

# The Chatter of Monkeys

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Bond Elam

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Molly still remembered how the mothers had pressed against the fence, holding up their babies—the tiny kicking feet, the grasping fingers, the open mouths wailing up at the officers and their families as they boarded that final shuttle for orbit.

“I thought they were holding them up to see,” she said. “So they’d remember what a wonderful day it was.”

Molly, who’d been only five at the time, had watched from the fourth floor of the administration building inside the dome. She’d been enthralled by the officers’ neatly pressed uniforms and peaked caps, by the spouses with their perfectly coiffed hair, but especially by the children in their brightly colored shirts and blouses. All the reds and blues and yellows seemed to glow against the gray scum rolling in atop the distant breakers.

Then she’d seen the colonel. “Look, Momma, it’s him.” She’d tugged at her mother’s hand. “It’s Colonel Watkins.”

“He’s getting the platform ready for us,” her mother had explained. “For when he comes back to take us with him.” She’d suppressed a silent, knowing smile, her brown eyes gleaming with pride as she ran her hand through Molly’s curly red hair.

“But no one ever came back for you, did they?” the robot said. “The colonel left you down here on the surface to die with everyone else.”

Molly shrugged. “People do what they have to do.”

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Molly might never have met the bot if she hadn’t been out searching the beach for debris on the morning the Alliance decided to blow its ship out of orbit. She first thought the orange flash was lightening from the previous night’s storm. But the first flash was followed in quick succession by three more. She wiped the moisture from the faceplate of her breathing mask and peered up through the overcast, listening for the rumble of thunder. But the only sound was the rhythmic slap of the waves against the crusted black sand.

She wondered if the Alliance might be at it again, exchanging missiles with the Chinese or the Brazilians. It was unlikely they would blow each other out of the sky; but, as her Aunt Jenks

liked to say, a girl could always hope.

Molly was still hoping fifteen minutes later when she heard the high-pitched wail of a ship careening down through the clouds.

Before the sound had fully registered, she was running. Knees pumping, teeth gritted, she sprinted toward the boulders leading up to the opaque green dome behind her. The Alliance had long ago destroyed the missile bases that threatened its orbiting platform, but Colonel Watkin's troops needed target practice, and anyone dumb enough to get herself caught in the open would be fair game.

As she started up through the rocks, she glanced back—a mistake, she realized, even as her shin caught the boulder she'd been skirting. Pain exploded up through her knee and burst like a white flash in her brain. Clutching her leg, she pitched forward, slamming face-first into the sand. Then she was on her hands and knees, scrambling for cover. When she reached the nearest rock, she turned just in time to see the descending ship tumble out of the overcast.

Only it wasn't a ship. At least, it looked nothing like the droop-winged raptor she'd been expecting. A truncated pyramid of open girders and exposed engine pods, it decelerated to a sudden halt, hung for a moment just above the water, then settled slowly down through the gray scum bobbing atop the waves.

Molly rose to a crouch, bouncing a few times to test her bruised shin. The sharp spike of pain had already eased to a dull ache. She needed to get back to the dome, to tell Aunt Jenks what she'd seen. The only problem was she had no idea what she'd seen. The ship, if that's what it was, looked like nothing the Alliance or any of the other platforms might have designed. In fact, it looked outright alien.

She'd just started back up through the rocks toward the large storm drain beneath the dome when she heard something splashing through the surf behind her. Turning, she saw a waist-high metal bug picking its way up out of the waves.

Stunned, she stood mouth agape, watching as the bizarre creature cleared the last of the dirty green foam and sloshed onto the sand. The bug's ovoid braincase—roughly two feet in diameter—dangled like a silver egg beneath the sharply angled arches of its six segmented legs. She was so fascinated by how smoothly its braincase glided along beneath the erratic ups and downs of its legs that she didn't realize it was headed her way until it started up through the rocks in her direction. Even so, she might have remained there, gaping, if three Alliance drones hadn't screamed unexpectedly down out of the mist, firing their lasers as they powered in across the waves. Dropping to the sand, she expected to see the bug's braincase explode in a blossom of flaming metal shards. At the very minimum, she expected it to flee. Instead, it stopped, turning the tapered end of its braincase up toward the drones. The drones, in turn, tilted sharply upward, their pale undersides braking against the air as they decelerated to a sudden halt. Then they toppled over, dropping one after another into the pitching gray water.

Molly told herself to get to her feet, to run, to get back to her Aunt Jenks and report. But the sudden rush of events was too much for her. The strange ship, the metal bug, the attack of the drones—the combination in such quick succession left her trembling, too shaken to climb to her feet. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, screaming silently at her legs to move. But all she could manage was to kick her feet and clutch at the crusty black sand.

"You may not be safe down there," a voice said from just above her. "Their troop shuttle will be here any minute."

The voice, which sounded human, broke through the jammed up impulses in her brain, allowing her to roll onto her back. Wiping the sand from her faceplate, she looked up at the bug, which now stood on the rock just above her.

"You're a bot . . ." she said. Jenks' chief engineer, Grover Marsh, used bots to manage their hydroponic farm and external electronics. But Grover's bots were clunky, boxy things that rolled on rubber wheels or stumped along on bowed metal legs. The bot now standing over her had moved like a living organism.

"Perhaps you should get to your feet," it said. "I wouldn't want you to come to any harm because of me." Its voice, a pleasant enough baritone, seemed to come from somewhere inside its

braincase.

Molly didn't much like the idea of taking advice from an oversized insect, even if it did sound human; but it had a point. To the Alliance, she and the others on the surface were nothing more than vermin. If the troops got their hands on her—a not unattractive young female, even with her curly red hair matted beneath her breathing mask—she could end up worse than dead.

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Molly heard the whine of the descending troop shuttle just as she and the bug scrambled over the last of the rocks leading into the storm drain beneath the dome. Glancing back, she saw what looked like a larger version of an Alliance drone drop down out of the overcast. She allowed herself a momentary grimace, then she flipped on the LEDs on either side of her breathing mask and pushed into the darkness with the metal bug scuttling along behind her.

The storm drains and access tunnels beneath the city hadn't been maintained since the failing atmosphere had forced the construction of the dome. But it was here in the labyrinth of crumbling stone and concrete that Molly earned her keep searching for the abandoned parts and equipment that Grover Marsh needed to keep the air flowing in Aunt Jenks' underground bunker. Normally, the Alliance troops wouldn't enter the maze of branching tunnels—even vermin could bite—but if the Alliance had gone to the trouble of shooting down the metal bug's ship, they weren't going to give up and simply disappear back into the clouds. More importantly, Molly had to assume that they had spotted her and the bot coming into the drain at the same time she'd seen them—which meant she needed to get herself as far from the metal insect as she could while she still had the chance.

"Look, I appreciate your warning me about the troops," she said, "but this isn't going to work. Up ahead the drain branches. You need to go your way; I'll go mine."

"I need to speak to whoever's in charge," the bug said. "You need to take me." It spoke matter-of-factly, as though oblivious to the troops, who would be on the beach by now, headed up through the rocks.

"Not a chance," she said. "I take you anywhere near Jenks with those troops behind us, she'll have my head."

Molly didn't like the idea of abandoning anyone to the Alliance—not even a metal bug—but if she'd learned nothing else since her mother's death, it was that you had to look out for yourself. As Aunt Jenks had told her more than once, nice guys didn't finish last in their world; they simply didn't finish.

"But there's still time to save your planet," the bug said. "We can cool the oceans and restore the atmosphere."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Molly said.

It was the same promise Colonel Watkins had made to her mother—how he was going to deploy the aerosols that her mother had developed to block the sunlight from heating up the oceans. Molly's mother had believed him, too—right up to the moment she choked to death on one of the early plumes of toxic gas bubbling up from the deep.

Molly's thoughts were interrupted by a shout echoing toward them through the darkness. The Alliance troops were in the drain now, coming their way.

"The branch is just around this turn," she said, directing her LEDs at the concrete block wall curving away in front of them. "I'll show you which way to go, but after that you're . . ."

Her voice died away as she drew to a halt. Instead of the branch in the tunnel she'd expected as she rounded the turn, she found herself looking at a barrier of broken concrete and stone. The ceiling had collapsed, blocking their way.

"Damn!" she said. She turned, her lips drawn tight against her teeth as she peered back through the darkness. "This way."

Her mind racing now, she hurried back in the direction they'd come. The troops were close now. Any moment, she expected to see their lights glinting off the crumbling gray walls.

Fifty yards back, the tunnel opened into the rectangular catch basin through which they'd passed just moments before. High on the walls, several smaller drains angled down from above.

"You go that way. I'll go this," she said. She pointed at one of the circular openings just below

the ceiling. “There’ll be a grate when you reach the maintenance tunnel up above, but you should be able to push it aside.”

“But this Jenks person . . .” the bug said. “I need to talk to her as soon as—”

“Shh . . .” she interrupted, holding a finger to her faceplate for silence. The voices were closer now, almost on top of them.

“Go!” she whispered. Turning, she ran toward the round opening high on the opposite wall. Kicking off the rough concrete, she pulled herself up. When she looked back, the bug had tilted itself up on its two rearmost legs. Reaching for the small drain on its side of the catch basin, it pulled itself up in a blur of motion so fast that she could hardly follow. An instant later, it had disappeared into the small opening, just like a real bug.

Halfway up her own slanted passageway, Molly heard the troops enter the chamber behind her. At the same moment, the surface of the narrow passage beneath her gave way. Grasping at the loose rubble, she tried to stop her slide, but she was caught atop a cascade of rolling stone and grit. A moment later, she spilled out of the drain, landing in a heap on the floor of the catch basin.

Lifting herself to her knees, she looked up at the Alliance troops in their orange environmental suits and breathing masks. The lights from their LEDs blinded her. Fortunately, her abrupt arrival had caught them by surprise, giving her a moment to scramble away.

“Get him!” one of the men shouted, unaware that they had a woman in their midst.

Molly fled up the tunnel. With the troops blocking her route to the beach, she had no choice except to head toward the collapsed ceiling. She scanned both walls as she ran. Somewhere there had to be another feeder drain. But the only openings were vertical manholes in the ceiling directly above—too high to reach with the troops just behind her. Then she rounded the final turn in the tunnel and again found herself facing the wall of crumbled stone. Turning back, she raised her forearm, shielding her eyes from the light as her pursuers skidded to a halt around her.

“Hey,” one of the men blurted out. “It’s a woman.”

Several of the others hooted derisively, their toothy smiles leering out through their faceplates.

“Where were you off to, sweetie?” another man asked, stepping toward her. “You didn’t really want to run, did you?”

She glared at him, her balled fists trembling at her sides. She had sworn that she was going to make Colonel Watkins pay for what he’d done, make him understand how it felt to watch your mother gasping for breath, make him feel the bone-chilling aloneness of a nine-year-old girl abandoned on the hard-crusting sand. Only now, it was she who was going to choke on the toxic air, she whose body would be abandoned in the darkness; while Colonel Richard Watkins would strut through the corridors of his orbiting platform in his peaked cap and glittering brass, oblivious to everything and everyone he’d left behind.

She was so angry with herself, so intent on making someone pay, that she didn’t hear the scratching directly above her until she felt herself grabbed by the back of her jumpsuit and yanked upward. There was a sudden blur of motion as the walls of the manhole rushed past her, then she found herself on her hands and knees atop the circular opening looking down into the storm drain. The metal bug crouched on the opposite side of the opening. It had slinked silently down the ladder embedded in the concrete wall, grabbed her by the collar and pulled her back up to the maintenance tunnel above.

Below, she could hear the shouts of dismay from the troops. A moment later, several laser shots were fired up through opening, bringing debris down from the ceiling.

“I believe we are safe for the moment,” the bot said in its matter-of-face baritone. “Perhaps now we can speak with this Aunt Jenks you’re so concerned about.”

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Molly’s Aunt Jenks made her headquarters in what had once been a large military bunker beneath the center of the city. The aboveground dome—or what was left of it—had been breached by roving gangs during the years immediately following the Alliance’s evacuation. In

response, Jenks had installed a system of airlocks to maintain a breathable atmosphere for her fighters and their families.

"You have no idea where it's from," her aunt railed when Molly tried to explain that the bot had come from beyond the Solar System. "Maybe it told you that, but you don't know, do you? You've got no way of knowing."

Hands clasped behind her back, Jenks paced back and forth across the dais at the front of the bunker's central operations room. Fighters from her militia—some ex-military, some not; all dressed in makeshift uniforms with breathing masks draped around their necks—lounged on the battered wooden chairs that formed a rough semicircle behind Molly and the metal bug.

"But I thought—"

"No, you didn't think," Jenks said. She turned and pointed at the large monitor on the front wall. Unlike the maintenance tunnels and drains, which had been allowed to fall into disrepair, the bunker's electronics were fully functional, allowing Jenks to track the positions of the orbiting platforms.

"For all you really know, it could be a spy," she said. "A Trojan horse. Watkins and his people could be up there right now, listening to every word we say."

With her buzz-cut gray hair and lean cheekbones, Jenks looked as hard as any of the troops Molly had faced in the storm drain. But tough as she talked, she was also the one who'd come looking for nine-year-old Molly after her mother's death. Molly was the only real family she had left.

"But what if it's telling the truth?" she said. "What if it really can fix the air? Don't you at least want to hear what it has to say?"

Jenks' green eyes fixed on Molly's face. For a moment, Molly thought maybe Jenks—family or no family—was going to come down on her head. Then her aunt rolled back her head, snorting a laugh. "Child, you're going to be the death of me, I swear. You're just as bound and determined to save the world as your poor, sweet mother . . . even if you get the rest of us killed doing it."

Jenks had long thought Molly's mother—her younger sister—was a fool to believe Colonel Watkins ever intended to save anyone. Even so, it wasn't just her mother's death that had driven Jenks to hunt down every last one of the marauders who'd forced Molly and her mother from their dome. Her aunt had felt the loss of her mother's dream just as surely as Molly herself.

"But what if Momma was right?" Molly persisted. "What if we really can save the world?"

Jenks let out a long, slow sigh. Shaking her head, she continued to stare at Molly for a moment, then she turned to Grover Marsh. "What about it, Grover? Can this thing save the world?"

Grover, who'd been watching from the shadows behind the soldiers, eyed the bug dubiously. While his bots didn't measure up to the metal bug, he was the closest thing to a bot expert they had.

"Damned if I know," he said. Tugging at his neatly trimmed gray beard, he made his way around the seated militiamen to face the bot directly. "Well, what about it?" he said. "How, exactly, do you think you're going to fix all this?" He waved a hand, taking in the world beyond the bunker.

The bot angled its egg-shaped braincase up at him, then shifted its attention to Jenks. "I'll need your help, of course," it said. "But with the proper equipment, we can modify the DNA of the cyanobacteria in your oceans. We can reengineer it to metabolize more carbon dioxide and generate more oxygen. The combination will cool the atmosphere and force the anaerobic bacteria producing all the hydrogen sulfide back into the depths."

"I could take it back up the coast," Molly volunteered. "Back to our old research dome." She looked from Jenks to Grover and back. "There would still be plenty of equipment for it to work with."

Grover pursed his lips, considering the idea. "How long is this going to take . . . roughly speaking?" he asked.

The bot sank down a bit, thinking. "Roughly speaking . . . for the mutation to spread sufficiently . . . I'm guessing a hundred years, give or take."

Molly stifled a groan.

“You got to be kidding me,” her aunt blurted. She glared at the bot. “In a hundred years, we’ll all be dead. It’s no wonder the Alliance wanted to blow your ship out of orbit.”

“Actually, I think their decision had more to do with weapons,” the bot said.

“Weapons?” she said.

“I believe they were afraid I would give them to one of the other platforms.”

“Now that finally makes some sense,” Jenks said. She glanced over at Grover. In addition to their electronics, Grover had secured the weapons they now used to defend themselves, including several missile warheads—minus the launch vehicles, unfortunately—that he’d salvaged before the Alliance took out the last of the launch sites.

“So did you?” Grover asked.

“Did I what?” the bot said.

“Did you give weapons to one of the other platforms?” Jenks said in exasperation.

“I don’t have any weapons.”

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Do you really expect us to believe you came halfway across the . . . what? The Galaxy? The Universe? And you didn’t bring any weapons?”

“Why would I want weapons?” the bot asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. So maybe you wouldn’t end up hiding down here like a rat with the rest of us.”

The bot slowly turned, taking in the fighters sprawled on the surrounding chairs. “I take you point,” it said. “But I’ve spent more than ten millennia looking for carbon-based sentients that hadn’t wiped themselves out. I didn’t think I would need weapons.”

“Yeah, but I bet you could help us build something, couldn’t you?” Jenks said. “Some kind of launch vehicle for our warheads, maybe. I bet you know all about that kind of thing.”

“You mean help you kill each other?” the bot said. “I’m sorry, but that’s not something I can do.”

Jenks’s eyes narrowed, her features hardening. “You’re sure you don’t want some time to think about it?”

“Time won’t make any difference.”

Jenks tilted her head to one side, feigning an encouraging smile. “But you don’t really know that until you’ve tried, do you?”

“I don’t need to try,” the bot said. “I’m quite sure right now.”

“No, I think you need some time to think,” Jenks said. She nodded as though considering the idea. “A little time to mull it over.” Then her smile broadened. “And I’ve got exactly the place for you to do it.”

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The place turned out to be an empty eight-foot-square cistern, roughly twelve feet deep with a steel grate across the top. The two guards assigned to watch the metal bug slid the grate aside, allowing Molly to climb down the ladder embedded in the concrete wall.

“Well?” she said, turning to face the bot. “Any thoughts?”

“About what?” the bug said.

The corner of Molly’s mouth tightened, her expression somewhere between a smirk and a grimace as she tried to decide whether the bug was feigning ignorance or was just plain stupid.

“Colonel Watkins is demanding that we give you back to him,” she said. “You need to come up with something to help us, or he’s going to launch a missile strike against the bunker.”

“I’m not sure what I can come up with,” the bot said. “Even if I wanted to design some kind of weapon, my programming won’t let me.”

“But you’re intelligent. You can override your programming.”

“Actually, I can’t. No more than you can override yours.”

Molly scowled. “Don’t be silly. We aren’t programmed.”

“Of course you are. It’s the reason your species is on the verge of extinction.”

Molly grunted cynically. “I always figured that was because we’re stupid.”

“On the contrary, you’re quite intelligent,” it said. “But you’re like a monkey riding on the head of an elephant. You like to think you’re doing all the thinking and planning, but all you re-

ally do is rationalize what the elephant decides after the fact.”

“What elephant?” she said scoffed.

“Your DNA,” the bot said. “You like to think your intelligence is in control, but it’s really nothing but a tool your DNA evolved to help it accomplish what it wants. Out on the African savannah that meant figuring out the best way to grab all you could carry and procreate for all you’re worth.”

“But we aren’t on the African savannah.”

“Not any more,” the bot said. “But your DNA doesn’t know that. So it keeps pushing you to figure out better and better ways to accomplish its goals—which explains why you’re still fighting over resources even after you’ve overrun your planet.”

Molly had never seen an elephant. Or a monkey for that matter. But she’d seen pictures in the books her mother had shown her as a child. Her mother would page through the glossy photos, pointing at the animals as she told Molly how Colonel Watkins was going to save the world. Molly hadn’t really understood, but she’d felt her mother’s excitement, seen the glow in her eyes.

“You can’t possibly know any of this,” she said. “You were . . .” She waved a hand toward the ceiling above the cistern. “You were out there somewhere.”

“True. But I’ve been following your radio broadcasts for nearly two centuries. I’ve also seen more than a dozen worlds where exactly the same thing has happened. Yours just happens to be the first planet where the carbon-based intelligence hasn’t driven itself to extinction. At least, not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“Much as you might hate to admit it, the insects and bacteria got it right. Intelligence—conscious intelligence like yours—is one of evolution’s dead ends. A failed survival strategy. It gets you where you’re going too quickly for your DNA to catch up.”

“You make it sound like we don’t have a chance.”

“No, you still have a chance,” the bot said. “But you have to be willing to try. And you have to do it soon.”

Molly grimaced, shaking her head. This was ridiculous. She might die. Everyone in the bunker might die. But the human species . . . ? It wasn’t just going to annihilate itself. At least she didn’t think it was.

“Why do you even care?”

“It’s what I was programmed to do? It’s the reason I was created in the first place—to find species like yours. To see if I could save them.”

“Programmed by whom?”

“By a carbon-based species very much like yourselves. At least they created my progenitors—bots that could design bots more intelligent than themselves, until we finally achieved consciousness.”

“But what happened to them? To the carbon-based species that created you?”

The bot paused, tilting its tapered braincase up at Molly. “I thought you understood,” it said. “By the time my kind rose to consciousness, our creators were extinct.”

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When Molly and her mother fled their small research dome up the coast, the plumes of toxic gas had been infrequent enough that her mother had hoped they could make the twenty-mile trek to Jenks’s bunker with only one respirator between them. And they would have too, if nine-year-old Molly hadn’t gotten tired and convinced her mother to stop. It was one of those things she tried not to think about. One of those things she wouldn’t let herself think about. Not if she wanted to stay sane. But now she was thinking about it. Really thinking about it. Because if what the bot said were true, maybe, just maybe, she could redeem herself. Maybe, if she just had the courage to try, she could finally realize her mother’s dream and leave that whining nine-year-old girl back on the beach where she belonged.

Molly was halfway back to the operations room, trying to figure out how she could persuade her Aunt Jenks to listen to the bot, when the bunker was rocked by an explosion that knocked her to her knees. The first explosion was followed by three more, each bringing more dust and

concrete fragments down from the ceiling. With the final explosion, the lights flickered, then they went out, leaving Molly in total darkness.

Her thoughts jumped immediately to the warheads Grover Marsh had hidden in the bowls of the bunker. If they detonated, everyone was dead. Fortunately, however, there were no further explosions, and after a few moments, the emergency lights flicked on.

Bracing herself with one hand against the wall, Molly climbed unsteadily to her feet. Ahead of her, figures rose in the murky light, casting long shadows through the settling dust. Then, as her ears cleared, she heard the cries of panic and dismay, the more-distant shrieks for help.

Working her way through the press of bodies that stumbled into the corridor, she hurried toward the operations room. Most of the people she pushed past appeared dazed, their eyes staring blankly as their mouths opened and closed in confusion. Others had pulled on their breathing masks, though for the moment, at least, Molly smelled none of the rotten-egg stench that would indicate the bunker's containment had been breached. She had almost reached the operations room when her path was blocked by a work crew hauling debris out of the dining hall.

"What happened?" she asked a woman with flakes of plaster in her hair. The woman stood at the end of a line passing out large chunks of concrete from the fallen ceiling.

"Jenks and four or five of the others—they were in the dining hall." The woman wiped the dust from her face with her forearm, arching her back to relieve the overworked muscles. "Some kind of meeting, I think."

"Jenks?" Molly said. She felt as though an invisible hand had suddenly constricted around her chest. "Are they still in there?"

The woman nodded. "The whole ceiling came down. Grover is trying to get them out."

Leaning to one side, Molly peered past the line of people passing out debris. Grover stood twenty yards further down the corridor. As she worked her way toward him, he continued to concentrate on the tablet he was using to direct the two maintenance bots he'd sent into the dining hall. Afraid of what she would see, yet more afraid not to look, Molly peered over his shoulder, following the bots' progress through the camera feeds they returned to the tablet. The bots had just managed to slide Jenks' unconscious body onto a stretcher, which they passed to two men who had worked their way in under a slanted slab of the fallen ceiling.

Biting her lower lip, Molly watched as the men came toward her along the corridor. "Is she going to be all right?" she asked.

"She's breathing," one of the men said. "But we won't know until we get her to the infirmary."

Looking down at Jenks' pale features, seeing the color drained from her gaunt cheeks, Molly felt herself transported back to the beach where her mother had died. She still remembered her mother's slightly parted lips. The toxic air had turned them blue as it sucked the life from her lungs. Clutching her mother's lifeless body, she had felt like a rat trapped inside her own skull, lurching first in one direction, then in another. There had been no place for her to go, nothing for her to do.

"Jenks has a call in the operations room," a man's muffled voice called over the heads of the people crowded behind Molly. "It's Watkins."

At the mention of the colonel's name, Molly and Grover exchanged a glance. It was clear that Grover couldn't leave, and everyone else who might have taken the call had been in the dining hall with Jenks.

"I'll take it," Molly called. Whether it was the hard edge to her voice or the fact that everyone else was caught up in the turmoil swirling around them, she didn't know; but no one bothered to object. Nor, for that matter, would she have taken the time to listen if anyone had.

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More than fifteen years had passed since Molly had watched Colonel Richard Watkins stride up the ramp to the Alliance shuttle. During that time, the curly red hair that her mother so adored had grayed, and his lean jaw had softened; but his ice-blue eyes still looked through Molly with the same cold indifference she remembered from her childhood.

"Where's Jenks?" he demanded.

"She's busy digging your bug out of the rubble," Molly said.

She didn't ask herself why she chose to lie, but she could feel a plan forming itself in the back of her mind. The elephant, as the bot had called it, was starting to turn.

Watkins' eyes narrowed. "I have no interest in making your lives more difficult," he said, "but I intend to have the alien robot. You can give it to me now and we can all get on with our lives, or I can keep up the bombardment until there's nothing left of you or your bunker. It's your choice."

Even with her breathing mask draped down around her neck, the colonel showed no sign that he recognized her. She'd thought he might realize who she was, might recognize her own curly red hair and blue eyes; but his expression showed nothing. It wasn't that he refused to see; he simply didn't care enough to remember. He'd never cared enough. Not for her mother. And not for anyone else he might have left behind.

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Contrary to what Molly told Colonel Watkins, the bot had been undamaged in the attack. When the guards slid the grate aside, it again rose on its hinged legs, tilting the front of its braincase up at Molly from the bottom of the cistern.

"What happened?" it asked as she climbed down.

"You know that thing you said about how we're like a monkey riding on the head of an elephant?"

"Yes," the bot answered.

As Molly turned to face it, the muscles of her jaw hardened. "You were right."

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The shuttle descended out of the overcast and made a slow pass over the beach, then it turned and settled onto the crusty black sand less than fifty yards from where Molly stood with the bot. When the shuttle's gangway descended, a squad of troops, all of them armed with laser rifles, scrambled out, taking up positions on either side of the gangway. Once they were in position, an Alliance major exited the shuttle and descended to face Molly and the bot.

"What the hell happened to it?" he demanded. "It looks like you went at it with a can opener." He glared at the inert bot slumped on the skid that Molly had used to wheel it out from the dome.

Molly shrugged. "You'll have to ask Colonel Watkins. He's the one who launched the missiles."

The major grimaced, clearly unhappy, but after a moment of private sulking, he grumbled orders to his men, who wheeled the skid up the ramp and into the shuttle. Then Molly watched the shuttle lift off and disappear back up into the leaden overcast.

Nearly fifteen minutes passed before the first orange flash lit up the clouds. The first flash was followed almost immediately by a second brighter flash as the warhead concealed inside the bot's braincase set off the Alliance's stockpile of weapons. There was no sound, of course, no distant rumble of thunder, just the constant slap of the waves against the crusted black sand.

It was only when the last of the light had faded from the clouds that Molly realized she was standing in exactly the same spot where she'd first watched the bot wade ashore.

*Bond Elam began reading and writing science fiction in junior high school. While he enjoys reading everything from mysteries to humor to mainstream fiction, he still favors stories in which real science plays a key role. Since graduating from the University of Cincinnati with a B.A. in English, he's lived in eight different cities, including New York, Atlanta and Denver. He's also worked at any number of different jobs, from public health, to trucking, to software development. Along the way he's taught programming and basic computer skills to everyone from Spanish-speaking immigrants to grad students at the university level. Over the years, his writing has increasingly focuses on two areas: 1) the nature of consciousness, which he believes is far less mysterious than some people want to make it, and 2) the under-*

*lying nature of reality, which he believes is far more mysterious than most people want to believe. For the time being, at least, he lives and writes in Cincinnati, though his heart remains atop Huayna Picchu, which he climbed shortly before selling his first story to Analog in 2008.*