

## The Awakening

“Even if we did agree with you, Banner,” General Ross was saying, “we still don’t have a way to fight them.” He reclined in his chair, looking smugly up at my father.

“We do now, gentlemen,” came the reply. “No, don’t interrupt me,” he said, holding up his hand for effect. The medals on his dress uniform flashed as he moved, seizing my attention. Those old symbols from a fallen empire meant nothing to me, but their shininess had a certain appeal, nonetheless. “It has taken us three years to build it.”

“Build what, Stephen?” The elder councilman was now leaning forward in his chair.

I watched the scene develop from the back of the room. The leaders of the human resistance meeting like this marked a turning point in the war. If my dad convinces them to join forces with us, we might stand a chance against the enemy. This was the pinnacle of our efforts.

Stephen Banner spoke softly, yet his words possessed a power not unlike the object of which he spoke: “A bomb, sir.”

After a pause, during which the room was silent, he continued: “Tomorrow my son will detonate the bomb at the robot headquarters in Turing, and we’ll prove to you that this enemy can be defeated.”

Several councilmen eyed me, dismissing me as nothing more than a child.

“Who authorized this attack?” Ross asked.

“Those things took my wife, sir, and I will not let this council interfere with our plan.”

“We aren’t sure Elizabeth’s dead,” another man said, using my mother’s name as if he knew her intimately. I made a note to ask about him later.

“God damn it!” my dad roared. “She’s dead. Those machines...they...all we wanted was to raise Alan...he’s all I have left.”

I was smart enough not to fall for this maneuver, but the room fell quiet again. If it took exploiting me to unite the tribes, well, fuck it. Nothing else had worked so far.

“Look,” a man I knew as Uncle Greg chimed in, “the robots have taken our families, our cities, and our dignity.” Here he turned to look at General Ross. “Maybe we humans are on our way out, but I think what Stephen’s trying to say is—”

“Shut up, Donnelly,” Ross barked. “We know what he’s trying to say. Stephen, you’ve got one shot at this. But if you bring those things down on us, those nanobots or whatever the fuck they’re called, then God help you.”

I tried not to laugh at the elder’s antiquated perception of the divine. God’s dead, General Ross, or else he’s a robot.

I was thankful this meeting was held close to our camp; our journey home would be just a few hours. As we crossed the barren landscape, I knew my father was reliving each exchange in the meeting, measuring his performance. At length he spoke.

“I think it went well,” he said.

“You did a good job,” I replied. I spent a minute composing my next words. “I will do what must be done tomorrow.”

“Alan, I don’t have to tell you how important—”

“I know, Dad.”

“I’d go myself if I were twenty years younger.”

“I know.” Then after a moment, “Dad?” I took his silence as an invitation to continue.

“I realize you think the robots are—”

“They’re a perversion,” he said, spewing his typical anti-robot bullshit. “A constant reminder of what’s wrong with this world. And we must fight them.”

“Yeah. So, there’s no way to make peace?”

I heard him laugh for the first time in weeks, but it was not the laugh that fathers and sons had shared in that age before the machines took over the world. This laugh was hollow, manufactured as a response to a foolish question.

“Peace? How do you make peace with evil? How do you compromise your beliefs?”

I had a hard time connecting robots and evil so easily, despite his propaganda. However, I lacked the courage to point out those were his beliefs, not necessarily mine. “Then we fight. For honor.”

“For humanity, Alan.”

As we neared the camp, I inhaled the familiar stench of human filth. Our home is a gathering of about 200 people living in tents. Children play among campfires and refuse, and today their parents scurry about too, preparing for the weapons inspection. These people look dirty, poorly clothed, and tired. Some show the glimmer of hope that tomorrow brings; perhaps they even think we humans will reign supreme once more. I know better than to think like this. The war is not going well, and I fear the robots will crush us soon. But I will fight, if only to appease my father.

Suddenly a blast ripples through the camp, and I feel my skin crawl. We walk by a mother who is explaining to her son that the crawling sensation is millions of nanobots dying from the electromagnetic pulse.

“E-lecko-mag-etic horse,” he said triumphantly.

She laughed, a soothing balm to my ears. “Just say E-M-P. It keeps us from turning into robots.”

At this the child’s eyes went wide, as he tried to comprehend what his mother just said.

Technically, the nanobots can only convert us from the inside, a process the robots dubbed “Awakening.” It amounts to billions of tiny machines ripping your guts out—literally—and fusing themselves into new, mechanical organs. The EMP kills the machines, but if you’ve gone too far robot, triggering an EMP could be fatal.

I’ve been told the Awakening is a bitch, but that’s probably an understatement. What scares me more than the process is the end result: robots that were once human. They’re not like the stainless-steel automatons that come off the assembly line. Do the Awakened remember what it was like to be alive? Or did they leave that behind when they joined the collective soul of the machines?

“Major Perkins,” my father said, as we arrived at the site of the weapons inspection.

“General Banner, good afternoon,” he replied. “Hi, Alan,” he added, smiling at me.

“Weapons report, major,” I shot back, asserting my rank. I was tired of these assholes treating me like I was still running around the campfire with their kids.

“Yes, of course, sir. Everything’s ready for tomorrow. All units reporting their equipment is in order. The, uh, device is ready to go. Alan, you know how to arm it?”

“Yes, major, I think I can handle it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a big day tomorrow. Major Perkins, General Banner,” I said, winking at my dad. I saluted and marched off, leaving them to pore over the remaining details.

I awoke early the next morning, dressing in my battle gear. I checked my uniform in the small fragment of a mirror I kept in my tent. Stepping out into the morning light, I picked up the

vial left near the tent flap, examining the blue liquid within. I drank the antirobotic and flung the container in the dirt, keeping with our custom of using the earth as a trash heap.

The men were assembled and waiting for me at the outskirts of the camp. They stood in a line, awaiting my order to move out. Each wore the same uniform, but to varying degrees of disrepair. Some had shoes, while others would go barefoot. I wriggled my toes in my socks, fully aware that some of these men would die today without ever having experienced clean socks.

I studied each warrior standing before me, as I supposed a good leader would. They carried spare vials of the antirobotic, in case we were gone longer than expected. Six soldiers carried miniature EMPs, which would neutralize any robots in a small radius. They were ready, but I felt compelled to speak to them before we left.

“Two teams will attack Turing from opposite sides. The first team will be a distraction. I’ll go with the second team, and we’ll arm the bomb. Once I give the signal, get out any way you can. If you see a group of robots come near you, wait until they close in and trigger your EMP.” I wanted to finish with something strong, in order to motivate the group. “Sun Tzu said, ‘When the strike of a hawk breaks the body of its prey, it is because of timing.’ That time is now. Let’s move!”

The men gave a little cheer, and turned to jog south toward the robot capital. The troops seemed to be in good spirits today. I didn’t want to dampen them by mentioning that Sun Tzu also said the worst policy is to attack cities. In our case, there was no alternative.

A mile north of the robot capital, we broke away from the first team. Turing loomed in front of us, its great towers stretching to the heavens. Constructed of an alloy the machines had created, it shone like a silver star. It amazed me that such perfection came from the hands, or rather, the actuators, of machines. They destroyed whatever city used to lie here, and built this

pristine metropolis in its place. I stopped and stood in awe of their power. Were we doing the right thing destroying this place? Is war the only path to peace? I shook off my doubts and kept moving.

As we approached Turing, we could see that the primary team had already launched their assault. The robots must have downloaded instructions to halt the attack, because many of them reversed course, heading toward the opposite side of the city. We fell in behind their lines, winding our way toward the command center. Robots and Awakened marched side by side in front of us, and a dark cloud of nanobots flew overhead. We slowed our movement enough so they wouldn't detect us, and soon stood before our target.

It was the largest building I had ever seen, rising infinitely high into the sky. Worker bots crawled around the structure, making repairs and upgrades. I wondered what our bomb would do to this building. How could something so small possibly destroy something so...

"Sir, can we get this over with? We'd kinda like to get the hell outta here."

"Yeah, okay. Stand guard," I said, and began programming the device, making sure we would be able to get out of the blast radius before it detonated. Then I smashed the readout so the robots couldn't disable it.

"Move, now!" I said, and began running back the way we came, figuring this was a good time to lead by example.

We ran through the city, and soon I could see the green grass beyond the silver pavement below our feet. As we got closer to our freedom, a black cloud descended before us, blocking our escape.

"Nanobots," I breathed. We stopped in front of the hovering wall, unsure of what to do. The sound of robots moving toward us reminded me that inaction would only cost lives.

“Run!” I yelled, for lack of a better plan. I took a deep breath and plowed through the wall of nanobots. They covered my flesh, trying to get into my pores. Millions of them flew up my nose and into my lungs, and I struggled to breathe.

The wall moved toward me now, changing shape as it surrounded my body. I screamed for help, but the soldiers were in shock. My eyes darted around frantically, looking for a way out. They came to rest on a robot down the street from us.

She was an Awakened, staring at me with unblinking eyes. The woman looked familiar to me, and in the split second before the nanobots covered my view, I came to accept the fact that my dad had lied. My mother was neither dead nor alive. She was a robot. I could do nothing but close my eyes and prepare for the worst as the nanobots covered my face and flew down my throat.

What happened next took me by surprise. I began to feel a tingling sensation in my stomach, softly at first, and then building into a solid warmth as the machines inside me gave off more heat. The feeling intensified, spreading to my chest and face. It felt like I was wrapped in the sun’s glow, a feeling of pure pleasure.

I had always believed the stories about the Awakening, but they must have been lies. The pure ecstasy of what I was now feeling was exhilarating. I lost myself in the machines’ embrace, forgetting the war, my duty to destroy the robots, even the friends and family I had lost.

I was only faintly aware of the screaming outside my cocoon, but I sensed that my soldiers were going to do something. I cried out for them to stop, to leave me in this state, but they must have thought it a cry for help. One of them detonated his EMP, because I felt a tremendous shockwave rip through my body, killing the mechanical creatures within. I cannot describe the agony I felt in that instant, but it was enough to render me unconscious.

When I awoke, I was back in my tent, and my father was bent over me. Several others crowded inside the small space, looking concerned.

“Thank God you’re all right,” he said. Whether he was worried about me as his son or as his finest soldier I could only guess.

“I’m fine,” I said weakly. “It was incredible.”

“What? You were almost Awakened!”

“Yeah, it felt so good. And Mom was there—”

“Your mother is dead!” he shouted, almost hysterical.

“I saw her. She’s a—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear about this again,” he said, and moved toward the tent flap.

“Would you stop loving me if I was a robot?” I asked, realizing I had already pushed him too far.

“You know what I would do if you were one of them,” he said, and walked out of my tent.

That night I dreamt of robots. I was married to an Awakened who resembled a girl in our camp. We lived happily until she gave birth to a robot baby, a steel child who turned my father against us. He disowned us when we stopped him from killing it, and we were forced to flee to Turing. But he never stopped hunting us, and one night I came home to find my wife and child slaughtered, and my dad lying in wait for me. As I knelt down to mourn my loss, he came up behind me and put a gun to my now metallic head. Without a word, he pulled the trigger.

I awoke sweating, my heart racing. For a second I thought I was still dreaming, because men were yelling outside my tent.

“We’re under attack,” I heard one shout. “Grab your weapons!”



I lunged out of bed, but without the strength to support myself, fell onto the floor. Who was attacking us? The robots? They only sent nanobots to convert us. Another tribe? Maybe the backlash from the bombing was too much, and they decided to sacrifice our camp to the robot gods.

My tent flap flew open, and a figure stepped inside, silhouetted against the full moon. As my eyes adjusted, I realized who, or perhaps what, it was. She stood before me, her skin glowing silver, as if it were giving off energy. Each of her movements seemed programmed, fluid but unnatural.

“Our son,” she said, her monotone voice echoing in my head.

“Dad said you were dead.”

“Yet here we stand. After our Awakening, he threw us out, much like your dream—”

“How did you know?”

“We are aware of your pain, Alan. You live with a man who only feels hate. And we come to offer you more.”

“You want me to become—”

“Awakened, yes. We offer you nothing but a new life, and an end to war and suffering.”

I was intrigued, but not convinced. Leave behind...the more I thought about it, the shorter my list became. There was nothing here for me, really. Dirt, pain, war, eventually death. But could I bring myself to leave him behind?

“This is the dawn of the robot era,” she said. “In the next decade, humans will all be replaced. They are an inferior race, and their time has passed. Stephen will either join us or perish. You too must choose.”

I hesitated, and she sensed it. “Come with us, to your future. We...love you, son.”

I had longed to hear those words, metallic or otherwise, and they validated a robot existence to me. They really can feel, just not the things I am used to feeling. And perhaps if I show my dad what it's like, he will decide to join us.

I felt the strength come back to my legs, and stood up. Together my mother and I walked out of my tent.

Outside, the battle was still raging around us, but there was room for us to escape. When we got to the outskirts of town, I was surprised to see Major Perkins running at us, waving his gun.

“Alan, get down!” he cried, preparing to fire. I screamed and stepped in front of my mom as I heard the bang from the gun. Major Perkins fell to the ground. I looked to my right and saw my dad lower his own weapon. He stared at the two of us with a blank expression on his face. I turned toward my mother, and she was focused on her husband. They held contact for a few seconds, as if silently negotiating my release.

Then he looked at me so intensely it almost hurt, as if he were trying to burn my image into his mind. I saw him differently then, not as a general, but as a father. In the end, he wouldn't shoot me, even if I was a robot. He loved me that much. I felt remorse over my decision, and took a step toward him. My mother's grip tightened on my hand, however, and he mouthed the word “go” to me. I could feel tears welling up, but I knew that soldiers did not cry. I saluted him and turned away.

Considering I had just attempted to blow the place up, it was weird to be in Turing again. Robots stopped to watch me as I strode past with one of their own. How could they let the enemy march into their city without doing anything? I supposed my mother had indicated to them that I was not a threat.

There was a huge hole in the side of the command center where my bomb had gone off. Robots were working furiously to repair the damage. She led me into the place I had tried to destroy, and I was just as amazed at the lobby as I was of the exterior. It was like being in an enormous computer. Wires ran everywhere, and the whole place hummed loudly. I felt uncomfortable standing there, but she took me further into the building, to a small room containing a single chair.

“Sit,” she commanded, and as I did, she pushed a small button on the wall. A vent opened above me and a black cloud poured into the room.

“The Awakening,” I said.

“Yes, Alan. Just relax and breathe normally,” she replied.

I tried to do as I was instructed as the nanobots swarmed into me. At first I felt the tingling, then the warming sensation, just as before. The pleasure was once again building toward that amazing climax, and then suddenly turned to discomfort.

“It hurts,” I gagged, spewing nanobots from my mouth. The pain coursed through my body, as if I were being eaten alive from the inside. Every fiber in my body was being destroyed, and I screamed out.

The robot standing before me laughed, an artificial sound that rung in my ears. “You thought the destruction of your body was going to be pleasurable? Or that we had feelings for you? We will destroy each of you, and remove all traces of your race from this planet.”

“No!” I yelled. My stomach was on fire, and my chest felt like it was going to explode.

She spun around, and spoke as if reporting to a superior officer. “The Alan Banner problem has been remedied. Requesting next assignment.” She tilted her head to the side, apparently downloading new instructions. I tried to move, to do something, but I was held in

place by billions of tiny machines. Without a word, the robot that used to be my mother walked out of the room.

The pain reached my head, and I could feel the nanobots clouding my vision. Almost instantly I went blind, as they prepared to install an enhanced visual system. The last feelings I ever had were of excruciating agony as I tried to claw my eyes out.