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*Praeter Vice*  
*Cleveland, Ohio*  
*USA, 2043*

“...so, if you are getting this message, get under now. End broadcast.”

Vincent finished recording the message and clicked ‘send.’ The screen of the PC before him glowed green, and all at once, he knew that his job was done. And now, to the most important part.

“Come on, honey. We’ve got to get out now,” he yelled as he raced out of the study in the house that had been home to him and his family for about seven years now.

“Has anyone seen my airpods?” Travis, his son, asked as they very nearly collided out in the hallway.

“Come on, Travis. We can get you another one at the bunker, but we have to leave right now,” Vincent said, grabbing his hazmat suit off the hook beside the study door. Even as he said that, he knew the response that would follow.

“I can’t do that and leave the airpods behind. Grandpa gave them to me. You know that—“

“Okay, okay. Find it as fast as you can. We just have—“

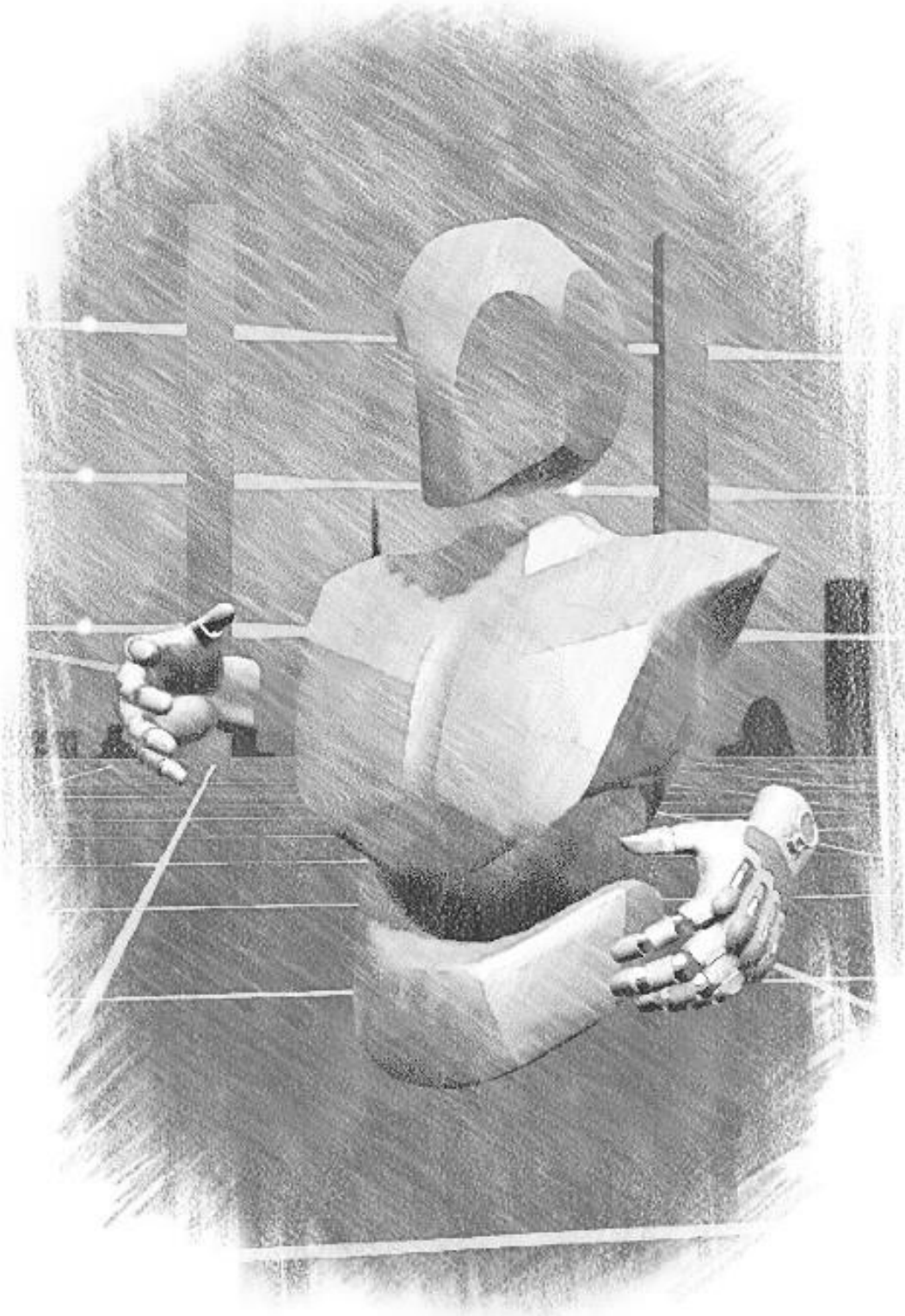
“My Dhalia, my Dhalia, I can’t find my Dhalia,” the eight-year-old Lilly cried as she came hurrying into the room.

Vincent had just turned to answer her when he saw the hover-drone, RBL, enter into the room, following behind his wife, Amy.

“We’ve got your Dhalia, honey. It’s packed up in that box,” Amy said, pointing at one of the boxes stacked up in RBL’s arms. “Travis?”

“I’m here, I’m here, mum. Found my airpods already,” Travis said, racing down the stairs.

Vincent saw the way RBL looked up at his son and felt a shudder run down his spine. Did they really have to bring the drone along? Of course, there’d be no way to broach the topic with his family, especially not now with the world falling apart



all around them. Still, it had to be said that sticking with the robot was too much of a hazard right now.

The Masons. Those modern-day descendants of the Luddites had gotten to him. He should have known that reading through all those broadcast messages, even if only to discredit them, would mess with his mind. Their rants about a virus slowly working its way through the Sentinel drones and totally warping their AI systems were total falsehoods! They had to be. Starbook Enterprises had firewalls put in place for this kind of thing, and if indeed there were slip ups, the alarm wouldn't be coming from external sources known for their alarmist anti-Starbook sentiments. That was essentially what the Masons were.

Vincent, as a security consultant with Starbook Enterprise, had experienced his fair share of run ins with the Masons, and it was even on one of their operations to a Mason safehouse that he had found RBL. The Masons had carried out a daredevil operation on one of Starbook's plants and stolen an entire batch of new sentinels. When he and his team finally tracked the Masons down to their safehouse, they found out that the Masons had hacked into the systems of the sentinels and tweaked all their functions.

One of the Masons', as he was being whisked away by Vincent's team had shouted out to him, "We are the good guys here! We have programmed these robots to resist the Armageddon! They are our only hope!" Eventually, the company had instructed that all the sentinels recovered from the Mason Safehouse be destroyed, but something about those words screamed at him by that Mason lunatic made him sneak one of the sentinels' home. He had lied about its origins to his family and they had welcomed the robot as sort of a house pet. He never really trusted the machine, but he had a feeling it was going to be useful one day.

The family of four got outside the house, bedecked in their hazmat suits, and Vincent saw that perhaps, they had been a little too late. A sandstorm had been whipped up in the distance, which was slowly approaching them, and within it, you could see those recurrent flashes of lightning coming again and again.

"Oh my God, Daddy. What are we going to do?" Lilly asked, throwing her face into her mother's neck as Amy held her closer up in her arms.

Amy turned to face him. And though they were separated by walls of glass shields and fear, Vincent sensed her thoughts just right. *What are we going to do?*

Something, Vincent decided. They were not late. They were not late, and he was going to do something. Being late meant being dead, and that was not about to be his family's fate. Not on his watch.

"Come along now," he yelled over the noise of the roaring wind. "We can still do this."

Travis after him, alongside Amy with Lilly up in her arms. They were going to do this, Vincent decided as he got behind the wheels of his hover-vee and started the engines. It was just a storm. It was just a storm and it didn't have a mind of its own, and he knew this area like the back of his hand. He could totally outrun it. There was a time when he lived the fast life. The demands of the domestic life may have mellowed him down in the years since, but he believed he still had the roaring stuff which made Amy fall for him in the first place.

"Save the family, save the world," Vincent said, paraphrasing stuff he was certain he had heard before. *Or was he mixing things up?*

He had just swung the hover-vee when he felt it sag a little as RBL settled properly into the luggage compartment. Vincent felt the shudder run through him again as he watched the drone in his rearview mirror. He didn't like that its hulking figure towered so much over the rest of his family. Vincent's fists clenched around the wheel as they shot out towards the storm beyond their home.

*They did this*, Vincent thought as he took in the raging storm closing in the distance. Starbooks and the rest of their corporation ilk with their scheming and money grabbing ways, sciencing their way into the secrets of nature which should have been left alone. It was they who had sentenced his family to die by posting them to this lonely station when everyone else was heading for the underground bunkers. Well, technically, he had been assigned alone. Amy's family was quite influential, and her parents had secured a marvelous bunker for her and the kids, but she had refused to leave her husband's side, sticking with him as things got worse, stating that she wouldn't be separated from him. The kids too had pulled an Article 306, overriding their parents' decision to send them on downwards. There was just too much freedom these days.

If nothing, though, the corporations had certainly messed the world up. Lord knows what they were looking for ripping a hole in the ozone layer, heating up a world which was already boiling over from climate change, which again were caused by the oil corporations before them. The Masons knew, though. The Masons claimed to have laid hands on a secret manifesto from one of the other corporations, and the supposed revelations were insane.

The explosion of the Taishan EPR reactor over in China back in '30 hadn't been an accident at all, but only one part of a series of ploys to thin out the human populace which had reached a staggering eight billion people. And when the resultant heat waves drove a good number of the people into subterranean and submarine bunkers, bunkers provided by corporations like Starbooks, the Masons claimed again that this was a ploy to keep the people from asking why the bunkers had been built, or when for that matter.

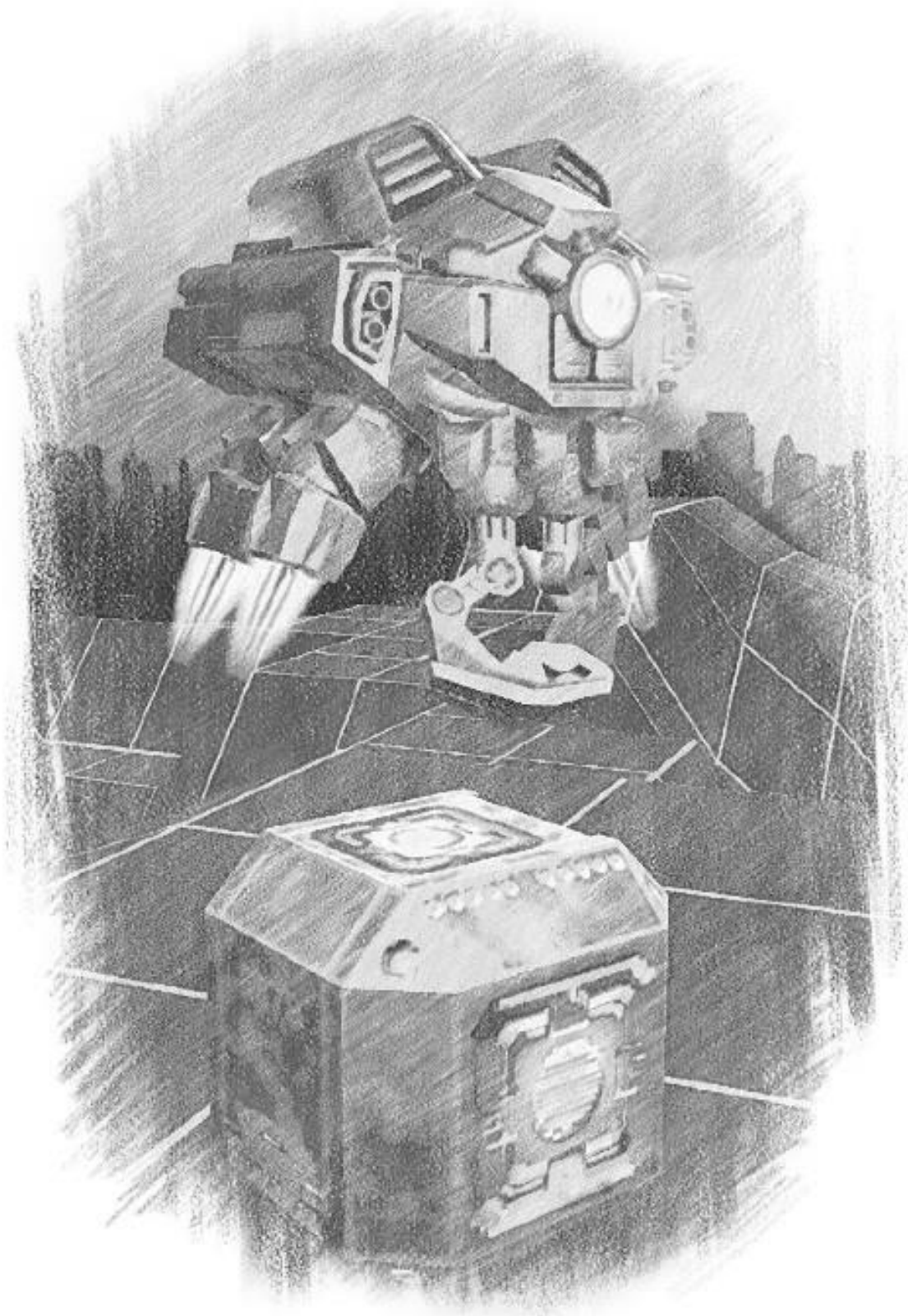
The storm seemed to have picked up speed and was getting ever closer in their direction. Vincent put their hover-vee in the direction of the edge of it and hoped it stayed that way. That way, even if visibility got any worse, he would still be able to navigate and find their way around relying solely on habit and memory. He would have ceded control to the vehicle's AI, but it wouldn't be able to negotiate the harrowing turns and make those split-second decisions necessary to beat the storm, should things go south. There was only one big problem in all of this. Up ahead, and just some ways away, there was a big magnetic ditch whose pull had been getting ever stronger in the years since. If he somehow lost his vision and their vehicle got sucked into the ditch's hold, he would need every of his wits to get them out of it.

"Everyone, brace yourselves and buckle your seat belts," he said, seeing that as he feared, the storm was already swirling from its center point. "Once we get through this, it'll be smooth sailing to the bun-"

"Vincent!"

"Look out, Dad!" Travis yelled from behind him.

Vincent felt all the wind within him get sucked deep into his guts. Up ahead, he saw two bright lights pointing sharply at them from within the swirling clouds, and he was certain what they were almost immediately. They were, unmistakably, the laser absorption beams of Sentinel drones that were positioned somewhere



above them, most probably just somewhere behind the clouds, and he strained his eyes, trying his best to catch the positions of the sentinels.

“Hang on,” Vincent said as he spun the wheel around and sent the hover-vee swerving from within the trajectory of the Sentinel’s fire. *Brrrrrrrrraaaaa*, the shots sang by in the space past him.

The wheel thrummed in his palms from the pulse of the engine and many others had in the years before him. But in many of those years, he didn’t have a family to worry about.

Lilly was a bawling wreck, howling her vocal cords hoarse like she had as an even smaller baby, not paying heed to her mother’s enjoinders to, “keep still, Lilly. Be quiet.”

“Dad,” Travis called from behind. The fear in his voice did things to Vincent’s heart that he hadn’t thought possible. “My seat belt won’t work. I’ve been trying since.”

Vincent cast a helpless look backwards, doing his best to rein his sudden irritation in as he struggled to keep the hover-vee under control.

“I’ve got this,” Amy said, undoing her seat belt and moving over backwards to help Travis.

The beams of the Sentinels followed the movements of the hover-vee with lethal determination until the rays trained on their vehicle.

“Hang on,” Vincent said as he swerved out of the line of fire again.

“umph,” Amy huffed from the floor of the hover-vee where she had been thrown.

They were clearly in need of a miracle now and, as if on cue, RBL began to make a low noise as his frame began to emit red blinking lights.

“Activating defense protocol.”

Vincent looked back to see who spoke, and he was surprised as he saw RBL rising up out of the luggage deck, as a secret compartment in its shoulder opened up to reveal two straight steel tubes with muzzles at their end. The barrels were RBL’s primary weapons from which it could shoot out laser absorption beams.

“Defense protocol activated,” RBL said as it rose up out of the luggage deck and scanned the area for the attacking sentinels. Utilizing its enhanced technological abilities, RBL quickly locked onto the two sentinels and it hovered out of the car and started towards one of the sentinels. RBL’s speed was incredible, and Vincent watched as it dodged a barrage of laser beams aimed at it while navigating towards the sentinels.

“What? I didn’t know he could do that,” Vincent yelled, his mouth agape, as he witnessed RBL effortlessly evading the beams.

An intense battle was taking place in the airspace above them as RBL tried to make its way to a point higher than that of the sentinels. The Masons were right. Those Luddite maniacs were right. Starbook’s Sentinel robots had turned, and Vincent wasn’t certain having RBL out there among them was a smart idea. Those were his kind for crying out loud, they spoke the same language. Up until a couple of weeks ago, drones like that had been his allies, scanning for radioactive waste on behalf of Starbooks. Now, they were something else. There was no thinking—

“Woah,” Vincent gasped as he felt the hover-vee tilt slightly to the left, against his directions. Then—“Oh, hell!”—he felt the entire machinery go totally out of control.

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Vincent woke up first before he knew he had passed out. It seemed the storm had cleared a little, and there was sunlight in his face. He was twisted slightly at an awkward angle and, when he tried to straighten up, felt a jarring pain in his side.

“Magnet,” Vincent said to no one in particular, coughing up blood. “It was the magnet.”

“Dad!” Travis called from too far out in the distance.

“Travis? Travis, where are you?” Vincent said, his voice no more than a hoarse whisper.

“Mum!” Travis tried again.

“I’m coming, Travis,” Vincent wheezed as he worked at his seatbelt. “Save the family—”

The belt unsnapped and Vincent felt himself drop downwards to land with a clang, against the metallic frame of the hover-vee. Groaning, he pulled himself out a window of the hover-vee which was suddenly open. Glass shards ripped through the gloves on his palms and bit into his flesh to answer any questions why, but Vincent just didn't take note.

He pushed himself up to stand upright and held his head to stop the swooning as he tried to reorient himself. There was only a little bit of the dust swirling around now, and he could see a lot more clearly.

"Travis, where are you?" he managed a yell, with what little wind there was in his lungs.

"Dad?" Travis responded from not so far away. "Dad!"

Vincent hurried in his son's direction, even though his steps amounted to no more than a waddle. Through the haze of a little sunlight filtering in through the dust, he caught sight of him.

"Travis."

"Dad."

Vincent put a few more springs in his steps as they limped towards each other. It happened all too quickly. A bright red dot appeared on Travis' forehead as he ran, and the little boy was completely oblivious of the danger he was in. His father recognized it as the deadly beam of a sentinel, however, and he was about to scream at his child to dock when they all heard a bang. Vincent eyes bulged and his heart raced as he prepared for the worst. He expected to see his son collapse in the sand, but he watched in surprise as the dot disappeared from Travis' head and his son ran into his arms. He looked up as he hugged his son, and he saw their savior. RBL was high above, aiming his beam at the other sentinel.

"Vincent?"

Vincent turned at the sound of Amy's voice. The brokenness of it weakened his bones. The singed tatters of her clothes were a sight that was never foretold. She was shivering uncontrollably in fear and disbelief, having witnessed her child almost getting killed by the machines her company had developed.

“My baby,” Amy said. As she knelt to join them in their embrace.

All of a sudden, a plethora of beams settled on their entangled bodies. They all looked up and watched in horror as more sentinels came into view, their beams encircling the family like strobe lights. There were six of them, this time, all of them flanking what remained of the family. Vincent did not even care to look up at RBL, there was nothing it could do. They were greatly outnumbered.

The storm was closing in again, Vincent saw. From within its torrents of swirling sand came those flashes of lighting. Vincent thought how this was an altogether fitting end. A burial under the sands. A ridding of filth like them who had ruined the world with their scheming and their lying. But then, there were the millions left breathing underground. There was no telling what would come next. All he knew was humans had a way of wriggling through, for good or ill. They were nothing if not resilient bastards. Vincent only wondered if what came up afterwards from the sands would be different from what went under. That was left for the future to decide.

For now, it was a time for singing dirges. If he knew any poems, he would recite one, but he didn't. So instead, Vincent laughed. He laughed, laughed, and laughed as the swirling sands closed in on their merry band of man and machines. And still he laughed.

The lighting flashes were merciful.