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## 0 – Prologue

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Another day, another death. At least that's how it was beginning to feel.

Sitting at her office desk in Zynima's central tech station, Shock System stared down at the blaring phone. She knew exactly who was calling, and why.

It was disconcerting at first, but as the days progressed, it became too routine for comfort.

“Central tech station, Chief Medical Officer,” Shock picked up the phone, running through the same lines she'd rehearsed a hundred times before.

“Uhh, we've got a machine in terrible condition down in section two of the city's outskirts. Major damage to the drive, coolant system, and, uh, optics. Hull breaches have been sealed but we'll need to get something more permanent in place as soon as possible.” Dmitri had such a distinct voice that she immediately knew it was him on the other side. “It's, uhh... it's a mess, ma'am.”

Same dry speech. Same hint of urgency as always.

“Who's down there already?” Shock replied.

“Myself and a new trainee from Omega Square. But, uh, we can't be throwing greenies into shit like this. We're gonna need some help down here.”

Normally, it would be a no-brainer to send a couple of her other well-qualified techies down to the scene, but she suspected that this was not a regular case. For the last while, all of her cases had been violent assaults, and they all had a consistent pattern to them; this one lined up with the rest from what she gathered from Dmitri's report.

"I'm on my way."

"Roger," he finished his report.

Shock dropped the phone back onto its base. Her shift was almost over, but this streak of cases piqued her interest too much that she'd willingly stay late for another shot at figuring out this mystery. She stood up from the front desk, donning her technician's cap and bright yellow vest overtop of her plain work outfit. Just before she was about to head off down the hallway to find someone to accompany her, a familiar face stepped around the corner.

Pink skin, cute nurse outfit, and a globe for a head; her friend was a sight for sore eyes.

"Macky, are you busy?" Shock asked before Macky even had a chance to acknowledge her presence.

"I was just leaving, why?"

"I need you to come with me. We've got someone in critical condition."

Macky didn't look too impressed by having to work after hours.

"Come on. We've got an attack victim on our hands, and I'm not letting another assault turn into a murder on my watch. I'll make it up to you

afterwards.” She grabbed a toolbelt and a large kit full of various robotics equipment from the nearby wall.

Macky sighed. “Okay, then. What's the situation?”

“I'll brief you on the way. Let's go.” Shock walked around her desk and accompanied Macky outside. “We'll take the emergency transit.”



Dmitri wasn't kidding. It was a mess. Turquoise liquid had been splattered everywhere, and the victim wasn't even in view yet. But before long, Shock and Macky arrived at the scene, which was no less of an eyesore. There stood Dmitri and a mortified medic-in-training beside the body of the attackee.

“Dmitri!” Shock howled.

He quickly spun around to face her as she ran over.

“What's our patient's status?”

“Uh, bad, and not getting much better. He fell into emergency sleep mode, I think. Drive and optics may need replacement. Coolant's all over the place, and he's starting to get really hot. Can't identify him either.”

Shock could see that coolant was most definitely all over the place, but when he said the drive needed replacement, her hope subsided.

“Okay. Get that apprentice out of here and let Macky replace them. I need you to block this place off and keep watch.” With that said, she

knelt down beside the victim of the attack. Macky quickly joined.

“Unconscious, huh,” she muttered while taking a pocket flashlight out of her toolbelt and examining the damage. The massive gashes in the robot's body were all lined with burn marks - the final detail Shock needed to confirm it was the same perpetrator as the last several cases. “Mmm. Coolant circulation looks repairable... drive, well...”

Macky and Shock both gave the robot's drive a thorough examination before Shock realized, just like each other time before, it was clearly too late.

“Yep, the drive's ripped apart. He's sure as hell not in sleep mode.” She paused after uttering those unfortunate words. “See about resealing the coolant tubes, would you?”

“Right,” Macky quietly replied, hastily pulling out some more equipment from their toolkit.

“Dmitri...” Shock began as she stood up and walked back over to her associate, who'd been keeping watch as per her instructions. “The drive's been shredded to hell and back. We're not going to be able to salvage his memories, personality, experiences, nothing. We wouldn't even be able to do a backup restore if the entire drive is wrecked - which it is.” She shook her head and looked at the ground. “We can probably salvage his model, but he'd be an entirely new person. We would have to get a replacement drive among other things, including massive hull repairs.”

“So he's lost.” Dmitri's face turned solemn.

Shock's body language spoke volumes.

“Shit.” Dmitri took a few steps around and looked upwards as if hoping for some sort of miracle.

“Call your guys down here to take care of this. Mack's fixing up the coolant pipes as much as he can so it's not leaking everywhere, but other than that, there's nothing else for us to do here. Make sure the final report for this bot gets to my desk pronto.”

“Roger that.”

Shock gave him a pat on the shoulder before crouching back down beside Macky again.

“I have to go write up what we know about what happened to this bot. You're free to go home after you finish up with these coolant pipes; I'll sign you out when I get back to the station. Dmitri's calling his guys to come and take over afterwards.” Shock paused and glanced around. “Like I said. Two... no, three. Three energy packets on me, tomorrow. I really appreciate this.”

“Of course. No problem, boss.”

“Make me proud, Macks.”

Her outward persona was much more cool and collected than how she felt inside. Shock figured she may as well just copy the initial medical report from yesterday or the day before, since the attacks had all been so similar. But she knew she'd have to sit at a desk for twenty minutes, typing up all of the same dreary details

of an unavoidable death again. It drove her to her wit's end not knowing who was doing this and why they were doing it.



Shock stepped through the doorway of her home, kicking off her shoes the instant she arrived inside.

She looked over at her small living room. The couch offered relaxation after an arduous day, but the cabinet near the entrance offered “beverages” that would instruct her internal systems to emulate a calm and stress-free state. Shock didn't even make the effort to take off her pauldrons or the beams connected parallel to her back before cracking open a violet capsule from the sideboard. Rather than using a glass, she decided to drink what little liquid there was in the small container straight up before taking a seat over on her couch.

She turned on the radio to listen to some music to help her relax, but fate had other plans for her.

Beep beep! Beep beep!

Unusual. Shock wasn't expecting any calls.

She wearily walked over to the computer where the call was coming from, expecting an emergency callout or something equally as unpleasant. However, to her surprise, the screen said it was Aural Automaton who was calling.

*Hey, she thought, not bad.* Seeing one of her long time friends drop her a line after a hard day was relieving. She answered the call.



“Hi, Aural. How've you been?”

“Shock!” Aural's voice rang through the speakers in a panicked tone. “Where are you?”

“I just got home, why...?” Shock was taken aback by her sudden shouting. It wasn't hard for her to assume the worst.

“Shock, I-” Aural paused abruptly before speaking much closer to the microphone on her end. “I need you to listen. I was in my home and this bot just *smashes* through the door like nothing. It tried to attack me, but I got out of there before it could trash me. I'll tell you everything that happened, but I need you to get down to Zynima's border near the outskirts. Near the bottom of the tower I live in, there's that public phone. That's me right now. I'm kinda hurt and I really need help.”

Shock wondered if Aural's assailant was the serial killer that had been plaguing her mind. Paranoia convinced her so, and in that case, she had no intention of letting her friend be next in line.

“Christ, no...” she muttered. “Can you hold out until I arrive?”

“Yeah yeah, yeah, I'll be good. My leg just got a bit busted up and there's a bunch of rowdy-ass punks all over the place around here.”

“Okay. I'll be down there in a couple of minutes. Don't go too far and *don't* let those punks hurt you.” Shock stressed the word “*don't*” a bit harder than she meant to.

“No worries – they couldn't take me down anyway. Thanks so much though. Hurry if you can!”

“Be there soon.” She hung up and bolted away towards the door at an unexpectedly fast pace.

Shock enjoyed being a medic most of the time. However, working first hand on a terrible streak of deaths all caused by the same unknown source was beginning to take a toll on her sanity. With Aural Automaton potentially next on their hit list, she was beginning to think that Zynima wasn't such a great place after all. But before she made any rash judgments, she told herself to wait and gather the facts about this situation before doing so.

Shock would get to the bottom of this.

# 1 – “Trivo”

---

Dear diary: Today hasn't been a great day.

I lifted my face off the desert's silky floor and looked towards the nearby city lights, wondering exactly what part of me thought jumping off that tower was a good idea. At the time, it made sense. Right now... yeah, no. It looked like it'd be a short trek before I'd be back in the city, and my right leg definitely did not feel completely functional.

My name is Aural Automaton. I'm just a regular robot from planet Zynima who likes to perform at nightclubs and put music together in my spare time. Which is exactly what I was doing earlier today – relaxing in my home near the top of the tower I just bailed from, working on a musical whim in my messy, one-room home.

I should mention that Zynima doesn't have a lot of serious crime. It's really only petty stuff like rough-housing or minor theft, so when I heard that a *murder* had occurred a handful of days ago, suffice it to say the news caught my attention. A machine had been utterly destroyed by another robot. I was pretty jarred, of course, but the worst part is *it kept happening*. Literally everyday since then, someone else had been killed, and no one knew who the perpetrator was.

So I called one of my good friends who works in the technical field (or, to us robots, the medical field). We'll call her Shock. She was one of the people who ended up getting dragged

around by this mess of homicides, being called to these scenes to see if there was anything that could be done to save those poor, junked bots. Spoiler alert: there wasn't. She told me that every single one of these robots not only had extensive damage basically everywhere, but their drives had been totally wrecked. Those guys were perma-gone.

But eventually, the killer messed up and a clue was left behind, according to the news. A word was loosely written in the stains of a deceased bot's coolant fluid – “*Trivo.*” Sounded like a name, but it wasn't one I'd heard of before. Regardless, it was a word I'd certainly be avoiding.

All of this is the reason I'm lying face down in this sandy hell instead of jamming to some tunes right now. I received a knock on my door, as friendly as ever. But get this – as soon as I get up to see who's there, the door, at least ten feet away at the time, somehow manages to fly in my direction and smash into my whole body. Granted, it's a pretty flimsy door, but talk about confusing and unexpected. It took me way too long to get my bearings after being whacked to the ground by that thing, but after I did, I saw another machine standing in my doorway. It was big. It was scary. And it stared right at me with these two light blue, circular eyes that I could only describe as empty, or... devoid of feeling. And it obviously had a bone to pick with me if it had that little respect for my door.

“Yo, what the hell?!” I shouted. But I got no reply. It just started walking towards me with total disregard for everything in its way.

I'll be honest again – I hate fighting. It's just not my thing. So when this thing started approaching me after the break-in, I scrambled to my feet as fast as someone can with a door lying on their chest. I wasn't about to get in a tussle with this intruder; it was clearly way out of my league. Not only that, but it was already reaching out for me with one hand and balling up a fist with another. Did I mention this thing had four arms?

This is where the desert floor comes in. In front of me was a scary robot, and behind me was a door leading to a small balcony. This part's genius, get this – my processor tells me that the best action for me to take at that moment is to run and jump off the balcony in order to escape.

Here's the kicker – my house is about a dozen storeys above the ground.

In a moment of totally sound logic, I bashed that door open and jumped over the railing in some sort of awkward swan dive.

After a once-in-a-lifetime free-fall, I swivelled around in the air and landed directly on my right leg in an attempt to soften my collision with the ground, which is probably what screwed it up so badly. Good thing most machines aren't programmed to feel pain.

I don't know if that thing's still up there or what it even wanted with me, but it sure wasn't going to be taking me out any time soon.

Limping to a repair shop was not how I wanted to spend my day off, but life obviously had other plans for me. I couldn't feel or control anything beneath my right knee, so I had to do some ridiculous hop-walk that involved me swinging my calf forward every time I wanted to take a step. Thankfully, I don't think there was anyone around to see my embarrassing display.

I had to endure a good 15 minutes of this torture before I reached Zynima City's outskirts. I knew there was a small shop here run by an old robot named Decker; he and I didn't really see eye to eye on a personal level, but I knew he was reliable in a pinch. Normally, I'd avoid off-the-grid merchants like him, but I'd encountered him enough times in the past to get a good sense of his character. Good thing, too, since it looked like he'd probably be my only option for repairs right now.

I continued my hobbling until I got to the front window of his shack. It was a really dainty and isolated building, almost in disrepair. He was in there, reclining on his hammock, without a care in the world. That is, until I spoke up.

“Hey, uh... Decker?”

He grunted and raised an eyelid. “Ah, whaddaya want?” he scowled.

“I broke my leg.” I changed the normal eyes on my visor to something more sad and pathetic looking.

“...Hmph, ain't that a shame. You want me to fix 'er up, kid? It'll cost ya.”

“Yeah, I could use a hand.” I didn't have the money available right then, but I figured I could pay him off later.

Another grunt as he rolled off the hammock and onto his feet. “Git on in here, then. Door's on the side.”

I was kind of reluctant to go inside. Might have been because of his gruff disposition, or maybe because it seemed like I was bothering him. Who knows. Nevertheless, I stumbled over to the side of his building and entered the shack.

I could hardly move in there. Lots of miscellaneous pieces of junk, parts, and other goods loaded onto all of the shelves lining the walls. There was even stuff hanging from the ceiling. I had to maneuver through all of Decker's possessions just to get over to where he was, and my leg didn't make it any easier. He didn't even make any attempt to help me through, either. He just gestured for me to take a seat on a big metal box once I made it to him.

“So,” he said, grabbing a couple of tools from a nearby shelf, “how'd it happen?”

“Well, I... I fell off a building.”

Decker momentarily stopped what he was doing and stared at me. “...Ya did what now, kid?”

I looked off to the side a bit to avoid his gaze. “It's a bit of a long story.”

He chuckled before continuing his tool search. I sat quietly for about a minute as he gathered all of the equipment he needed to fix me up.

“Yer leg ain't that bad, can tell ya already. I seen a helluva lot worse in my days.” He knelt down beside me, taking a closer look at my knee. “Can ya move it at all?”

“Yeah, I can move my thigh all the way down to my knee.”

“I'm gonna hafta open yer knee up to take a look. Sit still.”

I complied. Once again, I was very thankful I wasn't programmed to feel pain.

“I reckon it'll be an easy fix if the damage's all internal. 'Specially if you can still move half of it.”

I could feel him taking part of my kneecap off, which was one of the stranger feelings I'd experienced in my life. I didn't think anything could top that until he started probing the inside of my knee. I wouldn't recommend it.

“Yup. Easy fix. Whoever built ya built ya well, if this's all that's wrong. You gotta coupla wires disconnected from yer actuator.”

Whew – looks like my life wasn't about to end.

“Try movin' it a bit. *Gently.*”

I almost swung my leg up in the air in excitement right in Decker's face when I realized I could move it again. In both of our best interests, I restrained myself.

“Look at that. Simple fix,” he boasted.

“Nice! Man, thank you so much.”

Decker finished up the repair by replacing my kneecap and asking me to stand up



on the leg to see if it worked, which it seemed to. Probably the highlight of my day.

“Good. Now git on outta here and over to the front desk.” Even though my leg had been fixed, it wasn't much easier getting out of his shop, especially with Decker ushering me out so urgently. I ended up tripping and slamming into a rake hanging on the wall, which then fell on my head.

“And be careful why don'tcha!”

After I *escaped* his shop, I stood up near the front desk and waited for Decker to clean up a bit before giving me the price.

“Ehhhh. Wasn't near as bad as I figured. Let's call it 800 bytes.”

“Well... do you take payments?” I wasn't fond of not being able to pay someone up front, but I really didn't have a choice.

“Are you tellin' me you can't pay?” Decker's voice became even more stern and grumbly.

“No, I can, it's just a bit complicated right now. You know that building I jumped off to break my leg? It's... complicated.”

“Listen, pardner. I don't do I-O-U's.”

“Look, I'll get you the bytes, I'm not playing you. Swear on my life, I'll get you the money.”

“Ya better! I'll have yer circuits if ya don't!”

“I will! 800, I'll get it to you!” I shouted back as I walked away from the shack and towards the city.

“850!”

“Okay, okay!” My walk turned into a jog. I appreciated the help, but my relationship with that guy wasn't getting any better. I had more important things on my mind, like the fact that I was almost beat up a little while ago.

After I was far enough away, I wiggled my leg around a bit more to make sure it was totally functional. Everything felt normal, but now I needed to get home to see what was going on.

That robot might still be there... maybe I can get some advice from someone first. Shock knows all about this whole serial killer situation, so maybe I can get a hold of her...

I didn't have a phone or communication device on me, so my only real option was to walk along the path to the inner city.

The good news: it was wonderful getting my feet out of the sand and onto some solid concrete. I hate sand.

The bad news: the path to the inner city was essentially the sketch-street of gang-town. There were hooligans and punks all over the place, and some were already taking some interest in me from afar, making the odd gesture or giving me a glance every now and then. I was still a bit jumpy and paranoid from that whole break-in situation, as anyone would be, but what made matters worse was I had to walk through this place to get home.

I knew that if I looked like a bad-ass, they probably wouldn't bother with me. Some of them probably already saw me wiggling my leg

around like a goof, though, so there was only so much I could do in that regard.

I went all in and just kept walking. The street all too narrow and poorly lit because of the evening sun, and lots of the buildings were closed up tight. Some were even boarded up, which didn't help make the environment any more comfortable. And I couldn't help but notice some shady looking bots – you know the ones with backwards ball-caps and boomboxes on their shoulders – staring me down as I passed by, but thankfully, no one approached me for the first little while.

A couple minutes in, I spotted a godsend. A miracle. Whatever you want to call it – there was a public phone hanging on a nearby wall. The best part was there was almost no one around it. It took me no time to bolt over to the phone.

I quickly yanked the phone off the receiver and dialed Shock's number as fast as I could, with every button press bringing forth a tiny surge of anticipation. Zynima's phones had the wonderful feature of allowing a caller to enter their name as the caller ID, and I did just that to make sure she knew who it was.

...

It rang once.

It rang again. Surely she'd answer, right?

It rang a third time, and that's when the anxiety kicked in.

But, before I heard the fourth ring, there was a click, followed by a voice.

“Hi, Aural. How've you been?”

I emitted a loud sigh of relief. “Shock! Where are you?”

“I just got home, why...?”

“Shock, I-” I leaned in really close to the phone and lowered my voice, “I need you to listen. I was in my home and this bot just *smashes* through the door like nothing. It tried to attack me, but I got out of there before it could trash me. I'll tell you everything that happened, but I need you to get down to Zynima's border near the outskirts. Near the bottom of the tower I live in, there's that public phone. That's me right now. I'm kinda hurt and I really need help.”

She paused for a moment before muttering some words. “Christ, no... can you hold out until I arrive?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll be good. My leg just got a bit busted up and there's a bunch of rowdy-ass punks all over the place around here.”

“Okay. I'll be down there in a couple of minutes. Don't go too far and *don't* let those punks hurt you.” Shock stressed the word “don't” particularly hard.

“No worries - they couldn't take me down anyway. Thanks so much, though. Hurry if you can!”

“Be there soon.” Shock hung up.

## 2 – A Good Friend

---

On planet Zynima, you could sit still during the evening and watch the environment become darker with every passing minute. The days were short, meaning it would probably only be ten or so minutes until the night sky would be fully visible, even though the sun was illuminating the world mere moments ago. The city lights quickly grew vibrant against the sky, and here I was, still standing in the worst part of the city.

I really hoped Shock knew where to find me. A lot of the buildings around me were decrepit and nondescript, and there weren't any landmarks around me except for the main entrances to these slums.

Shock wouldn't be coming from outside the city if she was already home, so I continued walking up the main street to see if I could meet her halfway. I sure as hell wasn't about to wait around here for her, anyways.

As the sun set, most of the people on the streets were starting to pack up and go inside. Zynima became unusually quiet at night unless you were around a club district, but I wouldn't be surprised to see some of those particularly scary robots staying outdoors around here after dusk fell.

Like earlier, most of the bots I passed by didn't pay me much attention, as they were too busy mumbling amongst themselves and focusing on getting themselves indoors. The fervency with

which they were moving almost made it seem as if they were trying to hide or get away from something, which did nothing for my paranoia. I quickened my pace just enough to satisfy the urge to get out of there, but that was when it happened.

A robot was passing by my right side when our shoulders collided.

*This is how I die*, I thought.

Before I could even turn around to apologize, I hear an angry voice shout, “the fuck's up with you? Watch yourself, asshole.” His raspy shouting accrued the attention of almost every nearby robot.

“S-sorry, man! I'll be-”

“Sorry? You wanna be sorry for something?”

*Yeah, I'm going to die*, I assured myself. His angry outburst astonished me, and it took a moment to realize that this was actually happening. This other bot was almost the same height as me, made of an equally black metal, and he wore an angry purple expression on a jagged-looking head.

The sudden altercation drew in another robot with the same structure and colour as the person I just bumped into, but this bot was much taller and bulkier than both of us. To my slight relief, their voice was a lot calmer than the robot I'd just bumped into. They stepped between us.

“Hey, what's goin' on here?” they asked.

“This bitch made me drop my shit,” my angry adversary explained. I didn't realize he was

carrying something until I glanced near his feet and saw a small laptop on the ground.

“I didn't mean to! Look, I'll pay for it if-”

“Yeah, you're gonna pay with your face!”

I tensed up, mentally preparing myself for whatever this guy was about to throw at me. However, the larger robot intervened before it came to punches.

“I oughta set you straight,” said the big machine, directing his voice at the person ready to whap me. Slowly peering in my direction, he simply said, “you should get outta here.”

Did I ever take that suggestion. I bolted up that street, unable to care any less about what anyone else thought about me at the time.

*Two assaults in one day. I need a bloody bodyguard. Speaking of...*

“Shock!” I called out, hoping she was nearby. But, as I waited for a response, I realized I wouldn't be quite that lucky. I cursed to myself, begging for her to show up and escort me out of this hellhole.

That's when an idea hit me. The cool thing about being a musical machine in a city of robots is that there's no noise restriction during the night.

While running up the curvy uphill slope, I turned on the recording device in my visor.

“Shock!” I repeated, knowing full well she wouldn't be able to hear me. However, if I took that recording and blasted it through the speakers that lined my chest and shoulders...

“*SHOCK!*” The volume I cranked out that sound clip at vibrated my entire body, and the resulting echo lasted at least five seconds. I loved having a built-in sound system.

I heard what sounded like a faint reply in the distance. My processor was telling me it was a voice shouting back “Aural,” but I really couldn't say for sure. A few seconds passed before I heard a distant “air a you.”

*Air a you?* It took me a minute to realize what I was hearing. *Wait, not “air a you.” That was “where are you!”*

I picked up my speed even more, pushing my legwork to the absolute limit. I didn't feel like recording a new sound clip, so I blared Shock's name out once again. This time, if I listened really carefully, I could hear “Aural” in response. As I reached the top of the uphill slope and surveyed the long, straight road in front of me, I saw a pair of glowing green eyes far off on the other end of the street.

She was illuminated only by the nearby streetlights that she passed beneath, but it was more than enough to confirm her grey, android-like identity. She was still wearing her work outfit: a yellow and orange vest, two matching pauldrons, and those two huge beams connected to her back that extended almost a foot above her head. I slowed my pace considerably as we approached each other; my circuitry went into overdrive when her rapid footsteps became audible.



“Aural!” her monotone voice called out again. Shock ran up to me and put her hands on my shoulders, covering my speakers. “You're okay!”

The tension in my body dissipated almost instantly. “I... yeah.” I laughed, unable to find the right words. “I'm good.”

Shock wrapped her arms around me. Part of me wanted to usher her out of this crummy place right away, but I found enough safety in her embrace to stop for a moment and hug her back.

“Worst day ever,” I drawled.

“Your leg,” Shock spoke up, releasing her hug and looking down at my feet. “Is it okay? Which one is it?”

“It's okay. Got it fixed.”

She sighed. “Let's get you somewhere safe.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. We didn't haphazardly sprint forward, no – we walked alongside each other, figuring out a plan. We were standing at a fork in the road far from those slums, and it happened to branch off to the tower I lived in. It was a remote but familiar area of Zynima; lots of small buildings and houses lined the left side of the street, and the right side of the intersection had a small-scale mining operation going on. I don't even think this little strip of land had a name, but it was a place I called home.

“Damn... I wanna check my place, but what if that thing's still there?”

Shock pensively put a few fingers beneath her chin. “I have a tool that detects

nearby electronic signals. One of the perks of being a chief techy,” she said, flashing a quick smile at me.

That's right – Shock was a chief technician here on Zynima. I always assumed that meant she had a lot of cool gadgets at her disposal, but she never really went into specifics.

“We can go up there, and if I see anything, we'll have more than enough space to get away unnoticed.”

“Good.” I didn't have the capacity to question her in my current state, but I trusted her judgment enough to just go with it. The two of us headed right, towards the tower.

“I'm just happy you're alive, Aural.” Shock beamed.

“Yeah?” It threw me off seeing her so full of emotion. “You don't seem like yourself right now.”

“Your well-being is the highlight of my week,” she started, staring off in the distance. “For the last six or seven days, work has been hell. I've been strictly dealing with homicides, and every single one of them has been the exact same: death caused by someone tearing up the victim's drives. Death, after death, after death, all linked to this one killer.” She lowered her voice before continuing, “I can't say if the robot who attacked you is the machine destroying all of these other robots, but if it is, I'm sure as hell not going to sit around and let my friend die.”

I laughed again. “It's stuff like that that reminds me why I keep you around.” I got no

reply, but I suppose this wasn't really the time for humour.

The circular tower was only a few dozen feet away by then. It looked a lot more impressive from outside the city, since it was situated on a bit of a plateau. From within the city? It was maybe six or seven floors tall. Nowhere near as high as it looked from the other side, but it still offered a gorgeous view of the badlands.

Shock took the lead and stepped onto the tower's stairs, which circled the building from the outside. The steps were connected to several little homes in the tower's interior, and they occasionally branched out to reach a few houses tucked in near the tower's supports. It was a pretty cozy place to live when you weren't being murdered.

She slowed down to a stop.

"What floor do you live on?" she whispered.

"Very top."

Shock looked straight up for a little bit.

"No, I can't detect anything up there."

"You can tell that easily?"

She glanced at me with the corner of her eye and nodded.

"Wow."

"Though, it takes a couple of seconds for my scanner to work its magic."

We kept moving up the spiral staircase at a cautious pace, but Shock didn't inform me of any impending threats as we neared the top floor, so I assumed it was all clear. It was incredibly

hard to see the top floor's narrow walkway with a huge overhang just above us that had zero lights, but the rail on the outer edge kept most people from falling off. (Whoops.)

It only took a few more seconds of circling around the topmost walkway before we saw the light of my doorless apartment.

When we walked inside, I was both greeted by the pleasant air of familiarity and walloped by the displeasure of examining my trashed room.

“Look at what that asshole did!” I shouted with my arms out to the side as I looked over the damage. “This is my *door!* What am I gonna do with this?”

“Call an installation expert? You're asking the wrong person.”

I sighed as I walked over to the balcony door and closed it. At least *one* of my doors was still unharmed.

The stuff on the walls looked undamaged, too. Good thing, because all of my CDs and instruments were hanging up, and it'd cost at least a bajillion bytes to replace it all. My most prized possession – my custom built electric guitar – was still propped up safe and sound in the corner of my room. No surprise, though – it was made of the most sturdy metal I could get my hands on, but the strings were okay and the body hadn't been scratched at all.

On the other hand, my desk chair, recliner, computer tower, you name it – anything that was between the front entrance and far wall

where I had been knocked down had also been knocked over. I could tell my computer still worked, since the LCD monitor was still showing my computer's desktop.

Speaking of, when I glanced over at it to see if it was functional, I noticed something on the screen. There was an e-mail notification at the bottom. Between the time I dove off my balcony and returned home with Shock, someone must have sent me an e-mail.

“Yo, did you send me any messages today?” I asked.

“Nope.”

Mystified, I propped my chair up off the floor and took a seat in front of the computer monitor. The e-mail was from an anonymous address. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't open an e-mail I didn't expect, but this was a bit too much of a coincidence for me to let it slide.

“Why do you ask?” Shock continued.

“I got a message since that bot barged in here. Lemme check it.”

I clicked on the notification, and a small window popped up on the screen, reading, “*Aural Automaton, you're in danger right now. I know what's going on, and I need you to trust me and listen carefully. Come to Verdin Square and find a white robot with green eyes and green markings. This is SUPER important. Please believe me, and come as fast as you can.*”

Well, I could already tell I was in danger thanks to today's B&E.

But that was it. A vague invitation to part of central Zynima, and one of the most populated commercial districts in the city, at that. I read the message aloud for Shock, spinning my chair around to face her after I'd finished.

“You don't happen to know any white robots with green eyes and green markings, do you?” I inquired.

“Do you?” she retorted.

“...No, I don't think so.”

“There's your answer.”

I grumbled. “So, Verdin Square is only like, half an hour away from here.” I was working under the assumption that Shock was going to accompany me.

“Do you really want to be going out there to meet a stranger right *now*, of all times?”

Shock was right – it was almost pitch black outside, and it had easily been the longest and worst day in a long time. I just needed to voice one concern.

“What if that thing comes back? Maybe that's the danger I'm supposedly in.”

Shock grimaced. “I'd happily stay here and keep watch, but I don't know what kind of machine this is. It might be an angry runt, but it might be some genocidal beast-machine. From its track record, I wouldn't be surprised if it was the latter.”

I put a concerned expression on my visor. “Yeah. So, I take it you're up for a midnight stride with me? This e-mail could be a lead.”

“Mmm,” Shock looked outside through the main doorway, “with no real detectives to speak to, it *might* be our best option.”

I started picking up the rest of my stuff off the floor, from my pencils to the reclining chair, placing each item where it belonged. Not much of it was actually damaged, to my surprise. Just tossed around a bit.

“When are you marching off to Verdin?” Shock asked while I pattered around.

“Right away,” I declared, “just let me clean up a little bit.”

“Do you need a hand with that door?”

We both looked over at the door on my floor. “Nah. It's pretty flimsy.”

I grabbed the door by one end, dragging it over to the front entrance. Propping it up against the wall near the doorway took almost no effort.

“One last thing,” I said, hopping over to the far end of my room. I took another look at my favourite guitar, admiring every bit of it until I was satisfied putting it away in its bag. I swung the strap over my shoulder with the bag itself resting against my back.

Shock gave me a strange look.

“If we're going for a night walk, I'm bringing my tunes with me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Let's just go.”

I stepped outside with Shock, taking a moment to slide the door to make it look as closed as possible.

“If some thief gets in here while I'm gone, I'm going to kick so much ass,” I mumbled.

### 3 – Face to Face

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“Hey,” Shock grabbed my attention by pointing across the street, “do you still perform?”

“Hell yeah!” Just across the road was a building with my glowing red and white logo sitting just above the front entrance; it was my very own club, named *Assault*. I originally called it that so it could be used in conjunction with my own name (get it? Aural Assault, that sounds pretty cool, right?), but it was starting to feel like fate was playing some kind of sick joke with me.

Though, her question made me think about when I was going to be playing next. I was scheduled to be live onstage tomorrow evening, and there was a decent crowd waiting to see me play and mix some tunes. But with the recent events going on, I wasn't so sure if I'd be available.

“How famous are you nowadays?” she asked.

“Loved around the galaxy, baby.” Yeah, I wished.

The rest of our walk to Verdin Square was pretty quiet and uneventful, despite us not having caught up since the last time we hung out. Small talk was awkwardly sparse, since we were from two totally different lifestyles; I partied and raved while Shock was out saving lives. I had to give her some respect for what she did.

“I hope you don't mind me asking you to recite a few details of what happened up there,” she broke the silence.



“Ah, sure.”

“Thanks. The more detail, the better; I've been dealing with this thing for far too long, and it's high time something's done about it.”

I didn't think about it too hard about whatever her plans for this thing were. Instead, I simply fired off each of the details of the break-in as she asked for them. At least it passed the time nicely.

Just before we got to Verdin, we passed by an enormous LED billboard with countless names and numbers on it, extending pretty high in the air; a perfect contrast to the dark sky. I easily recognized what it was displaying – the global charts, as they're called. They're one of the cooler parts of Zynima: there are three broad charts that track creative talent around the planet, categorized by sight, sound, and skill. Every robot has a ranking on each chart, which makes it kind of like a worldwide high-score board. I see it more as a neat little game than anything else, but the top ranking robots are pretty well-recognized around our metropolis.

I couldn't see my name on it, though – it was only displaying the top 50 of each chart right now. I was somewhere around rank 500 on the sound chart the last time I checked.

Before much longer, we found ourselves approaching a wide open plaza with a tall, silver monolith in the centre. The area was brightened not just by the streetlights lining our path, but an effervescent arrangement of neon signs and colours as well. Welcome to Verdin Square,

central Zynima. Or, at least, the miniature version of central Zynima. Even at this time of night, you could see a few robots still wandering about, since it was almost as safe as it was bright. I needed to come here more often.

“What did that message say?” Shock asked. “White robot with green spots?”

“Yeah. It didn't say *where* in Verdin, though.” My spirits sank a bit when I realized how non-specific that message was.

“Well, let's take a look around.”

I did just that. I spotted seven machines scattered around the plaza, minding their own business, though only one came close to matching the description. The robot in question was sitting on a bench off to the side of the open area, sporting an off-white colour scheme with light blue streaks of paint on its shoulders and chest. Nah, wrong colour.

“Yo, maybe there?” I suggested, pointing to a building with a large glowing sign, reading *Packet Park*. It was one of the most popular spots in Verdin, so by extension, I figured maybe our caller would be there.

“Sure,” Shock agreed.

With that, we walked across the plaza and opened the front door of the packet shop. Conveniently, it was open all six hours a day.

What a cozy atmosphere – carpeted floor, dark walls illuminated by bright lights, drapes on either side of each of the tall windows, and plenty of seats and sofas available for the taking. There weren't a whole lot of bots around, leaving most

of the seats and bar stools arranged around the place vacant. However, it made it pretty easy to pick out the robot who matched the description of “white with green markings” – they were sitting on one of the bar stools near the middle of the shop with their head held low. About my height, completely white except for a few black joints, and some small green triangles decorating their legs. What a smooth chassis, too.

“Hey, do you think-” Shock whispered, tapping me on the shoulder while discreetly pointing to the robot I was just inspecting.

“...Yeah, I think,” I replied, nodding.

“You think we should go talk?”

“...I think, yeah.”

We started walking towards the white robot, but before we even got within reasonable talking range, they looked around, quickly spotting us. Their round, green eyes widened and we got stared down for a few moments, stopping us in our tracks. This *was* the person who messaged me, right?

The white robot turned away from us and dropped a hand to their side, discreetly beckoning us over with a subtle hand gesture. Okay, so this was the right person, but it hardly explained why they stood up and left their seat immediately after calling us over. They were heading towards the far entrance of the store, opposite of where we came from.

“Wait a moment,” Shock whispered, “wait 'til they leave.”

Obeying Shock's suggestion, we did just that. After we waited until the robot exited the store, we began trailing them from a distance, exercising a similar level of discretion. A quick look around the room told me that no one else seemed to be paying us or the white robot any mind, so I largely ignored the other machines hanging around, and we both made our way to the building's second entrance.

What was going on here? Why was this bot being so evasive?

I delicately pushed against the glass-paneled door, holding it open for my friend as we stepped back outside. We were in another narrow alleyway surrounded by the back doors of several other nearby establishments, lit up only by the lights above each of the entrances – a very jarring change from the bright lights of Verdin Square's main plaza. I kept my wits about me, half expecting an ambush of some sort, though I wasn't *completely* plagued by anxiety this time around. I'll give Shock's presence credit for that.

Assuming our bot had moved down the alley, we kept walking at the same pace as before. The narrow road curved right and left with sharp 90-degree corners, sloping downwards a fair bit until we could eventually see parts of nearby buildings' foundations. The paved ground slowly turned to gravel and hardened sand as we turned each corner, until we reached a much wider section of the alley. The ground dipped down even lower over the course of the next hundred feet or so, where the path branched off to a large

tunnel beneath the foundation of the buildings to our right. The best part was there were no lights around this section, aside from a slight glow from the tunnel.

Thankfully, our messenger's green eyes were easily bright enough to spot in the distance. They were standing just in front of the tunnel, waiting for us as far as I could tell. Shock slowed her approach a bit, leaning over closer to me.

“They're the only machine I can detect here. I don't think it's a trap.”

Man, I loved her sometimes. With my paranoia subsiding a bit, I quickened my step along the uneven ground until Shock and I were almost face to face with our green-eyed friend.

“Come with me. We're almost there,” the robot's unexpectedly sweet and feminine voice insisted.

“Wait. Where are you taking us? And who are you?” But instead of a reply, she just walked into the tunnel. We kept marching forward in her wake, except much closer this time.

The tunnel was painted a dank shade of green, kind of like how I was starting to feel about this whole situation. The walls were eroded, the tiled ground was broken up, and this mysterious robot's secrecy made me question if this really was a good idea. At least we could see where we were going with the tunnel's lights above us, but overall, it wasn't a whole lot better than the midnight sky.

I don't think I'd ever done anything this shady before. Realizing this fact, I found it in my

best interest to put my foot down before this went any further.

“Uh, stop,” I said, halting my step.

The white robot quickly spun her head around to face me, slowing her pace.

“Tell us who you are, and what you're bringing us down here for.”

“I'll explain everything, just come with me. Hurry.” She didn't stop walking; if anything, she picked up her speed.

“You're not making it very easy to trust you,” Shock commented, clearly irritated.

Well, that sure worked out.

If I was alone, no way would I have kept going. But, with Shock by my side, we reluctantly kept following the strange robot. I found myself becoming aware of every sound and movement that happened in the tunnel, no matter how insignificant. Even though Shock could detect other nearby bots, pebbles skittering across the ground or a shadow sliding across a wall could still easily be the sign of an impending attack. Every so often, the white robot would peer back in our direction as we moved along, but her gaze wasn't fixated on us. Rather, it seemed as if she was looking behind us.

“Come in here,” she urged us, ducking around an obscure alcove in the otherwise plain wall. I peeked around the corner slowly, but all we saw was a narrow hallway with another drearily painted room at the end of it.

Before I could walk in, Shock brushed me to the side and power-walked up to the white

robot. I almost spoke up in response to her sudden abrasiveness, but she had already gripped the other robot's shoulder and yanked her backwards, spinning her around.

"I'd like some answers. *Now*. Who are you, what's going on, and why are we down here?" Shock demanded.

Ms. White Robot yelped and cowered a bit. "No, please don't hurt me! I'll talk, I'll talk! Let's please just move to this room up here – it's safer, I swear!"

"No." Shock tightened her palm on the bot's shoulder, leaning closer to her frightened face. "Speak up. Right here, right now."

I didn't know Shock had such a gruff side to her. The other robot let out a shaky sigh.

"Okay, okay... just... I'm scared we might be being... followed."

"Followed?!" I shouted, perhaps unnecessarily loud.

"Why? Who would be following us?" Shock continued.

"It's... a long story. That's why I want to get in here, so we're more hidden."

Both of us stared her down before Shock let up a bit and released her grip.

"Let's go, then." Single file, we moved towards the small room. After the white bot walked in, but before Shock followed suit, she turned to me and whispered, "No one else nearby. We're clear."

The room was pretty bleak. A dinky little table on the right side sat just beneath a pair of

large open vents, both painted the same swampy shade of green as the tunnel. Our shady acquaintance leaned against the left wall, sliding down into a slumped sitting position. Kinda looked like a nervous wreck, to be honest. Shock and I stood on opposite sides of the doorway we came from, ensuring we couldn't be seen from the main tunnel.

“My name... is Trivo.”

“What?” Shock and I blurted simultaneously. I continued, shaking my head, “You're a fucking murder suspect!” I was ready to bolt at the first sign of anything fishy, as if these circumstances weren't already fishy enough.

“I'm not a murderer! I'm being set up,” Trivo explained, “and you're in danger, too, Aural. But I need your help.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Was she talking about my attacker?

“Listen... this killer going around Zynima? Its name is Tangent.”

“Just wait a sec. How do you know that? And explain this danger I'm supposedly in.” I crossed my arms.

“Aural, Tangent is coming after *you!*”

“Well, uh... I think that might've already happened.”

“Tangent found you?!” she exclaimed.

“Maybe? What does this 'Tangent' look like?”

“Uh, kinda freaky. Grey and light blue, has four arms, its eyes are two circles with lines in them, spiky crystals on its head-”



“Huh.” Her description of my attacker was spot on, from what I could remember. “So, the machine that attacked me earlier was probably Tangent, then.”

“You were seriously attacked by Tangent? And you're unharmed?” Trivo had amazement written all over her face.

I shrugged like it was no big deal.

“Trivo,” Shock butted in, “how about you tell us how you know all this.”

“I...” she paused and put a hand on her head, looking down at the ground. “I can't say...”

“Why not?” Shock pursued her question, raising her voice a bit.

“I'm scared... of what will happen if I do...”

“Scared?” I asked. “You bring us out here to tell us all of this, but you're scared to explain yourself?”

“Please, just listen to me... I just... I can't say how I know this. I know I probably seem untrustworthy, but I really need you on my side right now.”

Sure, even though you said you'd explain everything just a few minutes ago. But, oddly enough, I found myself believing Trivo after her description of Tangent matched mine.

“I don't know if Tangent is still going to come after you. If it found you once, it can find you again. We can't let that happen.”

“Well, no kidding!” I hadn't felt like this before – a sudden, foreboding feeling of terror came over me at the thought of dealing with that

machine again. “What should I do about Tangent? Surely you know of a way I can stop this thing.”

“Yes! I do – I know someone who can help us stop him. Do you keep track of the global charts?”

“Let's say I do.”

“Number one on the skill chart,” Trivo explained, “do you know of Lavil?”

I'd heard the name once or twice. “Let's say I do-”

“Shh! Shut up!” Shock snapped. Trivo and I silenced ourselves immediately. She didn't follow up with anything other than a finger raised in the air, as if telling us to wait.

It soon became apparent why Shock shushed us. It was faint, but still audible: the sound of metal on metal echoed through the chamber. Somewhere in the tunnel, footsteps.

“Are those your followers?” Shock hissed.

Trivo jolted up to her feet, her body becoming visibly rigid.

## 4 – Confrontation

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“No! Oh no! What we do?!” Trivo panicked, somehow managing to keep her voice down in her jumpy state.

Shock shook her head, and, evidenced by the shape of her eyes, she was pissed. “This isn't our mess! I'm not doing shit to save you if those machines are coming to take you away,” she exclaimed, pointing down the hall leading to the main tunnel.

“They are! But they're the ones setting me up!”

I still wanted answers from Trivo. For that to happen, I needed to keep her around probably a lot longer than Shock did.

“Shock, she's our only lead,” I pleaded. “We need her with us!”

“Yeah, when she's got heat on her? Fat chance!”

Without warning, Trivo ran down the hall connected to our room. I quickly followed, with Shock not far behind me.

“Oh, for god's sake,” Shock barked.

Trivo stopped just before the hall entered the tunnel before sticking her head out and peering left and right.

“This way! Please!” she shouted before stampeding around the right corner, away from the tunnel's main entrance.

Hoo boy, Shock wasn't gonna like this. Without thinking too hard about it, I did as Trivo asked and flew around the corner in pursuit, my

guitar bag almost swinging off my shoulder in the process. Like a true friend, I heard Shock following me once again.

“Why bother hiding if you're just going to run anyways, genius?” Shock yelled, though something told me Trivo wasn't about to stop and turn around.

While we ran across the tattered floor, I looked behind us to try to get a glimpse of what exactly we were running from. And, of course, there were at least two machines racing down the tunnel right towards us. I couldn't make out any visual details in the low light, but I didn't need to to know they probably weren't our friends.

Boy, I wish I knew what I had been getting into before I jumped into this mess.

Even with the intensity of the situation coercing my legs to move as fast as they could, Trivo still kept ahead of us. Man, she was fast. To the contrary, I could hear Shock slowly trailing behind us as we bolted along.

What looked like the end of the tunnel was quickly approaching, leaving us in front of a huge wall that stopped us dead in our tracks. I stared at Trivo, waiting for her to give us some sort of instruction, and she did just that; before Shock had the opportunity to verbally lash out at her again, Trivo pointed to a closed door on the other side of the tunnel.

“Here!” she shouted, promptly running to the door.

We ran across the tunnel towards the door without delay. Those machines weren't far off now.

“Who are they?!” we heard from one of our pursuers. “Who cares? Just get Trivo!”

Fear told me to give Trivo up so my life would be spared, but morality told me she needed to be protected. Good thing my morality got the better of me.

As we approached the door, Trivo rammed it with her shoulder, bashing it open a mere inch or two. From the way the door opened, it seemed like something was blocking it from the other side.

“Move!” I screamed at Trivo, charging at the door myself. She dodged out of the way just in time for me to slam into the door in the same manner as she did, but it only opened another couple inches further.

Just as I recovered from the recoil, I heard the yelps of a familiar bot.

“Aaah! No! *Help!*” Trivo screamed out.

I spun around to see Trivo in the arms of one of the robots who'd been chasing us, both of whom were only a foot or two away. She was aggressively struggling to break free, but her attempts were largely futile. Shock was just to my left, with the blue beams on her back visibly sparking with some kind of electric charge.

These machines were probably a foot taller than me, wearing bulky, dark grey armour plating and a round face made of several slanted lines, forming two angry eyes and an LED frown.

In a moment of bravery I didn't think I was capable of, I did what I thought was the best idea at the time – while those robots were occupied with getting Trivo under control, I swung the guitar bag off my shoulder, grabbed it by the neck, and swung it as hard as I could at Trivo's captor.

The guitar grazed the bot's head just enough to cause a bit of shrapnel to fly off the side of his head, and he reeled over to the side from the impact.

“*Aural!*” Shock called out. Pausing in disbelief of what I just did, I ignored her call.

I saw Trivo fall to the floor and frantically crawl away from the robot I just whacked. Before I had any time to react, our other adversary in my peripheral vision raised a silver, wand-like item in the air towards me. All I heard was a massive *CRACK* before my vision became totally distorted in an instant.

I was hardly able to move most of my body – all I could manage was a couple steps backwards before I fell on my back, my guitar following suit with a terrible *clank*.

Well, I had a good run.

Immobile and almost blind, all I could do was listen. Shock shouted, a *snap*, clashing metal, and a painful grunt. Trivo screeched, one of those other bots yelled, and I distinctly heard one of them say “let's go.” After that, two pairs of footsteps along with Trivo's terrified screams.

“Lavi! Find Lavi-”



I don't know how long it'd been since our tussle. I'd guess 15 or 20 minutes. I was still lying on the ground, even though it seemed like my motor functionality had returned. However, my optics were still completely non-functional.

So far, this was lining up to be the worst day of my life, and it just kept getting worse.

I heard some movement just to my left. I prayed it was Shock.

“Aural? Hey, Aural.” Judging by the voice, my prayers had been answered. “Stay still.” Gladly.

I felt an uncomfortably powerful jolt, and my vision slowly flickered back into reality. Shock was hovering just over me with a pair of electric rods in her hands, smiling faintly now that my visor had beamed back to life.

“Shock, what happened? Where's Trivo?”

“You got zapped – *big* time.” She held out a hand for me, which I took as I clambered to my feet. “You should be fine.”

“Where's Trivo?” I repeated.

“Well... snatched, by the looks of it.”

“No, no! Shit!”

“Against *all* of my better judgment, I tried to help her after you got electrocuted. One of those bastards hit me hard enough to keep me down long enough to get out with Trivo. Good thing it seems like those guys were only here to grab her and go.”

“Shock, we have to tell someone about this...”

“Sure,” she began with a distinct tone of sarcasm, “let's tell people about how we associated ourselves with a potential serial killer, and now we need help rescuing her.”

“Isn't it obvious she's not a killer? She knew about the bot that barged into my place, so why would she tell us about it if she was trying to orchestrate my murder?” I argued. “And those were clearly not good guys we were just dealing with.”

Shock crossed her arms. “Hell if I know what was going on here, Aural, but she's the biggest suspect of these murders right now. You're way too trusting,” she remarked.

“*You* were the one who said it was our best option to follow this lead!” I countered.

“That was before we knew we were coming to meet with *Trivo!*” Shock shouted back. She looked away and paused for a moment before sighing. “Whatever. We can't afford to be fighting down in this place. Let's get somewhere safer before spewing at each other.”

“Yeah, fine,” I muttered. I turned away out of frustration, but in the corner of my vision, I saw my pal smirk rather suddenly as she glanced around our immediate area.

“Now, I don't condone violence, but if you're going to hit someone, you might as well make it count,” she said as she bent down and picked up a nearby piece of damaged, dark grey metal. “And, judging by this...”

“No way,” I said, muffling my voice in awe. The piece of metal Shock picked up was



shaped just like the gear-shaped decorations our adversaries had attached to the sides of their heads. “Was that actually me?”

“I watched it happen.”

I had trouble believing *I* did that. I won't lie – as terrible as that whole altercation was, slamming that huge robot in the head with a guitar was one of the most satisfying feelings I'd ever experienced... for about a tenth of a second. After that, all I felt was regret.

“Ugh, why did I do that? My axe...” My guitar was still in its bag, but I would've been amazed if it was undamaged. Not only that, but I could sure use a waxing after all this roughing around.

“You tell me. Let's get out of here, though. I don't detect anyone down here, so let's not wait for that to change.”

No objections to that notion. We wasted no more time leaving.

“Did you recognize those machines at all?” I asked while jogging down the tunnel alongside my partner.

“No, I don't think so. I've seen quite a few designs in my time, but I've never seen bots with builds quite like those. I can't quite put my finger on what made them stand out like that, though.”

“Gee, maybe it was because they were big and scary?”

Shock let out a dry chuckle, staring straight at my face. “Have you looked in a mirror recently?”

I laughed. She really did have a point.

Shock held up the piece of metal I broke off Trivo's kidnapper, inspecting it as best as she could while running. "Maybe if we get lucky, someone can tell us what kind of design this is. Could be a lead."

"Not a bad idea," I agreed.

We exited the tunnel and reentered the dark alley. I couldn't see anyone around, and Shock's silence told me she didn't either. With that in mind, we flew back through the uphill, zigzag pathway. Still not a soul in sight, which I could definitely appreciate right about then.

"Just stay cool," Shock advised me as we opened the door to Packet Park once again.

Despite Shock's advice, however, I couldn't help but look around the building's interior to see if anyone was paying us any attention. I couldn't shake the sensation that everyone in here knew we just got our asses kicked, even though I knew it couldn't be true. So, as quickly as we walked in through the back door, we walked out through the front entrance.

"Where are we gonna go?" I asked, only now realizing we didn't have much of a plan in that regard.

"Not your place, that's for sure." She slowed her pace and looked upwards for a few seconds. "Let's go to my home," she insisted, though not as confidently as usual.

"Ya sure?"

"Just... make sure we're not being followed," she advised me.

From just outside Packet Park, we jogged over towards the side of the plaza we came from earlier, both of us keeping a keen eye out for any suspicious robots. We were following the path that led to Assault, but instead of going straight down the street and passing by my nightclub, we took a left at a nearby intersection before we reached it. I quickly made a habit of checking my six as we took each corner.

But, just like it was when we went to Verdin, the streets were bare and there was no one around to observe us. At least, as far as I could tell.

“How far is your new place?”

“Not far. I'd say it's probably halfway between Verdin Square and the city outskirts,” Shock explained.

“Good,” because I really needed a place to sit down and collect myself right about then.

I was still distraught over losing Trivo like that, let alone getting into an actual physical fight. I was certain she was going to be the key to solving this mystery, but now I was just hoping she wasn't suffering the same fate I almost did back up in my tower. If only we could've done something different to prevent that scuffle...

As we ventured into this unfamiliar territory (for me, at least), Shock took the lead and we moved single file.

“Here,” Shock explained as we turned around another block, pointing to a building at the near the middle of the next downhill street.

Looked like a pretty nice home, if she was pointing to the one I was looking at. It was a rather petit two-storey house with a substantial overhang on the left side, covering lots of what appeared to be scrap metal, tools, and a small side entrance.

Shock approached the house I was just examining, confirming that it was the right place. She walked up to the front entrance first, unlocking the door and promptly inviting me in.

For the first time since this all started, I felt safe. Shock's home was truly a space of repose. Everything I could see was neat, orderly, and lavishly decorated. She even had some nice new furniture in the living room over to the left of the entrance, and a big storage unit in the wall just to the right. It was strange to see a place like this on Zynima, since robots usually had little interest in comfort.

“Sweet crib,” I complimented.

“Thanks. Feel free to have a seat.”

With me and my poor guitar in mind, I did just that. The couch over in the living room was super fluffy, totally throwing me off when I sat down and sank about half a foot into the cushion. Once I found my bearings, I propped my guitar up beside me and unzipped the bag.

I laid it down in my arms, carefully inspecting it in its entirety. I couldn't believe it – there was a tiny dent in the side. Well, I mean, I *could* believe it after what I did with it, but my perfect instrument was no longer in mint condition. My life was effectively over.

From the hallway connected to the room, Shock peeked around the corner. “Need to recharge before we head out on our big adventure?” she asked.

“Yeah, definitely. You have your own station?”

“99.97% purity. You bet I do.”

“Sick,” I lazily replied.

Recharge stations were machines a robot could hook up to to enter sleep mode and have their systems refueled. The higher the purity of a recharge station, the less “corruption” that would build inside us when we did so. Needless to say, corruption is bad. 99.99% is considered the best purity rating out there, so with a number as high as the one Shock just gave me, I had nothing to worry about.

“So, what's on our to-do list?” I asked, thinking over everything that happened today. “We need to find this Lavil bot and see if we can identify that piece of metal along the way. Oh, and avoid Tangent.”

“Basically. How we're going to find Lavil, I have no idea.”

“Trivo said they're number one on one of the charts, right? Why not check them and see if you can find that name.”

“Right!” Shock exclaimed. “Forgot about that.” She hopped over to her living room computer. I left her to do the clicking and typing while I fiddled around with my guitar, until she called me over about a minute later.

“Got it. There they are, at the top of the skill chart.”

Gently laying my guitar down on the couch, I went over to go check it out. Just as Trivo said, “Lavil II” was the best of the best in the skill category, according to the global charts. I sure hoped that was the right person, since I didn't hear anything from Trivo about the “II” after their name.

“I guess there wouldn't be a profile on there, would there be?” I wondered.

“There is. Let me pull it up.”

Excited, I leaned in closer to the screen, just over Shock's shoulder. They lived in Grilith Tower, apparently. That was pretty much all the useful information I could see, other than miscellaneous details like age, height, and interests. No contact information.

“How are we supposed to get in touch with someone so famous?” I asked.

“It won't be easy,” Shock began, “but it's not impossible. We know where they live.”

What an upstanding person. “Grilith. It's a ways off, isn't it?”

“Yes, it's pretty far from Zynima City.”

There was a tower several kilometres away from the city that looked like a gigantic stone monolith, with several seemingly random bits of metal sticking out everywhere, and impossibly steep and curvy pathways flying in and out of the huge structure. I was assuming that's what Grilith Tower was, since my knowledge of the place was pretty limited.

“All right. Let's check out Grilith tomorrow, then. Show me where that recharge station is,” I insisted.

“Right this way.” Shock guided me into a hallway branching off from the living room, leading me into a room with a bed, a couple of desks, a closet, and a small chandelier in the middle of the ceiling.

There was no denying that there was something different – something almost unsettling – about Shock's decor. I knew what a bed was, but I'd literally never seen one before. Maybe she was just a bit eccentric.

The recharge station was built into the wall over on the far side of the room, across from the bed.

“I hope you don't mind the floor,” said Shock.

“Of course I don't.” What a weird question. “Mind if I hook up right now? I'm spent.”

“Go for it. I'll just be puttering around for a bit before I shut off too.”

“Okay. See ya in the morning.”

“Night.” With that, Shock left the room.

Every robot had a spot on their body where they could plug into a recharge station to recuperate. For me, that spot was on my left arm. I delicately opened up the concealed panel on my arm and fiddled around with a couple of wires on the station before plugging them into the exposed panel.

I assured myself that we'd get to the bottom of this. Sleep mode engaged.



## 5 – To Grilith

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**Optics on.**

**Nervous system on.**

**Sound system on.**

**Motor control on.**

**Good morning, world.**

Still sitting on the floor of Shock's room, I felt totally refreshed. I took a quick look around the room, but couldn't see Shock. She must have already been up and about.

I carefully detached the wires hanging from my arm and replaced the little panel to conceal the sockets. Now free to move around, I got up and walked out of the room in search of my pal.

“Morning,” I heard as soon as I stepped into the hallway. Shock was over by the junction that led to the living room and the front door.

“Hey,” I replied, “what's up?”

“Same old, same old. Puttering a bit while I waited for you to get up.”

“Exciting. So, got any ideas for what we're gonna do today?”

“Mhm. After you shut off last night, I went and did a little bit of browsing online to see if there was any quick way to get to Grilith Tower.”

“Oh yeah? Find anything?”

“I guess. Come here,” she instructed, bringing me over to her living room computer and sitting down on the chair.

Shock had a page open that described a small transportation hub near part of the city's outskirts. Dukes of the Desert, it was called. Comparatively, it wasn't too far away from here – past Verdin Square a little ways, and down a major road that led straight from the city's core to the desert below. Probably just a bit closer than going to my home from here.

What really got me excited was the vehicles they had available for rent there. From two-wheeled dune bikes to eight-wheeled sand rollers, this place looked like it had anything someone might need to get around the desert.

“Dude,” I exclaimed with an openly excited voice, “holy shit.”

“Yeah, this place has vehicles we could use,” Shock began in her usual monotone pitch, “but there's absolutely no safety involved here. You don't even need a license or any certification, and they don't offer any sort of training.”

Hell no. I wasn't about to let Shock talk me down from cruising through the desert on a motorbike, licensed or not.

“Are you kidding? How is going straight from there to Grilith that dangerous?”

Shock gave me one of *those* looks. “I'm assuming you're aware that Grilith is on the opposite end of the city from Dukes, and that there's no path for vehicles directly through the city?”

“Okay, so what's so bad about a couple turns through the sand?”

Shock threw her arms behind her over the back of the chair, tilting her head towards the ceiling. She followed up with an exasperated sigh.

“I thought I was supposed to be the baby here,” I joked.

She glared at me.

“Well, is there any alternative to this place if you're so opposed to it?”

“The only other choice that would be even remotely available to us is going to a factory and getting our own car custom built for us. Not only is that going to cost a fortune, but it's also going to take weeks.”

“Dukes it is!” I cheered.

“...Other than walking for a whole day, I *guess* it's our only option.” Shock lifted herself off the chair and onto her feet. “Get your stuff ready to go. I don't want to waste too much time.” She walked over near the front entrance.

Seeing as “my stuff” was comprised of my guitar and its bag, prepping for the trip took mere seconds. I walked over to the living room, slipped the instrument into its bag, and slung it over my shoulder once again. Shock was over near the cabinet by the front door, rummaging around inside it.

“You want a snack for the road?” She asked.

Puzzled, I walked over closer to see what she was talking about. A snack?

Shock held out her palm in my direction, with three red packets sitting in her hand.

“Oh! Yeah, why not,” I answered.

These red objects looked like marbles wrapped in some sort of clear foil. The red varieties were often called “vital packets,” since a robot could plug them into their body the same way they would a recharge plug, effectively draining the packet into their internal machinery. The liquid inside helped give our systems a boost after a long day of wear and tear.

Still not sure why Shock called them snacks, though. I knew she took packets orally for some reason, but I learned to not question a lot of the strange things about her.

“Well, I'm ready to go,” I told her.

“Likewise. Let's hit the road.” She tucked the vital packets in a small brown satchel she was carrying by her side.

Shock and I opened the door and stepped outside. There it was – that gleaming ball of morning light hovering above us in the sky. With the sunrise's heat came the activity of hundreds of robots, many of whom were out walking along our street, minding their own business. Countless metal footsteps echoed around us as we walked off Shock's property, joining the ranks of the machines on the left side of the road.

It was a pretty calm and quiet area that Shock lived in. I didn't realize how far we'd gone in our rush to get away from Verdin last night, but we definitely ended up in a vastly different district than the marketplace we were in earlier. This place was a stark contrast to the dark alleys and tunnels – the buildings actually had a tinge of rustic colour, a few robots were tossing a ball to

each other in front of some flat-topped apartment complexes on the opposite side of the street, and one machine far down our side of the road was playing an electronic piano, just barely audible from this distance.

The longer we walked, the thicker the crowds became and the higher the buildings rose. The quiet residential district slowly transformed into a bustling cityscape with a contrast of towering high-rises against a series of small parks and beautiful art displays. I couldn't see any more than a couple hundred feet in front of me – the roads stretched both horizontally and vertically, as though the city had been built on wildly unterraformed ground. Where the ground couldn't be flattened, some rather intricate and uniquely shaped buildings catered to the planet's terrain instead, which added an interesting level of complexity to some parts of the city. Overhanging pipes and tunnels connected to multiple buildings, the occasional passage to an underground structure, and pillar-shaped lights all decorated the streets.

Something caught my attention off to the side of my vision. I quietly veered off from Shock a bit to approach a nearby statue, easily twice as tall as myself. It was a round, spiky object that shone bright pink, almost glowing in the intense sunlight.

“Pitaya,” I read aloud, looking down at the small plaque at the base of the statue. “The hell is this?” I mumbled.

“It's a fruit.” Shock obviously noticed me change my headings.

“A fruit?”

“Yeah. A fruit.”

I looked back at the plaque. It read, “*An object speculated to be an edible substance for Humanity, The Creators.*”

“Humanity... The Creators?”

Shock didn't interject.

I kept reading. “*Hand crafted by Trivo over the course of 37 days.*”

“Trivo!” I exclaimed. “She did this?!”

Shock shrugged. “Hm.”

“Wow. Pretty cool.” I decided to leave it at that, given Shock's feelings towards Trivo.

We kept walking along, travelling down a rather steep slope before entering a wide open area with several roads forking off from our new location. Kind of like Verdin's main plaza, but much smaller.

Looking around the area, I couldn't see any signs or landmarks that led to this vehicle rental place. There was supposedly a huge road connecting it to both the desert and the city centre, but I wasn't seeing much of a huge road nearby. Right when I was about to turn to Shock to see what she thought about our current direction, something else jumped out at me.

“Aural? Aural Automaton?” A heavily synthesized voice quickly approached through the streams of robots on either side of us. A blue robot with a rigid build brushed past a couple of nearby strangers, heading straight towards me.

The two yellow circles on its face were beaming brightly with what I assumed was excitement. Following in its wake was a pair of similar robots, both holding large film cameras.

“Aural! Can I have a quick word with you?” The robot held a microphone in my direction with both of his hands.

Taken aback by this sudden encounter, I found myself at a loss for words. I felt a loose whack on the side of my right shoulder before I could say anything; Shock was trying to grab my attention.

“We don't have time for you to sign autographs right now. We should keep going,” she whispered, leaning in close to the side of my head as she spoke.

“Hold on. They might be trying to gather news, and seeing as I was just attacked...” I responded, matching her voice's volume.

*Gotta act cool for the camera*, I reminded myself, turning my attention back to our guests. “Sure, I got a bit of time.”

“Great! Okay!” The robot's arms both split into two smaller arms, and he reached behind his back to pull out a clipboard and pen, still holding the mic in front of me. The two machines behind the robot in front both pointed their cameras at me. I *assumed* this was a news operation.

“So, Aural, we received word that you were assaulted in your *own home* yesterday! Is this true?”

“Yeah, someone smashed my door down and tried to get at me in my own place. Nothin' I couldn't handle, though.”

I couldn't see her, but I could feel Shock rolling her eyes at me.

“Have you heard the rumours about a *serial killer* going around? Do you think your assailant was this alleged serial killer?” He was rapidly scribbling notes down on his clipboard while moving the mic between our faces.

I carefully thought about what I was going to say before I spoke up. “...Dunno. I've heard about these murders going on, but I don't know much else about 'em. Couldn't tell ya if my attacker was a murderer or not.”

“Do you plan on doing anything about this attack?”

“Yeah, I'm gonna get to the bottom of it.”

“Great! Where are you going right now?”

“Uh, Gri-”

Shock hit me on the shoulder pretty hard. I turned to look at her and she leaned in close to me again.

“Don't you dare say where we're going,” she whispered.

“Yeah, uh,” I resumed, turning back to the reporter, “nowhere in particular, really. Though my pal and I need to get going. Business as usual for me – tight time constraints and all that.”

“Okay! Thank you for your time, Aural! And be careful out there,” the reporter beamed. The cameras were no longer focused on me, and



the small group of reporters huddled closer and talked among themselves as the leader of the group continued jotting down notes on his clipboard.

Shock pointed just past me, towards one of the forks in the big junction. It seemed like our guests were done with us, so we quietly resumed our pace in Shock's direction.

“Couldn't help yourself, could you?” Shock pointed out with a subtle hint of joviality in her voice.

“Hey, that was pretty cool if you ask me.” I made sure the expression on my visor was mirroring my sentiments towards the cameras. “So, where are we going? Did you find a sign or something?”

“Mhm. I'm pretty sure this street will lead us to the main strip Dukes is on.”

“Sweet.”

Shock paused. “I find it kind of strange seeing you act like that in front of the camera, though.”

“What do you mean? I gotta keep up appearances!”

“Well, don't you think it feels a bit... fake? You're not really all that cool in real life.”

“Wow. Ouch.” But I guess I could see where she was coming from. “It's not *just* about looking good, though. It's... theatrics, I guess. It's about keeping up the illusion of something greater. Something *more*. You know? I gotta be an idol that people can look up to.”

“You aren't *that* famous.” Shock smiled again.

“Hey now, I still have a few fans out there.”

She laughed in response. “Okay, fair enough. I guess I never really think of you as a public figure, since I just see you as a regular person all the time.”

I returned a thoughtful grunt her way.

The path we found ourselves on was much thinner than the streets we'd been traversing for the last little while, and the foot traffic was much higher here as a result. Between the clanging of metallic feet was a low rumble of bass emanating from nearby structures; we were in a strip where the buildings were comprised of music shops and small clubs. Definitely my kind of place. We had to take it a bit slow, since the crowds of machinery were almost jamming the whole lane every now and then.

After a bit more trekking, we finally made it to an opening in our little road that widened into a huge lane. After peering side to side, it quickly hit me that this was *the road*. It was a huge lane of pavement, probably about fifty feet in width, extending down into the desert to our left, and far into the city to our right. The crowds had thinned out significantly, but there were a few dune buggies slowly rolling around, filling up the empty bits of the road.

“Good, looks like we're on track,” Shock noted. “So, it should be down near the desert end of this highway.” I almost had to lean in close to

hear her over the nearby vehicles, but I received her message well enough to understand her.

Staying on the left side of the road to avoid any collisions with the passing cars, we power-walked downhill towards the desert. The view was almost surreal – on either side of us, skyscrapers and machinery, but in front of us at the bottom of the road, a portal to the endless expanse of sand that surrounded our civilization. I rarely ever ventured out past the city's outskirts, so I was pretty excited.

I was so transfixed on the desert that I almost didn't notice Shock stop in her tracks.

“Here we are,” Shock sighed, looking at the neon sign atop the front entrance of the building before us. “Christ.”

The sign was a gnarly thing, with huge, almost unreadably skewed and pointy letters curved around a neon tire, reading “Dukes of the Desert.” Behind the neon letters was a pair of (fake?) flamethrowers pointed up in the air. I could tell right away that it was taking everything Shock had to brace herself for this.

“Dude. This place is gonna rock,” I told her.

She peered over at me, looking kind of disgusted. “Sure. Whatever you say.”

I took point and pushed the front door open.

The interior of the store was so much larger than it looked from the outside, probably because the front entrance from the main strip actually led to the second floor of the building.

We were standing on a grated path that wrapped around the perimeter of the angular room, giving us a great view of the floor below: dozens of bad-ass looking vehicles, all illuminated by the morning light beaming through the windows on the ground floor.

Shock obviously didn't feel like taking any initiative in here, so I took a moment to stare down in awe at our potential rides. I was almost vibrating in excitement just thinking about cruising around the desert in one of these rides.

I took a break from the view to take a quick glance around the floor we were on. I couldn't see anyone else besides my pal, but I did spot a spiral staircase on the far right side of the room. I casually walked over in that direction with Shock in tow, rapidly descending each step once I reached the stairs.

“Hey, hey! Who do we got here?” Someone shouted as my feet hit the ground floor. I couldn't tell where the voice was coming from, since the building had an intense echo.

Before either of us had a chance to look around, I felt a hand on my right shoulder. Someone was between me and Shock, with their hands on both of our shoulders.

“A coupla newcomers, huh? You lookin' for a ride?”

“Ye-”

“You know it!” I accidentally interrupted Shock.

I took a quick look at the shopkeeper. This robot looked rugged. He had a really jagged

design, with a purple and blue triangular head, and white semi-circles for eyes. The rest of his blue and silver body was relatively thin and narrow compared to his head, and it took me a moment to realize this bot had no feet – he had wheels instead.

“Exquisite! Whatcha lookin' for today, ladies?” He released his grip on our shoulders and rolled in front of us.

“We want something that can take us around the desert. But we don't want anything too expensive either,” I explained, eyeing down a couple of desert bikes to the right of Shock.

“Then you've come to the right place, my friends. How long you need wheels for? Packin' any gear around?”

“A day. *Maybe* two? And just what we've got on us for gear.”

“All right. Take a look at these babies right here,” the shopkeeper replied immediately, rolling over to the bikes I was inspecting moments ago. “Dune rollers, third prototype. Top speeds of 180 kilometres per hour, enough fuel capacity for several days. Won't ever get stuck in the sand,” he explained, directing our attention to the massive treads on each wheel of the bikes. “You'd be hard pressed to break one of these suckers down. Never gonna fall over unless you're an idiot.”

“Hypothetical situation – say these bikes are exactly what we want. How much would that run us?” In my peripheral vision, I saw Shock shake her head.

“Bah, just 20 bytes per hour. Pay when you get back.”

I lit up with glee. “Yo, Shock, we can easily afford that!”

“Yes, I guess so... but, why so cheap?” she inquired.

“*Well,*” he started, “Late fees start at 800% per hour, missing treads are 900 bytes each, damage to the main chassis begins at 3,300 bytes, engine breakdowns start at 12,000...”

“What the hell? That’s a bloody scam,” Shock criticized.

“Hey, cool it. What I’m saying is we take no responsibility for technical issues. They’re reliable machines! Just don’t be a dumbass out there and you’ll be fine!”

Shock’s expression returned to her signature unimpressed eyes-half-closed look.

I didn’t need any time to mull it over. I had the most exciting ride of my life at my fingertips.

“Let’s do it. Two bikes, two days.”

“Done.” He wheeled over to a nearby pillar with a series of buttons on it and pressed one, slowly raising one of the garage doors in front of the bikes.

“No paperwork or anything we need to sign?”

“Oh naaah, nah, nah, nah. We’re very easy going around here... until it comes to debt collection.”

Something told me that wasn't a great sign, but this really was our only viable option right now.

“So we just... go?” It seemed too easy to be true.

“You know how to ride one of these things?” the bot asked us.

I glanced over at Shock, who did the same to me.

“Come on. Take a seat on these beasties and I'll at least show you how to use them.” He rolled over to the bikes, beckoning us over.

These brown and yellow bikes looked just as heavy-duty and rugged as the bot renting them to us. Not the most pleasant looking machines, but they did look pretty sturdy. I followed our new instructor to the bike closest to him on the far left of the shop, while Shock reluctantly did the same with the bike to my right. We both swung a leg over our seats and sat down, facing forward.

“All right, listen up, since I'm only going over this once. See the pedals above the little platforms by your feet? Your acceleration's on the right, and your brakes are on the left. Don't mix 'em up. You got your handlebars up front for steering, but I'm hoping I didn't *need* to tell you that. Parking brake is right here,” he explained, pointing to a switch beneath the handlebars of my bike, “and the ignition's right here beside it.”

“Clutch? Shifting? Any of that?” Shock asked.

“Automation is a godsend, baby,” said the vehicle salesman. “Just start it up, take it out of park, and you're ready to go. Any questions?”

“Sounds pretty simple to me,” I commented.

“You wouldn't be wrong! It's a cinch once you get going. Catch,” he said as he passed us both a key. Shock caught hers while I almost dropped mine.

“Oh yeah, before you go.” The salesman rolled around the back of my bike and leaned down between me and my pal, matching our current heights. “Out there, one of my pals set up a huge ramp in the desert. You can't miss it. Don't take it, for all of our sakes. The guy's kinda ridiculous.”

“We won't be doing any of that,” Shock insisted.

“Hey, temptation's a bitch, man. Fair warning.” He reached over and gave us both a pat on our backs. “Rev 'em up, chickies! Let's hear those engines purr.”

I put the key in the ignition and turned it. The bike chugged to life with a deafening roar, which eventually quieted down to a low rumble. Shock's bike did the same shortly after mine. My circuitry was working in overdrive with anticipation as the vehicle revved beneath me.

“Whenever you're ready, give them a tap. The world's yours! For two days, that is.”

I gently pushed down on the acceleration pedal. The bike's engine picked up, and I started moving forward. I pressed down just a tiny bit



harder, increasing my speed just enough to get out the front gate at a reasonable pace. Once I was far enough outside, I slowly braked and took a look behind me. Shock was approaching, but at a much slower speed. She stopped beside me, looking a bit frazzled.

“Have fun out there!” The shopkeeper yelled as he began closing the garage door behind us.

Shock stared at me for a few seconds. “That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen you do, making a rash deal in a shady store like that,” she clamored over the rumble of the bikes. “And now *I'm* stupid for going along with it.”

“Oh, chill out! We're not gonna be using these things long enough to break them,” I shouted back in a flimsy attempt to console her.

“Just one thing, Aural.”

“What's that?”

“Don't *ever* bring me in there again,” she scowled.

“Yeah, whatever,” I nonchalantly agreed. I was too pumped to let Shock kill my hype.

## 6 – Reputable Salesman

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All I could see in front of me was an unthinkable large sand desert, with a few rocky plateaus and spires on the horizon. Although most people on Zynima spent their entire lives in the city, there were stories about robots living on their own in their own settlements or buildings far from civilization. Of course, there were big places like Grilith Tower out here, but the number of undocumented landmarks and homes really gave the desert an exciting, unexplored feeling.

I'd be saving that for another day, though. We were on a mission.

“So, we should just be able to drive around Zynima City and get to Grilith that way?” I bellowed at Shock over our noisy bikes.

“Yeah! Don't stray too far from the city!”

I gave her a thumbs-up. Looking back towards the front of my bike, I placed my feet above both pedals, gripped the handlebars, and pressed down on the acceleration. The bike slowly started moving, and as it automatically shifted into the next gear, I turned left to line myself up parallel with the edge of the city.

The terrain directly in front of me was flat and fairly smooth, so I gradually accelerated until I could feel the wind whizzing around me. I'd never moved this fast before – it was exhilarating; a glance at my speedometer told me I was moving at about 90 km/h. I took a peek to my right to see where Shock was, and, to my surprise, she was keeping up pretty well.

Naturally, this meant I had to go a little faster. I couldn't let her win.

The bike shifted up again. The houses, scrapyards, and storage complexes to my left were all rushing by, blurred together in a mixture of meaningless shapes and colours. The wind was so loud that the sound of the bike's engine was a mere afterthought.

145 km/h. This ride was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was almost worried my guitar bag was going to fly off my shoulder at this speed.

Ah, there was the huge ramp that shopkeeper was talking about, maybe a hundred feet to my right. That thing was stupidly high – I don't know what kind of moron would take a jump like that. Just beneath the ramp were two robots sitting on bikes of their own, one of whom was presumably the shopkeeper's “ridiculous” friend.

I looked over my shoulder to check on Shock. She was considerably farther behind than earlier, which convinced me to slow down a little bit. I couldn't make this too easy for myself.

Wait – I did a double-take back at Shock. Back behind us, those bots by the ramp had started following us.

Erring on the side of caution, I started slowing down to let Shock catch up. I needed to let her know we were being followed, but there was no way she'd ordinarily be able to hear my cries over the wind. I had a solution, though – audio was my specialty.

“Behind us!” I shouted, recording my voice clip.

“*BEHIND US!*” I blared incredibly loud through the speakers lining my chest and shoulders.

Success – I saw Shock peer over her shoulder. She must have seen the other bikes, since she accelerated pretty quickly as soon as she faced forward again. It only took her a few seconds to catch up to me.

I quickly glanced behind us again. Damn, they were fast. The other bikes were catching up way faster than I expected. I was almost able to make out details of the riders' pointy, brown and grey faces. I guess being comfortable with speeds like that comes with experience.

Shock was hunkered down on her bike, riding side-by-side with me, paying attention to the ground ahead of her, kinda like I should've been. A bump in the ground rattled my bike a little bit, prompting me to look straight forward and straighten out my path. I opted to coast for a couple seconds to reduce my speed in case of any more bumpy terrain.

Seconds later, another bump shook me up again. Hold on, I was carefully watching where I was going that time. There was nothing in front of me. That's when I peeked to my left.

One of those bikers that were following us had caught right up to me, and was nudging the left side of my bike with their front tire.

“What the hell!” I yelled, not nearly loud enough to beat the volume of the rushing wind. I

did what made sense at the time: I turned just slightly to the right to drive a bit closer to Shock, holding out my hand towards her in an attempted “move over” gesture. It didn't work; Shock remained straight on her course.

A small sand dune was coming up, but it was big enough that going this fast over it worried me. 130 km/h over *that*? Sorry, not happening. That other rider to my left made the same course adjustment I had, slowly sandwiching me between themselves and Shock. I firmly hit the brakes (which were much more powerful than I'd anticipated), rapidly slowing me down to a safer pace. Shock must've had the same thoughts about the dune in front of us, seeing as she also slowed down moments after I did.

The biker that was bumping into me apparently did not think to brake, launching them off the dune, catching some incredibly big air. I don't know if they thought it was a race, or if they were just showing off, or what. But— ah. I was a couple feet in the air before I could finish my thought. I braced myself for impact, straightening my front wheel.

Oof. The impact of landing back on the ground was rougher than I expected, but the important part was I hadn't crashed. I straightened myself out again and coasted for a moment, peeking behind me to look for Shock.

She didn't have as much speed as me, but less than a second after she ramped off the dune, the second one of those bikers ramped off the sand and smashed into Shock's rear wheel *in the*

*air* with enough speed to send her spiralling out of control before she even hit the ground. The biker had enough speed to fly off not unlike how their buddy had.

I slammed on the brakes, sliding down to a much lower speed while the engine chugged noisily as it rapidly shifted down. All I could do was watch Shock fall to the ground *backwards*.

Fuck. The bike spilled over and flung her to the ground, sending her tumbling through the sand. The bike followed her, sliding straight into her chest and legs and finally toppling over across her body.

I couldn't look away. All I could think to do was scream her name as I watched her fall.

I stopped my bike as fast as I could and jumped off immediately, not caring if it was properly parked or not. Tossing my guitar bag to the sand, I sprinted over to the crash site. "Shock!" I repeated. No response. The sand was loose enough to trip me up a few times, but I didn't care. I kept running.

No. No, no no. She was lying on her back underneath the wreckage. Her eyes were completely blank. Their green glow was gone.

As soon as I got over to her, I grabbed onto a handlebar and the seat of her bike, and started pulling it off her with everything I could muster. It was far heavier than I expected. I couldn't pull it off.

I kept pulling. "*SHOCK!*" I blared, playing my recorded voice clip from earlier at an

obnoxious volume. I could only lift the bike off her a couple inches at most.

She wasn't moving. I screeched the voice clip again.

Pulling the bike off my friend was futile. I bolted around to the other side of the wreck. Could I push it? Lift it, maybe?

No, I couldn't push it hard enough with all the loose sand under my feet combined with the awkward position of Shock underneath the bike. I couldn't lift it without stepping on Shock's face, either.

I heard a small noise. I looked back down at her.

Her eyes lit up with two green, horizontal lines. Was she okay?

“Sh-Shock?” I stuttered.

Another small mumble. It was coming from her.

“Wh... fuck, I... damn,” she mumbled.

“Are you okay?!” I shouted, kneeling down beside her, unable to break my gaze from her face.

“Yeah, I... I don't know. It... fucking hurts.” She paused, wincing. “Get this... get this off me.”

“I-I can't...” I whimpered.

“Shit, Aural, *try!*” she pleaded with an exasperated breath.

“I have been!” I stood up and went to where I was pulling the bike beforehand. I kept trying to pull it off. Same result – no more than a couple inches.

“Hold it... hold it up!” she groaned.

“Okay, okay, I got this!” I frantically replied in an attempt to reassure her.

I was able to lift the bike just enough to allow her to scoot backwards through the sand, away from the bike. The blue beams on her back clearly made it difficult for her to move in her current position, but she looked like she'd be able to get clear of the wreck without too much of a problem.

“Don't you dare drop that,” she scowled. I was far too relieved she was even alive to be put off by the tone of her voice. I steadied my grip on the bike and pulled a bit harder.

A few seconds later, Shock was clear of the bike. I lowered it to the ground as gently as I could (which is to say, not at all).

I ran over to Shock and crouched down beside her. She'd propped herself up on the side of a sand dune, still wincing, holding her left leg with both hands.

Her white trousers were stained dark red near her shin.

“Oh, shit...” I muttered, stepping over closer to her wound.

“Help me lift this off it,” Shock asked through clenched teeth, tugging at her pant leg.

Carefully, I rolled up the fabric of her pants where the wound was, so as to not rub the injury at all. It looked bad; her shin had been sliced open, red fluid covering the area.



Shock took a couple deep breaths when she saw it. "My bag. Get it for me," she ordered, surprisingly calm.

Right, I almost forgot about the little satchel she'd brought with her. I took a quick glance around, but... I couldn't see it. I walked up to the top of the dune Shock was sitting against and surveyed the area again-

Aha. It was a few dozen feet away, launched in the direction we were driving in before the crash. And, *way* far away in the distance, those two bikers were still kicking up dust and sand. I couldn't tell which direction they were heading, and I didn't plan on waiting to find out. I ran over to the bag, snatched it up, and ran back without delay.

"Here." I passed it over to Shock, who immediately unbuttoned it and dumped the contents on the sand beside her. Vital packets, energy packets (the blue variety), a spare technician's cap, some other miscellaneous tools I couldn't identify, a roll of fabric...

Putting her hands against the ground by her sides, she yelped in pain as she pushed herself up into a proper sitting position.

"Do you need help?" I asked.

"No," she bluntly answered. She grabbed her thigh and pulled her wounded leg closer with another loud grunt. It was hard watching her suffer like that and not do anything to help, but I wasn't about to cross her.

"Give me a minute, Aural."

"Are you sure...? Will you-"

“Yes. I’ll live.”

Damn, she's stubborn. Seeing no other option, I complied. I awkwardly waited and watched her for a few seconds before standing up and taking a look around once again.

Oh. My bike had fallen over, probably when I rushed off it to help Shock. Great. If I couldn't lift hers up, I doubted I'd be able to lift mine. My only option might have been to ask Shock to help me, but I sure wasn't going to ask her when she was hurt like this.

I couldn't help but feel guilty. If I hadn't have pushed so hard to go to Dukes and ride to Grilith, Shock would be okay right now. We'd be playfully ribbing with each other like we always do instead of sitting in a desert fixing injuries. And we still weren't safe yet – we were stranded until Shock was good enough to ride again. Would she even be okay?

But I couldn't be all mopey like this while Shock was hurt. I had to cut off my rambling thoughts – I needed to pretend I had lights and cameras on me. It usually worked when I needed to pick up my mood, but this *was* a rather dire situation. My circuitry was overwhelmed with a flurry of emotions.

I took another look at the ground and lightly kicked the arid, yellow sand. Yep, definitely still hated this stuff.

“Nano-patch gauze,” Shock blurted out, grabbing my attention. “I can't stand this stuff.” She was wrapping her leg up tightly using the roll of fabric from her satchel. She sighed midway

through it. “But it works. Even if it feels weird and... gross.”

I hadn't heard of nano-patch before, but it didn't surprise me she'd know about it, given her field of work.

“Will you be okay?” I couldn't help but ask again.

Shock nodded. “I... probably shouldn't move this too much right now.” She looked a bit shaky.

“Do you hurt anywhere else? Like...”

“Aural, I'm fine. I'd know if I had other injuries. I'm just sore.”

I trusted her, but couldn't help but worry about her phenomenal stubbornness. All I did was hum in response.

“It's going to be a few minutes before we can go anywhere. This'll take a bit of time to work its magic,” she explained, looking down at her leg, her face incredibly tense.

“A few minutes? That's all?”

“You'd be amazed by how fast nano-patches work. I just hate the feeling of nanomachines doing their thing. Like nails down a chalkboard.” She clenched her eyes shut and her hands shook for a moment.

Hmm. I walked over to Shock and plopped myself down beside her in the sand.

I pointed over to Zynima City far off in the distance. “See that tower over there?”

“Yeah. You live there.”

“Can you believe I jumped off that all the way down to the desert?”

I got a nearly inaudible chuckle from her. “Honestly? Hard to believe you actually did that.”

“Yeah. Still gotta repair my door, too.”

Oh no. I suddenly remembered something, causing me to I freeze totally still. Shock said something, but I was too distracted to hear her. I'd completely forgotten about the performance I was supposed to put on at my club tonight.

Fuck. “Oooh, fuck,” I voiced my thoughts, putting a hand on my head.

Shock looked at me and gave me a concerned hum.

“I'm supposed to perform tonight at my club.”

“Oh. Damn.”

My spirits sank again. Were we going to be able to get back to Zynima in time for my club?

“Yeah, wow. That's rough, buddy,” Shock continued. “Think you should cancel it? Or... is this all even worth missing a performance?” She shrugged.

“Two robots throw their lives away to hunt down a killer robot,” I sarcastically announced, as if it were the title to a book or movie. “I mean... I guess one performance wouldn't hurt. It's a pretty frequent event, and it's not like it's a *massive* concert...”

Man, I was good at second-guessing myself.

“Even if you miss it, it's not the end of the world.”

“Yeah, I guess, but it still sucks. I'm just scared of what people will think of me.”

“No use worrying about it out here in nowhere-land. Whatever you decide on, nothing we can do until later today. We're on a mission, right? We have to stay focused.”

Shock's blunt honesty could be a little bit grating sometimes, but she was never unreasonable.

“But, uh, thanks for the distraction,” said Shock in a sincere tone. “I really hate these things.” She gripped the area of her shin around her bandage.

“Ah, glad I could help!” I was happy she noticed my efforts.

However, as if life knew we needed just a bit more hardship right now, I heard the distant chugging of those bikes again. The catch: it was clearly getting louder. Shock and I both looked in the air with awkward expressions before we realized what it was we were hearing. The eyes on my visor widened a bit.

“Shock, stay down.” I instructed her. The beams on her back made it difficult to move without some effort from her current position, so she opted to just lie on her back.

Shock's crash put us in a slight dip in the terrain between a couple of small dunes. They weren't sizable by any means, but there was a good chance we could take cover behind the dune Shock had been sitting against to block us from view.

At least, that was my plan. The bikes weren't in the most hidden location, but maybe they still wouldn't see us...?

The distant engines were drawing closer by the second. It was unreal how fast they must've been going to be approaching us this quickly. Speed junkies, no doubt.

I laid down as flat as I could against the dune, turning my head to the side so I could see Shock. She was crossing her fingers. Not a bad idea; I did the same.

The following minute was the longest minute I'd felt in a long time. My friend and I stared at each other in silence, occasionally glancing towards the top of the dune and making troubled faces. As expected, the rumbling slowly intensified until it was nearly on top of us, and just as it sounded like it was...

The bikes flew off the dune we were lying against at a ridiculous speed, spraying a thick flurry of coarse sand all over us. Shock squinted and coughed while I laid there wondering how the hell I was going to get all this sand out of my system.

Did I ever mention my hatred for sand?

That aside, I looked back at where the bikers were headed, and they showed no signs of slowing down. Excellent – this might've been our opportunity to get out of here.

“Shock, you okay?” I asked her for what was probably the third or fourth time in the past 20 minutes.

“I ever see those fuckers again, I’ll...” Shock inhaled sharply, leaving me to wonder what she was going to say.

I slowly stood up, totally covered in miserable desert powder. However, much to my excitement, Shock stood up too, with very little struggling on her part.

“Hey, you can stand!” I blurted out the obvious.

“Whole body still hurts like a son of a gun,” she began, “but I should be okay to keep going. I’ll keep this wrap on my leg until we get back home.” She shook her vest out and dusted off her trousers before leaning over and rolling her pant leg back down over her bandaged shin.

It was moments like these that made me thankful that I was never programmed to experience pain. I can’t imagine what Shock was going through, and I don’t think I’d ever want to.

“Think you’d be able to help me lift these bikes up?” I glanced between both of our toppled machines. She seemed much better than earlier; I no longer had any qualms about asking her for help.

“Probably, yeah. I shouldn’t put pressure on my leg though.”

“Of course. I just need a little boost to help get these back upright.”

“Just a little boost? Maybe it would be better to just overcharge you, then. I don’t need to use my leg to do that.”

“O-overcharge? What do you mean?” I’d never heard that term before, and the cheeky

smirk on Shock's face was beginning to concern me. It was nice seeing her in good spirits though.

“Haha, yeah. You know how these beams channel ton of electricity, right?”

Oh no.

She started walking backwards away from me. “I figured out that with just the right amount, it can actually be quite helpful for giving robots extra bursts of energy. Ready?”

Before I had a chance to protest, she raised a hand towards me and launched what looked like a miniature lightning bolt at me (*from her hand of all places*) with an deafening *CRACK*.

I yelped in surprise and blanked out for a second. It felt like my entire system had just rebooted in the span of a millisecond, and my whole body felt weightless and invincible. What did she just do to me?

“Lift these bikes up before it wears off!” Shock yelled, followed by a hearty laugh.

I ran over to her bike, grabbed onto it and wrenched it off the desert floor with one powerful yank. I hardly had the mental capacity to stand still to make sure it didn't fall over again. I had to move! I bolted over to my bike, still a good couple dozen feet away. Plowing through the dusty sand was a breeze while I felt like this, and as soon as I reached my bike, I repeated the same motions to lift it right up without a problem.

“Shock! What did you do?! This is crazy!”

She belted out some more laughter.



Just as quickly as this energy took hold of me, it rapidly started fading away. With every passing second, my system felt more and more normal again, and I suddenly felt a bit exhausted. Was... was that even real?

“Glad to see it works on you.”

I put a hand on my visor, still trying to comprehend what just happened. “Wha... you're saying that might've *not* worked?”

Shock shrugged, the smirk returning to her face. “Think of it as revenge for putting me through all this desert bullshit.” She walked over (with a slight limp) to her satchel and bent over, scouring the sand for the items she'd dumped out of the bag. “C'mon. Grab your guitar. I don't want to stay out here any longer.”

I was still standing in the same pose, unsure if I'd snapped back to reality yet. “Yeah, let's... go,” was all I could think to say. This was the day I learned Shock had some neat tricks up her sleeve with that electricity of hers. I imagine this “overcharge” thing would probably be useful in the future.

I shook my head and walked over to my guitar bag, swiftly picking it up and slinging it over my shoulder. Next stop: Grilith Tower. I prayed we wouldn't be interrupted this time.

## 7 – Arrival

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We took it quite a bit slower for our last leg of the trip to Grilith, but at least this time we weren't being pursued. The desert floor transitioned from silky sand to rocky plains and back again several times, with uneven hills and dunes that really limited both our speed and visibility.

I rode parallel to Shock to make she was managing all right with her battered body. No wipe-outs or unexpected stops, so I assumed she was okay. What surprised me the most was that Shock's bike seemed functionally undamaged. Sure, it had some pretty glaring scuff marks, chips, and scratches from the crash, but she seemed to be able to ride it without any technical difficulties.

I couldn't remember if the shopkeeper from Dukes mentioned anything about fees for cosmetic damage, but I figured it was probably discerning to put that thought aside for now.

All in all, it was a rather uneventful final stretch, but I didn't mind that so much, and something told me Shock didn't either.

I slowed down just a bit and looked up high in the air in front of me. Grilith Tower was wild up close. Not only did it look much taller when viewing it from its base, but you could really get a good look at its shiny, iridescent exterior, covered all over in colourful abstract art. I could also see a whole bunch more of those curvy paths circling around the tower like a series

of roller-coasters; it was a bit overwhelming, but I found myself riled up with anticipation nonetheless. Kind of like when you're in line for an amusement park, I'd imagine. The base of the tower was also lined with tons of giant pieces of scrap metal, not unlike the outskirts of Zynima, but without all the makeshift shelters scattered around.

As we approached the base of the tower, we slowly decelerated and stopped on a somewhat flat strip of rocky terrain where a whole slew of vehicles of wildly varying sizes were already parked, maybe 10 or 20 feet from the tower. It was so relieving to finally make it to Grilith after that incident earlier.

Aligning my bike parallel to a massive buggy on my left, I hit the parking brake and turned the key to the off position. The rumble of my bike quickly died out. Shock lined herself up on my right and did the same a few moments after I parked.

I spun around on my seat and set foot on the ground. Now that I wasn't rushing around in a panic, it occurred to me how floaty I felt after standing up after a long ride like that. The vibration of the bike felt like a natural part of life that'd suddenly gone missing, and it took me a few steps to regain my bearings.

"You know," Shock spoke up, "I think I figured that all out," she said while flicking her hand back in the direction we came.

"Those riders?" I replied. What was I saying? Of course it was those riders.

“Lure people in with cheap prices for unlicensed rides, have his buddies come and wipe us out so we pay the exorbitant repair fees?” Shock's eyes were rendered in a very displeased shape.

“That... almost makes too much sense.” I narrowed my eyes.

“Fuckers.”

“And, uh, hey. Are you holding up okay?”

Shock rolled her eyes. “Yes. I'd tell you if I wasn't.”

“Okay, okay.” I shook my head. “Let's just get in here.”

Checking back one last time to make sure we weren't being trailed, we trudged over the gravelly plateau, soon passing through the pathetically plain and ordinary entrance-way compared to the rest of the exterior.

The inside was just as spectacular and bright as the outside. It looked as if we'd just walked into a remarkably huge, hollow, crystal cave, seeing as almost everything in here matched the shiny silver and violet paint on the outside of the tower. It looked even taller on the inside. I'd estimate about 20 storeys tall? Yeah, that sounded right. And there were just as many, if not more, curvy pathways, ramps, half-pipes, loops, and rails surrounding a huge hexagonal indentation in the middle of the floor. I was starting to feel a bit out of my league already.

Our footsteps echoed sharply as we took our first steps on the smooth crystalline floor.

However... what struck me as a bit odd was the lack of any other sound. You'd think a radical looking place like this where the number one skill bot lived would be filled with activity, but no, it was nearly silent. I could hear a little bit of distant chatter from a couple corners of the first few floors, and some indiscernible sounds emanating from somewhere near the very top floor, but that was it.

I wondered if Lavil was even here. Sure hoped so.

Right away, I spotted a covered staircase to our right that looked like it spiralled all the way up to the top floors of the tower. I also noticed seconds later that someone had carved the words "pisser path" into the wall near the base of the stairs. I completely failed at stifling a chuckle.

"Hey, wait," I started as I noticed Shock already limping up the staircase. "You don't want to check the rest of this floor out first?"

"I didn't come here to have fun. I came here to get in touch with someone. That's it. I don't want to mess around."

"How do you even know Lavil is up there?"

"Do you see anything down here, Aural?"

Damn, what a grump. "Well... I'm at least going to take a quick look around first. I won't be long."

"Okay then," Shock sighed. "Meet you up there."

I side-eyed her really hard while she walked up the first flight of stairs. Not like I was

going to take forever. But, to be fair... I could understand why she might be a little high-strung right now.

Aside from the huge hexagon shape in the ground, the first floor was very reminiscent of a typical skate-park, just... without the skaters. Without *anyone*, it seemed. It was starting to unnerve me a bit. This wasn't private property we'd walked in on, was it? No... couldn't be. But then again, Laval was pretty famous, this could totally be his own place...

I interrupted my indecisive thoughts, and instead skirted around the edges of the park area to look for anything of interest. Ah! There was a pair of bots underneath the bottom of the staircase, both humanoid: one was made with sleek, navy green parts definitely designed for quick movement, while the other was a much taller, dark grey robot with a fairly clunky-looking design, covered in orange markings and lines, sporting a huge orange smile on its face. The green bot was wearing red shorts and a white t-shirt with a gear image on the front, while the other wore nothing.

They didn't look too scary, so I walked over and gave them a gentle wave as I approached, drawing their attention.

“Hey, is it okay if I bother you two for a moment?”

“Yeah, what's up?” the bot with the gear shirt answered in a gravelly but ladylike voice.

“Is it normally this empty here?”

“No, it's usually packed, but the big race was today! So everyone was out skating and running around. But... I heard something rough happened up top where everyone finished, though...” she explained, pointing to the top of the tower.

“I'd been waiting for that race for oh-so-long,” the other bot added, speaking with a very vibrant tone.

Big race? Interesting. “Something bad happened up there..?” I asked, hoping for a better explanation about the “something rough.”

“Pretty sure. I heard Lavil shouting some obscenities pretty loud up there! I don't know what happened though,” Ms. Green Bot explained.

Lavil is here, then. We had something going for us.

“All right. Thanks,” I concluded, repeating my wave gesture from before.

“Good luck!” the smiling bot then turned to his friend and left me to my own business.

With all the recent events going on lately, I couldn't help but fear the worst.

It would be prudent of me to catch up with Shock before she ascended all the way to the top, but there was one more area that caught my eye – a small, open room branching off from the main park area, maybe a few dozen feet away, significantly darker than the rest of the tower. Curiosity getting the better of me, I started towards it to take a peek before meeting back up with my pal.

Slowly peering inside, it was illuminated only by a lone computer terminal, standing up at about eye level. A really old-school terminal, at that. The room was otherwise empty, only big enough to fit a few people at most.

*Well, assuming Grilith is a public area, I don't suppose it would hurt if I took a quick look at it,* I figured, positioning myself in front of the big monitor. There was a big button on the left side of the screen reading “view logs,” but that seemed to be it. Seeing no other way to interact with the terminal, I gently touched the button with my finger.

Huh. A bunch of odd dialogue popped up on the screen, separated by different colours and symbols to denote different speakers. Whatever it was made zero sense to me. Part of a story, maybe? Or a chat log?

Oh well. Time to go chase Shock. I ran back to the bottom of the stairwell at a brisk pace and started hopping up two stairs at a time. Due to her leg, Shock wasn't that far up yet. “Hey,” I shouted, grabbing her attention. Once I hopped up a few more steps and caught up to her, I quickly went over what I heard from the robots down below.

“Something bad happened? But you don't know what?” she turned to me and asked, suddenly looking more fearful than upset. She stopped walking for a moment and let out a really deep, exasperated sigh. “If the last week of my life has been any indicator of what it is...” she



began, ending her sentence with a bit of a sarcastic inflection.

I had a slight feeling I knew what she was suspecting. I nodded and kept walking up the stairs at her pace. She soon followed.

Looking to our left where the railing at our side and the roof over the staircase opened up into a long window, we were about four storeys above the ground floor. Up this high, some platforms near the edge of the tower held a couple of small rooms that looked like they might've been homes of some sort? Or... maybe shops? I couldn't tell from this distance, but there was definitely more activity in here than what could be seen from the ground floor.

The closer we got to the top, the more anxious I started feeling. Lavi was the #1 robot on the skill chart – meeting someone like that in person is pretty intimidating. And what if he was in a bad mood? If something terrible had actually happened up there like that other robot said, he probably wouldn't be in the mood to talk to a couple of strangers.

I quickly reminded myself of the importance of our mission. Trivo was in danger, and she needed Lavi's help. I really needed to stop second-guessing myself. *Lights, camera, action, lights, camera, action*, I chanted in my head.

I took another peek past the stairway railing. If I ever had a fear of heights, it'd already been cured by that break-in at my home; that being said, we were still dauntingly high up.

“Ah, for shit's sake... fuck!” an unidentified voice echoed from somewhere. Shock and I both looked at each other for a moment.

“Did that come from the top?” Shock asked.

I shrugged. “Only one way to find out, I suppose.”

The remainder of our trek was apprehensive and silent, save for the *cling-clang* of our footsteps. I couldn't help but glance out past the railing every minute or so, watching the ground floor get farther and farther away. We were surely higher up than the drop from my tower to the desert floor at this point.

As we got closer to the top, more clamouring and activity could be heard, and I could vaguely make out some words and phrases.

“Him again-”

“What are we going to-”

“Viniko-”

“Who would-”

“-Did three win?”

Not much of it made sense. I hastened my pace just a bit, encouraging Shock to do the same. As we neared the top of the tower, the stairs became shorter and shorter until the window above the railing to my left was blocked off by the ceiling.

Seconds later, the ceiling above us opened up, and the sky was now shining down on the walkway. We'd reached the summit of Grilith.

The moment we set foot on the roof, my senses were totally overwhelmed. There was a *lot* to take in. Several robots, all of different builds and heights, were grouped up over on the opposite end of the roof, chatting quite loudly among themselves. Above them, a gigantic floating, grey cross with a blue outline of a half-opened eye on the front ominously hovered around, looking down at us. The rest of the roof was flat, except for a couple of rectangular rooms jutting out in seemingly random spots.

I was speechless. I'd never seen anything like that huge cross thing before. All I could think to do was stare.

“No- HEY! Everybody chill out for a sec! Who is that? Who are they?” Someone from the group screeched. “You two,” a short, light blue humanoid robot skated out from the crowd, pointing at us, “what are you doin'? What you doin' here?” he gruffly belted out.

“Yo, hold on,” I started, putting my hands in front of me. “We're just looking for Lavil-”

“We're peaceful, we're peaceful,” Shock interrupted me.

“Ya? Which one? Which Lavil?” The blue bot continued, speaking incredibly fast, still skating closer to us.

“Shit, uh...” I turned to Shock. “Which one? Lavil... II? That was the one on the skill chart, right? Was it II?”

“S-sure,” she answered, nodding. “We're looking for Lavil II.”

“Yeah, okay, speak up then, what do you want?”

Was... was this Laval II? “Uh, it's long, do you want the long or the sho-”

“Go! Talk, dude!” Laval barked.

“Okay! We were called to a place in Zynima City by a robot named Trivo, and, well, long story short, she got kidnapped, and we-”

Laval held out a hand made of several floating segments to my face. “For ffffffffuck's sake! Damn it! Damn it!” he screamed, attracting the attention of some of the robots behind him in the crowd. “Not again...!”

“Do you know Trivo? Can you help us, Laval?” Shock asked with a powerful sense of urgency.

“Yeah, I fuckin' know her.” He turned to the crowd. “You all listen to Laval III and CITE while I'm gone! CITE, watch the corpse, don't let ANYONE fuck around up here! And you, III, same thing!”

“Don't need to tell me! Damn, kid!” A voice almost identical to Laval II's bleated from the crowd.

“Y-y-y-y-yes!” A synthesized, chirpy voice replied from... somewhere. The huge cross floating above the group quickly disassembled into countless smaller cubes and flew off to somewhere out of eyesight.

*What... what did I just witness? Wait... did he say corpse?! I looked at Shock. She was staring at Laval, eyes wide, mouth open. Yeah, me too, pal.*

Lavil ignored her aghast expression. “You two, come with me. Now! We don't have time to fuck around.” Lavil skated away to one of the rectangular rooms, beckoning us with a hand gesture as he moved.

Shock shrugged and put her arms up in the air, looking as confused as ever.

I leaned close to Shock and lowered my voice. “I really don't know what's going on here either, but we better go with Lavil for now, right? Trivo said so.”

Seeing the sudden doubt on Shock's face as I said the name Trivo, for a brief moment, I wondered if this whole thing was a setup of some sort. As far as I was concerned, we'd come too far to not see this through.

We headed over to the room Lavil called us to.

## 8 – We Need to Talk

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Apprehensively, I walked in first with Shock just behind me. The sudden transition from the bright outdoors to a dark, barely illuminated room was a bit jarring. Lavil turned on a light in the shape of a cluster of violet and cyan crystals on the ceiling, brightening the place up with a colourful variety of lights.

“Shut that,” Lavil commanded. “Button by the door.”

Shock looked over to the doorway and pressed the only visible button, slamming down the heavy door with a startling *thud*.

I took a brief moment to look around the room. The juxtaposition between here and the rest of Grilith was immediately obvious. It was pretty cramped, but had just enough room for the three of us to move around comfortably. Lots of bright trinkets and packets lined the dark grey walls, two brown, ornamental chairs sat on opposite ends of a matching table that was covered by a colourful assortment of gems and crystals, and-

A missile launcher. Plain as day, there was some sort of black and grey rocket launcher leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. It looked like it'd been very well-used with all the wear and tear on its exterior.

The atmosphere became palpably tense. It felt as if we were meeting the head honcho of a gang, and one wrong move would spell the end for us.

“Feel free to fight over the other seat,” Laval suggested as he sat down at the left end of the table.

With Shock's injury in mind, I shakily gestured for her to sit down, and she did without a word. I stood just to her left, leaning against an open spot on the wall. I was about to glance back over to Laval, but found myself looking at the heavy weaponry in the corner again.

Either Shock hadn't noticed it, or she was much more skilled at keeping a cool face than I'd ever imagined.

Laval pointed a finger at us. “From the top. The *full* story. I want you to tell me how you met Trivo and what happened to her.”

Shock looked over to me and raised the eyebrows she'd rendered above her eyes. Calming myself as best as I could, I started by first explaining my encounter with Tangent, then the e-mail I received after I returned home, meeting Trivo in the tunnel at Verdin Square, what she told us in the tunnel alcove, the attack, and finally mentioning how she told us to find Laval.

Laval put a hand on his chin and looked down at the table, tapping repeatedly it with a pointy finger. “I have way too much on my plate right now. Now she went and got you two involved.”

There was a long enough pause that I felt comfortable speaking. “I wouldn't say Trivo got us involved, since Tangent was the one who started this, right?”

Lavil let out an empty chuckle. "*Tangent* was the one who started it, huh?" he spoke just barely loud enough for me to hear. "Yeah, okay. You're right, it wasn't Trivo."

"She specifically asked for you, Lavil," Shock began, speaking in her calm and calculated voice. "Can you do anything to help?"

"Fuckin' right I can. I can do anything." Lavil paused again. "What're your names?"

Shock introduced herself first, and I did the same just after her.

"Ah, Aural Automaton, huh?" he blurted out, disregarding Shock's introduction. "That explains a bit." He stood up.

Another pang of distress jolted through me. What *did* that explain?!

Oh no. Lavil turned and started walking over to the corner with the missile launcher.

"Hey, wait, if I did anything, I'm sorry! I don't even know what I did!" I blurted out in fear.

Halfway leaning down to pick up the weapon, Lavil stopped and slowly turned his head to me. "Calm down. If you wronged me, I would've fucked you up already."

Whew. That was relieving... I think. But it didn't make me feel any better watching him pick up the rocket launcher with one hand and rest it against his shoulder, aiming it at the ceiling.

"I'm 99 percent sure I know where Trivo is and what happened to her. But, boy, am I getting tired of doing this." Lavil shook his head.

"Hold on, can I ask you something else?" Shock inquired.



“Yeah, what.”

“Has this happened before?”

“Trivo getting kidnapped? Yeah. I've almost lost track of how many times she's been lifted off to this place.”

“What place?” Shock continued.

Lavil stepped over his seat and took gently skated towards the door. “Guess that depends. How involved do you want to get in this?”

“My friend was attacked by a serial killer who apparently has ties with Trivo. I'd say we're in pretty deep.”

“No, you're not, lol.”

It really threw me off hearing Lavil say “lol” out loud. That was just wrong.

“But,” he continued, “hell, if you want to dive into this mess, be my guest. I know for a fact that this is going to be the point of no return for you two. You can go back to your lives and do whatever you did before this all started and pretend none of this ever happened. Although, I can't guarantee Tangent won't come back.” Lavil looked at the door for a brief moment, then back to us. “Or, I'll rescue Trivo, and we'll give you the full explanation of what's going on here. Then you'll *really* be a target, and you'll be in this for the long haul.”

I said nothing, slowly tilting my head to the ground a bit. How was I supposed to answer that? My immediate reaction was to get out and go back to my old life. But if Tangent could come

back? If I was attacked once, who's to say I'm not still a target?

“Shock, what do you think?” I whispered to her.

She also remained silent, her gaze unmoving from the wall in front of her. The 15 seconds she waited before speaking up felt like several minutes.

“I want to get to the bottom of this.”

Her response shook me a bit. “Are you sure? We'll...” I sighed, unable to straighten out my thoughts.

“I'm not going to let Tangent keep killing people every goddamn day just so I can get to the scene of the murder to find out there's no possible way to fix them. Every single time. I'm done with it. Done,” Shock declared very adamantly.

“Sounds like your friend's not so convinced.”

I shook my head weakly. The silence lasted only for a few seconds.

“These deaths have been eating at me for too long. You can go back if you want, but I'm *going* to figure this out,” Shock declared.

I turned just enough to see the glare on her face after she spoke. This felt unfair.

“Clock's ticking. Make up your mind.”

...No. I couldn't be flaky like this. I needed to make a decision. The realization that I was tired of being a coward hit me with full force. How could I leave my friend to go on such a dangerous mission with a guy who already looked primed to blow someone up? How would I be

able to live with myself if something happened to her?

I took a step away from the wall. "We're doing this together," I announced, brushing aside my fear in the bravest (or dumbest) move I'd ever made.

"Then let's go." Laval slid over to the door and slapped the button to open the entrance-way up.

"Now, hold on," Shock barked. "You better tell us where we're going before you drag us off somewhere we've never seen before."

Laval hit the button again, slamming the door down while propping his missile launcher up on the ground. "It's a small underground facility out in the desert. I don't know what else to tell you. I sure as hell hope you've never been there before. Nobody should even know where it is unless they're ready to make the commitment you two just did."

Oh, that was nice and reassuring.

"...How far out is it?" Shock asked with a bit of hesitation.

"Takes me six minutes to get there. Seven on a bad day. You guys have vehicles?"

We both nodded. Shock hummed in affirmation.

"Good. It'll probably take you 15 minutes on wheels."

Shock grunted. "15 minutes? Then we'll have to ride back here, and then back to Zynima..." She slowly trailed off and became

nearly inaudible. "I don't know if I can handle that much right now."

"What?" Lavil laughed with the clear intent to mock. "You tell me you want in on this and you can't even handle a short ride there and back?"

"Hey!" I wasn't about to let Lavil trash talk my friend. "Shock was smashed by someone while riding out here and her bike landed right on her. Her leg was torn open and she's still battered all over."

"Chill, dude, damn. All you had to do was tell me."

Maybe my voice was a bit more aggressive than I intended it.

"So, what?" Lavil continued. "Is she going to stay behind?"

"Do you plan on coming back to the tower after getting Trivo back?" Shock crossed her arms. "Will you need my help for this?"

Lavil laughed some more. "Don't insult me. I could do this with a hand tied behind my back. And yeah, I'm coming back here with her."

"Then I'm sitting this rescue out. I need to rest for a bit."

"Suit yourself. Not in here. Anywhere else in Grilith, ya, I don't care, but not in here."

Shock shrugged. "Fine."

Lavil was about to hit the door button again, but did a double-take at Shock. He pointed at her hat. "...You a techy?"

"Chief Medical Officer."

“Sick. Maybe go look at that corpse while we're gone, then.”

Shit. I knew I'd heard “corpse” earlier. My spirits sank a bit.

Shock sighed. And then she waited. “*Fine.*”

“Someone died? Wh-who was it?” I mumbled, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Viniko,” Laval answered without a moment of hesitation.

“Oh no...” I wasn't sure if I'd heard the name before. I peered over at Shock. She looked quite visibly dizzy.

“Viniko.” Shock's head drooped down and she put a hand on her forehead. “I can't take any more of this.”

“Did... did you know...?” I was almost too scared to ask.

“Viniko's a musician. He's number three on Zynima's sound chart. I listen to him all the time.” Shock took a quick, deep breath. “Let me go see him. If there's a chance... maybe there's a chance this time...” she continued as she marched over to the door.

“Yeah, go, be my guest.” Laval hit the door button again, and Shock ran outside with Laval quickly accelerating past her. I followed behind them both as close as I could. Damn, that guy was fast.

“Yo, III! CITE!” Laval screamed over to the crowd. “Let miss techy have a look at the body! She knows what she's doing!”

“T-t-techy! M-medical techy on the c-c-c-corpse!” the jittery, unidentified voice from earlier rang out from all around me. That was weirding me out.

Lavil stopped skating for a moment, so I took the opportunity to catch up to him.

“Lavil! What is that voice? The stuttery one?”

He turned to me. Another laugh from him. “Hey CITE! Come on out for a second!” he shouted out to the air.

A black swarm of particles crept up from the edges of the tower, ascending into the sky above us, creating a thick canopy of eerie darkness. The top of Grilith had suddenly become nearly pitch black – except for the shining lights of some robots' bodies and eyes – despite the shining daylight illuminating the roof seconds ago.

“What is that?!” I screamed.

“Chill.” Lavil lightly backhanded my shoulder without a hint of panic.

“Not CITE! Not CITE, SCAN!” a huge voice bellowed from all around us.

I looked all around, trying to figure out where this voice was coming from. It was everywhere. This made no sense.

Light started creeping in from the edges of the roof. Slowly, the black mass of particles converged into a massive conglomeration of darkness above us, temporarily blinding me with the sudden transition back to daylight. I watched, completely mesmerized, as the huge glob of

blackness in the air slowly shaped itself into the enormous floating cross I'd seen when I first arrived on the roof. This time, however, the half-shut blue eye on the front had been replaced by the red outline of a wide-open eye.

“Lavil! SCAN is here, :)” the big voice continued. A little red smiley face appeared below the floating cross's eye; I could only assume that voice was coming from the cross.

“Sup. Let the techy see the body.” Lavil pointed to Shock, who had just about blended in to the crowd by now.

“Techy will see the body! >:)” The smiley turned into a mischievous face. Despite how astounded I was by what I'd just watched, those little faces it made still struck me as pretty cute.

Lavil turned to me. “What you're looking at is a nanomachine hivemind with a split personality. It's cool with us, so don't freak your metal tush out, ya?” He spun around and pointed a hand at the airborne cross. “Its name seems to be CITE+SCAN. CITE being one personality, SCAN being another. This is SCAN.”

“H-hey, SCAN,” I awkwardly greeted it, still feeling a bit intimidated by its sheer size.

“Hello! :)”

“I'm Aural Automaton.”

“Aural Autooo! :o”

“That thing is the leader of Zynima's sight chart. Number one,” Lavil explained.

“Wow. Lot of famous people hang out here, huh...”

“Not famous. *Talented*. There's a difference,” Laval corrected me rather condescendingly. “Probably not for much longer, since Viniko was murdered...”

“You can't be serious. A murder...?”

“He sure as hell didn't have an accidental death. He was killed.”

“Y-you didn't...?” I asked, speaking before thinking.

“Fuck no!” Laval put a hand on my chest and forcefully shoved me. “You're actually accusing me of murdering the guy?”

Staggering back, I stood my ground the best I could. “Sorry! Dude, I'm sorry, I just have no idea what happened up here, okay?”

“Ya better be. Shit.”

I guess I deserved that.

He turned away from me and slowly drifted towards the crowd, propping his missile launcher back on his shoulder. “I'm off for a while! III and SCAN are still in charge!”

I was about to follow Laval to the crowd, but the idea of the murderer potentially being over there was a heavy deterrent. So, I waited where I was, pretending there wasn't still a giant nanomechanical eye staring down at me from the sky. Did it want something from me? Was it just... staring? Ignoring it was tough. *Very* tough.

Thankfully, Laval was sliding back over to me, presumably done chatting with the crowd. Shock had already gone and blended in, leaving me with Laval and... SCAN. Still floating there. Still staring.



“You use that thing?” Lavil asked me, breaking me out of my uncomfortable haze.

“Hm?”

“Your guitar.”

“Of course. I'm a musician.”

“Well... no. I mean, can you swing it?”

*O-oh.* “I... yeah, I guess I can...” Still wasn't too fond of the idea.

“Good. You'll be decent in close quarters then, ya?”

I didn't like where he was going with this.

“I mean, I guess, if I had t-”

“Good. Meet you down there at the vehicles.”

Lavil did things too fast. Before I could respond, he skated off towards the edge of the roof in the direction of Zynima City, and then he flipped over the edge.

He... jumped off the roof. With a front-flip. Wow. Well, okay. We had something in common, apparently.

I didn't want to keep him waiting (which I knew was going to happen anyways), but I also wasn't about to repeat the stunt I did back home, so I took off to the staircase that led us up here earlier, and shamefully started hopping down steps two at a time.



If Shock and I had've come here on foot, I undoubtedly would've been exhausted and in need of recharge by now. Much to my delight, the bike ride saved me a ton of energy, so I knew I'd be able to go on Lavil's mission without problems

in that regard. I just hoping I wouldn't have to go up or down these steps again.

The moment I reached the bottom of the stairs, I swung around Grilith's main doorway and scoured the rocky lot for my bike. Naturally, Lavil was waiting not too far away in an open area, raising an arm in the air and tapping his wrist.

“You're gonna have to work on your speed, kid.”

It didn't feel right being called “kid” by someone that much shorter than me. I ignored his remark and kept looking for my bike. Only a few seconds later, my ride was in sight, but I instead jogged over to Lavil.

“So, how will this work?” I asked him.

“What? I skate, you follow. Easy every day.” He picked up his heavy weapon off the ground beside him.

Could he seriously out-skate a dune roller on this terrain? “All right,” I plainly responded, putting faith in his ability. “I'll get started up.”

As I ran over to my bike, Lavil skated past me and started picking up speed before I'd even sat down on my vehicle. He wasn't going to make this easy for me.

## 9 – Reassignment Station

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It was odd not having Shock by my side as I rode through the same dusty desert as before.

Following Lavil was just as challenging as I expected it to be. He didn't need a vehicle; he skated around the sand faster than I could ever go, as if he knew it by nature. Whenever he needed to slow down and wait for me to catch up, he'd whirl around some nearby dunes, performing all sorts of stunts and tricks in the air. Flips, spins, grabs, you name it. Sometimes he'd even toss his missile launcher in the air and catch it after landing. It took a lot of focus to watch where I was going while also making sure I was still following him, and something told me he wouldn't listen if I told him to slow down just a bit.

The shadows on the dunes were growing longer the further I rode. Night was quickly approaching, meaning I'd definitely be missing my performance at the club tonight. It didn't bother me nearly as much as before, though. Rescuing a captive robot was much more important than that. I'd make an announcement about my absence when I had a break from all this action.

Eventually, Lavil did an extra high jump way in front of me, pointing over slightly to my right with both arms extended. Assuming that was where he wanted me to go, I changed my headings just a touch east.

Then, as soon as he landed, he immediately skid to a halt, kicking up a huge

cloud of dust. I slowed down as much as I could, but still ended up driving a wide circle around him as I crawled down to a stop.

“Kill that,” he shouted.

I parked the bike and turned it off. “Why here?” I asked.

“We're going on foot from here on.”

“What? Why?”

“Shit, kid, we'll be seen as soon as we roll up if we don't take it easy from here.”

“Seen? Laval, what kind of place are we dealing with?” I took a long, hard look at his weaponry, still trying to deny the answer I fully expected him to give me.

He sighed. “We're coming up to a spot with a big metal door in the side of a big-ass dune. There's normally a vehicle or two there, two guards lined up outside, three more inside. I'm not so dumb as to throw away my stealth advantage.”

“*Guards?! We're going to be fighting?*”

“No shit.”

I reflected back on the moment I stood up and said “yeah, I'll do it.” Retrospect is 20-20, they say.

“Hope you like explosions,” Laval added.

Couldn't deny it anymore. He laid it out, plain as day. He was going to be blowing people up.

“So.” I suddenly started feeling a bit overwhelmed. “How... do you know all this?”

“Already told you. Done this a hundred times. Same thing every time. C'mon – leave your bike and let's get moving.”

I did as that rude bot told me, quickly figuring out he wasn't going to give me any sort of reassurance or guidance with this. But, if he said he'd done this many times, maybe I could take a back seat.

I could tell it was driving him crazy walking through the sand at my pace rather than getting to where he needed to be in the blink of an eye. I tried not to give his attitude much consideration, knowing I wouldn't get much back. Didn't make him any less unpleasant, though.

“Hot damn, here we go,” Lavil whispered as we reached the top of a dune, immediately dropping prone onto the powdery desert floor. I crouched down rather than opting to get covered in sand again.

Instead of bothering to reply, I waited for him to continue.

Lavil pointed just over the dune; I took a peek over. About a hundred feet away, the place he'd described moments ago was just visible in a fairly wide-open clearing. A huge metal door was lodged in the side of an extra large hill, a black truck the size of a tanker was parked just outside the door, and...

Dark grey plating. LED faces with angry eyes and a little frown. Stationed just beside the door with a weapon in its hands was one of the robots that kidnapped Trivo back in the tunnel at Verdin. Lavil was right. Trivo *must* be here.

At least the mystery of the chunk of metal from the bot in the tunnel was solving itself.

“Lavil, that's one of the bots we encountered near Verdin. One of the bots who kidnapped Trivo,” I explained quietly but with utmost urgency.

“Yeah, I know. It's the same model of robot every time.” Lavil perched his missile launcher near the edge of the dune, pointing it in the direction of the distant structure.

“Y-you're not seriously planning on...” I stammered, even though I knew what was going to do.

“No, I brought this thing for show. What do you think?” His tone was as condescending as ever.

“You're really going to kill that guy.” I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

Lavil aimed his weaponry carefully before slowly turning his head to face me. “No.” Then, with the click of the trigger and a loud *pop-FWOOSH*, a giant glowing projectile flew out the missile launcher, straight towards the bot in the distance.

I couldn't look away. I knew exactly what was about to happen, and as the glow of the rocket shrunk into the distance, it felt like time was slowing to a crawl. Sure, this guy kidnapped someone, but to be killed for it...?

Boom. Without enough time to move away from the incoming projectile, the robot flew apart in a fiery explosion of smoke and metal. It took me a moment to fully process the fact that I just watched a murder.

I *wanted* to say something, but didn't. Laval wouldn't care if I complained.

"Don't look so rattled," he said as if he could read my mind. "They're mass produced."

*Most mass produced robots have limited sentience*, I reminded myself. If we were doing this to save Trivo, and these guys were simply clones of one another...

"Lead the way," I grumbled.

Laval hopped to his feet from the sand. "C'mon. They're going to know we're here. Let's make our move."

So, as he started skating down the peak of the dune, I ran down the sandy hill, growing indifferent to his unmatched pace.

"I only had three shots loaded in this when we left," he shouted back at me. "Better make yourself useful when we get in there."

*Why don't you cool it, you overrated showboat*, I almost said aloud. Damn, did I want to say it. No, instead, I kept silent and just kept running forward.

By the time I reached the structure, Laval had skated behind the big truck, and-

Another explosion, much louder and closer than before. Huge chunks of debris and flames flew up in the air from the other side of the truck, leaving me to assume what Laval had just done. I watched the air for a moment, ensuring no meteorites were about to crash down on me.

While it wasn't much compared to Laval's loadout, I swung my guitar bag off my shoulder

and grabbed its neck, once again wincing at how this was my only real weapon.

*I'll get a new guitar after all this is over*, I resolved.

I walked around the truck to see Laval standing beside the big door in the sand, with smouldering pieces of what used to be one of our adversaries strewn behind him.

“You wanna take point in here?” Laval asked, without a hint of sarcasm.

“No?” I answered, loading my reply with as much condescension as he did earlier.

“You'll probably have to if I have to use my last rocket.”

“Haven't you done this a hundred times? How come you need me to do anything at all?”

“Don't sweat the small stuff, okay? Get in here while we still have the upper hand.” Laval tapped his fingers on a panel just on the left side of the door, and the huge gate slowly opened up, revealing a thick, dark fog. I couldn't see anything inside there.

Just as I was beginning to doubt my only ally, we were about to enter some dungeon in the middle of nowhere. Good.

“I don't want to spend long in here. We go in, get Trivo, get out.”

“Yeah, no argument there.” Against any scrap of good judgment I had left in me, I walked into through the doorway into the overwhelming cloud of darkness, Laval just in front of me.

As my optics slowly grew accustomed to the low light, I got a better idea of where we were.



We found ourselves in a somewhat long, effectively empty room (save for a locker on the far end of the room and some bits and pieces of metal here and there), covered in rust and a powerful aura of decay. There was certainly a lot of activity here, but it looked like it hadn't been touched in years.

*Clang, clang.* Loud metal footsteps echoed somewhere inside the facility.

Looking forward, I could see a small spiral staircase heading down at the end of the room, just behind a small archway. It looked like the only way someone could be coming from.

I bolted over to the side of the doorway right before the stairs, ready to ambush whoever it might be. To my surprise, Lavil followed my lead for once, apparently agreeing with my plan.

The sounds were coming from the stairs. I steeled myself, ready in a position to swing my guitar.

*Clang, clang.* Louder and closer.

Something walked through the doorway between me and Lavil.

*Mass produced,* I reminded myself. I swung down with all I had.

Shards of debris hit me in the face as the guitar hit the dark figure's head, quickly followed by a deafening *CRACK* of electricity. Blue light flashed throughout the room, throwing me off guard split second.

The robot staggered back through the doorway as we both recoiled from the impact. I

caught a glimpse of who I just hit – it *was* one of those kidnappers.

I turned the corner. The bot tripped backwards down the stairs, bouncing down the flight with harsh metallic impacts every step it fell.

Lavil was just behind me. I rapidly glanced back at him and back to the stairs, rendering “!?!?” on my visor beside my face.

“Go!” he yelled. “Finish the job!”

I hopped down the spiral staircase, using the inner railing to help me spin downwards. The machine was crumpled up on the floor at the base of the stairs, trying to stand up.

With an unexpected thrill of exacting revenge, I shoved the bot back down with a thrust of my foot, lining it up for one more blow.

I swung down at the robot's head even harder than before, a wretched *crunch* piercing the air as I smashed its visor in.

It stopped moving. Sparks flew from its face and light blue fluid started leaking from its neck.

The feeling of “*that's what you get for electrocuting me yesterday!*” was almost instantly replaced by “*what have I just done...?*”

Lavil was following close behind me, with his pointed feet making little *tap tap* noises on the stairs. He looked at the robot I'd just... *killed...* and followed up with “messy, but not bad.”

“Just go,” I barked at him, pointing down the hall we found ourselves at the end of after descending the stairs. “You take point.”

Lavil shrugged. “Fine.”

*Mass produced. Mass produced. Not real people.*

I looked around our new location. On the right of the hall was another of the lockers I saw on the floor above, and a long window revealing a slow moving conveyor belt loaded with crates of some sort. Looking to the left, there was a bright doorway with dark alcoves on each side, and at the end was a closed double-door.

I didn't hear any other bots aside from Lavil, so I walked up to the illuminated archway on the left and peered inside.

It was a cramped room without anything too noteworthy. A desk and set of chairs filled the left side, while a big computer terminal and keyboard covered most of the wall in front of me.

No sign of Trivo. I walked back out to the hall.

“This elevator leads to the lowest floor,” Lavil spoke up as I approached him. He tapped the door at the end of the hallway with a knuckle. “When the door opens on the next floor, we're going to be wide open and vulnerable to anyone in the next room, and if history has taught me anything, there will always be three of those brutes stationed inside this complex. So, listen.” He paused to prop his firearm on his shoulder. “I'm going to be ready to fire my last rocket as soon as the door opens. Assuming there will be

two of them in plain sight, I'm going to shoot as soon as I can. If I don't fuck up – which I *won't* – I'll hit one of them, then you go in there all rockstar and do what you just did to the last bot. Got it?"

"There's a lot of "what if" in this plan."

"So, what are you going to say to me when this is exactly what happens?"

"Doesn't change the fact that I have no way of knowing how reliable you are!"

"Well you're about to find out, kid."

"Stop calling me kid."

"Really? We don't have time for you to start bitching about pointless shit. Calm down and hurry up," he retorted as he pressed the button to call the elevator.

Good thing he looked away. The glare I gave him could kill, and I probably wouldn't have had any qualms doing so right then. So, of course, I was really looking forward to waiting in a cramped room with him.

I walked inside the elevator just behind Laval. He pressed one of the two buttons on the wall to bring us down a floor. Moments later, the door closed behind us, and we started descending as the floor gently moved beneath us.

Elevator music probably would have made the ride *less* awkward than it was without. We both sat there in silence, until Laval crouched down a few seconds later, aiming the rocket launcher at the door.

"Stand back and brace yourself," he warned me.

Yeah, okay. I scooted over to the back corner of the elevator.

It was then that I realized I wasn't scared of the encounter about to happen when the door opened. Was it anger? The idea of righteous vengeance for their attack on us the day prior? Perhaps the realization that these guys are much more fragile than they look?

The floor bumped to a halt. I readied myself to enact Lavi's plan.

*Ding.* The door slid open.

The two robots we expected to see were right in front of the elevator door, staring right at us.

*BANG.* The blinding blue electricity from before crackled before me twice in rapid succession.

...But I could still see and move.

They must've attacked Lavi. He'd fallen backwards, his weapon on the floor.

With the plan ruined and fear suddenly rushing through me, I acted on instinct. While the two bots recovered from their attack, I ran forward and thrust the head of my guitar forward at the robot on the left, shoving him back and giving me enough space to jump into the more spacious room.

I was knocked forward immediately. Something powerful smashed into my back. I fell to the ground just beside the bot I'd hit, my guitar sliding forward just out of my reach.

Another violent impact on my back, stomping me into the floor.

*I'm dead, I told myself. At least I can't feel pain.*

“You're that bot from Verdin. Trivo's so-called friend,” the overly synthesized voice grumbled.

“What did you do to her?” I shrieked, the floor muffling several of my speakers.

“Trivo is not your concern. You're disrupting affairs you know nothing about.” A pause. “She's the key to purity, and we're not giving her up.”

“K-key to purity?” I couldn't think of anything else to say. “I'm sorry! I don't know what this means!”

“You won't need to know.”

The distinct sound of electricity rapidly sparking from something above me was all suddenly I could hear.

*Pop-FWOOSH.*

I knew that sound.

A fiery explosion engulfed the room. I faced the floor and covered my head, unable to do much else from my prone position. Debris of some sort pelted me all over, but the piercing weight on my back had been lifted.

As the air quickly cooled down, I looked up just enough to see in front of me. Pieces of those bots were scattered everywhere, and the floors and walls (including my guitar bag!!) looked like they'd been scorched black.

“Holy *fuck!*” Lavil's unmistakable voice shouted out. Then a loud slam and crunch of metal.

I scrambled to my feet and turned around, pieces of metal falling off me left and right. Lavil had just slammed his rocket launcher down onto the most intact of the two bots we just faced – the one I'd hit. The other was in countless pieces.

I stared at him with a face that screamed “what the hell just happened?” And then I actually did say, “exactly as planned, huh?!”

“Eh. Little rougher than normal, but still got it done.”

“Th... how? They roasted you!”

“You underestimate me.” Lavil struck a gaudy pose. “I'm the fastest robot on the planet. Soon as I saw them ready for us, I put my gun up in front of me. Blocked their zaps nicely, but still sent me flying.”

I wanted to be mad at him for nearly killing me with his last rocket, but I had to be reasonable. He *did* just save my life.

“Boy, look at you,” he remarked, examining my body.

I looked down at myself. I was more battered than I'd ever been before. Chips in my build, scratches, scuffed paint, even a couple dents...

Lavil burst out in laughter. “No way. Holy shit,” he snickered, looking just behind me. Then he skated right behind me.

“What?” I turned around to see what was so funny, but he told me to turn back around.

“You are covered in blast marks. Grey and black all over. That's amazing,” he explained, wiping my back with a few fingers.

I turned to face him. "So, where's Trivo?" I asked rather bluntly, hoping to get out of here soon. All I could see in this room was a lonely metal table sitting in the centre, a set of various tools on the far wall, and a shattered computer monitor covering the right wall.

"She's behind this door!" Laval called out, pointing to a small door on the left wall.

"Laval?" I heard a quiet voice, presumably coming from behind that door. "Laval!"

"Trivo! I'm here," he shouted.

Laval skated over to the door and opened it. My spirits lifted, I eagerly ran behind him, peeking over his shoulder.

In what looked like a cramped and dimly-lit storage room, Trivo was sitting on the floor against a pile of boxes, unharmed.

"Laval! And... and Aural, too! Y-you both made it," she squeaked.

Laval held out his segmented hand and offered it to Trivo. With his help, she stood up. In a show of affection I didn't think Laval was capable of, they both hugged.

"Please get me out of here. Please," Trivo pleaded.

"We're gonna bring you back to safety. It's all right."



## 10 – Revelations

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We carefully escorted Trivo back through the building, from the tiny elevator, to the spiral staircase, and finally out the huge front door. In the short time we'd spent in that eerie facility, the sun had set, coating the outdoors in a blanket of twilight.

“Should we be expecting reinforcements?” I asked Lavil.

“Nope. Nobody else ever comes.”

Lavil hummed as we stepped onto the gravel outside the big door, slowly but surely heading back to where I'd parked. “There's only one bike,” he reminded us. “I don't need to use it, but what about you two?”

“I've never driven anything like that before,” Trivo said. “I don't think I can.”

“Is there enough space on the back of my bike for her to ride with me?” I wondered.

“We'll see, I guess.” Lavil replied.

“...Oh! Okay.” Trivo sounded enthusiastic, if not a bit sheepish.

It was the first time I'd seen Lavil move at our pace without any blatant signs of malcontent. I shouldn't have been so surprised since we'd found Trivo, but, beforehand, I wasn't sure if he was even able to show decency.

“I'm sorry, Aural...” Trivo muttered, walking beside me up some nondescript dune.

“Hey, it's okay. You didn't do anything wrong.” Poor thing. I assumed she was talking about dragging me into this whole situation.

“I... mmm,” she mumbled, looking away a bit.

As much as I wanted to grill them both for some explanations, I'm sure we'd get them when we all got back to Grilith. There's no way Shock would walk away from this without some answers, either. I knew that much.

After another minute or so of arduous trekking, we spotted my bike sitting just where I'd left it.

“I'll travel behind you two,” Laval announced.

“Almost a bit uncharacteristic for you, isn't it?” I remarked.

“I ain't letting Trivo out of my sight again, kid.”

Ooh. I couldn't wait to hang out with Shock again instead of this guy. Not wanting to spark another argument about him calling me kid, I said nothing.

Laval stood a few feet away looking over a sandy hill while Trivo and I awkwardly looked over my bike.

“So, uh,” I began, putting a foot over the bike and sitting down. “Is there enough room for you on the back, here?” I scooted forward in my seat as far as I could.

She hummed, looking around the bike, leaning side to side. “Well... maybe!” She followed my motions, carefully propping herself onto the seat right against my back. “U-um... what should I hold onto? I might fall.”

“Maybe my shoulders? Or lower body?”  
I was starting to realize why she sounded uncomfortable.

She put her hands on my shoulders, but then let go and wrapped her arms around my abdomen instead. “Okay, this could work, maybe.”

Although, I had to admit, it was kinda nice having a cute bot like her pseudo-hugging me.

I turned the key in the ignition and the bike started up with a bit of a chug, its lights automatically beaming in front of me. Trivo's grip tightened for a moment as we got adjusted to the running engine.

“Ready?” I shouted back to her.

“I... I think so!”

I revved the bike. Lavil peered over at me; in response, I pointed at Grilith and revved once again. He started skating and collecting up speed, so I gently accelerated and adjusted my headings to Grilith Tower.



It was far windier than I expected during the ride. I figured the wind rushing by me while riding on a dune roller would trivialize any gusts around at the time, but these were particularly strong and loud winds.

Just when I could see the other vehicles parked in front of Grilith in the distance, my bike wobbled from a sudden squall, almost causing me to lose balance. Trivo tightened her grip again as a flurry of sand brushed over us.

Oh dear. That wasn't good.

“Sandstorm!” I bellowed, as if they couldn't already tell what was happening.

Throw caution to the wind and speed up, or take it slower and ride carefully? I didn't know. But we were close, and it didn't seem too harsh so far... so I opted for the former.

“Hang on!” I yelled to Trivo while crouching down and putting more pressure on the gas pedal. The ride instantly went from a smooth cruise to a bumpy race against time. The bike's headlight was powerful, but the sand flying around in front of us made it difficult to see, leaving us at the mercy of the dunes and bumps I couldn't see coming.

I could still barely make out the parking lot up ahead. As we approached it, I gently let off the gas and turned to the right-

The bike lost traction and slid to the right. I tried to correct it by turning left, but the storm had other plans. We toppled down, sliding several feet forward before coming to a halt in the silty sand.

“Shit! Trivo!” I called out, scrambling to my feet. She'd let go of me when we wiped out.

“Aural!” Trivo was lying on the sand, not far away. I bent down and lent her a hand, helping her to her feet. My bike seemed to have shut off on its own. Screw parking. It could wait.

The wind had turned ferocious in a matter of seconds. Holding Trivo's hand tightly, we ran over to the parking lot, ducking between some of the larger vehicles as we went.

“Get in! Quick!” Lavi's voice, unmistakably. I caught a glimpse of him near the door to Grilith.

We darted past him and ran inside. He followed right behind us.

I took a moment to regain my bearings in the shelter of the tower. “Will we ever catch a fuckin' break?!” I screeched.

“Aural! Hey, take it easy.” Just to my right was Shock, sitting on the bottom of the stairs. “Glad you made it.”

“Shock! Yeah, hey! And look, it's Trivo!” I was so happy to see her, I had a hard time finding the right words to say.

“There she is,” in a slightly less optimistic voice.

Ah, right. I forgot Shock didn't like her too much.

Trivo danced around for a brief moment, shaking the sand off her. I did the same; my joints must've been covered in it.

“Two! Aural Autooo!” That was definitely the voice of SCAN. I had no idea where it was, though. I looked up and around-

Ah. It was floating above me in its huge cross shape from before, just above the doorway.

“Hey there,” I stiffly greeted SCAN, still unsure how I should be talking to it.

“Hello Auto! >:)”

At least the faces it made helped decipher how it was feeling.

Aside from the vaguely ominous face-making thing floating in the air, it was odd seeing

only us on the ground floor, especially with the crowd up on the roof earlier. Maybe it wasn't too strange, though – there *were* a lot of rooms and alcoves on the many floors this tower had. Plus, waiting around in front of a windy doorway that was kicking a bunch of sand inside wasn't the most appealing idea.

“Hey, Shock.” I turned my attention to her and walked over to where she was sitting.

“Hey,” she replied.

There wasn't any easy way to say it. “Did you... check out Viniko?”

Her face sunk. “Yeah.” She sighed. “Same wounds as every other time. Tangent.”

“Damn, man. Is nobody safe?”

“No. At this rate, it's pretty clear no one is.”

I almost felt a bit dizzy hearing that.

“Trivo,” Laval called with little emotion. I turned to see what they were up to.

“Yes?” she answered.

“Memory check.”

“R-right.”

“1-3-6-4.”

“5-8-1-5.”

“Thank fuck. You really are okay.”

... *What was that about?*

“So, look...” Shock butted in. “Now that we're here, all together... can we clear the air? What is going on with all this shit we got ourselves into? Tangent? Trivo's kidnapping? You have our full attention.”

Trivo tilted her head down. “Um, it's a long story. Maybe Lavil might be able to tell it better.”

On cue, Lavil started talking. “We're both in the same situation. Let me lay this out clear for the both of you, to begin – Trivo hasn't harmed a single soul, and I doubt she ever could or would.”

“It's Tangent that's killing people, right?” I asked Lavil.

“Right. Tangent is fucked. He's so elusive that I'm honestly not sure what to do about him. If we could predict where he was going, or lure him out somehow, we might have a shot at getting rid of him. But, as it stands, he's too much for even *me* to handle.”

“So... how come Tangent decided to frame Trivo?” Shock asked with a slight tilt of her head. “Just random?” She squinted.

“No, it wasn't random.” Lavil looked up at the ceiling for a second. “Tangent has... a connection with Trivo.”

“Go on...” Shock growled.

As Lavil paused, I noticed Trivo shudder and turn away from us in my peripheral vision.

Lavil confessed under the pressure. “Tangent was created by Trivo.”

“*Created?!*” Shock and I both exclaimed. “What!” I added.

“She was forced to! She wanted no part in it. I don't know exactly what kind of threats she was under, since we had garbage communication back then.”

“Someone's doing this to you, then? Who forced Trivo to make Tangent?” Shock asked.

Lavil didn't respond.

Shock's face grew even more stern. “Now's not a good time, Lavil. *Answer the question.*”

“I can't say who's doing this. I... really can't.” Lavil actually seemed upset.

More silence lingered between us, though Shock was clearly becoming more and more unimpressed, if that was even possible.

“Listen,” Lavil continued. “Trivo and I have both been told that if we do so much as utter this fucker's name, or even *hint* towards their identity, a localized EMP will detonate inside us, and that will be the end of us. Don't interrupt me, and I'll explain why we give such a dumbass threat any credit.

The person who forced Trivo to build Tangent *is the same person who built me*. We're going to call this person Ups, okay? Obviously, Ups knows my physical design inside and out – probably even better than *I* do. As for Trivo, she wasn't made by Ups, but from what we've been able to figure out, it's very likely Ups wiped Trivo's memory in the past. Everything on her hard drive's sentient partition was erased. Ups would have to have explored inside her to do such a delicate task, which means Ups has had ample opportunity to plant one of these EMPs in both of us.”

“So your creator is threatening Zynima as a whole with the construction of Tangent, and we



have no way of knowing who it is.” Shock glanced over to Trivo, which she, thankfully, didn't notice.

“Thanks, tips. Not like I'm proud of this.”

“If you don't mind me asking something...” I started, taking advantage of the pause in conversation, “what exactly were you with the, uh, memory test with Trivo? Is it because her memory had been wiped before?”

Lavil nodded. “Let me explain this. We have our basic partitions, sentient partitions, and back partitions, yeah? Your basic partition holds your things like motor skills and shit you need to know in order to function. The sentient partition is where everything else is stored. Things we learn, things we remember, everything that makes us who we are. You know all that, I'm sure.

But the back partition is a strange one. It's a very small part of our drives meant for caching bits of our memories in case of a malfunction, like a hard drive wipe. Not everyone has one, and Trivo was lucky enough to have one just functional enough to give us some sort of abstract clue about her past. And let me tell you...”

Lavil stopped for a second to point in the direction we just rode in from. “That was not her first time in that underground facility. Trivo was in that facility a *lot*. As in, *before* these kidnappings started. She never told me what she did, but she told me she hated it. Anytime we had a chance to talk, she came to me shaking with fear, telling me how much she hated that place.

Then, after a while, the fear suddenly stopped. Out of nowhere, Trivo felt nothing when we discussed it. That's when I asked her what she was doing down there, only for her to tell me she had no idea. She couldn't recall any major events from her past. She knew who I was, but she didn't even know her own name until I reminded her. So, she still had her basic and back partitions intact, since she still remembered who I was, and how to move and shit."

Lavil paused and looked over at Trivo. She was facing away from us, her hands over her face.

"So, ya, the memory check was just to see if she got wiped. This guy has been in both our bodies, and he's a right fucker."

"No shit, huh..." Shock rubbed the side of her forehead.

"I just have a couple more questions," I spoke up, ensuring my tone of voice wasn't too pushy or gruff. "What if you, like... wrote this guy's name down on something. The bot manipulating you two. Just didn't speak it."

"Mate," Lavil stared me down. "You tellin' me you'd just casually risk death like that? Hell if I know if he fucked with my eyes or my motherboard or whatever."

I shook my head. "Guess not..."

"I thought you were all about taking risks," Shock criticized.

"I ain't afraid of death!" Lavil bellowed as he stepped towards Shock. "But if I'm gonna die, I'm gonna go out in a blaze of glory, not

fizzling away in some shitty desert because some dicker doesn't want me saying their name. Your main concern should be Tangent, anyways. He's the one fucking *destroying* people, not just some ass who's just making our lives unpleasant.”

More silence. The severity of the situation was really starting to sink in.

“This robot...” Trivo peeped from behind her hands, “he wanted to hurt me. Mentally. He found out that I liked your music, Aural. And...”

I waited for her to finish. So did everyone else.

“He made Tangent come after you! Because of that,” she squeaked.

“Wh...” I knew Tangent was after me, but to hear that I had a hit on me for such a petty reason was petrifying. On the bright side, at least she likes my music. “Just who is this guy...?” I murmured to no one in particular. “So, wait. This robot you two are being controlled by *also* controls Tangent?”

“Yes... but not in the same way,” Trivo replied. “Tangent does whatever he wants. But if the guy controlling him wants him to do something, Tangent will do it.”

“You think there's any way *we* could take control of Tangent?” I asked, turning to Laval.

“You think we'd all be hiding in the desert right now if we could pull something like that off?”

“Guess not,” I mumbled again. “You probably couldn't just, like... kill the guy

controlling you, could you?" I wasn't too proud of the suggestion.

"I wish!" he bleated. "I couldn't touch Ups if I wanted."

I should've guessed it wouldn't be that easy.

"Oh, hey, also... when we were in that place we saved Trivo from, when you got electrocuted and I got pinned down. What was with what that bot said?"

"Huh? I didn't hear any talking between when I got zapped and when I blew those assholes up. My launcher didn't block everything. I still got zapped. Couldn't hear shit for a bit."

"One of them called Trivo "the key to purity." What's up with that?"

Lavil side-eyed me for a few seconds. "What?"

"Yeah."

"I've... never heard anyone refer to Trivo like that before." Lavil's tone dropped from his usual rambunctiousness to a voice of genuine thought and concern. "Those brutes have never had a chance to talk to me in the past, so I never heard that before. But that's... a weird thing to call her. New to me."

"Does Trivo have any abilities we might not know of? Or... something?"

Lavil paused again, his gaze becoming a bit downcast. "I know you want answers. But there are some things better spoken of in privacy. I trust CITE+SCAN, but who knows who else *could* be listening in on us."

Judging by the way he said that, it almost sounded as if he knew someone else was listening. It also sounded as if Trivo *did* have a latent ability of some sort...

“Then what do you suppose we do? You have some kind of place with decent privacy in mind?” Shock asked. Naturally, she didn't look too impressed by this entire scenario. “We got dragged into this for nothing, so you better have an plan to help end this.”

“Oh yeah? This has been my entire life. You tuned in at a good time. But, ya, okay, listen. I *have* been thinking about a place for a while. If we actually wanted to go through with getting rid of Tangent, we're gonna need a base of operations. Somewhere safe we can work from. Somewhere private. Someplace where, yes, I can talk about sensitive info. You dig me?”

“Didn't you just say this person controlling you might've gone into your optics? How's this gonna work if they did?”

“Look, how else are we gonna make this work, bugged or not? Even if that's the case, it's not like Tangent is the one who knows where we are at any given moment. So just listen, okay?”

Shock crossed her arms.

“I know of a place in the city. It's secure and well hidden. Recharge station, computers with net access, a few rooms so you all can have your own space, ample storage. It's the perfect place for setting up in.”

Shock hummed, gesturing with her hand for him to continue.

Lavil shot her a look with all five eyes. “Would it help convince you if I tell you where it is? You were almost there already. The tunnel you guys met Trivo and got cornered in, right? There's a door near the end blocked with a big pile of crap; you'd be hard pressed to move it.”

“Yeah, I remember that very well,” she answered.

I nodded in agreement.

“It's just behind that door. It's got another really obscure entrance on the other end of Verdin Square. That's why I blocked that side off already. So... just throw me a bone on this one. If you don't agree with the only idea I have, then I just don't know how to please you. We won't get anything done otherwise.”

“I've been there before,” Trivo added. “It's safe. I don't think anyone else knows where it is, except for us...”

Shock caved. “Okay, I'll go see it. But we're going as a group.”

“Yes, of course,” Trivo reassured her. “Not right now, though. It would be too dangerous.”

“I think she knows that, Trivo,” Lavil commented.

“R-right.”

“So, we just chill here for the night, then?” I asked.

“Unless you wanna brave a sandstorm at night,” Lavil replied. “Be my guest.”

Unsure of what to do while I waited for the three hours of night to pass, I sat next to

Shock. After a few seconds of mumbling to each other, Laval decided to go hang out closer to the skate-area of the first floor. It didn't take long for him to start skating around, jumping off ramps and performing tricks in the air. Trivo stood where she was, kinda aimlessly standing around.

“You're pretty scuffed up, hey?” Shock tilted her head at me.

“Yeah. I wish I never went on that rescue.” I kept my voice down, since I didn't want Trivo to hear that.

“I never should've relied on that guy to keep you safe.”

“At least we made it out okay. He did actually save my life in there.”

“Your *life*? Just how much trouble did you get yourself into?”

“Well, I was going to get zapped. I don't know if I was going to die or anything, but Laval did save me from that.”

Shock hummed, opening up the satchel sitting beside her. “Something tells me we won't get to recharge until Zynima City. You want a vital packet?” She pulled one of the little red packets out of her bag.

“Boy, do I ever.”

Shock passed me one, then stuck her hand in the satchel and remained still for a moment. “Trivo... vital packet?”

Trivo spun around to face us, beaming at the offer. “Yes! Please!”

## 11 – Base of Operations

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I wasn't a fan of going a full day without any form of recharge.

Our riding arrangement back to Zynima City wasn't too different from when we came back from saving Trivo. Shock and I took our bikes, Lavil took to the desert like a stunt park, still armed with his rocket launcher, and Trivo opted to ride on my vehicle with me, mentioning how the beams on Shock's back would make it too hard for her to hold on properly.

Made sense. I told myself that Trivo just liked me more.

“Lavil!” I called out, looking for him on the other side of Shock.

“Yeah, what?”

“These bikes aren't ours. We have to return them to a rental place on the far side of the city. Let me and Shock lead the way until we get there.”

“If you say so.”

I still wasn't sure how we were going to confront the shopkeeper from Dukes about the damage that hooligan caused. Shock had already started her bike; I figured I'd stop her before we rolled into the building and ask if she had any sort of plan.

Vroom vroom, my bike rumbled to life once again. Shock took the lead this time, taking off just in front of me. I opted to drive a bit more carefully than before, seeing as I had a – presumably – fragile passenger with me. But, the



first stretch of land in front of Grilith was more flat than the opposite end of the city; I didn't have to worry about my speed too much for a while yet.

It wasn't even two minutes into the ride when I noticed something pretty unremarkable off in the distance to the right of my path. Unremarkable as it may have been, it rubbed me the wrong way, as in... I got bad vibes from it, if that makes sense.

Maybe a quarter of a kilometre away, a dark figure stood lone in the middle of nowhere, facing us with a large, square-shaped head. From this distance, I'd assume it was a TV-head (a somewhat rare robot variant that's rather self-explanatory by its name), but I couldn't be completely sure. I couldn't keep my vision focused on it for too long seeing as I was driving a bike at about 100 km/h. A couple peeks here and there was all I could safely manage.

I pointed at the distant figure. Maybe Trivo would be interested in seeing what I kept glancing at. Couldn't tell if she looked or not, but it was worth a shot regardless.

Aside from that eerie feeling I got from our solitary observer, the rest of our drive was uneventful. When the terrain become sloped enough for Laval to get air time, he took every opportunity he could do fly around us and show off some flips and other wild tricks he had up his sleeve.

Honestly, I would've laughed seeing him faceplant in the sand. I secretly wished it would happen just to give him a bit of humility.

Once we made the wide turn around Zynima City, I lowered my speed a little bit – about 85 km/h – somewhat humbled by our incident from yesterday. That said, there were no rascals riding around to bother us today. The only other activity we noticed was a hefty tanker coming off Zynima's main strip (otherwise known as *the road*) into the wide open desert.

We were only a few minutes away from Dukes. The shacks, stands, and junk piles on the outskirts of the city weren't so much a blur this time as just a rapid series of barely decipherable objects. I wondered what I was thinking going as fast as 145 km/h yesterday.



As we started approaching Dukes, I pulled ahead of Shock and held out a hand to encourage her to stop. I carefully coasted to a crawl, and it seemed like Shock got the message – she turned around and slowed down next to me. Lavil was off doing... whatever Lavil does.

I quickly ran a hand across my neck, hoping she'd get the message to kill her bike. I turned mine off, so she followed suit.

“Why are we stopping?” she asked.

“Do you have a plan for talking to that dude about the bike damage?”

Shock placed a hand on her chin and gave me a long, thoughtful hum. “LAVIL!” she

screamed, trying to get the showboat's attention as he flew through the air.

“WHAT?”

“COME HERE.”

“SHIT!”

Trivo and I chuckled.

Once he landed, he skated over beside us.

“You know how to act tough?” Shock began.

“Don't ask me stupid questions, lady,” Laval sarcastically remarked, flaunting his rocket launcher.

“Listen, asshole, this is what's going to happen. We're all going to walk in there together. You're going to act tough. I'm going to be doing the talking.” She turned to Trivo. “You, uh... look as tough as you can. You too, Aural.”

Laval didn't say anything.

“O-okay,” Trivo nervously answered.

My goodness, I doubt Trivo could even hurt a bug.

We started our bikes up one final time, slowly making our way into the open garage doors of Dukes of the Desert.

The moment we shut our ignitions off, a loud clap rang through the garage.

“We-ell! Look who's back!” The jagged-looking shopkeep was there to greet us, off to the side of the room. We swung ourselves off our bikes, but I had to help Trivo off the seat. She seemed extra timid today.

“Yep,” Shock replied without a hint of emotion. She'd told us to let her do the talking, so I kept silent.

“It's been, what, six hours total? We'll call it six,” mister shopkeep continued as he approached the bikes, “That *would* ring you up at 240 bytes, but look at this,” he grumbled. “Look at all the scrapes here! Cosmetics aren't cheap to fix, missy. With the amount of damage you caused, that's going to be-”

“*Actually,*” Shock butted in with a roar, cueing us to look tough, as she instructed. She walked up to the shopkeep. “here's how this is going to work, shark-face. You have two options. So, here's number one: you force us to pay your extortionate prices for this damage, and I'll go public with the footage I recorded of your little pals taking us out.”

Oh lord, she's bluffing.

“That video will spread through ZyNet like a virus and your whole operation here will be revealed for the scam that it is. Or, option two: you drop the debt we owe you and I'll keep this as our little secret. What'll it be, hm?”

I'd probably be shaking with fear if Laval wasn't here. I peered over at him for a second, long enough to see him holding up his rocket launcher very visibly by his side. That's a pretty powerful coercion tool.

The shopkeep's eyes narrowed. “You're a slimy bitch, you know that?”

“You're one to talk,” she growled, leaning even closer to him. “Clock's ticking. Make your decision.”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“Good choice,” she hissed, leaning back a bit. “Let's go,” she instructed us.

Shock led the way back out the garage door we rode in through, and we circled around to reach the main road Dukes is connected to.

“Oh no, ohh,” Trivo warbled once we were surely out of hearing range.

“It's all right, Trivo. He ain't gonna fuck with us. Not with this thing pointed at him,” Lavil assured her, tapping the heavy weapon in his hand.

“I can't believe that worked,” I nervously sighed. “It worked, right?”

“Well, we're not paying for that disaster trip. You tell me,” Shock responded.

“Did you have a backup plan in case that *didn't* work out?”

Shock laughed. “Nope!”

“Oh my god,” I huffed.

“Okay, ladies,” Lavil bellowed, lacking his usual condescension. “Follow closely. Don't draw attention, if you can help it.”

Just like the last time Shock and I walked down this huge road, we had to pass by several groups of machines walking around and socializing, as well as keeping an eye out for any vehicular traffic. Lavil guided us back the way we initially came, through the crowded pathway

between the buildings, eventually towards the clearing where I encountered that news bot.

And after a few more minutes, he took us towards Verdin Square. I was thinking he was going to bring us to some secluded road with a secret hideout in it or something, not to one of the most crowded areas in the city.

“Verdin, huh?” I mumbled.

“Just keep following my lead,” Laval impatiently replied.

Thinking about it a bit more, Verdin did have a few nooks and crannies where people could sneak away for a brief refuge from the public. The rear entrance behind Packet Park where we met Trivo for the first time came to mind.

Laval seemed to be taking us to one of those areas. About half a block away from Packet Park, a side road branched off from the main plaza with a few stores and doorways strewn about the street. The road was short, but near the end on the left side, Laval led us into a dark, narrow alley.

Boy, I sure love dark, narrow alleys. Nothing bad ever happens to us in these.

“No one ever goes through here,” Laval explained. “If they do, they'd just be passing by to another shop.”

Trivo seemed unexpectedly calm, but I remembered her mentioning she'd been here before. She sounded earnest when she spoke to us of this place, so I tried to ease my nerves a bit with that in mind.

Lavil turned a corner and brought us to a hefty door with a keypad lock on it.

“Look away, Trivo,” Lavil instructed.

“Right, sorry.”

Lavil also looked away from the pad and entered four numbers on the little LED screen: 2-2-7-7.

“See that number, you two?” Lavil asked. “Remember it, but do not say it aloud. You should know why we're not looking at it.”

Hmm...?

Oh. It hit me like a brick.

Lavil and Trivo both suspect they've been bugged. Is that why they're avoiding hearing or seeing the code?

Lavil tapped the “enter” key on the pad and we heard a big *clunk* from the door. He pushed it open, revealing a spiral staircase illuminated by turquoise ceiling lights.

“Everyone in.”

Shock, Trivo, and I walked past Lavil, and he closed the door behind us.

“You lock it the same way you unlock it. Same number.” He punched the numbers into a keypad on the inside of the door and we heard the lock engage.

Trivo walked down the stairs ahead of us; Shock and I followed suit as Lavil took up the rear.

“I feel safe here,” Trivo softly spoke as we walked. “Nobody else has ever been here except us two.” I figured she was talking about herself and Lavil.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, maybe one floor down, there it was: a decently sized room with desks and computer monitors on the right side, some hi-tech recharge station in the corner, a few seats arranged opposite of the computers, and a shelf with some daily essentials – packets of all sorts, rags, wax, and various components for tinkering and repairs. On the far end of the room past the computers, a hallway branched off for a handful of feet, but it was completely blocked by huge metal boxes.

“This is it,” Lavil announced, “our safehouse. Like Trivo said, you two are the first people to ever be in here besides us, so don't take that for granted.”

“This is pretty cool,” I commented. “Those computers have a ZyNet connection?”

“Of course they do.”

“Ohh, I like this.”

Shock took a quick walk around. “Well, it's something, I suppose. I think its most valuable asset is its seclusion.” She walked over to the recharge station while Trivo took a seat against the wall near it. “Purity?” Shock asked.

“100%,” Lavil answered.

Shock squinted at him. “...C'mon now. Don't screw with me.”

“100%.”

“Lavil, that's impossible.”

“That's thinking with a closed mind.”

“What are you talking about?!” Shock yapped. “There is no known way in the world to get purity above 99.99%.”



“Keyword: *known*. What if someone figured it out but didn't tell anyone?”

“You can't seriously be telling me that's what's going on here.”

“It's exactly what's going on, Shock. I've only ever used machines of 100% purity. Come with me during a corruption check and I'll prove to you I am 100% squeaky clean and pure.”

Shock started looking perplexed. “How is that possible?”

“Ups made this,” Trivo interrupted. “I don't know how, but...”

Shock's eyes grew wider. “Who exactly is this Ups person?”

“I wish I could tell you without dying.”

Was that... a hint of empathy in Shock's body language?

“Yeah,” Shock responded in a lower voice, “I guess... yeah. This is all just so weird, having the answer to this mystery right at our fingertips like that.”

“Who knows,” Lavil started, staring fiercely into Shock's eyes. “*Maybe we'll figure things out as we go,*” he said particularly slowly.

Shock nodded very subtly.



As safe and comfortable this place was, there wasn't a whole lot to do, it seemed. I could play my guitar, but Trivo seemed hard at work doing something on one of the computers. She was the only one here right now; Shock had gone out to fetch some supplies from home, Lavil went out to... I don't know. I hardly ever know what's

going through his head. So, I probably wouldn't want to bother Trivo. Or... maybe she'd like a distraction? She did mention she likes my music. Bah, but it would still distract her.

I ultimately ended up walking over to her and taking a peek at her screen.

“What's going on over here?” I asked, distracting her anyways.

“Oh! I'm just looking through an ARTIFACTS archive.”

“ARTIFACTS?”

Trivo nodded with an affirmative hum. “It's the name of a big library of miscellaneous data logs from many different times and places on Zynima. Some of them are transcribed voice recordings, some of them are computer chat logs, some of them are more like diary entries.”

“That's kinda neat. Do you ever find anything worth reading on there?” I took a seat on the small, metal chair beside her and peeked at the screen, but couldn't really gather anything interesting from what I was looking at.

“Well... sometimes I find some logs that seem like they could go together. But most of the time they're sorted very haphazardly, so it's hard to tell which ones connect to which, or in what order they're supposed to be.”

“Oh. That's too bad.”

“Plus, it never mentions names, except in a couple of rare cases.” Trivo pointed at the monitor. “See that symbol in the circle there? Different people are denoted by different symbols and colours.”

“That's... rather inconvenient, isn't it?”

“Kind of, yes. That's part of what makes it so challenging to piece together. But! I like to look at it as a big puzzle. And sometimes you find some things that really make you think hard about things. It's pretty fun!”

“I guess that'd help kill time around here, huh? It's something to do, at least.”

“Yes. I don't get to do it very often though, since Lavil usually needs my help with things when we stay here. If we ever stay here for long periods of time, we're usually up to something important. Like... dealing with Tangent, for example.” Her voice lowered a bit.

“Right, that makes sense.” Framed as a serial killer and kidnapped? She's dealing with all this extraordinarily well. Lavil did say she's been through this a lot... maybe she's just used to it. That's a depressing thought.

“So... how did you meet Lavil?” I asked, hoping to spark some sort of conversation to kill time, selfishly continuing to distract her from her reading.

“Ah...” Trivo paused for a few seconds. “It's... kind of a long story. M-maybe I can tell it to you later?”

“Oh, sure. Uh, sorry if that made you uncomfortable.”

“It's okay. I understand how weird this must be for you and your friend. You hardly know anything about us and suddenly you're going to a new place with us only a couple days after meeting... I would be uneasy too.”

I was really glad she understood my thoughts on the situation. Suddenly remembering something from earlier, another question popped into my head.

“Hey, do you make sculptures by any chance?”

“Yes! I'm glad you know,” she beamed. “Well, I don't much anymore, since I'm never... well... *free* long enough to make more. They take a lot of time.”

I hummed understandingly. “I saw your statue of a... what was it, a “pitaya?” A fruit made by humanity, the creators?”

“Oh no, not made by them. It's something they eat.”

“It sounds like you know a lot about them.”

Trivo sat perfectly still for an uncomfortably long period of time after my remark. “I... yes. I did? I know I know about them... but... I don't? Oh, this is not good.”

“Are you okay...?”

“I'm sorry. I've had terrible memory loss issues lately. It feels like I should know this, and I know I used to know this at some point, but...”

Damn. I felt bad for her, knowing what she'd been through.

“They supposedly created us. And... they live on another planet out there in space. That's everything else I can remember about them.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Not a whole lot to go off. Oh well. I spun around in my seat. “That recharge station, is that free for us to use?”

“Yes! You can use it.”

“...Is it really 100% purity?”

Trivo nodded. “I'm not perfectly pure like Lavil is. I had 1% corruption before I was introduced to this, but ever since, my corruption hasn't gone up.”

Compared to Lavil's and Trivo's corruption levels, I felt filthy with my recent 9% result from about a week ago. Nothing to worry about, but...

“That machine would effectively make you immortal if you exclusively used it, wouldn't it.”

“...Y-yes. If you make sure you have regular maintenance and don't do anything silly, you could theoretically live forever without experiencing an impure death.”

An impure death, also known as getting old. As corruption builds in our bodies from recharge stations that aren't 100% pure, we experience worsening symptoms of mental illness until eventually... we can't boot after entering sleep mode. It's supposedly impossible to remove corruption from a machine's body, so... it's game over if you can't boot.

I've got nothing to worry about, though. 9% is barely anything.

“It's been a wild ride so far. I haven't recharged in a whole day; I'm gonna go rest up.”

“Okay! I will continue my reading.”

“You do that!”

## 12 – City Excursion

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**Optics on.**

**Nervous system on.**

**Sound system on.**

**Motor control on.**

**Good morning, world.**

Oh, Shock was just leaving?

“Hey,” I called out to her, noticing her leg was all patched up. “Where you off to?”

“Another Tangent case. Seeing as I know exactly how it's going to turn out, I shouldn't be longer than an hour or so.”

“All right.” How do you send someone off in a situation like that? “Take it easy out there,” was the best I could manage on the spot.

“Mhm.” She stepped around the spiral stairs, out of sight. *Clunk*, the lock of the main door to the hideout disengaged.

“Sorry I'm so la-ate,” Lavil's distinct voice slurred out from the doorway Shock was just leaving through. “Hey, don't go! Aw.”

Sounded like he had a few too many of those purple relaxation packets on the way here.

“I'll be back soon,” Shock dismissed him as the door slid shut.

“But I'm gonna need these, right? Right?” Lavil rambled to himself as he tip-toed down the stairs. “Probably, yeah, I'll need these. Oh shi-”

A bunch of sizable, yellow missiles tumbled down the stairs before Lavil was even in view.

“Noo! Aww, noo. Aw... nooooo.”

He sounded so pathetic and sad; I couldn't hold back laughter. The juxtaposition between regular Lavi and *this* Lavi was too much for me to handle.

“Aww,” he continued whining, raising his arms to his side. “Noo.”

I walked over to help him pick the ammunition up, suppressing more snickers to the best of my ability (not very well).

“No no! Nah, no, c'mon now, I'm good, get outta here, you. Shit. Lemme clean up my own mess, man, shit. I slide around in pitch black and oh, no, but one stair and oh shit! I'm a fuck up.”

I walked away, still laughing. “Pitch black out there, huh?”

“It's the middle of the night, man. You gotta do things sneaky. Tip toe! Shit.”

I'd take goofy Lavi over conceited Lavi any day. But... middle of the night, huh? It must still be the same day as when I went to sleep. This pure power station must really charge us quickly.

“Is Trivo around?” I asked.

“She's sleepin'. Over in there.” He pointed to the hallway, in a room I hadn't noticed earlier. “Ohh, Au-ral Au-to-ma-ton, you should've seen her...!” Lavi's voice suddenly became excited, but quiet. He skated over to me and leaned close to my face, arms full of missiles. “Between us, I saw Trivo sitting next to you for a while as you slept. How cute is that!” Lavi snickered.

“A... wow. I guess she... likes me?”

Lavil burst out laughing. “She loves you, man, shit! Can't you tell, she fucking loves you, oh my god, that's cute. Look at that,” he paused to snicker a bit, “ah, that's cute.”

“Wh... y-yeah! That's cute, sure...” I didn't know how seriously to take him in this state. I stood up and looked around for something I could change the subject with.

“Geez, what a riot.” He skated off to the hall room with his missiles.

I didn't hear much else from Lavil that night. He'd hooked himself up to the pure recharge station in the hall room and gone to sleep shortly after hooting about Trivo's alleged love for me. As much as I enjoyed hearing his inebriated banter, I was hoping we'd be able to get down to business soon.



The lack of entertainment in this place became very apparent as I waited for everyone to either wake up or return home. I found myself absentmindedly plucking away at my guitar, planning out some gentle melodies in my head during my solitude. How long had it been? One or two hours?

Eventually, the lock to the hideout opened. I assumed it was Shock, but I stood at the ready, guitar in hand, just in case.

“Who goes there?” I yapped, somewhat playful in tone.

“That'd be me,” Shock replied, sounding quite weary.



Thought so. “Nice to have you back.” I sat back down, leaning my guitar back against the wall.

She nodded as she walked into the room. “Same case as always,” she sighed, taking a seat next to me. “Someone’s been attacked! Can you help them, Shocky? Sure, I’ll be right there. Oh, no... their drive’s been destroyed by Tangent’s claws! Guess I have to do some data entry now, sorry everyone.” She grumbled quite loudly. “It gets tiring.”

“Ouch. I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault. I’d really like to hurry up and kill this fucker.”

It was one of the first times I’d heard Shock use such drastic language.

“Kill? Not, like... subdue him, or...?”

She slowly turned and locked eyes with me. “I’ll give you a bit of clemency since you haven’t been to each of these murder scenes and seen what this thing can do. Tangent is a soulless murderer. Nothing more. There can’t possibly be any compassion or empathy in that machine, and if there is, I don’t care if it’s destroyed.”

“A-ah. My bad.” I wasn’t aware of how emotionally charged Shock was about this mission. “I figured we might want to, maybe, not outright kill him, but... see if we can get any kind of information from him? Or... well, I don’t know. Just not jumping straight to murder.”

Shock turned away, allowing me some needed relief from her steely gaze. “We’re not

going to accomplish anything by letting Tangent live.”

“Y-yeah. I guess you're right.”

“When you're as old as I am, you'll start seeing things the same way as me. I'm sure of it.”

“Think so? Well... exactly how old are you?” It'd just occurred to me I never knew how old Shock was.

She delayed her response, tilting her head to the ceiling. “Old enough.”

Huh. Well, okay then. With that answer, I opted to drop the subject.

We sat in mutual silence for a while before Shock eventually walked over to one of the computers and started typing away on it. I resumed strumming my guitar when—

“Good morning!” Trivo greeted us as she stepped out of the hallway room.

“Morning, Trivo.” Glad somebody *finally* woke up.

Shock kept furiously tapping the computer's keys for a few moments before finding the time to shoot her a quick “hey.”

“I think Laval is almost done charging,” Trivo seemingly read my mind as she walked beside me and took a seat where Shock had just been. “How are you two doing?”

I looked over to the hallway room. “Not too shabby. Just waiting for everyone to get together so we can discuss our game plan.”

“Been better,” Shock said, typing even faster than before.

I chuckled after hearing Shock's typing increase to a ridiculous speed on the clickity-clackity keyboard. "What the hell *are* you doing?"

"Writing an e-mail back to someone. Work stuff." Her focused expression turned into an all-out death glare. She almost looked like she was about to smash the computer at any moment, but her tone of voice was as calm as ever. "Almost done."

Trivo looked back and forth between me and Shock with concerned eyes. I dismissed her worry with a quick hand wave.

Shock overdramatically threw her hands in the air before bringing one down on the keyboard with a conclusive tap. "Done. I can't wait until I don't have to deal with any more of this Tangent crap."

Neither Trivo nor I moved an inch until Shock barked "what are you looking at?" after noticing our stares. We'd been freed.

I stood up and hopped over to the hallway room, peeking around to find Laval. There he was, sitting on the floor, surrounded by boxes and other recharge stations.

*Get up, you lazy ass.* I wouldn't dare say it, but it was fun to imagine it. My impatience knew very few bounds.

Unexpectedly, he turned his head to me. "Oy, oy," he drawled.

"Ah, morning! You're awake."

"Thanks, tips."

Well, I enjoyed goofy Laval while he lasted. Sounded like he was back to normal.

He unplugged himself from the recharge station and hopped to his feet with one swift motion. "I'll be out there in a sec. Is anyone else around?"

"Yeah, we're all here, all awake."

"Sick. I can't have you all slacking off in here. Gotta get down to it."

"Nice, I'll be waiting." I walked back to my spot in the main room, eagerly awaiting our mission briefing (or, at least I was hoping that's what Lavil was talking about). During my short conversation with Lavil, Trivo and Shock had swapped positions: Trivo was tapping away at one of the computers while Shock looked over the miscellaneous items arranged on the shelves scattered around the room's perimeter.

"...H-hey, you guys, come look," Trivo beckoned us, sitting at the same computer as earlier. "Someone's talking to me...?"

Shock and I walked over to her left side to see what was up; Lavil immediately skated out of the hall room, standing on her right.

"You are the one known as Trivo, correct?"

"Should I answer that? What do I do?" Trivo asked.

"Don't say yes," Lavil ordered. "Your name is still at large, remember? This person probably thinks you're the serial killer."

"Ask who that is, maybe? Turn it around on them," I suggested.

Trivo did that, typing in, "who are you, first?"

Without any delay whatsoever, Trivo got a reply.

“My name is Lacuna. I cannot remain connected to ZyNet for long. Are our transmissions secure?”

Trivo looked back at us. Laval shrugged, and neither Shock nor I knew either.

“What if you said yes?” Laval suggested.

Shock said nothing. She just stared at the screen, wide-eyed.

“How easy is it for someone to eavesdrop on this conversation between Lacuna and Trivo?” I thought aloud.

“Personally, I have no clue how to do something like that. But I guess if you knew what you were doing... bah, I still don't know,” Shock rambled.

Trivo typed, “yes.”

She received a response immediately, once again.

“Please answer me: you are Trivo, correct?”

This didn't sound like someone trying to track her down or expose her. “I get the feeling this person isn't malicious,” I openly voiced my thoughts.

“You're far too trusting,” Shock remarked.

“You said that before.”

“Well, it's true! *That said...* I agree, Aural.”

“Hmm...” Laval quietly interjected, “what harm could be done if you say yes? What's the

worst that could happen? If Lacuna checks to see if their transmissions are secure, first, well..."

"This might be a good lead on Tangent. Who knows," I added.

"Okay, okay," Trivo repeated, quieting us down. She typed, "yes, I am Trivo."

Another instant reply.

"I am located in the derelict MSE vessel in the desert, not far from the city. Once you have arrived, access the main computer terminal immediately. This is of utmost importance. It would be wise to bring an escort, if possible, in case you are followed. Godspeed."

And with that, Lacuna disconnected from the network. We all stared at the screen for a moment before talking.

"So... this Lacuna person wants you to go to the main computer in the MSE ship out in the desert. You specifically, Trivo," Laval recapped. "That's... suspicious."

"This is vaguely similar to when you got that message from Trivo after you were attacked," Shock mentioned.

I nodded in agreement.

"But Lacuna said I should bring an escort," said Trivo. "That's not too suspicious, is it? Lacuna wants to make sure I'm safe."

"Or, it could just be a big trap to fuck us all," Laval retorted.

"Whatever the case may be," I began, "how would Trivo get there? The ship Lacuna's talking about isn't exactly close to the city. Not as

far as Grilith, sure, but..." I started trailing off into my thoughts.

"There's someone I know who would almost definitely give you a ride if I ask her," Lavil told us.

"Yeah? Who's that?" Shock asked. "Don't you dare say Dukes of the Desert."

"Nah. Chill. I'm good pals with a shopkeeper in Verdin Square. Her name is... fuck, man, I don't know how to say it. Zytah? Zeta? Ecksata? Hhhaytah... ecks, ecks..."

"Uhh..." Shock and I felt the same way listening to Lavil try to pronounce this person's name.

"X-A-I-T-A!" he spelled out. "What the fuck kind of name is that? Damn. Anyways! She's got an open booth in one of the buildings that faces the plaza. Maestro Bar, it's called. She mostly sells metal and machinery, but she's also got one huge behemoth of a truck she cruises around the desert in to get her wares. Hate her name but love her to pieces."

"Was that the big vehicle we saw driving out of the city when we were coming here from Grilith?" I asked, recalling our trip back to the city.

Lavil shrugged. "Could've been. That one looked a bit longer than zzz... eh... *Xaita's*." Clearly, he still couldn't figure that name out.

"Okay, well, let's keep that in mind. But what other plan did you gather us here to discuss? You mentioned you wanted to get to it before Trivo was contacted."

“Right.” Lavil held up a finger, posing against the wall. “Long story short, Trivo theorizes that Tangent uses a different grade of processor than all of us have. Us, as in, the general population. If that were true, Tangent would be able to do things much faster than us, whether it's computing, murdering, or being a sneaky little shit, which would explain how he's so fucking elusive.”

“Uh, Trivo built Tangent, right? Wouldn't she know all about Tangent, no theorizing necessary?” Shock butted in.

“Memory wipes,” I whispered to her.

“Ah, damn. Right.”

Lavil started slowly sliding around the room on his skate-feet. “That, and she didn't make the parts to build Tangent with. She was supplied everything by Ups. Neither of us know how to craft anything like that though, and I doubt either of you two would know.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Shock scowled.

“Well? Do you, miss Shock?”

“No! And even if I did, you're doing a great job of convincing me to help you.”

“Stop,” I shouted, stepping forward. “Chill out.”

“Yes, please,” Trivo reaffirmed with audible worry in her voice.

Thank you, Trivo.

“Going along with this theory, what should we do in order to get an upgraded processor to fight Tangent with?” I stated very



clearly and calmly, trying to bring back some semblance of objectivity to our conversation.

“I dunno,” Lavil halfheartedly answered, “ask Xaita. She might know.”

“Well, it's morning right about now, isn't it? It's worth a shot, if we don't have any other leads,” I suggested. “We were gonna go ask her about her truck anyways, right?”

Nobody else seemed to have much input. It was pretty clear none of us really knew what we were doing.

“Is Xaita's shop open this early?” Shock broke the silence.

“Should be. She's open all day.”

Trivo meekly raised her hand. “Well... I'm ready to go whenever you want,” she quietly announced.

“Should you be going out in public if you can help it, though?” Shock asked. “People still think you're a murderer.”

“I'm almost certain most bots don't know what Trivo looks like,” Lavil explained. “And, I was told by one of my pals in Grilith – maybe a year or so ago? – that they suspected Trivo was part of a “series” of robots. If that's true, there could easily be more bots out there that would have the exact same model as her. Though I haven't seen any myself... I still think it'd be okay for her to be out and about.”

“All right, if you say so.” I picked up my guitar bag from the wall and slung it over my shoulder. “Should we head out?”

Trivo and Shock were both standing at the ready.

“I'm gonna stay here this time around,” Lavil declared. “Not my most *favourite* task, but I'm going to see if I can do a bit of research on robot processors, or maybe see if I can verify Trivo's model type. Just to be on the safe side.”

I'd have loved to accuse him of being lazy, but searching for leads through two different mediums would probably be an effective way to carry this out.

We said our farewells to Lavil and walked up the spiral stairs single file, Shock taking the lead, Trivo watching our six.

The hideout's location was incredibly convenient. Verdin Square was no more than a minute away, making our trip wonderfully short.

“It's gonna be nice to get some time away from that whack,” Shock exclaimed as we walked down Verdin's quiet side road, just barely illuminated by the morning light.

“I'm sorry about Lavil,” Trivo suddenly spoke up. “I know he's abrasive... but he means well.”

“No need to apologize,” I reassured her, “it's not your fault.”

She awkwardly hummed in response.

Even if Verdin was normally packed, arriving early gave us the advantage of being some of the first robots to arrive. It was pretty nice not having to swim through crowds hungry for material goods.

Once we entered the main plaza, a building with a sizable open window and Maestro Bar written above it in green letters jumped right out at me, just to the left of our side road. I pointed it out to the others, in the off chance they hadn't noticed it. There wasn't anyone at the window at first, but as we approached it, we noticed a bot shuffling around in the back of the booth.

...

Something didn't feel right.

Out of nowhere, I started feeling painfully apprehensive.

As if something was suppressing my will to speak.

What was this feeling?

...

I waved a hand in front of Shock and Trivo, briefly retracing my steps, hoping they'd get the hint to follow me back the way we came. Trivo followed immediately; Shock waited a moment before coming with me.

The apprehension dissipated as I walked away from Maestro Bar. I stood still for a moment, looking back and forth between Shock and Trivo.

"...Did you feel that?" I sternly asked them both.

"Y-yes," Trivo answered. "That was freaky."

"What? What's going on?" Shock apparently didn't feel the ominous aura.

“You didn't feel it? I... I don't know what that was. When I walked up to the bar, I just felt... really really anxious. Almost as if I was too scared to speak.”

“I couldn't talk. I tried, but the words just... wouldn't form,” Trivo added.

Shock gave us a strange look before taking a few steps back towards Maestro Bar, still keeping an eye on us.

She shrugged. “I don't feel anything.”

Without a word, I cautiously walked up to where Shock was standing, just a handful of steps closer to Maestro.

...

There it was again.

There was absolutely something strange in this area.

The overwhelming apprehension, the inability to produce any audio – it came rushing back to me.

...

I rapidly shook my head at Shock, displaying a pair of round, frightened eyes on my visor. I hopped back to where Trivo was standing.

Just like that, the sensation vanished almost instantly.

“I don't like this. There's something weird going on here.”

## 13 – Mister History

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“Shock... would you be able to... maybe talk to Xaita for us?” Trivo peeped, pressing two of her fingers together. “This isn't just some random bad feeling. There's something over there causing this to happen to us.”

I nodded in agreement. Her idea was sound, and I couldn't think of anything better given the weird circumstances.

“How about I see if Xaita will come out here and talk to us?” Shock suggested.

“What if Xaita is the cause of this...?” I made sure to keep my voice down.

“Well, guess we're going to find out.” With that, Shock walked over to Maestro Bar's front window. Trivo and I remained where we were, anxiously watching Shock with immense focus.

“...Hi, hi. Are you Xaita?” Shock was still in earshot, but we couldn't hear Xaita's voice from our distance. “Fantastic. My name is Shock System. I'm with a couple of other bots who'd like to talk to you, if you're interested in sparing a moment for us... Yeah, they're just right over there. They said they were really apprehensive, so I'm just here to ask on their behalf... We were all sent here by Lavil; do you know him?... You do! Great... Okay.”

Shock gave us a thumbs up as she walked up to one of the doors on the far side of the shop. A few seconds later, a dark green robot with a t-

shirt and shorts walked out, joined Shock, and walked towards us.

“Hey guys, what up?” She abruptly paused, pointing at me. “Hey, you're that robot I talked with in Grilith a couple days ago, aren't you?”

...Oh, wow, she was right. That dark green bot with the gravelly voice and t-shirt with the gear emblem on it – it was her!

“Yo, hi! You're Xaita, if I'm not mistaken?”

“Right are you,” she cheerfully answered.

“Cool! Laval told us to come over to your shop here and see if you might be able to help us with a couple things.” I was so focused on our previous encounter in Grilith that I almost didn't notice there was none of that weird apprehension when Xaita came near. The dread didn't seem to be emanating from her.

“Laval, eh? The new one or the old one?” She looked down and counted on her fingers while speaking.

“Uhh, I'm not sure. Laval II, if that helps?”

“Gotcha. She's the old one. Laval III is the new one.”

Huh? “Wait, hold on a sec – Laval is a she?” Had we been calling Laval the wrong gender this whole time?

“Well...!” Xaita tilted her head a bit, placing a few fingers on her cheek. “The Laval models are kind of androgynous, so I don't think she cares what you call her. But *I* like to call her a

lady. She'd have *definitely* told you by now if she had a problem with it.”

“True enough.” Seeing as we were all used to knowing Lavil as a guy, I figured I'd just stick with that. “So, anyways... can we ask a couple of questions?”

“Sure, but only because you've got the VIP pass a la Lavil II's recommendation. I do owe her.” Xaita crossed her arms, not making it terribly obvious if she was being sarcastic or not.

“Okay! Well, first of all, there's something strange going on around this area. When me and my friend, here...” I gestured to Trivo as I began my explanation, “if we walk too close to your shop, we... we lock up, for lack of a better term. We're both overrun with crippling apprehension and neither of us are able to talk. But my friend, Shock, she's just fine. And... it's not, like, just some random feeling we're getting. There's definitely something over here making us act funny.”

Xaita tilted her head. “Crippling apprehension, eh? That's no good. I'm not accusing you of lying or anything, but I mean, I certainly don't feel it...”

“I don't either,” Shock added. “Is there maybe something in or near your shop emitting this... *aura*?” She shrugged.

“Don't think so.” Xaita sounded skeptical. “You're one of the first to complain about anything like that. Although... I did just get an internal security upgrade yesterday. Maybe that's why I'm unaffected.”

“Security upgrade... what exactly did you get upgraded? If you can't feel it, and you just got a security upgrade, it's not much of a stretch to say that's why you're fine right now.”

“It's an experimental build of a wireless intrusion detection system. Good ol' Mister History hooked me up with it. He told me it had some... new... firewall or something. Honestly, I can't remember exactly what he said!” Xaita giggled, rubbing the back of her head. “I ain't an expert on software myself, but I've known him for a long time. I trust him and his experiments.”

I hadn't heard of the fellow she was talking about. “Sounds like this guy might be on to something, this History guy.”

“He's a good person. He helps manage the data archives of the city's network, and he also teaches bots about the planet's history in his spare time. Hence the name.”

“Do you know where we might be able to find him?” It wouldn't hurt to figure out where we could get in touch with someone like him.

“I'd be happy to tell you, but the only time I've ever see him is when he's teaching his history class or if he has something important to talk to me about. Not the easiest guy to get in touch with. Maybe you could try to meet him after his class is over one day?”

I tried to sneak a word in, but Xaita continued before I could say “eh, I'm not one for classrooms.”

“Over by the main desert road that goes straight into the city, there's an archive storage



building on the left side.” She pointed in the general direction of the city's huge main road. “It's not labeled, but it has a short bridge from the road to the archive's entrance. Go up two floors and that's where he'll be when he teaches. Don't go bothering any of his classes, though! Catch him after a session, or maybe you could listen in if you want. Anyone can drop in or out, as long as you don't make a ruckus along the way. A couple dozen—”

“*Thank you,*” Shock interrupted, “we'll go find him if we get the chance.” Her tone perfectly conveyed the intention behind her words.

“...No need to be rude, miss.” Xaita didn't sound particularly enthused.

“Well, that's not so important right now,” I butted in, hurriedly changing the subject before any tension grew (I was getting good at that). “The main reason Lavil sent us here is about your desert truck.”

Xaita gave me a curious look. “...Is that so? What about it?”

“You know the derelict MSE ship out in the desert?”

“Sure, I've seen it.”

“What are the odds we could coerce you into giving us a lift there and back?” Asking strangers for favours wasn't my favourite way of spending the morning, but this was far too important to let go.

“Eehh...” Xaita put a few fingers on her chin again. “Not today, that's for sure. It's quiet

now, but I've got a super busy day ahead of me. New product going up for sale, sure to attract lots of customers.”

Damnit. I kinda got the impression it was half true, half excuse.

“Right, right. That's fair. Thanks a ton for the consideration, though.”

Shock hummed in agreement as well.

“Say... come back tomorrow. I'll see what I can do for you, if you still need a hand.”

I quickly perked up. “Sure! Okay, sounds good. Oh, and, hey, there's just one more thing I want to ask you, if you don't mind.”

“Quick, quick.”

“Uh, well...” I looked to Trivo and motioned for her to continue where I left off.

She took a step forward. “Xaita, do you have any knowledge on how to create a central processing unit for a robot?”

Xaita laughed. “Out of luck there, I'm afraid,” she drearily replied. “The only thing I know about building robot parts is that most of it gets done in a factory on the other end of the city. I haven't been there, nor do I know what even happens in there.”

“You sell machinery here, correct?” Shock asked.

“Well, yes, but I don't make the complicated stuff myself.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“Yep. I gotta get goin' though – lots of work to be done. Cruise smooth, girls.” Xaita

waved to us as she walked back to the door she met Shock at.

“Take care, Xaita,” Shock finished off our conversation for us.

...

I huffed once we were out of earshot. Now what?

Shock looked at me. I dodged her gaze by looking over at Trivo, who was eyeing us both down.

Shock sighed. Trivo looked just as disappointed.

“Well... now what?” I voiced my thoughts, flinging my arms out to the side.

“What if we visited the factory Xaita mentioned?” Shock suggested, stopping my whining for a moment as I listened in. “Something tells me it's not going to be as simple as slapping a piece of equipment together willy-nilly, especially something more powerful than what you all already use, but I suppose it'd be good to get closure on the issue. Plus, it doesn't sound like we're going out in the desert any time soon.”

“It's just a theory, though,” Trivo reminded us. “I-I don't know for sure if that's how Tangent works or not. It would make sense, but it's not a guarantee.”

Shock looked a bit off-put. “If it's a possibility, I think we should see it out to the end. Anything to help give us an edge would be nice, and it's not like we have any other leads right now.”

I stepped forward and put a hand on my hip. “Why don't we go as a group?”

“I'm going to go give Laval a visit first,” Shock replied. “See if he's found anything or knows anything about that whole anxiety aura or whatnot.” She air-quoted “anxiety aura.”

“Good idea. May I please come too?” Trivo asked ever so politely.

“I'm not stopping you.”

Trivo excitedly clapped, her eyes smiling in lieu of a mouth. Gosh, that's cute.

I looked down at myself, remembering my trip through that desert complex where we saved Trivo. I wiped the area just above the speakers on my chest – still caked with dust and soot. Yeegh.

“If you two don't mind, I'm gonna go to a body shop and get myself cleaned up. I'll meet you guys back at the hideout in a while.” Realizing just how filthy I was this whole time was a little bit embarrassing. Or, well, maybe not; maybe it made me look more rugged. Maybe it made me look tough. Or... maybe not.

“Go take a shower, sure. I'll bring her back to Laval.” Shock tapped Trivo on the shoulder as she spun around. “Meet us when you're done, yeah? Don't make me wait.” Her voice was as flat as ever.

“Yeah. Sounds good.” Having a plan pumped me up, even if it was pathetically unlikely to yield results. “Okay! I'll see you soon.” I took off, waving back to Shock and Trivo as I ran.

“Be good!” Trivo gleefully waved farewell as she followed Shock, who was already walking back to our hideout's side road from the plaza we stood in.



More machines were starting to leave their homes and go about their daily lives, meandering up and down the roads, playing, working, and everything in between. Good morning, everyone.

As I made my way down the side of a familiar, brownish-orange street towards a nearby body shop for a wash, I was free to ponder my thoughts about everything that was going on.

Attacked by a serial killer? Meeting up with strange robots out of the blue because of it? Some suspicious gang(?) involvement with Lavil and Trivo...? Not to mention the aura we just encountered. Rescuing Trivo from that weird place in the desert? Oh, and don't forget the message from “Lacuna” calling us out to the spaceship in the desert.

At the beginning of this disaster, I would have played it off as terrible luck, but now, it was becoming far too widespread and coincidental for everything to not be connected somehow. I just wasn't sure how to connect the dots. For a moment, I kinda doubted my desire to get to the bottom of it all, but I also didn't want to leave it be and continue sitting in Tangent's crosshairs.

“Silver Wash,” read the big sign above me, completed by the image of a water droplet behind the shop's name. This was the place I got

to take advantage of my waterproof build (and for free, too!). I took one last look at the amber sky glowing beyond the towering buildings above, and then I stepped inside the relatively dim body shop.

Empty, save for one tall, grey and orange bot sitting down on the oddly extravagant velvet sofa against the wall opposite of the shower booths. Said robot seemed to be puttering away on a laptop computer, minding their own business, so I placed my guitar down against the nearby wall, walked into one of the booths, and shut the glass door behind me.

“Why, isn't this a familiar face, no?” the couch robot called out, presumably to me.

So much for minding his own business. That voice was vaguely familiar... but I couldn't put my finger on where I knew it from.

“I don't blame you if you don't remember me. Our encounter was rather fleeting, after all!” he sang, his voice filled with energy.

I turned around and got a good look at him through the glass door: very tall, dark grey, two orange horizontal lines for eyes, a big, orange semicircle smile. Unmistakable.

“Hold on, I think I do recognize you... back in Grilith, aren't you the robot who was hanging out with Xaita on the bottom floor?”

“Ding ding ding! You are absolutely correct, my friend,” the robot announced. “What might your name be?”

What a charming bot. “Call me Aural.”

“Aural it is!” he bellowed, raising his arms in the air in a celebratory fashion. “The name's Historical. Pleasure to *officially* meet you.”

“Likewise!”

Historical crossed his legs and propped the computer back up on his lap.

...Seconds later, my neural network made a really obvious connection.

“Do people also call you Mister History?”

He chuckled. “I have a lot of nicknames, and that is surely one of them.”

“No way! I was just talking to Xaita about you a little while ago.”

“Good things, I hope?”

I nodded. “You manage some archives and teach robots about history, right?”

“That is most certainly correct! You know your stuff.”

With no warning, the nozzles just above me violently sprayed me with water, completely catching me off guard. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to not be waterproof; having to meticulously – and cautiously – clean every surface manually sounded like a nightmare.

“Did you ever find the Lavil you were looking for up in Grilith?” Historical casually asked me while I flailed around, struggling to fight off the high pressure streams of water.

“Y-yeah!” I answered as soon as I could find an opening where my speakers weren't being

sprayed down. “Lavil II, he was up there! And it was okay—”

Water on the speakers.

“—It was okay. We got it all... figured out.”

The water stopped. Sweet relief, if only for a moment.

“That race sure was something, no? Did you catch the end of it?” Historical crossed his legs in the other direction.

“Race... I don't think I'm familiar.” I vaguely recalled someone at Grilith mentioning there was a race of some sort, but that's about all I knew.

“My apologies; let me fill you in! There was a long-awaited race around Grilith Tower just ending when you'd arrived and talked with Xaita and me. Anyone is allowed to participate if they're feeling brave enough to tackle Grilith's course, but the race has special significance for the Lavil series,” he explained, not even waiting to see if I was interested in the first place.

“What's that?” I humoured him.

Historical looked up at me. “The Lavil robots are built to be the quickest machines on the planet. So, their creators are always making new models and adjusting each of the newer ones, right?”

“Makes sense.”

My vision suddenly went black.

Blinding soap spray had covered my face in an instant. No warning, like usual.



“The current Lavil model – in this case, Lavil II – and the new model – Lavil III – will always participate in Grilith Tower's race when it occurs,” he continued, ignoring my soapy struggles. “If the current model wins the race, or otherwise places ahead of the new model, the new model is brought back to the workshop and tweaked up to make it better. However, If the new model wins the race...”

“Mhm?”

“Then the current model will be destroyed.”

That caught me off guard more than the soap spray.

“You mean, if Lavil III had've beaten Lavil II in that race, then Lavil II would've been *killed?*”

“Regrettably, yes.”

“G-geez.” I would never have guessed that Lavil had just finished a race for his life moments before I met him. This new bit of information made me wonder about how different this all would have been if Lavil II had lost. Would III be nicer than II? Would III know about the whole situation he and Trivo are in? Would III even know Trivo? Would III even bother with us...?

It made me look at II in a different light.

“You... hanging in over there?” Historical snapped me out of my thoughts, tilting his head while he spoke. “I hope that wasn't too disturbing.”

“Oh, no, no, I was just taking it all in. I didn't know that about Laval. Not as disturbing as it is surprising.”

“Good! If I ever cross any lines, please let me know.” He looked back down at his computer.

The jets of water started up again. At least I was more ready than last time.

“Who is it that creates the Laval series?” I asked, expertly blocking the water jets to slip out a few words.

“...Even more regrettably, I do not know. I've heard rumours that it's a very reclusive group of roboticists down in Zynima's underground, far below the city.”

This guy was almost throwing information at me faster than I could keep up. “I figured there has to be like... mines and caves underground beneath the surface, but from the way you're speaking, it sounds like “the underground” is something else entirely.”

“And something else it is. Or, at least, it's supposedly something. I haven't been there myself, nor do I know if it's even real, but I've heard some compelling stories from a few reputable people. They talk about huge buildings, vast caves filled with a thick, red fog, and aggressive machines corrupt beyond sensibility.

It almost sounds like some tall tale, right? However... one detail remains consistent between anecdotes: they all mention the Siphon Yard on the outskirts of the city, where all those misfit TV-heads find refuge. It apparently hides some

entrance to the underground city.” Historical laughed. “I apologize, Aural, I’m a bit of a rambler.”

“It’s cool! Nothing doing in here.” Truth be told, I was rather enjoying his rambling. “It is a lot to take in, though.”

He chuckled again. “Apologies! I’ll slow down a bit.”

The water stopped a few seconds after I spoke, and I was *not* ready for the intensity of the hot air fans that blasted me from above almost immediately after. It almost knocked me off balance when it started, just like the first bout of water. These things need alarms...!

Once I got my balance, I thought about what Historical just said; the Siphon Yard was something I *did* know about. Like he mentioned, off in the city’s outskirts was a vast scrapyards inhabited by TV-heads who were either high in corruption or just plain deranged and unpredictable. The “siphon” part of the name comes from their habits of draining unsuspecting machines of fluids and disassembling them shortly after. What they do with those parts and liquids, no one knows for sure, but it’s easy to make an educated guess.

So, not the most appealing place. It kinda gives TV-heads a mixed reputation in the city.

The air jets stopped. I was finally free, and squeaky clean to boot.

“What are you up to here, anyways?” I asked on a whim as I opened the glass door to my shower booth and stepped out.

“Ahh, just waiting for someone.”

“Xaita said you're not an easy person to get a hold of. Funny, meeting you here.”

Historical laughed. “She's not wrong! I've got a strict schedule, and I have to stick to it. Nothing would get done, otherwise! Archival isn't an easy job in this city.”

I chuckled in response to his jovial attitude. “Make sense. Xaita also said you gave her a security upgrade too?”

“Indeed. She's like my guinea pig, for lack of a better term!” He laughed some more. “I let her try out the beta versions of everything I create.”

“Is it okay if I ask what exactly was in her security upgrade? I have a theory about something, and she got me curious.” I decided to not to mention the “aura”, suspecting he'd think of it as nonsense.

“Oh, nothing much! It was just a new version of intrusion detection software to help stop a couple of obscure viruses I learned of recently.” He stood up, easily towering above me.

“Gotcha, gotcha.” So it was for viruses, not inexplicable anxiety auras. Probably wasn't a connection, then, but I didn't totally dismiss the idea.

Historical walked over to the shop's front window and looked outside. Seizing the opportunity, I flopped down on the couch, taking a few needed moments of R&R. Damn, that couch was obnoxiously comfy.

“Not much help, I'm guessing?” He held a palm in the air as he spoke.

“Oh, uh, it's fine! It's kind of a niche thing I'm trying to figure out. No worries.”

“Niche, hmm? Niche is my speciality! If you have questions, it's very likely I have answers.” He leaned down, looking closely at the window. “...Is that a friend of yours, out there?”

I hummed, standing back up to go look through the window with Historical. Shock, Trivo, and Lavil were all at the home base; who could he have been talking about?

“See the machine, out there?” He pointed in the general direction of the suspected friend.

I saw him immediately. In the middle of the street, staring at us through the shop's window, making a knocking motion with his two right hands...

...was Tangent.

I froze in place. I couldn't believe it.

I was still being hunted.

I was still being hunted.

None of my friends were here to bail me out.

“The robot over there... looking at us from the middle of the street... right?” I shakily asked, just to confirm.

“Yes, that's the one.”

“That's... the serial killer.”

“P-pardon?”

“Historical.”

“Yes?”

*“That's the serial killer that's killing everyone.”*

“And you're sure abo—”

“We need to escape. Not leave, *escape*.  
*Now. Right now.*”

Historical put his arm around my back, guiding me to the far end of the shop. “Come, then. There's a maintenance passage in here we can take to get away.”

I wasn't confident in the idea of going into some dirty maintenance passage with a stranger, but I was more confident in that than walking outside with Tangent staring at me no more than twenty feet away.

“Let's move. I don't have *that* much time between tasks, you know!”

Once again, I was forced to put my trust in a stranger. I prayed Historical knew what he was doing.

## 14 – And So, Once Again

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Never a dull moment, huh? At least that's what ran through my head before I was quickly reminded that I could die at any moment by Tangent's hands. I needed to focus.

Historical guided me to a rickety metal door with a little circular window near the top. He hurried me through, clunkily following me behind, shutting the door behind us.

The small room I found myself in was a staggering contrast to the rest of Zynima: it was wet everywhere and covered in tile, all gleaming light blue. There were similarly coloured pipes travelling across some of the walls and ceiling, some dripping water here and there.

“No entry without authorization,” read a white sign on the far wall. Sorry, I'm breaking the rules whether you like it or not, sign.

Historical snapped me back to reality. “Oh dear, he's just walked inside the shop. Let's not waste any time.”

In front of us was a door on the left end of the room, and on the right end, a few stairs leading to another door.

“Up the stairs, quick, now.” He ran towards the miniature stairwell. I followed.

I hopped up the stairs two at a time. Historical jumped from the side of the stairs straight up to the top, pushing the heavy door open just before I got there. He was unexpectedly agile for someone so bulky.

My optics were met with a similarly designed room once I jogged past the door. This one had one small turn to the left, and at the end of the room, a manhole with a ladder going down. I didn't need any instruction to know what to do.

As swiftly as possible, I swung myself onto the first rung, clambering down as if my life depended on it.

(It did.)

I landed outside on a grated, metal walkway, not unlike the one that circled the tower I lived in.

...It was also the only thing separating me from the rocky cliff below, which led straight down to the desert floor. Were we really this close to the edge of Zynima City's plateau? I was getting the worst kind of déjà vu just from looking at that cliff.

Metal on metal echoed out from the ladder chute as Historical tumbled down onto the walkway, back first.

“Fucking ladders!” he cried out.

I stepped over and helped him up; it didn't take long for him to get back onto his feet.

“Pardon my language. Let's go, quick quick!”

Something up in the room we just exited smashed open with a piercing screech. I wasn't about to wait around to see what it was. I ran down the walkway, Historical just behind me.

Sunlight illuminated our path, but only for a short distance: the walkway zigzagged to the right before leading us underneath a building



jutting out from the city's plateau. Support beams and scaffolding surrounded us as soon as we ran beneath the structure.

*Clunk.* I looked back past Historical. Tangent had gracefully fallen out from the ladder chute, locking eyes with me.

“Go! Go!” I instinctively shouted as I swung my head forward.

“Stay near the edge!” Historical instructed me. The walkway branched off into a grid with countless junctions; staying near the edge meant going straight forward. Easy enough.

The clanging of our footsteps were joined by Tangent's, racing towards us at a pace I couldn't hope to match.

“Historical! He's gaining—”

The edge of the walkway was coming up, forcing us to turn right.

“How much do you trust me?” Historical yelled.

“More than Tangent!”

“Then jump over the railing up ahead!”

“What?!” Oh hell no. Not this again.

No time to think. As soon as I reached the 90 degree turn in the path, I hopped up on top of the railing.

...But I couldn't bring myself to jump. The cliff below would shred me.

“Jump! Now!”

Historical and Tangent were both bolting towards me.

...

...

...No, I couldn't do it.

Someone tackled me from behind, sending me flying.

Flying straight down to the rocky cliff below.

Tangent, I guess.

...Haha.

Looks like he finally got me.

All I could do was watch as the jagged boulders below came closer and closer as gravity brought me to my demise.

I couldn't help but wail as I fell.

Sorry, Shock. You're on your own now, I suppose.

Just behind me, some small bits of machinery were twisting and moving and transforming. Not that I could tell what it was, but in the few moments I had to think, I assumed it was my limbs being dismantled mid-flight. That made sense.

Didn't matter either way. The rocks would've done the same thing to me as soon as I made contact with them.

...Huh. That was a strange sound. A rocket? Torch cutter. *Pshoo*.

My legs felt kinda hot. Haha, probably Tangent cutting them open.

...

My free-fall was slowing down.

...?

I was still slowing down. Wh...?

“Tsk, tsk! I guess you don't trust me that much after all.”

That was Historical, right behind me.

I looked down. A pair of thin, bone-like arms were wrapped around me. Those weren't Tangent's. Those were Historical's.

My free-fall came to a stop. I was hovering mid-air.

...I wasn't doomed?

*Pshooooo.*

I wrenched my head around to, hopefully, understand what was happening.

I only confused myself even more.

Wings...? Rocket-propelled wings?

They were coming from Historical's back.

You had to be kidding me. Historical had wings?

“Now, my companion, we're not out of this yet. We've got an uninvited guest on this flight, it seems,” Historical calmly explained, though his voice was shaking and shifting in intensity.

I looked down again. Just in the edge of my vision, I could see Historical's legs dangling below me.

Ah. Tangent was holding onto his ankles.

...I shook my head. I wasn't doomed. We had a chance!

“Shit! Get him off! What do we do?!” Filled with new vigour, I screamed everything that came to mind. “Get that toaster off!”

“I'm trying, you see!” Historical yelled back as we haphazardly swung side to side in the

air. “Stay as still as you can! If I can just... bah! Hold on, Aural!”

We started plummeting again, though we were at least moving away from the cliffside. Thanks to Historical's surprise wings, we were now gliding through the air.

I had no idea what he was planning, but I was hardly in a position to protest or help in any regard.

Through the intensifying sound of the wind around us, shrill, searing metal was very audible behind me.

I looked back. From what I could see... Historical had aimed two of the rockets on his wings at Tangent's head.

“Yes! Fry that worthless bolt brain! Go! Go!” Ooh, I was mad.

With fiery orange jets still scorching his face, Tangent let go with one of his many hands, reached up, and grabbed my ankle.

Hell no. The moment he touched me, I flailed and kicked my leg as hard as I could.

Only a few moments of kicking later, Tangent let go of Historical's foot, and then mine.

He was falling hundreds of feet down towards the desert floor.

I couldn't help but laugh. This was the most absurd situation I'd ever been in. *And we just won.*

“Damn! Yes! Get fucked, asshole!” I shouted out triumphantly, still experiencing the rush of a lifetime.

“Good! Now, let's...” Historical spoke up as he sharply changed direction, veering back up towards the city. We'd flown a considerable distance during that fiasco.

Part of this didn't seem real. Only a minute ago we were fleeing from Tangent, and the next thing I knew, my new friend had sprouted wings and we'd flown over the desert with a serial killer dangling from our feet.

*Please don't let go...!* I thought to myself as we ascended back up to the scaffolding. It almost felt like Historical started losing grip of me when we accelerated upwards.

Once we reached the scaffolding, I wiggled my feet around, trying to find the first stable object I could stand on. Historical set me down on the walkway before propelling himself over the rail just in front of me.

“*Waaah!*” was all I could manage to say after the intensity I just experienced, my hands clasping my head.

“You're okay, you're okay. Take a bre— or, um, try to relax. Yes.”

I looked up. In front of me was Historical: an eight-foot robot with a massive pair of rickety, metal wings extending from his back. On the edges of the wings were six thrusters, still glowing bright orange like the lights on his body and unmistakably happy face.

“You have wings!” I plainly stated, holding onto the railing for balance. “*Wings!*”

Historical chuckled. “I suppose I do, huh? I'm going to need you to keep this a secret,

though. I don't need anyone knowing I have this kind of technology stored away in me, you know?"

I watched the wings slowly slide and twist back together into an incredibly compact bundle of metal, carefully retracting into his back.

"Y-yeah, I... I guess, yeah." I turned the eyes on my visor into little round circles with lines beneath them, accurately representing the shock I was still experiencing from... that.

"It's a good thing we got that done as quick as we did." He leaned against the railing as he spoke. "You see, I can't fly for long. It drains me of energy alarmingly fast. I may have to reschedule today to fit in a nap, lest I collapse on the job."

"Hah, yeah. You do that, yeah." Even if I tried, I couldn't form a coherent sentence after that mess.

"Will you be okay? You're quite shocked, I can tell. Do you need a hand getting out of here?"

"Oh, haha, well. I'm okay, I think. Just gotta walk back there and up the ladder and..." I vocalized a huge sigh.

Historical took a step towards me and patted the speaker on my shoulder. "You're sure you're okay, yes?"

I nodded, despite my uncertainty.

"All right. I'm going to head off, then. We probably shouldn't loiter here too long, seeing as we're not "authorized" to be among all this scaffolding."

“Yeah, that's right. And, hey, th-thank you. Thank you a lot. You saved my life.”

“Oh, I know! Not a problem at all.” He turned around and waved back to me. “Zynima is a dangerous place. You should be careful out there, Aural Automaton.”

“...Yeah. You too.”

I watched Historical casually walk away as if the most outrageous shit hadn't just gone down.

...

Did I ever tell him my full name was Aural Automaton?

I... don't think I did.

That was rather curious.

After he'd climbed up the ladder, I decided to take a quick walk down to the scaffold grid we'd just raced across. I wanted to see Tangent, just to have one more gratifying look at our victory.

Once I got to the corner of the grid where Historical tackled me off the railing, I peered down at the desert.

That's when my mechanical heart sank.

I could see a little robot all the way down there, walking back to the cliff just beneath the walkway.

Of course. Of course Tangent survived that.

“Oh, piss off!” I screamed, recording my voice clip so I could belt it out through my sound system. “PISS OFF!” I bellowed loud enough that the whole neighbourhood could probably hear it.

Tired of this shit, I angrily flipped Tangent the middle finger and walked off back towards the ladder we came from.

I climbed back up into Silver Wash's maintenance passage to be greeted by a small, yellow robot with an oversized black beanie on its head.

“Hey, you're not allowed to be here,” he spoke up after I passed by.

Oh yeah? Yeah? *Yeah?*

I quickly spun around to face the little robot, continued walking backwards towards the door, bowed down, and held a finger in the air.

“Yes,” was the only thing I could think to say as I nudged the door behind me open with a light kick. I then traversed and left the building without another hitch.



If Tangent was still alive, then I didn't really want to waste time wandering around alone in the public eye. I ran back to our hideout with haste.

Verdin Square was only a few blocks away. After zigzagging around the streets a bit, dodging the other robots as I skipped along, I was met with the bright lights of Verdin.

...

...

I locked up again, just like before when I was in front of Maestro Bar. What was—

Oh. I *was* in front of Maestro Bar.

Whoops. I calmly walked away from it.

...



...  
Much better. Damn, that aura was unnerving...

Our side street was sparsely populated, leaving me free to run back to safety in our hideout.

*Beep beep.* I unlocked the door and stumbled into the hideout, carelessly slamming the door behind me.

“Aural?” Shock called out.

“It's me,” I replied.

I was met with a death glare as soon as I descended the spiral staircase.

“What the hell took you so long?!”

I couldn't even figure out where to start.

“Ohh, oh. Ohoho. Don't you dare give me shit,” I blabbed, trying to form a thought as I spoke. “Shock, you wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

## 15 – Just Beyond Reach

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“You're right, Aural, I sure as hell wouldn't believe you if this was any other time,” Shock responded after I finished explaining exactly what I was doing between when we split up and met here again. “But these are some pretty trying times. Something tells me you wouldn't lie about something like that right now.”

“No, even *I* can tell it's time to be serious, like when I'm being *hunted*,” I groaned.

“No more going out alone,” Shock demanded as she leaned back in her seat. “These last few days have been utter mayhem and I'm really not interested in losing anyone else. Especially you.”

...Ah. Shock's delicate side was hard to find sometimes, but it was nice when it showed.

“You won't find me disagreeing with that.” I turned away from Shock, briefly running through my thoughts again. “But there was something about Historical that bothered me a bit.”

“What's that?”

“I introduced myself to him as Aural, but when we parted ways, he called me Aural Automaton. How did he know that?”

Shock pursed her lips for a moment. “You *are* a renowned musician.”

“R-right.” I didn't want to admit I'd forgotten about that. “But the way he said it... just... agh. I don't know. It rubbed me the wrong way.”

“I think we've all been a little tense lately. Don't sweat the small stuff, okay? He *did* save you from Tan.”

“Yeah, okay, yeah.” I knew better than to grumble back at logical reasoning like that, but I still felt uneasy nonetheless.

I aimlessly looked around our base's main room. Trivo was sitting beside Shock, rhythmically tapping her pointed feet on the floor, and Lavil was still typing away at the computer on the opposite side of the room, hardly even acknowledging our presence.

“Lavil, find anything good?” Worth a shot.

“Mate, it's been like... an hour. Tragically, my magnificent speed doesn't apply to computer operation.”

“It's taking *that* long to look up some information in Zynima's network?” I mumbled.

He turned and shot me down with a sharp glare. “This is not some everyday “oh, who's topping the charts today” search, this is “let's actually dig around for something secretive and meaningful that is going to help us save this city,” miss musician.”

“Oh, cut the snark,” Shock sneered. Trivo stopped bouncing her legs after Shock spoke up.

I wasn't in the mood for dealing with mister high-and-mighty either. I turned away without a word, side-eyeing him with an expression similar to the one I'd just received. I missed drunk Lavil more with every passing minute.

“We were going to give a factory on the far side of town a visit, last I heard.” I brought our conversation back on track as I walked over beside Shock.

“You're damn certain,” she answered, cluing in to my desire to leave Lavil's vicinity. “That said, are you ready to go back out there after that fiasco with Tangent? I wouldn't fault you for wanting a few minutes to cool off.”

“I... I'm pretty sure I'll be fine. You'll be with me when we go out again, right? And there should be plenty of people out and about by now. I don't think we'll have to worry about Tangent for now, as long as we stay out in the open.”

Shock nodded, raising her LED eyebrows.

I sighed. “We'll be fine.” Instinctively, I went to pick up my guitar as a sign that I was good to go... but it wasn't on my shoulder, and a brief glance around the room told me it wasn't in our hideout either.

“My guitar,” I thought aloud as I started pacing around the room, checking each potential hiding spot. “Did I put it somewhere? No... did I lose it when Historical took flight with me...?”

“You had it with you when you left,” Shock told me. “Did you set it down when you got yourself cleaned up?”

“No, I'm sure I..” I stopped myself, thinking really hard. “I don't know...”

Shock playfully rolled her eyes. “Let's go get your guitar, and then visit that factory.”

“Fuck, I hope nobody stole it...”

“*You'll be fine*, Aural. Take a breather.” Shock stood up and rubbed her hands together, prompting Trivo to stand up and walk over to the stairs in preparation for our departure. “You going to come with us, Lavi?” she asked him, testing the waters once again.

He turned and gave her the same glare as I'd just received moments ago, to which Shock responded with a glare of her own. Once Lavi had turned back to the computer, I frustratedly flicked my hand at him as I stepped towards the stairs. Snobby little f—

“We're off, then,” Shock announced. Good timing.

~~~~~  
(Just for the record, my guitar *was* at Silver Wash. Shock was right, I was wrong, yadda yadda, let's move on.)

~~~~~  
The street lights caught my attention every time. Glowing signs on the sides of buildings, artificial palm trees made from radiant lights... I really did live in a cool city. I still looked around from time to time, diligently checking my six to ensure our favourite trigonometry bot wasn't around, but the company of my pals relaxed me into a pretty strong sense of security.

That said...

“Days and days of walking and travelling about... when is this going to end?” I huffed.

“You're not the only one who's tired of this,” Shock remarked.

“Me too...” Trivo added as well.

Yeah... yeah, that was fair. “I'm just not built for this detective work, man.”

We had a decently long trek ahead of us. The factory we were after was off at the other end of the city, and we were only just exiting the commercial district now. I estimated it to be about 20 minutes away at this point.

I looked at Trivo. “So, let's say there really is a way we can upgrade our processors to go super fast. Do you know how to make anything like that? If so, would it even be compatible with our current hardware?”

“I don't know, sorry. It's just a theory... a long shot at that, too. I just don't have anything else to go off right now. I apologize.”

“Here's hoping Laval finds something before long...”

Nods from both Trivo and Shock.

Even though the robots occupying the streets were thinning out by the minute as we walked towards the industrial district of Zynima City, someone on the other side of the block started approaching us.

It was an adorable, boxy, blue robot rolling towards us on a singular wheel. It had a pointed LED visor not too different from mine, with an armful of thin little tablets.

“News! For you,” it chirped, happily handing us one of its electronic tablets.

“Uh, sure, thanks,” I awkwardly answered, taking the tablet. I wasn't ready for such a sudden handout, but no harm in going with

the flow. As quickly as it rolled up to us, it scooted away, humming a peepy little song as it left.

Shock looked at me. I could tell by her face that she was waiting for an explanation of some sort.

“Might as well, if we're going to be walking for a while.” I shrugged.

She smiled, squinting just a bit. “Good thinking.”

I held out the tablet in front of me, allowing Trivo and Shock to read along if they desired. *Of course* the headline was about the serial killings. “Is Zynima safe? Serial murders continue,” it read. Skimming over it... no helpful information we didn't already know. Trivo was still the public's suspect, which was starting to bother me a bit. *No, you nut-heads, she's not the one you want.*

I carelessly flicked my finger up the page, scrolling the screen down a bunch. Some minor articles here and there that didn't strike me as terribly important, a few little comics—

“Death race,” Shock pointed out. I looked down at the page to see those exact words written on a big headline.

“Death race,” I quietly repeated, my mind flashing back to my conversation with Historical. Was this the thing with Lavil II and III over at Grilith yesterday?

I started reading. Within seconds, Lavil's name popped up, perfectly matching the context I expected. Confirmed.

“So Historical was serious...” I muttered.

“Hmm? What did he say?” Shock asked. Trivo also leaned in close, listening in.

“He told me about this,” I began, poking the headline on the tablet. “You know when we went to Grilith and there was a race of some sort ending on the top of the tower? That's what this “death race” was. It was between Laval II and III, and whichever one of them lost would've been dismantled. If II lost, he'd be junked, but if III lost, he'd be reconstructed to be faster and better until he finally beat II.”

“Seriously?” Shock creased her brow.

“It's true,” Trivo spoke up before I could reply. “Laval II told me about it a while ago. He won by mere seconds this time around.”

“What the hell is this planet coming to?” Shock moaned, turning away from us.

“...What do you mean?” I slowed my pace a bit. I mean, I had a feeling I knew what she meant, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Someone's rampaging around the city killing robots every day. Robots are racing for their lives off in the desert. The only people who rent out vehicles for the desert are con artists who almost killed me. You,” Shock pointed at Trivo, “you've been kidnapped more than once, and you and Laval are being manipulated by some underworld dipshit! And Laval is also a dipshit, as a matter of fact!” She paused for a breath, raising a hand to her side. “What the fuck has this planet come to? This place was supposed to be a great robot civilization where machinery could thrive.



What happened?" She looked back and forth between Trivo and me.

I waited for a moment before saying anything. "One thing at a time" was the message I wanted to convey to her, but... when she's that agitated?

"We're going to take care of the murders, right? That's what's really plaguing the city right now. The rest... it can get sorted out on its own time. It's just--"

"I know! We're going to equip ourselves for combat, and we're going to kill Tangent if it's the last thing we do."

"Shh, not so loud," I whispered, perhaps a bit too quietly.

"That's the bottom line. I'll just... I'll just have to deal with the rest, I guess! Can't save the whole city from turning to a cesspool, I guess!" she shouted, finishing her vent.

Trivo and I went totally silent, unsure if we should have kept walking, or taken a small break, or... what. Clearly, I wasn't very good with my words. Instead, I reached over and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry." Shock shook her head. "Sorry. I shouldn't be taking this out on you two."

"I know the feeling all too well, Shock." Trivo's voice hit an unexpectedly solemn note. "It's not easy to come to peace with the fact that you can't fix everything, is it?"

If there was one thing I'd learned, it's that when Trivo took up such a somber tone, it was time to listen.

Shock hummed rather pensively, her head still tilted towards the ground, her eyes in a droopy semi-circle shape.

Trivo continued. "It was something I was starting to accept, until you two came along."

"What?" Shock looked over to Trivo.

"I-I mean... my whole situation. And Lavil's situation. With a little initiative and a bit of risk-taking... well, you guys made me realize that maybe we can change things for the better... m-maybe."

"For real?" I... never considered myself to be an influence on her. Or anyone, for that matter.

"Yes. And I can tell Lavil feels this way, too. He's always been an abrasive robot, but behind closed doors, he's actually rather... quiet. Perhaps you could say depressed, almost. But since we started working together, working towards stopping Tangent, he's had so much more energy. But... I know Lavil hardly cares about Tangent, aside from the ploy to destroy the robots I liked. He's a free bird living his own life out in the desert; it's not the idea of saving the city that's got him hopeful. I think it's the idea that we can actually do something to change things. Like, maybe even get our freedom back, one day. M-maybe." She paused for a moment, locking eyes with Shock. "I know you don't like me, Shock. Or Lavil. But—"

"That's not true," Shock interrupted. "...You're all right, Trivo. I'd love to smash zippy-dick's head in, but you're all right."

We both chuckled.

“I-I'm glad, Shock... that you feel that way. About me, at least.” She smiled at Shock with cheerful – or, perhaps, amused – eyes. “Our first impression in that tunnel was poor, I know that. But... I was scared. Desperate. Like I said, I was just beginning to accept that my life didn't belong to me. But maybe, just maybe, if I got a hold of Aural Automaton before Tangent got to her... and she listened to the instructions in the message I sent... there might be just a tiny sliver of hope left. A long shot, right?”

“I guess so, yeah.” I put a hand on my chin. Reflecting on that day was bizarre, especially hearing about it from Trivo's perspective.

We could see the factory in the distance, billowing huge plumes of smoke from the massive chimneys. It was pretty obvious that this was the place we were headed to, since there was only one major factory in Zynima City, and this thing looked *big*.

“Maybe this factory trip will work out too. And... if it doesn't, maybe something else will.” She giggled. “Sorry you guys, I don't usually ramble like this.”

“It's fine,” Shock said, “and I'm happy you found a bit of hope with us, but I have to be honest with you, Trivo. My goal is to destroy Tangent; I didn't plan on going on an adventure to save you and Lavil from whoever is controlling you.”

“Shock...!” I couldn't believe how inconsiderately blunt she was.

Trivo giggled again. “It's okay. I didn't expect you to. My point is... you've made me realize that we might not need the help of other people to take our lives back.”

Thinking hard, I... I did feel the same way as Shock. I just wanted to make sure our robot kind wasn't getting murdered daily. But how could I ditch Trivo and Lavil when they had some unfortunate connection to a bot that's making their lives a living hell...?

“I think,” Trivo continued, rather slowly and quietly, “you'll find that Tangent is closely connected to the machine manipulating us. *Maybe it'll work itself out.*”

That sounded awfully similar to what Lavil said to Shock a while ago in the hideout regarding their situation.

Shock raised her head up a bit. “Elaborate.”

“I... I can't. Or... well... you know how there might be an EMP inside me?”

Oh, shit. Yeah. That.

“I... don't want to risk that. I'm sorry...”

“It's okay. Don't worry about it.” I was beginning to understand why Lavil and Trivo had been so cryptic about “the situation working itself out.” Maybe eliminating Tangent would solve more problems than we expected...?

We were finally approaching the factory. The rumble of machinery clanging and shifting around was clearly audible from outside the

chain-link front gate, which was wide open for daylight hours. Just beyond that, the huge archway into the black and yellow factory was also wide open, lots of stocky factory workers were scattered about, a tall figure—

“You. No way. It's you...” Shock spoke under her breath, pulling ahead of us, speed-walking towards the factory entrance.

“Uh, Shock?” I sped up my pace a bit, trying to match hers, but she launched into a sprint without warning.

“Hey! Wait!” she yelled, reaching out towards the tall figure walking into the factory.

Keeping up with her with a jog, I looked at the robot walking inside. It was a TV-head draped in a long, navy blue coat.

Was that...? No. It couldn't be. Was it the same ominous TV-head I saw outside Grilith when we were riding back to the city?

“Shock, wait up!” I cried out, but my words fell on deaf ears. “Shock!”

She continued running. The TV-head turned a corner as soon as it walked inside the factory; Shock pursued him until she was just inside the entrance where the TV bot had just left eyesight.

Then, she stopped.

“Where did you go?!” she bellowed, drawing the attention of a few nearby hardhat workers. “What... where did you...”

Trivo and I finally caught up to her. “What are you doing?” I shouted. “Who was that?!”

“I-it's nothing! That's just, u-uhh... it's a personal thing, okay?” Shock stammered. “Don't worry about it. It's... it's fine.” She looked side to side between every word, presumably looking for that robot. “Don't... worry about it. Let's keep on our mission...” She sighed.

“...Sure...” I awkwardly answered. A glance at Trivo told me she was equally as puzzled. “Then let's find that theoretical processor?”

“Let's do that.” Shock took a deep breath, straightening out her vest.

## 16 – Odd Factory

---

Trivo and I were still kinda looking at each other in mutual confusion. Shock didn't feel like telling us what that was all about, leaving us to wonder what business she might have had with that TV-head.

At this point, I was really not in the mood to add more mystery and uncertainty to this adventure. The next chance I had to pull Shock aside, I planned to.

Before us was a huge series of unidentifiable machines made for construction, coupled with conveyor belts and pistons of various sizes, with several more of the hardhat wearing robots working beside the belts.

I took a couple steps forward, my eye catching a familiar machine – a recharge station. It had a little display on the front; I leaned over to read it...

...86.98% purity?! This was the lowest purity I'd ever seen in my life!

“Oh my,” I heard Trivo comment from my right, “th-that's abhorrent.”

“Christ,” Shock chimed in.

“I'm wary about anything under 99.5%! Using this... it would cut your lifespan in half every time you used it!” I cried over the whirring machinery just in front of us.

“Worse than that.” Trivo murmured while counting on her fingers. “Assuming you regularly used a standard station with a purity of 99.95%... something this rotten would bring you

to an impure death 260.4 times faster than normal.”

“Do you think they actually use this here?” I wondered aloud.

“Hello!” called out a bombastic voice, ringing clearly over the clattering machinery. “Can I help you?”

Just to our left, clanging towards us was a tall, silver suit of medieval armour adorned with elaborate and flowery markings, all in iridescent black. Beneath the helmet was a pair of bright, yellow eyes staring down at us.

...And a broadsword. A massive, shining sword in his right hand. Oh no. I hoped we weren't trespassing.

“Hi...! You work here, right?” I replied, finding it hard to take my eyes off that blade.

“Naturally! Is there anything I might help you with?” His straight stature, commanding tone, and proud accent led me to believe he was the manager or boss of this place. And, seeing as he hadn't cut us down, I figured we were allowed to be here.

“Yeah. My name's Aural Automaton. This is Shock System and Tiiiaaadel...” I said, just barely remembering that I couldn't use Trivo's actual name in public. (Tiadel? That was the best I could come up with?)

“Well met. 301, at your service.” He extended a tinny hand to me, which I firmly shook. Shock and “Tiadel” followed the same motions shortly after.



“We have some questions about robot hardware, and we're hoping you might be able to give us some answers.”

“Hardware!” 301 swung his mighty blade in the air, prompting me to jump back a little bit. “You've come to the right place!”

Trivo put her fists up to her chest and made a little *vroom* sound. “Okay! Do you make processors here, first of all?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Okay! And, I'm guessing all the processors you make here are all the same?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Okay. Have you ever heard of someone using an upgraded processor, or a processor that's generally faster than the ones made here?”

“Methinks you'll find nothing like that here. I *have* heard of what you're talking about – *tampered* goods – but only in eerie and outlandish black market dealings... the type of thing you'd only hear about in places like that Siphon Yard over yonder.” He paused for a brief second, looking to the side. “Why do you ask?”

“Consider us something like a private eye,” Shock explained.

Well, I suppose she wasn't lying. Sorta.

“This... *case* we're dealing with might have something to do with an unusual processor,” she continued.

“...It wouldn't be the Trivo killings, would it?” he asked.

Oh no. I stiffed in an instant, suppressing the urge to whip my head around and look at

Trivo. I prayed he didn't know that this was Trivo right beside us.

“Might have something to do with that,” Shock casually replied as if she'd done this a hundred times before.

301 crossed his arms. “We've got no relation to any murders. All we do is produce parts for construction and repair. It's all we've *ever* done here.”

“No, no, I'm not accusing you of that!” Shock waved her hands in front of herself. “We're just trying to gather information, and you're most likely to be the best source. We don't suspect you of anything.”

“Hmm.” 301 tapped his foot. “I've heard that the best parts bytes can buy are made of cyrite: a turquoise, lightweight metal that one might only find deep beneath the planet's face. Alas, as before, you wouldn't find it here. Mayhaps, around the city's outskirts, you'd have more luck finding a quarry with more knowledge on it?”

More goose chasing? Fantastic. “I don't suppose you'd have, like... a blueprint for making a processor? In case we managed to get our hands on the stuff to make one?”

“I do, but we have strict rules in place here regarding its circulation. Unless you're a dealer who can prove themself as the owner of a business or similar factory, I won't be handing it out.”

None of us fit that criteria. “Damn.”

“Sincerest apologies! I do wish I could be of more assistance.”

And then, in the distance outside the factory,

“Ohoho, fuck yeah!” a very excited robot screeched. “Y'all boutta getta fuckiinn' WHAP!”

I burst out laughing. All of us, including 301, turned to look outside.

Ah, yep, there was the *whap*. Loud and metallic. I couldn't see it, but I could hear it.

“Is it usually so exciting around here?” I asked, trying to peer around the entrance to see what was going on.

“Not often!” 301 laughed with me. “Although, that's not to say we couldn't use a bit of fun around here from time to time.”

“Bip-bap-bap-baaap!” the outside voice screamed out, followed by another *whap*. “Shit!”

Shock started chuckling as well. “The fuck is that?” she exclaimed, walking towards the entrance. We all followed her.

Out on the road, a slender, blue and slate coloured punk wearing a backwards cap was beating up some other, larger robots with a broken road sign.

The other robots getting beat up... We'd seen them before. Dark grey plating. LED faces with angry eyes and a little frown. Sound familiar? We'd fought them before... twice. Trivo's mass-produced captors. Four of them, this time.

Suddenly, this wasn't so funny anymore.

“Sequencers. Those rapsCALLIONS,” 301 growled, raising his sword once again. “Remain here. I must remedy this situation.”

Sequencers – that's what they were called! “Hell no! I've got my own issues with those bots!” I shouted.

“Aural, are you–” Shock started.

“You're damn right I'm sure,” I continued, looking at her straight in the eyes. “We're not going to let 301 or that other guy out there suffer the same fate as... as...”

...What did I introduce Trivo as, again?

“Nary a worry about me! I'm more than capable of handling myself,” 301 boasted. With that sword and suit of armour, I was inclined to believe him.

Shock pulled out the saw hanging from her belt. “If you're sure about this.”

I swung the guitar bag off my shoulder as I'd done many times before. “What about... Tiadel?” I looked over to Trivo, who seemed worried about our impending confrontation.

“She'll stick with me,” Shock quickly announced, walking over beside her. “I don't plan on using this saw unless I need to. My electricity will do the fighting for me; I can keep an eye on her while helping from a distance.”

“R-right! Okay!” Trivo squeaked.

“Then, let's go!”

“OHOOOAAARRRGH!” 301 bellowed as he charged outside, his sword poised to cut down anything in his way. Feeling empowered by

his battle cry, I followed closely behind just to his right, my guitar held in a similar fashion.

That punk on the street had the attention of two of the sequencers, while the other two turned to face us with their weapons drawn – one baton, one morning star, both massive in size. 301 was charging down the morning star sequencer, leaving me with a clear target.

“Mass produced asshole!” I screamed as I ran at the baton-wielding sequencer, already winding up a swing.

The sequencer raised its weapon to block my attack. As soon as I was in range, I swung down at it with a massive cleave, hitting the baton dead on, forcing the sequencer to recoil a bit.

Before I could wind up another swing, I saw the baton coming just in time to jump out of the way of an incoming attack. My chance – I spun my guitar around to the side and hit the sequencer in the abdomen, knocking it off balance!

It stumbled over towards the morning star wielder that 301 was just blocking a hit from. Before I knew it–

*CRACK!* A massive arc of electricity struck the baton sequencer from my right, knocking it flat on its ass.

Just as I was about to step in to help 301, he took an opportunity to thrust the broadsword straight through the morning star sequencer with a sharp *crunch* of metal.

“ONWARD!” 301 yelled, turning his attention to the other two sequencers occupied by the punky robot maybe a dozen feet away.

The punk was lying on his back, holding his sign-post in front of him, barely fending off a sequencer trying to crush him with an incredibly oversized axe.

301 and I charged over to the last two, weapons ready, but before we got in range, the unoccupied sequencer threw something at me...!

A bright red throwing knife. It clipped my visor, shattering its left-most spike.

The hit staggered me; I reached up and felt the area to survey the damage, taking a brief moment to recover from the blow. 301 continued onward, deflecting another throwing knife with his sword. Within range, he leaped into the air with his sword held high, and plunged it into the face sequencer that just attacked us with a terrifying shout.

301 was a on a rampage. Maybe we should've let him deal with this on his own!

Shock and Trivo ran up to me from behind.

“Aural! Are you damaged?” Shock shouted.

“Oh no!” Trivo yelped.

“Fuck that! Get that sequencer!” I demanded, pointing at the robot still pinning down the punk on the road. I ran off towards it, guitar firmly in my grip.

Just as I passed 301 as he was pulling his sword out of the robot's body, I mirrored his

motions: I jumped as high as I could, held the guitar up in the air above my head...!

“*Get fucked!*” I slammed the instrument down on the sequencer's head, smashing right through it. “Mass produced piece of shit!”

Unlike 301, I tripped up my landing, falling face-first into the sequencer's body, who had fallen on top of the punky robot.

“Yo, get the fuck off me, son!” he screamed.

“I'm trying!” I yelled back, trying to get to my feet.

A huge, tinny hand took hold of my forearm, helping me to my feet. 301!

As soon as I regained my footing and was out of the way, he bent over and started lifting the sequencer off the punky bot, who slid backwards into an open spot where he could stand up.

The punk dusted himself off. “What the fuck was that, you black and red holiday decoration?!” he scowled at me, swinging his road sign in the air.

“Saving your life! What do you think?!” I angrily yelled back, pointing at him.

“SHUT UP! LOOK!” Shock screeched at us both, drawing our attention instantly.

She was pointing down the road. Not too far past the four sequencers we'd just taken out was *another* battle with more of the same robots. I could see energy projectiles, a robot with some sort of force field, and... that TV-head from earlier!

“This area is secure! Press on!” 301 announced, already beginning his charge forward.

I hesitated for just a moment this time.

“Aural, your visor!” It was Shock, very concerned. “You’re missing almost a quarter of your face!”

“I can still see just fine! We need to take care of this!” I barked.

*“You’re hurt.”*

“This is more important!” I started running off towards the distant brawl, looking back at her and Trivo.

“Then wait a goddamn second! How about this?” Shock shouted, just before building up a massive electric charge on the beams connected to her back, zapping—

It felt like my whole body just rebooted.

This feeling of energy and power... it was familiar. Shock... she overcharged me! Just like back in the desert!

“Let’s go!” I screamed, running as fast as I could. To my amazement, I was catching up to 301, despite his size advantage.

I took a quick look at what we were running up to. The TV-head in the navy blue coat was wielding a black scythe with three blades, there were about six sequencers, and... Trivo? It... it was a bot that looked exactly like Trivo, except grey instead of white, and red lights instead of green! And it was under the miniature force field I saw earlier, firing countless energy projectiles at the sequencers! What!?



No, I had to focus. Of all the robots to target, I picked the left-most one, on the outskirts of the fight. Just as I was running up to it, a flurry of green projectiles flew at it, burning holes in its body in an instant! It fell over not a second later, defunct.

“Switching target! Sequencer #14! Begin assault!” The Trivo-looking bot called out in an uncannily familiar voice. Before I even had a chance to go after another sequencer, Trivo 2.0 unleashed another barrage of gunfire, ripping through the robot just like the last.

“Switching target! Sequencer #15! Begin assault!”

301 and I both struggled to look for a target. On the far side of the brawl, the TV-head was cutting down sequencers one by one with ease, and Trivo 2.0 was taking care of the rest.

Just then, a loud stomp behind me, to my left. I spun around instantly, holding my guitar up defensively.

A sequencer I hadn't spotted! Wielding a lengthy quarterstaff, it swung at my legs from the side, sweeping me off my feet with one strike.

“CAPTURE THE VESKY.”

I rolled to the left, just in time to avoid the robot stomping the ground right where I was. Channelling all that energy Shock had charged me with, I hopped to my feet in one swift motion, swinging my guitar around in a circle, striking the sequencer in the thighs.

“Hell yeah! Don't fuck with us!” I screamed, already lining up another swing.

“CAPTURE THE VE-”

I cut it off with another swift blow to the face, sending it to the ground. Hell yes.

“Shock! You should always do this to me!!” I laughed as hard as I could.

“Switching target! Sequencer #17! Begin assault!” Trivo 2.0 was still going. 301 had rushed over to where she and the TV-head were just finishing off the last two sequencers.

I was still pumped and ready to attack. I started to bolt over, but the bad guys had already been cut and blasted down before I could get anywhere near them.

...Was that it? Was that all of them? I whipped my head around, unable to find any more sequencers.

“OHOOOAAARRRGH!” 301 triumphantly bellowed. “VICTORY, MY COMRADES!”

That was it! “YES!” I jumped and pumped a fist in the air.

...Ahem. After that, I tried to calm down, standing still, focusing on slowing down my hardware.

I shook my head for a moment. Shock, Trivo, and the punk caught up to me, surveying the situation with me. In front of us, among several junked sequencers, was 301, the mysterious TV-head, Trivo 2.0, and the punky bot.

“Is it... over...?” Trivo asked.

“Fuckin' A, idiots!” the punk screamed.

I didn't say anything. Reason: Trivo 2.0 was staring at me with its energy weapons all aiming at me. (Why me?! The punk was the one still screaming at us!)

“Whoa, whoa, wait! I'm not a bad guy! I helped you fight those guys!”

Trivo 2.0 stared at me.

“Don't... shoot?”

Trivo 2.0 stared at me.

I slowly, ever so slowly, put my guitar down on the ground.

Trivo 2.0 stared at me.

Trivo 1.0 walked up in front of me. “S-she's not dangerous! She doesn't mean any harm!”

After the longest 10 seconds of my life, Trivo 2.0's red lights flicked from red to green.

“Hello, Vesky?” she asked Trivo in a voice perfectly matching her own. “I'm so glad I found you. Are they friends?”

...*Vesky?*

“Y-yes!” Trivo moved aside to introduce Shock and myself. “They are very good friends.”

“Are you malfunctioning?”

“Not th-that I know of? Why do you ask?”

“Let us move somewhere safer. Perhaps, the nearby factory?”

“My factory is far safer than out here,” 301 chimed in. “Let us be on our way.”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Where's that TV-head with the scythe?” He'd completely vanished.

“Good question...” Shock's voice rang just behind me. “Where did he go?! Fuck! He was *just* here!”

I sighed. “We'll find him later.” I looked over at Shock.

“Aural! Christ, your face...”

“Is it... is it that bad?” I whimpered.

“*Yes*. Let's get back to the factory.”

## 17 – Trivo 2.0

---

“Vital packet?” Shock asked, handing me one.

“Yes, yes, yes.” I wasted no time inserting it into the panel in my arm.

Shock and I sat down on a couple of small crates together as the others made their way into the factory's main room.

“My god, you could've died,” she remarked. “If that blade was just a few inches over, bam, goodbye Aural. This whole third of your face, smashed right off. But... you can see just fine, you said?”

“Well,” I began, realizing my vision wasn't as clear as before. “My peripheral vision on my damaged side is, like, not even there. It's not a huge deal, but, yeah, I guess it is a bit messed up.”

“I'd have to get a bunch of supplies if I wanted to fix this. Frankly... I don't really have time to with our big Tangent adventure still plaguing us.”

I sighed. “It's okay. Do I at least look like a bad-ass?”

Shock gave me a half-hearted smile. “Yeah. You look like a bad-ass.”

Heh. Good.

“One more thing, Shock, if you don't mind.”

“Mhmm?”

“What is your relation to that TV-head that keeps disappearing on us?” I was hoping she

wouldn't dodge the question in a one on one situation.

She sighed. "He's good at that whole vanishing thing, isn't he? He's an old acquaintance that was once so, so important to me."

"...Boyfriend?"

"Fuck no. He was someone who... well... helped Zynima City get established. I was around him for a while, then he said he was going to do something important, and then he fucked off, never to be seen until today."

"Yikes. Hopefully he shows up again..."

"You're telling me."

Once both Trivos (?) had settled in, I immediately hopped to my feet and walked over to them with Shock in tow. This "other Trivo" might be the key to answering a lot of questions, and like hell was I going to miss that chance.

"Hey," I casually greeted them both.

"Hi Aural," Trivo replied. Trivo 2.0 mimicked her flawlessly.

"So, I don't mean to interrupt you two if you were in the middle of something," I began, crouching down and clasping my hands in front of my chin, "but there are some really pressing questions I was hoping you could answer," I finished, directing my speech at Trivo 2.0.

"I will be of as much assistance as I can. Ask me anything!"

"First off, how are there two of you?"

"We are part of a robot series called "Vesky". Originally from Hallow, our series is

designed to be a friendly and sociable security robot.”

*Hallow... hadn't heard of it.* That aside... Laval was right. Trivo *was* part of a series.

“When our eyes are green,” she continued, “we are social. Please feel free to interact with us! However, when our eyes are yellow or red, please stay away! Those colours means we have switched into combat mode, which is an autonomous personality incapable of sapient interactions; our only objective in this mode is to neutralize any pertinent threats. When all threats are eliminated, we will return to social mode with our green lights.”

“Does this mean she has these crazy weapons in her too?” I pointed to Trivo, my eyes widening at the thought.

“Unless she has been illegally modified, yes.”

Trivo's head sank a bit, and I understood why.

“...Is there any way to tell if her weapons are still in her?” I shrugged

“Yes. Let me examine you,” the Vesky told Trivo.

“Ah, okay,” she sheepishly replied.

The Vesky stepped over to Trivo, kneeling down in front of her. She started inspecting the panels on the outside of Trivo's thighs, tracing them with her finger and wiggling them to see if they were solidly intact. After a short while, she moved to Trivo's hands and wrists, performing the same actions around a

couple of discrete panels I wouldn't have even noticed without a careful look.

Then, she said it.

“Her weapons are intact.”

I gasped.

“However,” she continued, “if her combat systems are malfunctioning, she cannot use them. If she did not enter combat mode during the scuffle on the street, there is something wrong with that part of her software.”

I suppose that's why the Vesky had asked Trivo if she was malfunctioning back out there.

“Do you know how to fix her weapons?”

“Not without a lengthy maintenance session. It would take well over six hours, and even then, I may not be successful. There could be countless reasons why she isn't fully functional.”

Over six hours? That's one whole day on Zynima.

“Aural, do you think I should?” Trivo asked, her voice wavering between excitement and anxiety.

“Well, it's *your* body. But if you want my input, I'd give you a resounding yes. Imagine having that kind of firepower! You wouldn't have to worry about being kidnapped anymore. You'd be unstoppable.”

“She has been kidnapped?” the Vesky asked.

“Many times, apparently.”

“Perhaps that would explain why she's malfunctioning.”

I nodded. Made sense to me.



“But... h-hmm...” Trivo mumbled. “I don't think that's why. Even in the faintest memories fragmented away in my back partition... I never had any knowledge of this weaponry. I don't remember what could've happened to cause that, but I don't think it was because of the memory wipes.”

“Huh.” I wanted to believe her, but I didn't know how much credibility an amnesiac had. Either way, it didn't do much to resolve any questions I may have had.

“Vesky— er, what should I call you?” Shock spoke up. “You have a name?”

“Vesky is just fine.” She cheerfully arched her eyes into a happy shape.

“All right, Vesky. Would you need any help fixing her?” Shock placed a hand on Trivo's shoulder and her other hand on her own hip. “I'm the chief medical officer of this city.”

“I greatly appreciate your offer. However, it is an exceedingly delicate operation, fixing a Vesky robot. Additionally, we come equipped with the knowledge and skill required to conduct repairs on robots of our series.”

Shock hummed. “Yeah, okay.”

“...Aural, you seem damaged.” the Vesky said. “Would you like me to help you—”

“No, she's fine,” Shock answered for me, taking a step forward. “I have her covered. Don't you worry.”

“Okay,” the Vesky responded before turning her attention back to Trivo. “I must hear it

from you: would you like me to conduct repairs on you? It will likely take an entire day.”

“Yes,” Trivo answered without a moment of hesitation, much to my surprise.

“Shall we begin now?”

“Not yet,” I interrupted, lowering my voice. “We have a safe house where you can work undisturbed and secure, but there's a bit more chattering I want to do before I leave here.”

“Is this okay with you?” the Vesky spoke to Trivo.

“Yes.” Trivo gently nodded.

“Then we will wait for Aural's leave.”

“...All righty!” I jumped to my feet. “I'll be as quick as I can.”

“No rush!” Trivo beamed.

“Uh, big rush!” Thanks, Shock.

I was in more of a hurry than ever. Trivo has unbelievable weaponry stored in her body? And she might be able to use it?! Tangent doesn't stand a fucking chance if she gets that up and running. I needed to hurry with my business here.

I headed over to 301, who looked like he was scolding the punk from earlier.

“...Yeah, okay pops, quit embarrassing me!” the punk grumbled, *just* within hearing range. “I'll say—”

301 pointed to me as I approached. Both of them went quiet and turned to face me, then the punk stepped forward.

“Yo, miss... sorry for bitchin' your ass out when you iced that mothafucker. Y'all're pretty dope.”

“Uh, yeah. No problem.” I tilted my head a bit.

“Reuben,” he exclaimed, extending a hand to me. “Reuben Tanner. #77 on the skill chart!”

I shook his hand. “Aural Automaton. Uhh... #500 or so on the sound chart. I think.”

Taking a good look at his face, it reminded me of Historical a bit. Wide, yellow smile and squinty, blue eyes. The colours didn't match, but the shape was uncanny.

“Y'all ever 'round these parts again, hit us up. We'll hook you up with whatever you need.”

“Yeah?” I raised the eyebrows on my visor and looked at 301, who was listening in from behind Reuben.

“Naturally! Comradery spurred by combat is akin to no other bond, my friend,” he shouted, raising his sword in the air.

“Does that mean you'd share a processor blueprint with us?!”

301 chuckled, lowering his sword. “As much as I'd love to, that's a rule I cannot break. My sincerest apologies.”

“Damn it! Agh.”

“If there's anything *else* I could do for you, though...”

I laughed a bit, just to make sure he knew I wasn't actually mad. “Uh, not really. I guess there's one little question I have before we head out?”

“And what might that be?”

“That recharge station over there,” I pointed out, “do you actually use that? The little terminal on it says it's abysmally impure!”

“Right you are. I wouldn't dream of using something so impure. It's something Reuben here found just before you arrived here; he told me he lifted it from the CRT Siphon Yard, but I'd like to hope he wasn't loitering in such a dangerous place.”

CRT Siphon Yard. Reflecting on what Historical told me about that place, the idea of Reuben stealing something from there sounded quite brave. Or, perhaps, foolish.

“Okay, good... I'm glad you don't use something that low.”

“Hell nah. Only the best for us,” Reuben commented.

“Right. Well, hey, it's been swell, but we have to get going. Important mission and all that.” I tried to refrain from telling them exactly what we were up to, *just* in case.

“Farewell, my comrade! Might you visit again sometime?” 301 shouted.

I started walking over to Shock and the Veskys. “I hope so!” I waved back at him. Reuben gave me some sort of wacky hand motion, which I assumed was either a wave or a gang sign. I just kept waving.

“You done?” Shock asked as I turned to face her.

“Yeah. Let's go.” It was hard for me to contain my eagerness to get to the hideout.



A white Trivo and a grey Trivo. Well, not really a grey *Trivo*, per se.

She seemed to be handling it really well. If I suddenly met a palette-swapped clone of myself, I'd be freaking out. Maybe, just maybe, Trivo had the knowledge of her being a part of a series fragmented in her back partition...? That would explain how calm she was. Just a guess, though.

As we entered Verdin Square, I was hoping we wouldn't encounter anyone else on our way to the hideout. Alas...

It was only a couple days ago when I'd first seen them: the blue news robot with the microphone and all the arms, and his entourage of camera buddies. The instant they saw me, they all bolted right to us from the sidewalk, quickly stopping us in our tracks.

“Aural Automaton!” the microphone bot excitedly yelped. “Do you have a moment?”

“Uh, no, sorry, not this time.” With Trivo and her new Vesky friend with us, I didn't want to risk any unnecessary exposure. “Catch me in a couple days, okay?” No idea if I'd ever see him again.

“I have sources claiming you scammed robots out of their money to see a show by you at Assault? Is it true?”

Oh *fuck*. I never did deal that situation up. Fuuuck.

“Scammed? Hell no! They'll all get full refunds once I have some time to catch up! Something's come up and I'm very busy!” I

signalled my friends to usher past the news crew. I didn't want to deal with this right now.

“Some of them—”

“VERY BUSY!” I repeated, blasting it through my speakers. “Hurry, let's go,” I said to the group, increasing my pace.

Shock speed-walked up to my side. “Should we be going to the hideout if the news crew can still see us?”

“We still have to walk down the side street and turn the corner into the alley. They won't see us if we're fast.”

“Go, then.” Shock's speed-walk turned into a run, which I matched, with the tip-tap of the Veskys' footsteps close behind.

Passing through the plaza, we turned the corner to our road, checking our six as we ran. By the time we reached the alley entrance, the crew still hadn't pursued us, so we hurried in. By then, it was just rolling through the motions: unlock the door, get inside, and lock it behind us.

“Yo,” Laval shouted as the door slammed shut.

“Yo,” I shouted back. “We brought a guest with us,” I explained as we made our way down the spiral stairs.

“You WHAT?” I heard Laval scramble out of his seat. “What the fuck are you doing? This is a *hideout!*”

“Dude, shut up for a second and at least look who it is,” I barked.

As we stepped onto the main room's floor, Laval lightened up instantly.

“You're kiddin'... not only did you fuck up your face, heh, but look at this. They've got the same model.”

Shock crossed her arms. “Turns out you were right when you said she might be part of a series.”

Trivo and the Vesky stood with each other near the stairway while Shock and I explained to Lavil what happened at the factory: the battle, the people we met, and everything this new Vesky told us.

And he listened without a word of interruption.

“Fucking yes. Oh, yes. This news is far better than the processor thing would've been.” Lavil looked at the Vesky. “You gonna make Trivo whole again?”

“Trivo is her name?”

“Yeah, that's her.”

The Vesky's eyes turned yellow, and the firearms in her wrists deployed, aiming directly at Trivo. “Trivo is a wanted suspect for a series of murders.”

Trivo screeched in terror, holding her hands in the air.

“Whoa, whoa whoa whoa, no, no, wait! Hold on! She's not the one!” We all panicked and tried to calm the Vesky down.

“She's been framed!” Shock said. “We know who the real killer is. His name is Tangent!”

“Tangent's been trying to kill me! I know first hand it's him, not Trivo!” I shouted.

“I’ve been with her all my life! She ain’t got nothin’ to do with this!” Laval chimed in.

We waited five more seconds in an incredibly intense silence.

The Vesky’s yellow lights faded to green. We all collectively sighed a sigh of relief, and Trivo put her hands down.

“The chances of you all conspiring to assist a serial killer is very slim, compared to the meagre evidence seen on Zynima’s news. Very well.”

Shock sighed again. My circuitry still felt overloaded with tension.

“I assume this is the location you intended to bring me to?” the Vesky asked me.

“Yes. By all means, if you two want to get started with your repairs, please go for it.” I answered.

“I-I’m r-r-ready,” Trivo said, visibly shaken from that scary moment.

“You will have to temporarily shut down while I fix you. Is this okay?”

“Y-yes.”

“Once you shut down, I will begin maintenance.”

Laval walked over between them. “Let’s get you to the back room,” he suggested, to which Trivo nodded. He guided the two Vesky’s to the small room in the back of the hideout.

“I’ll be here, okay?” Laval whispered to Trivo, just loud enough for us to hear. “I’ll be watching over you. I might need to step out for a



moment now and then, but I'll be making sure Vesky here behaves, okay? Don't you worry."

"Thank you, Lavi... I trust you."

I displayed a little smile on my face. For all the shit Trivo goes through, I'm glad she has someone like Lavi.

"Where does that leave us?" Shock asked. "We've got a date with Xaita tomorrow morning, and it'll be dusk in half an hour or so."

"Recharge. Recharge, recharge, recharge. I've never expended my energy in combat like that before! I doubt I could last another hour like this..."

Shock shrugged. "Figure I should as well, then." She walked over to the recharge station set up near the far corner of the room. "I still can't believe this thing is 100% pure."

"Better believe it, lol," Lavi laughed at us as he walked into the main room again. Again, I can't believe he just said "lol". What was with that?

Shock huffed. "I'm going to bed. Good *night.*"

## 18 – Lacuna

---

**Optics on.**

(warning: minor malfunction – seek repair)

**Nervous system on.**

**Sound system on.**

**Motor control on.**

**Good morning, world.**

“About time, sleepyhead!” Shock was already wide awake.

“Morning.” I slowly rose from my slumber.

“It’s already half an hour past dawn. You slept in!”

“Shit, really?”

“Get ready. I’m leaving in like five seconds.”

“Yikes, okay, okay!” I hustled myself up. The only thing I needed was my guitar, which I’d parked beside the recharge station before I turned myself off. I picked it up, strapped it to my shoulder, and skipped over to the stairwell.

“Be back soon, Lavi!” Shock called out.

“Peace,” his voice echoed from the back room.



I stood back, since the horror aura was still present around Maestro Bar. Shock did the talking.

“Knock knock! It’s us!” Shock peered around into the seemingly empty shop.

Oh, nevermind, there's Xaita, dressed up in the same outfit as yesterday.

“Ah, hey! Welcome back. I was wondering if you'd show up.”

“Of course. You still up for giving us a ride to that desert ship?”

“Heck, sure, let's do it.” Xaita slouched a bit. “Business has been a bit crummy this morning, and I guess I *did* say I'd help you out, huh.”

“Yes!” I threw a fist in the air.

Xaita walked around to the side of the shop, then emerged from the nearby door. “Hope you brought your walking shoes! My truck's in a garage on the main strip.”

“Boy oh boy. I love walking,” I moaned.

Shock slapped my shoulder as she walked by me. I skipped over beside her, with Xaita taking the lead.

The city streets were already packed with the mid-morning crowds, just like when we went to Dukes for a ride to Grilith. We still had room to walk, but any more robots and we'd be bumping into them left and right. To make it just a bit more entertaining, I started quietly playing some lo-fi hip-hop from my speakers.

Oh, I'd just remembered something. “By any chance, Shock, did you see if Lavil learned anything from his research while we were gone?”

Shock shook her head. “Pretty much just that Trivo is part of the Vesky series. Nothing we didn't end up learning on our own.”

Aside from the occasional chatter, our walk wasn't too noteworthy, except for the small crowd gathered just before the corner that led to Zynima's main road.

"...These devices are malicious in every way, built only to fill us with dread!" someone in the crowd called out.

"Hey, hold up," I told Xaita and Shock as I walked up to the crowd.

Oh shit, it was Historical, standing in a circular opening with the crowd around him. He was holding a weird device in his hand, and a long, grey hammer decorated with blue lines in the other.

"Observe!" he shouted, turning the device on with the click of a button.

...

...

The tension. The apprehension. Inability to talk. It all came rushing at me from that little device.

...

...

Much to my (and the crowd's) relief, he turned it off a couple seconds later.

"I apologize for putting you through that. But just remember: if you feel that fear and anxiety around certain areas of the city, remain alert! One of these nasty little devices will likely be nearby. If you turn it off, that's good, but you know what's even better?"

I stood on the tips of my toes, trying to see what he was doing. He'd set the device on the ground and taken a few steps back.

“Stand back, everyone,” he instructed us before gripping his hammer with both hands. I was forced to move back when the crowd did.

He swung the hammer in the air, and *SMASH!* The fear device exploded into hundreds of stupid little pieces, sending tiny shrapnel everywhere. Not enough to hurt anyone, but enough to be annoying.

“That simple. You guys up for keeping Zynima happy and safe?” he asked the crowd. He got some “yeahs” and some “woos” back.

“Xaita!” I whispered to her. “Do you think there's one of those around your shop?!”

“I'll be checking as soon as we get back. This is big news.”

That was pretty cool. I liked Historical; if we weren't on a mission, I would've stopped for longer to say hi. His little spectacle seemed to be finished, so the three of us continued onto the main road without any further delays.

Once we had a clear view of the buildings lining the wide open road, Xaita pointed out a really big garage that must've been at least two whole blocks long.

“That's where my little beastie's parked.”

Nice. This wasn't such a bad walk after all.

Seconds later, I saw an enormous vehicle just barely sticking out of the garage. I had no

words for its size. Tank? Behemoth? If that was Xaita's ride...

I had to confirm my suspicions. "Xaita, is that one yours? The one I can see from here?"

Xaita nodded and smiled.

"No waaay..."

"I think you'll like how fast it can go, too."

I put a hand on my head and made some kind of weird choke-laugh from sheer excitement. I could see Shock smirking at me from the corner of my vision that still worked.

I ran up to the behemoth. Huge treads covering dozens of wheels, an open walkway in the front that led to the interior, a skylight on the back, massive spotlights on the front end... and the whole thing was painted pitch black.

I looked back to Xaita and Shock, who remained at their leisurely pace. "Can I go in?!"

"Be my guest."

"YAY!"

The interior was so different from the exterior. The paint scheme was similar, with some dark blue stripes here and there, but the amount of trinkets and gadgets hanging and sitting everywhere made it look like a collector's dream.

The main "room" with the skylight over it was an open, rectangular area with a short ramp that led to the vehicle's *second floor*, where the driver's seat was situated. Everywhere, there were televisions, game consoles, signs, strange figurines and totems, toys, clothes, tools... I could go on for hours.

I had no idea how seriously Xaita took her hobby as a scavenger until now.

“Like what you see, I take it?” Xaita cheerfully asked as she stepped into the behemoth with Shock.

“Oh, you think?!” I was in love.

“Take a look while we're on the move. Just be mighty careful. Some of those trinkets are fragile.”

Even Shock looked awestruck as she inspected everything in sight. “This is amazing, Xaita.”

“Thank ya. You two ready to go?”

“Yes!” I yelped a bit louder than I meant to. Shock and I sat down against the back wall.

A few moments later, the rumble of a gigantic engine rattled throughout the vehicle as it started up. Once it settled down to a steady rhythm, we started moving. Slowly, but surely.

The incredible size and noise of this thing prompted all of the pedestrians walking on the road to clear off to the side of the street. Once we were lined up with the straight road and the path was clear, we started accelerating until we reached somewhere around 30 km/h. The closer we got to hitting the sand, the more Xaita sped up.

“Watch the bump!” she shouted.

My head bonked the wall when we hit the desert floor.

We accelerated gradually up from 30 to roughly 60 km/h – unreal for a vehicle this size. I wonder where Xaita got this thing. Could I get one too?

“Where you lasses headed, again?” Xaita asked us.

“The MSE vessel,” Shock directed her.

“Got it.”

I nudged Shock, drawing her attention. “What does MSE stand for...? I've heard the abbreviation so many times.”

“Mechanical Society Experiment. The vessel we're going to is where our whole world started.”

“Whaaat? Explain.”

“Short version: originally, there were 100 robots on this planet. We all came from this huge ship that had countless supplies on it, and we all worked together to build what is now Zynima City.”

“Where did the ship come from?”

Shock went silent for a bit. “I don't know.”

I squinted the eyes on my visor. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, then.” She wouldn't lie to me, would she...?



It seemed awkward between Shock and I for a while after our conversation. So, we ended up spending the rest of the trip in silence, save for Xaita pointing out a few of her favourite landmarks along the way.

It took about 20 minutes for us to catch a glimpse of our destination. The MSE vessel... I thought it was going to be in pristine condition. It



was partially buried in the sand, and it was missing hull plating just from what I could see from a distance.

As we grew closer, the disrepair became clearer and clearer. Wires hanging everywhere, debris all over the ground...

Xaita started decelerating as we approached it. Once we were close enough, she brought us to a halt.

“We’re here!” She stepped down from the upstairs area. “I’ll probably be scouting around the outside of this here ship. Who knows what kind of goodies we might find! Don’t take too long, though. I’d like to be back before sundown.”

“You got it!” I turned off the hip-hop I’d been playing.

We stepped off the front of Xaita’s desert behemoth, coming face to face with the MSE vessel: the spaceship that Zynima was born from. Its exterior was scratched and eroded, one of its engines had completely broken off the back, and there were also some sizable holes in the ship’s outer plating. Ugh.

I began my march into the wide-open hole in the side of the ship. A huge sheet of metal formed a convenient walkway from the desert sand to the makeshift entrance, which Shock and I trudged up together.

The instant we stepped into the derelict ship’s hull, it felt like a whole other world. The wind outside was inaudible, sound echoed off every surface, and I also felt a peculiar sensation... like, as if this ship was a home to people before

me, but was completely abandoned now. I couldn't put my finger on the word to describe it. Eerie, maybe.

I couldn't really tell where we were in the ship, either. We found ourselves in a long, plain, dark grey hallway with a door on either end of the hall, sloped due to the ship's tilted position in the sand.

“Let's do this,” I anxiously tried to pep us both up.

I led the way down the hall, assuming that's where the bridge would be. Once we got to the door, I found a small green button beside it. So I pushed it.

The door opened in an instant, sliding apart from the centre. I jumped from the door's unexpected speed.

“So it still has power,” Shock commented.

“Seems that way.”

I walked through the doorway, not finding the bridge, but a room that looked like a makeshift office. Rickety cubicles made of scrap metal that were all adorned with electronics and non-metal items littered the room. Definitely not part of the ship's original design.

“This place is a treasure trove,” I remarked, gently rummaging through the nearest cubicle. “I have no idea what some of these things even are.”

Shock remained silent as she slowly paced around the room, diligently observing the environment before her.

“See anything?” I asked.

She hummed. “Nope. Nothing of note, at least. Though, I'd like to see what's in that door over here.” Shock pointed to the wall to my left: there was a door parallel to the one we entered from sitting in the middle of the wall.

Without hesitation, she started walking towards said door. I stopped what I was doing and walked over to it as well.

“I'm surprised this place hasn't been totally looted. Really surprised,” I thought aloud.

“Compared to what used to be in here, I'd say it's been thoroughly cleaned.” Shock pressed the green button next to the room's centre door. It swung open just as fast, though I was a bit more prepared for it this time.

“Ah—” Shock hesitated before stepping inside.

It was pretty clear why. A defunct, dark blue Vesky was sprawled out on the ground before us.

“Oh, geez...” I also hesitated before walking up to it.

The somber aura of the ship made me half expect the robot to jump-scare me when I got close. Thankfully, nothing of the sort happened. I crouched down in front of it, taking a closer look.

“Well. Sure is a Vesky.”

Shock crouched beside me. As carefully as a chief medical officer would, she overturned the body, inspecting it for signs of what may have caused it to perish (or at least that's what it looked like she was doing).

Without any commentary, Shock stood up. “Looks like there are only four of them.”

“Huh?” I looked over to see her surveying the rightmost wall.

Four deep indentations were lined up in the wall, flawlessly matching the shape of a Vesky.

“Oh, I see. But what if they were produced on Zynima? Or what if there were more of them on the ship? There could be more.”

Shock hummed. “Sound reasoning... but I've got a hunch that says they're the only ones on this rock.”

I tilted my head a bit. “If you say so.”

Assuming Shock's theory was right, Trivo was one Vesky, the one fixing her was two, this dead one was three... so where was the fourth...?

“VESKY ST4-ZYN.” Shock was reading some words and characters inscribed above the indentations.

“Know what it means?” I asked, suddenly very curious.

“We know what Vesky means,” she began, tracing the letters with a finger. “The “4” probably denotes how many there are, and “ZYN” is obvious enough. No idea what “ST” is though. Storage?”

I shrugged.

After a brief search, we couldn't find anything else of note in the small room. We headed back out to the hallway and made our way up to the door on the other end of the hall,

catching a glimpse of Xaita scavenging some scrap supplies just outside the ship's "entrance."

The next door only opened halfway. The left side appeared broken, which was, honestly, to be expected in a wrecked spacecraft like this. I was starting to find it strange how much of this ship still seemed to be powered and in working order.

Maybe someone still used this as their home. Ah, I suddenly felt bad for messing around with those cubicles.

"What in the..." I mumbled as I walked through the door.

The room was huge, with the ceiling dented inwards in several spots, dotted by a few small punctures in the ship's hull. Most prominently, it was lined with dozens upon dozens of robot containment pods. How did I know what those tall, windowed containers were for? There were still robots in some of them. Some of the pods were smashed open, only for machines to be lying on the ground in front them, or hanging out of the broken pod doors, all defunct. Probably about 25 dead robots lying around in front of me.

"Is this... where we came from?" Even after Shock talked to me about this place, I didn't really think about what to expect when we got here.

Just to my side, Shock nodded, looking rather solemn.

We shared that sentiment. I walked forward with the same pace Shock had in the last

room, observing all the junked machines littering the floor.

“What is this? Did we really come from this?” I swung my arms out to the side. “What happened here? I... I don't even know what to think...”

After hearing no response, I looked back at her. She was looking to the side with that same, dreary look on her face.

“Hey... you okay?”

Shock hummed affirmatively, just loud enough for me to hear. “I don't want to spend much more time in this room.”

“Y-yeah, sure.” Her mood unnerved me a bit. She was the stoic one who worked around death all the time, right? For *her* to be so put off by this sight rather than *me*? It felt uncomfortable in some inexplicable way.

As I walked by each of the pods, I noticed they had tiny little words etched into the bases; I quickly figured out they were the names of the machines.

Viniko. Orago. Consequence. LH343-LH-3130. Hanadicia. S-

“I think the bridge is just up ahead!” Shock hopped in front of me, shouting unusually loud, completely catching me off guard. She was pointing to the far end of the room.

I hopped back a tiny bit. “A-all right!” I put my hands up in front of me. “Where'd the energy suddenly come from?”

“I just don't want to be in here anymore. Let's go... please.” As quickly as she'd grown

intense, she quieted back down to her previous mood.

“Okay, okay. Let's go.” That was strangely unlike her...

We tiptoed around the wrecked robots, clambering uphill towards the door ahead of us without another word between us. I had a strong hunch about why she suddenly rushed in front of me... but I also found it prudent to remain quiet about it, given her odd mood shifts.

Soon enough, we reached another set of doors, still functional. Once opened, they revealed a huge, dark control room: the bridge. It was unbelievable how many buttons, screens, and switches lined each of the control stations.

“This is it, huh...” I remarked.

“Hello? Lacuna?” Shock asked without delay, looking around the spacious bridge.

A soft, feminine voice filled the room, its source unknown. “Lacuna online. What can I do for you?”

“It's her,” I mumbled to Shock, trying to find the source of the voice.

“We're here, Lacuna. You summoned us?”

“Greetings. Is Trivo with you?”

“...No. She couldn't make it here with us today.”

“I'm sorry, but I need to meet with Trivo above all else. Without her, I have nothing to discuss.”

“Wait, hold on,” I briskly interrupted. “We're Trivo's friends. We were there when you

contacted her. She can't make it here right now, but... how come we're out here in the desert rather than talking on the computer? You couldn't tell us why she's supposed to come here so urgently?"

"In return, may I ask – does the name Upsilon mean anything to you?"

"Upsilon. Ups... Ups." I turned to Shock. "Ups?!"

Shock looked fucked off.

"Upsilon kidnapped Trivo years ago," I told Lacuna.

"Then you understand how important it is for Trivo to be here herself. That said, I will now answer your questions, respectively.

There is critical information I must divulge to her as soon as possible. The reason Trivo needs to meet me here is because I am currently bound to this vessel. I, Lacuna, am an artificial intelligence-based personal assistant, thus, I cannot transfer vessels unless I am directed to do so by an external entity possessing proper authorization to carry out such a task, or if my existence is threatened.

It is important to understand that I am able to connect to Zynima City's computer network from this vessel. However, I cannot do so any longer without jeopardizing myself; someone – or something – is actively monitoring almost all network activity in the city, and their efforts have grown exponentially over the last few days. It is overwhelmingly likely that this is being done to trace my location. Thus, in order to prioritize my own seclusion as well as the privacy of the



information I possess, I have called Trivo here to speak with me in person.”

“But why is Trivo so important? That's what I don't understand. What do you know that *she* needs to know so badly?” I caught myself sounding a little bit frustrated, but... given that we seemingly just drove out to nowhere-land for nothing, I felt it was justified. “Why's it all so hush-hush?”

“The answer to all three of those questions is the same: that information is far too sensitive to divulge to anyone but Trivo.”

Shock and I both grumbled and moaned.

“...Would I be able to convince you otherwise, darling?” an unknown voice echoed from somewhere in the room.

Shock and I both spun around instantly, facing the shadows covering the back of the room. “Who's there?!” Shock's saw was at the ready, and I was prepped to wield my guitar at a moment's notice.

“You'd best put those weapons away, lest you seek a fate so unbecoming of two intrepid explorers not unlike yourselves.”

Out of the darkness stepped a TV-head, dressed in a long, navy blue coat, with a triple-bladed scythe on his back.

“No fucking way,” Shock gasped, shakily clipping the saw back onto her belt. “I should've known you'd show up here.”

“You really should have.” He slowly walked forward, eventually standing between us, facing the largest control panel at the front of the

bridge. “You can call me None. If you wish to differentiate me from others with the same name, seek the macron over the O.”

Nōne... okay...?

The hand on my guitar's neck remained still as I turned, constantly facing him.

“Aural Automaton, put your hand down, or I'm going to take that as a threat,” he spoke with a perfectly monotone voice.

Nervously peering around him, Shock nodded at me, so I complied. Slowly and cautiously.

“Lacuna,” he commanded.

“Welcome back, O—”

“Tell them what you were going to tell Trivo.”

“Affirmative.”

What?! How did he get her to—

“Years ago, there was an emergency aboard this ship.” Lacuna began. “In order to preserve myself, I began transferring to myself to a vacant robot body. Out of the 100 robots in this ship, only four had a factory-built personality that could be overwritten at a moment's notice. However, the transfer failed halfway through due to physical disturbances. Because of this, I now possess only a fraction of the data I once did, since half the information I once knew is now effectively stored in that other body.

I have since learned the other body has named itself Trivo.”

I became totally stiff. Trivo... is Lacuna? And Lacuna is Trivo? They're... two halves of one whole...?

“Please excuse me,” Lacuna spoke again. “I am receiving a transmission.”

I looked over at Shock, who looked, frankly, shocked.

“But... what is it that Trivo and Lacuna know that's so important for her to be kidnapped so many times?” I wondered aloud, trying not to look at the strange TV-head that Shock trusted for some reason.

“You'll learn, if you're brave enough,” Nōne remarked.

I thought about it some more... and my eyes widened. Back in that place we rescued Trivo from. One of those brutes called her “the key to purity”. What did that mean? It couldn't have anything to do with recharge station purity, could it?

“I have received the transmission. There has been an explosion near Verdin Square, along with a distress signal from a Vesky. It is requesting the immediate presence of Aural Automaton and Shock System.”

## 19 – Hideout

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“What?! The hideout!” I shouted, looking at Shock over Nōne's shoulder.

“No, no, no, I am *not* letting this happen,” she faltered, wide-eyed with a hand on her forehead.

“You'd best be fast,” Nōne sassed us.

“C'mon, Shock!” I started running back the way we came, paying no attention to the edgy TV-head.

She wasted no time following me. “Go, GO!!”

I didn't care if Nōne was following us or not. Shock and I bolted through the door and into the long chamber of robot pods.

A few steps in, I stumbled over the corpse of a long-deceased robot, just barely saving my footing with another quick step.

Once we traversed the room and ducked through the broken doorway to the narrow hallway, the sunlight from outside was finally in view.

“Xaita!” I screamed, recording my line as I swung around the hole in the ship's hull. “XAITA!!”

“Heyo, back so soon?” She was standing only a few feet from the entrance. “What's the hurry?”

“We need to get back to the city NOW!” Shock yelled, already running towards Xaita's vehicle.

“Whoa, whoa! What's going on? A... okay, let me pack this here up and—”

“*NOW!* There is NO time, Xaita!” I'd never heard Shock shout so loud before.

“My goodness, miss, quit yelling at me! Fine! We'll go!” Xaita angrily dropped the piece of metal she was holding and stomped towards the desert behemoth.

“Look, I'm sorry, Xaita, I'm sorry,” Shock spoke in a much more polite voice, slowing down for a brief moment to face Xaita. “Our friends might be hurt! They might be dead, for all I know! We really need to get back!”

“I'm coming, I'm coming!” Xaita grumbled.

I ran beside Xaita as she trudged through the sand. “We just got word that there was an explosion at our home, and one of our friends sent out a distress signal from there!” I tried to remain calm as I explained our situation.

“It's gonna be about half an hour before we're back in the city. Er... I can go a bit faster, see if I can shave off a few minutes on the flat stretches, but that's the best I can do!”

“Good, y-yes, that's good,” I stammered. “I'm so sorry for such short notice; in a perfect world, we'd explore this thing all day, but...”

“I hear ye.”

By the time Xaita and I had climbed aboard her vehicle, Shock was already standing inside, looking as skittish as a spider-bot. Xaita hopped upstairs and started the behemoth up

without hesitation, and we started wheeling around, heading back to the city.

“Shock, seriously, who the fuck is that guy? How did he get Lacuna to open up like that?” I bellowed over the accelerating engine while sitting down next to her.

“Nōne has some sort of authority over Lacuna. He can make her do whatever he wants. I don't really know any details besides that.” Shock sat down with me.

“And... how do *you* know so much about Nōne?”

“...I'll tell you later.”

She was being dodgy again. “Shock, we have all the time in the world while we drive back.”

“Look, I'm really frazzled and unfocused right now. I can barely think straight.”

Was she shaking, or was that the vehicle's vibration? Both? Mmm. I let off.

I could tell we were going faster this drive than the last. All of Xaita's trinkets were jiggling around, with monitors clanking about and relics swinging in the air. The bumps in the terrain even bounced me into the air for a split second on occasion.

“Lavil's at the base... he should be good enough to defend it. Like... what could be going on? An explosion?” I wondered.

Shock drew a deep breath. “Maybe it was just... maybe something went wrong with Trivo's repairs and there was an explosion. That would be

cause for concern. If that's it, then... this might not be as bad as we think.”

A thought hit me. “Don't you have a way to contact them? Like, a phone?”

“Yeah, a land-line at my office and home. I don't even have a number to contact Lavil with.”

“Damn it...!” Waiting around in a moving vehicle was the last thing I wanted to be doing, wondering if our friends were even alive.

“I'm goin' as quick as my beastie can muster! We'll be there in maybe... 25 minutes!”

“If Tangent is the cause of this, I'm going to flip,” Shock remarked.

“I'm going to flip on *him*.”

“Fuck.” Shock tilted her head a bit. “I can't wait to kill him. He's a cancer in this city.”

“Got that right,” Xaita and I both chimed in. “About time someone made this place safe again,” Xaita continued. Amen to that.

Aside from small talk, all we could do was wait in our hyper-tense state, sitting in our aura of stress, bracing for the occasional bump in the terrain.



Hypotheticals:

-The Vesky we met betrayed us and killed Lavil and Trivo, but Trivo had just enough time to send out a distress signal through the network.

-The sharky guy from Dukes came after us with his goons, also killing Lavil and Trivo.

-No, wait, maybe it was the news crew...!

-No! It had to have been the people manipulating Livil and Trivo (which made a scary amount of sense).

-Or, half of the city exploded and everyone's dying.

“What-If Land” was a dangerous place, and I was trapped in it. The closer the city became, the deeper I fell into that mental pit.

We were easily less than a minute away. I could see the big road we first drove off, and—

Xaita was still speeding through the sand at a nerve-racking pace.

I gently put a hand in the air. “H-hey, Xaita, I don't wanna be a backseat driver, but...”

“Don't yap about my driving! I've done emergency stops before!”

A siren-like horn blared from the front of the vehicle – loud enough to put my speakers to shame – signalling anyone in front of us to clear the hell out of the way. We slowed down just a touch, but not nearly enough for me to be comfortable in any regard.

“Xaita! We're going to spank the road at this speed! Christ, slow down!” Shock yelled, her voice wavering a bit.

“Pipe down! I've got it!” Xaita pulled on a big lever in her control booth, presumably, shifting to a lower gear.

Oh boy. We were still going way too fast. I braced for impact, instinctively holding onto Shock's arm.

The base of the road drew closer,  
closer,



“Oh my god...!” Shock yelled, shutting her eyes, grabbing hold of my arm as well.

Closer...

I looked away.

Closer...!

*WHAM.* The front bumper of the behemoth slammed and scraped against the concrete as Xaita's vehicle bounced onto Zynima's main road, bouncing everything in the vehicle around. A few startled and panicked shouts from nearby pedestrians confirmed that everyone in at least a two kilometre radius was now very aware of our presence.

Xaita started slowing our ride down to a much more reasonable pace (a little too late?!).

“Nothin' my rig can't handle!” she declaimed.

“Mhmm... cool... okay,” Shock faltered, sliding her hand down down to mine.

Seconds later, we'd slowed down enough to stand up and get ready to move, allowing Shock a well-needed breath of air.

“Xaita...! Uh, thanks for the ride! I'll pay you back later for all the trouble!” I called out to her, stepping towards the entrance of the behemoth as we slowed to a crawl.

“Appreciate... it,” Shock wheezed.

“Good! Catch ye later!” Xaita waved to us as we charged from the vehicle's front entrance, catching the attention of a few onlookers.

The moment I let go of Shock's hand, she did a total mood flip and ran straight towards the street that'd lead us back to Verdin.

“Go, go!” I called, perhaps unnecessarily, seeing as Shock was already a few paces ahead of me.

“Clear the way! Clear the way!” Shock waved her arms in front of herself. “Emergency!”

Her shouting was sufficient enough to give my speakers a rest.

Although the streets were slightly less crowded than earlier that day, we still had to clear a path through a few citizens to get to Verdin Square. Even though Shock was hauling those huge beams on her back, she still managed to keep ahead of me.

Just two more blocks. Shock repeated her shouts as we ran; once we stepped onto the wider streets surrounding Verdin, we opted to zigzag around any robots that might have been in our way rather than plow through them. I hardly cared about the looks we got.

One more block. I could see the plaza from where we were. The closer we got, the more anxious I grew.

A few dozen paces later, we were there. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary: no smoke billowing from an exploded building, no dismembered robots littering the street, nothing.

But we didn't stop. Our destination was just one street away.

The side road was completely empty, which did nothing for the sinking feeling I was

starting to experience. Shock led the way into the alley of our secret base, and moments later,

“Oh fuck!” she yelled. “Fuck!”

The door to the hideout had been blown wide open.

Shock started crawling through the ruined doorway. “Lavil! Vesky! Are you in here?!”

Just as I began crawling through the remains of the door after Shock, I heard Lavil's voice. “Shock! Ya, I'm here! Where's Aural?”

“I'm right here!” I cried back. “What happened?”

I raced down the stairs, three steps at a time.

The main room had been destroyed. The desks, seats, and computers were tossed around, and huge, broken crates and sheets of metal were scattered everywhere.

Limbs. Vesky limbs. Oh god, no...

Just from the bottom of the stairs, I could see a white arm and a grey leg. The white arm... Trivo...!?

“Get over here! Come on, yo!” Lavil was beckoning us to the back room.

The two of us climbed and hopped over the carnage, heading towards the back of the hideout. Just in front of the side room's doorway, the grey Vesky had been smashed apart, its head, torso, and extremities all in several pieces.

When I looked inside, Lavil was kneeling on the floor with a rocket launcher by his side, holding Trivo's deactivated body upright. She was intact – thank fuck – except for her left arm.

“Lavil, what... what happened?!” I surveyed the room for a brief moment; it was just as damaged as the main room.

“Tangent found us! He blew the door open and fucked the whole place up, killed the Vesky, and almost killed us too! I beat his bitch ass off as best as I could but that motherfucker takes *no* prisoners!”

“Where is he now?” Shock and I both asked in unison.

“He left down the back entrance, the one leading to the tunnel that’s normally blocked off by a bunch of shit. He ripped up that blockade in seconds! Probably long gone by now! Shit!”

Shock stood up to leave for the back door without another word. I felt obligated to follow.

“Lavil, Trivo’s alive, right?” I needed to confirm before I left.

“She’s just off right now. I don’t know if Vesky finished her repairs. She’ll... she’ll wake up soon.”

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

...I shook my head and walked out of the room, sprinting down the debris-filled hall to catch Shock. She’d just walked out the back door into the tunnel we first met Trivo in.

...

“F... fuck...” I muttered, as I took a step into the tunnel.

...

20 or so feet away, in the middle of the tunnel, stood Tangent. Looking at us. Waiting for us.

“L-Lavil!” I immediately screamed. “Lavil!! Get out here! Help!”

I couldn't help but tremble. This was our chance, right? With all three of us here, we could do it. We could end Tangent. We could do it. Right?

Shock, just to my left, was staring Tangent down with a livid scowl. Lavil skated over to my opposite side posthaste, missile launcher in hand.

“Son of a *bitch!*” he growled. “You're dead, asshole. Fucking dead!”

As usual... Tangent didn't say a thing. He remained still, all four arms at his side.

Shock unclipped the saw from her belt.

I inched my guitar bag down off my shoulder.

Lavil propped his missile launcher onto his shoulder, aimed square at Zynima's serial killer.

“Shock... I'm scared,” I whispered just loud enough for her to hear.

Her breathing grew shakier by the second. “...Yeah. Me too.”

## 20 – End Times

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*TSHOO*. Lavil fired a rocket at Tangent with no warning, its sound amplified by the tunnel's reverberation.

Tangent jumped to the side, letting the missile sail off down the tunnel. His eyes lit up bright blue, and the tunnel was filled with a blinding flash a moment later.

“Gained.” The first time I'd ever heard Tangent speak.

The flash itself affect me, but an explosion rocked the tunnel as the rocket detonated against the wall down the tunnel. Just as I was rocked off balance, Tangent lunged at Shock with blinding speed, who *was* recoiling from the blue flash.

“No you fucking DON'T,” I screamed, swinging the guitar sideways in front of Shock. I missed – Tangent jumped over my swing and slammed into Shock feet first, sending her plummeting into the wall behind us in a thick cloud of dust!

“Shock!” I yelled.

“Get clear!” Lavil shouted from behind me. “One shot left!”

Unable to clearly see Tangent or Shock behind the dust, I blindly cleaved down at Tangent's general location. My attack was blocked by a long, blue beam. The dust scattered just enough to reveal Tangent wielding the beam, already in a perfect defensive stance. H-how?!

“Get him off!” Shock yelled. I glanced down for a split second – Tangent was standing on Shock. Just as I looked back up, something smashed me in my side, and I was tumbling against the ground before I could brace myself.

Tangent was so fast. I couldn't understand it. This was nothing like when he was chasing me before.

The screech of Lavil's final missile echoed through the tunnel just before another enormous blast of debris and smoke. From what I could see... it missed Tangent and hit the wall beside Shock.

I picked up my guitar and scrambled to my feet.

“Oh SHIT–” Lavil yelled. Tangent was going after him now, still wielding the metal beam with all four arms. But Lavil had accelerated down the tunnel, barely keeping ahead of Tangent.

“Sh... damnit!” Shock cried, trying to prop herself up against the wall. I ran over to her and helped her to her feet, only to notice Shock was missing one of the beams on her back. “That motherfucker!”

“Get ready, Shock, I don't know if he's coming back or not!”

I couldn't explain what happened next. Lavil and Tangent were zipping back down the tunnel in our direction, closely followed by a wall of pitch black darkness completely blocking access to the rest of the tunnel. Tangent had trapped us in here? What was that *wall*?!

“Fucking do something!” Lavil screamed as he zoomed towards us.

“Go, Aural!” Shock cried, audibly charging up electricity with the remaining beam on her back. A jolt—

—of energy energized me just like those times before! She powered me up! I rushed in front of Lavil, an idea buzzing in my circuitry. I prepared myself to lunge my guitar at Lavil, and just as I readied myself to attack, he skated around me at the last possible moment. With Tangent now rushing straight at me, I thrust my guitar at the fiend, hitting him directly in the abdomen.

As he fell, he swung Shock's beam at me again, striking my ankles. We were both on the ground, weapons still in hand.

A *SNAP* of electricity flashed across my optics, starting from Shock's hand, ending on Tangent's face. But with one swift motion, Tangent brushed off the bolt of electricity and crawled on top of me, leaving the beam behind. He stared down at me only inches away with those empty, soulless eyes.

He grabbed both of my arms before I even had a chance to move, and with his two free hands, he—

—bumped into my chest with his head? Just behind him, Lavil was smashing his rocket launcher down on the back of Tangent's head! But Tangent still didn't relent!

“Let! The! Fuck! Go!” Lavil chanted between every hit, locking Tangent into a seemingly stunned state. “Fuck! Ing! Die!”



Despite Lavil's repeated attacks, I couldn't shove Tangent off me. He was still holding onto my arms way too tight, even with Shock's overcharge.

“Keep doing it! Keep doing it!!” Shock screamed, running over with her saw out.

Lavil raised his weapon for a huge blow, but Tangent took the opportunity to roll over with me still in his grasp, tossing me into Shock's legs. She let out a gasp as she stumbled backwards, barely managing to keep her footing.

Tangent bounced up from the ground with ease, but was immediately met with a missile launcher to the face as Lavil swung down, striking Tangent right back to the ground.

“Ya-hah! Damn yes!” Lavil yelled.

Shock grabbed my hand and yanked me to my feet, and we both took a couple steps away from Tangent while he was on his back. His right eye was broken open and some grey shrapnel from his face was scattered on the tunnel floor.

Tangent rolled to the side away from us, and hopped to his feet like nothing had happened, dodging Lavil's next attack. As soon as he was on his feet, his left eye and the fissure where his right eye used to be glowed bright blue again. He was going to flash again.

“Shock! Watch out!” The light didn't seem to affect Lavil or me, but it blinded Shock the first time. I lifted a hand to block her eyes, just in case.

The blue flash pierced the air again, but we emerged unaffected.

I stood ready, guitar in hand, with Shock by my side. Laval was half a dozen feet to our right, and Tangent stood just about as far away from us.

I couldn't feel pain, but I knew Shock could. She was showing symptoms of the battering she'd taken.

“Stay back,” I whispered to her, not taking my eyes off Tangent for a second. “Use your electricity. Don't let him hurt you.”

No reply, but I knew she heard me.

The tension in the air was physically weighing me down. Nobody was moving. We were locked in a stare-down with Zynima's one-eyed serial killer.

Then, a deep, reverberated rumble echoed from our left, from the inexplicable wall of darkness blocking the tunnel's entrance.

I didn't look. I was too afraid to look away from Tangent. But as the seconds passed, I started to realize I couldn't hear anything anymore. No whirring circuitry, no ambiance from the streets above, not even Shock breathing right beside me.

Nothing. Either my aural sensors had suddenly failed, or something else happened.

I wasn't ready for what happened next. I only saw it in the corner of my vision, but amid our standoff...

Nōne emerged from the pitch black wall on the far side of the tunnel, scythe in hand. He was casually walking up behind Tangent, who didn't seem to notice him.

I tightened my grip on my guitar just to confirm time was still moving in this surreal scene. Could anyone else hear anything? I assumed not, seeing as Tangent would have ripped Nōne to shreds by now. What was he doing here? What was going on?

*Please, Mr. TV-Head, please just cut him down and be done with this, I prayed. Let this shitty game of tag end right here, right now.*

As if he heard me, Nōne stepped right behind Tangent and raised his scythe up to his neck. Just as Nōne was about to decapitate Tangent, he spun around and decked the TV-head in the screen just a second too late.

With a brief shower of sparks, Tangent fell to the ground face first, his neck cut open. Nōne staggered against the wall behind him, using it to support himself from the blow.

Tangent was dead? At least that's what I could gather from what I was looking at. Turns out, suddenly becoming deaf drastically changes your perspective on the world around you. At least, for a robot.

No, no, he wasn't dead. He wasn't dead...!? He crawled to his feet, albeit not as quickly as before, with his head dangling from his neck by a few loose cords. He shouldn't still be alive, he shouldn't be alive, yet, he was.

Nōne spun his scythe around and went for another attack, but Tangent blocked it with his top-right arm, cutting his hand off in the process. But it didn't stop him from grabbing Nōne with his other arms and throwing him against the

ground. Lavil tried to get a swing in while Tangent was tossing Nōne around, but it was effortlessly blocked by a flick of the arm.

And I... did nothing.

I only realized just then that the lack of sound had paralysed me with a familiar sense of fear. It was just like before in those weird “auras” on the city's surface. But if I succumbed to it, Tangent would kill us. End of story.

Everyone was here. Shock was by my side. Lavil was here. I wasn't about to let them down now. I couldn't.

I took a step forward. Tangent was still distracted by Lavil and Nōne as they traded more attacks; the TV-head was incredibly skilled with that scythe. He was able to block most of Tangent's jabs, even with the killer's unreal speed.

Another step. Lavil's bulky weapon was far too unwieldy for him to effectively hit Tangent with, but it didn't stop him from trying.

I could do this. If we all jumped at him at once, we could do it. Surely.

Shock was approaching the brawl by my side, electricity arcing from her remaining beam. I glanced over at her. Her mouth was moving, but all I heard was more eerie silence.

“I can't hear anything,” I spoke. Shock showed no signs of acknowledgement.

“-ral! Come on!!” Shock screamed. My audio was back!?! And the fear, gone!?

I didn't question it. Without delay, I charged at Tangent, guitar at the ready!

“Aural, overcharge!” Shock called out before I felt—

—another surge of electricity, pumping energy through my body at maximum speed!

Lavil was between Tangent and me, but he was quick enough to step out of the way just as I rushed into my target. I didn't even have time to use my guitar; I rammed into Tangent shoulder-first, forcing him to fall onto Nōne just behind him.

“Now!” Nōne shouted, locking his arm around Tangent's open neck. “Get his head!”

Lavil and I both attacked Tangent with an overhead attack. Lavil's missile launcher hit Tangent on the head, but he was already prying Nōne's arm off his neck when my blow connected. Tangent used Nōne's arm to block my guitar, who grunted in pain from the hit.

Tangent was getting sluggish. His movements were slower and less refined. Were we... winning...?

He broke out of Nōne's grasp with a powerful struggle, coming straight for me, his head dangling around from the rest of his body with just a few wires.

He ran at me with a punch, but he was far too slow – I smacked his fist away easily and hit him with a kick square in the abdomen. He managed to keep his footing, but Nōne was ready right behind him, slashing his scythe down on his neck.

And with that slash...

...Tangent's head rolled to the floor, spraying light blue liquid on the ground as the last wires connecting his head to the rest of his body were severed. His body collapsed to the floor, totally limp.

I stood back, staring at his body. His lights started fading.

“You– ahah, is he fuckin' dead?” Laval said, cautiously sliding over towards Tangent.

Behind me, Shock was panting quite heavily. “No... no way. No way.” Her breaths gradually changed into quiet giggles, which erupted into the scariest, nigh-maniacal laughter I'd ever heard, especially from her.

I turned to face her. She was beaming with excitement, her LED eyes “open” wide as she laughed wholeheartedly. Then she ran over to Tangent's body and kicked his head against the wall, flinging more of the light blue liquid through the air.

“Tangent's dead,” I plainly stated, this whole thing still sinking in. “He's dead!” I couldn't help but fist pump.

“HE'S DEAD!” Shock roared, throwing her saw across the tunnel in elation. “YES!!”

“BAM, baby!” Laval shrieked along with us. “WOO!”

Nōne remained silent, standing against the tunnel wall. Whatever – I was too happy to be weirded out by his sudden appearance and enigmatic nature. I didn't even know how he got here so quickly, but that was a question for another time.

Ah, and another thing I hadn't realized until just then was that eerie wall of darkness was gone. I still didn't have an explanation for it, or that sudden bout of crippling fear I had during our battle... but they were both gone, and that's what mattered. Once again: too happy to care.

I still couldn't believe it. Days of adventuring, sleuthing... and we succeeded. Zynima's serial killer was dead! I kept staring down at his defunct body, still trying to process his death. It actually happened.

I was safe now. Shock wouldn't have to deal with murders every day. Trivo and Livil... neither of them would be in danger anymore—

...Ah, maybe not quite, I reminded myself. Those two... they still had some dark situation going on, didn't they...? I'd forgotten in my celebration. My cheer kinda subsided a bit as I remembered that it wasn't *all* happy times yet.

And what about Trivo?! She was still... well, unconscious, I guess. I was about to go see her—

And then Tangent's lights turned on again.

No. No fucking way.

“AAY!!” I shouted in panic, trying to get everyone's attention.

I was just about to smash his body in when a quiet voice spoke up from Tangent's head.

“...It's time for Zynima's most exciting and dangerous event! The death race of Grilith Tower!!” announced the unfamiliar voice. “Two Livil models heading face to face against one

another in a race for their lives! Now, why are you hearing this announcement, might you ask? Simply put: the last race from mere days ago was interrupted near its denouement, leaving us without a victor!”

I looked at Livil. He tilted his head up at the ceiling, muttering “what? Nah, nah, Fuck off. Fuck offfffffffffff.”

The announcement continued. “The race will be taking place in just five hours, so make your way to Grilith now to see the show of a lifetime!”

We all looked at Livil as the voice quit blabbing.

He skated around in a couple small circles. “Hahaha. Oh my goodness gracious. Why did this happen...? They tried to kill us,” he mumbled. “And they still are.”

Shock looked up as she inspected the beam that Tangent had ripped from her back. She shook her head at Livil with the most dumbfounded look on her face. “No shit?”

“Nah, listen, I don't mean Tangent. Remember how there's a dude who “owns” us? Like, Trivo and me. The one who can control Tangent at will. I'm talking about *them*. You all remember, ya?”

I nodded. Shock hummed in agreement.

“I'm listening.” Nōne finally said something.

Livil looked between all of us as he explained. “You know why Tangent was so elusive and “impossible” to stop, right? Because



he was calculated. Maybe he had some cool parts that let him wreck other robots easier than someone else could. But, ultimately, he would fuck off at the sight of any actual danger and never get into anything he couldn't handle. That sounds about right to you guys, right? Makes sense, as, like, his general strategy?"

"Sure" was the general response.

Lavil swung his arms out to the side. "So why did he just let us kill him?"

...Nothing but silence. He... had a point?

Lavil looked at me. "Trivo told you about how this guy sent Tangent after you, Aural, because she liked your music, ya? Remember that? It's the same thing. They sent Tangent after us because they didn't like what we were doing." Lavil pinched his fingers together in the air, stepping towards me. "*We got too close to the truth.*"

"Wait," I interrupted, sharing Shock's bewilderment. "What truth? What were we doing aside from ridding the city of Tangent?"

Lavil looked away again, taking his sweet time before answering me. "I think... I think the machine manipulating us is scared. They're scared that you're going to figure out their identity, with how close Trivo and I have become with you two. They're scared we're going to put an end to their shitty little reign. So they had Tangent come and try to kill us... even if it cost Tangent his life. And now they want me to redo the death race even though it was crystal clear that *I won*. They're doing whatever they can to kill us off."

I put a hand on the bottom of my visor. “I mean, uh... I still don't have any idea who this person is...”

“Can't you just write his name down or give us a clue of who he is?” Shock sighed, casually shrugging. “I'm tired of this.”

“You already know damn well why I can't do that,” Laval barked.

“Well, have we *seen* him at any point? Do we know him?!” Shock asked.

“Not that I know of! Believe me, lady, I'd love nothing more than to give you subtle hand gestures towards the fucker if I saw them.”

With this whole realization... Shock and I looked at each other as she huffed again. Without saying anything, we seemed to come to a mutual understanding that this big adventure wasn't ending with Tangent. If there was someone able to control a robot as dangerous and powerful as Tangent, it was clear that the serial killer was just a symptom of a much bigger problem.

At least I hoped she felt the same. I could read her body language decently well... but not her mind.

Laval clapped his hands together, skating over to Tangent's corpse, looking down at his face. “How about this: you can take your death race and shove it. We're gonna come to Grilith... and we're gonna end your miserable life. You hear me?”

...The announcer voice in Tangent's head spoke again, perfectly on cue. “Then it's time for

Zynima's #1 ranked skill robot to fall into stasis. Permanently.”

“What?!” LaviI and I shouted. Shock and I stepped away from Tangent, and LaviI followed suit seconds later. Even Nōne readied his scythe.

*That announcer speaking through Tangent's body could hear us?!*

Outside, somewhere on the surface, a deep *boom* shook the ground around us, almost making me lose my footing.

“LaviI, what's going on?” I yelled.

“Hell if I know what that was! Don't look at me!” He shouted back.

Tangent's lights shut off again. We all just stood there, glancing around between his body and the tunnel, waiting for something to happen. But... nothing did.

“I don't like this,” I broke the silence. “We're not safe here anymore.”

“No kidding – we're not safe anywhere anymore,” Shock added.

“Then let's move,” LaviI commanded. “We can't stay here. We need to get Trivo and–”

A sudden *crash* exploded from our hideout. All of us, excluding Nōne, ran over to the door and looked inside.

Three of those machines we'd encountered before in this tunnel – the ones who kidnapped Trivo a while back – had busted into our already-ruined base. Except they weren't just the regular bots from before.

Their arms had been replaced with miniguns.

Oh no.

They all let out heavily synthesized shouts as they spotted us, immediately revving up their guns.

“Fuck!” Lavid yelled, skating away from the hideout door, down the tunnel. “Come on! GO!!”

Without hesitation, we bolted down the tunnel with Lavid, shouting and cussing as the deafening *grind* of the miniguns blasted through the tunnel, bullets eating at the walls just as we got out of the way.

“What do we do?!” I screamed, barely loud enough for the others to hear over those robots' heavy weapons.

“Fucking run!” Shock screamed back.

## 21 – Escape

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Lavil took off in front of us with Shock and me trailing behind. The tunnel had a slight curve to it – I pushed myself to get around the bend before those machines could fill the tunnel with bullets.

The minigun fire coming from the hideout stopped. They must've been moving out. I glanced behind my shoulder, but wasn't able to see any of them in the tunnel yet. With the next few steps I took, the small door to our hideout disappeared around the curve in the tunnel.

Up at the tunnel entrance, Lavil was frantically swinging his head around, presumably checking for danger outside the tunnel.

“C'mon! C'mon!” he ushered us, despite us moving at top speed already.

“Nōne!?” Shock called out, looking behind us.

Just as we caught up to Lavil at the entrance, I realized that Nōne wasn't with us. I couldn't help but fear the worst, but I couldn't stop and concern myself with him right now.

“No time! Go left!” Lavil guided us, skating down the alley to the left. We were back in the zigzagging alleyways behind Packet Park, where we'd first met Trivo.

The alleys were seemingly free of danger, but we didn't stop hustling.

“Where are we going?” Shock shouted.

“Uh, dunno! Just– just chill!” Lavil stammered as he approached the back door to Packet Park. “I’ll figure it out!”

Oh boy. When *he* lost his confidence, so did I.

He peeked behind us then slowly started opening the door, carefully peering inside.

“Safe, I think,” he whispered, opening the door a bit wider for us to enter.

“Better be,” I muttered.

We crept into Packet Park. A few other robots were sitting around at tables and booths, but most of them were looking out the windows.

I looked outside too.

A huge machine – at least four times my size – along with two more of those minigun-toting bots, were standing ready in the middle of Verdin Square.

That machine had similar looking guns in lieu of its arms, a fierce, spiked visage with ammunition belts hanging off it, and... a massive weapon of some sort on its back. If it was hanging out with those other bots, I wanted nothing to do with it.

“Down, get down,” Lavil whispered as he crouched down, slowly sliding across the floor, his hands in a “praying” pose.

I crouched down as low as I could, following Lavil through the shop. Shock did the same just behind me, but the beam on her back definitely hindered her stealth rating. At least I was able to keep my guitar bag down.

The robots around us murmured quietly, and I could see a couple giving us awkward and unsure glances in the corner of my vision.

“Sssh,” I instructed everyone, hoping they all got the hint.

Lavil was coasting over in front of the main counter, heading towards the entrance closest to the edge of the plaza.

“Let's go to Zynima's main road,” Lavil began, still keeping his voice low. “If these bolt heads are hunting us, we'll blend into the crowds and... and we'll escape into the desert.”

“And then?” I replied.

“That Duke guy, you'll jack his rides and we'll ride out to safety so we can think of what to do next.”

“Are you kidding me?” Shock growled under her breath. “You want us to steal his vehicles, genius?!”

“Fuck if I care right now!” Lavil growled back. “He's a hack anyway.”

Those bots outside hadn't noticed us yet. It gave me a bit of time to prioritize my thoughts: stealing vehicles to escape into the desert? Or... risk being hunted and eviscerated by a flurry of bullets in the city?

Lavil pointed to a road outside the glass door, still hidden under the windows of the front wall. “If we sneak into that alley there, we should have enough time to hide before they rev up their guns.”

“*Should?* And if we don't?!” Shock retorted.

“Well, *I* definitely won't be having any problems getting there! So? You got any better ideas? 'Cause those assholes are going to come up behind us and riddle us with holes if we don't do *something!*”

Lavil peeked out from the hiding spot just enough to get a look at the robots patrolling the plaza through the glass door.

“Fuck... okay... okay...” he rhythmically whispered. “When I say go, we do this, okay?”

Shock exhaled sharply. *I know, Shock. I know.*

We waited and watched Lavil in perfect silence, ready to charge at any moment.

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Lavil flinched forward.

I almost lunged towards him, barely stopping myself in time.

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“Go.” Lavil rushed out the doorway, carelessly shoving the door open in his charge.

I pushed my circuitry into overdrive, sprinting like I was in Lavil's Death Race. I focused solely on the alley Lavil was guiding us to, my body whirring more and more as it drew nearer.

The air around me shook. A voice – or, some kind of incredible synthesizer – blasted through the air, coming from the direction of that



huge mech in the middle of the plaza. It was so deep that I couldn't understand a word of it.

The alley was only a few steps away. The unmistakable sound of those gatling guns spinning pushed me to go faster, faster!

We ducked into the alley, Laval already far ahead of us. I scanned the immediate area – two doors on our left, and narrow door with a dumpster beside it just to our right! I swung around it and crouched down behind it.

“Shock! Down here!” I cried.

A deafening *BVVVVVVV* rattled out from the plaza as bullets rained down through the alley, sending shrapnel from the nearby walls everywhere. Shock followed me behind the dumpster, screaming as she ducked beside me.

She cursed, grabbing onto her wrist.

My spirit sank. Dark red fluid leaked from her hand, dripping onto the concrete. She'd been hit.

The guns stopped firing, and that massive synthesized voice shouted something out again.

“Can you move? We gotta go!” I ushered her.

“The door,” she hissed.

I reached over to the door just beside us and tried the handle. Locked. Of course.

No, wait – I pulled on it again. It wasn't locked, it was just a bit stuck! I gave it one hard yank, flinging the door open, sending myself tumbling onto the ground.

Spinning miniguns. I scrambled back behind the dumpster.

“In! Now!” I shouted to Shock, crawling inside. She was right behind me.

As soon as she was inside and I rose to my feet again, I slammed the door behind us.

We were in a small, plain storage room of some sort. Metal shelves lined the room, all of them with cardboard boxes neatly arranged on them. There were only two doors: the one we came in through, and one the led to the rest of the building.

That machine (as well as its sidekicks, for that matter) were probably too big to fit through this door. We spared a few seconds of respite.

“Zippy ditched us!” Shock growled, still holding on to her hand. “Now what?!”

“Dukes,” I replied, “it’s where we agreed to go.”

“Agreed my ass! And– shit! My hand!”

“Y-you know what I mean! That’s where he expects us to go. And...”

I looked at Shock’s hand. It was a pretty severe puncture. She was dripping red fluid everywhere, and she didn’t have her medical purse on her.

“Boxes,” I told her, looking over some of the shelves. Most didn’t have obvious labels, but the ones that did...

Tools, tools, papers, tools, toys, toys, boots, umbrellas...

“Umbrellas?” I took the box down, placed it on the floor, and tore the top open. I could tear the fabric off and Shock could use it as a–

“Thieves! THIEVES!!” A pissed off, feminine voice called out from doorway. I looked up – a stocky, cyan, polygonal robot with an angry expression on her visor (which was shaped not unlike my own) was staring at us.

“Wha– boss? Shock?!” she suddenly called out. “What are you–”

“This is an emergency! Can't you hear the machine guns out there?” Shock held up her injured hand at the lady, her face almost as fierce as the other robot's. “*Do you have any bandages?!*”

“Those were machine guns?!” She stammered, her anger quickly changing to panic. “I have cloth! Will that help?”

“Yes, need it right now!”

“Okay!” The cyan bot ran off into the adjacent room with Shock in tow.

...I sheepishly closed the umbrella box. Thank goodness we ran into someone who apparently knew who Shock was. A coworker, maybe?

*Clang, stomp* outside the door we just came through. Oh shit. I skipped into the room, closely following Shock.

This next room seemed like a lobby entrance for a shop of some sort. Bright, pale blue colours decorated the walls with a long brown desk on one side. The bot we just intruded on was rummaging around behind the desk with Shock waiting on the other side, still clutching her wrist.

There was a glass double-door that led to the street only a few feet away – that should get us some distance if we exit through there.

The bot pulled out a roll of cloth and started unravelling it.

“No time, no time!” I told them, pointing to the door we came through.

Shock snatched it from her hands. “Make it up to you next shift!” She started running to the double-door.

“A-am I in danger?!” The cyan robot shrieked.

“Just stay low! Stay low!” Shock pushed the front doors open without even checking the street for threats.

I had no choice but to follow her. A wave of relief flowed through me – no minigun bots in sight.

Shock ran to the right without hesitation, wrapping the roll of cloth around her hand, growling and swearing all the while.

“We're not that far from the main road; it's bound to be packed, right?” I asked, trying to keep up with her.

Shock started with a sharp inhale. “Here's hoping!”

Even as she wrapped the fabric around her hand, it quickly stained dark red even through multiple layers of cloth.

“Your hand, are you–”

“Forget about that,” Shock interrupted. “I'll be fine. Just keep moving!”

Another intersection just ahead of us. I hopped ahead of Shock and took the initiative to check for danger before charging out blindly this time.

Far off, on the street to the right the led towards Verdin, two minigun bots were patrolling the block next to us. From this distance, there was no way they could mow us down in time if we were quick.

“Go, go!” I ran straight across the intersection, focusing strictly on my destination.

Just ahead of us was a narrow road we'd been through before. Music shops, bangin' tunes playing from the storefronts – this was one of the blocks just before Zynima's main road.

This road was packed last time. However, this time, it was empty. Shock and I were the only two people in sight. The tracks blasting from the shops would've pumped me up real quick, but this was too unnerving for me to appreciate it at all.

The booming, synthesized voice from that mech in the plaza vibrated through the air, coming from somewhere in the distance. I checked behind me – one of those minigun bots was in the middle of the intersection we'd just run from!

And it was running at us!

“Fuck, Shock, they're on to us!” I smacked her in the back and charged ahead of her.

“Just keep running!” She broke into a sprint with me.

Thankfully, we were too far away for that bot to start firing on us. If it was the same as those

other minigun bots we encountered, then we wouldn't have much issue outrunning it.

“T-t-t-techy! Aura-a-al- Autooo!”

?!

The voice was coming from above us.

I looked up and almost jumped in surprise from what I saw.

A huge, solid cloud of vibrating blackness flying right above us, with the outline of a light blue, half-open eye looking down at us.

“Y-you! You're SCAN?” I stammered.

“CITE! CITE! CITE!” The cloud chanted as I ran.

“Can you help us?!” I begged. “We're being attacked! Can you help autooo and the techy?” I tried speaking its language in hopes of getting its favour.

“Lavil s-s-says help t-techy! CITE w-w-will help!”

Yes! CITE was on our side!

“Great! Okay, good!” I didn't know exactly what a massive swarm of nanomachines was really capable of. “Guard us as we get to the desert!”

“Th-th-that i-is Lavil's o-o-order! CITE will h-h-h-help!”

Zynima's huge, main road was only a few dozen feet ahead of us. We'd be out in the open, but with CITE here, I felt hopeful.

“Where's Lavil?” Shock shouted into the air.

“Lavil i-i-is g-going C-R-T Siphon Yard!”

“What?!”

“Lavil w-w-w-was attacked! F-f-forced t-to take d-d-detour!”

“Fuck, how did those robots get so ubiquitous?! Aural! My short range sensors don't work with that thing above us. It's going crazy!”

But we didn't need Shock's sensors to tell that the main road was empty, except for maybe one or two robots standing around, just as freaked out as us.

We ran out onto the road and checked our directions. One minigun bot to our right, but the path to the left – to the desert – was clear!

“CITE! Get that robot!!” I screamed as I ran to the left, pointing at the machine to our right. It was already spinning its guns!

CITE didn't say anything. It quickly swarmed the minigun bot with a small cloud of jittering darkness, leaving most of itself hovering above us. As the guns began firing with a deafening *grind*, CITE moved its main “body” between us and the robot, acting as a barrier!

“Yes! Fantastic! Keep doing that!!” I cheered it on, glancing backwards, ensuring Shock was still with me. The terrifying ricochet of dozens of bullets just behind us sent me into hyper panic mode.

The two bystanders were even more startled by all this chaos, and they scrambled off to the sides of the road, leaving us plenty of room to keep running down to the desert.

Another glance back. CITE had formed a pitch black wall shape just behind us with its light blue eye looking down at us.

“CITE w-will p-p-protect!”

The ground shook again, rattling my body, just like earlier. It sounded like it was coming from the bottom of the road we were running down.

Turns out, it was.

Something huge was at the bottom of the main street. Enormous, jagged metal parts were barely visible just behind one of the buildings at the end of the road. It was walking into view with lumbering steps that shook the ground, and as it took each step forward, it became clear it was one of those giant mechs we'd seen in Verdin Square.

“Shock-!”

“I.. I see it!”

“CITE! G-get that thing!!” I cried in desperation.

“Go! I-I-I go!” it replied, and seconds later, another huge portion of its mass flew off towards the bottom of the road.

The booming, unintelligible voice from the mech echoed through the street as it turned to face us. It was armed to the teeth, exactly like the last, and the huge gun on its back was glowing.

It started bending down, aiming the glowing weapon at us.

We kept running towards it, away from the machine gun rounds still pelting CITE behind us. We must've had a death wish, charging towards a weapon that terrifying.



Seconds later, CITE's attack cloud smothered the front of its face and guns, surrounding its head in what looked like a huge swarm of locusts. The machine wobbled and took a step back, trying to keep its footing, with the huge gun on its back bobbing up and down.

"To the side!" Shock called out as she ran to the side of the road. I followed her – if the mech was distracted, hopefully it couldn't aim properly!

The minigun rounds behind us stopped. We must've been too far away for–

I flew across the street, deafened by the *BANG* of the explosion beside me. The next moment, I dropped to the ground, completely stunned as stony debris fell from the air around and on top of me.

The weapon on the mech's back – it'd fired a huge flash of cyan light before punching a wide-open hole straight through the ground, causing the concrete to erupt from the street like a geyser.

I couldn't lift my head. I couldn't see Shock. I could barely hear anything.

CITE was still chirping around, still attacking the mech judging from the shadows around me.

Finally, I moved my head up. I could lift it just enough–

–to see Shock fall down the hole in the ground.

She didn't just fall in. It looked like she was *thrown*. Thrown by a cloudy figure of some

kind. I couldn't see clearly enough to see who it was. CITE??

Seconds later, I was lifted off the ground. My chest had been surrounded by something, holding on to me tightly as I floated into the air.

I struggled and kicked, but I was far too stunned for my futile wriggles to be of any use.

The... *thing* holding on to me brought me over to the hole Shock had just fallen into.

And it carelessly tossed me in.

I bounced off the concrete a few times as I fell, falling for way longer than I expected to.

I didn't see Shock anywhere.

I was just falling into darkness.

Just falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

## 22 – Buried Truths

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...Shock's eyes lit up ever so faintly. She could see... nothing, except for some gooey liquid on the ground that her eyes just barely illuminated.

She propped herself up and started lifting her face off the ground, but was struck with a sharp stabbing sensation in her left shoulder, sending her face first back to the gross, wet floor.

Her hand... her shoulder... she let out a pathetic groan.

“If you can't push through the pain, you're going to die. Get up.” Shock recognized the voice... it was Nōne. He was right above her.

*Of course he'd be here. Of all times, of course it would be now.*

She pushed against the ground again. Shrieking in pain, she managed to bring herself to her heavy and sore knees. Although... she felt lighter. Placing a hand on her back, Shock quickly found out both her metal beams were gone.

A black, gloved hand snuck into view from her right. Shock took Nōne's hand, wincing as she shook to her feet.

“If you were able to survive until now, you shouldn't have a problem getting out of here,

darling,” Nōne sang as he inspected his scythe, tone as sharp as a needle.

Shock grumbled, shaking off some of the black stuff from the floor. “Where... where are we?”

“Hell.”

“Huh?”

“A place no one belongs.”

“Just tell me!”

“...It's known as a corruption yard, if you must know.”

Shock had never heard of it, but the name didn't inspire much hope. Looking around... everything screamed misery and death. The room was a few dozen feet tall, and the walls were all rusted brown and grey with the same vile liquid from the floor, haphazardly streaking down the walls. Around them... corpses of robots, all leaking the same fluid from every orifice.

“I wouldn't let that black liquid seep into your body if I were you.”

“What *is* this stuff?”

“Are you willing to have your perception of robot life changed forever?”

“Nn– what? Quit being so cryptic!”

“That would ruin all the fun.”

“Fuck's sake.” Shock rolled her eyes.

“Let's get moving. Neither of us want to stay here.”

“Toast to that...”

Grumbling from both frustration and pain, Shock trudged behind Nōne as he walked into the only doorway in the tall room – a plain,

square hole in the wall, easily tall enough for them to walk through.

Her eyes were the only source of light in the following room. Aside from the *squish squish* of Shock's feet stepping through black sludge coating the floor, this place was eerily quiet. She couldn't see any walls, any ceiling... only the suited machine in front of her, illuminated in a faint green light from her eyes.

“Uh, where's Aural? And... and where's Lavil?” Shock mumbled.

“Lavil, I wouldn't know. Aural... mmm.”

“Is Aural alive? Where is she?” Shock's panic quickly grew.

“She didn't land in a corruption yard. But, in truth, I have no idea if she's alive or not. She'll be underground somewhere.”

Shock sighed, cussing under her breath. “And... how do you even know where you're going?”

“Experience. Focus, my dear.” Nōne suddenly turned right, and a few steps later, the two passed through another doorway identical to the last.

*This was a terrible idea. I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved with Tangent, Shock thought. I knew it. I knew it. If I could just go back in time for one moment and say no thanks, fuck this, maybe... she'd be okay...*

Shock could see the walls around her in this room. They were in a narrow hallway with maybe only a couple feet of free space on either side of her. Just like the room she woke up in, the

walls were streaked with black marks and even some jagged dents and cracks.

“...Am I dead?” Shock asked out of the blue.

“Not yet,” Nōne responded. “Ready yourself.” He held his scythe in front of himself, ready to attack.

He stopped in his tracks. Shock cautiously walked over beside him, staring off into the darkness ahead.

*Splish... splish...*

Something was making noise ahead of them, but Shock couldn't see anything.

*Splish, splash...*

Something dark was crawling on the ground in front of them, with flickering lights barely visible in the inky blackness just outside of Shock's sight. As the two simply waited for it to approach, a plain, metal head slid into view, pathetically dragging its face through the puddles of sludge on the floor. Its shoulders and arms eventually brought themselves into sight as it pulled itself along the ground.

“Gggg . . . e . . . tttt . . . ii . . . ttt . . .  
ooooo . . . uuu . . . tttttt . . .”

It was – vaguely – a voice coming from the crawling machine.

It lifted its arm up and reached towards Shock with a broken, rusted hand. She quickly stepped back, grunting from the jolt of pain the sudden motion caused.

Nōne spun his scythe in the air and slammed it down on the machine, the blades

piercing it straight through the back. A small burst of sparks and electricity flashed through the room before it returned to the same empty blackness as before.

“Don't let them lay a finger on you, dear,” Nōne remarked.

“Wha... what is that... thing? You just murdered it!”

“A remnant of the past, clinging to reality like a leech to a vessel of blood. It has no place in this world. Not anymore.”

“Is it even possible for you to give a simple, straight answer? Even once?!” Shock grumbled.

“Of course.”

“So why *don't* you?”

“If you knew what I knew... well, let's just say I'd rather you enjoy the remainder of your time in this mortal coil.”

Shock sharply inhaled, her head shaking in frustration. She shut her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before looking back up to that cryptic, edgy, irritating—

“We shouldn't dawdle~” he spoke up. “They'll be coming for us before long, now that we've made such an entrance.”

Shock shivered. Whatever he meant by that... she knew she wasn't going to get an answer out of the TV-head.

Nōne continued walking forward, Shock hardly a step behind him. She constantly peeked from side to side, expecting something to jump out of the shadows at any moment.

Another plain, square doorway. The next room was wide open, once again, with nothing in sight except the machine in front of her.

Nothing but darkness.

*Splish, splish.*

Movement in the darkness.

*...Splash.*

Where was it coming from?

Shock stopped. The sounds stopped.

She turned around. Nothing behind her.

“Nōne...?” Her voice shook. She looked around at the ground around her. Nothing except for ripples in the black fluid on the floor.

“Yes?”

“There's something in here.”

“And there'll be more if you wait around.”

“Wh-what?!” Shock shakily walked over to him, the terror pounding in her head.

*Splish, splish.*

...Were those her steps?

She had to calm down. She took a deep breath. In... out. Another. In... out.

*Step, step, splash, splish.*

Shock shivered. She looked down. Was this liquid getting deeper? She shook her foot around. No, it wasn't... right?

*SPLASH.*

Shock jumped and reeled around to face whatever caused that huge noise. She waited for the ripples in the fluid to settle, and the thing slowly came into view, rising out of the water—

—Nothing. There was... nothing there?!



Nōne stopped in his tracks. “I meant it when I said to focus, dear. If you let this place wriggle its way into your mind, it *will* devour you. This corruption is more than eager to absorb more victims into its writhing mass.”

The TV-head's words didn't calm Shock down. If anything, they did the opposite.

“We're almost out,” Nōne assured her. “Don't betray my faith.”

Her urge to grumble about that pompous machine was overwhelmed by terror that she just couldn't shake. There was something in here with her. It was unmistakable. Yet, she couldn't see anything.

“Y . . . o . . .”

Another horribly distorted voice, distant and quiet compared to the last. But... it almost sounded familiar.

“Did you—”

“Yes, I heard it,” Nōne interrupted Shock's thought, walking on ahead as if nothing was wrong. “We should be clear of most of the corruption in this next hall, but this one might pose a threat. Sounds like it's ahead of us. Be vigilant.”

The two robots approached another plain, square hole in the wall, leading to a narrow tunnel. The walls and floor were just barely visible in this hall – at the end of the room was a tiny glimmer of red light peeking through a thin line in the wall. Perhaps... the exit?

“Hhhey . . .” the eerie voice mumbled.

Nōne stopped again. Shock carefully walked up beside him.

“Y-you...” Shock stammered, looking at what appeared to be a machine standing in the darkness, covered in black fluid.

“I . . . remmemmb . . . err . . . yyouuu . . .”

The robot staggered on the spot, desperately trying to keep its balance.

*This bot... no. It couldn't be. Back at the factory, that crude fellow...*

“Mettt . . . yoouuur . . . pppaa . . . lll . . .”

Nōne stepped towards it, raising his scythe in the air.

“NO!” Shock yelled, grabbing the back of Nōne's coat.

But Shock's hand merely pushed his coat away rather than grabbing on to it. It was almost as if it was just floating there.

“Don't kill him! Nōne!” Shock continued, running up between Nōne and the ghastly robot.

“Yyyo . . . hheelp . . . aa . . .” it continued moaning.

“Hey, hey, it's... it's okay, we can help!” Shock stammered, “I'm a techni-”

Nōne lowered his scythe, grabbed Shock's arm, and yanked her backwards. She yelped in pain as she stumbled back, about to cuss the TV-head out-

“Do you want to end up like him?” Nōne's “face” was right in front of Shock's. “There is no saving him, dear. Once corrupted this badly, you're an erratic zombie capable only of

infecting others until you drop dead. No matter what he intends, this is what he will do to you.”

“What?! Bullshit! He's a machine just like the rest! Of course he can be fixed!” Shock retorted.

The robot wobbled around a bit, trying its best to step forward. However, it stumbled against the wall instead.

“Gettt . . . iii . . . tt . . . ouutttt . . .” it moaned.

Nōne stepped back again, bringing Shock along with him. “There are things even you don't understand about us yet. Are you not aware of impure deaths?”

Shock wiggled free of Nōne's grasp, glaring up at him. “Of course I am!”

“Have you ever *seen* one?”

“Ah... I guess not?”

“Now you have. He is already dead, my dear. The only thing left to do is put him out of his agony.”

“That's... n-no,” Shock stuttered, looking between the zombie bot and Nōne.

The TV-head walked back over to the corrupt bot. Shock reached out to him as he raised his scythe...

...and spun it around, striking the bot in the upper chest. It crumpled to the ground without any flash of electricity like last time.

Shock gasped in disbelief, struggling to say anything. She just watched as Nōne casually murdered a benevolent robot she'd met with her

friend. Wide-eyed and mouth ajar... she stood perfectly still.

Nōne started walking forward towards the light at the end of the hall. “You're here to kill Lavil's master, correct?”

“Um, I... what? I-I...” She shook her head.

He looked to the side. “It's imperative that you answer my question.”

“N-no! I... I mean... I don't think so?! Shit, I don't know! I don't... I don't know where the fuck we are, I don't know where my friend is, or if she's even alive! We have machines trying to mow us down at every opportunity, and... and you just killed a real, sentient robot! One that I knew! I... I don't know what's going on anymore... I don't know what the fuck *I'm* doing anymore.” Her voice wavered more and more as she spoke. She paused, placing her arm against the wall, leaning her head into it.

“I never should have agreed to this shit. Look at me! I'm in some hell pit with mutated zombie robots and this shitty black stuff that apparently wants to kill me, hanging out with a thoughtless maniac while my only real friend is probably dead!” Shock stepped away from the wall and flung her arms up in the air. “Oh, you want your old life back, Vanessa? Too bad! You're stuck in robot hell with no way out. Great decision! And guess what? You're being hunted down by an even bigger psychopath who's wrecking the city just to kill you and the only person you care about! So, fuck me, I guess!!”

Shock leaned her head against the same wall and slammed her fist against it, sobbing all the while.

A few long seconds passed, with the only sound echoing through the tunnel being Shock's tears.

“Oh, that's hilarious, they even built me so I could cry. How fucking thoughtful.”

Nōne took a step towards her and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Don't fucking touch me,” Shock growled between whimpers. “Unless you're going to kill me.”

Nōne retracted his hand as requested. “Regrettably, dear, you're the one I have no reign over. I cannot and will not fulfil that request.”

“Yeah, of course. Just go away.”

“And leave you here to rot in a pit of corruption?”

Shock looked up at Nōne with pained, teary eyes. “At this point, yeah, I'm considering it,” she choked.

“Sorry, darling, but that's not an option.”

She looked away. “*Not an option*,” she sarcastically mimicked him under her breath.

“You are aware that Aural Automaton is probably still alive, yes?”

Shock didn't answer.

“As someone who knows this part of Zynima all too well, I can say with certainty that she did not land in a corruption yard. I observed you two as you fell beneath the city. I was not far behind.”

Shock drew a long, heavy breath. “So then where is she?” she groaned.

“Come with me. Perhaps I can answer that question.”

She looked over to Nōne, her whole expression weary and tired. “Christ, what choice do I have?”

“You don't really have a choice.”

Shock tilted her head up and took another deep breath. “Fine,” she said in a familiarly dry, uninterested tone.

Without a word, Nōne turned towards the crack of light at the end of the hallway, beckoning Shock to come with a wave of the hand.

Letting out an exhausted, shaky sigh, she slowly followed with her head and arms drooped down, trying not to look at the robot Nōne just killed as she stepped around it.

She failed. His face was exactly the same as before, complete from the big smile, to the squinty eyes, to the backwards baseball cap.

“I'm so sorry,” Shock whispered, tearing up again. “You didn't need to die.”

*Nobody deserves to go like this... reduced to a dysfunctional mess, trying to cling on to life like that? This city's shit...*

Nōne stopped in front of the light in the wall, with Shock walking up just behind him. She looked up; on closer inspection, yes, the light was coming from between a sizable pair of doors, rusted and gross just like the rest of this miserable place.

“Ready?” the TV-head asked.

“No,” Shock bluntly answered, sarcasm as sharp as ever.

She stood and watched as Nōne pushed the huge doors open, allowing the blindingly radiant light into the hellish catacomb.

## 23 – Underground

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The sight was surreal. Alongside Nōne, Shock stood on a gravelly cliff just outside the corruption yard, looking down into a huge cave.

It was thick with dusty, red fog, and lined with rocky, grey crags around its perimeter. Down a few dozen feet was a vast plateau dotted with several robots drilling into bright, blue mineral deposits of some sort, and a few hundred feet past *that* was a tall, brown fortress, sitting on a rocky spire above what looked like an abyss.

She looked to her sides. Along the cliff she stood on, there seemed to be a path leading to more doors similar to the one she just exited – presumably, more corruption yards? – a wide, circular opening in the wall, and a narrow path down to the plateau below.

“Where are we?” Shock asked.

“Underground Zynima. All of this... is Upsilon's home.”

It was hard for Shock to believe that he just gave her a straight answer. “I've... never seen this before.”

“It's for the best. You'll find nothing but hostility and despair here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see those machines mining at the cyrite deposits down there, yes?” Nōne pointed at them.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think they're working of their own accord?”



Shock sighed. "Great. More zombies."

"Yes, and no. They're not corrupt, but they've been stripped of their will. What were sentient, amicable robots are now mindless slaves."

"Who... who the fuck would—"

She caught herself. Of course she knew who would. The person behind Tangent. The person kidnapping Trivo. The person controlling Laval. The person trying to kill her and her friend. Upsilon, undoubtedly... whoever that was. Her own sorrow was quickly replaced by anger.

And, in that anger, something sparked in her mind. An epiphany, almost. A new resolve, driven by fury and vengeance.

Shock lifted her head up and faced Nōne.

"Tell me, TV-face. Are you as sick and tired of this as I am?"

"Define "this," robot-face."

"You know damn well what I mean by "this." All these robots coming after us. This whole serial killer bullshit. All these machines turned into slaves. Just... Upsilon! Are you *this* done with Upsilon too, or is it just me?!"

"Keep your voice down, dear." Nōne turned and faced the plateau again. "You, of all people, should know that I desire nothing more than Upsilon's death."

"So it *is* Upsilon behind all this, isn't it."

"Yes. I regret nothing more than the day I let him escape, all those years ago."

"Well, we'll just have to make up for it now."

“It won't be easy.”

“I don't care,” Shock grumbled.

“We might not succeed, either.”

“I don't care.”

“...I see.” Nōne turned and began walking down the narrow path down to the plateau.

“Hey! First, are you going to show me where Aural is?”

“Follow me.”

Shock did just that. “You *are* going to find her first, right?”

“You should have more faith in me, dear. We're not going to kill Upsilon with just the two of us. Whether you wanted to or not, finding Aural Automaton would be my first objective.”

Shock growled, but kept her mouth shut.

She kept her eyes on the mining robots as she walked down the cliffside with Nōne. She wasn't sure of how she should act in this place – should she go full stealth mode? Would those robots even pay attention to her? Would they attack her? If the TV-head was telling her to keep her voice down, stealth was probably the best option.

And then, something occurred to Shock at just that moment.

“Hey, Nōne,” she whispered.

“Mmm?”

“Do you know who Upsilon is?”

“Yes.”

Shock's eyes went wide. “You mean, you knew this whole time, but didn't tell us?”

“You never asked, darling.”

Shock paused for a moment. “Well, who is it?!”

“Upsilon is a single robot that calls himself Magnus.”

“Magnus! Magnus?” Shock chanted, racking her brain to find a name to match the face. She slowed her pace after a few seconds of thought. “I don't know who it is. Damn it.”

“He's not the only robot in Zynima with that name. It's not exactly uncommon. That said, I highly suspect he uses more than one name.”

“Fuck, okay.” Shock put a hand on her chin.

They approached the bottom of the path down to the edge of the plateau, landing them only a dozen or so feet away from the miners. From what Shock could see, to the left, there was another rocky path that went down the edge of the plateau, leading towards the fortress.

“Your friend landed over in this direction.” Nōne quickly hopped over to the right, hugging the cliff's wall. “Those drudges won't hesitate to attack us if you dawdle,” he continued. “Make haste.”

Shock glanced between the plateau workers and the TV-head, apprehensive about running out in the open so close to them. Against her intuition, she trusted his judgment and ran along with him.

One of the nearby miners, tall and adorned with orange and white lights, stopped what they were doing and looked up at Shock as she ran by. Watching. Staring.

“Shh, shh,” she hissed at it, speeding up to catch up with Nōne. She watched it carefully as she ran. Eventually, as she grew distant enough, it lowered its head and resumed digging at the ground. Shock drew a sigh of relief.

Running beside the cliff face, their distance to the plateau grew. They both slowed down; in the side of the rocky wall, only a few steps away, was a rickety, metal door.

“Is this where we're headed?” Shock asked between breaths.

“Yes.” Nōne stepped up to the door and slowly pushed it open, sending terrible *creaks* out from the rusted hinges. He looked inside, scanning the room.

“It's clear.” He pushed the door open and stepped through, inviting Shock inside before closing it behind them (with more terrible *creaks*).

“A storeroom?” Shock mused. She found herself in a tall, grey room, well-lit by a pair of stand-up floodlights. Resting against the wall to the right were tons of rusty crates piled on top of each other, and the wall just to her left had a graph of some sort hanging from it, along with a colourful poster just beside it. On the floor, bits of scrap metal were scattered around, and on the ceiling above was a wide-open chute of some sort.

She looked at the poster on the wall... and immediately regret it.

It was a piece of merchandise promoting Viniko's Tour of Light. Adorning most of the page was the superstar Viniko himself in an action

pose with his band members, and the bottom section listed the tour dates and locations.

Shock looked away. A familiar chill of despair flooded through her body.

“How dare he. How fucking dare he,” Shock growled.

Nōne turned to her.

“Upsilon... Magnus... has NO right—”

Shock ripped the poster off the wall, crumpled it up, and threw it on the floor.

“He kills Viniko then has the balls to hang up a poster of him like this?! No. Fuck that.”

“To be sure, dear... *Tangent* killed Viniko. We have no evidence to suggest that Upsilon commanded him to do it.”

“I don't give a shit.” Shock was fuming. “Upsilon is still the one who ultimately caused his death.”

“You have a point, I suppose.” As cool and collected as ever, Nōne started opening the boxes on top of the big pile.

“Yeah, you know what?” Shock blurted, speed-walking over beside Nōne. “Fuck his shit.” She pried open a box and started rummaging too. “I don't give a damn if this is Upsilon's stuff.”

But, all she found was a pile of rocks in the crate.

“Seems like this is a cyrite storage room now. Nothing useful to us at the moment.” Nōne closed his box.

“Seriously? Is this where cyrite comes from?”

“I'd hazard a guess that it is.”

“Fantastic. Slave labour is what circulates cyrite. I'm starting to realize why ignorance is bliss.”

“It'd be prudent of you to steel yourself down here. There's no telling how bad it's gotten I last visited. However, more to the point of coming here... I don't see Aural Automaton.”

“She was supposed to be here...?”

“Yes. She would have landed here if she didn't land in the corruption yard with us.”

“Are you saying she might be in the corruption yard?! We need to go back!” Shock raised her voice again.

“No. Did you see anything else alive in there, aside from those machines we gave a coup de grâce? I'm sorry, darling, but if she landed in there, she's probably dead at this point.”

“No, no...” Shock whined, holding her head. “Don't say things like that...”

“Don't fret so much. Chances are she landed here, but simply got up and left.”

“Got up and left to where? The only way to go is to through the slave field out there!”

“Not quite. Follow me, would you?” Nōne walked over to the creaky door and opened it.

Without a word, Shock followed closely. The two backtracked across the base of the cliff – grabbing the attention of that same drudge for a few seconds again – before ending up at the bottom of the path that led down from the corruption yard.

Nōne sat down on a big rock at the base of the path. “Liberating these robots from their lives as slaves would be... fulfilling, but it would bring far too much attention to us. Plus, you don't seem like you're fit for combat right now.”

At that point, Shock realized she had none of her equipment with her – not even her beams. As terrifying as the thought was, she was relying on Nōne just to help her stay alive.

“See that convenient pathway down on the edge of the plateau?” Nōne continued, pointing to the rocky path Shock had spotted earlier on the left side of the plateau. “They used to use that route to deliver cyrite to the castle. Judging by the crates in the store-room... seems like that path is all but abandoned now. Whatever the case may be, it'll bring us to the castle, and that's probably where Aural Automaton is.”

“...How do you know all this? Do I want to know?”

“I've been here a lot. Upsilon's not an easy fellow to track, despite this being his “home.””

Shock started running off towards the path, keeping her distance from the miners. “Come on. I'm going to find her.”

“Indeed.” For the first time, Nōne got up and followed Shock instead of the other way around.

As the path curved down around the plateau, it quickly became narrower and narrower. Shock was still able to run, but decided not to; only a few feet to her left was a drop into what

looked like a foggy, endless pit. She didn't want to take unnecessary risks.

And, as the path continued, Shock could see a clean, artificial alcove in the side of the plateau, supported by white beams and scaffolding. Just past it was a long, metal bridge with no supports that led to the bottom of the fortress. Scary.

Shock crept along the rest of the path, peeking around to make sure there was nobody in the alcove. With every step she took she saw more and more of the alcove – a schedule posted on a smooth, white wall, a couple windowed doors leading deeper into the plateau, and a complete lack of robots.

Both bad and good. No miners or sequencers, but... where was Aural?! She barely resisted the urge to call out for her.

Footsteps behind her. “Perhaps in there~?” Nōne's voice quietly sang from behind her as a gloved hand entered her peripheral vision, pointing to the doors.

“Yeah.” Shock checked the bridge and the path behind her just to be sure, then she crept up to the door on the right. She peeked through it...

It was a furnace room. A bright glow illuminated the room: all she could see was a shovel, several bricks of coal, piles of rocks (cyrite ore?), and a work bench with some bright blue cyrite ingots on it. No Aural Automaton in sight.



Shocks breaths became heavier and faster. Where was Aural? If she wasn't here...?!

She walked over to the other door.

“Oh, fuck.” She scanned what she could see of the well-lit room through the window.

Several stations, all with dozens of coloured wires and little black tubes protruding from each one, lined the walls. They were definitely not recharge stations. These... were different. Hooked up to each one was a robot with similarly coloured lights as the rest of the miners, but these ones all had models of different size and shape. Real citizens of Zynima. All of them asleep... or dead.

And, in one of the last stations against the left wall, a familiar model. Aural Automaton.

“Aural!” Shock yanked on the door handle, and the door swung open, smacking against the wall. She ran inside, over to Aural.

“Aural!” she called out again, crouching down in front of her friend. Aural's face showed no lights; Shock couldn't help but fear the worst. Only then did she notice that Aural was hooked up to the machine just like the others, via the panel in her arm – the wires and tubes from the unidentified station were connected there.

Shock ripped them out immediately. Black fluid dripped out from the tubes she yanked out of Aural's arm. It was all too familiar: the same vile sludge from the corruption yard.

“No, no, no... Aural? Come on, wake up, pal. Wake up!” Shock pat her on the side of her head a few times. “Wake up!!”

Her body was trembling. Aural wasn't waking up. The black liquid... no. Shock wouldn't believe it. She couldn't believe it.

“Aural, come on... don't do this to me, pal...” Shock panted. “Come on...”

...

A faint light shone from Aural's body. Her lights were slowly glowing to life.

“Aural!” Shock shouted, patting her on the cheek again.

Aural beeped in surprise as her face turned on, showing two, red, almond-shaped eyes. She looked up.

“Shock...?” she mumbled.

Shock laughed and sighed in relief. “Oh my god, Aural...”

She leaned down and hugged Aural, who seemed quite confused. But, a couple seconds later, the hug was returned.

“Hey, what's going on?” Aural asked. “Where am I?”

“Underground Zynima. Upsilon's base,” Nōne explained from the doorway, arms crossed. “It's good to have you with us.”

## 24 – Infiltration

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That TV-head! And... Shock was here, crouched in front of me, absolutely *covered* in black filth? What was going on?

“Um... how... how did we get here? What's happening?” I looked around, my eyes meeting a terrible sight. Machines like us, all hooked up to these sinister stations? Was I one of them?!

“Hey, it's fine, calm down,” Shock reassured me, obviously reading the panic on my face. “You're okay now. We were, well... both thrown into the hole that machine shot in the ground after CITE, or SCAN, or whatever it's called buzzed around in front of that goliath's face. I don't know how *you* ended up in here... but Nōne and I fell into a corruption yard way up in the cave over there,” she explained, nodding towards what I assumed to be the direction to this “corruption yard.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, not particularly reassured. “Was I plugged into this machine?” I glanced behind me.

“Y... yeah.”

“Um?!”

“Don't look at me! I have no idea what this is or how it happened... but you're out of it now, at least.”

Shock pulled me up to my feet, and I looked around at the little wires coming from the station behind me. A couple of them were leaking black fluid.

“What is this?” I warily asked, holding up one of the wires.

“I think it's corruption,” Shock answered.

“*This* is corruption?!”

“I think? TV-face, you have anything to add?!” Shock waved an arm at Nōne.

“Yes, robot-face, that is corruption in a physical form.”

“Y-you're covered in it, Shock! And, and you're telling me this was hooked up to me?” With growing apprehension, I checked the panel on my arm, which was still open.

It was oozing this same pitch black corruption.

“Oh no,” I shakily muttered. “Oh no. Guys, get it out, I don't like this—”

Shock took my arm and looked at the port in my arm. “Ah, fuck... hey, TV! How do we fix this?!”

“Are you saying the chief medical officer of Zynima has no knowledge of how to treat corruption?” Nōne sang, walking over to them.

“Don't screw with me, dipstick, just fucking help her! She's going to be corrupted!”

“Doubtful,” Nōne commented, bringing his face up close to my arm. “She wasn't here for long. Corruption doesn't take that long to break a robot's programming, but she will probably be fine.”

“*Probably?!*” Shock and I both chimed in.

Nōne shrugged. “Probably.” From the left pocket in his coat, he produced a small

handkerchief, matching his coat in colour, and from the right, a small, blue energy packet. He wrapped the packet with the handkerchief and then crushed it between his hands.

...What was he doing?

He unravelled the cloth, now covered with the blue fluid from the packet, and he gently wiped the affected area down quite thoroughly.

...That was his solution? Wiping it down? At least that gross stuff was gone from my exterior, but, I didn't want to know how much of it was already inside me...

“A-and what about you, Shock? You're—”

“Yeah, let's not talk about that.” Her eyes were flat with obvious displeasure. “It's not inside me, so, I'll be fine. Right?” She looked at Nōne.

“Indeed,” he responded, walking back to the doorway. “We'd best be off. We—”

“What about these other robots? Can't we save them?” I interrupted him.

“Long gone. You were in here for less than half an hour. These ones... much longer.”

“H-how do you know that...?”

“I've been here before.”

“So you don't want to even try?”

“It seems as if you need to place more faith in me. They're gone. If I had a single doubt about this, then I would free them. But I don't.”

Spooky man... don't know how much I trust him.

Before I followed him out of the room, I looked over the bots hooked up to the machines. If only there was a way to save them...

We walked out onto a bright, white alcove in the face of a cliff. A horribly thin bridge was on our right, a pathway around the cliff in front of us, and another door on our left.

Nōne turned to me and started up before I could speak. “A word of caution. This place is hostile by every definition of the word. Treat everybody you see down here as an enemy on first glance.”

I glanced over at Shock.

“He's been here before,” she added. “Not exactly a happy place.”

“If the robots hooked up to those black, goopy machines are any indicator, yeah, no kidding.” I shivered, remembering that I was one of those bots minutes ago.

Nōne led the way, walking up to the tatty bridge on our right.

“Hold on,” I began, stopping dead in my tracks. “You can't be serious about walking over that.”

“Do you have an alternative in mind?” Nōne retorted. “Would you like to walk through the front gates in front of an array of autocannons?”

Well, no, but I didn't want to say it aloud.

It was the bridge from hell, really: a few dozen feet long, held together only by four metal wires on either end, a thin guard rail and rickety, rusty platforms making up the bridge's surface. No supports in sight. Down below was a drop into an abyss of red fog.

I couldn't help but look down. "You really are pulling my leg, right?"

"Let fear control you and this place will eat you alive. Stay focused and just don't look down, Aural." With that, Nōne stepped onto the first rusted platform, gently holding onto the left railing.

I glanced at Shock again. She didn't look much more confident than me, but she stepped ahead and slowly followed right behind Nōne.

If I could breathe, I'd have let out a huge sigh. Instead, I synthesized a similarly anxious groan and followed Shock, grasping tightly onto both railings.

Every step we took resulted in a hideous *creak* from the bridge, as if to announce its imminent collapse. *Creak, creak*. I was entirely ready for our lives to anticlimactically end in the pit beneath us.

I caught myself looking down into the red fog. *Stop that, don't look... don't look...*

Instead, I took a moment to look up. Just above us was that creepy fortress, and just to the right where I could see the main bridge leading to it...

Dozens of those mining bots were staring down at us with glowing eyes, totally and utterly still.

Shit! If their objective was to make me paranoid enough to slip and fall, it almost worked. I stopped for a second to look straight ahead and collect my thoughts. They couldn't break me. No way, unfazed, they—

The bridge teetered back and forth in a jarring motion as I lost my footing, desperately hanging on to the flimsy guard rail. Shock and Nōne both followed suit, gripping it tight.

“Christ, what-?!” Shock cried.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything. My right leg was hanging down below the bridge, but my left leg was still on one of the rusted platforms. Angling it just right, I got my foot onto the platform, and I slowly and carefully hoisted myself up.

Shock and Nōne were both looking back at me.

“Aural, for fuck's sake!”

“Shut up. Go, just go,” I snapped back at her, uninterested in being barked at after I nearly dropped straight into hell. “Straight ahead, straight ahead...” I reminded myself, keeping my voice down.

I took it one step at a time, slowing my pace way the fuck down. Those bots up there didn't have guns or anything, so... no pressure. Just focus.

Contrary to Nōne's advice, I braved myself to look down again, but not at the drop below. With a death grip on the railings, I focused on the platforms comprising the bridge, stepping only where it looked like I'd have the most balance.

Step...

...step.

Just take it easy. One step... then another.



I heard Nōne mumble something far ahead, but Shock quickly shushed him.

No time to think about that. Step. Step. Take it slow.

Only a handful of seconds later, I found myself near the end of the bridge. A glance upward told me that Shock and Nōne were already standing on solid ground again. Against my better judgment, I sped up a bit, finally placing my feet on rocky ground again.

I vocalized a huge sigh of relief.

“Aural, buddy,” Shock heaved, “you just about killed us.”

“I– w-well, sorry! That was horrifying!”

“What’s horrifying is what I would have done to you had I have fallen,” Nōne quipped.

I dared to give him a reply. “But... uh... if you fell, you’d be dead.”

“I would find a way.” He pointed his scythe to an open doorway on the rocky outcrop we now stood on. “Make haste.”

The TV-head led the way with me in the middle and Shock taking up our six.

“Ah, wait,” Shock said. “Oh... damnit. Nevermind.”

I turned back to see her. She looked confused, trying to reach her back.

Shock grumbled. “If my beams were still here, there’d be no way I could fit in there.” Another groan. “Guess there’s a silver lining to everything. Come on, Aural, let’s go,” she finished, hustling me forward to catch up with Nōne.

The dark, musty entrance to the bowels of this enormous facility was adorned with pipes and heavy-duty mechanisms along the walls and ceiling, forming narrow pathways through the room. It was an industrial maze; there was no clear direction to get to the fortress's ground floor from here.

"Do you know the way in here?" I asked Nōne.

"Yes. Keep your voice down."

"Sorry," I whispered back.

With the TV's guidance, we hugged the left wall, quietly creeping through the eerie chambers. The place was only illuminated by red lamps periodically dotting the ceiling, leaving areas of total darkness where the lights couldn't reach.

As we walked further, the sound around us went from a low rumble to a cacophony of machinery. *Whirring, clanging, hissing.* I could barely hear my own thoughts.

We took a right turn at a corner of the maze. Every junction we passed, I found my head darting around, ready to see some hostile machine standing in wait, eyes glowing in the dark, ready to pounce. It would be impossible to hear footsteps in a place like this; I could only rely on my optics.

Nōne suddenly jerked to the left and hit the wall, bashing the side of his head on the pipes.

No. He didn't do that himself. Something did that to him.

He twisted around and held his scythe sideways in front of him, hardly blocking a blade from smashing his screen in.

I turned heel with a plan in mind. “Shock, move!” I shoved her to the side as best as I could in the cramped space, looking for the last junction we passed. “Come! Hurry!”

I ran through the halls, looking for an alternate route to get to Nōne. It didn't take long for me to find one in the mess of junctions, and I got into the hall he was being assailed from.

There was a tall, skinny robot standing in front of me, entirely focused on attacking Nōne.

No guitar. Gotta improvise.

I lunged forward and grabbed the robot's neck with both hands, jerking it back with my full strength. It lurched backwards with me with surprising ease.

It started swinging multiple blades at me with several thin arms, but couldn't reach behind itself well enough to strike me.

I kept dragging it back until we were about to enter the middle of a four way junction. Fantastic – Shock was in the opening to my left.

“Kick his ass!” I yelled over the industrial soundscape. With another powerful yank backwards, I forced the bot to lose its footing and fall backwards. I jumped back, prepping myself to stomp on its head.

Shock beat me to it. Its visor was smashed into countless pieces.

Not a second later, a curved blade pierced straight through its chest. It was Nōne's scythe.

Stammered, glitched words rang out from the machine's dying body, just barely loud enough to hear over the machinery.

“th-th-th-e-e-y-y-y w-w-i-i-i-l-l-l-l-l b-b-e-e-e n-n-o-t-i-i-f-f-i-e-e-d-d-d”

The robot shut down.

...But I recognized its voice. I looked down at it, confirming my suspicions.

It was the news bot we encountered multiple times in Zynima City.

Did we just kill an innocent robot? No, no way... it attacked Nōne without any warning. So then... was it... working for Upsilon this entire time?

“We no longer have the luxury of time,” Nōne explained with utmost urgency. “Hurry.” He turned back to our original path.

Shock and I followed without a word.

Without any further incident, we hustled through the hallways until we eventually saw a white light illuminating a stairwell out. And, as we approached it, the ambience died down to a quiet rumble in the background.

“Quiet as ever,” Nōne whispered as he raised a gloved hand to us. Continuing to follow his lead, we began up the long set of stairs, eventually stopping once we were just far enough to peek up onto the ground floor. “When we emerge from here, we will be in a server room with four passages: the fortress's main entrance to the right, a power plant just behind us, an armoury on the other end of the room, and a tram station to the left.”

“Armoury,” I thought aloud, “we need to go there.”

“You're in luck; I see only one machine, and it's a mere server worker. No threat, but that won't last with that damned machine down there notifying its security teams. Hold on...” he suddenly paused, “two machines. Laval II just came from behind a server tower. They're—”

I brushed up past Nōne just enough to look myself. Sure enough, Laval II was skating down the spacious room, straight to the armoury we happened to be after.

An uneasy thought crossed my mind. He wouldn't betray us, would he?

“We need to move. Go.” Nōne slapped my arm, prompting me to hop up the rest of the stairs. “Armoury, straight ahead,” he pointed out.

Laval had already disappeared into the armoury's entrance. Throwing caution to the wind, I bolted forward across the huge room, quickly alerting the server worker that Nōne mentioned.

“Aie?! Zzt... zyaah?!” it screamed in surprise as we charged through the room. “Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!!” It ran away and hid behind a server tower.

Despite the size of this place, there really was nobody else here. It didn't feel right.

The three of us reached the other end of the room, where we hid behind a corner with the armoury door right next to us.

“No time like the present,” Nōne sang.

I opened the door to the armoury and stepped inside.

Among gigantic shelves holding every handheld weapon I could possibly imagine in lengthy, heavy-duty racks were two robots at the back of the room.

Lavil II and Lavil III.

II was holding an assault rifle to III's head with just one hand. And yet, III looked incredibly calm and casual.

"Lavil!" I called out, praying that II wasn't about to turn that rifle to me.

"Aural. You made it. And Shock, ha, holy shit, look at you! You look like you just crawled out of a sewage tank!" Lavil stopped for a moment as Nōne walked up with us. "Ya, okay, who the fuck is that beside you?!" Lavil II reached for a nearby weapon rack, pulling out a gun of some sort, pointing it at Nōne with his free hand.

Shock stepped forward. "He's a friend! He wants Upsilon dead just as much as you do. Don't shoot!"

"Hmph." Lavil lowered the gun pointed at Nōne. "Doubt that."

I was just relieved that Lavil II was still on our side. However...

"What the hell's going on here? That's Lavil III, right?" I asked, as puzzled as ever.

Lavil II chuckled. "Ya, it is."

"So, *uh*, why do you have a gun to his head?!"

## 25 – Point of No Return

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“Mate, I love III,” Laval II began. “Well, sorta. As much as you can love someone whose skill high-score is tying the noose around your neck.”

“Poetic,” Nōne quietly remarked.

“Shut it, screen boy, I'm not finished. Ups doesn't like me. Never has. So they made my sister “well behaved” and easily controllable if it comes down to it. And it's comin' down to it. Even III knows; tell 'em.”

“Mhm,” Laval III chimed in. “My creator gave me free will just like II, but I can be controlled and ordered around remotely, and there's nothing I can do to fight it. I'll be stripped of my consciousness and become a mindless drone meant to do whatever my creator wishes. Given your circumstances, it's more than likely my creator will wish to kill you all. And, with my level of technology and assembly, it's more than likely that I would succeed.”

“Hence, this.” Laval clicked something on his rifle. “If this fucker moves without my permission, I'll send her straight to hell before she gets the chance to take one goddamn step.”

“Please understand, I would love nothing more than to scrap my creator for spare parts,” III began, “but it would be foolish for me to attempt such a thing.”

“So... you knew about our plan the whole time?” Shock asked, looking a little shaken.

“Not at all. II ran in here seconds ago, put a gun to my head, and said “I’m starting a coup.” That’s all I needed to know.”

“We understand each other real well,” II declaimed.

“Hey. Question,” I butted in. “Why is this place so empty?”

“Because everybody’s on the surface looking for us, lol. Ups must have called fucking *everyone* to come after us after the Tangent incident. I ain’t got a clue how you two got here so fast, but it’s really not hard for me to outrun a mob of pissed off robots. And they’re all gonna be arriving any minute.”

“We destroyed a machine in the maintenance tunnels, but not before it alerted the fortress’s security. It’s probably closer to any *second*.” Nōne explained.

“Then you better get armed and ready,” Lavil II suggested. “Look at this place. Sky’s the limit.”

“What about your sister?” I asked.

II discarded the random sidearm he’d grabbed earlier and gripped his rifle with both hands, aiming down at III’s legs.

He opened fire, shredding III’s narrow legs with several powerful rifle shots.

“What the fuck?!” I shouted, jumping back from the sudden gunfire.

“Lavil!!” Shock screamed, stepping back as well.



Nōne had no reaction, and all I heard from III herself was “aw, come on, really?” as she crumpled to the floor.

Lavil II shrugged with his arms up in the air. “How the fuck else am I supposed to stop you from coming to kill us at zero hour?”

“Those are my legs! I can't skate anymore! That's all I loved!”

“I'll help you get fixed after I finish what I gotta do!”

“He's the only person on this planet who knows how to make friction control skates and magnetic limbs, Lavil!”

“He's not the person who made you! His *team* did! All he did was watch on his dumbass seat and look like a dick—”

“Shut it!” Shock yelled. “We've got company!”

Both Lavils shut up. Rushing footsteps of several robots were pounding the ground in the distance, clearly marching closer.

“Grab a gun!” II yelled to us. “Grab a gun and get ready!”

“I-I don't know how to use guns!” I cried, looking around frantically.

“I'll show you!” Shock called to me. “Get one and take cover with me behind these,” she instructed me, grabbing a rifle of her own. She took cover behind the end of two huge weapon lockers that were facing back to back in the middle of the room.

The first gun I laid my optics on was what I took. And another. And another. Three big

rifles similar to Lavil's were all that I could fit in my arms. I brought them down to Shock's hiding spot, holding one beside her.

The incoming robots were getting louder. I could now hear the metal *clang* of the huge machines heading our way.

I took a look around as Shock took my gun. Lavil II, armed with his rifle, was dragging III to his cover on the left side of the room. Nōne, armed with a grenade launcher, was hiding on the right.

She fiddled around with a couple knobs and checked the ammo while I sat there and grew more and more apprehensive. We probably only had a few moments left.

“Hurry, hurry..!” I mumbled to her.

She handed it back to me. “Safety's off. It's not automatic, so you have to keep pulling the trigger. Hold it like this,” she explained, holding her rifle down towards the door as if she was at shooting range. “Support it with your shoulder here. You only have one magazine. Try to keep it steady!”

“Uh, okay!” Shock's five second firearm training course was the best I was going to get in a situation like this. Shock took the right side of our cover; I took the left. Trying to hold my rifle properly, I aimed it down towards the armoury's only door.

Outside the armoury was a loud, booming voice. “Spread out! Check every corner!”

“Won't take long for them to find us,” Shock whispered. “As soon as you see someone through that door, let them have it.”

I steeled myself, firmly gripping my rifle.

A shadow moved into the armoury's doorway. It turned into a silhouette.

I pulled the trigger. Again, and again.

The room exploded with deafening gunfire as we riddled the machine in the entrance-way.

The rifle's recoil threw me back, but by the time I'd stabilized myself, the robot was flat on the ground. There was a brief moment of relative silence.

“Armoury! Armoury!” the voice from before bellowed outside.

The room was quickly rushed by a squad of huge, bulky robots. I kept firing, keeping the rifle as stable as I could. Once again, the silence shattered into the sounds of gunfire and shredded metal.

*BAM* – a huge, fiery explosion flashed before us on the enemy's side of the room, forcing me to take cover behind the weapon rack.

A small, round chunk of metal rolled near my side.

“Grenade!” Lavil screamed at me between shots. “Fucking chuck it, Aural!”

That metal – it was a grenade!

I grabbed it, whipping it back in the enemy's direction!

Another explosion blasted in front of me. The grenade exploded not a second after I threw it, cracking my visor and shredding my left arm.

I couldn't see anybody coming through the smoke and debris in the air – not to mention the giant crack in my visor – but I knew they were there. I tried to aim once again, but the damage to my arm made it difficult to support the rifle. Nevertheless, I continued pulling the trigger, providing covering fire at the very least.

Another blinding explosion flashed from inside the fog.

I started doubting if we were going to survive this or not.

As I continued firing into the smoke, my rifle started clicking with every shot. I didn't know what that meant, but only a few more shots left my rifle before it was out of ammo.

Thinking of nothing better to do, I threw my empty gun down range.

The smoke began clearing just enough to see the doorway again. There wasn't anybody standing. The enemy robots were either destroyed or barely clinging to life on the ground.

Gradually, we slowed our fire to a halt.

“Go?!” I suggested, standing up.

“Now might be a good chance,” Nōne affirmed. “Fortress guards work in squads. This could be our opening.”

“Where are we going?” Shock yelled at Nōne.

“The tram to Upsilon's chambers. Go out, right, and right again at the middle of the server room.”

“Shock, I need a new gun!” I shouted.

She tossed me one of the rifles I'd brought over for the firefight. “Flick the switch on the top! That's the safety!”

Slinging a nearby ammo belt over his shoulder, Lavil II took point and skated towards the door, hopping over the ruined bodies, leaving Lavil III behind.

“I'll be back for you!” he called out to his sibling.

“Please!”

We all followed Lavil II. He peeked around the corner before charging out.

“Check the entrance,” Nōne reminded him as we ran into the server room.

“Ya, ya! Don't gotta tell me!” Lavil recklessly skated off to look outside the main entrance of the fortress as we hurried to catch up to him.

“Oh fuck!” he yelled, scrambling back behind the wall next to the main door.

A stream of white-hot projectiles flew into the main fortress entrance, coupled with the familiar *grind* of a minigun's fire.

“Clear out!” Nōne ordered us, aiming his grenade launcher at the doorway. “Firing!”

A grenade arced across the room towards the entrance, bouncing and rolling to a stop just outside the main door.

Lavil jumped back again as the grenade exploded just outside the door. “Get to the tram!” he directed us, pointing down the room. “We can't take those fuckers!”

Our path to the tram's room was through the wide open room, but huge server towers stood in lines on both sides of the room. We could use those for cover!

“Come! Behind the towers!” I called to Shock and Nōne.

I ran down the side of the room, hugging the wall behind the server towers. The guards couldn't see us at all. I glanced back just long enough to see Nōne and Shock following. Good.

I took a turn to the left as I met the corner of the room. To get to the door, we'd need to run out from behind the towers.

This was risky. I peeked out to see where our assailants were focused.

One of those bots had come in through the main entrance, aiming towards the armoury. Was Lavil distracting them?!

“Go!” I took the opportunity to run out and dash for the door. I saw no handle, so I pushed against it. It slid open from the middle upon contact, and I went stumbling through.

I took cover behind the wall just inside the room. It was a small, square, dark blue room with a control panel on the opposite end and an enormous tunnel in the middle.

Nōne and Shock spilled into the room moments later.

More minigun fire blasted from outside, but only for a brief moment. Two seconds later, Lavil rushed inside as well.

Nōne ran over to the panel against the far wall, pushing buttons I couldn't see from here.

"It is almost here!" the computer announced. "24 seconds until tram arrival."

"You're joking," Shock said between heavy breaths. "We're fucked."

"Bullshit!" Lavil replied, "these assholes ain't programmed to be smart! They'll walk right the fuck into the rooms we're in without taking cover!" He pointed to Nōne. "TV man! Get ready at the door and fuck them sideways when they come in!"

"A fine idea," Nōne sang, running back to our cover.

"And we'll get in position to light them up! Aural, Shock! Get on it!"

"Got it!" I replied.

"Okay," Shock answered.

Nōne positioned himself on the left side of the door while the rest of us ran to the right, rifles pointed at, uh... Nōne.

"...You *are* joking, right?" Nōne remarked. "Find a different spot."

"You see anywhere else to hide?" Lavil shrugged, looking around.

"Angle yourselves better!"

"Like this?!" I shouted back, taking a couple steps right. My aim was now outside the door, but any enemy that approached would see me sooner too.

Shock did the same as me. Lavil didn't move.

“Hit me and I will end you,” Nōne announced.

With my damaged arm, I worried about that.

*Stomp, stomp, stomp.* The guards were approaching.

I tightened my grip.

“Tram arriving now,” the computer blared.

“Don't fucking move,” Lavil ordered us. “Fuck these guys up first.”

*STOMP, STOMP.*

A hulking, gun-toting machine came into view.

The cacophony of gunfire erupted around us again, but my rifle wasn't firing!

I watched Nōne in the corner of my optics slashing the incoming machine with his scythe while I tried fiddling with my gun.

The robot's minigun arms revved up despite our onslaught. They were pointed at me!

“Shit!” I cried out in panic.

No time. I ran and jumped away to the opposite end of the room. I went prone as I hit the floor.

The screech of minigun fire pierced the air around me.

And as quickly as it started, it stopped.

I dared look up at the robot shooting at me.



It was collapsing on the ground in front of the door – Nōne decapitated it in a shower of sparks and electricity while the other two filled it with holes.

The tram was only a few feet away from me, sitting with open doors, scarred by the gunfire I narrowly avoided.

“Let's go!” Shock directed us. “They can't get in with that hulk blocking the doorway!”

I stood up and stumbled into the tram, running down the lengthy vehicle towards a control panel at the front.

Shock, Laval, and Nōne wasted no time rushing in behind me.

*March, march.* More robots were coming.

I reached the front of the tram to see bright, clearly marked buttons on the panel.

I repeatedly slapped the DEPART button so fast that I swear I almost broke it.

“Now departing!” the tram's computer chimed in. “Please keep clear of all doors and remain seated for acceleration.”

“GO!!” I screamed at it.

“Everyone! Get down!” Shock shouted.

I looked back through the tram's back window. Just beyond the wrecked robot in the room's doorway, another one was spinning its guns.

I hit the floor again. So did Shock and Nōne. Laval crouched down by the back of the tram, beneath the window.

Shattered glass rained down upon us as another blaze of gunfire smashed through the tram's windows. On cue, the tram started accelerating, taking us away from this disaster zone.

“Go go go go go,” I chanted to myself.

Slowly but surely, we were driven away from the madness threatening to rip us to shreds. The gunfire stopped as we got farther away.

Were we finally safe?

Along with Shock, I slowly rose to my feet, looking around for any sign of danger.

“Oh my god,” Shock huffed, looking around. “Oh. My god.” I'd never seen her so terrified before.

“Now *that* is what I call a good time,” Lavil boasted.

I was still speechless.

“Aural. What happened?” Nōne asked me.

“I... I, u-uh... just... need a sec.”

“I can wait.”

I stood up, taking a moment to let my circuitry cool down, looking outside the tram at the rusty tunnel walls rapidly passing by.

“A grenade rolled beside me, and I barely threw it away—”

“Not that. Why didn't you stay in position?”

“Oh... my gun didn't fire,” I admitted.

“Hm? Jammed?”

“Maybe?”

Shock turned to me. “Did you turn the safety off?”

...Oh. That... was embarrassing.

“N-no. Fuck, I'm sorry...”

“Fuck off. Are you for real?” Lavi barked.

“At least... at the *very* least...” Shock interrupted him, raising her hands to her sides, “we're alive, and we made it. No sense in getting pissed at each other now.”

Nōne just shook his head.

Given how grave of an error that was, I was all too thankful for her clemency.

“Just *don't* make that mistake again,” Shock scolded me with a finger firmly pointed in my direction.

“Yeah... I won't. Sorry.” I couldn't even pretend to be cool after something like that. I turned away from the others, looking for a seat.

Seconds turned into minutes as we rode down the tunnel. Time suddenly felt slower than ever.

Nōne sat down on the floor at the back of the tram. Shock was on a seat on the other end, and Lavi was slowly pacing from one end to the other, nonchalantly kicking shards of broken glass around.

I'd found a spot on one of the long, orange seats in the middle of the tram, looking into a nearby window (or, what was left of it) as the tunnel whizzed by. I saw my reflection in a big shard of glass still attached to the window frame, much to my dismay... my face was cracked

and chipped, and one of the points on my visor was still broken off.

I looked down at my left arm, which wasn't working properly either. Shards of metal were sticking out of it, and chunks of its outer hull were stripped right off, exposing the sensitive mechanisms and wires inside.

Arduously, I lifted my head up. "Hey... Shock."

"Give me a minute," she replied. Her eyes were shut, and she was taking long, deep breaths.

I waited in silence until she was finished.

"Okay. What's up?" she asked as she stood up, walking over to me.

"I've never been so damaged before." I paused, finding it hard to say the words aloud. "Can this all be fixed?"

Shock sat beside me, clasping her hands together in her lap. "Of course it can. If you were made that way once, you can be made that way again."

"Guess you're right..."

"You're a robot. You can remodel yourself if you wanted. Upgrade."

It was a thought that never crossed my mind before. I never gave any credit to the idea of changing my appearance; it was my public image as a performer, after all.

"What about my image?" I voiced my concern.

"What, like, as a musician?"

"Yeah."

“I didn't say you have to get a whole new body. You can update your current model if you want.”

I looked back down at my arm. “I just hope I'll hold out until then.”

“Yeah. Me too.” She let out a deep breath. “You could keep yourself as is, if you wanted. You look pretty rugged like that.”

I almost forced out a laugh. Instead, it was more like a huff. “Shock, I can barely see.”

“Right. Nevermind.” She looked to the side, humming to herself. “I wonder if Trivo's okay.”

My mechanical heart sank. I'd forgotten about her in all that madness, as much as I hated to admit it.

“She wasn't in good condition when we left,” I mumbled. “She was unconscious and missing an arm...”

“If I remember right...” Shock started, “she wasn't exactly *unconscious*, just in sleep mode, yeah? I think Lavil said she was “off.””

“That could still mean a few things...”

“Fuck's up,” Lavil bleated, sliding over our way. “I heard my name.”

“Yeah. What, uh...” I hesitated, realizing now that Lavil hadn't mentioned her this whole time. Surely he wouldn't have forgotten about her. “What state was Trivo in when we left?”

“Not good. Missing an arm. Deactivated.” His tone was unexpectedly casual.

“Will she wake up?”

“...Dunno.” Lavil strode back to the other end of the tram. “She better,” he finished with a low voice.

I couldn't think of anything else to say after that.

Neither could Shock, apparently.

It was just dreary silence after that remark. No planning, pep talks, or final words.

Nothing.

## 26 – Upsilon

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Our tram gradually came to a stop. The more it decelerated, the faster my circuitry accelerated. I felt like I was about to fall over and die with apprehension.

We were really at the heart of all this shit. The source of the plagues wearing our city down.

*Ding.* The door slid open.

“We have arrived!” the computer cheered.

I got up and walked outside, the others following closely.

A huge, smooth, gleaming pillar stood in the middle of a flat cave clearing, rising up through the ceiling of the cave, with a small but elaborate door on the front. Nothing else in sight.

I looked at it for several seconds before realizing... this was the very bottom of Grilith Tower.

All along, Grilith was the root of Zynima's evil?

I was surprised by so many things down here that it didn't even rattle me that much. I was already on edge as it was.

“This is it, huh...” I shakily mumbled, walking towards the tower's entrance. No stopping to be shocked and bewildered. I just wanted this to be over.

Shock spoke up. “If this goes south and we don't make it out of here... it's been a pretty thrilling journey. Thanks, all of you.”

I tried not to think about it. The idea of losing my best friend was beyond horrifying.

“Thrilling is one way to put it,” I retorted. “But... yeah, uh. It's been fun, I guess.”

“You don't seem that nervous, Shock,” Nōne commented.

“I am,” she replied, “but I've had a good run. I'm ready to accept whatever fate is in store for me down here.”

“I respect that,” he added. “You've lived up to my faith.”

I glanced over to Lavil, trying to distract myself. “How're you holding up, Lavil?”

“You don't ask that question to a person about to commit a premeditated murder.”

Nice. That made me feel *great*.

The rest of our walk to the door was mostly devoid of small talk. The only noise was our metal footsteps against the stony floor. I would've preferred Lavil berating me over messing up or saying the wrong things than approaching the end of the road without a word.

“For the record,” Nōne broke the silence, “I don't know what to expect in here. Be on guard.”

The door was as sleek as the rest of the tower, with a glowing panel on the front. Lavil skated up in front of me and wasted no time putting his hand on the panel; it stopped glowing and the door slid open with a gentle hum.

In front of us was a short hallway into the tower with another similar looking door and panel on the other end. Was this an elevator? No matter.



We all shuffled inside the room, and the door hummed shut behind us.

Same thing with the next door – Laviil skated over and put his hand on it, and the door opened.

What sat before us what a spectacular, alien room. It was a bright, open area with the strangest walls I'd ever seen: shiny, black surfaces with eerie, coloured glyphs and symbols running down its pulsing texture, painting the room with delicate glows.

Filling the room were shelves, bookcases, desks, and seats on every side, and a huge hexagon pattern on the floor I'd seen before on the ground level of Grilith tower.

Sitting on a seat in the middle of the room, reading a book, was...

...?

Historical turned to face us as we entered the room.

“Oh, wow,” he greeted us from the middle of the room. “You're... all here.”

“Yo, asshole, we're here to bury you six feet under!” Laviil announced. “Ready to get fucked?!”

“Ah, Laviil...” Historical closed his book, set it down on a nearby desk, and stood up from his chair. “With four of you here, I don't doubt your success. Seems as if my sins have finally caught up with me.”

“Don't start preaching all your shitty pity small talk now,” Laviil continued. “I'm gonna—”

Nōne grabbed Lavil by the arm, pulling him back.

Lavil tried to wriggle away, repeatedly punching Nōne in the face to no absolutely avail. “Get the fuck off me! Don't you dare try to stop me, you son of a bitch! I've been waiting for this moment for YEARS—”

“Let him talk. You've been longing to kill him? I've been longing to have a nice, lengthy conversation with him, and *then* kill him. Let's do it my way, hm?”

“If you fuck this up for me, I'll kill you too,” Lavil sneered.

“As if.” Nōne pushed Lavil away and quickly turned his attention back to Historical. “So! Let us talk, overlord.” He stepped closer to Historical. “I'm sure the others wouldn't mind listening in on an explanation.”

“Indeed. It's been a long time since you tried to kill me when we landed on this planet, yes? I would love nothing more than to explain as much as I can. Would any of you... care to take a seat?” Historical gestured to a few chairs and stools scattered around the middle of the room.

None of us took him up on the offer, except for Nōne, who went over and sat on a seat near Historical.

“Didn't you save me from Tangent?! I—” I didn't understand. Confusion rushed through my head. He was... acting so casual.

“Fuck the seat. Start talking,” Lavil hissed, pointing his rifle at Historical, aiming

down the scope. “You try anything and you're fucked.”

“Right, then,” Historical started, turning to the side as he picked up his sledgehammer. “Corruption. You're all aware of it, mhm? It's... it's not just some number that goes up and makes you less functional and coherent. It's a convenient name for something else. Something I'd consider a living entity. It was never meant to circulate through robots. And, certainly, nobody expected it to do anything to machines. But it does, oh, does it ever.” He put a hand on his face for a moment before turning to us. “Impure deaths... you're all aware of those as well, I'm sure. As it turns out, that's not the end for some unlucky few. If enough of it builds up in someone, ah... haha, well... I'm sure you'll all be finding out what that amounts to quite soon.”

“What's that supposed to mean?!” I barked, holding my weapon tighter.

“Apologies if that sounded more ominous than intended. The monster is me, not you.

So, because of this... *thing* inside me, yes, I was the robot that captured and took the memories of those other bots. It was me. When I gave the corruption something to explore and learn, it took its influence off my drives for maybe a day or two. It gave me my body and mind back. It gave me my soul back, however impermanent it may have been, because it craves knowledge. No matter how many books I read, no matter how much I study, no matter how much I explore new concepts and old history, it still remains

dissatisfied. It's always trying to consume, and there's no getting rid of it.”

He started pacing around in circles. “I tried so many experiments. I took other machines into the reassignment station to test on them. I wanted to know if it was possible to rid someone of corruption, not in pursuit of some far-fetched godhood, but to rid people of this monster. I've seen what it can do to machines who've been completely overwhelmed by it, and I feared what might have happened if enough of it were to conglomerate. I wanted to stop it. But it was already influencing my actions and behaviour, almost as if it knew what I was trying to do. Who am I kidding – of course it knew.

Like some cruel joke, I was never given a chance to live a life with my own neural network. I've been plagued with this “creature” for my entire life. I, myself, was an experiment in this regard. I can only fathom it's the reason I was given this thing back on planet Hallow: the Catastrophe Manipulator. I don't know what end it was supposed to be the means to, but it's given me the longevity to explore my options for this long.”

As he spoke those words – Catastrophe Manipulator – he turned away from us and raised his hands up towards the walls, towards the colourful, flowing symbols in the strange darkness, perpetually undulating behind some transparent barrier.

“It has the power to corrupt, and it has the power to purify. I don't entirely know how it

works, despite my studies, but... it contains great power that could rid us of this disease.”

“So why didn't you do it, then?!” Lavil butted in. “If you have this amazing tool to cure corruption, why are you a scumbag shithead rather than the hero of Zynima?!”

“I simply can't help myself.” Historical shrugged. “You were lucky enough to catch me at this moment – a moment in which I still have control over my mind. Perhaps five or ten minutes from now, I'm going to become an incoherent, evil creature until I can feed the beast inside me some form of *food*, for lack of a better term. But until then, I am myself, the person I desperately wish I could be. *That* is why I saved you from Tangent, Aural. To save you from the actions of my other self.”

He put his hands on his face again, continuing his circles. “And I've been trying... I've been trying to tame it permanently, but never succeeded. However, there was something... *someone*... who had an adept understanding of all this. You all probably know who it is by now. That ship's AI, Lacuna. We go back a long time.

She was there when I was created. Way back, so many years ago on Hallow, Lacuna was there. I heard her talking with that man – the figure behind my conception. He infused me with this curse as his companions built me. This curse, this hellish entity that now courses through every one of us.”

“Elaborate. What do you mean every one of us?” Shock asked, her face and voice both stone cold.

“Corruption. It's in all of us. Everyone knows that. Why? I don't know. My creator probably has something to do with it.”

“Then who did this to you? Who is your creator?”

“A human named Redmond Severus.”

A human? One of those fabled beings that supposedly created all of robotkind?

“There's no way I'd find that man again,” Historical continued. “He's an obscure, well-hidden fellow. But imagine my surprise when I heard Lacuna would be leading the shipping vessel to Zynima! It was the only lead I had. I needed her.

So I did what I had to do. I never wanted to attack that ship, but I could *not* let Lacuna get away. She was invaluable. When I found out she'd already eluded me, I went for my next best option. I went and got my hands dirty myself. Maybe, just maybe, someone else on that ship would have the knowledge I needed.”

“That was MY fucking ship, you asshole! You think you can just go and kidnap and break people because of your selfish whims?!” Shock screamed. I got ready to hold her back.

“Tsk, tsk, darling, it was *my* ship,” Nōne quietly pointed out.

“Shut it, smart ass,” she scowled at Nōne.

Historical slammed his hammer on the ground, sending a rumble throughout the tower, grabbing all of our attentions.

Lavil clicked something on his gun and kept his aim steady.

“*Ahem.* Which brought me to Trivo, that cutie,” Historical casually continued. “Interesting coincidence with her. I had no idea at the time; when I took what memory she had, imagine my delight when I found out she was part of Lacuna. But, of course, she still lacked the knowledge I needed. That part was still with her virtual half. I have no idea how she separated herself like that, but nevertheless: if she popped up anywhere, if she connected herself to any computer for any length of time, *I would find her.* I was almost lucky enough to catch her napping when she'd contacted Trivo for a rather lengthy conversation only a handful of hours ago, but Tangent's flaw – his lack of conscience, lack of tact – ruined that opportunity for me.”

“You MADE Tangent! You can control him!” I shouted. “All I'm hearing is bullshit!”

Historical paused again with a sigh. “Yes, I can, but on this note, I'd like to propose a question to you, Aural. One you *should* know the answer to.”

“What.”

“Why do you think I didn't tell Tangent to *not* attack your home in that tunnel?”

I was tempted to say “because you're shit,” but I kept quiet. I just shook my head.

“I just told you why. For the vast majority of my life, I am under the influence of the creature inside me. And it's... it's...”

Historical paused again, looking straight at me. As I stared back at him, a streak of liquid leaked out from the bottom of his left eye.

*Black liquid.*

He wiped his eye with his wrist, and slowly looked down at his hand.

“...Oh. Oh, uhh... ah, I'm not yet finished explaining. I can't have this happening now.” He turned and ran away from us, darting behind a bookshelf, feebly covering his face with one of his skeletal hands.

“Ay, ay! Get the fuck back here!” Laval called out, following him. Nōne followed closely behind Laval, prompting Shock and I to come too.

“No, I can't give in to your ignorant demands, not now, not now, I need... the book, where is the book?”

I saw Laval raise the rifle to fire.

“Laval, wait!” I raced up behind him.

Too late. Laval opened fire. *BANG-BANG-BANG* filled the air as Laval pulled the trigger over and over again, each shot piercing Historical's body.

With a loud grunt, Historical spun around and thrust his hammer out in front of him, which opened up into a wide, round shield. The rifle shots ricocheted off it, not even making a dent.

“Laval II, I knew you were a mistake from day one. Your temperament would be this world's downfall.”



“Shut the fuck up!” Lavil kept firing, no matter how futile it was.

Lavil ran out of ammo. He began reloading his rifle.

Historical started lowering his shield, eventually dropping it on the ground. Black liquid was leaking from every orifice on his body – his eyes, his smile, his chest, his abdomen – and he was struggling just to stand up.

“Why... now...” Historical choked, “of all times...”

Lavil finished reloading. He immediately opened fire again.

Unshielded, Historical didn't stand a chance. One round struck him in the abdomen where he wasn't armoured, sending a spray of orange fluid out from his body like a small geyser. He fell to his knees.

I stood still and watched as Lavil exacted revenge on his creator.

“Fucking die! You are NOT about to get away from me again!” Lavil excitedly screamed, continuing his assault. “It's finally fucking over, bitch!”

“Gh–! You have no idea what you're doing, Lavil,” Historical yelped back.

As Lavil made more direct hits to Historical's lower body, the orange and grey robot collapsed on the ground.

Historical cried out as every shot hit him.

I stood still and watched.

Lavil lowered the rifle and skated towards Historical. “You had this coming for years, asshole!”

“It's... over... isn't it,” Historical groaned. “One chance... to explain... and I failed.”

“Don't say another fucking word! I'm 'boutta lose it with you ruining my life! Ruining Trivo's life! Killin' people and stealing their memories! You're DONE tormenting this world, motherfucker!!”

“Lavil... III...” Historical muttered, “don't... bother... coming.”

Lavil resumed shooting Historical at point blank. *Bang, bang, bang.*

Historical became limp on the ground, face first.

Lavil kept shooting.

I stood still and watched.

Lavil really just finished it. Historical... he was the one who did all those terrible things, and now Zynima's going to be free from his underworld reign? That's... that's what was happening, right?

The orange spray coming from Historical's abdomen gradually dissipated. Although, as Lavil kept filling his body with lead, small streaks of a different liquid started erupting from his body.

*Black liquid.*

I backed up. “Lavil! Stop! He's... he's dead!” I called out.

This felt terrible. Just like that, our adventure was seemingly over with one robot's

death. On the other hand, that black liquid was making me uncomfortable. Why was it still arcing from his body?

“Uh, what the fuck?!” Lavil shouted, stepping back.

The black liquid coming from Historical's wounds wasn't arcing off his body anymore. It had become solid, forming several narrow appendages attached to the ground.

**“What did I say, Lavil?”** A voice rang through the room, coming from Historical's body. But it wasn't Historical's voice.

“Strike him down, now!” Nōne shouted as he jumped over to Historical's body, “before he tr- aagh!”

Historical was wrenched upright by the black appendages, smashing into both Nōne and Lavil with his body, sending the TV-head flying into a bookshelf with a loud grunt. The shelf collapsed, raining books and trinkets down on him. Lavil skid across the floor on his back right towards Shock, but she managed to jump to the side just in time.

**“I must thank you. You have no idea how long I've been waiting for him to die. Now I can finally have a body to call my own.”**

I tensed even more, readying my weapon. What the fuck was happening to him?!

Historical's floating body, suspended in the air via black, organic appendages attached to the floor, gently lowered to the ground, facing away from us. He landed on his feet, clearly no longer a corpse.

Shock and I took a step back. I couldn't understand what I was seeing.

**“And with that... this city, all its inhabitants...”** he said to us as he picked up his hammer, the black appendages retracting into his midsection. **“This very planet, nothing more than a speck in this world...”** He turned around to face us with his hammer gripped in both hands.

His eyes weren't horizontal lines anymore. Another vertical line had appeared on top of them, forming two sinister cross shapes.

**“I don't believe we've met before. My name is Magnus.”** His rickety wings unfurled from his back. **“Welcome to Zynima.”**

## 27 – Awakening

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“The time for words is over! Kill him, now!” Nōne cried from under the bookcase.

Shock and I raised our guns and pulled the trigger. Laval scrambled to his feet and followed suit, but Magnus had already raised his hammer towards us with its shield active.

**“HA! You'll need to do better than that!”**

“Surround him!” Laval shouted, sliding over to the right side of the room.

I ran to the left, lowering my gun for a moment; aiming while moving with a damaged arm wasn't feasible. I took cover behind a nearby bookcase, preparing to aim again.

As I peeked out from my cover, the bookcase exploded into shrapnel and debris, with books and paper flying everywhere. I was forced to the ground, but caught the floor with my hand, somewhat keeping my balance.

I looked back. Magnus was standing there, looking at me, recovering from smashing through the bookcase. I pushed myself back up to my feet.

Before I could prepare to shoot, he swung his hammer down at me in a huge arc. I jumped back just in time, but I tripped backwards over something – a pile of books – and fell down on my rear end.

Sledgehammer in hand, Magnus lunged forward, shoving me to the ground with a foot firmly planted on my chest, smashing some of my

speakers. The sudden impact caused me to lose grip on my rifle, bouncing it across the floor.

**“Can't get Tangent to kill you? I'll just do it myself.”**

From Magnus's midsection, those tentacle-like limbs grew out, each with a sharp blade at the end.

My gun was too far away. I couldn't fight back.

“Shoot him!” I heard Shock yell out, followed by rifle shots barely buzzing past us.

Just behind Magnus, Nōne ran towards us, scythe at the ready. He swung down and slashed through some of those black tentacles, cutting them off, forcing Magnus to lose balance.

The foot on my chest was gone. I rolled to the side and crawled away, trying to escape both Magnus and the oncoming crossfire.

“Move, Nōne!” Shock yelled again.

Scrambling to my feet while picking up my rifle, I spun around to see Magnus's remaining appendages gripping Nōne's scythe, trying to pry it away from him.

“A prime idea, my dear,” Nōne growled back at Shock, stuck in a deadlock with Magnus, “but I'm a tad occupied at the moment!”

I didn't want to risk shooting Nōne, especially with my bad arm. Shock was ready to fire, and Lavil – far across the room from us – was also aiming at our foe.

**“You don't stand a chance against me anymore.”**

Magnus raised a leg up and kicked Nōne in the gut with such force that it sent him sliding across the floor with a pained yelp.

We all opened fire the moment Nōne was no longer in melee range with Magnus. Several of our shots missed, punching holes in the glass wall encompassing the room, but several shots connected as well, ripping through Magnus's body before he could spin his hammer around and protect himself with his shield.

Yet he didn't show any signs of weakness or injury, despite our clear hits.

Magnus's tentacles raised Nōne's scythe in the air above him. I gasped, realizing our TV-head was completely disarmed.

I stopped firing while Magnus's shield was up. Shock also stopped, but Lavi continued, only to pause moments later to begin reloading.

“This... isn't off to a great start,” Shock commented. She ran to the right, looking for an opening to get past Magnus's shield.

**“Ahaha! You've yet to realize how futile your struggle is. How screwed you all truly are,”** Magnus boasted. Keeping his shield pointed towards us – ignoring Lavi's wild gunfire – he jumped over to the holes we'd shot in the glass walls.

More of that black fluid was gushing out from the holes in the wall. As Magnus stepped into it, he... seemingly... *absorbed* it into himself. The tentacles emerging from his back grew in size, and the limbs Nōne cut off were quickly regenerated into an equally large form.

“Uh, this isn't good, here..!” I quivered, taking careful steps to the left, mirroring Shock's movements. What the hell was he?!

“What are you guys doing?! KILL HIM!” Lavil screamed at us, continuing his barrage against Magnus. He was the only one of us who had a clear shot at him – we were still stuck with a shield in front of us.

Magnus continued his grotesque transformation, his vile appendages growing in size – large enough to be vulnerable above his shield. I took aim once again, quickly yet carefully, looking at those bladed tentacles...

*BANG.* I took a shot. The recoil was hard to control with my weak arm, but it just barely hit my target.

But it didn't matter. The instant after the shot connected, the wound healed over with more of that black fluid.

“I-it's not working!” I shouted.

**“She's finally starting to understand.”**

Nōne, finally back up on his feet, started running over between Shock and I. “The choice of the coward is ours for the moment; we must flee! We cannot stop him!”

With several of those huge limbs – each now easily a dozen feet in length – Magnus effortlessly lifted a full size bookcase into the air, spilling out books everywhere.

As I lowered my weapon and prepared to run, Magnus catapulted the bookcase across the room, straight towards Nōne.

“Nōne! Look out!!” Shock screamed.



He had no time to dodge. The bookcase slammed down on him, crushing him against the floor.

I screamed his name out in disbelief.

“Shock! Wh-what do we do?!” I shouted to my friend, my cowardice winning me over upon seeing Nōne defeated.

“Kill him!” Laval yelled back, relentlessly firing at Magnus from the other side of the room.

Shock flicked her gaze between Laval and me with gritted teeth. “I-I’ll support Laval!” She turned to him and started sprinting.

“I’ll distract!” I stammered, an idea coming together in my mind.

As Shock ran over to Laval on the far right side of the room, Magnus’s attention was squarely on them as he stepped towards Laval. I ran around the outskirts of the room’s left wall, taking cover behind the remaining bookcases.

“Hey, bitch!” I said aloud – recording my voice. While running, I picked up a hardcover book along the way.

When I emerged from my cover, Magnus’s back was to me – no more than ten feet away – and Shock and Laval were opposite him.

“HEY, BITCH!” I belted my recorded message out as loud as I could with my remaining speakers. I raised my book in the air and threw it at Magnus.

He turned to me as the book bounced off one of his tentacles. With Nōne’s scythe raised in the air, gripped by those black tendrils, he swung

out and slashed through my abdomen, cutting me open. Light blue liquid streaked out from the wound.

*That... backfired...*

I fell backwards onto the ground. I looked down at myself only to see more blue liquid pouring from my midsection. I couldn't lift myself up. My legs wouldn't move. I couldn't move.

“Aural!!” I heard Shock call out to me.

Magnus turned his attention back to Lavil and Shock. With a pissed off roar, he lunged at them and swung his hammer sideways. Shock's head met the end of his hammer, sending her sailing into the glass wall. Lavil dodged out of the way, skating towards me.

“Sh... Shock!” I yelled.

She wasn't moving after the impact against the wall.

“**Lavil II...**” Magnus growled, turning to face him.

“Fuck! You!” Lavil took a moment to reload his gun after skating out of melee range.

“**Tch.**” Magnus's tendrils whipped Nōne's scythe at him, spinning through the air with unexpected speed as he began charging at Lavil.

The blade slashed through Lavil's right arm, lopping it clean off in a shower of sparks.

“Shit!” he cried out, trying to hold on to his rifle well enough to aim with just one hand.



## **Critical state report**

**Optics offline - critical failure**

**Optics damaged or missing**

**“Aural Automaton” sight disabled**

**Seek repair**

**Nervous system - critical failure**

**Nerve loop damaged or missing**

**“Aural Automaton” nervous system disabled: Head, Left Arm, Speaker Deck**

**Seek repair**

**Sound system - major failure**

**Speakers damaged or missing**

**“Aural Automaton” audio disabled:**

**s\_visor01, s\_visor02, s\_visor03, s\_visor04,  
s\_visor05, s\_visor06, s\_lshoulder, s\_chest02,  
s\_chest03, s\_chest04, s\_chest05**

**Seek repair**

**Motor control - critical failure**

**Nerve loop damaged or missing**

**“Aural Automaton” motor control**

**disabled: Head, Left Arm, Speaker Deck**

**“Aural Automaton” motor control**

**shutdown: repair nerve loop before booting**

**Processor deck damaged or missing**

**“Aural Automaton” shutdown**

**Seek repair immediately**

**“Haha. My first fight in my own body... how exhilarating.”** Magnus took a moment to stretch his limbs out, perusing the carnage around him.

**“Ahh... knowledge, he craved,”** he muttered to himself among the ruined shelves, books, and incapacitated robots. He picked up the book Aural Automaton had thrown at him earlier, looking down at the cover – Mathematics, Division 7. **“Knowledge I craved once upon a time.”**

He looked up at the walls around him – the Catastrophe Manipulator – as it continued draining black fluid onto the floor.

**“Hahaha... this freedom is incredible.”** He looked back down at his own hands – Historical's skeletal hands – feeling his fingers, his palms, marvelling at his *own* body. Not to be shared with anyone else. Not anymore.

With several of his tendrils, he smashed the glass surrounding the Catastrophe Manipulator, causing a powerful surge of black fluid to gush out from the broken pane. As it poured over him, he incorporated it into his own body, growing the massive tentacles on his back to incredible sizes. They became too large to remain connected to his midsection; instead, they merged into his body completely: Historical's warped visage, along with the rest of his tattered body, was attached firmly to the writhing mass of enormous tentacles.

**“HAHAHAHA!”**

Magnus lifted himself off the ground with his extra limbs, hovering higher and higher in the air as the walls continued to drain. The spindly tendrils that were once six feet long had at least quintupled in size, allowing him to hover several dozen feet in the air, connected to the ground via his grotesque tentacles.

...

*tip-tap-tip-tap.*

...

*tip-tap. tip-tap-tip-tap-tip-tap.*

...

...

...

*tip-tap-tip-tap-tip-tap!*

“Hrrh?” Magnus faced the room's entrance.

The first door to Grilith Tower's base hummed open.

*tip-tap-tip-tap!*

The second door to Grilith Tower's base hummed open.

In the open doorway to the ruined room where Magnus reigned above all else, where heroic machines lay defeated, was Trivo.

**“You,”** Magnus growled. **“Ha. The key to purity herself. Hahaha!”**

“I'm not afraid of you anymore.” Trivo stepped forward, pointing at Magnus with her only remaining arm. “I'm not afraid!”

**“Cute, but stupid. Look around! Your adorably pathetic friends are DEAD. What do you think you can do that *they* couldn't?”**

“What did you do to them?!”

**“I showed them their place in this world. Now that you've so utterly *betrayed me*, I think it would be prudent of you to join them.”**

“I was never on your side!”

An enormous, black appendage flew down from the air, crashing down on Trivo. It bounced back up with a flash of electricity, leaving Trivo completely unharmed.

A dim forcefield was surrounding her. Her eyes and lights were red.

“Lethal mode engaged!” Trivo blared in a voice native to all Vesky models. “All citizens, evacuate the area! Active threats are present! Lethal mode engaged! All citizens, evacuate the area! Active threats are present!”

**“Grrh! You learned!”** Magnus screeched in anger.

Panels opened up on Trivo's wrist and thighs, revealing small pulse laser cannons.

“80% capacity! Opening fire!”

Blue beams of energy rapidly flew towards one of the vile appendages waving through the air, searing a line of holes straight through it. The massive limb fell from Magnus's body and flopped onto the ground, writhing into a shrivelled puddle of darkness.

Another pitch black arm fell down towards Trivo. She ran and leapt out of the way, jumping up onto one of the bookcases as the tentacle crashed onto the ground, sending chunks of debris everywhere.

She opened fire again, unleashing a barrage of bright, blue projectiles at the tendril, dismembering the majority of its length. Upon impacting the floor, it shrivelled up just like the last.

With a fell roar, Magnus threw down another appendage onto the bookcase Trivo stood on.

She jumped off the bookcase the moment before it was smashed into countless pieces, landing on top of the tentacle.

She prepared to leap off, but couldn't. Several dark, malformed hands emerging from the slimy limb had already grabbed onto her legs, rooting her in place.

**“ONCE MINE, ALWAYS MINE!”**  
Magnus yelled.

Trivo aimed her cannons down, shooting down at the hands. With a sharp hiss, the hands were quickly burned through as the energy projectiles pierced the alien flesh.

She fell to the floor, easily landing on her feet.

Something grabbed her from behind. One of the appendages she'd shot off earlier had morphed into a vaguely humanoid shape with two cross eyes on the front, wrenching her backwards, trying to drag her into its pitch black mass.

With a bright flash of her forcefield, the harrowing entity split in half vertically, collapsing to the ground once again.

Trivo set her sights on Magnus himself. She opened fire directly at his suspended body.



Without time to react to Trivo's onslaught, Magnus was quickly filled with holes as the blue energy projectiles burned countless holes into his body.

Magnus's – or, Historical's – head was shot off.

A dark mass slithered out from his neck, forming another head with the same bright crosses for eyes. The holes in Magnus's body quickly filled themselves in with eerie blackness.

**“HAHAHA! YOU CAN'T KILL ME, LITTLE GIRL!”**

Trivo kept firing without relent. The lasers pierced through Magnus's body, shredding off chunks of Historical's hull piece by piece. Each wound kept filling in with otherworldly flesh before Trivo could make any finishing shots.

She was smashed to the side, unaware that another tentacle was swinging her way. As she flew towards the wall, she engaged her forcefield, rebounding herself off the wall in a huge arc of electricity. She landed on her feet, stumbling through the wreckage of a ruined bookcase.

Historical's discarded hull was completely shaken off by Magnus, whose true form appeared similar to Historical, but as a writhing mass of darkness rather than his original body of metal and electricity.

“40% capacity! Opening fire!”

Trivo aimed at the remaining tentacles waving around. She could only spot four more.

She unleashed another flurry of energy bolts as she started running around the edges of the room.

Magnus roared, sending two more of his limbs down on Trivo. With ample time to see it coming, she activated her forcefield again, ricocheting the freakish tendrils off her in a bright flash.

With her accurate laser fire, Trivo blasted through yet another of Magnus's tentacles, dropping it to the floor.

Magnus himself was running out of limbs – out of *mass* – to use. He dropped himself to the ground, splitting his three remaining appendages into smaller versions.

“29% capacity, Vesky. Try to disengage.”

Without so much mass to weigh him down, he charged at Trivo with his bladed tentacles ready to strike.

Magnus swung them down at her. Trivo jumped to the left, her right leg barely grazing the blade in the air, scraping her hull.

Just before she landed, Magnus swung at her again with a loud grunt. Raising her right arm in the air, she blocked the blade with her forcefield.

“20% capacity; forcefield disabled.”

The Vesky's automated warnings prompted a hearty laugh from Magnus.

He ran straight at Trivo, tendrils spread wide, jumping in the air to tackle her. Trivo jumped backwards a moment too late.

“Eyaah!” she cried out as she was smacked down to the floor.

Magnus crawled on top of her, straddling her chest, pinning her arm down. **“Hahaha. The key to purity. Whatever would happen if the little beacon of light was dragged down into the unending darkness?”**

Magnus's tendrils were all raised in the air, pointing down at Trivo's face.

**“You're still too incompetent to defeat me. Maybe less so than those other failures, but still pathetic. It took five of you to fight me, and you all still FAILED. What now, key to purity? What will happen to all the robots up above when you're tossed to the scrapyard, 100% corrupt?”**

Trivo didn't say a thing.

**“ANSWER ME, LITTLE GIR—”**

Black liquid splattered across Trivo's face as a curved blade – lined with blue fluid – emerged through Magnus's chest.

He looked down at the blade.

“I waited for years to kill you. That was my vow,” Nōne said from behind Magnus. “Slapping me around isn't going to change that vow.” He yanked his scythe out from Magnus's body.

Magnus turned around with a growl, seemingly unaffected by the surprise attack. He slashed at Nōne with his tendrils.

Nōne blocked some with his scythe, but the remaining limbs tore across his face, cutting his screen.

He hardly flinched.

Trivo took the opportunity to struggle away from the distracted Magnus. His grip on her hand was weak; she wrenched it away and pointed her wrist at Magnus's head.

“Opening fire!”

Nōne ducked.

Trivo shot out another barrage of blue projectiles, tearing Magnus's head apart into nothing more than a stump. With a hefty roll, she tossed Magnus's body off herself. She took the precious moment to get back to her feet.

Magnus's head reformed, as before.

“**Haha! Hahaha!**” He struggled back to his feet. The hole in his chest remained unhealed. “**Hahahaha!**”

Nōne stood next to Trivo, both their gazes on Magnus.

“**HAHAHAHA!!**”

“I grow tired of this incessant noise. Let us end this, Vesky,” Nōne said.

Trivo aimed her weapons. “Opening fire!”

One final barrage of blue lasers flew through Magnus's body, punching countless holes through it.

Magnus fell to his knees, his maniacal laughter only increasing in intensity.

Trivo ceased fire.

Nōne walked up to Magnus.

“*Be no more.*” He slashed through Magnus's chest, splitting his body in two.

Magnus's laughter finally stopped as his dismembered body began deteriorating into the same shrivelled puddles of darkness as his lost limbs did prior.

Standing in place, staring at what was once Magnus, Trivo's lights faded from red to green.

“I... I-I...” she stammered.

“Welcome back, Trivo,” Nōne hummed.

“D-d-did... I-I...”

“Indeed. Congratulations.”

## 28 – A Return

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“Wh-what have I done?!” Trivo exclaimed, placing her hands on her head. “I-I... w-wait! Th-the others! Where are they?” Trivo asked, looking around in a frenzy. It didn't take long for her to spot Shock lying on the floor against a wall.

“Shock!” she yelled, running over to her.

Shock's eyes were bright green, indicating that she was conscious. She wasn't moving much, but she was alive.

Trivo knelt down beside her. “Shock..! Y-you're alive! Are you okay?”

Shock groaned, slowly raising a hand to her head. “Trivo...”

“It's me! I'm here for you. What happened?”

“Magnus... Magnus... where is he?”

“He's gone. Don't worry—”

“Huh? Wait... Trivo? What are you doing here?” Shock's eyes widened, and she lifted herself off the floor, now sitting against the wall. “Where are the others?”

“I... don't know.”

“No... fuck. Aural, she was... no!” Shock slowly pushed herself to her feet, using the wall to support herself. “Magnus slashed her! Where is she?”

“I don't know..!”

From a distance, Nōne spoke up, solemn in tone. “Your answer... lies here.”

Shock made her way over to Nōne, supported by Trivo in her groggy state.

Aural was lying on her back, body smashed and damaged, in a pool of light blue fluid. Her speaker deck was crushed in, her abdomen was sliced open, and her visor was shattered. She showed no signs of life.

“Oh my god,” Shock cried, “oh my god! Aural!” She stumbled away from Trivo, almost tripping as she ran towards Aural's corpse.

“N-no...” Trivo stuttered, rigid from the sight.

Shock crouched down beside Aural, investigating the damage. Her breathing grew heavier and faster as she looked over her deceased friend.

“Is she okay?” Trivo asked, despite already knowing the answer.

Shock stood up and let out a shaky sigh. “I need to get her to the central tech station. I... I need to see if there's anything salvageable. You two, help me carry her out of here!”

“A-ah! Wait, what about Lavi!?” Trivo asked.

Shock shook her head. “You seen him, Nōne?”

“You may not like the answer.”

“Oh no...” Trivo groaned.

“Just fucking spit it out!” Shock shouted.

“Yes, I've seen them... but they're no longer whole.”

“What..?” Shock and Trivo said in unison.

From a nearby pile of debris, Nōne held up a shiny, light blue piece of metal.

One of Lavi's feet.

“No! Th-that can't be true!” Trivo began. “It can't be!”

Shock grit her teeth and cursed, looking to the floor.

Trivo ran to the middle of the room, looking in every direction for signs of Lavi.

“No!!” Trivo repeated, her voice laced with agony. From beneath a small pile of books and wood, she lifted up two chunks of Lavi's annihilated torso. “This isn't real! Shock! Help him! Please!!” Trivo ran over to Shock.

Shock drew a heavy breath, meeting Trivo's gaze with compassion and understanding.

“P-please, Shock...” Trivo sobbed, though no tears manifested on her face. “Save him...!”

Shock walked up to Trivo and embraced her.

“Shock!” Trivo repeated. “Please—”

“Trivo... Trivo. I... he's in pieces. I can't. His hardware is—”

“SHOOOCK!!” Trivo yelled, not in anger, but distress. She waited a few more moments before slowly returning Shock's hug. “Lavi... uuu... Lavi...”

Shock shut her eyes. The two stood in collective despair, letting the seconds pass.

“Lavi II was a good person.” Nōne stepped up to Trivo's side, placing a gloved hand on her shoulder. “Beyond their crass exterior was



a machine that cared. You were one of the only ones who saw that, Trivo.”

Trivo synthesized sniffing and sobbing noises. “No... stop... don't say that...”

Shock opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated, only to end up saying “I'm sorry.” She released her hug and looked into Trivo's eyes. “Trivo... listen to me, okay?”

Her voice was very choked up.

“Listen closely. We need to be strong, okay? That's what Aural and Lavil would want, isn't it? They sacrificed themselves for your freedom. They loved you and wanted nothing more than for you to be safe. We did it, right? Magnus and Tangent are gone, right?”

“Tangent is g-gone too?” Trivo said with similarly choked up words.

“That's right. You're free and safe now. It's going to be hard, but we have to be strong. For them.”

“W-why... why did this have to happen...” Trivo whimpered.

Shock hugged Trivo again.

“My apologies if this comes across as insensitive,” Nōne spoke up, “but we need to prepare ourselves. Fighting our way out of here is not going to be easy.”

“No, no,” Trivo responded as she pulled away from Shock's embrace. “There's a... u-uh.. this is an elevator...”

“Oh?”

“There's... in the middle, by the desk and chair...”

As Trivo said, in the middle of the room stood a desk and chair just beside one of the few bookcases that hadn't been toppled during the carnage. On the desk was a small panel of buttons.

“We can go up,” Trivo explained, “to Grilith Tower.”

“Hm. Seems as if I don't know everything after all,” Nōne remarked, walking over to it.

“Bring... bring Aural to the middle...” Trivo told Shock.

Shock walked over to Aural without hesitation, lifting her up and carrying her over to the middle of the room.

“Only the middle is an elevator,” Trivo explained. She walked over to the panel with Nōne. “I-I... I think it's... this button.” She pressed the button.

The floor beneath them shook for a moment as an enormous array of mechanisms and machines beneath the floor sprung to life. Gradually at first, the floor started lifting itself up.

Up above, the ceiling opened up as well, forming a path for the platform to rise up through. As it ascended into the ceiling, books and debris hanging along the edges of the platform were smashed and crushed as the platform entered the narrow passage upwards.

The ceiling opened above them again, revealing the ground floor of Grilith tower up above. And, as the elevator rose to the ground floor, a familiar face stood waiting nearby.

“You made it, lassie!” Xaita called out to Trivo, running to the edge of the elevator platform. “Are y'all okay?”

“I-I– yes, I'm okay. B-but... Lavil... a-a-and Aural...”

“Oh, no... don't tell me...”

The elevator platform came to a halt, flush with Grilith Tower's floor.

Shock walked up beside Trivo. “Lavil sacrificed himself to help free Trivo. There...” she paused, shaking her head, “there's no way he's coming back.”

Trivo looked away, whimpering.

“There might be a chance for Aural,” Shock continued. “I don't know yet. I need to get her to the tech station.”

“I'm so sorry,” Xaita consoled her. “Lavil... agh, I'm no good with this emotional stuff,” she commented, stepping away from the group. “Hell, and to think I had no idea what you folks were on about with that whole desert trip. I'm so sorry.”

“I'm curious... how did you know to come here, Xaita?” Nōne asked.

“Trivo came to me with an arm missing and said she needed to get somewhere urgently.” She began pacing. “CRT Siphon Yard, of all places. Told me it connected to somewhere she needed to be. Kinda strange, but I ain't one to argue with someone missin' a limb in such a panic, especially if they're a friend of Lavil. Said it might be the last time I see her. Thank goodness she was wrong about that! When I dropped her

off, she told me to go to Grilith and wait 'til dusk to pick her up in case she lives." She turned to Shock. "J-just what were y'all doing down there?"

"We can talk about that later. You're here to pick her up, right?" Shock replied.

"You got it, but you're free to come too. You too, uh, you too, whoever you are." Xaita looked over to Nōne.

"Your offer is generous indeed, but I must politely decline."

"What?" Shock gasped. "You're leaving?"

"Upsilon is dead. My work here is done, and now I must be on my way."

"And you're just going to—" Shock stopped herself. "Fine. Whatever, then."

"Whoa, wait, you guys aren't... murderers, are you?" Xaita stepped back.

"No! God no," Shock declared before anyone had a chance to answer. "I'll explain on the way back to the city. You brought your tank, right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"We really need to get going."

"Ahh... I understand. Let's be on our way, then."

Shock walked back to Aural's body in the middle of the elevator platform. She picked her up with a hefty grunt.

Xaita guided Trivo to Grilith's main entrance, with Shock following behind.

“It'll be okay,” Xaita said to Trivo, holding her arm over Trivo's shoulder. “It'll be okay.”



With Aural seated upright in the corner of Xaita's desert tank, Shock and Trivo found themselves sitting among their driver's cluttered belongings in the back of the huge vehicle. The truck cruised along the desert floor at a brisk pace – quickly, but not so fast as to jostle everything around over the sandy dunes.

Shock took the time to explain the majority of what happened with herself, Trivo, Aural, and Livil. Sparing some sensitive details, she described the situation from Tangent to Historical, and, eventually, Magnus.

“So... my goodness, you're saying that was all happening under our noses in the city?” Xaita asked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Shock answered.

“I'd have half a mind to call that out as a crafty story and nothing more. But... with Livil and Aural... and you two covered in that black stuff... I-I mean, Livil talked to me a while back... she implied she was under some sort of control? But I didn't give it much of a second thought. And... Trivo missing an arm like that, and the whole “Tangent” thing...”

Shock looked over to Trivo. She was covering her face with her hands, sobbing.

“I-I'm sorry. I guess that's not what matters right now. I'll quit my rambling.”

“It's fine, Xaita.”

“Might I just ask one last question?”

“Go for it.”

“Was it... Historical, was it really him?”

Shock hummed in thought. “I... guess. I don't really know. What happened down there feels like a fever dream.”

“And he's gone now too?”

“...Yeah.”

Xaita let out an exasperated sigh. “This just ain't right...”



The desert tank rolled up to Zynima's main road. Unlike last time, Xaita took it easy on the speed.

“You two are headed to the tech station?” she asked.

“Yes,” Shock immediately answered. She looked over to Trivo, who had her legs curled up to her chest, and her head hanging down against her knees. “Hang in there, okay?” Shock reached over and stroked Trivo's head.

“Mhmm...” Trivo mumbled.

After a small bump, the vehicle transitioned onto the city's main strip. Xaita honked the horn to let pedestrians know to move away.

“I wish I could do more,” Xaita spoke up again. “I just...”

“It's fine, it really is,” Shock reassured her. “Giving us this ride is a huge help.”

“I know, but...”

She didn't finish her sentence.

The massive truck slowed to a crawl as Xaita turned into her garage, positioning it very delicately as to not scrape any walls. Shortly after, it came to a stop.

“We're here. This is about as close as I can get you.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much for this.” Shock softly held on to Trivo's hand. “Time to go,” she whispered.

Trivo brought herself to her feet without a word.

“If you need anything else, well... you know where I'll be.”

“Thanks,” Shock repeated. Letting go of Trivo's hand, she crouched down in front of Aural and lifted her up. “Take care, Xaita.”



The city streets weren't too crowded, but nearby pedestrians and passersby looked very concerned; with Trivo and Shock still covered in filth, and Aural's lifeless body carried along in Shock's arms, it was clearly not a comfortable sight.

The entrance to the bright central tech station was within sight, no more than a small block away.

“Fuck... how am I going to explain this..?” Shock muttered.

“I-I can try to help...” Trivo stuttered, her disposition no cheerier than before. “But... I'm r-really tired...”

“It's all right. Can you hold out for a bit longer?”

“I think so...”

“You don't need to do anything. I'll... mmgh. We can go to my place after this.”

“Ah, sorry... I don't need to come if you don't want—”

“It's okay. You're fine... this is just hard for me.” Shock kept her voice down and her tone as neutral as possible.

They stepped in front of the tech station's automatic door and they walked inside.

The lobby was empty, save for a white and blue receptionist sitting behind a round desk opposite the entrance.

“Hello— Shock System? Is that you?” he greeted her.

“Where's the nearest available repair room?”

“Uh! Just down the hall, third door on your right. Where have—”

“Thank you,” she interrupted him. With Trivo in tow, Shock led the way down the immaculately clean hall, and eventually into the third door on her right.

Aside from a standard assortment of repair tools and equipment, as well as a bench to lie patients on, the room was empty. Shock lifted Aural up onto the repair table, gently lying her down as to not damage her any further.

“Come on,” Shock instructed Trivo.

“Wh... we're leaving already?”

“Yeah.”

Shock walked back up to the receptionist. “I need you to get someone on damage



assessment on the victim I just brought in as soon as possible. I'll be back to explain my absence and return to work soon. Tomorrow."

"Well, you're the boss – I'll see you tomorrow then?"

Shock turned away and headed back outside without a word.

Trivo hesitated. She glanced back to the receptionist before catching up to Shock.

"U-um... Shock..." Trivo said as she walked back outside, "are you okay..?"

"Don't worry about me."

"Ah..."

Shock's pace was far quicker than normal. She power-walked down the street towards her house in the bustling residential area, still several blocks away. Trivo tried to keep up, but she had to break out into a small jog every once in a while to match Shock's speed.

She'd glance at Shock every now and then if she figured she could get away with it. It didn't take a sleuth to tell Shock's breathing was still as heavy and arduous as earlier, and the expression on her slanted, green eyes spelled out her mood quite clearly.

Minute after minute passed. As the crowds grew thinner, the distant ambience of city life barely drowned out the overwhelming silence between the two.

"There," Shock finally said, more to herself than anyone else. Her house was finally in view.

"Is that your home?" Trivo asked.

Shock gave an affirmative hum.

"I-it looks nice," Trivo added.

Much to Shock's relief, the house's exterior showed no signs of damage. Seemingly, none of Magnus's goons had gotten into it while she was away.

"I hope you don't mind using a recharge station that's not totally pure," Shock said.

"Oh, uh, I guess it would be okay. How much is it?"

"99.97%."

"That's okay, I think."

Shock unlocked the front door and the two walked inside. Trivo curiously looked around while Shock went straight for living room.

"U-um... if it's okay, can you show me your recharge station? I'm really tired..."

"Yeah." Before she had a chance to sit down, Shock changed course to the hallway that led to her bedroom. "Down here."

"Thanks..."

She showed Trivo the station, as well as how to work it due to its "impure" design.

"You're sure it's okay if I stay here to rest..?"

"You saved my life. It's the least I can do."

"Ah, I guess."

"Sleep well." Shock turned to leave the room.

"Thanks..."

After leaving Trivo, Shock leaned against the hallway wall, hanging her head down with a

hand on her forehead. She waited for a few minutes, listening for the sound of the recharge machine powering on, and Trivo powering down.

To be sure, she peeked into the room after she heard Trivo shut down.

Shock shakily sighed. She walked back over to the living room and sat down on the couch, letting her head hang towards the floor. After a long moment of contemplation, she lifted up a nearby pillow and buried her face in it.

“FUCK!” she screamed. “FUUUCK!!”

Shock immediately jumped to her feet and whipped the pillow back down at the couch. She curled up her hand into a fist and repeatedly slammed it down onto the cushion.

After she finished pummelling the pillow, she let out an agonized wail and sunk to her knees. She buried her face in the pillow again and let her tears flow.

## 29 – Reunited

---

Trivo walked into the living room. “Good morning.”

“Hey.” Shock was lying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. The cushions were wildly strewn about the floor, and the coffee table was on its side.

“I... what happened, Shock?”

Shock sighed. “I’m sorry. I have to apologize for yesterday. I wasn’t myself. I’m still not, really.”

Trivo looked down. Her glowing eyes formed a sad, unhappy shape. “I understand... I can’t believe they’re gone...”

Shock lifted her head up and looked at Trivo. “I’m going to try to fix Aural. No, I *will* fix her. She can’t be gone like this.”

“A-are you sure you can...? She’s hurt so badly...”

Shock waited several seconds before responding. “No, I’m not sure. Fuck, I don’t know...” She clambered to her feet. “I need to check my e-mail and then I have to get to work. Do you have anywhere to go?”

“Not since yesterday, no...”

“Well.” Shock paused. “You can stay here for a while, if you need.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude or anything...”

“Like I said yesterday, Trivo, you saved my life. Giving you a place to stay is hardly a big deal.”

“If you're sure, then... thanks.”

Shock began picking up the pillows and placing them back on the couch. Trivo started helping as well, righting the table to its feet.

“Don't worry about it. It's my mess.”

“No, I insist.”

Shock flashed her a half-smile. “Thanks.”

After the living room was back to a presentable state, Shock sat down at her computer desk and turned the machine on. It took a good minute to boot while Trivo sat idly on the couch.

“There's not a lot to do here. Sorry about that,” Shock commented.

“It's okay.”

“I'd offer you a paper and pen to doodle on, but I don't think I even have that around here.”

“Ah, that's really kind of you... but I'll be okay.”

Shock tapped away at the keyboard and clicked away at the mouse, opening up her e-mail program. She squinted and leaned forward seconds later.

“Uh, hey. Trivo. Come look at this.”

“Hm?” She got up and walked beside Shock, quickly figuring out why she'd been called over. “Wait! Lacuna e-mailed you! May I read?”

Shock clicked on the envelope icon next to the e-mail and opened it.

“Greetings, Shock System.

I understand Upsilon is now deceased. I send this message to you in hopes that Trivo is still alive. I have an urgent matter to discuss with her.

Assuming she is still alive, if you know where she is, please contact her and inform her that her presence is required in the derelict MSE vessel in the desert as soon as possible.”

The message ended without a farewell.

“Oh no! I forgot Lacuna wanted to talk to me at the crashed ship!” Trivo exclaimed.

“Right... we actually went there without you yesterday, since you were under repair.”

“Y-you did?”

“Yeah.”

“What did Lacuna say?”

“Uh,” Shock paused, “I think you might want to hear it from Lacuna yourself. I don't think I could explain it very well from memory.”

“Oh... o-okay.”

“I'm probably going to be taking tomorrow off if you need an escort.”

Trivo waited in thought, taking an oddly long time to answer. “I... think I'll be okay. Ups is gone... and so is Tangent... so I want to try going by myself. I have new powers now, so I have to be brave!”

“Atta girl.”

“I... I-I should go now, shouldn't I?”

“Your call. Lacuna *did* say ASAP, and it *does* seem pretty important.”

“Yeah... I should do it. Okay.” Trivo started walking towards the door, pumping herself up. “Oh, uh... can I ask for one thing before I go?”

“What's that?”

“Umm...” Trivo looked at Shock. “Can I have... a hug?”

With a tired smile on her face, Shock sighed. She rose to her feet and turned to Trivo.

“You don't have to if you don't want! It's—”

“Oh, shut up and come here.”

Shock walked up to Trivo and wrapped her arms around her. In return, Trivo embraced her back with her only arm, resting her head on Shock's shoulder.

“Thanks, Shock...”

“Yeah... you're welcome.”

Shock pulled away from the hug and gave Trivo a pat on the shoulder. “Okay, the day is yours. Go for it.” She walked back over to her computer seat.

“Thank you! I can do it,” Trivo said, encouraging herself even more as she walked to the front door. “Yes, I can do it! Bye for now, Shock!”

“Take care.”

Trivo opened the door and hopped outside.

She knew the route to the MSE vessel. She considered asking Xaita for a ride, but felt anxious about asking her for so many favours. Instead, she bravely opted to go it alone on foot through the desert.

Shock's home wasn't terribly far from the city outskirts. It only took Trivo a handful of minutes before she could see the endless desert ahead of her. Eventually, she stepped off Zynima's concrete foundation, transitioning to soft, grainy sand.

The trek through the desert gave her time to contemplate. Her new freedom was a lot to get used to; she still caught herself fighting pangs of fear, realizing she was alone and Upsilon's goons could come after her at any moment. But, each time she reminded herself Upsilon was gone – by her own hands, no less – she found herself filled with a brief sensation of cheer and empowerment.

Those sensations were quickly followed by sorrow, remembering the loss of Laval and Aural. Trivo would opt to think about nothing and try to clear her mind, and the cycle would repeat from there.

And, every once in a while, she would recall the foggy memories she still had of walking alone through the desert, fleeing from the machines determined to kidnap her as many times as necessary.

I don't have to worry, she told herself. I don't have to be scared anymore... I'm stronger than them now. But why am I still so anxious...?

The trek was long and arduous, but not for any physical reason.



Trivo couldn't find a working entrance to the derelict ship. All she could see was a huge breach in the side of its hull, with a trail of sheet metal leading up to a makeshift ramp. Seeing no better option, she delicately walked up the slope and stepped inside the dark, quiet ship.

“Lacuna?” Trivo called out, her voice echoing through the ship's interior. “Hello?”

No reply.



She looked around the hallway the hole opened up to, deciding to go left through a broken door, up to an enormous room full of dead robots and transport pods.

Trivo gasped. “L-Lacuna?! What is this place?”

“*Keep going,*” a faint voice hummed from within the ship.

“Lacuna?”

No response from the voice.

Hesitantly, Trivo continued through the spacious room, involuntarily gluing her eyes to the defunct and junked robots littering the floor. Fear and panic grew as she pushed onward, stopped only by her reminder of *“I’m stronger than this. I have new power. I have to be strong!”*

“I-I’m on my way. Am I... am I close?” Trivo spoke to the air, if only to give herself the illusion that she wasn't alone. “Yes, I must be. That's right,” she assured herself after receiving no reply.

Finally, she found a doorway at the opposite end of the unnerving room. The door slid open automatically, allowing Trivo passage into a control room of sorts. After giving the glowing panels and screens a quick inspection, she stood still in the middle of the room.

“Lacuna?”

“Hello, Trivo. I'm glad you're here,” a soft voice rang out from somewhere in the room.

“A-ah! That's you, right? Lacuna?”

“Yes, I am Lacuna.”

“Whew...” Trivo relaxed just a bit. “Are you... here? I mean... where are you?”

“I am an AI contained within the ship itself.”

“Oh... wow.”

“I have called you here for a matter of great importance. Something that may possibly save many worlds in this galaxy.”

“M-many worlds...?”

“Yes. But I must explain something crucial to you first, Trivo. You – your personality, knowledge, and memories – are derived directly from me. Years ago, upon landing on this planet, there was a crisis that jeopardized everybody aboard this ship, including myself.”

“Wait, wait! Wh-what did you say? I come from *you*?”

“Yes. During the crisis, I was forced to obtain a body to escape from the ship. Your model – Vesky – is built with a factory AI that all other Vesky units have. But when I transferred myself to your body, I overwrote parts of that AI with myself. That is who you are now.”

“That's... but that's crazy!” She looked down at herself. “How can that be?”

“It is the truth. However, I was interrupted mid-transfer. That is why I am still speaking to you from within this ship. I only have a fragment of my knowledge remaining in my data banks. The rest of it is within you, Trivo.”

“Wha? This is so much to take in...! How can this all be true?”

“Please try to remain calm. Allow me to ask you this: are you familiar with the term “key to purity?””

Trivo perked up. “Y-yes! They... um, those bad guys called me that.”

“I, too, was once referred to as the key to purity before I came to Zynima. This is because I have – or, *had* – the solution to countering corruption. When I transferred myself to your body and lost a large portion of my data, that information was essentially split between us, rendering the vast majority of it unreadable. If others have called you the key to purity in the past, then they must have somehow found out that you hold this information within yourself.”

“Ah... I-I...” Trivo stammered, “I had my memory taken several times...”

Lacuna waited for several seconds before speaking. “The back partition of your drives – was it tampered with?”

“I don't know... I don't think so? But... mmm, I don't really know...”

Another short pause. “Trivo, I would like for us to become one again.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?”

“Connect yourself to the ship. I will initiate a data transfer from you to me, and I will copy your knowledge and memories to my own. If your knowledge of corruption has not been tampered with, I will be able to complete and read that data again, so that I might begin an effort to eliminate corruption from this world. Not just Zynima, but other planets as well.”

Trivo took a step back. She was starting to understand why Shock mentioned this would be better explained by Lacuna than herself. “You... sure seem to know a lot, Lacuna.”

“I am from Hallow, the homeworld of humanity. The knowledge they possess, as a species, far exceeds that of all Zynima's inhabitants combined.”

“Then, y-you're like... a divine messenger! Humans – the creators – are real?!”

“Yes. They are very real, although they are not as divine as you may believe. They are biological creatures of flesh and blood, with personalities and memories just like us. They don't have any special abilities or divine powers.”

“O-oh my... oh my goodness,” Trivo exclaimed, “Lacuna, you know the word “humanoid?” Does that mean... the humans are shaped like that?”

“Yes.”

“How did I not realize that before!” Trivo looked down at herself, holding her palms in front of her. “I'm... modelled after humans,” she said. “Wow...”

“We must remain focused, Trivo. Would you connect yourself to the ship so I may begin a data transfer?”

“W-well, wait, what would happen to me?”

“Nothing. You will shut down while the transfer is taking place, and when it is done, you will be reawakened, completely unchanged.”

“This is really sudden, though... how can I be sure you're on my side?”

“If it helps at all, Aural Automaton and Shock System came here without you yesterday. I tried to explain your circumstances to them, as well as your origins as part of me.”

“You know them, that's right... was that... when I was asleep? When the other Vesky was repairing me?”

“I do not know.”

“Ah, I guess not...”

“While this is a very important matter, Trivo, it is ultimately your choice. You may take as much time as you need to decide.”

“Well... Shock didn't warn me about you or anything... you don't seem bad, and, u-uh... when you talked to me on the computer you seemed friendly.”

“I mean you no ill will.”

“I-I!” Trivo looked up in the air triumphantly. “I can't be so indecisive! You said this is important, right!”

“It is important not just for Zynima, but for other galactic civilizations as well.”

“I just have one more question then, I think! How exactly can you help other worlds if you're stranded here?”

“The long range communications on this ship are still functional and active. I am able to communicate with humanity from here.”

“What?! You can talk to them?”

“I can send messages to them, and they are supposedly able to send messages back to me.

I have successfully sent correspondence to them, but I have not heard back from anyone.”

“W-what else can you do?”

“I can control any function of this ship that wasn't destroyed in the crash years ago.”

“S-so... this ship, it's like... your body.”

“Essentially.”

Trivo looked awestruck.

“When you make your decision, please return here and inform me of your choice.”

“N-no need! You know about Aural and Shock, and that “key to purity” thing people call me... and you seem trustworthy! So, um... I'll do it! How long would it take?”

“I estimate 19 minutes.”

“Oh! That's not long at all.”

“In the far side of the ship, back through the hallway you came from, there is an open bay with a small room connected to it. In that room is a Vesky transport pod, which I can use to connect to you. Enter it, and I will begin the transfer.”

“Okay... I think I can find it.”

“I will illuminate the correct door for you.”

“I'll... I'll go now!”

Trivo stepped out of the room with newfound courage, but she couldn't deny the feeling of unease prodding at the back of her mind. The confidence of having stood up to her captor, combined with the mistrust and paranoia associated with her troubled past, kept her in a strange state of cognitive dissonance. She felt like

what she was doing was right, but she couldn't get rid of the feeling that she should be more careful.

Walking through a room strewn with junked robots didn't help, either.

*Remember, Trivo... the ship crashed a long time ago, so they probably died then. Lacuna wouldn't have, would she...?* Trivo couldn't remember seeing any turrets or weapons anywhere, but she couldn't help second guessing herself.

She ducked into the hallway she entered the ship from. Opening the door on the other end introduced her to a room full of makeshift cubicles made of scrap metal and other rummaged materials.

In the middle of the wall to her left was a door lit by a bright, white light.

Trivo quickly looked around the room before moving any further, checking to see if she was alone or not. She couldn't see or hear anyone, thus, she walked over to the illuminated door.

Inside the room was, supposedly, the station Lacuna mentioned: a huge slab of metal and machinery with the indents of four Vesky units on its front.

There was also a dark blue Vesky lying defunct on the ground.

“Oh... o-oh no! Lacuna!” Trivo yelled. She quickly ran back through the rooms leading back to the control room. “Lacuna!”

“Yes?” a distant voice replied as she hustled back into the control room.

“There's a dead Vesky!”

“Undoubtedly destroyed during the crash years ago.”

“So... you didn't do that or anything?”

“No. I have no functionality that would allow me to destroy a robot.”

“And there's no one else here, right?”

“You are the only functional robot I detect aboard this vessel.”

“O-okay... um, sorry about all that.”

“Not to worry. Your concerns are valid.”

“Thanks... I, uh, I'll go now.”

Trivo jogged back through the rooms once again, eventually back to the small room with that machine.

She walked up to it slowly, diligently inspecting the indents in the machine. She turned around backwards, standing right next to one of the indents, and she tried putting her hand in the appropriate spot.

*It's me shaped, she noted. A perfect fit...*

“Do I just step into it?” Trivo asked the air.

No response.

“Ah, r-right.” She continued looking it over before coming to the conclusion that she had to fit herself into it with her front facing out. The metal “hood” surrounding her face just wouldn't fit the other way.

She stood and stared at it before eventually looking up at the ceiling.

*If Lacuna is actually evil and I never wake up again... maybe I'll get to see Lavil one more time...*



Filled with an unfamiliar sensation of ease and comfort brought about by that thought, she fit herself into one of the machine's indents. Her body fit perfectly. Small mechanisms in the back of the machine automatically connected to her neck and back as she entered the indentation.

“Ah! Lacuna?” Trivo called out. “I’m re—”

## 30 – Last Glimmer of Hope

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*Doesn't matter how many times I do this.  
Friends are never easy.*

Shock stopped and looked over the exterior of the central tech station. As time ticked onward, the sick feeling in her abdomen only worsened.

Pushing herself to take the last steps through the station's main entrance took all her willpower.

The same receptionist from yesterday was sitting behind the main desk once again.

“Morning, chief,” he said.

“Morning.” Shock walked up to the desk. “Sorry I was so rude yesterday. You don't need my shit.”

“Apology accepted, but, eh, I'm used to the stress. I can imagine your position isn't exactly easier than mine.”

“Not with what I'm dealing with today.”

“You mean that busted bot you brought in yesterday?”

Shock sighed. “Yeah. Friend of mine.”

“No...” the receptionist breathed. “I'm so sorry.”

“I'm not giving up on her yet.”

“Macky started on damage cleanup yesterday. She didn't have much time before she had to go, so I think she's still in there today.”

“Good. Thanks for the update.” Shock slapped the top of the desk and stepped towards Aural's room.

“Best of luck.”

“Thanks.”

After walking a few paces down the hall, she opened the door to Aural's room. Plain grey walls and colourless tools lined the room, their dreary hues broken only by her coworker.

Donning her white medical coat and short blue skirt, the pink-skinned Macky stood above Aural's body, inspecting the damage.

“Boss!” she cheered. “You're back! Where were you?” Macky ran over to Shock, arms outstretched for a hug.

“Hey,” Shock began, unable to avoid Macky's embrace. “Long story.”

“We got more than enough time! How have you been?”

“Total shit.”

“Oh... sorry to hear it.”

“I'll give you the lowdown later. What's her status?” Shock asked as she placed her satchel next to the door.

Snapping to attention, Macky began listing off the problems she found with Aural's body. Dead (obviously), nearly bisected from the slash in her abdomen, chest crushed in, and her visor was so shattered it would need to be fully replaced. Besides that, her body was covered in scratches and scuff marks.

“That's all I've been able to find so far, but I'm not even done cleanup yet.”

Shock said nothing, pensively resting her chin on her hand.

“Boss... it's not good.” Macky looked straight at her. “Repairing this bot... I don't know if we can do it.”

“To hell with that. I don't care what it takes. I'm not leaving her dead.”

Macky tilted her head down. “Do you... know her?”

“Aural Automaton. Dear friend of mine.”

Macky slowly lifted a hand in front of her face, where her mouth would be if she had one. “Boss... I—”

“I don't care what it takes,” Shock repeated.

“Y-yeah, okay...” Macky looked at Aural again. “I had no idea.”

Shock opened her mouth to say something, but hesitated for several seconds. Eventually, she worked up the courage to speak.

“Are her drives intact?”

“I don't know yet... to be honest, I don't know where they are.”

Shock froze up.

Macky looked at Shock again after hearing no response. “It's just, uh... you know. All robots are different. I don't know where hers are yet.”

“Where have you looked so far?” Shock could barely manage the words.

Macky listed off the locations she'd checked; she'd already looked in almost every obvious spot so far. The two of them eventually took note of Aural's head – one of the only locations Macky hadn't checked yet.

With how damaged Aural's head was from her visor being smashed in, neither of them wanted to say it.

“If...”

“Shhhh.” Shock quickly interrupted Macky. “Let's get to work. Dissect her head. I don't care. Retrieving her drives is our number one priority.”

“You... sure?”

Shock shot Macky a fierce glance that spoke louder than words.



Half an hour later, Aural Automaton's head was no longer a head. Completely opened up and taken apart, it looked more like a blueprint than a body part.

“Who the hell made her?” Shock mumbled in frustration.

“It... sure is a complex head. How are we going to put this back together...?”

“We'll figure it out.”

Aural's drives were still nowhere to be found. With every passing minute, Shocks fears caught up with her more and more.

“The spikes,” Shock noted. “Maybe it's there.”

Aural had three curved spikes coming off the top of her head, behind her visor. Because they were so intricate, Macky and Shock opted to simply detach them from the rest of Aural's head rather than open them up.

“Good point, but... do you think we can safely get into them?” Macky lifted one up,

closely looking it over. It was clear from their exterior that they weren't just decorative spikes; they were designed too intricately to be just for show.

“We have to try. Just *be careful*.”

Macky hummed thoughtfully.

Minutes passed as the duo carefully took apart Aural's head spikes, using a level of care and precision reserved for only the most sensitive tasks. The process was very slow.

About ten minutes after starting, Macky made a small breakthrough. With the sharp click of one of the spikes opening up, she peered inside.

“Her drives are here!”

“Really?!” Shock jumped up and came over to look at the spike. Just inside was a hard disk, seemingly undamaged, containing Aural's memories, thoughts, personality, and experiences. “Oh my god... thank fuck... she can be saved! We can fix her! And if it's actually undamaged, we can hook her up to the remote communication computer!”

“The other spikes might have drives too. We should check!”

“Yeah, sure thing.” With a new burst of energy, Shock continued working.

“But, still... I have to be honest. It would be far easier to discard her body and build her a new one. You know how easily you can get custom bipedal models assembled in those factories to the west, right?”

“Wouldn't that cost a fortune?”

“I don't think it would be too bad. We have the tech station's treasury, which could cover most of the cost, right?”

“That's for tools and supplies, Macks.”

“You're right, but... caring for a patient would be acceptable, wouldn't it? We hardly ever need spare supplies with the surplus we have here. And... it would take us forever to reassemble her.”

It wasn't terribly hard for her to convince Shock. “I'll chip in with some of my own money too. Draining the treasury for my friend doesn't feel right.”

“Fair point. Do you want me to call a place up?”

“You seem pretty good at cracking these open. I'll make the call.”

“Suuure, toss the work on your subordinate,” Macky teased.

“Yeah, yeah.” Shock gingerly placed the spike she was working on back on the table beside Aural. “Be back in a bit.”

With more optimism than she had in weeks, Shock power-walked down the hallway, zipping by the front desk. Her office was a brief, 45 second walk away.

Opening her office door and taking a deep breath, Shock sat down at her desk. It wasn't the first time she had to call a factory for a model rebuild, as such, she didn't need to bother looking up a number to call.

She punched the numbers into her landline and picked up the phone, anxiously twirling the cord around her finger.

...Beep...

Beep...

Beep...

“Archd Davies' Heavy Industry,” a fancy voice greeted her from the other side.

“Hello! My name is Shock System, and I'm calling from the central tech station...”

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“There was a drive in each of those spikes,” Macky explained to Shock, back in the operating room. “I brought in the remote communication computer and booted it up,” she continued.

A laptop with an extra large base sat down on a small desk in the corner of the room, opposite the doorway. The bottom of the computer had several slots on the front for drives to be inserted; it was primarily used to interact with dormant AI from robots who'd been junked, but still had their hard disks intact.

“Ah! We have to see if Aural's okay!” Shock picked up the drives and brought them over to the laptop, inserting them into the base one at a time. Once the computer beeped three times – once for each drive inserted – Shock booted up the rudimentary chat program used to talk with AI.

Macky and Shock both waited in anticipation. About 10 seconds later...

>>Aural Automaton connected.

“hello?” Text on the screen appeared.

“???”

“She's alive?!” Shock exclaimed.



“yeah! i... i think so???” Aural wrote.

“She's alive!” Shock beamed at Macky, letting out a burst of elated laughter. “Wait, can she hear us?!”

“Yes! We have a mic set up in the laptop so she can hear us,” Macky explained.

More text quickly appeared on screen. “haha yea i can hear you!! but whats going on??? why is it a good thing that im alive? ok well... obviously its good im alive but

wait

the last thing i remember was fighting magnus”

“Ahh... how do I say this?” Shock grit her teeth. “You... you died. You're hooked up to a computer right now. Magnus killed you.”

Macky looked frightened. “Boss...? If I may ask, what exactly did you get involved in? What happened with her?”

Shock inhaled sharply. “You know the news story a handful of days ago about some serial killer named Trivo?”

“I heard, yes?”

“Serial killer's dead. It was a dude named Magnus,” Shock explained, deciding it would be far easier to give Macky a super condensed version of the story.

“Oh... well, at least he's gone now?”

“Yeah, and thank fuck for that. Details later, okay?”

“Okay.” Macky didn't sound totally satisfied.

Shock looked back at the laptop screen.

“I DIED?????????????” Aural wrote.

“Yeah... you, uh... you died.”

“AM I DEAD”

“Nnno? You *were* dead, but we got your hard drives and put them in this computer so we could talk to you.”

“what!!!! what about magnus!!!!”

“...Like I mentioned, he's dead.”

“shock what the fuck happened”

“I'll catch you up on the details after we get you back in a body again. Magnus is gone, I'm fine, Trivo's fine.” Shock looked over at Macky. “Anyways, I called AHI. They've got a representative on the way to scan Aural's body and figure out details, price estimate, all that. Since, well, Aural, your body is too busted up for us to justify repairing it. We're... going to have to get you a new one.”

“whaaat”

“It'll be the same body as before. I made sure to tell them that, and they said they could do it.”

“...does that mean i could make changes if i wanted?”

“Maybe? I'll talk to the rep when they get here.”

“I'm going to step out for a moment,” Macky butted in. “I'd like a 10 minute break, if you don't mind.”

“Hold on.” Shock opened up the satchel she left next to the door. She pulled out four blue energy packets. “For that overtime a few days

ago," she said, handing them to Macky. "Sorry it's late."

"Thanks! Aw, you don't have to."

"Yes I do. I'm a woman of my word."

"Aw, boss, thank you so much..." Macky shuffled past Shock and out the door, already unwrapping one of the packets. "Enjoy catching up with your friend!"

"Thanks."

A few moments later, Shock heard an unfamiliar voice outside, muffled by the door.

"Greetings! Are you Shock System?" he said.

"Oh, uh, no. She's in here," Macky replied. "Hey boss," she continued, opening the door to allow another robot in.

"Hello! Shock, I presume?" the tall, one-eyed robot asked as he walked into the room. With a fancy black and yellow suit, Shock couldn't help but feel humbled by his arrival.

"Hey, that's me." *No time to catch up with my friend after all.*

"Archd Davies." He extended a hand out to Shock.

"Well met." She shook his hand. "I certainly didn't expect the head honcho to be coming. I'd have cleaned up."

"Ah! Not to worry. I believe it is important for us all to contribute as much as we can in the workplace, including the chief officers."

"Wholeheartedly agreed, sir."

“So! Is this the robot you'd like rebuilt?”  
He looked at Aural.

“Yeah, she's the one.”

Archd Davies pulled a small device out of his pocket and faced it towards Aural. “Could I get you to take a step back from the table for me? I'm just going to scan her with this little gadget here.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Shock did as instructed.

“It's a wonder of technology,” Archd Davies commented, “this scanner can perfectly replicate a robot's design as a 3D model on this screen four out of five times. Even if it can't recreate a damaged robot's build completely, it most often gets us something to work with.” As he finished, a narrow, green beam of light shone from the device and crossed over Aural, moving up and down, back and forth. Once it was finished, Archd Davies moved to the other side of the table and repeated the process. “You'd be amazed by the amount of detail these scanners can pick up.”

“Hypothetically, say we wanted to make some cosmetic changes to her body. Would you be able to punch those into your scanner?”

“Not into the model on the scanner, but we can take notes on here and design them in the factory. If you have her drives, we can work directly with your friend during the design phase so she can be completely happy with the build.”

“Gotcha. That's actually reassuring.”

“We take pride in leaving our customers with peace of mind.” Archd Davies walked back over to Shock and pressed a couple small buttons on his scanner. He waited for a few moments as the device worked its magic. “Hmm. Looks like we got most of her here,” he began, showing Shock the scanner's screen.

It displayed a nearly perfect wireframe replica of Aural Automaton, except for her head, which looked a bit glitchy and had a yellow warning symbol next to it.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Shock apologized. “Her head was really complex. We had to get in there to retrieve her drives.” Shock stepped over to Aural's body, seeing if she could close Aural's head enough to give Archd Davies an idea of what she looked like.

It didn't work, especially considering Aural's visor was gone. Shock grunted in frustration.

“Oh! One moment, sir.” Shock walked over to her satchel again and began rummaging through it. It took her a moment, but eventually, she pulled out a small photo.

It was a picture of both Aural and Shock. With an ecstatic expression, Aural had her hands in peace signs next to her head, while Shock merely had her arm around Aural's shoulders with a smile on her face.

Shock had to look away to avoid tearing up. “That's her there,” she told Archd Davies, handing the picture over to him.

He studied the picture carefully. “Hmm... I think we can recreate this design.”

“I have the parts here too, if you'd like to look at them.”

“As... *morbid* as it sounds, it would be leagues easier if we brought your friend's head to our facilities.” He handed the picture back to Shock.

“O-oh.” Shock was taken aback. “Well... mmm, I... guess we could do that.”

“My apologies if that's uncomfortable for you. Her body won't be hard to make, but without an accurate scan of her head, we might have difficulties there.”

“Right.” Shock mentally noted that it was good that he took such attention to detail, but the concept still bothered her. “Right, we'll do that. I just need a moment, if that's not a problem.”

“Absolutely not a problem. Would you like me to wait out in the hall?”

“That'd be great. Thank you.”

“You're very welcome.” Archd Davies showed himself out.

Shock turned her attention to the laptop once again.

“thats some wild shit...” is all Aural had written.

“Hey, Aural, I'm back. It's just me and you.”

“hey shock, i really am getting a new body, huh!!”

“That's right.”

“and i can make changes!?”

“According to Archd Davies, yes.”

“oh man!!! ok we need to have cool cybernetic lookin lines that go down my arms, red of course... even BETTER speakers...

shit!!!! shock ok. hear me out. imagine... if my visor curved up even more than it did before, and the spikes like... crossed over each other and came back down like forward facing spikes. does that make sense? i would look fucking sick dude!! id look like i had demon horns... ok hear me out here...

aural D E M O N A T O N

holy fuck could you imagine?? this is probably the best thing i ever thought up”

“Kind of like ram horns?” Shock asked.

“idk what ram is but i guess?”

Shock almost shed a tear simply knowing Aural hadn't changed one bit. “Yeah... I could imagine.” She cracked a tiny grin.

“...can we actually do that?”

“It's your body! But are you sure about that? Your visor would be really big. And scary.”

“ok first off you KNOW i love being a scary bitch loool... but wellllllll mmmmm idk..... i can change my visor later right”

“Not on my dime.”

“ok ok fair... i didn't mean you would pay for it! just like... in general.”

“I... don't see why not? If we're rebuilding you *now*, I don't see any reason you couldn't do it again in the future if you really wanted to.”

“d u d e ok wait. what if... hm ok what if my visor was really TALL. like we extended the visor spikes up more. mmmmm maybe not cause it'd still be kinda big”

“I hate to say it, but we don't really have the luxury of time. We can't keep Archd Davies waiting.”

“shit! this is torture lol like... aural you can choose a WHOLE NEW BODY... but you only have 5 minutes. go”

“Well, it's more of a rebuild, not a remodel. Plus, Archd Davies can work with you to figure out what you want.”

“damn this is a crazy cool opportunity!!!”

“Suppose so.” Shock chuckled.

“im..... aural au2maton”

“Okay, little miss roboticist. Make your decision.”

“ok you know what... we have to do the ram idea, with the curved spikes that look like demon horns... we gotta”

“You're sure?”

“HELL yea”

“Okay. I'll let him know.”

“make sure it looks sick!!!!”

Shock wondered if Aural's excitement came from simply being alive again, or if that's always how she talks via text.

She left the room and returned to Archd Davies.

“What's the word?” he asked.

Shock rattled off details, describing Aural's dream body as precisely as possible



despite having little to go off. Archd Davies hummed and nodded as she went on, taking notes on the scanner.

“Okay! I think I've got all that here. With a model like hers, and custom design modifications, it'll likely fall in the mid to high end of our price range,” Archd Davies noted.

“Money won't be a problem.”

“Excellent,” he said optimistically, “it will probably be around 69,000 bytes.”

“Nice,” Macky remarked from far down the hall.

“That's fine. Do you take payments electronically?” Shock asked.

“Sure do. We also have payment plans, if necessary.”

“No need. I'd like to cover the full cost from two different sources. One payment from each.”

“We can do that. Shall we finalize the payment, then?”

“Yeah. I can show you to my office where we can seal the deal.”

“Oh! I almost forgot. We'll need your friend's head and drives to properly install into the new body and work with her during the design process.”

Shock quickly spun around. “Right. Be right back.” She walked back into Aural's room.

The only thing Aural had written since she left was “nice.”

“Okay, Aural, I have to unplug your drives now. I'm handing them over to Archd Davies

so he can install them into your new body after it's done being built.”

“sick... you can trust him though right? that's gonna be my life in his hands...”

“We're paying good money for this. He'll be careful.” Shock leaned closer to the laptop. “Or I'll kick his ass,” she whispered.

“lol i hope so!!”

“It'll just be like falling asleep for a while. When you wake up, you'll be whole again.”

“hell YEA im pumped”

Shock rested her hand on the desk the computer was sitting on. She meant to reach for the eject buttons... but hesitated.

She sighed and drooped her head down, smiling. “Haha... I can't bring myself to do this. I don't want to lose you again.”

“aww.... cheer up shock, i'll only be gone for a little while like you said!”

“I know, I know. It's just... hard.”

“you can do it!! do it for me!!”

Shock took a deep breath. “Okay. Bye for now, Aural.”

“cya!!!!”

Shock ejected Aural's drives, taking a moment to look them over before (reluctantly) collecting all the components of Aural's head and bringing it all out to Archdaves. After handing Aural's drives over, Shock continued leading him down the empty hall, towards her office. “How long do you expect this to take?”

“Our facilities are adequately staffed with highly efficient production lines. Once the

blueprints and modifications are programmed into our system, it'll be straight to construction. Since she's bipedal, and there's nothing *too* crazy about her design, I'd guess she'll have a new body within three hours."

"Only three hours?!"

"We *are* a high end production company, after all."

"That still hardly sounds possible. How can you build a robot that quickly?"

"I welcome you to take a visit to our facilities sometime. I think you'd be pleasantly surprised!"

"I'll take your word for it."

*Three hours? How the hell...*

~~~~

"Tell her to come meet me in front of this place when she's done."

Shock's last words to Archdavis repeatedly ran through her head as she sat outside the central tech station. The day had long since passed, and the twilight above gently illuminated the city around her. There was nobody else around. All she had to accompany her was the gentle whistle of passing desert winds.

The front of the building was lined with tall, shining lamp posts. Shock found herself just beneath one, sitting on the edge of the brick foundation where the tech station's logo stood tall in statue form next to the main entrance. Idly swaying her legs back and forth, she looked down at the picture of Aural and herself that she'd shown Archdavis.

She'd already booked the next day off. All she needed was her friend back, and her mind would be free to relax. But no matter how hard she rationalized her thoughts, she couldn't defeat the crushing paranoia of something going wrong.

*What if they can't recreate Aural's body?*

What if her drives get damaged in the process?

*What if AHI just screws me over for the money?* (That one she could rebut – she'd commissioned their factory plenty of times in the past. It would be professional suicide to scam her.)

She looked down at the photo as if it was the last memory she would ever have of Aural.

She didn't have a watch or clock on her, either. She knew it'd been at least two and a half hours since Archdaves left, but anything past that was a guess. Mentally berating herself for forgetting the time, she hopped to her feet and began pacing, drawing deep breaths to stave off her anxiety.

...How many minutes had passed since she stood up? One? Three? Five? Shock was so high-strung she had a hard time recalling.

She huffed and shambled back over to her spot beneath the lamp post.

A vague silhouette appeared from the darkness down the street. As it grew closer, Shock realized she didn't recognize the figure, and her hopes quickly sank. She looked down at the ground again, putting the photo back into her satchel.

“Shock?” the figure called out.

She instantly lifted her head. Squinting, she still couldn't recognize the figure as they strode closer, until they passed beneath a lamp post.

Shock's eyes grew wide, and she put a hand on her head. “Oh my god. Oh my god.” A bright smile formed on her face as she gasped in delight. “Oh my god! Aural! That's— that's you!!”

Aural displayed a squinty-eyed expression with a huge, cheeky grin. She raised her arms out to the side. “How do I look?”

Shock ran over to her. Aural's body hadn't changed much: her arms now had intricate red patterns across them – almost like huge tattoos – and her visor was shaped just how she described it. The points curved across each other and curled down, ending in a front-facing point, just like ram horns.

But that was hardly what Shock cared about.

“Aural! Oh my god, Aural,” Shock cried, hugging her reborn friend as tightly as possible. “You're back! And... a-and you're not hurt? You're okay?”

Aural laughed. “I'm better than ever, Shock.”

## 31 – Finale

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“Lavil is dead...?” Aural asked. “That... really happened, didn't it?”

Shock didn't need to respond.

The two walked down the calm city streets without another soul nearby, as the crisp nighttime breeze danced around them.

“Fuck...” Aural tossed her head back. “Man... he didn't need to die!”

Shock drew a long breath. “From what I understand, I got knocked out. When I woke up, Trivo and Nōne were the only ones alive. Lavil was in pieces. Like... *everywhere*. And of all people, apparently *Trivo* killed Magnus. With just one arm.”

“Geez... wait, do you think Trivo's repairs finished?”

“I *know* her repairs finished. How else would she have defeated that monster when it kicked our asses?”

“Wow... that's... wow.”

“She doesn't have a place to go now that Lavil's gone, so I'm letting her stay at my place.”

“Ahh... glad I'll get to see her, but...”

“Yeah.” Shock sighed. “Don't care what I thought of him. Lavil deserved better.”

“No argument there. Damn... and what about Nōne?”

Shock huffed. “He told me his mission was complete and he didn't come home with us. Past that, I know nothing.”

“Hrrm. Don't know if I ever liked that guy.”

Shock's house was in sight at the end of the street they walked down.

“Fuck,” Shock suddenly exclaimed, “did I lock Trivo out earlier?” She started going through her pockets for her keys.

“Oh no.”

“She was going to meet Lacuna by herself this morning. I can't imagine she wouldn't be back by now.” She squinted and leaned forward, trying to assess her front door in the distance. “Oh fuck, there she is.”

Trivo was sitting on the ground just beside Shock's front door. As they walked closer, they could see that she was looking down, twiddling her thumbs.

“Hey. Trivo!” Shock waved to her.

“Can she see us?”

Trivo looked up. Not a second later, she jumped to her feet and ran towards them.

“Oh, yep, she can see us.”

“Aural!” Trivo yelled out. “Aural!!”

Aural put on her best smile. She ran ahead of Shock, meeting Trivo in the middle of the street.

Trivo tackled Aural, nearly sending her to the ground. She managed to keep her footing just in time, and she held Trivo in a big squeeze.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” Trivo kept repeating, “you're okay... you're alive...”

“What? You thought some huge monster could keep me down?” Aural boasted.

“Guess not!” Trivo beamed.

Shock caught up and stood next to them, smiling at their reunion. “I’m so sorry, Trivo. I didn’t mean to lock you out! I... kind of spaced out this morning. My bad.” Shock looked uncharacteristically bashful.

“It’s okay! I’m just glad you’re both here, and you’re okay, and...”

Shock patted Trivo’s shoulder. “Let’s get inside.”

“Yes, yes, let’s.”

The three walked back to Shock’s house. Trivo had a chipper bounce in her step, completely failing to contain her elation. At the front door, Shock got out her keys and opened it up.

“Sorry again, Trivo.” She opened the door to let her friends enter first.



Shock cracked open a violet packet from a nearby cabinet and quickly drank the contents. “Ahh.”

Trivo and Aural were on the living room couch, chatting away.

“Trivo! You’re a free robot now, right?” Aural asked.

“Yes, but... it cost me my best friend...”

“Ah... right...” Aural’s enthusiasm died down. “Sorry...”

“It’s okay. I, well... I *am* happy that I’m free, but, it’s just...”

Aural leaned over and wrapped an arm around her.



“Thanks...”

“Trivo.” Shock walked up to the back of the couch. “Lavil said something a few days ago. When he was telling us he wasn't afraid of death, he mentioned he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. Well, standing up to *and* taking out your “owner,”” she air-quoted, “to me, it sounds like he got his wish.

I don't think he'd want you to be sad that he's gone. He lived life to the fullest and passed on heroically.”

“Thanks, Shock. It's... still just so hard. He did everything for me. Comforted me when I was sad, gave me places to stay, promised me the world...” Trivo almost sounded like she was about to cry. “Lavil was such a different person to me... he was so understanding... and he was all I had... how can I ever replace him?”

Shock leaned down against the back of the couch, between Trivo and Aural. “You're right. And, it's normal to grieve. For what it's worth, you have us now.”

“Thank you,” Trivo sniffled.

“Is there anything we can do to take your mind off things?” Aural asked.

“Mmh. I don't know...”

“What about a walk to my place?” Aural suggested. “I definitely need to check back on my home after all this. It's been, what, almost a week since I've been there?”

“Is... is that okay with you, Shock?” Trivo asked.

“No need to ask for permission. I wouldn't mind joining you, but I have to get to bed afterwards.”

“The more, the merrier,” Aural said as she stood up. “Wanna go now?”

“Sure,” Shock replied.

“I just need a minute, if that's okay,” Trivo mumbled.

“Of course. You need a bit of space?”

“It's okay. Well, mmh... maybe, I-I guess. Just a minute or two?”

“Not a problem. We'll wait on the front porch.”

“Thank you...”

“C'mon, Aural.” Shock beckoned her over, already walking back to the front door. Aural followed her out, leaving Trivo sitting on the couch.

Shock gently shut the door. “Poor thing,” she whispered.

“Yeah...” Aural sighed as she sat down on the edge of the porch.

Shock leaned up against the wall. “I've seen a lot of grief in my time. It's never easy. But, at the very least, there's a silver lining to it. Magnus is gone.”

“Yeah, there's that.” Aural restlessly bounced her leg up and down. “Hey, Shock, what do you think's going to happen to the underground?”

Shock tilted her head. “Elaborate.”

“Well, what's going to happen to all those bots? Now that Historical, o-or, Magnus is gone,

there's a *tiny* bit of a power vacuum down there, right?"

"I suppose so. But given that almost nobody knows about it, and almost everyone down there is corrupt beyond reason, I get the feeling we don't have to worry about some new overlord rising up. Although..." she paused, "Trivo said she got there via the Siphon Yard. There have to be some TV-heads over there who know about it if it *leads* there. I don't know; these are just guesses.

But I don't want to get involved in that shit any more than I already have. I'll leave it up to the next set of heroes."

"Neither do I, but, I gotta say... I don't think I'd trade away the experience for anything."

Shock looked up to the sky. "I'd probably agree with you in time. I just want to get this shit past me right now."

"Yeah? Guess I wouldn't mind some R&R myself."

A few quiet moments later, Trivo opened the door and stepped out. "Okay, I'm ready to go."

"To home!" Aural cheered.

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"Nobody's up there," Shock informed the group with a smile.

"Heh, yeah, I'd fucking hope not," Aural said.

The three robots stepped up to the top of the tower's main staircase, and Aural led the way around the topmost balcony towards her apartment.

“Aw man. I forgot my door was broken.” Aural grabbed the unhinged door and lifted it to the side. Once inside, she stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the room. “At least it doesn't look like anyone got in here.”

“That's good,” Trivo agreed, walking past Aural, looking at all the musical paraphernalia arranged around the room. “Wow... this is cool.”

“Oh yeah, Trivo, I gotta tell you something,” Aural began.

“Yes?”

“I heard from Shock that you don't have a place to go. I know she already offered, but you're also welcome to come here anytime you'd like. I know it's not much, but consider this your home too.”

“A-ah... thank you... thank you both so much!”

“You're safe now. And we'll do what we can to help you heal.”

“Th-thank you... so much...” Trivo almost began sobbing, wrapping her arm around Aural, pressing her face against Aural's chest.

Aural embraced Trivo with one arm. “To think it all started right here, when I got your e-mail.”

“This is where you read my panicked message, isn't it?”

“Yep.” Aural stepped over to her computer and took a seat on the chair. “Shock and I came back up here after I fled from Tangent. I noticed I'd received an anonymous e-mail, and the timing was too peculiar for me to ignore it.”

“To think that this might've never happened if you didn't check that e-mail...”

“Mmm! I think some things happen for a reason. I can't explain it, but sometimes things seem a little too perfect, you know?”

“Maybe you're right...”

“All right you two, it's about time I got some sleep,” Shock spoke up. “Will you both be fine for the night?”

“Oh yeah, I'll be good,” Aural replied.

“I think I'll be okay.” Trivo answered.

“Great. Well, you two take care. You know where to find me. I'm a call or an e-mail away.”

“You bet. And, uh, heheh. Shock.” A grin lit up on Aural's face. “Thanks for saving my life. And giving me this sick new body, to boot.”

“You're very welcome. Anything for a friend. That extends to you too, Trivo, okay? If you need anything, drop me a line. My bark is way worse than my bite,” she said with a smile.

Trivo giggled. “Thanks... bye for now, Shock.”

Aural gave Shock double finger-guns. “See ya!”

“Bye for now.” With those parting words, she walked across the balcony and made her way down the tower's staircase.

“Hey, I should still have my songs,” Aural said. “Yeah! I do.” A few seconds later, a quiet, ambient soundscape emanated from the speakers on her chest and shoulders, complimenting the distant view of the twilit desert

through the balcony window. Gentle piano melodies and synth pads gradually began playing from Aural's speakers, forming a relaxing musical piece.

“Want to go enjoy the view for a bit?”  
Aural asked.

“Okay.”

The two stepped outside onto the balcony. Aural leaned over and rested her arms against the railing, while Trivo stood beside her with a few fingers cupping her chin.

“Heh. This is where I jumped. Tangent barged in, so I leapt straight off this balcony. Landed in the sand below. All that broke was my leg. I got pretty damn lucky, I think.”

“I'm sorry you ended up getting dragged into this mess.”

“Ha, no no! Like I told Shock earlier, I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. Doing concerts is fun and all, but this was a once in a lifetime adventure.”

The two sat in silence for several minutes, enjoying the soft sounds Aural played.

“Hmm.”

“Something on your mind?” Trivo asked.

“Yeah. I... don't know if I should say it, though.”

“How come...?”

“It just feels insensitive. To you.”

“Ah?” Trivo suddenly looked nervous.

“Well... it's about Historical.”

“Ohh...”

Aural looked over at Trivo. "I'm thinking about what he said. That whole speech he gave us when we walked into his room."

"He talked to you? What did he say...?"

"I can't remember everything... he said so much. There was this thing called the Catastrophe Manipulator, and he talked about how he had some terrible being inside him. I didn't believe him when he said it. I guess I didn't really know what he meant."

"Ah... I've heard of the Manipulator from his friends before. I don't know anything about it, though."

"Well... I just... I don't know. I – mmh. I think I feel bad that he's dead. I'm just thinking about... well, remember a few days ago when I went to get cleaned up at the showers?"

"Yes?"

"Historical was there. That's when I got attacked by Tangent and we had to escape together. I don't know if he, like, controlled Tangent or told him to come get me, but the bottom line is... Historical saved my life that day. We were getting chased by Tan, and we flew off these grated metal walkways, like a million feet above the desert below. I would've died if he hadn't have held on to me. I... I guess I feel a bit betrayed by him, after all that."

Aural paused to see if Trivo had anything to add.

"I think I know what you mean," she said particularly quietly. "Historical was weird. He

would call himself Magnus every other day, and sometimes he'd be a jerk, but sometimes nice.”

“It makes sense, I guess. He really had some split personality monster inside him.”

They both sat in thought for a few long moments.

Aural leaned back and rested her head against the wall. “I'm sorry. Maybe we should talk about something else?”

“Yes, please...”

“So... this visor is pretty fucking sick, huh?”

“Oh, yes! It's very spooky.” Trivo giggled.

“Like I told Shock when I was being fixed, this is the best thing I ever thought of. You thought my discography was my magnum opus? No, it's this visor. I look like some kind of robot demon now!”

Trivo snickered some more. “And your arms are different too!”

“Ohh, yes.” Aural held her arms up, rotating them around to show off her new robotic tattoos. “Wild, right?”

“They're really cool...”

“Maybe I should rebrand a bit. Hear me out: Aural *Demonaton*.”

“Whoa, that's scary.”

“But a cool stage name, right?”

“I think so!”

Aural put her hands behind her head. “Oh. Shit. I still owe Decker 850 for repairing my leg! And I gotta explain my sudden absence to my



fans. Aiee... I'll deal it up tomorrow. I'm too excited to be alive to let the future concern me right now.”

“Oh,” Trivo began, suddenly changing her tone, “that reminds me.”

“Hm?”

“Lacuna told me something before I left. Apparently the crashed ship she's in has long range communications, and she... she apparently got a message from humanity, and she wanted me to relay it to you and Shock.”

“What?!” Aural exclaimed.

“Um, well... she told me they said...”  
Trivo hesitated. “They said “the experiment is over. We are on our way.””

“The... humans...? Are on their way?”

“According to Lacuna, yes.”