

**NANOSWARM**  
**Extermination Day Series Book Two**  
**William Turnage**

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NANOSWARM

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## **Part One**

### **The Rising Swarm**

## Chapter 1

**September 11, 2001**

Mohamed Atta fingered the knife in his pocket, sweating nervously in the front row of American Airlines Flight 11. He'd prepared passionately for this day, eager to change the world by striking at the heart of the Great Satan. He'd be a martyr, making his sacrifice to Allah. They'd chant his name in the halls of the great mosques around the world. He'd be rewarded in the afterlife with a hundred virgins, and he'd feast among the chosen ones at the great table beside the Prophet himself.

But before all of that could happen, Mohamed had a task to do and he needed to concentrate, stay focused, and put his fears aside. He and his brothers had trained for many months, planning for all contingencies. He looked down at his watch—8:14 a.m.—just a few more seconds. The plane was passing over Boston, headed for Los Angeles, having just taken off from Logan International. If all went as planned, the plane would never make it to LA. Instead it would plow into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, right into the belly of the Great Satan, dealing the infidels a crippling blow.

Mohamed glanced at Waleed, who was sitting across the aisle just a few seats over. He inclined his head and Waleed did the same, then both stood. The three other members of their cell also stood, one after the other, making their way to their positions around the passenger cabin.

The time was now. Heaven was waiting for them all.

Waleed walked to the front of the cabin, followed closely by Mohamed. It was their job to kill the pilots and take control of the aircraft. As they approached the door to the cockpit, Mohamed pulled out the knife from his pocket. His hand shook as his sweaty fingers fumbled to firmly grasp the hilt of the blade.

"Sir, can I help you?" asked a young raven-haired flight attendant who'd just stepped out from the serving area.

*Harlot. Infidel. Western women are all whores, the way they dress and flaunt themselves.*

Mohamed's hatred drove him forward. He gripped his knife, tensing his body. Then he lunged forward to stab the whore in her neck. But as he did so, she angled deftly to the side and blocked his blow with the blade of her hand. Then she grabbed his arm with both of her hands and used his momentum to pull him forward.

Mohamed was shocked. How could this woman move so fast? How could a mere woman knock him off balance like that? He didn't have much time to think, though, as she deftly spread her hands out on his arm, keeping a tight grip and making sure the knife was far away from her body. In one swift move she jumped in the air, brought her knee up, and jerked Mohamed's arm down with force.

A loud crack quickly followed as the bitch's knee hit his elbow and snapped his arm back. Jagged pieces of broken bone ripped out of his skin and tore through his shirt. Blood splattered across the wall of the cabin.

Mohamed screamed out in agony. "Fucking whore, I'm going to kill you!" he yelled in Arabic.

He reached down with his other hand to pull out a knife concealed in his belt buckle, but the flight attendant was too fast. She dropped his mangled arm and coiled her body to

the side, bringing her leg up to drive the sharp edge of her high-heeled boot into the side of his knee.

Another pop rang out as the sharp end of her heel dug deep into the front of his leg, breaking tendons and crushing his kneecap. Flashes of searing pain burned his vision as he fell to the floor.

Waleed had turned around by this time and had his knife out, trying to stab the woman. But she was too quick again. This time, instead of breaking an arm or a leg, she simply pulled out a gun and pointed the barrel at Waleed's head. Two shots right between the eyes with a low caliber weapon, and Waleed's jihad was over.

Mohamed tried to rise from the floor but with Waleed dead, the woman turned her attention to him again, this time kicking him in the head. He was almost unconscious when he felt a prick on his neck, then a burn that flowed along his veins and into his brain.

The last sounds he heard were shouts in Arabic and English from other sections of the plane. Then darkness swept over him.

#

Lieutenant Commander Charles "Buddy" Paulson bolted to attention in the back of the cabin when Agent Milena Mijatovic fired at the head of the hijacking terrorist. He wanted to help her, but he had his own trouble.

Two more al-Qaeda operatives had moved to other sections of the plane and were pulling out knives and smoke bombs, preparing to use them on resisting passengers. Paulson's target was a young man with a peach-fuzz beard—Abdulaziz al-Omari—a skinny little bastard hoping to meet his hundred virgins today. Instead he was going to be meeting Paulson's fist.

They only needed two out of the five hijackers alive for questioning. Paulson thought this kid would give up everything he knew with a just a little persuasion, so he decided to let him live. His older mustached companion, Satam al-Suqami, faced a different fate. Paulson didn't like the looks of him, a punk terrorist so ready to condemn the excesses of the West yet so willing to partake in them himself.

Paulson jumped into action. Inches away from Satam, he pulled out his pistol, grabbed the man by the shirt, and fired two shots point blank into his forehead. Blood, skull pieces, and brain matter splattered all over the screaming passengers in the aisle.

The younger terrorist, Abdulaziz, stared at Paulson in shock, a wet stream running down the inside of his pants as he pissed himself. He dropped his smoke grenade, more out of sheer terror than anything. It exploded seconds later, spreading ominous dark smoke throughout the cabin.

Paulson took a deep breath before the smoke reached his position and jumped over the center aisle to where Abdulaziz stood. As he did so, the hijacker lunged with his small knife.

Ah, there's fight in this one after all.

Time to get out some of his own aggression and show the punk he'd picked the wrong people to mess with.

Paulson went about 210 pounds, all of it muscle, and this kid had to be 120 dripping wet. Paulson simply enveloped the young man's hand with his own and clamped down hard. Abdulaziz's finger bones cracked, breaking under his vice-like grip. The terrorist let out a girlish scream and dropped his knife.

Paulson grabbed him by the throat with his other hand and easily lifted him up over his head and slammed him into the overhead bins. The impact just rattled the bastard's brains a bit as bags and suitcases fell from the compartment. He tried to break free of Paulson's grip, but was too pathetically weak.

Paulson dropped his center of gravity slightly, still holding Abdulaziz by the neck, swung him around, and then slammed him to the floor.

The force of the impact left the young hijacker gasping, the wind knocked out of him. Paulson pulled out his handy little tranquilizer injector and stabbed it into the downed man's neck. He was out in seconds.

Paulson stood and looked around, assessing. It was hard to make out everything in the smoky cabin, but it looked like his team members had done their jobs. Three of the five terrorists were dead and two were unconscious, captured, for later interrogation.

Paulson smiled at Agent Mijatovic, who was looking exotic and sexy in her flight attendant uniform. But he knew better. She was as deadly and cold-blooded as any of the male operatives, maybe more so. He was very, *very* glad to have her on his side. She smiled back and gave him a thumbs-up.

Mission accomplished.

Paulson knew similar scenes were playing out on airplanes around the country, all successful operations for the Navy SEAL Clandestine Operations Division.

Of course, knowing the future before it happened made their job a lot easier.

So just like that, September 11, 2001, became just another day in history, like any other on the calendar.

## Chapter 2

**Ten Months Later**

**9:00 a.m., July 25, 2002**

**Outside Lechuguilla Cave**

Dr. Patrick Chen was relaxing in his construction trailer with a nice cup of herbal tea when he heard the screams. They came from the construction pit, echoing up from deep inside the earth where they'd been tunneling for weeks. Chen ran to the main construction area where crews had been working round the clock to dig the tunnel. It was the first step in the construction of the underground base where Project Chronos would be located.

Abe Conner and his wife Victoria emerged from their trailer at the same time.

"What's going on?" Chen asked as he stood at the edge of the pit.

"We're not sure, sir," Timmons, one of the engineers, said. "It could be an equipment malfunction."

Another scream rang out. This one closer to the surface.

"Oh my God! What is it?" Victoria asked, her hands clutched to her chest.

Abe looked knowingly at Chen, who slowly nodded. Abe's eyes widened.

"Run, Victoria!" Abe yelled out frantically, pushing his wife away from the gaping hole in the middle of the desert. "Get in the truck and get away from here! Go now!"

Victoria resisted, twisting away from Abe's hands. "What's going on?"

"Ahhhh, No! No! No!" More screams echoed up from the dark pit.

"We need to go down there and help them," Timmons said.

Several military personnel, including the man in charge, Sergeant Briggs, came running up to join the construction crew and engineers staring into the pit. They were pushing a large device on wheels, a device that looked like a thick-barreled cannon.

"Back up, get back!" several men barked out as they positioned the cannon on the edge of the pit, got behind it on a platform, and aimed it down. One of the men flipped a switch on the side of the device, and it roared to life, filling the air with rumbles.

Abe was still frantically pushing Victoria, trying to get her to move, but she said, "Abe, we need to help those men down there. I can't just run away."

"What is that thing?" Timmons asked Chen as he stared at Abe and Victoria, panic beginning to spread over his face.

"An electromagnetic pulse cannon, one of the latest and most powerful models. And I hope it works." Chen knew what was happening now. It was their worst nightmare, and he couldn't believe it had arrived. Sure, they'd prepared for the possibility, but he'd never expected—

As they stood over the pit, watching and waiting, something zoomed up from the depths and into the sky. It was small and flying fast. Chen could barely make it out from the light of the midday sun reflecting off its shiny surface.

Sergeant Briggs fired the pulse cannon, which sounded like a bug zapper on steroids. A streak of distortion burst through the air, barely visible to the eye as it shot out from the cannon, and narrowly missed the flying object. The tiny thing flew up about ten feet over their heads, circled the area where they were standing, and then dove straight for Dr. Chen.

Abe and Victoria, standing beside him, both jumped out of the way.

Instinctively Chen held up his arm to shield his face, and the tiny creature landed on his wrist. Chen pulled his arm down and watched as a bluish-green creature with wings, about the size of a flea, began crawling over his wrist. Immediately it dove into his watch, using its claws and sharp mandibles to burrow into the metal.

Chen shook his arm in terror, then unsnapped the watch and threw it to the ground. He knew all too well what this creature was and what it could do.

It was a deadly nanobot from the future.

“Get out of the way, Doctor!” Briggs yelled out.

Just as the watch hit the ground, another pulse shot out from the cannon, this one striking Chen’s lower body but missing the watch. Chen collapsed, his legs momentarily paralyzed from the shock of the EM pulse. The nanobot had disappeared completely into his watch, which was vibrating and shaking in the dirt.

A second later the watch burst apart and eight new creatures rose up from the debris. They hovered about six feet off the ground for several seconds, like predators trying to catch a scent on the air. The pulse cannon fired again, this time hitting a few of the creatures. They fell, clinking on the rocky earth.

Chen picked up a rock lying beside him and poked at the remains of his watch.

“Damned glad it was a fake Rolex,” he mumbled under his breath.

The creatures zoomed toward Abe and Victoria. Abe jumped in front of his wife as the nanobots spread out and started circling them at a rapid speed. Terror filled the faces of the couple as their heads darted back and forth, eyes jumping as they tried to follow the creatures spinning around them, circling ever faster.

A second later several of the bots darted toward Victoria, landing on her neck.

“Your necklace! Throw it on the ground!” Chen yelled out. He knew the bots were after some type of raw material that would enable them to multiply. Whatever it was, it was in his watch and was likely in some of the jewelry Victoria was wearing.

She reached up to unlatch her necklace, but jerked her hand away when one of the bots bit her. Then she tried to pull it off, yanking violently, but it was too thick and wouldn’t break.

“Oh God, they’re biting my neck! Get them off, get them off!” she screamed as trickles of blood dripped down her neck and onto her white blouse.

Abe moved behind her and fumbled with the catch on her necklace. He swatted at a few of the bots still buzzing around their heads.

“Ahh! I can’t get it!” he yelled out in frustration. Then he pulled back one of his hands and started shaking it, yelling in pain.

“Abe, help me!” Victoria screamed, reaching behind her head and trying to undo the chain.

Chen tried to stand, but his legs were paralyzed from the EM blast. He started crawling away from Abe and Victoria, who were still right beside him. There was nothing he could do for them. He had to save himself.

“Briggs!” Chen called out. “What the hell are you doing over there?”

Chen wondered why he wasn’t firing at the bots.

“One of those damned things got into the machine,” Briggs yelled as he opened up the front of the device and looked inside. “It’s shot all to hell.”

He reached into the guts of the device and pulled out electronic and wire entrails still sparking, obviously destroyed.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Victoria’s blood-curdling screams echoed out into the desert.

Abe had returned to her necklace, trying once again to remove the death chain. The anguish on his face made him look old and near bloodless. Not only was the woman he loved being eaten alive in front of him, but the bots were still digging into his own flesh and crawling up his arms into his shirt.

He was finally able to get Victoria's necklace loose and threw it to the ground with a shout. It was covered with nanobots dividing and multiplying even as they watched.

Victoria had stopped screaming and stood unmoving, mouth open, staring off into the distance, blood pouring down her neck. Her white blouse was soaked in it.

"Victoria, Victoria, are you okay?" Abe asked as he grabbed her by the shoulders. "Say something, sweetheart. Oh please, God, make her okay!"

He tried to hold her up, but she dropped to her knees. Then Abe pulled away and grabbed at his chest. He ripped his shirt off, buttons shooting out, to reveal a chest swarming with nanobots digging into his skin and crawling on a chain he wore around his neck. It was similar to the one that Victoria had been wearing, but a large cross dangled from the end of it.

Chen was panicked now, desperately trying to get away, dragging his numb legs, his fingers bleeding from clawing and pulling himself over sharp rocks. He glanced back to see the heads of the tiny creatures digging into Abe's chest, their back legs twitching in ecstasy as they devoured his flesh.

A stiff wind blew through the desert, kicking up dust. Chen watched through the dust as Victoria sat on her knees in the dirt staring straight ahead, legs folded behind her. Her head tilted slowly up, as if begging the heavens to end her suffering. Her chin rose higher and higher until it was pointing straight up. Then a gaping hole opened up at the base of her neck. It grew wider and wider as both Chen and Conner watched in horror. Screams echoed through the site as others ran, trying to get away from the attacking creatures.

Victoria's head fell backwards and off her body, severed by the nanobots. Pieces of hanging flesh and part of her spinal column clung to her head as it rolled into the desert sand. Her headless body slumped and fell forward, kicking up dust as it hit the ground, collapsing in a bloody heap.

"Nooo!" Abe screamed, tears of anguish streaming down his cheeks and blood covering his mangled chest. "Dear Jesus, please help her. Please! I'll do anything..."

More of the bots sprang from his body, multiplying as they gnawed away at the cross dangling from his neck. Then they rose into the air and headed for Chen.

"Oh no," Chen whispered. This was it. There was no stopping them now.

But just as they were about to land on him, several of the creatures began flying in erratic circles, sputtering midair. Then they just fell to the ground, legs twitching as they lay on their backs. A few of the deadly things tried to rise again, but they quickly fell back, flopping and writhing. Moments later, their twitching stopped and they lay still, by all appearances, dead.

Chen picked up one of the rocks closest to him, raised it above his head, and slammed it down as hard as he could. A loud crunch filled the air, and he felt the miniature circuits of several of the creatures crushing under the force of the blow. Greenish goo oozed from their insides and stuck to the bottom of the rock.

Abe lay just a few feet away, clutching at his chest as the last few bots gnawed and clawed at his flesh in their final violent death throes. Then they simply fell off his body, oozing out of the holes they'd burrowed into. Draped across his bloody chest was a half-eaten cross still dangling from its chain. A single bot clung desperately to it, then it too fell

to the dirt. Abe looked at Victoria and started sobbing, despair pulling at his face.

“Oh, my love. My sweet Victoria.”

The handful of remaining bots that had attacked and disabled the pulse generator rose into the air, then soared away, heading north.

The feeling was starting to return to Chen’s legs. By some miracle he’d survived this initial attack. He had no idea how.

But he knew this was far from over. Those remaining bots were going to be hunting for whatever it was that helped them multiply. If they found that substance, then there would be millions—billions—of the creatures to deal with and their fight for the future of humanity would be over before it even started.

Chen needed to find out what they were after and stop them before they got to it. But he couldn’t do it alone. He needed reinforcements. He needed to bring in the big guns.

## Chapter 3

10:00 a.m., July 25, 2002

Las Vegas

“Ahh, shit, somebody turn off that fucking phone!”

The buzzing of the cellphone cut through Jeff’s head like a razor blade. He’d just fallen asleep about half an hour ago after a long night of partying.

The tall, blond showgirl slowly climbed out of the bed and eased over to the dresser on the other side of the luxurious and sprawling penthouse bedroom. Her long hair swayed gently across the top of her naked buttocks. As she reached over to turn off the phone, the angel tattoo on her back rippled like it was going to fly away. Then she glided back to the bed, stopping at the table in the middle of the room to snort a quick line of cocaine. Her ample breasts bounced as she brushed her hand across the bottom of her nose.

“Come on back to bed, babe,” said the Asian cocktail waitress lying on the other side of the bed, her voice dripping with lust.

Jeff had already forgotten their names. They were just two more conquests in a long line going back several years. It was the life of the international playboy he’d become. The money, the fame, and the power came too easily when you knew the future before it happened.

Jeff turned and buried his face in the cocktail waitress’s long dark hair. She smelled so good. He turned his head to kiss her full lips when the phone rang again. This time it was the room phone.

“God damn it!” Jeff growled as he reached over and snatched up the phone from the nightstand. “I told you I didn’t want to be disturbed!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Madison,” stammered the concierge from the front desk. “But I have an urgent message from a Dr. Patrick Chen. He says it’s a matter of life or death.”

Well, that certainly got his attention. Chen was usually very stoic.

“Put him through.”

“Jeff, thank goodness I got you. There’s been a horrible attack here at the Chronos site. The nanobots are loose, Jeff, they’re loose!”

The panic rose in Chen’s voice as Jeff tried to clear his thoughts.

“Patrick, please calm down and tell me what happened; you’re not making sense.”

Chen took one deep breath and then another. “It happened just moments ago. The crews were digging down and apparently unearthed a nanobot that had survived underground. It killed two of the construction crew, then killed Victoria and nearly mangled Abe to death. It absorbed a material from my watch and from necklaces that Abe and Victoria were wearing. Then it multiplied. Jeff, if it finds more of the substance, whatever it is, I fear it’ll be able to multiply at an exponential rate. Then there’s no stopping it.”

*That* was just too much for Jeff to take in. He looked longingly at the line of cocaine on the table. It’d been a long time since he’d thought about nanobots. He swayed dizzily as he stood holding the phone, still drunk from the celebration the night before. He wondered if this whole thing was just a dream.

“Jeff, Jeff, are you still there?”

“Yeah, give me a second, Patrick.” Jeff bent over and snorted a quick line. A second later the euphoria swept over him. It was the same feeling he used to get waking up on

Christmas morning as a kid. He smiled, but as he did so, a dark cloud passed over him.

He was back in Lechuguilla Cave, deep underground, surrounded by darkness and blood-curdling screams. He was standing over Holly Scarborough, her blood covering his eyes and dripping down his cheeks into his mouth.

Jeff slapped his face to jolt himself out of the nightmare he'd tried so long to forget. The coming apocalypse of deadly viruses and nanobots had seemed so far away, and now it was slamming straight into his addled mind.

"What about the pulse cannon? Did that have any effect?" he asked, trying to pull himself back to the reality facing him.

"It knocked out a few of the creatures, but not enough," Chen replied, his voice calming. "What are we going to do?"

"Have you called Paulson yet?"

"No, I thought of you first since you've had direct experience with the nanobots. You and Holly, that is. But Holly has gone missing. No one has seen her in over a week. Do you have any idea where she is?"

Jeff hadn't talked to Holly in years.

"I don't know where she is. I suggest you call Paulson; I'm sure he'll be able to handle this. Keep me posted. I've got some things to take care of now."

Jeff hung up and glanced at the two girls in the bed.

"Come on back, Jeffrey, we're not done with you yet," the blonde said as she draped her leg over the naked, petite body of the cocktail waitress and caressed her shoulder.

Jeff thought briefly of jumping back in bed with them and just forgetting the world. That was the pattern he'd followed for years now. Many times he felt he wouldn't even be around to see the disaster looming in the distant future. He figured he would be long dead from some age-related illness or his body would just give out from years of drinking and drug abuse.

Yes, it would be easy to just slip back in bed with the girls. But this time the fear was building inside him. His heart starting racing as his memories turned back to the damp dark cave and Holly's severed arm lying in the shadows beside her, swarming with tiny nanobots gnawing and eating the flesh like horrible maggots.

No, he had to get out of there. If the nanobots were coming, he needed to get as far away as he could—China maybe. He threw on his underwear and pants, grabbed a shirt, and headed for the door.

"Sorry, girls. Emergency. Gotta run."

They could fend for themselves.

Just as he was heading out the door, the phone rang again. This time it was his cellphone.

"I'm busy right now," he barked out. "This better be urgent."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Madison, I'm sorry to bother you. This is Sam Roberts, director of your satellite communications division. When we put up one of our first satellites years ago, you told me to contact you if we picked up a certain transmission frequency. Well, sir, we did, just a few minutes ago. There was a broadcast from an AM radio station just outside of Albuquerque."

Jeff tried to organize his thoughts and remember just what Sam was talking about. He seemed to recall that the nanobots used a special signal to communicate with each other.

Albuquerque wasn't that far north of Lechuguilla Cave. The bots that had escaped from the tunnel could've made it there by now. It was likely that they had broadcast the signal.

Why? Jeff could only guess they were trying to communicate, find out if there were other bots in the area.

“Thank you, Sam. I have a guy looking into that.”

Jeff paused at the door for a second, then walked back inside and grabbed a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels from the bar.

Just a few shots for the road to take the edge off. Too many things were happening at the same time, and his clouded mind couldn't take all of it.

“Oh, and sir, there was another signal just after the first, originating from somewhere in San Diego.”

Jeff's heart started pounding. Another signal? If the first came from the Lechuguilla nanobots, then what the hell was in San Diego? All kinds of possibilities churned through his head, none of them good.

“Sir, sir? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Sam. Just continue to monitor the situation and let me know if anything else happens.”

“Uh, okay sir. I'm sending you the location of the second signal and I'll continue to search for any others.”

Jeff hung up and looked out of the window of the luxurious penthouse suite, scanning the Las Vegas skyline sprawling out below.

Paulson can handle this. He was the soldier. Jeff certainly wasn't a fighter. He was... Well, he didn't know what the hell he was anymore.

He turned to the girls in the bed. They were in a full embrace now, legs wrapped around each other, kissing passionately, totally oblivious to his presence and the crisis at hand.

He hit speed dial on his cell to tell Paulson about the signals.

“Damn it!” He slammed the phone against his leg when he couldn't get a connection. Even to this day, Jeff missed 2038 technology.

He threw his shirt on and tried the concierge from the room phone.

“I'm sorry, sir, but all outside lines are down. The phone company tells me they're working on it, but they don't know when they'll be back up.”

Not good, not good at all. Jeff had seen this situation play out before. With communication lines down, something bad was likely looming over the horizon.

So there was no way to get in touch with Paulson. Jeff hung up the phone, returned to the window, and brought the bottle of Jack up to his lips. He wanted to forget this whole thing. Wanted to climb back in bed with the two girls and go back to his life of oblivion. The cool burn of the whiskey touched his lips.

Ah, sweet elixir.

Down below his window, the flashing lights of the Circus Circus Hotel and Casino blinked incessantly. Without prompting, his mind flashed back to a time in his distant past, to an event that wouldn't happen for another thirty years in the present timeline. He was standing beside his daughter as she rode the merry-go-round at the state fair. Her laughter filled the air as she waved to her mom. Then she grinned at Jeff and said, “Daddy, I love you.”

A day lost in time. Tears welled up in his eyes. He missed his daughter and son so much. No matter how hard he tried, he could never forget them. Not a day passed that he wasn't reminded of them in some small way.

He still held the bottle of whiskey to his lips. A tear dripped down his cheek, slow and cool against his skin.

It would all be over if he didn't do something. His children would never be born. Billions would die.

Jeff never wanted to be a hero. He never wanted to be a time traveler, and he never wanted to be responsible for saving the world. He just wanted his life back.

He tipped the bottle up again and let the Jack pour into his mouth.

Then, like a switch clicking in his soul, he lowered the bottle and spat the whiskey on the floor.

"No more. Never again," he whispered softly to himself.

He turned away from the window and hurled the bottle across the room.

It shattered against the wall, glass flying everywhere as a dark stain dripped down to the floor.

The girls looked up in surprise as he stormed out of the room, but he knew they'd be back in each other's arms in moments.

Jeff charged down the hallway to the elevator as fast as his clouded mind would let him. His loyal bodyguard, Chase Arrington, who'd been waiting patiently outside the hotel room, followed. He decided that he'd go to San Diego. He didn't know what was waiting for him there, but whatever it was, he was going to stop it.

The future would not end today. Humanity would survive this threat. Jeff might have lost his way for a time, but he was back now, and he was not going to run.

He would face whatever was coming at them head on.

## Chapter 4

**2030 HRS, July 25, 2002**

**Baghdad, Iraq**

Lieutenant Commander Buddy Paulson was finishing up his dinner at a small restaurant on the outskirts of southern Baghdad. He was sitting across from Jamal Bahar, the owner of a large construction company and general busybody who knew everything that happened around town. Jamal had his hands in so many different pots, Paulson wondered how he could keep track of it all. But with his close contacts to Saddam Hussein's regime, he was invaluable to Paulson in getting done what he needed to do.

Paulson had known him for two years; Jamal had been providing information on all of the political machinations of the Hussein dictatorship peppered with some really funny stories about his wacky family and friends. Jamal was always jovial and never one to turn down a cold beer and a hearty meal. Nor was he ever at a loss for words. Jamal had just gotten into a story about how his cousin's wife had found out he was having an affair with her sister.

"Yes, you see his wife, Fahima, insisted on going to the bar with him last Friday," Jamal said with a big smile.

Like a great hairy beast, he tore off a big hunk of lamb from a large leg bone. The juice dripped down his salt-and-pepper-colored beard. He continued on with his story, mouth full of food.

"When it got too late, she hopped on their mule to head home, leaving Mahmood at the bar with his friends. Now, that old mule had traveled that way so many times before, it knew exactly where to go. Only it didn't go to Mahmood and Fahima's house—it headed straight to her sister's!" Jamal laughed again, eyes wide with mirth.

"That old Fahima is a shrewd one. So instead of trying to force the mule to her house, she just let it trundle along where it wanted to go. When it stopped right in front of her sister's home, Fahima hopped off, ran up to the house, and found her sister there waiting up for Mahmood."

Jamal slapped the table, causing their plates and silverware to jump.

"Oh, my goodness, can you image the look on their faces! And that old mule gave it all away. So now my cousin, he's not sleeping with his wife or her sister; he's sleeping with the poor mule!"

Paulson's laughter joined Jamal's. Jamal was certainly a character and a good friend. Paulson hoped he'd survive the U.S. invasion that was coming in another year.

He took another swig of the Jordanian whiskey that was popular in the area as Jamal finished his drink and slammed his mug to the table.

"Speaking of wives," he said. "I'd better get home to mine."

"Otherwise she might think you're over at her sister's," Paulson said.

Jamal laughed. "No, no, I can't even look at another woman around my wife, she's so jealous. I still have a mark here on my cheek where she slapped me the other day for telling her cousin that I liked her new yellow shawl. You would've thought I'd grabbed the girl on her ass or something."

Paulson had met Jamal's wife before, a large, strong woman. He was sure she could pack a wallop. Jamal's cheek did look a little red.

“Just be glad she didn’t go after the family jewels.”

“You’re telling me, Buddy,” Jamal said, smiling as he put both hands in front of himself in mock protection of his prized assets.

Paulson paid the bill, and the two men left the restaurant, along with several other men who had been there about the same length of time.

“Until next time, my friend,” Jamal said as he walked away. “Greetings to your wife and family.”

“And to yours, my friend. Fi Aman Allah.”

As Paulson turned toward his apartment, his satellite phone rang.

“Commander Paulson, this is Patrick Chen. We have an emergency.”

Paulson listened as Chen explained the presence of nanobots at the Chronos site. He thought they’d been prepared with the military crew and the EM pulse cannon on site at Lechuguilla, but apparently he’d underestimated the threat.

“Any idea where they may go, Patrick?”

“A preliminary test on my watch leads us to believe that the material they are looking for is palladium. We’re still analyzing the chains Abe and Victoria were wearing to determine what it was that killed the bots and sent them flying away. Whatever it was, it saved our lives.”

“And where can they find palladium?”

“It’s a relatively rare metal, typically used in electronics and some jewelry, forming a type of white gold. You also find it in catalytic converters on most cars as an emissions control device.”

“So the nanobots are going after cars and jewelry?” Paulson asked as he made his way down the dark, dusty street.

“I suspect they’ll acquire some of the material as they move, but it’s our guess they are actually seeking a larger source of the element. I haven’t had time to do full testing on the nanobots we were able to destroy, but it looks like the one bot that survived down in the caverns was damaged, preventing it from reproducing normally. When these things reproduce, they make exact copies of themselves, so all the copies of the original bot also had the defect. Hence the need for a large source of palladium.”

“So where is this source?”

“The Stillwater Igneous Mining complex in Stillwater, Montana, along the north flank of the Beartooth Mountain Range. It’s one of the largest palladium mines in the world. If the bots get there, they’ll have more than enough raw palladium to reproduce a million—a billion—times.”

Paulson started doing the calculations. That many bots would be impossible to stop. They’d be overwhelmed and utterly annihilated.

“How fast are they traveling?”

“We received a signal from Albuquerque a few minutes ago. The signal matches those of the nanobots we have on record from the data pulled from the portables from the year 2038. Albuquerque is about two hundred and eighty miles from here, which means they’re traveling at around seven hundred and fifty miles per hour. Stillwater is about eight hundred and fifty miles from Albuquerque, so they’ll be there in just over an hour.”

Paulson thought before responding, scratching his forehead. There was no way he could scramble fighters or drones in time to catch the bots. Plus he doubted conventional weapons, like missiles, would be effective against the creatures. They were working on fitting drones with EM pulse cannons, but those were all in experimental stages and not

ready to deploy.

“What should we do?” Chen asked, concern growing in his voice.

Paulson knew they only had one choice if they wanted to stop the nanobots. And it was a horrible one.

“Patrick, I’m going to call the president. It’ll be his decision from here. Keep me posted when you have additional reports. And let me know immediately when you find out what killed those bots on site. If there is some new way to destroy these things, I need to know about it right away.”

“Good luck.”

Paulson clicked off the satellite phone and rang the doorman of his building. Kasam greeted him, as always, with a generous smile, and Paulson took the elevator to his fifth-floor apartment. Once inside he immediately turned on his laptop to have an encrypted video conference with President Bush. As the computer booted up, Claire greeted him from the corner.

“Hello, Buddy. I’ve been monitoring the situation,” she said in her feminine, British-accented voice. “Current projections indicate the highest probability of success is with the Sky Hammer protocol,”

“I know, Claire. It may be our only hope now.”

Claire crawled over and positioned herself next to Paulson’s computer. When he’d received her as a package delivery in Khafji, Saudi Arabia, during Operation Desert Storm, she’d been nothing but a black box from the year 2038. She was basically a highly advanced AI built into a portable and sent back in time to 1991. Yet since that time eleven years ago, she had changed, evolved, both physically and mentally.

Using detailed instructions from Claire, Paulson had added small arms and hands to the device. Finally able to manipulate objects on her own, Claire took to modifying her body, adding sturdy tire treads like a tank’s, multiple spider-like legs that allowed her to crawl over surfaces where she couldn’t roll, additional arms, several camera lenses that functioned as eyes, and protective body armor. She now looked like a metallic crab with wheels. Over the last few months, she’d added some scanning-type apparatuses, though Paulson wasn’t sure exactly what they did.

Her personality had changed as well, becoming more human-like. She was built with an interactive AI designed to learn and grow over time, as well as a predictive algorithm that allowed her to analyze vast amounts of data and calculate potential outcomes. That clairvoyant function, for which Paulson had named her, made her invaluable to the success of their mission.

“We need to know what stopped those bots at Lechuguilla,” Claire said from her perch on the desk. “I’ve sent Patrick’s team the top three probable causes so they can narrow their testing. They should have an answer within the hour.”

“Thanks, Claire. But that may be too late.”

“Sky Hammer is ready. We just need the president’s approval. Or I could initiate on your command.”

Paulson looked at Claire, surprised. “No! We need approval for this. I’ve told you that before.”

She’d begun to act too independently in recent months, and that concerned him. Claire was able to tap into any online system, and no firewall or security protocol could stop her from doing what she wanted. It was that level of power that scared him.

Finally an image popped up on the screen. It was the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

“The president is on his way, Commander. What do you have for us?”

“It’s happened, sir.” Paulson explained what had taken place at Lechuguilla and what options they had.

“How could this have happened!” Rumsfeld was furious. “Why didn’t you have safeguards there at the cave? More importantly, why the hell did you decide to dig there again knowing that those things could be down there?”

Paulson was unfazed by the Secretary’s tone. “Sir, we looked at other locations for the base, and Lechuguilla was by far the best choice. And if we had chosen to not dig there, then the nanobot would’ve eventually dug its way out on its own and there would’ve been no one there to stop it.”

“Well, that plan didn’t go so well now, did it?” Rumsfeld glared at Paulson. “So now we’re left with Sky Hammer? Our last resort that we had not planned on using for another thirty-five years, or long after I’m dead and gone. The president is going to be furious.”

Rumsfeld glanced away for a second. “Here he is now.”

President George W. Bush sat beside Rumsfeld in front of the video camera.

“Buddy, how you doing, son?” the president blurted out in his cheerful Texas drawl. “Sand fleas biting you out there in the desert?”

“It’s definitely not like staying at the Hilton, sir.”

Paulson knew he needed to engage the president with pleasantries before they started discussing the grave situation before them. It was crucial to warm him up before they got down to business, especially if Paulson wanted Bush to make the decision he needed him to make.

Luckily the two men had hit it off from the start after Bush took office in January of 2001. They were both from Texas and good ole boys of a sort, so they had that in common. When Paulson, with the help of Claire, accurately predicted the September 11 terrorist plot—and stopped it—Bush was forever grateful. And Paulson knew that once Bush trusted a man and took him under his wing, he was extremely loyal. Paulson hoped he would be able to parlay that relationship into convincing the president that he needed to make a very tough decision.

Rumsfeld brought Bush up to speed and as he talked, Paulson could see Bush’s smile and cheerful demeanor start to erode. He furrowed his brow and turned to face Paulson.

“What kind of proof do you have at this time, Commander?”

Shit, Bush had reverted back to calling him by his rank, never a good sign.

“I just received word from Dr. Chen a few minutes ago. Let me bring him in on the call.”

Paulson linked his video conference feed so Chen could join them. The scientist appeared on the screen looking tired, specks of dried blood and dirt streaked across his forehead. He told the president and secretary of defense everything he’d told Paulson just moments ago.

“They’ll be at the Stillwater Igneous mining complex in less than an hour if they continue traveling at their present speed,” Chen said.

“That doesn’t give us much time,” Bush said.

“We can order NORAD to be on standby for Sky Hammer initiation,” Rumsfeld added. “They’ll only need twenty minutes or so.”

A small message popped up on Paulson's screen next to the video feed. *Twenty-two minutes thirty seven seconds.* It was from Claire.

Bush looked up, in deep thought, and stroked his chin. "We need to be sure of these nanobots' destination and make sure we get all of them this time. It's like putting out bait for cockroaches; this palladium mine is the bait and it's where we need to trap 'em, and squash the damn things."

*Ninety-four percent probability that Stillwater is the likely destination,* chimed in Claire's instant message.

"Sir, if we wait, we run the risk of an exponential increase in the nanobots," Buddy said gravely. "Then we'll have no chance of stopping them."

"Sky Hammer is too big a risk to take without being one hundred percent sure," Bush said firmly.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but what is Sky Hammer?" Chen asked.

"It's classified, Doctor," Rumsfeld replied. "But if we do decide to initiate it, you'll know soon enough."

"What do you need to move forward, Mr. President?" Paulson asked.

Bush thought for a moment, looking unsure, then firmly he said, "I need to see satellite imagery or eyes-on-the-ground video of these nanobots at the Stillwater mine. When I see that, then I'll give the go-ahead for Sky Hammer."

Another instant message popped up from Claire. *Time from visual confirmation to initiation, twenty-four minutes, fifty-two seconds. Extrapolating nanobot growth rate, flight speed, and Sky Hammer effective radius shows that two point one seven percent of the nanobot swarm will escape. Ninety-seven percent certainty.*

Ninety-seven percent was about as high as any of Claire's predictions got. If just one of the bots escaped, then they would be right back where they started.

"That may not be enough time, Mr. President." Paulson said.

"Those are my orders, Commander," Bush said, staring into the camera.

"You heard the president," Rumsfeld said. "For now we wait to get visual confirmation. Dr. Chen, alert us if you find out anything new on how to stop these damn things. I'm going to put NORAD on standby for Sky Hammer initiation. We have a satellite positioned to give us a good view of the Stillwater mine, and I'm going to order an unmanned drone surveillance plane to the site."

"So we're just going to wait," Paulson said, a hint of desperation creeping into his voice.

*Let me take control,* Claire IM'ed.

"Buddy, I know how you feel about this," said the president, "But I need to weigh the pros and cons of every decision I make. In the past I've had to make life and death decisions without full information, but this is vastly different. We're dealing with too many unknowns. And I feel we need to be cautious. Wait by your computer; we'll be in touch."

The video flashed off and the faces of Bush, Rumsfeld, and Chen disappeared.

Paulson glanced over at Claire, now hovering on her spider-like legs just beside his hand near the computer keyboard.

"No, Claire. We need to wait for the president."

"Then all may be lost," she said.

Paulson stretched back in his chair, deep in thought,

Wood creaked behind him.

"Watch out, Buddy!" Claire yelled.

But it was too late. Paulson felt the cold steel of the knife at his neck. He'd been too distracted by the video call and the threat of the nanobots to realize that an assassin had snuck into his apartment.

He felt the man's breath on the back of his neck and smelled his sweaty arm as the blade began to move, drawing a trickle of blood as it dug into his flesh.