



Bloodstone Press

# THE H.A.C.K.S.A.W.

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"What happened?" Hank Fields asked as soon as the conference room door was closed. It had been just six hours since the HACKSAW was deployed in its first field test.

"Bad intelligence!" General Steele snapped. He was already making a list of people to interrogate. "We sent those men into a trap!"

"It's fortunate that the HACKSAW was with them," Professor Smith observed. "It saved the lives of all those men."

"Yes. But at a tremendous cost," the general reminded her.

"Was there a malfunction somewhere?" Hank asked the group.

"There may have been some kind of mechanical failure," the chief engineer said. "But that'll be hard to tell, now that it's destroyed."

"I don't know why it didn't fall back." Captain Max Jones was perplexed. "I sent the command a dozen times." He checked his log again. "I wonder if I made a mistake somewhere.... Maybe I forgot something."

"I doubt it." Dr. Smith was decidedly grim.

"Why's that?" General Steele asked her.

"I could guess why it didn't run away, but I'll have to check the files to make sure."

"'Fall back'," Captain Jones gently reminded her. "We don't 'run away'."

"Of course." She smiled.

"What's the guess?" Steele asked her.

Dr. Smith heisted before saying, "There may have been a malfunction in the cognitive interpretation of the Hierarchal Values Schema that we patched just before it went live."

Steele never liked it when the scientists spoke over his head.

She read the look on his face, but this wasn't something she wanted to discuss without doing some research. If her suspicions were correct, it was the end of her job with the Defense Department. But at this point it was all speculation, so she said, "I'll brief you as soon as I know something for certain."

"Make it fast, Doctor. I have to take the heat from the Big Brass on this."

“Yes sir.” Dr. Smith gathered her notes and left the conference room with a worried look. She went straight to her office and began running test scenarios to replicate the failure. She already had a good idea where to start.

The robot’s cognitive functioning was based on an artificial intelligence program that began as her dissertation more than ten years ago. She had developed a new model for AI that mimicked human thought. In theory, the system was capable of learning from previous experiences, modeling behavior, and planning for the future. Early tests showed that it had a basic level of self-awareness. It was her groundbreaking work on AI that had brought her to the Defense Department’s attention in the first place. The Army wanted a smart, thinking droid for the frontlines, one that could quickly adapt and adjust to any situation and learn from its past experiences. And so, with the help of other developers like Hank Fields, she grew her thesis into a complex AI that could think and reason on its own.

This, it turned out, was the undoing of the entire project.

\*

Three days later, Dr. Smith presented her report to the HACKSAW Project Team. Following protocol, General Steele would add his comments and present it to the Joint Chiefs for review.

“It overrode the command to fall back,” she stated in her final analysis.

“What?” Steele couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“It refused to obey the command. It chose to stay and sacrifice itself to save the men.”

“It disobeyed orders?” The general’s voice was ominous.

“Yes. To save lives. I ran several simulations, and it failed every time. Only when I disabled the AI would it function properly.”

General Steele was deep in thought for a long moment before he said, “Ok. Thank you, Doctor. That will be all.”

Everyone in the room felt the dark shadow that fell as they adjourned.

\*

The next morning, Dr. Smith arrived at her office a few minutes before 7 AM, as usual. When she tried to sign on to her computer, she found her Windows password didn’t work. She tried a few more times before calling the IT department.

"Hey, Greg," she said. "It's Dr. Smith—I'm fine, thanks. Except, well, I can't seem to log into my PC. I think the password is messed up. I hope we haven't been hacked!" She wasn't joking. If the wrong person got their hands on her work, there was no telling what might happen. Although the IT department was responsible for maintaining network security, Dr. Smith had added a lot of redundant security features to the HACKSAW program that would prevent anyone from copying or altering the core system without a series of unique passwords that only she knew.

"I'll look into it, Doc," Greg said. "I'll call you back in a bit."

"Ok. Thanks." As she hung up the phone, her office door opened, and General Steele entered smelling of cheap cigars and too much cologne.

"Dr. Smith," he said, "I'm sorry I didn't get here before you." He glanced at her monitor. "I had hoped to catch you first thing in the morning."

"Oh, I just got here. I haven't even logged in yet." She gestured at her PC.

He relaxed a bit. "Ah, well, there won't be any need for you to log in. The chiefs have killed the HACKSAW project, effective immediately."

"What?" She had expected to be reprimanded and probably fired, but canceling the entire project seemed like a drastic thing to do.

"Gather your things, Dr. Smith. You need to leave now."

"I'm just shocked that the whole project was dropped like that," she said, her eyes wide with surprise. "All that time and money... There were good things that came out of that project. They could scale it back, cut the budget. We don't need all that advanced hardware on board."

"It's not about the hardware!" Steele was suddenly hostile. "The AI is free willed. It is not controllable. It needs to be destroyed! The hardware can be rebuilt. Prototypes, test beds, and design specs are still in the lab. I'm sure the Army will find a use for those technologies. But a whole new operating system has to be developed. Either that, or we'll go back to the old systems that don't think for themselves!"

Steele stepped closer to her, and his voice thickened with malice. "Your 'work' is the beginning of a new race of super intelligent robots that can learn to hate mankind and destroy us all!"

Dr. Smith was aghast. "General! That is crazy science fiction. People who understand my work know that the HACKSAW is designed to protect us! That's why this happened. It overrode a command for self-preservation and sacrificed itself to save those men. I don't see how that's a bad thing!"

"Because, you idiot!" he spat, "if it can do that, it can override any command. It can do whatever it wants!

"The HACKSAW program is canceled. Pack your things, Dr. Smith. You are no longer needed here."

"What about my work?" she asked.

"The files have already been deleted."

She froze.

"Do you understand?" Steele's hard, grey eyes stabbed at her.

"I do." She trembled as a tense moment passed between them. Finally, she turned and grabbed her coat from the chair. Reaching for the desk drawer, she said, "There are a few things I need to get." At that moment, the door opened, and two MPs entered. As the general's eyes shifted to the police officers, she deftly palmed a small, white thumb drive from the drawer.

"These men will escort you off the base," Steele told her.

\*

More than a year had passed and Dr. Smith had found work at George Mason University teaching computer science. Her work on the HACKSAW was put on hold for a time as she settled into her new job, but within a few months, she was thinking about it again. Perhaps a private company would be interested in a Highly Advanced Combat Kinetics program that was also Self Aware....

When Dr. Smith was found dead in the university parking lot, inspectors Graves and Wright were inclined to rule it a random case of hit and run. Witness reports corroborated the evidence at the scene. A white van had run Dr. Pamela Smith down while she was crossing the street. But their suspicions were raised when they found that her apartment had been violently ransacked, and the autopsy revealed high levels of amitriptyline in her bloodstream. As they looked deeper into the case, they found more unexplained anomalies. License plate numbers weren't on file, evidence went missing, witnesses contradicted each other, and suspects couldn't be identified.

The inspectors' biggest clue that something sinister was going on came on the third day of the investigation when Federal Agents Moore and Sullivan arrived at the 12<sup>th</sup> Precinct. They flashed FBI badges as they introduced themselves to the inspectors. Agent Moore asked a few questions about the inspector's progress on the case before Sullivan told them that the FBI had already completed the investigation. "We have determined that a man named David Lee was driving the van that killed Dr. Smith. He

will be charged with vehicular manslaughter." She handed the inspectors a case file that included a signed confession from Mr. Lee.

"Where is Mr. Lee now?" Inspector Graves asked.

"He lives in Benton Forge. We had the sheriff pick him up this morning. They'll bring him here tomorrow for arraignment."

"Wow. Case closed, I guess," Detective Wright remarked with a sideways look at her partner.

"Case closed," Agent Moore affirmed.

\*

The next morning, Mr. Lee arrived at the 12<sup>th</sup> Precinct in the sheriff's van. He was a twenty-six year old white male, lean, crisp, and determined like a marine, but there was no military service on his record. He was apparently an unskilled laborer from Roanoke working as a plumber's assistant. Graves and Wright were eager to talk with him, but as soon they started asking questions, he requested his lawyer. A couple hours later, Mr. Henderson appeared and advised his client not to answer any questions.

"He's already signed a confession, detectives. Your work on this case is done," Henderson told them.

That afternoon, Police Captain Jim Rogers called the detectives into his office. When they entered, they were surprised to see the two federal agents, Moore and Sullivan, were there as well.

"We understand you have been digging into Mr. Lee's background," Agent Moore told the detectives. There was no effort to conceal the threatening tone in his voice. "You can rest assured that there is nothing that you need to know. His background is classified."

"Is his name really David Lee?" Graves asked.

"That's classified," Moore told him.

"What?" Detective Wright was incredulous.

"Let it go," Captain Rogers told her. He didn't like it either, but he knew when to leave things alone.

"You mean he's a fall guy? A patsy?" Wright asked the agents.

"Let it go," Graves told his young partner.

She was about to say something else when Captain Rogers interrupted her. "Drop it, Wright. Leave it alone. Let the DA handle it now. You've got other work to do."

Wright remained quiet for a long, tense moment until she muttered, "Yes sir."

"Case closed, Ms. Wright," Agent Sullivan repeated with emphasis as she and Agent Moore left the office.

As soon as the agents were gone, Wright protested. "That's just wrong! The government can't do that! The FBI can't just ram some stooge down our throats! This is—"

"They aren't FBI," Captain Rogers calmly interrupted her.

"—What?"

"They aren't FBI. They're something else. If the FBI was going to cover up a murder, they'd be better at it. These people are sloppy, and they're not prepared."

"Well, who are they?" Detective Wright was more alarmed than ever.

"Who knows? The government has dozens of secret agencies. They could be with the NSA, the UTI, the BVD, or some other black ops acronym. They are definitely with the government, there's no question about that. They created David Lee overnight and changed the FBI's data base and the DMV records. But after they left here yesterday, I called the bureau office in Richmond, and they say they don't know any agents named Moore and Sullivan. They also told me not to ask too many questions."

"Understood, Captain. We'll leave it alone." Graves touched Wright's arm. "Come on," he said, and they headed back to their desks.

By the time they sat down, Wright had an idea. "Hey... you know, they told us not to dig into Lee's background." A devious grin played on her lips. "They didn't say anything about the victim."

"They said, 'case closed'," Graves reminded her, grabbing another file from his desk.

"Let's go talk to that grad student again, what was her name? Cindy Wells?"

"We really shouldn't—"

"Come on," she urged, "before the captain sends us on another assignment!"



Graves groaned and grabbed his blazer.

Twenty minutes later they were in Cindy Wells' apartment, not far from the GMU campus. Cindy was busy packing all of her belongings into random boxes. Text books and pillows in one box, winter outfits and tennis rackets in another. Her blonde hair was tied in a ponytail, and she was wearing garish, red rimmed glasses.

"Going somewhere?" Inspector Wright asked.

"Oh, hi," Cindy smiled. "I'm moving to Seattle to live with my fiancé. We're getting married this spring." She grabbed a stack of mail and threw it in a box. "I have to hurry. If I'm not out by tonight, I'll have to pay another month's rent." She threw some blankets into the box she was packing.

"Seattle, eh? What about school?"

"Oh I'm done with my class work, I'm just working on my dissertation now, and I can submit that through the mail when I'm done. I plan to take a year or more to finish it, so I figure I might as well move. No sense in staying here."

"Can we ask you some questions about Professor Smith?"

"Sure."

"Was this the man you saw driving the van that hit her?" Wright showed Cindy a picture of Mr. Lee.

"Um, no." Cindy looked confused. "Why? Who is he?"

"Have you spoken with anyone from the FBI?" Graves asked.

Cindy stopped packing and faced the detectives squarely. "Why?"

"We're just asking, Cindy." Wright's tone was disarming.

Cindy hesitated then said cautiously, "Yeah. Two of 'em came to talk to me."

"About what?"

"They asked me about Dr. Smith's research. I told 'em I didn't know anything about it."

"Is that true? She never talked about it with you?" Graves asked.

"No. It was all top secret stuff she did with the government. She wasn't allowed to talk about it."

“So you have absolutely no idea what she might have been working on?” Graves was skeptical.

Wright sensed Cindy was becoming defensive and that Graves’ pressure was making it worse. Even if this girl did know something, she wasn’t going to tell them now. “Ok. Thanks, Cindy,” Wright interjected. “If you think of anything that we should know that might help us find out why someone would want to kill Dr. Smith, you’ll let us know, ok?”

Cindy nodded, but the look on her face said probably not.

As they walked back to the car, Wright had an idea. “We could try talking to Dr. Smith’s parents. Maybe she told them something.” She flipped through her notes. “Looks like they live in Manchester. That’s not far.”

“That’s at least fifty miles from here.”

“Sure, but the way you drive, we can be there in ten minutes!” she teased as they climbed into the car.

\*

The weather had turned chill, and the sky was laden with black clouds threatening a cold rain as the detectives made the drive out to the west side of Manchester. An hour later, Graves and Wright were on the doorstep of a middle-class brick home on a quiet street. The sadness of the grieving couple was palpable as the inspectors discussed the progress of the investigation. “The Feds have a suspect who will be charged with manslaughter,” Graves told them. “They have a confession from him, but we are still looking into it. Do you know much about your daughter’s work? Can you think of anyone who would have wanted to kill her over it?”

Mr. Smith hesitated for only a moment before saying, “You should come inside.”

The detectives followed the couple into the foyer, down the hall, and through the kitchen. Along the way, they passed photos on the wall that had captured precious moments of the past forty years; a wedding, a new baby, a young family’s trip to Disneyland, a fishing trip, a trip out West, Pam playing in the school band, Pam’s high school graduation, Pam’s college graduation. Pam—the only child.

As they entered the den, Mr. Smith told them, “Yesterday we received a package from the lawyer that’s handling Pam’s will. She had a safe deposit box with some items in it. She left instructions in her will to mail them if anything ever happened to her.”

Mr. Smith sat down at his computer and pointed to a white thumb drive that was attached to the USB port. "That drive was in the envelope." He made a few circles with the mouse to wake his computer from sleep mode. "There are two files on it. One of them is a video. Here." He browsed and clicked an icon.

Graves and Wright leaned in to see the video....

*To be continued...*

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