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Designed by Ron Kaufmann

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CHAPTER 1

Radiation blast!

Behind me, three doors—each three feet thick and made of steel-encased concrete—were already open to the outer world. Ahead was the final door protecting the inner core of the nuclear reactor at the power plant. It was the final barrier between me and the intense heat and radiation about to blast me when a computer signal triggered it to open like the ones behind me.

Had my body been there in my wheelchair, the heat would have made puddles of my skin and flesh, reducing me to bones and skull. Just as deadly were the radiation waves coming from the reactor's uranium core, only a half hour away from a final and catastrophic meltdown.

Fortunately I approached not in my wheelchair, but through a robot body that had rolled under my control through the first three doorways toward that last door. In theory, my task was simple. Pull the rod of uranium from the sheath that fueled the reactor, shutting it down. But I had to do it fast—all before the entire reactor exploded in a mushroom cloud with five times the power of any nuclear bomb.

And all because of bad hamburgers.

Ten hours earlier, a bizarre chain of events had begun the meltdown. First, one of the power plant transformers had been struck by lightning, triggering three key massive surge protectors. This in itself would have done no serious damage. After all, engineers had installed the surge protectors for something exactly like this. What they hadn't planned on was a second lightning bolt hitting the same transformer within the next 10 seconds. Millions of volts had overwhelmed the power plant's internal systems, crashing half the computers and scrambling the other half.

Even so, the problem should have ended there. At any given time, three technicians were on shift to monitor the system. In an emergency such as this one, only two of the technicians are needed to hit twin fail-safe controls on each side of the massive monitoring panel, and a computer would begin shutting down the nuclear reactor.

Shutting down the nuclear reactor wasn't something you wanted to do every day, though. The city of Los Angeles, California, would be shut down because they'd have lost the electrical power supplied by this nuclear plant. And it would take 10 days to complete the shutdown and then get the nuclear core up and running again.

But compared to the alternative, 10 days of blackout was a cheap price to pay. Because if the nuclear core exploded, its shock waves would kill every person within 30 miles. And with the wind blowing as it was, deadly radioactive dust would cover everyone else for another 20 miles beyond to the west.

Which meant all of Los Angeles. With the freeways jammed to a standstill by people trying to flee in panic.

On any other day, the one-in-ten-million chance of a sec-

ond lightning bolt would have led to an immediate and inconvenient shutdown.

Except for those uncooked hamburgers.

All three night-shift technicians had shared some take-out burgers as they carpooled to work that evening. And all three had gotten violently sick halfway through their shift. With one technician in the bathroom, the other two had stayed, doubled over in agony in front of the controls. That's why they had missed the first warning lights on the control board. Backup sirens had alerted them 30 seconds later. Sick or not, they knew what needed to be done: count down so that each could hit his own shutdown button. Both buttons had to be pressed at exactly the same time to begin the shutdown.

But the retching and dizziness caused by the bad hamburgers had proved to be too much strain for the older of the two remaining technicians. He had fainted and fallen backward as he reached for the shutdown control.

How did I know this? All of it was well documented on the video loop that monitored the control room. With one technician in the bathroom and one unconscious on the control-room floor, the sole technician remaining at the control board was helpless. He could only reach one shutdown control at a time. When the technician returned from the bathroom two minutes later, the nuclear core was out of control.

That's why I'd been sent. I'm Tyce Sanders. Fourteen years old and very new to Earth. I was supposed to be on an urgent secret mission to the Moon: locating a missing pod of kids like me, who could control robots through their own brain waves. Instead, because of this Earth emergency, high-ranking Combat Force military officials had flown me early this morning, 04.02.2040, by supersonic jet from

New York City, where I was supposed to meet with the military higher-ups, to an L.A. military base, with my robot beside me.

As if this wasn't enough stress, just a day earlier, my friend Ashley and I had nearly died. We and our robots helped stop a terrorist plot that would have killed all the Supreme Governors of the World United Federation—what used to be called the *United Nations* when my dad was a kid. Ashley was in the desert mountains of Arizona, helping with all the other robot-control kids who had just been rescued.

And I'd been sent here to California. With the thunderstorm that had begun the blowout long gone, the weather had been perfect for flying. As the jet circled the Los Angeles basin on its approach to the Combat Force base, the military division of the World United Federation, I had a clear view of the almost endless city sprawl and the autopilot vehicles that plugged the highways.

The city was in a valley, guarded by the jagged edges of the green-brown mountains against blue sky. I took in the view with awe since the planet I'd lived on all my life—Mars—looked so different. There the mountains are red, and during the day the sun is blue against a butterscotch-colored sky.

During the approach to the runway—with that view filling the window—thoughts of God and his amazing universe had naturally popped into my head. A little over nine months ago I hadn't even been interested in him. It had taken a crisis—the Mars Dome almost running out of oxygen—to make me even believe there might be a God. And then some more months to realize that he really loved *me, personally*—not just humans in general. My friend Ashley had been a big part of that discovery. That was only one of

the many reasons I was glad the director of the Mars Project, Rawling McTigre, had sent Ashley, my dad, and me to Earth together on a mission.

Today was only the beginning of my eighth day on Earth, and already so much had happened. Now I was faced with a nuclear meltdown that had begun 10 hours earlier.

Nuclear plant officials had spoken to me by videophone almost the entire flight, explaining the situation and trying to prepare me for my task. Time was running short, so they couldn't afford to give me instructions on my arrival.

Once the jet touched ground in L.A., it had taken another two hours for the nuclear experts to coach me through the training session. Or, more precisely, for me to run the robot through its training session. Again and again and again. I would only have one chance. If I made the slightest mistake, I might actually trigger an earlier meltdown.

Which would kill me just as surely as everyone else in the meltdown zone. Because I was only a mile away from the nuclear plant, controlling the robot by remote from my wheelchair.

Now the fourth and final door began to open, and I focused all my attention on the task ahead.

I'd already shut down the robot's heat sensors. Although the titanium skin of my robot was far more durable than my own skin, I didn't want my brain to panic, telling me my body was in a furnace.

A vertical bar of intense white heat widened as the door opened more.

I directed my robot to reach up with its right arm and flip down a protective shield of black glass to reduce the glare. Otherwise, with the light rays reaching my brain through the

robot's video lenses, it would be like staring into the sun. I was already in a wheelchair. I didn't want to become blind too.

Mentally I braced myself to rush the robot forward. Even with the robot's asbestos cape for protection, the technicians figured it would not last for more than 30 seconds against the heat.

So that's all I had. Thirty seconds.

If the robot even continued to function once the radiation hit.

The technicians' biggest fear was that the intense radiation would interfere with the robot's computer drive, which received signals from a receiver that was directly linked to a plug in my spinal column, and from there to my brain. I shared that fear. If the robot failed to operate, the nuclear plant would blow. And no one could guess if the radiation interference might scramble the transmissions enough to affect my brain. You see, if a robot is zapped with an electrical current, the controller is knocked unconscious at a minimum, or perhaps even killed. As for radiation interference . . . well, that could be far more deadly.

But with the door three-quarters open, I had no time to worry anymore.

I could see a huge glow through the black glass of my protective shield. Somewhere in the center of it was a rod the length and width of a person's arm. I had to pull it loose before the robot lost its function.

The door stopped opening, then sagged slightly. Had the heat melted its hinges?

I didn't hesitate. My robot was nearly six feet tall, 150 pounds, and incredibly strong. I surged forward, smashing into the door.

Pain instantly shot through me in my wheelchair. The vir-

tual-reality program that enables me to control a robot is so real, it felt like my left arm had broken. I tried to get the robot's left arm to wave. It wouldn't. I'd demolished it against the door.

But the door was open, and I was through.

At the center of the huge glow filling the room was a rod-shaped whiteness almost unbearable to see, even with the black glass that protected the robot's video lenses.

I had to act quickly. The robot already felt sluggish.

I commanded it forward. It lurched, stopped, then lurched again.

Radiation interference!

I'd spent 10 seconds, and the robot was only halfway there.

With all my concentration, I commanded it to continue.

Then . . . *clunk.*

It had hit the far end. The core was within reach. All I had to do was somehow get the robot's right arm up and . . .

Another 10 seconds.

The robot's arm began to glow. Would it last long enough to . . . ?

The robot's titanium hand closed on the end of the core rod and fused instantly.

That didn't matter. We'd expected that.

What I had to do now was roll backward and . . .

A sluggishness hit my own brain. Like black glue that oozed into my skull.

Come on, Tyce! I shouted mentally. *Come on! Think!*

In my mind, it felt like I was falling backward. Backward. Backward.

And then the black glue froze all of my thoughts.

Silence squeezed my consciousness into total darkness.