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Designed by Justin Ahrens and Ron Kaufmann

Edited by Ramona Cramer Tucker

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# CHAPTER 1

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Smoke bomb!

The only indication of the explosion had been a small crackle and a flash of blinding light. Instead of shock waves of blasting heat, however, dark smoke instantly mushroomed in the warehouse, blocking all light. And sucking out all oxygen.

Like any human, my body and lungs needed oxygen to survive. As the dense, choking smoke filled my vision, I fought panic. If I weren't seeing this through the eyes of a robot, I'd be dead as soon as my lungs ran short of air.

"Targets! Targets! Targets!" a deep voice yelled from somewhere in the smoke. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Weird, high-pitched hissing sounds whined past my microphones.

More screaming.

Something—or someone—banged into the hard titanium shell of my robot.

By the clank, I knew I'd been hit by another robot. Mine was one of nearly two dozen robots in the room. But that was about all I knew.

I'd connected to this robot body only 30 seconds

before. Barely enough time to look around and see the small army of other robots.

Thousands of miles away, the nervous system of my own body was plugged in to a computer that allowed me to control this robot through my own brain waves. I had done that plenty—handled a robot—but not like this before.

Because this robot was different.

It rode on wheels, like the one I was used to controlling. But this one was much shorter, with four arms. Two arms ended with the normal titanium hands that I'd trained with my entire life. Two others ended in round tubes.

I had no idea what to do with those tubes.

The weird hissing sounds continued to buzz overtop in the black confusion of the smoke.

“Ten seconds!” the voice screamed. “Kill! Kill! Kill!”

I made a mental command to switch to infrared, something I should have done the instant the smoke mushroomed.

My robot's controls switched away from visual, and the four video lenses mounted on top of the stem of the robot body blinkered shut.

Temperature sensors gave me instant feedback of my surroundings. What I saw in the shades of blue and orange and red was completely eerie.

The smoke roiled in clouds of cool blue, telling me the bomb had not been a heat detonator, nor something intended to explode anything but the smoke. My infrared detected glowing red shapes in the smoke. Human shapes.

“Fifteen seconds! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

Around those red human shapes and me was a frenzy of movement, the faintly red outlines of the titanium shells at room temperature. They scurried back and forth in the

smoke. Laser shots zipped from their extended arms, piercing the shading of the smoke.

Laser shots? This was the purpose of the tubes at the end of my extra arms?

I lifted one arm and pointed at the ceiling.

I thought out a mental command. *Fire?*

Nothing happened.

I tried another mental command. *Shoot?*

Nothing.

*Kill?*

It fired. A weird buzzing sound came from my extended arm. My infrared picked up a hot laser that left a tight red glowing circle in the ceiling.

I was shooting!

“Twenty seconds! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

As I began to orient myself and focus better, I saw that the laser beams were going through those human forms, like dozens of blindingly fast arrows zinging through the smoke.

*Kill? As in kill people?*

Robots spun and circled in all directions. The human shapes ran or crouched or fell.

More laser beams.

More targets pierced.

But where were the screams of dying people?

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

I scanned with my infrared again. There were only two remaining human figures. One pushed against the far wall, as if it were trying to claw its way out of danger. The other collapsed as I watched.

“Thirty seconds! Kill! Kill!”

It seemed as if all the robots turned their attention to the red glow of that final human shape against the far wall.

Dozens of laser beams zipped toward the upper body, and instantly the shape fell.

“Thirty-three seconds! And stop! Back to visuals.”

A giant whoosh began to roar.

I unblinkered my video lenses. I saw fans in the ceiling sucking away the smoke.

As the smoke lifted and the bare walls of the warehouse began to appear beyond all the other robots, I looked for all the bodies of the humans who had been shot with laser beams.

Nothing.

Where were the bodies?

I had no time to wonder.

A door opened on the far wall and a man in a soldier's uniform appeared.

“Thirty-three seconds! You are bumbling, pathetic fools!” he shouted through pale, thin lips. He had short blond hair, and his arm and shoulder muscles looked like small, smooth boulders under the tightness of his clothing. His thick neck bulged with veins. “Your opponents were totally blind! And you took over half a minute to kill them!”

Kill them? But where were they?

“And you! Number 17!”

He strode toward my robot body, pointing a flashlight in his right hand at me. Stopping in front of me, he slapped the flashlight in the open palm of his left hand.

“Look above you!” he roared. “Two ceiling holes! Do you think the human soldiers are going to fly to get away?”

I tilted my video lenses up to where he pointed. Little wisps of smoke curled from where I had fired.

“Those were the only two shots you fired!” he yelled. Lifting his cold gray eyes off my robot body, he looked

around. “All of you!” he shouted. “Each shot you take is monitored by computer! We see exactly what you do!”

He directed his next words back to me. “What, you were trying to be merciful? To simulated computer targets?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t trust my robot voice to not reveal who I really was—an enemy infiltrator, not the scared kid this man thought he was controlling. I was just glad my actual body was thousands of miles from this terrifying giant.

“When the time comes to kill, you *will* kill! Hear me? Or you will be killed! One flick of a computer switch and your death chip will be activated. Understand?”

He wasn’t asking as if he expected an answer. It was a direct command.

“All of you!” he roared to the other robots. “Let Number 17 here be an example.”

He lifted the flashlight high, like he was going to hit me with it. I almost backed away. Then he lowered it and smiled. “Sweet dreams.”

He touched the robot’s body stem lightly with the flashlight. That’s when I discovered it wasn’t a flashlight.

I heard myself scream as an electrical shock ripped through my consciousness.

And I fell into a darkness far blacker than any room filled with smoke.