

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

SWAT

Cliff Hardacre squints into the morning sun as the four members of the Biotactics team double-check the seals on their moon suits. Some of them are already pulling on their Kevlar. In this setting, a single hole in their suits can kill them, even if the bullet never touches their flesh.

Hardacre doesn't like the setup. Never attack into the sun. Choose your time. Choose your battlefield. He didn't get to do either. The time has to be now. The place has to be here.

He scans the surrounding rooftops, checking the position of the sharpshooters. A line of black and whites coils around the block, sealing the home address of Zhao Zheng. Two dozen sharpshooters have scopes on the place, eyes on every window and door.

Hardcore waits and watches. Calm before the storm.

He watches as a couple of crows land on a discarded McDonald's bag and begins to pick out ketchup soaks fries.

Within minutes, the Biotac team is at the door, weapons drawn. Hardacre's radio crackles. "Biotac is green for go."

"Sky team?" Hardcore calls to the snipers. The responses come in quick succession.

"Sky one is green for go."

"Sky two is green for go."

"Sky three is green for go."

"Sky four is green for go."

"Gas ready?" Again the calls comes quickly.

"Gas one green for go."

"Gas two green for go."

"Gas three green for go."

Hardacre scans the building. A branch of his facial artery pulses visibly at the edge of his forehead. He points a finger at three men with grenade launchers.

It is time to end the hunt.

Three tear gas canisters crash through the windows of the building. The crows scatter. Then three more canisters. Pale white clouds began to pour out of the broken windows.

Hardacre points to the biohazard team. The two largest of the four men picks up a battering ram. The cheap wooden door splinters open with the first swing.

Athena is sputtering and retching, a length of rubber tubing dangling from her outstretched hand. It is her third attempt at sucking gasoline into tubing in an effort to siphon it back into the canister, which we plan to jam into the laboratory fridge. After that, we will move the bomb to the outer door, close the inner door and shield ourselves behind an upturned lab bench. Athena's plan is a long shot, but to die trying is better than waiting to die.

That's when we hear the pounding.

Athena and I look at each other. Even through the wall, we can make out what sounds like someone hitting a door. The apartment door. We freeze and listen. Someone has come. The next sound is unmistakable.

A door bursting open.

Athena drops the tubing. "They're here." She stands up. "It's the police."

We can hear voices, loud, arguing. We can't make out the words, but one thing is clear.

There is someone else in the apartment.

More noises. Loud crashing sounds.

Athena gets excited. "They're searching the place. It has to be the police"

Athena rushes to the steel door and begins to pound on it. "Help! We're in here!" She glances back at the timer, down to its final minutes. "Quickly!"

From outside, more arguing, and a loud voice. "NO! NO! I GAVE YOU XV-17!"

Then silence. Except for the steady tick, tick, tick.

"We're in -"

I grab Athena. Something is not right. I signal her to be quiet.

Heavy footsteps rush to the door. The deadbolt clicks. We both step back to give the door room to swing. It slams open.

It's not the police.

A giant squeezes through the opening.

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The Biotac Team storms in, weapons drawn.

Hardacre can only watch the doors and listen. He waits for the sounds of confrontation. Angry voices, or even gunshots. The only sound is the SWAT team adjusting their weapons. The crows go back to eating French fries.

After two anxious minutes, the Biotac team tromps out of the building and their leader walks over to Hardacre.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head inside the suit.

"What do you mean nothing? What did you find in his apartment?" asks Hardacre.

The team leader shook his head again. "No, I mean nothing at all. The building is vacant."

"All we found is a little pile of mail just inside the door. Mostly junk mail, but there are a few bills addressed to Dr. Zheng. Nobody lives here. Must be some kind of dummy address where he gets his mail and pay checks"

"Damn!" Hardacre slams a palm down on the hood of his car. "That's it. Nothing else?"

"Not a crumb."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

No Rescue

Athena and I stare at the immense man who now stands in the doorway, a monster with a dense beard, coal black eyes and a fierce tangle of black hair, he seems to take up the whole lab. This is not a rescue. This is a nightmare.

Alpha. This must be the man Zhao called Alpha. He glares at Athena and me for a moment before unleashing a string of curses in some guttural language that I imagine people speak in remote mountain provinces of central Asia.

One thing is clear. Finding the two of us does not make Alpha happy. He pounds a massive fist into the wall. "Idiot!" he hisses as a beaker falls from a shelf and shatters.

We squeeze against the wall, trying to distance ourselves from the massive man.

Alpha sniffs. His face tightens. He glances at the bomb. His face turns from anger to rage. As his eyes dart back to us, he reaches inside his coat.

Sensing it is my last chance, I bolt towards the door. I hope I can catch him by surprise and escape, or create a diversion so Athena can get out.

No such luck. A huge arm lashes out, grabs me, and throws me to the floor. Alpha pulls out the biggest pistol I have ever seen. I scramble backwards, trying to hide under the lab bench.

But I have literally backed myself into a corner. As Alpha crouches down to finish me off, Athena appears behind him. She raises her arm, a steel rod locked in her fist.

Following my gaze, Alpha glances back. Athena swings. Alpha turns. His arm whips out, hands spread wide. He doesn't even wince as the rod slams into his palm. His massive fist closes around it. He rips it from Athena's hands and tosses it aside, throwing it back out of the room like a Q-tip. It hits the doorframe and clatters across the floor of the apartment.

Alpha turns towards Athena. He towers over her. With astonishing speed, he catches Athena with an open palm, sending her crashing into the wall. As she collapses with a gasp of pain, I launch myself at his knees.

A perfect crackback block. His knees should have buckled.

But it's like hitting a tree. I bounce off and crash to the floor.

I find myself staring down the barrel of a Smith and Wesson Magnum revolver. From that particular perspective, the massive handgun looks a bit like the business end of a bazooka. I brace myself.

Something flashes through my field of vision. Something just behind Alpha's head.

Then Alpha sees it too. He turns to look. It comes again and Alpha raises a hand as if fending off an insect.

It doesn't help. The dense cloud of black ink hits Alpha in the eyes. He howls in shock and pain.

Daedalus.

Terry.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Vaccine

The appearance of Daedalus can only mean one thing. Terry is somewhere out there, guiding it with his laptop. And that means he is close and we have help.

But I have no time to think about it.

Alpha swats blindly at the tiny robot, but it has already zipped out of range. Enraged, he tries to wipe his ink-covered face with one hand.

With the other he pulls the trigger.

The report of the immense handgun shakes the room. One bullet, then another, crashes into the wall behind where I had just been lying.

I scramble out of his line of fire, but Alpha begins to track the sound of my movements, following me with a gun that has been designed by the good people at Smith and Wesson to stop a grizzly in its tracks. One hit will rip me to pieces. Even blinded, Alpha will find me in this tiny room.

I have to get out. I make a silent dash toward the outer door. I might even have gotten past Alpha, but for a piece of

glass. An instant after it cracks under foot, Alpha swings towards me.

The next sound saves my life. In the small space, the empty gasoline canister hits the back wall with a noise loud enough to cause Alpha to spin reflexively towards it. As he raises the gun and fires in the direction of the can, I sprint in a crouch towards the door. Athena, who headed for the door just after throwing the gas can, is a step ahead of me.

Alpha spins back. I feel the breeze as another slug screams over my head. By the time Alpha has lowered his aim, I have slammed the steel door. As I throw the deadbolt, I feel the door shudder from the impact of another shot.

It is Alpha's turn with the bomb.

Behind me, Athena gasps. I turn. She is staring at Zhao, crumpled on the floor, his head twisted at a disturbing angle.

There is a tremendous growl from inside the lab. The whole apartment shakes as Alpha throws himself against the door.

"Let's fly." Athena grabs my hand and starts for the apartment door.

I follow, but as we reach the door I realize I can't go. Athena pulls at me. "Come on! It's gonna blow."

"I can't," I say, realizing the epic mistake I just made.

There is another growl and a thunderous crash rattles the room.

Athena looks at me like the parent of a child who has decided to play in the middle of a busy street. "We have to go. NOW."

I shake my head. "The vaccine." I gesture desperately toward the door of the lab. "It's in there. I forgot the vaccine."

Athena stares for an instant, her mouth open. The lab door thunders with the force of another body blow. A few bits of plaster fell from above the doorframe.

"Get out of here!" I wave her off and rush to the lab door. At least one of us should get out of this mess.

I examine the lock. I have about one minute and the biggest long shot of my life.

Alpha crashes against the door. Plaster showers down.

"What's the plan?" Athena is standing behind me.

I shake my head. There is no time to argue. "When I nod my head," I whisper, "you open the door." I mimic a sudden pull on the handle. "Then run like hell. Wait for me in the parking lot."

Alpha lets out a powerful growl and a second later the door shudders. I can hear the sound of wood, cracking.

Immediately, I flip open the deadbolt and pick up the steel rod from the apartment floor. As I raise the rod, I point to the door handle. Athena grabs it.

Alpha roars.

"Now." I nod my head. Athena jerks the door open. Alpha barges through opening, stumbling as the door he expected hit suddenly moves out of the way. I crack him on the head with the rod as he passes and his momentum sends him crashing to the linoleum floor.

I dart into the lab. The bag with the vials is sitting just where Zhao had left it.

The tick of the timer echoes in the tiny room.

No time. I am already in a full sprint as I leave the lab. Athena is holding the apartment door open. "Go!" she screams.

Alpha has risen to his knees, his face smeared with blood and ink. I throw the rod at him, but it simply bounces off the him like a Nerf rocket.

Athena joins me as I run out the door, clutching the precious vaccine. Alpha growls like a wounded bear. Our only hope against is to outrun him.

We fly down the hallway. Halfway to the exit, I pause long enough to pull the handle of the fire alarm. A few seconds head start might give the people living there a chance to escape. I also figure, at this point, we could use a little help.

"Come on!" Athena screams.

I glance back as I run. Alpha is emerging from the apartment. I see black fury in his eyes and the Magnum, rising toward me in his outstretched hand.

But the shot never comes. Instead I hear a faint buzz.

I glance back again to see Daedalus diving towards him at full speed, like a crazed insect Kamikaze. With a wild swing of his arm, Alpha sends the tiny robot spinning across the hall and into the wall.

Alpha shakes off the scratch on his face and raises his gun again. Daedalus rises from the floor in wobbly flight and crashes land on Alpha's left eyebrow with just enough force to save our lives one last time. This time, however, Alpha grabs it like an oversized mosquito and crushes it in his fist.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Alpha

Daedalus bought us enough time to reach the exit. With Alpha thundering behind us, we fly up the steps from the basement door and into a narrow alley. Without breaking stride, we sprint down the alley toward the street. The alarm screams.

Just as we reach the street, a tremendous explosion shakes the sidewalk and sends us sprawling. Zhao's bomb.

Flames and black smoke billow out of the basement window. We just made it out alive. We can only hope Alpha has not been so lucky.

We get to our feet and I scan the street. Immense corrugated steel buildings line the block. We are somewhere in Seattle's industrial south side, an area unlikely to offer much help in the early hours of a Saturday morning. There is nothing to do but run.

The sound of angry tires chases us down the street. As we reach the corner, I glance back, just in time to see a black Mercedes erupt into the street.

"It's him. It's him. This way!" I turn onto a side street, pulling Athena after me and out of Alpha's line of sight.

But Alpha has spotted us. Screams of engine and rubber echo off steel walls as he spins after us.

Athena and I sprint down the sidewalk. The buildings around us are large, silent, and locked. Other than an old Prius, park about halfway down the block, the street is empty. Somehow, we would have to outrun a car.

We have almost reached the Prius when the Mercedes goes quiet. The silence is almost as jarring as the sound of its motor on our tail.

Behind us, the Mercedes is park across the middle of the intersection. Alpha is staring at us through an open window as he raises the long steel barrel of a huge machine gun and rests it on the doorframe. The hulking weapon makes his giant Magnum handgun look like a cap pistol.

I grab Athena's arm and accelerate towards the Beetle.

"Duck!!"

Alpha opens up with a deafening barrage, just as Athena and I dive for cover.

A dozen bullets rip into the tiny car. By the looks of the shredded fender, we might as well be hiding behind a cardboard box. A second hail of gunfire claws at the pavement beneath the car.

With Athena and I trapped behind the battered Prius, Alpha's Mercedes growls to life.

If we make a run for it now, Alpha can simply stop and pick us off. We listen to the growing rumble of the powerful V12 engine as Alpha rolls up the street towards us.

Alpha moves in like a stalking panther on a sure kill.

Athena and I circle the Beetle, judging the sound and trying to keep something between ourselves and the gun. Alpha pulls even with us. A car door open. Bits of sand crunch under heavy boots. We freeze, waiting for the next round of bullets.

At that instant, a second engine starts and began to roar down the street.

Roar may be the wrong word. The sound of Terry's red Volvo backing down the street at full speed is more like the sputtering whir of a worn-out blender trying to crush peach pits.

To my ears, it's the bugle call as the cavalry rides to the rescue. The classic Volvo hits the front of the Mercedes with a terrific, satisfying crunch, like a hippo digging into a crate of iceberg lettuce.



For an instant, I can only stare, slack-jaw as Terry shifts the Volvo into first and drives away from the collision, his mangled trunk lid flapping in the breeze, and a maniacal grin on his face.

"GET IN. GET IN!!" yells Terry. Athena and I snap to our senses, jump into the back seat of the rolling car, and the three of us "roar" off.

"Man am I glad to see you!" The impact has sent Alpha sprawling across the pavement, causing the heavy gun to fly from his hands.

Athena and I collapse in the back seat gasping for breath. Terry jams the car into second and hits the gas.

"Man, I have always want to do that." The engine whines and the trunk lid bounces as Terry accelerates.

I pound Terry on the shoulder. "Filthy driving, dude."

"Demolition Derby 101. Never hit with the front end or you lose your radiator." Terry shifts into third. "I just hope my dad doesn't kill me."

Athena is crouching in the back, still peering over the back seat. "He won't have a chance if we don't get away from this guy." A block behind us, Alpha is back on his feet. He has picked up his gun and is climbing back into the Mercedes.

I look back. "He's hardly dented. That guy is invulnerable."

"Well we'd better find some kryptonite fast." Terry spins the wheel and scoots down a narrow street. The old Volvo hits a pothole and its joints cry in pain.

Terry isn't even halfway down the block when the Mercedes turns smoothly behind us. It has already cut our lead almost in half.

We have no chance of outrunning this guy.

"There!" I point to a gap in the buildings just ahead. "The alley."

We are out of options. Terry jerks the wheel hard to the right and the Volvo scoots into an alley.

A parked tractor-trailer truck looms in front of us, blocking our way. The Volvo jolts over the ruts and potholes.

Terry rattles up to the truck and hits the brakes. The Volvo groans to a stop.

The three of us blow out of the car.

As I go, the bag of vaccines catches on a bolt beneath the front seat. I hear a ripping sound and turn just as the bag bursts, sending syringes and dozens of golden vials clattering across the floor of the car.

I look back and see the Mercedes braking and skidding in a screaming, razor-sharp turn.

Terry and Athena are already sprinting down the alley between the truck and the wall. I grab two fistfuls of the vials, stuff them into my pockets, turn, and run.

The Mercedes brakes, crunching into the back of the Volvo. A car door opens. I have to reach the end of the truck before Alpha can get a bead on me. If not, the long narrow gap between the truck and the wall might as well be a shooting gallery. And I might as well be a metal duck with a target on his back.

The steel of the truck and the warehouse wall seems to amplify the sound of Alpha's approach. I am still fifteen feet from the end of the truck when I hear the distinct clicking sound of Alpha raising the heavy weapon and preparing to fire. I dive under the truck, just as the first bullets hit, clanging off the steel. I crawl the last fifteen feet to the ping of ricocheting bullets.

Then, as I pee out from beneath the back end of the truck, I see the real problem. This isn't an alley at all. It's the entrance to a loading dock.

There is no way out. We are trapped between a machine gun and a steel door.

To the left of the loading dock is a large dumpster. Terry and Athena wave me toward it and the three of us duck behind it. Alpha's footsteps echo like doom off the sides of the alley.

The footsteps slow. Then they stop. Alpha is past the truck. He has us trapped.

That's when he opens up, pounding the steel box with bullets. The dumpster thunders like a huge drum with each shot and the concrete walls seem to amplify the sound into a deafening cascade of terrifying noise.

Then, silence.

The three of us huddle together. Listening. Then a metallic click. Something hitting the pavement. Another click.

Alpha is reloading.

For the next few moments, the only sound is the crunch of heavy boots on pavement as Alpha walks steadily towards us. Then a long burst. Like fireworks. A handful of bullets whizz past and hit the overhead door to the loading dock. He is reminding us to stay in place until he finishes his bloody work. Then more footsteps, moving faster now.

He seems only yards away from the dumpster when we hear another sound.

A distant siren. Growing louder. Then another. And another.

The footsteps pause. More sirens.

Running. But the footsteps are not coming closer.

Now, the hunter is in the trap. He does not want to become the game. Alpha is leaving.

Sirens wail from every direction. The Mercedes screams as it backs out of the alley.

In disbelief, I touch the smooth glass of the vials in my pocket and sense myself awakening from a nightmare.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Finals

The warehouse is overflowing. Not only is the entire student body of the Academy jammed into the viewing area, but hundreds of curiosity seekers, the local media, and even the national media have arrived, turning the event into a circus. As exciting as Robowars was, it would never have attracted any attention, if word had not gotten out that "the kids who saved Seattle" would be competing in the finals.

In the two weeks since we had escaped from Alpha, the three of us have blown up. Seems like every talk show in the country wanted us. Some crazy guy even wanted to make a movie about me. Other than a few local interviews, I tried to stay out of the spotlight. Not my style. All I wanted was to be home with Dad and the boys.

The vaccine kept Abe from getting encephalitis. He fully recovered from the pneumonia and was his old, impish self again.

Dad's story has been trickier. The encephalitis had already started. It was too late to prevent it, but the doctors told me that the vaccine reduced the severity. So, I guess I did help save him, but it left him partially paralyzed. He's in rehab and they think he'll recover, but the physical therapy is tough.

Originally, the school was going to cancel Robowars but, with the virus destroyed, they decided to go ahead. I wasn't even sure I wanted to do it after everything that happened, but decided it would be good to get back a bit of normal life. A little bit of defiance would be a good thing.

So game on. We had one more match to complete the first round and, with three other teams, entered the semifinals. As before, nobody could see the matches to ensure that no team could learn the secrets of a future opponent. The finals, however, were open, and, once word got out that the "kids who saved Seattle" would be competing for the championship of a robotics competition, it rained craziness on the Academy.

And, as predicted, we are up against Kurt and the Terminator in the finals. Only this will be T2.

Kurt and his crew are certain to have revamped his monster, working in improvements and surprises designed to counteract and undermine the strategies used by Merlin and Daedalus. This will be a whole new ball game.

To make matters worse, we have had almost no time or energy to work on the bots. We managed to patch together a replacement for Daedalus from older models, but Kurt has had two weeks of free time.

Nonetheless, we're feeling good as we head to the old brick warehouse they've set up for the competition. As we approach,

suddenly the crowd outside starts cheering, like we're a bunch of celebrities. University Police are struggling to control the crowd, most of them people we don't even recognize, as it surges towards us.

That's when I see the tee-shirts, my head, photoshopped from the school directory onto a cartoon Ironman. Apparently, they are selling at a brisk pace. It gets even crazier when these three girls squeeze between the police and rush towards us. Two of the girls, ponytails flying, come at me, pens extended, begging me to sign the Iron-Jack tee-shirts they are both wearing.

No idea what to do, I take the pen and am just starting to sign, when I happened to glance over at Terry. A girl with a wild swirl of red hair and a mouthful of gleaming braces is staring up at Terry adoringly as he signs her homemade "I Love Terry" T-shirt.

"That makes it official," Athena whispers, as the police step in and whisk the girls away, "this is weird."

Then I see the crew from the Discovery Channel in the parking lot where they've set up four of the largest flat screen TV's I've ever seen, with images from cameras inside the warehouse. Hundreds of people are packed into the folding chairs that cover every square inch of asphalt. Hundreds more people



are standing on the grass and sidewalk around the parking lot. A few kids have even climbed up into the trees.

Half a dozen police officers close ranks around us to get us through the crowd and into the building. Only students and faculty from the academy are allowed inside and they pack the section of the warehouse not used for the competition.

When we finally slip into the prep room, the empty space comes as a shock.

Only Dr Larson is there, wearing a freshly pressed lab coat and, for the first time I've ever seen, a tie. He even seems to be standing taller than usual. He beams at me. "Good to see you again, Jack," he begins to say, but his words are lost in the cheers from the mezzanine. We look up.

I can see Terry's and Athena's parents smiling at us. The sins of borrowing the Volvo and sneaking around with the SARS virus have all been forgiven (even though fixing an antique Volvo that had been riddled with bullets and used as a demolition derby car is going to be a long, painful process).

On the opposite end of the railing a tall, immaculately dressed man with perfectly coiffed black hair and just enough grey at the temples to make him look distinguished stares down like an eagle. On either side of him are two women, equally tall and equally elegant, but about twenty years apart. The older one stands at an aloof distance and looks only at Kurt. The other,

young and stunning as she hangs like a jewel on the man's arm and whispers something in his ear.

"Looks like Kurt's dad has moved on to wife number four," Terry whispers.

I scan the crowd for Dad. He had told me yesterday he would try to make it, but I'm not surprised that his doctors didn't think he was ready. I search, to be sure, while telling myself that this does not really matter. What matters, I tell myself, is the fact that he's recovering.

As Terry and I set Merlin and Daedalus at the start, a murmur goes through the crowd. Jack turns to see Kurt march in with Marty and Sheri in tow. It is the first time I have seen the three of them since the run-in at the Pi. Marty and Sheri appeared a bit deflated, perhaps even embarrassed at being in the position of taking on a crowd favorite in front of his adoring fans. They are playing the role of the villains. Kurt, on the other hand, seems to relish the role of spoiler. Without a word, he opens the case for the Terminator and sets it at the starting line. Somehow, it looks even larger than before. I can see a new camera, mounted at the center of the turret and facing the ceiling

The six of us climb the stairs to the mezzanine and I find a spot at the railing as the others make their way to their parents. Sheri, also without a family member in the audience, is

looking at me, but her eyes dart away as I catch them. She has dyed her hair a shade of brown that I'm guessing is her natural color. It softens her look and I'm wondering if she might even be attractive under all of her camouflage.

She looks back at me. "Good luck, Jack."

"Thanks, Sheri. Good luck to you."

She smiles nervously. "What you did," Sheri's voice catches, "it took a lot of guts."

"I had no choice. It was for my dad and my brother."

She glances over at Kurt who is embroiled in an intense discussion with his father, then back at me. "No. You didn't have to do it. Everyone tried to stop you. But you figured it out. Realizing this was not following a typical advection-diffusion model, but was spreading through a lattice network with transmission as an aqueous aerosol ..."

The audience drowns out Sheri as they begin to count down: "Ten, nine, eight, ... Dr. Larson has mounted a large digital timer above the start. When the countdown reaches five, I feel a small hand slip into mine. I look down to see Abe, beaming with pride.

"Hey, Jack, you winning?"

Sam rushes up behind, chanting as he comes. "- two, one, zero."

The warehouse lights flashed on and off and a cheer rises from the crowd.

I squat down and throw an arm around each of the boys, pulling them in tight. Dad said he might get the boys a ride to Robowars, but it was still a special surprise to see their smiling faces. They hug me back for a moment before squirming free, squeezing up against the railing and poking their heads through to watch the contest unfold. I watch them for a moment and feel almost whole.

I stand and look down just in time to see Daedalus rising, Merlin scurrying along the wall, and the Terminator lumbering over to position itself near the finish line. The top mounted camera scans the sky. Clearly, Kurt's team has plenty of time and resources to devote to protecting their robot from the strategies that worked against them in the first meeting.

Daedalus soars past the Terminator without pausing to spray. As it flies off to look for the Target, I can only hope our plan works.

The loud rhythmic clunking sound starts quietly. It comes from somewhere behind me and I ignore it, assuming that the hot water pipes of the old building are banging. But the sound grows louder and I turn to look. Struggling towards the top of the stairs, relying heavily on the strength of his upper body and the two metal crutches that wrap around his arms, is Dad.

I rush to help him up the last two steps, then hug him. "I can't believe you made it."

Dad balances on one crutch and gives me a one-arm bro-hug, letting the second crutch hang from his fingers. "I wouldn't have missed it."

I can only stare in disbelief. "Thanks, Dad. I ..." For a moment, I allow myself to feel how close I came to losing everything.

"Come, come, come!" I turn to see Abe, gesturing emphatically for us "Merlin has the target."

"Let's go," says Dad, "We've got a show to watch." He settles back on his crutches. I stand for a moment, trying to figure out how to help him. "Come on, boy." I just follow him and stand behind the boys.

Merlin has already grabbed the prize. As I watch Daedalus rise up and turn towards the Terminator in a long steady dive, I suddenly realize two things with absolute certainty. First, I am sure that Merlin and Daedalus will carry the day. Second, standing there next to Dad and the boys, winning has never mattered less.

Post Script

"Your stupidity has compromised the entire operation." The voice is cold, the words sharp.

Sitting on a park bench in the summer heat of central Washington, Alpha listens. The burner phone disappears in his massive grip. As he responds, it appears as if he is carrying on a conversation with his hand. "I eliminated the problem."

"The problem never should have existed. You lost the vaccine! Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes. I understand. But we have other tools."

The voice on the phone grows harder, angrier. "I don't think you do understand! 'Other tools' won't get the vaccine back. Within six months, they'll be manufacturing it."

Beads of nervous sweat swell on Alpha's forehead. "I'm sorry, sir. There will be no more mistakes."

"You'd better start by fixing the mistakes you already made. Your first job is to find the vaccine and destroy it."

Alpha considers the enormity of the task, knowing that he has no choice. "Yes sir."

"That's the easy part."

"What do you mean?" What can be harder than breaking into a high security government lab, tracking down a few small vials, and destroying them?

"Your second job is to accelerate the plan."

"We are moving as fast as we can. We are on schedule to be ready in six months."

"Move faster."

"How fast?"

"Full release of all options in three months."

"All options? Three months? But-" The full release of all options will make Seattle look like a case of the sniffles. The scale of the thing is daunting. How can he possibly put together the operation in half the time they had planned?

"Three months." The voice coming through the phone is hard and matter of fact.

"It's not possible."

"Make it possible. You created the problem. I am giving you a chance to fix it."

"But-"

"You know what I can do if you don't succeed."

This threat has been there all along. Alpha signed on to the project because of what the Americans had done to him, but this is the threat that kept him in check.

"Three months?"

"Three months."

"I will be ready." Alpha has no choice.

"No more mistakes."

"None."

"Good."

The phone clicks off.

Alpha rises from the park bench and walks to an old green oil drum beneath a ponderosa pine. He twists the phone and tosses the shattered remains into the trash.

No one can know that conversation ever happened.

Alpha walks to a late model blue Toyota pick-up truck, climbs in the cab, and drives off.

He has three months to unleash the Apocalypse.

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