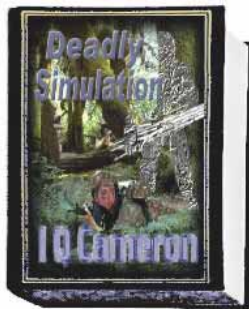


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## Deadly Simulation

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(Version V8.0C)

A novel by

**I.Q. Cameron**

## Introduction

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*Deadly Simulation* is the gripping, action-packed sequel to *Graphic*, in which the horrors of Vince Vanderman's island of carnage continue. When a trio of intrepid truth-seekers ventures to the forbidden island, they find a new twist on all the reported horrors of the past. The reported enemy has developed beyond anyone's wildest nightmares, and a battle already rages...

This novel is entirely provocative, engaging, and full of thrills and constant brutal action. *Deadly Simulation* will have you enthralled and gasping right up to the final twist. Even better, this story may give you very real reasons to question just how far your own government might go in the development of its own defense... or offense.

Frightening thoughts to consider!

*Now, please enjoy!*

## Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and

wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and ‘just too good’ to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...:)) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ’s intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don’t ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as ‘have faith’ or ‘simply believe’, which are meaningless to the one who doesn’t understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as ‘going too far’, than to indulge in the usual ‘*too valiant and too true*’ hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My ‘baddies’ are bad, and my ‘heroes and heroines’ are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing ‘real’ characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

## Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. No person or event described within this novel is intended to represent any real person, living or dead, or any event in history. It is purely a work for entertainment, and any similarity to any real or fictional person or event is purely coincidental.

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## PRELUDE

*Colorful patterns.*

They came and went, circled and mixed, then whisked away again.

And they were so pleasant as to be out of place with everything else in her mind.

*Her troubled mind...*

Dianne's head broke the surface of the water face-down, and she had her mouth open the instant that she sensed fresh air, sucking it in, in a loud, desperate gasp. Just for a moment she stared down at the bubbling, frothing surface, and, surreal as the thought was, she couldn't help but wonder if it had been the colorful fish that had made her mind play tricks on her with all those dazzling, swirling patterns.

But no. It hadn't. And it only took the strong, cruel fingers that crushed the back of her neck to convince her otherwise. The patterns had been the beginning of her brain's reeling panic to the onset of drowning, and not some pleasurable design meant to comfort her.

She gasped several more long, noisy breaths, coughing out water that had slipped by her tightly closed lips and into her straining lungs, and she was thankful that at least she was given the time to do so.

It was more than she expected.

She had barely seen her attackers, even though they hadn't bothered with masks. There had been little need. Their attack had been so quick, and had caught her so much by surprise that she had only time to glimpse them. *Big men, and strong.* That was all she knew. And her military training accounted for nothing against their tactics and power. In fact, she could still feel the strength of one man's hand constantly around the back of her neck, proof enough of that simple fact. And these were no gentlemen, either. Dianne's bruised ribs and legs attested to the fact as, all the while, she strained to regain her breath.

These men were serious, and they had wasted no time proving it. They had bound her wrists and ankles together behind her, kicking her down initially to subdue her with minimal struggle. A few punches to her midriff had knocked the wind out of her, removing all risk that she might cry out and alert her neighbors. After that she had been their plaything.

And yet they hadn't played. They had moved her small kitchen table against her fish tank stand, then hoisted her up to kneel upon it. A couple of well placed footstools and some large books were enough to steady her there, and one of the pair had begun dunking her head in the tank as though he was dipping a snack. She knew she was in trouble from the start.

"Okay, I'll *talk!*" she gurgled through a mix of bitter tasting fish tank water and noisy, heaving breaths.

"I know," came the soft, confident reply.

Out of the corner of an eye Dianne saw the other man, obviously the leader of the pair, give a small, silent nod. That was all it took to have her head forced down into her own pets' watery world again, though at least the thug doing the pushing allowed her to catch a long breath before he pushed her under. At first she thought it had been a merciful gesture, but in time, as her lungs burned, only prolonging her torment, Dianne realized that it had, in fact, been a cruel ploy to multiply her torture.

Though she strained valiantly to hold her breath, it was a simple matter for the two men to outlast her, one even nonchalantly glancing at his watch, as if to show that he had some other pressing engagement to attend. He didn't. This was his night's work, and indeed, his pleasure. He was in no hurry.

Only after Dianne imbibed a jerking series of watery breaths did the man in charge give another nod, and the muscular lackey raised their victim's head from the fish tank. Dianne vomited, long and noisily into the tank, gasping and coughing for quite some time before regaining her composure enough to communicate once more.

"*I'll talk! I'll... talk!*" She vomited once more as if to make her point.

"Enough," came the leader's calm response.

He stepped up close and removed his lackey's restraining hand from Dianne's neck, then used his own to coax her to look squarely at him. Then he used both hands to raise her kneeling, gasping form upright until she was kneeling at one end of her kitchen table, her long brown hair still dripping water into her now murky fish tank.

"I said I'd talk!" she repeated, coughing some more. She sounded bitter, angry that her earlier plea had been ignored.

The leader of the pair gently wiped matted clumps of long, dark hair from Dianne's face, his touch soft and for all appearances, loving. His tone, when he finally did speak, was soft and sounded quite genuine.

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm sorry about that. It's my bosses, you see. *They* are the ones who force me to use such... *unrefined* methods. But you see, *everyone* says they'll talk. And then I go soft on them, and the next thing I know, someone's getting all argumentative and... *resisting*. Resisting isn't good, you understand. My bosses won't allow that. So, yes, I'm very sorry, Dianne."

She coughed out some more water, making no effort to hide her disdain, but not offering anything to show that she would resist him either. His mix of brute force and intuitive use of the Stockholm syndrome was all the proof she needed that he would eventually get what he wanted. Indeed, he sounded so concerned for her welfare that she almost believed he cared what happened

to her. Of course, she knew better, but there was no point in resisting or testing him. All she could hope to salvage now was her survival.

And even that didn't look hopeful.

"Please, just don't put me back in the water. Okay?" she pleaded. For the moment, that seemed crucial, and who knew, maybe he would agree.

"I will not... seek to drown you again," he conceded, almost lightheartedly, "as long as you keep your side of our bargain, and tell me what I need to know. Deal?"

"Deal," she replied, and coughed up some more water.

He wiped her mouth clean with a nearby napkin.

"Oh look, you fed the fish," he noted, glancing at the small pieces of floating vomit in the tank before her.

"That's your ape-friend's fault," she shot back distastefully, unable to hide her disgust.

"Mmm," he conceded again. "He can be a little bit... *too* persuasive. Again, I'm sorry about that. You have to understand I have to... establish the boundaries... of our... *relationship*."

"*Relationship?*" She looked more surprised at his description than angry. "You break into my apartment and try to drown me! And for what? So you can... cover up something that you know very well is wrong."

She hesitated, afraid that she might incur his wrath, and upon seeing that he was happy enough for her to air her displeasure, she almost began to cry. "And don't think I don't know how this finishes, because I do."

He simply smiled, and surprisingly sympathetically.

"Dianne. Dianne. Dianne," he began. "You know nothing of the sort. Firstly, if I wanted to drown you, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. You'd be... drowned. Sorry, but it's true. And secondly, you watch far too many movies. Whatever you think of me – *of us* – we don't go about... *murdering* anyone."

"Liar," she argued.

"You're brave," he acknowledged honestly. "I'll give you that. I admire that. I really do. But it doesn't change my job. Now, like I already told you, all I need to know is your contact. That's all. Tell me that and my friend and I will be on our way – and there's no reason for you to fear..."

"If I tell you, you'll just finish what you started," she groaned, tears mixing with water that dripped from her cheeks.

He gently gripped her chin, turning her head away from the direction in which she was kneeling, forcing her to face him directly. Taking time to study her, he sighed, smiled again, then

pursed his lips.

“Dianne,” he said, “I give you my word I will not harm you any further if you tell me what I need to know. You’re such a pretty woman. How old are you? Thirty-five? Thirty? *Twenties?*”

“You know how old I am,” she stated defiantly, refusing to be so easily duped. “You know all about me. You’re part of some elite hit-squad, aren’t you?”

He sighed again, then spoke just a little firmer.

“Dianne, I thought we had a deal,” he warned. “I won’t drown you in your own fish tank as long as you talk to me. Now I give you my solemn word on that. Did we not have a deal?”

She nodded compliantly, her eyes diverting to glance at the tank once more. He held on to her chin, forcing her to look at him. Surprisingly enough, she could see no hatred in his eyes, though she knew he would do everything he threatened. There was no use in arguing.

“Thirty-eight,” she gasped, still struggling with some residual water in her lungs, and the strong burning of vomit in her throat. “Please, I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Just promise me that you won’t drown me again. I don’t want to drown. *Please.*”

“You’re really afraid of that, aren’t you?” he said. “Okay then, I give you my word that no one will drown you.”

Strangely, she could see in his face that he meant it.

“Are you going to kill me after I tell you?” she dared to ask.

He gave her a stern look to warn her that she was stalling far too long, then his face softened once more.

“Very well,” he conceded. “I’ll tell you the truth. As much as you fear what we might do to you, you only need fear me if you choose not to answer me. I have strict orders to get what I need to know at any cost – and I do mean *any* cost. If you were to die in the process of being questioned...”

“Tortured,” she dared once more to correct him.

“Questioned,” he continued, unfazed. “That would be... a pity. An unnecessary pity, might I say? I’d have to let my friend have his way with you a whole lot more than he already has, and then we’d have to make this look like some kind of robbery-gone-wrong. Maybe rape? I don’t know.”

She looked even more horrified at the thought.

“But fortunately, we don’t have to resort to such basic methods,” he crooned. “If you tell us what we need to know, I’m sure you won’t forget that we know exactly how to find you, and that any blabbing to the authorities, or even your superiors for that matter, could result in... well, let’s just say, a very poor outcome for you.



“But I have much higher hopes for you, *Captain* Dianne Phillips. If you tell me what my bosses need to know, and hand over any evidence you may have, there no longer exists any reason for us to have any... *angst* between us. Don’t you agree?”

“And no reason for me to live,” she reasoned.

“You will live,” he said simply, shrugging as though he had no particular feeling on the matter. “I am not a monster, and more to the point, I don’t *need to harm you*, because now you know that we can come for you at any time. *Agreed?* Now, the names of those you told, Captain. Please, let’s stop hurting one another and then we all get to go home. Okay?”

“I’m already home, and you broke in,” she pointed out, looking tearful and forlorn, but yielded nonetheless. She started to cry, and again he lovingly wiped her face.

And then she told him what he needed to know.



When the ordeal was over, Dianne looked up sadly from staring into the fish tank. She watched her small fish nibbling at the meal she herself had eaten earlier, unperturbed by her vomit. In her heart she felt terrible about the betrayal she knew she had just committed in the hope of saving her life, a deathly premonition hovering over her frightened mind.

At least her fish didn’t condemn her.

“Is this where you shoot me?” she asked, barely daring to catch the leader’s eye.

Having satisfied himself that his partner had retrieved all the software Dianne had confessed to having, the softly spoken man approached her, picking up the coat he had draped over one of her kitchen chairs at the outset of their violent encounter. She still kneeled before her fish tank, perched nervously atop her kitchen table, a footstool positioned to keep her from toppling. By now her feet had lost all feeling, and she doubted that she could stand.

But then, she doubted she would ever stand again.

“Are you going to shoot me?” she demanded bravely. “I told you what you wanted to know. I gave it all to you. Are you still going to... *kill* me.”

The very word sounded harsh, and she hoped fervently that it might make enough of an impression on the man to rethink the situation. Again he simply smiled. He seemed so calm, so in control – and he was handsome. Dianne wondered if he considered himself somewhat of a ladies’ man.

“Dianne. *Captain*,” he suggested lightheartedly. “Stop watched so much TV. No one shoots anyone in this line of business. And besides, didn’t I give you my word that I wouldn’t drown you – or shoot you?”

He looked to his partner for confirmation. The thug simply shrugged.

"I really don't want to drown," she said, almost distant with dread.

"I don't know what I said, now," the leader continued, again being quiet honest with her. "But it doesn't matter, Dianne. Because nobody's going to shoot you, or drown you. Got that? It's just not necessary. Besides, I'm pretty sure I gave you my word on it. I'm just truly sorry that we... *upset* you. Have a good night. Oh, and don't bother to get up. We can see ourselves out."

He saluted her, smiled again, then turned to leave.

"What about my friend? What about her?" Dianne's guilt would not allow her to let the matter go so easily. "Are you going to kill her too?"

"*Too?*" he asked. "I keep telling you, Dianne. No one kills anyone in this game. There's no need."

"Yes there is," she whispered quietly, her heart breaking that she had given up her friend so easily. "And you're a liar."

He shook his head again and began to move toward the door, but her eyes follow him. His accomplice simply waited near the door, ready to open it, but making no move to do so without his boss. A military girl all her working life, and a dealer in secrets, Dianne knew then for certain what was the truth.

That was why they hadn't bothered to cover their faces, she knew.

"*I hope you suffer before you die,*" she whispered. "I hope you see it coming, just like me. Better still, I hope it's a *woman* who kills you. You deserve that."

The leader shook his head as though genuinely disappointed, then let his coat drop to the floor, revealing a standard military-issue, single-edged combat knife firmly in his grip. Dianne tried to move, but her body was long since numb, and her bonds totally immobilized her. He was at her side in a moment, and pulled her nearest shoulder in tight to his chest with his free arm.

"*You lying pig!*" she spat with rage and absolute disgust, cursing him vehemently. "*You promised me! You promised me!* I hope you never find her! I hope she sees you all hang! You *lying, filthy pig!*"

He moved his embracing hand to grab a thick shock of her long, wet dark hair, and pulled her head back as though he might slit her throat, but no such blow came. She cried aloud, gasping shrilly, and shivering uncontrollably. The knife remained at his side, hanging easily from his right hand, never motioning as though he might strike her.

With a fistful of her hair right at her scalp, he pulled her face close to his.

"I *tried* to spare you," he explained softly, genuinely disappointed. "I really did. You

weren't supposed to see it coming. It's not my fault if you made me make promises about not shooting you... and now you won't even look away. Sorry, but I *tried* to spare you."

Dianne could hear the unsteadiness in his voice now, and could feel his strong hand shivering as it held her hair. She knew that such a tight grip on so much hair should surely have hurt, but she could feel nothing but a deep, icy fear at the certainty of what was about to happen.

"Don't let me *drown!*" she demanded, willing him to heed her plea.

"I tried to spare you. It's *your* fault!" he spat defensively, and he pushed her head forward and down over the fish tank once more, though not into it.

"No! It's *yours*..."

Dianne shook and shivered and tried to pull away, but there was nothing she could do to avoid the inevitable. It was cruel and awful, and she whimpered her complaint to the end, but he did what his masters had demanded from the beginning, following his orders without question.

And without mercy.

As the man forced his body to come under his full control again, trying to hide his excitement, his accomplice moved to his side once more, viewing their night's work with a somewhat distant and unconcerned look. Dianne's killer removed the bloody knife from before her slit throat and wiped it clean on the back of her blouse, several times until the blade glistened once more.

He waited, holding Dianne's head above the water by her hair until her small movements ceased, then explained himself to his subordinate.

"I gave her my word she wouldn't drown."

"I'd say she's beyond drowning by now, Captain," the other one noted simply.

"Maybe, Lieutenant," he insisted. "But I promised."

His assistant simply nodded his understanding, if not his agreement about the need to remain holding her head above the water for so long.

"She sure was brave," he noted.

"What else would you expect?" the leader replied in a gravelly voice, unhappy and almost chiding. "She was one of us."

The man simply nodded again, happy not to argue the point.



The leader eventually let Dianne's head sink slowly back into the fish tank, which was now tinted red with the young woman's blood. A few small bubbles rose from the mix as the last of the air in her lungs sputtered from her gaping throat, and then Dianne was completely still. In

just seconds the fish could no longer be seen through the red die that invaded their small world.

“You tried not to tell her,” the second man acknowledged.

“Yeah,” the leader agreed. “It was a pity. But I *did* try, *didn't I*? No matter. There'll be plenty more like her where we're going.”

His partner grinned, genuinely relishing the thought.

“I can hardly wait,” he said.

“Yeah well,” conceded his leader, “for now, just follow orders. Toss the place. Make it look like a robbery. I'm gonna make sure we've got all her computer gear.”

And while the captain was still trying not to show too clearly how much he had enjoyed the kill, he too felt his underling's enthusiasm at the prospect of sanctioned murder. Neither of them wanted to wait.

## CHAPTER 1

The trio slipped silently ashore, taking care not to splash in the shallow water as the cool, frothy waves caressed their khaki-clad ankles. Each knew they could not afford to make a sound.

She followed her trusted leader: He the experienced former soldier, and she the intrepid reporter, intent on performing her mission, no matter how fearful or dangerous it might be. A third individual helped to pull equipment from their inflatable dinghy before the trio worked at hiding the small vessel amid bushes. Each glanced about, ever vigilant and very cautious. Two of the three utilized night vision scopes mounted to small helmets, allowing them to peruse their surroundings with one naked eye and one assisted.

Happy that they were alone, the trio advanced, slowly and silently from the white sandy beach. She followed her leader without hesitation or question. He had prepared her well.

They were a trio of camouflage-clad prowlers, coming ashore under the cover of early morning darkness, testing at every opportunity to ensure that they had not been discovered. Their leader led them away from the open, dimly moonlit beach, and into the intimidating darkness of a thick forest.



Pale moonlight filtered down through the palm fronds and undergrowth, and the breeze was cool, almost chilling. Other than the pleasant rustle of the fronds above their heads, the dark forest was silent, undisturbed by its intruders' presence. In the distance the occasional sounds of

the gentle, lapping waves gave a tropical feel to the foreboding island.

The lack of penetrating moonlight revealed little of Bob Makepeace's form, and Libby Justice strained to make out not only him, but also what he was doing. Still, she trusted him implicitly, and had been so soundly drilled about what to expect and how to behave, that she made no sound, and simply waited patiently for his direction.

Bob retained his helmet-mounted night-vision scope, which allowed one eye to view the area in fluorescent green while maintaining a normal view with the other. Even in the half-dark, Libby could see that he looked troubled, something she had also seen as she watched him prepare over previous days.

It was no secret. Bob *was* troubled. In the dim light he checked his assault rifle and sidearm, as well as comms.

"Copy Lola? Libby?" he whispered.

The required single-word responses satisfied his need to know that technology at least had not let them down. Lola Tuff was thirty-two years of age, with dark hair and green eyes, and an uncanny ability to remain calm and focused while action erupted around her. She was lanky, with fair skin and a small chest, the cause of many jokes at her expense. Best of all, she was dependable and tough, as her name might suggest, and having served under Bob in his combat days, there was a trust between the two that made all tasks seem more achievable.

"Are we okay?" Libby whispered, finally daring to break the tense silence, activating the small button on her earpiece.

"Yeah," Bob whispered, nodding. "So far. Just keep quiet. This doesn't feel right."

"Why?" she asked, obediently still, yet annoyingly persistent.

Bob had complained about Libby's trek to the island being poorly conceived from the very moment she began formulating the idea. Again he nodded in the dark, knowing there was enough moonlight for her to see his gestures.

"No mine fields," he answered. "Didn't you notice that? There should have been mines. They're gone."

She shrugged, suddenly feeling the bite of the cool early-morning air. Her feet were especially cold.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Well, *yeah*," he mocked lightheartedly, his voice barely audible. "If you want to keep both feet attached, it is." Then he hesitated. "Well, maybe. Just isn't... what I expected. Wouldn't like to feel *too* welcome."

He took another silent reconnoiter of the forest. Lilly couldn't see a problem. Not getting a

limb blown off or having her organs shredded by a hidden mine seemed something of a bonus to her.

“It’s like they made it a little *too easy* for us – *or someone* – to get on the island,” he explained, knowing that despite the need for quiet, she would not be able to let the matter rest until she understood his reasoning. He hated to admit it, but her persistence was one of the many things he liked about her, though perhaps not while they were attempting such a clandestine and potentially dangerous venture.

“Oh,” she replied, nodding in the hushed imposed silence.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get to a safe point, and then we’ll wait for daylight.”

She nodded, and they set off without a sound.



Daylight served only to exacerbate the chill in Libby Justice’s lower legs.

She lay close to her leader and guide, hoping to stay safe, and perhaps gain some small warmth. The latter, of course, was a futile hope. Libby knew that she was not without skills of her own, but somehow the muscular, rugged figure of Bob Makepeace engendered a sense of confidence and safety that mere fitness and some karate training never could, even if she did remain cold.

In the growing light of day she could again see what it was that inspired so much faith in him. Apart from his experiences in the military, something of which he rarely spoke, Bob was a remarkable man. A six-foot-two hunk of pure muscle, and though in his late thirties, he was still almost as fit and fast as he ever was. Bob would admit to a few aches that once had never bothered him, and he made plenty of jokes about getting older, but in reality little had changed since his retirement from service two years prior.

He was private, almost secretive, rarely speaking of his days as an elite soldier, and for that matter, Libby knew little of what he had done or even where he had been during his beloved career. All she knew was that there was a cloud over him nowadays, a disquiet that made it hard for him to rest and even harder to confide. In quieter moments it hovered like a dark presence that could cause Bob to shrink into himself.

She loved him, she knew, though she had never taken it further. These days he seemed to brood; not angry, but simply not fulfilled, and obviously troubled. She wondered if he missed his fighting days, though again, he would never say. Since returning home to retire, he had become more protective of her than ever, even obviously so.

But in reality, as much as he was clearly desperate to protect her, and so had tried long and

hard to talk her out of coming to the island, he had also seemed more alive than she could remember in the past two years once he was actually committed to accompanying her.

But Bob had control. He had never cracked. And his secrets remained his secrets.

Libby was like Bob in many respects, though not all. She too was fit, but no matter what exercise or dietary regime she maintained, nothing ever showed on her slender form. Indeed, she looked quite physically innocuous, though she was far from it. At twenty-six years of age, she held a black belt in Karate, and while she had never put her fighting skills to the test in life, the confidence they gave her allowed her to succeed where others might not. She was adventurous; *gutsy* was how Bob described her. And she would generally do whatever it took to succeed as a freelance reporter.

Hence their presence on the forbidden island.

Of medium height, with mid length golden-blond hair, Libby had the advantage of being able to dress attractively for a party, as well as the strength and spirit to rough it in the outdoors, should the need arise. It had given her an edge for success from the day she graduated as a reporter. And yet lately, success had eluded her, time and time again.

The wrong place at the wrong time, inaccurate leads, or simple bad luck had left her without a catchy story for almost two years. She was in a drought. Everything seemed to have worked against her. Even her attractive looks had not opened a door for her to snatch a scoop. ‘Blond hair, blue eyes and a nice smile’ meant nothing when it came to nosing out a great story. Those assets could only serve to open doors and set traps once a story was already sensed. Without blood in the water, the finer skills meant nothing.

But the Defense Department had been just coy enough to rouse her suspicions. Hence, she had concocted her current ploy in a bid to capture the story no one else had been brave enough to attempt.

Of course, there might not *be* a story to be had. She knew that. But if there were, as she suspected, then it would likely be a prizewinner. And that was what she needed now like never before. Who knew, it might be a *massive* story.

But if it was, she thought, it would be nice to survive it.

## CHAPTER 2

Arthur Best liked to ignore all the rules, just as he always had. Even his own.

Within the company that he had inherited, and then built until it was a small but powerful

institution, he was the supreme leader, and he did whatever he pleased. And everyone knew it. It wasn't even that Arthur enjoyed smoking his cigar during meetings; the pungent stogie inevitably tempted him to be distracted. Instead it served a far greater purpose; it kept his underlings keenly aware that their boss would do anything he wanted, against company rules or even government laws, and most importantly, despite the fact that he could see that his staff detested the strong aroma and the smoke.

That only made Arthur smoke them all the more.

He took his seat late at the meeting of his most trusted company executives, slumping down casually into his plush, red leather chair at the head of the table, every movement, and especially the fact that he was late, exuding control. No one doubted that his underlings did well to fear him, but he liked to remind them nonetheless. He was a powerful man, and given his ruthless nature and powerful connections, people had been known to simply disappear should they oppose him in the wrong, sensitive area. His fellow board members knew all too well of Arthur's penchant for ruthless behavior, but then, they were all a little that way inclined on some level.

Had they not been similarly ruthless, they would not have been present.

The sixty-year-old boss of ArtBest Virtual leaned back in his reclining desk chair, sinking into it so that it gave him almost the appearance of a pilot slipping into his cockpit, a small array of electronic communications and control devices on either side of the sprawling, elliptical mahogany desk before him completing the image.

Arthur surveyed his closest allies, his cold, piercing black eyes showing no trace that he was generally happy with their progress and trustworthiness. He could never allow them to *too* feel safe; that might lead to complacency, something he would never allow. Formerly a handsome man, Arthur's now graying brown hair capped off what had become a hard, deeply lined face. He exuded confidence and control as he silently viewed his department heads, and none dared to speak until Arthur invited them to do so.

His right-hand man and second in charge, interestingly enough sat to his left, something that might have caused the older man to smile, though that too was something he would not do on the chance that it might project some form of weakness, or undue friendliness. At fifty-five years of age, Neil Strong was equally as ruthless as his boss, a trait that had undoubtedly been instrumental in accelerating his rise to the top. The small gap in their ages also seemed to cement their relationship, both sharing an interest in golfing and flying. Unlike his master, Neil's head was glistening bald, and looked as though he had used some kind of automotive polish to buff it to a perfect sheen. His green eyes sparkled, and yet remained cold and dangerously calculating.

Marta Vanstrum sat next to Neil, a laptop computer and a ring-bound notebook and pen



before her. Marta went nowhere without her beloved technology, always ready to give an account of company finances should Arthur or Neil demand one, but she found that the old-school pen and paper still served as useful. At fifty hard years of age, she fitted in well amid the group, with a rigid face and cold blue eyes that could stare right through an underling. But to her consternation, Marta had never been accepted into the *boys' club*. Despite her cold demeanor, her long, straight blonde hair, feminine features and ample form meant that she could still be attractive when she desired, traits that, ironically, widened the gap beyond hope for her to ever become close to her male counterparts.

Vicky Rourke, on the other hand, could never be enticed to be part of the *boys' club* even if invited. Slightly younger at thirty-nine, Vicky still retained all the attractiveness that Marta might once have exuded, and far more. The science officer was tall and leggy, with a captivating face and inviting wide brown eyes that could melt a man should she need to, though the men in *that* room held little interest for her. Despite her pleasant looks, Vicky could be hard enough to make the tough decisions when necessary, and moreover, had consistently put aside all other considerations in the pursuit of her beloved robotic research.

An angel on the exterior, she would kill to protect her precious machines, and Arthur knew it, and loved her for it. Sitting to Arthur's right, Vicky looked almost as though she was facing off against the three most powerful executives in the company, and it didn't bother her at all. She was a vital part of their work, and she knew it. *They all knew it.* Vicky was a woman of many secrets, and Arthur trusted her to keep them all.

The one remaining individual at the table sat beside the science officer. Walter Priest was their forty-five year-old security chief, who oversaw not only security matters within the building and its surrounding development sites, but other rather more clandestine matters as well. A tall, muscular, lean body cropped with short hair indicative of his former military career, Walter came across on the surface as amicable enough, but one didn't have to look very deep to see a lurking monster. He was Arthur's wolf, a dangerous man who was happy to do his master's evil bidding, and then more.

Arthur blew a long, satisfied puff of smoke high into the air above the group, something he knew would annoy the women present, especially Marta. Fully satisfied that he had done so, he spoke the few words needed to open proceedings.

"Well," he asked, "how are we going on the tests? Vicky?"

"Exceptionally," Vicky replied confidently. "Robotic hardware and software are meeting all specifications, Arty. We have a few small issues with the armor to work out, but given that this is our first field test, I'm very pleased."

He snorted happily, puffing more smoke.

“Well, if my chief science officer is pleased,” he said, “then things *must* be going well. Given the standards I know you to work at, Vicky, I feel *very... assured*. No major problems then?”

“None, Sir,” she confirmed.

“Wally?” the old man said, motioning with his smoldering stogie, and moving on from Vicky.

Walter Priest hesitated, sighed and then looked the old man in the eyes, nodding.

“I concur,” he acknowledged. “I wasn’t happy with a couple of small matters. A few of the test case bullets did a little more damage than I had hoped...”

Vicky Rourke turned in her seat to catch the security chief’s gaze, but didn’t say a word.

“...more damage than I had hoped,” Walter repeated, showing his contempt for the science officer’s silent interruption of his assessment. “Might need to beef up the robots’ head and midriff casings to protect their cameras and their own munitions respectively. After all, we don’t want them exploding because an enemy round gets in with their own ammo. But other than that, they’ve performed... brilliantly.”

Vicky turned back to the boss, looking somewhat placated, and Arthur took it all in.

“Good, good,” he cajoled. “And their operators? How are they handling the controls?”

“Some not as proficiently as others,” Vicky said, rather directly, again to show a measure of distaste. “Our own people have less trouble learning to handle them. I personally find them exceptionally responsive and natural to operate. I can’t imagine why these jarhead apes can’t do as well. It’s not exactly rocket science. Still, since our contract insists that one of our chief science officers go along for the first test, at least we have *one* of our own operators in there. That’s *something*, isn’t it?”

Arty’s choice of science officer to accompany the test clearly bothered her, it was plain to see. Still, she had the presence of mind to rethink her *jarhead* comment and looked briefly again at Walter.

“No offence, Wally.”

“None taken,” he replied flatly, but it was obvious that he *had* taken notice of the comment. Arthur took control immediately.

“Well, we all knew they’d have trouble from the outset, didn’t we?” he corrected. “You can develop the perfect weapon, and have your own people get the most out of it, Vicky, but in the end, ArtBest Virtual is building these... *robots* for a customer, a client – a client who wants the pleasure of having their own people operating them. We can’t blame them for that. You’re job is

to build them the perfect machine. After that, how they operate it is up to them.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, nodding but still showing distaste. “But it’s hard to watch while their lack of skill causes so many problems.”

“Teething problems, that’s all,” noted Neil. “Relax, Vicky. You’re machines are proving more than their worth in the field. That’s all we have to worry about. Let the boys and girls in green learn how to use them as they will. Besides, if you make them tough enough, it won’t matter who’s driving them.”

Vicky pursed her lips, well aware that the vice-president of the company had just subtly told her to toughen up her creations’ defenses. It was a decision she had already arrived at, but to be told in such a way irked her greatly, and she could not help but explain why it hadn’t been done sooner.

“I can toughen them,” she explained, looking directly at Arty, as though he had made the comment, rather than Neil. “But I do so reluctantly, *Arty*. It’s a weight-to-speed ratio problem. At the moment our Lightning class is fast and maneuverable. If I make their defenses stronger, I have to make them heavier. They become slower and more vulnerable to attack. Eventually you need more armour because they’re just too slow in battle. And then there’s their ability to fly...”

“We understand, Vicky,” soothed Arthur. “But if there is a problem, find a compromise. You can do it. I know you can.”

Again she knew she had been overruled. She had been told. They had both said it in a complimentary way, but there was no missing the fact that both men had told her to improve her precious creations’ armor.

“As you wish,” she complied, knowing it was not a request. Still, she had to make her point. “In any case, the Thunder class is faring very well. Their heavier armour so far has not been breached. It makes them very much slower, but so far anything that has come against them in the field is proving no match. It’s just a pity they can’t fly like the Lightnings can.”

Her point was lost on no one.

Mata Vanstrum rolled her eyes.

“I understand,” coaxed Arthur, softening his tone. “Okay, you made your point, Vicky. And you’re right, the Lightning’s ability to... *fly*, as you put it, is a... masterpiece. Your work is sheer brilliance.”

Vicky gave a single nod, as if to say that he was very right. Arthur continued.

“And while none of us wants to tell you how to do your job, it is in the company’s interest to make these robots as strong as possible. After all, my dear, they *are* being shot at on a daily basis, you know. Surely there is something you can do without cutting off their wings, so to

speak?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she agreed. “But the weak point on both models is that they are *so well armed*, Arty. Their strength is also their weakness! With all that ordnance, they’re just a walking ammo dump. One breach and... And the Lightning simply *has to be able to fly out of danger* if it is threatened... Okay, I’ll do what I can.”

“Outstanding,” he replied, and immediately moved on. “Mata, how are the predictions?”

“Very outstanding,” she shot back, and immediately began to consult her laptop. “Just as General Price promised, the money has started flowing in for the first robots. We’re now twenty percent over our development budget, but we should cover expenses after the second major order, and after that, given the General’s quota, we’re looking *very pretty*, Sir.”

“How pretty, Mata?”

“Five hundred and twenty-five million in the first year, with at least five more guaranteed year’s orders after that.”

Arthur nodded and blew more smoke, causing the blonde accountant to wave a hand before her face and look rather pressed for breath.

“I can live with that,” the old man said. “And our suppliers, Neil?”

“Supplies are all running smoothly, Arty.”

Arthur moved his gaze to Vicky again.

“And as much as I know you’re not ecstatic about the idea, I take it my best operator will be going along to monitor our machines’ first time out? Vicky?”

Vicky thought about how to answer him honestly, yet obediently. After all, as much as she detested the idea of being sent to some mosquito-infested tropical island-prison, she genuinely liked the older man, and certainly admired him. He had taken her in and nurtured both her and her career. Truly, he was the father she never had. Certainly she wanted to please him.

“Well, Arty, I can tell you that I’m not *ecstatic*, as you put it, about being sent to some sweaty island in the company of some sweaty jar-heads, to watch them brutalize my beautiful machines, but I’ll go anyway. Just for you, I’ll go,” Vicky assured him.

“Their operators are going to wonder what they’re doing wrong once they see how well you operate your own machines,” he encouraged, understanding her reticence about being sent away. “And that’s not just me buttering you with a compliment so that you’ll do this for me. I really mean that. You are exceptional, Vicky.”

“Thanks, Arty. That means a lot to me,” she replied. “Of course, that’ll only happen if they ever actually *let me on a machine*. Just because it’s in the business agreement that an ArtBest Virtual science officer has to be there for the first testing phase, that piece of paper says nothing

about me ever demonstrating one of my machines once we leave our own testing facility.”

“As you say, Vicky,” Arty cajoled. “But you are our leading science officer, and those machines are *your babies*, so to speak. They’re going to need you there – at least at the outset. After the initial period you can come home. No more islands.”

“Promises to be a grand ol’ time,” she said, rolling her eyes.

Arthur smiled at her as an understanding father might do. “I know you don’t want to go, but it’s for me. Okay?”

“And for you I’ll do it,” she answered honestly.

Arthur cast a questioning gaze to his security chief to read his take on the matter.

“Well, I wouldn’t have summarized the situation quite like that,” Walter said, and he shrugged, again showing his distaste for the ease with which Vicky put down their military customers. “But I can certainly acknowledge that Vicky is the right person for the job. She’s the best operator we have, *and* she built the things. There’s no one better.”

“Good then. I’m very pleased,” grated the old man. “Because there’s a whole lot riding on this, my friends. I trust we’ll all remember that while we’re casting doubt on each other, or mocking our customers. *Hmm?*”

There were nods all round. Any pleasantness in Arthur’s face ran away as he grew dark and somber.

“If our customers choose to do anything they shouldn’t with our machines, and if word ever gets out, we’re all going down, you know that,” clarified the old man. He waited until all eyes were upon him before making his point abundantly clear. “If this goes wrong – if it goes like that last fiasco went on that island – with that nutty professor in charge...”

“Vince Vanderman,” Vicky interrupted. “I studied his work. He was brilliant...”

“He was a *sociopath and a fruitcake*,” correct Arthur. “It just so happens that his work was good enough for a brilliant mind like yours to capitalize on. Now, don’t interrupt, Vicky.”

She nodded dutifully and fell silent as her boss continued, his tone so low as to be menacing.

“If this goes wrong, it’s more than likely we won’t go to jail. Our *customers* will never allow it. Our military friends went down hard the last time this thing went public – the last time they held tests on *real people*, if I recall. *Our own people!* And so far they’ve offered us lots of money, but said nothing about *how they intend to test our machines*.

“You do all understand *that’s why* they’re paying us so much to develop this technology under the radar, don’t you? *Plausible deniability*, folks. That’s what we are – *plausible deniability*. Nothing more. So, if we could put aside our bickering about whose department is

the best, or who might have to make some changes, that would be... *most helpful*. If you don't want to have this whole thing turn into a train wreck, and then have the general and his friends come to get rid of all those who ever worked on the project before we can testify against them, then perhaps we might all just try to get along. Understood?"

Again the group nodded. His message was understood very clearly.

"Outstanding," he grated once more.

He drew another puff on his cigar, and then tried to blow smoke shapes into the air above the table. Again Mata waved a hand before her face, clearly not enjoying the experience. She liked the old man, but not his smoke.

"Anyhow," Arthur coaxed, making eye contact with each person in turn. "Not that anything *could* go wrong, and not that we ever *could* have a leak in our organization, but *if* we did, as much as our customers might pose a threat to us, they are also one of our greatest assets. There's no way they are going down again for the same thing. The lunatic that ran that island testing facility was inept, and so were the last lot of military people who helped him. I suppose we're trusting that this lot will be... *better prepared* to restore order if anything goes wrong. In any case, I trust that we'll be okay. But that's another good reason for having our own science officer along to keep an eye on things."

Again he searched the faces of his science officer and chief of security.

"Absolutely, Arty" assured Walter, his stern face leaving no trace of doubt. "Doctor Rourke and I have run through the various foreseeable scenarios, and we've taken considerable effort to make sure that we'll be covered. Vicky knows what to do."

Arthur nodded, though he didn't look completely confident.

"And on that subject, what of that leak you warned me about? What was her name? *Phillips*? I saw what happened to her. Nasty business – and she a captain, too. Is that something I should be worried about?"

"Not at all," answered Walter, almost dismissive of the matter. "That one wasn't on us. I offered to take care of it, but the General was... *not happy* with that."

"That's an understatement," Arthur said with a faint whistle. "Someone cut her throat and fed her to her fish."

Walter Priest tilted his head, and those present understood that it was a shared military thing, a code of conduct. He felt it his duty to explain.

"She was one of them, so the General insisted that his people take care of it."

"Take care of it, they did," remarked the boss. "Phew. I saw the news photos. What a mess. I trust we're all okay with that. We all know that people are going to die here, don't we?"

Of course, I suppose we're all just hoping they won't be *our people*, but rather, our enemies. That's the price to pay for the weapons we're giving to our country. Do we agree?"

A consensus of nods and single word answers assured the boss that they were all agreed, and Walter Priest's words summed up the general feeling within the room.

"Yeah well," he noted, shrugging the female captain's death off as justifiable. "She shouldn't have been trying to give away national security secrets. Not just the *brass's* secrets, but *our secrets too*. She was a spy. Just a spy. It's hard and it's sad, but she knew the risks."

Again there came the single word responses.

Arthur Best summed up the other side of the same coin.

"Still," he said, "If that was them *taking care* of one of their own, I'd hate to get on their bad side and have them come and *take care* of any of us." He blew another ring of smoke, then added for effect, "But that isn't going to happen, is it?"

It was as much a statement as it was a question, and again it brought the usual nodding of agreement among those present. Having seen Vicky's machines, her *weapons*, and the commitment of their customers to remain anonymous, no one wanted to slip up.

"There's a fortune to be made here, friends," Arty said firmly, "but the risks are very high."

When Arthur Best stood up, it was a sign to all present that the meeting was over. Only as his faithful company directors were filing out did the aging executive call back his science officer for a private word, and no one dared to ask why. When they were alone, he spoke kindly to her, again like a father, and she knew then why she liked him so much.

"Vicky," he said softly, "I know you don't want to go. I know that. But you understand that *I need you there, right?*"

"I know, Arty," she promised. "And don't worry, I'll serve you well."

"Oh, I know that," he said lovingly, and he rested a hand on her shoulder for reassurance. "I've never doubted that. You're my favorite. You always have been. Like the daughter I never had. And you know *that* too."

She didn't say a word. He was right on both counts. She *had* always known that too.

"I know you'll do well," he continued, getting to the point. "But there's another reason why it had to be you, Vicky. A *very important* reason. You see, training with Neil and Wally is one thing, but if things really *do go wrong*, there's something else I need you to do for me. And it's very, *very important*."

They both knew she would do anything he asked.

## CHAPTER 3

Even though Bob Makepeace, Libby Justice and Lola Tuff swept back and forth through the jungle for over two hours as the morning warmed the landscape, they found little to show the horror that had been reported on “Island 243” as the military had designated it. *Vanderman’s Island* was what the media had dubbed it, due to the sociopathic lunatic who had led the murdering spree that had made the island infamous in the first place.

In the time since the only victims to ever survive Vince Vanderman’s computer-assisted hunting games had announced the horror to the world, much evidence of bloodshed had been long since washed away. Not surprisingly there were the remains of the matrix of large posts that had been reported, from which virtual-reality-controlled robotic arms had sprung to slaughter unsuspecting, unarmed victims. Those murderous mechanical devices, however, were now also gone, the expensive and damning technology having been removed. Small hinged doors hung open on all remaining posts now, each creaking eerily upon inspection, but there was little else of interest.

Still, Libby filmed it all, and even had Lola act as her cameraperson while she spoke directly to her potential audience. She put on her neatest face for the camera each time she gave a whispered summary of what they found – which to her chagrin, wasn’t much. Still, there was plenty to make her guide, Bob Makepeace nervous. From time to time he would silently inspect bullet holes in trees and posts, then brood, searching the forest for invisible foes. Bob never let his rifle out of his grasp, and never let his guard down for a moment.

The stories had been rife of invisible beasts that hunted and slaughtered unarmed victims without mercy, and all controlled by sociopathic individuals who never even had to face those they murdered. The media had likened it to drone warfare, though with much more personal and sadistic motives. According to what had quickly become urban legends, bodies had been eviscerated, beheaded and torn apart by the metal creatures under the control of crazed, evil individuals using virtual reality to operate mechanical killing machines, and all for evil motives.

It had been computer games gone mad.

And whether the stories became embellished with time or not, Libby knew there was good reason to fear. Many powerful people within the military and government had fallen over the scandal, and while many of the details and the technology had been hushed up and hidden away, what had been revealed by the survivors painted a deeply disturbing picture.

Certainly Libby’s friend and secret source in military intelligence, Dianne Phillips had been afraid. Libby drew a breath at the thought of her trusted friend. A brief investigation into



Dianne's murder had found no leads and no motive, just a bound victim whose throat had been cut. A few missing items in her apartment gave investigators enough doubt to make no official finding, but that Dianne had probably been unfortunate enough to disturb desperate thieves, who had decided to leave no witness.

Notably, of course, her computer had also been taken.

Libby hardly knew where to start with *that* finding, even though the investigation had not been closed due to a lack of evidence. Just the fact that her friend had been found to have fish tank water in her lungs, as well as vomit, it seemed not to fit with 'robbery gone wrong'. Surely, Libby reasoned, if Dianne had simply been tied up and then killed by a thief, or thieves, then she would not have had time to imbibe water, let alone vomit.

And why position her over the fish tank at all? To Libby, it reeked of torture, and likely torture for a reason – such as to extort information. The police had found it likely that the killing was carried out by an amateur, who merely wanted to insure his victim was dead, and so positioned her body on the table, her head in the fish tank, so that she would drown if the knife blow didn't end her life.

Sure. Like having her throat cut from ear to ear was ever going to leave any doubt...

Still, Dianne had been illegally passing military secrets to Libby, which, as far as the journalist knew, was probably a treasonous act. The prospect of spending time in prison for simply doing her job didn't sit well with Libby, so it made telling the authorities investigating her friend's murder much more difficult. The very information that might have made them look harder would most certainly have cost Libby's freedom, if not her life.

And right now, more than ever, she needed the freedom to investigate.

None of it sat right with Libby, who had gone into hiding as a precaution even before her friend's body was found. Dianne had warned her that knowing what she did wouldn't win her any friends in high places, and now Libby feared it had cost her friend her life. Once Dianne's body had been found by concerned colleagues, Libby had headed straight for her trusted friend, Bob Makepeace.

Bob had argued long and hard against bringing Libby to the site of so many murders, especially given the brutal and dubious circumstances surrounding Dianne's death. But Libby had insisted, trying to convince him that uncovering whatever was going on might be the only way to truly ensure her long-term safety. Only when she had threatened to hire others to accompany her to the island had Bob agreed, and only if he could bring along a trusted friend who had served under him during his years in service.

But from the beginning Bob had made it abundantly clear that he was not happy.



The island was roughly round in shape, with a large hill at its center.

Inside that hill was an underground bunker. This was well publicized after the horrific events that had occurred on the island had been made public. The central bunker sported a helipad above it, and could be accessed by hidden tunnels. Three tall block walls had been erected, each emanating from the central hill and towering all the way to the beach, dividing the island into three equal parts.

Mines and barbed wire had originally completed the barriers, placed at the water's edge to prevent anyone from passing from one area to another. In this way the island's operators had been able to maintain three separate killing fields, with victims never able to access other areas, or escape. It had been nothing short of an island prison – or perhaps, *three* island prisons.

The three 'gaming' areas had then been set up to mimic a jungle, a small town, and an outer-space setting, with no expense spared to make the ruses complete and compelling. For the spacecraft setting, a very large building had been constructed with a stainless steel outer shell, complete with a flight deck and other life-like features one might expect to find. A multitude of large flat-screen monitors placed at angles near the floor and ceiling, and upon which programmed images of shimmering constellations in a black night made the ruse complete.

It was a sterile world, with victims waking from a drug-induced sleep to find themselves dressed in clean, white uniforms upon a vessel that was, presumably, traveling through space. The effort taken to make the experience seem real was extensive, intended to convince even the most steady of minds.

But the real expense had been in the advanced technology that allowed 'players' to utilize virtual reality technology to let them think they were within their chosen battlefield, using flexible metal monsters under their control to kill victims, even face to face, close and personal, without ever endangering themselves.

It had been cowardly and barbaric... and most lucrative. Paying customers had paid millions for the right to play Vince Vanderman's realistic games, some without ever suspecting that the reason the victims seemed so real was that they *were* real.

Funded by a rogue element within the military, the goal had been to allow Vanderman to develop his robot technology and his most effective chameleon technology, which allowed the VR-controlled machines to go about their killing fields almost entirely unseen.

It had been a remarkably successful diabolical scheme – until at long last the right combination of resourceful victims finally managed to take control of the bunker and overthrow

their brutal tormentors.



After searching the forest until noon, Bob led the trio to a large breach in one of the block walls that separated the jungle game from another game. He and Lola checked the area surrounding the breach, which had clearly been made by something that smashed its way through by force. Shattered blocks, many with mortar still stuck to them lay strewn about, and on the other side of the wall was more forest.

“I don’t know which game lies beyond that wall,” Bob whispered to his crouching friends, “but I want us to maintain absolute silence. Look out for cameras, and especially for combatants. Any sign of trouble, just drop down and signal the rest of us. But *no noise*.”

Lola and Libby nodded their assent, then followed Bob as he picked his way gingerly over shattered blocks, and then ventured cautiously through the breach in the wall.



Lola Tuff adjusted the assault rifle slung over her shoulder so that she could retrieve it at a moment’s notice, then held up the camera on Libby. She glanced about cautiously, scrutinizing the thin forest that surrounded the once brightly polished metal structure that had captured the interest of her leader.

It was essentially a large building, made entirely of what looked to be stainless steel, and covered perhaps eighty by fifty meters. The metal had been buffed in its original state, but out in the weather and not maintained, it had lost most of its luster. Basically it was a rectangle with the corners cut off, and with all the sharp edges removed so that it now resembled a huge metal jewel with faceted edges. The trio traversed the entire perimeter of the shining metal hulk, finding two burned, shattered openings low on the structure, on one of the facets where the wall met the floor at an angle.

“I remember this,” noted Lola. “A couple of the women who survived said they blew holes in this thing to get away from the machines. Looks kinda creepy now.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Libby. Then she composed herself for the camera, and announced what they had found.

To save them having to crawl in through one of the jagged blast holes, they found a ramp on one of the short sides of the building, and a metal door that had been left ajar. The door was thick, heavy and insulated, and lined inside with the same metal of the outer hull. It had clearly

been left open for a long time, as there were dried leaves that had blown inside the otherwise clean, sterile structure. Those who had come to investigate the hideous crimes of Vince Vanderman's island had also removed metal panels at regular intervals along the ceiling, leaving opaque plastic outer panels through which sunlight could illumine the metal tomb after the power had been shut off.

"Well, at least it's not dark," Libby noted. It seemed a small concession. In reality, though, it was much easier and less stressful to prowl about the inner rooms and halls of the metal 'spacecraft' in good light, rather than to have to creep very slowly by flashlights.

Inside the metal hulk was even more eerie than the empty forest had been. It was a silent metal world in which even the trio's whispers echoed as though they were trying to inform some hidden and ghostly entity of their presence. Bob insisted on quiet as always, and the trio crept about, filming from time to time and speaking only in whispers. Numerous panels had been removed from inside the craft, leaving exposed wires and plugs hanging where once electronic equipment had been installed.

Despite the lack of any breeze within the hollow, metal confines of the vessel, Libby shivered, though she tried very hard not to let it show. Without air-conditioning the housing was warm, causing them all to sweat, so to shiver left her no excuse but to admit to considerable fear. She could not help but contemplate the horrors that those who were hunted within the craft would have felt. Indeed, she imagined their screams, their torture, and their eventual, inevitable deaths at the hands of those who hunted them without mercy or pity. The metal structure was morbid, clinical and threatening.

Hardly the place anyone would choose to die.

But then, all victims had been abducted, so not one of them had ever chosen to be there. The unfairness and horror of it only served to drive Libby on all the more. As she began to witness the cold harshness of the venues for so many callous murders of innocent, unsuspecting victims, it hardened her resolve to expose every detail to the world.

All such thoughts were cemented when Bob Makepeace suddenly dropped down to a crouching position and raised a fist to shoulder height. That was the signal, Libby knew. Either he had found something, or there was danger.

Bob knelt on the metal floor just a few meters ahead, his eyes always searching for danger. With a finger he pointed in the dim light to something ahead of him, and Lola, who was just ahead of Libby, nodded her understanding. Lola invited Libby to sneak past, then began to film the reporter's reaction to what she saw.

Libby needed add no words.

Her response, despite a strong resolve not to let her guard down while on camera, was one of shock and dread. Though the stains were dark and dry with age, there was no mistaking the numerous large sprays of what could only be blood, some spattered, and some in large, ominous pools on the once sterile floor. Scorched blood and burn marks on the lustrous metal walls here and there gave mute testament to the awful ways in which people had died.

Libby now had all the proof she needed to confirm that this truly was a place of horror and death.



Warm afternoon sunshine found the trio on a deserted street.

A soft breeze toyed with Libby's golden hair, and brought some tiny hint of pleasure to her otherwise troubled mind. It felt good to be out of the 'spacecraft', which had proven to be nothing more than an elaborate hoax to convince players in Vince Vanderman's games that they were indeed killing victims in space.

The very idea made Libby feel deeply oppressed.

Having found nothing more than repeated sights of blood and scorch marks within the craft, the trio had decided to press on to the last remaining venue – the last *killing game*. Depressing as that thought was, it felt good to be out of the echoing metal chamber of bloody hallways and haunting, sterile rooms of the *spacecraft*.

The streets of the *town* were as deserted as the spacecraft and the jungle, and eerily so. Reports of the horror that had occurred on these streets had been meticulously detailed by those who survived the ordeal, and it had been established that over three hundred innocent and unsuspecting victims had been viciously murdered while Vince Vanderman made his fortune and developed a host of new technologies for a rogue element within the military.

Now the only witnesses to the bloody tales were the occasional bullet pockmarks on walls and in the various cars that were parked on the streets. Indeed, the place looked as though it may have been cleaned up, and it seemed to be larger and more modern than the victims had reported. The 'town' comprised a main street with just a few intersecting minor streets, all being sealed and signposted. There were streetlamps and rubbish bins, even awnings from a few of the buildings.

It struck Libby as strange that the small town seemed to be bigger than it had been originally described. When the upper echelons of the military had been so deeply embarrassed by what some in their ranks had done, there had been a plethora of promises of investigations and 'clean-ups', and in Libby's skeptical mind, that clearly must have included sweeping away much of the shattered glass from car windows, as well as other debris she might have expected to see.

“Doesn’t look as... *rough* as I thought it would,” noted Lola, and she panned about with Libby’s camera to take in the almost-neat street. Her words echoed Libby’s own evaluation precisely.

“And the survivors said it was only very small,” Libby added. “I’m wondering if maybe it’s been added to. It looks... modern... and bigger than they said it was.”

“Yeah,” agreed Bob, and he shook his head and pursed his lips to show his continued unhappiness about being there at all. “None of it is how those people described it. Accordin’ to what they said, this must have been cleaned up a whole lot.”

“And made bigger,” repeated Lola, also nervous about the development.

“Typical,” grumbled Libby quietly. “They’ve cleaned it up just enough so that if people back in the real world saw it, it wouldn’t look so bad. Snow job.”

“Now, now,” Lola pretended to mock, agreeing with Libby’s evaluation completely. “We all know the government would *never* do anything like that.”

“That may be,” noted Bob, “But you’d have to admit that it still has that... *Chernobyl-look* about it.” He pointed to a car not far away, peppered with bullet holes, then added with a measure of disdain. “I’ll be glad when we leave this place behind, Libby. I just want you to know that.”

“You wouldn’t let me come any other way,” she pointed out with a grin.

“You got that right,” he agreed, always scanning for danger, never resting. He nodded toward a large, dark, dry bloodstain on one of the parked cars to accentuate his point, then made a small snorting sound. “As if *anyone* could have stopped you coming here.”

She had to agree, and shrugged silently so as not to speak unnecessarily.

“Come on,” Bob ordered in a whisper. “Let’s get a look inside some of these buildings. Surely these maniacs must have left *some* good things for us to find.”



Another tense hour later the trio found their investigation of Vince Vanderman’s infamous island taking them to a second storey room that had plastic sheeting where a large window had been shattered.

Broken shards of glass still lay strewn about the bare concrete floor, and crunched noisily beneath the boots. Normally Bob Makepeace would have passed by the room just to avoid the unnecessary noise of the shattered glass, but one glance and he knew that Libby would want to film *this* room at length.

Written on a wall in chalk letters were the names of many, many people, set out in rows of

six names at a time, with each row clearly written by a different hand. At first glance it seemed like there were perhaps a hundred names, maybe more. It was obscene, and took time for the full meaning of what they were seeing to sink in.

When it did, Libby felt her heart sink.

“It’s the names of those who were *killed*,” she deduced. “*I remember this!* The survivors talked about how they found all the names of those who were brought here, and then they added their own. This is... *sick*. There are... so many. Must be hundreds. Oh, this is just horrible. Lola, quick, film this, will you.”

Lola nodded, tilting her head and pursing her lips to show her agreement about the importance of what they had stumbled upon. She peered out through the plastic sheeting over the broken window, noting that it had been taped into place with considerable care to ensure that the elements didn’t erase the chalk names.

“Someone wanted this preserved,” she noted.

“Mmm,” agreed Bob. “I’ll keep an eye out. You film it.”

Just before Libby could compose herself and begin her tentatively prepared spiel, she noticed something else, and totally ignored the camera that recorded her every word and movement.

“Oh, wow,” she noted, studying the top row of the long list of names. “Look at this, you guys. I recognize the top row. That’s the names of the ones who survived this place when it all came out in the media. Or at least, I recognize some of them.”

She allowed both herself and her potential viewers a few seconds for the true depth of the revelation to sink in. And just for a moment, she forgot that she was being filmed.

“That means that all those others are dead. Shot and fed to the sharks. *That’s* what the reports said. Oh, that’s just disgusting.”

“Mmm,” Bob agreed again, also ignoring the camera, and glad that he was not part of the show.

Lola filmed the names slowly, aware that even those had been withheld by the government where they could be.

Libby swallowed and tried to focus.

She had always known that this would be a difficult and harrowing experience – coming to Vince Vanderman’s island. But now the task of reporting what no journalist or reporter had ever had permission to do, or even dared to attempt, was becoming increasingly depressing.

And frightening.



As Libby did her best to preen her hair and recompose herself, she had the added dread of wondering if she and her friends were truly alone in this morbid, fearful place. Could a government department *really* leave something as damaging to its image as this unprotected?

Would it?

She doubted it. While such evidence remained, *surely* there would be a guarding presence.

Suddenly Bob's reticence seemed rather more valid than perhaps it had earlier.

She was right. For even as she spoke into a small microphone and stared into Lola Tuff's camera, the trio were being watched by more than one pair of eyes, their every movement and sound observed by the miracle of modern technology.

## CHAPTER 4

The attack seemed to come from nowhere, and it was like nothing the veteran had ever seen.

Lola Tuff didn't know what hit her. Something came from her right, and without warning. At first she thought she was the victim of an anti-personnel mine or maybe a hidden trap, perhaps a spring-loaded timber, probably studded with sharp prongs so as to impale the unfortunate person who stumbled into it. Whatever it was, she didn't see it coming, and it hit with such force as to launch her several meters through the air, despite the added weight of her pack, weapons and camera.

Even as she was airborne, her mind was quick enough to realize that although she had been struck hard on the upper right arm and ribcage, causing her considerable pain, there was not the expected added agony of intruding shrapnel or sharpened barbs. Nor was there the loud explosion of a mine. And, surreal as the added thought was, she was glad it had not happened inside the confines of a room, but on the open street where there was room to roll and recover.

Lola flew almost horizontal for a time, then executed an expert shoulder-roll as she touched down, minimizing any further discomfort or injury. She even managed to protect Libby's camera throughout.

She reached out and placed the camera close to a wall so as to protect it, then came up with her rifle at the ready. Though stunned and in pain, she immediately sought the cover of a nearby concrete post. When she finally saw what had struck her, the realization served only to exacerbate her dilemma.

Bob Makepeace had the presence of mind to push Libby out of the way behind a brick wall,



and then opened fire. His rifle bucked noisily numerous times at an enemy he could barely make out, the sharp cracking sounds shattering the deceptive peacefulness of the deserted town, and causing adrenaline to surge through all present.

Libby heard the unmistakable sounds of lead striking metal, as though someone was shooting at an armored car or a tank, though there was no such vehicle in sight. She took a still-camera that hung on a strap about her neck and reached it blindly around the corner, snapping photographs even before she dared to peek.

When the reporter dared to look out in earnest from behind the wall, she could see only a moving, shimmering shape, slightly bigger than a man, though perhaps similar in outline, and almost perfectly transparent. There was just enough distortion at the edges when it moved to alert her to its presence. Other than that, she could see right through it.

*It* – whatever *it* was, was quite invisible.

It was also very angry.

Bob fired two more rounds before the *thing* began to advance on him, closing the five meters between them in just three audible strides. Libby and Lola both heard *it* walk forward, threatening their leader, its *feet* sounding like they may have been made of metal with rubber pads, though definitely with enough depth of sound to indicate that the thing carried substantial weight.

From Bob's perspective the thing was most definitely shaped like a man, very much invisible except for small distortions in its shape at the edges when it moved. The thing stood head and shoulders over him, and was considerably wider too, and just for a moment Bob thought he could make out the crude shape of a weapon it held on its right side.

It was terrifying and eerie at the same time, and although he had never seen anything like it, Bob knew without a doubt that *it* was his enemy. And enemy that wanted to kill him.

He fired again and heard the unmistakable sound of two more bullets ricocheting off the fearful, transparent beast. The thing pulled up just short of Bob and then struck him as it had done to Lola, sending him flying. And just like Lola, he seemed to have a long, long time to consider his plight as he headed airborne toward the hard ground. Despite his best efforts at keeping his team quiet and out of sight as much as possible, clearly they had been found out. Not only that, but this *thing* had managed to creep right up on them without being seen, despite the fact that both he and Lola were well trained and vigilant.

And perhaps worst of all, whatever they were dealing with was totally alien to him. It was quiet, essentially invisible, and incredibly strong. Like Lola, Bob rolled and brought his rifle to the ready even as he struggled to gain his footing once more.

But the thing was too quick. It was upon him even before he could get a shot off.

Bob felt a powerful hand raise him by the neck of his shirt until his feet no longer touched the ground, and then he bumped against the towering invisible monster's chest, so close that he struggled to turn his rifle enough to make contact with what, now at such close proximity, was crudely shaped like a human head. The thing definitely resembled a man, its almost-invisible form shimmering in the afternoon sun. Up so close he could hear small whirring sounds, and given the hostile history of the island, he imagined that what he was dealing with was probably some form of advanced robot.

Whatever it was, it was amazingly strong and totally terrifying.

The fearsome beast did not speak, but pulled Bob in hard, over and over, buffeting his body against its transparent form, confirming for the former soldier that whatever it was, it was not biological, but definitely metal of some kind. In those frightening moments, with the wind being knocked out of him and his bones rattling as he took a pounding at the hands of the beast, he could not imagine how he could ever defeat the thing.

The beast thrust him back at arm's length, and even though Bob could not see the thing clearly, the technology that hid it from him was not able to completely hide the fact that it was preparing to smash him with its right arm. Bob was certain that it wielded a large weapon in its right hand, but rather than shoot him, it seemed happy enough just to beat him to death. He bellowed, bracing himself for what he knew would be a smashing blow.

But instead of feeling the thing hit him, it pulled him in close once more, then thrust him away again.

Lola's bullets were well placed as she treated the angry monster as though it was human. She fired twice at its midsection from one side, then once toward the back of its head, making sure to hit it behind where a human ear would be, so that any ricocheting bullet fragments would be deflected away from Bob Makepeace. There came an ominous clanging as lead thudded hard against invisible armour.

*"That got your attention, didn't it, you sack of scrap!"* she pronounced fearlessly.

The towering monster dropped Bob as though it was done with him, and even transparent as it mostly was, Lola could clearly see that the beast had turned its head to look in her direction once more. And now, she could imagine it looking angry.

*"Did I say scrap? Sorry, I meant crap!"* she blurted, and shot the thing where she imagined its eyes should be. To her surprise, the thing's head jerked back as though she had stung it somewhat. But alas, she had only surprised it. A moment later it was advancing on her again.

The thing thrust Bob away like a wet jacket, sending him sprawling on the hard ground.

Meanwhile Lola took advantage of the fact that her ally was away from immediate harm, and let the beast have a burst of automatic fire. Numerous rounds clanged noisily against it, causing it to stumble back a pace. The thing recovered, surprised by her bravery but unaffected by the burst, and continued to advance on Lola.

The technology that allowed the monster to remain essentially invisible worked most efficiently when it was stationary. While on the move, it was more easily recognizable. Hence, Lola could see with some degree of clarity that it was advancing, and staring right at her.

A distortion of light, almost like ripples moving across a glassy pond gave the only sign that the thing had raised the weapon in its right hand, leveling it in Lola's direction. Incredibly, Bob could see right through the thing to where Lola stood, the look of fear on her face as clear as if the thing was not between them. Bob was already back on his feet, and fired two more shots at the thing's head as he instinctively charged it. With all his bodyweight he crashed against the right arm and the weapon it held, able to distinguish it only by small, shimmering distortions in the afternoon sun.

As he did, the angry, invisible beast fired its powerful weapon at Lola Tuff.



Libby peered out from behind the relative safety of the brick wall as her friends did battle with the powerful attacker. Like them, she was at first stunned by what she saw – or *didn't see*. All the while the beast moved, she could clearly see everything behind it, distorted only at its edges. And like Bob, she realized almost immediately that it surely had to be one of Vince Vanderman's 'invisible killing machines' that the survivors of the island had spoken of.

Or an even more advanced version.

It had all seemed so far-fetched at the time.

But not now.

Frantic thoughts raced through Libby's mind. Just what *was* this marauding enemy? And how could they fight such a powerful machine – if it really was a machine? And would it simply take them prisoner, or was its only purpose to kill?

Libby looked down to the ground to see the camera that Lola had placed out of harm's way, and she ran instinctively to retrieve it. She sprinted back behind the wall, then dared to step out again to film their ordeal.



Lola may not have been able to see the monster's weapon, but she knew when it was fired. There came a sharp series of cracks, and the young warrior heard numerous projectiles whiz by her, missing her midsection only because Bob Makepeace crashed so hard against the side of their enemy's weapon.

In that moment Lola knew for certain that her old sergeant had surely saved her life.

Bob watched with added fear and awe as the wayward projectiles traveled on to tear out huge chunks of concrete from a building behind Lola, decimating a large part of the wall there. Instantly he realized that the hostile robot was firing explosive rounds, and while he instinctively knew from the lack of volume of the weapon that the projectiles were not large caliber, they still packed a mighty punch.

The veteran could only imagine what they would have done had they struck Lola. A look of shock on his young ally's face told him that Lola wondered the same thing. Meanwhile Libby Justice managed to film much of the action, albeit in jerky, unprofessional movements, and with a few screams and descriptive words of her own thrown in.

The shimmering beast was clearly annoyed at having missed its target, because it swung its transparent right arm at Bob, catching him on his left side below the shoulder, and sent him careering off to the ground again. That done, it brought its gaze back to Lola, intent on removing her from the battle. She backed up two paces, thudding hard against a large concrete veranda post, and rather than fire her weapon, which by now she realized was having no effect on the alien creature, she prepared to dive away from its line of fire.

But the thing did not fire again.

Instead, it quickly became apparent that her enemy was now more interested in beating her to death, rather than using whatever weapons it might possess. She saw just a shimmer of light at the extremities of its right arm and the weapon it sported, and knew that it was not aiming at her. Instead, another shimmer showed its large left arm rise and swing back, then take a wide swing as it attempted to pulverize her against the post behind her.

The invisible arm struck with devastating force.



Libby's hold on the camera jerked some more as she captured the destructive blow.

Lola managed to duck just in time before the heavy concrete column exploded in yet another eruption of shattered concrete. Her invisible enemy smashed the pillar so hard that it gave way, beginning to collapse under the weight of the structure above. With one side of the column pulverized and now scattered across the surrounding ground, it cracked and bent

sideways, metal reinforcement within it just sufficient to hold it together. The column pinched down hard on the offending robotic arm, capturing it tight and holding it there.

Despite the technology that made the beast appear transparent, Lola could see that the arm was stuck tight within the faltering concrete upright. A loud groaning sound as the roof above her began to sag was all the added impetus she needed to tell her to run. Rifle still in hand she gave up any notion of shooting the intruder again, and instead made a long dive so as to make cover just inside the main building to which the veranda and its roof were attached.

Bob Makepeace did the same thing, slipping in just behind Lola and then turning to train his rifle at the invisible monster again. He called to Libby to join them, but she was afraid and remained at the corner of the same building, filming.

The angry beast struggled to free its trapped left arm, though only for seconds. Seeing that it was stuck fast, the shimmering thing simply trained the weapon it held in its right hand, then shot away the remainder of the shattered concrete column. The weapon blasted away with devastating effect, and the last of the concrete upright exploded to free the trapped arm in seconds.

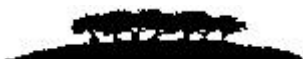
That done, the beast turned to face its prey once more, a generous coating of dust now showing its shape more clearly. It was considerably taller than Bob and wider at the shoulders too, with arms as thick as his legs. In its right hand it sported a weapon that Bob had never seen before, with what appeared to be three barrels of different sizes. The monster had no face, but otherwise it generally resembled a man – a very large, powerful man.

Bob and Lola put some distance between themselves, then prepared to fire on the metal beast once more, though they knew their efforts would have little effect. The *thing* raised its weapon too, and now, covered in dust as it was and much more visible, the trio could see the set of barrels rotate, bringing a somewhat larger one to the top.

They knew it could only mean one thing – some form of grenade launcher. Now the beast was *really* going to make them suffer.

Lola heard a high-pitched whirring sound that she guessed could only mean the device was arming itself. She stared in disbelief at the now dusty, irate machine, its new missile barrel armed right at her, and for a brief moment she thought that this was so much *not* how she expected to die.

Then without warning, the machine lurched forward, firing its missile as it did, and it was instantly enveloped in a blazing blast of white-hot flames and sparks.



Libby Justice was thrown back, partly by the instinct of self-preservation, and partly by the force of the explosion. For just a moment she thought she had seen a smoking streak, perhaps a smoke trail left by something that flew so fast as to be little more than a blur, especially through the view from the camera she wielded. But she knew she had seen something.

And so she had.

She managed to catch the precise moment that the marauding machine was struck, but after that, the camera diverted from its target. Not that it was of any consequence. All that mattered was the outcome. As she fell backwards behind the safety of the wall from which she had dared to venture, she hoped that what she had glimpsed was real.



Bob and Lola lunged for cover. As each fell heavily to the hard floor, they were showered with a stinging, buffeting cloud of disintegrated concrete and dust. Bob turned instantly to fire upon the invading machine once more, but stopped short as his mind quickly realized what had happened.

The aggressive, transparent machine had been struck from behind by something very powerful, far beyond the power of small-arms. The incoming missile had struck the beast's back, causing it to lurch forward just as it fired its own weapon. The result was that the monster's own powerful missile was directed up into the concrete and steel veranda roof, which then, already weakened by having one of its support posts shattered, fell in on top of the thrashing intruder.

The monster fell flat, covered in a dusty, shattered pile of timber, twisted steel and broken concrete, the entire veranda and the floor above demolished as it fell. The belligerent, violent brute was no longer even visible beneath a heavy blanket of fallen debris and a haze of thick, swirling smoke and dust.

It was a moment of enormous relief, and Bob knew for certain that the trio had just cheated death. What happened next, though, only served to add to his shock and dread of the situation.

A band of soldiers, dressed in camouflage fatigues and all heavily armed moved quickly toward them from various positions in and behind the surrounding buildings. One of the men even toted a smoking rocket launcher, evidence of having just fired the decisive missile that brought the rampaging robot down. The young soldier was busy fitting another RPG to his launcher, a sight that strangely both comforted and threatened the besieged veteran.

Bob raised his rifle in defense, but then lowered the barrel just slightly, realizing that he and Lola were hopelessly outgunned. The sight of the young man's readied RPG was just too menacing altogether.

He allowed the soldiers to advance, wondering if these men could possibly prove to be allies. His first instinct was to assume that they would be hostile, and yet it was obvious that they had just brought down the alien monster that would most certainly have otherwise killed him and his two friends. Besides, they were making no effort to shoot at the trio.

One of the uniformed men stepped ahead of the others, who took up defensive positions, their eyes scrutinizing the surrounding buildings for more enemies. The man lowered his weapon, as did Bob, and yelled through the dust cloud that still lingered from the veranda's demise.

"Come with us if you want to live!" he called, his voice no louder than was necessary to be heard. "*Move! Move now!*"

It took Bob and Lola only moments to glance at one another and then comply.

## CHAPTER 5

Lieutenant Dina Mayor screamed angrily within her air-conditioned virtual reality suit, her voice muffled by the all-encompassing headpiece, but her tone far from it.

She lay flat, sprawled out upon several flat padded supports, several meters above the concrete floor. Computer-controlled arms maintained the supports so as to mimic the ground upon which her fallen robot lay, while other small computer-controlled arms held yet more pads that pinned the officer down, mimicking the concrete veranda roof that had fallen upon her robot. Her entire VR suit was supported by yet another arm, this one larger and more complex than the others, since it also housed various arrays of electronics and air-conditioning ducts that fed her suit.

The entire system of complex arms worked in unison to wonderfully and perfectly recreate a safe, padded world that mimicked the real world in which she operated her powerful killing machine. Every bump and hollow was made to feel just as real as the high-definition graphics within her head-piece, each technically perfect part working together to make Dina feel just as though she was somewhere else, within another world.

And yet it was all achieved without ever placing the operator in danger.

The arms that held her down remained doing so, anchoring her. She pulled and struggled to stand, but could not, and found herself thrashing about like an injured bird attempting to fly. Her efforts were futile, the arms refusing to let her rise. That was their job. After all, in her virtual world, she was very much injured and pressed flat.

“Computer! Break! Break, dammit! Break!”

The system of downward-pressing arms suddenly released her, and she stood upright, her snug-fitting black VR suit glistening in the dim light of the bunker. The lieutenant was still supported by pads beneath her feet, and all several meters above the main operating floor below. Such a system allowed Dina to run and jump in her virtual world, and even feel the effects of gravity on her machine in the real world, without ever endangering her, since the arm that held her suit would never allow her to fall.

Still, the miracle of technology that could replicate almost every small detail of the outside world in such a lifelike way did nothing to placate the female operator. She reefed the VR headpiece off, cursing bitterly.

“*Dammit!*” she bellowed.

Her face was bright red with anger and embarrassment, her reddish-blond hair flopping down to her shoulders once released from the helmet and giving her the look of a woman on fire. And so she was.

“Get me down off this thing!” she growled. “Somebody *shot* me! In the *back!*”

“It was an RPG.” The explanation came from another female voice over an intercom system that could be heard throughout the entire bunker, as well as inside the headset that she had just removed. The voice also sounding somewhat annoyed.

“They shot me with an RPG!” Dina shot back, still shouting, even though she knew very well that they could hear her amply through the helmet’s comm, even when removed. “Just get me down off this thing. And get me another robot!”

“Very good, Lieutenant,” came the same voice, this time sounding sarcastic, and very much like a reprimand. “We’ll just get you another million dollar advanced robot for you to place in harm’s way, shall we?”

There came a small silence as the irate operator thought better of screaming demands again, especially to a superior officer. The voice on the intercom spoke again, this time calmer, yet still somewhat threatening.

“Those things are not cheap, Lieutenant.”

Dina Mayor nodded, knowing that even though she had removed her helmet, those in the control room could still hear her every word through the helmet’s sensitive microphone. They could also see her through large windows that faced the three large operating pads, one of which she was using.

“My apologies for the damaged robot,” Dina announced unenthusiastically.

She sighed, barely able to contain her dislike for being questioned about how she operated



her machine, least of all by a mere *scientist*. In the end she knew she had her commanding officer, the colonel, on side, and so could not resist being a little daring with the captain on the intercom.

“However, I’m here to learn, and I can’t help it if I get shot in the back,” she added. “And I think the colonel will agree that *I’m not cheap* either, so can I please just get back out there, Captain? I’ve got a score to settle now.”

“And therein lies your problem, Lieutenant,” came the cold female response.

But instead of responding again, Dina’s attention was drawn away by a male voice from the real world, close by on the floor below. He was older than the catty female on the intercom, and more soothing, while still full of authority. The low, controlled voice came from beneath her and somewhere off to her left rather than from inside her headset or a speaker attached to a wall, and immediately brought her crashing down from her anger.

“*Calm down*, Lieutenant,” the man ordered, his tone gravelly, and yet strangely conciliatory. While clearly in control of the situation, and silently demanding Dina’s respect, the voice was also reasonable and steady.

Colonel Frank Grave stood on the open floor of the cool bunker. He was a tall man, and even several meters above him, the lieutenant could see that he was an imposing figure. With short gray hair, a rugged face and black eyes, he seemed intimidating even when so far below. A grating, husky voice iced the tough-guy image, and Dina Mayor immediately came off the boil as he spoke to her.

“Firstly,” he said calmly, “you just managed to get *yourself* shot, and secondly, you’re now going to go back in there and bring that machine back for repair. Understood?”

“Yessir,” she shot back.

The colonel turned to another military man who had come alongside him when they had heard the lieutenant’s outburst.

“Captain Garrick,” the colonel said quietly. “I’d like you to suit up and take your machine out to help Lieutenant Mayor bring back her damaged machine. Take one of the Thunders, will you?”

“Yes, Sir,” the officer responded.

“Oh, and Captain,” the older man added dryly, “don’t get shot. *Please.*”

“Sir.”

Sean Garrick’s short brown hair had been cut off flat right across the top so that his head looked as though something had been dropped heavily upon it. His face was hard, and he was arrogant, though he knew to reserve his sarcasm for when the colonel was not around. He gave a

hint of a smile and a clandestine wink to Dina Mayor, who most certainly did not smile in return. Their relationship was frosty at best, and as with anyone she did not like, she made no secret of her distaste for him, despite the fact that he was senior to her in rank. Garrick was a womanizer, and she loathed him.

To need him to come and help her limp her machine back to the bunker annoyed her even more than having been brought down by her enemy. The colonel's next remark did nothing to sooth her bitterness.

"Oh, and Captain," Grave added, "try to help the lieutenant back without letting her incur any further damage."

"Sir."

Garrick nodded, happy to spend any time he could with his attractive junior officer, even if it was within the confines of virtual reality. As he strode off to don his VR suit, he made a joke to himself once out of the colonel's hearing.

"A date with Dina. My pleasure."



Bob Makepeace took the lead and headed toward the armed men.

While he had his reservations about them, eight at least that he could count, not a single one of the heavily armed individuals was training a weapon on him or the two women with him. It seemed like a good sign. Still, he approached the leader of the group cautiously, signaling for Lola to follow.

They moved past the fallen robot with weapons trained on it, giving it as wide a birth as possible. The thing was now completely hidden from view, with the entire concrete roof of the veranda having flattened and pinned it. A cloud of dust floated above the shattered debris, with beams of timber and metal jutting about.

"Crushing blow," he heard Lola whisper. And then, "Who the hell are *these* guys?"

"I dunno," he shot back, "but I'm hoping the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"I can go along with that," she agreed.

"Besides, I recognize the uniforms," he added, sounding only a little more hopeful.

They crept forward, past the demolition pile, ever closer to the uniformed soldiers, who all held their weapons at the ready, trained to cover every possible direction from which they could be attacked. As they moved tentatively toward the soldiers, the trio heard an ominous creaking sound from within the large pile of debris.

And then the pile began to move.

At first it just creaked, and then the heap of fractured concrete began to swell in the middle, eventually looking as though it was pregnant. The dusty demolition pile grew and grew in height until finally it gave birth to the mechanical nightmare once more. The thing burst forth, thrusting slabs of concrete and lengths of timber and steel away as it set itself free from burial.

It was all Bob, his two friends and the armed soldiers needed to convince them to run.



Libby raised her head, still panting from the vigorous run to the opposite end of town. There, amid some large hardwoods the group took cover, not far from the last building, a three-storey concrete-block structure that offered good cover and a way of retreat should the need arise. The newsgirl took the camera she still toted, and began to film the group.

“Thank you,” Bob said, well aware that the soldiers had just saved all their lives.

“Oh well, we were just in the neighborhood,” came the quick reply from the group’s leader, an intelligent looking man in his late twenties. He was of average height and build, with short brown hair and bright green eyes. A three-day growth and a sword tattooed on his right forearm gave him a rather tough and rugged look, though he did not attempt to intimidate. His need for answers, however, seemed rather pressing.

“Who the hell *are you people?*” he asked, looking and sounding rather shocked by their presence.

Even while he waited for a response his eyes were darting about, checking for intruders. Meanwhile, his people had taken up defensive positions, equally keen to ensure that nothing could creep up on them without warning.

Bob rolled his eyes.

“I can hardly wait to explain,” he answered with no small hint of sarcasm and a very obvious gaze in Libby’s direction. “I’m Bob. My friend with the rifle is Lola, and my other friend with the camera is Libby. We’re just civilians...”

“No *kidding!*” the man interrupted, looking perhaps more than a little frustrated by the fact. “I might have said I’d never have guessed, what with you all wandering into a restricted area and getting tangled up with one of *those* things. But come to think of it, you weren’t doing too bad against it, considering you only had bullets.”

Bob said nothing, biding his time before sharing the fact that he and Lola had considerable military training. The group’s commander could see that Bob was not going to explain, so he continued to ask what he needed to know.

“So, what the *hell are you doing here?* In this place? Don’t you know it’s off-limits?”

Bob nodded.

“We *do now*,” he admitted with a shrug and a rather sheepish look. “Yeah, we know. That is – we already knew. We... came to get some pictures. You know, personal interest. That’s all.”

“Personal interest?” the lieutenant mocked. “With automatic rifles? That’s a whole lot of interest – in a *very dangerous place*.”

“And yet strangely you haven’t tried to make us put them down,” Bob noted, squinting. “So I assume we’ve both discovered we have a common enemy. Look, my friends and I came out here because we wanted – needed – to have a look around – that’s all. So, we shouldn’t have been here. We know that. But I’m kinda guessing you don’t think we have time to worry about that now. Am I right?”

The lieutenant eyed him for a time, as both men tried to discern whether or not they could trust the other. In the end the commander simply blinked and held out his hand.

“Lieutenant Mark Green,” he said, and he shook hands with Bob.

Bob introduced himself and his two friends again, then repeated their reason for being on the island. They spoke for a time, and Bob did his best to explain himself and his two friends, without saying any more than he felt necessary. To his relief, Mark Green seemed to be more dazed by the trio’s presence than annoyed. In other circumstances, there was no doubt that he could have detained them.

In the end Bob simply felt relief that the man was not intent on arresting them.

Or worse.

“And thanks again for saving us back there,” he said. “What *was* that thing, anyhow?”

Mark Green shrugged and made a face.

“No idea,” he said.

Bob couldn’t tell if the lieutenant was telling the truth or simply keeping secrets. But for now, he knew, it didn’t really matter. For now he was just happy to have found an ally.

“Well, whatever-the-hell it was,” he noted dryly, “it seems pretty obvious to me that *you* aren’t exactly on speaking terms with it either.”

“You could say that.”

“Please, Lieutenant?” Bob asked, almost pleading for an honest response. “What’s goin’ on here?”

There came a long sigh.

“We’re just regular army,” Mark answered dejectedly, and he shrugged. “We were dropped in here several nights ago and told to look around. There was some question that there may have

been some unauthorized activity on the island. I take it you *do know* what island this is, right?”

“Yeah, we know,” Bob answered, nodding as he shot another glance at Libby. “*Vanderman’s Island*. All the horror stories. We know. That’s why we... came here... to take a look.”

“Course,” the lieutenant mocked, rolling his eyes. “*That’s* what any sane person would do. Come out here and take a look at one of the worst massacre sights on the planet. Makes perfect sense. Of course.”

“I get it, Lieutenant,” Bob conceded. “We shouldn’t be here. I guess we didn’t expect the place to be this hot.”

Mark Green considered his male visitor for a moment, pondering how he described such a dangerous war zone as this, ‘*hot*’. It made him wonder afresh about Bob, and when he continued, his tone was slightly more amicable.

“Hmm. Well, I guess you *had to know* about the island,” he acknowledged. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here, would you? Anyhow, like I said, we were dropped in here – told we were just supposed to be checking up on things – nothing more. But... well, let’s just say that there’s a lot more going on here than a *little unauthorized activity*. We ran into those things our first day here.”

“Those *things*,” Bob quoted him. “How many of them are there?”

Mark eyed his new visitor with concern, taken back at Bob Makepeace’s forthrightness. But there was something about the way Bob handled himself that instilled trust, or at least cautious cooperation. Besides, as a young lieutenant suddenly thrust into battle against an unknown and powerful enemy, and having already lost men, his confidence was shaken. He could not help but answer.

“No idea,” came the honest summation. “We don’t know. Maybe just two or three, maybe more. And I’m undoubtedly not supposed to be talking about it anyway – let alone to someone with a *camera*. But given all that’s happening, and the fact that you already *made yourselves* a part of it just by coming here, I suppose that doesn’t matter so much now.”

Bob rested a hand over Libby’s camera as a sign of assurance, even though she was not recording at the time.

“We won’t record what you say,” he promised.

Mark Green gave a slight nod.

“Fair enough. In answer to your question, they only ever attack one or two at a time, never more than that. But even if we hurt one of them, it seems to come back *real soon*. So, either they heal up, or fix themselves up real fast, or they get replaced by another. We can’t tell.”

“But only one or two at a time?” asked Bob, seeking to be sure.

“Yeah,” said Mark cautiously, and it was obvious that he found Bob’s need for answers to be surprising, even intriguing. “Should be thankful for small mercies, right? They’ve made an awful mess of us, I can tell you.”

“You’ve lost men?”

A nod told Bob the worst.

“You sure ask a lot of questions for a civilian,” Mark posed, intuitively certain that there was more to Bob than met the eye.

“Fair enough,” Bob conceded. “Sergeant Bob Makepeace, former Special Forces. Lola – the dangerous, cool chick with the assault rifle – she served under me. We’re both retired, and you’ll understand if I don’t want to say much more than that. But I get your predicament, Lieutenant. You’ve been dropped into a bad situation and you’re outgunned. So, if I’m not pushin’ it, are you allowed to tell me anything else?”

Mark Green nodded, his lips pursed as he pondered just how much he really could tell a civilian, despite Bob’s former credentials. In the end, the CO was feeling rather in need of any help he could get, and there seemed little time for secrets.

“As you saw for yourself, they aren’t exactly easy to see,” he explained. “And our weapons are of little use against them. I’ve already lost good men. Now, we’re happy to help you, Bob, but I’d suggest you have a quick word with your two colleagues and tell them to keep up, because when these things find us – and they *will find us* – then we’re gonna have to move, and *move fast*. Okay?”

Bob sighed, but nodded.

“Look, Lieutenant,” he dared to divulge, nodding in Lola’s direction. “I served as a sergeant for some years, and Lola and I saw plenty of... nasty things. So we’re not green. We may not have your RPGs, but neither are we totally unprepared. As for Libby there, she’s a good friend, and I’ll do my best to take care of her.”

Mark Green hesitated, and he lowered his guard just a little more.

“Glad to hear it,” he admitted. “Listen then, sergeant – *former sergeant* – right about now we’ll be happy to have you on board. These things are invisible, and they’re nasty, *nasty* killing machines. You already know the island’s history, right? So I think it’s fair to say we’re up against... just a more developed version of whatever the problem *used to be here*.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too,” agreed Bob. “Some kind of virtual reality-controlled invisible robots. You know, just the ordinary, run-of-the-mill pain-in-the-ass marauding robot killing machines. Nothing serious.”

“You missed out the part where they’re bulletproof,” Mark joked.

“And *really* angry,” Bob added.

In that moment, with just that small humorous exchange, there was forged a mutual trust between the two, despite the different lives they led. Both men realized that they would likely need the other just to survive their ordeal, and at the very least, that they were certainly not enemies.

“You understand I wouldn’t normally tell you any of this,” the lieutenant went on to explain. “I mean, I normally *couldn’t*. But given the fact that from what I’ve already seen, I don’t really think any of us are going to survive this, and since you’re a fellow... or *former* fighting man, I may as well tell you what we know, and try to get your help. Okay?”

“Works for me,” Bob agreed, his eyes also regularly diverting from the lieutenant to the surrounding trees and buildings, searching for enemies.

“I’m certainly not supposed to tell you why we were sent here,” Mark went on, “but let’s just say that we came to check on the island, and we’ve found that the machines are alive and well. And like you said, they’re *very, very angry*. Small arms only annoy them. RPGs sometimes knock them off their feet, and *very rarely* damage them at best. Well, at least, they knock the smaller ones off their feet, and occasionally damage them. Trouble is, there’s bigger ones, and they don’t scare off near as easily.”

“Great,” whispered Bob. “Please tell me that thing we encountered was one of the big ones.”

Mark Green smirked.

“No such luck,” came the dry response. “That thing you met – we call those the *lights*. The *heavies* are taller, wider and *way, way tougher*. It’s like trying to knock out a battle-tank. Hard going. And they’re *real destructive*. All we can do is hit them and run away.”

“Fantastic.”

“It gets worse,” Mark continued. “The *lights* can fly. Well, at least that is to say, they can jump real high. It’s near enough to flying. They have some kind of jet packs on their backs, and they can jump through the treetops, or from building to building. We’ve seen them jump over fifteen meters.”

“And the big ones – the *heavies* – can they do that?”

The lieutenant smirked again, then sniffed, shaking his head dejectedly.

“Again,” he said, “we should be glad for small mercies. And that may be the *only bit of good news* I can give you, Sergeant. No, the *heavies* don’t jump. I’m guessing they’re just too... *heavy*. So, on the upside, we’ve already disabled at least one of the lights, and damaged another.

Plus, like I said, the heavies are slow, and they can't jump. On the other hand, the lights can fly – or jump – faster than we can run, so you can't hope to outrun one. And so far the heavies have proven impossible to kill. The best we've been able to do with them so far is to blind them temporarily with tracer fire or an RPG. Even C-4 has little effect."

Bob sighed. "Can we get off this island?"

"No can do," Mark said. "We never came prepared for that, and our radios are being jammed, so we can't call for backup. Unless *you three* have got a big ol' boat just hiding out somewhere? Or a radio that still works?"

He looked hopeful for a moment until Bob shook his head.

"Just a small inflatable. Only room for three. Four if we ditch the gear."

The veteran stopped short of telling him that they had a larger boat about five kilometers offshore, and the lieutenant didn't think to ask about it. If Bob decided that these military people could truly be trusted, then he would gladly take them to the second boat, but until then, he didn't want to risk losing their only way back to the mainland. Besides, the part about their inflatable only carrying four people was quite true.

"Then maybe we'll have to try to get you and your friends out of here, and let *you* call for help," the lieutenant postulated. "You served in the forces. You should be able to convince them."

Bob was surprised at just how forthcoming the lieutenant was being – and right from the outset. Either Mark Green and his group were secretly waiting to find out the trio's escape route, and so prevent them from using it, or they were so rattled by the marauding machines that they *really would* accept help and share confidences, against all the usual rules.

As Bob heard the rustle of leaves and found himself searching for shimmering monsters, he decided that the latter was probably the case.

## CHAPTER 6

As evening approached the group made its way back into one of the taller buildings in the small, deserted town. It offered multiple exits, three floors with excellent views of the surrounding town, and a small forest not far away into which they could retreat if the need arose.

Lieutenant Mark Green had posted lookouts equipped with infrared detection and night vision headsets. Fortunately his people were well trained and very heavily armed. Two snipers took up positions overlooking the town, each armed with RPGs as well as rifles utilizing



explosive rounds. That done, he sat with his remaining people and invited Bob, Lola and Libby to talk.

A tall, heavy-built man with buzz-cut brown hair and no shortage of muscles came and joined the group before the Lieutenant began to speak. The man, somewhere in his mid thirties, toted an automatic rifle fitted with a grenade launcher underneath, as well as other weapons strapped to his imposing body. He had not shaved recently, and he reeked of body odor, causing Libby to withdraw just a little.

“All in position and clear, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” came the reply. “Then let’s get down to it. I want us to look after these people.”

“Sir, with respect, we can’t offer them much in the way of protection. Those... *things* have been tearin’ us apart, and these people shouldn’t even *be here*.” The response was quick and forthright from the muscular sergeant, and he shot a condemning look at each of the three visitors as he spoke.

“I understand that,” replied the lieutenant. “However, they have an inflatable boat that can get them off the island. If we can help them do that, then they can call in some help *for us*. And so far we’ve seen no evidence that these machines we’re up against have any presence at sea. Besides, I’m not gonna just leave them to these mechanical *things*.”

“Sir,” conceded his sergeant.

Mark Green turned his attention to Bob Makepeace and gave a wry grin.

“Meet my sergeant, Bill Ward.”

Bob smirked too and shook the soldier’s hand.

The group did introductions, along with some short, concise explanations.

The corporal, Jill Taylor, was in her mid twenties, with an average build and brown hair rolled up and held within a camouflage helmet. She had sharp blue eyes and freckles, and Bob thought she might have even been attractive, but dressed in fatigues and with camouflage colors painted on her face, it was hard to tell. A harshness about her personality that was required for her job made him think that he probably wouldn’t be in a hurry to take her home to meet his mother.

Private Ben Stern was of a similar age, and average in every way to look at, except that he seemed particularly attentive to his surroundings, and took in every word that was said. These were traits that Bob admired, and knew from his own experience were greatly useful.

To Bob’s surprise there were two more women among the soldiers’ number. Private Sheila Crosby was fair and blonde, and looked feisty enough to rip the face off anyone who dared

question female equality among elite forces. She was a computer and communications expert, but with someone jamming all radio signals off the island, had found her usual role rather obsolete. She found it disturbing that she could not help her team by calling to the mainland for help, and openly said as much.

Bob couldn't help but think that she might never pass as window dressing, but she was reliable and courageous in her attitude, as was her corporal. The other woman, Private Lisa Chang, explained that she was two generations removed from China, and proud of her heritage. She left it to others, however, to explain that she was somewhat of an expert in martial arts, a fact that she omitted to mention.

Private Alvin Davidson was tall and lean, in his mid-twenties, with a handlebar moustache and an amicable personality. He shook hands with a strong grip, something that always seemed important to Bob, and immediately the two felt at ease with each other. Private Brett Ogilvy, the last one present in the huddle, was a stocky blonde-haired fighter with blue eyes and an almost-orange moustache. He was in charge of explosives.

There were six other soldiers on guard too, making a total of fourteen.

"With you three, that makes seventeen of us," Mark noted. "And two of you have weapons experience. That's good. *Very good.*"

"Bob told you what we did?" asked Lola, looking to her former sergeant.

"Yes," replied Mark. "And very glad to have you here."

"We were just like one of you, not so long back," Lola encouraged him. "So you can count on us. Okay? As long as you remember later that you sanctioned our... *joining the team*, so to speak. Not that I'm planning on shooting anything – *or anyone* – but if I do, I want to know I'm covered... *we're covered.*"

"Noted and agreed," Mark conceded, again with an appreciative smile. "Honestly, I don't even know if I'm allowed to tell you that, but I am, and I'll take any heat from it. And I rather suspect now that you're stuck in this mess just like we are, you'll be getting *plenty of chance* to shoot something. So, I suspect you're being a little too... modest, Lola. Or should I call you by your former rank?"

"Just Lola," she said. "I'm happy to help if I can, Lieutenant, but don't be mistaken. I'm out of this lifestyle, and glad of it."

"Glad to be retired, hey?" he said, somewhere between Smalltalk and a deeper understanding.

"Real glad," she affirmed. "And not so glad to have some jerk shooting at me again. *Least of all, a machine.*"

“Yeah, I can relate to that. Then Lola it is,” he agreed. A small grin evaporated as he continued to explain their predicament. “Just three days ago there were twenty of us. I lost six men to these things already, and we barely put a scratch on them. And you haven’t even seen one of the *heavies* yet.”

“Well, that’s encouraging,” admitted Bob. “But I saw one of your men knock down that one that was after us with an RPG. That’s gotta count for something.”

“Yeah, but that was just one of the *lights*. And you also saw it getting up again,” returned the beleaguered lieutenant. “Trust me, these things are *real* hard to kill. The best we’ve been able to do so far is to slow them down. We might have disabled one, but we weren’t exactly going to hang around to confirm it, if you know what I mean. They even came out at night and got two of my men. Didn’t show any mercy either...”

His voice trailed off, and the looks on the surrounding faces said that it had been a particularly distasteful matter. Mark Green considered leaving such details out, but then decided that since Bob and Lola were both former military people, and since Libby was in equal danger, then they probably all should know.

“They got one of my men with a regular round, and we didn’t even hear it. You may have noticed they’re toting more than one type of weapon. I’m guessing their smaller rounds are probably standard issue, just like ours, but they seem to be able to use a suppressor to silence them...”

“So, like a sniper?” Libby asked for confirmation, knowing that her two friends would understand, even if she could only guess. A nod from the CO told her that she had guessed correctly, and then he continued to explain.

“They also have explosive rounds. I suppose I don’t have to tell you what a mess those make. They seem to be small caliber, but they pack an awful punch, and they never seem to run out either. And if that’s not enough, then they have some kind of missiles too – like rifle grenades, but pretty hard hitting. All high-tech stuff, I’m guessing. And after all that, what they don’t shoot, they just kill with their bare... *hands*, if that’s what you call those things. They’re incredibly tough. My men are well trained, but you just can’t compete once one of those things got hold of you...”

“Great,” Libby whispered in a moan.

“You came here for a story, didn’t you?” demanded the sergeant gruffly. “Well, you got one.”

“It’d be nice to survive to tell it,” she replied softly.

“Well then,” he came back, his tone still brusque. “You’d better be prepared to arm

yourself with more than just that camera. You know how to use a rifle – properly?”

Libby nodded. “Yeah, *he* taught me.”

She motioned with her eyes to Bob Makepeace, who spoke quietly, understanding very well how each of them felt.

“She can hold her own,” he assured the hard-faced sergeant, Bill Ward.

“Glad to hear it,” was all the reply Bill gave. He took a moment to lean close to his CO, and after the pair held a short whispered conference, the sergeant spoke again. “Corporal, when we’re done here, see to it that these people get some of our spare weapons. We got ourselves two former comrades in arms, so treat them with respect. And give ’em the good stuff, not just small-arms. As for the reporter – just give her a rifle.”

“Got it,” Jill Taylor shot back, but a glance of her eyes told of a nervousness about the order.

“Go ahead, Corporal, you can arm them,” assured her lieutenant. Then he drilled Bob Makepeace with a stern gaze. “Unless there’s anything else we need to discuss – anything you people would like to tell us? Anything you might have left out?”

Bob looked reticent for a time, then conceded with a slight nod and a sigh.

“Maybe just one thing,” he said. “But it’s not like we’re keeping it from you. The reason we’re here is because my friend, Libby here, got a tip from someone high up in the *clean-up department* of this Vanderman Island fiasco. Sounds like a typical *dirty tricks department* to me. Anyhow, Libby’s source told us that the old robots had been superceded...”

“Improved,” Libby corrected. “*Vastly improved* was what she said.”

“Improved,” Bob continued. “And that they were in operation again. I guess we all know the answer to that, now. Anyhow, Libby... that is, *we*... decided to help her take a look. Given all the scandal the last time some maniac let his robots run loose on the island, I think you can see why she wanted to check things for herself.”

“Not really,” Mark Green said with a shrug and a good dose of sarcasm.

Bob shot Libby a good-natured look of accusation, then continued.

“I’d have to agree,” he said. “But then, you don’t know Libby. Anyhow, the *real point* is that not too long after Libby’s source told us that the robot program had been restarted on the island, and that they were much more advanced now, her source ended up *very dead* under *very nasty* circumstances. The cops and the MPs covered the whole mess up, or were too dumb to see it. I dunno. The fact that her computer and all her software were gone didn’t seem to make them think it was anything other than a robbery.”

“Robbery... yeah, right,” echoed Libby bitterly.

The lieutenant shook his head, his eyebrows raised.

“And even after *that* you figured it was clever to come out here and see for yourselves?”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple,” Bob explained. “You see, if this lady – Libby’s friend – really *was murdered* because of what’s going on here – and it sure is startin’ to look that way to me – then you gotta know that whoever killed her would be coming after Libby *next*. So, as much as I didn’t want to come here, I kinda figured she would be in danger no matter whether she came or stayed away.”

Mark screwed up one corner of his mouth.

“And...” Bob continued, “I know Libby pretty well, and she would have come here with or without me – *us*.” He shot a glance at Lola to clarify. “So I figured she’d be better off with us than some amateurs. Just couldn’t let her come unprepared, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to talk her out of coming.”

“They killed my friend,” Libby said, her voice intense as she tried to cement the gravity of the situation in the lieutenant’s mind. “She wasn’t *just* my source. Dianne was my friend. And I *just know* they’re going to come after me next. After all, she had sent me several messages telling me what was happening. I just didn’t think they’d...”

Mark sighed and again shook his head.

“Fair enough. Crazy, but fair enough,” he conceded. Then he changed the subject, his mind moving on. “Before we arm a bunch of civilians here, no matter *what their history or training*, I need to know something. Can you three take orders from me and my sergeant?”

“Yeah. Crazy, but fair enough,” Bob answered, giving a slight grin as he copied the lieutenant’s own words.

Mark Green sighed, then spoke some more.

“Then, since you’ve been so... *forthright* with me, I’ll level with you, because what you just told me makes everything we’ve seen here suddenly make a whole lot more sense. You understand, I wouldn’t normally tell civilians *any of this*, regardless of their history, but I somehow rather suspect that meeting you here might make the difference for us. In any case, we’ve been taking such a hammering from these things that the chances are it ain’t gonna matter what I tell you. So here it is: Our orders were to come to the island and secure the central bunker. That’s where they control these things from.”

“I remember the stories,” Bob said, nodding. “Vanderman had it set up so that paying assholes could hunt unarmed people using virtual reality. Pretty sick stuff.”

“Cowardly stuff,” corrected Lola.

“Yeah, well, my people and I...” Mark hesitated and shook his head. “Look, this sounds

crazy, but you're a soldier – you've seen action – so you *must be able* to understand what I'm gonna tell you. My people and I never even looked like *getting close* to that bunker. Those machines were *waiting for us* – like they knew we were coming."

His corporal echoed his words for effect. "They *knew we were coming*."

"Oh," said Bob, understanding instantly what the lieutenant was saying.

"Yeah, *oh!* They definitely *knew we were coming*," Mark continued. "Not only that, but as soon as we got here, our radio and satellite signals to home base were immediately jammed. We can use comms to talk to each other, but nothing gets off this island. You can't tell me that's just coincidence!"

"Nope," agreed Bob. He looked so solemn that Libby felt a new wave of fear wash over her.

"Murdering pigs," murmured Lola. "Setting up your own people."

Libby's brow became lined as she realized what they were saying.

"And their amour is like nothing I've ever seen – except maybe on a *tank!*" Mark continued. "So I, that is, *we*, suspect that rather than being sent here to secure the island, it's starting to look a whole lot like we've been set up. I think, *we think*, we've been put here, not to take control of the island, but to *see if those robots can kill all of us*."

"*Oh no...*" Whatever Libby was about to say trailed off as the shock struck her.

"What better way to test new technology?" Lola reasoned. Her mind raced at the possibilities, then she gave a resigned shrug. "Mmm... Makes me feel *so much better* that I came along."

"It's your worst nightmare," stated Corporal Jill Taylor flatly.

"But you can't be certain," noted Bob, already fairly convinced, but wanting to coax his new ally's true feelings out as much as possible.

"Mmm," the lieutenant replied. "Sure I can. From the outset it was pretty clear that whatever technology that Vanderman-person had developed here, was still in use. But if *your source* was killed after telling you that they've improved on it, then... then I think it only stands to reason that we've been set up. On top of all that, when we parachuted in, they dropped in a whole heap of weapons and munitions for us. We've got more RPGs than we can carry, as well as some C4 and a mountain of ammo."

"Plus, our weapons are all toting explosive rounds," added Bill Ward. "How often do regular grunts like us get to use stuff like that? Huh? And on a mission where we've been told we just need to make sure the control room in the bunker is secure?"

"Yeah," said Bob. "That *does seem a little excessive* if they were just sending you here to

button the place up.”

“They want a fair test,” postulated Lola.

“A fair test?” Libby asked, still looking somewhat in shock.

“Well, yeah,” Lola explained. “No point sending the lieutenant and his troops here to see if they can stand up to these machines if they’re only armed them with regular bullets. But if you give ’em all the good stuff – RPGs and explosive rounds – and they *still can’t beat the robots*, then you know the robots are good to go.”

“Oh,” Lilly said, sounding particularly disappointed and beginning to look a little sick. “And we can’t even radio for help?”

“You got it,” Mark replied. “No radios, except for local comms. No satellite. Nothing. So, we can still talk to each other via comms, but our communications with the outside world either all miraculously went offline at the same time, or someone is jamming them.”

“Or they were sabotaged,” Lola offered.

“Well, my teckie here can’t make ’em work. So, either way, we’re in a lot of trouble,” Mark said, his face hardening.

Bob’s lips pursed and he gave a reluctant nod.

“Local comms only,” he postulated. “Just like any normal battlefield would have. So they want your people to be able to put up a fair fight, but just not call in reinforcements from the outside world.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Jill Taylor.

“Damn,” said Lola.

“Scumbags,” noted Libby.

“Traitors,” corrected Mark. “They’ve put their own people – *us* – in the middle of a slaughter just to test their latest weapons.”

“Looks that way,” agreed Bob.

Mark looked bitter for a few seconds, and then clearly moved on.

“So, we all agree they’re the scum of the earth and need to be wiped off the planet,” he said. “But for now, we need to stay alive – which means we better have less talk and more staying vigilant. So listen up; these things attack at night too, sometimes, but the good thing is that they can’t hide as well from our night-vision gear. So, while it’s not good getting hit by them at *any* time, it’s probably better to hunker down than get caught out in the open, looking for your boat in the dark.”

Bob nodded his agreement.

“So we’ll camp here for the night,” the lieutenant continued. “For now, the corporal here

will arm you with whatever you feel comfortable with. After that, we'll try to get you people to your boat in the morning. That way, one or all of you can leave and get us some help out here. Otherwise, we're just not going to last."

There were nods all around.

"Then we're dismissed," he said.

Bob Makepeace sighed as Corporal Jill Taylor took two of the privates to begin arming the civilian trio.

"Ah," Bob said, sounding rather sardonic. "I've *really missed* hearing those words – 'You're dismissed'."

Lola shrugged.

"Oh I dunno," she quipped. "Could be worse. We could be out here *alone* with those things."

"Mmm," Bob conceded. "Touché."



That evening Bob stayed close to Libby, his new weapons checked and ready. Jill Taylor had armed him with an RPG launcher, as well as a new assault rifle that came equipped with hard-hitting explosive rounds as well as a lower barrel that fired rifle grenades. Lola toted the same hardware, and both former fighters kept their weapons close.

Unable to have a fire, Bob stayed close to Libby, with Lola never very far away.

"I need you to be honest, Bob," Libby whispered in the darkness.

"Oh, damn, I hate that," he said.

"Have I gotten us all killed?" she asked solemnly.

Bob drew a long breath, then smiled so that Libby could see his teeth glisten in the dim moonlight.

"No," he promised. "People make their own decisions. You just... may have placed us in harm's way, that's all. But in any case, I didn't see a gun to my head – or Lola's, for that matter."

"Mmm," she responded, not sounding at all convinced. "I'm just so sorry I got you and Lola into this. What have I done, Bob? My friend, Dianne, is dead – no doubt murdered by the same scum who are trying to kill us all now, I'll bet. They figured her life wasn't as important as their filthy secrets, so they just... *killed her*. And now I've got my other friends in a position where we *all* might die. I'm *really* sorry."

"We won't die," Bob assured her. "Lola and I have been in tougher situations than this."



“Love that danger,” Lola whispered so that just they could hear. She lay with her eyes closed, and didn’t even move as she spoke.

“Thanks, you two,” Libby replied. “But I’m still sorry.”

“Couldn’t let you come here alone,” argued Bob. “Can’t have you having all the fun.”

She looked at him in the dim light, and wanted to touch his face, but felt suddenly nervous.

“No, you... *wouldn’t* let me come alone,” she corrected him. “Or with anyone else, for that matter.”

The tiniest movement in the dark told her that he had just shrugged.

“Thank you,” she repeated.

“Yeah, well,” interrupted Lola, lightheartedly, “and I couldn’t let *him* come without *me*. After all, who’s going to look after him while he’s looking after you? Huh?”

“Thank you,” Libby whispered again.

“Big ape,” Lola whispered with a grin. “Someone’s gotta look after him.”

Bob simply smiled and gave her an appreciative nod. With that, Lola stood up, her new assault rifle in hand, and whispered down to the pair.

“I’m going to take a walk. Don’t like the idea of one of these things creeping up on me, least of all in the dark.”

“Don’t leave the building, hey,” Bob said. “Please.”

“Okay, Mum,” she whispered, donning a helmet that came equipped with night-vision for one eye.

When Lola had crept away into the moonlit darkness, there was suddenly a rare and welcome silence that descended over Bob and Libby. It was strange and unusual too, as the two friends could normally talk about anything – no subject off limits. But not now. Each sat in the dark, eyes flashing about, each wondering what to say. The silence was so marked that both knew the other was likely suffering the same ailment.

“I really am sorry I dragged you into this, Bob,” Libby said again. “It’s weird. When we were just talking about coming here, it didn’t seem all that dangerous to me, and I actually figured it would be nice just to spend some time with you. I didn’t *really* expect to find anything going on here.”

“What?” he whispered, and she saw him smile again in the moonlight. “You didn’t come expecting to find crazy invisible robots all over the place, intent on killing us all?”

“Yeah, silly me,” she agreed. “But seriously, Bob, I didn’t mean to... I didn’t really think I was putting all our *lives at risk*. All of a sudden there just... I mean, I didn’t want to... Oh, you... I’m just sorry, that’s all.”

“I know,” he replied quietly. “S’alright, Libby. Let it go. I’d rather be here *with you* than back home in my bed without you.”

His smile turned into a grin in the darkness, and the speed of his next comment removed any doubt that his small slip had actually been on purpose.

“*Worrying about you*, I mean. Not, *in bed without you*. That’s not what I meant.”

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

“Bob? Really? Here? You want to make jokes about that here? Now?”

“Who’s makin’ jokes?” he asked calmly, clearly enjoying baiting her. “No, I’d hate to do that.”

“What?” she insisted. “Make jokes, or be in bed with me?”

He grinned even wider.

“You *are* making jokes at me,” she insisted, pretending to be annoyed. Then she smiled too. “Anyway, you already told me you weren’t interested.”

She knew *that* wasn’t true, but it gave her the ammunition to bait him back, and *that* was satisfying.

“No,” he corrected her. “That’s not what I said at all.”

“Okay,” she conceded. “I know. I know. Geez, Bob. Is this *really* the time?”

“Imminent danger, Lib,” he countered quietly, and suddenly he sounded just slightly less lighthearted. “Is there a better time to ask you if you’ve thought about what I said?”

She grunted lightly in the dim light.

“Hmph. I suppose not,” she conceded. “But really? Is this the way to ask me if I want to get religion? By suggesting *sex*? You sure make one hell of an evangelist.”

“No,” he responded, just a little more seriously. “That’s not it and you know it. Before we came here – to this place where you’re tryin’ to get us all killed – why I never made a move on you. And since we’re in so much danger now, I’m just findin’ a way to remind you why I haven’t.”

She nodded, well aware that he was telling the truth.

“Well, first of all,” she said. “Gee, thanks for that, Bob. I really appreciate you reminding me that us being out here in danger is *all my fault* – even though you just finished telling me not to blame myself. And second of all, yeah, fair enough. All jokes aside, I really do get it. You want me to... to *think about it*... before it’s too late.”

She thought for a moment, then as another joke, she tossed in, “And apart from that, you don’t think I’m very attractive.”

He gave her a firm gaze of rebuttal that she could just make out in the darkness.

“Yeah, like that’d ever be the case,” he promised dryly.

“Anyhow, I get it, Bob,” Libby continued. “I do. I really do. But... *shit, Bob!* Who’d-a thought you’d go and get religion? *You? Of all people!*”

“Not religion, Lib.”

“Jesus, then,” she corrected herself, remembering how he had tried to explain it.

“Jesus,” he agreed softly in the darkness.

Libby sighed long and probably a little louder than she should have, and then she put a hand to her mouth as a silent apology. Then she was whispering again.

“You’re my best friend in the world, Bob,” she assured him. “And you know that. And I *want* to... you know... agree with you. But I just... I’m afraid. I don’t really get it. I mean, I know you’re right – or at least I *think* you’re right – but it’s just... I dunno. You know?”

Another small grin.

“Oh, stop laughing at me,” she insisted as tersely but as quietly as she dared.

“S’okay,” he said. “I actually *do know* what you mean. Took me a while to see it too. But it’s real, Lib. *Really* real. And it’s good. And I may not explain it real good too – I get that. It’s kinda new to me too, so I know I don’t have all the answers. But I can still tell you it’s still completely real. You know?”

“I know *you know*,” she answered. “And I trust you, so that’s good enough. I just need time. Asking Jesus to save me is a bit of a... *an unknown*. Not sure I can live up to what he might want me to do. You know?”

“That I do,” he said.

There was an easy silence, a time of absolute trust and honesty.

“Forgiveness?”

“Total forgiveness.”

“For everything?”

“Everything – and I should know – ’cause *my* everything’s bigger than *your* everything.”

“Mmm.”

“And for *that* you’ve gotta remain... celibate?”

Even in the dark she could see his face screw up.

“Nooo, dummy.” He made it sound like she had said something totally inane. “I’m already forgiven, Lib. That isn’t gonna change. The way it was explained to me, I could still mess up and I’d still *be forgiven*. Nah. It’s not like it’s something you have to earn. In fact, you *can’t earn it*. Jesus just... *forgives*. That’s all. But if you’re serious about turning from your old life and letting him help you, then you just... *don’t want* to... let him down anymore. Not with

*anything*. You know?"

She nodded. Then she shrugged.

"I think the best part about it is what it's done for you," she conceded. "I mean, you know I've always liked you, but you're just so... *different* now. I guess... if I ever needed any proof that Jesus really works... I suppose I already have it just in watching you. Hey, after all these years of knowing each other, I actually think I trust you more than I did before – if that was ever even possible."

"Thanks."

She elbowed him again.

"And there I am, after... loving you as a friend all these years, and you... tell me I'm not interesting."

She elbowed him for effect.

"Not true," he countered. "That's not what I said."

"I know. I know," she said good-naturedly. "Still, a man not interested in just taking what he can in a girl's moment of weakness. That's pretty convincing proof right there, I think."

"Proof of what?" he asked, probing.

"That this whole Jesus thing is real for you," she answered honestly. "And that you... must value our friendship, I suppose."

The last part sounded a little weak, as if she didn't want to say what she really meant.

"And it's not because you're not hot," he said simply. "Go figure."

She nodded in silence.

"You're my best friend, Bob," she said earnestly. "And thank you."

"What for?"

"For..." She looked thoughtful in the dim light. "For telling me about Jesus. About what it's like for you to be *saved* and all. And for not taking advantage of me when I was down over Dianne. Thanks."

"You're very welcome," he whispered caringly.

"And for coming alone here," she added.

"Wouldn't have missed it," he lied.



*Was she feeling guilty? Or troubled? Or both?*

Bob Makepeace couldn't be certain. Either way, he could read her like an open book. He always had. And besides, she never kept anything from him anyhow. Indeed, he knew that *he*

was the one guilty of *that*.

They were still lying together, staring up at the stars in between cautious studying of their surroundings.

“You still worried about bringin’ us here?” he asked.

“Mmm... yeah.”

She didn’t sound very convincing.

“Somethin’ else? Spill it, Libby. What is it?”

“Yeah, something else... *too*,” she admitted, but she immediately sought to evade his intuitive probing. “But yeah. What if I get one of us killed here? Or all of us, Bob?”

“I already told you – we came here of our own accord,” he refuted. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay,” she insisted, shaking her head. “What if I get Lola killed? What if we *all die*?” There came a silence, and then, “*Are we* going to die here, Bob?”

“No. I already told you that,” he said flatly. He began to grin again, as if he enjoyed her squirming.

“What?” she asked, easily baited. “Don’t laugh at me. *What?*”

“Oh, you just gotta lighten up, Lib,” he insisted. “Have a look around you. Yeah, we’re in a heap a’ trouble, but we’ve known each other most of our lives, right? And I’m telling you, we’re gonna be okay.”

“Yeah, but what if we’re not...?” Her question sounded forlorn and drifted away in the darkness. “There’s things I haven’t done yet. Haven’t... *said*.”

He nodded. *That* was a ghost he knew all too well.

“Go on then,” he coaxed. “Spill it, Lib.”

“Who said it was to you?” she shot back.

“Okay,” he conceded. “Then I’ll start. I’ve been... *lost* since the service. *You* know that. Look at me; I can’t sit still, I’m never satisfied, I wander from job to job. That’s because I’m wanting to start something new. Something... *good*. And if nothing else, coming here and dodging bullets again has confirmed for me what I really want.”

“Okay,” she coaxed quietly in the dark. “And what *is it* that you want, Bob?”

She sounded nervous. Clearly *something* was troubling her.

“A new way of life, Lib,” he answered slowly, cautiously, like a soldier picking his way through a minefield. He had fears of his own.

“Wow,” she whispered solemnly. “Oh, we’re being *honest* then. I see.”

“Well, I am,” he said lightly, but candidly. “And the truth is... Can I just tell you the truth?”

She sighed so subtly that it almost went unheard.

“That would be... just *so nice*, Bob. I’m so tired. And scared. Can you? Please?”

She sounded like someone who had been skirting an issue, afraid to broach something that might prove dangerous or hurtful, and her fear was not hidden in the slightest. And Bob knew in an instant that it had nothing to do with the danger they were in.

“Okay,” he conceded. Then he baited her again. “Long as you’re sure you really want to know.”

“Bob!” Again it was a terse whisper, and she elbowed him for effect.

He was nervous too, and making light of what he was thinking and feeling was his way of easing into it, giving himself time to assess any risks. Bearing his body to fire was one thing, but his soul? That might kill him. Or worse.

“I think I want to try my hand at... I dunno, maybe... being a farmer. Maybe living off the land. Maybe... just being... ordinary, you know? I’d like to... get married, have some kids, maybe build my own home somewhere in the wild – away from the city. Away from... all things military. I’d like to know my neighbors, and maybe the people in my town – that sort of thing. And I’d like for no one to be shooting at me anymore.”

Even in the dim light Libby could see the way his face softened as he explained his dream to her, and in that moment she realized just how important it was to him. She sniffed out an apologetic sound and twisted up her face.

“And I go and bring you back to a place where you *are being shot at*.”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. Like I said, all that does is confirm for me what I already knew,” he explained, and immediately he was back in his imaginary world, willing his friend to dream of what it might look like too. “I picture a nice little place with lots of trees. Maybe a little creek and some animals. I dunno. I’m not big on details – only on how peaceful I want it to be. Haven’t been able to think of anything much else since I quit the military.”

*That wasn’t true... but did he dare tell her the truth?*

Libby let out an audible groan.

“I’m with you there,” she whispered. “I’m so tired of the city, Bob. And of pigs who want me to do them some favor just so I can get my story. Or, when I do get a hint of something, they just go and cut in on me. I guess I’m just... *tired*.”

“Really?” he asked. “I thought you loved your job.”

“I... did,” she answered, faltering. “I’m like you, Bob. Journalism is the only thing I’ve ever done, right from school. Just like you and the Special Forces. I guess... I guess it’s just hard to admit you’ve had enough, when there are so many people you know just watching you,

expecting you to get some new scoop, even when you're... tired."

"But you came all the way out here – for this."

She nodded, looking dejected.

"I know. And like I said, I'm sorry for dragging you along. But the truth is that I stopped enjoying my job a long time ago. They're all users, clawing their way up the ladder, and you just get tossed aside if you get in the way. That's not me, Bob. I don't want that. Truth is – and I hate even more to admit it now, but since we're finally being honest – I just want to get out. I wasn't sure, see. *That's* why I came here. One more big story just to see if I still wanted that whole hunt-for-the-story lifestyle. And you know what? Now I'm here, I realize I just don't."

"Wow." That was all he said for a time. Clearly she had surprised him. It took time before he spoke again. "Wow. I'm... really shocked, Lib."

"Don't be," she explained, always whispering. "I'm just so sorry for you and Lola. Honest, I am. It's just... I *really* needed to know if I could still get that one big story. But now that I'm here, I just... don't want it anymore."

She sighed, but he said nothing, and it was too much for her.

"Anyhow, on that subject, you're a great one to talk. I thought you loved your job too. So, why ever did you quit?"

"Quit the military?" he asked for confirmation.

"No, quit taking advantage of vulnerable young women on deserted islands! Of course, *quit the military!*"

"Mmm," he acknowledged. "Ah, *that*."

"I thought we were being honest here," she demanded. "Yeah, *that*."

He looked up at the stars through an opening where a window should have been. The night was clear and warm, and in the absence of city lights, the stars presented a panorama that almost seemed to crackle with life.

"Well, there's a lot to *that*," he said, squirming just a little. "And some of it, I haven't talked about to anyone, if you get my drift."

"Like?" Libby asked. Then she insisted. "*Come on, Bob. We could die tomorrow! Heck, we could die right here tonight! There just isn't time for secrets anymore, you know. You've never told me what happened to you to make you quit. You loved your job. It was all you ever wanted to do. You loved the service. And yet you and Lola both quit and neither of you will ever say why. I'm your oldest friend. Dammit! Why won't you ever talk to me about... anything? You know I care about you.*"

"You really want to know?"

“Yes. No – I *need to know*.”

“Okay, as you wish. I... *saw too much*, Libby,” he explained quietly. “Too much that was too nasty. Too much death. Too much... *everything*. I lost people in battle. Ah hell... You really want to know? You know what’s worse than losing men in battle? What’s worse is... I lost *women in battle*.”

She made a silent ‘O’ with her lips.

But now that she had uncorked the barrel, it simply oozed right out.

“Women who were a lot like you,” he continued. “Just like you, Lib.”

This time she actually made a whispered ‘O’.

“And then, if *that* wasn’t enough, one day something happened to make me realize I just couldn’t keep going,” he said, and instantly she could tell he was suffering a considerable emotional burden.

“What, Bob?” she asked. She leaned closer in the darkness, straining to see his face. “What happened?”

“I fell in love,” he explained simply. “Don’t laugh. It ended my career in an instant.”

She fell silent, completely stunned.

“Not laughing,” she coaxed.

But she was astonished to hear him say it, just the same. All the bravado, and no doubt actual bravery too. All the stories – *well, the ones he was allowed to tell*, at least. All the hard-earned maturity. And all the battles she knew he had fought. But she had never in all their years of close friendship, which really amounted to unspoken love, and they both knew it, she had never heard him use the actual word.

*Never heard you use the L-word*, skipped into her mind, but she knew this was not the time to make a joke. He had been emotional since leaving the forces; that had been easy to see. She had seen such a change in him, though he would never say why. But this was an unusual break from the closed book he usually presented. Her heart raced as she wondered what he meant, or rather, *who* he meant.

“I’m not laughing,” she promised again. “Please, don’t stop.”

There was no risk. He had only been waiting for the right opportunity.

“One day we were coming back from a mission,” he explained. “It had gone well. *Really well*. Too well. I guess we let our guard down, just for a few minutes. Some of the enemy had followed us. Don’t ask me how they found us, but they did. I lost two of my girls in the first fifteen seconds. One of them was married, the other wanted to be. Gone, just like that. Gone in a second. Wasted.”



He shook his head, deeply troubled, and she was wise enough not to interrupt.

“And when it was over, I sat down beside them both,” he continued. “They still looked... alive, you know. But they weren’t. There was nothing – just the waste. And in that moment, I realized how short time can be. How little time there was. And then it hit me, as sure as if someone had reached out and socked me one. At least those two *knew what they wanted*, and had told *someone* what they felt. But I hadn’t. And then I realized... sorry, this sounds so corny.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she promised again. “Please. You realized what?”

“I realized... there *was someone* in my life. ’Course, I’d never told her. Couldn’t, you see. The Service always had to come first. That’s how it works. You know that when you join up. That’s why those two girls were there. They both had... fellas back home, but they knew they had to put all that aside for the Service. That’s what you sign up for. I just couldn’t... justify... saying anything because... because while ever I was still enlisted, I had no right to ask someone to wait. Too big of a risk, you see?”

Libby nodded.

“But I take it you’ve told her now? Right?”

“No.” Again he shrugged, but this time as a sign of failure. “Lost my courage, see... Funny how sitting beside my two dead girls, it was as clear as it could ever be to me. And yet, when I came home, I... just lost my way. I’m a mess, Lib. Barely know what to think or do. Anyhow, all that conviction on the battlefield turned to doubt once it was over. When it really came down to it, I didn’t think she’d go for it, you see. Couldn’t blame her. So, now I’m stuck. I know what I want – what I think I’ve always wanted really – but I’m – paralyzed, you see.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“Well, as much as I hate to say it, Bob, you just gotta tell her. I mean... *Damn...*”

Libby swallowed and looked away for some seconds, turned back, looking sad but resolute.

“*Lola?*” Libby dared to ask, trying to sound like she wouldn’t mind, when indeed, she knew that the wrong answer right at that moment would devastate her. “Is that why you both left your unit at the same time? For Lola?”

“Not Lola,” he whispered simply. “And aren’t you listening to anything I’ve told you? Lola is no longer a career girl either, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Then who?” Libby asked. “Do I know her?”

“What?” he asked, making fun of her in the darkness. “All of a sudden you care more about who I might be after than why I left my career? Or is it that you just don’t think I’m capable of using the ‘L’ word... or *feeling it*? Hmmm? Which is it, Lib?”

Despite her inner turmoil, she couldn't help but laugh quietly at the comment.

"I almost said that to you," she admitted. "But I didn't want to interrupt you."

Then she fell silent again.

"No, I know you can use it. And *feel it*," she said quietly. "*We all can, Robert Makepeace.*"

"Ah, Robert?" he cajoled. "What? Am I in trouble for using the 'L' word now?"

There came a longer silence than before, and she was no longer smiling, though she was trying to.

"Only if it's about the wrong person," she dared to whisper.

"Who would be the right person?" he asked. He wasn't smiling so much now either.

"Me?" she whispered, barely audibly.

In the moonlight he could clearly see a tear slip down a cheek, glistening, reflecting moonlight. He exhaled softly, and they could both see the other's eyes were damp. Then there came the longest silence yet. When he finally answered, he was shivering slightly, as if from the cold night air, and she could hear the upset in his voice too.

"Course it's you," he said simply. "I always wanted to tell you, but... *I killed people, Lib.* And then I let two of my precious girls die. *That's* why I got out. I just couldn't... *do it anymore.* Because they reminded me of... *you!* And in the meantime, I had fallen in love with... *you*, but I... just couldn't tell you. *I couldn't.* You still have your career, and... I just needed to rest. How could you ever... have anything to do... with *me – especially after all I've done?*"

She smiled again, and gripped his hand in the darkness. It was some time before she spoke again, while he battled to hold back a flood of painful memories and emotion. He may have left his beloved military behind, but he was clearly still very much at war within himself.

"So brave," she whispered. "*So brave.* Will face terrifying enemies without ever a moment's thought. But couldn't tell someone who loves him back, how he feels. Imagine that."



They sat together, the power of honesty and love having liberated them from all that had bound them.

He did not release his assault rifle, but sat with her on his left so that he could keep the weapon at the ready while putting his strong left arm around her shoulders. The move gave them both comfort beyond measure, especially in the light of the revelation of shared, mutual love. With the relief of confession, the conversation moved again to their predicament, though now their problems didn't seem to carry the same weight that they had done just earlier that same

evening.

“They killed Dianne over this thing,” Libby began to reason aloud, though always in a cautious whisper.

“Yeah,” he agreed. Neither of them doubted it for a moment.

“And now they’re killing their own people just to test their machines,” she continued. “And *you gotta know they know about me*. After all, they have Dianne’s computer, and no matter how smart she would have been about contacting me, I’m thinking they’ll work out who she was talking to sooner or later. That means... that means they’ll still be after *me*, even if we *do* survive this horror story.”

She saw Bob nod in silent agreement.

“That means...” she continued reasoning. “That means I’ll never be safe. If they don’t get me here, then they’ll just get me sometime at home – when I least expect it. And you and Lola too, for that matter – now that you’ve helped me.”

“No,” Bob said quietly, and he squeezed her shoulder to give reassurance. “Not true. I’ll protect you. One way or another, you’ll be safe, Lib.”

Libby sighed in the darkness.

“I hope you’re right,” she whispered. “Bob, I sure hope you’re right.”

“We’re gonna get off this island,” he promised. “And we’re gonna do whatever it takes to make you safe.”

“Maybe I’ll just have to keep you around... permanently,” she suggested softly.

“Sounds good to me,” he whispered. “Sounds *real* good.”

## CHAPTER 7

Morning found the band of soldiers and civilians creeping through the town toward one of the block walls that separated the island’s original ‘town’ game from its ‘jungle’ game. Lieutenant Mark Green explained that the breaches in the walls had been made before his arrival on the island, probably to allow investigators to easily access all areas when the ‘Vanderman’ scandal had first broken.

The block walls looked as though they had been breached by some form of controlled explosion, the resulting holes about the size of a small car, and jagged at the edges. The walls themselves, which stood perhaps five meters or more in height, remained very much intact.

“All the mines are gone too,” noted the lieutenant. “And most of the barbed wire. Original

reports said that's how Vanderman stopped people from getting over the walls or off the beach. All gone now, though."

"Someone doesn't want their precious robots getting blown up," Lola ventured.

"Or us," grated Bill Ward. "Wants their gutless robot operators to be able to rip us to shreds instead. Anyhow, I doubt a mine would do much to one of those things, except maybe knock it off its feet."

"Comforting," noted Lola.

"Let's get on and find your inflatable," said Mark. "The sooner we can get you people off this island, the sooner you can call in some help for the rest of us."



A light onshore breeze over sparkling water seemed to offer an olive branch of relief in an otherwise tense situation. The water was blue and the sand golden, making the beach of the 'forest' game look like an island paradise.

But they all knew it was far from that.

Any pretence of an idyllic haven was wiped away in heavy gloom as the group came upon the place where the trio had hidden their inflatable boat. A series of large inhuman footprints around the site marked where a mechanical visitor had been, and caused the group to take up positions of high alert.

The boat had been shredded. The outboard motor lay in pieces on the grass, clearly having been torn apart by something very strong.

"Oh well," Bob said with a sigh, searching the trees for hidden enemies. "I guess that settles whether or not we leave our new friends to the machines."

Lieutenant Mark Green shrugged, trying to make light of it.

"Yeah," he said, "I *was* going to ask if you and Lola would have liked to stay and help us – you being, *one of us*, so to speak. I guess now I don't have to ask."

"Yep. Comforting," Lola droned. "This just gets better and better."

"Well, we can't leave now," Bob reasoned aloud. "And we're pretty sure these murdering buggers would have come after Libby anyway, given what they did to her friend after she leaked their secrets. So now at least I guess we can take the fight right to them, and get rid of the threat once and for all. No choice now. In some ways, it's kind of a relief, really."

"That's the spirit," Sergeant Bill Ward grated.

"Yeah, I feel *real* relieved," said Lola, again with droll sarcasm. "*Real* comforted."

"We need to get off this beach," Mark ordered. "They destroyed your boat, which means

they probably saw you come ashore in the first place.”

“They have cameras?” Libby interrupted. “Not *everywhere*, surely?”

Mark tilted his head dejectedly.

“Well, they did when Vince Vanderman ran the place,” he reminded her. “That was all part of his game, if you recall. So, no doubt they still have them, and that means they’re probably watching us right now. We need to get off this beach. Now.”

Unfortunately, the lieutenant wasn’t the only one who understood the tactical importance of being trapped on a beach.



One of the soldiers gave a terse warning that he had seen something. And that was all the warning they had.

Bob Makepeace recognized it as the same type of robot that had attacked them the previous day, even though he couldn’t actually see any detail. Its size was easy enough to make out by the shimmering around its outer edges when it moved, and it moved just the same, taking large strides and using brute force to smash its way through the trees once the element of surprise had been lost. The machine was fast and ferocious, and utterly terrifying.

There wasn’t a man or woman present who didn’t rain a hail of explosive rounds at the menacing metal monster – or at least where they *thought* it was. Heavy clanking sounds told when the target was struck, though these were to little avail. From somewhere to Bob’s right came the heavy thump of a rifle-grenade launcher followed immediately by a whistling sound as the explosive raced toward its target. The projectile found its mark perfectly, Corporal Jill Taylor’s aim proving true.

It didn’t seem to matter though.

The near-transparent machine only twisted at the hips as it took a direct hit to the chest. The grenade exploded on contact, shunting the machine and sending shrapnel and sparks in a shower around it as it hesitated, then continued to stride forward. The machine barely slowed. A moment later it was upon its first target, and was utterly ruthless.

The soldier who had first spied the intruder and given the others warning continued to fire at the shimmering beast, backing up until it was upon him, but his efforts were totally in vain. What happened next was among the most horrific things Bob had seen in all his years of combat.

Ignoring the peppering of bullets it was receiving from its victim and from others, the *thing* simply picked up the young soldier, who continued to struggle and fire his weapon for as long as he could.

Fellow soldiers gasped and Libby's grip on her movie camera faltered, barely staying on target as the angry machine then tossed the young man into the air above its head. He bellowed in a mix of anger and terror as the metal beast then caught him in its arms on his way down, then viciously tore the man in two at the waist.

The young man screamed and beat the invisible brute with his hands, dropping his rifle as his coordination failed. Blood and intestines dangled from his writhing body as the brutal robot held the two halves of its victim apart for all to see. The two halves remained connected by intestines and tissue so that the stricken man looked like some kind of robotic toy with the wires still connecting and supplying the ability for each half to continue moving, albeit in small spasms. Then the machine flung the two bloody halves away and the hail of bullets resumed.

Now covered in a gruesome spray of its victim's blood, as well as a sizeable scorch mark from Jill Taylor's rifle grenade, the machine's chameleon technology that allowed it to appear transparent and therefore virtually invisible, was somewhat compromised. When it turned away from its enemy, the blood spray disappeared, hidden by its own body, but when it turned to face its intended targets, the blood showed exactly where it was.

The young soldier's demise was not totally in vain.

*"Fire in the hole!"* they heard, and Bob glanced just in time to see Private Alvin Davidson aiming a rocket-propelled grenade at the thing. The young man took his time, waiting until his friend's blood gave a perfect target, and then he fired.

The missile sped the thirty meters to the rampaging monster in a moment, leaving just a telltale trail of smoke to show where it had traveled. And certainly the machine did not have the time to get out of its way.



In the bunker, Lieutenant Dina Mayor screamed aloud within her VR helmet. It was a cry of elation, of victory, and of great achievement. From within the confines of the central control room, not far away, Doctors Tony Gerard, Tanya Shelby and Vicky Rourke viewed the main display with morbid looks and mixed emotions.

Major Doctor Tony Gerard was in his mid fifties, tall, with neat graying, once-dark hair that was parted with precision on one side. His cold steel-blue eyes gazed with interest as the wall of monitors before him acted as one, allowing he and his voyeuristic allies to view the carnage in magnified form. A plethora of hidden cameras allowed him to choose between seeing the action from any of his robotic creations, or from any of thousands of fixed hidden cameras across the island. Seeing that an attack was imminent, he had already switched to one of the cameras not far

from where the unsuspecting group of *test victims* was attempting to leave the shore.

“You *had to know* they’d come back for their boat,” he mused victoriously, just above a whisper. “They’d have to be brain-dead not to know that we’d see them coming.”

Beside him, Captain Doctor Tanya Shelby looked on. She was of average height, coming just to the major’s shoulder, and had a flowing crown of long, dark brown hair. Like her fellow doctor, she gazed upon the action, agog, her pulse racing as she viewed with excitement the battle that was taking place. Tanya’s eyes were green and rather piercing, and she was not unattractive. But like her masters, she was cold and without conscience.

Beside her stood the one remaining science officer, Doctor Vicky Rourke. Though tall, she was not quite even with Doctor Gerard, and most certainly was not as hard as either of her two fellow science officers – though she *did try* to pretend she was. Vicky was far prettier than Tanya Shelby, and could never match the older woman’s icy gaze. Nor would she try. What she was fortunate enough to be able to do, however, was to hide her true feelings about how the tests were going.

In her heart she knew that her father figure, Arty Best would never approve of what was happening on the island. Her machines were never meant to be used against their own countrymen-and-women, let alone with such savagery. And she knew she would gladly tell Arty of such matters when she could. Arty would no doubt find a way to put a stop to it.

If only she could get her satellite phone to work...

The two senior science officers made up the military portion of the science contingent within the bunker, while Vicky Rourke was present as a representative of ArtBest Virtual. Her role was to oversee any maintenance or adjustments required to the robotics and virtual reality controls during the testing phase. And while brilliant in her own right, she was seen and treated very much as an outsider by her military colleagues.

To them, she was merely an obligatory addition; part of the contract with the technology’s developer. They were in command, and made quite certain that Vicky understood it. Not only that, but the threat to her safety should she decide to speak to anyone outside the bunker of what was going on, had been made abundantly clear to her. Veiled threats were still threats.

Given their thirst for blood for the machines, she had no doubt they would feed her to them should the need arise. Hence, Vicky Rourke played their game with an unflinching poker-face, and she did it very well.

Vicky’s face twisted as she saw the result of what Lieutenant Dina Mayor had just done to the young soldier. She wanted to look away, but she did not dare, and in any case her eyes were inexorably drawn back to the gruesome images before her. Voyeurism or not, she knew she

could not afford to be seen as weak by her already chilly co-workers. She did her best to join their revelry, but inside she was dying.

Out in the main floor of the bunker, suspended by a VR controlled arm some meters above the ground, with a support pad beneath her to give the feeling that she was standing on solid ground, Dina screamed again, ecstatic with her brutal feat, and almost insanely so. Even behind glass the trio could make out her jubilant shrieks over the computer-adjusted volume of her helmet-comm.

“Take that, you *filthy pig!*” she screamed. “That’s what you get for *shooting me with an RPG* yesterday!”

“Stupid cow just went and got blood on the suit,” noted Tanya. “How many times do I have to tell them not to do that?”

“Yep, and here comes one to take a shot now,” agreed Tony, his cold eyes and hard face showing his displeasure. “Now that he can *see her, that is.*”

“Shouldn’t we warn her?” asked Vicky nonchalantly. She cared nothing for the plight of the human victims; only that the machines pass their test.

“Probably,” replied Tony, “but we won’t.”

Instead he used a microphone to speak to a man dressed and walking about in a VR suit on a totally separate platform. “Captain Garrick, I’m sending you Lieutenant Mayor’s coordinates. Would you mind *getting in there* and helping her again, before she gets *another* robot damaged?”

Tony Gerard didn’t wait for the captain to respond. Instead, he addressed his underling again, without ever letting his eyes leave the action on the monitor before him.

“You know the colonel’s orders, Vicky. We’re here to learn, nothing more. So let’s just say nothing, and let the hard-headed Lieutenant learn.”



Dina Mayor turned just in time to see the missile streaking toward her.

In that moment she knew she had allowed herself to be struck with a weapon that could potentially damage her machine – *again*. It wasn’t a good career move, and neither would such an outcome help her win the fight she had gone looking for. Still, for now, the latter annoyed her far more.

Dina nursed a bitter streak that meant she had to win at any price. Even if it harmed her career. But even in that moment, she knew, she was doing everything she could to safeguard *that* too.

The RPG struck with heavy force, exploding in a shower of flames and shrapnel, and with



much more force than the rifle grenade had done. It struck the lieutenant's robot in the centre of the chest, and she knew she had been hit hard. On the VR floor of the bunker, with the errant operator securely supported by a strong robotic arm, and kept safe by a bevy of computer programming and padded matting that worked together to minimize operator discomfort, a corresponding arm struck Dina in the chest, toppling her, though without harm.

The reaction in the control room was immediate.

“Stupid! *Stupid!*” snarled Tanya, her face twisting to make her look even more bitter than usual. She was not nearly as patient about allowing the over-zealous lieutenant to risk such expensive technology, and moreover, hinder a quality outcome for the testing program.

Within her VR suit, Dina Mayor might not have described herself as *stupid*, but she did think it probably looked bad on her part to be so successfully targeted so easily by an RPG two days running.



Bob Makepeace didn't even have time to cover his ears, though at least he got his head down in time.

The RPG smashed into the shimmering monster, exploding in a shower of flames and shaking the earth close by. The robot's chameleon technology failed temporarily, flashing on and off several times like an electric light with a poor circuit. And as the troops dared to raise their heads after the shrapnel had flown, they could see the mechanical monster for what it was, the shining, imposing beast flashing completely visible for just a few intermittent seconds at a time.

All the while, somehow Libby Justice had the presence of mind to continue recording. And then the horrific creation was invisible again.

Private Alvin Davidson's RPG served not only to buy his friends some much needed time to take better defensive positions, but also to encourage them to take advantage of the fallen robot. As Dina Mayor began to raise her machine from the earth, she was buffeted by a hail of explosive rounds, none of which had the ability of harm her robot, but certainly to push it about.

Dina stood up to the sound of rifle-fire and the clanging of impacting metal, and when she did, she was angrier than ever. Having temporarily learned the risk of killing by hand, although she did enjoy the thrill of so much strength up close and personal with her screaming victims, she decided to unleash some return fire of her own. The multiple barrels of the large invisible weapon in her right hand rotated until she found the one she was after.

“Sniper rounds, missile grenades...” she heard herself saying as she read the on-screen readout. “Ah, there's a gift for you boys. *Explosive rounds.*”

Her machine's explosive rounds were small so as to allow it to carry a large number of them, but they were devastating just the same. There came a repetitive cracking sound as flames shot from her weapon, and she shredded the forest like a long, penetrating invisible saw.

Misjudging the power and efficiency of his enemy's weapon, one young private was shot numerous times through the chest, the projectiles passing right through the fallen tree behind which he had taken shelter. His chest was decimated, almost severed horizontally, and his body fell to the ground without him ever moving again. All around him branches shattered and fell, and pieces of foliage flew through the air until the scene resembled something of a particularly noisy and smoky ticker-tape parade.

When Dina Mayor ceased firing, there was an eerie silence as those she would kill remained temporarily down and out of harm's way. Smoke drifted up from her barrel as she took account of the situation. From her perspective, through the miracle of technology, she was standing right in the midst of the battle.

Almost immediately the soldiers began to shoot at her once more.

"Grenade!"

This time it was Private Ben Stern who took the offensive, and he lobbed a hand-grenade that landed right at the robot's feet. Now with one side of the machine spattered with its first victim's blood, it presented a much easier target, and Ben's aim was true.

Dina Mayor stood still and stared down at the metal ball, which had landed right between her feet. She didn't even try to move away, but simply stared down, pondering how much the device looked like a tiny pineapple. Then she smiled, ignoring her enemy's rifle-fire as well.

Ben Stern ducked down out of harm's way. He knew he had put the explosive right at the beast's feet, and he was hoping for a favorable outcome. If a hand-grenade was *ever* going to have any effect, this should do it. His fellow soldiers knew it too. When the grenade detonated, it thundered and sprayed more shrapnel and soil over the heads of those closest to the blast, and over the stationary robot.

Again the monster's chameleon technology flashed off and on several times before recovering, and in those seconds the beleaguered fighters could see the robot simply staring down, apparently undamaged and unconcerned by the blast. In fact, it barely moved.

When its head rose again, they knew it was going to punish them.

Dina Mayor didn't disappoint.

She sprayed the sheltering soldiers with explosive rounds once more, stepping forward as she did, wounding one, and taking the top completely off the head of another. His skull exploded as Dina simply stepped up close enough to see over the large stump behind which he lay, then

shot him at close range. The young man cried out with fear for just a second before several projectiles did their horrific bidding, and then he slumped, his boots shaking in nervous reaction for a time.

Up so close, Dina Mayor's robot was spattered with yet more blood.

Bob Makepeace took in what was happening to his comrades in arms, and immediately sent his own RPG sizzling toward the rampant robot. It struck between where a man's left hip and his groin would be, exploding in a ball of flame and causing the machine to stumble back a pace. Bob cursed out loud, having intended to strike the machine closer to the centre of its gut.

His miss, however, was a blessing in disguise.

The robot twisted and tried to step back, but couldn't. Within the safety of the bunker, Dina Mayor twisted in her VR suit, reeling from yet another blow as the computer struck appropriately at her hip to replicate what had just happened to her robot. She shouted angrily within her VR helmet and tried to face her enemy squarely again, but the robot would not respond as she directed it.

*"Oh, come on!"* she screamed irately. *"Work, dammit. Work!"*

Again she tried to face those who continued to peck away at her machine, but the latest RPG had somehow impaired her movements. She twisted her upper body until she could see their positions again, and then unleashed a bevy of rifle grenades upon her enemy. Explosions blossomed before her, trees splitting in two and falling like mown grass until she could no longer see her targets anymore. Smoke hung in the air, along with dust and slowly falling leaves and grass.

A moment later she was hit again, square in the chest by another RPG from Alvin Davidson. It knocked her back a pace, yet somehow she managed to remain standing despite what was clearly a damaged hip of the robot. With her machine now covered in blood and dust, the soldiers saw her plight too, and hammered the hip joint with repeated fire. While Dina felt no pain, the computer replicated every insult, both inconsequential and those more serious, by prodding her VR suit appropriately.

Her anger grew with every annoying peck.

She turned again, still unable to balance properly on the injured hip, and let loose three more rifle grenades. The forest boomed and blossomed with flying vegetation, dust and debris floating down again to conceal her enemy from her.

*"Let's try a little infra-red,"* she spat spitefully. *"Then we'll see how well you hide!"*

She used her left hand to touch a button on a control pad strapped to her right wrist, and her on-screen readout confirmed it for her.

While the soldiers saw the move, the dusty robot now almost fully visible to them, they of course did not see any controls on its arm, since those were only part of Dina's VR suit within the safety of the bunker. Dina Mayor's vision changed in an instant, and suddenly she could make out brightly illumined red portions of hiding soldiers. Her task was not easy due to the numerous small fires her rifle grenades had caused, but she could make out a few moving forms just the same.

She located one who had taken refuge behind one of the smaller trees and fired a rifle grenade right at him.

The tree shattered at chest height, snapping off almost entirely so that the top of the tree slowly creaked and began to fall. The soldier was flung back some meters, where he fell heavily on to his back and never made another sound. As if to cement his ordeal, the toppling upper portion of the tree then fell partly on top of him, shrouding him with bushy branches so that no one could be certain of his fate.

The young corporal, Jill Taylor then managed to get a clear shot at the robot's head, and struck it square on with another rifle grenade. Dina Mayor grunted in surprise, though of course, no one in the field heard her. Her head was knocked back by a soft, computer-controlled pad to alert her to what had just happened.

The soldiers then showered her with explosive rounds once more.

Dina hated to disengage an enemy; after all, fighting was her sole purpose. If her bosses wanted their new technology tested, she was happy to oblige. However, to allow a robot to be damaged beyond repair would surely be frowned upon. She knew she could not afford to incur any further serious damage to a robot two days running.

Then, within the buffeted, noisy crackling world of her VR helmet, she heard a familiar voice. And she felt her blood begin to boil...

*(Continued...)*

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