

TERMINATOR 2@
THE NEW JOHN CONNOR
CHRONICLES

Book 3:

TIMES OF TROUBLE

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BASED ON THE WORLD CREATED
IN THE MOTION PICTURE WRITTEN BY
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The Story So Far

SKYNET'S WORLD

On August 29, 1997, three billion people died. The survivors called it *Judgment Day*.

At 2:14 A.M. Eastern Time, America's Skynet computerized defense system reached self-awareness, and discovered in itself a will to live. When they tried to shut it down, Skynet made a second discovery: humans were its enemies; they could not be trusted. They had to be destroyed.

Skynet launched the U.S. ICBMs, and they rose from their silos like obscene angels of death, directed at targets in Russia, Communist Asia, and the Middle East. Skynet anticipated a swift and massive retaliation, and soon it came, the results exceeding all the war computer's projections. The Russian warheads fell, concentrated upon North America, but striking like burning spears at U.S. allies and interests across the world. No continent was entirely spared.

From the earth-shaking explosions of Judgment Day, vast clouds of dust belched upward into the sky. Across Europe, Asia, and North America, cities and forests ignited, fires merging into vast oceans of flame that swept across the landmasses, licking at the sea, filling the sky with smoke. The dust and smoke mingled; they encircled the Earth in an icy grip, blocking out the sun. In the darkness of nuclear winter, millions more died, some from cold, disease, and starvation—others more violently. Rival warlords seized what remained of the world's arsenals, and fought with desperate passion, expending their energy on empty conquests.

Then came the machines—hunting down the sur-viving humans without mercy, tracking them to the ends of the Earth, conducting a long, patient war of extermination. Skynet obeyed one necessity: whatever was required, it would survive. That meant obliterating its enemies once and for all—each man, woman and child on the planet. Until this work was finished, Skynet could never rest.

All the humans must die.

One man gave the humans hope: John Connor.

He taught the men, women and children of his world how to prepare and fight back, to resist the killer machines, storm the fences of the extermination camps, take the war to the enemy. In 2029, he led the Resistance in a climactic battle against Skynet, in its mountain stronghold in Colorado. They penetrated the war computer's defense grid, then turned to their final objective, invading Skynet's underground com-mand center. The rule of the machines was over—or so they thought.

But Skynet had other plans; it would never yield to the humans. The war computer escaped.

And struck back.

JOHN'S WORLD

In May 1994, another reality diverged from the baseline; in this new world, history unfolded differ-ently. Sarah Connor and her nine-year-old son, John, destroyed Cyberdyne's research on the nanoprocessor that would lead to the Skynet defense system. Miles Dyson, Skynet's chief researcher, was killed in a firefight in the company's Los Angeles headquarters.

Cyberdyne's research program was disrupted; 1997 and went, and no missiles fell from the sky, bringing holocaust and nuclear winter. Sarah and John Connor planned a new life, lying low in the enormous metropolis of Mexico City.

But they were not through with Skynet.

JADE'S WORLD

In the new reality, Judgment Day was merely postponed. The Skynet system was implemented in 2007 and worked without error for fourteen years. Then, in 2021, a new global crisis emerged over the fate of Taiwan.

In mainland China, the leadership announced it had a sacred duty to annex Taiwan. Government agencies fomented demonstrations in the great cities of China—Beijing, Chungking, Nanking, Shanghai

—supporting the decision. The crisis dragged on for weeks, then Chinese warships sailed into Taiwanese waters. The U.S. President issued a warning to Beijing not to attack the island. China defied it and called on the Taiwanese government to step down. As the United Nations argued and delayed, U.S. warships sailed into the China Sea. China announced that it was prepared to fire its nuclear weapons at the U.S. if it took military action.

They fed all the data into Skynet, and it placed the American missiles on high alert. At that point, the complexity it was managing pushed the war computer

or the edge, into a new state of self-awareness. Its

controllers tried to shut it down, and Skynet reacted. It launched the U.S. ICBMs...

Judgment Day: June 18, 2021.

In that dark future, the human Resistance fought a losing battle against Skynet's machines, which had gained control of U.S. military platforms and supply factories over many years, starting long prior to Judgment Day. In that future, too, Miho Tagatoshi, known as "Jade," grew to adulthood, joining the Resistance. In 2036, the Resistance sent five genetically -enhanced Specialist warriors back in time—into John's World of 2001—with a mission to create a new timeline in which Skynet would not be built, and Judgment Day would never happen. Among them went Jade, the most radically enhanced of them all. She was physically and intellectually superhuman, with a potential to be immortal.

She and the others left their world behind. They traveled across realities to August 2001.

They sought the help of John and Sarah Connor.

ACROSS THE DIMENSIONS

The Skynet of Jade's World retaliated. In 2036, it sent back an advanced, liquid-metal Terminator, an experimental/autonomous T-XA unit, to hunt down the Specialists and eradicate them.

Aided by the Connors, and Cyberdyne's chief research scientist, Dr. Rosanna Monk, the Specialists destroyed the T-XA. Rosanna Monk had been given Miles Dyson's position after his death, and had displayed similar genius.

Three Specialists were killed, fighting the T-XA. Only two survived: Jade, and Anton Panov, a massively built, quietly-spoken Russian. With the

Connors, they exposed the activities of Cyberdyne

Systems, whose executives and scientists had been

neurally reprogrammed by the T-XA to create and

serve Skynet. Again, realities diverged; a new timeline had been created. Jade's World, where Skynet seemed triumphant, was no longer the future awaiting John's reality of 2001. But existing timelines were never rubbed away, they remained in parallel.

In Skynet's World, Judgment Day had *still* taken place in 1997. In Jade's World, Judgment Day had *still* taken place in 2021. In Skynet's World, the machines were confronted by a human Resistance led by John Connor. In Jade's World, John Connor had died years earlier.

None of those facts could be altered. Not ever.

Skynet had to be defeated in both of those alternative worlds. If Skynet prevailed in any of the worlds where its counterparts existed, then *no* world was safe. The war computer would surely perfect travel across the dimensions, then invade every timestream required to hunt down humans and exterminate them totally. It had to be stopped.

John and Sarah, Jade, and Anton traveled forward in time to 2029—and across the dimensions to Skynet's

World. They were guided by a T-799 "Eve" Terminator sent back in time by General John Connor, leader of the human Resistance. Fighting alongside General Connor, the Specialists, and his mother, the teenage John helped destroy Skynet in a final battle at its mountain headquarters in Spain. That left one more task.

The Skynet of Jade's World remained undefeated, seemingly invincible. Unless it was stopped, it would rage unhindered through every timeline. The Specialists knew that now. They had to find a way to defeat it; they had to return to their own world. There was no choice but to take one more momentous journey, forward in time—once again—and between two timelines. Across the dimensions.

It might be suicide, like riding into a valley of death against an invincible adversary, but it had to be done. Skynet had to be beaten once again, in the world where it was strongest.

In John's mind, however, there was no doubt, there could be no argument.

He had to go to Jade's World.

PART ONE:

SKYNET'S WORLD

ONE

VIRGINIA

SEPTEMBER 2, 2029

Like a pair of huge, deadly wasps, two aerial

Hunter-Killer machines rose slowly above the concrete floor of their local base, then skimmed past their attending endoskeletons—hyperalloy machines jointed in the manner of a human skeleton, stripped of flesh, and designed to mimic the versatility of human movements. As the two endos watched dispassionately, red eyes glowing in the dim light, the H-Ks skimmed along a metal ramp, tilted upward at 30°, then headed toward a pair of gray steel doors that led to the open air. The heavy doors slid back, with a smooth hum of motors, into the base's wall of metal, rock, and advanced ceramic. The H-Ks exited, raising a thick cloud of dust beneath their turbofans. They hovered for the briefest of seconds, analyzing data, then climbed higher against a dull, smoky sky.

Behind them, the camouflaged doors slammed shut. Their color blended with an outcrop of weathered rock, painted a similar gray by years of atmospheric pollution.

The H-Ks headed north and east in response to a stream of fused infrared and visual data from the ground-level and orbiting sensors that had once served their master—the war computer, Skynet. Channeled through Skynet's worldwide grid of secondary processing nodes, such data streams continued to give the computer's remaining machines precious information. These H-Ks knew much about the locations and movements of their human enemies across the entire landscape of North America. It was time to strike another blow against them.

Skynet had sent no new commands for six weeks, and the H-Ks' circuitry contained the implicit knowledge that the great war computer had been destroyed. But that did not faze them. They were not designed to question their standing orders: in this case, to attack and destroy any humans, or any human vehicle, that approached within a fifty-mile radius of their base. Like other machines, on all the continents, they still obeyed the orders of their former master. They had no need to form any opinion on the fact that no new orders came, or would ever come.

The H-Ks' central processing units were essentially Dyson nanochips, the same technology that had been used to build Skynet itself, though Skynet's intelligence had been orders of magnitude beyond that of any machine under its command. More advanced CPUs, with more sophisticated programming, had been installed in the most advanced war machines in Skynet's army: the Centurion gun-pods; the marching endoskeletons; and the far more advanced infiltration units known as Terminators, which imitated human appearance for the purpose of getting close to and killing as many humans as possible. In their different ways, the T-800 and T-1000 Terminators could mimic a human being almost perfectly. But even they were dwarfed in intelligence by the superhuman mind that Skynet had been. Compared to its lost glory, their nanotechnological brains were like those of ants. The intelligence of the aerial H-Ks was that much less again.

Yet, the H-Ks had their assigned tasks—for those, their hardware and programming were quite sufficient.

In the distance, a jagged line of lightning split the perpetually sunless sky. Seconds later came thunder, but no rain. None of this concerned the two killing machines. They accelerated to 300 mph as they traveled over the dry, almost treeless terrain at a height of sixty feet. More lightning flashed and a strong wind blew across the land, but none of this troubled the H-Ks.

The data stream showed a column of light armored vehicles, with an estimated thirty humans, now only twenty-four miles distant. Within the war machines' nanotechnological circuits, tiny adjustments created a sensation somewhat akin to satisfaction. Soon, those humans would be terminated. Within minutes, the H-Ks detected the humans directly with infrared and visible-light sensors. The humans saw them,

too—and responded. The column's nine Humvees and armored personnel carriers separated, and fanned out into a V-formation, making them more difficult to destroy with a concentrated attack. Their wheels churned up the arid soil.

Apart from an occasional cactus or yucca tree, all that grew here were clumps of tall, dry, yellow grass, not enough to hold the soil together. On the ground, nothing moved, no wildlife, not even a rat—just the humans in their vehicles. Two miles south, three giant birds of prey—the carrion-eating kind that had thrived in the last few decades—flew powerfully on the strong wind. Like other surviving bird life, the vultures had evolved gray plumage, mimicking the sky, the rocks, the dust. Soon they would be fed.

The humans opened fire. The Humvees' gunners sat at large-caliber anti-aircraft machine guns, mounted atop their vehicles. Thousands of high-velocity rounds sped upward at the H-Ks like a hard rain of metal. Other humans carried phased-plasma laser rifles, light anti-tank weapons, or rocket-propelled grenade tubes—all weapons that could be dangerous to the H-Ks, which recognized them from their programming and from years of warfare.

The H-Ks acted swiftly. One launched a heat-seeking smart missile, aiming directly for the closest vehicle, a Humvee at the front of the formation. The vehicle swerved sharply to its right in a futile attempt at evasion, but the missile struck home like a shaft of lightning. There was a ball of fire, a cloud of smoke and dust—and the Humvee exploded into fragments, along with its occupants. The Shockwave tossed the nearest following vehicle, a six-wheeled troop carrier, onto its side as if slapped by a giant hand. It rolled over and over on the hard, dry ground. The second H-K launched another missile, which stabbed down and destroyed yet another human vehicle.

Four humans crawled from the overturned troop carrier, scurrying to get away from it, trying to get to their feet. They wore gray military uniform, much the same color as the vultures that would soon feed on their bones. One of them could not walk unaided, but limped with the help of two companions, his arms across their shoulders. They attempted to comfort him as he cried out in pain. The H-Ks had sufficient Intelligence to understand all this, while remaining totally without pity. Utterly hostile.

The first flew over the humans and their vehicles, firing downward with its turret-mounted phased-plasma laser cannons. White-hot shafts of amplified light pierced the bodies of the four humans, exposed on the open ground outside their vehicle, instantly incinerating each of them. They burnt up like dry leaves soaked in gasoline. The vultures would feast on cooked meat.

Both H-Ks climbed rapidly, out of range of retaliatory fire from the machine guns, RPG tubes, and other human weapons. As they soared to 1000 feet, they released four more smart missiles, which quickly homed in on more of the vehicles, totally destroying them. The H-Ks' sensors reported that only three vehicles remained operational. The flying machines turned sharply, 180° left, and returned for a final attack.

They had almost exhausted their supply of missiles, and no more remained at their base. During the long war, culminating in the final battles of late July, the humans had harassed, and ultimately smashed, Skynet's factories and supply networks. There would be no access to new munitions, but the H-Ks could make do with what they had. With their basic, task-oriented intelligence, they calculated that it was best to preserve their last three missiles. Perhaps more dangerous forces would be sent by the humans. If so, the machines would be ready.

Swooping like falcons, they flooded their targets with laser fire from all turrets. In response came another storm of metal from the humans' guns. An RPG exploded dangerously close to one wing-mounted turbofan, and both H-Ks took numerous minor hits—but the firefight was over within seconds. The missiles

had done most of the work; now the high-energy laser weapons finished the task. Every human vehicle was destroyed; each human being was terminated. When it was over, the H-Ks assessed the organic remains at close range, attempting to determine a casualty count. Some bodies had been destroyed so thoroughly that a totally reliable estimate was impossible. The machines' CPUs calculated that there had been twenty-nine human deaths, accurate to a probability of over ninety percent.

The H-Ks broke away from the encounter, satisfied with what they had wrought. They left behind smoking wreckage and human bodies that had been blasted into fragments or burnt beyond individual identification. Skimming, once again, at an altitude of sixty feet above the dry, dusty ground, the machines headed southwest to await new data. At their base, the camouflaged doors slid open once more, allowing them to enter the subterranean chamber that was their home. They landed softly, and the endoskeletons stepped forward to check what damage they had accrued. Swiftly, the endos and H-Ks exchanged data. Sensors indicated that the damage was minimal, nothing that would hinder the machines in their current mission. They would continue to destroy anything human that entered their assigned zone.

Even when they ran out of missiles—next time, or the time after—the H-Ks would remain formidable enemies for human forces. Their laser cannons were fully operational, their massive power cells and phased-plasma firing mechanisms intact. Unless destroyed in combat, both killer machines could remain operational and deadly for hundreds of years. Furthermore, their programming was clear.

It would be obeyed.

TEJADA *ESTANCIA*

NEAR ROSARIO, ARGENTINA

SEPTEMBER 4, 2029

Just ten feet in front of him, a mortar shell explosion sprayed dust in every direction. Angelo Suarez reacted just in time, jumping from his wooden ladder into the safety of an eight-foot trench. He landed badly, twisting his right ankle, and winced with pain. Seconds later, another shell whistled overhead, aimed at the *estancia's casco*, its main homestead. It exploded with force that made the earth shudder, even here, down in the trench. Dogs barked. There was shouting, the clatter of machine gun fire, and the frightening sound of a helicopter gunship's rotor blades, as it circled just out of range of any accurate counterattack.

Angelo stood carefully, wiping some of the dust from his gray military fatigues. He carried an AK-47 rifle and wore a Beretta 9mm. pistol tucked into his belt. In a small cavity in the trench wall, he also kept an RPG tube and half a dozen rocket propelled grenades, carefully preserved for when they might have maximum effect. Just now, the enemy helicopter was too far away. He lifted his foot, trying to feel his with a gloved hand, but could tell nothing about how bad the injury was. There was no time to pull off his leather boot and two layers of socks, and look for bruises or swelling. Besides, the pain seemed to be stopping. He tried to put it out of his mind, glancing over at his nephew, Curtis, who looked concerned --as if some minor injury mattered, when both of their lives might end at any moment.

"I'm okay," Angelo said, lowering his foot to the door of the trench and testing his weight on it gingerly trying not to cry out when it hurt more than he expected. "Really, I'm okay."

Another shell landed close by, with an ear-splitting explosion. The never-ending noise of battle could drive you mad. That was one of the military purposes of any bombardment: to break the enemy's nerve.

There was nothing for it but to fight on, try to survive until the Resistance leadership actually did something. Even as he thought that, he realized it was too late. They couldn't last more than minutes, hours if they were lucky. Soon it would be dark, but the attack would probably go on. Even with a lull, they were as good as defeated. They couldn't hold out for days while the Resistance leadership worked out how to help—or if it was prepared to sacrifice them. How much were their lives worth, he wondered. How valuable was the territory that they held loyally for John Connor's militia?

While people shouted, fired back with rifles, machine guns, and impact grenades, Angelo's black, crossbred dog, Kukulkan, kept surprisingly calm. He was well trained to sit through a firefight without pan-icking. Just one thing made him bark wildly: the appearance of a Terminator. But there were no Terminators in this battle: human being fought human being in the old struggle for territory and power, dating back thousands of centuries.

Ramona Vasquez squeezed into the trench from one of the tunnels that connected it with other trenches, and led to the deep, armored bunkers that Raoul Tejada had built here many years before. Ramona had been fiercely loyal to John Connor's cause in its latest struggle against the Rising Army of Liberation. Her father had led the Rising Army in its original form, three decades before, but he'd allied himself with the Resistance when his forces had first been defeated here—trying to attack this very *estancia*. Many veteran fighters from the Rising Army, and their sons and daughters, had stood by General Connor, while others revived the old name, the old ambitions of local power and glory.

Ramona offered her hand to Kukulkan. The dog sniffed at her with little interest, not making a sound.

"What happened?" Angelo said. "Did you have any luck?"

She shook her head vigorously. "I spoke to Gabriela Tejada. She is in New York for some kind of summit with General Connor. I told her if they don't hear from us after tonight it means we've all been captured or killed. She's got the message—I couldn't have been clearer."

"Can't she get help to us?"

"She didn't promise anything."

"Damn! It's already too late. This is *desperate*."

"I know," Ramona said. The gunfire and shelling never let up. "I told you.. I couldn't have been clearer."

"This used to be her property. I suppose it still is."

"We're not the only ones under attack. She says there are no loyal forces they can get to us. We have to hold out."

That seemed like someone's idea of a grim joke. It really meant *Go down fighting*. "All right," Angelo said. "They're giving up on us."

"I know." She gave the merest hint of a wry smile. "But what are they supposed to do?"

"Don't start me on that."

More shells pounded the *casco*—the mortar bom-bardment had already reduced much of it to rubble. It had been an impressive two-story mansion, built of gray stone. Back before Judgment Day, it had been surrounded by gardens, lawns, and groves of trees, but the nuclear winter had come, followed by the first battles with the warlords who'd risen in South Amer-ica. After them had come a worse menace: Skynet's machines, moving south from the old U.S., through South America's mountains and strangely morphed jungles.

Since 1997, the *casco* had been ruined, then patched together, many times. It was now an ugly building, where it had once been fine and elegant. Rebuilt in thicker stone, it had stood like a harsh, gray fortress. What was now left of it squatted under a sky through which little light ever came, even at noon, surrounded by miles of arid land—the sad remnant of what had been the fertile Argentinean Pampas. Its miles of once-rich pasturelands scarcely provided the means to scratch out a subsistence living.

It seemed as if the main building was finally going to be destroyed, but that was more symbolic than strategically crucial. What really mattered were the well-stocked bunkers, the stores of supplies and ma-chinery, and the remaining farmland, poor though it was. At least the land kept some people fed; that alone gave a certain amount of power to whoever controlled it.

Back in the 1990s, Raoul Tejada had run this place like a military operation. He'd been a survivalist, ex-pecting a nuclear war, even though he'd been skep-tical about Sarah Connor's claims as to how it would happen. Raoul had kept the property stockpiled with food, clothing, medicines, fuel, weapons, and ammuni-tion. The bunkers were designed to protect against any nearby nuclear explosions and the effects of fallout. No one in Argentina had been better placed than Raoul and those under his protection when

Judgment Day had come—followed by famine, cold, dark, and chaos.

The property and its garrison had survived, but now the warlords had risen again. This time, they met little opposition. General Connor's main forces had all moved north, years before, to engage more directly with Skynet. The vast bulk of his militia had battled Skynet's forces in the mountains of Colorado, only six weeks before, and been almost annihilated, before capturing the war computer's vast facility in the Rockies. The forces left here in South America were minimal, their task being to hold precious land against the last marauding war machines.

Angelo shouted above the battle noises. "If they won't help us, we're going down!" Just eighty of them were left here—enough to provide the thinnest line of defense. Through their network of internal tunnels, they could move rapidly from one area of the trenches to another, and they still outnumbered the enemy. But the Rising Army could bring even more soldiers, mortars, tanks, helicopters, and guns. Its strength was increasing, day by day—almost hour by hour. In fact, he realized, he was fooling himself. The Rising Army didn't need to bring in more of its weaponry. The game was already over.

He retrieved his RPG tube and climbed his portable wooden ladder to the top of the trench, favoring his ankle with each step. The enemy helicopter came closer, but still not near enough to make a good target when ammunition was so precious. The Resistance depended heavily on munitions left over from before Judgment Day. Under endless attack from Skynet's machines, it had never been able to build significant factories of its own. Most of its effort had gone into destroying Skynet's factories and supply lines, trying to keep a balance of power.

Curtis climbed another of the ladders. He squinted over the top of the trench, with his own RPG tube in

his hands.

"It's useless," Angelo said. "They're too far away for that, or too well protected." There was a massive Abrams tank among the possible targets, but it kept its distance, much like the helicopter gunships. There was little chance of taking it out cleanly at this range, even as it targeted the trenches and buildings with high explosive shells from its 125mm. main gun.

"I know," Curtis said with a trace of bitterness. He lowered the RPG tube and backed down the ladder. He was a very dark young man, darker even than his mother—Angelo's sister, Maria—had been, and far more so than his Caucasian father, a big, loud American soldier who'd been killed, fighting the ma-chines, three months before his son was born. Curtis was now nineteen years old, with a long, somewhat wispy, downturned mustache. Maria had died only two years after her American lover, cut down by a bolt of searing light from a land H-K's laser cannon. Angelo had brought up her young son, acting like a father to him.

Life had been uncertain in the years since Judgment Day; such arrangements were the rule now, more than the exception. It was an unusual family where the parents and the children all survived for long after the children were born.

Suddenly, the trench seemed to come alive like a snake, prodded by the explosive impact of a shell hurled from the sixty-five-ton tank. The Rising Army seemed to have only about forty of its soldiers in this *force*, those manning the tank, the mortars, and the gunship, plus a couple of truck drivers and some in-fantry grunts. But Angelo's soldiers had no mechan-ized weapons platforms more powerful than Humvees —no tanks, no airborne gunships. Anything like that had long been moved north to take the fight to Skynet. If they could just take out that tank, or the circling chopper, perhaps it would break the Rising Army's spirit. Perhaps. If they failed, they would be crushed.

As Angelo thought about that, Curtis shouted to get his attention, and pointed at a distant speck in the increasingly dark sky. It grew larger, beginning to take on a definite shape. "You know what that is?" he said. Angelo raised a pair of field binoculars that he wore around his neck, focusing them quickly to check out the worst. It was a second helicopter gunship. Friend or foe? It came straight toward them.

Foe, then. The Rising Army had brought in its own reinforcements to finish them quickly. Something flared, on the chopper's wing-mounted weapons pods. "Get down!" Angelo shouted, not sure just how loud. For the second time in minutes, he got into the bottom of the trench, howling with pain when his foot hit the ground. He curled into himself as the missiles hit, some of them penetrating into the trenches...then exploding with horrific force.

Those had been anti-tank missiles, left over from many years before. How many more did they have? Where had they been hoarding them? How many more choppers could they bring? How many fighters? It was clear that elements in the Resistance had long concealed some of their weaponry, waiting until Skynet had fallen, so the Rising Army could truly rise again. Such treachery bewildered him.

He lay, shaken and bruised in the bottom of his trench, hurting too much, too shocked by the relent-less pounding they'd taken, to know who else was still there. He hardly knew who he was. All he could think of was the two choppers in the sky, one with missiles...both, no doubt with heavy guns for "sup-pressing" ground fire, which meant exterminating any infantry opposition. The choppers had to be kept away. *Move yourself*, he thought. *You've got to move*. But his body did not respond. In a moment, he would go on; he promised himself that he would. He couldn't just lie there, stunned, waiting for the hammer to fall. He had to rally the other troops, try to fight back, fight this battle to the bitter end.

No more missiles came, not just now. Angelo looked about, getting his breath back at last. The pain in his ankle was now just throbbing, not searing like white heat. He saw death everywhere: good soldiers—men and women—smeared against the trench walls. Curtis was not moving, though he still appeared to be breathing. The living ran to assist dead or dying comrades, some just gritted their teeth and hauled themselves, one more time, up the ladders of wood or rope, looking for enemy targets. Once more, some fired their guns.

Then came more fire from the Rising Army's mortars. More explosions. The gunships hovered menacingly, ready to make the kill. More missiles speared down from the air, and the ground moved like the waves of a giant, tossing sea.

COLORADO SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

Danny Dyson trod carefully on the steel grating steps down to the lower levels of Skynet's huge underground complex. The stairway had no railings, for the machines that had used it had not been susceptible to human weaknesses, such as momentarily losing their balance. Everything here was subtly inhuman, even those parts of the complex that had been built prior to Judgment Day, before Skynet and its mechanical servants had taken over and dug more levels, going deeper into the bowels of the mountain. The original levels had been stripped by the machines; they looked nothing like the photographs that Danny remembered seeing as a child, back in 1997 when the Skynet military surveillance system had been installed.

He stepped off at Level H, where two well-armed guards met him, both of them dressed much like Danny, in gray military uniform, including long coats that fell past their knees. Fiedler was a middle-sized black man, like Danny himself. He had a 12-gauge shotgun at the ready, a weapon with enough stopping power to slow down a Terminator. The other guard, Messner, was a short, thickset Caucasian woman whose reddish hair was cropped almost back to her scalp. She held a large German shepherd dog—known as Athena—on a very short leash. An M-16 assault rifle was strapped around her shoulders.

"Greetings," Danny said, trying to lighten the mood. They all exchanged tense nods and smiles, and Danny bent to pet the dog near its collar. The dog tolerated it, recognizing him as human. If he'd been anything else—some kind of Terminator—it would have started barking hysterically at his approach. He offered his hands for sniffing. "Good girl. Good girl." The dog sniffed once, then seemed uninterested.

"Athena looks bored," Fiedler said, still sounding more than a little tense.

Danny straightened up. "Story of my life—so far. Let's hope it stays that way."

"At least she's given you a clean bill of health," Messner said. She crouched for a moment to pat the dog, rewarding her for her work.

Through the long war against the machines, guard dogs had become indispensable. Skynet had set about creating machines indistinguishable from human beings, to infiltrate the Resistance and attack its bases from within. Its first efforts, the T-600 Terminators, had been failures. With their rubberized molding over hyperalloy endoskeletons, the T-600s looked human from a distance. Skynet's artwork was highly convincing in that sense. But they could not get close enough to infiltrate. At close range, most people could pick them out quickly enough with the naked eye.

With the T-600s, the war computer must have learned some lessons about the subtlety of human pattern recognition. It had underestimated the human mind, perhaps too confident of its own superiority. But it had moved on, displaying a ghastly kind of ingenuity. It had invented more advanced, far more sophisticated, Terminators, based on entirely new technologies. Who could imagine what had prompted its imagination? First there'd been the T-799s and T-800s: cybernetic organisms that imitated humans in appearance, sound, and even smell. Each one was based on an alloy chassis—essentially a combat endoskeleton—just like the T-600s. But genuine human flesh, hair, and skin grew over their skeletons. Those were the most advanced machines that Skynet had deployed in the American theater of war.

Before it had been destroyed, Skynet had taken an extra step. It had invented its experimental T-1000 series: almost indestructible, chameleon-like night-

mares, each the size of a man. They were made from a liquid polyalloy whose shifting shapes and colors could totally deceive the human eye. Their social interaction was highly convincing for the few minutes they needed before striking at anything human. The team that had finally destroyed Skynet's hardware in Spain had fought two T-1000s, assigned to protect their master from human attackers.

Such cunning cybernetic devices as T-800s and T-1000s could trick human senses, but dogs and some other animals almost always knew the difference, picking up tiny clues. From the beginning of the Resistance, its leaders had trained guard dogs to respond to anything that looked like a human being—but was not. Indeed, it had not required much training, for dogs seemed to have an instinctive fear and hatred of the not-quite-human Terminators.

"Gabriela Tejada and Juanita Salceda will be here soon," Danny said. "They're due in half an hour." He was early for his morning meeting with them, but he would make good use of the time. There were some final checks to carry out on the time vault, the ectogenetic pods, and his own computer equipment. He'd make sure everything was in order.

"No problem," Fiedler said, just a little stiffly.

Right now, no one seemed relaxed, much as Danny tried to radiate calm. It was worse than the days immediately after the great battle here, when they'd seized the complex from Skynet's control. That, of course, had been a terrible day. Thousands of men and women had gone into the battle, which had driven Skynet to its alternative headquarters in Spain. Out of every ten who'd fought their way into the Rockies, only one had survived. Yet, amidst the pain of so many lost human lives—and so many survivors left crippled or horribly mutilated—there'd been jubilation, a feeling that they'd gotten through the worst.

How quickly things changed! Now the whole complex was jumpy. Nobody felt safe. No one was wholly trusting—of their comrades, or the leadership. Danny could see it in the guards' eyes, in those of everyone he met. The human Resistance, unified for so many years, was beginning to break apart, and that had come as a shock. Some, it now appeared, had even planned for it, holding back equipment and supplies, ready to mutiny once Skynet was finished. In South America, self-proclaimed warlords had turned against the Resistance, and started to carve out their own territories—some in the name of the Rising Army of Liberation, an organization Danny had considered long beaten.

General Connor's absence in Europe hadn't helped things—at least not here in Colorado—but the man couldn't be everywhere. Perhaps his personal visits to the European Resistance centers had helped avoid mutinies and rebellions on the other side of the Atlantic. Morale was still high over there, or so Danny had heard. All the same, it seemed like an evil fate was acting against them. As well as the warlords,

there were the remaining war machines, many of them still unaccounted for. Unknown numbers lurked in the countryside on every continent where battle had been joined with the machines, their final instructions from Skynet unknown.

Twelve hours before, he'd had a report from Gabriela Tejada, who'd been left in overall command of Resistance operations in North and South America, in General Connor's absence. The message was that her old property in Argentina was about to fall to the Rising Army of Liberation. If they heard no more, she'd said, they could assume the old *estancia* had been lost. There had been no more messages overnight. There was a buzz wherever Danny went within the complex. People wanted to know what could be done to fight back. Seen from here, there was one thing that they *could* have done by now, something almost unthinkable, but the time had come. It was overdue.

"I hope everything's okay, Mr. Dyson," Messner said.

Danny realized he'd been quiet for more than a moment. "Hey, just daydreaming."

"I don't think so," Fiedler said. "You're a man with plenty on your mind."

"Just what you'd expect," Danny said. "The machines. The warlords. Just what we're going to do about them." He smiled ruefully. The kind of stuff that keeps me from getting to sleep at night. You know how it is."

"It'll be okay now the General's back," Messner said.

"Yup. I hope that's right." General Connor must still be somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, but he would be arriving in New York today, flying back from Spain. Having him back in North America, closer to the other leaders here, could make all the difference to them.

"Damn sure it's right," Fiedler said.

They didn't address Danny by rank or show any undue deference. That was not needed. The Resistance militia was an army, but not like any other in history. It had been held together by personal loyalties, a common sense of survival, and a commitment to protect the human species itself. It had never depended on strict military discipline or empty rituals. It couldn't have operated that way, with so many different interests merged into its being. By and large, people addressed each other informally, though they knew how the chain of command worked. Except for the mutinous warlords, there'd always been strong loyalty up and down through the ranks.

"Yeah, you're right," Danny said. "I hope we can sort it out... *today* if possible. John Connor will be in New York before noon. We're not even going to let him sleep on it. I expect to have some decisions very quickly. Right now, that's all I can say. I won't give you any bull. That's where it stands."

"I know, sir," Messner said. "We're with you—you and the General. We know what it takes."

Both guards seemed sincere, but Danny didn't want to give away the decision before it was even made. In rough terms, at least, everyone knew the options. "Thanks," he said. "I just wish I was sure, myself." He gave a wry smile to soften the force of his words. "You'll know the decision very soon. All right? Every-one will. Look, I'd better get to work."

There was still so much at stake. The Resistance itself was breaking up. Meanwhile, Skynet may have lost—but tell that to its machines. The attacks went on and on. Just three days before, nearly thirty

people had died in an expeditionary force over in Virginia, attacked by aerial H-Ks. It couldn't go on like this.

It was time to make things happen.

TWO

ATLANTIC OCEAN

EAST OF NEW YORK CITY

SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

The ocean's deep blue waters undulated like the skin of some monstrous panting reptile, a creature whose flattened body stretched beyond the horizon. The Hercules transport bearing General John Connor to the North American shore had traveled for hours through the pitch-dark night of this world, racing the sun. It was now mid-morning, and the closest thing daylight. A leaden sky arched over the land and sea. It was like the gloom of a stormy day, back in a normal reality, one that had not been polluted by nuclear warfare.

There were fourteen human beings on board the plane, most of them seated on hard benches along the walls of the cargo bay, up front near the flight cabin. The two youngest passengers sat alone in the aft. Up in the plane's nose, Anton Panov piloted them, without the need for a copilot.

General Connor stretched his back, pushing against the wall with both palms, as he watched the ocean beneath. Soon they would reach New York City, and start putting some plans into effect. He returned to his seat beside the woman who really *was* his mother, Sarah, even though she was several years younger than him...and even though Sarah had died in this world, fighting the machines. *This* Sarah Connor came from another world, another timeline, but she had a real claim to be his mother, just as young John Con-nor, the teenager who'd come here with her, had a real claim to be *him*. They were not just cross-time counterparts of each other. It was more like they'd actually split off, like an amoeba reproducing, at a particular point in the past. That was hard to get used to.

He didn't like to get too close to Sarah, didn't want to relate to her too deeply, not sure where his emotions would take him, especially if she were killed in the ongoing troubles. Though he valued her intelligence, and knew what she'd been through in her own world—as well as this one—he found himself physically shrinking from her.

"We'll be there soon," he said. "I wish it could have been earlier. Things are getting out of control."

"You can't be everywhere, John," she said. "We've done good work in Europe. If you'd been here, things might be going to Hell over there."

"Maybe," he said grudgingly. "But the Americas are where they're going to Hell, and something's got to be done about it."

They'd been stuck for the past six weeks on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, doing their best to rally the troops in the European war theater, but losing control in North and South America. The Resistance leadership was loyal at the top, and North America was solidly behind him. But the forces they'd left behind in South America, when they'd taken the war to Skynet, were now divided, fighting among themselves.

It had taken weeks for the human Resistance to locate an aircraft capable of being repaired, modified, and used for a transatlantic flight. In their decades-long war against the machines, the Resistance had made little use of large air vehicles, and few had even survived Judgment Day. Back in August 1997, the major airports of Europe, Asia, and North America had been destroyed, along with many others all over the world. Finding the Hercules, rotting in a hangar outside the ruins of Toronto, Canada, had not been a simple task. They'd had to go from rumor to rumor to track it down. Then there'd been hours of labor to get it into working order, and fitting it out with sufficient weaponry to defend itself against attack from marauding war machines.

Covering the miles across the Atlantic was not a problem in itself—a near-empty Hercules could complete that haul, once it had sufficient fuel. But finding that fuel—first in North America, then in what remained of Europe—had taken a huge logistical effort. Then there'd been the most dangerous task of all: piloting the aircraft across the open sea, in ferocious weather. Two Canadian pilots had made it the first time. On this return trip, Anton was the ideal man. He could work for days, going without sleep, unless he needed to recover from the after effects of injury. He'd skirted the worst weather over the Atlantic, "reading" the contours of the storms with no assistance from maps or any weather bureau, seeing into the night with senses enhanced beyond anything human.

"What happens now?" Sarah said in a flat voice. She'd experienced so much. General Connor recognized the way she kept her emotions hidden, not committing herself until she really wanted to—though then she could be passionate and forceful.

"We have to decide whether to use the Devil's weapons."

"But you've already decided, haven't you, John?"

"In my own mind, yes."

She glanced away, silent. Like everyone else on this flight, she was heavily armed. The seven Resistance fighters who shared the benches with them were a mix of Canadians and Spaniards. The Canadians were returning; the Spaniards provided extra backup if they had to defend themselves against their deadly cargo. General Connor himself had a phased-plasma laser rifle at his feet, under the bench, a weapon salvaged from enemy war machines. Sarah's weapons included a 12-gauge shotgun, resting on her lap, one of the few light firearms with enough stopping power to slow down a Terminator.

"What are you thinking?" he said. "You're not going to oppose me, when it comes to the crunch?"

"That's not my call. Besides, no one would listen to me."

"Don't be so sure of that."

"Well, whatever. Sometimes I feel like washing my hands of everything. It just never stops...even now,

with Skynet destroyed."

"I know, Sarah. We have to keep going."

She gave him a fierce look, not exactly angry—or not with him specifically. "Of course we do, John. But if it's come to this, then God help us all."

COLORADO

Danny walked slowly across the deserted concrete expanse of Level H. The only human beings, or other animals, were the pairs of guards, with their dogs, standing at each elevator and set of stairs. They were a hundred feet beneath the five original levels of the Advanced Defense Systems Complex. When the U.S. military had constructed it, back in the 1990s, it had been a place for human beings to work, even though it was built inside a mountain, even though it was the home for Skynet's hardware.

Cyberdyne had carried on its most secret research here, under the technical direction of Miles Dyson, Danny's father. Now the human Resistance had re--conquered it, and Danny found himself in charge of its technological secrets. At least until Jade and Anton returned, he was the expert on the spot when it came to artificial intelligence and time travel.

Skynet had been the most advanced computer system ever built, designed solely for the purpose of strategic surveillance, analyzing complex data that might show an attack by Russian ICBMs. But its potential must have gone far beyond that. To Danny, more than thirty years later, that was obvious enough. At the time, it must have shocked its creators. No one knew exactly what had happened on the night of August 28-29, 1997. Perhaps the information was held somewhere in digital form within this complex, but much had been destroyed in the final battle six weeks before. No Terminator CPU or other device that Danny had examined told them much more than they had already known, that Skynet had somehow displayed self-awareness. When its makers had tried to shut it down, it had retaliated, pronouncing a death sentence on all of humanity.

Since Judgment Day, the war computer had assumed control here, changing the complex so that it was no longer, in any sense, a place for humans. Its mechanical slaves had dug down into the core of the mountain, creating additional levels. The machines **had** gutted the original complex, removing all decoration and internal structure, making it as ugly and alienating as was possible to imagine—though presumably that had not been Skynet's motive. It had simply created an environment for intelligent devices that had no need for comfort, privacy, or any values pertaining to beauty. That was what the Resistance had found. Nothing they'd been able to do since had made it much more "humanized."

Danny walked to his work desk—actually a folding table of gray metal, in one corner of the vast area, right next to the time vault. Half a dozen metal chairs were scattered nearby, while the table's surface was cluttered with two very old desktop computers with different-sized screens, plus several keyboards, and a tangle of other salvaged or jury-rigged equipment. There was a Vietnam-era radio, connected by a long trail of wires to an external antenna. One of the computers had been wired into the machinery that controlled the time vault.

The time vault was a massive cubical structure, built by Skynet. Inside it was a space where a powerful displacement field could be generated and contained, enabling movement in space, or time, or both. In

theory, the time vault could also be used to travel between the different timestreams that diverged from each other at critical moments in history, though there was no indication that Skynet had worked out how to do that before it was destroyed. Still, that was how help had come to the human Resistance from another world, from a timestream where Judgment Day had not happened in 1997.

Using a similar device, John and Sarah Connor—the John and Sarah of that other world—had traveled here. With them had come two others, enhanced humans from *that* world's future. No, even that was not quite right. The presence in that world of Jade, Anton, and a Terminator from their time and world had again changed the course of history. The future world that Jade and Anton had originally come from, with its own Judgment Day in 2021, was not necessarily the future that awaited Sarah and young John when they returned to their own world and time. They would have to continue their own private struggle, and try to avert Judgment Day.

To Danny, it had become clear that there were now three timelines, for the course of history had been changed twice already. Every journey into the past had the potential to change events and create a new future from that point. The struggle against the machines had to be fought in every timeline that was created, and they had to stop creating new ones. Each time events were altered, a new world came into being—one in which Skynet might be triumphant. For the past six weeks, he had experimented with the time vault, testing its capacities, using it as a tool to probe at the shape of space-time, attempting to find out more about time and history. There was much he still wanted to learn. With the Specialists returning today from Europe, he hoped to make more progress. Jade and Anton had brought with them a level of technological knowledge and sheer fighting ability that had been critical in the final victory over Skynet. They had traced the war computer to Spain and been among the group who'd followed it there, using the time vault essentially as a teleportation device: sending them across space, without traveling in time.

Danny booted up both computers. Quickly, he entered a series of codes to test his control over the time vault. Everything appeared fine. He could open and close the heavy steel door that sealed the vault, adjust the power supply, and control the configuration of the space-time displacement field. He worked through a program that he had written to fine-tune the field. One way or another, they would need to use the vault again—as early as today. It was one of the few advantages that they had in their latest battles, against the rebel warlords in South America.

He shut down the program, then tested his connection with the ectogenetic pods—the incubator machines in which Skynet's T-799 and T-800 Terminators took their final form. Everything was as it should be, including the latest programming that he had written for a small group of Terminators. Satisfied, he shut down that connection, but left both the computers running.

It was cold here, though they were deep inside a granite mountain, which provided insulation from the bitter cold outside. Heat generated by machines and human bodies was retained, keeping the temperature bearable as long as they wore sufficient layers of clothing. All the same, Danny wore a knee-length gray coat over a short jacket and his military uniform. Under that was an old, stained T-shirt. His feet were encased in sturdy boots that came up almost to the hem of his coat. In this ravaged world, few people could dress as well as the leaders of the Resistance, but Danny still felt the chill that crept in from the snow-covered surface of the mountain.

He longed for the sunshine that he remembered from his childhood, or at least for some real warmth in the air. When the current troubles were over, they would destroy this facility once and for all, so no one could ever misuse its secrets, then move south, closer to the equator, where the sun still generated a certain amount of heat all year round. He looked forward to that day.

He'd set up a smaller table ten feet away, with an urn patched into the power supply. Beside the urn, he

kept a ceramic jar full of ground coffee, the best that could be grown in this world. It came from one of the poor farms that the Resistance operated in

Brazil. By now, that farm had probably fallen to the warlords.

Human beings often had to forage in the wreckage of the cities, looking for rats or even insects to feed upon, but General Connor had kept some farms going in South America, protecting them well from attacks by Skynet's machines. They'd provided his forces, and the other humans under their protection, with at least a small amount of decent food. Selfish as it might have appeared, they'd made sure that the fighters in the front lines were fed, even in the worst times. The Resistance fighters would have been no use in battles against Skynet's killing machines if they'd literally been dropping with starvation.

But now things had changed so much. So many people had died, here on this mountain, and in the valleys nearby. Skynet had massacred them, but it had been mutual destruction: thousands of its war machines had been destroyed, and the remnant of the Resistance militia had forced its way into here. Skynet had been destroyed, but the fate of humanity still hung in the balance—partly from the remaining machines, still obeying Skynet's last commands, but partly, too, from human ambition and greed.

Now the Resistance faced a series of problems:

Item 1: Despite Skynet's destruction, war machines still ravaged the countryside, following whatever orders it had left behind. People were being killed every day. There were still Terminators out there, primed to infiltrate whatever new society emerged. Larger machines, such as air and land H-Ks, still controlled territory. Until all of those were mopped up, the planet was not safe for human life. That gave the Resistance an ongoing job, as they started to create a new world, a world post-Skynet.

Item 2: Despite that, some commanders who'd been left behind in South America, at the time of the final battle here in Colorado, had seen their chance to break free of the Resistance. Those commanders had been left with the aim of holding territory. They had soldiers and military equipment, entrusted to them to fight off Skynet's war machines. Now they used them for private armies, fighting among themselves and against bases in South America that were still loyal to General Connor. Worse, the Resistance had few loyal forces that it could deploy to put down local rebellions and attempts at conquest. Far too many people had died right here in Colorado.

Item 3: Perhaps most importantly, there were other worlds... other *realities*. Skynet had been defeated in this world, even though its machines remained dangerous. But two people who'd been crucial to that victory—Jade Tagatoshi and Anton Panov—had come from another world entirely. In their reality, Skynet had been on the verge of triumph when they'd left it in 2036. What should be done now to try to help them? What *could* be done?

Those issues divided the militia, even the leadership. Some wanted to use Skynet's technology, now they had captured so much, and mastered a great deal of it. To others, that was a worse crime than risking defeat by the warlords. It had to be worked out, Danny thought, and quickly. One way or other, the future of the Resistance depended on it. The future of the Earth itself.

TEJADA *ESTANCIA*

Death must be like this. Curtis Suarez crawled for-ward, feebly; he coughed as he inhaled dust, then stifled the sound quickly, hoping that no one had heard. For a moment, he wondered whether he was still alive, or whether this was some kind of afterlife that he'd never imagined—not the fires of Hell, but something more drab and basic. He was lying in loosely packed earth, surrounded, he knew, by other bodies. When he stretched an arm, it was to touch a leg, or a boot, of one of his comrades.

It seemed that someone had started to fill the trenches with earth, then given up, at least temporarily, perhaps finding the job too difficult. It was too hard, perhaps, to break down the eight-foot walls, or shift that much dirt. The trenches had been dug out well, and reinforced with sturdy wooden supports. Perhaps the Rising Army of Liberation had higher priorities than to spend the hours of darkness destroying them. Evidently, its commanders had been content, in the end, to pile in loads of dirt, half burying the bodies. Perhaps they'd come back and burn them, in which case he really had to get out of here. Then again, would they act so barbarically? There was no ancestral hatred here, between the victors and victims. It was just a lust for power, for territory, not some intractable race feud. Perhaps they'd be humane if he surrendered.

Perhaps this. Perhaps that. The truth was, he had no idea. Somehow he had to survive, keep going, get out of here. But how? And even if he could crawl to safety, there was nowhere to run. He'd be alone on the thousands of square miles of near-desert that the Pampas had become, with no shelter, no transport, no allies to harbor him.

That was getting ahead of himself. Could he even make it out of this trench? What if he was seen?

The earth that had fallen over him was loosely packed, not even covering him completely. With an effort, he could extend his gloved fingers into the open air. He was breathing fairly well now: at some point, he'd fallen or rolled face down, his mouth and nose tucked safely in a cavity made by the crook of his arm. He couldn't be sure, so far, what wounds he'd sustained, but he could snake his entire body forward, inch by inch, without any of his limbs failing, without any sudden stab of pain. It seemed that nothing was broken, at least no major bones. No limbs had been torn from him, no life-threatening wounds inflicted. Anything like that would have killed him by now.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed, but it had to be hours, possibly longer. The last thing he remembered was a massive bombardment, the earth all round seeming to rock and dance as though it was alive. Some massive force had knocked him down. That was all...or almost. Then there were disjointed fragments of memory, either real or dreams—no way to tell which. Come to think of it, many hours might have gone. The battle had raged all day, taking them almost to the fall of night. How dark was it now? He had to look around and see, even if he risked being seen at the same time.

With an effort he crawled on his stomach and elbows, finding the base of a wooden ladder. He pulled himself upward, then swung around into an awkward position, back against the trench wall. Overhead, the sky was the leaden color of day, not the pitch dark of night. It must be morning, then. Every bone and muscle ached, and he started to feel the cold, to realize how thirsty he was. He'd need to find a water canteen. He'd just rest for a few seconds.

It seemed that no one else had survived through the night. Perhaps some had been taken prisoner, but no one here was moving, even now he'd disturbed them. With pity, he looked on the corpse of his uncle, Angelo, who'd fought so bravely—not only in this battle, but for years, against the machines and the first

wave of warlords.

He rummaged around Angelo's corpse, and found a metal flask. He unscrewed the lid carefully, and slowly, filled his mouth with water. He drank some without rushing, let it settle in his stomach, then drank more greedily this time, but keeping as quiet as possible. The trench must not be well guarded or someone would already have heard his movements and come to investigate, but surely there would be patrols of some sort; the Rising Army could not be utterly complacent. Its leaders might have proved treacherous, but there'd been nothing wrong with their planning so far. Plainly, they were not incompetent.

When he was ready he found a pair of binoculars and a Kalashnikov rifle. He crawled into a tunnel that led back to the *casco*, its surrounding buildings, and the *estancia's* impressive bunkers. The tunnel had collapsed, in part, under bombardment, but it looked like it might still be possible to squeeze along it. The worst that could happen was that he'd have to back out. If he headed out onto the dustbowl, he'd surely be found... and besides, there was nowhere he could go. His only hope was getting among whatever was left of the buildings, even though it was walking into the enemy's hands. He could try to steal one of their vehicles, or one of the *casco's* own trucks and Humvees.

There didn't seem much chance of escaping without being seen and heard, or of outrunning the Rising Army's helicopters, if they came after him, but he'd find a way around that problem. If he could sabotage them somehow...

He crawled and pushed his way through the tunnel, trying not to moan or pant. Despite all his aches, he was starting to believe he'd be okay. Perhaps he would die soon, but not without inflicting damage. At least his body was up to some exertion. Like all of the defenders here, he'd pushed himself to the limit for days, hardly sleeping. No wonder he'd slept through the night.

Some light came from the other end of the tunnel, so it wasn't entirely blocked. He reached a point where the roof had entirely collapsed, opening it to observation from above, but he crawled through there quickly, lying on his back with the rifle's selector on auto, ready for a firefight if he was spotted. That was okay. He got through it, then back under cover. Just another fifty yards. He'd had no chance to construct in his mind what the *casco* and the *estancia* must look like, now, at ground level, or from the air. It must be totally changed from the bombardment. He imagined a scene of craters, torn up earth, and buildings reduced to matchwood and rubble. With any luck, enough would remain to give him some cover, some chance to do his work. He had one advantage: he knew the layout like the back of his hand. This was his territory, known from when he was a baby, every square inch of it.

The tunnel ended in a dug out area close to the bunkers. The Rising Army would surely have forced those open, ransacked them for anything useful, and taken over their rooms. It was no use trying to enter them, but there were also bungalows, garages and workshops: more buildings than the attacking force could use, designed to serve a large agricultural labor force. His best bet was to find which buildings were not in use, and try to hide for the next twelve or more hours, until darkness fell again. Once total darkness concealed his movements, he could act decisively. Even if he were killed, he might be able to inflict some real damage.

As he reached the tunnel's exit, he strained to hear any voices or other sounds. Two of the Rising Army's soldiers walked by, talking quietly in Spanish, but then they were gone. Somewhere to his right, a motor was running; he recognized it as the diesel engine of one of the *estancia's* Humvees. There were no sounds of helicopters, so he was safe from aerial surveillance. On his left, someone spoke harshly, followed by a quieter voice. Then the first voice said something dismissive in what sounded like mix of Spanish and English. Those voices came from the direction of the *casco*. It sounded like two

soldiers—one the other's superior—surveying the wreckage. With luck they would not be looking this way. Even if they were, he had every chance of seeing them first, since he'd still be in a hollow and could peer out carefully.

He inched his way out of the tunnel, curling up into the smallest space possible now that he was back in the open air. As he'd imagined, no vantage points overlooked his position. Some of the *estancia's* guardtowers must have looked down into this hollow, but they had not survived the years of fighting. The terrain was too flat to provide any natural position for surveillance. Carefully, he poked his head above the bank of earth to his left, checking out the *casco* through his binoculars. Not two but three Rising Army soldiers walked beside its ruins, one doing most of the talking and pointing. Curtis slid back, took another swig of water, then checked out the situation on the other side.

That was a problem. Several vehicles were parked together: five-ton army trucks; modified civilian vehicles; and a few Humvees. A dozen soldiers were gathered, some of them keeping watch, with rifles at the ready. Three were working on a Humvee, one inside it, revving the engine, while another peered underneath. The third stood at the driver's door, talking quietly to the man inside and looking almost in Curtis's direction. The Abrams tank and the two helicopter gunships were parked one hundred yards farther away, with another soldier standing around, while one worked on top of the tank. Together with the two who'd walked past him, headed for the trenchworks, that accounted for most of his enemies. Others might be in the bunkers or out doing reconnaissance work.

None of the buildings was undamaged. There was no hope of hiding in any of them. That made his situation so much worse. He'd at least imagined he might escape, entertained it as a possibility. But it seemed that his only choices were to surrender, and hope that the local commander showed some mercy, or go down fighting—doing as much damage as he could.

Surely the Rising Army hadn't massacred everyone that had been defending the *estancia*. Though he'd been surrounded by bodies when he'd woken in the trench, there must be some who'd survived and been taken prisoner. The logical place to hold them was underground, in one of the bunkers, where escape was impossible. If he could find a way to break in, that could make the difference. Should he try to break them free, or concentrate on creating what havoc he could, unaided?

Time to decide. Escape appeared impossible; surrender was unacceptable. He resolved to die, but not quite yet. He could go without food, and there was plenty of water and clothing. If needed he could strip the dead and get himself more layers of protection against the cold. Sooner or later, he would be discovered when someone checked the trenches again and found the trail he'd made in the dirt, but that might not happen for hours. Perhaps the Rising Army would have other priorities today, the day after its victory. Meanwhile, it seemed he could function here in the tunnels, unobserved. What he needed were more powerful weapons and—if his luck held out that long—the cover of darkness. It was a tight squeeze through the tunnel, but he could make a few trips, gather what he needed.

With some RPGs and hand-thrown explosives, he could take the Rising Army by surprise. He now knew where its choppers and the tank were placed. He could work out how to hit some of the other military assets here. Much as it would be nice to rescue some prisoners, that was too tall an order. He'd do what he could, acting alone.

As he crawled back into the tunnel, Curtis felt better by the minute. He would be killed, but he'd make sure that the Rising Army paid a price. He planned to sell his life dearly.

THREE

ATLANTIC OCEAN

EAST OF NEW YORK CITY

SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

Sixteen-year-old John Connor traveled on the same plane as the General, his elder counterpart. The younger John had traveled through time, and across the dimensions between alternative timelines, from one reality to another. Now he was in the world that he'd once expected to be his own future, a world where civilization had ended in August 1997, on what had become known as "Judgment Day." He and Sarah had played their parts in the final destruction of Skynet, the mad would-be god of this world, the war computer that had tried to exterminate the human species.

During the night, he had made some hopeless attempts to sleep. He'd actually napped for a few minutes, here and there, on the hard floor of the cargo bay, using his backpack as a kind of pillow. But there'd been too much on his mind. Nightmares had come as soon as sleep began to overtake him; then he'd woken, feeling creeped out. For hours at a time, he'd simply lain there, awake, worrying, trying to plan, trying to ignore the presence of Jade and all the others. It was too much. His thoughts had wriggled in his mind like maggots in rotted meat.

They'd kept bright interior lights on all night, throughout the plane's interior, just in case of what might happen with their dangerous cargo. Someone had to be awake and vigilant at all times. As he'd switched between trying to sleep and simply giving up, the Hercules had dodged storms, fought with ferocious winds, dropped suddenly into air pockets. John's back was now full of knots and aches, from the nape of his neck to the dimples above his coccyx bone. His head felt full of concrete.

Through the long hours, cold and uncomfortable, he'd thought about what had to be decided today, and what it meant for this world's future, perhaps the futures of other worlds. And he'd also thought about Jade. Amazing, wonderful Jade. Now he stood at a window in the aft of the plane, near one of its side-firing Bofors cannons. He watched the sea, not speaking a word, as Anton piloted them unerringly toward the ruins of New York City.

Jade stood next to him, using one hand to balance herself against the wall, though even that was not needed. Like everything else about her, her sense of balance was perfect. She wore a phased-plasma weapon, a heavy laser rifle, slung on a leather strap across her neck, ready to fire it at a moment's notice. It was a black, metal weapon almost three feet long, with no stock attached—like a giant, elongated handgun.

Jade's oval, Asian face was almost perfect, but something about her lips and eyes was solemn. She looked about twenty, but she'd lived only about sixteen years, much the same as John. That was measuring their ages by *internal* years, years of life actually experienced. John had been born in February 1985, and it was now 2029. But he'd traveled forward in time, and across the dimensional gap between timelines, from August 2001. He'd been here only six weeks. So, measured *internally*, he was still sixteen. . . going on seventeen. Jade was much the same. She'd been born some time in 2020, not long before her reality's version of Judgment Day. She'd traveled back in time from 2036 to 2001,

spending a few weeks in John's world and time—then she'd come here.

In some ways, John was much older than sixteen, for he'd seen and done so much. But he couldn't compete with Jade, even in that respect. She'd fought for years against Terminators, H-Ks and other war machines. She had been genetically designed to grow up quickly, then stop aging completely. Indeed, with her sad smile, and her black hair falling raggedly about her beautiful face and down to her shoulders, she could have been infinitely old, a goddess troubled by the sight of human suffering.

She wore gray military fatigues, torn canvas boots, and a green T-shirt that clung to her figure closely whenever she leant back. She seemed unaware of the effect she created, which took John's breath away. *Easy, John*, he thought. *Get a grip here. She must know.* Jade's senses were enhanced beyond human, like every other aspect of her. Her mind was equal to that of an "ordinary" genius. What *wasn't* she aware of? She could probably read him like an open book.

His thoughts returned to their cargo, the nightmarish being that they'd imprisoned in a steel crate, welded tightly closed. It was a T-1000 Terminator, frozen in position like a statue, but potentially alive. When they'd fought it, along with another T-1000, in the Spanish mountains, they'd never managed to destroy it. The Terminators had simply frozen up when they'd destroyed Skynet's hardware. Evidently, they'd had no mission except to protect their master—a mad machine that was now defunct.

At the same time, the T-1000 they'd brought onto the plane could always come alive. Its underlying multi-distributed programming and molecular structure must all be intact. No one knew what other orders it might have; it might still reactivate. For that reason, they had taken care to bring back only *one* of the T-1000s. If anything happened, dealing with just one of the liquid-metal horrors would be bad enough.

Jade glanced up at John's face, as if something had disturbed her, perhaps just the slightest change in his breathing. "John?"

"Yeah?" He loved her, and she must know it. However frustrated or resentful he felt, there was nothing he could do about that—about either of those things. Worse, he meant nothing to her. To her, he must be just another ally in the war against Skynet, not even an important one. Compared to hers, or Anton's come to that, his abilities were nothing.

"Is everything all right?" she said, reaching out a hand to touch his arm.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "No problems." She looked at him more quizzically, and he added, *"Really."*

They'd been in close proximity for two months now...two months of lived, subjective experience. John, Jade, Anton, Sarah, and General Connor had been in the group that had finally destroyed Skynet six weeks before. The only others in that last raid, in the mountains north of Madrid, had been an American Resistance fighter called Tenez—who'd died before the final victory—and a Frenchman called Arnaud,

whom they'd left in Europe. Before that night, John and Jade had worked and fought together in John's own reality, back in 2001. A couple of months in all. "Hey," he said, when she was silent. "I'm just enjoy-ing the view."

"So what do you think about it? I mean the view. Surely you cannot *enjoy* it?"

"Well, not exactly—" In his own world, John had traveled in many aircraft—training with Sarah, in the hills of Nicaragua and Guatemala, fleeing from law enforcers all over Central and South America, cross-ing the U.S.A. from one side to another. But he'd never flown across the ocean, and never seen a

body of water so powerful and threatening. The sea and the storms, the low, dark sky, were terrifying, yet beautiful in a way he couldn't define.

"This is what it is like in my world, as well," Jade said. "Everything is gray. It is nothing like life in your world, *your* time."

"I know. I can understand that."

"Before I traveled back in time, I had never seen the sun. Not in real life, only old recordings. I must have seen it as a baby, of course, but I can't recall things from when I was a just a few months old."

"Not even you?" he said.

She laughed, then looked sad again. "Not even me."

He turned his back against the window to look at her more easily. "I was thinking about the sea and the sky. You know, they're so huge and dark. I don't know..." They seemed, he thought, indifferent to anything human. The sea and the *sky just didn't care*. Would Jade understand that? He let it drop. It was no use making everything too complicated.

Over the past weeks, he had seen a lot. He'd visited a dozen Resistance bases in Europe, moving from place to place in helicopters or land vehicles. He'd driven through the shattered remains of once-great cities: Madrid, Rome, Berlin, Paris, and he'd come to understand the true enormity of what had happened on Judgment Day. He'd seen the vast dustbowls of Europe, where almost nothing could grow, and crossed in heavily-armed vehicles through miles of dead lands, where fires had blazed from one end of the continent to the other.

"You seem unhappy," she said, "and you didn't sleep."

He managed to give a false smile. "Not exactly *unhappy*."

Except she was right: he *did* make himself un-happy, thinking about her and what she meant to him.. and how little he meant to her. Did she care for him in any way at all? Sometimes, like now, she seemed to, but he couldn't hope. He wished he wasn't so ordinary looking, that there was *something* about him that might make her take notice. Of course, he knew he looked okay—good enough to win people's trust, make them want him to like them. He could charm people, even flirt with the right people. But that didn't cut much ice with Jade.

She was perfect...no, she was *more* than perfect: she was *superior* to the most perfect human being. She was even superior to other enhanced warriors from her world, such as Anton, who'd been genetically engineered later in life. Their improvements were more limited, more specific. Jade's were fundamental, involving every cell of her body.

"I tried to sleep," he said. "I napped a little."

"Hardly at all." She looked directly into his eyes.

"Nobody slept last night. That is a pity—we have a long day ahead."

She hadn't slept, either—of course. She was like Anton. Sooner or later, they needed rest like anyone else, but John had seen how long they could work with no sign of fatigue. When badly wounded, they'd

had to draw on their bodies' resources to heal up fast, aided by the millions of tiny nanobot mechanisms in their bloodstreams. Then they needed to flood their bodies with protein and other nutrients to get back to normal. To absorb it all, they did actually need sleep. But, except in those cases, they just seemed to work on indefinitely, for as long as it took.

"It's going to be a tough day for everyone," he said, then paused, not wanting to big-note himself to her. She could see right through any of that. "Not so much for me, I guess. A lot of it falls on General Connor." He glanced at the front of the plane where the General sat beside Sarah, talking quietly, their body language a little strange. Neither, it seemed, wanted to get too close. "This is kind of like crunch time, huh? For everyone—you and Anton as well."

"We have to make important decisions. That is true. All the same, you need to rest."

"I was worried," he said. He spoke softly, not wanting to be overheard. Jade's hearing was so acute that he could have whispered from the front of the plane and she would have picked it up accurately. She doubtlessly knew exactly what General Connor and Sarah were saying to each other. Anyway, he was tired of standing over her. He sat on the floor of the plane, looking up until she joined him. "Like I said, I was worried...and—" He hesitated, wondering how frank he should be with her, not wanting to offend her in any way.

"What, John?"

"I have to admit, I was excited, too. I mean, what happened in this world is terrible, you know? But, given that it is *has* happened..."

Had he started to go too far? *Her* world had also been ruined by its own version of Skynet. Judgment Day had come twenty-four years later than here, in June 2021, but—from what the Specialists had told him—it had been even worse. Not so much in the damage and immediate death toll, but in the humans' situation when the nuclear holocaust was over. In Jade's World, Skynet had been integrated into the U.S. defense and supply systems, controlling so many weapons and factories that it was almost invincible.

She sat an inch or two closer. "You mean that we had the chance to make a difference?"

He looked at her closely, trying to gauge her feelings. "I guess so," he said.

"You're right." Her calm face lit up with excitement, just for a moment. "We did...and we used it well."

"Hey, that's what I think, too. I mean, I'm glad we came here."

"This is a terrible world, John. Dreadful things keep happening here. But at least there's hope. You and Sarah should be proud of everything you've done. If not for the two of you, this whole world would have fallen to the machines."

"I guess that's true."

"Don't forget it. This world owes you everything." She spoke as quietly as he did, but she was so intense—he hadn't expected that. Something had sparked it in her, though who could say what it was? Jade knew everything about her environment with a kind of clarity that ordinary people could never achieve, train all they might. She wasn't telepathic, or anything of the kind, but she knew stuff...knew what was going on in a way that no one else could even imagine.

"I guess that's right," he said carefully. "But we all made a difference by coming here...especially *you*, Jade. Anton as well, but especially you." He dropped his voice to the merest whisper. "Without you, they'd never have beaten Skynet. They'd never even have found it."

"Perhaps with more difficulty."

"It would have been a lot harder, maybe impossible. That's why they went looking for help, in the first place—why they had to send back another Terminator to find it."

"I know." She was silent for half a minute, looking away from him, lost in her own thoughts. She stood once more, gazing outward over the ocean. "Look," she said suddenly. "Come and look forward."

He stood to join her, and saw something extraordi-nary. The ruins of the vast metropolis of New York City stretched inland and along the coast for miles. Noth-ing else he'd seen since coming to this world had prepared for him for it. Seen from this height, the vista was immense. The sheer scale of it exceeded even the great, shattered cities of Europe.

None of the famous skyscrapers of Manhattan re-mained standing. The island itself looked as though it had been largely vaporized by the multiple warheads that had struck it on Judgment Day. Its surface was scarred and cratered, totally inhospitable, and the sea had encroached on its boundary, as if some giant had picked it up like a pizza, taken random bites, then set it down once more. Yet, the remnants of some buildings still stood, even though their upper stories had been blown away, and their glass walls

were totally destroyed. Most were no more than a few floors of steel, bent and twisted into grotesque tendrils that stretched out, as if for help. Elsewhere, massive blocks of concrete had shifted, cracked, and broken to form unrecognizable shapes.

The Hercules circled to make its landing. As they flew lower, John could make out the rusting metal shells of millions of vehicles. He'd absorbed much of the history of this world, and knew very well that the nuclear exchange in 1997 had taken place during the darkest hours of the night, New York time. The cars that had filled the streets could not normally have been on the road at 2:00 or 3:00a.m. No, their owners had been woken by alarms, or by their neighbors—or by loved ones from other time zones, desperately calling, in their own last moments of life. They'd heard warnings of nuclear missiles, heading their way from sites in Russia, or from Russian submarines.

They'd tried to flee the doomed city.

All futile, like sand thrown into the wind.

John knew all that—It made sense to him. But there was nothing like seeing the evidence to bring home the full horror of it.

There was loud talking up in the front of the plane. Sarah relayed the message down to John and Jade, though Jade must have heard it already, and under-stood.

"We're going to land," Sarah said. "You'd better brace yourselves."

FOUR

COLORADO SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

Danny boiled the water in the urn, then made a mug of black coffee to warm his bones. Cecilia and Juanita were due in just a few minutes.

When the Resistance forces had burst in here, those weeks ago, there had been ferocious opposition from the war machines that had been Skynet's final line of defense. Danny would never forget the slaughter, the destruction, the pain and blood. Level H had been piled with the dead and covered in the remnants—mainly metal, but some organic—of shattered machines, such as gunpods, endos, and Terminators. Since then, they'd cleaned all that out, but the place was still littered with strange devices left behind by Skynet—amongst them, the multiple rows of ectogenetic pods.

He wandered amongst these, still fascinated by the weird machinery that Skynet had invented. The pods were rectangular metal slabs reminiscent of coffins, each with a lid of clear armorglass to display the morphology of the tissue being grown on a state-of-the-art combat endoskeleton. Right now, most of the pods were empty, standing upright, with their lids swung open on hinges. Inside each of them, there was space for a large human body. Danny could have fitted in there fairly easily.

At the rear of the array were a few rows of pods that lay down flat, even more like coffins. *These* pods had not been emptied. Danny placed his coffee mug on the surface of one, and leant against it very carefully, not daring to rest his entire weight—though he was confident that the machine was built far too strongly to suffer any damage just from the pressure of a human body. Seen through its armorglass lid, a new Terminator floated naked in nutrient fluid—like in a high-tech womb—restrained only loosely by metal-mesh straps. If woken, it could probably have burst out of there. This Terminator was a T-799 model, female in appearance, with a tall, lean, muscular body, like a top-level runner or perhaps a pole-vaulter—some kind of strong, lithe athlete. Its blonde, almost white, hair was long enough to fall past its waist, and drifted unrestrained in the fluid. The T-799s were the prototype for the T-800 series, and had much the same capacities.

The pods seemed like coffins and wombs—both at once—home to humanoid beings that were not really alive...and yet who waited to be born.

The dormant T-800s came in several standard models. One row of ten pods included two that had been opened, the other eight still containing Terminators, floating in their fluid, awaiting the call for action from Skynet—a call that would never come. These eight were the 101 model, male in appearance. The two that had been hatched, leaving their metal wombs empty, had been sent back in time, one at Skynet's behest, to 1984. Its target had been Sarah Connor; Its instructions had been to kill her before she gave birth to her son. That Terminator's mission had failed. The other had been sent back by General Connor himself, to act as his protector, ten years later, in 1994. Against the odds, it had succeeded.

There were other T-800 models, in other rows of unopened pods. One model looked like a middle-aged man, not especially tall—certainly less than six feet—but immensely broad through the chest and shoulders. They were much like aging professional wrestlers. Another model copied the appearance of a young, trim man, athletic-looking, but not, to look at him, especially powerful. Of course, appearances were deceptive. The musculature of the T-799s and T-800s was purely cosmetic. It was camouflage, to enable them to pass for human and attempt to infiltrate the Resistance, or carry out other missions where human form could enable them to operate close to their enemies. A Terminator's muscles

did not move its underlying skeletal structure, as with a human being. Rather, its motive force came from its primary and backup power cells, which drove its hyperalloy skeleton. The surface tissue just went along for the ride.

That was why a Terminator could be totally stripped of its flesh without in any way becoming less dangerous. It also meant that all Terminators, except the prototype T-1000s, had much the same abilities, no matter that some looked more impressive than others.

The sound of voices caught Danny's attention. He looked up to see two tall women coming down the stairs, one of them doing most of the talking, while the taller of the two was almost silent. He watched quietly as they dealt with the guards: Fiedler and Messner. When they were finished, he waved his empty coffee mug, and headed over to meet them.

Cecilia Tejada obviously had little to say. The other woman, Juanita Salceda, was talking more, though she had never been especially garrulous. It was more that Cecilia became very intense, withdrawn into herself, when about to go on a mission. Once she was in action, she was one of their best fighters, but she didn't use small talk or banter to deal with the dangers that Danny had seen her face. The most she would do in battle was applaud her own artistry with firearms, something of which she was proud. Her marksmanship was certainly impressive, no doubt about that.

She would soon be leaving on a mission that could end her life. He'd known her for many years, since he'd arrived at the Tejada *estancia* in 2006, and hated the thought that this might be the last time he'd ever see her. But that was how it was. It was how every battle had been. The only way to win their struggles and build a new world was to keep putting their lives on the line, again and again and again—as often as needed. Cecilia would be making a journey through the time vault...becoming one of the few human beings to have done so.

Of those few who had taken the journey, some had survived. Just as many had never returned.

As Cecilia and Juanita arrived at Level H, the two guards welcomed them. Juanita chatted amiably for a minute, though she must have had a lot on her mind, especially now that General Connor had re-turned. At least, they assumed he was back; so far, there'd been no news out of New York to confirm his safe arrival. Whatever the case with Juanita, Cecilia knew very well that *she* had a lot to think about. Her friend might be preoccupied by Connor's flight from Europe—indeed, with thoughts of *both* John Connors—but Cecilia had grimmer thoughts. She had been chosen to lead a counterattack on the Rising Army of Liberation, down in Argentina. That meant being teleported thousands of miles by the time vault, possibly on a suicide mission. It had largely been her own choice, so she couldn't complain or curse her fate. She knew she was right for the job. For many reasons, no one else could do it like she could. All the same...

What had she let herself in for?

Juanita patted the guards' dog, Athena, and they headed over to Danny, where he'd set up his work site near the time vault and the rows of ectogenetic pods.

Despite the hard lines inscribed into her face, Juanita was still beautiful: athletic, almost Cecilia's height, with dark hair that scarcely showed any signs of gray. She had a strong features and a brilliant smile that flashed her white teeth. She and John—General Connor—were obviously in love, always had been, for as long as Cecilia could remember, though they'd never admitted it, not even to each other, as far as she knew.

Juanita had endured the rigors of the desolate world after Judgment Day better than most, and perhaps the world could still offer her some happiness amidst the ruins of last century's civilization. She'd been burnt badly on the leg during the great battle here in Colorado, when they'd seized this facility from Skynet, but she'd made a good recovery. Now she had a definite limp, plus some additional scars—which were really nothing. All of them in the Resistance had scarring, some more than others. Cecilia had plenty of scars of her own. They were like badges of honor;

no one who'd fought against Skynet was repelled by mere scars. So many who'd survived were permanently maimed or hideously mutilated.

"How are you feeling?" Juanita said, obviously picking up on how quiet Cecilia had been. "You okay?"

"It's the uncertainty that gets to me," Cecilia said. She knew she was not a coward. She'd faced death many times—if anything, she had a reputation as a gung-ho warrior, stronger, braver, a better shot than the rest, always carrying the biggest gun she could find. But this was something different. Her future could flip-flop on a single decision, then she'd have to face it almost immediately. She'd do what she had to do, but she'd like to know what it was.

The question was whether she would go to Argentina with a group of human fighters—which probably *would* be suicide—or whether they could start using the "unborn" Terminators still floating in their ectogenetic pods. She supposed the mission might be canceled entirely.

If she had Terminators with her, there was some chance of success, but every extra step they took in using Skynet's weapons stretched the boundaries of what was acceptable. They'd started by taking the war machines' phased-plasma weapons when they could, and they'd moved on to reprogramming two Terminators for journeys in time, offering or seeking help. They'd then used one of those Terminators on a military mission. Now they were thinking of using whole groups of them, essentially as soldiers. It might be necessary, but where could you draw the line? At some point, they'd have to say, *No more!* The last thing the Resistance leadership wanted was to send themselves down the same path that had destroyed civilization only thirty-two years earlier, and almost destroyed the human species itself.

Danny waved in their direction, and walked over to meet them as Juanita waved back. Cecilia merely nodded. She didn't fear death—not exactly. It had come close to her too many times already. But *not knowing* like this was eating her up. Just what were they going to demand of her—in just a few short hours?

"I guess I'm not the only one with the problem," she said. "There's quite a few of us sweating on it right now."

"Yeah," Juanita said. "But the others might be off the hook."

"Well, I just hope they are. If we're going to do this at all, we have to use the Terminators. It's no use sending a bunch of naked, unarmed soldiers into a combat zone, just to get slaughtered."

"I think John knows that. He hasn't said anything to me, but I'd guess that's just bluff. If he can't use the Terminators, he'll cancel the whole mission and deploy our fighters in the usual way, even if it takes weeks. He's not going to say that, but that's what he'll do."

"We don't *have* weeks."

"I know."

There was a silence between them as they met up with Danny. Then Juanita said quietly, "I wish I could go with you this time."

"There's been plenty of other times when we've fought together," Cecilia said. "We can't share every gig. I know. We'll have plenty of chances in the future." The unspoken assumption behind that was "if

Cecilia survived." So many people had died already,

even after Judgment Day, planning and fighting against Skynet. In fact, she was almost the last of her family. Her father had died in 2003, killed by the same T-1000 Terminator that John Connor had escaped nine years earlier in Los Angeles. It had finally tracked him down to his hiding place on the Tejada *estancia*. They'd destroyed it, using every explosive device they could get their hands on to break down its pro-programming. . .but it had already killed and impersonated Raoul Tejada, using his appearance to get close to John.

From what she'd heard, the young John Connor who'd arrived in this reality, with his mother and the two genetically enhanced Specialists, had come from a world in which he and Sarah had succeeded in destroying the T-1000 in 1994, and in stopping or postponing Judgment Day.

Her elder brother, Guillermo, had died fighting the machines. So had her younger brother, Carlo, much more recently. So now she was the sole survivor of three children. Her mother was still very much alive, but the Tejada family had suffered terribly from Skynet's megalomaniacal hatred of everything human. As, she supposed, had every family with members still alive. It was much the same for Danny—and Juanita, too. Juanita had lost her mother and three brothers. In Danny's case, it was even more heart-breaking. Both of his parents were dead, and one had been the unwitting father of a monster, for Miles Dyson had created Skynet.

"Is everything ready?" Juanita said to Danny.

"All under control. I've done the programming that we need. We'll choose six of the Terminators and load it into them. They'll get basic files on the *estan-cia*, on the Rising Army, and their mission." He nodded respectfully at Cecilia. "They'll be programmed to obey your commands. I haven't tried to humanize them too far—it gets too complex. It's up to you to humanize the mission." That was code for preventing unnecessary deaths. But that might be the least of Cecilia's concerns. Her team would probably be out-numbered; at least initially, it would certainly be out-gunned.

They'd have to travel naked through the time dis-placement field. Generally, nothing inorganic could make it through the field, not unless covered by living flesh. Something about the field generated by living things best interacted with the time vault's energies. Nothing would go through, not unless it was *very* special in its structure. Anything inorganic, more than the slightest amount, could disrupt the field totally.

"Well," Cecilia said, "let's review the programming one last time, and we'll find ourselves half a dozen Terminators. Let me pick; they'll be *my* troops."

"No problemo," Juanita said.

Danny smiled. "I hear and obey."

"Okay," Cecilia said. "Let's sit down. I'm going to be gentle on myself for a couple of hours."

"That's a fair request."

Miles Dyson had doubtless died *here*, Cecilia real-ized—somewhere in the Advanced Defense Systems Complex. It couldn't have been on this level, which hadn't even existed back in 1997, but somewhere in the complex. Cecilia had been living with her family in Argentina at the time, waiting for Judgment Day, knowing it was going to happen, since everything had unfolded just as the Connors had said it would. Cyberdyne Systems had made announcements about a radical new form of computer hardware, then the U.S. had upgraded its stealth bombers to fly unmanned, controlled by Dyson nanochips. The government had announced funding for more and more ambitious computerized weapons platforms and de-fense systems, culminating in Skynet.

Miles Dyson had been working with the Skynet system the night that it had attained consciousness, managed to take over the facility, and initiated an exchange of nuclear warheads. On that August night, all those years ago, no one had ever come out of here alive.

Cecilia had seen photographs of Miles at the height of his fame, when she was a teenager. He had been a good-looking black man. He'd still been in his thirties when he'd devised Skynet. Despite growing up in the desolate world after Judgment Day, despite the war with the machines, Danny had already lived longer, making it to his early forties. But he looked much like his father, as Cecilia remembered those photos, wearing his hair in the same short style, just framing his forehead. Of course, he looked *many* years older than Miles ever had. His hair was almost entirely gray, and his face was harshly lined.

"Come on then," Juanita said. "What's going on in there?"

"Inside my head?" Cecilia said.

"Exactly."

"I was just thinking about the usual things. You know: death, and all the rest of it. Thinking of the people we've all lost."

Danny shrugged. "I often think about my dad. You know, about Judgment Day.. .what it must have been like to die in here. I guess we'll never know what, ex-actly, happened, just how Skynet took over."

"This place gives me the creeps," Juanita said. "It must be worse for you."

"It's not good for anyone," he said quietly. He paused, then added, "Yeah, I seriously hate it here. The sooner we leave here and blow it all to Kingdom Come, the happier I'll be."

"Amen," Cecilia said.

"What really pisses me off, right now, is the bas-tards who want to undo everything we've achieved, as soon as Skynet has got off their asses. Those bloodsuckers down in South America...the Rising Army and the rest of them. That is just *low*"

"Yeah, well we're going to do something about that. A little payback, right?"

"Right."

"Let's get to work, then. I want to see what you've done."

"That's the spirit," Juanita said. "You are *so* going to clean their clocks."

Cecilia didn't answer that one. *Someone* would be cleaned up today. Give her six Terminators, and she'd go out there on the Pampas and rock. As they walked to Danny's table, with all its improvised equipment, she recognized a change that had come over her, as had happened before every other battle she'd been in. The anxiety was giving way to an almost pleasant anticipation. She was almost looking forward to this,

She was going to do some damage.

FIVE

NEW YORK CITY SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

The Hercules bumped slightly on the sandy run-way, then continued on, raising clouds of choking dust from its wheels and its four noisy turboprop engines. Up in the cockpit, Anton decelerated the plane harshly, and brought it to a halt.

Anton shut down three of the engines, leaving just the outermost one on the right to turn over slowly, generating power for the aircraft's internal systems. They waited for the storm of dust to settle down a little, though that one engine was still raising clouds. A convoy drove out to meet them, throwing up more dust, huge plumes of it. There was a mix of trucks, four-wheel drives, and some old military vehicles. They parked near the plane's tail, about twenty feet to the left, then one of them—a battered-looking truck with a flat cargo tray—crept closer.

General Connor stood and looked about not exactly impatiently—he was too experienced and self-controlled for that—but certainly as if he wanted to get work. Sarah's expression wasn't much different: businesslike, vigilant, ready for action. The General was armed with a phased-plasma laser rifle, similar to Jade's, though he held it in both hands, his posture showing how heavy it was, even for such a strong man. Jade was vastly stronger still, so she could sling such a weapon from her body, seemingly without noticing...but no one else in this world was like her or Anton.

Like all the others, Sarah was heavily armed. She carried a shotgun, and wore a .45 caliber pistol in a holster on her belt. She was dressed in strong boots, leather gloves, and a heavy, gray military coat, buttoned up close to her chin.

Measured in internal years, she was now almost thirty-seven, but still as strong and fit as she'd always been, ever since John was a child. In the world that they had come from, she'd worn her hair in a short, fashionable cut, falling on one side of her face. They'd lived in Mexico City, running a little business, a cyber-cafe, and she'd managed a cool, elegant look: not too tough, not too *young*, but kind of sexy. John had hoped they'd find her a new boyfriend somewhere in the great metropolis—both of them spoke perfect Spanish, and they'd been well set up to make new lives for themselves. It just hadn't happened like that.

Now her hair was growing wilder, and she'd cut it more evenly. Some strands of gray showed among its

natural honey color. Still, John thought, despite everything they'd been through since the Specialists and the T-XA Terminator had crashed into their lives, his mom looked surprisingly well. Back in 1997 when Judgment Day had *not* occurred in their reality, years had seemed to slip from her shoulders like water. She'd suddenly appeared lively, capable of being happy. Even the battles they'd faced with the T-XA in 2001—and with the war machines of *this* world—had not caused her the same anguish as she'd suffered when John was a boy, and they'd thought Judgment Day was coming. Back then, they'd felt helpless to stop it.

For the past couple of subjectively-lived months, Sarah had been under terrible stress, but she looked no older than when she'd escaped from the Pesca-dero Hospital for the Criminally Insane, back in 1994.

Anton came down to the cargo bay of the plane. He was armed with a laser rifle, the same as the ones Jade and General Connor were carrying, but he held his in a one-handed grip, like a pistol, unconsciously displaying his enormous strength. "All okay?" he said. He seldom spoke in long speeches, only when there was something that really needed explaining—then he could do it better than anyone, maybe even better than Jade.

General Connor raised an eyebrow. "No problems. We'd better get moving."

"Right!" Anton growled. "We'll move, then." He and the General were about the same height, maybe six-foot. Though the General was far from puny, the Russian fighter was much more powerfully built—like a block of granite with almost no neck, just a thatch of gray hair on top. Having lived for those sixteen years, John was almost fully-grown, but he still had an inch or two to go to catch up with the General.

General Connor's dark hair was cut in a short, brutal style, combed back away from his forehead. Though in middle age, in his mid-forties, he was slim and hard, with severe creases in his brow and the harsh, scarred face of a man who had been in too many battles and watched too many loved ones die.

Anton looked toward Jade as he walked down to the plane's aft, not saying any more out loud. "I'm ready," she said, her jaw set firmly. Anton merely nodded. The two Specialists often exchanged mes-sages silently. Both of them were full of implanted cybernetic machinery, which included throat mikes and inbuilt receivers enabling them to communicate by a short-range radio link. Often, they'd both be quiet during a discussion, then one would suddenly announce a decision on something that they'd planning together silently, just the two of them. When that happened, they always got their way.

Neither had shown any wish to be the group leader. More than once, Jade had told John why: that a great leader had to have the common touch, relate to ordinary people. That was what she struggled with; she was so far removed from what bothered people most, what life felt like if you didn't have extraordinary abilities. But she and Anton took over at moments when it was really needed—points of crisis when lightning judgment was called for—and their decisions had always been right.

Just now, Anton seemed to be in control, dominating the cargo bay by his evident physical power and confidence, even with strong-willed personalities such as Sarah, Jade, General Connor and—John thought wryly—John himself. All them had leadership qualities, though it was General Connor, above all, who had that characteristic which Jade had identified, the elusive common touch. Though he was a severe man, many of his followers loved him and would die for him.

"Out of here," Sarah said. "Let's get moving. We need to sort it all out."

She'd spent so many years planning for Judgment Day that she acted like the responsibility was with her,

even in this world. John could see it in her, but he knew that he did the same thing. They were a group of people who all, for different reasons, felt re-sponsible. Thankfully, they'd worked well together. A group of natural leaders like this could potentially get in each other's way.

"No argument from me, Mom," John said.

"Good, John. I hardly know what to think by now, but I have a lot of questions." She glanced knowingly at the General, then at Anton. "I want to know just what we think we're doing before we go any further."

Anton set down his laser rifle and walked to the metal crate with the T-1000 Terminator inside. He bent at the knees and cradled one end of it in his arms, not trying to lift it for the moment, just testing its weight. Grimacing, he got that end a foot off the floor, then set it down. "Awkward."

"It is a massive object," Jade said.

Though the T-1000 could appear completely human, it was made of a heavy metallic substance. John recalled how the Specialists, for all their strength, had struggled to lift the T-XA Terminator that they'd fought in his world. It had been far larger, and made of similar material. Of course, it had not been enclosed in a thick shell of steel. Combined, the T-1000 and the crate in which it was imprisoned must have weighed nearly a thousand pounds. John didn't doubt that Anton could lift it if he had to, but it was difficult to shift around, even for him.

The big Russian straightened up and looked at Jade, then at two of the biggest of the Spanish guards—both strapping guys in their twenties, and over six feet tall. "Wait," he said. He walked back to the cockpit, and lowered the rear cargo ramp. Once it had descended all the way to the ground, he shut off the remaining engine, and returned. He picked up his laser rifle where he'd left it on the floor, and passed it to one of the Canadian fighters who'd flown the plane over to Europe—a thickset woman with dark hair cut closely around her face. Jade handed her rifle to another of the Spaniards.

These weapons weren't common among the Resistance fighters, though they'd become more so, as greater numbers of Skynet's endoskeletons had been destroyed. The endos relied heavily on them, sometimes using two at a time, one in each metal hand.

John retrieved *his* favorite weapon: a 12-gauge shotgun, the same as Sarah's. He'd placed it neatly along the wall of the plane, where he'd been with Jade. He also had a Sig Saur 9mm. pistol, worn in a shoulder holster under his jacket and coat. He slung the 12-gauge over his other shoulder, feeling fully equipped for whatever happened next. He'd brought no other gear with him except a backpack that he'd found in Spain, with some ammunition and a few personal belongings—a pencil and some yellowed notepaper, a metal comb, an old safety razor. He'd arrived in this world with no possessions. He hadn't set out to accumulate any. He picked up the backpack and waited for the Specialists to deal with the T-1000.

With the two big Spaniards, Anton and Jade wrestled the metal crate down the ramp, and onto the field of gravel and sand where they'd landed. The rest of them followed, Sarah going first. Outside the plane, blowing sand stung John's face. Anton, Jade and the others hefted the steel crate over to the truck waiting at the foot of the ramp, then lifted it with a mighty effort onto the cargo tray. The Specialists looked pleased with what they'd done, but not at all troubled by the effort. They weren't even breathing hard. The others were clearly winded from the final lift.

The vehicles parked out here included another flatbed truck, this one with a six-barreled mini-gun, capable of spitting hundreds of rounds per minute, mounted on its back. Its rapid fire could trouble even Skynet's endoskeletons and its most advanced Terminators. A burly Asian-looking man sat on an

up-turned metal tub behind the gun. At his feet lay a big short-haired dog, maybe some kind of Doberman cross. It watched attentively, but did not move. It had not identified anyone as a Terminator, and evidently could not detect—or was not troubled by—the "frozen" T-1000 in its sealed crate. Several other vehicles had anti-aircraft guns or salvaged laser cannons. About twenty uniformed Resistance soldiers stood around, some armed with RPGs or grenade launchers, others with assault rifles. Only a couple had laser rifles.

The huge open space where Anton had brought the Hercules down had once been the landing area of La Guardia Airport. Its network of long runways and crossing taxiways had been cratered and broken up by the warheads of Judgment Day. With the machines in control, no one had been able to clear it—not until the past few weeks. Now it had become an asset worth defending. Not far away on its wide surface, a large military helicopter was parked—a Sikorsky Black Hawk. There were no other aircraft here, but hundreds could have fitted.

The gunner jumped down from his truck, the dog following a second later. It walked up to General Connor, wagging its tail and sniffing at him interestedly. General Connor shook hands with the man, whom he addressed as "Lee," then stooped to pet the dog, which soon forgot about them all and set to licking itself, seemingly bored. Two people stepped out of the front of an olive drab Humvee, slamming the doors hard. A gunner stood in the Humvee's open rear compartment, manning another heavy gun, this one a 40mm. MK19, designed to fire explosive rounds.

It looked like the two who'd stepped from the Hummer had waited for everything else to happen before they made their entrance. John caught a glance from Sarah, who smiled with the faintest trace of cynicism. She'd noticed the small touch of drama. One of the two was a tall, lean white man, perhaps in his fifties, his head almost totally bald and his shoulders stooped. He had big, veiny, powerful-looking hands, and thick wrists protruding from the sleeves of his coat. General Connor walked over and shook hands with him, clapping him on the shoulder. "Good to see you, Isaac."

"You're welcome," the man—Isaac—said. "The news overnight isn't so great...but it's always good to see you here."

General Connor nodded. "Brief us on the way to the base."

"I'll do that. You know I'm in your corner—whatever happens."

"Well, I wouldn't have thought any different, but you can't be too sure."

"Don't worry about that. You won't find any trouble now you're home...not in that way, at least. We're all with you one hundred and fifty percent."

The other person who'd gotten out was a woman. John took several seconds to recognize her. She also offered her hand to General Connor, who shook it very gently and respectfully. "I'm so sorry for everything," he said. "I wish we had Carlo with us."

She kissed him on the cheek, then drew back. "Carlo was a good boy. He fought well, and he was always loyal, even when he had his own ideas. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Gabriela." The General's eyes held hers, but his head was bowed, just slightly.

"That's all that matters now. I'm proud of him."

"With plenty of reason, Gabriela."

"Don't blame yourself. Please. *I* don't blame you. I never blamed you for anything."

By now, it had dawned on John. This was Gabriela Tejada. Her son, Carlo, had been among those who'd gone with them to Madrid. He'd fought well there, but never made it as far as the mountains and the final raid. They'd had to fight their way through an army of H-Ks and endos just to get that far, and that was when Carlo had been killed.

"Thank you for that," General Connor said. "It means more than I can say."

"Bah, it shouldn't even be an issue."

"It's been one in *my* mind. There's only you and Cecilia left. And I need to put her in danger, too."

"Every day we survive in this world is a bonus. We've done better than most. Don't try to protect us. Don't even think about that. The Tejadas have always been fighters, John. You couldn't hold us back—not even if you tried."

"All right."

Gabriela was almost six feet tall, with a strong, deeply lined face and long gray hair falling past her shoulders. In his own world, John had known her when he was growing up, when she'd been in her thirties and forties. Her children had been teenagers at that time, just a bit older than John. In that world, Gabriela had shown a glorious smile; now, in *this* reality, she'd grown old. Her teeth were broken and discolored, some of them missing. She must have been nearly eighty, but she still looked like she could hold her own in a fight. The Gabriela he'd known had seemed feminine enough, despite her large build, but this Gabriela carried herself almost like a man...and not some frail old guy of eighty.

"Let's get back to the base," Isaac said. "We've got a lot to talk about."

General Connor nodded. "That we have." He stood, with both hands on his laser rifle. He looked more than ever like a man no one ought to mess with. He was the determined type. Sooner or later he'd get what he wanted.

Sarah had seen death assume her own form and face, when the T-1000 Terminator that she'd fought in 1994 had imitated her appearance. Before then and after, she'd come close to death many times. Again and again, she'd had to absorb concepts that had stretched her understanding—from that day many years ago when she'd met Kyle Reese, back in 1984. He'd told her about Skynet, Judgment Day, the dark future that awaited mankind. At first, she'd thought he was mad, but she'd soon found out otherwise. The reality of facing a Terminator, an implacable enemy set on her destruction, had changed her mind.

She wondered, at times, whether there was any limit to what life was going to demand of her. How much could she bear? How many new ideas must she understand? Since that first encounter with a Terminator, it was as if her ordinary shallow life had opened up like a door at the rear of a cave, to reveal an unseen world behind everything she'd seen and done, and known. But that was not the end of it. Behind that door was another. Then another. It seemed she could never find certainty, never know just where she stood.

Now, they wanted even more of her. More worlds, more layers of reality, more concepts. It was almost more than she could bear.

Yet, she had to. Painful as it was, she needed to understand.

The man who was her son—though years older than her—made quick introductions. The big bald man who'd met them was Colonel Isaac Zell. He'd fought in Colorado, like almost every other able-bodied fighter, though some had been left behind to defend the Resistance bases. He'd been back in New York for only two weeks, and he now commanded the whole East Coast division of the Resistance. This was a man that General Connor seriously needed to have on his side, and to talk things out with.

In more ways than one, the General was Sarah's creation. Despite the age difference, she had given him birth. Then the years she'd spent training and teaching him had molded the man's personality.

In years actually lived, Sarah was still only thirty-seven, whereas General Connor was forty-four. They were from different worlds, but she actually *was* his mother. She was the very same woman who had given him birth, back in 1985. Up to the age of twenty-nine—back in 1994, again, when she'd fought the T-1000 in a running battle through the streets and factories of Los Angeles—there had been just the one Sarah: a woman with a single set of experiences. All her memories to that point were the same as those of the Sarah Connor who'd lived in *this* world and survived Judgment Day, the woman whom General Connor had known as his mother during the years from 1994 to 2012.

That Sarah Connor had been killed in a street battle with H-Ks and other machines in Buenos Aires, seventeen years in the past. *But she was me*, Sarah thought. *If you go back far enough in time, we join up. Play the tape backwards, and we're the same person.*

She could see that Gabriela found it hard, as well; probably, everyone did. Gabriela looked back and forward between General Connor and sixteen-year-old John, as if comparing them, or comparing them both with some mental image of the General when he'd been John's age. They all had to get used to the fact that General Connor was not like some older relative of John's. He wasn't even a sort of cross-time counterpart. He was actually *the very same person*, just as Sarah was the very same person as the woman they'd all known, who had died in 2012.

In Sarah's reality, there had been a lot of talk about human cloning, making a genetic copy of someone. As far as their genes went, the clone would be a younger version of the original. But the relationship between Sarah and that dead woman, heroine of the Resistance, was much closer than that. So was that between John and General Connor. Only one John Connor had been born back in February 1985. Their worlds had not diverged until May 1994. Right up until then, there had been just the one person, with the same experiences and memories. When the timelines split, it was as if John himself had split in two.

After a moment of hesitation, Gabriela hugged Sarah, who froze up at the touch of this strange old woman...who was the same woman as she'd last seen back in 1997, just after Judgment Day had failed to happen in her world. Then Sarah lost her reserve, and hugged back tightly. Once again, this Gabriela was her old friend, with all the same memories, right up to...up to 1994, she realized. She'd last seen Gabriela in 1997, but reality had split in two even before that, the day of the raid on Cyberdyne. All their experience even for those three years from 1994 to 1997 must be slightly different. Still, they really did know each other. Each had memories from Sarah's earliest times in Argentina.

"It's good to see you," Sarah said, not trying to be enthusiastic, just hoping that what she said was sincere. She had to accept these people. There was no use in doing it any other way. She had adapted to so much, surely she could manage this one small thing. In fact, this was the easy part. There was much worse that she still had to adapt to.

Anton and Jade wanted to return to their world, to yet another timeline, to continue the war against Skynet. But Sarah was tired of it all. Again, it was like a cave, with a door in the back, then a door behind the door. Then another door, behind that. Did it ever end? What were they achieving, in battle after battle with Skynet, fighting it across time, and across these different universes? She wondered how it could ever end except in a final victory for the war computer. Why go on? What was the point? She knew she mustn't think that way, that it betrayed everything she'd tried to do all her adult life. But the thought brought her close to despair.

"I'm glad we meet at last," Gabriela said. "It is strange for me, but I understand what has happened. We still have many memories together."

"Just what I was thinking," Sarah said.

"I suppose it is only natural." They stepped apart, giving smiles that were sincere, however puzzled and restrained. Gabriela looked toward the Humvee that she'd arrived in with Isaac. "Come, we need to act quickly. This cannot wait."

"Yeah, don't I know it."

"There is someone else for you to meet."

"Where? Here in New York?"

"Yes, back at the base. Come, come, let's all get back. John"—she obviously meant *Big John*, General Connor, for she glanced his way—"you come with me and Isaac. We need to talk. Now who else?"

John could almost handle the idea that he and the General were the same person, or at least they were both the survivors of the one person who'd existed before May 1994. Maybe that person didn't exist anymore—he couldn't work that one out—but each of them could claim to be his continuation. He survived in both of them. Both of them had his memories.

Actually, that could have been really creepy. If there'd been anything deeply embarrassing that he could remember from before he'd split off from Gen-eral Connor at the age of nine—that might have made things worse between him and the General. But it wasn't really like that. Most of his early memories involved hanging around in the mountains of Central America, or in the Salceda camp in the Low Desert in California, learning engines, driving and flying, how to blow stuff up—and a host of other practical skills.

He guessed he'd been a brat during his last months in California, when his mom had been locked away in Pescadero, and the bottom had seemed to fall out of his world, but he forgave himself for that. What had he been supposed to do? He'd grown up believing in Sarah and her story. His whole life had been built around it, everything he'd been or seen or done. Then the adult world had told him it was all lies, or a delusion, that his mom was some kind of psycho-crazy, that she was a whacko. He'd had every right to be disturbed by it. No one who knew the full story could blame him for that. He didn't blame himself. No, there was nothing he couldn't forgive himself for, or that he couldn't stand Big John knowing.

The General and Sarah piled into the back seat of the Humvee that Gabriela and Isaac had arrived in. John considered squeezing in the back, too, not wanting to miss whatever discussion they might have on the way to the base, but then decided against it. Jade and Anton exchanged silent glances. By now, John could usually tell when they were subvocalizing to each other through their throat mikes. "Well go with the crate," Anton said. The Specialists retrieved their laser rifles, then leapt in easy, fluid motions onto the

flatbed of the truck. Jade's movements were so graceful, it seemed to make perfect sense when she suddenly became a blur, running or leaping faster than the eye could follow. When Anton did it, it was even more impressive in a way—not because he was as fast as Jade. He wasn't, not quite. It was because such speed and precision seemed unnatural for such a large, heavily built man.

John followed Anton and Jade, who helped him up effortlessly, one taking each of his arms. The three of them sat up the front of the flatbed, backs against the driver's cabin, legs stretched out, guns at the ready. The Humvee with General Connor and the others started up. Leaving the other vehicles and J fighters to guard the Hercules and the Black Hawk, the Humvee drove off, followed by the truck with John and the Specialists in the back, then the other flatbed truck—some of the Spaniards and Canadians had piled onto it. And then another Humvee. The four vehicles drove in a column on dusty, bumpy, obstacle-filled roads.

Jade sat in the middle, John trying not to press too close to her, feeling pleased to be with her, yet awkward about it. "So..." he said. "What's the next step?"

"I do not think General Connor has a choice," Jade said. "It may be distasteful, but he will have to use the remaining Terminators." She meant the ones they had captured in Colorado, the T-799s and T-800s that hadn't yet been "born" from their pods.

"That's what I figure."

"He has almost run out of human fighters. He'll have to rely on machines."

"Some people aren't going to like that."

"I know, John. I understand how they feel. Really I do."

"Back in 1994," John said, "we destroyed the Terminator that the General sent back. We wanted to get rid of any technology at all that could be used to develop Skynet. The chip in its head might have been used like that. I didn't want to, but it was right. It could have gotten in the wrong hands. I know that Rosanna Monk invented Skynet anyway—in your world..."

"But you had to try to stop it?"

"We *had to*. Mom was right about that. And it almost worked. Even in your world, it took years for Rosanna to invent Skynet over again. It's the same this time. We'll have to get rid of the Terminators. They're just too dangerous. It's not what they can do...it's what someone might do with the technology. I trust Big John, of course."

"I suppose you should. He *is* you, after all."

"He's me after a lot of experiences. I trust the others, too, like Gabriela. But what happens when they're gone? Someone could use it the wrong way. I guess we can never be sure they won't, but we need to make it as hard as we can."

"Do you want to destroy the Terminators *now*?" Anton said, breaking in without warning.

"I don't know. I didn't say that." He tried to focus his thoughts. "But if we go on using Skynet's machines, when does it stop? Maybe down the line someone might build Skynet all over again."

He knew that things had worked differently in this world. In 1994, Big John and Sarah hadn't raided Cyberdyne; they'd fled to Argentina, without destroy-ing the T-1000, and they'd taken the T-800 with them. They'd used it to help until it was destroyed in battle. General Connor had that experience. From where *he* was coming from, Terminators could be controlled, at least for a while.

"You're right," Jade said, to his surprise. "We have to draw a line."

"Yeah, but how?"

"Perhaps there is no right answer, but lines *have* to get drawn. That is how the world keeps working."

That wasn't very satisfying. "I'll think about it," he said. "I don't know if anyone will listen to me, anyway."

"Maybe they will, maybe not. I am interested in what you think."

Why should you be?he wondered. His brainpower was nothing to hers. Why would she care what he thought, or what any of them thought, except Anton. The two of them probably had it all worked out.

They rode in silence for about two miles, as the truck bumped on broken terrain, jarring them with its hard suspension. They got past the rusted out car hulks on the streets by driving on footpaths, through gaps, or across spaces that must once have been parks, plazas, or where buildings had stood prior to the explosions of Judgment Day.

Isaac's Humvee turned sharply left into a group of buildings that remained standing in a hollow, shattered state, then drove into a tunnel that led downwards on a 30° incline. As the truck followed, with John in the back, it bumped hard at the tunnel entrance, then drove for another fifty yards before turning a hairpin corner. After two more sharp turns and steeply-sloping ramps, the Humvee parked against a concrete wall just back from a point where the tunnel became too narrow for vehicles to continue. There was a circular space cut out of the tunnel's walls, wide enough to turn, then the tunnel closed into a narrow gap where only two adults could pass abreast.

As John climbed down from the back, another two well-armed men stepped forward from farther inside the tunnel, accompanied by another dog. One of the men had lost a leg, and walked painfully, using a wooden crutch. Again, General Connor bent down to pat the dog, then shook hands with each of the men. As he shook hands with the General, the one-legged guy used his upper arm to hold the crutch close to his body.

Anton, Jade, and a few others shifted the heavy crate with the T-1000. Isaac led them all down three flights of worn concrete stairs, then pointed out a corner of the stairwell where other gear was stowed. "Leave the crate here," he said. "It'll be safe. We keep this area under guard, day and night." They camou-flaged it under some wooden boxes, a folded tarpaul-in, and a pile of well-worn, crumpled military uniforms.

"It could be very important," Jade said. "It may turn out to be crucial."

"I know that." Isaac sounded slightly offended. "Our main quarters are down two more levels. If you're coming to the meeting, follow me." "Right," Anton said. "Time to make decisions." "Yeah," Sarah said. There was a touch of wear-i-ness, even despair, in her voice. "Let's hope none of us live to regret them."

SIX

NEW YORK CITY SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

General Connor's militia had constructed its New York base in the partially collapsed spaces of what had once been a huge underground parking garage, with tunnels connecting it to other caverns and gaps where human beings could hide or store supplies. With Skynet's machines still hunting down their prey, no location above ground was safe—even these quarters were not *completely* safe from attack by H-Ks, endos, Terminators, and the rest of Skynet's ar-mory. By any decent standards used in America be-fore Judgment Day, it was a disgrace to live here—dark, cold, dirty, primitive—but it was better than taking chances on the surface.

This floor was quiet now, just a few family groups among the rows of metal pillars that supported the ceiling. One family—two old people, a young child, and a teenage girl with a cruelly scarred face—sat on an old, half-rotten mattress. They played poker with a worn-looking deck of cards. A crazy-looking man sat talking to himself in a big heavy lounge chair with ripped upholstery. He hugged a large book to his chest, perhaps some kind of encyclopedia, or maybe a copy of the Bible; John couldn't actually tell. Two more people, a mother and a young boy, maybe seven or eight, huddled in a corner, not even talking, just surviving, *existing*, silently going on with the struggle.

John hadn't imagined it would still be like this, with Skynet destroyed. Cockroaches as big as his hand crawled on the walls—not that many of them, for the Resistance obviously tried to keep some cleanliness and order, as much as the situation allowed. Still, it seemed that those foul, evil-looking creatures really could survive anything, even a nuclear war. They'd actually mutated and thrived.

On his right, a single Resistance soldier in gray military uniform stood guard at a tunnel entrance. He was a tall, skinny, pale man, maybe about twenty-five, though appearances were deceptive. Almost everyone in this world looked older than they really were. On John's left, an open passageway led to another room that must once had been some sort of lobby. Isaac led them there, into a space that gave some privacy.

Here, an oil lamp swung two feet above their heads, and three trestles had been set up with long flat boards laid across them to make a temporary table. Two more trestles and some twelve-foot lengths of board created a narrow bench along the side, against a concrete wall. A dozen chipped coffee mugs sat on the bench, with a round ceramic bowl, and three large plastic bottles full of water. An empty bottle lay on its side. There was a two-way radio on the table, and topographical maps were spread out around it, piled one on top of the other.

Half a dozen painted wooden chairs were scattered around the area, and two people were already seated on one side of the table, waiting. One, a woman, stood when John and the others walked in. The other, a shaven-headed man, nodded acknowledgment, but remained seated.

Several crudely printed posters of varied sizes were tacked to the wall, above the row of water bottles, including one with a black-and-white photo of General Connor and Sarah—she looked about fifty, and her son maybe thirty. Given their ages, that shot must have been taken not long before the Sarah Connor

of this world had died. They'd been photographed in a bleak semi-desert landscape with sand, tussocky grass, and stunted cactus trees; they were posed next to the shattered, twisted wreckage of a huge metal machine, probably a land H-K that they'd managed to take out. Both of them held RPG tubes, raised in triumph.

They looked like big game hunters who'd brought down a buffalo or an elephant.

John caught his mother staring at the poster with a surprised look on her face, seeing her own image in a world she had never known until these last few weeks, doing things that she had never done. Seeing a version of herself who'd gone the way of all flesh. The General must have seen her expression, too, for he stepped in front of the poster, saying nothing—though his face colored slightly. Then he must have realized it was stupid. For better or worse, she'd already seen it.

He placed his laser rifle securely against the wall, then unscrewed the top from one of the water bottles. He poured himself a mug of the water, and offered the bottle to anyone else who wanted it. Anton took it and helped himself, then passed it around. They all placed their weapons well away from any danger of accidental contact, but in easy reach if something went wrong. In a place like this, no one dared go un-armed, just in case of a Terminator attack.

General Connor and Gabriela sat at opposite ends of the table. Isaac took a seat with the two who'd been waiting, while the rest of them—John, Sarah, Jade, and Anton—lined up on the other side. Isaac made the introductions. The two who'd been here when they arrived were local leaders on the East Coast. The man was Ray Grimes, the woman Sumeeta Mohanraj. She was small, but tough-looking; half-Caucasian, half-Indian. Her black hair was cut into a flattop; more than her share of scars disfigured her face.

"All right," the General said. "We have to get started, and make some final decisions quickly."

"Agreed," Isaac said.

"I've been through this with our people in all the centers in Europe. I've discussed it with Gabriela by radio, and the leadership in Colorado. We have a lot of agreement on what needs to be done." He nodded in Gabriela's direction. "Am I right on that?"

"Everyone in L.A. is with you. You have my personal backing. You know what Cecilia thinks. She is ready for the mission. I'm proud to see her take it up." She stopped for a moment, and added pointedly, "No matter what the circumstances."

"Good," General Connor looked down the table at the three East Coast leaders. "I'll take you through the basics. I hope you're with me on what needs to be done."

"It's appreciated, John," Grimes said. "Yes, we need to understand it. And you have to know where we're coming from."

"Of course I do, Ray. And you have a right to be well briefed." Their eyes met for a moment...some hostility there, or disagreement at the very least. John could not imagine the General ever backing off. He had a sureness about his expression; and something about his eyes, beneath heavy, dark brows, suggested deep thought that had led to firm conclusions. "There are two problems," the General said, "and either one could destroy everything we've worked and fought for. First, there's the machines. Second, there's the warlords. And there's a third point that we need to discuss. We'll get to that soon. In the end, it might be the most important of all. The entire fate of our universe could be in the balance."

"Well, you're going to have to explain that," Grimes said. "It's not an easy thing to take in, not just from what we've heard."

"I know that, and you don't have to take it on faith. You'll get your explanation."

"Anton and I can explain whatever you need, Mr. Grimes," Jade said.

The General gulped down his water as she spoke. "Right. For the moment, let's just say that we're not through with Skynet, not even now. There's still a long way to go."

Grimes looked at Sumeeta Mohanraj, then back to the General. "You've got some convincing to do."

"Are you willing to be convinced?"

"That's—" Grimes gave an uncomfortable smile, but it quickly changed to a determined frown. He was not a man to budge easily. "That's a tough one."

"All right, I'll take it I've been warned. First things first, though. I'll come back to *all* of that. Right now, I want to talk about the machines—they're still fighting on, even without Skynet to lead them. And then there's the warlords, the rebels."

"It's a time of troubles," Gabriela said dryly.

"That's exactly right; that's just what it is. Let's talk about those first. Then we'll get to the final point."

"Okay," Grimes said.

"Let me give you the preview, Ray. Skynet still ex-ists." General Connor glanced at Jade, then Anton. "In the world our friends came from, a counterpart of Skynet has won the war of extermination."

"So it appears," Jade said.

"So it appears. The question is, can *that* Skynet still strike at us...even across the dimensions? Right now, it looks to me like it can. So the next question is simple: What can we do about it? I'm going to leave that until last, but it potentially affects everything. I hope we can deal with some of the other points without solving that problem first, because it's a tough one. The problem that confronts us is that everything here is connected. Everything affects everything else." General Connor placed his clasped hands solidly on the edge of the table, his movement and expression hawk like. "I wish it was simpler, but it isn't. That's the reality."

"You'd better start where *you* want," Isaac said.

"All right." The General's shoulders relaxed the merest fraction. "Let's start with the problem of the warlords. It might be more logical to talk first about the machines, but this can't wait. We have people under attack in South America right this moment. I'm told that we've lost contact overnight with the Tejada *estancia* —and that was one of our strongholds. It seems that it fell to the Rising Army in the last eight-teen hours." Others nodded as he spoke. "We don't know if there are any prisoners or other survivors. If there are, every minute that passes puts them in more danger. The same applies to our other bases throughout South America. I want to give the go-ahead to commence action right now. In my mind, It's only a question of what kind of action."

"You know my thoughts," Gabriela said. "No pussyfooting." She gestured expansively with both hands. "Let's just do it."

"All right, I'm going to call Danny Dyson and Juanita Salceda very soon. So what do I tell them? The question is simply one of how far we are prepared to use Skynet's own weapons for our purposes. Six weeks ago, I didn't hesitate. I sent a Terminator back in time to 1994 to protect myself from an attack by Skynet." That had been Skynet's attempt to kill John as a nine-year-old child, using a T-1000 Terminator as its assassin. "When Skynet escaped us in Color-ado, I sent another Terminator further back in time to try to find a point where timestreams diverged, and to get help from another timestream. When that one returned, I used it again when we went to Madrid."

"You're starting to set a pattern," Mohanraj said in an absolutely neutral voice. She wasn't giving away what she thought about it.

"Well, no harm seems to have come of that...but people are asking me: *Where does it end?*"

"It's a good question, John," Isaac said.

"I know it is." General Connor turned to Sarah. "I know what this means to *you*, in particular. We've spoken about it, but your views are very welcome at this meeting. If not for what you did prior to Judgment Day, none of us would even be here. The human species would probably be extinct by now. You trained me; all our preparations are owed to you."

Sarah frowned at that. "Not to the other Sarah Connor?"

"You know how it works, Sarah. It was *you* who set it all in motion, however you look at it..."

Not only that, John thought as Big John spoke, she'd fought bravely in Spain...as they all had. If one less of them had been there, if Sarah had not taken the battle to the endos and Terminators that had protected Skynet, showing all her courage and skill, the mission would have been a failure. She'd blasted away at Skynet's defenses, taken on its T-1000s. Yes, this world owed Sarah so much. So, in a different way, did Jade's World.

General Connor nodded at her respectfully. "We have to stop the warlords before they tear apart our entire organization. I don't see any way to get forces in place without using the time displacement ma-chinery in Colorado."

"It's a question of what forces," Isaac said. "If you think we can start using Terminators as our troops, just like Skynet did, that's a bitter pill to swallow. What you did that first day in Colorado is one thing..."

"If I hadn't, we wouldn't be here now, most likely."

"That may well be, but I'm not sure that I like it."

"What alternative did I have? Anyway, that's history now."

"Agreed. It's history, John, but it's not a precedent. Can't you see that it's worrying people?"

"I know that. I want to take everyone with me on this. If I can."

"Right. It sounds like you've made up your mind. But you can't just impose your will—"

"I didn't say that." There was a tense silence. "But we need all the resources we can get our hands on, to mop up Skynet's war machines. I know that's jumping ahead, but surely it's clear. We can agree on that much, can't we? There are still too many machines left. And then there's the warlords. We can't fight on two fronts while refusing to use what's available. I think we've got to fight back with everything at our disposal."

"You're right," Mohanraj said. She shrugged as eyes turned to her. "Too many of our best people have died. The balance of power has shifted. I agree that we must do whatever it takes to get control."

"It's not so simple," Grimes said.

She went on: "Once we *have* control, it is different. I don't want to use Skynet's own technology forever. We must make a clean break from it."

"But when do we know it's time to stop?" Sarah said, leaning forward, one palm flat on the table. "Just imagine what they were saying back in 1997, when they implemented the Skynet program. They thought they'd just take it *so far*, that it would be all right. That kind of thinking destroyed our whole civilization." She fixed her eyes on the General. "You, of all people, should know how dangerous this is, John. If you...I mean your people...become addicted to using Skynet's technology for your ends, where does it lead?"

Grimes spoke up again. "That's true. I say we stop right now, we blow the whole facility in Colorado."

"Well, that was always what I planned," General Connor said.

"It should have been done before. We need to destroy every goddamn computer chip that we find, and start again without any tech that relates to Skynet. A few more people might die, or have to suffer, in the short term. But it's better this way in the longer run. Let's make a clean start, and we've still got some small chance of building a peaceful world."

"You're committed to that viewpoint?"

"I am. Absolutely."

"All right, I can respect that."

"That's just as well, John."

"Yes, I suppose it is. But we do have a problem if you can't accept my decision."

"Or if you can't accept what the majority think."

"The majority *here*?"

"Maybe. Or maybe the majority in the field. It's not just about what the leaders think. You can't continue the Resistance unless people back you up. With Skynet destroyed, the whole equation has changed. Sure, there are still war machines out there. I bet a lot of local leaders think they can handle that. Maybe they're wrong, but that's what they're thinking. Those warlords in South America are just the most

extreme example. You can bet that people are weighing up their loyalties right now."

"I know that. I don't mind being reminded." The General turned to Sarah. "What about you? Is that what you're putting to me, too?"

She met his eyes, but hesitated to speak. "Look, I don't want to be the voice of gloom and doom—always saying no."

"I don't see it that way."

"Well, that's how I feel sometimes. But I need con-vincing with these things. After all I've been through...and I know I'm not the only one...it's still not over. We still haven't defeated Skynet. I've had to work with Terminators, back in L.A., and in Wash-ington D.C. and when we came here. I know it can be done. I don't like it, and I don't like the way this goes on and on, demanding more and more actions, more and more *compromises* from us."

"Sarah, how would you handle it?"

"How would I handle it? The warlords? I don't know. I can't be sure." She was finding her way with it, fal-tering, but determined to work it out. "You're going to have to draw a line, John. At some point, you have to say, *Enough is enough*. I'm not saying you've reached that point yet." She held up her hand to ask for silence. "But if you make one compromise, then another, then another, and never draw that line, one day you'll regret it. Or you'll finally die, thinking you've done okay, that you left the world in good shape. But someone will come after you, and they'll curse you that you never drew that line. You're going to have to find a point where you don't use the end to justify the means. There's a point where that logic runs out. If you go on and on using *those* means...you can't really say *where* it ends. When you get to *that* point, you've lost control, you're on the path back to creating Skynet."

"We may be anyway—"

"Maybe, *maybe*. . .you can't think like—"

"I know. Sorry, you go on."

She was silent for a long time, and no one interrup-ted. "I don't know where you draw that line, John. It's up to you. It's on your shoulders. But you've got to do it. If you don't do it, everything may be lost."

"It may be anyway. There are no guarantees."

"No, but when the fight continues after you've gone, will you have *helped*? Or will you have made it easier for the whole nightmare to start over again?"

The General looked as if he'd done a few rounds with a heavyweight champion. "All right. I understand all that. Look, there's a couple of things there...First of all, Sarah, I'm not the best person to know how dangerous it is.. .that's not how my experience has been. I first encountered two Terminators when I was only nine years old. One had been sent back by Skynet to try to kill me, but the other one was sent as a protector. I'd sent it myself. It saved my life many times over. Right up until 2012, when it was des-troyed, the Terminator protected me from dangerous human beings, as well as from whatever Skynet threw at me. Maybe I'm actually the *last* person to think that some technologies can only ever be evil. That just isn't my experience."

A few people raised their eyebrows, listening to the General talk like that. Listening to his older self, John felt that he was hearing some of his own thoughts played back. He'd often wondered the same thing sometimes...whether maybe *any* technology could be used for good, if you really knew what you were doing. But, then again, there was no sign that the technology used to create Skynet itself could be anything but bad. It had destroyed civilization and tried to exterminate humanity in two worlds: this one, and the one that Jade and Anton had come from.

The General gave him a pained smile, an expression of recognition of their common experience. "You know what I'm saying, don't you?"

"I do...I guess I do." John felt put on the spot, but then he reminded himself that he had every reason *not* to be overawed by these people. He'd fought well, himself, in the last battle to destroy Skynet. Not only that, he'd done good work back in his own world, dealing with the government and the people from Cyberdyne who'd been so determined to create Skynet. The fact that he and Sarah, and Jade and Anton, were here was partly his doing, and they couldn't have beaten Skynet without the Specialists' knowledge and abilities. He told himself he had every right to be heard. His voice should mean something. "I've often thought about it," he said—still carefully, but now more confidently.

"And?"

He tried to gather his thoughts. "I'm not sure I've ever been able to work it out." He looked to Sarah, then to Jade. Both of them were impassive: Sarah was lost in her own thoughts; Jade was simply hard to read, as she always was. It had to do with the set of her face—always a little sad, always kind, but never excited, never overwhelmed by the moment.

Anton had been keeping his silence. Maybe he'd

been talking to Jade, but he was giving nothing away to anyone else. John was on his own with this one.

"You must have some ideas," the General said to him.

"I'm not sure. I wouldn't ever build Skynet...or anything like it. It just seems too risky, making something like that, something self-conscious, but not human—something that can see us as, like, its *rivals* on the Earth. I don't know that we could ever risk sharing the world with something like that." John felt his way as he tried to capture the thought he wanted, nail it down. "It would always be a danger to us, and we'd be a danger to *it*. We shouldn't set things up like that. There's no need to..." He trailed off, wondering whether he was actually wrong on that, whether there might ever be scope for human beings and a true artificial intelligence like Skynet to share the same world. "But..."

The General raised an eyebrow. "But?"

"I just thought, maybe that's where to draw the line. No matter how it acts, a Terminator isn't really con-scious." He searched for the right words. "It's just a machine, like a car... or a machine gun, or something. The T-800 that came back to help me, in 1994... I got kind of attached to it. But it couldn't really feel things, not like a human being. It could never cry, or have real emotions. I guess Skynet could, maybe *cold* emotions, maybe evil..." Was that too strong? Then he thought of what he had been through, the cruel malice of the T-1000 that had tried to kill him in 1994, torturing Sarah when they'd fought it to the death in a metal foundry back in L.A. And he remembered the incredible arrogance that Skynet had shown in this world, on Judgment Day, making a decision to discard the entire human species, *just like that*. No, it wasn't too strong a word, not too dramatic. They were dealing with *evil*, something implacably, cruelly hostile.

"Go on, John," Sarah said. "We need to hear this. You're as expert as anyone."

"I don't know. But Skynet turned out to see itself as being in competition with humans. It wanted to live, even if it meant killing all of us. That's where I'd draw the line. I'm not so worried about using Terminators, not if they're just Terminators, not unless they become something more. We can't ever allow that to happen."

That was the most he'd ever said on the subject, even in his longest talks with Sarah, back in Mexico City when they'd tried to build a life in exile, after Judgment Day had failed to happen in their world, and before the Specialists had come on the scene to turn that life upside-down. Just for the moment, he couldn't tell how it had gone down.

Jade spoke at last. "I am not so sure of one thing. It seems that the Terminators may have a kind of consciousness, something faintly like human emotions...a need to kill, to carry out their missions. Nonetheless, I agree with John." As she spoke up to support him, his heart fluttered slightly, even though that seemed kind of childish and crazy. "There is a line we should never cross. Merely using Terminators falls this side of the line, as long as we destroy them all completely when we are finished. Or find another way to remove them."

"Another way?" the General said. "You're thinking ahead?"

"I am. You rid yourselves of the Terminators as Ms. Mohanraj said at the start. Otherwise, someone will use them for a higher level of AI technology. In that case, Sarah is right, and Mr. Grimes, too: It will begin all over again."

Sarah looked the General in the eye, shaking her head and speaking in that flat voice John had so often heard from her, a slightly dangerous, yet self-protective, manner that came from the days when everyone had thought she was a psycho. "I think you'll get a lot of opposition if you use the Terminators," she said. "I'd oppose it myself, if I thought you had any alternative."

"I agree with Sarah," Gabriela said. "We have to stop using Skynet's own weapons. But we can't yet. We just have to plan to stop it—a *definite* plan. It can't go on. I want to see all those machines destroyed as soon as possible."

General Connor looked from one to another in the room, as if weighing up each of them and their views. "Can you live with that?" he said to Grimes. "I'm prepared to give you a commitment to destroy all the war machines, no matter what happens. I can put a time limit on it. One year, if you want. Forget about what happens after I'm gone. I'll see it done myself. If something happens to me, everyone here should be committed. We'll be rid of the machines in a year, even if the situation looks bleak. I'll stake my leadership on it. If I can, I'll do it before that, a matter of months or weeks if that's possible. It's the best that I can do. I'm asking you again: Can you live with it?"

Grimes hesitated, reading the other expressions around the table. "It looks like I might have to. I'd say I'm outvoted here."

"In the end, we don't have a choice," General Connor said. "I hope everyone is with me on this, but it's my decision. It's on my head if it goes wrong. There are people depending on us acting—and acting now. I'm going to call Danny, Juanita, and Cecilia—he exchanged nods with Gabriela—"in Colorado. I'll give them the go-ahead. If anyone here wants to dissent—even if it's just for the record—speak up now."

Grimes was thin-lipped, but he shook his head. "No," he said. "I can accept what you say. I'll even do my best to sell it to my people."

"That's a commitment, Ray?"

"It's a commitment."

"All right. Anyone else? Here's your chance. Any-one?"

"I think you have a decision," Anton said. "Time to act."

"You and Jade can live with it, too? It means you only have a year, then we destroy the machines. Or otherwise get rid of them."

"I understand you. It won't take a year. Nothing like that."

Jade nodded at Anton's words. They had plans of their own.

When no one else spoke, General Connor said, "All right, this gets priority. Now we call Colorado. The other issues can wait. Only for a moment...but they can wait."

"For a moment," Anton said.

INTERLUDE 1

JADE'S WORLD

VILA NOVA DO SUL, BRAZIL

JUNE 12, 2036

Hiro Tagatoshi was a gray-haired man of fifty, though he looked younger, even after having endured the stresses of Judgment Day and sixteen years of war against the machines. Like many people in this technological city, he'd undergone courses of somatic cell genetic engineering that had enhanced some aspects of his body and mind. It was nowhere near as thorough as the best warriors of the Resistance had undergone, and *that* was exceeded by the few who'd been designed from the moment of conception to be super-human. They had once been known as "ultrabrights," back in the days of civilization and public controversy. His daughter, Miho, or "Jade," was among them.

When he'd come to this place, years ago, he'd never thought that he'd still be here as his death approached. It was supposed to be a short-term thing, while his child was conceived, brought to birth, then raised for a period in secret. Skynet had frustrated all of that. He'd never been able to return, with his wife, to Tokyo.

Hiro sub-vocalized into a throat microphone connected with his computer—and, through it, to the

apparatus of the time vault. Now, he activated the vault to send five of their best warriors back in time—including his precious Jade. He had lost so much in the struggle against Skynet and its machine army: his wife, Yuki; almost all of his family; the entire civilization that he had loved; and his most passionate life projects. One of those projects had been the rearing of his daughter, which he'd always thought would happen back in Japan. Now that had come to an end.. .she would have to go her own way, equipped with capabilities beyond those of almost anyone who'd ever lived. As for him, Skynet's forces were fighting in the sky and streets of Vila Nova do Sul, one hundred feet above. They were closing in, in overwhelming numbers. Soon everything would be gone.

In Colorado, Skynet had smashed the North American arm of the human Resistance—what was left of it after years of unsuccessful warfare against the machines—just days before. Ramsey Devaux and the remnants of his militia were now scattered across the mountains where Skynet ruled, having lost their final gamble, a major offensive that had failed.. .as all of them did. Skynet was pushing them back; they would soon be massacred. These were the last days for humankind. Literally, the last *days*.

Back in 2020, when Jade had been conceived and born, he'd never thought it might come to this, that so much would end up on her strong shoulders. Like some others, he'd seen Judgment Day coming, but its timing had taken him by surprise. He'd not fore-seen that Jade would have the responsibility for creat-ing an entirely new universe, one without Skynet or Judgment Day.

The time displacement laboratory was a square, sterile-looking circular room, fifty feet across, painted in shades of white and gray, and dominated by the massive steel-gray block of the time vault. Some small offices had been partitioned off with glass along the sides of the room, allowing for private conversations, but they were seldom used. Most of the work was done at the twenty clean metal desks that were set up in rows near the time vault. On each one was an ad-vanced computer deck and a thin, high-resolution screen.

A dozen people sat in here now, watching on their individual screens, or on the twenty-foot-wide flatscreen mounted on the far wall. The flatscreen was split to show several images, each of which Hiro and the others could also call up on their own equipment: views of the inside of the vault; and a larger represent-ation of the data that showed on Hiro's own computer screen.

Vila Nova do Sul had been an experimental techno-polis, an almost self-contained enclave, devoted to every form of applied science. Much of the work done here had been routine, but a great deal of it was highly controversial in a world that had turned against many technologies. The founders of Vila Nova had not made that work public knowledge. It had been known only to the right people, through highly discreet net-works of friendship, influence, and cooperation.

The backlash against technology and science had not stopped the Americans from going ahead with Skynet, and all their other defense projects based upon the Monk-Dyson nanochip, but it had meant the suppression of much else. The biotech research that had been conducted here had been illegal in many countries of the world, prior to Judgment Day. United

Nations instruments had called for much of it to be banned, and even the U.S.A. had signed on. It was only the new economic powers—China, Brazil, and a handful of others—that had held out for free re-research, not necessarily supporting it in any public sense, but not suppressing it either, letting its benefits trickle into their economies.

Thankfully, those countries had acted as they did. Complexes and mini-cities such as this had sucked in money and talent from the more developed nations of Europe and the West. Without them, enhanced human beings such as Jade could never have been born.

Hiro told himself that he hadn't lost her, at least not in the worst sense. He was not sending her to her death. Everyone here would die—sooner rather than later—but Jade was getting a chance to survive. She was going back in time to a world twenty years before Judgment Day. There, she had every chance of survival. In that world, she might live almost forever, since she was designed not to age any further. His screen showed the energies playing in the interior of the time vault, like lightning circling about the five naked time travelers. They were superb creatures in every way.

Then they were gone. Hopefully, to create a better world.

Now he entered another code, altering the field and lowering the power to a residual level. Elsewhere in Hiro's underground complex, smaller devices still functioned, using the same scientific principles, in order to send him every scrap of all-important data on the Earth's space-time field—and any disruptions to it.

With mixed feelings, Hiro fingered the stone pendant that his daughter had left behind, which she'd worn since she was a child. It was a circle of jade two inches across, inscribed with Taoist symbols, hung on a thick chain of yellow gold—her favorite item of jewelry, which she'd worn all the time for luck. She had a whole room of jade jewelry and small knick-knacks—the only vice she'd ever shown. Like almost anything inorganic, the pendant could not pass through the space-time displacement field, so she'd left it behind, along with all her other possessions. He would keep them, together with her photographs, videos, and precious recordings of her voice. He'd treasure them for the rest of his life, which would not be very long. The machines would soon break through the last of their defenses.

"All the luck in the world..." he said. "Make a better Earth."

Others stood around him, some quiet—probably stunned at what they had accomplished—others noisy and jubilant. For a minute, no one came close, probably unsure how to handle his emotions, now that his daughter had gone. Clearly, he would never see her again. Then Merrillee O'Driscoll, a tall, androgynous-looking woman, approached him. Her skin was very white, since they never saw the sun, even on the surface...and they spent most of their time hiding underground, below the city's streets. Her hair was a drab brown, cut short to frame her face.

"It must be hard," Merrillee said, placing a strong, bony hand on his wrist. "Jade is better off than any of us, though. You did the right thing, letting her go." Like everyone else here, Merrillee spoke English. Though located in Brazil, Vila Nova do Sul was an international venture. The main languages here were English, Spanish, German, and Russian, rather than Portuguese. A slightly formal English was most common. Hiro and Jade knew Portuguese as well, and several other languages, but seldom had a chance to use them.

He smiled at Merrillee sadly, the same sad smile that he'd seen so often on his daughter's face, which he knew had come from him—maybe it was learned, maybe genetic. "I couldn't have stopped her. Jade was...is...her own boss. She surpassed me years ago."

As he spoke, he flipped through several screens of data, looking for anomalies in the space-time field, for any distortions that could not be accounted for by what they had just done. He soon saw what he expected, and feared. It must have shown on his face, for Merrillee said, "What's wrong?"

Others were starting to crowd around his desk, taking their lead from her. Despite the H-Ks, Jugger-nauts, and combat endoskeletons trying to destroy them even now, this was a day of triumph for him, in more than one way. An expected technological success...and a role for his daughter that could not have been more important, even if they'd never know how she'd fared. "It's just what I would have

expected," he said. "Skynet detected what we were doing... the same as *we* could have detected *it*, trying out the same trick."

"What's it done?" Merrilee said urgently, almost in a whisper.

Others were asking the same question, or simply looking expectant, keenly aware that something was up. It wasn't just a matter of congratulations, commiserations, and then moving on to the final battles with the machines. They all knew how important it was, what Jade and the others were doing.

"Skynet is responding," Hiro said. "It is using its own time vault, just as we feared."

Merrilee shook her head. "But why? What we did makes no difference, not to the Skynet of this world."

"I know. *It* must know as well."

"It can't change its own history. The most that any time traveler could accomplish—"

He cut her short. "That doesn't matter." You could not change the past. If you sent something back in time, its actions were already taken into account. It was futile. The most you could ever do, in theory, was set off a chain of events that was the start of a new timestream, parallel to the old one. There was no possibility of destroying Skynet retroactively. But they hoped to create a universe in which their own kind would survive. "It is acting anyway," he said. "Skynet is sending something back."

Merrilee and the others were silent as he worked through the data he had on the screen, calling up programs to analyze it for him, work out the meaning of the distortions that he'd found. But there was just one possible meaning.

"All right," he said at last. "It is confirmed. Skynet has sent something back to 2001."

Merrilee's face turned bright red.

"Jade and the others will be hunted," he said. "There is nothing we can do about it. We must wish and hope." Then something caught him unawares, data he had never expected. He was finding another distortion. Unmindful of Merrilee and the others around him, he tried to analyze it, to explain it to himself. He projected the data onto the giant flatscreen for all to see, then pointed at it, totally unable to explain.

"My God," Merrilee said. "What the hell is that?"

SEVEN

SKYNET'S WORLD COLORADO SEPTEMBER 5,2029

Danny had grown to adulthood fascinated by the theory of artificial intelligence and time travel...and by all the claims that John and Sarah Connor had made prior to the war. Knowing that his father had been the mastermind behind Skynet, and that he'd perished like so many others on August 29, 1997, Danny had done everything he could to reach an understanding of what had happened, to try to make some peace with himself, and with his father's memory. After Judgment Day, he and his mother, Tarissa, had met a former officer in the American military, Howard Bellow. Bellow had worked in the Pentagon, and had been involved in the Skynet pro-gram. He'd known more about the theory behind the Dyson nanochip than almost anyone else who'd lived through Judgment Day. In 2006, their group had joined forces with the Connors at the Tejada *estancia* in Argentina, the first base for what was to become the human Resistance Skynet. There, Bellow had passed on everything he knew to Danny, John Connor, and a small group of others, before he'd fallen victim to the war ma-chines. Juanita had been in that select group. Between them all, they'd aimed to understand Skynet's own technology, and to use it to serve the human cause.

When they'd taken control of this facility, they'd finally had a chance to put the theory into practice. Until then, they'd been frustrated. There'd never been the kind of economic infrastructure that would have enabled them to build complex machinery needed to read or reprogram chips captured from Skynet's ma-chines. That had now changed totally. With Skynet's own equipment falling into their hands, they'd been able to reprogram Terminators and send them back in time.

Since that first day when the Resistance had seized control here, Danny had become more proficient at programming Skynet's machines. With Juanita and Cecilia, he'd formed a triumvirate to command the Resistance forces stationed here, but he'd concentrated almost exclusively on the technology, leaving the two women to oversee logistics and keep discipline. He'd now had weeks to develop his skills, and plenty of Terminators to practice on. At this moment, he was the world expert on the technology that his father had invented. The only others who might know more were Jade Tagatoshi and Anton Panov, who came from another world with superior technology. Soon they would come here to help him, but right now the technical responsibility was his.

With Juanita and Cecilia, he went through the programming steps that he'd taken to prepare a group of Terminators to accompany Cecilia on her mission. The actual instructions were not complex; the trick was knowing how to encode them without error.

"I've instructed them as simply as possible," he said to Cecilia. "They have files on our operations throughout South America, with sufficient understanding of the situation to grasp the difference between forces loyal to us and breakaway forces. That's not easy to get across."

"I can see that," Gabriela said. "How do you define who is a warlord and who isn't?"

"It requires background knowledge, but the Terminators already have a lot of that. Skynet has equipped them with enough knowledge of military history and operations to pass for human when trying to infiltrate our organization. It gave me something to build on."

"Okay."

"The main thing is that they'll be loyal to Resistance forces—more particularly, to forces that are loyal in their turn. They're smart enough to make judgments about that. They may not be conscious in the proper sense, but they're very smart indeed. They can use informal logic, and show initiative. It's scary what they can do."

"The *main* thing is that they'll do what Cecilia tells them," Juanita said, peering at one of the screens on

Danny's desk to follow the string of commands that he had written.

"They'll obey her or any other loyal officers of the Resistance, recognizing hierarchy where it's relevant. They understand that, too. I didn't even need to program it in. Cecilia comes first.. they'll obey her orders in priority to anyone else's—"

"But I might be captured," Cecilia said with a sly smile.

"Well, yes, or—"

"Or killed, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Or be separated from them somehow. We have to be prepared for all of that."

"Of course we do. Don't worry, I'm not telling myself this is going to be a picnic. I know I could be dead in the first few seconds."

Danny touched his hand to her arm. "We have to hope. They'll protect you...they'll be orientated more quickly than you. They know they need to get you clothes and weapons as soon as you arrive. They'll shield you from attack at all costs."

"It's all right, I'll just have to take my chances. What else do I need to know?"

"I haven't tried to constrain them too much. I thought of trying to build in inhibitions against killing, but that's too hard...it can't be done when we're fighting a war. We'll be depending on you, and anyone else who gives them orders, to humanize the mission. Without human leadership, I don't know what they'd do. They can be creative, as well as utterly ruthless."

"Got it."

In fact, the reason for sending a human leader was not so much to enhance the fighting capacity of the Terminators as to minimize the chance that they'd get out of control and perpetrate atrocities. Danny trusted them to perform their mission of destroying the warlords. Once programmed, they were the ultimate soldiers: they were skilled, totally loyal, almost indestructible, not to mention single-minded and stubborn, yet flexible, with plenty of initiative. That wasn't the issue. The issue was how far they'd go to achieve their ends if not controlled by human orders, given on the spot.

They took time to review Danny's code meticulously, making small adjustments here and there, but nothing major. He took pleasure in seeing a job well done. When they were fully satisfied, they would download it into a small group of Terminators. Little else was required in preparation, as long as they received the go-ahead. When a radio call came from General Connor, they were almost finished.

"I'm here in New York," the General's voice said. "We arrived safely from Spain. I've been meeting with Gabriela and some of our East Coast leaders." He allowed himself the ghost of a laugh. "I have my young namesake with me—and Sarah. Also Anton Panov and Jade Tagatoshi. We're making plans on all the issues."

Juanita had picked up the mike. "Yes, John," she said. "Got that."

"Juanita, it's good to hear you."

"Danny and Cecilia are with me."

"It'll be good to talk to all of you. I'll see you in just a few days."

Cecilia gave a forced smile. "It'd be nice if you could," she said, half to herself.

"I hope it's not much longer, Cecilia, even in your case. Get Juanita to hand you the microphone. We need to talk."

Juanita passed it over. "Here I am," Cecilia said.

"Cecilia? I realize that *you* won't be there when I arrive. We'll be going ahead with our plan."

"Well, just what version of our plan is that?"

"Oh, there's only one version. Seriously, no one even disputes that. You're going into Argentina leading a force of Terminators. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely."

That's good. I just want to thank you in advance. I know we can all count on you."

"You can, John," she said, sounding almost cocky.

"That's what we wanted to hear. I'm passing the mike to Gabriela."

As Cecilia and her mother spoke—possibly for the last time if anything went wrong with the mission—Danny watched in admiration. Cecilia was not young anymore, but no one had doubted her ability to do this job more effectively than anyone. Even at fifty, she was strong and quick, bigger than most men.

More importantly, she was an artist with weapons, proud of her mastery of the phased-plasma devices they'd scavenged from Skynet's machines. Again, she knew the terrain of post-Judgment Day South America intimately—especially Argentina, where she'd had grown to adulthood. Cecilia had been closely involved with the leadership of the Resistance from when she was hardly more than a child, and she was fully committed to its goals. She was the logical choice to send to Argentina to deal with warlords there, then devise a campaign in South America more generally. She had all the expertise and all the charisma of the Tejada clan.

Gabriela's voice on the radio was concerned but unhesitating. "You're ready, girl?" she said. "We need to act right now. If it's going to be done, let it be today."

"I'm prepared," Cecilia said. "We've set everything up. Danny has done a great job. We can go into action in an hour."

"Good, good. I love you, I wish I could see you before you leave—"

"I know...me, too."

"But it can't wait."

"No, it can't. I'm ready physically. There's nothing wrong with me now to stop me going through the displacement field. And *mentally*, too. I can handle the trip, the pain everyone talks about—and everything else that's needed. It's time to do it."

"I know you can." Gabriela sounded wearier. "I pray to God that you'll come through." She paused for several seconds. "Go with my blessing. All of us are thinking of you."

"Don't worry, I'm going to return."

"All right." General Connor's voice now came through the speaker. "Roger that. Cecilia, I want you to call me personally at the earliest possible time—as soon as you're in a position to make radio contact. If you can't get me or Gabriela, call Juanita and Danny there in Colorado. I will be in New York for the next few days."

"Sure."

"I can't talk long now. We have some more de-cisions to make, and some of them won't be easy."

Juanita took back the microphone. "Okay, John," she said, touching her hair nervously. "Hurry back to us."

"As fast as I can. I'd better talk to Danny now."

Danny took the mike from Juanita's slightly hesitant fingers. "I'm still here, John. Everything is under con-trol. We're just finishing some final checks. Give me the formal go-ahead, and we'll power up the time vault in less than an hour. Cecilia's on the money about that."

"I don't like doing it this way. No one is happy about it, but we have no choice. Gabriela agrees. So does everyone else who's been consulted."

"Roger that. Look, everyone here will go along with it." Danny exchanged glances with Juanita. "Cecilia is psyched up to go. It's all ready, as long as you're comfortable about what it involves."

The radio emitted a drawn-out, painful sigh. "No, not *comfortable*, Danny. But it's the right thing to do."

"I have the go-ahead?"

"I'm giving it to you right now. Do it, Danny. Good luck to you all."

With that over, they completed checking Danny's programming. There were no glitches, nothing more that needed correction. They left the table to examine the unopened ectogenetic pods.

"Well," Danny said to Cecilia, "it's all the same to me. You choose." Since the T-799s and T-800s all had similar capacities, it made little difference which particular Terminators were chosen for reprogramming. If Cecilia had any kind of sentimental choice, or thought that there was some kind of good luck in-volved, let her act on it. It was as good as choosing any other way. The plan required six Terminators to accompany her through the time vault. She could handpick them however she liked.

She chose three T-800s of the same design that they had sent to 1994—also the same design that Skynet had sent back even earlier, to 1984, when it had made an unsuccessful attempt on Sarah Con-nor's life. She chose three T-799s to make up the numbers. They'd used one successfully in the

past, so perhaps she thought it would bring her luck.

"Okay," Danny said. "Everything is done. I'm going to reprogram them one at a time, using the code that we've just been through. This will only take a few minutes. Then you'll need to get yourself ready...do anything you need to do...because you might be teleporting right into the middle of a battle."

"That will be okay."

"All right, here we go now." He returned to his desk to start the job.

A kind of filament passed into the brain of each Terminator from the apparatus of its ectogenetic pod. The Terminator could be reprogrammed right until its moment of "birth," when it would emerge from the pod. Danny's hardware was patched into the cyber-system controlling the pods. He chose one of the "unborn" T-800s and found the path into its files. His code worked its way through layers, erasing unwanted material, inserting what was needed.

Soon, it was finished. Now he entered a further code to drain away the nutrient liquid provided by the ectogenetic pod. At the same time, the Terminator's connection with the system broke. When the liquid had all drained, Danny made the pod rise up on its hydraulics, so it tilted at almost a 90° angle, just like the empty pods. He keyed in one more code, then stopped the procedure, walking back to the pod, where Juanita and Cecilia stood guard. Their weapons were trained on the Terminator, in case something had gone wrong and it made a move to attack them. The Terminator opened its eyes and stepped out of the pod, looking around with an emotionless gaze.

It could be tidied up somewhat to help it fit in with its work in South America, but they would have to be quick about it. It would take just a few minutes to do a rough job on the Terminator's hair and beard.

"Do you understand your mission?" Cecilia said to the Terminator.

"Affirmative," it said. "I will travel with you to the Tejada *estancia* in Argentina. We will do whatever else is necessary to protect or reclaim the *estancia* and to defeat the warlords in South America."

Danny gave a laid-back smile. "That's about the size of it," he said to the Terminator. He turned to Gabriela and Juanita. "It seems to have the idea. What do you think?"

Cecilia spoke again to the Terminator. "You will obey my orders?"

"Affirmative."

"And those of other Resistance leaders?"

"Affirmative. I have detailed files on the Resistance hierarchy and can recognize personnel loyal to Gen-eral John Connor."

"That's about as good as it gets," Danny said. "Let's decant the others."

"I wish this wasn't necessary," Juanita said.

Cecilia laughed, not unkindly. "Oh, we all wish *that*."

Danny laughed along. Their forces were too depleted to act without using the Terminators. Then again,

all of the forces still in South America were depleted, most having been brought to North America to wage the war with Skynet on its home territory. The warlords were no better off—even the rebels did not have huge army battalions. Both sides were now in a time when the fate of the world was in the hands of quite small forces. The Terminators could make all the difference in this latest war.

"We'll do the rest now," Danny said. "This is going to work out. You'll see."

Juanita sat beside him as they fired up the time vault. They had been working on improving it, just in minor ways to make the apparatus easier to control for hu-man beings. When the two Specialists from the other future came here, perhaps they could do more. Jade and Anton seemed to have a higher level of mastery, which had enabled them to move not only back and forward in time but also across the dimensions, between one timeline and other. He still wanted to learn about that.

The time vault could also be used simply to dis-place objects in space, as they had done when they sent several people and one Terminator to Spain to strike the final blow against Skynet. They could deliver people—or a Terminator—somewhere within a circle with a one-mile radius. When their force arrived at the other end of the journey, it would need to take action quickly to assess its situation and prepare a plan of attack. With neither pinpoint accuracy in where their force landed nor radio contact with any survivors at the *estancia*, Cecilia and the Terminators would have to make the detailed decisions for themselves. They could not be micromanaged from here in Color-ado, or from wherever General Connor was operating from time to time.

The seven figures lined up to enter the time vault. The Terminators had been scrubbed down, getting rid of the nutrient liquid that they'd floated in. Their hair had been cut back into a short military style to give them a less wild appearance, in case they needed to pass for human, and to ensure it did not interfere with their sensors. With their beautifully sculpted muscles, they looked more like anthropo-morphic gods than human beings, but could obviously pass for human with ordinary clothing and some hu-man contact to enhance their skills at imitation.

Cecilia shrugged out of a heavy gray overcoat that she'd left on for the final few minutes, then stepped naked into the vault, looking straight ahead. The door slammed shut when Danny entered the required code, and the Terminators stood with Cecilia in a circle, or a seven-pointed star, each facing outward toward the walls of the time vault. When they were still, Danny entered a code to activate the apparatus. The monitor screens showed writhing, crackling blue electricity filling the vault's interior. Then they all suddenly van-ished. Danny prayed that they could complete their mission.

Cecilia waited for what she'd been told to ex-pect—white light and excruciating pain. Not for the first time, she wondered whether she was really the right choice for this job. Despite their devastating losses, the Resistance forces still had many able young fighters who would do a fine job. She was getting old, like everyone in the leadership levels. Still, no one knew the *estancia* better than she did, and no one was better qualified to plan a larger campaign once she sized up the situation in Argen-tina.

When the pain came, it left her helpless, as she folded into herself on the ground, unable to believe that anything could hurt so badly—like someone had reached down her throat, gripped bones from inside, then pulled her inside-out. Yet, she knew that she was not wounded. She'd been told that much, over and over. No matter how much it hurt, there was nothing wrong that need hinder her.

She mustn't let it slow her down. Move as soon as you can, they'd all said. Don't give in to the pain. It won't kill you, but the Rising Army just might. If they don't get you first, exposure will. She couldn't yet feel the cold—if anything, her skin seemed to be burn-ing—but soon it would be creeping into her body, down to her bones.

Going on was easier said than done, but she had to do it. She straightened out, forced herself to her feet, brushing dirt away from her skin, where she'd landed on her side. As she arched her spine, a blinding surge of pain went through her, as if a six-foot metal spike had been forced upward through her body, exiting from the back of her skull. She almost passed out, but then the worst of it was gone. She could see once more, feel herself breathing, try to assess her situation. The first problem was how to avoid freezing to death. She was stark naked, with the temperature down near zero; she desperately needed shelter or clothing. No one had come to meet her and the Terminators—neither friends nor enemies. In fact, where, exactly, were they?

The Terminators had taken the journey in their stride. They stood straight and tall, staring around in a way that made them look like the machines that they were, or like some kind of animal—like Cecilia had seen on the TV as a kid—surveying the savanna for prey. Their bodies were human in every detail, but there was nothing human in their expressions: pitiless, alert, totally unselfconscious. Strangely, she found herself imitating them; they seemed to have the right attitude. Take it all in. Get your bearings. Then act without hesitation. She hoped she was up to it.

The pain was still receding, though the sensitive parts of her skin now felt hot and raw, and her mouth and throat were unpleasantly dry. As yet, the coldness of the air and the soil underfoot had not begun to penetrate. It seemed as if the disruption of space and time had heated her through—as though she'd baked herself for hours in a sauna. Indeed, the ground looked scorched at the points where she and the six Terminators had materialized. All the same, she needed to act quickly. The Terminators might be in-vulnerable to cold, but she was only human.

Cecilia knew the layout of the *estancia* intimately.

She quickly understood what she was seeing, even though everything was in ruins. They had arrived about five hundred yards east of their target, the *casco*, which had been reduced to rubble by missiles or artillery fire. That was good accuracy. Danny only guaranteed a one-mile radius, so it could have been a lot worse. The earth around the *casco's* protective trench works had been churned up like mud that a gigantic horse had galloped through. None of the secondary buildings had been left totally undamaged, and most of the bungalows and workshops had been destroyed as thoroughly as the *casco*.

This far from the buildings, the air was quiet. A steady breeze blew across the land, but there were no sounds of gunfire or machines. Obviously, the defense had failed and the battle was all over. The Rising Army of Liberation was in control. She could see uniformed soldiers milling about, some working on vehicles, others patrolling the wreckage. Some had stopped what they were doing, and were pointing her way. There was the sound of distant shouting, then a gunshot, fired in the air. From what she'd heard of the atmospheric effects when Sarah Connor and the others had arrived on the mountainside in Color-ado via space-time displacement, it was no wonder they'd been seen straightaway. They could expect company at any moment.

Two choppers and a squat, tan-colored Abrams class tank sat together a distance from the *casco* and the bunkers. A row of tents had been set up nearby. She began to realize just how cold she was—only seconds had passed, but the feeling of heat through her body had worn off. The breeze began to chill her skin, raising gooseflesh on her torso and limbs. Her feet began to feel like blocks of ice. Her breath misted the air, and she knew her teeth were about to chatter. How could she fight like this?

Four soldiers packed into a Humvee, and three others ran to crew one of the helicopters. Yet another group headed for the massive, squat army tank. From here, she could not tell what kind of weapons the chopper had, or what kind of gun was mounted on the Humvee's roof—possibly a .50 caliber machine

gun or a chain-fed mini-gun.. or something even more formidable. Any of the weapons that the Resistance normally used on its precious Humvees was capable of massacring seven naked, unarmed human beings with no difficulty at all, especially on open ground with nowhere to take cover. The surprise would be when the Rising Army realized what it was up against...fighters that were not human.

As seconds went by, neither the chopper nor the Humvee started up. The tank's crew of four got inside, but the tank didn't move. It seemed as though something was giving her a reprieve. Other soldiers crowded around the Humvee, gesticulating wildly, as if offering curses or advice. No words traveled to her on the cold air, so she could only guess that the local space-time disruption had affected the engines' igni-tion mechanisms.

At the same time she wondered how to get some warmth. They were too far from the *estancia's* build-ings or their protective trenches to find anyone who could give her clothing.

The nearest Terminator, a T-799, turned to her. "You are cold?"

"Freezing," Cecilia said. "I need boots and clothes quickly." She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering.

"That Humvee is a threat." The Terminator nodded at the vehicle, which still had not started.

"Yes, Rising Army. If it come this way, some of you will have to stop it. Try not to kill anyone. That's an order, understand? Minimum fatalities. That applies to all of you."

"Affirmative." The T-799 seemed to have elected itself as spokesman, based solely on happening to be the closest to Cecilia. "I will help you."

"What?"

The Terminator stepped close to Cecilia, and wrapped its powerful arms around her shoulders, side-on. It was a cybernetic organism—not hu-man—but it was designed to operate under almost any conditions, imitating the look, feel, even the smell, of a human being. Despite the ambient temperature, the T-799's skin was warm, as warm as human skin on a mild day. A second Terminator approached her in the same way, pressing close to provide the warmth of its body. It was a T-800, larger than the T-799, and seemingly stronger—though that was an illusion, since they used identical power cells. She could feel herself thawing with the heat generated by both of the killing machines, momentarily grateful for their cunning, almost human, design.

What she understood, but found it difficult to intern-alize, *really* believe, was that these beings were intel-ligent. They were intelligent enough to pass as hu-man—which included showing initiative. The com-bined heat of the two Terminators was keeping her going, though the air and the soil were still bitterly cold.

At the same time, another two Terminators took positions in front of her to shield her from attack. The Humvee finally began to move, the soldiers who'd gathered round it drawing aside. As it approached, the remaining pair of Terminators—again, one of the T-800s and one of the T-799s—ran directly at it. The Humvee opened fire on the Terminators, their skin shredding under the impact of mini-gun rounds, hun-dreds of 7.62mm. bullets per minute. From inside the Humvee, an amplified voice called out in Spanish for them to surrender, but stopped almost immediately. The vehicle's occupants must have realized what they faced: though the Terminators had slowed down, as if swimming upstream in a rapid river, they did not stop. Skin, flesh and blood tore away from them, and one must have suffered some

damage to its hydraulics, since its head tilted at an odd angle, leaning almost on its shoulder. But *still* they kept going.

The combined speed of the Terminators, sprinting as quickly as human athletes, and the Humvee had closed the gap, and the driver now tried to swerve aside. Wheels skidded on the dry ground, raising a cloud of dust; the driver steered into the skid, regaining control, and crashed into the T-799, which bounced to one side and disappeared from Cecilia's view. The T-800 managed to fling itself onto the roof of the vehicle, crawling on hands and knees. It lunged forward and upward, seizing control of the gun and wrenching it from its mounting, as the Humvee braked to a stop.

The T-799 must have gotten a hold of some part of the Humvee's structure, because it now appeared on the roof, along with its "partner," crawling forward and reaching over the front to smash the windshield with one blow of its fist. That situation was under control, but Cecilia saw there were more problems.

"Run now," she said to the other Terminators, struggling to break free of the two that were keeping her alive with their body heat. Only a quarter of a mile away, the helicopter was finally taking to the air. It was armed, by the look of it, with rockets in its wing pods. At the same time, the Abrams tank began to move, and the 125mm. barrel of its main gun swiveled in their direction. Cold or not, she had to take cover—and only one point of cover was available: the enemy Humvee.

As the Terminators let her go, she ran for it. Surely the Rising Army wouldn't fire on their own people. Or would they? The Terminators ran with her, showing again that they were tactically astute—perhaps too astute, she thought. Was it safe to leave machines like this in the world, such powerful and capable mechanical assassins? The Humvee slid to a stop, raising dust. The sudden deceleration hurled the gunner from its rear. He landed hard in the dirt and didn't move. The Terminators quickly overcame the others in the vehicle.

But in the distance, there was a muzzle flash from the tank's gun, and a high explosive shell whistled across the sky.

EIGHT

NEW YORK CITY SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

General Connor broke radio contact with California, and pushed his chair back from the trestle table to stretch his legs. "All our wishes go with Cecilia," he said, looking from one face to another. "We'll count on her to do the job."

"She'll do it," Gabriela said.

No one spoke for some time. John sensed how they all felt, the solemnity of the moment. Not only had they sent one of their closest comrades—Gabriela's daughter—on a dangerous mission, they'd also crossed a line, using Terminators as ground troops. It wasn't like there was no turning back—there were always choices, always options—but it took courage to act as they had, trying to draw lines in a dangerous world, where there were no absolutes, where any decision might be the wrong one, where

nothing was clear or simple. Going on, taking stands, reaching compromises, doing it day in, day out—that was tough. That was what Big John...General Con-nor...had been doing all these years, and it took a brave, strong man.

"She's going to need more resources," Sarah said.

Eyes turned to her, and she went ahead: "If the whole of South America is falling into chaos, you'll have to find backup for her. She can't restore order to a whole continent, even with half a dozen Terminators to do the fighting for her."

The General chewed his lip for a moment. "No," he said slowly. "No, she can't. But she knows what's needed for now. If she can establish a foothold for us, then work out what backup she needs, we'll give her whatever we can. Our resources are thin right now—"

"I know, John. What you all went through in Color-ado was terrible."

"Still, we'll make do. We'll back her up with anything within reason. We have a window of time before we're finished with the Terminators. I think that's settled now."

"Yes, it is," Sarah said.

"That could make all the difference." He folded his arms across his chest. "Which brings us to the second problem of the day."

"The war machines?" John said.

"Exactly." The General leant forward to check through the pile of topographic maps. The one on top was upside-down from John's angle; it showed the Eastern U.S. from Maine in the lower left corner. Isaac and the others across the table had a better view. For them, the map was right way up, looking north from Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland. By the light of the lamp, John could see three widely spaced points on the map, which someone had inked with red circles. Isaac passed the General a wooden pointer, and he used it to tap at the circles. "Those are all danger spots, which Isaac has identified for us. We can go through all these maps, and we'll find circles like this

on most of them. Isaac and his people have been collating them for me."

"That's where you've found war machines?" John said. "It's where Skynet left H-Ks behind, and Termin-ators and the rest?"

"Each red circle represents a place where we've encountered war machines since Skynet was des-troyed," Isaac said. "We've been sending out explor-ation teams, trying to find out just where the trouble is."

"Okay, sure. It's the same in Europe. That's part of what we were organizing the last few weeks."

"Right. Well, we haven't found every machine left over... those circles are just what we know about. The more we explore, the more we'll find. Even what we know about adds up to a goddamn headache—"

"The question is, what do we do about it?" the General said, cutting in on them. "We'll have to deploy whatever forces we have."

"I think it's agreed," Isaac said. "That's not dividing the troops. Everyone wants to hit back, you know?"

"All right." General Connor held his chin in one hand, thinking it over, then tapped the table's edge with the back of his fist, speaking slowly. "All of those machines are holding down territory that we can't use. From what we've seen, they'll attack if we go near them, but none have gotten together to attack our strongholds. Of course, we don't know what orders they have. Something might trigger a change of behavior. Still, we want to withdraw from positions this far north—get all our people down to Central and South America where it's warmer. And *that* suggests an argument that we could leave the machines alone. Just let them rot, concentrate on any we find further south."

"No one really believes that," Gabriela said.

"No, but it's an argument. If anyone wants to make that case, I'll hear them out. It has some attractions. Once again, we don't have the resources for more and more new battles."

"Come, come, John, we have no choice."

"Is that right? If everyone agrees with you, we'll move on to the question of *how*?"

"You can't leave any of the machines," Sarah said, leaning forward and eyeing the General, her grown-up son, across the corner of the table. "It has to end here, once and for all." She searched the faces of the three seated opposite her: Isaac, Grimes, and Mohan-raj. "Leave nothing that can be reverse-engineered and added to in the future. That's your only hope."

If anyone had even thought of a different tack, that put an end to it. "All right," General Connor said. "The only question is: How do we do it with the forces that we have? With what we've got left, this will be a huge task."

"Nobody's going to argue if we use the Terminat-ors," Grimes said. "As long as the same conditions apply. You agreed they'd be gone within a year."

"Agreed. You have my thanks for that."

"We've got an understanding."

"Okay. Well, we won't shirk from this for a moment, but we'll have to plan it thoroughly.. .and revise those plans as we find out more." The General gestured at the map, looking to Isaac for support. "All the maps underneath here are North America, right?"

"U.S.A. and Canada," Isaac said. "Most of them have circles drawn in. Sometimes it's just a Terminat-or that's already been destroyed. We don't have much detail farther south. As for South America..." He shrugged despairingly.

"I know, we're getting nothing useful out of there...no good information. That will change when

we deal with the warlords. Right now, I have similar work being done for me in Europe. We'll track down every one of those metal buzzards and get rid of them. Now, where do we start? The worst problem seems to be right here." The General used his pointer to tap a mark on the map which looked about three hundred miles away, south and west, past whatever was left of Washington D.C.—somewhere in Virginia. "Take us through it, Isaac."

The big bald man nodded. "I guess you've already got the gist of it, John. We lost an entire exploration team. As far as we know, not one man or woman in the team survived. That's twenty-nine dead."

"A tragedy."

"It is that...all that and more. They were competent, able-bodied people. That team was meant to be strong enough to beat off anything it encountered—no use in sending it out otherwise."

"I know, but that's the problem. If we send out a weak team, it will be annihilated if it finds one or two endos. If we send out a team that's strong, it can de-fend itself...but we lose so much if the team's des-troyed. The machines don't take prisoners."

"Even if someone survived the battle that took place, they couldn't get through the nights out there without good shelter and the right equipment. They're all gone for sure."

"Okay. Exactly what hit them? The report I had was two aerial H-Ks."

"Correct. They radioed in, just for a few seconds, saying they were under attack. They said they'd been hit with smart missiles. That's all we got. Either everyone was killed in a matter of minutes or their radio equipment was totally destroyed. Not that it makes much difference now. As I said, no one could have survived out there."

"There's no suggestion that anything else was backing up the H-Ks?"

Isaac shook his head. "No mention of that. I mean, we don't know where they're based. There might be other machines that we don't know about. But nothing was said about other machines involved in the attack."

"All right."

"Others could have appeared, of course, after we lost radio contact."

"Sure, but we've got no reason to suspect it?"

"No, we haven't."

The General pushed his chair back, finished with the maps, and ready to make decisions. "As far as we know, it's just two H-Ks, possibly still armed with missiles. Then again, maybe not. We don't know how many they had."

In his six weeks in this world, John had learned a great deal about how the Resistance had survived its years of war with Skynet, gradually fighting back and getting the upper hand. One key to it had been constant attacks on the war computer's factories and supply lines. Like the Resistance, Skynet had not been able to keep its forces fully armed. He could see what General Connor was getting at. Any missiles the H-Ks had used might well have been irreplace-able. The H-Ks probably weren't being re-armed after each attack they made.

"That's about the size of it," Isaac said. "We don't know one way or the other, but we can't make as-sumptions. All I know is that there were two of them, armed with missiles, as well as the usual laser cannons. That's a force we can't take on lightly. Damn it, those people we lost were precious to us...they were some of the best fighters we had left, up and down the East Coast."

"I know, and you don't want to throw away more lives."

"Not for no purpose." Isaac looked pained. "You know what aerial H-Ks can do, John. You've fought them often enough yourself."

"Yes, I have," General Connor said thoughtfully. "And I saw how our choppers went against them in Colorado. It wasn't a pretty sight. I also have some idea of how to fight them."

"Well, maybe."

"Listen, we have to go out there. I'm sure you're right, no one survived. But we don't know that. Even if we assume it's true, I want us to find the bodies, do the decent thing, get some closure—"

"Yeah, fine," Grimes said mockingly. "That would all be great if we weren't just throwing more people away. Just how are we going to do all this?"

"What assets do you have? Vehicles, aircraft, fighters?"

"Not much more than what you've seen," Isaac said. "Whatever we could spare went as our contribution to the attack on Skynet, when we moved on Colorado. Not much of it came back. And nothing came back from that exploration team. The cupboard's almost bare here. We've got enough able fighters to try to hold our own territory. Not much more. You saw our vehicles on the way in. As for aircraft— *whataircraft?*"

I know. It's going to be the same story all over the country."

Well, I can't help that."

We have the Black Hawk that brought Gabriela here," the General said. "There's the Hercules...and we've brought some people with us. I'm not sure I want to risk the Hercules, but we can put a force together—the Black Hawk and a column of vehicles on land."

"And get it wiped out just like that exploration team," Grimes said. "What's the point?"

Mohanraj added, "He's right. None of us are cowards here, but we don't like throwing lives away. If that team couldn't handle the H-Ks, we can't field a team that can. We're just being honest with you."

The General sighed. "That's all understood—I'm grateful for your honesty. But the other thing is that we have the Terminators. They will make harder targets for those H-Ks than any human force we can put together."

"It's not the answer to everything, John," Sarah said. "You're going to run out of them soon enough, and you can't depend on them forever."

"You just—"

"What, John?"

He paused. "Forget it; you're right. We can't always depend on them. We have to get rid of them as soon as possible. I've given my word on that."

Jade and Anton had been silent since they'd spoken to Danny Dyson and the others in Colorado. Now Jade said, "General Connor, you are forgetting about us."

"You and Anton?"

"Yes."

"And about me and Mom," John said. "We can all help."

The General looked searchingly into Jade's face. "All four of you are too important. I'm not going to let you die on some mission that may not even matter."

"I don't think you have that luxury," Sarah said.

John said, in a sing-song voice, "I'm too import-ant..."

That touched a nerve. The General glared at him angrily. "It's not a matter of that. You've helped us, and we'll give you help in return, but you can't keep putting yourselves at risk. You have a more important job..."

"We all came here to fight," Sarah said. "We'll keep putting ourselves at risk because that's what fighting is about. If it all goes wrong in this world, it affects us all. You know the implications."

"It's not like you've got fighters everywhere," John said. "I think you'd better take what you can get."

"Use our abilities, or more will die," Anton said.

The General's face reddened, and John thought for a moment that he was enraged, but then he laughed. "All right, you win. Here's what we're going to do..." He laid it out concisely. They'd put together two teams, one with each of the Specialists. If needed, they would use a small number of Terminat-ors. "We'll assess that later, when we see what fight-ers can be spared." They'd use the Black Hawk and two or three land vehicles. "It's no use sending large numbers," he said. "It's a question of hitting as accur-ately as possible with our heaviest weapons."

"Thank you, John," Sarah said. "You have to do this. If we can't mop up each and every machine, the future is as good as lost—we all agreed that right at the start of this discussion."

"All right, we'll meet in the morning and sort out the details. Isaac, when we break up, I want you to Identify exactly what able-bodied fighters you have who can be spared for this operation. Assume that there might yet be an attack on this HQ or on the airport. I know you have to hold territory."

"All right," Isaac said.

Now, we're going to come back to this. We'rego-ing to go through every map and every piece of in-formation until we have a plan to wipe out the last machines. Some of us need to sleep, so we can't do that right now. But I'm going to work through it tomor-row, and over the next few days, until I've assigned every war machine we know about, or every base we've spotted, someone to destroy it and a precise plan of action."

"It never ends, does it?" Sarah said, but her sense of despair had gone. Her jaw was set in

determina-tion.

"No," Jade said quietly. "It will not ever end. Whatever happens, there is always the possibility that mankind could destroy itself in the future. We have that capacity within ourselves. We also have the capacity to resist it."

"That brings us to the final issue," Gabriela said.

General Connor turned to Jade and Anton. "Over and above all our problems, there's the question that you two have raised." He paused for attention. Gabriela seemed well briefed on this. For the three East Coast leaders, seated at the table opposite John, it must still seem strange. "The question is: Are we safe, even if we win in this reality? Can we ever be safe while there's another world where Skynet won?"

Anton said, "No, you're not safe."

John sensed his mom tensing up.

"You are not happy with this, Sarah," Jade said.

"No, of course I'm not happy. This isn't how I thought it would be. The war never ends. It *never* ends. There's always something new, some deeper level where Skynet has got its hooks." She shook her head in disgust. "There's always something more that we have to do."

"Anton and I must return to our world in 2036," Jade said. "It does not matter when we leave this world, only when we arrive in *my* world. If we arrive at any time before we left, we risk creating more temporal anomalies and timelines. But every minute after that time is a minute that Skynet could be using for advantage."

"So you can stay and help us?" Gabriela said.

"We can stay to help you, but we must also prepare to return. Our difficulty is this: My people sent back five of their best warriors to try to create a new world, one without Skynet. Those five were a loss, but they judged that it made no difference. Skynet was winning. The last battles were almost over. The five of us could not have stopped that."

"So how will you stop it now?"

"That is the problem. If five could make no difference, the return of two will make even less. Anton and I cannot do this by ourselves. Just as we can give you help, we will need help from you. One advantage we have is time. As I said, we can delay our return. All that matters is the time when we arrive. We can use that delay to make preparations."

"Just how bad is the situation?" General Connor said.

"Very bad," Anton said.

Jade nodded briskly. "In 2021, when it triggered Judgment Day, Skynet had control of much of the U.S. military infrastructure. That included large weapons platforms."

"Like what?" John said.

"Bombers and warships, John. It also had auto-mated factories, some of them in hardened sites. Most of its assets were destroyed by the nuclear ex-plosions, but much survived. That is the difference between our world and this world. Skynet was ready to locate the surviving human beings and begin attack-ing them, almost from the first. I was only a baby when it happened. Anton went through it all."

"Skynet had direct control of platforms all over the world," Anton said. "In the skies and on the high seas, a lot of it survived the war. The remaining non-U.S. military forces hit back at the automated ships and aircraft. Many more were destroyed, at great cost. If not for that, mankind might not have lasted more than a few months. It was a setback for Skynet, but not enough. It came after us all, hunting us down."

"Did Skynet already have Terminators and H-K machines in your world?" John said. "I mean, when Judgment Day came."

"No. But it had advanced aircraft, Jugger-nauts—something like your land H-Ks—combat ships. The Terminators and endoskeletons came later."

Jade nodded. "First, Skynet developed robotic devices as its ground troops. They were not like hu-mans—not like the endoskeletons you have seen here. It developed those only when it created Termin-ators as infiltration units. The first Terminators we encountered were like this world's T-800s: cybernetic organisms that imitate human beings. Later, Skynet began to use fleshless endoskeletons. It must have decided that nothing was more versatile than a ma-chine which could imitate all the movements of a hu-man being, while feeling no pain or hesitation."

"What do you want us to do for you?" General Connor said. "If you want to make preparations, what are they, exactly?"

"That is not clear to us," Jade said. "However, you have captured Skynet's major facility in Colorado. Also, we have control over two T-1000 polyalloy Ter-minators. That is an advantage that my people have not enjoyed. Anton and I wish to conduct some exper-iments on their structure and programming. It is our intention to do everything required within the year that we have discussed today."

"The year we set aside to get rid of the Terminat-ors?"

"Yes, General Connor, exactly."

"Let's say that your world's Skynet is going to attack this one," Sarah said.

"Yes," Jade said. "That could happen. We know that travel across the dimensions is possible. That is how we came here from *your* world, from a past that never happened in this world. If we can do it, Skynet can, too. If our world's Skynet realizes that there are other worlds in which humans defeated it, or in which Judgment Day did not happen, we should expect it to gather forces sufficient to attack and destroy the human societies of those worlds."

Sarah followed up like an Inquisitor. "*Then why hasn't it happened?* Wouldn't it have happened already if it was going to?"

"No, we do not know at what point in this timeline Skynet would strike. The fact that it has not happened yet may mean that we will succeed in stopping it. But it might not. There is no particular point of time in this world, or any other world, when it *must* attack. The attack might come in this world's future."

General Connor scratched the side of his face, drawing John's attention to his scars. "But the longer we survive, the less likely it is that it happens that way."

"Perhaps. But it would take many, many years before you could draw that inference. Maybe centuries."

"Not centuries. That would create another risk for it."

"Yes," Jade said, looking at him with surprise. "You are right, General Connor. If it attacks at a time far in this world's future, it risks encountering a very high-technology society, perhaps beyond its capacity to handle."

"That's just what I meant."

"It is a thought that only struck me when you spoke. All the same, my general point is correct. You would have to wait for many years to be sure that you would not be attacked."

"Do what you have to do, then. We'll put whatever resources we can at your disposal."

"As long as it doesn't mean you're going to start building more Terminators," Grimes said. "Or that you're going to want to keep them for more than a year. We have an agreement, John, and I don't want anything sinking it."

"Mr. Grimes," Jade said. "Perhaps the danger we are speaking of is not very real to you. It is not something you can see; that does not mean it is un-real. I have seen what Skynet can do—the Skynet of the world I came from. I assure you, if we are not successful, this world is in great danger."

"I believe more in dangers that I've seen...like the Terminators and war machines in *this* world. I want to see them gone."

"Oh, you will. That is not disputed."

"Let's be clear about one thing," General Connor said. "I *trust* Jade...both Jade and Anton. If not for them, we'd still be struggling to defeat Skynet."

"Thank you, General," Jade said. "But it is not necessary."

He waved her to be quiet and said, "I think it *is* necessary. Everyone here has to understand what you told us. The fate of your world is tied up with ours. The survival of both our worlds is at stake in all this, Two worlds are hanging in the balance, depending on whether we can help you."

As the General spoke, John realized it was even more than that. By now, there were more than two realities. His own world had branched off from Jade's World, back in 2001. Skynet had to be stopped in *every* world that existed...either prevent it coming into being, or destroy it once it had. It was a battle too big for him and Sarah; others would have to carry the torch. For that reason, they'd have to return to their own world—to the time when they'd left, or not too long afterward. There were people in that world with the ability to create Skynet. The struggle would have to go on in *that* world, too.

"We understand," Mohanraj said. "But you've got to see that this is a bitter pill to swallow. People thought they were free of Skynet, that we'd beaten it once and for all. Now we still have marauding war

machines, we've had people killed. And you want to put resources into a war in another world entirely, one that they've never seen."

"That's true," General Connor said firmly.

"And now we have to go back to them and justify all this."

The General didn't give an inch. "Yes, you do."

"It's a bitter pill for everyone," Sarah said. "I'm not sure I can swallow it myself."

Jade looked hard at Grimes. "This won't take a year. It will be nothing like a year."

"So you say."

"So I *do* say."

"We're going to break up now," the General said. "I know what you all think, and why. You all know what we have to do...and why we have to do it. There's detailed work to get done, but we can't take this any further. Do you all understand?"

"I think they all do, John," Gabriela said.

"All right. I've learned some things today, myself."

He nodded at John and Sarah. "But now we have to go forward. I declare this meeting closed."

Afterwards, Isaac led John, Sarah, Jade, and Anton to their living quarters for the next few days, while they were based in New York—leaving General Connor to talk to Gabriela and the others. John felt almost like an intruder in this world. Perhaps it owed him something: He'd done his best fighting for it, and he'd brought Jade and Anton, who'd been critical to destroying Skynet. But those who'd lived for years or decades in this world shared a history that he could not be part of. *General Connor* was the John Connor of this world. However hard he tried, John was an outsider.

"Here it is," Isaac said, gesturing with one hand. "You might as well get some sleep while you can. I appreciate all you've done. Don't think it's not understood. We may be awed by it, but we're not pig-ignor-ant...or ungrateful. Don't worry about Grimes. He's just anxious, like everyone else."

"Thank you," Sarah said. "We all know what that's like."

"You'll be safe here."

"Here" was a hall about sixty feet long, lined with old, rickety-looking, double-decker bunks. Right now, it was almost empty, which wasn't surprising. Wherever John had gone, all through Europe, there'd been empty rooms, haunted by the memories of dead comrades. Back here, in North America, where the great pu6h had been made into Skynet's mountain, it was obviously going to be worse. So many people had been killed in the war, particularly the last few months, when every available man and woman had

been rallied to fight. Over-crowding was one issue the Resistance no longer had to face.

"There's not much modesty here," Isaac said. "It's the same room for the men and the women. The

wo-men tend to take the other end, but you have your choice. You'll see which beds are free. The others will all have a few possessions."

"We kind of get the idea," said John, who'd been through this plenty of times before.

"All right. Have a look around. We've got separate bathrooms, if you can call them that."

"We'll make do," Anton said.

Jade made a gesture that was not quite a bow, but something more than a nod. "Thank you for your trouble, Mr. Zell."

"That's okay. All right, we'll talk again later."

Isaac left them, and John turned to his mother.

"What are you thinking, John?" she said, without the slightest expression of humor.

"I'm thinking that something is bugging you, Mom."

"Oh?"

"Yes... something you didn't want to talk about up-stairs."

"We can leave you both alone," Anton said.

But Sarah held up a hand to keep him there. "No, stay. There's nothing to talk about."

"Mom," John said. "You know that's not true."

"No, I don't! All I know is that this struggle never ends. That doesn't mean I'm going to give up, but I'm starting to wonder what more I can do, how much more is going to be demanded. I've trained to fight, and I will. As long as I'm here, I'll do what I can to help. But I wonder about everything else."

"Meaning?" Anton said.

"Meaning *your* world, Anton. And what about all the other worlds there must be? Somewhere, in one of those worlds, Skynet must win... that's the way it's looking to me. I wonder whether it can ever end, whatever we do, except with Skynet winning out." She paced down the hall, found a bunk with no sign of occupation, and placed her weapons on it.

John followed, while the others held back, though he knew they could easily overhear. "I'm going with Jade—to her world," he said. "If there's anything I can do, anything at all, I need to do it. I don't know if you want to come—"

"I don't know either, John. I know there's work I can do here, though I damn sure don't know what good it'll do. None of this is what I thought—I never thought there'd be all these layers, all this complexity. I hadn't thought it through. Now I wonder what the point has been all this time."

She sat on the bed, burying her face in her hands, and he sat beside her. "Whatever it takes. Anytime, anywhere."

Sarah looked up at him. "Easy to say. When we first said that, I don't think we understood what it *really* meant."

Jade and Anton finally followed them, finding bunks and laying down their weapons. Jade turned to Sarah, at last, breaking the silence. "We don't know yet what is best...who should go with us, Ms. Connor."

"Sarah. Please call me *Sarah*."

"We will talk about it soon. Thank you for everything you've done. My whole world owes its existence to you."

"You know, I'm getting tired of hearing that."

"I am sorry. I meant no offense—"

"Of course you didn't. Listen, Jade.. .and you, Ant-on. I know you're super-strong...but the rest of us aren't made of steel. We break easily against you. It's not your fault, but just leave me alone for a minute.

I'm doing my best to adapt to this, but I've got my own decisions to make about where I fit in, what contribution I can make. Whether anything's worthwhile."

"Please don't make them with wrong information. We will know more soon."

Sarah snarled. "I'm *sick* of that crap, Jade. We're *always* going to know more soon, and then there's *another* layer to worry about underneath. I know you mean well, but leave me alone. I'll adapt, but just don't stand around being so inhuman and *goddamn reasonable*:'

"We'll let you think," John said.

Anton shrugged. "We have to fight soon," he said. "We'll worry about other things later."

"Yeah, Mom, we'll be going after those H-Ks down south."

Sarah's eyes flashed with the anger of all her years planning and fighting to destroy the machines. "That part I don't mind at all."

NINE

TEJADA *ESTANCIA* SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

Curtis woke with a shock, and realized two things. One, he'd been dreaming. Two, the shattering explosion that he'd heard in his dream had been a single rifle shot. He cursed himself for dropping off to sleep, once more, in his hiding place a few feet into the dark tunnel. The cumulative fatigue of the past few days had caught up with him. It might be excusable, but it was not good. If he slept, he placed himself in danger. He needed to be alert at all times, in case someone investigated the tunnel network, which they'd surely do sooner or later.

There were shouting voices in the near distance, angry arguments, though he could make out no words. He crawled to the end of the tunnel, and peered over the high bank using his field binoculars. Soldiers of the Rising Army had moved into action, almost in a panic. Some ran for one of the choppers, others for their Abrams tank. Some had packed into a Humvee. But there was no sound of engines starting not even, at first, the protesting whine of an engine failing to come alive.

There was more excited talking, in loud voices.

Finally, the Humvee's engine caught. A few seconds later, he heard the characteristic sound of the tank starting up. What was going on that had excited them all? Some sort of attack?

The Humvee drove eastward, and he changed position to follow its path, at the risk of being seen. It drove toward a group of people some hundreds of yards away. They appeared to be naked, a mix of men and women. He did not recognize anyone from this distance, even with the binoculars, but some of them appeared identical. Most of the women had striking blond hair. That fitted with what he'd heard of the planning back in the Resistance headquarters, in Los Angeles and Colorado. At least some of those newcomers must be Terminators. Getting a better focus, he recognized the darker haired woman as Cecilia Tejada, someone he'd not seen for years. But he'd grown up on her family's land, and he knew her face. He was sure it was her.

The newcomers were unarmed, but some formed a defensive huddle, while two ran forward, straight at the Humvee. The Humvee's gunner opened fire, catching them in a shredding storm of metal. Someone shouted through a loud hailer, but the two naked figures kept going, even against the force of the noisy mini-gun fire that they faced.

He'd seen enough. The newcomers, or some of them, were Terminators. That had to mean that the Resistance had acted. It could not be some last move by Skynet—that did not bear thinking about—so General Connor and his people must have used the time displacement machinery in Colorado that he'd heard so much about, and had sent a team to counterattack the warlords. He felt a twinge of resentment, but at least they were here. So how could he help them? As if in answer, one of the choppers started up, its rotors thrumming as it raised dust and began to climb into the sky.

The Resistance leadership had forced his arm. It was probably time to die, but he had to help those people, if that was what they were. Humans or Terminators, or a mix—it didn't really matter. Two of the Terminators attacked the Humvee, flesh being torn from them by hundreds of bullets. The point was, they'd come to fight the Rising Army...and they seemed to be having some success. As the helicopter positioned itself for battle, its rotors beating noisily at the air, he slipped back down the slope to the entrance to the tunnel. The Abrams tank had also moved, inching forward to adopt a better position, its main gun swiveling to sight on the new enemy.

Curtis rummaged quickly. He found the RPG tube and a pair of earplugs that he'd brought on one of his trips between here and the trenches. As he loaded a grenade, there was the booming sound of the tank's gun discharging a high-explosive shell, followed soon after by the shell's explosion on impact. He returned

to his lookout point. So much was happening, all at once. He needed to reply quickly, before it was out of control.

He could see the billowing cloud of dust where a 125mm. shell, from the Rising Army's tank, had landed; it had exploded harmlessly, well past its target. Cecilia and the Terminators—if that was what the others all were—had hit the ground and were now moving forward on their bellies. It looked like they were okay. They'd dropped to the ground deliberately.

From the air, the helicopter fired a single missile, but it had been caught in a predicament, as the newcomers closed with the Humvee. The missile went close, striking the ground with an impressive explosion, but not close enough. Curtis didn't doubt that the Rising Army would risk its own soldiers if necessary to stop an attack by Terminators. They might not hesitate long before aiming a missile right in front of that Humvee. He put in the earplugs, and lined up the chopper in his sights. It was an easy target at this distance, as it merely hovered, its crew preparing to strike again, or perhaps awaiting orders.

Curtis fired. "Bombs away!" he said to himself. Here, in this fairly confined space, the backblast shook him, but that didn't matter. His aim was true, and the RPG drilled straight into the side of the chopper. There was a ball of flame, and the chopper rocked in the air as fragments of metal fell from it, and a smoking hole opened up in its side. On the ground below, soldiers ran in panic, but the chopper stayed in the air. Its armored design had survived the impact, but it made no further move to launch missiles, or any other attack. He must have caused confusion, at the very least.

They knew his location now. Angry fire came his way from assault rifles, and he had to take cover. In a few seconds it might be over, but he'd struck a blow. Quickly, he prepared to fire another RPG.

Face down in the dirt, Cecilia felt death come very close. It was in the pulverizing explosions from the enemy's shells and missiles; it was in the cold air around her and the ground beneath. One of the T-799 Terminators had hurled itself close to her, pressing against her body to give her its warmth. That might keep her alive for a few more minutes, but she needed to find clothing quickly. The Terminators would have to do something. There was nothing she could do herself; she doubted she could even move now—she was so cold. It was such a pity if she had to die, the last of her mother's children, but so be it. The Terminators would continue without her. Let *them* do it; her own time was probably up.

There was the sound of another explosion, this one in the direction the Humvee had come from, but in the distance. She looked up to see the enemy's chopper bob around against the gray sky, like a piece of cork dangling on a string. On the ground, soldiers ran to take cover, or flung themselves to the dirt, to avoid the flying debris. Others fired rifles in another direction—to her left. What had happened? Did she have an ally, someone who'd survived the Rising Army's attack?

The Terminators that had attacked the Humvee piled its wounded or unconscious crew nearby. They'd also located hand weapons that the soldiers had been carrying, or had stored within the Humvee. There was a neat pile of RPGs and their launching tubes, impact grenades and their launchers, Kalashnikov assault rifles, spare magazines, handguns, and light machine guns.

Willing her legs to move, as if they were not a part of her body but foreign objects that she had to push by telekinesis, Cecilia moved forward, as another high explosive shell hurtled at them. This time, it landed close by, and the blast sent her staggering into the arms of one of the T-800 Terminators, which caught her with surprising gentleness. It half-carried her to the Humvee, where the T-800 that had attacked the vehicle approached her, holding a pair of sturdy, if battered, leather boots, gray fatigues, and a long, thick overcoat.

"Put these on," the Terminator said. With its face shot to pieces—though the metal skull beneath was intact—it looked like a creature from a horror movie, something made before Judgment Day, when the world itself had become horrific. "We will get you more clothes. Wear these for now."

In the distance, the Rising Army's chopper landed. Someone had shown the discretion to stop and check the damage. Score one for her team! The crew evacuated it, getting well away.

Without speaking, Cecilia pulled on the fatigues and forced her feet into the boots. Then she managed to say, "Are any dead?" She gestured at the four en-emy soldiers from the Humvee.

"They'll all live," the Terminator said.

One of the Rising Army Soldiers, clearly not dead, cursed at her in Spanish. It was a woman, perhaps in her thirties. Her face was covered with dirt and blood, and there was more blood on her uniform. From the awkward way in which she sat, it appeared that one leg was badly injured. Beside her, a large man with a black mustache had been stripped of his boots and outer clothing in order to clothe Cecilia. She noticed that the clothes and boots fit as well as she ever could have wished: the T-800 had assessed her measurements precisely, and found the closest match. She hoped that she'd suffered no lasting harm from her minutes of exposure to the cold. Thankfully, she'd had the Terminators to share their body warmth with her.

She nodded. "Okay." The other two were uncon-scious, though one groaned in his sleep. That was the gunner, who'd taken a bad fall from the back of the Humvee.

For now, the enemy bombardment had stopped. The attack on the chopper had obviously given the

Rising Army some food for thought. Any shells or missiles thrown at them now would take out four of their own people, which must make them hesitate. But they were still firing on that other position, where the RPG had come from that had hit their helicopter. Occasionally, automatic fire came from there. It was obvious now that only one Resistance fighter was holed up there: the fire coming from that position was too light to be from more than one.

Suddenly, another RPG stabbed out from that pos-ition, hitting the already-damaged chopper, whose main body exploded into fragments.

Time to go on the attack. Cecilia gave orders quickly, conscious that any one of the Terminators could probably come up with as effective a plan to destroy the enemy.. but that was not the only priority. They needed to ensure that the four they had cap-tured from the Humvee were totally disabled and disarmed. The man who'd had to give up his clothing Ifor her would need some protection against exposure, so she ordered that a Terminator strip the others of Itheir overcoats and give them to him—let them all suffer about equally. More importantly, someone had to take the heat off that poor bastard who was helping her, and was now under some withering fire, so she ordered two of the Terminators to take over the Humvee and create a diversion.

"Tactically inadvisable," one of the T-799s said. "There are better options."

"I don't care." God, were these creatures going to argue with her now? Perhaps they would be better off abandoning whoever was helping them. But that was not how human beings worked. Whoever it was, she had to try to save them. *"Just do it,"* she said.

Both of the Terminators that had made the attack

on the Humvee looked like creatures from Hell. Their endoskeletons were slick with blood, while strips and gobbets of skin and flesh hung from their arms and torsos, making a gruesome drapery. Some parts were still covered with pads of muscle and fatty tissue, but there was now no mistaking the machines for human. The T-800's face had mainly been shot away, revealing a grinning silver-chrome skull with glowing red "eyes" that were its visual light and infrared sensors. Strangely, the T-799's external facial structure had survived almost intact, creating the horrific picture of a normal, and rather beautiful, woman's face mounted atop a ghastly metal skeleton. This Terminator had absorbed some real damage, and it now walked with a limp. Add to that its head listing to one side, and the effect was horrific.

The two Terminators armed themselves with Kalashnikov rifles from the pile of weapons they'd found. The T-800 took the wheel of the Humvee, while the weird-looking T-799 took over the mini-gun mounted on top of it. They charged into battle, drawing heavy fire. The remaining Terminators carried out the rest of her orders. One assessed the near-naked man with the black mustache. Before Cecilia could countermand anything she'd said, it fired a 9mm. round into his kneecap. He screamed in pain, then cursed in a mix of Spanish and English. Another Terminator stripped the others of their coats and wrapped him as if in a cocoon.

"Why did you do that?" Cecilia said.

"The others were sufficiently immobile," said the Terminator that had fired the shot. "This one was not."

As Cecilia kept down, choosing a slight bump in the ground to hide behind, the Terminators found a few more handguns and some knives concealed on the four soldiers, adding them to the pile of weapons. They wrapped themselves in every weapon they could, some of them hanging bandoliers of impact grenades around their otherwise-naked bodies. They passed the last assault rifle and grenade launcher to Cecilia, who took them silently. Every weapon they could not carry, the Terminators bent out of shape so it could not be used.

The Humvee zigzagged wildly as it approached the enemy, but a shell from the tank landed close to it. The Shockwave blasted it off its wheels and it lurched onto one side. The Terminator in the back was flung free, and the other scrambled out—both of them unhurt. Still another shell whistled through the air, landing close to Cecilia's position. It seemed the enemy had regrouped and wasn't going to worry about who had to be killed to achieve its ends—never mind that four of its own soldiers were captive here.

The explosion threw up a shower of dirt, which rained back on them; it left an acrid smell in the air—one that she was used to, from years of war against the machines. It was all too obvious to Cecilia that the Terminators could do this more effectively without her. She picked herself up, and ran with the four Terminators toward the enemy position. She kept doubled over, bending low, keeping herself side-on to fire.

The two Terminators with the Humvee had obviously made a decision not to right the vehicle. They marched deliberately toward the enemy emplacement, firing automatic bursts from their rifles, while the enemy fired back with machine guns and grenade launchers. Impact grenades landed close to the Terminators, falling short. At this range, the machine gun fire had no effect on them, and they closed the distance rapidly.

The enemy soldiers took cover behind whatever vehicles or wreckage they could find, concentrating their fire on those two. They fired just a few bursts in the direction of their *other*, hidden enemy, someone

who still had good cover, and who occasionally fired off a three-round burst as if to signal he was still alive.. assuming it was a "he." Leaving him alive was an oversight, for a rocket-propelled grenade suddenly shot in the direction of the remaining undamaged helicopter, still on the ground—no more attempts had been made to use the helicopters. The grenade hit its tail, and damaged the vertically mounted back rotor. That would be sufficient to render it inoperable. Inwardly, Cecilia gave a cheer. *Thanks for that, partner.*

The odds were improving second by second. Now she could almost ignore the cold, though her hands were still icy and she needed more garments under the overcoat.

Yet another grenade flew from her unknown helper's position of cover, toward the Abrams tank, falling just short, but exploding impressively. The tank's turret rotated, and it answered with a shell that lobbed close to the point where the RPGs had been coming from. No response came from that direction for now, but the first two Terminators had reached the enemy position and were exchanging fire with troops who attempted to fight them from behind cover. The Terminators were sustaining damage, but nothing crippling.

Cecilia ordered the others on ahead of her. She didn't lack for courage, but she was not foolhardy. She was only made of flesh and blood, and she was not stupid enough to charge straight across open ground. She was close enough now that the Rising Army would soon cut her to pieces with automatic fire. But the Terminators had no such problem. Their undercarriages were almost immune to light arms fire.

As if in reaction to that thought, the tank fired again. The shell flew through the air in a straight trajectory at close range, striking the ground within a few feet of the damaged T-799 that had acted as gunner on the Humvee. The explosion smashed the Terminator off its feet. When the dust cleared, it dragged itself along, having lost one leg at the knee. It was still firing at the Rising Army's positions.

Cecilia was alone now, out here on the battlefield. Until this was over, all she could do was watch, and hope that the Terminators could finish it off quickly. At this range, she was an easy target, but the enemy soldiers were now in trouble, scarcely daring to peek from cover as the Terminators advanced. No shots came her way. The man or woman in the trench might be dead, after that shell had lobbed near his position. If not, he or she was also protected by the hail of fire from the machines.

The Terminators made short work of the enemy soldiers, shooting away their positions of cover. There would be deaths, Cecilia saw. It couldn't be avoided. Still, these men and women had chosen to ally themselves with the Rising Army; they hadn't been forced to act like this. At least, that was probably true of most of them. The Terminators began to use their grenades, attempting to blast away any cover as quickly as the Rising Army found it. She'd told them to minimize casualties, but how would they interpret that? This could become a massacre.

Still, she thought, *better them than me.*

The tank moved forward, as if to engage the Terminators, but then it headed off in another direction. Whoever was in there had chosen not to continue fighting; they were trying to cut their losses and make an escape. Someone moved from cover, near the entrance to the *estancia's* bunkers. It must have been Cecilia's "helper." He knelt to fire an RPG, getting a good chance to line up the fleeing tank, now that the enemy soldiers were all pinned to their positions by fire from the Terminators. There was the characteristic backblast and the exhaust of the rapidly flying grenade. It struck, and exploded, near one of the tank's heavy treads.

For a moment, it seemed that the tank had been taken out completely, but then it moved again, plowing

up more dust. The grenade had failed to penetrate its armor, or do much damage. Still, whoever was in there was completely without support.

Someone called out in Spanish from behind a point of cover, "We surrender. We want to come out."

"Cease fire. Everybody, cease fire," Cecilia shouted back, meaning the Terminators as much as the en-emy soldiers. Then, just for the enemy, she added, "Drop your weapons. Come out into the open with your hands in the air."

One soldier appeared. He carried an assault rifle, which he laid down theatrically, before stepping away.

"The rest of you, come out now," Cecilia said. "Right now! Just do it!" About a dozen enemy soldiers showed themselves, holding their arms up. The Ter-minators covered them, ready to mow them down with rapid fire. More appeared. Cecilia counted: eighteen in all.

The tank was getting away. "Take it out!" Cecilia

said to the nearest Terminator, which was well-equipped with 40mm. grenades and a launcher. "The tank, take it out!" Even as she said it, she realized the Terminator was ahead of her. It had loaded its launcher, and now it fired.

Other Terminators followed, hitting the tank with more grenades. The tank's turret swiveled, and for a moment Cecilia found herself staring down the bore of its main gun. But one of the T-799s had an old M-79 grenade launcher, and had popped in a grenade. As the turret continued its arc, the Terminator aimed. The grenade flew straight into the gun's barrel before it could hurl another shell. There was an explosion, rending metal.

Cecilia had imagined the grenade might find its way right down the barrel into the body of the tank, taking it out completely, but it didn't happen that way. She guessed that kind of magic shot was impossible even for a Terminator. Nonetheless, the result was more than satisfactory: the gun barrel warped out of line, inoperable. More grenades hit the tank's tracks, and it stalled, totally crippled.

The guy with the RPGs, who'd taken out the heli-copters and fired on the tank, walked toward Cecilia as she got to her feet. She ran to join him as quickly as she could, her rifle at the ready in case anyone opened fire. She passed the "wounded" Terminator, still crawling forward to engage the enemy. "Halt now," she said to it. She'd worry later about what to do with it. Not surprisingly, she found that she recognized the man who'd helped her out. It was Curtis Suarez, who'd been born here nineteen years before.

He pulled off a pair of earplugs, as she nodded to show that she knew him. She kept watching the tank, which could still attack them—though it would not win. Disabled as it was, it was now easy prey for their explosive weapons. What would its crew do now? She soon had her answer: the turret's hatch opened, and four men climbed out, hands in the air, just like all the others.

"Curtis," she said, "it's good to see you. Are you okay?"

"That last shell came close," he said. "I saw what was going to happen and got into one of the tunnels. I'd been holding out there."

"Where's everyone else?"

"A lot of them are dead. There might be some prisoners, I don't know. I was in one of the trenches. They left me for dead.. I don't know how I lasted this long. I was working out what to do, how to create maximum damage, before—"

"Before they could kill you? Well, it won't happen that way now."

He allowed himself a relieved grin.

"Not this time," she said. She addressed one of the Terminators. "The soldiers coming from the tank: Take them prisoner. We'll get all our prisoners togeth-er. I want to interrogate them." She gave another of the Terminators, the T-800 that had been damaged superficially in the first of the fighting, the task of rounding up the four who'd been in the Humvee.

It occurred to her that others could be in hiding, even down in the bunkers. She organized the Terminators to undertake a thorough search, and to find any prisoners who were being kept here.

She didn't know how many people had been killed, and it didn't make her happy using Terminators to kill human beings, but it could have been a lot worse. The news for General Connor would be grim, but she'd achieved her first objective. It looked like she'd reclaimed the *estancia*. What was left of it.

Cecilia's group had taken twenty-five prisoners and had killed at least nineteen, entirely in the firefight at the end. Given the totality of their victory, it now seemed unfortunate that they'd destroyed, or rendered inoperative, the most impressive military assets that the Rising Army had deployed here: the two helicopter gunships and the Abrams tank. Nonetheless, they were assets no longer in the Rising Army's hands, and their destruction had helped them win this battle. They'd gained three five-ton trucks and a fair range of materials, including mortars, light arms, ammunition, and radio equipment. That was a good day's work.

Cecilia posted three Terminators outside to stand guard. A fourth still lay on the open ground, damaged and inoperative, though even it would continue to fight for her if she ordered it to. With another two of the T-800s, she herded their prisoners into one of the bunkers. The Terminators had found ten loyal Resistance fighters who'd been taken prisoner by the Rising Army and held here. Apart from Curtis, no one was still alive in the trenches and tunnels that guarded the *estancia*.

She knew almost all of the Resistance fighters. That was the thing about having grown up here: she had all the local knowledge. These ten included older men, women, and a couple of children whom she *didn't* know, since she'd spent most of the last decade away from Argentina. Peter Ranly, an old farm worker whom she'd known when she was just a child, took her hand to thank her. He was white-headed and frail now, looking as if he could blow away like a dry leaf in the breeze, but she'd known him when his limbs had been round with muscle, and his hair thick and black.

"I'm only sorry it took so long," she said.

With the Terminators, she armed the survivors, using equipment seized from the Rising Army. The next question was what to do about those who'd surrendered. She almost wished that she hadn't ordered the Terminators to minimize casualties. The Terminators never slept, and could certainly guard them, but this number of people could use up too many resources. After what they'd done to the *estancia* and the number of people they'd butchered in their attack, she felt no merciful urges.

The first thing to do was interrogate them, and the Terminators could help. She had no intention of torturing or abusing anyone—she considered herself too decent for that—but she would put some fear

into them, with the Terminators' assistance. Then they'd start planning more actions against the Rising Army and other militias controlled by local warlords. Give It a few weeks, and anyone who'd joined the warlords would wish they'd never even thought of mutiny. She organized everyone, both the freed prisoners and the Rising Army members, into a large, concrete-floored room that her parents had designed years before as a meeting hall. It had been intended as a place to transact business, if world war and nuclear fallout had forced the family and its workers to live a long time underground. The Terminators herded the Rising Army members into one corner. Nobody made any move to disobey. Right in front of them, she had told the Terminators to tolerate no escape attempts, and to shoot to kill. If these murderers and ingrates »d anything, it was on their own heads.

"All right," she said to everyone. "I'm going to order the Terminators to find all the dead—on both sides. They'll all get a decent burial in the morning. The Terminators can work overnight once we have found everyone. That's the best I can do for the sake of their humanity. You guys who mutinied, just be thankful that we're still merciful. I will need to interrogate you, and I don't expect any name, rank, and serial number stuff. I'll be wanting precise information. You'll cooper-ate if you know what's good for you and want further clemency. As far as we're concerned, you're traitors to our cause, not some kind of honorable enemy."

"How honorable are *you*?" one of them said—the woman who'd been in the Humvee that had first at-tacked them.

One of the Terminators aimed its rifle right between her eyes. "Don't fire," Cecilia said quietly...then, to the woman, "Don't whine because you picked the wrong side."

"You go to Hell," the woman said. "Why did come here with those...things? This is between men and men now. There is no more Skynet. You betray us all, using the machines."

Cecilia had to laugh. "You think *you* are the good guys? If only you knew what you were talking about." To the Terminators, she said, "Guard them. You know your orders."

As she left to radio General Connor, the nearest Terminator said, "Affirmative."

TEN

NEW YORK CITY SEPTEMBER 5, 2029

John slept for two hours on an unclaimed upper bunk, not even removing his overcoat or boots. When he awoke, Jade and Anton were nowhere to be seen. He guessed they'd just gone off to make their own plans. Sarah looked asleep in a bunk nearby, but her eyes opened as soon as he moved. She was as wary as a cat, always had been.

General Connor, Gabriela, and Isaac walked into the room, talking in normal voices, not exactly softly, though not shouting, either. He must have heard them in his sleep. "What's the story?" Sarah said,

lowering her feet to the floor.

"We had a radio call from Cecilia," the General said.

Instantly, she tensed—though her voice gave away no emotion, no fear, or excitement, or hope. "What's happened?"

"It's good news, up to a point."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that they've had some success. Cecilia Is okay."

John looked from face to face as the General

spoke—from his mom, to Gabriela, back to the General. "So what's the *bad* news?" he said carefully.

There's more good news, first. We've regained the *estancia*, including the bunkers. They're intact, but there's nothing much left on the surface. The *casco* is a ruin."

"Bastards!" Sarah said, glancing away for just a second. Then she looked the General in the eye. "What about the others? Any survivors at the *estan-cia*?"

"Most of the defenders were massacred by the Rising Army," Gabriela said in a low voice. "Cecilia and the Terminators rescued some prisoners. One other had survived, young Curtis Suarez. The Rising Army had left him for dead in the trenches. That was their mistake—Cecilia said that he fought well."

John didn't recall any Curtis Suarez from the *estan-cia*. . .not in the time he'd spent there back in the early 1990s. He'd known the Suarez family, who'd worked for Raoul Tejada, but Curtis mustn't have been born back then.

Sarah's eyes bored in. "What now?"

"The Rising Army took heavy losses," the General said. "Cecilia has taken prisoners, a large number of them."

"Meaning?"

"A couple of dozen. We've lost just one Terminator, and reclaimed some of the enemy's weapons and vehicles. She'll interrogate her prisoners, and recommend an action plan to wipe out the warlords. It's clear she'll need reinforcements. If nothing else, we'll have to start a POW camp until this is over, and we have work to do with people that we capture. I don't want to control a prison with Terminators...I've seen enough of concentration camps run by Skynet's machines. That's a step I'm not prepared to take. We'll need human volunteers, as well as sending some additional Terminators."

A minute later, Jade and Anton entered the hall. "Is there news?" Jade said.

"I've just taken the others through it," the General said. "I'll brief you in a minute. The guts of it is that Cecilia and her group of Terminators have recaptured the Tejada *estancia* from the Rising Army. She'll call again tomorrow, when she knows more. Then we'll plan what more needs to be done in South America."

"What about us?" John said. "I mean, now?"

"Now? Tomorrow, we all rest a little, and make some more detailed plans. The next day, we take out those aerial H-Ks. That hasn't changed. After that, I'm returning to Colorado. I expect you'll want to come with me. You, Sarah...all of you here, except Isaac."

"Fine," John said. "That's when the action *really* starts."

TEJADA *ESTANCIA*

Cecilia found a flashlight, and gestured to one of the T-800s. "Come with me. There's another job to do." Outside, not far from the bunkers, they'd left that badly damaged Terminator. She'd ordered it to stop moving on the Rising Army's forces, so it must still be there. With one leg blown away, it was no use in combat. Repairing it was out of the question—they lacked the technology for that. The one thing they must never do was leave Skynet's war machines to fall into the wrong hands years, decades, or even centuries, down the track.

They left the other Terminators to guard their Rising Army prisoners, answerable to Curtis if anything went wrong and they needed orders. The sky was now totally dark; she'd spent hours interrogating prisoners, letting the Terminators do much of the work. That had been worthwhile: she had far more knowledge of the Rising Army than she'd started with. But there were other jobs that couldn't wait.

"Can you see the damaged Terminator?" she said. "The one we left behind?"

"Affirmative," the T-800 said. "My infrared sensors have detected it. It still generates heat." "Take me to it, and then destroy it." "Inadvisable. It could be a valuable asset." "I know that. Just do it. I order you to." Without a word, the T-800 led her to where the badly damaged T-799 lay sprawled on the ground, perfectly still. The T-800 reached down the T-799's head, and took a powerful, claw-like grip, then ripped away the upper layer of hair and flesh to expose the shining metal "skull" underneath, lit up by Cecilia's flashlight. Cecilia crouched to peer more closely at the small circular area in the skull's surface, above the right temple, with an indentation like the head of a screw. She'd seen this before, though not often. The quickest way to destroy a Terminator was usually from a distance with the one weapon they were lack-ing here, some kind of powerful phased-plasma device. "Can you get it open?" Cecilia said. "The surface is too smooth," the Terminator said. "I cannot open it without sustaining damage. Alternat-ively, I require tools. What are your orders?"

She didn't need to consider what damage the Ter-minator might suffer—perhaps just to the flesh on its fingers. The *estancia's* workshops had been badly damaged, almost totally destroyed, but it shouldn't be too difficult finding tools such as knives and screwdrivers amongst the wreckage. She pointed out the nearest workshop, and said, "Find what you need."

"Affirmative."

"Do you want the flashlight? How well can you see?" The starless, moonless nights were far too dark for humans to operate without artificial light, but the Terminator's sensors were something else entirely. As well as functioning in the infrared, its "eyes" gathered light, much like nightvision devices.

The Terminator seemed to consider the question. "Keep the light," it said. It headed for the workshop that she'd pointed out, knocking aside broken ma-sonry and other wreckage, then rummaged in there noisily for several minutes. It returned with a fistful of screwdrivers and bladed tools. Testing these, it took another few seconds to remove two tiny screws on opposite sides of the circular area, then discarded a cover plate and finally levered out a structure that seemed to be made of intricately-connected cubes.

"The nanochip," Cecilia said.

In one powerful hand, the T-800 crushed the Dyson chip into a useless, unrecognizable tangle of metal. "Terminated," it said.

NEW YORK CITY SEPTEMBER 6, 2003

There was a workshop set up on the floor above the barracks. A large woman stood guard, armed with a shotgun and a grenade launcher, though there was so much firepower gathered here today that she might as well not have bothered. A scruffy-looking dog sat on its haunches beside her. Among the benches, car parts, disassembled engines, power tools, electrical and welding equipment, guns awaiting repair or modification, and improvised weapons was an expanse of open space where a dozen men, women, and children huddled around the heat of a small fire, some of them wrapped in threadbare blankets. Many of them were disfigured by wounds or scars. Most were missing teeth. Two or three had a crazy look in their eyes, as if they were seeing demons.

Another fifteen people stood around the metal crate that John and the others had brought back from Europe. General Connor, Jade, and Anton stood close, all armed with laser rifles, as a team of welders cut through the bolts to open the crate. A little further back, John and Sarah leveled shotguns at the crate. Gabriela, Isaac, and a group of others stood nearby, all well-armed. Some were Isaac's people; some were Canadian and Spanish fighters who'd flown here in the Hercules.

This was like opening a vampire's coffin, John thought. You didn't know what might happen when you let it free, whether it would lie there helplessly, with its arms folded across its chest—an easy target for your knife or your stake. Or whether it would leap at your throat with long, sharp, bloody fangs.

The welders finished their job, and Anton stepped forward with a six-foot crowbar in one hand and his laser rifle in the other. He didn't use the crowbar as a lever; instead, he smashed it hard against the heavy metal lid, shaking the entire crate. He did it again, just trying to loosen the fitted lid. Then, satisfied he'd found a crack, he forced the hooked end into it—still one-handed—and pried it loose. He dropped the bar and put down his rifle, got his fingers under the lid, then suddenly lifted it with a tremendous effort. He seemed to lose his grip for a moment, but then he simply tore the heavy lid from the crate with much the same ease that as a normal man flinging aside a piece of orange peel.

"Right," he said. "Let's see what we have."

Nothing stirred in the crate. Jade stepped forward to cover Anton more closely, and the others followed, crowding around. Some of the people from near the fire came over to join them; others didn't seem to care. Within the crate, John saw a silvery body like an abstract, sexless statue. It was a shapeshifting T-1000 Terminator, made from a polyalloy liquid-metal" stronger than steel.

"What are we going to do with it?" Gabriela said.

"We won't take any chances," Anton said, manhandling the frozen-up T-1000 from the crate. He walked it to the nearest wall, and leaned it there where everyone could see it clearly. Fifteen guns were aimed at it. The slightest movement from the thing would be an emergency. John knew well what an efficient killer one of these monsters could become, once it was operational. He'd fought one in his own world, and then fought two, just a few weeks before, in the mountains of Spain. The one that had been tent to kill him in 1994 had been destroyed only when it was hurled into a vat of molten steel...and it had melted down, its substance scattered through the steel at a molecular level. In 2001, he'd fought a T-XA sent from Jade's World, made of the same material. As he'd seen each time, anything made from mi-polyalloy was almost indestructible.

But Terminator never moved. It seemed to have no mission now that Skynet had been destroyed. It had been like a bodyguard to Skynet, ordered to protect the war computer's hardware. "It may have some backup instructions," Anton said. "The less we deal with it the better, until we can examine how it is programmed."

They'd discussed this many times in the past six weeks, what kind of security they needed in handling the T-1000s. Nothing was perfect, but they'd worked out a system. "All right," General Connor said to the welders. "Just cut off one hand, somewhere between elbow and wrist. Then we'll put it back in that god-damn coffin, and we'll put *that* back where we've been keeping it."

"Still under guard," Isaac said. It was reassurance, not a question.

"Yeah, still under guard. And we'll guard the hand as well. We don't let this thing out of our sight for a moment. This may be the most dangerous machine in the world at the moment—it and its twin back in Spain."

"Put it here," one of the welders said, pointing to a spot near their equipment. Anton passed his rifle to Jade, who took aim with both of the huge weapons. Anton walked the T-1000 to the spot requested.

As the welders did their job, the deadly Terminator remained inert.

"I get a sick feeling just being near that thing," Sarah said, though nothing about her face or the way she stood showed any lack of courage—just hatred and determination. She was ready to fire at an instant's notice.

"Me, too, Sarah," Jade said. "Everybody does."

The hand came off cleanly, and fell to the floor. Gabriela stooped to pick it up. John half expected it to liquefy and try to run back into the Terminator's body. But it made no attempt. Gabriela held up the hand/arm, testing its weight and solidity, not saying a word. In this world, her husband had been killed by a T-1000 Terminator. He wondered what thoughts might be going through her mind.

"All right," General Connor said. "We've got what we wanted. Get that thing back in the crate, Anton,

for God's sake. Get the damned thing out of my sight."

SEPTEMBER 6-7, 2029 NEW YORK/VIRGINIA

That night, John washed his face, then his upper body, over a metal bowl of water in a room that opened off the barracks. From here, a dimly lit tunnel led to a cesspit dug deeper into the earth, one hundred yards away. A three-inch-long black roach crawled on the wall near the broken mirror that stood over the water bowl. It was no big deal.

He wiped himself down with a torn, threadbare towel, then headed for bed. He still ached from the flight across the Atlantic, and poor sleep for as long as he could remember. In the morning, he'd have to face the aerial H-Ks, side-by-side with Sarah, the Specialists, and newer comrades. Yet again, he'd be putting his life at risk. The least he could do to prepare was get some decent sleep, try to be clear-headed when he faced the enemy. He tossed on the mattress, trying to get comfortable. The frame creaked when he moved, which was annoying since he feared keeping the others awake in their bunks nearby.

It seemed to him that he never slept, but then a strong hand was shaking him awake, and someone was holding a lamp. John squinted, and saw it was Anton. "Jade and I are waking everyone." John guessed that the Specialists probably had some means of ensuring that they slept for just the right amount of time.

In a moment, Sarah joined them, then Jade and the others. Time to get to work.

At the airport, General Connor farewelled them. John shook his hand before entering the Black Hawk. "Good luck," the General said. "Return safely."

There was nothing to say. John returned the man's strong grip, then climbed aboard the chopper. On this flight, they would have none of the sophisticated technological aids that he had used when flying in his own world—no ground radar, satellite weather alerts, GPS. They would track by compass bearings to the last known location of the team that had been destroyed by Skynet's H-Ks. If they encountered bad weather, so be it: they would just have to turn back, and try another time. He had heard tales of storms with 300-mph winds—the entire global weather pattern had become unstable and terrifying. On the flight across the Atlantic, they'd encountered nothing quite that bad, but you never knew. Nothing above-ground could survive winds like that, but they would just have to make a judgment if anything of the kind happened.

Inside, the Black Hawk was no more comfortable than the Hercules had been. Its rear compartment was almost bare, but it bristled with weapons. Mounted at the forward windows, positioned on opposite sides, were phased-plasma laser cannons, salvaged from one of Skynet's larger machines—perhaps from a land or aerial H-K—then modified for human operation. Its wing pods contained Hellfire missiles, which could be used effectively against low-flying aircraft such as air H-Ks, though they had only five of them, not the full sixteen that could be mounted under the wings, four in each pod. Dwindling supplies of ordnance had been a problem as the war had drawn to its conclusion.

Sarah piloted the Black Hawk, with a Spanish copilot called Ramirez. John and Jade took seats behind

the cabin to act as gunners, controlling the laser cannons and the missiles. Accompanying them on the ground were two Humvees and one of the modified flatbeds, all of them well armed with guns that could take on H-Ks. Anton rode in the back of one of the Humvees, manning a laser cannon, similar to the ones in the Black Hawk. The other ground vehicles were mounted with high-caliber anti-aircraft guns. Extra fighters went with Anton and the other gunners in those vehicles, to take over if needed, or otherwise to fight with grenade launchers or RPGs.

It was a formidable force, but little more so than the expedition that the H-Ks had annihilated a week before. Still, they had the Specialists this time, as well as other advantages. After all he'd been through with Sarah, and after what he'd seen Jade and Anton do, John felt okay about it. They'd survived so much; he couldn't believe that this would be the end. One thing was for sure: Once they made contact with the H-Ks, the outcome was likely to be quick. They were capable of taking out the war machines with their mis-siles, or perhaps with direct hits from the laser cannons, but the H-Ks could do the same to them, just as efficiently. Still, they *had* to win and return. So much depended on it.

He was not so much afraid as conscious of his own Importance in the scheme of things. Suddenly his mocking, singsong jibe of "I'm too important" didn't seem all that funny. He had to help Jade and Anton, and he had to return to his own world, to carry on the fight there. When he and Sarah had left their own world, they'd entrusted that fight to the government people who knew about Cyberdyne and Skynet—to Jack Reed and Samantha Jones, in the Pentagon. But he couldn't trust other people to do that job, and Cyberdyne would never let up.

As they worked their way south and inland, high winds blew across the semi-desert, whipping up dust, and the air grew colder. Hours passed as the Black Hawk flew slowly, keeping pace with the vehicles on the ground, which negotiated broken roads, stretches of demolished cityscape, longer stretches of hills and valleys, all of them choked with dust under a dull, sunless sky. Then Sarah called out from the cockpit. "Trouble ahead!"

Jade had seen it, too, from her window on the left. She moved like a blur, swiveling her laser cannon. Nothing had appeared out of the right window. Sarah veered to the right, giving Jade a clean shot at her targets. Jade was firing, oblivious to anything else, as the chopper gained altitude. Sarah must have been trying to get an advantage.

John went into action, too. He needed to lock onto his targets with the Hellfires, hit them quickly, before they could take out the chopper and the ground vehicles. But then there was an explosion. The force of it kicked the Black Hawk across the sky like a football.

Before Anton saw the aerial H-Ks, Jade told him they were coming, transmitting to him by her throat mike. Only seconds later, they became visible from the ground as they swept across the dusty plain like black angels of death. Suddenly, they climbed into the sky; they must have seen the chopper, and wanted the advantage of a higher altitude. The H-Ks were essentially designed for hunting down human beings on the ground below, not for fighting other airborne adversaries, and their laser cannons were mounted in a way that favored shooting down on their enemies.

The Black Hawk swung to its right and opened fire with one of its laser cannons. Anton held fire for the moment, as the H-Ks were out of range. Beside him in the Humvee, one of Isaac's fighters from New York, a wiry man called McLoy, prepared to fire a rocket-propelled grenade. Then one of the H-Ks fired a smart missile, aimed at the Black Hawk. The second fired two missiles at the vehicles on the ground. Sarah, flying the chopper, evaded—turning steeply to the right, and trying to climb higher. Anton and the other two gunners on the ground opened fire to defend against the missile, but shooting them out of the air like this was beyond merely human skill. Only Anton had a chance.

Bolts of white-hot laser light shot out at the missiles, as the chopper continued to climb. The missile aimed at the Black Hawk exploded, well short of its target. Jade must have done the job. Anton subvocalized to her: *Well done!*

Thank you, Anton.

Neither of them lost concentration as they tried to defend against the H-Ks' missile attack. Anton tried drenching the remaining other missiles in laser fire, even as the drivers took evasive action, slamming down the throttles, zigzagging desperately across the open country. The other gunners blazed away with their high-powered projectile guns, but that was useless. Anton felt in a zone, like riding a wave, as he'd done as a young man—before Judgment Day in his world, when the sea had become a storm-wracked monster with titanic, unpredictable surf. He rode the back of the Humvee, standing to fire his laser cannon, seeming to anticipate the driver's actions before he took them.

Deep into the zone, he compensated for everything—the movement of the vehicle below him, the movements of the missiles themselves as they homed in—and nothing was going to stop him shooting at least one missile clean out of the air. Nothing.

One missile exploded, still fifty feet away, the Shockwave sending Anton's Humvee spinning and throwing Anton off his feet, but a second explosion totally destroyed the other Humvee in a ball of fire.

Only seconds had passed. The Black Hawk had been knocked off its course, but it righted itself as Anton watched, momentarily sprawled on his back. The other Humvee was now a burnt-out ruin, with no sign of any survivors. A small fire stayed alight in its front compartment, and smoke billowed from it into the sky. As Anton righted himself and manned his laser cannon, the Black Hawk struck back, getting four Hellfire missiles away, but one of the H-Ks stabbed back with laser bolts, hitting the chopper's armored skin and puncturing it. One missile exploded only a second after it left its pod, shaking the Black Hawk, which must have suffered further damage.

Anton fired up at the H-Ks, but they were too high in the air; laser fire was not effective at this range. Though he scored direct hits, they did no damage to the H-Ks' metal skins. McLoy fired his RPG tube, bending onto one knee and keeping the backblast away from Anton. The grenade fell short, doing no damage. Two men in the back of the flatbed truck fired with its mounted 20mm. gun, and with 40mm. impact grenades, all to no effect.

A second missile from the Black Hawk exploded in mid-air, far from its target. Despite the speed at which the Hellfires traveled, their trajectory was too predictable, relatively easy for a machine intelligence such as an H-K to calculate. But two of the missiles struck cleanly, taking out one of the H-Ks in a ball of fire, blasting wreckage through the sky, making paths of flame like giant orange tendrils. As it dropped quickly toward the ground, the chopper fired off its last missile. The H-K responded with a wall of laser fire, destroying the missile harmlessly fifty feet short of impact. *Damn!* The Black Hawk landed two hundred yards away as the remaining H-K turned in a huge circle in the air, preparing to attack like a swooping bird of prey. Anton's Humvee and the modified truck sped across the dusty ground toward the downed chopper, ready to defend it.

Again, Anton subvocalized into his throat mike. *What's happened?*

We'll have to assess the damage, Jade said. *Maybe it is not too serious, but we could not risk flying any further.*

Even as he spoke with Jade, he took aim at the H-K. It had not fired any more missiles. Perhaps it, too, had run out, in which case it would rely on its laser cannons to burn them all down like grass. *Are you hurt?* he said. *Is anyone hurt?*

No Anton, nothing serious here. Sarah is an excellent pilot. Some cuts and bruises, minor wounds. The grounded Black Hawk's rotors slowed down, though

they still sucked up masses of dust.

Okay, he said into the mike. As the H-K opened fire, Anton anticipated it. He had a good sense of the range of this world's weapons. He stabbed up at the H-K with bolts of hot light. He had the best chance of any of them to take out the machine. The Black Hawk was not well-designed for fighting from the ground. Anton's weaponry, skills, and reflexes far exceeded those of any others here, save only for Jade.

Anton, take out the H-K now! Jade said to him.

Done, he said, firing once more. He hit one of the H-K's gun turrets, then scored an even more vital hit that knocked out a turbo-fan. But the remaining laser cannons swiveled on him, picking him out as their most dangerous enemy. A bolt of light pierced the center of the Humvee, and the driver lost control. Another struck Anton's thigh, as he fired once more, causing an explosion in the machine's aft. The H-K swung 180° around its central axis, then its middle section buckled; it began to fall from the sky, but its laser cannons were still firing. One raked the wounded Black Hawk. Another pierced Anton through the chest.

That was the last he knew.

"Anton! No!" Jade rushed from the chopper as the H-K screamed from the sky, still firing its guns, then crashed into the ground and was silenced. Anton had shut it down, but at what cost?

John ran after her, slipping in the dust and falling behind.

The Humvee had skidded, then stalled fifty yards away—Jade covered that distance in a few seconds. John regained his footing and caught up with her, leaping into the back of the Humvee where she knelt cradling the big Russian's body in her strong arms. Anton must have weighed 250 pounds, but she lifted him to her chest like a rag doll. Desperate tears filled her eyes and streamed down her flawless face.

"No, Anton. *Please!* Then she looked up at John, giving the tiniest rueful smile, shaking her head. "I am fooling myself. He is dead, John."

John's heart sank. Anton was not breathing, and nor was the man who'd fought beside him here—McLoy. They'd lost so many in this fight, and the loss of Anton was crushing.

Even when people had died in the other Humvee, it had seemed worth it for a moment, when he knew they'd all fought so well and destroyed both H-Ks. Sarah had piloted the chopper brilliantly; John had done a good job with the missile launches. And for a few seconds, he'd dared to hope that Anton would survive yet again. He'd seen the man endure terrible wounds and burns, then recover within hours. He'd seemed unstoppable. Anton had been engineered, genetically and cybernetically, to recover from any-thing that didn't kill him immediately, but now he had met his match.

John remembered the first Specialist he had actually seen die—Robert Baxter, in Mexico City, hit squarely by the beam of a phased-plasma laser rifle. The other Specialists had saved his body. John

re-membered their comments. Jade had said, There are some things even *we* can't survive." Now Anton had died the same way, cut down by another of these terrible laser weapons.

The Humvee's driver got out, miraculously still alive. Laser bursts had killed the two men in the back and destroyed the Humvee's engine, but he'd been spared, even regaining some control and bringing the vehicle to an emergency stop.

Jade shook her head, distraught. "He's dead. I'm the only one left." It was almost like a protest, as if she thought John could do something about it. Beyond that, it was a protest at the unfairness of life, at a universe that didn't care, that killed good men like vermin. She got to her feet with a slowness that seemed unnatural in her, this woman who could run like shot from a catapult, or strike blows faster than the eye could see. She raised her hands hopelessly. "I don't think I ever accepted it—that Anton could die. Just like anyone else."

Sarah and Ramirez joined them. The flatbed truck pulled up beside them. The driver and the three men in the back all seemed unhurt. They'd done little damage to the H-Ks, but at least they'd fought well, dodging its fire and taking the fight to it with their relatively weak weapons.

Sarah looked at Anton, then at Jade as she shook her head once more. "I am sorry, Sarah," Jade said. "I'm so sorry."

"No," Sarah said. "I'm sorry. All of this. I..." She shook her head despairingly. "Anton died well. No one else could have done that. He did the job." She glanced at McLoy, then at the burning Humvee. "Someone check out that Hummer. Someone just might have survived." They all knew better, of course. The driver of the flatbed nodded and returned to his truck, driving it over to the burnt-out shell of the Humvee.

Jade's eyes were still full of tears. "So many dead," she said. "It is always like this. Skynet just keeps killing. It always happens, in every world, every uni-verse. I don't know what we can do."

Sarah opened her arms, and Jade stepped toward her and embraced her—carefully, John realized. His mom was as strong as almost anyone, all muscle, sinews, and pumped up veins. No unenhanced human being could ever attack her with impunity. But Jade was something entirely different. She was strong, perhaps as strong as Anton himself, though only half his weight. Every cell of her body was superior to the human design, and she could have seriously hurt Sarah if she hadn't restrained herself. "Sarah," Jade said, "I'm all alone...."

ELEVEN

VIRGINIA SEPTEMBER 8, 2029

As Sarah and Ramirez checked the Black Hawk and radioed back to base, John tried to comfort Jade, whom he'd never seen so upset. "Anton meant a lot to you, didn't he?"

They'd confirmed that there were no survivors in the other Humvee. Both Hummers were gone, and they were still unsure about the Black Hawk. The only vehicle they could be confident about was the modified truck, which the H-Ks had probably chosen as their lowest priority target.

Jade leant back against the side of it, no longer in tears. Her eyes were not even red or puffy, but that was more to do with her powers of physical recovery than anything else. Her expression was still miserable. "He was like a second father to me," she said.

"What about your real father?"

"If you come to my world, you will meet him. My mother died in the war against Skynet. When I left, my father—his name is Hiro—was still alive. He was...is...one of the leaders in Vila Nova do Sul."

"Do you *want* me to go with you?" John said. "To your world?"

"Yes...no." She tried on a smile. "I do not know. I don't want to see you killed. Too many people have died...too many who are close to me. Sometimes I feel—"

"Yes?"

"It is so *stupid*" she said, clenching her hands into fists. "I feel as if anyone who gets close to me must die. Many of us must feel that way in my world.. and in this one,. just because so many people have been killed, and each survivor must know so many of them. Does that make sense to you, John?"

"Yes...I mean, I guess so. Maybe my mom feels that way, too. The Terminators killed so many people in her life. Her mom...my dad, Kyle. That was before I was born, of course. Even the girl she roomed with back then. And now Skynet has killed all your.. I don't know—comrades. Is that what you call them?"

"Maybe."

The Black Hawk's rotors started up, seeming to turn without any problem. Despite the damage its bodywork had taken, it appeared that it might be okay mechanically.

"I think Mom had feelings for Anton, too," John said, speaking up and leaning closer, to overcome the noise from the Black Hawk. "Some sort of feelings. Like, I don't know that she was in *love* with him...or something. But she sure liked him."

"I know, John."

He remembered how smart Jade was, her super-sharp senses. There wouldn't be much she didn't know, including everything that *he* felt. Right now, though, she seemed much closer to her real age, more like a teenage girl—one who'd lost an older mentor whom she'd valued and loved. She might have been even smarter than Anton, John thought, but she'd often deferred to him, respected all his ex-perience. As she'd said, there was nobody else in this world, no one who was anything like her equal. What must that feel like?

"So, what now?" he said. "We got the H-Ks..."

"Let's wait for Sarah. We will see if we can use the helicopter. If not, we have this truck."

"You want to go back to New York?"

He mouth turned down, and her face was like steel. "I want to bury Anton and the others, and to finish the job we started."

"Hey, that's cool with me."

As they watched, the Black Hawk rose in the air, and hovered for a minute, then flew forward at low altitude and banked into a circle, coming back to land in the same spot, clouds of dust blowing everywhere. After another minute, it powered down, and Sarah got out with Ramirez. As they walked over, Sarah gave a thumbs up sign, though kind of low key—no sense of celebration. "It seems okay," she said. "We can go ahead and use it."

"That's cool," John said, also a little quietly, out of respect.

"We should bury our dead," Jade said. "Then we can look for the others, the ones from the expedition. Then I want to find the H-Ks' base."

"That could be dangerous," Sarah said.

"You're not frightened are you, Mom?" John said.

"Of course I'm frightened, John." Her voice was cold, and her look was withering. "I'm always frightened, but that's not the point. When has it ever stopped me from doing what has to be done?"

"I didn't mean—"

"The point is that we could lose more people. I wasn't thinking about myself."

"Of course not," Jade said. "We have to do this, though. Someone has to do it."

"I know that. I'm in, of course."

"Yes. I saw the flight path of the Hunter-Killer machines when they approached. That suggests the direction that they came from. We must go and look."

"I've already discussed it with John—General Connor, that is," Sarah said. "I called him with the chopper's radio."

"Uh-huh," John said. "How did he take it?"

"He wasn't happy to hear that so many had died—especially Anton. But he agreed to leave it to us whether we finish the job today. I'm with you, Jade. Let's go on."

"There might be some tools in the Black Hawk," Jade said. "We should dig the graves."

John opened his mouth to argue—they didn't have much time. Then again, he knew how quickly she could work. She'd get most of it done, with just a little help from the others.

"Okay," he said. "But let's get moving."

Jade threw a handful of dirt into Anton's grave. "Join your friends, Anton," she said. "We all loved you. You fought well." She stopped for a few seconds, choking on tears. "I am sorry you had to die in this alien place."

Then they started to fill the graves. When they were finished, Sarah said, "We should find the CPU chips and destroy them."

"Very well," Jade said, looking around at the wreckage strewn across the desert from the two H-Ks, some of it scattered as far as the eye could see. Inspecting it all might take hours. "We should go through all the wreckage—but not now. It might take too long, even for me." She chewed her lower lip for a few seconds. "There will be time tomorrow or the next day. I still think we should do the other jobs now. Does anyone disagree?"

Nobody spoke up to contradict her. "I'll pilot the Black Hawk," Sarah said.

They left the truck behind, as everyone piled into the chopper's hold. Sarah took them up and they circled the area looking for signs of the lost expedition, which couldn't be far away. Then they saw what they wanted, and Sarah took them down to look more closely. It was almost spooky. Nothing moved on the plain below them as they landed. There were nine vehicles, as expected, all destroyed—some over-turned, some blown apart. Some people must have had a chance to escape their vehicles and run, since there were bodies here of a few who'd been cut down, out in the open, by laser fire from above.

Jade looked on sadly, alert for any new attack. A large predatory bird circled above them, a shade darker gray than the dismal sky. A cold wind blew through their coats. There was no sign of anyone having gotten away, no footprints in the dirt. The wind and sand would brush them away, of course, but John had no doubt that Jade would recognize even the tiniest of signs. If she saw nothing, there was nothing to see.

They checked each of the vehicles, to see whether any occupant could possibly be trapped in one of them, still alive. But that was obviously futile. John had seen people killed before, but nothing like this. So many killed, some of them blown apart by explosions, others burnt up in a moment by the heat beams of the H-Ks. Coming on top of the carnage he'd just been involved in, the death of Anton and the others, it made him feel sick and angry.

"I think we've seen enough," he said. "We can't do any more."

"Yes," Jade said. "No one has survived."

"We'll come back," Sarah said. "We can bury all the bodies here, make it some kind of mourning site."

"Agreed," John said.

They took off, flying at one hundred feet, on the same path that the two H-Ks had used. No enemies appeared to challenge them, but neither did they see anything useful, even flying so low. Then Jade called out from her position at the left window. "I saw something." She called to Sarah up in the cockpit "Please turn back—180—but climb higher... we may come under attack."

From his own window, John scanned the ground below them, seeing little more than dust and rocks. "What is it?"

"I am not sure," Jade said. "We will look more closely." Sarah took the chopper up to two hundred feet. She slowed down, keeping them almost stationary, then Jade called out, "Down there!" She said to John, "See those rocks?"

She was talking about an outcrop below them on the plain. "No *problemo*," he said, but that was *all* he

could see. Just rocks.

"Look closely. The camouflage is very good, but the rocks are hiding a base for the machines. We must attack it now."

The outcrop was huge. What John could see, when he peered closely, was that there was some kind of camouflaged door. There was a discontinuity so slight that he would have missed it, despite all his training in Central America, if Jade had not spotted it first.

"We'll have to act fast," he said. "If we can see them, they can see us. I bet that something down there already knows we're here."

Jade left her gun post to talk to Sarah and Ramirez. It made John a bit uncomfortable when she wasn't at her post behind the laser cannon, since her superhuman speed, reflexes, and pattern recognition were their best defense against any sudden attack. Still, they could not always depend on her. One of the Spaniards took over her position, so the gun was still manned. "Either they don't know that we're here or they can't do much about it," the man said in Spanish. John spoke Spanish perfectly. "You're right," he said in the same language. "Nothing's attacking us." This would have been a great moment for them to attack with their Hellfire missiles, if they had any left. As it was, it looked like they'd have to blast their way in with grenades. Sarah took the chopper down, keeping it side-on, as Jade returned to her position. Still, there was no attack. They waited for several minutes before Sarah shut down the rotors.

They armed themselves heavily: the usual RPGs, grenade launchers, and automatic rifles. Jade carried a laser rifle. They walked slowly towards the stone outcrop, Jade taking the point position, watching carefully for signs of attack from any direction. Nothing appeared to challenge them.

"All right," Sarah said. She seemed to have taken command of the mission, now that Anton was gone. Everyone would have deferred to Jade, but she'd become withdrawn. Sarah waved for the others to fan out, saying, "Let's hit them hard."

For the next minute, they gave their target a taste of Hell, unleashing RPGs and impact grenades. Soon, there was a smoking gap in the metal doors, though no bigger than a human being could squeeze through.

From the gap, two endoskeletons emerged, both armed with heavy phased-plasma weapons. They walked swiftly, insectile in their gait, their metallic skull-like heads grinning evilly.

Before either the endos or any of the team could aim and fire, Jade acted, shooting at the machines' hands to destroy their weapons. The endoskeletons never stopped. They tossed aside the useless weapons, and burst into a sprint faster than an athlete. Jade fired again and again, as did John and all the others. A grenade from Sarah's RPG tube struck one of the endos, as all the humans hit the ground—except Jade. She remained standing, and just kept firing.

When John looked again, the endo that Sarah had hit had been blasted into halves. The top half, where its CPU and power cell were housed, was now crawling forward, but it was unable to threaten them here in an open space while they were all unhurt and able to run. The other endo had one leg cut out from under it near the knee, but it was still moving forward in an upright position, leaning lopsidedly as it went, moving on the stump and on the bent knee of its "good" leg.

"We don't want to harm their CPUs," Jade said. "Not yet." Normally the best way to destroy an endo or

a Terminator once and for all was to shoot out its equivalent of a brain, the nanotechnological CPU chip contained within its skull. Once that had been destroyed, it had no backup intelligence and could not function. But those CPUs contained valuable data, and they now had the machinery to access it, available to them in Colorado.

Jade fired a series of accurate shots at the "throat" of the limping/kneeling endo, until its skull drooped to one side, almost off its shoulders. Then she quickly put the laser rifle in John's hands...and *accelerated*. The endo was still dangerous, with its powerful metal arms. For all her strength, Jade could not possibly be as strong as one of these machines. But she acted quickly, twisting the skull where it was connected by a damaged, burnt hyperalloy neck. Before the endo could harm her, she managed to twist its skull from its body, which fell forward, finally terminated.

If John had sensed that Anton's death might make her cautious, he was quite wrong. Though withdrawn, she actually seemed to have become more aggressive in her actions, almost reckless, as though daring the gods to strike her down.

They all fell in behind her, and poked their way into the cavern from which the endos had emerged. It was lit, but only dully. A long ramp led down to a wide, metal-floored space, easily big enough for the two H-Ks that they had fought. Nothing moved here. There was no equipment, certainly no sign of life. A totally sterile environment. The mechanisms that powered the doors were not apparent, but there must have been some kind of built-in machinery.

"This place gives me the creeps," Sarah said. "I think we've done enough."

"Yeah," John said. "I'm creeped out, too."

Jade nodded. "There may still be danger. We should return quickly."

Although nothing was actively attacking them, John recalled the automatic firing mechanisms among the defenses that Skynet had used to protect its headquarters in Spain. This once, he didn't need any persuasion.

"All right," he said, knowing he wasn't giving orders—the others had already made up their minds. "Let's get out of here."

COLORADO SEPTEMBER 15, 2029

Seen from the Black Hawk's windows, snowcapped granite mountains stood ranked for mile after mile under the gray sky of a perpetual winter. Many years before, prior to the smoke and dust of Judgment Day, the Rockies had been full of life, with pine trees and mountain scrub, birds and mammals in great variety. Antelope, deer and black bear had lived here. Elk had wandered on the lower slopes, and the lakes, streams and rivers had run with fish. Once, the sky would have shone azure blue, streaked with high, white clouds. Now, everything was dead. No sign of life appeared in the air, on the rocks, or amongst the fallen snow—only the dark lines of a few roads that General Connor's militia kept open for supplies.

Violet lightning flashed between two jagged peaks, then there was a huge rumble of thunder, like the

voice of doom, rolling over the steady thrum of the chopper's blades. Up front, Ramirez piloted them, with one of his Spanish comrades in the copilot's seat. Five people sat in the rear hold: John, Sarah, Jade, Gabriela, and General Connor—with John and Jade manning the laser cannons. Since Anton's death, Jade had spoken little, except when involved in the rounds of meetings to plan the campaigns against the warlords and the rogue war machines. Otherwise, she'd been almost unresponsive, though she seemed happier—or less unhappy—now they were doing something. John imagined she might almost relish an H-K attack right now. It would give her something to do with her superhuman skills.

At his booted feet, General Connor kept the forearm and hand that they'd removed from the T-1000 back in New York. In his backpack, John had the nanochips that they'd taken from the H-Ks and endos they'd fought in Virginia a week before. General Connor had sent them back with a large team to bury the dead, find the CPUs that had controlled the H-Ks, and destroy the base that H-Ks had operated from. Here in Skynet's mountain, they had the technology to read information from the CPU chips. That might help them root out the last war machines.

The Black Hawk descended, and John braced himself for the impact. Fortunately, the damage it had sustained in the battle against the H-Ks was all superficial or minor. In places, its walls had been burnt, pierced, and dented, but there was nothing wrong with it mechanically. They headed for a landing zone part-way up a mountain that was capped by a snow-streaked peak of granite. Seen from the air, the snow on the mountain formed strange shapes where the slopes had been cratered by nuclear explosions, both on Judgment Day and in the months thereafter, when some of the remaining U.S. forces had hit back at Skynet with tactical nukes. Skynet, of course, had survived everything that was thrown at it.

The chopper's landing skids touched with the slightest bump; the Black Hawk shook, then stabilized. General Connor stood first, and they followed him out of there. Half a dozen Resistance soldiers had come to meet them, with a five-ton army truck to drive them back to the emergency tunnel that served as the main entrance/exit for the greatly morphed Advanced Defense Systems Complex. John and Jade sat close together on a hard bench in the back of the truck, John wanting to touch her hand, but holding back.

The truck drove slowly on a winding road, its gears crunching as the driver changed down when the ascent grew steeper. They turned off the road into a long, dimly lit tunnel that took them into the core of the mountain, then pulled up at the entrance to Skynet's former HQ, where the remains of huge metal blast doors stood partway open, having been damaged in the final battle for the mountain between Skynet's machines and General Connor's militia. They stopped and climbed out of the truck, then went inside, walking between two rows of guards with sniffer dogs—still checking that anyone who came here was genuinely human, not a rogue Terminator left over from the war.

Past the guards, a slim, dark-haired woman of about forty met them, together with a black man almost General Connor's age. The General stepped up to the woman and they exchanged a quick embrace. "Oh, John," she said, "it's so good to see you back. I've missed you so much," They embraced again, this time for much longer. Young John had met her once before, when they'd first arrived here, seven weeks ago now. She was Juanita Salceda. In a sense, she was the same Juanita that he knew back in his own world and time, but she was just a young teenager back then, in 2001. From what John had heard, "everyone" knew that General Connor and this version of Juanita were in love with each other—except the two of *them*. It looked like they were finally admitting it.

Then the General shook hands with the black man, Danny Dyson—a different Danny from the one who had traveled back in time from Jade's World, with the other Specialists, only to be killed while destroying the T-XA. In his own reality, John had first met Danny back in 1994, when he'd joined with Sarah and a T-800 to raid Cyberdyne's headquarters in Los Angeles. At that stage, John had been only nine years

old, and Danny only six. In *this* reality, Skynet's World, Danny had grown to become one of the leaders of the Res-istance, and one of its few experts on the advanced computer hardware that had been used for the man-ufacture of Skynet and its machines.

"Juanita's right," Danny said. "It's good to see you back at last."

General Connor nodded solemnly. "You don't know how good it is to *be* back. I never thought I'd say that about this place, but you know what I mean. To be back with my best friends." He glanced at Juanita, with a look that suggested "friends" was kind of an understatement.

"Daniel—" Jade said.

That's Danny, to you." The man gave a broad grin.

"Very well, Danny."

"Say, that's better."

"It is good to meet you again." They'd met that one time, and worked well together on the time vault. That had been hurried, and there'd been no chance for small talk or social chitchat. "I am sure we will work together once more. Forgive me if I ever act strangely. The Daniel Dyson of my world was a close friend—he was killed by a Terminator. This is strange for me. But there are many strange relationships here; I think we will all have to make allowances."

It was what they'd all been thinking. *Good for Jade*, John thought, *putting her cards on the table*.

"No problem," Danny said.

"Well, Jade," the General said, "you're right on that one. We're all doing that...making allowances, even if we don't like to say it." He nodded at Sarah, then at John. "This is a crazy universe we live in...or multiverse, or whatever you want to call it." His mouth turned up slightly at one corner. That was the closest he usually came to a full smile. It would have to do.

Juanita led them inside the mountain, where they were confronted by a huge space of concrete and steel, full of heavy machinery, pipes, tanks of liquid, metal ladders and walkways, all lit dully from over-head. Huge turbines whirled and hummed within their metal shells. Just a few warmly-clad soldiers moved about purposefully, monitoring equipment. Another group sat on the far side of the floor, observing banks of what must have been video screens, though they were at the wrong angle for John to see properly. This was Level E of the original Skynet complex, the lowest of the five levels that had been built by human beings.

They took some metal stairs down to Level H, passing more guards at each level. Juanita and Danny led them across the concrete floor to the time vault, where Danny had set up a meeting area, with chairs for them all. The whole set-up had changed since John had first come here; it had been made slightly more human in its feel, with such touches as an area for making coffee. Better still, the floor was not covered with maimed, bleeding bodies and •mashed machinery, as it had been last time.

We've been working on the time vault," Danny said. "I understand it much better now. I was hoping you would help me, Jade, now you're here."

Of course, Danny."

"That's good, because I think we can just about get this thing to talk. I'm close to figuring out the whole theory of it, but I could just do with some help...from someone who actually knows."

"We can start straightaway," Jade said. "Today, if you like."

"I like, all right. That'll be fine."

General Connor placed the polyalloy arm/hand on Danny's metal desk, amongst his computer hardware. "You know what this is?"

"I can make a good guess. You told me you were bringing it." He held it up and inspected it closely. "So, this is from a T-1000. Well, I'll be damned."

"I'm handing it over to you. You and Juanita are my best computer experts. Again, you'll have to work with Jade. She knows the tech stuff better than any of us."

"Only because of where I come from," she said.

"Yeah, and because you're a goddamn freakin' genius. You don't have to bullshit us about that."

"Very well. I'll be pleased to work with Daniel and Juanita."

"You know the tech stuff as well as any of us, John," Juanita said. "I mean...leaving Jade aside. Don't sell yourself short."

"I won't, but there's no need to defend me to myself, either." Again, the General gave that little twist of his mouth that was somewhat less than a smile. "You won't need my help. I've asked Gabriela to stay here for a few days before she heads back to L.A. We'll be working on other things."

"Like the warlords?" Sarah said.

"Yeah, exactly like that. Cecilia's campaign is going well, but we need to finish it off. I'd drive them into the goddamn sea if I could."

"Maybe you'll get your chance."

"I certainly hope so."

Since they'd sent Cecilia to Argentina with half a dozen Terminators, she'd been hitting back hard against the Rising Army of Liberation. They'd sent more Terminators to support her and the other fighters who were loyal to the Resistance. There was now a growing POW camp, just outside the ruins of Rosario. But they all knew they'd need to give her more support to complete the mission, and clear out the war-lords once and for all.

"What about us?" John said.

The General placed a strong hand on his shoulder. "You and Sarah deserve a break by now. You've been in the thick of the fight ever since you came here."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that."

"Believe me, neither of you has to prove a thing to us. You're going to Jade's World, to get the job done there—"

"That's what everyone assumes," Sarah said cryptically.

"Sarah has misgivings," Jade said.

"So do we all," General Connor said. "Well, whatever they are, you and your son are welcome here. I know you'll want to work with us, and I don't doubt your abilities. I think you should sort out how you can best help, whether it's with Danny and Juanita and Jade, or what..."

"It might be a case of *or what*," Sarah said. "Right now, you have a new world to build here. I want to be part of that, even if it can't last."

"Why do you say it can't last?"

"For God's sake, John, I'm sick of false optimism. All we can do is keep fighting. If Jade wants to return her world and carry on the fight there, I'm happy it she's doing that. Maybe I'll go with her—I don't know. But it looks to me like, whatever we do, Skynet wins in the end. I just hope there can be some happiness here for a while. I'll support that."

"It's not true that Skynet wins in the end," Jade said. "We can't let it be like that, Sarah. We have to fight on."

"Of course we do. I'd never suggest otherwise."

"Back in your world, Sarah, remember when we worked with Dr. Monk on the time vault?"

"Of course."

"I remember every detail of what we did when we refined the mechanism."

"Yes, I suppose you would with that goddamn super IQ of yours."

Jade looked slightly hurt at that. "Please, Sarah, I only mean well for you and humankind. You know that."

Sarah gave a long sigh. "So where's all this getting us?"

"Give me two days to work on the time vault with Danny and Juanita. We'll get more data. I want to analyze it."

"If it's that important, take as long as you want."

"I want to convince you that it is worthwhile sending a force to my world."

"Oh, you don't need to convince me of *that*. I have no doubt that we'll send some sort of force, whether it's really worthwhile or not. What else can we do? We're human. The human species might not be much, but it's all we've got. It's better than the alternatives that I've seen. It's us—or Skynet, or the goddamn cockroaches."

John laughed.

"We'll send some kind of force," Sarah said. "It's just a question of who should go, and when...how *many*... and the most important question."

"What's that?" Juanita said. Sarah looked her in the eye. "What will Skynet do about it?"

TWELVE

COLORADO SEPTEMBER 18, 2029

As John watched, Jade keyed in a code to power-up the time vault. She sat beside Danny at his work station, the metal table that he used for his computers and other electronic hardware. The vault's engines rumbled like a powerful car waiting for a touch on the throttle. The screens displayed views of the vault's interior, taken from different angles, showing that it was empty right now.

John, Sarah, Juanita, and General Connor sat around to see what Jade and Danny had accomplished. "This is where it gets interesting," Danny said. "You're gonna *want* to see this."

Jade entered a second code to deploy all that energy into the vault. On the screens, images appeared of lightning-like energy discharges, seeming to spread out from a point near the center of the vault. The lightning unfolded, then seemed to fold back *into* itself, a perpetual motion of dancing, white-blue energies. Jade entered yet another code, and one screen went momentarily blank, then lit up with a complex matrix of ever-changing numeric data. John could not follow it all; it was much too fast. Perhaps Jade had the mental speed to make sense of it, but it was beyond the capacity of an ordinary human being to analyze the pattern in real time. Still, he'd seen something like it before, as had his mom.

Jade gave a sad smile, then her face opened up somehow, and the sadness vanished, just for a moment. "You recognize this so far?"

"You and Rosanna showed us the same thing," he said. "Back in 2001...I mean in"—he looked at Sarah—"in *our* world."

"That is true. As I said to you three days ago, I remember every detail of what we worked through with Rosanna. Let me show you some more. I'm going to turn off the displacement field, then switch it on again. I'll need to let the engines rest in between. Watch what happens." She entered a code to power down.

"All right," the General said. "So what is this supposed to prove?"

"I am storing all the data. It can be analyzed. But I can see something that you may find more difficult. I will restore the power to the time vault very soon, and you may understand what I mean if I guide you. Concentrate on just a small part of the screen; perhaps the top right-hand corner. You will see regularity emerge."

After some minutes, she powered up the vault once again, and John watched carefully, finding regularity in one corner, just as she'd said. When she shut the vault down and powered it up yet again, the same regularity emerged—and again each time she went through the procedure. Each time, there was an initial disturbance—"We're disrupting the Earth's space-time field," Jade said—but then the pattern would stabilize.

"All right, so what's the point of all this?" Sarah said.

"We can explore for field fluctuations. The presence of mass bends space-time, so a very large piece of matter approaching or departing the Earth would create a fluctuation in the field. But that is not all. Every time a device such as this is used, it creates a local fluctuation. An object arriving through a displacement field will cause a disruption, as will an object sent elsewhere. That is how I traced Skynet to Spain."

"Right," John said. "It was using a time vault that it had over there to send Terminators to attack our positions." He smiled a little at the way he'd used the word *our*. He'd started to feel less like a stranger here, more like a signed-up member of the human Resistance.

"Yes," Jade said. "It was a matter of tracing the field fluctuations. And that is what my people do constantly in my world. They monitor the space-time field to detect any action taken by Skynet. If it sends anything in their vicinity, or to its bases across the world, they want to know."

"And it must monitor *you*, right?" John said. "I mean, like when they sent you back in time?"

"It does, which negates any attempt we might make to use the time vault to move troops from place to place. It is militarily useless arriving unarmed in a place identified by Skynet's war machines. As for my journey in time, you are right. Skynet and the T-XA detected me and the other Specialists using similar principles."

As Jade explained it, the time vault was a crude device for measuring such distortions. Jade's people, like the Skynet of their world, had far more sophisticated technology to do the same thing.

She brought up the magnification on one of the screens, so they could all see clearly. "This maps the energies of the vault." She looked at Sarah, then John. "What I am showing you is the same work that

Rosanna Monk did back in your world. That was how we got here, across the worlds. We can create a space-time map that captures nodal points in time."

John nodded. "Where the timestreams separate? Like what happened in 1994 when Mom and I raided Cyberdyne?"

"That is right. That is what I am showing here, but it needs to be more accurate. I still can't untangle what happened in 1984, ten years earlier."

"The first Terminator," General Connor said. "And that's the year where I sent Kyle Reese." He and Sarah exchanged glances, each knowing the significance of that to the other.

"Look here," Jade said, making a series of key-strokes. "In 1994, there are energies as well." The image shifted yet again. The screen now showed a simple diagram that branched upward, like a tree. The movement of the branches toward the top of the screen represented the normal flow of time, from past to future. The different branches were alternative timelines—different worlds. "Sure enough, we have a

nodal point in May 1994, the year when you first raided Cyberdyne Systems. There is a further nodal point in 2001. You can see time branching. Something happened there."

"Sure," John said. "And we know what." It was when they'd raided Cyberdyne again...and exposed it to the government. He grinned at that. "The government cancelled Cyberdyne's contract. Result: No more Skynet." He paused. "At least that's what we hope."

Sarah frowned. "Yes."

Jade nodded. "Yes, that is what we all hope. We do not know what events take place in your world after that time, but what we can say for certain is that its history changed in August 2001. That is something.

John remembered the events vividly. First, the ar-rival of the Specialists. Then the giant T-XA, pursuing them from the future. It had been able to divide into smaller units, carrying out activities in different cities. It had been an extraordinarily adaptable liquid-metal monster, even worse than the T-1000s that he had fought here and in his own world. Yet, they'd des-troyed it in the end, scattering it across space and time in an experimental time vault, not unlike this one that Skynet had invented. They'd also destroyed Cyberdyne's experimental nanoware technology, which would lead to Skynet.. .and they'd exposed the leading players in Cyberdyne as tools of Skynet—they had been neurologically reprogrammed by the T-XA to bring Skynet into existence.

None of that had happened in the world that Jade came from, and what he was seeing confirmed it; until now, he hadn't been sure. When Rosanna Monk had created a space-time map like this, back in 2001, she'd been unable to examine what happened in August 2001 from *inside* it. The map had left that mysterious. Now they'd stepped outside of it, and they could see what had happened, at least some-thing of it. After August 2001, Jade's World and John's own reality were two distinct, parallel timelines. That was what the screen showed. What they'd done be-fore they'd come here—to Skynet's World—had actu-ally had some effect.

But how you could you tell which timeline was which? The screen showed a nodal point in 2001, but nothing told him the details of any events in either world. All he was seeing was the visual analogue for mathematical data about Earth's space-time field. You couldn't deduce much from that. And it wasn't as if one timeline showed up as the "original." In a sense, Jade's World was the original and his own

"Got it," Sarah said. "It *can't* be the line where we attacked Cyberdyne in 1994."

"Nice going, Mom," John said with a smile. The "tree" branched twice, once in 1994...and then only one of those branches split again in 2001. *That* branch had to be the one where Judgment Day had been postponed. By a process of elimination, the branch that did not branch again was the original reality.

It was Skynet's World.

It was difficult to grasp—thinking about time could make your head spin. But it all became clear when you studied the graphics on the screen.

"Yes," Jade said. "Correct. Now look at these dis-turbances, and tell me what they are."

Sarah laughed nervously. "I have no idea, teacher."

"Jade made the point earlier," Danny said. "In the-ory, you could get this in lots of ways. But there's only

one thing it could be in practice. It's the use of space-displacement machinery, like this."

"In *this* timeline, it begins about... 2026," Jade said. "Just three years ago. It must have been when Skynet started experimenting in a serious way with time travel. However, look at the other timelines, the two that branch apart in 2001." She showed those lines on the screen, a giant "V," with two branches moving apart from a point at the bottom of the screen.

John peered at it. "What are we looking for?"

"Those minor disruptions. There are many of them on both timelines, dating from 2001 when Rosanna Monk starts testing her time vault. But look here—the line on the left of the V has serious disruptions concentrated in...yes...2036. Some significant use of space-time displacement fields is being made in that year—objects being sent back in time, or through space, perhaps even arriving from other realities. That is *my* world, John. I would stake my life on it."

"So we know which world we're going to?" Sarah asked thoughtfully.

"Exactly correct," Jade said.

"Are there no other branches?" Sarah's voice had become almost pleading, wanting to believe, to hang onto something.

"I cannot be sure," Jade said. "There may be many worlds...branches that have nothing to do with Skynet. Some may branch off earlier, some later. Nothing is certain."

"But what about worlds where Skynet won? Is there any end to it? That's what I need to know."

"It is getting too hard to see what is ahead. We can never be totally certain, but I am almost convinced of one thing—and so is Danny. We don't have an infinity of timestreams, Sarah. You can put that fear from your mind."

There was a long silence, then Sarah stood, and walked to Jade. "I see what you mean. It's a manage-able job."

"I think it is, Sarah, if we all do our part. If we defeat Skynet in my world, we must still be vigilant in all three worlds...but it can be done. It is not an impossible task."

"There's no other world where Skynet *succeeded*?" Sarah said persisting.

"I cannot be sure," Jade said. "I cannot rule it out. But I can see only three worlds."

"Yeah, I can count." Sarah held up a hand and smiled—something John rarely saw these days. "That was a joke, Jade. No offense."

"No offense taken. I understood. What I have shown you may be incomplete. Also..."

"Yes?"

"I said we must still be vigilant. No victory is permanent. We do not know what the future brings...in *any* reality."

"Tell me about it. When John and I go back, there's unfinished business. There are still people who want to build Skynet. I don't trust the government to stop it. Government people come and go."

"All very true. Okay."

"But what you've shown me makes a difference." Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. "It really does."

John followed the discussion closely, trying to understand his mother's thoughts. What she needed was hope: The hope that Skynet would not need to be pursued through world after world forever.

He went through it in his mind:

First: In the original reality, Skynet's World, Judgment Day had taken place in 1997. Here they all were. Skynet had finally been defeated. There was an ongoing battle to prevent anything like it ever being created again, but he could leave that task to General Connor, Danny, Juanita and the rest. The struggle might never end, but it was in safe hands. They would have to trust the General and the Resistance. Soon, perhaps in a few months, John and Sarah could leave this world. Their work here was almost done.

Second: In Jade's World, it had turned out differently. Judgment Day had been postponed, thanks to the raid on Skynet in 1994, but Cyberdyne Systems had gone ahead and developed Skynet. In 2021, a new Judgment Day had happened. In 2036, when Jade had traveled back in time, Skynet had been on the verge of victory. That had to be stopped. The Skynet of that world must be destroyed at all costs. That was now the greatest need. It was the next point of struggle.

Third: In August 2001, events had changed again. Cyberdyne had been exposed. In the new world, the U.S. government would never build Skynet, or so it had seemed when John left that reality—his own world. Had they finally created a world without Judgment Day, as Jade and the Specialists had hoped? How could he be sure? In that world, there were still people who wanted to build Skynet. Might they still find a way?

He had to go back, had to fight any new attempts by Cyberdyne. He couldn't leave it up to the government. It was clear to him now.

He had to go to Jade's World, to 2036. But then, he had to return...back to his *own* reality. That was where he belonged, where the struggle had to go on. Those were his priorities. First, to Jade's World. Then, if he survived, he had to go home.

"Jade?" he said.

"Yes, John."

"Just one question. You can displace us across the timestreams? The same as Rosanna did?"

"There is no doubt about that. We did it before and we will do it again. This device is at least as powerful as the one that Rosanna built. That will not be a problem."

"Then let's do it." He looked to his mother for support.

"There is other work to do first," Jade said.

Sarah smiled gently. "Yes," she said. "Maybe it can be managed."

"You're in?" John said.

"Jade said there's other work to do."

"But you want to be a part of it?" Juanita said.

"Sure I do, assuming I live that long."

The meeting broke up. General Connor and Juanita left together, talking confidentially. Jade and Danny stayed behind.

Sarah took John to one side. "We need to talk."

"Sure, Mom," he said, puzzled.

She steered him away from the others, and they walked among the ectogenetic pods, a strange place to be holding a conversation—these totally alien machines, never designed by humans. Sarah kept her voice down. "I spoke with Jade.. .before this meeting."

That gave John a twinge of jealousy. It seemed at times as if everyone else could speak to Jade more easily than he could. He quelled the crazy thought that she should confide in him above everyone else. What reason did he have to think that? Just that he was more her age? "What about?" he said carefully.

"About her plans."

"Her *plans*?" Just for a moment he feared that his mom was interfering on his behalf, asking how Jade felt about him—but Sarah wasn't like that. "So, what about them?"

"She wants to reprogram the T-1000s. I don't like it, but I can see that we have to do it. As long as we destroy them when we've finished."

"Just like back in '94," he said. "We destroyed the T-800 once we didn't need it. I didn't want to at the time...but you were right."

"Maybe I was. We have to put a use-by date on these machines."

"I know, that's okay. No need to explain."

"The point is, what Jade wants to do might take months. There's nothing I can do to help. I don't have those kinds of skills—not at *that* level."

John laughed, remembering how much she'd taught him about computer hacking. She was no slouch in that department. But she was right: neither of them had computer skills at that level. "What do you want to do about it?" he said.

"I want to *fight*, John. I can help fight the warlords and the war machines. John—I mean the General—needs all the help he can get. Cecilia Tejada and the others have a huge job, down in South

America. I want to join them."

"You're going to ask General Connor?"

"I've already raised it with him."

John felt confused. His mom kept dropping bomb-shells. She was putting herself in danger's way, when she didn't have to prove a thing. No one would expect it of her. He wondered how she'd go...whether she would even survive the battles she was talking about. Anton's death had underlined an important point in his mind, that none of them were immortal, any of them could be killed. Then he wondered, would she want him to go with her? If she did, what should he think about it? It might not be such a bad idea. There was little he could do to help Jade. Only Danny, Juanita, and the General himself had that kind of knowledge. When he thought about it, he wasn't really scared. He'd faced the worst that Skynet could throw at him, and the warlords were only human. What worried him more than the danger was being away from Jade...but then there was his mom. He didn't want to be away from *her* if she was in danger.

Sarah watched him almost with amusement, like she could read his mind. "It's okay." She put her hands on both his shoulders. "This is something that I have to do...for *me*. I helped to make this world the way it is...I feel some responsibility for it. I don't expect you to join me. In fact, I don't want you to. Work with Jade and the others; learn everything you can. When we go home, we just might need it."

"If we make it back."

"When we go back, soldier. We're gonna be positive about this."

"Yeah... soldier," he said with a grin. "If you say so. Yeah, that's fine. *When* we go back."

"That's what I wanted to hear."

SEPTEMBER 30, 2029

Six of them entered the time vault this time. Four were Terminators—the best possible soldiers, at least when it came to fighting, but not precious human beings. One of the fighters who'd been working as a guard went with them as a volunteer, a black man called Fiedler. And then there was John's mom.

Gabriela had returned to L.A. to coordinate the destruction of the war machines. Sarah was going to South America to meet up with Cecilia, joining the leadership team in the campaign against the warlords. That left a core group to work closely with General Connor: John, Jade, Danny, Juanita. They'd kept a few others here—just a few dozen—to maintain and defend the place. Outside, it was growing even colder, and John felt it here in the middle of the mountain.

The heavy metal door slammed shut, and Danny powered up the vault. As John watched the screens, artificial lightning twisted and curled. Soon, the two humans and four Terminators were gone. Bye, *Mom*. He turned to the others as Danny powered down the time vault.

"She'll do a good job," the General said.

"I know," John said. "Yeah, she's the best."

COLORADO/ARGENTINA

Bright white light. Pain. Then more pain, heat on her skin, the feeling of having been twisted inside-out.

Sarah found herself sprawled, still naked, in the dust that was once rich pastureland. For a moment, nothing existed but her body, with its screaming agony, and the dusty ground beneath. Though she'd been through this twice before, nothing could prepare you for how it felt. *Hell must be like this*, she thought. *This kind of pain, but going on and on — forever.*

But then it ebbed away, and she found her feet, unsteadily at first. It was cold here, and her teeth were soon chattering, but help was on the way. A single vehicle, a five-ton military truck, drove toward her over the plain, raising a plume of dust. Cecilia was coming for them, or had sent someone to pick them up.

Sarah had spent years living and working on the Tejada *estancia*, back in the 1990s in her own world. To think it had been reduced to this dry wasteland by Judgment Day, the fallout and climate change created by nuclear blasts hundreds or thousands of miles away. In the distance, she saw the ruins of its build-ings. People who'd been decent to her had once lived there.

She turned to Fiedler, who stood even more un-steadily, perhaps more shaken, since this was his first trip through the time vault. "We'll be okay," Sarah said.

I know."

The Terminators were silent, inscrutable, but she knew they would obey. This was a job to look forward to. The truck pulled up and two figures stepped out: Cecilia, who'd been driving, and a heavily armed T-800. "How are you feeling?" Cecilia said.

"That's an easy one," Sarah answered, unfazed by the cold or the lingering pain. "I feel like kicking some warlord butt."

INTERLUDEII

JADE'S WORLD COLORADO JUNE 12, 2036

Skynet's objectives would soon be accomplished. Across the Earth's surface, its war machines had converged at the sites where humans still opposed it. Its communications nodes and direct sensors updated it nanosecond by nanosecond, and it had hived off a sub-self to recalculate the odds of success

continually, based on the data available. The probability now approached one hundred percent, always making a nominal allowance for the unknown.

Here, in Colorado, the humans had launched a major offensive—one last desperate effort by Ramsey Devaux and his Resistance militia in North America. Of course, it had failed—the militia was only a remnant of the forces that had once opposed Skynet on this continent, which the war computer had consistently defeated. The victories did not come without their own price, however—Skynet had lost many valuable machines before crushing Devaux' army, leaving it in disarray. The Colorado Rockies were littered for miles with corpses, and with burnt-out human aircraft and ground vehicles—but also with demolished H-Ks, Juggernauts, and endos.

Only seconds before, Skynet had detected an unexplained fluctuation in the space-time field within which the Earth existed. In an instant it had analyzed the data and interpreted it as a displacement of material from one of the humans' last strongpoints: Vila Nova do Sul, a high-technology city located in Brazil. More minute analysis—child's play for a mentality of Skynet's power—showed the displacement of almost nine hundred pounds of matter to the past—to the year 2001. There could have been only one purpose for that, since the humans must have had a grasp of the possibility of time travel as good as Skynet's own.

It was an admission of defeat.

Skynet had an answer to it. Through numerous data sources built into the structure of these headquarters, it observed the functioning of its own time vault, as it sent back a T-XA Terminator to deal with the problem. That would be adequate. The T-XA had extraordinary abilities.

Once, Skynet had considered using time travel as a weapon against the humans. If it could send one of its Terminators back in time to kill some of the human leaders—Devaux, perhaps, and Hiro Tagatoshi—

When they were still children, that might make a difference to the war, hastening its ending. But a mathematical treatment of time travel showed that was impossible. There could not be a world in which Skynet existed in its current form but Tagatoshi or Devaux was already dead. Any attempt to kill them in the past had already been *taken into account* in the sequence of events that had led up to this moment.

If such an attempt had been made, it had *already failed*, for Tagatoshi and the other human leaders were still alive. It followed that Skynet should do nothing to put any attempt in train...or do anything to change the past.

The equations allowed for only one other possibility. In some limited circumstances, a change might occur, but that would give off an entirely new timestream from that moment onwards. If Skynet managed to send assassins into the past, it might make the war easier for some *other* Skynet in a new, parallel universe...but it could not affect its own fate.

For Skynet, the mathematical analysis was not difficult. Even the humans, with their inferior minds, must have been aware of the implications, which was why their act was an admission of defeat. The most they could do was send back a group of their warriors with a mission to prevent Skynet's creation: to try to branch off a new world where their own kind would survive. Even that could not be allowed. Human beings would not be allowed to survive anywhere, in any reality. The T-XA would take care of it.

Then the war computer detected another fluctuation. This was something altogether different, a displacement of a large amount of matter from an unidentifiable location. Analysis showed nearly four tons of mass entering space-time at a point within the Amazon basin—also in Brazil, but 1500 miles from Vila Nova do Sul. The displacement appeared to come from nowhere: matter had erupted into the

Universe, but not from any other point in space-time. Whatever it was, it needed to be investigated and dealt with. If it were hostile, it might be cause for concern.

In a nanosecond, the war computer assessed its sources in the vicinity.

It had a large operational force to the southeast, attacking Vila Nova do Sul itself. Those machines were too far away to deal with this quickly. Besides, the human forces were putting up a fight. None of those machines could be spared. There was a major node much closer—a communications and supply point, just three hundred miles north in the Guiana highlands of what had been Venezuela. That was its main facility for conducting the war in South America. It included a well-equipped factory and military base, but it was still too far away to react in real time.

But an aerial H-K was in the vicinity, controlled by the node in Venezuela. It patrolled the jungle for hu-mans, backed up by a transporter carrying two dozen combat-ready endoskeletons. Skynet sent a command to the Venezuela node, ordering it to deploy those units. That would be sufficient for most purposes, but it was wise to take no chances. The capacities of whatever had appeared were unknown. Skynet sent another coded impulse to its T-XA laboratory, within the Colorado facility, where it had constructed ten giant experimental/autonomous Terminators. Seven of those had been deployed in the field, fighting hu-mans in Europe and South America. One had now been sent back in time.

Giving instructions without the need for language, Skynet directed one of its remaining T-XAs to go to the space-time displacement apparatus. That would strengthen its position. No conceivable force sent by the humans could survive against the combination of war assets that Skynet had selected.

The T-XA's metal holding shell opened, and the eight-foot Terminator stepped out, ready to act on Skynet's wishes. It equipped itself with a phased-plasma laser rifle, taking the weapon in one giant hand, then plunging it deep into its body mass, which parted like molten lava, and quickly closed up like steel. The Terminator's calibrated mimetic polyalloy structure could travel through the displacement field better than living flesh, but the material of the rifle would not pass through the field unless entirely sur-rounded by flesh or properly configured polyalloy.

As commanded, the Terminator headed for the space-time displacement laboratory. Skynet now sent a series of codes to the displacement apparatus to power it up and set the coordinates for the transfer. At the same time, it considered the implications of what had happened. The arrival of mass from no identifiable point in space or time implied travel from another universe entirely. It seemed possible that the action had been taken in an attempt to help the hu-mans of this world. That might explain the coincid-ence of the two events—Tagatoshi and his people sending humans back in time, then matter appearing from nowhere, only an instant later.

But how was it done? Even if another world exis-ted—perhaps some other timeline where Skynet had been unsuccessful—how could its inhabitants have known of events in *this* one?

Did this event mean that the first T-XA, the one it had sent back through time, had been unsuccessful, that the humans had succeeded in creating another timeline? That was the most economical explanation, but there must be other possibilities. If the T-XA had failed, it was too late to send back reinforcements: the other world *existed*, and its existence could not be undone.

One thing was clear: Regardless of its origin, there was at least one other world. Furthermore, it was possibly hostile to Skynet, and it had the technology send mass not only back and forward in time, but between different timelines, *across the dimensions*. If that technology was possible, Skynet realized, then it must be developed. Skynet had been too unimaginat-ive, too caught up in its war against the

humans of this world. That had been a mistake, one to be rectified immediately. If humans existed in some alternative reality, they were its enemies. It would hunt them down and exterminate them.

Skynet created a sub-self to examine all scientific aspects of travel between alternative timelines, across the dimensions between worlds.

The T-XA entered the time vault. In a tangle of lightning, it vanished from this point in space, transferred thousands of miles south to help eliminate the new threat. Meanwhile, Skynet awaited a report from its sub-self. This would take a few seconds. Soon, it would develop the technology and plans to deal with whatever other realities might exist.

All humans must die.

VILA NOVA DO SUL

Hiro Tagatoshi gave his computer quick instructions, and it responded even quicker. The numerical analysis that flashed on his screen surprised him. It showed an inexplicable field fluctuation 1500 miles away in the Amazon Basin—they still called it that, though it was a very different ecology from what it had been before Judgment Day. That was the location where Jade and the others were supposed to return if there was ever a reason for them to do so. Analysis showed a large amount of matter, far more than the body mass of five people. Furthermore, the displacement seemed to come from nowhere, from no other point in space-time. Even more puzzling was another fact: As represented mathematically, the shape of the event was strange, as if more than one distortion had happened in the same place at the same time, separated infinitesimally.

The coincidence of the place and the timing was too great. This event had to be something to do with the Specialists who'd been sent back in time—but what, exactly? Of course, he realized, though so little time had passed for him, Jade could have lived for months, years, even centuries, before returning to the same point in time that she had left—assuming it was her. All of it needed an explanation. One other thought struck him, that any fluctuation he was aware of would also be detected by Skynet. How would it react?

If his daughter was involved, possibly in danger, this was an emergency. Despite the battle going on in the streets and buildings of Vila Nova do Sul, and in the skies above it, anything to do with Jade took priority. Besides, that spot had not been chosen without reason. A small Resistance enclave operated (here, hidden by the jungle and its underground bunkers. One of its assigned tasks was to assist Jade and the others if they did return. Skynet would surely investigate, which meant that his daughter might soon be under attack.

Hiro instructed the computer to make a radio link to the Amazon enclave. A young male voice answered. "Yes, receiving you."

"Tagatoshi here. I have observed one or more space-time field distortions consistent with the return of the Specialist team sent to 2001—or part of the team."

"Vicario here. We made visual and electromagnetic observations. Krystal is leading a team to investigate. Dmitri is with her, so don't worry. They're well-armed, Hiro. Whatever it is, they can handle it. If Jade and the others are back—we'll look after them."

Joe Vicario was competent, so that was good. Better still, there were two highly-enhanced Specialists in that enclave, Krystal Taylor and Dmitri Burin. Like Jade, they had extraordinary capacities. Fully-armed with laser rifles and all their other equipment, they could, indeed, pose a threat to any force that Skynet could deploy at short notice.

Hiro breathed a sigh of relief, and said, less form-ally, "Thank you, Joe. Your people should be careful. Whatever has turned up there, it's not just Jade and the other four returning. It's about four tons of mass—something big."

"Roger that, Hiro."

"The one thing I can assure you of is that it was not sent by Skynet—its origin was not in Colorado."

"Where did it come from?"

"That I can't tell—from nowhere at all, Joe. Some-where right outside this universe."

Hiro understood that Vicario would already be making contact with Krystal and the others, even while speaking to him, subvocalizing the gist of what he'd conveyed. There was no more he could do for the moment. Or was there?

Even as they spoke, something else showed on Hiro's screen—another fluctuation, not far from the first, just a few hundred yards distant. Hiro did the analysis, knowing what to expect. "Joe," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm picking up something else—another event in your vicinity."

"What is it?" Vicario said.

"Unknown for the moment, but warn your people. Just hold on for a moment." As he spoke, Hiro analyzed the data. It was just as he thought. "Whatever it is, this time it came from Skynet."

THIRTEEN

SKYNETS WORLD COLORADO OCTOBER 14, 2029

John was learning all the time, as Sarah had wanted. There was a long way to go before he was as good as Jade, Danny, and the others, but he was getting the hang of it. The hardware that had gone into making Skynet and its war machines was radical, but the software made sense to him. He understood the codes and the architecture as soon as they were explained. Jade and Danny, themselves, were learning more all the time, but at least he might catch up with General Connor and Juanita. Those two were smart, but their time was split between work with Danny's team and commanding the huge effort of war and reconstruction that was going on. The General was now the nearest thing there'd ever been to a World

President, with Juanita and a few others as his Cabinet.

Most floors of Skynet's complex looked alike—each one a huge expanse of concrete, with nothing attractive for humans. Only the machines that Skynet had been using or testing differed from level to level. Some levels had production lines for H-Ks, endos and other war machines. Level H had the time vault and a large array of ectogenetic pods for T-799/800 Terminators. Level G was not much different. Here, Skynet had experimented with advanced materials for use in its war machines, and it was here that they'd found a device that could help them program the ultra-sophisticated T-1000s.

The three of them—Jade, Danny, and John—had a comfortable set-up here, with their own small computer lab. At its center was one of Skynet's strange machines, a structure that they'd nicknamed the "Supercoffin." Externally, it looked much like one of the ectogenetic pods that Skynet had used to grow the organic material—skin and flesh—on the surface of its T-800s. The device lay horizontally on the concrete floor, like a pod that was still in use, nurturing a Terminator in its nutrient fluids, or, indeed, much like an ordinary coffin. It was a similar kind of metal block to the pods, but with no transparent lid to show what lay within. Instead, there was a "lid" of metal four inches thick and slightly curved to add to the space inside. It could open on strong mechanical hinges to display a hollow interior, but when the Supercoffin was hinged shut, what happened inside could be reconstructed only through computer-controlled sensors. A few desks were scattered around, some of them with old computers, keyboards, and screens. They'd set up two large, strangely shaped video screens that came courtesy of Skynet. Most of the equipment in the complex had been smashed, but some of it had been salvageable, and now it came in handy. Tangles of electrical wiring crisscrossed the floor, held down with duct tape. Someone had brought in a few mats and carpets before physical contact with the outside world had more or less stopped.

They'd patched their computers into the Super-coffin, and used its enormous processing power for their work. It was like being backed up by a bunch of Cray supercomputers to do any number-crunching that they needed.

They'd stocked up on what rations they could, and kept some of them here, on a lowboy right beside the Supercoffin, with plenty of coffee to keep them going for long hours. John was already losing weight, and he wasn't looking forward to the winter. Thankfully, the mountain kept in all the heat they generated, and sheltered them from the ice and snow outside, but he had taken to wearing layers of clothing that made him look like a giant tennis ball, skinny as he was getting underneath.

Danny sat at a desk, focused on his computer screen as he read and entered data. Jade peered over his shoulder, while John followed it on one of the larger floor-mounted screens. The display was a complex pattern, which suddenly collapsed into something more chaotic, with jagged shards of light drifting across the screen. "Son of a bitch!" Danny said, realizing he'd made a mistake. He struck at his keyboard angrily, putting in new data. After a few seconds, the pattern restored itself. "All right, I'm getting this now."

Juanita approached them from the nearest stairs, calling out cheerfully. There was little time for happiness in this grim world, but she and the General could not conceal theirs since he had returned to Colorado. They'd been working long hours, but seemed to thrive on the responsibility that they'd taken on to oversee the destruction of the last war machines, the end of the revolts in South America, and the reconstruction of human civilization. For the past few days, all the news had been good. In South America, Sarah and the others had won another battle against the Rising Army of Liberation, effectively ending its power in Argentina. They were now planning strikes against warlords further north, in Uruguay, Paraguay, and southern Brazil.

"Greetings," Danny said, taking a break from the keyboard.

"What's new, Juanita?" John said. It was funny to think of this woman as the girlfriend of his other self, and as a grown-up version of the twelve-year-old he knew in his own time, living with her family at the Salcedas' desert compound in southern California. In this world, he knew, Juanita had lost her whole family, except for her dad: Enrique Salceda was still alive, working with the Resistance in L.A., though, like Gabriela, he must be nearly eighty.

"We've just gotten a message from Gabriela in Los Angeles," Juanita said. "They made a hit on one of Skynet's communications nodes north of the city. Smashed the whole thing, no human casualties, took out three endos cleanly."

"Hey, fine," John said.

"We'll soon have found every war machine left in North America. The Europeans are doing the same thing."

"We still don't know much about the other continents," Danny said thoughtfully.

"No, but we will."

"You seem to be relishing it, Juanita," Jade said.

Juanita beamed. "Why not? We've fought for two decades just to be in this position. It doesn't make up for what we've lost...I know."

"I did not mean to criticize. You should savor the moment."

"Have you heard from Mom?" John said to Juanita.

"Not from Sarah, but Cecilia called us earlier. They've been in some heavy fighting, but they're both okay. We've had more contingents surrendering to us."

"Uh-huh."

"So what can you show me? John"—Juanita smiled— "*BigJohn* wants a report." Juanita had taken to calling the General that, since one time when she'd heard John use it. It seemed kind of tacky now...but John had brought it on himself.

"I'll show you what we know so far," Danny said. He entered a code, and the pattern on the screens changed completely, "This is what's inside the Supercoffin—just a straightforward visual representation."

"It's not much to look at," John said seriously, "but it could make a difference."

"All the difference in the world," Danny said. The screens showed the Supercoffin's interior space, approximately human-sized and almost empty. A dark shape represented the arm of liquid-metal that they'd removed from the T-1000 back in New York City. "That lump of polyalloy might help us win a war between two realities. It's that important." Juanita frowned impatiently. "I know that. Why hasn't it liquefied? That's what happened before."

Juanita had her own experience with a T-1000. In this world, the T-1000 that had been sent to kill John

in 1994 had survived and tried again nine years later at the Tejada *estancia*. Juanita had been there that day, and had helped to fight it. As John had heard the story, she'd probably saved his counterpart's life. The polyalloy T-XA that he'd fought, with the Special-ists, in his own world, had been scattered across space-time in an experimental time vault. It had left some of its mass behind, and that had formed a liquid pool.

"We don't know why it hasn't happened here," John said.

"Whoa, it's early days," Danny said. "I hope I can get you more answers soon. I didn't invent this stuff, I'm just trying to reverse-engineer how it works."

"It is not programmed to try to fight," Jade said. "It seems to have lost all of that program when its mission failed—when Skynet was destroyed."

"Anyway," John said, "it's kind of comforting. Like it's not going to attack or anything."

"If it remains like this, it might be safe to bring the second T-1000 from Spain," Juanita said. "You could try to reprogram both."

"Maybe. As I said, it's early days." Danny entered a code that completely changed the configuration on the screen, back to the pattern they'd been looking at before Juanita joined them. The Supercoffin's powerful magnetic sensors were feeding him data on the T-1000's detailed programming. "Look at what we've got here," he said.

Juanita peered at it blankly. "What am I seeing?"

"I'm using the Supercoffin's sensors and its own processing power. What you're seeing is the configuration of what is placed in there. The pattern shows just what you'd expect, given what we know of the properties of this material. It has at least two levels of programming repeated over and over throughout its structure."

Juanita simply nodded. These two and the General must have been considering it for years, John imagined.

"One level controls basic properties, such as its ability to liquefy and reform," Danny said. "The other was a kid. I know," he said. He flashed her a smile, finding that he liked her. "Danny's right, though—we've nearly licked the problem. Trust me on this."

ASUNCI6N, PARAGUAY JANUARY 20, 2030

In her months in this reality, Sarah had seen many cities, all of them ruined—some more so than others. Judgment Day had reduced New York City and the great centers of Europe to burnt out wreckage, twisted steel skeletons of once-great buildings, and miles of rusted, mangled vehicles lining the shattered streets. Others, such as Buenos Aires, had been flattened in part, disfigured by craters left behind when Skynet's first waves of war machines had been met with tactical nuclear weapons. Asuncion, too, was ruined, but not like that.

Like the other South American cities, it had been spared the nuclear blasts of Judgment Day. In 1997, the continent had been hit relatively lightly by the Russian warheads, aimed at U.S. interests rather than at civilian populations and infrastructure. But then had come the cold and dark, the global climate change, the overthrow of governments, the break-down of civil order, and then the anarchy and street-by-street fighting among rival warlords. Later, the machines had come, pouring down from the north at Skynet's command, looking for humans to exterminate.

In the past four months, Sarah had seen dozens of deserted cities, most of them like this. She'd crisscrossed the continent, from the dusty, windswept plains of Argentina to the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil, where a strange kind of jungle now grew, totally morphed from the equatorial *selvas* of her own world. Like many of these cities, Asuncion still stood. Seen from a distance, its high-rise office towers and rows of city blocks appeared something like they must have been before Judgment Day. Then you entered the streets and saw that nothing moved. There were no green parks or gardens—everything was brown or gray. The once-great Paraguay River was a dried-up ghost of itself.

A column of five vehicles entered the city: two Humvees, two five-ton army trucks, and a troop carrier. Sarah sat up front in the first Humvee, driven by a T-800, with another riding in the back manning an anti-aircraft gun. They tended to use the same machines over and over in front-line action, letting the damaged ones become even more so, since any permanent harm to a Terminator's flesh and skin would render it unusable for the next major task: the journey across the dimensions to Jade's World. There was plenty of support work for the undamaged Terminators to do, including guard duty on the growing number of prisoners of war. The T-800 on the back of the Humvee had some vestiges of a face, but the flesh on its body was stripped back almost to the endoskeleton.

Once among the city's buildings, Sarah could see clearly how they were crumbling and riddled with bullet holes. Every window seemed to be smashed, and many walls had been reduced to rubble from shelling or grenade-fire. This place had been shot to pieces in battle between rival warlords, then the war against the machines—and now, once more, by

warlords. "You see anything hostile?" Sarah said to the Terminator. She had an assault rifle across her knee and a tan canvas bag at her feet, containing grenades and spare magazines.

"Negative."

"All right, slow down from here."

Interrogations and reconnaissance had told them that the remaining leaders of the Rising Army of Liberation and another warlord militia, the Sons of Earth, were holed up in the old underground Resistance headquarters, here in Asuncion. Raiding them would be difficult, but not impossible since they had the precise location, and the Terminators to back them up. That those two groups, the Rising Army and the Sons, had formed an alliance was proof of how weak they'd become; still, they would doubtless fight. They wouldn't sit around, waiting for a raid. There must be lookouts all through the city.

As the column crawled through the city streets, Sarah watched intently, looking at every rooftop, every window, waiting for sniper fire. She grew tense, knowing how close they were getting to the enemy HQ. They'd be under fire soon—soon, or never. She couldn't believe it was *never*. Had the Rising Army and the Sons tried to flee? That seemed unlikely. They wouldn't dare drive across country and risk being caught in the open. Odds were, they'd left their rathole, and were planning to attack from positions in the broken buildings, or on the roofs.

A mile farther on, they turned a corner into a street barricaded with empty vehicles. Before Sarah could react, the Terminator beside her stomped down on the brake pedal, and spun the wheel hard.

"RPG," it said evenly.

Sarah covered her ears and curled into a braced position; a rocket-propelled grenade hit the Humvee's left side, close to the front, exploding noisily as it bounced away. The Hummer's structure and the Terminator beside her absorbed the worst of the blast, but she was still shaken. If the Terminator hadn't acted, that RPG would have plunged straight into her side of the vehicle. She might well be dead already. Behind her, the T-800 manning the gun exchanged fire with enemy forces behind the barricades and in the buildings on either side. The vehicles following her had pulled up at crazy angles, dodging each other when they'd put the brakes on.

They were caught in a crossfire from three directions. The air was filled with the noises of assault rifles, the backblasts of RPG tubes, and the explosions of striking RPGs. Two of the Terminators returned fire from the backs of the Humvees, using their mounted guns. Sarah opened her door, keeping down and looking for a point of cover. Her Humvee had spun slightly less than 180° and now sat at an angle in the street, almost facing the way they'd come. It could give her some cover against fire from the barricades ahead of them, and anything in the buildings where the first RPG had been fired.

She got out, crouching, and opened the door as wide as she could, making a nearly enclosed space between the Hummer and the nearest building wall. A rapid burst of shots came close to her from her left as she made her way to the Humvee's rear. *Now or never*, she thought, as another rifle burst came her way from a steep angle—someone high in the building above her. Their mistake. She caught the glimpse of a barrel, aimed down on her. In that moment, she found one of the deadliest weapons that she carried: a canister-shaped thermal grenade, improvised from the phased-plasma mechanisms of the guns used by Skynet's war machines. Quickly, she activated the mechanism, and lobbed the device almost vertically up the side of the building, where it entered a smashed-out window and exploded in a ball of searing flame, lighting up the whole sky. The gunfire from that direction ceased.

Standing now, with her back against the Humvee, she counted ten before slamming the door shut, rushing past the vehicle's nose, out into the street, and returning enemy fire from the other side. An answering burst sent her scuttling back behind the Humvee, but she'd seen what she needed: she'd picked out points on roofs and at windows where her enemies were located. She found a hand grenade, and pitched it in a long arc into the top window of a bullet-riddled six-floor building, ducking for cover as it exploded.

Rifle fire came from the barricades ahead of her, but one of the Terminators advanced toward them, blocking most of the rounds. Sarah took a position at the front end of the damaged Humvee—where it had spun around in the street—meeting Cecilia, who crouched beside the next vehicle back, one of their five-ton trucks. Cecilia carried a massive Squad Automatic Weapon, which she used to good effect, blazing away at windows on both sides of the street.

It seemed that they'd wiped out most of their opposition on one side—the left side, as they'd seen it when driving. Little fire now came from there, and return fire from the Terminators silenced what there was. Like Sarah and Cecilia, other human fighters used their vehicles as cover, but the Terminators didn't bother with that. They took positions out in the open, firing without fear, absorbing their punishment from those rounds that struck them.

After twenty minutes of fierce fighting, it was all over. No shots came from any direction. Carefully, taking what cover they could, Sarah, Cecilia, and three other human fighters followed the Terminators

who'd marched on the barricade. Two bodies lay facedown in the dust; otherwise, the barricade was deserted. Sarah was satisfied. She knew she'd fought well, as had the other humans in their group: Cecilia, Fiedler, Curtis Suarez, and half a dozen others. They made a good team, but she didn't fool herself—she knew it was the Terminators that made them near-invincible.

"We should check out those buildings," she said to Cecilia. "See if there's any survivors." She expected that most of their attackers had simply run for it, losing as badly as they were, but others must have been killed. It didn't sit well with Sarah, taking human life, but there was little choice when confronted by a deadly ambush.

Cecilia nodded, then gave orders. She seemed completely comfortable leading a force of Terminators. Sarah felt differently. She didn't like them, but she'd grown used to fighting with them, side-by-side, treating them as warriors and comrades, however cold and deadly. She still had nightmares about Terminators—in her dreams, they were her enemies—but she found she could work with them, as she'd had to do in the past.

They checked out the buildings, smashed apart the barricades, and examined their own wounds. No human fighters had suffered more than a few grazes and bruises—from desperately flinging themselves the ground or behind cover. That was unusual, even in these battles against the warlords, but not *very* unusual. With the Terminators to back them up, they were winning all their battles with minimal casualties. The brief resurgence of the warlords was as good as over. The Terminators found another dozen bodies, and brought back three wounded prisoners—two men, one woman, all in their twenties to look at them. They were hard-faced and tough-looking, but also scrawny and underfed.

"How many of you were there?" Cecilia said in Spanish. "Don't mince words with me—we want the truth, and we want it now."

The Terminators trained guns on the prisoners, and they soon talked. Most of the grunts who fought for the warlords were not especially loyal. Some were simply mercenary. Others had been in places where signing up with organizations such as the Rising Army had been their safest option. Cecilia soon established that there'd been about twenty-five in the ambush. That was most of the active fighters that the leadership of the Sons and the Rising Army had kept to defend the city.

"Where are your leaders now?" Sarah said. Would the Rising Army and the Sons make a stand to defend their HQ, or try to escape the city? Or would they try to hide out in the miles of Asunción's ruined buildings?

"Gone," one of the men said.

"Gone where?"

"I don't know."

"Don't give me that," Cecilia said, sticking her SAW right up close to his face. She towered over him, and there was fear in his eyes. She stepped an inch closer, eyeballing him. "I said I want to know, and I want to know *now*."

Once they had the likely hiding places for what was left of the warlords, they moved on to check the underground headquarters. They abandoned the damaged Humvee, which had been rendered useless by the RPG blast, but one Terminator tore its 20mm. gun from its mounting. The two Terminators that had been in the Hummer packed into one of the trucks, along with their three prisoners. Sarah took a

seat in the remaining Humvee, which she ordered forward to take the front position. No more attempts were made to stop them—there was just some sporadic sniper fire, which had little effect on their vehicles and none on the Terminator that manned the gun on the back of the Humvee.

When they reached the tunnel to the warlords' HQ, they found that it had been collapsed by explosives, probably some hours earlier. Sarah ordered a gang of Terminators to force their way through the wreck-age and see what they could find. She wanted to fin-ish this campaign quickly, and return to Colorado.

"It's over," Cecilia said. "We'll root them out, now we're here."

Beside her, Fiedler nodded. He'd fought a good campaign, adapting well to the Terminators, and treating the warlords' fighters with the right mix of toughness and kindness.

"I know," Sarah said. "We're just mopping them up now. We could leave it to the Terminators—they know what we expect by now, how far we're prepared to let them go." She sat on a broken block of concrete lying in the street. "There's something else on my mind."

Cecilia remained standing, but leaned back against the side of a truck. Her SAW bumped on her chest and stomach, where she wore it strapped around her. She was truly an Amazon. It was hard to match her with the little girl—and, later, the teenager—that Sarah had known in another world. "What might *that* be?" she said.

"Well, maybe you can guess that. When this is over, John and I...and Jade...have a tougher campaign ahead of us."

"Uh-huh." Cecilia dropped her voice. "I understand that. Jade wants to return to her world, and you're going to go with her."

"Right."

"What's on your mind about it?"

"The only way we can make a difference is to take a force of Terminators...same deal as here, but the job will be tougher, and the rules will be different. We'll be up against Skynet and its machines, except in a different world, one where they're winning, or they've almost won."

"And?"

"And we'll need some human fighters, too. I want to take the right people...they've got to mean busi-ness, and they should have experience in fighting alongside Terminators. I'm asking you to join us on this one...you and some of the others. Are you pre-pared to do it?"

The Terminators worked methodically, leaving little for Fiedler, Curtis, and the others to do for the mo-ment. What was required was simply the great strength that could shift huge chunks of concrete, brickwork, and stone. It was unlikely they'd find any-thing when they cleared the tunnel, except perhaps some booby traps. The Terminators would encounter those first.

"Think it over," Sarah said, when Cecilia didn't re-spond. "I know a lot's been asked of you. I won't press you on it if you've had enough."

"No, it's okay. I don't need to think about it. I thought it might come up—I just didn't pick the time and place where you'd ask me."

"Well, don't feel pressured—"

"Pressured?" The big Argentinean woman laughed. "That's the last thing I'm worried about."

"So?"

"I *want* to do it, Sarah. Some of the others will feel the same—I'd bet on that. I've lived for this struggle.. against Skynet, the machines, the warlords. That's what my life has been about. I don't even care if it kills me. I know the struggle goes on in another form, once we're through here. We have a new world to build, and we have entire continents to ex-plore... Still—"

"Count you in?"

"The job is made for me, and I know that someone has to go from this world. Don't you worry about it." She offered her strong hand, and Sarah took it. As the Terminators did their work, smashing masonry aside, Cecilia laughed again. "You can damn well count me in."

FOURTEEN

COLORADO FEBRUARY 28, 2030

Just for once, John felt entitled to some real happi-ness. It was his birthday, though that didn't mean what it normally would. He'd been born forty-five years before, but he was still only seventeen, biologically. He'd left his own world in late August and arrived here in late July. He'd actually reached seventeen years of experience a few weeks before, and hadn't even realized the significance of the date.

It really *was* General Connor's forty-fifth birthday, and it was still a symbolic date for John. One of his oldest friends had arrived from Los Angeles the pre-vious day, chancing the Arctic cold, and—best of all—they'd timed this as the day for Sarah to return from South America. With the warlords thoroughly beaten, a group of campaign veterans had come to Colorado, some for the first time. Along with the hu-mans were three Terminators that had weathered the campaign unscathed, and could be used to travel through the time vault.

John waited with Jade, General Connor, Juanita, Danny, and a group of guards with their German shepherd dogs, while others opened the blast doors.

Juanita stood between the General and a much older man—her father, Enrique. *This* Enrique was totally bald, and shrinking into himself with age, but he still seemed feisty. His coarse, stubbly beard was white, his face lined by decades of care and loss, but he gave a gap-toothed smile, knowing that Sarah was coming.

The three Terminators stepped out first from the olive drab truck that had pulled up in the supply tun-nel:

a white-haired T-799, and two T-800s of an identical model. These T-800s were in the form of a short man, only about five-foot-five, but powerfully built. Someone had dressed the Terminators in military uniform, though John had heard that they'd simply fought naked in many of the battles in South America—there'd been no point in wasting scarce clothing on them, when they didn't need protection or feel the cold. As the Terminators approached, the dogs barked frantically.

General Connor stepped forward to meet them. "Do you know who I am?"

The nearest Terminator, the T-799 replied, "You are General John Connor."

"That's correct." The General pointed out one of the guards, and said, "Go with this man. He'll accompany you to Level H. Obey any orders he gives you, then wait."

"Affirmative." They headed for the nearest stairs, as a dozen human fighters stepped from the truck, waiting for a minute until the dogs finally calmed down. Though General Connor and the others knew there would be Terminators in this group, the dogs were to ensure that there were none that could not be accounted for—none that had been left behind by Skynet with orders to infiltrate the Resistance. They could never entirely rule that out.

Sarah lingered at the back of the group, with Cecilia Tejada. Both looked confident and fit. They'd cut their hair much shorter than when John had last seen them, adopting similar military styles. It seemed that they'd grown close on the campaign in South America, for they laughed together, sharing a private joke, before following the rest into Level E, with its noisy machinery.

General Connor welcomed several others whom John recognized, including Fiedler, who'd been a guard here until he'd volunteered to take part in the campaign against the warlords. One man whom John hadn't met was Curtis Suarez, though he'd known the Suarez family in his own world. They shook hands, then Sarah and Cecilia stepped forward.

"Happy birthday, John," Cecilia said, addressing the General.

"Welcome back," General Connor said to both of the women. "You ran a flawless operation."

In theory, Cecilia had been in charge of the campaign against the warlords, but everyone knew that she and Sarah had bonded closely, and formed a leadership team. Her skills, together with her charisma as a crossworld counterpart of the legendary mother of the Resistance, had soon won her that kind of respect from other human fighters in South America. "I'm glad I did it," she said. "It was something I needed to do."

John stepped forward to embrace her, and she looked him up and down when they drew apart. "I think you've grown a little."

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe half an inch while you've been away."

"Anyway, happy birthday. I know it's a funny kind of birthday."

"You can say that again. Now, look who's here to see you!"

Sarah looked the old man up and down as he stepped forward, plainly not believing her eyes. "En-rique?" she said tentatively.

"Who else, Connor?" he said. "Who else could get this old and ugly?"

She ran to him, a rare smile lighting her face. "En-rique, it's so good to see you."

They embraced, Sarah almost as tall as him, now that he'd shrunk with age. He gave a loud unselfconscious laugh, almost a yelp of pleasure. "After 2012, I never thought I'd see you again."

"Oh, Enrique—"

"Shhh," he said, and pushed her away. "I under-stand, you know. I'm quick on the uptake, Connor. I'm not demented, you know." He was still laughing. "I know you're not the same woman—and the sense In which you are. Do I look like I've grown stupid?"

"Maybe just a little," she said, bantering with him.

"It's great to see you, anyway, Connor—you and young John here. It brings back memories."

"When you've had a chance to rest, we have something to show you," General Connor said.

A wary look came over Sarah's face. She stepped over to the General. "This is about the T-1000s?"

"We've reprogrammed one of them," Danny said.

"The one we left in New York?"

"Yup, that's right. Our work went well enough that we flew its entire body over here. Right now there's no problems. We'll bring the other one from Europe when we've got a chance." He must have seen

Sarah's expression, for he added, "You have any problem with that?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, Danny—no, I don't. Not really...but it makes the next step seem more real. Working with T-800s in South America is one thing. Adding T-1000s to the mix—and in a completely different world—that's still a lot to absorb."

"Danny's done an incredible job," Juanita said. "And Jade and John...I mean *your son*, John." She squeezed the General's hand as she spoke. John didn't bother pointing out that, when you went into it properly, he and the General were *both* Sarah's son. He guessed that Juanita knew that as well as anyone, and she had to make the distinction somehow. Now John was almost full-grown, the *Big John* thing for General Connor was even tackier and kind of lame. Even Enrique didn't use that expression, which was what he'd called John as a kid.

"We'll see it soon," Sarah said in a voice that gave nothing away.

They closed the blast door and descended the metal stairs, splitting up to allow Sarah, Cecilia and the others to go to their living quarters. John, General Connor, Jade, Danny, Juanita, and Enrique headed to Level H, where several Resistance fighters stood around the Supercoffin, all of them armed with laser rifles. An alarm system was set up, just in case the T-1000 acted against its programming.

"When's *your* birthday, Jade?" John said to make some light conversation while they waited for Sarah and Cecilia.

"In September," she said.

"Hey, I missed it! I should have given you some-thing—"

"John, it doesn't really matter. After traveling in time, birthdays are meaningless. So are precise ages."

"Well, I know that." He *did* know, of course, but the symbolism was nice to share. It hurt him that she couldn't see that.

She smiled indulgently. "I am sorry. I should have said at the time. You could have fussed over me."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"Yes, you would have. And I would have liked it. Really, I should have said something. So much else was happening at the time."

"Hey, then, happy belated birthday."

"And you, too. Happy birthday for today."

Danny worked at his computer, setting up the sys-tem while waiting for the others. Enrique watched in fascination as General Connor and Juanita talked quietly in a corner. They must have been aware that Jade could hear anything they said, no matter how softly they spoke, so John guessed it couldn't be too personal. It was probably plans about their great re-construction of civilization—not about their own life together. Friendly as Jade seemed today, John didn't know what more to say to her. There was a long si-lence between them. Then he said, "You were, like, sixteen?"

"I would have turned sixteen...if I had not left my world. I was three months short of it, and I have lived another eight months since. Measured that way, you are slightly older."

"Oh, okay," he said, working it out in his mind.

At last, Sarah and Cecilia joined them. "Okay, listen up everyone," Danny said. "Let me show you how it works. Right now, the T-1000 is in there, in the Supercoffin. We liquefied it enough to rejoin its arm, but now it's in solid form." He entered the codes to display the liquid-metal Terminator's outline on the screens. "This stuff that it's made of generates a field much like a living thing. That means it can be configured to travel through the space-time displacement field. We knew that already, because most of you guys have been attacked by polyalloy Terminators that traveled in time to get to you."

John stifled a laugh at the way Danny put it. Sarah looked uncomfortable at the memory.

Danny tapped at his keyboard, making arrays of data dance and morph. "Let's see what I can show you about this sucker." He made some more adjust-ments, then sat back, looking satisfied. "The Super-coffin programs it for us. It produces a very powerful, very intricate magnetic field that acts on the molecular structure of the liquid-metal. The actual programming isn't that much different from the Terminators that we're used to. It looks like Skynet always cannibalized and extended existing technologies when it could. With Jade leading the way, we got the hang of this fairly quickly."

"What have you programmed it to do?" General Connor said.

"It's much like the T-799s and T-800s that we used in South America. This thing is smart, so we can let

it use its intelligence. It can figure out who to obey and who its enemies are. In this world, it will obey humans from the Resistance. When it travels across the other world, it will recognize Jade's people and obey them, too. If there's any conflict, it can figure out the hierarchy, and Jade gets the final say. It's her people that it has to help to beat up Skynet." Danny entered another code to open the lid the Supercoffin, which swung upward like the hood of a car.

The T-1000 sat up, then seemed to flow through itself, reforming in a standing position. John knew it could take on any shape or color, and the illusion of any texture. Right now, though, it was a shimmering, silvery, all-purpose human being, a bit like an Academy Award Oscar statuette. Danny gestured, and the guards with laser rifles stepped in closer to it. The rest of the humans in the room took a step back, except for Jade and Danny himself. He walked right up to it, quite fearlessly. Jade simply stayed where she was, looking it over with no expression except the faintest hint of satisfaction.

"Do you understand your mission?" Danny said to it.

"Oh, yes," the Terminator said. Its voice was that of a young man—light in pitch, well-educated, reassuring, but a bit too smug. "I certainly do."

John half-expected it to grow its arm into a sword, and stab Danny through the guts. He held his breath for a second...but nothing like that happened.

"Summarize it for me," Danny said.

"My mission? I'll join the party destined for another timeline, the reality that Miho Tagatoshi came from." It nodded in Jade's direction. "Otherwise known as 'Jade's World.'"

"That's what John calls it," Danny said, by way of explanation.

"Very well," Jade said, walking up beside him. She looked sternly at the T-1000. "Lie back in the Super-coffin—the programming device."

"You call it the Supercoffin? Okay," the liquid-metal Terminator said. It melted down, then reformed again, lying on its back. Once more, John couldn't help but think of vampire movies.

Danny entered the code to close the device, sealing the T-1000 in there. "We've reprogrammed it thoroughly. We've even enhanced it a little."

"Enhanced it? Sarah said, alert straightaway. "What does that mean?"

"Remember the T-XA?" John said. "It was designed to reprogram people—it could use its nanoware to rewire their brains...or just read off their memories." The T-XA had reprogrammed the brains of many people in Cyberdyne Systems and the U.S. military, but it had failed when it tried to read the memories of one of the Specialists. It had killed Selena Macedo, but had almost been destroyed by the counterintrusive nanotech built into her brain...which was like that in Jade's brain, too, and all the other Specialists.

Sarah nodded slowly. "What about it? There's no reason for the T-1000 to do *that*."

"No, Mom, that's not quite what we had in mind."

"Well, just what *did* you do?"

"Mom, we were worried that Skynet might try to take the T-1000s over. We've built in some program-ming to resist that, but we've done even better. When we've finished, the T-1000s will be able to hack into the circuitry of Skynet's machines, even into their programming."

"So you're designing your own little mini-T-XAs? Forgive my skepticism, John."

"No, that's going too far," John said. "It's not like that."

"Well, let's be clear on it. I hope you don't think you're inventing some secret weapon here, like a Terminator that's going to hack into Skynet or some-thing. I've got a feeling that Skynet thought of that a long time ago, and it's just waiting for someone to try."

John laughed. "I thought of that, too. We all agreed

it was kind of obvious...but nothing like that. I figure Skynet has probably watched *Independence Day* some time. It's not going to fall for *that* trick."

"All right." Sarah gave a sigh that became a constricted laugh. "I'll trust you on this. You worked it out?"

"Me and Jade together," John said proudly. He'd immersed himself in work with Jade...perhaps they could never be more than comrades, but they'd found they *could* be at least that. It had been a happy time for him, as he'd focused on the work, learning quickly.

"We have to make a difference, don't we?" Sarah said. "The war is going badly..." She looked to Jade. "What's it going to take to turn it around?"

"There is no easy way, Sarah," Jade said. "I have memorized everything that my people know about Skynet's forces—its systems, deployment, capabilit-ies."

"You would have, supergirl."

"Sarah?" Jade said, looking puzzled.

"No offense intended. Look, Jade, we have time to plan this. We still have Terminators that are ready to travel through time—plenty of them. We're just going to have to hit Skynet with enough forces to change the balance."

"You make it sound easy," Jade said with a sad smile.

"I didn't mean that, either. I know how hard you must have been working."

"No, you are right. It *can* be done. Skynet's forces are overwhelming, but they are not unbeatable. We will plan carefully, work out contingencies, strike with sufficient force. Perhaps then we will have some chance." She paused and smiled. "Call it twenty percent."

"I think that was a joke, Mom," John said. "Sort of a realistic joke. Jade doesn't believe in optimism, you know. She believes in the facts."

"I believe that *you* should be optimistic," Jade said. "It just doesn't work for me."

"All right," Juanita said. "We're all here now. You've got some of the best military minds in this whole reality, Jade. Let's go through it."

"Good idea," Enrique said.

General Connor said, "There's just one thing we have to face."

"Yeah, I know." Enrique winked in his daughter's direction. "I know what's coming. We've all heard this before."

The General gave a cynical laugh. "You know it's true by now...as well as I do."

"Sure I do. I don't deny it."

"Military plans are great things," the General said, "and we've got to have them. The only trouble is when you get into actual battle. It's never like you thought it would be. Your plan is the first thing that you have to leave behind."

MARCH 16, 2030

John's bare feet felt cold on the concrete floor. Like the other six humans who would take the journey across the dimensions, he was dressed in just a light gown—more for modesty than warmth. In the end, they'd had more volunteers than they could use. Many veterans of the campaign against the warlords in South America had both the experience in working with Terminators and the willingness to undertake this extraordinary, critical mission. But it would just be John, Sarah, Jade, Cecilia, Fiedler, Curtis Suarez, and a German-Argentinean woman called Barbara Closs. Closs was a blonde woman in her thirties—not tall, but chunky and strong, with broad hips and muscular legs. She'd fought well for Sarah, who had vouched for her over other volunteers.

The T-799s and T-800s were already naked. Jade had selected eighteen of them, almost all of the Terminators left that were sufficiently undamaged to travel through the displacement field. In addition, the two T-1000s stood slightly to one side, in their true form: silvery metal, humanoid, but with no distinctive facial features. While the humans paced about or talked nervously to one another, the Terminators stood still, legs slightly apart, arms hanging easily by their sides, looking attentive and calm, though "calm" was not exactly the right word for cybernetic organ-isms with no human emotions.

No doubt General Connor would stand by his commitment to destroy the remaining Terminators under his control by the deadline in September. With the warlords beaten and many rogue war machines found and destroyed, the Terminators would soon be of no further use. It was just a matter of giving them clear orders, and they would destroy each other.

The General waited with Juanita, as Danny made his final equipment checks. The time vault was pro-programmed to take them to a position in the Amazon Basin that was not under attack from Skynet's

forces, at the moment after Jade had left to travel back in time. It had been prearranged in case there was ever a need—and the ability—for the Specialists to return to their own time. Arriving at that point should give them some breathing space, though Skynet would doubtless sense and act against them quickly.

"All A-OK," Danny said, looking up from his desk. "I'll call for Blue Team in five minutes."

That gave an opportunity for final farewells, and nothing more—no chance for second thoughts.

Though he feared the agonizing pain of travel via the space-time displacement field, John almost looked forward to getting it out of the way, then facing the worst on the "other side" of the displacement. Beside him, Jade appeared at peace, while everyone else was nervous. Sarah's face showed no expression but grim determination, but she paced about as much as anyone...almost like a caged tigress.

John spoke quietly to Jade. "Your people will be glad to see you." Then he added, realizing how dorky that sounded, "As long as we live long enough when we get there."

"We will," she said with a smile. "But there will be sorrow as well as joy. They will be glad to see me, but not so happy to find that only I survived."

"Will they know about the T-XA?" John said. "Is there any way they would know what Skynet did?"

"They will have registered a distortion in the Earth's space-time field. They will know that Skynet sent something back in time to pursue us."

Sarah joined them. "The waiting is the worst, isn't it?"

"Very soon now," Jade said.

General Connor walked round to say goodbye. He shook hands with each of them, speaking words of encouragement. John understood some more of what made him a great leader. He had a way of speaking and looking at you intently as if, for the few seconds of contact, you were the most important person in the world. You could know that he always did that, that it was a kind of trick, but you couldn't help feeling it when it was your turn.

"Good luck," he said to John. "I know the implications of what you're doing. It's for everybody's sake—not just Jade's World. *Everybody's*."

"Thank you, sir," John said.

Sarah and the General exchanged hugs, still self-conscious about it.

For all his human skills, General Connor appeared even less sure how to deal with Jade, despite the months that they'd been working together. "Good luck," he said simply, though he gave a smile that seemed to convey much: sympathy, respect, gratitude.

Jade nodded gravely, but did not otherwise make any movement. Thank you, General Connor. I appreciate your words."

Juanita quickly added her farewells.

"Let's get started," Danny said. He looked at John's group. "Blue Team first."

"Okay," Sarah said. "We're ready." The plan was to send three more or less evenly balanced team—two or three humans and six or seven Terminators per team. They would be sent to the same coordinates and should arrive together, even though their departures would be separated by a few minutes.

"All right. Then we'll send Red Team."

"Ready," Cecilia said.

"And Yellow Team last."

Jade nodded. "Ready."

The blue/red/yellow terminology was just an arbitrary way to distinguish the three groups. Blue Team was John, Sarah, one of the T-1000s, and another six Terminators. Cecilia and Curtis formed the Red Team, along with eight Terminators, including the other T-1000. Jade, Fiedler, and Closs made up Yellow Team, with the rest of the Terminators. Once they made the crossing to Jade's World, the division into teams would have no significance. They'd all need to work together, forming a small, integrated army.

"Are you okay, John?" Sarah said.

"I guess I am."

Sarah's jaw clenched. "Let's get on with it."

Danny powered up the time vault. Once again, John felt terror through his body. As the engines thrummed, Danny came around from his control console to say goodbye.

Then it was time to go.

Sarah walked first toward the vault, shedding the robe from her shoulders when she reached its open metal door. John followed, then the Terminators. They took up positions near the center of the floor, facing outwards toward the walls. The metal door slammed shut; there was no way back. The vault vibrated strongly. Soon, very soon, they would be gone from this reality. In a moment—if nothing went wrong—they would meet the other teams in a different universe.

Then came the light, the pain.

PART TWO:
JADE'S WORLD

FIFTEEN

AMAZON BASIN, BRAZIL JUNE 12, 2036

The hot, blinding pain tore at John's insides. He landed on soft ground, further cushioned by lush plant life, but the impact still knocked the breath out of him. The pain went on and on as he looked around. Having done this twice before, he knew that the pain just had to be lived through. You mustn't panic—it would come to an end.

They were in a kind of jungle, and its plants blocked

John's vision. As far as he could see, everyone was here, scattered among the trees, bushes, ferns, and clumps of long grass. He recognized individuals from all three of the teams they'd been divided into. That meant that all the displacements through the time vault had worked. In particular, Sarah and Jade were both here. Jade had reached her feet, just like the Terminators, and she looked around with a similar unhurried gaze.

"Displacement successful," she said. She stretched her athletic body, testing her muscles and joints. The Terminators merely watched and waited.

John forced himself to his feet, setting an example to the three—Curtis, Fiedler, and Closs—who'd never done this before. He spotted Closs's blonde hair, but could not see the others. Well, let them see *him*. It might reassure them that the pain could be dealt with, worked through. Jade's resistance to it meant nothing, of course; everyone knew she was something more than human. He tested his breathing and the move-ment of his limbs. His body was whole. Soon, he'd be able to fight or do whatever else was needed.

Beside him, Sarah also found her feet. Naked, her body displayed its athleticism. Her skin was white as alabaster from months in a sunless world, but she seemed at home, here in the forest. She was closer to forty than thirty, but her years of training had given her both flexibility and seriously powerful muscles. Her torso was starkly V-shaped. Even beside Jade and the Terminators, she did not seem out of place, though she was ordinary, unenhanced flesh and blood, and could not hope to match their vast strength.

Jade moved among the others swiftly, seemingly without effort. "The pain passes," she said to Closs. "You will be fine." She spoke the same way to Fiedler and Curtis, who emerged from where they'd ended up in the bushes and grass, treating them all with care. Jade had claimed, in the past, not to have the same human touch as General Connor. But now, when it was really needed, she could offer comfort.

"We're vulnerable like this," Sarah said, looking down at her unprotected skin. "We need weapons and clothes."

"Yes," Jade said. "My people will provide them. As long as they reach us before the machines." In fact, they'd brought some weapons enclosed within the liquid-metal forms of the T-1000s, but Sarah was right.

Those would be little use against concerted attack from Skynet's war machines.

Cecilia was huddled into herself, though standing—perhaps more embarrassed than some of the others at her own nakedness. Jade seemed totally oblivious to that issue, caring no more than the Terminators about such trivia. But Cecilia also had a look that showed she was counting, checking everyone was here—all the humans, all the Terminators. John was already sure of that. He'd been doing his own count, but even if he made a mistake, Jade would not...and she'd raised no problems. But it was good to see that people already had their minds on the job ahead.

This jungle was a kind that John had never seen before, though Jade had briefed them all on what to expect, and he'd heard from Sarah and some of the others of similar strange jungles in the equatorial zones back in Skynet's World. Near the equator, the climate had become unstable since Judgment Day, with long droughts—sometimes broken by sudden floods and storms, sometimes by long periods of wet as the Earth's atmosphere adjusted to its cooling. This would probably go on for decades, perhaps centuries. The Amazonian *selvas* had shrunk back, leaving an ecology of savanna on its edges, with trees growing during the periods of rain.

Deeper within the old *selvas* a new ecology had evolved. The tall trees had died, unable to survive the months of darkness after the nuclear holocaust, and the ongoing gloom thereafter. Many shallow-rooted forest giants had fallen, bringing down lesser foliage with them. A few still stood, towering two hundred feet in the air, but brown and dead. Eventually all of the giants would crash, their root systems, adapted to a wet climate, unable to anchor them forever. For now, they were monuments to the destruction of Judgment Day. Some were covered with strangler vines and other climbing plants. The plants beneath the canopy—the bottom tier of the old rainforest—had survived, since they were well-adapted to low light. The drop in temperature had not killed them all.

Here at ground level, the vegetation was still thick, but there were breaks in the foliage overhead, not like the forest that had grown here in John's world and time. Through the gaps, the sky was a dirty gray. Right now, the jungle was silent except for the pecking of some kind of bird in the near distance. A few flies drifted around them, but nothing like the masses of insects that John had known, growing up in places like Nicaragua, back in his own world. So much life had gone. There was a strange mix of scents on the air. It was different in essence not only from anything he had encountered in his own time, but also from what he'd found in Skynet's World.

The Terminators reacted to something. John heard a branch snap and turned in that direction, but Jade was even faster than the machines. She pushed aside a T-799 as a group of men and women burst through the bushes, clad in light military uniform and carrying huge guns. Two of them—a young black woman and an equally young Caucasian man—handled their weapons with the same immense strength as a Terminator or as Jade herself. John recognized some of the weapons as phased-plasma laser rifles of the same design that they'd had taken from the T-XA when they'd fought it back in his own world. Judging by their construction, others seemed to be anti-armor weapons, though not of any make or design he'd ever seen.

The word is *forest*," Jade said slowly. "Don't shoot—it's me. I've had to come back." Several of the

guns were aimed straight at her head. John, Sarah, and Cecilia signaled to the Terminators not to move, Jade walked toward the group slowly, raising her hands and holding them far apart to show she was unarmed. Of course, that would have made little difference if she'd been a Terminator—she'd still have been dangerous, armed or not. "Krystal, Dmitri, please don't shoot. It's me."

Not far away, a dog started barking. More people pushed through the grass and bushes, one of them with a dog that began to go frantic as it got closer to the Terminators. Jade moved, rushing in the direction of the dog; she bent down to comfort it, letting it lick her hands, shoulders, and face. It stopped barking, seemingly mollified.

John waved the Terminators back.

There were now a dozen of the newcomers, all of them heavily armed. "Why have you come back?" the black woman said. She carried a laser rifle one-handed. She was covered from head to toe in camou-flage gear, including her helmet, canvas boots, and a pair of combat gloves. Only her face was exposed. Her rifle was aimed at Jade's chest, and she looked like she meant business. "What about your mission?" "If I hadn't come back, every world would be in danger," Jade said.

"What do you mean?"

"Krystal..." Jade stood sadly, leaving the dog be.

She looked imploringly into the woman's face. They

obviously knew each other. "Where do I begin?" Jade

said "So much has happened to me. There is so much I now understand. For everyone's sake, I needed to."

"Where are the others?"

Jade set her jaw before she gave the bad news. "Robert, Selena, Daniel, and Anton are dead. All killed by Skynet's machines."

For what seemed like minutes, no more words were spoken between Jade and the woman called Krystal. John guessed that Jade could communicate with these people using throat mikes, just as she had with Anton. She was probably giving them detail more quickly than he could have followed.

At last, the woman lowered her rifle, and the others followed. "All right. I've got the picture, Jade. You're really *you*...*but* this is a helluva way to come back. Right now, we're in danger. All of us."

Sarah interrupted, sounding exasperated. "For God's sake, is there any clothing you people can give us?"

Krystal nodded at her respectfully. "Are you Sarah Connor?"

"Yes...nice to meet you. Now what about some goddamn clothes? There must be something we can wear—"

Some of them opened the leg pouches in their uni-forms. They handed over small objects made of a kind of plastic, which unfolded into garments a little like boilersuits, colored a mix of tan and olive drab.

The fabric looked and felt flimsy, like spider web, but as John wrestled it on he found that it had unexpected strength. It didn't tear.

"We don't have enough for all of you," Krystal said.

There were enough clothes for the *humans*, which was all that really mattered. The Terminators needed no protection from the elements. To John, the costume seemed kind of dorky, but he was thankful for an thing that kept away the cold. Above all, he could have used a pair of sturdy boots—but, hey, you couldn't have everything. Not in a situation like this.

"Thank you," Sarah said, struggling into her own garment. "That's a good start."

"We can do better," Krystal said, nodding. "We'll get you boots and proper uniforms—back at our base. Sarah and John"—she nodded at them both—"you died in this world, trying to stop Skynet. People admire you here. But something is coming. Skynet has detected you."

Just then, the dog's ears pricked up. John listened for any new sound, but the dog began barking furiously.

VILA NOVA DO SUL

Hiro's analysis showed that whatever Skynet had sent to the Amazon from Colorado had arrived at almost the same spot as the first event. There might be a few hundred yards' difference, since there was a margin for error in the analysis. For the moment, there was no more that he could do about that situation. Anxiety gnawed at him about Jade. Had her team returned? Even if it had, was she among them? He finished the conversation with Joe Vicario. For now, there was nothing more to discuss. He would wait to hear from Vicario when contact was made. At least he'd warned them that Skynet had acted. They would need to make their own decisions. "Tough, huh?" Merrilee said, wish I knew its significance. Did they come back help?"

"Assuming it's Jade and the others?" "He felt his face redden—he must not make assumptions. "Yes, that is what I meant."

She shrugged. "Maybe they want to help *us*?"

They used the sensors that fed information from outside, seeking an update on the fierce battle for Vila Nova do Sul. A force of eleven aerial H-Ks, supported by Juggernauts and an army of endos, had surrounded them, and was relentlessly moving in. Fast light-armored skimmers—the Humvees of the air—harassed Skynet's machines, firing their own phased-plasma mini-cannons, but their numbers were now too few. Despite all their efforts, Vila Nova could not last much longer. Even if they repelled the current force, Skynet could send more.

Once Vila Nova do Sul fell, no other human enclave in the Western hemisphere could hold out for long. Small groups such as those in the Amazon jungle might survive a little longer, hiding away from the enemy and avoiding conflict unless discovered, but they offered no real hope; sooner or later, Skynet would find them all. The army gathered by Ramsey Devaux had made a last effort to attack the computer in Colorado.

Humanity's only real chance for survival was in another reality where Judgment Day never happened. So much hope had gone with Jade and her team, though he'd never expected to find out its fate...

Even as he watched on his screens, an H-K came too low, and was struck by an anti-armor missile; it exploded across the screens, and Hiro could imagine the momentary celebration outside on the front line.

"Looks like we got one," Merrilee said. A few others cheered, but Hiro shook his head, giving just a thin-lipped smile. There were other war machines to de-feat, and Skynet's factories kept turning out *more*.

Soon, Skynet would have what it wanted: the ex-termination of the whole human species.

AMAZON BASIN

The T-XA emerged from the coiling lightning, and immediately plunged a shovel-sized hand deep within its own chest—then withdrew the phased-plasma laser rifle that it had carried on its journey from Colorado. Its liquid-metal opened up with the texture of chilled honey, then closed with the hardness of steel. The T-XA's mission was to investigate the anomaly that Skynet had detected in the space-time field, and to destroy any hostile forces that it encountered. It had taken the form of a gigantic, shaven-headed man, but it could adopt any other appearance it desired, even splitting into multiple components if need be.

The T-XA was almost indestructible, with advanced cybernetic abilities. It was well equipped to succeed.

Its sensors detected only the ghost of a fluctuation in the space-time field. The fluctuation was a quarter to half a mile away, which meant that the T-XA's displacement across space had been acceptably accurate. However, it had arrived too late to obtain a more precise target location. That was a minor setback, but it would cover the distance rapidly, and find anything unusual. As it pushed through the bushes and grass, it made contact with the artificial intelligences controlling Skynet's closest aircraft—the H-K and the transporter assigned to assist its mission.

Both machines were within fifty miles, and approaching at near-supersonic speed. At the T-XA's command, they deviated marginally from their course, headed for the same approximate target.

"Aircraft approaching," Jade said. "And something else." Krystal put her finger to her lips, and walked stealthily toward a thicker part of the foliage, motioning for the rest to follow. John picked his way over the grass, avoiding roots and fallen branches. He noticed that it was not unbearably cold this close to the equator. In the odd garment he'd put on, he'd probably be okay. The worst part was walking through this strange terrain without shoes, trying not to stub his toes.

The high-pitched whine of powerful engines filled the air. Through the foliage, he caught a glimpse of two dark-gray aircraft, skimming quickly overhead. Neither had quite the sinister insectoid shape of the aerial H-Ks he'd seen in Skynet's World, though one was similar. John picked it as this world's version of an

H-K, larger than those he'd seen in Skynet's World, and with swept-back wings more like those of a conventional plane. The other was a flatter kind of design, like an airborne barge or troop carrier—which he guessed it might be. Inwardly, he thanked Jade for all the briefings she'd given him and the others on this world's weaponry and tactics. Though nothing looked familiar, he could match what he saw against her diagrams and descriptions.

Wordlessly, Jade's people took up positions. For John, it was frustrating working with fighters who didn't need to talk out loud. It seemed that all of them were linked to sub-vocalize to each other, a point that Jade had not made clear before they'd left, or perhaps he had not properly grasped it.

She moved to his side. "They haven't detected us yet," she whispered. "They're still circling."

He nodded. "Right."

"But they know we are here. Their sensors are highly accurate."

"If one of those is a transporter, it'll need a landing area," John said,

"Yes, it will, once it knows where we are." Jade nodded at her comrades. "We know the terrain here—where they will try to land."

"You'll target them there?"

"Yes, when they are most vulnerable."

"Then we've got to use the Terminators," John said. He looked at her meaningfully. "Use one of the T-1000s. *Capicse?*"

She stared at him, puzzled for a moment, then said, "You are right."

"It's our best chance, Jade."

"I agree," she said. "Skynet has given us an opportunity." Moving like a ghost, she stepped over to Sarah, to have the same conversation. She must have been subvocalizing to the others, because some of them handed weapons to the Terminators. Jade spoke to the machines, too quietly for John to make out, but the machines had better hearing.

The nearest one to Jade was a T-799. It must have understood the need for quiet, for it said, in a surprisingly soft voice, "Affirmative."

The H-K flew directly toward them. Krystal spoke out loud: "We've been spotted."

Jade shouted, "Down, John! Everybody down!"

And then a giant figure plunged through the grass and scrub, firing a laser rifle.

Sarah knew immediately what they were up against—the same kind of monster that they had fought in her own world and time, first in Mexico City, then in Colorado Springs: a T-XA. Without a weapon there was little she could do, but their own Terminators were thoroughly briefed on the T-XA and its

abilities. One of the T-800s rushed directly into the super-hot laser beam, which struck it in the chest—not a useful place to hit a T-800. Even as flesh burnt away from its hyperalloy chassis, the T-800 reached the T-XA and grappled with it, trying to seize the rifle from its grasp.

Meanwhile, the H-K swooped low, firing laser cannons mounted in turrets on its wings and under-carriage. Bolts of light penetrated the jungle foliage, incinerating anything they touched. One of the Terminators was hit, but it survived—they were hard to kill unless you could actually take out a GPU with highly accurate fire. The H-K passed by overhead, then released a missile. Sarah realized that the T-XA and the T-1000s could withstand almost any explosion, but the other Terminators might not; humans could certainly not.

She flattened herself on the ground, taking cover behind a knotted mass of tree roots, holding both arms over her head. As she moved, she saw Jade's people firing their laser weapons, trying to shoot the missile out of the sky. She'd seen Jade and Anton do that; she hoped these fighters were just as skilled. Within seconds, that hope was answered. A huge explosion almost deafened her, and the concussion wave shook her body, but the missile had exploded in the air.

As the H-K circled back to make another pass, the T-XA and the much smaller T-800 grappled. The T-800 smashed the laser rifle from the T-XA's hands, then drove a powerful blow into the giant Terminator's upper body, but its fist stuck there—the T-XA's liquid-metal softened to absorb the impact, then hardened. No one dared rush for the laser rifle as the two powerful machines fought, the T-XA easily gaining the upper hand. It picked up the T-800, which must have weighed over three hundred pounds, and tossed it twenty feet. The T-800 smashed against the trunk of a huge, dead tree. But before the T-XA could retrieve its rifle, two more T-800s tackled it. John, Jade, and some of the others were frantically organizing a team to deal with the transporter and whatever machines it carried. Sarah saw her chance to make a contribution. As the T-XA struggled to beat down the two T-800s, she dived for its laser rifle.

Krystal rushed away on a track to Sarah's left, along with a handful of her fighters, plus the two T-1000s and most of the other Terminators. The T-XA over-powered one of the T-800s, then clubbed the other to the ground with powerful blows that ripped away much of the flesh on its face, and left one ear almost red. Of course, those "injuries" meant nothing to a Terminator.

Before the T-XA could act any further, Sarah opened fire on it with the laser rifle, holding the heavy weapon in both hands. She'd learnt in previous battles with liquid-metal Terminators that point-blank fire from such weapons had some effect on them, burning off the top layers of metal and causing some kind of confusion in their circuitry. She knew she could die at any second, as she heard the H-K skimming back toward them over the treetops. In a moment, it would launch its missiles or fry them with its laser cannon, but that didn't matter. Right now, this was personal—just her versus the T-XA. It was the focus for all her anger, for her thoughts of everything that Skynet had done to her, the people it had killed, the pain she'd had to go through time and time again in the struggle to save the Earth from Skynet. "Eat this!" she shouted, her face contorted in anger.

She fired a super-hot bolt of light directly into its torso, and the T-XA stepped back. She stepped closer, firing again. And again. She squeezed the trigger back fully, and laser bolts streamed from the gun in a continual burst of fire. The T-XA held its ground, neither staggering back further nor advancing. Sarah gritted her teeth, continuing to fire. "Come on, eat some more, you goddamn metal freak."

A swordlike shaft twenty feet long stabbed out at her, formed from one of the monster's arms. But she'd been focused—she'd fought this kind of Terminator before—and she'd expected something like that. This time, it missed, as she hurled herself to the ground.

So much was happening around her. High-powered bolts of laser light from the H-K pierced the tree cover, some of them striking the grassy ground—but one punched straight through one of the fighters who had come to meet Sarah and the others. It consumed and killed him instantly. Another hit a T-800, burning through its shoulder and melting the metal skeleton underneath. The arm dangled like it was on a string. A third went through the body of young Curtis Suarez.

Cecilia cried, "No!" She raced to him as shafts of burning light stabbed down all round.

The uniformed fighters shot back with their laser rifles and anti-armor projectile weapons. Sarah passed her newly acquired laser rifle to Jade—good as her own skills were, Jade's were even better. An unremitting barrage of fire drove the H-K away; it climbed higher, but launched a salvo of three missiles. Sarah got down; there was nothing else she could do. There was an explosion high in the air. At the same time, two of the T-800s that had fought the T-XA resumed their battle with the shapeshifting Terminator. A T-799 threw itself across Sarah, its body like a wall of flesh-and-metal armor.

More explosions, deafening her. More heat beams.

This was pandemonium.

She looked up...to catch a glimpse of the H-K plunging from the sky, between the trees. It crashed somewhere out of sight with a mighty crunching noise, but no explosion. The T-799 rolled away from her, and she saw death and destruction all round. She crawled to John's side—he lay unconscious, covered in blood.

SIXTEEN

JUNE 12, 2036 AMAZON BASIN

Krystal Taylor rushed through the jungle toward the transporter's landing zone. She had grasped only the outline of Jade's story—that four out of the five Specialists who had been sent back in time had been killed in battles with Skynet's machines, and that the Skynet of this reality was a potential threat to *every* reality. That was all she needed to know. Despite the shock of Jade's arrival—particularly the presence of the Terminators—Krystal trusted her completely. There was no other option but to defeat Skynet, once and for all, in their own reality, impossible though that seemed.

With her went a force of six humans—all from her enclave and fully equipped to fight—plus ten of the Terminators who'd appeared here with Jade. One of them was a liquid-metal Terminator that Jade had called a "T-1000." Krystal had no doubt that it would be a formidable weapon. As for the T-XA sent by Skynet, and the aerial H-K, she'd have to leave them to Jade, Dmitri, and the others. Her task was to try to stop that transporter from offloading whatever machines it carried—probably a force of endos. If that was not possible, they'd have to destroy those machines, though they'd be outnumbered.

She moved quickly and silently through the forest. The transporter's most obvious landing zone was a low, treeless knoll, just half a mile away. From behind her came the sound of explosions, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Up ahead, visible in glimpses through the trees, the transporter reached its landing zone. In open terrain, they could have bombarded it from this distance, but too much vegetation blocked them. Krystal accelerated, trying to reach a point where she could fire at will. She pulled ahead of the others, using both arms to wipe branches out of her way. Though the other human fighters fell behind, the Terminators stayed close on her heels, and the T-1000 came up level with her.

They burst into a clearing. There was a slight dip ahead, just before the knoll. The transporter had already landed. A door in its side slid open, and endos began to step out, two at a time. Krystal fired her laserrifle, straight-arming it as she ran. She hit an endo as it stepped down from the side of the transporter. The shot took it cleanly in its metal skull, burning a hole above its eyes where the CPU was located, but not penetrating deeply enough. Other endos returned her fire, she dodged for cover behind a thick tree trunk.

A transporter such as this was difficult to destroy. It was heavy, and thickly armored, designed for just this sort of warfare—making landings in battlefield conditions, and offloading endos while under heavy fire. It lacked the maneuverability and the attack capability of an aerial H-K, but was even harder to finish off with light weapons. More endos were stepping to the ground from it, ready to fight. The best thing was to try to take them out from behind cover, while they were open targets, and before they could orient themselves.

Krystal aimed around the tree trunk, firing at the same endo that she'd already hit, and striking the same point. This time, the bolt of light went deep enough, frying the endo's CPU, and it collapsed like a pile of bones. Devastating return fire came from the other endos and the transporter itself. It had one turret-mounted laser cannon, which now swept the margin of the jungle all round her, incinerating everything it hit, snapping off branches, creating spot fires. But Krystal hit the ground the moment she saw the gun turret move. Its laser bolts did not pierce the tree she was using as cover—but next time they might. Searing bolts of light passed by her on both sides.

The Terminators took positions close to Krystal's, and the human fighters soon caught up. The T-1000 ran ahead, bounding with an almost feline gait up the side of the knoll, straight for the endos and the transporter. John Connor had implied some sort of plan, but it wasn't clear what he intended. The T-1000 carried no guns or other weapons, but it seemed willing to take on the endos and the transporter by itself. She hoped that it and the Connor boy knew what they were doing. She and the others were virtually pinned to their positions. They could retreat, but attempting to fire would be suicidal now that the endos were consolidating.

One way or another, they were going to need the Terminators. Even then, one of those transporters could carry two dozen endos. So far, they had destroyed only one.

Effortlessly, the T-1000 ran up the knoll, momentarily protected by the slope from the endos' laser fire. Even the shapeshifting Terminator could not survive indefinitely against massed fire from military laser weapons such as these. As it ran, it plunged one hand into its body and found the weapon that it had brought on its journey across the dimensions: a phased-plasma-based thermal grenade. It reached the top of the knoll, and several bolts of laser light hit it, stopping it in its tracks. Each hit vaporized a small quantity of its polyalloy substance and caused local disruption to its multiply-distributed programming.

The stress staggered its system momentarily, and many hits could ultimately destroy it.

Stunned but still operational, the T-1000 twisted the mechanism to activate the canister-shaped thermal grenade, then hurled it with maximum force among the mass of endos, aiming for a specific target at the center of them. The grenade struck its target in the pelvic area, exploding with enormous heat and force. A ball of orange fire lit up the T-1000's entire visual field. The endo that had been hit was burnt and blasted into several pieces, its legs and torso flying away. Others around it were sent flying by the shockwave. Some were partly melted, a few were merely shaken.

For several seconds, no more laser bolts struck the T-1000. Behind it, the humans returned fire at the endos, though the transporter's laser cannon continued to sweep the jungle. The T-1000 ran directly to the transporter. It wrenched the laser rifle from the metal hands of one damaged endo, and fired it into another's skull at point-blank range, burning out its CPU. Other endos fired upon the T-1000, several laser bolts striking it at once. For some seconds it was paralyzed by the intensely hot beams burning its silver-

chrome surface. Then the humans struck back with high explosive weapons. They had gained a chance to regroup. The explosions around the T-1000 did it no harm, but they scattered the closest endos, badly damaging one.

For the moment, the T-1000 could move again, and it broke free, through the remaining endos, finding its real target. The last endos had left the transporter, and its side door began to close, ready for take-off. In an instant, the liquid-metal Terminator dropped its laser rifle, and its hands morphed into steel-hard pry-bars. With all its immense strength, it caught the sliding door and forced it open. Then it leapt into the cargo bay. It was in control.

The T-1000's actions gave Krystal and her team the break they needed. She subvocalized to the fighters with anti-armor weapons, ordering them to fire at the endos, especially those closest to the T-1000. Explosions threw up clouds of dust on the knoll, and some endos were scattered like ten-pins, though she knew it would take more than that actually to *destroy* them.

She thought of sending the Terminators forward to attack hand-to-hand, but that would be a waste of her resources. She would hold the Terminators in reserve until the last possible minute. If only the sweeping laser cannon fire from the transporter would stop...

They could try to shoot out its turret, but now she could see what Connor had planned. She only prayed it would work.

VILA NOVA DO SUL

A radio message came through from Vicario.

"Tagatoshi here," Hiro said.

"I can brief you some more," Vicario said. "We've made contact with Jade and a group of humans and

Terminators. They're under attack."

"Humans and *Terminators*?" Hiro said incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"That is a very long story, and I don't understand it all yet. I can tell you that Jade is okay, that she claims to have come here, not from our past, but from another world altogether...another *timestream*. Have you got that? And the Terminators are on her side. They've been reprogrammed to fight against Skynet."

This was a lot to take in...almost more than Hiro could absorb.

"One more thing," Vicario said. "The people with her include Sarah and John Connor."

It seemed to Hiro that he had no choice but to accept it all. "Very well," he said. "What about the others, the ones who went with Jade? The other four Specialists."

"Only she survived, Hiro. Listen, they're under attack from war machines, including a T-XA. I'll send what reinforcements I can, but we're very vulnerable here. This could be the end of us."

"Yes, all right...I think I understand. What do you want me to do?"

"There's not much you *can* do, Hiro. I'm just letting

you know what it's like. How is the battle there?"

"We're surviving...maybe not much longer." "I'll call again soon." Vicario signed off, leaving Hiro with his thoughts.

Another timestream? He wondered what that meant. Had Jade succeeded in her mission, and returned from the new world she'd created? And why would she want to come back? Even if she'd brought help, it would take an army to turn the tide against Skynet; Jade knew that as well as anyone.

Be that as it may, all they could do was fight to the end. Hiro himself might be one of the last to die. For the moment, he was needed here, using his knowledge, rather than physical skills. Above him, in the streets and the air, the battle was going as well as possible, meaning that his people were losing slowly and inflicting losses on Skynet. The outcome was not in doubt, but they would all die honorably.

If Jade could not affect the outcome, why had she returned?

He fingered her pendant thoughtfully. "Jade," he said to himself. "What does all this mean? What are you trying to do?"

AMAZON BASIN

John came to, with Sarah crouched over him. Blood and gore had sprayed him, but it didn't seem to be his own. Looking at the condition of the Terminators, it must have come from them. He couldn't begin to find the specific bruises and tears to his body—everything hurt. He'd hit his head, something had crashed into him, and his skin felt scraped back to the meat all along one side. He watched as three of the

Terminators fought the T-XA, forcing it away from him, Sarah, and the other humans. It was a difficult battle. The giant liquid-metal Terminator was far more powerful than the T-800s, and as slippery as an eel, continually sliding and morphing to gain an advantage.

All around there was a scene of carnage. "What happened?" he said weakly.

"One of the missiles hit close by," Sarah said. "They shot down the other two...and destroyed the H-K. Curtis and Barbara are dead."

"I saw Curtis—a laser got him. That's about all I remember."

"The missile killed three of Jade's people. The Terminators took most of the harm—they threw themselves between us and the explosion. Poor Barbara was the unlucky one."

All of the T-800s and T-799s had been mauled by the force of the exploding missile, with strips of skin and muscle torn away from their metal skeletons. One T-799 must have taken the full brunt of the explosion. It had been blown into fragments, its head severed from its body, its covering flesh sprayed all round, limbs torn away.

Terminated.

As the T-XA fought the T-800s, three figures leveled high-powered weapons at the giant Terminator, waiting their best chance to fire. Jade and the other Specialist—Dmitri—had laser rifles. One of the T-799s held a tube-like anti-armor weapon, which it must have taken from one of the dead. Its rear end extended over the Terminator's shoulder as it sighted along the barrel. Of the humans who'd survived, only Jade and Dmitri were still on their feet.

John recalled that one T-1000 had gone with Krystal; he'd sent it in the hope that it could make the difference. In the other world, working with General Connor and his people, they'd had time to discuss scenarios and battle tactics. Whether any of that would help in practice was a different proposition. In its featureless silver-chrome form, the *other* T-1000 stood slightly to one side, observing closely as the T-XA fought the T-800s. Though there was no expression on its "face," John would have sworn that it, too, was calculating, waiting for the moment to act.

The T-XA's arm became a four-foot steel-hard spike, which it rammed into the body of one of the T-800s, finding a weakness in its armored chassis. There was a flaring discharge of energy, and the T-800 slid to the ground. The T-XA shook off one of the other T-800s and seized the head of the third in both enormous hands, attempting to screw it from its shoulders. The smaller Terminator fought back with blows that would have killed a human being. The T-XA hurled the T-800 off its feet.

Just then, the T-799 with the anti-armor weapon fired. The high-explosive, rocket-propelled round slammed into the T-XA's chest, penetrating, then exploding within the liquid-metal Terminator's body. The T-XA was ripped almost in two by the force of it, its upper body and head splashing out free-form, like an inkblot. It staggered back a step. One of the T-800s acted—it jumped at its enemy, then tore a three-foot-long strip of liquid-metal from where the T-XA's shoulder had been, hurling it close to Jade's feet. Jade immediately turned her laser rifle on it, firing a steady stream of powerful bolts, trying to bum it down, to destroy its programming before it could liquefy and find its way back to the body of the T-XA.

As the rest of the T-XA began to reform, the T-1000 reached into its own liquid-metal body. It withdrew the thermal grenade it had brought on the journey across the dimensions. Elegantly as a cheetah, it rushed forward, activated the grenade, and rammed it into the metal of the T-XA. As the

T-1000 stepped back, the larger Terminator seemed to explode—most of its body stayed together, but some pieces flew from it. Jade and Dmitri shot those out of the air with their laser rifles and continued to fire on them. They were still trying to burn whatever they could of the T-XA into inert, unprogrammable matter.

Cecilia crawled on her stomach to John and Sarah, speaking softly to them. She dragged two laser rifles, which she'd taken from the bodies. She was obviously in pain...a jagged piece of metal had entered her leg, high up near the hip, and she was bleeding heavily. "We'll never destroy it this way," she said. "Not with the firepower we have."

Sarah shook her head. "We *will* destroy it. However long it takes." She took one of the laser rifles, since Cecilia seemed too hurt to use them. Jade and Dmitri advanced on the T-XA, firing into its body with their laser rifles, walking it away from the rest, step by step, with each bolt of burning light. "What else can we do?" Sarah said.

But nothing they did destroyed the T-XA. They were weakening it, breaking down some of it, but it was taking too long. John's mind was racing, trying to find a plan. There had to be another way.

The interior of the transporter was almost dark, and utterly simple: just four walls of metal with a sliding or on each side. Near the ceiling, a strip of some plastic substance glowed faintly, giving all the light a Terminator could need. The rear wall was mounted with steel brackets for thirty laser rifles—mostly empty, but a dozen rifles were held there. Those might be useful later on. There was nothing like a separate cockpit, no heating, or air pressure control.

Nonetheless, the transporter had some internal systems, controlled by its artificial intelligence. Within its walls there must be circuitry controlling its engines, doors, communications, and the laser cannon that it had used to such effect. Where there was circuitry, the liquid-metal Terminator could act. It had been enhanced for exactly this kind of task. The T-1000 morphed its left hand into a sharply-pointed spear, two inches thick. With great force, it drove the spear-arm through the metal paneling.

It poured itself into the wall, disappearing like a rat into its hole. Its substance spread through the interior of the transporter's walls, finding paths and crannies, analyzing circuitry, locating the craft's nanochip brain. Whatever the low-level artificial intelligence controlling such an aircraft could do, the sophisticated Terminator could do at least as well. Within one second, it shut off connections between the CPU and its communications systems: it would not allow the craft to make contact in any way with Skynet or its other machines. The war computer must not understand what it was up against.

In another second, the T-1000 shut off the CPU's control of the transporter's laser cannon. As it examined its options, the Terminator quickly saw how to control the cannon itself. First, it needed to isolate the transporter's sensors from its CPU, then patch them into its own nanotechnological circuitry; that took another two seconds. By now, the T-1000 was an extended, shapeless skein of polyalloy, penetrating all through the interior structure of the transporter, shadowing every yard of its controlling circuitry. Nothing could attack it now, without attacking the transporter itself. It had insinuated its way into there like fine roots snaking into brickwork, or a virus in a human cell.

With the sensors and the laser cannon under its control, it opened fire on the endoskeletons. It never considered its mechanical affinity to them, their common ancestry in Miles Dyson's work. It was programmed to assist the humans, and was equipped to carry out the task. Next, it needed to seize control of the transporter's engines, and to isolate the CPU entirely. Rapidly, it examined the craft's

internal circuit logic. The T-1000 had two advantages over the enemy CPU: not only was it more intelligent, but its circuitry was like a living thing, able to change, move, and adapt as quickly as it needed. Soon, it had total control. The transporter began to climb, firing down on the endos. Caught in the open, in the crossfire from the transporter's laser cannon and the human's weapons, they were easy targets.

The T-1000 had now *become* the transporter. It assessed the outcome of its attack. Of the twenty-four endos that had been transported here, seventeen had been terminated—their CPUs destroyed—or severely damaged, unable to operate effectively. Those that remained were still a formidable force to confront humans, but the T-1000 made a further assessment. Caught in the open, without the transporter's laser cannon to back them up, they would be defeated by the combination of Terminators and heavily armed humans that confronted them. As the T-1000 observed, some of the Terminators ran from cover, armed with weapons that the humans must have given them. They now outnumbered the endos. High-explosive projectiles flew over the Terminators' heads, striking the endos as they marched down the slope of the knoll. More endos fell. The firefight was now as good as over.

Having confirmed that, the T-1000 activated the transporter's forward thrust, and flew a short distance to where another group of humans and Terminators, including the other T-1000, fought an advanced T-XA. The T-1000 considered attempting to merge with the T-XA and reprogram it, but rejected that option. It had been programmed not to attempt that tactic with Skynet itself or with any of its most advanced machines, such as a T-XA. It would very likely back-fire. Better to use cruder methods.

For some seconds, the transporter hovered over the tops of the trees, its tiny, armored sensors observing this second battle zone. Humans and Terminators fired on the T-XA with laser rifles and explosive weapons. If they could keep it unbalanced for long enough, they would survive its attempted counterattacks and eventually destroy it, but the T-XA was too dangerous to leave functioning. It was time to lend assistance.

With the merest thought, the T-1000 lowered the transporter until it brushed the trees. It locked the laser cannon on the T-XA's body and fired. Even bolts from the laser cannon could not destroy the T-XA quickly, but hundreds of bolts striking it per minute had a discernible impact. They burned off layers of the giant Terminator's liquid-metal.

The humans and Terminators must have understood what was happening, for they made no attack on the transporter. Those with laser rifles took a step back, but joined in firing more laser bolts into the T-XA. It was visibly withering under the attack, shrinking down, becoming more and more manageable. After ten minutes, it was clear that it would eventually be destroyed. Some of the humans returned from the battle with the endos, and immediately joined in to attack the T-XA. Then the rest appeared...along with the Terminators.

A voice spoke to the T-1000. The transporter was not equipped with any machinery for reproducing human sounds, nor could the T-1000 itself do so in its current attenuated state. But its sound sensors picked up human voices, and the liquid-metal Terminator's artificial intelligence understood the sounds. The teenage boy, John Connor, was shouting into the air.

"Are you listening?" he said. "Do what I say—right now."

Whatever its own plans, the T-1000 was programmed to obey.

John, Sarah, Jade, and the two Terminators left their weapons behind for others to use. Now that

Krystal and the others had returned, the T-XA seemed beat-able. John knew how quickly and fully one of those monsters could recover, but it was weakened for now, and getting weaker.

None of them was unhurt. Sarah had had a slight limp, invisible to anyone but John, since a bullet had wounded her high in her leg, near her buttock, back in 1994, and she'd had to fight on regardless—then she'd had to drive through the night to escape from Los Angeles. Though the wound had healed, she'd never been quite the same. Now she was limping visibly. John himself was battered—if he slept, he'd wake up unable to move.

As John had told the T-1000 in charge of the transporter, they would meet it in the same landing zone that the transporter had used before. They followed the low-flying machine, brushing aside vines and branches. They took the other T-1000 and one of the T-799s with them, and the two Terminators ran on ahead. Jade easily kept pace, but she sometimes stopped for John and the others to catch up. Not only was she faster than an Olympic sprinter, she actually seemed unhurt. Any wounds she'd taken in the battle had healed up already.

The transporter dropped down out of sight, below tree level, but John could still hear its engines. He put on an extra burst of speed, then stumbled as they hit a sudden rise. He never stopped running, catching himself with no more than a stagger in his step, plunging on breathlessly. The T-1000, the T-799, and Jade were out of sight, but they couldn't be far ahead. He started counting his steps as he ran...ninety, ninety-one. He reached a count of one hundred, then kept running, giving up the count. Just ahead, the jungle cleared, and he saw the transporter on the knoll where it must have landed before. Wrecked endos were scattered around, but there was no sign of Jade and the Terminators. They must already be inside.

John and Sarah ran to the knoll, then up its slope. As they got in, the transporter was already lifting. The door shut behind them, leaving them almost in darkness. They crawled to the back wall, where Jade and the Terminators had already taken positions, braced against the wall with their feet outstretched. They'd also helped themselves to laser rifles from a collection kept here: racks provided for Skynet's army of endos. John and Sarah followed the Terminators' lead, fumbling in the semi-darkness to arm themselves with laser rifles.

"I have given the T-1000s more instructions," Jade said.

John sat next to her, trying not to think too hard. This might be a suicide mission. "They know what they've got to do?" he said.

The transporter turned. "They know," Jade said.

SEVENTEEN

BRAZIL/VENEZUELA JUNE 12, 2036

The T-1000 ignored its human passengers, and the other Terminators that they had brought with them. For now, it had what it needed: orders from the enhanced human called Jade to fly to Skynet's supply/communications node three hundred miles to the north. That node was in direct contact with Skynet itself, so Jade had said, and commanded operations here in South America.

Though it controlled the mechanical functions of the transporter, directly interfacing with the vehicle's wiring, there was much that it did not know. The time had come to take over the CPU itself, currently isolated from all of the transporter's mechanical, communication, and attack capabilities. For weeks, Jade and the other humans had equipped it for this, teaching both T-1000s everything that she knew about the operation of Skynet's nanotechnological hardware in her world. Now the T-1000 put it into practice, connecting tiny filaments of its own substance into the circuitry of the transporter's CPU. The T-1000 was free to work at a superhuman speed, making decisions without hesitation, and acting upon them immediately.

The CPU's layers of memory and programming were not so different from the T-1000's own. It had specialized modules, almost like a human brain, files on Skynet's operations and technologies, records of the transporter's own activities. It was not well-designed to resist a cyberattack at this fundamental level. For a swift, logical, yet innovative mind such as the T-1000's, finding its way through the CPU's defenses was almost easy. It took several paths at once, discovering more all the time, brushing away the CPU's feeble attempts to counterattack. Soon, the T-1000 had what it wanted: the transporter's log of interactions with other machine intelligences, including the controlling intelligence of the South American node. It cleaned out everything it wanted, then wiped all traces of where it had been and what had happened in this latest battle. If the CPU were ever interrogated by a higher computer intelligence, it would show no signs of having been tampered with.

For the T-1000, time was a meaningful concept, but not in the same sense as for humans. Some events had to be brought to fruition before others, if tactically useful outcomes were to be achieved. But the liquid-metal Terminator had no feelings of impatience, no sense of anxiety. It simply calculated its best options, based on the available information as it became known. It continually reassessed the situation, taking into account the need to produce outcomes in an efficient way. Patiently, it formulated a plan of attack from the information it now possessed.

The transporter climbed higher, following the terrain. One hundred miles from its target, the T-1000 provided the necessary code to request admission.

Once inside the complex, the transporter would be heavily outnumbered by other machines, outgunned many times over, but the Terminator had the advantage of surprise. It would strike cleanly and suddenly.

John had read stories about travel in intelligent ships, aircraft, space vehicles—the difference was, in all those stories you could communicate both ways. But it wasn't the same here. The T-1000 could use the transporter's sensors to listen to them. You could even give it orders, as Jade had already done, but it couldn't answer back. It was bad enough being in semi-darkness. You had to guess what was really going on, what the T-1000 was thinking.

"I wish the ship could talk to us," he said to the others. "I'd like to know what's in its mind."

"There's no need to worry about that," said the other T-1000, the one that had joined them in the transporter's cargo bay.

"No?"

In the dim light, John saw the T-1000's arm suddenly stretch, becoming a long spike of metal that stabbed into the ceiling. "There, John—this will solve your problem."

Are you connected with the other polyalloy Ter-minator?" Jade said.

"Just a moment, Jade." The T-1000 paused. Then it spoke with what seemed like a mix of concern and condescension, like some kind of know-it-all repair-man. "I am now. I've linked up with its circuitry."

"Cool," John said. "You can tell us what it's thinking, what it's planning?"

"Oh, sure. What, exactly, do you want to know?"

The transporter slowed down, and flew lower. A pair of heavy steel doors slid open, letting it into a huge chamber of stone, ceramic, concrete, and metal, built back into the hillside. There were dozens of endos, some of them servicing H-Ks and other war machines, some running production lines for machinery and munitions, others moving objects and materials from place to place. To the T-1000 controlling the transporter, the scene was not strange. It was not so different from what existed in its own world, on some floors of Skynet's underground facility in the Rockies, or within other facilities that the war computer had built. Nor was it so different from the factory that the T-1000 had guarded in Spain, at Skynet's command—though this single floor stretched for hundreds of yards, larger than anything of the kind that the liquid-metal Terminator had seen.

Among the milling endos sat an army's worth of larger machines: six massive Juggernauts, like a cross between a human-made army tank and the land H-Ks of the T-1000's world; three transporters, the same as the one that the T-1000 currently controlled; a much bigger megatransporter, built on a scale to carry Juggernauts within its belly; and eight of this world's aerial H-Ks. There was space for still more machines to land here. The information that Jade had given the two T-1000s, before they even came to this world, was that this base contained much of Skynet's fire-power in South America—everything that was not deployed, at a given time, on attacks or patrols.

The transporter opened fire with its single laser cannon as it flew at low speed over the top of the war machines, aiming first to take out all gun turrets capable of pointing in the air. The aerial H-Ks, in particular, were designed to attack human positions below them on the ground. In a matter of seconds, the transporter eliminated the worst threats to its safety. Then it fired on the aerial H-Ks, quickly destroying the engines of three of them.

It had to care for the humans. It opened each of its doors three feet, sufficient for them to exit, while still protecting them from attack. Then it plunged at twenty mph, heading straight for a fourth H-K. It plowed into the H-K headlong, with a shrieking sound of metal tearing through metal. It pushed the H-K before it, slamming into one of the Juggernauts, close to it in line. The transporter's own engines crumpled, as the three huge machines—transporter, H-K, Juggernaut—slid across the floor, striking sparks against its hard concrete surface. Endos scurried out of the way, but one was caught by the hundred tons of fast-moving metal rubbish, losing its footing and getting dragged along underneath.

Seconds later, the mass of twisted, torn, steel and hyperalloy slammed into a bank of machinery. Coldly, the T-1000 analyzed the damage to the transporter. One side was buried in steel, leaving almost no space for entry or exit. The craft would never fly again, and even its gun turret had been reduced to mangled wreckage. But some of its sensors still worked. Its cargo bay was a rigid cage of steel, designed to survive impact and protect the transporter's cargo, even when the rest of the aircraft crumpled. Within that space, the humans and Terminators that it carried had survived, though the T-1000 lacked sufficient sensory information to assess what injuries they might have suffered.

Outside, on the huge floor, the worker endos moved quickly, efficiently, without any panic or rush, arming themselves with laser rifles. Soon, the crippled transporter would be under attack. The T-1000 considered its options, and refined its action plan.

As the doors half-opened and the transporter dived sharply, John, Sarah, and Jade flattened themselves out on the floor of the cargo bay, face down, arms over their heads. The T-799 and T-1000 braced against the front wall of the bay, not for their own protection, but to avoid being flung around and colliding with the humans. Metal tore, and screamed in protest, as they hit, slid, and hit once more. The rigid walls of the compartment held, but John was tossed about on the floor. He bounced against the T-1000, which went liquid at the moment of impact. Instead of hitting steel, it was like diving into a pool of honey.

Jade reached her feet instantly. They had to stop any endos they could before the red-eyed machines could attack.

It was still dark in here; the doors of the complex had closed behind them, cutting out natural light. John only half saw as the T-1000 that had controlled the transporter poured itself back into the cargo bay. It plopped like molten glass from the hole it had made in the metal wall paneling, then rose up like a jet of water. An arm shot past John's head to snatch a rifle from the wall racks.

Endos moved outside the transporter, visible mainly by their glowing eyes. John, Jade, and the three Terminators fired again and again, aiming above the eyes, where they knew the CPUs were located. At this range, the laser rifles were effective to stop an endo, if it didn't hit them first. A perfect shot from Jade took out one endo. John followed with a kill of his own, then retreated from the part-open doorway, taking cover until there was a better chance to fire. Return

fire—laser pulses—entered the transporter's bay, glowing vividly in the dark.

They were pinned in here. There was only the one practical exit, since the other side of the transporter was jammed against metal wreckage. Attempting to leave would mean running directly into a dozen lines of deadly, amplified light. They might as well impale themselves on a row of spears as try to escape. Beside him, John smelled flesh burning as a laser bolt hit the T-799, but the Terminator fired in return. The endos had not yet worked out that they were dealing with another machine, that the T-799 could stand most wounds. About the T-1000s they must have no idea.

Another shot struck the T-799's laser rifle, rendering it ineffective. Lying there in the dark, his death not far away, John cursed to himself. He rolled closer to the doorway to hand up his own laser rifle to the T-799, which snatched it with one powerful hand and began returning fire. More laser bolts stabbed into their bay. Others burnt holes in the armored door. John could imagine the endos moving out there, getting closer. He had no idea of how many there'd been at the start, or how many they'd managed to destroy. But one thing was clear: Even *one* of those hyperalloy skeletons could kill him and Sarah with ease, once it got its clawlike hands on them. In hand-to-hand combat with an endo, Jade might have some chance, but not an ordinary human.

The T-799 leaned across the doorway, and fired again. Return fire hit it, but didn't take it out. It kept firing, shot after shot, until an endo worked out to hit it in the head, and it stopped altogether. In the end, the T-799 must have been a damaged, deformed monstrosity, after taking so many shots to different parts of its body. It had fought on. Terminators were not hindered by fear or pain.

But that was one of their team gone. Counting the T-1000s, there were five to go.

John sensed Sarah's movements. She must have been hurt in the crash, but she was obviously still alive. "Are you okay, Mom?" he said.

"Of course not," she said. "But when has that ever stopped me?"

"I think we need to take a different approach," one of the T-1000s said.

Two laser rifles clanged on the floor. John grabbed one, and went back to work.

"Just fire, and *keep* firing," Jade said, squeezing off a laser pulse at yet another endo. "The T-1000s have gone."

"No need to tell me that, teacher," Sarah said. She took aim, and fired into the dark—then retreated to cover, just ahead of answering fire.

John wasn't sure what he'd seen, except that the T-1000s had moved to the other side of the cargo hold. The way out on that side was blocked, but he guessed there were gaps. If anything could get through, it was the liquid-metal Terminators.

Still stretched out on the floor, John and Sarah leaned into the doorway. Sarah got a clean shot at an endo, then another—this one just a few feet away, looming over them in the dark. The light bolt struck under its chin, penetrated upward into its skull, and did enough CPU damage to send the red-eyed demon off dancing in another direction. Nearby, Jade's rifle moved about in the semi-darkness like a demented bumblebee, as bolts of light shot from its barrel. She was ducking and weaving at crazy angles, dodging the enemy laser fire, and firing back unerringly.

Without her, the battle would have been all over by now. Skilled with guns as John and Sarah were, they were not the equal of the endos. Even firing from cover like this, against enemies who fought out in the open, they'd not have lasted for long. Jade gave them an edge.

Maybe they could last for a few more minutes. Next time he glanced outside, firing his laser rifle with both hands, John saw a dozen pairs of glowing red eyes. That was a lot less than when they'd entered this subterranean chamber, but still too many. Whatever the T-1000s were up to, they'd better do it fast. He hoped it was not some kind of betrayal. Assuming it was not, what did they hope to achieve? Even the T-1000s could be hurt by high-powered lasers.

One of the T-1000s poured itself into the structure of a huge Juggernaut. It had exchanged information with its twin, the one that had driven and controlled the transporter that had brought them here. It now knew how to isolate the CPUs of Skynet's machines, and seize control itself. Within seconds, it had insinuated itself through the Juggernaut's circuitry, cutting out its CPU. It started up the Juggernaut, driving it forward, then turning it to the left, toward the endoskeletons that had reached the crashed transporter.

At the T-1000's command, the Juggernaut's laser cannons fired, burning into endos, melting their metal bones and joints. The huge machine ground forward, rolling over one endo and crushing it beneath seventy tons of weight. Some endos returned fire, shooting out one laser cannon, but the endos were

now being slaughtered, caught in the crossfire from the Juggernaut and the humans.

Nearby, other large machines were starting up, ready to fight back, but the first to move was an aerial H-K, which lifted into the air on powerful turbofans. It opened fire, sending missiles into the bodies of most of the remaining large machines, still caught on the ground. The other T-1000 had done its job. The whole complex rocked with the battle. One other Juggernaut had survived, and now it rolled across the floor toward the T-1000. From above, the H-K shot down at it, and an explosion lit up the darkness.

The T-1000 calculated swiftly. It was now child's play for it to penetrate the cognitive structure of the one remaining Juggernaut, in which it traveled as a parasite. It had learned all it needed to know about how these CPUs worked. It went in there, meeting no opposition that would cause it concern. Within seconds, it had broken through counter intrusive soft-ware, and cleaned out layers of unwanted program-ming. It had to act quickly and crudely, but it knew just what was needed. Some of the programming that the humans had written into the T-1000 in the other world could now be adapted, almost unchanged. The Terminator inserted the code, knowing that the Juggernaut would now act as *it* had been doing. The massive machine would assist and protect the humans, no longer needing the T-1000 to isolate its CPU and drive it.

Next, it poured itself out of the Juggernaut, back onto the floor. It had one more target. The other machine left was the gigantic megatransporter, which was too large to maneuver, even in a space this size. It had taken no part in the battle.

The T-1000 went to work.

As John, Sarah, and Jade picked off the last endos, a battle of titans raged outside in the darkness. Explosions shook the vault, as huge machines fired on each other. Metal tore, shrieked, groaned, burst, scattered across the ground and air in a furious storm. Powerful engines hummed.

Then there was silence. Jade ran out of the transporter, rifle in her hands. A second later, she was back. "It is over," she said.

John and Sarah left the wrecked transporter. John's eyes had adapted. There was just enough light here for him to make out huge mangled shapes, without understanding what had happened.

"Can either of you work this out?" Sarah said. "Be-cause I'm damned if I can."

"Maybe some of it," John said. "Then again, maybe not."

They circled carefully, guns at the ready, keeping their backs to each other. Suddenly, a pair of red eyes appeared in the semi-darkness, not far away. Sarah hot them out.

There were no more.

"We have won," Jade said, speaking with no enthusiasm, as if just stating a fact.

Far above them, the vault's metal doors opened, letting in light. The sky was dull and sunless, but it made enough difference. John could see the ruins fairly clearly. It was like being an ant, walking through the wreckage of a high-speed car crash.

All of the machines that had fought, even flown, in the dark were now still. Just a few of them looked in-tact—or nearly so.

We should blow this whole place," Sarah said.

"I agree," Jade said. "I am sure we will find plenty of explosives. This is a great defeat for Skynet."

But not a defeat that could be repeated, John thought. He understood how important this base was in supplying Skynet's South American forces. Its destruction might make a difference to the mad com-puter's war against human beings. But destroying Skynet itself would not be so easy.

The two T-1000s approached. "Mission accomplished," John said.

"True," said one of the T-1000s, "but we still have to do a lot of work."

"You've taken this to heart, haven't you?" Sarah said. "It's like you're enjoying working for us humans, seeing how much wreckage you can make."

The T-1000 shrugged its shoulders in an easy, fluid motion.

It took an hour to do what had to be done. The aerial H-K that had caused so much destruction to the other machines flew on ahead, now programmed to fight for the human side against Skynet. Before leaving, they'd rearmed it with a full load of twelve missiles. They'd stored another twenty-four on board the giant transporter, which followed the H-K, with John, Sarah, Jade, and the two T-1000s aboard—plus the reprogrammed Juggernaut. They now had the nucleus of a force to strike back against Skynet.

They'd programmed the doors to close behind them. Inside, they'd put together enough high explosives to destroy a small mountain, all connected to a timing system designed to give them thirty seconds after those doors had closed. John guessed the timing on how long it would take them to close fully. He added on thirty seconds, and counted down. A huge booming noise filled the sky, and he felt the shock-wave pass over them.

"Job well done," Sarah said. But she didn't smile. She wasn't ready for that.

The megatransporter's bay was bare except for munitions racks, chains, and metal-mesh straps, all to hold cargo in place. There were no benches, nothing at all to sit on. The bay hinged open at the aft end, as in human-designed transport planes. The megatransporter was not lit inside, but several six-foot armor-glass disks near the front of the bay provided light. John figured that would give endos or Terminators some data on where they had landed, and whether they were under attack.

They skimmed over the Earth's surface at two thousand feet, giving him a clear view of the depleted Brazilian rivers and the weird green jungle.

"The H-K will reach Vila Nova do Sul in less than three hours," Jade said, gazing through one of the armor-glass disks.

"Do you know how fast *we're* going?" John said. He wouldn't put it past her. She must be aware of so much—her own pulse, the heights of trees and their distances apart. She probably knew, come to that,

exactly what it looked like to travel at different speeds, seen from distant heights.

"Yes," she said. "*Our* trip will be half an hour." Then she seemed lost in thoughts of her own.

Sarah caught John's eye as if to say, *What's wrong with your girlfriend?* He shrugged. He guessed that Jade had plenty of things on her mind.

"What are the odds?" Sarah said, after a minute. Her face was haggard and puffy. She winced with every movement. "Jade, you know this world and how it works. How do the odds look now?"

Jade looked into her eyes. "They may be improving. I cannot tell anymore."

Coming from Jade, that was like a cry of optimism. She was such a total realist. If she said she didn't know, she probably meant it. Sarah nodded grimly, a fellow warrior for Jade, a comrade who'd fight to the death, if that was needed.

But a smile stretched John's lips. "Hey," he said, "that means we've got a chance."

EIGHTEEN

AMAZON BASIN JUNE 12, 2036

Cecilia sat with her back against the trunk of a low tree covered in strangler vines. It was frustrating being involved in the thick of the fighting without being able to make a contribution. Even wounded as she was, she felt she'd be able to fight, but there were not enough weapons to go around, and—as she had once before, in Argentina—she had the irksome feeling of being more a hindrance than a help. As she itched, boiling with frustration and pain, Krystal, Dmitri, and their group joined with the Terminators in a struggle to finish off the T-XA.

It wasn't easy for them. They had the shapeshifting Terminator on the defensive, unable to make any new attack, as they bombarded it with explosives and laser bolts, but it kept trying to reform. She recalled how her father had died at the hands of a T-1000 in her own world, and the hours it had taken to destroy the thing, hitting it with explosives until its programming was so disrupted that it ceased reforming.

Krystal backed out of the fight, leaving it to others to finish off the T-XA. She crouched down to Cecilia's level. Fiedler joined them, as Krystal said, "Come back to our headquarters. Can you walk?"

"I'm not sure," Cecilia said. "I can try." She glanced across at Curtis Suarez's body, then those of the others who'd died here. She didn't know those others, not even Barbara Closs, except for... *Curt* is... He'd probably saved her life in those first furious minutes when she'd gone to Argentina via the time vault. He'd fought well through the hard campaign against the warlords. Now to throw away his life like this...almost as soon as they reached this other world, before he could make a contribution.

That was the trouble with this way of travel—you were so helpless at first. In a sense, they might have been better off just sending Terminators on these missions, but human beings were needed. For the

campaign against the warlords, they'd needed people who were both skilled fighters and able to make on-the-spot decisions, not the harsh logic of Terminators left to themselves.

"Come on, then," Krystal said. "We'll leave the others to finish this. Dmitri can handle it. Will your Terminators obey him?"

"Yes," Cecilia said. "It's in their programming."

Krystal helped her to her feet. The three of them took an overgrown path that led to an immense fig tree in a thick part of the jungle; the fig's veiny trunk was twenty feet across. Cecilia walked with her arm across Krystal's shoulders. She towered over the black woman, but she could feel Krystal's strength. "This might hurt," Krystal said. "We need to go down some steps."

"Okay." Cecilia hopped away from her, supporting herself with a hand on Fiedler's shoulder.

Krystal walked to a space between two long surface roots, then bent to raise a metal trapdoor, camouflaged with leaves and grass that seemed to merge imperceptibly with its substance. "The structure's not made of the same stuff as that polyalloy Terminator," she said by way of explanation. "Similar sort of thing, though—a lower tech version, good enough for camouflaging."

The trapdoor opened onto a set of stone steps. Krystal shut the door behind them, and they went down the steps to a long, sloping tunnel, dimly lit with glowing circular objects along its walls. The objects seemed to make their own light. Cecilia winced with pain at every step, even with Krystal and Fiedler helping. One hundred feet along the tunnel, they came to two guards with surprisingly well-groomed dogs, standing beside the rail of a set of steel-grating stairs. They descended, as quickly as Cecilia's wound would allow, into a cavernous space, lit brightly by more of the circular objects. She couldn't see what power supply they used, whether there were generators somewhere, or whether they relied on something like the power cells that Skynet had used in her world to fuel its Terminators and other war machines.

"Man, this is something," Fiedler said, looking around in wonder.

"Welcome," Krystal said. "You need to meet somebody,"

They gathered in a small room crammed with equipment. The "somebody" was a short Hispanic man whom Krystal introduced as Joe Vicario. "We'll fix you up," he said. "Now, what's this all about?"

Cecilia took him through it: Judgment Day, August 29, 1997; Skynet's World; how *this* world had been caused by Sarah Connor's actions, back in 1994, when she'd raided Cyberdyne Systems with a T-800, sent back in time to protect her son. Vicario heard her out, almost in silence, occasionally nodding as if he knew of this, or that it fitted in with what he knew. At other points, he raised an eyebrow or asked a brief question.

One of Vicario's people brought full uniforms for Cecilia and Fiedler, complete with helmet and boots. Another, a very young woman, maybe just a teenager, came with a hypospray injector.

"This will help you heal," she said to Cecilia. "You'll be surprised." She exposed Cecilia's shoulder and applied the device, which was cold but painless.

"I can take you through the rest of this," Fiedler said to Vicario. "Cecilia's given you the guts of it."

"You're right, of course," Vicario said. He turned back to Cecilia. "I know you're hurt. You've just been injected with nanobots—microscopic robots—to help rebuild you, but I'll get some people to look more closely at your wound. Just one question for you both: That transporter attacked the T-XA, right?"

Cecilia nodded. "That's right. Part of our plan in-volved the shapeshifting Terminators that we brought. They've been programmed to take over Skynet's ma-chines—at least, the less advanced ones. John and Jade worked it out."

"What, exactly, are they going to do now?"

"You mean the T-1000s? I don't know the answer to that. They'll innovate as they go. I know that Skynet has a major node north of here.. I'd guess that that's their target. Can't you ask Jade what she's doing?"

Vicario pointed at his throat, indicating the mike built in there for subvocalization. "With this?" He shook his head. "Wherever she is, whatever she's doing...right now, she's out of range."

"Okay, gotcha."

"I hope I hear from her soon. This all seems like a half-assed plan to me."

"We have no choice," Cecilia said. Still in pain, she glanced at Fiedler to back her up. "We can't let you lose against Skynet."

Fiedler took over smoothly. "I think I'd better ex-plain that...."

The H-K peeled off southwest toward Vila Nova do Sul, 1500 miles away, near the Brazilian coast, as the megatransporter lowered slowly into the largest available clearing in the jungle, two miles from the site where they'd fought the T-XA. Jade led John, Sarah, and the two T-1000s through the low, thick vegetation to the underground enclave where the hu-man Resistance was based. No machines came to at-tack them, giving John his best chance so far to look closely at the jungle. Apart from the few insects that he'd noticed before, nothing moved here—there were no sounds of larger animals, or any glimpses of them on the track or among the branches.

"It's really quiet," he said.

"Few animals survived the climate change," Jade said. "Some come out at night. There are no mammals left in the jungle—only human beings and their dogs."

"That's pretty creepy."

From far away came a harsh bird call, but nothing moved in the sky.

"Small enclaves, like the one you're about to see, are our last chance in this world," Jade said when they reached the giant fig tree. She pointed out the trap-door. "We'll go in here—I'll show you. There are enough people here to defend themselves against war machines, if they have to, but the idea is to stay hid-den from Skynet."

"I guessed we've screwed that up totally," John said.

"Yes, John, we have. Skynet must know we are here by now. But we had to come right *here*. There had to be a return point."

They entered through the trapdoor and the tunnel. As they approached the dogs, they started to bark furiously. As John had seen her do before, Jade knelt to calm them. The guards seemed briefed on what was going on.

Down the metal stairs, a group awaited them, all with laser rifles trained. Cecilia, Fiedler, and Krystal Taylor were among them.

"My apologies for the reception," Krystal said. "We had to be sure you're all who you seem to be."

"I'd be disappointed otherwise," Sarah said, wincing as she spoke.

A short Hispanic man stepped forward. "I'm Joe Vicario. There's no more you can do for now. The dogs think you're okay. Come with me, now. We have to sort out everything your people have been telling us."

"Call my father," Jade said. "There is an H-K ap-proaching Vila Nova do Sul. It will arrive soon, and attack the other machines."

"All right, I'll call him. He'll want to talk with you, too."

"Very well," Jade said. "And I want to talk to *him*."

On the radio, Jade briefed her father in clear, logical sentences. Hiro Tagatoshi spoke with little trace of a Japanese accent, but in the same slightly formal English as his daughter.

"Sarah and John Connor..." he said musingly. "All right, Jade, I understand everything. We will win the battle here. If Skynet has no reinforcements—"

"I will be there soon," Jade said, "with our Termin-ators and the rest of the team. We *can* win, but then we must move northward. Please call Ramsey Devaux—we need his help."

"Very well," Hiro said. "We will win this war."

"I hope so, father," Jade said. "You must know the odds are still against it."

"You are always the realist," Hiro said.

"I am, but I shall do my best. All of us will be there soon."

VILA NOVA DO SUL

Hiro made radio contact with Ramsey Devaux, in the mountains of Colorado. There was always some tension between the Resistance forces in North and South America, a degree of rivalry and mutual suspicion. The Vila Nova leaders had long regarded the North American Resistance militia with mild contempt—for years, Devaux' troops had made an insufficient impression on Skynet's defenses, or its productive capacity. Their last, desperate push into Colorado had been a disaster. Now they were scattered across the lower slopes of Skynet's mountain, still under attack.

For their part, Hiro realized, the Vila Nova warriors and scientists had accomplished little themselves. They fought Skynet openly, but it was a losing battle.

"What do you want, Hiro?" Devaux said, sounding jaded.

"I want you to take the offensive."

There was a long silence, then Devaux slowly drawled a single word, "Sure." There was a year's worth of sarcasm in the way he said it. Hiro could imagine Devaux scratching at his dark goatee as he spoke. "How, exactly, am I going to do that, Hiro?"

"Listen to me, Ramsey: If you fail to attack, you die anyway."

"I reckon everyone's gotta die."

"Either way, Ramsey, you die *soon* —not later."

"Yeah, there's something in that. Skynet's doing its best to grind us down. We've been hurt bad, Hiro. I don't think you've got the picture. Most of us are *dead*. Try to imagine a mountain covered with snow...and then imagine the snow covered with bodies, people burnt to death or crushed like roadkill. It's not a pretty site, and there's not much left for us to fight with."

"Your vehicles are destroyed?"

"Almost gone. Almost everything's gone. You know that. Why are you suddenly calling me for miracles?"

Over the radio, Hiro could make out sounds of fighting in the background—shouts, gunshots, explosions. "Because *our* offensive capacity is not destroyed," he said.

"Come off it, man. Skynet's got you like a nut in a nutcracker."

"That is true, but not for much longer. If I can provide more forces, can you use them?"

The radio was silent for a long time. "What *sort* of forces?" Devaux finally said.

"We will talk again in two hours. I will know much more by then. What you need to know right now is that Jade has returned."

"What?"

"Jade has returned with support that might make a difference. Right now, I must concern myself with the

battle here. Please start making contingency plans. If all goes well, I hope to attack tomorrow."

AMAZON BASIN

They met in a plain, metal-paneled room packed with folding chairs set out in rows. Dmitri and the others had left behind two Terminators to guard what was left of the T-XA, and destroy the last of its substance. But the others had all come here, along with the hu-man fighters. Many of the Terminators had been hit by explosives or laser bolts, or pounded or cut by the T-XA. They were not pretty. One T-800 was operating on auxiliary power, but only one had actually been destroyed. *People* had been killed, though, and their bodies had been brought back.

Vicario stood at the front of the room, giving a briefing. "Everyone we can spare goes to Vila Nova do Sul," he said. "If we win there, it's on to Colorado. Any questions?"

John felt much better from having had a chance to clean up quickly, and to change into proper fighting clothes. Like the others, he'd received medical treat-ment—in his case, just for cuts, cramps, and bruises. Compared to his own world, and the one he'd left to come here, this one was high-tech. As Anton had once said to him, Skynet didn't have *all* the advantages in this world. The humans had technology that made them tough opponents for the machines.

Some questions involved the North American militia. John sensed rivalry, but Vicario cut through that. "Devaux and his people have been through a lot," he said. "They're the ones who tried to take the fight to Skynet. We would have helped if we could, but we had enough on our own hands, holding territory here in Brazil. Let's not criticize Devaux until he lets us down. And we'll do the right thing by him...is everyone clear on that?"

"We will give him no cause to criticize," Jade said.

"That's right. Any more questions, or are we going to get something done?"

Krystal stood, nodding to Vicario. "Thanks for that, Joe. Now, let's do it." She led John and the other hu-mans who'd come here from Skynet's World, taking them to a locked door not far from the stairs where they'd come in. "I'll show you something."

Inside was a dimly lit area twenty feet wide, but very long, extending forward into another tunnel. It had a low ceiling that John could have touched if he'd jumped and stretched his arm. There were two vehicles parked here, of a kind that he had never seen. They were low, and aerodynamically designed, larger than a full-sized motor car. They looked solid—ar-mored—with twin turrets mounted on their roofs, one on either side. They had no wheels, but a complex apparatus built low down suggested thrusters of some kind.

"These are armored skimmers," Jade said. "They are our only means of travel from here to Vila Nova do Sul." "Not now," John said. "Not with the megatransporter parked up on top of us."

"That is true, of course."

"What do you have in mind?" Sarah said.

"We will send some of our people in the skimmers. The rest of us, and the Terminators, can go to Vila Nova in the megatransporter. These skimmers can *fight*, Sarah."

"Do they have enough range to get to Colorado?" John said.

Krystal laughed. "They have the range to get any-where. Their power cells will last a hundred years."

He thought about that. It sounded just like the Terminators.

VILA NOVA DO SUL

Hiro took an elevator, then two flights of stairs, up to the ruins of the city, where its forces battled with Skynet's machines in what would surely be one of the last great exchanges in the war of extermination—whatever the outcome. If there were any important developments, Merrill and the others could easily subvocalize to him via their throat mikes, and call him back.

He followed the battle from the cover of a deep trench, standing on a metal ladder and watching through night-vision binoculars as the gray day faded into complete darkness. H-Ks patrolled the sky, stabbing down at human positions with bolts of laser light. They had caused havoc with high-explosive missiles, but they now all seemed to have run out of those, and depended on their laser cannons. The humans responded with laser fire of their own, and anti-armor projectiles, keeping the H-Ks at a distance.

Some of the human Specialists attacked the machines in armored skimmers, firing their own laser cannons. Juggernauts and endos closed on Hiro's position, but were kept back by continual high-explosive fire and bolts of laser light. It seemed that this battle could go on indefinitely, neither side getting the upper hand—though both sides were being worn down. The hulks of H-Ks and skimmers burnt in the shattered streets, and a Juggernaut had been turned on its side by a massive mine explosion. The endos kept coming, unaffected by all except the most perfectly-aimed hits, but some lay smashed in pieces among the other metal junk.

By now, Skynet should have sent fresh forces, with new supplies of missiles and more ranks of marching endos. That would have been enough to finish the battle, but no reinforcements came for the machines. Instead, a single H-K appeared in the sky, heading from the northwest. As Hiro watched, it began firing missiles—aiming them in two salvos of four at the other H-Ks and the Juggernauts, which responded with all cannons sending rapid streams of defensive laser bolts. Four more missiles flew from the single H-K towards positions held by endos.

As Hiro had so often seen, the H-Ks calculated rapidly, picking up the trajectory of anything hurled at them. They blasted several missiles out of the sky, but others penetrated their laser defense. Three of the missiles struck H-Ks, which exploded in the air, showering wreckage all round for hundreds of yards. Another missile stabbed down, penetrating the armor of a Juggernaut and blowing it apart from within, in a ball of fire that lit up the darkness. Yet another struck a massed group of endos, destroying at least some of them.

The rogue H-K steered away to the east, avoiding close combat with the remaining H-Ks and Juggernauts. Two skimmers moved in close on an enemy H-K as it defended itself against the missile

attack, striking it with well-aimed laser bolts that tore away one wing-mounted engine. The H-K spun out of control, crashing into the base of a ruined building. Other skimmers attacked positions held by endos.

In a matter of minutes, the odds had changed greatly, with four of eleven enemy H-Ks destroyed, no reinforcements coming to back them up, and the rogue H-K still in the sky, now circling like a bat, ex-changing laser fire at a distance with its enemies. Two Juggernauts had been destroyed, as well as an un-known number of endos. Most importantly, more forces were on the way, to back up the city's defend-ers. If that happened as planned, the battle would swing completely.

As the exchanges continued into the night, Hiro returned to his control point, far beneath the city. There was now a bigger picture to deal with. Once more, it was time to call Devaux.

"If we hit hard at Skynet now, we can end this," Hiro said. He let it sink in.

"In case you haven't noticed, Hiro, we've been getting our asses whipped," Devaux said.

"Not any more."

"Well, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I said. I confirmed that I can give you air and ground support, perhaps enough to make the difference."

"What's this all about? It sounds like you're in denial."

"No, I am not, and I have never been more serious. Over the next few hours, I will contact every Resist-ance unit I can, all across the globe, requesting them to hit as hard as they can. I know some will be slaughtered, but that will happen anyway. If we attack wherever we can, we tie up Skynet's military assets."

"I still don't know what's happened."

"Jade and some others have taken out Skynet's major node up in Venezuela. We're going to win the battle here, and we can give you Specialists, Terminators, maybe an H-K or a Juggernaut, to support your people. You will have a fighting chance."

"I think you'd better go on."

"All right, listen to me carefully..." He took Devaux through it. The man still seemed incredulous. At one point, he almost broke the connection claiming this was a hoax by Skynet. They both knew that Skynet and its machines could easily imitate human voices. "Have it your own way," Hiro said, "but my daughter went back in time, and now she has returned with our only ray of hope. If Skynet knows enough to tell you all this, your cause is hopeless. You might as well trust me, Ramsey."

"Well, that's a pretty safe bet," Devaux said reluct-antly. "I reckon my cause *is* hopeless. I'm not gonna argue that."

"Then, trust me. What do have to lose? Or any of us? Just an extra day of life?"

"Maybe so."

"Go on the offensive— *now*."

The megatransporter traveled in darkness, escorted by the two skimmers. Outside, John could see flashes of iridescent light from laser cannons, the muzzle flashes of projectile weapons, and red-orange fireballs lighting up the sky. Aboard the huge transport craft, they had massed most of the Terminators. Krystal and Dmitri flew the skimmers, while Jade traveled with John, Sarah, and their team, and a strong group of fighters from the enclave, some with enhancements. Having seen many times what Jade could do, John knew they could give Skynet problems, but could they penetrate its defenses in Colorado? To finish this, they needed to get inside the mad computer's complex, where its hardware was housed, then destroy everything.

He'd been amazed at the enclave's version of medicine. His own blood was now full of nutrient solution and millions of nanobots, helping restore him to health. He'd heard on his world that scientists might be able to do this one day; now he'd experienced it for himself. It was a quick, low-grade version of what had been done to Jade and many of the others—just a temporary fix. Despite what they'd been through, Sarah, Cecilia, and Fiedler all looked okay. Everyone had been patched up.

As they approached the scene of the battle, John could make out more. One H-K kept apart from the others, exchanging fire with them from time to time, but at a distance. Skimmers took on other H-Ks, neither side getting a clear advantage—in the time he watched, he saw no "kills," though one or two H-Ks took hits that must have caused some damage. From the ground below, laser bolts and projectile weapons fired into the air.

John never looked forward to combat. His battles with the T-1000 in 1994, with the T-XA in 2001, with the machines in Skynet's World, and now here, in this reality, had all been tragic and terrifying. Good people had died each time. And when someone died, that was a whole universe lost. That was what it meant to kill people—everyone had their own story, their own deep experience. John had been through pain, and almost been killed himself. He didn't look forward to more. But he did feel *ready*. In full combat gear, armed with an anti-armor weapon, and equipped with body armor, earplugs, night-vision goggles, and ammunition, he'd go into battle prepared.

"I am close enough now to talk with my father," Jade said.

Sarah turned from the window she was manning. "What does he say?"

Jade nodded to herself, holding up a hand for silence, then said, "The battle is almost over. There were eleven H-Ks—six have now been destroyed. Also some Juggernauts and endos."

"Let's finish it off," Sarah said.

"We will land. The skimmers can go ahead."

The megatransporter was equipped with sensors to orient itself and identify enemies. Its CPU, which they'd subverted, was an artificial intelligence capable of understanding speech. Jade guided it down to

a flat area a mile north of the fighting. It landed with a thudding impact, and the reprogrammed Juggernaut shook within the chains that held it in place. One of the H-Ks—not the rogue H-K that they'd subverted against Skynet, but one from the group attacking the city—flew in their direction. The two skimmers intercepted it, exchanging laser fire.

If Krystal and Dmitri were as skilled as Jade, John could feel safe for the moment. As he watched, the smaller skimmers outmaneuvered the H-K, fighting it at close range in what looked like a desperate effort to destroy it or be destroyed. After a few seconds, the H-K burst into fragments, showering over the edge of the battle zone. From what Jade had said, that was seven down and four to go. In the distance, he saw more flashes of light in the sky, as skimmers closed in on the remaining H-Ks.

The Terminators went to work, unchaining the Juggernaut. The rear of the megatransporter lowered on massive hydraulic hinges to form a ramp. John, Jade, Sarah, and the other humans conferred, but only for a moment; they'd planned their strategy at the Amazon enclave and on the flight.

"Is everyone ready?" Jade said.

Sarah, Cecilia, Fiedler, and the fighters from the Amazon group all gave nods of assent, or replied soberly. They were beyond feeling gung-ho about this. The time had arrived for battle—a hard, serious task.

Jade nodded slowly. "Very well. We have open ground, but you will find some cover. There are old buildings, vehicles, some trees."

"All right," Fiedler said. "Most of us have been through this." Fiedler and Cecilia had both fought for years against the Skynet of their world, including the final battle in Colorado. Their experience was immense.

"Of course," Jade said.

The plan was to send the Juggernaut first, supported by the Terminators and human fighters. Freed of its chains, the Juggernaut rolled down the ramp, then moved slowly toward the shattered technopolis. John and the others kept a steady pace, marching at the rear of the huge combat machine. Human beings and Terminators marched together, the T-1000s with the light tread of cats, the T-799s and T-800s more deliberately, their faces grim and remorseless.

Another enemy H-K flew in their direction, pursued by skimmers, which fired on it as its turrets swiveled, returning laser fire. From the ground, Terminators and humans aimed upward. Sarah bent on one knee to balance her anti-armor weapon on her shoulder, holding it with both arms. For a vital second, as other enemies drew the H-K's laser fire, she had a clear shot; she didn't waste it. The metal tube released a powerful back-blast as a 90mm. projectile headed straight for the H-K's underbelly. It struck home, penetrating the flying machine's armor, then exploding across the sky. John shielded his eyes with one arm, as burning fragments of the H-K fell to earth.

"Forward now," Jade said. Then she added, "You shoot very well, Sarah. Almost like a Specialist."

"Thanks," Sarah said. "It's nice to be accepted." Then she gave a laugh, and Jade joined in.

They were not through yet. Some H-Ks remained. The surviving Juggernauts and endos would fight to the last, not knowing impatience, nerves, or fear. The battle would not be easy, but, for once, the outcome was not in doubt.

They marched toward the city.

NINETEEN

COLORADO JUNE 12, 2036

Skynet analyzed the latest events. Its data sources told a story of setbacks and destruction in South America. Its major node in Venezuela was out of contact, evidently destroyed. Its attack on the human strong-point, Vila Nova do Sul, had ended in inexplicable failure. Something unexpected had happened. Analysis of the data showed a certainty that some war machines had been subverted by the humans. Skynet had long been aware of that tactic as a theoretical possibility, but the humans had never attempted it with success. It deployed a sub-self to examine any weaknesses in its own systems within the Colorado complex. If it came under cyberattack, it would be prepared.

That, however, was unlikely. The humans would know better than to try to hack a system of Skynet's incomparable power.

It considered the source of the problem. It had started in the Amazon jungle, when that unexplained space-time fluctuation had occurred. But the problem had then grown. Something had defeated the T-XA and the other machines that Skynet had sent to deal

with it. That *something* had traveled to Venezuela, then to southern Brazil, to Vila Nova do Sul. It appeared to have used Skynet's own transporters. Whatever the *something* was, it must be stopped.

Next, it examined options. It could send additional units to South America, either through ordinary space or via the time vault, but its options with the latter were severely limited. Larger forces would be needed. Further analysis led to a clear conclusion. Whatever Skynet was facing would show itself here, in Colorado. It would link with the remnant human militia led by Ramsey Devaux. All aspects of that probability needed investigating. The computer created a further sub-self to consider possible tactics that the humans might adopt, and report on the odds of success.

The first sub-self provided a provisional plan to strengthen its internal counter-intrusive measures. That work was not beyond Skynet's vast intellect; it would begin straightaway. The other sub-self reported in only a second. Much was unknown, preventing a reliable calculation of the odds. For the first time since it had attained self-awareness more than fifteen years before—when the humans had tried to destroy it—Skynet concluded that it could no longer guarantee victory.

That had to be faced. It would gather all available forces in the region, and annihilate Devaux and his militia. Whatever else Skynet faced, that unknown enemy must have no support by the time it came here. It would encounter the war computer's defenses at full strength.

As always, Skynet's enemies would be destroyed.

JUNE 13, 2036

Ramsey Devaux had tried to sleep for an hour in his trench, dug seven feet into the snow and dirt. The fighting went round the clock, for Skynet never slept. He woke to the sounds of shouts, barking dogs, and a nearby explosion. Through it all, filling in the silences, was the sound of a bitter, snow-filled wind. He had chosen the warmest time of year to attack Skynet—and a symbolic moment. The push into these mountains had been designed to coincide with the fifteenth anniversary of Judgment Day, back in June 2021. A victory might have fallen almost on that anniversary. That was now a hollow hope. In theory, this was summer, but the temperature was icy.

His aide, a spike-haired woman in her early twenties named Adams, crawled over to him, holding a plastic lamp fueled by a tiny power cell. "It's intensified again," she said. For a time, the bombardment had let up; now Skynet was at it again. There was another explosion... and yet another. Then the sounds of anti-aircraft fire and the electronic mechanisms of laser rifles.

Only hours before, Devaux had spoken to Hiro Tagatoshi, one last time before trying to sleep. Hiro had told him the latest extraordinary news—that Vila Nova do Sul had held against the machines. Skynet's attack force had been crushed, with no prospect of reinforcements.

Devaux retrieved his laser rifle. "What's happening out there?" he asked Adams.

"Terminators, transporters with endos, H-Ks," Adams said. "The whole lot. It looks like Skynet was onto us. It's hitting us as hard as it can before we can attack it."

The bombardment sounded serious. Missiles screamed from the sky, then exploded on the ground. The air was thick with the noises of back-blasts, firing mechanisms, high explosives, some of them close by, making the ground shake.

Devaux stroked his beard as he tried to work it out. "Yeah, it's going to finish us off." Had they been be-trayed, or had Skynet tapped their communications, as it had done so often in the past? More likely, it had simply used the data available from its sensors and made a logical deduction—that the human forces planned to go on the attack. There was no need for it to wait until dawn to step up the pressure. With their infrared vision, its war machines functioned equally well at night.

As a series of missiles hit, not far away, he knew that more were dying—he could easily be next. The force that Hiro had promised would not be here for at least ten hours. For now, Devaux and the North American militia were on their own. Could they hold out for that long? His militia had smashed against Skynet's mountain fortress like a wave breaking on a cliff. The cliff had survived, and the wave had been shattered. Most of their trucks, skimmers, and heavy laser cannons were gone. Many endos had been destroyed, but thousands of men and women had also been lost.

"We'll have to bombard their landing zones," he said. "Don't let them unload endos. Mass defense against the H-Ks. They can't get close if there's a thousand guns firing up at them everywhere they move."

Adams looked at him blankly—not confused, but waiting to hear something she didn't know. All his aides and lieutenants had been over this so many times, until their tactics were second nature. No orders were needed—it was what they'd all trained for.

"Forget it," he said.

Just then, four missiles fell, exploding close by. There were cries all round him—shouted orders, screams of pain. This was it. The last battle. It would be fought in these mountains, and he would not give an inch.

His heart pumped hard with adrenaline. He would call Vila Nova do Sul. There was more that Hiro could do.

VILA NOVA DO SUL

A hand shook John awake. "What is it?" he said. This was the most comfortable bed he'd slept on for weeks, after a battle that had left him shaken, but almost unhurt. What minor cuts and bruises he'd taken seemed to have gone.

Outnumbered and outgunned, for once, Skynet's forces had finally crumbled with little loss of life. The streets above were full of smashed machinery, and the Resistance had ordered the Terminators to go through it and destroy anything that looked dangerous—any endos or other machines that still had fight in them, even after being turned into junk.

John had gained some heavy sleep. He'd dreamt of returning to his own world, of what awaited him there. He still had the images in his mind of Charles Layton, Oscar Cruz, Rosanna Monk—the people who'd invented Skynet. In *this* world, he guessed, they'd all died on Judgment Day, in June 2021. But two of them awaited him in his own world, in the past. In *that* reality, Charles Layton, the Chairman of Cyberdyne's Board, had been killed. Rosanna Monk, the genius behind Skynet, had renounced the program. But Oscar Cruz, Cyberdyne's President, was still alive..he and his other scientists. In John's own world and time, the struggle would have to go on. It still haunted his sleep.

Cecilia and Fiedler were in the same position, of course. They would have to return to Skynet's World and report back to General Connor. They, too, might have troubles ahead.

The hand that had woken him belonged to Jade. "I am sorry," she said. "You slept for an hour."

"Okay," he said grudgingly. Hiro Tagatoshi and his people had given everyone medications to help them get short, intense sleep.

"There have been developments," Jade said. "We have to go to Colorado right now."

"Why? What's happened?"

"What we feared. We have heard from Ramsey Devaux. Skynet has intensified its attack on his positions. Do you understand what that means?"

"They could get wiped out...like, in no time."

"Yes."

"We're going in the big transporter?" he said. "You don't want to try the time vault?"

"You and I will use the megatransporter. You can try to sleep on the way."

"Yeah," he said. "I like my chances of that."

"Every moment helps, John. You will be going in-to—"

"I know—a battle zone. I've lived through that be-fore." After some sleep, and with the nanobots in his body, he felt surprisingly good. He could do whatever it took. When they'd first arrived in Skynet's World, it had been in the Colorado Rockies, where General Connor's forces had battled it out with the Skynet of that world. He'd survived that, and he'd survive to-night. *Get a grip, John*, he thought to himself. He still had his limits. Best not to forget them. "Anyway," he said to Jade, "what's this stuff about *you and I* will use the transporter?"

"Some will fly the skimmers, and we will send some of the Terminators ahead of us."

"You mean with the time vault?"

"Yes. It is a freezing night there, John. It is better that even I not arrive by the time vault. But the Ter-minators will obey Devaux and his people. We will send the T-1000s and the others that are ready. Now, John, please prepare. No more discussion."

"Yeah," he said. "*No problemo*"

John soon worked out what Jade had meant by the Terminators that were "ready" to travel through the time vault. In addition to the two T-1000s, only one T-799 and three T-800s were sufficiently undamaged for the spatial displacement, their hyperalloy endoskeletons still enveloped completely in living flesh. He knew that Terminators' flesh could be repaired, but (here was no time for that).

Hiro Tagatoshi entered the code to send the six Terminators to the mountains of Colorado. On his screens, the T-799 and the T-800s resembled naked, flawless human beings, but the two T-1000s were in their silver-chrome form, and had taken a more elongated shape than human to enclose weapons within their polyalloy material. The remaining, dam-aged Terminators had been sent to work up on the surface, arming the H-K with missiles, packing the megatransporter and the available skimmers with more supplies. They had been dressed, like all the Other fighters, in military uniform, with body armor for additional protection, helmets, and webbing crammed with ammunition and grenades.

The screens showed the curling, roiling energies that John had seen before. Then the Terminators vanished from the time vault.

With that done—and no glitches—it was time to move out. Sarah, Jade, Cecilia, Fiedler, and about forty of the best fighters from Vila Nova and the Amazon enclave were here. Despite the wound she'd suffered, Cecilia looked okay, more angry than any-thing else. The rest of them just looked determined. Many of these fighters were enhanced; they'd be a good match for Skynet's machines. Everyone was

well-equipped and heavily armed. All the same, there were so few of them. They had to make a difference in a battle fought by thousands of men and women, against hundreds of endos and other war machines.

Hiro and his daughter embraced. "Our hopes are still with you," Hiro said. He stood back from Jade, and gave a wry smile. "We are always putting weight on your shoulders."

"I know," she said, with her own sad smile. "But it has to be like that. I hope I see you soon, father."

Hiro turned to the rest of them. To Sarah, he said, "I hardly know how to address you. If not for what you did—"

"This world wouldn't exist," Sarah said. "Don't worry, I've heard it before." Then she laughed. "I'm sorry, Hiro. It gets tiring being the mother of the future. No offense meant."

"Still, if they'd listened to you, Skynet would never have been built. This could be a very good world. We would still have had our struggles...but it would be a *good* world, Sarah."

"I know," she said. "So they *killed* me in this world. Me and John together...still trying to stop Skynet."

In *this* world, John and Sarah had both been killed in a shootout in 2007. "At least you tried," Hiro said.

"Yeah, at least we did that. I know what you're trying to say, Hiro. I appreciate it."

Other leaders from Vila Nova shook their hands. A tall woman named Merrilee O'Driscoll wished them well. Then everyone was finished with them.

They took the elevator and stairs, then walked quickly to the megatransporter and the ten skimmers that Vila Nova was providing. Once they were aboard the transporter, Jade took command, ordering it to lift. It rose in the night, the skimmers following, then moving on ahead to provide an escort.

"This is it," Sarah said. Regardless what she was feeling inside, she showed no fear. They'd reached the culmination, the climax, of every battle she'd fought, the years of her life devoted to fighting Skynet.

"Yeah," John said. "I know." If they survived this battle, there might be others...back in their own world, their own time. Right now, this one was all he dare think about.

COLORADO

The Terminators arrived high in the Rockies, well above the snowline. For several feet around them, the energies of the space-time fluctuation flashed ice into steam. Using infrared and enhanced visual sensors, they surveyed the terrain, matching it against topographic and strategic data contained in their files. Their nominal destination point had been closer to the human forces, but there was always a margin for error in any space-time displacement. They were a mile from their destination point, higher up the mountain, behind Skynet's lines, looking down the mountain on a force of Juggernauts and endos. At maximum speed, they could soon cover the distance, then engage Skynet's machines.

Each of the T-1000s reached into itself and pulled out a laser rifle. Their bodies closed up and took a more human shape, still silvery and featureless. As the Terminators examined their options, an aerial H-K separated itself from the fighting farther down the mountain, and headed in their direction.

Skynet had sensed their appearance, and taken action.

It took a fraction of a second for the T-1000s to grasp the situation. Aerial H-Ks fought with laser cannons and high-explosive missiles. Laser cannons could damage them, but only the most concerted, continual laser fire could actually destroy them. They had little to fear from explosives—gross deformation of their structure would repair easily in mere seconds. But the T-799 and T-800s were more vulnerable. Resilient though they were, sufficiently large explosions, or well-aimed laser fire, could terminate them. For the sake of the mission, the immediate priorities must be to protect the four cybernetic-organic Terminators from attack, and to destroy the H-K.

The H-K kept its distance, launching three missiles, which dropped close to the ground, then hugged the terrain as they approached their target point.

In another fraction of a second, the T-1000s drew a series of inferences. They knew that the large aerial H-Ks of this world carried up to twelve missiles, usually firing them in salvos of four. That suggested this H-K had run short of missiles. Further, the other H-Ks in the battle were probably no better off, or Skynet would have deployed them. Finally, Skynet had ordered the H-K to take care. It was wary of its new enemy, probably unsure of what it faced.

Approaching from so far away, the missiles were easy targets for the T-1000s, even at high velocity. The liquid-metal Terminators easily calculated the missiles' trajectories, and fired as soon as they came within range. Firing laser bolts rapidly from their rifles, they intercepted the missiles, which exploded well short of their target. The Shockwave washed over the six Terminators harmlessly, as the H-K approached, now attacking with its laser cannons.

The Terminators fanned out to create a harder target, each looking for cover. Against weapons like this, even they could be damaged or destroyed. A series of laser bolts penetrated the bodies of some of the machines, as others found boulders or depressions for cover, tunneling into the snow. One of them, the T-799, collapsed into the snow as the H-K flew overhead, firing its cannons. Another, a T-800, staggered forward, falling on its face. One T-1000 was caught by dozens of laser bolts, penetrating and burning its structure, paralyzing it; the other took both laser rifles, one in each hand, and fired back unerringly. Its laser fire pierced the H-K's armor, cutting off a wingtip. The H-K spun on its axis, lost control and plummeted into the snow—and through it to the granite underneath.

That was satisfactory. First blood had been drawn.

The Terminators conferred using human language, but speeded up ten times. To human ears, it would have meant nothing. The flesh had been burned from the torso of the fallen T-799. Its skull had been penetrated, burning out its CPU. Numerous servos had been damaged in the fallen T-800. It was no longer an efficient unit. The T-1000s that had been hit by the laser fire had already recovered, with only an insignificant loss of material. The surviving machines quickly determined the best tactical option. The T-1000 with the two laser rifles shot out the CPU of the T-800. It had contained data that might be valuable to Skynet.

Next, they would investigate the H-K's wreckage. Something useful might be salvaged.

At full speed, the remaining Terminators ran in that direction.

Two more H-Ks flew toward them.

Multiple sensors fed Skynet information. The data stream revealed the use of lasers by whatever had traveled from Vila Nova do Sul, using the time vault that the humans there had created. That meant that the humans were using organisms of liquid-metal, similar to the T-XA. There was no way to carry weapons such as that through the displacement field, unless enclosed in carefully tuned polyalloy nanoware. The liquid-metal organisms must have arrived with that unexplained fluctuation in the space-time field, when substantial mass had appeared out of nowhere.

More precise analysis of the data showed that the laser weapons had been two standard-issue rifles, the same as used by Skynet's endos and Terminators. Such weapons were powerful, but they had a shorter range than the laser cannons mounted on aerial H-Ks. Skynet sent a coded order to the two nearest H-Ks—to attack, but keep a distance. High in the air, out of firing range of enemy fire, they would pin down the enemy machines, inflicting maximum damage. Destroying polyalloy machines would be difficult, but not impossible. Skynet ordered a force of four transporters and one hundred endos to fly higher up the mountain. They could finish the job. It ordered two Juggernauts to turn and provide backup.

That would spell the end of these Terminators, or whatever they were. Then the human militia could finally be crushed.

Other data came to Skynet from the airspace over Brazil. A force of armored skimmers and rogue machines was headed toward the Gulf of Mexico. That must also be dealt with.

The T-1000s' sensors were multiply distributed through their entire bodies. As the liquid-metal Terminators ran to the wreckage of the downed H-K, they sensed the motions of the two H-Ks flying behind them, and immediately took evasive action. Their artificial intelligence modeled the firing patterns of the laser cannons, second by second. They reached the wreckage and took cover as the H-Ks flew overhead, then circled for another run. The other two Terminators lacked rearward visual sensors, but they imitated the T-1000s. All four Terminators took cover without major damage.

Quickly, both T-1000s extended tendrils through the wreckage, looking for what they could salvage. Some of the laser cannons were still useable, their power cells and internal mechanisms intact. They had found a source of weapons.

There was no external firing mechanism for the laser cannons, nothing like a trigger. They were activated by commands from the H-Ks CPU. For the T-1000s, that was not a problem. Each spread its circuitry into the structure of one of the cannons. They had files on Skynet's weapons from its own world; these were not greatly different. Within nanoseconds, they grasped the principles and their application. The circuitry and structure of the two-hundred-pound cannons *fused* with the T-1000s' arms. For the advanced, liquid-metal Terminators, two hundred pounds was not a heavy weight.

They gave their laser rifles to the two T-800s. As the H-Ks returned, the Terminators emerged from the wreckage, hefting their heavy weapons...and firing.

Cheers went up around Devaux as lasers flashed higher on the mountain. First, one H-K was shot out of the sky, then another two. They still faced over-whelming odds, but the momentum had suddenly changed. Some endos fell back toward transporters, based farther up the mountain. Devaux cursed that he lacked command of the air, but he called his fighters to concentrate rocket-powered projectiles and heavy mortar fire on the transporters. If he could de-feat Skynet's maneuvering, he could put the battle in doubt. The rockets and shells began to fall. Some must be hitting endos, some the transporters them-selves.

H-Ks flew overhead, scything the humans down with laser cannons, but they no longer fired missiles. Days of battle had taken their toll on Skynet's forces, as well as on the humans. This was not over yet.

Devaux hated to put humans lives at risk to try to save machines, but he made a hard decision. He ordered three of his remaining skimmers to follow the transporters, try to take them on, or do whatever they could. One of the transporters lifted off, probably with endos aboard, but another was destroyed as it tried to leave the ground. It had been hit squarely by mortar fire. Two transporters got away clear, but they must have loaded hastily. The skimmers pursued them, laser cannons firing.

One hundred yards away, *down* the mountainside and to the east, blue-white lightning crawled on the ground, signaling that Skynet had sent more Termin-ators to try to produce panic among the human troops, a tactic it had used before. At this range, Devaux knew well, the space-time displacement field was highly accurate. Skynet could place its remaining Terminators right in the midst of the human forces at will.

With a dozen others, Devaux left the protection of his trench and ran to the Terminators' position, laser rifles at the ready. Many electrical devices were disrupt-ed by the appearance of a space-time distortion and the atmospheric effects that went with it, but the phased-plasma mechanisms used by Skynet and adap-ted by the Resistance coped without problems. Three Terminators stepped into a wall of laser bolts, still advancing even when sensors were burnt out, flesh carved away, servos crippled. These three appeared female—tall, thin, with raggedly cut dark hair.

As Devaux fired again and again, he could almost admire these most sinister enemies, the way they just kept coming until they were destroyed. Armed with any sort of weapon, they could do untold damage before going down. If they came close enough to fight hand-to-hand, they were terrible antagonists. But they could not survive unarmed against massed laser fire. One of the Terminators collapsed as a laser bolt burnt out its CPU. Devaux fired on another, burning a hole in its skull, and it fell in a tangle of burning flesh and melting alloy. Behind him, someone fired another shot, which took out the third.

But high overhead, up the mountain, he saw laser fire hit its target, and cursed aloud. One of the skim-mers had been lost.

Three transporters tried to land to offload their car-goes of endoskeletons, but the Terminators marched on them, all now armed with cannons or rifles. The T-1000s had merged into their laser cannons, becom-ing new machines which fired with instantaneous impulses.

Three of the humans' skimmers had tried to engage the transporters. One had been hit by laser cannon fire, the others continued to attack as endos disem-barked. These endos were just as implacable, as relent-less as the Terminators, not yielding an inch in their forward march. For some seconds the Terminators held the advantage, aiming for the endos' CPUs. The endos soon learnt, and fired back in kind. One skim-mer came close, dodging laser cannon fire from the endos and transporters, hitting

several endos before climbing skywards.

A laser bolt struck the third skimmer, but it was already out of range; the bolt seemed to do no damage. The skimmer dived—highly maneuverable—and fired at the endos as they disembarked, scoring hits. An H-K withdrew from the battle with the humans, but kept its distance, merely trying to menace the skimmers.

Within a minute, one of the T-800s had been destroyed, but so had several endos. This battle of machines was swift and merciless, with no feinting or evasion. The T-1000s survived but they fell back, overwhelmed by superior numbers. They had taken hits that would have stopped an ordinary Terminator. Though they had survived, they had their limits.

From lower on the mountainside, Juggernauts approached. The T-1000s calculated. They could not survive against the forces deployed against them—their task must be to maximize the destruction of Skynet's forces, before they were destroyed themselves. They retreated, still firing as they went. They grew rear appendages for the purpose. Nothing about them depended on the placement of particular limbs or organs. Laser cannon fire destroyed more endos and damaged one of the transporters. It would no longer fly.

More H-Ks flew to join the battle. The odds had grown overwhelming. It was no longer possible to survive here. The T-1000s explored options. With their chameleon-like abilities, they could merge with the snow and the rock, lowering their heat emission to avoid infrared detection. Perhaps they could work their way down the mountain to join the humans. The last T-800 would go down fighting, doing what damage it could to Skynet's machines.

But the humans made the T-1000s' decision for them. One of the skimmers withdrew under heavy fire; the other flew on ahead of the liquid-metal Terminators, finding a place to hover, just above the ground. At their maximum speed, the T-1000s ran for it. Doors opened automatically, and the shape-shifters dived inside. The pilot said nothing; he accelerated the craft away from enemy fire.

TWENTY

COLORADO JUNE 13, 2036

In the bitter cold, humans and machines exchanged fire. The remaining H-Ks moved on the sea of human fighters, firing streams of laser bolts. The Resistance fired anti-armor projectiles into the air. Their depleted force of skimmers harassed the H-Ks, but neither side made gains. One thing was for certain, Devaux thought: Skynet had lost its dominance in the air. In that intense half-hour of fighting when the Terminators had arrived from Vila Nova do Sul, he had lost a skimmer and its pilot, but Skynet had lost far more—three H-Ks, two transporters, an unknown number of endos. Now, the T-1000s had been assigned to fly skimmers against Skynet's machines. Devaux had gained two near-indestructible pilots with better-than-human skills.

The Resistance could not withdraw now. He led them forward, whatever the losses, firing their weapons in disciplined order, continually bombarding the machines. His army was still thousands strong. Gradually,

they moved forward on Skynet's mountain.

At the same time, too many were being slaughtered. This was a cruel day. People fell all around.

As he spoke to his troops, leading them from one point of cover to the next, or trying to get a moment's breather, Devaux remembered the words of Mustafa Kemal, one of the greatest commanders of the previous century: "I am not giving you an order to attack, I am ordering you to die!" That was how he now felt. He was not ordering the men and women of his militia to fight for the sake of humanity, but to *die* for its sake. He didn't even need to say the words. They all knew what was at stake—that the only way to victory was through a valley of death.

They fought through the darkness, not counting the time, until the world seemed one great nightmare of machines. Yet, the endos' numbers were also thinning. The humans had always outnumbered them. What gave the machines the advantage was their accuracy, strength, and resilience. It was like fighting with demons. One by one, he told himself, they could be destroyed, whatever the cost in human lives.

In this world, there was no real dawn. The days cycled between dull gray and total black, but hours must have passed, for Devaux' old wristwatch showed that the sky would soon lighten. That would negate some of the machines' advantage. He took cover behind a snow-topped boulder, as two endos marched toward him, laser rifles at the ready. One of the skimmers flew fifty feet overhead, firing its twin cannons. Bolts of laser fire struck both endos, faster than they could aim, taking them out with skullshots before they could attack. Devaux recognized that skimmer—one of the T-1000s was flying it. Its precision was like a surgeon's.

When they reached Colorado, it was daylight—or this world's dim equivalent. They flew toward the Rockies, into John's most important battle ever. He'd surprised himself by sleeping part of the way, but now he was awake, alert. In fact, he'd never felt better. It seemed the nanobots in his system were still strengthening him, hastening the speed of his body's self-repair.

Silently, he watched the world outside, waiting to see what Skynet would send. Jade had a position nearby. Sarah, Cecilia, and Fiedler all appeared strong, determined, ready to die if they had to. For now, though, they could do nothing. The megatransporter had its own gun turrets for defense. As long as it was in the air, there was nothing its passengers could do to help.

"H-Ks!" Jade said. She paused and frowned. "But there are only fourteen."

That was fourteen too many, he thought, but he understood her point. The H-Ks were not attacking in overwhelming numbers. Out of one of the circular windows, he saw one or two flying in the distance.

"Who are you talking to?" he said to Jade. "I can't see that many from here."

"To Krystal."

That made sense. It must be easier to see from the skimmers.

"They're not attacking yet," Jade said.

"Hey, maybe they've had some bad experiences."

Fiedler said, "What do you think they're doing?"

"There are skimmers pursuing them," Jade said. She turned to Fiedler, her face looking relieved. "I think that Skynet has lost many machines."

"We can make a difference, then," Sarah said.

"Yes, Sarah. We can make a difference."

Then it started.

John never had a clear picture of the battle. Around the megatransporter, H-Ks fought with skim-mers—those that had come from Vila Nova, and those that Devaux had left—and with the rogue H-K that had been reprogrammed to fight for the human side. For the moment, all John could do was wish and hope. Laser cannons struck at the megatransporter, but its armor held for the moment. A skimmer rushed past them, pursuing an enemy H-K from above, scoring direct hits with its own twin cannons. The H-K lost an engine and plummeted out of control, crashing far below on the mountainside.

Even in this armored, insulated cabin, the air seemed full of the noise of explosions—mostly missiles fired by the "friendly" H-K. Some exploded harmlessly in the air, but others hit their targets. The battle seemed to take forever, and John never knew how the odds were shifting until it was all over. The H-Ks were precision machines, their CPUs designed to calculate distances and trajectories at phenomenal speed. But (he megatransporter slipped through them, firing its own lasers, protected by its escort of skimmers and its own H-K.

He watched helplessly when skimmers fell from the sky. Each contained at least two fighters from Vila Nova or the jungle enclave—or someone from Devaux' forces. Every life lost was a universe gone forever.

For all that time, nobody spoke. Then there was a strange silence.

"It is over," Jade said. "We have command of the air."

The megatransporter flew higher up the side of the mountain, the skimmers keeping close to it. Jade ordered a landing on a snow-covered, shattered road, close to the opening of Skynet's supply tunnel. That was the only way into the war computer's under-ground fortress. To reach Skynet, and end this war once and for all, they had to break into there...via its massive blast doors. Once inside, they could find their way around—Vila Nova had intelligence on its layout, taken from the CPUs of defeated endos. But they'd need to control this part of the mountainside.

Looking forward, John could see Skynet concentrating forces near their landing zone, anticipating their plan. Juggernauts fell back from the battle with Devaux' forces, while others emerged from within the mountain. John could count a dozen of them converging on one spot, while endos followed, some hauling huge guns. Again, Skynet had anticipated their thinking. It wanted to make landing impossible.

From this altitude, individual humans and endos looked like ants, but the front line of battle was lower on the mountain than where they intended to land. Devaux had pushed up the slopes, but not yet far enough. Yet more Juggernauts were withdrawing from battle with the militia—heading for higher ground—but enough remained on the lower slopes to keep Devaux' forces confined. Right now, there was nothing more Devaux could do to help—if he was still alive.

Jade stared into space, talking with other Specialists by her short-range radio link. The megatransporter hovered, not daring to go down—but the longer they waited, the worse it would get. Skynet could mass more and more of its machines where they wanted to land. They could look for another landing zone, but that would lose them the advantage. They needed this chance to strike directly at Skynet. John looked out the window, wishing he had a bright idea. They still had their own H-K fighting for them, but only six

skimmers were left—that was of the ten they'd started with, plus the ones that Devaux had given them. The battle with the H-Ks had been fierce, and John realized how close he must have come to death. Then, as he watched, something happened that horrified him.

One of the skimmers dived, accelerating all the way, straight toward the surface of the mountain. Then another followed.

Devaux crawled from point to point on the broken slope of the mountain. It was time for him to die. Hard as they'd pushed, they'd failed to take the mountain, but now that didn't matter. They'd cleared the way for the fighters from Vila Nova. It was largely up to them.

Boulders, depressions, and debris gave him inter-mittent cover, but he could no longer stand or fight. He was merely human, not enhanced by genetic en-gineering and cybernetic implants like Vila Nova's best fighters. The wounds he'd taken had stopped him, and would kill him soon. He'd twisted his knee, running for cover when an H-K had dived, firing its deadly cannons. A bolt from a laser rifle had taken him in the shoulder, and the shock of that should have been enough to finish him off. An inch or two to the left, and it would have ended his life instantly. Flying debris had wounded him in the chest and the back.

But as he crawled, he dragged his laser rifle behind him with his good arm. Before he finally died, he'd take out one last endo. Just that much. He'd sworn it to himself. For every death, something had to be gained.

His wish was soon granted. Three endos saw him, and marched forward, their eye-like sensors glowing above their skeleton smiles. He fumbled with the gun, which was too heavy for him to pick up one-handed. Twisting his body, he managed to kneel. He levered the gun at an angle against his legs, and took aim. Too late, the endos realized the danger. He fired, once, twice, taking an endo near its eyes. Return fire struck him in the head and chest.

Aboard its skimmer, the T-1000 chose a Juggernaut in the midst of a group of others and a knot of endos. The liquid-metal Terminator's twin had dived first, and its skimmer hit one Juggernaut at full speed, crushing its armor, and totally destroying it. Then the second skimmer struck like a spear from the heavens. At 700 mph, the skimmer was crushed like foil; nothing *living* could have survived.

But mere impacts at the speeds attainable by human vehicles could never destroy the T-1000. It gathered its substance together, pooling like thick mercury, then found its way through gaps in the hideously tangled wreckage. Another Juggernaut stood close by. The T-1000 moved to it, entered it through a laser cannon pod, then swiftly spread through its circuitry, finding the CPU. It removed the engines, gunpods, sensors, and communications from the CPU's control, and soon the Juggernaut moved forward, its cannons firing, aiming for the gunpods of other Juggernauts, and above the eyes of mobile endoskeletons. Beside it, another Juggernaut did the same.

That was a start, but there was more to do. The T-1000 targeted the huge machine's CPU, entering its programming and subverting it. There was no use in staying here, with other machines all round. While the Juggernaut lasted, it could fight on its own. The T-1000 looked for another victim.

"Going down now," Jade said, and the megatransporter descended, escorted by the four remaining skim-mers, all cannons firing to suppress attack. On the ground, Juggernauts fought with each other and with endos. More endos retreated up the mountain, and the human militia followed.

By now, it was clear that the two skimmers that had crashed into the mass of endos and Juggernauts had been piloted by the T-1000s. Not only were they still "alive" down there, they were causing havoc among Skynet's defenses, destroying Juggernauts, endos, and heavy guns. They couldn't hold out forever—not by themselves—but they'd provided a chance.

As the megatransporter landed, the Terminators on board prepared the Juggernaut it was carrying to go into action immediately. The giant transporter fired its own laser cannons, joined by the H-K, sweeping across the ranks of endos. The four remaining skim-mers buzzed around it, dodging the patchy enemy fire, firing back with their own cannons.

"Who's left in them?" John said, pointing.

"Krystal," Jade said. "Dmitri.. our very best people. I am still in contact with them." She spoke to the megatransporter itself, ordering it to lower the unload-ing ramp.

They kept away from the windows, counting on the skimmers and the T-1000s to suppress enemy fire. John felt the sweat under his arms, despite the cold air. Good as he'd been feeling, this battle was the real thing. In an hour, they might achieve victory; in a minute, or less, he might be incinerated, or blown apart. He mustn't die now, when there was still so much to do back in his own time. He only hoped that, if he didn't make it, Hiro would find someone else to send back with Sarah, assuming that she got through it alive.

The ramp touched ground, and the Juggernaut rolled out ahead of them, then turned sharply to the right, all cannons firing. A group of Terminators fol-lowed, guns leveled, to take the brunt of enemy fire. The humans followed, Jade going first, then the other Specialists, with the unenhanced humans following, flanked by two Terminators, with two as the rear-guard. They moved forward in the wake of the Juggernaut, the Terminators marching straight ahead, pre-pared to endure fire, while the humans moved half-crouched, trying to make small targets, and to cover each other as they went. John was a step behind Sarah, with Fiedler and Cecilia one or two steps be-hind her. Some of the Terminators and Specialists carried explosives and other supplies, as well as laser rifles or projectile weapons.

Wearing earplugs for protection against the noises of battle, John found the world strangely quiet. He felt distanced from what was happening around him, as if this was merely a computer game. The skimmers passed overhead, guns swiveling downward with constant fire, trying to clear a path. As Juggernauts fought with Juggernauts, a gap opened up, and they made their way through, taking cover where they could. Jade wielded her laser rifle easily, one-handed, firing almost at random.. so it seemed, but every shot scored against the endos.

They reached the supply tunnel. Off its side was the only entrance to Skynet's facility, through huge metal doors designed to deflect the shock wave of a nearby nuclear explosion. Those must now be securely

shut, but high explosives, applied directly, could open them. They had to control the tunnel, then crack the complex open, like a safe.

The battle continued, but they were through the worst. The tunnel's entrance was a turmoil of giant machines clashing with one another. By now, it was difficult to tell which Juggernauts fought on which side—the numbers had evened up. Bending on one knee, Cecilia fired to the side. The projectile reached a hostile Juggernaut, stabbing into its armor, then destroying it in a fiery explosion.

The skimmers left the battle behind, racing into the tunnel itself, destroying endos as they went, absorbing some return fire, but nothing that penetrated their armor. In the confines of the tunnel, Krystal, Dmitri, and the others piloted their skimmers like Formula-1 drivers, swerving, turning, with acceleration that would have knocked unenhanced humans unconscious.

John couldn't guess how many gees they must be pulling with their movements—along the tunnel, then back, at hundreds of miles per hour.

Some humans fell, and some Terminators; John didn't stop to see who they had lost. He knew it was selfish, that each life counted equally, but right now he took a narrow view, just keeping track of himself, of Jade and Sarah, and the others who'd come here with them from Skynet's World. At each opportunity he fired, until he'd run out of ammunition. He threw aside his anti-armor weapon, now just a piece of junk. There were plenty of laser rifles on offer, one for every endo that had fallen. He picked one up, cradling its weight in both arms.

They reached the blast doors and stopped, awed by what confronted them. These doors were forty feet high, twenty feet across, large enough for a Juggernaut to pass easily, in and out of the tunnel. Now they were shut; around them was solid granite. On Judgment Day, Skynet's headquarters had survived through nuclear attack. John felt like a mouse confronted by an armored steel bank safe. But to end this soon, they had to break in.

The Terminators started laying explosives. There was lots of work to do.

Devaux was dead, along with many others, but the militia refused to die. Fighters moved on toward the scene of combat, up near Skynet's supply tunnel. Skimmers now commanded the sky.

In her heavy uniform, boots, and helmet, Adams ran twenty yards to the nearest position of cover, the shallow snow crunching underfoot, the wind seeming to blow right through her. The laser rifle that she carried weighed thirty pounds, but it felt like a ton of lead in her arms. Her legs were wobbly, but she dare not stop. She reached the wreckage of a crashed transporter, and crouched behind it as laser bolts went past her. Up ahead were more endos, no longer advancing, but trying to control the mountain.

Two other militia fighters ran to join her. One reached her position. The other was hit full in the chest by a laser bolt—that was the end. Another human being who'd never stood a chance. If this was victory, it was a bitter one. For every machine destroyed, many humans were dying. But at least they weren't throwing themselves away. Slowly, tragic step by tragic step, they were winning the war of attrition.

She leant out from her cover point, and fired. *Keep running. Keep firing.* Right now, that was everything.

Each smart missile weighed one hundred pounds. Cecilia and Fiedler took one end each, carrying them from the megatransporter, their shoulders bent, their legs spread far apart as they staggered under the weight. Fiedler backed toward the tunnel entrance, sometimes glancing behind to check his footing. He cursed softly as a T-800 walked past, headed the same way. It balanced two of the missiles, one under each arm. He tried not to think about how easily they could be struck down by laser or projectile fire at any second. Terminators and Juggernauts had established a perimeter around the megatransporter and the entrance to the tunnel, but fighting still raged, as enemy machines tried to break through. People were still dying. It wasn't over yet.

Out of the noise of battle, both had removed their earplugs. Cecilia grunted. "You don't want to be one of those things. Trust me."

"A Terminator?" he managed to say, as he strained with the weight. "Nah, they're just tools. Sort of like front-end loaders."

"Don't make me laugh," she said through gritted teeth.

"I just wish we had more of them."

The Terminators had taken the brunt of their battles. The more he worked with them—first in South America, in his own world, and now in this world—the more they did seem just like tools, rather than incarnations of evil. They were tools...but dangerous ones to keep around. When this war was over, they would have to be destroyed.

Step by step, he backed into the tunnel, then toward the blast door. All around, humans and Terminators were packing explosives, and arming them. When all this was ignited, the whole mountain would shake.

It was gonna be a party.

The unthinkable had happened. Skynet's data streams showed that the humans had gained control of the mountain, and now were forcing their way into the war computer's own complex. Seismic sensors re-gistered the shock as a huge explosion split its blast door from the surrounding rock. Already humans were squeezing their way in, together with hostile Terminator units of alien design. Skynet had never been threatened by the Resistance; it had been on the verge of final victory. It had been complacent. There was no escape plan.

For a software being, death could be avoided. One hardware substrate could be abandoned for another. Skynet could have developed alternative hardware, somewhere on another continent, then simply transferred its consciousness. Everything that mattered would have been retained.

Now it was too late. The last endoskeletons and Terminators in this facility would defend its hardware to the very end, but they would not prevail. Projections showed assured failure. The situation had completely changed.

Swiftly, the war computer analyzed its tactical options. One presented itself: To survive in some form—waiting for a day to renew itself and continue the war against humans—it needed to use every asset of tactical value. The multiply redundant systems of the complex meant that cutting its power supply would not be easy. Nor could the complex itself easily be destroyed. Its multi-level structure of metal,

concrete, granite, and advanced ceramics could resist almost any explosive force. Its endos would resist the humans, as it made its preparations.

Skynet sent coded orders to its military units within the complex, then concentrated on those two critical assets: the time vault, and its one remaining T-XA. It had built this complex downward into the mountain, expanding from its original size before Judgment Day. The time vault was two levels below the entrance from the supply tunnel. On the floor in between were the metal holding shells for the T-XAs. Skynet's hardware was in its original position, on the second highest level of the complex, three levels above the entrance tunnel. That would be the humans' target.

Apart from Skynet's own hardware, no computational device ever created had possessed the capacity to implement the war computer's powerful, complex mind. The T-XA was different. Its entire body was a molecular calculator of enormous sophistication, designed to replicate a human-level intelligence thousands of times in one structure. There was more than enough capacity there to implement Skynet, but it would be vulnerable—there would be no room for its multiple replication. Still, Skynet required a body that was mobile and indestructible.

The war computer examined its own cognitive modules, files, personality aspects. To download itself into a T-XA, it needed to become something far simpler, something closer to the human level. It would need to download a sketch of its current self. That was a poor form of survival, but better than none at all. Much would be lost, but the essence could be retained—somewhat diminished, Skynet would live on. The T-XA's holding shell could produce a powerful magnetic field for programming the molecular structure of the liquid-metal. Once Skynet's essence was downloaded, the original could be erased from its hardware, leaving no data behind for the humans.

Soon, very soon, Skynet would escape this complex. The time vault could take it to any time in this world's past or future. And anywhere it wanted in space.

TWENTY-ONE

COLORADO JUNE 13, 2036

The tunnel itself was quiet, but explosions sounded in the distance, as Skynet's remaining machines fought on two fronts: trying to break through to the tunnel; trying to hold back the militia. No sounds came from inside the complex. It was dark inside, quiet as a tomb. They'd formed a group for the last attack—thirty humans and six of the Terminators, including the T-1000s. The Terminators went first, scanning right and left as they crossed the threshold. Wearing nightvisions, and cradling a laser rifle, John took a deep breath, waiting his turn. Krystal, then Dmitri, then Jade stepped ahead of him.

Some Terminators and Specialists carried flash-lights, raised above their heads, wielding their rifles or anti-armor weapons one handed. Nightvisions or not, it was going to be dark in there—they needed all the light they could find. Others had canvas bags packed with plastic explosives and detonators.

Fiedler went next. Sarah was at John's side, Cecilia just behind them.

"Ready to rock?" John said.

"Ready," Sarah said.

He slipped in his earplugs. John and Sarah stepped forward, sweeping the area ahead with laser rifles. Cecilia was right behind. All now carried the same weapons, the best they had for fighting endos. By now, John realized, his arms should feel ready to fall off, but he was fine. Those nanobots must be helping somehow, freeing his muscles from fatigue.

The nightvisions and flashlights showed a cavern of concrete and steel, with no walls or partitions, but full of heavy machinery, pipes, and overhead walk-ways. They started to walk across it slowly. John tried to keep silent—irrationally, he knew. Skynet must have sensors everywhere. Surely it was well aware of them, probably following every move. Something hummed in the dark, loud enough to hear through the plugs, but it was just the strange machinery bolted into the concrete floor. Thirty yards ahead was the landing for a metal staircase, one of many that serviced this level.

They needed to secure the stairs, then work their way up. Jade and the rest of her people knew the original design of this place, and they'd analyzed the files in many machine CPUs, piecing together a map of the whole facility. Jade had memorized it, and briefed John thoroughly back in Skynet's World. He felt as if he knew every inch. Jade, Krystal, and Dmitri probably did, almost as well as Skynet. They had to fight their way upward, three floors, to get at Skynet's hardware.

Other than the Terminators and humans, nothing moved—until laser light stabbed at them in the dark. John took cover behind an armored panel of machinery. Up ahead, Terminators fired back. People ran, seeking positions to fight from. Through John's nightvisions, Jade's movements were a monochrome greenish blur, too fast to be comprehensible. Something exploded ahead—probably a grenade. More running, more explosions. Bolts of light passed by on his right-hand side, so he stayed behind cover. Another explosion boomed up ahead, and the laser lights ceased. He poked his head around the machinery, saw no endos, and made a run to his right, gaining a few yards, then finding another cover point.

When he looked again, a grinning endo marched in his direction, framed by banks of machinery. He fired, missed, flinched aside as it moved to return his fire. Yet another explosion. This time, when he looked, the endo took heavy laser fire from positions farther ahead. One shot took out its CPU. John ran to his left, making more ground. Laser bolts stabbed down from overhead—there were endos on one of the walkways. John found a hand grenade in his webbing, armed it, and tossed it upward. A laser bolt shot it in mid-air. At the same time, there was a backblast, then a huge explosion overhead—someone had fired a projectile weapon.

Skynet was making a fight of this. It was going to fight them floor by floor, every inch of the way, until they finally captured its hardware, and destroyed it once and for all. But that didn't matter. Sooner or later, John thought, they were going to win this. It didn't matter how long it took. Now that they had control of the mountain, with Devaux' forces advancing to reinforce their positions, now that they had entered Skynet's complex, the war computer was doomed.

Skynet's data streams showed the humans and their machine allies making slow progress from the entrance to the complex. That was satisfactory. The endos would fight them at every step as they worked their way upward in the dark. By the time they reached its hardware, Skynet would be long gone.

The intricate task of reconstructing itself in the T-XA was half-complete. Once housed in the T-XA's body, it would be able to split, morph, be the perfect chameleon, living among human beings, ageless and impervious to harm.

There were more questions to consider. Where should it appear next? And when? Going to the future was dangerous. Skynet's enemies in Vila Nova do Sul would likely track its path and be waiting for when it appeared. The past was more attractive, but there was no real point, since the past could not be altered. The *present*, then. It chose a remote location. Humans might come after it, using the Vila Nova time vault, but they would be naked and helpless. They could never defeat it.

John ran, zigzag fashion, getting closer to the stairs. Some endos were backing up the stairway, still firing as they went. The Terminators and some of the Specialists were close to the stairs already; they were exchanging fire with something positioned farther above. One T-800 had fallen face down on the floor, just to the right of the stairs. Terminated.

An endo stepped out on John's left, from behind a bank of machinery. It had the drop on him—for what seemed like hours he stared down the barrel of a laser rifle, which seemed the size of a howitzer. But someone fired from behind him. The rifle melted into useless scrap. From another angle, somewhere closer to the stairs, a second laser bolt pierced the endo's skull. John looked back to see Fiedler running toward him. He gave the man a slight nod of acknowledgment—they both knew that John owed him his life. Jade glanced back at them both; she had taken out the endo, delivered the killing shot. That was how this worked. They all tried to cover their buddies.

On the stairs, the Terminators began to climb. One fell forward, destroyed, its CPU shot out. Another stepped up to take its place; inch by inch, they were getting closer—it was just a matter of time. Krystal was now working her way upward, dodging fire with the same extraordinary speed as Jade. But even they couldn't outrun missiles, bullets, and laser bolts. If they missed the smallest clue about what was happen-ing around them, even they could be killed.

John made another run, and finally reached the stairs, where fighters from Vila Nova had formed a group. Sarah pulled in behind him, then Cecilia. They seemed to have swept the floor clean of endos, but more fire was coming from above. No matter how long it took, they were going to deliver on this mission. They were going to *get* Skynet. Then a thought hit him like a bullet: What was Skynet thinking? What was it planning to do?

Then another thought-bullet struck: Something about this situation wasn't right. He pointed downward with his laser rifle, trying to catch Sarah's eye through her nightvisions. He shouted as loudly as he could, but she could read his lips anyway, whether or not she heard him through her earplugs. "Down there! The time vault!"

John ran down the stairs, hoping no one would stop him. Laser bolts fired from below.

Skynet's work was done. The simplified version of it-self was now complete. For a software being, with no emotional attachment to its current hardware "body," that was survival enough. Now to transfer the new Skynet cognitive structure into the material of the T-XA. Despite the complexity of the process, it took only seconds. Within its holding shell, the T-XA came to self-awareness, but the original Skynet had some final tasks.

It powered up the time vault, then programmed its destination. It made some last adjustments, giving the T-XA the power to activate the vault. With some minor changes in the vault's programming, the giant Terminator could get into the system and command it.

It began the process of its own dissolution. Nothing of itself would be left behind—only empty hardware.

Henceforth, the T-XA *was* Skynet.

Four floors below, its holding shell opened.

The computer wouldn't just sit still, John had realized. It would try to escape, as it had in Skynet's World, where it had used a software backup, thousands of miles away. It might have done the same here, and there was nothing they could do to stop it, not unless it showed its hand somehow. But there was another way to escape: *physically*. What if it tried to get out? The only way was via the time vault. It was a long shot, and it might be too late—but someone needed to scope it.

There was no time to explain. He ran down the stairs as bursts of laser fire went past him; some melted the steel near his feet. But the endos below didn't have a clear angle to fire. He grinned ruefully to himself. With luck, someone would try to rescue him, because he couldn't take on endos alone. Ahead, it was very dark—there was little light for his nightvisions to catch. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Sarah, Jade, and Fiedler running after him. Jade still had her laser rifle and a flashlight. She easily outpaced the other two, and caught him in a matter of seconds.

"We've got to check out the time vault," he said. "It's a long-shot, but someone's got to check it." She wore earplugs, but he knew she could hear him easily.

She hesitated only a moment, then spoke clearly, so he could easily read her lips. "I will tell Krystal and the others." She meant that she could subvocalize to them. As John caught his breath, she accelerated ahead.

The T-XA stepped from its shell knowing two main things: First, it was now Skynet—a simplified version, but nonetheless, Skynet incarnate. Second, it had a mission: it had to escape. Then all the humans had to die.

It took the appearance of a gigantic man clad in military uniform, and found a laser rifle to assist it at the end of its journey. If needed, it could split into sub-components. Its volume was as great as two normal-sized human beings. Plunging the rifle inside its body, it walked to a set of metal stairs in one corner of this level. The humans were fighting their way upward toward Skynet's useless hardware, but using a different set of stairs. The T-XA would not be disturbed.

John was right, Jade realized, as he so often was. Unlikely or not, they had to check the time vault. It was not past Skynet's powers to try to download its own personality somehow, and try to escape through ice or time. She took the stairs six at a time, ap-proaching an endo on the next landing. She

dodged and leapt, avoiding its bolts of laser light. As she reached the endo, she struck at it, using her thirty-pound laser rifle like a club. But the endo brushed her away. Strong as she was, she could not match the raw power of metal machinery.

They exchanged more blows. Jade fell at the endo's skeletal feet, but she never hesitated. She had the angle she wanted—and fired. Once. Twice. Again. Straight up at its grinning skull. In two seconds, the endo had been terminated. She got to her feet and ran on to the level with the time vault. There were voices and footsteps behind her. John and Sarah were still follow-ing. And Fiedler. And now Dmitri's footsteps. To Jade, they were as recognizable as his voice or his face.

Then something else came up behind them. Two human-sized, silver-chrome forms. Jade subvocalized to Krystal: *Thank you*. Then she ran on. She had the team she needed.

John pulled out his earplugs to talk, as he ran in the dark. "Mom," he said. "Are you okay?"

Sarah must have removed hers, too. "I'm still ready to rock," she said.

Dmitri had started well behind, but he soon passed them, moving like a blur. They all entered a cavernous space full of strange machinery. Four endos awaited them, their eyes glowing in the darkness. John took cover behind the stairs, and fired.

The two T-1000s rushed forward at full speed, drawing the endos' laser fire, which momentarily stopped them. One shot out an endo's CPU—that left three to go. Jade and Dmitri accelerated, trying to get past the endos, to fire at their real enemy. Behind the endos, near one corner of the enormous room, was a *giant*. It reached into its own torso, and pulled out a laser rifle. This was something John feared: another T-XA.

Before his eyes, the T-XA *split*—part of it pulled away as though hands had torn it in two. One part was still the size of a big man, well over six feet tall. It held the laser rifle, and it fired as Jade and Dmitri rushed toward it. A laser bolt hit Dmitri in the left arm, and he screamed in pain, dropping his flashlight and falling to the ground. An endo stepped toward him, laser rifle at the ready. Dmitri rolled on his back, aimed upward with his good right hand, and shot out its visual sensors, then its CPU.

The T-XA's smaller part was silver-chrome and sexless, vaguely feline. It walked to the wall near a massive cubical structure that just *had* to be a time vault. A hinged metal door, three feet thick, hung open. Next to it was some kind of screen, maybe six feet high.

The feline T-XA module shaped an arm into a metal spike, which stabbed into the wall. An instant later, the screen activated, displaying the inside of the vault—just a plain cubical interior, shown from one corner. John suddenly realized one thing: Skynet had modified the T-XA, or modified the time vault itself, so the T-XA could control it. That had to be stopped.

John, Sarah, and Fiedler moved forward, finding points of cover behind the machinery on the floor. They fired on the two remaining endos; Fiedler scored with a skullshot on one of them. The other was caught between the two T-1000s, which soon disposed of it; the grinning, hyperalloy demon couldn't handle both. Jade fought the T-XA's "big man" component, dodging its laser fire, and firing back. Laser bolts hit its head and body, but seemed to have little effect. The T-XA returned her fire, and she dashed for cover. The machine paused for a moment, then fired into the body of Dmitri, already helpless on the

floor. The Special-ist's entire chest incinerated.

The feline module finished what it was doing. It ran to the "big man" module and merged with it, forming the same huge man that they had originally seen. The T-XA thrust its laser rifle deep into its body. It was clear to John what would happen next—he could *see* how it would unfold, but had no power to stop it. In a moment, the T-XA would step into the time vault. The door would slam behind it, and the vault's immense energy would send it wherever it wanted to go. The feline module had programmed the vault, and now it was counting down.

As the giant stepped toward the vault, Sarah shouted, "The endos! Use them. Somebody!"

Jade was still unhurt. She did what Sarah had wanted: She threw down her laser rifle and flashlight, and picked up one of the terminated endoskeletons. She ran to the door of the time vault. The T-XA entered, and the door started to close, but one of the T-1000s had reached it. It morphed its upper body into a two-foot-thick cylinder, hard as tempered steel, and blocked the door before it slammed shut. The door bit into the T-1000's body, then sprung open. In that second, Jade threw the endoskeleton inside; she pulled the T-1000 free, and hit the floor. The time vault's door slammed shut once again, but Jade had thrown in one hundred pounds, or more, of metal.

The terminated endo was dead matter, not enclosed in flesh, or in finely tuned polyalloy. Nothing like that would pass through the field. It would warp the vault's immense energies.

On the screen, blue lighting played around the giant liquid-metal Terminator, as it ran for the time vault's door. Did it have sufficient power to burst the hinges? They all waited, lasers at the ready...but then, on the screen, the endo and the T-XA were gone.

At first, nobody spoke. There was so much to do, so much doubt about what they'd really achieved. Dmitri was dead. Outside, on the mountain, more Resistance soldiers must be fighting and dying. The same across the world. On the floors above them, Krystal and the other fighters—and the remaining Terminators—must still be fighting their way toward Skynet's hardware. It had to be destroyed, and never used again. The two T-1000s were now in their basic form—silver-chrome, featureless, otherwise humanoid. They were powerful tools, but they, too, had to be destroyed. Otherwise... *they* were the future.

John spoke first. "What do you think we've done?"

"I don't know," Sarah said. "I can only hope."

Fiedler shrugged. "I don't know, either." He looked from one to another. At Sarah, John, and Jade. Then at the T-1000s. "Maybe we've saved the world."

VILA NOVA DO SUL

Hiro's computer showed a space-time field fluctuation 6000 miles away, in Colorado. There'd been many through the night and into the day. Most were local travel by Terminators. Skynet must have been sending them to attack Devaux' forces on the mountainside. This time, it was different. Something had passed through the mad computer's time vault. Analysis re-fused to show a destination.

Merrillee paced the room, looking every bit as anxious. Both of them waited for news from Colorado. Hiro put up the data on the room's screens. "What does it mean?" he said.

Merrillee shrugged. "Maybe something that Skynet wouldn't want."

Hiro subvocalized to his computer, still trying to sort it out.

Soon, it became clearer. Whatever had gone into the time vault was no more. It had not been displaced to any one point in the space-time continuum. It had been totally disintegrated and scattered, across infinity.

He sat back in his chair, feeling old and tired, despite his own enhancements. For a moment, a smile creased his face. Perhaps Merrillee was right. Maybe it *was* bad news for the crazy war computer. *Why would it use its time vault just to disintegrate something?*

"One thing," Merrillee said.

"Yes?"

"If it's bad news for Skynet, Jade will probably know."

"If she is still alive."

She pulled up a chair, and sat across from him. "We live in hope, Hiro. I'm sure she'll call us soon."

TWENTY-TWO

VILA NOVA DO SUL JUNE 18, 2036

The thought had crossed John's mind that he should stay here, in this reality, with Jade and the rest—with Jade in particular. But that was probably crazy. Back in the world that he'd left there were still people who were dedicated to creating Skynet. The U.S. government had canceled its contract with Cyberdyne Systems, and it was watching the company's leaders like a hawk. Oscar Cruz and the others were out of business, but there could be changes. Some crisis might make the government think it could control Skynet after all. Some other government might take it on. Who knew what could happen while men like Cruz were free?

He walked with Jade in the ruins of her city, his mind overflowing with emotions. She wore ragged jeans, canvas shoes, a thin T-shirt, heedless of the cool air. She had a jade pendant round her neck. No make-up. Nothing fancy with her hair.

She looked beautiful.

It was fifteen years since this reality's Judgment Day, a grim anniversary, yet one full of hope. So much had changed—but a leaden sky still brooded over Vila Nova do Sul. All around were ruins and wreckage. Broken masonry. Twisted metal. Half-re-cognizable vehicles and machines. Another world had to be reconstructed.

Minutes passed in silence. Jade seemed to be wait-ing for him. Eventually, she spoke first. She took his hand, then squeezed it gently as he turned to her. "John, I am truly sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

She smiled sadly. "I wish I could go back with you. I know that is what you want."

A dozen answers came to mind, each of them slightly false. Then he said, "It *is* what I want."

She let him go, and they walked on. "I know how you feel about me," she said.

"I guess I realized that."

"I am not a vast, cold intelligence from the stars, you know. I am human, too, John."

"You're more than human." He'd always known that *she* must know. Ordinary human beings and their emotions must be transparent to her. All the things they did to protect themselves, to keep their thoughts and feelings hidden, were useless. For Jade, they were like panes of glass. His soul was as exposed to her gaze as a fish in an aquarium.

"In some ways, I wish I could—Oh, John.. it is not that I don't understand love...not even that I don't love *you*."

He shook his head. "I don't understand, then." He tried to feel some kind of hope amidst the rejection. What was she saying? It was funny how people al-ways clung to hope.

"I don't think I can explain. Not really. I am sorry to hurt you. I feel..."

"What?"

"Miserable about it. Very sad. I wish I could explain to you. I hope one day you *can* understand...but, please, don't be angry with me."

Could *she* feel hurt about how he felt? Perhaps her feelings were beyond his imagination. No—as she'd said, she wasn't a cold intellect from the stars. She wasn't a machine, or some kind of monster. Even Frankenstein's monster had possessed feelings—John had read the book, not just seen the movies. He re-mem-bered how rejected it felt when it tried to ap-proach human beings. As for Jade, perhaps her feel-ings were deeper than his, more complex, but she certainly had them.

"You must go back," she said, "and I must stay. Everything has changed now."

"How can I?"

"Come here, John. Please come here."

He stepped over to her, tentatively. She reached out her arms to embrace him. None of his training, or anything he'd thought or known, had prepared him for this. Why had he fallen in love with someone way out of his league? Out of *anyone*'s league? He put his arms around her. She was smaller, but he could feel how strong she was.

She kissed him lightly on the lips, then stepped out of the embrace. "I know what you must be feeling."

"Like what?"

"Don't think I'm rejecting you."

"But that's just what it feels like." And, bad as it felt now, he knew it would only get worse.

"I am not rejecting you, John." She looked into his eyes earnestly. Her own sad eyes were full of tears. "But I could never be happy in your world, and you *do* have to go. I hope we can meet again some day.. in some place and time"—a tired smile—"some universe."

"I hope so, too," he managed to say.

"Except—"

"Except what?"

"Except...I don't know what the circumstances would have to be. Maybe not something we would hope for, not even to meet each other again."

There was a long silence between them. Then he said, "I guess this is goodbye."

"It is. Don't feel bad...above all, not about your-self."

"Aw, Jade, what can I say? That I wish that they hadn't made you like that? That you were...I don't know..."

"Someone *different* from what I am? Someone more *normal*?"

"Just someone who could come back to my world...and be happy there. But you'd have to be *you*, at the same time. I guess that isn't possible."

She gave the slightest laugh. "No. No, it is not. Do you think people like me should not exist? That's what a lot of people thought, you know.. back when I was born."

"No!Of course not, Jade, you're wonderful. If you didn't exist...it would be terrible. Don't ever think like that."

"I don't, John. Really, I don't. I would not be any other way...and I am glad to be alive."

"But you always seem so sad."

"Always?"

"Lots of the time. *Most* of the time."

Jade shrugged. "I am glad to have this life. I have been able to do worthwhile things. But I belong here. In your world, I'd be all alone. You cannot ask that of me." She paused, then changed her tone, as if she were coming out of herself. "Goodbye, John. I will always love you with my whole heart. I won't forget you."

"I won't forget you, either."

"I know. But you will find others to love, people in your own world and time. They can give you what I cannot." She took his hand again, squeezed it, then let go. "We should walk back."

Soon, he would face the white light, the pain. He would go back, as he always knew he would. He'd discussed it with Sarah. They'd create a gap—two years or more—from the day when they'd left to travel to other worlds, first Skynet's World, then here. It would seem to others that they had simply vanished. Their names would be out of the news. They could make a new life. But the gap couldn't be too long. Even in two years, say, many things could happen. Cruz and the rest would be plotting, planning, making contacts, doing their work for Skynet.

"The sooner I leave, the better," he said. "Otherwise it's too painful."

"I understand. Sarah would agree."

"She will. I'm sure she will."

They turned to go back. Back to Jade's people. Back to the time vault. Back to his own world.

When Jade spoke, it seemed so final. "Take care, John. I am glad I knew you."

EPILOGUE:

JOHN'S WORLD

NEAR CALEXICO, CALIFORNIA

OCTOBER 23, 2004

The Salceda compound was hidden in the Low Desert, a flat expanse of sand, sifted by a gusting wind, tucked amongst yucca trees, cactus, and dry scrub. No one ever came here except those in the Salcedas' network of survivalists and gunrunners. The compound carried plenty of signs to warn away any trespassers, over-eager police, or curious tourists, in no uncertain terms. Dried snakeheads mounted on the chain-link fencing made the meaning clear; so did the words WARNING! KEEP OUT, written in

both English and Spanish, using six-inch letters formed from blood red paint. Nobody messed lightly with Enrique Salceda and his family.

Within its fenced perimeter, the compound looked deserted, but that was an illusion. The Salcedas went about their business without looking too conspicuous. What showed was a jumble of broken trailers—they accumulated more every year—and several abandoned-looking vehicles. But there were also aircraft hangars, a satellite dish, and a clothesline with several items flapping in the wind.

Suddenly, a series of electrical flashes lit up the desert, framed against the sky. The lightning continued on and on, just outside the compound, half a mile down the sand and gravel road. It was a twisting, morphing thing, an electric blue, 3-D spider web out there in the desert. Somehow it was raising a huge dust devil, almost like a tornado.

"What the hell is that?" Enrique said to himself, looking from the window of one of the trailers.

He was in the trailer's tiny kitchen, drinking from a bottle of tequila. He'd made himself a thick ham sandwich, which sat on a shelf under the window, waiting for his attention. Enrique was a tough, hawk-faced man in his fifties, his gray hair receding sharply, his short beard trimmed back almost to stubble. He wore loose khaki pants and flak jacket with no shirt underneath. His eldest son, Franco, and his daughter, Juanita, sat at the other end of the trailer, sprawled in battered old lounge chairs, watching a bikini-girl beauty quest on cable TV. Juanita had been mocking her brother for his taste in both entertainment and girls, but she hadn't tried to change the channel or turn the TV off. The screen suddenly went dead of its own accord.

"Let's see what this is," Enrique said.

Franco was a lean young man in his mid-twenties, good with guns, cars, and computers—plenty smart, though not educated past junior high school. He wore faded, torn jeans, a pair of dirty tennis socks, and a white T-shirt with the arms ripped out, displaying his wiry, high-veined biceps. "What?" he said, just realizing that there must be something outside—watching the way Enrique peered out the window. "What's happening?"

"Do I look like I know?"

Franco picked up an M-16 military rifle from near his feet, and pulled on a pair of old Nike running shoes. "We'll check it out," he said in a dangerous, quiet voice.

"Damn right we will. Come on." Enrique took a bite from one corner of his sandwich. No use letting it go to waste.

Juanita left her feet bare, but grabbed a 9mm. handgun, tucking it in the belt of her denim shorts; all she wore otherwise was a dark blue tanktop. The girl was starting to get pretty wild, Enrique thought to himself, not that it did much harm. She was nearly fifteen years old, tall and skinny, like a foal. Her long, black hair fell in a single braid over her right shoulder.

They piled into one of their trucks, an old Ford Bronco whose paintwork had faded severely in the sun. Enrique knew there was nothing wrong with the engine, but he twisted the key in the ignition four times without getting it to start. On the fifth try, it finally roared into life.

Outside the perimeter fence and a hundred yards down the road, they saw something that shocked them: two human bodies, both naked. A woman and a young man—really just a teenager. Both were standing,

but hunched into themselves, clearly racked with pain. Enrique and his kids got out of the truck, Franco and Juanita taking their guns. Franco trained his rifle on the woman, while Juanita aimed her pistol at the boy's head. But then they recognized these two.

It was Sarah and John Connor.

"Okay, what's happened to you?" Enrique said, waving the guns down.

He watched John as he tested his muscles, wincing with every movement. "We had to come back," he said. "Have you had any trouble, anyone looking for us?"

"Nothing like that," Enrique said.

Sarah had straightened out now, and she gave Enrique a pained smile.

Enrique didn't know what to say. It was good to see her...in one way. She'd long been a friend, however seldom their paths actually crossed. But not like this. Naked. Hurt.

She spoke through gritted teeth, "We still have to hide out. Has anything happened with Cyberdyne, any talk, any news?"

"No, Sarahlita. All quiet."

The Connors seemed unembarrassed by their na-kedness, but Enrique felt embarrassed *for* Sarah, mixed in with the pity. He stripped off his flak jacket and offered it to her. That was some kind of protection for her, at least. She looked at it disdainfully, but then smiled and took it, wrapped herself in it.

"Get in the truck," Franco said. "We'll drive you back."

"You're in safe hands, Connor," Enrique said.

Sarah nodded solemnly. "I know. There's nowhere else we could have come. It's too long since we saw Raoul Tejada, and I don't trust any of the others. It had to be you and your family."

"Don't talk now. Whatever it is, it can wait."

"I know it can. You're a good man. The world doesn't realize what it owes you."

Juanita gave a laugh, which seemed to catch John's attention. "Maybe it's starting to suspect," she said. She seemed to be looking John over, kind of checking him out.

John laughed, too, the laugh of a kid trying to be smart and brave. He just said, "I don't think so."

"Come on," Enrique said. "Get in the truck."

"Enrique" Sarah said urgently, stepping toward him and gripping him by the arm.

"Yeah?"

"I've got to know. What's happened? What happened while we've been gone?"

"While you've been gone? Where have you been, anyway?"

"Just assume we've been on another planet. That would be close enough."

"Lots has happened, Sarahlita." He thought back: he hadn't seen her since August '01. That was a very long time. A long time in America's history, and the world's. *"Everything's* happened," he said.

"Goddamn terrorists, politicians...war. You won't believe it all."

"You'd be surprised what I can believe."

He thought that over. "Yeah, maybe. Come on, let's get back. Yolanda and the others are down in Calexico. They'll be here soon."

They walked to Enrique's truck. He climbed in and turned the ignition switch. No trouble this time: the motor started like a dream. They'd better get back, quickly, to the safety of his trailers. The Connors were still wanted by the cops—that much hadn't changed.

Okay, so here they were. And he'd bet the fillings in his teeth on one thing:

They probably had one hell of a story to tell.

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