



Chapter 4: People Don't Just Disappear

"Shane."

Kurt's voice broke into his thoughts, interrupting a mental run-through of the escape sequence for tomorrow's final test. "What?"

"Yves and I think we have a problem."

"You *think* you have a problem or you know you have a problem?" "That's just it. We aren't too sure."

"So, what is this possible problem?" Shane asked impatiently.

"You remember how Tomas asked us to let his robots train with our security guys?" "Yes."

"Well, it's been weeks now—"

"I know," Shane interjected, growing tired of this slow recital. "I watched one of the early sessions. Remember?"

"Yeah. And it was okay then. The robots were cool, Tomas was cool, and the trainers were good with it too. In fact, a lot of them thought it was great we were on the leading edge of warfare—you know, men and machines working together."

"So, what's changed?"

"It's hard to say. Tomas has developed some really incredible battlebots from those early prototypes. It's like watching every sci-fi movie you've ever seen. His 'NuMan' robots are real androids—they almost look like human soldiers, only they're bigger, incredibly fast, strong, and seem to be totally immune to bullets."

"Then our security is looking good for the future."

"Yeah, it is," Kurt said, "only it doesn't feel right. The troops are too good and they follow their own orders. Tomas says he's building them for us, the institute, but we aren't so sure anymore."

"You think he's planning a takeover?"

"We don't know. But I'm telling you he could. These things are scary beyond all belief and they have a mind of their own, or maybe it's just Tomas directing them."

"But you're not sure?"

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"We're not, but Leon is, and you know he's been one of our chief commanders on all the defensive exercises. He says we've got to act soon. So far, the robots have taken part in the exercises without any problem, but even the elite trainers from the outside world are saying something funny is going on."

Yves, who'd been standing silently beside Kurt with a worried expression, spoke up. "Leon has been warning us for some time. He's been bugging Tomas too, demanding more information and more transparency. They've had arguments about it."

Shane frowned. Leon wasn't the sort to be paranoid about things. "The robots don't have live ammo, do they?"

"No, but if they did we'd all be toast or taking orders from Tomas."

"Do you have any actual proof there's something going on or are you guys just jealous that the robots are tougher than you?"

"If we had proof, we'd destroy them now before they destroy us," Yves said bluntly. "But no, we don't have anything but intuition."

Shane thought for a moment. "You say others are concerned as well?"

"The two Navy SEALs instructors who are training us now came to Yves and I this morning with their concerns."

"Well, their spider senses are good enough for me," Shane said. "How can we disable these things?"

"Not easily, but it can be done," Kurt said. "Our concern is that Tomas has built more that we aren't seeing, so that if we move against the ones we do see, we'll get creamed. That factory of his is impossible for regular guys to get into."

"We need to talk to the Founders," Yves added. "There's a night exercise tonight. Why don't you come and see what you think before we go to them? We need your support because they won't like our concerns. You know how pleased they were to get Tomas here."

The night was overcast, the only light a slight phosphoresce from the sea that made the surf shimmer as it washed against the rocks and beach. Wearing the night-vision goggles, Shane could see the training defenders spread out across the terrain. Even Tomas's robot defenders gave off enough heat to show up. The sea gave no sign of attackers, just the usual, steady rolling swell and waves.

Time passed and the night grew cold. Even bundled up, Shane wished he'd stayed indoors and watched from the monitors. It seemed the cold was making him feel sleepy rather than keeping him sharp. His thoughts drifted to his final test, the suit escape from a sunken Ray. He went through each step in his mind, determined to be perfect when the time came.

Then the night exploded. A blaze of light blinded him and he was stunned by a deafening, screaming howl. Out of the sea and onto the island came troops, guns blazing. They seemed to leap ashore and onto the defenders before Shane got his mind around what was happening.

Fortunately, the defenders had not been lulled into sleep. They fought back fiercely. The flashing simulator lasers weaved intricate tracer patterns through the darkness and revealed more crafts landing on the beaches with troops leaping from them. They began firing the moment they landed, responding fire erupting from the beach defenders. The noise and flashing lights left Shane stunned. It had been so long since he'd attended one of these exercises that he hadn't realized how far they'd come or how realistic they now were.

The battle was short, however, and the defenders had the higher score. If this had been real, the institute and its people would have lived to fight another day.

Shane saw that Kurt was right. The new robots Tomas and his team had built were superior to those from only months ago and far superior to any human soldier. If they had a weakness, it wasn't apparent in the exercise. Even seawater didn't harm them and they bounded across the rocks on their flexible paddle feet like Paralympic athletes.

Nothing about the robots, however, suggested that they were a threat to the island or its men. Only their awesome capability made them frightening. As long as the institute was in control of them, they would make a formidable weapon against any possible adversaries.

"What did you think?" Kurt asked. He and Yves watched anxiously as Shane gathered his thoughts.

"I thought everything looked fine. Why, what did I miss?"

"It's hard to explain. Tomas controls them and they don't do anything they shouldn't, but—"

"If you can't explain it, does it really exist?" Shane asked.

"The two instructors will be here in a minute. Maybe they can explain it better than we can."

The instructors, however, were also reduced to saying it was "just a feeling." Shane frowned. He hated the phrase but had come to be wary when it was used. He could never remember having this "feeling" himself, or at least not as others described it. Over the years, though, he'd discovered that even ordinary people seemed to have this ability to know things were happening when he couldn't see anything wrong. And here were four people who he knew were *not* ordinary telling him that something was wrong.

"Have there been incidents or events that were odd on any of the other exercises?" he asked.

"Yes," Yves answered, "but Tomas said they were just due to the earlier versions being slow learners."

"This new version hasn't shown any odd behaviors?"

"No, and that's odd, don't you think? Even humans make mistakes when they're first trying something."

"Maybe, but Tomas will have taught them everything the earlier bots knew and everything he's observed in all the exercises," Shane responded.

Yves hesitated. "You remember when you created your Interview Responder and people said it was more human than you?"

Shane nodded grimly. He'd been surprisingly wounded by those jokes.

"Well, that's what we have here. Those bots are more soldiers than we are and we've been practicing with the world's best soldiers for almost a year now."

"Yves has gotten it right there," one of the instructors said. "And it's not just your institute soldiers that the bots are superior to. They're already the best soldiers I've ever seen and they've only just started."

"Then we need to get control of them in the Founders' hands," Shane said. "We can't have just one person controlling them."

"Will Tomas give them up though?"

"If he has the best interests of the institute in mind, I'm sure he'll have no objection." Shane prepared to leave, signaling the end of the discussion.

An anxious voice came across the communicators. "We have a problem." "What is it?"

"Leon is missing."

Shane and the others exchanged horrified looks.

"What do you mean 'missing'?" Kurt asked.

"He was with us in the boat as we landed but nobody has seen him since."

"How is that possible?" Yves demanded. "Everyone in the exercise has monitors all over them. Even if people can't see him in the dark, it isn't possible for the security system to lose him."

"There's no record of him from the moment his boat hit the beach."

"Then get every man and every robot looking for him now," Shane said.

"We are looking," the voice said, "but there's no sign. That's why I called." Shane muttered a curse under his breath.

"He can't have disappeared," Kurt said. "People don't just disappear."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul James is an engineer with a life-long interest in books and writing. Originally from England, he's lived near Toronto, Canada, for many years and where he hikes, runs and takes wildlife photos whenever the weather will let him. In his writing, he likes to capture the humorous side of life even when the times sometimes don't seem to warrant it. For his new series, The Modest Proposal Institute, he's returned to one of his earliest loves — science fiction.

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