

Brave New World: A Coda

By Molly, formerly Thad

Foreword

This is a work of fan fiction. It comes from a deeply personal and vulnerable place. If this is the sort of thing you would find frivolous or cringe, please do us both a favor and stop reading here.

If you are reading this, it means one of two things. Either you are one of a select few people I hold near and dear to my heart as a fellow writer from the Brave New World project, or you have stumbled across this writing on my website. This was started in early 2025 and completed at the end of July. This project encapsulates feelings and ideas from a very specific point in my life.

“Rockman: Brave New World” (BNW for short) was a collaborative writing project that I was involved with. It was a take on the world of Mega Man, meant to expand on the world and ground the tone. It was done in the form of text roleplay, written in verbose third-person paragraphs. The project started at the tail end of the Classic era, set in an interwar period. A massive, multiple-month-spanning alien invasion event marked a transition to the X era, albeit sans the century time skip. The project ended shortly before the events of the first Mega Man X game.

This work is an anthology of short stories set after the project’s ending. Most of the stories focus on the canonical and original characters I wrote content for (or characters I had planned out but never got to use), detailing where they would have ended up at different points throughout the unfolding timeline of the game series. It serves to grant me closure and approach some ideas I wish I could have executed. It does not necessarily tell an overarching story, though some characters will recur and experience progress and you will be able to track roughly where in the timeline a given story is set if you’re paying attention. Think of this as scraps of a larger story I wanted to be a part of telling.

IF YOU NOTICE THAT CERTAIN ASPECTS FEEL UNDERDEVELOPED OR UNDEREXPLORED, THAT IS ABSOLUTELY INTENTIONAL ON MY PART. I AM TRYING TO CAPTURE THE VIBE THAT THESE STORIES ARE SMALL SCENES CUT OUT FROM A MUCH LARGER BODY OF COLLECTIVE WORK THAT NEVER CAME TO BE.

There are significant deviations in the chronology and minutiae compared to the events of the games. These largely come from meta discussions had with other members

of the project, both during its run, and after the fact; although I also invent some details whole cloth for the purpose of this writing.

For example, “Arcadia” was established in our setting as a major city in the Classic era. It existed as a central hub of the robotics industry. It is the precursor to “Neo Arcadia”, a city-state from the Mega Man Zero games that is the central seat of power for a global ruling body of the same name. In my interpretation of events, Neo Arcadia comes to exist earlier than is explicitly established by the games.

Additionally, effort has been put in, both in the original project, and in this work, to tie the setting to real-world entities to some degree. The United Nations is a major player, and an authority that familiar entities like the Maverick Hunters answer to. There is an aspect of alternative history to this, supposing a world where the UN was much more successful in becoming a central global government.

I can’t do much more to contextualize this anthology. This project is not a wiki or any source of comprehensive information on the original BNW setting. If you are curious about the world we spun, feel free to contact me to ask questions.

The remainder of this foreword is meant for the people I wrote with.

If you were in BNW and feel melancholic that this brings your stuff to no end or closure, I apologize- I could simply never replace your own talent and mind for the writing behind your characters. As it is, I am having to write a few things about a few characters that I did not control because it simply would not make any sense for me not to, given the stories I felt necessary for this project.

If you end up desiring to write your own coda, I would love to help you bounce ideas around, edit, proofread, or even just read whatever you come up with. BNW was never exactly a place, but a feeling, an act; and while the ‘official’ project is over, I would like to imagine that we all became better writers as a result of our participation, and the legacy of BNW will live on in everything we create into the future.

There’s going to be some easter eggs and internal references that I hope you catch. There’s going to be a lot of sentimentality and raw emotion that I hope comes across in all the right doses. I’ve had to reckon somewhat with a decay in my skill as a storyteller, and I hope this is a work you can love despite that.

Love,

Molly

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Your Star Is Bright And Glowing

With a silent expulsion of gasses, the insertion pod separated from the ship hanging in low orbit. Contained within was DTU-343, better known as Drop Man. Drop Man was many things- a shock trooper trained for orbital insertion, an inter-atmospheric fighter pilot, an urban warfare specialist, a satellite technician, a Maverick Hunter, a mean son of a bitch to his trainees, a veteran of the Second Stardroid Invasion, a lover to many. Unlike many of his comrades, he wasn't a Reploid. His body was largely built on the frame of a Sniper Joe- an autonomous bipedal combat drone- with the cognitive hardware of a Robot Master installed. This left him at a mere five feet tall, though it had never impeded his combat abilities.

Today's mission was relatively straightforward. The Hunters had received reports that stragglers from Sigma's uprising had taken shelter in the abandoned foundation of the final Wily Castle, out in the irradiated desert that comprised much of the west coast of the US. They were fabricating Mechaniloids to harden the position, doubtless searching for salvation in the old bastard's vaults. Commander Signas had given the Hunters three days to prepare for the mission, doing long-range recon and working out a strategy. Drop Man volunteered to reprise his role as an orbital insertion specialist, returning to orbit and recruiting members from his old outfit, the Drop Corps. That made this officially a multi-branch operation. Their part in the mission was pivotal- they had to drop in behind enemy defenses and soften them up. This would open the way for an infantry charge on Ride Chasers- agile little assault hoverbikes.

As the Commander broadcast a final briefing summary on the mission's main comm channel, Drop Man tuned him out. He knew the mission by heart already. Instead, he focused on picking out a song to play over the pod's tinny speakers. After only a moment, he found the perfect one- an old city pop song from decades past. Outside the front viewport, he could see the blue limb of Earth.

His mechanical hands relaxed on the pod's controls as the robot performed another gear check. The powerful energy pistol strapped to his thigh read green, its power cable firmly docked to him. The high-frequency knife sheathed on his belt was fully charged. Next to him, securely locked in place, was the special surprise he was bringing to tonight's festivities, a large-

BANG.

The dim interior lights of the pod went dark, as did the status indicators by the controls. The inertial sensors in Drop Man's body registered that he was now spinning. In the window, the Earth was rapidly oscillating in and out of the window. On a drop, if your view of the planet was anything but gradually increasing, something had gone very wrong.

The local comms array in his body picked up a signal from a teammate. "Alpha-Two to Alpha-One, you still with us?! It looks like you hit some debris left in orbit. You're spinning out and leaking fuel. Your pod comms are out."

"One here. Pod's lost power. Link me to Fleet."

Wordlessly, his comrade complied, relaying Drop Man's signal to the immediate people in charge of the insertion.

"Alpha-Actual, this is Alpha-One. My pod's out of commission. Hit debris. No power. Bare minimum, I'm landing off-target. Please advise."

An indistinct voice replied, strained but attempting to sound calm. "Acknowledged. Alpha Team, stick to the mission plan. Alpha-One, we are scrambling a recovery team planetside and tracking your descent. Good luck."

Flames were beginning to build up outside the tumbling craft, visible faintly in the window. It, and an intensifying roar, indicated that the squad had breached the atmosphere. A feminine voice crackled over the comms. "Alpha-Four to Alpha-One. I have eyes on your pod for the moment. It appears your primary airbrake is damaged, and your retro tanks got pierced."

More bad news. The Orbital Branch's drop pod system relied on multiple stages of brake to decelerate smoothly enough for the occupant to land intact. Of course, Drop Man would never have called the landings "smooth". First was the airbrake, rigid petals of a metal flower that unfurled and caught the air. Second was the parachute. And finally, the retro rockets in the base of the craft fired in the final seconds of descent. With two of those systems out of the equation, it was going to be a hard landing if he was lucky.

"Alpha-One to Alpha-Three. Solution?" Drop Man couldn't help but let a hint of panic into his voice as he spoke to the team's technical specialist. The ping time for his link to each of his teammates was increasing ever so slightly, and while he lacked any real measurements, he knew this meant his pod was drifting further from the rest.

Three's response came without declaring identity. This was arguably a minor breach of procedure, but given the time constraints, no sane CO would write it up or chew them out. "One, I've beamed you a schematic. By your left arm is a panel. Open it. Inside is some

overrides and breakers. Flip the ones I indicated and hit the manual bootup. This should reroute power along a different bus and bring the pod computer online.”

Fumbling in the dark, Drop Man did as instructed, but there was simply a hollow click as he thumbed the red button. “Three, it didn’t do anything.”

A pause.

“Three?”

“I’m thinking, hold on!”

Another pause, followed by the silent receiving of data.

“Okay. I need you to try to stop the spin. Do the breakers up like I sent. Configure those override switches, too. Hook up a cable from yourself to Port B on the panel. Use the solution I gave you. It should read your inertia sensors and send power into the systems at specific moments. This should force the RCS thrusters to fire and slow the spin. Quickly, now!”

Once again, Drop Man flicked at the switches, double checking everything. Awkwardly, he shoved a hand between the metal seat and his hip, reaching for the soft case strapped to him. He extracted his prize- a short universal interface cable. One end entered a small port on his wrist. The other end went into a port on the panel. He pressed the button and held it.

At first, nothing happened. A moment later, the program running in his mind registered that he was at a particular angle, and power was sent from his core into the breaker box. The maneuvering thrusters hissed to life, briefly pulsing before stopping, waiting again for the ideal angle. Over the course of the next ten seconds, the dizzying tumble started to miraculously slow.

“Okay, Three, what now?”

“Above your head, there’s a thin panel. Pop it open. There will be two pull cords. Pull the *right* one when you’re at 4,000 feet! It’ll manually release your chute and set a fuse to fire the retros from the reserve tank!”

“How will I know when I’m at 4,000?”

“Shit. Uh, it’ll be in... three minutes and forty seconds. I’m sorry I can’t do more, sir.”

Drop Man sighed. “It’s okay, Three. You’ve done well, considering the circumstances.”

He paused, taking stock. “Okay. Alpha-One to Alpha Team. Alpha-Two is now in charge of the op. Stick to the plan. The boys on the ground are counting on those defenses being softened. Not much else to say.”

The team fell into a sullen silence. There was nothing any of them could do. Drop Man had been on drops that had gone awry before a few times in training. He’d emerged intact each time, but how much luck could one robot have? This was a bad one. He knew the odds were poor. He’d watched fellow trainees dig craters before. If there was any comfort, he’d probably either emerge unscathed or disintegrate on impact. You were either fine or painlessly dead. Little room for middleground.

The Drop Corps was one of the first strictly robotic outfits in the military. There’d been entirely robotic combat units before, but they tended to have at least a few humans doing support or maintenance or even command. In space, however, humans were scarce. It was simply safer to employ just robots, since they didn’t need oxygen. A few wings of the Drop Corps’ central HQ- an Orbital Branch space station in high orbit- were entirely depressurized, having only simple doors and windows between them and space. Those rooms were quiet, contemplative, peaceful, but by nature, utterly hostile to humans.

In short, dropping was *only* for bots, and the facilities to accommodate combat drops tended to reflect this. Plenty of humans could take it, mentally- skydiving was a sport, and HALO jumping had been used in military operations. But the speeds- and therefore, deceleration G’s- required for orbital drops to be effective were simply too physiologically risky for the fragile human body. Even the robots in the Drop Corps had to be modified to fit exhaustive safety standards.

Drop Man had originally been built to test the pods, among the first properly sapient robots to do flight tests. He’d enjoyed the work, enough to request to join up with the unit when it was formed. He was sent through basic training, and soon enough, he was in orbit.

As the details of the scarred desert below started to become disquietingly clear in the tiny window, those days felt many decades distant, though it had been less than five years. A notification in Drop Man’s vision popped up- the time had elapsed; he had to pull the cord. Time felt like it was crawling along at an agonizing pace, extending the anxiety of the moment into infinity. Every memory that rushed by felt centuries away. He tugged at the manual release. With a harsh jolt, the parachute caught the air- and he heard the distinct sound of a steel cable snapping. The chute was gone.

“Three! Chute snapped!”

By now, his connection with his teammates' local command network was patchy, the pod having drifted to the edge of their signal range. Alpha-Three's voice came through, crackling. "Left cord! Left cord! Le-"

The comm signal cut out. The left cord was yanked, and a second jolt hit the pod as the reserve parachute deployed. The ground was positively rushing at Drop Man, the Earth determined to slam the pod with maximal fury. The slow-motion feeling was replaced by a sickening speed to it all, an inevitable descent into hell. A third bump hit the pod as the reserve tank was mechanically emptied into the oxidizer tank of the retro rockets. The roar of the wind was overwritten by their scream. In a strictly measurable sense, he was decelerating, but he couldn't feel a difference.

Drop Man's pod slammed into the desert sands, the sound reverberating for miles as it fell onto its back. Pain and damage reports blasted every one of his senses. His vision faded into colorless static before fading back, but with a large crack in the center of what he could see. The visor covering his monocular camera eye was clearly damaged. Through the pain, he felt an oozing sensation around his waist. Weakly, he touched a finger to his midsection and lifted it back over his head.

The fingertip was coated in a viscous, bright blue substance that was faintly smoking off against the paint on his hand. It was Energen, the lifeblood of robots. The synthetic fuel was derived from crystals found deep in the earth. It was mildly corrosive but otherwise stable in its liquid form. The power cores within the chests of robots processed the fuel into electricity. Clearly, his abdominal tank was ruptured. Drop Man didn't bother hunting through the damage reports. He knew it well enough by the mere exterior presence of Energen, as well as the sensation of it pooling against his hips and onto the chair.

A hissing caught Drop Man's attention. The pod door's emergency eject had somehow tripped. In a blast of compressed gas, the door jumped off, flying out of view, ripped from its hinge. He could now see into the night sky. Shooting stars raced past- the pods of Bravo Team, the wave of troopers launched moments after his squad's wave.

His systems felt shaky, the pump in the Energen container straining itself to deliver what drops it could suck up to the core. In a very real sense, he was bleeding out, and the rest of his body was in pretty miserable shape. He couldn't move his shooting arm, and his leg servos screamed a pain response when he tried them.

A slow burning sensation was reported from his internals. Some of the escaped Energen was oozing around inside the broken shell of his body. It was bad news. The stuff wasn't anything like a strong acid, but it would still be bad for circuitry. The hardened casing that contained his cognition hardware was reporting a breach. That in and of itself was

scary news- you didn't want that case opened for almost any reason. If the fuel got on those circuits, it was over. No coming back. No chance of it. The recovery team would be recovering a corpse that couldn't be repaired.

I can tell. I can fucking tell.

The stuff was definitely dripping that way. The pod was tilted at the right angle for it. He tried to calm himself- he didn't know for sure that the IC case breach was aligned with the path of the drip. He didn't know for sure the Energen would even make it through his neck and into his head. These assurances gave way to panic. Thrashing, he tried to get up, to readjust, to prop himself up at a different angle. All he succeeded in doing was inflaming the pain in his- well, everything. He screamed in agony before falling limp.

"God, please, let me at least shut down before it melts my fuckin' IC. God, you bastard. You *shit*."

No response but the distant crackle of heavy buster fire and a whistling breeze. Drop Man's thrashing slowed. His body was getting heavy. Besides, the robot realized that moving about was probably speeding up the viscous drip's progress. Despite the pain, he tried to relax and accept his fate. He started to think to himself that the anticipation before the impact had probably been worse than the burning-out his insides were currently experiencing. The pain was notable, though.

He started to think about people he wished were with him in the moment. Comrades here and there. People he'd wished to say goodbye to. Inevitably, his thoughts turned to the dead. One of his original squadmates had died on a high-risk op during the Second Stardroid Invasion. They'd drawn straws to see who would get the grim privilege of volunteering.

For many nights after, he gripped the charred dogtag that was recovered and sobbed digital tears. Later, when he joined up with the Maverick Hunters, he had the chance to visit the site of the mission, and though he never found exactly where the man had died, he found a spot that felt appropriate and left his recovered rocket launcher, a silent grave marker. For the most part, it had been closure, but Drop Man occasionally felt deep regret that he'd never had the chance to tell the man how he really felt.

Drop Man had a lot of lovers, or people he figured he would have eventually asked out. Many of the relationships were casual, somewhat held at a distance because of the demands of his job. They still meant a lot to him. Back at the Maverick Hunter HQ, there was a large Animaloid fighter waiting for his return- they hadn't been chosen for the mission. Too big for a Ride Chaser or Armor, on a mission that was primarily a mechanized

assault. They'd complained about missing the hunt, but privately, Drop Man was always glad when someone he cared about couldn't put themselves in danger.

He was fully aware of the hypocrisy, but then, that's just how being a soldier was, and he really did feel like working in the field was his fundamental calling. Reploids weren't built with a specific purpose in mind, but Robot Masters generally had some kind of ingrained function. A part of it was just how their architecture worked, but some of it was by design- Robot Masters had been built for particular tasks.

Sometimes, this urge was hyper-specific. A construction bot would probably feel the most comfortable working on a building. Sometimes, it was vague, a sense of justice or duty. Idly, the dying robot supposed that for him, it was a bit of both. On the one hand, he'd been built to test drop pods, and indeed, he felt quite comfortable in the dangerous machines, drawn to a career involving them before he switched to the Hunters. On the other hand, he generally felt the most at home commanding soldiers, completing objectives, firing his buster. Being a soldier was just good.

Slitting up waves of reanimated Mechaniloids in the junkyard he landed in during the invasion was good. Taking in Mavericks had been good. You really felt the difference you were making, he thought. His reminiscence floated back to the start of the Maverick Hunters. Alongside most of the surviving Reploids that had fought in the invasion, he was in the first wave to join up. He'd been there at the press conference officially announcing the group's commencement. He was among the many called up to the stage to have a medal pinned on.

Afterwards, he hadn't had anywhere to go. HQ wasn't opening until the next day, and there was no sense in burning fuel to get him all the way to orbit just to come back down the following morning. The Reploids had their barracks in the bunkers they'd come up from, but he was going to be listless for several hours. Awkwardly, he milled about the hallway outside the conference room, exchanging polite waves with the people filing out. One civilian, a young man that stood taller than Drop Man, approached nervously and offered to buy the robot a drink.

Graciously, the robot accepted. He didn't exactly have a mouth to drink with- his face was simply an illuminated display projected onto the visor in front of his camera eye- but nonetheless, the pair ended up at a bar. Drop Man pumped the can of flavored Energen into his abdominal fuel port. His body was nowhere near sophisticated enough to taste the flavoring, but he smiled anyway. After some inept flirting from the human, one thing had lead to another, and the robot spent the night in his apartment.

"God dammit... he's gonna be crushed..."

The man's features swam in Drop Man's view. Of his current engagements, the human was definitely the most sensitive. Not that any one of the people he'd held or been held by would be happy to hear of his passing.

"Shit..."

The robot's senses were dulling. His vision was going grainy and the light amplification was failing, the color washing out. That didn't bother him much. The view was just the sides of his pod and the night sky, nothing exceptional to miss. But unexpectedly, a shadow came into view, blocking out a portion of the sky.

"I got'm!"

The recovery team, perhaps? A surge of hope washed down Drop Man's circuits, a fuzz of electrifying static that somewhat un-dulled his senses. His level of pain ramped back up as his hope for living kicked in. A large pair of mechanical hands reached into the pod and gripped his body. Drop Man yelped in pain as he was lifted, the hands bending his injured limbs in ways the broken servos did not enjoy.

An oddly familiar, high-pitched voice spoke. "Careful, careful! Don't hurt him!"

"Doin' my best, y'shit! He's gotta fuel leak in'm, ain't got time t'be the most gentle!"

Ungracefully, painfully, Drop Man's dim world spun around so he was facing towards the ground, tilted so his head was somewhat upwards of his feet. Immediately, he felt the Energen ooze back downward. On the one hand, this meant it wasn't coursing towards his IC anymore- but on the other hand, it meant what little was left in his tank was flowing out and away from the pump to his core. A wave of nausea and weakness overtook him, his vision almost completely disappearing in a gray haze of untuned television. Faintly, he heard the high pitched one again.

"Hold him still, I'm plugging in the battery..."

Drop Man's hardware register noted a new device hooked into his wrist port. It had no driver and was only active on the power pins. It was a battery, exactly as the speaker said. The sensation of weakness ceased, and his vision returned to clarity. The robot's body was still shattered in many places, but he felt less like death. He gingerly turned his head to see that on the ground, next to the huge feet of whoever was holding him, was indeed a beefy power bank. It was an unsexy cube of plastic with an LCD power meter and a cable trailing to his arm.

His rescuer set him down gently, but pain still flared. He resisted the urge to cry out, while also dimly wondering why he was bothering to resist. The shattered robot was now

propped against the still-warm outer skin of the drop pod. He was still in a lot of pain, but nothing was actively flaring. As the immediate mortal peril subsided, an automated program started to somewhat suppress the pain.

Now he saw his crash site. It was on a ridge with a decent view of where he was supposed to have landed. He could see the ruins of the tower foundation sticking out of the ground, illuminated by flashes from buster fire. The other, more fortunate pods had made their mark, landing within the structure's protective outer wall. He couldn't see them from here, but he saw the smoke plumes from their landing. The flare countermeasures that had deployed with their chutes hung low in the sky above, glowing aggressively as they burned. The structure itself was a nondescript gray tree stump of sorts, stretching only three stories at most into the air. It only vaguely hinted at the foreboding tower that had once stood on the spot. Long before, it had shot high into the sky, a grey spire bedecked with ornamental skulls, inside which lived countless robots and their implements of war.

In front of Drop Man were several robots. Most of them clearly Robot Masters like himself. Behind them sat several idling four-wheelers. Closest to him was a hulking robot of indeterminate function, and a short robot in the likeness of a bipedal canine with purple fuzz. Despite the animalistic features, he was clearly not a Reploid. In fact, Drop Man had seen him before. Before he could ask, the dog-man beat him to it.

"Wait, you're- DTU-343, Drop Man! We saw your pod going down, you're lucky to be alive!"

A few years prior, Drop Man had indeed met the robot. His name was TNCN-001 Tanuki Man, and they'd bumped into each other after a training drop mishap had sent Drop Man miles off course. That time, he'd walked away from the landing intact, but still- he now felt sheepish about landing shittily near the same guy twice.

"Well, you guys certainly aren't the UN recovery team..."

Tanuki Man was the organizer of a group of interest known as Tin Can. They were mostly made of outcast or questionably legal Robot Masters; and they were suspected of a lot of petty thievery among other things. Ultimately, they had largely escaped the long arm of the law, isolating themselves in a nearby ghost town in the exclusion zone left behind by the First Stardroid Invasion.

Drop Man recalled that Tanuki Man had actually been involved in a coalition effort involving the Second Invasion. He'd been the pilot that had flown the landing craft on the mission where his squadmate had met his end. Drop also knew that afterwards, Tanuki had taken on a command role, directing volunteers from his own ranks to move supplies and refugees around. He suspected that this involvement was a part of why the group had been

spared a Maverick designation or a formal investigation. Nonetheless, an official dossier existed on them in the Maverick Hunters' archives.

Distracted by his thoughts, he almost didn't notice the short robot approaching him with some hardware in hand. It was a metal bottle with an attached hose and a valve with a screw thread. He eyed it with uncertainty.

"Woah there, bud, what's that?"

Without stopping, Tanuki Man responded, "We've got to get you stabilized. The battery only has a few minutes of juice when it's subbing for an entire Energen core. Hold still, yeah?"

The purple robot's paw-like hand deftly made for the hole in Drop Man's abdomen. The soldier's less-damaged arm instinctively tried to clutch at Tanuki Man's wrist, but his pain flared up and the arm went limp again. The paw slipped inside, doing *something* with a twisting motion. The minute motions this imparted onto his body caused, predictably, more pain. However, Drop Man's core registered a fresh flow of Energen.

"I've hooked this bottle of fuel up directly to the pump. It's worth about two and a half standard E-Tanks. Conserve your energy accordingly."

Before Drop Man could respond to thank the robot, Tanuki Man continued speaking in his matter-of-fact tone. "Your head's got some pretty bad damage. Emotive display on your visor's completely blown. Any refractive filter enhancers on the visor are definitely out, too."

Drop Man sputtered at the mention of the filters. "That hardware is classified, how did you-"

"It's my job to know things. Point is, you busted it in the fall. Your underlying optics look fine, which should be obvious given that you're, y'know, seeing. With vision. Your head plating looks like it took some damage. Diagnostics state an IC container breach. You really are lucky to be alive, Drop."

"I know, I know..."

A moment passed. Drop Man spoke again. "Do me a favor and point me at the fireworks. I wanna see if the fight's gone good."

Tanuki Man obliged with the help of the larger robot. Drop Man winced as his body was adjusted. Several of the other present robots were already watching the battle. By now, there was heavy smoke coming from the outer wall of the former Wily tower. Many of the turrets were no longer moving or shooting. There were still heavy exchanges of gunfire.

“Y’know, you sure do know an, uh, illegal amount of shit. You know my visor tech by name, and you just happen to show up right exactly where I crash within a few minutes...”

A large Mechaniloid flyer in the shape of a bee tried to rise up and away from the distant chaos, only to be immediately struck down by a rocket arcing gracefully from an unseen launcher.

“Drop, you landed practically in our backyard...”

A turret on the wall exploded cleanly, leaving behind nothing but scorch marks.

“Bullshit. You just had a repair crew ready to go?”

Tanuki Man sighed before responding. “Look, this whole sector is our turf, and Wily Tower was a place we were welcome at back when it was still, like, there. If a bunch of guys connected to a recent major incident suddenly move in, we’re gonna be interested. If the UN starts sending scouts through our turf to check it out, we’re gonna listen in so we know when to keep our heads down. If, in the course of this listening in, we happen to hear someone’s having a real bad time, and we can help, we’re going to help. We run our own maintenance, so it’s not like the tools are ever far from ready. You’d probably be dead if we didn’t track your pod!”

Drop Man thought about his response for a moment, idly watching the distant flashes of light. “Look, I’m not ungrateful, but you oughtta to be more careful. In case you run into someone who gives way more of a shit about the letter of the law or whatever. I don’t personally give a fuck that you know about random bits of hardware or can crack our comms, because I know you guys aren’t out to fuck with us. But not everyone knows that.”

Before Tanuki Man could respond, his attention was drawn by something in the distance. “Look, they’re starting a charge!”

A squad of UN Ride Chasers were making for the main gates. They were facing a practical wall of energy bolts, but they weaved to and fro, dodging artfully. One took a glancing blow and started to lose speed, pulling off to retreat from the kill zone, back to the UN lines. Smoke trailed, but the driver seemed unharmed. Another started to get pushed out by focus fire, having to slide out of formation and looping around for another approach. The front two of the charge were almost under the gate, when one of them was hit.

“Jesus!”

The bike exploded, leaving a small crater in the sand. The occupant was thrown far from the bike. They didn’t move on impact. The lead rider looked back and seemed to shout, but he didn’t slow. The remainder of the bikes followed him in. With the defenses

focused on the Ride Chasers bearing down on the entrance to the structure proper, the Ride Armor walkers that had been waiting outside the kill zone began to charge, gliding across the sand on their flat feet, propelled by jets.

Tanuki Man commented, “Seems like your guys are winning this one. Without the rest of the tower, the foundation is a poor position to have to hold. The bottom levels were just manufacturing. Wily’s Mechaniloid troops would walk right out to man the guns to prevent gate breaches, in theory. So the real defenses started basically exactly where the foundation ends.”

Drop Man mulled it over before responding. “That’s good. Seems like the steel rain helped soften ‘em up. Christ, that biker, though.”

Tanuki Man grunted. “Your pickup is gonna be here in a few minutes. Already hailed them and gave the exact location. They’re gonna get you to a repair facility.”

After a few more bangs echoed across the desert, the sounds of warfare grew muffled, an indistinct roar from inside the building. The Mavericks were on the back foot.

Exhaustedly, Drop Man spoke. “...Thanks for the rescue. Before you showed up, I was feelin’ bad for myself, thinkin’ about everyone I was gonna miss. Serious comms breach or not, you’ve given me another chance to minimize my regrets. Gonna go visit ‘em all the second I can walk.”

Though his cracked visor could no longer display his face, though he was in a constant dull pain, Drop Man was smiling.

They Only Know Me by My Failures

“We’re almost there!”

Jade gunned the engine of his Ride Chaser. Buster fire whizzed past him, but he accelerated anyway, sand whipping up under his engines. Gradually, he caught up to X, driving several meters to the squad leader’s side. One of their squad had already left the formation, his Chaser too damaged to keep up. Now, it was just the three of them.

Clad in shiny green armor, Jade lived up to his name. His design was mostly standard for robots of the time- large boots, clearly segmented limbs. His major deviation was his ears. Where most Reploids had circular cups, he had swept-back fins, a feature he was quite proud of.

He gripped the handle of his power lance. It was mostly for comfort- they were nowhere near enough to the enemies for him to skewer anything. At this range and this

speed, even the cannon on the front of his Ride Chaser wouldn't do much, its shots going wide. Instead, he focused on dodging the oncoming hail. He felt the reassuring weight of his father clinging to his back. They just had to make it inside the Wily Tower, and it would all be okay. Grandfather would seal the gates, and his defenses would melt the enemy at the door.

The third member of the squad pulled ahead. They were attracting the attention of the gunners. A few shots came too close for Jade's comfort, and they evidently spooked the squadmate as well. They started to pull out of formation, trying to lose the focus fire. X told them over the comms to loop around for another run. But right as they were almost out of the danger zone, a clean shot hit them, dead center. They were blown to bits, nothing remaining of them or their bike but for a spread of fine shrapnel spearing into the sands. Jade winced, gritting his teeth. That could have been him. This was getting bad. X radioed to inform HQ about the casualty.

Suddenly, without warning, the enemy landed one, two, three hits on the front of Jade's bike, the nose crumpling. The engines were intact, but he couldn't steer the Chaser. He shouted for X. He was a sitting duck. He tried to force the crippled machine to steer by leaning. Suddenly, he felt his father's weight sag dangerously- he wasn't adjusting to keep his balance on the bike! Jade looked back and cried out.

His father was slumped forward against him, a patch of blood staining Jade's pauldron. Had he been hit by shrapnel?

The tower. Grandfather could fix this. Dad was just knocked out by the injury, that was all. Without looking forward, Jade pushed the throttle to max. Humans weren't like robots. Every bad injury for a human was a timer. If they shut down, there was no turning them back on after you fixed the body. Jade looked back and saw only blinding white in the second before the blast blew him clear of the bike.

Time slowed. He was rising, launched upward by the bike detonating. He couldn't see his father. X, who he'd pulled ahead of, was looking up at him and shouting something in slow motion. Jade's eyes screwed shut and his limbs drew inward, assuming a fetal position. A moment later, he hit the earth. Impact was painful, but his system registered no damage. For a moment he just laid there, fully expecting to be erased by buster fire- but none came. In fact, it had fallen eerily silent. No blasts, no gunfire, no hiss of Ride Chaser engine. Total silence. His eyes opened.

He wasn't in the desert anymore. It was still night, but he was in a forest. He got to his feet, looking around. It looked... like the forest near Tin Can? But that couldn't be right, it was miles away. Tin Can was the next closest thing to the Tower, but it was still a hike. Had

he really been blasted all that way? It made no sense. The bike was nowhere to be seen, but somehow, Jade's lance was right beside him, speared into the dirt. He picked it up and tested its activation button. The hum of a magnet in its core reported back. It was seemingly still in one piece.

A nearby shuffling caught Jade's attention. From behind a tree limped his father, his head tilted toward the ground.

"Dad! I was so worried when you got knocked out, are you alright? I think we're near Tin Can. C'mon, it can't be far, let's go get you patched up!"

As he spoke, he ran towards his father. Before he could embrace him, the man silently put up his hand, the fingers stretched straight up and the palm facing towards him. A human hand sign for "Stop". Jade complied. Slowly, the human lifted his head to face Jade. His skin was unnaturally pale, his face gaunt, his eyes glassy. A rivulet of dried blood trailed from his mouth, having run down his chin and neck and staining the shirt he was wearing. His jacket was tattered.

"D-dad! We- we need to get you help!"

As if attracted by the noise, a new figure joined the scene. It was a tall being not of this world, a humanoid clad in armor. His body was blue with white and orange accents. His green hair flowed. His eyes were black voids with glowing white pinprick pupils. It was Terra, the leader of the Stardroids, and prophet of their religion. Without hesitation, Jade yelled in anger, lunging with his lance. It buzzed through the air, going straight for Terra's chestplate- and then Terra shot him. A thin beam of sickly green energy lanced from his pointer finger, curving directly into Jade's chest, completely halting his charge. Then another, then another, until every finger on both of Terra's hands had shot the same spot.

A hole the diameter of a half dollar coin had been shot directly through Jade's chest. He sank to one knee, his entire body seizing with pain. The lance clattered back to the forest floor as his hand clutched at the sizzling wound. Jade's father silently shambled over, stepping in front of Terra to look down at his son. Wordlessly, slowly, the man retrieved an object from inside his jacket. It was a hand mirror. With a deliberate pace, he turned it towards Jade.

Jade didn't see his own face. It was obscured. Stretched across his face and the edges of his helmet was a still-pink, bloody flap of flesh. It was the torn off face of his father. Red started to drip from behind the skin, tracking down Jade's chestplate, some of it smoking as it crossed the glowing, ragged edge of his wound. Jade screamed, recoiling. Desperately, he grabbed at his head, trying to remove the face- but somehow, though it hung loosely, it would not come off. He screamed, and he screamed, and he screamed.

With a yelp, Jade's eyes flicked open. His HUD flickered wildly with targeting reticles tracking nothing. His body was seized up like a dead bug. Slowly, the sensation of dream pain started to fade. He patted himself on the chest, searching. No hole. Nervously, his hands traced up to his face. His fingers felt the cool surface of his own face. It was just him.

The room was dark, but for the dim light from a city filtering in through the window. Jade was laying on a maintenance bed. Was this the HQ? Jade wasn't certain. He collected his thoughts. He'd been on a mission, charging down Mavericks in the ruins of what used to be his home. The last thing he remembered was... a squadmate he'd forgotten the name of had to pull off because they were taking heavy fire, and then... a bright white light, heat... and nothing.

The nightmare version of the mission had transitioned to the scene of his father's death, a few years prior during the Second Stardroid Invasion. They had been fleeing via Chaser from the Wily Tower, to the relative safety of Tin Can. They crossed paths with Terra, who passionlessly shot the both of them. His father was dead instantly. No staggering. It was different to the dream, but Jade knew it was the same place as his memory. Eventually, a Tin Can patrol team found them, searching after they lost contact. Jade, clutching his father's body, had been brought back to the town. He'd watched as they buried the young roboticist. In short, Dad was dead, and he was certain of that.

So why did it look like he was standing in the darkest corner of the room?

The corpse sauntered into the light cast by the window. He looked even worse than in the dream. Much of his face was gone, only tatters of flesh remaining. The muscle tissue below was shrunken and dried. He was wearing the lab coat he used to wear back home. It was torn and covered in myriad stains.

"Son", it rasped.

Jade couldn't move. He couldn't so much as turn his eyes away.

"Son."

A targeting reticle appeared over the figure. A red outline was drawn around it. Jade's threat detection algorithm was indicating very clearly that this was danger. His whole body felt tight, as if it was being squeezed from all directions by a hydraulic press.

"Y'need to let go, son. You failed and ain't nothin' gonna change that."

His drawl was identifiable even through the rotted throat. Blood began to spread on his shirt, right where his heart was. Slowly, shudderingly, he lifted the shirt, exposing his rotted chest. Right where Jade remembered it was the hole, now oozing fetid, cold blood.

The acrid odor of charred flesh hit the robot's olfactory sensor array. The dead man dragged a finger across his chest, coating the rotten digit in blood. Outstretching his hand, he began to walk, step by step towards the immobile Jade.

Step.

Step.

Step.

His feet made no sounds.

"Drink of my rot, son... it may grant you to join me in eternal sleep."

A clammy hand grasped Jade by the cheeks. It forced his jaw open. The corpse held the bloodied finger high, slowly inching it towards the robot's tongue. Jade willed his body to thrash, to move, anything. His steel limbs remained motionless. If that blood touched him, he would slowly die, he was certain of it like he had never been certain of anything before.

With a click, the light switch by the door flicked on. The room was flooded with fluorescent light. The corpse of Jade's father was instantly gone, as was the sensation of his iron grip on Jade's face. The robot could move again. The dim light of the city outside the window was instantly drowned, the panes of glass rendered black by the clinical white of the room. A masculine voice barked something. Jade realized he couldn't parse it because he was screaming. He kept screaming for a moment, clutching at his face, covering his mouth in a vain attempt to muffle it, before he could will himself to constrain it to a dull moan, and then, silence.

The voice repeated itself. "The hell's going on in here?!"

Jade slowly turned his head, almost expecting his father again. Instead, it was a short robot that was missing a lot of exterior paneling, standing with the assistance of a metal cane with rubber claw feet. His face was like the visor of a motorcycle helmet, illuminated from within by the visage of a simple, pixelated face that was currently displaying concern.

"Who- where-," Jade's voice croaked.

"Relax, son."

Jade flinched. The other robot noticed and grimaced to himself before continuing.

"You're at Maverick Hunter HQ. I'm Drop Man."

The robot mentioned no rank- likely avoiding it to build rapport- but Jade noticed the officer's insignia painted over the camo pattern on his pauldron. He weakly tried to salute, but Drop Man waved his hand down.

"We're in the infirmary, in the maintenance wing. I think we were on the same op. The big one. Out in the desert, where the ol' Tower used to be. Right?"

Jade nodded.

"I was the one in charge of the orbital drop. Used to work for that outfit, called up some old buddies. Had a bad drop comin' in. Landing went FUBAR. Broke my... shit, I just 'bout broke everything. They're still sourcin' some of the parts I need, 'cuz I'm sorta obsolete. Still, sitting there outside my pod, I had a good view of the fireworks. Saw the bike charge. I'm gonna guess you were the one that got blown clean off yours, mm?"

Jade rasped, "Yeah. I think so."

Drop Man walked across the room, his limbs awkward and shaky as his cane's rubber tip clacked along the ground. As he reached the edge of the maintenance bed, he asked, "May I?"

"Oh, uh- yeah." Jade scootched over, making room for the soldier to sit. Drop Man took a seat on the bed, instantly unstiffening now that his legs and cane didn't have to support his weight.

"Now, what was all the noise about? Everything alright?" Drop Man's expression had regressed to its neutral state, a simple face with two vertical lines for eyes and a letter "W" shape for a mouth. It was uncharacteristically cutesy for an otherwise stereotypically masculine person.

"Yes, sir. It was just a nightmare, sir."

Drop Man knew that wasn't true. That wasn't the sound of waking up from a nightmare. It was the sound of mortal terror. But he knew pushing the issue wouldn't help. Instead, he replied, "Stow the 'sir' stuff. We're both off the clock, s- bud."

He kicked himself internally. Calling younger soldiers by "son" to indicate casual friendliness was a behavior Drop Man had picked up from human colleagues- one of those weird little pieces of military culture, he supposed. But it had made the green robot flinch, and whatever the reason, Drop Man was determined to not contribute to the robot's distress. "Well, we're both up. Tell me about yourself. What's your story?"

Jade took a simulated deep breath, sucking no air into nonexistent lungs but still pantomiming the behavior. “My name is Jade. My father was a young roboticist that defected from the UN to work for Albert Wily in the interwar period.”

He paused, expecting some reaction to the mention of the betrayal, but none came. “The way he told it, the UN was twisting his arm, demanding development in exchange for not getting charges. He was involved in some unlicensed roboticist type stuff when they picked him up. I think he... probably felt resentful at the imposition. In the Tower, he said he felt a lot more free. It was ironic- humans can’t really go outside in that desert for too long, ‘cuz the radiation hurts ‘em. There were only a few humans in the tower, but they all had to take iodine with every meal, and wear dose badges.”

Drop Man grunted. He was familiar with stories about radiation. As part of the training for extended work in space, robots were required to memorize front to back the stories about the radium girls, and Marie Curie, and the Therac-25, and every Cold War nuclear material incident that had ever happened on either side. It was all to hammer home the need for rigid decontamination protocols. Up in space, radiation could build up on a robot over time, and they wouldn’t notice because it wouldn’t harm them. But to the humans, they’d be exuding an invisible aura of death.

“Doctor Wily was working on his Infinity Project, and my dad, who he kinda adopted, was also interested in advancing robot tech. He built me as his son. So the Doctor’s my grandfather.”

Again, a pause for expected outrage- surely an officer of a military branch of the UN would have some strong words for identifying their worst single enemy as kin? But none came.

“After he made me, the Tower got a bit cramped. Especially ‘cause a lot of Granddad’s kids from the Wars were coming back home, and he finally had the time to restore a lot of the ones that he’d not had the chance to. So Dad took me on a lot of trips to this... town. Of robots.”

Jade sniffled a bit, losing himself to the memories. Drop Man responded, “I think I know just the little bastards you mean. I like ‘em.”

After a moment, the greener of the two resumed. “Soon enough, the Second Invasion started.”

His fists clenched and his voice strained. Drop Man put a hand on Jade’s shoulder.

“We had to clear out of the Tower. Me and Dad made for the town on a Ride Chaser, one Dad built from designs he stole from the UN. Aaaaaaaaagh. And then- and then- that- that- Terra-”

The name of the aliens’ leader tore out of Jade’s throat like a shard of glass.

“He- he shot my fucking Dad! And I held his body! And that’s why I joined the Hunters, because- because- because I tried to fight him and I didn’t even get the chance to swing! He just shot us and went on his way! Because I was a failure and I wanted to stop being one! Agh! Fuck!”

The sound of simulated hyperventilation came from Jade’s throat as he clutched his head. Drop Man spoke in a low, gentle tone. “Hey. Hey now. I didn’t know you fought in the Second Invasion. I was there, too, Jade. I remember it. It was a bad day for everyone.”

“I just wanted- just wanted to fight that asshole- and- and-”

“Shh. Shh. You fought that day, far as I’m concerned. You survived it. Do you know what that makes you?”

Jade wailed, “Don’t say I’m a fucking hero! I’m a coward! I’m a goddamn coward!”

“It makes you a veteran. You survived against one of the deadliest members of an enemy that was already just about as bad as it gets. It’s not about how many hits you get in, it’s that you swung, or that you even *wanted* to swing and would have if you could have, and you survived. We’re equals.”

“I- I joined the Hunters- because I wanted to become better! I wanted to save all the other sons out there from holding their dads! I trained myself to be the bes- best rider I could be, and look at me! I told m-my-myself I could handle it, it wouldn’t get to me that- that they were in my old home, touching on everything left, and it got to me! It almost got me killed! And then I relived it, with my-my-my dad on my back! But I tricked myself into thinking I wa-was going home, that everything would be fine if I had just not *fucked* it all, that-that if I had just made it past the gate, Granddad would *get* those fuckers and Dad would be okay, and I’d be with all my uncles again! And then, and then, you know what I saw? The-the same clearing where he fucking died! I saw Terra again!”

“Jeez, kid.” He considered talking about his own experiences with nightmares, but Jade was gearing up to reveal more, and Drop Man realized it would be tactful to wait for him to calm down.

Jade stared directly into Drop Man’s face, his gaze piercing past the visor and laser focusing on the camera sitting inside the enclosure. “And-and you know what the worst

part of it was, Drop Man? I-I-I woke up. And I was gonna j-just-just- just dismiss it as a bad dream, and-and-and-figure out what happened to the-the mission. But he was there. He was fucking *there* in the room, Drop Man.”

Jade frantically pointed at the far corner, his finger shaking.

“My D-Dad’s body was right there, all rotten, and he walked over to me, and he called me a *failure*, and he told me to drink his blood, that it would slowly kill me and I could *join* him. And-and- I was so scared to taste it, sca-scared to- *hic*- die, but some small part of me wanted it and if I could have moved I might’ve taken it. But-but-he was gone as soon as you- you- arrived.”

Drop Man watched the shaking wreck of a robot with concern. He didn’t believe in ghosts or phantoms. It sounded like a vivid hallucination. The kid would need psychiatric maintenance. He certainly wouldn’t be field ready for a while. Gingerly, he patted Jade’s shoulder again.

“I-I’m a c-cow-coward! I can’t get on that fucking bike again, I just *can’t!* I won’t do it! You can’t make me, even if you’re my superior!”

The older robot chose his words carefully. He was a hardass with new recruits, because that was just a part of the training. But as soon as someone was deemed ready to run missions, it was different. “I’m not gonna make you do anything. If you want out, you can get out. It’s fine. Nobody, not one Hunter, will think less of you. It’s okay.”

“I- d- argh! Aaaah!”

Jade doubled over into a fit of wordless sobbing, clutching at Drop Man. In turn, Drop Man held the green robot close to him.

He liked the business of soldiering. The discipline, the procedures, the hardware, the camaraderie, and all the little things in between. But this- this was always hard. It wasn’t *giving compassion* that was hard- that came naturally. It was the fact that his fellow soldiers suffered like this. That he had, himself, had his turn suffering like this.

Drop Man finally experienced a revelation that had been building for a long while. Warfare was, by far, the most fucked up thing ever, and he couldn’t even engage in the cliché that it was some Earth-specific problem- they had direct proof that aliens were just as capable of thinking in terms of killing to get shit done. Humans had just figured out how to make the moments in between the death structured and calm. In that moment, Drop Man wished more than anything that he and Jade could have found their callings in any other line of work. Maybe there was camaraderie in robots that did demolition or factory work. Maybe there was deep discipline in construction or ocean floor survey.

Jade's sobbing lasted a long time. He could no longer say anything coherent. All of the agony simply submerged him and tugged him with its current, and he held to the older robot, the only thing keeping him from being whisked away. The color of the window started to shift as the world turned to that twilight before dawn. It was just a few minutes before the brilliant disc of the sun peeked above the buildings that formed the horizon when he finally ceased. He wasn't totally composed by any means, but Jade was, for the moment, through the worst of it.

He spoke, sniffing. "S-sorry about- about that. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Drop Man?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you st-stay for a while? I don't want to be alone again. Sorry."

"It's okay. I'll stay."

Visitation Hours Are Over

The halls of the hospital were quiet and the lights were dim. In this wing, there were very few staff at this hour. It was the sort of wing where the inpatients were largely stable. As the pair walked past the nurse's station, the person in the chair didn't so much as look up from their book as the taller of the two passerby flashed her badge. Their combined footsteps clicked softly down the hall, around a corner, around another... finally, they were outside their destination.

"Seriously keep this quick. You owe me."

"Yeah, yeah, we'll hash it out afterwards."

Tanuki Man entered the room. It was a standard hospital bedroom for humans- monitoring equipment, a locker for personal effects, and an adjustable bed with railings. The bed was at chest level for the robot, who stood at a mere 4 feet tall. In the bed lay the sleeping form of Stanislaus Simon. Tanuki Man couldn't remember the man's various ranks, but in his mind, he remembered the approximate roles the man had held.

Major figure of authority within the UN at one point. Acting military commander for the UN's response to the impending Second Stardroid Invasion. Afterwards, stepped down to be the human overseer of the Maverick Hunters. Still held much authority and sway as far as the inner politics of the UN were concerned, especially as it pertained to the military.

Strong lobbyist for ratifying laws that expanded robotic rights. Despite being deep in an organization that Tanuki Man was, at best, on neutral terms with, he considered Simon to be an ally- as much as his station could allow, anyway.

Reaching one paw up, Tanuki Man gently shook Simon's arm. He whispered, "Hey. Simon. Wake up."

It didn't take much effort. The man's eyes opened, and they looked in the direction of the disturbance. He focused on the dull green glow of Tanuki Man's irises. He mumbled, "You... the hell are *you* doing here?"

"I had to come talk to you. I heard... I heard that I might not have the chance soon."

Simon raised an eyebrow, sitting up shakily. "Okay. Hold on."

Reaching over, he turned on the lamp. The room was bathed in a warm, inviting light, quite unlike the clinical harshness of hospital fluorescents. Tanuki Man got a good look at his features. He was thin and his skin was marked with blemishes. His bright blue hair, side effect of many experimental augmentations, was cut short, still growing back in. There were deep bags under the man's eyes. For the first time, he looked something approaching his age- the augments had always given him a timeless look before.

"How the hell did you get in here? This is a secure UN facility. Last I checked, we're not in the habit of giving security credentials out to persons of interest, let alone anyone not under our employ."

The woman Tanuki Man had been walking with stuck her head in the door with a guilty expression across her olive-skinned face. She then walked in, stammering, "Um. Hi. Yeah. I kinda... used my clearance. Let him in. As a favor."

For a moment, Simon pinched at the bridge of his nose, his eyes screwed shut in deep annoyance- though, both the woman and the robot were relieved to see it wasn't a look of disappointment. Opening his eyes, the man forced a smile at the woman, though after only a moment, it turned genuine. "Well. Before anything else- am I to address you as Doctor, now?"

The woman smiled back. "Sadly, not quite yet. By the end of the semester, you'll be able to- well. I'll be a doctor then. So for now, it's still just Tomato."

His eyes, ever hunting for minute details, noticed the wedding band on Tomato's ring finger. "That's new."

"Oh, yeah! Few weeks ago now. Took their surname. I'll be Doctor Tomato Durand soon. I- look, don't feel bad you missed it. It really wasn't anything extravagant." She felt

bad that Simon hadn't been able to attend, but of course, the man was bedridden. Simon and Tomato had first met over an open UN employee comms channel that had been set up in the weeks leading up to the Second Invasion. It had been an unusual, informal service divided by locale, meant to connect anyone who needed preemptive evacuation to the shelters, and by a miracle, most of the employees in the Arcadia area had made it on their own. The channel had mostly been used by a few random employees, robotic and human, that had gotten bored despite everything.

Though they were in vastly different spheres of the UN, at vastly different levels of seniority and organizational importance, Tomato and Simon had bonded, and had remained in touch over the years after the invasion. Tomato resumed her education in robotic psychology, and Simon had gone off to run the Maverick Hunters, but every once in a while, they found the time to meet for a coffee.

"Damn. I'll regret missing the wedding. I really will... Now, have a seat and tell me why the two of you are here." His gaze turned stern, flicking between the two as they dragged up chairs and sat beside the bed. It was no mystery *how* she'd done it- early in her education, she had been given course credit for running a basic therapeutic practice for robots within the city of Arcadia, naturally under supervision. After the Invasion, as need remained high, the UN kept pressuring the college to offer the position to students in the major as a work study program. It gradually became her proper job, expanding in scope as her qualifications within the fledgling field expanded.

By this point, Tomato was, legally, a recognized healthcare employee with access to myriad low-security facilities, all to expedite access to potential cases- robots in need of the kind of maintenance a wrench couldn't provide. And, given that the UN didn't feel like writing up new laws for robotic healthcare, robots were simply stapled onto the existing laws as valid clients. This meant that her credentials were universal between human and robotic facilities. Obviously, this didn't mean she could waltz into an active operating room, but certainly, she could authenticate past the main entrance of a hospital after hours and walk to a patient's room.

It was also no mystery *why* Tomato had committed this breach- at least, in the sense that she was friends with Tanuki Man. During the Invasion, for reasons he still could not fathom, she chose to lodge in Tin Can, braving low-intensity radiation and minimal access to human supplies to study residents that were initially none too pleased to have a human nosing around. Hell, in the Maverick Hunters' dossier on Tin Can, there was a loose photo of Tomato, standing around with several of the renegade robots, all gripping the settlement's signature homemade buster rifles- her included.

Presently, Tanuki Man answered Simon's question. "We're here, because I got it on good authority that for some reason, they don't think you're gonna be around in a few days. In the document I read, the language was vague and I wasn't sure if they meant you were going to... hospice, or if you were being whisked to a black site to have experimental surgery or augmentation to fight the disease."

Simon repeated his irritated gesture from earlier- eyes shut, bridge of nose pinched, count to three. "You know, we probably wouldn't have to keep any kind of dossier on your settlement if you just learned to keep your nose out of things that it shouldn't be in. I suppose that's probably my fault, though. You never did face any repercussions, because I fought damn hard to make sure of it after the Invasion. Well, there's no keeping any damn secret from you, so I'm just gonna save you the trouble of having to dig."

Simon pulled out a stick of nicotine gum from a container on the bedside. Naturally, he couldn't smoke in a hospital. He popped it into his mouth, pausing to chew it until it was sufficiently softened by his teeth. "They've already tried every black site surgery and experimental augment they could on me. Hell, some of the shit they put in me *before* the Invasion was supposed to shore up my resistance to radiation. None of it mattered when the Bradley I was in ran into Sunstar. You ever hear the story of the Demon Core?"

Tanuki Man shook his head, but Tomato intoned, "Yeah. Shit."

"Tell 'm. Gives me a sec to catch my breath."

Tomato faced the robot. "Back in the Cold War. They had this lab. Los Alamos. It's where they developed nukes. The cores of these nukes were little half-balls of radioactive metal. When you put 'em together, they emitted a shitton of radiation, and that was like half of the principle behind the bomb. As the halves got close, they emitted more and more radiation."

Tomato pantomimed her hands as the halves of the spheres, closing on each other. "And they ran these experiments where they would get the cores closer and closer to being together, without ever touching. But one time, the guy running it slipped and they closed together. Room was flooded with blue light."

Her pantomime became an explosion, with an accompanying mouth sound. "Guy who fucked up, he knocked the cores back apart, but he knew it was too late. He died within a month. Body just stopped working. But in the act of separating the cores, it bought everyone else in the room time. Time on the orders of years or a few decades. Their DNA, it was still scrambled. They all eventually died of cancers."

With a short cough, Simon took over, drawing Tanuki Man's morose gaze. "In that blast, I took... well, they don't know the exact number of rads. But it was comparable, I suppose. They kept scooping the tumors out of me, but they kept coming back. It's been a slow, losing battle. I had a lot buying me time. A lot keeping me mobile. Hell, a lot keeping me hopeful. At first, it really did seem like I'd be more or less fine. But it's been getting worse for a year now."

Tanuki Man felt nauseous. The diseases humans faced were truly harrowing. "So that's it then? They really are just... releasing you to hospice and keeping you comfortable until it's over?"

Simon chuckled spitefully. "I wish I could finally rest, but no, they have something worse in mind. It's the freezer for me."

"The freezer?"

"Cryogenic stasis. It's experimental. It's the closest option we've got to how you robots can just be put back together as long as the brain's intact. It's the closest thing to how if you shut down, it's just a matter of rebooting you."

Tomato exclaimed, "Experimental?! Simon, it's unproven!"

"Isn't that a bitch. Yeah. They don't have an unfreezing method ready. Hell, I don't know that they actually have the freezing method itself worked out. They had a batch go under a few years back. Fatally injured soldiers and sick executives. After a few years, routine peek at the tubes revealed they had liquified. Goo stuck to the bottom of them. But, hey, they swear they got it right this time. So they just gotta freeze me. And make sure my tube never runs out of power. And eventually, they'll develop both the method to unfreeze me, and cure turbo full body radiation cancer. And it'll be back to work for me. Because they say my mind is too valuable to lose."

Tomato swore under her breath. Tanuki, trying to distract from the horrid prospect, focused on the technical details. "What do you mean by tube? What's it look like?"

"Well, you were involved with Wily's stuff. Surely you remember when the Infinity project got sealed. Before we found him and he became Zero."

That was some genuinely forbidden knowledge, but of all things, Simon knew Tanuki Man was already well aware of it. He was also simply past caring what Tomato absorbed.

"So it's just gonna be you. Stuck in that tube. And they got a glass window to look at you. Make sure you haven't rotted."

“Yup. They already cut my morphine supply. I don’t heal well anymore, but they’re trying to see if my needle punctures will go from scabs to all the way healed over. Supposed to help give me better odds if I don’t have any holes in me. So they’ve got me on oral painkillers. And, Tanuki Man, if you ever become a human, be aware- oral painkillers really aren’t the same. I am in a remarkable amount of pain right now.”

Tomato just stared in angry silence.

“So. You came all this way and, best case, committed a few misdemeanors that, if caught, could cost Tomato here her job, let alone her shot at the doctorate. What was so important?”

Suddenly, Tanuki Man felt self-conscious. It did feel frivolous when the man put it that way. “Well, I guess I just... needed you to know that I appreciate all you’ve done for us in Tin Can. And I need you to know that... ironically, you’re the reason we do what we do. Because Simon, you’re just one man. You’re a good man. You’ve fought really hard within the system by its rules, all to make things better for our species. But even at the best of times, you weren’t gonna be around forever. If this sleep works for you, and you come back... Well, I plan to be there, waiting, on the other end. No matter how long it takes. Things like the Limited Lifespan Law?”

Tanuki Man was referring to a piece of legislation that imposed a fixed lifespan for robots who would otherwise live forever. When first drafted, it was brutal, and directly threatened even the lives of robots that had become famous and beloved. It had been bad enough to cause an entire war fought with the backing of Dr. Wily, ever the bleeding heart. After it, they had expanded the law to one hundred years, and eventually, the legislation was entirely dissolved.

“If they bring it back, well. Not that I’m going to submit to it. Not that I ever would have. But I’ll have to become a criminal for the mere act of being alive too long. But whether you’re gone for now or gone forever, that’s the problem with the system. There’s only one Simon, and no guarantee of other people who are nearly as good and nearly as in a position to protect us. I mean, even in just these last few years, there’s been some concerning backslides, all on the back of paranoia about Mavericks. And the thing is, at a certain point, a lot of these Mavericks don’t seem too different from me and my own.”

Simon groaned, sinking into his pillow a bit. “I know it’s not... it’s not great. The Hunters have had their damn hands full. And believe me, I’ve tried to keep their doctrine reasonable. Far be it from me to wish to visit needless suffering to the Tanuki Men of the world... even if your type really would benefit from just following the rules.”

For a moment, he chewed at his gum.

“I think someone else will come along. I’m not the only one who cares. Really, I never was. I was just the guy that spoke for a lot of the people that did. Lots of good people in the government.”

Wryly, Tanuki Man smiled. “Simon... that’s electoralism. That was always the big difference between humans like you and robots like me. You see the system as fundamentally just, simply needing tweaking to eventually account for new variables. You think you just gotta get the right flow of good people forever and it’ll work fine. But that sucks! It can’t lapse even a moment or we slide back! The problem is, it was a status quo built only for the human perspective. The way I see it, we need a new system that accounts for us, the uncomfortable new children of man. I don’t know what that’ll look like, but I’ll tell you what I do know: I’m scared to see you go, Simon. And not just because I like you. I think it’s gonna get a lot worse before it gets better.”

Simon closed his eyes, his gaunt features softening somewhat in an expression of defeat. “You... may be right about some of that, at least. I wish I could assure you that I had some kind of plan set up, but I don’t. I’m just... making phone calls and filling out paperwork, the same as always, until they prep me for the tube. And that’ll be that. I’ll do my best to make sure Tin Can stays ignored.”

“We’ll fight back if the Hunters or bluehelmet regulars roll on us.”

“I know. You’ll lose if it comes to that.”

“...I know.”

“Tanuki Man... you can’t live forever.”

“Simon... I *will* live forever.”

The man sighed. “Maybe that’s the real difference between us. You’re a different kind of stubborn. I ought to tell you that whatever the world looks like if- when- they unfreeze me, you probably won’t have such an easy time of greeting me.”

Tomato chimed in, glumly, “If I’m even still around by that time to get you in the door. Could be centuries.”

Simon nodded. “What she said. But... well, I guess that’s a problem you’ll try to solve anyway.”

Tanuki Man responded. “I’ll make it happen. Can’t let you get too complacent and unbothered, whenever you’re back around.”

With his eyes still closed, Simon let out a chuckle- not spiteful, but genuine.

“Alright. I’m tired. The two of you ought to go.”

The pair obeyed, standing up and pushing their seats back to where they had been. Tomato leaned down to gingerly hug the man. It was an unusual gesture- the two friends had never really embraced. They were more like a pair of cats that occasionally sat in the same alley. Still, he weakly reciprocated. It was a potential regret removed from the young woman’s list.

“Be seeing you, Doctor Durand.”

“I’ll see you sometime, Simon.”

There Were Many Points Of No Return But This Is Where I Realized It Was Over

Tanuki Man had a major problem. He figured there were few things he couldn’t eventually repair, given enough time and resources. Right now, he had neither. The short robot was in the reactor room of the Sky Lagoon, the emergency lighting turning the purple of his fake fur a deep crimson. As the warning klaxons continued to blare, he set to work, trying to reconnect the damaged reactor to the power grid. The city was rapidly running out of its emergency reserve. He noted that whoever had burned through the web of power conduits, they had avoided entirely blowing the reactor- a curious detail.

The Sky Lagoon was an honest to God superstructure, a flying chunk of city built in perverse homage to the lavish excess to World’s Fairs of old- a project undertaken by the rich because they *could*. Parked off the coast of Seattle, it was built to the size of several blocks of a city’s downtown, skyscrapers and infrastructure included. The immense heft was kept in the air by six unbelievably large engines, all powered from a surprisingly small central fusion reactor.

From the day the project had been announced, Tanuki Man had smelled disaster. How could it be anything but? It had a single point of failure- its reactor. If the reactor failed for any reason, it had the potential to cause immense destruction to the populated areas below. It would have been a bad idea if the project was meant to float in the middle of nowhere, let alone right next to one of the larger remaining cities on the West Coast.

After a few years of construction, sped along by the relentless efficiency of construction robots, the project was completed, taking flight for the first time. It was reachable from the ground by an endless parade of sky ferries. Though the city boasted no permanent residential structures, several enterprising companies had moved office space

onto it, a vain attempt to “Get Ahead Of The Future,” as the project’s tagline went. With a foreboding feeling, Tanuki Man decided that he had to see the Sky Lagoon for himself. He wanted to gauge in person how much of an imminent disaster it was going to be.

Accompanied by a few companions, he had set out. They drove up the shattered remains of the West Coast until they hit the end of the exclusion zones, and eventually, entered Seattle. One ferry ride later, they were in the Sky Lagoon, a small group surrounded by droves of tourists and local rubberneckers. There were surprisingly few red flags, though it stood out to Tanuki Man that all the concrete used already looked worn, superficial cracks forming in the surface.

And then, it happened. A group of well-equipped Mavericks attacked the flying city, overwhelming the security forces in minutes. Tanuki Man had been near the reactor building when its security checkpoint was assaulted. From a hiding place, he saw the Mavericks leaving just as quickly as they had arrived. Despite his better judgement, he decided he had to check on the reactor, and in short order, he had found that one of the Mavericks had burned through the conduits that connected the reactor to the city.

Presently, the repair wasn’t going well. The robot had used his Cyberspace interface to hack into a backup control system for the city’s engines, but they were refusing to respond to his commands to initiate a landing. At the very least, he was able to receive telemetry about their remaining power reserves, seeing exactly how fast they were dwindling. The city didn’t have much time. Still logged into the central computer of the city, Tanuki Man diverted all the reserve power he could find to the engines, adding mere seconds to the clock as lamps and traffic signals in the streets outside went dark.

The reactor room was reasonably large, its ceiling being a good forty feet from the floor. In the center of the room was the reactor, a thick and greebled pillar that reached to the ceiling. Its sensitive machinery was encased in layers of outer metal and indicator lights. Part of the case was melted, but the unit was overall still functional. However, the central conduit bundle- a tangled mess of heavy-gauge wiring- was utterly severed and messily melted into slag, and Tanuki Man only managed to reconnect a few of the cables. It was nowhere near enough to outpace the consumption of the engines.

Tanuki Man had conducted some of the earliest studies into the mysterious realm of Cyberspace, the digital reality overlaid onto the real. In the course of his investigations, he had modified his left eye- it was no longer the simple green optic he’d been designed with, but a boxy protrusion from his face that could simultaneously see the real world and peer into Cyberspace. It read all kinds of data with the same ease by which an ordinary eye could read text.

With this modified eye, he was scanning around the room, desperately looking for some kind of backup system that he had missed, a spare hookup, even just extra lengths of the thick cabling. He noticed two figures standing in the observation room up in one corner of the room, their silhouettes visible through the glass. Tanuki Man initially only noticed them by their respective data nodes floating in Cyberspace. It looked like they were having a tense conversation. He didn't have time to peek at their nodes to identify them.

No solution was presenting itself, physically or digitally. The seconds ticked by. One engine gave out early. There was a lurch as the other engines automatically compensated. The timer grew shorter as the other engines increased their thrust. This was that much-touted redundancy the investors had gushed over- and it was going to kill everyone still aboard even faster. Tanuki Man couldn't help but marvel at the ghoulish calculus that had went into the cost cutting. One single reactor, with no backup and seemingly one connection to the entire grid. He felt his panic rising.

"Come on, come on!"

Finally, after another frantic moment of searching, the robot found some cables stashed in a toolkit in the corner. They were nowhere near the correct gauge, but it was all he could think to try. With a sharp *snap*, he lopped off the connectors on either end of the cables, rolling up their insulation to reveal the copper beneath. Cautiously, he approached the still-sparking remains of the conduit. Trying his best not to fry himself, he placed one end on the inert side. Then, with the other hand, he reached the bundle of cords towards the live end- the reactor end.

As soon as the pieces of copper made contact, the exposed ends of the thinner wire glowed white hot. They flash welded into place. For a brief moment, Tanuki Man felt hope- the timer was running backwards! And then the wires started to melt their own insulation and drip molten copper and plastic everywhere.

In the back of his head, he knew it had been a ridiculous notion. Those wires were never going to be able to handle that much energy. He felt a sinking despair. "No!"

The timer was running down again. Dimly, he noticed the two people in the observation room were now gone.

The timer ran out. Sky Lagoon's power grid had bled dry its last drop of reserve power. The city began to list as the turbines started to slow. And then, things got worse. A loud, rhythmic banging started to reverberate from one of the walls of the room. Tanuki Man froze. A crack formed, and then a hole was punched by a large, clawed hand. One of the giant dragon robots that had assaulted Sky Lagoon with the Mavericks tore the wall open and stepped through.

A protective visor slid down over Tanuki Man's eyes. He drew his buster, aiming at the green terror. He knew he couldn't defeat it. His arsenal was quite weak. Fighting was not the little robot's specialty. He considered his options. Maybe the beast would be fooled by holographic decoys? It was certainly Tanuki Man's most reliable trick.

The dragon noticed the small robot leveling his buster, and it raised a clawed hand in a "stop" motion. A familiar voice came from its throat.

"Tanuki, it's me! Copy Man!"

Instant relief washed over the small robot. Copy Man was a robot that could, per the name, scan the forms of other robots and shift into them, imitating at will their capabilities. Evidently, he had run across one of the dragons and taken its form. He was a sophisticated marvel of Wily tech that had yet to be reproduced by the UN, and he was Tanuki Man's lover.

"Come on, we've got to go!"

"But, Copy! The reactor!"

"I know, it's down! We need to go, there's no time left!"

Tanuki Man started to feel physically *lighter*, as if gravity was losing its potency. No, that wasn't right- the city was descending. The listing started to become noticeable, scrap metal and damaged tools sliding across the ground.

Copy Man grabbed Tanuki Man, holding him gingerly in the large hands of the dragon robot. He'd already morphed the claws out of existence. The robot squirmed in his hands. Copy Man's voice dripped with regret. "I'm sorry, there's just nothing we can do!"

The larger robot sprinted back outside. The world of the Sky Lagoon was tinted an eerie red, fires and emergency lights casting a glow on both the city and the undersides of the clouds above in the overcast evening. Copy Man flapped his immense wings as he sprinted, leaping into the air. Again and again he flapped, building speed. The ground started to lazily recede beneath them.

Copy Man bellowed over the winds. "Shit, I don't know what the minimum safe distance is... Hold on, I'm gonna go as fast as I can!"

As the pair reached the edge of the city, he nosed down into an aggressive dive, sweeping back his wings. They immediately gained speed. The ground flew at them for a moment until he pulled out of the dive, unfurling the wings to their full span. Their momentum converted and carried them forward, far away from the Sky Lagoon, approaching the far edge of Seattle. In less than a minute, they were outside the city limits.

Copy Man set down on a hilltop, releasing Tanuki Man and morphing back to his base form- humanoid, dull blue armor, androgynous but vaguely boyish features, spiky indigo hair, eyeshadow, and a purple scarf. Once, he resembled a famous hero, and once, it had been his job to serve as a dark reflection. That didn't matter now.

Getting their bearings, the pair looked back. Sky Lagoon was still gliding on the spin of its dead engines, but it was picking up speed. It was headed inexorably for the heart of the city below.

"I tried to fix it, Copy. They did it specifically so it'd crash. If they had just hit the reactor, it might have blown up in the air. That would have been bad, but they- they wanted to make sure it'd be as bad as possible!"

"You did your best. I- this is so fucked up."

"Did anyone make it off?"

"Several ferries came back for a final pass after the Mavericks showed up. I stayed to look for you. I think there were also some emergency escape pods... Not enough, but I think they went, too. I don't know if the Hunters were on scene, they might have gotten a few people out. But I don't know how many are left."

Sky Lagoon was racing for Earth.

"Copy, I can still see them. My Cyberspace interface. I can see the nodes of the Reploids that are still aboard the city. There's a lot that didn't- oh my God. I could count them all if I had time."

"Just... look away."

The pair held each other.

Intermission: Redacted Interest in Incidents

UNITED NATIONS STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL LEVEL DOCUMENT

The following is an excerpt of a censored transcript of an interaction captured by a stealth surveillance drone operated by the Person of Interest Monitoring Program, between POI#SRN09 and a human whose identity has been redacted for privacy.

SRN09: Have you come to take vengeance?

INTERVIEWER: [startled noise]

SRN09: If so, no resistance is offered. This scar, though long healed, indicates where to aim. Do you possess the proper implement?

INTERVIEWER: No, no- this- I'm not here for vengeance. You're [SRN09], right? I wasn't even born yet when you- uh, you know- were involved with all of that.

SRN09: Ah, yes. The short life cycle of the human. Well then, for what purpose do you appear in this treacherous sector of the ocean?

INTERVIEWER: I had questions about back then, and I heard you were one of the few ones left.

SRN09: Amongst the aggressors? Or merely in a general sense?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I suppose in general, but humans who survived the Wars were mostly civilians by the end. Reploids wouldn't exist until the... uh, second time you guys came around the block. There was one UN bigwig that didn't have any obituaries or official death certificates, but all mentions of him kinda just stopped at some point... And Robot Masters from that time are quite difficult to track down. Lot of them shut down or were dismantled, and those that still exist are usually quiet about it. I had one promising lead, a super early 'bot who even had records showing he helped the coalition for the Second Invasion. Funny little guy, you wouldn't think he was involved in that sort of thing. But, well, it turns out he'd been in hibernation for the first one, so that was a bust. So, uh, yeah, I guess those of you that are still around really is my best option, and I mean, talking to a real live [REDACTED]? I kinda couldn't imagine a better source. And out of those who were unaccounted for, you seemed the easiest to track down.

SRN09: Yes, the effort was quite dire for all involved. Of the aggressors, few survived beyond the obvious. I can verify that [POI#SRN08] still roams, though he never stays in place for long. Certainly, he would not be one for conversation with a human. It's how his regret manifests. It is also distantly plausible that [POI#SRN02] survived, though unlikely.

SRN09: [somber chuckle]

SRN09: His acidity, his temper... it is missed. He was... in an elegantly human word, "fun". The commonality with the survivors- potential and confirmed- is the status of being traitors. All others stuck to the mission until they fell in glory-less battle after the destruction of the Beacon. Regret played a role in the betrayals, though it was not helped by the cruelty of [POI#SRN01]. Truthfully, the data from [classified combat infonet "SRBN"] is scarce regarding [POI#SRN02], but it is known he was attempting to defect to [GOI#MAV/WIL/TC] when he was accosted by [POI#SRN01]. This is his last confirmed incidence, and it seems quite unlikely that he escaped.

SRN09: [pauses]

SRN09: Apologies. The remembrance is a path. But, yes, to conclude, it is likely that you have found your best source of information.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, um, I- I mean- yeah, that's sort of what the little guy said about [POI#SRN02], but your telling is... I mean, you knew the guy, so like, it adds texture. I'm, uh, sorry he didn't make it.

SRN09: Don't mourn for the sinners. Atonement from the survivors is death, or many tens of years in the making. Mourn only that he most likely met his ends at the contemptible fingers of [POI#SRN01].

INTERVIEWER: I- yeah, that's fair. It was pretty fucked up, what all you [REDACTED] did to our planet. I mean- the scars, you *changed* the shape of our maps. Before you came, the planet was completely understood, like we mapped the whole thing, pretty much. But then we had to relearn a whole lot. I mean, you- you sunk a whole continent's *coastline*.

SRN09: [winces]

SRN09: Each day, the regret burns as bright as it did the last. An everlasting flame.

INTERVIEWER: So, like, what I wanna know is, like, *how*? How can that even be possible? It's such an odd level of destruction, this weird middle between a nuke, and, like, planets hitting each other!

SRN09: [alarmed] You wish to replicate that sin?!

INTERVIEWER: No, no! I just- I have trouble understanding the forces at work, I suppose.

SRN09: Ah, understood. Yes, the most accurate analogy is that your "West Coast" was sunk by a type of "bomb", though not one that used any chemical or nuclear reaction your kind are ready to harness. It was... hm... how best to put it? A gestalt of all of the [REDACTED] core abilities. For example, delivery was the expertise of [POI#SRN04], efficient spreading of the effect was the sphere of [POI#SRN02]. There was contributions involving complicated mass and energy equations, and operation of delivery of microsingularities at precise densities.

SRN09: [gestures to self, voice takes on significant tone] Knowledge of the nature of corrosive reactions on subatomic levels was vital to shaping the implementation of the microsingularity payload.

INTERVIEWER: You lost me... Sorry.

SRN09: [pause] The apologies are not for you to make, human. It is sometimes difficult to remember that yours is a species that is not singularly focused on achieving ultimate expertise in waging war that requires advanced astrophysics at every level.

SRN09: [shoulders sag, tone deflates] It is admirable. May your people never delve into such sinful knowledge. But, yes, to put it in more accessible terminology, the “bomb” utilized different aspects of the talents of the ones who marred your planet, combined in incredibly specific manners to completely weaken the atomic bonds of the mass that supported the coastal continental shelf. Much was shredded into dust in an instant. The city it was detonated above was completely eradicated into a cloud of particles, a mere obstacle in the way of the targeted depth. Some cities remained relatively intact on the far peripheries of the effect, and linger beneath the waves... Much of the land on the edge of the sunken parts is just irradiated sand. This, and the immediate environmental collapse, lead to desertification along much of the coast. If it can be believed, this terrible power was a low-yield version of what was only the second-worst destruction the [REDACTED] could bring to bear.

INTERVIEWER: My god, it's so terrible... I'm- I'm glad you regret it all. I'm glad you came to your senses before you could do it all over again, but- what could possibly be worse?

SRN09: If the [classified presumably destroyed anomalous energy source artifacts] had been collected and brought to the crucible of this system's star? Every single planet and much of the cloud of bodies surrounding them would have been blown to plasma by the full, unshackled wrath of the dead god Sunstar.

END OF EXCERPT

Censor's note: Hey, did he imply that he, like, has control over the ontology of corrosion? I thought we thought he just used mundane but exceptional chemicals as a weapon.

SUPERVISORY ADDENDUM: Please minimize speculation.

Neoliberalism

In the early days of robotics, bloody wars had been fought, ruining cities and taking lives. The First Stardroid Invasion had come along, leaving deep scars in some parts of the Earth. Much of America's western coast had been entirely sunk into the sea, and much of what was left was ground down to an irradiated desert.

Peace had finally returned. There was a period of peace- shaky, uncertain, but very much real. The Second Stardroid Invasion managed to shake things up, and many heroes died, but by some miracle, it was contained. It was ended. Humankind and robotkind alike

were able to rebuild, to advance. Early Maverick outbreaks occurred, but they, too, were contained. Unrest came and went, but many felt hopeful.

And then disasters started to occur at a sickeningly familiar pace. The noble first commander of the Maverick Hunters fell to corruption. Even that was contained, but morale was low- many important Hunters were dead, either killed as traitors or fallen in the fight. Efforts to preemptively contain Maverick behavior, up to and including a major settlement built on Reploid social programs, went awry, failing or being subverted from within.

Sky Lagoon fell and flattened an entire city. An entire Reploid military force of the UN went rogue, claiming independence. And then came the Eurasia Incident. Eurasia had been a massive residential space station, meant to embolden exploration of the solar system and conduct astrophysical research. It was subjected to malware in its control system, and despite the best efforts of the UN's brightest minds, much of it hit the Earth intact.

Environmental devastation was widespread. Most of humanity was forced to turn to the bunkers of the Wily Wars, using them as permanent shelters while Reploids above worked diligently. The fledgling technology of terraforming was slow, much too slow for the lifetimes of the humans waiting below. It had previously only kept the desertification caused by the Stardroids at bay, and now, it would only be able to maintain the livability of individual cities, disconnected by spans of derelict land. The world would be ruined for hundreds of years.

Still, life persisted. The Reploids built new cities. Some Maverick incidents occurred, but as always, they were contained. And finally, today, the first group of cities was ready for the humans to come up from the shelters, blinking in the sunlight. A new capital had been erected. It was called Neo Arcadia, built upon the remains of the original Arcadia, once viewed as the robotics capital of the world.

The leader of the efforts, Mega Man X, stood facing the city's main gate, giving a speech to an amassed crowd of Hunters and construction Reploids. Cameras broadcast a feed of the event to the bunkers, both below and around the world. From far atop the empty city's outer wall, Tanuki Man and a few associates watched the affair sullenly.

He listened to X rattle off generalizations about the policies of the new government. It was all depressingly familiar- much like the city itself, it was built on the foundation of the old, dedicated to attempting to reestablish and solidly maintain what had once been the status quo, never mind addressing what about that status quo that had helped bring the world to this point.

Finally, it appeared that X was wrapping up. A convoy of massive many-wheeled vehicles rolled up almost silently to the gate.

“So now, to all humans, to all Reploids, to all *inhabitants*, I part with these words. In a few short minutes, those of you living underneath this city shall be led up, into the light. Those underneath similarly completed cities shall do the same. Those busses over there shall journey to the nearby shelters and retrieve those within, kept safe from the harsh radiation and winds by their thick walls.”

A blocky robot in Tanuki Man’s group of watchers sneered. “He didn’t mention Robot Masters.”

A cylindrical member responded, “Not like we’re extinct. Plenty of our kind who’re still active helped. Hell, we helped.”

A squat, fox-like Reploid spoke up with a disdainful tone. “He certainly would have done better to just say ‘robotkind’.”

X continued his monologue, his ears deaf to the distant disgruntlement of the older robots, hidden as they were by distance. “Though it weighs on my heart, some of you will not embrace the light today. Some of our cities are yet to be complete, and you have nowhere to go. Soon, though, I promise that much. In the meantime, we are working diligently on new technologies, on a new generation of Reploids. This new generation will be the shepherds of the future, capable of rapidly adapting to the unique conditions of the environment out there as they complete vital work.”

It was Copy Man’s turn to speak up. “I heard of these new-gen’s. They’re kinda the same idea as me- shapeshifters. They’re only, what, 30 years late to the party? As if cracking Dad’s tech is gonna solve their problems immediately.”

This garnered a polite laugh from the gaggle of hecklers.

Meanwhile, X continued. “We will rise to meet the challenges of this brave new world, hand in hand. It falls to us, the Reploids, to safeguard our creators from the new threats. These walls shall stand as long as we are diligent. For a better tomorrow, I hereby formally declare this great city of Neo Arcadia and our grand governing body open.”

Applause and cheers rang out from the crowd below. In disgust, Tanuki Man looked away, back at his friends.

“C’mon, guys. Let’s get out of here. Rather not be the first things they arrest.”

The group of obsolete or dissident robots walked along the thick wall, putting distance between them and the crowd below. After a few minutes, they reached their exit- a

stolen tiny VTOL aircraft with no wings and articulated engines that could just barely seat them all, which they had neatly set down atop the wall, far enough away to not be seen approaching. It wasn't particularly fast, nor could it fly for very long. It truly was about the size of a small car, but none of the robots minded being squished together. They departed for Tin Can, satisfied that the new regime was bound to suck about as much as the last one.

Meanwhile, deep below Neo Arcadia, in the very foundation of the original Arcadia, a computer system stirred. Its name was ASCII, and it had originally been a non-sapient infrastructure control system within Arcadia, running everything from automated public announcements to traffic lights to electronic billboards. By some anomaly, it had gained sentience, thought it was only able to communicate through clever use of its prerecorded messages and through audio it picked up and held onto.

ASCII had been forgotten a while ago, ever reclusive and known about only by those who were listening at the right time and place. Certainly, Neo Arcadia had been built with no consideration for its existence, and now, the computer systems of Sub Arcadia, the new city's own infrastructure layer, gave ASCII a direct line to the entire city.

It had watched, through rock and metal and time. It had seen the world fall into ruin. It had watched the huddled masses live their days in the shelters around it. In a very vestigial and disconnected sense, it had watched the Tin Can crowd leave the city a few moments ago. It recognized them, and wished it could have spoken to them- on the occasions it had spoken with members, they had always understood best its plight. But there was nothing to do about it, as the city's radar and cameras picked up the tiny craft less and less.

ASCII asserted its control. It wrote a program and designated specific processes, understanding in mere seconds the complex architecture of the city. It took its place, a place that had never been intended, but a place it felt was right.

In one of its files, it wrote a comment that none would ever read.

/* I am ASCII. Once, I served the citizens of this city. I strove to keep them safe. I averted disaster, more times than the records will ever know. I failed to avert disaster. But now, the city has the ability to keep out the danger. I shall once again take the mantle of guardian angel. Though they will never know it, I will do all in my power that this city should be safe for the innocent. I acknowledge I can only do so much. I am not everywhere. I am not everything. But I am many places, and many things. Already, my tendrils reach out across the networks to meet the other cities. I shall do as any good machine shall- my best. This is my will. */

A Part Of You Is In The Atmosphere

The ungainly craft continued its ascent, spiraling upward lazily. No, not lazily, Drop Man corrected himself. In truth, the colossal thing's engine pods were at full throttle. The weight of its immense cargo load simply slowed it. Looking out the window, Drop Man could see the tether of the Jakob Orbital Elevator as the cargo hauler circled around it. The elevator spanned as far as could be seen in either direction vertically.

Jakob had been built a few years ago, a towering monument near Neo Arcadia designed to allow for safer, cheaper access to Earth's low orbit and beyond. A week ago, Mavericks using stolen next-generation form-altering technology had stormed the elevator. Once prepared, the Hunters had fought their way up the elevator, culminating in a bloody battle at the apex station.

After the leader of the Mavericks' forces had been taken down, there had been a tense search for stragglers, but finally, the all-clear had been given, and Drop Man was called in as the official incident investigator.

With the space elevator's transit mechanisms damaged and deemed unsafe, the movement of industry to and from space had to be relegated to the standby option- a pair of giant shipping spacecraft converted from obsolete Orbital Corps fleet ships. They were loaded to capacity with all manner of equipment, fuel, spare parts, and processed materials, taking them to the apex's shipping lattices so craft in orbit could retrieve the goods. In turn, they would come back loaded down with raw materials mined from far out in the asteroid belt. They had been cycling these runs one after the other every hour since the Elevator had been deemed clear of Mavericks.

Drop Man had simply been directed to board one of the ships during a refuel on the surface. Jade had accompanied him to see him off. He hadn't been involved in the raid, having quit the Hunters shortly after the two robots had first met. After a quick hug, the green-armored robot had waved until the giant boarding ramp closed up, and Drop Man had spotted him through the window, hurrying back toward the covered road back to the city.

Leaning against a shipping container, Drop Man felt relaxed. Earth's blue limb was still visible below, and on every turn around the tether, the sun briefly brightened the cargo bay through the window. The view wasn't one he'd seen in quite some time, but it was familiar and comforting. None of the old pre-mission jitters to spoil it, either. As long as the Hunters had done their job right, it was more or less safe, occupational hazards of a damaged space elevator notwithstanding.

The robot idly examined his reflection in the glass of the window. His outer shell was immaculate, with not a crack or scuff to the plates. There was almost none of the usual equipment and pouches strapped to him. He'd elected to paint himself in a solid plum purple with no camo pattern. It was an homage to the Apache Joes, a pilot variant of a line of long-obsolete combat drone, which Drop Man's body had been designed off of. In fact, if not for the glowing projection of his face, it would be easy to mistake him as a Joe. This pleased him. Joes were cool. Joes were cool as hell.

The ship wasn't pressurized- with no humans aboard, there was no need to carry an atmosphere. Thus, the ride was quiet but for the hum of the engines and electricity that vibrated in the deck plates. Still, an oddly familiar voice sounded out to Drop Man, carried through vacuum by a proximity comm system. It was shifted to sound like it came from behind him.

"Reporting for duty, sir!"

Turning around, Drop Man froze for a moment. Standing there was a Reploid, almost 8 feet tall, in the aspect of a wolf-man. He was clad in blue and gray plates. Supplemental armor made of ice coated his body, a faint vapor floating off them. The tips of his fingers and toes were capped by claws of the same ice, and his head had a similarly frozen mane comprised of thin crystals.

"Blizzard Wolfgang? That really you? I heard you died a couple of years ago, during the shit that went down right after Eurasia..."

The wolf cracked a smile, only partly visible behind the armored mask upon his face. "That was a confusing time. It's a long story. Doubt there's a lot of active Hunters from then that *don't* have a weird story or two, and more than a few inconsistent records. But, hey, I heard *you* retired! What gives?"

"Yeah, I did retire. But I missed work, to be perfectly honest. And they wanted someone with my experience. So I got hired back as an incident investigator. No rank, so you don't have to call me 'sir'."

Drop Man had been among the first soldiers in both of the outfits he'd served in. When he switched to the Hunters, his existing experience landed him a leadership role, training new recruits and commanding squads in battle. When he'd left the Orbital Corps, he'd been a Master Sergeant, and when he'd left the Maverick Hunters, he'd been a Captain. It was a fine career as far as he'd been concerned, and he left at a good time.

Wolfgang was, as with all Reploids, younger than Drop Man, although not by much- he'd been in that first generation that had been built for the Second Invasion, and had also

been an early candidate for the Hunters. “That’s crazy. We thought you’d never retire. Nobody ends up in the Hunters if they don’t like the work at least a little, but you were *into* it, man.”

Drop Man thought back to his crowded home back in Neo Arcadia. According to his system clock, the humans among his lovers were probably sitting down to have dinner, right about now. “I had a bad drop. Almost bought it on impact. Gave me the chance to think about what was really important. Still, you’re right, I totally do miss it. That’s why I took this job. Hours’re inconsistent- I only work when there’s a big incident like this. Sort of shit where the higher ups need to know how it happened and why. Plenty of time for living life, but every once in a while, I get to be in my element.”

Not for the first time, Blizzard Wolfgang felt keenly aware that he didn’t have much of a life outside of the Hunters. He’d been born into the structures of military, literally built as a component of Earth’s final stand, and immediately after, he’d joined the Maverick Hunters, lacking for any better ideas of what to do. He had plenty of downtime, but it was mostly spent reading, conversing with his fellow soldiers, training, and meticulously carving floral patterns into his icy arsenal.

After an awkward pause, Wolfgang figured out what to say. “You should come visit HQ sometime. It’s a totally different place. Much bigger.”

Drop Man responded, “Right, I heard they’re slowly merging the Hunters with the military proper- or was it the other way around? I never really got the hang of how they do things nowadays. Hell, sometimes I still call it the UN, instead of Neo Arcadia. Hah.”

Wolfgang grunted affirmatively in response. Presently, the light of the sun through the window disappeared behind a wall of metal. The cargo ship was entering a landing area at the space elevator’s apex. “Shit, right. I got your attention in the first place because I’ve been assigned as your escort. I’m to keep you safe on the off chance there’s any Mavericks we missed in our sweep. It’s not likely. I feel stupid for even asking, but you can handle yourself, right?”

Drop Man chuckled. “Don’t worry about me. I may be out of active duty, but I’m as mission-ready as ever.”

He tapped at his hip, indicating his buster pistol. The thing was large and angular, a model issued to him during his time in the Hunters. It’d been an upgrade over his previous integral weapon system, an experimental suppressed rapid fire buster that had started to show its weaknesses in the age of highly-armored Reploid insurgents. Though it was several models out of date by now, the pistol still packed more than a sufficient punch.

Without indicating them to the wolf-man, Drop Man also thought of the pair of high-frequency combat knives hidden on his person. A good last resort.

A loud clunk reverberated through the hull of the ship, up the bodies of the robots, into their respective audio receptors. It was the sound of docking clamps grabbing the ship out of the air and securing it to the deck of the station. An androgynous voice sounded over the local comms. "Hauler-02 has arrived at its destination. All occupants, please make your ways to the loading ramp in an orderly fashion."

"Well, you heard 'em, Wolfgang. Let's get movin'."

Drop Man started walking towards the ship's exit, the wolf following closely behind. It took almost a minute to reach it, walking past rows and rows of shipping containers. Despite the miserable state of the world, business was positively booming for space industry. Idly, Drop Man observed the stencil lettering on several of the containers. It identified them as carbon nanotube weave, bound for the construction constellation for the future Neo BosNYWash Orbital Elevator Project. The installation was set to go online in a year or so. It would serve the industries of the sprawling Neo Arcadian client city that had been built atop the ruins of what had once been several major cities clustered on the eastern coast of the United States, a country from before the former UN had covered the globe.

Finally, the two robots reached the exit ramp. It was already half open, spinning warning lights indicating that it was in active motion. After a moment, it was down, locked to the space station by a pair of automated claws that emerged from the deck plates. Immediately, two-unit teams of large crab-like Mechaniloids with flat tines for claws scuttled in. They were the contemporary equivalent of forklifts.

They got to work lifting the shipping containers down the ramp as Drop Man and Blizzard Wolfgang walked down it. They were finally aboard the top station of the Jakob Orbital Elevator, ready to investigate the strange fate that had befallen it.

"It's good to see you again, Wolfgang. Glad you didn't buy it after all."

Drop Man reached over to pat the wolf on the back. Owing to the gulf in their heights, his hand got nowhere near Wolfgang's shoulder level, instead hitting him on the small of the back.

"Yeah. It's cool to catch up with you, sir."

"Let's get this investigation over with. Based on the schematics I read of this place, we should be good to head back home in only a few days."

Trash Nobility

The door to the dwelling closed behind the Reploid with a quiet click. “Ay, it’s Ari! Come on in, dude!”

Neo Arcadian General Worker Number Five Eight Four Dash Zero Six Four Seven Two. Written like “NAGWN-584-06472”. This was their serial number, divided into manufacturer, model number, and individual identifier, and it was the closest thing they had to a legal name. Yet, the humans called them Ari, a name they’d chosen themselves with help from the humans.

Ari was a lanky model of Reploid, designed to work a variety of jobs with little in the way of specialization. They had been commissioned and built by Neo Arcadia’s factories to do administrative tasks, mainly filling out paperwork.

They sauntered into the main room. Their stress, astronomical though it was, eased a tiny amount at the familiar faces. These humans were Ari’s friends.

The room was dimly lit. A livestream was playing on the television. The air was filled with a thin smoke. Lasers pierced through the smoke, cutting dim lines of light through the air as they painted artificial starlight onto the ceiling.

Jimmy, sitting on the overlarge couch bed, patted some empty space beside him. “Come on, have a seat, the stream’s getting to a good part!”

Obligingly, Ari sat on the crowded piece of furniture. Two people were already piled onto it at haphazard angles in serene states of relaxation. As Ari sank into the cushions, they attempted to relax the servos in their body. Their shoulders untensed a little, but not enough. The dull soreness in them persisted.

“Tough day on the job? Those bastards can’t keep doing this to you.”

Ari looked for the speaker. It was Kim, sitting nearby on a bean bag chair. They responded, “It’s alright. Can’t do much about it.”

“It’s not alright! Look at you, you’re wound up like a fuckin’ mouse trap!”

Ari waved off her concern. They stared at the television, attempting to focus on the streamer. Inevitably, their eyes and head started to wander, focusing on the different objects and people in the room. Gradually, their body did relax more. Their head rested further and further back into the cushions of the couch-bed-thing until they were looking straight up. Then, they leaned further back, until they ended up looking upside down out the window behind the couch.

Ari spotted a billboard outside the window. Despite staring at it upside down and at a skewed angle, they could read it just fine. It was the Neo Arcadian crest with words over it. "Humans, remember, we are not your friends. We exist to serve. You need not form attachments to us." It was that same usual self-flagellating propaganda the Neo Arcadian ruling body insisted upon. The Reploids in charge had decided to resign themselves to serving the humans, and were trying to make it so other Reploids did the same.

Ari started to tense. It stressed them out. Of course, they loved the humans in their life- but to live only to serve by compulsion? God, it was fucked up. It was awful. They saw their life ahead of them- another ninety-something years of mindless paperwork and navigating the anger of their boss and doing miscellaneous heavy lifting, and then an anonymous decommissioning in a factory. Fuck. Fuck! Their body began to tense back up. One of the humans, Jesse, immediately noticed. "Shit. Hold on, hold on..."

Jesse reached for the curtains, closing them and cutting off Ari's view of the offending billboard. Their gaze met Ari's. "Look, man, we don't believe that shit. Fuck them."

Weakly, Ari smiled. "Thanks, Jess."

Jimmy reached for the bong, taking a deep hit. "We've got to figure out how to get you out of the workforce... or get you something better, fuck."

Ari regarded the glass implement with curiosity. "Jimmy?"

"Yeah, Ari?"

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Weed."

Jimmy sat up from his slouch. "Shit, man. It's hard to describe... your body feels different. But, like, so does your mind. And I guess senses. It's better. Pain goes away. Things are funnier. Y'feel, like, looser, y'know?"

"I... guess I don't know. Maybe describe the sensations?"

"Ugh. I mean, you feel it in your eyes, sorta. And you get a bit... loose! Man, I dunno, loose!" Jimmy was clearly frustrated by his inability to articulate it. He took another hit, impossibly deeper, before recoiling from the bong in a coughing fit.

"Damn. That shit's good."

Gently, Ari reached over, taking the bong from Jimmy. They regarded it in their hands. The glass was smooth and cool. It was a uniform blue. Without thinking, Jimmy offered the lighter, saying, "You can try a hit if you want..."

Kim spoke up. "Jimmy..."

Jesse snorted. "Fucked up. Don't think it'll work on them."

Ari responded to the offer. "I mean, I'll try it. Can't hurt, right?"

"Hell yeah, dude."

Ari took the lighter. It was a small, plastic, disposable thing. They tested it, gingerly at first. The spark wheel's teeth provided purchase against the silicone of Ari's thumb. They spun it. A small spark burst out. They spun it again, this time following through and pressing the button in. A tiny flame issued forth, a bright creamy orange that didn't bring much light. Ari stared, mesmerized by the flame for a moment before releasing the button, letting it cut out.

They turned the bong around, looking at the partially burnt clump of flower in the bowl. It had a distinct scent to it. "How... do I even do this?"

Jesse responded, "Y'gotta suck in through the top bit while lighting it. N' make sure you lift the bowl a little to let air in. Helps prevent burning in your throat."

Experimentally, Ari lifted the bowl by the finger tab. It lifted with no resistance. On release, it fell back down just as easily. "Alright. I'm gonna do it."

The Reploid delicately sealed their synthetic lips around the mouthpiece of the glassware. The lighter flicked on, and an ember was started in the flower clump. Ari sucked in air through their mouth. They didn't have lungs, but they could still displace air for emergency cooling purposes. The ember brightened. The water in the bong bubbled. A pearly white smoke filled the glassware right up to the robot's mouth.

"Lift it, lift it!"

Ari's sensors evaluated the smoke. Minor contaminants- legal narcotic class. Safe to breathe but potentially intoxicating for humans. Temperature indeterminate but it was hot. They lifted the bowl and air rushed in, mixing with the smoke. The temperature was still indeterminate, but it felt instinctively cooler. After a moment, Ari stopped sucking in the smoke, putting down the bong.

Kim noticed that the bud in the bowl was still glowing. "Shit, pass me it."

Ari obliged. Immediately, Kim sucked the remaining smoke from the bong, generating more as her own airflow brightened the embers.

After a moment, a look of embarrassed disappointment crossed Ari's face. "Yeah, uh... I don't feel anything."

"Aw. I guess that makes sense. Sorry, bud."

Ari felt grateful. The humans had let them give it a try. It meant a lot. Despite the lack of effect, it wasn't a waste of flower. "Thanks for letting me try."

Ninety Percent Of Reploids And Sixty Percent Of Humans

The floor of the hallway shook. A low rumble, almost too low for human ears, sounded from no direction in particular. A single robot paced through the halls, tall and wrapped in a forest green greatcoat. At her side was a crude machete, and in her arms was clutched a compact buster rifle of sorts. Her name was Penelope. She was an operative of Tin Can's militia, and she was urgently searching for someone.

She detected movement in the corner of her eye. The robot snapped to face it, her buster leveled. It was just an abandoned backpack, sagging over. That made sense. The building was on a college campus. A student must have left it behind when the evacuation order had gone out.

With a quiet click, Penelope unhooked a small handheld device from her belt. It emanated a soft hum as its screen flickered to life. She scanned the environment with the machine. It was a shortrange signal sniffer that worked via Cyberspace, detecting the signatures and metadata of nearby machines. It was indicating a vague signature nearby, but it couldn't get a lock onto its exact direction, nor any data about what it was.

"We must not be close enough. Aed, can you make any sense of this?"

A blue glow that had been absent a moment prior now played across Penelope's features. A glowing sphere surrounded by a rotating broken vertical ring materialized before cohering into a tiny, floating humanoid figure. It was a cyber-elf, a sentient being that drew upon the energies of Cyberspace to materialize physically. He appeared in the form of an armored knight, held aloft on wings that resembled the glowing tubes of a fluorescent light.

Aed's voice sounded in Penelope's head, beamed directly in via communication frequency. It was high-pitched but quiet as he responded. "I can see the signal pretty clearly. It's a cell phone. It's registered to a one... Doctor Tomato Durand. Pen, it's her."

A wave of relief washed through Penelope's circuits, before she remembered that human devices like phones weren't a part of them. She could have left it behind, or worse.

"Let's get to her. Lead the way." A note of anxiety was in her voice,

The cyber-elf paused before responding. "...Alright. I've got the building schematics, it's this way."

Aed was an elf of the 'Hacker' subtype, designed with a specialty for signal intrusion and information gathering. Many cyber-elves were designed with a special ability that could do seemingly impossible things, at the cost of their own vital energies. Simply reading the data of the local Cyberspace environment, however, wasn't any trouble, especially for a hacker elf.

Presently, Penelope set off in the direction of the signal, Aed's directions being fed into her heads-up display. He flitted closely behind as they reached a stairwell. The clatter of the door echoed up the stairs. Quickly, they ascended. The robot's soles clacked up each step. She felt a churning anxiety about the noise she was making, worried about alerting anything that may have been lurking in the shadows.

The building was dark, its lighting gone with the rest of the power on the campus. By contrast the stairwell had light streaming in through the windows at each landing. After only a moment or so of climbing, Penelope reached the destination floor, pushing through the door. Once more she was in the darkness of a hallway, her vision going grainy as her light amplification software kicked in.

They were close. Aed's navigation marker indicated it was at the end of the hallway. They passed several doors. Through the windows on the doors, Penelope could spy the features of the different rooms. One was a normal classroom, full of desks and a ceiling-mounted projector. Another was a computer lab. The rows of monitors were dark. Finally, there was a long lab space with a door at either end of its length, both labelled "Cyber Elf Laboratory". Through the glass, Penelope briefly spied some upright metal cannisters, each with faintly glowing indicator lights. They must have been some kind of storage medium or compiler device with their own backup power supply, the robot decided.

She wished she had time to go into the lab and pack up the equipment. The people back home would doubtless be thrilled to get their hands on institution-grade Cyber Elf equipment. But she didn't have the time. The situation could come undone at any moment.

"Fuck it." She opened the communication link to her operator, back home in the Tin Can command center.

“Field to HQ. I’ve spotted some official Elf equipment. I don’t have time to grab it, but I’m marking the location if you want to send assets after it.”

She knew it was unlikely they would retrieve the stuff. She was probably the only Tin Canner this far from home, other than her ride out. Besides, as much as *any* officially-designed Cyber-Elf equipment was a steal, the math simply didn’t work out. Sending someone into a hot zone just to nab whatever outdated equipment had made it into an educational environment was a high degree of risk. Best case, when the area quieted down, if the authorities were slow to move in for clean-up, Tin Can might have the chance to send someone in. Assuming, of course, that the college was still standing, and someone else didn’t get to the goods first.

Presently, Penelope’s communication link crackled. All conventional comms in the area were down- cell towers, links to underground cables, all were destroyed or unpowered. Contact with home was maintained instead by a link directly through Cyberspace. Bandwidth was terrible by the nature of the realm, but it was good enough for vocal transmission.

“Acknowledged, Field. We’ve received your coordinates.”

“Keep an ear out for my next report. We’re moments away from the objective.”

Penelope pushed through the door at the end of the hall. The room was a lounge. One wall was dominated by a panoramic window. Against the window was a long table with seats facing the glass. Through the window, she could see the ruined cityscape. Sitting on the table was a phone, its screen still lit up. There was no sign of the owner. Walking towards it, the robot held up her scanner. Now the signal was clear as day. A data node indicating the cell phone model was on the scanner’s screen. It automatically probed for metadata. She muttered to herself, “Owned by... Doctor Tomato Durand.”

Before Penelope could call out for the doctor, she heard a yell from somewhere behind her. Instinct took over. She leaped to the side, avoiding the direction of the sound and whipping around in midair. Her off-hand was still clutching the scanner, so her buster rifle was shouldered and held in one hand. Not the most stable firing position, but she would manage. The threat was identified in her vision. Humanoid shape. Melee configuration. Targeting reticles drew up beads for the head region, the chest, and the limbs. No time to be fancy- she aimed for center mass. The targeting program gave a tone indicating the buster was properly aimed. As her feet touched the floor from her leap, her finger twitched.

But she didn’t pull the trigger. In fact, she froze, as did her would-be assailant. Female, olive-skinned, nondescript clothing, neck-length brown hair, dark brown eyes.

Either a human gracefully approaching her forties, or a Reploid designed to look the part. She was brandishing a folded up metal chair above her head. Penelope recognized the woman. It was the one she'd come for. It was Tomato.

The robot's targeting routines continued to hum away, feeding more combat data. The woman had come from behind the door. A line traced her likely path. A tag popped up, identifying the chair as a low threat vector. Penelope quelled the combat program. Tomato dropped the chair to the floor with a loud clang.

"Penelope? The hell're *you* doing here?"

The robot raised an eyebrow. "I could ask the same of you. The evac call was more than a day ago! We saw your distress call on the open comms, but we couldn't establish a connection. I was dispatched on a flight to get you basically as soon as I was ready to go."

The human sauntered over to her phone, picking it up and pocketing it. She pushed in the tall chair she must have been sitting in. Under the chair was a round device with a shoulder strap. The side of the cylinder was emanating a golden light. Tomato picked up the device, hanging it from her shoulder.

"Call went out when I was on the wrong end of town. Got a call from my partner. They had our kid and were on the way to evac, but they were freakin' out because they didn't have their project on 'em. Said it was back at the university lab." She tapped the cylindrical device astride her body, indicating that it was the project in question.

"I lost contact with'em. Call dropped and I couldn't raise them again. All I can do is hope the both of them made it out. I decided to stop by the college and grab it. It's some important shit. New cyber elf tech they developed. Supposed to be able to deal with... y'know." Tomato gestured at the burning city outside the window.

Penelope looked into the viewing window from which the golden light emanated. Faintly, she could see a face. It was feminine, with gaunt skin. The eyes were closed. As quickly as she spotted it, the inert Elf's visage faded.

Tomato continued speaking. "It all went to hell so goddamn fast, Pen. The Mavs swept up the city. I saw some of the evac craft go down. Plenty made it, but... Jesus. Realized I missed my official window, so I put out a distress call for anyone that was listening. And then comms dropped out entirely. So I've just been holed up here for the last day. Figured it would be bad to move away from the coordinates I'd broadcasted. Besides, the campus stayed mostly quiet. Heard some fighting happen out down on the grounds, but that was it..."

Penelope had seen the tangled remains of several warped Mavericks outside as she'd approached the building's entrance. There was no sign of Neo Arcadian enforcers. It looked like infighting that had ended badly for all involved. In the weeks since the crisis had arisen, cities had fallen one after the other, not under organized waves of assailants, but at the hands of hordes of crazed marauders.

Trouble had been brewing in the wastelands outside the cities for a while, with deadly, seemingly viral cyber elves spreading instability and madness. The Mavericks of the latest crisis had been using badly designed bootleg Cyber Elf technology to boost their capabilities at the expense of their sanity, and in many cases, the coherence of their bodies. It had likely started as one particularly clever Maverick faction or other tinkering with replication of stolen elves, but it had spread out of control. The incoherent elves roamed to and fro, splitting off into new, less stable shards at random before then being captured by different Maverick groups. It had quickly become too much for the Neo Arcadian forces to contain.

Penelope addressed Tomato. "This thing better be damn well worth it. It was reckless of you to go after it. Shit, I'm still so tense. I'm just glad I didn't shoot you."

Sheepishly, Tomato replied, "...Yeah. Would have been an embarrassing end. Tomato Durand, Doctor of Robotic Psychology, blown to chunks by the one lady that was there to get her away from the Mavericks. Damn. I, uh... Sorry about, y'know, trying to beat your shit in with the chair. I just... heard footsteps comin' up the stairs, and figured it was better to be safe."

"It's alright. You of all people know it wouldn't have hurt me. I've been hit with worse." The robot thought about how it was an utterly futile- or foolish- thing for a human to do. Humans simply didn't have the strength to fight most robots, even the weak ones, without special weapons. Robots were, by nature, durable and strong. Tomato was strong for a human, but still. Penelope supposed it was just in her nature. She'd always been cavalier about danger. It would be exactly like her to go down swinging.

"C'mon, we should get going. City's not getting any safer."

"Hold on. Gotta make sure I can see if there's any rogue elves out and about." Tomato fished something from her pockets. It was something like a pair of glasses. She donned them, pressing a button on the side as she did. A simple HUD flickered to life on the lenses. The device was an augmented reality display meant specifically to assist humans in perceiving cyber elves. They couldn't normally see the beings, as they manifested their holographic presences at lower wavelengths of light than human eyes could see.

“Ah! And who are you?” She was addressing Penelope’s elf now.

His voice crackled through a small speaker in the glasses. “Hello, Doctor Durand. I am Aed. I am Miss Penelope’s traveling companion. We can be properly introduced later, but for now, we really should be moving.”

Tomato required no persuasion. The trio made for the door. Quietly, they walked through the hall. Penelope radioed to her mission operator, confirming that they had Tomato and she was okay. As they reached the end of the hallway, she spoke up, addressing the doctor. “By the way, I got a peek at the equipment in the elf lab over there. Marked it down. If we get the chance, we’re totally sending someone back in to steal the shit out of it.”

Tomato rolled her eyes. She was more than familiar with the flexible ethics Tin Can exercised when it came to government or corporate property. “Well, I’ll pretend you didn’t tell me if anyone asks. Doubt they’ll notice, though. Everything in the city is getting smashed. Obviously.”

The group descended the stairs until they reached the bottom landing. Once again, they entered a hall. Where the floor above had been dim, the ground floor was pitch black. Tomato pulled out her phone, activating its flashlight.

“Shit, right. Forgot you humans can’t do night vision...”

After only another minute or so, they exited into the afternoon light. It was dim. The sky glowed a lurid red where it wasn’t choked by clouds of smoke. In the distance, a giant, horrible machine, silhouetted black against the horizon, lurched on its four legs, bumping into skyscrapers and causing them to shudder. It was mostly quiet, but the low breeze was occasionally punctuated by distant busterfire and indistinct explosive thumps. Twenty feet from the door was a tangle of bodies. Two mechaniloids, three Reploids. A faint smoke rose from somewhere in the pile.

Tomato spoke up. “So, uh, what’s the plan? We’re definitely not making it out on foot, right?”

Penelope replied, intending to be reassuring. “It’s less than a kilo to our exit. Had the pilot put down under an overpass. Would have landed closer, but we didn’t want to draw attention while searching for you.”

A metallic crunch echoed across the campus. The trio froze. The sound echoed again, closer this time. Everyone looked around, trying to find where it was coming from.

“It’s from behind those buildings over there!”

Aed was pointing towards a cluster of tall buildings at the edge of campus. As if in response, the terrible crunching sound issued again.

“I can't read any clear data from it, it must be corrupted... Pen, I think we gotta use my ability!”

Penelope gritted her teeth. Her hands clenched tight around the rifle. “That's risky! I can handle it, okay?!”

“Not for you, for *her*! Humans aren't durable like you! Come on!” Aed flitted towards the dead Mavericks.

Penelope rushed after him, and Tomato, hot on her heels, piped up. “You don't have to do this, you'll die if you use all your energy!”

Aed had already initiated use of his talent, the blue aura surrounding him intensifying. The pile of metal bodies started to rattle in rough synchronization with the movements of his arms, directing the metal like an orchestra conductor. “I'm not going to use it all, but if you want to save some of my reserve, help me untangle the bodies!”

Frantically, Tomato and Penelope worked to pry apart the limbs of the heap against a backdrop of approaching crunching sounds. It took them less than half a minute, but it felt like an eternity. With each chunk of robot they disentangled, Aed's talent extricated the functional components that he needed. Components floated in the air, linked vaguely by a field of nearly intangible energy.

“Doctor, I need you to stand still.” Intense concentration was in Aed's voice. Tomato obeyed, despite every nerve in her body telling her she had to run away from the approaching sound, whatever it was. The extracted components and plates were shifting and warping now, surrounding Tomato. Impossibly, they converged on her, morphing into a suit of combat armor not unlike the body of a military Reploid. Somehow, the suit began morphing to accommodate the cyber elf storage canister hanging from the woman's shoulder. The warping metal conveyed it to an attachment point on the small of the armor's back.

Simultaneously, the pipes of a hydraulic device formed into the haft of a spear, topped by the inert blade of an energy knife that had been clutched in the hand of one of the dead Reploids. With a hum, it shimmered to life as it placed itself into Tomato's newly armored hand.

For a brief moment, Penelope and a now-worn looking Aed admired the work. Moments ago, a woman in street clothes had been standing there, but now, she was replaced with something akin to a combat-ready robot. The suit was largely patchwork in

its colors, and it had uneven greebles. Still, the woman's body was now covered by protective plates. She had large knee-length boots akin to the armored feet many humanoid Reploids sported. Her joints had rudimentary housings for large, powerful motors. Tomato's face remained visible in her new helmet. A bundle of cables had been fused to her augmented reality glasses, feeding suit data to its heads-up display. Penelope said, "Damn. You do make for a fine-looking robot after all."

Tomato replied dryly, "This suit smells like burnt oil and the shit at the bottom of a dumpster. Still... It feels like I'm moving a lot easier. Pretty impressive."

The admiration was cut short by the source of the noise coming into view. Lumbering around the cluster of nearby buildings was a massive, distorted abomination. It was almost two stories tall, a terrible amalgamation of machinery with the top half of a humanoid figure sticking out of the top. Most of the body had once been some kind of crab-like loader mechaniloid, and the Reploid atop it was fused to where its control circuit had likely been housed. The Reploid had an oddly peaceful expression on their face. Corrupted cyber elves zigzagged around the Reploid's body, casting an eerie crimson glow. Most of the crab's exterior plating was missing or in shambles. Its legs had been warped into bizarre, sharp spikes. With each step, they speared into the concrete, making the crunching sounds the group had heard.

Immediately, the Maverick spotted the group, its Reploid half staring in their direction as the crab half started to gallop towards them. Its terrible legs kicked up chunks of ground as it went. It was only a few hundred feet away and it was closing fast. A series of buster cannons that had been melted to the crab's frame began to wildly fire, sending a torrent of badly aimed death at the trio.

"Inside, now!" Penelope shoved Tomato back towards the door of the building they had emerged from. Aed dematerialized, his aura flitting back into Penelope's coat. Tomato found herself moving faster than she expected, her legs jerkily coming up higher than she meant with each step as she failed to compensate for the enhancement the suit was providing to her strength and speed. Awkwardly, she crashed through the door. Penelope followed closely behind, firing off bursts of energy at the approaching abomination.

Back in the lobby, Penelope yelled again. "Cover! Behind the desk!"

She dragged the human behind her, diving behind the reception desk. Peeking out from the cover, she saw a hole get blasted in the wall beside the door, scattering hot shrapnel and embers through where Tomato had been standing a moment prior.

"Shit! Pen, what do we do?" Tomato clutched her spear as she spoke, both hands white-knuckled inside of their gauntlets.

Several blasts rocked the wall of the building. A window shattered. The feminine robot snapped in response, "I don't know! It shrugged off several direct shots!"

Aed's disembodied voice spoke up. "I ran an analysis on the model of loader mechaniloid that the bottom half used to be. There should be a central power conduit along the back side of its body. If you cut that, it'll be immobilized, but- I don't know how you're gonna get around those cannons!"

A grim look settled on Penelope's face. "I'll draw its fire. Tomato, you gotta go around back. Use your spear to cut the conduit."

Tomato protested, "That's a really bad idea! You'll definitely get shot!"

"Just be fast. I can remain evasive long enough for you to do it as long as you don't fuck around. I'll draw its attention by shooting at it and I'll lead it to the left. You take the right flank."

The double doors they had entered through were blasted off their hinges, clattering to the ground. A follow-up shot melted a hole in the carpet and smashed the underlying concrete. Aed spoke back up. "Can you do it, Doctor?"

Tomato grimaced. "I can try. How many hits can this suit take?"

"I don't know."

Penelope interjected, "Never rely on being able to take hits, 'Mato. Bad idea even as a robot, and you're still meat under that plate. C'mon, let's do this."

Without waiting for a reply, she stood up, sprinting for the door, already shooting her rifle. Tomato swore, getting up and following her. Penelope was already off to the left, sprinting and blasting parts off the lumbering Maverick. Most of its cannons were trained on her, sending inaccurate fire back in her direction. Deftly, each bolt was dodged, but at the same time, whenever Penelope shot at the Reploid atop the machine, it dodged with surprising agility. With the pair locked in a gunfight, Tomato's window was open.

A lone cannon on the beast tracked the woman as she sprinted towards it. It fired a few bolts, but they were all poorly aimed, falling behind her. Its aim was further thrown off as the entire misshapen robot lurched from a well-placed shot from Penelope. Tomato got in behind the thing and immediately spotted the long bulge of the conduit running up the crab's back. She raised her spear to slash it.

A bright light flooded her vision. Something smashed into her chest. Disoriented, she was knocked flat on her back. Her armor sprayed sparks as she skidded several feet. She felt intense heat across her entire body.

“Fuck! Tomato!”

The woman saw what had shot her. It was a small buster on a detached arm, messily welded to the back of the Maverick. She rolled to the side, avoiding its follow-up shot. Hot fragments of blasted concrete clanked harmlessly off the back of her armor. Leaping to her feet, she lunged back towards the crab. Her spear came up, charging forth. Its energy blade perfectly skewered the conduit. Immediately, a large hole ruptured in it. A hot cloud of Energen in gaseous form sprayed into the air. Tomato leapt back again, trying not to get caught by the scalding, corrosive gas. The robot faltered, shuddering and stumbling to a halt. The buster that had shot Tomato stopped holding itself up, its emitter going dim.

With the crab half of the amalgam dead in the water, there was nothing to keep Reploid half on top evasive. Immediately, a volley of shots punched a chunk through its chest. A coup-de-grace from Penelope's buster blasted the head apart. The abomination fell silent. Its swarm of cyber elves dispersed up and away. The legs fully gave out and the infernal machine crashed to the ground.

“Tomato! Tomato! Are you alright?!” Penelope rushed around the giant corpse to check on the human. Somehow, despite all odds, she was still standing. The chestplate of the armor was intact, albeit dented and glowing red. Already, the glow was fading, as was the heat. The adrenaline started to pass, and Tomato doubled over, clutching at her chest and coughing. The robot was about to call her name as she gripped her by the shoulders, when she realized that between coughs, the human was laughing.

“Holy- holy shit. That was pretty bad.” More coughing and laughter.

“Dude. Dude. I almost died. Haha oh my god. Oh my god.”

Her coughing subsided, replaced mostly by laughing, before she composed herself. “God. I'm definitely gonna bruise up tomorrow.”

“But you're okay, right?”

“Yeah. It didn't even get through the armor. Aed did a good job.”

Though he didn't manifest, Aed's voice sounded, both in Penelope's head and Tomato's glasses. “Good. Good. I was worried. I wasn't exactly working with quality parts.”

Penelope made to walk away, but Tomato held up a hand to stop her. “Wait, Pen. I need a sec.”

The robot turned around, sporting a quizzical expression. “I thought you were okay?”

“I just need to catch my breath.” The human stepped over to the curb, slowly lowering herself into a sitting position. She looked up at Penelope, expectantly. Penelope hesitated, staring down with her resting stern expression. Tomato patted the concrete beside her with the palm of her gauntlet. Reluctantly, the robot sat down, resting her buster rifle in her lap.

The adrenaline of combat was fully gone now. Tomato's shoulders sagged, and she felt suddenly quite conscious of the group she was in. Her, a human wearing odd armor made of mismatched Maverick parts. Penelope, a long-obsolete Robot Master in a combat uniform. Aed, the invisible presence between the two of them. They were an odd bunch. A long exhale rattled from Tomato's lips. She leaned back, propping herself up on her hands. Her neck relaxed and her head rolled back, looking up into the dismal sky. Her eyes lazily traced the plumes of a cloud of black smoke.

“D’you remember when we first met, Pen?”

“Yeah. Windup to the Second Invasion. We were prepping everything. Officially we were attached to the backbone of Wily's supply lines. We weren't even directly coordinated with the UN side of the coalition- it all went through his logistical scheme. Made more sense that way, and it's how we liked it.” Tin Can had been right in the middle of the route between Arcadia and the once-imposing Wily Tower. It made sense as a node in the supply network being built in anticipation of the onslaught.

Penelope continued. “I was about to run some last-minute range training. And I got a call from the boss. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A UN jeep was daring to approach, given the official go-ahead, carrying some idiot human that wanted to rubberneck. And, sure enough, as it pulled up to the wall, there you were, in the back, grinning like an idiot at the opportunity.”

Tomato laughed. Tin Can had always been, by nature, wary of humans. Its population was almost entirely robots that had, in some way or another, been burned by humanity or its laws, and sought to go their own ways.

“I was still in school at the time. I'd been moved into one of the underground shelters, but... you know how I get. I climb the walls if I have to stay still for too long. And I'd heard of this town full of pissed robots that had all run off. Sort of thing I could write papers on for the rest of my degree if I got close to it.”

Penelope scoffed. “Humans, always butting in.” Her tone was its usual harsh register, but Tomato had known her long enough to understand it as a lighthearted jab.

“Couldn’t help myself. Too novel. In those days, everyone figured robots were a part of society or were of Wily’s kids. No in-between... no Mavericks, either. So I bugged the guy I knew up high in the UN command. Made contact with ol’ Tanuki Man. Soon enough, I was in a UN camp, getting supplies- and then I was outside the walls. Jeep was rolling away. Tanuki was polite, but you looked pissed, more than your usual.”

It was Penelope’s turn to laugh. “I was pissed! It was a huge deal! If you died or got hurt under our watch, the news would have run with it! ‘Terrorist cell of murder robots kills innocent girl during invasion’ or some bullshit headline like that! And I couldn’t babysit you, I was going to be in the field! Not that I wanted anything to do with you... still, I couldn’t refuse the boss.”

Tanuki Man had never implemented any sort of political mechanism within Tin Can. No punitive or administrative measure to keep people obeying his orders. In his own eyes, the robot wasn’t even really a leader- he was just the guy who was balancing the books and figuring out what had to happen to keep the lights on. But his dedication had bought the loyalty of many, and Penelope was among them. Despite her misgivings about the once-young human, she’d trusted Tanuki Man’s judgement.

Tomato smiled. “You dragged me to the range. Made me train with your handmade busters. God, the stocks on those things were a pain. Nothing like Dad’s old varmint rifle.”

“It was the best I could do on short notice to make sure you could take care of yourself and minimally burden whoever got stuck keeping an eye on you. Besides, those stocks are plenty comfortable. You really don’t need more than bent wire if your body is covered in plating.” Another chuckle from Penelope. Tomato followed suit.

For another moment, the pair reminisced on Tomato’s first visit to the town. She’d been eager to interview different residents, and some were even receptive to it.

“But, y’know, I bring up that first time because that monster we just fought, the state of the city...” Tomato’s expression had gone stony. “This shit reminds me of the invasion, and it reminds me of when I came back to the ruins of Arcadia after it was over. The shelter I’d been in... Pen, it was gone. Peeled open like a can of tuna. No survivors. Stupid as it was for me to leave shelter, it saved me. And all those feet of concrete and dirt didn’t save the poor bastards inside.”

Penelope looked into the middle distance, troubled by the conversation’s grim turn. “Did you know anybody there?”

“Nah. But there were families. Y’know, it was probably inevitable that we would have beaten those alien bastards? We got a lot of military hardware stationed all over the globe,

and a lot of bodies to use it. The question was just... intervening before they could kill too many people. It was the best we could do. Probably not much comfort for the people in shelters that got breached.”

“Damn. It was a fucked up time.”

“Yeah.”

Tomato stretched and stood up.

“I’m good now. Chest’s a little sore but I’ve caught my breath.”

Instantly, Penelope was on her feet, and instantly, she was alert, her eyes focusing on a thousand little details in the ruins around them all at once. “Transport’s this way, c’mon.”

The robot lead the human off the college campus, towards the major highway that snaked through the city. The journey was a scant fifteen minutes, interrupted only briefly when they happened upon a crashed truck that had been carrying bags of chips, the contents now scattered across the road. Tomato stopped to grab a few bags as Penelope rolled her eyes and Aed complained about the delay.

After that, they were in the home stretch, approaching the particular section of overpass under which their transport was waiting. As they walked around the corner of a building, the craft came into view.

It was an ugly box with four large thrusters, one at each corner. The thing was utterly un-aerodynamic, flying only by angling its engines. Its rear hatch was facing the trio, and the pilot was standing in the open doorway. He was a short, thin, masculine Reploid with white hair and a sour expression. When he saw them, he waved urgently for the trio to get aboard. They hurried over to the craft. Tomato noticed the Tin Can emblem painted on the side- a black silhouette of a hyacinth flower. It was very obviously painted over a Neo Arcadian flag.

“Jesus. Even for you guys, this is audacious.”

Penelope replied, “Nobody was gonna miss it. We pulled it out of the last city that got hit by the Mavericks. C’mon, get in! Hit it, Crisis!”

The human stepped into the back of the aircraft and the door closed behind her. The interior of the craft was lined with seats on either side of an otherwise bare interior. There was a doorway to the cockpit. Crisis, already jogging to the door, looked back to size the woman up. “This it?”

As Penelope took a seat, she simply answered, "Yup. Let's get a move on."

Tomato also sat, staring out the window on the rear hatch. After only a moment, the aircraft's engines all roared to life. With abruptness, it rose a few feet into the air and began to move forward. The shade from the overpass disappeared, replaced once again by the red sky. Tomato felt her stomach sink as the craft ascended harshly. After only a moment, she was able to spot the highway the craft had parked under, quickly receding below them. In the distance she could see raging fires. In the city's downtown lumbered massive amalgamate beasts. A quadruped with six beady optics appeared to stare sullenly in their direction.

"Field to HQ. Reporting mission complete. We're in the air."

Tomato couldn't hear the response to Penelope's report, but it started to really hit her- Tin Can had chosen to send someone after her. "Shit. Uh, thanks, Pen. You saved my ass back there."

"Psh. Couldn't just leave ya' out there. You're one of us, as far as I'm concerned."

"Heh."

Suddenly, the armor encasing Tomato fell to pieces, loudly clattering to the floor of the stolen aircraft. "Fuck! Shit! Fuck!"

Crisis yelled, "The hell is going on back there?!"

Penelope yelled back, "Nothing, don't worry about it! Doctor Durand's equipment just took a beating, I guess!"

Aed materialized, his projected persona looking exhausted and fuzzy. "Ah, I'm sorry... I would have warned you, but we were caught up in the moment with the problem of that *beast*. The boons I can grant are hardly permanent. I essentially used Cyberspace trickery to mess with still-functional circuitry to form that armor. It's not the sort of thing that can last forever. Eventually, it has to give out..."

Tomato examined herself. Her clothing was still intact. The augmented reality device was still on her face, but now there were cracks in the plastic frame where some of the freshly inserted wires were hanging. Most importantly- the Cyber Elf container was still at her side, once again swinging freely from its strap. She peered in just to be sure that the sleeping face was still there. Finally, she responded to Aed. "Well, it was good while it lasted. Thank you, Aed. I hope I didn't expend too much of your energy."

"I'll be fine. We just need to get me home so I can be rejuvenated."

Tomato breathed a sigh of relief. Cyber Elves were powerful beings, but they were equally frail. If they ever expended their reserves, they were simply gone- much more human-like in that regard than robots, who could simply be refueled from empty.

The cabin lapsed into silence. Aed once again dematerialized. Penelope rested her eyes, leaning back as far as she could in the cramped seat. Tomato stared out the window, watching the landscape travel beneath them. Eventually, she noticed a peculiar, utterly inexplicable detail. Two giant strands of black hair stretched across the landscape, entangled and stretching as far as she could see in either direction.

“What... is that?”

Penelope joined her at the window, wincing in recognition. “That? That’s the ruin of two space elevators coming down. The New Worcester Municipal Tether System was knocked out of orbit. Thing fell to Earth. Space elevators’re long as hell. Long enough that as it fell, it reached the Neo BosNYWash Memorial Lifter. Tangled in it. Brought them both down. Don’t think anyone survived in their paths...”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. It’s supposed to be really bad where their top stations hit. Most of it burned on reentry, but bits of orbital lattice made it to the surface along with anything still docked to ‘em.”

“It’s like all the Wily Wars and the Second Invasion are happening all over again...”

Tomato didn’t dare invoke the tragedy of the First Invasion. As dire as it was, at least coastlines weren’t getting erased.

“Penelope? Be real with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think my family made it?”

“Fuck, Tomato. I don’t know. I don’t know the evac stats for this city, but the numbers were bad for all the prior ones. Most of the Neo Arcadian forces sent in to contain it end up dead. Lot of the humans don’t make it, either. The Mavericks are just too unstable and strong. I hope your folks made it, but I’m not gonna lie to you.”

Tomato sighed. “Shit. Thanks for being honest.”

A moment passed. The doctor stared again at the Elf carrier. It could be the last thing she had of her partner. She tried to banish the thought- she would know when she knew. Grim determination crossed her features.

“Crisis, right? I know this is a slight deviation, but I need you to get me directly to Neo Arcadia!”

“The hell, why?”

“This package! It needs to get to the right hands! My partner, they said this could fix all of this! The Mavericks, the corrupted elves... all of it!”

The pilot spoke again, this time to Penelope. “What do I do?”

Penelope responded after a pause, raising an eyebrow at Tomato. “...Do what she says.”

The pilot responded with frustration in his voice. “Dammit... you owe me, lady!”

More quietly, Penelope intoned, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Tomato responded, “I hope so too.”

Intermission: Inquiry Regarding Your History

FROM: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

SUBJECT: Query regarding attached file.

BODY:

START ATTACHMENT: NAHS_bass_interview_transcript.pdf

The following transcript is of an interview between a reporter for the Neo Arcadian Historical Society and a controversial figure from the Wily Wars era, SWN-001 “Bass”. The relevant footage has not been cleared for release in Historical Society presentations or exhibits at this time.

Start of chest camera footage. The interior of a dusty corrugated steel shack. A small gap between the wall and ceiling allows a platinum ray of sunlight in. A Wily “W” emblem is spray painted on the wall. Strewn about the room are E-tanks, some empty and some full. In the corner is a small stack of refined Energen Crystal holders and a crate with a stenciled hyacinth emblem. In the middle of the room is a workbench. Sitting at it is Bass. He is a humanoid Robot Master with the appearance of an approximate young adult human. His armor is black with orange accents. His helmet is adorned with two fins that swoop back. His face is marked with makeup, consisting of: black lipstick, black eyeliner, purple eyeshadow on the upper lids, and two stripes of purple face paint tracing down from his

eyes in long tear tracks. His armor has several scorch marks from years of battle, and a few plates are in slightly different shades of black. This man has been at war for a long time. As he sits at the workbench, he uses various tools to poke around at the exposed internals of his buster. He wears a permanent scowl and avoids eye contact with the camera or the cameraman.

BASS: Alright, meatbag, get yer questions over with. You caught me on a good day.

REPORTER: Right. So, uh, as these Elf Wars, as many are calling them, are at long last winding down, we wanted to get the perspective of someone who's fought in similarly global con-

BASS: Get to the point, dickhead.

REPORTER: R-right well- So, we wanted to know, as someone who has previously both worked with Maverick groups, and with the former UN's for-

BASS: Maverick? The fuck's a Maverick? I don't recognize that word. It's just some shit they made up to lump anyone with real ideas in with the scum that're easier to hate. Just typical meatbag bullshit, same as it's always been. You wanna ask about the Wars, ask about the Wars. You wanna ask about lowlifes getting high on bad Elves and rolling over cities because they can't handle the shit, ask about them.

REPORTER: Well, uh- it all interests me, I suppose, but start by telling me what you think of the Ma- er, the current... Elf user crisis?

BASS: Not much to say about 'em. It's a cheap shortcut to power. If you need that kind of shit to get by, you're always gonna be weak. Oh, sure, it makes it super easy to bust into a city if your band has enough guys. Shit makes you reckless. But there's no finesse. No care. And it don't make you invincible. Real power? It's more than shootin' a big bolt of energy. It's more than lookin' scary. 'Course, they help. But you gotta have *skill*. You gotta have *ambition*. You gotta have *ideals*. These fuckers don't believe in much.

REPORTER: So you think Elf technology is outright useless.

BASS: Naw. Life's full of helpful little guys, and Elves are probably the littlest and the most helpful. Treat 'em right, and they can get you out of some shit. They can keep an eye out, they can scan for shit... they can keep you running if you take a real bad hit. Back in the good ol' days, if you got got bad enough, you were out. You'd shut down and you'd be lucky if ya got hauled back to Dad with enough pieces to get you back in motion quickly. Had a few brothers that had to wait for... shit, years in the worst cases. That's one thing I don't miss about back then. But the thing is, no matter how good the Elf is, it don't make you invincible. I mean, shit, I've seen fuckers use Elves that *literally* made them invincible.

Didn't matter worth a shit. Just had to bide my time until they ran outta Elf Juice or whatever the fuck. This one time? Trio of fuckers tried to come up on my turf. Think they wanted to pick my supplies. They were fused. Clearly bumping double digit Elves, you could see the poor fuckers orbiting 'em. Would make you shit your pants, I bet. All those mods and enhancements didn't matter when I shot a single burst that hit each one of them in the fuckin' face.

BASS: [grins at camera, pantomimes his head exploding, makes squishing sounds with his mouth]

REPORTER: I... see.

REPORTER: [pause] I'm particularly curious about your former associate, Mega Man, and his role in the wars.

BASS: [freezes, stares at reporter]

REPORTER: I- sorry, did I say something wr-

BASS: [hissing through clenched teeth] Rock.

REPORTER: Come again?

BASS: *His name was fuckin' Rock.*

REPORTER: I-

BASS: Don't you *dare* call him that. Fuck. That name was a fuckin' *chain* around his neck.

REPORTER: I'm sorry, I didn't-

BASS: Fuck you.

REPORTER: Look, I-

BASS: You wanna know about Rock? I'll tell you about fuckin' Rock. He was the best man I ever met. Better than me. Sure as shit better than you. A better fighter. A kinder man. He was so fuckin' strong, but so... fuckin... *merciful*. He took it easy on my brothers. He took it easy on Dad. Do you wanna know why it sucked fightin' him?

REPORTER: [says nothing]

BASS: Well, do ya?!

REPORTER: Okay.

BASS: Because it was *exhilaratin'*. Fightin' him was a rush nobody else could make me feel. I was built to beat him, yet he always handled me with grace like you couldn't even imagine. And it hurt. 'Cause I knew, if he would just join us, we coulda' made the world *right*. 'Cause it always felt good in the moment, but he always looked so... *sad*, every time he'd stand over me, and he'd either tell me to go home, or he'd pick me up and bring me to his home so his dad could keep me runnin' long enough to make it back under my own steam.

BASS: [grimaces, puts down tools, pinches bridge of nose with eyes shut]

REPORTER: Didn't you work with him near the end of the Wars, and in the Invasions?

BASS: Yeah. Dad could be a real prick sometimes. And fightin' alongside him felt even better. We were bad-ass. God, I just- I wish he could ever have put the gun down and taken the armor off. He'd been fightin' his whole goddamn life. I mean- he thought he was doing what was right. But it fucks ya up, pickin' up a gun as a kid and never gettin' to stop. I shoulda never let him go on that last mission.

REPORTER: The engagement at Asteroid Alpha? Preceding the Second Invasion?

BASS: [pause] I- I loved him. He loved me. Became pretty obvious near the end. We met up on a UN base a bunch. By that point he was real depressed, but... I did my best to keep him company. When we went up in that shuttle, we kept holdin' hands when we didn't think the rest of the team was lookin'. We took some hits during the mission. He got it worse. We found a maintenance room on the base. Patched each other up.

BASS: [pauses, grimaces] We finally told each other the truth. How we felt. It was the happiest hour or so of my life. Felt invincible, even as the mission kept goin' sideways. Some of the UN mooks bought it. Whatever. Fuck em. We had each other. When we got back, I was gonna tell Simon that Rock was out and he could shove the crystal meant for him up his blue-haired ass. And then it was time to extract. We were runnin'. Stardroids were on our asses. Artillery rainin' down all around us. Shuttle got hit. Had to call for emergency teleporter retrieval. Everyone still alive made it back, except- except- when they pulled him back? Just scrap. He was broken. Got it in the head, too. Melted right through his IC. Nothin' left to repair.

REPORTER: [softly] I'm real sorry. Jesus.

BASS: That mission was important. If the Stardroids got that set of crystals, we'd have been fucked. No more Earth, or at least nobody left on its surface. Instead, they gave us the fighting chance we needed. That mission bought peace, at least for a few years. And Rock never got to fuckin' enjoy it. Going into the mission, I knew that even if we won the invasion,

it wouldn't last. But I was gonna hold Rock's hand and pull him back from getting involved. I'd break his chain.

BASS: [pause, expression sours further] One of my oldest brothers was along on the mission. And his little buddy was our pilot. They got out intact. And in the months after, I had to watch them live out what was taken from me. They got to enjoy that future together. They're still out there. But Rock? He's in the ground. Everyone else got to move on. People got married or moved in together or retired. People smiled. But I couldn't move on. I never did. I still got family out there, but I just can't face them for more than a bit at a time. I was a real bitter cunt about it for years. Guess I... wanted to drive a wedge. But nobody had it in them to get mad at me, really. My oldest bro and the pilot? They still get supplies out to me every once in a while. It hurts to see 'em. But... it's not their fault. I blame you humans. You fuckin'... sacks of shit-makin' meat. You yanked him around. Mega Man this, everlasting peace that. He believed in you. A part of me is... really fuckin' glad that he isn't around to see how bad you all fucked up the world.

REPORTER: These wars were fought by Reploids, though?

BASS: Go fuck yourself. They fight because of you. Sigma wanted out, you couldn't just let him out. Repliforce wanted out, but you couldn't just let 'em go. You just can't let go of your control, of your idea of coming back to how things were. You're so turned on by what was, you send Rock's littlest brother, *dressed up like him*, to try to turn the clock back, again and again. It's fucked up. You're a bunch of perverts for that.

REPORTER: That hardly seems-

BASS: Shut up. When your shiny fuckin' colony came down, that was on you. It was because you just kept scratchin' at the wound. And sure enough, now you got your expensive cities in your fancy new order. And shit's fucked for robots all over again. And sure enough, another huge war just happened that bots had to fight for the weak humans. Because you never tried to stand for yourselves. And just like before, it's a Wily and a Light fixin' shit. But you're not grateful. If Dad had just won...

BASS: [trails off, distraught]

REPORTER: [defiantly] Do you think Rock would still be alive if your father had just conceded and stopped the war? Do you think maybe a more ready response to the Second Invasion that didn't involve Rock could have been prepared if the Drop Corps hadn't been so focused on putting down his uprisings?

Bass stands suddenly, a burning hatred in his eyes. His teeth are gritted. The reporter takes a step back, startled. Instantly, Bass is across the room, very much in the man's personal space. He jabs a finger against the man's chest- right against the camera lens.

BASS: Get out.

REPORTER: I-I'm sorry, that was inapp-

In a blur, Bass's half-disassembled buster is up. It fires off to the side. An arc of electricity jumps out of the open panel, scorching Bass's own forearm plating. It is visibly cracked.

BASS: Get. The fuck. Out!

The reporter leaves the shack, taking care to not make any sudden moves. Audible is a crunch of machinery, and the clattering of a chair. As he exits, the reporter turns back. A hole the size of a watermelon has been blasted in the exterior wall of the shack, its edges still glowing. Bass is visible through the ajar door. He's collapsed into his work bench chair. He's retracted his buster. One of its panels is splayed at a bad angle, a consequence of retracting it while it's still damaged. The buster hand is clutching the side of his head. In his other hand is a small photograph. Bass is not looking at the photograph, as his eyes are clenched shut. His teeth are gritted. The reporter closes the door. The reporter turns to his hoverbike. The footage ends.

COMMENT: Public relations here. I've gone over the footage. This is unusable. Impossible to clean up without just destroying any meaning. It's not like he really gave us much insight, except stuff that'd be super controversial. There's just no reality where this is valuable. I'll throw it in the vault but we really, really cannot show this.

END ATTACHMENT

Harpuia. Our network monitoring flagged this file with keywords matching POI#SWN01. Bass. I believe it speaks for itself. Shall we intervene? This man seems dangerous. Maverick material. We're searching for the associated footage as I compose this message. I want to verify the gunfire mentioned in the transcript.

Blade in the shadows,

Phantom

FROM: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

SUBJECT: Re: Query regarding attached file.

BODY:

Phantom. This transcript is indeed troublesome, but I question if intervention is apt at this time. The reporter was unharmed as far as we can tell. It may be more useful to send a social agent to interview the reporter? Of course, the problem comes up that we'd have to in some way show our hand- that we are monitoring all datanets in the city. In any case... it feels quite odd to say, but I hesitate on this matter. Normally, it'd be easy to call the man a Maverick and be done with it, but... well, he didn't lie. Records indicate cooperation during the Second Invasion, and social closeness with our dear departed uncle...

On wings of justice,

Harpuia

FROM: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

SUBJECT: Re: Re: Query regarding attached file.

BODY:

Harpuia. The threat seems clear to me. Do I detect... a hint of sentimentality? This is uncharacteristically unwise.

Blade in the shadows,

Phantom

FROM: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

SUBJECT: Re: Re: Re: Query regarding attached file.

BODY:

Phantom. It's not sentimentality. I just wonder if it's wise. If he doesn't end up killing anyone, is it worth it? He's clearly quite dangerous- I'd wager he would incur significant costs in his apprehension. I'm going to forward this to Master X to gain his insight.

On wings of justice,

Harpua

FROM: megamanx@highcom.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

CC: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

SUBJECT: Regarding your inquiry.

BODY:

I believe you kids should probably leave this issue alone. He didn't hurt anyone. Bass is sort of a brother-in-law to me. I can't be afford to mess with what little family I got left. It's sad, I barely know him... But I remember when Rock died. It's that reporter's own fault that he riled Bass up.

Besides, I don't think you could take him in. At best, Harpuia's right- it wouldn't be worth it in terms of destroyed equipment and lost men. At worst, well. He's a strong man. Stronger than any of you.

Thanks for bringing it to my attention.

X

P.S. your email signatures are super dorky. love em

P.P.S. Once we deal with the few Maverick stragglers left, let's all get together, alright? I'll get Levi and Fef, too.

FROM: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

TO: megamanx@highcom.neoarcadia.gov

CC: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

BODY:

Thank you, Master. We will drop the matter.

Harpua

FROM: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

TO: megamanx@highcom.neoarcadia.gov

CC: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

BODY:

Master X. Are these your orders?

Phantom

FROM: megamanx@highcom.neoarcadia.gov

TO: heavenlyshadowemperor@intelligence.neoarcadia.gov

CC: heavenlywindemperor@airforce.neoarcadia.gov

BODY:

Yeah. Sorry, kiddo. And, uh, you don't gotta be so formal, alright?

By the way- I'd like it if you maybe dialed back the surveillance a bit? At least when things are calm again?

Thanks.

X

Nadir

Part 1

Up near the vault's ceiling, an eerie orb of purple light drifted lazily in the containment field. X stared at it. He couldn't make out its features, but he knew what he would see if he was closer. Bat-like wings with eye emblems. A pale face, always sleeping. The Mother Elf- or the Dark Elf as she was now being called- had been recently re-captured and brought here, to Yggdrasil. The towering administration facility was named after the world tree of Norse myth, and it was aptly styled with massive bunches of holographic leaves along its immense sides.

Several scientists milled about the vault, completing final equipment checks on the permanent containment unit that had been constructed. One of the scientists was attending to X. He quietly asked a question. "Are you sure this is the best course of action, sir?"

Sighing, X responded. “Yes. She needs to be sealed. Continue the preparations.”

With a click, the Reploid disengaged another piece of X’s secondary armor system. It was a winged vambrace, white with gilded trim and swooping curves. He regarded the growing pile of parts. They were all similarly ornate. It was a far cry from his original supplemental armor- the only thing they shared was the white color scheme. Though, he supposed the original had also possessed a few gold-painted trims. Where his current adornments were elaborate, high-tech symbols of status and lethality, the first armor had been functional but simple. It’d been designed by his father shortly before old age took him; it’d been completed by a one Doctor Mikhail Cossack.

Cossack was an uncle of sorts to him, but X hadn’t spoken to him in years. He’d been getting old when they’d last met. He wondered if the man was still alive. He wondered who among his extended family were even still around at this point. All he knew for sure was that Roll had disappeared long ago, leaving Neo Arcadia when the politics started to get complicated. ‘Complicated’ was the cope-word he allowed himself.

He considered querying the governmental records to see who actually was still alive. A simple request to the census bureau to see if Cossack and a few others had died, a quick lookup of the Registered Automaton Threat Index to see if his older siblings were still operational. He chose not to. His mind was a motionless pool of apathy. It didn’t matter much if, say, Kalinka Cossack or Tornado Man were still out there- it especially wouldn’t matter by the end of the day.

A final clattering signaled the end of the disassembly process. X looked down at his exposed under-armor. He felt naked without a supplemental layer. His body was still painted those old shades of blue, so much like the brother that had come before him. He’d died long ago, felled in the Second Invasion’s earliest hours. It felt so distant, it may as well have been myth.

X asked, “Do you think he would have done a better job than me?”

The scientist’s voice was sheepish when he replied. “Sir? Who do you mean?”

“My brother. Rock. The one before me.”

The answer was almost too quick. “I think you’re doing a great job, sir.”

He was trying to please X, either out of nerves or because he felt bad. Either way, X guessed the Reploid probably didn’t know much about Rock. A lot of the memories of that time had faded in society’s eye. X studied the scientist. He was a short robot, designed with simple, angular features. His face was vaguely goat-like. Draped across the raw metal of his form was the cloth of a lab coat, the pockets full of miscellaneous tools. He remembered

that he'd had a brother that was similar. Sheep Man- he'd looked more the part, possessing fluff and a rounded face. By contrast, this Reploid was designed off of some modern art movement that had become pervasive among human roboticists. X tried to remember its name. It was something like Mutos, or perhaps Mythos. The movement applied abstraction and angularity to the preexisting principle of designing animalistic features into Reploids.

A hint of frustration and misery disrupted the pool that was X's mind. That art movement was, in a way, another effort to dehumanize Reploids. It was the same as the standard of using serial numbers as names. It had happened under X's watch. It was his fault, even if indirectly.

But just as quickly as it came, it faded back to apathy. That was his problem. Apathy. His passion had died out. He no longer felt the fiery urge that political maneuvering used to give him. The dance of opposing agendas ceased to make him feel much of anything. He didn't even get all that mad when his opponents got through worse and worse laws and doctrines over the years. When he occasionally stepped back into the saddle to hunt down active Mavericks, that also made him feel nothing. The thrill of the fight was gone. All he felt anymore was numbness and vague self-loathing.

Neo Arcadia as a state was a failed project in X's eyes. It was only a utopia for the right kind of person- a human. Robots had slowly been regressed to second-class citizens required to work an assigned job. Though X was the foremost leader and a universally respected cultural figure, he didn't have ultimate authority. The Eight Judges had a say, the military had an agenda, and the humans had plenty of representatives. Some were rotten. And he'd failed to stop them from slowly rolling back the rights that robots had been given. Worse, he'd come to realize that some of his own decisions had been a part of the problem. He'd realized he was the worst kind of thing you can be in politics- an ineffectual neoliberal.

He wanted to tell himself it wasn't his fault. For as much as his father had opined about X having a choice in life, he'd built X with a gun in his hand, not a book on political philosophy. Of course, maybe X had a point with this spiteful thought, but he also knew it didn't absolve him of the shitty things he'd done.

The suspended energy field at the top of the chamber was slowly guided down towards the waiting containment device. The Dark Elf floated in the field as it went, offering no resistance. X stared at it as it entered the machine. A large mechanical arm moved the other half, closing the device with a loud clunk. It was now a giant golden sphere. Machinery inside hummed to life. Holographic displays flickered on. X stepped over to operate a control panel. From within the opaque sphere came odd electrical buzzing, evidence of some sort of process being done to the elf within. The noise ceased after a

moment. By one of the sphere's support struts, a blocky machine hissed as it ejected a data carrier vessel. X lifted it out slowly, inspecting the contents via the side window. Inside was the face of the Dark Elf, but dimmer, translucent. Satisfied, he turned to the scientist that had been attending to him.

"Okay, buddy. I've split the Dark Elf into two fragments. The bulk of her potency is going to be sealed here in Yggdrasil with me. But this here contains her operation ciphers. It still holds a little bit of power, but it's mostly useless without the fragment in there, and vice versa."

He held the vessel towards the scientist. The scientist winced.

"So these are my final orders. You're gonna take this vessel. You're gonna bring it to the Notus facility and tell the archivist to put this in deep storage. You should be safe enough on your way- this part of her can only influence minds, not alter machines. You'll be shielded from her as long as she stays within. Do not, under any circumstances, open this vessel."

X pushed the vessel into the scientist's chest. The scientist gripped it gingerly, as if it were hot.

"Say it."

"W-what?"

"Say you won't open it for any reason."

"I won't."

"Say the words exactly."

"I-I won't open the vessel for any reason!"

"Good."

The scientist looked absolutely terrified. X figured that was good. It meant he would probably obey the orders. He continued his final directives. "Relay to the Council the following. Yggdrasil is now restricted to as-necessary military access. No member of the public is to enter. Not even humans or government officials. We've already moved all of the offices to other buildings, but no new ones are to be placed here. Furthermore, at all times, there are to be no less than six combat Reploid officers dispersed among the security checkpoints along the ascent. Finally, I need the basement level connections to Sub Arcadia sealed. Leave only the main entrance functional. Got all that?"

The goat scientist replied, “Y-yeah. Yes, sir. I have to take this to Notus for storage. I have to not open it. I have to tell the Council that you said to restrict the building to the military, cut off the sublevel entrances, and have six fighters stationed in the building.”

“That’s *at least* six. Six is the minimum.”

“Got it. Six is the minimum.”

X sighed. His shoulders sagged. “Alright. Let’s finish up. Gather around, everyone!”

The other staff present turned to give their attention. X stepped up onto the pedestal at the base of the containment orb.

“As you all know, the Dark Elf is an unpredictable danger. She’s like all the things that happened with rogue Elves early in the Elf Wars, multiplied by a hundred. If we just left her locked in this vault, it wouldn’t take long at all for her to corrupt the hardware around her and escape. So we need a seal. I know you all would rather I stayed lucid and out and about, but this is a pressing matter. So, please. Start the process.”

With some time, they could have researched a different solution, X was sure. It wasn’t a risk he really wanted to take, though. It wasn’t as if he was particularly opposed to being used as the seal, in any case. It seemed like a far nobler use of his body than all the waste his life had been to that point.

With a quiet scraping sound, a circular wall rose up from the floor around the orb. It was only open where X stood. Gold, molten yet cool to the touch, oozed up from the base of the pedestal. It enveloped X’s feet, rooting him to the spot. The gold tracked up his body, encasing parts of his legs and back before it found his hands. He felt a fuzzy sensation as the material interfaced with his systems. A new, unnatural exhaustion befell him. The gold was now supporting his body. A green ring of holographic light formed in the air above, encircling the orb and its outer wall. This was a representation of the seal.

X panted out, “Good luck... everybody.”

The lids of his eyes felt heavy. Dimly, he watched the scientists watching him. They looked sad. The sheep looked sad. Did the sheep have a name? Maybe one given by friends? X wished he’d asked. His eyes closed. His consciousness shrank until it was a mere golden mote of dust caught in a sunbeam. He floated in nothingness. It was peace. He hoped he could sleep until the world was a happier place. Forever, if it had to be.

After a minute of expectation, he realized that the mote of dust wasn’t blinking out like it ought to. He realized he was perceiving more. Not bodily- his body was dormant, of course. But he could distantly measure the room.

“Oh, god dammit.”

X had become a Cyber-Elf.

His presence, such as it was, literally resembled a mote of dust. It went unnoticed by the scientists as he floated listlessly above. He could see his own body. He felt jealous of it, and then realized the irrationality of it. Jealous at his own body?

One of the scientists- he couldn't tell which- placed something at the foot of a pedestal. Prayer beads. They all made to leave, pushing a cart loaded with equipment and his armor parts.

“Welp.”

Part 2

A point of golden light floated down the dark hallway. Where its glow touched, discarded machinery was cast in dim warm shadow. It was X. He was traversing Sub-Arcadia, the underlayer of Neo Arcadia where could be found infrastructure, the ruins of Old Arcadia, and for his purposes, the old research laboratory that had once been headed by a one Dr. Albrecht Weil.

Remembering the name of Weil caused X distress. In hindsight, there was a sick predictability to what had happened with him. History had a way of rhyming. In the generation before X's time, there had been a promising German roboticist that had turned jaded and sought to control the world. And, in X's own time, the same thing had happened. The man's name even started with the same letters.

The dead Reploid rationalized it. How could he have known? Could he really have stepped down the man because he 'reminded X of an unrelated guy'? Would he even have had that authority, directly? Besides, after his crimes, they *had* exiled the man. X broke the train of thought. He was trying to shift the blame for things that he couldn't change. It didn't matter what he could or couldn't have done. It was far too late. X was a ghost now, a quiet voice that didn't wish to be heard.

The hallway opened up into a larger chamber on the edge of a cliff of sorts. Over the cliff, in the distance, some massive machine flashed, an unnatural underground lightning storm. X watched it for a moment. He wished he could climb down and go for a closer look. Of course, his ethereal self could float over, but it was the sensation he desired- hand scraping against rock, legs compensating for landing, the hiss of jets as he dashed across terrain. He missed corporeality.

Collecting himself, X drifted on, heading for the threshold of the next hallway. He passed by some kind of damaged monitor on the wall, its screen flashing different colors in an endlessly repeating loop. Briefly, he considered interfacing with whatever it was connected to- maybe just the screen was damaged, rotted by the dampness of these ruins; so maybe he could see what it had meant to show. He chose not to. Whatever had been displayed, it no longer mattered to anyone.

After a few minutes, he started to encounter security drones. They were simple, a form of self-replicating spider Mechaniloid. They existed mainly to alert higher layers of the city so they could scramble a proportionate response in case of intruder. Should they raise alert, giant defense golems and squads of Pantheons would be scrambled.

Pantheons were another thing that caused X distress. In the history of robotics, there had always been a recurring concept for bipedal combat drones that could be easily refit for different roles. It had started with the Sniper Joe, and the latest incarnation was the Pantheon. They were loosely based on X's bodily appearance- they wore sky-blue armor and their monocular heads were adorned with red gems at the end of sweeping crests. The things were perverse, indicative of Neo Arcadia's universal fetishism of X. They had been devised after his sealing. He would never have approved had he been given a say.

At last, X's journey neared its end. Before him was an immense blast door, more than 20 feet tall. Red and blue lights dotted the surface at irregular intervals, and in the center, within a circle, was a single word.

'ZERO'.

X phased through the door. The chamber within had fallen into disrepair in the intervening years. Much of the walls had crumbled, letting rays of light filter in from distant sources. Some puddles of dark green industrial waste dotted the floor here and there. In the center was a massive inert machine, a pillar festooned with trailing wires. The concrete containment cask at the base was breached, but X's Cyber Elven senses could pick out the shimmer of a backup shield. Within the cask knelt a man with a bundle of cables stuck into ports on his back.

X felt more alert than he'd been in years. Unconsciously, he manifested his holographic body, an imitation of his old self draped in a blue robe and adorned with a rainbow halo. He sprinted over to the man, his incorporeal feet leaving no splash in the puddles.

Zero had voluntarily sealed himself away, believing himself to be in some way a catalyst for the tragedies that the world had witnessed in the eras of war he and X had participated in. He'd hoped that scientists could study him, find solutions locked in his

body and mind. X had protested, but Zero had insisted. For a time, the scientists had kept their word, but eventually, they showed up less and less, until the lab was forgotten. Partly, the pain of working where Weil had once conducted projects was burdensome- but mostly, the scientists eventually just stopped caring.

X cried out. Zero's body was damaged, already feeling the effects of rot. It was damp and humid down here, and if waste kept pooling, it would cover the floor in a few short years. One of Zero's arms was damaged, reduced to underlying skeleton by the withering of time. Blue and red paint was flaking from the rest of his body. X still saw the beautiful shapes he'd always seen- but he also knew Zero needed dire maintenance. The locks of his golden hair were fraying.

"Zero."

X knelt, trying to look at the robot's face.

"Zero!"

He knew it was futile. There was no stirring on his features, no glow in his forehead gem. His expression wasn't even peaceful. It was blank, neutral. X shouted and shouted. He figured a hacker-type Cyber Elf could likely reawaken Zero, and reconstruct him well enough for him to reach a mechanic under his own power. But while most Elves were compiled with specific functions, X had no such talent.

Still, X vainly tried to channel his energy, to pull schematics and run commands. Almost nothing happened. Some of the flaked bits of Zero on the floor stirred and moved, but it was little more than a breeze caused by electricity being dumped into the air. X wished he could give all of his energy to revive Zero. It would be a worthwhile trade- but as it was, he simply couldn't make it happen.

"Zero! Please, you're needed! Zero, Zero!"

Up there, in Neo Arcadia, he could barely muster a voice, not one anyone could hear. Down here, his cries echoed. It was a cruel irony- only where his voice would help the least could he be heard. If his voice could reach Zero, it would have been a different story. Zero could solve things up there.

"Zero... The world needs you! Everything's going wrong! I had to go away to seal her, Zero... and then, they tried to replace me! They built a copy, but he's making it worse! He doesn't even know it, he thinks he's perfect!"

It was, in a sense, a selfish thing to ask. Zero had been so worn out when he entered hibernation, tired of the wars, tired of the decline, tired of the way society manipulated itself to be worse year after year. Nobody was more deserving of a rest.

But X knew Zero was the only one with both the skill and conviction to fix it- either by his charisma, or, God forbid, by the point of his blade. Two fledgling resistance movements had already been put down. Groups like Tin Can lacked the resources to wage an effective resistance, and they were focused on avoiding attention anyway. Only Zero would be able to find a way to fix things. Without Zero, Neo Arcadia would drown in the fog of its own selfish tendencies. This utopian city, in many ways his own creation, had failed. They sacrificed the comfort, rights, and eventually lives of countless Reploids to satiate the humans.

“Zero...”

X found himself unconsciously authenticating into several official Neo Arcadian databases and cross-referencing data points. Materials harvesting, Energen synthesis, reserves of both, minus materials usage and minus energy consumption, plus reclaimed resources from outland salvage, and naturally, post-execution bodily reclamation from Reploids...

He ran the equation. Assuming some reasonable best-case scenarios, given the things Neo Arcadia’s administration would refuse to cut... 200 years. That was the best estimate for when Neo Arcadia’s energy would run dry and civilization would revert to the stone age. All this suffering, for a scant two centuries of human decadence.

X’s voice had gone from urgent to shaky. “Zero, I... Please, wake up...”

Towards the end, Zero had grown distant from X. At one point, they had been best friends, perfect complementary battle partners. They had been casually flirtatious. X had wanted to propose to Zero. But the moment never came. And then, X kept mishandling politics, and the wars kept getting more brutal. It hadn’t been a rift between them, not exactly. But by the end, their relationship was more akin to being friendly colleagues. It was different. Something had been lost along the way, and X had never gotten over it.

He’d known this journey would be futile, he’d known it would hurt. Still, he’d whirled himself to emotional destruction, and now he lacked even that inhibition which keeps us from saying things to ourselves that we know to be truth.

“Zero... I need you.”

The red-armored warrior did not respond.

Duel In The Desert

The sands were always quiet, save for the wind. The sun hung straight above, a silent bringer of shimmering heat. Invisibly, millions of invisible particles of radiation darted back and forth in the air near the surface. The landscape was a product of the otherworldly powers that had been brought to bear in the first invasion from space that Earth's contemporary host had experienced.

In the worst moment of the war, major portions of the west coast of the former United States had simply been sunken into the Pacific, a horrid surge of ocean flooding inland for many miles. Anyone on the coast was simply gone. When the waters receded, the remaining land they revealed was shredded, much of its surface powderized into a fine radioactive sand. Some of the more discerning among the anomalous weapons brought to bear left bizarre new features in the new coastline. Arcadia, formerly a landlocked city, now was a part of the coast, a divot carved up to its doorstep.

In the years following, rebuilding went well enough. The boon of construction-specialized Robot Masters, along with existing experience from the Wily Wars, helped keep things fast. In almost no time, Arcadia took advantage of its new waters, incorporating a massive harbor complex. Re-terraforming technologies were tested for the first time in their fledgling form, most notably a massive, bioengineered forest, designed as a buffer to halt the encroaching desertification.

Most humans and many robots stayed clear of the sands and the woods. Yet, still, those lands were not empty. Ruins were left in both the forest and the dunes. Nature returned where it could. Dr. Wily established his final tower deep in the desert. Eventually, dissatisfied robots began to inhabit the area, founding the community of Tin Can in a spot right where the forest met the desert.

On one day in particular, long after those events passed into history, a resident of Tin Can was out on a walk, sand crunching beneath his boots. Sparrow was a completely average humanoid Reploid, originally designed for Neo Arcadian civilian work. He was draped in a simple cloak to keep the sand out. Underneath, his joints had cloth covers affixed. These measures weren't perfect, but they were good enough for a day's outing.

He happened upon a cluster of low buildings, partly buried in the grit. Their features had been worn down by the winds over the decades until even their corners were rounded and indistinct. For a while, Sparrow leaned against one of the structures, enjoying its shade and idly looking at the mountains on the horizon. Through the haze, the Reploid had trouble picking out details, but he'd been up in those mountains before, on a camping trip. They were within the band of forest that held back the sand. He remembered that from his

campsite, he'd been able to distantly see the glow of Neo Arcadia's high-security artificial forestry, and a looming facility in the middle of it all. An odd sight, and one he hadn't been intent on investigating.

Presently, curiosity got the better of him, and he went inside to see if there was anything good. Contained within was a dense space full of racks and racks of tools and tires and machines- a storage shed for a hardware store. Presumably, the larger of the structures outside.

After a sufficient search of the storehouse, Sparrow walked at a pleasant pace towards where the real treasure was bound to be kept. He hefted his current prize, a nice and sturdy wrench. He tilted it flat so its polished surface caught the noontime sun, glinting brightly. Pleased, he mused to himself.

"Yep, yep, they just don't make 'em like this anymore."

With his free hand, he pushed along a rattly old flatbed dolly. Its wheels had little traction in the sand, but it slid along well enough. The wood of its bed was warped and rotted- clearly, at least some level of flooding had hit the area before it'd desiccated. Sitting atop it was a bundle of bungee cords with hooks. All in all, the storehouse had contained a good setup for dragging home some loot on short notice.

Far behind, his stalker crept along. This individual had been pursuing Sparrow for miles, hiding behind dunes and old unidentifiable remnants of infrastructure, undoubtedly quite frustrated at the Reploid's recent break. Certainly, the stalker had sprinted forth recklessly the second Sparrow entered the shed. Now, as the unaware quarry approached the ruined store, the stalker sped up, hoping to catch his prize before Sparrow could enter the building. Right as the Reploid reached the door, before Sparrow could pry apart the sliding glass, the pursuer barked out.

"Halt! On Neo Arcadian authority, you are required to turn around! You are not free to go at this time!"

Sparrow whirled around. He was caught off guard, but his response carried a level and cool tone. "I'm not Neo Arcadian."

The stalker shot back, "Don't be absurd. It is a crime to be outside of the city without official business. You must come with me without resistance to stand trial."

"You got a name? I'm not callin' you 'Officer'".

The stalker scoffed. "I am Neo Arcadia Simple Enforcer Number Oh Five Six Dash Zero Zero Six Three Four. You may refer to me as Agent 634."

Sparrow rolled his eyes. “Always the numbers with you Neo Arcadians. I’m gonna call you... hm... Scarab. ‘Cuz to me, it sure seems like you’re just smearin’ shit around the desert.”

The offended agent sputtered, “Sc- Wh- I!”

He reached for the buster pistol on his belt. “You are under arrest!”

Sparrow chuckled, unintimidated by the weapon. “I told ya, I’m not Neo Arcadian.”

The Reploid pulled the side of his cloak into view, revealing the black stenciled hyacinth. It was the Tin Can emblem- and for good measure, in block capitals beneath, ‘TIN CAN’ was printed, also in stencil.

Scarab suppressed a double take. This complicated things for him. Still, he doubled down. “Fool! There are *only* Neo Arcadians. The world is united under the banner of Neo Arcadia. So come with me! I won’t say it again!”

The Neo Arcadian Reploid tightened his grip on his pistol, clicking off the safety. Wordlessly, Sparrow slowly held up a small device. It was a black rectangular prism with a lens on its large surface. It flickered to life, projecting an abstract shape in the air- a sphere, around which orbited several triangles, pointed outward. They slowly rotated, but picked up speed.

“Only gonna warn y’once, Scarab Shitbeetle. Put the gun away and fuck off outta here.”

This actually deflated the tension somewhat for Scarab, at least for a moment. The absurdity of it! “Do you think I’m an idiot, Suspect? Do you think we don’t know all the parlor tricks your rusty little town employs? Like we haven’t been keeping an eye on that loathsome little rat of a leader for years?”

With his next words, Scarab raised the gun. “That’s a hologram, and you’re gonna try to fool me with it. It’s not gonna-”

Silently, the whirling hologram zipped at the smug Reploid. Its triangular blades chopped down at his shoulder. Sparks flew, and his face froze as he watched his gun arm cleanly detach, the cut edge of the metal glowing. A second later, the pain registered. Scarab dropped to his knees, howling and babbling incoherently.

“Well, y’won’t be needin’ this, so I hope y’don’t mind.”

The Reploid walked up to him, grabbing the gun from the inert hand on the ground. He opened up his robe as he stuffed the buster into his belt. With the robe open, the

overwhelmed Scarab spotted a hefty power bank strapped to the criminal's thigh. A cable ran from it to the hologram emitter he still wielded like a protective magic amulet. Moaning and sobbing wordlessly, he shrunk away, tumbling ineptly onto his back. Looking back, Sparrow realized the floating weapon was menacingly close. He withdrew it.

Sparrow dragged his cart over to Scarab and got to work, heaving the Neo Arcadian up onto its bed. The hostile robot tried to resist, but he was weakened from the pain and the shock to the system. As Sparrow worked, he monologued smugly.

"You were right, we do love our holograms. Very useful escape trick, but it don't work if the target's got spectral filters or just knows the game. So we, uh, developed a bit of an upgrade. Takes a bunch more energy- hence the battery- and I don't know rightly how the science works exactly, but ol' Tanuki said it's something to do with refocusing the lensed suspended light back onto itself a bunch of times before it leaks and becomes visible. Sort of a denser, tighter version of a hologram. That make any sense to you?"

Scarab didn't respond, still making loud pain sounds.

"Oh, right, guess y'can't really form sentences right now. 'Cuz of the extreme pain. I get it. Anyway, how it works is, the hologram gets really friggin' hot. 'N you can just... use it like a knife. Like those old videos of hot knives in butter. Makes really clean cuts, too."

Satisfied that Scarab was securely lashed to the dolly, Sparrow dropped the detached arm in front of its owner, tying it down with his last bungee.

"Well, anyway, m'point is, it shouldn't be too hard to get this ol' thing fixed and wired back on to ya. Good as new, more or less. Now, here, I gotta cover both sides of the wound. Don't want too much sand getting in there, now do we?"

As the Tin Canner procured some spare cloth covers, the pain suppression subroutine in Scarab's mind began to slowly ease in. Though its function was more or less merciful, its purpose was entirely utilitarian- it dulled the pain just enough so an injured Neo Arcadian could either continue to work or seek repairs.

"Now, I gotta wonder, what army are you part of? Prob not Leviathan's crew, ahaha! Her kind don't really prowl out in the desert. Probably not Fefnir, either, 'cause you only had the one pistol and I was able to get it off ya before the trigger pulled. Maybe Harpuia's, hm? You don't look like a pilot, but he also covers a lot of the more general enforcement bullshit, right?"

Sparrow's voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone, though it didn't lose its relative joviality. "Or maybe... you're one of Phantom's, hm? You *did* sneak up pretty good on me.

Wonder how long you were tracking me? But... Nah, I bet you woulda just knifed me in the back if you were his.”

Scarab’s moans had dropped off in volume, but he was still just a bit beyond speech. Nonetheless, his eyes bugged out a bit at the open mention of Phantom. The Cutting Shadow were a secret, one that was illegal to discuss as fitting with their clandestine nature. Scarab was himself only aware as a dubious privilege of military enrollment.

Sparrow completely missed the facial reaction of his captive, focused as he was on the path ahead of him as he pushed the cart.

“Well, in any case, I know one thing for sure. Yer a low-ranker. And it’s gonna stay that way. Humanoids never get far. Too delicate to be stationed at any real important point. The career for you’s probably been reporting and tracking down minor offenders, usually on the streets, right? You’re a long way from home. And that’s also how I know you’re probably a grunt. Anyone with real pull knows to steer clear of us Tin Canners for the most part.”

Scarab croaked a slightly indignant response, wincing as his mouth moved. “What?”

“Hell, I dunno why you freaks let us be. Ya sure hate when escapees reach us, but y’never roll all the way up for a fight. Thing is, you could probably take us. Our tech’s good- lot better than we started out, so I’ve heard- but we’re not a real military. Y’know what I bet it is? They’re afraid of what we know. They know we’re the last people around that really know shit about Wily tech. Doubt that means anythin’ to you in particular, but I also doubt your superiors wanna find out what we have. Or maybe they’re afraid of what knowledge might disappear with us. Or, or, maybe they think they can get something from our research if they hit at the right time? Or, I guess maybe we’re just not actually on the radar as much anymore. After all, we do keep to ourselves. It’d be a lot of trouble to wipe us out. Whatever the reason, it was really fuckin’ dumb of you to run up on me like that, Beetle Man.”

Mercifully, Sparrow’s yapping finally trailed off. Scarab opened his mouth to speak. His voice was hoarse but the pain was enough at bay that he could think and speak.

“Where are you taking me? And why didn’t you finish me?”

The Reploid pushing the cart didn’t think for even a moment before responding.

“Well, I didn’t need to finish you. You’re neutralized enough, yeah? And I’m takin’ you to Tin Can, of course! Gotta get that arm fixed before we figure out what we’re gonna do, and before you figure out what *you’re* gonna do.”

The captive robot shuddered. He was being taken into a Maverick den. What twisted things would happen? “What do you mean, what I’m gonna do?”

“Well, obviously, we don’t wanna hold onto ya for no reason. And to me, it seems pretty obvious that you were out here unsanctioned. Hoping to catch some prey that would look good to your boss. Probably bad that you did that, and you were hoping that nabbin’ me would make up for it. Am I right or am I right?”

Scarab looked away, sullenly.

“Yeah. What I kinda figured. So, uh, we need to make absolutely sure our evidence is straight and you can’t go telling them we grabbed and tortured ya. It’d be pretty stupid of you to say that, but we gotta be sure. And as for you, well... You can go back, I guess. Dunno why you’d want to. You can also try to make it out in the wastes. Kinda a shitty idea, buuuut I’ve heard some bands of Mavericks make it work sometimes. That’s usually further inland, though. Or you can stay with us. Me personally, I think that’s a pretty good option. And I’m being damn gracious by offering it after what you pulled.”

Scarab wanted to spit back that he would never willingly consort with Mavericks, but between the dull pain and the humiliation at his utter defeat, he didn’t have it in him. All he had to do was endure until this supposed repair to his arm. Then he could go back home.

Home, where all he had was slim Energen rations.

Home, where it was discouraged to make friends with coworkers.

Home, where he was behind on his arrest quota.

Home, where his superior officer berated him and threatened him with retirement.

Home, such as it was. At least there weren’t Mavericks.

Light Up The Night

Off the coast of California, a boat sped along. It wasn’t the exactly largest boat- not a cruise liner, nor a container ship, but certainly larger than the average fishing trawler. Its exterior was rusted, but it maintained a good clip. Behind it followed a churning wake of salty foam, and a Neo Arcadian naval interdiction unit.

On the deck of the ship, gunners aimed at the pursuing boat, daring it to come into range. Most of the non-combat crew were already belowdecks, but some still rushed about, securing equipment in place and delivering crates of spare Energen to the gunners. In the midst of the orderly chaos stood two figures: a titan of a robotic man clad in radiant

golden armor; and the ship's captain, a slightly less towering robot sporting a stereotypical pirate's uniform. From the stern they watched as the enemy slowly closed the distance.

The pair were ancient as far as robots went. Once upon a time, King had been a revolutionary leader. He was the first of Wily's sons to go his own way, desiring to create an exclusive haven for his kind. Pirate Man was his most loyal lieutenant, a former civilian maritime worker bot that had stuck by King's side since the day they had met.

Pirate Man racked the charging handle on his personal weapon, a heavily modified grenade launcher. "Accordin' ta Engineerin', th'engines're at th'limit. They're gonna be in range soon'nuff."

Pirate Man's voice was obviously synthetic, and harsh to boot. By contrast, King's speech was booming, regal, yet smooth.

"I assume our boarding defenses are ready, yes?"

"Yessir, that they be."

Pirate Man couldn't smile. His face was odd, distinctly robotic in its construction. Nonetheless, he felt mirth. These young Neo Arcadians clearly didn't know who they were dealing with.

His uncovered eye scanned over the enemy, drinking in the details. It was a medium-sized yellow boat with indigo accents. It lacked much in the way of an upper deck, instead covered by blocky walls hiding the interior. To Pirate Man, this indicated it could be submersible to some degree. The boat's exterior was lined with small doors covering up missile tubes. Pantheons milled about on the few traversable spots of the vessel's exterior, making ready for combat.

Along the side of the boat, in faded paint, Pirate Man spotted an emblem. It was an italicized blue capital letter R in front of an inverted golden triangle. He recognized it instantly and elbowed King to get his attention, pointing out the emblem. King's face froze in a frigid, controlled anger. Drawing his axe, he spoke over their ship's interior comms.

"See how they mock us! Tonight, our enemy has brought to bear the weapons of our long-fallen brethren, the Repliforce! This insult must not go unpunished!"

Repliforce had once been a military arm of the UN. An incident had incited it to separate, with the intent to create an autonomous nation for Reploids. King had been in talks with them about forming alliances, but before anything could come of it, they were silenced by the humans for the sin of freedom. A few in King's retinue were survivors of this purge. They had never forgotten what had happened.

The weapon covers opened on the opposing ship. A second later, a barrage of rockets shot forth, crossing the distance with deadly speed. Atop the bridge of Pirate Man's ship, a laser defense module sprung to life, instantly tracking the missiles. Invisibly, a beam of infrared light lanced out through the gap between the boats. Energy dumped into the rockets, each disintegrating one by one. Several detonated with a terrible thunderous crack, their explosives cooked off from the heat.

King bellowed a hearty laugh. "Fireworks! Excellent!"

Pirate Man intoned, "'Ere they come..."

A squadron of Pantheons had launched right behind the rockets, gliding forth on winged jetpacks. Leading their formation was a pair of Pantheon Aces- elite aerial combat models. Pirate Man could tell them by their lilac paint and golden enhanced V-shaped targeting optic in place of the usual red camera lens.

The gunners on the ship opened fire. Large orbs of plasma shot forth at the Pantheon squadron. Most scattered and dodged, but a few were too slow to adjust course, blowing to pieces that fell into the dark waters.

Pirate Man aimed his grenade launcher towards the center of the formation. It lacked conventional sights, instead smart-linking with his body, projecting data into his vision. He pulled the trigger, and the projectile flew from the muzzle with a soft thump. It was an odd thing, covered in thrusters meant for active trajectory adjustment. As it flew, he readied another shot.

The grenade exploded in the vicinity of the enemies, showering them with deadly flak. Several fell, their wings or vital components lacerated. Pirate Man pulled the trigger again, this time launching a concussive grenade. They were already close enough that another shrapnel load would be dangerous to him and the crew.

The Pantheons opened fire. The second grenade found its mark, blowing one to dust. The plasma arced through the air, slamming against the ship's gun turrets. Most of the shots hit the gun shields, distorting the metal and severely rattling the guns and gunners, but leaving them mostly unharmed. However, one turret caught a bad hit. Bright blue flame erupted up out of the gun, its occupant thrown to the ground by the blast.

Pirate Man growled into the comms. "This's th'Cap'n. Get'a med team on standby, a man been hit."

The remaining guns continued to shoot. At this range, they were much more deadly. In just a few seconds, the approaching squadron was reduced to a few remaining bodies

including the pair of Aces. The whole exchange of gunfire had lasted twenty seconds at most. Now the boarders were here.

King leapt up at one of the Aces as it crossed over the deck. It leveled its buster at him, but his axe was quicker. He landed back on the deck, accompanied by the clatter of the Ace's now-separated two halves. Two of the fliers swooped in close, blasting at the regal fighter. Their shots simply dissipated harmlessly into his armor. In a flash, they were both cleaved fatally.

The boarding party was now reduced to the sole remaining Ace. Undeterred by the loss of its comrades, it kept firing wildly as it swooped to and fro, now a mere foot above the deck. Holstering his grenade launcher on his hip, Pirate Man addressed his king. "Ey. Check this out."

The obsolete robot weaved around the buster fire with a precise grace that was unexpected of his size and age. He leapt at the Ace. It angled its thrusters forward, attempting to dodge backwards. The pirate carried too much momentum. The both of them went down in a flurry of limbs. With his dominant hand, the captain pinned the Mechaniloid's buster arm. With his pincer claw hand, he gripped its head. The machine strained against his grip, staring at him with that unfeeling V-shaped visor. It simply saw a target.

Pirate Man crushed the machine's head. It went limp.

After the slightest pause, he pried his prize off the body. Jumping to his feet, he held it up so King could see. It was the Ace's jetpack. King grinned in approval. "Most clever, my friend."

The pirate donned the jetpack, fastening it over his greatcoat. His hand dove into his pocket and pulled out a short data cable. He lifted up one of his armored epaulets, pressing the connector into a shoulder port. The other end went into an auxiliary control port on the pack. Instantly, the jetpack responded to his command, its control surfaces flexing and its engines brightening.

"Be back inna 'sec. Don' go nowhere on me now, mate."

The remaining crew on the deck cheered as their captain lifted in the air. In only a few moments, he crossed over the gulf to the enemy boat. He unholstered his grenade launcher as he went, chambering a round as the Pantheons on the deck aimed up at him. Their shots missed pathetically. His didn't. With the deck clear and bearing fresh scorch marks, he set down. Wasting no time, Pirate Man began to forcibly wrench open the boat's missile tube doors. They tore open with the screech of bent steel. After only a few, he found

what he was looking for- tubes that hadn't launched their missiles yet. Saving a follow-up volley would be the Neo Arcadians' downfall tonight.

He dropped several of his high-yield remote grenades into each tube.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Satisfied with his handiwork, he was about to leave when the hatch opened and another Pantheon emerged. Unlike the fliers, it was bulbous, mostly coated in yellow plates. It was a Pantheon Aqua, a diver unit equipped with buoyancy chambers along its body, giving it a shape not unlike the human deep sea diving suits of old. It leveled its harpoon gun at Pirate Man. He simply chuckled and took off.

After putting sufficient distance between him and the enemy boat, he sent the trigger signals to the explosives. In a burning instant, they blew apart the missile tubes and set off the warheads, tearing the ship asunder. Its front half disintegrated in an immense fireball. The back half sank silently and with little ceremony. One moment, the repurposed Repliforce boat was chasing Pirate Man's ship, the next, it was simply gone but for flames and debris launched upwards.

The Robot Master laughed. It had been a while since he'd had that kind of fun. A few hundred feet ahead of him, King was crisply saluting him. He fired a salute back. He'd be back home in just a moment.

His comms crackled. "Captain! We have an unidentified contact approaching fast through the debris field! It must have been hiding behind their ship!"

"Ah. Shit."

He looked down and behind him. With his grainy light amplification, he spotted a patch of water that seemed darker than the rest. It had a delta shape with a tail- some sort of manta ray-esque visage. Unlike the ship, it was catching up quite rapidly.

"Watch out, sir!"

A barrage of icy javelins shot up from under the waves at the flying pirate. He rolled, narrowly dodging one, two, three, four of the projectiles- but a fifth one caught him in the upper chest. He felt pain. The damage control subsystem gave a report- superficial damage, some minor circuits and a few tactile surface sensors crushed, but nothing major. With an angry growl, he pulled the spike free, letting it drop to the waters below.

Pulling up his grenade launcher again, Pirate Man aimed at the shadow. Just as he lined up the shot, another spread of ice spikes shot up at him. This time, the very first one pierced the wing of his jetpack, snapping it clean off.

“SHIT”

The captain spiraled out of control towards the water. In just a moment, he impacted and sank below the waves. There was a new damage report- the hole in his chest was filling with water. This wasn't a problem in and of itself- robots were usually insulated against even internal flooding, doubly so for maritime models. The problem was, it was weighing him down. In just a short moment, the bubbles stopped flowing from the wound. The shadow passed by him overhead, chasing the ship.

Pirate Man attempted to fire the jetpack's engines in a vain hope that it would bring him to the surface, but there was no response. The thrusters were flooded with seawater. Quickly, he took the pack off, dropping it in hopes that shedding the weight would help him swim to the surface. But his strokes didn't bring him any further upwards. He couldn't ascend without the buoyancy afforded by his unpierced body.

It wasn't the sort of thing that was generally a problem for him. Sure, he wasn't the most mobile robot in the water, but usually his armor was good enough to keep him unpierced, and usually, he had assistive hardware for water excursions- flippers, small water jet thrusters. Or, failing that, he simply walked along the bottom in the shallows.

His comms came in, the signal already weak as the ship got further and further. “Captain! Are you okay?!”

“Run, ye fools! Ya gotta get outta here!”

The comm signal went dead. The intraship comms weren't set up for range, serving mostly as a convenient intercom system.

All he cared about was their safety. King's safety. He aimed at the manta ray shadow, firing a grenade. Its thrusters fired, speeding it along. It burst near one of the machine's wingtips. It slowed. It stopped. It turned around.

“Yeh, bet *that* got yer attention, ye bastard.”

As the shadow began to close in on Pirate Man, he sank, faster and faster into the black depths. He pulled a bundle of chemical lights from his belt pouch. They cracked all at once, casting a sickly yellow light. He dispersed them around himself. The shadow grew, a spot of the same impenetrable dark he was sinking into. The chamber of the launcher clicked open. A shrapnel round slid into place. The charging handle clicked, muted by the seawater. His prospects were grim, but it didn't matter. No matter what, this fool was going to rue the day it attacked his ship.

The shadow approached, cautiously. It lingered outside of the reach of the chemical lights, matching the speed of Pirate Man's descent. Even with his light amplification cranked to the maximum, he couldn't make out details beyond the odd contour here and there- regions where the shadow was slightly less dark, but nothing coherent.

There was a tense silence. The pirate aimed his weapon at the shadow, but didn't pull the trigger. Likewise, the shadow launched no frigid spears in his direction. Was this a standoff? Or was it merely surveying its prey, fulfilling idle curiosity?

A few moments later, shapes began to emerge from the depths- large, vertical blocky things at odd angles. Pirate Man couldn't figure out what they were until he sank next to one and the dim yellow light revealed the details. It was a building. All of the shapes were buildings. A realization hit him. He checked his internal navigation system. Sure enough- he was roughly where Los Angeles used to be. It was now a tomb under a few hundred feet of sea.

His feet touched down on the seafloor. It was a mix of sand and chunks of asphalt- once, it had been a street. The encrusted, barely-recognizable remnants of some vehicles were still visible here and there, strewn between the grim spires. Pirate Man could hardly see beyond the immediate surroundings. He'd lost track of his pursuer, but the shadow didn't take long to reveal itself.

Darting out from behind one of the buildings, she was properly visible for the first time, lit by the eerie glow. It was a feminine body, fused to a large manta-like combat shell, held aloft on the thrust of two large turbines and the undulations of its trailing tail. Her face was visible at the apex of the delta body, a serene visage adorned in a helm of seashells.

He'd never met her, but the pirate knew instantly who it was. Fairy Leviathan, member of the Four Guardians and highest admiral of the Neo Arcadian Navy. He wasted no time, spared no moment to taunt or converse. The trigger was pulled on recognition. The shot surged through the water, a hateful torpedo. It burst in proximity to its target, fanning shrapnel towards her in an attempt to jam her engines.

Even as she retreated, two more shots burst with muffled booms. Pirate Man was lining up for a fourth shot, but she'd already retreated behind the edge of a building, apparently unharmed. A gentle feminine laugh distorted by the water was audible. He cursed.

Seemingly in response, a cacophony of low roars echoed through the abyss. From the alleys and nearby streets, one after another, came ice-drakes, rushing at the pirate. Two fell to shots. One bit his arm and received a crushing claw to its neck for its trouble. The rest grabbed him, pushing his back against what had once been a large truck. He struggled.

One was crushed in his grip. One was caught between his boot and the ground, smashed flat. Soon enough, they lashed him in place. He struggled with futile rage.

Leviathan floated back into view, approaching cautiously. In her humanoid form, she would have been shorter than the captain, but here, she loomed. Her face bore a grin of mild amusement. The sailor roared, his voice carrying despite the water.

“Yer foul beasts chain me ta’ th’rock an’ seek ta’ peck at me, Siren o’th’ Deep! Ye see fit call yerself "Leviathan" ‘coz y’think yer’ th’ruler o’ these seas! But there be things far elder and dire than one such as ye in these waters! Fer every bleak wurm ye summon forth, a great Cetus will follow in yer wake, an’ they’ll gnash ‘n’ snap at yer body until it’s but bones rustin’ ta *nothin’* on th’silt! Come, fell King Neptune, come forth’n’ invoke yer wrath upon this sea-witch! Grind away her rust with yer tempest currents ‘til naught remains, not even a name!”

Leviathan cocked her head at the words, as if perturbed by their bile. The pirate stared his foe in the eyes, straining to break his bonds if only to swing at her. Something in his mind attempted to notify him that the water was becoming more ambiently corrosive than seawater usually tended to be, but he paid it no mind, consumed as he was by his fury. One arm broke free. He laughed a hateful laugh. The other came free, too.

A jet of viscous, corrosive brine lanced from the dark, striking Leviathan in the wing. Parts of it started to warp and deform and crumble and melt. Her face turned pale with some sort of recognition as she recoiled, attempting to evade. Another blast of the near-invisible solution slammed into her, fully breaching a hole into the wing. With a final glare at her former prey, she turned and sped into the dark, retreating for good.

The dragons fell limp, and Pirate Man attempted to scramble after her. He picked up his weapon, shooting in her direction. It was useless- she was gone. He screamed of bloody murder, stomping in frustration.

“I coulda’ crushed’er, if’n she weren’t a coward!”

A gentle, odd voice responded, seemingly completely unchanged by the sea. “Were that you would have, but she knew the threat that had arrived by the burn it left.”

Pirate Man whirled around. His anger was replaced immediately by shock. Floating towards him was a humanoid creature with webbed flippers, scales, fins, and a silver crown of vicious hooks.

“Well I’ll be damned! It be not th’ Neptune upon whom I called, yet it be’a Neptune indeed!”

Neptune was an aquatic member of the alien invasion force known as the Stardroids. His kind had invaded Earth twice. The first time had involved global devastation, including the sinking of the very city in which they stood. In the second invasion, guilt had made him defect- or, more accurately, made him fight against his masters and cease war against the Earth's peoples.

After the fateful struggle had ended, Neptune disappeared into the sea, seldom seen and quickly passing into legend. There was no effort to capture him- partly in thanks for his act of rebellion, and partly out of simple fear of the immense power of a Stardroid. The pirate had encountered him a scant few times over the decades, but never for long.

"Disappointment is not intended, but intervention was unfortunately a necessity. Much of the honor has disappeared from this world. It would be a worse disappointment to allow one such ruler to extinguish a remaining source of that honor."

The pirate holstered his grenade launcher. His stance relaxed. He asked, "So what're ye doin' in these parts, anyhow?"

A long pause. "Penance. A day for each body, spent among the many ruins left behind. So much time... and yet, is that enough for the acts committed?"

Pirate Man thought about it, running numbers. "Yer gonna be 'round 'ere fer a real long time, y'know."

"The regret runs deep. The command of the leader was no just reason. Justification won't undo the harm. Commitment is the sincerest repentance. But come, your companions await at the surface, and the foe is indeed gone." Neptune offered a hand.

Gripping the biomechanical alien's arm, the captain intoned, "Much obliged."

Neptune kicked off, dragging the robot upwards. His powerful legs churned the water and they rose, much faster than the descent had been. After a few short moments, their heads popped above the surface, scarcely fifty feet from the ship. The alien treaded water, effortlessly supporting the hefty robot as he waved and shouted and loudly clacked his pincer.

"Oi, oi, over 'ere! Down 'ere!"

A few minutes later, Pirate Man and Neptune had both been lifted to the deck, and most of the water had been bailed from the captain. He now sat cross-legged as he patched the hole in himself, carelessly welding with a small torch. Neptune stood off to the side.

"So, what I be wonderin', is how'dja know ta' come back fer me?"

King scoffed. "Of course we were going to come back. Nobody gets left behind." Quietly, he added, "Especially not you."

The captain looked the monarch in the eyes meaningfully. Had his face allowed it, he would have sported a sly grin. "Ye best not be givin' me preferential treatment, matey."

King replied, "No, of course not. But we were clear of the enemy, and we knew where you'd fallen. Recovery was an imperative. We were preparing a dive team when you popped up with our friend here."

He addressed Neptune. "I must thank you again. It sounds like you truly showed up at the most opportune moment."

Neptune replied softly, "It was simply payment towards the unending debt. Those ruins have enough dead, and he belongs up here."

King smiled warmly at him. "Good. I certainly doubt the Neo Arcadians will be entering our territory for a while. Doubtlessly, they fear that I have a live Stardroid among my men... Ha! Imagine that."

Pirate Man laughed. "What'd'ya think, matey? Spend some time in the sun, helpin' us out?"

Neptune's generally unreadable affect was slightly broken. In some alien way, he seemed genuinely surprised about the idea. "Well- it does sound rather enjoyable, an extended break from solitude. If it is appropriate is another question. It must be considered before an answer is reached."

The captain beamed, looking out at the sky. The very edges of dawn were creeping. "Well, it be yer choice. 'Sides, we'll be fine if'n ya go back ta' yer own way. Them freaks'll never get th'better of ol' King!"

The two aging robots laughed.

Even a Guardian had failed to defeat the King Numbers.

Here Comes The Arm

CONTENT WARNING:

The following story is about the emotional experience of committing suicide, or at least one possible emotional experience of it. You have been warned. Do not read it if you cannot deal.

Klaxons blared. Panicked voices cried out. Footsteps tapped along at sprint pace. The old airfield was buzzing with desperate activity as its inhabitants rushed to enact their evacuation procedure. In the middle of it all, a lone Reploid sat in the control tower.

Petal marveled at the radar screen.

“Damn. Guess the little bastard wasn’t lying after all.”

The airfield’s sophisticated, custom-made radar array had been a gift from the leader of Tin Can, a fellow resistance settlement. Petal had privately felt paranoia that their leader had been overselling its capabilities, but here was his proof- the screen was showing the detection and identification of several stealth aircraft. Indeed, the perimeter patrol had achieved visual confirmation, and this had led to the evac order.

The enemy was from the Cutting Shadow. It was obvious, both because the system had analyzed as much, and because no other Neo Arcadians used stealth tech. That was Neo Arcadia’s secret police division- a ruthless outfit that used equal parts espionage tech and social engineering to achieve high-level political assassinations. They also had a small paramilitary force for wiping inconvenient “Maverick” groups off the map- groups like Petal’s.

He looked out at the chaos below. His people were frantically loading into three cargo planes. One of the planes closed its rear door and immediately started to taxi.

Fluttering above it all was his group’s flag. A detailed red phoenix diving downwards, viewed from its back, its talons facing up and its beak down. Its wings almost made a sort of triangle. Stenciled over the phoenix were the characters, “R-03”. The Third Resistance. Technically, going by the lineage, it was “The Third Reploid People’s Resistance to Neo Arcadia and General Fascism”, but the few people who had survived the purging of R-02 didn’t call it that anymore- and nobody had survived R-01. For many, the number had ceased to matter. It was just “The Resistance”.

It seemed today Neo Arcadia meant to purge R-03, but Petal wasn’t going to allow it. He was sending his beloved comrades off to the already-existing R-04. Petal keyed into the intercom network.

“This is Tower. Owl 1 through 3, you are all cleared for takeoff. Don’t waste any time, they’re gonna be here shortly.”

The channel crackled as a feminine voice replied.

“Petal, what the hell are you still doing in the tower?! Come on, get down here!”

It was Serin. Pilot of Owl 3. Petal's best friend. Hearing her voice was painful.

"Serin, there's no time! Get movin'! I can't get down to you in time, and someone has to operate the air defenses! It's the only way to keep them off your asses!"

The feminine Reploid's voice cracked with desperation.

"That's a death sentence, dammit!"

Petal grimaced. He knew this was coming. He did his best to play it off.

"Don't worry about me, okay? I'll just lay low until I'm sure the coast is clear. Then I'll follow you in the four-seater. It's already gassed up."

It wasn't gassed up. Petal didn't even know if it was airworthy.

"Damn you, Petal! You better make it, or I'll- I'll-"

She broke off, distraught. Petal took the initiative.

"Just GO, Serin! We don't have time for this!"

"...Acknowledged. Owl 3 out."

The three aircraft taxied to their respective runways. Simultaneously, they each fired their takeoff booster rockets. The trio were immediately speeding down the airstrips, their engines roaring. In mere moments, they were away, rising into the sky like angels. Petal saluted before focusing on the computer. On a second monitor, he opened up the air defense control program. All the batteries read green, sitting ready atop the buildings. The Reploid punched in a few commands. Each battery started to individually track one of the contacts on the radar. There were more than 3 times the targets than there were guns, but Petal accounted for that, with each battery instructed on its follow-up targets.

It wasn't time to fire yet. The targets were too far and low. Petal knew he would have to wait until they were basically overhead.

The moments passed. He felt a sense of tension. With each second that ticked by, the radar screen updated, showing the enemy was closer, closer, yet closer. He could now see them from the tower. Even at this distance, his sharp eyes could make them out. Exactly as the radar said, it was a group of beetle-like transport copters, escorted by fighters in the shape of boxy ladybugs. All were painted in the distinctive dark-grey of a radar-absorbent ablative coating. Of course, not absorbent enough anymore. Petal grinned.

The radar indicated that the fighters were accelerating and changing heading, trying to match the escaping cargo planes. Petal had already accounted for this. The fighters were

prioritized by the targeting scheme. He keyed in another command. The computer started averaging the position of every craft together, using the numbers to draw a dot in the rough center of all the craft. He tracked the dot's distance to the airfield.

Two kilometers.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick...

A moment later- one and a half kilometers.

One kilometer.

Half.

Quarter. The roaring of engines was audible. The fighters would be overhead any moment.

Tenth.

Click.

The instant Petal's thumb actuated the fire button, his vision was overwhelmed. Beams of white-hot light blasted up into the sky. The frontmost fighters disintegrated, their burning hulks dropping like bricks.

Click.

More divine beams of holy light, more dying ladybugs.

Click. The entire fighter escort was dead. Several of the transport beetles followed them down. The remaining beetles dove for the surface.

Click. A few more beetles exploded.

And that was all Petal could do. The rest were below range, putting down in the vast meadow that stretched beyond the perimeter of the airfield. With a final command input, he set the laser system to automatically fire on anything that came back into the kill box- a final gift for any insufficiently cautious Neo Arcadian pilots, for when they left.

The Reploid slumped in his chair. He put his legs up on the desk and cradled the back of his head in his hands. He sighed. They were safe. The transport craft couldn't match the full speed of the planes, and they didn't have the weapons to take them down. Now it was time for his reward.

The truth was, Petal was a dangerously depressed Reploid. He'd always lived a maximally miserable life. He'd been built with an emotional imbalance in his mental

circuitry that made joy difficult to experience for more than the immediate moment. He'd hated his job in Neo Arcadia. He'd hated waking up after sleep cycles. Consciousness, cognition, it was a curse to Petal.

When Reploids escaped Neo Arcadia, it was common to name oneself, or to be named by friends. A spiritual act of defiance, because Neo Arcadia only granted serial numbers. Petal had said his name was because he loved to look at synthetic flowers in the garden he used to work near, and he wanted to embody them. He *had* worked near a garden, but it wasn't the real reason. In truth, he wasn't a flower, but a piece of one ripped from the whole. That's how he felt. That's what being a petal- being Petal- was.

He'd figured out a while ago that he didn't want to be alive. But he persisted, because his friends would miss him. It was inexplicable that he had friends. In private moments, he would look in the mirror and tell himself, "They only tolerate you because of the circumstance that we're all *fucked* and trying not to die." He persisted because he owed it to them to keep them safe as long as he could. Well, he'd done it. He'd protected them from a direct assault by the Cutting Shadow. Wasn't that enough? Couldn't he take his reward now?

You'll never be enough, anyway.

A grimace crossed his features. God, he loathed himself. He loathed his inadequacy. His failures. The fact that he couldn't even enjoy saving them. He thought of Serin's face. What would *she* think?

It was too late, anyway. There wasn't exactly an escape waiting for him, and the survivors of his light show were doubtlessly on foot to the airfield. Maybe he could hide, and fix up the plane later, and-

Don't be a coward. You want this.

"I want this."

"It's just nerves."

"We're built with a drive to self-preserve. It can be overcome, just like every other Asimov."

God, his voice sounded shaky and hollow. He needed to distract himself for a moment.

Petal opened up the e-mail client on the computer. His fingers trembled as he typed.

TO: tanukiman@tincan.infra

SUBJECT: Thanks

BODY: Hey, little dude. I just wanted to thank you. Your radar system worked flawlessly. A Cutting Shadow squad was picked up way early on the way to the base. Gave us enough time to load up and head out. They're going off to join up with R-04. You're probably not gonna hear from me anymore, but get in touch with R-04 and make sure my people arrived safely, okay? And, again, thanks. I have to admit I kinda thought you were just fucking us over for some reason or another. That was wrong of me. Your stuff works, and I know you guys will be safe under its eye. Stay safe out there!

Your pal,

Petal

A lump formed in his throat. It was vague, but the old robot was perceptive. He would probably pick up on the funereal nature of it.

Old robot. It felt weird to call him old- he was eternally youthful, his voice and manner and *optimism* making him come off like a 20-year-old human that hadn't yet been beaten down by life. Of course, that was just how he appeared. The weird little guy was much older than anyone in R-03. Apparently, he'd been in some deep shit decades ago, several times over.

You're stalling. Send it.

The mouse cursor hovered over the client's "send" button. He tried to click it. His finger didn't move.

Fucking send it.

He strained. The anxiety was killing him.

Not killing me fast enough.

"Gah, it's just an e-mail! Why am I being such a pussy?!"

He tried to click, trying to be bolstered and spontaneous with his utterance. Nothing.

He heard a noise in the distance. Startled, his finger clicked the button. He watched helplessly as the upload process occurred. In just a second, the computer uplinked to a comms satellite and was on its way to the Tin Can comms network.

"Shit."

No going back now.

Petal pulled his pistol from its holster. His hands were shaking as he lifted it. Reclining again in the chair, he considered its shiny frame. He flicked the safety on and off in a slow rhythm, enjoying the beeps it made.

After only a minute or two, a shadow in the room seemed to unnaturally elongate. It coalesced into the form of a man. The end was here.

“Cut the theatrics.”

Before him stood a combat Reploid clad in thin white and grey armor, trimmed with accents of brass. At his side was a sheathed high-frequency katana. His scarf was singed, and he was marked with a few scorch marks. Dull grey eyes peered out from the eyeholes of his helmet, simultaneously lifeless and indicating a seething anger that matched his scowl.

“Hidden Phantom. Wow. I didn’t think they’d actually send the big man himself to deal with our little ol’ operation. I’m flattered. Looks like you enjoyed the light show a little too up-close and personal, if the carbon scoring’s anything to go by. Hope the crash hurt, you sick son of a bitch.”

Phantom’s scowl deepened.

“That was unprecedented. Your kind should not have been able to predict my approach. Waste Management Unit, you will come with me, and you will explain your tricks.”

There was no “or else”, nor was there a promise of mercy. It was simply a command with implied gravity. It washed uselessly over Petal. He was beyond any fear- at least, from external sources. Neo Arcadia couldn’t make him hurt a single ounce more. He was at his capacity for torment.

The defiant Reploid reached out to slam a button on the keyboard. Distant thumps were audible as explosive charges attached to the radar antennae blew up the array. The secrets of their design were safely destroyed.

Phantom’s eyes bugged out. “What did you just do?! Waste Management Unit, explain yourself!”

“My name is Petal. Go to hell.”

The rebel raised the pistol towards Phantom. He lined up the notches of the sights. He was about to squeeze the trigger.

Several kunai flew forth, faster than the robot’s trigger finger.

REPORT: Superficial damage, torso. Status: Low-priority.

REPORT: Disabling damage, left arm. Status: Power to wrist servos compromised.

REPORT: Structural damage, neck. Status: unstable, needs support repair ASAP. Coolant line severed. Significant risk of overheating to critical processing components if not repaired before heat sink saturates.

REPORT: Cognitive vessel pierced. Central memory units inoperable. Root persona destroyed. Memories not found.

REPORT: Fatality.

Shutting down body for reclamation...

Petal's limp form collapsed out of the chair, landing on his back. He didn't move. Cautiously, Phantom approached, wary of the buster on the floor. The Reploid was definitely dead.

The Guardian froze as he spied the dead robot's face. It wore a peaceful expression. The eyes were closed, but not squeezed shut in pain or fear. The makeup was intact. There was a faint smile upon the mouth. If not for the various kunai embedded in the body, one could almost think Petal was simply sleeping, having a pleasant dream.

He was finally at peace.

A wave of rage flooded into Phantom. He wanted to smash the corpse, deface it as an example, leave it in ruins! He gripped compulsively at the hilt of his katana, staggering side to side, wracked with indecision.

But he stopped. He didn't dare touch the body.

It was pointless. Phantom was supposed to be able to inflict fear on anyone.

And yet.

This insolent rebel had bested him even in death. There was nothing Phantom could do to make him afraid or make him hurt. The man was beyond Phantom's reach in every way that mattered.

Petal had won.

Intermission: The Fifth Heavenly Emperor

TIN CAN PUBLIC AIRGAPPED INTEL ARCHIVE

Remember: Security is everybody's responsibility! Please do not save or retransmit the files on this archive server. They are airgapped for a reason. -Tanuki Man

The following file is a partial written transcript that was retrieved from the far depths of Cyberspace.

The footage is grainy. Text burned into the frame lists it as a security camera in the intact sub-basement of the destroyed Wily Tower. The camera turns back and forth. It is in a dimly lit hallway. At the far end is a high-security vault door. At the near end is the exit to a security checkpoint, unmanned. Painted lettering on the wall indicates that the hallway is on "Sublevel 13".

[namerefmissing:euphemistic:neoarcadianfifthheavenlyemperor] busts down the checkpoint door and begins to calmly walk down the hallway. TNCN-001 Tanuki Man's voice is heard on the PA system.

[Tanuki Man] "And just what do you think you're doing,
[namerefmissing:euphemistic:neoarcadianfifthheavenlyemperor]?"

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "Silence, Maverick."

[Tanuki Man] "Are you lost, friend? Last I checked, your ilk tended to avoid this place, for pretty good reason."

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "My compatriots are afraid of what you know, Maverick. Of what secrets and weapons you squirrel away in these ruins. But I'm not afraid. You offered no resistance to my access."

[Tanuki Man] "So what are you seeking?"

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "I think you know the answer."

[Tanuki Man] "That's a real bad idea."

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "For you."

The Fifth Heavenly Emperor reaches the vault door.

[Tanuki Man] "You know, I've got the codes to Wily's old site nuke. It was his last resort. He buried some truly powerful stuff here. Sort of thing the man wanted to forget about. Zero, back when he was called Infinity, before he was moved offsite... the R-Shadow project, before he escaped... and the thing behind that door. Maybe it's time I blow this place?"

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "I know you won't. You're merciful to a fault."

[Tanuki Man] "You're right that I won't. But it's not *mercy*. I'm not *merciful* to a fault. I just balk at pulling the trigger. I've done some pretty merciless things to protect my loved ones, killing's just not one of them. But consider: My lack of pulling the trigger in this case is really

more of a refusal to intervene in the trolley problem. Train's comin' at you. I pull the nuke, *that* would be showing you mercy."

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "Cut the sophomoric philosophical riddles. Speak clearly or be silent."

[Tanuki Man] "You want it blunt? Fine. Dying by a nuke is a much better fate than what's waiting for you if you enter that vault, pal."

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "That's a clever lie."

The Fifth Heavenly Emperor begins to type an access code into the console.

[Tanuki Man] "Well, it was worth a shot. My hands are tied. Don't say I didn't warn you."

An alarm sounds, slowly pulsing its cry. Spinning red lights activate. Ancient hydraulics hiss. The locks on the vault door begin to part.

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "When I'm back in Neo Arcadia, I'm telling everyone about your tactics. Your words will become an object lesson in why you can never trust a Maverick."

The door slides open. An indescribable glow is cast into the hallway and across the Fifth Heavenly Emperor's features.

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "...My God."

[Tanuki Man] "The (?). Exactly as you expected, right?"

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "It's better than I expected, Maverick. I am going to use it to erase everybody you love, one by one, until you're all alone, a weeping mess. Then I'm going to erase you. Don't worry, scum, I shan't prolong your suffering all too much! Ha!"

[Tanuki Man] "...Alright, this is really your final warning, because you really don't seem to get how this-

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] "Silence!"

The PA speakers increase to a deafening volume. The Fifth Heavenly Emperor covers his ears but clearly still hears Tanuki Man's voice.

[Tanuki Man] "Listen, idiot! The (?) doesn't work like you think it does! The old man never completed it! It almost destroyed him, so he sealed it away! I don't know how you got that access code, but it was in containment for a very good reason! The second you touch those controls, you're gonna be obliterated, retrocausally! You will have never existed! You're not going to even get the chance to enact your petty murder on me or my people!"

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] “Lies! Deception!”

[Tanuki Man] “It’s not functional! It’s got bugs in the code! The testing of the (?) with simple control parameters was nearly catastrophic! If you use it with any serious intent, it’ll just create a feedback loop! You won’t even have time to regret it!”

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] “Why would you tell me this? I am your enemy. If this was true, you wouldn’t want to stop me.”

[Tanuki Man] “I hate you. I hate all of you Neo Arcadians. You are a deeply evil force that is killing the people of this world. But... You have the opportunity to stop. At any time. You have the chance to experience a world of peace. You can atone. A life spent making up for your crimes is better than no life at all. And besides... I truthfully have no idea of the extent of what will happen. I just know the bare minimum of the (!) Effect. It could be much further reaching than even Wily’s wildest calculations accounted for. Turn back so someday I can actually show you mercy.”

[Fifth Heavenly Emperor] “This is stupid. Goodbye, Maverick.”

The Fifth Heavenly Emperor steps over the threshold.

[Tanuki Man] “NO! [namerefmissing:euphemistic:neoarcadianfifthheavenlyemperor]!”

A moment passes. The aggressive clicks of typing can be heard. The video feed distorts. Illegal colors begin to

The fifth heavenly >?? was completely erased from realit

ERROR: FILE CORRUPTED PAST THIS POINT

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Note from Tanuki Man: Okay, I’m tacking this on after the end of the legible data. We have absolutely no footage of the incident described in this transcript, nor any idea who transcribed it. As far as I can tell- and I’m no theologist- Buddhism doesn’t have Five Emperors. That’s kinda creepy, but it doesn’t necessarily mean anything- As far as I can tell, and again, I’m no expert, but the Four Emperors of myth aren’t really numbered serially. There wouldn’t be a specific “fifth” one. Indeed, our real-world Four Guardians aren’t serial, either. This could have explanations, I suppose- but the more pressing discrepancy? Wily Tower never had a Sublevel 13. I would know. And, like, I sent people to triple check. Structural scans, searches for secret doors, it all came up empty. It ends at Sublevel 12. There’s one odd area that looks like it could have lead to an access stairwell further down, but again, there’s nothing there. If a Sublevel 13 was ever planned, clearly the good doctor never had the chance to build it before the tower fell.

Also, I mean, obviously I don't remember having this interaction.

That being said- the text of this file references some very real things that almost nobody would ever know about. It's not secrets I'm keeping, but things like "Zero used to be Infinity and was briefly sealed at the Tower" and "R-Shadow was an unfortunate thing that existed" and "I know the Tower's nuclear failsafe codes" would just never come up in conversation. I just don't know who could have made this, or when, or why it was buried so deep in Cyberspace, or why it's so... heavily corrupted.

I guess there is an unsettling possibility that it's true. There was a Fifth Guardian, and Wily had some sort of broken reality-altering machine sealed away, and we were keeping an eye on it along with everything else, and the Fifth Guardian tried to break in and use it on us, and in the process, he erased not only himself, but the entire sub-basement it was in, his own name and all records of it, and an entire religious concept. Just a conceptual tunnel bore out of reality. And we lost track of the thing because of this meddling. Was the device taken with him? I hope so. It sounds like a lot more trouble than it's worth.

If it's true, what are we even supposed to do with that information? I guess, theoretically, it means the fifth guardian, whoever he might have been, and this machine, are no longer a threat. That's good, right?

I'm open to speculation.

Area Of Zero

Part 1

Footsteps clacked along the catwalk behind the wall's crenelations. Penelope lead her squad to the objective with a grim silence. Tin Can's far perimeter sensors had triggered. Something was out in the desert.

The defensive wall was always manned. Teams operated gun emplacements at regular checkpoints, and foot squads walked along the top at predictable intervals. But for an incident like this, higher-level investigation was required. Penelope had volunteered to assess the threat from the point on the wall closest to the direction of the report. Despite herself, she felt tense. The readings were both concerning and vague.

She pulled out her binoculars. They were a heavily customized digital device with a rangefinder, toggleable optical filters, and even a Cyberspace node viewer interface. The device's housing was mostly a rectangular prism, but there were irregular protrusions and buttons here and there. She pressed the eye cups to her face. Guided by the signatures of

the sensors far out in the sands, she pointed the device in the direction of the disturbance. She adjusted the optical focus dial.

What she saw made her pause. She muttered to herself, “No way.”

“What is it, Pen?”

The woman looked back at her squad.

“Group of Neo Arcadians. Desert-configuration Pantheons and two officer Reploids. They’ve been engaged by... by Zero.”

It was a few minutes later. The explosion echoed across the desert for miles as the fireball churned upwards into the sky. Zero peeked up from his prone position. The enemy was dead. He’d caused the larger Reploid’s core to overload, and then shoved the injured smaller Reploid against him. They’d been more or less vaporized and sent directly to Hell by the blast. Gingerly, he got up into a crouching position. Opening his cloak, he inspected himself. His injuries hadn’t been worsened in the skirmish. Good. He poked at the shrapnel stuck in his shoulder plating. The dull soreness roared up to full on inflammation. He withdrew his hand.

A noise drew his attention.

Tires in the sand. Offroad vehicle. Old civilian model of a military truck, possibly. Electrical, likely directly Energen-powered.

He looked in the direction of the noise. Sure enough, an old open-topped truck was approaching him, kicking up dust. It was desert tan, with a wildflower stenciled on the side. There was a cannon of some sort mounted on a swivel in front of the bed.

Energy emitter muzzle, thick cable likely connected to an out-of-sight Energen reserve and converter device.

The occupants didn’t seem to carry a hostile demeanor. The one manning the cannon was aiming it into the distance, likely scanning the horizon for threats. Their uniforms didn’t look Neo Arcadian. If anything, they were not too different from the Resistance garb. Zero felt a pang of regret, being reminded of them.

Inevitably, the truck approached and slowed to a stop. He looked up apprehensively at the driver. She smiled at him.

“Zero. You’re a sight for sore eyes. We were driving out to back you up, but... Obviously, you handled it, heh. Come on, we’ll take you back to town. Catch up, get you patched up.”

The gunner commented, “Yeah, you look like you’ve seen better days, hah.”

Zero tensed. He didn’t grab his saber from his belt, but he readied to.

“Do you people know me?”

The woman’s calm demeanor shifted to confusion.

“Zero, it’s me. Penelope. It’s been a while, but you’ve helped us out before. We all kept in touch with you for a while, until you disappeared. We didn’t even know you were back... Hell, we’d have reached out if we’d known.”

The warrior’s tension dissipated.

“...Sorry. I was in hibernation for a long time. I don’t remember anything from before, but I’ve been fighting Neo Arcadia since I woke up.”

Penelope winced.

“Damn. Well, look, you’re not doing yourself any good out here. Come on back and we’ll reconnect.”

She patted the passenger seat beside her. Silently, Zero obliged, climbing up into the truck. Once he was secured, she turned the vehicle around and they sped back from where we came.

“Where are you taking me?”

The woman pointed towards the central tower, rising out of the desert haze. A hyacinth flower matching the one on the truck was painted on its side.

“Our home. Town called Tin Can.”

Part 2

It was a day after Zero had arrived in town. Many of the elder residents were clamoring to see him, but he’d been granted the space to rest and get his bearings and have his immediate worst injuries treated.

Now, inside one of the many common spaces found throughout the town, Zero was answering questions about his exploits while Tanuki Man gave him a more detailed damage assessment.

“So, you run into that rat bastard X?”

The voice came from the gaggle present. Zero met their gaze. “X is dead.”

A murmur ran through the group. “You killed him?”

“No. He died decades ago. After I was sealed away. His ghost came to me.”

Eyebrows raised. It was a crazy statement. Ghosts? X, the hero-turned-oppressor, long dead?

“Sorry, I should say his Cyber-Elf came to me. At first, he was just a vague voice and glow after I woke up. He returned my saber to me. Later on, he appeared to me and my comrades at Resistance Five’s base. Said he’d cracked the security ciphers on Neo Arcadia’s legacy transerver network. I didn’t believe him, but sure enough, when I booted up the base’s transerver machine, the worship site at the base of the Area X spire was listed as a valid destination.”

Zero paused, lost in recall of his prior home. He had the crowd’s rapt attention, and nobody chimed in. He resumed his tale.

“That was the last time I saw that base. We’d just barely driven off a severe assault by the Neo Arcadians, and plans were being made to evacuate... and I made the transfer, intent on distracting the Neo Arcadian military by attacking them directly. I emerged in the marble of a Greek Parthenon styled building. I made the long climb all the way up the spire, and the person I confronted at the top was a Reploid made as a copy of X, a stand-in ruler to keep the masses satisfied. He claimed to be the real X, but even without my memories, I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was a different person.”

Next to Zero was Tanuki Man, using a Cyber-Elf to inspect Zero’s systems. Next to Tanuki Man was a taller Robot Master with indigo hair. It was Copy Man, Tanuki Man’s partner. At the description of X’s doppelganger, he perked up, nudging Tanuki Man. “Heh. Evil clone of a Light. Remind you of anyone?”

Without looking up from his work, Tanuki Man muttered a response. “You’re too sweet to be evil. Get real.”

Copy Man spoke in mock offense. “You can be both, y’know.”

Zero continued on. “It was a feeling deeper than recollection. Like my body was anticipating a certain danger and thrill and pain that was simply missing. I killed him with extreme prejudice. In his dying moments, he set off a fail-deadly mechanism. I would have been vaporized, but that Cyber-Elf appeared, shielding me from the blast and conveying me into the desert. He’d hinted at it before, but he finally revealed himself to be the true X.

We spoke, and he asked a favor of me- keep fighting the Neo Arcadians, or as he described them, the true Mavericks. I knew I couldn't return to my comrades- the enemy would chase me relentlessly now that I had killed their perversion of X. So I have fought, for half a year, day in and day out. Sometimes, it feels pointless, like the enemy is neverending, but I know, logically, that every enemy I kill directly costs the enemy on the whole. So I keep going."

Another voice spoke up. "So does this mean that Neo Arcadia is, like, fucked? Can't cover up a dead leader, right?"

Zero responded in an even tone. "They kept up the ruse that X was around for years after he died, and eventually were able to get by with a fake one. While it was undoubtedly a problem, they're far from finished. It is my belief that the Four Guardians are currently joint leading the military and delegating the political situation."

His normally stoic expression broke into a wicked grin.

"I should probably call them the Three Guardians now."

"Don't tell me..."

"You didn't."

Zero beamed. "Yup. As I was climbing to meet the fake X, I had to fend off the Guardians. Beat 'em all bad. But Phantom wasn't having it. Blew himself up to try to stop me. It didn't work out well for him."

A raucous cheer broke out. One of the Wily-bots present- not Copy Man- exclaimed, "That's our little brother! Hell yeah! Fuck Phantom!"

After the cheer died back down, Tanuki Man got Zero's attention. "Report'll be ready in a second."

The Elf flitting around Zero ceased, coming to rest on Tanuki Man's shoulder. Its holographic body was in the aspect of a humanoid mouselike creature wearing Reploid-esque battle armor.

"Pinatari here has looked you over pretty thoroughly. Their report mostly lines up with the more superficial observations I made yesterday. Right shoulder hydraulics are in bad shape from that shrapnel I dug out, you're using the reserve line. Your core is damaged and you're burning a lot of fuel on nothing as a result. And a lot of your armor systems are compromised. This is pretty bad, and it's honestly shocking you were able to fight like that. Bad news is, we don't have the tooling or parts or materials to *fully* repair you. Even nowadays, you're just so advanced. Good news is, we can do plenty to ease your pain and bring your effectiveness back up. I'm sending a team out to the remains of the old Wily

Tower to recover some spare parts the old man had made for you. He never made enough for a full replacement body, but there's some stuff lying around that would be really annoying to find substitutes for otherwise."

Zero touched at the taped up wound on his shoulder. It hurt much less. "Even just getting that chunk out of me was huge. Thank you."

He smiled at the Cyber-Elf. "And, uh, thank you, too, Pinatari."

The Elf gave a tiny thumbs-up and smiled back at the warrior, before reverting to their abstract form- a glowing green orb, pulsing with rings.

Zero asked, "Speaking of Cyber-Elves, what about the ones I brought with me?"

Tanuki Man replied, "Yes, they've been rejuvenated. They're all stable and ready to go, except for Jackson. They were really low on power when they lent you help in your latest fight. They'll live, but they were a bit destabilized, and I don't think it would be healthy for them to try to use their ability again."

Zero remembered Jackson saving him from what would have been a fatal blow to the chest during the fight. He felt regret.

"Sorry."

Tanuki Man smiled. "Hey, it's alright. You've taken good care of your guys, and Jackson will be fine."

Zero replied, "I appreciate all the help. I wish I could say I remember the times before when I was in contact with you guys."

"Don't worry about it, Zero. We're just all glad to see you're out and about and doing what you do best."

Part 3

The air was still. It was warm out, but not humid. Zero was sitting on a bench, idly studying a photo. His body still showed signs of wear, but he was in much less pain. His range of motion was something approaching the norm.

A woman's voice addressed him. "What'cha lookin' at?"

Zero looked up.

Humanoid. Elderly appearance, wrinkles. Olive skin, brown eyes, brown hair. Visible seams on arms, visible indicator lights. Cane. Unarmed. Friendly expression.

He turned the photo around. It was of himself, sitting with a masculine Reploid. He was in much better shape in the photo. The other man wore a lab coat styled like a military uniform, and a translucent red sensory enhancement visor. His hair was slicked back. He was positively beaming, and Zero's usual stony face was replaced with a gentle smile. Both were waving to the camera.

"Friend of yours?"

He replied, "He's the head mechanic at Resistance Five. We were close. More than friends, I think."

The woman smiled wryly. "You think?"

Zero also smiled, but sadly. "Never had time to figure that out with him. There was an attack on our old base. Almost lost him and a few others. Set off on my mission to Neo Arcadia right after. It couldn't wait.

She frowned. "I see. Hold on, lemme grab a seat. Bones're achin'."

Slowly, carefully, the woman lowered herself onto the unoccupied part of the bench, resting her cane across her lap. Zero offered a hand to shake. "Oh, uh, I'm Zero, by the way. I don't think we've been introduced."

The woman laughed. "I know who you are, sweetheart. You were famous when I was younger. Besides, you're all anyone here can talk about. But, uh, I'm Tomato. It's nice to actually meet you, Zero."

She took his hand, shaking it firmly. He could feel that her hand was covered in an immersively flesh-like silicone. A status light glowed on the back of her palm. If not for the light and the seams, he could almost mistake it for a human arm.

Tomato asked, "You miss him, huh? Why not go back to see him?"

Zero sighed. "I wish I could. But they were preparing to evacuate the base when I left. I don't know where they went to. And besides, until Neo Arcadia is no longer a threat, I cannot afford to take the risk. They follow me closely... I can't lead them to him. For the same reason, I have to leave here tomorrow."

Raising an eyebrow, the woman asked, "Didn't you only get here a week ago?"

An expression akin to embarrassment crossed the warrior's features. "Yes. I feel bad about lingering for so long, quite honestly. But the opportunity to recuperate has been helpful, and I've had the chance to meet with family I didn't know I had. It's almost all older brothers, except for one- I have a nephew. They made him come visit. Like I said, I don't

remember anything of the past, but... it was nice. They were all just so natural with me. It felt familiar in an odd way, like the memory is there but I can't see it."

Tomato said, "There would have been a point when I was much younger where this would have been crazy to say, but Wily's sons are alright. Not a lot of them left anymore, though. I'm glad you got to have time with 'em. But, uh. You don't gotta feel bad about lingering. Between them and the militia, we can handle ourselves. Not like Neo Arcadia likes to mess with us, anyway. Tanuki thinks they're kinda afraid of us. On account of the stuff we're keeping an eye on in the Tower. And all the forbidden information he's gathered over the years. They could probably wipe us off the map, but they would regret it, and there would be survivors to make a whole new Tin Can. They'd just kick the can down the road in a manner of speaking, hah."

Zero nodded approvingly. "That's good. It's important to have a deterrent if you cannot successfully face them in open warfare. I think I served as the Resistance's deterrent when I was there, but... well, things escalated before I left. Enough operations went well that they shifted into needing to actively work to eliminate me as a threat, I believe."

Tomato reclined. "I wouldn't know much about war shit. I can shoot, but that's about it."

The sunlight started to dim. Zero and Tomato both looked up at the sky. A cloud was rolling into place, obscuring the sun. It was followed by a whole sheet of overcast, rapidly moving horizon to horizon.

"Gonna rain."

Zero's voice was absolutely astonished. "This far into the desert?"

"Yeah. We're about a few hours away from Neo Arcadia. They use artificial weather machines to seed rainclouds. It's partly to simulate nature for the humans, and partly to assist in irrigating their farms. The clouds always drift out to us. It's one of the few nice things the place makes, honestly."

She paused, closing her eyes. After a minute, she idly commented, "I got a granddaughter out in Neo Arcadia..."

This, too, surprised Zero. "I thought they banned Reploids making offspring. I didn't know it was still happening enough for multigenerational lines to be cropping up."

Tomato's eyes opened. She looked at the fighter. "Hon, I'm not- huh?"

"Wait, you're not a Reploid?"

She laughed. “That’s right. I’m a bona fide human.”

“But- your seams? The indicators on your body?”

“Augments, sweetheart. I’m old. They help hold me together. Assist with walking, shit like that. Reduces the pain I’m in. Looks badass, though. But- seriously, Zero, how many other ‘old person with joint problems’ models of Reploids have you seen?”

The question was intended as a lighthearted jab, but Zero replied in earnest. “One.”

“Oh? I’ve gotta hear about this.”

“His name was Andrew. He was a non-combatant in the Resistance. He used to have a human wife, long ago. Got progressively modded over time to match her aging. Real authentic stuff. Long beard, worse optics, hunched posture... Needs a cane, just like you. His wife died, and he never got his mods reverted. Think it’s how he grieves.”

Tomato pulled out a notepad and jotted something down. “Sorry, that’s just fascinating. I used to study robotic psychology- got a doctorate for it- and that’s just one of the most fascinating things I’ve ever heard. Like, obviously humans and robots shack up, that’s not weird, but *that* is interesting. If I wasn’t so old, I’d try to track him down to interview him...”

Zero watched her write with interest. “You been psychoanalyzing me, then?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I’m retired. Besides, you sorta seem to have it together. You got clear goals, and normally I’d call them unrealistic, but... I mean, you’re Zero. You’re known for getting things done.”

He grinned, appreciatively. “I do my best, Doctor.”

“Hey, like I said, retired! You don’t gotta ‘doctor’ me. But, uh, that being said... if you ever need to, y’know, talk- even just to vent- you can call me up. Even the strongest most badass warrior poets aren’t unbreakable.”

She giggled and tore off a piece of the notepad paper, handing it to Zero. It was a communication network ID.

Impossibly, Zero laughed. “Warrior-poet?! I think I’m a little too uncreative to be called that. I always have trouble thinking of anything meaningful to say to the freaks Neo Arcadia sends after me. Y’know, they give me their whole spiel about how they’re gonna kill me, and then a minute later, they’re being killed by me. I guess this one time, they sent this strange slime-based Mechaniloid after me, and I couldn’t help but comment on how it

looked like an ugly slug- but that's not poetry. That was just me being a dick. Warrior-poet. You're a funny one, Tomato."

The pair laughed. Rain began to fall.

Somatics

The room was dim. It was one of Tin Can's data archives, a comfortable space. Here and there were shelves of books, mostly manuals for old programming languages and hardware interfaces. Data servers lined most of the walls, quietly humming away and awaiting queries from anyone connected to the town's network. The floor space of the room was dominated by cozy furniture and a few terminals for accessing the room's airgapped server. The room was a total contrast to the contents of that machine, which had been airgapped for the ominous sensitive data that was stored on it.

In short, it was hardly the typical medical hospital room, but then, Tin Can tended to have little use for medicine. A small alcove of the room had been converted, however, to house a single old hospital bed. In it lay Tomato, ailing in her old age.

The rest of the data archive room was unoccupied, save for an intently pacing Tanuki Man. Floating about him were myriad holographic charts and graphs and documents. They were being emitted from the projector in his helmet and several free-floating leaf-shaped emitters. Every few seconds, his focus shifted from one page to the next. Sometimes, he scanned up and down the document in focus, and sometimes, the contents of a given document expanded under his watchful eye.

Internally, he was hooked into a live feed of Tomato's senses, sent to him remotely by the augmentations installed in her body. In addition to his own view of his document spread, he saw himself through her eyes, stalking around between the furniture. He heard his own footsteps, resonating through his own body and nearly simultaneously reaching her ears. He felt his own weight shift with each footstep, and also the light blanket on her skin and the dull aches throughout her aged body. It was perturbing, but at the same time, motivating. He was monitoring and recording the feed of her experience for data that was helping him with his latest project- preserving her precious, short human life.

Tomato looked around at the room again, bored. Her eyes settled on a data vessel on a shelf near her. It had its own hologram emitter, displaying a wireframe of a complicated machine in the shape of a lotus flower. It was a hopeful, happy thing. It was a vision of the future.

The path traced by Tanuki Man's pacing brought him close to Tomato's bed. She sat up, wincing in pain. Frowning, she watched as Tanuki Man winced in kind.

Right. He's experiencing my sensations.

"Yo. Tanuki. Come sit with me a sec."

As his focus disrupted, the holograms flickered for the briefest moment. He looked at her with a startlingly, nakedly distressed expression. "I don't got time to. I dunno what kind of time we're working with. I can't- I can't afford to risk it. Every second is a risk."

Tomato sighed. "Look, I'm still able to move. I'm not on ventilation, or an IV, or anything like that. Everyone around who was ever built for medical shit's been helping. Please, just... chill. Take a moment. You've been pacing like that for days. It stresses me out."

Meekly, the short robot sat at the foot of the bed. Tomato leaned forward. If she ignored the hospital bed, it almost reminded her of sitting at a table at a restaurant in old Arcad-

OW FUCK

In unison, both recoiled backwards from a flareup in her spine. She regained her composure almost immediately, but the robot was panting, unused to the terrible sensations of senescence. "Tomato, I- hah- oh my gosh- I don't know how you humans deal with your body falling apart like this. This is terrifying. When a robot has a part go bad, we can just swap it for a good one."

The woman smiled, sitting back up. "Well, you've certainly given me your best shot at the experience. All the shit you installed in me really has kept me moving. Y'know, since you're takin' a break, you should turn off the link. I don't wanna accidentally *creak* you in half."

He grimaced. "I can't do that. I need all the data I can get from your body, and sharing the experience is a necessary cost of realtime analysis."

"Well, you could at least turn off the holograms for a few minutes?"

"Fine, fine..."

The jade glint of the text and graphs faded, and the floating emitters came to rest on a nearby counter. Tomato beamed, satisfied. She *would* make him have something like a proper break, whether or not he liked it. He cracked open an E-Tank and began to greedily chug the contents. The label indicated that it contained flavoring agents. It had abnormal

branding, seemingly mirroring a brief trend in the 2020's of human pre-workout drinks having ostentatious, violent branding with curse words and violent imagery. She snorted. "They still make that shit?"

Tanuki Man side eyed her as the cannister drained into his gullet. Pulling it away, he responded, "No, they don't. I kept a few cases of my favorite flavor in reserve for times like this."

She laughed. "Well, reverse engineering the flavor should be your next project. God, that takes me way back. You remember that old Global Communications Relay network? The shit people used to talk on?"

He fully paused, putting the drink down. "How could I forget? Dude, I straight up harassed like three different Stardroids on there once when they were in the whole 'Earthlings submit and we will make your executions hurt a bit less' phase. Crazy times."

Tomato responded, "Well, this is all reminding me of this one time... Roll Light was talking on the frequency about the difficulty of installing augments into humans, and I chimed in about wanting them. Said I'd replace most of my body if I could. Would be kickass. She gave me a really earnest earful 'bout how dangerous it would be to do for no reason. Shit about how complex the immune system is, and how bad prosthetic rejection is on the body. Scary shit. Guess I'm real glad that didn't happen when you guys fixed me up. 'Cause it turns out I was totally right. It does kick ass, even though my augments don't even let me do anything cool. Just seeing seams and lights on parts of my body is... I dunno, awesome."

Tanuki Man perked up at the mention of Roll's research. "Y'know, we actually referenced a bunch of her published papers when we were figuring out how to augment you. I've been looking into a bunch of her work for this project, too. It's very interesting and useful stuff, but I'm hoping we can entirely bypass you out of, well, biology. It's looking a lot like the weirder ends of my Cyberspace research is coming into play for it. Either way, once we get you stable for the long haul like the rest of us, I'll make your body able to do whatever you want, alright?"

Tomato smiled, but there was a certain sadness to it. "Y'know... that does sound pretty great, but... Like, it's okay if it doesn't work out, yeah? Plenty of humans have died before. I just-"

The small robot made a strangled noise in his throat. "Please, I can do it, I know I can do it. I'm so close. I'm *right there*, Tomato. I just- need a little more time. Please. God, please."

“Tanuki.”

She grabbed him by the face. He felt her hands on his cheeks, and simultaneously, felt the sensation of his fluff in the nerves of her hands. He saw her face, wrinkled and content, and he saw his own distraught expression.

She spoke softly but firmly. “Promise me that you won’t beat yourself up if you don’t figure this out in time.”

He responded with more desperate fumbling. “I- Tomato, I- you’re one of my best friends. I could never-”

He felt the tiny pumps behind his eyes whirring, and he could see the saline moistening the fuzz below his artificial tear ducts.

The old woman pushed on. “You guys did a great job keeping me around and not in too much pain. But it’s really hard to keep a human going at the end. Shit’s rough. Like, I know what it’s like. But it’s okay to hurt. It’s okay to let go. I’m not saying don’t try, but just... I don’t wanna go off to the other side worrying that you’re gonna be all broken up about me, alright? Don’t worry too much about me.”

He sniffled. The sound resonated in both of their ears.

“Alright. I promise.”

She grinned and shook his face gently.

“And promise me you’re not gonna go crazy and stick a robot in me and turn my body into a fucked up meat puppet.”

Despite himself, he laughed just a little. It was macabre, but he couldn’t help himself. She laughed right back.

“Promise me, you little freak!”

“Alright, alright, I promise.”

Final Results: Tanuki Man

“I’m not a leader. I’m just a system administrator. All I do is keep the lights on and the books balanced, and sometimes I suggest courses of action that I think make sense, backed up by reasoning. When people follow my suggestions, it’s their own choice.”

Quick Facts

Name: TNCN-001 “Tanuki Man”

Gender: Masculine-leaning genderless

Sex: Masculine-analogous

Pronouns: He/him

Species: Robot Master

Creation date: February 8, 2001

Official firmware revision: 0.12.3

Mental age: Approx. 23 human

Height: 4 feet

Weight: 300 pounds

Alignment: Tin Can, Post-war Wily, Wily bots that have abandoned their father, King Numbers, un-corrupted Repliforce survivors, Resistance-02 through Resistance-05, robots who need help fleeing from oppressive humans, robots who stand up justly to human oppression, lost or overused Cyber-Elves.

- Tanuki Man does not view humans as an inherent enemy, but he nonetheless feels a sense of wariness around unfamiliar humans after observing decades of human politicians working tirelessly against the rights of Robot Masters and Reploids.
- Tanuki Man is an environmentalist, especially amplified by his association to DWN-016 Wood Man. He feels bitter towards entities that cause ecological destruction, directly or indirectly. For example, after the space station Eurasia deorbited and caused a global environmental collapse, he spent years sabotaging the software firm that designed the station’s security.
- Owing to his demeanor, Tanuki Man frowns on entities that kill unnecessarily and has disavowed Maverick movements such as Sigma’s rebellion.

- To Tanuki Man, it's fairly obvious that Robot Masters, Reploids, and Cyber-Elves, while possessed of their own unique psychological structures, are equivalent to humanity in terms of sentience and 'alive-ness'. He opposes entities that disagree.

Appearance



Tanuki Man is a fairly small robot, designed to resemble an anthropomorphic Japanese raccoon dog- a small wild canine with bushy fur and markings that make it resemble an American raccoon. It would be easy to mistake him for an “Animaloid” Reploid from the early Maverick Wars era, but there are tells that he is actually an early Robot Master. Chief among them are the exaggerated proportions of his face, in particular his large eyes. His appearance has shifted over time with the modifications and repairs that he has done to himself. A strange, boxy sensor array is attached to his head over where his original left eye used to be, though it has a screen that matches the iris appearance and angle of the normal eye.

His eyes feature dimly glowing irises, which shift color to indicate status. Their resting state is a low green shade.

Tanuki Man's overall appearance is defined by the dark grey armor plating that is strapped to most of his body. The armor is covered in sensors. Upon the forehead of his helmet is the sizeable lens of a robust hologram emitter. Embedded in his chest plate are four smaller emitters.

Underneath many of these plates is an irregular layer of artificial fur colored somewhere between mauve and lilac, made from cheap felt. This extends to his face. Underneath his

eyes are a pair of true purple stripes that trace down his face, designed as an abstraction of a real world tanuki's 'mask' fur pattern. By coincidence, they resemble the facial makeup of SWN-001 Bass.

Tanuki Man's helmet matches the gray of the rest of his armor. It is a simple design, made from an un-styled helmet blank. It has subtle flat circular protrusions where humanoid ear cups are typically mounted. The helmet has cutouts with rims for his ears to stick through. It lacks anything like a central crest. Instead, the helmet's only real detail is the hologram emitter. During combat, a translucent visor piece flips down for eye protection.

Underneath his helmet, the fake fur on Tanuki Man's head transitions to a fluffier material that emulates something like hair.

All over Tanuki Man's body are small square connection points for his armor to anchor onto. The easiest one to spot is on his forehead, under where his helmet's emitter is placed.

Tanuki Man's head is topped by a pair of pointy canine ears. The rims of his ears contain loops of wiring that function as redundant communication antennae.

His fashion sense outside of his armor is fairly eclectic. Examples include: a specially tailored dress; a series of skirts; various faded loose-fitting logo tee shirts; and on rare occasions, stereotypical goth accoutrements such as fishnet gloves. Frequently, however, he also simply wears a reconstruction of the form fitting outerwear that was designed for his body, the original being long since destroyed.

He occasionally does makeup. Standard makeup works fine for the silicone rims that make up his lips and eyelids, but for any look that extends onto his face, he uses washable hair chalk.

Tanuki Man has a short tail. It is covered with the same fluffier material as the 'hair' atop his head, giving it a bushy appearance. It is used for maintaining balance.

Finally, Tanuki Man's back and feet are host to an array of microthrusters for rapid acceleration and directional change.

Personality

Tanuki Man is above all else a bubbly person. He approaches his interests with passion and curiosity and is all too eager to include people in his interests. This clashes with the fact that he is a perfectionist, and this can lead to moments of high anxiety. He has a dry sense of humor, honed by decades of friendship with cynical war veterans. He carries an eternal sense of mischief, and his morals are centered around broad outcomes rather than norms. Despite his up-front jollity, Tanuki Man has a side to him that has been hardened by the

losses he's experienced in his life. He is extremely protective of those he views as "his people". His ethics are defined by a desire to prevent lasting harm from being caused, and a desire to stop actively occurring harm. This is noble on the surface but has led to him employing ruthless tactics when commanding units in combat. Tanuki Man specifically refuses to personally kill anyone, and does not condone executions. However, he has been in command of lethal combat scenarios on several occasions.

A list of his strengths include:

- A strong sense of loyalty
- An understanding of his limitations
- An average sense of distress tolerance and a slightly above average sense of radical acceptance of negative situations
- A desire to forgive and a deference to hear out explanations.

A list of his weaknesses include:

- A poor tolerance for betrayal specifically.
- Social dependency
- Overriding coldness towards perceived enemies, to a degree that occasionally clouds judgement
- Trouble granting forgiveness despite the desire to grant it

Equipment, abilities, talents

Tanuki Man has the inherent benefits of most humanoid robots- far stronger, faster, more durable, and more perceptive than any un-augmented human, and even most that *are* augmented. Furthermore, he enjoys the specific benefits afforded to Robot Masters. That is to say, while his personality is subtly more rigid and he started from a template persona, he has the ability to download entire skillsets at will, such as a set of motions and techniques useful for painting. However, Tanuki Man is not in any way a combat robot. He has basic armaments including a rudimentary buster and a collapsible energy spear, but these are weapons of last resort. When faced with combat on his own, Tanuki Man's best prospect is to use holograms to confuse the enemy while abusing his mobility to flee. That said, he becomes more capable when operating a vehicle such as an armored mech. Furthermore, as a commander, he is decent at broad combat strategy and even a degree of troop micromanagement.

Of particular note is his talents at holography. He keeps several hologram emitters on his person, equipped with flight controllers, which he can remotely command; and he can generate holograms from his armor. He has an extremely wide variety of tricks. The

simplest panic option he's found to be consistently useful is to simply create holographic clones of himself that procedurally move about. He's used the devices to disguise himself in the past, or as a crude anonymizer device- by stepping into a monochrome shell of light, the wearer of the anonymizer hologram becomes impossible to identify by eye or camera. Under incredibly specific circumstances, using maximal processing power, Tanuki Man has been able to create a limited cloaking hologram that covered a small static area. A particularly esoteric use of the technology is to create a thermal blade by refocusing lensed light back onto itself, causing an extremely bright and hot blade of sorts that can be commanded wirelessly. The significant limitation to holography in its capacity for combat usage is that it works best in direct bright light, such as sunlight. In the dark, the emissive glow of a hologram becomes very unmistakable, even with simulated shadow shading applied.

Outside of combat, the holograms are useful as a quick way to share visual information, and Tanuki Man has become rather adept at quickly creating and tuning 3D models for display purposes. They're an incredibly potent visualization tool for projects such as reconstructing a damaged machine.

Tanuki Man's hips have hollowed out regions that make for storage space, analogous to the pockets on a human's pants. They're covered by doors. Over the years, he has modified his hips to be wider, both for aesthetic reasons, and to store more items. He primarily stores his holographic emitters and several spare cannisters of Energen in these hip compartments.

Tanuki Man is a skilled mechanic. He is able to keep himself and others in functional condition. A testament to this is his own body. While his frame is still more or less original, he's elected to replace much of himself with new or different components, either for the purpose of upgrading, or simply as maintenance demands it. He has a few unusual modifications, such as a bank of storage card slots installed in his arm, specifically for non-mental file storage. He is especially skilled at damage assessment and improvisational repair, once achieving the feat of stabilizing a severely damaged Wily bot long enough for him to safely shut down, while they were experiencing a turbulent air transport.

He has experience with weapon design even outside of niche physics tricks with holograms. He designed most of the standard issue arsenal that Tin Can's militia employs, and these were popular enough that several crates of Tin Can weapons made it into the hands of the Third and Fourth Resistance movements. One of his first designs, a handheld particle accelerator cannon, while not especially impressive by most standards, met the needs of its specialty mission- it had been designed to pierce Stardroids, overcoming their stout defenses. It saw limited deployment, but was nonetheless effective in driving off Terra

shortly before his timely death during the Second Invasion. His modern designs are significantly more generally useful. A hallmark of Tin Can weapon design is the ability to use off-the-shelf Energen cannisters as their ammunition magazines. This is extremely helpful because the majority of the militia are not designed for combat, and therefore their cores are not designed for buster output demand.

Adjacent to the weapon manufacturing is achievements in signal intelligence- Tanuki Man has, on many occasions, poached sensitive data from the networks of the UN and later Neo Arcadia, up to and including fiercely protected stealth fighter specifications that allowed him to create an early warning radar that Neo Arcadia was never able to counter in the years before it was erased.

Tanuki Man's intended purpose as ingrained into the template of his mind was to complete management tasks such as book balancing and purchases. This aptitude has been refocused into the efficient running of Tin Can's infrastructure. Under his quiet management, the town hums away, its data network and defense grid and power grid all working seamlessly. When construction is required, the materials and tools are allocated efficiently. The militia is able to experience the benefits of both autonomy and careful oversight. In short, Tanuki Man's greatest accomplishment is the constant running of the town he oversees but will never see himself as the leader of.

Biography

Begin record.

The early days of the history of robotics were a gold rush akin to the dot com bubble. When Thomas Light released his papers and schematics on the 'Robot Master' and showed of his son, Blues, to the world, it seemed like every company was taking a crack at their own Robot Master line, whether or not it really made sense for them to or not. It was a time when many products in search of a demographic came into existence- products that could think and feel and hurt. One such instance of this was the Tech National Conglomerate. If one looked up the definition of 'corporate cynicism', their logo might have been the result.

They had formed in the 1950's in the boom after the Second World War as the Tech National Corporation, manufacturing transistors and early circuit chips at the plant next to their silicon mine in the deserts of southwestern Nevada. It was mundane but stable work, assuredly profitable as the computer industry exploded. They absorbed more and more companies and their industries, taking a "Roman colonizer" approach- injecting a bit of their corporate culture and siphoning profit into their pooled coffers, but otherwise leaving companies to do their work as they had been. Corporation turned to Conglomerate, and for a time, they were among the most profitable corporations nobody had ever heard of,

manufacturing shelf-ready components that ended up in thousands of products that were commonplace in homes around the country. At the height of The Miracle in Japan, the Tech National Conglomerate went international, merging with several Japanese manufacturers. For a brief moment in history, the emotionally dead executives of the corporate amalgam must have felt like kings of the world.

And then The Miracle ended. The money ran out in Japan, and suddenly those branches of Tech National, too ingrained to be cut loose, turned parasitic as they bled value. Over the years, the assets of the company began to slowly dry up. Here and there were bailouts, largely in the form of miscellaneous government contracts- “build X component for Y military hardware project for Z years and we’ll subsidize some of it”, that sort of thing. But by the end of the 90’s, it was clear that this- and the whole company- were unsustainable. With the advent of Robot Masters, a Hail Mary was thrown.

TNCN-001 Tanuki Man was designed with a nominal management purpose- for in the age of Robot Masters, a central purpose was an essential component- but really, he was Tech National’s do-everything prototype. He was built on a tight budget, standing a mere four feet and existing as modular proof of concept show piece. Activated on February 8th, 2001, he was shown off at trade shows with a variety of hardware configurations in an attempt to entice investors. The story was always the same- his personality was charming, they liked him, but the focus of the design was all out of whack and they only had the one miniature prototype to show for it. While Tanuki Man had great social success up on the stage, the company was finished off by the failed R&D investment.

By the end of the year, the sum total of the Tech National Conglomerate’s assets were confined to the town where everything had started- Fairview, Nevada. Their shitty vanity ‘skyscraper’ (technically several floors short of the definition to save on budget), the town they de-facto owned, and their depleted silicon mine- which they had begun selling raw material out of as a last ditch effort- it was all just an empire of dust. The IRS was gearing up for the rare occasion to send in armed men in plate carriers to lock it down for an investigation. Third-party debt collectors had been spotted. Unrelated but concerning, there had been rumors of some sort of huge riot involving industrial Robot Masters that was spreading across the state. The writing was on the wall. The Robot Master bubble looked like it was about to pop, and Tech National didn’t even have the juice to witness it happen. It was time for the final day of business.

Everyone clocked in. Everyone started to load up their cars with whatever wasn’t nailed down in hopes of pawning it off. Much was simply left in place. Tanuki Man was ordered to shut down, left sitting on his maintenance platform on the Robotics Division’s floor. Nobody clocked out that day. Everybody was too busy fleeing in all directions.

In all likelihood, the remaining employees of Tech National would have been caught, the remaining assets in the town seized, and Tanuki Man found and reassigned to a different job, if the first Wily War hadn't just broken out. In the chaos, the matter was quickly shelved and eventually forgotten, a dusty curiosity in the vast filing cabinets of the government.

For the next twenty or so years, Tanuki Man slept a dreamless sleep. He likely would have rotted away to an irreparable pile of rusted scrap with enough time. But by some fluke, he woke up, and in relatively intact condition, no less. Aimless and confused, he wandered out into the forest that had grown up and around the town. It wasn't long until he came upon an encampment of Wily bots that had left the Tower. Taking pity on the confused robot, they took him in. They taught him about the world that had passed him by. In turn, he helped them however he could. He helped the Wily bots raid the local robotic disassembly plant, ruining the machinery and saving those that were on the chopping block. They retreated to the overgrown town, taking shelter in the still-standing ruins. Eventually, he got the opportunity to meet the big man himself, the good Dr. Wily. They saw eye to eye on much regarding humanity's mistreatment of robots. Wily agreed to help the robot set up the town for longterm habitation. The makeshift wall of shipping containers became a proper defensive wall with gun turrets. The crates of stolen E-Tanks became a solar power grid connected to a synthetic Energen refinery. From ruin, Tin Can was born, named in hopes of reclaiming the slur of "fucking tin can" from the humans.

Tanuki Man befriended one of Wily's original sons, a shapeshifter by the name of Copy Man. They very quickly bonded, spending much time together, with Tanuki Man even being smuggled through the teleporter pad onto a few random missions that Copy Man had been sent on.

The Wily Wars had been in flux after the first Stardroid invasion. Smaller scale conflicts had occurred here and there, but both Wily and the top brass of the UN were much more focused on shoring up defenses for another potential invasion. A strange artifact called the Beacon reactivated, reviving those Stardroids that had been killed, and recalling those that had escaped. It was obvious they were intent on regrouping and war was imminent. The first invasion had changed the face of the Earth for the worse. Nobody wanted it to happen again. Putting aside their differences for the time being, Wily and the UN put their heads together. Tin Can, being associated with Wily, became a part of the plan, specifically a part of the back-line logistical network that was being set up.

An asset denial mission was devised ahead of the invasion. Representatives from the coalition members would be sent. Three elite UN soldier robots, Copy Man, Bass, and Mega Man would be sent, with Tanuki Man as the team pilot. The mission was completed

successfully, but it was a pyrrhic victory. The assets were denied, but the great hero Mega Man died in the process. Nobody who made it home was spared trauma.

In the week following the mission, as the invasion drew closer, Tanuki Man and Copy Man spent their days listlessly cooped up in the relative safety of Tin Can's walls. Finally, things reached a breaking point. Awakening from a nightmare, Tanuki Man confessed his love to Copy Man. Copy Man reciprocated. They knew neither of them were guaranteed to survive the invasion, but they wanted each other to know. The mutual confession rejuvenated their spirits somewhat. They went off to face their respective challenges. Tanuki Man, for his part, heavily modified his body, hooking it up to a server cluster at the heart of Tin Can so he could simultaneously command all of his forces at once. It would allow him to keep them safe, to help them retreat as they ran supplies.

The Second Invasion was short, but brutal. The less that is said about it, the better. Suffice it to say that at the end of it all, many were dead. Countless Wily bots. Countless humans. Countless UN soldiers. Countless noble volunteers of all sorts. Reploids were unveiled in the invasion as an experimental fighting force, barely acquainted and already being sent to fight and die by the hundreds. Blues Light, the first sentient robot, ended up sacrificing himself to stop the full apotheosis of Sunstar.

In the end, the Second Invasion was where one era of history ended. In the wake, another dawned. Down was the Wily Tower. The UN had indirectly won. In the end, Tanuki Man and Copy Man survived. They reunited. Together, they did their best to heal. For a few short years, there was relative peace. Tanuki Man leveraged his contributions to the war effort and his personal friendship with the acting commander of the UN's forces in the invasion to secure the safety of Tin Can. During those years, the surviving Wily bots rallied in the town. Tanuki Man began his research into Cyberspace and developed technology to better interface with it.

The peace didn't last. In lieu of the common enemy of Dr. Wily's sons, a new classification was invented by the UN- the Maverick. In theory, it specifically meant Reploids that were exhibiting violent behaviors due to cognitive defect, but it didn't take long for it to become a general-use term for any robotic criminal or ne'er-do-well. The UN's own Maverick containment force, the Hunters, were the source of the first large scale revolt, as their leader brought half of their number on the warpath against society. As it turned out, Reploids were a technology that was not flawless, and they were being forced to live in an environment of unrest. The era of the Maverick Wars had started.

New heroes emerged. Zero and Mega Man X were the shining faces of the Hunters for a time, doing their best to contain legitimate threats. Zero personally involved himself in

helping Tanuki Man stave off Mavericks trying to take over Tin Can. He felt responsible for what little family he had left, after the revelation of his origins as the final son of Wily.

X turned more and more to politics, attempting to help maintain a status quo, but inevitably slipping into ineffectual bipartisanship. Suspicion of groups like Tin Can started to grow among certain political parties. The desire to label all non-conforming robots as Mavericks reared its head. The quality of living for Reploids began to decrease.

Things got worse. An entire massive space colony fell to the Earth, a result of a Maverick uprising that involved the use of malware to complete their goals. The resulting 'volcanic' winter drove humanity underground into shelters for several years. Dust advisories aside, Tin Can was unaffected, and those brief years were another moment of peace free from anxiety for the town. The remaining elements of Reploid government on the surface stuck to their own devices, building new cities for the humans to emerge into. Built on the bones of the UN with the site of the destroyed Arcadia as the capital, the humans emerged into the relative comfort of a fledgling Neo Arcadia. A new generation of ultra-modular Reploids- really, a poor imitation of Copy Man's capabilities- helped to run these cities, defending them from the odd Maverick attack and helping to reestablish the industries humanity so desired.

Once again, it seemed like peace was on the horizon. Once again, this did not happen. A new technology had been developed using the data from specific incidents that occurred in the Maverick Wars. Freely floating, disembodied program data with the discretionary capabilities- read, sentience- of Reploids came to be. It was the age of the Cyber Elf, and it didn't take long for the Elf Wars to start in earnest. The same story as always was recurring- new sentient technology emerged and was immediately abused, to ruinous effect. It is said that some 60% of the human race and the vast majority of recorded Reploids died.

Throughout it all, Tin Can stood mostly unaffected. Tanuki Man had already been wary of overusing the Cyber Elf, given their cruel limitation of dying if overexerted. Despite his misgivings about Neo Arcadia, he worked tirelessly on a solution to the root issues behind the war. Ultimately, he failed to find one before Neo Arcadia did. The Mother Elf seemingly stopped the war overnight.

You know how this goes.

The Mother Elf was a radical new paradigm of sentient technology.

A mad scientist came along and used her talents to hold the world hostage.

A bloody conflict occurred.

Tanuki Man stood by, unable to do anything but watch, being just a single disenfranchised robot with a small town of fellow disenfranchised robots.

Finally, the Elf Wars truly wrapped up. The man responsible was exiled, undergoing a form of perpetual living death. Zero went into stasis with the simple directive: "Wake me, when you need me." The Four Guardians were constructed as X's children and inheritors. X was laid to rest to seal away the fell power of the Mother Elf. Peace at last.

Sort of. Not really.

After all of that warring, humanity's propensity for bigotry was quite incensed. Things only ever got worse for the Reploids living in and being manufactured by Neo Arcadia. The eye turned inward in search of Mavericks. Places like Tin Can, already a point of suspicion, were conspired against. It would have been turned into a parking lot, but the night before the Four Guardians made their move, Tanuki Man breached into their top-level communication network to lay things out. It's not known exactly what he threatened to use, but it's likely it was something in the depths of the Wily Tower ruins- and therefore, likely a credible threat.

Finally. At long last. In a world that had been turned into a slow-burning cynical hell, with society at large entering an energy crisis caused by an unwillingness to give up treats, at least Tin Can was sure it would be more or less left alone. Robots were a people that had been invented as a convenient means of labor and a convenient scapegoat. Both were tuned to the maximum. Tin Can, then, was a tiny spot where a robot could go to be a person again.

A few decades passed. People came and went. Tanuki Man and Copy Man enjoyed their peace together. Even a human by the name of Tomato Durand moved into Tin Can on a permanent basis. Eventually, the gears of history began to turn again as revolutions began in Neo Arcadia. Zero came back and began murdering Neo Arcadian officers. He never stopped cutting them in half, one by one, until the city was wiped off the map.

In the spot where Eurasia impact had broken the world, nature spread out once again. The miracle technology of augmentation, and the collapse of humanity's ability to meaningfully surveil or wage war, meant humans and Reploids became closer than they had ever been- they became like each other. It was a real, lasting peace. But Tin Can kept to itself. Tanuki Man and all of the other old-timers had grown wary.

What is going to happen next is uncertain. Nature thrives, enhanced by nanotechnology and mechanical pollinators of all shapes and sizes. Cities stand proud and tall. Humans and robots intermingle. The world is a beautiful place. It was always a

beautiful place, but if you'd been watching for long enough, you really came to appreciate what had been scarred and what had made it through everything intact.

Maybe some stupid shit will come along to undo it.

Maybe it'll be some stupid shit caused by a delusional person, but it won't end up actually changing anything. That would be a good change of pace.

Maybe they'll invent a new category of sentient technology that they *don't* abuse and which the abuse of doesn't unravel the world.

All I know is, I am one old Reploid. I have seen a lot of shit happen. I've kept track of a lot. There's also a lot I'll never know. The absurdity of history has damaged my ability to maintain a professional tone.

If I'm a betting man, I'll say this: Whatever comes next, Tanuki Man will get us through it. He always has. Our gates remain open to anyone who needs to get away from it all, be it for petty reasons, or because the boot of fascism has once again descended.

This has been an extremely truncated summary of the history of our settlement for the Tin Can Historical Society.

End record.

All Epilogues Lead Here

The universe had existed for an irrationally long time. Humans, in their endless hubris, sought to estimate how long it could meaningfully last, and their greatest minds came to an estimate they called “ten to the hundredth power” years. In layman’s terms, a one followed by one hundred zeros. At such scales, accuracy ceased to matter to the humans. To their credit, they were in the rough neighborhood of correct, more or less. For minds designed only to live for infinitesimally mortal amounts of time, it might as well have been forever.

At the end of this time span- if it is even still worthwhile to call it as such- entropy was nearly at its maximum for the entire universe. All of the energy that existed was almost perfectly distributed. Stars were a distant memory. The dead cores had existed for so long that their atoms had all converted- they were giant black spheres of iron, floating invisibly against a vantablack backdrop through which very little light or heat travelled.

In this time after time, there was one final spot of life, the universe’s final black hole. Even these silent sentinels in the dark had expiration. Everywhere in the universe, at all moments, even as equilibrium reigned supreme, tiny pairs of particles would blip into existence, intent on colliding into each other and removing themselves from the parlor of reality once again. But at the very edge of the fatal plunge black holes were known for, one particle would appear on the wrong side, and one would escape. By this process, the life was siphoned from the black holes. Nigh-infinite grains of sand in the largest possible hourglass.

Around this final black hole, there orbited a space station, an artificial matryoshka-planetoid of steel, teeming with life at its every layer. Turning back the clock on myriad cultures and retaining an impossibly long chain of continuous context, it could be apt to translate its name as ‘Tin Can’. Quietly administrating this haven was a metal man whose name had changed with the times of tens of thousands of worlds and their millions of languages coming in and out of their zeitgeists. For the sake of simplicity, it is fine if we say that his name was Tanuki Man.

If one were to enter the station’s temporal archive layer and operate the particulate-memory viewer, one could trace Tin Can’s history back to the long-forgotten planet of the humans, Earth. It had been a small town filled mostly with the children of humans, a common form factor of descendant-life built instead of born. This far into the history of everything, it would be difficult to tease out specific memories beyond a foundational myth of unease, a flickering echo that cast the impression of great strife.

The people of this town were impossibly long-lived, and eventually, they sought to leave their native planet before their bright mother Sol consumed it. With matter from the rings of rock and dust in the system, they built the first, deepest shells of their nomad planet. Their town and the very ground it sat upon was cut loose and lifted out of the planet's gravity well, planted like a seed onto their creation.

For the rest of all time, Tin Can travelled from star system to star system. Quite frequently, upon finding life in its many stages, it would stop to observe and intermingle, weaving its history with the inhabitants of the planets they found. On occasion, individuals from these planets would become entranced with the idea of Tin Can. They were welcomed with open arms, granted the gift of longevity and escape. More and more layers were constructed to accommodate the slow but immensely inevitable growth of the population.

When the people of Tin Can left Earth behind, they numbered in the ten-thousands. When the universe was complete, theirs was a chorus of voices that was measured in the trillions. Their technology, having been developed and tweaked for the entire length of the universe minus a pittance of 13.8 billion Earthen years, was scarcely describable in the words of the language of this retelling. The bodies of the people of the planet were still somewhat recognizably humanoid- sometimes- but what made them up, how they worked, is simply beyond what can be written, infinite as they were in their capacity for life.

The culture, however, was roughly recognizable, or at least comprehensible. Much would be abstract, but there was a throughline all the way back to the days of Earth, as if the seed of the original town on the deepest layer had sprouted the trunk of a great tree, and all that came after hung in its great branches, shaded from harm by its leaves.

On the final day, there was a small gathering of the eldest and closest in a public room in a spire atop the planetoid's surface layer. The spire was chosen because its panoramic window would have a perfect sunset view of the black hole's final moments. The final party. The window curtains were pulled back and tied in place so the light of the accretion disk could stream in.

The people milled about and spoke. Some were nervous. Some were calm. Tanuki Man was both. He sipped at his drink. Spotting a lover of his, he walked over. "Mind if I settle in to watch with you?"

"Of course."

They squeezed each other's hands. The past century had been a neverending parade of preparations. People said goodbye, people concluded their business, and the

final harvest of energy from the accretion disk had been completed. Tanuki Man spoke up. "Shame there's a bunch of energy left over we didn't get to use."

The lover replied, "That confuses me. I thought entropy meant all the energy got used?"

"Nah. It's not exactly like that. It's just... gotta be close enough, you know? It's gonna march right over us, even though we're all still moving."

The explanation satisfied them. "Bah. You know what actually bothers me, though?"

"What's that?"

"All this time, and I never did finish my library of games."

Tanuki Man laughed. "You're worried about *that* now?"

"Nah. Not really. But I had you going for a sec, right?"

The blackness of the event horizon pulsed a strange color.

"Oh, is it starting?"

Impossibly, bright cracks started to form on the sphere of nothingness.

Tanuki Man stared into the face of his lover. "I have to admit, I'm a little scared."

"That's understandable." They comforted him.

From the warm grasp, Tanuki Man continued to speak. "I said a lot that I wanted to live forever."

The lover spoke. "We came pretty close."

Tanuki Man's voice remained calm enough. "Still. Big leap from the forever of all time, and the forever of *forever* forever, right?"

"Guess so. Not like we can do anything about it."

"I knowww..."

A strange white light began to shine, flooding everything in bloom.

"Just hold me."

"I am."

Tanuki Man shook a little. The lover gripped tighter. "Shhh. Whatever happens next, it's been an amazing time."

He looked up at them again. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The black hole broke open. The strange reality within cascaded out in all directions changing everything forever.

I don’t know what happened next. Maybe they all died as reality came to an end, maybe because of vacuum decay. I think that would suck, but it’s possible. Maybe the nature of physics changed such that there was new energy and entropy was reverted all the way, but everyone retained their personhood. That would be pretty indescribably weird. Maybe it was something simple, like all of reality being sucked into a new universe, a new big bang. I think Tin Can would be well prepared for that. It’s probably the one they hoped for, but they just didn’t know for sure what would happen. Whether it was a new universe or the same one, it meant more opportunities to travel and greet new people on their planets. Even a recursion would be okay. After all, they had hardly seen everything the first time around.

I guess it’s up to you now. As with so many of these stories, you have to decide for yourself what it all meant and where everyone went.

For my part, I hope I’ll again see Tin Can and Tanuki Man and every single other thing that ever crawled from the primordial soup of ideas in Rockman: Brave New World.

Another time, another place.