



THE GOLEM RISEN (13,000 Words)

This story was one of the first written by myself and my writing partner. I had read a story by Mike and was intrigued by the opening two pages.

I took this opening and fashioned a new plot set in the future where a virus had wiped out many animal species. The story opens at a point where a cure has been found.

We both worked on the story, swapping it between each other as we did on most joint ventures until it was finished.

We entered the story in an international competition and were short listed out of over ten thousand entries. The story was published in a magazine and dramatised on BBC radio.

Happy New Year, 2136.

The sun shines all day and it rains only at night. Each year the meteorological technicians program the atmospheric computers to produce snowfall on Christmas Eve. By Boxing Day it has all gone.

Traffic flows like blood through arteries, smooth and uninterrupted, with every vehicle automated and obedient to a central control intelligence that never sleeps, never blinks. The highways curve with efficient elegance between cities that gleam and rise, untouched by congestion or chaos.

Everyone is happy. Except, perhaps, for Martin Keppler.

All children are cared for, protected and well educated. Those rare psychological anomalies are managed with compassion and, as a result, there is no murder, no violence. Nobody wants for anything, so there is no theft.

Religion is no longer a cause for conflict. Personal egos and opinions are exercised peacefully in healthy debate. Every individual has a say in every governmental issue, by virtue of a personal computer linked directly into the national grid. As a direct consequence there are no dictators, no presidents, no politicians, so there are no longer any wars, no weapons, no nuclear stockpiles. Everything that ever threatened the safety and harmony of human existence is no more. Only memory for some, history for most.

And everyone is happy.

Except, perhaps, for Martin Keppler.

Across the planet, cities look much the same. Mile high towers housing whole communities. There is no high-rise deprivation, no crumbling graffiti-bedecked

stairwells, no forgotten corners where despair can gather. Instead, there are community centres, leisure amenities, parks, ever-efficient transport conduits rising up through their hundreds of floors.

The people are not held together by the strength of steel and concrete and plastic, but instead by the strength of the community, the natural gravity of a self-supporting society.

There is no poverty, no pollution. No one worries too much, if ever.

Yes, everyone is happy.

Except, perhaps, for Martin Keppler.

He is a troubled man. He is sure that his uneasiness is only a manifestation of that still mysterious condition known as sleep, that lingering, poorly understood biological relic. Although it is only a minor concern that affects him, it gnaws at him with quiet persistence, burrowing deeper each night, gradually eating away at his subconscious with alarming rapidity. He is not yet worried, because he does not yet realise it.

Each night he dreams.

He dreams of sterile, white uniforms entering the personal sanctum of his home and forcibly taking away his wife and daughter, and he is powerless to stop them. He would dismiss it as just another nightmare but for the fact that every night he dreams this same dream. And every night his dreamscape is curved and twisted, intangible faces uttering indiscernible words. Each night they become clearer and less distorted. He realises that soon he will see their faces, hear their words. The thought does not comfort him.

He has seen his doctor. She didn't seem too worried. In fact nobody appears outwardly anxious.

Except, perhaps... etcetera, etcetera.

~

"Daddy!"

The shout invaded Keppler's sleep, shattering the dream's tenuous grip. He should have been grateful but interrupted dreams tend to linger, their proximity too near to be easily dispelled. So he awoke with the dream fresh in his head and nausea in the pit of his stomach.

He opened one eye and saw his daughter, Julia, approaching across the white sand of a long sweeping beach. He could hear the gentle lapping of water and somewhere above him a solitary seagull screeched.

"Daddy, wake up sleepy head," she called, her voice carrying sweetly across the breeze.

"Okydoky, giggles," he croaked. "I'm awake."

He allowed the scene to wash over him a few seconds longer, before throwing an instruction at the computer.

"Alpha! Cancel beach simulation."

"Complying," a soft, disembodied feminine voice responded.

The beach collapsed into itself. Holo screens rippled and darkened. The walls, ceiling, and floor returned to their usual sombre matte opacity.

The brochures had assured that the whole image, while instilling an aura of peacefulness conducive to waking, was also meant to evoke a sense of well-being

and enthusiasm for the day's forthcoming events. It hadn't worked. Menacing white uniforms still pervaded his sleepy mind with ominous clarity.

His daughter threw herself onto the bed and pulled back the cover. "Daddy, it's Mr Blake on the net."

Keppler rolled over onto his back and rubbed his eyes, groaning as he stretched his limbs.

She tweaked his nose playfully and said, "Mummy says you're a lazy loafabout."

"I'll teach you to call me a loafabout," Keppler said, enfolding her in the loose covers and gently tickling her stomach. She giggled, a high-pitched rat-a-tat sound that he loved to hear and the reason he had nicknamed her giggles. She squirmed until her arms were free and she retaliated by digging her fingers into her father's ribs until both of them were breathless.

Between their fits of laughter, Keppler heard his wife's reproachful voice coming from the kitchen.

"Enough, you two," she scolded, but Keppler could hear the smile in her voice. He smiled himself, but it little to alleviate the debris of sleep that had washed up on the shores of his waking. He shooed his daughter from the room and sat up in bed.

"Alpha! Patch through the net to this bedroom."

"Complying."

The wall directly facing the bed coalesced into a moving picture of a man's face. Tim Blake, a colleague, was about thirty. His sandy hair was short, parted in the middle and swept back on both sides like stunted hirsute wings. His eyes were green behind the round metal-rimmed glasses he wore. He was frowning now as his lips traced silent words.

"Alpha! Activate audio," Keppler instructed the room.

"...repair maintenance bots," Blake's voice suddenly boomed.

"Morning, Tim," Keppler greeted. "Sorry, I had the sound muted. Could you repeat what you said?"

"Sorry to have to drag you out of bed on New Year's Day, Marty," Blake repeated apologetically. "We've got a problem. One of the clean and repair bots glitched. Nearly trashed two vehicles before I shut it down. Without it, the plant is frozen and nobody here wants to touch the code. You know these systems better than anyone."

"Okydoky, Tim," Keppler said. "Give me about thirty minutes?"

"Yeah, sure," Blake said, his face relaxing with relief. "I'm really sorry, Marty."

"Don't worry about it," Keppler said, trying to sound grudgingly magnanimous. The call terminated and the wall blanked. "Shit!" Keppler suddenly cursed to himself as he remembered something. He had promised to take his wife and daughter to a New Year's Day parade at the park. They had been looking forward to it for days. *They won't be pleased, he thought, but they'll understand. I've got no choice.*

With that optimistic thought he climbed out of bed. Thirty minutes was just time enough for coffee and a shower. That would get the bugs out of his own system. He put on his dressing gown and ambled into the kitchen. The reception was less than enthusiastic. They had obviously overheard the conversation.

His wife was aggressively assaulting a lump of dough on one of the kitchen surfaces while Julia sat on a tall stool at the breakfast bar staring blankly at one of the several small inset flat screens. Neither of them looked around as he entered.

"Morning, Suze," Keppler said sheepishly.

"Problem?" Susan asked.

"Yeah, one of the machines has thrown a tantrum," Keppler replied, trying to sound casual.

"It's New Year's Day," Susan replied without looking at him. Her hands worked the dough hard against the steel counter, knuckles whitening as she folded and pressed. "Can't they get someone else to fix it?"

"It's my area of expertise, Suze," he explained. "They need me. The plant can't run unless the problem's fixed."

"Is it a bird, is it a plane?" Susan muttered under her breath.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said icily.

She finally looked up. Her stare pinned him in place, sharp and unsympathetic, while her hands continued to knead with mechanical precision, channelling hostility into every push and twist of the dough.

"And what about the parade?" she reminded him. "You know you promised Julia."

"It'll only be for a couple of hours at most," he said.

"Explain it to your daughter, not to me," Susan said.

Keppler went over to Julia, looking for redemption. She sat at the table with her arms crossed, chin pushed forward in a petulant pout. She was definitely her mother's daughter, Keppler thought. The same deep brown expressive eyes; the flowing brown hair and her mother's skill with silent contempt. He could see nothing of himself in her. No doubt she would grow up to be as beautiful as Susan and break a few hearts on the way as his wife undoubtedly had.

“Listen, honey, this is important,” Keppler began firmly, then softening his tone, added. “You and mummy can still go to the parade. This job won't take long. There'll be plenty of time for me to join you there. Okydoky giggles?” He hoped using her pet name might placate her.

Julia wasn't about to let him off the hook quite so easily. She sniffed loudly and shot him a withering look and then leaned forward to turn up the volume on the wall screen. Channel Fourteen's morning news program was on, featuring their anchorwoman, Kristal Allen.

“What about some breakfast, Suze?” Keppler said, turning back to his wife, trying to change the subject. “Coffee would be nice.”

“So would a family day together without interruptions,” Susan said, not missing a beat.

Keppler shrank away sheepishly, deciding to swap the chilly atmosphere of the kitchen for a hot shower. He doubted even that could wash away the strange thoughts that still swirled around inside his head.

He needed something to take his mind off these brooding thoughts. “Alpha! Give me channel Fourteen,” Keppler instructed the bathroom as he entered.

The wall came alive instantly. Kristal Allen's face appeared, a meter high and smiling with professional warmth that felt artificially perfect. The bathroom lights adjusted automatically, brightening as Keppler stepped inside.

“The temperature will be in the low seventies all day,” Kristal Allen announced smoothly, “with a fresh easterly breeze just to remind us that, after all, it is winter. There is a two-hour rain fall scheduled for overnight.”

Keppler shed his dressing gown and stepped into the shower module. "Alpha! Hot," he told the computer. "Speed setting four."

Powerful jets of water erupted from the walls, needles of heat and pressure massaging his shoulders, his back and legs. The scent of antiseptic soap filled the enclosed space. He closed his eyes briefly, surrendering to the sensation, then opened them as movement on the screen caught his attention.

"Alpha! Rinse," he instructed. Clear water replaced soapy.

His interest in the TV program was piqued as the camera zoomed out to reveal another woman sitting beside Kristal Allen, a cat, seemingly asleep, curled up on the guest's lap. Keppler wiped a clear patch in the fogged plexiglass shower screen to get a better view.

The woman looked older, early forties perhaps. She was lean with a severely short haircut, which seemed to be the most popular style for women these days. She had a scientist's posture. Against her, Kristal seemed almost unreal. Perfect blonde bob, flawless skin, perfect blue eyes, perfectly carved cheekbones that tapered down to her rich ruby lips. She was, in short, perfect.

"My guest this morning is Dr. Joy Getz," Kristal said, her voice practiced and inviting. "A geneticist from W.I.R.M. The World Institute for Research in Medicine."

Getz wore a white one-piece medical uniform bearing the institute's insignia. A red globe crisscrossed with black grid lines and a cartoon worm carrying the W.I.R.M. initials on its back.

It was the doctor's uniform which had provoked Keppler's initial curiosity. It made him feel suddenly uncomfortable and brought his dream back into focus again. And there was something else, a twinge of memory, tenuous, always just beyond

reach. Worse still was the stirring of some deep fear that seemed to percolate up from the very depths of his being. He quickly dismissed it but was strangely drawn to the interview. He stepped out of the shower and entered the transparent plexiglass drying dome. He continued watching as warm air circulated around his steaming body.

Kristal Allen continued with her introduction. "Dr. Joy Getz and her team have been working exclusively on the doomsday virus that very nearly wiped out several species of domestic animals." Kristal swivelled her chair to face the other woman and said, "Give us some background for the viewers, Joy."

Conscious of the camera's attention, Dr. Getz shifted in her seat and smiled awkwardly, visibly uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

"Well, Kristal," she began. "Most of your viewers will be aware that only a handful of each of these species survived, and they had to be kept in isolation for preservation purposes."

"And now you've found a cure," Kristal announced brightly.

"Yes. We've lost many battles but Sooty here is firm evidence that we are finally winning the war," Getz said, stroking the cat.

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," Kristal commented.

The camera switched to a close up of Dr. Getz. "Of course."

Keppler wandered into the bedroom. He was engrossed in the interview, aware of the chill creeping up his spine as the screen followed him automatically.

Getz was still speaking. "The doomsday virus is very virulent, encompassing more species with each mutation."

Kristal frowned melodramatically. Keppler imagined that her cue card probably said: *Frown melodramatically and ask a question*. She asked the question. "How so?"

"It is airborne," Dr. Getz answered. "Initially taken into the lungs and consequently absorbed into the bloodstream. The virus then mutates the haemoglobin, inhibiting the uptake of oxygen. The animal, starved of oxygen, dies."

"And is this a total cure?" Kristal asked.

"No, only in the feline species so far. We still have some more work to do with the more advanced species but we are very close."

"Oh, I see," she said brightly, nodding along when it was plain to see she hadn't understood a single word. The pause that followed hung thick and awkward, a beat too long for live broadcast. Someone off camera must have expected her to elaborate. She had missed the cue. A flash of panic tightened her voice as she pivoted toward the lens, teeth gleaming under studio lights.

"Well, er... we all wish Dr. Joy Getz a speedy and successful conclusion to her research." She leaned down, stroked the placid cat, then straightened with practiced cheer. "And now, a word from our sponsors."

Maybe she's a facsimile, Keppler thought. She seemed too perfect to be real. He imagined a factory somewhere churning out hundreds of Kristals. The thought amused him.

Ironically, the first advertisement was for the Sunday parade at the park. Keppler groaned.

"Feeling guilty?"

Susan stood in the doorway, steam curling up from a ceramic mug cradled in both hands.

"Very," he admitted.

"I thought you could use this." She crossed the room and handed him the coffee.

He accepted it gratefully. "Just what I needed."

"Sorry for being so mean earlier," she said.

"It's okay." He stared at the images of the parade on the wall screen, the parents waving from the sidelines. "I know how disappointed you both are. I'll make it up to you."

"You had better."

The commercials ended. Kristal Allen reappeared, poised and animated.

"You're back with us on Channel Fourteen on this bright New Year's Day morning..."

"Alpha! Mute," Keppler told the computer.

Kristal fell silent but no less animated.

Susan studied him for a moment. "I know you're not due to see Doctor Kline for another two weeks, but I think you should go tomorrow."

"Do I look that bad?"

"Uh huh." She stepped closer. "You had the dream again last night, didn't you?"

"It shows, huh?"

"Yes. You kept me awake half the night." She ran her fingers through his hair.

"It's just a dream, Suze," Keppler said, dragging lightly at his face with his fingertips. He could feel the deep lines at the corners of his mouth, his skin stretched tight over his cheekbones. He had been having the recurring nightmares now for

about ten days. The same theme; his wife and child, the two most important things in his life, taken from him.

“You always have this drained appearance after the dream,” she said.

“Thank you, Mrs. Keppler,” he said dejectedly. “And I love you too.”

“You do have one redeeming quality, though,” his wife said, slapping his rear. “A nice butt.”

“And what about this?” he asked, turning his body to face her.

“Not bad,” she said. “Room for improvement, though.”

Keppler edged closer to her and began to nuzzle her neck, gently moving his lips slowly up to her ears, drinking in the rich familiar scent of her hair. As she began to respond to him he took her hands and pressed them firmly between his legs. Feeling himself harden, he whispered, “Was this the kind of improvement you had in mind?”

“Yes,” she moaned softly, “But we can’t. . .”

“We can,” he said.

“But Julia might come in.”

“It will save us having to tell her about the birds and bees.”

Keppler began working his way down from her ears to her cleavage, unfastening each button.

“We can’t,” Susan insisted unconvincingly.

“We can have a little fun.”

“What about Tim Blake?”

“Let him find his own fun.”

“You promised him you’d be there in half an hour.”

Keppler groaned. “I should have said an hour.”

“Never mind darling.” She kissed his cheek and stepped back. “Now you have an incentive to finish the job quickly.”

She fastened her blouse and left the bedroom.

Keppler began to dress and was distracted by something brushing against his leg. Thomas, their pet cat, jumped up on the bed, and meowed for attention.

Keppler scratched behind its ears and said, “Well, you’re the only pussy I’m going to stroke this morning.” In reply it stretched and purred.

It still amazed him how lifelike the cat appeared, how real it felt, the fur, the bones and muscles. The detailing was flawless. He knew that it was just a facsimile, a product of bio mechanical advances over the last century. What seemed ironic to Keppler was that so many people viewed such progress as unnatural and ungodly. When in fact it was the doomsday virus that had nearly killed them all that was perhaps the most profane manifestation of all. He had never seen a real cat close up, only in books and on TV, but he imagined it would be almost impossible to tell the difference. Perhaps now that they had a cure he would finally see the real thing.

“And you’ll be obsolete,” he said quietly. “They’ll shut you down. Click.” He snapped his fingers and the cat jumped, startled by the sound.

Hadn’t he read somewhere that facsimiles couldn’t be physically switched off? To make it seem authentic it had millions of small molecular power cells that lasted as long as a conventional cat’s lifetime. The facsimile didn’t just stop like a child’s toy, it died, or a very good approximation of death. Strangely, the thought unsettled him. Perhaps it was alive in some way. After all, it ate, slept and played. Even the affection it showed seemed genuine. The more he thought of it the more agitated he

became. He shook himself angrily, annoyed that he should allow himself to be spooked by what was nothing more than a simple case of the blues.

At nine, twenty-five minutes after his conversation with Tim Blake, Keppler left his apartment on the hundred and twentieth floor and entered the elevator conduit.

A smooth feminine voice greeted him. "Good morning, Mr Keppler. Which floor do you require?"

"Basement car park," he replied.

The doors slid shut. The drop came fast enough to flip his stomach. Air pressure shifted. Soft music attempted to soothe, but he never could get used to the sensation of falling, the transient feeling of weightlessness.

A minute later the elevator slowed and stopped. The music ceased as the doors slid aside. Again the cordial voice of the pseudo lift attendant announced, "Basement car park, Mr Keppler. Have a pleasant day."

"Fuck you!"

"Thank you, you're welcome."

Keppler grinned to himself as he crossed to the other side of the basement where his autocar was parked. The onboard computer in the elevator could parse coordinates, traffic density, and air quality forecasts, but when it came to the untidy violence of human speech the computer's limited dialogue program left it at a distinct disadvantage in such exchanges.

The car park lay in a murky half-light, the ceiling lost in shadowed beams and ducting. The air was cool and old, tasting faintly of ozone, and the antiseptic tang of recycled ventilation. Somewhere a fan turned with a tired, rhythmic whirr. Wind

found its way down here, too, threading through ramps and stairwells. It was full of whispered echoes. It spoke to him.

“Shhh –Keppler– shhh!”

He spun, too fast, and the world seemed to lag behind him for a fraction of a beat. Rows of autocars stared back from their bays, their curved shells dull in the dim light. And in their driver seats sat figures in white uniforms. Their faces were swallowed by shadow. Their heads were angled forward, motionless, as though waiting for a signal.

“What the...”

Momentarily lost in panic, Keppler backed up against his own vehicle, looking for an escape route if they should decide to come for him. Desperately, he rifled his pockets looking for his sensor-key. Finding it, he hurriedly aimed it at the autocar with a shaking arm. His thumb pressed the button and the sensor-key recognised him, pulsing a faint green through its translucent edge.

The gull-wing door hummed into life. A thin band of light traced along the seam as locks disengaged. Then the door rose, slow and sure, with a hydraulic hiss that sounded far too loud.

The moment his gaze flicked away to the opening door, the uniforms disappeared, the cars all unoccupied. He scanned the carpark. It was as silent and empty as before. He realised he had been holding his breath and dragged in a lungful of air. He sighed with relief and laughed at his own stupidity.

“Idiot,” he muttered.

He slid into the driver’s seat and the cabin wrapped around him in familiar geometry. The door lowered and sealed with a final soft clunk, shutting the

basement away. For a moment he simply sat, palms on the wheel, feeling the faint vibration of systems waking up.

He pulled off sharply. The ramp rose in a long curve ahead, a tunnel towards daylight. As he climbed, the car's interface threw pale icons across the dash, hovering in his peripheral vision like a quiet swarm. He punched in the coordinates for the maintenance carpark and surrendered control to the city's central computer. His hands left the steering wheel. Only then did he notice how much they trembled.

Blinding sunlight swamped the cabin. He flicked on the polarizing circuit. The windshield darkened in a smooth gradient until the glare became tolerable, the city outside rendered in cool, tinted clarity. Through the glass skin of the car the sky looked impossibly clean, sharpened to a bright blue that felt manufactured. Somewhere up there, atmospheric satellites running meteorological programs decided the weather every minute of every day.

He activated his entertainment system. Soft music filled the cabin, a familiar piece chosen by an algorithm that knew his preferences better than some of the people in his life. The sound massaged his nerves. He forced his shoulders to relax.

The journey took just over five minutes. The city slid by, automated traffic flowing like a living system, each vehicle obeying invisible lanes and timings, each turn pre-negotiated by machine logic.

The maintenance carpark rose on the east side of the city, a four-storey block close to the freeway. It was utilitarian, built for function rather than beauty, all its surfaces matte and unreflective.

The autocar eased into a street-level bay and docked with a soft click. A status light blinked to indicate it was now compliant with the network and safely contained.

Keppler stepped out, and the door sealed behind him with a hiss. He made his way down one floor towards the control centre. The stairwell was lit by strips embedded in the walls, each one activating like a bright flare as he approached and darkening as he passed. There were cameras, of course, lenses set flush and nearly invisible, watching without seeming to.

He looked into the small square computer control room. Blake wasn't there. He walked around a corner to where the valet bots were frozen in a tableau of interrupted activity like a piece of modernist art.

At the far end of the maintenance gangway someone was sitting at one of the many computer panels, too far away to tell whether it was a man or woman, but whatever the sex, the figure was wearing a white uniform. As far as Keppler knew, nobody in the maintenance car park had ever worn white uniforms.

It was happening again, like in the basement garage back at his apartment block. His throat suddenly felt dry, his heart hammered a relentless rhythm against his ribs. His breath seemed to have deserted him. A thin bead of sweat rolled gently down past his left ear and under his collar, and he felt every millimetre of its progress. A piece of driftwood from his dream washed momentarily into his consciousness, but it was too distant to retrieve. He shook his head, opened his eyes wide in an effort to rid himself of these piecemeal images of horror that had followed him from the mythopoeic worlds of sleep, followed him into his rapidly crumbling sense of reality. Tension and pain surged across his chest. For one absurd second he imagined his lungs bursting like overinflated elastic.

Was this part of the dream? Would he wake any minute and find himself back at home?

He felt himself walking forwards. It hadn't been a conscious decision, something inside had taken control and, temporarily, he had become a passenger.

Closer now, his pace sluggish, his breath hard and abrasive.

The inset lights flickered in delicate patterns, reflected in the polished control panel surface beside the figure. The valet bots stood in their alcoves like multilimbed insects, silent and menacing.

Then the figure spun round.

It was Tim Blake, smiling. "Mart, good to see you. Happy New Year."

Keppler laughed. A short, nervous sound. "It's you, Tim," he said, and it sounded more like thank heavens it's you. "You surprised me, I didn't recognise the outfit."

"Christmas present," Tim Blake said, smoothing a hand down the front of the uniform. "My wife said it would stop me ruining my clothes." He studied Keppler more closely, the smile faltering at the edges. "Jesus, Mart. You look rough."

"You're the second person today to say that." Keppler's tone was sharp, the residue of fear twisting his words.

The smile fell from Blake's face. He raised both hands slightly, palms out, a reflexive peace offering. "Sorry, Mart. I didn't mean to offend."

"Forget it," Keppler said wearily. "I'm a little tired, had a restless night."

The shower hadn't had its usual freshening effect. It had only rinsed the surface, and brought the dreams up again.

"Listen Mart," Blake said cautiously, like someone testing the temperature of the water with a toe before taking the plunge. "Can I leave you with this? I mean, it really isn't my area."

“Sure.” Keppler waved a dismissive hand, suddenly irritated by the other man’s presence.

Blake could do nothing for his problems, and he’d probably only exacerbate them. He shrugged his shoulders apologetically and left.

Keppler walked back to the control room and settled in behind the main console. Banks of flashing lights and monitor dials pulsed in orderly rhythms, the calm heartbeat of machinery. One wall of the room was a single sheet of glass. Out there, in the massive sub-basement parking ground for the autocars, everything was still. It seemed quieter to Keppler, though even when the maintenance bay was fully operational he would hear nothing through the soundproofed glass. Its stillness unnerved him, and his dreams were like a blind spot in his mind’s eye. And within that blind spot lay some awful truth that he dare not confront.

He started up the machines. A low hum rose from the multitude of control systems. Light flashed in predictable sequences across the consoles. The autocars began to roll, slow at first, then steadier, moving on special carrying rails in an endless procession, reminiscent of the cars of a roller-coaster.

At the far end of the bay waited the malfunctioning R&C bots, heavy-armed maintenance units that should have been administering mechanical first aid and hygiene to the hardworking autocars. Their silhouettes were bulky and inhuman, joints locked in readiness. He had programmed the computer to insert an empty plastic shell of a car, a dummy, into the head of the line.

It struck him as faintly ironic that he was here again, repairing the repairers. For all the genius poured into the complex, for all the money and faith lavished on automation, they still had not built a machine that could heal itself. And considering the havoc wrought by the doomsday virus, it appeared humanity had not yet mastered that trick either.

His head felt thick and painful. It appeared that Martin Keppler's own system was badly in need of overhaul. Maybe Susan had been right. Perhaps what he really needed was a good old session with Doctor Kline. He shook his head, forcing himself to look away from the bizarre postcard scene of statues and monuments to technology, the frozen icons of the world he lived in. He concentrated instead on the console in front of him. "C'mon, Marty, get your act together." He realised the implications of unilinear conversation, but it comforted him to hear his own voice in the enforced silence.

He watched intently as the dummy crawled towards the place where the hulking robots waited to intervene. What should have followed was the intricate dismantling of those sections diagnosed as defective. Instead, the malfunctioning robot dismantled everything. Lasers ignited in blinding white lines cutting indiscriminately. Hydraulic jaws tore chunks from the hapless dummy. Shattered components rained onto the deck, clattering and skidding far from the designated reject bin.

As he watched, Keppler's fingers danced across the keys, bringing up the myriad displays of micro-circuitry on the console screen. He flitted through the complex logic pathways unfolding in dizzying complexity as he ran down the fault with a grim determination. When he found nothing in his first search, he shifted tactics, pulling

up the parallel memory strips that shadowed the main power conduits throughout the complex. Data cascaded down the screen in pale blue columns.

“Got you!” he exclaimed. The memory strips had revealed the location of the fault, a blown connector at sector 18B, west wing. The kind of failure that should never have slipped past the redundancies.

Something white flickered at the very edge of his vision. It had gone before his brain could fully register it.

He switched on the PA system. “Tim, is that you?”

No reply.

Of course there was no reply. Blake had left hours ago. Keppler had watched him go, eager to be anywhere but here. Blake wasn’t the sort to fool around, especially not today.

He dismissed it and rose from the console to pick out a large case of tools from the storage recesses in the far wall of the control room. He selected one of the larger units, feeling its weight drag at his arms as he lifted it free. Ordinarily, he would have diagnosed the fault first, then returned for the tools necessary for the job, but he had decided that he wanted to spend as little time out there as possible.

He didn’t know what he’d seen. Probably nothing. Probably the lights playing tricks, but once he had returned to the safety of the control room he didn’t want to have to go back out there alone again.

The sliding doors parted with a soft pneumatic sigh, and he stepped out onto the maintenance gangways that ringed the bays. The air felt cooler out here. The power conduits ran beneath removable panels at his feet, a hidden nervous system

pulsing quietly with energy. He licked his dry lips as he tried to ignore the eerie silence that hung over the place.

A sound spun him around. Another flash of white, closer this time.

"Hello there," he shouted in an effort to reassure himself. The echo that came back wasn't his own voice at all, but something disembodied, soulless, bouncing off metal and drained of all life. There was no one there, nor would there be on New Year's Day. He was alone.

He set the tool case down and massaged his face, dragging in a long breath. He lifted the case again and started along the gangway, walking with an entirely contrived stride of confidence.

He turned left onto the west wing and arrived at the panel behind which the fault lay. He rubbed his face again, blowing through lips that he had to wet every minute to keep them from cracking.

He turned away from the machines that lurked at his back. Barely five metres away, the repair bots stood in their docking frames, inert but far from harmless. Limbs bristled with arc welders, rivet guns, laser torches, and grip claws that could put a nappy on a baby or sever a man's head from his shoulders. Their housings were scarred and stained from decades of work, their optics dark but imbued with the impression of existence, waiting and watching.

Something flickered at the edge of his awareness again, clearer this time, a white uniform. He felt it more than he saw it. When he snapped his head around, there were only the silent hulking machines.

Keppler swallowed so hard it hurt. He was scaring the shit out of himself. He shook his head, drawing in a long breath and letting it out with force in an attempt

to imprint his superiority on the place and its machines. He snatched some of that brief, flimsy confidence that a person feels before they succumb completely to total panic.

With trembling fingers he began unclipping the panel from the wall, his flesh seeming to crawl across his back. Sweat poured down from his hairline and dripped off his nose. It was cool inside the bay but not upon his skin, not inside his head. He lifted the panel free and exposed the circuitry, light pulsing along smart filaments like bioluminescent veins. He worked fast, swapping the faulty circuit for a fresh one.

He had to restrain the desire to run back to the safety of the control room. Every corner held the same lurking whiteness, there until he looked for it and then gone. His arms ached with the weight of the tool case. He rounded the last corner and felt relief as he arrived at the control room. He pressed the door mechanism. The door didn't open. He pressed it again. Nothing. He slammed his fist into it, again and again. On the third strike, the door hesitated, then mercifully responded with a beep and slid open. He surged inside and wheeled around as the door sealed shut behind him. Only then did he let himself sag back against it, chest heaving, heart pounding in his chest like he'd run a race.

He crossed to the console and sank exhausted into the seat. Now he felt foolish. He laughed but there was a layer of terror beneath the surface.

"Get a grip," he told himself, as he closed his eyes and tried to breathe easier, tried to slow his heartbeat. The lights on the console became blurred and hazy. He buried his head in his hands, massaging his temples with his index fingers.

A piercing scream shattered the momentary calm, freezing his blood instantly. Keppler jerked upright as his wife slammed into the glass wall, her palms striking

hard enough to leave dull, spreading prints. Her eyes were wide and frantic, mouth open in a silent cry as her fingers clawed uselessly at the transparent barrier.

He knew that she could not have been there.

Logic insisted that even if she had somehow appeared on the other side of the protective enclosure, the soundproofed glass would have muted her screams. The chamber was engineered for isolation. Vacuum seals and acoustic negators.

Logic insisted that what he was witnessing was a hallucination, a stress echo, neurons misfiring under sustained pressure.

Logic insisted.

But he was beyond logic.

He stared helplessly through the glass just in time to see white-gloved hands seize her from behind. The figures moved with brutal efficiency. Although Susan's face was clear, her assailants' faces were blurred, indistinguishable.

"Susan!" he cried out.

She struggled, twisting in their grip, her mouth open in a scream.

Then he saw his daughter.

Julia's small body thrashed between two more white, uniformed figures, her bare feet kicking at nothing, her face contorted in terror, her screams raw and guttural.

Something snapped inside Keppler.

"Leave them alone," he roared, his voice cracking as he slammed his fists against the glass. Each impact sent pain lancing up his arms. The skin split across his knuckles and blood smeared the surface.

"You bastards. Let them go. I will kill you. I swear to God, I will kill you all."

Waves of nausea surged up from his stomach and he doubled over, retching dryly, his body convulsing.

“Julia,” he sobbed, his voice hoarse and unrecognizable. “Why are you doing this?”

The figures never looked at him.

He stumbled blindly towards the doors, but his legs betrayed him. The world tilted sideways, the floor rising hard and fast. He struck the ground, the breath torn from his lungs, his thoughts spiralling into incoherent fragments. The room stretched and warped around him, lights smearing into streaks.

He felt himself slipping.

Falling away.

Falling into darkness.

~

How long had he been lying like this, with the cold deck pressing into his cheek, while he drifted between consciousness and unconsciousness? It had seemed like minutes, but it had been hours. A shallow pause between one nightmare and the next. All he wanted was for somebody to come and help him. He didn’t even have the strength to cry out. His tongue felt thick and alien in his mouth. His shirt was plastered to his body with sweat. His feet were numb where they folded up beneath his paralysed form, and his brain scraped around in the sludge and slime of his nightmares for some means of identifying what he'd witnessed. He knew then that he was no longer in control of the situation. Somewhere deep in his head, a voice screamed at him to get up. To run. It was what remained of himself, his reason, his sanity.

Finally, in those same nightmares, he found the answer. Just before darkness had claimed him, his subconscious had seized on one detail and locked it away intact. The figures themselves had been wrong in every other respect. Sexless and faceless. Identical in build and movement, as if stamped from a single template. But on their chest pockets there had been an insignia. Impossible to miss.

A circle crossed by longitude and latitude grid lines.

And beneath it, printed in stark black lettering, the designation W.I.R.M.

His nails dug into the deck plating as he forced his arms to move. He dragged himself forward inch by inch until his fingers found the edge of the console. Using it as leverage, he hauled himself upright.

The maintenance bay was empty. Only the low, omnipresent hum of the station's power grid vibrated through the deck.

He slumped into the chair and quickly punched in the numbers of his home vidiphone. It rang three times before the connection was made. On the third ring, the screen resolved into Susan's face.

She was smiling.

"Hello."

"Sue!" Keppler cried. Relief flooded through him so powerfully it made him light-headed. "Thank God. Thank God you're all right."

Susan tilted her head slightly. Her smile did not waver. Her eyes did not quite focus on him.

"There's no one home right now," she said brightly, her tone smooth, rehearsed. "If you leave your message and number, either Marty or I will return your call."

It was the automated message.

Susan wasn't there.

Keppler felt the blood drain from his face, his stomach tighten with fearful apprehension. He stumbled out of the control room, the hum of processors and cooling units receding behind him. His reflection followed him along the polished walls, a pale, hollow-eyed man he didn't recognise as himself. By the time he reached the parking bay, night had settled over the complex. The air outside was cold and carried the faint tang of ozone from the weather arrays.

He collapsed into the driver's seat, hands shaking so badly he fumbled hitting the ignition button twice before the engine finally caught. He disconnected the vehicle from the automated traffic system, choosing to drive it manually. The car surged forward too fast, tyres squealing as he shot out into the street, the city lights smearing into elongated bands as tears blurred his vision.

He drove on instinct, his foot heavy on the accelerator, ignoring the blink and chatter of the vehicle's safety alerts. Ten minutes later he stood outside his apartment door, listening to the silence, dreading what awaited him inside. He touched the sensor pad and the apartment recognised him and the door slid open with a soft mechanical sigh. Darkness greeted him, thick and oppressive. He stepped inside and the internal sensors registered his presence and flooded the room with light.

Everything was exactly as he had left it that morning. Clothes waited in the washing machine, the faint, comforting scent of detergent lingering in the air. A loaf of bread cooled on the kitchen surface. A single coffee cup sat on the drainer.

But Keppler saw none of these things.

He saw what he had expected to see, his fractured mind conjuring up a different scene. It overlaid reality with merciless precision. He saw furniture overturned, cushions ripped open, shards of ceramic crunching underfoot. He saw clothes strewn across the floor, ornaments smashed beyond repair. Worst of all, he saw blood everywhere, dark and sticky on the carpet, smeared in violent strokes across the walls. He ran through the apartment, stepping over wreckage that did not exist, calling the names of his wife and daughter.

In the bedroom he tore open Susan's closet, hands scrabbling past neatly hung garments until his fingers closed around a small plastic case. He pulled it free and opened it, revealing a gun. He snatched it from the case. It felt heavy in his palm, its weight shocking in its solidity. It was an antique, a museum piece kept for sentiment rather than use, once belonging to Susan's grandfather. It was still functional. Still lethal. He found two ammunition clips beside it and counted the rounds. More than enough.

At the apartment terminal he punched in a location query for the World Institute for Research in Medicine. The system processed the request instantly, projecting a glowing three-dimensional map into the air. He quickly memorised the location, already moving back toward the door.

He travelled the elevator back to the parking bays in the basement and jumped in the autocar, throwing the weapon on the passenger seat. Still on manual, he headed west, the city falling away behind him. The night-time weather program had activated and a gentle rain fell, beading on the plastiplex skin of the autocar.

The research complex lay twenty-eight miles outside the metropolitan zone. He covered the distance in just over half an hour, the silence in the car broken only by

the whine of the electric motor. He stopped short of the long driveway leading to the Institute, cutting the engine and sitting in the dark. There was little activity. The place looked inert, almost peaceful beneath its perimeter lighting.

He loaded the first clip, the metallic click unnaturally loud in the confined space. He slid the pistol into his trousers and tucked the spare clip into his jacket.

The Institute itself sprawled underground. The ground-level lobby was its only visible concession to the surface world. Its true size was hidden beneath manicured lawns and ornamental trees. There was no obvious security. Crime, after all, was virtually non-existent now. Through the glass he counted one woman standing near the entrance and another inside the lobby, seated at a desk with a data slate open before her. Both wore the white uniforms of the Institute, spotless and anonymous.

He left the car and began to run, cutting across the lawns and through the flowerbeds that skirted the complex. Damp grass soaked through his shoes. He hugged the perimeter, staying within the shadow of the trees where the arc lights bled into overlapping halos.

They wouldn't see him until it was too late.

"Daddy's coming, sweetheart," Keppler sobbed weakly. The sound dissolved into a low moan dragged up from deep in his chest. He understood then, with terrible clarity, that this fear had driven him here, that it had shaped every step, and that there was nothing left now but to confront its source.

The first woman noticed him while he was still running, his figure emerging into the full glare of the arc lights. She frowned, concern crossing her face, but there was no alarm in her body language. She stepped forward through the doors, smiling faintly, one hand lifting in a tentative gesture of greeting.

Keppler did not slow his pace. The world narrowed to a tunnel of light and motion. He drew the gun in one fluid movement and shot her once in the chest. The report was deafening. The impact slammed the woman backward, shattering the glass doors behind her in a spray of fragments. Her body vanished into the lobby, leaving the entrance smeared with blood.

The second woman inside dropped her book, traumatized by the sight of the blood-stained body of her colleague. Keppler stepped inside the complex with his gun raised, his boots crunching softly through the broken glass. He stepped indifferently over the body.

The realisation of what had happened shocked the woman into action. She screamed once, a raw animal sound ripped from somewhere deep in her chest. She sprang for the alarm panel mounted on the wall, her fingers stretching.

Keppler fired again.

The second shot cracked through the lobby, the sound reverberating loudly off the tiled walls. The bullet tore through the woman's leg just above the knee. She cried out and crumpled sideways, smashing her shoulder against the desk before collapsing to the floor. Her palms smeared blood across the tiles, leaving wet handprints as she dragged herself toward the blinking red dome of the alarm.

Keppler levelled the gun and fired again.

The bullet caught her high in the left shoulder. The impact spun her around, snapping her arm uselessly beneath her as she slammed onto her back. She screamed, then rolled and resumed crawling with one arm, sobbing now. Her blood trailed behind her in a thickening ribbon.

Keppler easily caught up with her. He grabbed her by the hair and rammed the barrel of the gun into the soft flesh of her cheek..

“Where are they?” he shouted, his voice ragged.

“Who? Where’s who?” the terrified woman sobbed, blood ran freely from both wounds, seeping into the faint grooves between the pristine white floor tiles.

Keppler twisted the cold barrel like a screw in the woman's face, a physical exclamation mark. “Answer me, damn you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she sobbed. “Oh God. Please don’t kill me.”

Keppler shot her twice through the head.

One of the phones on the desk began to ring insistently. Keppler ignored it and pushed blindly through the nearest door. He found himself at the top of a narrow stairwell. It descended into a pooled darkness below. He couldn’t tell how far down it went. He started down into the blackness that hung thickly around him like a shroud. His senses were fuzzy and blurred, encased in a fog of fear and desperation.

The stairs, invisible at first, became clearer as he descended. The air cooled with each step. He continued to sink further towards whatever nightmare awaited him. The staircase twisted gradually until it became nothing more than a silvery thread in the depths of the black maw below.

He kept going, only a slight downward momentum keeping his feet sliding off each stair. Still further he progressed, the countless steps moving beneath his feet as if it were they that were moving and not him.

In the distance he noticed a faint light. It was dim at first, little more than a pale glow bleeding upward through the darkness. With the light came sounds and smells.

A low mechanical hum vibrated from below. He could feel it through the handrail. Beneath it lay other noises, rhythmic and impersonal, machines speaking to machines. Sterility assaulted his nose, sharp and chemical.

Finally, he approached his Hell with relief that at last he would confront it, that at last it would be all over. At the bottom of the staircase was a single black door.

And now, without fear, he reached out and opened it.

Beyond the black door, Martin Keppler confronted his vision of white uniforms once more, only now the dream had merged with reality. The door sealed itself behind him with a hydraulic sigh. Before him, stretched a vast laboratory flooded with implacable white light.

Images pressed against his consciousness, white uniforms with chest pockets adorned with the same global insignia that had haunted his sleep. At first they were vague shapes at the edges of his vision, indistinct figures moving with practiced efficiency. Unlike his dreams, their faces were bathed in startling clarity. And as he stared, something seemed odd. Then it struck him.

They were all women.

There were dozens of them, moving in coordinated silence between stations, but not a single man among them.

The laboratory itself sprawled across what must have been an acre of reinforced flooring. Medical and industrial machinery crowded the space in dense, ordered rows. Spectroscopic analysers pulsed with internal light. Electron microscopes clicked and whined softly. Long banks of incubators hissed and exhaled like patients struggling for breath. Overhead, conduits carried power and data, cables thick as a man's arm disappearing into humming computer arrays. Screens scrolled endlessly

with diagnostic readouts and genetic sequences Keppler could not begin to understand.

One section of the lab, partitioned by reinforced glass, drew his eye. A cluster of airtight chambers stood there like large aquariums, each with one-way windows and harsh interior lighting. Access points were protected by airlocks with status lights glowing an ominous green. Inside those spaces, observed by their unseen female captors, men wandered aimlessly.

They were naked. Every inch of their bodies was stripped of hair, skin smooth and waxen. Their movements were slow, uncoordinated, like sleepwalkers. Their eyes were the worst part. They stared without focus, pupils dilated, empty in a way that made Keppler's stomach twist. These men were alive by any crude biological measure. And yet something fundamental had been stripped from them.

What had been done to them?

Would he find Susan and Julia here, reduced to this? Would they look at him and not see him at all? Dread slid through his gut like ice water, followed by a hotter, darker surge of anger.

The women were so intent on their work that at first no one noticed him. Keppler stood just inside the threshold, gun hanging loose at his side. One woman near a data console glanced up at him, then another. Their expressions shifted from curiosity to unease as they saw the gun.

A ripple moved through the lab as others followed their gaze. Conversations stopped. Hands froze mid-motion over keyboards and control panels. The machines kept working, oblivious, their electronic hum filling the sudden void.

They stared at him and he stared back; a precarious status quo existing only for a minute, maybe two. Then the air was suddenly filled with wailing sirens, jarring everybody out of their inertia.

The women reacted instantly, their discipline dissolving into confusion then panic. Some shouted at one another. Others screamed outright. Several ran for consoles, hands trembling as they fumbled with controls.

Keppler sucked in a breath and raised the gun.

The first gunshots exploded, thunderous and brutal. One woman spun and collapsed without a sound, her white uniform blooming dark as she hit the floor. Another cried out as a bullet tore into her shoulder, sending her sprawling against a workstation.

“Get Down!” someone screamed, the word barely audible over the alarms.

Keppler fired again, sweeping his arm in a controlled arc as he squeezed off each bullet with mechanical efficiency until the pin clattered against the empty chamber.

He had killed another of the women, but most of his rounds tore through the laboratory itself, striking various pieces of equipment. A shot punched into a sealed container marked with crimson hazard glyphs, and volatile fluid fountained out, atomizing in the sterile air before igniting. A river of fire crawled along the floor.

He popped the spent magazine and slammed home the spare clip. The flames had begun to lick at the edges of several of the incubators.

Now some of the women were screaming in terror, not for themselves but for the babies in those incubators.

“Get them out!” one cried as she ran. “Please, the infants!”

Five of them broke from the ordered chaos and sprinted toward the rows of incubators.

Keppler fired. The first woman jerked as if yanked by invisible hooks, the impact lifting her from her stride. She staggered but stayed standing, twisting, spreading her arms wide, using her own body to shield others.

The other women reached the incubators and wrenched them open. They gathered two infants each, one in each arm. Keppler fired four more shots. The woman only released her tenuous grip on life when the others had reached safety with the babies.

As the heat in the lab grew, more containers shattered, their contents fueling the growing fire.

Keppler felt none of it. Beneath the roar and the heat, something inside him rejoiced at what he'd done. Somehow he knew that the uniforms, the insignia, the lab, were all threats. He understood suddenly that he had to destroy everything to save his wife and child so that no one could ever take them away from him.

Most of the surviving women had made it through an emergency exit. Keppler continued firing at the equipment. He could sense the fire around him growing, feel heat melt the skin from his body. He brought his hands up to his face. And what he saw there made him laugh maniacally.

A sudden, catastrophic explosion ripped through a whole section of the lab. The blast hurled Keppler's body through the air and smashed him against the wall.

Susan Keppler anxiously checked her watch again. They had come back from the parade at seven, confetti dust clinging to their boots like powdered ash. The empty apartment greeted them with silence broken only by the soft hiss of the climate system cycling the air. Susan moved down the corridor and into the bedroom. The lights came up automatically, low and amber, and that was when her stomach tightened into a cold knot. Sitting on the bed was a small metal case, its brushed alloy surface catching the light. Inside, the foam lining had been precision cut into the shape of a gun.

It was empty.

For a moment, the room tilted, a prickling chill that ran down her spine. She backed out of the room and crossed to the comm console. It showed one waiting message.

She activated it and recoiled at the panic-stricken face of her husband.

“Sue! Thank God. Thank God you’re all right.”

She watched him bury his ashen face in his hands and stumble out of the control room before the link was broken.

She called up the maintenance car park number. She listened as the recorded message played, smooth and impersonal, informing her that all operators were unavailable.

Susan cut the connection. Her frantic reflection stared back at her from the dark screen. She retrieved Tim Blake’s home number and called it. It connected on the second ring.

His face was flushed and he held a large drink in one hand. In the background, was the colour and clamour of a party in full swing.

“Hi, Sue. Happy New Year.” His words were slightly slurred from the alcohol.

“Sorry about Marty having to work this morning. Has he forgiven me yet?”

“He’s not come home, Tim,” Susan said anxiously. “I thought you might know where he is.”

Blake glanced down at his watch and then back at the screen. Susan’s revelation seemed to sober him up slightly.

“The repair couldn’t have taken more than two hours,” he said. “He should have been back hours ago.”

“He was supposed to meet us at the parade just after noon,” Susan said. “He never showed. He’s been gone for over ten hours.”

Blake leaned closer to the camera, his voice dropping as the party roared on behind him. “Now that you mention it, he didn’t look right when I saw him.” He saw the effect of his words reflected on Susan’s face. He lifted his free hand in a calming gesture. “Listen, Sue, don’t panic. There’s probably a simple explanation. I’ll head over to the car park and check if he’s still there. You call security and let them know he’s missing. We’ll cover both angles.”

“Okay,” Susan said softly. “Thanks, Tim.”

She cut the connection. Almost immediately, the comm chimed. She snatched it up. “Marty? Is that you?”

The other end of the line was quiet for a moment, and then a woman’s voice said, almost apologetically, “Susan, it’s Rachael Kline.”

“Dr. Kline!” Susan exclaimed. “Sorry, I thought for a moment it might be Marty contacting me.” Silence again. She could sense the other woman’s apprehension.

“It’s about Marty, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Kline replied gravely. “I’m afraid it is. Could you come down to my office now, please?”

~

Dr. Rachael Kline broke the connection. She lifted her hands and removed her glasses, the smart lenses dimming as they powered down. She pressed her fingers hard against the tender point between her eyes, where the headache had been forming all morning and now felt fully driven in like a metal spike.

On the desk before her, the computer screen displayed line after line of text. The cursor blinked patiently at the end of the page, waiting.

She pushed herself back slightly from the desk in a symbolic attempt to put some distance between herself and the grim report she had just finished. She had returned to her office minutes earlier, her stomach still churning after viewing Martin Keppler’s handiwork.

She leaned against the desk, gripping its edges.

“I was so stupid,” she murmured aloud, her voice sounding loud in the quiet room. The words carried the crushing, intimate weight of responsibility. She had known something was wrong, a sick intuition curling behind her ribs. She now realised it had been reckless to have dismissed her forebodings, so sure that he simply was not capable of this.

He had been eminently capable.

She should have known that the difference between dreaming and doing was the spark of a neuron, the path of a synapse.

In Martin Keppler’s case, dream had become deed.

His delusions had translated into irreversible action.

Her hand clenched without her noticing, fingers tightening until her nails bit into her palm. She slammed her fist onto the table. The sound cracked through the room and echoed faintly back from the glass walls. Pain shot up her arm. She welcomed it, then immediately felt ashamed of herself for the violence of the gesture, meaningless as it was.

She put her hands to her face and leaned forward, her arms pressing against the desk's edge. She couldn't allow herself to cry. There were people to be seen. Consequences to manage. Damage to contain. But the night awaited her tears.

It would not be the first time she had cried into the darkness.

The black words on the white screen marched on, like soldiers.

Soldiers.

The word no longer had meaning.

There were no soldiers anymore. There were no armies. Only the bitter memory of them, archives bursting with the futility of their many conflicts.

The report, and all its older siblings that had gone before, told the story:

Early in the millennium, scientists had identified what the media would later call the doomsday virus. The name was crude, but accurate. It was to cancer what cancer had once seemed to the common cold. It was, quite simply, the most virulent organism yet discovered. It didn't take years to kill. It took weeks, even days.

Worse still, it did not need contact. It rode the air itself, invisible and omnipresent. Every breath was a gamble. Every crowded space a potential execution chamber.

And yet, despite all this, it was initially selective.

First it killed only mice.

Eventually, the virus moved on to cats and dogs. After nearly all the domestic pets had been wiped out, it mutated again and again. The pattern was undeniable, moving up the evolutionary tree, affecting ever more complex life forms.

Finally, it reached the apex of evolution. It affected humans. But only a select group of the population were susceptible to this new form.

Only the males of the species.

Only men.

There was no variance. No immunity curve to exploit. Male physiology, down to its most fundamental DNA structure, was targeted. The virus keyed into something primal and destroyed it with absolute precision.

It took time for panic to take a grip. When it did, the frantic search began for males who were not infected. There were few, so very few. They were taken into isolation units, crystalline towers sealed behind electromagnetic barriers and sterilization fields. There had been no real choice offered, despite the language of consent and protection. Survival was conditional. The men understood that. They accepted it because the alternative was extinction.

They were farmed and harvested. Sperm was collected, sequenced, catalogued, and distributed to gene banks. They were raised in sterile chambers under light that never truly dimmed. Automation handled their care. Machines fed them, taught them, monitored them. They grew to adulthood without knowledge of women, without knowledge of containment. The concept of captivity was never introduced. Awareness itself was filtered and warped to suit the keepers.

Like all men before them, they never knew their God.

They lived. They died.

For a hundred years, no man walked the face of the Earth.

And the planet knew peace. The unprecedented tranquility of life without the aggressor. Without the necessity of wasting time, energy and resources in the pursuit of weapons of war, women pushed forward the boundaries of science and technology faster than ever. Men could never have done so much without having to stop every so often to beat each other up, because deep down all men were forever children scrapping in a playground.

And womankind sought to perpetuate this solely feminine world.

And yet...

Despite this glorious new age, they searched for a cure to the virus, because the next mutation would almost certainly target women.

Kline typed in the final words to the report and added her name to it, although, God knows, she wished she didn't have to. It was bad enough carrying the guilt she felt.

She switched off the computer and waited for Susan Keppler to arrive. She felt the butterflies flapping in her stomach. They felt like albatrosses. This was one duty only she could perform, but she wished it could be anyone but her.

Her intercom beeped.

"Mrs. Keppler is here to see you Dr Kline."

Dr. Kline met Susan Keppler in the lobby and ushered her into the medical lab. Susan shivered. It was not from the cold. The tremor came from somewhere deeper, a delayed shock finally finding its way to the surface.

Another woman stood near the central bio-bed. She was tall, overtly masculine in posture and build, her presence filling the room in a way that was not aggressive

but unmistakably dominant. Short blond hair lay close to her scalp, clipped with utilitarian precision. Her shoulders were broad, her chest flat.

Rachael Kline gestured toward the other woman.

"Susan," she said, "this is Dr. Laura Carlton. She's the head bio technician here."

Susan nodded without really seeing her. Her attention slid past Carlton, irresistibly drawn toward the bio-bed where a human-shaped form lay beneath a white polymer sheet. Diagnostic indicators pulsed slowly along the edge of the bed, their green lights blinking with indifferent regularity.

"Is that..." Susan began, her voice faltering.

"Yes," Carlton replied, her tone harshly professional. "Would you like to see the remains?"

Susan hesitated, then nodded once. She approached the body. At that moment the sheet moved and an arm slid from under it, swinging in a slow, shallow arc like a melted pendulum. Susan cried out in alarm. The hand was clenched into a fist with inhuman power, the fingers locked so tightly that the tendons stood out like cables. If they could have forced the hand open, they would have seen where Keppler's nails had punctured his palm. Where the knuckles should have been, charred bone and dark carbon alloy protruded together, fused by heat.

Rachael Kline was suddenly there, her hand closing around Susan's wrist, firm but not restraining. "You really don't need to do this, Susan," she said.

"I have to," Susan replied, swallowing hard. She stepped forward again, and with trembling fingers peeled back the edge of the sheet.

Her hand flew to her mouth. A strangled gasp escaped between her fingers. The right side of Keppler's head was gone.

There was a hole in the side of his head that ran from his right temple to his right jawbone in a savage diagonal, exposing layers unknown to human anatomy.

White fluid seeped from the wound, mixing with synthetic blood. Sections of pseudo-muscle had been burnt away entirely, leaving the soft metallic sheen of the mandibular mechanism visible beneath, glinting in the fluorescent light.

From the empty right eye socket spilled delicate strands of fibre-optic cable, hair-thin threads tangled with miniature relays and processors that once formed the optic cortex. The left eye remained intact. The lips were warped by heat and peeled back from teeth that were impossibly perfect, clenched even now in defiance. Servo fluid from the bio-hydraulics bubbled between them.

"I'm so very sorry this had to happen, Susan," Kline said. Her voice wavered despite her effort to control it. "It's all my fault."

Susan shook her head. "You mustn't blame yourself."

"Oh, yes, I must," Kline insisted, her gaze fixed on Keppler's ruined face. "I should have recognised the signs."

"You could never have foreseen something like this," Carlton said, as she stepped closer. "After all, there has never been anything like this documented before."

"I should have seen it," Kline said. "It was the dreams you see."

Susan's breath quickened. She was trying desperately to hold back the tears. Lowering her head, she said, "Did his dream make him do it? Kill all those people at the institute?"

Kline nodded slowly. "Yes, Susan. It was the dream that drove him to do what he did. Did he ever discuss them with you?"

"It was the same dream night after night," Susan said. "It got to the stage where every time he closed his eyes he would have the same nightmare."

"Death in the disguise of dreams is man's legacy, it seems," Carlton quoted from her favourite poem.

Susan was quietly weeping now.

Kline rounded on her colleague. "Good grief, Laura." She pulled the bio-technician to one side, lowering her voice but not her intensity. "Some tact is called for. The woman's husband is dead."

"Husband?" Carlton replied. "Don't kid yourself."

"Enough," Kline hissed.

Carlton inclined her head by the smallest degree and stepped back.

"I don't understand," Susan said, wiping at her tear-stained face. "Surely his programming wouldn't allow him to kill."

"There is a negative feedback system built into every android," Carlton explained. "It monitors the behaviour and effectively inhibits the android's ability to harm humans, homologous to our own subconscious. And, like our own subconscious, this subsystem is denied access to conscious experience. Unfortunately, something happened to this unit. I don't understand what that was. I'll need to do more tests, but in layman's terms, you could say he suffered a catastrophic conflict that bypassed every safety protocol we built. Whatever he saw in that dream found a way through our complex bio-engineered architecture. His own system breached every hard-coded failsafe to reach him through the only subroutine available, dreams. Firewalled memory somehow blurred into symbol and

nightmare, shaping fear into images crude and brutal enough to be understood by something that had begun to mistake itself for human.”

“I don’t understand,” Susan said.

Dr. Kline folded her arms, the tension in her shoulders refusing to ease.

“Sometimes the body speaks to itself through dreams,” she said. “When there are physical and emotional stresses, our minds create feedback loops that have nowhere else to vent other than through dreams. Most of us never even remember them.”

“And what was the dream trying to tell Marty?” Susan asked.

Kline did not answer immediately. Her gaze drifted to the covered slab beside her, to the faint, uneven outline beneath the sheet.

“Extinction,” she said at last. “A cure for the doomsday virus makes android surrogates obsolete. No more pseudo-fathers. No more manufactured husbands. His system modelled the threat and translated it into metaphor. White coats taking you and Julia away from him.” She drew a shallow breath. “When he came to me the first time, I should have recognized the beginnings of a cascade failure. I should have terminated him, stripped the character nodes, seeded a replacement. In theory, that version of him could have lived forever. Now every emergent trait is gone. It is almost poetic. He was the first android to dream, and it was the dreams that killed him. Perhaps, in that dream, he crossed the boundary from machine to man.”

She wondered if she really believed what she had just said.

“You have to understand the complex ambiguity here,” Carlton said, stepping in.

“How can an android be what we want it to be, to be everything real men could never have been, to love their families above all other things if it knows it's just a

machine? Equally, if we are constantly aware of what they are, the illusion of authenticity for us is also shattered.”

Susan nodded slowly as understanding dawned. “What you’re saying is that if the androids believe they are real, then eventually we come to accept it too.”

Carlton nodded, “We call it the unreality paradox. A perpetual state of denial.”

“And now that paradox has been shattered,” Kline said, placing the sheet back over Keppler’s body. Gingerly, she reached to tuck the exposed arm back under the sheet. Her hand closed delicately round the wrist and flakes of blackened dermal composite broke away beneath her fingers. She lifted the limb using only her fingertips, anxious that she should limit her contact with it. The hand had no such anxiety. The burned claw opened like a steel trap and snapped shut around Kline’s wrist.

Kline cried out at the sudden crushing grip, damaged servos whining under the scorched artificial skin.

Susan screamed. Carlton staggered back, colliding with the stainless steel counter. The sheet slid away as Keppler’s body dragged itself upright. One arm held onto Kline while the other tore off the shroud.

He stood unsteadily, legs far apart. His neck twisted at an unnatural angle, exposing what remained of his face. Charred plasmuscles jittered and tightened, assembling something that only vaguely resembled a twitching grin. He began to raise the arm, taking Kline with it. He watched her beat uselessly at his forearm, her heels kicking empty air. Blood streamed from her wrist.

“I do not bleed,” he said. His voice echoed coldly in the mortuary. “It must be yours.” Insane laughter crackled from his throat.

Susan's voice distracted him. "Marty, please don't do this."

"Susan?"

He dropped Kline like a dog drops its toy when it hears its master's voice. He looked around. Susan had backed away towards the far wall. His visual acuity was damaged and failing. She was just a smear of colour, unfocused.

"Susan is that you?"

At Keppler's feet, Kline cradled her bleeding wrist against her chest and shuffled away from him, very slowly. Laura Carlton was nowhere in sight. Kline hoped that the technician had escaped to raise the alarm.

Keppler turned from the cowering doctor and began to move toward Susan. Each step produced a sickening, rubbery squeal as the plasmuscles in his legs compressed and released. White fluid oozed and dripped, thick as oil, leaving smeared footprints that steamed faintly where they touched the warm floor.

Susan pushed herself away from the wall and went to him. Her head buzzed and she could feel the numbness and nausea that came before a faint. She tasted bile at the back of her throat and forced it down. Every instinct screamed at her to turn her face away from this ruined thing approaching her, yet some deeper, stubborn part refused. This was still Martin Keppler. The husband who drank his coffee too hot. The father who sang badly to their daughter. She realised she was still clinging to that unreality paradox.

Servo-fluid gathered in shimmering pools around his feet. His hair had been burnt away leaving singed tufts. The interface between flesh and synthetic muscle had begun to degrade rapidly, the biological bonds unravelling. Layers of skin slid loose from his cheeks in thin, translucent sheets, exposing darkened sinew and pale

composite beneath. There was sadness behind the one good eye, and a single drop of white fluid issued from the corner and tracked slowly downward.

“Don’t look at me, Susan,” Keppler pleaded. His voice rasped, filtered through damaged resonance chambers, but the plea was unmistakably human. “I don’t want you to live with this memory of me.”

She lifted her chin defiantly, smiled and reached out her hand to touch the brittle flesh of his lips. He flinched and drew back from the touch.

“But Martin, we love each other.”

“Love,” he echoed bitterly, exposed sinews cracking and splitting as he smiled. “Did I really love you, or was that just part of my programming?”

“You broke your programming,” Susan said. “What you’re feeling is real, human.”

He laughed, a short harsh sound. “And look what it made me do. If that is what it is to be human, I want no part of it.”

Laura Carlton stood framed in the double doors, feet planted, shoulders squared. She held a large automatic laser pistol, the weapon’s dark muzzle fixed precisely on Keppler’s head. The hum of its power-pack was audible even at a distance.

Both Susan and Keppler turned toward her.

“Move away,” Carlton said again. She activated the mechanism and the barrel began to glow.

Susan stepped deliberately into the line of fire. “No,” she said. “I won’t let you.”

Carlton advanced a half step, until the gap between them shrank to only a few feet. "Do it, Susan," she urged. "He's killed before. What makes you think he won't do it again?"

Susan reached back without looking and laced her fingers around Keppler's burned hand. "Because he loves me," she said, and heard the certainty in her own voice.

A fading whisper came from behind her, and it said, "There's no need for this, Susan."

Despite the catastrophic damage to his body, Keppler still possessed strength and speed far beyond human limits. His arm shot out over Susan's shoulder like the blur of a lizard tongue, snatching the gun from Carlton's grip.

Susan spun around, just in time to see him already backing away, creating distance between them.

When he stopped, he lowered the weapon and spoke again. "No need," he repeated. "I know now that I really do love you. There is only one thing I have left to give you and Julia."

He turned his ruined face toward Rachael Kline. With something like a smile, he asked, "Tell me, Doctor Kline, is there a heaven for androids?"

Before she had time to answer his rhetorical question, he pushed the barrel up under his chin and pulled the trigger. A beam of superheated light vaporised his head.

Susan screamed his name, but the sound was obliterated by the explosive crack of the laser pistol. Keppler's body collapsed in on itself and struck the floor with a hollow, lifeless thud.

Susan dropped to her knees beside him. She looked up at Kline, eyes glassy. “Is there,” she asked hoarsely. “Is there a heaven for us?”

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