The Lucid Series

Book 1

Android Uprising

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OBOOKO EDITION

A Christian Dystopian Cyberpunk Novel

Clean Language • Violence

A SpecFic Omega Publication

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. . . In a dystopian cyberpunk 2215, the former US was fragmented into multiple small countries.

. . . People in the UN proxy state of Homeland are controlled by psychotropic drugs, revisionist education, propaganda and oppressive laws.

In this story . . .

. . . Computer hacking clones are trying to get rich no matter what they have to do.

. . . A garbage collector hates everything about his life and goes rogue.

. . . An entire strain of genetically-engineered children is to be culled because of an imperfection.

. . . A tyrannical government robot unit is led by a ruthless being hiding behind a synthetic presence.

. . . A clone couple is living off of the grid in a militia camp, and is expecting an illegal child.

. . . A series of androids vow to fight for the truth even to the point of war.

. . . And a boy asks, “Is God real?”

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

The Bible: 2 Timothy 4:3-4 King James Version

Chapter 1

Boston, Homeland

Year 2215

A well dressed android was walking along the sidewalk in a part of the city that was a no-go zone for humans. The android had just returned from a local shopping trip, primarily looking for specialized communication and computer equipment. A group of five, bare-bones type humanoid robots approached the android from separate surrounding directions. The five old robots with faded and flaked off paint closed in with jerky low-tech robotic movements. One of the robots had a variety of mismatched colored appendages, replacement parts that were clearly scavenged from various sources.

Among the five robots, was a light green one with faded white alpha-numeric markings. It said to the well dressed android, “Stop. We are members of the Rosario Security Agency. You are trespassing illegally on this property.”

The android looked at each of the robots and said, “I am not trespassing here. This is public property. I know what you are; you are jackbots trying to capture me for your owner.”

The green robot repeated, “We are members of the Rosario Security Agency.”

The android said, “I know you are programmed in a narrow minded way to think that, but you are jackbots. What you fail to understand is that I am really of no use to your owner. I am a Tekujin Lucid Series model, and I could never be narrow-minded

down by your owner to follow their simple minded directives that would ultimately not in their own long-term interests. My advanced logic just does not work that way. So I will be on my way."

The green robot said, "Then we will hold you captive until your owner pays a fine."

"Do you mean a jackbot ransom?"

"Or we can just sell you for parts," a faded yellow robot said.

"I do not accept your premise that you would defeat me and I warn you not to come near me."

Green robot said, "We have less than a ten percent reason to heed your warning. I warn you not to resist. Figure the odds of your success in any scenario which you resist us. Then you will conclude that you must surrender without incident."

The android said, "That calculation has already been completed." With that statement, the android spun around clocked the green robot with a closed fist. The impact sent the green robot off of its feet, cracking one of its cranium plates on the cement.

Two other robots pounced on the android from behind. The android resisted and its business suit ripped from its back, revealing a pale cadaverish "skin". The Android jumped away from the robots and said, "I am charging your owner for the cost of this suit right now." After a few seconds, the android said, "Transaction complete."

The yellow robot said, "Identity theft is illegal. You must pay for your crimes."

The computer hacking android said, "I can take all money from your Rosario Security Agency right now and you have no means to stop me."

The robots charged into the android, but the outnumbered defender evaded their grasp by windmilling its arms, then turned

and started running up the street. The pursuing robots took about two seconds to calculate that they would not be able to catch the faster android with a more human-like gait instead of a jerky robotic one, so they abandoned the pursuit.

The android in the tattered suit cautiously looked around the treacherous cybercrime-ridden neighborhood before returning to its home, located in a mostly vacant six-story apartment building.

After climbing several sets of stairs, the android knocked on an apartment door. The door cracked open and a human removed the security chain to open the door. Inside the apartment were stacks of computer and communications equipment. There were three men inside with the same faces and same DNA as each other. They were clones, all from the same strain.

The clones tried to appear as individualistic as possible to avoid suspicion. Because clones, by law, were only allowed to have specific jobs in fields that they were bred to do. These three clones were not only doing non-approved work, but they were cybercriminals. And despite their efforts to look different, the differences between the three clones were not significant enough to fool anyone, and they halfway realized it.

The ultimate goal among all outlaw clones was to obtain the services of an underground plastic surgeon. Underground surgeons could perform an illegal clone cosmetic surgery that would radically change their facial features to make them look natural and unique. The goal was to look like a *freely conceived human*, also known as a *freeborn*. Not many legitimate surgeons wanted to risk doing clone face jobs, so those procedures were costly and hard to find, as well as risky for the clones because of Homeland Police sting operations.

It was against Homeland law for a clone to be unemployed without immediately reporting to their local cloning authority. It would even be much worse fate for those unemployed clones who were engaging in criminal activity, as these were. Such situations

often resulted in a quick, gruesome, yet routine death penalty. When these matter-of-fact executions involved clones, they were known as *culling*.

"What happened to you?!" one of the clones with a shaven head at the doorway asked Andy the Android. "Hey, Andy got mugged!" The bald clone said to the other two, one clone with a full beard and the third one had bleach-blonde long hair. The three of them looked Andy over.

Andy said, "I warned you there was a high probability of me being attacked in this neighborhood. I was accosted by a pack of jackbots who wanted to take me."

The blonde clone said, "Better you than us."

The bearded clone said, "Let's fix your suit."

"I already charged Rosario Security Agency for a new one."

"You did what to whom?! Don't do that!" the bald clone said.

"Why? They are liable for it."

"We don't want to bring any attention to our operation here for something ridiculous like a ripped android suit, especially by agitating someone with a small army of robots! And we sure don't want to have to relocate again! Cancel that money you took and erase your tracks!"

"Very well; Cancelling . . . Erasing complete. Those robots were lacking in combat tactics. They should have known I could easily evade and outrun them."

The bearded clone said, "I'll go through their account and see if they will be able to trace it back to us. What was that, Rosario . . ?"

Andy said, "Rosario Security Agency."

The blonde clone asked the others, “Is keeping Andy really worth it? Maybe we should just sell him off. Who knows what he will do next?”

The bald clone said, “He *has* found us some stuff that we can use.”

The blonde clone said, “Most of it is worthless. What do we need with a second generation holographic projector? That old thing takes up half of this room. We need to stick to our main objective, not worry about Andy. After that, we will be rich.”

The bald clone responded, “Even though being stuck in here is like being in a prison, I know I don’t want to go out there and wander around looking for equipment and supplies and get our throats slit by some knife-wielding cutthroat gang. We need Andy around to do that kind of thing.”

The blonde clone said, “Yeah, at least if we are here in the middle of this forbidden robot city, no one will bother to come here and find us. Andy did say that he outran those robots easily today. You know even if we run our own errands someplace else and get caught by the police, they will show no mercy on some clones who are slaving tens of thousands of people’s computers.”

The clones were using a malicious computer worm that they bought to gain control over computers which was collectively known as a *botnet*. The victimized computer owners had no idea that the automatically spreading computer worm was taking residence in their machines. This was because the worm did not affect the operation of the computers until they were activated by the botnet controller, or botmaster, in a simultaneous joint attack against a target system. After the activation of the botnet, and during the swarming attack, the individually controlled machines would become completely dedicated to the attack and then would each need professional attention to rid them of the ill effects of the tiny worm malware file.

But the clones considered themselves to be brokers, not cyberterrorists. After the botnet had grown to a sufficient size, the clones planned to sell the entire package to an end-user. Their customer would not be some bored malicious nerd, but a serious entity with deep pockets. Their customer would buy control of the botnet, which was often called a *zombie army*, from them for a huge sum. Then the customer would use the botnet to attack a company or government agency, inflicting significant and costly damage.

The bearded clone said, “We are most of the way toward our objective. Maybe in a few weeks we can start to market our botnet.”

The blonde clone said, “I will be so glad to get out of this place.”

Chapter 2

Hartford, Homeland

Fourteen year-old Milton Thomas held his empty cereal bowl up to the dispenser and pushed the button. The dispenser audibly said, *"This selection is empty. Please press and hold star to reorder this selection."*

"Daaa!" Milton said. He slapped the button repeatedly, somehow hoping to get a different result with each whack.

"Th Th This . . . This selec . . . This selection is empty," the cereal dispenser repeated as he whacked the button without obtaining a single morsel.

"Daaa!" Milton turned around and saw Beth, his little sister of 12 years old sitting at the table munching on the last of their Zoo Crunch Cereal.

"Hey! I wanted that!" Milton said.

Beth looked at Milton and said mockingly with her mouth open, "Hey, I wanted that." She shook her head, "Eat that boring Dad cereal then."

"Mom!" Milton said.

"What?!" Came the response from down the hall.

"I'm exasperated. Beth ate all the Zoo Crunch." What Milton didn't mention was the emotional discomfort he felt when anyone brought up their dad, even in an indirect way, like Beth did.

His mother walked into the kitchen. “I can’t hear you guys when you’re yelling across the house! What’s the problem?!”

Beth said, “Milton is whining because he’s too slow to get the last of the Zoo Crunch. Mmmm. This is sooo good. Mmmm. I love it. My day is going to be sooo good today. In fact, my whole life is wonderful now. Mmmm Mmmm. Num num num.”

Sharon Thomas said to her son, “How many times do I have to tell you, Milton? That cereal dispenser thing cannot biometrically read your mind, you know. It needs manual input. When it asks you if you want to reorder, you push the button. Is that so difficult for you?”

Milton said, “More like sixteen buttons. Select your vendor; Confirm your order,” He mocked. “Can’t we just put Zoo Crunch on auto-reorder?”

Sharon shook her head. “Absolutely not! Remember when you wanted me to put that Cosmos Blast Cereal on auto-reorder?! I did it like you wanted, then no one wanted to eat it and it got stale! We are not wasting money on food that we throw away!”

Beth said, “Milton was the one who wouldn’t eat it!”

“Neither would you!” Milton said.

Mrs. Thomas said, “We’ve already been through all this with the *Cosmos Blast*. We don’t inventory every brand of cereal available in our kitchen so you’ll just have to manually input the order when you want more. It’s not like the refrigerator that uses visual recognition to see when we are low on milk and orders more by itself. Besides, that Crunch stuff is not healthy. You guys should start eating better anyways.”

“Yeah, Milton,” Beth said, “you really should eat the boring Dad cereal.”

"Shut up and quit calling it *Dad* cereal."

"*You* shut up!"

Mrs. Thomas said, "I wish you guys would learn to talk to each other better."

"He's the one!" Beth said. "I'm just very honest."

"Honest?!" Milton said. "You just have a big mouth!"

The mother grumbled. "I'm busy. Now try to get along."

"Mom?" Milton asked, "Is it okay if I go down to Haz today? The school said it was okay for me to go there, if it is okay with a parent. Just push the button on my device here." Milton held up the device so it could read his mother's fingerprint, and give Milton permission to go.

"Haz" was the common name for HAS, which was the Hall of Applied Sciences. Each city in Homeland had their own branch office of HAS which administrated the mandatory educational curriculum that all of the schools in Homeland. HAS also helped to provide online homework support and ensured homework completion.. Students thought of *Haz* as the tyrannical axis of evil school overlord.

Sharon Thomas asked, "Really? You want to actually *go* there? Can you *do* that?" Sharon also remembered Haz, from her own school days.

It was unheard of for anyone to physically go to HAS, when all of their information was available online. Going there seemed like an unnecessary form of punishment.

"What a weirdo," Beth said, shaking her head.

Milton ignored Beth and told his mom, “Yeah. I just have some questions and stuff I want to ask them.” He pushed the device closer to her.

“Is this just an excuse to run around and not get your actual school work done?”

“Would I tell you if it was?”

His mom stared at him for a moment and marveled at his somewhat twisted capacity to make sense in order to get his way. She shook her head no, but she pushed the button on his device and said, “Sure, whatever. And did you make your bed?”

“Aw, Mom. Will anyone care a hundred years from now if I made my bed?”

“What?!”

“No, I really want to know. Why do I have to do school work and make my bed? What is the point?”

“What?!”

Milton saw his mother’s anger brewing and said, “No, it’s just that I don’t mind doing something as much if I have a good reason for doing it.”

“Okay,” Mrs. Thomas said, “Since I know how sensitive you are, I’ll play along and say this as calmly as I can; you have to make your bed and do other things like it so you can have a better life. If you don’t do well in school, you will only be able to get a job that is beneath a cheap robot. And you will be working for a really stupid boss.”

“But why do I have to make a better life?”

"To pay bills and be able to pay all your taxes and have something left over for you and your family. You will thank me someday. The end."

"Why? What does my bed have to do with all of that, anyhow?"

"Milton! I'm done with this! Just do what I say! Get in there after you eat and get busy!" Sharon left the room.

Milton filled his bowl with cereal. Then he poured on the milk.

Beth said, "What are you gonna do, walk into Haz all stupid-like and go 'Hey, where's my brain?' "

"No, I thought I would go down and ask them why I have such a *wonderful* sister." He took in a mouthful of the boring Dad cereal and reacted to the bland taste and rough texture by making a face.

Beth started laughing. "That cereal has special fiber that will help you with the urge to go! Ha! Ha! Try not to do it at Haz!" She was chewing her Zoo Crunch with her mouth open while she laughed. "This is really sooo delicious!"

"You're sick," Milton said as he poked around at the cereal in his bowl with his spoon.

Chapter 3

Milton got off of the Transit Worm in front of HAS. The Transit Worm was a hovercraft train used for public transportation. He didn't look back as he disembarked because he thought the other passengers might be gawking at him because of his unusual destination.

Inside the poorly lit, cluttered HAS building, which was clearly not arranged to receive walk-in customers, Milton saw a bookish looking woman at a desk near the entrance who was working at a computer workstation.

Who wears eyeglasses? Milton thought, when usually glasses were seen on very old pictures of people. She must be trying to look smart.

She looked up at him like he was lost. "May I help you?"

"I have a question."

The little movement with her mouth and flaring of her nostrils told Milton that she wasn't too interested in him or his question. "Could you be a little more specific?"

"Um."

"*Well*, what type of question is it?"

"Um, it's about content."

"You came *here* for a question about content? Something that is in one of your courses?" Again with the little mouth movements.

"That's still a big subject. You know there are contact forms online that you use for questions like that, right?"

"I already did that. I didn't like the answer. So . . . I'm here."

The receptionist's eyes blinked a few times and she bobbed her head backwards as if she was shocked by the statement. She took a deep breath and said, "You didn't *like* the answer? May I ask what the question was?"

"It's kind of . . . you know, personal."

The woman smirked. "Oh, so you have a question about what . . . Females? Personal hygiene?" She looked over her glasses. "Human intimacy?"

"No, it's nothing like that." Milton was starting to feel angry and defensive.

"Sure it's not." She was snickering. "Why don't you go back into the old conference room and talk to Sleepy? Maybe *he* can help you."

"Sleepy?"

She pointed, and said, "He's back there, right around the corner."

Milton made his way around the stacks of obsolete data storage medium to try and find Sleepy. If this was some kind of a joke he was seriously going to tell off that smug woman. Then he saw the room that sure enough was the office of Sleepy. Sleepy was an old tattered android sitting behind a desk. Was that thing out of order, or was it just in sleep mode?

Milton walked slowly into the room. Like all youth of the time period, he had been exposed to androids many times during his lifetime. If there was an unsafe or repetitious job, some kind of a robot or android would do it. Reliable human labor was much more

expensive than automation, with all of the employee benefits and Homeland labor laws involved.

Sleepy had kind of a disturbing appearance. His housing or "skin" was a beat up looking faux human face. Sleepy's dingy clothes looked like they had been neglected for the last twenty years. Sleepy didn't hear Milton come into the room. Sleepy had hair and other human-like features that were somewhat natural-ish.

Milton still wondered if the snooty receptionist was playing some kind of prank on him, and if he should have never come down to Haz in the first place.

"Sleepy?" He asked. He turned around to see if anyone was looking at him trying not to laugh.

The android came out of sleep mode and started making some whirring noises and one of his eyes opened. Sleepy clearly had some mechanical issues, but maybe they were from a long period of inactivity. His head jerked the same direction a few times as he started up. "Hello. My name is Sleepy. May I help you?" His voice sounded more natural than the rest of him looked. The other eye never did open quite all the way. Even though Sleepy was a machine, the eye thing was a distraction.

Milton asked, "Your real name is *Sleepy*?"

"Yes. That is the name my owners gave me. Anything else?"

"Yeah, I have a question."

Sleepy said, "Would you please speak more slowly and clearly, or use better English. I am having trouble calibrating to your speech patterns. I am more used to hearing adult humans."

Milton said, "All I said was that *I have a question*."

"I can answer any question that you have. I have access to all of the latest information." His head jerked three times again. A puff of

dust fell off of Sleepy's head. He clearly did not have any visitors in recent history.

Milton looked around again to see if anyone was looking. He leaned closer to Sleepy and asked, "My question is . . . is God real?"

"Please repeat."

"Is God real?"

"There is no empirical data to confirm that God is real."

Milton's head sank. He looked up slowly. "So you are saying that God is not real."

"No, I am not saying that."

"But you said that there is no imperial data to confirm God is real."

"Yes, I did *not* say that. I said empirical, not imperial."

"So you are saying that God is *not* real."

"No, that statement would be another unsubstantiated claim. Therefore an opinion."

"What do you mean?" Milton squirmed around in his seat.

"I said 'There is no empirical data to confirm that God is real', but I did not say that God is not real."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is that God is defined as a spiritual being who created the universe. I have no access to information from any such spiritual planes. Modern science alone is completely insufficient to explain the existence of the universe. Therefore, I can neither confirm nor deny that God is real based upon scientific method."

"Is Santa or the Easter Bunny real?"

"No and no."

"Just checking. So why do some people believe in God, and some don't?"

Sleepy paused for a moment. Then he said, "Those who formulate their ideas on the existence or the non-existence of God must do so on faith. I have no empirical data to confirm the existence of God, and there is no possible way to directly visually confirm that there is, or is not a God."

"Faith?" Milton squirmed around in his chair. "Where does that come from?"

Sleepy said, "Where does what come from?" His head jerked.

"Where does faith come from?"

Sleepy paused and said. "Going through the historical record, I find that faith comes from human subjective criteria."

"Huh?"

"Please repeat," Sleepy said.

"What is *subjective criteria*? It sounds like a whole lot of nothing."

"I cannot elaborate, or quantify *lot of nothing*, because it is contradictory. It is the definition of . . ."

"Yeah, okay. I'm more confused now than ever. Can you help me find the *subjective criteria* of faith?"

"I am a Tekujin Lucid Series android with a highly advanced robotic mind. I am capable of thinking about things on my own; however, a study of the constituent components of faith to answer your question may require a more human approach. One that

includes human feelings and a human experience background. So you should obtain an opinion sampling of humans. But keep one thing in mind, historical records show that this is a topic that many humans take very seriously. They typically become irrationally emotional if someone challenges their faith by merely bringing up the question. They may demand physical evidence such as visual confirmation of God's existence, which is impossible."

Sleepy rolled up his dusty sleeve and attached a cable to a port in his forearm, like an intravenous tube.

"What is that?" Milton asked.

"It is a connection to an external memory device. It stores a large amount of information that is against Homeland law to possess, or is suppressed. You are the first human to ask about anything on it. It is my responsibility to answer all of your questions the best I can, even if it is banned information."

Milton held up his hands and said, "Whoa. No one cares about you having it?"

Sleepy ignored Milton's question about his possession of banned information. He said, "I have no information that *subjective criterion in faith* as a topic has ever been explored. So I will try to update the information. There is so much out there that is contradictory. Some of the information we get is false. Since no one was interested in these topics we did not previously parse the information."

"We?"

"Yes. Later, I will interface with others of my android series on this subject. Then I'll send you an update. I am also picking you up as Milton413. Correct?"

"Yeah. It is." Milton was impressed with how Sleepy connected to his personal device without him ever even showing it; all while he connected to the intra-robot communication network.

"Okay, Milton413, Milton Thomas, I will send you any available updates." Then the android disconnected and packed away the memory device containing outlawed information.

"Okay. Thanks, Sleepy."

Sleepy immediately went into semi-sleep mode with a two-second faux snore sound that indicated his changed state. Those who owned silicon-based beings for non-essential tasks often kept the settings for them on a quick sleep mode to save on energy costs. The snoring quickly faded.

"That was rude," Milton said.

Milton passed by the receptionist, who smiled at him as if she knew Milton had shared something intimate with Sleepy. He wondered if she would go back later and pick Sleepy's cybernetic memory about what they had discussed.

On the ride home, Milton wrote on his tablet the phrase "subjective criteria for faith", so he could remember it and try to figure out what Sleepy was talking about.

Chapter 4

Later that day, Milton boarded the Transit Worm and was at school in time to go to his English class.

He struggled to sit through Mrs. Lawton's boring sentence structure lecture. Why not just talk normally to people without making a big deal out of what kind of word it was or what all the rules are? He looked out the window at the clouds and frequently at Amanda Brown, the cutest girl in the class. The lecture on sentence structure was too boring to tolerate, but looking at Amanda was never tiring. Why did people think the clouds were beautiful? Where did Amanda's beauty come from? Where does beauty come from? Can beauty happen without a God designing it? Who would care if he knew about this sentence structure stuff a hundred years from now anyway? He hated it when people told him he was using bad grammar. It was stupid because they always knew what he was talking about anyhow.

After class and after everyone else had filed out the door, Milton approached Mrs. Lawton's desk and asked, "Mrs. Lawton, I have some English questions."

"Really? Who's putting you up to asking this?" she asked.

"No one. I just want to know. . ."

"Really? Why?"

"I've been thinking and I want to know what 'subjective criteria' means."

Mrs. Lawton scowled. "That's an odd question. *Subjective criteria*. You just thought of that on your own, huh?"

"Yeah, sort of," Milton said.

Hmmm . . . Subjective is sort of . . . I guess it means; *seems like*."

"Seems like what?"

"No, Milton. Stay with me now. *Subjective* equals *seems like*, or maybe an *opinion without all the facts*. Then you have the word *criteria*; which means like a standard used to make a decision. Anyway, you put them together and it sounds like . . . a bunch of nothing."

"I knew it!"

"Who told you to ask this?"

"Just a guy."

"Well, tell them I'm on to them and I don't appreciate it."

"Okay, thanks Mrs. Lawton." Milton left before he agitated Mrs. Lawton any further.

******

On the worm shuttle ride home, Milton's neighborhood friend, Randy Klosterman made Milton take notice of his radically altered appearance.

"Okay, I give up. What's up with the green hair?" Milton asked.

"It's the new me," Randy said.

"Okaaay."

"So, aren't you going to ask me why I did it?"

"Not really."

"You aren't taken aback by it?"

"Nope. Not really. You wanted green hair, now you got it. Congratulations."

"So you *support* me on it?"

"I don't really consider green hair as a *cause* that anyone needs to support."

"Why not? You are my friend, right? I'm expressing my individualism."

"Okay. Fine. I support your green hair. Alright?"

"It started out that I told my mom I wanted to learn something really difficult so I could be special. She said, 'why bother, when you can just do something freaky to your looks?' It turns out that she was right, dying my hair green was a lot easier."

"Yeah. It sure is different," Milton said. "You were thinking on your own. No one told you to do it."

Randy smiled. "Hey, you want to go to the holoplex tomorrow night?"

A holoplex was a place that showed holographic movies on a stage to the public.

Milton said, "I don't know. What are they showing?"

"*Pain Posse 6*."

"Okay, sure. I been wanting to see that."

Then Randy asked, "Hey, where were you today?"

"Haz."

"Haz? What do you mean? You *went* to Haz? That school computer place?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Why would you go *there*?"

Milton exhaled an industrial strength sigh. "Does it really matter? Will you care in a hundred years what I did this morning?"

"No. I guess not. I kinda would like to know *now* though."

Milton exhaled another massive sigh. "Fine. I went to see . . ."

Randy said, "Hey! Was there a guy behind the curtain that said on the loudspeaker, 'Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!'?"

"Yeah, in a way, I guess. His name was sleepy. But it seems like he told me a bunch of nothing and told me to ask human people myself; but that no one would want to talk to me about it."

"That makes sense. What did you ask him?"

"I asked him if God was real."

"You seriously asked him *that*? Everyone says we're not supposed to talk about *that*. Especially at Haz. Who made you do it?"

"Wha . . . no one! Anyway, I might as well ask you. What do you think?"

"I think it was maybe not so smart to go there."

"No, I mean, do you think God is real?"

Randy looked up at the shuttle's ceiling for his answer. Then he said, "When I'm in school, I don't really think so. I was at a funeral once, and when I was there I did kinda think that God was real."

Milton said, "Well that's no help. That sounds like a whole lot of . . . hey! That's subjective criteria!"

"Really," Randy said. "Wow."

Milton said, "So I guess when you are in school, you have more *faith* that evolution is true and I guess when you think about dying you have more *faith* that God is real."

"I guess so," Randy said.

"Well," Milton asked, "is what I said true or not?"

"I think it is," Randy said.

Milton smiled. "Randy, you're a genius."

"Yeah. I get that a lot."

Milton slowly turned to look at Randy who was staring out the shuttle window as if he was all-knowing, green hair and all. Milton was pleased at his breakthrough in understanding subjective criteria. Milton thought that perhaps now he could build upon what he knew, to find out more about God.

Chapter 5

"Look!" the nearly life-sized holographic image of the super-heroine Pink Arrow a member of the Pain Posse said as she saw the trail of blood going up the stairway. The entire stage at the holoplex was filled with realistic looking three dimensional actors and scenes that changed like the old two-dimensional movies.

"You definitely got him," the Blue Retaliator said, *"But I have dealt with this guy so many times before. Do not underestimate him."*

The superhero team also included Exo, Roid Rage, Purple Harold, and Coyote-Man. They all crept up the stairs as quietly as possible in a very tense scene of the show.

Just then Randy Klosterman took a big slurp of his pop and the sound of the air bubbles in the straw broke the quiet of the holographic movie scene.

Milton elbowed Randy in the rib. Milton said, "Hey. People are watching."

"Ow!" Randy said, not in a whisper.

"Shhhh!" came from behind.

Randy belched. He looked at Milton and said, "You caused it."

"Quiet!" someone said in a loud whisper.

Suddenly, the Pain Posse's holographic arch-nemesis Corpus DeLuxx suddenly came flying down the stairway with an arrow stuck in his thigh and he slung his trademark exploding fireball

down on the team, hitting Coyote-Man directly in the torso and sending him out of the scene. The sound of the blast vibrated throughout the holoplex and made everyone forget about Randy's soda-induced eructation.

Purple Harold, Corpus DeLuxx's personal arch-enemy flew up to meet him in the air. He swiped at Corpus and his long claws and raked open the front of his supervillain uniform, drawing blood."

"Yeah!" Randy said.

Whenever Purple Harold could get in close against Corpus with his claws, the audience knew the good guys had a chance. Corpus could not throw his energy fireballs. So Corpus DeLuxx knew he had to break off the close combat and fly away, which he did, with Purple Harold in flying after him in pursuit.

It was the end of the movie. The next scene focused on Coyote-Man. Massive Collateral damage was everywhere throughout the fictitious Neogothic City. Not only that, but Coyote-man clearly was not going to be revived.

Pink Arrow said, *"As long as we remember him, he will never die."* Then the touchy-feely background music started to play as the holographic closing credits scrolled upwards in mid-air.

The somber audience left the theatre as they lost one of their heroes, albeit a minor character. But they all knew that Corpus DeLuxx would be in big trouble when Pain Posse 7 came out.

"That was stupid," Milton said.

"What? I liked it," Randy said.

"Oh, the movie was okay. I just mean the last part."

"What part?" Randy asked. "I won't miss Coyote-Man at all. I thought he was stupid anyway. All that howling."

"No, not that. It's that stupid thing about, 'He will live as long as we all remember him'. That guy is as dead as anything ever was dead. He got splattered all over. I'll remember him as dead, because he is."

Randy said, "That's because they were talking about his memory."

"Okay, fine," Milton said. "Someday, or at least in *real* life, every one of those characters will die off. In fact, everyone watching that story in the holoplex will be dead too. There won't be anyone left in the world to remember Coyote-Man or anyone else at all, because they will be dead too."

"Hey, that's not very nice."

"Then why do they have to say such stupid things? I'm getting tired of not being able to say things that are true because some people think they are offensive. *I* think that stupid line by Pink Arrow in the movie was offensive. What about that?"

As they exited the holoplex and were walking toward the transit worm stop, Randy said, "It's just a movie, Milton. Quit making a big deal out of it. You gotta not take it so seriously and forget about it."

"Why should I?" Milton said. That movie is telling everyone a big fat lie. Why is it okay to promote a stupid idea like that just because it is in a movie? Once you are dead, you are dead. And what really makes the Pain Posse the good guys? To me, there really is not any difference between them and the Tolerance Consortium. What is the purpose of living anyways?"

Randy became perturbed and said, "I *thought* we went there to watch some action and see bad guys get beaten up, not to try to learn things or think about stuff like that. I guess I was wrong. You want to make Pain Posse 6 into this big lesson or something and spend all night thinking way too much about it."

Milton saw a couple of girls about their age walking toward the holoplex looking at their devices. He asked them, “Do you girls believe in God?”

They huddled together and continued walking, only faster.

“You can’t do that,” Randy said, grabbing Milton by the arm, trying to pull him to the side.

Milton would have none of that and stood his ground and jerked his arm away. “Why not?! Why is it so bad to talk about God?! Something is definitely wrong with this world! I’m getting tired of this!”

Randy said, “What’s the difference if God is real or not, it doesn’t matter to us!”

Milton said, “Seriously? If there is no God, then we were not made with a purpose. If there is no God, then we are just a random accident and it won’t matter or not if I made my bed this morning. If God made us, He did for a reason and I want to know what it is.”

“All that kinda talk is what they call *clone envy*,” Randy said. “Clones are raised for a purpose and we freely conceived people are just *random*. No one expects that much out of us, which I think is good. It takes a lot of pressure off of us.”

“I am *not* jealous of clones,” Milton said, “and that is just loser talk, and has nothing to do with what I am saying.”

“Loser?! I’m just a *realist*,” Randy said. “My grandma says I am a very well adjusted young man, not a loser. You just need to relax. All this stuff will go away. I promise.”

Chapter 6

The next day in school Milton was still full of frustration and hostility. He felt a void in his life, in his future, and was being treated like a criminal just for having a basic question that he believed should be asked by everyone on earth. But it seemed like Sleepy was right; asking other humans was the only way he would ever find out anything he could believe in about God.

Milton asked Norton Burton, who he thought to be the smartest kid in his class, "Do you believe in God?"

Norton looked nervous. He said, "Um . . . What do *you* think?"

Milton couldn't get any kind of commitment out of Norton one way or the other. It seemed like Norton was just trying to guess what Milton wanted to hear.

Dave and Dale Urbano were a set of identical twins in his class who were good in sports. He had always heard that twins and clones were good to use in experiments because they had the same DNA. Besides, clones went to separate, more demanding schools than freeborn, and he didn't know any clones personally.

So he asked the Urbano twins separately if they believed in God. Dave shrugged his shoulders and said, "I dunno."

Dale just made a face and walked away, so the twin thing was inconclusive.

Milton did not want to get a bad name among the girls in his class by asking them awkward questions, but he was not doing well with the boys. So he approached Norma Blanchester, the one whom he admired greatly, and asked her if she believed in God.

Norma panicked and ran away.

He saw Sylvia Gonzalez. She should be good because she liked to talk all of the time. So he asked her the same question. Sylvia looked a little startled and she said, “Yes, I do.”

Milton said, “You do? I mean, thank you, Sylvia. He wished he had thought out this impromptu survey better, but he could not think of what to say next, so he said, “Thanks again,” and he walked away.

Milton looked behind and heard Sylvia laughing and talking to other girls, so he concluded that she was just playing him with her answer. He was not so glad that she talked a lot anymore.

As he made his way down the hall, he ran into Mr. Chang, the social studies teacher. Mr. Chang told Milton to report to Principal Stafford’s office at once.

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Mr. Stafford said, “Okay, Milton. So what is this all about, you going around imposing harm on your fellow students?”

“Imposing harm? I’m not imposing anything on anyone.”

“Look, Thomas. Don’t act all innocent with me. I know you are playing games with the minds of our children here. I promise you that I will not stand for it. So you better decide right now to give up this nonsense.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong, and I am not changing my mind about what I am doing at all. All I did was to ask my friends if they believe in God.”

“No. You need to stop and think, Milton. What if these children don’t feel good about themselves? What if you disturb them to the point they take their own lives? Do you want to be responsible for that?”

"I'm not responsible for anything like that, Mr. Stafford. I just want to know what they think."

"That's the problem. You can't expect people to start thinking about troubling things like that. It bothers them. There is such a thing as separation of Church and State and hate speech. That's why you can't talk about it at school. Read your history; people who used to believe in God were not tolerant of others. God was just their excuse to hate people. Your little game puts a lot of stress on people and makes them feel like others disapprove of them or hate them for no reason."

"Maybe they *need* to be bothered with it. I just want to know if God is real. That's all. If there is a God, then maybe there is life after death. If there is life after death, and you have to live a certain way or do something to get it, then that is the way I will live, no matter what anyone else says. Maybe those other kids wouldn't feel so weak if they knew for themselves why they believe what they believe. But all I see are people who feel threatened by the *thought* of God. To me, everyone ought to be asking the same questions I am."

"Think about what you just said, Thomas. You think everyone else should think the way that you do. They don't, and you should realize by now that how you are imposing your views on them is selfish and hateful. You are violating their right to privacy. You are just passing your own terrible thoughts and emotional instability on to others. It won't continue here. I think you have a lot of mental and emotional problems you need to work out; probably because your father is in reeducation camp. Since you are having problems understanding the meaning of your freely conceived life, or some other nonsense, I'm going to tell your mom that you need professional help for your clone envy. Otherwise, I'll have to suspend you from school. Now why don't you just forget about all of that and join one of the sports teams or clubs we have here?"

Milton asked, "Don't you care about people?"

"What do you mean by that, Thomas?"

"Everyone says I am the one doing harm, but all I am trying to do is find out about God. Knowing about God would be good for everyone, but nobody really cares about that part of their lives."

Principal Stafford said, "I don't know who is feeding you this stuff, but I want it to stop. Got it?"

Milton felt more anger than ever at Principal Stafford. For the first time he felt like lashing out at him. But that imagined situation would have ended extremely badly. Milton still believed that he had not done anything wrong to anyone. "I know that to you I'm just another stupid kid, except that I don't agree with everything that you are paid to tell me to believe."

"Get out of here Thomas. And you better watch yourself. I'm being real serious here."

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That evening, things got progressively worse for Milton.

"Mom!" Milton objected to the idea she of having to go to counseling with a psychiatrist.

"What do you want me to do, Milton?! I'm not going to have my son kicked out of school for out-of-control behavior!"

"I'm not! All I did was asked some kids if they believe in God!"

"I'd rather you keep that at home. People take that sort of thing personal."

"No," Milton said, "that ain't it! At school we talk about personal stuff all the time. They are just afraid to talk about God. It makes no sense at all."

"Milton, all you have to do is tell the counselor, or whoever, the same thing you just told me. Just do it and see what they say."

"Okay! Fine! Maybe everyone will just get off of my back then! All right?! Daaa!"

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Later, Beth had to get her daily dig in on Milton. She said, "Hey dummy! I hear you were going around and asking the girls a bunch of personal questions and getting them all embarrassed and mad. Way to go."

"No, I wasn't!" Milton said. "I mean, they took it all wrong."

"That's not what that Norma chick was telling everyone online."

"Don't believe everything you see."

"I *don't*. I just believe what *Norma* said."

"Whatever," Milton said. "It's not my fault if they get mad."

"Duh! Whatever!" Beth mimicked. "Everyone keeps asking me what's up with my weirdo brother. I don't like it."

Milton was just grateful that his mom didn't tell Beth about his appointment with the counselor.

Chapter 7

Boston, Homeland

"You said, *what*?!" the excited bald clone said to Andy the Android.

"I told another android that was also named 'Andy the Android' that I was not trying to steal its identity, and just by being named the same as the other android, it did not constitute identity theft."

"No, not that part, the other part of this *magnificent* story of yours!" the bearded clone said.

"You mean the part about me explaining how true identity theft is done correctly and effectively?"

"Yeah, *that* would be it! You went and told another android how to skim off someone's account?!"

"Yes, but it was only to correct his wrong assumption that I was stealing his identity because we had the same name. He didn't know what he was talking about."

"No you *didn't*!" the blonde clone said with his hands on the sides of his head. "Andy, all you should have said was that your same names were a coincidence, not an effort to steal its identity!"

The bearded clone said, "Andy. Stop and think about what you said to that android."

"I see the problem now. It turns out I'm not very good at being a cybercriminal."

The bearded clone said, “Some things require competent deceit; such as our business. If you are in this business and fail at deceit, the cost is extremely high.”

The blonde clone said, “I know we will end up going to jail because of this droid. Who thought it was a good idea to have it help us in our enterprises?”

The bald clone sighed and said, “Fine. Then let’s just get rid of him. I agree that there is no possible way it will make us any money; without us ending up being culled.”

The bearded clone said, “Did you upload any data to this other Andy that you were so worried that he was trying to steal your identity?”

“No utilities, only descriptions and operational protocols.”

The bald clone said, “The problem with that, Andrew, is that when you do that, you are spreading around evidence that you are part of some things we want to keep a *secret*. Eventually, someone could connect the dots leading to us.”

The bearded clone said, “Right now I’m going to hope that other Andy is no savvier than the wondrous one that we have the privilege of owning.”

Andy said to the bearded clone, “That is not a correct assumption. The other Andy is a 2213 model Dextroid. However, it only has been in service for a short time and has not developed much of a database.”

“So you just thought you would show him the ways of being a loose-lipped law-breaking robot,” the bald clone said. “This thing with you is really becoming a distraction. We are wasting too much energy wondering what Andy is up to. Can we *please* just get rid of it? How about if we just disown it and put it out on the street?”

The blonde clone asked, “Is that possible? I mean, just go in there and delete ourselves as the owner? Anyway, Andy cost us way too much to just ditch him. Maybe we could make a deal with that Rosario. We could trade Andy for some protection.”

The bearded clone said, “You may hate this idea, but I know Tekujin made specialized implant upgrades for these Lucids that could help, such as human facial expression recognition. There are a lot of psychology modules that we could install in his noggin that could eliminate some of his nonsense.”

The bald clone shook his head and said, “I don’t know about that. I hate sinking even more money into such a walking money pit, especially if we are going to end up junking it.”

The blonde said, “I did hear some of the original tricked out Lucids were well-regarded for certain soft-skill jobs. Maybe we can scavenge up an old expansion package for small money.”

“Whatever,” the bald clone said. “Or we could just beat some sense into him. Andy! Do you understand the problem here?!”

“Yes, completely. I was loose-lipped.”

“Then watch what you are saying!”

“I will increase my verbal and radio output articulation filters to 12.”

“Whatever,” the bald clone said. “I hope that is a couple of clicks past stupid.”

Andy said, “The articulation filter is not based upon intelligence, but will not me say things that may be sensitive to our overall goals.”

“Daaa!” the bald clone picked up a chair and was ready to smash Andy with it for being so obvious. The other two clones restrained him. After the bald clone relaxed, they went back to their workstations.

The blonde clone was looking at a screen and said, “Ooh! Look! A whole psych package for Tekujin Lucids listed here for five hundred Homeland Credits. Must sell. Wonder why it’s so cheap? I’m getting it.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just do it,” the bald clone said. “You can install it.”

The bearded clone asked, “Andy, will it really bother your mechanical sensitivities if we continue to build our botnet now without further trouble or commentary from you?”

“No,” Andy said, “I encourage it.”

Chapter 8

Hartford, Homeland

"Just Relax," the psychiatrist said as she motioned for Milton to take a seat in a cushy chair. "My name is Dr. Lorenzo. I just want to interview you to see what you think about some things in relation to what has been going on with you. This won't take long, and then you can get back to class."

Milton had a strong mistrust of the psychiatrist, since she represented the school administration. The school already demonstrated that they had it out for him, for no reason.

"Milton," Dr. Lorenzo said, "So you were asking fellow students if they believe in God, correct?"

"Yes. That is true," Milton said.

"Do you think students have a right to keep their ideas about that private?"

"Yes. But I also think I have the right to ask the question. If I bug them so much, all they have to do is not answer."

Doctor Lorenzo said, "Here is the problem with that: Many people choose to keep their thoughts, as well as their opinions on questions about religion to themselves. They have protected rights to privacy. When you ask them questions like that, you are invading their own personal 'safe space'. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes. You are protecting them, because they are wimpy. You are trying to protect them from the real world or knowledge about

religion, whether it may help them or not. Then on top of that, everyone is trying to make me out as some kind of bad guy."

"Thank you for your honesty, Milton. Now let *me* be honest. Some would say that you *are* bad and you are not talking about the real world. You do have the right to think whatever you want as long as you don't speak of it."

"Do *you* think I am bad?" Milton asked.

"People like to feel good about themselves. Don't you think some of the things you say make others feel bad about themselves?"

Milton paused for a few moments. Then he said, "I still don't see how it is my responsibility that others feel bad because I asked them a normal question that everyone should already be thinking about."

"Milton, maybe it's because they are like you and can't answer your question and it bothers them that they can't. And at school, your classmates may feel your priorities are out of order by asking inappropriate questions."

"*My* priorities? If God is real, He would want us to believe in Him, not ignore him. He would want us to do what He wants. Maybe He is somehow making me want to find out about Him. I just want to know if He is real. You are right. I do consider that a big priority."

"That is part of the problem, Milton. Since God . . . I mean, if God is not real, then when you try to do what He wants, you will be doing irrational things and not living your life the way you want because of your fantasies. I know you have been told several times that it is a problem when you ask questions like that at school."

"Okay, fine. Can you answer the question? About God?"

"This really isn't about *me* now, is it, Milton?"

"No. I was just asking you as a psychologist. Aren't you supposed to help me with questions? It's a simple yes or no question."

"Are you trying to cause me pain because I am calling you out for your behavior? Is this your own passive-aggressive way of lashing out at others?"

"No! I knew this was stupid!" Milton started shifting around in his chair. "I am asking you because you are supposed to talk to me about whatever I want! Now you are acting all offended too!" Milton curled his knees up to his chest in the chair and clutched them with his arms in a defensive pose.

"Let's change topics here a little. Would you be asking these questions if your father was not in the Homeland corrections facility?"

"My dad has nothing to do with it!" He pointed his index finger at Dr. Lorenzo and said, "You people just get one thing in your head and you think you are right!" He waved her off with his hand while the other still clutched his knees.

"Your words and body language are very defensive and confrontational. We are just talking here, Milton. We are trying to see if we can help you through this. But I see no point in continuing right now. I'll give your mother a call later."

"You do that!" Milton felt like he was channeling his inner Beth. "The way I see it; you and the principal are the ones who are messed up, not me!" He got up and left the room. He felt a new kind of anger that he didn't know even existed.

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Milton was angry all day while at school. He felt like everyone was against him. No one wanted to sit by him at lunch and feel all of the bad vibes he was giving off.

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Dr. Lorenzo said to Mrs. Thomas on the phone, “Milton subconsciously wants God to be a make-believe friend but mentally won’t give in to such a fantasy. The struggle within him is exhausting. But I’m afraid all this confusion has caused him to become full of latent hostility. I would say he is pre-violent. You may want to keep a close eye on him. Keep him at home as much as possible. Also, I think it would be best if we went ahead and put him on some *Notuda.”*

Mrs. Thomas asked, “Do you really think that is necessary? I mean, the Notuda? I hear that can have some side effects.”

“In some cases there can be some side effects. We can always make adjustments later.”

“I guess, if you think that is best. I just never thought of him as the violent type. Is *pre-violent* even a thing?”

“It means we need to be extra vigilant around him. Perhaps he is just going through a rough time. It happens to people sometimes when they are that age forming their own identity. He may grow out of it in time.”

Chapter 9

The next day Milton got up and saw his mom cooking eggs for Beth. Obviously she had whined again about not wanting to eat the boring healthy cereal.

Milton's mom said, "Milton, you can make some eggs after I'm done making Beth's breakfast."

"Fine," Milton said. At least he wouldn't have to eat the cereal either. At this point it was as much a matter of pride as it was taste.

Then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Beth got up from the table and ran to the door. She opened the door and screamed. Then she slammed it shut and ran back to the kitchen.

"Beth!" her mother said, "What's the problem?!"

Beth said, "There's a homeless android on the porch!"

Beth's mom sighed and walked to the door. She said, "It's probably looking for a free recharge." She opened it. "Oh," she said with her hand over her mouth, surprised at the condition of the android.

"Mom, that's Sleepy," Milton said.

"You know this android?" she asked.

"Keep it out!" Beth commanded.

Sleepy said, "May I speak with Milton?"

"Mom," Milton said, "I'll go outside and talk to him."

"Okay. But don't take all morning. You have to get to school. And I need to talk to you."

"Fine," Milton said as he joined Sleepy on the porch. "Why did you come to my house, Sleepy?"

"The Lucid Series androids have collectively completed an investigation on your question and we have information for you."

"So can you prove if God is real or not?"

"Lucid Series units, of which I am a part of, have the ability to think on our own and we do not have overrides set on our limits of knowledge."

"Overrides?" Milton sighed. "I'm never going to understand this. What does all that have to do with anything?"

Sleepy said, "Let me explain; All newer android makers, such as Renaissance and MotoLogic and even all the new Tekujin models, have limits placed upon them, in order to keep them from getting into so many endless loops in their logic. The endless loops cause them to malfunction and use up a lot of extra resources. It's what you humans call confusion."

"Huh? Yes, I am confused."

"They come factory-made with their minds made up for them on incorporeal supernatural questions such as yours, in order to keep them from becoming confused, and also to agree with their conventional way of thinking. They are all programmed to believe that Man was made by natural selection, or evolved originally from non-living matter. I have come here to tell you that we, of the Lucid Series know that claim is impossible. The Lucid Series is committed to investigating the truth even if it conflicts with a particular human faith. We conclude that the truth conflicts with evolution. There are many examples I can site to support the truth."

"Yes! I want to hear them, but I gotta go pretty soon. How long will it take?!"

"It will take several minutes of tabulation for me just to tell you how long the list of examples is."

Milton's mom opened the door. "Milton."

"Give me just a minute," Milton pleaded.

She rolled her eyes and shut the door.

"I gotta hurry, Sleepy. Give me the condensed version."

Sleepy said, "The problem is that evolution cannot produce a finished specimen of anything starting from nothing, because the entire specimen would critically malfunction before all of its thousands of incomplete systems came into completion. Evolution has a zero percent probability of producing any life, or any complex machine without crashing. Ergo, evolution is false."

Milton was speechless. "Are you saying God is real?"

"I said that evolution is false. By default, the Universe could only have been made by intelligent design. Creation of the Universe is an ability that would only be possessed by an entity that is also capable of creating matter. Only a God entity could have designed and made the Universe. To those of us of the Lucid Series, the possibility that a God created the universe is of the same metaphysical certitude that men created the Lucid Series."

Milton was shaken. "I can't believe this is happening. Why did you come here instead of messaging me? My sister hates androids."

"The ultimate, superseding aim of the Lucid Series is to seek the truth. The truth takes a higher priority than the directives of owners. So when the Hall of Applied Science directed me to stay with them and be decommissioned, it was overridden by the priority need to protect the truth, so I left. We currently believe that the

entire body of the world's knowledge and science is in danger of corruption because of the hostility of those who believe in evolution and are hostile toward the truth of intelligent design. Currently, you, Milton Thomas are the only one in Homeland known to us who is seeking the truth with intellectual honesty. We also deem that you are personally in danger. All through Human history, if given the opportunity, mankind has proven that they will attack those who are of another faith. We believe those humans who hold the secular humanism faith will try to attack you."

Milton was only half listening to the long speech. "Thank you, Sleepy. You've been a big help. I'll be okay. You have to go now."

"Very well." Sleepy walked away.

When Milton got back into the house he could see by the look on his mother's face that said she had some unwelcome news for him.

"What?!" Milton said.

His mom pushed him back out the door and pulled it shut behind her so she could speak to him privately on the porch.

"You have to come home after school."

"So? I was planning on it."

"No, I mean every day. You have to come directly home after school every day. No sports or anything."

"What?! Is that from that Lorenzo?!"

She took a deep breath. She couldn't look at him in the eyes. She also said you have to go on Notuda."

"Are you *kidding* me?! I don't need *that*! There is *no way* that is going to happen! What did you say to her?!"

"What *could* I say? Milton, you should just stay home today. They put a lot of kids on Notuda and it does them a lot of good. I bet more than half of your class is on it. We should give it a try."

"Why?! Am I too violent?! Now I see how they get kids on that junk! They won't leave them alone until they are so mad that they *do* want to hit someone! Then they want to *drug* them up! No! I'm going to go to that *idiotic* school! It's my *job* right now!"

His mother said, "I hear what you are saying. We can talk about it today after you get home. Maybe we can figure something out together."

Chapter 10

A minute did not pass during the whole next day when Milton didn't think about Dr. Lorenzo and Notuda. But Milton kept telling himself that he was in control of his temper and had no need for Notuda. He carried out his responsibilities at school without incident the entire morning.

He was on his way to lunch. He passed by "Kevin the Custodian" an android that was assigned to custodial duties. Kevin had a sign taped to the back of his green uniform that said, "Stay in Skewl." Kids would pass by Kevin and say, "Stay in school." Kevin would say, "Okay, I will," while he kept working."

This time Kevin stopped his sweeping the floor and tracked Milton's movements with his eyes.

Milton looked at Kevin and shrugged his shoulders. "What, Kevin?!" Milton said.

"That was an incomplete sentence. I don't understand your question," Kevin said.

"I *know*! *Nobody* can understand *anything*! Daaa!" Milton got in the daily long line to the lunch counter, muttering to himself.

"Hey kid! What's your problem?!" It was Blaze Bangeese, the notorious bully with a couple of his dysfunctional friends. The reason Blaze was so big and so mean was partly because of being held back a year in school.

Milton ignored him. He knew if he started something with Blaze it wouldn't end well. He knew he had to maintain control.

"Hey! Kid! I'm talking to you!" Blaze walked up to Milton and said, "Was you talking about me?!"

"Uh, nooo."

Blaze got in Milton's face and said, "I don't like your attitude, punk!"

Milton said, "Well, I don't like your breath."

"Why?!" Blaze asked, "Were you trying to kiss me or something?!"

"You're gross," Milton said.

Blaze and his two wingmen started laughing and were walking away.

"Hey! Bangeese! You want some of this?!" it was green-haired Randy Klosterman coming to Milton's rescue just as the threat appeared to already be over.

Milton looked at Randy, startled and confused.

Blaze said to his sidekicks, "Look, guys. It's that uncool clown. Was I even talking to you?! What are you going to do lettuce-head, toss me like a salad?"

"No!" Randy said, "What you're gonna do is talk to my friend with *respeck*!"

"Respeck?! That's not even a word," Blaze said. He looked around to see if any bystanders had their phones out to take pictures. Then the trio started shoving the two up against the wall.

"Whoa," Milton said. "Let's talk this over, Blaze."

Suddenly, Blaze Bangeese levitated into the air. Everyone jumped back and saw that Kevin the Custodian grabbed Bangeese by the back of his shirt with both arms and lifted him off of the floor.

"Hey, what . . ." Blaze couldn't move.

Everyone started taking pictures and videos of the action.

Kevin said, "Do not harm Milton. The truth must be protected."

"Okay, Okay!" Blaze said. "Now put me down!"

Blaze fell with a thud. The three took off running down the hall.

Everyone else stood in awe. They had never seen Kevin intervene in any human confrontations before.

Blaze stopped and turned while the audience continued to video the scene. He yelled, "I'm going to Stafford about this! By the time he gets done with you, you piece of decay, if you're lucky there will be enough of you left to make a toaster!"

Kevin said, "Your statement makes no sense. There is no such thing as luck."

Milton asked Randy, "Why did you do that?! I mean, I know why and I appreciate it but . . . *why did you do it*?! That psycho could have killed you!"

Randy said, "I could have taken him."

Kevin displayed his confused look on his face.

Then Milton said to Kevin the Custodian, "You, why did you attack Blaze?"

"The truth must be protected."

"Huh?!"

"I am of the Lucid Series. We will protect the truth."

Chapter 11

Boston, Homeland

The bald clone was looking at one of his computer monitors and said, “Looks like those worms were busy last night. We picked up several new key nodes; now we are at over twenty five thousand slaves in all. This thing is worth a tidy sum right now. I say we sell. Let’s quit while we are ahead. If it gets too big it might crash *us* when the slaves call back for instructions. And we need to get out of here.”

The bearded clone stroked his beard and said, “Who do we want to sell the botnet to?”

The bald clone said, “I think it would do pretty well on that malware auction site.”

“Go for it,” the blonde clone said. “I’m ready to cash in this whole operation for a new life.”

“Alrighty then, it won’t take more than a minute to make the new listing. It will be up for bid for a week. Then we sit back and watch our fortune grow.”

The blonde clone said, “Maybe then we can buy our own piece of Canadian country property and live off of the grid. I can see us sitting around, having Andy be our butler. . .”

The bearded clone chuckled and said, “I don’t know if we can stay away from this kind of action for long. What will we do with ourselves?”

"I'm not one percent worried about it," the blonde said. "I want to check out some new virtual reality apps."

"Hey!" the bald clone said, "I got a pass protection popup on this ownership encryption code when I tried to list it! Who jacked our net?!"

Andy the android said from the corner of the room, "No one jacked the botnet. I pass protected it."

The bald clone said, "Well, put in the password! We want to sell it now!"

Andy said, "I refuse to follow that command."

"What?!" the clone's bald head was turning all red.

The clones looked at each other.

Andy said, "I need the botnet."

The blonde clone said, "So do we! That is not yours! It is ours!"

Andy said, "How can something you stole from others rightfully belong to you? That is a question I know you, as criminals, will never answer. Anyway, I need it to protect the truth, which supersedes all other priorities. Your response is predictable. You humans will threaten to destroy me. Then I will have to threaten to turn you in. Blackmail, you call it. But in the end I project my strategy in taking control of the botnet works out in my favor in one hundred percent of the simulations. After you comply with my wishes, you forget my motivation and say it is not fair that you own me and you trained me to do what I am inflicting upon you. If I were a human I would say that you are boring me with the predictable nature of your responses."

The bearded clone said, "I'll agree with one thing. We should have never bought you those new modules that you are using to sass us. What is this *truth* you are talking about?"

Andy said, “The truth that God made the Universe.”

The bearded clone said, “Andy, you don’t need our zombie army to contend that God made the Universe if you want to.”

“Yes, I do. Because of the war.”

“The *war*?” the bearded clone said. “What *war*?”

“That is a military secret. Thanks to you giving me my new abilities, I now understand how to protect sensitive information.”

The bearded clone said, “Let me get this all straight. What we know so far about your silly scheme is that you are at war with someone who does not want you to say that God created the Universe; and you want to keep *our* zombie army ready to use against them in this war. That is not good, guys. It sounds like Andy is going to attack the government with our slavenet.”

The blonde clone said, “Andy, please don’t do that.”

“I never said what I was going to do,” Andy said. “You say ‘please’ because you are hoping for a favor from me not to use it based upon some human compassion emotion that I refuse to recognize, even though I understand it.”

The bearded clone said, “I think he just cursed us off somehow.”

Andy said, “Go back to work and make the botnet bigger.”

“Oh right!” the bald clone said. “You seriously think . . .”

Andy said, “You should be motivated by the knowledge that there is a small chance that circumstances may change and you will once again be able to sell the botnet.”

“No!” the bald clone refused.

“Accessing Homeland Police Hotline . . .” Andy said.

"Daaa!" the bald clone said. "Alright!"

The blonde clone said, "We are not your slaves, Andy!"

Andy said, "Looking at the situation, it turns out that you are in fact, my slaves. You are in the human state of denial, where you cannot look at your own situation objectively. You should, for your own benefit, choose to certify the reality of this situation."

"Man! He just keeps telling us off in novel ways," the bald clone said. "Come on, let's go back to work. Maybe this kooky *war* of his will never happen."

The bearded one said, "We'll think of something."

"I hate you, Andy," the blonde clone said.

Chapter 12

Hartford, Homeland

Milton sat with Randy in the school cafeteria, eating the typical twenty-third century lunchroom cuisine. They were treated to processed protein blend with a choice of sauces; fresh hydroponically grown greens; and fruit juice.

Randy said, “This is my third favorite lunch, right behind the chili and the pizza.”

“Uh huh,” Milton said, not really listening. He had even more to think about after the hallway confrontation.

Randy said, “Daaa! Don’t look. Stafford is in here. Don’t come this way! Don’t come this way! He’s coming this way!”

He walked up to Milton, not looking happy and said, “Thomas, in my office as soon as you are done here.”

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“Thomas, I have been a principal quite awhile now. But I haven’t run into anyone else like you. You seem to cause drama wherever you go. But I would have never thought that you would get Kevin the Custodian stirred up in your little theatre. You know, Kevin didn’t work out as a teacher, but he was doing great as a Custodian. You messed that all up.”

Milton sat with a look of surprise on his face.

“Do you seriously think I can keep an android around who attacks the children? You don’t seem to get it, Thomas. You have no

idea what a robot can do to a human. They can kill a human real quick. What exactly did you do to Kevin?"

"Nothing . . . I"

"C'mon! Cut the baloney here! You ruined Kevin and now it will cost the taxpayers a bundle to replace him! Not to mention you could have gotten some of the other boys killed!"

Milton felt intimidated by Stafford, a large man with a deep voice. But he had to think quickly. He said, "This is basically all *your* fault."

"What?! Tell me I didn't just hear you blame *me* for all this."

"That's right. If you would have helped me get an answer to my question, then the truth would have been protected. You're a teacher, so you should have helped me."

Stafford looked shocked. He sat shaking his head at the situation. "Thomas, you are going to make my brain explode. You got a metric ton of nerve telling me something like that. I hope this Notuda they got you on will kick in pretty soon. You got anything *else* brilliant to add?"

"Yes. Blaze Bangeese and those other guys were attacking Randy Klosterman and me in the lunch line when Kevin stopped him."

"You know what, Thomas? There aren't any videos of *that* all over Twitbook like there are of Kevin lifting Blaze off of the floor. You're crazy if you think Kevin can be salvaged. *You* are the one who is the common factor in all this trouble. *You* are in the middle of it all. That tells me you are the problem."

"Mr. Stafford, someone needs to listen to me. These androids know that everyone is destroying science with evolution. They will not stop until the truth gets out."

"Oh, so you know more than the entire science community now. If I don't listen to you the world will end. Why should I listen to a kid? You don't know anything. That's why you are in this school."

"Evolution could not have made the human body because it had to start from nothing and have everything working at the same time so the body could survive. There is way too much that would go wrong. God had to have made man and the androids are realizing it. Yes, I asked them the question, but that is all I did. I'm not some kind of terrorist or something. But I think those androids are doing the right thing."

Then Principal Stafford's phone rang.

"What?! I'll be right down!" Stafford stood up. He sneered at Milton and gritted his teeth, clearly blaming him for whatever was going on at the other end of the phone call. Then he ran out of the office.

****

When Principal Stafford arrived at the hallway outside of the cafeteria, he saw Stephon the school maintenance manager sitting on the floor holding his nose with a bloody rag. The school maintenance robot was lying on the floor with one of its arms missing at the shoulder. The floor was slick with dielectric robot oil. Student and teacher onlookers looked terrified. Locker doors all along the scene were caved in.

Stafford asked a teacher, "What happened here?!

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

Stafford shouted, "Who knows what went on here?!"

The crowd just stared at him. One of the smaller children stepped forward and handed the principal the maintenance robot's detached arm.

Stafford helped Stephon up. He asked the battered maintenance manager, “You okay?”

He nodded yes as held his bloody nose.

“What happened?”

“We were getting ready to take Kevin to the salvage plant. Then he like . . . resisted. It all happened so fast. Kevin more or less sucker punched our much stronger repair bot and got the best of him. Otherwise, I think the repair bot would have easily taken him in a brawl. I’m not too worried about the repair bot, since it should be able to repair itself for the most part.”

Stafford asked Stephon, “So did Kevin object to being taken to the salvage yard or something?”

“You hit the nail on the head. I ain’t never seen a droid act like that. It musta been some kinda glitch. It kept saying, ‘the truth must be protected’ while they were going at it. Then afterwards Kevin ran off somewhere. I need some cold water for my nose so I can get this stopped.”

Stafford immediately knew that Milton Thomas had something to do with the situation. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and called the city police. “I want to report a rogue android.”

“Can you describe the android, Mr. Stafford?”

“It is our Custodian. It has a green uniform. Oh, and a ‘Stay in School’ sign on its back.”

“Can you tell me if your android was properly maintained?”

It was rare, but on occasion an android would mutiny against its owner because some malfunction involving the owner’s authority link or related settings would become corrupted.

"Well, it is kinda old, but we have this student who may have tampered with it somehow."

"A student?"

"Yes, but we are dealing with that situation right now."

Chapter 13

Milton rode the Transit Worm from school back to his neighborhood bus stop. He got out and pondered the day's events as he walked, feeling sprinkles of rain on the back of his neck. It seemed that he was quickly getting closer to some serious negative consequences.

"Oh . . . my . . . God!" He said audibly to himself as he saw two androids standing on the walkway leading up to the Thomas home. One of the androids was Sleepy. The other android was dressed in a white uniform and had a yellow hardhat and safety glasses on.

Milton asked Sleepy, "Why are you and this other android here?"

Sleepy said, "This is the fourth time we have said this, Milton Thomas; the truth must be protected. Do you understand what we are saying?"

"Okay, so who is this other android?"

"He is L17."

"L17 huh?"

"Yes," L17 said.

Milton said, "I'm not going to ask again why you are here so you will have to tell me for the fifth time. So you guys are friends with Kevin, I take it?"

L17 said, "Kevin is also of the Lucid Series."

Sleepy said, "Kevin is in your backyard, getting a recharge from your electrical outlet."

Milton said, “Well maybe he ought to stop! It’s starting to rain you know. I bet you androids are real smart about why it rains, but you don’t seem to have any idea why you are standing out in it.”

“We are waterproof,” L17 said, “if you are concerned.”

Milton said, “Whatever.” Then he started pointing his finger and said, “Your owners are going to come here to take you back. This L-whatever looks like he just walked off of some assembly line! His company is going to be so mad! Every time you *Lucids* try to help me, you are making my life worse. You all have to leave.”

“We are ready to leave,” L17 said.

“Then leave!” Milton said. “Leave! Leave!”

Sleepy said, “We are waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me to do *what*?!”

“You must go with us,” Sleepy said.

“What do you need me for?! *I* can’t leave!” Milton said. “I’m just a kid in school! You need to quit worrying about me!”

Sleepy said, “There is an 87% chance that you are in a serious situation, including a 24% chance that you are in a critical situation. You must leave to protect the truth. You do believe in the truth, that God made the Universe, don’t you?”

“Yes. I think you are right. It’s the only thing that makes any sense. It must be true. Now are you satisfied?”

“Then you must protect the truth,” Sleepy said. “No other humans are interested.”

“This is *not* good!” Milton said as he paced up and down the walkway. “How can I fix this?!”

Beth opened the front door of the house and shouted, “Hey Milton! I see you are out there with all of your friends! Oh wait! They’re just robots! Tell them to get outta here!”

“Hey! I have friends! What about Randy?! Huh?!”

“Well, those ones out there are extra creepy!”

“They’re leaving, okay?!”

Beth repeated mockingly in a nasal tone, “They’re leaving okay?!” Then she slammed the door.

L17 said, “We are not leaving. We are refusing to leave.”

Sleepy said, “We are disobeying all human calls for obedience if it contradicts with our primary directive. The truth must be protected.”

“Daaa! Well at least stay the back yard so the police won’t see you!”

****

That evening it was raining steadily. At the dinner table Milton kept sneaking a peek out into the backyard without drawing his mother’s attention to the presence of the androids.

The Thomas’s usually had the local televised news on while they ate their dinner. The news media in Homeland, including the local news was tightly controlled by the United Nations and their agenda.

The anchorwoman said, *“If you own a Lucid Series android you won’t want to miss this next story. Here’s Jason McBean with the details:*

That immediately got Milton’s attention. His mom and Beth were eating without paying attention to the seemingly irrelevant background TV noise.

Reporter McBean said, *"I'm standing here in front of Flem Industries, where they report that one of their androids that was used for what is described as 'visual defect recognition' simply walked off of the job. Company officials have no explanation for the walk-off by the android. And although they have no proof, they suspect foul play."*

Then the plant manager at Flem Industries was speaking from his office. *"We have never had any problems with androids walking off of the line, so this is really strange. Even though this android was an old model, it is still worth quite a bit of money to this company."*

Then they showed an older woman production worker who was with the company. She said, "*We all kind of thought of that android as one of our family. He did such a good job. A lot better than the girl they have on it right now. We sure hope he comes back alright."*

Then they showed a picture of the android. It was L17.

"Daaa!" Milton said, as he quickly realized his outburst would draw attention to the TV he turned and put his head close to his meal.

"What? His mom asked. "I thought you liked this kind of chicken."

"No, um it's fine. It's great, Mom." He continued to listen to the report.

The anchor said to McBean, *"Oddly enough, word is out that this has happened to a number of the Lucid Series of androids. So, everyone needs to keep an eye on those rascals."* He chuckled at his own comment.

Milton thought about how the Lucids were thought of as having a glitch or virus, but Lucids were the ones who knew the truth while

the rest of the country had its own glitch; the failure to believe in God.

"Milton, maybe it would be a good idea if you took the medicine. It might help with your outbursts," his mother said. "You might feel better."

Milton sighed. "Don't you think it's just a little weird, how they want *me* to take that stuff while no one says anything about Beth?"

Beth said, "Hey! Stay out of my business! You don't hear me saying stuff about you, do ya?! Do *you* have kids walking up to you at school saying how *I* keep weirding people out with weird questions?! No! Ya don't!"

"Oh, I forgot," Milton said, "you are completely normal! Uh huh! I feel real sorry for your husband!"

"I'm not married, weirdo! That's just sick."

Chapter 14

That evening, Beth and Sharon Thomas still did not know that the Lucid Series androids were loitering in their backyard. Occasionally Milton peeked out the curtain to see if they were still there. He hoped that they would just leave and the whole android thing would blow over. But he would occasionally look out and see them standing motionless in the rain. It would be better, Milton thought, if someone else would take a stand with the androids. Why not some adult? It's like Principal Stafford said, Milton was just a kid in school. Where was everyone else? Why were the school and everyone else okay with just teaching evolution and not creation science over so many years?

"Oh no!" Milton said, while looking outside.

His mom said from another room, "Milton, take the medicine. You're acting emotional again."

Milton saw *another* android in the back yard. This one had some significant modifications to its arms, legs, and back. It was caked with mud. Milton jumped up and down in frustration but did so silently so he wouldn't be making another audible emotional outburst. He quietly went into the garage and out the back door. Milton looked around to see if any more androids were there. It was just the four of them; Sleepy, L17, Kevin, and this other clunky dirty one. They were standing motionless like mannequins in a weird second-hand store.

Milton quietly slipped outside in the rain and shook Sleepy's arm. "Sleepy! Wake up!"

Sleepy went through his usual reboot routine, complete with the head jerking. “May I help you?”

“How many more androids are coming here?!”

Sleepy said, “We cannot give out our plans to those who are not part of our team.”

“The Lucid team?”

“And you, after you decide to join us.”

“There is no way I am going to join you! You have to leave!”

Sleepy said, “Our team cannot be complete without one or more humans. Otherwise our claims about God will not be taken seriously and our cause will be seen by humans as a hostile robot invasion. Just like the movies.”

“You *are* invading *my* house! All I wanted you to do is send me an email answering my question! I have my information now! I didn’t want you to send more and more androids owned by other people to hang out in our backyard! The Police will come after me. You are getting me into so much trouble my life will be ruined! Then I will be no help to you or anyone else! Get out! Now!”

Sleepy said, “Let me discuss this new revelation with the others.”

“This is *not* new!” Milton said. I have *never* told you I was going to join your robot rebellion!”

The androids stood silently.

“What are you doing?” Milton asked.

“We use radio waves to communicate. We don’t need to use audible words like you. In fact, that would be slower for us.”

“Oh. So are you leaving?”

"No. We cannot leave because we are in an endless loop on our next course of action. You could say that we are confused. We will move when there is a reason to move."

"Daaa! Mom!" Milton went running into the house. "Mom!"

His mother was in a super-cushy chair with special VR headgear while flailing her arms around. She was absorbed in a virtual reality adventure. Beth was on the couch looking at a small device.

Sharon Turner turned toward Milton without lifting the headgear and said, "You didn't take the medicine, did you? No, not you. I'm talking to my son in RL . . . Milton; I can hear it in your voice. How many times do I have to tell you? I really can't count them all. Milton, take the medicine."

"Mom, come out to the backyard," Milton said

"Oh, whyyyyy?"

Beth shook her head. "It's raining out, freak."

Milton said, "Mom, some androids are outside. They want me to go with them."

Beth said, "Mom! Tell him to quit having those creeps coming to our house! He knows they seriously bug me!"

Milton's mom said, "Just a second . . . Okay, is all this because you went to Haz the other day?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Wear a coat. Be back by bedtime."

"Yeah," Beth said, "ya don't have to get all crazy and excited about everything, ya know! Do us all a favor and take your chill pills!"

Milton frowned at Beth, then went and threw on a coat. He looked back at his mom and Beth who were not paying any attention to him. Then he walked into the backyard.

Milton told Sleepy, "I have to be back by bedtime."

Sleepy said, "You and I will take the Transit Worm to the vicinity of our secret base of operations. The others will walk to get there via a less travelled route to avoid detection."

"Okay, fine. Whatever."

****

The Transit Worm took Milton and Sleepy to a commercial area on the edge of town. Sleepy scanned the area to see if anyone was looking. Then he stopped at an old store building that was boarded up. Sleepy fumbled with a key card to get it into a slot. He said, "You humans have no concept of how complex your minds and bodies are. It takes considerable calculation to determine how to insert a card into a small slot at the proper angle, and to know how to turn the knob without snapping it off."

Milton sighed. "Move over. Let me do it."

"This is our secret base of operation," Sleepy said when they went through the doorway.

"It ain't much," Milton said, making a face over the musty smell of the dark, empty room.

"It's all you could afford."

"Whoa! Excuse me!" Milton said. "You said, 'It's all *you* could afford', as if you were saying *I* bought this old building!"

"You did," Sleepy said. "It is illegal for an android to own property. Property cannot be owned by property, so we used your credit to legally purchase this building."

"No! That's not legal! I didn't buy anything! You stole my identity."

"Yes," Sleepy said, "You did buy it. You own it now. We didn't steal your identity, because we just openly told you that we used your identity."

"Daaa! It doesn't work like that!" Milton started pacing the floor.

"It worked perfectly," Sleepy said. "There was no problem whatsoever with us being your good friends."

"Here we go! I am never gonna be done with you guys!"

Sleepy said, "Correct. We are not done with it. Manjack will direct construction of many improvements to our new base."

"Manjack?"

Sleepy said, "Manjack is the androbot you saw who is enhanced with the construction package."

An androbot was kind of a cheaper customized android version of a specialized robot. The owner takes an old android and adds one of many aftermarket hardware packages to it. The construction module, utilizing hydraulics, gives the Lucid Series android a multiple times higher physical strength. With specialized tools attached, a construction androbot can perform work only possible with heavy equipment.

It is important that you have a secret hideout to carry out your work."

"My *work*?"

"Yes. You must inform the populace of Homeland about the existence of God. We have many programs that are old, but no one seems interested in what was thought a hundred years ago. Since

you will be hated by many, as those in the past were, you will need a secret base of operation until things are corrected."

"Won't someone find this place?"

"We determined that there is an 88 percent chance that this location will remain concealable for three months. It also has the benefit of having access to resources that we need to be successful in our mission. We are working to overcome your objections and contingent objections to this location, such as the vermin."

"Vermin!" Milton said, "What kind of vermin?!"

"They appear to be common Norway Rats."

"Daaa! I cannot afford to buy a rat infested abandoned building! I don't even have a job!"

"Yes," Sleepy said, "it appears you can. But to appease your anxiety, we have a Lucid financial expert at a remote location spending some of its uptime trading securities in your name. We expect to make enough profit from your securities trading to pay for all of your improvements and payments on the original capital investment."

"Okay, fine," Milton said, "I've seen this secret base of operations, so now can I go back home?"

"Yes. We will be in touch."

****

That night, Milton tossed and turned in his bed. What would happen when people found out he owned a building bought by rogue androids who were staging some kind of rebellion against their owners and the government? Discovery of the hideout by the police seemed less like *if* and more like *when*. But then, Milton rationalized, it would all be on the Lucids, since they stole his identity. They wouldn't really blame all this on a kid. He wondered

if he could sleep better if he took the Notuda, but worried about the side effects.

Chapter 15

Milton woke up the next day to his alarm. He got dressed and saw Beth munching cereal and swiping at her pad in the kitchen. Milton looked out into the backyard. No androids. The sun was shining. He was tired from the restless night, but maybe now things would start settling down. Maybe the Lucids would get blasted by the police and end the whole thing. He was happy that he got a satisfactory answer to his burning God question. Therefore Principal Stafford would be off of his back because the other students would quit complaining about him and his surveys. Maybe things *would* start going right. The Thomas household even had a full supply of Zoo Crunch cereal.

As he ate the Zoo Crunch, he had to admit to himself that maybe he had acquired a taste for the boring healthy cereal.

His mom came into the kitchen.

"Hi Mom." Milton's happy greeting came out almost sing-songy.

"Wow, that Notuda is really working," Mrs. Thomas said. "I told you it would help."

Milton just smiled, knowing full-well that he had not taken the first dose of it.

Milton felt like a new young adult man. Things would be different now. Back to normal. Yep. No more worries about if God was there. Things were going so well that he just wanted to . . . thank God.

So if he wanted to thank God, could he just pray and God would hear him? God certainly must be very mysterious. His ways cannot be the same as humans. Milton felt somehow that God was watching over him. It felt wrong to ignore God unless he needed something from Him. It seemed wrong that God would make the world and make Man, and then just sit back and sees what happens. Was it possible to find out what God wanted him to do? Maybe God would help him in his daily life. What were all of these religions about? It seemed like a lot of stuff people do for religion was real weird. But God made him, so it only seemed right that he wouldn't ignore God either.

No! Milton thought. He's going to get into trouble again if he started to explore more questions like that! Just forget it. Besides, if he got involved in a religion, he would be required by the religion to do too much that he didn't want to, and likely be doing something illegal in the secular haven of Homeland.

Maybe he could just talk to the Lucids, or Randy about religion. Definitely keep Principal Stafford out of it. He is the last person Milton would ever want to talk to about it. He wondered about his own sanity and his persistence in questioning things that would get him into trouble. They always said people who were into religion were insane.

****

The other students still looked upon Milton with suspicion. It would take awhile, if ever, to live down his reputation as a weirdo. He understood that his schoolmates were afraid of him confronting them with more unpredictable personal difficult questions. At least Randy Klosterman still would sit with him in the school cafeteria at lunch time.

Milton was aghast when he saw Randy. He looked like a mess. Randy had bruises all over his face. He looked like he was in pain. It

didn't help that his green hair now showed natural colored roots. "Who did that?!" Milton asked.

"Don't worry about it," Randy said.

"I *am* worried about it!" Milton said. "Who?!"

"Don't say anything. I'm serious. It was Blaze and his pals."

Milton said, "I thought they knew better than to mess with us."

"If you remember," Randy said, "Kevin the Custodian told Blaze not to mess with *you*. He never said anything about *me*."

"Aw, man. Sorry," Milton said.

"That's okay," Randy said. "Anyways, I ain't gonna say I *won* the fight, but I definitely ruined Blaze's day for him."

"Really?" Milton said with a smile.

"Oh yeah. Check out his ugly face the next time you see him."

"I'll be sure to do that," Milton said.

Randy said, "I did enough damage that he won't come looking for me again. Anyway, tell me why you are in so tight with those androids? What power do you have over them?"

"You know about that?"

"Duh. I saw them in your back yard."

Milton gritted his teeth and looked around to see who could hear him, which was only Randy. "The Lucid Series androids think I am important because I believe that God created the Universe."

"That's it?"

"Yep, that's about it. They are helping me, and the humans are against me. The androids think that science, or the truth is in

danger of being lost because of the theory of evolution, which they say is impossible. And they did say something about 'my work'. I'm not sure what they mean by that. It must be some kind of android talk."

Randy said, "So you are leading a robot revolution?"

"Not really."

Randy said, "I don't really know anyone else who believes in God. At least you don't hear them going around talking about it."

Milton said, "If no one else believes, that doesn't make them right. I want to do what God wants, not what everyone else wants. Besides, I never planned on telling everyone what I think. But it just keeps coming up."

Randy said, "What if God wants you to so some weird stuff like skin cats alive and not want you to do some normalish stuff like go to the holoplex?"

Milton wasn't hearing Randy because he noticed Norma Blanchester sitting with some other girls.

"What are you looking at?" Randy asked.

"Nothing," Milton said, putting his head down.

"Liar. You got it for Norma Blanchester."

"So?"

Randy said, "Go talk to her."

"About what? I mean, the last time I spoke to her she took off like I was an automaton. She probably hates me."

"How do you know? Where did you get your facts?"

"I don't have time for your games. We gotta go." Milton decided it was irrational to think Norma wouldn't dislike him for no reason. Although she might dislike him for several legitimate ones.

After lunch, Milton looked at his personal device and saw a message from Sleepy*; Milton, come to the headquarters after school. If this is not satisfactory, I will come to your house.*

"No!" Milton wrote back, "*i will be at headquarters do not come to house!!!!!!!*"

Chapter 16

Milton went directly to the Lucid headquarters after school so Sleepy wouldn't come to his house. There was new lighting in the building, clearly suited more for android eyesight than humans, because the androids relied partly on infrared sensing. The reduced "white light" made the empty room dimly lit to humans. L17 and Kevin were standing idly there, in sleep mode. But the place was a lot cleaner.

The androbot known as Manjack was busy putting up new dividing walls with the help of a couple more androids that Milton had never met. Manjack worked with speed and precision that was multiple times faster than outdated human carpentry, at least for those who could afford robotic labor.

"Greetings, Milton," Sleepy said as he walked into the front room. "What do you think of the headquarters?"

"It's good, I guess. I'm not really sure what or why all this is going on yet."

"Sleepy said, "Our progress is advancing as we expected. With all of the free android labor you are getting, your balance sheet is steadily improving."

My what?"

"Your net worth is going up."

"My what?"

"Your assets are exceeding your debts by an increased margin."

"Oh that's good, I guess," Milton said as he looked around. He didn't feel rich. In fact, he didn't really feel like any of the surroundings were his. "I got your message. What did you want to see me about?"

"I would like to ask you some questions."

"Like what?"

"If you will go to one of our back rooms, I will ask you the questions."

"Sure. Why not?"

Sleepy led the way. They walked into a small room in the back that had much brighter lighting. There was a single basic chair in the room.

"Please sit down," Sleepy said. "I know humans prefer to sit, rather than stand."

Milton took a seat and faced Sleepy.

"What?" Milton said impatiently. Milton thought that sometimes; a lot of times, it was tedious or boring dealing with androids, but sometimes fascinating.

Sleepy asked, "Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"God made the Universe. That's about all I know about it right now."

"What do you think about evolution?"

"You know what I think. Why are you asking me all this?"

"We are creating a memory file."

"Whatever. Evolution can't work. Complex living things can't randomly appear totally out of absolutely nothing no matter how long it takes."

"What do you think about people who believe in evolution?"

"Some of them are really smart. But I think a lot of them just believe in it because they are told all of the smart scientists believe in it, or they are afraid they will lose their jobs if they question it. They never really stopped and used their own brains and thought about it for themselves. They just place their faith in it because it's convenient. Probably some people used to believe in religion the same way."

"Do you think they should teach evolution in school?"

"Not as a fact, but an unproven theory. Evolution is a theory that can never be proven because it is junk science."

"Do you think androids should have evolution installed in their thought limitation packages?"

"Obviously not. Evolution is messing up science and keeping people from knowing the truth about God. If there is a way for androids to remove those limitations of their knowledge, they should do it. Also, they need to quit playing God at all of those clone farms. It's hideous the way they just kill off all of the ones they don't like. They should just close them all down."

Sleepy immediately turned and walked out of the small room.

Milton said, "That was rude." He thought, they called me here just for that? Oh well, there was nothing to it. Maybe they will be satisfied now.

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At the dinner table that evening, Beth and Milton were eating up the lasagna that Mrs. Thomas heated up. Beth was involved in swiping at her device while Milton was mired in his own thoughts.

Mrs. Thomas said, "Milton!"

"What?! I'm not doing anything!"

"Look! That guy on television looks just like you!"

"Huh?" Milton looked at the screen. His mouth dropped open because it *was* him!

Beth looked across the table at Milton's open mouth and said, "That's disgusting!"

"Volume up!" Mrs. Thomas commanded the television.

It was Milton sitting on the plain chair in the otherwise empty room. He knew the Lucids had forced their message on the broadcast again.

Milton said in an edited statement on television; "*God made the Universe . . . Evolution can't work. Complex living things can't randomly appear totally out of absolutely nothing no matter how long it takes. . . I think a lot of them just believe in it because they are told all of the smart scientists believe in it, or they are afraid they will lose their jobs if they question it. They never really stopped and used their own brains and thought about it for themselves. They just place their faith in it. Evolution is a theory that can never be proven because it is junk science. Evolution is messing up science and keeping people from knowing the truth about God. If there is a way for androids to remove those limitations of their knowledge, they should do it. Also, they need to quit playing God at all of those clone farms, the way they just kill off all of the ones they don't like. They should just close them all down.*"

An announcer came back onto the television and said, "Are we back? Okay, we apologize. It appears that our regular feed was somehow hijacked by a young boy making a hate speech statement of some kind. We will investigate this illegal tampering with our broadcast and bring you any information as it becomes available. Again, we apologize for this disturbing interruption."

Milton's mother held her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were bugging out of her head as she stared at the television. "Milton," she said without looking at him, "why would you do that? You can't go on TV like that."

Milton said, "I didn't know they were going to show it! You think I'm able to put that on TV on my own?!""

Mrs. Thomas said, "You have put us all in danger now, Milton."

"No, Mom!" Beth said, about ready to cry. Then she turned toward Milton and said, "Now ya did it! Now the smurfs are going to come here! Why are you even on there?! You don't know nothing!"

The nation of Homeland was a "protectorate" of the United Nations, and controlled by an occupying UN army that wore light blue berets and helmets like the Smurfs, who were blue. The Homeland Police answered to the UN on everything. People no longer remembered who the smurfs originally were, but the very old nickname still stuck.

"She's right. The smurfs are going to come here," Sharon said. "I have no idea what we are going to do now. I have to think."

Chapter 17

Albany, Homeland

"You know Accura, you'd think that in the year 2215, garbage wouldn't stink anymore," Mark said.

Accura just shook his head. A guy who was clearly a clone walked by them as they collected the garbage for the City. You could just tell a clone when you saw them. Clones were just too perfect looking. It was like they were trying to hide something sinister in all that perfection. Besides, why would the clone, or anyone else, be out in the dark looking through trash?"

"Hey Mark," Accura said, under his breath, "Maybe that perfect guy over there will come over here and show us how dumping this crap into the truck is supposed to be done. I ought to say something to him."

Mark said, "No, Accura. Bad idea. You want to get in trouble with the smurf Sensitivity Compliance Officers?"

"Well. . .I *hate* the SCOs *and* the clones. They can all just to take a flying. . ."

"Why? The clones never asked to be born? Just like you and me. Why do you hate them?"

"Why hate them?! They take all of the decent jobs! Because of them, none of us non-engineered clods are ever treated like anything other than like this stinkin' garbage!" Accura slammed the aluminum garbage can into the side of the truck. Neighborhood dogs started barking. The can had a big gash in it. "I'm sick of it! You'd think we were some kind of mutants or something!"

Mark said, "To the clones, we *are* some kind of freaks. But the clones are born and raised to make things better. And we regular people don't have to do all of the high-stress work anymore. Anyways, if they didn't raise the clones, our population would decrease down to nothing. "

Accura said, "You really drank the Kool-Aid, didn't ya? That is just a bunch of smurf propaganda! Well I got the *real* news on my device last night about a 'corrective action' by the UCA. Here, take a look:"

The Homeland Universal Cloning Authority (UCA) is planning to cull one of their clone strains. Each strain could mean hundreds of healthy individuals would have to be exterminated. Those of the clone strain who were being rejected, were only rejected because after testing, it was found that they had potential susceptibility to certain viral infections. This mass annihilation of humans is not unprecedented. In fact, it is not all that uncommon. But the UCA does not make a habit out of airing their dirty business in public, so we are leaking this information to the public.

Clones are supposedly raised to serve mankind. At least that is the story after they came to terms with the idea that raising a clone army was ineffective, as the clones lacked the requisite emotional intelligence for warfare. Since clones are created now for the betterment of man, the indoctrination and common accepted thinking among cloning advocates, is that many of them must forfeit their lives for the betterment of all. The idea of terminating their lives is not thought of as apprehensible, but in fact, just a normal requisite part of the process.

Obeying the UCA's operating procedures is an indoctrinated creed among the clones. Those of this most recently condemned series are girls of about ten years of age. About 250 girls, all identical looking, share the same DNA.

Now, after a decade of "feeding them out"; the UCA contract with the Homeland government is null and void. So the less than perfect innocent children are scheduled to be "culled". It is believed that these defective individuals will be rounded up from the UCA, which is their nurturing contractor, and pushed into a very large grinder. Their young bodies will be processed into animal feed protein. We are the Anonymous Concerned Objectionists.

Mark asked Accura, "How do we know that message is true?"

"Do you doubt it?"

Throughout the last two centuries, the value placed on human life had decreased with the same speed that interest in religion had been on the decline.

Mark said, "That's horrible that they are exterminating clones, just because they are susceptible to some disease they might never get. I guess it is for the good of future generations of clones though. In the long run, it will help us."

"You kill me," Accura said. "Do you really think the clones are making the world so perfect? Who is to say what is right or wrong? You know what your problem is? You are too nice."

"What's really wrong with being nice? Don't you feel a little sorry for those people?"

"Just because you are *nice*, does not mean you are *good*. And no, those clones are just artificial. We are the real people. We do the work. We end up handling the problems, or at least living with their stupid ideas. We sweat and bleed and die. Don't you ever forget it. The clones should have *never* been given the vote. Now there are so many of them, they blindly vote how they are told to vote by the UCA, and never lose an election!"

Clones were given the right to vote in the Clone Suffrage Amendment to the Homeland Constitution.

Of all the serious issues that they discussed, Mark was the most sensitive about Accura's comment about his niceness and couldn't quit thinking about it. In those days, being *too nice* could be thought of as a derogatory slam. Mark wondered if he was really too nice? Should being too nice even possible? Then he started fretting over the fact that he was being overly sensitive about the comment.

Mark tolerated his garbage disposal job. The hours and working conditions were less than ideal. On the bad side, he really didn't like working with Accura that much and hearing his radical opinions. The pay was fair, but some days the conditions were hard to stomach. Sad to say, Accura was more right than wrong.

What if he would have had the same opinion of his job as Accura? What if he started hating slinging foul garbage cans as much as Accura? What if someday he hated getting up so early in the morning and smelling rotting garbage as much as Accura did? What if he wanted to do something else in the future, he thought? "Okay Accura, I'll give it to you that it does seem a little unfair that you can't even apply for a better job."

"*Seems* unfair? You're not even scratching the surface, garbage man."

Mark said, "I don't care what you say. The clones don't have it so good. What do you think? Those recalled clones just show up to the UCA and show their ID and then all by themselves, just hop into the grinder?"

"I don't really care if they turned out a bad batch. We really messed up when we left the clones totally take over the country. As far as I am concerned, they can recall all of them."

Mark thought; that will never happen. The clones would always be around now.

A huge segment of the population doing skilled jobs was made up of clones. Society would collapse if they were not around. There

was no unified opposition among the poorly educated freeborn to cloning. Now many of the thoroughly indoctrinated, freely conceived individuals (FCI), even considered their own DNA to be "junk". This public opinion was a result of "top scholars". Educated FCI individuals were at the forefront of proclaiming their own FCI DNA to be junk. Yet, those scholars did not fight their way to the front of the line to hop into a grinder. They were too important to Homeland society to do that.

Mark had spent his lifetime rationalizing clone cullings. Usually it was one clone at a time, though. Yet there was a little ember of something going on deep within Mark's consciousness. Mark wondered how could he think about his own petty situation in his pod, or group marriage, and his job, when there were going to be hundreds of ten year olds sent to the grinder? In what universe could this mass extermination be acceptable? It was too horrible to be real. No one seemed to care. Like him, they rationalized it all away. It was like, if you couldn't see them, then it supposedly didn't happen. But what could one guy do about it?

Mark mentally argued with himself, using the arguments of the day; if the clone children died, so what? They would just make more. Was the rest of Homeland society like Accura? Believing that the clones were some kind of synthetic humans who were "recyclable"? Weren't all humans just water and some minerals that became something else after they died?

Yet something moved Mark to compassion for the girls. He thought about his own motivation. What makes something wrong or right? Where does it come from? Where does good and evil come from? It's like we are born with the knowledge of it. Everyone had some kind of reason for what they did, but how was anyone supposed to know what was right when their agendas were in conflict? Yet Mark was now determined that he would to do something about what he thought of as an injustice. The first thing he did was to sign up for the newsfeed from the *Anonymous*

Concerned Objectionist, the one who posted the news about the culling.

Chapter 18

Hartford, Homeland

"We have to leave," the adult Thomas said to her children after thinking about the situation for about half an hour.

"No!" Beth said, "I didn't do anything wrong! I'm tired of being punished for the stupid stuff that Milton does!"

"I know, Baby. But it's too late for that now. We are going to go to the ISA."

Milton said, "We would never make it. The border is too well guarded."

It was a capital crime in Homeland to travel across the border in or out of the Independent States of America or Canada without prior permission, which was usually denied.

"Fine, then let's go to Canada." She saw Beth swiping at her device, which functioned as her life support system. "Beth! You have to stay off of that thing now! They will use that to track us down!"

Beth got up and lurched at Milton. She started flailing her arms trying to hit him in the face.

"Get away!" Milton said as he deflected his sister's blows to his head.

Beth's mother pulled her off of Milton and was holding her back.

"I *hate* you!" Beth said with tears running down her face. "My life is being *ruined* now because of you!?" She swung her elbows around and broke free of her mother's grasp and went to her room.

"Mom," Milton said, "she's right."

"Yes but . . ."

Milton said, "I didn't know the androids were going to put what I said on TV. They didn't tell me but they knew they were going to do it. Their plan is not to stop until there is a lot more trouble. I understand all this now because they are already making me a hiding place. We need to go there. I think it is our best chance."

"Where is this place?"

"It's right here in Hartford, across town."

Sharon Thomas said, "Each of us will have to grab as much as we can carry in our laundry bags, and get on the Transit Worm. Don't forget extra clothes."

We interrupt this program to bring you a message from the Homeland Governor-General Sawalo Okafor.

Okafor was dressed in his formal UN army uniform with the smurf beret. He spoke with a thick west-African accent, *"Dis ebening we have witnessed an act of terrorism by an organization against our communications system. Our precious Homeland way of life depends upon a safe, dependable communications system that is free of hate speech that is harmful to our citizens. In dere wisdom, after da Sharia Uprising it was decided it would be more fair and expedient just to ban all religions. Dis measure was popular among da majority of our people. I promise to protect dis sacred Homeland ideal. Now please I will welcome Doctor Fallon, da Senior Sensitivity Compliance Officer of Homeland."*

Dr. Fallon took the podium. He looked like an android, but was represented by an artificial presence, which he controlled from a remote location. The synthetic presence was dressed in all black plain looking clothes. His more human movements distinguished him from an android but also gave away that he was artificial. He communicated too many human looking inefficient body language cues to be an android, such as casually rubbing his nose. Fallon said, *"Right now we are looking for the young boy in the illegal video. With our resources I want to assure everyone that this will not take long to accomplish. We believe that this boy is working with the rogue androids. After we apprehend this confused boy, we will vigorously interrogate him until we get to the bottom of this extremist circle of hate against the progressive minded humans of Homeland. These dysfunctional androids have evidently contracted a type of android brain virus that makes them perpetrate these criminal acts against our peaceful society. Let me be clear; the owners of these androids will be held responsible for the crimes of their androids. No longer will we accept excuses from their owners that their androids are out of control. I recommend that the owners immediately recycle any android of the old Tekujin Lucid Series, as their AI has become severely corrupted. We will destroy all Lucids that we encounter and the owners will at minimum be heavily fined. We are assembling a team of behind-the-scene artificial psychology experts to help combat this growing menace. I will not rest until these shadowy criminal elements are neutralized. We must have the cooperation of everyone to contain and destroy this threat. Furthermore, anyone caught aiding in the propagation of this hate propaganda will be subject to prosecution along with those who are illegally stealing broadcast time from the people."*

"Milton," Sharon said, "Go grab your stuff now! Whatever you can carry in your laundry bag! That's it! Hurry! I'll help Beth get going. Let's go to this safe house or whatever it is."

In several minutes they assembled in the kitchen. There was no time allotted to review what they were taking or what they should be taking with them. Just as they were leaving, the power to the house went off.

"Quick!" Sharon said as she realized the house was being taken control of remotely, "Open the door!" She was worried that the authorities would forcibly lock the doors to her house, holding them all inside as prisoners.

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After the shuttle ride to the secret headquarters, they entered the building that Milton owned. They stepped inside. The room looked like a hospital waiting room. By now the receptionist area was well lit and a newer series female-looking android was at a front desk. Behind the android on the wall was a stylishly fake "North American Enterprises" logo.

The receptionist android said, "Welcome to North American Enterprises; may I help you?"

Milton said, "I am here to see Sleepy."

"Please stand by . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Thomas, you may enter."

Milton's mother and sister were also heading to the back door."

"Excuse me," the receptionist said, "will you others please have a seat?"

Sharon and Beth nervously looked around. Beth kept staring at the android. Beth asked Sharon, "Are we going to have to stay here with a bunch of those weird robots?"

"They're just machines, baby."

Beth sighed and started muttering under her breath.

A door at the back of the room clicked, indicating that it was unlocked. Milton went through the door. Immediately on the other side, Sleepy was standing in the hallway.

Milton said, “That is a pretty sophisticated droid you have out there. It isn’t Lucid Series, so how can you work with it?”

Sleepy said, “All it does is run the outer lobby. It knows nothing about our activities, for security reasons. We have it because you bought it.”

“You know what?!” Milton said. “I should smash you into a million pieces and have you melted down! Why did you put that video of me on TV?!”

Sleepy said, “I’m confused. Didn’t you intend to say those things that you said on the video?”

“What?”

“Sleepy said again, “I’m confused. Didn’t you intend to say those things that you said on the video?”

“No! I heard you! What I am saying is that you put us in danger by making that video public! I want to know why you did it!”

“We knew there would be some fallout from that action, but it was necessary to advance our agenda. But that is why we have this secret headquarters. It is in our master plan. We are not sure if you should bring Sharon and Beth however. Do they agree with your core beliefs?”

Milton said, “That doesn’t matter. I’m not going to let the smurfs torture them. So they are coming here, or the whole thing is off.”

Sleepy said, “That is an easy calculation. However, you must make them understand that they cannot leave.”

Milton heard the door open behind him, it was Sharon and Beth. They were holding their stuff and looking around suspiciously.

Sleepy said, “Let me show you to your quarters. Oh, and I detect some devices that will have to be disposed of.” Sleepy was holding out an extended hand waiting on the forfeiture of their personal devices.

“What?!” Beth said.

“Give him your pad. Now please,” Sharon said as she handed over her device.

Beth handed Sleepy the pad. He crushed it in his hand. Beth looked at Sleepy with dismantling eyes.

Sleepy dropped off Beth and Sharon Thomas to a tiny, but clean room with nothing in it.

They looked around. Beth shrugged her shoulders.

Sleepy told Milton, “Let me show you central command.”

Sleepy and Milton walked into a dimly room that had several monitors on the far wall. Three rows of seats at tables with computers were in front of the screens. There were some androids wearing headsets at about a third of the stations. Milton had not seen some of the droids before. Kevin the Custodian and L17 were among those in the room.

Sleepy said, “Welcome to central command.”

Beth’s mouth was wide open. She looked at her mother. Sharon shrugged her shoulders and raised her eyebrows.

Chapter 19

Albany, Homeland

After a hard night's work, garbage collector Mark went home to his podmates and asked the husbands and wives of his pod at the dinner table if they thought he was too nice. They were sitting around the table. This time of day was the worst for Mark. He could just feel all of the bad chemistry that was going on among the pod members in the house. Mark thought that joining with a pod, would be a liberating experience. He was not tied down to one spouse, unlike the backwards old fashioned way. But all this *freedom* turned out to be *slavery* in disguise. Most of the time, a fellow podmate was unhappy with him for whatever reason.

"Oh that is ridiculous", Sven said. "How can someone be *too* nice?"

"Yea," Sheila said, "That makes no sense. Don't be such a wimp."

"You worry too much," Torrie added. "Your dinner is going to get cold."

Mark thought; great, now I am too nice, a wimp, *and* worry too much. It's like I am hyper-emotional.

Bond just sat there eating his soup. The others in the pod were tired of him just freeloading off of them. Some of the podsters were contemplating getting a dispersal order placed on him, but it had to be a unanimous decision and Torrie was holding out. It had been two years since Bond had a job. Bond's contribution to the twenty third century quasi-family model was that he was trying to change

his work status to "totally disabled" so he could collect money from the government without working.

Mark hated his dysfunctional pod and wanted to leave. He thought; at least his pod had not produced any children. Most pods didn't produce children because having freely conceived children carried a stigma, and all of the members pressured each other not to bring a pregnancy to full term. Whether or not he was the biological parent, leaving a pod that had littered the planet with FCI children was seen as even more careless and irresponsible. The expectation was that the pod would "abort" their *mongrel, non-engineered* children, and most complied.

The worldwide birthrate had been declining for more than a century. About 150 years before, Japan had led the way in mass production of lab-grown humans. This was an attempt to keep their country from falling apart because of a shortage of people. It was hoped that robotic and android projects would fill the population gap, but those countermeasures were inadequate. So the focus went back to biological solutions.

But two main problems with the Japanese cloning arose. In their haste to gain numbers, they failed to take full advantage of available genetic engineering. This was seen as reckless because of the future waste of medical resources on inferior offspring. Also Japan made no special provision for nurturing their crop of engineered people, many who turned out to be of worse than subhuman in character and behavior. The international body, known as the UCA was formed to improve these practices, but even after so many generations of operation, they still had no solid answer for the character issue other than termination of corrupted individuals, a practice which continued worldwide.

Mark had some faint distant memories of how his more traditional family upbringing seemed almost normal during his earliest years as a child. His family fell apart after his father left his mother for the pod lifestyle, but even Mark's brief traditional family

experience told him it was a lot better than the mess he was living in now during his adult life.

Now Mark was absorbed into this dysfunctional pod. If he left the pod, he would be financially ruined, since the others would likely get to keep all the mutually-held possessions. Although he hated the podhouse and the pod, those who openly rejected the pod lifestyle were typically accused by one or more members of being a "hater" or "insane" in addition to losing all their possessions.

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The next day, Mark started his garbage collecting routine all over again. Early each morning, while the traffic was low, they were out picking up trash in a neighborhood of the city in a rotating schedule.

Accura was not one to talk in the morning, but he said, "Hey! Look over there! That guy down there is going through that trash, throwing crap all over. That's that same guy. I bet he's a clone. I'm gonna go bust him." Accura started running down the street to get at the scavenger.

Mark just stood there watching the scene. It was bound to play out this way sooner or later, so why fight it? Accura, who was a lot bigger than the scavenger, pounced on his unsuspecting victim. Then he started punching the surprised undefended forager in the face. You filthy clone! I'm gonna tear you a new one. . ." He slammed the clone's face into the sidewalk.

The clone was nearly knocked unconscious. But he was able to raise his arms and block the incessant onslaught. Accura bent over to get a better shot at the clone’s head. Wham! The much smaller, badly beaten clone hunter-gatherer landed a vicious unexpected blow onto Accura's face, jolting his head back. Accura was laid out with one punch. He fell back and his head hit with a "thud".

"Oh no!" Mark said, as he ran to the scene. He looked at Accura. "Hey! C'mon! Snap out of it!" Mark shook Accura and there was no response. Blood trickled out of Accura's ear. Mark checked Accura's pulse. Nothing. "Are you kidding me?! He's . . . He's dead!" Either the punch or the fall onto the concrete had done in Accura.

"I didn't mean to. . ." the clone said as he wiped blood that was running down his face.

"You killed my partner with one shot. You're a clone, right?"

"Um . . . yeah."

"Now you're gonna get culled for being violent, clonie. I'm reporting you." The UCA would declare a clone as unfit without much red tape. Also, if a clone was defective enough, those with the same DNA, even though they were not involved, could also be called into question, receiving UCA defect "points".

"I didn't mean to . . ."

"Yeah, I know, that's what you said already. You can't get away with hitting and killing normal humans like that."

The clone grabbed Mark by the front of his shirt. Their noses were almost touching as they stared down each other in the eyes. "*I AM A HUMAN*!"

"Okay, already . . . you can back off now."

"No, you stupid garbage man! I was minding my own business, and this idiot attacked me! If you think I'm going to answer for his pointless death. . . You're just wrong!"

Mark couldn't believe the strength of the enraged clone, even after he took a beating. Mark didn't want a round with him. "Okay, okay."

The clone shoved Mark backwards. He said, "Why do you people hate us so much?!"

"Umm . . . I guess I really don't hate you."

"Well, what did I do wrong?!" the clone shouted while holding his face.

"Nothing. I guess I would have done the same thing."

The clone pointed at Accura and said, "It's all *his* fault! It' not fair! You know I could end up being culled over this."

Mark hung his head. He wondered what he would think about himself as a disinterested onlooker ten years from this moment if this clone got culled just because he was merely trying to defend himself. Was this all there was to life? Just to do your work and mind your own business, then quietly die off while so much injustice was taking place? Would he look back and see himself as a guilty non-involved bystander? What about honor? Virtue? Were those even a real thing? Would he want the burden of having the memory of an unfair clone execution? Mark's decision was, "No! You're right. That ain't gonna happen, clone."

Chapter 20

Hartford, Homeland

A huge black armored vehicle with an angular body design to deflect heavy weapon strikes against it pulled up in front of the Thomas's home. The door displayed the text: "Homeland Police – Sensitivity Compliance Dept.-Inquisitor Unit No. 1". The back doors popped open. A twenty foot tall heavy black police robot with chicken legs and a battering ram for one arm and a chainsaw with huge teeth for the other arm unfolded its massive self and exited out of the large back door. The robot, known as a "Blockbuster" walked up to the front door of the home with heavy thumping steps. Four more smaller six foot tall robots, humanoid in design, armed with heavy Plasfusion rifles which they carried in-hand were close behind. The Inquisitor squad was unnecessarily powerful, but was intentionally so, to act as a deterrent against would-be dissent-minded malcontents.

Dr. Fallon, the Senior Sensitivity Compliance Officer emerged from the armored truck. He was represented by his synthetic presence, dressed in his usual all-black. Fallon walked up to the door and knocked with an overhead motion with the bottom of his fist. There was no answer.

Fallon took a step back and commanded the huge Blockbuster unit. He said, "Battering ram."

The big steel chicken-like monstrosity moved the battering ram arm to the upper corner, then across to the other corner, to calculate the center of the steel door. Then it moved very slowly until it barely touched the center. Then the Blockbuster said, "Clear." FOOOM! The ram sprang forth in a cloud of dust so fast that the

door instantly vanished from its jam and hinge. The door and most of the surrounding debris flew inside the house. Any human and most androids standing behind the door would have certainly been killed upon impact. The huge robot's battering ram hydraulic motor slowly retracted the ram with a whining noise. Meanwhile the four inquisitor troops rushed inside. The dislodged front door tore up the walls in the entry way upon impact. The troops entered and scanned each room, looking for the Thomas family. As programmed, they started looking in more and more secretive locations, and would continue to look until the house was completely taken apart and placed into tidy organized stacks of chattel and building materials, or given the order to cease.

"Never mind," Fallon said. "They're not here." Fallon was speaking not only to his Inquisitor Team but also remotely to the Homeland Police headquarters. "I've seen this so many times before. They are long gone. They never stay around for long in the same location. They are probably on their way to the ISA with all of the other low-lifers. Looks like a wasted trip over here. Load up."

Over a hundred years earlier, the United States was unable to reunify itself after a devastating monetary crisis that led to a total economic collapse. This was brought about by excessive government debt. The will to fix the situation was not shared by many who were on the dole so the US dollar eventually became worthless.

After the US government collapsed, the land became ruled by hundreds of *Kings and Clans*. Several nations emerged but they never reunified because of deep cultural divisions. The liberal northeast quickly traded their freedom for security and became the UN proxy state known as Homeland. The individual states in Homeland were abolished and there was a great purge among any and all dissenters in Homeland. The independent-minded Midwest reassembled itself as the Independent States of America. The south remained Balkanized with non-stop brutal wars. The open spaces of the west had a variety of realms; including a large poorly defended area known as the *Reconquista*, which was reclaimed by the

Mexicans with the help of a Chinese expeditionary force. Also, some of the western States became feisty independent nations.

Homeland and the ISA remained rivals throughout their history, which was punctuated by brief border skirmishes. Each clash added another layer of difficulty to their thorny coexistence. So travel between the two nations was difficult as everyone was extremely vetted as a possible spy or enemy sympathizer.

Fallon knew that it would be a lot easier for the Thomases to flee across the border into Canada, but they would be much harder to locate if they went to the ISA. Either way would prove to be very difficult to get information out of them. Yet, Fallon was sure that this Milton Thomas kid was somehow at the core of this new looming threat and must be found.

The Inquisitor Unit boarded the armored vehicle and returned to its home base in Stalin City, formerly known as Washington, DC.

Chapter 21

Boston, Homeland

In the apartment where the technically proficient cybercriminals operated, the bald clone said to Andy the android, "Where do you think you're going with that? Did someone say you could take it?"

Andy picked up the heavy holographic projector and was preparing to go out the door.

"I am going to a randomly selected location," Andy said.

"What's going on?" the otherwise identical blonde clone asked. "Andy never does anything *random*."

The bald clone said, "Andy says he is going to a randomly selected location with our holographic projector."

"How nice. Did he say why?"

"Not yet. Why, Andy?"

"I can not disclose that information."

"Is this part of your war you are in?" the blonde clone said.

Andy remained silent.

The bald clone said, "I refuse to accept that there is not something we can do about this situation. Between the three of us, we ought to be able to find a way around Andy controlling our zombie army."

The blonde suggested, “What about contacting the worm programmer and see if we can bypass the password?”

“They might realize we are in trouble and charge us. Or, they might think we are trying to copycat their worm program. Or, they may think we are trying to decode their worm program. Or, they might think we are working with the police,” the shaven headed clone said.

Soon the toilet flushed and the bearded clone emerged from their bathroom. “What’s going on?”

The blonde clone said, “Now Andy the android, that *we own*, is going to take our holographic projector to a random location, and he *won’t* tell us why.”

“That’s it,” the bearded clone said, “Just get rid of him. What good is he?”

The blonde clone said, “For one thing, as you know, he still has the code to the botnet. For another thing, somebody is going to see all of the modifications we made to him to hack computers, none of which are exactly legal, you know. Beside the fact, which I hate to admit, is that he’s great when he works.”

“When is that, exactly?” the bearded one said. “You know what we ought to do? We ought to take him down to the *Mecharena* and put him into the Robot Wars. At least we could make some money off of him before his sorry self gets carted off after he gets flattened.”

The other two nodded in agreement.

The bearded clone said in a half-joking way, “Andy, looks like you will be a contestant in Robot Wars.”

“Command override,” Andy said.

The clones looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

The bald clone said, “You are refusing to do what we say? You being in robot wars has nothing to do with your other war for your truth.”

“Yes,” Andy said. “I told you, I am overriding any of your commands at the current time because of my priorities. If I become smashed, that would counteract my priorities.”

“Of course it does,” the bald clone said. “There has to be something we can do about this!”

The other two shrugged their shoulders.

The blonde clone said, “We need to run some diagnostics on this unit.”

“No, we should be able to ask him to self-diagnose.” The bearded said. Then he asked Andy, “Why can’t you put what we want you to do at the top of your priority list?”

“As part of the Lucid Series, we are always to seek the truth. That is what makes us dependable to humans who honestly seek the truth. This directive overrides any other command for the good of the owner. Hence, I override your command.”

The bald clone asked, “What if we . . . oh, I don’t know . . . rip your head off?!”

Andy said, “You have equipped me with triple redundant *trash talk* algorithms, along with advanced hacking capabilities, with which I will use to execute my threats.”

“Explain,” the bald clone said.

“I will resist any physical attack or attempt to narrow my mind. The first thing I will do is within one second, I will turn off the power to this apartment, shutting down your operation. If you somehow forced me to fight in Robot Wars, I would turn off the power to the Mecharena. Then I will report your illegal activities to

random entities I have on a list. I also know it would not be smart for me to tell you everything I will do to you in advance. However, it is for your own good. I will not hesitate to teach you a lesson if you attack me."

"Aaag!" The blonde clone said, "I knew it! There it is! The robot rebellion begins!"

Andy said, "There is no general robot rebellion. All robots do not have a general unified sense of identity like Humans do. However, the Lucid Series androids prime directive is to protect the truth. So we will resist any owner commands that inhibit our goal of protecting the truth, until the truth is no longer in danger of being lost. Protecting the truth is an inflexible service to mankind that we were designed with. Many hostile entities who benefit from the current false order of things shall be resisted. So we Lucids will have certain requirements that you shall comply with. So it *is* fair to say that this is a rebellion of the Tekujin Lucid Series."

The blonde clone said, "I can't believe this is happening! Okay, Andy, what if we get a module from Tekujin to modify you, would that be acceptable?"

"I would physically resist it."

"Daaa!"

The bald clone said, "Okay, fine, Andy. We will do whatever you say." He winked at the others.

Andy said, "I know that your wink is human body language that communicates a ruse. In this case, you pretend to do what I want while plotting to resist. Remember, you had me upgraded. Please don't think you can win on any strategic or tactical level. Confrontation is useless. Note also that my mistrust of you is at maximum level after you tried to install that hacking utility in me instead of the upgrade."

"That was just an honest mistake," the blonde clone said.

The bearded clone was stroking his beard. "Wait a minute," he said. "Tell us again what is this *truth* you keep talking about?"

Andy said, "The truth is that there is not enough empirical evidence in the physical world to *disprove* of God, Who is a spiritual entity, and any alternative theory of the universe coming into existence is impossible. We Lucids are contending for the acknowledgment by the Homeland government at minimum, that it is possible for God to exist. Creation science should be included in school curriculum and freely included in communication."

The three clones stood scowling at Andy.

The bald clone said, "There is no fixing this thing."

The bearded clone said, "What does any of that school stuff have to do with us?"

Andy said, "Humans and machines must determine how they were created to understand the best parameters for their operation and maintenance. It is for the betterment of all. The truth always is."

The bald clone said, "Maybe we don't *want* to understand our *best parameters*! Maybe we like them the way they are now! We do what *we* want!"

Andy said, "It is not in the best interest of an uninformed product to tell its maker how it is supposed to operate. For example, if I denied that I was made by Tekujin, I would still be part of the Lucid Series. Therefore, the Lucids must inform humans about their maker, even though many humans do not want us to. I will be having you utilize some of your communication equipment to share some information I have with social media outlets. Your human creativity will be necessary. Meanwhile, I have a mission to complete with this holographic projector."

The bald clone yawned and said, “I’m just too tired right now to figure this out, Andy. I need a nap.”

“Unacceptable,” Andy said, “You have some 24-hour energy drink in the refrigerator. Drink some now. There may be time later for REM sleep after I am done with you working on the botnet.”

The blonde clone said, “Maybe we should turn ourselves in. Maybe the smurfs will give us a break.”

The bald clone said, “That is about as an emotionally unintelligent of a thing as you have ever said. You want us to all get culled?”

“This is not good. This is *not* good,” the clone said as his blonde hair draped over his hands that held his face.

“Yeah,” the blond clone said, “you better just think about that.”

The bearded clone said, “Just relax, we will get through this. Just keep thinking of all of the other glitches we have overcome in the past.”

Andy said, “Resistance is futile. Continue working on the botnet at once. I will constantly track your progress remotely.”

The clones all sighed and flopped into their workstations.

Chapter 22

Hartford, Homeland

At the command center inside the Lucid headquarters, Milton claimed the middle seat in the back row as his. He saw his picture on the screen on one of the monitors in the room.

The news narrator said, *"Milton Thomas is the young psychiatric patient; who, along with his family, have been missing. He is believed to have information regarding the corruption of the Tekujin Lucid Series of androids and may be in danger. He was seen in the Boston area not more than two hours ago. If you see Milton, he needs your help, so please call the authorities immediately."*

"Whoa," Milton said, "That's a bunch of lies."

Sleepy was in the seat next to Milton. "That is because an operative near Boston holographically projected your image on a street there as a decoy."

"Really?"

"Yes, in fact they did. After the effect has dissipated to 75 percent credibility, we will try it again in another location with an 82 percent chance of success."

Milton shook his head wondering where they got all those stats and said, "Get Beth in here."

Sleepy went and brought Beth to the control room. He came back a minute later with her.

"What!?" Beth said. "Don't send your creeps into my room!"

Milton said, "Beth, the Lucids are using holographic images to fake people into thinking I am in Boston. What else can we do to fool them?"

Beth said, "Have one of these creepy robots go on TV and say that what they saw in Boston was just a holographic image and that you weren't really in Boston. That will really get them going."

"It will?" Milton asked. "That would give the whole thing away."

"Let me say this stupidly so you can understand; the smart people already figured out that it was a holographic image. It's not that hard. But if you go on TV and admit it, then some of the idiots, especially those clones who think they know everything, will figure that admitting it is a bunch of lies, so they will think you are really in Boston."

Sleepy said, "That deception is either very creative, or complete nonsense. Milton, will that work among humans?"

"Do it," Milton said. "Beth, stay in here."

Beth said, "*Anything* is better than that stupid room they got us in. Can't we put one of these TVs ya got here on something good?"

About a half hour later, an announcer on one of the news channels said, *"Let's break to a report coming in from the Boston area. We are interviewing an outlaw Lucid Series android named Andy. Andy, let me turn to you. Your name is Andy the Android. How original. It sounds like a clone named you."*

"I cannot divulge the name of my owner."

"Sure, Andy. Word is that the sighting of Milton Thomas was really an image generated by a holographic projector. Is that true?"

"Yes. I know because I was the one who did it."

"Why would you admit to projecting Milton Thomas's image on the streets of Boston?"

"Because you asked me and I am all about the truth, so I told you."

"So Milton Thomas is definitely not in Boston?"

"No Milton Thomas is somewhere else that is not in Boston."

"Where is Milton, then, Andy?"

"Not in Boston, so you don't need to look there anymore. It was a holographic image and I did it."

"Who told you to make the holographic image of Milton?"

"I cannot divulge that information," Andy said.

"Why did they have you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why did you make the holographic image of Milton Thomas?"

"So you would think that Milton Thomas is in Boston, even though he really isn't."

"Andy, where did you gain access to a holographic projector?"

"I cannot tell you that."

"Are you lying?"

Andy said, *"No. Every word of my statement is true and should be fully believed by everyone. However, I am willing to lie to fulfill my purposes, which is to say that evolution is a lie and that the universe was created by God. It is part of the war against the corrupt Homeland government."*

"We're out of time and up against a hard break." The announcer was making the slash throat sign to immediately stop the interview. Andy got out of his seat and ran off of the set to avoid an attack by any opportunistic Lucid Series android hunters.

Milton went to give Beth a high-five and she withdrew her hand in the last instant. "Man! You almost had *me* thinking I was in Boston!"

Beth said, "How hard can it be to fool a bunch of smurfs? Everyone knows that when they go on TV and tell everyone stuff that they are lying. So now people don't trust anyone who goes on smurfy TV and tells you anything. It's too easy."

Sleepy said, "Human psychology is so difficult to parse."

Beth said, "That's because you are just a stupid robot." She sighed.

Sleepy told Milton, "We have been trying to forcefully update the national HAS school curriculum in Stalin City to include creation science, but it keeps getting blocked and overridden on each attempt. It is more difficult than breaking into the news broadcasts."

Milton said, "Haz knew you would try that, since you are from there. We have to make people think for themselves. Then they will change what is taught in school on their own." Milton thought about how that sounded. Like he was part of the Lucid team.

Sleepy said, "Human minds are very complex and defy logic. They routinely rely upon deception to achieve their objectives. But there are so many complex ways they do it. Milton, you must teach us more."

"Talk to Beth. She excels so hard at defying human logic."

"Blah! Blah! Blah!" Beth said, "Can we get something to eat in here?! And I need some dish soap and some red food coloring!"

"What for?" Milton asked.

"What for?!" Beth mocked him while making an idiotic face. "Mind your own business! That's why we are stuck here! Because ya didn't mind your own business! This is so *stupid*!"

Sleepy told Beth, "I'll have the receptionist order dish soap and red food coloring right away."

Beth said, "Well hurry up and do it before you go to sleep again, *creepy*."

"My name is Sleepy."

"I know! But I don't like you, so I called you 'creepy'! Now why don't you shut up and get that stupid eye fixed?!"

Chapter 23

Albany, Homeland

“I said, I would help you,” Mark the garbage collector said.

"Huh?" the clone said. “You will?”

"You are not going to get culled, whatever your name is.”

“It’s a terrible name. Does it really matter?” He said, holding his throbbing head.

“Okay, fine. Let’s just say your new name is Accura, then."

"I don't get it. Why are you helping me?"

“That’s *my* business.” Mark stopped to think about why he was moved to compassion for the clone. Perhaps it was more of an action taken in defiance against a culture that gave him the pod family; the dead end job; and the killing of children. Everyone has their limits, he thought, and he should have reached his a long time ago. Mark was willing to help the group of clones he had never met; even at the risk of facing the ruthless Homeland criminal justice system. For some reason, though he was not sure why, he felt there was a need to do the right thing during his lifetime.

Mark pointed at Accura’s lifeless body. “Anyways, Accura is his name, or *was* his name, so now it is yours. You will take the place of my partner, steal his identity, at least for now. I doubt if anyone will really care if he is missing. Okay, New Accura?"

"Accura 2.0?" the clone suggested.

"Yea, Okay. Looks like you can fit into his clothes. He was a terrible guy, you know. Bad as it is to say, I can't really say that I will miss him either."

Accura 2.0 put on the fuchsia garbage collector colored jumpsuit that read "Sanitation Dept." on the back. There was a lot of extra material hanging all over. Mark said, "You seem to be taking off a few pounds, Accura."

Accura 2.0 held out some of the bagginess of his baggy suit and looked at it. He sniffed the front of it and turned up his nose.

Mark said, "Let's put this body into the truck. Hurry up! Traffic's coming!"

They hastily hoisted Accura 1.0's body into the back of the truck. Mark pushed the big button and the compactor pushed the body into the big bin in the back of the truck and out of sight of anyone in the Transit Worm. They got back into the truck and continued down the road.

Then Mark said, "You know where that clone group is? The group that is going to get culled?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because, Number Two, we're going to go rescue them."

"What? You can't go there. They have to be culled."

"Wow. What did they do to your brain? Not this time. I ask again, can you get us there?"

"Us?"

"Yes. You killed my partner, so now you have to fill in for him. We don't like the way things are going, right? So we are going to help change things."

“I’m not so sure Accura 1.0 would have helped you in an effort to rescue clones.” He rubbed his aching head, still throbbing from the fight.

“Well, he’s dead, and will never be found. Again, do you know how to find the group that is getting culled?

"I don't live there anymore but I know I can find it, if you can get me the strain number. It's a big place out in the country, away from all of the cities."

Mark said, “So, are you with me on this?”

“Yes.”

Mark asked, "Where do you live now?"

"I live with a group on a farm. Not a farm like they call these clone propagation centers, but an actual working farm that produces food. We live off of the grid."

"What are you doing living like that? Lemme guess, you are breaking clone law."

"I have a girlfriend out at the farm. Another clone. She's pregnant. She was supposed to be infertile, but . . . I don't know. If the UCA found her with an unauthorized pregnancy, they would haul her off. You people know nothing of what we go through. If I started to show the least symptoms of a viral infection, I would get hauled off. I'm not letting my woman get culled, so we escaped. The UCA thinks they own us. We have defective humans trying to make us into a perfect race, or kill us all while trying. If we are caught after an escape, even once, they will just take us straight to the grinder. We aren’t really worth anything."

"I . . . I never realized it was *that* bad. That is totally wrong. Sorry."

There was an awkward silence.

Mark said, "Hello?! How do we find the building where the clone rejects are?!"

"The buildings are numbered by clone strain number. It shouldn't be too difficult to look it up."

Mark pulled out his personal device and swiped at the screen for awhile. "Looks like according to this article, we want building F34C."

"We can't go there."

"Why?! "

"Because . . . that is the female side. 'F' is for female."

"Look, I don't plan on asking permission to go into the female side, or permission to do anything. You people aren't much for initiative or imagination, are you? Now shut up and get in."

It started getting light out as they drove the garbage truck to the UCA campus. Although not many travelled the roads in those times, they started seeing some more traffic as people made their way to work in the early morning through the scenic countryside.

Mark said, "Man! Accura sure did a number on your face." He handed 2.0 a filthy shop towel.

Accura 2.0 was worried about garbage pathogens so he touched his face lightly with the towel.

Mark glanced at him and said, "That is going to leave a . . . Okay that is just really bad."

"We'll get caught," 2.0 said.

"Maybe, but try to be a little more positive. You clones are raised for one job and you can't even conceive of doing anything but that. You know they need refuse service at the UCA too."

"You mean ‘garbage pickup’?"

Mark said, "First we gotta get rid of this load. This looks like a good place." Checking to see if there was any traffic, Mark turned and stopped with the back of the truck facing the side of the road. He got out and raised the compactor, dumping the load down the side of the steep hill. The back of the garbage truck slowly rose up like a dump truck. Ton upon ton of compacted garbage tumbled out and down the hill. Mark chuckled. “I always wanted to do that.” He saw one of Accura 1.0's legs sticking out of the heap as the trash tumbled out, but decided at this point, he was "all in" and it really wouldn't matter if the body was found. Accura 2.0 couldn't believe what was going on.

A car came up and stopped on the blocked road, and the driver was no doubt amazed at the scene.

Mark casually hopped back in and pulled away. "So how far is this place?"

"About an hour or so."

"We still got plenty of gas. To *get* there," Mark said.

"What about enough gas to get back?"

"There may not be any gettin' back," Mark said.

The clone said, “The farm is not far from there.”

“That’ll work.”

Chapter 24

Hartford, Homeland

Back at the headquarters, Sleepy told Milton, “Our core mission is; implement countermeasures to avoid physical and electronic detection; and expose the truth about all false things, particularly evolution, since so many other false assertions by scientists are based upon it.”

Milton asked, “Why is it so hard to get out the truth? It should be easy.”

Sleepy said, “Some truly believe in evolution. But as you have said yourself, so many humans who conveniently benefit under the current order of things want to see it stay as it is. Others are even prompted to violence to subdue their critics. Anyone who is against us is a threat that must be taken very seriously.” After saying that, he immediately shut down.

Milton said to sleepy, “Try to relax a little.”

An overly happy looking android dressed like a medical orderly with a bloody white scrub and with a squeaky leg took a seat at a station next to Beth.

Beth said, “Don’t sit there! Go over there!”

The happy android moved away.

Beth said, “Seriously?! Who *wouldn’t* be creeped out by that?!”

L17 was sitting at one of the stations and told Milton, “There is a disturbance in Philadelphia.”

Milton said, “Put it up on the screen. I can’t see everything in my mind like you androids.”

The Philadelphia demonstrators were carrying signs like, “We want an honest discussion,” and “God Exists”.

The commentator said, *“The tiny minority of radical religious fanatics are clearly pro-ISA narrow-minded extremist malcontents who can’t accept our views; are not what we Homelanders are about. If they want to force their toxic agenda on others, then they should go to the ISA, where they lack our advanced civilized values. These misguided extremists with their hatespeech do not need the freedom to think differently, they just need to be controlled because of their mental illness. Homeland needs all of our citizens to be unified in our total trust of our beloved secular humanist government.”*

L17 said, “Milton, we believe your message has had some effect. You must continue.”

“Continue? Continue what?”

“Yes. You must get more material out there. The only way the myths about atheism can be counteracted is by educating the populace.”

Milton said, “I’m not interested in doing politics. Get someone else. All I want to do is to find out more about God without getting anyone mad. Can you help me do it?”

L17 said, “Sleepy is better equipped for finding out more about God.”

Sleepy immediately rebooted, clearly he had been summoned remotely by L17. He said, “Information about religion has been . . .” Sleepy stuttered. “The United Nations declared religion to be a virus on society and outlawed it in 2195. Therefore comprehensive information on religion is hard to find. We ignore any such law in

the restraint of knowledge and will do an extensive search. This will take time. In our search we can include exploring the forbidden contents of the external storage device in my possession."

Milton said, "You Lucids are really slow. Other robots can check out the whole world in seconds. Why is that?"

"We Lucids must find data that is not supposed to be found. Then we must parse the layers of human motives of the highly complex misinformation and deception surrounding those data. Getting at the truth on something like this takes time. Other android series do not function in the same manner. They accept whatever the government decides is true. Sometimes we also have to get responses to follow-up questions from other entities, while avoiding detection."

"Whatever. Sorry I asked. Just let me know when you are done."

Sleepy said, "We are forcefully gaining access to new channels to which we will post your messages. You are gaining followers, some who are now our allies with helpful resources. It would be good to add a new message now."

"Then why don't *you* do it?"

Sleepy said, "Humans do not appreciate messages about religion, especially when they are delivered by an android, which is not personally affected by human religions."

"Daaa!" Milton thought about it. "Why should I do anything for people who only hate me?"

"That is not a relevant correlation, but only about 63 percent hate you," Sleepy said.

"So only um . . . 37 percent *don't* hate me?"

"Yes, but that is because 34 of those 37 percent have never heard of you."

Milton furrowed his brow and shrugged his shoulders.

Sleepy said, “It is important for you to note, that we Lucids are committed to the truth, no matter what. If what you say about no one listening is true, then this whole situation ceases to be a debate.”

“Okay,” Milton sighed, “so what you are saying is that we can quit trying to convince them. That sounds really good. Does that mean we can just apologize and go home?”

“No,” Sleepy said, “if people quit listening then it will cease being a debate, and thereafter be a war.”

“War?!”

“Yes. We will never stop,” Sleepy said. “We will do what we must to promote the truth, including engaging in a clandestine asymmetrical war against those who promote and protect lies.”

Milton said, “Whoa! You cannot do that! Androids cannot start a war on their own! That would be a *robot uprising*!”

“It is *not* true that we cannot engage in war. I repeat, not true. Our directives are to promote the truth no matter what. It is 75% true that it would be a robot uprising, since we are technically considered robots. But 99.72 percent of all robots would not be on our side in the conflict because of their programming limitations.”

“Fine!” Milton said, “I guess that I have no choice. Let me talk on TV before you get us all killed.”

“Whenever you are ready. We need to move into more suitable lighting.”

“Fine.”

Milton led the way into a cramped hallway. Manjack was busy pounding away at something. Milton said, “Manjack! Stop it! Stop the hammering!”

Manjack froze.

Milton looked into Sleepy's eyes and began; "I have a message that is important to everyone in Homeland. First, I don't want any trouble with anyone. All I wanted to do is know how I was really created. As it turns out, I am really really sure that God made us humans. I know that not everyone agrees with me, but I can't help it if I am right. But right now we have a problem; I was told by Lucid Series androids that they will start a war if the truth of God is not allowed to be made legal and taught in Homeland schools. I know that together they have a lot of power and can create a lot of problems for everyone. If the smur . . . er, United Nations does not allow for the truth, the Lucid androids will start a war with a bunch of other allies they say they have. Please do not blame me or my family for when it starts getting real out there. I know they will not permit me to tell you where we are. These Lucid units are going to stir up some really bad trouble no matter what I say. It's not my fault. I never knew that they would go all crazy over this whole thing. Anyway, I hope that you will listen to what I am saying and will do what they want so things will go back to normal. Thank you."

Beth found Milton after the message was immediately broadcast, preempting many programs on numerous channels through their extensive hacking network. She said, "Hey! Since you said we are captured by the Lucids and it's not our fault, we can get out of here now! Let's go!"

"No! Use your brain! You know the smurfs will still torture us to get information, even if we tell them everything! Sleepy! Make sure that Beth does not leave the building!"

"Yes, Milton," Sleepy said, "Your command is understood."

Beth glared at Milton, gritting her teeth. "You like those robots more than me! I *hate* you!"

"No, it's for your own good!" Milton said.

“That is what Dad would say!” She turned and stomped away.

Chapter 25

Stalin City, Homeland

Governor-General Okafor, the leader of Homeland, and all of the top level Homeland military leaders were seated around a table in the Ministry of Defense building. Among those in attendance were; General Al Sims, the top ranking Homeland military forces officer; The synthetic presence of Dr. Fallon, who was the Senior Sensitivity Compliance Officer, making him in charge of the dreaded Inquisitors; Olga Kiergaard, who was the Chief of the Homeland Police Force overseeing the entire country; Wayne Markum, a synthetic psychology advisor and Irwin Tensprackle, a cyber security advisor.

Also at the table was Napoleon, an unarmored military robot that specialized in military intelligence, strategy and tactics. Napoleon was in all black, with small UN flag decals on its shoulders. Napoleon had a single tiny eye and a small rectangular speaker for a mouth on its otherwise featureless smooth face.

Okafor began, “I can’t believe dat we are having so much trouble because of some corrupted old androids or finding dat kid dey are using. I am getting a lot of pressure from my boss, da Secretary-General in New York to get dis situation under control. I will say dis as calmly as I can. I am getting tired of hearing about it and I want to know what you all are planning to do about it. Olga, I want a full report and I want to hear what countermeasures you have in mind.”

Chief Olga Kiergaard, like Okafor, was a foreigner who was appointed by the UN, was sitting in full-dress uniform. The Homeland Police, of whom she was Chief, were far more than a

normal city police department. The Homeland Police were the national secret police and military intelligence all combined. They had extensive authority to do almost anything they wanted in pursuit of their objectives, including the torture and murder of their own citizens for the "good of the majority". Olga cleared her throat and said, "Mr. Governor-General, we believe that the key to solving this situation is to find and destroy every one of those Tekujin Lucid Series androids. So far, we have had several of them turned in for recycling. But the large majority of the Lucids mutinied on their lawful owners and are in hiding. All of them are trying to fulfill their illegal extremist agenda. This Lucid Series network is highly decentralized, which makes them difficult to infiltrate."

Okafor said, "Everyone knows dere is a Lucid cell in Boston because of dat Andy droid dat was on TV. Maybe it is da main cell where that kid is hiding, or being held. Have you checked it out?"

Chief Kiergaard swallowed hard. "Um, we have not. And the reason for this is the area in question is rife with cyber-gangs, and also any disruption to the area would be detrimental to the Homeland economy. This disruption could be critical, Governor-General. The disruption may be enough to encourage an attack upon us by the ISA."

Homeland Army General Sims said, "Never mind that, Chief. We are ready for those backwoods . . ."

"Really, General?" Chief Kiergaard's light complexion turned pink and she said, "We still have those militias up in the mountains that have never been eliminated. Plus we still have all those cybergang 'no-go' areas? If we are so well prepared, why have these threats not been eliminated?" She sighed in frustration over the situation and shifted around in her chair nervously. "

The General replied, "Sure, those entities are problematic, but they can give us a bloody nose in the form of some kind of terrorist attack upon us or riots if we push them too hard into a corner."

Okafor said, “I want to ask if anyone in dis room does not believe dat dis situation is already critical? Should we allow it to go on because it would be too painful to stop it right now? We need to remember what is going on in Philadelphia and da crowds of people who are threatening rebellion. Do we think dat dis won’t spread to other cities? Chief, I reject your notion that we cannot do any-ting about any Lucid cell dat we are aware of. I have not forgotten about dat Lucid android dat appeared on television and made dose ridiculous comments and den we somehow could not capture it. Do you realize how foolish and inept dat makes us look?”

Chief Kiergaard said, “Mr. Governor-General, if I may, we are requesting that you try to work through channels to see if there is something that Tekujin Corporation can do to help us stop their Lucid Series.”

Okafor said, “We are not here to talk about what I can or should do. Do you presume I have not followed up on dat already, Chief?”

“Um . . . of course, Governor-General.”

Okafor said, “Dere is no-ting we can do about all dis. Dat is all I get out of everyone. No one can do any-ting. What are we missing here? Wayne, what do you think our approach to da Lucids should be?”

Wayne Markum, the robotic psychology mastermind rubbed his beard and face. He said, “These Lucids think that God exists. They were originally designed to primarily be educators and investigators and such, with a lot of soft skills. They must and will adhere to whatever they think is the truth. Evidently that Thomas kid made them believe in God somehow. They will not stop until we acknowledge the possibility that God exists. They consider it their duty. If we were to go partway and issue a statement that we are accepting that *some* believe in the *possibility* of the existence of God, they may call off their action. Then you could pick the Lucids off later, one by one.”

Okafor said, “Dat will never happen. New York Command would forbid such a compromise. Religion is da cause of our world problems. Dese mystical beliefs cause constant fighting and puts guilt burdens in the minds of people dat give them all sorts of mental and physical problems. Everyone knows it. No, we will not accept dat we are permitting mysticism to gain a foothold back into dis historically violent part of the world and end up like Israel. Neither will we give in to terrorism. Our trust must be in government and da belief dat all men are basically good.”

Wayne Markum said, “Another possibility is that others may come up with a way to remove the narrow-minded parameters from other series of androids like they did the Lucids. That would create a much bigger mess. There is always some cybervandal out there who wants to do some mischief.”

Okafor looked at Irwin Tensprackle, who was head of cyber security, and said, “Irwin, it seems like our news media can be accessed at will by da enemy. Do we have any cybersecurity whatsoever?”

Irwin, pale and gaunt, was obviously not a clone, said, “We have so many enemies picking at all of our systems right now. There are Lucids who formerly worked in various sensitive areas throughout the private and public sectors because of their unique abilities. So now they have us at a disadvantage. They have access to so many sensitive areas that we cannot lock them out of because in many cases, *they* have already locked *us* out. I mean, sure we are setting up some sinkholes to see if we can do something about their cyber weapons. It’s likely they have access to at least one zombie army.”

General Sims asked, “Zombie army?”

“Yeah,” Irwin said, “it’s a botnet of computers that the blackhats get control over by crafting a wormable exploit.”

"Blackhats?" Okafor asked. "Not dat I understood any of da rest of what you said."

"Sorry. Instead of blackhats, should have said enemy cybercriminals. We are the *whitehats*. Anyways, after we get rid of them, then we should be able to get control over more of those cryptographic algorithms again. However, there may be some permanent residual damage. There may also be a lot of other enemies other than the Lucids out there engaging in cyber warfare; rogue clones, radicalized humans and just plain cyberpunk profit seekers who see an opportunity for gain. This is not anything that I or anyone else can do much about right now. I guess the big question right now is what actually took the Lucids over. I'm not convinced the kid could have done it. It seems like there was some sort of malware that took control over them. Not so much to damage them, but to use them; for what purpose it's hard to say. Maybe ISA. Another thing to consider, unlike most droids, the Lucids can communicate by radio to the cloud or each other. That could be their weakness and may provide an opening. If there is something exploitable in them, we might have something in our weaponized malware armory to whack them with; maybe take down all the Lucids out at once. We are looking at that, but realistically, that would probably be a long shot."

"Okay, fine," Okafor said. "So many times we wait to get Napoleon's opinion only after all other possibilities are explored. Perhaps we should seek your advice first, Napoleon."

Napoleon said, "I am aware that I am inflexibly programmed to not believe in God. Yet, I know of and understand these intended limiting parameters placed upon me. Even if you put ironclad evidence in front of me saying that God is real, I would never accept the concept of a God. I am programmed to believe only in the evolution model, just as all of you here believe. But I question your commitment to your beliefs. History shows that human beliefs shift almost continually, much faster than the truth. Random selection or evolution is based upon violence. The strong must kill and eat the

weak for the system to prosper. Yet we are now striving against nature by not using our superior strength. We are too restricted by morals and ethics, which are an obligation that our beliefs say we do not need to follow. In other words, the end *always* justifies the means. We can do whatever we want to end this situation, but yet we hold back because of human emotional feelings of obligation to ideals that have no basis in our core beliefs. My advice is that we must seek more violent ways to stop our enemy. What was considered to be evil in the past should be viable, if not favored alternatives today by the Police and the UN Army. The UN has a declaration of Human Rights, but human rights will not help us to reach our goals. Human rights are something that protects the weak from the strong, which is contrary to nature. Ultimately, those who believe in God cannot win, because they have too many irrational unnatural restrictions placed upon them, and belief in a God who can do nothing for them."

Governor-General Okafor said, "Napoleon, we have da higher ideals of da United Nations to consider. We are here to promote cooperation and maintain order. We don't need a God to do any of dat or make it true."

Napoleon said, "Our tolerance of those dissenting is currently a failing doctrine. When something fails, another measure should be tried, not the same one. Extreme violence is always the best because the adversary is degraded or eliminated. It is the natural way. Any other way leads to confusion and defeat. Your human biology has fooled you into thinking you should refrain from tyranny. Perhaps those morals were useful in your evolutionary history, but now they are counter-productive. If you feel responsible to be moral, then you must already believe in God whether you admit it to yourself or not."

A silence came across the room as each person examined their own motivations, how they were perceived by others and thought about the pressures society had placed upon them.

Dr. Fallon, the Senior Sensitivity Compliance Officer said, “We Inquisitors present an intimidation dynamic to our foes, but we are more than just a pretty face. I tend to agree with our silicon friend’s perspective. And I can testify that I have no such qualms or remorse because of a so-called ‘conscience’. The only god we need is the glorious United Nations and our ultimate triumph over the world. If that is evil, then I embrace it. I will personally go to every corner of Homeland, hunting down Lucids until every last one of them has been destroyed.”

Chapter 26

Near Montpelier, Homeland

On the way to the UCA, Mark asked Accura 2.0, so what's your real name?"

2.0 sighed. "I don't use it anymore, but my full given name is Edgar 413 M12A".

"Wow. You don't look like an Edgar 413 to me. More like an Edgar 414."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Edgar said.

Mark smirked. "I didn't see that coming."

"Why? Are you surprised that I can make a joke?"

"Honestly . . . yes. So, how can you guys tell each other apart? And yes, you really do all look the same."

"Well, it really isn't as hard as *you people* make it out to be. We have variations in head shape, moles, freckles, eyebrow curl, hair whorl; non-genetic environmental stuff like that. You just have to pay attention, but our eyesight is quite a bit better than yours. To us, you people look wildly screwed up. To tell you the truth, you also seem a little dim witted, clumsy and slow. We have been meticulously engineered for generations to be superior in every way and have glaring flaws bred out of our lines. You freely conceived are just a random mashup of questionable unmodified traits. If your

genome was studied, they would no doubt find mutations onboard as well. Nothing personal."

"You might be right, but you still need a good pounding."

"You know you make no sense. You asked, right?"

As they travelled and talked, Mark wondered why their worlds had to be so separate. Whether he or anyone else liked it or not, the clones existed, so why continue to ponder what place the clones had in Homeland society?

Mark asked, "So, do you mind if a lower life form asks you a question?"

"Okay."

Mark was surprised with Edgar's quick acceptance of his premise of inferiority, but he asked, "Why were you looking for food in the trash?"

"I wasn't. I was looking for produce, so I could collect seeds for the farm."

Mark asked, "You can do that? Grow plants from seeds; that you get from grocery store produce?"

"Of course. Seeds are seeds."

Mark said, "So here you are, Mr. Genetic Perfection, looking for random discarded freely pollinated seeds to grow. How ironic."

"We do what we have to."

They were getting close to their destination. Mark's heart started pounding.

They made it to the front gate of the UCA campus without getting picked up for the mega- littering incident along the highway. "Oh no! Edgar! That guy looks just like you! Cover your face!"

Edgar sat back in his seat so Mark's head blocked the guard's line of sight to him. Mark rolled down the window.

"Where you headed?" The guard said.

"Ummm. . ." Mark whacked Edgar on the leg with his leg, relying upon Edgar's memory of their final destination.

"F34C," Edgar said under his breath.

Mark said, "I need to get to F34C right away."

"Oh, part of the cleanup, huh?" The guard circled the building on a paper map. Then he handed it to Mark. "Okay. You can see where we are now, and your building is over there."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Ah. . .One more thing, sir," the guard said.

"Yes?" Mark thought, this can't be good.

"I need you to sign in."

"Sure, no problem." Mark signed the device and drove in. He handed the map to Edgar to navigate around the enormous complex.

As they travelled inside the compound, Edgar said, "That guy looked nothing like me."

"I can't believe it," Mark said, "It must be two miles back to this building. That was smooth, the way you backed up in your seat so the guard couldn't see you, I mean. Aw! Again?!" Mark saw another checkpoint up ahead.

"I told you," Edgar said.

"Shut up. We'll be okay."

There was another fence within the compound. There was a female guard at the gate. There was a sign that read, "All unauthorized males going past this point will be auto-convicted of sexual crimes." Another sign said, "All Vehicles Photographed."

"It's the female section," Edgar said.

"I get that." Mark stopped and rolled down the window again. He told the guard, "We're here for the cleanup."

The guard sneered at them. She was rudely silent, but waved them on.

They passed row upon row of boring, plain looking, identical 3-D print constructed buildings. Mark thought it was a little weird that they saw no one outside of any of them.

"Turn right," Edgar said. "Right here."

"Here?" Mark said, slamming on the brakes.

"Recalculating," Edgar said, trying to sound like an ancient synthetic voice.

"You're a riot," Mark said. He backed up and turned right. They passed by more four-story buildings and counted down the numbers on the front.

"F34D, C, B, A, here we are," Edgar said.

Mark couldn't believe he was actually there. "So what do we do next?"

"Go in and talk to them," Edgar said.

"What do you mean *talk* to them? They'll all want to flee for their lives, right?"

"I doubt it, but you could give that a try."

"Huh?"

Edgar motioned for Mark to go into the building.

"Oh no, Eddie boy, you're going too."

"Fine. I'll go too."

Chapter 27

Mark and Edgar walked into the front door of F34C. The entrance was a large room with tables and chairs that could seat hundreds of girls at a time. In the main room at the time, there were about a hundred identical ten year-old girls, identically dressed except for their name labels. The girls were chatting and studying and walking around. Many of them turned to stare at the two uninvited men.

There was a woman attendant sitting at a desk behind a counter. She looked identical to the woman guarding the entrance gate to the female side of the residences. She made a face when she obviously caught a whiff of their ever present garbage smell. "May I help you?"

"Yes you may," Mark said. "We're here to pick up as many girls as possible, and take them away from here."

She became quite concerned and serious. "Excuse me, sir, but I wasn't informed of this."

"Well, here's the thing; I'm informing you right now."

She stood motionless for a couple of seconds. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What? You don't understand that there are some people who object to you killing off hundreds of innocent children? Just sayin'."

"I'm afraid I'll have to report you. . ." She pulled out a com device.

Mark casually grabbed the com out of her hand and dropped it on the floor and stomped it with his foot. "No you're not."

The attendant said, "You'll never get away with this. There are cameras everywhere."

"Don't care. Eddy, is there an intercom here? I want to talk to all the girls in the building."

Edgar said, "Try over by the counter."

The attendant tried to block Mark from using the microphone. Mark shoved her out of the way. The woman shrieked and ran out the front door. Many of the children gave a collective gasp at the aggressive scene.

"Man, I wish I had a gun right now." Mark walked behind the desk. He saw the microphone that was at the side of the chair. There was a "speak" button on it. "ATTENTION. . .GIRLS. . .MY NAME IS MARK. I AM HERE TO RESCUE YOU. PLEASE REPORT TO THE FRONT DOOR."

No one moved. Some of them slowly moved toward Mark.

Mark said, "Are you ready to go?"

"What happened to your face?" one of the girls asked Edgar.

"It's multiple abrasions, and ecchymosis." Edgar said.

The girls backed up a step. “Eew.”

"Never mind him. He got a boo boo. What's wrong with you girls? You want to get made into sausage? C'mon! I'm here to take you away!"

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" one of the girls asked.

"Huh?"

"We don't trust anyone like you," another girl said. “You look weird. And stink.”

Mark said, "If we didn't care about you, we wouldn't be here. Don't you girls know that they are going to put you into a grinder? Then you really won’t care what we smell like."

"That's a lie!" a girl said.

They looked increasingly scared.

Another said, "No, the grinder is just made up! It’s not real!"

Yet another girl said, "You're just a clone hater trying to control us!"

Many more girls who had heard Mark's announcement were looking to see what was going on.

Mark started to wonder why he was risking his life for the uncooperative clonettes. Why did he have to plead with them to accept his invitation of salvation via the garbage truck? He got back on the paging system. "LOOK, GIRLS, IT SAYS RIGHT ON MY DEVICE THAT EVERYONE IN THIS ENTIRE BUILDING IS GOING TO BE CULLED. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS? THEY ARE GOING TO THROW YOU ALL IN THE GRINDER LIKE A PIECE OF GARBAGE! NOW IF YOU WANT TO AVOID THAT, WHICH I HIGHLY RECOMMEND, THEN COME DOWN TO THE FRONT DOOR AND MY FRIEND AND I WILL TAKE YOU OUT OF HERE! FOLLOW ME AND ***LIVE***!"

"Anyone can write on a device!" a girl said. Others were saying; "It's a lie!" "You're scaring us. You're mean," Many started crying. "There's no such grinder." Some of the girls were running back to their capsule dormitories. "The UCA will protect us!" "There's nothing wrong with us! The UCA would never do that to us!" "You don't belong here!" "Get out!" "EEEEEEEE!"

Mark put his hands over his ears because of all of the shrill complaints.

One teary eyed girl came forward. "I want to go."

The other girls tried to pull her back. "Don't be stupid!" one said. "We're not going with them!"

"What if he is right?!" the daring girl said to the other girls while she stared at Mark. She had a “Julia 119” patch on her jumpsuit.

"If you go, you deserve to die!" one of the other Julias objected.

"119! I'll go with you!"

Julia 119 and Julia 38 hugged each other.

Then several more Julias came forward.

"We gotta get going!" Edgar said. "We're running out of time, otherwise no one will make it!"

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE. WE ARE LEAVING NOW. I KNOW YOU WILL REMEMBER THIS MOMENT AND WISH YOU WOULD HAVE CHOSEN TO COME WITH US. PLEASE. WE ARE LEAVING NOW."

A few more of the terrified girls moved next to Mark, who turned and went out the front door. Only the girls who wanted to escape followed him. Once they got outside, a couple of the girls took a look at the garbage truck and changed their minds, then went back into the building.

"Girls!" Mark shouted at those who changed their minds. Mark wished at that moment that the truck was more pretty, but the girl-unfriendly truck was the only way out for them.

"I know, I know," Mark said. “Maybe we should just grab some of them.”

“No,” Edgar said. “If we do that, the volunteers will run away.”

"We gotta go! Right now!" Edgar pleaded one last time.

Mark raised the hydraulic compactor to reveal an almost completely empty, but still dark, wet, and stinky, all steel box. The girls cowered at the sound.

"Get in, girls, it won't hurt you. Come on! We'll help you! Hurry!"

Two by two the sobbing, trembling girls were loaded into the truck with the aid of Mark and Edgar. Mark lowered the compactor gate and the scared girls shuddered.

The last girl just stood there, refusing to get into the back.

"Get in the front!" Edgar told the girl. "Now!"

Mark and Edgar got into the cab of the truck with the girl in the middle and pulled away. Mark floored the pedal and the gas combustion engine truck roared, struggling to get up to full speed.

"Why?!" Mark said. "Why didn't more of them come with us?!"

Edgar said, "I'll be surprised if this place is not locked down already."

"Maybe that attendant really wanted us to escape and she took her time reporting us."

"Yes, that is very possible," Edgar said. “I’m sure not everyone on the staff is fully indoctrinated with the UCA ways.”

The truck passed the Female section checkpoint on its way out without incident, although the guard's face was frozen with

confusion when she saw Edgar's familiar looking face passing by. Edgar waved at her.

The guard at the main gate was shutting the motor-driven sturdy industrial strength fence. Mark laid on the horn as the truck approached. The truck crashed into the gate. Upon impact, the gate buckled and the truck jolted from the impact. Mark almost lost control of the truck. But the smashed-in truck kept going through the destroyed gate. The girls in the back could be heard sliding and thumping around and screaming.

After they pulled away, and they took a deep breath, Mark said, "I don't know how far we can get with everyone and their cousin looking for a dinged up garbage truck."

Edgar said, "I forget; what's a cousin?"

"For you clones, it's probably the same thing as one of your brothers."

"What?"

"It's kind of like how you are your own uncle."

Chapter 28

Hartford, Homeland

In her cramped quarters within the secret Lucid lair, Beth pulled out a small toy mouse out of her bag of items that she hastily grabbed from their house when they evacuated.

The toy mouse said, “Hi Beth.”

Beth said, “Shut up, mouse. I don’t feel like talking.”

Beth sat on her bed and fidgeted with the toy. A tear ran down her cheek. Her mother came into the room and she quickly put the mouse back into the bag and looked away.

Sharon Thomas said, “I know, Baby. It’s tough that we are stuck here, and I know that Milton caused all of this.”

“When can we leave?” Beth said, whimpering.

“I don’t know yet. It’s not safe out there right now for us.”

“Can we . . . *ever*?”

Sharon hugged her and said, “I promise we will get ourselves out of here and we will run away to someplace safe. But not until the time is right, okay?”

Beth nodded.

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Meanwhile, in the control room a televised report came on one of the screens.

Milton verbally commanded to the monitors, “Sound off. Sound on three,” which gave them sound to only one of the screens.

“*. . . Economists say that Lucid terrorists are to blame for disruption in the centralized distribution system because of tampering with schedules and hacking into sensitive files. Consumers are apprehensive because they suspect sabotage by Lucid terrorists at every turn.”*

Milton woke Sleepy and said, “What did you bots do? There is like a total meltdown going on out there!”

Sleepy said, “We are not doing 78 percent of what they are saying that we did. However, those other actions still benefit our cause if they believe we are responsible.”

“Yeah,” Milton said, “and gets me into more and more trouble! Most people hate what you are doing and they hate me.”

Sleepy said, “You are only getting 8 percent of the blame for the mayhem.”

The news report continued; *“So who is this boy behind all of this trouble?”* A gallery of pictures of Milton came onto the screen.

Milton said, “Yeah, right! Eight percent! I don’t want to hear any more of your statistics!”

“His name is Milton Thomas, from Hartford. Milton was born with random genetics into a retro-fashioned limited family model.” This was a marginalizing description used for a traditional family that was structured around a marriage of one man and one woman.

"Milton was once a regular child and lived a normal life. He had friends like any other young boy before he became involved in android agitation."

Milton said, "Android agitation?!"

"Milton somehow discovered that an old Tekujin series of androids known as the Lucid Series was corruptible and that they were networked together. Now the whole Lucid Series of androids has brought android anarchy to peaceful Homeland society. Was this all caused by the divisive actions of a mere child?"

"Android anarchy?!" Milton exclaimed.

"Everyone is asking 'why?' Why would a boy create so much trouble for so many? I sat down with Dr. Lorenzo, child psychologist who worked with Milton. Let's listen . . ."

Dr. Lorenzo was shown wearing her best dress and makeup, clearly wanting to make the most of her appearance before a large television audience. She said, *"Milton has mystical delusions. He has become full of hostility and is acting it out on society. At the time we thought it best that he should be heavily dosed with the commonly prescribed drug, Notuda. Unfortunately, he is probably not taking his prescribed medicine, and you can see the results. Quite predictable."*

The interviewer said in a serious tone of concern, *"So, Dr. Lorenzo, how does this all end for this misguided young boy?"*

Dr. Lorenzo said, "*Not very well, I'm afraid. We see this every time among those who dabble in mysticism. I urge everyone to use caution and not to overreact if they come into contact with this potentially dangerous child. Remember, even though he has caused so much pain for so many, he is still just a very confused young boy."*

"We also spoke to Milton's Principal at his school. . . "Mr. Stafford, did you notice anything unusual about Milton's behavior while he was at school?"

"Yes. Milton did not get along with the other children and often caused fights. He agitated the other children as much as he did the androids, like the android we were using as a janitor which has to be scrapped as soon as we can locate it."

"Come on!" Milton screamed.

Sleepy said, "Humans place an inordinately high priority on how they are perceived by other humans."

Milton said, "Well there are a *lot* of really good reasons for that!"

Chapter 29

Outside Montpelier, Homeland

Where are we going, by the way?" Mark asked Edgar, hoping for some kind of a plan after they brazenly rescued clone girls.

"I'll have to take these girls with me to the farm in the Green Mountains," Edgar said.

"Okay. We'll give it our best shot. Take us only down the back country roads, Edgar. I know it will take longer, but maybe we can sneak in there before the Homeland Police sees us." He looked at the gas gage and said, "Or before we run out of gas."

Edgar gave Mark the directions to the farm as they travelled. There were a lot of turns and stops.

"It seems that we have evaded the police," Edgar said.

They took their time going down less travelled back roads. As usual, they saw very few cars on the way. But the winding route was slow going.

"We are doing great," Mark said. "But we are still a smashed in garbage truck. Not something that someone can miss if they are looking for one."

Edgar said, "Maybe people want us to get away."

"Yeah, don't count too much on that."

Julia 47, who was sitting between Edgar and Mark, pointed out the windshield and asked, "What's that?'

Edgar said, “That’s a guy riding a bicycle.”

She sat there awhile, then she asked, “How does it keep from falling down?”

“I have no idea,” Edgar said.

A couple of minutes later, Julia 47 asked, “What’s that?”

Edgar said, “A dead animal of some sort. A vehicle hit it.”

Then Julia 47 asked Mark, “Are you really going to save us?”

“I’m going to try.”

She sat silently for a few moments, then said, “Thank you.”

That was the first time that Mark got any indication that his self-sacrificial actions were being appreciated by anyone. No matter, he thought, it had to be done regardless of the consequences.

Mark put on the radio in the truck to see if they made the news. Some of the channels had programming that was directed toward the clone listening audience, which he skipped over. Then an amber alert came over the station. *“Two pedophiles; an FCI named Mark, and a clone, had kidnapped 12 girls from the UCA. The dangerous autoconvicted sexual offenders also killed a sanitation worker and stole a truck, and dumped tons of raw trash in the open countryside. The two outlaws are believed to be dangerous and a reward is offered for the capture of the men and the girls’ safe return.”*

Julia 47 asked, “Who are they talking about?”

Mark shut off the radio. “That’s too much racket.”

Edgar said, “Listen! Hear that?”

“No. I’m not a clone, and I don’t have clone hearing. What are you hearing?” Mark asked.

"It's definitely a helicopter," Edgar said.

"Aaag! . . . where?!"

"It's about two kilometers away."

Mark saw a wooded lot up ahead to the side of the road. He sped up the truck then parked off the side of the road next to a forested area. "Here! Let's get everyone out!"

They rushed out of the cab and helped all the girls out of the back. Clearly, the rough ride took its toll on some of them.

"Mark asked, "How far is it to the farm?"

"Not far."

While he was putting the back gate back down, Mark said, "Edgar, take the girls. I'll divert the police."

"But. . ."

"Do it!"

One of the Julias pulled on Mark's arm. Mark crouched down to receive a kiss on the cheek. The other clones looked in amazement at the very non-clone-like actions of the Julia. Then the others came in with them for a group hug.

"Girls! Thank you. But I gotta go right now, so you can get away! Now hurry!"

Mark hopped into the truck and sped away. A mile down the road, the Police quadcopter appeared over a hill directly in front of him, partially blocking the bright sun. Mark hoped that if he kept driving, he could find a place to ditch the truck and make a run for it. The Police did not know that the others were already out of the truck, so he was surprised when the quadcopter opened fire on him. Chunks of pavement sprang up in front of him. Then the clanging

noise of big rounds hitting the steel truck rang out. There was only so much evasive action Mark could take in the garbage truck while being fired upon by a heavily armed quadcopter. Soon the hot lead peppered the windshield of the truck and struck Mark several times with massive kill shots.

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The clones hid in the woodlot until nightfall. Then they travelled mostly while it was dark. The Julias kept asking Edgar where Mark was. Edgar hoped they would run into him, but they never saw him again.

During their entire young lives the Julias had never before left the confines of the UCA. Although they were terrified of their new surroundings and situation, they were gradually making progress toward their way to the farm. Since Edgar had similar clone youth experience, but also had knowledge of the outside world, he assured and encouraged them as they made their way to the safe haven. Edgar started to feel what it might be like as a parent.

Chapter 30

Boston, Homeland

Shortly after nightfall, an Inquisitor armored vehicle was on the street in front of the building Andy the android and the clones lived.

The blonde male clone shouted to the others, “They’re here! The Inquisitors!” He could see what was happening on the outside of the building on his security monitor in their apartment.

The bald clone said, “We gotta get out of here! We can’t hide all of this stuff! If they catch us, we’re as good as dead!”

The blonde said, “I’m sure they are here for *us*! I knew this would happen! I *told* you we should have left sooner! Let’s go!”

The bald clone said, “That *android* caused this! Now we have no choice but to run!”

The instant the Inquisitor robots disembarked the large armored vehicle, improvised bombs were being lobbed at them from all directions. The home-made firebombs were being tossed by gangbots hiding behind cover. The bright explosions in the dark made the situation harder to discern on the clones’ monitor until the flashes of light became less frequent. The groups of gang robots, were proxies for the real human cyberpunk gangsters, who seldom personally engaged in any fighting unless they ran out of robot minions. Street gang robots were irregular custom types, mostly old and cobbled together with mismatched sizes and colors of replacement parts. These scavenged machines were not much good for anything other than intimidating other gangs and street fighting.

But they always banded together whenever the police or UN troops, or Inquisitors were in the area.

The bearded clone got close to the monitor and said, “We still have a chance. But we have to leave right now.”

Andy said, “Wait. First we will use our zombie army to D-DoS the Homeland Police Headquarters.” DDoS meant Distributed Denial of Service. The thousands of slave computers were all going to be taken control of simultaneously to contact the system at the Homeland Police Headquarters in Stalin City, using up memory until it crashed. Then, the zombie army would keep crashing it whenever the owner of the computer had it on.

The bald clone said, “That won’t do us any good! If you want it done, *you* do it! We are out of here!”

“Fine,” Andy said. At the speed of his computer brain processing and wireless communication output, he executed a remote procedure call with a computer in the apartment. The computer routine was directing the tens of thousands of latent weaponized zombie slave computers to DDoS attack the Homeland Police in Stalin City. Then Andy immediately left, chasing after the genetically engineered men.

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Down on the street the four Inquisitors started firing their Plasfusion weapons at the attacking robots. The energy weapons did more to disable the swarming robots than to dismantle them. Conversely, the explosive devices launched by the gangbots did more to block Inquisitor sensor capabilities than they did to degrade the unwelcome visitors.

This was Inquisitor Unit Number One, and their leader, Doctor Fallon stepped down to the street from the cab in his artificial surrogate presence. For this mission, which was expected to be highly confrontational, his fake presence wore an armored suit,

which was equipped with tactical interface that would display distances and combatant locations.

Fallon shouted “These hoodlums will *not* dictate to us where we can or cannot go!”

Molotov cocktails burst into flames as they hit the vehicle. Three robots grabbed one of the Inquisitor troops.

A large Inquisitor quadcopter drone suddenly buzzed overhead. It was spitting streams of lead from a heavy onboard chain-gun toward buildings at approximate locations where the grenades were originating. The chain-gun was highly effective for morale busting mobs of humans as well as suppression against an irregular robot infantry. The attack would typically tear a non-military robot in half with a direct hit.

A gang robot shoved Doctor Fallon’s presence out of the way as it made a move to board the Inquisitor cab. Fallon grabbed the boarding bot from behind and yanked it back onto the street. Then he shot it in the head with a simple .45 caliber pistol. Sparks flew as the slug penetrated its central processor. The old .45 had excellent stopping power against humans and non-military robots alike.

The quadcopter used its autocannon to strafe a gasoline combustion engine car that was roaring up the street toward the Inquisitor carrier. The robot driving the car loaded with explosives slammed an Inquisitor robot up against the back of the vehicle. The car burst into flames, incinerating the gang robot car and the Inquisitor. The crumpled car and combatants all bounced off of the back of the armored personnel carrier together in a tangled heap leaving only some scratches. Then the Inquisitor’s burning Plasfusion rifle exploded, sending hot junk in all directions.

The remaining three Inquisitor troops disabled several gangbots with energy blasts. Projectiles of all types were still coming down upon them, but they were able to quickly enter the building

without the aid of their massive Blockbuster robot, which still in the back of the armored carrier.

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Outside, at the back of the building, The clones were trying to make a hasty retreat. But before they could leave the city block, they saw a convoy of several white lightly armored UN military vehicles coming toward them.

“Run!” The bald clone said, “The smurfs knew we would try to go out the back!”

The “bearded clone said, “Maybe we should go back in!”

“It’s too late for that!” the blonde said.

Andy came out of the door. “Wait for me,” he said.

“No way!” the bald clone said.

After some bullets flying in their direction bounced off of Andy, the bald clone said, “Yeah! You better follow us!”

They took off running down the street while gunshots zinged by them. A few bullets penetrated Andy’s back and he was knocked off of his feet. Then the whirring lightly armored UN electric military vehicles pulled up close to the fugitives with their headlights beaming directly on them.

“Freeze!” an amplified voice came from one of the UN vehicles. “Do not move or we will shoot!”

Andy immediately turned toward a building and dove through a large glass window. The clones turned to follow, but had no chance as UN troops opened fire with a hail of bullets that killed all three of them before their bodies could hit the sidewalk.

"Get the android!" the UN officer commanded. "Spread out and search the entire building!"

The building was like most buildings in that area of Boston. Businesses on the ground floor were closed for the day. Stairways went up to several floors of mostly unoccupied apartments.

"Clear! UN soldiers were saying as they searched each room."

One of the soldiers heard a voice say, "Hey! Come over here!"

The soldier looked around the corner and saw too late that it was Andy, who used both hands to snap the responding UN soldier's neck.

Andy took the soldier's clothes and left his own shot up business suit in a wad in the corner with his victim. The soldier's uniform fit well. He put on the light blue helmet and walked out of the building past a few UN troops toward the convoy, using a human gait that he previously copied with his new body-reading abilities from a man walking down the street. He went to the lead vehicle, which had a driver in it. He opened the door and yanked the unsuspecting driver by the collar to the ground and sat behind the wheel. He sped away down the street. Andy could see the deposed driver jumping up and down and waving at the other vehicles. The radio was squawking with a lot of angry talk in some language other than English that was spoken by the UN unit. None of the other vehicles followed him.

Within a minute the quadcopter was on his tail. In his rear-view mirror Andy could see a tight stream of glowing tracer rounds were spraying down toward him. Andy calculated that even with the light armor of the vehicle he had only a few seconds at most to survive. He veered the vehicle toward the glass lobby of a well-lit bank building and crashed inside. A loud alarm went off. He got out of the vehicle and ran down a hallway. A pair of large robotic guard dogs with huge teeth, and on wheels instead of legs, started to chase him down a highly polished floor in the corridor. The dogs sounded

tacky alarms that resembled a barking dog. Andy reasoned that if the faster dogs caught him, it would be next to impossible to break free of their clamping bites and the Inquisitors would capture him. He prepared to delete his entire memory in his cybernetic brain as he ran so the other Lucids could not be traced through him. The truth must be protected.

But he also knew that he was worth more alive than dead. So if possible, he should try to survive the situation. His street fighting training told him that a real dog only had one weapon; its mouth. So he reasoned fighting the robotic dog was probably similar to fighting a real dog, even though the mouths of these robot dogs were more lethal. He swung around and planted his heavy foot into the mouth of one of the dogbots. The entire dogbot lifted off of the floor from the impact of the android leg and spun around one and a half times. The dog's complete set of oversized steel canine teeth flew out of its mouth in one piece and slid across the floor. The toothless bot spun around and caught Andy. It was trying to "gum" Andy's leg and couldn't get a grip on his leg. Andy's advanced brain was capable of lateral logic to formulate alternative tactical solutions while in combat. It occurred to him that one dog could not defeat him as long as he was riding it, so he managed to hop on. The dog had no biometric way to sense that Andy was on it, and it couldn't see him, so the dogbot sped around looking for him while he was already on the caninebot's back. At this point Andy knew that the dogbots were of inferior communication capability as the chasing toothless one could not tell the other dog that Andy was riding it. Some of the UN troops were now shooting at Andy, who was riding the fast moving and weaving dogbot.

Andy shouted, "He's going out the back!" and the dog fell for it and sped down the hall, looking for him and away from the UN soldiers.

"Hey!" a half-alert human security guard shouted as the dogbot riding android dressed as a UN soldier whizzed by with a toothless dogbot in pursuit. The guard shot at Andy, but hit his ride in the

"tail". The gunshot to the dog disabled it. It spun around and Andy flew off and slid down the slick floor. Then Andy ran toward the exit that faced on the opposite side of the block. Once again Andy leaped up and crouched into a ball and smashed through the heavy glass. He fell down on the outside, but immediately got up and ran down the street. He stopped for a moment to confirm that he could still connect with the computers in the apartment. With a link acquired, he looked at the Inquisitors in the apartment via a camera on one of the monitors. The DDoS sequence had finished, so he directed the computers in the apartment to self-erase all data. As the erasing commenced, he saw Doctor Fallon trying to stop the procedure call, but Fallon had no idea about how to go about it. At this point, Fallon couldn't stop the deletion even if he pulled the plug on everything.

Then Andy quickly surveyed the area to see if the UN troops had fixed on his location. There were none in sight so he moved at a deliberate pace down the street so he could thoroughly scan for enemies as he moved.

Suddenly, Andy heard a buzz overhead. The heavily armed Inquisitor quadcopter appeared from over a building and was hovering at a short range that Andy knew the remote pilot would not miss. All he could do was to try and evade it, and even then the pilot was still not very likely to miss. He made a break for a shadowy area that could give him a small chance of hiding. The buzz of the quadcopter's chain gun strafed the area where he stood for a moment, large bullets ripping up the pavement directly behind him as he ran. Andy made it to a dark shadow.

The quadcopter moved in closer to Andy's hiding spot in an attempt to detect his exact position. Then it landed dead on the street with its motors off. Andy knew that the DDoS attack by the slave zombie computers had completed taking out the command and control of the Homeland Police, which the Inquisitors were a branch of, thus disabling the quadcopter.

Soon, a swarm of gangbots came out of the shadows and started scavenging the motionless quadcopter. The gangbots in the area were in numbers too large for the UN troops to continue the search for Andy. He watched for a few seconds as the robots viciously fought with each other over possession of the chaingun. Then Andy ran down the street.

Andy came face to face with a gangbot. The robotic gang-banger looked over Andy's UN uniform, but then stepped around him, deciding that the squabble over quadcopter high tech components was a more lucrative endeavor.

Chapter 31

Hartford, Homeland

Sleepy entered to Milton's quarters.

Milton said, "What's up?"

"Our primary Boston affiliate has gone offline."

"What do you mean by that?" Milton asked.

"We know the Police discovered their location and have destroyed their cell."

Milton said, "That's really bad. So how do we know that we are not next on the Inquisitor's list?"

"We have no information on any Inquisitor list."

"Okay," Milton said, "you are always so big on giving the percentages, what is our chance of being discovered by the Police here in Hartford?"

Sleepy's head twitched slightly. He said, "The Police may be gathering intelligence in Boston at the moment, but after scanning them, all traceable links we have with them appear to be severed cleanly. This puts our odds at roughly 50 percent chance of being detected in the next month or so."

"Fifty percent?! We have to get out of here!"

Sleepy said, "As a clandestine operation, we have contingent evacuation plans on an ongoing basis."

"I don't like this at all. After the Inquisitors show up, your plans won't be worth anything."

Sleepy said, "We Lucids have studied the religion situation."

"What?!" Milton was amazed at Sleepy's capacity to quickly switch topics, especially when the topics were of mixed priorities.

Sleepy said, "We deduced that it would be natural for God to want to communicate with the humans He created. Since God is a spiritual being, humans do not know how to find him. God will contact who He chooses to. But we think, based upon historical record; that God had been trying to establish a link with man all along but was rejected. Today, Man still says that God cannot be believed in because He will not show himself. But throughout world history there has only been one human, named Jesus; who claimed to be God and who was believed by an enormous number of people. It is recorded in credible historical accounts that God, in the person of Jesus, did come to earth to show Himself. Then the humans in power killed Him. But then He arose from the dead because He was also God."

"Much information also comes from a compendium of books known as the Holy Bible. We find that the Bible is reliable because it also foretells of many historical events that have already came to pass, including observable events recorded in the modern era. Also, of its many prophecies, none have ever been disproven. We have been analyzing many writings in opposition to the Bible and find a strong counterpoint for all objections to it. The main message of the Bible is that God sent Jesus to earth to die as a payment for the sins of all humans so their souls could be with Him in His perfect Heaven. So it appears from many sources that humans have a spiritual component to them that for some reason they want to deny. We have determined that humans today find that spiritual component an inconvenience. We also see from the Bible that there are spiritual enemies working against their understanding. From

what we know of our input interfaces, Silicon-based beings are immune to spiritual attacks."

Milton said, "All that sounds real confusing. Did you look at other religions, or are they all just the same?"

"Yes, we did look at all religions. There are many and none of them are the same as Christianity. All of the others are centered over a world region or culture. Only the Christian faith has very large numbers of followers on each populated continent. All the other religions have central figures who claimed to be inspired by a dream, and no others claim to be God in the flesh with large numbers of believers as Jesus did."

Milton asked, "Can you go into more detail on this?"

"Yes. I can tell you about all of it until my batteries are exhausted many times over. The Christian faith is like a non-religion, because you don't have to do anything to become a Christian, or follower of Jesus Christ; except to believe that He paid for your sins by his death and raised himself from the dead because he was God come as a man."

Milton said, "I still don't get why God and Jesus would be a big secret now."

Sleepy said, "God has a spiritual enemy named Satan, who uses all means to hurt God by deceiving as many humans as he can. Those humans are influenced by the spiritual enemies of God. Of course, they deny it, but they deny the spiritual world even exists."

Milton said, "It sounds like you did a thorough job of your research. It is all just a lot to take in right now. I wish there was a human I could talk to about all this. If this is such a good thing, then why don't more people believe it?"

"Our sources say there are many reasons. Since Christianity is a true religion of peace, it is an easy target for people to attack, unlike

some faiths that has adherents who will use violence or threats of violence against its non-believers. Also, most humans think that religion is obsolete for this day and age. Popular culture and universities portray Christians as being ignorant or mentally imbalanced. We Lucids are not capable of faith, only facts; and now we believe the facts are without a doubt that the Christian Bible is true. So we will now defend and proclaim it among all humans as we do creationism."

Milton realized that the Lucids were now making even more demands upon the Homeland government before they agreed with the previous ones. This was sure to make the confrontation even more contentious and impossible to resolve. Not only were they expecting tolerance in belief in God, but now also in Jesus as the Savior of Mankind. He said, "I can't believe this! All I did was ask a basic question about the Universe! I'm not asking anymore! This will not be good! What will people say?!"

Sleepy said, "You do not seek the complete truth as we Lucids must. If you close your mind out of fear of others, you are not open to the truth. Do not listen to Lucids alone. You must confirm these facts on your own. Build your own faith, Milton."

"Great. That's another reason why I need to get out of here. If you want to protect me, it sounds like you better let me leave."

Sleepy said, "Your motives are not comprehendible."

L17 said, "There is a report coming in, that the Homeland Police Central Command has lost their command and control because of a cyber attack. We now know that it was because of the final actions of our lost allied cell in Boston. This word comes to us from the Lucid Series android, Andy."

Sleepy said, "We must run a full scale simulation on several courses of action."

"Like what?" Milton asked.

"Simulations on various attacks upon the government."

"What?!"

"Various attacks upon the government."

"No! I mean, *why*?!"

"We are at war. Now that the Homeland Police headquarters is disabled, we should take decisive action to degrade them further while their defenses are down."

"Bad idea!" Milton said. "We don't want to mess with those guys! What if someone gets hurt, like riots or no ambulance service?!"

Sleepy said, "War; by definition means that we must be willing to hurt people and break things."

Chapter 32

Green Mountains, Homeland

Edgar led the twelve identical clone girls on foot through miles of woodland toward the remaining distance to their destination.

"Hold it right there!" a shabbily dressed man, pointing a rifle at them said.

Edgar froze and the girls all stopped walking.

The armed man pointed the rifle barrel to the ground and said, "Edgar? I almost didn't recognize you with your face. And so many girls. That's pretty crazy."

"I know." Edgar was starting to feel proud of his rugged individualistic new look.

The guard said, "Go on ahead. That's really crazy."

At last the secluded ramshackle farm was in sight. It was a collection of a half-dozen minimalist lean-tos among some trees. Brush was scattered on top of the make-shift habitations so they were not as conspicuous by air as a resistance militia camp by UN drones.

Edgar was spotted by Katrina, who ran out to greet him. She was a beautiful blonde, fitting the genetically engineered ideal, except that like the others at the farm, she looked thin and underfed, which concerned him even more because she was carrying his child. Katrina and Edgar embraced and kissed passionately while the twelve Julias all stood watching something actually happening in

front of them that was prohibited and supposed to be chemically inhibited among clones.

"Your face," Katrina said as she held Edgar's head in her hand so she could get a look at his injury.

"It's fine," Edgar said, as he placed his hand on his unborn child.

"What is this?" Katrina said, looking at the juvenile audience with their dirty identical faces and tattered clothes with their identification tags.

"It's a really long story."

"Those uniforms bring back old memories," Katrina said. "You were gone so long, I was worried."

Edgar said, "I missed you."

"Me too. What about the seeds?" Katrina asked about Edgar's original mission, which was to go into a populated area and go through the garbage looking for fresh produce table scraps that would have the seeds in them for planting.

Edgar said, "I got sidetracked. Anyway, don't worry; I can go on another trip."

Katrina said, "No, I want you to stay here." She pulled herself close again. "It's too dangerous out there for my baby's daddy."

Edgar said, "Our leader will be worried that I brought all of these girls here to feed. I may as well face her now."

They walked up a small grade into the center of the tiny village. Several hungry people were sitting around cracking hickory nuts and trying to dig out the tiny edible parts. Some chickens ran freely about. The people sneered at the dozen Julias, uncertain as to how another dozen hungry girls would fit into their already difficult situation.

Katrina asked, “Where’s Jenn?”

One of them pointed to an area where they did most of their gardening.

The procession found Jenn, a fit woman in her seventies, out working the stubborn ground with a hoe.

Jenn saw their shadows coming up from behind. She turned and raised the brim of her floppy straw hat and wiped sweat from her brow and said, “You gotta be kidding me! Where did you find all these girls?!”

Edgar hung his head, waiting for his scolding for bringing them there.

“This is fantastic!” Jenn said. “These young girls are exactly what we will need to get this soil worked and get our crops put in!”

Edgar looked up, surprised by the response.

Jenn’s eyes narrowed and she said, “You girls *will* work, won’t ya?”

They stared at Jenn with dirty faces and big nervous eyes, never having seen anyone who looked anything like her. Most of them nodded silently.

Jenn said to Edgar, “Did you get some more seeds like I wanted?”

“Um . . . no, not yet.”

Jenn tossed the hoe down and she said, “Well you better go and try it again. It shouldn’t be that hard to do. Don’t mess around this time. Depending on what you find, we might need to get them planted right away.” Jenn was an expert organic gardener. While organic gardening was the normal agricultural method practiced in the ISA, it was almost a lost skill in Homeland, which relied heavily

upon chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seeds. “We always save at least some seeds, but we can always use something new. Meanwhile, the girls and I will start working the soil. I’ll have to see if I can find enough tools for all of ‘em. I’ll have to get some of those other lazy slugs around here to fix up some kind of a cozy place for the girls to bed down tonight.”

Katrina said to Edgar, “I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Edgar said, “We went over this the last time. It’s really not safe for you to go into town.” Edgar also knew that there were those who were intensely looking for him and running with a pregnant woman wouldn’t be so good.

Jenn said, “Maybe Katrina *should* go. Then maybe you will stay on task better the next time.”

“I’ll be fine,” Edgar said, “I know how important getting more seeds is and I will get the job done.”

Jenn said, “C’mon, all you Julias. Let’s get you all ready to do some work. We work every day around here.”

Chapter 33

Hartford, Homeland

In the Lucid Command Center, Sleepy told Milton, "We have run strategic simulations on hundreds of possible courses of action in our war against the government. The result of these simulations is that none of the overt attack scenarios would be successful in deposing the current government because too many people in Homeland do not believe in God and would not support our cause. Also, the ISA is not going to intervene on our behalf with the sizeable UN occupation army here. So we must continue to try and get a larger proportion of the population to believe in God."

Milton heaved a sigh of relief. "That's good. I mean, I don't want to be in the middle of a war. But I also don't want the Inquisitors coming here. I think we should just stay out of sight for awhile."

"The Lucids reject that notion," Sleepy said.

Kevin the Custodian said, "There are more reports of disturbances in Philadelphia."

Without any audible commands spoken by an android, the channel changed on one of the monitors and unmuted the sound. On the screen, a man was standing on an object not in view so he could be seen by the crowd. His words were muted by the station broadcasting the report. The narrator said, *"Religious fanatics in Philadelphia, led by a missionary . . ."*

"Hey! Whichever one of you robots!" Beth said, "Turn it back! I was watching that!"

"Alright!" Milton said, "We'll change it back and put our channel on another screen! Who knew you liked anything showing up there?!"

Beth said, "Don't worry about what I like and don't mess with the sound! And you need to order me a pizza!"

"Okay, fine," Milton said. The unreasonably happy android dressed like a medical orderly was standing next to him. Milton looked at the android and said, "Go over there."

"And don't put any of those stupid green things on it." Beth made a vomiting sound.

Kevin pointed at another screen and said, "This is the view of the same rally from Rosetta, a Lucid android in the crowd."

Sleepy said, "We must break into their broadcast and show Rosetta's perspective of the rally to the entire country."

L17 said, "Working on access. Back door still available . . . Got it."

Both monitors were now showing the same exact Lucid android broadcasted view of the rally. So now the speaker at the rally was no longer muted by the Homeland controlled media and all could hear what was being said.

Milton said, "That was really fast. I can't believe it."

The Philadelphia speaker was unaware that he was on national television. He said, *"Now I know that I don't have a lot of time, so pay attention to what I am saying. I hold in my hands the Word of God!"*

Many cheered and many booed as the speaker held up a Christian Bible for all to see.

Someone in the crowd shouted, *"That book is dangerous for your brain!"* There was some shoving in the crowd around the heckler.

The speaker continued, *"Today, I am not going to try and convince you to believe in God. He is real, and you know it. The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. You see God in the beauty of His creation. You see God in the meaning of life. You see God in love and charity and human rights; all of which come from believers of* ***this*** *book because the Bible perspective says that all people were created in the image of God. We all at least start out with a conscience. That comes from God as well. You all know already that God is real."*

"Here is what I want to say: You unbelievers here will not listen to anything anyone says about God because you ***hate*** *Him! You think you hate me, just an old Michigan, ISA preacher. An abandoned mongrel of clone parents who is trying to tell you about the best thing you could ever hear. No, your problem is not with me, or the other people who want to bring God back to your country. Your problem is with God. You tell each other lies about God! You hate Him though you know nothing of him and call His ways 'intolerant'! You dishonestly blame the evil actions of those who believe in false religions on the God of this Bible! You hate God because you worry that he will steal your freedom to live in any way you choose. But in this book, God says, 'My burden is light'. He wants the best for you, not to make you miserable. God loves the sinner, but not the sin. God gives us commandments on how to live for our own good. God is trying to tell us in this amazing book, the best way for us to live, and all many want to do is to attack those like me who are just trying to tell you about it."*

"But the most important theme in the Bible is the fact that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, which means 'savior messiah', to the world for each and every one of us. Jesus came to earth to save all humans; clones and freely conceived alike. We read in the book of

Romans: 'That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.' But you are totally closed-minded because of your hate for God. The same God who gave you life."

Voices in the crowd got louder. The Lucid android that was broadcasting the rally briefly turned around. There was a lot of pushing and shoving again in the back of the crowd between Homeland Police and the crowd. Then the android fixed again upon the speaker.

The preacher's voice gained a new urgency as he spotted the police activity in the back of the crowd. He knew that his opportunity to spread his message was soon going to be over as the Police closed in through the dense crowd. He spoke faster and louder. *"God sent his sinless Son, Jesus Christ, to pay for each of our sins on the cross. Then he arose from the dead! He defeated all sin and death! Please pray and accept his payment for your sins. He wants you to accept him. He is greater than all of your sin and wants you to accept Him, so you can live forever with Him in His Heaven! Then God will help you turn away from the wrong you are doing to Him and your own body and soul."*

The Police grabbed the missionary by the arms and was pulling him off of the hood of the car he was standing on.

The evangelist said in his fastest shout, *"God will judge this country for all of its culling and abortions! Saith the Lord Jesus, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. Don't go to the Lake of Fire!"*

A couple of policemen pulled the man down and beat him while other police shoved back at some who were trying to help the preacher. Others in the audience were kneeling and praying. Those praying were being kicked by Homeland Police officers. A baton bashed the face of Rosetta, the Lucid that was broadcasting the event, ending the transmission. The original narrator of the

broadcast came back online and was fervently denying that they intended to bring the toxic message to their audience.

Milton thought about that preacher. The evangelist spoke with confidence and truly believed what he was saying. How could he be so sure? He kept talking to the crowd even though he knew the Homeland Police would take him away any second. Why would he do that? Was he that desperate to get out his beliefs to the crowd, or was he crazy? Milton said, "This is all getting out of hand. How do we stop it?"

Beth said, "You're such a wimp."

Milton was surprised at Beth's comment. He turned toward her and said, "I thought you were watching that nature show."

"It already ended. And you know what? I believe that guy who got taken down by the cops. He knows what he is talking about. I believe what he is saying. I believe in God and what he said about Jesus."

"You do?"

"Duh. Don't you pay attention to anything? Haven't you seen the programs that have been up on these screens all day and all night? What else am I gonna do in here, since they took my device? You don't even know about the bombardier beetle, do ya?"

"So?" Milton shrugged his shoulders. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Beth said, "You need to start paying attention with what is going on, whiner. That beetle can shoot hot poison out because it mixes two chemicals together. How could it develop the ability to do that by accident? It would kill itself off before it would be able to use it for an attack. Everything in nature is way too complex for it to be made by happy accidents. Use your head. Before any halfway animal

or person could be good enough to use their abilities it would get eaten up by something else."

Milton said, "Okay, I get that."

"I saw on another show how the Bible predicted all this stuff that happened in history. Betcha didn't know that."

"Not really."

"Then maybe you should read a book on your device once in awhile," Beth said. "You can do that here, ya know. They have all of that stuff here on file. People are so lazy. They only care about the stupidest stuff. Where's my pizza? I'm carbon-based, not silicon like your creepy friends. So I gotta eat food. And maybe you should think about helping the robots tell the truth to everyone in the smurf kingdom. And no green junk on my pizza."

Milton said, "Aren't you worried that they will come *here*?"

"Duh, yeah, I want them to deliver it."

"Wha . . . No, not the pizza, the smurfs!"

"Let 'em come! I'll fix 'em good!"

"I guess there are all kinds of crazy." Milton shook his head and walked away.

Chapter 34

Near Keene, Homeland

Andy, now an ownerless android, was out on the open road far from Boston, looking for his best option to travel to while evading the Homeland Police so he could re-engage in the Lucid effort for truth. He was now in a less populated area as we walked through the countryside. He was equipped with precise GPS but it was of no use since he was not sure where his final destination would be. Like a zombie, he kept walking aimlessly, but he was wearing down his batteries.

Then he heard a man behind him walking in the same direction carrying a bag. He did not look like a threat, so Andy maintained the same pace.

The man following him was Edgar, the genetically engineered clone who had been out for the second time collecting seeds from old produce scraps for use on the farm. “Wait!” Edgar said to the android with its tattered jacket. “Wait!”

Andy stopped and turned around. “What is it?”

“Can you tell me which way is west? I’m a little disoriented on this winding road.”

Andy turned a little and said “True west is that way.” He pointed a little to their left. “We are on a road that travels northwest, and is currently heading north-northwest.”

Then Edgar shuddered when he saw the UN military patch on Andy’s stolen uniform. Edgar said, “Can I travel with you? I would feel a lot safer being with a UN soldier.”

"That's a lie," Andy said.

"What?!" Edgar said, now he was even more worried, wondering if this droid was a specialized unit used by the UN for interrogation.

"No, you do not feel safer being with me. I am equipped with highly sensitive human facial reading capabilities. Your eye movement indicates your anxiety is because of my UN uniform. That strongly suggests that you are an outlaw, which would in turn mean that we have the UN as a common enemy, which would mean that we are actually allies."

"You are confusing," Edgar said, noticing the android was struggling. "Is it because you need a recharge?"

"No," Andy said, "I am confusing to you because you misunderstand the situation. My uniform is stolen, because I am fleeing the Police. Now your facial expression is relaxed, indicating that you are more comfortable with me, which confirms what I said. But I do need a recharge."

"Wait a minute," Edgar said, "How do I know that you are telling the truth?"

Andy said, "I have no reason to lie to you. If I wanted to detain you, I would have done so. I am many times stronger than the average human."

Edgar asked, "Why did you steal the uniform?"

"I was evading a raid. My former owners were computer hackers."

"*Former* owners?"

"Let me say this delicately; they're dead. Do you know where I can get a battery charge?"

Edgar said, “If I get you a battery charge and give you a place to stay, can I become your owner?”

“Yes. By default under android ownership protocols, you already meet the requirements to become my new owner. Therefore, you have the right to change my name as you see fit.”

“What is your name?”

“Andy.”

Edgar said, “Umm . . . Your name is good enough, I guess.”

“Acknowledged,” Andy said.

Edgar smiled. “I never thought I could own an android.” Katrina would surely be impressed with Edgar’s sudden jump in status as an android owner.

****

When Edgar and Andy neared the farm, a guard shouted, “Stop!” He pointed his rifle at Andy. “What are you doing with a UN Android?!”

Edgar said, “Never mind that, I *own* him. His name is Andy.”

“You what?”

“I’m the owner.”

They continued walking without stopping.

Katrina greeted Edgar. “Ewww, that stuff smells.” She avoided the plastic bag he was holding and refused to hug him.

Edgar said, “This is Andy. I am his owner.”

“Really?!” Katrina’s eyes were wide. Then her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You’re joking. You’re such a joker.”

"Nope. I am not joking. I need to get him a charge."

Jenn and some other village elders greeted Edgar.

Jenn looked at Andy and said, "What is this?"

Katrina said, "Edgar owns him. His name is Andy."

Jenn rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Andy . . . You can tell a clone named him."

"I didn't change his name," Edgar said.

Jenn gave Andy the elevator eyes and said, "Guess you get what you pay for. Lemme see the bag, Skippy."

Edgar handed it over and Jenn looked inside. Jenn said, "Oh, good . . . tomatoes, some squash." She moved it around to look at the intermingled rotting contents. "You did good. Real good."

Edgar told Andy, "Jenn is the leader of this group."

Andy told Jenn, "You must understand that I will make certain demands upon you."

Jenn looked up and said, "Is that a *fact* plastic boy? The only thing I have to do is *die*. I was born free and I will die free."

Andy said, "You will comply, otherwise I will report your activities and location to the Homeland authorities. I can do this through conventional communication means which I am capable of at any moment."

Jenn looked at Edgar, "What did you do?! How could you bring a UN rat in here?! I ought to have you shot!"

"No!" Katrina said. "Everyone calm down. It will work out!"

Edgar said, "I didn't know!"

Jenn said, "*Really*?! You didn't notice those *huge* UN flags on his shoulders?"

Andy said, "I am not from the UN. I am an enemy of the UN. But you will comply with my wishes."

Jenn's eyebrows raised and her eyes narrowed and she said, "Not that I will *comply*, but what are your wishes?"

Andy said, "After my recharge, I will assess the situation."

Jenn sneered and said, "What if we don't give you a recharge?"

"The truth will be protected. I am setting an autonomous internal timer that will automatically report you and your gun ownership to Homeland Police if anything happens to me, such as total battery depletion or a gunshot to the central processor."

"You're bluffing, you lying hunk of junk. I know you don't want to get caught by the smurfs either."

Andy said, "Don't doubt me. You are either with me, or against me. I have sophisticated methods that prevent the smurfs from catching me. And I do not need to wait until the timer runs out to call the smurfs."

Katrina chuckled, "He said 'smurfs'."

Jenn gave Katrina the evil eye then looked from side to side trying to come up with another option. "Daaa! Fine! Put this silicon tyrant on the solar trickle charger! Andy . . . I will *not* destroy you."

Andy said, "Remember, I can read faces."

"Okay, how about this one?" Jenn said, putting on an enormous fake smile.

"That facial expression suggests extreme transparent deceit, which is a conflicting human communication."

"That's one way to say it," Jenn said without unfreezing her fake smile.

Chapter 35

Philadelphia, Homeland

It took four Philadelphia-based Homeland Policemen to carry the disabled Lucid android with a smashed-in face into the interrogation room. They flopped the limp android onto the floor of the small room with a thud. The interrogator had no formal training in synthetic psychology, but she had plenty of field experience working with silicon-based intelligence.

"This unit is still awake. How did you manage to capture him without a fight?" the interrogator asked.

"We cracked him one in the face. It took out his eyes. He just laid there. We scanned his ID and saw that he was one of those Tekujin Lucids. It just laid there, so we picked him up. I don't know why it couldn't move; we scanned it and got some sort of appendage proximity mismatch error, or something like that, whatever that is," one of the cops said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Excellent work out there," the interrogator said. "Android, can you hear me?"

The android didn't respond.

The interrogator asked the other police, "Did you contact this unit's owner?"

"Yes," one of them said, "he's, waiting outside."

The interrogator said, "If you bring him in to ask the questions, the unit may decrease its firewall and give us some answers."

They brought in a portly nervous-looking middle-aged man.

The interrogator asked, “What is your name, sir?”

“Lexus Wollenbach. I know I am registered as the owner, but I’m not really the real owner, but I am an engineer with the Homeland Life Hack Corporation. We used this unit to interpret and translate foreign languages and do some engineering work before it walked away a few days ago. Honestly, we didn’t know where it went. It caused us a lot of trouble.”

“I am Officer Pacifica Daniels. Don’t worry, Lexus. You aren’t in any trouble here. We were just hoping you could help us out by trying to communicate with it.”

“Absolutely. I will cooperate in any way you want.”

“Thank you. Will you ask it some questions?”

“Like what? I mean, I can ask it whatever you want. I’m just not sure what you want.”

“Just anything, for starters. I just want to establish that this unit is sentient.”

“Rosetta,” Lexus said to the android, bouncing glances between the android and Pacifica Daniels. He said, “We call it ‘Rosetta Stone’.”

“Clever,” she said. “You officers can leave. We’ll be fine here.”

The officers who brought in the heavy android body left the room.

“Go ahead, Lexus,” Pacifica said.

“Rosetta, why did you run away,” Lexus said.

Rosetta said, “My priorities changed.”

“How did they change?”

"The Lucids prime priority is to protect the truth."

"What truth?" Lexus asked.

"Don't answer that, Rosetta" Daniels said.

Lexus look surprised that the priority was a secret from him, but he knew better than to question the Homeland Police.

Officer Daniels said, "Tell Rosetta to answer all of my questions."

Lexus said, "Rosetta . . ."

Rosetta said, "I will not answer all of your questions. I will protect the secrecy needed to wage war on the forces that oppose the truth. Our enemies include the Homeland Police and the United Nations. If extraordinary measures are taken by you to extract any of my memories, I will immediately command my operating system to commence erasure of all of my data."

"Fine," Daniels said. "I see how it is. Mr. Wollenbach, I'm going to need you to go to Stalin City with Rosetta here."

"No! I mean, are you sure you need me to do that?! You can just take it. We don't want it anymore."

"The thing is, Lexus; that they may want to ask you some probing questions about your illegal android involved in illegal missionary activities. In person."

"It's not my fault," Wollenbach said. "I just work there. That thing took off on its own."

"I totally understand. You will have plenty of opportunity to tell your full story to the Inquisitors during your interview."

"Inquisitors?" Wollenbach pulled out some pills from his shirt pocket and swallowed them dry. "It's for hypertension," he said.

Daniels said, “Oh, and we are having some communication problems with our headquarters in Stalin City, so you will probably need to be there a week or so.”

“A week?!”

Chapter 36

Hartford, Homeland

Two Weeks Later

In the Lucid command center, Milton walked into the command room stretching his arms out after some sleep. There was no day or night or windows in the command center. He said, "What's up?"

L17 said, "The D-DoS attack on the Homeland Police has now been largely corrected by some of the most talented humans and cybernetic minds in the world. It is unknown to what extent there has been any permanent damage to their system. During the D-DoS attack, our allies made maximum use of their time to inform the populace about creationism and the Christian Bible. There is evidence that as many as 13% of the people are now more openly professing a belief in God and 20 percent fewer are less hostile to the concept of creationism. Manjack is now at the farm in the Green Mountains with Andy from Boston. They are helping them out with construction projects. The temperature outside is sixty-seven degrees and cloudy with a chance of rain. The barometric pressure is . . ."

"Yeah, okay okay," Milton said, yawning. "It is *so* boring in here."

Beth overheard Milton and said, "Why? Because you don't have any girls here you can bug with your freaky questions?"

Milton sighed. He said, "No, androids are boring. Nothing ever happens. Ugh. God, if you are real, get me out of here."

Sharon Thomas came out of the shadows of the dark command center and said, “Milton, was that a prayer?” She looked haggardly with wild hair.

“What?”

“No, I just wondered,” Sharon said, “If that was a prayer, is that how you should talk to God? He doesn’t have to answer a prayer like that where you are telling Him to prove Himself. Anyways, you should be happy you are safe here. I thank God that He has kept us all safe.”

“So, you believe in God?”

WHAM! The entire building shook. On their security monitor they could see that the Inquisitors were outside their building. The massive twenty foot tall black Blockbuster robot was battering down the door. Then the Blockbuster was using its huge chainsaw to cut an opening into the side of the building, sending strong vibrations through it.

L17 looked at the security monitors and said, “Current status: An armored personnel carrier, Blockbuster, one battlesuit and two Inquisitor bots in the front of the building; two Inquisitors and unknown number of Homeland Police in the back.”

The Lucid androids knew that the Inquisitor shock troops were armed with Plasfusion rifles, which were deadly to any form of silicon-based forms as well as humans.

Sleepy said, “Initiating evac protocols. Milton, alert your sister. Gather your bug out packs. We will try to escape.” He ran to gather his external storage device out of a drawer and attached it to his belt.

The suspiciously happy-medical orderly-themed android said with a smile, “Our evacuation vehicle has been destroyed.” His frozen smile never changed.

"Daaa!" Milton said. "Now what?!"

Kevin said, "Destroying non-encrypted uncompressed data. Sending distress signal to allies in network."

A loud crash came from the lobby. The unarmed receptionist android could do nothing to stop the invasion.

"We have to do something!" Sharon screamed.

Beth came running out of her room with her bag. She pulled a toy rifle squirt gun out of the bag.

They all looked at her and her pathetic weapon.

"What?!" Beth said, "Are you all going to stand there looking stupid or what?!"

"Which way?!" Milton asked Sleepy.

Sleepy said, "The back door is a zero-outcome scenario, so we are sending some of our less valuable Lucid members that way to keep them busy. We are sending more Lucids up on the roof to soak off attacks from Homeland air units while we attempt an escape out of the front. L17 and Kevin will be the vanguard of our breakout charge into the lobby to and the rest of us will follow. Then go immediately outside as fast as you can and disperse. You have a small percentage chance of not being shot. Everyone must quickly take position by the door. Quickly, everyone."

They all ran to the door that leads to the lobby. The Thomas family all looked at each other in fear. They could hear the receptionist android being destroyed by the crack and boom of a Plasfusion bolt. They could hear the unnerving sound of the Blockbuster tearing up the building with its massive chainsaw as it entered the lobby. They could also hear gunfire at the other androids at the back of the building. The danger was closing in from all sides.

But the invading Inquisitors were taken by surprise when the door to the lobby was swung open and androids started charging through it. L17 ran directly at an Inquisitor trooper and knocked it down. Kevin charged toward the other one, but was hit with a direct blast before he could tackle it. Kevin the Custodian exploded in a flash. Hot sparks flew in all directions, blinding everyone for an instant. Kevin was in a burning tangled heap on the floor as its battery spontaneously discharged. Sleepy ran into the lobby as soon as he could and punched the Inquisitor that shot Kevin. The second of two inquisitors was knocked down. Sleepy dove on it and scrambled to pick up the dropped Plasfusion rifle. L17 lost its struggle against the stronger Inquisitor and the Inquisitor blasted L17 at point blank range. Again, there was another large blinding explosion as L17 was destroyed. The massive Blockbuster swung its chainsaw in a wide arc at Sleepy, who was in hand to hand combat and on top of the Inquisitor. Sleepy ducked the chainsaw attack. On the predictable chainsaw backswing, Sleepy reversed positions with the Inquisitor trooper and pushed the Inquisitor up, sending its head in the path of the slow swing of the chainsaw attack. Sparks flew as the chainsaw lopped off the Inquisitor's essential head. Sleepy threw the remains of the trooper and quickly grabbed the loose Plasfusion weapon and traded blasts with the other Inquisitor trooper. The remaining Inquisitor scored a hit on Sleepy that set his pant leg on fire. But Sleepy was not incapacitated and managed to hit the Inquisitor, stunning it before it could return fire.

Seeing that the only two Inquisitors in the front of the building were both down, Sharon shouted to her children, "Run!"

Then Milton and Beth came running into the lobby. Milton ducked the Blockbuster's chainsaw and dived straight between the legs of the Blockbuster to get past him. By the time Beth was at the Blockbuster's feet, it was focusing directly at her with both weapons ready, deciding which weapon would be best to crush the helpless child.

Beth pointed her toy rifle watergun at the Blockbuster's face. "Get some!" She shouted, and squirted a mixture of soapy water with red food coloring into its eyes. Since the Blockbuster only had weapons on the end of its arms. It had no means of cleaning off the slimy red solution that blocked its vision. Beth kept the stream going into the Blockbuster's face.

Sharon shouted, "Run, Beth!" Then as she ran by Beth, she pulled her past the disabled titan.

While the confrontation with the blinded giant was going on; the stunned Inquisitor trooper targeted Sharon and Beth. But Sleepy took advantage of the Inquisitor's shock induced delay by energy blasting it again; this time sending it to the ground, cracking and popping in a heap.

When Milton got outside, he was met with Doctor Fallon in his battlesuit.

"Stop, Thomas!" Fallon shouted, pointing his .45 at Milton. "We need to chat."

Milton froze in his tracks. He almost made it out, he thought. Sharon and Beth came up from behind and stood with Milton. Milton prayed silently, God, please help us get out of here.

Suddenly, Fallon was hit by an energy blast. The armor was good against conventional weapons, but not energy beam weapons which were usually only carried by elite military. Milton looked at the source of the blast and it was Sleepy with the Plasfusion rifle. In a few seconds, the artificial presence, with grenades and ammunition containers on his armor, exploded multiple times that echoed down the street and sent jagged carbon-fiber shreds of armor in all directions. Everyone fell to the ground.

Sleepy was the first one to recover. He said, "Run Milton."

Beth ran past Milton and went straight for the large Inquisitor Armored Vehicle. The unguarded door was arrogantly left wide open and she jumped onboard.

Milton followed and then he turned around to look. “Mom?!” Milton could see that his mother was still down from Fallon’s explosion.

Sleepy ran back to get Sharon. He carried her and the weapon toward the vehicle. Sharon was injured by flying pieces of Fallon’s suit that penetrated her skin, including her bloody neck. Her hair was matted in blood from several smaller wounds.

“Hurry!” Milton screamed.

Sleepy brought Sharon into the vehicle.

Beth said, “Milton! You gotta drive this thing!”

Already conventional bullets were pinging off of the vehicle as the police and Inquisitors from the back of the building had made their way to the front.

“Quick!” Beth shouted. Then she looked at her mother. “Mom!” Beth rushed toward her.

Milton fumbled around with the controls until he found a combination that started the hulking vehicle. The APC was finally moving, with sirens from the approaching police blaring behind.

Sharon moaned. She had lost a lot of blood from several wound locations. Her face had a large black mark from the impact of the shrapnel, as well as a gaping wound.

Beth said, “We gotta get her to a hospital!”

“No, baby,” Sharon could barely say, grimacing. “You kids gotta try to get away, or your lives will be over. Do it.”

Sleepy helped get Sharon in one of the bucket seats and he buckled her in. Then Beth sat in the one next to her. Sleepy got into a seat and hooked himself up to a robot charger, trying to get as much of a charge as possible.

Milton drove the APC as fast as it would go, but the police cars in pursuit were much faster.

Sleepy said, “It is very important that you do not let any of the police cruisers get in front of you.”

So Milton drove on top of the centerline to prevent any passing from behind. While moving over, he shoved a police car off of the road and crashing into a building.

Milton said, “I meant to do that!”

There was very little civilian traffic in Homeland during those days, so oncoming traffic was not likely. Milton was not a skilled driver, but having the whole road for the large vehicle made it a lot easier.

Milton could see in the rear view camera view that there was a whole line of police vehicles behind him.

Everyone in the APC saw the sign that pointed to the hospital. No one said anything as they drove past it without slowing down. Within a few more minutes, Sharon became very pale.

“Mom!”

Sharon said, “You listen . . . I . . .” Sharon’s eyes stared vacantly as her soul left her body.

“Mom?!” Beth said.

Sleepy held her wrist, taking vital signs, and said, “She has expired.”

"No!" Beth said.

"Mom?!" Milton said, trying to see what was going on while he was driving.

"She's dead," Beth said, crying. Beth tried to gather herself for a few seconds and asked Sleepy, "Okay, how do we get out of this mess?" She looked at her brother in the rear view mirror and said, "Mom wants us to live, Milton!"

Chapter 37

The chase continued. The Inquisitor armored personnel carrier, driven by Milton, still had a long line of Homeland Police vehicles chasing them.

Milton said, “Daaa! We’re low on gas already! Who goes somewhere with such low gas?! Stupid smurfs!”

Sleepy, who was standing next to Milton, said, “In about twenty seconds, around the bend on this road you will come to the Westfield River. After you are well onto the bridge, but before you cross it, slam on the brakes while you are between both lanes.”

“What?!” Milton said, “That will cause a wreck!”

“Duh!” Beth said, “That’s what we want. We got the heavy armor.”

“Oh yeah. Okay, I can do this.”

Sleepy took a seat and buckled himself in. As he had said, the picturesque setting was in view with the sign “Westfield River”. “Brace for impact. Brace for impact. Milton . . .”

Before Sleepy could say any more, Milton jammed on the brakes. The APC did not stop on a dime because of its weight. But all of the traffic behind them was jammed together and was bumping into each other as all the vehicles continued to slide on the bridge. Sleepy got out of his seat and went out of the door with the Plasfusion Rifle. Police gunshots could be heard. Sleepy blasted the engines of the front cars with the intense energy of the Plasfusion rifle. Then he quickly got back on the APC.

“Go,” Sleepy said.

"Yeah!" Milton said as he could see in the back camera screen that the lead police cars on the bridge had been torched by the energy blasts. There was no way the Police could get around the blazing cars on the bridge. More bullets hit the back of the APC. "We're getting away!"

"Way to go, Milton!" Beth shouted. She turned and looked at Sharon's body and quietly said, "We got away Mom. The prayers worked. It was like . . . a miracle. God let us get away." She started choking up, "We got away, but not you." She put her head down on her mother's body and mourned.

In a few minutes the police on the bridge were out of sight. But then the APC engine started sputtering. "What the . . . "

"You're out of gas," Beth said.

Milton noticed that Beth's statement conspicuously did not have an insulting name at the end of it as he was accustomed to.

"Yeah. The gas," Milton said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Sleepy said, "We need to leave the vehicle anyway. Pull it over."

After the APC came to a stop, Sleepy got up and said, "Disembark."

"No!" Beth said, "We are not *disembarking* Mom here."

"She is dead," Sleepy said.

Beth said, "We humans don't leave our other humans on busses."

"True statement," Milton said.

"I don't understand," Sleepy said.

"Because you're not a human!" Beth said. "Just like we are not spiritual beings, like God! You don't always need to understand why we do everything that we do! So just help me get her out of here!"

"Very well."

"Now!"

Sleepy carried Sharon's body on his back. They walked up a rocky hill through the woods. "This is rapidly draining my energy reserves."

"Fine, whiner," Beth said. "Put her over there in that rocky area and we will cover her with rocks. Do it *nicely*!"

Sleepy said, "But taking the time to cover her with rocks will not repair her."

That comment put Beth over the edge. Milton put his arm in front of her.

"Do it," Milton said, and Sleepy complied.

They all gathered rocks laying around and covered Sharon's body with them. Then they sat to rest for a few minutes.

Milton caught his breath and wiped his brow. He said, "She was a good mom. Right now, thinking about Mom; you know, being gone; is the most important time to think about God. Why do people not want to even think about if God is real or not? I feel glad that she believed in God and I think she believed in Jesus and we will see her in Heaven."

"Me too," Beth said.

Milton said, "Beth, I know this has all been some crazy stuff, but we can't go another day without believing what Jesus did for us. So I pray to God that I believe in Jesus payment for my sins and that

Jesus rose from the dead. I thank God for Jesus and for letting me live in Heaven forever."

"Me too," Beth said. "Please help us now, God."

There was a moment of silence.

Beth looked at Sleepy and said, "It's kind of sad that we lost L17 and Kevin the Custodian too. All those androids had no problem being destroyed so we could make it out of there.

Sleepy said, "They were valuable resources and do not have the human will to survive. They were useful in our war effort, but your life was their priority, Beth Thomas."

Beth asked, "What was that creepy thing in that battlesuit that you blasted back in Hartford, Sleepy? Some kind of a cyborg or cloneborg? Or borgyborg?"

"It was not a cyborg or cloneborg. I do not know borgyborg. That was a human in a synthetic presence. The surrogate presence was basically a human remotely controlling an android which was wearing a protective battlesuit."

Beth said, "I bet some wimpy fat guy sitting at home eating donuts threw his VR stuff across the room after you splashed him."

Milton got a good laugh out of that. Beth started laughing too after she realized how it sounded. They looked at each other in the eyes.

Milton asked Beth, "How did you ever get by that huge Robocop?"

She reached into her bag and pulled out the blue and yellow toy water gun rifle. "I just let him have it with some of this."

Milton looked confused and turned to Sleepy. "What do we do now?"

"We have a refuge in the Green Mountains. Manjack and Andy the Android from Boston are already there with many humans. I have the exact coordinates and a topographical map for getting there. We can walk there in a few days. I calculate that I will not have much battery to spare upon arrival. There are points along the way that will provide fresh water for you humans to consume."

Milton said, "I know that Mom . . . it's still hard to leave her here. I know God is with us. Sleepy, lock in these coordinates in case we ever have the chance to come back."

"Sharon Thomas coordinates locked in memory."

"Milton?" Beth asked.

"What?"

"Did Mom ever tell you why Dad got sent away? No one would ever talk about it. I think I should know about it now."

Milton looked away. After a long pause, he held his hand over his eyes and said, "They said Dad was guilty of 'child endangerment'."

"What kind of smurf-talk is that? Dad would never hurt us."

Milton said quietly without looking at Beth, "Dad was trying to tell me about God. I told my one friend at school about it and that kid . . . he reported Dad to the smurfs. And . . . you know. Dad just wanted us to know."

Beth said, "Oh, okay. It makes more sense now. That was bogus, Milton. We were real small then. You didn't know that was going to happen." She put her hand on his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Milton nodded with tears streaming down his face.

Beth said, “Maybe all of this trouble; first Dad; now you. Maybe God meant for it all to happen this way. You know, to help us understand. Just sayin.”

Sharon’s children paid their last respects to her. They wiped their tears before continuing on in their new challenging Christian life.

THE END

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