Chaos knew that he was in trouble as soon as he saw the markings; a red circle with two curved lines inside of it. It was a mark of warning, left behind by survivors fleeing the area that this area was under the control of the Sabredrones. The husky couldn’t help it though, he had to travel through the area in order to get to the supplies needed for him and the other caravanners to continue to flee the wave of assimilation that was coming their way. If they didn’t get to the coast and evacuate to another continent before the Sabredrones got there than any chance of escaping their fate as one of them would be gone. At this point the husky had come too far to give up now, especially after everything that he had to go through to get to where he stood now.

He was one of the few that managed to escape the city where the initial… infection? Mutation? Where the first Sabredrones had appeared. At first no one knew what was going on, everyone just saw these strange sabretooth creatures in rubber running around. Some people thought it was a joke, others some sort of strange event that no one else really knew around. Little did anyone know that by the time people started seeing them around the corruption had already rooted itself so deep in the city that it was practically bursting at the same.

They spread like a virus; those that were caught by them were soon turned into drones like one of them. For most the transformation was quick and they would soon turn around to try and change those that might have been helping them at one point. Some, however, took great pleasure in their assimilation… very great pleasure. More than once as Chaos ran from to the city limits with the others did he see one or more of the Sabredrones rutting with a half-transformed citizen in the throes of pure pleasure. It was like watching a zombie invasion unfold, except that these creatures were very intelligent and craved something far different… though in a way it was still flesh.

At that point the blue and white furred husky had two options; evacuate with the others or try and stay holed up until the military arrived to liberate the city. Chaos chose the former option and when he heard a few days later that the incursion to retake the city failed miserably, creating even more Sabredrones that now had specialized training, he was glad that he didn’t. Unfortunately the city was merely a hub for the corruption now and as he found out the surge had somehow managed to overtake the convoy that he was traveling with. Just as he was about to start making his way into the city however there was a noise that caused him to pause and look around while on high alert.

“Chaos!” the voice tried to shout in a hushed tone, the husky walking over to where the male fox was sitting holding his rifle. “Don’t tell me you were about to do what I think you were going to do.”

“Our car is out of gas and all the stations along the highway are completely tapped,” Chaos explained as he moved around so he could be behind the bushes as well, seeing the female wolf and male cheetah from his caravan group were also there. “That paint on the wall has been there at least a few days if not longer, if we’re lucky than the bulk of them probably moved on to the next city to try and catch up to the bulk of the survivor groups. If we try to stay here or go on foot though than the Assimilators are going to get us for sure.”

The other three let out a small cacophony of groans and sighs as the situation was laid out for them. With other cities evacuating as soon as they realized what was happening most of the travel areas had been picked clean of supplies as others fled. Since they had come from the epicenter of the epidemic, they were picking up scraps at best and the further away they went the scarcer things got. They had rolled into a nearby rest stop on fumes to find that there was no gas left in the station, which meant that they either had to abandon their ride or find what they needed in the city.

“Alright, no sense in waiting around for them to find us,” the fox said as he checked his rifle before looking out from the bushes. “Let’s do two teams; Chaos and I will take the north area while Vikus and Ariel take the south. Remember to stay out of the commercial sectors or any skyscrapers, they tend to make those their little nests more than the single homes.”

“You sure we should split up like that Trevor?” Ariel asked nervously.

“Two teams means more ground covered in less time,” Trevor replied before getting a forlorn look on his face. “Plus if one team gets discovered it might buy the other one a chance to escape, just make sure you give those bastards a run for their money before they catch you.”

The idea of potentially being captured had always been on their minds since they first left the city, but with their willful entry into Sabredrone territory the thought of being captured and assimilated was at the forefront of their minds. Once the two got into the city proper they split up, giving each other one last nod as they passed under the warning spray painted on the wall and continued to move in. Though the streets appeared empty as they moved in that meant very little, the four had seen ambushes happen in places just like this and some even had food and supplies out in the open to lure out survivors coming that way. Still it did appear that most have moved on from the location since the place wasn’t swarming with drones eager to get another glowing stripe on their rubber bodies.

As they made their way through the yards of the houses it was strange to them how… pristine everything looked. Other than a few broken doors or panes of glass one could easily confuse this place from being an area occupied by others that were just about to come out and mow the lawn or start a barbeque. It was only the patches of solidified rubber on the ground that told a different tale, the sabredrones agile and strong enough to make their way through such areas without causing damage or destruction. Even in the first city they conquered most of the damage created was from those attempting to flee the city before they were converted.

“Makes you wonder,” Trevor stated, Chaos jumping slightly when he heard the fox’s voice suddenly. “Do you think we even stand a chance?”

The sudden question posed to the husky through him off-guard, causing the canine to sigh and shrug his shoulders. “I don’t know…” he finally said. “You got to think the military or someone is out there trying to find a cure or a vaccine or something. This continent might be entirely lost but once we get across to one of the other lands we will at least be safe until they figure something out.”

“Oh really?” Trevor scoffed. “What makes you think that Sabredrones aren’t smart enough to take a plane or a boat over themselves? It might keep them there for a while maybe, but eventually these rubber plague isn’t going to be content with just sitting here waiting for us to find a means to stop them.”

“So… that’s it?” Chaos replied with a slight hint of anger in his voice. “We should just find the nearest drone and say that we’re done, we give up? Sorry everyone else in the caravan but it all looks futile anyway?”

“Oh don’t be like that,” Trevor stated with a sigh. “You know that’s not what I meant, it just seems like we’re on the losing team and there’s no way to turn the tide. Not to mention all the loss we already suffered… you came from the first city, did you lose anyone important over there?”

Chaos stopped and looked down at his feet, this time catching the fox by surprise as the vulpine quickly apologized for bringing it up. Though the husky didn’t have to explain himself to his traveling companion it still didn’t stop the images from coming to the forefront of his mind. He tried to close his eyes and shake his head to get rid of the image of his friend being covered in rubber, looking up at him with those eyes of shock and fear before the shiny substance completely coated them… Chaos heard the fox ask if he was fine and he told Trevor that he was alright and to keep going. Even though he could tell that the other male was concerned they continued to move forwards in silence.

Eventually they crossed over one fence to find themselves on the other side of a small road bridge over a river, and on the other side of that something that caused their eyes to widen. “Thank heavens,” Trevor said as they looked at the flickering lights of the small gas station. “This far in I doubt that many survivors were able to siphon it all out, I just hope they have gas cans so we’re not bringing it all back in milk jugs and whatever other containers that we can find.”

Just as it seemed that their prayers were answered Chaos stopped and motioned for Trevor to do the same, then duck into a nearby house. The door had already been broken open and as they made their way through to the windows that faced the gas station they saw something that caused their hearts to sink into their stomachs. It was a Sabredrone, and from the looks of it was probably one that they typically labeled as an Assimilator. Assimilators were the hunters of the group, while they all looked for others to convert these were specialized to hunt down stragglers that might have been missed or potentially important targets.

“What is an Assimilator doing so far from the rest of the horde?” Trevor hissed in displeasure. “I was thinking if anything we’d come across a few straggler drones looking for scraps, not one of them. Do you think they might be hunting for someone in particular?”

“Either that or this town wasn’t as cleared out as we thought,” Chaos whispered back. “But since there’s only one of them flying around I think it’s safe to assume that they are just looking for a specific target in this city.”

“Doesn’t mean that they won’t assimilate us if given half a chance,” Trevor said as he continued to look out the window. “Right now he’s doing a sweep of the area, but with him flying that high up and that bridge giving us zero cover we may as well be waving flashing lights in the air. Maybe we should wait until it gets dark…”

“But what about Vikus and Ariel?” Chaos asked. “If we wait here until nightfall they’re going to think we got captured or something, and if they found fuel too then they might just cut their losses and move on without us.” As the Sabredrone made another pass over their area the husky’s attention looked back down to the bridge that they had to cross and slowly nodded to himself. “I think I may have an idea…”

About fifteen minutes later the two were clinging onto a pipe that hung on the underside of the bridge, their clothes muddy from the slide they took down the embankment after running there from the house. Though the river didn’t look too deep they didn’t want to risk being carried out to where the Sabredrone could detect them, instead the two continued to shimmy across the pipe from one side to the other. Chaos could hear Trevor huffing as they tried to make as little noise as possible to not draw the attention of the Sabredrone flying around.

Once they got to the other side they continued to hang there as they realized that they didn’t quite have a foothold and would have to drop down onto the embankment from the other side or attempt to scale up onto the bridge. The two looked at one another as they hung there, then back down at the drop into the muddy shore of the river. There was nothing they could do at this point since the bridge was blocking them from seeing where the Sabredrone was currently. They both took a deep breath and let go of the pipe at the same time, silently falling through the air before landing on the mud with a wet thud.

Trevor let out a cry as he continued to roll further down while Chaos was able to tuck and roll in order to absorb most of the impact. When he looked back up the fox had already fallen into the water, splashing down into the river. As soon as the husky managed to get back onto his feet he ran downward and dived forward to grab onto the vulpine before the current took him out of the shadow of the bridge. Though Trevor sputtered quite a bit as he was pulled back onto the muddy embankment he continued to try and stay as quiet as possible while they slid themselves towards the concrete that made up the retaining wall.

For more than a few minutes the two continued to sit in the wet and mud, breathing heavily as they waited to see if the noise they just made attracted the attention of the Assimilator roaming overhead. After they both managed to regain their breath Chaos took the time to make sure that his friend was still able to walk, which despite a bit of tenderness from his ankle seemed to be able to handle the pressure. The two of them knew that they needed to move and finally got up the courage to get out from the shadow of the bridge and go back into the open. As they crawled up they found that their presence had not been noticed, the two of them breathing a sigh of relief when they saw the coast was clear.

“We live to be droned another day,” Trevor said under his breath as they got up towards the gas station, looking up in the air as they did. “Looks like they might have found the trail of whatever they’re looking for, either that or we got lucky and they moved on. Since we’re never that fortunate I assume it’s the former so let’s get the gas and other supplies we need and move on.”

Chaos nodded and the two carefully peaked into the gas station in order to make sure there wasn’t another drone lurking about. It wouldn’t be the first time that people thought that the coast was clear only to have a Sabredrone jump out from the shadows. As they examined the area and checked through every door they found that while a lot of the food and other supplies had already been cleaned out there was still gas to be pumped and a few boxes of supplies that they could scavenge. The husky grabbed the red cans and brought them out to the pumps to be filled while the fox tried to find whatever was still fresh enough to eat and stuffed it in a few bags.

After a few minutes the two had gathered two large containers of gasoline each and also had an overstuffed duffle on their back. Though it would significantly slow them down they couldn’t afford to leave so much viable stuff behind. It also meant that they would have to take the bridge across since there was no way they could climb underneath again with all the stuff. Carefully the two picked their way out of the gas station and continued to keep a wary eye over the sky as they made their way into the open area of the road. Thankfully it appeared the Sabredrone that had been flying overhead was still not around, though that didn’t stop both of them from ducking into a nearby house to try and stop themselves from shaking.

“I don’t think I can handle much more of this,” Trevor said as he took out one of the meat sticks he had gotten and unwrapped it. “How are we supposed to continue on evading an increasingly powerful enemy while living on stolen fuel and gas station sponge cakes?”

Before Chaos could respond the two of them both heard a scream that caused their ears to perk up. It was a female scream and though it was possible they could be mistaken there only one that they knew of in the city that it could possibly belong to. From how loud it is they could also tell that it was rather close, probably only a few blocks away. After a minute of heated but still hushed discussion they knew what they had to do, grabbing the gas cans and bolting for the city limits. If Ariel was shouting then they knew that she and Vikus were probably both in trouble, which meant that there was nothing that they could do for them but hope they provided enough of a distraction so they could escape.

Chaos and Trevor quickly dashed down the road instead of using the previous route through the lawns. If the Sabredrones were alerted then it wouldn’t be long before more were possibly going to start buzzing in the surrounding area looking for other survivors, which meant that this place was no longer going to be safe. They still attempted to keep to as much cover as possible with the combination of the gas sloshing in the cans and their panting made any attempted stealth unlikely. Still it appeared that whatever was happening on the other side of the suburbs continued to draw the attention of the Sabredrones that were in the area.

Just as the two were about to get into the woods that surrounded the edge of the suburb they saw something that caused them both to pause. It was Vikus running down the street as fast as he could, a panicked look on his face as ran towards their location. Though they were glad to see that he was alright the two heavily-laden creatures were both silently hoping that he wouldn’t see them. If he brought whatever he was running from over to them they would either have to ditch the supplies and make a run for it or attempt to hide and sneak their way through the woods.

It appeared they wouldn’t have to make that choice however as a blur of black and purple swooped down from the air and plowed into the feline, causing both creatures to tumbled onto the road. The one that did so was a typical Sabredrone, the unmistakable shine of latex covering the female form along with those saber teeth, synthetic mane, horns, and the collar around its neck. As the two continued to slowly back away and try to get to the woods they saw that this one didn’t have any stripes on it either… which meant that it was a fresh conversion. Though neither of the two said it they both thought the same thing, that they were watching the former Ariel press her hands on the head of the cheetah.

Almost immediately the rubber began to transfer over from the female Sabredrone onto Vikus’ head, his rounded feline ears turning pointed just like hers as the assimilating substance pushed into his skull. It appeared in this instance that the process would be rather fast; already the cheetah’s mouth had started to go slack and his eyes began to become tinted green as more of the shiny substance spread over his face. His blunt muzzle stretched and extended and a pair of fangs stretched out as the struggling of the other male quickly stopped. Soon the head of the cheetah was no more, instead it looked exactly like the one that was above him as a shiny glowing orange stripe appeared on her shoulder.

“So much for that,” Trevor whispered as he motioned for Chaos to continue. “Let’s go, there’s nothing more we can do for them and the Assimilator might still be out there somewhere.”

Chaos nodded and the two were about to move forward when they saw a shadow move overhead that caused them both to stop dead in their tracks. “Too late,” the husky whispered back. “What do we do now? This place is going to be swarming in minutes and Assimilators can catch people when they’re not loaded down.”

“Well… two cans of gas are better than four…” Trevor said, giving Chaos a small nod even as the husky looked at him in confusion. “Get to the caravan and tell them to leave immediately, don’t wait up.” Before Chaos could say anything Trevor ran out into the middle of the road and back into the suburbs, deliberately doing things like banging the gas cans against the pavement to make noise. Though the husky wanted nothing more than to shout at him to come back he knew that it would be too late and even as he turned to go the other way he could see that same shadow start flying towards him.

After Chaos managed to get back into the underbrush he turned to see if maybe he could get Trevor to come back, only to find him kneeling down as an Assimilator Sabredrone stood in front of him. Though it was hard to tell what the fox was saying it was clear that he was surrendering to the rubber creature as he raised his hands above his head. The husky watched in shock and horror as the Assimilator nodded and slid a collar around the fox’s neck before pointing towards the area where Vikus had been transformed. There was no resistance from Trevor as he stood up and pulled the duffel bag off his shoulder before walking willfully to the area that he had been told to go.

With three of his four fellow caravan crew caught Chaos knew it would only be a matter of time before they shared the information of where they were currently stopped at. The canine once more grabbed the supplies that had cost the others so dearly and made his way back towards the highway. Though he wondered what he was going to say to the others when he got there he knew that they would likely understand no matter what. It wasn’t the first time they had lost others to the scourge that had been chasing them, he thought to himself with a grimace, and it likely wouldn’t be the last time that he lost members of his team either.

Little did Chaos know how true that was going to be as he made it back to the exit that had pointed him to the town in the first place and saw his caravan from the overpass… or rather what was left of it. The gas cans clattered to the ground as he watched Sabredrones swarming the area, those that hadn’t already been converted were collared and being loaded onto a bus. It was a conversion transport vehicle, modified specifically so that they could transport survivors they had caught back to the corrupted city to be assessed and given specific drone tasks while those that gave in willingly, like Trevor, would be given special promotions like Assimilators or Controllers. At least that was what the rumors were, tales told by those who claimed to have escaped the corrupted city and the grasp of the Sabredrone Overlord that ruled it.

With the caravan gone there was only two things that Chaos could do now, either submit himself to the will of the Sabredrones and see if he couldn’t get some of that preferential treatment or try to make a run for it. Though he knew he would never make it to the coast at that rate he could possibly find a place to hide out, maybe ride this whole invasion out until that hope of rescue would be fulfilled. Just as he was about to make that decision though he heard the flap of wings and a soft thud of something landing behind him. He realized at that moment he had been standing out in the open for too long, something that proved to be a fatal mistake as he slowly turned around to look at the Sabredrone Assimilator behind him.

Though it was hard to tell individual identities of who Sabredrones used to be, especially for the regular drones that almost always were given the form of the overlord, this creature had enough features for the husky to realize who it was. “No… it can’t be…” Chaos said as he found himself taking a step back, nearly tripping over the can of gas that he had dropped. “Newlyn?”

“I’ve been hunting you down for a very long time Chaos,” Newlyn replied with a grin, his long latex tongue licking against his elongated fangs. “I thought that I might have had you when you went into the city but I couldn’t find where you had wandered off to, so after we captured your friends and found the location of your convoy I figured it would just be easier to meet you here.”

Chaos felt a pit forming in his stomach as he realized that he was the one that the Assimilators were hunting, and it was because of that all those survivors that he had been traveling with were now captured by that which they were trying to flee. “You don’t have to take them all Newlyn,” the husky said, swallowing hard when the Sabredrone stepped forward and closed the distance between the two of them. “If I’m your target you can take me, leave the others alone.”

“Your self-sacrifice is certainly noted,” Newlyn replied as the smirk on his muzzle grew bigger. “But you should know by now that just because you were the one I was looking for doesn’t mean I’m going to bring the rest in. Plus the Controllers had been sniffing out your group for some time now, it was just me that happened to point out the direction of where you went off to. Speaking of things you should know by now it’s time for you to make another choice, are you going to submit now on your own or would you like me to do the honors?”

As the Assimilator gave him those options Chaos saw a collar being swung around the finger of the rubber creature. The husky found himself unable to answer right away, his words catching in his throat as he continued to try and disbelief the thing that was standing right before his eyes. Part of him wished that he couldn’t see the feline features of the Sabredrone that gave him away as his friend, or the fact that the Assimilator had a number of glowing green stripes to denote all those that he had captured and converted so far. How many had fallen in his friend’s pursuit of him, he wondered as he looked into those glowing green eyes.

The canine’s thoughts were interrupted as something was put in front of his face, his eyes looking down at the rubber collar that hovered only a few inches from his face. His fingers trembled slightly as he found himself taking it and slowly putting it on while his corrupted friend watched. There was no clasp for him to loop the straps through, instead once he got it around his neck he overlapped the two ends and felt them melt into one another. Almost immediately as soon as the heavy band settled around his neck he felt a sense of calm wash over him as his tense muscles relaxed completely. Though he found himself still in control of his body and thoughts when Newlyn told him to go down towards the parked truck he responded immediately by walking towards the destination.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Newlyn said as they walked down towards the transport together. “Last time I saw you we were running through that alley away from the growing horde that was forming in the corrupted city. Do you remember that Chaos?”

Chaos found himself nodding as the images of what happened that day flooded his mind once more. He and the snow leopard had just managed to get out of the apartment they were in and down into the street as the building became overrun with rubber creatures. At that point they hadn’t realized how clever they were and as they ran over to where their car was parked Newlyn had stepped on a puddle of latex that stuck to him like glue. By the time Chaos realized what had happened and turned around he saw the rubber already starting to creep up the feline’s body, the snow leopard’s half-covered hand reaching up to him for help as the rest of him became covered.

Even though Chaos wanted to turn back and help his friend the sight of shadows quickly moving on their position prompted him to run instead. When he got to the corner he made the mistake of turning back one last time and seeing the fear on Newlyn’s face before the latex puddle engulfed him completely. Soon the feline was nothing more than a cocooned creature wiggling on the ground as Sabredrones came from the other side of the street to grab the trapped snow leopard. That was the last that the husky had seen of him… until now.

“I don’t fault you for going by the way,” Newlyn stated, snapping Chaos out of his thoughts to realize that he was standing at the entrance to the bus already. “Had you helped me you would have just ended up stuck right next to me, though I do regret that since you missed out on all the fun that I’ve been having. Don’t worry though, I’m sure we’ll catch you up very, very quickly.”