

HAUNTED ROBOTS

by

James P. Warner & Ronald Joseph Kule

(Based on a story by Michael E. Noll)

CHAPTER 1 ~ Orientation

High in the Sierra Nevada Range, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) Robotics Lab opened its doors to another day. Sunlight bathed the atrium of the two-story structure built on a plateau near a canyon arroyo carving its way through foothills well to the East of Berkeley, California. Its décor of white-marble floors, alabaster walls and stainless-steel curvatures heralded advanced thinking and technologies. Near the entrance, majestic potted palms added a luster and color to an otherwise drab café where hot breakfasts, lunches and dinners served Lab researchers and other employees who worked there during varied day and night shifts.

Although the Lab did offer accommodations where its scientists might rest during all-nighters, it was not a residence hall. In their leisure hours, all employees lived “down below” in Pollock Pines, a picturesque village situated at a bend in the arroyo a little bit west of the Lab’s location higher up.

A 10-foot-high, gated security fence delineated the Lab’s campus and butted up to a pathway used regularly by joggers and hikers. A single helipad adjacent to both served as a safe target for incoming military guests associated with the Federal government’s robotics project.

Oren Stanson already had earned four PhDs under his belt by the time DARPA hired him to supervise the manufacture of the world's most advanced robots.

On his first rounds of his first day, he greeted Bionetics Psychologist, Doctor Ingrid Reese, with one of his usual comments, "You're very pretty today, Doctor Reese."

Ingrid Reese was, in fact, easy on the eyes but she hid her looks behind heavy, black-framed reading glasses and long, dark hair that fell often across the top of her forehead and face. Wearing little makeup and, most days, a gray pantsuit hugging her curvaceous shape, all of which she hid under her Lab coat, she worked at presenting a demure, all-business look and demeanor because of her shyness. Every time Stanson complimented her, however, she tingled all over.

"Thank you, Doctor," she blushed in reply, turning away. Reese knew her "science"—after all, she, too, had earned several degrees—but she was not too sure of her role as a woman.

"How are the bionetic functional diagrams coming?" the Director asked.

"V-very well, Doctor."

"Good. Keep up the good work."

The Director continued his daily, walkabout routine, and Doctor Reese watched him go. Sighing, she finished up some detail work before she broke work for a morning coffee in the café.

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The five S-series robots being worked on in the glassed-in main room of the Lab were identical, except for alphanumeric designations painted in large characters on the backs of their heads: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5. Their seamless skin, a material called Liquid Metal, stretched across their

titanium-alloy skeletons and replicated the layered design of human skin. Throughout the robots' internal structures microscopically thin gold-and-platinum-alloy wires transmitted signals from bionetic brains to the robots' extremities and back—a network much like a miniature Internet. Their chest and stomach cavities contained power-pack systems run on electrical storage batteries. A covered, multi-purpose plug on their left waist hosted re-charging and data-transfer ports.

The robots' faces bore masculine features and expressive eyes. An anti-radiation protective layer sprayed onto their heads allowed for safe operation in highly radioactive environments for the 24-hour duration of their power supply, though they would not survive a nuclear direct-hit.

Each robot emitted a light-energy field designed to affect humans in their vicinity by making them feel affection or trust toward it. Bionetic designer Linda Flynn had thought such a field would help them assimilate into the human community but she, not having thought through the combined effect of every robot being turned on in the same place all at once, had on more than a few occasions experienced around them passes that were more affectionate than she had bargained for; or which she could ever have expected, based on the field of study from which she had graduated: The “Man Comes from Mud” theorists.

Robot S1 was classified as Transcription Class. Lead Programmer Hank Mellon had worked nearly a year to program S1 with advanced voice-recognition software. S1 could identify every team member's voice recorded with handheld recorders, though it still had trouble with phone-call recognitions.

Maintenance Class Robot S2 had “learned” to remember where the cleaning supplies were stored, and how to use them, without Mellon's programming.

Robot S3 was a Sniper-Class, military-grade weapon that was deadly against targets equipped with ID code radio chips. His visual face- and body-mapping routines still required more advanced development evidenced by his friendly-fire mishaps average of one out of every four trials, which satisfied only the military liaison to the Lab, U.S. Signal Corps Brigadier-General Roger Rogers. Even Rogers' superiors at the Pentagon felt the percentage number of incidents gone wrong was not good enough to pass the PR/smell test of news-media personnel embedded in war zones. This ongoing disagreement constantly rankled Rogers, who, in turn, consistently got under everybody else's emotional skin daily at the Lab.

Aquatic Class Robot S4 was equipped with underwater intake and filtration apparatus and taught how to don hand and foot flippers. Unfortunately, though an excellent swimmer, in ocean trials it tended to take out (kill) any aquatic life form larger than a man that it encountered. And so, for now, S4 was considered merely a developmental-stage robot.

Robot S5, albeit fully programmed, laid in storage, never fully activated. It provided a baseline prototype for comparison use only.

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“BJ” Rogers—the not-so-friendly nickname spoken only behind his back had a decidedly “blue” hue attached to it—took a phone call in his spacious office overlooking the array of hardware in the main room of the robotics factory. In charge of military oversight and security for the entire robotics project, he employed two uniformed guards permanently stationed outside of his door, and another inside his office. In no time, he once again started to pace back and forth, wave his arms, and yell into his cell phone.

“Sir, I can no longer abide that idiot Stanson. If he keeps up his useless rant about using our military machines as domestics, I’ll be sick. What I might do won’t be a pretty sight, I’ll guarantee you that!”

He then had to listen to the callers’ muffled response, but he kept on stomping around the office.

“Sir, I understand you need this project to go through. I get that, but I need it to go through as planned.”

Rogers was told to shut up and listen, so he listened some more; this time while pulling on his lower lip.

He muttered aloud, “If I can just get this maniac to shut up long enough to get my mission completed...”

His caller, cutting him off, admonished him again.

“... Yessir. I’m hearing your words, sir... I understand, sir. But, sir, when can I get out of here and get myself back into a real command?”

He pulled on his lips and twitched from the upbraiding he had to endure for saying that.

“Yessir, yessir; understood, sir. But, every other day I get this lecture from him about how we should be keeping the peace at home with our product (the robots), instead of only making war and helping soldiers. I just cannot deal with him any longer.”

He paused and held the phone away from his ears, because now his Pentagon superior easily could be heard shouting at him.

Rogers sighed. He dropped his head and shoulders.

“Yessir. Whatever you say, sir. We’ll probably have all the bugs worked out within a week. Anyway, if that insect—ha-ha—will just shut up and do his job... The thing is, he acts

like he's the one in charge here! What a joke! I'm in charge around here, sir!"

He pulled on his lip again; then pulled on his ear lobe; then twitched his face muscles incessantly. His eyes started to blink and twitch rapidly. His buzz-cut hair stood higher on end, but he kept his mouth shut and listened in silence.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Goodbye for now, sir."

He hung up the phone and looked toward the door to his office, yelling, "Sergeant, get in here right now. I have something urgent for you to do."

Later, BJ Rogers walked into the lunchroom café and ordered a coffee. Spotting Doctor Reese sitting alone, he approached her and, sporting a lascivious smile, asked, "Is this seat taken?"

In reply, Reese tittered self-consciously but she allowed him to sit at her table.

"Doctor Reese, do you have those functional diagrams DARPA has been requesting?"

"Just finishing them up now, General."

"OK. Good. We'll need to sort out why we can't get our battle-performance specs tighter. As you know, we're rapidly approaching the finish dateline."

"Right, I know. We will get them, sir. I'll have them for you this evening."

"Saturday night?! That's the team spirit, Doctor!"

He paused long enough to get her undivided attention before he spoke some more: "Say, would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night? We could celebrate..."

He never finished his sentence. He just smiled that smile at her and watched Reese's lips as she opened her mouth and

closed it, and then, flustered and red-faced, put her hands up to her mouth.

Rogers was about to offer up another advance, when the Director came up behind him on his way to the elevator. He had heard most of their conversation and was aggravated past normal as he approached. He turned toward Rogers.

“I still say we should create robots that can be used in multi-function environments, not just battlebots,” he snapped at Rogers, continuing their ongoing daily battle.

“Bullshit!” Rogers roared, standing and spilling his coffee on his pants.

Stanson continued, ignoring his mishap, “We have already assigned various functions to the ones we’re working on now. They’re doing great at different tasks. An automated-robot factory setup could build several types of domestic robots, plus the battle-bots. They could also replace themselves as needed. That would be cost effective...”

He never got to finish the thought, because Rogers took over.

“Listen, Stanson, your stupid notion would be a real security nightmare! I already told you, ‘What’s done is done!’ Dammit, it’s a ‘done deal’, Stanson!”

Growling louder than usual, Rogers jumped up, in the process overturning his table. “Don’t you understand that?!” he shouted at Stanson.

Fearful, Reese backed away from Roger’s vicinity, which, seeing his chances of having a date with her go south, irked him even more.

“Just zip it, Stanson!” he yelled—his face reddened a deeper hue as he stabbed a napkin at the growing coffee stain on his table. Stanson and Reese said nothing. They just stared at him.

Seeing the way Reese was shaking, Rogers dialed himself down, took a deep breath.

“Stanson, the military hired you to perfect these machines, not go all blubbery about their uses. DARPA is paying for these robots to assist warfighters in combat situations, and that’s the end of it! End of story. Don’t talk to me about this again. Besides, I couldn’t change the plan even if I wanted to, which I don’t.”

He looked again at Reese and saw she was totally disinterested in him now, setting him off again. He shook visibly. His face went purple, and his mouth drooled enough that he had to keep wiping at it as he went on:

“This argument is academic. DARPA pays for the god-damned things we make around here, and it will use them as it sees fit... and right now that’s to save warfighters’ lives in combat!”

Stanson didn’t move a muscle or say a word.

“I’ve heard all your bleeding-heart crap before, Stanson! This conversation is over!” he shouted. As he stood and walked away, he added, “... Someone pick up that goddamned table!”

Stanson also stormed away, his Italian complexion unusually colored. He knew he was not going to win this argument with DARPA backing Rogers. On the way out, he picked up his cat Tes, whom he’d named after the famed scientist and inventor Tesla, and he stalked out of the café and the lab building for a cooling off in the direction of the nature path.

With the two men gone, Ingrid Reese’s mood had changed. Her fear had turned into pangs of grief-filled loss for her Director leave so upset and angry.

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Outside and headed toward the nature path, Stanson thought more in terms of how robots could help firefighters, police, and search and rescue units fighting natural disasters and performing emergency medical procedures. The idea of putting his “jewels” (how he thought of his S-series robots) into war zones still seemed a huge waste of every taxpayer dollar of their billion-dollar price tags.

Looking out over the adjacent canyon, holding his forehead with one hand and Tes with the other, Stanson moaned aloud to no one, “Oh God! I know I’m really nothing more than a highly paid office manager, but I want to do something useful. I haven’t personally created these robots, but they feel like they’re mine; they have such grand potential...’

As his thought drifted away, the good doctor took a deep breath and shook off his temper. His mind turned to Reese. He was fond of her. He had noted that she was an attractive young woman, although incredibly shy. Smiling, he decided to invite her to dinner “down below” in Pollock Pines, where he knew a good Spanish restaurant had opened in the neighborhood.

Perfect he told himself, feeling calmer. Pushing his glasses higher up on his nose, he prepared to turn and go back to his office. Suddenly, Tes stiffened and leapt away.

Stanson never saw what spooked her; instead, he felt something strike him hard across his face. Like the sound of a baseball bat smacking a homer, a THWAK! smote the air around him like lightning at close range. A split-second later, his body hurtled down toward the bottom of the arroyo far below.

Minutes later, as silently as it had appeared where he stood, a shadowy figure clothed in a dark hoodie, black pants and black athletic shoes slipped away into the shadows from which it had come, unscathed and unseen.

Two morning joggers chattering to each other passed by going in the opposite direction on the pathway. They never noticed anything out of place... or that a murder had just taken place nearby.

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