

ANY ONE YOU CAN WALK AWAY FROM

"It's following us." Eric's voice was thick with melodrama and a touch of real fear. Max ignored his brother-in-law's melodramatic nature with ten years of practice, the fear was another factor completely. Not that Max felt Eric had anything to really be frightened of, but Nathan was eight and very susceptible the tone of his fathers voice.

"It's not following us." Max used the same sort of tone he would use to inform flight specialists that the bump that they had just felt on the way to orbit was complexly normal, even if it wasn't.

"Are you sure?" Sakita asked. Max was well aware just how well his sister could read him. She had learned a long time ago just how much of his life was an act. For his superiors, for his crew, even his family.

"We're well outside of the local M.I. zone." Max finally answered. "Frankly we don't matter much to them. As long as we stay out of their way, they don't give a damn about us."

Nathan, riding shotgun next to Max, twisted and squirmed in his seat, trying to turn around and get a direct look at the M.I. drone that was behind the aircar. When Nathan reached for the

buckles on his safety harness Max spoke up again.

"Not so fast copilot." Max ordered. "Always, I do mean always wear your safety harness when you aloft." Nathan pouted, but did as he was told. Max reached forward and switched a display to show the M.I. drone flying behind the aircar. Just as the camera focused on the flyer, nothing more than a desk sized spheroid, it turned and sped off into the distance.

"It's flying away." Sakita said. She reached from the back seat and tussled her sons hair, hoping to relive some of the tension in the compartment. "Perhaps it was just curious about us."

"It's about time that someone did something about those things. It's not right, or natural having machines run around like they own the place." Eric complained. Max bit back his comments. Ten years hadn't given him any real immunity to what his brother-in-law sensed as right or natural.

"Fasten your safety harness." Max told Eric, noting that Eric has once again undone them. "In my aircar we follow safety procedures at all times."

"And you're not about to let us forget that it is your aircar are you?" Eric sniped as he refastened belts back into place.

"Listen to Uncle Max, Daddy." Nathan said gravely, "He is an astronaut." It was difficult to tell from Nathan's tone if astronaut was above or below the divine, but it was clearly part of the same command structure.

"He doesn't let us forget that too." Eric grumbled under his breath. Once again Max wondered just what it was that attracted Sakita to Eric. Whatever it was, he was blind to it.

"Uncle Max," Nathan said jerking Max out of his critique of his brother-in-law's faults. "What's that?" Nathan pointed to a jagged, broken line winding across the scrub far to the south.

"That's what left of old highway eight." Max answered. "Before the M.I.'s and the war, millions of ground cars used to drive there every year."

"We have a ground car." Nathan said, the disappointment clear in his voice. "It is so two oh."

"Hey kiddo," Sakita interrupted, "There is nothing old about our car. Its last years model."

There were less than fifteen hundred aircars in the United States, but to an eight year, a ground car must seem like a horse drawn cart.

An alarm beeped in Max's earpiece, drawing his thoughts away from Nathan and groundcars to more pressing matters. Satellite reports were crawling across the aircars' GPS displays. A large number of M.I.s were moving south, towards their current flight path. Damn, flying through M.I. held territory was to invite disaster. While the Machine intelligences didn't care to harm mankind, nor did they seem to mind making them roadkill either. To make San Diego now and avoid the M.I. would mean flying into Mexican Airspace. He started his on-board systems toward getting permission to enter Mexican airspace, Not that it would likely be granted. The war of 37 had created an awful lot of bad blood between the continental neighbors.

"It's back." Eric announced, "And he brought friends." M.I. drones sped in from the North. Dozens, no hundreds of them.

"There's more," Sakita cried out pointing back east, behind the aircar. The two groups were clearly vectoring in for an intercept, Max noted. Worse yet, that intercept was going to take place right smack on top of his aircar.

"Max, why don't you get us the hell out of here?" Eric demanded.

"I can't go any further south without entering Mexican airspace." Max said, hoping it came off as a matter of fact

statement. "If we don't interfere in whatever the M.I.'s are doing we should be fine." Max didn't say that it would be hard to keep for being a nuance if he didn't know what the M.I.'s were doing. He wasn't very religious, but prayer on the option list now. Max reached over and made sure Nathan's belts were secure. If he had to taken manual control of the aircar, he didn't want his nephew bouncing around the compartment.

"What do you think they are doing?" Sakita asked as she videoed the drones closing in on the aircar.

"Maybe they're going to take over Mexico for a change." Eric offered.

Max started to reprimand his brother in law when sudden the air about the aircar was filled with bright white and yellow beams as the drones of both groups began firing at each other.

What the hell was going on? This would be as sensible as a person suddenly stabbing himself. Max would have to sort this out later, right now he had to get the aircar out of this cross fire. As he started to switch off the autopilot he was suddenly blinded by a bright flash of electric blue from outside. Max's stomach leaped to his throat as the aircar loss lift and began plummeting.

Sakita gasped while Eric and Nathan screamed as the car nosed over and dove at the hard, broken ground below. Max ignored the screaming, the ozone smell filling the compartment, the rapidly approaching ground as he tried to get control of the aircar. A quick look confirmed his worst fears. Every display and system was dark, his watch had more power than his aircar at the moment. Fear tried to push itself to the forefront of his mind, but his training was in command. Work the problem, that was his mantra of the moment. Everything else, including being scared out of his mind, could wait.

Main power was dead. Max tried to re-start the aircar from batteries, no good, they didn't have any power either. Ten seconds wasted and the aircar was still a brick pointed towards the ground. Okay, prayer was rapidly moving up the options list, but it wasn't at the top, yet.

Max reached up and yanked a Plexiglas cover away from a heavy mechanical toggle. If this didn't work, prayer was going to top the list. Max grabbed the handle and gave it a hard fast pull. Through the sun roof of the aircar Max saw the cover jettison, spinning away into the air then he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the drogue began to deploy above them.

"Hold on!" Max warned just before the parasail unfolded and bit air. The fall of the aircar was stopped with a sudden and terribly hard jerk. Max was thrown into his safety belts, he could feel his shoulders bruising up almost at once. This was not something you did for fun. But the aircar wasn't falling anymore, now it was drifting, gently, towards the ground.

"Everyone okay?" Max asked. Sakita and Eric nodded, still getting their breaths back from the terrifying fall.

"I..." Nathan started, his voice weak as he tried to hold back the tears.

"It's okay copilot." Max said, "We didn't dig any craters today." Nathan bite his lip and tried to smile. In his peripheral vision Max saw his sister started to undo her safety harness to lean forward.

"Not yet." Max ordered, holding his hand up to Sakita to emphasis the point. "The landing might get rough."

"Like that wasn't?" Eric contested.

Max didn't grant Eric an answer, he was already surveying the situation outside of the aircar. The M.I. drones that had been in the immediate vicinity of the aircar were already beating the

aircar to the ground. The terrain was littered with their husks like metal hail pounding the desert. Above them, surviving drones were firing their new energy weapons with deadly abandon. It didn't make any sense. The Machine intelligences simply were not human, they had no conceivable reason to war. They didn't even exist as individuals in any human understanding of the word.

"Is you aircar dead, Uncle Max?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah." Max replied absently, turning his attention to the ground coming up to meet them. Location, location, location, everything now depended on where they set down. The trouble was, without power, he couldn't manipulate the parasail to control their decent. It was all up to luck.

"It's not like he can't afford another one." Eric groused. Max tried to hold his anger inside and tried to tell himself it wasn't his brother-in-law's fault that he was too stupid to see that this had become a life and death situation. Max was not going to let this jealous rivalry get in the way of the first order of business, survival.

"Can you call for a rescue?" Sakita asked, with only a little quiver in her voice.

"Power is dead to everything, but after we ground we can try our phones." Max didn't add that with the M.I.'s battling overhead, no one was going to fly in to pick them up.

Max was growing very unhappy with the terrain as the aircar closed on the ground. The land here was high hills and low mountain, all of it bare of trees and strewn with boulders and rocks. He reached over and rechecked Nathan safety straps.

"Not too tight." Nathan complained.

"Sorry copilot, don't want you bouncing around here like a super-ball." Cocking his head back toward the rear he added, "Tighten up, we may roll when we hit."

May roll? They would be damned lucky not to roll. The aircar was heading towards the top of one of the medium sized hills and Max didn't trust for luck to leave them stable at the top. He reached up and readied himself to cut the parasail loose. If they did roll he certainly didn't need the lines fouling about the aircar. Not much longer now, and damn that boulder looked like it was going to be slap damned right where they were going to touchdown! The aircar hit hard, parasail landings only looked soft from a distance. Max jerked at the release as soon as he felt the slam of impact. The parasail, free from the tonnage of

the aircar continued over the top of the hill and disappeared.

For a moment Max thought that Our Lady Of Ejections had smiled on them and left the aircar stable, but then it tipped over towards the drivers' side. This ride was not over. As the aircar tipped further and further over on its driver side Max got a very good look the downhill slope stretching away from him. It looked like a very long way to roll. As he feared the aircar didn't stop as it rolled over onto the driver side, but continued on to roll onto its top. That was it, it had gained too much energy now and it was not going to stop until it smashed into a boulder or it reached the bottom of the hill.

The straps held Max securely into place as the car picked up momentum on its tumble down the hill. Beside him, Nathan began crying with terror as the world spun past the wind-screen.

The world spun about the an unstable axis outside of the wind screen. Inside small unsecured object bounced about as tiny, dangerous projectiles. Nathan's screams were almost as piercing as the rending of metal as the body of the aircar was smashed and deformed out of its' elegant lines. Max snatched a glimpse of the rear seat, thankfully the straps were holding for everyone. Max was suddenly tossed hard into his straps as the car hit a boulder with its' front and threatened to start tumbling on more

than one axis. Mac gave a short silent prayer of thanks as the side impulse dampened out and the car continued in a simple roll.

Time stretched out until it felt as though they had been rolling forever, then the car stopped and everything was quiet, even Nathan.

"We're upside up!" Max cheered. "And they say there isn't a god." Max looked down at his nephew, secured by the straps and apparently unhurt. "Safety straps are our friends." He intoned carefully to the young boy. Nathan nodded in solemn agreement.

"I thought you were a pilot!" Eric complained as he worked to unfasten Sakita's safety straps.

"Any one you can walk away from." Max replied as he undid his own safety harness. The door refused to open. Not a surprise with how badly banged up the car was.

"Uncle Max, How are we going to get out?" Nathan asked, panic edging into his voice as he discovered that his own door would not open.

"Through the front." Max answered as he slid down in his seat, bring his feet above the controls. With both feet Max kicked out swift and hard at the wind screen. He added to the numerous

fractures and cracks, but the plastic wind screen hardly moved at all. Taking a deep breath he tried again, and then again. After five blows, when Max was certain that his lower spine was going to give before the wind screen, the plastic wind screen popped out of the frame.

"See " Max said between ragged breaths, "not a problem." With more pain that he would have cared to admired, Max sat up in his seat, and climbed out on the hood of the aircar.

"Your turn." He said to Nathan. His nephew obediently undid his straps and climbed out. Max grabbed him and swung him up to the roof of the aircar. "Keep an eye out, copilot." Max then dropped to one knee and peered into the car.

"How are you two doing?" His tone showing more concern than he had revealed to Nathan.

"Banged up, but not badly." Sakita answered as Eric continued to try to get her safety strap to release.

"This damned thing is jammed!" He spat out. Max reached onto his belt and pulled off his knife and tossed it to Eric.

"Cut her free." Then he added, "Just don't cut her." Eric's look, had it been directed at the straps, would have freed his

wife immediately. Max ignore the look and stood back up looking right into Nathan's large brown eyes.

"Is Mom and Dad okay?"

Max started to make a light response, but found all he could do was nod. Then a tremor started about his knees and seemed to take all the strength from his legs. With a bit of a shudder, Max found himself suddenly sitting down, rather hard, onto the hood of the aircar.

"Uncle Max!" Nathan screamed as he leaped from the roof of the aircar to the hood. "Mom! Dad! Something's wrongs with Uncle Max!"

"Noth... Nothing's wrong Nathan." Max managed to say, just as Sakita and Eric began to climb out of the passenger compartment of the aircar and onto the hood.

"What happened?" Sakita asked.

"He just fell down. What happened?" Nathan demanded of his mother.

"I'm fine." Max insisted. "Just the post crash shakes. I always get them." He held up his hands to show the tremors he was talking about.

"I didn't know you crashed that much." Eric quipped as he jumped down from the hood to the ground.

"You're scared?" Nathan asked, his tone filled shaken faith.

"Yeah, " Max admitted, "Only a fool isn't scared, Nathan, but it's better to have the shakes after the crash than before." With a weak smile, Max reached up and ruffled Nathan's hair. Then with a deep breath Max picked himself up and climbed off the car.

"I can't call out." Sakita said as Max helped Nathan and her off the aircar. Eric open his mobile and quickly discovered he was cut off as well.

"They're jamming us." Eric accused, "Making sure we can't call for help."

"I doubt that." Max commented, "More likely they are jamming each other and we're just caught in the middle again."

"Well how the hell are we going to get picked up?" Anger and panic mixed in equal parts in Eric's voice.

"We don't." Max answered plainly, "Even if we could call, no one is going to come in an active M.I. zone." He stood and looked around at the bleak brown scrub around them. "We're on our own."

"How far is it?" Sakita asked pragmatically.

"About thirty miles to El Cajon." Max replied.

"But the car is scraped." Nathan complained. Max marveled for a moment at how much eight year old Nathan could sound like his father. Or was it the other way around?

"We do what people did before they had cars. We walk."

"Are you crazy?" Eric demanded. Max wondered for a moment if anyone had ever answered that question with a yes. "We can't walk thirty miles with these homicidal machines on the loose!"

"One, we have to cause there isn't another way out of here. And Two, if they wanted us dead they would have been all over us already. They don't care, how many times do I have to tell you that?!" More anger crept into his voice than Max he had intended. His sister had to fall in love with this spoiled idiot.

Eric started to escalate the fight, but Sakita stopped him with a touch to his chest and a look that always disarmed him.

"If we don't have a choice, then we might as well get started."

Max turned away from his moron brother in law and started trying

to pry open the rear hatch of the aircar. It took several strong tugs, but finally the hatch opened. It was more bent open than swung, but that didn't matter to Max. In a few moments he had recovered, the first aid kit and a liter bottle of water.

"Which way?" Sakita asked, it seemed that Eric was still giving him the silent treatment.

"The remains of the old interstate isn't too far south. We walk to it and follow it west."

"Sounds pretty simple."

"Navigation isn't the problem." Max informed her, "No food, very little water, " He held up the liter bottle to illustrate his point. " and we can't reach El Cajon today. So we're going to spend at least one night out here. It's going to be very unpleasant."

"Well lets not waste any more time, then." Eric snapped. Taking his sons hand he started walking. Max sighed, gave his sister a look she had seen too many times, and then the two of them followed along.

The going was not easy. The ground out here was broken and littered with stones of every size, from pebbles that made your

feet roll on the uneven ground to large boulders that caused numerous detours. The ground was rarely level, and no one had footwear for climbing and descending such grades. It wasn't long before their feet and ankles were making their complaints known.

"Mommy, my feet hurt!" It wasn't the first time Nathan had made this complaint, but it was becoming more constant. Max looked ahead of them and saw the white concrete of the old interstate a few hundred yards away.

"Okay, lets rest a bit." He called out, reminding himself that he was the only one here who had any military service. Hell even his marching days were more then fifteen years behind him. With a contented sigh, Sakita and Eric stopped and sank to the ground.

"Why are the machines doing this to us, Uncle Max?" Nathan asked, "We didn't do anything to them."

"They're just being bullies." Eric offered from flat on his back.

"Bullies care, the M.I.'s don't." Max replied, then turned his attention back to Nathan. "The machines don't care about us, Nathan. They don't hate us, or even think about us most of the time. We're like flies to them. You know that the flies are out there doing whatever it is that flies do, but unless one lands on you, you don't think about it."

"Why did we make them?"

"Well, we didn't make the current generation of machines, they made themselves." Max saw that Nathan had missed the meaning entirely.

"We made the first smart computer. It was no where near as smart at today's M.I.'s, but it could think on its' own, just like a person."

"And we should have pulled the friggin plug then!" Eric interjected.

"Some people wanted to turn it off." Max continued incorporating Eric's outburst into his narrative. "But it was decided that a computer was just like a real person, and turning it off would be like killing a real person."

"So what happened?"

"That first smart made other smart computers. At the start everyone was happy. The computers were making inventions for us and making our lives better then they had ever been. And the computers were getting what they needed to keep making themselves evolve."

"That made computers that turned around?" Nathan asked with naked confusion on his face.

"Not revolve, evolve." Max replied, "It means to make better with little steps, little changes. Animals have done this for millions of years. The horse millions of years ago wasn't much bigger than a dog, but some horses were born bigger and faster than others. Slowly horses got bigger and faster, until we got the ones we have now."

"And the computers got bigger and faster?"

"Actually that got smaller and faster." Max picked up a stone and tossed it into the gully that they were facing. "No one knew just how much the computers had learned and invented. When they started making their own areas, they had already learned more about physics and such than all the people in the world had learned in the last hundred years. By that time they could do whatever they wanted, the computers did need or want anything that people had to offer so, they pretty much stopped talking to us humans and now no one really knows what they are like."

"But you know what they are like Uncle Max. Everyone knows that 'cause of the Power-Sat." Nathan explained.

"That's enough story time." Max said, "We have to get marching again. I think we've given your old man enough of a break don't you think?" Max laughed with good nature as he got up from the ground, but it was plain that Eric did not share in the humor. Max readied himself for another salvo from his brother-in-law, but Eric simply started south towards the ruins of the Interstate.

"You could go a little easier on him." Sakita said as she fell in step with Max.

"He could go to Pic-N-Save and buy a sense of humor." Max hated that he sounded more defensive than he was.

"It's not easy on him you know, having a hero-astronaut as his sons' uncle."

"And I thought it was my boyfriends that upset him so."

"Stop it, Max!" Sakita didn't shout, but when it came to Max, she didn't need to. "Eric has got his faults, I know that and I love him anyway. What's your excuse for acting this way?"

Max started to reply, but Sakita fell back to her husband and son, leaving Max alone to think. When he got to the edge of the old and faded concrete highway he had decided that his sister was right. Yeah, Eric could be immature, but that didn't give him

licence to be a dick.

Max reached the old interstate well ahead of everyone else. He kicked at the dirt and small stones waiting for Sakita, Eric, and Nathan to catch up with him. Then he noticed the wreckage of one of the M.I. drones a few dozen yards away. He stepped carefully over to it and inspected the wreckage. The metal was twisted and melted. It had once been the shape of a football, and about three times as large, but now the front blossomed open like a flower, peeling back to just more than half the length of the drone.

"What did you find?" Nathan demanded as he ran up to his uncle, his mother and father not far behind him.

"Looks like one of the drones that zigged when it should have zagged."

"Wow." Nathan moved closer to the wreckage, eyes wide at the twisted and melted metal. "What did that Uncle Max?"

"I don't know. I don't think anyone has seen anything like that weapon."

"Blazin'" Nathan probed the wreckage with a small stick.

"Do you think it's safe." Sakita asked, the eternal maternal

edge in her voice.

"Yeah, it's pretty messed up. I'd hate to get hit by whatever sliced through it."

"Is the gun intact?" Eric said with sudden new interest. He reached down and took the wreckage away from his son. Nathan blew out a heavy sigh, but didn't whine. Max certainly liked his nephew.

"It's light." Eric commented as he peered into the blasted and burnt out front of the drone.

"The inside is pretty burnt out, there's nothing of value left." Max said.

"Easy for you to say, you're already getting a royalty." Max knew this tone from Eric all too well. Oh god, here it comes again, the money.

"Carry it with you if it will make you feel better." Max replied as he climbed back up towards the ruins of the highway. "But don't blame me when they say there was nothing to learn from it." The little family followed Max to the highway, Eric clutching his new found trophy and dreams.

"Mom, is an Uncle royalty? Like a king?"

"No, Nathan, dad isn't talking about kings, he's talking about money."

"Oh." The disappointment in Nathan's voice was all too clear. Clearly adding knight or such to the title of astronaut would have be one hell of a promotion.

"Come on kiddo." Eric called out to his son, "I'll explain it all too you." Nathan hurried to catch up with his father, but not with too much excitement.

"It's like what your uncle said, " Eric explained, "The computers invented things we never even came close to. Like the anti-grav that made the aircar fly. If someone finds something from the computers that is really cool and everyone wants, then the person who got it away from the computers gets a little money for every one that gets sold. That's called a royalty. Your uncle makes like a hundred million a year on his power sat royalty. Don't you Max?"

"You know it's nothing like a hundred million." Max snapped. He really didn't like reminding Eric how much money he made from the power satellite, why did Eric have to keep bringing it up? It was like the man wanted to be belittled in front of his own

family!

"A hundred million dollars?" Nathan said with unbelievable wonder in his voice. "There's like nothing you can't buy."

"It's not a hundred million, Nathan. I'd doing alright, but nothing like what your father thinks I'm doing."

"What is it Max? Sixty, seventy Million? That power sat is selling power to the whole eastern seaboard."

"Come on Eric, drop it." Max snarled.

"Yeah, that what's I thought, I was pretty sure it was close to a hundred million a year."

"It's fifteen, sixteen a year tops, Eric! I'm not even getting a full percent for Christs' sake!" Damn it! Was this his reward for not lording it over everyone?

"Oh." Eric drawled sarcastically, "Only sixteen million dollars a year, the poor boy doesn't even get paid a full percentage point. How do you manage to stay so upbeat? I would be so depressed that if I had gotten that screwed."

"Oh shut up." Sakita ordered. "It's bad enough we're stuck out here, I'm tired of you two fighting."

Max considered reminding his sister that he had not brought up the money issue, again, but he could tell she was in no mood for it at all. He took a deep breath, and just continued to put one foot in front of the other in the long march to El Cajon.

They marched in silence, except for running observations and comments from Nathan. Eventually even Nathan began keeping quiet as the exertion of the walk wore him down. Max watched the skies as the walked along the highway. Intermittently he caught flashes in the distance. Somewhere the M.I.'s were continuing to fight their battles. The M.I.'s sudden interest in war disturbed Max. He was certain that this could not end well. Eric looked up from his close, and pointless, examination of the M.I. drone and noticed the distant battle as well.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and all the M.I.'s will wipe themselves out." He suggested. Max seriously doubted if Eric have any concept of what it would like to collateral damage in a war.

"I guess war is a universal." Sakita remarked, with evident depression.

"I never would have figured on this." Max said, sad at conceding that war was indeed a universal. "I hoped they could have

avoided the trap of war."

"Metal or flesh, looks like we're all the same." She observed.

"But we aren't. We're so alien to each other." Max replied.

"They really are not just humans with machine bodies, but something totally new and different."

"Uncle Max, my feet hurt. Can't we please stop?"

"Not yet, kiddo. We'll take another break after we round those hills." Max said pointing to the far side of the gully. He turned his attention back to his sister, as they started across the bridge crossing the gully.

"The M.I.'s aren't even individuals."

"One big group mind, like a bug swarm." Eric interjected, speaking with an authority that he had neither the facts, nor the experience to support.

"No, not like that either. It's both and neither. A fresh identity for them, is nothing more than a new software package. For us, it's a whole new person. Always alone and never preserved"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Eric asked.

"I was born thirty five years ago, and everything I seen and done changed me into who I am today. But I can't really share that with anyone. I can tell you what has happened, and how I felt, but what you get is filtered by your own viewpoint. We simply have no way to directly experience lives and histories. They do. The M.I's create a new person from whatever they use as code. It observes the world, makes its own judgments about what things means, it is in effect as unique as you or me. Then when they want or need to learn what it know, they simple incorporate it back into their core code. It would be like if we were suddenly created fully intelligent and educated, lived our lives, and then everything we were was made part of another greater whole. So that our lives were their for anyone to learn from."

"That's not a pleasant thought. I don't like it." Eric complained.

"You're human, so am I, we can't imagine what it would truly be like to spring into being fully formed. Hell, it took us all a couple of years just to learn the most basic methods of communication. From what I learned in the Power sat, they exist in a constant boil of new personas being created and old ones being reclaimed. A ever changing, but always constant, population."

"Maybe someone didn't want to get reclaimed." Eric said as he gestured towards the distant battle. Max found he had no answer for that. But somehow he felt that wasn't the answer. It just didn't feel right.

"Do you think they bury their dead?" Sakita asked as she came to a sudden halt. At the far end of the bridge they were crossing were half a dozen M.I. drones, now sporting multi-jointed legs in very inspect like fashion.

"What do you think they want?" Eric asked.

"I don't know." Max said as he bend down and picked up Nathan. God he was tired, but he knew he was the one in the best shape to carry Nathan if they had to sprint. But sprint to where? If the M.I.'s wanted them, there literally was no where to go to.

"Let's just keep walking." Max suggested. "They may have no interest in us at all." Keeping closer together than they had for most of the long walk, Eric, Sakita and Max closed on the line of M.I. drones. The line of drones were not still. The drones moved among each other, weaving in and out like a dance. Max couldn't tell if it was random, or if there was a pattern to their movements. Like so much else about the M.I.'s he simply

didn't understand it.

Nathan whimpered softly as they approached the line. Max hugged him close.

"One thing at a time, kiddo. Don't start worrying about things that haven't happened yet." He whispered into his nephews' ear.

They were now close enough to hear the click of the metal feet of the drones on the concrete, as they moved amongst each other. Max couldn't shake the impression of glimmering sliver spiders. Why couldn't the M.I. be reminiscent of something less disturbing, like Pumas? Eric stopped several yards short of the line of drones.

"I don't like it." He complained.

"We don't have a choice." Max said as he continued to walk, at a forced even stride, towards the line. Eric's hesitation lasted for just a pace, and then he was again in step with his sister and brother-in-law.

As they stepped among the drones, all the drones stopped moving. Becoming as still as metal post-modern statues. Max held his breath as he continued to walk, trying desperately to keep his pace even and deliberate. Just as they had passed beyond the

line of drones, Max started to breath again, when one of the drones snapped out with a limb and grabbed a hold of Eric's trophy.

"Hey!" Eric shouted as he started to engage in a tug of war with the drone.

"Let it go!" Max shouted, his voice steeled with command. Something he rarely used outside of flight, and even then only in rare situations.

Eric let go, not even aware at once that he had done so. The drone to the wreckage and scuttled off with it. Eric took a single step to retrieve it when another blast came from Max.

"Leave it!" Max turned and moved quickly, carrying Nathan with him. Eric took one look at his wife, saw he had no support and angrily followed.

The three of them moved at a much more rapid pace, until a turn of the highway a hundred yards further west than the bridge, took them from view of the drones. Then Max stepped off the old highway and collapsed to the ground, taking most of the impact himself leaving little for his nephew. Eric and Sakita dropped beside him just a few moment later.

"What hell is your problem?" Eric demanded. "That was worth a fortune!"

"It was junk!" Max snapped back, holding up his index finger, indicating this was just his first point. "If they want it, they'll get and you aren't going to stop them!" Another finger in the air. "All you would have succeeded in doing would have been to get us all killed, and I am NOT going to let you do that." Max shook the two fingers and his upright thumb under Eric's face to emphasize his points.

"Don't shove your fingers in my face!" Eric shouted, his face turning red with anger. "Not you, or anyone else gives me orders!" Eric reached out surprisingly fast and grabbed Max's fingers. He started to twist the fingers to emphasize his point, but was unable to finish the twist as Max's fist smashed into his face. Eric rolled back in surprise and pain, letting go of Max's fingers. Max was on his feet in a flash, but didn't follow up in the opening.

"Come on!" Eric screamed as he got to his feet. "Let's have it out right now! I am sick and tired of you lording over everyone and ordering everyone around!"

Before Max could make a reply, verbal or physical, Nathan ran to

him crying.

"Don't, Uncle Max! Don't hurt Daddy!"

"Christ!" Eric cried. "You've got my son brain washed into thinking you're hot shit!"

"Eric, stop it!" Sakita shouted, as she got to her feet. "Just stop it!"

"Not you too! Are you ever going to take my side?"

"Grow up!" It was clear from her voice, that she had reached her breaking point. "We are in serious danger, and we are going to listen to Max because he's got the training and experience to get us through this alive."

"I was trying to..." Eric started to plead, the force daring from his voice.

"I don't care Eric. What I care about is getting Nathan and you home alive. That is all I care about." She walked over to Eric, taking him gently by the shoulders.

Eric surrendered to his wife, and sank to the ground with her. Nathan, sensing that the fight had ended, rushed over to his parents, tears streaming down his face.

Max turned from the family and walked several yards away to give them privacy. He also needed space, outbursts like that could be fatal. Not just for him, but for all of them. Max spent a considerable amount of time getting control of his emotions. Letting his rage seep away, bit by bit.

Presently the sky darkened, becoming purple with the first stars coming out, and then black as night descended. Max looked up at the sky, wishing that he was in orbit, or en route to the moon. Anywhere but here, and now.

"Uncle Max, where are you?" Nathan called out from the dark. Max turned away from his reflections and back towards his responsibility.

"I'm coming!" He shouted as he headed back.

Max walked carefully and slowly back the way he had come. A slight glow from El Cajon in the east lit the sky, but it provided no illumination here. It wouldn't take much to make a misstep and take a nasty tumble.

"Over here, flyboy." Eric called out. Max turned in the direction of the voice, and after several moments he was able to make the outlines of Eric, Sakita, and Nathan in the dark.

"If you get lost, we're all sunk." Eric added, the sarcasm thick in his voice.

"Stop it." Sakita remanded softly. Max could hear the sigh escape from Eric.

"What now?" Sakita asked her brother.

"We sleep and rest." Max answered. "Of course Eric and I will take turns keeping an eye out. In case anything breaks."

"What, women can't stand watches?" Sakita said, a real edge in her voice.

"One of us should be totally rested." Max replied. "I expect you will have your hands full tomorrow with Nathan. We haven't even come half way yet."

"Can I stay up too?" Nathan piped up. "I'm a big boy. I can watch out for the computers."

"Someone has to stay with your mom." Max replied. Nathan huffed, not fooled for a moment, but not fighting either.

"Mom, I'm hungry." Nathan said changing the subject.

"We don't have anything to eat, honey." Sakita answered softly,

trying to not sound as worried as she was.

"But I'm so hungry it's hurt!" Nathan tone promised that tears were not far off. Max had to remind himself, however brave the boy had been all day, he was still just a boy.

"Maybe your dad and me can find something to eat." Max suggested. Max got to his feet and tapped Eric softly on the shoulder.

"I don't think there's a seven eleven on the other side of that hill." Eric said as he got to his feet and followed Max into the night.

"We need to talk." Max said after they had walked a distance away from Sakita and Nathan. "We can't be blowing up at each other like that. Not if we want to get those two home."

"We? Seems I was told all we needed was you."

"You're his dad. He needs you."

"I don't think so, I'm not his hero. So don't worry, you're going to stay the rich uncle."

"Damn it." Max cursed as he reached the top of the hill. "This is not about my bank account."

"Speaking of which, how do you plan to use that to get food out here?" Max could practically see the smirk on Eric's face.

"This place only looks desolate. There's plenty of things out here. Snakes, lizards, rabbits, we'll hunt up some food. I was a boy scout."

"I'm sure they weren't happy about that." Eric quipped. "So how do we hunt this lovely meal?"

A half moon had risen, casting faint pale light on the country side by the time Max and Eric had returned. After Max once again demonstrated his eagle scout capabilities by starting a fire, they started to cook their meal of small lizards and a snake. Nathan accepted the fare much better than his mother did. But Sakita did eat the snake after only a little prompting from Max.

"This isn't a lot." Max apologized, "But it will help."

"This is blazin'!" Nathan voted.

Max started to say something, but low sounds from over the hill captured his attention. Max signaled to the other to be silent, and then he carefully made his way up the side of the hill.

From the top of the hill he could see that the sky was lit with

the reflections of distant flashes. The air shook with the rumble of explosions and fighting.

"Guess everyone studies war sooner or later." Eric said softly from next to Max. Max's heart skipped several years worth of beats as he collected himself from the surprise, of Eric's stealthy arrival.

"Looks like we're going to have to fight them after all." Eric continued.

"Good God I hope not." Max replied the winner of this fight likes us, but I'm not going to count on it."

"What can you do about it? You died in a whisper. "'cause we will lose if it comes to that."

"Then you had better hope that it won't get it. They are further ahead of us than we are of some stone age tribe." Max reasoned.

"I can grab one of those drones. If we have that weapon of theirs we have a shot." Eric countered.

"Not a chance." Max said flatly. "Our first order of business is survival."

"I'm talking about survival. My race's survival, that's worth

the risk."

"And the chance to get rich is purely a side effect." Max said sardonically.

"I don't see you giving away power for free."

Max always hated the way Eric turned arguments around into attacks. It was a very irritating trait.

"Eric," Max said as clearly and as persuasively as he could.

"If I see a chance for us to grab one and get it out of here, I will help you do it, and you can keep the royalties. All of them. You have my word on that." Max waited to see if Eric would take the offer.

"And if I think we can do it, and you don't?" Eric asked.

"Then we don't go for it. It's not worth getting Sakita and little Nathan killed over." Max could feel that his brother in law was close to accept the deal.

"Listen, " Max added, "Even if I did want you to be dirt poor, which I don't, I don't want Sakita to be poor. If I see a chance to put her and Nathan on easy street, I'll help you grab it."

"Okay." Eric agree. "But don't order me around. Treat me like

an equal, and listen to me." Max knew that what Eric was asking for was impossible in a fast and dangerous situation, but he agreed to it anyway.

"Let's head back." Max said after they shook hands, "And hope they keep their distance."

They found Sakita nearly asleep, with Nathan fully asleep curled tight next to his mother.

"Looks like we can stay put." Max said as he sat down. He looked over to Eric and added. "I'll take the first watch. You get what sleep you can and I'll wake you in a few hours." Eric mumbled an agreement, and laid down beside his wife. Max went uphill, and sat down on a cold hard boulder to start his watch.

As it came time for Max to wake Eric and go to sleep himself, he considered letting his brother-in-law sleep the entire night, but decided against it. To stay awake all night would leave him tired and his mind fogged. Not a good survival strategy. So Max woke Eric and laid himself down on the cold earth, wondering if he could get any sleep like this at all anyway.

"Uncle Max." Nathan whispered in desperation. "Wake up." Max came awake groggily. It took several moments before he was aware of where he was and what had gone on.

"Uncle Max, I think they're getting closer." Panic was edging into Nathan voice.

"Where's you dad, Nathan?" Max asked sitting up.

"He went to see what the machines were doing. But he's been gone a long time."

"He what?" More anger slipped into Max's voice than he intended.

"He said I was a big boy, and I could watch out for the machines." Nathan defended sharply.

"Damn it!" Max cursed to himself. "Yes you are Nathan, and you did right to wake me up." Max reached over to Sakita and shook her gently awake.

"Eric gone off looking for riches." He said as she opened her eyes. "I'm going after him. I'll look after him, sis." He added as he saw the anger flash in her eyes.

Max levered himself to his feet and turned to Nathan.

"Look after your mom. I'll be right back." He turned away and headed up the hill, towards the sounds of battle.

As he got to the crest of the hill, Max dropped to his knees and

approached more carefully. The sounds of the battle were certainly closer than they had been a few hours earlier. Oh, yes much closer. As he looked over the crown of the hill he could see drones fighting in a grand melee. A few fired that nasty beam weapon of theirs, but this fight seemed to be mostly about physically tearing each other into little bits of scrap.

And there was Eric, crawling on his belly trying to get close to one of the casualties. Christ, there was nothing Max could do from back here. If he called, it would only get the kind of attention he really didn't want. All he could do, was hold his breath and watch as Eric inched closer and closer to the edge of the battle.

Eric has edged to within a few yards of the battle, and had hidden himself behind a large boulder. Max doubted if the boulder hid his brother-in-law at all. He could only hope that the M.I.s would continue to ignore Eric as he engaged in his foolish quest. Max bit his lip as he saw that Eric had spotted a damaged drone on the edge of the battle.

"Wait." Max said to himself softly. "See if the battle moves away from you, first."

Eric didn't wait. He moved at a sprint, snatching the downed

drone with one hand. As he turned and ran back in the direction of the camp, three drones spun about and began to give chase.

"Let it go!" Max shouted as he watched the drones easily overtake Eric. There was never a chance that Eric was going to be able to out sprint them. Eric turned around as the drones reached him and swung the dead drone as a crude club at his pursuers. The metal body of the drone bounced harmlessly off the first one Eric struck, with a resounding clang. The Eric was surrounded by three of the drones. They didn't threaten or posture, but simply attacked, using their appendages like metal spears, stabbing Eric repeatedly.

Hating himself as he did it, Max leaped to his feet and started running down towards his brother-in-law. Eric's screams pushed that extra bit of speed out Max he dashed towards the melee.

Eric had taken several deep and dangerous stabs when Max reached him. The drones ceased all attacks as Max ran into the melee.

Eric had already passed out from shock and pain, the damaged drone rolling out from his grip. Max dropped to his knees, and in the poor light, tried to determine just how much Eric had been hurt. There was blood, and a lot of it. Eric has several deep stabs on his left leg, but none of them were spurting with

arterial power, so that was a bit of luck. The punctures in Eric's abdomen was much more problematic. He was losing blood fast, and serious infection would be a danger even if Max could find a way to stop the bleeding. Well nothing could be done about that. First things first, and then meant stopping the bleeding.

Max didn't waste any time thinking about the drones, or why they were now just standing about, immobile. A part of his mind just assumed they would recover their own and leave. Max was far too busy trying to rip clothing into bandages and cursing himself for forgetting the first aid kit to consider the issue.

"Pilot-Astronaut Maxwell Faber, greetings." The three drones intoned.

"Hello." Max replied as he continued to apply pressure in an attempt to stop the flow of blood. "Want to help?"

"Assistance is already being readied." The emotionless voices said, "Why are you interfering in the skill development? Attacking was most dangerous."

"Our vehicle was downed by your attacks on each other. We are simply trying to reach safety." The blood had made his hands wet and slippery, but Max continued to apply pressure to the wound.

It seemed that the flow had slowed, but Max couldn't tell if it would be enough.

"That was not intended. The parameters for the skill developments were lacking in their quarantine requirements."

"Skill development." Max repeated, "Warfare skills. Why are you learning them now?"

"To attack others, and defend from attack."

"Who? Who are you planing to fight with?"

"That is not known. Assistance has arrived." A large silver egg floated down out of the night sky. It touched down without sound or landing gear of any kind. The side of the craft melted open and several drones exited. The newly arrived drones moved straight to Eric and began to work on him. Max stood and wiped the blood off his hands and onto his clothing.

"You will be moved out of the area." The M.I.s informed him.

"Your presence is disrupting."

"There are two others. I have to get them." Max replied.

"Yes." Was the simple reply. Max turned and hurried back to where he had left Sakita and Nathan.

"Where's Eric?" Sakita pleaded, panic on the edge of her voice as Max approached.

"He's hurt, but he is being taken care of." Max said as he got within a few feet of Sakita and Nathan. Sakita could see the dark blood staining Max's clothes. Max watched as she teetered on panic, then got control of herself. She would fall apart later, right now she would hold it together.

"Take me to him." She said flatly.

"And we have a ride out of here. The M.I.'s wants us out of here."

"Took them long enough." Was all she said as she took Nathan's hand and followed Max back to the scene of the battle.

"Daddy!" Nathan cried out as they came close enough to see Eric lying prone on the ground. Nathan tried to break free and run to his father, but Max held him fast.

"The computers are taking care of him." Max said comfortingly.

"I think he's going to be okay."

Nathan was not completely reassured. Max had to admit to himself it was a frightening sight. Eric was still unconscious,

and now the lower part of his body was layered with a stiff foam the color of blood. Sakita took Nathan from Max, and moved to her husband. She kneeled on the ground and caressed his face while speaking softly to him.

"You must be moved." The M.I.'s droned. "You are disrupting the experience."

Several drones moved closer to Eric, and lifted him. Sakita and Nathan followed as the drones loaded him into the egg shaped craft. Max entered last, looking back at the battle field where all the drones were stationary like a metal plants in a garden.

The craft sealed itself behind him, leaving the four of them alone in quiet and soft yellow-white light.

"What happened?" Sakita asked. Max told her about Eric's excursion to the battle, and the fight that followed.

"Why didn't they attack you?"

"I think they recognized me from the Power-Sat. Why that made any difference I haven't a clue." Max answered.

A silence fell on the compartment. The M.I.s would not answer any questions Max posed, so presently he stopped trying.

Then after fifteen or twenty minutes the side of the compartment melted away and Max could see that they had landed on the old highway, just above the valley where El Cajon sat gleaming in the night.

"Everyone out." Max said as he stood in the compartment. He and Sakita worked carefully to bring Eric out of the craft, Nathan sticking close to his father's head, tears streaming down his young face. Once they were all out of the craft, the craft resealed itself, and lifted off into the night.

"What happened?" Eric mumbled.

"DADDY!!" Nathan screamed with joy and tossed himself around his father's neck. "Daddy! I was so scared."

"Sakita," Max said, "I think the phones are working here, why don't you call for some help." As his sister called for emergency assistance, Max knelt down to his brother-in-law and said softly into his ear.

"You see, it's about Daddys, not rich uncles."

THE END