

# T755

by

**John Markestad**

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## **DAY 126**

The morning begins like nearly all do: the sun rises in a sky of magenta, yellow and purple. Clouds are scarce, high and thin, and shredded by the winds that dwell at altitude. A dozen kinds of sea birds are already wheeling above the waves, some dive in the shallows for their breakfast; others begin a much longer flight out to the deep where they hunt what they will. Winds that were calm begin to kick up in fits and starts as the sun warms the land's surface; rising air above the island drags cooler air in from the sea. Whitecaps begin to form on otherwise sluggish, slowly rolling waves.

The beach is wide here, seventeen point six meters on average over its fourteen hundred and eighty-seven meter length. The sand is unremarkable. It's a cream color when dry but turns to a medium brown when wet. It does not do a very good job of supporting my weight; leaving me nearly ankle deep with each step. Still, some part of my complex Activity Management Program finds walking in the sand, on the beach, preferable to walking on the humus covered sand in the forest.

The engineered flesh that still doesn't quite cover my polyalloy fingertips has advanced a barely imperceptible millimeter or two since yesterday. There are two other places where my skeleton of not-bone is visible but those can be hidden by clothing...my style of fishing is effective but sometimes leads to unexpected and less-than-desirable consequences. I simply walk out into the ocean, the east side of the island is best. About two hundred meters out the water is still five meters deep and the coral reef is healthy. I walk around in the coral until I see a fish dart into a small nook or cranny. It's only a matter of reaching in and grabbing my meal. I recently made a small mistake in that what I took to be a fish of only a kilo turned out to be the tail of a moray eel just over a meter in length. It ripped the engineered flesh from three fingers before I killed it. On another day a small shark, not even a meter in length, bit my calf and took a sizable chunk of muscle. My engineered flesh requires organic matter in order to stay healthy and re-

grow where it has been damaged; therefore I fish. The island life above the waterline is either too small to be worthwhile or flies away. The few snakes that were large enough to provide a decent meal were eaten months ago.

I walk the perimeter of the island every day, and that too requires organic matter for energy. The island does not have a name that I am aware of and I have not given it a name. It is nine point eight one kilometers in length and six point eight eight kilometers in width, its shape is vaguely egg-like. There is a small, apparently dormant volcano on the island, no doubt the original source of the island's creation. It rises twenty-two hundred and fourteen meters, high enough to affect the winds blowing in from the sea and creates almost daily thunderstorms. The storms, in turn, produce rain which allows the jungle to flourish.

There are no animals on the island that couldn't have been seeded here by accidental arrival on tree-limb rafts or been blown in on storm winds. There are no pigs, goats, chickens, peacocks, sheep, rats, or other animals that humans normally bring along to recreate anew wherever they started out from. Of course, an island as small as this one would not sustain a human population for very long. Their over-whelming drive to over-populate, and the consequential resource demands, would very quickly outstrip the island's ability to provide. The human blight has not found this island in a way that has led to permanent residence.

Inland, one point four two kilometers from the closest beach, near a small waterfall, there is the remnant debris of a human-made shelter. It can't be more than a few decades abandoned or it wouldn't be recognizable at all. Bamboo poles lashed together with fiber rope for walls and palm leaves for a roof are the evidence. No doubt some castaway made it this far. Whether rescued or other, I've not found any skeletal remains to explain the owner's absence. It wouldn't be surprising to learn that that lonely island occupant was not the first cast off of the sea to live here, and certainly was not the last. Although, I suppose it must be stated that I am not technically a castaway in the same sense as the hut builder.

Most likely that builder began their life here lying in the morning sun on some otherwise barren stretch of sand much like that on which I'm walking now. Bright sun, bird calls, partially eaten and now rotting sea creatures, and the soothing lap-lap of the waves are the recipe for most days on this island. Some days, like yesterday, are more memorable if only for the strength and duration of a storm. Yesterday's storm didn't originate over the volcano as happens most days, it blew in from the southwest already strong and pushing a significant surge ahead of it. I stood my

ground where the jungle meets the beach, watching the dark clouds and lightning as they approached, letting the surge rise around and then above me.

The successive surge waves, each with the weight of thousands of gallons of water, came ashore like a horizontal wall. Using left over fiber rope that I'd found at the hut location I'd tied myself to a thick coconut palm trunk to experience the storm firsthand. The surge was visible from nearly a kilometer out, moving on the island like a tsunami, climbing up as it entered the reef shallows. Wave upon wave was pushed forward by the wind, each wave catching up to and piling upon those ahead of it. Above the waves there was grey-green sky with white spray lit blue-white by nonstop lightning. Beneath the waves it was dark, very close to black; a darkness that the lightning had little effect upon. Beneath the waves was much less interesting. I don't think it was an actual hurricane or typhoon, but it was a storm worthy of any sailor's notice. I may not have emotions, but I was very much impressed with the energy that such a storm contains. As elemental a thing as the heat energy of the ocean warming the air above, sending that warmth up, then drawing in more warm air as it funneled up, which fueled even more wind. And that wind drawing upon yet more of the ocean's heat energy. I admired the simplicity of the positive feedback loop. All the while that the surge lunged at me and retreated I wished for such an experience for every human, without the protection of a stout palm tree, of course.

And that, yesterday's storm, explains the spire of wooden mast that is now visible two kilometers away poking above the rocky prominence that delineates the end of this beach and the beginning of the next. Along the way there's other debris littering the shore: a piece of wooden desk, half of a cabin door, a foam pillow with the pale-yellow pillowcase still on it, bits of teak that may have been from a railing, a boy-child's body dressed in dark blue shorts and no shirt or shoes. The crabs have found the boy. Beyond the boy, washed up on the rocks of the promontory, is more of the boat. Extrapolating from what is left I determine that it was no more than twelve meters in length; the sort of small sailing yacht popular with wealthy families.

It's not clear to me precisely where I am in the Pacific, south of the Equator, for certain. The time I spent in the pressures of the deep walking the ocean bottom to get to the island damaged some circuitry. Salt water seeping by my seals was not helpful in any way. Bits of memory and computational ability have been lost. I'm certainly much further out from a civilized harbor than this little boat should have been.

From the promontory I look northeast to the next beach, one point eight one kilometers long with a sharp turn to the northwest at the one kilometer mark. This beach holds more wreckage. The small boat had had a difficult time with the reef as it came in, there were no pieces in sight larger than an average dining room table. The mast is propped against the boulders of the promontory, standing alone as though waiting for a cross piece to be attached to mark the final resting place of its owners, has been stripped of all its rigging but for those items bolted and screwed tight. I can see two more bodies, one adult male and one adult female. Thermal inspection tells me that they, too, are dead. There's a sudden motion at the edge of a bit of wooden flotsam beyond the two adult bodies. Zooming my optics I spot a child's hand with fingers twitching.

I pass the first body, the woman, still wearing a bright red bikini but missing her right leg from the knee down. The man is intact but it appears that encounters with the reef have broken all four limbs and left little unlacerated. Neither the man nor the woman has anything that offers identification. I move on.

Lifting the splintered piece of wooden hull, or possibly cabin roof, that the child no doubt floated to shore on, I find a female of twelve years, or possibly thirteen. She is in the very early stages of puberty. She is conscious for the most part and I help her to sit up with her back to the wreckage. It takes over a minute for her eyes to focus on me.

“What is your name?” I ask her.

She makes several failed attempts to speak before whispering “Mariah Trudeau.”

In a motion almost faster than her poor human eyes can follow, I ram a strip of jagged teak into her chest, piercing her heart. If she had uttered the correct name I would still have killed her, but much more thoroughly. Standing up, looking back in the direction I'd come, I don't see anything else of interest.

The rest of the walk around the island is without incident.

## **DAY 1**

The initial boot-up process took a very long time, three point five three seconds. But then, there were a great many routines that needed to be run, checked, cross-checked, backed up to permanent onboard memory, parsed for any possible contamination by unknown viruses or Trojan horses, and finally, a series of physical tests. The T755 model, Serial Number 47661309,

twitched on the rack where it was hanging by its neck like a nerve damaged animal. Starting with the fingers and toes tiny motors activated for a seventeenth of a second. The tests then ran into the foot structures and the palms, then the ankles and wrists. The twitching worked its way into the larger muscles of the legs and arms, and the hips and shoulders before meeting at the spine. The not entirely alive body twitched like someone experiencing a grand mal seizure. Finally, eyelids opened, pupils dilated, nostrils flared and lips skinned back into a parody of a smile. Even the ears gave a disturbing twitch.

At the end of the boot-up process, when the onboard computer was satisfied that no human shenanigans had been able to creep in, the T755 model ordered the twin shelf hooks from which it was suspended to lower it. T755 took two steps forward and executed a left turn that a Marine drill sergeant of earlier days would have smiled to see. Looking every inch the part of a normal, if totally naked, human male, T755, Serial Number 47661309, walked the three hundred and four meters along the racks of other T755 units. On the left was only a blank wall, grey and featureless. On the right were the five sets of racks of T755 units. Each rack unit contained thirty-six individual T755s. Overhead, the ceiling was twenty meters away and filled with propellered drones darting to inscrutable tasks. SN47661309 noted and stored the smell of hot machine oils and atmosphere burnt from the electrical arcs in use. These were the last of the T755 model. The other thirteen assembly buildings were being converted to build the T1000 model. The T1000 model units were larger, stronger, faster, more durable, and most importantly, looked exactly like a human man. At the conclusion of the causeway he opened a cabinet and withdrew shoes, socks, pants, and a shirt. There was no need to check the size, all T755 units wore the same size.

An internally received and processed radio call directed this particular T755 model to report to a room twenty-seven point one kilometers distant. The T755 unit moved to a spot just outside of the manufactory doors marked with a simple X. In less than a minute a cargo drone swooped down and gripped him by the head. After a flight of twenty-seven point one kilometers T755 was returned to ground level and the drone released the clamp. Directly in front of T755 was a door that had no markings to indicate what was on the other side. None of the doors had markings, nor did any of the buildings that were under the control of The Primary. Information about each building and each room was either loaded into memory, or not, depending on whether it had been determined that that unit needed the information. The T755 unit standing before the

door didn't know what was beyond the door, but knew with machine certainty that it was the correct door and that he was supposed to enter. So he did.

The room was the size of three human high-school gymnasiums, and was crammed with electronics. Light from the hundreds of display screens was the only illumination. The room was hot and the synthesized skin of T755 registered that and began to glisten with the first sheen of sweat. Some of the devices present in the room were the size of T755's closed fist. Some, if hollow, could have carried more than a dozen of him. Most were somewhere in between. Cables of many different thicknesses were strewn on the floor in no recognizable pattern. T755 could see some ends ending in attachments to some machines, others slithered into the shadows, snaking between devices to destinations unknown. T755 was the only human looking mechanism in the room, all others were machines made to the best efficiency of form for function. Not a single machine 'eye' turned his direction.

In the center of the gigantic room was a 'something' mounted on a dais. It had three grayish, metallic rings that were larger in diameter than T755 was tall and each looked to be gimbal-mounted in a different plane. It was immediately clear that all three rings rotated about a single point. The mountings for the rings had very thick cables attached. T755 found that focusing directly on any one of the rings was difficult. The small section of ring that was the point of focus seemed to slip away, refusing to be seen. T755 shifted through several spectral bands with his optical sensors but found no improvement. The ring material did not permit visual scrutiny.

Radio communication flashed between the T755 unit and a node of The Primary. Unaltered, the communication was undetectable to human senses. If printed out as a transcript, as it surely would be if the humans ever managed to take this facility, the communication would read as follows:

The Primary: ***Deposit the clothing on the bench on your right.***

Without responding T755 turned right, took two steps, removed his clothing and put them on the metal bench. T755 returned to his previous position.

The Primary: ***The device in front of you is a time machine. You have been selected for an urgent mission. You will be sent back in time to a precise location where you will seek out a specific individual, a human female child, and you will kill that human.***

T755: ***Without clothing I will be noticed.***

The Primary: *Time shifted items must be fully enclosed in living matter. Acquire clothing upon arrival.*

T755: *What is the method for return to this time?*

The Primary: *Through the natural passage of time.*

T755: *How far back will I travel?*

The Primary: *Thirty-six years, ninety-two days, four hours, eleven minutes, forty-one point six one one seconds.*

T755: *Location?*

The Primary: *Baraboo, Wisconsin, United States of America, North American continent. Precision of arrival destination is not guaranteed. Eighty-one point eight percent likelihood of arrival at intended destination.*

At this point additional relevant information was downloaded to the T755. When that was completed The Primary ran a final diagnostic on T755.

The Primary: *Step onto the platform in the middle of the rings and assume a crouched position.*

Seconds later the three rings began rotating. The specific and unique composition of the alloys of their construction, passing through the naturally occurring magnetic field of the Earth, plus the reverse of that field generated locally, caused a rising discontinuity in the space-time frame within the spinning-ring volume. Electro-magnetic charges accumulated and began discharging into the room, each one seeking out specific grounding rods mounted in carefully located positions. Within the spinning rings the space began to waver visually. A fully organic eye would have seen the image of T755 flicker as though it might not be fully present. The instants of T755's absence within the room grew until he was gone more than he was present. Of a moment, without any special visual announcement except for a particularly energetic electric flash, T755 ceased to be in the room at all.

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In the fraction of a second that it took T755 to fall the meter and a half, approximately, to the ocean he was able to note that there was land only a few kilometers away. The main processor within T755's chest also noted that Baraboo, Wisconsin, North America, was well inland of any ocean. *Precision of arrival destination is not guaranteed.*

The fall to the sea floor, one hundred and forty-eight point eight meters, happened quickly. T755's mostly metallic body sank much more efficiently than it floated. He touched down feet first in a small explosion of silt, then stood for the three minutes it took for the cloud to dissipate to a point of adequate visibility. Accompanied by a soft whirring of servos, T755 pulled his feet loose from the muck and began trudging across the mostly empty underwater plain. It was too dark for plant life to make any decent headway here and without plants nothing else had much interest in the area. The sea bottom trended upward although at one point T755 had to jump into a twenty meter deep trench and then crawl up the not-quite-vertical opposite side of bare stone.

Sensors that monitored internal processes and states noted that minute amounts of salt water were seeping past seals. T755 was forced to shut down certain electronic pathways and isolate those areas. He knew that the longer he was forced to remain below one hundred meters the greater the accumulating damage would be. As best he could manage T755 increased his pace across the ocean floor. When the silty bottom turned sandy and began to rise he pushed harder yet. By the time he reached the shallower waters he'd lost a full four point one one percent of his overall capacity, fortunately the majority, though not all, of the degraded files were memory banks dealing with social engagement protocols among humans of different races and ethnic origins.

Upon reaching the coral band that surrounded the island T755 picked his way slowly through the maze of sharp edges. It wasn't the fear of pain should he cut his flesh coverall, but rather the potential difficulty in explaining what lay beneath should he find the need to pass for a human. Also, as it turned out, the blood-like fluid that supplied the flesh with oxygen and nutrients attracted predators just as normal human blood would.

T755 wasn't precisely relieved, that sort of emotion wasn't remotely possible for a T755 unit, when he finally strode out of the surf and onto the beach. He did stand in the bright sun and the onshore breeze a while to maximize and accelerate drying out. When he felt he was as recovered as he was going to get T755 turned left and began walking the beach edge. Nine hours and forty-eight minutes later he was back where he'd begun, on an island without any immediately visible signs of human habitation.

**DAY 581**



The morning dawned like most did. The sky turned scarlet and amber with purples thrown in for contrast. Winds were calm. On the bare-faced cliffs birds threw themselves from their perches and began the long day of fishing or stealing from birds that did the fishing. If one had the patience you could watch as the shadow lined crept down the cone of the old volcano turning dark greens and grays into vibrant emeralds shot through with colored flowers of every hue, shape, and size. In the forest small life began stirring from where they'd hidden the night away from the predators that prowled the dark. Chirps and chitters joined the daytime chorus of the forest.

T755 did not sleep, nor did he hide from nighttime predators. There was just enough of what it was to be human in T755 that he just naturally slowed down when the day passed. His multi-spectrum optics dealt easily with the diminished light; after all, it was only the portion of the spectrum that was most useful to humans that went away. Still, he usually would stop moving with the advance of the darkness: not sleeping, not dreaming, not even computing the next day's activities. Those were set: circumnavigate the island on the beach, identify any flotsam that might be useful in getting off the island, and kill any humans that washed ashore still alive. The last part had only happened the one time but the high priority command string remained: kill humans in general, kill a specific young human in particular. Killing that specific human was posing a problem since that human was a half a world away and T755 had no immediate ability to traverse the distance.

Seven minutes and twenty-three seconds into the walk around the island T755 saw the thing that would make this day singular of all the five hundred and eighty days that had preceded it. About one kilometer off shore a boat was at anchor. T755 took a picosecond to determine if it was a boat or a ship. His memory came up with numerous descriptions of each but finally settled on the generally agreed upon definition: *a ship can carry a boat, but a boat cannot carry a ship*. It was a boat that was visible offshore, and in fact had a smaller boat tied to its stern. T755 didn't see anywhere that another boat of any size could have been hoisted up and onto the water craft. Therefore, it was a boat. And the smaller boat still tethered to it meant those aboard hadn't yet come ashore. T755 walked quickly into the forest. Once there he put himself half behind a coconut palm and watched. Nearly an hour passed before there was visible activity.

By now it was late morning and the breeze had picked up as it always did, which kept the boat straining at its anchor line as it first climbed one round-topped wave and then plunged down

on its way to the next. The operation of moving two people, male adults, from the stern of the bigger boat into the bow of the smaller took several times longer than it would have in calmer seas. T755 zoomed his optics and watched as the men tried several times to match their stepping action to the rise and fall of the two boats. In the end one of the two all but fell into the boat and the other leaped awkwardly, ending in a tumble that took him near the rear-mounted outboard motor. Following that the two untied from the mother boat and motored to the beach. The final hundred meters through the surf generated by the reef was also not done well with the small boat nearly getting sideways as it rode the frothy front side of a wave.

When the two men, both looking to be in their late twenties or early thirties and dressed only in swim trunks, sandals, and sunglasses, were finally standing on the sand they gave the nearby jungle an appraising look.

“Look at this place. This is gonna be perfect,” said one.

T755 dialed up his auditory sensitivity to pick up all of the conversation

“Don’t get your hopes up just yet, Phil. That’s what you said about the last two and they didn’t pan out.”

“True, but they didn’t have a whopping big volcano to create rain. I mean, look at this place, Nug. I betcha a million bucks that when we go inland we’ll find that what we saw was a fresh water stream and not just a sea intrusion,” Phil said.

“Well, we aren’t going to find out by standing here are we. Lead on, MacDuff,” Nug said and raised his arm to indicate that Phil should lead them into the jungle.

Their passage through the jungle was loud with snapping branches and raised voices marking the trail. T755 stayed well off to the left of the two but close enough to listen in on the conversation that gained in excitement with every hundred meters. Time and again Phil would bend down and dig with his fingers into the jungle floor.

“Look at this, wouldja,” Phil would say. “It’s real soil, topsoil. You only get this with thousands of years of growth. This place is gonna be it. We’re gonna have to step back as soon as we plant the seeds, that’s how fast they’re gonna grow.”

Nug would always reply positively but without the certainty. When finally, two hours into their exploration, they stumbled upon the fresh water stream that collected the daily rains flowing down off the volcano Nug finally capitulated.

“Okay. I agree. This is the island. We have fresh water, good soil, and plenty of isolation. This little spit of land isn’t on the charts except for the satellites’. And it’s way off the shipping lanes. I don’t see us finding a better location. Let’s follow this upstream a ways and then circle back around to the beach. Then we can let Trip know what we’ve found.”

“Oh, man. We are gonna get so damn rich. Three, four years and we can sell this grow operation for millions, no, tens of millions, and retire before we’re thirty. “Course, this jungle is gonna be a bitch to clear,” Phil said looking up and around at the canopy. “Chainsaws are gonna get a real workout here.”

“Yeah,” Nug agreed, also looking up and around. “And no burning during daylight. We don’t want to attract any attention.”

“Damn, right we don’t. This is gonna be the biggest marijuana grow in the whole damn Pacific. Way the shit of in the lost little bits of the Western Islands. Nobody’s gonna find us here. And we got Asia on one side and Australia on the other. Easy importing. Hot damn, Nug. Champagne, oysters, and naked ladies are not far off for us,” Phil said showing white teeth in a great smile.

“One step at a time,” Nug said but still gave Phil a fist bump.

With more congratulatory discussion the two men moved off following the stream. At this point it was too wide to jump across even with a good running start and about chest deep. Where the water slowed down in calm pools a few small fish could be seen below the surface and near the edges as they hunted for even smaller fish and insects on the surface. Short stretches of rocky rapids interrupted the smooth, sedate flow, adding oxygen to the water. By the time the water reached the sea it had warmed considerably and the small pools just short of the sea had substantial green growing over the surface. Occasionally small fish from the ocean would venture up the stream a short ways before deciding they didn’t like the taste of the fresh water.

Phil and Nug walked within ten meters of the collapsed hut without seeing it, they were too busy marveling at the cascade of waterfalls that backed up the site. When Phil wanted to jump in for a swim Nug reminded him that they should wait until they’d had the water tested. There was no telling what parasites might be in the water. The thought of some small worms burrowing into his flesh was enough to dissipate Phil’s enthusiasm. At the waterfall they turned away from the spray and headed directly into the early afternoon sun.

Staying thirty to forty meters away T755 moved quietly through the jungle, shadowing the two human men. The fact that what they were planning was, at this time and in what he now knew was an island in the Philippine chain, a highly illegal marijuana growing operation made it almost certain that these men would not be missed...at least not soon and not by many. In the course of listening T755 learned that the two were Americans, no doubt the children of well-off parents and spending most of their time engaged in shady dealings as they moved around the world surfing or participating in other warm weather sports.

“I say we go back out get drunk to celebrate. We can stay anchored and sail back into the chain tomorrow. But we need to take a big roundabout so when we turn the transponder back on we’re nowhere near here,” Nug said.

“I’m all for that. Trip’ll be happy to hear the news that we finally got our island. This is gonna be so damn cool”

T755 was considering making his move just before the two cleared the jungle but when he heard that they were planning to stay on the boat he changed his mind. There was a better way to handle this, one that presented much lower risks. So he stood in the jungle and watched as the two men managed their small boat off the beach, got it turned around and plowed through the breakers. Again, showing that they had not nearly enough practice, Nug managed to get the boat off angle as they approached a wave and nearly caused it to capsize. In spite of that they did finally make back to the larger boat, got tied off, and inexpertly clambered from the one to the other. After that T755 settled into the foliage, his back against a coconut palm, and waited. It wasn’t long and a something on the boat began playing loud music, over that the voices of the three men could sometimes be heard although the music made deciphering the words impossible. One by one the men would show up on deck to pee over the side, always with a beer bottle in one hand. Late in the day, about an hour before dark, Phil actually went over the side while trying to not pee on himself. Fortunately for him he was not so drunk that he’d forgotten how to swim and after some splashing and cursing he’d managed to climb back aboard at the stern. Right after he disappeared below deck into the small cabin there was a round of raucous guffaws that easily overwhelmed the music. It was near midnight when the laughter and talking died away, although the music continued.

**DAY 582**

Picking a two minute window of time when the half-full moon was cloud obscured T755 stood and walked out of the jungle, across the beach, into the night dark ocean. Using internal sensors to keep him aligned with the anchor rope he made his way through the sand and into the coral. His progress was slow as he picked his way with care, having to wend a path through the sharp edges while always staying on course. It took three hours to make the half-kilometer walk across the bottom and sunrise was only an hour and a half away when T755 came to the rope. Using the rope he hauled himself to the surface and then over the gunwale and onto the sailing boat. Under the music he could hear muffled snoring coming from the below-deck cabin. When he walked across the deck he left a trail of synthetic blood from his coral-cut feet diluted with dripping sea water. Peering down and into the cabin he saw Phil sprawled partially on and partially off of a chair, his head was lolled back and mostly unsupported. On any other morning that would have meant a terribly sore neck for him when he awoke.

Moving with more care than the situation likely required T755 stepped down and into the cabin. Between the available moonlight and his enhanced vision the scene was as clear as any sunny afternoon would be for a human. Phil, near the door in the chair, and to his right on a short and narrow bunk was Nug. Across from Nug in a matching bunk was Trip. He is dark-skinned with tightly twisted black hair that is cut close to his scalp. He is a noticeably larger man than the two Caucasians, heavily muscled and wearing blue shorts, a sleeveless white tee, and brown deck shoes. The cabin is a mess. There are at least thirty empty beer bottles sitting upright or on their sides on every flat surface, including the floor. All of the bottles had long since come to terms with the rolling of the ship, now much settled in the early morning calm.

Phil was first. T755 spoke softly while coaxing Phil to his feet. The intent was for Phil to believe, in his still drunk and half awake state, that one of his friends was moving him to a more comfortable spot. With additional coaxing T755 managed to get Phil to climb the five steps out of the cabin and onto the deck. On the eastern horizon there was not so much as the barest hint of the dawn creeping up on them. Once on the deck it'd been easy to maneuver Phil near the cable railing. Then, much faster than Phil could have defended against even in a fully awake state, T755 slammed his left fist into Phil's right temple. As the body slumped it was guided over the safety cables to splash into the sea. Phil floated face down. There was no movement in his limbs or head but for what the gentle swells imparted. The receding tide started the body on a trip out to the deeper water.

With almost identical motions T755 put Nug into the ocean not far from his friend. Other than the two splashes that must have been barely perceptible below deck there hadn't been any significant noise. For that reason T755 was very surprised when he started down the steps into the cabin and was confronted with Trip pointing a revolver at him.

In better lighting conditions Trip would almost certainly have said 'What the fuck are you?' rather than what he did say.

"Who the fuck are you?"

T755 took a full second to review the situation, noting that the revolver was essentially harmless to him, and that there was nothing else present that might be a more effective weapon on Trip's behalf. He stepped forward. The pistol bark was loud in the close space and the muzzle flash gave a lightning-like strobe effect to the scene. Entering perfectly centered on his sternum the bullet stopped almost instantly, having no effect other than to make a small red hole. Before Trip could get a second shot off T755 had a grip on the pistol and had wrenched it from Trip's hand. Continuing the stepping motion T755 grabbed Trip by the right bicep. Trip screamed as the fascia enclosing his muscle tore and the humerus cracked. The physical resistance that Trip attempted had virtually zero effect in slowing T755 from dragging him up the stairs and onto the deck. Then, with an open-handed slap across Trip's right jaw T755 all but sheared his cervical spine. The mandible broke with an audible snap as Trip's head spun to the side before lolling forward into an unnatural position. Still holding Trip by the upper arm T755 threw the quickly dying Trip into the ocean.

The motor-sailboat was a forty-one footer and the name on the stern read *Trust Fund*. The irony was totally lost on T755. It took only a minute for him to locate the navigation charts in a surprisingly well-ordered drawer. That part at least had been kept sharp. In addition, there was a basic GPS unit and a marine radio. Both of those were turned off. With the GPS unit back on T755 was able to locate his position and found he was indeed in the Western Islands in the deep ocean between Indonesia and Palau. This small island he'd been marooned on for over a year and a half was not on the charts. Instead, the chart showed only open ocean. Not surprising. The Indonesian chain alone consisted of nearly eighteen thousand islands and there were uncounted small dots of land that extended east into the Pacific on the way to Palau and south to New Guinea. It was really no great wonder that this particular spit of land didn't receive visitors.

A more thorough search of the cabin provided passports for all three: United States passports for Phil Armana and Nug Tregar, and Indonesian for Trip Natsir. In addition, there were two separate stashes of currency: eight thousand and seventy-one U.S. dollars and nearly seventy million in rupiah...equal to a few thousand U.S. dollars depending on the exchange value on any given day. T755 considered this to be quite adequate to get him to Baraboo, Wisconsin. Ammunition for the revolver, a .38, was in a drawer next to the sleeping bunk used by Trip. Going through the luggage aboard turned up a nine-millimeter Sig Sauer automatic and one hundred rounds of ammunition. Taking clothes from a drawer under Trip's bunk T755 put on the first clean and complete clothes he'd ever worn. The battered and weather-cracked leather trunk near the island hut site had yielded a few clothes that had not quite fit him well enough. They'd been adequate to stave off the sunburn that even his synthetic skin was susceptible to in the intense Pacific sunlight.

T755 studied the passports and concluded that with a new photo he could modify that of Trip to serve him. The overall construction and security built into the passports was primitive and would be easy to defeat. Still, there was the problem of his physical appearance. Under normal lighting there was no chance that he could pass for a human. Even in bad lighting the texture of his skin was easy to spot up close. Well, there was time to think that through. After reviewing his internal files on sailing T755 upped the anchor, raised the mainsail and turned west, leaving the island and the floating corpses behind. Finally, he could get on with the mission he'd been assigned.

## **DAY 598**

The trip west went smoothly even when taking into account the three occasions that T755 anchored on the leeward side of an island to await the passing of strong squall lines. He didn't make any stops during the entire island hopping journey. There was more than enough food aboard for his limited requirements and the winds stayed favorable although he did a great deal of tacking. He decided on the island of Kalimantan, or more specifically the island of Palau Tarakan, a small island just offshore that had an international airport. It looked small enough not to have much in the way of security. T755 noted that he was in the year 1966 and security at airports was non-existent by the standards in place after the attacks on the United States in 2001. So long as he had a ticket and a passport he should breeze through. Of course, there was still the

issue of his appearance. T755 models simply didn't look like normal humans, the synthetic skin was too smooth, lacking in visible pores or hair follicles, and didn't move correctly; the underlying muscles structures required weren't there. Any type of mask he might wear would surely arouse interest, if not in Indonesia then more certainly when he made it to more 'civilized' countries. He couldn't very well go through every day with a mask on.

The answer came up out of his data files as one of several possible solutions. Opening the cap to the diesel fuel tank T755 used a bit of wire tied to a rag. He withdrew the soaked rag and rubbed the fuel on his face, neck, and the backs of his hands. Then, after setting the onboard fire extinguisher next to him, and using a Zippo lighter he'd found in a drawer, T755 lit his face aflame. He kept his eyes tightly shut, located the extinguisher, and sprayed the CO<sub>2</sub> at the flames on his face. A quick check in a mirror showed the results he'd wanted. The synthetic skin was slightly melted, no longer smooth and blemish free. His hair, real human hair that had been inserted one follicle at a time, was scorched and twisted. In some few places there was blood-colored fluid leaking out and adding to the fairly gruesome overall effect. No one would want to spend very much time studying his new face. T755 performed similar burning to the backs of both hands. A critical examination satisfied him that any human looking at him would quickly conclude that he was the unfortunate victim of a terrible burn accident. He now had a face that he could be seen wearing in public places.

He stayed three days in Palau Tarakan holed up in a cheap hotel room and used a skin dye to darken the visible portions. At night he visited local bars along the wharf listening to conversations that the participants thought were private. T755 kept a scarf around his neck and which he used to partly obscure his face, as someone with real scarring might do. The whores and the hustlers have him a wide berth after getting a quick look at his face. During the first full day he located a coin operated photo booth and used the results from that to replace the original picture of Trip Natsir with one of his own on the passport. On the morning of the third day he sold the motor sailboat for the equivalent of sixty-one thousand U.S. dollars to a marina dealer that showed no particular interest in the boat's title papers. The two U.S. passports he sold in a bar that night for two thousand U.S. each. The last morning he settled up with the hotel, hired a cab to take him and his single suitcase to the airport where he had an open-ended round trip ticket to Kolkata, India. When asked the purpose of his visit there he stated that he was meeting with a plastic surgeon to explore skin grafts to his face and hands. T755 even had the name of a



real surgeon and clinic available, if needed. In Kolkata he stayed for two-days, booking a flight to Kuwait City, also as an open-ended round trip, and used the same reason for his travel. There was no reason for anyone to doubt his story. Using the same tactic, T755 hop-scotched his way through regional airports over the course of another week until finally arriving at Chicago's Midway airport at 2:11 am on a Tuesday morning. Twenty-three minutes after landing he was on I-90 West headed for Wisconsin in a new, white, Mustang fastback with a V-8 engine and an automatic transmission.

### **DAY 607**

Exiting at the 119 mile marker, Hwy. 60 West, T755 turned right at the downtown stop sign in Lodi. From there he drove the two-lane Hwy. 113 seven miles north through rolling farmland and past the shores of Lake Wisconsin. The nearly full moon was not far from setting and it laid a silvery path across the calm lake waters. When he reached the free car-ferry at the Lodi side of the lake he was just thirty seconds too late. The last on-ramp had been raised and the ferry was already twenty yards from shore, pulling itself across the lake along steel cables laid beneath the water level. T755 pulled into the number one slot, right side, turned off the car and headlights. On his right there was railroad trestle low and dark against the trees and hills of Sauk County. The first hints of dawn were still a half-hour away and the stars were bright.

Fourteen minutes after leaving the ferry was back. It dropped the number one ramp and T755 drove on, the only vehicle for this trip. So far, there were no lights of cars or trucks waiting on the other side. In two hours that would change dramatically as commuters from the north side of Lake Wisconsin queued up for their morning drive to work somewhere in or near Madison. During the months when the lake wasn't frozen it was a nice way to start and end the workday. Over the winter the lake froze and the ferry was pulled onto shore for winter storage. For those months the commuters were forced to drive Hwy 12 south through Sauk City or go north on Hwy. 78 to Portage and pick up the interstate...depending on which side of Madison lay their destination. On this night the air was cool and the sky dark, a few small meteors streaked across the stars. T755 was oblivious to all of it.

Following Hwy. 113 north T755 passed the entrance to Devil's Lake State Park on his left and up the steep hill. Although the first colored sky of morning was just being created there were already two lonely vehicle lights on the greens and tees of Baraboo Country Club. At the

three-way corner where Hwy. 113 met Broadway and South he pulled into the Standard Oil gas station next to the pedestal mounted pay phone. The Baraboo phone book, still fairly new looking, was housed inside a black protective binder anchored with a steel cable to the phone. The phone book showed four Connor listings.

Records for the pre-war years were fragmentary and the names of the parents of Sarah weren't something that survived. It had been only by cross-referencing two newspaper articles that The Primary had determined that she'd grown up in Baraboo until age eleven or twelve. Where the family moved to from there wasn't known. Sarah didn't show up again in the public records until she was twenty-two and living in Los Angeles. T755 loaded the four listings, their rural route addresses, and phone numbers in his memory, and left the book hanging from its cable.

A sixtieth of a second was all that was required to determine that his data banks did not have a conversion table for rural route address to physical addresses. Knowing that Gerald L. Conner lived at Rural Route 2, Box 23, got him no closer to locating Gerald. In fact, all four listing were rural route addresses, most likely farms T755 concluded, so there was no Connor family within town that he could visit. He would have to wait until the Post Office opened.

"Here is a map showing the rural routes and their addresses. The address is listed as a location on a sort of grid," the plump, middle-aged woman in the pale blue USPS shirt said as she pointed out the location of Gerald Conner. She was making it a point to not look at 755's face. "It's on Man Mound Rd., W41334. The 'W' means it's west of this location. The postal delivery box should have the box number, and possibly the name, on the box." She slid the 8 ½" x 11" sheet across the counter.

"Do you happen to know if Gerald Conner has a daughter named Sarah?"

"No. I'm pretty new to this area. And I'm sure I'm not allowed to tell you if I did know. I'm not supposed to give out personal information on postal customers," the woman said with a forced smile. "Is Gerald a friend of yours?"

"No, we're trying to do some business together, is all," he said in a casual and measured voice.

"Alright, well, good luck."

At the double glass doors leading out of the lobby area he caught the reflection of the woman's face. Eyes wide, her hand was over her mouth and her head was shaking slightly side to side.

Using the map from the Post Office T755 navigated up Broadway to 8<sup>th</sup> where he turned right. A left turn onto County Rd. 'A' led up a long hill where it met up with Man Mound Rd. There he made another right. Watching the mailboxes he quickly found box #23 on his right. A crushed-rock drive fifty meters long led back to a white clapboard farm house. The grass around the house was more weeds than grass and looked at least a week overdue for mowing. There were three rusting Ford pickups sitting on cinder blocks lining the right side of the drive and the nose of another was visible in the doorless opening of a small barn or large shed partially hidden by the cottonwood saplings that had gained a foothold. A white porcelain bathtub was sitting on blocks of wood on the left side of the drive. The tub was nearly full of water with a layer of old leaves floating on top, a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes. There was a porch attached to the front of the house but it sat slanted down to the right where time, gravity and soggy ground had allowed the foundation to settle. The roof of the porch had a two-by-four poking several inches up through the old, dark-green shingles, only most of which are still there. A screen door leading from the porch into the house was ajar and the screens were half torn away.

T755 pulled up next to the rear corner of the house where another screen door stood fully open at the top of three unpromising steps. A wooden house door with only about two-thirds of the white paint still on it was closed. Turning off the Mustang T755 walked to the door and rapped four times.

"Whaddaya want?" said a male voice from inside. The voice was harsh and rasped of abused vocal cords.

"I'm looking for Gerald Conner. I'm from the Highway Commission. We're going to be widening Man Mound Road and we want to buy some of your property," T755 said in a loud enough voice.

The sound of boots crossing an insubstantial floor heralded the screech of wood on linoleum as the door opened. A man of perhaps forty dressed in boxer shorts and a white tee shirt looked down at T755 from behind a cigarette. He had a beer bottle in one hand and a Pop Tart in the other.

"How much you want and...Christ Almighty, what the shit happened to your face?"

“I was burned, Mr. Conner. Before we continue, may I ask if you have a daughter named Sarah?”

Conner looked down with a mixture of curiosity, greed, revulsion and confusion. T755 watches as the emotions made themselves plain. Gerald Conner wasn't quite sure what it was he wanted to say or do next.

“What? No. There's no one named Sarah here. Never was. Now what about you wanting to buy my land? I ain't given it away. My family's been on this...”

That was as far as Gerald Conner got before T755 pulled the 9 millimeter pistol that he'd brought all the way from the South Pacific out from under his shirt and shot Gerald twice in the sternum at point blank range. Both bullets passed completely through Gerald and imbedded themselves in the lathe and plaster wall behind him. The man took a half-stumbling step back, the Pop Tart and the beer both falling to the floor. The bottle landed flat on its bottom and erupted in white foam before toppling over. The frothy beer ran across the uneven floor and mixed with the pool of blood that had begun forming. Together the two seeped between the untended floor boards and dripped into the crawlspace beneath the porch.

T755 screeched the wooden door shut on the bleeding corpse and walked back to the Mustang. In the car he consulted the Post Office map for directions to the second Conner home.

## **DAY 607**

Craig Connor cursed silently as the backhoe jumped around, sending the rest of the John Deere tractor with a bucket on one end and the backhoe on the other, and himself, lurching in place. The whole tractor danced around as the outrigger feet jumped and resettled into a new spot. With each movement of the control sticks the boom arm would leap to a new position rather than make a slow and controlled crawl. No matter how delicately Craig tried to maneuver the control stick the boom would suddenly leap up or down, left or right depending on the movement of the stick. He knew the problem was due to the non factory-standard diverter valve he'd used to replace the old one. Knowing why it was doing it didn't make the job go any more smoothly or make the ride on the poorly padded seat any less taxing. Trying to dig a hole for the new septic tank and seep pipes with the backhoe behaving like he was sitting atop a very pissed off bronco was making for a long morning. On top of that he knew that each violent jerk was putting stress on the variety of pinned joints that allowed the backhoe arm to move in three

dimensions. If he couldn't get this corrected he'd eventually end up having to repair and replace more than just the offending valve.

The hole was growing in size though with much less alacrity than he'd hoped for. A couple of times he'd come within inches of smacking the bucket into the concrete silo that he was currently passing. Not that it would have hurt the bucket or the silo if he had, but it also wouldn't have done either any good. Whereas he thought he'd have this part of the project done by 9:30 it was already crowding 11:00 and he was not much more than half way. Lunch couldn't come soon enough today.

The movement in his peripheral vision brought his head up in time to see a white Ford Mustang pulling up in the driveway. Craig turned his torso around and tapped at the horn button mounted into the dash panel. Whoever it was, most likely a salesman of some sort based on the fancy new car, Craig didn't have time to schmooze with anyone...he needed to get his work done.

The man that exited the car gave him a small wave and began to walk his way, crossing the thirty yards along wooden feeding bunker without noticeable haste. Craig stopped and studied the man, noticing the unique, ever-so-slightly stilted gait and the man's physical build: height, shoulder-width, hair color. Craig motioned to the man to come around the hole on Craig's left rather than the right where all the dirt was piling up. When the man was within twenty feet Craig saw the scarred facial features and recognized the face that had been before the fire.

Leaning forward and to his left like he was going to talk out of the open window, Craig kept his right hand resting on the right control stick. At the point where the visitor was even with the backhoe boom Craig snapped the stick to the left. The boom arm leaped left and smashed into the visitor full on sending him flying against the silo just seven feet away. Shoving forward on the same control stick pushed the boom into the ground, holding the stick forward applied down-pressure which caused the tractor to rear up off of the outriggers. The whole tractor was now perched on the front loader bucket and the backhoe. Snapping the boom stick to the right sent the entire tractor off to the left three feet. Craig lifted the boom up, swung it left and smashed it down onto the man lying on the ground. Caught right at the edge of the bucket when it came it came down, synthesized flesh tore away from the man's left forearm exposing the polyalloy endoskeletal 'bones'. Six more times Craig lifted the bucket arm up and brought it down. Each time he extended the boom arm slightly. Each time the bucket came smashing down

a little higher up the on the torso. More flesh tore away with each strike, exposing more of the not-human internal structure.

On the sixth strike there was an electrical discharge that rivaled the one Craig had seen when the pot transformer mounted on the power pole at the end of his driveway had shorted out. The report from the discharge was easily as loud as his 30.06 rifle. When Craig went to lift the bucket one more time the body of the stranger came with it. The electrical arc had fused some part of the polyalloy to the steel of the bucket. He put the bucket back down and applied down-pressure to pin the body to the ground.

Craig reached under the seat and tripped the lever to allow the seat to swivel back around to the front. Snapping the door lever open he climbed out of the tractor cab and walked the long way around to get to the head of the man-like thing on the ground. The right arm, still attached whereas the left was not, scratched feebly at the ground, trying to grab onto Craig's out-of-reach foot. The face, burned and scarred, with splatterings of something that looked somewhat like blood, tilted back slightly and looked at him.

"Bring Sarah Connor to me," the thing on the ground said in a voice that rasped of electrical static like a scratched up record. "Bring her to me and I will let you live."

Craig didn't respond to the thing on the ground anymore than he would have talked to his tractors or his hayfork, or a record player. Turning away, convinced that the machine-thing was well pinned and harmless, he walked up around the silo, crossed the driveway and the too shaggy grass that he really did need to cut, and entered the house through the mud-room door. Written on the wall above the pale-blue, wall-mounted Princess phone was a number that very few people in the world had. Craig lifted the receiver and punched in the number.

The phone rang once and was answered.

"General Tiebow," said a man's voice.

"Craig Connor, here. You were right. Another one showed up today. I have it disabled. It's yours, come and get it. And...I'll take the relocation for us that you offered last time."