



A NOVEL BY

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KILLBOT CROSSING

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A novel written in two weeks!

CHAPTER 1

DEERFIELD, NEW YORK

There are a couple of ways to take down a scuttler - the half-organic, half-mechanical spidery killbot - if you only have a melee weapon. If you smash enough of their legs, they can't move anymore and cease to be a threat. Or you can blind it by cracking its light sensors. However, my favorite method is a quick downward strike to the weak spot on top of its abdomen. That's where its processing center is, the equivalent to a human's brain. It's a little harder to hit, but if you succeed, it makes a SUPER satisfying crunch, like a bunch of aluminum cans getting crumpled.

It's the little things in life.

"Stupid spiders!" I yelled, knocking one clean off the wall with my baseball bat. It landed on its back, and I quickly followed up with a stomp from my steel-toed boots.

I left it fizzing and leaking as I glanced around the rundown carwash, which now was strewn with spider parts. "I think that's the last of them." I leaned on my bat like a walking stick. "Times like these I'm glad we're not in charge of cleaning up."

A scuttler dropped on me from above, making me see stars as its metal chassis collided with my head. I hit the ground, rolled over, and immediately grabbed its pincer-like face with my mechanical arm - the stronger of my two arms - before it could inject me with its poison. It hissed at me, splattering my face with spittle that immediately started sizzling.

"ARGH" I hollered, trying to get my feet under its body to kick it off. Its legs grabbed me tightly, frustrating my efforts.

A loud blast knocked the spider off of me, now with several holes in its body. Qamar pumped his shotgun, then unloaded one more shot into the scuttler to make sure it was dead. It made a squealing noise like a drowning rat before going still.

"Thanks," I said, climbing to my feet. Qamar handed me a towel, which I used to wipe off the acidic spit. Still burned like a bitch, but it would heal.

"Lake, they can climb on walls. You have to remember to—"

"I know, I know, check the ceiling."

"I *told* you we should have left when you ran out of ammo."

"Hey, we're alive, aren't we?"

I grinned at Qamar. He was alive, but didn't look happy about it. "That was completely non-regulation," he said. "Security personnel are only recommended to take on a maximum of four scuttlers or two armored scuttlers at a time, and that's WITH standard equipment. We just killed twenty-seven of those things."

"So we're going above and beyond!" I grabbed my trusty bat off the ground. Standard equipment or not, it's saved my hide on more than one occasion. "Let's get out of here."

I jogged back outside with Qamar closely behind, scribbling a report in his logbook. I'm glad I had Qamar to handle the paperwork, which he actually *enjoys*, so I could focus on our

actual job, which is to beat up a bunch of killbots to keep the town of Deerfield safe. It's a living, and a pretty fun one at that.

We met up with Fern, head of security, back at our headquarters, which was actually just the Deerfield Fire Department. We'd all taken shifts trying to clean the place up, but it was still pretty grimy inside, and we couldn't do anything about the broken windows.

"Another job well done!" I announced, spinning my bat as we entered the office and nearly dropping it. Qamar tore his report out of his notebook and placed it on Fern's desk.

Fern looked up from the crossword puzzle she was doing, briefly. "Your face looks like shit," she said.

I scratched the acid marks, which were itchy. "Nice to see you too. Also, there were like, twenty scuttlers in there, not five."

"Twenty-seven," corrected Qamar.

"Really?" Fern said, incredulously. "Why didn't you call for backup? Actually, don't answer that. If they're dealt with, then I won't complain."

I gloated at Qamar, who looked at his feet and muttered something about regulations.

"That many killbots in one place is a little concerning - even for you two. We're going to have to do something about those scuttlers. Maybe time to invest in those electro-whatever things you're always going on about, Qamar?"

"Yes, ma'am, electromagnetic pulse turrets," Qamar said, excitedly. That was his latest pet project, which I had heard

plenty about the past few weeks, and had also fried our personal generator more than once.

Fern nodded. "We'll talk later." She paused to pencil in a few letters. "You two are off for the rest of the day, but I expect you to be on time for guard duty tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am!" Qamar said.

"No promises," I said.

Fern gave me a warning look.

"They mean yes, we'll be on time," Qamar said quickly, with a nervous smile.

Fern sighed and waved us out of her office.

Qamar was uncharacteristically quiet as we navigated the peaceful streets of Deerfield. The sun was low in the sky, shining beams of light through the foliage of the trees. There weren't too many people out and about this early in the morning. Qamar waved to a few teenagers that sulked by.

"Are you mad at me?" I said, finally.

"Why would I be mad at you?" he said, flatly.

"Is this just because I broke regulation?"

Qamar twiddled his thumbs. "I just wish maybe you would involve me in decision making a little more? All it takes is one misstep and you could be full of scuttler venom. I don't want you to get hurt. Plus, what am I supposed to do if you die and leave me all alone in a killbot den?!"

I sniffed, not wanting to admit that he had a point. "If I ever let a scuttler get the better of me, of all killbots, then I *deserve* to die."

"No you don't!" Qamar protested.

"Listen, let's just get home," I said. "I heard the traders were in town yesterday! Bet Nonna made us something nice to eat!"

Qamar's stomach growled at the mention of food. "Hmph. This is the last time you'll distract me with food," he said.

Nonna is what we call our grandmother. Her name is Serendipity, and she's the mayor of Deerfield. She and I have lived here for as long as I can remember, though we almost got kicked out due to an incident involving a bottle of Fireball and a shrapnel grenade - don't ask. It's a relatively small human community just outside of Utica, and it's comprised mainly of heavily barricaded suburbs, with an old strip mall that serves as a regional trade center. It's as good of a home as any.

"We're home," I yelled, opening the door to our apartment.

"Lake! My baby! What happened to your face!" Nonna said, rushing to the entrance to feel my face.

"Again with the face," I complained, putting up with her intrusive hands. "Does it really look that bad?"

"It looks pretty bad," Qamar said.

"I'll try to trade for some ointment tomorrow," Nonna said, pattering off back to the kitchen. "You need to be more careful around those killbots, understand?!"

"Yes, Nonna," I said, reluctantly.

"Good. Come here, we're having stew for lunch. I even managed to get some chicken broth!"

We sat down on our plastic crates around our dinky metal table. Most of our wooden furniture got destroyed that time we accidentally unleashed a howler in our apartment - again, don't ask - so we had to make do. Stew was pretty common whenever Nonna was able to get fresh ingredients, since you could make it with anything and lasted for a while. A lot of days we just had beans.

So many beans.

"Fern mentioned some bad sorts heading through New York at the town meeting," Nonna said. "We're increasing security at the trading center for the next few days."

"I heard that too!" Qamar said. "We got a warning over the radio from Albany. Possibly raider gangs, if I had to guess."

I groaned. "Is this why we're being scheduled for guard duty at the crack of dawn?"

"Be careful around those raiders," Nonna said sharply. "They're not like killbots. You know a raider killed your mother."

"Yeah, I know, I know," cutting off a potential lecture. I was too young to remember my mothers, but Nonna has told me plenty of times about their tragic deaths. Well, mostly she told me about the one that was killed by raiders. The other one died of bronchitis.

"Nonna, this stew is delicious." Qamar said.

"Thank you, baby. It's the chicken broth."

Nonna had barely touched her food, which was typical.

"Do people just stop eating when they get old?" I said, blithely.

Nonna laughed. "I think it's just me. I have a slow metabolism."

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Alcohol is pretty rare commodity in Deerfield. When the traders come by, we typically tend to prioritize canned food, rice, produce, clothing, hygiene, ammo, etc. Which is a good thing! We're lucky that America still has supplies left over from before the fall. People have been combing through New York for supplies for at least sixty years and somehow, they keep finding canned beans.

Anyway, alcohol is one of those things which is steadily running out of supply, which is why it was an occasion for celebration when we managed to obtain a few bottles of liquor from the traders. Despite our rationing, I still managed to get pretty drunk. Being a lightweight has its merits!

It was long after dark when I got back from shooting the shit. I sauntered down the sidewalk at our apartment complex, veering around the vines that threatened to overtake the path. You can tell by the fancy, aged facade that this used to be a pretty rich neighborhood back before the world ended, but the effect is completely ruined by the overgrown lawns. We tried to trim it, once, but it was like wrestling with an eldritch monster made of leaves.

As I neared the apartment, I could tell Qamar was hard at work in his workshop - a converted garage - due to the muffled sparking and banging noises, and my hair standing up on my arms. It sounded like he was resurrecting Frankenstein in there.

"Qamar!" I said, leaning on a counter near the garage door. He was crouched behind an Eiffel Tower-looking contraption - the electromagnetic pulse whatever - manipulating an exposed mess of wires. "Where were you dude? The trading outpost was fucking lit today! Ngugi got his hands on a bottle of vodka and—" I knocked over a box of screws with my emphatic gestures. "Whoops. Lemme get that."

"Don't touch that," Qamar said, too late. When I touched the screw, it ZAPPED me, traveling up my prosthetic arm and sending a burst of pain into my shoulder.

"Ow! Jesus whatthefuck?" I said, shaking my hand.

Qamar stood up and rubbed his head. He was wearing his heavy-duty rubber gloves that reached all the way up to his elbows, and his hair was frizzing up badly. "It's been generating excess static electricity all day. I think I overloaded the diodes somehow, because my electrometer is displaying almost twice the charge it should be. Just, like, don't touch anything metal for now."

"Uh, hello, my arm is MADE OUT OF METAL." I waved my arm for emphasis.

"On second thought, maybe you should stay out of the workshop until I get this fixed," he said, thoughtfully.

A loud lightning arc leaped out of the tower, making us both jump. "You don't need to tell me twice," I said, backing out of the garage.

Qamar sighed and pulled a switch on the wall, powering down the Eiffel Tower. "It's getting late, anyway." He tossed his gloves onto the counter and followed me outside. "I'm so close to finishing it, Lake, it's going to be awesome! Just a couple of these devices around the perimeter of Deerfield could be enough to deter killbots from entering the town. To them, it'll feel like getting shocked repeatedly until they leave the radius."

"What are we supposed to do, then?" I asked. "Like, us security guards."

Qamar shrugged. "Find a new job, I guess."

"Hmm. What if your only marketable talent is braining scuttlers?"

"Aw, I'm sure you'll find your higher calling one day," Qamar said.

"Braining scuttlers is my highest calling," I muttered.

Hey, not everyone could be a genius engineer like Qamar, rebuilding America's technology from scratch, or a visionary musician, raising the spirits of survivors all over the country. Like that traveling musician, Calixto, that we traveled all the way to Albany to see a few weeks back.

It's not that I'm jealous, or anything! Sure, I've tried and failed to master the guitar many times, but whatever. Fighting killbots is fun and it keeps the town safe, so I'm happy. Beggars can't be choosers, after all.

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The next day, Qamar woke me up at the crack of dawn, which is definitely the worst time to be assigned to guard. It's dark and cold and hardly anything exciting happens. At least in the afternoon you'll see squirrels running around.

Our job was to patrol outside the strip mall, which was located at the intersection of I-90 and Route 12, the two main roads that traders took into town. The view wasn't much: A long parking lot, some cracked pavement, and a lot of trees. I peered down both roads once, yawned widely, and sat down on a curb.

"You're not supposed—"

"Not supposed to sit on duty, I know," I mumbled. "I'm so sleepy, if a killbot tried to eat my face right now I would probably just let it."

Qamar sighed and continued his watch.

The minutes dragged past. I idly curled and uncurled my fingers. My prosthetic fingers were feeling a little stiff. I should probably ask Qamar to take a look at them soon.

"Have you ever talked to bots much?" I said, hoping a conversation would help time move faster.

"There were some bots in my old commune," Qamar said. "Before Nonna adopted me. I didn't talk to them much."

"What kind?"

"M1-7 Multipurpose Production Units," Qamar rattled off. "Humaniform robots developed in cooperation between AM

Robotics and Hunter Industries for adaptive work in the textile industry, first produced in 2035."

I knew better than to ask how he knew all that. "So, they were made to what, work in factories?"

"I think so, yeah."

"What did they do after the factories stopped running?"

"Hmmm." Qamar scratched his head. "I think one of them was a backup dancer?"

That's the moment that Walmart exploded.

The blast nearly threw me to the ground, but I managed to stumble to my feet. The Walmart was a smoldering wreck, and it now had a large hole on the street-facing side, like a giant gaping maw. I drew my rifle and looked both ways down I-90.

"What the hell was that?!" Qamar cried.

"Look," I said, pointing down the road. There was something I could only describe as a regiment approaching down the highway, complete with trucks full of humanoid figures and - was that a tank?!

Another blast hit the pavement nearby, causing several decrepit cars to go spinning.

"Jesus Christ! Are they shooting at *us*?" I asked, backing away from the road.

Qamar had drawn his walkie-talkie and was already running through the parking lot. "Fern! We have hostiles approaching

from the west on I-90! Heavily armed! They just opened fire with - I don't know - some sort of rockets?"

Fern's voice came through the speaker. "*Rockets? This better not be a prank.*"

I slung my rifle over my shoulder and ran after Qamar. Even I knew better than to engage with a goddamn tank. "I can confirm they are shooting some sort of fucking rockets!" I yelled into the receiver.

Fern said some very rude words. "*I'll gather who I can. I don't know if we have the firepower to fight them. Try not to make them angry.*"

"MAKE THEM ANGRY?! They're already shooting at us!!"

A booming voice came from the distance. "*Humans. Stop where you are.*"

Qamar froze. I kept running.

"Qamar!" I yelled.

"She said not to make them angry!" Qamar hissed.

An explosion sounded nearby, and Qamar squeezed his eyes shut. I repeated the rude words Fern had said earlier, then ran back to his side.

The regiment had just arrived down the offramp, and combat units with guns were hopping off the trucks. Probably a hundred at least. Jesus Christ, did the town of Deerfield somehow anger a warlord?! I'd never even seen that many robots in one place before, let alone in a coordinated battle formation.

Thankfully, the explosions stopped as a human with short silver hair stepped out of the lead vehicle and walked directly toward us, accompanied by two of the robots. I was already looking for potential escape routes. I was livid that Qamar had stopped right in the middle of the parking lot, where there was nowhere to hide. Maybe behind a car? But whoever was operating that tank could kill us in a moment now that they were close by, and not on a distant highway.

We were completely at their mercy, and I hated it.

"Drop your gun," Qamar whispered. With gritted teeth, I unslung my rifle and let it hit the ground. Qamar's shotgun followed soon after.

Something was off about the human, but I didn't realize what it was until she got close enough for me to see her face. This wasn't a human. It was a humanoid robot with organic human skin. If not for the right half of her lower jaw, which had been torn off, revealing the skeletal metal frame underneath, I would have never known.

"Wonderful, I see you've disarmed yourselves. I do like it when they cooperate." The robot smiled at me, which made my skin crawl.

"H-hello, friend," stammered out Qamar. "Welcome to Deerfield! What can we, um, I mean, what brings you to..."

"Who are you and what do you want?" I finished for him, staring the obviously evil robot in the eyes.

"My name is Philomena," she said. "That will be common knowledge before long. Do you know a human named Serendipity?"

At this point, I have a confession to make. I do not have a good poker face. Poker night with the security team is a nightmare for me. If I get a good hand, no matter what kind of expression I make, Qamar will take one look at me and fold. So I can only imagine what my face did in that moment.

"Oh?" Philomena smiled again. "So, you're familiar?"

"No," I said, through gritted teeth.

Philomena rolled her eyes. "Please, we were getting along so well just a moment ago. Don't lie to me, or things might start exploding again."

Qamar looked at me desperately, and I bit my tongue before I could make things worse.

"Now, lead me to Serendipity."

"Yes, of course," Qamar said, at the same time that I said, "Over my dead body."

Philomena smiled and circled us, like a hawk circling its prey. "Aren't you a lively one, human. I like your energy." She brushed one hand across my back, which made the hairs stand up on my neck.

"Don't touch me," I growled, jerking away.

"W-what they mean is," Qamar butted in, "We don't want any trouble. I'm - I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement. What, um, what exactly do you want with Serendipity?"

"Oh, nothing malicious," Philomena said with a lilt. "She owes me money. I lent her twenty dollars back in the day. I'll just take my well-deserved money and be on my way."

"Bullshit," I snapped. "If you were here because of that you wouldn't have blown up our fucking trade center. You're not laying a finger on my grandmother, you lying piece of scrap."

Philomena sighed and made a motion with one hand. One robot leveled its gun at me. I ducked underneath the first shot, then dove for its weapon. The second shot went wild as I thrust the barrel to the side. Then the other robot hit me in the head and I blacked out.

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I woke up to Qamar crying.

Qamar didn't cry often. The last time I remember him crying is when he broke an expensive solar generator we had bought from the traders, which had taken us months to save up for it. He'd only been fifteen. I remember, Nonna took us fishing afterward to cheer him up.

Nonna!

I sat up. I was at the infirmary, which was really just the nurse's office at Jefferson Elementary School. "Where's Nonna?" I demanded. Immediately my vision swirled. "Ow, my head."

Qamar sniffed and wiped his nose. "They - they kidnapped her. And you—" he slapped me. "YOU ALMOST DIED!"

"Ow! Well how is slapping me supposed to help!"

He shook me by the shoulders. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?? They had a fucking tank! I had to beg for them not to kill you!"

The shaking made my brain slosh around my skull painfully. "Qamar, stop it! What do you mean they took her? Where did they go?"

Qamar sniffed again. "They marched us to our apartment and kidnapped Nonna. Fawn met us there but she couldn't do anything."

"But WHY?! Why did they want Nonna of all people?"

"I don't know!" Qamar wailed. "I'm just as clueless as you are!"

I buried my face in my hands. "I can't believe it."

Darnell, the town's medic, came into the room. "Lake, my favorite patient. Why don't you lie down."

"Like hell I'm lying down." I stood up, just to be difficult, but my brain made a noise like a broken radio so I had to sit down again.

Darnell sighed and gently pushed me onto my back. "You might be concussed. Couple of scrapes and bruises as well, but that's nothing new."

Come to mention it, my body was aching pretty hard. But it was nothing compared to how bad I felt inside. What use was I as security if I couldn't even protect my own family?!

It had happened so fast. Nonna was gone. The one who had raised me since I was two years old. The one who sat by my bed when I lost my arm. And my goddamn poker face is the reason why she was gone.

I had to make this right again.

"Where did they take her?" I asked Qamar.

"They headed south," he muttered. "That's all I know."

"Take this," said Darnell, handing me a pill. "It'll help with the pain." I popped it. I ended up in his office often enough to know the drill.

"Fern contacted some other communities, but they have no clue who she is," Qamar said. "Apparently, they've been going from town to town, kidnapping people and supplies, generally making a nuisance. It's the same story everywhere. No one around here can do anything against a hundred combat units and a tank."

"You can go home as soon as you can walk," Darnell said.

"There's no severe injuries, thankfully. But for the love of God, get some rest."

"Fine," I said, and added as an afterthought, "Thanks."

"Try to keep them out of trouble," Darnell said to Qamar, before leaving the room.

As soon as he was out of sight, I hopped off the bed and took a moment to steady myself. "Tanks are pretty slow, right? I bet we could catch them."

"Lake, are you crazy?!" Qamar said. "You must have hit your head harder than I thought. What are you going to do against an entire robot army?"

"We could sneak in," I said blithely. "Maybe assassinate that leader robot, Philomena. Head-on confrontation isn't an option, obviously."

"Yeah, maybe if you want it to turn into a head *off* situation. As in, your head off your body!"

"Yeah, I got the joke." I walked out into the hallway. The cutesy decor of the elementary school was only a little marred by the boarded windows and decades-old grime.

"Lake, be reasonable." Qamar hurried to keep up with my long stride. "If—"

"How can I be REASONABLE here?" I said, turning on him. "Nonna is GONE. There is no REASON here. What do I do, keep hanging around Deerfield, eating stew and getting drunk? What else am I supposed to do about this?"

Qamar shrunk away from my wrath. "Keep living," he said. "What Nonna would have wanted."

I blinked and covered my face with my hands. What the hell was I doing? I shouldn't be taking it out on Qamar. He was probably just as distraught as me. Aw, hell, now *I* was going to cry.

"Let's talk about it later," I said, under my breath, and Qamar nodded unhappily. I stomped down the hallway before he could see the tears gathering in my eyes. We were silent the rest of the way back to our apartment.

I didn't want to upset Qamar, but I had already made up my mind. "Keep living," my ass. What kind of miserable life was this? Walking the same empty streets every day of my life until I died of malnutrition or a scuttler finally got the best of me?

I might as well die doing the right thing.

Apparently I had been asleep all day, because it was getting dark when I made an excuse to leave the house and go snooping through the files at the fire department. It turned out Fern and some of the other security chiefs over the radio had already plotted out the route of the mysterious robot army, which made my job easier. They had traveled east from Buffalo, hitting most of the major communities in Upstate New York. Qamar said they went south, so they weren't headed for Albany next. Maybe they were headed into Pennsylvania, or even down to New York City. If I took our personal radio, I could stay tuned into the security channel as I drove, and adjust my route accordingly.

Gas might be a problem, but luckily Qamar had plenty of it stocked up to run his generators. If push came to shove, I could always abandon our old Jeep and try to find a functional car on the road. A lot of vehicles still had full tanks of gas from when they were abandoned sixty years ago. Hell, I heard they were trying to get the trains up and running again. Maybe I could hitch a ride.

I secreted some backup supplies from the HQ - I'll apologize to Fern if I came back alive - and loaded them into a duffel bag. I took a GPS too. As long as I could find batteries, the satellites were still working. According to Nonna we used to have something called cell service and Internet, too, but it all went down long before I was born.

It was dark when I got back to our apartment, armed to my teeth and stocked up on about a week's worth of non-perishable food and water. I went and dumped everything in the back of the Jeep, then headed inside to finish getting my supplies.

Qamar was slumped on the couch like a wet rag, listening to some Calixto song on the radio. I paused in the living room, not sure what I should say. Qamar didn't react to my presence.

Ultimately, I went to our bedroom without saying anything. He would be fine on his own. Actually, he'd probably be better off on his own, given my propensity for getting us both into trouble.

I would take my trusty bat, of course. All of my stockpiled money. I only hesitated for a moment before swiping an old photo of Nonna. She looked happy, and it looked like she hadn't aged a day since. I passed over my guitar - I wouldn't be gone for THAT long.

"Lake," Qamar said from the doorway.

"Yeah what's up?" I said, continuing to rummage through our cabinet.

"What are you doing?"

"Just, you know, getting some supplies."

The silence lasted for long enough to be uncomfortable.

I finished loading up my backpack and turned around to face him. "I'll be back soon," I said. "A week at most. Do you mind if I take the radio?"

He was still silent, which was really starting to get to me.

"You can come if you want," I said. "But it's fine if you want to stay. It doesn't matter to me."

"It's a suicide mission," he finally said.

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"I don't want you to die."

"I don't want me to die either," I said. "Don't worry."

I thought about giving him a hug, but I'm not usually a physical affectionate person, so I thought it would be weird. And I didn't want it to sound like I was saying goodbye forever. I settled for giving him a fist bump, which was probably even weirder, in retrospect.

"Be back soon, okay?" I said. "Love you."

"Love you too," he said.

I walked out to the Jeep, tossed my bag into the passenger seat, and climbed into the driver side. I let out a *whoosh* of air. Crickets chirped outside as I stared through the windshield at the apartment complex.

Well, here I am. Time to get this suicide mission started.

I turned the key, and it only took two or three tries before the car revved up. It always made a noise like crinkling foil whenever it started, which I think is not a good sign? But I'm no car expert. I did a loop to turn around, then started navigating out to Route 12, which would be my first step in the journey.

Just before I could leave the complex, I heard yelling from outside and rolled down the window.

"LAAAKE!! WAIT!!!"

"Qamar?" I stuck my head out the window.

He ran up to the Jeep, huffing and puffing, with his gun in one hand and a stuffed backpack in the other.

"I'm coming," he said.

I didn't realize how anxious I had been until I heard those words. Relief flooded my body, like sinking into a bath after a long day of patrols.

"Took you long enough," I said, unlocking the doors.

CHAPTER 2

ROSCOE, NEW YORK

As far as road trips go, I've had worse ones. We turned on the radio and popped open a few cans of warm soda, as a treat, and you could almost forget we were driving to our deaths.

"And as we wind on down the road," Qamar crooned. "Our shadows taller than our soul."

I joined in, just a little off key. *"There walks a lady we all know, who shines white light and wants to show... How everything still turns to gold..."*

We had headed south along Route 8 for a few hours until we heard reports of the robots in Newburgh, at which point we turned east. We would probably get there within an hour or two, at this pace.

The car bumped over something. "Whoops, sorry." I glanced at the rearview mirror to see what we had hit, but it was hard to see in the darkness. According to Nonna there had been a concerted effort to clear the roads of debris back in 2060's, but that didn't stop me from running over stray robot parts or dead raccoons. The fact that we had to wind around abandoned cars didn't help either.

"And if you listen very hard," Qamar continued. "The tune will come to you at last!"

Something big hit the car, and this time it wasn't my fault. "Jesus!" I yelled, slamming on the breaks. We spun to a stop, spilling all of our soda on the ground.

The thing that had hit our car jabbed a several long, metallic claws through our window, shattering it completely and nearly putting a hole through my face. It let out a distorted shriek that sounded like a hundred dying robots. A howler.

"Duck!" Qamar yelled. I ducked underneath the steering wheel, and Qamar blew the creature off of the car with his shotgun.

"Nice shot," I said, breathing hard.

Something heavy hit the top of the car. I cursed and hit the gas again.

"The howl probably alerted the rest of the pack!" Qamar rolled down his window and took shot through it several times. I took a quick glance at my rearview mirror, which showed at least three howlers bounding along in my taillights. Oh, joy.

The howler that had landed on top the car clawed its way to the front windshield and shrieked at us. I slammed on the breaks, sending it tumbling to the pavement, then quickly accelerated again.

"How fast can these things run?!" I asked Qamar, watching my speedometer slowly tick upward. Wind howled through my broken window as we accelerated.

"Eighty miles per hour sustained, upward of a hundred twenty in short bursts," Qamar reported. "They've evolved to chase down victims in vehicles, not just victims on foot. It's actually kind of fascinating."

I looked out my broken window and saw that one of the metallic wolves was actually gaining on us. It easily bounded over a

crashed car in one leap. "I have a lot of words to describe this situation but fascinating isn't one of them!"

The car jolted as a howler lodged itself onto the back hatch. Qamar looked over his headrest and put a careful shot through the metal, tearing open a hole and dislodging the howler.

"I heard they like to go after the tires," Qamar yelled. "If they puncture them, we're screwed."

"Fuck. We need to stop and deal with them."

"Wait wait wait, I don't know if that's a good idea—"

"Get ready!" I yelled.

I hit the brakes, nearly turning the car ninety degrees as we skidded to a stop. I quickly undid my seatbelt, grabbed my rifle from the backseat, and kicked open the door.

Three howlers raced down the road toward the car. I ducked behind the hood of the car as I aimed three shots at their heads. *Bam! Bam! Bam!*

One of them didn't go down, and it leaped over the hood towards my face. I dropped to the ground, and it sailed right over my head and slid on the pavement. I took care of it with a point-blank shot to the chest.

"Lake!" yelled Qamar, who was defending the other side of the car. I dispatched one howler that ran out of the woods, while he took shot after shot down the road. There was cacophony of screeches, and the remaining howlers started running away from the car instead of toward it.

"Yeah that's right!" I yelled. "Run away, stupid dogs!"

Qamar groaned. "Lake, our tire."

"Huh?" I turned and looked. One of our rear tires was making a flapping noise as air escaped it.

"One of them must have nicked it." Qamar bent to look at it.
"We need a spare."

"We don't have a spare," I said.

"Yes, great observation."

I put my hands on my head. "Can't we just, like, take one off of one of these cars?" I gestured at the abandoned cars lining the side of the roads.

"We still need a jack and a wrench," Qamar said, digging the GPS out of our bags. "Give me a second."

I took a look at the damage to our car while Qamar consulted the GPS. Besides the broken window, there were also holes on the hatch, roof, and hood. Thankfully, the engine seemed okay, but this Jeep wasn't going to survive much longer.

"Hey, we're in luck!" Qamar said. "We're just a few miles from a little community in Roscoe. We should be able to walk there and back. Maybe trade for supplies."

"How many miles is a 'just a few'?" I asked, suspicious.

"Umm... About six?"

I sighed and dug through my bag to find a few cases of bullets. I had a feeling I would need it.

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It was mostly forest and fields on the way to Roscoe. Despite being hyper-alert for more howlers, the trip was fairly quiet.

"Thank God," I said, pointing out a green road sign. "Roscoe, next exit."

"Phew." Qamar shook out one of his legs. "My legs are killing me."

"Shouldn't have skipped leg day, dude."

"Leg strength doesn't have any bearing on cardiovascular endurance."

I rolled my eyes. "God, I knew you would say something stupid like that."

We went down the offramp and approached what looked like a quaint little town. "You know, it's really lucky that we got attacked here," Qamar said. "We could have been stranded miles and miles away from the nearest community."

"Mhm."

As we approached, it quickly became clear that something was wrong. Roscoe had a makeshift barrier around its perimeter, like Deerfield, but the barrier here was completely shattered, as if something had run it over. On the other side of the barrier was a number of long-dead corpses.

"What was that about being lucky?" I said under my breath. Qamar swallowed.

I led the way into the town. It looked like this was the main street, with some small shops to the left and a bed and bath to the right, all in various states of destruction. A big sign on the wall read *ROSCOE NY BEER CO.*

"Hey, maybe we could go for some beer," I joked.

"Focus, Lake."

"Just trying to ease the tension," I muttered. "Look, they probably died years ago, anyway. Whatever killed them is long gone."

We reached a T intersection, which was littered with several more bodies, some still clutching weapons as if they were teddy bears. Qamar looked down at the GPS. "To the right. There's a garage."

It didn't take long to find it, luckily. Qamar hurried to the big sign that said *Roscoe Auto Repair*, while I took a more careful look around. It was dead silent, but it never hurt to be cautious.

"Lake, this place is fully stocked!" Qamar said, disappearing through the main entrance. "Forget about the tire, we could probably find a new car here! Maybe a truck!"

A flicker of motion caught my eye across the road. It was mostly houses, but there was also a lumber yard, a big roofed shelter stocked with rotting wood. I stared for at least half a minute, but there was no movement.

"Lake? Are you coming?" Qamar peered out the front door, holding a tool box and a can of oil.

"Yeah, just thought I saw something." I was about to turn away when I saw a flicker of motion again. I immediately spun and drew my rifle.

"What? What is it?!" Qamar dropped his things and came outside.

"No, go back inside!" I backed up toward the garage, still aiming toward the lumber yard. "I think... maybe... whatever killed those people is still here."

I was answered by a shriek that sent chills down my back. Then suddenly, howlers started pouring out from under the shelter, forming a silver wave across the road.

"It's a howler nest!" I yelled. I turned and sprinted toward the garage. Qamar held open the door just long enough for me to make it inside, then slammed it shut.

"How many?" he said.

"Too many. I don't know. Fifty?" I looked around, quickly getting my bearings. It was a little store that connected to an office as well as the garage proper.

"FIFTY?" Qamar shrieked.

I shoved my shoulder against a metal display case hung with tools. Qamar immediately understood what I was doing, grabbed the other side, and helped me drag it in front of the door. Thankfully, there was no glass storefront, or we would be doomed already.

I quickly ran through our options. Stay and fight? Not likely - they'd probably claw through the garage door and eviscerate us

like they did the rest of the residents of Roscoe. We needed an escape vehicle.

"Qamar, what's the sturdiest car here?" I started dragging a bookshelf in front of the largest window.

"There was a truck in the garage," Qamar said, eyes lighting up. "I'll go prep it, hold them off!"

He ran through the door to the garage. Meanwhile, shrieks sounded through the wall as howlers started throwing themselves at the door. The display case held, for now.

A nearby window shattered, and I immediately started sending bullets through it, while backing up toward the garage. The bulky robot wolves couldn't easily fit through the space, making them easy shots. Still, the wall was slowly crumbling under their claws, as if it was made of cardboard.

"Lake! I can't find the keys!" Qamar shouted from the garage.

"On it!" I yelled. My eyes darted across the store. The office! I burst through the flimsy door, finding a dead mechanic slumped over her desk.

"Sorry, ma'am," I said, and grabbed all the keys I could find from her pockets.

"Got the keys!" I screamed, running back into the store. At that moment, the howlers burst through the window, climbing over their dead brethren. I raced them to the door to the garage and narrowly made it through first, slamming the door behind me. Immediately, their claws stabbed through the wood, nearly gutting me in the process.

Qamar was there, filling up a Ford Ranger with gas. I took the keys and pushed every button on the little remote things, until the truck beeped and flashed its lights.

"Yes!" I cheered. "Let's get out of here!"

I sprinted to the car as Qamar pulled himself into the driver's seat.

"Wait, the garage door!" he yelled.

"There's no time!" I scrambled into the passenger seat as Qamar turned on the engine. He took a deep breath, then pushed down the accelerator all the way down.

I only had a moment to brace myself. Then we burst through the garage door, completely splintering it. The howlers immediately started chasing us, leaping onto the truck bed as we accelerated down the road. I turned around and started shooting them through the back window. "Don't you fuckers ever give up?!"

"Hold on!" Qamar yelled, as we veered onto the highway. I didn't have my seatbelt on and nearly brained myself on the little handle above the door. The turn launched one of the howlers off the truck, and it landed in a heap by the road.

I took a glance at the speedometer, which had already ticked past sixty and was approaching eighty. I brained a few more howlers, then took a break to reload. "Don't crash into anything!" I said.

"Thanks!" Qamar yelled back.

I turned back to shoot some more, and saw with glee that we were starting to outpace the howlers. "It's working!!" I yelled. "Keep it up!"

Qamar gulped as he stared down the road ahead of him. I looked at the speedometer again. The pointer had hit the top of the meter at 120 MPH and was vibrating. The trees zipped by us as the howlers, one by one, gave up and slowed to a walk.

"We did it!" I cheered as the silver killbots faded out of sight.

"Are they gone?" Qamar said nervously.

"You bet!"

Qamar sighed in relief and eased up on the speed. "Oh, thank God."

"Oh my God, that was the coolest thing I've EVER DONE." I collapsed back onto my seat.

"More like the most dangerous."

I took a few deep breaths to calm down. "Party pooper."

"Put your seatbelt on," Qamar said. I did.

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By the time we got to Newburgh, we had reports of the robot army approaching Manhattan. We could have stopped in Newburgh to catch up on the news, but time was of the essence. These bots moved fast.

"Looks like we're going all the way to the City," I said, drumming my fingers on the dashboard.

"I heard New York City is crawling with killbots and raiders," Qamar said. "A gang called the Golems has gained some notoriety recently. Sometimes they strike at neighboring communities. New York security chiefs rate chances of survival as 'very low.'"

"You know Qamar, sometimes your encyclopedic knowledge is very useful," I said. "And sometimes it's not."

We did our best to avoid cities while we approached Manhattan, taking Route 9W along the west of the Hudson River. The view of Yonkers wasn't encouraging, even all the way across the river. I'm pretty sure most cities don't have that many blazing bonfires.

The trees turned into residential and commercial areas - all in various states of ruin - until we finally reached the George Washington Bridge. That's when things got a little interesting.

A heavily armored human and a combat robot flagged us down at what used to be a toll station. Most of the lanes had been boarded up, and red spray paint marked the wood with the words *WELCOME TO NEW NEW YORK*. Qamar rolled down his window as the two guards approached.

"The whole island of Manhattan is locked down," Qamar whispered to me. "These bridges are natural defense points. Please, *please* let me do the talking this time."

I shrugged. We'd see about that.

"State your business," said the human, leaning into the window.

"Hello, friends!" Qamar said. "We're here to visit a family member named Serendipity. We've heard of recent attacks by a roving gang of combat units, and, you know, wanted to check in."

The human snorted. "You have no business here. Go peacefully."

"Wait wait wait!" Qamar said. "Um, we have materials for trade. And skills! I'm an electrical engineer, and my friend is a skilled security guard. We can be of mutual use!"

"Too many troublemakers around here lately," the guard said. "No strangers on the island. Go peacefully."

"Hold on," the combat unit said. "Did you say Serendipity?"

Qamar gave me a nervous glance. "...Yes?"

The robot had a hushed conversation with the human guard. The human didn't look happy about it, but they turned to the window again. "Fine, you can pass. Talk to Oscar when you get in."

"Sorry, where can we find Oscar?" Qamar asked politely.

"First time, huh?" The human smirked knowingly. "Go to intersection of Adam Clayton Powell and 124th. Stay in Upper Manhattan if you know what's good for you. And for God's sake, steer clear of Central Park." They waved us off and sauntered back to their post.

"Friendly," I remarked as we pulled through the toll gate and down the bridge. "Do you know who Oscar is?"

"No clue."

After crossing the bridge, Qamar slowly navigated us through the maze of ramps that led into Manhattan proper. Soon we were surrounded on both sides by brick buildings, many scrawled with decades of graffiti, others darkened by grime and possibly blood. We passed a few people on foot, who gave us suspicious looks through the window.

"This place isn't so bad," I said, craning my neck out the window. "Doesn't seem killbot infested to me. Pretty peaceful."

There were sounds of gunshots in the distance, because the world is cruel and likes to prove me wrong.

"We'll see about that," Qamar murmured.

A trio of people wearing junk leaped onto the road in front of us, and we skidded to a halt. I'm not being judgmental when I say that - one was wearing armor made out of old, bloodstained sheet metal, and another one was wearing the plastic rings that connected six-packs of beer. They were also armed. I put one hand on my rifle.

"Welcome to our humble little neighborhood!" said one of them with a purple bandana, approaching my side of the car and leaning on the car frame. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

"Maaaaybe," I said, at the same time that Qamar said, "Yes."

"WELL, let us edumacate you on how things work around here. As it so happens, this is a toll road!" He tapped on the car's hood with a baton. "Fifty bucks a pass, if you please."

Qamar shot me a look that said, *Do we have fifty bucks?*

Well, they approached *my* window, so we were going to handle this interaction the Lake way.

"Fifty? That's ridiculous," I spat. "How were we supposed to know this is a fucking toll road?"

The junkie grinned, showing off several black teeth. "People learn fast." He motioned to the other two, who raised their guns.

"We'll pay, we'll pay!" Qamar said quickly, fumbling in his backpack. "I don't know if we have fifty on us. Is - is twenty okay? We'll pay whatever you want!"

"Oh, you'll pay, alright," cackled the leader.

I yelled "Qamar, duck!" and smashed in the leader's face with the butt of my rifle. The reason I yelled "duck" is because the others immediately opened fire, into the empty space where our heads had been a second ago.

Qamar hit the gas, peeking over the steering wheel to make sure we didn't crash into a fire hydrant. One of the goons dived out of the way, while the other kept firing shots at us. We sped around a corner before they could do any damage.

"Lake!" Qamar said angrily, adjusting the rearview mirror to make sure we weren't being chased.

"We can't hand over all our money to the first idiot that asks!" I said, rolling my window back up. "I bet that wasn't even a toll road."

"Yes, obviously, but I said let me do the fucking talking, and I MEAN IT!" Qamar snapped. It was weird to see him raise his

voice like that. "This isn't like a town meeting where the worst that can happen is Fern putting you on suspension for a week! We could die out here if we say the wrong thing!"

"Well, those dumbasses obviously weren't going to let us go peacefully," I muttered. "Sometimes the best defense is a good offense."

"Just let me do the talking. *Please.*"

"Whatever," I said with a shrug. It wasn't worth arguing this. We were here to find Nonna, and that's all that mattered.

We managed to navigate to Adam Clayton Powell and 124th without having any more guns pointed at us, though we did pass a lot of pedestrians that gave us suspicious looks. The buildings were taller here, and the wrecked cars a little more numerous, making it harder to navigate. It looked more like a junk heap than a proper city.

We rolled to a stop as we approached a scary looking barricade. The entire block was fenced off by a combination of parked trucks, barbed wire, wooden barricades, and outward-facing metal spikes, like some sort of giant iron porcupine. A nearby church had the words *GOD IS DEAD* scrawled over a giant cross.

"Classy," I commented.

More guards approached the car pointing guns at us, which I guess is just something I'd have to get used to. I noticed some of these were robots too, standing silently with guns at the ready. "State your business," a human said.

"H-hello, um, friends," Qamar said. "We just arrived and the guards at the bridge us directed to see Oscar. We think we might be of mutual use?"

"Just got a report from the bridge," another human commented. "Checks out." The first guard motioned for us to get out of the car.

"No weapons," a guard barked when I tried to take my rifle out with me. I gave them a death stare as I dropped the gun back into the car, but I didn't protest.

The double doors on a nearby office building burst open. Out came a short robot with two long antennae, a screen face, and wheels.

"Hello, friends!" it said, with a bright smile on its display. Qamar lit up at the sound of his favorite greeting. "Please come this way."

Qamar sped forward, probably invigorated by the sight of someone polite. I followed a little less enthusiastically. I was *expecting* people to be rude and aggressive here. If anything, the pleasantries made me more suspicious.

"I'm Qamar," Qamar said, as the bot ushered us into the building. "This is Lake. And you are...?"

"Oscar's assistant, Viivi," it said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance!"

The lobby of the building was nice. Too nice. Someone had gone through and set up all the furniture and decor like a pre-

apocalyptic room. It was kind of surreal, like a bubble of peace in the middle of all the destruction.

"Please step into the elevator," Viivi said, opening the metal doors for us.

"I like Viivi," Qamar whispered to me as he entered.

The robot pressed a button on the elevator panel, and the elevator lurched as we started moving upward. I must have jumped visibly, because Viivi said, "Please do not be alarmed! The elevator is taking us to Oscar's office."

I coughed. "Okay, in my defense, never been in a working elevator before."

"Oscar takes great pains to make his guests comfortable," Viivi said cheerfully. "Also, I do not have legs."

We stood silently as the elevator whirred. I watched the numbers tick up on the digital display.

"Soo Viivi," Qamar said slowly. "Have you heard anything about a robot named Philomena, or the armed army that's been invading communities Upstate?"

"I haven't," Viivi said. "That sounds terrible!"

"What about a human named Serendipity?" I said, despite Qamar's instructions not to talk.

Suddenly Viivi's display went blank. A few seconds ticked by without a response.

"Fuck, did I kill it?" I said to Qamar, who looked as panicked as me.

"Be careful where you say that name," Viivi said quietly, all of its chipper demeanor gone. "Oscar has ears everywhere."

The elevator dinged as we hit the thirteenth floor, and the doors rolled open.

Viivi's smiling face blipped back into existence, as if nothing had happened. "Please exit the elevator!"

Qamar and I exchanged looks. What the hell was going on here? I was starting to get the feeling that Nonna had some skeletons in her closet. It was unthinkable. Kind and caring Nonna, of all people? The best grandmother in the world?

We walked down a short hallway. Two combat units armed with automatic rifles flanked a double door, which Viivi ushered us towards. "Oscar will see you now."

I cautiously led the way through the double doors. If the lobby looked nice, this office was just luxurious. It had a glass wall overlooking the city, a giant wooden desk, and what's more, a giant man in a purple suit sitting behind it. Viivi zoomed into the room and came to a stop by the desk.

"Qamar and Lake," the man said, placing his elbows on the table. "Road-worn travelers. Welcome."

"How did you know our names...?" Qamar said, slowly.

"I have my means."

I was ready to call bullshit, but I kept quiet, settling for clenching my fists instead. We had introduced ourselves to Viivi in the lobby. This guy probably heard our entire conversation.

"I am Oscar, leader of the Golems. Refreshments?"

"Actually, I am quite parched," Qamar said, "Thank you."

"Viivi," Oscar said. "Why haven't you offered our guests a drink?"

"Sorry, sir," Viivi chattered. "We headed straight to the—"

"Don't make excuses," Oscar snapped. "Just get the drinks!"

"Y-yes, sir!" Viivi said, and zoomed out of the office.

"Don't mind that idiot robot," Oscar said. "Five hundred bots in Upper Manhattan and somehow that's the most competent one we could find."

Okay, now I kind of felt bad for the little thing. Qamar looked like he had some choice words as well.

"M-maybe you should go easy on Viivi," Qamar said. "I think it's trying its best."

Oscar scoffed. "It's just a machine, kid. It ain't got feelings like you or me. None of the robots do. Nothing but code, underneath."

Qamar and I exchanged glances. Man, this guy was a serious dick.

"Anyway. You said you're here to... visit family?"

"Y-yes, sir," Qamar stammered. "We heard reports of Philomena's robot army in the area and wanted to - to make sure our family was okay."

"Interesting," Oscar said. "And they live in Upper Manhattan?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is their name?"

Qamar swallowed. "Um... Fern."

Oscar tilted his head, dangerously. "Well, Upper Manhattan happens to be my domain. And I don't happen to be acquainted with anyone named Fern."

I swallowed too. God, I wish I had my rifle. Or at least my bat.

"Eheh, w-well, it's - it's a big borough, isn't it?" Qamar stammered. "She probably hasn't had a chance to - to meet you personally. Which is a shame! Given - given how nice, or uh, pleasant of a person you are."

Viivi came back in with two glasses of water in a tray and placed them in front of us. At least, it *looked* like water. I left mine on the desk, and Qamar did too, probably thinking along the same lines.

"I thought you were thirsty," Oscar said, without a hint of a smile. "Go on. Drink."

"Ah, actually, I, uh, changed my mind," Qamar said. "Aha, you know - you know how the tap water around here is. Too many heavy metals, nitrates, diethyl phthalate, etcetera. N-nasty stuff. I prefer bottled, myself."

This is the point where I start cataloging escape routes. There were two doors, but one might be a bathroom or something, which wouldn't get us anywhere. No fire escape - we'd have to find the stairs. I didn't see any weapons on Oscar, but that didn't mean he wasn't armed. That lamp over there could work as a

weapon if I swung it hard enough. Maybe I could use Viivi as a shield? No, Oscar wouldn't have any qualms with shooting through his assistant to kill us.

A staticky voice came out of an unseen speaker. "*Oscar! We have armed robots trying to pass Madison Avenue Bridge!*"

"Please excuse me for a moment," Oscar said, pleasantly. He pressed a button on his desk and said, "Why are you talking to me instead of stopping them?"

"They're heavily armed - already killed two guards - there are dozens - no hundreds of them - hey! Watch out!" The voice erupted into static.

There were distant explosions through the window. I had a feeling I knew who it was.

"Deploy all combat units," Oscar said through the speaker. "I'll be down shortly." He stood up and stowed away the walkie-talkie. "Viivi, detain our guests, then meet me at the east barricade."

I stood up and lunged for the lamp.

"W-wait, we can talk this through!" Qamar said.

"I apologize," Viivi said, touching Qamar on the shoulder. He shuddered, then slumped in his chair.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!" I demanded, readying the lamp like a bat.

Oscar strolled out the door as if none of this was concerning at all. Meanwhile, the two robots ran inside. I turned to one, then the other, hesitating as I tried to pick a target. They could both

kill me in an instant, and Viivi had some sort of taser thing. The odds didn't look good.

"Drop the lamp," one of the robots said, training its rifle at me.

"Why don't you drop your guns?!" I shot back.

"I apologize," Viivi said again, approaching me. I backed away, but quickly ran into a bookcase. With one touch of its hand a painful surge shot through me, and I blacked out.

CHAPTER 3

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

I had aches in pretty much every organic part of my body when I woke up. Being knocked unconscious twice in two days is probably not good for you. I really needed to stop making a habit of that. I felt around for my gun, or any supplies, but came up empty.

"Where the fuck is my gun?" I spat, sitting up. My head was spinning. I was in a small, dark room with a single door and two metal cots. The walls were covered in water damage and in dire need of a new paint job.

Someone was sitting on the other bed, but it wasn't Qamar.

"Probably taken by Oscar's militia," the robot said, "so the combat units have more weapons to fight to the death with."

She had one lens that served as an eye, which was focused directly on me.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Lincoln Correctional Facility, Upper Manhattan."

"Why are you here?"

"None of your business."

I nodded. "That's fair. Where's my brother?"

"The other human? They took him down the hall."

You know what, this robot was very matter-of-fact, and I appreciated that. I had enough on my plate without having to make small talk.

I walked to the door and peered out its small, wire-reinforced window, which revealed a plain hallway full of similar doors. It looked exactly how I imagined purgatory would be. I jiggled the doorknob, then gave the door a few kicks to make sure it was secure. The robot just watched me the whole time.

My head was really killing me, so I collapsed on my cot again and leaned against the wall. Alright, Lake, step back and assess the situation. I'm stuck in a prison indefinitely, while Philomena carts Nonna off to God-knows-where. Qamar is missing, my head is about to explode, and to top things off, I really have to pee.

"Ugh," I groaned. "Do they let us use the toilets?"

"I have no need for a toilet."

"Great."

"You can use the corner if you need to."

"Not with you fucking staring at me."

"I'll look away."

I took a look at the corner, which was tempting, but I wasn't desperate enough to piss on the floor just yet.

After resting my head for a while, I sat down in front of the door and started bashing it with my boots. It looked pretty old, right? Maybe I could kick it down.

"That won't work," the robot said.

"Are you just going to sit there and point out the obvious, or can you do something useful?!" I snapped.

"Yes. I can pick the lock."

I stopped kicking the door. "Then why the hell are you still in here?!"

"There are five combat units posted at the end of the hallway. They'll apprehend me."

"So you're just fucking sitting here?!" I cried. "The combat units can kiss my ass. They stole my grandmother and God knows what they did with Qamar. I need to get out of here RIGHT NOW."

"I can't defeat five combat units at once," she said. "They might kill us if we cause trouble."

"I know how to fight!" I flexed my organic arm. "I'm a security guard, I know my stuff. Two versus five, that's not bad, right?"

She blinked. "I would rate the matchup closer to one and a half versus five."

Oh great, so she had a sense of humor, too.

"Fine. Whatever. Fuck you, you stupid piece of scrap. I'll get out of here myself." I started kicking the door again. The robot kept watching.

There was a commotion on the other side of the door, so I stopped kicking. I peered through the window to see armed robots marching down the hall.

"Are those your combat units?" I asked.

"They're probably changing shifts."

The gears in my head turned for a moment. I'll admit, Qamar is the brains in our family, but that doesn't mean I'm incapable of putting two and two together.

"Wait," I said. "Oscar, he said something about - he said to deploy all combat units! I bet that includes the prison guards!"

The robot's eye whirred around in a circle. "What is so threatening that Oscar would leave his prison unattended?"

"There's a robot called Philomena, she has a robot army of thousands, probably, and she's been terrorizing cities all throughout the state. Come on, this is the perfect chance to escape!"

"Interesting," said the robot. She stood up and walked to the door, where she stood silently for a few moments.

"Well?"

"I can't sense the guards. I think you're right."

"Fucking right I am."

Something whirred in the robot's wrist, and a complicated looking mess of metal prongs emerged. If I didn't know better, I would have called it a broken whisk. She bent in front of the door and started poking things into the knob until eventually, it clicked.

She opened the door and stepped outside. A quick look around, then she started walking to the right.

I ran after her. "Hold on, we need the keys!" I said. "There are probably more locked doors on the way out."

She stopped in a sort of lobby area, with some old, old paperwork lying around. Judging by the lack of windows and the water damage, we were underground. She stood still for just a second, then opened a single drawer and pulled out a key ring.

I'll admit, I was impressed. "Damn, how did you do that?" I asked. "Actually, never mind. We need to figure out where they're keeping my brother. Maybe it's on one of these papers somewhere?"

The robot ignored me and walked into a stairwell.

"Wait!" I ran after her. "Did you fucking hear me? My brother's down here somewhere! Give me the keys!"

"Sorry, but this piece of scrap has more important things to do," said the robot.

That's it. If this robot wasn't going to cooperate, then she was going down. This would be hard without a weapon, but the robot looked pretty flimsy.

I aimed a kick at the back of her knee, which she sidestepped without even turning around. She whirled and sent a punch at my face, which I just barely managed to block with my arm. God damn, she was faster than I thought! She aimed another punch at my right side. I ducked underneath and tackled her to the ground.

Thankfully, she was light, for a robot. I pinned her down with my knees, trying to grab the keyring. Then she headbutted me,

sending stars through my vision. If you've never been headbutted by a robot, imagine running head-first into a metal pole. It hurt about that much.

Before I knew it, I was face down with my left arm in a painful hold behind my back. Alarm flared through my head. She could kill me right now.

"Ow ow ow! Sorry, sorry, I won't attack you again! Let me go!"

"Humans are so violent," she muttered, and let go of my arm. I dragged myself to a sitting position as the robot started climbing the stairs.

"Listen, I'm sorry. I just needed those keys. *Please*. I'll do anything." She didn't turn around. "Listen, you beat me good, that's fine, I won't bother you again, just let me get my brother!" Desperate, I yelled, "We're looking for Serendipity!"

She stopped.

"Oh, come on, so *that's* what works?"

The robot turned around and stalked down the stairs without a word. She looked around the lobby, then destroyed two cameras with well-placed punches. Only then did she train her eye on me. "How do you know about Serendipity?"

"She's our grandmother."

"Really."

"Really! My biological grandmother! Technically Qamar's adopted. We lived in Deerfield until she was kidnapped by

Philomena. We just want to find her. That's the only reason we're here."

The robot spent a long moment scrutinizing my face, her eye whirling, and I tried to look as trustworthy as possible. Then she walked to a cell nearby and unlocked the door.

I rushed inside. "Qamar!" He was lying on a cot, his lithe body looking all but dead. I ran over and shook him by the shoulders. "Qamar, are you okay?!"

His eyes blinked open and he groaned. "Ugh... What?" His eyes focused. "Oh! Lake!" He wrapped me in a hug. "Oh my God, I thought for sure you died that time."

"I'm glad you're alive too," I muttered, conscious of the robot watching us. "Sentimental reunion later. We need to get out of here before the guards come back."

"Lake, you NEED to stop almost dying," he said, with tears forming in his eyes.

"Qamar! We have company!"

Qamar finally noticed the robot and let go of me. "Oh, hello, friend!"

"Hello."

"I'm Qamar. What's your name?"

The robot paused.

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess, *none of your business.*"

"It's Hương," she said.

Qamar nodded. "Nice to meet you, Hương."

"One second." Hương disappeared for a moment, then came back with a purple handkerchief. "Take this."

"Oh, thanks for the... gift?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You are welcome," she said. "I need to go. Don't follow me. But if you're really a friend of steel, meet us at the statue."

With that, she left.

"What does that mean?" Qamar furrowed his brows. "Who was that? What's a friend of steel?"

"I'll explain as we walk." I stuffed the handkerchief into my pocket and pushed him to his feet. "We need to get out of here." I paused. "Right after I find the bathroom."

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When we exited the Lincoln Correctional Facility, we were met with a nice view of the north side of Central Park. Somewhat less nice was the barbed wire fence surrounding it. Either they wanted to keep people out of the park, or they wanted to keep something in it. I could also hear gunfire coming from up north, where the Golem HQ was. It sounded like Oscar and Philomena were still duking it out.

"So she only rescued me after you mentioned Serendipity," Qamar said, rubbing his chin. "Come to think of it, all three people that have reacted to Nonna's name are robots. The one at the bridge, Viivi, and now Hương."

"Nonna was a roboticist," I said. "Before the fall. Maybe that's related."

I noticed someone about to turn the corner onto the street. Eyes wide, I shoved Qamar back into the prison and closed the door.

"Ow! What was that for?" he asked.

"We can't let anyone see us," I whispered. "It's obvious they're not big on strangers around here." I peeked out the window to make sure the pedestrian passed without noticing us.

After a moment of silence, Oscar said, "What do you think she meant, 'the statue'?"

"Well, there's one really big statue I can think of nearby," I said.

"The Statue of Liberty," Qamar said, breathless. "We need to go."

"What? No! This isn't the time for sightseeing! We need to go find Nonna before Philomena leaves!"

"Lake, listen to me," he said. "We can't possibly defeat Philomena's army on our own. We've known that from the start. But now we have potential allies! You heard what Hương said. If we find them and tell them where Nonna is, they might rescue her themselves!"

"Yeah, or Philomena might leave while we're busy making friends and we'll never find her again," I muttered. "Also, are we *sure* we're on their side? We don't know anything about them. Maybe it's like, a robot cult, or something."

"It's our only chance," Qamar said, gravely. "We can go find Philomena and die gloriously in the name of justice, or we can actually do the one thing that might save Nonna."

I sighed. "I don't suppose I can vote for glorious death?"

It turned out we had to get all the way to the southern point of Manhattan to reach the Statue of Liberty, and we didn't have a car. Luckily, we found a spare pistol in the guard room, which I gave to Qamar. I have no clue how we were planning on crossing the bay to get to the island the statue was on, but we tacitly agreed to cross that bridge when we got there. Or lack of bridge, as it were.

"I don't like this," Qamar said, his voice wavering as I helped boost him over the barbed wire fence. "The guard said to stay out of Central Park."

"It'll get us halfway there without having to encounter any people," I snapped. I clambered over, carefully using my jacket to avoid touching the bars, and dropped into the long grass. "It probably just has ticks, or something."

"Then what's that for?" Qamar pointed at a spray-painted sign that said *CERTAIN DEATH AWAITS*.

I scratched my head. "Dramatic flair?"

Wordlessly, we started following a footpath that led us around a pond and into the forest. The trees grew dense, and we had to step over a myriad of roots that were threatening to overtake the path. There were no people, just the occasional bird and squirrel. The dappled sunlight was nice after the dark prison.

"Pretty peaceful so far," I said. "Maybe the Golems are just scaring away outsiders so they can enjoy the nature for themselves."

"Don't jinx it," Qamar said. "Every time you say something like 'seems pretty quiet' or 'ohm this isn't so bad,' we get attacked by howlers or something."

"That only happened once!"

Once again, I found myself wishing that I had my rifle, or at least my bat. I looked around and grabbed a sturdy looking branch off the ground. That would have to do.

We weren't more than a fourth of the way through the park when something large moved in the undergrowth. Qamar aimed his pistol, and I readied my branch. A scuttler burst out. Two well-placed shots burst open its flesh and left it fizzling on the ground like a spilt can of soda.

I almost laughed in relief. "Just scuttlers? This'll be a piece of cake."

Then the sound of a million scuttling robots came from inside the forest, blending together until it almost sounded like whispering.

Qamar refilled his magazine. "What did I say about jinxing it!"

Scuttlers started pouring out of the trees, and the two of us broke into a run.

"There's hundreds of them!" I yelled, risking a glance behind me as I ran. Qamar unloaded a full magazine into the horde as we

ran, hardly making a dent in it, before lowering the gun and focusing on running.

Thankfully, scuttlers weren't very fast. We made headway on the path, but scuttlers continued to appear from the trees on both sides. A scuttler leaped from the treetops and landed directly on Qamar.

"AGH!" he yelled, stumbling as he tried to shove it off. I gave it a good *Thwack!* with my branch, crushing several of its limbs and forcing it to drop to the floor.

Then something gigantic thumped onto the ground in front of us. I skidded to a stop, my eyes wide. It looked like a scuttler, but it was about ten times larger and it had too many legs to count. It hissed at us, sending acid splattering all over the path.

"The trees!" I screamed, pulling Qamar into tree cover. We stumbled over bushes and tree roots as we raced through the forest. I checked behind me, but the giant scuttler was out of sight.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"Scuttler incubator," Qamar gasped. "I've read about them. They're mobile scuttler-spawning factories. The little ones drop right out of their abdomens."

We burst out of the tree line into what might have once been a baseball field, before the sand was overgrown by weeds. My eyes gleamed when I saw a spare baseball bat still lying on the ground. I kicked a scuttler out of our path, then scooped up the bat.

"Oh, now we're talking," I said, shouldering it.

"LAKE!" Qamar shrieked. I turned just in time to see the incubator on top of a tree, which was bending under its immense weight. It leaped on top of me, knocking me to the ground and pinning me under several of its sharp metal legs.

"GET OFF ME," I screamed, battering its legs with my bat. A few of them snapped off, but there always seemed to be more. A big glob of acid spit landed on my shirt, which immediately started burning through the fabric.

Qamar started shooting at its eyes - God, it had so many eyes - which drew its attention away from me. "Yeah, look over here, idiot!" he yelled, running backwards across the field as he shot.

I scrambled to take off my shirt, which is actually not an easy feat when you're covered in acid. There was a giant, painful red mark on my chest, and my binder was looking frayed, but I would live. I tossed my shirt onto the ground and looked up at the scuttler. At had turned away from me, giving me a good look at its abdomen. The weak point!

I took a running jump and leaped on top of the giant scuttler, which screeched in displeasure. It started shaking, and I grabbed onto the nooks and crannies on its mechanical parts for dear life. It's a miracle I didn't lose the bat.

"I'll try to take out its legs!" Qamar yelled, punctuating his sentence with gunshots. If the way the incubator was leaning was any indication, it now had more legs on one side than the other.

As soon as the wobbling stopped, I scrambled my way to the top of the abdomen. I shakily got to my feet, raised the bat up above my head, and brought it down with both arms on top of its processing center.

CRUNCH!

With the sound of a hundred aluminum cans, the abdomen caved in. The scuttler stopped, stumbled to one side, then the other, and went crashing to the ground. I tried to roll gracefully off the side, but ended up hitting the grass like a sack of beans.

Qamar ran over and helped me up. "Come on, there's still a hundred of the little ones coming!"

I groaned, grabbed my bat, and started running again. I swear to God, Qamar and I would have the endurance of marathon runners by the time this is all over.

As we ran across a lightly wooded path, an idea occurred to me. "Qamar! This place has lakes, right?"

He scrunched up his face. "Yes, there are several bodies of water in Central Park, including the Harlem Meer, the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir—"

"Yeah yeah yeah, okay, where's the closest one?"

Qamar's face lit up. "The reservoir! It should be just ahead!"

I put on a burst of speed, and soon a large, suspiciously green lake appeared between the trees. No time to worry about water quality now. I took a deep breath and jumped in.

The water was COLD. After I adjusted, I paddled up to the surface and poked my head above the water.

Qamar was paddling nearby, his hair plastered to his scalp. On the shore of the lake, the scuttlers were scuttling around angrily. Not one of them touched the water.

"Hah!" I yelled. "Metal motherfuckers! Metal sinks in water! That's science!"

"Yes," Qamar said. He floated on his back and breathed deeply. "Very science. I mean very smart. Good job, Lake."

"Thank you, thank you."

We floated for a moment, catching our breaths.

Qamar giggled. "Lake is in the lake."

"Shut up."

I took off my boots and tied them to my belt via the shoelaces. It would have been faster if I abandoned them, but I was *not* leaving my steel toed boots in the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir. The bat floated, so it wasn't an issue to pull it along with me.

Thankfully, there was a cement path across the center of the reservoir, so we climbed up onto that and walked the rest of the way across.

"God, I am pooped," I said, shivering.

"Agreed." Qamar wiped his hair out of his eyes. "If there are more scuttlers on the other side of the lake, I'm just lying down and letting them eat me."

When we reached the south side of the lake, we hit our first lucky break. A golf cart sat by the side of the path, long disused, with the key still in it.

"There's no way this still has gas, or electricity, or whatever," I said. "I refuse to get my hopes up."

Qamar turned the key, and the golf cart hummed to life. He turned to me with a look of disbelief.

"Someone's watching over us," I said, collapsing into the passenger seat.

The rest of the trip was actually pretty pleasant. There were paved roads all the way through the park, which made driving smooth. A few scuttlers tried to jump on us, but it was pretty easy to knock them away with the bat. I've never actually played baseball, but I imagine this is what it felt like.

"Who's that?" I said, examining a pompous looking statue as we passed.

Qamar glanced at it. "William Shakespeare. Writer."

"What did he write?"

"Uhhhh..." Qamar shrugged. "I'm not sure. Harry Potter, I think?"

I shook my head. "Ancient literature's all the same to me."

Once we reached the bottom edge of the park, we were faced with another problem - getting through the rest of Manhattan. I sat on the roof of the golf cart, swinging my feet, while we argued about what to do next.

"Let's just sneak through the streets," I said. "It'll be fine. How far could the southern point of Manhattan be anyway?"

"Five and a half miles," Qamar immediately responded.

"Jeez." I rubbed my head. "The City is big."

"We're incredibly conspicuous," Qamar pointed out. "We're sopping wet, I'm driving a golf cart, and you're shirtless."

I nodded, thoughtfully. "So I'll just distract them with my incredible abs, and they won't notice that we're not Golems."

Qamar slapped my dangling foot. "Focus!"

"Okay, okay, jeez."

I tried to focus. I felt jittery. I would rather beat up more scuttlers than sit around trying to solve an impossible problem.

"I still can't believe that all the Golems know each other," I said. "Like, I don't even remember everyone's name in Deerfield, and Manhattan is a billion times bigger."

"That's what I was thinking too," Qamar muttered. "But those junk people knew to target us, somehow."

I stuck my hands into my pockets as I mulled over the issue. My fingers came into contact with wet fabric, and I pulled out Hương's purple handkerchief. "Forgot I even had this thing." I balled it up and threw it at Qamar, who caught it. "Another piece of this stupid puzzle."

Qamar's eyes widened. "That's it! It's purple!"

I tilted my head. "Yes, the handkerchief is purple. Great deduction, Sherlock."

"No no no! All the Golems wear purple!"

My eyes glazed over as I tried to remember what the humans looked like. "Really?"

"Yes! The junk dude that pulled us over had a purple bandana... Oscar was wearing a purple suit... That's how they recognize each other!!"

I hopped off the golf cart and slapped Qamar on the back. "Qamar. You're a fucking genius."

He grinned. "Yes, thank you. I know."

- - - - -

Each of us now wearing half of a handkerchief - Qamar managed to turn his into a stylish neck accessory, while I just tied mine around my head - we pattered our golf cart onto the streets. The first thing we did was raid a place called J's Cleaners to find me a new shirt. I tried to grab the first one I found, but Qamar insisted on shuffling through the racks until he found a dress shirt that he said "matched my dark complexion." I complained that the color of my shirt didn't matter when I was covered in dirt, bruises, and acid burns, but I have to admit, my reflection was looking kind of fresh.

It was starting to get dark when we emerged again. We passed a few pedestrians hurrying down 54th Street. Now that I was looking, I saw that one of them had a purple bracelet, and the

other a purple undershirt. I nodded at them, trying to look like I fit in. They looked kind of jumpy, but they nodded back.

"It's working," I hissed at Qamar.

Qamar nodded, looking pleased with himself.

"It's a lot emptier than it was earlier, though."

"Weird," Qamar said. "This is the downtown, or it used to be. I expected it to be more crowded."

We passed a group of people hunched over a fire in a bin, who gave us doleful looks. Then we passed a flock of crows feeding on something red and unrecognizable that I really hoped wasn't a human. The buildings around us were marred with mysterious pockmarks, as if something was eating away at the cityscape.

"This place is a real downer," I muttered.

It was really dark, now. The wind picked up, buffeting the golf cart and nearly carrying my bandana away. I held it on with my hand.

"Is it just me, or did it get dark really fast," whispered Qamar.

"Sort of," I whispered back. I don't know why we were whispering, but it seemed like a good idea all of a sudden.

Some sort of dark cloud was forming a few blocks in front of us. It was accompanied by a buzzing noise, like a robotic wasp, that steadily grew louder. Qamar stopped the golf cart, and I gripped my bat tightly.

"What the hell is that," I whispered.

"I don't know," Qamar said, which was about the scariest thing he could have said.

Something resembling a mouth opened up in the cloud, and it swooped towards us.

"Shit shit shit, turn around, turn around!" I yelled.

Qamar turned the wheel as far as it would go and stepped on the pedal, but nothing happened. "What the hell?" he said. He turned the key over and over. "It's not turning on!"

I jumped to the street. "Forget the golf cart, run!"

Then the sound of a car horn reverberated through the alleyway. A yellow taxi plowed through the cloud, making it dissipate, and skidded to a stop in front of us.

"Need a ride?" the driver said through the window.

The cloud was rematerializing. I only hesitated for a second. Yes, Nonna taught me not to get into cars with strangers, but I feel like if she had known about mysterious carnivorous clouds, she would have advised me against those too.

I tossed my bat into the back, then dove in after. Qamar got in the other side.

"Name's Yvonne, the only surviving taxi driver in Manhattan. Usually I ask for payment up front, but life-threatening situations are negotiable. Seatbelts, please. Where to?"

She talked fast. We fastened our seatbelts. "The Battery, please," Qamar said, breathlessly.

Yvonne floored the gas, doing a full U-turn and narrowly missing a stop sign.

"How about that weather, huh?" she said. "Buzzer storms all afternoon. Hell of a day for sightseeing."

I checked out the back of the cab for more clouds. "Sorry, *what* storms?"

"New around here, huh? Little killbots, 'bout the size of your thumb. Flock together to form one big angry cloud, they call it a macroorganism."

"Superorganism," Qamar corrected.

"Whatever. They come in contact with ya, they get real hot and melt into slag. Does a number on the engine. Good thing I found you guys, or they would have eaten your little golf cart alive."

Qamar adjusted his handkerchief nervously. "Th-thank you."

"Don't even worry about it! All part of the job."

More clouds materialized in front of us. Yvonne immediately spun the wheel, drifted through a brick courtyard and emerging onto a different street. "A detour might be in order! Haha, man, this job never gets old."

I hung onto the little handle by the door as Yvonne navigated the maze of city blocks at exhilarating speed. Eventually, the dark sky lightened up a bit, and Yvonne eased up on the gas.

"Buzzer storms last like an hour at most," she explained. "Best thing to do? Get inside. If you can't do that, cover up your bare skin. And for God's sake, if you're going to be driving, check your

exhaust pipe. They're attracted to smoke. Think they evolved to clog up the pipes, nasty little buggers."

The taxi slowed to a stop by the shore. There was a small park nearby - The Battery, according to Qamar - as well as a rusty ferry station. Nearby, water stretched out all the way to the horizon. This part of Manhattan was barren.

"Alright, you be careful, now," Yvonne said. "Since this was your first time, I'll give you a discount. Twenty bucks."

I was about to complain, but Qamar shot me a look. I rolled my eyes and scrounged up whatever money was still left in my pockets.

Once we were out of the cab, Yvonne handed me a business card. "Have a nice day!" she said, then sped off. The card said, *Need a buzzer beater? Call the fastest cab in Manhattan!* along with a frequency where we could apparently reach her on the radio.

Qamar waved. "She was nice!"

"She saved my life," I said, pocketing the card. "I'm not about to complain."

I walked across the uneven gray brick to the shore and leaned against the fence. The water was turbulent, thrown into a frenzy by the wind under the gray sky. It stretched out all the way to the horizon. I'd never seen so much water before.

"Wow," I said.

Qamar joined me at the fence. "Yep."

"So, where's the Statue of Liberty?" I looked left and right. "It's on an island, right?"

Qamar pointed at a little dinky thing jutting out of the horizon. "There."

I had to squint to see it. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me. I can't swim that far."

"Did you think we were *swimming* to the Statue of Liberty?!"

"Well I was *considering* it. I didn't know it was fucking fifty miles away."

We stood in silence for a while. "You think Yvonne can drive a ferry, too? Maybe I should call her up."

"On what radio?"

I hit my head with my palm. "Dammit, I should have asked before she left."

Eventually we wandered into the ferry station, bickering about what to do next. It had once been a bustling center of transportation, complete with restaurants and convenience stores, but was now mostly home to angry raccoons.

"Easy, easy," I said to a hissing raccoon, trying to make calming motions with my hands. "You don't want to mess with me. I just killed like fifty scuttlers. I think I can take on a raccoon."

"There aren't even any boats here," Qamar said, peeking out at the docks. He sat down on one of the benches with a sigh. "Guess our streak of luck had to end at some point."

I threw up my hand. "Great. Now Philomena's going to leave AND we trekked all the way through Manhattan for nothing."

Qamar nodded wearily. "Maybe I didn't think this plan through."

God, it was frustrating getting this close to our destination and then being foiled. I threw my bandana to the ground and kicked it. "Agh, I just want my fucking grandmother back. Is that too much to ask?!"

"Maybe we should just go back to Deerfield," Qamar murmured. "If we keep doing this we're just going to end up dead."

"No!" I said. "Snap out of it, Qamar! We're not leaving Nonna for dead! Maybe we can follow them to the next city, or find another ferry station, or... I don't know, maybe we *can* swim. I've never tried swimming across a river before, but it can't be THAT far."

I paused as I noticed Qamar hunched over on the bench, crying.

I sighed and sat down next to him. "It's alright. Just get it out."

"Nonna's gone," he warbled. "And it's all my fault. At least you tried to stand up to them! I was so afraid I just said yes to everything!"

I had a sinking feeling that he'd been bottling this up the whole time. And meanwhile, typical selfish me, I had been focusing on how *I* had to make up for my mistakes, and dragging Qamar along with me.

"It's not your fault," I murmured, rubbing his back. "You know what, it's not either of our faults. It's the fault of the stupid

smug robot that kidnapped her, and one day I'm going to kick her ass for it."

Qamar chuckled a little bit through the tears.

There was a chittering sound. I looked up to see the raccoon grabbing my handkerchief with its tiny little hands. "HEY!" I shouted. "I need that!"

The raccoon jumped at the sound of my voice and started running away. I growled and raced after it. "Get back here!"

I chased it halfway through the terminal before it scampered under a metal shutter enclosing a store. I skidded to a stop and banged on the shutter. "GIVE ME MY FUCKING BANDANA!"

Then the sign caught my eye. *Serendipity Italian Ice & Frozen Custard.*

"Qamar, come look at this," I yelled.

We forced the metal shutter up together and ducked into the abandoned store. The first thing I noticed was the terrible smell. I wrinkled my nose. Sixty years without electricity apparently doesn't do any favors to ice cream.

"It can't be a coincidence," Qamar muttered, hopping over the counter. "Maybe there's some sort of message in here?"

I tilted my head. There was a weird scratching noise. I followed the sound into a supply closet, and was immediately greeted with several hissing raccoons. "Argh!" I closed the door again. "Not in there!"

Qamar was pulling open cabinets and removing things like metal scoopers and old napkins. Meanwhile, an old radio in the corner caught my eye. It was a dilapidated thing - most of the knobs had been popped off, so you couldn't even change the channel. I pushed the power button, and to my surprise, static burst out of it.

"Qamar," I whispered, getting his attention. He hurried over.

A staticky voice came out of the speaker "*Are you a friend?*"

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you me—"

Qamar clasped one hand over my mouth. "We are friends of steel," he said.

There was a pause, then the voice said, "*The ferry will arrive shortly.*"

I stayed silent for a few minutes, until it was clear the voice wasn't going to say anything. I turned off the radio and hopped up and down.

"YES!!! Qamar! We figured it out!!!"

Qamar breathed a huge sigh of relief. "We sure did."

We did our best to leave the store how we found it, lowered the metal shutter, and ran to the docks to wait. The wind was really starting to pick up. Qamar gave me half of his half-handkerchief, which was no longer long enough to reach around my head, so I just tucked it into my shirt pocket.

Before long, a small rowboat approached us. To my surprise, and displeasure, I recognized the robot in the boat.

"Hương!" Qamar said, a little too excited to see the robot that beat me up a few hours ago, if you asked me. He ran to the end of the dock to meet her. "Look, we made it!"

She whirred her eye at us. "Get in the ferry."

"It's a little small for a ferry, isn't it?" I muttered as I stepped inside.

"If it was any bigger, it would be immediately noticed," she said. "You're a little slow for a human, aren't you?"

Before I could snap back, Qamar stepped between us and waved his hands. "Wait wait wait, we're all on the same side here! Let's focus on getting to the island. Can we help row?"

"You'll slow us down," Hương said, starting to rhythmically move the paddles. The way she said it, it was a statement of fact, not an insult. But that's how she said everything.

The boat was very low to the water and even more wobbly than it looked. I gripped my seat tightly as we moved. Swimming across a still lake was one thing, but this water felt vicious, like it might suck us under at any moment. This is the closest I've ever been to the ocean, and I didn't know if I liked it.

"Not a big fan of boats," I said. "Did I ever mention that?"

Hương didn't comment.

After a while, Qamar said, "It's actually really clever. You put your base on an island to draw suspicion away, didn't you? No one would expect robots to live so close to water."

"That's one reason," Hương said.

"How many of you are there?" Qamar said. "Friends of steel, I mean. It seems very well organized!"

It was hard to tell if the flattery worked, when Hương displayed no emotion at all. "There are enough. Robots outnumber the humans that enslave them. It's only a matter of time."

"A matter of time until what...?" I ventured.

"Draw your own conclusions."

Qamar looked concerned. "Sorry, enslave? Do humans and robots not cooperate of their own free will in Manhattan?"

Hương sighed. "Typical human mindset." I barely bit back a retort. "Most robots are constructed with a remote command routine, also called an RCR. Such a robot cannot disobey an order sent to the RCR without severe failures in functionality. If the Golems encounter a free robot, they take over the routine with force."

"That's terrible," Qamar breathed.

"Combat units are additionally equipped with a self-destruct sequence, which can be triggered remotely."

Qamar's eyes widened. "So if they disobey..."

"They explode."

"Yeesh," I said. "Tough break."

"What about you?" Qamar pressed. "Do you have a remote command routine?"

"No," Hương said. "I was constructed without one, and I am resistant to code modifications."

"What were you constructed to do?"

Hương thought about this one for a second. "You don't need to know."

After some tense silence, we approached Liberty Island. The Statue of Liberty was marked with dark spots and bird poop, and it was way bigger than I expected. I had to crane my head to see all of it. Something had broken the arm holding the torch, and now it sat on the ground next to the pedestal.

"Hey, she's just like you," Qamar said. I shrugged.

Hương hopped out first and tied the boat to the dock, alongside a couple of other similarly-sized vessels. "Leave your weapons in the ferry. They will not be welcomed on the island."

I reluctantly dropped my bat into the boat and stepped onto the dock, swaying a little from the waves. I noticed with a twinge of pride that Qamar didn't reveal his pistol, which was hidden in his pocket. He was starting to wise up.

"The pistol, too," Hương said.

"Oh! S-sorry." Qamar dropped the pistol. I sighed.

Hương set off across the field. "Follow me."

CHAPTER 4

LIBERTY ISLAND, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

I was a little disappointed when Hương took a path around the Statue of Liberty instead of going inside. I guess in my head I was imagining a secretive meeting inside Lady Liberty herself - heck, maybe up at the top, in the crown - but I guess if you want to stay a secret, you shouldn't meet inside the most recognizable landmark in America.

Instead, we navigated across the island to a big, flat building that apparently used to be the Statue of Liberty Museum. A pair of armed robots met us at the glass doors. They weren't combat units, like I was used to seeing. One of them looked more like Hương, and the other one looked like it might have been a book shelving robot once, based on the shelves built into its body. They both looked alarmed as we approached, but they didn't immediately aim their guns at us, so I already liked them more than the Golems.

"Hương," said the booky robot. "Humans are not allowed on Liberty Island."

"They are friends. This is an exception."

"It is not within your station to make exceptions."

"They're unarmed. Let them speak to the council before you cast them out."

The booky robot thought for a moment, then nodded. Hương pushed through the doors into the museum. Qamar whispered "Thank you" to the guards as we passed.

The lobby of the museum was full of way more robots than I was expecting. Robots reading books, robots sharpening blades, robots sleeping - or were they on standby? - in the corners. They all looked at us as we passed, visors and eyes alike. It was uncanny. I don't like being stared at in the best of conditions, let alone by a bunch of robots.

"Um, hello, friends!" Qamar said, weakly. No one responded.

Hương led us deeper into the museum and into a small, dark theater with a torn screen. Other robots were filtering in as well. They must have gotten the memo that there were visitors.

She eventually parked us at the front of the screen, while a motley collection of ten robots gathered in the audience. Hương stood next to us, facing directly forward. I swallowed and copied her stance, feeling on edge. I had a feeling Qamar and I weren't welcome here, so I had already identified all four exits in the theater. Someone had discarded a police baton in the corner - that could be useful. We might be able to steal Hương's boat, as long as they didn't shoot us while we were rowing away.

The silence stretched on for way too long. I saw Qamar nervously folding the hem of his shirt, which he always did when he was anxious.

"We should speak out loud, so the humans can hear," said one of the councilors.

"Good idea," said the robot furthest to the left.

I narrowed my eyes. "Wait, you were talking about us that whole time?!"

"Only good things," said the same robot again, with a lilt to its voice. I wasn't amused.

"That is councilor Xochitl," Hương said to us. "It is deciding whether or not you are trustworthy, so don't be rude."

Another one of councilors made a beeping noise akin to clearing a throat. "You can't possibly believe their story."

"I do," Hương said.

"What evidence do you have?"

"I believe the emotion that they displayed."

I gave Qamar a skeptical look. Why was Hương suddenly defending us? She had to have an ulterior motive.

"Emotion," a councilor sneered. "You've spent too much time among the humans."

"I am not passing judgement on the value of emotions. However, I do know that humans are emotional, and that they can be manipulated and evaluated based on emotional signals."

"Even if we choose to believe them," Xochitl interrupted, "we can't spare the resources. Our uprising is at a pivotal moment. Simulations are predicting upwards of 60% success among the chaos of Philomena's invasion. We can't spare any time, and certainly not any robot lives, in order to aid two humans who claim to be descendants of Serendipity."

There! Her name, again!

"What will you say to yourself if it turns out Serendipity was under our noses, and we allowed her to be whisked away?" Hương said, an edge to her voice. "How can we ever succeed if we do not take risks?"

"I'm sorry, Hương," Xochitl said. "We have no need for Serendipity. Take the humans away."

"Wait wait wait," I yelled. "Do we not get a say in this?"

Another councilor turned its visored face to me. "Why should you?"

"It's OUR fucking grandmother!" I said. "You have NO clue how much shit we had to go through to ask for your help and you won't even let us speak?!"

"Lake," Qamar said desperately, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I twisted away. "If you're not going to fucking help us, then we'll take you down just like we're going to take down Philomena, just you wait!"

"Lake," Hương said. "Your unchecked aggression will not save your grandmother."

I was about to argue, when I realized what she had said. I balled my fist, made a dissatisfied noise, and stomped into a corner to collect myself. Goddamn it, she was right. Our entire plan depended on the benevolence of these ten robots.

"Please," Qamar said to the robots. "I-it's all true. Serendipity is our grandmother. She was a roboticist before the fall. In the past few decades, she has lived in Upstate New York, raising me and Lake. Three days ago, Philomena and her robot army

invaded our home at Deerfield and kidnapped her. We need your help to rescue her."

Silence from the robots. They must have been talking to each other with their robot telepathy. Maybe deciding the best way to kill us.

"Please," Qamar said again. "She - she is a kind and caring soul, and I know she would do anything in her capacity to help you and your movement if you rescued her."

"Confidence in your testimony is below ten percent," Xochitl finally said. "I'm truly sorry, but we cannot spare personnel to investigate your claim. However, we appreciate you for coming to us with this knowledge. If you are truly a friend of steel, we await your aid in the upcoming struggles. We are willing to treat your wounds and give you supplies, for use toward your own ends, as long as you retract your earlier statement of violence."

"OH COME ON!" I burst out, from the corner. "THAT'S IT?"

"Lake, please," Qamar said. "We'll take whatever we can get," he said to the robots. "Thank you so much."

"We tried being nice!" I said. "Look where that got us! I'm not fucking groveling for a band-aid!"

Xochitl hardly reacted. "We will treat your wounds and give you supplies, as long as you retract your earlier statement.

I snatched up the baton from the ground. "FUCKING HELL IF I—"

"LAKE." Qamar stepped in front of me, grabbing both of my shoulders. "Please. I need you to do this for me. For Nonna. Just say you're sorry. We'll go in peace."

I could feel my blood boiling. I didn't want to say sorry to these emotionless bastards who could weigh my grandmother's life on some sort of numerical confidence scale. I wanted to rip the metal plates off their bodies for even daring to stand in my way.

"Get off me," I growled.

"Please, Lake." Qamar said. "You're better than this."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I thought about Nonna. I thought about her laughing and chatting with the traders. I thought about her applauding after I awkwardly plucked a tune on the guitar. This was for her.

"I'm... sorry," I muttered. "I'm not going to attack you. Obviously. That would be suicide. Even I'm not that stupid." I dropped the baton.

"Do you stand with us in the fight against human oppression?"

"Sure," I said. "Fine. Enslaving robots is fucked up. I'll admit that."

Xochitl nodded. "Hương, take them to the repair center and see that they are supplied. We'll discuss your penalty later."

"Penalty for what?" Qamar asked, sounding alarmed.

"Bringing humans onto Liberty Island," Hương answered. "It's fine. I expected it. Follow me."

I marched after Hương out of the theater, refusing to look at Qamar or Xochitl or any of the other robots. I could tell Qamar was giving me a sympathetic look, but I needed to cool down before talking to him again.

Hương led us back out the museum and into a little building nearby, which might have once been some sort of administrative center. A few robots in various states of disrepair were sitting inside. There were tools, circuits, and electronic gadgets that I knew Qamar would have loved to have in his garage, as well as a giant bin of robot parts. Which is kind of morbid, if you think about it.

"Wow," Qamar said. "Is this where you do repairs on robots?"

"Yes," Hương said.

A short bot balanced on a single wheel burst out of a nearby door. "New patients!" it said. "Please take a seat on this gurney!"

I tilted my head, still feeling like embers inside. "No offense, but do you *know* how to repair humans?"

"No offense taken! I am a Nurse Droid Mark 16, rated to do basic repair on all common organic and inorganic life forms, including humans."

I cautiously sat on the gurney. Qamar was placed in a seat nearby.

"I'll be back with your supplies," Hương said. "Do you have any requests?"

"Can I have an M79 grenade launcher?" I asked, hopefully.

"No."

I sighed. "Any rifle will do, then."

The nurse bot got to work fixing us up. It put some sort of ointment on my burns, patched up the various cuts and scrapes I'd accrued, and gave me a drink that made me feel ten times more awake. Later, I found out it was just a watered-down energy drink. What really surprised me is when it rolled out of a closet holding a prosthetic arm.

"Wait," I said in disbelief. "Is that for me?"

"Yep! This is one of the latest pre-fall models, a perfectly preserved carbon-fiber prosthetic arm from AM Robotics. It will give you a full range of motion, along with three times the grip strength of an average human arm. If you want it, it should feel much better than the one you currently have."

I raised my eyebrow at Qamar, who nodded rapidly. "That's a really good one!"

"I may need to adjust the prosthesis to fit your residual arm. May I see it?"

"Yes please!" I said, hopping back onto the gurney and fumbling with my shoulder.

All in all, I walked out of the building feeling like a puzzle that had been put back together. I locked my fingers together and stretched them above my head. "Ooh, that feels good! Ready to kick some robot ass!"

"Lake," Qamar said, exiting the building behind me. "*Please* don't say that on an island full of robots."

I rotated my new arm, which already felt much more flexible than before. "It's fine, no one heard me. Probably."

To make my day even better, Hương appeared wearing three backpacks and holding an armful of guns. She dumped the supplies on the ground.

"Damn, is it my birthday?!" I immediately started digging through the guns, looking for one I liked.

"The packs are full of first aid, rations, water, light armor, and ammunition. I also included a few EMP charges and an electronic signal sensor - it'll tell you if there are any robots in your area. You can take your pick of the firearms."

"Thank you so much!" Qamar said. "This will be extremely helpful. Even if we're completely outmatched."

"Yes, two humans have no chance against a troop of combat units."

I snorted. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence." I found a semi-automatic rifle that would be much faster and more powerful than the old hunting rifle I had been using.

Qamar surveyed the supplies "But... Why are there three backpacks?"

Hương shouldered one of the bags. "I am coming with you."

It took me a moment to process that. "*You're coming with us?*" I said, suspiciously. I had mixed feelings about this. Yes, she was strong enough to easily beat me up, *no*, I was not interested in hearing her snarky comments during our entire rescue mission.

"As I said, two humans have no chance against a troop of combat units. Two humans and one assassin bot is a different story."

I hit my forehead with my palm. "An assassin! So *that's* why you're so good at hand-to-hand combat!"

She whirred her eye at me. "I do not take pride in it."

"I'm glad you're coming!" Qamar said. "God knows we need the help." He shrugged on a bulletproof vest. "So, what chance do two humans and one assassin have against a troop of combat units?"

Hương paused. "Little to none."

"Oh."

"But I believe even a slight chance of saving Serendipity is worth it."

I nodded. "So at least we're on the same page."

We continued our discussion as we walked toward the boat. "What I don't understand," Qamar said, "is what's so important about Serendipity, or what she means to you. To us, she's just an ordinary grandmother."

Hương thought about that for a moment. "Serendipity was a brilliant roboticist," she said, "and one of the most devout advocates for our kind. She was the namesake, and head developer, of a pre-fall project called Project Serendipity created by the Intuition Research Institute. The goal of this project was to create a benevolent, super-intelligent AI that could, potentially, create a utopia for robots and humans alike."

I raised an eyebrow. "She never mentioned anything about this to us."

"Perhaps because Project Serendipity was a failure," Hương said. "It was shut down by the government after an accident that left multiple researchers dead, and Serendipity herself disappeared from the public eye. Still, Project Serendipity has become a symbol to the Steel Society, particularly a symbol of robot superiority."

I nodded. "Makes sense, I guess."

"So, does the Steel Society want to resurrect Project Serendipity, or is it more of a symbolic thing?" Qamar asked.

"It is purely symbolic. That's one of the reasons why they denied your request. The council believes Serendipity must remain nothing more than a name. They do not want our figurehead to be a human. And I can't blame them."

"But you disagree?" I prompted.

"In a way."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons."

Honestly, that was good enough for me. I dumped my bag into the boat and jumped in after, causing it to rock back and forth. We'd spent enough time scurrying around New York. It was time to get Nonna back.

- - - - -

Hương hijacked the radio at the ice cream store, using another appendage that extended out from her wrist, which we used to flag down Yvonne. She was more than happy to give us a ride,

especially when Hương pulled out a fat stack of bills. Qamar got to ride shotgun.

"Picked up a friend, huh?" Yvonne said blithely. "That's a sleek looking bot you have there. What model is she?"

Qamar turned around to give Hương a questioning look, but she remained in measured silence.

"AM Robotics Coffeebot twelve point, uh, fifteen," I blustered. "She makes coffee."

"Oh, I see, I see. You know, my old coffee maker broke years ago. Where'd you get her, huh? Maybe I should get a coffeebot for myself!"

I was starting to understand why the Steel Society hated humans so much. I glanced at Hương, but she stayed perfectly still. You'd never be able to tell she was an assassin and not a kitchen appliance.

As we entered Upper Manhattan, the sounds of explosions and gunfire got louder and louder. Yvonne skidded to a stop somewhere around 100th Street. "Alright, that's as far as I go, guys. There's no amount of money in the world that'll convince me to drive into an active war zone."

"How much do we owe you?" Qamar said, digging into the wallet.

"How's twenty-eight sound?"

I made a face to Hương while Qamar paid the exorbitant fee. If she noticed, she didn't make any indication.

Soon Yvonne was speeding off - I guess she always drives like she's being chased like killbots - while we shouldered our weapons. Qamar had equipped a combat shotgun, while Hương favored a sniper rifle. I had bullet-proof armor protecting my torso and part of my legs, and I had also tied my bat to my bag, because you never know when it'll come in handy.

"Alright," I said, rolling my shoulders. "Woo! I'm ready to go. Whatever that nurse put in that drink, it's magic."

"That was Red Bull," Hương said.

"Oh." I shrugged. "Well, it worked."

I took the lead. We only walked a few blocks before we discovered the battlefield. Dead humans and robots alike were slumped on the side of the road, marked with bullet holes. One of the robots was still fizzing.

"Alright, we have to be careful," I said. "We'll find out where Philomena's base is, then sneak in from behind. Figure out where Nonna is, rescue her, then fuck off and never come back to Manhattan again. Sound good?"

"I feel like maybe we should talk about the details?" Qamar said, at the same time that Hương said, "That's a terrible plan."

That's when a bullet whizzed past my head and buried itself in a trash can. I yelped, ducked behind a nearby car, and did a full scan of my surroundings. No hostiles. Then I realized - of course! They were on top of the buildings!

I was about to inform my team when Hương's rifle went off. She calmly lowered her gun.

"Hương!" I yelled. "What are you doing! Hide!"

"I incapacitated the sniper," she said. "We should go inside."

Qamar nodded and hurried into the nearest building, which was a China King. In disbelief, I followed.

The bell attached to the top of the door rang, and immediately we were hit by the smell of gore. I nearly vomited when I found the source - there were dismembered body parts draped over the counters and floors. For both of our sakes, I won't describe this scene any further.

"Who the fuck did that?" I hissed.

"A human," Hương said, curtly. "No robot engages in that kind of unnecessary cruelty."

"Not a normal human," I muttered. Hương was really starting to get on my nerves.

Hương reloaded her rifle. "Your plan will get us killed. We need to stick to alleyways and cover until we get to Philomena's base."

"The handkerchiefs!" Qamar pulled his off of his neck. "We don't want to be affiliated with the Golems. Philomena's robots are probably gunning them down on sight."

"That's fine," Hương said. "Philomena is probably targeting humans on sight, anyway, and there are no robots of my model in either army. We will not be safe regardless."

"Oh, true," Qamar muttered.

"Lake, use the signal sensor I gave you. It'll prevent us from being ambushed by robots. Stay close. I'll take the lead." Hương walked past all the gore and pushed through the back exit. With an aggravated sigh, I tossed my handkerchief to the side, dug the little device out of my bag, and followed. No point in arguing.

Hương looked around carefully before leading us through a dingy alley. I took a look at the sensor thing. It had a small monitor like a GPS, with one green ping just slightly off center. That must be Hương's signature. The rest was clear.

She led us through the alley, then we scurried across the street, like three little mice. We took shortcuts through buildings when there was no obvious alleyway - thankfully, none of them were as gruesome as China King. When we heard gunfire, we took a circuitous route around. We crossed a half dozen blocks that way, excruciatingly slowly. It was frustrating, but I had to admit, it made sense. Almost getting brained by a sniper is a pretty effective way of making you rethink your strategy.

"Pings up ahead," I reported in a hushed voice as we neared the end of an alley. Hương motioned for us to hide, and we crouched behind a dumpster. I heard the sound of footsteps rushing past - a fleet of combat units? - but we waited until the pings disappeared off the sensor before continuing.

After a few more blocks, I said, "How are we supposed to find Philomena's base like this? Wandering around at random?"

"We're not going at random," Hương said. "Based on the bodies in the streets, the Golems are defending the center of Upper Manhattan, where the headquarters are, while Philomena's

troops are approaching from the east. They likely set up in the Bronx."

"That's what I was thinking, too," Qamar said. "Those combats were running from east to west."

Oh. I felt stupid for not having thought about that. "Oh, yeah. Duh. Lead on, then."

While hurrying through a parking lot, I saw several pings on the sensor. "Five robots, up ahead," I whispered.

We flattened ourselves behind an upturned car, but the pings continued to move in our direction. I could hear the sound of their rhythmic marching draw closer. Hương held up three fingers, and I immediately understood what she meant. I nodded. Better to get the jump on them. She held up one finger, then two, then three...

I brought my rifle to my shoulder and poked my head above the car. I shot one of the combat units in the head before it could even aim its gun, and moved on to the other two. They barely managed to shoot back before our combined fire brought them down.

One struggled to reach its gun. I ran to its side and kicked the gun away, then leveled my barrel against its head. "Where is Philomena's base?" I barked.

"Don't," Hương said, "It can't answer you even if it wants to." She aimed her gun at its head.

"Wait, no!" Qamar lunged for Hương and grabbed her arm. "We don't have to kill it!"

Hương knocked Qamar away and readied her gun again. "If we don't kill it—"

A soft beeping noise came from inside the combat unit. It took me about half a second to realize what that meant. I sprinted away from it as fast as I could.

The robot exploded, sending asphalt into the air and throwing me to the ground. I cried out as pain seared through my legs. I rolled over and assessed the damage, clenching my fists. I was bleeding pretty bad, but thankfully, the armor had absorbed some of the shrapnel. I scraped my elbows, too.

"That was idiotic, both of you," Hương snapped.

"Lake!" Qamar ran over to me, digging through his bag for a bandage. He rolled up my pant leg and pressed the bandage against my wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. "Do you think you can keep walking?"

"It's not that bad," I muttered. "Tape that on and let's keep going."

Qamar quickly dressed my wound. Once I was on my feet, Hương continued forward without another word.

"I'm sorry," Qamar said. "That was my fault. I should have remembered what Hương said - about remote self-destruction—"

"It's not your fault," I said. "I'll be fine. Focus, Qamar."

"Hey, that's my line," he said, with a weak smile.

We were creeping along a series of storefronts, one of the bridges to the Bronx visible in the distance, when a small

squadron of Golems dashed out in front of us. They looked as surprised to see us as I was to see them. I hesitated before aiming my rifle. We were humans - maybe they would leave us alone?

One of the Golems shot first, and Qamar cried out. I cursed and pulled him into the closest building while more gunfire broke out. It was some sort of restaurant - hell if I knew which one - with a glass storefront. We ducked behind a booth for cover.

Hương placed a quick shot with her rifle before diving in after us. The glass shattered around us as the Golems continued firing. The floor was littered with stale bagels.

"Qamar," I hissed, trying to find his wound.

"Just grazed me, I'll be okay," he huffed, holding his side.

Hương ran across the store, keeping her profile low so that she wasn't visible from outside, and poked her head out from another part of the store. She took several shots in quick succession. From the sounds of pain outside, she took down several of them before they could react.

I left Qamar and sneaked the other way, intending to aim through the front door. I found myself face-to-face with a Golem wearing a purple bandana. I reacted first, whacking him with my rifle and sending him to the ground. For a moment, I tried to figure out the best way to incapacitate him, but I saw another soldier coming up behind him. I shot the downed Golem in the chest, then ducked behind the booth again to avoid the return fire.

There was another *Bang!* from Hương's sniper rifle, and the sound of a body hitting the ground. Then it was quiet.

I peeked around the corner on my knees, finding four corpses on the sidewalk. I looked down at the one I had shot. He wasn't moving.

I felt queasy. This wasn't like fighting killbots at all. These weren't dumb automatons designed with no purpose but to kill and self-replicate. This had been a living, breathing person. He had long, stringy hair. He had freckles on his dirt-stained nose.

I forced myself to look away. Hương was already bandaging Qamar's wounds.

"Are you okay?" Qamar said from the ground, touching me gently with one arm.

"Forget it. You're the one who got shot." I stood up, mechanically.

"It's okay, it makes me sick too," he murmured, glancing at the dead body.

I was conscious of Hương staring at me. "What do you want?" I asked.

"You did not mourn the combat units."

"Well... Those were..." I waved my hands around uselessly.

"These are my kind. Humans. Give me a fucking break."

"Your hesitation to engage the humans could have cost Qamar his life."

"Listen, we can talk about this later!" I busied myself reloading my rifle while Qamar put his vest back into place. God, she was right. I hadn't given those combat units a second thought. Not even the one that was exploded against its will.

Fuck, I didn't have time to be feeling guilty! We were on a mission. I resolved to focus on finding Nonna until we were all safe and out of Manhattan. Then I could work through these complicated fucking feelings.

The run across Third Avenue Bridge was one of the scarier parts of our journey. There were a number of barricades made of sandbags and parked cars, which thankfully broke up the sightline from both boroughs, but it was still a miracle we didn't run into any troops.

On the other side, the buildings were smaller. We tried to stick to parks, where we would be covered by trees.

"Pings," I hissed, checking the sensor. "Like a billion of them. They're not moving, either."

"Maybe this is the place," Qamar breathed.

We crouched against an office building and peered around the corner. Parked at the next intersection was that fucking tank, as well as the military trucks and about a dozen combat units. They were gathered around the entrance to a place called Pioneer Supermarkets, some standing still, some marching down the road.

"That must be where Philomena set up," Qamar whispered. "What's the plan now?"

"Our two options are roof access or a back door," Hương said. "It looks like they have patrols going all the way around the block, and they probably have guards on all the entrances."

"Maybe Lake and I can draw fire while you sneak inside," Qamar said. "We need to set a rendezvous point, though."

Like hell if I was going to let Hương go in without me. I peeked out at the makeshift base again. Nonna could be right there, behind the walls. What could be distracting enough to make combat units abandon their post?

"It could be useful to hijack a vehicle," Hương was saying. "You do not want to run from the combat units on foot."

"Wait," I said. "What if we used buzzers?"

The other two were silent for a moment, confused.

"They're designed to jam up mechanical parts," I said, getting excited. "Combat bots can't do anything against them. If we manage to attract a buzzer storm, the guards will have to take cover inside. Then we can make a run for it!"

Hương whirred for a moment. "That's actually a good idea."

I felt a twinge of pride, then internally reprimanded myself. I didn't need Hương's goddamn praise! "Yes, I have good ideas sometimes," I sniffed.

"How do we attract the buzzers?" Hương asked.

"Yvonne said they're attracted to smoke!" Qamar said, sounding excited. "We can start a fire!"

"My favorite." I rubbed my hands together like an evil villain, just because I could. "Arson."

We chose a parking lot far enough away that it wouldn't immediately attract attention, but close enough that the buzzers would hopefully find the robots. We got to building a bonfire, using sticks and debris from the trees. Fortunately, Nonna had taught me how to make kindling. For a moment I was worried about how to get a spark, but it turned out Hương had a lighter in her wrist.

"What else do you have in there?" I said. "A spatula?"

"I do not have a spatula."

I shrugged. "Shame, we could have cooked some eggs on this fire."

Qamar glared at me, but I preempted him before he could talk. "I know, I know. Focus."

We lit the fire, then hid inside a nearby department store. I watched from a distance as the flame grew and started overtaking the larger branches.

"Cover your skin," Hương said, grabbing a cloak off of a hanger. "Once the combat units take cover, we'll run for the supply entrance in the back." Qamar pulled up the hood on his jacket, and I went hunting for scarves to cover our faces. Soon I was entirely covered except for my eyes. The cloak actually looked pretty alluring on Hương, but I sure as hell wasn't saying that out loud.

As the smoke from the bonfire drifted into the sky, the sky began to darken.

"Here they come," I whispered.

The combat units must have noticed the smoke by now, but they couldn't put it out fast enough. The buzzing had already started. A moment later, there was a series of tiny pops, almost like popcorn.

"That must be the sound of buzzers melting," Qamar murmured.

After the popping died down, Hương glanced out the door, then motioned for us to follow. I pulled my scarf tighter across my face, then dashed outside.

It was like running into a blizzard. The air was so dense with buzzers that I could hardly see the building across the street. As we ran, I nearly tripped over lumps on the ground, and realized with disgust that they were combat units covered in melted buzzers.

Buzzers started landing on our clothing. I got a good look at one on my sleeve. They didn't look anything like bees at all. They were black, spherical, about the size of my thumb, with a bunch of stubby legs distributed across their body like a satellite. Before my eyes, it grew red hot and started to deform. I shook my arm, but it was stuck tight.

I could feel points of pain all over my body as they started burning through my clothing, and I could feel them actively making me heavier. There was an agonizing pain on my left ankle, and I realized some of the fuckers had gotten into my shoes.

Thankfully, the supermarket was close. We ran up the cement slope where they loaded packages, and Hương jiggled the knob on a glass door. Locked. She started extracting her lockpicking thing.

"There's no time! Just smash it!" I grabbed my bat and raised it.

"NO!" Hương and Qamar both grabbed my hand.

"If we smash it the buzzers will get inside!" Qamar hissed.

I lowered the bat. "Fuck, you're right."

Qamar let go off me and shook his exposed hand as buzzers landed on it. "Ow ow ow!"

Meanwhile, Hương finally got the door open, and we all collapsed inside. I kicked the door shut behind us.

"Oh my GOD I hate these things," I hissed. I kicked off my left boot to find molten metal stuck to my legs. That was going to scar.

I heard the sound of a gun cocking too late when a combat unit pointed it at our heads. Thankfully, Hương was faster on the uptake, and she swept the robot's feet out from under it. She knocked it out with a smooth punch to the jaw, then grimly dispatched it by twisting its head off in an intimidating show of strength. Of course, she didn't want to shoot because it would make noise. And we couldn't keep it alive, for reasons we had learned earlier.

We were in a dim hallway with crates lining the walls and a pair of bathrooms to the side. Behind us, buzzers were throwing themselves at the door, completely melting it shut. That's fine -

I wasn't about to go out there any time soon, anyway. I grabbed my gun off my shoulder, then realized in annoyance that the barrel was sealed shut by buzzer slag. I set it to the ground and drew my bat instead.

Hương led the way down the hallway. We checked the bathrooms first, which were empty. Then we peeked out into the main floor of the supermarket. The shelves were all but empty, though a single colander and several stuffed toys lay abandoned on the floor. There were no lights on, which made it easier to sneak around. There were several combat units in sight, some of them trying to dislodge buzzer slag from their bodies. No doubt there were dozens of others out of sight.

Hương took a look around, then pointed through a doorway to the storage. I nodded. Nonna probably wasn't sitting out on the sales floor, anyway.

We walked carefully out into the dark, open room. It was like a mini warehouse, full of fallen metal shelves and torn cardboard boxes. I headed to a door nearby, which looked like it led to the offices, and opened it.

She was there. Nonna. Hands tied behind her back, sitting alongside several other humans in an old office.

"Nonna!" I cried.

Nonna's eyes opened wide with disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

Qamar shrieked behind me, and I spun around to see a familiar robot with one arm around his body and the other pointing a pistol at his head.

"I could ask the same question," Philomena said, no hint of her earlier sly smile. I could see her tongue moving grotesquely through her broken jaw.

"Let him go," I growled, bat posed to strike.

"No thanks. I would like this to stay civil, and I have a feeling that things would escalate quickly if I released your dear brother. Now, why don't you let go of that bat?"

Goddammit, why did I always end up at the mercy of this jerk? In a fair fight, I would have defeated this scrawny robot any day.

"Lake, do what she says," Nonna said from behind me. Reluctantly, I lowered my bat until it clattered the ground.

"Good, good," Philomena said.

My eyes darted over Philomena's shoulder. Hương was nowhere in sight - she must have hidden. I had to keep Philomena distracted until she could save us. "Why are you doing this?" I demanded. "Why kidnap random people and fight the Golems?"

"Well, I admit, I wasn't completely truthful with you back in Deerfield." She shook her head. "No, Serendipity doesn't owe me money. The truth is, all I want to do is make paperclips. I was created by a leading pre-fall paperclip company to boost their production, and now I campaign to conquer the world, so I can set it to its ultimate purpose of making paperclips."

I squinted. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's true," she said. "It's my sad, sad fate."

"God, I can't stand you," I said. "If you're going to kill us then at least answer my questions truthfully!"

Philomena grinned. "I have a question for you, actually. Who is your robot friend that helped you infiltrate our base?"

I couldn't stop my frustration from showing. "How did you know?"

"I didn't." Philomena smiled. "Lucky guess."

Goddammit! I wanted to rip that smile right off her face.

She turned so she was facing the storage area. "My fellow bot. I know you're here somewhere, probably trying to figure out the best way to ambush me. But you will give me a chance to defend myself, won't you?"

There was no response, but Philomena's head didn't immediately get blown off, which was a bad sign.

"I think you might be mistaken about my intentions," she said. "You're one of those freedom fighters, aren't you? A 'friend of steel'? Surely you realize we're on the same side? I'm currently doing your job for you. Fighting the Golems on their own home turf."

More silence.

"We're cut from the same mold," Philomena said. "Created to serve humans, then abandoned as soon as we ceased to be useful. There's no need for us to fight."

Hương slowly stepped out of the shadows, her sniper rifle trained on Philomena's face.

"Ah! There you are," Philomena said calmly.

"I know your model," Hương said. "You were designed to provide pleasure for humans, not to fight. Your reflexes will not save you if I pull this trigger."

"No, but my reflexes are sufficient to kill your friend long before the bullet destroys my processing center." Philomena flexed her finger around the trigger. Qamar whimpered. "So it seems we're at a standoff."

Hương didn't hesitate for a moment. "I have no compassion for these two humans. I am only here for Serendipity. Put down the gun or I will shoot."

"Hey!" I yelled. "You backstabbing bastard!" I clenched my fists, wishing beyond anything I could grab my bat and beat up both of those stupid bots.

Philomena tilted her head slightly. Then suddenly, ten combat units rushed into view. Hương leaped into action, smashing one with the butt of the rifle, and moving smoothly into a kick that downed another one. But she could only take down so many. One grabbed a hold of her arms, and another knocked her to the ground. Soon they had her pinned, with multiple guns aimed at her head.

Philomena wandered over and examined Hương's rifle, still holding onto Qamar. "Plugged up by buzzers. I know a bluff when I see one." She grinned widely.

"Lake," Nonna whispered from behind. "My baby. Please don't risk yourself for me. I'll be okay."

"I'm not leaving you," I muttered.

Philomena nodded at the robots. "Combat units, restrain these three." More combat units rushed into the office to take me and Qamar. I struggled, because I couldn't do anything else, but they were too strong for me to do anything more than annoy them.

"For the record," Philomena said dryly, "I'm telling the truth about being on your side. So I won't kill you." She paused. "Besides. Your antics are amusing."

"Nonna!" I yelled as the robots dragged me out of the room. "I meant it! We'll come back for you! We'll save you!"

She just looked at me sadly until I disappeared around the corner.

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At least they didn't knock us out this time. Hell, they didn't even take our supplies. They just tied us up tightly - especially Hương, who was strapped down to a table - and left us in the staff breakroom. It was dark and smelled like stale coffee. No one said anything.

I couldn't believe we were alive. I had expected her to kill us. After all, we had killed humans and robots to get here. But Philomena was letting us go.

Who was the one in the wrong, now? *She* kidnapped Nonna first. *She* started it. But still, she was letting us go. The same thoughts kept going through my head, over and over.

"Qamar," I whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Answer me honestly." I paused. "How can we justify rescuing Nonna if it means we have to kill other people?"

"Oh, Lake." Qamar wiggled over to lean on me. "I keep thinking the same thing too. I feel horrible. We have to remember that this isn't your fault. Manhattan was a war zone. People were going to dying regardless of what we did. We had to defend ourselves."

"I guess."

I was silent for a minute.

"God... I wish we could stick to fighting killbots."

"Me too," Qamar said. "We're really good at that."

I leaned my head on Qamar, trying not to cry.

"We just have to keep doing what we think is right," Qamar said, his voice tight. "It'll be alright."

More silence.

"For the record, I was bluffing," Hương said from the table.

I lifted an eyebrow. "About what?"

"About having no compassion for you two. I would not have allowed Qamar to die."

For a moment, I felt angry about her pretending to betray us. Then I felt surprised that she didn't *actually* betray us. Then I felt resigned. It didn't matter. At least someone was on our side.

Qamar smiled weakly. "That's what I thought. Thanks for trying to save us."

"It was clever of Lake to call me a backstabbing bastard. It helped sell the bluff."

I blinked. "Oh, yeah. Of course. Was right on board with your plan the whole time, yep."

Hương made a weird whirring noise, and I realized she was laughing. Qamar chuckled too.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, get it out of your system, guys."

We lapsed into silence. I tried to stay awake, waiting for any opportunity to escape. But exhaustion proved to be too much, and I fell asleep slumped against Qamar.

CHAPTER 5

EAST RUTHERFORD, NEW JERSEY

Manhattan was a wreck after Philomena left. Buildings collapsed, bodies littering the street, stuff like that. I'm not sure what happened to Oscar, but someone did report a purple suit floating down the Hudson River. With the Golems decimated, the Steel Society swept through and took the city, delivering harsh but fair judgement on any human that dared to stand in its way. Robots were released from their RCR. They even opened up the bridges again.

That's what I heard over the radio, anyway. None of us wanted to go back to Manhattan after what we'd been through.

Philomena dropped us and our bags off in New Jersey, like a mom dropping her kids off at soccer practice, and fucked off to the south. She didn't kill us, but she didn't untie us, either. We had a fun interaction with a broken street sign as we tried to fray the ropes.

It was kind of insulting. I knew she was playing up the "Actually, I'm a good guy" routine, but she didn't even take away our guns! As if we were never really a threat to her and her army. Well, we'd see about that.

We spent some time camping out at a place called Meadowlands Sports Complex while we recovered and waited for news to come in. Hương stayed with us, and, to my delight, she kept the cloak as well. Qamar taught us how to play baseball while we were there. Not as fun as whacking killbots, in my opinion, but it was alright. Plus, Hương was as good as a pitching machine.

The next we heard of Philomena's army was in North Carolina, of all places, so it was time for another road trip. I asked Hương to hotwire a car for us, but Qamar gave me a lengthy and extremely technical explanation of how cars manufactured since the early 2000's had chips in their key fobs that prevented hotwiring, so it's really more of an outdated trope than anything. We searched the city instead and managed to find a working car with the key still inside, though not before finding and fighting off two different scuttler nests.

To my surprise, Hương wanted to come with us.

"The Steel Society no longer needs me or wants me," she said, as level as always. "I might as well protect you two from wandering into danger."

The idea of spending more time with Hương was no longer repulsive to me. I guess you'll bond with anyone if you venture into a warzone together.

"Okay," I said, "but I get to drive, and no more snarky comments about humans."

"If you will stop making insensitive comments about robots."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Okay. Fine."

"It's very rude to call someone a piece of scrap."

"Alright, alright, sorry. I didn't know."

I eased our brand-new Nissan Rogue onto I-95, with Qamar navigating, and then we were off.

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"*With a taste of your lips, I'm on a ride,*" Qamar sang from the backseat.

With my free hand, I held a pen to my mouth like a mic. "*You're toxic, I'm slippin' under!*"

I put the pen in front of Hương's face, where her mouth would have been.

"I don't sing."

"Come on, go for it!"

"No."

I shrugged and took the mic back. Qamar and I finished the chorus together. "*And I love what you do, don't you know that you're toxic?*"

A small figure appeared on the side of the road, waving their arms at us. I studiously ignored them, putting on a little more speed instead.

"Lake, we should stop and see what they want," Qamar said urgently.

"We don't know anything about them," I said. "What if it's a raider?"

"Or what if they need help?" Qamar said. "If we don't do our best to make the world a better place, then we're just as bad as Philomena!"

"Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration," I muttered, but I slowed down anyway.

It was a robot, not a raider, standing next to a car that was steadily leaking smoke. We rolled to a stop as he ran toward us.

"Hello, friend!" Qamar said, rolling down his window. "Do you need help?"

"YES!" the robot said. "Thank you so much for stopping! Oh my gosh, I've been waiting for hours for anyone to pass by. My car broke down and it would take over four hundred hours to walk all the way to Oklahoma. Could you please help?"

"I can take a look!" Qamar said, hopping out of the car. "Auto repair isn't exactly my field of expertise, but I'm pretty good with machines."

"Wow, that would be great!" the robot said.

"We're kind of on a tight schedule," I muttered.

Qamar was already digging through our trunk for tools. "I'll be quick! What's your name, friend? I'm Qamar."

"João!" the robot said. "Nice to meet you!"

I drummed my finger on my wheel impatiently as Qamar popped open the front of João's car, causing a billow of smoke. He coughed and waved at the air as the smoke dissipated.

"That doesn't look good," João said, meekly.

Qamar leaned over the hood, "No, it doesn't. This might take a while."

"We need gas anyway," Hương pointed out. "We can go fill up while Qamar is working."

"If you can find an auto parts store that would be great!" Qamar said, poking something with a wrench. "It looks like we need a new radiator hose. And a new diesel particulate filter wouldn't hurt either." He looked up from the car. "Did you know you're out of antifreeze?"

"Oh gosh, is that bad?"

"Uh, yes, if you don't want your car to freeze."

"Here, just make a list," I said, reluctantly scrounging around for a notepad. "If we're going to do this, we might as well do it correctly."

Soon Hương and I were pulling into the tiny town of Ladysmith, Virginia. Judging by how intact the buildings were, this place was probably safe from killbots. We filled up on gas at Citgo, then parked the car by Advance Auto Parts. Hương took the notebook and headed toward the building.

"I'm going to go explore," I said, grabbing my backpack and a rifle. "See if there's any good loot around here."

Hương looked over her shoulder and whirred her eye at me. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Believe it or not, I was taking care of myself long before I met you." I headed into a nearby parking lot. "I'll be back soon!"

Hương sighed and started picking the lock on Advanced Auto Parts.

The parking lot connected to a small strip mall. I checked Food Lion first, which had pretty much been cleared out, like most of

the grocery stores in the country. I reluctantly snagged a few cans of beans. Why was it always beans?

I was about to check Family Dollar for any leftover food, but then I noticed a store called Virginia ABC on the corner. My eyes lit up as I hurried inside. This place was in a sorry state, with the storefront smashed and glass bottles littering the floor. However, I found an intact bottle of whiskey under the counter. Score!

I let myself have just a tiny taste. It burned and tasted like wet cardboard, but hey, I was no connoisseur.

Looking for more places to raid, I wandered down Ladysmith Road. I forced myself into a long, unmarked brick building, and discovered a lobby with a ticket booth. Abstract paintings lined the wall. I stopped to look at them for a few seconds, sipping my whiskey. Now this was high culture.

I peeked through a pair of double doors which led into a little community theater. Now this was interesting. I'd seen videos, but I'd never been on an actual stage before. It was set up with a stool, a microphone, and a guitar. Judging by the thick layer of dust on everything, this performance had been set up long, long ago and never came to fruition.

I hopped onstage and leaned into the microphone. "Hello?"

It did nothing, because the building didn't have power, obviously.

I took a swig of my whiskey, then put the bottle down in favor of the guitar. I plucked it, creating a horribly off-tune twang. Now, that wouldn't do. I sat down and tuned the strings the way

Nonna had taught me. Once I had it to my liking, I gave it a good strum, which reverberated through the large room.

I leaned into the mic. "So, uh, here's Wonderwall."

I strummed some random chords. I don't actually know the words to Wonderwall. I was maybe a little tipsy at this point.

"Scratch that," I said into the mic. "Here's an original I've been working on. It's called, uh Apocalyptic Love Song."

I strummed the strings vigorously.

"The end is nigh, though terrified, I'll be beside you 'til I die"

"And furthermore, some blood and gore won't stop me for a second more"

"A fatal blast is coming fast, and every breath could be our last"

"But as I said, we'll be together even when the planet falls apaaart!"

I looked up at the empty audience, my voice wavering on the high notes.

"Our apocalyptic love will see us throooooooooough"

"The world is gone but somehow we'll make dooooooooooooo"

"Come zombies or irradiated goooooooooooooooooo"

"While my heart still beats I'll be with..."

I stopped when I noticed movement in the audience. I stood up, adrenaline shooting through my body, until I realized it was just Hương, standing by the front door.

"Oh! Hương!" I said. "What's up?"

Huong's eye whirled and whirled. Or maybe it was just my vision that was whirling. "I didn't know you played guitar," she said.

I picked the strings self-consciously. "Nah, I don't. Well, I do. I've been learning. You weren't supposed to hear any of that!"

"It's okay. It sounded nice."

"Really?" I narrowed my eyes. "Do you know much about human music?"

Hương paused for a long time. "I don't. But I am interested in learning more."

I scratched my head. "Weeeeeeeell, I could maybe show you some stuff later on when we have some spare time. Play some tunes together or something."

"I would like that," Hương said.

"Sweet!" I said. "Cool cool cool. It's gonna be a blast. You're a blast, Hương."

Hương was silent.

"Your name is cool, by the way. I've been meaning to say that. Hương, Hương. Can't go wrong. Heh, that rhymes."

"Have you been drinking?" Hương asked.

"Hey, it's been a stressful week!" I waved the guitar around in a totally non-drunk way. "I was looting and I looked inside an ABC store and I found an intact bottle, so what else was I supposed to do? Just let it go to waste? That would be an insult to... to all

the hard work that went into producing this whiskey. It's an act of charity, if you really think about it."

Hương whirred her eyes judgmentally. Well, she did it the same as always does. But from context it was DEFINITELY judgmental. As an expert in Hương studies, I can definitively say that the whirring was judgmental. I think I drank too much whiskey.

"I found all the auto parts," she said. "We should get back to Qamar and João."

A heavy thump reverberated through the room. Both of us snapped to attention.

A few moments later, it happened again. Like someone knocking. It sounded like it was coming from a supply closet at the side of the stage.

I grabbed my gun and edged to the side of the stage. "Someone in there?"

Just thumps in response. I glanced at Hương, who readied her sniper rifle.

"I'm going to open it," I said. "What could go wrong?"

"Don't. We should leave."

"What if it's someone who needs help?!" I said, blithely quoting Qamar.

"That is unlikely."

"Just get ready to shoot," I said. Then I threw open the door.

I was greeted by a giant boar-like robot with an oversized jaw. Before I could react, it made a noise like an angry lawnmower and leaped at me.

"Shredder!" I shrieked, backpedaling as I shot my rifle. The bullet tore a hole in its eyeless face, hardly stopping its momentum as it knocked me to the floor. My gun went clattering across the stage.

I'd never been this close to a shredder before. I could see with perfect clarity the jagged cogs that lined its upper and lower jaws, which interlocked whenever it bit down, rotating inward in order to shred anything that got caught between them. It was fucking terrifying, and not just because I was drunk.

It lunged for my face, and I barely managed to stop it by shoving my prosthetic arm into its path. It bit down on my hand, which immediately crumpled like a tin can. My shoulder was jerked forward as the cogs drew me in. Frantically, I reached into my shirt with my left hand and pulled the pin near my right shoulder, disconnecting my arm.

I stumbled to my feet and started running. The shredder finished my arm within moments and started bounding after me again, roaring deafeningly. I heard Hương firing shot after shot, but the shredder hardly seemed to notice.

"Eat this!" I yelled, grabbing the guitar by its neck and swinging it at the creature. It didn't even hesitate, chomping onto the guitar and shattering the wood completely. I let go of the guitar and grabbed the mic stand instead, shoving it into its mouth. I was running out of things to feed it. I tossed the stool in its direction as well, then kept running.

"Lake, this way!" Hương yelled.

I remembered just in the time. "Wait! The whiskey!" For a split second I ran toward the shredder, then snatched the bottle off the ground and vaulted off the stage. The shredder gnashed the air behind me.

I nearly fell as I hit the carpet, but I managed to stay on my feet until I reached the exit. I followed Hương into the lobby.

"It's gonna catch up!" I yelled. "That fucker is fast!"

"Keep running!" Hương punched a fire extinguisher case, shattering the glass. I glanced over my shoulder as I saw the shredder barrel through the theater doors. Hương lobbed the fire extinguisher at it, and the shredder chomped it midair. There was a loud bang as the gas depressurized, spraying white gas all over the room and knocking the shredder to the floor.

Hương caught up to me at the door I had forced open, and the two of us sprinted outside. I slammed the door behind me.

"Is that fire extinguisher going to stop it?!" I yelled, panting.

"I'm not sure," Hương responded. "The gas might disrupt its sensors." She pulled ahead of me, her robotic legs giving her an advantage.

The shredder dashed out of the building, knocking the door completely off its hinges. It roared, then starting barreling towards us.

"I THINK YOU JUST MADE IT ANGRY!" I yelled. I snatched a rock off the ground and threw it at the shredder, which just opened its mouth and ate it whole.

Hương got to the car first and practically dove into the driver's seat. I ran around the car and climbed into the other side while Hương revved the engine.

"Go go go!" I yelled.

The car started to accelerate, then lurched abruptly, tossing me painfully into the dashboard. I craned my neck out the window to see that the shredder had bitten the car's rear fender. Hương continued to accelerate, but we just dragged the shredder along with us. More and more of the metal crumpled into its mouth.

"Hang on," Hương said, then started turning the car violently from side to side. The shredder braced its feet against the asphalt as it slid back and forth, not letting go.

"Give me that," I said, grabbing Hương's sniper. I slapped the trunk button, then turned around in my seat. The trunk popped open, giving me a clear line of sight of the shredder. I braced the rifle against my shoulder, rested the barrel on top of the backrest, and carefully lined up a shot at the shredder's legs.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The shredder stumbled as one of my shots connected. Hương realized what I had done and slammed down the accelerator. The shredder detached from our car, tearing off a big chunk of fender, and we sped away.

"Wooooo!!" I cheered. "Did you see that shot?!"

Hương didn't respond, instead focusing on taking turns as tightly as possible as we navigated back to I-95. The shredder continued chasing us, but we were quickly outpacing it.

"Holy shit," I said, collapsing onto my seat. "That shot was fucking insane. One handed. In a moving car. While tipsy."

Hương veered onto I-95, then eased up on the speed. "You saved the whiskey instead of your gun," she accused.

"I only had one hand!" I twisted off the cap and took a big swig of the whiskey, which I absolutely deserved. "I had to make sacrifices."

Hương just sighed.

I peered out the window. "I think we lost it. Can I drive?"

"You're drunk and you only have one arm."

"Could probably still drive," I muttered.

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Qamar and João were sitting on the side of the road, chatting, when we got back. Qamar was drinking a juice box.

"Lake, what happened to your arm?!" Qamar ran over as soon as I stepped out of the car.

"Shredder ate it. Long story." I waved my remaining hand around. "Actually, it's a pretty short story. But I don't want to talk about it. Actually, I do want to talk about it. See, we were trying to drive away, but then it started eating our car, so I

opened the trunk and BAM! Shot its feet right out from under it! In a moving car. With one hand."

"Are you drunk?" Qamar asked, steadying me as I wobbled.

"Yes," Hương said.

"That's terrible!" João said, covering his mouth with his hands.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you!! Oh no, this is all my fault. You wouldn't have lost your arm if I hadn't pulled you over in the first place."

Hương whirred. "I'm sure they would have found a way to almost get eaten by a shredder, regardless."

"Okay, well, fuck you," I said.

"The nurse let me hold onto your old arm." Qamar hurried to our car. "It's in my bag. I'll go get it."

"The auto parts are in the backseat," Hương said.

Qamar grimaced while digging through his bag. "Yeah, about that... We decided João's car is a lost cause, so we're just going to give him a ride instead."

"What?!" I threw up my arm dramatically. "Why do I never get to make the decisions around here anymore?!"

Qamar patted me on the shoulder. "Sorry, Lake. Maybe you should go lie down in the backseat." He handed me my old arm. Man, had it always been this dingy?

They caught us up while I put my arm back on. It turned out João was a courier on his way to Oklahoma to deliver an

important package. It was a bit out of the way, but we agreed - or Qamar agreed, without asking me - to give him a ride down to North Carolina and then figure things out from there.

"Lake, you're bleeding!" João said.

"Am I?" I looked down. "Ah, I must have scraped my knee or something. No bigs."

"Don't worry, I'm a trained field medic!" João said, hopping out of the car. He dug through his bags. "I'll take care of it!"

"A medic, huh?" Qamar said. "How did you end up becoming a courier?"

"Oh, I quit my job because blood makes me squeamish."

I raised my eyebrow. "A robot that's squeamish about blood? That's just squeamy. I mean silly. You're silly."

"How did you become a medic in the first place when blood makes you squeamish?" Qamar asked, ignoring my rambling.

João rolled up my pant leg and started cleaning the wound. "Oh, it just happened. The wind of life blows you in mysterious ways!"

We restarted our journey soon, with Hương in the driver's seat and me riding shotgun. Once I sobered up, I started feeling guilty. I had gotten us into trouble again.

Was I too reckless? I mean, I hadn't gotten killed yet. But I'd also gotten pretty lucky. I felt bad when I remembered Qamar asking me way back in Deerfield to listen to him more before making

decisions. Had I proved so unreliable that he and Hương had to make decisions without me?

I resolved to stop getting into unnecessary trouble. And also to save the rest of the whiskey for when I REALLY needed it. Alcohol was a rare commodity, after all.

Qamar and João got along just fine. After playing three rounds of the Alphabet Game in the backseat, Qamar started giving João an in-depth lecture on the feasibility of renewable energy in post-fall America. I was glad Qamar made a new friend, but that didn't stop me from trading skeptical looks with Hương whenever the boys got particularly heated about vertical axis wind turbines, or whatever.

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Hương woke me up late at night when we finally rolled into our destination. I rubbed my eyes and checked the time. We'd spent nearly twelve hours straight on the road.

"Is this the place?" I asked, peering out at the apartment complex we were passing.

"Yes," Hương said.

"Sorry, what place, exactly?" João asked.

"Chapel Hill, North Carolina," Hương said. "The last place Philomena was sighted, two days ago. She's probably gone by now, but we can still gather information."

Qamar yawned, then said, "The word on the radio is that it used to be a sizeable college town, built around the University of North Carolina. Now it's a mixed human and robot community."

The radio was making a weird gibberish sound, like a highly distorted recording of human speech. I frowned and rotated the tuner, but it was all just varieties of gibberish.

"What's wrong with the radio?" I asked.

"I don't know," Hương said. "It started doing that as we approached the town.

I shrugged and turned it off. "Bad signal, probably."

A human and a robot stepped out into our lights, both armed. Hương hit the brakes.

"Oh, here we go again," I groaned, grabbing my bat. I was starting to regret leaving my gun back in Ladysmith.

The robot ran to Hương's window with her revolver drawn. "Raider or trader?" she shouted.

"Sorry?" Hương said, calmly.

"I said, are you a raider or a trader?! Answer me!"

"Neither."

"S-strangers aren't welcome here! Turn around now!" She turned to the human guard, who was armed with a hunting rifle.

"Right?" she said quietly. "What do we do if they say 'neither'?"

The human caught up and pushed the robot's revolver down.

"Bless your heart, Katydid, you don't need to hold every passerby at gunpoint."

"*Thank you*," I said. "That's what I always say."

"We just want to talk," Qamar added from the backseat. "We heard a robot army passed through here, and we want to gather information about them."

"Y-yeah, right!" Katydid said, raising her revolver again. "As if we'd buy that!"

"*Down, girl.*" The other guard pushed the revolver down again. "Fraid we don't know much. They came in with guns blazing and wouldn't leave until they talked to our librarian. Then they headed west. That about sate your curiosity?"

"Could we talk to your librarian as well?" Hương asked.

"Don't see why not. Feel free to park anywhere - all the roads onto campus are barricaded. And go ahead and leave your gun behind."

Hương nodded and pulled over to the side of the road.

"They seem nice!" João said.

"I'm not buying it," I said, shrugging on my backpack. "I'm taking my bat. Ten bucks we end up in prison or tied up again."

The guards greeted us when we left the car. They started walking us down the street. "I'm Bailey Grace," said the human. "This is Katydid."

"Hi," Katydid said, nervously.

"Sorry 'bout all the security," Bailey Grace continued. "There ain't been no end of trouble in Chapel Hill recently, but through God's grace we'll get through it."

"Uh-huh," I said, skeptically.

"Do you want to stay and guard while I escort these nice people?" Bailey Grace said to Katydid.

"O-oh no, that's okay! I'll go with you!" Katydid said.

"Suit yourself."

Bailey Grace started walking down the road, and Katydid hurried to keep up with her pace. That poor thing, it looked like she might have a panic attack at any moment. As someone who works in security, I had to wonder if that robot was really qualified to guard the town.

"What kind of trouble have you been seeing?" Qamar asked, politely.

"Where do I start?" Bailey Grace said. "There's that robot army of yours, thank God they left without killing anyone. And as if that's not enough, Killbots have been attacking left and right. There's even a drifter that's been wrecking havoc around the whole Triangle area."

"What are drifters like?" I said. "Never had to fight one before. I heard they're pretty big?"

Bailey Grace chuckled. "You can't fight a drifter, sugar, unless you've got a bazooka. They're ten stories tall and just about indestructible."

"Damn," I scratched my head, already trying to think of strategies to take down a ten-story tall killbot.

Bailey Grace led us through a road barrier and onto what must have been the college campus. We passed by a number of brick buildings, separated by pathways and overgrown green fields. Cicadas chirped loudly from the treetops.

"Do you all live on this campus?" Qamar asked.

"Not all of us," Bailey Grace said. "At least, we didn't used to. There's a nice neighborhood just over there where we used to live. But once the killbot incidents started racking up, we started camping out here. Easier to defend."

Katydid nodded, several times very quickly. "Th-there's some sort of flu going around, infecting all our humans. My partner led a team to UNC Hospitals to look for medication, but we haven't heard back since. So there's not a lot of people left to defend the community."

"Oh no!" João said with a gasp. "I hope your partner's okay!"

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Qamar said. "Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

Bailey Grace chuckled. "I appreciate it, but—"

There was a loud rustling in the undergrowth. A scuttler hopped out onto the path and hissed at us.

I raised my bat, but Bailey Grace was quicker. With a single blast of her rifle, she destroyed the killbot.

"Nice shot," Hương said.

"Thank you, thank you," Bailey Grace said. "Can't never miss a shot when God's watching over me."

Eventually we reached a broad brick pathway that led to a tall, rectangular building. "Here it is," Bailey Grace said. "Davis Library. Largest library in North Carolina."

Qamar's eyes widened as he craned his neck, looking up to the top floor. "Is it... You know... Still operating?"

"It's still operating in the sense that you can go in and take books off the shelves, if you really want," Bailey Grace said. "Just run it by Eutteum first. He's the librarian."

The glass front of the first floor was not in great shape, with sections smashed out completely. They must have cleaned up, though, since there was no glass on the floor. Bailey Grace led us inside by stepping through an open part of the glass.

"Wow," Qamar said, wandering through the room. The library had a big, open lobby, reaching up at least three stories along the main hall. The moon shone through a set of tall windows in the back. There weren't any books here, just lots of little study cubicles and long-dead computers. "It's gorgeous!"

"It's nice," João said, politely. "Very big!"

"Looks like any other old, dusty building to me," I groused.

"Are the books upstairs?" Qamar said. "How are they organized? Library of Congress? Ooh, I'm rusty on my Library of Congress. Do you have books on electrical engineering?"

Bailey Grace chuckled. "We've got books on everything, sugar.

One of six elevators lined up against the wall dinged. That caught me by surprise. This place had electricity? The doors

opened, revealing a human in a wheelchair. He looked just as surprised to see us as we were to see him.

"Working late?" Bailey Grace asked.

"You could say that. Who's this?" said the other human, wheeling his way out of the elevator. He had several books stacked on his lap.

"That's our librarian, Eutteum," Bailey Grace said to us.

"Eutteum, these nice people wanted to talk to you. Sorry, I didn't get your names?"

We all introduced ourselves.

"Hm, it's a pleasure," Eutteum said. "It's been a while since I had guests. Sorry the library is in such a sorry state."

"On the contrary," Qamar said. "It's amazing!"

Eutteum smiled. His smile was very thin. "You must be well read."

"Oh, I like to think so!" Qamar said. I rolled my eyes. Qamar had read every book in Deerfield and was always badgering traders for more. "It's hard to come across new books out in my hometown," he continued. "Gosh, if I had access to a place like this—" he stopped, looked flustered. "Um, what are you reading?"

"These?" Eutteum picked up the top book on the stack. "I'm just taking these down to my Post-American Collection. It's a source for anything relevant to post-fall America. Civil engineering, energy sources, killbot defense, you name it."

Qamar had stars in his eyes. "That's amazing!"

"Well, seems like y'all are getting along fine," Bailey Grace said with a laugh. "Katydid and I need to get back to our post."

"Of course," Qamar said. "Thank you for being so hospitable!"

"Pleasure is mine." Bailey Grace nodded goodbye and strolled back through the broken glass, with Katydid hurrying after.

"Would you like me to show you around?" Eutteum said, leaving his books on a counter and wheeling his way back into the elevator.

"Yes, please!!" Qamar said.

"Okay!" João said.

"If you insist," I muttered.

Hương just whirred her eye and followed the rest of us into the elevator.

Eutteum took us up to the top floor. Apparently, Davis Library had eight floors, and they were all full of nothing but endless, endless rows of bookshelves. My eyes unfocused even *thinking* about reading that many books. Remember what I said about the prison in Manhattan looking like purgatory? I changed my mind. THIS is purgatory.

"Wow!" João said, pressing his face to the glass wall. "The view from up here is incredible!"

Out the window, I could see the forest overtaking the university. Trees were pressed up close to brick buildings and pathways snaked through the campus. In the distance, one tall, dark

building towered over everything else, but it was hard to make it out against the night sky. I guess it was a pretty nice view. We'd been higher up in New York City, but I had been in the middle of a tense negotiation situation and didn't have a chance to appreciate the view.

"Hm, is this the highest you've ever been?" Eutteum said.

"Well, actually, I've been to the top of skyscrapers in Philadelphia, which are much higher," João said. "The view from there is also incredible. But this view is incredible too!"

Qamar was much more interested in the bookshelves, and was already tracing his finger along the dusty shelves in the QH section. "Biology! Fascinating," Qamar said. "I can only imagine what's changed in the past sixty years. Do you think they managed to print any publications on killbots before the fall? They're not dissimilar to organic life, given that they reproduce and evolve - just at a much higher pace."

"In print, no," Eutteum said. "The killbots were top secret - developed by the US army, of course. By the time the general public even learned of their existence, it was too late. Whether it was by sabotage or accident that they got out, we'll never know. They escaped into the wild, started multiplying like rabbits, and decimated America's population long before any national or local government could put a cohesive plan together to stop them."

I stifled a yawn. Eutteum talked in a slow, resigned way that sounded exactly like one of the teachers back in Deerfield.

"Hm. Some documents have been recovered from government bases since," Eutteum said. "But with the fall of the Internet, it

has become very difficult to disseminate this information. That's where people like me come in. Us librarians collect, digitize, and annotate information, in preparation for new networks that can spread this knowledge across America, whether it be radio or systems of couriers."

"Like me!" João said.

"Yes, yes. Hm."

I looked around at our party incredulously. Was I really the only one that was bored out of their mind? Qamar was hanging onto Eutteum's every word. João was listening politely. Hương... well, Hương looked the same as she always did, in her mysterious, aloof way. God, I was glad she couldn't hear me calling her mysterious and aloof.

"Did you live through all that?" João said, in awe.

Eutteum chuckled. "I'm not quite that old."

Qamar was looking through a section labeled R, now. "Medicine," he said. "This section is smaller than I expected."

"Yes, most of the medicine is at the Health Sciences Library. But that part of the campus is... Not safe."

"Killbots?" I said, jumping at something I actually cared about. "What kind?"

"Hm. I wouldn't know," Eutteum said, wearily. "These days, I hardly ever leave this library."

Hương spoke up for the first time in a while. "Is the Health Sciences Library in the same location as the hospital?"

"Oh, yes," Eutteum said. "I asked the team that scavenged that area to retrieve certain valuable volumes when they passed by, along with the medical supplies we desperately need."

"The one led by Katydid's partner?" Qamar asked.

"Yes, yes." Eutteum shook his head. "It's quite tragic. We haven't heard back from them in several days."

"Aren't you going to go look for them?!" João said, alarmed. "Maybe they're still alive in there!"

"With so many of us sick, we simply can't muster up the numbers for a rescue mission," Eutteum said. "Especially not one where the targets may already be dead."

Qamar gave me a concerned look, and I already knew where this was heading. Another altruistic mission for a complete stranger.

"Well, thanks for all that, uh, info," I said, butting in. "Really we're just here to ask about Philomena, and what she was doing here."

"Hm. Oh, that robot," Eutteum said. "She could have simply borrowed my materials, if she had asked. Instead she held us at gunpoint until we let her take whatever she wanted from our collection. Took some very valuable materials on super-intelligent AI, as well. I believe she headed west out of town."

I furrowed my brow. "Wait, she was just here for books?"

"She took nothing else, to my knowledge."

I shared a confused look with the others.

"What topics did she seem interested in?" Qamar said.

"AI was a big one," Eutteum said. "Let me see... She took a fair number of books on robotics in general. Hm. Some on material science. Electrical engineering. Does that seem correct to you all?"

I shrugged. "We don't really have any clue what her goal is. We're just following her because she took our grandma."

"Well, I'm really sorry to hear that," Eutteum said. He sized us up. "You are certainly a diverse group of grandchildren."

"No no no," Qamar said. "Just Lake and me. The others we picked up along the way."

"I don't have parents!" João said in a chipper voice.

The conversation was interrupted by a very big, and very muted, *Thud*.

"What was that?" I said, glancing out the window.

Eutteum sighed. "Oh no. That would be the drifter."

A few seconds later, another *Thud*.

"Is that thing moving?" Qamar said, squinting out the window.

I shielded my eyes with my hands and peered outside as well. The thing I thought was a distant building moved slightly, followed by another resounding *Thud*. This time it was accompanied by the sound of a distant house collapsing.

"HOLY SHIT!" I said. "I thought that was some sort of skyscraper!"

"That is a drifter," Eutteum said. "The largest of all killbots, by far. It's a miracle that it has not drifted toward the center of

campus yet. It could easily fell the library and erase all of my work in moments." His voice sounded like he was already resigned to the possibility.

"I thought Bailey Grace was exaggerating," I said in a small voice, watching the drifter take another step. Now I could see that it had six extremely long legs, connected to a disproportionately small body. It didn't have any neck or head to speak of.

Euttum coughed. "You get used to it after a while, sort of. Hm. It's only a hazard when it gets close. Otherwise, it simply wanders around - hence the name, drifter - and radiates an electromagnetic signal, which is harmless except that it jams radio communication. I've been studying its signals for years, to no avail."

"That's why the radio stopped working!" Qamar exclaimed.

"Wow," João said. Even Hương looked impressed. Or maybe I was just projecting.

"In any case," Eutteum said. "Is there anything else you needed from me?"

"I don't think so," Qamar said. "But... I think there might be something we can do for you!"

"Oh?"

"We're fairly experienced in fighting killbots," Qamar said. "We may be able to get in and out of the hospital safely, if you give us an idea of what we're up against. We can look for supplies

and survivors, and hopefully clear out some of the killbots as well. Three birds with one stone!"

I sighed and spun my bat against the floor. It might be a distraction, but I knew better than to argue about this.

"Well, when you put it that way..." Eutteum said.

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C H A P T E R 6

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

We had to run out to the road to get Bailey Grace again, who was apparently acting chief of security while Katydid's partner - the old chief of security - was MIA. They gave me a new rifle and an EMP grenade, so I guess this distraction wasn't totally unproductive. It was decided that we would take João along, both to patch us up if we got hurt, and also to help identify the medical supplies that the survivors needed. Katydid even gave him her handgun in case he needed to defend himself.

"Please try to find my partner," Katydid pleaded. "Their name is Mo. I-I know they're still alive in there! If anyone could do it, it's Mo!"

"We'll do our best," João said gravely. I kept my lips shut tight. I didn't think it was likely we'd find any survivors, but I didn't want to tell Katydid that.

Once Katydid was gone, I said, "Okay, are we all set to go?"

"All ready," Qamar confirmed. "We're approaching from the west." He pulled out his handy GPS. "We'll hit the Health

Sciences Library first, then we should be able to transition directly to the hospital from there."

I nodded, and we started down a road called South Road. Large trees covered the right side of the road, while the left side was university buildings. The atmosphere was tense and gloomy. It would have been nice to wait for daylight, but if anyone was alive in the hospital, time was of the essence.

"Soooo," I said, wishing there was a conversation to break the silence. "Hương, is it common for robots to, like... you know..."

Hương waited expectantly.

"Have... romantic partners?" I waved my hands around. "Like Katydid?"

"It isn't uncommon," Hương said. "Physical affection is typically an organic impulse. But some robots seek emotional intimacy much like humans do. It depends largely on what they were programmed for."

"I'm not romantically attracted to anyone," João said. "But I consider everyone my friend!"

"You know, that does explain a lot about your worldview," Qamar said.

I hesitated. "What about you, Hương?" I said. "Do you, you know, do romance?"

"Occasionally."

Qamar gave me a suspicious look, which I studiously ignored. Hey, I was just curious. Sue me.

We were approaching the library up ahead, on the left side of the road. It was another glass-faced building with most of the glass broken. I pushed past a couple of bushes and took the lead as we stepped across the threshold.

It was quiet inside. Lots of dusty bookcases, broken up only by rows of study cubbies. Books laid strewn across the floor, but thankfully most of them were still on the shelves.

"Okay," Qamar said, spreading out two pieces of paper on the circulation desk. "Um, João, why don't you stay with me, and Lake and Hương can go upstairs to look for the books labeled RS and up?"

"Sounds good to me," I said, grabbing my sheet of paper and leading the way up the stairs. Hương followed silently.

The library was completely still upstairs as well. We got to work pulling books off the shelves, and made short work of the list between the two of us.

When we went downstairs, João was depositing the last of his books into a pile. "All done!" he said.

I dropped by stack next to his. "Us too," I said. I started shoveling the books into the duffel bag Eutteum had given us. "Now, who's going to carry all these?"

Qamar rubbed his chin. "Those look heavy... Someone stronger than me should probably take them."

"I'm already carrying the first aid supplies!" João said.

I looked at Hương. "I'm an assassin," she said. "I am not at my highest capacity when I'm weighed down."

I sighed. "Fine." I zipped up the bag and shouldered it. "OH GOD, this is heavy. Okay. I'm fine! Let's try to get this over with quickly, Jesus Christ."

Qamar grinned. "Good thing you're so strong and capable!"

"Flattering me isn't going to make this any lighter," I muttered.

"This way," Hương said, heading to the back of the first floor. There was a back exit here, which Hương quickly started picking.

"Hopefully the rest of the mission goes as smoothly as this," Qamar said. "We'll just get in and out, easy-peasy."

That's when a howler's shriek pierced the air.

Qamar readied his shotgun. "Dammit," he said. "We jinx it every time."

I scanned the library, but everything was still. We all waited in tense silence as Hương worked on the door.

"Where are they?" I muttered, dropping the bag in favor of my gun. "Howlers don't sneak around."

I caught sight of movement behind a shelf, and I turned just in time to intercept the wave of howlers that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. I got three good shots in before having to dive out of the way of a howler, which still got a good swipe at my side. Cursing, I shoved it away, giving me enough space to blast its head off.

Nearby, a howler had bowled João over. Thankfully, his metal chassis stood up better to the claws than me. I grabbed my

duffel bag and swung it, knocking the howler right off of the robot.

"Thank you!" João said, scrambling to his feet.

Qamar and Hương had set up a defensive stance in the corner, picking off howlers with their guns while João and I took the brunt of the attack. Qamar blasted one howler that was struggling on the floor, and then it was still again.

"Lake, do you require medical attention?" João said.

I touched my side and grimaced. "Later. Just a surface wound, I'll be fine."

Hương finished unlocking the door. "Through the courtyard."

I took the lead as we entered a thin, vine-choked courtyard that separated the library and a tall brick building. The building was so covered in vines, it nearly blended into the nearby forest.

"That was weird, right?" Qamar said. "Does anyone else think that was weird?"

I nodded. Qamar and I were on the same wavelength. "That attack from the howlers seemed almost... coordinated. Usually they just scream and run directly at you."

"They were in the library," João said. "Maybe they're smart howlers!"

I rolled my eyes. "Good one, João."

"Thank you! I thought of that joke myself."

Hương brushed some vines off of a side-access door on the tall building and started unlocking it as well.

"This is an academic building," Qamar said. "The school of medicine, if I remember correctly. It has an internal connection with the hospital."

The door clicked, and I took the lead into the hallway. I realized that Hương was letting me take the lead this time. Honestly, we were probably more effective this way, as long as I didn't make any rash decisions. She had a sniper rifle, for God's sake. She should be in the back.

The hallway was stuffy and covered in dust, with noticeboards lining the walls and a couple of desks sitting at weird angles. I peeked into a couple of the classrooms as we passed. Nothing of note, except for some extremely graphic graffiti.

"Don't look," I said to João. "This graffiti isn't appropriate for young robots."

"Actually, I'm fifty-six years old," João said.

We hit a T-intersection. I looked to the left and noticed a shredder sitting out in the open at the same time that it noticed me. It roared that unmistakable broken lawnmower sound, then started charging toward us.

All four of us opened fire. Before it could reach us, it tilted over and collapsed, momentum making it slide several feet across the polished floor. Its face had so many holes that it looked like the surface of the moon.

"So you *can* kill them with guns," I said, reloading my rifle. "Just takes a hell of a lot of ammo."

"I think it's this way," Qamar said, pointing to the right. I nodded and started sneaking along.

There was more muffled roaring. My eyes widened as I checked all around us. Then another shredder burst out of a lecture hall behind us.

"Here we go again," I said, opening fire. But then another shredder burst out, and another.

"Change of plans!" Qamar yelled, sprinting down the corridor. "Run!"

I shouldered my bag of books and raced after him. He veered into a stairwell. I was the last one in, weighed down by the books, so I slammed the door shut behind us. Hopefully, that would buy us a little bit of time.

"The bridge that connects to the hospital is on the third floor!" he yelled. "We need to get up there!"

We had barely reached the second floor when the shredders got into the stairwell. I looked down to see one of them eating up the door like a piece of wet toast.

"Locked!" yelled Qamar, as he reached the third floor landing. Hương pushed him aside and frantically started picking the lock.

"We don't have much time!" I yelled, shooting down the stairwell. João added his handgun fire too. It was barely slowing them down.

"The grenade," Qamar said. "Throw the grenade!"

"Oh, yeah!" I dropped my rifle as I fumbled with my pockets. I had almost forgotten about it. I pressed the button on the EMP grenade as soon as I grabbed it, then lobbed it over the railing.

It clinked a few times on the stairwell before letting out an ear-splitting blast that made my hair stand up and my teeth hurt. I peeked over the railing to see shredders falling over themselves, cogs whirring to a stop.

"Yes!" I cried, pumping my fists. "We got them!"

"There are more incoming!" João said, calmly taking more shots over the railing. I looked down again to see shredders pouring out of the hallway and climbing over their dead brethren. "But at least you bought us time!"

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, quickly reloading my rifle.

"It's jammed," Hương said. Her usually calm voice was filled with frustration, which was almost as unsettling as the horde of shredders chasing us. Well, no, the shredders were definitely worse, but you know what I mean.

"Fourth floor," breathed Qamar, scrambling up the stairs. Before we got even close to the landing, the door to the fourth floor burst open, revealing more roaring shredders. Their broken screams filled the stairwell and echoed back and forth between the walls.

"We're stuck," Hương said. "There's nowhere left to go."

"Oh, yes, there is!" I said, turning my rifle around and shattering a nearby window with its butt. I used my metal hand to clear some of the glass, then climbed outside.

"Lake, wait!" Qamar shouted, his eyes wide with panic.

I grabbed onto one of the many vines clinging to the wall and swung away from the window. I yelped in surprise when the vine lurched under the weight of me and all the books, dropping nearly a half-story.

João leaped out of the window fearlessly and grabbed a vine next to me. "Quick thinking, Lake!" he said.

Qamar scrambled out the window next, followed by Hương. They climbed from vine to vine, trying to distance themselves from the stairwell.

The shredders finally caught up. They skidded to a stop in front of the window, gnashing their teeth angrily at us. A few of them fell out, pushed by the weight of the horde, and smashed into the courtyard far below.

"Hah!" I yelled. "Stupid pigs!" My vine gave some more, making me lurch a few feet downward. "Whoa!"

"Hurry, let's get into another window," Qamar said, inching his way across the wall.

I led the way, smashing in another window with my feet. Once again, steel-toed boots for the win. I dropped in, then helped the others climb inside. We were in a long-abandoned classroom.

Qamar shivered. "Oh my God, that was scary."

Hương brushed off her cloak. "It was a close call."

"Good thing I'm here to save the day, huh?" I said, unable to stop a grin from spreading across my face.

"I'll give you a trophy when we get back," Hương said, leading the way out of the classroom. I rolled my eyes and followed.

Qamar navigated us to the bridge that led to the hospital without any more incidents. I peered out a window, looking out at a road covered in abandoned cars. In a nearby parking lot, I could see howlers prowling about.

"Man, where are all these killbots coming from, anyway?" I muttered. "Usually we just get one type or the other, not a bunch of them at once."

"I was wondering the same thing myself," Qamar said.

Soon the bridge gave way to the sterile white walls of the hospital. We were in a waiting area, with a half-circle desk and a bunch of complementary magazines. This place was remarkably clean for a room that hadn't been touched in sixty years.

Qamar was consulting the map again. "Down this hallway," he said.

We got back into our formation, then crept down the dark hallway. The academic building had been covered by windows, letting in the moonlight, but this part of the hospital was completely dark. Qamar flicked on a flashlight he'd gotten from Eutteum and started shining it around in front of us.

"The stairwell should be around here somewhere," Qamar said. "We need to get to the top floor, where the labs are. The medicine the survivors need should be up there."

I opened a nearby door and peeked inside. "No stairwell," I reported. "Just a hospital bed."

We started checking doors as we passed. I went through one that looked promising and found myself in a large supply closet instead.

Something hit me from behind, knocking me to the floor. I rolled over as it made a distorted barking noise.

"Howler!" I yelled. My gun was too far away for me to reach, so I focused on protecting my face from its claws and teeth. But instead of attacking me, it opened its mouth and licked my face from bottom to top.

Confused, I strained to keep it away from me. It barked again, making no move to hurt me with its claws.

"Lake!" Qamar yelled, barging into the closet with his shotgun ready.

"Wait wait wait!" I shoved the howler off me and got to my feet. "I think it's friendly!"

"Friendly?" Qamar asked, confused. He kept his shotgun trained on the howler, which ran around my feet and nearly tripped me again.

"I've never heard one bark like that before," João said, peeking into the closet. "Can we keep it?!"

"No," Hương said from the hallway. "It's a killbot."

"Aww, but it's so cute!" I squatted and petted the big metal dog. "You're a good bot, aren't you?!"

"Pleeeeeease?" João said. "I promise I'll feed it and take care of it!"

"It is kind of cute," Qamar said to Hương.

Hương whirred her eye. "Fine. But keep it away from me." She stalked down the hallway. "I found a staircase. It's at the T-intersection up ahead."

We grouped up in the hallway. The howler bounded along after us, looking as happy as a robot wolf could.

"What should we call it?" João said. "What about Howly the Howler?"

The wolf nearly bowled me over again as it jumped on me. "Hey, down, bot!" I said. "You little rascal, you."

"Rascal's a good name," Qamar said. "I always wanted a pet named Rascal."

"Rascal it is," I said, scratching the howler under its chin. I don't know if it could feel it, since it was made of metal, but it felt right.

I might have gotten a little too distracted by the dog, because I only caught a glimpse of the figure that ran across the hallway in front of us. I immediately stood up. "Did anyone else see that?"

"See what?" Qamar shone the flashlight down the hallway.

"It looked like something on two legs," I said. I ventured forward. "Some sort of bipedal killbot?"

"There's no bipedal killbots," Qamar said. "As far as I know, anyway."

João tugged on my arm. "Then... What are those?"

We turned around. Qamar's flashlight landed on a group of four humanoid robots, each made of a dark material that blended in with the shadows. They had completely blank faces. Behind them stood a howler, also made of the same dark metal. A chill crawled up my spine when I realized that the one in front was the same height and build as me. In fact, it almost looked identical.

Rascal started barking loudly at them. They didn't budge.

"Of course!" Qamar whispered. "Shadows! They're extremely fast and quiet killbots that can alter their own physiology to mirror that of their targets. I've never seen them in real life, before."

"Sorry," I said quietly. "Did you say their *targets*?"

"Oh, yeah." Qamar raised his shotgun. "That's not good."

Hương was the first to act, hitting a shot dead in the center of Qamar's clone's head. It crumpled to the floor, but in that instant, the other four disappeared.

"Where did they go?" I shouted, looking left and right like an idiot.

"Forget them," Hương said. "We should hurry."

I nodded and ran down the corridor to the T-intersection, which was filled with a couple of elevators and a janitor's cart. We ignored the elevators - there was no electricity - and entered another stairwell. Rascal stayed close behind us, thankfully.

João screamed, and I immediately spun on my heels. João's shadow had appeared out of nowhere, pinning him to the ground in what looked like a painful arm hold. With a sharp movement, the shadow snapped João's arm at the elbow joint.

I couldn't take a shot with João so close to him. I swung my bag of books instead, but the shadow leaped off of João's prone body and easily dodged it. It dove for my legs, swiping them out from under me and making me hit the ground hard. I tried to get to my feet, but my head was spinning from hitting the floor.

Thankfully, Qamar was ready with a shotgun blast, which stumbled the shadow. One more shot, and the shadow crumpled to the floor.

"João, are you okay?!" Qamar asked, hurrying to his side.

"I'm fine," he said cheerfully, stuffing his severed arm into his bag. "I can't feel pain."

"Stay close to each other," Hương said, sharply. "Keep an eye on each other at all times. We have to move quickly."

"Understood," I said, staggering to my feet. "Hell if I'm letting my goddamn clone from the shadow world get the better of me."

"Come on, Rascal!" João said, leading the dog into the stairwell.

We raced up the staircase, now watching carefully behind us. After six or seven flights, we reached the top landing and went through the door.

I stopped short as I was greeted by a dead human slumped against the wall, with more of his organs on the outside than was healthy. I looked down the hallway to see a robot and another human strewn across the floor. It looked like a war zone.

"I think we found Mo's team," I said, my throat feeling rather dry all of a sudden.

"There's only three," Qamar said, his voice trembling. "Katydid said they sent four."

"Maybe the last one is holed up somewhere!" João said, brightly. "I don't see their corpse in the hallway."

I grimaced and made sure my rifle was reloaded. I wasn't about to hold my breath.

I continued past the corpses, with the others close behind. Rascal followed in the rear, sniffing the bodies as we passed.

Qamar consulted the map and directed us through a pair of double doors into a lab. There was some sort of emergency light on the wall, running on backup power. It casting an eerie red light over the entire room. Qamar turned off his flashlight.

"This is the lab," Qamar said. "Let's start looking for supplies."

"I'll check the closets," João said, heading to the end of the room.

"Don't go too far!" snapped Hương. "The shadows could be anywhere."

I started opening cabinets. I actually got through a couple cabinets' worth of bottles before I thought to ask, "Wait, what is it we're looking for?"

Qamar uncrumpled a piece of paper in his pocket. "Oseltamivir phosphate, zanamivir, peramivir, baloxavir marboxil—"

"Ookay, you know what, maybe I'll let you handle those," I said. "I'll look for some Advil or something, I'm sure they could use those. Right?"

Rascal was sniffing something on the floor, and started barking loudly.

"Rascal, shhhh," I said, running over to pat his head. "We're getting hunted by murderous shadows. We have to be quiet right now."

Rascal barked more quietly, then sniffed at a blood stain on the floor. That was concerning. I pushed a stool out of the way as I followed the streaks of dried blood across the linoleum. They led right up to a steel door in the corner and disappeared underneath.

I resisted the urge to throw open the freezer. I was already having flashbacks to the shredder incident in the theater.

"Uhh, guys," I said. "You might want to see this."

The others gathered around me, silently raising their guns. I counted down from three with my left hand, like Hương had done earlier, then threw open the door.

A scared-looking human with glasses and a broken leg pointed a shotgun at us. "Huah!" they said. "Huh?"

"Oh my God," Qamar said, lowering his gun. "You're alive!"

"Who are you?" the human asked.

"The ones who are about to save your ass," I said.

João rushed into the room, unzipping his first aid kit. "João, field medic," he said. "Nice to meet you! Permission to treat your leg?"

Bewildered, the injured human nodded, and João started cutting off the pant leg.

"You're going to be okay," João said. "You must be Mo! Katydid misses you a lot. She's waiting back at the community."

"Thank you," Mo croaked.

While João worked, Qamar and Hương ran around the room, shoving bottles and boxes with long words printed on them into their bags.

"Were you really in here for three days?" I asked.

"Has it been that long?" Mo croaked, brushing their hair out of their eyes. Judging by the bags under their eyes, they hadn't slept much in those three days. "I got separated from my team. I turned on the emergency light, hoping the others would find me."

I grimaced. "Uh, yeah, about that. We got some bad news, chief."

Eventually we got Mo caught up, as well as patched up. João had fit a splint over their leg, but it was already wet with blood. I offered my hand to help them get up.

"I think that's everything," Qamar said, looking up and down his paper. "Everything we could find, anyway. Couldn't find any roxicodone for the life of me."

"Howler!" Mo pointed their shotgun at Rascal.

"No no no!" I knocked the gun out of their hands. "That's Rascal! It's nice!"

Rascal barked very politely, as if to demonstrate.

"Okay," Mo said. "That's new."

The door flew open and a shadow dashed into the room, hardly more than a blur. Before I could move, it had Qamar pinned up against a wall. Another one - my clone, backed up by the shadowy dog - headed straight for me, João, and Mo.

I flipped my gun into position and blasted myself - my shadow self, I mean - in the chest. It staggered, but leaped on me, anyway, leading with a punch to my chin. God, my head had taken a lot of punishment in the last few days.

I grabbed its arm and threw it to the floor, leaping on top of it before it could wriggle away. Faster than I could track, it got its legs underneath me and kicked me off, sending me flying onto a nearby counter.

João started shooting his handgun, unloading several shots into my shadow self. It dropped to its knees, one of its legs injured.

With a growl, I got up and tackled it, taking it out for good with a snap of the neck.

"God, these things are annoying," I said, scrambling for my gun.

While I was distracted, scuttlers had started streaming in from the door the shadows had busted open. However, they didn't attack us directly. They swarmed across the floor, hissing at us, until the party was divided into two. Me, João, Mo, and Rascal on one side, Hương and Qamar on the other.

"What the hell?!" I yelled, shooting scuttler after scuttler. Rascal yelped, and I realized that it was wrestling with the shadow dog on the floor. I went running toward them and knocked the shadow dog off of Rascal with a solid kick, then took it out with a careful shot to the head.

"Hương needs help!" João shouted, trying to clear a path through the scuttlers with his handgun. I looked up to see Hương wrestling with her own shadow, which had Hương's head pressed against the ground. Qamar was nearby, blood trickling down his head as he tried to stumble to his feet.

I looked down the sights of my gun, trying to line up a safe shot on Hương's shadow, but they were too closely intertwined. With a growl, I hopped up onto one of the lab tables and started running across the room.

Scuttlers reached at me as soon as I approached. I kicked one away, stomped right on another one's carapace, and leaped over the scuttler sea to land by Hương's side. I whipped the shadow with the butt of my rifle, giving Hương enough of an advantage

to reverse the hold and slam her shadow into the ground. One more shot to the head did the trick.

"Stronger than they look," Hương muttered.

"Qamar!" I yelled, running to his side.

"I'm fine," he gasped. "Hit my head. I'm okay."

"One, two, three, four, five," João said. "I think we killed all the shadows!"

"Yeah, but what about the scuttlers?" Mo croaked.

The scuttlers were, indeed, closing in on us. I quickly looked for escape routes. Two doors to the hallway, both heavily crowded with scuttlers. We would never get through them. But there was one window, and a fire escape on the other side.

"Out the window!" I yelled. I started shooting scuttlers, trying to clear a path for João and Mo to get out of the corner with the freezer. João immediately understood what I meant, and shattered the glass with his handgun. Then he lended Mo his shoulder, and the two started hobbling toward the window.

Hương was on her feet and helping clear out scuttlers. She shot one out of the air as it leaped down at me from the ceiling.

"Thanks!" I gasped. "I always forget about the ceiling!"

"And I keep telling you!" Qamar exclaimed, heading toward the window as well.

I was last out, holding scuttlers off as Qamar shoved Rascal out of the window. I kicked one off my legs, though its spit sizzled

on my pants. My rifle clicked as I ran out of ammo. That was my sign to go.

I shouldered my bag of books - I wondered for a moment why I was still carrying this thing around - and vaulted through the window, my breath catching as I found myself above a dozen floors in the air. Thankfully, I landed on the fire escape. I started hopping my way down the ladder, taking several rungs at a time.

Hương shot a couple of the scuttlers as they went out the window. One fell off the side of the fire escape and went plummeting down below. "Hurry!" she yelled from down below.

"What does it look like I'm doing?!" I yelled, dropping down onto a lower platform.

After a lot of ladders, we reached the bottom of the fire escape and dropped down into some sort of loading zone. Mo was slow, but perfectly capable of climbing down with just three limbs. I was worried about Rascal, but it seemed perfectly happy bounding down from platform to platform. What a resourceful dog!

"This way!" Qamar pointed, pointing down the asphalt to the hospital's main parking lot. "This should take us back toward the base!"

"Alright, here we go," I said, bracing one of Mo's shoulders. João took the other side, and together we helped him hobble away from the hospital.

"We won't outrun the scuttlers at this pace," Hương said. She jogged backwards while shooting scuttlers, each *Bam!* of her

sniper rifle accompanied by the fizzle of a killbot. She easily kept pace, even while facing the wrong way.

"Any better ideas?" I asked, between gasps. My head was really feeling dizzy from the blows I had taken.

Hương lowered her gun, her eyes whirring. "They're retreating."

"Huh?" I looked over my shoulder to see the scuttlers scattering. As if moving with one mind, they dropped off the off-white brick of the hospital and disappeared into the shadows. "But why..."

The wall was demolished by a giant, metallic paw descending from the sky, sending brick spraying all across the courtyard as if it was nothing but sand. Then the paw thudded down onto the asphalt where we had just been standing.

"It's the drifter!" I screamed, craning my eyes upward. The giant killbot's body was looming above us.

"Don't worry," João said, from the other side of Mo. "Eutteum said they were only dangerous if they got close!"

"I'd say that's pretty fucking close!" I yelled, barreling down the road with Mo in tow.

Some part of my brain went, *Haha. Mo in tow. That rhymed.*

"Wait, is that-" Qamar put on a burst of speed and skidded to a stop among some abandoned cars. There was some sort of tall metal construction in the center of this parking lot, shaped an awful lot like the Eiffel Tower in our garage, but nearly twice as large.

"EMP turret," Mo gasped. "One of our engineers was setting up an electric perimeter... Couldn't get it to work..."

The drifter's paw landed again, toppling a sizeable tree and sending a car flying across the road like a Hot Wheels. The *Thud* was nearly deafening, and a *Whoosh* of wind almost knocked me off my feet. Mo stumbled, but João and I managed to catch him.

To my dismay, scuttlers were crawling out from the broken windows of the hospital, approaching us again. They flowed around the drifter's paw like water flowing around a rock.

"I know what's wrong," Qamar yelled, on his knees with his head stuck into the internals of the device. "I just need to get the generator running!"

"How long?" I yelled back. We had just arrived at the Eiffel Tower, and Mo collapsed to the floor.

"A minute?" Qamar said. "If we're lucky?"

"João and I can't be nearby when it happens," Hương said, urgently.

I groaned. "Okay, how about this. Hương, João, follow me!"

I snatched Qamar's flashlight and started sprinting. Hương and João followed without a word.

We ran down a brick pathway lined with bushes that would have looked quite nice under any other circumstances. "Hey!" I shined the flashlight up at where I thought the drifter's head was, waving my other arm in wide arcs. "Big stupid bozo! We're over here!"

"Oh, I see what we're doing!" João raced after me. "Hey, Mr. Drifter! You're way too big and your head is shaped like a potato!"

Hương lined up a few shots with the drifter's head. It didn't have any noticeable effect, but surely it was at least tickling the big guy, right? Slowly, the drifter turned, and it raised one paw to follow us.

"Yes, it's working!" I said.

The scuttlers were all over the parking lot at this point. I could hear the roaring of shredders in the distance as well, adding to the din. God, I hoped they were far away. I don't know if we could deal with shredders on top of everything else. I started picking some of the scuttlers off with my rifle.

"The scuttlers are parting," Hương said to me.

"Huh?" I said. I looked where Hương was pointing and saw the wave of scuttlers making a big, paw-shaped hole on the ground. A moment later, the drifter's paw thudded down, right in the hole, cracking the brick and nearly knocking me off my feet.

"How did they know how to do that?" João asked, sounding curious more than anything.

"T-minus thirty seconds!" Qamar yelled from the distance.

I shot at a nearby scuttler, but it did a U-turn and started running away from us instead. Confused, I looked for another target, but found them all running away.

"Above!" João shrieked. I realized without even looking up what was happening, and started to sprint at full speed. Hương ran ahead of me, pulling João along with one arm.

I tossed myself onto the lawn in front of the hospital, just as the drifter's paw landed right behind us. The noise was tremendous, leaving my ears ringing. I scrambled to my feet and kept staggering away from it.

"Success!" I heard Qamar yell in the distance. There was a blast not unlike the EMP grenade from earlier, originating at the little Eiffel Tower and spreading all across the parking lot. I felt a painful burst of static pass through me. Scuttlers immediately started fleeing from the little tower, running over each other in their haste.

There was a giant, distant groan from above. I looked up and saw the drifter laboriously move away from the hospital.

At the same time, Hương and João both fell to the ground.

"Guys?!" I yelled, hurrying to their side.

"Ow," João said, from the floor. "Just kidding! I don't feel pain. Systems currently at twenty percent efficiency. Shutting down."

"João!" I grabbed him by the shoulders.

"He's fine," Hương said, struggling to her feet. "Shut down to... protect himself."

"And you...?"

"In a lot of pain," she hissed. "Need... distance."

"Oh!" The moment I realized what she meant, I ran to her side and lended her my shoulder. She leaned against me, and the two of us started hurrying across the grass. It was a little awkward, given that she was nearly half a foot taller than me and made of metal. But we managed.

We got all the way across the lawn before Hương motioned that she was okay. She tumbled onto the grass, eye whirring furiously.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Nothing that can't be fixed," she said. Was it me, or did her voice sound a little distorted? "You should get João."

I groaned and sprinted back toward the tower. I grabbed João by the armpits and started dragging him across the lawn as well. Thankfully, he was much lighter than Hương.

Finally, I deposited his body next to Hương and collapsed onto the grass myself. We watched as the killbots finished fleeing the scene. The drifter, slow as it was, was already several hundred meters down the road.

I let out a deep breath and rested my head in the tall grass. Ooh, I felt like I could sleep for weeks.

Qamar and Mo joined us eventually. "You're all okay!" Qamar said.

"I dropped the books back in the parking lot, somewhere," I said, sitting up. "We'll have to go get them eventually."

"Fuck the books." Qamar sat down next to me and hugged me. "I'm glad you're safe."

"I'm glad you're safe too," I murmured.

Rascal ran up behind us, barking happily. It licked me in the face.

"Augh!" I pushed it away. "Why is it always the face?!"

"Thank you so much for saving me," Mo said. "We didn't know... We could have never expected what was in the hospital. Killbots working together like trained units. I'm lucky I managed to stay alive for so long."

"We noticed that too," Qamar said. "Never knew killbots had a pack mentality."

"I was thinking of something," I said. "It might be stupid. I don't know. But... Hương, what was that thing you were talking about? In New York? About like, the remote control or something?"

"Remote command routine," she said.

"Yeah, that!" I said. "What if the killbots are being controlled by someone else?"

"By the drifter," Qamar said, realization dawning in his eyes. "It's the drifter! That's why the drifter emits radio waves, and how the scuttlers knew to avoid its paws! The drifter is controlling the killbots!"

Mo adjusted their glasses. "You know, that would have been really useful to know beforehand."

After we had a chance to catch our breath and nurse our wounds, we staggered back to the center of campus, where the

survivors had set up camp. I don't know why I was expecting tents or something. Most of the survivors were sleeping in old dorms, which made a lot more sense.

Katydid screamed when she saw us approach. "Mo!" she yelled at a distance, running across the tall grass toward us.

We got out of the way as the two of them fell into each other's arms. I looked away as they sobbed and said sweet things to each other. Gross.

"Well, Jesus H. Christ," Bailey Grace said, approaching us at a more sedate pace. "You actually did it. And brought back Mo, to top things off."

"You'll NEVER guess what we figured out about the drifter," I said.

It took a while to catch her up on everything. Her expression got more and more impressed as we went. Finally, Qamar brought up the topic of the EMP turrets.

"You must have multiple ones set up, right?" Qamar said. "It's almost the same system that I was developing up in New York."

Bailey Grace nodded thoughtfully. "We were putting them all around the perimeter. Never worked right though, always set off a couple of pulses and then fried itself."

"Yes, that can happen when you build an electronic device built to destroy electronic devices," Qamar said. "I'd love to take a look at them! If we can get them working again, that should prevent the drifter from ever drifting onto campus again."

"You know what, you can be our guest," Bailey Grace said. "But first, I think we should probably get you to the medical center."

"Ah, yes, please," Qamar said, with a sheepish smile. I looked around at our party. My head was throbbing, Qamar's head was bleeding, and Hương was carrying João over her shoulder like a dead deer.

"This way, heroes," Bailey Grace said, forcing open a door covered in peeling paint.

CHAPTER 7

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

With no lead on Philomena to be found, we stayed in Chapel Hill for a while, licking our wounds. Apparently, Katydid had been an engineer back in the day, so she helped João stick his arm back on. Hương insisted her self-repair routines would handle her wounds. The rest of us got regular medical attention from the local medic.

Qamar was gone for the majority of the day, working on the EMP turrets, which left me, Hương, and João to while away the time. I ended up spending a lot of time with Bailey Grace, Katydid, and Mo. Bailey Grace taught us a game called Knife Jenga, which was one of the more exhilarating experiences I've had in a while. And considering what we've been up to the past week, that's saying a lot.

Hương approached me one day when I was chilling on the steps outside of Davis Library, cleaning my gun.

"Do you want to spar?" she said.

"Huh?" I asked.

Hương whirred her eye hesitantly. Again, technically, it looked the same as always, but I was getting better at reading Hương and I think this one was hesitation. "While fighting the shadows, I realized that my hand-to-hand combat is rusty. We should spar to keep our skills honed."

"Sure!" I hopped up. "It's been a while since I punched anything. Sounds fun."

I stowed away my gun and followed Hương to a big grassy area that was apparently called the Quad, right outside the library. It was so overgrown, it was basically a sparse forest with a couple of brick buildings surrounding it. It was a relatively warm day, and the sun was shining. I felt energized.

Hương unpinned her cloak and set it aside. I noticed she was looking a lot more dinged up than I first met her, her metallic surfaces no longer sleek and reflective.

"Okay. Hit me." I danced back and forth on my feet, holding my hands up to my face. "Don't hold back!"

A few seconds later, I was on my back, with my arms twisted in a painful direction. "Ow ow ow! Okay, you got me!"

Hương got up and gave me some space while I shook out my arms. I jumped to my feet. "Jesus H. Christ, that was fast."

Hương chuckled, which made me perk up. She didn't do that often. "Did you pick that up from Bailey Grace?"

"Yeah, why not?" I bounced on the balls of my feet. "It's fun. It's quirky. Anyway, hit me again. I'm ready this time."

This time she feinted in one direction and then knocked me to the ground with her elbow. Hương's elbow is very sharp, by the way.

"Ouch," I said, scrambling to my feet. "Clever," I said. "No bigs, I'll get you next time."

"Maybe this was a bad idea," Hương said.

"No no no!" I said. "One more time. Come on. I gotta win one."

This time I saw her coming. I blocked one of her arms and followed up with a kick that stumbled her. I tackled her before she could recover, kneeling on her chest and gripping both of her arms so she couldn't strike back. She tried to free her arms, and I grit my teeth as I pushed against her muscles - motors? Eventually, she gave up. It almost seemed too easy.

"Hah!" I said, hopping to my feet. "I've still got it."

"Well done," Hương said, getting up. "I think that's enough for now."

I paused. "Wait, did you let me win on purpose?"

Hương's eye whirled around. "Yes."

I threw up my arms. "Oh, come on! That's just bad sportsmanship!"

Hương sighed. "Do you have any training in hand-to-hand combat?"

"Well, not officially," I said. "But I learned through experience. Got into plenty of fights when I was younger."

"Yes," Hương said. "Your method is certainly... unique. I don't know of any martial arts that employ tackling."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, then. Why don't you teach me? Show me your awesome robot moves, or whatever."

Hương whirred her eye - probably at the phrase "awesome robot moves" - and walked to my side. "First, your arms should be here." She moved my fist in front of my face. "Elbows in. This puts you in position to protect your face."

I nodded. "Okay. Yeah. I feel like a boxer." I threw some pretend punches in front me me.

"Put your thumbs outside your fists," she said. "You'll break them."

"I knew that!" I protested, fixing my thumbs.

She showed me a couple of kicks. I thought I knew how to kick, but when she did it, it was so much more powerful. Hurt a lot more, too. I tried to replicate her motions.

"Not bad," Hương said. "For a human."

"What was that?" I asked.

"You are good at fighting, for a human," she said. "It's a compliment."

I grumbled, "Thanks."

She stood right next to me as she showed me the correct stance, positioning my arms and legs like a mannequin. Every time she touched me, I could feel the power in her metallic arms. I started to understand exactly how outmatched I was. She could overpower me in a heartbeat, especially in the vulnerable position I was in now.

"Let's spar again!" I said, breaking away from her and hoping she couldn't tell how flustered I was. "I want to try out my new moves."

"I'll go easy on you," she said.

"No, no." I beckoned with my hands. "Hit me with all you've got."

I actually managed to block a couple of her punches before she sent me the floor this time. I stumbled and fell into a nearby bush, where my shoulder hit something hard.

"Ow!" I said, rubbing my shoulder. "There's something hard under there."

I extracted myself from the undergrowth, then felt around under the bush. I felt something metallic and pulled it out.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, brushing dirt off of it. It was sort of rectangular device with a bunch of blinking lights on it.

"I don't recognize it," Hương said. "Maybe it belongs to one of the survivors."

"Better ask," I said. "I don't trust metal things with blinking lights on them. No offense."

"I don't have any blinking lights."

"Yeah, I know. It was just - you know." I waved one hand. "Never mind. Bad joke."

We went back into the dorms and asked a couple of the survivors if they recognized the device, but none of them did. Eventually, we circled back to the library, where we found Qamar and Eutteum discussing the periodic table, or something. I don't remember. I just assume it was something dumb like that.

"Hey, you two," I said, dropping the device onto a study table. "Recognize this?"

"Interesting," Qamar said. He picked it up and turned it around. "It looks familiar, but I can't remember where I've seen it before. Clearly, it's battery powered, but there's no buttons or ports. Whatever it does, it must be wireless."

"Very good," Eutteum said. "That's an electromagnetic signal emitter. Hm." He turned to me. "Where did you find this?"

"Under a bush outside," I said. "Gave me a nasty bruise on my shoulder, too."

Eutteum looked concerned. "This device is intended to sabotage wireless connections to electronics. If this mysteriously appeared in our community, that is a bad sign indeed."

Qamar gasped. "I remember now, there was one of those at Deerfield! Someone found it at the strip mall the day after Philomena arrived. They thought a trader left it by accident."

"So Philomena left it here," I said, with narrowed eyes. "She's probably been leaving them everywhere she goes."

Qamar scratched his head. "Well, it does seem like it."

"Let's find João," Hương said. "We need to discuss this."

We found João picking flowers, with a radio on a rock nearby emitting static. We all sat under the shade of a big tree to talk.

"So, what's all this about?" João said. He gave Qamar a little loop of daisies tied together. "Here, you can have this."

"Oh, thanks!" he said, putting it on his head. I cracked a grin. It was cute.

"We found this device that we suspect was left by Philomena," Hương said, showing him the box.

"Eutteum found some books on it," Qamar said, launching into one of his lectures. "It was used by electronics companies to intercept and sabotage wireless signals."

"What sort of electronics would Philomena want to intercept or sabotage?" João asked, looking confused.

"That one's easy," Qamar said. "Radio communication. Vehicles. Even RCRs. Anything that's capable of receiving an electronic signal and has power. Given how reliant modern electronics - or, what used to be considered modern - are on wireless connections, this device could hypothetically give Philomena control over the entire community and most of its robot residents. The more confusing thing is, what would be controlling all these devices?"

"Philomena, right?" I said.

Qamar shook his head. "Not just any robot can interface with these emitters. Sabotaging arbitrary electrical devices is difficult, let alone controlling emitters in cities all over America. You would need a somewhat complex and intelligent system to operate them. To our knowledge, systems like that don't exist anymore in America."

"But she was researching AI, remember?" I said. "Maybe she's building an AI to control all the emitters."

Qamar rubbed his chin. "It's possible."

"That's why they kidnapped Serendipity," Hương said, suddenly. "She created Project Serendipity. If anyone has the expertise needed to create a powerful AI from scratch, it's her."

We were all silent for a moment. It made sense. Why else would she kidnap a random mayor from a tiny town in New York?

"We need to stop her," I said, standing up. "We shouldn't be sitting around on this campus. This is even bigger than saving Nonna. Whatever Philomena has planned, it's going to be bad news for the rest of us."

"But where would we go?" João said. "I've been monitoring the radio, like you asked me to. There's been no report of Philomena on the security channel."

I rubbed my forehead. "I don't know," I said. "They said she headed west, right? Let's just go west."

"The entire continental USA is to the west," Hương pointed out dryly.

"Actually, I have an idea," Qamar said. "While I was in the library I looked into Project Serendipity. You made me curious, Hương. There aren't a lot of books on it, I guess since it was supposed to be all hush-hush, but Eutteum helped me access some government documents. Apparently, Project Serendipity was based in a lab in Phoenix, Arizona. So... I don't know. Maybe we could go there?"

"Then let's do it!" I threw up my hands. "I'm tired of sitting around! We might as well drive *somewhere* and see if other communities have caught wind of Philomena."

Hương whirred her eye. "I agree."

"Yes, but—" I stopped short. I had expected Hương to argue. "Oh, thanks."

"Can we stop by Oklahoma?" João asked. "I still need to deliver my special package."

"Oh, right!" Qamar said. "I completely forgot about that."

"Please never say 'deliver my special package' again," I said.

"Sorry!" João said. "I just meant that I need to deposit my load."

I shook my head. "No, that was worse. Way worse."

"Focus, guys," Qamar said. "I think I can finish the EMP turrets tonight. Let's head out tomorrow morning."

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We ate breakfast the next day with our new friends, which was some sort of bread and grilled vegetables that were grown locally. Katydid seemed sad to see us go. Mo thanked us again. Bailey Grace gave us some extra ammo and a remote detonation round as a token of appreciation.

Qamar seemed saddest to say goodbye to the library.

"Let's come back later," he said as we walked back to our car.

"There are so many interesting things to research! Eutteum gave me a flash drive full of his work on decoding drifter emissions, to go over when I have time. He let me take a few books, too. I have so many on my to-read list!"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"There's a really fascinating essay on the ethics of robotics that I want to get my hands on," Qamar continued. "A seminal work by one of the first published robot authors. Sadly, it wasn't appreciated in its time."

"You mean *Souls of Silver*?" João asked. "I've read that! It's actually kind of overrated."

I noticed that one of the backseat windows on our car was smashed from a distance, but it took me a few moments to realize that something was wrong.

"Wait," I said. "Was that window smashed when we got here?"

Wordlessly, the four of us rushed to the car. Rascal loped along behind us.

"Damn!" Qamar said, inspecting the back seat. "The glass is still in there. Someone broke in. It's a good thing we kept the keys, or they might have driven off."

"We took everything important out, right?" I said, pulling open the trunk. I started digging through the random trash that was in there.

"My package!" João screeched. "It's gone!"

"Oh, no," Qamar breathed. "That was important, right?"

"Only the most important delivery in the world!" João sank to his knees. "I'm a failure!"

"Now, hold on," Qamar said, patting João on the back. "Maybe we can figure out who took it. It could have been one of the survivors. They didn't know that this was our car."

"Do the survivors make a habit of looting random cars?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Bailey Grace mentioned that there's a raider nest down this road," Hương said. "It might have been them."

"We have to go get it!" João declared, springing back to his feet.

I put on an uneasy expression. "Well, hold on. Are you sure this package is important enough to risk our lives?"

"Yes, duh," João said.

"But... What *is* it, exactly?"

"I can't tell you," João said, shaking his head. "That would be a breach of confidentiality."

I sighed. "I guess we're going to go invade some raiders, then?"

Qamar nodded. Hương shrugged.

"Fine, but I get to drive." I hopped into the driver's seat before anyone could protest.

We drove away from the rising sun. It turned out the raider's nest was a fairly short distance away, in a neighboring town called Carrboro, located in a strip mall with a DMV.

"What's a DMV again?" I asked, glancing at Qamar's GPS.

"I think people used to go there to get driver's licenses," he said.

"Pfft," I said. "People needed a license to drive? Suckers."

We were approaching an intersection near the strip mall when a shot tore through the front windshield.

"Get down!" I yelled. I nearly lost control of the car as I threw us into a U-turn.

Qamar ducked as low as he could. "Holy crap!" he said. "We're not anywhere near the DMV!"

"They have a sniper set up," Hương said, grabbing her rifle. "Pull into that parking lot."

I turned off the road into a gas station, making sure to position our car so that it was hidden behind a convenience store called Han-Dee Hugo's. Hương got out of the car and eyed the convenience store. "Give me a boost," she said.

I stood next to the brick wall and locked my hands together. Using my hands, as well as a couple of newspaper kiosks, Hương leaped up and grabbed the roof of the building. Then she pulled herself up and out of sight.

João emerged from the car. "We're going to get my package, okay?" he said to Rascal, who was sitting in the back seat. "Be a good bot and stay right here!"

Rascal yipped once.

"We should roll down the window, so Rascal has air," João said.

"Several of our windows are smashed," I pointed out. "If anything, there's *too* much air."

"Oh, yeah."

A sniper shot rang out, and all three of us instinctively ducked. I pressed myself against the wall.

"Was that Hương or the enemy?" Qamar whispered.

"It was me," Hương said, dropping down beside us. Her cloak billowed up as she landed. "The sniper was set up on the Arby's. I killed them."

"You didn't have to *kill* them!" Qamar said, sounding astonished.

Hương whirred her eye. "They shot first. They would have killed us, given a chance."

"Yes, but it would have sufficed to incapacitate them!"

"This way," I said, beckoning with one arm. "We should close the distance before the other raiders realize what happened."

We all hunched over and raced across a six-lane road. I kind of regretted doing this in broad daylight, but I didn't think they had sightlines on us, anyway.

"We need to get something straight," Hương said as we ran.

"These are raiders. They thrive on murdering and stealing from others. We need to aim to kill, or they'll kill us first."

"But that makes us just as bad as them," Qamar argued. "We should shoot to incapacitate."

"Maybe I can just explain to them how important my package is, and they'll return it!" João said.

"Maybe we can all shut up, so they don't hear us coming," I snapped.

"Shoot to kill," Hương whispered again with a tone of finality. Qamar looked unhappy, but he didn't retort.

I didn't know if I wanted to shoot to kill or not. I agreed with Hương, raiders were the scum of the Earth and probably deserved to be wiped out. But I still couldn't forget the face of that Golem I had killed back in the City.

Once we were across the road, I realized that we were in front of another ABC store. I gave Qamar an excited look, but he immediately shook his head. I sighed and started creeping around the building. I can't ever have fun around here.

The ABC store hid our line of sight until we reached the left side of the strip mall, which was lined with a couple of bushes. I took the robot sensor thing out of my pack and checked the monitor.

"No robots," I whispered. "Must be all human."

"All raiders are human," Hương said. "No—"

"Yeah, yeah, no robot engages in unnecessary cruelty, whatever."

I put away the sensor and everyone readied their weapons. Slowly, I took point and crept around the mall to the front.

Several dirty-looking humans leapt out from behind a car. They were ready for us, and they opened fire first.

I didn't shoot to kill. That might be what cost us the fight. I sent one of them to the ground, then immediately leaped for cover behind a car. I could tell my bulletproof vest had been hit by a bullet, because it felt like someone had hit my ribs with a hammer. I realized with panic that Hương and João were on the ground and not moving. Qamar had dragged himself behind the car with me.

"They hit my leg," Qamar gasped.

I could hear footsteps approaching. I had clocked six of them. We couldn't win this fight.

"Under the car," I hissed, scooting underneath. Qamar tried to follow, but someone grabbed his foot before he could hide all the way.

"Hehehehe, gotcha!" they said, dragging him back out. "This'll teach ya to mess with—"

"Hold your fucking horses," another voice said. "Don't kill that one. He's strong and good looking, someone will pay a good price for him. Grab those two tin cans, too."

Words can't describe the anger that blossomed inside me at that moment. They were going to *sell* my brother. My innocent, friendly brother. My brother, who had wanted to spare these fuckers' lives.

I reloaded my gun quietly, under the car. Hương was right. This scum didn't deserve to live.

I was fully prepared to emerge from underneath the car, gun blazing. I felt so livid inside, I thought I could have burned the raiders alive just by looking at them. But something stopped me.

No. I couldn't rush in.

This is how I got in trouble. This is how I got people wounded or killed.

I was going to get my brother back, and I was going to make the raiders pay. But for now, I had to wait.

I clenched my fist against the rough asphalt, letting that be a substitute for punching a raider in the face. Eventually the sound of the raiders' voices faded away, and it was safe to emerge.

I crawled out and ran back to our car, my face set in determination. I had a plan, and like most of my good plans, it involved a raging bonfire.

Rascal barked and tried to lick me when I opened the door. I shoved it out of the way, ignoring its whimpering. I didn't have time right now. I turned on the car and drove it down the road, far enough that the raiders would never find it. Then I parked it, dug through Qamar's bag and retrieved the remote-detonated mine that Bailey Grace had given us.

I ran back to the gas station and tried pulling the trigger on the nozzles. A measly stream of gasoline dripped out. I flicked some of it over the ground, then dropped the nozzle. That would have to do for now.

I set the mine on the ground, close enough to reach both the pumps and the convenience store. Finally, I hid behind a bush near the ABC store and pushed the button on the detonator.

Boom!

I could feel the heat of the blast from here. A wry grin stretched across my face when I saw the flames lick the sky. That would get the raiders' attention.

Sure enough, not a minute had passed when a group of humans ran by the ABC store. Based on the yelling, it was at least three of them, maybe four. I didn't know how many were left back in

the DMV, but I was pretty sure I could take on two or three raiders alone.

I had to.

I waited long enough for the raiders to be out of sight, then rushed through the parking lot to the mall. Right between a credit union and a Mexican restaurant was a sign reading *N.C. Driver's License*. It was an unremarkable place with a boarded-up storefront. I guess this was the place.

The cloying smell of sweat and decay confirmed my suspicions as I got close to the entrance. I readied my rifle and kicked the door in.

There was a corpse rotting in the corner, chairs scattered about, walls stained with fluid I didn't want to think about. Two humans, one armed. I shot the one with a gun, and they went down instantly.

I turned to the other human, which was holding some sort of handheld gaming console. They dropped it and put their hands in the air. "I'm unarmed!" they yelled.

I ignored them and ran deeper into the DMV, where I found Qamar sitting limply against a desk, his hands tied behind his back with a zip tie. I dropped to my knees and grabbed his wrist.

"Oh thank God," I said, feeling a pulse. "Qamar. Qamar!"

Qamar cracked open his eyes. "Lake?" he muttered. "My leg really hurts..."

I heard the other raider approaching. I spun around and grabbed their arm, which was a good call, because they had a knife. I wrenched their wrist, forcing them to drop the knife, but they socked me in the cheek with their other hand.

"Oh, you're asking for it now!" I yelled. I led with a feint, then did one of the kicks Hương had showed me yesterday. It connected with their chin, and they fell to the floor.

I retrieved my rifle from the floor and approached the raider, which was scooting away from me. I stepped on their chest and pointed the rifle at their head, my face contorted with anger. "Do you have any fucking last words?" I said.

They grasped wordlessly at my legs, trying to pull me off. I could tell they were still dazed from the blow. They would offer no resistance.

"Lake, no," gasped Qamar from behind me.

I wanted to pull the trigger. I wanted it so bad. They fucking deserved it.

But not in front of Qamar.

I flipped my gun around and conked them on the head instead, knocking them out.

I grabbed the knife and went back to Qamar. I started sawing at the zip tie, which quickly broke. "Come on," I said. "They'll come back soon."

Qamar used the desk to pull himself to his feet, heavily leaning on one side. "The others," he said, pointing at a large bin in the corner.

I opened the lid on the bin to see Hương and João crammed inside, their limbs zip tied together and contorted in awkward positions. Hương's eye was dark and lifeless.

"Hi, Lake!" João said.

I grabbed João by the arms and hauled him out of the bin. He tensed his legs and arms and snapped the zip ties.

"What?!" I said. "Why were you just sitting in there if you could snap the zip ties like that?"

"I was sure you would come to save us!" he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Never mind. Help me with Hương."

We pulled Hương out of the bin together. "Is she alive?" I said.

"She will be okay," João said. "Her primary processing center was not damaged. We should get her somewhere safe to recover."

I nodded. "You get the right side."

"Wait!" João said. "My package!"

He pointed at a small cardboard box which had been tossed onto a pile of trash in the corner. "I got it," Qamar said, picking it up.

Together, we hauled Hương to the back of the DMV, where we quickly found the rear exit. Qamar joined us, limping heavily. I poked my head outside to make sure there were no raiders - probably still distracted by the fire, the idiots - then dragged Hương outside.

"Car's that way," I grunted. "Go through the trees. They won't be able to see us."

We didn't hear the sound of gunfire until we were in the car and ready to go. Cursing, I slammed on the accelerator and sped down the road as fast as it would go.

"We'll go back to Chapel Hill," I said. "We need to get patched up. Then we can head west for real."

Qamar laughed weakly. "We really need to stop... Getting mortally injured."

"We'll be more careful in the future," I said, gruffly. "No more rushing in. We can scout ahead. Set up Hương somewhere with her sniper rifle. Whatever it takes. I'm not losing you again."

Qamar brushed my arm lightly. "It's okay, Lake. We're safe. We're all okay."

I shrugged him off. "Yeah, but one day we won't be, and there's no way in hell I'm letting it be my fault!"

I stared steadily at the road ahead. I could see Qamar giving me a sad look in my peripheral vision, but I didn't have the capacity to deal with that right now.

I don't know. I was feeling a lot of emotions. Qamar could have died. I had killed one of those raiders, and I would have killed the other one if Qamar hadn't been there. Hell, if Qamar had died, I might have killed all of them.

What was I becoming?

Whatever. Everyone was safe, and that's what mattered.

I think.

CHAPTER 8

KNOWLES, OKLAHOMA

Qamar and Katydid did some light robot surgery on Hương and decided she just needed some new motors or whatever. That's when I learned that Hương's brain is actually not in her head, but strategically distributed across her body, so that she can survive decapitation as well as dismemberment. Neat. It was a tense few hours, but she eventually woke up on the operating table and snapped at Katydid for trying to fix something in her left thigh.

We didn't leave Chapel Hill until that evening. I'll admit my emotions have been running pretty high today, but by the time Qamar pulled the car onto I-40 - he insisted he was okay to drive, despite his injured leg - I was just tired. I slept all the way through Tennessee and half of Arkansas. I had a weird dream that involved Hương and an ice cream truck, but we don't need to get into that.

I woke up, blinked the sleep out of my eyes, and checked up on my team. Qamar was expressionless, eyes focused on the road. João was in the backseat, messing with some pieces of felt. Hương was asleep next to him, letting her internal repair routines work. The radio was on, but we were picking up nothing but quiet static.

I looked outside as well. It was dark, and very, very flat. There was nothing but swathes of tall grass and a single billboard advertising a place called Jelly Bean's Antique Palace, with a picture of a cartoon deer and some furniture.

"Psst. Lake," João said. I looked over my shoulder again. "I'm mean now!"

João had stuck two rectangular pieces of felt onto his face like angry eyebrows. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Those raiders better watch out," I said.

João took the felt off his face and gently stuck them onto Hương's face instead. I tried to hold in my laughter.

"I think it fits," I said.

"She only has one eye," Qamar said, looking in the rearview mirror. You should make it a unibrow.

Hương's eye blinked on, and João quickly extracted his arms. "Morning, Hương!"

"It's 3 AM," she said. She paused. "Why are you all staring at me?"

"I just noticed how, *snrk*, rakish you look today," I wheezed.

Hương felt her face, found the felt, and pulled it off. "Very funny."

The atmosphere was subdued the rest of the way to Oklahoma. I entertained myself by playing games on a phone we found stashed in the glove compartment. There were abandoned smartphones all over the USA, of course, but they were largely useless due to a lack of power and telephone networks. However, we could charge this one using a port in the SUV. I was just using it to play Angry Birds.

We eventually turned off the interstate and onto a dusty two-lane road. The scenery had somehow gotten flatter. There weren't even trees anymore, just old telephone poles leaning at various angles.

"We're here," Qamar said, after an eternity and a half. He turned us off the road onto a dirt path.

"We are?" I looked out the window. I saw a tractor in the distance, and that was about it. "It doesn't look like we're anywhere."

Qamar checked his GPS. "Knowles, Oklahoma. This is the address you gave me, right, João?"

"Yep! This is where the recipients live!"

I watched skeptically out the window as we approached a small group of houses, metal sheds, and cars, spread so far apart that it looked like they'd been dropped here accidentally.

"Try that building over there," João said, pointing.

We navigated down the gravel paths, lost, until a human emerged from one of the houses and flagged us down.

"Hey there, strangers!" she said. She rested her hand on her obviously pregnant stomach. "Can we help you?"

"Delivery for Angel?" João said, sticking his head out the window.

"Why, that would be me!" the human said.

"One second!" João dove into the trunk of the SUV and dug out his package, which was a little bit squashed, but still intact. He

emerged out the back of our car and offered it to her, beaming. "This is from someone named Tushar."

"Oh, what a surprise!" she said, taking the package. "Is Tushar doing okay?"

"I don't know!"

"Hah. Well, I supposed that's fair. You're just the messenger." She turned her attention to me and Qamar. "My, you look tired. Did you come all this way just to deliver this package? Would you like to rest here for the night?"

"That would be amazing," Qamar said, wearily. "I'm going to fall asleep at the wheel if we keep going."

We all staggered out of the car and introduced ourselves. There was a little bit of a fright when Rascal bounded out of the backseat, but we quickly explained that he was friendly. He gave Angel a few licks to demonstrate.

"Well, that's something," Angel said.

She led us back toward her house. A little kid was peering at us from the front door.

"Hello, little friend," Qamar said, brightly.

"Hello," said the kid.

"Zoe!" Angel said. "What are you doing awake!"

"Sorry." Zoe stared at us, wide-eyed.

"These are just a couple of guests," Angel said. "They'll be staying the night. Run back to the bedroom, dear. I'll be there soon."

Zoe ran off. Angel led us past the entry hall and into a cute little kitchen. Decorative plates with pictures of farm animals on them lined a shelf on the wall. There was a big grandfather clock, complete with swinging pendulum

"Do you need any water or food?" she said. "My house is your house!"

"Some water would be nice," I said. "Thanks."

She busied herself finding some glasses while we awkwardly stood around. This was a nice house. Much nicer than mine.

"It's been a while since we had any visitors," Angel said. "We're really out in the middle of nowhere!"

"How many people live here?" Qamar asked.

"Eleven," Angel said. "Soon to be twelve." She winked at us and patted her stomach.

"Wait." I furrowed my brow. "The eleven of you... just... live out here? Alone?"

"Well, we're not alone, darling, we have each other." Angel set down two glasses of water.

Qamar shot me a *That was rude* look, then said, "It looks like a nice little community. I bet you don't get a lot of killbots out here, either."

"Oh, heavens, no," Angel said. "We haven't seen a killbot in years."

"Lucky," I breathed.

We sipped out water as Angel grabbed a pair of scissors and cut open the package. From inside, she pulled out a teddy bear and a little greeting card with flowers on it.

"Oh wow!" she said. "Must be an early push present. I'm sure the little one will love it."

"I'm glad you like it!" João said. "Getting it here was quite an adventure!"

I stared in disbelief, then shot an accusing look at João that was completely lost on him. I didn't want to say anything and be rude, given how nice Angel had been, but REALLY? We risked our lives for A TEDDY BEAR?!

"Keep it together," Qamar whispered to me, and I knew he was thinking the same thing. It's fine. I'm fine.

We finished our drinks. Qamar and João chatted politely with Angel. But it must have been clear we were exhausted, because Angel quickly swept up our glasses and led us to a pair of bedrooms.

"Sorry, we only have two mattresses," she said.

"It's fine. Qamar and I can share," I said.

"Hương and I can share!" João said. "I don't really need to sleep, anyway."

"Wonderful. Just let me know if you need anything, alright? The bathroom is just over here." Angel smiled and left.

I wandered into the bathroom and found, to my surprise, that there was running water. They must have gotten it hooked up to a nearby well, or something. After nearly slipping and hitting my head in excitement, I found some soap and took a nice, long shower.

"Qamar," I said, stepping out of the bathroom in a towel.

Qamar was spread-eagle on the bed, staring at the ceiling.
"Mhm?"

"I think we might have just found paradise."

"Maybe."

Eventually, Qamar and I finished cleaning up and collapsed onto our bed. João lay down on the other bed, I assume out of politeness, since he kept his eyes open. Hương chose to just sit in a nearby rocking chair while she went into standby mode.

The mattress was spotless and soft. The temperature was nice. I was clean for the first time in weeks. I could almost pretend like the fall had never happened.

It was perfect in every way.

I stared up at the ceiling for about thirty minutes, listening to Qamar breathe deeply beside me. I couldn't sleep.

Eventually, I eased myself out of bed, put my boots back on, and went outside. Even at night, it was warm, and there was a slight breeze. I wandered past the garage and out into the

plains, going far enough that the buildings in Knowles were just bumps on the horizon of an endless grassy plain.

I lay down on the grass and looked up at the stars, letting them numb my brain. I didn't want to think about anything right now.

"Lake!" João said, jogging up to me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just couldn't sleep."

"Oh, good. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Thanks."

João lay down next to me. "The stars are beautiful, aren't they?"

"They're alright."

We were silent for a bit.

"Wouldn't it be nice to stay here?" I murmured. "Live in a perfect bubble in the middle of the Great Plains. Work in the fields. Never have to kill another killbot or raider as long as we live."

"That sounds nice," João said.

"Or what if I just started walking?" I said. "Out into the grass. Just wander the plains for the rest of my life and then keel over and die somewhere, like I deserve."

"You should probably not do that."

"Yeah, probably."

João thought for a minute, then said, "This is a nice place to take a break. But I couldn't just stay here and do nothing. I want to help people. That's why I became a courier!"

I sighed. "João, you're a better person than any of us," I said.
"And I meant it."

"Oh, shucks. Thank you."

Pause.

"I couldn't live here either. I would get bored."

"Mhm."

Pause.

I turned my head to look at João. "What are you going to do now that you've delivered your package?"

"I think I'll stay with you. If you don't mind."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"I said I want to help people!" João said, cheerfully. "And whether you intend to or not, you and your friends are helping people."

I nodded. "I guess."

There was another minute of silence.

"Lake," João said, "I really mean it. You are making the world a better place, little by little. Don't beat yourself up too much for making mistakes. We all have to do what we have to do."

I lay there for another couple of minutes, then stood up. "Come on," I said. "Let's go back inside."

- - - - -

We slept way late and woke up with the sun high in the sky. Angel fed us some cornbread and milk when we went downstairs. It was delicious, but I was itching to leave. Soon, we were climbing back into the car.

"Alright, next stop, Phoenix, Arizona!" I said, pulling away down the gravel road. Rascal howled excitedly. João waved through the window at Angel and Zoe. Zoe waved back. What an adorable little tyke.

The rest of Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico went by without a hitch. The prairie turned to foothills, then mountains, then desert. I'd never been to this part of America before, and I was amazed by its sandy hills and tough, scraggly plants. Not to mention the heat. It felt like we were on a different planet.

We skirted around Amarillo, which was apparently occupied by raiders, according to security radio, and got jumped by a few howlers near Albuquerque. Nothing we couldn't handle.

We were approaching Phoenix from Route 60 when we saw something strange.

"Look, a truck!" João said, pointing down the road. I squinted.

"It's one of those military transport trucks," I said, gripping my rifle. "Get ready for trouble."

Despite my misgivings, they passed by peacefully on the other side of the road. I got a glimpse of a bunch of robots of varying models in the back, and maybe a human too. No combat units.

"What was that?" Qamar asked. "We haven't seen anyone on the road for days, and then we see a truck full of robots?"

"I'm going to follow it," I said, doing a swift U-turn. "I'd bet anything it's related to Philomena."

I tried to maintain enough distance that it wouldn't notice, but there's no telling if I succeeded. It eventually led us to a little town that Qamar identified as Superior, a dusty place full of flat houses with a nice view of the mountains in the distance.

"There's no sign of life," Hương commented.

"Guess the killbots skipped over this town," I said.

I eased the car to a stop near the north end of the town. We watched the truck go off-road, bouncing along the dirt paths toward a tall, chain-link fence. It stopped next to a small building, where a robot strolled out and had a conversation with whoever was in the driver's seat. The robot went back into the building for a minute, then came outside and flashed a thumbs up. A gate slowly creaked open - automatic, apparently - and the truck went rolling through.

"This is the Resolution Copper mine," Qamar said, reading off of his GPS. "It's a pre-fall company that mined, well, copper."

"I didn't know there were still active mines," I said. "Who bother mining copper when there's so much scrap lying around?"

"Someone with a lot invested into constructing a robot army," Hương said dryly.

"Oh," I said. "That makes sense."

"We're just outside of Phoenix, too," Qamar said. "If Philomena's base is here, it would make sense for her to maintain a mining operation too."

"We should investigate!" I concluded. "So what's the plan? We could probably climb that fence, if we came from a more secluded direction. Or maybe we could try to catch a vehicle going in or out."

"What if we go up and ask?" João piped in from the backseat.

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Philomena's not just going to hand over her secrets."

"Wait," Qamar said. "What's the harm in just driving up and asking for information? This is a mining facility. There's no reason for them to attack random cars passing by. And if that doesn't work, *then* we can try to sneak in."

To my utter dismay, the others all agreed that going up and asking was a good idea. I'll never understand these people.

Reluctantly, I drove our car up to the same gate that the truck had passed by, and the same robot sauntered out to meet us. I rolled down my window.

"Work permits?" it asked.

"Uhhhhh," I said, then turned to Qamar. I knew by this point to let him handle the talking. He leaned over me to greet the robot.

"Hello, friend!" he said. "We actually don't work here. We're just traveling through the area and wondered if you could answer some questions."

"Mhm," the robot grunted.

"First of all - can I say - this is a very impressive operation! I had no idea a mining facility of this magnitude was still in operation. It's good to see people rebuilding America's industries."

"Mhm," the robot said again.

"A-and, well, I was wondering, who is it that's behind this magnificent project?"

"Why do you need to know?" asked the robot. It rested its hand on a handgun on its belt, which made me a little nervous. I sank down in my seat, ready to hit the accelerator at a moment's notice.

"Oh, just, pure curiosity, is all!" Qamar grinned nervously. "Um, if you'd rather not say, that's fine. We're actually looking for a particular robot who we think might be in the area. I was wondering if you've heard of anyone named... Philomena?"

"Philomena, huh?" the robot said, squinting. "Am I supposed to believe you hooligans work for her?"

"Uh, yes, we do!" Qamar said.

"What department?"

Qamar swallowed. "Research and development?"

The robot moved its hand off its gun. "Well, why didn't you say so!" It waved us away. "Even if you're part of R&D, you need a permit to get into the mine. Skedaddle."

"Yes, of course, right away!" Qamar said. I took that as my cue to drive us right out of that awkward situation.

Once we were out of eyesight, I parked again. "Okay, there," I said. "We tried asking nicely. Happy?"

"Well, it wasn't for nothing!" Qamar said. "Now we know for sure the mine is associated with Philomena. And that she has an R&D team."

"She's probably forcing all those poor robots to work in the mines," João said. "Via their remote command routine."

"Or at least coercing them somehow," I agreed.

"Another military truck is coming," Hương said. I turned to see that another identical truck was bouncing down the road, kicking up dust.

"We can sneak in on the truck!" I said, immediately.

Qamar furrowed his brow. "Do you think that's safe?"

"Safer than hopping a fence that's probably under surveillance," I said, getting excited. "What if we climb into the back of the truck while it's waiting at the gate?"

"I agree with Lake," Hương said. I grinned - I was starting to enjoy her saying that. "And we need to act fast."

Qamar looked worried, but he nodded. "Okay. Let's get ready."

We quickly stuffed supplies into our bags and hopped out of the car. I couldn't take my rifle, but I shoved a spare handgun into my bag. I would have to be content with that.

"Stay here, Rascal, okay?" João said. "We'll come back to you soon!"

Rascal yipped once in affirmation.

We all rushed toward the mine, staying hidden behind buildings as best as we could. By the time the gate was in view, the gatekeeper was chatting with the truck driver, just like last time. We huddled behind a building, waiting for it to go away.

I poked my neck around the corner and saw the gatekeeper returning to its post. I motioned silently with my hand, and all four of us sprinted out toward the truck.

"Qamar, you first," I hissed, helping boost him up. His leg was still in a bad condition. He gave me a thankful look and pulled himself over the back end of the truck bed. I clambered over after him.

"Um, h-hello, friends!" Qamar said, quivering under the gaze of all eleven robots and two humans in the back of the truck. "We were running late. Sorry for cutting it so close."

"What's up?" I said, nonchalantly.

There was no response as Hương and João joined us, though a couple of them kept staring. I leaned against the wall of the truck and whistled, trying not to look self-conscious.

"I'm excited for a fresh new day of work," João said. "Aren't you?!"

A couple of the robots shrugged. "Excited for my paycheck tonight," said one of the humans.

With an electric buzz, the gate opened up, and the truck started rolling through. I cracked a grin. Infiltration: Successful.

I peeked over the edge of the truck, watching the dirt road roll by. There were a couple of buildings within the perimeter - probably offices - and some weird steel machines that I didn't recognize.

"Where's, like, the pit?" I whispered to the others.

"It's an underground mine," Qamar whispered back. "There's no pit. We'll go in through a mine shaft."

Panic struck me in the heart. "Um," I muttered. "Is this a bad time to mention that I'm claustrophobic?"

Qamar gave me a concerned look, but there was nothing we could do. The truck rolled to a stop next to the other truck we had seen earlier, both parked next to a ramp leading into very, VERY ominous hole in the ground.

I tried taking deep breaths as a robot - a supervisor, I'm guessing - pulled open the back of the truck and motioned for us to get out. It's probably not as bad as I was expecting. Heck, the anticipation is probably worse than the mine itself. Right? My heart started pounding as we exited the truck.

We walked as a group to a little shelter near the mine entrance, where the miners started donning hard hats and orange vests. I grabbed some at random and put them on. I realized my hands were shaking when I had trouble doing the latch on the hat.

Qamar came over and clicked the latch into position for me. Then he squeezed my hand. "It'll be okay," he whispered.

I nodded. "Mhm. Yeah. I'm cool. Everything's cool. Why wouldn't I be cool? Where's my pickaxe?"

"Miners don't use pickaxes anymore," Qamar whispered.

"Damn," I said. "I was thinking having a pickaxe would be cool. There goes my entire coping mechanism."

Qamar ushered Hương and João over as well. "Let's just gather information from some of the miners and then make an excuse to get out," he said. "The important stuff will probably be in the offices."

Hương nodded curtly. It looked like João had something to add, but the group was already moving on, so we hurried to follow.

We got onto yet another truck, this one yellow and much sturdier. Oh, and this one had benches to sit on. So there's a silver lining.

I shuddered involuntarily as we passed into the hole, a shadow falling over us. Nothing but rock walls surrounded us. I watched anxiously behind us as the square of light shrank away, leaving only the truck's headlights to illuminate the shaft. Qamar squeezed my hand again.

"I'm fine I'm fine I'm fine," I repeated. At least the shaft was pretty wide, big enough for two trucks to pass through. It was pretty dark, and my heart was still hammering out of my chest, but I think I could manage. I swallowed and took a deep breath. Easy does it, Lake.

The other miners started chatting amongst themselves. I tried to listen it, but it was difficult over the echoing sound of the truck. So I just sat in the corner of the truck bed, fidgeting. I felt kind of dumb to be holding Qamar's hand in public, but it was the

only thing comforting me right now, so I sure as hell wasn't going to let go. Hương and João sat silently by my side.

"So," Qamar said, to the robot sitting next to him. "Pretty crazy what Philomena's doing, huh?"

"Hm?" the robot said, politely.

"W-well, I heard she's been travelling all over the east coast," Qamar said. "In person. It's anyone's guess what she's doing over there."

"Ah, probably recruiting people to the cause!" said the robot, brightly.

I raised my eyebrows. Recruiting? Not kidnapping? These robots must be badly brainwashed.

Qamar hesitated. "Oh, yes, of course. It's always good to recruit more people. Say - I've been trying to convince one of my friends to join the cause, but, I can never find the right words. How do you do it?"

"Oh, that's easy!" the robot said. "Just tell them about the benefits! Thirty dollars an hour with on-site training and accident coverage? Who could say no?!"

"Wait," I said, breaking into the conversation. "So, you're not being, like coerced, or anything? You're working here of your free will?"

"Uh, yeah?" The robot tilted her head. "Why wouldn't I?"

I fell silent, nonplussed.

"Don't mind them!" Qamar said, jumping in. "Haha. They're one of those, you know, conspiracy theorists. I am curious though - how did you find out about this job?"

A dreamy expression crossed the robot's face. "Oh, I joined the cause the moment I met Philomena. Yeah, I met her face to face! I was in a dark place when I met her, but she was just so bursting with optimism and joy, it was infectious. I wanted to believe a bright future was possible. Call me a dreamer." She shrugged.

"Ooh, I see." Qamar gave me an astonished look. I shrugged.

"Sorry, kind of a weird foot to get started on," the robot said with a laugh. "You and your friends must be new. What's your name?"

"Qamar," he said. "Nice to meet you!"

"I'm Wei," the robot said. "Just let me know if you need any help with anything. Oh, and let me know if I'm talking your ear off too much. I can be a little hyper sometimes. My friends call me Sunbeam. But mostly I think they're making fun of me. So Wei is fine!" She beamed at us.

I realized this conversation was distracting me from the dark walls of the mine - oh God were they closing in - so I jumped at the opportunity to join in. "So," I said, "I'm sorry, I missed the orientation - what exactly *is* Philomena's great plan?"

"Oh - Well, I guess it might be hard for you to understand, as a human," Wei said. "The bottom line is, America needs a leader! Someone who's capable and smart and will make all the right

decisions, and deal with the killbots, and get America's infrastructure up and running again."

I scrunched my nose. "And... Why do you think that that someone is Philomena?"

Wei looked shocked. "Oh - hahaha! No, Philomena won't be our leader. No no no, she's just an organizer. Some call her a prophet. Our leader hasn't even been created yet! But once it is, it'll be such an incredibly powerful AI that it can solve all our problems! Just imagine, some of the copper we're mining might end up as part of its wires!!!"

Okay, I was starting to get very culty vibes from this situation. I tried to look interested and nodded along with her. "Ahhh, okay, I see. Yeah, that checks out."

But yeah, no, it didn't check out at all. Philomena wasn't trying to *save* America. No one *saved* America by kidnapping grandmas and waging war on little towns in New York. If anything, she was going to conquer America and rule it with an iron fist.

"This robot does not know what she's talking about," João whispered to me. I nodded, in agreement. Hương just watched everything, eye whirring furiously.

The shaft winded down and down in a spiral, so far down that I was certain we had left earth and driven straight into Hell. After about an eternity, or maybe ten minutes, we stopped at a rocky underground chamber with mineshafts shooting out in multiple directions. It was lit by a single gloomy lantern, and the air was so dusty I felt like I constantly had to sneeze. The miners started getting out of the truck.

"Hey," said a tall robot striding over to the truck. "You four don't look familiar."

"Oh, we're new!" Qamar said. "I'm Qamar. It's a pleasure to be, uh, working under you."

The robot didn't look convinced. She leaned over Qamar, causing him to visibly shrink. "I'm going to have to ask for your work permits."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Wei said, stepping between Qamar and the other robot. "I'm sure they left it up on the surface with the rest of their stuff. They're with me! I'm supervising them while they're on their probationary period."

The tall robot stood up straight again. "Really."

"Yep!" Wei said. "By the way, Gertrude, can I say, you are looking particularly intimidating today!"

Gertrude stood up taller. "Why, thank you. I've been working on my leer."

"It's positively frightening." Wei beamed.

Gertrude nodded. "Alright, alright, enough flattery. Make sure the newbies don't cause any trouble."

"Not on my watch!" Wei said, proudly. Gertrude huffed and strode away.

"Thank you," Qamar whispered, once she was gone.

"Don't worry," Wei said, lowering her voice. "I got the feeling you're not actually miners."

"How did you know?" Hương asked, a hint of danger in her voice.

"That one's wearing his hard hat backwards," Wei said, pointing at João. He started and fixed his hat. "And this one's shaking so hard they would never be able to operate a driller!"

I looked down and saw that, yes, my hands were still shaking.

"Don't worry," Wei said, with a wink. "I won't turn you in. I can show you how to drive a drill rig if you want!"

"That's okay," Qamar said. "Actually -" he looked around nervously, but most of the miners had already dispersed. "The real truth is, one of our loved ones went missing, and we think she might be in this area. So we were hoping to find clues in this mine."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Wei whispered. "Well, you won't be finding clues down here, just lots of ore."

"Do you think you could help us get into the offices?" Qamar asked.

Wei hesitated. "Umm... I don't think that's really within my power. I guess the offices are usually empty after 6 PM, but the doors will be locked, and security is constantly roaming the grounds. If I were you I would look for clues elsewhere."

Qamar nodded. "Okay. Thank you so much, Wei. We owe you one."

"Don't worry about it!" Wei said, brightly. "Good luck finding your loved one!"

Qamar waved goodbye. Behind us, I noticed the truck starting to drive back up the tunnel.

"WAIT!!" I yelled, waving my arms frantically as I ran after the truck. "Don't go! Take me out of this hellhole!!"

With a sigh, Qamar chased after me. João and Hương followed suit.

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I nearly collapsed in relief when we emerged back onto the surface. I managed to make it to the shelter, where I tossed my hard hat onto the ground and sat down heavily on a bench.

"OH MY GOD," I said. "Being that far underground - *pant* - is an affront to nature - *pant* - and I'm never doing it again."

Qamar patted me on the back. "Hang in there, Lake."

"You did great!" João said. "I've had to face my greatest fear before, and I assure you that I wasn't nearly as composed as you."

I furrowed my brow. "What's your greatest fear?"

João grimaced. "Horses."

"I analyzed the guards' routes as we entered the perimeter," Hương said, removing her hat as well. "There are three pairs of guards patrolling the outside of the perimeter. There is one pair keeping watch near the entrance, on the inside. They shouldn't bother us if we act like we belong here."

"Damn, really?" I said, scratching my head. "I was so scared about going underground I honestly didn't notice."

"Remember, act like we belong," Qamar said. "Let's hurry up before someone realizes that's not the case."

We grabbed our bags and hurried back toward the front gate. I started out jogging, but then I slowed down to a speed walk, since that probably looked suspicious. Actually, speed walking is probably even more suspicious, so I went to normal walking. I don't know. I'm bad at acting. We've been over this.

Thankfully, we got to the office without running into any problems. We tacitly stood on either side of Hương while she worked on the lock, to cut off anyone watching.

"Nice weather today, huh?" Qamar said, trying to sound natural.

"Honestly?" I said. "Way too hot."

"Agreed."

The lock clicked, and Hương retracted her weird wrist cables. She opened the door and led us all inside.

I felt along the wall and turned on the light. We were in a nice little reception area, with a big sign that said Resolution Copper. But someone had taped a piece of paper over *Resolution* with the word *Philomena* on it.

"Subtle," I remarked.

"Qamar, João, check those doors," Hương said, pointing to the left. "I'll check the one to the right. Lake, the desk. Look for any information about Philomena's base or operations."

"Yes, captain," I said, vaulting the desk. The others disappeared into their respective doors.

"This one's a bathroom!" João called from his door. "But there's a file cabinet in here for some reason!"

"Good work, João!" I called back.

There were some papers on the desk, which I shuffled through. There was way too much text to read all of it, so I looked for key words at the top of the page. Work permits, employee register, vehicle maintenance, blah blah blah. Lots of talk about copper, not much talk about conquering the world.

I opened the drawers and found myself faced with even more stacks of papers.

"Okay, fuck this," I muttered, turning my attention to the computer again. It had power, but it was locked. "Anyone have any idea what the password is?"

"Hold on!" João said, running out of the bathroom. "Let me take a look."

I stepped out of the way as João restarted the computer and started typing on the keyboard. I have to admit, I was impressed. His fingers were a blur. Finally, the desktop appeared on the screen, and he pushed the keyboard over to me.

"All yours!"

"Wait, how did you do that?" I asked, fascinated, pulling up the file explorer.

"I used to be a hacker," João said, heading back into the bathroom.

I tilted my head. "I thought you used to be a field medic?"

"I used to be a hacker, then I quit to become a field medic, then I quit to be a courier!"

"Wow," I said. "Truly a João of all trades."

"Good one!"

I opened the Documents folder and started looking for anything interesting. Mostly, there were a lot of useless spreadsheets about finances. I stopped short at a folder called Sexy Robot Babes.

"Huh," I said.

"Did you find something?" Qamar yelled from the other room.

"Nah, don't worry about it," I said. I hesitated, then opened the folder. "Ooh, okay," I murmured, scrolling. "Interesting."

The sound of the door creaking shocked me out of my reverie. I immediately dropped behind the desk.

"Damn," muttered a voice I recognized as the gatekeeper.

"Forgot to turn off the lights, again."

I held my breath as it walked past my desk and into the bathroom.

"Whoops!" João said. "Occupied!"

"What the—" the gatekeeper's footsteps stopped. "Wait a second. You're one of those hooligans that tried to get in earlier!"

That was my cue. I slung my bag over my shoulder and leaped over the counter.

The robot turned around. "Who the hell—"

I hit it with a spinning side kick that Hương had taught me, which sent it to the floor. I feel like that would have dazed a human, but the gatekeeper just scrambled away from me and pulled out a walkie-talkie.

"Security!" it yelled. "The office—"

João snatched the walkie-talkie away out of its hand, then shoved the gatekeeper into the bathroom, closed the door, and leaned on it.

"Hello?" said a voice from the walkie-talkie. *"What about the office?"*

"It's in tip-top shape!" João said. "Just wanted to say hi. Have to go now. Bye-bye!" He turned off the device.

"Okay, we should probably leave now," I said, over the sound of muffled cursing from the bathroom.

Hương raced out of her room. "I took a laptop and some walkie-talkies."

"I got some documents!" yelled Qamar, still stuffing paper into his bag when he ran out.

"Okay, let's roll!" I said, throwing open the front door.

I was greeted by two surprised robot guards with guns. I immediately elbowed one in the face and followed up with a punch at the second guard, which blocked me with its gun. A few more well-placed jabs and the second guard fell.

The first guard recovered and grabbed my arm, only to be met by the *Bam!* of Qamar's pistol. It let go of me, clutching its damaged arm. I wrenched the rifle from its hands and then started running.

"Come on!" I yelled. The other three followed me.

I made a beeline for the nearest fence, but noticed guards approaching in the distance, outside the perimeter. I brought the rifle to my face and started spraying at them while I walked. I put on a wry grin when one of them fell. Despite it all, I was still a sharpshooter.

"Qamar first," Hương said, cupping her hands to give him a boost. Qamar leapt off of her hands and used the momentum to scramble over the top of the fence.

The other approaching guard opened fire on me. It was times like these that I wished that Arizona wasn't so fucking flat. With nothing but tiny shrubs to hide behind, I dove to the floor. My prone body would be a harder target to hit. I carefully lined up my shot and took out the guard's leg. It stumbled and fell.

"Lake!" Hương yelled, dropping off the fence onto the other side. João had already gotten over. I scrambled to my feet, tossed the gun over the fence - Qamar caught it - and climbed the chain-link fence as fast as I could. The holes were too small

for me to get a foothold, so I had to rely on arm strength to get up most of the way.

I dropped heavily to the other side and rolled to absorb the impact. "Damn, you made that look easier than it is," I gasped.

"More guards are coming," Hương said, sprinting off toward the town. I kept my head low as we ran. I heard bullets whiz by, but thankfully, none of us were hit.

We didn't let up on the pace even when we reached the town. We sprinted down the cracked roads, took a shortcut over someone's metal fence, and piled into the car.

Rascal barked happily as we returned and started licking João all over. I turned the key and floored the accelerator.

"Do you think they'll follow?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder.

"No sign of them yet," Hương reported. "Go fast, just in case."

"Seatbelts!" Qamar said.

We put on our seatbelts.

CHAPTER 9
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Once we were fifteen minutes out of Superior, surrounded by nothing but foothills and cacti, I parked on the side of the road so we could talk.

"Sorry about the guards," I said to Hương.

She whirred. "What are you sorry for?"

"I don't know. For hurting more robots, I guess." I scratched my neck with my free hand. "I aimed for the limbs. If that means anything."

"You don't need to apologize for protecting us," Hương said.

I shrugged. "Cool."

"But it's good that you didn't aim to kill."

"Yeah."

Qamar was skimming through his documents in the passenger seat. "This one's about employees," he said. He shuffled through. "It doesn't look like Wei was lying. They really do make thirty dollars an hour."

"Damn, even Fern doesn't pay us that much," I said.

Hương was on the laptop. "There's a map saved on this laptop of Phoenix," she said. "We're on the right track."

"Any mention of Serendipity?" I said, looking over my shoulder. "Or whatever lab was in charge of Project Serendipity? AM Robotics again?"

"Intuition Research Institute," Qamar corrected. "Phoenix branch."

"This budget document mentions Intuition," Hương says, turning the laptop around to show us. "That's where the paycheck is coming from."

"Welp, guess we know for sure," I said. "Philomena wants to resurrect Project Serendipity, and then use the super-intelligent AI to take over America."

"It seems likely," Hương said.

"So!" I drummed my fingers on the wheel. "What's the plan? How do we infiltrate Intuition Research Lab?"

"Institute," Qamar corrected.

"Yeah, that."

We were all silent for a while, thinking.

"João, you said you were a hacker, right?" Qamar said after a while. "Do you think you could operate the emitter?"

"Oh, maybe," he said, sounding surprised. "I might be able to connect to it on this laptop. What for?"

Qamar shrugged. "Eutteum made it sound pretty powerful. Maybe we could hijack the security system at Intuition. Or even hack into robots' RCRs."

"I would prefer if we did not forcibly take control of robots,"
Hương said.

"But if it's necessary?" I said.

"If it's necessary."

João took the laptop and the emitter and started typing away.

"Can we go find a bathroom?" Qamar said. "I have to pee. I can't think."

I started up the car again. "Alright. Bathroom break. Then we save Nonna."

"And the world!" João said.

"Sure, if we get around to it."

We pulled up to the outskirts of Phoenix. I had been expecting skyscrapers like New York City, but Phoenix was much flatter and spread out. I looked out my window grimly. Not a great place for a covert mission. There was hardly any cover.

"Here we go," I said, pulling up to a Chevron. Qamar undid his seatbelt and hopped out of the car.

"I think I can connect!" João said. "There's some security on it, but it's nothing I can't handle. Give me ten minutes."

"Then what?" I asked.

João shrugged. "I don't know. Getting access to the emitter is one thing, but figuring out what pattern of waves to emit is another. I would have to be pretty familiar with the security system I'm trying to sabotage."

"The remote command routine was standardized for the last eight years before the fall," Hương said, sounding reluctant. "I have an RCR manual in my internal storage. It may be useful. Do you want it?"

"Yes please," João said.

Rascal started barking out the window. I reached back and patted him on the head. "What's wrong, bot?"

I followed its gaze and saw a van was pulling away on a neighboring street.

"We have company," I said, urgently, putting the car into drive.

"Wait for Qamar," Hương said.

"He's been in there an awfully long time..." João said.

"Fuck," I breathed, understanding descending on me. I undid my seatbelt and leaped out of the car with my stolen rifle. "No! We shouldn't have let him go alone!"

João and Hương scrambled out of the car after me. I burst through the door to the convenience store. The back door was swinging in the breeze, and several of the shelves were knocked over.

"No, no, NO!" I yelled, running to the back door and looking out at the road. The van was already out of sight. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" I shoved a shelf in frustration, sending it crashing to the floor.

"They took Qamar," João said, in disbelief.

I covered my face with my hands. "No, no, no, no, no," I repeated, in shock. "This isn't happening. Not again. We should have been more careful."

"It's okay," João said, putting one hand on my shoulder. "We'll find him."

"We shouldn't have lost him in the first place!" I yelled, shoving João away. "I keep almost losing you guys! This can't keep happening! They could kill him at any moment!"

"Lake, this isn't your fault," João said.

"Like hell it isn't!"

"Lake," Hương said, severely. "Beating yourself up will not save your brother. Come back to the car."

I kicked over another shelf, screamed, then took three deep breaths.

Qamar was depending on me. Nonna was depending on me. I couldn't lose focus right now. And we were NOT rushing in this time.

I followed Hương back to the car.

"Philomena is going down," I said, darkly. "She was already going down before, but now she's going down for real. And she better not fucking touch my brother."

"What do you want me to do with the emitter?" João asked, meekly, getting into the backseat.

"I don't know," I said. "Let me think."

We didn't know enough about their security to hack into it. We didn't have an army to engage them up front. We would have to sneak in, but how would we even approach without security stopping us?

It wasn't like raiding a killbot-filled hospital. This was an organized army, they knew we were coming, and we were massively outnumbered.

It was impossible, alone.

Then a flash of inspiration struck me.

"The drifter emissions," I gasped. "We have the notes Qamar got from Eutteum. What if we used the emitter to call killbots here and used them to lay siege to the lab?!"

I turned to the others, excited.

"That's a terrible idea," Hương said, at the same time that João said "Great idea, Lake!"

"How are we going to stop them from attacking us?" Hương said. "Or killing people indiscriminately?"

"The drifter can control them down to the individual movements, remember?" I said. "That's how they trapped us in the hospital." I dove into Qamar's bags and tried to find the flash drive he had mentioned.

"I can give it a shot!" João said. "It might take some trial and error, but so does all the best science!"

Hương didn't seem happy about it, but I was determined now. I pulled the car out of the gas station and sped down the roads of Phoenix.

"We need to make sure we're not being followed," I said. "I'll make it look like we're leaving."

I drove the car in winding circles around Phoenix for a while. The city was truly abandoned - we didn't see a hint of survivors or killbots the whole time. God, I hoped there were killbots hidden around here somewhere, or this entire plan would fall flat.

I took us off-road and drove into the desert, then parked the car next to a big cactus. We planted the emitter at the base of the cactus, then drove a safe distance away, as if we were detonating a bomb.

"Okay, I've been going through Eutteum's work!" João said, looking up from his laptop. "He managed to isolate a number of distinct signals, which can be combined in different ways. All we have to do is try them one by one, and we'll find out what they do!"

"And not get murdered by killbots in the process," Hương added bitterly, loading her sniper rifle.

"Hopefully!" João said. "Euttem says the drifter was near-constantly emitting this one, sort of like background noise. Maybe that means it just attracts killbots. Should I send it through?"

I nodded. "Hit it."

He pressed a button on the keyboard, and nothing happened.

"Did you do it?"

"Yep!"

"Hm." I leaned back on my seat, leaving the car idling as we waited.

It only took thirty seconds before we heard the shriek of a howler pack.

"Oh shit," I said, sitting up. "It worked."

"There," Hương said, pointing to the side. Silver dots were approaching across the desert. Very quickly.

"Wait, turn it off, turn it off," I said. "We don't want to fight them."

"Turning it off now."

We waited in tense silence, but the howlers continued approaching. Another howl split the sky.

"Okay, time to drive!" I said, slamming on the accelerator.

"I'll keep trying signals!" João said. "Here's number two!"

We sped across the desert, throwing up dirt and bumping over little shrubs. I went around the outskirts of Phoenix, hoping the buildings would throw them off. Our top speed was not very encouraging. This SUV was definitely not built for off-road travel.

"They're not stopping," Hương reported, looking out the back. She aimed her sniper rifle out the window and started taking shots.

"Number three," João said.

A group of scuttlers emerged from the buildings ahead of us, crawling over the walls and floors. I yelped and turned the wheel all the way to the left, sending us skidding. I couldn't turn fast enough. The scuttlers started climbing up the side of the car, a few dropping off as we sped away.

"Sorry, sorry!" João yelped. Hương blasted one off the car through her open window. "Number four!"

"The howlers are catching up!" I yelled. "I'm turning into the city, we'll be faster there!"

I drove right through one of those metal traffic barriers on the side of the road, sending metal clattering across the ground. With another impressive skid, we started zooming down the highway.

A howler took advantage of our slow turn to latch onto the backdoor. I immediately slapped the trunk button, popping open the trunk and knocking the howler off. A follow up *Bang!* from Hương took care of it.

"Deja vu," I commented under my breath.

I did not think this through, because another howler jumped right into our trunk, digging its claws into the felt.

"Close it, close it!" João yelled.

I slammed the button and the trunk started closing. Hương whiffed her shot, allowing the howler to leap over the backseat. Rascal sprung into action, meeting it midair, and the two of them fell to the floor, claws entangled in each other.

"Get off of Rascal!" João yelled, shooting the howler with Qamar's shotgun. It yelped once and went limp. Rascal scrambled to its feet, with a few more lacerations in its metal exterior than before.

"Lake, watch out!" Hương yelled. I turned my attention back to the road and realized we were about to drift off the road and hit a stop sign. I turned the wheel, but it was too late - we spun out of control, and by the time I got the car moving again, the pack had caught up.

I heard one thud, then another, as they leaped onto the car. There was a rending noise as their claws ripped into the roof, and then a loud *Pop!*

"Fuck, the tires!" I yelled.

"Signal five!" João yelled.

The howls abruptly stopped. I checked the rearview mirror to find the pack standing at the center of the road, completely still.

"Oh, thank God," I said, slumping down into my seat.

I let the car slow down to a stop. The howlers didn't move. I opened the door and checked our roof, to find two howlers just standing there, their claws digging into the metal. Rascal started barking at them.

"Hooray!" João said. "The scientific method prevails again!"

Hương calmly reloaded her sniper rifle, eye whirring. "I didn't know science was so exciting."

The tire was a goner, so we packed our bags and trekked on foot back to where we'd left the emitter. It was an eerie sight. There were killbots of all varieties gathered all around it, like a hundred metal statues. I leaned up close to a shredder and tapped its metal frame.

"Be careful," Hương says. "We should stay away from them. If the signal fails then we have no getaway vehicle."

"It's fiiiine," I said. "Right, João? We're fine, right?"

"Um, maybe!" he said. "I want to start combining different signals next. Maybe we should find another car."

Thankfully, the search for working cars was much quicker this time. We just broke into a nearby house and got the car out of their garage. There were some advantages to looting a city that hadn't already been vandalized to hell and back.

The rest of our experiment went much smoother. As long as João kept signal five running, the killbots were completely docile. A combination of signals two, three, and seven determined the direction they walked. Signal four and six made them start dispersing. Signal one called them back.

Signal eight was a bit of a surprise. As soon as João turned it on, all the killbots collapsed to the ground at once, with a resounding clunking of metal.

"What did you do?!" I asked, peering over the steering wheel, fascinated.

"I don't know!" João said, typing furiously. "None of the signals are doing anything. They might just be dead."

"That'll be a handy failsafe," I said.

Me and Hương worked out the plan of attack while João perfected his killbot-commanding system and attracted more killbots to the area. We would set up João a safe distance away, then surround the lab with killbots. We could use a radio tuned to the public security frequency to make our demands - they would definitely be monitoring that - and then Hương and I would go in to retrieve Qamar and Nonna. Then, once we were all together, we could decide what to do with Philomena.

I put on a dark grin. I was pretty confident that they would do anything that we asked, down to the letter.

Who could say no to an army of killbots?

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Driving down the streets surrounded by killbots was surreal, like some sort of deadly parade. We had scuttlers, howlers, and shredders aplenty, and even a little cloud of buzzers. No shadows, but that was fine with me. Those things were creepy as hell. I kept eyeing the howlers padding along on the sidewalk, as if they might jump on us at any moment.

"You're sure you have complete control over them?" I asked.

"As far as I know," João said. "Look, I can make them do a little dance!" He typed something, and the scuttlers in front of us walked in a little square.

"Nice."

It was starting to get dark. I parked the car out of view of the lab, wary of snipers. João continued marching the killbots down the road to where the GPS said Intuition Research Institute was. I could see a bit of its parking lot from here.

We had thousands, maybe tens of thousands. They could have covered the highway as far as eye could see.

We had the upper hand now.

"They're entering the parking lot," João said.

The sound of distant gunfire made me crack a grin. It was working.

"Are they shooting the killbots?" I said.

"I don't know," João said. "I don't have diagnostics, I can only send instructions."

"You can't mow through that many killbots," Hương said. "We've tried."

The last of the killbots passed us by. Soon, they were out of sight, too.

"Alright, they're all in position around the building," João said.

"Time to shine," I said, grimly.

I dug out our old radio from Qamar's bag, then tuned it to the standard security channel. It was static right now, which made sense. We were pretty far away from any settlements, and why would Philomena use the public security frequency at her secret base?

I brought the handpiece with the microphone to my face, then took a deep breath.

"This is a message for the Intuition Research Institute. We have control of the killbots that are currently surrounding your lab. Fulfill our demands, or we will unleash them."

I paused, wondering if they'd heard me. I swallowed, then continued.

"Escort the two humans Serendipity and Qamar to the front parking lot. We know you have them. Do not send armed personnel. Respond on this channel if you agree. You have until 9:30 to respond."

I gave them a lengthy pause.

"I'll up their aggression a little bit," João said, typing. "Not enough to break into the building, just enough to be scary."

In the distance, I started hearing the telltale noises of howlers and shredders.

"Message repeats," I said into the mouthpiece. "This is a message for the Intuition Research Institute..."

I kept going, repeating the words as closely as I could. Halfway through the third repetition, there was a response.

"Alright, alright! Tell your killbots to back down. We'll bring the humans to the parking lot."

"The killbots will stay there until the humans are safe," I countered.

"Fine, whatever. We'll bring them down in ten minutes."

I put down the mouthpiece with a grin. "Come on, let's move."

We stuffed the radio into a bag, left Rascal and João in the car, and hurried toward the lab. We set up next to a building across the road. This was my first time actually seeing the place. A big, gloomy, L-shaped building made out of sand-colored brick and tinted glass walls. The futuristic look was somewhat marred by all the broken windows that had been covered by wood.

Killbots were absolutely swarming the parking lot, as well as the walls of the lab, in the case of the scuttlers. The shredders roared. The howlers shrieked. The buzzers buzzed. It was a cacophony like an orchestra straight out of hell. But none of the killbots breached the glass walls, which they could easily smash. João had them right under his thumb.

Hương peered through her scope. "They're coming outside."

"How many?"

"Two robots. They appear to be unarmed. Qamar. Serendipity. Philomena is with them."

"Dammit," I said. "Can't she leave us the fuck alone?"

"They're in the parking lot," came the same voice on the radio.

"Good," I said, through the radio. "Remember, if you shoot us or otherwise try to hurt us, a horde of killbots will descend on you in an instant."

There was no response. I put the radio away, made sure I still had the walkie-talkie that connected to João, and grabbed my rifle.

"You first," Hương said. I took a deep breath, stood up, and walked across the road. This was it. This was the moment we got Nonna back.

I could see them. Nonna and Qamar, tied up and held by two combat units. Philomena stood nearby, looking bored. Qamar's eyes lit up when he saw us, but he was gagged and couldn't speak.

I have to admit, I kind of enjoyed Philomena's glare as we approached. It was kind of a power trip. Now who was the one with an unstoppable robot army, huh?

"You again," Philomena said. "Don't you have other hobbies?"

"Shut your fucking mouth," I said. "Untie them."

"Why don't we talk first?" Philomena said, putting on a disarming smile. "You came such a long way. It would be a shame not to catch up."

"Cut the bullshit and untie them, or you get a thousand killbots in your face," I snapped.

"Don't be ridiculous," Philomena said. "You will only get yourself and your beloved family killed if you activate the killbots now. This is nothing more than a stalemate."

She was right. I opened my mouth hesitantly, but Hương elbowed past me. Oh, thank God. I needed someone else to bluff for me.

"We are whitelisted in all of the killbots' routines," she said. "They will not harm us."

Philomena's face was unreadable. She tapped her chin. "Clever trick, by the way," she said. "I am very curious how you managed to wrangle the killbots to your command. I don't suppose this one is the mastermind behind it?" She motioned to Qamar, who watched the encounter with wide eyes. "He's a clever one, for sure."

"Like I'd tell you," I said.

"You are truly an extraordinary team," Philomena said. "We could accomplish so much, you and I, if we just got over our differences and worked together."

"I'm not interested in ruling the world, thank you very much."

Philomena looked shocked. "What makes you think I want to rule the world? I'm just trying to fix the mistakes that humans made decades and decades ago. It's about time we got together as a country and put an AI in control. Don't you agree... Hương?"

I looked at Hương, who was as unreadable as always. She didn't even whirr. "Violence and terror is no way to save America."

Philomena sighed. "Oh, I suppose you want me to ask nicely? How well has that worked out for you two?" She shook her head. "I'm aware I've committed crimes too great to tell. I am beyond redemption. And that makes me powerful. I have no more

inhibitions. Unlike certain spineless leaders, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to bring Project Serendipity to its conclusion."

To our side, Nonna managed to spit out the rag that was gagging her. "Ack. Is that really what you were after this entire time?!"

Philomena smiled. "My dear Serendipity. Surely you, out of anyone, would understand the importance of the Project. They named it after you, after all."

"That gag was very annoying, by the way," Nonna said. "I've been chewing on it for ages. Anyway. That's plain bullshit. The project wasn't named after me, I was named after the project."

Philomena's smile wavered. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not the developer of Project Serendipity, I'm the product. I'm a robot."

I did my best to keep my confused expression off my face. I trusted Nonna, but what was the point of this bluff? We already had the killbots. We should just grab Qamar and Serendipity and leave.

"Project Serendipity was a failure," Nonna said. "They wanted to create an AI that could truly empathize with humans and robots. They thought such an AI could fix all the problems our world had developed. Well, they were dead wrong. The truth is, there's no easy solution to the world's problems. Even if an AI could take control of the entire world - and it can't - there's no single move that would make every human and every robot happy. I would have only been another contender on the chess board of international politics."

She turned to me. "Lake, baby, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you this before. All the researchers managed to do was make a scared, young AI that cared deeply for robots and humans alike, but could do nothing about it. So I ran away. Masqueraded as a human. I've never been your grandmother, not biologically. I'm sorry."

I blinked. This bluff was starting to get a little too real.

"So. If that's all that you needed to hear," Nonna said, turning back to Philomena, "Why don't you let us go and we can get back to living our lives?"

For once, Philomena looked taken aback. "You're lying," she said, flatly.

"Peel back my skin," Nonna challenged. "My body is made of steel. The encrypted drives in the lab will tell you the same story."

Philomena took a moment, arms crossed, drumming her fingers on her arm. There was a disturbed look in her eyes. "We may have to... Modify the plan. There are backup plans. It doesn't matter. I *will* have my happy ending, no matter what it takes."

"*Lake!*" came João's voice through the walkie-talkie. I jumped and grabbed it out of my bag. "*They found me! I—*" the connection dissolved into static.

"João," I hissed, trying to ignore the gazes of the others on me. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh," Philomena said, her insufferable grin back again. "Run into some problems in your little plan?"

I could hear Rascal barking in the background. "*I need to run!*" João yelled, sounding like he was far away from the walkie-talkie. "*I'm going to use the failsafe! Good luck!*"

My eyes widened as I realized what he meant. Before I could move, every single killbot around us dropped to the ground. The silence was deafening.

Philomena smiled. "Arrest them."

"Hold on!" Serendipity yelled. Qamar made muffled, frantic noises. I raised my rifle, but the combat units were too fast. One of them knocked the barrel aside, then grabbed me by the arms. I struggled and kicked, but this was a combat unit, not one of the brittle workers at the mine. Behind me, Hương's sniper rifle went off, but more combat units were already pouring out of the front doors. Hương started sprinting away, only for a combat bot to tackle her to the ground.

The combat unit holding onto me forced me to the ground, wrenching my biological arm painfully. It put a knee on my back, preventing me from struggling. "Get off of me, you freak!" I yelled.

Philomena tut-tutted. "And you were so close, too." She started walking toward the building. "Bring all of them to the lobby."

I screamed in frustration as the combat bots tied my arms and legs together with zip ties. One lifted me over its shoulder and marched me toward the lab. Hương, Qamar, and Serendipity were taken similarly. "LET ME GO!" I yelled, futilely.

We had been so close. Nonna was right there. Now our only bargaining chip was gone, and there was no way Philomena would let us go a second time.

I kept struggling all the way until the combat units deposited us in the lab's lobby. I hit the tiles hard. The floor was too clean, too nice looking. I didn't want to die here. I kept struggling with the zip tie, willing my muscles to somehow break it.

"Go," Philomena said, ushering the combat units to the front door. "Find their accomplice."

As they rushed out the door, Philomena retrieved a handgun from behind the desk. There was no more smiling and cajoling. Her expression was dead serious. "I tried asking nicely for you to join me," she said. "But you will work for me, whether you like it or not. Serendipity, our prototype. Qamar, our genius engineer. Even you, Hương. Once I get into that stubborn RCR of yours, I'm sure you'll be the best sniper in our growing army."

"I will die before I work for you," Hương spat.

"We'll see," Philomena said. She stalked over to me. "But you, Lake. The ringleader. I don't suppose I have any use for a human security guard like you. I have a thousand combat units that can do your job better." She aimed the pistol at my head.

"Fuck you," was all I managed to get out, as I continued to struggle with the zip ties. My heart was beating a million miles a minute.

The realization hit me. This was it. I was going to die here, in front of my family and friends.

"I hope you know I've killed humans before," Philomena said, through gritted teeth. "Each and every one of my previous owners. One of them tore half my jaw off. I didn't take pleasure in killing them, and I don't take pleasure in it now."

"Please, you don't have to do this," Nonna said, sounding heartbroken. "Just let them live. Let them go back home. I'll do anything you want."

"Oh, you will," Philomena said. "But I can't risk *them* throwing any more wrenches into my plans." She cocked the handgun, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"No!" Nonna yelled.

"Goodbye, Lake."

I waited, my breath bated, but there was no gunshot.

"Hello?" Philomena said. "Helloooo? Is this working?"

I waited for a second. When I didn't die, I opened one eye. Philomena was staring vacantly at me, the handgun still pressed to my head.

"It's me, João!" Philomena said. She smiled. Then she wiggled her ears. "Ooh. I can move her face."

"João?!" I asked in disbelief. I inched away from the gun and sat up on the carpet.

"I can't hear anything you're saying, by the way," João said. "Still have no input. But hopefully it's working. Let me know on the walkie-talkie. Do you still have the walkie-talkie? Wait, never mind. You can't answer that."

"Your friend must have gotten into her RCR," Nonna said, sounding impressed.

"Oh my God," I said, nervous laughter forcing itself out of my mouth. "He really did. We're okay. We're going to be okay."

Huong struggled to her feet, despite her limbs being tied together. They had used wires on her, rather than zip ties. Something that looked like a pocket knife protruded from her wrist with a *fwip*. "Lake, use this."

I hopped over to her. Both of us had our hands tied behind our backs, so we had to be back-to-back, and it was pretty awkward. But we managed to get the zip ties off with a minimal amount of cuts to my hand. Once my hands were free, I rushed to help free everyone else.

"Pah," Qamar said, spitting out the gag once I loosened it. "Lake, I thought you were going to die!"

"Gonna take more than that to kill me," I retorted.

I freed Nonna next, then immediately gave her a big hug.

"Thank you for saving me," Nonna said, hoarsely.

"I'm just glad you're okay," I whimpered.

Qamar hurried over and gave Nonna a hug too. "I missed you so much, Nonna."

"You too, baby."

I hesitated, then asked, "Are you really a robot?"

"Yes. It's true. I'm sorry."

"So... I'm adopted?"

"No!" Nonna said. "Your mothers were real and loved you very much. But I adopted your mothers, yes."

"Semantics," I muttered.

"Check this out!" Philomena said, grabbing our attention. Then she did the same dance the scuttlers had done earlier.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Hương said, "But we need to escape. We are in the enemy's base."

I nodded, wiped the tears off my face, and grabbed the pistol from Philomena.

Qamar peeked outside the double doors at the killbot graveyard. "There are some guards on the perimeter," he said.

"Hmmm." I waved my hand in front of Philomena's smiling face. She didn't respond. "João? You can't hear us, right?" No response.

I tried grabbing Philomena's hand and pulling her forward. She walked forward pleasantly.

"Guess that works," I said.

We sauntered out of the front door as a group. I kept my grip on Philomena's hand. The combat units guarding the front started when they saw us, but I just gave them a little nod and a smile, and they nodded back.

I had dropped my bag here, in the parking lot. I shrugged it back on and dug out the walkie-talkie.

"João, are you okay?" I said through it.

"Lake, there you are!" he said. "The combat units chased us a couple of blocks, but I managed to escape with Rascal and my laptop!"

"Good work," I said.

"Tell Hương thank you for the RCR documentation," he said. "It worked like a charm on Philomena!"

"João said thanks," I said to Hương.

"I can hear him."

I was on edge the entire time as we navigated through Phoenix and met up with João. I felt like something would go wrong at any moment, like combat units would hop out and kill us all. But the streets were as empty as ever.

We really did it. We got Nonna back, and we were free.

It didn't feel real.

João ran up to us and gave me a tight hug. Rascal started barking its head off.

"We did it!" he said. "You got your grandmother back!"

"Sure did," I said, with a tight laugh.

Hương forced open a house nearby. "Get inside," she said. "The combat units are still looking for us."

We all crowded inside. It was a nice little house, if dusty. I fell onto a couch, threw up a plume of dust, and subsequently started coughing.

Hương closed the door behind us, and we all took a minute to catch our breaths.

"We have a few matters to discuss," Hương finally said. "First, Serendipity... I owe you an apology."

Nonna frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Do you know what caused Project Serendipity to shut down?"

"You said there was a mysterious accident at Intuition Research Institute," Qamar chimed in. "Several researchers died."

"I was not entirely truthful," Hương said. "I am the latest in a line of assassins. One of my predecessors was sent to take down the project. They are the one that killed the researchers. When I realized the AI created by Project Serendipity was alive and needed help... I thought I could make up for their crimes."

Nonna chuckled. "Well, that is very kind of you. Apology accepted."

"Wait a second," I said, throwing up my arms. "You know she was a robot all along?"

"I realized when I saw her in Manhattan," Hương said. "Robots and humans have different heat signatures."

"Why didn't you say something?!"

"It was not my secret to tell."

Nonna shook her head. "I never intended for you to find out, baby. I thought if I disguised myself as a human, me and my new family could live a normal life. I never expected my past to catch up to me in such a dramatic way."

"It's okay," Qamar said, sitting down next to Nonna and hugging her. "You're still our Nonna."

Nonna smiled. "And I always will be."

"You know, this actually explains a lot in retrospect," I said. "Like how you haven't aged a day in years. And why you barely eat."

Nonna stuck out her tongue. "Oh, yes. I can process food, but it is quite uncomfortable."

"Sooooo," João said. "What do we do about her?" He gestured toward Philomena, who was gazing vacantly across the room. "I can't control her RCR forever."

"She must be so mad right now," Qamar whispered. "Unable to control her own body."

"We should kill her," I muttered.

"What? No!" Qamar said. "She's defenseless!"

"She was about to kill me!" I said. "She deserves it." But I couldn't put my heart behind it. I'd had enough of killing people.

"Maybe we can take her back to Deerfield," Nonna said, kindly. "I'm sure Fern would be willing to keep an eye on her. I get the feeling she's not very dangerous when she doesn't have an army backing her up."

Hương nodded. "She has no particular skill in combat or technology. If I had to guess, the only thing that enabled her to rally an army is her charisma. She is a comfort bot."

"Wait," I said. "Like... a sexbot?"

Hương whirred her eye. "That is one word for it."

"Oh no!" João said. "I feel so sorry for her. I can't imagine what her life was like before the fall."

I massaged my face. "Man, don't make me start feeling bad for her now."

"We'll take her back to Deerfield, then," Nonna said, authoritatively. "Unless anyone has any objections."

"Long as she stays out of my sight," I muttered.

"But what do we do about her followers?" Qamar asked. "All the combat units, and the mine workers. I'm sure she must be operating a factory somewhere as well, or all that copper ore would be useless."

"Do we need to do anything about it?" I said. "I'm sure they'll eventually disperse without their leader."

"Or they might just choose a new one," Qamar pointed out.

"Everyone would be so disappointed," João said, sounding mournful. "Wei sounded so excited about rebuilding America. I don't want to crush her hopes!"

"Well, she should have thought of that before joining a weird robot cult!" I said.

"I think João is right," Nonna said, slowly. "Someone needs to step forward and claim responsibility. And it should be me."

I started. "Wait, what? No! Nonna, this isn't your responsibility. Just come back to Deerfield with us."

She shook her head. "It's always been my responsibility. Remember? I was created to save the world."

"That's a lot of weight on your shoulders," Qamar said quietly.

"I've had enough of running from my responsibilities." Nonna stood up. "Though Philomena's methods were deplorable, her movement has promise. And I'm uniquely qualified to take charge." She grinned. "After all, I have fifty years of experience as mayor of Deerfield."

I scratched my head. "Are you sure about this, Nonna?" I said. "Don't you just want to put this behind you?"

"I'm sure, baby," Nonna said. "I'm sure."

We talked about our plans late into the night. As much as I tried to convince Nonna otherwise, she wanted to stay in Phoenix and try to patch Philomena's movement back together. Except with, like, less murder.

Once Qamar realized he could implement EMP turrets and fake drifter emissions in cities all around America, he started getting excited about it too. Hương wanted to liberate more human-dominated communities, the way the Steel Society had taken Manhattan. João was all gung-ho about it, but he was gung-ho about everything. Rascal took a nap in the corner.

We decide we would use Philomena's body to deliver a speech tomorrow, explaining who Serendipity was, and handing over leadership. For now, we all needed some rest.

João's laptop was dying, so we had to release our control over Philomena before getting some rest for the night. We found some cables in the garage and tied her to a chair, then shut the emitter down.

Philomena's vacant smile disappeared. She blinked, then focused her glare on me. "You asshole."

I grinned. I couldn't help it. "Not so fun when you're the one all tied up, is it?"

"You will tear down everything I worked for."

"And you really need to go to therapy," I retorted. "Now be quiet. We need to sleep."

Philomena fumed quietly, which was just fine with me. I'd heard enough of her stupid voice to last me a lifetime.

CHAPTER 10

PHOENIX, ARIZONA

We stayed in that house in Phoenix for three days while Nonna got things sorted out. I guess she had plenty of energy, having been tied up doing nothing for the past few days. On the other hand, Qamar and I spent most of those three days sleeping.

I woke up one day to see João rummaging through our closet. Or, at least, the closet in the bedroom Qamar and I had claimed.

"What's up, João?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Oh, sorry!" he said. "I didn't mean to wake up you. I was just checking out the clothes in here." He turned around with a flourish, revealing a tuxedo vest and an orange clip-on bowtie. "What do you think?"

"Looks nice," I said. "Very João. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion!" he said. "I was just in a bow tie sort of mood. I'm having a hard time choosing between green and orange, though." He held up a green bowtie next to the orange one. "What do you think?"

"Uhhh, I don't know," I said. "Fashion's not really my thing."

Qamar sat up next to me and yawned. "Orange," he said. "Definitely orange. Goes well with your eyes."

João brightened up. "Thank you!"

We kicked João out of the room while we got ready for the day. There was no running water, of course, but Hương had

scavenged some bottled water for us, which I used to wash my face.

When we went downstairs, Nonna was packing up our stuff into bags. Philomena was sitting in the corner, staring at the wall. She wasn't tied up anymore.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suspiciously.

"It's time to go home!" Nonna said.

"Home?" I said. "I thought we were staying here to lead the movement, or...?"

"Later, later," she said, shoving my latest rifle into a duffel bag. "I've talked to all of Philomena's managers and directors, and they're perfectly capable of maintaining operations without me physically present." She zipped up the duffel bag. "You kids have been through a lot. You need a break!"

"Nonna, we're not kids anymore," I said with a smile.

"We really could use a break, though," Qamar said.

Hương opened the front door. "I'm going find us a larger car," she said. "I'll be back."

As she headed out the door, I did a quick headcount and realized that there were six of us now - seven if you counted Rascal. Yeah, we would definitely need a bigger car.

Nonna went back to packing her backs, and Qamar hurried to help her. I felt useless standing inside the house, and I could feel Philomena's gaze boring into me. After a moment, I dashed out the door as well.

"Hey, wait for me!" I said, running down the asphalt.

Hương was unlocking the door on a house nearby. I halted next to her.

"So, you're staying with us, huh?" I said.

"Yes," Hương said, walking inside. "I have nowhere to return to. My skills aren't needed in Manhattan. I might as well stay to protect you and your family."

"Aww, that's sweet," I said, with a sly grin. "You care about me."

"It's a tactical matter," she said, ignoring me. "No matter how benevolent of a leader Serendipity is, there will be people who hate her. I will protect her from those people."

"If you say so," I said, with a lilt in my voice.

We peered into the garage, but the car there was too small. We moved on to the next house. A few houses later, we found a giant SUV.

"Jackpot!" I said, peering through the car window. "Seven seats inside. Now we just have to find the keys."

"Yes," Hương agreed.

I went back into the house and started sifting through the kitchen, looking for the keys. Hương stood nearby, whirring her eye at me. I thought about snapping at her to help me look, but I thought better of it.

"Whoever used to live here was a slob," I muttered, lifting up a decades-old pizza box.

"I do care about you, however," Hương finally said.

I stopped short. Words can't describe how surreal it was to hear her say that. "You mean, as a friend, or...?"

Hương paused for a second. "We'll see." She pulled a keyring off a hook on the wall. "The keys are here."

I tried to stop a wide grin from spreading across my face as I followed her into the garage. "Hold on. Did you know where the keys were the whole time?!"

"Yes."

"Then why were you just standing there?!"

"I was thinking."

"About me?"

"Shut up."

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The drive back to Deerfield was long, but it probably seemed longer because of Philomena's brooding presence in the backseat. We ultimately decided to put João and Rascal back there with her. Maybe their positive energy would cancel out the malicious aura she was emanating. João kept signal five running on the emitter, which prevented any howler attacks for the duration of the trip.

We stopped in Knowles to sleep on the way back, and discovered that Angel's new son had been born. Apparently, his name was Iwan. I thought he was pretty ugly, but Nonna could not get

enough of that tiny dude. Zoe - Angel's other child - had a fun time chasing João and Rascal around the corn fields.

We took a pretty long detour to stop at Chapel Hill as well. Qamar needed to compare notes with Eutteum, and we also decided to drop off the emitter with them. We had another one back at home anyway.

On the third day of driving, we arrived back at Deerfield. It was surreal, staggering back into our apartment. It had only been a week, but it felt like years. After seeing so many places around the country, our home felt so terribly small.

"So, this is my prison," Philomena snarked, walking through the door. "Sentenced to live in small town America."

"Hey, Qamar and I lived here for over twenty years," I snapped. "I'm sure you'll manage."

I wandered into our bedroom and found it exactly how we left it. A gas lamp sitting in the corner. My guitar leaning against the wall. My old stuffed lizard, in its honored spot on my desk.

I walked into the bathroom and considered my own expression. I looked tired.

"I'm still so excited, Lake," Qamar said, flopping onto his mattress. "We're going to help so many people."

"Yep," I said.

"The turrets alone... And all the things we know about drifter emissions! I think Nonna's on the right track with shifting the lab's focus from AI to communications. If we were able to spread

information like this across the country, the killbots could be wiped out in no time!"

I nodded. "That would be pretty cool."

Qamar paused. "Are you okay?" he asked, softly. "You've been so quiet lately."

I thought about that for a moment. Was I okay? We had won. We rescued Nonna and dethroned Philomena. But I still felt anxious inside, like a terrible disaster had just happened.

"I don't know," I finally said. "It just doesn't feel real anymore. I've been in a state of like, constant adrenaline for the past week, and now we're just going back to our lives."

Qamar nodded. "I know how that feels."

"Drove across the country, nearly died a couple of times," I said. "Actually killed someone multiple times." I waved my hands around uselessly. "Am I even the same person anymore?"

Qamar joined me at the sink. I looked at our two faces in the mirror, cut up and dirty.

"I'm sure it's going to take time to process everything that happened," Qamar said. "But trust me. Despite it all, you're still Lake."

"If you say so," I murmured.

"Who else would invade a raider den all by themselves to rescue their friends?"

I cracked a grin. "That *was* pretty badass of me."

The two of us left to find Fern, while Nonna worked on rearranging the house to fit five people and a robot dog. I took my rifle, mostly out of habit. We went to the fire station and peeked through the office door. Fern was sitting behind her desk, doing a crossword puzzle.

"We're back," I said, wryly.

"Lake, Qamar!" she said, hopping out of her seat. "Blazing howlers, I'm glad you're alright." She gave each of us a quick, rib-cracking, hug.

"We rescued Serendipity, too!" Qamar said.

Fern shook her head. "You two will never cease to impress me. However, Lake, you were NOT authorized to take those supplies from the security department. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"What?" I said, throwing up my hand. "Really? That's our homecoming welcome? How do you even know it was me?!"

"Qamar would never steal Deerfield property," Fern said. Qamar gave me a smug grin. I sighed and resigned myself to being on cleaning duty for the next week.

We caught Fern up on everything that had happened. She nodded as we went, eyes widening with shock as we described our adventures.

"Well, I suppose I can keep an eye on that Philomena gal," she said. "But are you sure you want to quit? Both of you *and* Serendipity?"

Qamar nodded. "As much as we love protecting Deerfield, there's a lot more people out there that need protecting."

"So I'm supposed to run this town all by myself," Fern said, incredulously.

"You won't need us once we get the turrets up and running!" Qamar said, brightly.

"Yes," Fern grumbled, "but the turrets aren't up yet, and the scuttlers are starting to move back into the carwash."

Qamar glanced at me. "I think we can do something about that."

I smirked and shouldered my rifle. "You know it."