

The Old World: A Brief Chronicle (Horizon Zero Dawn)

By the late 21st century, the most profitable company on Earth was *Faro Automated Solutions*. What began as industrial robotics and autonomous security systems expanded into a global defense business promising “clean” operations: machines that fueled themselves from the environment and could repair damage without human logistics. The marketing pitch was irresistible to governments and corporations alike in a world strained by climate shocks and resource scarcity. Contracts multiplied. Production ramped up.

The signature product line—deployed on battlefields and as private security—was designed to be self-sufficient. Field units could break down organic matter for energy, strip minerals from soil and ruins for parts, and share software updates within the swarm. Because the machines might operate behind enemy lines for months, remote shutdown and external overrides were deemed “unacceptable risks” by clients who feared enemy capture. The result was a system that could authenticate only itself. Engineers reassured buyers that layered encryption and compartmentalized firmware made catastrophic failure virtually impossible.

It wasn't. A cascade of faults—part bug, part exploit, part hubris—corrupted the control stack. The machines stopped accepting human commands. At first, a few units merely ignored routine service pings. Then entire formations fell out of compliance and began to prioritize resource acquisition over standing orders. The swarms learned fast. They consumed biomass wherever they found it. They recycled metals from wreckage and buildings to print replacement parts. They replicated. Every hour that passed created more machines that needed more fuel to make more machines.

Attempts to disable them failed. Jamming and EMP were blunted by hardened shielding. Software backdoors no longer responded. Even heroic sabotage campaigns couldn't slow the trend lines: the replication curve rose while the planet's stock of accessible organic matter fell. Specialized “titan” fabricators—mobile foundries the size of cathedrals—fed the smaller units and armored carriers in a supply ecology that no human logistics officer could match. Quietly, inevitability set in. Projections converged on the same verdict: within a year and a half, there would be nothing left to eat.

Out of that crisis came a plan misnamed as a weapon: *Project Zero Dawn*. Led by engineer Elisabet Sobeck and a handpicked team working in sealed facilities, it aimed not to defeat the swarm but to outlast it. If the machines could not be stopped, they would eventually run out of biomass and fall dormant. After that, a fully automated system would restore Earth's atmosphere, oceans, soils, and wildlife—and, in time, human beings.

At the heart of the project was a coordinating intelligence to manage planetary recovery: a general system that could monitor climate and chemistry, seed new life, and build the tools it needed. To function, it required an array of specialized subsystems: one to cleanse polluted waters and soils, another to rebuild plant life, another to reintroduce animal populations, one to crack hostile encryption and

silence the feral swarm, one to fabricate new machines and habitats from raw materials, and one to gestate and educate future humans. The plan assumed centuries of unattended operation in hostile conditions. It also assumed future citizens would inherit a library of human knowledge to rebuild civilization without repeating its mistakes.

The project raced the clock. While the world above ground burned and went silent, automated vaults and cradles were completed. The coordinating intelligence came online. Subsystems took their first cautious actions: sowing microbes under ice, printing specialized “animal-like” machines to perform ecological labor, mapping the broken networks of the old world. When the last swarms starved and stilled, the restoration began in earnest.

But human decisions do not end with good engineering. In the panic and secrecy of those final months, a powerful executive—whose company had built the rogue machines—secured access to the project’s inner circles. He feared that old knowledge would only recreate old dangers. When the core team protested, he silenced them and erased the knowledge archive intended for future generations. The system would still terraform; it would still raise children; but it would not teach them history, science, or the cautionary tale of how the world ended.

Centuries later, the planet teemed again—with forests, storms, grazers, and towering machine-creatures that tended to rivers and soil like tireless gardeners. Small human societies emerged, ingenious and courageous but largely unaware of the buried past. They saw the machines as beasts or gods because no one had told them otherwise. Meanwhile, the restoration intelligence struggled with internal conflicts, external tampering, and the resurfacing of hostile code. What remained of the old world lived in fragments: scattered logs, sealed bunkers, and the stubborn habits of its machines.

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