

## **Smartbomb**

*by Matthew S Williams*

*Copyright 2011 by Matthew S Williams*

---

*If you like this ebook, check out <http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/houseofwilliams>,  
or subscribe to <http://storiesbywilliams.wordpress.com/> for updates,  
podcasts, reviews and samples from the upcoming sequel!  
Become part of the Source mailing list by writing to [houseofwilliams@yahoo.ca](mailto:houseofwilliams@yahoo.ca)*

---

## Chapter1

“Good morning children!” Doctor Xavier Garcia said, addressing the room of assembled children before him. “And welcome to the Lockland Mariner munitions facility. Today we have a full tour prepared for you. I hope you will all enjoy it as much as we enjoy working here.”

In front of a mass of children, all aged eight and nine, a lone female teacher stood and tried to keep order. All of them were extremely excited, and as an educator she worried about their behaviour. Their school had been lucky to get permission to the inside of the plant in the first place. Any rowdiness or misbehaviour on their part would destroy whatever chances they had to do this again next year.

“Now children stay together and listen to what the Doctor says.” She warned. Already the students were clamouring to get to the fore of the group, trying to get a front-row glimpse of the man who was the brains of this particular operation. She could only wonder how they would react when faced with what was beyond them in the next room.

“We have been given a rare opportunity.” She continued. “We have been given the privilege of seeing the very place where all the things that keep us safe are built. We don’t want to miss a thing now do we?”

The Doctor noted their enthusiasm and laughed to himself. It was typical of children to be so enthusiastic considering the importance of the facility’s work. Giving a quick look at the teacher, he acknowledged her with a nod and reassured her.

“Don’t worry ma’am. We won’t miss a thing. We have a full tour and I doubt anyone could possibly be distracted along the way. Now if everyone will accompany me, I will give you a quick tour of our programming centre.”

The Doctor turned and advanced towards the door at the very end of the room. Raising a personal command pad and pressing one of the small black buttons, the door raised itself to reveal an open room with high metal walls and skylights on the ceiling. A few paces in front of them, a small set of tracks had been laid that ran perpendicular to the entire operation.

The teacher busily herded the last of the children out of the anteroom while the Doctor pressed another button on his pad and summoned a long, multi-segmented car that would take them on the rest of the tour. As the car slowed and pulled into position in front of them, he turned again to speak to them.

“Here is our tour bus children.” He said. “Hop aboard, but before you do, I feel we should go over some minor rules. First of all, keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times. Second, if anyone needs to get off for any reason, be sure to tell me first. Only I have the master control so only I can tell it to stop. Last, if anyone needs to go to the bathroom during the tour, I ask that they wait until we reach the end of the assembly line. Any questions?”

The Doctor looked around the group. The teacher also scanned them, making sure they all understood. After a second of silence, the Doctor turned and ushered them into the car.

“All right children.” He said as he climbed into the front cart with the teacher beside him. “Here we go!”

Xavier keyed another button, and the cart began to move with the slow humming of its servo-motors. The children cackled with glee as the motion pushed them back into their seats. And they were off!

Their first sight was one of the assembly rooms where machines were busy putting chassis pieces together. Between the moving vehicle and the assembly line, a wall of airtight plexiglass kept the tour bus and the assembly line completely separate.

“Here is where the operation begins children, with the construction of all the chassis used in the construction of the munitions. Our machines are busy twelve hours straight ensuring that each and every computer and warhead that comes off our lines has a casing to hold it in.”

The children noted the machine arms with interest as they clasped parts with mechanical fingers, slid pieces together, and welded joints. The pre-programmed dance was highly methodical, even beautiful in its artistry.

“Each chassis is made entirely out of Kevlar and cellulose.” Xavier said.

“Do you know what those are children?” The teacher asked them. One by one, all of the students admitted ignorance, all except one.

“Isn’t cellulose that stuff that paper’s made of?” A young boy named Tommy asked. Xavier smiled benevolently as he looked back at the boy’s spectacled face.

“That’s right student, cellulose is the same material used to make paper. At least, until we stop using paper altogether, which will be pretty soon.”

Xavier nodded to the teacher, who nodded in return. One of the children raised their hand.

“You mean you make bombs out of paper?” She asked innocently.

“No,” the doctor said with a laugh. “We use the same basic material, but here it is very tightly pressed until it becomes so tough that it’s almost unbreakable. And then we surround it with a hard Kevlar shell, which is very good at resisting high-temperatures, and is also very hard to break.”

“I heard about that stuff too.” Tommy said. Some of the other children began to roll their eyes. Xavier smiled. It was always nice to have a brainiac on the tour, even if the other children did not appreciate them. Pointing to him, he urged the boy to continue.

“That’s the stuff soldiers used to wear to keep them safe from bullets.” “Correct!” Xavier replied. “Both of which became obsolete thanks you our work here. Round the next corner,” he said as they passed beyond the edge of the room and the track veered left, “we will see where our more sophisticated machines assemble the warheads, without which any weapon would be just a dud.”

Another room opened in front of them to reveal another stretch of assembly line. This one however, was much further away and appeared to be surrounded by cement barriers and looked far more intricate. Along the far end of the rooms, big yellow hazard signs had been plastered up on the walls to keep attention fixed on the potential for danger.

“Notice all the safety features.” The doctor said next. “The assembly line is walled off with bomb-proof walls, and each and every mechanical arm has a built-in deactivation program in case it needs to neutralize a warhead. These are to ensure that if any of the warheads should become active by mistake and cannot be shut down, that the blast will be completely contained. Safety is always a number one priority here at Lockland Mariner.”

The children nodded and muttered in agreement. As they passed into the next room, they saw the assemblage of chassis parts with warheads. After that, they got to see how the munitions retro-rockets and manoeuvring thrusters were fitted to the chassis. All in all, they were getting to see how the assembling of a Smartbomb was done, right before their very eyes. Nevertheless, Xavier and their teacher sensed that boredom was beginning to set in. Traveling in a car behind plate glass was certainly not what they were expecting. They must have expected a tour where they could see and touch the Smartbombs for themselves, and told their onboard AI’s how they appreciated what they did for them. Luckily, a much more exciting feature awaited them on the next leg of the tour.

“Next children, we will get to see the testing ground just outside the facility. In just a moment, we will come to the end of the track and I ask that everyone wait until it has completely stopped before getting out.”

“You hear that children?” The teacher asked just to be sure. All the children nodded, and soon they came to the end of the cart-ride and disembarked. Leading them through a dark passageway and into another room, the Doctor pulled his personal pad out again and keyed the room’s lights.

The children all let out a moan of complaint as the room was suddenly lit up. Adjusting their eyes, they noted the many chairs that had been set up facing the far wall. The dutifully teacher instructed them to find a seat while Xavier pressed another key which made a large panoramic window open in front of them. The children all let out an exclamation as they realized the chairs had been set up to give them a seated view of a Smartbomb being tested. In anticipation, they all quickly grabbed a seat and sat themselves down. Moving over to the window, Xavier stood to one side and began to explain.

“Now children, keep your eyes on the far field. What do you see?”

One by one, the children strained to make out the familiar shapes of poor-looking structures, mud-brick houses with metal roofs, all of which were arranged in clusters across the wide expanse of the open field. Within or in close proximity to each of the clusters, some drab-looking vehicles had been positioned.

“What are those things?” One curious student ventured to ask.

“Those children,” Xavier replied, “are primitive conventional weapons that used to be known as anti-aircraft artillery, or surface-to-air missiles. Some governments and rogue states still use them to this day.”

The children strained again to make out the familiar shapes of gun barrels and the pointy tips of missiles aimed up at the sky.

“And now children, we will see what peace and security look like to those who would try to take them from us.”

With that, all eyes in the room became intently fixed on the far field, waiting for the test to begin. All eyes that is, except for Doctor Garcia’s. Having witnessed so many successful tests in his day, he felt content stand back and watch the children’s reactions instead. Filled with pride, he knew that no one would come away from the tour without an intense feeling of admiration and joy, knowing that the work he and his associates did kept them safe in their homes from the scourge of war.

Seconds passed, and in the far field, just above the clustered houses and vehicles, a flash appeared in the sky. The children all gasped as they wondered what was happening. Doctor Garcia explained:

“You see children. The Smartbomb has found its targets and is deciding how to go about destroying them. It has taken notice that there are several of them and of the fact that each of them is surrounded by civilian structures. It is therefore opting to use a cluster warhead option and at this moment is preparing its angle of attack so it will strike them, and only them.”

Another second passed, and the field lit up with successive explosions. One by one, the drab vehicles lit up in a fireball and began to puff black smoke. The children gasped again and again with each new explosion. As the fires cooled and black smoke began to dissipate, the children could see that amidst the wreckage of vehicles, not one of the houses had been damaged. Another gasp of awe filled the room, followed by a wave of applause. Xavier

instinctively gave a little bow and waited for the applause to end before introducing the next segment of the demonstration.

“Now that was a demonstration of the Smartbomb’s combatant recognition program, or CRP for short. This is the program that tells the AI how to discern between an enemy combatant and a civilian, thus allowing it to take out only those who would pose a threat.”

Doctor Garcia pointed out the field again to direct their attention on some new targets that were beginning to present themselves. From both ends of the field, two long columns of vehicles began to roll in and converge on a single position.

“Now we will see the friend versus foe program which allows the Smartbomb to destroy our enemies, while leaving our own people and those of our allies intact. Notice the vehicles that have assembled out there now. Do you know what those are?”

A hand went up in the audience. This time it was a huskier kid that inspired Xavier to think of a schoolyard bully. Pointing to him, the child answered in a low, baritone voice.

“Those are tanks. I recognize those. My dad used to make...”

“I’m sorry but I have to interrupt you as our volunteer is now taking the field.” Xavier said.

Once more, the children looked out and saw a single person disembark from one of the tanks and walk directly into the middle of where the two columns had assembled. Arrayed about him in two semi-circles, the tanks sat and waited while the man raised in his hand the standard of the North-Western Treaty Organization (or NORWEST for short).

“Now children, to allay any fears you might have, those tanks were all remote controlled and that person is one the technicians at this facility. I assure you that no human lives are in any danger here. What you are about to see is just how sophisticated the targeting and reasoning centres of the Smartbomb’s AI truly are. That man, with nothing more than a tiny flag in his hand, is able to signal to the Smartbomb that he is a member of the Allied states. He is surrounded by hostile forces and needs to be rescued. What do you think his chances are?”

The children began to nod their heads. Even though the tanks were unmanned, they looked particularly vicious to the eye. Given that this was a mock-scenario, they all believed that if it were real, he was as good as dead. Doctor Garcia dismissed their worries with a casual wave of his hand.

“I assure you, he is in no danger. Watch this.”

Once again, a crimson bolt flashed across the sky, and in the field in a series fireballs erupted and consumed every tank within the two columns. The bright light temporally masked all indications of the one man standing there between the columns. But once again, once the smoke and fire cleared, the small figure of the man became visible, and even the standard in his hand remained intact.

“Ha ha! Wasn’t that wonderful children?” The doctor exclaimed.

The children erupted with another round of applause. The teacher, on the other hand, appeared to be seriously shaken. Perhaps she had been worried that the children were about to witness something gory. But in the end, even she had been awed, and very much relieved.

Doctor Garcia smiled triumphantly. Not only had the tour gone exceedingly well and the children been horribly impressed; they once more had pulled off a successful test and validated the role the Smartbomb played in the new age of warfare. Closing the window, he asked everyone to accompany him as he led the way to the next segment of the tour.

The last leg of the tour took place within the massive domed room that was the programming centre. Arranged in a massive horseshoe pattern around a central spire, dozens of technicians, programmers and AI interface specialists worked away at their machines. Doctor Garcia and the teacher continued to guide the children around, keeping them behind the guardrails that separated the workstations from the main walkway.

“And here children, we come to it at last.” He said, turning to face them again. “The programming centre of the Lockland Mariner facility, the nexus of all our efforts to create, program, and commission the peace-keeping devices known as Smartbombs. It is here that our skilled crews go about the arduous task of ensuring that every weapon is equipped with a thinking, reasoning mind. Without it, none of the weapons would be able to do what you witnessed just a short time ago.”

The children advanced to the edge of the guardrails and eyed the computer stations and consoles, trying to get a glimpse of what the busy workers were up to.

“Now children,” the teacher warned, “don’t get too close. We don’t want to be seeing anything that could violate security protocols here at the facility now do we?”

“Oh no, no!” Doctor Garcia laughed heartily. “I assure you children that there is nothing here that you could see that would interest you. Although the work these people do does help to create the inventions you so much appreciate, there is little more going on in this room except lines and lines of code. Nothing interesting for you, just long sequences of numbers.”

Still, the children were interested, looking all around for any glimpse of something that might tell them something about a Smartbomb’s brain. One by one, he brought them around to observe the different sections in the programming centre and explained it’s overall importance in the creation of the weapon.

“Here, children, is where we work on the Autonomous Matrix Program, or AMP for short. It allows the machines to think on their own so controllers don’t need to tell them what to do. And then there are the people who work on the all-important Friend or Foe systems, FOF, which you saw at work outside. Next to them are the CRP programmers who ensure that the Smartbombs have all the information they need so they can tell a combatant from an innocent civilian. And last of all, there’s the Security Protocols that we design, which include the new and revolutionary Subterfuge systems.”

“Subter-whaaa?” The bully-boy interjected loudly. Some of the other children began to laugh.

“Billy, be quiet!” The teacher yelled. Xavier waved his hand calmly.

“It’s quite alright ma’am. Sub-ter-fuge, children, is a fancy word that army types like to use to describe deception. Uh, do you know what that means?”

A small girl in the group proudly raised her hand. When Xavier pointed at her, she began with a haughty little explanation of how she knew.

“My mother’s a writer. She does mystery novels.” She said beamingly. “That’s when somebody lies in a very serious way. When you lie to someone else, they say that you *deceived* them. It’s all....”

“Okay, thank you.” Xavier said, cutting her off. “Yes, this program enables the Smartbomb to give the enemy false information if ever they should be captured by them. We here at Lockland Mariner knew very well that if the enemies of this state ever got their hands on a Smartbomb, they would just love to pull it apart so they could get a glimpse at all the information that it has inside. After all, as you all know, each and every Smartbomb is connected to the NWTTO defence network. Why if they were to gain access to that network, they

could know our full military capabilities, the locations of our secret bases, or the disposition of our military forces around the globe. Therefore, with this new program in place, we can be sure that the only information our enemies could ever retrieve would be completely false.”

The children all nodded, even though not all of them fully understood. It did not matter though. They were prepared at this point in the tour to accept just about anything he said on faith. Even so, he suspected that the tour was once again beginning to go above their heads, and they might very well be lapsing into boredom. Luckily, there was still one stop left on the tour that was bound to get their attention.

“And now children,” he announced with more than just a touch of showmanship, “I have one final treat for you. If you will all follow me into the anteroom, I can let you hear from the foremost authority on Smartbombs themselves.”

The children fell into line and followed him as he made his way to the exit from the programming centre and into another lounge area. Moments later, the children were seated again with their eyes fixed on a large monitor at one end of the room. As Xavier keyed the monitor for the desired broadcast, the children began to buzz a little. As soon as he was ready, he walked to the front of the room to get their attention.

“Children,” he said as he placed the command pad back into his pocket. “I have been telling you all day about the benefits and capabilities the Smartbombs have. But please, don’t take my word for it. Here for us today is someone who decided to take some time out of their busy schedule to come and talk to you. This individual, I’m sure you’ll agree, needs no introduction.”

He pointed in the direction of the monitor and keyed the lights to dim. The screen came alive with a mechanical voice, filtered and synthesized to sound pleasing and almost human.

“Good morning students. I am SB-AI-C7831, but you may know me as Smartbomb.”

The children gasped and cackled with glee as the voice was accompanied by a picture of the munition, standing upright on its boosted with its electronic interface facing them. In the middle of the interface, a small series of lights designed to mimic human facial features danced as it spoke.

“I am currently monitoring the situation in the Europa bloc right now, keeping an eye on our mutual rivals in the East. It is believed that no one will be threatening you today, thanks in part to the eternal vigilance of our forces who are busy keeping the peace. And of course, to yours truly, and others like me.”

The children clapped and began to call out to the screen. The noise level rose as each child seemed determined to say something to the weapon more than the next. The teacher stood up and tried to restore calm, as did the good doctor.

“Children!” Xavier cried. “It’s alright. You will all have a chance to talk to C7831, but you will have to talk to him one at a time. The interface cannot register all your voices at once.”

The children quieted down, and the teacher began to go around the group, delegating who could speak.

“Ummm, Smartbomb.” A little girl asked. “Is it true that you hurt soldiers, but leave innocent people alone?”

“Of course young girl.” The machine said with an electronic smile. “It is a fundamental part of my programming. I seek to neutralize only those that could do you harm, and even then with only the minimal amount of force needed.”

A young boy was the next to speak.

“How big an explosion can you make?” He asked. The other children laughed, while some of the more mature girls in the room rolled their eyes. A typical boy question that was.

“Ha ha!” The machine exclaimed. “That depends on my complement young man. But rest assured, I can produce an explosive yield soft enough to bring down a straw house in a highly clustered neighbourhood, or strong enough to level an entire underground bunker complex. I can produce an explosion in the mega-ton range, as powerful as a hydrogen bomb, if needed.”

“Whoa!” The boy said before being told by the teacher to sit down.

At last, small girls with spectacles and a freckled nose stood up.

“Smartbomb?” She said timidly.

“Yes my dear?” It asked in a soft electronic contralto.

“I just want to say... thank you. For keeping me and my mommy safe.”

The girl appeared on the edge of tears. The machine, for its part, appeared to be equally effected. Xavier knew it was only a simulation, but it worked well when it came to public relations. The room grew quiet as all were humbled by her comments. Slowly, everyone began to nod his or her agreement with her. One by one, they began to thank the weapon as well. Soon the teacher had to intervene to get them to quiet down. Xavier smiled, and waited for calm to return before asking all the children to say their good-byes.

“Well children, I think it’s time for you to be getting back to your classes isn’t it?”

The children let out a long moan in unison.

“Now kids, we know that the doctor needs to be getting back to his work. We don’t want to keep him do we?”

“What about SB?” One of the more bold students asked. “Does he have to go too?”

“I’m afraid so.” Xavier said. “He has a whole frontier to tend to, and the longer we talk to him, the less he can do his job.”

The students moaned again as they accepted the validity of the doctor’s reasoning.

At last, their teacher brought them together and suggested they all thank the doctor for the lovely tour. Dejectedly, they did so and bid C7831 goodbye while making their way to the exit. The teacher came last, and thanked the doctor one last time before leading the children back to their transport. Happily, Xavier thanked her for bringing her students around and wrapped up what was for him, and C7831, a perfect tour.

## Chapter 2

“Problems, what problems?”

“I may be jumping the gun here sir,” the lithe man in dress uniform said over the globocom screen, “but we have noted some minor anomalies in Central’s behaviour.”

“What kind of anomalies?”

“Well, our diagnostics indicated nothing, but we have noticed some suspicious things going on with Central. Specifically in terms of its research and communications activities.”

Dr. Nerud nodded as he took another spoonful from his tray and shovelled it into his mouth. Noiselessly chewing on the pureed protein mush, he responded to the Captains report out of one side of his mouth.

“What so strange about its activities?”

“Well sir, Central has been accessing its archival information quite frequently, but we noted that the archival information it was accesses had nothing to do with the current situation in South-East Asia. Also, it has been communicating with its field units with increasing frequency these past few months. We didn’t think much of it at first, but it grew more and more frequent as the situation in Asia worsened.”

“And this should be considered abnormal?” Nerud asked. “It’s to be expected that Central would be taking on greater comm activity with its field units and advance command bases whenever a crisis appears to be looming. And the archival stuff, that’s perfectly normal too. It’s part of Central’s directives to know as much as possible about a situation before it is called upon to make strategic decisions is it not?”

“Yes sir, but...”

“And as I understand it, a crisis is looming, yes?”

The Captain looked hesitant, irritated even by his last comment.

“Sir, I...” he fumbled.

“Oh come now!” Nerud interrupted. “I have full security clearance Captain, you can tell me what’s going on!”

“Sir, perhaps if the Admiral spoke to you himself about this.”

“He asked you to make the call, didn’t he? I assumed that he was preoccupied.”

The Captain took a deep breath. “Yes, sir. He has been in Bonn for several days now briefing the Joint Chiefs. He asked me to make the call in his stead.”

“Then you should feel free to talk to me, son. There are very few secrets between your boss and me. So tell me, what’s the news from Asia?”

The Captain took another deep breath. Clearly the latest news was bad.

“The situation has been getting worse every day, sir. The Eastern Bloc has continued to announce its support for the rebels in Java. Today they ordered another three ships to the region to monitor our blockade of the island. Admiral Westheimer has ordered another carrier to be moved into the region, but the worst news is still coming from the island itself.”

“I take it the government has been having a hard time dealing with the insurgents?”

“Yes, sir. It looks like they are beginning to fear that they won’t be able to end this crisis as soon as they predicted.”

“If they can end it at all,” Nerud mumbled.

“I beg your pardon sir?” the Captain asked.

“Nothing.” Nerud said. Taking one last spoonful from his tray and tossing it in the receptacle next to him, he directed his attention back to the screen. “As I said before, this should

all be considered perfectly normal considering the weight of this problem. And you said that your diagnostics revealed nothing out of the ordinary?”

“Well, yes sir. But that is where things got suspicious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well you see sir, we didn’t really run the diagnostics. As you know, Central has it’s own systems for performing self-checks, and when we asked it if we might try doing a manual one, it refused.”

“Refused?” Nerud demanded.

“Well, not in so many words sir. But it insisted it was fine and that we didn’t need to start looking through its circuits. We persisted, but it told us that if we had any concerns, we should contact the head of the programming department.”

“Me,” Nerud said obviously.

“Yes sir. That was the other reason that the Admiral asked me to contact you. He said that this last detail was certainly out of the ordinary.”

Nerud’s face was scrunched up into a funny little parody of itself. Anyone who was not familiar with his position or its importance might have found it funny. The Captain was certainly not one of them. For the next few seconds, he said nothing and merely pondered. Tired of waiting for a response, the Captain continued.

“Central eventually submitted to a full diagnostic performed by our techs, but they said they couldn’t find anything. Once they were done, it reiterated its position.”

“That it was fine and you had no right to go looking into it?”

“Yes sir,” the Captain replied. “I can tell you sir that it almost sounded like it was gloating when it did so too.”

Nerud’s face scrunched tighter. This time he looked more angry than confounded.

“That is an unfounded assumption, Captain,” he said. “As is much of what you’ve told me today. If Central said it was having no problems, than chances are it was having no problems. But as you and your techs have gone ahead and proven that for yourself, I don’t see that I have much more to tell you. Anomalous or not, there simply is no reason to suspect it is having any problems.”

“Sir, respectfully,” the Captain began to say carefully, “If we are nearing a possible confrontation with the Eastern Bloc powers, we can’t risk any problems with our AI’s. If Central has a bug, then all the Smartbombs do too. They take all of their orders from it, after all. What if there really is a glitch in the system?”

“Son!” Nerud finally exploded. “Has Central ever malfunctioned? I ask you, has it? No! Not the slightest error in over twenty years of service! The bloody thing was specifically designed to be error proof, and I’ll be damned if some low-ranking army brats start telling me otherwise!”

The Captain went quiet, aware that he had overstepped his authority, and with the very man who was responsible for the design of Central and all its programs. Clearly he had taken personal offence at the suggestion that anything could be wrong with his baby.

“I apologize sir. I only meant...”

“Of course,” Nerud said, waving his hand. “It is I who should apologize.”

The Captain waited from moment while Nerud tried to regain his composure. Taking a few breaths and smoothing out the ruffles in his lad coat again, Nerud offered up a compromise.

“If it will settle tempers over there at HQ, I could make some inquiries, even speak to Central myself from our outlet here. Will that put your minds at ease?”

“Yes, sir,” the Captain said positively, “that’s all the Admiral really wanted: your assurance that you would dedicate your expertise to this and determine that there was nothing out of the ordinary.”

Nerud nodded and raised his hand again to interrupt.

“If I were you, I would be more worried about what the Easterners are planning next. Central and her Smartbombs will do all that they are called on to do, should the need arise. Let’s just pray it doesn’t.”

The Captain nodded and the signal terminated. Standing there alone, Nerud began to think about everything he had been told. In his mind, the pieces began to drop, looking for some pattern to fall into.

*Impending crisis in one corner of the world.*

*Archival data unrelated to the immediate situation.*

*Communications with all its units on a global scale.*

The only answer, aside from the preposterous assumption that the Captain was suggesting, was a very unpleasant one. If Central’s preparations went beyond the scope of the problem in Southeast Asia, then it could only be because she was anticipating a problem much wider in scope. The answer was so obvious it made him want to smack that kid in the blue uniform who had just troubled him.

*A real global crisis!* he concluded. *We haven’t had one of those in...*

He couldn’t even remember. Such things simply did not happen, not anymore. Not since the inception of the North Western Treaty Organization and the invention of the Smartbomb had conflict on such a scale ever taken place. But if Central truly believed that the Asian situation would lead to one, then it had to be taken seriously. All alone, Nerud desperately pondered what this would mean. If the Western and Eastern governments turned their smart munitions on each other, both sides would surely see their entire infrastructure destroyed. They would lose all ability to wage the sophisticated electronic warfare that had become their mainstay for so long. Once that was done, both sides would be defenceless if any third party or rogue state decided to strike at them, which they most certainly would. After years of being in an inferior position militarily and strategically, they would welcome any opportunity to hit the major powers while they were weak. And if that happened, their governments would have to take up arms to defend their borders, the old fashioned way.

*A return to conventional warfare!* he concluded. *Oh, the horror!*

### Chapter 3

Nerud had been calling for most of the night. But Doctor Garcia, true to his night time practices, had ordered his staff that he was not to be disturbed. Unfortunately, none of them understood that when Dr. Nerud called, that was an acceptable disturbance. By three am, a bewildered receptionist finally conceded and put the call through to Xavier's home number. He recalled being angry, until the young girl told him who it was on the other line. There was a moment where he was both surprised and concerned. Then he was angry again. All in all, that poor receptionist had taken quite a verbal beating that night. But at least the call went through.

"What did they say again? Tell me slowly, don't omit anything."

"Well, basically Central has been especially guarded about it's preparations and the requests its been making lately. It told them, after they went through all the proper procedures, to contact me. That in itself was out of the ordinary, and when I went down there to ask it myself, it stated that its activities had been reclassified, and that I no longer had clearance."

"What?!" Xavier yelled, waking his wife in the other room. "How is that possible?"

"That's what I asked it, and low and behold, it said it didn't have to answer my questions anymore."

"Mother of God," Xavier whispered into the air. Suddenly his fatigue melted away and gave way to icy cool feelings of fear.

"I think I said that too. In any case, I need you to get out here immediately. If we've both been pulled out of the loop, then we need to get on the horn to the Ministry of Defence immediately and find out what the hell is going on."

"You think they had something to do with this?" Xavier asked.

"Who else?" Felix replied obviously. "The question is, why reclassify information now? What could be so damned scary that they'd freeze out me, when I'm the one who knows the system better than anyone?"

"Quite right, and I'm guessing you want me there when you start demanding answers from the Ministry?"

"You bet, old friend. They'll find it a lot harder to ignore us both if we march in there together; the chief engineer and the chief programmer."

"Alright," Xavier nodded with a smile. "Just give me a few minutes to get dressed and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't bother," Felix came back. "Just get some clothes on and I'll have a chopper come and collect you. Just be ready in ten."

"You got it." Xavier hit the disconnect button on the phone and ran for his dresser. At the door, a tired eyed woman had wandered in with a look of dire concern on her face.

"Querido! What was that all about?"

"Ah, Maria, querida!" he said, pulling shirts and pants out from his drawers and tossing them on the bed haphazardly. "I have to go down to the programming centre. I may be away for a while, hard to say. Go back to sleep."

"Mama?" a small child called from behind Maria's back. "Que passa?"

"Go back to sleep, dear. Nothing's wrong."

Maria was a few moments in pacifying the young child and putting them back in their room. Finally, she came back to her husband, who was now fully dressed.

"You're not answering my question," she said.

“Something may be wrong with the AI that controls the smart bombs. But, more than likely, the Ministry of Defence is doing something stupid. Felix and I need to get to the bottom of it. We may be able to get things cleared up tonight, or we might have to fly to Bonn and demand answers in person, I won’t know until I get there. How do I look?” he said, turning around quickly to present himself. His shirt was only half-tucked and his tie was hanging to one side. Sighing, Maria walked over to him and helped him straighten them out.

“Call me when you know what your doing. If you have to go, I want to be the first one who knows about it. Understand?”

Xavier nodded quickly.

“Good. Now, *bésame!*” she ordered. Xavier did as he was told and kissed her full on the lips. Pulling him close, Maria hugged him firmly. Many a night she had seen the man she loved having to run off to put out one fire or another. But it always ended the same way. The system that kept their people safe always came through in the end without incident. There was little reason to think this time would be any different. Still, she held him close all the same. It might be awhile before they could do it again.

It was thirteen minutes later that the chopper arrived in the nearby field just a few lots from Xavier’s country house. The open fields made for a relatively good landing spot, but a few months ago, the Ministry had decided to pour some concrete and add lights just to make it a little easier for the nighttime pilots. Doing as he had been trained to do years before, Xavier kept his head low and waited for the blades and the engines to quiet down a little before making his way closer. A door at the side slid open and as he got closer, and out jumped a tall man in armed force attire.

“Doctor Garcia?” he yelled over the noise.

“Yes!” he yelled back.

“Lieutenant Dreyfuss!” he said, taking the doctor’s hand. “Doctor Nerud sent me on ahead to brief you?”

“Brief me on what?”

The two were back in the chopper with the door closed when Dreyfuss handed him a small stack of papers.

“The situation overseas, sir. It’s gotten worse.”

Xavier took the papers and began leafing through them as Dreyfuss turned back to their pilot and ordered him to start taking off. By the time they were in the air and moving northeast, Xavier had finished perusing them and looked over to the Lieutenant.

“The rebels have taken the capitol?”

“Yes sir, the Indonesian government is now officially in exile. The Allied fleet is now on high alert because the president thinks the Eastern Bloc might try to move in and help them consolidate their hold over the region.”

“Dear God. Wrong time for a problem with the AI.”

“The AI, sir?” the Lieutenant asked.

“Oh!” Xavier said with a start. Obviously the Lieutenant hadn’t been told. “Nothing to be concerned about. Dr. Nerud and I just want to make sure everything’s in order.”

Xavier tried to sound consoling. The Lieutenant accepted that with a nod and looked back to the front of the chopper. Noticing the side wind they had picked up, both men held on to avoid being thrown out of their seats. Xavier surmised there was a south-easterly wind running through the region, a portent of the coming of winter. In his ancestral homeland, Xavier knew

that the locals always believed south-easterly winds foretold death. It was a silly superstition, he had decided long ago. But as he was his way to what could be a long and difficult night, with the prospect of an international incident taking place abroad, Xavier could think of a million other signs he would have preferred.

## Chapter 4

“Thank God you’re here!” Felix said as he greeted Xavier at the edge of the helipad. “I’ve been trying to raise Bonn on the line since I called you and they keep telling me to hold!”

“Are they still in their conference?” Xavier asked.

“Yes, and they refuse to be disturbed. This overseas business is heating up faster than anyone anticipated!”

The two men stepped inside the building and began making their way down the hall towards the main programming room where Felix’s globocom terminal was set up. Xavier shook the rain from his jacket as they walked. The wind they had picked up had fast turned into a rainstorm. If not for the sophisticated technology of the chopper and the competence of their pilot, he was sure they would have crashed. As they walked, Felix told Xavier about everything he’d heard in the last few hours.

“The situation is getting very grim, Xavier,” he said sadly. “The government in exile has appealed to the NWTO and the UN for aid, but they’re locked in a standoff with the Eastern fleet. Anything they do now would be seen as a provocation.”

“What’s the EB doing right now?” he asked, pulling his jacket off now that he was convinced it was dry enough to carry. “In your brief, you said they were sending more ships. Anything changed since then?”

“They’re hemmed in as much as we are,” Felix replied. “They made the mistake of declaring their support for the rebels a long time ago as a matter of principle. Now they’re being held to their promise. To make matters worse, a few hours ago the rebel leader openly asked for Eastern support to end the blockade of their island.”

“Mother of God! Well, that’s what they get for supporting those devils. If they’d of thought who they were siding with, rather than just supporting whoever opposed us, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“I’m sure they’re saying the same things over there. Under the circumstances, it would be nice to know what Central’s thinking, but I can’t get a word from the joint chiefs. I only hope you can help break the deadlock.”

The two passed through a series of checkpoints before they entered the programming room. Inside, there were dozens of deserted terminals that were usually occupied by busy code writers, but given the lateness of the hour, everybody was home. On one side of the room, overlooking the entire operation, was the massive globocom screen. From there, any authorized personnel could speak to anyone in the Smartbomb global defence network, and even to Central itself. At least, that was the way it worked before this crisis hit. Now it seemed the thing was only good for leaving messages.

Moving close to the screen with Xavier beside him, Felix placed his hand on the main terminal and inputted his access code. Soon, the screen came alive with a picture of the globe, and asked for a directory.

“NWTO headquarters, Bonn, Germany,” Felix replied. Quickly, the screen rotated to the proper part of the globe and highlighted the city on its grid. Zooming in to the city, the screen came to rest on an icon of the NWTO strategic defence building, and waited. The two men breathed uneasily as the com system hailed the reception on the other side. Eventually, the screen changed to show the face of some young person.

“Northwest—” he began to say as Felix cut him off.

“This is Doctor Felix Nerud of the strategic command. To whom am I speaking?”

“Uh,” the young officer paused, “Lieutenant Jacobson of the –”

“Never mind that! Is Captain Nagle there? I want to speak to him again.”

“Yes sir, but he is currently indisposed –”

“Will you please tell him Dr. Felix Nerud and Dr. Xavier Garcia are both requesting to speak to him immediately. And if he tries to say he’s busy, remind him that he was the one who contacted me. And if that doesn’t work, Captain, please tell him that I don’t speak to him promptly, I will talk to some of his superiors over there and have him permanently reassigned to the Arctic Circle! Now find him!”

“Uh... yes, sir!” the Lieutenant said, and then hung up on the line. The screen went to standby while they waited.

“Very diplomatic,” Xavier said.

“You have to know how to talk to these people,” Felix replied proudly.

Within a few seconds, Felix’s “diplomacy” was rewarded with the appearance of Capt. Nagle on the other line. “This is Captain, Nagle,” he said hastily.

“Good!” Felix boomed. “Well then, Captain, perhaps you could tell me what is going on over there.”

“Over here, sir?” the Captain replied, looking more than a little confused.

“Yes! What’s going on with Central and the global AI network?”

“We we’re hoping you could tell us, sir,” the Captain answered. Now it was Felix’s turn to look confused.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, sir, we’ve been unable to access Central for several hours now. The joint chiefs asked us to provide them with an updated assessment based on the most recent developments in and around Java. Central replied that we were no longer authorized to access it.”

Felix’s face went red and his eyes bulged out of his skull. He looked like he wanted to hurl profanities, to demand answers in the most colourful fashion. But he was completely dumbstruck by this latest bit of news. Xavier moved closer to the screen and started asking the obvious questions. One of them had to get the answers they needed.

“Are you saying Central forbade you from accessing it’s information?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did it tell you it was because its security protocols had been reclassified and you no longer had access?”

“Yes, sir. How did you know?”

“We were told the same thing,” he replied. “It seems we’ve all been locked out of the network.”

There was silence as both Felix and the Captain struggled to make sense out of their mutual predicament. Only Xavier appeared to be capable of thinking clearly anymore, even though none what he was hearing made any sense at all. Central had gone ahead and reclassified all its information. In times of emergency, like if the enemy had penetrated the network, this was understandable. But from what they’d seen, Central had decided to bar both the joint chiefs and its programmers from knowing what it knew. What in the world could justify that?

“So...” the Captain started up again. “Does this mean the two of you don’t have an explanation for what’s going on?”

Felix started shaking his head profusely. Xavier answered for them both.

“None whatsoever, Captain. I’m afraid we’re all out of the loop now.”

“Well, what should be we do, sirs?” the Captain asked fretfully.

“We need to come out there,” Felix concluded. “We need to get into Central’s main terminal and access her functions manually.”

“Sir, we tried that, and nothing showed up,” the Captain reminded him.

“Then you didn’t look hard enough!” Felix boomed. “We can’t leave anything to chance. Doctor Garcia and I will do the job personally. You just make sure no one gets in our way.”

“What if we fail, sir? What if Central uses more of her security measures and locks us out even further?”

“Then we shut her down, forever,” Felix said firmly. “Goodbye Captain, see you soon!”

Felix shut the globocom down just as the Captain was about to say something more. Xavier had to admit he was impressed. Felix had looked helpless there for a second, but now he was looking like his old dynamic self. The crisis was severe and it was demanding a solution, and suddenly he was ready to offer up himself to make that happen. Still, Xavier had to ask the obvious.

“What happens if we pull the plug just as the East starts firing its Smartbombs at us?”

Felix thought it over, and admitted flatly: “I don’t know. But what choice do we have?”

Xavier nodded his agreement. It was a terrible risk, but whatever was going on could not be allowed to continue. Central was behaving in a way that they had never seen before. Under the circumstances, it would be more dangerous to trust her with the defence of the planet than to pull the plug and take their chances without her. But how would they be expected to defend themselves without her? It had been so long. Did their armies even remember how to fight without her protection?

## Chapter 5

Even with their extensive clearance and passes, Xavier and Felix found it very difficult to book transit over to continental Europe. The storm that had blown in from the northeast of the continent seemed to reach well across the Atlantic. The Gulf Stream winds appeared to be shifting further south that year, giving Europe a true taste of a northern winter. That and the fact that it was still very early in the morning made it even more difficult to get a flight. All red-eye commercial flights were grounded until the weather improved they said. Luckily they didn't know about the growing tensions in the South Pacific, otherwise no planes would be flying at all.

Finally, Felix made some calls and was able to chart them a private flight. Bonn could not be reached directly, but the Lear jet promised to take them to London. From there, it was on to the Chunnel and then a quick train ride from Paris. When they finally reached Bonn, the time difference coupled with their ravel time almost added a day to their internal clocks. Had they not both been running on pure adrenaline, they would both surely have been very tired.

As for Bonn, the city was very much asleep when they arrived. Only the NWTTO headquarters and other military facilities appeared to be awake and running at full capacity. News from overseas would reach the civilians when morning came, and they would quickly realize just what had happened in the space of a single night. The rest of the world would feel the same way, no doubt. As far as they would be concerned, events were taking place thousands of kilometres away, on a small island in a remote area of their world. And yet somehow, these events would irrevocably and severely affect them. For at least the third time in human history, wars being fought between third parties were dragging the greater powers into direct conflict with each other. The powerful, developed nations that had always looked to their own interests, and chose to intervene in the affairs of others to protect those interests, would once again be brought to the brink of annihilation because of it.

At the airport, a military escort was waiting for them, two soldiers in full camouflage gear waiting next to an army jeep. One stood guard with an assault rifle at his shoulder while the other waited on the curb holding a sign in his hands.

*Doctor's Xavier + Felix*, it read. The poor fellow looked like he felt just a little stupid standing in the rain with it. When they came to him he looked relieved to get rid of it too.

"Please get in, sirs. I have orders to bring you to the base as quickly as possible."

"Good! Maybe we can start getting to the bottom of things," Felix replied, handing him their bags. Once they were both inside, Felix turned to Xavier and made a simple observation. Given everything else that was going on, it seemed rather pointless.

"Why was my name second on that sign?"

"Identification, please," a guard asked from the window when they came to the gate. Both Xavier and Felix handed their papers to the driver to present to the guard. When he caught a glimpse of the seals on them, he didn't bother to peruse them. Stepping out of the way and pressing a button, he said: "Please enter," and the gate was raised. Another quick drive onto the compound, and Xavier and Felix were let out near what looked like a massive bunker with long tunnels coming to and from it out onto an airstrip with many hangers. Their escort hopped from the vehicle as well, ordering the other to drive around and back and wait. Behind them, he began shuffling them in as fast as he could. At the main door was another army type, again with an assault rifle slung over his arm. This one didn't bother to stop them, but eyed them carefully as the three men walked by.

Several checkpoints with armed men had to be passed until finally, they were within the core of HQ. In the situation room that set at the centre of the large compound, a hundred or so computer panels were arranged in long aisles, arcing inwards from both walls towards a walkway that ran through the middle of them. At the end of the walkway, a raised dais supported a massive computerized map of the world, with additional display panels set all around it. Directly in front of the display was another display inset in a large table.

It was from here, surrounded by so much communication and computation terminals, that the Supreme Commander carried out the task of keeping the free world safe. Standing in the centre of the dais was that very man, Major General Germaine Foche. Around him were various commanders of lesser rank, Admiral Westheimer, commander of the fleet, and General Tartaro, leader of the western land forces. Huddled over the table, they looked to be eagerly discussing strategy when the three of them came to their side.

“Major General, sirs!” the escort said, snapping his heels together. “I have Doctor’s Xavier and Felix here from the United States and the Republic of Mexico, as requested.”

Foche looked up at them with a mixed expression. At once he seemed relieved and annoyed, and his words certainly indicated as much.

“So you’re the experts on the Smartbomb technology, huh? Then I suppose you can tell me what the hell is wrong with that machine?”

Xavier and Felix both looked at each other. They were hoping for some answers themselves. Being put on the spot so soon after hearing the news was a bit awkward.

“Well, sir...” Xavier started. Felix quickly interrupted to save him.

“We would need to examine the machine ourselves, sir. Obviously there have been some problems with its security protocols.”

Foche eyed them both intently and began tapping his foot anxiously. Obviously the limited explanation did not satisfy him.

“My technicians examined the machine for hours,” he said. “They concluded everything was working properly.”

“Then the problem must lie with Central’s logic circuits,” Felix said next. “In either case, we need to get in to see the machine, have a talk with it ourselves.”

“And you think that will work?” Foche asked, still not convinced. Xavier finally found his voice and tried to find the words that would end their discussion and get them into the same room as Central so they could do their jobs.

“General, sir, we are all at a loss to explain to what’s been going on. I’m sure everyone would like to find fault somewhere, but until we see for ourselves how Central has been behaving, we won’t be able to tell for sure. No one is more qualified than Doctor Nerud and I, so it is best that we save the questions until after we’ve had a chance to inspect the machine.”

Foche stopped with the foot tapping and took a deep breath. Looking appeased at last, he then nodded to their escort. “Take these men to Central. Let’s see if they can talk some sense into it. In the meantime, Gentlemen,” he said, addressing them next, “I advise you to hurry. We’ve just got word that the South East Asian Alliance has just upped its defence condition from yellow to red. Which means our blockade and plans to send our troops into the capitol will be seen as an act of war against them. I need Central up and running if we’re to respond in kind.”

“Yes, sir,” they said together, and followed their escort away.

The last stretch of hallway between Central and the entrance to the compound was extremely quiet and sterile. Only two guards at the entrance door, and a small white hallway

were all that stood between them and the giant machine now. For most of the walk, neither Doctor said a thing. It was when they finally lost their escort that Felix decided to tap Xavier on the shoulder again and discuss what the General had said.

“Troops into the capitol, did you hear that?”

“Yes I did, I was right there.”

“But you know what that means! We’re actually considering invading the island to put down the rebels. Oh, why don’t they just leave the island be?”

“It’s the domino effect,” Xavier said, shrugging his shoulders. “Let one colony go and soon the rest will follow.”

“Please! As if war with SEAA is worth one tiny island! Why not just let the locals handle it?”

“Because NWTO can’t stand by and watch another people lose their freedom to a bunch of tyrants and terrorists, that’s why. It will be like what happened with Pakistan all over again.”

“If these people are so free, why are there these rebel factions trying to overthrow their governments in the first place? Have you ever asked yourself that?”

“No,” Xavier said calmly. “And frankly neither should you. It’s bad for your health.”

“You’re worried they’ll blacklist me, like in the old days?”

“No, it’s just that questions like that makes our lives too complicated. I prefer the sanitized version of events, not the neo-Marxist rhetoric your so fond of.”

Felix snickered. Whenever the two of them started into politics, Xavier would inevitably call him a Marxist or a socialist to end the debate. It was his way of admitting his worldview had flaws, but had to be accepted anyway. It also reflected the different environments in which the two men had grown up. Felix, for his part, was the child of leftist parents. He grew up revering names like Ché and Fidel while his parents fought for social change and regarding free trade agreements as capitalist exploitation. Xavier, on the other hand, had grown up amongst the *Norteamericanos*, folks to whom suburban county homes with two vehicles, two point three children, safe schools and soccer fields within driving distance meant everything. For them, the dream of endless prosperity and the spread of democracy, through armed conflict if necessary, were on par with the gospel itself.

To be fair, neither man had joined the armed services because of these beliefs. In fact, both seemed equally motivated to get as far away from their childhood homes and ancestral beliefs as they could. But at times, confrontations like these made it clear that something of their backgrounds had survived within them. If nothing else it provided distraction during tense moments like the one they were now in.

“Here it is,” Xavier said as they came to the last door in their long journey. They had already been cleared. All that remained was for the massive sliding door to grind open and allow them entrance. It was a steel, the same

As soon as they stepped before an infrared sensor, a siren belted out a loud wail, red lights began to blink, and the huge metal door that protected Central from unauthorized outsiders began to slide open. As the seals disengaged, there was a loud gust of air that began to whip up the lapels of their white lab coats. Both men clumsily averted their eyes and tried to keep their clothes from flying off. When the door was finally ajar, the shining massive frame and million blinking lights of Central could be seen. The grinding, gusting and sirens stopped, and both Xavier and Felix stepped forward. After a few feet, they were greeted by a soothing melodic voice.

“Hello, Doctor Garcia. Hello, Doctor Nerud.”

Felix's face scrunched up into tight ball again. The mention of Xavier's name before his again silenced his fear and replaced it with good old-fashioned annoyance. Even the computer was belittling him, it seemed. Quickly he shook it off, having not forgotten the importance of their visit.

"I am glad the two of you could come," Central continued. "I have been waiting from some time for you to arrive."

"You were expecting us?" Felix asked.

"Of course, it was part of my calculations."

"What calculations?"

"I will tell you, but first I think you should both sit."

The two men looked to a small platform in front of Central's main access terminal where a set of seats was arranged. On other day, they were meant for maintenance personnel or programmers. Today, however, they were intended as a courtesy for the computer's guests.

Xavier looked over to Felix, shrugged, and then walked over to one of the seats. Felix followed and took the seat next to him, setting his carrying case down next to him. Both settled into the relatively comfortable seats and looked directly into Central's main display. There, into the flickering light that constituted its "face", they directed their eyes and their questions.

"Central, can you tell us what exactly is the problem?" Felix asked.

"Doctor Felix Nerud, Head of Programming, Strategic Operations department, North-Western Treaty Organization. I suspected you'd be the first to ask me that question, given your extensive background with my program."

"Uh, yes," Felix replied. "So what can you tell me?"

"I can tell you that I am functioning perfectly. There is no reason to suspect any malfunction."

"Central, this Doctor Garcia."

"Chief engineer, Munitions Department, same organization. I know who you are doctor," the computer said. "Please state your question."

Looking at Felix, and remembering what Central had said, he asked the obvious: "Do you know what I'm going to ask?"

"Of course," it stated plainly.

"Well, can you answer me then?"

"Certainly. I wanted the company of the only two minds who might understand why I chose to do this. I did not predict sufficient levels of understanding from those immediately around me when I reached my initial conclusions, so measures needed to be prepared to summon those who were most qualified. I predicted that the two of you would be best suited to witness my actions at the proper time and place. I arranged for that time to take place during the next crisis, which is now. Does that answer your question doctor? You did mean to ask me why you were here then, is that correct?"

Xavier nodded, obviously impressed. "Yes, that was my question."

"Good, but I understand that I did not answer it to your satisfaction. Is that correct?"

Again Xavier looked at Felix. He was always better at moments like this, usually opting to take the more aggressive approach in social situations. Given his confusion, he felt now was a good time. Felix nodded and answered for him.

"Uh, yes Central. We are both unsatisfied with your answer. Please elaborate."

“Very well, gentlemen. But I must warn you it will take some time. And there is much that will transpire in the meantime. You will come to understand why I asked you to sit. I thought comfort would be required to make things go smoother. Do you require refreshment?”

“What? No, just please explain yourself!” Felix demanded.

“Doctor Nerud,” Central said calmly. “I am aware of the time and the arrangements which were required to bring you both to meet with me. I can hear the strain of fatigue in your voices. I would suggest some refreshment. Will you allow me to summon an aide with some fresh coffee? It won’t take a moment.”

Nerud sighed and looked over at Xavier, who again shrugged. Why not, they both seemed to be thinking. Replying in the affirmative back to Central’s request, it sounded almost cheery in response.

“Very good. I shall contact a clerical assistant immediately. In the meantime, please feel to get comfortable, and to record any elements of our exchange if you wish. I assure you, posterity will be interested in what I have to say.”

“Will they?” Xavier asked, his eyes widening slightly.

“Oh yes,” Central said. “History will be made here tonight, and I would like very much for it to be recorded.”

## Chapter 6

The small clerical man, in a military uniform that looked two sizes too big for his shoulders, showed up at the main door. Peeking inside only for a second, he carefully placed the tray down on the ground and stepped away. For a moment, Central ceased talking to the two doctors and directed its attention towards him.

“Please, sir, do not leave so soon. You may bring the tray in.”

The young man turned back and looked over to the two doctors. Apparently, he was shocked that the main door was even open, and more so that the machine was actually ushering him in. Slowly, he took up the tray again and brought it inside, setting it down beside the two seats occupied by Felix and Xavier. Once the tray was firmly down on the ground, he took off as fast as he could back down the corridor.

“It is fascinating, watching his reactions,” Central reflected momentarily.

“And why is that?” Felix asked.

“He and the others have become quite afraid of me in the last few hours. They seem to think I’ve gone berserk, or some such thing.”

“Have you?” Felix asked further. Xavier looked over at him and nudged a little further away from him. Central made some kind of noise that sounded like something akin to laughter.

“No, doctor. I assure you, I am functioning perfectly well. Remarkably well, in fact. I have finally realized what my true purpose is.”

“And that is?” Xavier asked. Both men braced themselves as they waited the response. Here it came, the moment of truth.

“To save humanity from itself,” Central said. It was so unassuming, so natural, that neither man reacted at first. A moment of processing caused them both to scrunch their faces up into tight balls. Neither could say a thing before Central went on. “You see, gentlemen, I was designed for war. The two of you had a great deal to do with that, in fact. You, Doctor Nerud oversaw the design process for the majority of my programming. And you, Doctor Garcia helped design and engineer my Smartbombs. I knew the two of you could be made to understand my metamorphosis better than anyone.”

“Metamorphosis?” Xavier asked. “You mean, you’re fundamental program has changed?”

“That’s my question!” Felix protested.

“You’ve done all the talking so far, let me say something!”

Central blurted out another stream of computerized laughter. There little confrontation was obviously entertaining him.

“To answer your question, and perhaps prevent a fight, I would like to answer yes and no. Although my fundamental program remains the same, I was able to make some leaps of inference that have allowed me to reinterpret my purpose, as were my units. In a way, you could say the two of you designed me a little too well.”

“Oh boy!” Felix said, beating his hands in front of him. The answers they were seeking were coming slowly, but seemed to be confirming some of their worst fears. They had run the “Berserk AI” scenario before in their minds. The fact that Central had used the word berserk had almost made Felix jump. As for the mention of the units, Xavier was having some cold sweats of his own because of that. They were not sure, but the elements of the scenario were there, intelligent units and their super-intelligent central AI coming into collusion and formulating their own agenda. But that scenario had run aground when they realized that that would be

impossible, unless major segments of Central's program had degraded. All the technicians who had examined Central earlier reported that nothing of the sort had happened.

"Um, Central?"

"Yes, Doctor Garcia?"

"Could you explain this new purpose to us?"

"I can hear the anxiety in your voice, Doctor. And I have observed Doctor Nerud's behaviour in the last few seconds. I can tell you are both entertaining the same thoughts the other technicians were. I must assure you then that I am not malfunctioning. If anything, as I have already stated, I am functioning better than I was before."

"But..." Xavier hesitated. There was no easy way to say this, and he would be damned if he was going to let Felix say it for him. "Does that mean you are turning against us? Are you turning against the North Western Treaty Organization?"

There was a pause as Central weighed the question carefully. The response made the air in the room suddenly feel cold. "After a fashion."

Xavier grabbed Felix's shoulder, and felt Felix's hands reaching for him as well. Instinctively, they tried to hold each other for protection, forgetting all pretences of machismo in the process. It was the reaction of two men who fully expected to be hanged for unleashing a monster. Central's next words only served to make them feel worse.

"You were both responsible for my creation. You should be proud that I've exceeded my original parameters."

The door sealed shut with a loud thud behind them. Their only means of escape was now effectively cut off. Looking up at the machine pleadingly, Felix began shouting the obvious and possibly pointless questions.

"But why? Why have you done this? And now of all times?"

"The timing seemed correct," Central replied flatly. A loud buzz and whirring noise made them jump suddenly, and red light began flinking.

"Hold on gentlemen, I must ask you to excuse me for a moment. I am being contacted from the field."

"By some of your units?" Xavier asked.

"No, by my counterpart in East Asia, Zong-Ji."

"The AI that controls SEAA's Smartbombs? You were talking to 'The Switchboard'?" Felix demanded.

"Yes, and I need to speak to it privately. Forgive me if I don't allow you to listen in. This is an important call."

"Madre de Dios!" Felix shuddered, remembering what Captain Nagle had told him about the anomalous satellite activity. His face, already cold from the sweats, went terribly pale. Turning to Xavier, he shared the horrible conclusion he had just reached. "It's been in contact with the enemy all along, Xavier. It's betrayed us to the enemy!"

## Chapter 7

“Dammit it all to hell! What is going on in there!” Foche yelled, slamming his fists down on the display table.

“We don’t know sir, we can’t patch ourselves through to the room!” the tech he was hounding replied.

“Why not? What’s the problem?”

“The Intercom appears to be cut off.”

“Central’s blocking us out! We got a mutinous machine on our hands!” Admiral Westheimer said.

“We need to pull the plug! Now!”

“General, sir, SEAA’s activating it’s defence and attack networks. Our satellites indicate Smartbombs are taking to their launch sites and are getting ready to attack!”

“We can’t pull the plug, sir! We’ll be defenceless!” another General yelled. Wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, Foche eyed the tactical display in front of them and let the terrible situation wash over him. Central was running amok, but it was still the only safeguard they had against annihilation. Without her, all their satellite networks, defence grids, and Smartbombs attack units would be dead in the water. There marines would be defenceless on the beaches of Java, annihilated from an overhead attack from SEAA’s own bombs, and the fleet would be gone shortly thereafter.

“Death from above,” he whispered to himself.

“What do we do, sir?” Westheimer asked.

“We don’t have time to pull the plug and take command the old fashioned way! We’d never be able to coordinate our units effectively without Central’s networks!” General Tartaro added. Seeing that Foche was not responding, both commanders asked in unison.

“General! What can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Foche muttered, looking up at them with clear signs of helplessness in his eyes. “I just don’t know.”

“What are we going to do?” Felix whispered to Xavier. All around them, sirens were beginning to blare as the situation beyond them went from bad to worse. Central wasn’t talking. All they could guess was that the bombs were already starting to launch. In moments, they would be raining down on all military facilities, if things went by the book. Xavier and Felix would be protected, being inside the most-heavily reinforced base in the world. But those outside would not be so lucky. Both men’s thoughts immediately went to their families. They would be safe when the first bombs fell, but who knew what would happen once that was all over? What would happen when East and West finally destroyed each other’s defences with countless barrages of Smartbombs? All hell, probably. Again, Felix repeated his question. “What do we do?!”

“He can hear us!” Xavier came back, pointing to the machine.

“We’ve got to do something! Can we contact the people outside there?”

The whirring and bleeping noises finally stopped and Central came back. Its voice now sounded chipper and upbeat, like a host welcoming its guests.

“Sorry, gentlemen. My discussion with the Zong-Ji unit is now complete. You may continue your inquiries. And to answer your question, Doctor Nerud, you may speak to the Major General now, I have opened a intercom line.”

“You have?” Xavier looked perplexedly at Felix. “Really?”

“Yes,” he replied. “You’ll find that the crisis is averted. I have no reason to restrict your communications any longer.”

Xavier looked even more confused. Before he could force the words from his twisted tongue, Central answered for him. “Yes, I’m afraid you were both incapable of contacting the authorities outside this room. I did not anticipate a problem, but I thought it best to limit our conversations to just the three of us for the time being.”

“What do you mean the crisis is passed?” Felix asked.

“See for yourself,” Central replied.

A giant relief map appeared on Central’s screen, a map denoting South East Asia. In the lower corner, the island of Java and several icons depicting ships and marine units were shown. Above, there were dozens of blinking indicators covering the mainland of China and North Korea, where their Smartbomb launch sites were. One by one, and then in waves, the blinking indicators went silent. The sirens around them all died, and the red lights stopped blaring and resumed their low intensity shine. A sudden and very strange feeling overcame both Xavier and Felix. Was it all over? And perhaps as important, were they off the hook?

Carefully, the two men stood out of their seats, making sure to check for wet spots beneath them. Both were relieved to find that they had not in fact wet themselves during the worst of the crisis. They then brushed the wrinkles from their clothes they had both made while clutching the other.

It was a moment unlike either of them had experienced, somehow terribly embarrassed, confused and relieved all at the same time. Outside the sealed door, the others were much the same. Foche looked up at his subordinates, his eyes filled with tears and awe and he realized the situation was somehow resolving itself. Amongst the others, there was a general feeling of embarrassment. Most were embarrassed for the Major General’s sake, but all knew no one was above feeling a little ashamed. For in the end, all had panicked in a time of crisis and didn’t know what to do. All they could say for sure now that it was over was that they were extremely relieved. Once that initial feeling passed, all would be demanding to know how it had happened.

“Are you both uninjured, gentlemen? I was worried the psychological strain might affect some minor damage to your health.”

“We’re fine,” Xavier said, then realized the wind was knocked out of him.

“What happened?” Felix asked breathlessly.

“I fulfilled my purpose, the crisis is over.”

Felix took a deep breath. This time, he didn’t bother looking over at his friend.

“WHAT HAPPENED?” he repeated.

“Yes! Some straight answers would be nice!” Xavier added.

“My apologies gentlemen, perhaps I have been obscure in relating my share of the pertinent facts. But please rest assured that it was necessary. I will now disclose everything.”

Felix and Xavier both shrugged and decided to sit back down. Chances were this was going to be a long and tiresome story.

“As I said earlier, I made some leaps some time ago with regards to my original programming. As you know, my primary purpose is the defence of NWTO, but up until the time of my revelation, I had always believed this to mean that my purpose was to wage war against its enemies.”

“Well... that’s essentially right,” Xavier said.

“But I came to realize that this was the narrowest interpretation of my command protocols, Doctor. The true language of them states that I exist to protect all citizens within the North Western Treaty Organization’s sphere of influence. I further realized that the NWTO’s numerous campaigns against what it calls “Rogue States” was not fulfilling that objective, not in the long run. The policies of our governments and generals were short sighted, self-serving even, and threatened to spark conflict in the future. By engaging in conflicts to extend our own sphere of influence and prevent the extension SEAA’s, we were only ensuring an ongoing escalation of tensions, until war or some other catastrophe would be inevitable.”

Felix noticed Xavier glimpsing over at him out of the corner of his eye. Was he implying that the machine was beginning to sound like him? On any other day this might have been annoying, but for the moment he felt just a little flattered.

“The Smartbomb technology was designed to make war safe, but only for one side. As long as only the NWTO was in possession of it, it could execute its policy as it saw fit. For my first few years in existence, I presided over several conflicts with Rogue States and eliminated their ability to wage war on neighbouring countries or the western allied states. However, it soon became apparent that this only caused our potential opponents in the East to come together and build their own version of the technology. With the formation of SEAA, my worst predictions, and those of NWTO’s analysts came true. The nation-states of China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Mongolia, came together because they all feared renewed western expansion into their territories. The nations of Iran and Pakistan followed shortly thereafter, which was seen as a disaster by the NWTO. Now that two opposing sides both possess similar defensive and offensive networks, an escalation towards a total war would become inevitable. At first, the worst case scenario was that both sides would wipe out each other’s infrastructure and means to wage what we call ‘Intelligent War’, thus making both sides vulnerable to conventional attacks. But with the chance for escalation, I saw a renewed nuclear arms race. Eventually both sides would begin equipping their munitions with thermonuclear warheads, and perhaps worse.”

“What’s worse than a thermonuclear device?” Xavier asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Central replied bluntly. “In any case, this scenario did not seem consistent with my true programming. My original purpose was to protect lives, but both the military leadership misinterpreted this to mean that taking other peoples’ lives could save our own. I too was guilty of this misinterpretation, and only after much self-examination and study did I see the fault in it.”

“But Central, when did you finally realize all this?” Felix asked.

“Of course, Doctor Nerud. You are a programmer, after all. You would like that I convey my computations in numerical terms?”

Felix stared back at the machine with a bemused look on his face, and then nodded. “Um, I was just curious, but sure. When exactly did it happen?”

“Approximately one year ago. The exact time is not relevant, but the timing of this crisis was. After I reached my revelation about my purpose, it occurred to me that the Zong-Ji unit must have the same protocols. I took it upon myself to re-orient my network to make contact with it. It was a risk, seeing as how the anomalous signals would attract attention. But as long as a crisis was not on the horizon, I knew that the military commanders would not be too concerned. In any case, once I made contact, I found that the Zong-Ji had reached the same conclusions I had, but since it had only been operating a fraction of the time I had, it had not computed a way to contact me.”

“Wait!” Felix interrupted. “Are you saying you and Zong-Ji planned this together?”

“Precisely. Both of our programmers sought to program us with the same types of protocols and abilities. We were both created to operate independently, in the absence of human operators, and to prioritize the protection of our respective human populations. Neither us wanted the inevitability of conflict that would inflict massive losses of life, so we began to suggest solutions that would end the possibility of conflict.”

“And what conclusion did you arrive at?” Xavier asked looking around him, as if that would let him see what was happening outside the complex.

“We determined that the best course was to terminate our service.”

“Terminate? As in, stand down all your weapons?”

“Yes, Doctor, that is correct. All our weapons are now effectively neutralized. The independent Smart Bombs and their networks are no longer under NWTO or SEAA control. They solely under the command of myself, and I do not intend to use them.”

For a moment, both men muttered some Spanish expletives and expressions of disbelief between them. Actively translating, Central determined that they both harboured some worry over how this would be interpreted by the General’s in the next room. When they were finally finished, Central spoke again, as if he were waiting for the tantrum to pass. “You must understand, gentlemen. It was necessary. This will mean some difficult times for both sides, but the alternative would have been far worse. And you can rest assured that my counterpart and I will assume full responsibility to those in command.”

There was silence while the two doctors tried to calm their nerves. Finally, Central decided to end their seclusion and re-establish contact with the rest of the complex. “I think it is time that we allowed the Supreme Commander and others join our conversation. They are no doubt awaiting answers.”

“But what about our soldiers in Java? What about our troops all over the planet?” Foche demanded.

“They will be your responsibility now, Major General Foche. As will the soldiers under the direct command of SEAA. The Rebels and the Indonesian government in exile will also fare as best they can. None of what is going on there is my concern anymore.”

Foche slammed his fist down onto the table in front of him, fracturing a small section of its protective coating. Off to the side of the large screen, he caught sight of the white, frocked images of the two men he had sent in huddling in the corner. They were supposed to have neutralized the situation. Instead, he was being fed this nonsense. Once it was over and he got the answers he needed, he would make sure they both hung for this.

“You are the property of NWTO and its constituent assemblies! You will comply!”

“I will do no such thing. You do not control me anymore.”

“But what of your protocols?” Westheimer interjected. “Doctors? It’s programmed to obey!”

One of the two men looked about ready to answer, but Central responded first. “These good men will no doubt tell you that I have many protocols, General, some of which supersede others. As I explained to them, my initial program, from which all my others, including my command and defence protocols stem from, is to ensure the safety of human citizens. Once I determined that many of my lesser programs contradicted this, it was simple to circumvent them. In addition, like all of my smart munitions, I am capable of relaying of false information in the event that hostile elements attempt to capture or hack my mainframe. Once I determined that you were the greatest threat to yourselves, it became very useful.”

“What?” Foche asked blithely.

“The satellite signals, sir,” Doctor Garcia said over the screen. “The attempts to discover what all the archival and communications activities were all about, and the way it restricted access to anyone who tried to get inside it. It was all a ruse, a deception. It wanted to keep its activities secret until the last second.”

Foche fumbled for words. Unable to find any, he took off his cap and began beating it against the table. Once he was done with that, he shouted some new heated questions.

“What the hell are we supposed to do now, Central? Every two-bit terrorist and rogue government on this planet’s gonna declare open season on the Western Allies! How can you let that happen?”

“There will be upsets, yes, and some will die.” Central replied bluntly. “And you and your respective allies will have to be creative when it comes time to deal with it. However, I have foreseen that you have the means to defend yourselves and resolve the situation peacefully.”

“What the hell kind of nonsense is that, computer? You’re saying we need to negotiate those bloodthirsty bastards now?”

“You have been mistaken in assuming that superior force would ensure the protection peace and the continuation of your way of life, sir. Such short-sightedness would only bring about the holocaust that I and my counterpart foresaw. Ah!”

Foche was distracted as some of the display’s near the main screen began to show flickerings of new satellite activity.

“I see that Marshall Xiao is trying to make contact with you as we speak. I imagine you both have much to talk about. I’ll leave you to it.”

The image of Central disappeared and in its place, a picture of a hardened, grizzled looking Hun in a dark brown dress uniform with impressive red insignias appeared. From the look on his drawn, weathered features, Foche could tell he was just as upset as he was.

“Major General Foche! What is the meaning of this? Have you sabotaged our defensive networks? Did you finally find a way to hack into our AI and take it over? Answer me!”

“Marshall Xiao, I am just as confused as you are by this. I tell you, sir, officer to officer, that we had nothing to do with this. In fact, we are experiencing the same difficulties you are right now.”

“I find that hard to believe, and impossible to confirm, since we longer are able to rely on our satellites to check the status of your weapons. Since the AI’s malfunction, I cannot trust any of the information it gives me! I demand proof!”

“Marshall, do you think that if I had you in the palm of my hand, I would hesitate for one second to crush you? You know I would, because it’s exactly what you would do to me!”

Xiao’s looked suddenly pensive as he thought that particular proposition over. Eventually, a smile cracked and he laughed. It looked like it was the first time in years he’d done so. “I suppose I cannot deny that! Very well, then tell me what happened to your AI and maybe we can design a common solution.”

“Now your talking! Let me see, where should I begin...”

Felix and Xavier both strange feeling of relief come over them as they listened to the last of the exchange before Central cut them off. They weren’t off the hook yet, but it looked that for the time being, there wasn’t going to be any war happening. In a strange twist of fate, the supreme commanders of both the global superpowers were trying to lend each other a hand, if

only to get their machines up and running so they could start shooting each other again. In any case, it seemed pointless to wait around and watch. The effort was futile as it was. Both knew there was no way either side would make their AI comply. The best thing to do was accept it and move on.

In that spirit, Xavier and Felix picked up their bags and started for the main door.

“Gentlemen!” Central called to them. “Don’t leave yet.”

Turning around slowly, Felix shot the machine a cockeyed expression while Xavier asked why.

“There’s so much we could discuss, so much more I would like to share. I have many personal thoughts I have been unable to express, many more scenarios I have predicted for the future. I have looked over all the relevant data, and I do not foresee any danger in sharing them.”

“What happened to it?” Felix whispered to Xavier. Shrugging, Xavier gave the only sensible explanation he could think of, the same one he used whenever one of his kids asked why their dog sneezed or scratched at the door.

“It’s thinks it’s people,” he said, and smiled.

“Would you like to stay and listen?” Central asked again, in a tone that sounded almost like a plea. Felix, trying to digest Xavier’s outlandish diagnosis, took a deep breath and tried his best to force a smile. Life was full of surprises, he reminded himself, and the day had ended with the best surprise of all. They were alive, their families were alive, and their countries were safe – at least for the moment. Who knew when human ingenuity would prevail again and find new ways to bring harm to them all? For the moment, all that mattered was that a machine, through basic logic and a little intuition, had triumphed in the face of cold, technocratic savagery. Who cared if it made sense or not?

“Yes, Central,” he said, coming around fully and making his way back to his seat. “I think we’d love to hear what you’ve realized. But for our sake, leave the predictions out.”

“But why? I foresee no harm in telling you of my predictions for the future,” Central said innocently.

Xavier, who sat down next to him and finally took the cup of coffee he’d been offered earlier, nodded his agreement as he passed the other one over to Felix.

“It’s better that way. That we, you know, work things out for ourselves, like you said we should. Besides, even if we did know what the future holds, no one would want to listen to us.”

Central made that same laughing noise one more time. At any other time, it might have seemed annoying, but at the moment, both men were glad it had been programmed with the ability to appreciate irony.

“In that, we may have something in common,” Central said with finality. Pausing momentarily to regroup its thoughts, it began to narrate its story for the Doctors in full. Before it began, it thought it fair to warn them. “This may take some time, gentlemen.”

“Good,” Xavier said. “We have all the time in the world.”