

III

When I wake up, I hear a familiar voice.

“Look out road, look out trees, we’re going to school!” It’s my son, Nimitz. Out of the corners of my eyes, I can see him trying to read a story to Mom and Dad. His favorite story.

Where am I...? I’m in bed but it doesn’t feel like my bed. My eyes move upward. The ceiling looks too fancy to be the one in my apartment.

My body feels... funny. Can’t describe it yet. I take a deep breath—the air smells really clean. Then I remember being on top of a haywire robotic spider just as a Mach 6 bullet killed it—

My God, the shockwave. I survived it. But how...?

“Nimmy, look! Mommy’s awake,” says my Mom. Tears fill my eyes as Nimitz rushes the bed and tries to give me a hug.

“Mommy, you’re okay!”

How did I hear their voices? I remember something else. I couldn’t hear the rail gun bullet splatter Arnold the spiderbot’s brain box—I thought my eardrums ruptured at the same time.

“Yes, my little admiral, I think I am,” I say. Mom and Dad are now standing next to my bed. Mom plants a quick kiss on my forehead then starts to weep a little.

Dad’s eyes are watery, too. “Hi, princess,” says Dad. “You’ve been sleeping a while.”

“How long was I out?” I ask.

Nimitz starts to count his fingers then stops. “I can’t count that high, Mama.”

Mom and Dad glance at each other. “Nimmy, Grandpa and Mommy need to talk. Let’s go outside and walk around, okay?”

“Okay.” Nimitz gives me another hug. “I have so much to tell you! I’m much better at reading lips now.” Nimitz giggles.

Mom squeezes my hand softly then playfully pushes Nimitz out the room.

I now notice the regular beep of the heart scanner remotely monitoring my vitals. “Sam, it was a brave thing you did out there,” says Dad. “But we almost lost you.”

Dad tells me the price I paid. A month in a coma. Several surgeries mostly experimental—

“But what about my team? They saved the others, right?” I ask.

The expression on Dad’s face, though, tells me I’m being too hopeful. I feel tears in my eyes again.

Dad says that Arnold killed almost all of Bear team, and severely injured everybody else. I would’ve been the latest casualty had it not been for the specialists and the tech Waveform Industries brought in to save me.

Advanced alloys grafted to my bones. Nanotechnology used to minimize brain damage and skin trauma. For most of my coma, I was submerged in a womb tomb, or a chamber that mimicked where human embryos live during pregnancy, to accelerate the healing of my body including my shattered eardrums.

Dad was just as frightened as I am now discovering how Waveform kept me from dying.

“I don’t know why, Sam,” says Dad. “But the company did everything to save you. I’m thankful, but I hope there isn’t some other agenda going on here.”

Dad then holds up a mirror to my face. “You look the same to me,” he says. “But with all the damage you took, no scars. Maybe you’ll notice something I didn’t.” I thought I would catch an odd deformity hiding in my cheekbones or something—

But, no, it seems to be the same baby face staring back at me my whole life... Then I do notice something. In the mirror, off in a corner, I can see the words of a safety poster tacked on a bulletin board... through the window of my room roughly twenty feet away. I focus more and can clearly see the backwards letters of the poster’s fine print. Before, I would’ve needed my glasses to make out something so small so far away.

I turn around to see if I can read the fine print through my room’s windows... and I still can—COPYRIGHT WAVEFORM INDUSTRIES. No trickery in the mirror—my eyes are better than before the incident.

When I look back at my Dad, who starts to move the mirror away from me, I notice something else in the reflection. My eyes shimmer a very unnatural blue hue.

Dad notices, too. “What have they done to my daughter...?” gasps Dad.

While I was being cyberpunked, I missed the group funeral for the dead members of Bear team. So I pay my respects later by visiting their graves and their families. I also check on the injured survivors. Their injuries aren’t as drastic as mine, but all of them spend several weeks on the mend in the same hospital. And for those of us who survived, not only is there a lot of pain but a lot of questions.

When I’m ready, I review video footage of the rail gun snapshot that killed Arnold. That was hard to watch. At the point the kinetic kill happened, the shockwave tossed my lifeless body like a doll with limbs bent at disturbing angles. I should’ve been shredded like Arnold’s brain box but I wasn’t.

It turns out that the rail gun operator who fired the kill shot used an experimental weapon—never fired until that day—that had limited AI-capability. The rail gun itself was aware of all environmental factors and somehow nullified them, so the operator who fired the gun could catastrophically damage Arnold while not killing me in the process.

Meanwhile, no one really knows why Arnold went mad during the training exercise.

I try to ask Virginia, our robot expert.

She's relieved I survived but quickly goes all nerd herd on me since I'm asking about her work. "I don't know," she says. "Mutating code? Conflicting parameters? I would need at least a thirty percent intact brain box to even hazard a guess. It's too bad Arnold had to be destroyed. We'll never know now."

She then slips out of nerd mode. "But that doesn't really matter because you're okay," says Virginia with a teary-eyed smile. We small talk some more then Virginia tells me she can't tutor Nimitz for a few weeks because of the training incident. She has to run diagnostics on all the Waveform robots to ensure none will go haywire like Arnold did.

Without anything close to an answer, some co-workers start claiming sabotage. Maybe a disgruntled employee. Maybe a ballsy competitor. Maybe someone creeped out by robot tech.

I try not to get caught up in the hype, though. I'm more worried about the tech now caught up in what's left of me. By now, I can describe how I physically feel—lighter, maybe? How come I couldn't feel like this when I was closely watching my weight?

As I mend some more from my injuries at home (mandatory vacation), I receive a chat request from a recruiter for Husker Taske, blueberry mogul and apparent hater of AIs.

SAM: What's this about?

TASKE FORCE: Ms. Chardonnay, we heard about what happened at Waveform. Our condolences for the losses incurred by your team and our hearts go out to the families and survivors. In today's world, such a tragedy should've been prevented.

Well, Mister Recruiter had to go there...

SAM: Prevented? How?

TASKE FORCE: The man I represent believes once we relinquish decision making to machines, humanity will be overrun or worse by its creations—

SAM: Yeah, yeah, I know. Imperfect creator's paradox. I'm not some rent-a-cop, you know.

TASKE FORCE: Ah, yes. I didn't mean to insult you, but unlike you, most of the populace is enamored with the prospect of driver-less cars, hands-free dialing, and auto-aiming weaponry.

I may have been almost-killed by a rampaging robot, but an AI saved my non-robotic bacon, Mister Recruiter!

SAM: I don't think all AI is bad. It was an AI assisting a human who stopped the haywire bot.

TASKE FORCE: Perhaps. But if there wasn't an AI puppeteering the killer robot in the first place...? Makes you wonder, yes?

SAM: If there were no AIs, I wouldn't be working at Waveform and we wouldn't be having this conversation... Look, it's clear you want me to sign up with Team Taske, but I don't feel strongly either way on the issue of AIs.

TASKE FORCE: And you feel safe working for a company that creates hardware that can potentially kill you without a second thought? What about your family and others like yours? Don't they deserve a working environment that's free from such hazards for their loved ones?

Okay, Mister Recruiter, it looks like we don't see eye to eye and probably never will. I may have been put in harm's way but Waveform did everything it could to put me back together.

SAM: I'm sorry. I'll have to pass on whatever opportunities you're offering me with Taske's company. Have a good day.

This doom-and-gloom talk about AI apocalypse is too heavy for me. But one of our robots did get out of control and people died. I'll need to talk to Virginia again to see what she thinks about all this. If she thought AI-driven robots were dangerous, she wouldn't be playing around with them in the company basement with the other nerds, right?

Just as I think that—yawn, I start to feel tired, drained even. Reminds me of the days leading up to the sideways uncon against Arnold.

That's not good. Yawn.