

# ROBOT OVERLORDS

A NOVEL BY MARK STAY

Based on the Screenplay by  
Mark Stay and Jon Wright



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## PROLOGUE

### THE DAY WE LOST THE WAR

They came for them in buses. Street by street. Queuing in the glare of the headlights as the sun went down. Packing everyone in. Standing-room only. Sean squeezed in next to his mum. No one spoke as their bus pulled up alongside dozens of others in the car park outside the hospital.

The crowd surged forward. The huge wave of humanity nearly knocked Sean off his feet and onto the Tarmac. He'd only experienced anything like this once before, when Dad took him to a football match at Wembley, but that had been like swimming in a tide of happy people. They were excited to see the game, fans were chanting and singing, and you didn't mind the pushing and shoving.

But here everyone was fearful, quiet, worried about what lay ahead. This felt like drowning.

Nearby, a woman cried out and fell into a puddle. Sean caught a glimpse of blood. A gashed knee, grazed knuckles. A man helped her to her feet and Sean saw they were both crying.

'Stay close, Sean.' His mum gripped his shoulder. 'Don't get split up.'

That was the first time Sean saw one of them.

It was a Sentry. The different types of robot were named by those who survived the war, and eventually even the VC and

Mediators adopted some of the names: Sentries, Drones, Snipers, Skyships, Lampheads, Cubes, or just Clankers. The Sentries were the most common, posted on almost every street corner. This one towered over the hospital entrance, standing two storeys tall, the high-powered beam in the middle of its faceless metallic skull sweeping across the crowd. Rows of silhouetted heads turned away from it, wincing at the intense light.

Sean felt sick just looking at it. Until now, he'd only seen blurred footage on the news. Shapes flashing by as fighter jets and tanks burst into flames, before the TV cut to presidents and prime ministers making speeches from bunkers, then not saying anything at all. But this one was real. From here, Sean could see small chips and cracks in the blue steel of its outsized arms. The wear and tear of invasion. Its weapon-arm crackled with energy, glowing red in the dark. Thick, clumping legs were attached to a segmented, ribbed torso topped with huge, brutish shoulders, in-between which nestled its tiny head with its circular lamp. Everyone was watching it. Would it turn on them? Had they been brought here to die?

There was a murmur at the front of the crowd, at something Sean couldn't quite see, and now there was a faint drizzle in the air, the fine raindrops and searchlights creating a dazzling mist.

'What's going on?' he asked.

'It's okay.' His mum squeezed his arm as she craned her neck to get a better view. 'Just some people coming out through the main door. I think ... I think that's Robin.' She sounded puzzled. 'What's he doing here?'

Sean inched forward for a better look. There were about a dozen people – the mayor, councillors, police officers – all milling about under umbrellas near the hospital's main entrance. They were swapping sheets of paper, preparing to make a statement as someone wired up a microphone to a PA system. And on the fringe of the VIPs was Robin Smythe. Sean's geography teacher, head of Year Ten and terminal dickhead. Sean wasn't surprised to see him

mingling with the nervous-looking town leaders. If anyone knew how to kiss the buttcheeks of power, it was Mr Smythe.

The mayor put the microphone too close to her lips. ‘—this on?’ Her distorted voice echoed off the hospital walls and around the car park.

Some people at the front started shouting questions.

‘Please!’ said the mayor. ‘I have a short statement, and then ... just please listen.’

The crowd simmered down, still restless.

‘As of midnight last night, in order to prevent any further loss of life, every government on the planet surrendered unconditionally to the Robot Empire.’

A wail swept through the crowd as people started crying. The rain began to fall more heavily.

‘We are now all subject to their laws.’ She was sobbing as she spoke and more voices rose up around her. Angry voices.

Sean felt a tremor beneath his feet and glanced around. More sweeping searchlights; more Sentries moving in, surrounding the car park. No escape.

‘Please, listen!’ the mayor cried, but the shouting grew louder. More organised. Threatening.

Someone threw a rock. It clanged off the first Sentry’s armour.

Without a second’s hesitation, the Sentry raised its gun-arm. The casing at the end split open with a whirr and a clank, revealing a glowing red mechanism that spun rapidly as it powered up. The flash of light momentarily blinded Sean and he felt the heat bloom brush across his cheeks. Four times. Five. There were more angry shouts, then, ‘No! Please, I didn’t mean to—’ And another voice was silenced by the searing heat from the Sentry’s gun. There was a new smell in the air: a strange metallic tang from the weapon’s energy discharge. Around Sean, people exchanged silent glances: most were terrified, some looked angry. A few, their fists and jaws clenched, looked ready to surge forward and attack, but they were

also hesitant, unsure. Unwilling to die quite yet. Sean felt completely helpless, and it took him a moment to realise that everyone else around him did, too.

Smythe grabbed the microphone from the mayor. Say what you want about a weasel like Smythe, he had a voice that carried authority.

*'Quiet!'* he bellowed, and he got it. 'It's very simple: we can cooperate or die. The war is lost. If you want to live, if you want your loved ones, your children, to live, then you must do as you are told.' He was getting through to them. The silent, frightened crowd wanted someone to tell them what to do next. 'You have been brought here today for registration. It's a simple procedure, so let's show the robots that we can work with them, that we're better than a rabble. Our lives have changed and no amount of shouting, screaming or fighting is going to change that. The greatest armies in the world couldn't change that.' He let that sink in. 'We're going to read out some street names, and we'd like the people who live in those streets to come to the front. The quicker we get this done, the quicker you can get home.'

It actually worked. Any thoughts of uprising vanished as quickly as those who had died. The promise of home stopped a riot – or worse, a massacre. Only afterwards, when it was too late, did anyone realise the robots planned to make everyone's home a prison for the next seven years.

**TRANSCRIPT OF TRANSMISSION, I-DAY+12  
MEDIATOR 452 - ASSIGNED TO ZONE FB-  
UK-9174635 (FAIRFIELD BAY-UK)**

**AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM MEDIATOR 452:**

‘My name is Mediator 452.

‘I have been purpose-built to liaise between the Robot Empire and the humans in this zone.

‘Approximately 9.78 million years ago, we were brought to the brink of extinction by our organic creators. We are Data Miners. Our mission is to study all sentient thought in the universe; to scrutinise this data to ensure that no life form can threaten us again.

‘Do not be alarmed. We wish you no harm, but disobeying our laws will not be tolerated. With your full cooperation, we will complete our study of humankind in seven years, eight months, six days, eleven hours and nine minutes, approximately. We will then leave your planet and never return.

‘Our laws are simple:

- 1: STAY INSIDE.
- 2: OBEY ROBOT COMMANDS AND MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN VOLUNTEER CORPS (VC). THEY CAN BE IDENTIFIED BY THEIR ARMBANDS AND GREEN IMPLANTS.

Everything we have told you is the truth.  
Robots never lie.’

## IMPLANTS AND ROBOT OCCUPATION

Sean remembered getting his implant vividly. He and his mum were some of the first to be called. She held him as long as she could, tears streaming down her cheeks as they dragged him away behind a green hospital curtain. There he saw his second robot, headless, multi-armed like a chrome spider, devices whirring. Two doctors in white coats stained with red handprints strapped him to a bed as the machine went to work.

‘Hold still,’ one said, voice muffled by his face mask.

Sean, pinned down by the straps, could only look up. The hospital must have taken a few hits during the invasion. Whole panels had fallen away from the ceiling, revealing air-conditioning ducts and pipes swaddled in ragged insulation. A neon light dangled precariously from the damaged ceiling at the end of a couple of wires, glaring in Sean’s eyes. He squinted, turning away.

‘Keep bloody still,’ the other man said in a tight voice. Sean recognised that tone. His dad used it whenever he got angry and then instantly regretted it. This was a good man doing a bad thing. Sean could see it in the doctor’s baggy, bloodshot eyes as he grabbed Sean’s jaw, setting him straight.

It took less than a minute. An injection to numb the pain, a drill-like device stabbing into his neck, a punch followed by a tight squeezing sensation, and then it was in.

Without a word, the doctors unstrapped him and bundled him out into a hallway tinted a murky green by the flickering emergency lights. Sean didn't know where to go, what to do. His mind tried to make sense of what had just happened. He looked up and down the hall. It was full of stooped, sorry figures, their implants glowing blue as they cried, 'What have they done to us?' and, 'What is this thing?' Howls of pain came from behind the rows of closed hospital curtains as more people were implanted.

Some clawed at them, tried to pull them out. One man had found a toolbox and was attempting to unscrew the implant of an RAF pilot in a tattered flight suit. Sean wondered if he was from the same base as his dad. He was about to ask when a doctor barged past and ran towards them, hands waving. 'No! Don't! It'll—'

The explosion turned the pilot's head into a red mist of brain and pulverised bone. His friend with the screwdriver lost his face completely. It was a mess of red-raw flesh, muscle and white, exposed skull. He tried to scream, but his lungs were burned and all he could manage was a gurgling, rasping noise before he fell dead to the ground.

Sean watched, frozen to the spot, ears ringing from the blast, his mind unable to comprehend what he'd just seen.

He felt a hand gently squeeze his arm. His mum, her eyes red from crying.

An implant glowed blue on her neck. Just like his. Just like everyone else's.

'Sean, sweetheart.' Her voice trembled as she tried to keep it together for him. 'Our bus is ready. Come on.'

It became clear after a few weeks inside that the robots were serious about confining everyone to their homes. Those who tried to run or sneak out got one warning and that was it. A flash of light, followed by dark ashes floating on the breeze and that smell. That

hot-Tarmac smell. Some mornings it wafted through the windows, and you knew someone nearby had tried to do a runner in the night.

The internet was shut down immediately. The robots had their own network that no human could access. The phone lines were all cut, and all mobiles and pagers were now nothing more than worthless lumps of metal and plastic. But the TV and radio stayed on.

The Mediator broadcasted daily, explaining the rules between repeats of old TV shows. People with VC armbands and green-glowing implants went door-to-door and handed out transcripts of the Mediator's words. They made public information films that played on a loop on every channel for days.

Sean and his mum had taken a crowded yet silent bus back to their temporary home, the shelter at the school. Their street had been totalled on the third day of the war when a Tornado fighter jet spiralled out the sky, crashing with a plume of thick black smoke, killing dozens and destroying their house.

They'd been volunteering at the shelter at the time, helping those who'd already lost their homes. Sean's first question whenever he heard a fighter had crashed – and it happened every day – was the same: 'Was it Dad's?'

His father, Danny, had left in a hurry on the first day of the war. His orders from the RAF came through at breakfast. He headed out with big hugs and a promise to be back soon.

Since then, Sean had kept count of the days and weeks, then months and years, first in a notebook at the school, then on the wall of his room in their new home. Over a thousand tiny scratches, spread in rows of green ink, red, blue, black. Each change an old pen run dry.

After a few weeks, the Volunteer Corps had found them a house in nearby Fleetwood Street, one in a row of redbrick terrace houses. Sean's mum asked who had lived there before, but none

of the VC would give her an answer. Few would even look her the eye. Clearing up, she found photos of a family: grandparents, children, grandchildren. She kept them safe. 'Just in case,' she said.

Mr Smythe, who used to work with Sean's mum at the school, had pulled a few strings and pushed them to the top of the housing list. She didn't find out till much later and was furious. 'We don't want any special treatment, Robin,' she shouted loud enough from her doorstep so that all the neighbours could hear. 'Especially not from you!'

Smythe had left in a huff that day, but he was back by the end of the week, apologising, squeezing her hands and trying to make amends.

But Sean was secretly happy about it. Having a place of their own was better than a sports hall full of crying children. Better than a playground ripe with the stench of death, and flies buzzing around rows of bodies in black bags. And the occupation wasn't too bad to start with. Smythe visited regularly and kept them informed of the latest news. He reassured them that Danny would be found soon. The RAF had surrendered and the pilots were being held nearby. 'Your dad'll be here in no time, lad,' he told Sean, scruffing his hair.

And while they waited they gorged on DVD box sets, read every book in the house, played every board game a gajillion times. The first year was like a long summer holiday. The sun shone and people still smiled. You could chat with neighbours from your doorstep, so long as you were careful not to cross the threshold and set off your implant. Everyone learned that the hard way. Sean had slipped over the line when mucking about by the front door and his implant briefly turned red. It had only been a few seconds, but the Sentry on the corner registered the infraction and it cost him a day's rations. Mum had pleaded with Smythe, but he shrugged and said, 'I thought you didn't want any special treatment, Kate,' in that calm Yorkshire accent of his, relishing the opportunity to

throw her words back at her. The more sincere he tried to sound, the flatter and more inhuman his voice became. Whatever spark of humanity he'd possessed had died a long time ago. 'Besides, I report to the Mediator and he won't allow any acts of clemency. Zero tolerance is the only way to keep order.'

Mediator 452. Just thinking about the robot made Sean shudder.

The only humanoid model that Sean knew of, Mediator 452 appeared on their TVs every day. It looked like a child and creeped everyone out.

Morse Code Martin, who lived a couple of doors down, had told Sean about the Mediator. They'd been scaring each other with old ghost stories, but then Martin said he had a bit of gossip that would really put the willies up Sean. Rumours he'd heard from a loose-lipped VC ration officer about the boy robot's construction.

'The robots studied us for decades before the invasion,' the old man told Sean. 'They abducted people, did experiments on 'em and found out that humans responded positively to children. So they created these Mediator robots. Made 'em look like little kids, thinking we'd all pat them on head and smile, I s'pose. One in each zone, apparently. This one's Smythe's boss. Imagine that – saluting to a robot that looks like a little kid.'

Last January it had come down their street with Smythe on a routine inspection. It had gone door-to-door introducing itself like a politician polling for votes, probably Smythe's idea. 'Thank you for your cooperation,' it said in its odd, boyish and fragmented voice.

Small children could be cute, Sean thought, no doubt. But the thing on his doorstep was a creepy, soulless automaton. Far from putting him at ease, it made him feel sick. Its glassy eyes peered at him in a mockery of human emotion and its smooth, plasticky skin made his own flesh crawl. Just looking at the odd Fuzzy Felt black hair stuck on its head, its bizarre grey hooded and shiny PVC trousers and its unblinking stare made him recoil.

‘The Robot Empire appreciates your patience in these difficult times,’ it said in a voice made up of dozens of different intonations, all rising and falling in pitch like bad Auto-Tune.

Some people spat at the Mediator on its rounds. They shouted and screamed, ranting about their incarceration, but Sean said nothing. The Mediator was about to move to the next door along when it stopped and looked at Sean again. The black implant on its neck pulsed, little white lights dancing across the circular display. It appeared to be studying him. Sean felt his mum’s grip on his shoulder tighten.

‘You are perspiring and your heart is beating at 117 beats per minute,’ it said. ‘Do not be afraid of me, Sean Flynn.’

Sean felt tears running down his cheeks. He couldn’t help it. How did this thing know his name? How did it know what his heart rate was? He felt invaded. They’d taken over his world, his country, his street, his doorstep and now him personally. He couldn’t bring himself to reply. The Mediator tilted its head in a simulation of curiosity, fascinated by this unexpected show of emotion.

Smythe’s guiding hand indicated the rest of the street. ‘Come, Mediator,’ he said, ‘lots to do today.’

That was the day when Sean realised the robots were keeping a secret. He didn’t know what it was, but the fact that they could sense heartbeats, that they knew everyone’s name, that they were making such an effort to be friendly, reeked of trying too hard.

They were hiding something.

He told Morse Code Martin his theory. The old man had the idea of knocking the walls through in the lofts so they could meet and talk and swap books, games and DVDs without the robots and VC spying on them. They marked the divides between each house with silver duct tape, careful not to cross for fear of setting off

their implants. Sometimes he and Sean sat and talked in the loft on rainy days.

‘Of course they’re hiding something,’ Martin said. ‘They didn’t come all this way for a holiday, did they? You mark my words: they’re up to something. We’ll figure it out sooner or later, you’ll see.’ They were going to get through this, he kept telling Sean. They were going to survive. He often talked about the ‘Blitz spirit’.

But after the first winter, things changed and the Blitz spirit faded. The occupation felt more real and the weekly rations were getting smaller. The power, kept running by the VC, started cutting out. The water that came in sporadic hiccups from the tap looked less clear than it used to be ... And that’s when it dawned on Sean: they had another six years of this to endure.

From the start, Kate did her best to keep them both active, mentally and physically. She knocked up homework from memory and Sean worked out a daily exercise routine. He hated it to start with, but what the hell else were they supposed to do with all that time?

The first winter was hard, but the second summer was even worse; seeing the sunshine but not being able to go outside was torture. They opened every window, every door, and Kate filled the windowsills with plants bedded in old baked-bean tins from their rations. Anything to bring a bit of the outside in. She ran a length of hosepipe from the guttering so they could capture rainwater in the bath, then watered the plants with an old cracked water jug.

At night, Sean was sometimes woken by flashes of light, followed by screams, made worse when Smythe stopped by to tell them horror stories of people who thought they could sneak past the Sentries to see their family in the next street. He’d become Zone Chief within a year of the robot takeover and his visits were less frequent now, and he hardly ever mentioned Danny. Sean always

had to bring his dad up. He knew it upset his mum, but he had to know.

Smythe never had any news, just more empty promises.

Well, after three years, Sean wasn't waiting on Smythe's bullshit anymore. He'd found a tube of tennis balls in the loft and had an idea.

'Mum, can I borrow that photo of Dad?'

She gave it to him with caution. Everything else had been destroyed in their old house and the one in her purse was the last remaining photo of Danny. He was smiling. They all were. It was taken at the beach during their last summer together.

Sean then tore a dozen or so blank pages from his old school notebooks, sharpened a pencil and started sketching.

He traced around his dad's face. It wasn't a good likeness, and he wished he could draw something that didn't look like a bad Manga villain, but he got better with each attempt. The final one was the best of all, capturing his dad's big grin and bright eyes.

Sean then cut a slit in each of the tennis balls and carefully folded a sketch of his dad into each one with a message and a description of his dad, headlined:

### **LOOKING FOR MY DAD - DANNY FLYNN - HAVE YOU SEEN HIM?**

The back door creaked open. Sean stood on the threshold, not daring to go any further. He felt the sun warm his face, the gentle sea breeze wafting in from the beach. He could hear the waves lapping on the shingle even from here. The gulls, too. No cars, no planes, only the occasional distant rumble from squadrons of Drones, or a Skyship passing through the stratosphere overhead.

Sean placed a message-stuffed tennis ball into a large catapult made of bungee rope salvaged from some gym equipment he'd swapped with a neighbour. He clamped it to the sides of the back

door and stretched it as far as it would go. The first ball arced over their garden into one two doors down. Not far enough. He tried again, pulling harder on the bungee. One after another they flew, over fences, roofs, and into neighbouring gardens and alleys. His note urged people to pass it on. If they couldn't help, maybe someone in the next street could. Spread the word. Sean's message included a crude hand-drawn map showing where he lived, where to return it. He knew if Smythe found out he'd be in trouble, but he was long past caring what Smythe thought.

The last ball was loosed. Sean watched it go, arching up into the sunlight as it spun over the roof opposite. He desperately wanted to go with it. To rush out and hammer on every door, screaming his dad's name at the top of his voice.

'Hey.' His mum placed a hand on his shoulder and kissed his head. Now he was sixteen, she had to stand on tiptoes to do it. 'C'mon. I've got some washing. Want to help?'

'Lemme check my diary.' He flicked through an imaginary calendar. 'Ah, you're in luck. I'm free for the next four years. Yeah, why not?'

As they stepped back inside, Sean scratched at the robot implant on his neck. Its weight tugged on his skin, which was numb where its metal edges pressed into him. They left the door open, the gentle sound of waves breaking on the shore drifting through the house.