HomeStarr 2100' which was real popular back then. Most of our friends and neighbors had the same model. Well ours just went nuts for some reason. It was destroying the kitchen and had managed to start a small grease fire. Mom and I tried to shut it down, but it was no use. I ended up using a baseball bat. I beat the hell out of it until it stopped."

Carl looked back down at his pocket screen. "Not long after that, I found out you could actually make a living putting down malfunctioning robots. I took a course and got a license. I've been doing this ever since."

"What was the course like?" Lester asked from the front passenger seat.

"The course? Well, it covered a lot. First we learned about various robot types and what they were made to do. We went over their specs, capabilities and vulnerabilities. We learned to properly identify a malfunctioning robot. After that it was weapons training. Everything from the basics of operating primitive firearms to using today's advanced pulse weapons systems. Then, we moved to strategies and tactics. Finally, we had intensive hands-on training and weapons proficiency drills in the simulator. We even learned some basic unarmed hand to hand combat techniques, though I've never found them useful against robots. The course lasted about six months."

Lester followed with another question, "What exactly does a robot do when it's malfunctioning?"

"There are so many different kinds of robots. Makes and models all over the place. They're capable of so many things and they do many different jobs. But when they malfunction, it goes down pretty much the same way. They lose complete control to put it bluntly.

All their motor skills and decision making go out the window. That means that they can cause a lot of damage, even hurt or kill people. Not on purpose, they're just like unguided spastic machinery at that point. They also leak fluids and babble incoherently. Their vocal synthesis chips go crazy too. You can't communicate with them and you can't shut them down either. You're pretty much stuck with destroying them as quickly as possible. It's really the best way."

The cab slowed and arrived at the destination. "Time to get to work."

Chapter 1

ONE YEAR EARLIER - 5:33 pm, Smiley's Bar

They've got some old movie up on the telescreen, though I admit I'm just barely paying attention. I'm really more interested in being left alone and enjoying my drink. But between that, the dim lights and the wash of crappy background music, I'm finding it hard not to watch. Besides, this is only my first of what I hope will be many more drinks and a long, boring night.

Well, back to the shitty movie. It's one of those low budget, old classics where the characters are shallow but the chicks have short skirts and tight tops. I can handle that. The movie was supposed to take place in the future, a time where technology was advanced and robots were everywhere. There was a civilization where people and robots coexisted in peaceful, beneficial lives.

Were people a hundred years ago really that stupid? What the hell do they know anyway? Yes, it's only a movie. But if they really knew what the future was like, they'd probably just go back to huffing gasoline or doing whatever bored fucks did back then. I'll tell them this: if their future is anything like my present, it probably going to suck ass.

"Here's to you not inventing a time machine and coming here," I said as I toasted the telescreen. Nobody seemed to notice, but then I'm pretty sure that I had the bar all to myself. Well at least that robot bartender is here to keep me company, though he was doing a shitty job at it. And besides, his drinks were a little weak. Nevertheless, I ordered another...just because I had nothing else to do anyway.

I don't know if I mentioned this or not, but I hate robots. And not just because they get on my nerves. Actually, it's because they really get on my nerves. Whenever I see one, I feel like I'm looking at the pinnacle of stupidity. I mean, they all look some moron got drunk and drew up some grade-school level blueprints which then got manufactured into these pieces of garbage. No matter what model they were or what they were made to do, they looked like they were the bastard offsprings of circus clowns and 1960's era kitchen appliances.

But there's a somewhat intelligent reason for the way they look. It goes back about 50 years or so. At that time, technology had evolved to the point that we could create a robot that was almost indistinguishable from a living human. And some companies actually did. Problem was, those robots were too 'human-like' and they basically creeped people out. Nobody wanted to own one or even interact with one of these things. People were paranoid because they couldn't tell human from robot. Orders never materialized and the companies that made them soon went bankrupt.

Basically, demand dictated the design development of robots over these last few

decades and they evolved accordingly. So the robot models that humans were comfortable with were the ones that got made. Simple as that. Hell, even the Japanese were on board with this one. Their robots looked just as moronic as everyone else's.

See, those idiots in that old movie might be looking forward to robots being everywhere and to cheap intergalactic space travel and all, but they're in for a rude awakening. Actually, it's probably their grandkids that will be in for it. Still, there's a reason why I carry a pulse gun everywhere I go no matter how safe they tell me it is.

Perfect example is my bartender. At least it's *my* bartender now, because I'm the only living soul in here. Anyway, I'm looking at about 200 pounds of synthetic shit, you know, circuits, wires, chips, servos, alloy, paint, and whatever else goes into one of these heaps of garbage and I wondering why the hell I don't waste this thing right now. Actually, I do know why. Because first, I need another drink, and second, there are stiff penalties for destroying someone else's property without a good reason.

The front door to the bar opens and a large, blinding shaft of light disrupts my thoughts. I had no idea it was still daylight outside. I guess I'm due for another drink.

Chapter 2

Rise of the "Patterson-Jones" Code

The story, as I remember, goes something like this.... About 30 years ago, late one night in an average college dorm, a couple of engineering students were bored, stoned and drunk or whatever. One gets the bright idea to create a universal algorithm that can be easily uploaded to just about any kind of robot which will cause the unit to instantly malfunction. Though it is believed that their initial idea was harmless in nature, things didn't work out like that.

Yes, they were successful in creating and uploading the code to one of the dorm's maintenance robots. And, yes, the unit began to malfunction in an almost comical way. It started blabbering a synthetic sounding gibberish and limping around in circles while flailing its arms uncontrollably. After a few minutes the robot's vocal noise and body actions became even more exaggerated as it bumped into furniture and struck the walls. The unit also started to leak oil. It quickly created a mess, knocking over chairs, lamps and and then just about everything that wan't bolted to the floor.

The noise attracted the attention of the other residents on the floor who gathered to see what was happening. What was at first a funny curiosity quickly escalated into a serious problem as the malfunctioning robot errantly moved from room to room destroying everything in its path.

I guess the students forgot something before they uploaded their prized code into the victim robot and that was this: robots communicate with other robots wirelessly. That's how they're able to work together so quickly and efficiently. It's so rudimentary and every grade-school aged kid knows it. But, these stoned geniuses must have overlooked that fact. Well, that's how the virus was later spread from one robot to another.

What made things worse was that the code was very sophisticated. Once introduced to a new host, it immediately overrode all emergency shutdowns of the infected robot. Then it would adapt to and outsmart any attempted software fixes. Once comfortable in its new home the code would then concentrate on locating other robots to invade. This left very few options other than destroying the unit before the code could be passed on to other bots.

Chapter 3

It's Not Usually This Easy

It's a sound I instantly recognized. Even through the haze of my fifth drink, I can easily make it out. I knew what it was before I turned and saw it. Another robot. From the looks of it, it's an older model, less sophisticated than my bartender unit. And, its got a problem. The erratic movements and synthetic blabbering are a dead giveaway. It's obviously malfunctioning. The first thing I want do is disintegrate the bastard. Hell, that's what I get paid to do. But the law says I have to wait for the authorities to contact me and then deal with it.

Fine, I'll just order another drink and use the alcohol to help tune it out. Meanwhile that obsolete wreck is staggering all over the place making all kinds of noise gibberish that nobody can understand. It's stumbling across chairs and breaking things. And now it's leaking oil. Exactly what a malfunction would do, but it's not my problem yet and I have to remember that. So I did exactly what I should do in a situation like this: I turned away and ordered another drink.

But the sound is getting louder and that thing is getting closer. I look back and see that it's practically trashed the place and now, it's headed over to me. Great. Then it does something I didn't expect. It sits down on the stool next to me. "Fuck, they never make it this easy", I thought.

I tried to ignore it, you know, and not look at the thing. Maybe it would go away. Then it let out the loudest series of ear-bleeding synthetic chirps, squawks and garbles I've ever heard. As it did that, oil started flowing, not leaking, it was literally flowing from all its ports. I'd had enough of this. Any sane person would have had enough of this.

I slid my hand into my jacket pocket and carefully pulled out my pulse gun, making sure the bot couldn't see it. I made a quick aim, though at this range, I was all but guaranteed a clean hit. Then, with a sense of pride, I pulled the trigger. There was a bright flash of green light and a deep, percussive crack. That was it. I blasted that thing right back to wherever the hell it came from.

Not much was left of that pathetic wreck except for some splattered synthetics, fried circuit boards, a servo or two and a pool of burning oil. "Well at least there's that." I thought. Not like I even knew what the hell it meant. "Bartender. Another!", I said in a proud voice.

Chapter 4

They Like Glitchy Robots

"Patterson-Jones" is what they called it. Named after its creators, the code quickly transmitted from robot to robot. The bots may have been created for a variety of purposes but the results were the same: a complete malfunction. Service bots, pleasure bots, construction bots, maintenance bots, every damn bot that got infected went apeshit! And when bots went apeshit, things got broken and people got hurt.

Think about it. Robots were such a part of everyday life, even back then. They drove people around. They fixed things. They cleaned things. They served food. They were everywhere. Now what do you think happens when those robots malfunction while performing their programmed tasks?

I mean, imagine for a minute that you're this poor soul. Let's call him "Ralph". Ralph is your typical middle aged professional and right now he's getting a massage from his favorite massage bot. Just before Ralph has his 'happy ending' the massage bot receives a wireless dose of the "Patterson-Jones" virus. Now Ralph is really screwed because his dick is stuck in the pleasure port of that malfunctioning robot. It starts blabbering, flailing and limping about all with Ralph still stuck in it. Then things really get bad. Get the picture?

Think about it. Nanny bots ripping babies to shreds. Catastrophic multiple hover car accidents as robot drivers simultaneously malfunction. Firefighting bots letting flames rage or actually starting and feeding fires. Medical bots rupturing rectums during prostate exams. Anything and everything robot related went to shit. Property damage was widespread and ordinary life suddenly became very dangerous.

Situations like this played out all over the country, then globally and eventually off-planet. "Patterson-Jones" was so simple and elegant that it easily spread from robot to robot and there was no way to stop it. Oh, and by the way, the creators of the virus. Well, they got expelled from college and had to pay for the damages the original infected robot caused. Rumor has it that they were later hired as military contractors. Typical.

Chapter 5

I'll Just Pay the Fine

The authorities arrived, late as usual, to a bar covered with bits of blasted robot. The humid air smelled of burnt synthetics and stale beer. A thin haze slowly lifted up to the ceiling. I already had my pocket screen out, ready to make a transfer. You know, they fine people for unauthorized destruction of private property. It was worth it, though. I smiled and ordered another drink.

A quick scan of one of the larger fragments revealed that this robot was close to 50 years old and just a common "helper bot". They were good for light cleaning, taking out the trash, walking the dog, telling stories to the kids. You know, basic things. That model was generally reliable and very popular a little over a generation ago. They were kind of status symbols in their time. Nowadays you can get them for almost nothing in pawn shops and at flea markets.

So I got my slap on the wrist and brief lecture from the authorities on when I could legally waste a bot. Then I went back to my liquid dinner.

Chapter 6

7:34 pm, 1244 Oak Leaf Drive

I was about to finish my seventh drink when my pocket screen started beeping. It was a job that would make up for the fine I just paid and then some. The details were pretty typical with a hysterical housewife and a robot going crazy. So I took a cab and headed out to suburbia.

I arrived to a textbook scenario: Housewife in Distress. Almost subconsciously, I had my pocket screen out ready for this nice lady's fingerprint which acknowledged that she read the terms and agreed to my waiver and payment. Funny thing is, they hardly ever read the waiver. But, basically it gets me off the hook for any damages related to doing my job.

A frantic Ms. Ward, pressed her finger on my pocket screen and then proceeded to give me directions to the malfunctioning robot. Like I needed directions. I just do what I always do: follow the noise and the damage path and it takes me right to the malfunctioning son of a bitch.

My eyes and ears led me upstairs to the kids' playroom. Inside was violently thrashing newer model service bot. It was small and fast, with six hook arms and about the size of a beagle. These models were popular with the upwardly mobile families who had small children. You know, a machine that did the work, but also something that the kids could play with. Anyway, this one had gone berserk and made one hell of a mess. There were broken toys, holes punched in the walls, and smashed furniture everywhere. It also exhibited the other telltale signs of a malfunction: leaking oil and making a vocal racket that nobody could understand.

I pulled out my pulse gun and carefully aimed at the flailing pile of garbage then pulled the trigger. Missed! That damn thing jerked right out of the path of my blast. The energy pulse blew a huge hole in the wall and that's exactly where that hunk of shit bolted. My buzz must have affected my aim. Sometimes it happens, especially when I've been drinking heavily. Whatever. I followed that little bastard through the smoldering hole into one of the kids' bedrooms where it started tearing up the bunk beds as if nothing had happened.

Again I aimed and pulled the trigger. Bullseye! I blasted that little shit bucket right back to hell. It looked like a small bomb had exploded. Because of the robot's small size and the power my pulse gun, there wasn't much left of it except for some small shards of metal and bits of burning wire, which were pretty evenly scattered across far end of the bedroom.

The carpet was singed and one of the beds was smoldering, but that wasn't my

problem. When Ms. Ward appeared upstairs she was sobbing. She was saying something about how the mess I made was worse than the robot and asking who was going to clean it up. Hell, it's not my problem. I just smiled, thanked her for her business and wished her a nice day. Outside the Ward's house a small crowd had gathered. "Nothing to see here," I muttered as I passed them. Then, I got into my cab and headed home.

Chapter 7

They're Just Like Family

Back at the Shithole Palace. It sucks, but it's my home and it's all I've got. I set my pulse gun down on the coffee table, which in reality was just an old crate, then I grabbed a couple of cold ones. I sat down and fired up the telescreen. Great, a story on robots and the "Patterson-Jones" virus. How novel. This was like most other stories: a feel-good, bleeding-heart commentary on how we should pity the poor infected, malfunctioning robots.

They were trying to make the point about how it wasn't the robots' fault and that we really should blame people for all the damage and injury. Of course, they suggested rehabilitation for the malfunctioning bastards instead of simply destroying them. Funny, I bet none of those robot-huggers ever faced down a schizophrenic Mark II Security Unit before.

But most people didn't think of robots like I did. They viewed them as pets or even parts of the family. They interacted with bots as if they were lifeforms with personalities and some people even cherished them. It was pathetic, really, how most people said they couldn't live without their robots.

Then the story went into the history of robot communications. It showed how they went from tethered to wireless and how it was supposed to increase the efficiency between bots. But what it really did was provide an obvious entry point for the human created virus. Again, it was 'humanity's fault'.

I could handle about five minutes of that garbage before I switched over to some "B" grade porn and fell asleep.

Chapter 8

11.38 am, Summerland High School

The simultaneous beeping of my telescreen and pocket screen woke me up. It was about 11am and an emergency message flashed across both devices. I splashed some water on my face, grabbed my pulse gun and headed out the door. Because this was a government job, it barely left me with anything after I paid the cab fare. The authorities always got generously reduced rates for their contracts and that's just the way it was. At least I got to enjoy the thrill of blasting the hell out of one of those malfunctions. Always look at the bright side and glass half full. Shit, whatever kept me going.

Summerland High School was on lockdown and they had initiated an emergency shutdown of all campus robots. It was standard procedure. But "Patterson-Jones" was made to override forced shutdowns once it was inside a bot. However, it did keep the virus from spreading to any nearby bots. The assistant principal met me as soon as I set foot out of the cab. He started to give me directions, but I really didn't need any. My experience told me to just follow the fresh trail of destruction so that's what I did.

As usual, it wasn't hard to find. There was the obvious tornado-like path of damage cut through the school. The halls were void of students. There were rows of trashed lockers, books and papers everywhere, broken glass and a stream of leaked oil. It didn't take a rocket scientist to track this fucker down. As I got closer, the noise got louder and I found it in the girls' bathroom in "C" Hall.

It was a cafeteria bot and it was even wearing an apron. How cute. Normally, its job kept it busy preparing food and serving the students. During off hours, it would be cleaning tables and mopping floors. Cafeteria bots were programmed to be pleasant and friendly, often making brief conversations with the students. But this one was seriously going apeshit.

It had virtually destroyed the bathroom. It wrecked the sinks and stalls, and smashed the toilets to pieces. Mirrors were shattered. Water was spraying in all directions from newly broken pipes. The sound of the spraying water had all but covered up the synthetic gurgling made by the malfunctioning bot, though I could easily make out the oil running down its legs.

I didn't hesitate in putting that pile of shit down. I pulled out my pulse gun, quickly aimed and fired. The bright green light reflected off the thousands of scattered shards of mirror glass and briefly the bathroom lit up like one of those antique discos I'd seen in the movies. A direct hit from the energy blast sent the malfunctioning bot backwards against the tile wall with an unbelievable force. The bot instantly blew to pieces along with a good part of the wall behind it. "Hell yes!!!", I shouted. I felt a huge smile on my face and an upwelling of pride in my gut. Another job well done.

Chapter 9

5:28 pm, Sun Lake Towers, 12th Floor

I guess my dry spell may be ending soon as this is my second call of the day. Still internally gloating over my last kill, I'm headed towards the rough side of town for another job. Again, it's a government contract job but at least I get to vaporize something.

Sun Lake Towers is a subsidized housing project that's been around since before my Grandfather's day. It was pretty run down even back then and by some miracle, I guess, the complex is still standing. Hell the whole facility looks like a pack of malfunctions ransacked it and I haven't even seen the inside yet.

I make it up to the 12th floor and am greeted, if you can call it that, by a 300 plus pound screaming woman. For a brief second, I thought that she was the malfunction and I started to reach for my pulse gun. But no, she's the client. Well, she's shrieking on about how this thing is tearing up her home and scaring her babies and how I have to do something now. Well, that's what I'm here for.

So my instincts kick in and I follow the noise which leads me right to her apartment. Because the whole floor, I mean, building was such a wreck, I couldn't tell robot damage from the normal decor. That's where my ears paid off. Anyway, I entered her apartment and found a place that made my Shithole Palace look like a luxury estate. The smell was like a combination of a thousand rancid feet and a giant festering ass. It was fucking horrendous. It took everything I had not to puke up the contents of my stomach all over the place. The malfunctioning bot was making a loud racket as it was further destroying an apartment that was basically already destroyed.

The culprit was one of those ancients similar to the unit I disintegrated in the bar yesterday. In other words, it was a 'flea market special' that really wasn't good for anything. It was in what I guessed was the master bedroom and it was thrashing in the corner, gurgling and leaking oil. It was an easy shot and I was appreciative of that because I really wanted to get the hell out of there quick.

I pulled the trigger and blasted that bot to machine heaven which was certainly better than anything this apartment had to offer. Unfortunately, the energy blast caused a lot of collateral damage. Probably because of the thin walls and overall deterioration of the surrounding structure. Anything that wasn't nailed down went flying. There was a row of large smoldering holes through the walls that went into and out of the next unit and so on. I looked in and saw smoke rising and plaster falling from the ceiling in the adjacent apartment and then quickly ducked back. A thick haze started to fill the room. Time to go.

My client was now furious with me because of all the new damage. I was surprised that

she could actually tell the difference. But, whatever, she was screaming so loud that it attracted other residents. Great, so instead of one 300 plus pound screaming woman, I had five, maybe six or eight of them all in my face. Hell, it was louder than when that damn robot was malfunctioning. The only thing that kept me from being attacked by the residents of the 12th floor was the fact that I had a pulse gun and I knew how to use it. The smoldering evidence in the form of molten robot remains and blast holes in the walls were proof enough of that.

Chapter 10

8:12 am Corner of Broadway and 18th

I fucking hate these early calls. I'm still half-buzzed and my head is pounding. And, I think I have to take a shit. The location isn't that far from my place so I arrived pretty quickly after getting the call. It's a construction site that looks like they're building an office complex or something. About a dozen guys with hard hats are standing around. Some are holding shovels in 'defensive' postures for lack of a better description.

I'm greeted by the foreman who tells me they've got a bot on the inside that's gone insane. It's breaking a lot of stuff. Oh, and it's big. Very big. From the sounds echoing all around us, I could tell that he wasn't exaggerating. He also informs me that all his men are out so I don't need to worry about hitting any 'friendlies'. Good to know.

I'm feeling very nervous as I make my way onto the site. Also, I definitely have to take a shit. The sounds of destruction are much louder now and they're a bit different from what I'm used to. These are really big sounds. All I have to do now is just follow my ears. I continue on maybe a minute or so through this labyrinth of half-built whatever as the sounds get much louder. I'm getting closer and more nervous with each step.

I'm almost there now. My ears are hurting from the overwhelming noise and I can see flashes of light from around the next corner. I cautiously continue on. This is really bad. Just then, I get a glance of the hugest fucking construction robot I've ever seen in my life - or even read about. Seriously, this thing is the size of a small house and yes, it's got a bad case of the "Patterson-Jones" bug. It's smashing everything in its path and the flashes of light are from plasma torches that I guess it uses to cut steel. It's flailing its huge arms erratically as it randomly limps forward continuing on its destructive path.

I must be out of my mind because there's no way in hell my pulse gun will deliver enough punch to take this thing out with a single shot. Nevertheless, this is what I get paid for. My hand was shaking as I grabbed my gun. I inched closer to the bot as it continued to malfunction and carve out a path towards the outer edge of the building. I started to feel numb and my vision became tunnel like. It was 'go time'.

I squeezed off a pulse from my nickel plated weapon. A flash of green light and a percussive blast interrupted the giant bot's own generated noise. Boom! Direct hit on the bottom left of the bot's body. It's smoking and on fire, but still flailing hard. I'm so focused that I don't even notice parts of the walls collapsing around me. I fire again. A hit, but it's still going. Now it turns to me. Oil is leaking out of various ports and joints on the robot. It starts to growl, though I can't tell if it's a synthetic vocal sound or if it's the internal structural support of the bot failing.

I fire a third shot and the robot staggers back. More fires are breaking out on the bot

and in the surrounding structure. I squeeze off three more quick shots. Two hit the robot. The third went off to the right and blasted out what was left of a support wall. The entire right side of the structure collapsed onto the robot and set off a chain reaction.

I start running as fast as I can to get my ass out of there. Walls and supports are falling like dominos and fires begin to engulf what's left of the building. Underneath it all, a moderately damaged, malfunctioning construction robot the size of a small house is continuing to pound away. As I make it out, I see the crowd of workers looking at the mass of destruction behind me. I turn back and see a plume of black smoke rising high into the air. "I'm not done yet," I gasped.

"The authorities will be here in a few minutes," the foreman calls out to me.

"We don't have a few minutes," I shout back as I check my pulse gun. A second or two later, the bot literally explodes its way out of the burning heap that was once a half-built office complex. The noise was deafening. Chunks of concrete and pieces of metal come raining down.

The bot was still malfunctioning as it thrashed uncontrollably, its parts partially on fire. The workers quickly scattered and I was instantly alone. Well, it was just me and this huge rabid mass of mechanized terror! I aimed and blasted off another volley of shots. I was so nervous, I didn't know exactly how many times I fired. They were hits, I think because the smoke and dust were now obscuring my view. But I did see the robot buckle back at least once.

It's coming towards me now. Fuck! I fire again. A hit, but it's still coming. Again I squeeze the trigger. Nothing. I slap the gun. Squeeze. Nothing! Damn it I'm out! I've never emptied my gun on any single robot, ever! I eject the spent energy cartridge and fumble for my spare as I back peddle away from the bot.

It's still coming towards me. I'm backing away but I can see that it's heavily damaged. A few more hits should do it. But what the hell do I know, I've never tackled anything this big before. I insert a fresh cartridge and charge my gun. I aim and then quickly fire as the robot closes ground. Boom! Two hits and it's staggering even worse than before. Thick black smoke is belching from most of the bot's ports and fire is burning on it's extremities. "Die bastard!" I scream as I pull the trigger as fast as I can. My pulse gun blasts out all the power that was left in it. Eight hits. Ten hits. I don't know. But I blasted that fucker right back to mechanized hell or wherever it came from. I completely destroyed that giant bastard. All that was left was a heaping pile of incinerated metal and a toxic plume of black smoke.

I felt a burning sensation in my right hand and reflexively dropped my weapon. It had overheated from rapid firing and was pretty much useless at this point. That's when the authorities arrived, late as usual.

I filed my report and fortunately was not liable for any of the damages, thanks to my

waiver. But destroying this robot left one hell of a mess. By the time it was over, close to an entire city block had burned. Now I needed a new gun and I still had to shit.

Chapter 11

A Bigger Gun

My pulse gun was toast. Most of its sensitive internal components were melted during my battle with that giant construction bastard. It was going to cost me far more to repair the gun than it was worth. Besides, this last incident had taught me one thing which was that I needed a bigger gun, ASAP.

I took a quick trip down to the local gun store and browsed their selection. I only had two requirements in a weapon. It had to be concealable and it had to pack a massive punch.

The salesman showed me several and I ended up leaving with one that I couldn't wait to use. It was a little bit larger than my old gun, but many times more powerful. In fact, it was the most powerful handgun a civilian could own. The new gun was flat black in appearance and had multiple blast settings. I thought about how much easier my last job would have been if I had this baby with me. Well, there's always the next victim.

I spent the next week fantasizing over and over about my blasting the living hell out of just about every model of robot ever made. Unfortunately, I was going to have to wait a while to disintegrate my next bot. I didn't get another call for what seemed like forever. Damn, I need to get a life.

Chapter 12

3:25 pm, 7554 West Century Drive, Burger Burgers

Finally, a call flashed on my pocket screen. Malfunction in progress at a fast food joint. I know the place, Burger Burgers. I've eaten there many times so I'm familiar with the layout. Of course by the time I get there it's already been evacuated. No customers, but a couple of employees remain close by. The afternoon manager meets me and quickly fingerprints my screen. I know he didn't read the waiver, hardly any of them ever do. But in all fairness, I'm sure he just wanted to be rid of this bot quickly so he could get back to serving customers.

My experienced eyes and ears led me to the kitchen where I saw a cook bot laying waste to whatever the hell was back there. It was almost funny. Food products were flying everywhere, condiments spattered on every surface and the vocal gabber the robot was making sounded kind of comical. Then the bot went into some sort of an overload rage. Time to use my new gun.

I really wasn't thinking about the consequences when I set my pulse gun to "MAX". I wanted to see what it could do, and I guess that was a bit irresponsible on my part. Whatever. I aimed and fired. The green light from the gun was blinding and the explosive concussion just about made my ears bleed. "Holy shit", I thought.

All I saw was smoke and all I heard was a squelchy ringing sound. It took about a minute or so for things to settle. Turns out I blasted the living fuck out of everything. More like I disintegrated everything. I mean, the entire kitchen and back part of the restaurant was gone. Only rubble and dust remained from about knee level down. Nothing else was left. No walls. No roof. No robot.

I turned and made my way out of what used to be Burger Burgers. The manager was screaming something at me but my ears were ringing so badly from the blast that I couldn't understand what he was saying. I walked right past him and smiled. Job well done, though it would probably be a good idea that I take a few minutes and read the manual for my new gun.

Chapter 13

11:45 pm, Police Station, Precinct 5

The great thing about my job is that I'm one of a very few people who are licensed to destroy malfunctioning robots. Even the authorities can't put one down. They have to rely on someone like me. So, no, I wasn't surprised at all to get a call from the police who were having a problem with one of their bots.

As soon as I get to the station a desk sergeant is there to meet me. He starts with the usual instructions and layout, but I had to interrupt him. I can clearly hear what's going on and I want to get to this robot quickly. Besides, this is a government job and I'm going to be lucky to break even on this gig.

As I head back, I pass several 'boys in blue'. I can hear the sounds of the malfunctioning robot further down the hall. Sure enough, it's a maintenance bot that's gone crazy. It looks like it was mopping the floors then just went berserk. Shouldn't be a big deal as it hasn't really damaged much yet.

I pulled my gun and made sure it was on the lowest setting then aimed and squeezed the trigger. The blast was much more subdued this time, but it was still enough to take care of the job. I blew that bastard into several pieces and laughed as the bot's body parts skidded down the hall. "What a work of art," I said to myself as I looked proudly at my new gun. Case closed.

Chapter 14

1:30 am, Nudie Bar

I decided to treat myself, so I stopped at a nearby nudie bar. The beer was cold and the girls were lukewarm. Just what I needed to get my mind off of things. Seeing naked women pole dance to shitty music really put things into perspective. I mean, here I was at the top of my game, but life just seemed to be passing me by.

Most men my age were married and had grown kids. Some even had baby grandkids. Hell, many of them were probably living the dream and ready to retire to the tropics. Suckers.

And I'm the guy that gets to vaporize the robots that break their shit. It could be worse, though. I could be living in Sun Lake Towers with those screaming fat tubs of filth. But by my fifth beer the girls began to look hotter and the shitty music began to sound a little better. One of the bar bots brings me another beer and all i can think is that I'd love to disintegrate the hell out of it. Just because. Maybe I should get a dog.

Chapter 15

3:17 am, State University, (Name Withheld) Sorority House

I've never been to college before, so there's a first time for everything. The yard of (Name Withheld) sorority house had been roped off by university police and the fire department was also present. Good, they're playing it safe. I'm greeted by one of the many beautiful, but hysterical female resident students. She kept repeating, "Sarah's trapped, you've gotta help!" That's what I'm here for. By the way, any one of these girls could easily qualify for the position of my "future-ex". They were half my age and very hot.

The girls were going nuts, shouting at me where to go and saying "She's trapped, she's trapped". Again, with the directions. Like I need that, really. The noise was so obvious and loud, I just had to follow my ears. Upstairs, third floor, fifth room on the right. I knocked, but the door is locked. I can hear female screams for help and the usual sounds of a malfunctioning robot's rampage. Three kicks and I've got the door open. It's a typical single-person dorm room. Small, bright and decorated with lots of girly stuff. Now it's in a shambles.

This time I'm dealing with a Class II pleasure bot. Late model, next generation technology, it features 4 fully rotating smooth-servo arms and wide gripping tracks for extra support. Back in the day we called these 'Mother's Little Helpers'. This particular one is a luxury unit with special add-ons that only rich girls can afford. I have a problem, though. The robot's got Sarah pinned in a corner with only a bed sheet between her and it. It's midsection is spinning and it's blindly thrusting its appendages in all directions. Because it's so close to her I can't get a clean shot. And between the screaming, the bot's blabbering, and my waning buzz, I'm short on patience.

So I started kicking the hell out of that high-rent bucket of garbage. I'm full-power, all out kicking the robot as Sarah screams. The bot is continuing to malfunction as it lands several unguided arm blows to both me and her. Finally, after a dozen or so kicks I get the machine to move to the middle of the room. I aim my gun and fire twice on the lowest setting. Flashes of green light, a couple of percussive cracks and it's all over. That little metal tub of shit is now laying in several sputtering, smoking pieces across the floor.

Sarah's in shock, I guess, because she doesn't seem to realize that she's dropped her sheet. She's got nothing on! Holy fuck! I tried to act like a gentleman by looking down at the dead bot and not at her naked body. I aimed my gun at the largest chunk of twitching metal and fired again. Not that I needed to, I just wanted to show off a little to my 'future-ex'. "Got to be sure," I candidly said to Sarah as I raised my left eyebrow. Then I turned and left the room. I know, I'm a classy guy.

Chapter 16

9:02 am, Happy Playground Day Care

I'm pretty sure I was dreaming about Sarah when unfortunately, my telescreen's beeping woke me up. I think I was playing the part of her pleasure bot because.... Well now that's over. But really, it wouldn't work between us anyway. We're just from two different worlds. She's rich, young and gorgeous and I'm.... Meanwhile I had business to take care of. I splashed some water on my face and was on my way.

Happy Playground Day Care was about 10 miles from my 'Shithole Palace'. I arrived and found kids and staff running everywhere. It was complete madness. There were several nanny bots on the grounds every one of which seemed to be in some state of malfunction. The bots were flailing about, throwing toys and children all over. I started screaming at the staff to get the kids out of the way. The fewer 'friendlies' the better. I pulled out my pulse gun, punched in the lowest setting and began to chase one of the nanny bots.

I picked one that didn't have a child in its grasp. I aimed, and then fired. A partial hit, but enough to take it out of action temporarily. I turned to the right and saw two other bots each gripping and pulling apart on the same child. The kid was of course shrieking bloody murder and I really don't blame him. I fired at the left bot and singed its side. But it still held on. I shot again, and this time I hit a more sensitive spot and the bot let go. Now the other robot was free to drag the kid across the ground.

I focused on that bot and aimed as far away from the kid as I could. The shot grazed the back part of the bot which just ignored me. So I chased the bastard down and kicked it right in the head. It still wouldn't let go of the child. I aimed again, and this time I was so close that I blew its glitching head right off. The rest of the robot's body was intact and it still had a grip on the child, but at least it couldn't hurt him anymore.

There was still one more bot left and it was smashing itself against the jungle gym. Several kids had climbed up to get out of reach so they weren't in any immediate danger, but they were scared nevertheless. This was a pretty easy shot. I moved in for a close-up and pulled the trigger just inches away from the back of the robot. That was it. I blasted the hell out of that bot launching fragments of it across the playground.

I went back to each one of the injured bots and finished them off. Four kills in 5 minutes. Not a bad show. I guess the children weren't all that impressed because they were just milling about and sobbing. Then, behind me, another nanny bot busted its way out of the school. Kids started screaming and running again. I had a brief thought of, "Why the hell didn't you tell me there was another?", but this was no time for questions.

I checked my gun and raised its power setting, aimed and fired at the bot. Fucking bullseye! I blasted that shiny waste of metal backwards into the room it came from. Fire

and smoke started billowing from the windows. Kids were still panicking. "Are there any more? Any more?" I asked to the nearest staffer. "I don't think so." she replied. "Fire department's on the way", she added.

Quickly, I had her fingerprint my pocket screen. Usually I have the clients do that before the job, but this was an emergency and children were in danger. No time for formalities. Good thing there wasn't too much collateral damage.

Chapter 17

11:44 am, Police Station, Precinct 5

I knew this place seemed familiar. Hell, I was just here. Different shift, and a different desk sergeant meets me. He starts to brief me and give me directions. From the sound of it, this thing's pretty big. Not 'construction bot from hell' big, but definitely bigger than what I just disintegrated here some twelve hours ago.

Then he hits me with the bad news. They have a Mark IV Law Enforcement Unit that's gone to shit. Probably picked up the bug from that mopper I wasted last night. Whatever. I've got major problems. The Mark IV is armor plated and armed with a variable output pulse cannon. It stands over seven feet tall and weighs about 800 pounds. And just as the sergeant is giving me those details, we hear the first cannon blast. That explosion triggers an evacuation alarm and now the 'boys in blue' are moving swiftly towards the front exit. No escape for me, however, as I've got a job to do and am pretty much screwed. The sergeant then politely leaves me to my business.

I've never put down a Mark IV before. I don't know of anyone who has. These things are supposed to be immune to "Patterson-Jones" and similar codes, but I guess this one didn't get the memo. Glad I have my new gun.

I check my weapon and set the output to "MAX". Then I just follow the sounds. This is going to be one hell of a show. As I weave my way down the halls of law enforcement central, I'm reminded of the construction site and how I almost lost my ass. As I got closer, the sounds got louder. Soon after, I found it.

The Mark IV was in the transport bay violently destroying police hover cars, armored vehicles and other miscellaneous LEO equipment. There was smoke and fire everywhere. It was randomly firing unaimed energy pulses into the floor and ceiling. Also, it was leaking oil. This robot was definitely under the influence of a malicious code and if I live through this, we'll probably have a new case study.

I didn't have a lot of time as the smoke and fires were growing fast. The metal beast was unleashing an all-out mechanized terror and was now about to break through the back wall to the outside world. I aimed and fired my 'work of art'. It emitted a blinding green light and lashed out with an explosion that was insanely loud, but barely audible over the destructive sounds made by the Mark IV. It was a hit to the bot's mid-section which punched the unit forward into the buckling wall. The bot then turned towards me. It errantly fired its pulse cannon upward, blasting a massive hole into the ceiling. Contents from the floors above now rained down onto the huge robot as the flames and smoke continued to spread.

I fired off a succession of rapid shots. Five, maybe six or eight. I lost count. The light was blinding and smoke was beginning to veil over the Mark IV. The robot fell back into

a sitting position and fire started to break out from inside its guts. It was sputtering and slamming its arms on the floor. I think I got it. I moved in closer, fired and hit it three more times just to be sure. This Mark IV was now just a heap of lifeless burning metal. Time to get the hell out of here.

I quickly worked my way to the front of the building. The heavy smoke and flames were not too far behind me. At least the fire department was here now.

Here's where it got kind of strange. Even though it was a robot, this Mark IV was technically considered a law enforcement officer. It's not like I was in trouble for doing my job or anything. It was malfunctioning, causing heavy damage, and very dangerous, so I was covered. But I did find it odd that the cops were planning a memorial service for it. I even got an invite.

Chapter 18

9:28 am, 144 131st Street, Apartment K-10

I got a call to head to a not-so-nice section of town. I've been to worse, but this was pretty bad. I arrived at Apartment K-10 on the second floor. A sloppy middle aged man wearing a stained wife-beater and ragged pants met me outside. I could hear the sounds of robots trashing the place along with the high-pitched yelps of a small dog. The man was overweight, sweaty and spoke like he had a constant mouthful of saliva. He was frantic about his dog which had the unbelievable name of "Cumshots".

He told me that in the back bedroom, his dog "Cumshots" was getting killed in the middle of a '2 pleasure bot meltdown'. One minute, everything's going fine. The next minute, the bots went haywire. I had to contain myself, I mean, I'm a professional. But what kind of name is that for any living thing? I had the man fingerprint my pocket screen, then I proceeded inside.

The apartment had a nasty, thick smell that I didn't want to be exposed to for any longer than I absolutely had to. I knew exactly where to go. As always, I just followed the sounds.

The door to the back bedroom was open and I could see what was causing the trouble. Two pleasure bots were literally destroying the place. They were flailing uncontrollably, leaking oil and making the usual synthetic gurgling sounds typical of malfunctioning robots.

Cumshots the dog was yelping over the sounds, but I couldn't tell where he was. I set my gun to the lowest output, aimed for the closest bot and then fired. I blasted the living shit out of that miserable pile of trash rendering it pretty much inert except for some smoking wires.

I aimed for the second bot which was still in the midst of an all out seizure. It was then that I got my first glimpse of the dog known as Cumshots. It was a tiny white poodle thing and it was yelping from the shelter of a small closet. Seeing that the dog wasn't in my line of fire, I pulled the trigger and sent the second bot straight to machine hell or wherever those things go when they're disintegrated.

Once the robot sounds stopped, the wife-beater wearing man entered the room with an extinguisher and smothered the flames. He sure was happy to see his dog alive and the dog must have felt the same way. As soon as the man set his extinguisher down, Cumshots jumped right up into his arms and showered his face with wet doggie kisses. It was touching, almost poetic.

The relieved man then told me his story. Not that I really wanted to hear it, mind you. But sometimes it helps people who are coming down from a stressful situation. I pretty

much just wanted to get the hell out, you know. But considering how fucking weird his dog's name was, I figured, I'd give the man a couple of minutes.

He said his name was Lester, Lester Herman. Though in retrospect, I doubt it was his real name, but whatever. He was in the adult entertainment business. Basically, he made porn. Not that he appeared in any films, thankfully. He just produced them. Today he was working on some 'hot robot on robot action' as he called it. He told me that there was a actually a very profitable niche market for those kinds of films. He said that he'd been in the business for almost 30 years and told me how the business had changed in that time.

He also proceeded to name off some of the titles that he'd worked on. Sure enough, I was familiar with some of his movies. And to tell the truth, they really weren't bad for low budget porn. I guess you could say I was a fan of his and didn't even know it. But, I really didn't see how people could get into pleasure bots doing things to each other. Whatever floats somebody's boat, I guess.

Meantime, Lester was so happy that I saved his dog, or just the fact that someone would listen to him for more than five minutes, that he transferred copies of several of his newest titles over to my pocket screen. Hopefully, it's not weird like that adult robot stuff because the only thing I like to do to robots is vaporize them.

Chapter 19

12:51 pm, Shithole Palace

Home, sweet home. I grabbed some leftover slop and a cold beer, then uploaded Lester's movies to my large telescreen. The first one was an alien theme titled "Bad Girls From the Fourth Nebula". The title gave me the impression that there was actually a story going on. In reality, it was just two aliens going at it for an hour and a half. I really didn't have any interest in blue creatures with three vaginas doing unspeakable things to each other, but because the movie was a gift, I figured I'd watch it.

I quickly recognized the small bedroom where the movie was shot as the one where I blasted those two pleasure bots earlier. And I admit that, for a brief second, I felt a little pride for having been there. Truth was, Lester did have talent. He had an eye for angles and perspectives. Plus, the lighting wasn't half bad either, though a bit underexposed for my tastes. His music selection did leave a little something to be desired, but most people don't watch these things for the soundtrack.

"Cumshots" the poodle dog even had a cameo when he unexpectedly scampered into the background. Cute. The timing of it was perfect as the dog introduced a brief comic break into the action. I don't know if Lester meant for that to happen or not. I guess it didn't matter. But Lester's 30 years in the business definitely did show in his work.

I was going to have to wait a while before watching Lester's other films as my telescreen interrupted with an emergency call.

Chapter 20

1:48 pm, 22481 Ridgebury Street, Sparkey's Antiques

Sparkey's Antiques was a legend. At a little over 90,000 square feet, it was the largest antique store in the region and had been in business for over 50 years. It offered a little of everything from furniture and appliances to clothing and toys. Sparkey's also sold old collectable robots.

I arrived and found the store roped off and evacuated. Spectators were gathered around the perimeter. The day manager intercepted me before I could enter the store. He was trying to brief me, but all I really needed was to have him fingerprint my pocket screen and then follow the sounds which would lead me to the problem. I politely thanked him but told him that I had it from here.

I walked inside and started tracking down the bot. I could hear the sounds of things being broken along with the gurgles and gabber of a malfunctioning robot. Then I came across the telltale path of destruction which was impressive. Whatever this thing was, it had done a really good job of fucking shit up. I continued following the trail and the sounds which were increasing in volume as I got closer. And there it was literally trashing the place. It looked like an old beat-up trashcan on stubby legs with flimsy metal arms. And that's exactly what it was: a trash bot. It was a relic, probably something that was on sale here.

Trash bots were basically smart trash cans. They picked up garbage and then emptied themselves out into larger cans or dumpsters. They were a really great idea that had unfortunately had a limited purpose. Later on, multi-function helper bots came along and rendered the single-use trash bots obsolete. Nowadays, if any trash bots were in service, they were more a curiosity or relegated to low income buyers who used them as cheap status symbols.

Despite the limited capabilities of this trash bot, it had done a respectable job of destroying the place. The damage so far was well beyond what I'd have expected from such a relic. Nevertheless, I had to put it down. I set my pulse gun to the lowest power output and then fried the miserable heap. The blast of energy sent the bot skidding down the aisle leaving a trail of oil mixed with bits of smoldering robot parts in its wake. It was a real easy kill. I almost felt bad for how simple this job was.

And that's when a second bot came crashing through the adjacent aisle. Holy fuck it scared the hell out of me! I wasn't expecting another robot. I probably should have listened to the manager. I quickly regained my composure and then identified the model and classification of the second unit. It was a maintenance bot and it was much newer and stronger than the little bastard I just wasted.

This bot was crushing everything in its erratic path and was probably the one that was

responsible for most of the real damage to the store. I bumped up the power setting on my pulse gun then aimed and fired. I missed! The blast went just to the right of the staggering robot and hit what looked like a collection of expensive heirloom furniture which quickly ignited into a raging fire. I aimed and fired again, this time hitting the bot dead center. It was almost a complete disintegration of the unit with a few fiery fragments flying off in random directions.

Now there were several fires burning in Sparkey's. Time to get the hell out of here. I ran for the front entrance as smoke and flames filled in behind me. Seemed like a typical escape for me, especially with the manager screaming obscenities at me for torching the place. At least he doesn't have a robot problem anymore and fortunately for me, I had a waiver.

Chapter 21

9:56 am, 102 East Second Avenue, Business District

I'm looking at the dumbest fucking idea ever implemented in human history. It's an 82 story robot. That's right. Some brainiac asshole decided that in the name of ultra efficiency, they'd make a building that was completely automated. Doors, vents, plumbing, cafeteria, communications, elevators, escalators, hell everything was controlled by a central computer core. Not only that, but what made the building a 'robot' so to speak was that it had internal 'appendages' that would perform specific tasks which used to be handled by individual robots. All custodial, maintenance, pest control, food prep, and whatever else, was all automated and up to the discretion of the main computer core. And they had hundreds of people living and working inside of it around the clock. Idiots!

Well, the entire building had gone to shit and was catastrophically malfunctioning. My first instinct was to nuke the hell out of it, but there were people trapped inside. This time, I actually listened to the instructions offered to me. The Vice President of Operations for the building transferred blueprints of the entire complex to my pocket screen and off I went.

The blueprints put the primary computer core in a sub-basement level which fortunately was accessible by stairs. My progress inside was slowed by the random opening and closing of doors and there was no way in hell I'd get on an elevator. Every route was dangerous as the building's many internal appendages were going haywire, smashing into walls and breaking everything not nailed down. I set my pulse gun to the lowest output and made my way down to the main core.

Environmental control was completely lost as each room and hall were set to different extreme temperatures. This hampered my progress even more as it was just too damn uncomfortable and even dangerous. One room would be over 100 degrees, then I'd move into a hall that was just above freezing. It was like that everywhere. Vents were spraying unknown gasses in all directions. Lights were flickering off and on. Elevators were ripping through their shafts at speeds that would kill the average person. And every so often a service appendage would emerge from a maintenance port and lash out uncontrollably.

After about a half hour of hell, I made it down to the primary core. It was located inside a massive fireproof vault which of course was locked tight. I tried to bypass the locks using the outer service panel but that was useless. The only thing I could think of doing was to blast my way inside. I set my gun to MAX then backed up and took cover behind a corner wall. Then I aimed and fired. My gun unleashed a blinding green light and an energy pulse of unbelievable force. There was a powerful explosion. I peeked around the corner and saw that the door was damaged, but still intact. Great. I fired again and then again. I felt the whole sub-floor buckle under me as concussions from the energy

blasts impacted the vault door.

Finally, my shots breached the door. Inside, there was nothing but walls of reddish lights and an eerie hum which made up the main memory core. I thought about vaporizing it, but more than likely I'd die as the core collapsed around me.

I thought for a minute and figured I had few options, but then got a great idea. I ejected the partially used energy cartridge from my pulse gun and inserted a fresh one. I programmed the gun for a controlled overload - a feature that I learned about from reading the manual.

I gave myself 10 minutes to get the hell out of there and tossed my 'work of art' deep into the vault. Then I proceeded to haul ass. I was moving like there was no tomorrow. Because if I didn't make it out in time, there probably wasn't. Up several floors, dodging all kinds of obstacles, several minutes later I made it up to the lobby. It was empty other than a few flailing building appendages. I ran out the front yelling for everyone to take cover.

A massive underground detonation followed only seconds later. It was huge and reminded me of a nuclear depth charge they used against submarines. The ground quaked and felt like it lifted up all around us. Asphalt cracked splintered everywhere. Gasses began to vent from underground and water plumed upward from a break in the main. The robo-building was still standing, but I could only imagine the damage that was done below. I hoped that nobody was caught down there.

Inside the building, everything stopped. Lights were dead, doors and elevators seized. Air stopped moving. Once they had determined that things were stable enough, the authorities sent in automated rescue teams and survey crews. Finally I was able to see how much damage I did sub-basement levels. It was amazing!

The explosion had turned the computer core into a pool of molten silicone and metal. It was too damn hot for anybody to get close to, but the images I saw were astounding. They rescued dozens of people from the building, some of whom were badly injured. It could have been worse though. Now I need a new gun.

Chapter 22

12:03 am, Shithole Palace

It's been a long day. I rewarded myself by picking up a new gun and a case of cold beer. I put one of Lester's movies up on my telescreen. This one featured humans and it was also shot in the same bedroom as before. "That place gets a lot of action", I muttered to myself. Far off in the background, I heard a pulse gun fire. "Probably some kids having fun", I thought as I continued to watch the movie.

About 30 minutes passed and I was into my fourth beer, I heard another pulse gun. It sounded like 3 or 4 rapid shots and it was a little closer this time. Again, I ignored it thinking that it was just a couple of kids. Shortly thereafter, I dosed off.

Sometime later, I was abruptly awakened by an emergency flash on my telescreen. It was late and I was tired and still buzzed. I really didn't want to go out now, even if it was to disintegrate something. Then my pocket screen started beeping in harmony with the large screen. Both were flashing emergency messages so rapidly that I couldn't read them. I was able to make out some addresses and business names, but as soon as I'd get a fragment, a new message would replace it. "This has to be a joke," I thought.

I was jolted out of my disbelief by a much closer pulse blast followed up by something I hadn't heard in a very long time: primitive gunfire. Other than in the movies, it had been years since I heard a primitive firearm discharge. It was a little unnerving.

Emergency messages continued to flash across both of my screens and they were going so fast that I still couldn't understand them. More weapons fire continued nearby. It got louder, closer and more frequent.

Both my screens went blank briefly followed by an emergency graphic which at first, I thought was just a test. Not my luck. Then a talking head appeared on both screens and started to bring me and all the other viewers quickly to reality.

He started his message, "This is an emergency. In the past few hours, thousands of robots of all models and classifications have begun simultaneously malfunctioning. There has already been extensive damage and numerous human casualties. Authorities have waved all restrictions on destroying malfunctioning robots.

Citizens are to use extreme caution when dealing with such robots as they are very dangerous. You are advised to shelter in place until the danger has passed. The authorities will be initiating an emergency grid shutdown which will begin in exactly 30 minutes. Power will be restored when conditions are considered safe."

Chapter 23

1:24 am, SHTF and Granddad's Machine Gun

I didn't have much time as the grid shutdown was just minutes away. I grabbed my new pulse gun and spare energy cartridges. Then I picked up a flashlight and my pocket screen. I took a quick inventory of my provisions which included some kind of mystery food and 7 cold beers. In the back closet, I had a large dusty box that was faintly marked "Only open in emergency".

This was an old military foot locker that my Grandfather had passed down to me. I opened it up and found a very special relic: Granddad's machine gun. It was an AK47 assault rifle that was over 100 years old. I don't know when he got ahold of it, but I do remember him taking me out to shoot it back when I was a kid. He told me that one day, it might come in handy. In addition to the gun, there were several empty magazines and a few boxes of ammunition. I downloaded some operational instructions for the weapon to my pocket screen so that I could figure out how to load the ammo and fire the thing.

After a brief but informative instructional video, I was loading magazines and making sure that the AK was operable. Outside the weapons fire was continuing to escalate. Then, the lights went out. It was a total grid shutdown just as the talking head had warned. Everything got quiet except for the outside gunfire.

I set my pocket screen to continue to receive emergency communications so that I could get some kind of handle on what was going on. It was basically mayhem out there. They had widespread out of control fires. People were trapped in buildings and homes. Swarms of robots carved paths of destruction in just about every possible location. First responders were stretched thin as there were too many calls to handle.

There was already speculation as to what was causing this to happen. The authorities believed that the "Patterson-Jones" code had evolved and become 'smart'. It was possible that an updated version of the code had infected almost every robot causing them to simultaneously malfunction. Fortunately, the authorities were working hard on a solution. Great. Meanwhile, every able-bodied person now had a free ticket to shoot at any robot that is, or that they think is malfunctioning.

I positioned myself and my essentials in what I figured would be the safest part of my house. I thought that the best thing to do was wait it out as long as I could. I didn't want to be a part of the chaos outside as I was probably just as likely to be hit by friendly fire as I was to be killed by a berserk robot. Because the grid was down, it was almost pitch black. The only light came in the form of burning buildings and flashes from the now abundant gunfire.

It sounded like a war zone for as far as I could hear and the emergency flashes on my pocket screen continued nonstop. This whole thing seemed to be spiraling out of

control. That's when my front door was smashed in. I had company.

It was a malfunctioning robot and it was in my home! I aimed and fired. The flash of light was blinding and the explosion was more than I expected. I blew the living hell out of that robot along with most of the front of my home. I looked at my gun to check the setting but my eyes were still blinded by the green light. It took a minute then I saw my mistake. The gun was on a higher output setting, but fortunately not MAX. Nevertheless, I wasn't so safe in my own home anymore.

I stuffed some essentials into an old backpack as the sounds of war raged around me. I slid on my pack and then slung Granddad's AK over my shoulder. I was ready to move out when the time came.

It wasn't long before another robot entered my home. It was easy for them now since basically there was no front of my house to get in their way. The bot was obviously a malfunction as it flailed and flung itself inside. I aimed and started to squeeze the trigger.

My gun was just about to fire when the bot exploded forward - flying directly at me. I reflexed and raised my gun while still squeezing the trigger and the weapon discharged almost straight up. The blast blew a huge hole into the ceiling above me and what was left of my home started to burn. The exploded robot landed on top of me and it was then that I realized that it had been shot from behind. I pushed the thing off of me, grabbed my pack and got the hell out of there.

Chapter 24

3:08 am, Somewhere

I took cover in a small park not far from where the Shithole Palace once stood. Fires were spreading from home to home and building to building. The sounds of constant gunfire kept what would have normally been a calm night at bay. I saw hover cars overloaded with people traveling around shooting at anything that moved. Then a lone streak would come from a dark house and hit the car.

Hell, there were people in cars shooting at other people in cars. It was insane. Like they couldn't tell the difference between a hover car and a malfunctioning robot. Maybe they didn't care. For me, I'd rather be facing down another Mark IV than dealing with this catastrophe. I didn't like the idea of a death by random friendly gunfire.

I heard something behind me. I turned to look and saw some kind of robot in the near dark. My gun was already in my hand so all I had to do was aim and fire. The blast disintegrated whatever kind of bot it was. Then gunfire started raining in my direction. I guess that whoever it was spotted the flash from my pulse gun. "Don't shoot, I'm a human you stupid fuck!" I screamed out. They fired a few more shots at me. Fortunately they couldn't hit what they couldn't see. Time to go.

Just as I got up to move out, more shots came in. I hit the ground fast and screamed out again, "Stop shooting! I'm a human!" The blasts landed close by and started a small fire which was now giving my position away. I moved forward towards some brush for cover and switched from my pulse gun to the AK. I got up to move out. They fired at me again! I hit the ground and then set my AK to FIRE.

I briefly stood up, then dropped as they shot at me again. This time, I was able to get their position from the flash of their pulse gun. It was coming from a small house across from the park that I was in. I aimed my AK at the house and pulled the trigger. Nothing. Fuck!

I quickly went over what I remembered about how to operate the thing in my head. Oh, right, charge the weapon. I pulled the charging handle, aimed and then squeezed the trigger. The AK unleashed a fury of fully automatic hell! It was amazing! I riddled the small house with a wash of old fashioned lead and then I dropped to the ground. Nothing came back at me. I waited a minute, then got up and got out of there.

Chapter 25

4:45 am, Looking for Shelter

The chaos continued. I was doing my best to keep away from everything. The problem was that this event was happening everywhere. I was tired and getting hungry. I stayed in the shadows most of the night and began to look for some kind of safe shelter. I figured that the best thing I could do would be to not shoot at anything unless I absolutely had to. Besides I didn't think I was going to get paid for any robots I wasted while this was going on.

I happened on a relatively quiet area in a dark subdivision and found an out of the way place by the side of a home. I laid down and dosed off. I was out for maybe an hour or so when the noise awakened me. It sounded like an ongoing demolition and it was getting closer. I readied my gun and got set for a quick move.

As I looked out, dawn was breaking and I saw a mass of robots. They were all malfunctioning. Moving erratically, bumping into each other and everything else. Trees, hover cars, homes, light poles, they were hitting everything. Metal arms were flailing and those with weapons were randomly firing in every direction. The mass itself was carving out a wide path of destruction, though it didn't seem to have a purpose to it.

As the swarm of infected robots continued, bursts of gunfire from nearby homes lashed out into them. Some of the bots were hit, but overall, the damage was light and did virtually nothing to slow the advance.

I figured it was time for me to do something. I set my pulse gun just below MAX and aimed at the center of the crowd of bots. I fired a single shot which hit the mass and vaporized a dozen or so robots. The blast blew a wide hole into the street under them and several other bots fell in. I fired again and again disintegrating many more. Unfortunately, there were hundreds of new robots to take the place of the ones I just destroyed. The mass continued moving forward over their wrecked comrades like ants.

People started fleeing from their nearby homes as the robots continued their destructive progress. I figured, I'd try to blend in with them until I decided where to go next. There were twenty or so of us. People of just about every age except for very old were dressed mostly in night clothes or things that looked slapped together. If they were carrying anything, it was just a small bag or backpack. I didn't see anyone with weapons. So, I guess I stuck out a little bit as I ran alongside these strangers with an AK47 slung across my back. I doubted any of them even knew what it was though.

There was a roar overhead. I looked up as I was running and spotted two military style aircraft coming in low and headed towards the direction I had just come from. Then a massive explosive concussion threw me hard to the ground. It briefly stole my breath and I could feel the heat of the blast. I lifted up just enough to look back. The explosion

engulfed the entire neighborhood that I was in moments ago. Everything was on fire and there was a giant mushroom cloud of smoke and flames expanding towards the sky. My guess is that more bots went up in one fireball than I've disintegrated in my entire career. That's the kind of firepower I needed.

Chapter 26

8:31 am, On the Offensive

I had one warm beer left in my backpack and I was operating on just an hour's sleep. Despite that, I was actually feeling pretty good. Maybe seeing all those robots get simultaneously vaporized was why. It was light out and I felt like I had a rejuvenated sense of purpose. I wasn't really sure where to go so I just looked for large plumes of smoke and set out towards one of them. My pocket screen was still flashing emergency messages along with updates on casualties and where to find 'safe zones'.

"Hell with the safe zones", I thought. And I set out to do what I do best: vaporize robots. I didn't have to wait long as I heard a huge crashing sound coming from nearby. I set my gun to MAX and got mentally prepared for battle.

I made my way towards the sound and saw a large security bot, an older Mark II unit, emerging from the recent ruins of a pet grooming shop. Mark II Security Units have been in service for about 15 years though some were being replaced by the new Mark IV's. They have a light armor plating and feature a non-lethal stun weapon. They're also strong, agile and very reliable.

I had no doubt that this one was up to no good. It was limping in circles, smashing everything in its way. About every 10 seconds or so, it discharged its stun weapon. It also synthetically babbled incoherently and leaked oil just like all the malfunctions do.

I aimed and fired my pulse gun and blasted the living hell out of it. Its armor was no match for the full-power of my weapon. The blast literally ripped the robot in half and sent burning pieces flying a good distance. I fired again, just because. There was an unbelievable explosion and fires spread quickly throughout the store and adjacent attached units. Another plume of dark smoke billowed up to the sky.

I spent the next couple of days hunting robots. At first, it felt like Summer camp when I was a kid. You know, I got to sleep outside and pretty much do whatever I wanted. Honestly, it got old quick. My much older body didn't do so well sleeping on the cold, hard ground. My back and knees constantly ached as my arthritis kicked in with authority. On top of that, I began to really miss having regular, decent meals, fresh water, and cold beer.

Chapter 27

3 DAYS LATER, 6:34 pm

I had been internally debating with myself about whether or not I could possibly hit any lower point in my life. I had lost everything. My home, along with almost all of my belongings were burned to the ground. And beyond that, the prospects of me making a decent living now were pretty much gone.

See, in the last few days there was an all out war on robots. Everybody who had a weapon went crazy killing robots. And I admit that I played a small part in it too.

Then, on the second day, the authorities got their shit together and joined in the fun. They went after everything robotic using their latest weapons. I saw just a little bit of it when I caught a glimpse of those military aircraft nuking the hell out of that robot swarm. Shit like that went down everywhere.

The robots barely had a chance. Reports put their population at just 10 percent of what it was only days before. And now the authorities had mop up teams working on the few remaining malfunctioning bots.

I was sleeping under an oak tree when my pocket screen went off. It was Lester Herman of all people. He was just checking in and wanted to know how I was doing. Well, I told him my story and he generously offered to have me crash at his place for a while. I admit that Lester weirded me out, but I really didn't have any other options. So I accepted his offer and headed over to his apartment.

The city was pretty much trashed from the last few days' events. Most structures had at least some damage and about a third were completely destroyed. The sky was hazy with the smoke from the smoldering ruins. It was hot and I was tired and hungry.

Lester was lucky in that his building had only minor damage. Inside, his apartment looked pretty much like it did before. Cumshots the poodle was the first to greet me at the door followed by Lester who was wearing what looked like the same wife-beater from the first time I met him . Lester offered me his couch and said that I could stay till I got back on my feet.

I was grateful for Lester's hospitality, really I was. But I admit that I slept with my hand on my gun that first night because I had no idea what would happen once the lights went off.

Morning broke and I had survived my first night on Lester's couch. But for a few bug bites and bad dreams, I was unscathed. Lester was in the kitchen cooking breakfast when he asked me what I had planned for the day. "I'm not really sure." I told him. "I've got to figure out what the hell is going on out there. I may be out of a job, hell my whole

pathetic career might be over."

"Well you could work for me." Lester said. "I could use an editor or even someone to help me come up with ideas for movies."

Shit, for a second I thought he was joking about wanting me to be in his movies. Hell, I'm not that desperate - yet. "I don't know how to edit movies and I'm not sure what ideas I have that could help you." I replied.

"It's really simple. If you can blow up a robot, you can edit a movie. I'll show you how. And as far as story ideas, just think back on some of your jobs and maybe we can use those experiences to make a script." Lester said.

In addition to being talented at making adult movies, Lester could also cook. He made me the best damn eggs I'd had since I could remember. Or, it could have been that I hadn't eaten a decent meal in three days. Whatever, they were great fucking eggs.

"When you finish your eggs, get cleaned up and I'll show you how to edit." Lester said to me. I did what he said and met him in his bedroom which also doubled as his edit suite. He showed me the ins and outs of editing. It really was easy. Hell, within 30 minutes, I was doing edits for Lester's next release which was a movie that had a 'sea creature' theme. In actuality, it was just four people dressed up as sea horses going at it for an hour and a half.

Lester had me continue editing while he went out and walked the dog. I guess that maybe I did have another career opportunity, but I didn't want to make any quick decisions.

Chapter 28

The Idea

About a week had passed and I hadn't received any calls for a single job. There were no reports of any malfunctioning robots anywhere. The city had pretty much settled back to normal. I had gotten somewhat used to staying on Lester's couch and was paying my way by editing his movies. But, inside I knew that if I didn't start getting some serious work - robot killing work - soon, I was going to be stuck here for a very long time.

Lester returned from walking the dog and I was busy editing the "sea creature" movie. "Hey Carl, you know, I don't have any movies in the works after this one. And there won't be any editing for you soon. Have you come up with anything that I can work into a new film?" Lester asked me.

"Actually, I've been thinking and there might be something you can use. A while back I blasted this fucking pleasure bot to hell at a sorority house. It belonged to this rich girl and while the bot was in use, it started to malfunction. That's when I got the call to destroy it". I told him. Then I went into the details of the job and how there was the bed sheet and she was naked underneath and all.

"Holy shit, you've been holding out on me!" Lester exclaimed. "I could make the best fucking movie out of that. It'd be so easy! I'm going to start writing and then contact a few actors." Lester left me to finish my editing and he went to the living room and began to write.

Just about a half-hour later, He returned with a completed script. "This is a masterpiece!" he exclaimed to me. I read it over and sure enough it looked pretty damn good, though I was far from an expert on adult entertainment film plots. He had also lined up the talent and set aside tomorrow afternoon to shoot the movie.

Lester had his old standby, the back bedroom, ready for production. The only change that he made was to put a generic "state university" pennant on the wall. Otherwise the bedroom was exactly the same as all his other films.

The talent arrived an hour early and started to ready themselves for filming. I was surprised when Lester offered me a second camera and said he wanted me to shoot something he called "B-Roll". I didn't have any camera operating experience, but again he told me it was easy and that "if I could operate a pulse gun, I could use a camera". He showed me how to operate the thing in about 5 minutes. It seemed simple enough.

A little over an hour later, we began filming. The story was pretty similar to what had really happened up to a point. There was a young, attractive college girl being "attacked" by a malfunctioning pleasure bot. Well, we didn't have any robots for the

production, but Lester did have a fallback. He covered his poodle "Cumshots" in foil and had him jumping on the college girl and yelping. I was surprised at how well the dog actually did in this role.

Then the young man burst into the room. "I hear you have a robot problem," he said. "Oh, please help me!" she screamed.

The young man then "shot" the robot with his large fake gun. Lester had said that we could add the explosion by computer in post production, so I wasn't worried about how stupid it looked at this point. Anyway, with the robot destroyed, the college girl was so relieved and she really wanted to repay the young man for saving her. Since she didn't have any money, she had to come up with another option. And that's where things really deviated from my experience.

It got really interesting at this point and I kind of wished that my job with Sarah was something even close to this. Though these two actors were "unknowns" as Lester called them, they sure looked like they were experienced. Their moves were professional all the way.

Lester's mastery of filmmaking really shined. He was directing the talent to move in specific ways. He would do retakes at different angles, change perspectives and adjust the lighting between shots. Lester even had directions for me, telling me where he wanted me to shoot and when and where to zoom in. It was amazing. I had no idea that there was so much that went into one of these movies.

We wrapped about three hours later. As you can imagine, the actors were exhausted and I admit that I was a bit tired myself. Nevertheless, Lester was so excited about how things went in production, that he insisted we start editing right away.

Our marathon edit session went through the night and into the next morning. We switched off working while the other napped. And in the end, we had Lester's masterpiece titled "Robot Killer at Your Cervix". Lester was bubbling with excitement. He couldn't wait for the release, so he continued to work on the artwork and the trailer. Everything was uploaded by that evening and he was already getting sales an hour later.

"Carl, this is my finest work." he said to me. "And I couldn't have done it without you." "Well, Les, I really didn't know what the fuck I was doing so I don't know exactly how essential I was. But, it's great your already getting sales so quick." I said.

"Well, kid, I'm gonna give you a bonus and you should have enough to rent your own place. I still want you to work for me, though." Lester said.

Lester sometimes called me "kid" though in reality he was only a few years older than me.

Chapter 29

My New Palace

I rented an apartment just a few minutes walk from Lester's which was convenient since he had a lot of new work for me - all based on my ideas. He took the whole "Robot Killer at Your Cervix" theme to a new level and made several movies from it.

We worked on a "school bathroom" movie, a "shitty apartment" movie (which actually was a best-seller for some reason), and a "construction site" movie. All of these were basically the same thing, of course, but with different actors going at it for an hour and a half each. We shot all of the movies in Lester's back bedroom as well.

We had just started production of the fifth "Robot Killer...." film based on an encounter at a police station when I got the call. My pocket screen lit up with a message to head to Shady Pines Retirement Community where they had a malfunctioning bot. I told Lester that I needed the afternoon off and headed out to visit some geriatrics and vaporize a robot.

I was so rusty at this that I actually had to turn around and grab my pulse gun. I couldn't believe I stepped out the door without it. I arrived at Shady Pines about a half hour later. It was a beautiful afternoon, sunny with just a couple of clouds. The sunlight felt good on my face. It was something I missed since I had been spending so much time indoors lately.

Shady Pines was a typical quiet old folks home in the suburbs. I met with the property manager who told me that they had a troubled robot inside the main lobby. I had her fingerprint my pocket screen and then brief me on the situation. The culprit was a piano playing entertainment bot, which was basically a robot built into a piano that played music and sang for the residents. Like the old times, I just followed my ears which led me right to the bastard.

This piano bot was about as old as most of the residents and it was based on a simple design. Nothing on it really moved much except for the arms and hands on the keys and the bot's head would turn. That was it. I was pretty sure that it was malfunctioning as it was erratically flailing, randomly smashing the keys and making a cacophony of sounds. Its head was spinning completely around in circles and oil was spraying from its mouth. "Yep, you've got a malfunction here," I told the manager.

Despite the fact that this piano bot was making absolutely the worst music I have ever heard, there were still residents seated nearby listening. They seemed to actually be enjoying the experience. Obviously their hearing was so bad that they couldn't tell the difference. Nevertheless, I asked the property manager to remove all the people from the lobby so that they didn't have to see me destroy the thing.

The evacuation process took some time as these were all old people who were in wheelchairs or on walkers and they didn't do anything fast. The manager lured them into the cafeteria by saying that it was bingo hour. That got them going.

With an empty lobby, I could go about my work without worry. The piano bot was thrashing away on its latest concerto as I readied my gun. I made sure that I had the weapon on its lowest setting, then aimed and fired. There was the familiar flash of green light and percussive crack that I had long enjoyed. I blasted the living shit out of that thing sending bits of bot and shredded piano strings all over the lobby. The excess energy blew out a couple of windows and started a small fire.

I felt great, like I had a new lease on life. My brief moments of joy were interrupted by a pissed off property manager. She didn't seem to agree with my methods. I wasn't sure what she expected, but I did know that it was time for me to go. Thankfully, I had that waiver.

Chapter 30

10:43 am, Clark Baptist Church

The next morning, Lester and I were hard at work on the fifth installment of "Robot Killer..." when a message flashed across my pocket screen. It was something unusual, a call from a church.

I got the afternoon off and headed out to Clark Baptist Church located on the other side of town. Although I hadn't ever worked a church before, I did remember that they got the government rate because of their special status. That meant I'd probably just break even after cab fare. But at least, hopefully, I'd get to vaporize something.

I arrived and was quickly greeted by a church assistant. She was a short, older woman who had the name of Miss Becky or something. She was hysterical telling me how the preacher had gone crazy and was possessed. That didn't make any sense to me at all. "Miss Becky, I take care of robots. I can't do anything with your preacher." I said.

That's when she literally broke down and began weeping. "We have a secret and you've got to keep it." she sobbed. "Just go inside and you'll see".

I went inside as she requested. The church was modest on the outside, but very expensively decorated on the inside. It looked like they had absolutely the very best of everything in there. And right now, the preacher was destroying it all.

It sounded like mayhem. The preacher was going absolutely crazy. It was like he was on some kind of strange, powerful drug. If I closed my eyes, the sounds would lead me to believe that I had a large robot tearing the place apart. But a human was doing it.

Then a sobbing Miss Becky came in. "See, you must keep it a secret, please!"

"OK, but I can't shoot a human." I said.

"He's not human." she cried.

"What? He looks like it to me and I can't kill him." I replied.

"No, that's the secret. The preacher's a robot. We paid for the most human-like robot we could afford and had him programmed to be a preacher. But our flock doesn't know it." she wept. She was very embarrassed and I thought I understood why she wanted to keep it a secret. I guess it could ruin the church if the congregation found out about this lie. Nevertheless this was the most human-like bot I'd ever seen.

"I need to see some kind of documentation before I can do anything. Your preacher isn't

going anywhere." I said.

Miss Becky led me to the church's office and pulled up the documents on a pocket screen. Damn, she was right, the preacher was a bot! It was made three years ago by some small company I had never heard of. I transferred the information to my pocket screen then had her make a fingerprint. At that point I warned her to stay away, and I went back to take care of the preacher.

I re-entered the sanctuary and the preacher was still going to town. He was wrecking everything. He was also spewing forth some kind of computerized malfunctioning sermon that sounded like a hyper-evangelical synthetic babble. In between phrases, he projectile vomited a slimy oil from his mouth. It was time to put him, or it, down.

The preacher had worked his way between several pews and was smashing the hell out of them. He was turning all that expensive wood into worthless splinters. I readied my gun, aimed and then fired. There was the usual bright flash of green light and minor explosion that I was used to and even enjoyed.

The blast hit the preacher right in the gut and blew him backwards about 20 feet into the side wall. The impact shattered a stained glass window above him and several religious icons fell from nearby shelves. The bot rested in a sitting position against the wall. He now looked like a drunken homeless person that was passed out but dressed in religious attire.

The entire midsection of the preacher bot was scorched and a small fire was burning on its chest. His mouth was twitching and soft synthetic gurgles were coming out along with an ooze of oil. It was over.

This bot was different alright. It was very human-like. So much that it was kind of haunting. I could hardly tell the difference until I got close. And now that it was neutralized, I could safely touch it.

Its skin felt just like a real person's. It was even warm. Its salt and pepper hair more than likely was human, possibly lab grown. Robots like this weren't even supposed to exist. After all, there was that 50 year old unwritten rule about not making them 'human'. It was almost too much to take and I felt guilty like I had killed a person. But Miss Becky gave me the documents and it proved that this preacher was a robot. Still, it was spooky. I needed some time to think about this.

Chapter 31

The Billion Dollar Idea

The ringing of my pocket screen woke me from an enjoyable afternoon nap. It was Lester. "Get over here quick." he said. I splashed some water on my face and made my way to his apartment. I figured he had some new movie planned and needed my help to shoot it.

"What's up Les?" I asked.

"Carl, I have the most amazing idea and it's going to make us both rich!" Lester replied. "Come back to my edit suite and we'll talk." I followed him back to his bedroom which doubled as the edit suite and sat down.

Lester continued, "I can't believe I hadn't thought of this before, but we've been so busy. I've been thinking about a new show that would appeal to a much wider audience. It would be like a documentary." Lester's cadence became rushed. "It would star you, you know, killing robots. Doing what you do with nothing held back. And we'd call the show 'BOTS'. What do you think?"

"Um, Lester." I paused. "So you want to do a show on me actually killing robots and not on the adult stuff?"

"Yes, it'd be great. You know, guns, explosions, dying robots, stuff burning." His eyes grew even wider. "It would be easy to make. I'd just come along with a camera and I'd mount a camera on you. Oh, and wire you for sound. It would be easy and we'd make a fortune!"

"So you want to follow me around while I kill robots and that would be the show?" I asked.

"Yes kid. Just trust me. It'll be a hit!" Lester sounded like he knew what he was talking about, and he did have success in making movies.

"What the hell, let's give it a shot."

Lester leaned forward to shake my hand, "It's a deal. There's just a few things I need to do and we'll be ready to go. Give me a couple of days to work out the logistics and all you have to do is just let me know when you get a call. Now lets finish this movie." And with that, Lester and I finished editing the fifth installment of "Robot Killer at Your Cervix".

Chapter 32

BOTS episode 1: Housewife in Distress

I was on my way to the first call for the show 'BOTS'. Lester was in the front passenger seat of the cab and I was riding in the back. "OK kid, this is how it's going to go. I'm rolling on you and what I want is to you tell the audience what you're about to do. You know, where you're headed and how situations like this usually play out. Make sure your camera is recording too. Watch your language and...forget I'm here."

"Sure thing," I responded. "I'm on my way to suburbia. Some lady called and said she's got a robot that's gone crazy. It's breaking things and making a huge mess of her house. Her kids are freaking out because they love this robot. Usually the bot has to be put down. It's got the virus and that's unfortunate. There's just not much else that can be done for it."

The cab pulled up in front of an average house in an average suburban neighborhood. I could barely get myself out before this lady met me.

"You've got to stop it. It's destroying my house!" she said. "What's with the camera guy?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm Carl and I'm here to take care of your robot problem. We're shooting a documentary. Just ignore the camera, but I need you to read this and fingerprint it." With that, I handed the nice suburban lady my pocket screen.

"I'm Rachel. Where do I sign?" she asked. "Oh, it's in the back bedroom and it's gone crazy. It's breaking everything! Please hurry."

I made my way into the front door and followed the sounds and the path of damage. Lester was close behind though I really wasn't keeping track of him as I was in 'business mode'. The sounds and damage path led me to the master bedroom where a small service model was going apeshit. It was spinning uncontrollably as its six hook-arms smashed into everything within reach. There was broken glass along with all kinds of personal belongings strewn across the bedroom.

I pulled my pulse gun and aimed at the little fucker. I double checked to make sure I was on the lowest setting and then pulled the trigger. It was a direct hit that blasted that little robot backwards into a large bookshelf. The impact caused the bookshelf to fall forward, crushing what remained of the robot. Then a small fire broke out which is when I turned and said to Lester, "Time to get out of here."

Both of us made it out of the house and I walked over to Rachel, "Better call the fire department." Then I angled towards Lester with his camera. "That's pretty standard for

this kind of situation. There's generally a lot of broken stuff and sometimes things get burned. It's just another day, really."

With that, Lester and I hopped back into the cab. "That was fucking brilliant kid! We get a few more like that in the can and we're in business. We need more destruction though." The cab started heading home. "I know. Look, kid, you could maybe miss a little, you know. Make it look even more dangerous. Like give the robot a chance. That could work."

"It's not always like this Lester. Sometimes I do miss. Sometimes there's more than one robot. And sometimes, shit really burns down. It just depends."

"Well, we need more of that." Lester proudly said as he shifted around to face the front.

"I'll see what I can do." I replied. "Just remember to be ready on a moment's notice. You never know when I'll get another call."

Chapter 33

BOTS episode 1: Carla's Flowers

"Lester I got a call. I'll meet you in five minutes at your apartment with a cab."

"Sure thing kid." Lester's voice squawked on my pocket screen. I called a cab, grabbed my stuff and headed outside.

It was another early call and I have to admit that I was kind of getting used to those. Maybe it was that I was beginning to appreciate the work more, I don't know. Anyway I found that I was actually enjoying the feeling of the morning sun on my face. It was kind of refreshing. The day was starting out cool and crisp along with all the typical sounds of a morning rush hour.

I hopped in the back of the cab and headed over to Lester's to pick him up. We quickly arrived and Lester was in the front passenger side seat and in no time, we were headed to the job. "Lester, here's what we've got."

"Wait kid, let me get my camera rolling.... OK, go."

"It's a small flower shop. Just a few miles away. There's a service unit that's gone crazy. It's wrecking the place. Lots of broken glass, so watch that we don't get cut."

Lester shot back, "Alright, now more for the show. We need more as we head over there. You know, store dimensions, number of people and robots. Are there any fatalities? Oh, and how do you think this thing is going to play out? Make sure not to leave out anything. The more you talk, the better."

I looked down at my pocket screen and made like I was reading some kind of situation detail report. "Well, it looks like it's a small flower shop. One, maybe two employees and a robot. The robot's gone crazy and it's wrecking the place.... Friendlies have been evacuated, so it's just the robot inside. There's a lot of broken glass and crushed furniture with sharp edges so we need to be careful of that.

The robot is a typical service unit so it's not really that dangerous other than if it happens to strike you with an errant blow. It's got no weapons." I looked up at Lester, "This should go down pretty easy."

The cab arrived at the flower shop. Several bystanders were nearby, but being kept from getting too close by the local police who were managing the scene. Lester and I got out of the cab and went to work.

We could hear the sounds of breaking glass and synthetic gabber from outside the

store, but it was pretty evident that this was going to be a relatively easy job. "Lester, stay behind me. I don't want you getting hurt."

"Right kid. Remember, don't talk directly to me. Forget I'm here. Just do what you have to do. Oh, and make sure you keep your language under control."

Inside, broken glass and mangled plant matter covered the floor. I could feel bits of glass crunching under my feet with every step. The bot was over to my left and it was on a malfunction binge, flailing and leaking oil. I readied my pulse gun and double checked the power setting, then aimed and fired. Missed! Actually, I really missed and not just for Lester.

The blast went just to the right of the robot and blew out one of the few remaining intact large glass windows. The discharge continued outside across the alley and blasted into the next store. "Damn it!" I aimed and fired again. This one hit the robot center mass and punched it forward into a flower display. The bot was pretty much neutralized at that point. Everything else after this, I did for the camera.

"You've got to be careful in situations like this. You know, where the robot might be neutralized or not. You never know. Those things are really unpredictable." I cautiously approached the bot and checked its smoldering remains for signs of life. "Good. This one's done. Let's go." I motioned to Lester and we left. That was it.

Once outside, Lester wasted no time in getting some B-Roll of the exterior and 'outside looking in' shots. Then he directed me a little bit saying that he wanted close-up's of my pocket screen and of me holding my pulse gun. It was pretty mundane stuff, but he said it would really work in the show.

A few minutes later, we were in the cab headed home. "Alright kid, I'm rolling. Just give a quick summary of what happened."

"Sure." I paused briefly to think, "OK, this was pretty routine all around, though I missed with that first shot. Maybe I was concerned about all the broken glass and sharp edges. It shook my concentration a little bit. Sometimes it happens. Other than that, this was just a case of a malfunctioning robot turning a nice store into a total disaster area. It's regrettable. I mean, that robots do that. Today's technology shouldn't be so susceptible to renegade viruses. It's sad, really. I'm just glad I don't have to do the clean up."

"Lester started to laugh, "That was great kid. Brilliant! One more and we should be ready to edit the first show."

Chapter 34

BOTS episode 1: Industrial Sector

Carl jumped out of the cab, still scanning his pocket screen. "We're at Dirk's Metals and Recycling. This place is proof that robots don't go to heaven."

Carl and Lester were in front of a massive scrapyard that was the size of several city blocks. Behind the surrounding razor wire-topped fences were dozens of large mounds of all kinds of different metals and synthetic scrap, most of which were robot remains.

Carl continued, "All of this, behind the fence...it's dead robots. Most were destroyed during the outbreak a few months back. This is what's left of them. Their parts were collected, brought here and separated. They'll be used to make new robots later on."

The morning's quiet was rudely interrupted by the loud sounds of crushing metal along with the discharge of a low-power pulse weapon. Carl's attention quickly went off to his left, deep in the yard. Lester aimed his camera and zoomed in, but he couldn't see anything behind the tall heaps of scrap.

"Lester, listen up." Carl said, "It's back there. This is what we're here for."

"OK, for the camera, tell us what's going on." Lester then returned to framing Carl in a medium shot. "Now I'm ready."

"We've got a malfunctioning Mark IV Security Unit. It's supposed to keep people from getting in here after hours and stealing the scrap. But it's gone crazy and I've got to deal with it. You can hear it firing it's weapon. It's a non-lethal, stun only, but it will knock a person out and that's still dangerous in a situation like this. You could easily get crushed." Carl looked down at his pocket screen to review his notes. "Friendlies have been evacuated already. Front gate's been left open for us."

Carl made his way inside the yard with Lester following. "Careful Lester." That's the only thing he said to his cameraman. Then he proceeded to follow the sounds.

Deep inside the yard, things were a real mess. The carefully separated mounds of scrap had been changed to a cacophony of intertwined waste courtesy of the Mark IV. It's seven-plus foot, eight hundred pound mass was flopping, then flailing then 'swimming' in the piles of scrap. This was randomly accented by the uncontrolled blast of its pulse weapon.

Carl switched over from his pocket screen to his pulse gun as he got closer to the bot. It was hard for him to get a good footing over all those small pieces of metal and synthetic scrap. Lester was finding it difficult too and his camera work which was normally steady,

was all over the place. Additionally, both of them were getting hit by pieces of debris that the Mark IV was kicking up.

Carl glanced back at Lester just to make sure he was still there then reverted his attention to the ailing Mark IV. "This thing's turned Dirk's into a disaster area. I'm going to try to get closer without getting killed...and finish off this bot."

As he got within shooting distance Carl was under a thick shower of falling metal. The Mark IV was kicking up debris like a child throwing a tantrum in a sand box. Except this child was over seven feet tall and instead of sand it was thousands of pieces of sharp metal raining down.

Carl set his pulse gun to MAX, then aimed and fired. The flash was blinding and the concussion, along with their unsteady footing, knocked down both Carl and Lester. The Mark IV was hit almost dead-center. Even its armor plating couldn't withstand the impact of that energy pulse.

The bot was ripped in half, but both halves were still flailing. Carl, though slightly stunned from the blast concussion, had recovered enough to assess the damage. He aimed at the top half of the Mark IV and fired again. Bullseye! The power discharge of his gun turned the bot's head into a red-hot molten sludge which neutralized the arms and midsection.

Ignoring his own pain, Carl aimed for the lower half of the robot and fired. Its legs were still kicking up debris. It was a hit to the crotch section of the robot which then separated from the legs. Smoke rose from the now dead sections of bot.

Carl briefly checked himself. He was bleeding from numerous small cuts, probably from the impacts of metal debris. "Lester!" He called out, then turned to look behind him. Lester was back about 20 feet. He was splattered with soot and bleeding from a few small cuts as well. There was a huge smile on his face. "You got that Lester?"

"Kid that was amazing! I'm still rolling."

"Well, we need to get out of here and get these injuries checked. Dirk's gonna have a huge mess to clean up."

Lester chopped back, "Wait, I need some B-Roll. I also want some closer shots of the dead bot and then some establishing shots. Our cuts can wait." Lester was like a madman. He was grabbing all kinds of additional shots from different angles and perspectives.

"Lester, we've got to go."

"Just a minute more Kid. This is gold. Pure gold!"

Carl gave him five minutes but even then he had to practically drag Lester out of the scrapyard. Once outside, Carl called a cab. While they waited, Lester wanted Carl to do a quick summary interview for the show. "Alright Kid, I've got you framed up. Go."

Carl looked somewhat beat up. He was still bleeding and stained with soot and mud. "That was a little rough. I'm cut up. My cameraman has some injuries too. We need to get some medical attention."

The cab pulled up and both men got in. From the front seat, Lester grabbed some more filler shots as they headed for the nearest walk-in clinic.

After a quick once-over by the local doctor, Carl and Lester were back in the edit suite. Post production for the entire first episode of BOTS took them about 3 weeks to complete which seemed like an eternity compared to Lester's previous works. There was a lot more polish and detail to this show. It had all of the professional touches of a successful production.

Lester had really planned things out. He had set a release date, but before that, he posted a brief teaser which generated some interest. He even sent out press releases to the mainstream media. That also worked at sparking a little grassroots buzz. For Carl, the rest was just 'waiting'.

Chapter 35

BOTS episode 1 The Big Premiere

I have to admit that I was more excited about this show than I had been about anything else in years. Probably since I could ever remember. I even let it slip to Lester a couple of times, though I had been trying hard to contain my enthusiasm.

My concern was that I had gotten all worked up over nothing and that we had wasted a lot of valuable time on a flop. I mean, this was Lester's first venture into something that wasn't in the 'adult entertainment' genre. And as for me, I just killed robots. What the hell did I know?

What I did have going in my favor was the fact that more and more new robots were going into service every day. Companies were working overtime to replace the models that were destroyed during the outbreak. There were stories in the media repeatedly about how the most brilliant minds had worked out fixes to the "Patterson-Jones" virus and that new robots were immune. And as expected, the masses took right to it because they couldn't live for long without their bots.

That seemed great on the surface, but the truth was, I was putting down more robots now than I had since the outbreak happened. Most of those bots were new models like that Mark IV Security Unit. Robots that the propaganda praised as now being immune to the virus. And yet, I was a little worried since I was vaporizing the very hardware they said couldn't fail.

Lester chalked it up as job security. He told me several times not to worry and that "they keep churnin' them and you keep burnin' them". He said that the more robots that went berserk the better because we needed them for the upcoming episodes of the show.

I wasn't sure if he was being enterprising by constantly thinking about future episodes when we hadn't even released the first, or whether he was just crazy. I was beginning to lean towards the latter. Nevertheless, Lester insisted on continuing business as usual. He accompanied me on several more jobs and continued to document my work.

I was on a serious run, destroying an average of two malfunctioning robots a day. This went on for weeks. We had about twenty hours of unedited footage, enough for six more episodes. Problem was that we were too busy to put them together. And I was so wrapped up in putting down bots that I actually forgot when the first episode had been released.

Fact is, that day had come and gone. There was virtually no initial response, but I was working too much to really care. I mean, I did care. Truth was it haunted me like a dark shadow in the back of my mind. Like a small, but growing, failure that I couldn't let go of. Whenever I asked Lester about it, he would just tell me to keep going and that these

things take time.

Well, time passed and I continued to try to shove the issue aside. Besides, I was making great money blasting away at all that shiny new metal that the media referred to as 'technical achievements that would never malfunction'. Then things changed.

We were in a cab were riding home from a job. I had just disintegrated a 'fresh off the lot' maintenance robot. This thing had literally just gone into service and the next day, it went apeshit. So Lester and I were headed back and he's got this look on his face. A look like he knows something. "What's with that look Lester?"

"Don't worry kid, it's nothing. You did a good job back there. I got some great footage and your on-camera presence is really improving", he replied.

"Seriously, Lester. Don't you think this is getting to be too much? I mean, the show's been out for weeks and we've heard nothing. It's like we never even made the thing to begin with. And you keep insisting on doing more. We've been so busy we can't even start editing the second, or third, or any other for that matter. And you've got all this new footage. What are we gonna to do with it?"

Lester just smiled, then looked down at his pocket screen. I started to really get annoyed. I didn't think he was even listening to me. That's when I began to realize that I was going to have to re-evaluate our working partnership.

My pocket screen started beeping. "Another one", I said softly. Then I looked down to review the details but it wasn't a job. It was a funds transfer to me in an amount that was more than I had ever seen. "What the hell is this?"

"Happy birthday, kid!" Lester looked back at me with a shit-eating smile on his face. "That's your first royalty payment. The show's gained traction. It's getting viewed like crazy. People want more and we're gonna to give it to them!"

This was seriously more money than I had made in several years combined and it was paid to me in just one second. I didn't even know what to think. "Is this real Lester or are you fucking with me?"

"Kid, it doesn't get more real. We've gotten millions of views worldwide! Tens of millions! Hell, off-planet, you're a hit too. It seems people love watching you nuke robots. You're spreading faster than that damn virus. Go figure. We've got to do more. Lots more. There are advertisers waiting for new shows. And you get half. We're splitting it right down the middle. I told you this was gold!"

"I don't even know what to say. I mean, I was just about to rip your head off for not listening to me. And now I'm rich?"

"A simple 'thanks' will do kid. Now lets get home. We've got work to do." The cab

continued back to Lester's place. Right before they got there, Lester came up with a bright idea. "Wait kid, we need to celebrate. Let's stop at Smiley's. Drinks on me." Carl agreed and they diverted the cab.

Carl hadn't been in Smiley's since before the outbreak. He'd been too busy to even grab a quick drink. The place had changed a lot since then. It was still dark but there was all new furniture and several large bright telescreens on the walls, each showing something different. There was a new bartender bot as well since the original one had been destroyed during the outbreak. Its scorched remains probably lay in a pile somewhere at Dirk's along with thousands of other dead robots.

The place was crowded, which was also a change. In fact, that's one of the things that Carl really liked about the old Smiley's which was few people were ever in there at any one time. Carl and Lester weaved their way through the crowd to a small open table in the back corner of the bar.

They were midway through their second pitcher, talking about nothing important, when Lester spotted something on one of the telescreens behind Carl. "Look behind you kid!" Lester sounded excited. "Look, it's us! I told you."

Carl turned behind him, then adjusted his chair for a better view. "Shit, it's our show. It's really our show! You didn't do this did you?"

"No kid. I told you, the show's gone viral. People love it." Lester replied. "And we get a royalty every time it's viewed. Which means that right now, we're making money."

"Well, maybe we should get out of here before someone recognizes us. What do you think?"

"Sure thing, kid. Let's go. Besides, we've got a bunch of editing to do." The two downed the last of their beers and quickly left Smiley's.

Chapter 36

It's Not About the Money Except When It's About the Money

Things were seriously busy. I was completely wrapped up in blasting robots to hell while Lester was doing most of the camera work and post-production. We were exhausted and it started to show in our work. It was taking me longer to put down bots. I was missing more shots which was fine for the show, but not for the clients. Basically I was causing a lot more collateral damage than the job called for. I still had the waiver, which saved my ass more than once, but it didn't excuse the fact that I was getting sloppy.

Fortunately, Lester had another great idea. Because we were making so much money, we could afford to hire help to take some of the workload off of us. It sounded great to me and before I knew it, we had four part-time editors and a full-time cameraman working for us. We also rented a small space nearby and that became our new edit suite. The work started to go a lot faster and before long we were cranking out full episodes of BOTS about every 2 weeks.

Even with the new expenses, I hardly noticed a difference in my income. Hell, I was making so much money, I had a new problem which was 'where was I going to put it'. I was too busy to spend it and besides, I didn't have any idea what to blow that kind of money on. The only thing I could think of was to do what the rich people did with their money: invest it.

I didn't know anything about business or investing, but I did know about disintegrating robots and drinking...though I didn't have much time to drink nowadays. So I figured that the best things for me to buy were companies that made robots and companies that made parts for the companies that made robots.

My plan was simple. If a company made robots, I bought stock. If a company sold the materials that were used to make robots, I bought stock. I also grabbed up shares of computer chip makers, steel mills, glass makers, software developers, and copper miners. If it was robot-making related, I bought it. And, just to keep myself invested in both sides of the equation, I purchased a few thousand shares in a small outfit that made pulse guns.

In between jobs where I was destroying robots, I was investing in the companies that made new ones. Seemed smart enough to me. I even shared my strategy with Lester who eagerly jumped in with his own cash.

Chapter 37

A Pebble in My Boot

It started back when I euthanized the preacher bot. Something really wasn't right about it. After all, the unwritten rule was that robots couldn't be too human...and yet that one was. Every so often the thought of it would crop up and really bother me. Sometimes, I'd wonder how many more of those things were out there.

Since I had a little more free time to think now, I started to do some research on robots that were indistinguishable from humans. At first, I couldn't find much other than a few really strange conspiracy theories. It was hard for me to grasp some of those ideas.

Apparently there were people out there who believed that aliens had covertly taken over the world via ultra-sophisticated human impersonating robots. They speculated that we, the inhabitants of Earth would repel an off-world species invasion, but if they were "us" and we didn't know it...well, then all bets were off. The planet was taken without a shot fired.

Another theory was that about 50 years ago, technology had evolved to the point that machines became smarter than man and that those machines now controlled everything - business, government, religion - everything. The key to their success was that the machines had perfected the process of creating synthetic replacement humans. They put those robot-humans into positions of power and control like top government officials and the ultra wealthy. They did it slowly, over decades, so that nobody would notice. It worked. Now basically, we are their pets.

There was one that did make some sense to me and it had to do with the "Patterson-Jones" virus. The thought was that the virus was created by corporations and not by the pair of engineering students. It was a virus that would prematurely destroy perfectly-functional robots which would make people have to buy new ones. Actually, that sort of sounded like it might work and it would explain a lot of things.

But, I threw that theory aside because it was a just little too simple. Besides, there was no good reason to me to have all these fresh robots coming online only to have them malfunction within days or weeks of going into service. It would end up costing the companies more in the long run because the new bots were under warranty.

I even talked to Lester about this, but as usual he figured that whatever was happening was good for business. He told me to "quit thinking and enjoy the ride". Besides, business was booming and that made for a convenient distraction.

Still, my mind occasionally jumped back to the main question of "Why?" Why were there so many new robots malfunctioning even when the media propaganda was touting their unshakable reliability? Why was our show such an overnight success? Why did people

really enjoy watching me vaporize robots? I spent the most time speculating on the last question.

I figured that watching a robot get blasted into a million pieces might be interesting to see a few times. Then after a while, it'd get kind of old. But people couldn't get enough. Not that I was complaining. I just thought it would grow stale pretty quick when in fact views increased with each new episode.

Truth is, there were probably a thousand reasons for the show's stratospheric popularity. The one that sat the best with me was the idea that we as a civilization still had the upper hand on technology. We controlled it instead of it controlling us. If it ever got out of hand, we could easily put it down. BOTS gave its viewers a pseudo sense of comfort so to speak. So I guess, in a way, I had become a giant security blanket. That all looked fine on the surface, but I kept thinking that there was something else at work underneath.

Chapter 38

2:27 pm, Warehouse 3238

"This is unbelievable," Carl said. "Evan, come here. Get a close-up of this. Look right there." Carl pointed to the remains of the freshly smoldering robot.

Evan was their new cameraman. Lester had hired him a while back and so far, he was working out well. He was young, hungry, and fresh out of film school. Lester liked his demo reel and his attitude. "Right Carl. Give me a second to get it in frame," Evan replied. The young man made some quick adjustments to his camera. "OK, ready."

"See this right here?" Carl motioned to a section of the bot's charred carcass. "The robot's fused to the metal wall. Look....It's amazing how much power these pulse guns spit out."

Carl then started on a short personal commentary about how the new robots were having all the same problems of the older ones. He even mildly ranted about how "Patterson-Jones" was every bit effective now as it had ever been and that we should be keeping a close eye on our robots...especially the new ones.

Lester, who was a little farther back getting wide shots chimed in, "Carl, less of your opinion. We're going in a wrong direction. I liked how you were talking about blast power and metal fusion. More blood and guts stuff like that. Evan, grab a close-up of the dead bot. I've got Carl."

"Alright, Les....Back on me in three...two...one...." Carl continued, "It's going to be a chore separating what's left of that bot from the steel wall. Glad I don't have to do clean up. What a waste of a perfectly good machine. Thanks 'Patterson-Jones'."

"Damnit, kid! My dog listens better than you!" Lester shouted.

"Fine." Carl replied, "It's just that we're euthanizing a lot of new robots. The ones they said were immune. Don't you think there's a story in that?"

"No, I don't." Lester shot back. "You stick to disintegrating robots. That's what people want to see and it's the only story we need to worry about. Now let's do that again."

The three finished their shots, wrapped up, and called a cab. Despite the fact that Carl and Lester were making a small fortune and could afford to ride to jobs in a fleet of sleek new limousines, they still chose to travel in a single cab. Lester said that it kept them true to their roots. Nevertheless, with the addition of Evan and some extra production equipment normal transportation was getting cramped.

Chapter 39

9:51 pm, (Name Withheld) Hotel

I'd never been to a place like this. It was an elegant hotel that catered exclusively to the super-wealthy. We were instructed to meet a representative at the back service entrance. Once there, we waited about 5 minutes for him to come out and greet us. With him was a space-age hunk of garbage ridiculously dressed up like an old school bellhop. It was holding several black jackets. "I think you'll be more comfortable in these," the rep said as the robot handed each of us a jacket.

"Here are the rules." The representative started his instructions before any of us could get a question out. "First, you can't show anything that has our hotel's name or logo on it. Also, you have to obscure our guests' faces. You can't socialize with them either. And last, you have to use this." The rep handed me a small silver pulse gun. "I've seen the show and I know what kind of damage your blaster can do. We can't have that in here. Our decor is too valuable. Jackets on when you're inside our hotel and sign this if you agree to these terms." With that, he presented his pocket screen. I gave Lester the honor of fingerprinting it.

This was the first job where we had to sign a waiver. It was the first for a lot of things. We came in through the service entrance, just like the 'help' would. Inside, was an alternate reality. A world that we'd never heard about or even imagined. The rich played here. And not the kind of mediocre rich like Lester and I had recently become. These ultra-rich could each buy 10 'Lesters and me' several times over every day without thinking about it. Hell, their maids and caddies made us look poor.

The rep showed us to the main lobby. It was packed with a crowd of mega blue-bloods all dressed like they were attending a Presidential state dinner. They looked perfect in their stunning gowns, priceless jewelry, and black ties. The high ceilings helped to amplify the wall of murmurs coming from the onlookers as well as the sounds from the malfunctioning robot.

The culprit was another bellhop, very similar to our 'jacket dispenser'. The bot was in the center of the lobby tangled up in a luggage cart. Bags were strewn across the floor as the bot thrashed about aggressively attempting to free itself. At least, that's what it looked like to me. It was also babbling a synthetic gibberish as it fought against itself.

Lester and Evan got set up to grab some footage and I readied myself for action. "You guys set?" I asked. Both nodded in agreement. "Here goes.... We're at a very exclusive hotel downtown. There's a service unit that's gone crazy and it's damaging some really expensive furnishings. We've got numerous friendlies close by watching, so I have to be especially careful." I looked down to re-check my loaner gun.

It was a simple model, similar to my first gun. It had only one output setting that emitted a very low-power blast compared to my current work of art. It would keep the possibility of any substantial collateral damage down, but also make me have to hit the bot several times to fully neutralize it.

Fortunately, the ridiculously dressed robot had tangled itself up in the luggage cart so it really wasn't about to get anywhere quickly. It looked like an easy shot. I glanced over at Lester, then Evan to make sure that they were ready for me to go, and they were. With that, I positioned myself within ten feet of the bot and set my gun to fire. I aimed and squeezed off three quick shots all of which hit the robot. I heard a few indiscernible comments from the crowd as the bot shuddered.

The flash, blast and concussion felt like they came from a toy instead of a real weapon. Though the robot was hit, it was still functional, or actually still mal-functional. I fired several more times, each one hitting the bot. It must have taken ten more shots to neutralize the thing. Once that happened, the crowd began to clap like they were attending a golf tournament. It was over.

"Lester, you got me? I'm ready for a closing whenever you are." I said.

"Sure kid, go."

"Fortunately I neutralized the robot before there was any real damage. Nobody was injured either, which is always the best case. Now we just have to wrap up and get out of here." I was a little rushed on my monologue. I wasn't very comfortable around these people. "Lester, Evan. Get your footage and let's leave these nice folks to their party."

While the two grabbed their filler shots, I met with the hotel's representative and returned the loaner gun. We were instructed to leave through the service entrance and return our jackets to the bellhop bot once we were outside. Everything else was taken care of. I thanked the man for his business and complimented him on the hotel, then helped Lester and Evan with their extra equipment. We quickly left after that.

Outside, Evan called a cab while I chatted with Lester. "You know there was something weird about that place and those people. We'll talk once we're in the cab."

"Sure kid."

A few minutes later the cab arrived and we got in. We had a formula that was perfectly executed every time we traveled. Gear went into the trunk except for the two cameras. Lester sat in the front passenger seat. Evan was in back with me. As soon as the cab left the job site, we started filming my event summary.

"Alright guys, I'm ready." I said. "Three....Two....One....That was probably the easiest kill I've had in a long time but people were still in danger. I'm glad that nobody was hurt. You just can't tell how things are going to go. And when you get lazy, that's when bad

things happen."

"Good job kid. I think we've got this one." Lester said.

"Lester, we need to talk."

"Sure, what's on your mind?"

"Something wasn't right in there. It seemed 'staged' for lack of a better description." I went into detail about what was on my mind. I told Lester that if I really had to guess, I'd say that the whole thing was a setup. Like *we* were the evening's entertainment.

"Lester, they had the robot in the main lobby where everybody could get a good view. And the robot. What a piece of junk! Don't you think that a business like that, who catered to those kinds of people, could afford better robots? I mean, they could buy a small army of those preacher bot kind of units. You know the high-end hardware."

Lester took a deep breath, "Kid, you're jumping to conclusions. Sometimes, things are what they are. Maybe their other bots were destroyed in the outbreak. Maybe they had to use whatever was available. And maybe the robot just happened to lose it in the lobby when a bunch of people were around. It happens, and when it does, it's good for our business."

"But everything was 'too perfect', Lester. I've seen a lot of these and I can tell the difference. This one was staged and we were the show."

Lester's tone got sharp, "Kid, this is the last time I'm saying this. You need to relax and quit reading into things. Just sit back and enjoy the ride." He repositioned himself to face the front. Nobody talked for the rest of the cab ride.

Chapter 40

3rd Class Ticket in a Slow Rotting Can

I can't believe Lester talked me into this. He had another bright idea and figured that in order to keep BOTS fresh, we should do some shows from a few 'remote locations'. My first thought was that we'd be filming on another continent, so I downloaded some language translator programs to my pocket screen. I was wrong.

A week later, Evan and I boarded the *Atlantic* a colossal pile of patched-together floating junk. *Atlantic* was the first super interplanetary freighter completely assembled in space. It was commissioned some 60 years ago and now it really showed its age. The hull was freckled with repair patches that I'm guessing were from space garbage impacts and the general stresses of decades of under-powered interplanetary travel.

It had been making the Earth - Mars run for almost 60 years. A trip which originally took a month one way. Some 12 years ago the *Atlantic's* propulsion system was refitted with a more modern power plant. The trip now lasted only about 3 days one way. That was still 6 more days than I wanted to spend on this heap (assuming I lived to make the return voyage).

Lester's idea was simple: send Evan and me to Mars with a brief stopover at the Martian Orbital Space Station, where we would euthanize malfunctioning robots. He estimated that we'd be off-planet for a couple of months at the most. We'd transmit all the new footage back to Earth where he stayed behind to edit and supervise our employees. Something deep inside my gut told me that he had gotten the better end of the deal.

As bad as the exterior of the ship was, *Atlantic* looked much worse inside. It was dark, cold, and rotting from its core. The ship was short-staffed by a crew that was overworked and underpaid, and the evidence of that was obvious. There was plenty of rust, volatile gasses vented from failing pipes and cracks in the bulkheads, along with an intricate patchwork of shoddy repairs.

Despite this, Evan was more than excited about our new assignment. Like me, this was his first venture into space. As soon as we were shown to our quarters, he was out the door, eagerly exploring and getting footage of this massive ship. I spent my time in my bunk reviewing the ship's schematics making careful note of the location of the nearest escape pods.

What really blew my mind was the overall size of this vessel. I mean, it was almost as large as a space station. *Atlantic* was in fact the largest freighter ever made at the time of its commission. As the years passed, new sections were added to the ship to increase its cargo capacity, similar to how rooms would be added onto a house. This

was an ongoing process, and by the time *Atlantic* celebrated its 40th birthday, it had doubled from its original size.

The more time I spent onboard studying this decaying heap, the more I pissed off I got at Lester. He was a great producer who usually came up with brilliant ideas. Though he was obviously a shitty travel agent. I decided that the best thing to do would be to tell him what kind of miserable wreck he had booked Evan and me on. I set up a com-link to Earth and prepared to let him have it.

"What's up kid? Enjoying the trip?" Lester's smiling face appeared on my pocket screen.

"Lester, this is the shittiest thing you've done. You've booked Evan and me on this obsolete heap that's probably going to implode in the middle of nowhere before we ever reach the Martian Space Station. You're looking at a dead man."

"Come on, it can't be that bad."

"Yes it is. Actually it's worse. Our cabin looks like it's a converted janitorial closet. It smells like one too. And I haven't even tried the food yet. I think we're making enough money to travel like decent human beings, don't you?"

"OK, kid. Next time, you book the trip. Meanwhile, I want Evan to get a lot of footage of the transport ship. Also, a few departing shots of the Earth station would be nice if he can. Then, I want an opening monologue from you. Got it?"

"Lester...." I lifted the pocket screen to get a real close shot of my mouth. "Kiss my ass, buddy." Then I smiled. "You owe me big....If I live through this."

"Sure thing kid. Now get off the com-link. This long distance is costing us a lot of money."

With that, I ended the call and went back to studying the ship's escape pod locations. Some time later, Evan returned to our quarters. "Evan, Lester has an assignment for us."

An enthusiastic Evan responded, "Sure boss. This ship is huge! It goes on for miles. I only saw about a fourth of it. I've got some remarkable footage to show you."

"Not now. We need to set up an opening monologue and get some departure shots of the space station."

"I got the space station an hour ago. It's just a dot now. And I got some really great stuff from around this ship. I know a nice place for your monologue. There's an observation area...."

"Good. I want to get this thing over with. This shit can will probably be the death of us."

I'm gonna show you where the escape pods are."

"Look boss, we don't have to worry about that. This ship's been making runs for 60 years. It's totally safe. We'll be OK."

We made our way through the never-ending maze of the freighter to an observation deck. Really, it was more like an oversized look-out port. But it lined up with the departing Planet Earth which would look nice behind me. Evan took a minute to set up the shot and get my sound rolling.

"Alright boss. I'm ready. In three...two...one."

"I'm on the interplanetary freighter *Atlantic* en route to the Martian Orbital Space Station and then to Planet Mars itself. Seems that Earth isn't the only place that has problems with malfunctioning robots. This is my first time in space and it should prove to be interesting to see a bot get blasted to bits in zero gravity."

"Good one Carl. Now let me get a quick shot of the Earth behind you without any talking....That's it."

"Alright Evan, I'll be back in my bunk. Have fun exploring the ship. Just keep in mind your where the nearest escape pods are."

"Sure thing, boss. See you later." Evan left me to continue his onboard adventures. I couldn't get to my quarters fast enough. I didn't know how I was going to deal with being on this freighter for three days. I felt claustrophobic on this ship. I really missed the warmth and safety of Earth. I spent the next few hours re-studying the ship's schematics and reading space emergency survival stories. I dozed off with my pocket screen in my hand.

Something jolted me awake. A powerful force threw me from my bunk right into a nearby bulkhead. My face, which impacted first, began to hurt like hell. Blood started flowing from my nose. "Shit, what the hell was that!" The ship's alarm sounded with an unnerving howl that echoed throughout the vessel.

We were listing almost sideways. Anything that wasn't nailed down was now littered across the side bulkhead along with me. I was stunned, but at least aware enough to grab my pocket screen. "This isn't happening...."

I could feel vibrations as the structure of the freighter groaned and shuddered. The alarms continued. The ship's onboard lighting had switched to a deep red hue. I didn't know exactly what the hell was going on, but I knew we were in serious trouble. "Evan!" I screamed. There was no response. I was alone in my quarters.

I was able to pull up the ship's schematics on my pocket screen along with a route to the nearest escape pod. Time to get the hell out of here. I figured that I'd either find

Evan on the way or be able to contact him once I had gotten to a safer spot. The escape pod wasn't really that far from my cabin, but the trip was made more difficult because what had once been the wall, was now the floor. And, the ship was continuing to roll.

An announcement came over the intercom, "All ship's passengers and personnel to escape pods. This is not a drill." It repeated several times. The ship was still rolling over, slowly becoming inverted. By the time I made it into an escape pod, the ceiling had become the floor. The groans of the ship were accented with repeated harsh snapping sounds which I thought might be supports giving way. "Damnit Evan, get your ass to a pod!" I strapped myself in.

I was calling Evan from my pocket screen. Over and over, while the ship's alarm was sounding, I was calling him. I got nothing in response. Then, the air lock and door to my escape pod shut, sealing me inside. It must have been automatically set as I hadn't touched a thing. The pod's internal computer voice sounded, "Escape pod jettison in ten seconds." I heard the docking clamps release as I kept trying to contact Evan. I got nothing back.

A sharp blast sent my escape pod tumbling away from the *Atlantic*. It took me a few seconds to get my bearings as the pod stabilized. I could see the giant freighter from the window and I set up my pocket screen to film the event. "Emergency beacon activated." The pod's computer voice reported.

The rear sections of the massive ship were burning. I could see large parts of the vessel separating from the main structure as well. Explosions erupted from the remaining parts of the ship which sent fields of debris fanning outward. I used the pod's radio to try to contact any other survivors. I got nothing but static in response.

As I watched the slow destruction of the *Atlantic* unfold, I worried about Evan. Did he escape? Was he hurt? What about the other passengers? What caused the ship to blow up? Actually, I thought I knew what caused the ship to blow up. It was a massive hunk of shit. It was a catastrophe waiting to happen. It should have been scrapped 30 years ago. Now, dozens of people probably are dead. One of them, a friend of mine.

My escape pod continued to fly away from the wreckage and my emotional shock was briefly interrupted by the pod's computer voice. "You are approximately mid-way between Earth and Mars. There are no other ships in this area. Estimated time until rescue is six weeks."

"Six weeks? You've got to be fucking kidding me" I replied. "How much food do I have onboard and how long will life support last me?"

The computer briefly paused to make its calculations, then responded, "You have two days of food and water with enough power to operate one week of life support."

"Great, so I get off the burning ship only to starve or suffocate in space?"

"There is one other option." The computer continued, "This escape pod is equipped for long-term cryogenic storage. You can be kept alive and safe until rescue."

"Oh, even better. You want to fucking freeze me? I can't wait to get my hands on Lester!" I thought about my situation for a minute as I looked out the pod window at a shrinking mass of space garbage that was the *Atlantic*. It really started to sink in, just how big and empty space was. "OK, fine, I'll take my chances. Go ahead and freeze me."

The onboard computer went to work preparing the pod for the freezing process, "Cryogenic process will begin in 30 seconds. Please make sure you are strapped into your seat and that your bio sensors are attached." Next to my right hand, two wires with suction cups on the ends of them began to blink. I placed the flashing cups on my forehead and waited.

There were brief sounds of gasses venting inside my pod along with a some mechanical noises that I couldn't identify.

"Cryogenic process will begin in 10 seconds. Please stay still." A hissing sound began. It quickly got very loud, almost ear-bleeding loud. Immediately the pod's temperature dropped. "Three....Two....One." For a brief second, I felt like I was being electrocuted. Then...nothing. I was out.

