

THE WHIRLING METAL DEATH

by Steve Kaye

A maniac is turning the city's servant robots into crazed killers. Day after day, mechanical monsters slice through innocents with whirling blades of death - striking without warning, without reason! But can Sam Jacks uncover the mystery and stop the hidden killer before he strikes again?!



Chapter One

THE WATCHING MANNEQUIN

ITS EYES SHOULD NOT have been able to move. But they had moved, slowly, carefully, with just a hint of sinister intent.

A stringy youth, no more than twenty, alone spotted the mannequin's bizarre behavior. Despite his familiarity with strangeness and peculiar events he at first did not believe his own senses. Years of working with Sam Jacks had taught the youth to be wary of even the most certain observations.

The youth circled a display stand, arms filled with special equipment requested by Sam Jacks, his guardian and mentor. Intent on other business, Jacks had again entrusted the boy to the careful work of collecting sensitive experimental equipment. The items in hand, as well as the several commonplace items now to be purchased in this department store, were to become the nexus of some great new experiment.

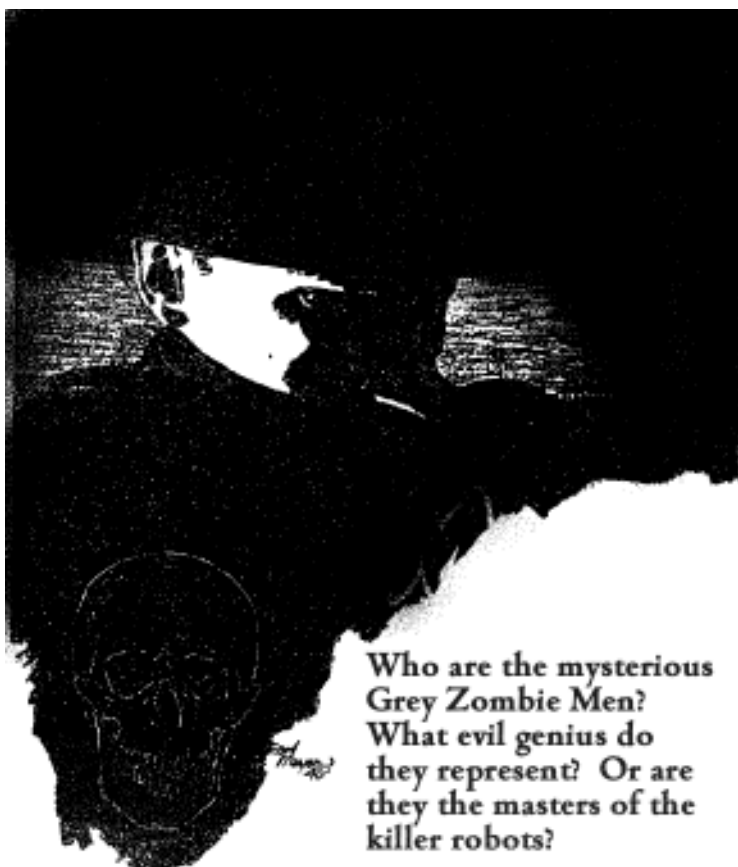
Randy McGonnigal moved cautiously to another display stand, his muddy brown eyes nonchalantly keeping track of the mannequin. No, the eyes of the imitation man did not fol-

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Complete in this issue.

low the youth. Instead, it scanned the department store for its own mysterious purposes.

"May I help you?" intoned an officious clerk.

Continuing to watch the mannequin, Randy said, "Some surveillance system you got, mister."

"I beg your pardon?" The clerk twiddled one end of his narrow mus-

tache and raised a superior eyebrow.

"That display dummy," Randy said. "Didn't know you could fix photoelectric cells into those things."

Bewildered, the clerk turned toward the display dummy, then back to, in his mind, the living dummy.

"Young man, this store does not spy on its customers! And I resent your implication!"

Resting the bundle in his arms, Randy said, "Look, pal, I saw that dummy's eyes move. It's okay by me if you've got spy cameras. Only it's no reason to snap my head off."

Nervous, the clerk took Randy by the arm and pushed the boy away from the counter.

Several customers had heard their conversation and showed angry expressions.

"Now look here, young man," the clerk whispered when they were clear of other customers, "I see no reason why you should want to sabotage my business with such talk. I must ask you to leave."

"Not until I get what I came for. And

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besides, go see for yourself if that thing's eyes ain't moving."

The clerk looked Randy up and down, measuring the youth's sincerity. Tall and stringy with a mop of unruly hair and ill-fitting clothing, Randy did not cut a trustworthy figure. But his eyes were those of a puppy-dog's and these were most sincere.

Randy stepped over a squat, bug-eyed janitorial robot easing away from the clerk. With great care he began gathering all the items on Sam Jacks' tersely written list.

The clerk meanwhile sidled over to the mannequin, staring intently at the machine's eyes.

"Well, there you are!"

Randy turned sharply to face Maggie Cable. Maggie had twenty years on Randy but hardly looked a day older than the boy. She dressed out of a fashion magazine and turned heads no matter where she went. But she was a tough gal, too, and handled her own in any scrape Sam Jacks got into. She punched harder than Jacks, too, although Randy never admitted that to anyone.

"I've been looking all over for you," Maggie said, handing the boy a note. "Sam called. He needs you right away at this address. Say, what are you so fixed on?"

Smiling, Randy said, "Take a look over at that store clerk."

The clerk had pressed close to the mannequin, peering into every sculpted pore of the machine.

"What about him?"

"He said I was crazy when I told him that dummy's eyes moved. Now who looks crazy?"

"So what if the thing's eyes moved? They're probably camera's."

Randy shook his head, his mop of hair waving uncontrollably. "Uh-uh. Asked him. That thing's eyes aren't cameras. They're not supposed to move."

"Say, you don't think this might tie into all the trouble Sam's been ..."

"Wait! Look over there!" Randy pointed to a pallid-looking man dressed in a grey shirt and loose-fitting grey trousers. The man had been inching his way over to the clerk for a full minute. Randy thought the man looked confused, torn, and not a little nervous.

Now the grey man took hold of the clerk's arm. He pulled roughly and the clerk lost his footing. Randy set aside his purchases and started toward the two men. Just then the janitorial robot made a second pass, mightily sucking up fallen refuse and dust. Randy tripped then watched from floor level as the 'bot skittered on down the aisle. The resulting clatter distracted the grey man, sent him scurrying away.

Harrumphing, the clerk stomped over to the fallen youth.

"I think you've had enough adventuring for one day, young man. And you've had your joke on me. I'll ask you to leave my store now."

Maggie's eyes flared suddenly. She stepped over Randy, shaking a fist at the nose of the nonplused clerk.

"Look here, you. If this boy says something, then it sticks. He works for Sam Jacks, and that's no joke."

Dubious, the clerk frowned. "What would a man like Sam Jacks need with such a kid?"

"Why, this boy's one of the most ..."

Maggie's testimonial was cut short in the sudden din of a piercing scream. All eyes whirled in the direction of the bone-chilling shriek to find a woman being attacked by the janitorial robot.

The woman's bare leg had been sucked up against the nozzle of the machine. Blood poured out from around the wide oval of metal that had attached itself to the woman's skin. Her eyes ablaze with terror, her voice now rasping from violent overuse, the woman held desperately a counter.

Several men clamored around the renegade machine, pulling at it, kicking it. One man attempted to pull the woman's leg free but the resulting pain sent her into unconsciousness.

Suddenly the machine let go of the woman and sucked her rescuer's hand into the opening. The man screamed as he battled to keep his distance.

The robot then unleashed a strange array of unusual devices. A thin, mechanical arm shot up and grabbed onto one man, shoving a four-inch electrode into his side. A quick jolt of electricity raged through the man's body leaving him singed and dead.

Another device, a small hacksaw, scraped at the hand of the man who was stuck in the machine's nozzle. Three brisk strokes of the blade sev-

ered the man's hand completely.

Several other dangerous weapons now whirled about the robot as all the customers fled to safety. Like a deranged madman, the machine chased after everything that moved.

Screams echoed through the cavernous store. Display stands and tables overturned under the frantic feet of terrified men and women.

Randy and Maggie kept their distance but did not flee. This was exactly the kind of trouble Sam Jacks was endeavoring to end. The city had been stricken this past week by a series of inexplicable robotic malfunctions. Each incident had ended in savage,



Maggie Cable

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horrible deaths.

The crazed machine slammed into counters, shattering glass and expensive porcelain. It slashed at any human in reach.

Then the elevator doors opened on the far wall and the robot lunged for it. The sole occupant, a smallish woman of delicate features, shrieked as the thing dove into the elevator car beside her. She slapped at the machine's weapons and threw herself out of the car as the doors closed behind her.

Randy found the clerk hiding under a pile of boxes and dragged the man to his feet.

"Where are the elevator override controls?!" he cried.

The clerk pointed dumbly to a locked panel to the right of the call buttons. Randy raced to the box and, using a special electronic key he took from his pocket, popped the control box open.

Somewhat recovered, the clerk made a grab to stop the youth.

"You can't!"

Randy shrugged free and threw a series of switches. Immediately the soft whine of the elevator died. Randy quickly checked the status board and found the car had been stalled between the fifth and sixth floors.

Randy thought swiftly about this building. There were three sub-basements which housed parked cars. Set free, then, the elevator would plunge eight and a half stories. Enough to mangle the elevator and any machine inside it.

Randy reached for the second series

of controls. This time the clerk threw himself across the boy's arms.

"You haven't the right! You're destroying private property!"

Maggie pulled the clerk away with a vicious tug.

"And if I don't, that thing'll get free and destroy more than property! Blast it, man! Lives are at stake!"

With a violent punch, Randy hit the override buttons, completely cutting off power to the elevator's super-conductive suspension. A few seconds later, a whooshing sound rose up from behind the closed elevator doors. It built to a crescendo then faded, replaced by the twisting and rending sounds of metal and glass crashing to the ground.

Randy nodded to Maggie and sighed. Behind them the casualties were just now being treated. Screams had turned to whimpers and then stunned silence.

"This is insane!" the clerk cried. "Robots going mad, killing people! Somebody should do something about this!"

"Somebody is doing something, mister," Randy said proudly, finding and displaying again the note Maggie had given him. "Somebody named Sam Jacks!"

Chapter Two

ROBOT MENACE

MECHANIZED ARMS WHIRLED furiously, razor sharp tongs

dancing ever closer to Sam Jacks. Stepping back with a jerk, Jacks swerved, face nicked, blood drawn. Another step back and the wall crowded him.

He was timing it close, too close. Ordinarily Jacks liked to put on a show for those who inevitably gathered to “watch him work.” That’s how this business had begun. But the ‘bot had suddenly produced two twirling fists of glimmering scalpels and Jacks’ show abruptly ended.

White enamel pressed coolly against Jacks’ back. In front of him whirring hydraulics whined louder and louder as the sleekly triangular machine inched closer. Its stabbing pitch mimicked anticipation — anticipation of the kill.

Then with a burst, Jacks dove forward beneath the sets of careening blades. He ducked, rolled, and, with less than Olympic precision, came to his feet. A pocket of his immaculately tailored jacket held a miraculous device that Jacks now removed and pointed at the glossy white wall.

The ‘bot whirled, its razor honed talons seeking a victim. Then before it could resume its attack, Jacks ignited the device in his hand, causing a layer of the enameled wall behind the ‘bot to spring forward, elastically engulfing the mechanism. Beneath the white blanket, the ‘bot’s whines continued, piercing and shrill until they ended with a pop and a plume of smoke.

“Man, that was something!”

Randy pushed through the dumb-

founded crowd at the door and in three lanky steps stood beside Jacks. Hands on hips, Randy stared with wide, youthful eyes at the glazed robot lying motionless on the floor.

“Don’t know how that thing works, boss, but it sure did the job!”

Amazed, Randy shook his head slightly. That single movement disturbed the boy’s precariously perched coiffure, which promptly fell into his eyes. For all of his desire, Randy just could not carry off the modern look of his contemporaries. To Jacks, the boy seemed forever out of place, from a time of his own making.

“All that matters, kid, is that you got the wall up in time, before I drew that monster in here.”

Jacks did not use the word monster lightly. Now, stepping out of the room through a jagged hole in the far wall, Jacks was given sudden reminder why he would call an inanimate ‘bot a monster.

In the next room, ironically called a living room, lay three dead people. Each had been carved up by the whirling blades of the renegade robot. Pieces of each person — a man, his wife and child — were scattered about the room. Blood dripped from the walls and a ceiling fixture. Fingers had been tossed around like so many match sticks.

Jacks’ mind grimly reconstructed the events. He could see the ‘bot moving suddenly on the husband — he had been cut through. Raising his hands in futile defense, the husband had lost his digits to laser-honed blades. The

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Sam Jacks

wife, struggling to reach her child, met her end similarly. But the child ... the child. Jacks shut down his mind and turned from the room.

"Inhuman. Just too damned inhuman!"

Outside the apartment, Jacks passed Chief Inspector Sanger who was at that moment holding the head of one of his officers as the youngster heaved the contents of his stomach onto the thickly carpeted floor. Jacks and Randy moved to a discreet distance.

Absentmindedly, Jacks removed a packet from an inside pocket of his coat. He flipped a cigarette from its interior up to his mouth. Randy flashed a lighter. Jacks' only failing, other than poor athletic ability and an aversion to exercise, was smoking. A filthy habit which he discouraged in others but to which he clung in the name of nostalgia.

At the end of the hall, the young officer straightened. He coughed, embarrassed.

"Sir," the officer croaked, "I hope this won't reflect badly on me."

"It would've reflected badly on you, boy, if you hadn't've given us that replay of your lunch."

Sanger put a beefy hand on the officer's back and pushed him toward the elevator. He said to go home, then turned to Jacks.

"Damn it, Jacks, what'd I give you that All-Levels flier's permit for!"

Jacks dragged the cigarette to its long blue filter, tossed it.

"Now look here, Inspector..."



Chief Inspector Sanger

Sanger shook his thick face.

"No, you look! If you're to keep your prized consultancy with the Continental PD, then you've got to be more responsive."

A woman shrieked, piercing echoes reverberating down the hall. The men stabbed six eyes toward the far end of the hall. There, the coroner had just stepped out of the victims' apartment past a woman who had apparently just fainted at the doorjamb. The man drew behind him an anti-grav field that towed a small, white pallet. The field had not sealed properly, however, and one of the victim's unattached fingers had slipped and fallen into view.

The coroner grinned sheepishly at the chief inspector as he passed on his

way to the elevator.

Sanger moved to the apartment, looked in.

"Sorry, Sam. It's getting to me. I know you got here as fast as anyone. Faster. Just wasn't enough time."

Sanger's hunched, wide shoulders seemed to carry more weight than usual.

"Seven people dead in one week. All caused by renegade robots. And no one knows why."

Sanger turned heavily, stared straight into Jacks' cold blue eyes.

Jacks said, "I have a theory."

Exiting the elevator on the seventy-eighth floor of police central Jacks turned a hard left, his quick paces speeding him down the corridor. Chief Inspector Sanger had already taken several steps toward his own office to the right, with the stringy Randy in tow, when he saw Jacks had other plans.

At the end of the hall, Jacks slammed his way through double doors that swung away with a whoosh of air. Inside was a room full of electronics, dials, wires, and scopes. At the center was a round steel table, impossibly balanced on a thin wire extending from the ceiling down into the hub of the table. On that shiny cold slab were two dismembered robots, both assassins from earlier carnage.

"Well, hiya, Mr. Jacks!"

A bald midget wearing thick, old-style eye glasses turned from a board of di-

als to greet Jacks. He took a step forward and rose up on two cushions of air pumped from the soles of his feet.

The little man's hand was extended and Jacks took it, absentmindedly.

"You've been away a while, haven't ya?"

"Too long, Smitty."

Sanger and Randy pushed into the room now.

"You could tell a fella where you're heading, Jacks."

Not pausing for small talk, Jacks approached the table and began examining the ripped-up robots. Jacks had done the destruction himself several days ago when he had been called on to do service similar to today. But each time he had arrived too late. There had been no forewarning that the robots were about to go renegade, so there really had been no way to save the victims. If he were to save future lives, though, Jacks would have to discover the reason behind this madness.

With eyes peeled to his work, and hands testing every circuit, Jacks labored steadily for half an hour.

"Each robot," Jacks explained as his fingers explored the innards of the metal beast, "is the product of a different manufacturer. Each robot has a different function. Domestic, assembly line, and surgical assistance."

Jacks shifted, removed another circuit. A third robot, the one from this morning's murders, was brought in. Jacks quickly dashed some chemicals together from a supply Smitty kept in a corner of the room and poured the

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mixture over the white-glossed mechanism. In moments, the enamel was eaten away leaving behind only a wisp of smoke.

Jacks began rummaging through the device.

"And yet," he continued, "each time one of these 'bots failed, they turned lethal. Why?"

"Blast it, Jacks, you said you were going to tell me why!"

"Quite so, Inspector!" And as he spoke, Jacks, with a theatrical flourish, removed his hand from the third robot. Held in his neatly manicured fingers was a burned circuit.

Randy stepped forward, his myopic eyes squinting for a better picture.

"Gee, boss, what's that?"

"The logic circuit, Randy."

"It's burned to a crisp, Jacks."

"Yes, Inspector ..."

Smitty, aloft on air cushions, moved forward, his high brow knit tight.

"Just like the other two!"

"As you know, Inspector, every robot is equipped with a logic circuit that keeps it focused on its programmed task. Reprogramming through that circuit allows for the nature of the task to be altered. But that's something that can only be done by the robot's owner. Yet here we have intentional and specific destruction of the key element in all robots.

"Someone, Inspector," Jacks concluded, "is deliberately using robots for murder."

Sanger moved forward angrily.

"Jacks, that's insane! Who would do

such a thing? What would he gain...?"

Suddenly the doors burst in with a gear-wrenching screech, banged open so quickly the hydraulics could not move the doors fast enough. The cause: a breathless uniformed officer.

"There's another one, sir! Another killer robot!"

The police sedan was crowded with Sanger, Jacks, Randy, and the driver crammed in beneath the bubble top. Smitty had insisted on coming and there had been no time to argue. But the little man had been forced to sit on Randy's lap, a situation both men tolerated with visible discomfort.

The sedan moved easily through the air traffic, lights flashing a ring around the oval aircar. The driver was practiced and they sped in record time to the area of disturbance. Jacks sat forward in his seat, nose almost pressed to cool glass. He felt as if they were standing still.

"There!" Jacks screamed.

Below, in a shopping mall that fronted Lake Park, was a crowd of people. They formed an agitated semicircle around a store front as police pressed the throng back.

The driver jammed the stick forward, sending the sedan plummeting earthward. Suddenly a klaxon sounded inside the aircar and several yellow lights flashed on the steering console. Leaving the laser-beam guidance system that controlled all air traffic in the city had set off these warning devices.

Sheepishly the officer clicked on the All Levels override device he had earlier forgotten to engage. The din ended just as the officer pulled back on the stick and the car, atop a cushion of radiating force, settled safely to the ground.

Jacks popped the bubble top and poured out onto the sidewalk. In the store front window was a mannequin in the shape of a female. The summer frock it had worn was tattered and bloodstained. Its imitation anatomy peaked daringly from beneath the scanty cloth.

Unhesitatingly, Jacks jumped forward and tackled the pseudo-woman. Its arms flailed and its legs kicked, but Jacks kept himself inside the thing's reach. Pushing to his feet, he held the machine in a close embrace and ran from the store front.

Outside the crowd screamed as one. Jacks was bringing the horrid killing thing toward them! Several policemen raised their weapons in defense, although to a man each grimaced at the thought of having to gun down Sam Jacks.

Ten feet from the storefront window, Jacks was suddenly upended. He and the robot were jerked back and slammed to the ground. Immediately, the mannequin ceased its movements.

"What's the big idea, you blamed idiot?!" Sanger bellowed as Jacks rose and brushed himself clean.

"Calm down, Inspector," Jacks smiled. "Simple enough so even you could understand."

Smitty chuckled, then hid his elfin face behind stubby fingers.

"That's a store mannequin, Inspector."

"I know that! Blast you!"

"Well, unlike more sophisticated 'bots," Smitty said continuing for Jacks, "which require freedom to move unrestrained, this machine's function is to remain in a prescribed area with limited movements. Leg kicks, hand waving, that kind of thing."

Jacks' attention drawn elsewhere, Smitty finished the explanation.

"So, the mannequin does not need an expensive internal power source. Sam saw that right away."

"You mean ..." Randy started to say.

"That's right, Junior. Sam just unplugged the thing."

Jacks stepped away from his friends, pushed into the crowd. Well-wishers gathered around him, but Jacks pressed on. His steely eyes reached over the crowd to an alley across the street. A figure stood in that alley, watching intently.

"Jacks ...?" Smitty started to ask.

Abruptly, the figure darted down the alleyway into darkness. Jacks bolted, slamming his way through the crowd in hot pursuit. Jacks quickly gained on the figure. It was a man, whom Jacks could see was enormous in size.

The big man, realizing he could not outrun Jacks, took to a fire escape tube and began riding the forced air flow up. Jacks dove into the clear plastic chute and, with hand-over-hand action, pulled up after the fleeing man.

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Buoyed by the rushing air that was designed to slow descending bodies, the two men raced up a dozen floors before Jacks eventually gained on the big man.

What this man lacked in speed, though, he more than made up for in strength. Raising a heavy, studded-sole boot, the man brought it down on Jacks' head. The blow was tremendous, sending searing pain through Jacks' entire body. His vision blurred and swirled and yet Jacks pressed on. Twentieth floor, twenty-first.

The man jabbed his boot again and this time Jacks could not hold on. His entire body went limp as he gave in to the spinning bliss of unconsciousness and began a startling slide groundward.

Chapter Three

NAMING NAMES

THE HARD STREAM OF WIND rushing angrily past his ears roused Sam Jacks as he shot down through the fire escape tube. Coming to his senses he immediately realized he had only seconds to assert a proper counter force. He glided his hands along the wall of the chute, pressing just firmly enough to allow the tube's automatic sensors to counteract natural gravity. Jacks' momentum slowed appreciably until he finally, casually

emerged from the fire escape.

Randy was first to Jacks' side.

"Oh, my, oh, my!" the boy fretted over Jack's cut forehead.

Randy dabbed at the trickle of blood running down his boss's cheek, but Jacks would have none of it.

"We've got no time. There's a man on the roof of this building I think might be connected to this whole business."

Jacks moved passed his friend and raced unsteadily out onto the street and up to the inspector's sedan. Sanger, Randy, and Smitty followed.

"We've got to get up to that roof," Jacks bellowed at the driver.

"It's all taken care of, sir," the officer said. "I saw you chase that man-mountain and called for a couple of squad cars to follow after. They've caught him on the roof, although he's done some damage to some of the boys."

Jacks grinned to himself. He knew what damage meant.

"Have the 'gentleman' brought to my offices. I'll question him there."

Chief Inspector Sanger eventually gave in and the man-mountain was brought to Jacks' offices.

Jacks kept a suite of rooms on the top two floors at the Wentworth Arms downtown. The floors, each distinctly decorated, were connected by a winding staircase. The first level housed a series of laboratories, examination rooms, equipment rooms, each dressed in austere fashion. Only necessary

equipment and texts were kept here. On the uppermost level were the living and guest quarters, the miraculously expansive library with thousands of paper and microchip books, pool and rarely used exercise rooms, kitchens and dining room. Every one of these areas was meticulously designed for comfort and pleasure, elaborate and ornate.

Sanger led a dozen uniformed officers and the shackled man-mountain into Jacks' main laboratory. The police consultant was presently being administered to by his secretary and lab assistant Maggie Cable. She tsk-tsked over Jacks as she applied a laser stitching device (of Jacks' own design) to the wound.

The man-mountain barked once, a sneering smile on his kisser.

"Gotcha good, eh?"

"Shut up, you," Sanger growled, twisting the controls that tightened the electro-cuffs.

The man mountain winced slightly but said nothing.

Maggie applied a small medicated bandage to Jacks' head before packing up the first aid kit.

Jacks said, "Put him over there. That chair'll hold him."

Randy stepped into the room now, hot with news.

"No record. But his prints showed up at the first 'bot murder."

"Sure dey did!" the giant said.

"Got a name, Gorgeous George?" Sanger asked.

"Hey, I ain't gotta take dat."



**The Man-Mountain,
Sidney Spears**

"Shut up."

Randy spoke up.

"Prints ID him as Sidney Spears."

Jacks' right ear perked up at the name.

"Spears. Wasn't one of the first victims of these robot killings named Spears?"

"Da very first, ya boob! He was my brudder!"

Scowling, Sanger backhanded Spears.

"Watch who you're calling boob, pal. That's Sam Jacks you're talking to."

Jacks studied the huge man named Spears for a full minute, watching the

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eyes and the flare of the nose.

"Turn him loose, Inspector."

"Huh?"

Spears turned his thick head up and toward Sanger. A wide grin spread across the big man's face.

"Yeah, Inspector. Turn me loose."

Sanger shrugged and twisted the control device in his hand. Spears brought his arms up, rubbed his wrists. He then stood, slowly. At his full height he was a dozen inches taller than anyone in the room. He looked down hard at Sanger.

"Cuffs was pretty tight, Inspector." That last word kept coming out of Spears' mouth like venom.

"All right, enough of this," Jacks asserted. "You've some questions to answer, Spears."

"I ain't talkin'."

"Listen to me, man. There've been nearly a dozen deaths now, including your brother's, by crazed robots. I think someone is behind this, and it's a lot bigger than you can handle alone."

"That ting kilt my brudder. I'm gonna find out why."

"There might not be a reason why, Spears. But if there is and you go off half-cocked you could wind up like him."

Smitty glided into the room through sliding doors. He held a small steel plate in his hand. On the plate was a burned circuit.

"Just like the others, Sam," Smitty said. "Burnt logic circuit."

"Blast!" Jacks blurted. "Four robots, four manufacturers. No connections

anywhere."

Randy tentatively moved forward.

"Well, boss, actually there is a connection."

It had been so obvious, they all had missed it. All except Randy. By law, no robots could be produced in the city, an ordinance that kept the dangerous elements of robot construction away from densely populated areas. All robots had to be brought into the city through a central distribution center; in this town the company that ran the center was called MechCorp Distributors. That was the place where all the killer robots had once been stored.

Spears had been impossible to leave behind. He insisted, with all his weight and strength to back him up, on teaming with Jacks. Yet for all his bluster and bravado, the man-mountain urgently needed to find his brother's killer, to see justice done.

The MechCorp Distribution Center sprawled across ten square blocks on the outskirts of the city. Fliers and ground trucks swarmed about the place like a legion of worker ants. The movement was chaotic, yet seemingly followed some grand design.

Jacks maneuvered the flier out of the speed lane, shifting down to the lower levels. His security clearance beacon allowed him to press through the horizontal sky lanes without protocol.

Setting down on the visitor's platform, Jacks and Spears made their way easily into the reception room. There



Professor Anschwer

they could see through five-story-high windows a beehive of activity as robots were hoisted from enormous steel shelving to trucks and from trains to various loading platforms. Men hustled by on air-cushion platforms or riding force-elevated forklifts, while government inspectors put their seals to examined merchandise. Hundreds of men, and machines which numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

"You wanted to see me."

Jacks turned to face a smallish, bookish man. The man's features were thin, his hair slicked back. His shirt sleeves seemed permanently rolled. His right ear sported a radio cup, the

short antenna dangling behind his head. This was MechCorp manager Elsworth Billings.

Jacks held out a piece of paper.

"I need to know about these four robots."

Billings studied the paper.

"From these descriptions you have here it looks like they were all standard models. All except for the surgical one, that is. That had to have been special ordered."

Jacks said, "What about security around here? Possible anyone could come in and tamper with some of the units?"

Billings laughed.

"Brother, is it possible. Hell, just look around you. You think anyone'd be noticed walking in here? And this building goes on for almost a mile in every direction!"

Jacks bit at his lower lip, shifted his eyes in thought.

"Every one of these 'bots went renegade after their logic circuits blew. Any ideas?"

"Not a one. Never heard of such a thing."

Spears, quiet until now, jumped forward and grabbed Billings. He threw the man against a wall, pushed him up toward the ceiling.

"Get some ideas, quicklike."

"Spears, cut it out."

Billings began to shake.

"Honest. It's the oddest thing. Logic circuits don't blow. And if they did, the machine wouldn't kill people. Might bump into walls or mix up the program-

ming commands.”

Spears let Billings slide to the floor.

“Why don’t you go see Professor Anshwer,” Billings suggested, holding his throat.

Spears mumbled, “Anshwer?”

“Yeah. Don’t you guys know your history? He’s the guy that developed the circuit for Compudyne Industries. He’s retired now, I’m pretty sure. But if anyone can tell you about it he can.”

Jacks agreed then guided Spears out of the warehouse. But before leaving he arranged for the police to check through the shipping and storage records on the four robots. Billings agreed gladly.

Chapter Four

SKY DEATH

SAM JACKS DID REMEMBER his history; he knew all about Professor Anshwer. The illustrious inventor had, thirty years ago, redefined robotics. His creation of the logic circuit enabled robots to graduate from simple assembly line work to specialized, thought-intensive labors.

The circuit made it possible for robots to examine a situation, decide if its programmed tasks were complete, and, if not, search its programming for the necessary series of commands to allow it to finish its job. That, combined with balancing mechanisms perfected a decade earlier, gave unlimited free-

dom of movement to the machines, and expanded their usefulness to society to the point where modern civilization depended heavily on mechanized assistance.

Yet Anshwer was not a man to rest on laurels. Although retired from University, he continued to apply his tremendous brain to new inventions. Even now rumors were rampant in the scientific community that Anshwer was again about to revolutionize robot technology. A remarkable man who was, in fact, inspiration for Jacks’ own illustrious career.

“I’m gonna rough dis one up, too, Jacks,” Spears said after a while.

“Now take it easy, Spears.”

They were still eight hundred feet in the air, gliding along an invisible Traffic Control laser guidance beam. Jacks wanted no trouble this high over the city where he might ram into a skyscraper.

“Jus’ so’s ya know, Jacks. Dis guy made dat chunk’a robot. He jus’ better know why it ain’t workin’ right. ‘Cause if he don’t he’s gonna get dis.”

Spears held his massive hand into a great ball of steel-hard bone and sinew.

“He’s an old man, Spears. I’m sure he’s as confused about all of this as you and me. Let’s give him a chance before we condemn him. Okay, fella?”

Spears grunted something of an approval.

The shipboard computer alerted with a series of beeps that Jacks was approaching his destination. Jacks shifted down, moving earthward

through sparse air traffic. He slid the car into a street level parking space, popped the bubble top, and got out. Two blocks down was the professor's apartment building, one of the few remaining brownstones in a city of polished steel, glass, and polystyrene.

Without warning a white-haired man crashed through the front door to Anschwer's apartment house. He tumbled painfully down the stone steps, landing on the sidewalk with a bone-squishing thud. Two men in grey shirts and loose trousers piled through the doorway, jumped down to the unconscious man on the sidewalk.

Spears dove headlong into the fray, Jacks a half step behind. Spears hefted one of the grey-shirted men, tossed him like a newspaper. Jacks punched the second man three times before the man seemed to realize he was being pummeled.

Two more men in grey shirts charged down the steps to grab Spears. The man-mountain scooped up each of them, squeezed them to his chest. Neither man cried out, but each eventually went limp.

Jacks' man was returning punch for punch, but the blows seemed half-hearted. Each fist Jacks threw was a haymaker, giving terrible punishment to the recipient. The man bled and bruised and swelled, and yet he gave no cry of pain or torment. Ultimately the man's body could take no more pounding and it collapsed beneath the terrific blows.

Jacks stepped back, breathless. His



Men in grey shirts charged!

fists were red and bruised. A dull, bone-deep ache throbbed through them.

"Not bad for a shrimp, Jacks," said Spears, who had taken a seat on the porch steps to watch the fight.

"Make yourself useful and call the cops, you ox!"

Jacks dropped to his knees beside the white-haired man. There was a pulse in the old goat yet. Turning the prone man onto his back, Jacks saw red burn marks, circles about two inches in diameter, on the man's face. Jacks had no doubt that this white-haired man was Professor Anschwer.

"Take it easy, Professor."

Jacks cradled the man's head gently in his hands.

"No ... time ..."

The man was dying fast.

The Whirling Metal Death



"Kill ... it ..."

A rasping gurgle escaped the man's throat as his life ended.

Shuffling feet behind him alerted Jacks to more trouble. Turning, he saw three of the grey-shirted men running off in different directions. Spears, gone to phone headquarters, was nowhere in sight.

The fourth man was slower to rise, having been resoundingly beaten. Jacks jumped him, tackling him to the ground. The man went unconscious, head turning slightly. And that is when Jacks saw the other bruise. It was red and seemed to pulse just below the skin of the man's left temple. It was warm to the touch and caused the man to convulse with the slightest pressure.

A flock of leather soles noisily approached.

"Hi, Mr. Jacks." The cop was of an old acquaintance of Jacks. "This mug put in an alarm. Says he's working with you. That right?"

"For the time being, yes."

Other officers arrived. Jacks quickly explained the situation and sent men to canvass the area looking for the grey-shirted killers. The coroner was called to cart away the professor's body.

"What about this guy, Mr. Jacks?"

"I'll want to question him."

"Right. We'll take him downtown for you."

"No time!"

Jacks could see the red bruise on the man's forehead glowing brighter. It was warmer now to the touch than

before.

Jacks dug into his pocket and removed a small leather case. In it were several surgical instruments and an energy field nullifier. Jacks took a scalpel and the nullifier and began to work on the man's head.

"I've got to remove this thing immediately. It's killing him."

The man writhed as Jacks worked. His body twisted and arched, not from the pain of Jacks' operation (for Jacks' skill eliminated any pain whatsoever), but from the agony inflicted by the glowing red bruise.

"Hey, take it easy, Jacks," Spears remarked, amazed at the speed at which Jacks' fingers moved.

"No time!"

As he spoke, the grey-shirted man's head flared momentarily then collapsed into a gelatinous mass loosely held together by the skull. Jacks jumped back as a stream of blood shot out of the man's nose.

"Implosion!"

Jacks turned, his own stomach trying to find sure footing.

"I don't get it, Jacks. What'd ya kill'm for?"

"I didn't, you lummo! That red bruise you saw? That was a mechanism to control the man's movements and thoughts. It must have been booby trapped."

A curious crowd had gathered around the activity. It pressed closer for better vantage, straining against a handful of policemen. From the center of the throng stepped an agitated

woman. Her manner and air were so strong that the police could not restrain her.

"Father!" she called then ran into the brownstone.

Jacks mounted the steps after her.

Inside, Jacks followed the sound of heels on wood into a library. The girl was not there, but now Jacks heard sounds on stairs. He exited the library, found a staircase, and waited. In moments the girl returned, defeated.

Seeing Jacks renewed her vigor. Her slender legs brought her quickly to the foot of the stair where she stood, hands on hips, demanding to see her father.

She was a stunning girl in her mid-twenties, with strong features to match her powerful personality. She stood almost as tall as Jacks, sleek and feminine, with a pile of raven hair swooping over her left shoulder. Her clothes fit loosely which served to hide her ample figure and yet accentuated it at the same time. Jacks' enthrall left him momentarily speechless.

"I asked you where my father was, sir."

Jacks started.

"I'm sorry, Miss Anschwer. Your father is dead."

The girl's face blanched and her knees began to buckle. Jacks dipped an arm around her waist, pulled her to him.

"Easy, Miss."

"Easy yourself," she said with a sideways glance.

Jacks guided the girl back into the

library, lowered her into an overstuffed armchair. Spears was waiting for them.

"Der ya are. Cops want ta move the stiff."

Jacks shot a piercing look at Spears, about to chastise the large goof, when he spotted a movement in the far corner of the room. Jacks straightened, moved toward Spears.

"Close the door, Spears."

The man-mountain obeyed, moved by the intensity of Jacks' voice. Jacks himself cautiously stepped to the far door. He closed it, locking the three of them in.

"What's de idea ..."

Jacks' raised hand was signal enough to quiet Spears.

The far corner of the room came alive again. Visible were several lights of various color. Steel glistened under the room's strong lighting. A soft whir sounded then and a round robot shot out from its hiding place behind the chair.

A hydraulic whine reverberated in the room as the 'bot activated two wiry arms. Jacks rolled from the 'bot's path. Grabbing a statue from an end table, Jacks hefted the stone at the airborne mechanism.

Knocked aside, the robot's servo-motors screeched as it tried to maintain balance. Spears grabbed a chair and tossed it at the confused machine. The force of the blow sent machine and chair crashing out through the closed door.

Jacks fumbled getting to his feet then

gave quick chase. The pounding beats of Spears' boots followed.

Outside, several officers had encircled the robot and were firing electrical charges into the thing. Overloaded with energy, the robot spun wildly before dropping to the sidewalk and shattering.

One proud officer stepped forward.

"That's one damn robot won't be killing any people, right, Mr. Jacks?"

"Yes. Have it taken down to the police lab with instructions to examine it immediately."

Jacks turned and re-entered the house. The girl was still in the library, still dazed in her chair. Jacks bent to pick up something from the floor then helped the girl to her feet.

It was a tight fit getting the girl, Spears, and himself into the aircar, but they made it. The girl's eyes, glazed and unseeing, allowed herself to be led.

"Where to, Jacks?"

"My lab. We haven't a minute to lose."

Jacks drove the car into traffic then lifted off for the first flight level. Four minutes, and three shifts later, Jacks had moved up to cruising altitude, guided on an ultra-thin laser beam.

Suddenly, the car spun upside down as if strung on a wire. The stick would not respond to Jacks' urgent maneuvering; the dashboard dials danced frantically. Now the car nose-dived, a hurtling bullet racing toward disaster.

Chapter Five

THE RISING PINK MIST

BLACKNESS PUSHED AT Jacks' eyes. The G-Force created by the tumbling aircar was tremendous. Already the girl was unconscious, and Spears' eyelids fluttered nervously.

No control responded to his touch. As the earth loomed nearer, Jacks flashed on the idea that "no control" was the key and shut down the automatic guidance system. Immediately, the steering mechanism answered his slightest command.

Jacks shifted again and began a careful climb back to the cruising altitude. He would have to fly manually from now on, which was illegal since exact control of all air traffic was essential to safe in-city flying. But Jacks' special police permit allowed him many privileges not granted the average citizen.

"Man, dat was close! Wha' happen?"

"I'm beginning to get an idea, Spears," Jacks said, his mind buried in thought. "I think I'm beginning to get an idea."

The trip to Jacks' offices took no time. On the way, a police aircar pulled along side. But after examining Jacks' flight beacon he turned away to other duties.

Carrying the limp Anschwer girl in his arms, Jacks ran into the upper floor of his abode. His goal was the recreation area and there he deposited the girl on a luxuriously deep couch, the

cushions hugging the girl comfortingly.

Summoning Maggie, Jacks turned to the telephone and called police headquarters. He left a message for Sanger.

Randy burst in but stopped cold seeing Miss Anschwer. His youthful mouth gaped. His hands ran to the swirling points of his hair trying to set them right. As always, he failed.

"Wow! Who's that?"

"Put it in neutral, kid," Maggie scolded Randy, fretting over the girl as she had earlier done for Jacks. "This dame's about a dozen steps above all of us in the social hierarchy."

"I'll get a ladder."

The girl started coming around.

"Where am I?"

"For now you're safe. I'm Sam Jacks. And you are ..."

"Rebecca Anschwer. My father ... why, you told me he was dead."

"Yes," Jacks said, head lowering slightly. "I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you. Your father was murdered."

"I don't understand ... Please ..."

Maggie interrupted.

"All right, honey, just take it easy. Come on, I'll put you to bed. You'll think better in the morning."

"I can't sleep." The girl was almost frantic.

"That's okay, I'll give you something to rest."

"Are you a doctor?"

Maggie shot Jacks a look which amused him.

"Honey, I ought to be having done this as many times as I have."

Maggie helped Rebecca out of the

room toward the far end of the suite where the bedrooms were situated.

"Say, what's the big idea, boss? You knew who that girl was, didn't you?"

"Never assume, junior."

Jacks took the spiral staircase down to the lower level, moved on into the electronics lab. Randy followed and Spears tagged along dumbly. Jacks was grateful the big man had kept relatively silent throughout the ordeal. He understood that the man-mountain was overcome with a need to do something about his brother's death, to not sit idly by while others pressed on. Yet Jacks also realized Spears knew he was not up to solving the mystery alone. He had subjugated his own pride, deferring to a greater intellect. And for the first time in his life, this beast of a man had found someone in whom he could trust.

Smitty entered the room, for once walking on the floor.

"Stopped by on my way home, Mr. Jacks. Thought I'd tell you we put those 'bots through the ringer. Couldn't find anything else."

"What about the most recent robot?"

"That's a funny thing. Wasn't anything wrong with it really. Except we couldn't find any programming instructions on the microchips. It shouldn't have been able to do anything."

A light seemed to go on in Jacks' eyes. He raced over to the far wall where a series of panels stood, crowded with dials, meters, and switches. Jacks put his rapid hands to all of it, shutting down power in the suite. The room

plunged into darkness.

“Hey, wha’ gives!”

Jacks pushed through the inky room guided only by the dim city lights which shown through the eastern wall of windows. He moved to another wall, felt for switches, clicked them on. A spot of light ignited to illuminate a portion of the room.

Maggie was at the door. Jacks gave her instructions before she could ask her many questions. In moments normal lighting resumed.

“I’ve just had Maggie turn on the emergency generators, boys,” Jacks proclaimed.

“We had plenty of regular juice, boss.”

“Yes, Randy, but I had to kill all outside sources of power. I think that whoever’s behind these killings has tapped into this city’s electrical system. We can only be safe from his spying, or further attempts on our lives if we use a self-contained power source.”

Smitty rose up to look Jacks in the eye.

“That’s a bit far-fetched, Mr. Jacks.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree with you, Smitty. But I’ve evidence.”

Jacks related the events in the aircar when he lost control of the flight.

“I only regained stability,” continued Jacks, “when I removed all outside electrical influences.”

Smitty pondered, stubby fingers pulling at his lip.

“I guess that would explain the robots, too. Somehow a signal is being sent along normal electrical channels

that causes the logic circuit to fry.”

“And, more importantly, to relate new programming.”

“Aw, where’s dis gettin us!?”

Randy put a hand to the big man’s shoulder — or as close to it as his arm would reach.

“Hang on, pal. The boss’ll clue us in.”

“There’s also this,” Jacks said, holding up a circular, pyramid-shaped device no bigger than a thumb.

“I dropped this in Professor Anschwer’s library when we left to chase that robot. It registered abnormal electrical activity, specifically a scanning beam. If you care to stay, Smitty, I’d like for us to examine this thing tonight.”

Smitty grinned big and said, “I’m in, Mr. Jacks. I’m in.”

The banging at the front door was fierce. Randy galloped to it, expecting the slab to slide open automatically. The power off, the youth smacked into it with a thud. He took a moment before his senses let him find the manual override control.

Outside steamed Chief Inspector Sanger. One meaty hand was raised, his mouth poised as if to strike high C.

“What the hell is going on? Damned elevator’s out, no lights in the halls, and this bloody door ... what’s with you?”

Rubbing his forehead Randy said, “Aw, skip it!”

Randy muscled the door back then stalked off to the electrical lab.

"What the hell's going on here?"

On tiptoes Maggie ran to the top of the curved stairway, glared down at the police chief.

"Blast it, you big ape, a girl's trying to get some rest!"

Sanger harrumphed then followed Randy's path to the lab. Inside were Smitty and Jacks working over oscilloscopes and computers; Randy, who watched the scientists intently; and Spears, who was giving it his all to comprehend the only reading material in the room, a technical manual.

"Morning, Inspector," Jacks said more cheerfully than he should have considering he hadn't slept in nearly twenty-four hours.

"Yeah. Hey, Smitty! Who do you work for, Jacks or the city?"

Smitty slid over to Sanger on aircushions, drenched in humility.

"Why, the city, of course, Chief. And how better to serve the city than to work diligently beside this country's greatest scientific mind and solve these ghastly killings." This last uttered in mock conspiracy.

"All right. That's enough. Whatcha got?"

Jacks, pushing aside his work, said, "Plenty."

"Well, put it in a shoe box, boss. Girl's awake — thanks to certain loudmouths — and she's asking for you."

Maggie stood in the doorway in a very commanding way. There were times she was to be obeyed even before Jacks. This seemed to be one of them.

Jacks joined her in the doorway.

"She decent?"

"I'm no judge of that."

Jacks smiled, pecked her forehead.

"On my way!"

Jacks pushed open the door to the guest room. It slid heavily with an audible whoosh, pulling light in from the hall. Rebecca, covers to her throat, lay deep in pillows, head turned, eyes focused on nothing in particular.

As Jacks entered she came around, straightened herself, and let the covers fall slightly. Sleep clung to her face like a soft mist.

"I want to say I dreamed last night. But I don't think I did."

Her words came out silky, sleepy.

"No."

Jacks pulled a chair to her bedside, took her soft, warm hand.

"I slept so long. Almost like I couldn't wake up."

"I gave you something to make you sleep. You had quite a shock."

Rebecca talked for a few minutes about how well liked her father was, and how respected. She never knew him to have enemies, or to have done anything to warrant an attack on him. She was confused and, Jacks thought, about to go into shock again. He decided to focus her attentions.

"What was your father working on before he died?"

"Well, he put his latest project aside to concentrate on the robot killings. He didn't understand how they were pos-

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sible. He was convinced that someone had to be behind it."

"I think he was probably right. What was this latest project that he put aside."

"I guess I can tell you." The girl suddenly became secretive, pulled Jacks closer.

"The Army," Rebecca said, "had developed a bio-mechanical brain. The next step in computer technology. The brain would actually think and reason, as well as calculate at a phenomenal rate. Father consulted with them, and then was charged with finding a cheaper, more effective way of creating additional bio-computers."

"Expensive, huh?"

Rebecca nodded, her nightshade locks dropping over a bare shoulder onto her bosom.

"Had he," Jacks said, "told anyone he was dropping the Army's project to start his own investigation."

"No one, not even me. But I could tell. Every day I saw him hunkered over his examining tables, searching through thousands of circuits and gears. He was astounded by these murders, and obsessed with stopping them."

Jacks leaned back into the chair, mind racing. Anschwer had been murdered for what he was doing, or for what he was capable of doing. Someone was afraid Anschwer would either discover the man behind these crimes or a way to prevent further killings. And Jacks, now at the center of attention, would be target for more attempts

on his life.

"I want you to stay here for a while. Until we can wrap this up. You'll be safe."

"Don't leave me, please."

"I must. I think I have a clue."

Jacks pushed back the chair then left, swinging the bedroom door fully shut behind him.

Sighing, Rebecca said, "No, Mr. Jacks. You haven't a clue at all."

At the door, and ever at the ready, stood Randy, coats in hand.

"Now where are you off to?"

Smitty piped up, face eager and bright.

"Got a line on that scanner signal finally. We think we can trace it to its source!"

"Oh," Sanger spurted indignantly, "and I suppose you're going off with Jacks, too. Just forget that the rest of my department might need you."

"Well, Chief ..."

"Aw, forget it. Get out of here, all of you."

"Listen, Chief, while we're ..."

Jacks stopped cold, head jerked left and down. Under the door oozed a white putty-like substance, squishing and squeaking. It sealed the door airtight.

"Wha's dis?"

Jacks' nose twitched in overdrive. He turned his head in every direction jack-rabbit fashion. Then he bolted for the chemical lab.

The air was suddenly getting thick,

and everything began taking on a pink color. The men collapsed, coughing and gagging convulsively. Smitty tried to rise above the fumes but lost control of his shoe lifts and dropped heavily to the floor. Spears, a mountain of will, shoved his gargantuan boots in Jacks' direction until he too succumbed to the pink mist.

Chapter Six

THE ZOMBIE HORDE

RANDY OPENED HIS EYES and screamed. Before him stood a faceless man, all features wiped clean from forehead to chin. The beast grabbed at Randy, held him by the shoulders. It made a mumbling sound, urgent and fierce as it shook the boy hard.

Smitty had awoken now and turned to help Randy. But before he could attack, the strange beast ripped off its faceless face to reveal Sam Jacks.

"Gosh, boss, you sure had me going!" Randy exclaimed, still panting.

"It's a new gas mask I've been working on, junior. Filters out most particulates down to the sub-atomic level."

"Scary as hell, too," Smitty observed.

"It has that advantage. Just wish I could have gotten to it sooner. Was knocked out for a few minutes myself."

Randy jumped to his feet, screamed, "Miss Anschwer!" and flew up the

stairs.

Sanger, groggy and eyes bloodshot red, pulled himself erect.

"No more, Ellen," Sanger mumbled, still dazed. "I'm too old for these games."

Jacks shook Sanger by the shoulders until the man's senses returned.

"Huh? Oh, Jacks. How long were we out? I suppose someone's been killed or ..."

"Kidnapped!" Randy cried from the top of the stair. "They got Miss Anschwer!"

Jacks turned to look at Spears peacefully sleeping on the carpet.

"We'd better wake up this hulk. We're going to need him."

Randy stayed behind to care for Maggie and to man the radio. Smitty went back to headquarters. There he would help triangulate off the scanner signal in hopes of positively identifying its origin. In a grand harrumph, Sanger agreed to send officers to investigate the MechCorp Distributors shipping records.

Accompanied by a barely conscious Spears, Jacks took to the airplanes in his bubbletop. Speeding up to the fast lane Jacks set the autopilot for cruising. Their destination was two hundred miles out of town, up into the surrounding hills.

"Ya know, Mr. Jacks, I ain'ta feelin' too good. I don't tink dis air trip was such a hot idea right after being dropped by dat pink mist."

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"Take it easy, big fella. You've got bigger lungs, so's you swallowed a lot more than the rest of us. Give it a few more minutes, you'll be all right."

For all of his monstrous size and strength, Spears looked more like a sick kitten than the deadly giant he was. Jacks smiled softly then turned his attention to the ground below. The height of the buildings had gradually decreased until now there were few higher than ten stories. To the west and barely visible even at this altitude was the MechCorp building. Beyond that were wheat and corn fields, lakes, streams, and Ring Park, which encircled the entire city. Cartwright Hills, where the robot parts companies were, lay far beyond.

The radio squawked with Randy's voice.

"Sam Jacks. Come in, Sam Jacks."

Jacks pressed a button on the joy stick to answer.

"Go ahead, kid."

"Boss, I've got ..."

"... Give me that!" Sanger's voice growled over the radio. "Jacks, my boys just called in from MechCorp. Seems every one of those logic circuits were manufactured by an outfit called Microelectronics, Limited. Head guy's name is Gregor Ithalyps, but he claims every one of his chips were good. Guess you'd have to expect that."

"I'd've been surprised if he hadn't said that. I'm heading in that direction now, Inspector."

"Want some back up?"

"I'll call in if anything turns up.

How're you coming on finding Miss Anshwer?"

"No luck so far. There were some witnesses outside your apartment saw a couple of goons in grey shirts dragging off an unconscious girl, but the trail ends there. They had a flier, though. We're trying to trace it."

"Don't think you'll have much success, but good luck anyway. Jacks out."

Spears stirred some.

"Don't look too good for da lady, do it?"

"Actually, Spears, I think she's safe for the time being. Whoever's got her wants to keep us jumping — and guessing."

Jacks flew for thirty minutes before he checked in with Smitty. The police scientist had been riding herd on a dozen machines, tracking the movement of Jacks' flier and coordinating it with the backtracked scanner signal. Finally, as Jacks closed on the hills, Smitty positively identified the source of the signal as the Microelectronics plant. The news, Jacks thought wryly, came as no surprise.

Jacks set the bubbletop down outside the plant's main entrance. Spears managed to pull himself out of the flier and follow Jacks into the building.

"Say, wha's wit da bag, Mr. Jacks?"

Jacks walked on, pretending not to hear. He turned into a corridor, stepped past a nonplused receptionist, and into the main circuit assembly room. One hundred white-smocked workers, all wearing surgical masks and gloves, hunched over shiny steel tables finger-

ing electronic components. Silver identification badges dangled from the left breast panel of each smock. Few workers looked up from their chores, and those only to gawk at Spears.

At the far end of the clean room were doors that whooshed aside as Jacks approached. Beyond lay another room, replete with white-garbed workers and steel tables. Another door opened into the company warehouse, an arid, slightly breezy cavern of a room.

"Hey, you!"

Two men in blue overalls flashing gold badges approached at a run. They slowed a bit when they got a clear look at Spears.

"We're not open to the public," the first man said, his tone now noticeably less hostile.

"Where's Gregor Ithalyps?" Jacks inquired.

"He's upstairs in the main offices. Look, really, you shouldn't be here."

A jolt rocked the wall behind Jacks, splashing orange sparks ten feet high. Jacks rolled aside, Spears at his heels. The two blue-suited men looked around dumbly just before a second blast seared them.

Jacks spotted the shooter, two stories up on a catwalk. Jacks and Spears dodged out from behind a palette of boxes, raced along the outer wall to the assembly room. Perforating blasts gave chase along the wall dashing colorful fire where ever they struck.

Leather soles on steel echoed from above. The shooters reached another vantage point and opened fire again.

The new blasts cut off Jacks and Spears from the loading platform exit, toward which they had been heading. Now they doubled back, ducking in and out of isles of boxes.

Every shot brought a new fire to the warehouse. Soon the building would be in flames. Jacks had to either kill the shooters or move the fighting outside.

Ahead sat a forklift. Jacks turned to Spears, motioned for them to separate. Amazingly, the brute understood at a glance what Jacks was to do. The man obviously became super alert during times of extreme danger.

The shooters concentrated their fire on the bigger target, now running to the far end of the warehouse.

Jacks bolted from his place of concealment toward the forklift, hopped on, fired it up. The engines whined as air forced its way from underneath the machine. Hearing the noise, the shooters returned to Jacks. But it was too late.

Jacks threw the throttle forward. The lift lurched and dove for the outer wall of the assembly room. The colliding steel screamed beneath the force of the impact, opening a man-size hole in the wall. The assembly workers, scattered from the sound of shots, had left the room beyond empty.

Jacks piled into the hole, raced through the assembly rooms and out into the corridor. Thundering footfalls followed. Jacks ducked into a small room, waiting for his pursuer. As he passed, Jacks jumped the man and

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threw a twisting headlock about his neck.

"Dis is no time for foolin' around, Mr. Jacks!" said the headlocked Spears.

More footfalls echoed down the corridor. Three men rounded a corner. Each was dressed in grey shirts and loose fitting trousers. Three more men, dressed exactly the same, appeared at the door of the main assembly room. Every man of them brandished an electric blaster.

Jacks pulled at Spears and rolled back into the small room along the corridor. Another door opened into a stairwell. Jacks and Spears took to the stairs, racing up several flights. At the fourth stairwell landing, Jacks paused.

"Spears, listen. We've only seconds." Jacks dug into the pouch he had been carrying and pulled out a handful of blue pellets, barely an inch long and oval in shape. "Take these and at every chance you get force one down the throat of each of those men dressed in grey. Now don't argue! We'll split up here."

Jacks shoved the pellets into Spears' hand then pushed the big man through a door just ahead of three shot blasts. Jacks whirled, drove up the steps.

Two flights higher, Jacks turned through another door and into a suite of executive offices of ultramodern curved plastic furniture and shiny walls. Footfalls clattered at his heels.

The well dressed occupants of the offices started at Jacks' arrival then screamed as flames of orange and yellow blasts followed him in. Everyone

dove for cover except Jacks who carelessly burst through every door in front of him.

Jacks turned right through one door, then right through another. A left turn brought him to a large conference room. Leaving one of the double doors open, he slipped back of the second door and waited.

A string of grey-shirted men raced into the room toward the next exit. Jacks grabbed the last man, slipped a pellet into the man's mouth, then ducked back out of the room.

Jacks ran down a short corridor, turned a corner, and slipped into a coffee room. A grey-shirted man busied himself searching a closet. Jacks jumped him from behind, threw a pellet down the man's throat, then pushed him into the closet. Ignoring the man's fallen blaster, Jacks exited the coffee room.

In the hallway Jacks bumped into two more grey-shirted men. He jumped at them, knocking their blasters away. The first man to his feet punched Jacks hard in the stomach. The second man came with an uppercut. Jacks swung back, connecting with hard jaw. Bringing his knee up, he jammed into soft stomach. Both grey-shirted men jerked back.

Jacks jumped the first grey shirt, sending a pellet down the man's throat. The second man piled onto Jacks, wrenching him away from the first man. On his feet again, Jacks took two blows before returning one of his own.

Jacks swung again, and then again.

The grey-shirted man jerked back with each jab but stepped forward just as quickly to receive another.

This man, like the one outside Professor Anschwer's apartment house, could take a lot of punishment.

Finally dazed, the grey-shirted man dropped to the floor and Jacks fell onto him, out of breath. Carefully, Jacks turned the man's head. Just as he suspected. A pulsing red mind control device.

Jacks took another of his pellets and fed it to the grey-shirted man. Almost immediately the man's eyes frosted over, his limbs became stiff, and his skin cold to the touch.

For a moment, the only sound Jacks could hear was his own breathing. In the quiet, no one had ventured into the hallways, giving Jacks a moment to collect himself.

Shortly, Jacks pulled himself up and turned, ready to find Spears. At the end of the corridor were three more grey-shirted men, blasters leveled. Jacks' mind raced. Two steps right was a door. Four steps left was another hall. Jacks wondered if he had any more strength in him.

Suddenly, a growl rose from behind the three men. They whirled and were scooped up inside giant arms that squeezed them together like a grape press. Blasters clattered to the floor.

"Dish out some a dem blue chips, Mr. Jacks, den let's blow."

No other words were ever more welcome to Sam Jacks.

He leapt forward, tossed pellets

down each man's throat, then stepped back as the cold things did their work.

"Got me 'bout a dozen of 'em downstairs, Mr. Jacks. Stuff works like a charm. Dese should be da last of 'em."

Collecting his pouch, Jacks led Spears back down to the main level and to their car. Jacks, using a special frequency, called Smitty.

"That's fantastic," exclaimed Smitty over the radio. "But how did you knock out all of those zombies?"

Jacks explained that he had developed the pellet to induce temporary cryogenia. Normally, the drug would be used in extreme emergencies when medical attention was too far away to save a dying accident victim. Jacks simply improvised a new use for tablets, hoping the drug would not only immobilize the zombie men but keep their booby trapped control devices from imploding.

"Their metabolic rates," Jacks said into the speaker, "and their body temperatures will drop drastically and stay that way for twenty-four hours. That should be long enough to wrap things up."

"Sounds to me like you got things wrapped up already. We tracked the scanning signal to the Microelectronics plant. And that's where the horde of zombie men were hiding out."

"Don't forget the shipping records," Jacks reminded. "Those all point to Microelectronics, too."

"That's right. Now all you have to do is find this Gregor Ithalyps and we can put an end to the whole mess."

Jacks shook his head.

"Found Ithalyps, Smitty. He was one of the zombie men. Saw his ID badge."

Smitty came back. "So what? All that means is someone else at Microelectronics is behind the killings."

"No, Smitty," Jacks said with utter certainty. "What that means is we are definitely looking in the wrong place."

Chapter Seven

"IT'S ALIVE!"

SMITTY'S STUBBY FINGERS were a blur, furiously scribbling every command Sam Jacks now gave over the radio. Time was of the essence, Jacks said. At any moment, the heinous criminal behind the ghastly robot murders could strike again; Jacks was frantic not to allow any more killings.

Smitty acknowledged Jacks' orders then signed off. It would be two hours before the little man could get all of the materials Jacks needed, even with Chief Inspector Sanger's assistance. But he knew Jacks would take almost that long getting back from the Microelectronics plant.

Rising up on the cushion of air provided by his shoes, Smitty skated out of his office, down the corridor, and into Sanger's office. Mili Wiflin, Sanger's sizable secretary rolled her wide chair into the little man's path.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"Mili, I've no time for this today. Sam Jacks needs us!"

Adjusting the controls of his shoes, Smitty rocketed through Sanger's door, shoving the hefty secretary ahead of him.

"Blast it, Smitty, I'm on the phone with the Commissioner."

"Good. Maybe he can help us. Sam needs this list of material right away. Bring them to that address there."

Sanger studied the list, dumbfounded. A high-pitched mumble blared out of the phone he had set absentmindedly aside.

"A dozen hand held anti-gravs," Sanger read, "Four soldering rifles — and ten slabs of foot-thick ...!"

"That's right, Chief. And hurry! I've got things of my own to get. I'll meet you there!"

Smitty took to the air again and whooshed out of the room.

Scratching his head Sanger regarded the list.

"Now, what would he need with ten slabs of ... Oh my gosh!" Sanger scooped up the telephone receiver from which a din of mumbling could be heard. "Yes, sir, Commissioner. No, sir. Of course not, sir. Yes, sir...."

Spears had balked at making yet another stop but now had calmed knowing they were nearing his brother's killer. They were on the other side of the city now, just entering Ring

Park. At the horizon, Spears could somewhat make out their destination.

Sam Jacks was on the radio again.

"I suppose so, Mr. Jacks," said an official sounding voice. "The President has cleared your way."

"I appreciate all your assistance," Jacks said with some deference.

"Well I think you might run into some resistance here. Your plan won't sit well with some of our research boys."

"Can't be helped, General. Jacks over and out."

Spears sat bolt upright in the car seat, bumping his head on the bubbletop.

"Look, Mr. Jacks!"

Spears pointed to a car passing slowly in the opposite direction. Inside the auto were two grey-shirted men and Rebecca Anschwer. The girl, having spotted Jacks, pressed against the window, waved excitedly.

"Turn dis buggy aroun', Mr. Jacks! We got 'em!"

"The killer's just trying to steer us away, Spears. The girl will keep."

Spears grabbed at Jacks' arm.

"Not on your life, brudder. We get the girl."

Jacks eyed the brute carefully. He meant what he said, but so did Jacks.

Jacks swung the aircar around and paced the other car, neither gaining nor falling back. He used the radio to alert Randy to their position, ordering the youth to take the coupe and join the pursuit. Another call, this one to police headquarters, got a squad of patrol cars into the area.

"There," Jacks said, pointing out three airborne patrol vehicles. "The girl's got an army to look out for her. Now, do you or do you not want to catch your brother's killer."

The man-mountain weighed the situation deeply. Thoughts, in huge block letters, were visible in the giant's eyes. Eventually, Spears agreed. Jacks turned the aircar around and sped on to their destination.

Fort Bexter grew on the horizon as they approached. Jacks dropped casually to the ground, rolled up to the main gate. He was expected and escorted in by three MP motorcycles. A few minutes later they pulled up to a huge Quonset-like structure. General Topajian was waiting for them.

"Still not sure what you have in mind, Mr. Jacks," the man said from behind braids and stars. "But if the President says okay, then it's a-okay."

Jacks shook the man's hand curtly, thanked him.

"My men?"

"Inside."

Jacks followed the General, who followed the MPs, into the building. Pomp, thought Jacks. No time, damn it.

Jacks pushed past the military men, jogging down a hallway. Turning the corner Jacks saw Smitty waiting at the far end. Behind the little man were double metal doors, sealed hydraulically. A portal of thick, slightly green glass, punctured each door. A photo-

The Whirling Metal Death



electric retina scanner clung to the wall.

Sanger came up to the group now carrying a box of tools and several anti-grav units.

"All set, Jacks. You better know what you're doing, 'cause my rump's in a sling with the Commissioner."

Ignoring Sanger's bluster Jacks said, "Need in."

With a nod from the General, an MP stepped up to the retina identification scanner, making his eyes wide for the device. A thin red beam eased out of the unit into the MP's eye. For a moment all seemed well. Then suddenly the beam flared hot red and thick. The MP jumped back, screamed, and covered his face.

"I'm blind! I'm blind!" the man cried, writhing.

Stepping over the fallen man, Jacks slapped a square of green metal to the scanner. He grabbed the MP, dragged him back out of harm's way. With a burst, the scanner popped from the wall, sparks and miniature lightning bolts shooting from its wiring.

"It knows we're here!"

"It?" the group said in unison.

Jacks muscled the double doors open. He moved unhesitatingly into the anteroom then, through another set of doors, on into the main lab.

There before him sat a monstrous machine of fearsome design. It was a hodgepodge of machine parts and smaller robots. Metal arms waved wildly, lights flashed chaotically. Even now the larger machine was adding smaller ones to its construction, swal-

lowing them whole as a boa does mice. At the steel beast's center was a glass bubble, filled with an undulating green mass. Sparks danced around the mass; occasionally portions of the blob would light from within like a compact thundercloud.

In one corner, hacked and bloodied lay three men in what had once been white lab coats. Another man, alive but terrified, cringed behind a desk, transfixed by the mechanical danse macabre.

"What in the name of heaven?" The General muttered theatrically.

The men had crowded in behind Jacks at the doorway and could see for themselves a nightmare come to reality.

Deadly pincers and scalpel sharp steel waved erratically around the room creating a circle that would be fatal to enter. Jacks and his group stood just outside the reach of the thing, but not for long. The mechanical beast busied itself applying casters from captured cart.

"Stop it!" exclaimed the trapped scientist, his mind in agony. His mind, utterly terrified and confused, had been betrayed by a thing he believed could never be harmful. "Kill its power before it becomes mobile!"

Attached to the right wall behind a fallen bookcase was a metal case.

"There's the control box," an MP spurted as he grabbed tools and gloves from the box Sanger carried and leapt inside the deadly circle.

"No wait!" Jacks cried.

Too late. The soldier, in heroic fashion, threw himself onto the box, tore open the cover. With insulated gloves and thickly padded wire cutters, the brave military man attacked the multi-colored, wormy innards of the control box. As he labored, an electrical tendon began to work its way loose, unseen by the officer.

"Blast you, man. Get out of there now."

"Almost got it, Mr. Jacks," came a valiant reply.

But the MP was wrong. The loose electrical tendon wrapped itself slowly around the man, twirling about his legs, stretching up to his chest. Suddenly, he became aware of his danger. He jerked and spun away. The tendon tightened, fully restraining the man. The head of the thing, bare and alive, plunged into the man's chest. A sickly, searing squawk mingled with inhuman screams of horror and pain. In an instant, the brave man was dead, fried from the inside out.

"Too late! It's too late for all of us," Jacks cried, running from the room.

Shocked, the group of men stood dumbly, uncertain of what to do next.

Three floors below, an MP rushed ahead of Sam Jacks, who had dropped his pretense of cowardice, a threadbare act for the killer computer's benefit. Weaving through complicated corridors and rooms they soon came to a set of doors, the construction of which rivaled the complicated entrance to the room

that housed the killer computer.

The MP said, "This is the place you want, Mr. Jacks. Don't see how you can get in, though."

Not pausing to explain, Jacks attacked the door's retina scanner with another square of green metal. After the explosive did its work, to the amazement of the MP, Jacks kicked open the door and ran inside.

This room was relatively small, and very cluttered. A man, shocked into immobility, sat behind a regulator panel at the back of the room. Shelving lined the walls where ever panels of dials and lights did not. A few servo 'bots lay silently in the corner.

Behind the man was a series of thick metal casings that pierced the ceiling. Undoubtedly, Jacks thought, the housing for this building's power supply.

He moved toward the things, which were twice a man's thickness, studying them under an intense glare.

"What's the meaning of this?" The room's occupant finally said.

Jacks ignored the man, but the MP answered, "This is Sam Jacks, Professor Lipton."

"I don't care what his name is, he must leave. There are very delicate balances to be kept here."

Jacks whirled on the man.

"I don't give a damn for your balances. There's a machine upstairs that's killing people."

Jacks dug into his pouch, unaware that Lipton, dumbstruck, was babbling.

"Impossible," Lipton muttered. This professor was not a young man, to be

sure, and he seemed to be getting older by the second. "He was created to serve mankind. To replace mindless, antiquated robots with thinking machine-beings. Here, what are you doing?"

Jacks had squeezed out a thick red gel across all of the wire casings and was now applying a small electrical device. Lipton grabbed at Jacks, twisted him away from the casings.

"You can't do that! You must be mistaken!"

Apparently from nowhere Jacks produced an anti-grav disc and pushed it to Lipton's stomach. Throwing the switch, Lipton shot up fifteen feet and stuck to the ceiling.

Jacks stepped to the door. He fingered a control device.

"Stop. You're killing it," Lipton howled. "Don't you realize, man, it's alive!"

The MP, youthful and obedient, played out a moral dilemma on his pimply face.

"I don't know," the boy said, "about leaving the Professor up on the ceiling like that."

Before Jacks could reply the red gel along the casings ignited. The air sizzled, acrid fumes filled the room.

With a crack, one of the servo 'bots bolted from its perch and attacked the red gel, slapping and scrapping to remove the substance. Jacks gave up a wry smile as again he fingered the control device in his hand.

"Are you judge, jury, and executioner, Mr. Jacks," Lipton yelled from above. "Have you been elevated to

godhood."

"Don't give me that guff, Professor. I'm doing what I have to do."

"Don't you understand that we're dealing with something beyond our laws. We're redefining life, damn it all."

The servo 'bot was now fully engulfed in red gel. It danced wildly, arms whipping about like a crazed marionette.

Every light in the room jerked on and off. The red gel had nearly eaten its way through each casing.

"What do you propose, Professor," Jacks called above the din of whining motors, klaxon, and electrical sparks. "Bring that... thing... in front of judge and jury and try it for its crimes?"

"Yes, if that's what it takes."

"You give that thing back its power and it'll kill like never before."

"And if we don't supply it with power in a very few minutes it will die and you will have killed it. Listen to me. I have an experimental battery pack that will give the machine just enough power to keep the living cells of its computer brain alive. It won't be a danger after that."

In a final burst of flame and red flashes, the casings gave way. Wires, eaten completely through, popped and splattered yellow electricity as they dangled, dying. Every panel in the room was now colorless.

Jacks looked from the casings to Professor Lipton. His roundish jaw suddenly rigid, his mind whirling with thought, Jacks made his decision.

Smitty was the first to make a tentative step into the computer's room. The arms of the frightful machine had collapsed awkwardly. A portion — it might have looked like a head, being perched at the very top of the creature — lolled to one side. The bubble of green gelatin no longer sparked, and only twice now had been lit from inner lightning.

Spears took a step to join Smitty then stopped short.

Sam Jacks, dragging Professor Lipton, dashed into the room.

"Well, it looks like it's all taken care of, Jacks," the General proclaimed with groundless pride.

Turning his back to the military man, Jacks addressed Professor Lipton.

"Save it if you can."

Sanger blew. "Are you nuts?!"

Jacks nudged the men back to the doorway. Lipton stepped cautiously into the room. He could see the bloodied bodies of his colleagues in the corner. Jacks, he knew, had told the truth. Yet still the scientist could not believe the machine capable of murder.

Lipton held a small metal box no bigger than an overnight suitcase. Two coiled black cords protruded from the top of the box. Lipton set it down and extended the cords up to the glass bubble. Attaching the brass ends of the coils to two different nodes growing out of the bubble, Lipton stepped back to watch the results.

A light flashed from within the green gelatin, then another. Lipton turned and smiled at Jacks. Suddenly, the gelatin lit fully green, bright and an-

gry. The computer's arms, once lifeless strips of metal on the floor, jerked reflexively from the infusion of power. In an instant, one razor-sharp talon thrust itself into Lipton's bowels, spun him upside down, and collapsed again. The man never even had a chance to scream.

Chapter Eight

SETTLING ACCOUNTS

RANDY SAT BESIDE Rebecca's bed, fretting needlessly over the woman.

"Honestly, I'm fine, Randy."

"Can't be too careful," the boy enthused.

Sam Jacks stepped into the room, smiled at the tableau.

"Give the girl a break, junior."

"Well, you weren't there, now were you, boss," Randy said with uncharacteristic assertiveness. "I mean chasing down Miss Anschwer here and pulling her from the aircar when those zombies suddenly keeled over was something I had to do."

"I guess you are right, Randy. I'm sorry."

"I mean she had quite a shock. Only right she should rest."

"Well she," Rebecca said, tossing aside the covers and dropping shapely legs to the floor, "would like to hear what happened."

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Sanger, Smitty, and Spears all piled into the room then and assailed Rebecca with the story. Eventually, all the odds and ends came together into a tale that somewhat resembled the truth. At least Rebecca seemed satisfied.

Maggie, however, was a different matter.

"If Lipton had it all figured, how come he died?"

Jacks explained, "Lipton had been right. The power was not enough to sustain the machine's activity. But the sudden jolt of electricity created an involuntary response. Sort of a muscle spasm. Poor fool was just in the wrong place."

"On that list of yours," Sanger offered, "you wanted ten slabs of Teflon sheeting. Why?"

"Simple enough really. Teflon is a very poor conductor of electricity. While you were busy removing the bodies, the boys and I, and the Army Corps of Engineers, built a Teflon room so even if Lipton's calculations were off, the computer wouldn't be able to

tap into any outside electrical supply and resume its killings."

No one understood why the bio-computer had taken to killing.

"The Army programmers will have to figure that one out," Jacks said. "My theory is that it was attempting to discredit present technology in the hopes of being given a role in the redesigning of all robots. Who knows what the thing could have done from there."

"Geez, premeditated murder," Sanger said, shaking his head. "It really was thinking."

"That's right. It could tap into any electrical source, turn on any device, redirect any signal — all with the speed of thought. That's how I figured out Microelectrics was not where we'd find our answers. Everything pointed there. It was too neat, planned. That was proof enough that a thinking being was behind it all."

"And the murders ...?" Rebecca asked.

Jacks suggested, "Create an uproar, speed its plan along. Who knows, maybe the thing just went mad."



"Hey, Jacks, you're planning on this thing go to trial, aren't you?"

"Depending on how well the legal system holds up under all of this, Inspector."

"Yeah, well, I'd better get down to its cell and read the Civil Rights Warning to it. Don't want that thing loose on a technicality."

Sanger bowed out of the room and Smitty followed. No rest for the weary, he said.

"Danks for ev'ryting, Mr. Jacks. An' any time ya need some help ya call me."

The two men shook hands, Spears taking care his mitt did no damage. Maggie then pushed him and Randy from the room, despite the boy's protests.

Rebecca said, "I appreciate everything you've done for me, Sam. I wish I knew how to thank you."

Jacks stuck a friendly hand out and said, "No need. Glad to help."

A furrow creased Rebecca's brow. She playfully slapped the hand away, threw her arms up around Jacks' neck, and then, on tip-toe, kissed him.

At the door, Maggie tugged at Randy's sleeve as the boy shook his head. "Well, sister, there you go," Randy said, filled with dejection. "What dumb luck I got. I do all the rescuing, and he gets all the kissing!"

THE END

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