

THE INLANDS I:

The Man with the Stone

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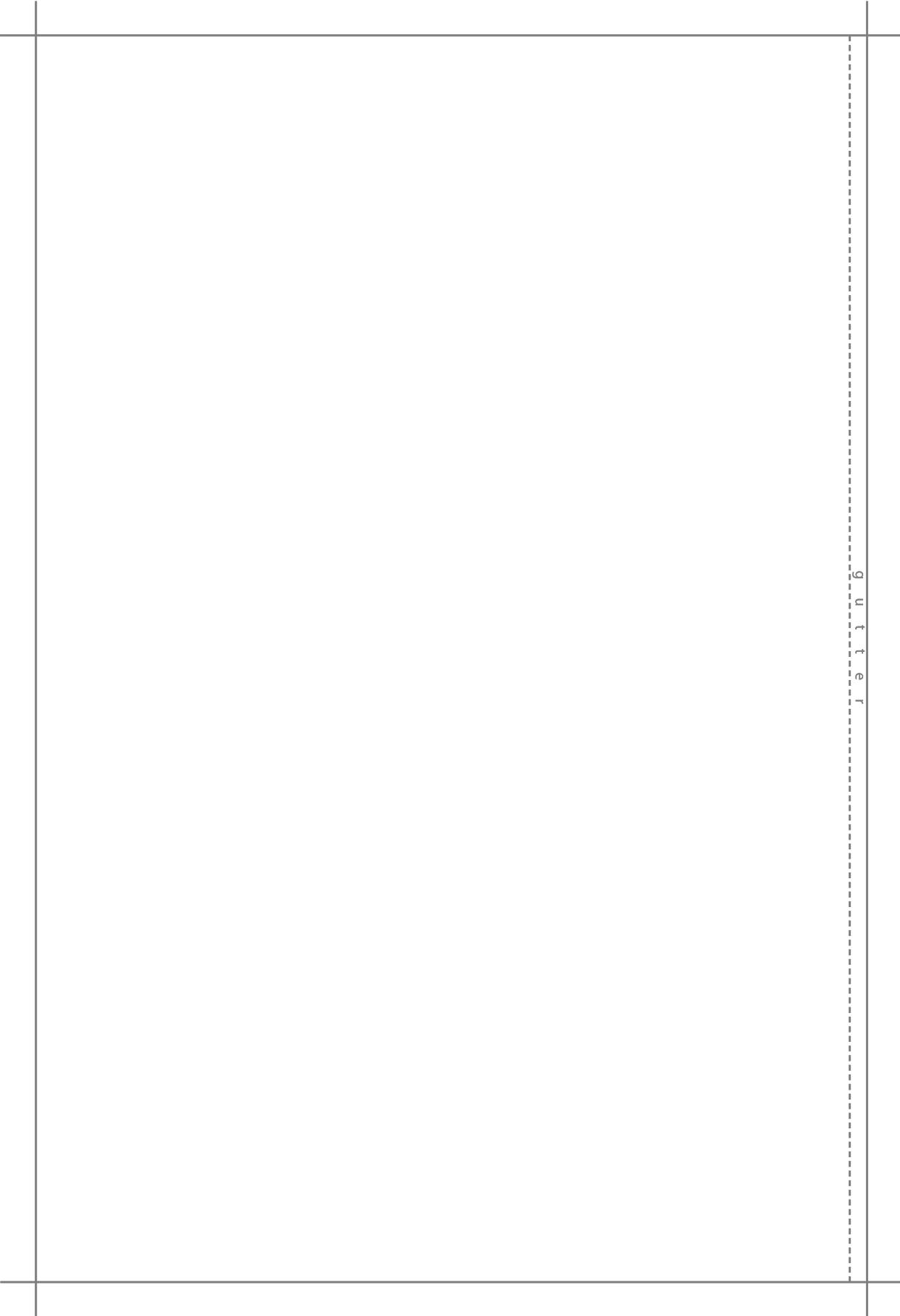
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*For my family. And my beautiful girlfriend Deanna.
Thanks for the support and the patience.*



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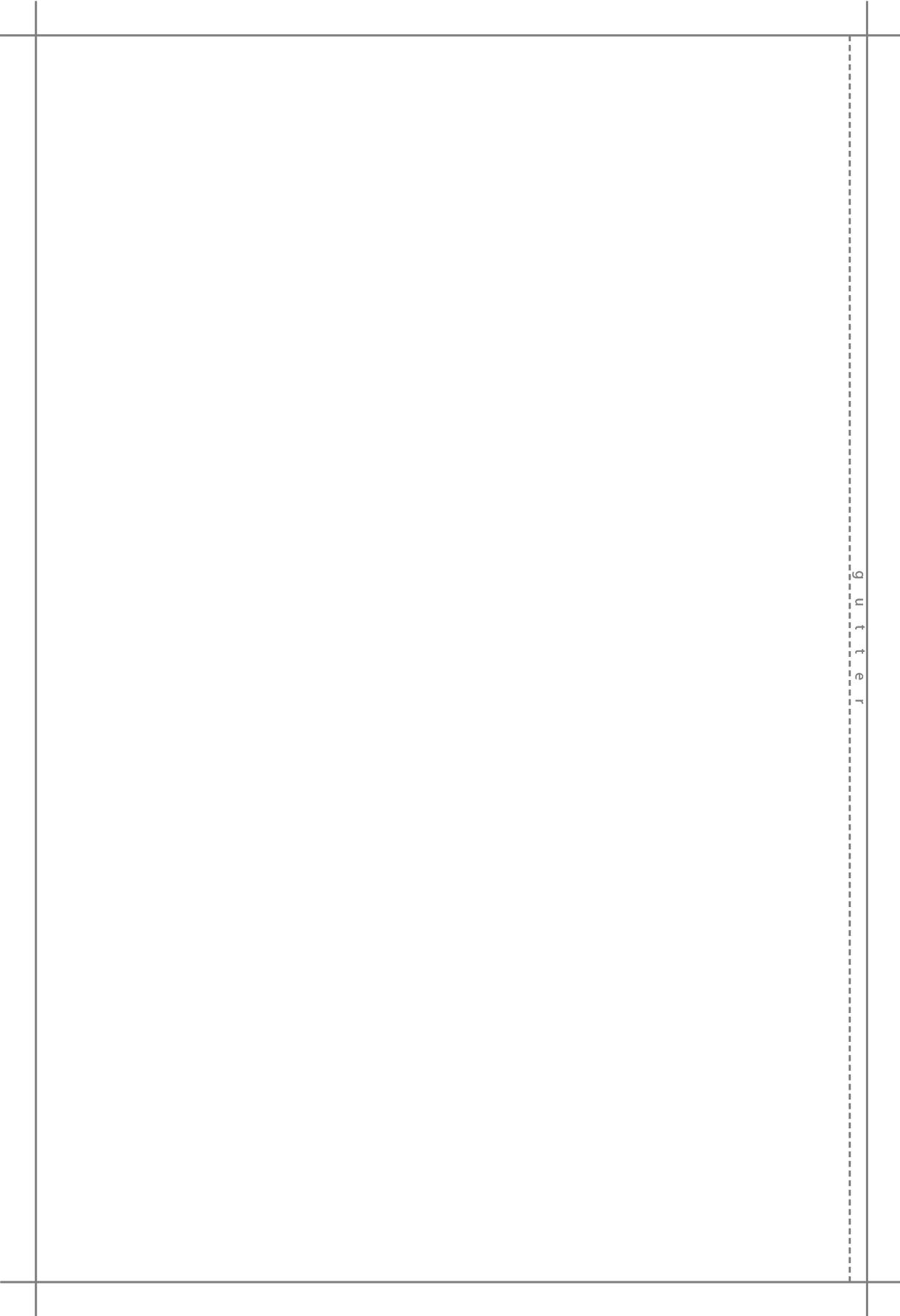
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PART I

THE MINES

*"There are other worlds than these." —Jake, *The Gunslinger*.*

Stephen King



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CHAPTER 1

THE SURVEILLANCE ROBOT

1

Edwin Krollup was the richest man in town, perhaps in the country. He lived in a huge mansion on top of a hill over the old coalmines. Why he lived there was suspect, though most people agreed his house was purely for show, taunting the entire city below with his wealth.

His house was like a castle really, the towers of the Krollup dynasty he'd like to say, with large arches and a steeped gothic roof. It had three chimneys jutting from the slanted roof like bricked cigars, as if revealing to the very town below Mr. Krollup's constant appetite for Cubans.

There was a huge courtyard around the mansion, densely vegetated with gardens, trimmed trees and hedges, and a winding path that snaked around statues, each held atop carved pedestals like Doric columns. The yard was bordered by a stone wall, gated at either ends of the house, and monitored by the Krollup security team.

Money wasn't a problem for Edwin Krollup. In fact, he would never run out of money. Edwin Krollup desired power. Perhaps that explained his tall house, and the yard guarded by countless statues. And perhaps that explained why he created both local sports teams, the Blackbird baseball club, and the Pigskin football team, which itself had been involved in two Super Bowls. Unfortunately Mr. Krollup wears no tacky ring made of gold with the Pigskin logo splashed across it in diamonds, because his team managed to lose both championships; in fact, just last year Mr. Krollup himself became so angry in his President's Club box, that he ripped his cigar in half and wished the field would split in two so that the humiliation of his team could be stopped. During the half time show it was a coincidence that the field should cave in

on the fifty-yard line, and the float that teen singing sensation Brittany Arrow stood upon broke in two as it collapsed down the chasm—needless to say, the game was delayed while the field was fixed, and poor Brittany was escorted to the infirmary. Edwin Krollup was delighted at the stoppage, but was ashamed to watch the remainder of the game. The Pigskins lost 43-14.

And here *he* sat, Edwin Krollup, looking out the curved windows from his bedroom with one of his coveted cigars held between two hairy fingers. He had the telephone to his ear. His legs were crossed, sticking out of the open flaps of his long robe, a robe he believed made him look like a king. He chugged on the long cigar and blew tendrils of smoke from his nose into the phone. Apparently he didn't like what he was hearing, because a man of Krollup's pedigree rarely stayed quiet. It was his voice that did all the talking, but his mind was on other things at the moment. This conversation was, at least for the time being, an effective method of patience.

"Listen, it isn't about wins; attendance is high because of atmosphere. You have to look at it from a business perspective if you want these negotiations to get anywhere." He wanted to add, *you nitwit*, but thought better of it. Perhaps it was the cigar that was calming him down, or the soothing notion of the sun against the panes of glass in his room, but he knew he wanted to sell his stupid baseball club; he hated losers, and the Blackbirds were a big bunch of them.

He took one last drag of his cigar and put the end out with his fingers, wincing slightly as the ashes fell between his knuckles. "So be it, but you're missing out Mr. Johnson. My club has potential, and if an ingrate like yourself can't reasonably see that, well, then you don't deserve the benefit of owning this team." He slammed the phone and muttered under his breath. He had gotten the last word, and that was good, but he hadn't sold the team, and that was bad. After offering big Barry "Five-Hundred Footer" Stocks a huge contract to come over to the Birds only to get downright rejected in a much ballyhooed press conference, well, his patience with the stupid team had diminished.

Edwin stood up, closed his robe and stuck his feet into golden slippers that had his initials embroidered in silver stitching. The little guy had to be done by now, there was no way around it. Edwin walked to the grand staircase, which curved downwards to the front hall. His robe fell behind him as he descended.

He walked across the marble, onto a lush carpet and past a fireplace that despite the comfortable weather outside, constantly housed a fire. He passed two maids, a cook, and a security guard doing his hourly rounds. He nodded to all of them, but never broke his forward stare. A man of his prestige rarely

ever needed to converse with the common folk; he had people on the payroll that did such things for him.

Edwin turned into a corridor that led to two huge maple doors, both with sharp looking stones carved into them in a wooden avalanche that swung inwards when he pushed them. When they shut behind him he turned and locked the doors. While doing so his robe opened and a necklace popped out in front of him—a thick gold chain with a rock that hung near his hairy breastplate. When he clasped the stone for a second he seemed to levitate slightly, as if his feet hung suspended three inches from the plush red carpet. No, that couldn't be possible; it was probably some trick of the eye, but there was a slight fluff as his feet returned to the ground. Edwin tucked the stone back into his robe and closed it.

He was standing in an office—his office actually. There were huge bookcases against the far wall that touched the roof; they must have been filled with hundreds of books, and some shelves contained weird artifacts, like skulls that were chipped and arrows that were broken in half. On his wall he had mounted the head of an elephant, something he had flown in illegally from Africa, and in glass display cases he had mannequins dressed in armor, golden chest plates adorned in jewels, and weaponry that seemed to have dulled over the ages. He paid no attention to any of this. Edwin Krollup walked over to a wall with one simple picture in a simple silver frame; it was a picture of a mineshaft.

Edwin knocked on the wall under the picture. He waited a moment until there was a slight rumble from the other side, a sound like shifting stone. His brow furrowed and he pressed his hand firmly against the wall and pushed. Something funny happened next, for this wall he leaned against was actually a door. Edwin pushed himself right into the next room, and pulled his robe through the opening before the wall closed on it.

And there he stood, his slippers not on the plush red carpet in his office, but on rock that looked rather slick in places and dangerous in others. The wall he had pushed through was wood, and had silver hinges lined along the right hand side, but ten or so inches from the wooden door and plaster beyond, laid a bed of rock that crept into darkness. The smell in here was weird, like dank mud and old earth mixed with steel shavings and smoke.

There were extension cords snaking around the floor, connecting either to the drills atop a small table, or the television monitors secured to the wall across from Edwin. To his right there was a slight flickering light through sparse grout in brick, where he had patched up a wall himself between the fireplace and this little room. He could vaguely hear the logs splitting and wondered why he hadn't had the contractors build a better wall when they were finishing the house.

Because you weren't married then Eddie, and there weren't kids running around the house either...little spies they are.

That much was true. Edwin rather liked hearing the stories people came up with, how and why he built on top of the mines, and what specific purpose they served him. Ever since he purchased the property from the city, there were speculations that assumed he was a druid feeding the earth sacrificial bodies; that he was, he laughed at this one, building an underground shrine to the Auger mining crew which was lost in the mine explosions forty-six years ago.

Lying in the center of the rocky room, lit only by a few light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, was a crude looking machine: a square of metal with different cables leaking out like innards, two long arms with hydraulic pumps as elbows and stubby little steel legs that ended on blocks of aluminum with wheels at their base. Atop the abdomen of cables sat a small square of metal that had been hollowed and filled with what looked like the lens of a camera and the frame of a flashlight. From the lens exploded thick cables that lined into the back of the steel frame. Surrounding the mess of metal there stood three robots, two of which were alloy compositions of Edwin himself, only crudely different in that the robots domes were completely bald, and whose hands lacked the fingers necessary to hold a good cigar. All three were turned off.

Standing in front of Edwin—or *cowering*—was a short man in a white lab coat that unlike his oddly long hair, seemed rather clean. He stood with his shoulders stooped and his neck collapsed, staring up at Edwin with two puppy dog eyes that were attempting to elicit any sympathy they could. His wrinkled face was lined with silver shavings that looked like a tinsel beard; he was bald on top, but had long graying hair at either side of his ears, which hung down to his neck and curled up like greasy check marks. Both his hands were badly scarred, and were clasped together in front of him.

“Are you finished?”

The little man in the lab coat, who had a little cot set up in the corner of the rocky room, swallowed deeply until he could produce a sound in his throat. “It just won’t stand up yet. The camera works fine, I tested it already but—”

“Step aside Leonardo.” He pushed the little man as he walked to the mess of steel, which had been made from old box springs, sections of an old car frame and old VHS players. Edwin crouched beside the sitting robot and put his hands underneath each arm. He lifted it, only the wheels on the bottom of the robot’s feet rolled along the ground and swooped its legs out from under it, sending both the robot and Edwin to the ground.

Edwin turned red, tilted to one side as he rubbed his rear. “Sometimes I don’t understand your idiocy. You build robots with simple response devices... you built this robot from *scratch*, yet you don’t understand why it doesn’t balance?” Edwin got up and pointed at the stubby little legs on the machine. The wheels on the bottom of the robot were lined single file, like roller blades, obviously emphasizing the robot’s tendency to lean and topple.

“Common sense Leo, common sense.” He tapped his temple. “Every day it gets easier to understand how you got caught by the police.”

Leo turned red. Thoughts of the outside world infuriated him because he was forced to leave that world, to leave it and enter this cave...this pathetic little operation. He squeezed his hands together very tightly until his knuckles turned white and the dirt that had been deeply stained was pushed further into his flesh.

Edwin bent down and tore every wheel from the robot with his bare hands. “Fix it, or I *will* tell the proper authorities where you are hiding. Sometimes I wonder why I saved you. Believe me Leo, there are people outside this wall that would be ecstatic to get the arrest.” He smiled, and wished he hadn’t put out the cigar in his room.

Leo swallowed again and waited to cool down a moment. “Y-you suhsuppose I should rearrange the wheels in a square pattern?”

Edwin crossed his arms and the rock necklace fell from out of his robe. When Leo saw this he shivered; he could feel the room vibrating under his feet, as if the rocks were calling out together in a terrible scream. Edwin was floating again. This time he could tell because he could see the rock wall under his feet...not around them, but actually under them. Edwin pushed the necklace back under his collar and with a light bump his feet fell back to the ground.

Instead of hesitating, Leo did just what he had said; he grabbed his socket and the wheels that had been scattered and started working with the terrible image of Edwin Krollup standing in midair as the rocks beneath praised him.

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Little pieces of rock embedded in the ground started to crack from the surface and soar to the wall in pee lines. They stuck in places creating a thin dust, and Edwin Krollup sat watching as Leonardo bent over the robot’s feet with the socket. One of the robots that had been standing was turned on; its eyes lit a luminescent yellow. It was holding the wheels in its palm.

Edwin's hand was inside a flap of robe, and he licked his lips as the pebbles splattered the wall in front of him; there was little sound, just the small cracks of dirt falling back to the ground. "Are you finished that poor excuse for a machine yet?"

Leo wavered at the sound of the voice behind him. The robot which held the wheels on its palm looked towards the master—as Edwin was deemed to be called during programming—and said in its rickety old robot voice, "in a moment sir."

That monotone voice...that *utterly* ridiculous drone. Edwin turned his attention from the pebbles for the time being and frowned at the robot. The ground underneath the robot split and rose a few inches and the machine teetered, losing the wheels on its tray hand, which fell onto Leo's head causing him to turn as he twisted the socket, missing the bolt and hitting his thumb. He muffled a curse word.

"None of that Leo, you don't want to teach these pitiless creatures that kind of rubbish."

"I'm sorry Mr. Krollup, it's just..."

"It's just nothing, you hurry and finish. You know what I can do to you." With anger in his voice, Edwin reached into his robe and grabbed the necklace, rising from the ground again, causing a big chunk of rock to rip from the wall and land on Leonardo's cot, shredding the mattress. Leo looked at his bed in horror—had he heard glass shatter? He looked under the bed quickly to see if his old aquarium had broken. "Look what you made me do Leo. And you won't be getting a new one till the end of the month. You should think first before you decide to talk back."

"Yes sir," Leo said, as he wiped the blood from his thumb onto his clean lab coat, which wasn't so clean anymore. He tried to duck his head down low enough to look under his box spring, but it was too dark to see anything.

Edwin returned his attention to the pebbles.

Five minutes later, Leo got up from his knees and dusted down his front. He didn't bother saying anything to Krollup—a name that seemed more monster than it did human. He just grabbed the remote he had built from an old VHS and blender and switched on the television monitors. A thick snow covered the screens and the room flickered a pale white. Leo bent down and turned on the camera inside the robot's head. Two monitors waved in and out between that irritating snow and a hazy image of two hobbled over robots, with the rocky wall behind a distant fuzz. There was no color; just navy blue and light blue almost, which most considered black and white.

Leo pulled the analog stick on the remote and both hydraulic pumps on the robot's arms revved to life. There was a grinding sound, and then both

arms straightened as the robot lifted from the ground. The image on the monitors began to rise with the robot's head.

Edwin was fascinated by the procedure. The little guy was practically senile, but when it came to machinery, Leo couldn't be beat. When the robot was fully erect, standing balanced on its new wheels, Edwin clapped. He couldn't help it. This was a job well done. The camera even worked, which was the most important part if they were going to send this thing deep into the mines.

"Thank you sir," Leo said, until he caught sight of all the pebbles embedded in the wall beside Edwin. While he completed the robot, Mr. Krollup had legibly written on the wall with small rocks: **HURRY UP THEY KNOW ABOUT THE BOMB**. Leo lost his voice and had to swallow as his face flushed in a heat of anger. *Who knew about the bomb?* he wanted to scream, because he wanted those who knew to find him and take him away—a part of him did at least. It was funny. Leo had believed Krollup when he told him he would protect him from the police. He thought staying behind the chimney and in this mine was just temporary, but oh he was wrong. He had filled a permanent position, and Leo believed the possibility that Edwin Krollup had called for the set up with the police just so it would look like he saved poor Alvin. The idea wasn't so farfetched. Leo had gotten out of this stupid room once, through the door into Krollup's study. He had managed to shove a rock in the jamb when Edwin left one night, waited an hour and ran. He even managed to knock over a security guard, who had actually assumed a bum had broken into the house. But Krollup had stopped him. There was nothing surprising about it either because there was something special about Krollup. Something *terrible*. Edwin stood at the top of the grand stairs in the front room watching Leo run towards the doors with the anticipation of his freedom. He would have made it, maybe, but the statue that usually stood beside the door on the stand—Leo knew this because the stand beside the door was empty at this point—had somehow changed places. It stood in front of the doors with a menacing look on its stone face. As if it had been waiting for him. Edwin had been floating then too, and Leo just stopped dead in his tracks, waiting for the security guard to tackle him from behind. He was going to be escorted off the property but Edwin told the guard he wanted a couple of words with the little dirty man. This in turn led Edwin to thrust the little man back into his hole behind the chimney, and oddly enough, to magically block the wooden door with a sliver of rock from the wall. Leo even saw the rock extend from the wall in a thick arm that covered the door when Edwin left.

It wasn't normal. Not at all.

Oh yes, Leo was a prisoner. He knew this because the security guard that had happened to tackle him that night didn't recognize him. He was a dirty little secret. But that statue in front of the door. And its face, its *sneer*. Edwin was capable of doing things. The writing on the wall was proof. The pebbles Edwin had used were embedded so deep the legibility of the words was actually due to cracks in the rock rather than the actual stones.

So as flustered as the writing made the little man, there was no way he could really act upon such anger. He just practiced a simple breathing test...1-2-3 breathe out. It was as simple as that really. But he would have to get rid of that stupid little message. Maybe he could do so by proving a point to Krollup; the man did seem eager to view the robot's functions.

"You see sir," Leo said as he showed the remote control. "If I push the joystick forward the robot...err, well, I decided to call him Alvin2...he leans forward and the weight pushes the wheels in that general direction. With the gradual decline of the mines I thought this would be best suited, especially since my other idea with your Rolls Royce engine was so laughable."

Edwin smirked. "Indeed. I would never let those grubby little hands near my cars, no matter the business intended."

"Of course, of course." The robot leaned as Leo pushed the stick, and it started to roll forward slightly towards Edwin. Krollup watched this with delight, as he glanced from the monitors to the robot, back and forth, watching his face grow larger on the television screen.

"I have to tell you Leo, I prefer black and white to color. I've always thought black and white gave the picture a vintage crispness, you know what I mean, as if my kingship were timeless really." He posed for himself on the screen, opening his robe slightly and placing his hands on his hips like a superhero. "We've established two points here little man. Firstly, surveillance seems to work fine. And secondly, we know the hunk of junk can move, slower than tar that is, but hastiness in the mines would mean worse picture quality, isn't that right?"

Leo nodded.

"So we're left with its defensive capabilities. What if one of those *things* were to see it—I mean, would it be as easily dismantled as your last attempt?" Edwin walked towards Alvin2 the robot and knocked its steel abdomen; there was a hollow thud and an eerie metallic echo. "Truth be told little man, I'd like to see this thing take a couple of those werewolves down—or whatever *they* are—before getting knocked to pieces."

Leo grinned. Not on the outside where Edwin could see, but on the inside, where he knew this was his chance to rid of that blasted message on the rock. He had installed hydraulic arms on the robot, both to help the hunk of metal get back on its feet without Leo's help, and to pack one mean

punch if anything out of the ordinary were to confront it. “You see sir,” he said as he shifted the robot towards the message on the wall, “both of Alvin2’s arms...”

“Don’t call it that, it’s so stupid. You don’t have much respect for yourself if you can go ahead and give your name to such a piece of garbage. Show some pride little man.”

“Yes sir...err both of this *thing’s* arms have hydraulics, oiled quite well, and if I push these buttons here, both arms should come up and distend just like that, knocking whatever’s in its path out for the count. Would you like to see?” Leo knew visual presentations were necessary with Krollup. Edwin nodded.

When the robot was a couple feet from the wall Leo let go of the joystick. The robot halted. Just looking at that stupid message prompted his anger to return, no matter his stupid breathing exercise. He pressed two buttons firmly and both of the robot’s arms reached towards the wall, and just like that two smaller arms jutted out quickly and silently. Both collided roughly with the rock wall, chipping it terribly in one spot, and nearly exploding it where the other metallic fist hit. Needless to say, the message Krollup had spent ten minutes making turned to dust. Only the letters **HURR** and **MB** were still intact, and to Leo’s broad knowledge, no such word as **HURRMB** existed...well, at least not in the English language.

“Bravo, bravo. You’ve both displayed your distaste with my sense of humor and partially destroyed a wall to the mines...if you ever attempt anything like this again I swear I will crush you. What if your stunt had caused a fall out in the mines, a blockage of some sort? We can’t take those chances...we’re lucky enough to have preserved the opening for this long...ridiculous. You’re ridiculous. If my wife heard your display of heroic bravado, I’m telling you now, I’ll strap you to this rustic piece of garbage and pray the werewolves chew you to pieces. It’ll be better than what I have in store for you.” Edwin’s eyes were flaming. Leo was scared the man would float again, or worse yet even send the statue in *here*, in this little rocky room, staring at him with those blank eyes.

“I’m sorry sir...it won’t happen...”

“Enough said Leo. Send your machine down the mine and turn off those other monitors. The snow on the screen is making me angrier than I have to be.”

Leo did as he was told.