

## Chapter 21

It took a minute past her declaration for Tessa to pass me her glasses, which I quickly put on my face, peering down into the town. Sure enough, dozens of basic, relatively crude robots were walking around, going from building to building, exploring the town. There were dozens of different shapes and sizes, all of them bipedal and none of them looking bigger than possible for a human. Still, the fact that most of them looked to be armed with at least a blunt weapon, and more than a few with guns of some sort, this did not look easy.

I kept looking for a moment, before focusing on the park in the center of the town. It was in perfect condition, as if a team of gardeners had just finished tending it, which told me that there was some noble bullshit going on. There I could see a stone platform of some kind, also cleared of rubble or overgrowth. On that platform were two black boxes, the shape of which I remember from when I first arrived here. In between them was a plinth of some kind, with a big red button on it. I pulled off the glasses and handed them back to Tessa.

“Look at the center of town, at the park. It’s all cleared of overgrowth and-”

“Are those how we get home?” She asked, leaning forward and adjusting the special glasses. “They don’t look like much.”

“Yeah, that’s how we get home,” I confirmed. “We each sit in one and it takes us back, according to what I was told before I left.”

“What’s it say on the side of the thing in between them?”

I frowned and held out my hand, my partner handing her binocular glasses back over. It took me a second to find the center again, focusing on the pedestal. Sure enough there was some writing on the side, along with a symbol I recognized.

“It’s an emergency stop button,” I explained, pulling off the advanced eyewear. “You have to have them in any business that uses automated things around people. They turn off all automated equipment in the building in case the cleaning bot glitches and tries to clean people with acid or whatever nightmare people used to have about robot workers.”

“So... we get to the center of the town, press the button and all the robots turn off?”

“I... That’s what it looks like,” I answered, holding my hands up when she gave me a harsh look. “I don’t know, it’s not like I can read the instruction manual from here. If this was a Jumbo Value Mart, then yes, that button would turn off all the robots and drones and whatever. But here... All I can say is probably.”

She put on her binocular glasses again and looked down into the town, silent for around a minute before pulling them off and closing her eyes.

“Okay, we can do this,” She mumbled to herself, sitting back against the roof of the house we were perched on. “What’s the likelihood that this is a puzzle challenge? That we could talk our way through.”

“Not very good,” I responded, pretty sure she knew that already but choosing to humor her. “They are almost all armed in some way, no reason to do that if we weren’t supposed to fight them.”

“Alright, so no puzzle, what are the chances of sneaking through? Or just saying fuck it and running through it?”

“For you... decent?” I guessed, shaking my head. “I wouldn’t stand a chance at it, not with my top speed like, what, half of yours? Two thirds?”

“Well... you said they like loopholes, what if I did it alone?” She suggested, chewing her lip. “I use my jacket to go invisible, cross as much distance as possible before it runs out and blitzing the last bit. I slap the button and you take your time.”

“That... Might work,” I painfully admitted. “But that looks like almost a full mile. Your jacket doesn’t last that long and even with your enhancement, can you run full tilt for that long?”

“... Maybe?” She admitted just as reluctantly. “Alright, do you have a better idea?”

“Yeah. I start making noise and you head in,” I said with a shrug. “I keep them distracted until you reach the button and shut it down.”

“What? No, there are way too many, you’ll get overwhelmed.”

We were quiet for a while. Both of us knew exactly what we were trying to do, make sure the other person was safe, by putting ourselves in danger. I shook my head and laid back on the slanted roof, looking up at the slightly cloudy sky.

“We could just go for it.”

“What, just head right in, smash our way through?” She asked, laying back with me. “Brute force isn’t exactly the smartest play.”

“But we would be together,” I pointed out quietly. “But it doesn’t have to be pure brute force. Why don’t we do some recon, see how many of them there are, and then come up with a plan?”

Tessa nodded and I pulled out my drone, activating it and sending it off, steering it through my implant. Together we watched the projected screen as I directed the drone out over the town. When it got there I slowly lowered it down, low enough so we could see the streets and count the robots. As I circled and crisscrossed, we noted large concentrations of robots. We quickly realized that the distinctions between them went beyond just what they were armed with or their size.

The largest seemed to be lumbering giants, but armed with the biggest, or best quality guns. Meanwhile the smaller sizes seemed to be in better shape, but armed with nothing more than metal poles. Stranger still, the small ones seemed to be the only ones capable of noticing the drone, even going so far as to throw their weapons at it when it flew close enough. One particularly lucky machine, no bigger than a large dog, happened to be on the roof of a building when I flew over. It tagged the drone with a rusted pipe, causing the drone to spin and spiral for a moment before it reoriented itself and I pulled it back up high, far out of range.

“Okay, so it's not completely hopeless,” I said, shaking my head. “I think we could both easily stay ahead of the slow ones, and it doesn't look like they can see anything long range.”

“Unless they are fucking with us,” Tessa added, catching the drone as I flew it back to us, passing it to me.

I took it back and turned it over in my hands, finding where it had been hit. There was a slight scuff mark from where the pipe had smacked into the side, but as far as I could tell it was just superficial. I brushed it off a bit before putting it back in my backpack.

“Yeah, there is that...” I reluctantly admitted. “But don't forget-”

“Their first priority is making money, which they won't do if they screw us over,” She finished for me. “I'm not sure that adding a last minute twist would come across as screwing us, but I understand. Alright, so how do we get to the park and hit that button?”

We sat on the roof for a while, each of us trying to come up with some trick or strategy that would make this safe, or at least safer than just attacking head on and getting overrun.

“From what we saw... they can communicate, but it has a range,” I said, thinking out loud. “So what if we clear out an area, take a break and then move on to the next?”

“Sounds a lot like brute forcing it, but it's better than just bum rushing it to the center,” Tessa admitted. “Are you sure-”

“No, you are not just sprinting to the center,” I repeated without waiting for her to finish. “Getting spotted by one seemed to get the attention of every robot a block... How many of them were in a block?”

“Like fifteen, unless there are some hiding inside buildings,” She answered. “... do you think there are any hiding inside?”

“No, they would have come out when the bots started throw stuff at us,” I explained, pausing for a moment before adding a bit more. “But we should definitely check before heading in, even if I have to sacrifice the drone.”

We spit balled ideas for another. Tessa added onto the idea of sacrificing the drone on purpose, giving us a chance to make headway when the droid converged on it. It wasn't the worst idea. I had no desire to bring the drone back with us, and if it could pull away any of the bots I would consider its role fulfilled and leave it behind.

After an hour, we finally had an outline of a plan, which started with us traveling around the outside of the town center, as there was a better angle to enter from and we both agreed that we wanted the deck stacked in our favor as much as possible.

For now, though, we would find a place to spend the rest of the day and night. It wasn't even close to dark out, but we both agreed that attacking in the morning would be better. We climbed down off of the roof and searched the residential neighborhood, eventually finding a basement under a mostly intact house. We did a bit of scaving for some extra food before barricading ourselves in the basement as we had done dozens of times before by now. We cleared the room to have space to sleep, pushing aside old boxes of clothes and other to the side. The basement was on the smaller side, but it was pretty easy to make room when you didn't really care about any of the junk inside the boxes and containers.

When we were done we sat down on the floor, using some clothes and a blanket as a cushion. We cracked open our food, some of which we had found up stairs and some of which we had been carrying. We silently ate our food, mentally going over our strategy, both of us too far inside our heads to really talk. Eventually the silence got to me, however, and I let out a sigh.

“We just need to give it our all,” I said. “Not much more we could do than that.”

For a long moment she didn't respond, eventually looking up at me from a can of vegetables.

“Leon... I appreciate all of this. You've given me a chance to get out of this hell hole and... Well the less said about my mental state when we first found each other the better. I... I just want you to know that even if I don't make it with you, this gives me hope... giving me something to work for... I can't thank you enough.”

She trailed off for a moment, looking over at the dusty pile of junk that we had made on one side of the room, chewing her lip. I opened my mouth to assure her that we would both be getting out of here when she cut me off.

“I guess what I’m saying is I don’t want to be the reason you don’t make it home,” She explained. “If it comes down to it, between saving me and hitting that button... don’t get yourself killed trying to get me home. Promise me you go home.”

“... are you fucking crazy?” I asked, Tessa finally turning to look at me, her eyes a bit misty but mostly opened wide at my response. “Tessa, there is no I’m going to promise you that! You are the only reason I have any chance at all of making it back to my family. I mean without you I wouldn’t have even made it out of the city! I’ve already done what I can for my family, and while I will do everything I possibly can to get back to them, leaving you behind is not something I consider possible.”

She kept looking at me, for a long moment. Eventually, I reached out, holding my hand open for her to take. Her eyes trailed down, looking at my hand before eventually reaching out and taking it. When her hand was in mine I pulled her closer until she was sitting with me, her head on my shoulder. I wrapped both of my arms around her, pulling her against me until we were both comfortable.

“We are going to fucking crush this, alright?” I assured her. “We have done some incredible things the past few months, and this is just another incredible thing we need to do. We’ve got this.”

She sniffed, rubbing her face with her palm before nodding. She started to talk, and coughed, clearing out her throat.

“Yeah, you’re right,” She said, her usual confidence returning. “Killing the vispers was way crazier than this. We are going to crush this.”

## Chapter 22

We woke up the next morning and quickly got to work. After a quick meal, we emptied our bags of anything we weren’t going to try and bring back with us. We had both gathered a good chunk of stuff, from jewelry and coins we found in homes, to several books that made up a series that Tessa liked. Some of the stuff I planned on keeping for myself, or giving as a gift to Olivia and Tyler, but the vast majority I was planning on selling.

My family had no massive backers waiting in the wings to support us, or to fund our businesses or schemes. I needed to generate as much money as possible to give my siblings as many chances as possible. I was stuck doing shit like the last few months, but my siblings were the ones who would have to pull our family along.

When our packs were ready, we set out immediately, wanting to get around the outskirts of the town as quickly as possible. Compared to the distance we had been covering daily for a few weeks it was a small stretch, but combined with the stress of being so close to so many hostile bots it seemed to drag on forever. Still, when we arrived what we agreed would be the best avenue attack we were both still brimming with energy.

“Alright... Are you ready?” Tessa asked, turning her head to look at me, both of hiding behind a large overturned truck.

Ahead of us was a long road, the park sitting at the end. Several automatons moved back and forth on the street, and we knew that there were even more hidden around and down crossing streets. We had around a mile of hostile ground to cross, with hundreds of armed and armored bots waiting to stop us.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

She nodded and together we stepped around our cover, starting at a walk, slowly picking up speed as we headed in. Our first target was a half collapsed building just inside the outskirts. Quietly as possible we scaled the pile of rubble, making it up the mound and using it as a place to jump up to the building next to it, which was still mostly intact. We managed to make it with relatively little sound, Tessa jumping first since she was much lighter on her feet.

Once we were up on the intact shop, our building hopping journey began. Slowly but surely we jumped from one structure to the next, making a not insignificant amount of progress. The entire reason for coming to this side was the long string of shops, a motel and then some sort of concrete office, all in a row that we could easily run along.

A few times we had to work to scale a bit higher, especially between the one floor, brickwork motel and the concrete office building, which was three but had an already smashed window near the roof of the motel.

During our entire journeys, both of us were tense, doing our absolute best to make as little noise as possible. We managed to make it past the office building by two buildings, standing on a small general store style shop when we finally had to stop, a street cutting across our path that was obviously too wide to jump. We had known this going in.

We knew that charging through the town to the park in the center would only draw the attention of every bot we passed, but if we somehow managed to make it without being stopped we would be fine. Unfortunately, the likelihood we could cross that much distance without being slowed down or stopped was too large to risk. We would have to push inward slowly but surely, destroying robots as we went in order to keep from being overwhelmed.

With a shared look, we both drew our weapons, my axe deploying from its hatchet form, the intricately detailed weapon growing to its full size. Tessa pulled an arrow from her quiver

stepping closer to the edge of the roof, finding her target quickly. As we discussed yesterday, my job would be to keep the smaller, faster robots off of her while she focused on the slower, bulkier robots that could kill us easily with their guns if they got in range. I stood next to her silently, waiting for her to announce our presence with her first shot.

The now familiar sound of her bow firing cut through the silence, only for a metallic thump to echo through the streets, followed by a screech of static. She had nailed a distant rusted and lightly armored robot, whose head almost reached past the store front it was standing in front of. Her arrow punched through the metal encased "head" of the large automaton, which sparked and spasmed, its legs falling out from under it as its speaker blared.

Suddenly the whole street was alive with movement, dozens of robots shifting and turning to look at us, before, as one, they started running, heading directly for the store we were standing on. Tessa immediately turned and took aim at the second large bot, firing another arrow. I, however, wasn't paying attention to that anymore, I trusted my partner to keep the gun-wielding robots off of us. Instead, I was focused on the smaller robots as they clambered up the large truck that was smashed through the building.

You see, we were counting on the robots taking the path of least resistance. Since there was no easy way to climb up to the roof, then a three-foot jump from some sort of tow truck to the roof was the next obvious bet.

A half-dozen robots reached the rusted and broken tow truck at once, clambering up the side and running along the back to leap at the edge of the store, just able to sink its robotic hands into the edge. I could hear the whirring and complaining of electrical servos as it pulled itself partially onto the roof, only to go limp and fall back after I caved its "head" in with my axe.

Unfortunately the next robot was smaller, and it seemed that the smaller the robots where the more agile they were, as this one was a full head shorter than me and easily cleared the gap between the truck and the roof. The first one to make the jump got greeted with a push kick that sent it falling back off the roof, slamming into the bumper of the truck. The next managed to force me back, two more quickly joining them.

The smallest of the three immediately charged, swinging what looked like a wooden table leg at me. I ducked out of the way and swung my axe up into its side, swinging one-handed so my other hand could grab its crude weapon. Sparks flew out of its rib panel and it stumbled, giving me enough time to swing my axe back up and around to slam into its shoulder, nearly taking its head completely off. The camera mounted in its head spun and tried to focus before the few lights visible in its frame dimmed.

I didn't have time to celebrate my victory, as the other two robots were on me moments later, one of them swinging a rusted pipe at me. Instead of dodging I let my shield tank the first hit, the red energy barrier flickering and snapping, stopping the hit and letting me should check

the bot. It stumbled back and slammed into another bot who had just stepped onto the roof, both of them falling off, the sound of the impact reaching me a second later.

Unfortunately the shoulder check left me open and I felt something slam into my side, another robots swinging a bent piece of rebar at me. Mentally thanking whoever made the robots that they were to stupid to realize *impaling* me on the rebar would have been a lot more effective, I swung my axe around and smashed the black spike into the base of its head, the droid flopping instantly. There wasn't even much armor there.

The wave of articulated metal and rusted machines continued, until I had managed to destroy ten of them, and tessa another seven. As I finished off the last one I idly pushed it off the roof, turning to Tessa.

"You notice the weak spot?" I asked, stepping away from the edge flicking out my arm, trying to work a bit of soreness out from absorbing a hit from a desperate bot.

"In the back of their neck?" Tessa asked, and I nodded. "Yeah, the only spot not armored up for the last two I took down."

We waited for a few minutes, surveying the now quiet streets waiting for a while, nervously waiting for any stragglng machines to show themselves. When none did we relaxed a little, though most of our tension remained.

"Not super useful when they are charging head first at you," I said, shaking my head. "You ready to move on?"

"I need to get my arrows first."

I nodded and we both made our way down off of the building, both of us staying quiet as we went to each of the seven larger bots Tessa had taken down, pulling her enhanced arrows from them. I spent a minute trying to pull the guns from their hands, but quickly discovered that not only were they welded in place,m but they weren't really built in a way that a person could fire them.

When Tessa was done we oriented ourselves down the right street and slowly headed off, creeping down the empty road, the large park a distant goal. We made it about a third of the remaining distance when a randomly roaming bot, one only about half my height spotted us. Tessa took it down within seconds, an arrow slamming into its chest and out its back, but it was already too late.

Another swarm of robots charged us, this time mostly smaller bots. I held them off as long as I could, giving Tessa enough time to take down the larger ranged bots before she dropped her bow on the roof of a rusted out car and pulled out her sword. While it was extremely sharp, it wasn't enough to punch through any armor. Luckily for us it was enough to



punch through the unarmored weak spot, and the spark of electricity the weapon could discharge also stunned the machines long enough for one of us to finish them off.

We fought through the wave, as well as the final behemoth that came around a corner and sprayed us down with zap rounds. Neither of us were hit, but one took down my shield, which meant it would be down for a while. Luckily Tessa was able to grab her bow and take it out with a few rapid shots while I played as bait.

“You okay?” She asked when it had finally fallen, making her way to me and helping me to my feet.

“Yeah, the shield took the bullet for me,” I assured her. “It's gonna be a while before it comes back.”

She nodded and set about finding her arrows again, gathering them all quickly before we set out again. Our strategy continued, varying slightly occasionally depending on what sort of situation we found ourselves in. We smashed, crushed and fought our way through the town, taking out droves of robots as we went. We also accumulated some wounds as we fought, though most of them were simple scrapes and bruises. I was pretty sure I had a cracked rib or three, as breathing was painful, though not hard enough to stop me. Tessa had a jagged cut along her hip, which had already stopped bleeding but would start again every time she did something strenuous. We bandaged it as best we could, but ultimately decided that since it didn't really affect her movement save hurting like a bastard when she moved, that it was problem for when we got home.

Every time we survived a fight we got closer and closer to the central park, our way home easily discernible every step of the way. Soon only a single street and the expanse of well maintained grass was left between us. The temptation to sprint across was almost overpowering, but we somehow resisted. We stopped at the last bit of clover, a truck that had been turned on its side from a collision with a smaller car.

## Chapter 23

“So... Can I make a run for it now?” Tessa asked as we rested quietly, peaking over the edge of the sideways truck. “I mean It would only take a few seconds.”

“No. We are doing this together,” I said, shaking my head. “I'm... I'm worried there is something else...”

“I thought you said you didn;t think they would try to screw us over?” She asked, turning to look at me.

"I still don't," I assured her, watching the robots on the other side of the park slowly mill around aimlessly. "That doesn't mean there won't be *anything*."

"Right..." She responded, clearly not nearly as confident as I was in my assumption. "Any ideas?"

For a long moment I was silent, studying the ground, the buildings and everything around us, trying to spot anything unusual. As far as I could tell there wasn't anything indicating a hint or signal what could happen when we tried to cross the final hundred and fifty feet or so.

"No, if there isn't anything obvious then they clearly intended us not to find it," I finally responded.

"Are you saying you think there is something waiting for us... and the only way to find out what it is is to trip the trap?"

"...yes."

Tessa looked at me for a long moment before pulling away from the truck and walking around me, almost stepping out of cover. I managed to grab her and pull her back.

"Will you stop? Let's just get this over with!" She said, slapping my hand. "There's no reason to stop."

"Will you calm down for a second?" I jerking her back into cover before letting go. "I just wanted to say that we should still rush for the platform. The emergency stop will probably still shut down the robots, meaning if there is something else we can focus on that rather than dealing with it and the bots."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then we fight until they kill us," I said, Tessa slapping my shoulder at my statement. "What, do you have a better idea? You were just about to basically do the same thing."

"Alright, fine. Are you ready?" She asked, getting ready to run around the truck and out of cover again.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Together we stepped out of cover and ran towards the center of the large park. The second we stepped off the asphalt and onto the grass, I knew I was right. A tremor shook the ground under our feet, almost making me trip. As I recovered Tessa looked back, but I waved her to keep going.

Without the need to keep pace with me she shot forward, pouring on speed and crossing the last bit of distance to the stone platform. Without pause she jumped up the steps to the shutdown button, slapping it immediately.

As we were running towards the center, dozens of alarms sounded around the park, robots noticing us from almost every angle. Immediately they had begun to run towards us, the smaller ones almost reaching the grass while the larger ones were just stepping out from around buildings. When Tessa slapped the shut off all of them collapsed at once, their forward momentum causing them to slap and tumble along the ground. Tessa jumped and shouted in excitement, only to stop and focus back on me, and the growing mound in the dirt between us, another tremor shook the park.

The mound under the grass continued to grow until the grass couldn't cover it any more, and it tore away, sliding off the metal underneath to reveal what had been hiding. A large mechanical monster about twice the size of the largest robot we had seen so far. It was quadrupedal, shifting and moving with smooth joints, and looked vaguely canine, its legs and head shaped in a similar way as a wolf. It also had jaws filled with metallic teeth, each of its feet armed with sharp looking claws.

It looked like if someone combined a wolf with an advanced piece of construction machinery, the type nobles sent out to build their business fronts in Outer York City.

The massive machine shook the dirt off of itself with fluid motion that told me this was *not* a clunky, low quality bot like we had been facing. This was built with much more advanced stuff.

"Run!" I shouted, waiting for Tessa to jump and sprint away from the platform, heading back to some building for cover before running myself.

I could feel the slow tremors as the robot shifted its feet, knowing it was watching us and *letting us escape*. As we both dashed around the corner of a random building, some brick structure with long broken display windows in the front. We kept running, past wrecked cars and disabled robots, both of us almost stumbling and falling as the massive robot let out a long, mechanical howl, the sound making the broken glass shattered around us vibrate.

Once the long howl stopped we could hear and *feel* the massive robot chasing after us. Tessa grabbed my arm and pulled me into an alleyway, which cross to another road. We kept running, the electronic growls and barking of the canine-esque machine echoing from behind us as it tried to follow us, eventually running around to find a different way.

"We are going to have to kill it!" I said, still running after Tessa.

"No shit!" She shouted back.

It was only about ten seconds later that the quadruped robot found us again, jumping over a burnt out truck and skidding on the ground, cutting off the road we were running after. In one smooth motion Tessa drew her bow, nocked an arrow and fired, the enhanced arrow flying to and punching through one of the machine's eye sensors, making them yelp and bark in simulated pain.

Seeing it reel back from something as if it was capable of feeling pain I immediately turned back and charged at it. Tessa shouted as she saw me turn, but I just waved her toward it.

"Keep hitting it!" I shouted, the road shaking as I crossed back through the distance. "Try and take its other eye!"

I reached its feet, just as it settled down, thankfully still focused on Tessa. I swung my axe, the enhanced blade punching through the armor on its inner leg, cutting through whatever was underneath. The canine like machine reacted with a deep, electronic growl, but was forced to avoid Tessa's arrow, rather than attack me directly. It dipped its head as she shot, giving me a chance to attack its leg again, heaving a strike that slammed into just the same spot, before yanking the axe free.

The bottom quarter of the leg, the foot and a bit higher went completely limp, sparks shooting out from the "wound" in its leg. It limped and spun, attempting to chomp at me, its metal jaws sounding like a ragged pair of shears before slamming shut with a mighty clang. I just managed to jump clear, onto and beyond a car. Its jaws slammed down around the car's front end as it jumped back again, tearing through it before shaking its head loose.

It growled in frustration and climbed over the car, its frame crumpling under its massive weight as it limped towards me, its leg dripping black oil. I turned to run, circling around a large wreck. I could hear Tessa firing arrows at it, three shots slamming into the armor on its back, all three penetrating but not doing anything.

Finally, her third shot managed to slam into its neck, causing it to flinch, slamming against the storefront it was walking past. I turned and once again rushed it, this time holding up my hand and activating my flashbang glove, a massive flash of light blasting out, followed by a massive concussive blast, the sound hurting my ears.

True to my theory the metal canine reacted as if it was alive, reeling back and yipping, lashing out with its "uninjured" paw. It smashed the side of a truck but missed me, letting me hack at the limb unimpeded, getting two swings in before it reacted and jumped away.

The ground shook when it landed, a partially wrecked building about two dozen feet away completely collapsing from the shaking. I charged after it again, getting ready to stun it again when it suddenly jumped back, attacking me directly. I managed to just barely lift my axe up and get it between us, which was the only reason the impact didn't break any bones. It still

lifted me off my feet, threw me backwards until I slammed into the side of a van, shattering a window and caving in the paneling. The landing rattled me worse than the blow, my head slamming into the car hard enough to see stars.

“Leon!”

I could hear Tessa shouting, and through blurry vision, I could see an arrow hit the mechanical wolf's nose, with no reaction. It seemed determined to take me out, making its way toward me. It was almost on me when suddenly Tessa leaped over the van, definitely using her jump boots to add in extra height as she landing on the massive robots head. Her hand flashed and she slammed a knife into its head, the blade, her safety knife, cutting easily through the armor, carving a massive chunk of it off completely.

The wolf roared in anger and pain, tossing its head around, trying to dislodge Tessa as she effortlessly cut into the armor plating. I stood up, leaning against the van behind me until my feet were under me before charging with my own shout, throwing caution to the wind. I could see Tessa drop her knife, the charge undoubtable drained as she drew her sword and plunged it into the mess of exposed machinery. Sparks zapped out around its head, the whole body jerking as I slammed my axe over and over again into its legs, until finally it collapsed.

I ran out from under the massive metal construct and attacked its neck, hacking away until after a half dozen strikes it went completely limp. Oil, hydraulic fluid and some kind of coolant all sprayed out from the deep “wounds” the both of us cut into him, covering us both. Eventually, my energy ran out and I collapsed backward, the dull aches turning into more persistent and debilitating pain.

“Tessa?” I called out, slowly walking my way around the massive “corpse,” looking for my partner. “Tessa, you alright?”

“Yeah...I'm fine.” She responded, standing up from where she had fallen off of the robot dog. “You okay?”

“Fuck no, but I'll survive,” I responded, almost collapsing before she darted forward, helping me stay upright. “Thanks.”

“You sure it's dead?” She asked, looking back at the machine's head.

“I nearly decapitated it,” I said, “It's dead.”

Slowly but surely, we walked away from the mechanical corpse, making our way to the center park. As the adrenaline faded the pain from being slapped across the street got worse, and it was clear that Tessa hadn't gotten off scot free either. Still, we supported each other as best we could, eventually making it back to the grassy park. As we climbed to the top of the platform we stopped and sat down, facing back toward the town.

“Are you ready to go?” I asked as we recovered.

“Yeah... you gonna bring your axe with you?”

“It should be fine,” I said with a shrug. “It’s nice and small when it’s a hatchet.”

She nodded and for a long moment we sat in silence, looking back at what we had survived. After a few minutes had gone by I slowly stood, wincing as I straightened up and offered Tessa my hand.

“C’mon, time to go home.”

She looked up at me and nodded, taking my hand and letting me pull her up. Wordlessly we turned back to the two boxes, before I helped her climb into hers. Once it was shut I could hear it locking up tight, sealing up to protect her from moving from this reality to mine. I quickly made my way to the other box, climbing inside and shutting the door, letting it seal around me.

As far as I could remember, it felt identical to the box I had arrived in, all the way down to the viewscreen. After a few seconds, I stood inside the box and a countdown appeared in the bottom left corner. Without any fanfare it started counting down from ten.

The red familiar lighting appeared almost instantly, arcing and spinning around the box, this time in a wider arch that enveloped both Tessa and I. It spun faster and faster, obscuring our view of the park and the town past that, until all I could see was the red energy. Suddenly, with only seconds left, the box vibrating constantly, the screen went black. I could feel the box falling, and while I forced myself to breathe calmly I realized that with everything I had talked about, I had never explained to Tessa what this felt like.

Before I could think of anything past that feeling disappeared, and suddenly the view screen was of the same lab space I had left from. Smoke partially obscured the room, but it soon faded. After a few more seconds there was a beep and the screen blinked green. I could hear and feel the box as it unlocked itself, the door opening just a fraction of an inch, letting me push it open completely.

## Chapter 24

I stepped out of my box, looking to my right to see Tessa stepping out of hers, looking around. If I didn’t know her so well at this point, I would have missed the nervousness she was doing her best to hide. Before I could say or do anything, a loud tone echoed through the empty lab space, and suddenly it wasn’t so empty any more.

Dozens of people rushed into the room, all dressed in hazardous environment gear. They made a beeline for us, making Tessa and I flinch, instinctively reaching for our weapons. I managed to stop with just the flinch, but Tessa had her hand on her pistol before she slowly pulled it away.

“Welcome home Leon! And Tessa, welcome to your new home!” A familiar voice called out.

I turned and looked up to see the same observation room as before, with Ilbryen standing front and center, giving me a wave. There was a whole group of people behind him, several of which were directing camera drones. Seems like we still had an audience

“These fine folk are going to make sure you're alright, then you and Tessa are going to need a good decontamination,” He explained with a smile. “When you're all done with that we have some people who would like to see you. Have fun!”

The people in protective gear scanned us for a minute or so, making sure our most recent injuries weren't going to act up. When they were done they listed off our injuries and gave us each a large shot through a device similar to the enhancing serums. Almost immediately the pain faded, both Tessa and I letting out a groan of relief. One of the people scanning us chuckled.

“Sounds like the painkillers kicked in,” He said, folding up his scanner and stepping back out of my personal space. “I suggest you take it easy for about twenty four hours while the medicine does its job. Both of you have a couple of cracks and hairline fractures each and some internal bruising, but beyond that you're both fine. As long as you don't get hit again for a day or so it should heal up nicely.”

I could only nod as he quickly walked away, all but two of the people following him out. It was beyond strange to be around so many people, a sort of uneasiness creeping around the back of my head. As the two remaining staff gestured for us to follow them, I turned to look at Tessa.

“You alright?”

“Yeah... it's a lot to handle once...” She admitted, looking around constantly, trying to take in every new thing. “

“Just stay close,” I said, and she looked back at me, giving me a serious nod. She clearly had no intention of leaving my side anytime soon.

We continued to follow our guides before eventually ending up in a room with a series of cylindrical tubes. Two of them were open, with a floating cart next to each and a privacy screen between them both.

“You’ll both need to strip down, put your stuff on these carts and stand in the decontamination vessels for about five minutes,” One of the people explained. “We will decontaminate your stuff, and provide you with new clothes. Don’t worry, once everything is clean it’s getting sent to Leons home. It will probably beat you there.”

The two guides left, leaving us alone in the room. We stepped on either side of the privacy screen and quickly stripped down. While we hadn’t exactly been dancing in front of each other naked for the past three or so months, we had gotten used to having each other nearby, so any awkwardness that might have floated between us had long since faded.

“You think we will actually get this stuff back?” Tessa asked as I pulled off my jacket and folded it.

“Yeah, nobles don’t steal,” I explained, working on my armor next. “They might trick you into giving up ownership of stuff, but Ilbryen said it was ours, so it’s ours.”

When we were done we both climbed into the tubes, and stood inside for the five minutes we were told to. As I stood inside the slightly cramped space, I could feel some of the stress slowly leaking from my body. I was finally home, Tessa was with me, my family was safe and I didn’t have to worry about anything for a while.

The tubes vibrated and a harsh light blasted through the top, and I could feel something working around from the outside of the inner wall as it did its job. Suddenly the vibration stopped and a series of nozzles were revealed around the interior, all facing at me.

“Son of a-”

The nozzles sprayed me down with harsh, cold liquid that was way too green to be water. The spray reached *every* corner of my body, before suddenly switching to blasts of dry air that quickly dried the not water off of me. When it was done I could hear Tessa cursing loudly in her own tube.

When the tubes opened back up the floating carts carrying our stuff was gone, replaced by one carrying a new set of clothes. A simple pair of gray slacks, a white button up t-shirt and a black suit jacket, along with a pair of fancy loafers, combining into a sort of business casual outfit that I should probably get used to wearing. Of course once it was all on it slowly shaped itself around me until it fit perfectly, adjusting to the perfect temperature as well.

“These clothes are even more comfortable than the stuff we found in the white crates.”



As I pulled on my loafer, Tessa leaned against my side of the privacy screen, running a comb through her mostly dried hair. She was dressed in a similar outfit to mine, though her pants had a bit of flare at the ends and her jacket was a dark blue. She was also in some comfortable but stylish sandals.

“Of course, I wouldn't want us to get access to the good stuff,” I said, standing up and giving Tessa a good look. “...You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm just focusing on staying focused,” She said with a rigid nod. “I'm sure I'm going to break down eventually. Just... don't let me get overwhelmed?”

“Yeah, I've got you,” I said with a nod, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “We-”

Before I could say anything the door into the room opened up and Ilbryen stepped into the room, grinning wide.

“Oh it is good to see you two with my own eyes!” He said, walking up to me and giving me a hug. “You two have done so well, better than we could have ever hoped for!”

I gave Tessa a wide eyed look, completely caught off guard by the Nobles sudden affection. I hesitantly patted his back before he stepped back. For a moment I thought he would hug Tessa, which I was pretty sure would end badly, but it seemed that that had occurred to Ilbryen as well.

“I am so glad that you both made it back, safe and sound,” He said, reaching out to shake Tessa's hand, putting both of his on hers and smiling. “How did you like Fenrir? A good challenge, right?”

“The wolfbot?” Tessa asked, looking stunned at his. “The thing that almost killed us?”

“Almost, that's the key!” He said, seemingly missing her rising anger. “Our merchandising department is having a field day with him! Oh, right, I'm sure you both would like to get home and rest, and here I am gushing! Well, come on, let's get a move on!”

Tessa opened her mouth to shout at the flamboyant noble, who had already turned to the door. I quickly stepped between them, putting my hand on Tessa's mouth.

“Tessa, I know,” I said, shaking my head. “But he won't understand, it's not worth it.”

She pulled my hand off her face, thankfully more angry at Ilbryen than at me.

“I... god you warned me but how could he... What was he thinking?”

“That we signed a contract, and now that we completed it how could we not be excited about the money being made?” I guessed with a shrug. “Even if we won't be seeing any of it directly, the fact that we are a part of a project that brings in that much cash is prestigious. It's just another type of currency for them.”

Before she could respond, I could hear Ilbrey's voice calling down the hallway for us. I nodded to the door and Tessa let out a deep breath, before taking the lead and walking out into the hall.

We followed Ilbryen down the hallway, passing by the space where we had landed back in this world, continuing on until we reached an elevator. We stepped inside and the door closed behind us, perky elevator music playing as we rose up through the building. Ilbryen hummed softly, following along with the elevator music while Tessa visibly struggled to keep her cool. When the doors opened with a ding Ilbryen stepped to the side and gestured for us to go on without him.

“Oh I'm sure I would just get in the way,” He said when I gave him a look. “Just do me a favor and let me know when you leave.”

Resisting the urge to say we wanted to leave right then, I walked out onto the new floor, Tessa following behind me. I absently noted that the elevator door closed behind us with another ding before I was hit with two fleshy missiles.

“Welcome home big brother!”

I couldn't help but laugh, catching both of my siblings in my arms easily, spinning around to burn off some of the energy from them jumping on me. I could see Mom standing not far behind them, looking like she was about to join my siblings.

“It's good to see you guys, I missed all of you so much,” I said, gently putting them both down.

Both of them had clearly grown, Tyler because he was at the age where you couldn't turn around without him adding an inch, and Olivia because she had spent the last few months recovering from her condition. Both of them looked good, healthy and happy.

“We missed you too!” Tyler said, while Mom finally stopped holding back and gave me a crushing hug.

I mentally thanked the worker who had given me the painkillers earlier.

“I'm home, Mom,” I said, hugging her back. “I told you I would make it.”

“I’m so glad sweetie,” She responded, her voice choked up from crying. “Oh I am so glad.”

It took a minute or so for my mom to finally let me go, wiping her eyes with a small cloth. She turned to Tessa, giving her a watery smile.

“It’s good to finally meet you Tessa,” She said, walking up to her and giving her just as big of a hug. “Thank you so much for taking care of my boy.”

“Of course Mrs Draver,” She said, happily returning the hug. “He kept me alive just as much as I did.”

“She is staying with us, at least until she gets used to this world,” I said.

“I know sweetie. I couldn’t bear to watch your show but Ilbryen informed me we would be having her as a guest most likely,” She explained, pulling back from her hug and smiling at Tessa. “We have plenty of room, you can stay as long as you like. Coming up from being a Lowie was a shock enough, I couldn’t imagine how you’re feeling.”

“It’s... a lot,” She admitted, looking over her shoulder at me. “I...”

As she looked back at me, her eyes caught onto something and her voice trailed off. I turned back to see that the far was one massive window, featuring a massive portion of the city. I watched as Tessa wordless stepped closer, all the way until her hands were pressing on the glass. Just as I had remembered, the city was filled with hundreds of flying cars, people and other things. The buildings were decorated with hanging plants and beautiful artwork, some of which moved and animated. It was incredibly impressive, and I couldn’t imagine how insane it looked to someone who grew up in the wreck of a world that died seventy years ago.

As she watched, my mom put her head on my shoulder, while Olivia walked forward and took Tessa’s hand. The shocked woman looked down at my sister, who smiled encouragingly up at her.

“Welcome to Inner York City.” I said. “Welcome to your new home.”

## Chapter 25

It took Tessa a while to finally step away from the window and join us on a nearby sofa. During that time Mom called for our company car, as well as texted Ilbryen that we would be leaving soon. He responded with a series of animated images that ended with a thumbs up, which was more than enough for me.

Stepping out of the building and into the waiting hover car triggered another bout of wide eyed staring from Tessa. She looked like she was trying to take in every angle at once, which made my mom nervous as she moved around on the open air, extended platform. It would have made me nervous too, if I didn't know that with her enhancements she could do backflips in the small space and never even slip.

The city was as impressive as ever, even more so without the tinted glass between us and the open air. The staggered construction, combined with how high up we were meant that all we could see were rooftops and open space, with green, plant covered bridges connecting everything.

"How does the air feel so clean?" Tessa asked, taking a deep breath. "I thought cities had pollution and smog."

"I don't know, but I can tell you that the air is terrible outside golden cities," I explained. "The whole family had to get treated for pollution exposure when we first left."

After a few minutes Mom dragged us both into the hovercar, which sealed shut after we climbed in. I couldn't help but chuckle at Tessa, her face pressed up against the glass, watching the other cars and a few people flew by. I could tell by her face that she would eventually be joining the ones flying without a vehicle.

It didn't take long for us to make it back home, the large, luxurious apartment greeting us with a friendly chime. The house was mostly like I remembered, save the slightly more lived in feel. I could see our pictures displayed all over the walls, with books, toys and other stuff tucked here or stacked there. It was definitely clean, but it didn't feel as... sterile as it did before I left. It still felt big, even with Tessa and I having spent so many nights inside normal homes. The open architecture and judicious use of glass windows made it feel even bigger. Mom ended up giving Tessa a tour, which was also a bit of a tour for myself as plenty had changed since I had left. Oliva had turned her room into a combination library and garden, with books filling four large bookcases and plants filling the remaining free space.

Before her treatment the dust from the books and the pollen from the flowers would have been enough to kill her.

Tyler's room looked like a toy store, which considering that most of them had probably been free wasn't surprising. He had racks, display cases and tables laden with toys of all shapes and sizes. Oddly enough a lot of the action figures, models and more seemed to be on display, rather than temporarily put away. Mom explained that when Tyler realized he could get toys for free he got hundreds of them delivered to the house. He opened up every single one, stacked and played with them for minutes before getting bored with most of them. Even as full of stuff as his room was, she assured me they had returned even more.

After showing Tessa where she would be sleeping, the guest room decorated with some pictures and a large media screen that was currently set to a scene view of a lakehouse, we headed to the kitchen. Mom apologized that she couldn't cook for us, but they hadn't really known when exactly we would be returning, so they had spent all day waiting for us.

"Mom, having you guys waiting for us there was worth some take out," I said, giving her a hug. "Did you guys find any new restaurants while I was gone?"

Tyler immediately suggested we get Mexi, some sort of Noble twist on Mexican food. He promised me it was amazing, but I waved him off.

"Sorry bud, but this is Tessa's first meal here," I pointed out, his eyes going wide. "It's gotta be really special."

About twenty minutes later we had a massive stack of pizza delivered to our house, a robotic drone dropping it off at our doorstep before zipping off, lit up by the purple glow of antigrav tech. We ended up getting five small pizzas so we could get a variety, letting Tessa try as many types as possible.

We quickly put plates out, drinks and napkins, Olivia rushing from her room, a streak of dirt on her cheek and hands from tending to her plants, having neglected them when they were waiting for me. Mom fussed over her for a moment, before we all finally sat down around the table.

For a moment we all watched Tessa, who was looking down at a slice of plain pizza with wonder in her eyes. After a moment she looked up at me and I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm sorry, how am I not supposed to be amazing that you just type some stuff in on one of those chips and food just shows up at your door?" She asks, shaking her head. "And it smells amazing..."

As she talks she grabs the pizza and takes a bite, purposely trying to come off as nonchalant. The second she starts to chew, the flavor spreading in her mouth, her eyes going wide as she all but jammed the small slice into her mouth. I couldn't help but laugh at her various noises of appreciation, even as she quickly grabbing another one.

"Oh my god this is so fucking good," She said with her mouth full, getting another laugh from me.

Still chuckling at her, I joined her in eating, holding back my own sounds of appreciation. I had missed food like this so much at the start of my trip, but somewhere along the line I had forgotten just how good food could be. About five minutes into eating I slowly realized that my family was staring at Tessa and I as we ate. I looked up at my mom, who with a raised eyebrow reached down, took a napkin and handed it to me.

“Sweetie, I know the last few months have been rough...but maybe slow down before you choke?” She suggested looking a bit worried.

I looked at her for a moment, a bit confused before I looked down at the boxes of food. A bit of math and suddenly I realized that Tessa and I had eaten a lot more than I had realized. I swallowed what I had been chewing on before taking the napkin and wiping my hands.

“Sorry Mom... guess my brain hasn’t realized we aren’t still in Tessa's world,” I said, looking at Tessa who was blushing a bit, wiping her face with a napkin. “Haven’t really been watching out for table manners.”

“I know sweetie, I just don’t want you to choke.”

I nodded and Tessa and I continued eating, this time both of us eating much slower, and without being slobs about it. When we were finished, I stuck around the kitchen to help Mom clean up, while Tyler and Oliva dragged Tessa out to the greenery covered bridge that connected our home to our neighbors.

“How has everything been?” I asked, as I leaned against the counter, handing my mother plates as she washed them. “I mean how have things really been?”

“It was... tough. At first,” She admitted, drying one plate and accepting another. “For a week or so Tyler was having a hard time finding things to do, once the excitement wore off. He was used to having a whole megatower of people to spend time with. Between working with a tutor and the move...”

I watched through the window as Tyler showed Tessa some sort of toy, a wand of some sort that he was pointing at a glowing ball. The wand let him maneuver and move it around, and Tyler whipped it into the air, the ball disappearing up with a faint crack.

“What changed?”

“There is an entertainment center down the road where a lot of kids in the area go,” She answered with a smile. “It’s nice, there are a lot of noble toys that he seemed to enjoy, and he made some friends. Olivia on the other hand...”

My sister seemed to be content watching Tyler and Tessa play, the latter making some impressive catches as the former hurled the lightly glowing ball into the air.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, tearing my eyes away when I noticed she had trailed off. “Her issue isn’t coming back, is it? We can call Ilbryen and he-”

“No, no, nothing like that. She just seems content to work on her garden and plants, watching the city sometimes,” Mom explained, drying her hands and smiling as she watched

Tessa and my siblings play. "I've tried to encourage her to find some friends. Apparently she has some online friends she talks to, but beyond them..."

"Has she asked about traveling?" I asked, my mom turning to give me a confused look.

"Traveling? What do you mean?"

"She was obsessed with watching media about foreign places, whether it was a streamer or a documentary," I explained. "I was certain I would come home and her first question would be if she could come with me next time."

"And you would say?" Mom asked, giving me a harsh look.

"No, of course," I assured her, shaking my head. "But she might enjoy traveling to other golden cities, maybe seeing some of those restored historical sites? She's seen so many shows about them at this point she probably knows them better than the guides. Who knows, maybe it would help her come out of her shell."

We continued to talk as we finished cleaning, eventually heading outside to sit with Olivia. Of course I got roped into playing along with Tessa and Tyler, the latter of which was clearly enjoying the challenge of getting Tessa to leap around and catch the ball. Tessa wasn't even sweating.

Eventually, as the sun set we returned inside and Tyler was sent off to bed, quickly followed by Olivia. When they were gone my mom, Tessa and I sat around the island in our kitchen, talking about finally being home and sharing a drink, the first alcohol I had had since leaving.

"Ilbryen wanted to drag you off to some sort of event immediately," Mom said, taking a small sip of her wine. "He eventually agreed to let you unwind for a few days."

"Event?" I asked, not sure what that could mean. "Did he say what kind?"

"A meet and greet of some kind, one with some big wig nobles," She explained. "I was very cross with him when he told me that plan."

"Do... you talk to him often?"

"Well... he would keep me updated on how you two were doing," She admitted, shaking her head. "I'm sorry sweetie, but I couldn't watch! I tried and I couldn't stop crying."

"Mom, it's okay. I'm glad you didn't watch," I assured her, stepping around the counter and giving her a big hug. "It wasn't fun and I wouldn't wish that on you. Trust me I know how terrible just watching it was first hand."

She sniffed before looking at me, watering eyes, tilting her head in confusion, and I snorted and gestured to Tessa.

“There were plenty of times when she needed to do something by herself, or when her mods were better suited for something than me. Watching her putting herself at risk while I just watched sucked.”

Understanding colored my moms face, nodding before resting her head on my shoulder. For a long moment we stood in the kitchen, sharing a hug, before I pulled away slightly, noticing that Tessa was walking away, heading to the living room. I looked back at Mom when she pulled away the rest of the way.

“Go, she needs support,” She said, nodding towards Tessa, before wiping her cheek. “Go on, you being home is all that I need sweetie, the house feels different already.”

I nodded, giving her one more hug and kissing her cheek before leaving the kitchen and heading to the living room. I came around and dropped onto the couch beside her, settling into the incredibly comfy seat.

“How are you doing?”

“How often are you going to ask me that?” She asked, a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice.

“Probably a lot.”

“It’s gonna get old quickly,” She pointed out.

“Maybe.”

“Ass.”

After a long moment of silence she leaned her head on my shoulder and we sat there, on the couch, late into the night.