

## Rebuilt

Jake Dani woke on Earth to find that everything he knew had changed. Gone were his clothes and his comm. Everyone he knew had attended his funeral. His girlfriend, Gancha, was wanted for murder. His friend Deek, a captain in the Zor Metro Police Department, was suspended while under investigation for tampering with evidence that Jake had provided. The Binger colony being setup in Telmot was in danger from the bigotry of anti-Bingers. His best buddy Ron had been killed. And a coup was being planned to take over the government of his adopted hometown. To top it all off, his nemesis wanted him dead—and was powerful enough to do it. All while Jake was a prisoner on Earth.

The first five chapters are available for reading on [www.crayne.com](http://www.crayne.com).

“...is an extremely well-crafted espionage/sci-fi thriller. Readers will love this absorbing mystery and its strong, dynamic and influential hero.”

- C. Putsche

“It's a very nice blend and quite an imaginative story. Many are fleeing to the planet thinking they can escape their past such as their criminal past, dangerous past, or escape arrest. They bring old world thinking and views with them and bring this newly colonized planet back to a time where ignorance led to more crime and suffering, racial views askew with new world technology.”

- B. Perez

“If you love science fiction and suspenseful stories, you have to read this book! ...fast-pace action scenes peppered with great dialogue. The characters created were colorful yet realistic. Unlike Earth, Rossa is run by a new set of rules. Criminals escape the cops by fleeing to Rossa, thinking no one will find them. Wrong.”

- N. Light

“I recommend it to anyone who likes sci-fi, thriller and/or mystery combinations. One thing I particularly liked is that many of the supporting characters are well developed, atypical, and just plain fun.”

- S. Barnes, editor

“...runs an espionage ring on the planet Rossa, an overflow world where people go to escape an overcrowded Earth. Unfortunately, they take their [cultural] baggage with them. I can't wait for the next novel, and neither will you. Read it today. I would award seven stars if I could, but I'll have to settle for five. It's that good.”

- J. Bowers

“The story hits the ground running and rarely lets up. The chance for the characters and the reader (me) to pause and catch my breath are few. Jake is in and out of trouble so often that you'd think he had an evil spirit riding on his shoulder. Well, such is the life of a spy, I guess. But if that's it, I'll pass and just read about it (more fun).

The characters are well-developed and sympathetic (I don't like stories where I don't care what happens to the major characters).

I'm sure the next book will be a fun ride too -- if Jake lives through it.

- Tank

# **Rebuilt (chps 1-5)**

By

**Victory Crayne**

## Chapter 1

“Where am I?”

The room was unfamiliar. I was not at my apartment nor at the operations center. All I could remember was traveling to Earth and undergoing a nano-rejuvenation.

I glanced around me.

The walls sported a light blue on the top half and beige on the bottom. Except for the wall that housed the telly. That was white. The bed I lay in was large enough, especially in length. At six foot one, I often had difficulties in finding a bed I could be comfortable in.

The room contained only my bed, a light brown dresser of four drawers on the wall opposite the foot of my bed, two upholstered chairs in a light brown print on my left, and a small circular brown table between them. On the wall opposite my bed was a telly. No mirror. On one wall rested a window but the dark blue curtain let in no light. The only door to my left was shut. The white and beige walls glowed to light up the room.

I glanced at my left wrist but could not see my comm. Instead, I stared at the tattoo everyone received soon after they were born. In my baby years, the tattoo could be used to track my location in case I was kidnapped. Later, I got a comm to lay over it, powered by the heat of my blood. Everyone wore a comm and used theirs to communicate.

No comm. Only the tattoo from my childhood.

The red blanket on my bed didn't ring any bells. I flipped the cover off and looked at the sheet. White. I had on thin light-blue pajamas I didn't recognize.

*What the hell?*

I pulled the cover back and sat up on the edge of my bed. In front of my feet I spotted black slippers of the type worn in hospitals.

None of this made any sense at all.

*Where the hell were the clothes I came in with?*

I put my feet into the slippers and walked to the window.

“Open window.”

The curtain remained closed.

I looked for a cord to pull and found one on the left side. So I pulled it and stared at my hand. My fingers were different.

The curtain slid aside but that didn't help much. The window was covered with a black something. I touched it only to learn it was part of the glass or was painted on the outside. I could not scratch the covering. So I had no idea if it was daylight out or where I might be.

That did it. I wanted answers and I wanted them now. I rushed to the beige door.

"Door open."

It didn't.

I looked for a slot and slid the door aside.

One big guy in a green uniform turned toward me. Behind him stood three robots, dressed in the same green. It was hard to tell when a robot stood at attention. One thing was clear. All four were six feet or higher and looked strong.

"Where am I?"

The guy lifted his left wrist to his mouth.

"He's awake."

He gazed into my eyes.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you must remain in your room until the doctor comes."

"Doctor?"

Behind them I observed another wall across a wide hallway. It had the same color scheme as my room, blue on the top half and beige on the bottom.

I turned to the human I had spoken to.

"Can you at least tell me where I am?"

"I'm sorry, sir. The doctor will explain everything."

He looked aside. "Door closed and locked."

The damn thing slid shut. I inserted my fingers in the slot and tried to slide the door aside as before, but it wouldn't budge.

I stared at the off-white color of the door.

"Damn!"

I was a prisoner.

## Chapter 2

A glance around the room revealed no clock on any wall. Having nothing to do, I retreated to the bed for some serious thinking.

I recalled going to the rejuvenation center to get a template made, paid for by my boss and spymaster, Acorn. I was a spy, as were many Bingers. My father Petro's younger brother was Berry Dani, who was the Binger spymaster. Berry preferred to call himself by his code name of Acorn.

An American and Japanese team developed the Bordland Drive for faster than light travel. Humanity finally got the chance to explore beyond the Solar System.

Two years later, jump gates were discovered and humans migrated to the planet Rossa. At last, we became a multi-planet species. Then chaos came. On an exploratory mission, a Chinese spaceship encountered another species, the mercons from the planet Durr. As often happened when a group of humans met someone from outside their tribe, hostilities soon started.

In the Earth-Durr war of 2035-2043, Dr. Bing used snippets of DNA from captured alien mercons to enhance human intelligence, strength, and healing abilities. He inserted the snippets into human embryos and the children born of such experiments became known as Bingers.

After the war ended, human prejudice against the hated mercons persisted and was directed onto the Binger children. Almost every Binger family had at least one member who had been killed in the persecutions. The families went underground and changed their names.

Berry was a full Binger and had married Arlene Smith, a normal human. Their union had produced two sons, Charles and Albert.

After graduating from college, Berry went to work for the American CIA and had received promotion after promotion until he worked his way up the org chart to second in command. Along the way, he learned everything he could about analysis, field operations and training. When the CIA purged itself of Bingers, he left before his own DNA was discovered.

Then he formed the Binger Intelligence Service, which became known as BIS. He tried to recruit every Binger as soon as they finished their education, either from high school or college.

His son Charles graduated with a bachelor's degree and joined BIS. On a mission inside Russia, Charles Dani was killed.

His brother Albert turned to a life of crime and on a one poorly planned caper, got caught while taking the jewelry of a rich man's wife. Acorn pulled a few of his influential strings and managed to get the sentence for Albert commuted as long as he migrated to the new planet of Rossa and changed his name. Albert chose Ron Boscoe.

On Rossa, Ron and I became buddies and I used his help on several of my private investigator contracts. At one time, Ron asked for my help on a spy mission. The idea was to rescue my father Petro. Petro had only joined BIS on condition that Acorn not recruit me. After I rescued my dad, and nearly got killed in the process, I made a deal with him. He was to drop out of BIS and go back home to Earth to care for my mom and run his engineering business. I would take his place as a BIS agent.

I didn't learn until later that Acorn could hardly believe his good fortune, for he had had his eyes on me for a long time.

After several assignments on Rossa, in which I excelled as a spy, I heard rumors of my eventually replacing Berry.

Six months ago, I got a coded message from Acorn. He was getting a template made in the rejuvenation clinic. Since there existed a small chance he would die during the process, he wanted me to take over BIS if he couldn't.

I breathed a sigh when he woke up. I didn't really want to go to Earth and be stuck behind a desk.

Later, he wanted me to come to the home planet and get a nano-rejuvenation template made too. On a BIS nickel. It wasn't exactly a request. More like an order.

And who wouldn't want to get a template made? I could later return to the rejuvenation clinic and get a full rejuvenation done. I would have my body turned back to the age of my template but I'd get to keep my memories. Talk about the ideal solution to aging!

Acorn said in his message, "I can only afford Second Class. Bring along my son. When you get here, you can spend a few days with your parents. I'd like to see Ron again."

Things were quiet on Rossa at the time, so we made the journey from Rossa to Earth, covering the twenty-five light years in thirteen days. I left Vincent Stone in charge of the BIS team in York on Rossa.

My visit to my father Petro and my mother Maurine lasted three days. The last time I had seen them was five years earlier, and that was my dad only.

When I arrived at the clinic, I changed into blue pajamas and allowed the doctor to inject a sedative into my left arm. The only sensation I got was the full feeling under my skin after the injector hissed. Gone were the days of needles piercing skin. Injectors used compressed air to press a solution under the skin over an artery.

I went to sleep and woke up in this room by myself.

## Chapter 3

*What the hell can I do?*

If I had my comm, I could at least tag Acorn and get help.

I thought of bursting through the door and overpowering the guy and bots on the other side. Even if I escaped, I still had on only my damn thin pajamas. And what would I do next? I needed a plan.

While I waited, I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I yelled.

The door slid aside and a woman in a brown business suit stood in front of the four guards. Her hands clasped a matching color purse. She entered and the door slid shut behind her.

A Caucasian woman of five feet six inches, short black wavy hair, toned-down makeup, and wearing a maroon skirt suit and white blouse. The image was conservative and professional. She extended her hand with a smile.

“I'm Dr. Deanna Boyne.”

Her handshake was gentle but confident, the kind that put a patient at ease.

“Please come in, Dr. Boyne. I apologize for my lack of attire.”

“I understand, Mr. Dani. May I call you Jake?”

“Of course. And where are the clothes I came in here with?”

“Your pajamas were a simple precaution to discourage you from leaving until I had a chance to explain.”

“And you have lots of that to do, Dr. Boyne. I came here for a template, not incarceration.”

“Shall we sit at the table and talk?”

She pointed with her head to the small table between the two guest chairs centered under the window.

She sat in the one closest to the door.

If I hoped to get any answers, I had better listen. So I parked my butt in the other chair.

I saw her comm on her wrist and wondered about overpowering her and taking it. But she could have it coded only to respond to her voice. I still needed a plan.

“Mr. Dani, something unusual has happened. This has happened only twice before, at other rejuv clinics, but this is a first here.”

I sat back, alarmed.

*Oh oh.*

She was going to tell me I came out “different.”

I couldn't tell if something was wrong. How could I? I still had two arms and hands, two legs and feet, and a head.

*My god! My face! Was she going to tell me I had a different face?*

“I assure you, the template went successfully. You are the same person.”

I must have exhaled because she smiled. I pulled my eyebrows down.

“Then why are you here and why am I prisoner in this room?”

She replied, “After our talk, you are free to go.”

I stood and walked to the door.

“Door open.”

It did and I stared at the guy with the three bots.

Then I froze and turned my head in her direction.

“What did you mean by ‘something unusual has happened’?”

“Please close the door.”

“Door close.”

This time the damned thing obeyed me.

I took the chair opposite her.

She stared at me as if she were forming her response carefully. “I'll explain everything, but first I want you to close your eyes and take ten deep and slow breaths.”

“Relax, eh?”

She nodded.

I did and when I finished and opened my eyes, she continued.

“What I have to tell you is going to require you be patient. Something unusual has happened to you. First, let me assure you your procedure worked flawlessly. There is nothing wrong with you.”

“Then why can't I leave?”

She put up the palm of her hand as if to silence me.

“Sometimes life gives us surprises, and not always good ones. Sometimes we draw a hand of cards with a disaster in it. It's how we handle it that makes all the difference between a well-adjusted and happy life. Or a broken and bitter one.

“You went through the template procedure and the results were normal. But I'm afraid it's later than you think. More than a few hours have passed since you came in to the clinic. As a matter of fact, more than a few days.”

*Whoa!*

“How long?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It's been more than a few weeks.”

That made both of my eyebrows arch and I opened my eyes wide.

She continued, “As a matter of fact, it's been five months.”

My jaw dropped.

“What?”

*Oh oh. Had I been in a coma?*

“You went through the template procedure and woke up normally. You left the clinic and went home. Unfortunately, events after that led to a tragedy...and, I'm sorry to say, but you didn't make it.”

I had died? Memories of the pre-op briefing came to mind. I had been told that I might die during the operation, but her explanation didn't sound right. I had gone home and died?

Then the truth slammed into my brain.

I was a rebuilt. Brought back to life from the template of Jake Dani.

#

Most folks who can afford to get a template wait until they showed signs of aging, usually after thirty years. If they had the money and could afford it, they could go back to a clinic, and get the age of their body turned back while retaining their memories. Telomeres would be lengthened, fat would be reduced, and connective tissue rebuilt.

If they waited another thirty or so years, they could return to the rejuv clinic and get a new body but with their accumulated memories intact. There appeared to be no limit to the number of rejuvenations one could have but so far only a few hundred people had done rejuvs twice. None had done more than two.

It had never happened but there was another possibility. That of being rebuilt from scratch.

This could only happen if the person died and someone else paid to have them “rebuilt” from their last rejuv or template. If that happened, the “new” person would have the memories as well as the body from the time they had their last rejuv or template. But no memories after that. Couldn't. Those memories were not available as of the last rejuv or template.

And, of course, provided the dead body was used. If none was available, a cadaver could be used. But the memories and DNA of the cadaver would be destroyed.

In my case, I had only one template done and no rejuvs.

“How long ago?”

She frowned. “Like I said, five months.”

“No. I meant how long ago did I die?”

She sat quietly for three seconds. “Three months.”

“So, let me get this straight. Two months had passed after I left the clinic. Then I died.”

She nodded.

It was my turn to be quiet.

*Son of a bitch!*

“I think you need some time to digest this,” she said. “I’ll leave you by yourself. It’s about time for lunch.

“Oh, and here’s your comm.”

With that, she pulled a comm from her pocket and handed it to me.

“I’ve already taken the liberty of informing your uncle Berry that you’re awake. He said to let him know as soon as you woke. He wants to tell you something important before you leave here.”

I took my comm and put it on my left wrist. But first I verified the date. It was five months after I had the template done. She was right.

She walked to the door.

“Wait! I have a question.”

She turned and raised her right eyebrow. “Yes?”

“How did I die?”

She hesitated on that one. She looked down at the floor for two seconds and then up into my eyes.

“You were killed.”

I dropped my jaw.

*Killed?*

“Your uncle Berry said he’d explain everything.”

With that, she pulled a thin plastic sheet out of her purse and placed it on the table.

“Here’s the menu for your lunch.”

She stood, walked over to the door and slid it aside. The door closed behind her.

I sat at the table, quiet. Stunned would be a better word.

*I had died and was rebuilt? That was theory only. This wasn’t supposed to happen!*

## Chapter 4

I studied the menu Dr. Boyne had left and saw lunch was a choice of roasted chicken breast with a mushroom sauce or three pieces of tri-tip steak. I could choose from a long list of sides as well as my choice of potato. At least I wouldn't starve here.

The menu came on a plastic sheet. After selecting my options by pressing on the circle next to them, I pressed the button near the bottom and a light around the button turned green. The words to the left of the button changed to a yellow on black.

"Your order has gone to the kitchen."

I went to my bed and lay on it. This new situation was a lot to digest.

A half-hour later, I heard a knock on my door.

"Open."

It slid aside and a male in hospital green pushed a cart into my room. He stopped at the small table, unloaded my lunch plates, and left.

Half-way through my lunch, I got a tag on my comm.

"Acorn here. I hear you're awake. I'll be there in forty minutes and will explain everything."

He disconnected.

I shook my head. Just like him.

I finished my meal and examined the limits of my prison. On the wall at the foot of my bed was a sign of "Bathroom" I had not noticed before. When I pushed on the wall, the door opened with a snap. There stood a stainless steel toilet, a white sink, a mirror, and a shower.

Cautiously, I approached the mirror and looked at myself. A stranger's face stared back at me.

The face in the mirror had a full head of brown hair (mine had been black), brown eyes (mine had been green), a long and more pointed nose and pronounced cheekbones. I raised my hands to touch my face and saw them in the mirror. The back of my hands were different too.

*If everything had gone all right, then why the new face and hands?*

#

I took a leak, rinsed my hands, and paused at the mirror to examine my new face again.

A knock came at my door.

I wiped my hands on the hanging towel, left the bathroom, and stood three feet from the front of the door.

“Come in!”

I never thought I'd be happy to see my uncle's face but there he stood. He walked in and the door closed behind him.

Acorn was a little shorter than me at five eleven but he was heavier. Maybe 210 pounds. The top of his head was bald, with gray hair on the sides. I noticed he had a belly despite working out with weights three times a week. The guy must eat a lot. He liked cookies. Chocolate, too. Today he had on a dark gray suit without lapels, the current fashion in men's business attire.

He sat at the table and I sat opposite him. My arms itched and I absent-mindedly scratched them while I listened.

“Dr. Boyne told me she informed you you're a rebuilt. We changed your DNA too, to make you a full Binger. I thought that might help.”

“Is that why I itch all over so much?”

“Could be. Your body was made with Jake's RNA. We know enough about DNA now. So we changed your DNA to match your new identity. Maybe the DNA is gradually changing your RNA and that is changing the proteins in your cells. Some of those cells were muscles and some of them are at the base of your hair follicles. And some are in the nerve fibers. Hence the itching. You might sense some muscle soreness too, over the next few days.”

I asked my boss, “Am I going to gradually change so I look like my old self?”

Acorn's eye went wider before he answered, “I hope not.”

“Hope?”

He shook his head.

“This has never been done before. Changing your DNA, I mean. I suspect your new face, voice, and hands will stay the same.”

“Speaking of which, why the new face?”

He reached his left hand and covered my right.

“I think you'd better take this one step at a time. A lot has happened to you.”

I stared into his eyes and said, “You can say that again.”

He retracted his hand and continued.

“You came to this clinic five months ago and the template procedure went flawlessly. I gave you an assignment to look into the political events surrounding Ash Getner.”

That name was familiar.

Ash Getner was the head of the York Security Agency, the largest spy agency on Rossa. No one knew how large his budget was but it was rumored to be in the hundreds

of millions. In the last year, YSA had been chosen to oversee all spy activities in York, including eavesdropping on communications everywhere on the planet through the YSA. At least, that's what the org charts said.

"You returned to Rossa. Within three weeks, you attended a political meeting while undercover. I have your report right here." He tapped his comm.

"A week later, while you were eating in a restaurant several men came up to you and fired guns. According to the police report, which I attached at the end, you were shot first and then Ron tried to rescue you before he was also gunned down. The police found a total of nine slugs in your body and eight in Ron's. Both of you took shots in the head. They never did find those guns."

*Ron was dead?*

That news hit me like a fist in my stomach. Ron had been my best bud for years now. And he was gone.

Then I thought of how that must feel to the man sitting across from me.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Your son died a brave man."

He looked down at his hands and sat quiet for three seconds.

"Thank you."

We both sat quiet for a while.

"Are you going to have Ron rebuilt too?"

He shook his head.

"Cost too much."

He was quiet for maybe five seconds. Then he grabbed a tissue from the box on the table and blew his nose.

"I knew something big was going on. Your report indicated that. I decided we needed to find out what. The more I thought about it, you were my best agent on Rossa. I needed you there. So I decided to bring you back alive. It cost a big hunk of my reserves. Rebuilding is expensive."

I watched as his fingers tightened on the tissue. He must be thinking about his son.

"Then I thought about what you would go through as a rebuilt. Most of the people who knew you had also attended your memorial service or the burial of your ashes.

"I decided it would be easier for you if you had a new appearance. I dug into my reserves of IDs I had kept active, having them build payment histories, just in case I ever needed them. After choosing one, I had the face, hands, voice, and even fingerprints of your body changed to match that ID."

He looked at me with red eyes.

“Your new name is Michael Shapeck. S-H-A-P-E-C-K. I suggest you memorize it and take it internally.”

That explained the stranger’s face in the mirror and the unfamiliar hands.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

We had done this many times before in training when we assumed a new identity.

*Might as well get used to it.*

“I’m Mike Shapeck.”

That brought a smile from him.

He tapped a few keys on his comm, reached his left wrist over mine, and touched our comms.

“I just transferred your tickets to Rossa, along with several reports. You’ll be traveling by the fast method. It’s about time you got the experience of being drowned. You leave tomorrow at noon from LAX.”

LAX was the main airport in Los Angeles.

“You’ll fly to Brazil to the Macapa Space Elevator. You should arrive at the Meda Space Elevator on Rossa in twenty-four hours.”

He reached into his coat pocket.

“I put some cash in this envelop. You have a bank account in the Bank of Zor with more.”

Zor was the capital city of the nation of York on Rossa. And my hometown.

He sat opposite me with a serious look, the one he uses when he’s giving assignments.

“Something big is going to happen. I don’t know what but it’s going to change everything. It’s centered on York. That’s why I wanted you to be rebuilt and investigate. With a new identity, no one on York will suspect you as you look into it.

“Your first job is to find out who killed the two of you. Your second job is to find out what is up. I don’t care what happens to your killers. Do you understand your orders?”

I nodded.

“You’re like a son to me, Mike. Make me proud.”

He stood, buttoned his suit coat, and reached out to me with open arms.

We hugged. After all he was my uncle as well as my boss and we both had suffered a big loss. I had lost my best friend and he had lost both of his sons.

## Chapter 5

Acorn added, "I will send a message to Vincent Stone that I've assigned a new guy to be the station chief. I will give him your name."

"Will?"

"I'll send it in time for your arrival. I had to make sure you were okay with your new identity."

He pressed buttons on his comm. Then he tapped it to mine.

"I also transferred several reports to your comm. One is the full report of what you, or should I say your unbuilt, learned. One is the background on your new identity. Another is the report on your murder. I've also included newscasts that should help you adjust to what to expect when you arrive on Rossa.

"There's one more thing you need to know about. The Binger Disease. Since you are now a hundred percent Binger, you have an increased risk of dying of heart disease. Something in the changes that Dr. Bing made increased our risk of arterial disease. Bingers, full Bingers, have a tendency to build up cholesterol in their arteries.

"As you know, I'm a full Binger. I've lived with this all my life and expect to die early. That's just reality.

"I paid for the removal of such deposits in your arteries, but since you have Binger DNA now, you may build up cholesterol anyway. Jake had some risk of that when he was a half-Binger."

I remained still, my eyes glazed over while I stared at the table top.

"On the positive side, you have increased intelligence, strength, and healing abilities. I hope that makes up for this.

"Any questions?"

I sat still.

*Wow. A death sentence.*

I mustered up the courage to speak.

"How do you know? About the Binger Disease, I mean."

He replied, "Ten full Bingers have died so far, not counting those who were killed. Of the ten, autopsies revealed that eight had died of heart attacks."

"So I have about an eighty percent chance of dying of a heart attack?"

He looked down at his hands.

"Living on the increased gravity of Rossa may stress your heart even more. So far, we've had no deaths of Bingers there."

"What about Jake?"

“There was an autopsy since he died a violent death. Jake had some build-up of cholesterol in his heart. But he really died from being shot.”

He opened his arms again and we hugged.

When we broke away, he said, “Good luck, Jake,...er, I mean Mike. I put a lot of faith in your abilities to get to the bottom of this.”

“What about my parents?”

“They don’t know and it’s best if you don’t tell them. They must believe their son is dead. If they find out you’re alive, they might leak that. You will be free to investigate his murder. Later, you can tell them yourself. Any other questions?”

I asked, “Who else has been rebuilt?”

He paused for two seconds.

“Only two men have undergone the procedure. Both were rich and their heirs were upset. The public is too, especially the religious leaders. Many nations are considering laws against rebuilding. There is a lot of resentment against the top one percent. And rebuilding in particular.”

“Was that a factor in your decision?”

“Yes. But I paid extra to keep this quiet.”

“What about Gancha?”

Gancha Morentoss was my girlfriend.

I asked, “Does she know about me?”

He shook his head.

“I’ll leave that up to you how to handle.”

With that, he turned and walked to the door. He turned toward me.

“Oh, before I forget. You can find some clothes in the closet over there.”

He pointed to a blank section of the wall to the left of the bathroom door. With that, he turned to the door and commanded, “Door open.”

It did, he walked through, and it closed it behind him.

He had given me a lot to think about.

But first I needed to get into some decent clothes. The blank section of wall next to the telly puzzled me. I walked up to it and pressed several times. A door opened and I saw a single suit of gray clothes and a white shirt. My size too. In the bottom of the closet, I found a pair of shoes.

I went to the dresser in the main room, opened drawers, and put socks and underwear on the bed.

After a quick shower, I dressed.

*Might as well find out if I can leave.*

I went to the door.

“Open door.”

This time it slid aside. The four guys were gone. I stepped into the hallway and looked both ways. At least I could leave.

Not having much to do until I left tomorrow, I returned to my room and sat at the table and read some of the reports Acorn had left.

## Chapter 6

The first I chose was the police report of the deaths of Jake and Ron.

The images of their bodies struck me. Here I lay with blood oozing from my head. There was no way anyone could survive such a wound. The dark hole in my right eye socket. The neck wound, itself fatal.

I stared at the image a long time. It's not every day you get to see yourself dead.

*Your death was the reason I'm here now.*

Next I examined Ron's body with its large dark spot behind his head, undoubtedly from blood.

*Goodbye, buddy. If you had not stayed to help Jake, you might be alive today.*

My buddy was gone. Life wouldn't be the same without Ron.

I wondered how his husband Tosten was taking this. Must be a bitch to miss someone close to you. My feelings when my ex-wife died came to my mind. Leanna had remarried after our divorce but putting her in a body bag after her death was hard. Thank heavens I had Ron with me. The presence of another male kept my tears to a minimum.

*But Ron was no more. I had to get used to that.*

I thought of visiting Tosten but decided he didn't need to know my new identity just yet.

Next I read and memorized part of the background on "Mike Shapeck" so I could respond to questions.

The itching lessened but it was replaced with muscle pain. As in all over my body.

*Must be growing new muscles.*

After several hours of reading and enduring the muscle pain, my stomach told me it was time to eat. So much had happened since I was "gone."

The plastic menu left by the doctor was for lunch only. Said so right on the cover. I wondered how to order dinner and looked around the room. I spotted a big word "Menu" on the telly with words too small to read below it.

When I got closer I read, "To order meals from the menu, select Channel One on the television."

*Made sense.*

"Telly on."

The white wall changed to show a rectangle of blue. Must be two feet by three feet. The logo of the Rejuv Clinic appeared.

"Channel One."

The logo of the Rejuv Center disappeared. In place of it were several choices.

“Select Menu.”

I chose rib eye steak, medium, baked potato with butter, broccoli, a fruit side dish. The choices of beverages included iced tea, different sodas, and several kinds of wine, beers, and hard liquors such as scotch and bourbon. With all I had to digest before I left Earth, there was no way I could afford to drink alcohol, although I was tempted. I stuck with water. For now.

After making my selection, I said, “Send to the kitchen.

“Channel Four.”

The top story that appeared focused on lawyers and the Harbor Justice Center in Newport. I got the impression this case had started long ago.

The reporter said, “The attorney for the plaintiff in this ‘Robots Have Rights’ lawsuit against the State of California was himself a human but his robot client sat next to him.”

All I could see were humans in the court, except for the plaintiff, who appeared to be a humanoid bot. He wore a blue suit and white shirt. I could not tell his height or weight from his sitting position but he appeared average.

His face gave away his origin. Too perfect. Symmetrical, average nose, average lips, average eyebrows, average facial bone structure. From this distance, I could not tell his eye color but I guessed they were blue or brown. His skin tone was halfway between Caucasian and African. Average also. But his posture was too perfect. Stiff even.

I watched several minutes of this newscast before becoming bored so I changed channels. On Channel Seven, a different view of the same court room appeared.

“In this class action lawsuit, the first to reach the courts, the plaintiff’s attorney has just started presenting evidence.”

The other channels showed the same courtroom scene from different angles. One channel used Spanish words and another was in an Asian language, maybe Mandarin or Vietnamese. I couldn’t tell.

Outside the courtroom, human demonstrators shouted and waved banners. I could not see any robot demonstrators.

The next report on the telly was the growing tendency of the rich to change the DNA of their babies. They wanted them to have beauty, intelligence, and strength.

*Just like Bingers.*

The rich didn’t discriminate against us nearly as much as the less educated and lower classes. The problem was there were few wealthy or educated people.

The last news report I watched was on the growing rift between humans and robots.

A female reporter said, "Each does what he does best. Robots process and store data and serve humans. Humans are more emotional and creative. But sometimes their emotions hurt other humans. We've all seen examples of that."

"The robot population is split. Some believe humanity is weak because they have emotions. Other robots believe humanity is special just because they have emotions. These robots have emotional circuits and have said humanity is more creative because of their emotions. The human brain does not think like a robot's."

Next came a robot, which said, "The emotional bots point out that the intellectual bots are acting exactly like emotional humans who want to preserve their past values and opinions."

The same female reporter came back on with a view of a factory making parts for robots. The workers were, of course, more robots.

"Humans design the newer models of robots to have emotional circuits. On the other hand..."

The view shifted to a different assembly line.

"...other rational robots are building bots of their own. It's a race to see who can make the most robots that look like humans. And the cheapest."

The view showed the reporter.

"But the real question is, who will buy those bots?"

The view changed once more to show a man and woman in a showcase full of both emotional robots, wearing red clothing, and the more intellectual robots, wearing blue clothing. The humans asked a humanoid face of a robot in red, "How are you with children?"

The reporter spoke next, "That question presumes the bot will understand its meaning."

When that program ended, I said, "Telly off."

I went back to reading reports that my boss had left. In one, Sheila Fish of Channel One News on Rossa spoke on the vid, "Jake Dani was a personal friend of mine. You may know him as Albert Poors. Jake chose that identity to protect himself from public attention."

*Oh well. There goes one alias. Too bad too. That was a good one.*

An item in Sheila's report caught my attention.

"Jake Dani was the father of Alena Dani, the well-known xenoanthropologist who wrote the articles in the *Journal of Rossan Biology* on the relationship between humans and the alien species—the mercons, and the napes—here on Rossa. And how the Bingers fit into all this."

*Oh yeah.*

There was a photo of my daughter, Alena, as she attended my funeral services in a black tight dress.

Sheila continued, "Alena will take Jake's ashes back to Earth for burial. She lost both her parents on our planet."

It took five minutes of research before I found the report of Jake's on his attendance at the political meeting of conservatives. I read the part about Getner looking up and staring into my face.

*Was that part of the reason I had been killed?*