

WARHEAD

8071 words

Keith C. Blackmore/1990

TM:30:00:00

The moon was full as the skimmer darted across the hazy night sky, cruising a hundred feet above broken terrain which was once a bright pasture. No longer a shining example of the reconnaissance aircraft that once filled the air, the nose of the helicopter-shaped body sported a spray painted Jolly Roger, grinning maliciously. Knotted and mean looking, the jet engine pods located on the craft's sides had been kissed with enough love dents and scratches to make one wonder how it remain airborne. A blunt auto cannon hung from its undercarriage, as if the beast was looking to mate. Its dumpy form swooped into a wide arc, surveying the surroundings below. Assured nothing was amiss, the airship dipped quickly like a hand to water and closed with the landscape. It reined into a halt, hovering just above the ground, stirring up ripples of dust and debris. A panel yawned open on the skimmer's side and a single man, bald and dressed in a grey running suit complete with matching sneakers, bounced onto the coarse gravel, landing in a crouch. His face was a strong one, with prominent cheekbones and a knob of a nose which might have been broken at some point in time. Hard eyes looked back to the open hatch of the ship, its maneuvering jets thrumming with power and anxious to be off. The blaring mechanical purr drowned out the use of words. Another man, wearing the tattered remains of a flight suit and a shaggy baseball hat, appeared in the closing hatchway. He pointed pass the crouched figure, eyes squinting against the billowing dust clouds. Then, with a sorry half smile, he saluted and held it as the door slid shut. The skimmer's engines, now a high pitched whine, bucked as it lifted its

weight into the dark sky above. The stranded man below watched it rise, memorizing its every detail; the dents, scratches, and scars crisscrossing the hull. Its red landing lights flickered on and off. A final goodbye, he guessed, and raised his hand.

The auto cannon blinked to life, whirling about to the south. Sharp, snapping bursts of energy shot forth, meters above the man's head. He sprawled for cover, his right hand raised protectively over his bare head as the airship continued its assault upon an unseen foe. He heard the engines whine reach a peak and hot air rushed about him.

Thank God they're away, was his only thought.

A second later, a heavier, deeper roar of engines pounded overhead, accompanied by an ominous pumping of heavy thunder. If the skimmer sounded like a boar in heat, then it was being charged by a dragon. The clamor swept over the still form below.

There was a distant explosion which rolled over the low hills and a sudden blazing light penetrated the darkness of the man's closed eyelids. He blinked and caught the flaming wreckage of the skimmer spiral downward to disappear behind a rift. Another explosion blossomed and his throat tightened.

"Later Jones," he whispered.

YEAR 2075, MONTH 12, DAY 25.

"Robinson!" The voice shouted.

A lean, thick bearded man looked up from his portion of cooling stew, his fingers still in his mouth. He wiped them on his made-in-Korea sports pants and, still chewing, stood up. He still had not placed where the voice came from. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a young man with an officer's stripes, a Lieutenant, making his way through a motley group of men sitting and eating around a small fire. An embarrassingly small assortment of automatic weapons—of which half were empty—lay around them.

"Sergeant John Robinson?" The officer asked again, stopping in front of Robinson and regarding the other men with apparent distaste.

Robinson wondered what the man's problem was. He continued chewing thoughtfully on one of the tougher pieces of meat in his mouth. The officer turned back to him.

"Robinson, you're to come with me."

Robinson looked squarely at the man while the men around the camp fire stopped chewing. The last man to speak to Robinson in such a tone had his testicles shown to him. They were well away from the front lines, but cleaning accidents occurred with weapons all the time.

Unafraid, the Lieutenant scowled and used his rank.

"Orders, Sergeant. Follow me."

Robinson switched to the quiet faces of his men, then back. He nodded once and plodded behind the officer, following him out of the campfire's warm glow.

TM:27:58:56

Robinson got to his feet and started moving under the moonlight, breaking into a jog and pacing himself, heading south. With each stride the harsh, beaten earth rose to meet his antique jogging shoes, Reeboks by label.

Not a bad shoe, he mused, pounding out a steady gait. His eyes were fixed ahead. Seven kilometers away was supposed to be hill and cliff. His target lay beyond it. Warcon-1. The Cybernist's brainchild. A military supercomputer designed to command the Cybernist's struggle with the remains of humanity. The creator of the A-program; 'A' for annihilation. A program that had claimed too many lives.

Robinson was in deep and his sole ticket out lay within one heavily armored bunker housing a machine whose job it was to kill people. And he was the bug.

DAY 26.

Robinson sat fuming in a small briefing room. Not since noon yesterday had that Lieutenant or anybody else spoken to him at wherever he was. He had been placed

inside a bare, metallic grey room with a single gutted couch, two chairs, and a table. Across the room, opposite the door he had entered, was another door.

Locked.

A handful of plastic tubes containing "processed nutrients and essential vitamins in a favorable paste" rested on the table and he irritably sucked out the bland contents of one. It was a feast compared to the rat food he and his men usually ate. And his men would be wondering just where in hell...

The far door clicked and opened, breaking his thoughts. Three men entered. One soldier wearing a sidearm, another man was a Force Commander by the stripes on his shoulders, and the third was a scientist of some sort, wearing a white garb complete with thick, wire framed glasses. The guard stood at the door, his hands behind his back while the Commander sat down directly across from Robinson. The Tech stood at the man's right.

"Sorry for the wait, Sergeant," the Tech in white began, "we've been busy."

Robinson grunted. His thick beard hid any expression.

"You've been selected for a special mission, Mr. Robinson, because of your background."

John coldly regarded the Commander. The officer had been seriously scrutinizing him ever since he entered the room, and it bothered him. He crossed his arms and fixed the officer with eyes straight back.

"My background? Nothing special about that," Robinson mumbled almost

incoherently. "Just your regular grunt. Sure you have the right guy? sir?"

The Tech cocked his head and began his recital.

"Jonathan Dean Robinson. Sergeant in the second division. Long standing service in corp. Married with one child. Both wife and daughter abducted and presumed dead. Fought at Grand Gulch and suffered head wound requiring extensive surgery. Steel plate required in section of skull...."

The mention of his wife and daughter drove screwdrivers through Robinson's heart. He stared down at the smooth, reflective surface of the table. The backlash of memories drowned out the Tech's voice and he blinked uncontrollably.

"Sergeant."

It was the Commander.

"You had a brief career as a long distance runner. Our reports state that you're still in good shape. Good stamina and endurance, plus a good sense of direction. And you follow orders it seems... tho at times described as an insolent pain in the ass. But, regardless, you possess a sincere loyalty and belief in our war with the Cybernists and their A-Program," he paused, drawing breath.

"You have a special faith."

Cindy was alone with Sam that night. John had just stepped out for a pack of cigarettes when a Cybernist squad raided their apartment building. Actually took everyone. Word was because it was a section of town considered a detrimental slum to the surrounding suburbs, made up of junkies, social deviants, and welfare dwellers. No

one would miss anyone. They lived there because, despite the grim surroundings, it was the cheapest rent to contend with.

Twenty minutes. He was gone for twenty minutes. In that length of time the Lifers had seized everyone in the building and herded them into waiting armored transports. The police never showed, as if they would. The corruption ran that deep. Samantha's doll was discarded in the open doorway of their scruffy, single bedroom apartment, its stitched button eyes staring accusingly up at him. As John picked it up with trembling hands, he could've sworn he heard his wife and daughter cry for him, somewhere... presumed dead.

A special faith? Is that what they called a death wish these days?

"John..."

Robinson met the steady gaze of the Force Commander.

"How great is that faith?"

TM:24:11:46

He was making good time. The fact that he was still around *making* good time told him that Warcon hadn't detected him. That knowledge lifted his spirits somewhat, though not much. Low flying sniffers and shrikes would probably be scanning the entire sector attempting to pick up any presence of metal, and the stumpers would be covering

the ground. Warcon was dead thorough in its scanning functions but not impregnable as the Cybernists believed. The remote cannon sentinels, A-mines, and Dead Fields were all quite destructive to anything heavy the resistance possessed--skimmers, transports, stompers; to metal in general, but not to flesh alone. In the shedding of their own skin, the dehumanization of their souls, the Cybernists deemed that organic material alone was frail, weak, harmless.

And it was there that they made their mistake.

Though not worthless, Robinson thought, not in the least when they can control you. And if that happens you're as good as dead. Though the night air was humid, Robinson shivered at the images of people being grafted, cybernized. Whole families, in some instances, subjected to the steel sharp knives of that damned science. Their heads opened up like tins of gray peas and the contents played with.

It began about thirty years ago when Lazarus Botan, an aging scientist in the field of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, founded the Cybernists or "Lifers" as people came to label them. It started as any small faction would and no one would ever conceive the existence of such a group. Yet the people in the Cybernists had three things in common: they were old--the youngest being sixty-nine perhaps--all were accomplished scientists in their respected fields, and all dearly loved life. Treasuring it highly enough to consider any alternative in prolonging it.

Botan deduced that life was merely the sustained functioning of the internal organs of the body, which houses and serves the "essential you." The mind... or more

specifically, the brain. It is within the folds of the cerebrum that a person originated. He argued that existence was thought and to be aware of thought was essentially life. He contended that the body was artificial and nothing more than a pale extension of one's greater existence. A short leash even, holding back one's potential. If one's brain has expired, then one's mind is lost though the body carries on. If the heart was ever damaged and caused the body's death, the brain would follow within seconds because its support system had failed it. Botan suggested that it was possible to exist indefinitely as long as the brain's support system operated. Technology could now duplicate the organs and maintain the brain's support without interrupting its mental functions.

Aided with the science of the day, years of experience, and a fanatical belief in immortality at any cost, dear old Lazarus developed Cybernization; the process by which the brain is surgically removed in its entirety from its organic cage and placed within a mechanical, though not always bipedal, body--a new body whose main concern was corrosion. There were stories abound of how the first few attempts were clunky and messy, like fishing around a can of beef stew with one's fingers? but Botan, with the aid of volunteers, eventually perfected the process.

However, this immortality had its drawbacks. The brain still needed blood and oxygen to be operative. Though electronic gills located in the cerebellum solved the oxygen crisis and filters purified the blood, the new body was totally incapable of producing the blood needed. Plasma could only go so far, and so blood, human blood, was needed. And acquired.

And thus, the century bowed to a race of pseudo vampires.

In the beginning the new body was a cranky intercourse of flesh, fiber, and metal. The frame was bulky from the guts of micro motors, fiber cables, and tubing needed. Strong and durable, it represented the means of existence the Lifers desired. The entire group eventually submitted themselves to the process at first. Politicians, business people, and other V.I.P's soon followed. Their ranks began to swell. Those in the public eye would only make appearances in shadow, or with intense lighting focused squarely on their faces, so that their latex flesh would be unnoticeable. Out from under their illusions, they appeared as obese mannequins...Seamless. Motionless. They were moved about and aided by a supporting staff that appeared like army of first responders, devoted only until it was their time to undergo the immortal transformation.

By the time people started to notice it was already too late. The bums on the streets had already disappeared, crime rates were nonexistent, and hitchhikers and wanderers had vanished. Suspicions were voiced, voiced again, and eventually silenced.

Botan's fanatics were in the main seats of power and were tapping into everything.

Life became cheap.

Then precious.

When the Lifers brought in a person, they analyzed the body. If healthy, the *vessel* would become a blood farm and their sole duty would be to manufacture blood until the strain becomes too much to bear? upon which they die. If the body possessed

diseases, abnormalities, or in poor physical condition, the brains would be extracted, the memories erased, and used as guard drones. The resistance would come to call these airborne and land based units as “sniffers,” the heavy ordnance dobermans of the Lifers.

John silently looked down at his feet and watched them blur over the dark crusted earth. The sound of the soles smacking against the hard packed ground, his steady breathing, and his arms chugging to and fro at his sides all reminded him of his humanity, however frail or limited it may be.

John corrected himself since he was no longer, technically, a human.

But rather a primed detonator.

DAY 29.

The air was cool to Robinson's shaven head and face. Cindy wouldn't recognize him in this state. He couldn't remember his last haircut or shave and now with both gone, he felt naked.

"The surgery," the Tech explained as he walked along Robinson's stretcher being wheeled to the operating room, "Involves a very delicate procedure which has only been

previously attempted in animals."

Robinson heard the man but because of the working sedatives, the words were distorted, long and deep like in a slow motion picture show. Then the pink balloons came into his vision. Everywhere, pink balloons, and he suddenly had a hankering to taste Thursday once last time? his favorite flavor.

"The Cybernist's main defense of Warcon-1 is primary circuit sensors. Anything potentially destructive basically requires metal somewhere. Be it detonator caps, wires, and so on. The sensors detect and the sentinel gun emplacements lock on and neutralize."

A gun is a gun is a pink balloon, Robinson thought dreamily, but a pink balloon was invented for only one purpose.

To be blown up.

The ceiling lights above flashed by.

Thursday. How good Thursdays tasted.

"The body is used as a carrying case for a large deposit of explosive. In this case the plastique explosive G-4, recovered from an old munitions depot and wired using nanotechnology. A section of the patient's stomach and intestinal track is removed. The remainder is stapled. The G-4 is placed within the cavity with the detonator. Muscle sinew will be extracted from various muscles through your body to coat the foreign substance long enough for the body to accept it. We're not sure how sensitive the circuit sensors are so we have to use as little metal as possible. By the way, any teeth with

fillings will be removed. And that steel plate of yours."

Robinson's stretcher battered its way into the last corridor to the surgery room. The bus driver was a hard one, and Robinson felt he should kick his ass. But who was the guy running outside the window? Man, that guy could run. Weirdness.

"The same sinews, laced with minute particles will be used as a means of conducting the electrical impulse needed to detonate the load. It will only work once because of the tissue compound, but it only needs to work once."

"You're a fast one, son," Robinson slurred, and tightly closed his eyes against the white glare of lights? but even in here the balloons ruled.

The Tech continued, faster.

"The sinew circuit will be wired from the load to a minuscule battery located near your heart. It, in turn, will be wired to the top portion of your skull, underneath the plastic plate replacing your other one. This plate will be elevated a fraction above a small, likewise wired switch panel. This will serve as the pushbutton trigger for the battery. When the plate is depressed, the battery will release its electrical energy to detonate the G-4. A thin plastic safeguard will be fused to the bone to ensure prevention of any premature expiration. Only a hard deliberate blow to the top of the head will-"

Robinson didn't hear the rest, passing into drugged oblivion, grinning.

Pink Balloons.

He had a fistful.

TM:19:35:34

Robinson felt the inside of his mouth with his tongue. Specifically the gaping gums which were once filled with teeth. No matter, he wouldn't be eating anything, anymore, *anyway*.

God above. The bad humor made him smile, easing the ache of his missing teeth.

Sweat laced his back, making his running jacket stick uncomfortably. The night air had no cooling effect on the temperature which remained a wet 29 degrees Celsius. The Dead Fields were all around him. He could hear and feel the thrum of their electromagnetic walls, flexing. Waiting for something to shoot through so it could kill its circuitry dead. Maybe it was their underground generators that heated up the damn air? It was already unbearable. It felt as if he was breathing through a steamy towel--though, admittedly, it could've been worse.

The mission could've been set for the daytime.

Robinson barked a laugh at the thought. Yes indeed, they were doing him a real favor by scheduling the run in the night. Yes sirs, thank you muchly. Too bad they weren't around for a first hand experience, running along in near pitch blackness. They couldn't have him blowing up during the day. They wouldn't get the full firework show then.

He bounded over a low outcropping of rocks and sidestepped a shallow crater. He scolded himself afterwards. If he had landed the wrong way on his feet and twisted

an ankle where would the mission be then?

He concentrated on the ground before him. Broken shards of rock, mounds of loose sand and gravel, very unstable for runners. Slippery to run and the darkness tripled the threat of an accident. His feet and legs were vital.

It was no mistake they chose him. No mistake at all. Very sharp, in fact. No family, no protests, nice convenient little hole in my head to rig up. Stamina? Any footman had juice. He was just expendable. A mess that doesn't have to be wiped up, and the fact that, after he lost his family, he had gone a little crazy and tried to off himself probably didn't hurt much either. So to them, he *wanted* to die?

"How great is that faith?" A voice whispered close to his ear.

Robinson steamed onward.

DAY 31.

Medical Entry:

Surgery successful. The sergeant had been armed and primed. He had been fuelled intravenously with performance enhancing stimulants and appears to have suffered no immediate side effects. His body successfully accepted the load of G-4, coated with a thin muscle tissue taken from the patient's biceps and triceps muscles. The wiring had been laid and the battery, no bigger than a pinhead, had been successfully connected to the patient's heart. The cutting into the cranium and separation of the plate proved to be no problem. The fusing of the plastic to the bone did, but it was

finally connected with the addition of plastic rivets. At this point, damage to the brain seemed possible with the difficulty in the fusion. Time will tell when the patient wakes.

Entry closed.

Robinson had some time to recover in which he slept, peacefully sedated. When he woke, his drugged mind swimming and disoriented, he discovered the Tech examining his bare head. The man seemed to be in pleasant thoughts as he inspected the completed surgery, his fingers dabbing lightly at the fusions.

"Good evening," the Tech greeted warmly.

Robinson remained silent.

Not noticing, the Tech continued his inspection.

"A success I'd say," the man finally declared, and sighed deeply. The man was as utterly delighted with the operation as a child would be on Christmas morning. Beaming at Robinson, he offered his hand.

"I'm certainly glad you opted to take this mission John. Very glad. It takes a brave man indeed to make a sacrifice of such a magnitude. We all hold you in the highest honor and respect." The Tech paused, thinking of what to say next, his hand still held out.

"You would certainly get a medal for this."

Robinson simply stared at the man.

An hour later and fully aware, John was being briefed by the Force Commander in front of a skimmer hangar. His midsection ached and it felt as if he needed to take a

monstrous dump. The massive blast gates of the hangar were ajar and buzzing with the tuning and revving of engines. An aroma of oil and grease filled the air, but Robinson did not detect it.

A battered skimmer rolled steadily towards the Sergeant and Commander upon two sets of solid rubber landing wheels.

Robinson cocked an eyebrow as he noted the grinning skull and crossbones on the nose of the reconnaissance craft. The Commander strained to be heard over the humming of the ship's twin engines.

"The track suit will blend in with the landscape," the Commander handed Robinson a grey mottled sweat suit. "You'll be placed on a straight path which we have cleared and concluded to be empty of A-mines and Dead Fields. The time of your drop has been synchronized to be in between stomper patrols. Visual sightings are still a risk," the officer frowned in annoyance of the droning racket. "Our people estimate a thirty minute window of opportunity before a patrol will visually scan the area. If you haven't crossed the distance in that span of time--"

"I'll be dead?" Robinson asked innocently.

The Commander never hesitated.

"You're going to die, John. No bullshit. So make your peace. But this way, you'll give the rest of us a fighting chance and for that, I, for one, am grateful."

Robinson's attention switched back to the aircraft. A helicopter's body with two large barrel-shaped pods universally mounted under stubby wings on either side instead

of the traditional turbine engines. An auto cannon drooped from the hull. With its skull and bones and a collage of bruises, the thing looked mean.

The aircraft pulled up alongside the men. Robinson barely discerned the pilot rummaging about behind the darkly tinted windshield of the cockpit. Some metallic clanging issued from the depths of the machine followed by an audible barrage of profanity. The side hatch rumbled open like an enormous maw flexing. A slender man wearing a dirty white flight suit topped off with an old White Sox baseball cap leaned through the portal. His dark sunglasses glinted at the pair and he flicked a quick salute at the Force commander.

"Loaded and ready, sir," the flight man's voice sounded restrained, as if accustomed at speaking at a higher tone.

The Commander nodded. "This is Lieutenant Jones. He's responsible for getting you to the drop point. Once you get to Warcon's bunker, locate a small alcove on the outside. This houses the out-computer where incoming personnel punch in their security codes for internal access. The armor will be the thinnest there."

Robinson locked eyes with the sunglasses. Jones scratched at his unshaven chin, ignoring the stare.

"There's nothing else to say Sergeant," the Commander made 'Sergeant' sound as if he were addressing a piece of equipment. Cold, indifferent.

"Good luck." The officer saluted, held the pose for a second, then turned about on his heel and marched stiffly away, disappearing into the darkness of the hangar.

Robinson watched him go.

Nearby, Jones cleared his throat, a sound resembling a motor turning over, and spat.

"Friendly bastard, ain't he?" He tapped a finger on his wrist chronometer.

"Time to rumble, Sarge."

Robinson's eyes swept over the hangar and surrounding compound. Concrete and steel, cold and unyielding, would be the last vestiges of civilization he would ever see again.

He thought of a child's lost doll as he hauled himself aboard the skimmer. The chords of 'Auld Lang Syne' came drifting along with the darkness of the craft's cabin.

TM:16:02:19

The ground under Robinson was becoming increasingly smoother. The outer barrier of jagged, protruding rocks and low hills coupled with deep craters and loose gravel had made the first ten minutes of the run quite treacherous. Every now and then, he would look up to ensure that the hill was before him.

Robinson noted that it must've been farmland once as he passed over the dried out topsoil. It was packed solid by patrolling stompers, nickname given to the massive tanks the Lifers employed. The tread marks the monstrosities left behind in their wakes were engraved inches deep. Robinson skipped into a tread print five feet wide as it ran

in the direction of the hill. It reminded him of the old train tracks he and Samantha used to walk along on the way to the welfare offices in the summertime. The old suburbs stunk of decay and overturned garbage since the sanitation department ceased regular clean-up duties long ago. Everyone in the old 'burbs were responsible for their own waste disposal. Everyone who *cared* to be responsible. Thank God the sewage system still operated. Once the Lifers got into the public departments, one public service after another was either cancelled or regulated to upper class neighborhoods only.

Robinson's feet began to ache. In reminiscing, his mind naturally blocked out the pain receptors. But now, he was vaguely aware of the growing discomfort in the soles of his feet, feeling it creeping into his ankles and lower shinbones. Each pounding stride sparked a dull throbbing which lingered long enough to make him set his jaw. That in itself was suddenly interesting. He thought he was given something to kill the pain.

He thrust his mind into the discomfort, exploring it, searching for the roots. He imagined himself moving through the thick bone marrow of his shins, down past his ankles, into his feet, where a white fire was burning and thriving. Surging towards him. He recoiled from the whiteness, shutting it away.

Start thinking of other things. Robinson cruised along the treads, glimpsing, in the moonlight, beads of sparkling sweat which fell behind him in the dust.

Trains. Samantha and trains. She had always enjoyed those walks along the tracks. She had enjoyed any chance to get out of her playpen and the apartment. Robinson distantly remembered her tiny one year old hands reaching for him

expectantly. Some days he would be heading outside wearing the ball cap he always wore on walks to keep the sun's rays off the back of his neck and Sam, understanding the significance of the cap, would call out to him from in her pen. Her soft little voice charming him.

"Daddee," arms outstretched, waiting.

Sometimes he took her. Most times he did not.

Robinson pursed his lips at the memory.

Then switched back to the pain of his feet.

DAY 31: 2300 HRS.

"Smoke Sergeant?" Jones held out a half empty pack of camel cigarettes, the butts jutting out. Robinson shook his head, noticing the silver neck of a small flask peeking out from Jones' hip pocket. Jones shrugged and smoothly extracted a smoke for himself. He then thought otherwise and replaced it, eyeing the surgeon's general warning.

"Don't need lung cancer a second time," he tucked the cigarettes in a breast pocket and looked to the open door of the cockpit.

"ETA, Slack?" Jones shouted over the engines drone.

"Thirty minutes," came the gruff reply. "Smooth and easy."

Nodding, Jones turned back to Robinson. He produced a crinkled envelope from

a hip pocket and tore it open. "Have to read you rights, Sergeant," he unfolded the letter and examined its instructions, still wearing his sunglasses.

"It's Robinson."

"Whatever." Jones quickly scanned the letter in the dim light of the cabin. He sat with his back against the right wall of the cockpit entrance. Robinson, wearing his tracksuit and joggers, sat opposite him, strapped in. His head had been placed in a special harness to keep his head in place. The leather band running across his forehead gave him a commando look. Seconds passed when Jones finally folded the letter and leaned back, letting his breath out in a whistle.

"And I thought I had problems," he pushed his glasses up on his nose. "I was wondering why we were flying straight in injun territory. You're a walkin bomb."

"More of a running bomb," Robinson corrected.

"You got guts."

"Used to," John stated in a grim voice.

Meditating on this, Jones adjusted his ball cap and regarded the Sergeant in a new light. This time it was Robinson who ignored him.

"Got a family?" Jones asked.

"Had one. Lifers took them."

Jones grunted an apology and quickly sought another subject. "You know how much you're carryin in ya?"

"Nope," Robinson replied.

Jones' brow arched challengingly. "Wanna know?"

Now there was a thought, Robinson admitted to himself, how much of a bang *will* I make? He nodded.

"It looks like this stuff was experimental plastique which was abandoned because of its instability. The letter don't go much into specifics. No other stuff like it though. Non-radioactive."

"How much?" Robinson demanded.

Jones shifted in his seat and nonchalantly ran a finger across the bridge of his ball cap.

"One megaton."

One megaton. The words scrambled about in circles in his head, howling gleefully. One megaton. He figured he would give off a great pyrotechnic display but one megaton.... At least the place would not be glowing green years later.

And they were worried about armor penetration. Hell, who was going to fill in the hole afterwards?

A heavy sigh escaped Jones across the cabin.

"Well... no problem with the circuit detectors. They scan for metal. Everything else is still dangerous. Besides the obvious with the stompers and the remote cannons."

"The cannons aren't tuned to flesh," Robinson interjected.

"No but they can be switched pretty fast by Warcon if they get you on visual," countered Jones, absently scratching his neck. "Plus the Dead Fields could--"

"Shut me down." Robinson finished.

"Yep." Jones went for his cigarettes. "Sure you don't want one?"

Robinson watched quietly as Jones somberly lit one for himself. He took a long drag before blowing it out towards the ceiling. Robinson stared at the pack, then found himself eagerly snatching one and lighting it, puffing hard on the butt.

"Hey Slack," Jones suddenly roared. From the cockpit, a helmet with the sun visor pulled down peered over the edge of a shoulder. Only the lower part of the man's scruffy face was visible.

"Wha?" The mouth flexed.

"Put on some music `eh?" Jones' hand crept down to his hip pocket and began to gently extract the flask kept there.

"No troubles," the helmet disappeared, only to reappear a second later.

"Gimme a smoke `eh," a hand reached forth from the hatchway. Jones obliged and the hand instantly withdrew.

Though only for a moment.

"Gimme a shot too."

Jones frowned, not wanting to share out his last New Year's nip of Jack Daniels with the reputed rye guzzler up front.

"Against regulations guy, you're on duty." Jones made a sour face at that. He was on duty.

"Besides, you're drivin'," he added desperately, clutching his bottle.

Silence ahead from the cockpit.

"Frig it. Gimme one anyway," and again the greedy hand appeared--fingers snapping impatiently.

Jones sighed and handed over his flask.

"Go easy on it man, you *are* drivin,"

In response, the craft's nose dipped slightly forward, making the two men grab on to their seats in reflex. Jones grimaced and quietly bid farewell to his bottle.

A moment later the craft leveled off, the engines were muffled, and the stirring of a string section drifted over twin loudspeakers located above Jones' head.

"Vivaldi, the Four Seasons," Jones stated and began gently swinging his cigarette in time with the music. Robinson couldn't help but smile at the copilot. Jones tilted his head at the grin.

"Don't like classical music?"

"No, I like it. It just seems out of place to see you guys listening to it here," Robinson drew on his cigarette.

"Well, me and Slack got music for all tastes and places. Vivaldi's nice travel music. We got 'Hell's Bells' for strikes. Wanna hear it?"

"No--thanks," Robinson quickly answered, "Vivaldi's fine." He really felt like hearing the Funeral March by Chopin.

"Yea, 'Hell's Bells' isn't great travellin music. But this stuff soothes the savage soul," Jones finished in a melodramatic growl. "Ain't that right Slack?" He added with a

sudden shout.

"Yea," came the deep reply.

"Slack likes the classics too, with the odd sprinkle of the heavier stuff. Easy goin' guy."

"That why you call him Slack?"

Jones shook his head. "No, that's his name."

The Four Seasons flowed into the cabin and cockpit. Cindy had loved the piece but Robinson didn't have any time for it. He could not hear what she heard when she played it on their antique CD deck. But now, its serene melody began to tug softly at Robinson's guarded thoughts and he allowed the gentle symphony to carry him off into its hidden realms. The notes were so full of understanding and emotion that he would not have been able to lock it out even if he had wanted to. A flood of images filled his mind of the wife he had lost, and he immersed himself in their warmth, not wanting to separate from her again. Not now, not ever.

"Nice `eh?" Jones asked when the soulful strings had faded away into stillness with the memory of a lady Robinson missed very much.

"Yeah. Very nice," came Robinson's quiet reply.

From the open hatchway of the cockpit, smoke from Slack's cigarette spiraled lazily upwards to cloud around the flickering lights of a control panel.

TM: 12:42:16

Robinson's feet and legs began to ache like hell. If he had been administered painkillers, they were quickly wearing off. When his feet slammed down on the uneven ground, the muscles flared with pain. Pain which ebbed away a fraction as the soles of his feet rose, only to flash again when his feet slapped down. Stinging sweat slid into his eyes and he wiped them his suit's sleeve, which was already drenched with perspiration. Robinson noted that his breathing was not as steady as it should be. He was saturating his lungs with hot air. It seemed he was breathing in a blazing furnace.

Robinson dipped his head, looking down in front of his body to watch his sore feet coast over the ground. He was still jogging in the tread marks though he didn't care to notice. The hill loomed ahead.

Smack, smack, smack.

With the heat of the night came a dead silence. An eerie stillness which hung about him like a hangman's noose, urging him to run faster, to bolt and exhaust himself, to collapse, panting like a beaten dog upon the ground. There he would lie until morning, or until a stomper simply rolled over him, grinding him into the adamant earth, spinning it treads in the reddening stain which was once his body. That feeling of despair was constantly with him, lurking in the long shadows of his mind. A gnashing abomination hunched up on four paws waiting to pounce on his median of control. Control which he professed to have but often questioned. Did he really possess it? He could attempt to convince himself that he would never succumb to its frenzy again but

how could he be sure?

When he lost his family, Robinson had crossed over the boundary of sanity. When he returned home on a warm July night, a pack of camel cigarettes jutting from the breast pocket of his shirt, he saw the open doorway to a deserted apartment and a child's abandoned doll. And yet at this perception, John not only wholly yielded to the panic which gripped him... he went berserk.

His body tore through the apartment. It was his body, searching wildly, which stumbled aimlessly about his neighborhood for days, maybe even weeks. Time was seamless then. But somewhere in that period following his family's abduction, he decided to join the rallying forces against the Lifers. After years of fighting and searching he had given up and wanted to die. Tried to die. Pushing the limit and exposing himself to every danger there was in battle--hoping that one shot would end it all for him. Yet, still, he survived to be delivered him to the briefing room of the Force Commander. In his heart he realized this was what he was waiting for...

Redemption.

John Robinson had neglected his family when they were alive. A tide of remorse washed over John. He felt shame--shame because of how he had treated them both when they were alive. After being in the ranks of volunteers which made up the resistance against the Lifers, after hearing one sad, desolate tale after the other, and after witnessing war and hell for four steady years... Robinson then realized what he had. What he had after he had already lost everything. Four years, it had taken him that long

for him to figure out how badly he needed Cindy and Samantha. How badly he needed them, missed them, and how much they were a part of him. Four years ago he had shut out the two best things in his life for the last time. Two people that he desperately wanted back... or to be with.

It was this thought that enabled him to smile when he reached the base of the hill. His first objective met.

DAY 31: 23:25 HRS

Lieutenant Robert Jones and Corporal Arnold Slack were the first "real" people Robinson had talked to in four years. In his short time about the battered--and sometimes lurching--air ship, classical music playing wistfully in the background, Robinson had found himself actually enjoying the company of the two pilots. During the discussion on the path he had to travel, Jones was whipping off one-liners aimed at the high command and bantered with Slack. Slack had been a pilot for five years serving in the forces. Jones had apparently joined for the sole reason of having nothing better to do and that they let him handle guns and sometimes explosives. That was three years ago. He professed that it was his carefree attitude that had kept him alive to date. Several friends had died in the air from Cybernist's cannon fire but Jones shrugged off the matter.

"I'll be seein' them later," Jones took another long drag on a fresh cigarette.

"Everybody is on a wheel. We only die to be born again. Round and round."

"Think so?" Robinson asked through the haze of smoke.

"Know so."

"Really believe that?"

"Gotta believe in somethin, man." Jones exhaled, making lazy grey rings which floated across the cabin. Everybody had to have something in their back pocket to face the next day. Robinson thought about what he had held dear to him. What he came up with were distant memories of a life he did not care for at the time.

Overhead, piercing through the grey veil of smoke, a red light flashed once, twice. Both men faced one another in an awkward silence.

"Drop point in sight," Slack stated emotionlessly from the cockpit. Robinson could only see the back of his helmet. The skimmer veered off at a slight angle, circling.

"My stop," Robinson murmured. Jones glanced over his shoulder at something hidden from Robinson's sight then turned back again, his cigarette a dull beacon in the fog, his face expressionless.

"Everything set?"

Robinson nodded. He was trembling.

The craft dropped suddenly and Robinson felt his stomach bob and go sick. He fought back the urge to open his mouth and heave. No telling what would come up, he thought darkly. The ship leveled off--its stabilizers screaming from its steep descent.

"Drop in ten seconds," came the steady voice up front.

Thanks Slack. Robinson unsteadily got to his feet and braced himself at the side hatch, holding onto its grips. He heard Jones move to his left to stand. Robinson faced the grey metal of the door.

"You really believe in reincarnation Jones?" He stared beyond the door's cool surface, his thoughts racing, focusing. The skimmer slowed to a floating stop.

"Later, man," Jones calmly answered. It seemed as if a smile accompanied his words. John couldn't be sure, but he nodded.

The hatch split apart with a metallic wail. Dust and sand swirled savagely beyond. Robinson took a deep breath before jumping to the murky ground below.

TM:08:37:38

The Cybernist's routinely inspected its instrument panel. Its brain was human grown, the rest of its body was humanoid shaped to waistline. Here, replacing legs, the Cybernist was mounted on a short pilot platform connected horizontally to the computer it was working with. The same platform was strategically stationed to allow the occupant convenient access to all systems on board its craft, spinning the Cybernist upon its mental command. Mechanical hands punched codes and commands into a gleaming keyboard.

Its label was C2999. Lone pilot of the atmosphere fighter encoded Shrike-6 and part of the anti-aircraft web Warcon had weaved about itself. C2999 was one unit of the

massive graveyard shift currently employed. The Cybernist had detected a renegade bug in his sector minutes earlier and had shot forth to intercept it.

And to vaporize it.

The cannons of Shrike-6 had been fully charged before liftoff. The bogie skimmer was speared and skewered in mid-air. Even as it erupted into flames after a burst of energy from the cannons, C2999 only satisfied its Termination Priority code by repeatedly blazing the fighter's armaments and riddling the smaller craft until it blossomed. The only trouble with C2999's TP code was that, in fulfilling the directive, not much was left of the target to make a full report on. Still, Warcon decreed it and this was Warcon's show.

Codes and reports. C2999's human brain allowed a breathless sigh escape its pale synthetic gills located on its neck. How could a system attempt to reconstruct the bug when all that remained were fragments and dust? Impossible.

Still, C2999 reported what it had sighted at that moment. A class 4 reconnaissance skimmer with light armaments hovering two meters off the ground for ten seconds. Crew of possibly four at most. A probe of the outer defense network perhaps? Warcon had long since given up on movement sensors. Too many rats and dogs had caused unwarranted alarm. A human alone was ineffective against Warcon's bulk. Yet a human carrying weaponry or inside a vehicle could be a threat. Considering this, metal and circuitry alone were much more rational to detect.

C2999 punched its report into a keyboard, instantly wiring it into Warcon's

memory banks. One thousand fluid suspended brains.

Repeat scan of area, came the adamant reply.

Acknowledged, C2999 returned and its platform whirled it about to the guidance controls of the shrike. The Cybernist checked its position before banking and slowly retraced the distance back to the bug's initial position.

TM:06:24:58

The hill had proved to be a mass of corroding metal debris and rock. In the darkness, Robinson pawed his way up the steep side of the mound, dragging his feet. A piece of iron hooked the toes of his right foot and Robinson fell forward, arms flailing, to crash into the spiky surface and to lose consciousness.

TM: 04:20:28

C2999 was puzzled. That in itself was illogical to its system's programming. Dwelling upon the mystery of the class-4 skimmer, C2999 wondered if Warcon's last order had some merit. It was suicide for a single skimmer to attempt a breach of the defenses. The fact that the resistance had limited aircraft and pilots at its disposal made the concept of a probe illogical. A detailed scan proved nothing exceptionally lethal

about its weaponry.

The shrike fighter now circled the last position the bug had held for ten seconds before attempting to escape. Upon reviewing the compiled digital footage of the shrike's outer cameras, C2999 noted that the skimmer had hovered approximately one point five meters above the surface. Quite close, though not enough to escape the Cybernist's visual.

The craft had approached at an altitude just under scanner detection then dropped practically on the ground for all of ten seconds before blasting off again.

A well executed combat drop.

C2999's glinting hands quickly manipulated a keyboard. A grid pinpointing every Cybernist defense location around Warcon for a seven kilometer spread flashed upon the computer monitor before C2999's grafted features. The grid then switched to the ground below the shrike. The fighter's cameras began searching and searching and search--

The Cybernist's pilot platform spun it around to communicate with Warcon on a single, urgent mental command. In the dark gravel below, illuminated by the shrike's outer hull search lights and partially filled in by settling dust, were the prints of two feet.

TM:02:15:45

Robinson's eyelids open. His right hand buzzed with pain. Warily, he lifted his

hand to his face to examine it. In the moonlight, blackness oozed from a deep gash which stretched from the base of his forefinger to the edge of his palm. His left hand was sticky and stung from several smaller nicks.

How'd that happen? Robinson gingerly rolled over his back and sat up. He flexed his arm sluggishly and winced in agony, needles of pain piercing his left arm

"Christ," he muttered through a clenched jaw. The arm was not broken but in his fall and connecting with a piece of debris, the point of his elbow punched through the dull flesh there and scraped itself against the sandpaper surface. Fluid and blood trickled through the raw slit.

Robinson hissed as he prodded the damage of his elbow, feeling the bone splinters shifting under the pressure he applied. Samantha had once hooked her elbow on an exposed nail in the apartment, making her screech like a five o'clock whistle.

How long out? He wondered, getting to his feet and sprinting frantically up the hill, despair clawing at his innards and shooting energy through him.

TM:01:57:23

Deep within a black dome of armor plating, Warcon-1 had been designed to be the throne room of Botan's new order. Millions of circuits connected Warcon's memory banks of a thousand suspended brains, all neatly stacked tier upon tier in sterilized steel and glass canisters, surgically gleaming in the dim interior lighting. All were high level

military authorities, scientists, and theorists who either submitted themselves willingly to be a part of this creation or had simply slept too soundly when the Lifer pressgangs came storming through their door. Each was now placed in its own individual stasis-tube, swaying gently in pink preservation fluid and blood siphoned from victims mummified in tubing and housing in a cavernous basement. Kilometers of wiring and IV tubing connected each brain, harnessing the memory and thought of all, collectively know as the prototype christened as Warcon-1--an acronym for 'War Council.' A delicate yolk encased within a shell of thick armor and protected by innumerable security wards devised by Warcon itself; the perfect tactical defense.

Its second objective was the exact opposite. The completion of the A-program: the perfect tactical offence.

And in devising this flawless strategy to annihilate millions, it could not be surprising that it took only a nanosecond to decide the fate of one single bug inside its web after receiving Shrike-6's report.

Location and termination.

TM:00:59:59

Robinson stumbled exhaustedly over the pinnacle of the hill, passing a nest of sentinel cannons which instantly began weaving left and right on their tri-pods like some offended snake. Robinson could swear that the weapons had his scent. A mere second

to lock on to him would finish the run.

He laid his eyes on the thrumming dome of Warcon-1. Like a huge circus tent, numerous white and red beacon lights blinked over its surface in a brilliant mosaic, performing some unknown function. In the blinding glare of Warcon's magnificence, Robinson could vaguely see the black eye of the entrance into Warcon's depths, but there would be no replacement blood farms being delivered this night.

It was a perfect bulls eye.

And at this, Robinson summoned up his last reserves to propel himself down the incline ending in a cliff overlooking his target.

"How great is that faith?" A ghostly voice whispered in his ear.

"I won't forget you Sammy," John rasped, and gave into the urge to bolt, blood falling to the ground in his wake.

TM:00:45:23

Warcon's visuals came to life like a Christmas tree's lights. All electronic eyes zeroed in and locked onto a single ragged human now steaming down the base of the hill at Warcon's back. Warcon's programming instantly activated all outer sentinel cannons. The bug had somehow gotten beyond all A-mine fields. Onwards it came, making a direct path to Warcon, and bypassing all nearby Dead Fields by mere feet. Scanners analyzed the human as non-lethal in an eye-blink. Warcon also concluded that

the powerful sentinel cannons located on the hill could not be angled properly to lock onto the human and fire without the blast following through to the outer shell and input panel; needless overkill and collateral damage for such an insignificant gnat. Stomper tanks were too ponderously slow. But Warcon did not want this bug assaulting Warcon's grand entity with its repulsive flesh, like the feathery touch of a cockroach. With the speed of thought Warcon pinpointed all shrike fighters in relation to the bug's location.

And alerted Shrike-6.

TM:00:26:37

C2999 had been attempting to reestablish the bug's trail when the order whipped across its monitor. Its platform spun the Cybernist to the shrike's helm and it violently gripped the flight stick. A moment later, the shrike's engines flared to life and shot the craft across the night sky. The fighter's anti-personnel weaponry fully charged and primed, C2999's fingers clicking at the gunner's targeting computer.

TM:00:10:00

"Robinson, you're to come with me," a voice shrieked inside his head, "orders Sergeant!"

Robinson gasped for breath. His arms spiraling wildly as he neared the cliff,

momentum carrying him completely. John had finally reached the blissful utopia known as Jogger's High and felt no pain. Not far now. Not far.

"Da-deeee," a voice pleaded.

"Hold on Sammy, hold on," Robinson spat exhaustedly. His daughter was here! She was here! Warcon had her!

NINE.

Behind him, his left sneaker flew off his foot and into the air. Robinson pounding onward, off balanced for a moment and heedless of the rocks which stabbed at his bare foot. He was so close now. One leap and his body would arc downwards into Warcon's face.

EIGHT.

"A special mission," the man in white said.

"How great is that faith?"

He pushed onward.

Thirty feet to the cliff's edge.

Engines screamed behind him.

SEVEN.

The shrike soared over the high hill and came to a stop, stabilizing. Within, C2999 surveyed the landscape and spotted amidst the spectacle of Warcon's outer lights, a lone figure scrambling towards the low cliff overlooking Botan's throne dome. No visible weapons, the message crossed its monitor.

SIX.

C2999 nodded once and activated the targeting computer, gazing into its HUD. Crosshairs zoomed in and focused on the center of the bug's skull. The Cybernist's thumb lingered over the firing stub of the flight stick. The running figure below glimpsed over its shoulder at the poised shrike.

C2999 saw the bug's face... and paused.

FIVE.

The shrike was targeting him. Robinson knew he was done for but kept running towards the edge just before him. No blast. His heart was rupturing with exertion.

FOUR.

Ten feet. Still nothing. Six. What the hell-

"Time to rumble Sarge."

THREE.

Robinson leaped.

And fell. Head first.

"You really believe in reincarnation?"

"Later guy."

TWO.

John Robinson's shaven head filled Warcon's monitors and *still* the shrike had not fired. Warcon's sensors instantly analyzed the curious plastic fusions on top of the bug's head. It decided on a new approach to its analysis and its sensors were tuned to

flesh in a blink. It detected and isolated the foreign material appearing as a dark mass in the bug's abdomen.

For a whole second, an eternity, Warcon-1 was dumbstruck.

ONE.

Though her vocal cords had been long since removed, C2999's mouth twisted, formed, and tried to whisper the once forgotten word of ... "Daddee."

TM:00:00:00

The wheel came full circle.

And began anew.