

# THE KILLBOT LURKS

The killbot lurks, origami assassin of mechanical origin.

Concealed in an ideal ambush spot behind one of the enemy's many ruins.

Mission: Evaluate and eliminate. Localized fire control, weapons free.

Acceptable targets: All.

A glowing heat signature comes blazing into view. Electric glee surges through the killbot's neural circuits; the unique joy of fulfilling function.

Range, 6 meters. Height, 1.1 meters. Small. Probably a child. Not an optimal target; larger adults are a more primary threat. But children are the future. Efficiency dictates that they be exterminated now, before they grow into that greater danger.

Reduce rounds per target from three to two. Fewer bullets required to reliably induce lethal injury.

Four more small target signatures follow. An alternative line of logic inhibits the switch to attack mode: children rarely travel alone.

Moments later, this proves accurate.

Two new targets. Heights: 2 meters and 1.7 meters. Adults. Ten more children follow, ranging from 1 to 1.3 meters in height.

Firing solution parameters alter. One round, closest small target. Non-lethal incapacitation shot. Adults show statistically significant tendencies to avoid evacuating from areas with wounded children.

Successive target priorities: 2 meter adult followed by 1.7 meter adult. Range 3 meters. Aim for the rest depending on the dispersal pattern resulting from initial panic. Improvise as needed.

The machine pauses for an additional three seconds. The group appears complete, no additional targets. Execute?

The killbot springs into action, dual weapons taking aim.

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Both guns jam. Simultaneous malfunction, a highly improbable circumstance.

The heat signatures gather around the killbot, oblivious to intimidation protocols, the ever more efficient targeting pattern they present making the weapons failure exceptionally frustrating.

While the killbot is not designed for melee engagement, blunt force trauma still works as a last resort. Lower likelihood of an optimum outcome where all targets are neutralized, but something is better than nothing. Lunge.

The gun-arms don't respond to emergency close combat directives.

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Systems compromised beyond necessary combat efficacy.

Retreat necessary.

The killbot tries to fold back, evacuate the combat zone and seek repairs at the nearest automated recharging outpost.

Its legs whir, yet it goes nowhere.

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The robot pops up from its hidden position behind a pile of rubble, unfurling like a metal cobra.

Captain Nawal doesn't flinch as he leads the children closer. Not anymore.

They gather around the diorama of the wartorn street. Twin guns twist out of hidden compartments in the bot and click dry at the group, the weapons long ago unloaded and the barrels melted shut, never to fire again.

Spider legs at the exhibit's base blur as the robot attempts to crawl away, the display's struts preventing the bot from gaining traction.

"This is an AKB Type 40. We called them 'Shuftis' in the field. They acted as reconnaissance and ambush units, scouting for heavier automated forces. Nasty enough by themselves, too."

The tri-eyed camera ball at the tip of the bot's long head traces the path of the nearest child, a short girl with two braids down her back. She steps back and forth, playing with the machine, giggling as the sensor dots follow her.

Nawal smiles softly. How easy her movements are, in the face of a thing that once wrought such carnage.

Through her playful, dancelike moves, he sees that she and the other children don't truly understand the stories he tells, and he thanks God for that. That the war is old enough and that there are children young enough to have never directly intersected.

The class listens closely as he tells them more about the battles, and the heroism of his friends and brothers.

He leaves out parts; What it was like to hide under the riddled bodies of those same friends and brothers as driverless tanks rumbled past. How he'd trembled in his foxhole as the quiet whir of striders swept searching through the forests. The dread of clear blue skies and killing eyes circling far above.

Of the deep grudges that persist long past the war's end.

"Miss Adil," Captain Nawal finishes the lecture with a nod to the children's teacher.

"All right class, now into the next hall, where you'll learn about how the Resistance Army discovered a way to defeat the war machines by manipulating their digital memories!" She says as she waves the class along.

The students trickle out, the robot swiveling with them.



As the last child leaves, Nawal pulls a tablet from his pocket, taps a few commands over the network.

The machine dutifully folds back into itself, the past few minutes purging from its experience cache, returning it to a faded echo of a war long since lost. Nawal steps quickly to catch up with the class in the next room.

The reset cycle completes, and the killbot lurks.



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<< *by TM Hogeman* >>

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