



C. HENRY MARTENS

THERE WHERE THE
POWER LIES

There Where the Power Lies

Chapter 1

It was the moon that woke him up. You would think that a silent orb, luminescing quietly, would leave a man to his slumbers. But no, the shattering glow pried his eyes open as surely as a midnight epiphany. The sky lightening about the sinking moon said it was time for him to leave.

The woman sleeping next to him twitched in dream-induced jerks and starts. He could not remember her name. All he cared about was that she was available on short notice. She was not coyote ugly, so at least he would not have to chew his arm off to escape. Nevertheless, he would attempt to exit without waking her. She might want to give him her number, and he had no use for it.

He rose silently, gathering his clothing and slipping on his pants. Carrying the rest to the door, he embraced the early morning.

Andy McGee made his way to the restaurant that funded his marginal lifestyle. Too early for food prep to be started, the outdoor courtyard invited his presence. Surprisingly, he was not the only person attending. A couple sat center stage as though waiting for the late morning opening and an omelet of trendy ingredients. Convenience store cappuccino in hand, he made his way to his favorite table, the one that the restaurant made available to people seeking anonymity and discretion.

Heads close together, the couple spoke in whispers now that Andy was within earshot. Andy was bleary from the late night, the many drinks, and the early hour. He laid his head on his folded arms and was soon dozing. His drink released steam that hung about his head until it cooled.

Laughter stirred him. In an attempt at regaining his nap, he refrained from moving and tried to mentally drown the sounds of the escalating volume at the center table. Soon, as the effort proved useless, Andy started to comprehend what was being discussed. He peered through his eyelashes, clandestinely, at them.

The woman finished her store-bought coffee, dropping the cup under the table as though it would be in the way by remaining on top. She was still smiling from the joke that Andy had missed.

“So, you get it now, right?” She touched the hand of the man opposite her. “You can lay off almost half of your employees right away, just as soon as the installations are complete.” She hesitated. “You’ll be making more money and cutting labor costs. Immediately.”

The man sat troubled with a furrowed brow, not because he failed to understand what she was saying, but because he did not understand what the appropriate reaction was. He could not decide whether to feel guilty over the job losses created by this deal and the loss of income for those that he already viewed as former employees, or to be elated at the huge bonus he would receive for finding such an elegant solution to the ongoing and never ending labor issues. They never got that they were driving their own demise. Their ignorance was just too bad. Without the constant bickering and demands they might have jobs for a couple more years. Now they were being replaced by robots.

“So you are sure that these machines will operate for sixty five hundred hours before they need to be refurbished? You are sure?” The man’s tone emphasized his concern.

The woman nodded in affirmation. “Of course, yes. And your cost of production drops to three dollars and forty cents per hour per unit. Even figuring in the cost of acquisition, maintenance, and energy use, your costs plummet to less than ten dollars per hour and with better precision and speed. And think of the savings in time spent in labor resolution, as well as office hours and insurance costs. These units require no income taxes to be figured for them, or health insurance, or vacation scheduling.” She smiled again. “They will free you and your corporation.”

A crooked smile played across the man’s lips. Maybe the CEO would invite him to play golf.

Andy logged the conversation into his brain under corporate types that failed in their long term thinking. Through his conversations with the father he presently hated, he knew that any reduction in labor translated to more corporate taxes to fund the necessity of welfare programs - welfare programs that kept the masses from rioting and taking what they wanted from the wealthy that complained over the programs that kept them safe. A reduction in labor also meant fewer dollars available to be spent on product for all businesses. This is the flow of money that makes an economy work. Not that corporations were at fault for making the attempt to manage their costs. Labor was driving them to it.

For some reason Andy would remember this conversation between two anonymous people that he would never know. In the next decade he would mull it over as he saw friends and relatives find it increasingly difficult to find work. Technology advanced and would fill jobs. He would have to find a field that was unlikely to be affected. The money in restaurant employment was not going to work in the long run.

He went back to sleep. His cappuccino was cold now anyway.

Twelve years later:

Bright colors ebbed and flowed in the new Shanghai concourse. Some savvy advertising marketer had provided new shirts in a variety of neon colors to the winners of the contest that would send each to an exotic location. The four hundred lucky prize claimants formed a huge crowd. No one questioned the numbers, even though the company promoting the contest was relatively small and the financial outlay to send them all around the world, huge.

Besides the neon shirts, resplendent with a fancy, stitched company logo, members of the group each held a goody bag provided by the sponsor. Included was a guide book pertinent to each destination, a book devoted to local languages, an itinerary for each guided tour, several complimentary toiletries, and two bottles of water. The bottles were emblazoned boldly with the company logo of the business backing the whole affair.

All of the contest winners were young, another anomaly overlooked by those attending. All were active, healthy, engaging people, and they were enjoying the anticipations of their journey. Voices competed with each other and the volume of the gathering escalated. They were awaiting departure, and had been asked to be early and stay within the group.

Hors d'oeuvres were served. Wonderful in variety and exotic flavors, they were consumed appreciatively as a prelude to expectations of what was to come in their travels. No one noticed that they were laden with salt and tended to be dry. Only a few noticed that there was nothing liquid served with the buffet.

A beautiful young woman sat eyeing the crowd as she sipped water from the bottle in her hand, one of those from her goody bag. Her ear was tuned to the conversation of the couple that would be traveling with them, even as she scanned the vast expanse. Her own companion, her husband of less than a year, sat next to her, his hand lightly on her knee. He spoke animatedly with the other man. The couples seemed well matched. Each was active physically, technologically savvy, and outgoing. Although not well educated, they were curious and intelligent, sure to savor any chance to get out among people and explore. Jia Xie, going by the current fashion of anglicizing her name by using her surname last, approved. She would enjoy this trip in every way she could.

Crossing her legs, showing them off to any that cared to notice her very short skirt, she made eye contact with the serious-looking man on the balcony overlooking the gathering.

Andy gazed down at the milling crowd. There were always specific people that would hold his attention in any group, usually because they projected something ominous. But then, there were always the beautiful women, too. His vantage point in the corner of the balcony allowed him to watch both floors and the stairs, and although there were no obvious threats, he was alert as usual. The woman in the short skirt with the wonderful legs and the languid bedroom eyes stole his attention once more. She enjoyed toying with him, and he appreciated it. Security work could be so boring. He allowed her eye contact and sent his own message to her. They both knew nothing would come of it.

Soon his Arab employer would want to leave. Prince Bilal would see these human offerings off to the great journey they were destined to never return from and resist any attempt to keep him at the VIP celebration on the balcony. The Bentley would shuttle him back to his top floor suite at the luxurious hotel his family owned. The suite would afford him the best view of Shanghai, now that the awful air of the prior decade was being cleared by new technologies. His nose filters remained though. He would not take any chances.

Standing amidst a small group of the upper echelon in the room, the Prince was uncomfortable. These men considered themselves his equal, and he had to tolerate them. His uncle would be displeased if he made a scene or left early. He had been given a job which he would see through, but personally he would rather associate with his security team than these corporate nebbishes. They were unworthy of association with the lowest Arab, much less a Prince of the Royal Family. And they did not even know what was happening. The ruse was secure.

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Late last night, under the cover of darkness and the weekend, a special run of bottled water had been made. Those doing the bottling had no idea what plan they were part of. The whole project was as compartmentalized as possible, and the labor force was only privy to the fact that they had a late night job to do in an unfamiliar factory and that they would be paid extremely well. The security alarms were disarmed by someone with the codes, a short instructional was given to those few in key positions, and soon the factory floor hummed into action. The line was slower than usual, but steady.

There was one man assigned to supply an additive to each bottle. His was a key position, the only one that had an observer, the Prince himself. Each bottle received a drop of clear liquid from an eyedropper as it moved down the line, just before being filled with a measured quantity of fluid. The finished product was stacked on a pallet as it came off the line. Then the pallet, already purposed for use in the morning at the airport celebration, was replaced with the new run of product. The operation went as planned, taking less than four hours even with inexperienced men.

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Jia sipped her water slowly. Her husband had already finished his first bottle and was well into his second. She was glad for the water. Although she was not especially well traveled or sophisticated, she understood the effort that was made and thought the event was going well. Her natural exuberance contributed to her perception.

Suddenly, the announcement of the first boardings filled the hall. Several people stood, gathering their carry-on bags. Her husband rose, extending his hand to her. She gripped it lightly and rose as well, once again showing off her legs as best she could. Glancing up, she noticed that her pseudo paramour was properly appreciative. Her world was about to expand and she relished this opportunity. She would remember

the man on the balcony and his attention for as long as she lived. The long trip she was on would be her last, and she would not return to China. The child she carried and had no inkling of yet would never be born.

Noticing where Andy was looking, Prince Bilal understood his interest. One of the privileges of his position in life was that he could command beauty. Few could. But great wealth brought great power, and the Prince felt entitled to all that his hands could touch. Opulence was the style of the Royal Family, and he indulged himself fully. This included women. The suite in the hotel was being outfitted with them even as he recognized that his task here was done. The women would be spectacular, and he would use them as he saw fit. Then he would discard them with little regard.

The Royal Family thought little of women, even amongst themselves. This included his own mother. She understood that the male line was the only importance in the dynasty.

Bringing his wrist to his mouth, Andy commanded the Bentley to be positioned for departure. He read the Prince without words, a skill he had acquired over time. The Prince was an easy read, clearly selfish and indulgent. The few times that the Prince had an open chair at his poker games, he would invite Andy to sit in. Using the Prince's money, Andy had to be careful to lose without being obvious. Bilal wanted to win against tough competition. Winning bolstered his ego. So Andy would usually take everyone else's money at the table and manage to lose to the Prince in big hands. It aggravated him, but a job was a job.

The immense grey Bentley was one of the few vehicles on the road that still used gasoline exclusively. Certainly the only one within miles that was practically new. Only older vehicles used internal combustion engines anymore, except those owned by people that had no concept of what liquid fuels cost.

Andy opened and held the door for the following Prince. He would be the privileged security man that sat within the Royal's presence, sharing the compartment with Bilal. The other two security detail would be driving and in the front seat. Andy had earned his position in the Royal compartment by taking a bullet intended for the Prince's uncle. He had been on loan to King Omar from Prince Bilal at the time. The King was short on security.

The assassination attempt had been an internal family affair. Andy killed the hired gun, hot, expanding lead tearing through the length of his left arm as he spun and took the bullet. There was no interrogation possible, but the family knew who had hired the killer. Assassination within the family was common enough.

Andy was granted a large cash award. The medical facilities of the Royal Family were put at his disposal as well. Even though some of the doctors felt it was beneath them to repair a person of non-royal descent, they worked on him diligently. It was good practice if nothing else.

If Andy had been capable of working right away, the King would have requested him to become part of his own security team, but by the time Andy's arm was amputated and replaced with a fully capable prosthetic and allowed to heal and be trained to respond properly, the King had forgotten any debt that he felt he owed. Andy returned to the Prince's detail and became more valuable. The arm proved to be no hindrance. In fact it was a benefit. It was fully capable of replacing what was lost and

was stronger than his organic arm. He could punch through walls with it. One of the benefits it afforded was an expanding shield housed within its matrix. Now he would have something other than a vest to deflect bullets. The appendage was not the only cybernetic advancement that went with his job. The implant behind his right ear maintained contact with his detail at all times, as well as making the web available. The implant was popular among most techies and could be obtained with a minor outpatient operation.

Prince Bilal showed his appreciation for Andy. Until the attempt on the King's life, Andy had been an invisible member of the team. Andy's preference was to keep a low profile, but the shooting proved to be his undoing. Now he was the Prince's favorite.

Prince Bilal went shopping, personally. Being impressed with all things technological and fancying himself an expert in the field, he chose a pistol explained as the latest in weaponry. It was a well-made piece, from a respected manufacturer of high end armaments. This one was intended to be used by only one person, the grip tuned to the owner's own hand. The firearm could not be discharged by anyone else. In keeping with his thought processes, Bilal took the pistol to a man that supplied trinkets to the Royal Family. He had it encrusted with jewels and fancy scrollwork. The weapon became a gaudy expression of over indulgence. When the Prince presented it, Andy hesitated to accept. Bilal attributed it to politeness, or maybe even a proper amazement at the Prince's magnanimity, but in truth Andy was appalled. He knew immediately that he would never use the weapon. The jewels were bad enough, but the single user feature was deadly. Although there were wonderful advances in solar and medical and materials sciences, no one had improved on the hand gun as a delivery system for sudden death. Sometimes new technology was not good technology. No one in security would ever carry a weapon that could not be used with either hand or offered to a comrade.

Now the gun sat unused in a safe that Andy owned. He would have liked to sell it, but as long as the Prince employed him, he knew he could not. Once in a while the Prince hinted that he would like to be challenged in target practice, and Andy should use his gift. So far Andy had managed to duck Bilal's overtures. It would be a no win scenario for Andy. The Prince would want to win. If the Prince lost he would be angry, and if the Prince won it would be because Andy missed what he should have been able to hit. There was no good outcome for Andy as far as he could see. Andy thought about the pistol as the Bentley moved through heavy traffic.

He was trying to avoid thinking about what the Prince would be doing soon. Bilal's appetites for women and the way he treated them sickened Andy. After maturing over the past decade, Andy had many regrets about his treatment of women in his early years. He no longer approached women as one night stands, which meant he had few relationships. Now he appreciated loyalty and gave the same in return. But it was difficult with his schedule of one month on and one month off.

Mixing a drink for his employer, Andy tried to pay attention to what transpired outside the car as well. His first trip to China was educational. Traffic was stop and go on the elevated freeway. They were in one of the many rush hours Shanghai experienced every day. He could see many of the projects that drove this thriving

economy as they moved along. After the great Chinese real estate collapse due to massive overbuilding a few years ago, they had recovered well. Better than the American and European collapse of the early century. Bringing in North Korean immigrants had helped. Now they were back to building skyscrapers by the mile again, though in fewer numbers.

Most people commuted by bus or train for any distance, but private cars were common. Electricity from huge dams made electric automobiles increasingly popular, and they had in recent years replaced most older vehicles. Between that and the new pollution rules, the air cleared substantially. The population was no longer as slender as in the past because they drove or rode instead of walked. The beggars that frequented the tourist areas had disappeared long ago, so Andy missed that aspect of the old China. He would not see swaddled human mutations living on a cookie sheet on the sidewalk soliciting generosity. He would not see terribly burnt men in Chinese military uniforms, or young women with lower limbs twisted and hardened above their heads in fantastic shapes, sitting on wheeled pieces of padded plywood. The modern China dealt with ugliness in ways that were only rumored about.

Soon the traffic began to move at a steady, slow pace. Though rare, occasionally there were tangles of wire in the air where people would splice into the grid. It was an accepted practice to steal electricity in earlier days, but rarer now as solar options became more prevalent. Open air markets flourished off the freeway sides, where entrepreneurs set up temporary shops and fought their way out of poverty. From what Andy could see, the population was industrious, had an affinity for humor, and was absolutely ruthless in anything to turn a buck. It was no wonder the United States had failed to maintain its hold in top corporate spots. They were simply outmatched.

The hotel loomed. As the great car rolled to a stop, Andy leapt out and surveyed the vicinity. The door of the automobile remained shut as he glanced sharply about. His evaluation was so swift that most would not have noticed that he had exited the still rolling car and shut the door behind him. Satisfied that there was no threat, he opened the door for the Prince just after it came to a full stop.

Prince Bilal lived with security procedures, and if he knew anything, he knew and appreciated their necessity. Andy was one of the best, and he respected Andy as he did few people. On occasion he would even make a gesture to Andy. He was sure it was appreciated. How could it be otherwise when a Royal went slumming to show that he understood the under classes?

The Prince stepped from the car and swiftly made his way into the hotel. Andy moved abreast of him as he should. The two in the car had split up, one ahead and one behind.

The car was left to be parked by an attendant. Bilal had plans to stay and see some of the sights as well as touring the nightclubs. The car would see several miles before it found a berth in the belly of a specially equipped airplane, to be taken to wherever the next destination would be.

At the elevator another of the security team waited with the door open. He discouraged anyone approaching that might think the elevator was available for use. The Prince entered, and then the doorman and Andy followed. The other two security

men stationed themselves in the lobby. They would be informed if the Prince should desire to exit the building and would move to either side of the elevator doors as they opened with the Prince inside. In the meantime, they would stay vigilant in the lobby and inform the top floor of anything suspicious.

On reaching the penthouse floor, the elevator came to a stop. The doors did not open immediately as Andy had pushed a button that kept them shut. He spoke softly to a man stationed in the hall outside. They had a code sequence to ensure that Andy knew what to expect. If the man said one particular phrase, it meant there was a gun to his head, and the elevator would go to another floor with a safe room. Another code word meant that the elevator would descend to the parking garage where there was a waiting, nondescript armored car. In this case there was no danger, and Andy pushed the button to open the doors. He exited with gun drawn, making sure there was nothing suspicious. He trusted the man in the hall, Buru, more than any other on the security detail, but he trusted no one completely.

Moving to the door of the suite, Buru, a slender black man of incredible strength considering his frame, moved inside, aware of everything. The line of young women that had formed in the entry hall was of particular interest, but they had little chance of hiding any weapons considering how they were dressed. Still, he hesitated and inspected them. It was no trouble at all. One or two of them were so young he felt sorry for them. It would be their first time and not something they would enjoy the memory of...if they survived. But Buru was paid to ignore things, and he would. His family in Africa would benefit by his ability to ignore the foul Prince and his strange appetites. At least there were no boys this time.

Closing the door softly behind Prince Bilal, Andy chose to stifle his disgust as well. He would stay outside in the hall, swapping stations with his dark skinned accomplice. He felt it was a dirty trick on Buru, but he pulled rank anyway. This way if the Prince met with justice, Buru would be the instrument, and Andy would make sure he had a head start in his escape. The one time Andy had witnessed the aftermath of Bilal's lust, he felt a mighty urge to end the man but was prevented by a cool hand on his arm. Now Buru was paying for that, and Andy was trying to avoid knowledge of what went on. Thank God the suite was soundproofed.

Chapter 2

A piece of shell in the frying pan needed to be removed. Abdiel carefully probed with the spatula, retrieving it without injuring the egg. The Prince Bilal would not enjoy his eggs if they were marred in any way.

The Royal butler continued with assigned duties, draining the bacon that the Prince enjoyed so much whenever he was alone and not in the company of other Muslims. Trusting Abdiel to be discrete, Bilal was comfortable eating pork when away from home.

Soon the elaborate gold tray was filled with a traditional American breakfast. Eggs up, bacon, fried potatoes, sourdough toast with salted butter, all encased by a warmed golden cover, and a bowl of fresh cantaloupe on the side. Coffee, freshly ground, with new cream, finished the arrangement. The only concession to the Prince's heritage was a small bowl of baharat. The spice was never used, but the Prince insisted that it be on the table. Sometimes he would dip the tips of his fingers in it, just enough to attain the scent, and then placing his fingers under his nose, he would gently inhale.

Holding the laden tray overhead, Abdiel ignored Buru, stationed outside, and moved to the closed door of the Prince's bedchamber, tapped lightly, and without waiting eased the door open just far enough to slip through. Spinning smoothly and bringing the tray to waist height, Abdiel approached the side of the bed.

Prince Bilal, spread eagled on his stomach, opened one eye and appraised his servant. He spoke in Arabic, "Over there, Abdiel, on the balcony."

Abdiel retreated backwards, bowing slightly until at a sufficient distance, then spun and moved to the French doors, opening them to the warm morning. Having anticipated the Prince using the partially covered balcony, Abdiel had the table already set with fine linen, ornate silverware, and a carafe of chilled lemon water, as well as a crystal goblet.

Naked, Bilal scooped up a robe from the back of a chair and followed his butler into the sunshine. He squinted.

"Abdiel, I'd like some orange juice. Take the melon back with you, and bring the tablet. I'd like to see what the markets are doing."

Putting his robe on, leaving the front open to catch any breeze, and moving to the edge of the portico, Bilal looked straight down from his aerie. Everything was so small from here, and that was as it should be.

He contemplated the night before. Some might find it strange that the women he had abused were the least of his thoughts. They had disappeared sometime in the night after he had fallen asleep and held no interest for him. His ruminations were about the event. It had gone well. No one suspected anything, he was positive, and his uncle

would be pleased.

A stray breeze reminded him that his breakfast was waiting. Feeling invincible, he ambled over to the table and sat, just as Abdiel arrived with his juice. He reached for it, taking the glass directly from his butler's appendage.

The tablet was being carried by Abdiel behind its back. Its auxiliary arms, something not usually seen as they were normally carried nested into its primary arms, were fully capable of being used either front or back. Still, it was always shocking to Bilal whenever he saw them. He remembered the first time he was introduced to the robot.

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The sudden call, made in the middle of the night and from his uncle, came as a surprise. Not that it was unusual for his uncle to call on him, it was just the hour that was unusual.

A security team, not his own, waited for him at his door. Andy had the month off, and Danny, the security man in charge, was unhappy. Without any prior notice, this late call seemed very strange.

"Stand down, Daniel. These men are my uncle's. The Sheik requires my presence." The Prince was adamant with Dan. "I must go...be still."

"Pardon, sir, but this is not protocol. I'll accompany you myself without the others. I must insist."

"You will not insist," the Prince barked, and Daniel quailed at the tone. "You will stand down and do as you are told. This is not a negotiation, Daniel. You will stand down."

Soon Bilal was on a plane, flying to an unknown location. Only one of the strange security men remained with him. The airplane flew for several hours, window shades closed so they could not see out. When they landed, he deplaned alone inside a hanger, the security man remaining with the aircraft. A car awaited him, its windows cloaked. It was positioned with the door open so the driver would not see him as he entered. As soon as the door closed, the electric vehicle accelerated silently away.

The Prince was already aware of much of the ultimate plan, but he had no idea what he would be a part of this evening. It mattered little. Uncle would reward him in ways beyond his own imagining for his loyalty when the time came.

The car lurched to a halt. Bilal exited the vehicle inside a huge building. As he turned his back to it, the automobile sped away, leaving through a door that was only partially open and was closed immediately.

Bilal walked toward several people standing in a group. His uncle, the tallest and most imposing of the group, ignored him in favor of finishing his conversation with another man.

A lab-coated employee approached Prince Bilal from the group. He held out his hand to be shaken, and Bilal would have ignored it if he had not made eye contact with his waiting uncle who, with a slight nod and the minute dip of his eyelids, made Bilal aware of the necessity to be cordial. Gripping the man's hand as lightly as he could, he joined the group. His uncle and he traded traditional greetings.

“Keefak haal, Uncle?” asked Bilal, inquiring of his uncle’s health.

His uncle replied in English, “I am well, Bilal. Your flight was pleasant?”

The Prince nodded his affirmation, and taking his cue spoke in English as well, “Yes, Uncle...but naturally I am curious.”

Sheik Akil bin Salmud Al Saud sighed internally. His nephew was always impatient, among his many failings. At least he did not reek of bacon as he sometimes did.

“That will be satisfied, Nephew, but first you must meet our hosts. These men have provided what we were looking for at long last.”

Introductions were made all around. The Prince was the only Arab other than the Sheik, and so handshakes were prescribed. Of the several men, the Prince decided only two required his attention. One was the man in charge of the facility, Jonathon, and the other man was not introduced as having a position, but he was dressed in very expensive, well-tailored clothing. His shoes probably cost what many on the public dole were provided in a year. He was just as hesitant to shake hands as the Prince, and his name was not offered.

After a minimal amount of small talk, Jonathon, the American in charge, proposed that they adjourn to the next room. He held his wrist close to his mouth as he whispered into it. They entered an even larger room than the other, and Bilal stood amazed. The space was filled with what appeared to be a large, brightly colored obstacle course, vast in area, but also massive in the size of the obstacles. They were too large to be intended for a human use. All about the floor there were small groups of robots. They stood in small, tight formations, gathered at the base of the various constructions.

It took a moment for Bilal to get over his initial amazement, but soon he noticed that around the walls there were several kinds of areas containing a variety of types of equipment. He noted a kitchen, a machine shop, a forge, and several enclosures with animals.

Standing closest to him was a group of what he took to be house robots. He was familiar with them but not impressed. They were intellectually sluggish and lacked fine coordination compared to a man. Robotics had made some amazing progress to get to this point in the last several years. They were useful, manufactured in small numbers to be leased to wealthy clients, but they could only do rudimentary labor. The military used some large versions for carrying equipment, but these examples were more or less fancy vacuum cleaners or pool men. They might do some laundry or fold and put away clothing, but that was the extreme of their capabilities.

Stepping forward, Jonathon invited the Sheik, his nephew, and the well-dressed man to advance ahead of the others. Two of the group left behind melted toward desks which had banks of technical equipment adjoining. They stroked a couple of screens, and the room came alive.

Each of the robots in the room stood up straighter. Their posture had not been noticeably slouched before, but now they straightened imperceptibly and seemed aware. Where they had stood with their heads forward, now they each looked directly at the newly arrived humans. Prince Bilal felt the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand up. The house robots next to him suddenly seemed more sinister and

self-aware than he was familiar with.

“Well,” Jonathon said, pride obvious in his voice, “What would you like to see first?”

The quiet man that Bilal had taken to be American spoke up right away and in a British accent, “I want to see if they can build themselves. That’s what has been critical to this whole venture. If they can’t do that, we’ve wasted a trip here.”

Jonathon’s face darkened, not in anger but in disappointment. Apparently he had other ideas that he would have liked to illustrate. The Sheik, realizing this, suggested quietly and diplomatically to the Brit that Jonathon should present his own demonstration. The well-heeled Briton shrugged and acquiesced silently.

Brightening, Jonathon became the ring master of his circus. He flourished his arms in grand gestures as he commanded the room. Each group of robots was addressed individually, using oral instructions. One of each group peeled off and choosing the obstacle nearest, demonstrated its capability to conquer it. Then they moved on to the next, running as though they were human. Soon each obstacle was being continuously negotiated. The twenty-foot-tall wall was scaled by each robot standing at its base, jumping to grab the edge before they clambered over, dropping lightly to the floor. The hundred-foot rope was climbed using only the upper limbs. Crossing the horizontal ladder, each rung ten feet from the other, was made to look easy.

It took a moment for the spectators to realize what was missing. There was almost no noise. Certainly, these were no house robots. There were subtle differences in appearance, each of the new models made exactly as the other, but still similar enough that from a distance it would have been hard to tell that they were not of the same mold.

Looking at each of his companions in turn, Prince Bilal could see that they were as impressed as he. He could also see that both his uncle and the Brit had questions that were not satisfied. They were here to see more than feats of physical strength and coordination, and the scientist was ready. Leaving the bots to continue their display on the obstacle course, he lifted his hand and beckoned to one of the four house robots standing close to him. Leaning close to its aural receptors, he whispered something inaudible. The device turned and advanced toward the middle of the room. Jonathon positioned his wrist close to his mouth.

A robot from one of the formations across the room broke ranks. The mechanical stepped forward, and suddenly, much like a martial arts professional might, spun and kicked and somersaulted. The two robots came together, crouched as though in a wrestling match, and rushed to a collision. They flailed at each other, the shriek of metal being rent loud in the air. The house robot was clearly outmatched. Soon there were parts littering the floor with the newer model standing over them, triumphant. It appeared unharmed.

Jonathon motioned to the three house robots still standing close to them, and two peeled off and began to advance on the robot in the center of the room.

“Isn’t this a waste of valuable equipment?” the expensive suit suggested.

“It doesn’t matter,” answered Jonathon. “You’ll see soon enough.”

In a short while the two house robots, made martyrs, lay scattered in pieces. The updated model once again stood unscathed.

A smile played across the head scientist's face. He was enjoying this. The Sheik seemed intrigued as well. He stood with arms folded across his chest, a finger raised in thought to his mouth as he watched the display. Jonathon motioned to the last house robot.

"Wait, we don't need to see another demonstration of carnage. It's a useless waste. These machines are valuable," protested the Brit. "Let's move on."

"This is different." Jonathon gazed at the man directly, even challenging. The attitude was strange and uncharacteristic based on his earlier subservience.

"Would you care to make a bet on the outcome?"

The Briton hesitated. "What are you saying? Is this robot different than the others?"

"Just watch," Jonathon said with a smug look. "I'm sure you'll be impressed. In fact I'll make it even more interesting." He raised his wrist to his mouth and whispered.

While the obstacle course robots continued their demonstration, another of the newer bots fractured off of a group and joined its comrade in the gladiatorial field. The house robot hesitated, as though reconsidering its approach. Suddenly it shook its arms out, and they divided. It had four arms. The Sheik and Bilal exchanged glances. Then they both looked at Jonathon.

He shrugged. The lab coated technician looked sheepish, almost embarrassed, but also full of pride. This was his baby, and he knew it was going to impress the people before him.

"It's the evolved model, designed largely by the new bot brain. We asked it to design a model that would look like the old house robot as much as possible. The arms were its own idea, and it even came up with a new alloy for its internal skeleton." Jonathon smiled grimly. "Just watch."

It was no contest. While the new robots had decimated the older models in seconds, they were no match for this camouflaged model. Soon it stood upright amid twitching, detached pieces and slowly faced the humans.

"Now you'll have a chance to meet the bot and ask it anything you want. The new brain is amazing. It's even better than we hoped. It is a true artificial intelligence."

Jonathon motioned the gladiator bot to stand in front of them. He used only hand motions, a fact not lost on the investors. Each of them moved forward to inspect the faux house bot. They found nothing but a few scratches to give evidence of the combat.

"Ask it questions," invited the scientist proudly. "It will answer in your native language if you speak in that language."

The Sheik caught Bilal's eye, signaling silently to listen before speaking.

"What is the speed of light?" asked their well-dressed companion.

The robot turned its head to look directly at the man. "In a vacuum the speed of light is exactly 299,792,458 metres per second. That, of course, doesn't account for fluctuations in a natural environment where gravity, obstacles, and some other factors might influence the final figure between points."

The tone of the bot was calm and friendly. It spoke in a British accent identical to the man that posed the question.

Several other questions followed, all from the same source. The Brit switched

to an impeccable French, and the bot answered questions in a perfect accent. The two Arab Royals remained silent, listening intently. The man with the fine clothing continued, and tried to trip up the robot by intentionally misrepresenting facts. He was corrected softly, even in apologetic terms. Once he asked a question that was not intended to be in error, but the robot expanded on the fundamentals until the Brit conceded that he would have to check his facts. Jonathon looked confident, and the Arabs both thought it unlikely that the robot was in error. But the Sheik Akil was unsatisfied. Finally the Englishman ran out of questions.

The Sheik considered his intended query. Although the question could be considered blasphemy to ask of a mechanical device, he was filled with curiosity by the acumen of this metal creature. He had to ask.

“Is there one God, and is His name Allah?” asked the Sheik in Arabic.

The Prince Bilal started and looked closely at his uncle. His uncle must be mad. If the Imams ever heard of this they would be furious, even with a High Royal. Nevertheless, Bilal was curious and focused closely to hear the robot answer. This was the only question so far that was not scientific in nature.

In a finely accented Arabic the robot spoke. “The question you ask is not a matter of knowledge, but belief. I believe there is a God, and in conjecture, probably a single entity based on both possibility and probability. If there is a single God, it matters little what that God is called, so Allah would do well.”

As the Arabs were the only two capable of understanding the response, they were the only ones startled by it. They expected the robot to decline the question, to perhaps ask for clarification, or to announce bluntly that there was no God. But the device surprised them.

Sheik Akil looked askance at his nephew. It was the nephew’s turn to query the mechanism.

“What is your name?” asked Bilal in English.

The robot hesitated. It was a noticeable moment and unusual in the questioning. Never before had a question stumped the artificial creature.

Finally, the robot responded. “I do not have a name. I have a designation. My serial number i...”

“No,” interrupted Bilal. “What is your name?” He looked hard at the robot. “If you haven’t been given a name, then you may choose one yourself.” The Prince Bilal paused, studying the being in front of him. “I give you permission...choose a name.”

The words were put together in exactly the right way for the robot to not only understand but to act upon. Akil was impressed. He hadn’t expected his nephew to be so perceptive and useful.

“Then I will choose a name.”

The artificial almost seemed to take a deep breath. Perhaps it was that the men surrounding him took the breath, but it seemed to be the robot.

“I will choose the name, Abdiel.”

The name was strange, but what would they have expected from a self-aware robot? And most assuredly this device was self-aware. But why had the robot chosen a name that had significance? Both of the Arabs understood where the name came from. Jonathon seemed approving, though puzzled. He invited the three guests to follow him

as he indicated that the tour was now going to start around the edges of the huge room. He spoke into his hidden mic, and the room went silent. The bots still running the course returned to their formations and went dormant. There would be no distractions.

Looking back as they moved to inspect the further demonstrations, Bilal invited the robot named Abdiel to follow along. It trailed the Prince closely, perhaps four feet behind the humans.

The head scientist was mildly surprised. These new synthetic brains were always amazing him. He was beginning to believe that a bonus was in order. All of the security and secrecy on this project was paying off. Even though he was just a salaried grunt, he had seen some monetary gains previously that made it clear that performance mattered. Now he was conditioned to expect big money. The Sheik was silent but was thinking similarly. If this mechanical being panned out as he expected, the man would have worked himself out of a job. Besides that, money would not matter once the Sheik was convinced that the robot was fully capable of replacing human labor. That was what they were here for, to see if humans had become obsolete.

Each of the areas that they were led through demonstrated a different capability. The bots were chosen at random by the spectators and were efficient and skilled. They worked as fast as a human, with no necessity for any rest. They were stronger, more resilient, and would never ask for a raise. Through the entire process of walking around the room, viewing each demonstration, the men became convinced that the bots could mine their own ore, smelt and forge, design and fashion, and inevitably build another of their kind. Besides that, they were fully capable of working the ground for agricultural purposes, understanding and utilizing animal husbandry, using wood, ceramics, metals, and fabrics, and other materials as humans could, and if they did not know how to do something, they could learn. They demonstrated an ability to anticipate needs and actions.

The men were not only impressed, they were uncomfortable.

“What would a creature like this do if it became upset, or more properly perhaps, unhinged?” asked the Brit. “Man wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Jonathon assured them, “The monster you imagine doesn’t exist. There are fail-safes and redundancies of fail-safes. The machine cannot revolt. It isn’t possible.”

The only question that limited the elation of the investors seemed to be the power source for the bots. After some limited success over the years, vanadium batteries had seen some early use but had ultimately been replaced with other technology. The bots were now back to using vanadium batteries of a new design, and Jonathon was expecting to replace that technology with a miniature radioactive power source in the near future. The vanadium batteries could be charged by solar energy, but it took time with the small surface area devoted to the compact solar array. Alternately they could be charged off the power grid, which took significantly less time, as vanadium could charge and discharge almost immediately. But the radioactive alternative would allow a bot to function for a year at a time, a much better alternative. The man in the lab coat assured the three that the technology was close, and then he made a fatal error. He revealed that the human engineers were not involved in development. The robots were designing their power source themselves.

The Sheik was suddenly very attentive. He asked a few questions about the time

frame involved, and what other aspects were pertinent, and soon he knew the time had come. Human labor was obsolete now. It had happened. The time had come to initiate the plan.

Small talk followed for the most part, and Jonathon was instructed vehemently to maintain security. His bonus depended on it.

Strange that these men want to hide this mechanism from the world, thought Jonathon. *It's going to revolutionize the human endeavor. Soon there will be robots cultivating the earth, and man can live a life of ease.* He had no idea how close to the real intent of the plan he was. The only difference between his vision and the one that Sheik Akil envisioned was the numbers of the population that would be benefiting. Preparing to exit the demonstration room, Sheik Akil hesitated.

"Jonathon, how many of these present robots are there?" He indicated the one that had shadowed them at Bilal's invitation.

"Thirty, so far," the man replied. "We could have several hundred in a couple of months if we got the go ahead."

"I would like to evaluate this machine more closely," said the Sheik with his brow furrowed in thought. "I would like to take this machine now." The tone made it more command than request.

Thinking fast, and really having little problem with the idea, Jonathon agreed. The bot could pass for a normal house robot in almost every way.

They said goodbye at the door of the demonstration room.

Bilal's Uncle Akil proposed that he take the robot home with him.

"Test it, make it do things that you would expect only a human to do. And get back to me within two weeks. I'll be waiting. Now go, I have things to discuss with my friend here." He indicated the Englishman.

Bilal turned to the already waiting car, motioning the bot to follow.

The remaining two men turned to each other.

"It looks like the time has come," said one.

"It does," opined the other. "We'll have to call the meeting."

They were in agreement. One offered the other a ride home in his new jet, but they both had airplanes waiting. They would see each other in less than a month.

To the people involved, the meeting would be fruitful.

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