

Futures

Left over life to kill

A shot at redemption. By Paul Alex Gray



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

KillMech 486.C5 had a name once. It remembers this name as it walks through the shallow water lining a beach ... *she* remembers the name, the word bubbling up deep in her cybernetically modified brain. A mumbling sound that forces its way to her lips.

Momma.

That's what the boy called her. The one she is beginning to remember. She can't recall his name, or his face. But she holds onto the sensation of his soft skin on hers.

Thirty feet above, a Hunter/Guidance Drone, Crow, issues a stern warning. Its metallic voice blares in her head.

Latent memories are forbidden!

KillMech steadies herself in a wave, holding her rifle above her head. Her body is damaged, mechanical components corroded from years without maintenance, her organic parts stinking with infection.

The humans are close.

"We haven't seen humans in years," says KillMech. "We've not heard from HQ or another

unit in just as long."

Crow sends a command that makes KillMech jolt with pain, and it repeats the message she's heard a hundred times before.

KillMech. Your purpose is elimination of humans in unlicensed zones. I will locate humans and Ship will transport us to them. You have many weapons at your disp –

"I've got barely any weapons left, Crow," she coughs. "I'm falling apart."

Systems are operational. I will drive the humans to a suitable elimination point.

Crow's ray-shaped form zooms off in the hazy afternoon sky. She wonders if it has organic parts like her. Some remnants of a soldier meshed in with cables and chips. Does it remember anything of a life before?

Her memories, long suppressed by chemicals and conditioning, have been returning ever since her transport vessel, Ship, exhausted its supplies of drugs. Terrible visions come sometimes, reminders of when she was *upgraded* – parts of her replaced with machinery designed for death.

Crow was concerned by KillMech's increased emotions, and it dogged her constantly. It was rare that the drone wasn't in her thoughts – they were connected minds, primed for killing. But there were moments, when Crow would descend and connect with Ship for a few hours to recalibrate.

KillMech would stand at the bow, staring out across empty seas.

She would try to remember.

The boy ... in her arms, back when she was just skin and flesh and bone, not augmented with metal and plastic. The child was giggling. They were in water ... a swimming pool? He would turn his head, but the memory ended before KillMech saw his face.

Alert. Cross the beach to the rocky outcrop. Two humans are beyond. Proceed and shoot to kill.

Blurry red crosshairs appear in KillMech's vision. She nods instinctively and steps from the water, her flanged metal feet struggling for balance on the pebbled beach. If these humans are armed, they might be able to

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defend themselves. Maybe even kill her.

She never cared about dying when the drugs kept her in a state of emptiness. But now ... she feels something. Fear. She does not want to die before she remembers the boy's face.

Cease memory recalls! Proceed to eliminate the humans.

Crow sends a burst of pain, a reminder that it is in command.

KillMech stumbles forwards, reaching awkwardly with one hand and scraping it against the rocks. She feels no pain, but alarms chime within as she observes her forearm. The skin has torn and blood seeps out, along with foul yellow pus. Her hand trembles.

"I've damaged –"

Proceed. Be cautious when shooting. Systems will consolidate.

KillMech moves along the outcrop, staring ahead as the red crosshairs brighten. Squatting, she aims her rifle and looks through the scope.

A gaunt man cowers, his arms wrapped around another human. Behind them, a rocky cliff rises. They might be able to climb it, but it is steep. Crow has led them into a trap.

Kill them.

KillMech steadies her breathing, willing her body to be still although she shakes with more than fear. Something scrapes at her thoughts, pressing and probing, wanting to be free.

She fires, the blast echoing.

You missed. Again – quickly, before they flee.

KillMech watches the man's mouth open in a wail, although she cannot hear. He tries to wrap himself around the other human – a child. Face to the ground. Even from this distance she sees it trembling. It turns to face her, scraggly hair framing its face. A young boy. Eyes wide with fear.

A memory breaks free in KillMech's mind.

Michael.

KillMech swivels fast, almost falling as she raises the rifle skywards. The outline of Crow comes into the scope and before it can issue a command, she pulls the trigger. The recoil knocks her back, but not before she sees the drone shatter, raining sparks as it plummets out of sight.

Alarms flare in her mind as systems try to process the situation. She can hear Ship hailing her, operating on protocols, steaming to

extract her to safety.

KillMech gets to her feet slowly, trembling, worried that Crow will appear and punish her. The humans stand by the cliff, staring with confusion.

"Go!" she yells and lifts her rifle weakly.

They run, scrambling up the cliff.

KillMech turns to the sea. Parts of Crow float on the surface, and in the distance, she can see the outline of Ship, drawing closer. She's not sure what will happen now ... if she can even survive without Crow. If they encounter other units, she'll be killed. But she doesn't care.

Memories flood within her. Moments from a life before. Waves of light and love and happiness. She stares at the setting sun as it bleeds into the horizon, her eyes stinging with tears for the first time in forever.

Paul Alex Gray writes fiction starring sentient black holes, wayward sea-monsters and curious AIs. His work has been published in *Nature Futures*, *Andromeda Spaceways* and *On Spec Magazine*.