

# *Robots*

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The Major drove north along 95 into the oncoming darkness. The sun hung low over the desert behind him, turning Vegas into a blur of light in his rearview mirror. From here it'd be forty minutes of uninterrupted silence before the electric gates and Building C came into view. Each night he prepared himself like a boy scout on retreat. His assignments had become top secret and a different officer put in charge with each one. A minimum of words, the flight plan revealed, then the darkened room for ten hours of flying time. He began to feel more like a robot than a boy scout and requested a transfer back to Building A. Instead, he was promoted to Major, given a pay raise, and an extra day off each month. Nothing else changed.

His promotion made Nancy happy. The extra money had more than covered Billy's private school for the year, plus the new couch. It also meant he could keep the red Beemer, and she could continue driving the SUV. The extra day off usually came on a weekend when he could catch up on his sleep and watch a football game.

He found flying in a darkened room much more exhausting than the real thing, and missed the freedom of disappearing into the sky without someone sitting behind him, monitoring his every move. He'd been denied his request for a transfer back to Building A so he asked to be reassigned to the base he had come from in Germany. They ignored that request completely and didn't promote him, meaning he was going to stay in Building C where they needed him until further notice.

Flying the drones was boring. Sitting in a seat over targeted terrain, thousands of miles away, watching it on video screens from a few thousand feet up. Color by day, black and white by night. Various young sergeants sat next to him, working the drone's cameras, but he controlled the plane. That included the switches that dropped 500 lb. bombs, and fired deadly missiles at the assigned targets. They had turned war and surveillance into a video game, unlike flying his beloved F-17 where he was as far above the target as he wanted and didn't have to see it, or even think about what he'd hit below. The silent drone was more precise and he could be in as close as he wanted. He could see what people were wearing, catch their expressions, and even hear their voices.

Most of the time he followed convoys, or a stranded soldier put in harms way. He'd maneuver the drone in as close as he could to watch and protect until reinforcements arrived. What he couldn't get used to was working in such close proximity to the targets, and the high expectations of the intelligence officers. They never seemed satisfied with anything he did, and yet never complained. There were different agents every night with the same expectations for their particular projects. Nothing spoken. He'd just be handed the orders and a flight plan.

He began leaving for the job earlier each evening to stop and pray at the little church outside Indian Springs. There never were any priests or people around and he'd arrive and leave alone. A priest's vestments hung in a corner of the church near the confessional and several benches, in need of paint, made up the few rows of uncomfortable seats. A large crucifix dominated the simple yellow sandstone altar.

Invariably, a variety of coins had been thrown into the holy water bowl at the front door, probably by gamblers looking for a little luck at the tables back in Vegas. The Major would scoop them out and drop the dripping coins into the little wicker basket on the floor. Then he'd bless himself with the residue of water on his hands, throw a few bucks into the basket on top of the wet coins, pray for a few minutes, and head for the shiny red Beemer he'd parked in the lot outside. His life had turned into these simple rituals. Dull and numbing like the desert itself. Between the church's collection basket and Building C his old life had turned distant and faraway. Only the crucifix over the makeshift altar and the ironed vestments hanging in the corner seemed real to him.

The ride through the darkness to Building C went quickly if he found the jazz station that he sometimes got on clear nights when the desert smelled of perfume and sand. Miles Davis' muted trumpet played his old version of SUMMERTIME and it made him think about that time before he'd been born. The Cold War when jet planes were patched and shining, and the pilot's only challenge was how fast or how high he could fly. In the years that followed, the fighter pilots had simply graduated to missions and targets. Those exciting times were gone and only existed when he talked to old men in worn flight jackets, holding drinks in their fists, and dreaming of walking on the moon.

He came up on the security checkpoint and the lighted gates. The guard knew him but went through the routine of checking his IDs, saluting, and then raising the barrier. More dull repetitive rituals. He rolled into the base at the required fifteen miles an hour and

headed for Building C. It was the nondescript tan building, hardly noticeable in the day, and just a dark shadow at night. Large fan palms had been planted along its northern perimeter to lessen the look of the numerous satellite dishes facing the southern sky.

He parked in his usual spot away from the lighted entrance where his red Beemer would be less noticeable. He grabbed his leather pouch, threw in his sunglasses, locked the doors, and headed for the building. It was still hot, and the strong AC hit him when he walked in. There was another check of IDs at the closed window by someone he hadn't seen before. The buzzer sounded and he went through into the narrow hallway, and down to the cramped room they called the lounge. It was empty and someone had left the TV on. A pro football game was in progress. The Redskins were up on the Giants by a field goal.

"Sir," a voice said behind him. He turned and saw another new face. "They're waiting to assign us. I'm Sergeant Davies. I'll be with you tonight." They shook hands and the Major followed him down the hall.

Several extra people were at the table. He had worked with some of them before. Their silence and avoided glances made him look around for the guy who'd be running things on this particular mission. He sensed it'd be the one in plain clothes at the end of the table, dressed in chinos, Hawaiian shirt, and a desert jacket. He had a nondescript preppy look, probably Ivy League, with a shock of sun burnt hair. Someone he didn't know or want to know. The guy smiled and said, "You're late, Major."

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again," he said stiffly.

"We have a lot to do," the man in the Hawaiian shirt replied,

and the usual manila envelopes were handed to him and the Sergeant. The others stared quietly at the proceedings. The Major opened his envelope and the Sergeant followed. A black and white picture lay on top of the papers. A man dressed in Arab robes looked back over his shoulder. The expression had fear in the eyes and a surprised look on his face, like he wasn't sure which way to turn.

"This is Farouk Abdul. He's a top recruiter and one of the higher ups in the organization," the Hawaiian shirt said, keeping the information minimal. It was doubtful he even used the man's real name. The Major studied the picture and the apprehensive eyes staring back at him.

"How old is the picture?" he asked.

The man smiled, and said, "A year at most."

In this game the Major knew how much a man could change in a year. He looked for some clue in the man's face to be sure he could get a quick identity. He saw a small, almost unnoticeable, birthmark along the left line of his jaw. It would have to do. The angle of the picture made it difficult to tell how tall he was, and the loose Arab clothes hid his body and head.

"He's our target," the man in the Hawaiian shirt said. That was it. An evening's work spelled out in three words.

The Major signed the usual pieces of paper under the picture and stood up. The Sergeant rose with him and they both saluted the other men at the table. They were ready for work and headed for the interior room behind them.

They took their positions in the large leather chairs and the video screens flickered and lit up. The Sergeant adjusted the focus on

his controlled cameras and the brown terrain came into view. The Major thought it was probably Afghanistan, or the run along the Pakistani border. On one screen he could see mountains in the background and even a few houses. He took the controls, gave the signal and felt the power switch over to him. He thought he recognized this particular drone by the easy feel of it. He'd spent an entire night flying it a week earlier, protecting a group of men in a disabled Humvee. Shots had been fired and he'd used two missiles to protect them. It had been a long, boring night but everyone in the room seemed satisfied with his work and the positive results. Three insurgents were killed and the trails of blood meant several others had been wounded. He liked this drone and felt sure it was the same one he'd used that night.

This flight plan would take him over a mountainous ridge toward some small houses nestled in along a dirt road that ran down the mountain. It was early morning there and he could feel the men stir in the seats behind him when they saw the houses. The Sergeant zoomed the belly camera in and caught what looked like a covered lump behind one of the houses. The Major maneuvered the silent drone higher and glided to the other side of the structure where the shape of a car could be seen more clearly under a loose covering. The Hawaiian shirt moved in closer to the TV monitor and stared at the quiet scene. Absolute silence covered the room. The Major kept the drone in the glare of the sun where it would be less noticeable. The mountain peaks also helped conceal the drone from the houses. The guy in the Hawaiian shirt and desert jacket looked back at him from the monitor and smiled. He understood what the Major was doing. No one in the room moved. They sat waiting for something to

happen like large birds of prey.

A door opened and a young man slipped out of the house dressed in Arab robes. He looked carefully up and down the road, checked the mountain passes, than moved to the car. Tugging and pulling at the covering he finally managed to lift it, revealing an old, pale Mercedes touring car. The young man checked the interior and pulled out what looked like used food wrappings. Then he turned, checked the road again, and went back into the house.

“Do you think he saw us?” the Hawaiian shirt asked.

“I don’t know,” the Major said. “Is he the target?”

“No,” the man answered, and continued to stare at the quiet scene on the TV monitor. “But they’re getting ready to move.”

The room got quiet again, in a death-like way, and he figured the car would be his target and that they’d want the strike to be out on the road somewhere away from the houses. The brass didn’t like civilian casualties.

The room stirred when the same man came out again and got in the car. He started the motor and pulled in closer to the house. A woman came out with a covered basket that looked like food for a long trip, and she placed it in the back seat. A berka covered her face so there was no way of identifying her, or linking her with the man. She wrapped the cloth even tighter around her head and went back into the house. Everyone in the room seemed riveted to the screen. The door opened again and the woman came back out with a little boy in tow. He was dressed in plain jeans, sneakers, and a t-shirt with something written on it. She opened the back door and lifted the boy up into the Mercedes. He hugged her, and for a moment the berka dropped, and she kissed him. The Sergeant tried to zoom in on her

face but she pulled the berka up again and went back into the house.

The man in the Hawaiian shirt took out some other photos, spread them across the table, and stared at the pictures that he'd probably studied for months. "I don't think that's his wife," he said. "She looked older. Maybe it's his mother."

"Who is the boy?" someone asked.

"I don't know," the man replied.

The screen didn't move. The Sergeant tried another camera to catch the face behind the wheel but the man remained in the car's shadows. The Major watched the door for the man in the picture to come out. There would only be a moment for identification unless he went around the front to get into the passenger seat. The Major was sure the man in the Hawaiian shirt knew that too. The room seemed to tense with the waiting.

The back door opened again and another man in Arab robes came out carrying a small briefcase. He turned to speak to someone inside and then headed for the car. It looked like the same man in the picture. Except now he was laughing as he threw the briefcase into the car and got into the back with the boy. The car pulled away and the men in the room got up and quietly headed for the door, leaving the Major, the Sergeant, and the man in the Hawaiian shirt alone in the room. "Thanks for coming, gentlemen," he muttered as they left.

The Major lifted the drone higher, staying behind the Mercedes so that the mountains covered him. The car drove past the small community of houses and turned north toward the main road. There was hardly any traffic and the only question was the little boy in the car.

The agent took off his safari jacket and moved in closer to the



monitor. "He's our man. You can take him anytime, Sir," he said.

"What about the child?" the Major asked.

The air hung heavy in the air-conditioned room. "What child?" the man asked, keeping his eyes on the monitor.

The Major did not acknowledge the Sergeant's quick glance at him, and said, "I thought civilian casualties—"

"Our target has killed civilians and more," the man answered quickly. "There's a ruthless killer in that car."

The man with the sun burnt hair had still not looked away from the monitor and watched the Mercedes bounce down the road toward the main highway. "We've been hunting this guy for three years, Major. I can't go back and write another report telling them he got away again. This is exactly what he's done in the past. I was expecting it."

Behavior like this was against the rules. The Major was in charge of making the choices and decisions. Protecting policies and planes was his ultimate duty. He watched the Mercedes go out past the last house, getting closer to the main road. The man in the Hawaiian shirt finally turned away from the video screens and stared at the two men in the leather chairs. He started to say something but the car on the screen stopped and the Sergeant asked, "What's happening?"

"I don't know," the Major answered.

The man in front of them turned back to the monitors. "Watch him," he said. "It may be some kind of trick."

"Are we sure it's him?" the Major asked.

"It's him!" the man said.

One of the back doors on the Mercedes opened and the little boy got out and ran off the road. The man in the back got out to follow

him and the camera zoomed in closer. The boy ran to a ditch and pulled down his pants to piss. The man came closer and the boy laughed and waved him away. The man laughed with him and stepped back. The Major angled the drone slightly and felt the missile release in his hand. The monitor lit up in colors and a cloud of dust and debris covered the area. Through it he could barely see the Mercedes beginning to move down the road and he flew the drone up over the dark cloud and headed north with the car. He angled the drone again and fired. The silent explosion rocked the video picture. The car lurched off the road, the gas tank blew, and a ball of flame covered the picture. The Major lifted the drone and slid back toward his first strike. The smoke had almost cleared and he could see the dark hole where it hit. He looked toward the ditch for the boy but nothing moved.

“Do you see the kid?” he asked.

“Negative,” the Sergeant called.

“Get out,” the Hawaiian shirt yelled.

The drone lingered and moved to the other side of the ditch. One of the cameras caught the boy lying on the side of the ditch. He either crawled or had been blown there.

“There’s nothing you can do. Get out!”

The man was right and he knew it. He lifted the drone and headed for the mountains. There were people running like bugs across the screens. Then the mountain peaks suddenly covered everything. He veered the drone southward and gave the signal. He felt it come back and heard a voice telling him, “Nice work,” and he let go. For a few seconds he sat there letting the tension run out through his arms

and neck.

“Great shooting, Sir,” a voice said next to him. “You might’ve even saved that kid.” When he looked over the Sergeant saluted him. “I never saw anything like it.”

“It was a definite kill,” the other man said, shuffling papers and pictures off the desk, and stuffing them into an attaché case. He spun the numbered lock, picked up his jacket, and said, “You’re absolutely the best, Major. The best.” And he heard the door close.

“I’ll be in the lounge, Sir,” the Sergeant said.

The Major left the building and went out to wait in the car to be reassigned. The young Sergeant came out to tell him he could go home early. It was still dark. The moon had come up and its pale light covered the desert in a cool glow. The Major swung the car out past the security gates and headed for the highway. He tried not to think of what had happened and clicked on the radio. Bill Evans and strings drifted in around him playing a Faure piece. It had a clear sound to it like the night. The road was empty and he picked up speed, heading for the glow in the sky over Vegas. He’d be home in half an hour.

When the turnoff to the church came he took it, and had to rethink which way to turn in the dark because he had never come up on the church from this side of the highway. He needed to pray.

He slowed down, saw the pile of stones by the church’s entrance, and made the turn. It looked different at night. Smaller. He edged the Beemer forward, looking for the parking spaces. It seemed to take longer than usual and then he saw the building ahead. It was difficult to judge how far he’d come because the headlights seemed to miss the structure completely, turning it into a shadow. He thought he’d taken

the wrong turn, and got out to see where he'd landed. When he turned the headlights off the old stucco building glowed in the moonlight off to the left. He had come in from another angle and started walking down what looked like a path to the little church.

He didn't expect to see anyone around at that hour and made the turn to open the door, but it wasn't there. It had been ripped off its hinges and thrown out of sight. What were left of the benches had been piled in a corner. The holy water bowl had been removed and the wicker basket gone. He looked up at the altar where the crucifix used to be, but only the faint image of a cross was left on the yellow sandstone.

He looked quickly around for the priest's vestments. They were gone and he felt cold and alone. The church looked like it had belonged to the desert for a long time. The Major turned and saw the covered stall of the confessional box where the vestments used to hang. The oval top had been smashed but the set of seats were still intact. A lizard looked up at him for a moment and then crawled quickly away under a board. Then nothing seemed to move in the cold moonlight. He pushed aside what was left of the torn pieces of curtain on the confessional, mumbled a short prayer, and began talking about what had happened to him and where he'd been. His voice got stronger as he spoke, but only the moonlit night heard him. □