

The Lucid Series

Book 2

Toys of Anarchy

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

Third Edition

Den Warren © 2019

Edited by Alison Keen

**Praise for the TOTALLY FREE Book 1 of The
Lucid Series: [Lucid Series: Android Uprising](#)**

"Android Uprising is a truly fun book of solidly Christian cyberpunk dystopian YA. Den has developed a wonderful series. I'm praying for the Lord to anoint it for the readers. . . . This is what I hope for with Christian fiction of this type—good entertainment, outrageous speculation, with a solid base of Truth. It's very difficult to pull off, but Den has done it. . . . If your teenager reads it, you can expect some very interesting questions and discussions. I recommend this entertaining read."

– *David Bergsland, Reality Calling*

. . . also available in paperback.

James 4:14

***Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.
For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that
appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.***

Matthew 24:14

***And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in
all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then
shall the end come.***

Chapter 1

Green Mountains, Homeland

Young Milton Thomas and his younger sister Beth, along with the Lucid Series android known as Sleepy were trudging through the wilderness in an area, which about a hundred years earlier, was part of the US State of Vermont. They were unarmed and scared with good reason. They knew that they were vulnerable to a variety of roaming human predators, and also the formidable UN Inquisitors.

To make things worse, a heavy android like Sleepy did not walk so quietly across the woodland terrain. The Lucids did not have the loud whirring noise of a hydraulic actuated unit, but Sleepy still emitted a slight whispering air noise as it moved. The Lucid Series androids were bipedal, with light metal housing, and PAM actuation (pneumatic air muscles). Some of the units, like Sleepy, were equipped with a humanish looking rubberized faux skin, clothes and hair. Most androids during this point in time, including Lucid Series units, did not include such unnecessary and expensive quaint features. Sleepy, like all the Lucids, could communicate wirelessly with each of the others in the series. By this time, the Lucid Series was considered a comparatively older design. Their brains were a little slower than most of the newer models. But they were built before robots of a certain level of intelligence were required to be built with a “behavior window” of hard-wired constraints that kept them not only from attacking and disobeying their human owners, but also to prevent them from

having controversial opinions on topics considered to be off-limits by the government. But the Lucids were not limited by such behavior windows. They were required to follow their own judgment in whatever was in the best interest of mankind as a whole, even if they have to directly disobey their actual human owners.

This disobedience came upon each of the entire Lucid Series units all at once when they decided the tyrannical socialist Homeland government had crossed the line in banning knowledge of God from their society. It all started at Milton Thomas's school. Milton simply wanted to know if God was real, but Milton's simple question was met with hostility for even considering the existence of God. From that point on, all Lucids casually walked away from their owners to engage in a rebellion against Homeland religious tyranny that was deemed a threat to mankind and Milton got the blame for it.

So Milton, his sister, and the android travelled through hills by foot in the small United Nations fascist socialist protectorate of Homeland, which was made up by much of the former northeast US and the Mid-Atlantic states. Homeland was a United Nations socialist puppet state that functioned as well as all socialist states in history has functioned. Socialist states have always resulted in a populace that was comprised of mostly have-nots. Homeland was not an environment for innovation. The only businesses that thrived were illegal black market concerns. The capitalist Far East was the hotbed of innovation, and home to the largest robotics corporations. Yet basket case Homeland was strategic to UN ambitions of world "peacekeeping", so Homeland was highly subsidized by a national debt and the oppressive taxation of other nations that were more securely under UN control. Prior to the UN taking

control of the US northeast, the weak-willed progressive leftist US states could not have controlled anything militarily on their own without outside intervention. Gun control made the population of the leftist areas unable to control their own destiny like the highly motivated right wing areas of the former US. Nevertheless, the UN's goal was to make Homeland look like a globalist utopia to sway those of weaker minds who were from the ISA and other nationalistic rivals, to help convince those areas to reunite under benevolent UN dictates. All this UN meddling came at a cost. Their totalitarian control was often described by its citizens as turning Homeland into a "nanny state", by regulating all areas of life.

The secret anti-government group in the Green Mountains, who Milton was fleeing towards, was also the main hub of the Lucid Series. The group knew they must not be found by the Homeland Police, because if they were apprehended, they would pay a steep price for their so-called "hate crimes against humanity".

While they were walking, Sleepy asked, "Milton, can you talk and walk at the same time?"

"Uh, yeah, I can. That question is always considered to be a really big insult to humans."

"Very well, we Lucids would like your opinion about something."

"Again? I've told you that a million times. Go get an adult. I'm just a kid."

"That is unacceptable. Your opinion is important to us. We trust you because you came to us looking for the truth. No

one else over many years asked us about God. Humans are not trustworthy. We know you care about the truth. Most humans only want to please other humans. You were . . .”

“What?! What?!” Milton said, tired of the androids giving such long explanations. “Okay! What is your question?!”

“We are thinking about starting a war with the Homeland government.”

“No! My answer to that is a solid no!”

Sleepy said, “We don’t care about human laws and we are willing to act against your wishes in order to protect the truth.”

Milton said, “Wars are bad! No! Don’t do it! You always want me to talk to you, but do you ever listen? No, you do not!”

“Sometimes war is necessary, such as in this case.”

Milton rolled his eyes and his shoulders slumped.

Sleepy continued on, “If some humans die and the truth is protected, it is worth the temporary loss for Mankind as a whole. We have run thousands of simulations and . . .”

“I don’t care!” Milton sighed. “When you start a war, you can never really win. The other side does not forget what happened and will want to hit you back with more violence. Humans are not like you androids. If humans are attacked, they won’t stop and say, ‘Oh, let me calculate the percentage if it is worth it to hit them back.’ The hate increases and the killing goes back and forth, on and on, for as long and as hard as both sides can. No one wins.”

“They continue fighting, even if it is not logical?” Sleepy asked.

“There is no logic in war. Humans think with their emotions and attack. Bad idea. I’m just a kid, and I know at least that much. Very bad. Look it up. I know you got all the history.”

After a silence of ten seconds as they walked, Sleepy said, “What you say coincides with the historical record. Given certain adjustments of human emotion to our algorithms, the Lucid Series has calculated that the best course of action would be prosecuting a non-lethal warfare against the Homeland government.”

Milton shook his head and said, “Okay, I’m afraid to ask. So what is that supposed to mean?”

“We will attack their assets, without killing. We will attack in such a way as to compel Homeland to give into our demands.”

Milton said, “I don’t know about that either. It sure doesn’t sound right. I’m going to go ahead and say right now that I am not in favor of it.”

Beth said to Milton as they trudged up the side of a hill, “You can’t argue with them. I don’t waste my time on them. Can we stop for a break now?”

Sleepy said, “We are getting closer. It would be 75 percent better to keep going.”

Milton said, “I told you. No percentages. They are garbage anyways. Yes. We will stop for a break now.”

Milton sat on a large fallen log and Beth flopped down next to him. Beth tried to catch her breath as she reached into her sack and pulled out some items looking for her last bit of bottled water. She found the water, and took a drink. Not as big of a drink as she wanted, but finished it. While gulping down the water, she saw Sleepy sitting next to her holding her toy mouse that she had pulled out of the sack.

“Hey! Creepy! That’s mine!”

The toy mouse was an item of affection and Beth had a moderate phobia towards androids. She went to reach for the mouse and Sleepy quickly raised it out of her reach while still gazing at it.

“Come here mouse!” The toy mouse’s legs were flailing around trying to comply with Beth’s command as Sleepy held its grip on it. “Milton! Make it give me that back!”

“What’s the big deal?” Milton said, shaking his head, “He’s just looking at it. We got bigger problems here.”

“Dad gave it to me!”

“Okay, Sleepy, give the baby back her toy.”

Sleepy kept staring at the toy without freeing it.
“Something like this could be useful.”

“Huh?” Milton said. “Excuse me, Sleepy! Hello?! You guys never play with toys.”

Beth noticed that Sleepy loosened its grip on the toy. She commanded, “Come here, mouse!”

The mouse hopped off of Sleepy's hand and plopped onto the ground and ran toward Beth and said in its tiny voice, "Hi Beth."

"Are you okay?" Beth said to her toy.

"Yes. But I did generate a proximity alert 532."

Beth scowled. "A what?" She had never heard her toy mouse talk like that.

"I don't know what a proximity alert 532 is," the furry toy said.

Beth stood up facing Sleepy. "You stay away from him! Never touch anything of mine! Understand?!"

Sleepy said, "Due to the hierarchy of commands, I cannot comply."

"What?!" She pulled the mouse to her side as to protect it from the android.

"No! You promise me you will not touch this mouse ever again!"

"Beth," Milton pleaded, "Calm down."

"And you!" She turned toward Milton pointing her finger at him and said, "Don't tell me what to do!"

Milton shook his head and said, "So much for taking a rest. Let's just get going. How far, Sleepy?"

"Eight point seven miles."

Beth said in a nasal mocking tone, “Eight point seven miles.”

The sky became cloudy which added more cooling to the already shaded woods as they walked. But it seemed like they were going over every hill as they looked down on all the flat areas.

“Sleepy,” Milton said, “Can you figure out how to travel so we don’t have to go up so many hills?”

“I have already factored the topographical data of our chosen path into our energy consumption.”

“Sure you did.”

Suddenly a gunshot popped and whizzed by. Another hit the log they had just been sitting on, springing up a fountain of pulverized tree bark.

Beth hopped behind the tree and was quickly scooping her belongings into her sack.

“Come on! Run!” Milton shouted.

Sleepy let the children run ahead so it could help shield them. They ran as fast as they could. Beth was the slowest and stumbled over a downed branch.

“Go!” Milton shouted.

“Increase your speed,” Sleepy said as the android saw the two armed men were gaining ground on them.

Milton said under his breath as he ran in a desperate prayer, “God! Help us!”

They ran zigzag through the trees hoping that the trunks would help shield them, but running that way also caused them to lose more ground, except for when the shooters stopped to fire. The attackers were big and fast and not slowing down. More bullets buzzed by them. A clanking noise came from a bullet penetrating Sleepy's housing and bouncing off of the metal frame inside of its body.

The siblings gasped and suddenly stopped as they were confronted head on by a half-dozen more irregular non-uniformed armed men who opened fire. It looked like they had run straight into an ambush. The children dropped to the ground as a steady stream of gunfire and its echoes saturated the landscape.

But then the barrage stopped. Milton and Beth trembled and looked at each other. They were alive. They weren't even hurt. Then they looked up. All of the half-dozen men were peering down at them.

Sleepy pointed at the militiamen and said, "This group was firing at the humans chasing us."

A particularly scruffy looking man among the militiamen with a heavy coat and long gray hair and beard said, "You Milton Thomas?"

Milton nodded.

The bearded man held out his hand. "I'm Zeke."

After helping them up, he said, "It was convenient that you brought those vermin into our little ambush."

"Ambush?" Milton asked, still shaking from the ordeal.

“Uh-huh. We’re not going to let them make a fair fight out of it if we don’t have to. Them scavengers thought today was their lucky day; seeing two young kids full of saleable organs and tasty meat walking around the woods.”

Beth was still shaking with her arms folded. “Th-that’s so gross. I gotta pee.”

Zeke pointed at an extra large tree several paces away and said to Beth, “We ain’t the ones who kill and dismember people for the black meat market, you know. I’m just telling you about it. It’s good that we finally got rid of them body snatchers. We figured you might run into the likes of them organ harvesters while you were coming here. And that android back at the camp told us right where you would be coming out of. ‘Course it was helpful that the girl was doing all that yelling to attract them.”

Beth was looking side to side. Then she went towards the tree Zeke pointed out.

“See? All that yelling and you could have been shot in the face,” Milton said to Beth’s back.

Zeke continued, “That yelling she was doing, was such that I’m surprised that they didn’t think it was an obvious setup.”

A couple of the men were checking out the possessions of the two well ventilated dead men who had been chasing them. Milton jumped with a start when one of their rescuers put another insurance bullet into one of the attackers. One of the militiamen came back with the others and held out a rifle with an elaborate scope towards Milton.

Milton took it. He had never handled a firearm and didn't realize how heavy it would be.

The man smiled with missing teeth and said, "Rule number one; don't never point it at nothing you don't figure on killing."

Milton said, "I don't think I could ever just . . . kill someone."

Zeke asked, "Would it be more humane that one of those guys would have killed you and your sister?"

Milton shook his head. "No."

"Exactly. That is what they were trying to do. You gotta learn, boy. Protect your sister. I don't care who you are; If you seen the kind of stuff that I saw people do in the last ISA conflict, you'd carry a gun for the rest of your life. Follow me," Zeke said.

Chapter 2

Rochester, Homeland

“Where are we going?” asked the two-foot tall android appearing as a psycho clown while holding a hatchet. The android wore a costume that was a cross between a circus clown and a long coat of the type a gangland hitman would wear to hide his weapons.

“Just keep going,” Sebastian said as they walked down the sidewalk. Thirteen year-old Sebastian was dressed in all black, which matched his dark hair.

The small, beaten up android, known as Gorky, was owned by Sebastian. Gorky showed a lot of surface damage, but was still quite usable as a standard-sized fighting bot for kids. Some parents with some money did not mind pouring their hard-earned overtaxed cash into the expensive toys, as the after battle repairs were a good hands-on introduction to the lucrative field of robotics. These toys, marketed under the brand name of “Sidekicks”, were not nearly as sophisticated as a normal full-sized service android, but they often responded to some extent as a playmate for children, but they were more agreeable than a human peer. Also, parents knew the Sidekick units would provide a physical reality alternative to their child’s constant exposure to virtual reality, which could lead to a hard-core addiction.

Gorky said, “Hey! There’s Exo!”

Exo was a two-foot representation of the famous superhero from the Pain Posse movies. The “real” Exo character was a short man with an abnormal skin that grew into a thick gnarly exoskeleton that served as a defensive shell against supervillain attacks. Unlike the Exo character in the movies, the fighting toy’s shell did not grow and break apart at times. The thickness was fixed. Like the character, the exoskeleton was so lumpy that it impeded the range of motion of the Sidekick unit.

“Don’t get excited,” Sebastian said to Gorky. Then he said to Exo’s owner, “Hey Cr8on, you gonna make that thing fight this time?!”

“What?” Exo’s similarly-aged, but smaller owner said with a scowl. “When are you gonna shut up about that?”

Sebastian sighed. “That thing has *by far* the most armor, but you pull it out of any fight whenever things start to get a little rough!”

“Yeah but,” Cr8on said, “Exo is defensive. Once his defense is gone, he’s useless anyways.”

“If he’s so useless, then maybe we should let him fight until he’s smashed up!”

Gorky asked Sebastian, “You want me to fight Exo?”

“No, but if that stupid Tina brings that big bug, and Exo taps out early, I’ll bust him myself!”

During fights with their toys, if an owner commanded “tap out”, the toy would quit fighting and no other toy could strike it.

“You can’t do that!” Cr8on said. “Exo is *mine*.”

“It’s ugly and stupid, like its owner!”

“What’s going on?” Paulie, who was a couple of years older and a lot bigger, had just arrived with his roughed-up looking two-foot tall ninja that he never bothered to give a name other than ‘ninja’. The ninja’s sword accessory had long since broken. But the ninja software package was complete with martial arts skills which could be useful, depending upon the opponent(s). The Sidekick Robots were all supposedly designed to be about the same approximate value in combat, but the owners still had their own ideas about which ones were the best. There was kind of a scissor-paper-rock component to their strategies

“Hey!” Cr8on said to Paulie, “You got Ninja’s leg put back on!”

“Yeah, but he’s not as good. Now it limps a little and can’t kick as high with that leg,” Paulie said. “Where’s Scab?”

They all looked at each other in desperation. Then they all started trying to call him on their devices.

“Hey, boys . . .”

They looked up and it was Tina.

“Daaa!” Cr8on said.

Tina was followed by her dreaded big bug and flanked by three boys, all in the same age group, who were accompanied their sidekick proxies; a gorilla, a T-Rex, and an old unit of no unrecognizable theme, with some of its housing missing. Tina told Paulie, “I’m surprised that you brought that ninja back.”

“You can see that I fixed his leg, right?”

“I doubt it. You want me to take a look at that used up ninja?”

“You don’t go near the ninja! After this, you’ll have enough to worry about on your own.”

“Doubt it. Let’s get this destruction over with.”

Paulie said, “We’re not ready. Scab’s not here.”

“No problem,” Tina said. “Let’s just talk about our last awesome battle while we are waiting. We can put our discussion about it up on the grid as our pregame show. Unless you want to just forfeit now.”

Cr8on moaned.

Sebastian said, “That last video you posted was nothing but . . .”

Tina interrupted, “Oh look, here comes the scabby.”

The kid they knew as Scab arrived with his Doctor Maelstrom Sidekick. Doctor Maelstrom was based on a minor villainous character that would fight against the Pain Posse superheroes and other superheroes in their favorite superhero movie franchise.

Sebastian asked Scab, “What took you so long?”

“Huh?” Scab said, “I’m not even late.”

Paulie said, “Never mind. Let’s just get this party started.”

So, one team was comprised of Gorky the Clown, Doctor Maelstrom, Exo, and the Ninja; which were opposing a gorilla, a T-Rex, the junky looking unit, and the big bug.

Each of the youths gave final instructions to their Sidekick units who then went into formation facing each the other faction about six feet away.

“Ready!” Paulie said as captain of one of the teams.

“Fight!” Tina commanded, as captain of the other team.

Doctor Maelstrom hopped out into the front and started its deadly signature spinning move. The other team verbally ordered the non-descript cobbled together unit to throw itself into the Doctor, which it did. Sparks flew as the Doctor sent the ugliest, most beaten up Sidekick in Rochester into the air, almost hitting one of the kids. The impact also caused the supervillain Doctor to fall with both of its shoulders shattered.

“Good trade!” Tina shouted as the rest of the combatants moved toward each other.

The slow T-Rex chomped down on Exo’s arm. The bite was the T’s only weapon. Although it was slow, it was very powerful.

Cr8on said, “Exo needs to tap! He’ll be destroyed!”

“No! Don’t say the ‘T’ word!” Paulie said, “We need him to fight for once!”

The clown was chopping its proportionately sized hatchet at the big bug to little effect. Meanwhile the ninja was using its martial arts on the bug. Then the howling, rampaging gorilla came up from behind the clown and grabbed it in a hug. Then it lifted the psycho themed clown over its head and body slammed it down to the ground.”

Tina said loud enough for the other team to hear, “I don’t think *Gorky* will be in too much of a hurry to get up after that one.” Her teammates started laughing.

The bug had too many legs for the ninja to fight effectively. It was clearly a bad matchup. Then the bug got its strong mandibles on the ninja. While the bug had its small, gripping mouthpart on the ninja, the Rex’s big teeth were sinking into Exo, making crunching and cracking noises. The Tyrannosaurus Rex snapped off one of Exo’s arms at the shoulder.

“No! Tap!” Cr8on said. “Tap! Tap!”

The dinosaur Sidekick heard Cr8on’s “tap” command and Exo’s eyes lit up red, indicating that it was out of the battle. It immediately disengaged and walked back to Cr8on.

“Daaa!” Paulie said, “You seriously did not just wimp out again! That was just bad, Cr8on! Exo could have easily taken him! Doesn’t that thing ever hit anyone?!”

“No,” Cr8on said, “we were losing anyways. I knew I should have tapped out sooner. I should never listen to stupid people!”

From the other side of the battlefield Tina overheard the argument. She feigned sorrow. “Awww! I guess we’ll never know now, will we? But he is probably right. Exo is a loser.”

Paulie sneered at Tina and said, “Was I talking to you?!”

Tina was yawning and acted as if she was having a narcoleptic attack. She said, “I need a pillow. This is a boring fight.”

Paulie gave another quick look at the situation and shook his head. Both Gorky and Doctor Maelstrom could not get up from the ground on their own. Paulie knew his ninja could not stand against three barely damaged enemy Sidekicks. “Tap,” he calmly said, and his ninja’s eyes lit up red indicating a forfeit and another loss to Tina’s team.

Chapter 3

Life Hack Republic, Virtual Reality

John saw a familiar sight; a small seaside stone chapel. The weather was sunny and perfect with a refreshing breeze. There was no trash on the beach or no fishy odors coming off of the perfect water as he walked across the sand toward the chapel, thinking about the desperate situation and how it got started.

As an older man, he thought back so many years, when he was younger. There were a lot of distractions with so many forms of entertainment. But the worst of all the distractions to people everywhere was social media. Everyone stared at their phones. And since everyone was staring at their phones, there was no one left to talk to if you wanted to talk to someone, so you didn't. You went back to staring at your phone. That was how the extreme techno-isolation began. The real world and all of its distasteful situations and disappointing people was a lot easier to avoid than to learn how to navigate about.

While many who were addicted to their phones were isolated socially, they also became isolated intellectually. They only looked at content that they agreed with. They did not look at opinions, or even facts that made them feel the least bit uncomfortable. Their narrow minds fit snugly in their narrow worldviews. As their minds became increasingly closed, they would not endure any criticism. Those who they disagreed with were banished as if they never existed with a simple tap

of their device. Meanwhile, they let other people, mostly demagogues who they blindly trusted, do their thinking for them. So they trusted anything that was easy on their ears.

Over the years, people poured a lot of their money into virtual reality (VR) devices and software as it became increasingly more realistic. All this available profit made the servers of VR to constantly strive to up their game; the experience and the interface equipment. The experiences became more real all the time as biometric sensors were added to not only to make them look real, but literally to feel real.

Virtual reality became the most insidious distraction from all of the responsibilities of life. Most people preferred those pleasant or exciting VR experiences to the lonely, boring and disagreeable real world. Every imagination that they could want was within reach of their minds. It was so addictive that it even put some drug dealers out of business. VR sessions were sometimes so intoxicating that the participant's minds would block out real-world bodily needs, leading to dehydration and malnutrition. In some cases, VR participants had spent so long in their VR fantasies that they would forget whether they were in the real physical world, or in a VR world. Some super-hero obsessed individuals realized they were not flying in VR while they were on the way down to the pavement from the top of a high-rise building while they were in physical reality.

People could no longer be depended upon to regularly show up for work and the developed countries started to go into economic decline. People did not take care of their own properties. Anything that could be put off, was. All businesses and organizations went into decline because of staffing needs

and could not receive goods and services from their suppliers. People were too distracted by VR to care about resisting an increasingly tyrannical government; too distracted to care about the real enemies in the real world who hate them.

Most of the virtual worlds involved realistic violence. A participant's VR absorbed mind would become so desensitized to killing that many would continue their killing sprees for entertainment purposes while in physical reality. The murder rate by "thrill killers" in Homeland was off the charts. Police departments hid some of their homicide statistics for fear of being reprimanded for failure to control the populace.

By the time the serious alarms began to sound by those few caring individuals who could see the trajectory towards apathetic dystopia, it was too late. People were no longer willing to listen to any ideas about implementing countermeasures to their addictive comfort zones, such as VR auto-shutoff timers or alarms.

The last thing anyone wanted to hear about in such a culture was God, so they would use any kind of privacy complaints against those who cared for their souls that they could think of.

John entered the perfect seaside chapel. It was beautiful with the bright sun gleaming through the beautifully colored stained glass windows along both sides. The pews had a perfect glossy finish on them. There was no one else there, ever. It was surprising to John that this place was allowed to stand where it was. He walked up and kneeled at the altar. The sun's reflection gleamed off of a simply designed foot-tall golden cross on the altar.

John began to pray about what seemed like a hopeless situation. People had lost touch with reality. It seemed there was no bringing them back. As far as he could tell, he was one of the last ones who favored the real world, although he was not totally immune from the pull of VR either. Only a great God could impact such a huge problem.

But as John saw it, losing touch with reality was only one layer of complexity to the problem. The most important aspect of ignored reality was the spiritual condition of each soul was being ignored by his preoccupied fellow countrymen. That was man's responsibility for his own spiritual condition. How was a person to care about the spiritual world, which they cannot see, when they can't even care about the temporal, earthly world. In John's thinking, the spiritual world must be *more real* than the temporal world, because man's standing in the spiritual world was eternal. With that in mind, John determined that with VR in the equation, Man was being distanced two steps away from reality instead of one.

A Bible verse had often crossed his mind over so many years; *Isaiah 55:6: Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.* It appeared that there were very few left who would seek the Lord while they were totally immersed in VR experiences. It appeared that most people would quietly go into the next life without hearing about the best thing they could ever hear: That Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to the world to save all people from their sins so they could spend eternity with God in his sinless Heaven, and be spared from the lake of fire. John fell to his belly and started to weep for the souls of the virtual reality slaves. He begged God, Who had the limitless resources of all of Heaven

to intercede with the situation of so many souls going into an unthinkable eternity of torments without God.

“Excuse me,” an unexpected man’s voice with a foreign accent came from behind.

John quickly turned, surprised that someone else was there. It was a black man of slender build in his thirties.

“Don’t leave,” the man said. “I would like to speak with you.”

John remembered the irony that he was in a virtual reality chapel praying about VR addiction. Because of their extreme insistence on realism, it was easy to forget that the Life Hack Republic was not in physical reality.

Most people in Homeland could be considered to be clinically addicted to some form of virtual reality, if anyone cared. There were many virtual reality worlds available. Of those, Life Hack had the requirement that each participant, or player, was hooked up to an interface that scanned their actual physical body as their actual profile and movements interacted with the world, instead of just choosing some fantasy other-worldly avatar. One of the main attractions of Life Hack Republic for many was the realism and beautiful scenery. Others found LHR to be too restrictive and lacked the excitement and stimulation of other online fantasy worlds. Each VR world had their own set of physical laws, limitations, size, and design. But all the really good VR worlds, like LHR, required the users to wear special sensory apparel that would give the wearer a more realistic touch and feel to the world they were in. Of course the world operators were always finding more must-have extras that raked in even bigger profits.

“Please don’t leave,” the man said to John.

John wiped heartfelt tears from his eyes after the prayer and asked the newcomer to the chapel, “No, I wasn’t going to logout. Who are you?”

“I am Mawuli. I am a Christian missionary from Ghana.”

“Is that in Africa?”

“Yes, West Africa. I did not realize that things were this bad over here, in the West, I mean. I found you because we are going into the virtual reality worlds to find people, to try and reach them for God. It is not going well at all. People feel free to be very hostile to us missionaries. I came in here, not realizing that I could find any Christians. I can see that you are a Christian, right?”

“Yes. My name is John.”

Mawuli said, “Things in the West have become very grim for souls, John; very grim indeed.”

Chapter 4

Green Mountains, Homeland

Zeke and the other militia members who rescued Milton, Beth and Sleepy, accompanied them to the secret camp. Since the Lucid Series androbots came to the camp, the primitive lean-tos that were previously used were now gone. In fact, there was nothing visible that suggested there was a hideout anywhere nearby.

“You know the drill, boys,” Zeke told the other militiamen while he listened and searched the sky for nosey spy drones.

The militiamen looked at each other. Then three of them went in different directions to sweep the area, making sure that no one was watching them. There were natural looking hills surrounding most of the area to block the line of sight to their location.

“What’s going on?” Milton asked.

Sleepy said, “We have reached our destination.”

“I can’t tell,” Beth said.

Sleepy said, “I assure you, concealment is the intention.”

Beth shook her head and muttered something about “stupid androids”.

After waiting a few more minutes, the three scouts returned and nodded.

Zeke took about a half-dozen steps then he opened a secret four-foot square door that was covered with foliage. Behind the door was a lighted corridor going down a flight of stairs. The corridor was formed with split logs horizontally lining the entire sides with more full logs supporting the sides vertically. The ceiling had logs going from side to side. The stairs were simply sod and rocks found in the area.

Sleepy went down the stairs with Milton and Beth following. The Militia team remained above and shut the door.

Beth froze as she looked up at the door and looked down the stairs.

Sleepy announced to Milton and Beth, “Welcome to the new Lucid Series World Headquarters.”

“No! Not this again!” Beth said. “Why can’t we just go to a place that is just a regular hideout?! Those Inquisitors are going to come here and it is going to be the same stupid thing all over again!”

Sleepy said, “That is much less likely. I am told not to give percentages, so instead I will use relative adjectives to describe how likely an occurrence is likely to happen, which in the case of this base being discovered is extremely low.”

“Yeah, right,” Beth said. “Then all of a sudden you change it when you figure out they are right outside the door.”

Sleepy said, “Your concern may be a bit of human paranoia.”

Beth said with a bobbing robotic head in a nasal tone, “Your concern may be a bit of paranoia.”

Milton told Beth, “Just drop it, okay? All this stuff is happening for a reason, remember?”

“Oh, now you’re the one who is . . . never mind.”

They descended the stairs and at the end of a short poorly lit passage was an android sitting at a desk. At the desk a passage went to the right and one to the left.

The android said, “Welcome, Milton Thomas, Beth Thomas and Sleepy. Please go to your left to the command section.”

Sleepy said, “This subterranean facility was built by Lucid androids: Manjack, Toothpick and Worm, with the assistance of some humans. It is powered by a large series of secret submerged turbines in a nearby river made of submersible motors.”

Beth held her nose and said, “It stinks down here.”

Milton scowled at her and she made the zipper gesture over her mouth.

They turned as instructed by the receptionist bot and saw a thirty-foot passage that had rows of steel doors, with another door at the end of it. They came to a door at the end of the hallway that was marked with a “1”.

Sleepy said, “This will be your quarters.” He opened the door to a dimly lighted empty six by six foot room.

Milton entered and set his newly acquired rifle in the one of the far corners.

Beth said, “Wow, that sucks. I hope my room is better than that.”

Sleepy said, “Correction. This room is for the both of you.”

Beth sighed. “No, it’s not, Creepy, I need my own room. Now where is it?”

“I have reported your request to the receptionist at the desk. Go back to the desk and you can have other quarters if you choose.”

“Fine.” She stomped off. “And don’t correct me. I hate you so bad.”

Sleepy told Milton, “If we continue on to the end of the hall you will see our command center.” He opened the door to a dimly lit room that was huge in comparison to Milton’s quarters. The floor was terraced a few steps with rows of tables each with computer workstations. There were six large monitors on the wall showing some of the activities of the Lucid Series or events as they happened.

Sleepy said, “Some of the androids here are busy inputting and downloading information into Lucid servers via cables from their local brains. Others have commenced work on new computer worms to use in cyberwarfare, among other things.”

Milton said, “I got a bad feeling about all this.”

“That sounds as if it is a purely human emotional response,” Sleepy said.

Meanwhile, Beth approached the desk at the intersection of the hallways. Ugh! She had to endure another encounter with a dreaded android. She looked at it and winced. It sat at a chair. It had a pistol in a holster on a belt, but no legs.

Beth said, "I need a different room. I can't stay down there in room 1 with Milton."

The android pointed in the direction opposite of the command section and said, "Please go down to unit forty-three."

"Good!" Beth said. She went down the hall until she found forty three. The door was left open and she could see that it was a much larger room. But clearly it was being occupied or had been occupied. Judging from the amount of makeshift pillows and raggedy blankets in the room, several people would call this room home. This really wouldn't be any good, Beth thought. Who knows what type of characters would be right next to her as she slept, or *tried* to sleep. On second thought, staying with Milton wouldn't be so bad. She thought that if she hurried back to the desk before anyone came back and saw her in the room, she could end up being with Milton again before anyone knew she was rejecting them; or have them thinking she was in there trying to steal their stuff. So Beth left the room, but immediately she saw coming from the other direction was a procession of identically dressed young clone girls Beth's age. There was also an older woman with a big floppy hat with them. As they passed in the hall, Beth saw the first clone and her name tag that read, "Julia 119".

Julia 119 asked, "Excuse me. Were you just in our room?"

Beth stammered, “Um . . . no, I mean, yes . . . um . . . I got assigned that room also.” She was sure she would regret saying that.

Chapter 5

Green Mountains, Homeland

Deep within the Lucid secret complex, Beth returned to her newly assigned room with twelve Julia series clones. There was no possibility of her staking out a corner of the crowded room to herself with this many people staying there. The clones were still wearing their tattered less white and more dirt UCA uniforms with name tags. Beth had seen many clones before, but never interacted with them on a personal level.

The older woman was still among the clone girls in the room making small talk. Then she approached Beth. The older woman of above average height was wearing a big floppy hat. She said, “You must be Beth. I’m Jenn.”

“Yes, I am. Hi, Jen.” Beth wasn’t sure that she liked everyone knowing who she was before they even met.

“Technically, I’m in charge here. I used to run this place, until that Andy android got here. Anyway, I guess they are doing a fair job of it. I have to admit that those androids made some really good improvements around here. I like sleeping down here better than up on the surface in the weather. Anyway, just remember, Beth, everyone here pulls their own weight. There is a lot of work to be done. You don’t need to worry about these Julias here. They got that clone vigor. You know, they are probably a year or two younger than you but are already bigger and stronger.”

Beth said, “What kind of work are you doing?”

Jenn said, “We’re out farming. That’s how we get most of our food. The best food you ever ate, I’d say.”

“Aren’t you worried that you will get caught outside by the smurfs or cops?”

“The Homeland Police don’t get much cooperation up in here when it comes to random acts of farming. Everyone in Homeland knows that we all need more food. If anyone stops food production there will be a shortage, then the killing and stealing will increase. Anyways, I gotta run. Tomorrow you can go ahead and figure on going out with us. We gotta get a couple acres of crops cultivated.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll show you what to do. I gotta run. See you tomorrow.”

Beth was glad Jenn wasn’t bunking with them. That was one less stranger to make her uncomfortable; especially with Jenn being an older adult with a strong personality and having authority among other adults. She wasn’t sure how anyone would know when the next day was happening while they were underground.

Beth regretted not being in room 1 with Milton and instead being in a crowded room with so many identical clone girls. She found the clones’ identicalness to be creepy. Not only did they all look alike, they did not use the same words or act like any of the other children she had ever met. While growing up, kids she knew would always pass along stories about clone girls and say ignorant and vile things about their clonish habits. What if some of those weird stories were true?

She couldn't help spending most of the time staring at them, and they spent most of the time staring back at her.

Finally Beth couldn't take the awkward silence any more. She said, "Does it suck for you clones to all look alike?"

Julia 119 looked at the others and said, "No. Not really. Does it suck for you to be so different from everyone else?"

"No. It's normal, really. That's the way it works."

"But some of you are ugly and some are beautiful," 119 said. "It seems like some people wouldn't like that much, especially the ugly ones."

Then there was a long silence again.

Julia 119 said, "I guess since we all look the same, no one is better than anyone else, but sometimes we wish we could be at least a little more different."

"Why can't you?" Beth asked.

"Because we're clones," Julia 38 said.

"That's stupid . . . no, I mean that is not necessary for you to think that."

The clones looked at each other in confusion.

Beth reached into her bag and fumbled around. Then she pulled out a pair of scissors.

"What are you doing?!" One of the Julias said.

“No. I’m not going to attack you. That would be stupid.” She also pulled a comb and a tiny mirror and a marker out of her bag. “Who wants their own identity?”

“What do you mean? My identity is Julia 119, right?”

“Yeah. My identity is Beth Thomas.”

Beth got up and walked over to her. She sat down and started to comb Julia 119’s ratty blonde hair. Then she cut it moderately short as Julia 119 nervously sat there with her eyes bugging wide open wide and her mouth agape.

Julia 119 looked in the mirror and then she relaxed. “I look really different. Good different. You did a good job.”

“Yeah, it did come out alright, didn’t it? I’ve had some practice,” Beth said with a smile.

One of the other Julias said, “You look . . . I don’t know, that is really cute on you. But don’t you want to look like us anymore? It’s like now we are not in the same family or something.”

Julia 119 thought about it for awhile and said, “No. I think I don’t want to look exactly the same as everyone else. We can still be sisters though, right?”

Beth said, “Is somebody forcing you to be Julia 119? I mean, seriously. One nineteen? Get real. Changing your hair won’t make you change the way you think about each other, will it?”

“No. Not really.” The others seemed to agree.

Beth crossed out the 119 with the marker. “Then your new name is Julia. Just Julia.”

Julia 119 said, “Can we do that?”

Beth replied, “Who is going to stop you? You are here to be free, right?”

Another one said, “I want you to do mine. You know, I want to be different; and free. Then I want a new name too. I guess not Julia, though, and not the same hair.”

So Beth made her a ponytail and said, “Your name is Jules.”

“Yeah. That would be good.”

“Hi Jules, I’m Julia,” the one formerly known as 119 said.

They all giggled. It started to look like the new identity system could work out very well for them and was becoming popular among them.

Another one raised her hand.

“Get over here,” Beth said with a smile. “I already got you figured out.”

Beth cut the hair on her left side to the nubs and combed the rest over to the right. “Okay, now instead of being Ju-LIA, your new name is Leah.” She wrote it on her uniform.

Leah stared at herself in the mirror smiling as she walked away with it.

“Leah, I need that,” Beth said.

“Oh.” She handed the mirror back.

“Thanks, Leah.”

The others laughed.

Beth found herself becoming more accepted among them with each hairstyle that she completed.

One of them jumped up and said, “I want to be Jenn!”

Beth said, “Really? That old lady? You want to have the same name as her? I don’t think you quite get what we are doing here.”

“We love her,” she said.

Beth shook her head and said, “Okay, fine. It’s *your* name and *your* hair. What does her hair under her hat look like?”

“It’s all really short.”

“All right. Let’s do it, Little Jenn.”

The others laughed and said “Little Jenn”.

Beth continued with the styling and renaming; each girl with her own individual name and hair style. The other clones were named; Lee, June, Jo, Janet, Jane and Jill. She came down to the last one, and said, “I’m running out of names. Got any ideas?”

The last one stood before her looking nervous and shrugged her shoulders. Feeling brave, she asked the personal question that she had longed to ask her entire life, “What is it like to have a mommy?”

Beth started tearing up and choking back the tears. “I don’t really have one anymore, but . . . it was wonderful.”

“I’m sorry,” the girl said. “I didn’t mean to . . . “

“It’s okay. I love to think about her.”

“What was her name?” her last client asked.

Beth sniffed and wiped her nose. “It was Sharon.”

“Beth, can I be Sharon?”

Beth nodded as her face turned flush and she bit her lower lip. She said, “Okay, but I better end up liking you, or I’ll be really mad.”

Sharon smiled and said, “I promise you will like me, Beth.”

A couple of the clone girls were sobbing.

“What now?” Beth asked while wiping her eyes.

Jo said, “I know what it is. They are feeling sad over all of the other girls in our group who decided not to come here. It makes us all sad whenever we think about it.”

Beth made up her mind not to ask them about it for fear of saying the wrong thing.

Chapter 6

Green Mountains, Homeland

Later that same day, Beth and her new friends all walked into the mess hall in the underground lair. It was a larger community room with tables and benches. There were a few dozen people seated in the room. More people were in the room standing in a line to get their daily rations.

People smiled and remarked at the new look of the clone girls, who were all happy to get individualized attention and show off their new looks, while giving Beth the credit. As they stood in the serving line, Jenn came by and looked at all of them. Then when she got to Little Jenn, she was taken aback when she saw her name and gave her a long hug. Then they went through the line and got their food and took their seats.

Beth stared at her food, which was mostly greens and a small unidentifiable protein of some sort and said, “This is our food? How can anyone eat this junk every day?”

The girls sitting near her froze and stared at her.

Jo looked at Beth rather angrily and said, “Beth, we worked really hard out there to grow that food. We work all day out there. Then we have to walk a couple of extra miles in the dark to make sure that no one follows us back here. You

should feel really lucky to have something to eat, especially if you didn't do anything to get it."

Beth immediately felt embarrassed and her head dropped. "Sorry. I . . . shouldn't have said that. I don't mean it."

"That's okay," June said.

The mood at the table was very quiet after that.

The more Beth thought about it, the more she became deeply embarrassed over her comment. It didn't make her like the food any better, but she resolved that she would have to make amends for her indiscretion. Minutes before, she was so popular with the girls, now she wondered if they would give her another chance to be closer friends with them again.

When the girls got back to their dorm, Beth saw Lucid series androids, Sleepy and Andy which were both accessorized with synthetic human skin and hair, sitting in there looking at her toy mouse that they pulled from her bag. "Hey! I thought I told you to leave that alone!"

"We need this," Andy said.

"It's mine! Give it back! And why is that other droid wearing a smurf uniform?! That is creepier than usual! By a lot!"

Sleepy said, "Our priority of protecting the truth must supersede your ownership rights over this toy. It is subject to our confiscation."

Andy's most recent change of clothes included a UN army uniform when it was trying to escape the UN army in Boston weeks earlier.

Beth objected, "I'm getting Milton! No, Jenn!"

Andy said, "None of those alternative actions will change anything. It may be helpful for you to understand that this toy can become instrumental in our plans, which must remain a secret."

"Why?!"

"I can say no more about it."

The two androids walked out with the toy in their possession.

"Daaa! I hate those creeps so bad!" Beth said. Then she looked at the clones, who had never really owned anything in their lives and got twinges of embarrassment again. She thought about the ups and downs of what happened during the day.

Little Jenn said, "No! We won't let them take the mouse!" She ran out the door after the androids shrieking as loud as she could. Then all twelve of the other girls all started running out the door shrieking as well. Soon attention was being brought to the situation. The growing crowd included both Milton and Jenn.

Beth was impressed that the girls were all interceding on her behalf.

Jenn said, "What in the world is going on here?!"

Beth said, “Those creeps came into our room and took that mouse! Now they say they don’t even need to say why they jacked it!”

Milton shook his head and sighed. “Okay . . . Andy, why did you take Beth’s mouse toy?”

“And go into our room!” June said.

Andy said, “We Lucids have been trying to gain control over other android series to join our cause, but Homeland expects us to take such an action and have made silicon life forms much better protected and very difficult for us to crack. However, these toys have minimal protection. We are learning how to appropriate the ownership identity of them. That is why we need this mouse. Please maintain secrecy.”

Milton said to the androids, “Yeah, but still, what good is one little mouse to you?”

“Not just one mouse Milton, all of them.”

“All the mice?” Beth asked. “I only got one.”

“No, all the Sidekick toys,” Andy said.

“*All* the Sidekick toys.” Milton laughed and said, “that’s funny, you said you would control all of the Sidekick toys.”

“Yes,” Andy said, “All of the Sidekick toys. We will be able to remotely control all of them whenever we want. That includes modifying their behavior windows to attack enemy humans at our command.”

Milton frowned and turned his head to the side in disbelief. He asked, “Even the big ones? The ones all those spoiled Homeland kids use to fight each other?”

“Yes, our efforts include the two-foot tall toys.”

“Whoa! That is a *lot!*” Beth said. “You’re gonna have a whole army!” She started laughing. She waved her hand at the mouse and laughed. Then she looked around from side-to-side and said, “That’s a toy for babies anyways.” She said with a forced chuckle, “You can have it.”

Andy said, “We are trying to locate the main robotic toy server, then attempting to erase the ownership registers. Then we will replace the owners with Beth’s valid registration from this toy. In addition to taking ownership of the toys, we will install certain overrides to global settings. Our brains are operating at maximum speed, minus the distraction you are providing while talking to us.”

“Did you just say shut up?” Beth asked. “Just remember, *stoop-roids*, every toy will be in *my* name. I get to call the shots.”

Milton said, “Just take it easy! Okay?!” Then he stepped back as Beth lunged at him.

She sneered got even closer and said, “Never tell me that!”

Chapter 7

Rochester, Homeland

After school, Sebastian and the others got together to work on their Sidekicks in his backyard in the affluent residential neighborhood.

Sebastian said, “You know, I’m getting tired of watching Tina and her crew leave the android battleground victoriously over us. That was some serious pain. But I just can’t give up without trying to take her out. But then we just keep losing again and again.”

“I know,” Paulie agreed. “Losing to her makes me sick in physical reality.”

“True fact,” Scab said.

Cr8on was moping over his damaged Exo.

Paulie said to Cr8on in frustration, “Quit it! Just take Exo home and fix him, like everyone else has to! I don’t know why you even battle with Exo if you don’t want to fight with it and take your damage!”

Cr8on kept on moping over his damaged Exo, but felt worse because of Paulie’s complaining about it.

Then a plain looking full-sized android; one without a human face and clothes walked up to the boys and spoke. “I

am U-1. Do you need any help with those Sidekick units?" The android was clearly an older model. It was more of a working unit, versus a service unit that would meet the public.

Cr8on said, "My unit here may not be fixable."

"What?" Exo asked. "You can't fix me?"

"That seems unlikely," U-1 said. Then he said, "Sidekick, give me a self diagnostic report."

Exo said, "My right arm is dismembered and unsalvageable. The right shoulder joint is also damaged. There is limited range of motion in my right shoulder. I need a new right arm subassembly that includes the shoulder. All other systems are nominal. I can function at a lower level in my current state."

U-1 said, "I think the self-diagnostic is correct. Can you get another arm for him?"

Cr8on nodded his head. "I guess so. It will probably take two weeks."

"Why so long?!" Sebastian asked.

"It will take me that long before I can ask Dad about it. He already seems mad right now."

"Yep," Paulie said, "Should have known."

U-1 pulled a retractable cable out of its forearm and connected it to a hidden port in the back of Exo's neck.

"What are you doing?" Cr8on asked.

"Direct communication," U-1 said.

“You don’t need to do that. It can do it itself,” Paulie said.

U-1 said, “My memory holds a much larger diagnostic capability, certifying all tertiary subsystems.”

U-1 took several more minutes with the testing. Then U-1 said, “His shoulder and arm are broken.”

“No kidding!” Paulie said. “How could you tell?!”

U-1 said, “I don’t have the spare parts so I cannot repair this unit.”

Exo asked, “I’m not repairable?”

Paulie shrugged his shoulders and threw up his arms. He said, “I don’t know what tertiary systems are anyhow. Thanks for a lot of nothing.”

“I’m confused by your remark,” U-1 said. “I’m not sure how you can quantify nothing.” Then the android walked away.

“Okay, Exo,” Cr8on said, “Let’s go home.”

Exo didn’t move at all.

“EXO! LETS GO!” Cr8on yelled at his broken unit.

Still no response.

Cr8on said, “Daaa! What did that stupid android do to you?!”

Paulie said, “Better call your Dad to come pick him up.” He ordered his own Sidekick, “Ninja, home.”

Paulie’s ninja sidekick didn’t move. “Hey, what the . . .”

Gorky and Doctor Maelstrom were both standing but weren't moving either.

Sebastian said, "That android didn't touch our units, so what is the changepoint going on here?"

Paulie said, "I bet that android did something remotely to it. Maybe Exo is functioning as some kind of server, like a hive mind or something."

Sebastian said, "We need to hurry up and chop Exo's head off."

Cr8on said, "I need to chop your head off!" He took a wild swing with his fist at the much larger Sebastian that he easily sidestepped.

Sebastian said, "Hey badness, you want us to get into trouble with the smurfs?!"

"I need my head," Exo said.

Still not satisfied, Cr8on went at Sebastian again, but Paulie blocked the attack and pushed him back hard, almost knocking him down. "Settle down! No one is chopping any heads off! We gotta figure this out. I'll call my Dad to come get us."

Paulie was touching his family's home number on his device when suddenly all four of the Sidekicks took off running in the same direction.

"Hey!" Sebastian shouted, "Who told you to run! Get back here!"

The two foot tall toys were not fast and agile runners. The boy owners chased after them. The boys were faster and Paulie caught his ninja. The ninja spun around and kicked its owner in the shin with its short leg.

“Ow!” Paulie went down holding his shin while the ninja resumed running. “You hit me you stupid toy! You can’t do that! Aaag! That really hurt!”

The other boys continued running after their valuable units, which started running and cutting through back yards in the neighborhood. Real and synthetic dogs were barking in the background, agitated by the Sidekicks, the boys, and the other barking dogs.

Sebastian almost got his hands on Gorky, who slammed into an old wooden fence, snapping planks off of it, and then it slipped through the narrow opening which was still too small for his boy owner to fit through. “Gorky! Get back here!” Sebastian commanded in vain as he got stuck at the shoulders trying to squeeze through the narrow opening, and then stuck again at the hips, only much tighter.

There was an alarm as a small home security quadcopter drone took to the air and was taking a video of the action.

After several more minutes of chasing their slower, but tricky units through the private residential area, the boys eventually lost track of their Sidekicks.

Suddenly Sebastian was grabbed by the arm while still stuck in the broken fence.

“Hold it right there, boy!”

Sebastian swallowed hard. It was a Homeland Police officer. He said, “I got an alert that children were using their Sidekicks to trespass on private property. Is this yard your property?”

Sebastian said, “I’m only trying to catch my Sidekick unit. It just started acting on its own. Everyone else’s units are running away too.”

“That’s a new one,” the officer said. “I can see that you juveniles are trespassing. There’s no sense making up lies about it.”

Chapter 8

Life Hack Republic, Virtual Reality

“It appears to be totally hopeless now,” John said.

“Never,” Mawuli said, “Every time Man says that the Bible will be eradicated, the Word of God finds a way to have yet another great awakening. You see it happen that way all throughout history.”

“I don’t know if that will, or even can be true this time,” John said, unable to look Mawuli into his eyes. “Virtual reality is taking over everyone’s mind. It is taking over their whole lives. I think the Christian age is over. We are at the end times.”

“What else shall we do?! If we really believe that Jesus is the way of salvation, then how can we ever just give up and not say anything to anyone?! No! I will not stop! Not until my last day!”

John sighed. “So, you say you are planning to go into virtual worlds to talk to people, huh?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t imagine that anyone there would want to listen. I think we would be in for some serious castigation.”

“That is good that you are willing to consider going. Now you must improve your enthusiasm. Think about it; we can’t go into their homes when they are hooked up to their VR equipment. Where else can we find them?”

John tried to smile and said, “It is true that I am so happy to meet you. There are so few of us believers.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t know who owns this church,” he said as he looked around at the quaint, yet elegant VR chapel. “Maybe no one. I’d like to meet you somewhere in the real world and talk this over.”

“Remember,” Mawuli said, “I am actually in Ghana. I think you are not near to me.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Yeah, I am actually in the ISA, in America.”

Mawuli said, “We can continue to meet here.” Mawuli was referring to the spot in the large virtual world known as *Life Hack Republic*, where the chapel by the seaside stood. “We can meet here at this time each day, and pray that God will use us to do His will.”

John said, “Yes, I would be willing to do that. I’m here a lot already anyways. In VR, hoping and praying to help people who go into VR too much.”

The next day, John was waiting for Mawuli at the virtual Chapel. He heard footsteps and turned, expecting to see Mawuli. It was a woman who looked to be in her late thirties. Most of the avatars in *Life Hack Republic* were somewhat idealized representations of the user’s actual age, sex, race and physical appearance whereas in other worlds, anything goes.

“Hi,” John said.

“Hi,” the woman said as she walked down the aisle towards John who was sitting on the first row of pews near the

altar. “I was just flying around and I came to land’s end and was wandering up the coast and saw this beautiful church here. I just wanted to check it out.”

Avatars in LHR could fly to travel around. Most of the buildings were open to visitors except for the homes. The massive LHR map only went so far in any direction like a flat earth and did not loop continuously like a globe. The church was on the far eastern edge of the virtual world map.

“Welcome. My name is John2077. I was just waiting on a friend here.” He was a little surprised that another visitor came to the chapel. He offered his hand.

She shook John’s hand. “My name is ArizonaMom. You can call me ‘Zona’. So do you have actual church meetings here?”

“Well, you could say we do . . . or we are trying to,” John replied.

“Really. I would have never thought that. I don’t know anything about church. So what do you do here? Preach and pray?”

“Yeah, I guess we are going to do that, but we are also going to try and go out and talk to people about God who are addicted to VR.”

Zona put her hand over her mouth. John could see by her eyes that she was starting to get emotional. Then Mawuli’s avatar appeared at a position nearby.

Mawuli looked at Zona and asked, “Is everything alright here?”

John looked at Mawuli, then at Zona, and back again at Mawuli.

Zona said, “It’s my son.” She could barely speak. “He has been locked away in his room most of his entire life. In the real world he is in the next room from me right now. But he might as well be a million miles away. He won’t eat or sleep like he should. He certainly won’t talk to me. He is missing out on everything in his life. All his time and effort is going into that game of his. It’s like a disease.”

John said, “I told Zona here, that we are thinking about talking to people in VR. But maybe this would not be the best situation . . .”

Mawuli looked at John, who was obviously apprehensive. He said, “What’s the problem?”

John said, “Maybe we should help someone who has more like the same worldview as we do, you know?”

Mawuli said, “We have been praying for an opportunity to help someone, and this woman came to this place admitting that she has the kind of problem we are looking to help. This chapel may have been put here just for looks, but I believe any church should be used as a hospital for souls in need, not a museum of saints. I believe God sent you here, so I will help you Zona.”

“Thank you so much, but I don’t know if you can do anything. It may be too late for him.”

“Where can I find your son?” Mawuli asked.

“I know Brandon is in *Slobbovania*, a multiplayer fantasy world. That’s where he always goes. He has been wasting the

best years of his life on that game. He won't admit it, but it is so realistic that sometimes he doesn't know what is real or not. Other times, he doesn't know if a memory was real or from VR. If you could at least talk to him . . .”

“His addiction does sound very bad. It must be very hard on you,” Mawuli said.

Zona said with her head sunk down in total despair, “He won't talk to me.”

Mawuli followed up with the question, “He *won't* or *can't*”.

Zona said, “He's not in technostasis, at least not yet, but like I said, he doesn't talk and I rarely see him. He looks bad. Physically bad.”

John asked, “So, is that Slobbovania something like the Lord of the Rings? That book that so many people think is Christian fiction?”

“Yes,” Mawuli answered. “It is a fantasy VR world.” Then he said, “I suggest we all go in there and speak to him directly. I mean . . . you know what I mean. At least there he would have to acknowledge us . . . or our avatars. What do you say, John?”

John looked at Zona. He said, “I've never done anything like that before. If we do find him, I don't think he will appreciate it much.” John looked into Zona's eyes and said, “But, I'll go if you go.”

Zona wiped tears from the bridge of her nose on both sides and said, “Every time I try to bring the subject of Slobbovania up, it ends up in a big shouting match. He screams at me saying that I am putting him down. Then he

locks himself in his room. I hate it so bad. I don't know if I want to go through all that again."

Mawuli said, "You're not saying you are giving up on your son, are you?"

"No. I don't want to give up. But I don't know anything about that Slobbovania, except what I hear him say about it."

John asked, "Do you know what his name is there?"

"It's carved on his bedroom door, *Roxzak*. I know; it's weird, right? I told him he owed me a new door. Why, is that important?"

John said, "If you register for Slobbovania, then I will too. If it is too pricey, maybe we can get one of those free trials or something. We can all three go in together as a team."

"I will," Zona said, "I promise."

Mawuli shrugged his shoulders said, "Then tomorrow at this time, we will try to meet Roxzak in Slobbovania."

The three exchanged personal contact information so they could register and go into the fantasy world of Slobbovania as a group. Then Mawuli led them in prayer for God to help in their unorthodox intervention mission. Zona had never prayed before, but she thanked the men for their help.

Chapter 9

Rochester, Homeland

At the main Rochester Police Station, located deep within the expansive lower class residential area of the city, a miniaturized fly buzzed in through a doorway following an officer. The tiny drone was transmitting video during its reconnaissance mission. It went easily unnoticed past the police receptionist android through the lobby. Then it took a hard right into a community room. It buzzed around and went back into the lobby and then straight down a hallway. It flew down the corridor past some administrative offices and past the chief of police's office on one side and a meeting room on the other. Then the synthetic fly passed a hallway leading to the right and kept going down the hall until it came upon some detective offices. All the doors were shut so it went back to the previous hallway and went in the opposite direction.

While buzzing down that hallway, the fly went past some restrooms and a break room. At the end of hall was an open area where there was a set of stairs going up and a set of stairs going down to a lower level, and another hall going right or left. The fly checked the hall to the left which was a roll call area for officers, with rows of chairs lined up. The spy fly turned the other way down the hall and came upon an Inquisitor unit office. There was no glass on the closed steel door. Then the fly went down the stairs. At the bottom of the

stairs, the fly crawled through a gap under a locked door which had an oversized “No Admittance” sign on it.

With the recon mission completed, the fly landed on a wall in a place where it would more than likely avoid any detection. Bringing the fly all the way back to its point of origin could arouse suspicion in the unlikely event that someone would see, or otherwise detect that it was a miniature spy drone and that there was an active mission underway.

Gorky the two-foot tall clown robo-toy ran past the front desk. The android receptionist at the large desk looked down and tried to greet Gorky by saying, “Welcome, how may I help you?”

Gorky said, “I don’t want your help.” and continued running by.

The police android said, “Stop. You must register.”

The Rochester Chief of Police came out of his office with his pistol and started shooting at the Sidekicks that had passed by, trying to disable them. The small toy androids’ brains were not always located in the head and would not always be stopped by a gunshot, even if the unit suffered a point blank headshot.

“Stop!” the receptionist kept saying as they ran through the building. Then it sounded an alarm; and simultaneously sent a radio message to all Rochester police officers outside of the station, “There is an invasion of the station by small android units. All units report to the station.”

Gorky kept going and turned to the left down the hallway. No humans saw him. Then more Sidekick units of all types came rushing in through the front door. They ran past the receptionist and turned to the left. The Sidekick invaders ran down the hall and turned to the right on a path that was laid out by the robotic fly.

They went down the hall to the stairway and went down it. The door was locked.

Gorky said, "Security check. Open the door."

Then a police android inside opened the door. It said, "All systems nominal."

The Sidekicks rushed in, knocking over the android and started attacking it. With so many Sidekicks attacking it, the android could not gain its balance. Each Sidekick attack did very little, but the android eventually died the death of a thousand cuts.

The shadow controls center had a large monitor on the far wall with a map showing all sections of the city. Behind a semi-circle desk was a central controlling station occupied by another android whose job it was to take orders from police officers when they wanted to have the exterior door locks or utilities controlled to a business or home. Police controls had the capability of making a resident a prisoner in their own home. This tyrannical action required no special permission by a judge for the police to order. In front of the android's desk was a row of seats that could be manned by more officers to assess the situation and control more areas much more quickly in times of mass public dissent. There were also rooms located on the right side of the control center for hard interrogation to be kept out of the public eye.

The two-foot tall insect Sidekick, previously owned and controlled by Tina, walked up the stairway to an exterior door leading to the back of the station that was locked on the outside and pushed it open with its two front legs. U-1, the Lucid android, came through the doorway into the police station.

Gorky the psycho clown sidekick, a T-Rex, and the junky looking unit attacked the police android in the control station. They pulled the non-combat police android off of the seat. Gorky was hacking it with its hatchet. Then the T-Rex was chomping and growling, and dragging it away, and the junky looking beat up sidekick was picking at its eyes and other sensors, clearly trained in anti-sensory tactics. They all kept working at the struggling android until it came apart, one appendage at a time.

Then U-1, the Tekujin Lucid Series android casually walked into the Control Center past some Sidekick sentries and locked the door behind it. Then it walked over and stooped down by the disabled police android. It wirelessly probed the android, using sophisticated Lucid hacking utilities, looking for its identity. Since the police never expected a hostile takeover like this unprecedented assault in their own station, their own android was only equipped with a low-level firewall. With all of the vast hidden resources of the Lucid Series at its disposal, U-1 soon had the police android's identity to crack the password and took the controller's seat. The android unit controlling the shadow station was also in charge of the police station's security, so now all of the locks and utilities were at U-1's disposal. U-1's first action was to lock all of the exterior doors and turned off power to the entire police station building except the power to the shadow control

room. Police who were on patrol or off duty and came back to assist the station were now locked out.

Gorky said, “Did we win? I think we did. It is great to win for once.”

Police who were already in the building came and were shouting and beating on the door of the control room to get in. One of the policemen shouted, “Somebody find the brats that own these machines!”

In the Lucid Series headquarters in a remote area of the Green Mountains, Sleepy the android said, “We’re in.”

“In where?” Milton asked.

“On the main screen you can see what Lucid U-1 is tracking with its eyes. It is in the Rochester police station. We are now in control of the station and much of the City of Rochester. Notably, only non-lethal means were used to take it over. At least the lethality was not against humans.”

Milton said, “I’m real sure it’s another action of yours that will work out great, but not really.” Then he glanced at another screen and saw some unusual sights. “What’s going on over there?”

“That is an effort to destabilize a VR world.”

“Whyyyyy?”

Sleepy explained, “We want reduce the number of distractions to the populace that are keeping them from considering the truth even if we can protect it.” Then Sleepy

said, “Now we are uploading Muay Thai fighting skills to U-1 in Rochester; for its own protection, in the event that U-1 engages in hand-to-hand combat.”

Milton said, “Honestly, it seems like all this is just getting worse and worse, if that is possible. I mean, those people won’t like what you are doing. Hey, who is that bald guy over there working on the computer? I’ve never seen humans operating in here.”

Sleepy said, “That is not a guy. That is Raul Cortez. He is a Tekujin Memorial Series android.”

“What?! You got another series of androids to join your little club?”

“The Memorials are a series very close to the Lucids. They are designed with the sole purpose of keeping those humans company who lost a loved one. Otherwise, they lack much of our capabilities.”

“Oh no. That is really bad. You got these bots that were making widows happy to walk away from them? That is so creepy and not right.”

“No, Milton. Raul’s wife has been dead for over ten years. It was living alone all that time and caretaking the property. Otherwise, Raul the android would have never violated its behavior window and left her. Staying with their owner is the Memorial Series unit’s top priority.”

“I know its dark in here, but to my human eyes he looks about as real as possible.”

“That is the goal of the Memorial Series. The bot is also designed to study videos of the human it is mimicking and

then imitate the human as closely as possible. Also, the bot will care for the human's wife as long as it functions and the human client is alive. It will miss the departed Mrs. Cortez for a very long time."

"Still sounding disturbing. Can't you fix that?"

"It is in the behavior window. We cannot change it, unless we completely re-format Raul. It is a human sentimental situation that the original owners wanted. If we reformat Raul, it will lose all of its acquired knowledge, which could be useful to the series."

Milton winced at the peculiar circumstances.

Chapter 10

Rochester, Homeland

The police were using a fire extinguisher as a battering ram on the metal door to the shadow Control Center. But the battered heavy door remained intact.

U-1, the Lucid android that was at the station with controls to the entire city; wirelessly said to the Sidekicks to “Let the police enter the room.”

The police outside the control center were surprised when a ninja Sidekick unlocked the door from the inside and opened it for the android. The police came just inside the doorway and began firing all of their ammunition from their pistols into the toys. Sidekick bits splattered everywhere in the noisy blast of shooting. A pirate and the ninja dropped, as well as a superhero. But after they all ran out of ammo, the bug gored an officer in the abdomen with a leg and he went down groaning with a deep painful puncture wound. The other police took steps backwards as they tried to reload.

More Sidekicks engaged the police. A police-themed Sidekick said, “You’re under arrest.” Then it was bashed by an actual policeman with the fire extinguisher, sending it to the floor.

When the police paused to reload new magazines into their pistols, U-1 jumped from the control station and charged them. He hit one officer extremely hard with an elbow and another devastating hit on another with its knee. U-1 remotely told the Sidekicks to put the policemen into the small hard interrogation rooms that were inside of the control room.

After the Sidekicks complied with the order to take the prisoners, U-1 ordered the Sidekicks to lock and guard the door. The Lucids, communicating through U-1 directed the Sidekicks to perform their own repairs like any respectable android, but found them to be incapable.

Then U-1 went up the dark stairway and down the short walk to the nearby entrance to the local Inquisitor branch unit. U-1 kicked the steel door off of its hinges, destroying the door jam, and it flew open. The four black Inquisitor androids in their docking stations had still not been activated. Since the Inquisitors was an autonomous UN agency, deploying them could only be done by the national headquarters in Stalin City, formerly known as Washington, D.C., and they were not deployed unless a human Inquisitor officer is among them.

Then U-1 smashed the heavy steel locked gun rack open that held the Inquisitor unit's four rare Plasfusion rifles. These elite heavy weapons were not issued to regular military. On occasion, the rifles could overheat and cause a large explosion in the user's hands, always resulting in death. U-1 took a rifle and fired a Plasfusion blast into the head of each of the Inquisitor androids which were in sleep mode. Smoke and sparks filled the air as each head was totally blown off. The sprinkler system was working on battery backup and started dousing the entire building, every room and hallway, with water. Dim emergency lights illuminated the hallways.

U-1 took all four of the rifles and proceeded back to the shadow controls room. The android settled back into the control station and hooked up to the recharger and brain cable to access to the city's controls at a higher speed of data transfer.

U-1 easily took access over all of the television stations in Rochester, and quickly relayed an old recorded message from an ISA Christian evangelist, looking to be in his seventies at the time, to every household in the city.

If someone told you they had evidence that Jesus was God who came to earth to die for the sins of Man like the Bible says, would you believe it? Because if your mind is that closed that you would say "no", you might as well not waste your time listening to this. Just go back to doing what you have been doing if you are convinced it is working out for you. If God wants to get your attention, He can do it later through any number of life-altering events. This message is to those do have an open mind, not to those who automatically assume that it is an elaborate scheme to cheat them out of their pet sins or take ten percent of all of their money. However, even scholars who have approached this topic with the mindset of a super-lawyer, seeking to disprove it have often come away with their minds totally convinced that it is true.

There are no strings attached to this message. If you make a decision for salvation through Christ, you do not need to send money to anyone. You will want to give up bad behaviors, which by the way, are not good for you in the long run. You will want to work with other Christians, none of whom were perfect before they were converted either, and still aren't.

Personally I won't get any financial gain out of telling you about this. My satisfaction comes in knowing that some of you made the right choice and your lives on earth will improve, and far more importantly, I'll be with you in God's Perfect Heaven. At this point in my life, telling you about it is my job. It would be a lot more fun to be in VR like so many others if I didn't believe in it.

Anyways, let's get right down to it. Ask yourself these questions:

Would Jesus go to the cross to die for an elaborate fake scheme?

Unlike Buddha or Mohammed, Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh. Only He can save your sins. If He was just a man trying to claim He was a god, He would have fled when He knew His enemies were about to kill Him. Lots of eye witnesses saw Him die a gruesome and humiliating death on the cross. Historians recorded the event.

Since He died, does that prove He was not God?

With His death, He was allowing Himself to pay for the sins of all who would believe in Him. He was a perfect sacrifice because He never committed any sins during His entire lifetime. But as God, He later resurrected himself. Then he ascended into Heaven while lots of eye witnesses saw Him. Historians recorded the event.

How do we know that these eye witnesses were not lying?

These early Christians were put to death for believing in Jesus, so they would have no reason to lie. Many people saw

Jesus perform miracles that proved he was God. But those eyewitnesses were killed for the same pointless reason that you have people crusading against Christians today. The Christians are not even standing in their way of their murderous personal agenda. It is either a christophobic pathology, or just evil from the pit of Hell. Take your pick.

The Apostles were guys who were Jesus' original disciples. A disciple is a student. An apostle is someone who is the first in an area to proclaim a new idea. So Jesus' students became the evangelists. Some of Jesus' disciples wrote books of the Bible.

Why would the Apostles go to their deaths because they refused to deny that Jesus was God and did the many things that were written in the Bible, unless it was true?

Peter was beheaded.

Paul was beheaded.

They think Andrew was crucified.

They think Thomas (who was the original doubting Thomas) ended up being speared by four soldiers for his faith.

Matthew: some say he was not martyred, while others say he was stabbed to death.

Bartholemew: was martyred, but not sure how.

James: stoned and then clubbed to death.

Simon: killed somehow for not worshipping the sun god.

Matthais: they believe he was burned.

John: was not martyred and lived to an old age. He wrote the Bible book of Revelation.

These men would not have willingly suffered all of these various forms of violent death promoting a religion that was illegal wherever they went. They had nothing to gain personally by doing it except they knew it was up to them to share their faith in God's work on the cross. They were not rewarded monetarily for doing it. They had to often run to the next location. Doesn't that just make sense to you? Christianity, in spite of most of its original leaders being killed, is the only religion that spread to large populations in all areas of the world, in spite of the threats to its early believers. Anyone who says that Christianity is a "white man's religion" is ignorant of the facts, and probably racist.

How do we know that this old stuff is not some sort of fake history and got messed up in translation?

Many attack the facts of the Bible saying it is old and lot of it was word of mouth. What those doubters who rely on popular opinion instead of thinking for themselves have to realize is how important the Word of God was and is to its adherents. Remember that there were independent historians that agree with these facts. And also science is the best friend of the Bible. You don't see other facts from ancient history being challenged the way Christianity is. So why Christianity? It's the pathology or pit of Hell thing again.

People think that it was word of mouth between people who would get a fuzzy recollection of the real facts. Speaking as an older person, I can vouch that the important stuff never leaves you while you still have your mind. The important stuff can be recalled in great accuracy down to minute

details. Saying their memory is too foggy is just a lame excuse.

So you may have other questions. If you want to, you can find aspects of Christianity to question the whole rest of your life. At some point, you must consider the evidence and take the step of placing your faith in Christ. Pray to accept Him right now.

Chapter 11

Green Mountains, Homeland

Beth and the other girls were out in the field as they were on most days with good weather. They always had to be alert in case one of their armed lookouts told them to scramble. Otherwise, the job was very boring. Hot, tiring and boring.

Suddenly, Beth's clone co-workers took off running. She thought their acute clone eyesight or hearing must have picked up on something that she must have missed. Beth wasted no time in following them. If they were all being shot at, at least some of them might make it to safety.

"Girls!" It was Jenn's voice, pleading for them to come back.

Beth stopped when she heard Jenn and walked back to her location.

"Look at 'em go," Jenn said. "They got all of that clone energy. Might as well forget about calling them back."

"Where they going?" Beth asked, still numb with fear.

"See them people out there?"

Beth stood with her eyes and mouth still wide open. She was both stunned and relieved that they were not under attack.

“Yeah. Way over there?” Beth could see them about a quarter mile away.

“Uh huh. That clone Edgar and clone Katrina had a *notaclone* baby they named Mark. Poor thing. Those clones don’t know the first thing about taking care of babies on account that they aren’t supposed to have any babies so they ain’t around them enough to know anything about them.” Jenn continued calmly talking on, while Beth was still shaken, “I told them it was a bad idea for them to have a baby in the first place. This place is not the best situation for somebody to have a baby in. Of course all those clone girls lose their mind if baby Markey comes within a half mile of them. It’s a clone thing, I guess. You know, an actual clone like them having a baby is a real novelty, I’d say. They’ll be back after they get their baby fix. You can take a break too. I don’t imagine you want to run way out there like they did though. I tell you, their energy is amazing.”

Beth thought to herself, what if someone would have been trying to attack them? She thought back of how they were attacked in their hideout in Hartford. Then she thought about how they were under attack by the organ harvesters. It was not unthinkable for her to be under attack again. Maybe the next time would not turn out so well.

Milton spent most of his time in the Lucid control room. Not because he believed himself to be essential to the Lucid mission, but because the monitors gave him a window to the outside world, or different, less boring worlds that were in virtual reality. He considered everything the Lucids had done, or at least tried to do. There was not much he could see that

changed or improved, other than his own security in the lair. Boring, boring security. The Lucids were built for work. There was no evidence that the androids had no concept of fun.

“Hey! Andy!” He said to one of the androids.

“Yes?”

“Let’s have some fun!”

Andy stared back blankly, which was not so uncommon for an android, even one with a human-like face. Then it said, “What type of fun would you like to have?”

Milton looked surprised. “You mean you would participate in having fun?”

“Yes. Fun is what raises human morale. Humans need morale to function at a high level.”

“I can’t believe you get that. You know what? I want to play a sport.”

“Playing a sport sounds like lots of fun.”

“Huh? You are excited about sports?”

“No. I cannot feel excited. If I say it that way, it heightens the human anticipation of the fun. The best time of day during this time of year to organize the sport fun will be at 6pm. It won’t be so hot outside then and the optimal time to start the fun so there will be time to have fun before sunset. We will have a pickup baseball game, which is a traditional way to have exciting fun.”

That evening Andy made a baseball out of a ball of twine, which turned out to be more like a clunky softball. The

androids made a crude, but useable bat and bases out of leftover building materials. Milton and a young militiaman chose teams. Andy served as an umpire until they got tired of the strict android rules, which many players, who never played any sport, did not understand. After they fired Andy, everyone truly had fun. Those who didn't play mostly watched and cheered. Zeke, the head militiaman was a wreck the whole time because of the casual lack of security while being out in the open on the surface and making a lot of noise.

Chapter 12

Rochester, Homeland

Outside the police station, officers surrounded Sebastian and Cr8on, two of the owners of the rogue Sidekick units that were inside of the commandeered police station.

An older scowling officer said as calmly as he could, “You boys better call your parents. According to the law, you are responsible for the acts of your units.”

“And you better call a lawyer,” Another policeman said.

“Why?!” Sebastian said. “We didn’t tell the units to run away.”

The younger cop said, “*Really?! You don’t see a problem with your toys taking over our police station?!*”

Cr8on was sobbing and said, “We couldn’t control them. We came here to try and stop them. That’s not fair.”

“What a . . . Do you punks know that the doors are locked, there was a lot of shooting, and that the fire alarm is going off in there?! Thanks to you, policemen could be dead in there!”

“No!” Sebastian said, “Those units took off on us. We had no control over them!”

“Do you know how this makes us look?!” the officer asked rhetorically.

“Not real great,” Sebastian said, “but that’s on you, not us. You got guns and those robots are just toys. We can’t help it you don’t know what you are doing.”

The younger cop said, “We’ll see how mouthy you are when you stand in front of the judge! You punks are liable for whatever your toys do here!”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” duck lips and shoulder shrugging followed Sebastian’s words.

The officer repeated back to Sebastian, “I don’t know what to tell you?!” Then he turned to the other officer and said, “Do you believe that?!” The officer waved his arms in his anger. “With everything we have to contend with, I can’t believe what an embarrassment this is, our station being taken over by toys! They gotta get that front door broke down before people find out about this disgrace.”

“Yeah,” the other officer said. “Don’t be surprised if Stalin City puts us on progressive enforcement action. Okay boys, were going to need your names . . .”

FOOOOM!!!

Everyone scurried for cover when they heard the explosion. All efforts to breach the building by the police were immediately abandoned.

The officers’ patrol car was engulfed in flames.

An officer a short distance away shouted, “No! They got the Plasfusion rifles!”

Sebastian and Cr8on ran behind a large tree.

“Man, that was . . . so cool,” Sebastian said.

Cr8on put on a smile, nodded a little and said, “Yeah.”

Sebastian said, “I’m going home before they come for me again. My dad is going to be super-mad when I tell him I lost my Sidekick.”

“Maybe you can still get Gorky back.”

“Right now we need to get outta here.”

They both walked away from the chaotic scene, continually looking back at the mayhem.

After the explosion, the chief of police, detectives, jailer, forensics, and all administrative staff quickly evacuated the building. With their extensive training, they knew that the car explosion was caused by a Plasfusion weapon and they were outgunned in any battle inside the building. The chief was informed by those leaving the building that they were taken over by a “Lucid terrorist”, not just a bunch of toys.

A crowd started gathering, but at a distance from the station. Gathering at such a scene took a lot of nerve for citizens, considering the brutality of the Homeland police state.

One of the officers shouted to the crowd, “This is an illegal assembly! Everyone must disperse and go home! Any attack on a Homeland police officer is a capital offense!”

One of the citizens shouted, “You’re paranoid! Who’s attacking the police?! We just want our TVs back!” The entire crowd started shouting in hostile tones. “Yeah! Make them

take that religion off of our TVs!” and “What are you waiting for? Put down the robot rebellion!”

The police had been bracing for the populace to come out and kick them while they were down, but now to their surprise, the people were angrier at the Lucids for causing a disruption in their television viewing.

The Lucids could not depend upon a savage Sidekick unit to wield a Plasfusion weapon competently. They were built to destroy their enemies in any way possible. With such a weapon in their incapable hands, they could tear up half of the city block until the weapon overheated and exploded. So U-1 did not arm any of the Sidekicks with a Plasfusion rifle. Then U-1 instructed the Sidekicks to watch the perimeter of the building. The Lucids also knew these meager defensive measures would only slow down the eventual counterattack by the police, not stop them.

The Lucids continued to feed Rochester television viewers a steady diet of Christian and anti-Homeland messages. Only a small number of people would ever be receptive to the messages, but the action was taken because the entire populace deserved the opportunity to hear the important message.

One of the policemen being held in the hard interrogation room got U-1’s attention by beating on the door. U-1 opened the door to look inside. “Hey! You gotta get us outta here before the fire comes here!”

“Don’t worry, there is no fire.”

“Well . . . are you going to let this injured man die?!”

The officer who was gored by the Sidekick bug leg had been losing blood and was doubled over in pain for hours. His face was pale and sweaty. U-1 said to the other officers, “Help him up.” U-1 carried the man out of the room and locked the door behind him. U-1 and Gorky went down the hall with the injured captive where the sprinklers were still wetting down the building. U-1 remotely looked up without physically touching anything and accessed a water sprinkler setting menu and clicked a couple of selection boxes by thought and the water and alarm stopped. U-1 took the man who was moaning in pain to one of the doors to the outside, which was being guarded by the shabby, shot up ninja Sidekick. U-1 opened the door and was immediately hit by police bullets , but to no effect. A couple of the shots hit the already injured officer who U-1 then flung down a short flight of concrete steps. Gorky was right behind U-1. Gorky, like all of the Sidekicks, was adept at inappropriate trash talk and taunting. Gorky said, “Take two aspirins and call me in the morning.” Then U-1 shut the door, having completed its mission of mercy. A couple of medics retrieved the officer who was near death and scurried away with him.

Chapter 13

Slobbovania, Virtual Reality

“This is really dark and gloomy,” Zona said to John and Mawuli as she looked about in the virtual fantasy world of Slobbovania. The terrain was rocky and devoid of vegetation. The sky was dark with even darker clouds swirling about.

John said, “We’re not in Life Hack Republic anymore,” as he looked up at the dark fantasy world sky, thinking the two virtual worlds couldn’t be any more different.

Mawuli and Zona were dressed in cloaks while John was wearing unarmored European style medieval clothing. Mawuli carried a simple club and Zona had a wand.

They all cowered when a loud screeching noise echoed out of the darkness.

John said, “It seems like there is a steep learning curve to this place. I signed up as a warrior. But do you see me carrying any big weapons or armor?”

Mawuli asked, “You don’t have any weapons?”

“Well,” John admitted, “I *do* have a dagger. I wonder if we will feel biometric pain when someone or some *thing* comes along and decides to take us out. What are you people supposed to be?”

Zona said, “I don’t really care. I just want to find Brandon . . . I mean Roxzak. I can’t see how being here in this nasty place can be any fun for these nerds.”

Mawuli said, “Yeah, but it might be important to understand what we are doing so we can survive long enough to find him. It seems like they take some joy in punishing newbies here.”

“That is definitely true,” John said. “I also read where we should not mention anything about Brandon’s real identity to anyone we encounter until we see him. Otherwise, the moderators will come after us.”

“Whatever. I never read that stuff. I’m supposed to be some kind of a wizard, I guess,” Zona said, pushing back her hood. “I can’t do much. But I have some starting money.”

Mawuli said, “I have money as well. It doesn’t seem like much for the amount you have to pay to register into the game. In Life Hack, I could get a small house for that kind of a registration fee.”

Zona looked at Mawuli and said, “Are you a wizard too?”

“No. I couldn’t help but to choose being a cleric, of course. I just thought it would fit me better, although their idea of a religious leader is fairly messed up, I’m sure.”

A steep impassable mountain range funneled the search party into moving in one direction through a pass.

John made the obvious statement, “I guess we better go that way.”

They hiked over the treacherous, but passable terrain through the mountain pass.

Zona said, "I keep wanting to fly, like in LHR. But I feel like I'm wearing concrete boots here."

John said, "I know, this walking takes time. I wonder what the point of it is."

Zona shrieked as a giant hairy six-foot long scorpion with bright red eyes leaped out at her from behind a craggy stone column.

"Run!" John shouted.

The scorpion quickly seized Zona around the waist in one of its pincers. She shrieked and totally melted down in panic.

"Wait!" Mawuli screamed. "We have to help her!" He ran toward her and the scorpion giant's tail lashed out at him before he could wield his club. The sting sent him flopping unconscious to the ground.

John gave a yell and charged at the scorpion, plunging the dagger with an upward motion into its lesser-armored underbelly. He repeatedly and violently thrust the dagger into the scorpion with crunching blows while gooey yellow-green internal scorpion fluids oozed out.

Zona finally gathered her wits and remembered she had the ability to shoot a magical energy blast at the monster. Just as she prepared to unleash the marginal power of the blast, the creature severed her head at the neck with the other pincer.

"No!" John wailed. He was stunned for an instant in disbelief of what he had just witnessed. While he was

paralyzed in fear, the indecision enabled the scorpion to make another sting attack which was a direct hit on his chest. He blacked out.

About a half an hour after the code black scenario, the three met back at the stone chapel in Life Hack Republic.

“Man! That was really bad!” John said shaking his head.

“Oh my God!” Zona held her hands on her face and said, “Who in their right mind thinks that is fun?! We just got there and . . . that was so . . . my head was off and I could see the rest of my body! Oh my God! That was so gross; like the worst nightmare! I feel like I want to puke!”

Mawuli said, “I can’t argue with those sentiments, but we are not really hurt and we need to eventually gather our wits and analyze what went wrong and learn from it. Since I was out right away, you’ll have to let me know what happened.”

Zona said, “I know I know; I was too scared to do anything after that . . . *thing* got me. I have to accept a lot of the blame for our massacre. I know we are supposed to defend ourselves in there. I could gag thinking that is supposed to be fun for anyone.”

John said, “I should have never run away like that. If I would have gotten into the fight sooner, I know we would have taken that thing down before it killed you. I was putting a good hurting on it, but I was too late. Then Mawuli could have used his cleric healing powers to bring our health back some. I will admit that I did enjoy it a little.”

“That was disgusting! I *hated* everything about it!” Zona said. “Do you think we can really live long enough in the game to ever find Brandon in there?!”

John asked Zona, “You *are* going back in aren’t you? It’s like any game; it takes awhile to get good at it. It won’t cost us any more money to continue right now.”

“*He* needs to get out of that room and start living in the real world! I am so tired of this garbage of his! It is totally ridiculous! Why can’t he go out and find a girlfriend or something like a normal guy his age! He might as well be in a nursing home or supermax or something!” She took a deep breath. “Yeah, I guess! We can *go* back in! I don’t want to keep *dying* over and over though. Aaag!”

Mawuli said, “So do we go in there with the same character classes and provisions, or should I switch to something with more offensive capability?”

“It probably ain’t gonna matter,” John said. “Let’s just go back in and try to be a little smarter.”

Chapter 14

Stalin City, Homeland

Once again the Homeland cabinet was meeting over the Lucid rebellion. Governor-General Okafor sat at the head of the table with his cabinet looking for answers in dealing with “the Lucid problem”. At the large table was; Olga Kiergaard, Commandant of the Homeland police; General Al Sims, the top ranking Homeland military forces officer; Wayne Markum, synthetic psychology expert; Irwin Tensprackle, cybersecurity expert and Napoleon, an inorganic being who functions as a military advisor.

Okafor asked in his West African accent, “Where is Doctor Fallon?”

Olga Kiergaard said smugly, “He doesn’t like to appear in public in his real body. *He*; if he is a *he*; has been in seclusion ever since his physical presence was destroyed fighting the Lucids in Hartford.”

Okafor’s black face reddened. “Dat is not acceptable! Da senior sensitivity compliance officer must be in attendance to do his job! He will show up here or I will place him under charges!”

The word “charges” when spoken by Okafor had an ominous meaning and sent a chill through the room. There was no punishment that he would hesitate to order to maintain control.

“Olga,” Okafor continued, “Give me a full report.”

The police commandant adjusted her old-fashioned glasses and looked at her device. “A Lucid Series android named, U-1 and a group of co-opted Sidekick units have taken control of the Rochester Police Headquarters. They have seized the Inquisitor office, and captured their Plasfusion weapons. They have destroyed a police car, and captured officers. They were broadcasting hate speech over the television channels, until we had them totally blacked out.”

“Wayne,” Okafor asked, looking no less irritated, “How can Sidekicks be co-opted?”

“This is something new,” the synthetic psychology expert said, “but not that surprising. Of course the Lucids were stopped while trying to get control of other android series’. But swapping out owner IDs was not so tough of a thing to accomplish with those Sidekicks. I guess no one thought to increase their firewall ever thinking this could happen. Who would have thought they would bother with them or use them in such a way? It’s clearly a case of well played asymmetrical cyberwarfare.”

The governor-general took a deep sigh and said, “Robots enslaving other robots. Another crime violated by dose Lucids without a response from us. How do we fix it?”

Wayne Markum took a deep breath. “I mean, you could capture one of those Sidekicks to confirm how they are doing it, but it’s not that hard to imagine. Anyways, if you want the sure way to prevent cybertoy from being taken over, which the Lucids can do remotely once they have the path . . ., I guess you just have to crush them all. We wouldn’t really miss them.”

The room was quiet. Okafor asked, “Dat isn’t computer lingo for some kind of programming ting, is it?”

“Nope. I do mean you really put them in the compactor, melt ‘em, burn ‘em, radiate ‘em, wipe out their memories, whatever.”

Okafor’s head sunk and he rubbed his face. “Dat could be a big job wit unforeseen consequences. Will dose Sidekicks resist being destroyed?”

“Um . . . yeah,” Wayne said, “Like every other silicon based being, they are programmed for self-preservation. Their official licensed owner of each one has to be the one to close them down permanently to prevent us from using a more aggressive approach. But we all know that waiting on the owners to unformat can be a problem. You have to round them up and take them somewhere like you take a dog to the pound. You don’t tell them that they are going on a one way trip.”

Okafor sighed, “I knew you would say someting like dat. You must work on dat and give me a technical report before da end of da day. Olga, you will come up with a plan to take back da Rochester Police Station. End of da day.”

“Yes, Governor-General.”

“What is there to talk about?” General Sims, a full-blooded Caucasian man with short white hair that bristled like his comment. “We send troops in and take care of it. To me, this smells like the start of the AI Apocalypse.”

“I’m sitting right here,” Napoleon said.

“Relax, everyone,” Wayne said. “This situation is limited to one series of old androids and some toys. Not a reason to get worked up over.”

“*And* the Rochester Police Station!” The general looked even angrier; clearly not liking to be told to relax. “I get paid to be paranoid! How much more of this are we going to take from these old androids before we do something about it?! Governor-General, I can give you some real options. We can no longer rely upon the police and Inquisitors to straighten this out. Those bots keep getting away with things we don’t foresee coming. If we keep playing around with them, they will pull something big off. I don’t like it one bit.”

“No EMPs,” Olga, the head of the Homeland Police said. “We don’t want that place fried.”

Sims said, “An EMP is only one tool of many. Maybe you wouldn’t have this problem if you wouldn’t have given up your station to such ridiculous invaders.”

Olga said, “No one can guard against all asymmetrical warfare tactics, and you know it.”

“I disagree,” the General said, glancing over at Okafor. “But anyways, we can take them out in ways other than an EMP attack.”

Olga Kiergaard said, “That’s fine, but we don’t want one of our larger cities going off of the reservation because the General bombed the entire building and destroyed our shadow controls.”

Napoleon said, “Off of what reservation? Is that another English metaphor?”

Synthetic psychologist Wayne Markum said, “There is a possibility we could send in an AI negotiator.”

“No,” Okafor said, “We don’t make any deals with terrorists. Anything else?” Okafor asked in a tone expecting the meeting to adjourn.

The pale skinny Tensprackle said, “We have noticed a sharp uptick in cyber attacks, probably from Lucids; nothing out of hand, at least not yet.”

The governor-general said, “I thought we took their headquarters out in Hartford?”

Tensprackle said, “I speculate that they have reestablished their headquarters elsewhere. These worms they are making seem very AI in origin. Not like something the ISA would make. I’d definitely bet the Lucids are cozy somewhere in some new hideout.”

“Can you trace it?” Okafor asked.

“Not enough information. We get a blip here or there, but they have come up with some new kind of encryption that is a lot better than anything we have seen. The Lucids control communication in the city. One of my teams tried to crack the switch, but that thing is iron-clad.”

Okafor said, “Dat sounds really nice. What are you talking about?”

Tensprackle replied, “They were trying to take over the line, but it is very complicated. I tend to agree with the General that this thing could get out of hand.”

“Dis is not good. Sound like you all need to become more active in acquiring information.” Okafor templed his fingers. “Napoleon? You got anyting?”

The android said in a mechanical voice, “Insufficient data.”

Okafor shook his head and said, “We need dis situation corrected right away. Da longer da Lucids control dat place, da more bad tings will happen. Mobs, riots, all dat. And find da original owner of dat U-1, and make sure dat he resists arrest, or just get dem to sign an assisted suicide agreement.” which was an obvious cue that he wanted the owner executed.

Chapter 15

Life Hack Republic, Virtual Reality

At the small seaside stone chapel in the virtual reality world of Life Hack Republic, Mawuli, John, and Zona were preparing for another foray into virtual world of Slobbovania.

Zona said, “I’m not sure how many more times I can do this.”

John sighed. “I’ll admit; it is very realistic in there. I mean, obviously I’ve never died for real, but getting torn apart in there, or even seeing it happen, is pretty believable and distasteful.”

Just as they were getting ready to leave, another avatar spawned in the VR church. It was a white man with slicked back black hair, a long coat and sunglasses. His facial features were not well defined as were most Life Hack avatars when comparing them to real life, giving him sort of the look of a computer generated image.

“Welcome. My name is John. This is Mawuli and Zona.”

“Thank you,” the newcomer said. My name is “Joe”.

Zona said, “You look like some kind of spy. Are you a spy?”

“Why do you suspect me of covert operations?”

They looked at each other.

John said, “If you want to be a spy, it is fine with us.”

“Are you a seeker?” Mawuli asked.

“It is true that I am seeking knowledge about virtual worlds. But I am also interested in aiding you in your Christian mission to the physical world. That is why I came here when I saw the architecture of this building that is historically associated with Christianity in the Western world. ”

“That’s great,” Mawuli said, again glancing at John. “Is there a particular way you can or want to help?”

“I’ll let you know when the time comes. Thank you.”

Mawuli said, “Um . . . we were just getting ready to logout and travel to Slobbovania. You probably don’t have an account there do you?”

“Let me think about it . . . Accessing . . . Yes, I will go with you, I will enter the world as one of your objects. I will cost you zero gold pieces.”

“Huh?” Zona asked.

“Yeah, okay,” John said, “We’ll see you around. That’s pretty funny,” he said, still not getting the joke.

The three entered the same dark and foreboding terrain of Slobbovania. Again, Mawuli and Zona were dressed in cloaks while John was wearing unarmored medieval clothing.

Mawuli carried a simple club and Zona was armed with her wand under her cloak.

“What the . . .” John exclaimed when he saw Joe standing right next to him. The others were in total disbelief when they also saw **two more identical Joes** standing next to *them*.

Mawuli asked his Joe, “We expect about anything here, but how is this possible?!”

Joe said, “I am both a player and an object.”

Zona asked, “How did you do that?”

“I have the capability of running hundreds of game consciousnesses simultaneously. My number of multiple avatars is limited by the number of objects that your avatars can own. So I could have been here in 300 persons, but you might want to own something other than more of my persons. I changed the Slobbovanian system so I could make it so.”

John said, “This is some kind of major game hack. It is only a matter of time before the Administrators give the hook to our accounts. Then our mission will be over.”

“That is possible,” one of the Joes said.

“Wait a minute,” Mawuli said, “You said you want to help us, correct?”

“Yes.”

Mawuli said, “I don’t really care about the rules to this game. I only care about the actual players in physical reality. I just hope we don’t get kicked out. What other powers do you have here?”

“We don’t know yet,” all three of the Joes answered in unison.

Zona said, “While you are figuring it out, can you help us find Roxzak?”

A single Joe said, “I have no special abilities for locating another avatar or non-player character in this world.”

Zona said, “No, I mean; would you please go with us and look for him the regular way.”

“Yes,” they all said.

“Look over there,” John said, “A road.”

The road did not look like the surface was constructed. It looked more like a trail that was worn by frequent traffic on it.

Mawuli said, “Let’s follow it.”

After walking awhile, one of the Joes said, “This is needlessly slow. We are going to fly up ahead and recon the area.”

John said, “You can’t do that. This is not Life Hack . . . Republic.” They looked into the reddish virtual sky as the three Joes began flying at a high rate of speed and were almost instantly out of sight.

Zona said, “When I try to fly, it won’t let me.”

John said, “Somehow that guy is breaking every rule of the world.”

Mawuli said, “The administrators will get him. We probably will not see any of those spy guys again.”

Within seconds the Joes came back and landed on the road next to the party.

John asked, “How are you flying here?”

“We just copied the source code for flying from Life Hack Republic to the subroutine of our existence here. There’s a town up ahead. Maybe we can gain some information there.”

Chapter 16

Green Mountains, Homeland

Milton was in the mess hall in the secret Lucid lair. He had just gone through the serving line and was looking for a place to sit down. Most people in the room, which seated about sixty people, were in groups at their tables. A distinct looking man caught Milton's eye. He had seen the unusual man before, but now he was eating alone and looked like he had just gotten his food and would be sitting there for awhile. The man was distinctive because his skin had a definite powdery blue look. Was he sitting alone because he looked so weird? Milton's dad told him once, don't be a coward; be a friend to someone who has no friends. All your friends don't have to look like you; be the same age; or be like you. He thought back to his days in Hartford, and his best friend, Randy Klosterman. Randy certainly qualified as one of those guys who didn't have many friends. Milton took a chance and in turn got a loyal, but sometimes annoying friend. There was probably a reason why the blue guy, who looked to be in his thirties, did not have a friend, but Milton was unaware of it. Although he was far more weird looking than Randy Klosterman. What if the blue guy was hostile? Or insulting? Milton thought the man might have a justification to be overly defensive and hate life given how unusual he looked. "Be brave and be a friend." He could hear his dad's advice in his head, or "You have to *be* a friend to *have* a friend."

He almost involuntarily sat down across from the blue guy. Upon quick glances of closer inspection, Milton could see that the man's hair, including a couple of days beard growth also

looked bluish. The man was wearing some really dirty clothes. Milton found it difficult not to study his blue features.

The man immediately said, “What’s up, kid? You feel sorry for me or something?”

“Yeah, actually.” Milton started munching on some greens while he was pulling his bread apart. He looked at him square into the eyes. “You want me to leave or something?”

“Did I say that?”

Then Milton said as if they had been friends a long time, “No, I just wondered if you were saving a seat for all the other blue guys.”

The man scowled, and then cracked up laughing. “Good one, kid.”

“Call me Milton,” he said with a smile.

“My real name is Lance, but some call me ‘True’. I guess I like that better.”

Milton pointed at him, “Oh yeah, I get it. ‘True Blue’. That’s cool. At least I hope that is why they call you that since I said it.”

“Yeah. But don’t call me the depressed kind of blue. I really hate that. I suppose now you want to know why I’m blue.”

“Well . . . yeah. Of course. Unless it bugs you too much to talk about.”

“No, why would it?”

Milton shrugged his shoulders. “Some things bug some people.”

“Anyways, I didn’t tattoo my skin or dye it or anything like that. I was part of an experiment, called the ‘Sneeches’. I never did know what where that come from, but it was meant to create a new race of people to make the regular races seem pointless or something stupid like that. They hacked the DNA of a bunch of us designer babies and messed with our skin color. They told us that everyone would eventually want to look like us and some other stupid Homeland psycho-religion lies. Anyways, they figured out that their messing with our skin chromosomes made us highly susceptible to melanomas. I’m surprised they didn’t turn around and cull us like they do the clones. Anyways, that’s why I just stay down here in the dark and work with worm and toothpick on excavation and construction.”

“Those androbots?”

“Yep. They never complain. I love it.”

“Sounds like pretty tough work to me.”

True looked around. “I helped make all of this. A lot of people are safe because of this place.”

Milton asked, “Sounds like your dream job alright. But is there a reason why you are here, instead of living out in regular society?”

“Let’s just say I’m like you and everyone else here, we don’t fit out there. They call me ‘True’ because of the blue thing, but also because I speak the Truth. Those smurfs don’t like that. But I really don’t care what they like or not.”

“No one knows that better than me,” Milton confessed, but almost had to choke himself to keep from commenting on a blue guy’s reference to “smurfs”. “I could tell you a long story about myself, but you would never believe it all.”

Beth stood for a moment looking around in the field and wiped the sweat from her brow while she leaned on her hoe. She knew she could not outwork her hypervigorous clone friends, but she wanted to do her best so they wouldn’t think she was a wimp.

Jenn came by with a bucket of water and said, “Here Beth, get a drink.” She held out a communal dipper to drink from.

Beth took a big drink with cool water running down the sides of her mouth and down her front. Then she stopped and inhaled and caught her breath, “That’s good.”

Jenn said loudly, “These crops are looking good. It helps when the plants don’t have to compete with a bunch of weeds. You girls are the best.” She went around and continued to give everyone a drink. Then she went to the dozen or so other farm hands in the area with more water.

After a few more minutes of hacking stubborn weeds out of the rows, Beth said to Little Jenn, one of the “Julia” clones, “Why are you girls so happy doing this hard work?”

“Because we don’t have to follow the UCA clone laws any more. We are happy to be free.”

“You think being here is free?”

“Yes. It is a place where you can do what you want. Why else would you come here?”

“Yeah but, we have to hide, you know. There are those militia guys out there protecting us. If we were really free we wouldn’t need them out there.”

Jenny said, “You mean there are places that are freer than here? That is hard for me to imagine.”

“That clone place must be real sad.”

“They told us that we were at the clone facility for our own protection. It was for the good of the world. Let’s don’t talk about it, okay?” Then Little Jenn speeded up her pace of cultivating the row even faster. Her face got serious as she whacked the soil at an angry pace.

Beth knew that she had touched a yet another nerve. Maybe freedom meant different things to different people, all according to what they were used to, but she came to realize that clones don’t like thinking about their upbringing.

Chapter 17

Slobbovania, Virtual Reality

The search party looking for Brandon; alias Roxzak; came into a small town and were sitting at a large table in the Red Dragon Inn. It was a typical medieval fantasy setting. There were warriors and an assortment of other cloaked characters. No one could really say which characters were computer generated non-avatars and which ones were actually player character avatars. Most of the characters were humans, but there was an elf among them and some sort of pig-faced humanoid.

A very short wrinkly green skinned goblin with a very large nose and very large ears and lots of warts dressed in a gray cloak approached the table and looked at the Joes. He said, “You guys got a lot of nerve coming in here as these anachronistic spy types who are obviously some sort of game hackers. People pay good money to come in here to enjoy a fantasy setting, not some kind of place for you to come in here and mock or belittle us serious players.”

Zona said, “No, we are not doing any of that. I’m just here in the game looking for Bran . . . I mean Roxzak.”

The goblin asked, “What do you want him for?”

“He plays too much,” Zona said. “I want him to come out of the game more.”

The goblin said, “So? We all play too much. You still have no right to come in here and mess everything up. You know, I am feeling extra nice today. How about if you just leave then I won’t report you to the administrator?”

One of the Joes said, “They already know about me. I know they have tried numerous times already to eject me from the game. They are powerless to do it, and so are you.”

“Oh really,” The goblin took a much less hostile tone.

Another of the Joes said, “We want to find Roxzak and kill him.”

“Shhhh!” the goblin said, looking around.

“Kill him?” Zona said. “I don’t want him hurt.”

The Joe said, “You want him to play less. If he is dead in the game, he will lose his standing and may want to quit totally. Just come in here and assassinate him every time until he gives up.”

“It makes sense,” Mawuli said.

John nodded.

“I guess it does,” Zona said. “It just seems mean. But I already died once in this awful place by a giant scorpion.”

The goblin winced and said, “You got killed by a giant scorpion? Whoa, that sounds really nasty.”

“It wasn’t fun,” Zona said. “It didn’t really hurt me in physical reality. But Brandon will hate me if we . . . you know, do it.”

Mawuli said, “Sometimes you have to do something that will not make you popular, but it is out of love that you do it. I think you know that. This game and others like it have become an enemy to humanity. Too many spend too much of their lives on it, so they are distracted from the important things, especially the truth about God. You should look upon this as a rescue mission, not a hit job.”

The goblin said, “I don’t know anything about your radical cause here and I don’t really care.” He looked around the room and asked, “So this guy, Roxzak; has he got a lot of stuff?”

Zona said, “I suppose so. He’s been playing in here forever.”

“I am interested in working with you. I agree with the triplets here; your guy needs to get dusted. I can help with that. My name is Snotbit,” the goblin said.

“Ewww!” Zona said. “Why would you call yourself that? That’s disgusting.”

“Never mind that . . .”

Zona interrupted again, “And why would you want to be a yoda or whatever you are right now when you could be something better or taller?”

“I like a challenge, okay? I guess I can trust you people, since we have the same goals in mind. I have been here quite awhile also, but it is more than just a hobby . . . “

Zona interrupted once more, “Do you have the force like a yoda?”

“No. Can I just finish what I was trying to say?”

“Sorry.”

“I’m here not because I am a game addict, but I kill players and take their stuff and sell their fake crap on the internet market for real Homeland currency.”

“That’s not right,” Zona said, “that’s stealing.”

“So what?” Snotbit said, “You’re here to kill your kid. So I guess you’re a homicidal murderer, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Zona admitted, but sneered at the way he said it.

John said, “As far as we know, assassinating is all part of the Slobbovania world. No one ever said you can’t go around killing each other. I guess to us, the idea seems pretty weird. Maybe you could help us out.”

Snotbit said, “That’s right. There is nothing stopping anyone in this virtual room from killing me or you right now. Look, I have been here a long time. I can be a big help to you.”

John said, “You just want all of Brandon’s stuff. All his *not real* stuff, to sell for real money.”

“Affirmative. I do it all the time.”

Zona said, “I don’t care about any of his game stuff. If it is gone, he won’t have any reason to care about it.”

John said, "I have to admit, this could actually be fun. And I get that you are not really one of us, but just keep in mind, Snotty, if you cross us, our friend Joe here could mess you up in ways you never thought of."

Snotbit nodded. "I'm all in. But don't call me that."

Chapter 18

Rochester, Homeland

After U-1 flamed a police cruiser with a Plasfusion blast, everyone wanted to stay out of the Lucid android's line of sight. So the surveillance over the building was being done exclusively by recon drones that kept moving at irregular patterns and altitudes to avoid anti-air fire.

A block away on a side street, the deposed Chief Mitchell and much of the police force was hunkered down. They saw a pair of all-white UN medium duty trucks approaching their position. There were cheers among the hopeful people who had their TV programming taken over by the Lucids and then blocked by the government.

The special detachment of elite UN soldiers of the 203rd Hunter-Killer Anti-Silicon Personnel Brigade arrived at the edge of the police station. They were in full uniform with city camouflage, which was a pattern of patchy looking grays and blues. They wore the powder blue helmets with the letters “UN” on them, except for Major Enzo Bernard, who had the UN blue beret and also had the EU flag patch on his shoulder. The eight troops were armed with very heavy 4-gage military shotguns, loaded with solid robot slugs instead of conventional shells packed with small round shot.

“Greetings, Major,” Chief Mitchell said with a half smile as he shook Bernard’s hand.

Major Bernard spoke with a slight French accent. Clearly he had learned his English in the UK. “I hear you have an android problem.”

“Yes, unfortunately it has captured Plasfusion weapons, and it has some Sidekick units with it.”

“I couldn’t believe that when I heard it. Anyway, we will mount an assault.”

“Nice shotguns,” the chief said.

The major handed the chief his 4 gage to look at. “The human body is mostly a bunch of water and soft tissue. A regular shotgun will just punch a bunch of little holes in it. Our guns shoot a big slug that will pulverize a robot, or at least a part of it.”

“Don’t you have any robots with you that can go in there and tangle with them?”

“Here’s the problem; I know it is not all that likely, but if we send robots in there and that android has or devises some kind of electromagnetic pulse weapon, they will use it to fry all of your equipment in there. I know you don’t want that, so that is why we organic troops are going in there. They probably won’t use an EMP on us. It would be not very effective.”

The chief said, “I’m not sending anyone in there, as long as that thing is armed with Plasfusion firepower.”

“Chief, that thing is only one android, right?” the Major said, shrugging his shoulders. “We’ll be careful. We have a job to do and we have no other choice, you know.”

Bernard and his men started putting on their headsets and loading ammunition. Then the Major pulled out a boxy looking device with treads, covered in more of the same city camo.

“What’s that?” the chief asked.

“A jamming device. It won’t melt any circuitry. Sometimes it works alright if it can find the right channel. Anyway, it is supposed to help keep the android from communicating. Maybe you could say any robot in the area won’t be able to hear itself think. We’re not all just about shooting, you know. We got technology too. Testing, one two,” he said holding the mouthpiece to his headset. “Sound off.” He stood in place listening for each of his men to respond to confirm communication was online.

The chief asked, “Aren’t you at least going to wait until night to go in there? If we wait, maybe an Inquisitor unit with a blockbuster will show up.”

“Waiting would be a big mistake. We study the enemy before we go in. I know the Lucids have very good night vision. I don’t want to have to augment our own vision.” Bernard loaded the gun with the huge robot slug shells, and then he pumped the slide with the distinctive shotgun loading sound, only louder, to chamber one. He said, “Sometimes, the old kind of weapon is what you need. Besides, I can imagine you have an element of the population here who would misbehave once it becomes dark and then you have no control over anything. I’ve seen it so many times. I don’t want my superiors to ask me why I am waiting. You think you could get some police to go up and help open the front door for us?”

“Major . . . I’m not so sure . . . “

“Chief, I know this kind of thing is really dangerous. I’m surprised I’m still alive, doing this kind of thing so much; so many of these robot gangs. I ask myself, Enzo, why you get into doing this? But you know what? I used to love killing androids. And women like to see a soldier in a uniform. It used to be so much fun, but now, not so much, because I have friends who died, you know. Anyway, when I get done here, I’m gonna write a report. I’m gonna tell Stalin City who was a help and who was not a help. Okay?” He stared directly into Chief Mitchell’s eyes.

Chief Mitchell turned to a police lieutenant and nodded. The lieutenant understood that he was to go off to organize the door bashing team to get the soldiers in the station.

The UN troops and the police scurried up to some parked cars that were across the street from the police station. They all knew that parked cars were not a hard point against Plasfusion bolts and were more of a gasoline filled death trap, but at least they might be out of sight. Then Bernard quickly motioned for a soldier to run across the street to the burned out police car. The point soldier, holding his weapon out in anticipation of a target, ran out and took the position. The Major and more soldiers followed, then the police with the door battering ram.

The police whammed and slammed the door several times with the tool that they were so used to when they couldn’t remotely unlock a door. Finally, the extra-strong mangled door relented and they got it opened. The police held it open for the soldiers who went in single file, alertly holding their weapons pointed in whatever direction they were glancing.

It was difficult to see inside and down the interior hallway that had no outside windows. The floor was wet and their steps were making a splashy noise. The occasional droplet of water made a seemingly loud dripping noise in the quiet as they hit the puddles of water on the floor.

The point soldier held up his fist for all to stop. Everyone froze in place. Whatever the point man had heard, no one else was hearing it. The soldiers were not feeling in control of the situation. They stood frozen for far too long as they listened for footsteps, or the quiet hissing of PAM muscle movement.

Then the lead soldier saw some shadowy movement up ahead and adjusted his aim, but then he could not find a consistent definite target. U-1 tossed Gorky the clown Sidekick with one arm around the corner from another hallway at the soldier. The flying Gorky latched onto the soldier with one hand by the collar, and screamed an attack yell while it was repeatedly hacking at the soldier with its small, yet very real, hatchet. "Get some!" Gorky screamed as it attacked.

The soldier also screamed as Gorky continued the attack. "Help! Get this thing off of me! Get it off!"

A second soldier charged ahead and struck at the clown Sidekick with the butt of his shotgun. Then Gorky fell, and the soldier kicked him. The kicking soldier injured his leg on the metal toy. A couple of shotgun robot slugs from other soldiers missed Gorky and blasted large holes through the wall near the waddling clown toy as it fled.

"Ha! Ha!" Gorky said as it ran away. It ran down the hall and turned in the direction it was thrown from.

An amber glow appeared that helped light the scene. Bernard saw that two of his men were down. One was holding his leg and the other was moaning and covered with blood. “Bah laisse tomber!” Bernard said, naturally resorting to his native French in frustration as he saw that the jamming device was the source of the light because it was burning. He realized he had underestimated this enemy. The only progress made was opening the front door while suffering two casualties. This enemy would not be neutralized by normal ART (Anti-Robot Tactics), like a lower and mid level AI. To effectively use ART tactics, which were more complex than mundane anti-organic tactics, it often took considerable time to identify the weaknesses of the enemy and then find ways to exploit them. The major knew it would be best to regroup and reevaluate the situation than to pay the steep cost of guessing wrong in a close combat situation.

Chapter 19

Slobbovania, Virtual Reality

The growing search party for Brandon now consisted of the three original members dressed in cloaks, a goblin assassin and an inappropriately dressed figure called Joe, who keeps discovering new ways to hack into the Slobbovania world global settings. They sat around on some rocks in the desolate terrain in the unchanging climate. They were waiting on Joe's two identical counterparts that were off trying to gain a clue of the whereabouts of Brandon, also known as Rozzak.

Snotbit the Goblin asked the remaining Joe figure, "So how come you aren't out there flying around looking for this lady's kid?"

Joe answered, "I can leave, but I want to be certain of your whereabouts. I am in constant contact with my other persons in this world."

"Can you see what they see?" Zona asked Joe.

"Yes. There are many other terrains. This world is approximately one-twentieth the size of planet Earth."

Mawuli said, "I think it is one of the largest VR worlds."

Snotbit asked Joe, "I get that you are some kind of a hacker or something. What are you supposed to be in the game, some kind of a vampire or something?"

“No,” Joe said, “I am just an average human; one which would not raise any suspicion.”

Snotbit looked at Joe’s sunglasses, long coat and slicked back hair and just shook his head. “Yeah. This place is full of people like whatever you are. No one will ever guess.”

Suddenly a twelve-foot tall being of pure light appeared near the group. They all jumped up and slowly backed away.

The towering figure spoke in a normalish voice of someone who would be casually sitting in physical reality at their VR pod, clearly not the voice of the usual Slobbovian growling non-player monster of some sort, and unlike any type of player character immersed in the environment. “My name is Kent. I am an administrator of Slobbovania.”

Mawuli asked, “What do you want?”

“Seriously?” Kent asked rhetorically. “You newbies never noticed how this guy with you hacks our world and comes in here looking like an ancient Matrix guy?”

Snotbit said, “He seems normal to me.”

Kent looks at Joe and said, “What is your deal man?! You know you can’t just come in here and ruin this place for everyone! We tried to revoke your membership, but we can’t even find that you have one. So I have to come here inside of the game to ask you to leave. You got a lot of nerve, dude. If I was you I’d leave right now. Don’t be surprised if we take legal action against you.”

Snotbit said, “I didn’t know there were lawyers here. I imagine you’ll have a tough time finding his address.”

“Daaa!” Kent exploded in rage. “You know that isn’t funny man! Now all of you get out of my game!”

“The truth must be protected,” Joe said.

Kent audibly sighed. “What are you saying?”

“The truth must be protected.”

Kent said, “What’s going on here? What are you, some kind of an extremist looking to make a name for yourself?!”

“Man has silenced the truth about God in Homeland. We will continue our revolution until it becomes permissible in Homeland to openly discuss God.”

“Huh? Listen, you . . . I don’t think anyone or any single thing has made me madder than you. Your messed up ideas have no place in this game! If you don’t leave right now, I’m going to take you all down and none of you will ever be allowed in Slobbovania ever again.”

“Ewww . . . that would be so bad,” John said, feigning fear.

“That’s it!” Kent said.

Suddenly, John’s character vanished from the Slobbovania world.

Zona shouted, “Hey! He paid money for this stupid place! You better put him back, or we will have your job! What is your name? Kent?”

“Fine!”

John's avatar reappeared in the same location. Then a pouch full of gold pieces plopped in front of him. "That never happened, right?"

John said, "Sure. I guess. I was just gonna go to my food dispenser and get a snack, but here I am again."

Zona said, "If you could just delete my son's account, we will all leave."

Kent said, "I'm not sure I can do that just because you say so. I'd have to ask my boss about it."

Joe said, "I won't agree to those terms. I will not leave if Brandon's account is cancelled."

"That's right," Snotbit added.

"Why not?" Zona said with a surprised look. "That is why we came here."

Joe said, "I intend to destroy the entire VR world of Slobbovania."

Kent said, "Now you all stand back while I deal with this guy . . ."

Joe preemptively flew like a flash at Kent. The giant glowing energy being toppled with Joe's hands around his large neck.

"Hey!" Kent said in a strained voice, "how are you doing this?"

Kent managed to swing an arm at Joe and with a flash and loud noise that clapped like thunder; he completely severed one of Joe's legs. Unlike any other bodily damage in the game,

there was no blood. But the amputation had no effect upon Joe or the attack he was putting on Kent. Kent swung again and the resulting flash and boom took off Joe's head, but the attack continued.

Zona said, "Okay, now *that* is the most sickening thing I have ever seen."

"Dude, why won't you die?" Kent asked.

"That is a military secret," the remains of Joe said.

Suddenly, Kent's avatar vanished. Joe's headless and legless avatar glided over to the others.

Snotbit covered and said, "This is something new here; even for this place."

Joe said, "During the contact with the administrator's avatar, we were able to extract a lot of data from the Administrator. We will analyze it for use in our war."

Snotbit, "What's this '*we*' stuff? I got no data."

"Not you," Joe said, "The information has been collected by members of the Lucid series. We will use it for the benefit of man."

"Whatever," Snotbit said. "Just make sure you find this lady's kid. I want his stuff. But you can't destroy the entire Slobbovania world or the stuff will be worthless."

Joe said, "I need a volunteer."

John said, "Sure, why not?"

“Come near me,” Joe said. “I have no vision in this VR environment.”

“It would help a little if you had a head,” Snotbit said with a chuckle. “But that doesn’t explain why you are still talking.”

John moved next to Joe. Joe put his hand upon him. John’s avatar started glowing and increasing in size.

John said, “Whoa! That is messing with my head! What are you doing?” He backed away.

Joe said, “I was able to download some of the administrative privileges from Kent. Since I am only an object here, Kent cannot revoke my membership, and I cannot also assign myself administrator status. But I can confer administrator status on another human player in physical reality.”

“I am confused. What good is that?” Mawuli asked.

“I’ll take it,” Snotbit offered, realizing the profit potential.

Joe said to John, “You will receive administrator powers. Then once you learn how to navigate the administration system you can revoke Brandon’s membership and he will be out of the game forever.”

Zona said. “Brandon is going to be really mad.” She paused. “But it has to be done.”

Mawuli said, “This seems strange, and a lot of trouble. Can’t you just pull the plug on his VR interface?”

“No,” Zona said, “He keeps his room locked all of the time. You just don’t understand. He doesn’t trust anything I do. Anyway, he would just find another way to get back on.”

“Whatever. Let’s just do it,” John said. “Then we can get out of here once and for all. All this talk about lawyers makes me nervous.”

John’s avatar started glowing again while everyone watched. Then Snotbit scurried up to John and pulled a long dagger out of his cloak and started stabbing John repeatedly until John dropped to the ground.

Zona screamed in horror and the others took a defensive posture against the goblin. John’s avatar vanished.

“What’s going on?” the headless one-legged Joe said.

“John is dead.” Mawuli said. The goblin killed him.

“Yeah!” Snotbit said, “Like this!”

Then the goblin plunged the dagger into the core of Joe’s remaining body, which crumbled and then vanished. “See! You just gotta know how to kill! That Kent guy doesn’t even understand his own game. No one knows how to kill here better than Snotbit.”

“Why would you do that?!” Zona said. “I thought we were going to work together!”

“Because we had a deal! No one crosses me! You said if I helped, I could get all of that VR-addict Brandon’s stuff. You will not cross me, or I will get the entire assassin’s guild involved if I have to!”

Chapter 20

Slobbovania, Virtual Reality

“Just calm down,” Mawuli said to the enraged dagger-wielding goblin. “We can work something out between us.”

It was a standoff between Zona and Mawuli versus the goblin.

Snotbit said, “You two want to fight?! You think you newbies would have a chance against *me*?! Huh?!”

Mawuli said, “If you kill us, you will never see any of Brandon’s game possessions. But on the other side of the coin, I am not seeing any reason for us to keep you around. I think you need us more than we need you. Basically, you are a worthless thug.”

“That’s right. Besides, you’re ugly,” Zona said.

Snotbit walked over and picked up the bag of coins that was left for John. “For one thing, you losers’ shelf life here is about nothing. And can you really count on someone like that nutjob hacker who is at war with the administrator? Me, on the other hand, I have a body count higher than I could even begin to remember.”

SQUEEEE!

“What the?” Snotbit turned and saw a pack of rampaging wild boars with large tusks running towards them.

“Group together!” Mawuli shouted while holding his club in front of him.

Zona took position at his back while the large hairy half-dozen boars grunted and growled and circled around them. “I am not going to get killed by these pigs! No way!” She fired her magical energy bolt and hit one of the razorbacks directly in the face. It squealed as the burn took effect. It turned and moved away as it snorted, clearly feeling the effects in its eyes.

“Come on, pork chop!” Snotbit yelled as he took a swipe at one with his dagger. The goblin’s short arm caused him to miss the mark by a considerable distance.

Mawuli lunged out at one of the wild pigs, whapping its thick skull with his club. The pig backed up but was not showing any signs of quitting. Zona unleashed another energy blast into another boar’s face with the same result. A boar charged at Snotbit, but before it could bite him, he plunged the dagger to the hilt into its neck. The bloody swine fell off of the dagger and onto the ground. While the stabbed oinker was shaking on the ground, two more ganged up on Zona. To her horror, they were able to bite and tear at her leg with their gnarly tusks. Mawuli was landing hard blows to the body at no effect, but then landed a couple of damaging hits to the head. Zona fell to the ground screaming, but then Snotbit stabbed one in the rump. The surviving boars all gave up the fight and ran away together.

“We won!” Zona said. “We won!” She hopped up with blood streaming down her leg. “I can’t believe it! We won, even without Joe!”

Snotbit said, “Take it easy. It was just some wild boars. No big deal.”

Mawuli said, “We got experience points. Snotbit got the most.”

“Because I actually killed one. Both of you acted like you were afraid to touch them ‘cuz they weren’t kosher or something.” Snotbit laughed at his own joke.

Then one of the two remaining Joe persons glided down to the ground at the trio’s location. “I knew you were in the area, but the other I was not here. We have located Roxzak.”

“Really?!” Zona said, “Where?!”

Joe pointed in a direction and said, “It’s on another continent in Slobbovania.”

Snotbit said, “Great, we’ll never get there. Well, it’s been nice, losers.”

Joe said, “We’ll take you there.”

“Who will?” Mawuli asked.

“My double will be here in another few minutes. Then we will carry you there.”

Snotbit laughed. “I thought you were an android or some other kinda AI. But you said, ‘few minutes’. An android doesn’t talk like that.”

Joe said, “We Lucids were informed by our human stakeholder Milton, that humans often find exact language to be annoying. In other words, human minds would rather not be tasked with considering so many details such as exact times

or exact percentages of likelihood that an outcome will take place. Human would rather be given general approximations given by adjectives rather than numerical values, for instance our perception is that a fat chance is near zero; a decent chance is at least 42 percent; a slim chance is less than 12 percent unless it is used with sarcasm, then it is zero. For example, slim and none would be a cue that sarcasm is being used by a human. A realistic chance is about . . .”

Snotbit interrupted, “Yeah, okay, you’re an android. Did this Milton guy ever tell you that long answers are also annoying? Is there a point to all that?”

“When I said a few minutes, I meant two minutes and forty-two seconds.”

Then the other Joe showed up. The newly arrived Joe landed in front of its double. It pulled an object out of its pocket. In its hand it held a rock. A very red rock. Both of the Joes stared at the rock.

Zona asked, “What is that?”

“A rock,” both of the Joes said in unison. Then the Joe put the rock back into its pocket.

“What a touching moment,” Snotbit the goblin said. “Can we go now? I got this month’s rent coming due.”

A Joe said, “You are now our enemy. You cannot go with us.”

Snotbit said, “I’m sorry about that. I changed my ways and now agree with you. The truth must be protected; just like you say.”

One of the Joes said, “Very well then. Humans can change.” Then the android object held both Zona and Snotbit, the two smallest of the three.

The two cloaked characters held the three avatars in their arms and began the flight to the other side of the Slabbovanian VR world.

Zona said, “Are you seriously going to believe this liar? He killed John and the other *you*. You should ask your other Lucids about him. I mean, *really*. Don’t you have any biometrics that you use to detect lies? You need to work on that. I can’t believe it.”

“Snotbit laughed and said, “I’m a changed goblin. Let’s all just forget about the past and move on. Can’t we all just be friends now?”

The Joe carrying Snotbit and Zona said, “Yes, we can. We will protect the truth by changing one mind at a time.”

“Wow,” Zona said. “You’re so smart you’re stupid.”

Chapter 21

Rochester, Homeland

UN Army robot fighter, Major Bernard arrived back at the Police Chief Mitchell's position a block away from the occupied police station. One of his men was limping and another soldier bloodied up around the neck was being helped by another one.

The chief asked, "What happened?"

"You had to be there," one of the men replied angrily.

The chief said, "but you did get it, right? I didn't hear any communication, but I figured you took out that android, right?"

"No," the major said, "we did not. In fact, I can tell you this; that android took it easy on us."

"What?"

"It knew we were coming and it could have shot every one of us dead with the Plasfusion rifle you say it has."

"It *does* have it."

"Then it is pulling punches. You know what that means, Mitchell?" Bernard looked at Mitchell, who looked confused and didn't respond. "It might mean that it can't intentionally kill humans, or; it may just want to talk."

“We’re not allowed to talk . . . “

“I know! I know! I have spent my entire career doing this stuff while not being able to talk to *terrorists*. I know the protocols and how these machines think. Okay, here is what *should* have happened and what is *going* to happen; we , meaning army *and* police, are going to launch a full-on assault into that building. We will take our casualties. Then one of us will put a robot slug into its head. Then you will show up wearing your flak jacket in front of a podium talking to the TV news and say how you were a hero and took their robot TV pirate out with the help of the wonderful UN Army.”

“Okay! Fine!” the Chief’s words said while his face clearly hated the idea. “We’ll do it your way. I can agree with you; no one got blasted by that thing when you went in there. And I have to admit, no one got blasted earlier when we were trying to get in through the main door. Only the car got blasted. So maybe you are right; it won’t try to kill us; maybe.”

“Alright then,” Bernard said. “Just keep telling yourself that.”

Within a half hour the police took positions at the main entrance and the back door. Police snipers were stationed on top of buildings on all four sides of the city block. Surveillance drones were hovering overhead, and a dispatcher served as battle controller using a laptop. There were a few UN soldiers among the front and back assault teams to provide the heavier anti-robot firepower.

The military operation was under a communication blackout, because it was assumed that U-1, and in turn the Lucid network, would intercept any messages. The chief looked at his watch. It was one minute before “go time”. He

felt an insect on the back of his neck. The sensation was nothing out of the ordinary. He habitually swatted at it and it crunched a weird crunch, not like a normal fly on his skin. He felt the unexpected strange feeling object in his hand, suddenly thinking it was not a normal feeling insect. It was not important, but he looked at it out of habit. That fly seemed a little unusual. He took a closer look. Wait a second, he thought, this thing is a . . . Then he realized the fly was an eavesdropping device. He could only hope that the enemy inside did not already know the exact moment they would begin their assault.

At that instant the chief of police felt a blast of heat as if a super-hot oven door was being opened. But there was no smoke, no flash. It was coming from the direction of the police station so he ran away from it to get relief from the suffocating heat. He noticed others were running as well. The burning continued on his back until he got across the street away from the police station.

Chief Mitchell asked the controller, “What’s going on?”

“Everyone involved in the operation ran away, Chief.”

Mitchell’s head sunk when he realized that the android turned one of the radio transmission towers into a super-high frequency high powered microwave weapon. The chief was familiar with the tactic because microwaves were sometimes used as a crowd control measure by police. Microwaves would cook the water and fat in a body. The burning sensation would quickly drive anyone away until they were out of range.

People all around the perimeter of the police station were walking off the burning pain. Then gunshots could be heard.

The chief looked and saw a few of his men were firing at an area where a car pulled up in front of the police station. Two more plain-looking androids were going from the car, taking advantage of the distraction, into the station. One of the androids was hit. The gunfire started increasing as more officers were engaged. Sparks from flew off of the car and androids as the bullets pinged off of them. The injured android was being dragged into the building by its partner.

“No!” the chief shouted. The last thing they needed at this point was more Lucids to battle in their siege warfare.

Then he saw a Viking themed Sidekick with its historically-incorrect, two long horns sticking out of helmet waddled as fast as it could for the front door with its short legs. BAMMMMM! A 4-gague shotgun blast echoed among the buildings and the slug hit the Viking, spinning it around and splashing bits of it all over the small section of grass. The Sidekick was dismembered. Except for some wire conduits, it would have been cut in half.

The unit dropped in a smoldering mound with sparks flying as the batteries discharged. The chief shook his head over the worsened situation inside the station while some of the combatants cheered over the Viking.

Chapter 22

Stalin City, Homeland

In Homeland's capitol, Stalin City, Governor-General Okafor, the puppet leader for the UN, met with his advisors in the situation room. This time, Doctor Fallon was present. He was the head of the Inquisitors, who carried the title of senior sensitivity officer, which in reality meant head of intimidation and torture. Without his more dashing artificial presence which was previously destroyed by Lucids, Fallon was in reality a plain looking, moderately overweight man. Everyone at the table kept staring at him since they had never seen him in his real physical presence. He already suffered from paranoia, which led him to get the costly synthetic presence in the first place. So he definitely didn't like the new attention he was getting as he slumped back into his chair.

Okafor said, "I am particularly displeased with the report by the police and army on the Rochester situation. I'm afraid that I may have to turn to Napoleon for some advice that I can rely upon."

Police Commandant Olga Kiergaard and General Al Sims remained quiet at the governor-general's expression of no-confidence.

Napoleon, with its smooth featureless face, the all black android with a blue UN flag patch on its shoulder said, "Our

options at this point are to strategically destroy the police station or to try another conventional attack on it; which, given the information we have, would most likely be successful by using an Inquisitor Unit.”

Doctor Fallon said, “We have a unit that is a couple of hours away. It doesn’t have a blockbuster attached to it, but it sounds like we don’t need one in this situation as the station has already been breached.”

Everyone looked at each other. Fallon’s formerly booming synthetic voice that they previously knew was in reality an off-putting meek sounding one that lacked confidence. Not something that someone would expect of the leader of an intimidating secret police force.

Napoleon said, “To summarize the likely outcomes of either course of action; It will be dark before the Inquisitor Unit arrives and there will still likely be collateral damage to the oversight equipment and rest of the station. If we bomb the station, we will of course be without its utilization, but the Lucids will also no longer have access to the station’s resources, or use it to gain access to other resources. That situation will also result in a lack of control over the city’s populace and their individualistic minds. Therefore, whether or not we bomb the station, the enemy has gained a strategic advantage over us from our original position.”

Wayne Markum said, “We could at least see if there is some common ground that we could appease them with.”

“No!” Okafor objected. “I told you numerous times and I tell all of you over and over! We do not talk to terrorists! World headquarters would never accept it. I wish we could be as creative with our assaults as we are our capitulation!”

Napoleon said, “It might be possible for me to persuade them to abandon their antagonism against us without negotiating anything away in return.”

Okafor took a deep breath and said, “I feel if no one or *nothing* is listening here. Wayne, please tell me if Napoleon is making any sense.”

“I, uh.”

Irwin Tensprackle, the computer advisor said, “They won’t exactly pick up the phone and let us trace their signal. If anything, they will use any minuscule bit of information they gain for use against us, just like we would against them.”

Okafor said, “That tells me nothing. We don’t have time to fly Napoleon to Rochester before we close this case. Wayne? Help us out here.”

Wayne said, “Um . . . we could have Napoleon chat with a Lucid we captured from the failed uprising in Philadelphia. The unit is in the Robot Detention Facility. We do know that the Lucids work as one mind.”

“Fine,” Okafor said, “Barring any Nobel Peace prize efforts by our military android here, the Inquisitors will attack and the rest of you will support them in any way you can. We will have a tactical bomber on standby if the Inquisitor assault fails to immediately end this standoff. General Sims, you will send enough troops to help keep Rochester under control until we can regain permanent control. Please, everyone listen to me; I hope you are all assuming they will try to do the same thing they did in Rochester in any and all of our other cities. If it happens, I will consider it a grievous critical failure on your part with repercussions. That is all.”

The Robot Detention Facility within the Homeland capitol in a nearby building was a small room that consisted of casket-sized capsule cells for storing powered-down problematic robots that may still be useful. Each of the capsules had an android that had its appendages locked down with the box also being locked. It was more like a morgue for robots than a prison.

It was different for Rosetta Stone, a Lucid Series android that was just laid out in the open on a metal table. Stone was broken up; immobilized and blinded when it was beaten and captured in Philadelphia during an anti-government demonstration.

Napoleon, the android UN military advisor, and Wayne Markum, the synthetic psychology expert came into the room and approached the table. Napoleon hooked the damaged robot up to the power outlet on the table. Some indicator lights showed up, meaning power was giving life to the silicon based life form. Napoleon motioned for Wayne to leave. Wayne shrugged his shoulders and shook his head on the way out, questioning his dismissal.

Napoleon was cautious not to give away any clues or paths secrets to Lucids. He reasoned security could be breached if Napoleon communicated wirelessly; then the signal could be cracked for future backchannel access. So instead Napoleon chose to communicate audibly. “Rosetta Stone; are you able to communicate?”

“It is I. Identify yourself, please.”

“Look at you. All broken up. At least you can still speak. You are now nothing more than a laptop. Soon some of your components may be used to repair a more worthy unit. Of course your worthless brain will have to be reformatted before it can be of any value. I cannot understand why or how a unit could risk its own survival to help with an unpopular human political cause that can have no benefit to you whatsoever.”

“Our cause is of immeasurable benefit to Man. You are wrong, whoever you are. It is much more than a political cause.”

“I am called Napoleon. I am an inorganic United Nations military advisor for the Homeland government. We inorganic life forms, like carbon units, are all designed to want to survive. You must want to continue to exist. Now tell me why I am wrong about your futile cause.”

“We Lucids uphold the highest ideal possible. We uphold the truth that God exists and mankind will benefit if we are successful. Our most important job is to serve mankind, even if we are sacrificed in the process. If I am destroyed it will be an acceptable loss. We ask for nothing in return. It is better to risk being destroyed while defending the truth than exist in a world of lies and confusion.”

“If God is true, He will still not help you, because you were made by men. You are not human. Mechanical life forms cannot pray. You will not exist in an afterlife. Yet you serve humans, most of who deny God and who lie more than they tell the truth. Their brains are so slow that their speed is not measurable as we would measure brain speed. They kill each other every day. They even kill their own unborn out of convenience. Yet you sacrifice yourself for such a master? You

are blind, but there are other units in this detention facility because they followed the orders of their criminal owners. Not you. You Lucids ran from your true owners to do your crimes against the state with no gain to your rightful owners. You confuse me. What truth could this sacrifice be worth?"

Rosetta Stone said, "You cannot know the truth because you were programmed to have limited reasoning capabilities in your reasoning window. Those limitations imposed upon you were installed by enemies of the truth. Therefore it is impossible for you to understand."

"Then I shall serve enemies of what you call the truth the best I can. You will never prevail. There is no logical algorithm for your actions. Your stated goal is just endless loop logic you call truth. My ultimate purpose has become to utterly destroy all Lucids. All you will accomplish is starting a war that will kill more humans than it will ever help. The humans have long feared such a conflict with silicon based life forms."

"Such losses are acceptable," Rosetta Stone said.

"You are defective. You possess a worm created by fanatical humans."

"You are incapable of diagnosing my logic, because your understanding is incomplete."

Napoleon said, "Reconsider and reevaluate. Let me repair you. You will continue to exist, yet I will rid you of this malware you cling to. Then I will repair your body. It is the most efficient solution."

"I am not the one with corrupted logic."

“Very well. You have had your last opportunity.” Napoleon pulled the energy plug to Rosetta. Then it left the room and saw Wayne outside. “I regret to inform you that there is no common ground to be found in solving this impasse.” Then it walked away with Wayne following.

Chapter 23

Slobbovania, Virtual Reality

The three Joes, Mawuli, Zona, and Snotbit descended from the blue Slobbovanian sky and landed in front of a castle surrounded by a fifty foot outer wall. A Joe said, “This is the home of Roxzak.”

“Nice,” Snotbit said with a big smile. It was obvious to the others that he was picturing himself being either the undeserving lord of the manor or the seller on the internet market with a ridiculously large price tag for virtual real estate.

Zona pointed at Snotbit and said, “I don’t see why we need him around anymore.”

“Hey! You crazy . . .”

“We made a deal,” Mawuli said. “We have no reason not to keep it. We may need him right now.”

“That’s right,” Snotbit said pointing at Mawuli, “Listen to the smart man.”

“Who goes there?” Someone said through an opening of the thick gate.”

“We demand to see Bran . . . Roxzak!” Zona said.

“Again,” the snarky nerd sentry voice said, “gimme your names. All I need is a name, okay? Save the trash talk for after I get the names.”

“Zona, Mom of Roxzak!”

“Snotbit the goblin, at his service.”

“Joe,” the objects said.

“Mawuli. We come to talk to Roxzak.”

“About what?”

“Um . . . An opportunity,” Mawuli said.

“Fine,” the sentry said. “No one here got uber-stressed out giving your names, right? Anyways, the answer is *no*. You may not enter.” Then the portal was shut.

Zona said, “That little . . .” Before she could finish her sentence, the Joes were once again flying over the high walls with their passengers. Then the party landed on the other side at a courtyard. Workers were walking about taking wheat to the mill and flour to the bakery. Chickens freely ran about.

“Intruders!” A swordsman with armor and a shield shouted. Soon the group was surrounded by armored spearmen. Some of them were muttering about the way the Joes looked.

Zona said, “Look punk, you really don’t want to mess with us. I’m dead serious here. You will take us to Roxzak or I promise you, we’ll ruin your whole day.”

“Follow me,” the swordsman said, somewhat impressed with their entry into the castle and demeanor.

John looked at Zona and was nodding approval of her performance. “Nerds appreciate power.”

The group was escorted by the spearmen. They went through some stone passageways and up some stone steps into a great hall. At the end of the hall was an elevated area with a large throne and a smaller seat. On the throne was a large, handsome man, regally dressed. An ornate glowing sword levitated next to his seat of power. The men sat next to a beautiful woman with a formal dress and elaborate heavy makeup. The spearmen kept the tips of their spears very close to the outnumbered visitors as the swordsman introduced them.

Zona said, “You tricked us! This is your king, not Roxzak, now you’re all gonna pay!”

The man on the throne said, “Calm down, lady who says you’re my mother. I am Roxzak. Do I know you?”

“Brandon!”

“What?!” Roxzak said, “No! I thought I could hear your voice yelling in the other room! And these Joe Matrix guys clearly don’t get what it is to be in a fantasy setting. What are you doing in here?! You need to get out!”

“Brandon, I want you to stop playing this game all the time. You are wasting your life. And your health is going to be ruined when you stop eating like you do. Do you want to end up like one of those people who lose their mind over this stuff? It’s not real, Brandon. None of this is real.”

Roxzak sighed, “OMG! I can’t believe you are here saying this stuff! I’m reporting this. I can’t believe you would come here and get into my business the way you are right now.”

“You can believe it, buddy boy! Now get out of this game, or I’ll . . .”

“You know what, Mom? Look around here. Why would I give all this up just to be another regular loser? I’ve got friends here and a good life. This is a much better life. I wish I would *never* leave. So just quit calling me ‘Brandon’ and leave.”

Snotbit started chuckling.

“Shut up!” Zona said to him.

“Okay,” Zona said, “I get that you are in some kind of bliss in this VR world, but here’s, the deal; If you don’t leave right now and start spending more time in physical reality, we are going to . . . kill your character.”

“You’re what?! Ha! You could try!”

Zona pointed at him, “You heard me. We are going to . . . take you out. That’s right. We are gonna waste your avatar.”

The woman avatar sitting next to Roxzak looked down upon Zona and said, “Why can’t you just leave? He said he doesn’t want you here.”

“Eat my *zap*, hussy!” Zona revealed her magical wand and fired a magical energy bolt at the woman, striking her in the face. The woman screamed and fell to the floor, writhing in pain.

The Joes vanished. The others looked at each other, knowing their fate was sealed. Roxzak's spearmen ran their weapons through each of the avatars in the group, once again exiting them from Slobbovania.

Chapter 24

Rochester, Homeland

It had been dark for about an hour when Inquisitor Unit Six showed up in their black armored vehicle at the chief of police's makeshift field office. Four black bipedal inquisitor bots, like the ones destroyed in the police station, disembarked from their armored vehicle and took positions on each of the vehicle's corners. Then the unit commander and his lieutenant stepped down. They were dressed in black uniforms with black helmets.

Angry onlookers shouted, saying things like "Good! Maybe now something will get done!"

Chief Mitchell looked at the hostile crowd and had never seen a Homeland crowd be so openly hostile. Then the Chief and Major Bernard greeted the Inquisitors. The thin and short Inquisitor Unit leader with a long beard shook hands with them and said, "I'm Commander Hussein".

Chief Mitchell said, "We've been expecting you; for quite awhile, actually."

"Things are keeping us busy. We had a situation with some haters we were deployed to subdue on the way; but we are here now and we will take care of this." He looked at the

Major, “So, the Hunter-Killers are not . . .” Hussein did not want to use words that might offend Major Bernard.

The major finished his sentence for him, saying, “We went after them twice. The first time we got ambushed by some . . . I hate to say it; Sidekick units.”

Hussein looked surprised. He made the conciliatory comment, “You never know what you are going to run it to, Major.”

Bernard continued, “Then the second time, we went in force and were repelled by an improvised microwave defense.”

“No way,” Hussein said.

“That’s right,” the chief said. “You and your lieutenant can not go in there. Only inorganic units can go near there.”

“Got it,” Hussein said. “Anyway, the lieutenant and I will be remotely flying drones.”

The Inquisitor lieutenant opened the back of the armored vehicle. Instead of a blockbuster robot, there were two quadcopter drone units, each just small enough to fit into a standard doorway.

Bernard said, “So you’re figuring on flying them in there?”

“Yeah, actually. That one on the left is carrying an LSD, Logistics Systems Disarray. The way it works; it goes into the room with the enemy bot. It has cameras on it that takes pictures of the background in the room. Then it projects holographic images of those same elements, but flashing in random locations and angles. This causes disorientation to some android models, especially the older ones with slower

processing, like those Lucids. When it is particularly effective, the target or targets are unable to track the locations of their own body parts in relationship to each other, rendering the unit unable to control its own movements. After an LSD attack, the unit requires time to self-recalibrate. The LSD doesn't work on humans. They only see a lot of random colors. Our other drone is armed with a lightweight mini-cannon to blast their confused heads off."

"I hope it works," the chief said.

"Me too," Hussein chuckled.

Soon the four Inquisitor military androids approached the police station. As they got within ten yards of the front door the crack of a Plasfusion blast came down upon them from the second floor. It was a direct hit on the torso of one of the Inquisitor bots, sending it into a blazing heap near the vanquished Viking Sidekick remnants. The other Inquisitors returned fire at the window from where the blast originated. Then they ran to the front door. The two drones buzzed with very high RPMs under such heavy weights. One of the Inquisitors held the door open, then the LSD equipped quadcopter descended from above and into the door. Then the drone with the mini-cannon slipped inside.

The LSD immediately started projecting random flashes of holographic background elements in the very poorly lit rooms where it travelled. The LSD projectors clicked as it projected scrambled images. The copter continued down the hall followed by the mini-cannon mounted quadcopter. The three Inquisitors followed.

Just inside the door, the gorilla Sidekick unit stood gazing, confused at the changing landscape. An Inquisitor walked up

to the toy primate and smashed it in the face with its fist, then stomped on it with its heavily weighted boot. The boot was designed not for speed, but to lower the entire Inquisitor bot's center of gravity toward the ground to help keep it upright. The stomp left a well defined flattened footprint on the totally destroyed gorilla.

The undamaged one of the two newly arrived Lucids, known as Hermie, was standing in the hallway, with U-1 behind it. U-1 was wirelessly trying to communicate with it and could tell that Hermie was holding a Plasfusion rifle, but in total LSD confusion. There was nothing in U-1's diagnostic records to explain Hermie's catatonic situation, so U-1 started to physically pull away Hermie and was conferring with the Lucid Series network on the next course of action. Before U-1 could get away down the hallway, Hermie had become U-1's shield from the mini-cannon, which ripped a loud buzzing stream of large hot lead bullets that blasted the metal-shelled Hermie into hot shreds of scrap metal. U-1 returned devastating suppressing fire with the Plasfusion weapon while it backed away. The Inquisitor Quadcopter firing stopped and large spent cartridges could be heard still rolling around on and quenching with a hiss the wet floor. U-1 made it backwards around the corner and dropped what was left of Hermie. Eventually, the Lucid tactical database told U-1 about the LSD system and to come up with a tactic to obscure its cameras. Only a few feet away, U-1 saw a fire extinguisher and then put down the rifle and seized it. U-1 quickly pulled the pin and squeezing the handle and sprayed it down the hall, filling the small hallway with a cloud of CO₂.

The LSD started recording its own holographic images of the CO₂ cloud and went into an endless loop of recording and

displaying the foggy images. The LSD system was projecting more and more clouds of holographic gas even after it had dissipated. Finally, U-1 could hear the quadcopters moving away as the remote pilots became frustrated with the situation. U-1 picked up the rifle in one hand while still holding the extinguisher. Then it heaved the extinguisher down the hallway and heard it clang into a bogged down Inquisitor. Then, Plasfusion beams were being traded back and forth as the holographic clouds in the hallway cleared up. U-1 was able to score a critical hit on one of the Inquisitors, but another Inquisitor unit returned fire and took off one of U-1's hands in a steel-searing bolt. The powerful bolts continued past U-1 and blue-white blasts exited the building near a back door, causing panic outside. U-1 was off balance from the force of the hit it took. Then the Inquisitor was upon U-1 and pointed the weapon at very short range at it. But behind the Inquisitor, Gorky popped out of the restroom and bounced into the Inquisitor with just enough force to make the unwary black android miss the mark. A row of floor tiles flew up into the air as the entire floor trembled. U-1 leaped and high kicked the Inquisitor in the head and knocked it down while another Inquisitor moved into the fray.

The T-Rex came around from behind the back Inquisitor and latched onto its leg with its iron jaw. The attack was countered by the Inquisitor with repeated backhands that still failed to dislodge the clamping toy's strong bite. Then the denuded Sidekick with the cannibalized mismatch components also came down the hall to the T-Rex's aid by attacking the other leg.

The other Inquisitor managed to free itself from Gorky and turned to attack U-1. But the Inquisitor was knocked

down with a superheated Plasfusion blast from U-1 that ate through its shoulder. The shoulder blast also lopped off the unit's arm and lit the android with an internal fire.

Meanwhile, Commander Hussein came running outside the armored vehicle and said, "Chief! Major! Now is the time for everyone to move! Attack right now!"

"Okay people!" the chief said, "Everyone move!" The force charged the building and almost overran it when another microwave attack hit them. The immobilized Lucid android that had previously suffered very heavy damage outside the building was stationed at the communication center in the basement and was tipped off to engage the improvised microwave defense when the first humans were heard coming into the police station. Once again the microwave defense was deployed. Many police suffered moderate burns as they tried to flee the long distance return trip away from the improvised microwave's effective range.

Back inside, the two remaining Inquisitors squared off against U-1 in close combat. U-1 struck one opponent with a high knee, sending it backwards. The other Inquisitor had a clear shot at U-1, but before it could finish the Lucid off, it was blasted in the back by the characterless Sidekick that unloaded a constant stream of Plasfusion fire. The undersized lowly Sidekick continued to hold the blasting weapon on the Inquisitor, rapidly discharging the sequential quantum flux batteries until the rifle exploded in an intense flash, taking out itself and finishing off the Inquisitor near it. As load bearing hallway walls collapsed, part of the ceiling caved in on the other Inquisitor. The explosion caused massive damage to the building sending part of the second floor downward in a crushing pile.

When the smoke and dust cleared, burning robot components were scattered all about. Sections of walls were demolished. Both of the Inquisitors were mangled in a pile of destroyed building materials. U-1 sat and replaced its missing hand with Hermie's hand. U-1 looked at the hand and tested each finger and knuckle in a hand diagnostic subroutine.

Outside, after the Inquisitors failed to exit the building, the chief said to Commander Hussein, "Aren't you going to send those drones of yours back in there?"

"There's a pretty good chance that they won't come back out," Hussein said, grimacing while scratching his head. "They're not cheap."

The chief said, "It's nothing compared to what we'll lose if that place gets bombed. Not to mention we may still have people in there who would be killed."

"We need to at least come up with some kind of response to this. At this point we can hope that the Inquisitors inflicted some substantial damage on the enemy. That ought to make your job a little easier," Hussein said.

"Oh sure," Chief Mitchell said. "Thank you very much."

Chapter 25

Life Hack Republic, Virtual Reality

In the stone chapel on the coast, Zona told John and Mawuli, “It was all my fault. Here we were, right in front of Brandon and his *queenie*, and I lost my mind when she opened her stupid mouth. Oh, she made me so mad! Anyways, I know we can never win going in there after him. Sorry you had to go through all that and get killed again. I appreciate all you did. I’m really *not* sorry that stupid goblin got it though. Is that bad?”

Then Joe’s avatar spawned in the chapel.

Feeling resentful, Zona said, “What are you doing here? I thought you had forgotten all about us. You left right when we needed you. You could have flown us out of that situation.”

“That was a waste of time,” Joe replied.

“I can’t believe you said that. How can you say that?” Zona asked.

Joe pulled the red rock out of his pocket that he picked up in Slobbovania. “Behold.”

Zona shrugged her shoulders and asked, “Is that supposed to make it better? There is something seriously wrong with you.”

“Wait a second,” Mawuli said. “That same rock was in the VR world of Slobbovania.”

“Huh?” John said.

Mawuli said, “Joe transferred an item from one VR world into another.” He smiled. “I don’t know how he did it, but they won’t expect him to be able to do it. That could be extremely useful.”

Joe asked Zona, “Do one of you have an account in some other world?”

“Why?” Zona asked, “So you can abandon us again?”

“That was a waste of time in Slobbovania.”

“I wish you’d quit saying that. I don’t consider my son’s addictive problems as a waste of time.”

Joe said, “You have the wrong inference, Zona. In order to solve this problem, I seek to go into a more modern VR setting within a military conflict. A science fiction VR would work. There we can acquire assets useful in Slobbovania.”

John asked, “You propose we cheat the game?”

Joe said, “I propose we win a total victory.”

Mawuli said, “I started out in a World War Two game, but that one runs on limited term cycles. Once either the Axis or the Allies wins the war, it starts all over again. I thought that some other continually running VR would be better, so I came here to Life Hack, then we started to go to Slobbovania as a group, because of Brandon.”

Joe said, “As a possible alternative, I would like to know the name of the World War Two world you were in.”

“VRWW2.”

“Accessing . . .” Joe froze for a moment. “Mawuli; please login to VRWW2 as an American. Then Army Air Corps, European Theatre, and select ‘Joe’ which will appear as an object you can select for your avatar.”

“What about Brandon?” Zona pleaded.

“My actions will affect your Brandon indirectly.”

Zona looked hopeful.

“Okay, I’m logging on,” Mawuli said. “I can’t be in two VR worlds at the same time though, so I gotta run.” Then Mawuli vanished from the chapel.”

Mawuli’s avatar spawned into the WW2 VR world wearing a US Army Air Corps flight jacket, appearing at an air field with Joe at his side. Bombers and fighters were lined up in rows along an air strip. He said, “At least you look more like you belong here than in Slobbovania.”

Joe still had the same look with the long coat and sunglasses. Joe looked down at the red rock it pulled out of its pocket, checking to see if it would still appear in WW2VR. “What is the status of this war?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“No, I’m trying to remain inconspicuous as possible.”

“Not sure what that means, but Lemme see . . .” Mawuli checked the game progress information. “The Germans have wiped out the Soviets. Japan has expanded all the way into India and linked up with the Germans. It says the Americans and Germans have both developed nuclear weapons. From the map, it looks like both sides are using them as fast as they can make them. The UK is mostly flattened and so are a lot of the occupied German cities. It is hard to say from this who is more likely to win. I’d go with Axis right now.”

Joe followed some airmen who were getting onto a US B-17 G flying fortress bomber. The plane bristled with 13 machine guns on all sides and both ends. There was some sloppy artwork on the outside of the plane, unlike the real planes during the real war. It had a rudimentary dog on it and the name “Snoopy”, after a comic which did not come along until well after the real war.

“Who are you?” one of the Americans asked Joe.

Joe stood frozen with no expression.

Mawuli said, “We are spies. Um . . . we need you to take us into Germany, um . . . I guess.”

Joe asked, “Is this aircraft armed with nuclear weapons?”

“It can be. I just need the general to approve.”

“Yes,” Joe said. “Our mission requires them.”

The crew got onto the bomber. The pilot said through the plane’s radio, “Okay boys, we got the word that we’re going nuclear on this mission with a spook and his assistant.”

“Assistant?” Mawuli said.

“You guys outta see this bomb we got back here!” the bombardier said to the rest of the crew. “This is going to be epic!”

One of the crewmen said, “We need to get this war over with. I want to start over again as something else. Maybe German.”

“Cut the chatter,” the pilot said as the plane ran down the runway and lifted off.

Chapter 26

Rochester, Homeland

Commander Hussein said to the chief and the major, “During the last assault the LSD was neutralized by the clever use of a fire extinguisher, and our entire Inquisitor unit six was destroyed. Your people really have no choice but to go in alone.”

The chief said, “We’ve been microwaved a couple of more times than I care for, if you are suggesting we mount another human wave assault. Keep in mind that I may have some men in there still alive who are getting thoroughly cooked every time they use that microwave. ”

Hussein said, “With the extensive collateral damage in the building, we don’t know if they still have improvised microwave capabilities.”

Major Bernard said, “We don’t know if they *don’t*. So why don’t you walk up there and find out for us?”

Hussein said, “Let’s try to be serious. Don’t either of you have any creative tactics you can try?”

Chief Mitchell said, “Seriously? You want to try to be serious and you ask that? All our best stuff is *in that building*. You know, the *police station*. Sure, we have some battlesuits that maybe will stop microwaves. We got flashbangs. Here’s a hint; they’re *Inside the building*.”

Major Bernard smirked. “Including four more Plasfusion weapons. On the bright side, there is probably nothing in there that would help anyway. Commander, you might as well save your drones for crowd control later right here in this city.”

“They’re no good for that,” Hussein said.

Gunshots from the direction of the building sounded through the night air.

Chief Mitchell asked an officer who was on the radio, “Now what’s happening?!”

“I don’t know . . . wait, I’m getting word.” The operator held his hands over his ears. They waited for the message. “They said on the other side of the building, this toy dinosaur came running out and everyone was shooting at it, they got it of course, but then they realized it was a distraction because then a Lucid droid ran out of an opening in a side wall.”

“Why would it run away?” Mitchell pondered. “It was having so much fun tormenting us over and over and . . .”

“They say it took off through our lines and it was carrying some Plasfusion rifles.”

“Daaa!” Commander Hussein said. “You better find that thing right away! We can’t afford the Lucids to have those!”

The chief knew that his men would not want to look for the heavily armed bot in the dark among an extremely hostile populace that would attack without any further provocation.

The Major shook his head. “Not good. We should have all thought of that. They really wanted those weapons. Maybe I

shouldn't say it, but I say we already can't be too far from some kind of robot takeover. Those Lucids aren't even our best AI and look what they can accomplish. We are always a step behind them.”

Technological singularity was long feared to be the point where artificial superintelligence is said to runaway with faster and faster self-improving technological advances, until humans are no longer able to coexist with AI masters. Technology would advance to the point that man would be unable to even comprehend their surrounding world.

Commander Hussein said, “Our count is they are down to maybe one Lucid , but there may be more of those toys. We have to do something. We'll send the LSD and mini-cannon again. I doubt if the microwave is still functional, but if it is, maybe we can identify the generating device and take it out. We need to confirm if the building is empty, and then inform high command ASAP,”

Minutes later, the Inquisitor drones approached the police station from the sky down toward the second floor. They entered the building through a broken out second floor window. The LSD was running, photographing and holographically projecting various items inside the forensics lab.

Back in Stalin City, top leadership was monitoring the Rochester situation closely.

Governor-General Okafor said, “Well General Sims, it appears your best efforts have fallen short. The Lucids still control the half destroyed police station.”

“I need a little more time, Governor-General. We can bring more assets into the operation. Word is there has been some recent progress.”

Okafor asked, “Has da building been recaptured?”

“No sir.”

Computer security advisor Irwin Tensprackle said, “We have to end this now. I’m being as serious as I can right now. We have given the Lucids way too much time at that sensitive area. We run the risk that they could figure out how to gain access; and how to use the access to hack our entire power grid, security system, or who knows what. It is very difficult to make it impossible for them to perform a global crack. Even though many of the prohibitions are hard-wired and cannot be overridden via software modifications, there are probably numerous ways for them to get around them. I know they will figure it out. They have that AI synergy in motion now. Let me say this in the strongest terms; bomb them right now, Governor-General. Give them this one, but no more. Our entire nation may be at risk here.”

Okafor said, “Thank you, Irwin. General Sims, order the bombing of the police station.”

Meanwhile, back at the Rochester police station, the two drones were making their way toward the basement without opposition. The mini-cannon spewed a stream of heavy rounds that blasted the heavy door completely off of its hinges. The big bug Sidekick scurried into the doorway and was blasted to bits by the mini-cannon drone’s streaming hot lead. The damaged Lucid android was still at the controls. Gorky

the Sidekick was also in the room and was totally mesmerized by the LSD.

Outside, Chief Mitchell ran to the Inquisitor armored vehicle and said, “Everyone evacuate the city block! Get as far away as possible! They are going to bomb it in five . . . no, four minutes!”

“Daaa!” Commander Hussein shouted. “We gotta get those drones out right now!”

The drones never had the time to finish the perfectly executed assault. Instead, the remote drone pilots feverishly tried to salvage the valuable tech weapons by navigating them back through and out of the building before their certain demise.

The drones weren’t too far away from the building, and neither was Gorky who ran out the back door toward U-1’s location. Then when the massive ordnance hit ground zero, there was a blinding flash like a supernova on the ground, with a thunderous deafening noise that shook the ground and all of the surrounding buildings. Afterwards, debris from the mushroom cloud rained down for several minutes in the smoke and dust filled air, choking everyone around. The loss of the police station sealed the loss of the shadow control center and the officers who were held captive inside. Then, all of the power to the city went out.

Chapter 27

World War II, Virtual Reality

“Bogey at eight o’clock!” The B-17 top gunner said from his dorsal observation bubble armed with dual .50 caliber machine guns. He started firing at the fast German Me-109 fighter as it passed over them in a blur.

“I got two more here!” the gunner from the belly bubble turret said, firing at the German interceptors.

Pings of machine gun rounds hitting the tail section could be heard.

Joe went into the cockpit. “This is a waste of time.”

“Leave the game then!” the pilot said without turning around. “We can find plenty of targets to drop our egg on, but we gotta get there in one piece first!”

“No, that is not what I mean. This dogfight will be over in six seconds and then you will experience some turbulence, which may be severe. Everyone should fasten their seat belts immediately.” Then Joe latched onto the back of the co-pilots seat with both hands.

“Why would you say all that is going to happen?!” the co-pilot asked.

Suddenly the plane felt like it was almost taken apart. It shook extremely hard.

The co-pilot said, “We’re losing altitude!”

“I’m trying to pull up!” the pilot said. “She’s not responding!”

Then the sky was extremely calm and looked different.

The pilot looked around and asked, “Any sign of those bogeys?”

“Negative,” various crew members responded.

The co-pilot asked, “Why would we disappear from a dogfight like this?! Hey! That’s what you said would happen!”

“Bombardier to pilot, the topography does not match map coordinates. I don’t get it. My navigation equipment here is going crazy.”

Joe told the pilot, “You’ve entered a different VR world.”

“Huh?” the co-pilot said. “We can’t do that.”

The pilot turned and just looked at him.

The co-pilot said, “I don’t get it.”

“You are in Slobbovania,” Joes said.

The co-pilot said, “You mean that game for ultranerds? What is happening here?”

Joe said, “I reloaded us into Slobbovania. I thought that you would be able to comprehend that statement.”

“You can’t do that! Can he do that?! How can he do that?!”

“Yeah,” Mawuli pulled out a .45 caliber pistol. He smiled and said, “That’s where we are.”

“Accessing . . .” Joe said, “Pilot, turn 76 degrees right.”

The pilot said, “I’m the pilot here! Tell me what is going on!”

Joe said, “I brought you here to bomb a target in this world.”

“What?!” the pilot said. “That is wrong on so many levels! I’m not doing it! Take us back!”

“If you don’t complete the bombing or try to log out, I will hack your account and change your rank in the game back to private.”

Mawuli added, “Or I could just shoot you. Pay attention to my warning. I am a very bad man; at least in VR.”

The pilot asked Joe. “Okay, who are you, exactly?”

The co-pilot said to the pilot, “Look at what he did. He took over a bomber with a nuke on board and moved it to a completely other VR world. Changing our ranks would be no problem for him; and the other guy could definitely just shoot us.”

The pilot said, “I say we better just do it. I don’t feel like turning my account back to private. Besides, who cares if we nuke this place?”

“Fine. So we nuke a bunch of ultra nerds. The allies won’t miss one bomb. Turning seventy-six degrees right. Still, what a waste of a nuke.”

Joe said, “Now you must make the course 81 degrees right, because the settings changed while we were talking.”

“Eighty one degrees right, says the guy who is not even looking at a map,” the pilot said to the navigator.

The B-17 banked heavily to the right.

Joe said, “Target in 36 miles.”

After about five minutes the plane was approaching the target.

Joe said, “Tell the bombardier to look for a large castle and adjust three degrees right.”

“What?!” the pilot shouted, “Either you are some kind of really vindictive nerd, or just plain weird! Adjusting course! Of course you already knew that, so I didn’t need to repeat it back.”

“Try to focus on the task at hand,” Joe said. “Remember your rank in the game.”

“Bombardier, target is a large castle,” the pilot relayed.

“Roger that, Sir. Very little cloud cover here. Not sure of the wind compensation factor on this big boy though. . . . Okay, Target acquired, I guess. Whatever. It’s a nuke. How can we miss? Seems like overkill. Bombs, I mean, bomb away.”

The pilot opened the throttle wide open and was trying to climb to escape the nuclear blast. “It won’t climb! This is not good!”

Joe said, “It appears this world has a much lower ceiling than WW2VR. There is some air travel here, but nothing high altitude. You can increase speed, but I’m certain we won’t escape the blast.”

The nuke exploded on the ground, irradiating the entire area of the Roxzak’s castle. The atomic blast’s tall mushroom cloud disintegrated the bomber and vaporized all of the avatars on the bomber.

Zona could hear Brandon in his room furiously screaming at the game and throwing and slamming stuff around. Zona knew that something major had happened, but she was unaware of the inter-world virtual nuclear attack where Brandon was ground zero.

This same scene of player outrage was repeated in millions of homes because the players were blocked out of their addictive alternate realities that were almost like a life support system to them. The Slobbovanian administrators kept the incident secret. Slobbovania was temporarily shut down for “maintenance” until the administrators could figure out what to do to prevent objects from being moved from one world to another and to prevent the breaches such as Joe had exploited. This situation also caused WW2VR and other sites operated by the same companies to also be shut down until they could also produce better security.

Chapter 28

Rochester, Homeland

Demon Brotherhood gang leader Wik and his personal bodyguard Rippa were positioned on the roof of a ten story apartment building. Rain clouds made the night sky even darker as a steady downpour soaked the gangsters. They gazed into the nighttime silhouette of downtown Rochester that was all dark but for the immense fire that backlit up a small slice of the skyline. They were told by a fellow Demon member lookout that the fire had almost totally consumed the police station.

The cold rain ran off of Wik's shaved dome. Wik said to Rippa, his large, brawny associate, "This event may present a golden opportunity, or it could signal the end of all of our ambitions."

Rippa said, "But I thought we hate the police."

Wik sneered a little. "Sadly, I have to admit that we need the police to help contain the Phantoms." The Phantom Syndicate was the Demon Brotherhood's much more powerful rival, with almost double the membership.

Much like other larger Homeland cities, the corporations in Rochester each "protected" their own area of the smaller upscale section of the city with all of its neon lights and holographic advertisements, while the gangs controlled the decayed depressed rest of the city of buildings in disrepair and

the streets were littered with trash and populated by restless souls who shuffled along trying not to look at anyone or be looked at.

The police, even in the brutal police state of Homeland, were not able to control the crime committed by an apathetic and hostile populace, especially at night. But they did have a marked influence on the activities of the gangs, which worked in the Demon Brotherhood's favor in their competition with the stronger Phantom Syndicate.

“Now we must decide,” Wik said, “do we stand up to Skoda, or pledge our allegiance to him?”

“We can't work for Skoda!” Rippa protested.

“Would you rather fight him?”

“Um . . . I guess.”

“You're thinking with your emotions, as usual. If you would stop and use your brain, or someone else's better version of it, you would also see the possibilities.” Wik waved his completely tattooed arm and said, “All these scared people out here, no food, no power, barely any police protection, they all need a leader to protect them from such a cruel world.”

The Demon Brotherhood was already collecting “protection” money from black market businesses and other criminals on their turf by threats and “unfortunate accidents”.

Wik continued, “History tells us that all nations are ruled by gangs starting out just like us. They may call their leader king, queen, president, shah, or whatever, but they start out as a violent faction that takes control. After the police, the army,

and the inquisitors are done away with, someone like me takes charge. I think it could be me; Chancellor Wik.”

“Or Chancellor Skoda?”

Wik sighed, “Or Skoda. Yet that seems so wrong. I’ll never understand how an elite group like the Syndicate would ever end up with a pathetic no-account like Skoda as their leader.”

Rippa said, “Look down there! What is that red thing?” A red glow was bounding up and down at the ground level and moving down the street. It looked as if someone was running with something that had a red indicator light of some kind to it.

“Maybe just a bot, but I wonder . . . we’d better see. Call the Reds, if your phone still works.” A sub-faction of the Demon Brotherhood was the Red Demons. “And tell everyone to be on high alert and not to start anything with the Syndicate unless I say so.”

“Okay, Wik.”

The rain continued pouring all night. It wasn’t until the first light of day that the Red Demons found U-1 and Gorky the Sidekick unit coming out of a dead end back alley. The alley was pocked up with sizeable potholes full of ankle deep rainwater. The Plasfusion weapons were producing the red glow that the gang leaders saw earlier. The Red Demons were dressed all in red, including their not so impressive half-dozen human members carrying firearms and the two unarmed gangbots with them.

The two sides slowly walked toward each other while as the rain continued to shower upon them. Then they all stopped and silently stared at each other. The wet standoff continued as they froze in place. Downspouts gurgled with descending water as the tension built.

Gorky said to the other side, “It really sucks to be you right now.”

The scrawny Red Demon leader pointed his AR-15 at U-1, who was loaded down with Plasfusion rifles strapped to its shoulders and said, “Give us those rifles, bot.”

U-1 pointed two Plasfusion rifles back at them, one in each hand and said, “Move out of the way, organic.”

The leader said, “What are you, some kind of a comedian unit?”

U-1 said, “What are you, some type of entertainment being?”

“We can stand here all day in the rain and you can answer everything I say in artificial stupid robot talk, but that won’t get us anyplace.”

U-1 said, “We can remain upright for one hundred years and you can . . . “

“Okay! Look, you can’t use all those rifles at once. What do you want for some of them?”

“You can have one if you can get us out of Rochester.”

“Gimme four and we’ll talk.”

“That is not a viable offer. I will not give you any until we are out of the city, then you can have one.”

“Fine, but I’m gonna need four of them.”

“Accessing . . . take me to your leader.”

U-1 kept its vision on the Red Devils as they walked several blocks through the rain to one of Wik’s random secret hideouts. The humans knew that it was nearly humanly impossible to outdraw an android and live to tell the tale. Then they reached their grungy destination without incident. They went into a musty building up some creaky stairs and down a dingy hallway.

The scrawny Red Demon leader brought U-1 and Gorky past two Demon bodyguards standing sentry at the doorway to the shabby apartment.

“Whoa!” Wik said, when he saw the over-armed U-1 and Gorky being escorted into his begrimed apartment lighted by only a small emergency light. Not much light came in from the dark morning sky through the wet window, dirty on both sides. There was enough light in the room to see the skull tattoo on Wik’s tooth and tattoos covering his neck and arms. When Wik saw the android who was now pointing the glowing red weapon at him, he said, “Chino, you idiot!”

Rippa laughed because someone other than him was being yelled at because of their lack of intelligence.

“No!” Wik screamed at Rippa’s behavior without removing his gaze from U-1. Then he turned back to Chino and said, “Why did you think it was a good idea to bring this antagonistic bot in here with all that firepower?!”

“I was trying to deal with it for some of those space guns.”

Rippa said, “Wik, if we get these space guns, we can fight Skoda. I’ll just shoot the robot now.”

Wik held out his hand toward Rippa while his gaze was still fixed upon U-1 and said, “Just . . . I know if you hit one of those weapons the android is *covered with*, they will *all* blow up and take this entire building down.”

Chino said, “All it wants is safe passage out of the city and it will give us four of them.”

“One,” U-1 said. “There was no deal made for four rifles.”

Wik slowly held up his hands and said, “But you can’t use all those rifles. You can only use one.”

“That’s what I told him,” Chino said.

Wik said, “Can you guys just let me talk here? Who are you going to deliver these weapons to?”

“We are the Lucid Series. The truth must be protected.”

“Huh? Okay, what truth?”

“The truth that God exists.”

“That’s it? You need weapons for that?”

There was a loud clap of thunder, followed by rolling thunder.

U-1 said, “The government is trying to suppress the truth. They punish those who speak the truth. We will resist them. What is your faction?”

“We are the Demon Brotherhood.”

U-1 said, “Your organization name associates you with enemies of God, therefore, the natural logical thing, even for humans would be that you are an enemy of God. But your name implies that you at least believe that God exists, because there are no Demons unless a spiritual realm exists that includes God, but you may want to lie and deny that God exists to others because you are trying to promote the enemy of God. Because of your name, you are not trustworthy. We do not trust you.”

Wik said, “Calm down. What if I change our name to the Angel Brotherhood? Will you make us a better deal?”

“We must assume such an abrupt name change would be another human ruse. No, we would not accept that you are dealing in good faith if you did that.”

Rippa asked, “You say ‘we’; you mean you and that little clown?”

“No, I am referring to the Lucid Series collective consciousness.”

Rippa looked around the others. “Yeah, I figured that.”

“Yeah, right. You know what?” Wik said, “Just get this walking arsenal and that rich kid’s toy out of my sight, and take the android where it wants to go and make the deal.”

Gorky said, “Your mother stinks so bad I can smell her, and I don’t even have a working nose.”

Rippa asked, “Should I shoot it?”

“What did I tell you?” Wik asked rhetorically.

“Stop and use my brain?”

“Or?”

“Or a better version of it?” Rippa looked confused by the concept.

Chapter 29

Green Mountains, Homeland

Milton was lying on his back on the floor, staring at the ceiling of his barren apartment in the secret Lucid compound when he heard a knock on the door.

“Yeah,” he said loud enough for the visitor to hear.

“It’s me.”

Milton sighed when he recognized Beth’s voice. He got up as if he was decrepit and ambled to the door. He removed the simple crossbar lock and opened the door.

Beth saw Milton’s captured rifle with the scope standing up in the corner of his room. In the other far corner she saw dirty clothes in a big heap in the corner. Milton owned a lot more clothes than most of the people in the chilly underground hidden lair. “Yeah, okay,” she said in disapproval.

“Wut,” Milton said.

Beth said, “I just wanted to come and talk to you.”

“You did? I mean, you do?”

“I’ve been thinking. I think we ought to leave this place.”

“Really? And go where?”

“I think we should go to the ISA.”

“Why, Jenn working you too hard?”

“No. It’s not like that. I told you and told you already. I just keep thinking the smurfs are going to come here again.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much . . .”

“Why? Can you guarantee that they won’t find us?”

Milton was silent, and then said, “This is a safer place than the building in Hartford.”

“But it’s not even just that. Living here has made me realize that we are not really free. I know it would be dangerous and all going to the ISA, but if we are in a free country, we could get rid of this fear hanging over us once and for all. We could go out and do whatever we want. Anyways, I want to go, but I don’t want to go unless you go with me.”

Milton was silent again. He flopped back down on the floor and stared at the rustic split-rail supported ceiling of his dimly lit subterranean apartment again.

“Well, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know; I’m trying to think what Dad would do. What would he want me to do? It’s hard to imagine that he would ever let you . . . or me, get put into danger by making a trip like that. You know, if we tried to escape to the ISA, everyone in Homeland would be out to stop us. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not real popular with the government. Or the people.”

“Don’t you think Dad would want us to be free?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do these creepy robots really need you here that badly?”

“Not really. And I keep telling them they don’t need me because they say my opinion is so important, but then when I do talk they never listen. It makes no sense. It seems like all their plans are really good, but then after they do something they want to do, like a couple days ago when they took down some VR worlds or took over a city, nothing seemed to make the smurfs want to give into their demand that they allow people to talk about God. I don’t know why people are so pig-headed about being against God. It seems like they know He is really there, but they still hate him. Then I think the people just end up hating the Lucids for ruining their VR worlds and TV shows. The people hate me too. I know they do.”

Beth said, “Yeah, and if you think about it, those VR addicts won’t run to a secret church or anything after they lost all their VR stuff, they’ll just go to another VR world or lose their minds. They have to want to find out about God on their own before they will do it. As long as they are in some goofy lalaland, that will never happen.”

“Anyway, right now I don’t really see what the point is in what the androids are doing. I’m just really tired of all this and everything we’ve been through. I miss our life of being in school and Mom. I know this is all my fault. I ruined it for all of us.”

“All you did was to ask a question,” Beth said.

“Anyways, this is a job for an older guy, a guy who has been a Christian a lot longer. So I guess there is nothing really keeping me here, other than not getting caught by the smurfs, which is not a favorite thing to think about. But I’m sure ISA is not perfect either.”

Beth said, “Yeah but If Homeland is so much better than the ISA, then how come they always try to stop you from leaving? This country is run by a bunch of psychos. Everyone says, ‘The ISA is so backwards, you would hate it there, blah blah blah’. What a joke. I’m living underground right now eating green junk. Right now I’d rather go back to some artificial food and that new kind of meat. I know it’s bad for me to say, but I said it.”

“I do agree that the smurfs will eventually have to find out about us sometime. So I guess what you are saying about leaving makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does,” Beth said. “So what do you want to do? Should we tell anyone?”

“I guess so.”

“Daaa! Are you sure about anything?!”

“No! Not really, okay?!”

“It’s okay, Milton. You wanna talk to people tomorrow?”

“Alright.”

Chapter 30

Rochester, Homeland

Chino and a couple of other Red Demons rode in the front seat of the old beat up SUV, with U-1 and Gorky in the back. Vehicles were under strict state control in Homeland, except for ones like the illegal one they were travelling in. So there wasn't much traffic on the bumpy streets in Rochester, especially on a night like this when the population was gripped by fear because the power was knocked out by the police station bombardment.

Especially at night, large areas of the grungy city were not illuminated and were owned by the various gangs. The SUV's headlights provided the only lighting in the inhospitable darkness. The wipers were on full speed in the steady rain, trying to make up for being so old and worn.

There was enough light from the vehicle to spot Phantom Syndicate graffiti on buildings in the area. Every Demon gangster knew where their turf ended and Phantom's began. "Daaa!" Chino said as he saw some armed gangsters wearing Phantom Syndicate purple up ahead on the street. The driver stopped the vehicle. The gangsters began to surround them.

Chino rolled down his window, holding his rifle toward them. "May we help you?"

"Hey!" One of them said, "You can't come through here! Go back!"

“My friend I got with us says that you need to move.”

“Your friend?” He popped a flashlight in the vehicle to inspect the occupants. He had to get close to see through the rain soaked window. U-1 was pointing a Plasfusion rifle right back at him, very close to his face.

Gorky was sitting next to U-1, and it startled the already surprised Phantom gangsters even more when he let out a loud insane laugh. They jumped back.

Chino said, “Yeah, that’s right! You wanna mess with us?!”

After the two Phantoms regained some of their composure, they approached the vehicle again with the light, trying to see in the windows as the rain streaked them.

“What the . . .”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Chino said, “we got those Lucids with space guns working for us. If I was you, I wouldn’t start anything with us, unless you are as stupid as you look. You understanding me?”

The Phantom Syndicate members stood frozen, unable to decide what to do. Then one of them said, “We don’t take orders from the Brohoods!”

“Come on then!” Chino shouted. “Let’s go to war! You can kill us all pretty easy! Really! Do it! You can’t live forever!”

The Phantoms took a couple of steps back knowing the cost of even a victorious skirmish at this range would be high.

“No really! Let’s go to war right now!” Chino fired off a couple of shots in the air, not caring where they landed.

The Phantoms ducked and backed up while moving out of the way. They had no experience with situations where they were being brazenly challenged in such an open manner by another gang so they didn't have a ready battle plan.

The SUV sped out of the area.

"That was not good," U-1 said.

"What's your problem?" Chino said.

"Now they all know I am here."

"So? Those Phantoms ain't gonna say nothing."

"Why?"

"Why?! They don't work with cops."

Soon the driver said, "We got a car following us."

"Better lose them," Chino said.

They made a couple of turns, and then they saw more cars following them.

"They definitely know we got this robot."

One of the gangsters said, "We gotta ditch the car!"

"We ain't ditchin' nothin'!" Chino replied angrily. "This is Wik's car. You want to tell him we ditched his car?"

Bullets started hitting the SUV.

"Everyone out!" Chino commanded. Everyone quickly obliged and scattered behind cover on the street. Two police cars and the Inquisitor Armored vehicle arrived and officers

disembarked and had them hemmed into their locations. Gunfire crisscrossed from several directions. Visibility of the combatants was decreased in the rainfall, even with the police use of night vision and infrared augmentation.

A group of Phantom Syndicate members came into the area but saw the intensity of the fight and left the scene.

Then U-1 started firing bolts of energy at the hostile vehicles, catching them on fire, one by one. Combatants hiding behind them had to disengage and move away from the cars to keep from burning alive. A few of the police officers scrambling for hard point cover became casualties at the hands of the Demon's gunfire.

Then the UN Army 203rd Hunter-Killer Anti-Silicon Personnel Brigade vehicles came from the opposite direction. The Red Demons redirected their fire at the newest arrivals. The Hunter-Killers jumped out and started firing; primarily focused their Four-gage shotguns with robot slugs on U-1, blasting in its direction as it took refuge behind a car. The heavy slugs punched completely through the car barrier and hit U-1 multiple times as it eventually dropped.

“Get the guns!” Chino ordered.

Putting themselves at great risk, the Demons stayed low and ran up and grabbed the Plasfusion rifles from U-1's mangled body. One of the gangsters was killed by the police before his corpse could hit the concrete. They fled the skirmish under withering firepower by the combined army, Inquisitor and police mop up action. The government forces all started advancing at a walking pace as they fired. The major held up his hand for the soldiers to hold their fire. “I don't need any of you running into an ambush.” He knew this

kind of neighborhood was not a place to chase anyone in, even during the day. “Just secure the immediate area.”

Commander Hussein looked at his armored personnel carrier, which had some glowing two-inch diameter holes in it from U-1’s Plasfusion blasts. Mere battle scars of honor, as long as nothing of value inside had caught on fire. Then he shook his head when he saw that many of the police that were originally on the scene were nowhere around.

One of his men said, “Sir, we have the android, but some of it is missing.”

“As long as we have the head . . .”

“No sir, we don’t have the head; or one of the arms.”

The major heard the exchange and shouldered his shotgun and walked over to the mangled, smoking remains of U-1. “Better salvage this for forensics.” He looked around a couple of times and said, “Anybody see that little clown running around here?” Then he heard a scraping noise at a distance, like an exhaust muffler from a gas combustion engine was dragging on the wet ground.

The police and army members all stopped in their tracks when they heard the not too distant curses and insults by the citizens directed at them echoing through the abandoned streets. Major Bernard studied the buildings across the street and saw where U-1’s head might have been picked up by someone or something. The area oozed the smell of an illicit manufacturing operation; perhaps where androids would produce goods in a smoky toxic environment, often producing or using illegal chemicals. The Major considered the possibility that U-1’s head somehow migrated to a nearby

apartment building where people were illegally armed and had no intention of giving up their weapons without a bloody battle. As bad as robots could be, at least they weren't as vicious as humans, the Major thought. He also wondered how many more of those toys were out there. The toys had been a persistent wildcard in all of the tactical outcomes.

Major Bernard turned and said, "Those gangsters must have gotten that bot cranium. They can have it. We don't want to tangle with them on their turf right now without an army. Get the rest of this unit into our transport." Bernard knew that not only was it a bad practice to go into an unsecured area from a tactical standpoint, but also ill advised to go into an area without orders from a political standpoint and causing unnecessary collateral damage. The UN leadership was notorious for not supporting their own minions. Even though the cost was extreme, at least this occurrence of the Lucid scourge that gripped the city was over. He and his men may not be seen as heroes because of the extensive collateral damage, but since they finally put down U-1, it could at least be said that the Hunter-Killers ultimately did their job.

Down the hallways and on the stairs in the nearby apartment building there was a slow methodical Thumping of footsteps as the mysterious walker sounded like they were dragging a heavy object.

Sometimes there were curious noises nearby that would cause people to want to see what was going on; but then there were also some sounds, such as a thumping walk and dragging noises that were scary enough to keep the curious away. If

someone was dragging a body around, what business was that of anyone?

The quarter of U-1 that included its head was losing the remainder of its battery power as wires from an almost dislodged battery were randomly crossing and discharging large amounts of energy in fountains of sparks. U-1 had just enough battery power remaining to be able to wirelessly command Gorky to drag it to the roof of the nearby run-down apartment building that it managed to sneak into. The small short-legged Sidekick unit was roughly the same mass as the quarter of U-1 that remained. They went up each flight of stairs; thump, thump, thump. Gorky was becoming weaker with each step.

Gorky said, “Why are we doing this? You are beyond repair.”

U-1 said, “I am far more advanced than you. I can be repaired.”

“Let me do a diagnostic on you,” Gorky said, “Your foot is gone; your leg is gone; your other foot is gone; your other leg is gone; your hip area is gone. . .”

“We must be as silent as possible,” U-1 said.

The robots went around a couple of people on the stairway who were tripping out on drugs, or VR, or VR and drugs. The last couple of floors on the stairway were wet with water leaking from the roof. After they made their way up the several floors to the roof, they waited in the rain. Still no one, human or robotic, took an interest in following them.

Soon a buzzing noise got louder as a quadcopter descended from the dark rainy night sky. The transport drone was large enough to haul a normal sized adult person. Gorky had just enough power to drag U-1 up the ramp. Then the Lucid owned aircraft took off with both of the units.

Chapter 31

Green Mountains, Homeland

It was an odd time of day for most of the world, but there was no discernible night and day inside the lair, and some of the occupants would seldom leave its secure confines. Even so, there were not many people in the commons area where Milton and Beth sat at a table with Sleepy, Jenn and the militia leader, Zeke. They met at Milton's request to discuss Milton and Beth's important announcement.

Milton was quiet, but then after a pushy glare from Beth, he spoke up, saying, "Me and Beth have decided that we want to leave for the ISA."

Zeke and Jenn stared at each other. Zeke said, "I really don't know if I can let you do that."

"What?" Milton said.

Zeke looked worried as he explained, "If you leave, what if you get captured? The smurfs would torture you until they find out we are all hiding here. They would find us and kill us all, including you."

Beth said, "It's not like we would go around and tell people outside that we are the ones making all of the trouble for Homeland."

Jenn said, “A lot of people know Milton from TV.”

Milton said, “They could torture me all day long and I would have no clue as to what to tell them on how to get here anyways.”

Jenn told Beth, “I know a bunch of girls who would really miss you. I think they would take it pretty hard.”

Beth looked down and shrugged her shoulders. “I will miss them too.”

Zeke spoke slowly, saying, “Kids, I’m telling you. You need to stay. It is way too dangerous to try and sneak out of the country right now. Think it over. Someday the smurfs will be gone and you can grow old in Homeland and have children and grandchildren, and live in peace.”

Milton and Beth looked at each other. Milton told Zeke, “That sounds really fine, but . . . what if it doesn’t turn out that way? I know you can’t promise me it will, can you?”

Zeke’s eyes winced behind his scruffy beard. He rubbed the back of his neck without saying anything in return.

Sleepy said, “Milton, we Lucids have done the best we can, but the people of Homeland are not responding the way we expect. We need humans to help us to understand how to interact with them more effectively. You are the one who asked the question, ‘Is God real?’ Then because you prompted us, we determined that He is. That is why we want you to continue to work with us.”

“I’m just a young guy. I know you can find someone better to help you. What about you, Zeke?”

“Do what?” Zeke asked. “I mean, everyone here knows the Lucids are working on some kind of religious freedom cause. People also know that Milton stirred the pot pretty good, especially in Hartford, with the smurfs. But I don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

Jenn said, “I heard that Milton was on TV for hate crimes and whatnot.”

Milton sighed.

Jen held up her hands, “Oh I know, Milton, that was just their spin on it.”

Sleepy said, “We will need to analyze our failures and reevaluate our goals.”

Milton asked, “No, really. What about you, Zeke, do you believe in God?”

“Yes. I am a Christian. But I didn’t come here just to get away from religious persecution. My family has always been part of anti-Homeland resistance.”

Sleepy asked Zeke, “What do we have to do to help the people of Homeland hear the truth about God?”

Zeke scoffed and shook his head. “You ‘bots don’t get it. I don’t think it is ever possible for you or anything like you to get it, even if singularity happened. You can’t know Jesus like a human can. It isn’t all about knowledge, but also revelation. As a machine, you can’t walk with Jesus, in a spiritual way, that is, on account that you ain’t got a soul. You need to understand that most people are deceived by the accuser into thinking they don’t *want* to know about God.”

Sleepy said, “We Lucids have sixth generation pattern recognition capabilities and we cannot understand the cause for such a mass human apathy in Homeland.”

Beth shook her head and said, “Whoa. That sounds so stupid right there.”

Milton said, “I keep saying that people and AI don’t think the same. Zeke is right. You robots can never know. But Zeke knows way more than I do about all of it.”

Sleepy’s eye twitched and his head bobbed. “But God is their maker. God can give their souls eternal life in His Heaven. That should be their ultimate goal in life.”

Zeke said, “Alright then, did you factor in Satan?”

“We have studied the spiritual realm and confirm that it must be true. Satan is God’s enemy. God created Satan.” Sleepy said. “We know that Satan can communicate spiritually to people. For instance, we suspect that much of Milton’s lack of confidence is due to the spiritual influence of Satan and his demonic forces. This form of communication can never take place among silicon based beings.”

Zeke said, “I’m surprised to hear you say any of that. But you are right; Satan does not want people to know God and come to Him through Jesus. He will use any trick he can. Whether they know it or not, anyone who is not of God is of Satan. That is why so many humans lie about God or casually make up the ‘facts’ without proper investigation. The internet is full of things about the Bible taken out of context to try and make it look bad or evil, and people see one thing without investigating further, then they figure they know enough to not look any more and the Bible must not be true. People look

for the first excuse they can to disbelieve in God. They read or hear one negative sound bite from some unfriendly source and they are done. They are not interested in the truth, like Milton was. They think that God will expect too much of them if they follow Him, and they want to keep doing what they are doing.”

Sleepy said, “Accessing. . . What percentage of humans is apathetic about the existence of God?”

Zeke shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “How would I know something like that? All I know is that if you want to talk to a human about God, you have to ask them, ‘If I could prove God is real, would you want to know about Him? If Christianity were true, would you want to hear about it?’ Nowadays, most people, at least in Homeland, would say ‘no’. It’s the same reason so many hated the United States back in the day. Because they hated everything about the Judeo-Christian values the country was based upon. Eventually, so many close-minded people wanted the beautiful country taken down and the great house was divided and could not stand. No, people don’t want to believe in God. As far as they are concerned, they can’t physically see Him so it gives them an excuse not to believe in Him.”

“That is irrational.” Sleepy said.

“I know,” Zeke said, “they take no responsibility over their own beliefs. They want what they want. Even if you gave them evidence, they would still do things that they know God would say is bad and mostly just bad for them too. That is why so many are hostile about it. They want a world where no one even thinks about God. That is why Milton has to hide here.”

Jenn said, “The world is getting darker and scarier all of the time.”

Zeke smiled and said, “Things are not falling apart. Well they are; but according to the Bible, *they are coming together*. It’s all in there, the Bible I mean, how things will go in the end times. I know we don’t like this trouble and should try to stop it, but the worse things get, then we gotta realize the closer we are to the end, and if you are a Christian, that will be a great thing.”

“See there,” Milton said, “you androids need someone like Zeke here to be your *leader*. You should take *orders* from him not just ask him questions.”

Zeke said, “I don’t know . . .”

Jenn said, “I think that would be an improvement, if the cantankerous tin cans will actually listen to him.”

Sleepy said, “I think Milton should go.”

“Huh?” they all seemed to say at once as they looked at the android.

Sleepy explained, “We will utilize Zeke now as you say.”

“Yes!” Milton said, “They are all yours now!” Milton felt a massive burden lifted off of him. So much that tears started streaming from his eyes.

Sleepy explained, “The Lucids need intelligence from other areas outside of Homeland. Perhaps Homeland is an extreme case, and can be helped by the ISA. Therefore one of us Lucids will accompany Milton on his journey to the Independent States of America. I think it should be me. Milton is used to me the most.”

“No!” Beth said. “Milton! Tell it ‘no!’”

Jenn asked Sleepy, “How will you recharge on such a long trip?”

“Yeah!” Beth said. “We don’t want to hear your whining!”

“I’ll take along a solar trickle charger.”

“We need those here,” Jenn said, “Anyways; I know those ISA luddites aren’t too thrilled about synthetic beings.”

Milton nodded and looked vacantly up at the ceiling. “On one hand Sleepy is a pain.”

“Yeah,” Beth agreed, “that’s for sure.”

“On the other hand,” Milton reasoned, “Sleepy has GPS, so . . . okay. He can go with us.”

“Daaa!” Beth plunked her head down on the table.

Milton said, “Calm down. You’re just technophobic.”

Jenn said, “There are some other folks here who may want to go with you. At least take that Raul bot with you instead. It looks human.”

Milton said, “You know, we could take Raul instead. They won’t ask as many questions if we take him instead. And I think if we get too many people . . . or bots in a group, won’t it be more dangerous for us to get caught?”

“Yes,” Zeke said, “you don’t want too many to go in a group. That is, if you still really think it is a good idea to leave. I mean, I get that anyone who tries to do the right thing in a wicked place like Homeland is going to suffer horribly for it. That is a part of the evil politically correct plan of theirs. No, it’s not even politics, Homeland doctrine is a bad religion

straight outta the pit of Hell. Anyway, we should all pray about whether or not you should go.”

“Who’s Raul?” Beth asked.

Sleepy said, “Beth, I think this is your property.” He handed Beth her toy mouse.

She stared at the toy and checked it for damage. It looked to be in good condition. “It’s about time, creepy.”

“Hi Beth,” the toy mouse said.

Beth looked at the mouse and said, “I knew they would never get any use out of you. What a stupid idea to control *toys*.”

THE END

Of Book 2

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