

BEATRICE OF SUBURBIA



MAXIME RHODES

Beatrice of Suburbia

A Novel

Maxime Rhodes

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Beatrice of Suburbia © 2023 by Maxime Rhodes is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0 

Published in the United States by R.O. Shipman Publishing.
roshipmanpublishing.com

First Edition: August 2023

	4
Chapter One: Virtues of Electronic Mail	6
Chapter Two: Jesus of the Badlands	13
Chapter Three: Programs and Parents	16
Chapter Four: Annabelle of Precious	19
Chapter Five: Tremor and Flow	28
Chapter Six: But a Shadow	34
Chapter Seven: Roboticists in Green Houses	46
Chapter Eight: Taste of Mandarins	51
Chapter Nine: Aisha of Asphyxiation	56
Chapter Ten: Southerners in Sephoras	62
Chapter Eleven: Oliver of Dogs	69
Chapter Twelve: Hommes Sont Mortels	75
Chapter Thirteen: Bakeries Post-Apocalypse	80
Chapter Fourteen: Arson is Amoral	83
Chapter Fifteen: Miria in Hometowns	90
Chapter Sixteen: Salim of Ants	94
Chapter Seventeen: Electric Sheep	98
Chapter Eighteen: Snowfall in Deserts	104
Chapter Nineteen: Star Morals	111
Chapter Twenty: Dreamers Often Lie	116
Chapter Twenty-One: Raison D'Être	118
Chapter Twenty-Two: Hour of Morning	122
Chapter Twenty-Three: Medical Malpractices of Harry Harlow	126
Chapter Twenty-Four: Henry of Eliza	133
Chapter Twenty-Five: Maxim of the Brute	137
Chapter Twenty-Six: Miles of Road	148
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Everything that Burns	152

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Caine of Cascades	154
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Vehicular Manslaughter	157
Chapter Thirty: 387.44 Million Circuits	160
Chapter Thirty-One: Cri de Cœur	162
Chapter Thirty-Two: Bounded in Nutshells	166
Chapter Thirty-Three: Being and Nothingness	169
Chapter Thirty-Four: The Rebel of Red Solo Cups	173
Chapter Thirty-Five: Hors D'Oeuvres	182
Chapter Thirty-Six: Huis Clos	184
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Paradiso Aflame	188
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Don't Look Down	190
Chapter Thirty-Nine: Rain in Suburbia	192

Chapter One: Virtues of Electronic Mail

Year: 2058

It wasn't often that Beatrice drank gasoline. In the midday light the petrol drizzled from the tip of her blade like honey that would kill you — which wasn't too unpleasant a way to go, given that the other option was being torn apart by sentient metal limbs. Since the Great Miscalculation of 2043, robots intent on human destruction had swarmed America like maggots on rotting meat, quickly slaughtering the native population and, by extension, greatly reducing local property values. The midwest was left a barren wasteland of crumbling infrastructure, cutthroat survivors, and empty, sun-baked highway. That wasn't to say that Beatrice didn't like living in South Dakota. It made for a surprising safe haven from most of the worst calamities due to the fact that, pre-apocalypse, it had absolutely nothing going for it.

The felled nursebot kicked out a few times as its programs collapsed around her sword: the thrashing of a bug that was already under her heel. Her sword wobbled, and then the end of the blade speared the sand as the nursebot collapsed.

Beatrice wasn't sure why she'd tasted the gasoline. She was sure that it tasted bad. "Shit," muttered Beatrice, and then she 'hawked a loogie,' as the old South Dakotans would've said. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and grabbed the hilt of her sword and yanked. It held for a moment, and jerked free from the jagged metal wound with a wet slurp.

Without her sword Beatrice was useless. Made of Arakhene — a spindly material that had been synthesized to imitate spiderweb — it was bendier than most metals, and rougher, patterned with white fibers that resembled paper mache. This layered composition made it both rust-proof and impervious to bullets. It had been the hottest new technology before the apocalypse, and only a limited supply had been produced, making it the most valuable thing she owned.

Beatrice sheathed the sword, lifting her free hand to her face. The edge of her mask dripped with sweat. Her phone rang in her pocket, and she sighed through her teeth, then fished it out.

"Ann. Hey."

"Hey. Can I talk to you about something?"

Beatrice pinched the phone in the crook of her neck and got work sawing off the robot's head. "Sure."

"We didn't get the package you said you shipped."

"That's weird." It ripped free, trailing wire cartilage and black lubricant that slicked her palms. Robot parts were a valuable trade commodity. If it didn't go Beatrice could use it for spare parts on her own machines. "I definitely sent it. Must be a problem on your end."

There was a pause. Beatrice stuffed her winnings into her stained nylon backpack and then started back towards her house. It was a quick walk — the kind that got just enough sand in your sneakers to make Beatrice consider suicide.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, dude, but — is it possible your delivery robot malfunctioned?”

“Nope. Impossible.”

“It’s not ‘impossible.’ The whole world’s a fucking testament to the fact that it is possible.”

“My robots don’t malfunction.”

“Hey, I’m not calling you a bad robot-maker or whatever, I’m just—”

“I’m not lying,” interrupted Beatrice. She made a nasty face at the phone like Ann could see it. “I’ll figure it out, alright?”

“Okay, okay. Thanks.”

Half of the shingles of Beatrice’s house were molting off of the roof, and the siding, once Country Blue, had flaked and faded into a sickly gray. Beatrice pushed through the rusty screen door, slipped off her sandy sneakers, tossed her sword to the coat rack, and then tripped over a small, unassuming bot.

Beatrice raised her eyebrows. So Ann had been telling the truth. She hadn’t gotten the robot — but there was no way it was a problem with the bot itself. If it hadn’t been working, the homing beacon wouldn’t have sent it back home. Someone from Suburbia must have turned it away.

She patted its head and shut it down, then turned it over and saw that it was still carrying her package, as well as a note scrawled on aging looseleaf.

No sender name provided.

Unlabelled packages are not accepted within Suburbia’s city limits.

Resend with a return address.

-John Williams, Suburban Postage Supervisor in Chief.

There. That was the problem. Suburbia had changed its stupid ‘security’ laws again. Another genius diagnosis by Dr. Beatrice, handing out prescriptions like candy. You want a lollipop? You get a lollipop. Not Ann, though: Ann could go fuck herself. Or maybe Beatrice would just give her grape. Beatrice had traded a pack of screws for a bunch of grape lollipops a few years ago. It had been the worst mistake of her life: grape lollipops fucking sucked.

She gave in and pulled out her phone. Ann had texted her twenty-nine times in the last half hour.

-message received 5:42-

Ann123: okay i know i told you to call me back and i should probably just wait rn but my brother keeps bugging me about this. like literally every second

Ann123: ‘ann did you talk to her’ ‘ann call her again’ ‘ann the people are rioting’

Ann123: getting on my fuckin nerves

Ann123: anyway message me please

-message received 5:56-

Ann123: okay but seriously

Ann123: what could you possibly be doing right now that you havent replied

yet

Ann123: hey i saw the little three dots notification you cant hide from me

Apocalypseangel: Who the fuck is John Williams.

Ann123: jesus christ

Ann123: did he send you the package back?

Apocalypseangel: Yeah. He wants a sender name. And a return address.

There was a pause.

Ann123: and?

Apocalypseangel: And what? My name is sensitive information. And next to my *address*? What if someone got it in their head to track me down out here?

Ann123: okay so make one up. its not that hard.

Ann123: what about

Ann123: idiot person

Apocalypseangel: Wow, good burn. I'm gonna need some ice for that one.

Apocalypseangel: I'll send it back, but keep in mind that this is a favor that I'm doing for you. I don't really need the vitamin gummies you're paying me with.

Tossing the phone to the table, she plucked a pen from an empty can of beans and kneeled back down beside the bot.

'Sender: William John.'

Beatrice capped the pen and looked down at her watch. The face was that of her mother's — the famous actress Blake Blaire. The numbers blocked most of her, though, so it ended up looking more like a clock with a nose in the middle of it.

Six-oh-five. Time for dinner.

The nutrition packs lined her shelves in utilitarian stacks, and on a drying rack below them were the two chipped plastic plates she cycled in and out of use.

Consuming a nutrition pack meant nutrition plus a sour film over your tongue. It was just a really, really great thing to eat on your sixteenth birthday, and Beatrice was very happy at the prospect, and she didn't hate her life at all. It was better than drinking gasoline by a very small margin.

When she opened her microwave door she was met with her reflection in the warped metal.

Everyone wore masks to keep the robots from detecting them, and Beatrice's was a kitsune fox, red and orange hard plastic that swam lazily on the metal. Reflective lenses over her eyes protected her from being detected as "human" by both the robots and, most of the time, herself. The mask was held by a band of bright red elastic at the

base of her skull. In the past four years she had barely taken it off, even inside the relative safety of her home. When the nomads were still alive they'd told her she looked like her mother. She didn't want to have to see that.

She slammed the microwave shut. "Post forward slash microwave content hyphen type equals message forward slash microwave content hyphen message hyphen body equals double quotes accept hyphen additions open parenthesis equals heat thirty seconds hyphen type equals double quote high double quote close parenthesis."

"You — you-," stuttered the intercom. Sometimes Caine got a bit mixed up when controlling the finer details of her home, like the microwave or the washing machine. She had lost track of the times her sweatshirts had come out of the washer still sudsy.

She slammed her closed fist into the microwave's side.

"You got it."

The microwave started up. She really needed to set some instructions for that in plain English.

"So," said Caine, over the intercom. "Judging by the fact that you came back alive I'm going to guess your outing went well."

"I did what I set out to do."

"Hm," he hummed. "Happy birthday, by the way. The big one-six. You could drive, now, if you had a car. And if laws still were real."

"Thanks, Caine." The microwave beeped. She pulled out the food and grabbed a fork from her neatly-sorted utensil drawer. All of her utensils were plastered with the stunning visage of uber-famous movie star Blake Blaire. She dipped her mother's face into the steaming sludge, watching intently as her dazzling caramel eyes were submerged. "Pull up my email, please?"

"Sure."

"Dear Blake Blaire." Her hands dropped the fork and clasped in reverence. "How are you? The last time you sent me an email you were in a bit of trouble. According to my sources, though, you beat the robots back."

Beatrice didn't really have any 'sources'. That's just what she called it when she lurked around message boards, waiting for people to post shaky videos of her mother in action. Getting information about your mother from a message board might've seemed strange, but it didn't mean Beatrice and Blake weren't close: nearly everything in Beatrice's house was Blake Blaire merch. Her shirts, her shoes, her towels and pens and even her shower curtain. She had a very strong relationship with the woman.

"That's sweet," said Caine. "She worries about you a lot, you know. You should probably let her know how you're doing."

Beatrice cowed down over her kitchen table, eyes digging into the wood, hands temples over her head in prayer. The empty room around her smelled like wood

glue and must. “The robots have started picking me up as a threat, but I can handle it. I’m very capable. I’ve killed two thousand and thirty seven robots in total, now. I’m well over the requirements for the Homecoming.”

She paused, and it hung in the air like a line of clothes that were sopping wet. Probably because Caine had messed up the dryer again.

“Oh, and — uh. It’s my sixteenth birthday today. In case you were wondering.”

Nine months ago Blake Blaire had sent out a message over the radio to all surviving teenagers. She was holding a ‘Homecoming’ competition in Suburbia — one of the largest settlements left in the US. To enter you had to be older than thirteen, younger than twenty-five, and responsible for the death of at least one hundred robots. It was meant to determine her successor.

When Beatrice learned of this contest she’d sliced up every single Blake Blaire poster she could manage to rip off her walls.

It was a little bit difficult with her sword — it hadn’t been meant to cut up paper, so she ended up ripping them by hand. They still sat in a slivered heap in her basement. She had entered, of course, but more as a formality. Everyone had expected Blake to choose Beatrice as her successor. The ‘Homecoming’ part of it ultimately changed nothing. Beatrice intended to win.

Reality, however, couldn’t care less about intentions.

Beatrice was going to lose Homecoming. She was going to lose it very, very badly: so badly, in fact, that the last remaining city in America would be razed to the ground by Beatrice’s dearest, oldest friend. There would also be barely any dancing and the punch would taste terrible.

“Maybe she’ll send you a gift. Do you remember that signed copy of her autobiography that showed up on your doorstep last Christmas?”

“Yeah.” Beatrice smiled fondly and glanced up at the intercom. “Let me know if anything new develops. I miss you. Love, Beatrice.”

“You done?”

“Send it.”

Her phone buzzed.

“It’s sent.” The intercom made a whooshing ‘sent’ sound for Beatrice’s benefit. “Though you might have wanted to check for grammatical errors first. That stuff can really make you seem unprofessional.”

“Haha.”

Her phone buzzed again, and Beatrice groaned and ran her hands back through her hair and fished it out.

Ann123: hey bea

Apocalypseangel: whattt

Ann123: i have an idea

Ann123: what if. instead of sending this package back to me. I came to you?

Apocalypseangel: What?

Ann123: what if I drove out there and picked it up myself?

Apocalypseangel: Seriously? Are you actually fucking insane?

Ann123: why not?

Apocalypseangel: Literally infinite reasons. Two people draw more robots than one. I'd have to worry about you being stabbed on your way over.

Apocalypseangel: Look I have to go kill some robots my answer is no no absolutely not

"No, you don't," said Caine. "You already did that today. Humans need rest."

Beatrice fished her phone from her pocket and pulled up her radar. "There's gotta be something out there."

"This isn't a healthy outlet with which to de-stress."

There — two robots on the horizon, fast approaching, symbolized by winking neon-green dots. They bore into her skull, coloring her thoughts a putrid olive.

Caine prodded her again. "Do some therapy or something instead. Do you want me to do therapy on you? I've memorized literally every psychology book written pre-apocalypse."

She stood and stretched back. "Actually, I think killing robots is the best possible thing I could be doing with my down time."

"Oh my god," said Caine as Beatrice laced up her boots. "Fine. Be careful. And don't forget your backpack."

"Yeah, I know." Beatrice slung it over her shoulder and tightened the straps until they dug into her sweatshirt. "See you in a minute."

And she stepped back out, into the muted, endless plains of the badlands.

South Dakota was the center of the universe. It was a place of perpetual anticipation, always the morning before a storm but never the absolution of a downpour. The purple sky bulged with the build-up, swollen and ripe like a bruise, and when Beatrice's sneakers dug especially deep into the dry earth she'd almost think it would split, shaken by her footfalls to the point of bursting. But it never would. It was always on the edge — held back by a thin membrane of clouds, the rot of evaporation, the decay of sand's reflection — and her steps would always echo to no response, alone and forgotten in the unceasing end of the world. When she rubbed her pointer finger and thumb together in the heavy air they'd come back greased.

It took her fifteen minutes to crest a nearby hill and spot her targets: mechanbots, rolling slowly, as if enamoured in conversation. She unsheathed her sword like a person who wasn't thinking about death.

All robots were solar powered, and all contained a combustion chamber. Combustion engines were used to fire off impulses and, more recently, murder people. The efficiency of the gasoline used in the robots' attacks was unparalleled, and that was

always the first target of anybody who fought them, because once a combustion chamber was drained the robots were largely harmless — and, if you killed one without disabling the engine, there was about a ten percent chance of it combusting right in your face. Humans had learned that one the hard way.

Beyond their fuel source, the only unifying factor between the five different subsets of robots was that their parent company, Valvidan, had programmed into their source code that hurting children was prohibited. That took precedent over the command to kill. Once a kid hit sixteen to eighteen, though, it turned into open season. Maidbots attacked with brooms and dustpans, giving you a bruise at worst. Nursebots could read your heartbeat and overdose you if you were slow enough to let them prick you. Mechanbots had power tools and piping they could shoot out like bullets. Guardbots could stun you and call reinforcements. The last type of robot — Policebots — were rare, because only government officials had been allowed to distribute them, but where they did crop up they counted. Like Nursebots, they could sense heat signatures, but they moved at speeds nearing thirty feet per second, and had tasers or guns. Guns in the hands of humans weren't very useful against the robots due to their Arakhene bullet-retardant properties. In the hands of robots, though, guns were deadly, because humans were soft and malleable and extremely un-bullet-retardant.

Beatrice waited until what she could imagine as being the point where she could see the white of the bot's eyes, and then steeled her jaw and charged.

The blow was instant, as well as her roll to dodge it. Beatrice's fights were a tight, painful dance where every step was a matter of survival; a waltz with a partner whose hands were on her neck when they dipped her. The ground hurt her more than the robots. It beat into her again and again, a ringing of impact up through her knees like the thunderous wobble of aluminum sheets.

She ducked a metal pipe, and drove her blade through the bot on the right with an animalistic squeal. Routine. Waking up and fighting and living — it was all routine.

Suddenly she felt an enormous love for the robots, pulling at her throat and her stomach like the plow of a blade. It was love that made her hesitate, and fall out of step. A love that nauseated her. A love that was a sudden pain in her side.

It took her a moment to realize she'd been shot.

Chapter Two: Jesus of the Badlands

High on adrenaline, her blade twisted up and through the second robot's core. It toppled backwards, an ear-splitting whine piercing through the air behind it like the tail on a ripped kite as it spiraled to the ground, then slumped limply as the soft hiss of hydraulics signaled its death.

Immediately afterwards she doubled over, intense pain burning through her midsection like a burning poker. She glanced down at the small pipe that pierced in her stomach, sight curling black around the edges like photos warped in a house fire.

"Fuck." Stifling a cry, she raised her wrist to her mouth and bit down on the fabric of her sleeve and the meat of her lips, and when she pulled back from the kiss the skin was stained red. "Fuck, fuck — holy shit—"

It was a low wound, off to the left. The object in question was about as thick as a bottle cap, and looked solid. She was still breathing okay. It probably hadn't punctured a lung. It also looked relatively shallow — the instrument that had been used to fire it hadn't been that long. She would have to make it back to her house, where she had the medical supplies to treat it. In no circumstances could she allow it to dislodge before then. That would mean bleeding out.

Most of the possibilities resulting from this scenario led to bleeding out.

"Motherfucker!" Beatrice had fallen to the fetal position, cradling her stomach. It wasn't far back to her house — a minute in normal condition. "Jesus — holy — oh my god, I'm going to — I'm going to die—"

It hurt to talk, so she stopped. Tears twisted the scene in front of her so that she wasn't entirely sure which direction her house even was. She could feel herself going into shock. Breath. Breath. She needed to focus. In, out, in, out, more slowly, less ragged.

She wanted to live. She needed to live. She needed to breathe.

Fists clenched, she dug rivulets into the dirt with her nails, pulling herself up. It was just a bunch of steps. Like building a machine. One thing at a time — first reach her backpack and fumble out the first aid kit, take the shot of adrenaline even though her hand was shaking and it seemed like finding the vein took hours, like that in itself was an impossible task, and she'd die here with a needle plugging uselessly into the soft meat of her forearm. She shifted through each bolt in her transporter bot's inventory. Pneumatics. Redline. Falcon motor one and two.

The vein. She watched the stopper slide under her thumb, soft and forgiving, and pulled in a shaky breath as the syringe dropped from her hand. A prick of blood beaded where it had been, and she swiped it over and then blinked. Her vision steadied. For all of her mother's faults, the medicine she'd left Beatrice had been state of the art, and she felt it in the way her blood pounded louder in her brain.

Six steel bolts and six treaded wheels. Eighteen metal bearings. Two limelights.

She pushed herself to her feet, and stumbled forward, backpack abandoned. The sand shifted into her front porch beneath her feet. Time was hazy, like light through a beer bottle. She turned into her garage by habit before finding the bathroom, and then slumped against the tile wall and peeled off her sweat-soaked shirt. The wound looked bad.

Plastic bumpers. Threaded drill bits. One hundred and nineteen screws.

She had been mostly right, earlier — the pipe didn't look too long, and the fresh blood caked on her shirt wasn't enough on its own to kill her. She fumbled out a thin orange bottle of painkillers from the medicine cabinet and struggled with the kid-safe top for a minute before it popped open. She fished a pill between her thumb and pointer finger and fit it between her teeth, swallowing around her knuckles. Some indiscernible amount of time passed and the pain continued to pulse steadily, and suddenly she wasn't sure whether she had taken it or just imagined she had, so she choked down another.

No — she was forgetting the ones on the bumper. One hundred and twenty-seven screws.

The wound needed to be cauterized. It was too wide, too prone to losing blood. She pulled the silver nitrate from the back of the cupboard, as well as a roll of gauze, and slumped back against the wall, staring at the rings of coagulating cruor and flesh, blushed an angry red.

"Caine," she managed to croak. "Set logic library: panic."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I have to cauterize this huge fuck-off hole in my stomach."

"Processing."

Moments felt like days. Her mouth felt warm and coppery. She had already half bitten off her tongue trying to stay conscious.

"You will be using what?"

"Silver nitrate."

"A small application device is optimal."

It took a moment for her to process the words. "I have a rag."

"Wet the tip. Don't get the chemical anywhere else on you. You will need to dry out the wound first."

Beatrice winced. "I haven't removed the pipe yet."

"Operate immediately following removal, or you risk bleeding out."

Her skin felt hot and greasy, like she was the collateral of an oil spill. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Then proceed as instructed."

Beatrice stuffed the less bloody end of her shirt in her mouth, biting down on the cloth. She then placed a hand on the end of the pipe. Her stomach burned so hot she nearly jerked her hand back on instinct.

“Three.”

Beatrice looked up at the intercom. Her head felt fuzzy. “What?”

“I am counting down to help strengthen your resolve. Three.”

Beatrice’s fingers bent around the rod, and the world bent with them.

“Two.”

She braced herself.

“One.”

Beatrice pulled the pipe from her side and immediately saw stars, and applied the gauze, gritting her teeth as her brain was crowded with spring blooms of agony — Chrysanthemums and Marigolds, pushing out her eyes and nose. Pollen dripped from her nostrils and gaping, gasping mouth. The blood flow slowed to a trickle, and the pale, slick skin of her stomach was visible. She grabbed the silver nitrate and pressed it to the wound, biting down hard on the shirt as pain once again tore through her, rending her flesh into gory petals, winding it’s way up to her head until that was all she could think about, about how much it fucking *hurt*.

The cloth fell from her hand, and hit the tile with a wet slap, burning through her bathroom floor.

Chapter Three: Programs and Parents

When she woke up she blinked, slowly, and rubbed away the salty brine that clung to her lashes in large clumps. It fell away in her hand like chips off a bad paint job. The bathroom floor was cold and wet beneath her, and her hand left streaks of dried blood on her eyelids. She wiped them half-heartedly on her shirt, crumpled beside her, and caught her bearings like they were a baseball and she was a tee-ball player high on pixie sticks.

Oh yeah, she thought. I'm dying.

It was that which prompted her to look down at the wound. She winced. It was stained a nasty black, but at least it was no longer bleeding.

Beatrice experimented with getting to her feet. She found that, despite the tightness in her stomach, she could actually do it rather easily. The sun was already lower in the sky, but it was probably the same day. The painkillers would still be in effect, then. Medicine had been improving rapidly pre-apocalypse. The stuff Blake had left her with kept her alert, numbing her pain receptors while still keeping her thought processes stimulated. At this point, though, she would have almost would have preferred not to think.

Kicking her bloody shirt to the side, she stepped into the shower and turned it as hot as it would go. The water came out lukewarm.

Her bathroom was cramped, and colder than the rest of the house due to shoddy insulation. Yellowed fiberglass bloated where the plywood walls met like clusters of puff pastry. Half of the time her water would spit out a diseased yellow, and she'd have to ask Caine how to repair the pipes again. Soap suds slicked the bottom of the tub and crowded the dirty water as it ran down the drain, reflecting herself, but opaline.

Infections, reminded the back of her brain as she ran her fingers through the dust and blood caked into her hair. She was propped up against the shower wall, shoulder blades digging into the tile. *You're going to get so many infections.*

That was a serious threat. Cauterization was basically a welcome mat for bacteria. Gently, she rubbed at the skin surrounding the wound, flaking dried blood to the ground to have it spiral down the drain. There was going to be so much shit to clean up. She wasn't looking forward to it.

It was only when she had used up an entire half bar of soap that Beatrice shut off the shower and stumbled upstairs. This was a challenge in itself: Beatrice was maybe the most exhausted she had ever been in her life. She sat on the edge of her bed and fumbled for Robert, who stared up at her in beady-eyed judgement.

Robert was a stuffed blue elephant left for her by her mother. In principal, Beatrice knew that he was inanimate, but he seemed to have such a way of

communicating with her that she had a hard time arguing for that fact inside her own head.

Beatrice buried her face in her pillow. "I shouldn't check."

Robert seemed to agree that this would be a bad idea.

"She's probably crowded up my messages again is all. While I've been out."

Robert hated crowded inboxes.

Beatrice sighed into the pillow, then rolled over, blinking up blearily at the ceiling. Her light fixtures had gone all blurry. "Alright. You've convinced me."

Ann123: heyyy. i hate to bug you

Ann123: i mean, i dont really, but i figured you'd appreciate the sentiment

Ann123: but you said fourteen hours. and the package is still not here

Beatrice blinked at the screen. It was hard to read the messages through the cotton stuck beneath her eyelids.

Apocalypseangel: wait. Foirteen hoirss??

Ann123: yeah

Ann123: are you okay? you're not being a grammar nazi

Apocalypseangel: 14 horus ohmy god

Ann123: okay seriously are you alright

Apocalypseangel: im finee jesus you subrurbrians sre all such wimps

Ann123: uh huh ok

Ann123: how about once you go back to being beatrice let me know if you've reconsidered my offer

The log closed. Beatrice frowned.

Caine: How did it go?

Caine: Beatrice? Are you alright?

Apocalypseangel: finne

Caine: You need to sleep.

Caine: I don't know how much this means to you right now but the area you cauterized is prone to infection. You're gonna need to be super careful.

Apocalypseangel: yeah ill tone it down. only maibdots and nuraebots

Apocalypseangel: *nuserbot

Apocalypseangel: fuck

Caine: Wait. I'm switching to intercom.

The speaker above her crackled to life.

"Hey, Bea. How are you doing?"

Beatrice closed her computer screen and pushed it off of her legs. It slid, and before she could react it had hit the floor.

"Shit." She covered her face with her hands. "Not great."

"You can't fight at all, okay? Not for the next few days. Maybe weeks."

"How'm I supposed to protect my house?"

"You're more important than your house, Bea. If one breaks in just hide in the crawlspace."

"No."

"Beatrice, please. You will reopen your wound, and you will most definitely get an infection. You are in no condition for fighting."

Beatrice groaned. "Bullshit."

"It is not. Whatever little high you're feeling right now on account of being alive and doped up on painkillers will not last."

She turned over. Her head felt crowded. "Bullshit."

"Your mom emailed you back, by the way. While you were asleep."

Beatrice perked up a little bit. "Can you read it to me?"

"Sure." Beatrice could hear him smile. "Just like when you were a kid and I read you bedtime stories. You were always so hard to get to sleep."

"Yeah. Like that."

Caine made a clearing-his-throat sound. "Darling Beatrice: Thanks for the email, kiddo! I hope you had a great birthday. I'm still working on trying to destroy the robot's servers. Today I ran into the Lucias and helped them take out a cluster. They didn't even thank me or anything once it was done — not the kindest group of kids, haha! But I was glad to do it anyway. I can't wait to see your face. I'm doing all of this for you. I want you to grow up in a world like the one I grew up in. Better, if possible. I love you! Don't give up! Blake Blaire."

"Hm." Beatrice sighed against the bedding. Getting emails from Blake always made her head feel fuzzy and warm. "I'm going to sleep."

"In the morning send me a picture of the wound and I can give you some suggestions."

The tips of her fingers dug into the bed a little, creating small patterns of ruts in the blanket on either side of her. It was hard to breathe against the fabric, and she felt — not for the first time — lonely.

Beatrice felt lonely in the way an astronaut might as they perpetually tumbled down towards a miniscule Earth. She felt the kind of lonely only a kid could feel, one slowly coming to terms with the pains of adulthood in a unique, unreplicable experience that everyone else went through, too. At least if she had been left in the city she would have had people she knew. Now she was stuck on her own, paranoid that anyone she trusted enough to meet would be the death of her, and all the survival she had been doing up until now would be for nothing. Even the robots weren't as lonely as Beatrice:

They all shared a parent program.

Chapter Four: Annabelle of Precious

Caine: I got your photo.

Caine: You're not going to like what I have to say about it.

Beatrice sighed, watching an ellipses pop up as he composed a text. Caine never took any time to text her unless he was thinking really, really hard about something, or he was trying to sound human, to make her feel better.

She hunched forward. Her Blake Blaire merch bunched at her stomach, which felt as though it was being manhandled by a really nasty butcher — the sort who had calluses and sharp nails and who always put his thumb on the scale. The wound had turned even more ugly, if that was possible. Beatrice couldn't bring herself to look at it. Every time she would try to evaluate the damage the thought would hit her that this was her own skin and she'd begin to feel even more nauseated.

Caine: You need professional medical help. ASAP.

Caine had been right. She didn't like that.

Apocalypseangel: You're right, Caine. I don't like that.

Caine: I don't want you to die.

Apocalypseangel: I appreciate it, but it isn't like I can call up the doctor or anything. I'm on my own out here.

Caine: There is an option.

Apocalypseangel: No there isn't

Caine: I'm not even going to say it, because we both know what it is, and it requires you getting over your stupid paranoia.

Beatrice groaned and leaned back in the bed, rubbing her eyes. Sunlight filtered through her fingers, staining her view a blotchy red.

"Fine!"

Apocalypseangel: Fine.

She switched tabs, this time to an entirely new conversation — one that gave her the illusion of a clean slate.

Apocalypseangel: Ann123? I've decided to accept your offer.

Beatrice opened a new, blank tab in lieu of staring at the screen, waiting for the reply. Her heart was racing, like she'd just run a mile.

She was going to see Ann face-to-face.

She had just fucking *agreed* to see another human being face-to-face.

Why had she done that? Back up for just a second, because holy shit, *what* was the fucking reasoning on that again? She needed medical attention? Beatrice had taken care of herself for her whole life. Hell, she'd stitched herself up for the first time when she was *ten*. Was this really that big of a deal?

She breathed and felt knives twist in her gut.

Her computer pinged. After a moment of mental preparation, Beatrice switched back to the conversation. Instinctively her hand went to Robert for support.

Ann123: fucking finally. I'll come to you.

Apocalypseangel: Okay, no way. I am not meeting you at my own house.

Ann123: but what if im already on my way

Beatrice's heart jumped up her throat.

Apocalypseangel: Are you serious?

Ann123: chill, dude. you're the one who gave me the address, remember?

Apocalypseangel: In confidence. And also at three in the morning. Evidently a mistake.

Ann123: look, you may be living it up on your own in the middle of fuck-knows-where, but some of us have actual other people to be worrying about. there's over a thousand citizens in my city alone. we can't just let all of their water filtration machines and electricity generators fail.

Apocalypseangel: Fuck you.

Ann123: im already pretty close, okay?

Beatrice stared at the screen. The computer was hot in her hands.

Apocalypseangel: If you're so set on coming, then I want to change our deal. I want you to take me with you to the Suburbia for medical attention.

Ann123: sure.

Ann123: see you soon <3

Beatrice stripped off her sweat-soaked Blake Blaire branded pajamas in exchange for a Blake Blaire branded lavender sweatshirt and a pair of jeans with Blake Blaire's face sewn onto one of the back pockets. She pulled on her Blake Blaire shoes and managed to make it down the stairs to her workshop. On the radar was a small blip, about an hour away at the rate it was moving. Ann123's car.

In the bathroom she lifted her mask to splash some cold water on her face and swallowed a painkiller. The shitty electro-magnetic pulse gun — or EMP — that was hooked to her front door looked like it would still function fine, but she couldn't afford to test it — or even use it, really. An EMP would kill everything in her house: the water filtration system, the lights, the heat, and, most importantly, her brother Caine.

Beatrice returned to the radar room and watched as the light blinked closer. Closer. Ten minutes.

Time to shut everything down. If she was going to be gone for a few days she wasn't going to just leave her stuff running — the water filtration, the lights, the radar.

"Or gate fuzzy judgment t-norm strong conjunction set custom content to 'Ann is/n't a robot:' Should life functions be shut down? If one: Disable all electronic devices. End. Zero: Abort shut down. Proceed as normal. End."

"I'm a person," said Caine.

Right. She had set a password for this function.

“Wrong, you’re a program,” she replied.

“You got me.”

The radar screen blinked black beneath her palms, and the familiar hum of her fluorescent lights and bubble of her water purification system cut off abruptly, leaving the house silent. She grabbed the package, which had returned once again while she’d been asleep, and took up post on her porch.

There was a dust cloud on the horizon. It was sooner than she’d have guessed by the radar — but at least it wasn’t a robot. Robots didn’t move that fast.

The car gained clarity by the second, shimmering into view as it crested the gentle badland slopes.

Beatrice’s first conversation with Ann123 had been on one of many post-apocalyptic forums discussing Blake Blaire.

Ann123: im just saying

Ann123: we shouldn’t fall into the trap of worshipping her

Ann123: like most places are safe by now anyway

Apocalypseangel: Seriously? Blake Blaire is the reason you’re alive, moron.

Ann123: okay are you dumb

Admin Terminator69: @Ann123 this is a debate chat if your gonna make an ad hominem attack im gonna ban you

Apocalypseangel: No, don’t. I wanna hear them out.

Ann123: yeah wait apocalypseangel just called me a moron?

Admin Terminator69: Finger is over the ban button.

Ann123: fine whatever

Ann123: she did some great stuff right. at the start. no ones refuting that

Ann123: but now she isnt even needed and actually ends up causing more casualties a lot of the time?? cause shes reckless?

Ann123: like saving people is fine and dandy but she doesnt have to keep putting them in needless danger just to look heroic to the public

Admin Terminator69: @Ann123 you literally live in suburbia

Suburbia. The most peaceful city in the United States, located in the southwest and protected by pre-standing electric fences. It was an abandoned army base/ suburban town with plenty of food reserves and empty barracks. Teens flocked there after the apocalypse.

Apocalypseangel: Gosh really?? Suburbia?? So you must have a ton of experience in this subject! Everyone knows that Suburbians have to face the robots at least once a week — nigh, once a day, even. It must be so hard for you.

Admin Terminator69: go off

Ann123: @apocalypseangel where do you live

Apocalypseangel: Not a city.

Ann123: yeah sure you wanna say that and sound tough go ahead

Apocalypseangel: Humans attract robots. Living on your own is better, stupid.

Ann123: whatever. doesn't matter. blake has caused more casualties than any other resistance group in the USA. she sucks

Apocalypseangel: Does that account for the hundreds of thousands of lives she'd saved by taking down the factories?

Ann123: im not saying she didnt do great things. Im saying the risky stunts are no longer needed. she's an actor, she's obviously playing it up for the audience

Ann123: remember in 2049 when she lured robots into a trap and got a bunch of civilians killed

Apocalypseangel: It's impossible to fight a war with no casualties.

Ann123: im not asking for her to be a saint, dude, im asking for her to at least try to minimize the body count

Ann123: @apocalypseangel look you remind me of most of the people on here

Ann123: acting like human life doesnt matter

Ann123: if u really dont live in the city your probably hiding in your moms basement and pissing into a can

-Ann123 has been banned by **Admin** Terminator69-

Beatrice had thought that would be the end of it. She came across lots of people like Ann123 — it came with the job. Barely a week had passed, however, before she received a private message request with Ann123's name on it, and again a few weeks later. Every few months Beatrice would find Ann in her inbox, at first only when Ann was angry about things, but over time just to give updates about her day or Suburbia or how her plants were doing. Beatrice had grown to look forward to their conversations, but it was only last week that Ann had actually bought something. And now she was here, and Beatrice was going to meet her in person.

The car pulled up outside, the loud clunking sound it made as it drove strangled by the dying of the engine. Beatrice found that she was holding her breath and then felt stupid about it. The driver's side door swung open, and Beatrice breathed.

Out stepped an African American woman of around seventeen with sunglasses and a tentative smile.

She had sharp features, not in that they were especially severe, but in that she exuded the energy of someone who was always making it a point to look your way. Her shoulders were set back in a confident lean, draped by a bulky letterman jacket with green embossing on the sleeves. Beatrice could very easily imagine her tumbling backwards, probably unphased, her expression closed like the snapping of two opposite ends of a magnet as wind resistance tugged her hair free from its tight updo. However, her air of indifference was fractured by the tense angle of her violet hiking boots towards escape, and the nervous fidgeting of her hands, which were shoved deep in her

pockets as if this would eliminate any possible betrayal of emotion. She wore a boar mask, its tusks framing the line of her lips.

For a moment they both stood in silence, as if each were convinced the other was a desert mirage. Then Ann raised her hand in what Beatrice hesitated to describe as a greeting — it seemed more like she was mediating a shootout.

“Woah. Let’s lower the sword, alright?”

Beatrice’s arms were shaking. “I told you not to come here. It’s dangerous.”

Ann flicked up her mask to reveal her eyes, which were crinkled in amusement. Her eyebrows pulled together like damp clothes on a line. “C’mon, Bea. I didn’t have a choice — you get it.”

Beatrice’s eyes stayed locked on Ann, and then in a single swift motion her sword was sheathed. “No. I don’t.”

There was an awkward pause. Her house seemed to slump behind them, the shingles warping and dripping down to the sand under the heat of the sun. Beatrice felt the siding roll over her like the slow advance of expired jello when you tipped over the mixing bowl. It crept up to Ann’s shoes, lapping at the rubber soles, and Beatrice watched passively on through the melted window glass that now clung to her hair and slipped down her jaw. Ann took a step back, haltingly.

“I — okay.” Ann cleared her throat. “So, we’re ready to go, then? Get you your ‘medical attention?’”

Beatrice tensed, the world snapping back into focus. “Yes. Right. Let me grab my things.”

“And the battery?”

Beatrice nodded to the door. “My things, I said.”

“Sick,” muttered Ann, and Beatrice turned and retreated back into the safety of her home.

She spanned the stairs as quickly as her wounded stomach would allow her. From her room she grabbed Robert, a container of water, and a change of clothes. She probably wouldn’t be in Suburbia long, but it was better to be safe than sorry, so she snatched up her laptop, sliding it in beside the rest of her supplies. On her way out she stopped by the bathroom and took a moment to gather her thoughts.

She had just come face-to-face with another person.

She had just come face-to-face with *Ann*.

Holy shit. This was insane? This was insane.

Beatrice forced herself to relax. She needed to stay focused. From the medicine cabinet she took the painkillers and then, bag under one arm and package under the other, she headed back outside. Ann was waiting where Beatrice had left her.

“You know, I thought a lot about how it would go when we met in person for the first time. Never imagined a sword in the mix.” She tapped the hood of the car, her

eyes scrutinizing the cold sweat on Beatrice's neck. "You're not looking too hot. Wanna take off your mask?"

"No."

And then they were interrupted by an alarm.

Beatrice jumped, and whipped back around. The emergency generators would be activated if her radar detected something in dormant mode — she stumbled back into the house, and hastily plugged it back in, fumbling with the cord. The radar blinked on, and the dot was still moving, and it couldn't be Ann's car.

Her blood ran cold.

Ann, who had followed her into the house, glanced at Hal appreciatively.

"What's wrong?"

Beatrice swallowed, forcing her voice to even. "Is your car electric?"

"No, it's an older model."

Beatrice glanced at the dot. It was large enough that it could only have been a policebot.

Beatrice grabbed Ann's arm and pulled her over to the door to her basement.

"We need to hide."

"Why?" asked Ann, following her down the steps. Beatrice's basement was cool and damp, and they had to dodge neat rows of supplies.

"Policebot." Beatrice pushed her over to a metal hatch in the floor and flipped it up. "Get in."

Ann stared into the cramped, dusty crawlspace which Beatrice was crouched at the edge of. "Uh. No?"

"It hides our heat signatures," explained Beatrice as she lowered herself down. She landed, and looked up at Ann, lips pinched in frustration. "You're going to lead it here. Get in."

Suddenly, the ceiling shook, loosening a cloud of dust. Ann brushed it from her hair, nose wrinkling in distaste. "What the fuck is that?"

There was a low rumble. Beatrice grabbed Ann's ankle and yanked her down, and Ann shouted in surprise, falling to the crawlspace floor with a heavy thud. Beatrice stretched up and slammed the door shut behind them just as the basement door ripped from its hinges. She winced and doubled over at the sudden motion. A loud thud came from right above them, and a snap of electricity — probably the tasers misfiring. The crawlspace was warm and acidic: the stomach of a beast. Beatrice's eyes squeezed shut. She had promised herself to never come back here again.

"What the hell," Ann hissed after a moment of foreboding silence.

Beatrice had her hands clamped over her ears and didn't hear her.

Ann stood and pulled Beatrice's hands away. "Hey. What the hell?"

Beatrice glanced up at the hatch and swallowed. She tried to stop her hands from shaking, tugging them from Ann's and pressing them against her knees. "What?"

“That’s a *policebot*?” asked Ann, her frantic gestures only hindered slightly by the narrow space. “And it’s inside your house?”

Beatrice stared at Ann blankly. What, did Suburbia not have to deal with policebots? Was this a burden the universe has dumped solely on her?

Ann seemed angry. “Why do you live out here? We have defenses — it’s better than a fucking coffin, at least!”

Something rolled over the hatch, and it creaked forebodingly. Beatrice leaned away from the other girl, silent.

“So, what? Do we just stay down here forever?”

“Its program calls it a false alarm after ten minutes of no heat signatures,” explained Beatrice softly. “If we had to fight we’d be dead.”

Ann sighed. There was a thump, and something went back up the stairs. “I think it’s leaving.”

She went to crack open the hatch, but Beatrice stopped her, silently shaking her head.

“We can’t wait here forever.” Ann shifted, her face betraying her frustration.

Beatrice swallowed. She couldn’t hear the bot anymore, but that didn’t mean it had left. “Ten minutes.”

Ann paused, and then nodded, lowering herself to lie down on the packed Earth. Her brow was creased with annoyance, or concern, like she didn’t entirely believe a robot had just wrecked Beatrice’s basement.

“Naw, yeah, you’re right. This is totally cool. Trapped, hiding from a robot that wants nothing more than to kill us — yeah, this is usually how my Monday goes.”

Beatrice said nothing.

The seconds passed unlike candy, in that they were sour and made the world slower. The two girls didn’t speak, and if not for her troubled expression Beatrice thought that Ann might have fallen asleep. She could practically hear the gears turning in Ann’s head. In her own head all she was hearing was a heavy wind.

“Hey,” said Ann awkwardly, propping herself up on her elbows. “It’s alright. You don’t have to freak out.”

Beatrice tried to say that she wasn’t, but she couldn’t get the words out through her breath.

“Are you, like — hypothermic? Wait, no. Claustrophobic?”

Beatrice’s voice came out breathy. “Can we shake hands?”

Ann seemed taken aback. “I guess we didn’t do that, huh? Didn’t want to get my fuckin’ arm sliced off.”

Beatrice extended her arm. After a moment Ann obliged, and their palms connected. Beatrice jumped a little at the contact, and then took a deep breath and moved her hand up and down.

For a moment, they stayed like that, Beatrice enraptured, and then Ann pulled away to wipe the sweat from her palm onto her jeans.

Beatrice stared the scars on her palm. That had been strange. Her whole arm felt tingly, all the way up to her shoulder.

Ann chuckled nervously. "You good?"

Beatrice stretched up to open the trapdoor. "Let's get out of here."

Ann helped her lever the door open. The basement was trashed — the food packs were torn, strewn across the floor, and the few lights that hung from the ceiling had been smashed.

"Holy shit," said Ann.

Beatrice headed straight for the back corner of the basement. She found a discolored patch of the concrete, and pressed it lightly with her fingertips, and it flipped up as if it was as light as air. Beyond it was dark, and she leaned inside until her entire torso had disappeared into the opening. Ann watched in mild confusion.

Beatrice leaned back out again, and closed the hatch, slumping against the wall. She pushed her hand back through her tangled hair. "Thank god."

"What? What is that?"

"Caine's servers."

"Caine. Oh, right — your AI friend." Ann reached for the bottom of the concrete panel. "I remember you mentioning him."

Beatrice caught her wrist before she could touch the wall, and then immediately let go like it was a burning iron, so that she ended up just ineffectually batting it away. She buried her fist in her sweatshirt pocket and looked askance. "We should move quickly. It might come back."

Ann seemed miffed, but followed Beatrice back up the stairs anyway. She glanced around outside, searching for the policebot, but when the landscape remained undisturbed gave up and climbed into the driver's side. Beatrice seized her sword and opened the passenger door, tucking her bag and her blade beneath the seat while clutching the battery safely in her lap. The sedan was a dull, chipped maroon with a smashed tail light, but it had a clean interior, tanned seat skins and door linings peeling away to reveal red metal sidings as shiny and slick as fresh cruor. As a whole it reminded Beatrice of a skinned animal.

"That was crazy," said Ann, starting the car up. "Is that, like, a regular occurrence for you?"

Beatrice didn't reply right away, but stared out the window as they pulled away from her ranch, thoughtful. The house grew smaller and smaller, until Beatrice could have pinched it between her thumb and forefinger, and then it disappeared.

Beatrice turned away from her house, slouching back in the faux-leather. "I try not to make it a habit."

For a moment the only sound was the low complaints of Ann's car.

Ann's thumbs worried the steering wheel in small circles. The textured plastic had been worn down to a smooth sheen. "You look younger than I expected."

"We're practically the same age."

"No, I mean — yeah. I know. But I kind of expected you to look really mature for some reason."

Beatrice considered this, leaning her head against the window. "I expected you to be scary. But you're actually quite nice looking face-to-face."

"Thanks."

The next minute passed in silence. Beatrice took the time to inspect Ann's jacket. It was very clean, but well-worn, and the colors were a bit faded from repeated washes. She reached over and bent back the collar a little, to which Ann jumped.

"Annabelle Archon," read Beatrice, squinting to make out the scribbled sharpie. Her hand retreated. "Is that your full name?"

"My mom's," explained Ann lightly. "My brother named me after her."

"So your parents—"

"Like everyone else's. Six feet under. Well, except for your mom, I guess."

"I'm sorry."

They passed by a cactus. Beatrice kept her eyes trained on its shadow.

"You know," said Beatrice. "I've never been this far from my house before."

"What, were you planning on staying there forever?"

"No. I was gonna meet up with Blake."

"You wanna meet your mom. I get it."

Suddenly Beatrice's throat felt very dry. She swallowed. "I just have to kill all the robots first."

Ann laughed.

"Don't laugh."

Ann stopped laughing and smiled. "Sorry, I didn't know you were serious."

Beatrice turned away from Ann, and stared out into the desert. It was blurred as it passed their windows — alcohol on paint. "Somebody has to."

Chapter Five: Tremor and Flow

The drive from Beatrice's house to Suburbia was seven hours. Beatrice and Ann had left around six o'clock. Now it was ten, and Ann's driving was getting worse.

"We're gonna have to pull in somewhere for the night," said Ann, stifling a yawn. "Tomorrow we can finish the trip."

Beatrice pulled her forehead away from the glass and blinked blearily. Her eyes ached pleasantly from the neon streaks of the setting sun. "Pull in where?"

"There's a gas station a few miles from here. They have supplies, and two rooms in the back up for rent if you can trade them something valuable enough."

"Great. Tomorrow I get treatment, and then you drive me home."

They turned off the former highway and cruised down a road that was even more barren, crevices sneaking up and down its length and wild grass peeking up from wherever the cracked asphalt provided shade. Beatrice fished her bottle of pills from her bag, placing one of the pills on the back of her tongue and reaching for her water.

Ann glanced over, startled out of her exhaustion, and slapped the bottle from Beatrice's hand. "Woah, woah, woah. What are you doing?"

Beatrice watched as the pill bottle clattered to the floor of the car, in her shock swallowing the pill dry. She coughed, and pounded her chest. "What the hell?"

"The first factor of the apocalypse was the degradation of medicine. Those could be poison."

"You're an idiot." Beatrice leaned over to scrape the fallen pills back into their container. "I've been taking these for years."

"Maybe that's why you're so weird. Drugs messed up your head!"

"I'm not weird!"

"Right."

The car swerved to the left a little. "How about you watch the road?"

Ann shook her head. The gas station's neon sign grew closer, a shining beacon in the darkening sky. "What are they even for?"

They pulled into a well-lit, grimy parking lot. "None of your business."

The gas station was surrounded by robot carcasses. The lights of the eave over the pump were angled out into the desert, casting a yellow glow for at least two hundred yards. The gas itself was sealed away by a metal cage which ran down from the lights to a lumpy concrete mound.

Beatrice looked between the lights and the robots. "How—"

"EMPs. Jose and a few of his friends run the place. They're holed up with a bunch of engineering manuals and stuff — plus, Jose himself is, like, a genius. Those lights detect when a robot comes near and send out an electromagnetic pulse. Anywhere on the pavement is safe."

“That’s incredible.” Beatrice’s gaze traced curls of metal. “So this is a Faraday cage, then, as well as a vault to keep out thieves. Genius.”

“I guess. I never really got how it worked.”

“It redistributes the electric charge. Like if you poured water over a balloon — nothing inside gets wet.”

“Okay, whatever,” said Ann. “C’mon. Let’s get inside.”

The two girls filed into the squat, run-down gas station in silence. The store was fluorescent and mostly empty — a few bags of chips sat on the center aisle, and some plastic water bottles as well as some saran-wrapped sandwiches with wilting lettuce were scattered haphazardly in the refrigerators lining either wall. A kid who looked around nineteen glanced up as they came in, spared Ann a curt nod, and then returned to a tattered porn magazine he had propped up on the counter.

Ann walked up to the counter and snatched the magazine from his hands, tossing it into a nearby garbage can. “I’m renting one of your rooms tonight, José.”

José pulled an identical magazine from under the counter, this one beat up in a slightly different way. “And why would I give it to you?”

Ann reached back into her bag and pulled out a pile of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issues. He ogled the top one.

Ann tapped the top of the pile, and then slid it back as he reached for it. “I know how much you love Kate.”

He hesitated, and then nodded, and she let go of the magazines. He slid them under the counter, then tossed Ann a key.

“Just for the night. Breakfast is free of charge.”

“You’re the best.”

Beatrice followed as Ann pushed through the door marked ‘employees only’. As she passed José he glanced at her sword and nodded appreciatively. Ann found one of the doors that lined the hall they had emerged into and fumbled the lock open.

Ann locked the door behind them. “There’s only one bed, but I can take the floor.”

“No, I’ll take the floor. It was a long trip.”

Ann shook her head. “You’re the one who needs medical attention.”

“And you’re the driver,” retaliated Beatrice, dumping her stuff next to the door. “I’m not trusting someone with sleep deprivation to take me to that medical attention.”

Ann stretched out on the floor. “Look, this is fine. Almost comfortable. You get in the bed.”

Beatrice sat down on the floorboards beside Ann. “Wow, it feels like a cloud. I’m not sleeping on the bed.”

Ann sat up and rubbed her eyes. “I’m too fucking tired for this. Just get in the bed, it isn’t that hard.”

Beatrice pulled Robert from her bag and laid back on the hardwood. “I guess we’ll both just sleep on the floor.”

Ann stared at her blankly, and then laughed, tugging her hand down the side of her face. “Is that a fucking stuffed animal?”

By the time Ann finally woke up the next morning Beatrice had eaten breakfast — a cup of watery, lukewarm coffee and some tasteless pastry from one of those 3d food printers — and was sitting on the floor, sword in one hand and a smooth stone in the other.

Ann groaned. “What time is it?”

“How should I know?” Beatrice ran the stone down the sword, and it made a nasty metal sound.

Ann rolled over so she could reach her bag and pulled from it her watch, which she strapped to her wrist. “8:30. Oh shit, that’s kind of late.”

“I woke up an hour ago,” said Beatrice. “You’re the one who’s late.”

“Whatever.” Ann stood, stretching backwards. Her back cracked loudly. “Are you ready to go?”

Beatrice glanced up to the boarded-over window, through which small shafts of light seeped into the room. “Sure.”

Soon the two girls were once again cruising down the highway. For a few minutes the road passed in silence. Beatrice felt itchy and wrong — she wasn’t doing what she was supposed to be doing, which was reheating breakfast, and it caused her a deep unease.

“So. Stuffed animal.” Ann hid her smile behind her steaming cup of shitty, watered-down coffee she had paid five dollars for. “What’s the deal there?”

Beatrice crossed her arms and elected to ignore Ann.

“It’s just a funny juxtaposition. You’re this whole badass robot fighter who’s the daughter of *Blake Blaire*, but you sleep with a teddy? I mean, it’s not like I’m putting you down or anything — well, maybe a little — you do you, yeah?”

“You know what would be nice? Not talking anymore. You to me, or me to you. How about that?”

For the next hour the two sat in silence, and then Ann spotted something stark against the line of the road on the horizon.

Ann, now alert, took a sip of the coffee and squinted at the horizon. For a moment she was silent, desperately hoping that she was wrong.

“Are those robots?” asked Ann cautiously.

Beatrice’s head snapped up from where it had been previously trained on the bottle of pills in her hand. There weren’t many left, but she wasn’t feeling too hot already, and if she was going to be fighting-

They grew closer. Nursebots. She could handle that. Beatrice downed a pill.

“Stop the car,” said Beatrice, leaning past Ann to snatch her sword from where it lay across the back seat.

“What?” asked Ann incredulously. “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“You value your life.” Beatrice unsheathed the blade. “Stop the car.”

Ann’s eyes widened at the sight of the sword. They rolled to a stop.

“When was the last time you fought robots?” asked Beatrice, opening the door and moving to stand on the faded tar.

“Robots themselves?” Ann looked between Beatrice and the robots. “A few months ago? A year? Suburbia has training facilities and shit.”

The robots grew closer.

“Why don’t I just go around them, dude?” asked Ann, placing her hand on the keys to the ignition. “They’re not that fast.”

“I have to kill them,” said Beatrice. “It’s two more down in the scheme of approximately a hundred thousand.”

“That’s so stupid. You’re just going to get hurt worse.”

Beatrice didn’t say anything, but her shoulders tensed.

Ann sat in the car, watching as the robots grew near. After a moment she let out a sigh, and laboriously climbed from the car. In her hand she clutched a metal hello kitty baseball bat that she had produced from the glove compartment. “I’ll take the one on the left, then?”

“Distract it for as long as you can,” said Beatrice, adjusting her stance subconsciously.

The robots gained ground quickly — their primitive tank-like wheels gripped the rough terrain, propelling them forward at high speeds. Beatrice lunged forward, like she had done a thousand times before, while Ann bashed the second one over the head. One of the shoulder guns popped up, but Beatrice sliced down on it, severing its connection to power. One well-placed stab to the center later and robot one was out of commission.

Ann hit the robot again. It’s head was beginning to dent, and razors emerged from it’s stubby steel hands.

“Get out of the way,” said Beatrice, aiming for the robot’s side while Ann leapt back from the blades.

“Fine,” said Ann, attempting to knock off the razors with the bat before taking a step back. “Geez.”

Most robots that Valvidan’s facilities had sent after the unsuspecting public were fairly harmless cooking and cleaning bots. The problem with robots, however, was not the level of threat they posed, but the sheer number them. With most humans wiped out and many automatic factories of Valvidan’s ROBOTS R US subsidiary still up and running, most thought that the difference in population size would be the advent of the age of the robot — until Blake Blaire, the actress turned action hero, took down the

factories one by one. Beatrice owed Blake Blaire her life, along with everyone else that had survived. Blake Blaire had then turned her attention to Valvidan's main servers, which hosted the AI that controlled the robots. However, they proved to be impenetrable: robots swarmed so thickly that it was impossible to get anywhere near them, even with the best, most reliable EMP available

The robot swung around to face Beatrice. Moving quickly, it knocked into her, and she stumbled to the side. It turned again, and this time Beatrice twisted around to meet it. Her sword ran through its center, and it finally died.

Beatrice winced. "Ow." She stumbled to stable footing, clutching her stomach, and sat down heavily in the dirt. "Ow. Ow. Ow."

Ann looked at the robot, and then crouched beside Beatrice. "You good?"

Beatrice tilted her head back, struggling to take control of her breathing.

"Yeah."

"Can you stand?"

Beatrice nodded. "Yeah."

The two sat in silence. Beatrice did not stand.

Ann moved to sling her arm under Beatrice's. "I'll just help—"

Beatrice shoved Ann away, and then doubled over, gritting her teeth against the sudden movement. "I don't need your help. I've survived on my own for over sixteen years now, and you think that I'm suddenly going to be some clueless idiot who needs other people to take care of her?"

Ann crossed her arms, straightening. "I don't—"

"Well I don't!" shouted Beatrice. "Get the fuck away from me!"

Ann recoiled. "Fine. Mess yourself up, I'm not gonna stop you."

Beatrice pushed herself over to the car and reached for the handle. Her fingers found purchase, and she used it to haul herself up every agonizing inch. She fumbled open the door and slid into her seat as gracefully as she could manage.

Ann started up the car again, eyes trained on Beatrice, who was staring intensely at the road ahead of them — less perusing the landscape and more an attempt at control. Ann cleared her throat and turned her eyes forward. The car peeled off in the direction of Suburbia, bouncing slightly as they ran over some metal piping that had fallen from the attacking bots.

"To be fair," said Ann after a minute had passed. "That sword shit you did was pretty badass."

Beatrice, who was just beginning to regain her ability to hear things over the pain, had a vague idea of what Ann was saying. Most of her brain was concentrated on trying not to pass out, and words ran through her head like yellow text on billboards that hogged the sides of highways. She could see the instructions flashing before her.

Acknowledge the pain. Accept the pain. Control the pain. Okay, not there yet, back to acknowledge the pain. Accept the pain. Scream about the — NO.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE FUCKING PAIN.

Beatrice let out a strangled sigh. "Thanks."

"You good?" asked Ann.

"You say that a lot," said Beatrice, mocking. "You good?"

Ann's mouth did the twisty question mark thing again. "Can I see what's bothering you? I might be able to help."

Beatrice laughed, but it quickly dissipated into a tortured moan. "Sure you could, Ms. Pills Are Poison."

"They literally are! Look, I run the garden back at Suburbia—"

"A garden. How cute. You grow tumbleweeds? Or maybe — rocks? Beef jerky you stuck in the dirt like a tree?" Beatrice's eyesight was thinning, an encroaching black taking up at its borders. "Aw, that was pretty bad. Sorry, I'm better at this when I'm not dying."

Ann grimaced. "For your information, we have produced a ton of fresh food. My point was that I know a thing or two about natural remedies. I might be able to help."

"Essential oils are gonna patch the hole in my stomach? You know, I'm liking you more and more. You're young. Idealistic. I might just hire you."

"I think I enjoyed you more when you were a silent, edgy teen."

Beatrice tugged up her shirt to show the burn marks. It was worse than the last time she had checked it — the skin surrounding it was a nasty medley of purple and yellow, and the wound itself was-

"Holy shit," said Ann, quickly looking back to the road. "I don't think I have anything for—"

And then Beatrice passed out.

Chapter Six: But a Shadow

A light beat down on Beatrice's eyes, the dull thump of it mirroring that of her heart. A beating heart — that's usually a good sign you're alive.

Oh, she thought as her vision flooded with the red sort of spots that you get when you've had your eyes closed against something bright and demanding. *Is it morning already? I'd been having the nicest dream.*

She had been. Blake had been there. They had been in — a bar? A cafe?

Moments earlier Beatrice had been sitting in dream 80s cafe. Beatrice was a regular in dream 80s cafe, oftentimes finding herself dropped in two or three nights in a row. It was classier than the other dream locals she frequented — there were no monsters or caves, no bare towers or soulless oceans. Beatrice had always been fascinated with the '80s. Status and wealth — both things that Beatrice never had an opportunity to interact with — had been so valued. Dream 80s cafe was turquoise and pink, or yellow and royal blue, it didn't really matter. It was always some gaudy variation on the vibrant edges of the color wheel, though, as if someone had taken a pinball to the thing and let it bounce around until a rainbow of neon signs and semi-realistically colored jukeboxes had been assembled. Usually Beatrice would nurse a cup of coffee and gobble down carbs that meant nothing but tasted weird enough to be good, waiting for nothing to happen.

This time, though, nothing didn't happen. Blake happened instead.

"Hey, kiddo," Blake had greeted, sliding into the shiny red chair across Beatrice's table. She was wearing a puffy plaid overcoat and a tight jean dress that went down to her knees. "How are you holding up?"

"As well as can be expected," said dream Beatrice, who was generally nonplussed by the things that normal Beatrice would be freaking out over. "How's the robot killing going?"

"As well as can be expected," said Blake, a smile ghosting over her lips. "Heard you met a real person today."

"Yesterday," corrected Beatrice. "Ann. What a fucking weirdo."

"Woah, bud, you might want to slow down for a second. Weirdo is a pretty heavy term. Start at oddball, instead, and we'll work our way up."

Beatrice laughed, and it didn't hurt. "I wish you'd reply to my messages. We could talk like this in real life."

Blake smiled again. Smaller. "We'll meet up eventually. Train first. Get good enough to not slow me down."

"I wish I wasn't—" said dream Beatrice. "I wish—"

"If wishes were fishes." Blake grabbed Beatrice's coffee, taking a sip. "Is that how that saying goes? Damn, this is good. You've got one hell of an imagination."

Beatrice gestured back to the kitchen, their view of which was blocked by a porthole door. "There's plenty more. This diner is like putty. Much easier than a cliffside or wherever I'll end up tomorrow."

"Reminds me of this gala I went to one time. The finger foods were the fucking bomb. Little fish things and shit." Blake stood, pushing back her chair. "Anyway, wish I could stay and chat, kid, but you need to wake up."

Beatrice also stood. "Wait. Not yet."

Blake smiled at her, tired. "You need to let go."

"Please." Beatrice scrambled past the table so she could grab her mother's hand. Her grip was desperate. "I've seen all of your movies."

Blake chuckled. "Seem petty now, don't they?"

"No! They're amazing! And I just — can I—"

Blake held out her arms for an embrace. "A hug?"

Beatrice hesitated for a moment before nodding furiously. Blake stepped forward, obliging.

At the contact Beatrice melted, like a warm bath at midnight, like the wave of relief when you close yourself in your closet and all you see is dark and all you feel is fabric textures. She closed her eyes and almost cried, only choking it back because she didn't want to get Blake's shirt damp. In that moment Beatrice was so grateful for her mother that she would've dug her own heart from her chest with bare hands if she'd asked. That probably wouldn't have been too difficult, actually — people work differently in dreams.

And then the phantom of her mother pushed her away, and the floor dissolved.

"Time to wake up, babes."

Beatrice fell.

And then she wasn't falling, because she had hit something springy which knocked the breath from her lungs. When she opened her eyes was staring up at a white popcorn ceiling smattered with brown stains, bright surgical lights boring into her like a scalpel. A musty old hospital gown clung to her shoulders, and on a squat metal table beside her was an array of medical equipment swimming in a shallow pool of disinfectant. On either side of her windows were painted over black, so that she couldn't tell what time it was, and, presumably, robots couldn't look in.

She lifted the neck of her hospital gown. A bandage wrapped her stomach — it was numb, reduced to just a dull ache. A bit below it, just past her waistline, ran a long, diagonal and misshapen scar from when she had sewed herself back up. She had a feeling that this new scar would look much nicer.

"You're awake." The voice was calm and feminine. A book snapped shut.
"Good."

Her bed was surrounded on either side by a row of sagging cots. Near the end was a boy with bandages wrapped around his face, but other than him that it was empty save a pudgy young woman — a few years older than Beatrice — dressed in turquoise nurse scrubs. Her skin was pale and dotted with freckles, and cheap-looking pink plastic gems hung from her ears. Over her head was strapped a mask of some sort of pink monster. With a jolt of apprehension Beatrice realized what had felt so wrong — her own mask was missing. She clapped a hand over her face, pushing herself up to sit on the sagging cot while grabbing blindly at her surroundings.

There was a hand on her shoulder. Beatrice jumped, and fell off the side of the bed. She scrambled to her feet, tucking her face into the soft cotton of the robe.

Beatrice tried to look around, but her eyes were covered by the fabric.

“Where’s my mask?”

“Safely stored,” said the girl. “You will—”

She stopped mid sentence. Beatrice was already at the door.

“Where?” asked Beatrice, jiggling the handle. She peeked out from under the cloth draping her head — the girl’s manner frustrated Beatrice to no end.

“Go back to your bed. You’ll get your things back as soon as we make sure you are not carrying weapons.”

“I was carrying weapons.”

The nurse nodded, unfazed. “Sit down and I’ll return your things.”

Beatrice hesitated, and then let go of the handle. She crossed her arms petulantly and perched on the edge of the bed. The girl pulled a comically large ring of keys from her belt.

“One moment.”

“*One moment,*” mocked Beatrice under her breath as the door swung shut.

A moment later the door reopened. The girl had Beatrice’s bag clutched in one hand with not nearly enough gravity for the situation.

Beatrice sprung to her feet, ripping the bag away. She fumbled for her mask, and slipped it under the loose fabric, letting out a tight sigh of relief. Robert stared up at her from the depths of the bag. He was probably angry she had left him alone. And beside that, her laptop, and beside that-

Her blood ran cold. “Where’s my sword?”

“Confiscated. The scouts have it by now.”

Beatrice scowled. “Where are they?”

“Suburbia’s gym.”

Suburbia. Right. Beatrice thought about this and picked at her hospital gown. It clung to her shoulders, dampened by sweat and antiseptic.

“Do you have a bathroom?”

The nurse gestured to two doors — one with the silhouette of a person in a dress, one with the silhouette of a person in pants. “You’ll want the door to the right.”

Beatrice slung her backpack over her shoulder and pushed into the bathroom. Graffiti covered the chipped, pale-red porcelain walls. Beatrice squinted to make out the sharpie scrawlings and spray painted complaints of Suburbia's citizens, pulling a change of clothes from her bag.

"Anyone else in Suburbia 2049?" read one in a scratchy green marker. Beside it, in black sharpie that looked a bit fresher, was a phone number with the note "Humans call. Robots do not interact." It struck Beatrice that, for the first time in her life, she was somewhere with a recent human history consisting of people other than her. It made the room feel dirty, suddenly — like it was crawling with bugs.

Beatrice ended up hopping out of the bathroom window, leaving the gown neatly folded on the sink. Outside of the former Sephora's it was near dusk, and a chill cut through her sweatshirt.

Suburbia seemed to Beatrice to perfectly match the archetype implied by its name. The line between its sky and its earthly possessions was uniform, trending upwards and downwards with the red mesa roofs like the steady drum of a heartbeat. They cast long shadows onto the street, framing the kids who walked there in a desolate shroud — and kids walked everywhere, very few of them wearing masks. Beatrice stared into the faces of the Suburbians as they passed her, chewing diligently on their mealy, synthesized snack foods and rims of coffee cups. Their eyes were blank with innocence. It scared her, how vulnerable the curve of their noses were, how unabashed the purse and stretch of their lips, how shamelessly they flaunted the sunburns raised by what fat clung their cheeks. It was a viscerally human scene, and it made her feel like a viewer from afar, as if the pulse of muffled chatter and crimped sun dresses were badly-directed scenes in a low-budget film. She stumbled forward, nearly trailing off after one of the larger, louder groups. Like a lost puppy. She stopped herself, and covered her ears to shield against the swell of human noise, sucking in a half-choked wheeze of air. The oxygen fell into her lungs like a brick.

Beatrice was startled back into reality by a guy in scrubs at her side. She tried to pull her sword from her side, only impeded by the fact that it wasn't there.

"Anyone home?" A sandwich was splayed precariously between his teeth. Brown ringlets of hair spilled into his eyes, and a cracked blue power ranger mask was propped on the edge of his nose. The most jarring thing about him was that he was really old — at least in his mid-twenties.

He took a bite from the sandwich. "What are you doing out here?"

Beatrice turned to walk away.

After a moment, he followed, and soon the two were walking step-in-step.

"Doctor Hunt." He swallowed, and extended an arm. "You're Beatrice Blaire. My patient."

Beatrice stared at his hand. "I need to get to the scouts."

"I'm surprised you're up and about — that wound is very serious. You need to stay in bed for now."

"I'm not going back to bed."

He raised an eyebrow. "If you hadn't come at the time you did I'm not sure you would have made it."

Beatrice doubted that. She couldn't die when she had so much stuff left to do. "The scouts."

He fished a packet of mayonnaise from his pocket, squirting it's remains onto the bottom half of it's sandwich. "You'll want the gym. Ask for Aisha."

He took a bite of pure mayonnaise, and spit it out onto the floor next to him. He then straightened, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and gestured vaguely downtown.

"Huge building. Can't miss it. Attached to our old high school." He reached back into his coat pocket and flipped Beatrice's pill bottle at her. She caught it. "If you're going to go, at least take your pills. It's real high quality stuff. Hope you don't mind that I snagged a few for my own supply."

She minded. "Of course not."

He nodded. "Thanks."

"Yeah, uh—" Beatrice tucked the pill bottle in the front pocket of her pack. "Thanks for saving my life."

He grinned. His teeth were yellow with mustard. "No problem."

She felt the doctor stare after her for a moment, but then he went back to his sandwich, and the feeling was gone.

Walking through Suburbia was an exercise in control. The opening of a door, a particularly loud footstep, the rumble of a passing car — all of it set her on edge, so that she was constantly resisting the urge to bolt. The traffic lights still lit up, vestiges of Suburbia's pre-apocalypse — it almost seemed that the town could've been plucked from 2041 and dropped back down 17 years later. It was much louder than anything Beatrice had ever heard before, and in so many different ways, too. In most of the towns of Blake's movies the pavement was layered with grit, soft in the viewport like a curdled sponge cake. "Hyper-realism," it had been called. Everything was sharp and dirty and pasted with sweat. Beatrice had assumed that's what Suburbia would look like — but the rot of Suburbia was more subtle. She could feel it crawling up her neck.

The street receded to a village green, which was marked in the middle by a cell tower that stuck up from the weeds like it was humanity's stake in Earth. Either end of the green faded into a park, but directly across from Beatrice was a large, romanesque high school. She hopped the overgrown bushes that ringed the edge of the green and stomped through the grass — it was ringed in places with circles of bricks and wood, like somebody had set up and then abandoned a bunch of campfires. A snaking gravel path led into the woods, and about fifty yards down a few kids were huddled around a

park bench, lighting up cigarettes and chatting in hushed tones. As she grew closer Beatrice could make out muffled shouts, all coming from a large, boxy side building bleeding yellow out onto its surrounding brickwork.

She found a side door and peeked through the thick glass. It was an open space, with torn basketball hoops bent into the ceiling like retracted claws and ratty purple gym mats lining the walls in slumped rows. There were around twenty kids scattered throughout the room, ages ranging from preteen to young adulthood. Most were practicing against a haphazard row of beat-up punching bags, while a few were sparring against each other. On a bent metal rack in the corner was a pile of wooden poles, hockey sticks, and tennis rackets, most of them broken in some way. It pained Beatrice to imagine her sword among them.

Beatrice shoved through the door. Inside was warm, and smelled like sweat and fabric softener. As the door swung shut behind her, she glanced up at the mountainous ceiling the looming exterior had disguised. It invoked awe.

She looked back down at the people inside of the gym, who had mostly ignored her — too caught up in their various activities — and the awe was gone. Her gaze snagged on one older teen in the corner: she was staring at Beatrice with such intensity that for a moment Beatrice was afraid she'd dragged in a dead body behind her. Her hair was blonde enough to be silver, and it was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, beads of sweat tracing from it down to ivory skin flushed red with exertion. The clothes she wore struck Beatrice as bizarrely nice — all branded work-out clothes that would've seemed more in place in the wealthy yoga classes of LA that her mother would've circled pre-apocalypse. Muscles bulged from her biceps as she set down a pair of weights. As she stood, she struck an almost ridiculously imposing figure. She was tall, in part naturally — nordic, probably — and in part artificially, the puffy rubber soles of her sneakers pushing her higher and the set of her shoulders adding at least three inches in intimidation. She caught Beatrice's eye and waved her over: it was unmistakable as a beckon.

Beatrice turned and made a brisk beeline for the weapons rack.

"Hey!"

Beatrice reached the rack, and shoved aside a pile of baseball bats. Around her, the combat had abruptly stopped — apparently at the call of the young woman. They all looked to her, and then Beatrice, and Beatrice sifted through the weaponry with increased desperation.

There was a hand on her shoulder, and she wrenched herself away with such a sudden fervor that she stumbled back into a bin of dodgeballs.

"Woah!" The girl lifted her hand. Behind her, the entire gym was standing at attention. "Calm down! What are you looking for?"

"Sword," said Beatrice, pushing herself to her feet and backing away. "My sword."

The girl looked at Beatrice like she was thinking about dentists. “The Arakhene one?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm.” The girl extended a hand. “What’s your name, fresh face? Or should I say — fox face?”

She laughed at her own joke, loudly, and behind her the kids grumbled. She shot them a stern look, and then waved a hand dismissively, and they went back to fighting.

“Beatrice.”

“Beatrice! Fantastic!” When Beatrice didn’t move to shake her hand she reached forward and took Beatrice’s for her. Her grip strength was astounding — Beatrice could feel her bones grinding together. “My name is Aisha.”

“My sword,” said Beatrice, tugging her hand away.

“I’m afraid you’re looking in the wrong place. I keep heavy-duty weapons in the locker room.”

“Where is that?”

“Woah, woah, slow down!” Aisha held up her hands like a traffic director as Beatrice attempted to step around her. “I’m the one around here who takes care of weapon distribution. And I only give people swords if they can prove they’re capable. You’ll need to take a permit test.”

Beatrice’s expression soured. “A... permit test?”

“A permit test! Evaluating your combat ability.”

“I don’t need my combat ability evaluated.” Beatrice took a step towards Aisha, who remained still, staring her down with an even, immutable confidence. “I need my sword. And you need to give it back.”

“The test will take half an hour, at most.”

“No. I need my sword back now.”

“Oh, good,” said Aisha. “You can start now, then!”

“No, I—”

“Look,” interrupted Aisha. “*Beatrice*. You have a choice here. Either you take this test and fight for the sword, and we’ll keep it all professional and courteous and one-on-one, or you don’t take the test and fight for the sword, and you’ll be up against me, my scouts, and then a very long jail sentence.”

That wasn’t really much of a choice, but she had a feeling that was Aisha’s point.

“Are you the one I have to fight?” Beatrice wasn’t so sure she could do that.

Aisha laughed. “No, no. Of course not. That wouldn’t be fair!”

“Then who?”

Aisha tapped a finger on Beatrice’s mask, and then the empty air as Beatrice leaned away, nonplussed at the rejection.

"First this'll have to come off!"

Beatrice grimaced, and then removed her mask, setting it gingerly to the side. Aisha's gaze dug into her face like a shovel digging a grave. She hoped it wasn't hers.

Aisha squinted, and glanced from Beatrice to her mask. "You look familiar."

Beatrice looked up, and pulled in a breath, evening the purse of her lips. She felt herself blink — brown eyes, like Blake's. They'd been more striking on her mother, who had blonde hair to match them. Beatrice had inherited her father's dark hair and olive complexion. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Like, really familiar." Aisha circled her pointer finger an inch from Beatrice's nose. "Your facial structure. It reminds me of someone."

"Weird," said Beatrice, angling away from her.

Aisha stared at her for a moment longer, silent, and then huffed a laugh and shook her head, and the subject was dismissed. She turned to a young woman running on a treadmill who looked to be around Beatrice's age. Her loosened blonde bun kept hitting her neck as she jogged — a rhythmic thump, thump, thump. At Aisha's gesture she shut off the machine and trotted over to meet them.

"This is one of my more experienced scouts, Emma," explained Aisha. "You'll be fighting with her, not me."

Emma turned to Beatrice and smiled, sticking out a hand. She needed braces. "It's a pleasure."

Beatrice hesitantly accepted the handshake. She wasn't sure how many times they were supposed to shake, or how long they were supposed to stay like that. Her skin was hot.

"You have the whole building to use," said Aisha, pointing to a side door. "This used to be a school, so it's pretty large."

Emma, who had disappeared into a side room, came back out in a laser tag vest. It was black and hung snugly over her shoulders. Right over the heart was the same small sensor as on the tips of the poles, except it was blue instead of green.

She held out a similar uniform to Beatrice. "They're a little heavy, but you'll be fine, I think."

"The rules are the following," said Aisha, retrieving a wooden pole from the rack and tossing it to Beatrice. "Emma and you will both wear laser tag suits. On the end of the poles is a sensor, inside the suits is a sensor. You touch the pole to the target on her vest within ten minutes, you win, and vice versa. When the targets are touched they'll turn red. Now, you don't need to win to get back your sword, necessarily — we're just testing to see that you're competent in a battle situation."

Emma looked over to Beatrice and grinned. "I'm aiming to win. Just letting you know."

Beatrice squared her shoulders. "Me, too."

Aisha chuckled like this had amused her and tapped her watch. "Alright, on my mark we start."

"Wait," said Beatrice. "I can't use the pole. I need my sword."

"Hey, no time for hesitation against robots, kid. Contestants, you may begin!"

Emma spun and ran out the door that led to the rest of the building. Beatrice glanced down at the pole, and found the sensor at the top. She ripped it off, tossing the pole to the side, and ran after her.

The hall behind the door was darker and dirtier than the gym. While the windows were painted over like in every other building, the lightbulbs of the school had all been smashed, so it was stiflingly dark. Trash crowded on the edges of the corridor, and an oppressive scent of rotting chalk dust had taken root in the chipped brickwork. Beatrice slowed to a jog. Ahead of her, the corridor split. She couldn't see around the corner, but on the opposite wall there was the slightest blue glow. She brought her hand up to cup the light from her own vest in the palm of her hand.

Beatrice didn't want to fight Emma. Wounded and without her sword, she couldn't. She backpedaled, and then turned and sprinted as quietly as she could back down the hall. Near the end was what she was looking for — the place Emma had disappeared off into earlier. The gym supply closet. She ducked inside.

The interior of the supply closet was pitch black. Beatrice shut the door behind her as delicately as possible and groped around on the wall for a switch. She found it, and a swinging light overhead flickered on, illuminating a crowded, messy space stacked with various sports equipment. Shadows lurched as the light swayed in the air. It was a very narrow space, and she felt her heart pounding in her ears, in time with her watch. It was only for a few minutes. She just had to tough it out. Let the panic at confinement swell, then wash, then fade — like letting the ocean tide recede. That was something you couldn't hold on to.

"Three minutes left!" shouted Aisha. Beatrice had yet to emerge from the supply closet, and Emma was growing restless.

"Beatrice? You in there?" Beatrice heard someone rap their knuckles against the door, and grimaced, making one final adjustment and then fumbling the vest back over her shoulders. "It's alright if you're scared. You can just give up, no one will judge."

"Oh—" Beatrice pulled the vest's straps tight. "Uh, yeah. Mhm."

The doorknob rattled. "Hiding isn't a good idea."

"My bad." She tossed the loose sensor in a box of basketballs, and pushed herself to her feet, brushing off her jeans.

"I'm going to come in."

Beatrice's head whipped to face the door. "Don't—"

"I am," said Emma, and she pushed the door open.

Beatrice lurched forward, attempting to shove past Emma with brute force. For a moment the two wrestled in the confined space of the doorway. Emma managed to throw her down, then swung the weapon around for her face. Beatrice rolled, and the pole hit the narrow walls of the closet, reverberating. Emma quickly recovered, bringing it up to try again at Beatrice's chest, but not before Beatrice had scrambled back to her feet and pulled over the bucket full of tennis balls.

"If you've been hiding in here and that's all you've come up with you don't deserve a license." Emma kicked some to the side, and turned back to Beatrice, advancing further. "I'm glad you're finally fighting again, at least. I thought this was going to get *really* boring."

Beatrice stumbled on the tennis balls, falling backwards over herself. Her hands scrabbled at the shelf, and her lip began to quiver, and she regained her footing just to charge her opponent again. She aimed a poorly-timed punch at Emma's midriff. Emma knocked her attack away, and shoved Beatrice over onto her back. She landed heavily, and choked for breath, throwing her arms over her head in self-defense.

"Damn," Emma said, raising her pole over Beatrice's chest plate. "You really weren't ready. I feel a little bit bad."

Beatrice lay prone, not daring to move. In Blake Blaire's *Fistfight Movie 17* Blake had been beaten very badly in the first of seventeen fistfights in the movie. She tried to recall what fear had looked like on her mother.

"A little bit. But not enough that I'm willing to lose."

And then she plunged the end of the pole onto Beatrice's target.

Nothing happened.

"I think it's supposed to turn red." Emma squinted. "Why isn't it turning red?"

Beatrice brought her hands away from her eyes. She looked up at Emma, and then pushed herself to her feet so they were standing face to face.

Beatrice bowed her head. "Congratulations."

"Oh," said Emma. "Thank you?"

Beatrice straightened, and steeled herself, and then went in for a hug.

"I win," whispered Beatrice in Emma's ear, pushing them a little closer. For a split-second the contact burned, Emma's hands iron-hot on her skin, and then their vests came into contact and Emma's light turned red.

It took a moment for Emma to register the change. She looked down at her scarlet chest, and then back up at Beatrice, confused.

Beatrice jerked away from the embrace and smiled, pointing to her vest's sensor, which was green.

Understanding dawned in Emma's eyes. "That's a dirty trick!"

"Time's up!" shouted Aisha, storming into the hallway with impatience.

"Where have you two gotten off to?"

Emma stared at Beatrice's vest, brow drawn. She was silent.

"Here," shouted Beatrice. "Um — storage closet."

Aisha spotted them through the open doorway. She smiled, and then her gaze landed on Emma's red sensor.

"Oh," she said, her smile falling before she quickly recovered her vigor. "Well. Congratulations, Beatrice! How—"

"She switched the sensors," interrupted Emma. "Between her vest and her pole. She switched them."

Aisha stared for a moment. Beatrice held up the detached blue sensor, and Aisha's gaze slid from Beatrice's eyes down to the lights, slowly. She was unreadable, barely a silhouette, only illuminated by the fuzzy light from the gym and the vest sensors.

"My sword," said Beatrice.

Aisha placed a hand on Emma's shoulder, and then on Beatrice's. Her nails dug into Beatrice's back. "Come back to the gym, you two."

The three girls reentered the gym. Aisha's brow was knit, her mouth set in a thin line. She sat on the edge of a bench press and rubbed her hands together.

"My sword," reminded Beatrice.

"Yes," said Aisha. "I'm afraid I might not be able to give it to you."

Beatrice stiffened. "What?"

"You didn't really complete the exercise," explained Aisha. "We were trying to see how skilled you are with a weapon. You tossed yours to the side."

Beatrice's fists clenched. "I'm the one who put up with your stupid challenge! If you're going to go on about the purpose of it, I might as well ask why you even had me fight a human in the first place. Wouldn't a robot be better? Or even a dummy?"

"Aisha," interjected Emma, who looked pained. "I think she should get the sword. She won fair and square."

Aisha stood. "It doesn't matter what you think. I still have no idea how Beatrice fights. While I honor her win, I can't give her a deadly weapon in good conscience — especially if she's willing to tread a line so thin between being resourceful and being a cheater."

"I didn't cheat."

"You didn't play in the spirit of the game."

"I need my sword! You need to give it to me. I told you before we started that I can't fight without it. It wasn't a fair game."

At the other end of the gym a boy picked up a heavy dumbbell with a grunt.

Aisha paused. "What do you mean, Beatrice, when you say you can't fight without your sword?"

"I mean that I can't use the pole. It doesn't work with me."

"Is any sword good?" Aisha measured Beatrice's expression. "Or just that one?"

"That one."

The boy dropped the dumbbell onto his foot and screamed.

"I think we may have had a misunderstanding," said Aisha, recovering her confidence. "People show their passion differently. Your passion, Beatrice, makes my heart swell!"

Beatrice was taken aback. "Is your heart alright?"

Aisha laughed, and then beamed down at Beatrice, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I have a compromise for us. Tomorrow, at noon, I will have your sword for you. But in return you must fight me."

Beatrice looked at Emma, who was leaning against the treadmill, pouting.

"Will that be safe?"

"I won't hurt you," assured Aisha. "Badly."

Beatrice pushed off her hand. "I meant for you. Anyone using a sword on someone is dangerous."

"Don't worry about that. We proof anything too dangerous."

"Fine," said Beatrice, sticking out a hand. "Tomorrow."

Aisha shook it, and Beatrice tried not to wince. "Tomorrow."

"Oh," said Beatrice, wiping her hand on her thigh. "Do you know where Ann Archon is? I'll have to tell her I'm staying overnight."

Aisha looked to Emma. "Where do you think Annie could've gotten off to?"

"Salim's sister?" Emma raked her hand back through her hair. She was trying to hide periodic glances at Beatrice's vest. "Uh — greenhouse?"

"Yeah, you're probably right." Aisha turned back to Beatrice. "You'll want the greenhouse. Now give us back your vest, yeah? We've got some repairs to do."

Chapter Seven: Roboticians in Green Houses

After about a minute of aimless strolling Beatrice stopped outside of a doorway that was set into the ground. The walls around it were painted an olive color that reminded her of her nutrition gruel. The door was unlocked.

Inside was illuminated by a blue-tinged bulb, and around a work table in an adjacent room sat a boy munching on chips and laughing at a joke that a girl sitting across from him had made. They hadn't noticed Beatrice, so she closed the door behind her as quietly as she could manage and took a look around. The room was crowded with spare machine parts, and smelled stale, like nobody had cleaned it properly since the apocalypse. In the corner was a tv playing some old program starring superheroes decked out in primary colors. In the other room the voices swelled, and a whiteboard caught Beatrice's eye — it was smudged, but drawn clearly on top of the stray marks was a purple diagram of an android. She spotted the marker, and grabbed it, turning it over in her hand.

"Hey! Who the fuck are you?"

Beatrice turned. It was the boy, the bag of chips still held loosely in his hand. He was heavy set, and over his large frame was a clean blue shirt advertising a video game. A shock of curly brown hair lay on the top of his head reminiscent of a dead bird. To his right was a smaller asian girl with heavy yellow eyeliner and blue, pink, and white socks that were slumped around her ankles. Beatrice noticed that she was bouncing on her heels, her hand tapping a rapid, unintelligible pattern on the side of her thigh.

"I think I may have the wrong place."

"No shit." The boy stepped closer. "What the fuck were you doing to our plans?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Beatrice glanced around the room again. "Do you know where the green house is? I'm looking for Ann."

"Calm down, Henry." The girl placed a hand on Henry's shoulder. "Ann's greenhouse — do you mean the one made of glass?"

Beatrice nodded. "Is that what she meant? Sorry. I only remember things that are useful. Like pneumatics. Which is what — do you, like, *do* robotics?" She could hardly believe her luck to have stumbled into a green house that was filled with machines.

"Yes. We 'do robotics.' Why?"

"I was just going to—" Beatrice gestured back to the drawing, words failing her. "I mean — I know where you got your plans from. I've seen them before online. But you drew the pneumatics wrong."

There was a pause. Eliza's smile faded, and her fingers began to tap faster. Slowly, her eyes narrowed. Beatrice returned her stare. After a moment of awkward eye

contact Eliza turned to the modified plans and stepped closer, delicately scratching away a stray mark with the tip of her nails. For what seemed like a good ten minutes she stayed like that, her gaze tracing over the lines as her foot bounced against the ground impatiently. Beatrice tried to avoid Henry's glare.

"You're right." Eliza waved Henry off as if she anticipated his immediate protest. "No, no, I — fucked up a bit, yeah. I'll pull them back up again and fix it."

"Jesus Christ," said Henry. "Big fuckin' deal. It's just a rough sketch."

Eliza turned back to Beatrice. "Do you work in robotics?"

"Yes."

Eliza grinned. "Wanna see what I've been working on?"

Henry stepped between them. "Please, Eliza. Sweetheart. Let's not invite this total stranger *further* into your home."

"Stranger is a strong word." Eliza had a finger to her lips, and was looking Beatrice up and down. "I'm ninety-nine percent sure I know who this is."

"You *know* her?"

"No. I know *of* her."

Henry ran a hand down his face. "Jesus."

Eliza turned to face Beatrice. "Hear me out. At the PTA meeting yesterday—"

"You're not in the PTA! *I'm* the one who represents us."

"I bugged you," dismissed Eliza. "Of course. Anyway, you were discussing—"

"You *bugged* me?" Henry's eyes widened, and his hands flew up to pat desperately at his shirt. "Where?"

"Let me finish!" Eliza crossed her arms. "You were discussing the parts allotted to us by the scouting team and Salim interrupted to talk about a new citizen. That was a big deal, and got everyone's attention. New citizens are rare."

"I'm not a citizen," interjected Beatrice.

"And he set several parameters, which you shut up and listened to," said Eliza pointedly. "For one, that she was only there on behalf of Ann."

"I can't believe you bugged me," muttered Henry.

"Second," continued Eliza, undeterred. "She was *famous*. The daughter of some bigshot who had apparently left her to fend for herself which we know, again, due to the resourcefulness of Ann, who had apparently been in communication with this individual for four years."

"Some bigshot?" Beatrice was mildly offended.

Eliza grinned, her foot tapping to the crescendo of some fast-paced invisible beat. "Doesn't she seem like someone who's a little — uh. Spent a lot of time alone."

Henry's upper lip wrinkled, and the sweat there congealed. "Get to the point."

Eliza stuck out a hand. "Beatrice Blaire, if I'm not mistaken."

There was a beat of silence. Beatrice hesitated, and then took the hand and shook.

"Beatrice is fine."

Eliza turned on Henry triumphantly. She had a very large presence, for her small stature. It welled up in the room like a tipped over glass of lemonade.

He snorted. "Do what you want, Eliza. But when she breaks something don't come crying to me."

"Fantastic!" Eliza looped her arm in Beatrice's, pulling her towards the adjacent room. She pulled Beatrice down to ear level. "You look just like your mother, you know."

Beatrice grimaced, and was about to reply, but the words died on her tongue as Elia's robot came into view.

It was half-finished, splayed on the table like a patient mid-surgery. Wires were wrapped in neat coils in its chest, then devolved into a mess of tangled yellow and blues as the cavities of the metal receded. Beatrice recognised it as Arakhene.

"Woah."

Eliza spread her arms. "Meet Thomas07, my magnum opus!"

"Thomas07," echoed Beatrice. "Did you name the robot?"

"Obviously! Do you like the motion design?"

"It's very nicely done," admitted Beatrice, running her hand along the pistons. "Where did you get all of the parts?"

"Robots the scouts kill," explained Eliza. "Cars, abandoned building supply shops — a lot of places. We're not picky."

"And the purpose?"

"We want to enter your mother's contest. Since his initial plans were made by my parents he's old enough, and with all the parts he's used he's caused the deaths of around five hundred robots, approximately." Eliza squinted like she knew this was bullshit, but also Blake's entire competition was kind of bullshit, and everyone knew it. "So he's technically fine to enter."

Henry was watching them from the doorway. "Can you please stop sharing our entire life story with this — with this—"

"That's very cool," said Beatrice, ignoring him.

"Thank you."

"Hey. Uh." Beatrice fiddled with the robot, and then, thinking the better of it, the hem of her shirt. Her hands tugged at the fabric so hard that a stitch popped. "I kind of need somewhere to stay until tomorrow. Cause I've got to fight someone to get back my sword. So maybe I could — keep looking at this overnight? Like, in this room?"

Eliza did her best to stifle her smile. "Well. I wouldn't be opposed to that."

"This is madness," hissed Henry. He straightened from where he'd been leaning on the doorframe. "You are crazy, Eliza. I want it on record that I think inviting a total stranger to stay the night is a bad idea."

"Henry—"

“You heard her! She’s looking for a sword. And, I’ll say it again, in case you didn’t pick up on it, which I *know* you did — she’s our competitor, Eliza! She’s obviously here for Homecoming!”

Eliza pursed her lips, and then turned to Beatrice. “Henry is right on some parts. Him and I never introduced ourselves. I’m Eliza, and the stick-in-the-mud over there is Henry. We run Suburbia’s tech department.”

“Hm,” said Beatrice. “I mean — it’s nice. To meet you.”

“I was about to turn for the night, but you can look at the robot, if you’d like, and sleep on our couch. I can even take you over to Ann’s in the morning.”

“Thank you. I would like that very much.”

For a moment there was silence. Henry was going to protest but Eliza shot him a glance that seemed to be saying something important. It occurred to Beatrice that this might be a test, and if she messed with their robot they’d know she was untrustworthy, but if she left it alone they might allow her to help them in the future. Beatrice really wanted to help with the robot.

“I’m leaving.” Henry sounded defeated. “I’m going to take a long, hot shower and *attempt* to debug myself. I’ll see you tomorrow, Eliza.”

“See you tomorrow, Henry!” She waved after him, then cast Beatrice an amused glance — like they were sharing a joke. “Please! Make yourself comfortable.”

Beatrice spent a while inspecting the robot. It really was a clever design, and as she investigated she cultivated a deeper and more intimate appreciation for it. Eliza must have really been a genius if this work was all hers. She plucked at the wires, and they reverberated like guitar strings. The bot was music under her hands. Robotics was a dance.

One that was getting a little hard to make out. She blinked, and the metal warped beneath her gaze — tripping over her partner’s feet.

“Fuck.” Beatrice slumped over the table, burying her face in her forearms. It must’ve been late, because the room was dark around the lamp illuminating the workspace. She had slung her backpack off against the table leg, and now reached down, fumbling for Robert. She pressed her nose to his head, taking a deep breath. It still smelled like home.

“Okay — okay. Just five minutes.” Her whisper was further silenced against Robert’s stomach, which she had propped up over her crossed arms. “My back is going to feel like shit tomorrow.”

I don’t like being in Suburbia, he told her. *In confidence. This is strange and overwhelming. I want to leave.*

“Shut up.” Beatrice let her eyes slip closed. “I didn’t even ask. So shut up.” *Rude.* His trunk pat her on the head affectionately. *Let’s leave tomorrow, okay?* But Beatrice was already asleep.

Chapter Eight: Taste of Mandarins

The next morning Beatrice was roused by Eliza, her hair carefully tied back and new, clean eyeliner applied — this one a bright blue. She sat up abruptly, and Eliza stepped back, staring at Beatrice with a strange expression.

“What time is it?”

“Uh—” Eliza pulled out her phone. “Around ten.”

Beatrice’s brow knit. She never woke up that late. Eliza was dressed for the day already, in a baggy set of pink overalls and a white tank-top and dangly sky-blue earrings that reminded Beatrice of worms.

Beatrice stood awkwardly, tucking Robert back into her bag. “Thanks for letting me crash here last night.”

“You obviously understand robotics.” Eliza was rubbing a loose wire over the pad of her thumb. “It’s a hobby of yours?”

Beatrice nodded, brushing the wrinkles from her jeans busily.

“My point is,” continued Eliza. “I’m not sure if you’d like to stay on my couch, but you’re certainly welcome to hang around during the day, if you want to help us build it. We humans can use all the help we can get in Suburbia, yeah?”

Beatrice looked up, slightly startled by the offer. The urge to work on the robot was too strong to refuse. In *Alien Invasion Movie 3*, Blake had always accepted propositions with a very specific inquiry of her own. Beatrice had always liked that, because it was both a question and a promise, of sorts.

“One human to another?”

“One human to another,” agreed Eliza with a private smile.

Beatrice hung onto that smile for a moment before remembering herself and losing the expression. She glanced to the door. “Did I imagine you offering to take me to Ann last night?”

“Oh, no.” Eliza stepped back to the door and pulled out a crumpled yellow power ranger mask from her back pocket. “No, you didn’t. It’s just down the street.”

Beatrice grabbed her backpack from the arm of the couch and pulled on her mask. They set out into the road. Suburbia looked different in the daytime. The glowing signs that had previously lit the streets were now dull and gray, and where the damp pavement had thrown up the reflection of the night sky was now dusty yellow concrete. Beatrice squinted up at the sun, and then turned to follow Eliza, who had started out towards the right.

“She’s probably in the cafeteria.” Eliza smiled and waved at people as they passed. “That’s where Ann usually works. But if she’s not we might try her house.”

Beatrice nodded. She was trying to memorize the buildings as they passed them so that she could find her way back. The street smelled like congealed corn syrup and fried meat.

“They’re still making breakfast,” explained Eliza, catching Beatrice’s expression. “Or cleaning up from it.”

Beatrice was alarmed at Eliza’s nonchalance. Did they all eat breakfast in the same place? Didn’t that attract robots? She didn’t ask, partly because she didn’t want to annoy her, and also because it turned out that words were hard for Beatrice to force out of her mouth when other people could hear them. She wasn’t completely sure that she was speaking at the right volume. It was hard to judge that sort of thing from movies.

Eliza led her up to a squat tan building with a green sign outside that advertised a hospice. The image on the sign was of a smiling pink horse, and it was faded, but in a way where you could tell it had once been a real eyesore.

Eliza held open the door for her. “They won’t bite. Promise!”

Beatrice nodded and made an awkward noise of agreement. She hadn’t thought that anyone bit.

The inside of the building was carpeted, and a whiteboard covered in sharpie graffiti hung on the wall — ‘fuck the policebots,’ ‘anarchy,’ and a lot of penises. Arranged in sporadic rows were card tables, some still stacked with unused bingo cards, and a kitchen stuck out in the back like a thumb that wasn’t sore but was perhaps a little cramped. Beatrice quickly spotted Ann. She was carrying a stack of dishes and disappeared into the kitchen before Beatrice could catch her eye. A cluster of slouchy kids huddled together like a losing sports team all glanced up at once. A stack of dirty plates hung precariously off the end of their table. Beatrice looked back for Eliza. She seemed to have disappeared.

A guy with floppy black hair and a bored expression set down a juicebox. “Who are you?”

Whatever bravado Beatrice had enjoyed last night from Dr. Hunt’s painkillers had evaporated. She was silent.

The boy glanced at the kids beside him, pulling the straw from his juicebox and flicking it in her direction. “Did you hear me?”

The eyes of the children were like needles, raking over her and drawing thin lines of blood to her surface. She couldn’t meet their gaze. She couldn’t even stand to be looked at.

She fled.

Outside, her back hit the wall, and she sank slowly down to sit, picking at the front of her shirt. Some time passed — enough for her to reign in her breath — before the door opened.

Ann crouched down beside her. “You good?”

“I’m always good.”

“You kinda freaked out,” said Ann. “Like you short-circuited.”

Beatrice shot her a pointed glare.

Ann shook Beatrice's shoulder in a friendly way. "Hey, it's cool. You're here to ask me to drive you back, right? I've got to deliver some stuff to the library first, if that's alright with you."

Beatrice shook under Ann's hand. Her head hurt. "I've got to stay until twelve to get my sword."

Ann looked incredulous. "Why?"

"Why do I need my sword?"

"No, ah — why twelve? Why not get it now?"

Beatrice shrugged. "Bureaucrats."

"Ah. I see." Ann stood, and offered her hand. "You ready to head back inside?"

Beatrice took it. "I guess."

"That's the spirit." Ann socked Beatrice's arm, but there was no weight behind it. Beatrice didn't think Ann would do very well up against the scouts.

Ann sat down at the table stacked with pots. Beatrice took the seat next to her, ignoring the stares from the adjacent table.

"It seems sort of dangerous," murmured Beatrice. "Having so many people gathered together. Half of them aren't even wearing masks. Is it really any more efficient?"

"Speaking of efficiency — you want to help me plant some tomatoes?" Ann held out a packet of seeds.

Beatrice hesitated, and then took the packet. She watched Ann plant the seed, then replicated Ann's process identically, down to the accidental knock of a wood chip into the side of the container.

"...good." Ann cleared her throat, like she was going to say something else, but instead opted to lovingly push dirt onto another seed.

She and Ann worked in a comfortable silence for a while. Soon Beatrice finished her pot, but she was too shy to say anything, so it took a few awkward minutes of fiddling with the dirt for Ann to notice.

Ann grinned, and slid her another pot. "You're quick."

"I don't see why *you* aren't quicker."

Ann placed a hand over her heart. "The difference is that I want my seeds to grow up loved."

A surprised laugh slipped from Beatrice's lips.

"Oh, that's rich. You're the one with the stuffed animal, but I can't be attached to something that's actually fucking alive?"

Beatrice's laughter died.

"I mean, look at it. It's going to grow because of me."

"Plants," said Beatrice. "Awesome"

Ann spread her palms. "Plants are food. Food is awesome. Better than robot fighting by a mile."

Beatrice grabbed another bag of seeds. "The robots destroyed civilization."

Ann grimaced. "Did they? I mean, the Valvidan corporation made them, then sent the kill order. That's all human."

Beatrice pushed down the seed, hard, and it sank into the pliant Earth.

"Do you get what I'm saying?"

Beatrice sprinkled dirt over the seed. "I mean, you're wrong, so no. The AI the robots operate off of isn't human."

"And who made that program?"

"Doesn't matter. The robots are evil, and one day I'm going to kill all of them." Beatrice looked up at Ann. "You know who my mom is."

"Yeah. Right." Ann put her chin in her hands and stared at her buried seeds. "Maybe if Blake wanted a successor so badly she shouldn't have left you all by your fucking self."

"No one gets good from being coddled."

"Whatever." Ann stood. "You think you can help me carry these to the greenhouse real quick?"

Beatrice set down her seed packet. "Alright."

Ann stood, stacking the pots in her arms and pushing through the door with her back. The edge of the pot was propped up beneath Ann's chin, and as the dusty daytime light reflected off of the red clay she was lit up in a warm sort of glow. Beatrice shifted the pots in her arms and looked away, concentrating on keeping her footsteps steady beneath the weight. The concrete felt springy and warm underneath her soles — the elasticity of plant matter.

They stopped outside of a skeletal house wrapped in thick but see-through plastic. Inside Beatrice could barely make out something that looked green. It definitely was not made of glass.

"My greenhouse." Ann beamed. "There's a couple more in production, but this is the only one up and running."

The door flaps wrinkled under Ann's hands, and were tied back by black straps, only further muting the light seeping through the tarp. The floor was red brick, and cast with pearly light reminiscent of an oil spill. That wasn't, however, what caught Beatrice's eye.

Green was a color Beatrice had never really thought about beyond LEDs. The greenhouse changed that for her in an instant: green was the bend of the flower stems and the leaves on trees and the unripe fruit. It was beautiful in the way fresh water is beautiful to a girl stranded in a desert.

Caught up in introspection, Beatrice took a step forward and was smacked in the face with a low-hanging planter.

She took a step back, rubbing her cheek, and set down her pot. "Did you grow all of this?"

"I had some help," admitted Ann, tenderly inspecting the leaves of a low-lying flower.

Beatrice looked up at the ceiling. The plants were reflected in marbled green blotches on the plastic. "I think green is my favorite color."

"Mine too." Ann moved through the plants like she was dancing, carefully avoiding crushing any of them. "The best one is the orange tree. It's kinda small, and it's my fifth attempt, but we've finally got some fruit."

"Is this how you guys get all of your food?"

"Ah, no. We use those 3d NUTRITION-something printers. No way Suburbia could be fed off one greenhouse."

"So you just do this—"

"For fun. It's a hobby."

In front of them was a small tree, roots bulging from a large burlap sack at its base. A few misshapen orange fruits hung from its bowed branches. Ann plucked one, and then turned to Beatrice, holding it out.

"Try it," said Ann after Beatrice hesitated. "It won't kill you, I promise. Not like those pills."

Beatrice shot Ann a glare, but took the fruit. It was bumpy, with a small green knob on the top. She hesitated, turning it over, and then put her lips to it, preparing to bite.

"Wait!" Ann snatched the fruit back. "No, you—"

"What?" Beatrice reached for the fruit. "You said I could try it."

"You have to peel it first, dumbass." Ann laughed, and dug her thumb into the top of the orange. It smelled like the flowers that would crop up along the badland's mountains during spring. "Here."

When she bit into the fruit she couldn't have said what it tasted like, because her senses stopped working altogether. It was granular, and overwhelming, and it made her feel wealthy. She wouldn't ever be able to eat gray goo again.

Ann popped a section into her own mouth. "Don't forget to chew."

Chapter Nine: Aisha of Asphyxiation

Ann and Beatrice watched Aisha pull apart the person she was fighting. It was systematic, how she rended their limbs from one another, pinned them up against an imaginary wall and took them apart. She had the eyes of a surgeon.

“I can’t believe you’re fighting her.”

It was ten to noon, and Beatrice and Ann were at the back of Suburbia’s high school. Spectators were arranged on old playground equipment — on one end of a battered seesaw Beatrice spotted the girl with purple hair who had been at the kitchen, and a line of her friends sat up on the hollow, fragile monkey bars, their feet swinging idly back and forth in the air below. In the midday light the building looked similar to schools in some of Blake Blaire’s earlier films. It was large, and made of a fading, red brick that crumbled along the edges to cushion the weeds and dandelions that had sprung up around it. The grass was tall and patchy, and rusting, disassembled bicycle parts littered the yard alongside emptied bottles of water, remnants of a world long lost to them.

Beatrice shrugged.

“Would’ve told you off if I knew.” Ann’s toe scuffed the edge of the playground. “You’re not gonna win.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nobody can. She’s never lost.”

Beatrice looked up at the curl of clouds above their heads. “Neither have I.”

“Yeah, no shit. You’ve never fought anyone!”

The scout was slammed to the ground, feet swept out from under them and a pole aimed at their sternum. They winced, and raised their hands in surrender, to the complaint of the crowd. Aisha had barely broken a sweat.

“Alright!” The gaze Aisha turned on the crowd was aggressively cheerful as her opponent hobbled away. “Who’s next? Beatrice, yeah?”

Ann tsked, and raised her voice over the din of the crowd. She was a good orator — people paid attention. “What is this, lord of the flies? Just give Bea her sword back.”

Beatrice stood. “It’s alright, Ann. I want to.”

Aisha split a grin in her direction, then turned, waving her hands to the small crowd. “You heard her! Let’s hear some noise!”

They shouted, a pitched, oscillating sound that wavered between exultance and bloodlust.

Beatrice stepped forward into the ring. She tried to ask for her sword, but it was drowned out by the crowd. Aisha caught this, and gestured to where a scout had her saber. But something was wrong — a slab of rubber had been fitted over it so that there were no sharp edges.

"Oh no. Oh, no." Beatrice snatched it up, cradling the weapon in her arms. "What did they do to you?"

Aisha gave her a strange look.

"My poor baby," whispered Beatrice, adjusting her grip on the sword and swinging it through the air. She raised the point at Aisha. "You bastards!"

Aisha laughed, and reached for Beatrice's non-sword hand, which she shook despite Beatrice's efforts to maneuver herself away.

"If you want to give up no one will blame you." Beatrice thought her hand might break in Aisha's grip. "I've fucked up a lot of faces prettier than yours."

Beatrice stared into Aisha's eyes. "You're the first person I've fought with a face."

Aisha laughed, again. Beatrice dropped Aisha's hand like she was releasing a bird to the wild, palm upturned in mercy. She was glad Aisha had taken her hand for her — she'd never been very good at knowing when to do that kind of stuff.

One of the scouts raised his arm in mediation. "Starting positions."

Beatrice adjusted her sword in her grip, backing into the corner. There she crouched, feeling the beat in her chest begin to rise, like a drum of war. She had fought countless robots and stayed alive. This wasn't any different.

"On my mark," said the scout, and the crowd hollered encouragement. "Ready?"

Aisha flashed him a thumbs-up. Beatrice swallowed and nodded.

"You may begin."

Immediately Beatrice rushed forward. She needed to take the first move. Stay in control.

Her sword made a low swipe at Aisha's knees, which Aisha side-stepped easily. Beatrice whipped around to aim again, but Aisha wasn't there — her eyes narrowed, and she ducked just as the pole came in a sweeping arc over her head. Beatrice turned to thrust her sword forward again, but Aisha was gone by then, too, and had come up on Beatrice's other side.

Beatrice took a step away, and Aisha's sword met air. She felt a pit of foreboding grow in her stomach, right above her stitches, a messy cocktail of nausea and apprehension. Aisha had backed off. She looked confident, but Beatrice didn't miss the way her shoulders rose, as if she was trying to hide the fact that she was winded.

"You're holding back," said Aisha quietly, so that only her and Beatrice could hear. "I can tell. Stop being afraid to hit me!"

Beatrice kept her expression neutral, and Aisha went on the offense again, her center torquing like a drop of water in a river rapids. Beatrice couldn't land a hit and come out of it dry. She raised her sword to block, but then as Aisha adjusted she changed her path to swing forward. The pole knocked into Beatrice, and Aisha disappeared so that Beatrice's sword sailed vainly through the empty air. Beatrice spun,

and managed a hit on her side, and Aisha's recoiled, her brow drawn and her teeth grit in fury.

Staring into her eyes, then, for that split second — it was clear to Beatrice that Aisha was the type to want her opponent dead.

It was the only explanation for the passion with which she stabbed at Beatrice's heart. The eyes of the crowd dug into them like maggots, enthralled by their leader's grace. Beatrice was coming to understand some things about the expression of human emotion. Lies, for example: even though the crowd jeered Aisha, and by all metrics appeared to despise her, it was really just a sign of a respect too intimate for worship.

Beatrice's heels dug into the wood chips, and they rolled under the impact like the tide. Aisha's pole flew a foot to her right, and then swung around and collided with the face of her sword. Beatrice's forearms rang with the impact. She blinked sweat out of her eyes, trying to focus on the scene, but it was stubbornly blurry. The blob of red and yellow that made up Aisha was being stretched out against the teal sky grotesquely, and each clench of her opponent's hands against her weapon's hilt were the thousand scuttling steps of a garden bug that had been plucked from the soil and was now dangling helplessly in mid-air.

She blinked, and Aisha had landed back on Earth. Taking the opportunity, she squared her shoulders and rushed forward to attack. Their weapons collided, and for a moment they were each trapped like that, struggling to take back control.

What is control, really? Power? Violence?

Sentience?

Beatrice's sword slipped forward, falling through empty air, and Aisha was behind her. The heel of Aisha's boot connected with her lower back, sending her sprawling. She landed roughly on the packed dirt, and tried to scramble to her feet, but the end of Aisha's pole was already digging into the base of her throat.

She dropped the sword and her hands flew up to her neck, meeting Aisha's eyes. For a moment they stayed like that, a pain and imminent bruise blooming at the base of Beatrice's throat as she struggled to get into a breath.

And then Aisha jerked away — as if she was snapping out of a trance.

A rousing bout of complaints stirred the crowd, and Aisha stared down the length of her weapon to Beatrice, panting in exertion. Beatrice let her head fall back and raised her hands in surrender.

"Aisha wins," said the scout solemnly.

Aisha regained her composure and took a deep breath, setting the weapon gently to the side and crouching to offer Beatrice a hand. After a moment of hesitation Beatrice accepted, and a few kids cheered as Aisha pulled Beatrice to her feet.

Aisha managed a conflicted smile. "That was fun."

Beatrice held onto her sword a little tighter. "I lost."

“Yep,” said Aisha, her grin straightening out as she remembered the crowd. “Mind if I see your sword?”

“You’re taking it?”

For a moment Aisha looked shocked, and then she laughed. “No! You may have — you definitely lost, new kid, but you at least did that very well.”

“You lasted longer than, like, every other scout!” added the girl with purple hair, looking up from a timer in her hand and then glancing at the boy beside her. “Including a few I could name.”

He rolled his eyes and shoved her playfully, and she laughed. Aisha nodded stiffly. She turned to Beatrice and placed a pair of confident hands on her hips, a heavy contrast to the boisterous group surrounding her, like an oil spill in an ocean. She almost looked scared.

Beatrice looked away. “Are you. Are you oka—”

“This wasn’t a real fight,” interrupted Aisha, turning away. “Expecting anyone to beat me would be cruel. I just wanted to assess your skills.”

Beatrice absorbed this information. “So you just like to beat people up?”

“Ah!” said Aisha, raising her hands in protest. “No, it isn’t like that at all!”

“Yes it is,” said the girl with purple hair from the crowd.

“I’m the leader of the scouts. I have to assess your fighting ability. Now, are you going to let me see your sword or not?”

Beatrice reluctantly handed over the weapon. Aisha’s hands worked gently as she inspected it, and she tugged at the rubber until it came off.

“Wow,” said Aisha, turning it over. “Pure Arakhene. How’d you get something like this, kid?”

Beatrice took the sword back, and adjusted the strap on her sheath, tightening it around her hips. “My dad made it. Gary Davis.”

Aisha froze. The arena hushed, gradually, as the crowd came to a similar realization. Purple hair had kept laughing, but the boy beside her shushed her, and then leaned over and whispered something in her ear. Her eyes widened, and panned to Beatrice, along with everyone else in the arena.

“Wait,” said Aisha. “If Gary Davis is your father — then is Blake Blaire your mother? The best resistance fighter in all of North America?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Beatrice. “You’re pretty good.”

Aisha laughed breathlessly and grabbed Beatrice’s hands. Beatrice cringed back. “Beatrice Blaire, will you give me the honor of training you personally in the art of combat?”

Ann stepped between them. “Leave her alone.”

“Ann.” Aisha looked at Ann like there was a stain on her shirt. “You’re not even competing.”

Ann tensed. “So? A ton of people aren’t competing.”

"Yeah, leave Ann alone," said Beatrice. "If she doesn't want to fight, that's her choice."

Aisha turned back to Beatrice and raised her arms in mock surrender. "I'm not making anyone do anything, Beatrice. I'm simply giving advice. I *am* the best fighter Suburbia has, and I *will* be competing. Meet me in the gym next Sunday if you want to have a chance come Homecoming."

"Alright," shouted one of the scouts. "Fight's over. Who're the next competitors again? Holly and James, right?"

Ann grabbed Beatrice's arm. "Let's go."

Beatrice allowed herself to be towed off the field by Ann, their backs buffered by the hushed murmurings of the crowd of teens and Aisha's cheerful, projected instructions. Ann only slowed when they rounded the end of the block. It was silent, but not real silence, like Beatrice's house, where on still days she could hear every shift of sand in the desert outside. This was Suburbian silence: awkward and loud, characterized as quiet only by the fact that nobody was speaking.

"That was weird," said Beatrice.

"Aisha is weird," said Ann as she paused outside of one of the houses, looking up at the thin, high windows, and then kept walking. "You know she won't be doing it for you. She'll be doing it so that she knows how to beat you. Or maybe — to prove to herself that she can."

Beatrice squinted. "But she did beat me."

Ann shot Beatrice a small smile. "Even you must've been able to tell that she was uncomfortable. You should've explained that you were Blake Blaire's kid before the fight. Would've made her feel less threatened."

"That doesn't make any sense."

Ann watched the soles of her worn purple hiking boots bore into the concrete. "That's the thing you've gotta let go of with Suburbians, Bea. They're not robots. Not making sense is their specialty."

"And that doesn't include you?"

"Nope. I'm the only sane person left, angel." Ann grinned as Beatrice stifled a laugh. "In fact, I'd say I'm so sane that I've transcended into sanity godhood. At this point the Suburbians may as well be ants to me."

Beatrice shook her head and spoke slowly, because before her the horizon was dipping and swirling, like it was a hot cup of tea someone had taken a spoon to. "I guess I'm lucky I ended up with you and not some other weirdo, huh?"

"Yeah, totally." Ann buried her hands in her pockets. "So. I was going to get my car, but — you were just talking about meeting up with Aisha on Sunday. I'm gonna guess you've already made up your mind to stay."

"Oh." Beatrice looked up and felt a rush of nausea. "I hadn't even — yeah. Yeah, I have, I guess."

"You probably need a place to stay," said Ann, leaning back on her heels.

"I — I do." Beatrice raised her hand to her forehead. "I'm sorry. I'm not feeling very well."

"Well, I was going to offer—" Ann was cut off abruptly as Beatrice fell forward. "Holy shit, are you alright?"

Beatrice, who was on the pavement, blinked up at the distorted buildings. Ann was clumsily trying to prop her up. She dug the heel of her palms into the ground, and felt as though she had lurched forward and was now spinning, weightless, through space. She blinked at the void, and scrambled at it, feeling concrete beneath her chipped nails. The sidewalk was immune to her efforts to tame it, and it looped in on itself once before coming up to collide against her face.

Chapter Ten: Southerners in Sephoras

When Beatrice opened her eyes she was, once again, in the Sephoras.

For a moment she stared up at the ceiling, unmoving. A peeling advertisement for facial cream was pasted on the wall opposite to her. The way it slumped over made it look, a little, like the face was melting off. The nameless celebrity started back at her, blue eyes gently folding inwards, and Beatrice was hit with the scent of formaldehyde and nail polish remover.

She sat up. There was no nurse this time. In fact, the room was vacant save the row of empty cots lined up beside her. Near the end was the kid with the wrapped up-face. He didn't seem to notice her. She felt her shoulders relax somewhat, and realized that she was exhausted. With a twinge of annoyance it registered that this was now the third occurrence of her passing out in a very short period of time. She did not want to make the practice a habit.

Beatrice glanced down at her watch. It was six o'clock. She had been asleep for five hours.

"You're here a lot," remarked a voice with a soft southern twang from the corner.

Beatrice tensed, and turned to the bandaged boy, but he was unmoving.

"I can tell," he explained in a saccharine drawl. "I can smell people."

Beatrice crossed her legs, tugging the sword from the sheath that was still at her side and setting it beside her. She looked the creature over curiously. He had stray tufts of hair that trembled like a flickering light peeking up from where the bandages overlapped, and his skin was pale and dotted with freckles the color of spongy diner maple syrup. He was dressed in a hospital gown, a green woolen blanket draped over the lower half of his legs.

"You don't have to talk." As he spoke the bandages over his mouth caved slightly inwards. They sounded wet. "I can talk plenty for the both of us, I reckon. Nobody ever comes in to listen to me. So it's nice, for once, to not be ramblin' to an empty room."

Beatrice let her eyes fall shut. She half-listened as the patient began.

"Most people don't talk much anyway." He made a piteous noise. "I think the bandages scare them. A lot of people got hurt fightin' robots, but most injuries are non-con-fron-tay-shnal. People don't have a choice but to look at my face."

All of his words were spaced out, and spoken slowly, as if he was rolling them around on his tongue to savor them before finally spitting them free. Beatrice found the cadence rather pleasant. That perturbed her.

"Now, I'm not by any means tryin' to say that anybody don't have the choice to be a little freaked out by my appearance. In fact, I reckon it's right about natural for us humans to freak out over things we know ain't frightening. But a man's got to talk to

somebody, don't he? A man can't be expected to stay locked up all on his lonesome, talking only to the nurse who drops off his meals, can he?"

Beatrice didn't reply, and at that he seemed a little ticked off.

"Now," he heeded. "I didn't mean you should ignore me or nothin'. I respect the silence, but seeing as how we're both reasonable people, I think a man's got a right to expect some sort of dialogue, wouldn't you say?"

"Why's your face bandaged?" asked Beatrice.

"Well. That's not very sportsmanlike. I want you, young woman, to put yourself in my shoes for a moment. What do you think I get asked about the most? My face. And if you were in my situation, would you want to speak on it?"

Beatrice felt shame. It frustrated her.

"Obviously not, because we're both rational people." He leaned back on the bed, deflating somewhat. "You smell real strong like metal, and a bit of musty-somethin'. I didn't want to say it earlier, out of politeness, but seeing as how you've gone tossed decorum out the window I'll say that I'd suspect you're not from around here."

"I'm not."

He chuckled. "Don't get upset. I don't blame you for askin' bout the bandages. Lots of people don't put thoughts into their words. Not like me. Everything I say is in-ten-shun-ahl."

"I can hear that."

"Thank you," said the patient crisply. "Let me do you a favor. If you really want to do well 'round here I suggest you talk to John Williams. He can set you up with a job."

John Williams. Where had she heard that name before?

"He's a good man," said the patient. "Frankly, I think we should all be a little bit disturbed at how few good men are left in this world."

Right. Beatrice registered John Williams as the man who had confiscated her package.

"Take the contest that's comin' up," he continued. "People are making to be right flooding into Suburbia. Are they gonna do honest work? No! They're gonna eat our food and crowd up the hospital and take too long getting out."

Beatrice found it hard to believe they'd crowd up the hospital while this guy was there. "Isn't that good for you? You'll finally have someone to talk to. Maybe you won't be as lonely."

"Woah, woah, I didn't say that," he said. "I'm a lot of things — hard worker, honest man — but I ain't lonely."

Just then the nurse pushed in through the front door. Beatrice recognized her as Nellie with the boyfriend.

"Dinner time!" announced Nellie. "I see both of our patients are conscious."

"This feels familiar," said Beatrice.

Nellie glanced back to the door, where someone was maneuvering a basket.

"Hurry, Ann. They look hungry."

Ann, cursing at the door as it swung into her foot, managed to make it into the room. "Jesus, hold your horses. I'm literally right here."

"Ann," greeted Beatrice with a note of surprise.

Ann looked up. "Oh. Hey. That's the second time you've fainted on me, asshole."

Beatrice hesitated, her mouth opening to reply.

"I'm just messing with you," interrupted Ann, breaking into her usual friendly smile, like she couldn't go five minutes without it. She rooted around in the basket for a minute before pulling out a water bottle and tossing it to Beatrice. "Hydrate, idiot. And maybe don't fight people when you're recovering from surgery."

"I'm really sorry about the collapsing thing," said Beatrice, uncapping the bottle.

Ann's head quirked to the side. "Get some rest tonight and we'll call it even."

"Blake wouldn't be very happy if we lost her daughter," joked Nellie as she set a tray of rice, beans, and chicken cutlet on the patient's bed.

The patient, who had been peeling back the bandages surrounding his mouth, was taken aback. "What did you just say?"

"That right there is Blake Blaire's daughter," said Nellie with a note of pride, as if the information itself was something special.

"I'm here for the contest," explained Beatrice. "I'm going to win."

For a moment the room was silent. Beatrice took a swig of water.

"That's a can-do attitude if I've ever heard one," said Nellie, finally. "But not for the next five days. The doctor prescribed you bed rest, young lady."

Beatrice glanced at the patient, and then Ann. "I can't stay here another five days."

"Somehow I think you'll struggle through," said Ann.

By the fourth day Beatrice and the patient were best friends. If by best friends you meant people who talked to each other and didn't immediately after go hide alone in their rooms. (Mostly because neither had rooms to hide in.) Either way, for Beatrice this was a big accomplishment.

"You should be good to leave tonight," said Nellie, flipping through handwritten notes from Dr. Hunt. "You're a very fast healer. Almost miraculously so."

"Like an angel, angel," added Ann.

"Right," said Beatrice. "So I can go?"

Nellie beamed, and dropped the papers. "Yes. You can go apply for housing from Salim and the PTA."

Ann nodded, and grinned. “Ah, but Nellie — I’m actually in the middle of a project, and I need people to help me. Why don’t I take her to the library, first, and introduce her to Miria?”

“What project?” asked Nellie.

“I’m sorting the contestants. Making sure no one sneaks in an application.”

Nellie frowned. “I’m not sure—”

“Very non-labor intensive,” appealed Ann. “Sitting and reading, really. Plus, Miria’s an adult. Very responsible”

Nellie looked to Beatrice. She sighed. “I’ll have to let Dr. Hunt know, but it seems fairly harmless.”

Beatrice was already standing, a steadying hand on the edge of the bed. “I didn’t know you were—”

“Thanks Nellie,” interrupted Ann, flashing her a warm smile. “You’re the best.”

Nellie flushed, as she was prone to. “Yes, yes, I know. Get a move on, if you’re going to go.”

Ann grabbed Beatrice’s arm and directed her to the door. “She’s forever in your debt.”

“No I’m not,” muttered Beatrice.

“Goodbye,” said the patient.

Beatrice stopped Ann at the door. “Goodbye.” She felt proud to have interacted successfully with a man, even though he had no outward looking face, and was more similar to the robots in that respect. “Feel better.”

“C’mon, Casanova,” said Ann, pulling her outside.

Once they had spanned the block Beatrice rounded on Ann.

“You made that up,” she accused.

Ann shrugged. “Not all of it. We are going to Miria’s, and I am going to be processing applicants. You can do what you want, stay with us. Trust me — you do not want to go through the PTA for housing.”

For a minute they walked in silence.

“I could have just left,” said Beatrice as they turned the corner. “Not like they could have stopped me.”

“But then you couldn’t go back.” Ann gave Beatrice a curious look. “If you come to a door, Bea, do you try to kick it down or do you ask someone for the key?”

“There’s no talking your way through robots,” said Beatrice.

“That explains a lot.”

Beatrice looked at the darkening buildings, their shadows deepening as the day slowly waned. She spotted a mural to Blake Blaire on tan brick across the street — her smiling face had been rendered in bright blue and pink spray paint, with stylized, blocky words written beneath it reading *we owe her our lives*.

"I just — don't want to cause you any inconvenience," said Beatrice haltingly. "You're very nice to me, even when you don't have to be."

"Yeah," said Ann, lightly socking her in the arm, and then moving her palm downwards to thread their hands together. "It's called being friends."

Beatrice smiled at her, and then glanced back to the sidewalk, frowning at her steps. "I don't want to owe anyone anything, Ann."

"You don't owe me anything," said Ann. "If anything, Suburbia owes you. Enough power to run our water sterilizer for a hundred years is worth more than whatever you were getting."

"The fruit gummies," supplied Beatrice.

"The fruit gummies," agreed Ann.

"I wasn't trading the battery for the fruit gummies, though," admitted Beatrice. "Even before."

Ann's hand tightened around Beatrice's. "It makes sense that you'd want to talk to another human."

"I wanted to talk to you."

Ann stopped, her hand falling to her side, and looked up. The library loomed over them, its brutalist architecture sending spiking shadows in the twilight. "We're here."

Inside was cooler than the street, and Beatrice thought she could hear the distant sound of fans humming through the messy stacks of books. Ann led them up a familiar route, her purple hiking boots shuffling softly against the thin red carpet. It smelled like glue, rotting paper, and — strangely — scented soaps.

Ann pushed open the door like it wasn't there. "My favorite old lady!"

"I'm twenty-five." Miria was a tanned woman in her early twenties with a bad fashion sense and a slight Mexican accent. She was wearing dirty bright-pink plastic sandals, propped up on her desk for the viewing pleasure of the room. In her lap was her laptop, the fabric of a fading purple camisole bunching around it, while loose strands of black hair clung to the sweat on her neck. Her shirt had a rainbow-colored cat with wings on it.

Ann stepped around the loose stacks of paper to peer at Miria's screen. "I rescued Beatrice from the hospital. She's going to hang out here."

Miria glanced up, her eyes peering over the top of a taped-together pair of cheap plastic reading glasses. "Ah. The young prodigy returns. I've seen the videos of you fighting Aisha."

Beatrice had thought that this might happen. She had looked at thousands of videos featuring possible contestants. It would only follow that thousands of people would look at a video of a known contestant.

Miria nodded at the couch. "You can hang out while Ann and I work. Feel free to push some of the mess to the floor."

Beatrice looked at the couch, her distaste palpable. "Right."

Miria snorted. "It's the apocalypse, babe. Bigger picture."

Bigger picture. Beatrice thought that she spotted a few pictures on Miria's desk — they were covered by empty food containers. "Would you mind if I cleaned?"

Miria, who was handing Ann a clipboard, seemed confused. "Not if you want to."

Beatrice picked up one of many stacks of paper. They looked like tax forms, but nobody in Suburbia used money, so Beatrice wasn't so sure what they actually meant.

"Uh — I'm gonna throw some of these out."

"Have at it."

It took her about three hours to clean Miria's office. By the end of it she was exhausted — both of dumping garbage and listening to Miria and Ann argue over 'admittance lists.' A lot of kids in Suburbia seemed insistent about their bureaucracy. They had neat databases and messy rooms.

Beatrice tore herself from their exchange and walked from the room, stepping into the first door she met in the hallway. She took a short breath through her nose and closed her eyes, pinching the inside of her arm. Beatrice was adaptable. She was super fucking adaptable. If she was going to be living in Suburbia until Homecoming, training among all of those emotional wrecks, well — she could adapt to that. She just had to be Blake. Being Blake to fight the robots had been easy enough. How much harder could it be to be Blake around people?

The door opened behind her, and she knew this because her body had already leapt about halfway across the room before her eyes could register that it was Ann.

Ann froze in the doorway, jolting like she had been electrocuted. "Are you — crying?"

"Hmm?" asked Beatrice, taking a moment to gather herself. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Oh. Yes."

Ann opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it indecisively, shutting the door softly behind them. "You need to get some sleep, dude."

"No," said Beatrice, looking at Ann through a prismatic smear. "I'm not tired."

Ann took Beatrice's elbow and guided her over to the couch. Beatrice only resisted for a moment. It did feel sort of good to sit down.

"Well," said Ann slowly, retrieving a box of tissues from somewhere out of the pile of junk that took up the room's corner. She made to toss them, then seemed to decide against it in favor of setting them gently in Beatrice's lap. "You're going to have to help me out here. Why are you crying? Is something wrong?"

Beatrice took one of the tissues. "I thought you were busy — or else I wouldn't have."

"I was," said Ann. "But you kind of just walked out. Miria was worried."

Beatrice squinted, and a tear rolled down to a somewhat recent scar on her cheek that had been courtesy of a particularly belligerent nursebot. It was as she wiped it away the mild sting of salt that she realized her mistake. “Dammit. I should have said goodbye.”

“I guess,” said Ann, placing a hand on Beatrice’s shoulder. “But you don’t have to — if you’re sad, you don’t have to be sad by yourself all the—”

“No,” interrupted Beatrice quickly. “I was practicing.”

Ann’s hand stilled. “Practicing?”

Beatrice nodded. “I was practicing crying like Blake Blaire does. When something sad happens.”

“Why — dude. Holy shit.” Ann laughed incredulously. “Why would you do that?”

“In case something sad happens.”

“That makes no fucking sense, Bea.”

Beatrice gestured to Ann’s smile. “See, you already have such a good smile. Even if I manage to smile right, how do I know when to do it?”

Ann’s head tilted to the side. “You like my smile?”

“Yeah. Of course.” Beatrice began to list off points on her fingers. “It’s warm. It’s smart. It makes me feel like we’re sharing a joke. You have dimples that don’t line up quite right, and your eyes crinkle when you do it in a very genuine way. You probably have the best smile I’ve seen yet from the Suburbians.”

Ann stared at Beatrice, her expression slipping into something Beatrice couldn’t place. “Are you being serious?”

Beatrice nodded dutifully.

Ann looked away suddenly, and coughed into her hand. “Thanks.”

“You seem uncomfortable,” pointed out Beatrice. “But you asked me.”

“No, yeah — um.” Ann stood, gesturing for Beatrice to follow. “You know, I think you should really stop worrying about all of this stuff. Just act like yourself.”

Beatrice paused and then smiled up at Ann, who beamed back and grabbed her hand protectively. That was the stupidest advice Beatrice had ever heard.

Chapter Eleven: Oliver of Dogs

Beatrice woke up the next day curled up on Miria's couch. She flailed out on instinct, and her hands caught in scratchy green fabric. Her heart skipped a beat as it tangled. She was stuck. Confined. She flung it off, and clutched the back of the couch, staring down at the blanket. A wave of relief washed over her, and then was quickly replaced by a feeling of incredibly silliness.

Beatrice stood as softly as possible, and picked up the blanket, folding it neatly. The wood creaked underfoot. She put a stabilizing hand on the doorframe, and lifted her wrist. Her watch read eight — when she usually would have woken up in the morning back on her ranch.

Footsteps padded down the end of the hallway, and she jerked back into the room, scrambling to find the window on the far wall. The room looked to be about three stories high, and brickwork receded beneath the window ledge like it was dropping off of the edge of the world. A hard climb.

The footsteps stalled, and then retreated.

Beatrice grabbed the bottom of the window and yanked it upwards. It complained for a moment before finally giving a bewailing shudder and relenting. A breath of cool air rushed into the office. Outside the sun was cresting the low-strung clouds that were tacked up around Suburbia, a soft yellow sheen snagging on their furrowed edges. Beatrice leaned out the window, staring down the three-story drop, and climbed up to sit so her shoes dangled in the open air. A short drop below was the next sill. Slowly, she lowered herself down, her hands locked around the lip of her window. Her feet found the ledge, and she hugged the wall, gradually moving down to a crouch. She repeated the process until she was at the lowermost window. From there she dropped to the ground.

It was still early enough that most kids hadn't woken up yet, and Suburbia's usual buzz was noticeably absent. Beatrice hadn't really thought about where she was going — she'd been mostly concentrated on escaping Miria without confrontation — so she chose a random direction and walked.

As her feet fell upon the concrete, the rubber soles smacking delightedly, Beatrice's mind took the time to wander. The calloused pads of her fingers lowered to the sword at her side, and she had the abrupt realization that she hadn't fought a robot for nearly a week. If she wasn't such an athletic person she might have stumbled, and if she wasn't so in control of her emotions she might have gasped, but she was both, so what she did instead was walk head-first into the wall.

Beatrice stumbled back, a hand outstretching to steady herself against the brick. She rubbed her nose, cursing softly, and looked up at the structure. Something about it seemed strange. It was only when her sight had cleared and she had taken a step back from the barricade that she realized there it had no windows or doors, and

stretched out for quite a bit, snaking around the surrounding buildings. A few blocks away she could see someone had poured cement between it and a fence, linking the two. Suburbia's barrier. Was this what kept out the robots?

Beatrice slung her backpack from her shoulder and extracted her kitsune mask, knotting it tightly before continuing. She had kept it off in the hospital and the library, when the walls and boarded-up windows had protected her, but now that she was back outside it was better to be safe. Walls were pretty flimsy, when you thought about it. There was one side of air and then another — no guarantee that it wouldn't leak through.

A lot of Suburbia's houses were pretty similar in build. Beatrice thought that if not for the apocalypse the place would have actually been pretty idyllic, despite having an army base at its center. Most were multi-storied, their faux-stone sides transforming from rugged to demure in the dawn. Wilted planters hung from second and third story windows, whatever semblance of daisies they might have had once lost to the stale earth and ruddy dandelions now occupying them. Dandelions were perhaps the most prolific survivors. It wasn't as if robots had targeted plants — in fact, in targeting humans they did quite the opposite — and the rearing, undomesticated highways of southern America had given dandelions free reign in human's wake. Wildflowers, too. A few hills away from where Beatrice lived they sprouted with abandon, almost overcome with joy to be alive, as if they were mocking the countless humans six feet under. Beatrice had never seen anything like Ann's greenhouse, though. Fresh food was never something offered up to trade — the effort wasn't worth it when vitamin packets and 3D printing were so convenient. Walking to the microwave is a lot less dangerous than risking your mask falling off as you struggle with a particularly hardy weed.

The buildings petered out after a while, and Beatrice came to the first big bend in the fence, before which was a small park. It fell half within and half without Suburbia. Beatrice could make out the part beyond the fence as being significantly more unkempt, bursting with gnarled wood and the occasional flash of an animal. It hadn't been a natural park — set there by the previous, non-apocalypse generations as a community center, perhaps. She approached the edge, where through the spindly trees and boxes of crusting soil led a narrow footpath. Following the footpath led to the swift realization that it led nowhere. After a minute of continuing onwards, debating whether she should turn back, she came upon a small clearing with a dry looking wooden bench at its center.

Beatrice took a seat on the bench and leaned back, taking a deep, slow breath. She slung her backpack to the dry earth, rubbing her sore shoulders, and allowed herself a moment to reflect.

Twelve years ago Beatrice had been a practical child. She had always taken care, when speaking, to do so in the most precise manner possible. She believed it made her sound more mature. On the days when she'd wake up to the sound of peeling

laughter and raucous conversation she'd contain her excitement well, stepping the kitchen with a succinct wave and polite greeting. The nomads, crowded around her stove, would all wave back. They were a variety of ages, heights, and races, and some of them spoke in languages Beatrice didn't know. After a breakfast of kings was cooked — foods like eggs, and bacon, and sausage, which Beatrice would never have otherwise — they'd retreat to her lawn where their trailers were haphazardly parked. The little kids would play games, and sometimes Beatrice would join, but most of the time she'd sit on the living room couch with Lavinia and talk.

"It's nice to see you again," Beatrice had offered solemnly.

"And you as well, *mon petit ange*," replied Lavinia, giving her a knowing glance. Lavinia was beautiful, even in her growing age, with long, coarse blonde hair tied into a loose braid and dresses with little flowers sewn on the sleeves.

Beatrice's smile beamed, and then softened. "What does that mean?"

Lavinia raised an eyebrow. "Do you know what we are, Beatrice?"

Beatrice hesitated. That didn't seem to answer her question, but a lot of times grownups answered her questions in roundabout ways, like they had looked from point A to point B and thought 'this would be a great place to put a maze!'

"You're nomads," Beatrice answered confidently.

Lavinia laughed a high and airy laugh. "Where did you come up with that?"

"I read it in a book," explained Beatrice. "It said that people who move around are nomads."

"Hm," considered Lavinia. "Well. I suppose you can say I'm a nomad if you want, though you might want to hush about it around everyone else. I'm from Quebec. Do you know where that is?"

"I learned it online," said Beatrice self-importantly. "It's in Canada."

"Impressive," indulged Lavinia. "Yes, it's in Canada. Do you know what language they speak in Quebec?"

Beatrice paused. "English?"

"Well," said Lavinia, considering. "You're partly right. But they mostly speak French."

"Oh."

"*Petit ange* is a good child, in France," explained Lavinia. "But literally it translates to little angel."

Beatrice grinned. "Oh!"

Lavinia smiled back at her. That moment had been a happy one. That whole week had been wonderful. The nomads had stayed the entire time, and Beatrice had talked and sung and danced with people. One of the men had taught her how to take apart an FM radio and put it back together. That had been one of the first times she had seriously thought about making her own robots. The nickname, too, had stuck on her mind, like a fly to the sticky brown paper strips the nomads had hanging in their vans.

Beatrice sat on the bench, contemplative, before finally unzipping her backpack and pulling out her laptop. The dusty sun cast a glare on the screen, and she shifted to the left until she was under the shade from a spindly, gnarled tree branch. Three unread messages from Caine.

Caine: I haven't gotten your daily email.

Caine: If the videos are any judge Suburbia must be keeping you busy.

Caine: BlaireAishafight.gfx

Beatrice read over the messages again, giving her brain time to adjust. Her emails had slipped her mind. Usually Blake didn't reply, anyway, but they were so ingrained into her daily routine that if she missed one it was like missing a limb. It was strange for that part of her to have vanished so mindlessly upon entering Suburbia.

She clicked the link and was brought to a video of her fight with Aisha. It was titled BLAKE'S SUCCESSOR REVEALED, FIGHTS FOR LIFE. That reminded Beatrice a little of the tabloid headers her mom used to get. She watched the video passively for a moment — it was pretty bad quality, shot from a shaky phone camera, but already had nearly two thousand views.

Apocalypseangel: Has Blake seen it

Caine: Not that I'm aware of. I don't think she really uses the computer much?

Caine: Or if she does she hides it from me.

Apocalypseangel: Good. I don't want her to.

Apocalypseangel: I mean, I wasn't exactly putting in my all. Letting everyone see my best would put me at a disadvantage.

Caine: Really?

Apocalypseangel: I mean

Apocalypseangel: Okay no. She beat me fair and square. I can admit that.

Apocalypseangel: But I was recovering from a major surgery, for what it's worth.

Caine: But you don't want her to see it?

Apocalypseangel: What if she's disappointed?

Caine: Yeah. Okay. I can't really hide it from her, but I can block any emails about it, I guess.

Caine: Anyway. You know about Lucia, right?

Lucia — a settlement only slightly smaller than Suburbia. Where Suburbia had fences Lucia had a sewer system protected from the robots by virtue of being underground.

Apocalypseangel: Sure.

Caine: A group of them are traveling out for Homecoming. Call themselves Lucia's dogs.

Caine: They have a bit of a fixation on you.

Beatrice opened the link Caine sent her. An image of a familiar face popped up — it was a screenshot of her blurry but obviously concerned expression from the point in the fight where Aisha had pinned her.

“Blake Blaire’s daughter,” read bold, black text beneath it. “You are a failure. Quit Homecoming, or when we face you, we won’t be as charitable as this Suburbian was.”

“Jesus,” muttered Beatrice. “What the fuck?”

Her eyes fell onto the slightly smaller text near the bottom. “Are you as confident as we are?”

Apocalypseangel: Well.

Caine: I know, right?

Caine: As your agent I suggest you make a reply.

Apocalypseangel: You aren’t my agent.

Caine: “I see your challenge, and I accept.”

Caine: Something simple like that. I’ll even post it for you.

Apocalypseangel: No.

Apocalypseangel: I don’t need to intimidate people. I know I’m going to win.

What happens interpersonally is irrelevant.

Caine: Fine. Suit yourself.

Caine: I have something a bit more pressing to talk to you about anyway.

Apocalypseangel: What?

Caine: So. It isn’t unusual for people to disappear occasionally.

Caine: Fighting robots, running for their lives. It all takes up time.

Caine: But as far as your customers are aware Apocalypse Angel might as well have fallen off the face of the earth. I’ve been deflecting as many emails as I can, but you’re going to need to do something.

Apocalypseangel: Oh, shit. I forgot.

Caine: Don’t get upset. It’ll be easy enough to do the Suburbia shipments. Why don’t you go talk to the package guy here?

Apocalypseangel: John Williams.

Apocalypseangel: I send food, it goes through. I send paper, or pencils, they go through. I send anything a little bit fun and suddenly he’s telling me I need a return address.

Apocalypseangel: I really don’t want to talk to him.

Caine: There’s only so much ‘she’s busy right now’ and ‘she’ll get back to you later’ I can say before people get mad.

Caine: Just think about it, alright?

Apocalypseangel: Alright.

The sun rose like the swelling of a wave, and alongside it a strange feeling waxed in her stomach. She sat there for another half an hour before it had finally

climbed up her throat and was spilling into her brain. It was a product of her hasty escape, part of her thought. She had gone off human contact too quickly, as was experiencing withdrawal, maybe. That had happened with Lavinia. Really, she had *only* felt this way after Lavinia had left, or sometimes late at night when it was dark enough for her to ignore it. Some people might have called it loneliness. Beatrice preferred to think of it as delirium.

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore it. Eventually the sun grew too bright for her to doze comfortably. When she opened her eyes again she looked down at her watch and hesitated for a moment, not quite comprehending the time, and then with a jolt she realized that her training session with Aisha was scheduled for ten minutes from now.

Chapter Twelve: Hommes Sont Mortels

Aisha was lifting makeshift milk-jug weights in the corner. She looked up as Beatrice pushed through the front door and dropped the load onto the ground. They were comically large, and the sand inside trembled as they hit the rubber mat.

“Beatrice!”

“Hey.” Beatrice set down her backpack, and then began to unsheath her sword before stopping and instead gesturing to her belt. “I have—”

“Leave it by the door.”

Beatrice frowned, delicately setting down the sword, and approached the bench Aisha had sat upon.

“I’ve got a question,” said Aisha more quietly, even though her and Beatrice were the only ones in the gym. She reached over to grab the sheath. “When you said you can only use your sword, did you mean you can only do sword fighting? Or did you mean that you just like using that specific weapon?”

Beatrice thought her words over. “The second one.”

Aisha’s brow creased in a pattern that looked deep-cut. She placed her palms together as if in prayer, and brought them up to the bridge of her nose in reverie.

“Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t apologise.” Aisha’s hand moved to wave away the question, but it flew out kinda far, and Beatrice took a step away to avoid it. “I’ll change you.”

Beatrice frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Enough talking! We’re not here for girlish gossip, we’re here to improve our bodies and souls!”

She strode over to the weapons rack and tossed a pole to Beatrice, who snatched it out of the air, then selected one for herself.

“No stretching?” Beatrice laughed awkwardly, lowering the pole to her side.

Aisha’s walk turned into something strong and intimidating. Her expression hardened, and she lifted the weapon threateningly. “I’m going to kill you, Beatrice.”

Beatrice took a step back. “What?”

Aisha’s upper lip twitched upwards in disgust. “I’m going to kill you.”

Beatrice clutched the wooden rod and spoke, unsure if in defiance or disbelief. “No you’re not.”

Aisha’s pole came swinging at Beatrice, just like in the arena, and Beatrice sprung backwards. She caught traction clumsily against the scuffed floor and sprinted for her sword, but Aisha seemed to materialize between her and her bag, and Beatrice recoiled reflexively. The pole came swinging at her, a practical extension of Aisha’s body, and she raised her own to block. The wooden rods bounced off one another. Beatrice’s hands slipped, and her pole clattered to the floor. She snatched it up again

and backed away. Aisha, who had begun to move more slowly, began to approach her again.

"You know I could," said Aisha. "You can't beat me in endurance. You can't beat me in strength. Are you going to die like a dog?"

"Dude, chill," said Beatrice, but not before the pole connected, again, with her stomach. It hit her sewn-up wound — Beatrice didn't know if that was on purpose, but she keeled over anyway, her teeth gritting from the pain.

"Hey robots, chill out," mocked Aisha. "Is that what you're going to say?"

Beatrice tensed. "You think I can't fight robots?"

"Nothing like your mom, from what I've seen. Not if you've got such a handicap that you can only use a single weapon."

"Fuck you," said Beatrice, her hands tightening around the pole.

"Attack me!"

Beatrice felt sweat bead on her hands, running along the grain of the wood. Still, she couldn't force herself to go on the offensive. Aisha looked fed up, and rushed her again, this time the rod connecting with the back of her knees so that she fell to the floor. Beatrice looked up at the gym ceiling, her head ringing from the fall, and sucked in a breath of air.

Aisha looked down at Beatrice, waving the pole at her throat. "Thrust, parry — do *something!*"

"I can't."

"Attack me!"

"I don't know what you mean." Beatrice squeezed her eyes shut. "You keep saying that. Tell me what you mean!"

Aisha froze, and took a step back. Beatrice ran her hand down her face, wicking off sweat, then climbed to her feet and watched warily as Aisha leaned her pole to the side.

"You weren't kidding."

"You know," said Beatrice. "I'd appreciate it if you stopped trying to kill me."

Aisha nodded towards Beatrice's sword. "Grab your weapon. We're going to do some basic combat exercises."

"I'm throwing out a *wild* guess that they'll involve me getting my ass kicked, with your track record!"

"Stop whining," said Aisha, a smile creeping back onto her face. "You want to get better, don't you?"

Beatrice tossed the pole to the side with more force than necessary, but went over to pick up her sword. "I'd also like to keep all of my limbs intact."

"You're being childish." Aisha sat down on the edge of the bench. "Now, Beatrice, demonstrate! Thrust that sword like nobody's business!"

Beatrice swallowed, and stood still, her arms tight by her sides. "I don't. Know. What you. Mean."

Aisha tilted her head, and then stood up and demonstrated, her hand holding an imaginary sword flying forwards as her feet shifted.

"I don't do a 'thrust'." Beatrice watched Aisha closely. "I don't do individual moves like that."

Aisha placed her hands on her hips, and her head tilted back. "How did you learn to fight?"

"I watched Blake's movies and copied the moves on robots."

Aisha was still, for a moment.

"You can't do that. Fighting is like a puzzle. And you're looking at the box, not the pieces."

"That's a dumb metaphor." Beatrice crossed her arms. "Tell it to all of the robots I've killed."

"Pretend to attack a robot, then. We don't have to call it anything if you don't want to."

Beatrice hesitated, and then turned, moving to hold her sword at the ready like it was the most natural thing in the world. She stared down the blade — and then lowered it.

"Is this a nursebot? Or a mechanbot? Or something else?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes it does," argued Beatrice. "With a nursebot I'd have more time, because it can't do long-range attacks. If this was a bot meant for plumbing or cleaning I'd act more quickly and aim to disable extremities. If it was a policebot — I'd be running. Or dead."

Aisha stared at the empty air. "You've thought about this a lot?"

Beatrice glanced over at Aisha, but didn't move her head, not wanting to come out of her fighting position. "Who hasn't?"

"Nurse."

Beatrice took a deep breath, and tried to imagine a nursebot in front of her, and then attacked. The air around her quivered in fear as the sword arced, and as she hit nothing she pulled up short, taking a step away from the imaginary bot.

"This is uncomfortable."

Aisha ignored her. "Your feet are moving weirdly. Do it again."

It went on like that for a while — Beatrice would attack, and Aisha would adjust little things about it, and by the end Beatrice was feeling out of place in her own body.

"This was good," said Aisha, voicing the exact opposite of what Beatrice was thinking. "Let's take a break."

Beatrice set down the sword and sat, taking a moment to catch her breath. Aisha walked over to her bench and rooted through her bag for a moment before retrieving two bottles of water. She sat beside Beatrice, handing her one of the bottles.

Beatrice jerked off the cap and drank, then wondered belatedly if it might be poisoned.

"So. What's it like having Blake Blaire for a mom?"

Beatrice sighed, angling the bottle in her hands so that it projected light out onto the floor. "I don't know. I never see her."

"Never?"

"Not that I can remember." Beatrice set the water bottle down. "That's why I'm doing this. If I win the contest I can go and fight alongside her."

Aisha, who had finished the bottle of water, crushed it easily in her palm and tossed it at a garbage can in the corner. It bounced off the wall and into the trash.

"Damn. I was trying for nothing but net."

"You'd probably be better at this than me."

Aisha was startled. "What?"

"The killing all robots thing. The fighting with Blake Blaire thing. I don't think she even wants me."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"If she wanted me she'd talk to me."

Aisha stared at Beatrice's hunched form for a moment, and then stood. She clapped her hands together, drawing Beatrice's attention, and grinned.

"I have a question for you, Beatrice Blaire!" she boomed. "In a world where people are too scared to venture out onto the street, much less around the country, would it be better to have you sit and do nothing?"

"I—"

"In a world like ours, wouldn't we need every person with the courage to take a stand?" continued Aisha. "So are you, Beatrice Blaire, one with so much history on your shoulders, telling me you're not strong enough to lift it?"

"No," said Beatrice slowly.

"You're telling me that you want to die like a dog?" asked Aisha. "Or are you telling me you want to fight for humanity?"

"I want to fight."

Aisha crouched, and grabbed Beatrice's hand in her own. "Swear that you won't stop."

"Not in a million motherfucking years," recited Beatrice dully as Aisha pulled her to her feet.

Aisha broke into a grin and pulled Beatrice into a side-hug. "That's the spirit!"

Beatrice froze. Her shoulders burned, and when Aisha let go she thought she might collapse at the sudden absence.

Aisha picked up the pole and handed it to Beatrice. "Now, you're going to do all of the things I just taught you, but you're going to do them using this."

Beatrice paled, and then at Aisha's hopeful expression recovered. "I'll give it a shot."

They moved back into the positions, and Beatrice tried to hold the pole like her sword. It felt strange and unpleasant.

"Now, thrust," said Aisha.

Chapter Thirteen: Bakeries Post-Apocalypse

“General combat,” snorted Ann. They were walking down the street — Ann on the inside, and Beatrice a few feet away from her, trying her best to stop perspiring. “Man. I hate that class. Thousands of sweaty kids packed into the school, trying out for the missions.”

“Do you not like Aisha?”

Ann rolled her eyes. “She’s just annoying. The whole cheerful protagonist act. I hope she didn’t subject you to any of her long, empowering speeches.”

“Ah,” said Beatrice. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, come back to me in a month.” Ann grinned. “You meant it when you said you’d help me out with the party stuff though, right?”

“Sure.”

“Great,” said Ann, stopping short in front of the Inn. “We just have to haul some shit. My brother’ll help us out, too.”

Beatrice stepped inside. It was empty. “Salim?”

“Miles,” Ann corrected, leading Beatrice to the kitchen in the back.

Sure enough, standing over the stove was a boy only a year or so older than Ann. He wore a loose gray sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up under a pale, baby-blue apron and well-fitted dark jeans. His hair was shorn, and as he brushed loose flour from the table his jaw jutted out — it was confidence that squared his shoulders. He reminded Beatrice of a more refined version of Ann: wine which had been aged a few extra years, not yet curdled into vinegar. On the table beside him was a discarded Hello Kitty mask, and he waved, all the while chewing intently on a piece of bubble gum. It made a smacking sound every time his teeth connected.

“Hey, Ann,” he greeted, around the gum. “And stranger. Hey, stranger.”

“This is Beatrice. She’s helping us.”

He grinned wryly, waving his spatula, which he was using to scrape up cookies. “Ah. The daughter. Blaire’s descendent. You know how to bake?”

“No,” said Beatrice.

“That’s what I thought. Useless.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “He’s just messing with you.”

“Oh.” Beatrice nodded, and then tried for a laugh. Miles wrinkled his nose at her.

“The PTA meets every Sunday, and then once a year they throw a big celebration to our survival.” Ann was pulling tupperware from the cabinets. “Salim thought it up the first year of Suburbia’s founding. It’s good for morale.”

Miles snorted. “Salim thinks everything up.”

“It’s pretty fun,” said Ann. “Everyone contributes. Some of the more musical kids put on a performance.”

“Lessons on Suburbia’s history,” offered Miles. “Eliza always does something cool with her team.”

Beatrice tried to picture Eliza’s robot, upright, doing tricks for an audience, and failed.

Ann nodded, ticking off attractions on her fingers. “There’s usually a booth about what things were like before the apocalypse, a few half-assed carnival games. The real event is when Blake videos in to say hello.”

Beatrice stiffened. “Blake does what?”

“Video calls on the projector,” said Miles.

“Only for like, half an hour,” amended Ann. “She’s busy.”

“And you weren’t in trouble.”

Miles snorted. “Celebrities like our godly Blake Blaire have got to keep appearances up. It’s basically the same as kissing babies. If she really gave a fuck about Suburbia she’d travel out in person.”

Beatrice wanted to punch something, suddenly. She tried to stifle the feeling, but it wouldn’t go away, even as she fidgeted with her pockets and took deep, calming breaths, which usually worked pretty well. Blake never video called her. What had she done to drive Blake away? What did Suburbia have that Beatrice didn’t?

And then it struck her: she was inside of Suburbia. If Blake Blaire did this yearly, then-

“So — this is the PTA party?” asked Beatrice. “Like, tonight?”

“Naw, it’s still about a month away. Tonight is the bonfire. We do one every few weeks.” Ann sectioned off three cookies onto a plate and handed them over to Beatrice. “Throw these in the microwave, yeah? They taste better hot.”

Beatrice nodded, finding the microwave on the wall and placing the plate on the little rotating table inside. “Post forward slash microwave content hyphen type equals message forward slash microwave content hyphen message hyphen body equals double quotes accept hyphen additions open parenthesis equals heat thirty seconds hyphen type equals double quote high double quote close parenthesis.”

Nothing happened. Both Miles and Ann were staring at her, Ann in amusement, Miles slack-jawed.

Ann’s head tilted. “I didn’t know you spoke gibberish.”

Beatrice realized with a start why it wasn’t working. “Oh, right. My bad. Uh — microwave, please. Thirty seconds.”

It didn’t work.

“You have to say start.”

“Start.” Beatrice’s face was flushed red. “It’s — Caine’s usually there to help me.”

At her apology Miles seemed to suddenly sputter, a wide range of unreadable emotion flitting over face in the span of two seconds. Beatrice wondered if she had said something wrong.

Ann waved her hand in front of her brother's face. "Miles? Hello?"

"I have to take this," he said, turning and wrestling his phone from his apron pocket.

His phone hadn't been ringing. Beatrice and Ann shared a glance. He cursed, and dialed a number.

"John," he greeted, raising the phone to his ear. "What the fuck, dude?"

The voice on the other line said something muffled.

"Yes. That is what I'm—" Miles growled. "Hold your fucking horses. I'm coming."

John shot something back.

Miles lowered his voice, covering the receiver with his cupped hand.

"Seriously, old man. Chill."

The other end of the call ranted at Miles. He rolled his eyes, then snapped the phone shut mid-sentence, burying it in his jeans and yanking loose the tie of his apron.

Ann leaned against the counter, watching her brother brush the flour from his lower jeans. "What, you got a date?"

"Haha. Funny." Miles tossed his apron to the counter. He was — subtly, but still unmistakably — refusing to look anywhere near Beatrice. "You two carry over the goods. I've got some business to take care of."

"Business," mocked Ann. "What could possibly be more important than chocolate chip cookies?"

He headed to the door. "A robot could bust down Suburbia's gates and you'd ask if they'd prefer gluten free, Ann."

"As long as you've got a handle on everything," said Ann.

He shouted from outside. "Please. I'm so good at handling things I might as well be on a pot. Or the front of a bike."

Ann stared after him, her brow creased and her mouth quirked up into a grimace. "What an asshole."

Beatrice was silent, watching after him. The front door slammed.

Ann handed one of the warmed cookies to Beatrice. "Eat, Bea."

Chapter Fourteen: Arson is Amoral

By the time Beatrice and Ann arrived, around thirty kids had already begun to crowd the small green in front of the school for the bonfire. It was the same park Beatrice had wandered that morning, except on the side without as many trees. At its rough center was a mass of laughing teens, the largest of them stacking a huge pile of brushwood up into a pyramid shape. A few folding tables were set up around it, as well as a circle of the same type of wooden, backless bench Beatrice had stumbled across on her walk. Seeing so many people made Beatrice's head hurt a little. She resisted the urge to turn and run.

Ann bumped her shoulder, nodding to the empty tables. "Over there."

Sitting on one of the benches furthest from the fire was a boy tuning a guitar. Beside him was a girl with a pair of bongo drums cradled in her lap. Beatrice set down the cookies and watched, entranced.

Ann surveyed the loose gathering of people. "It's actually pretty empty today."

Beatrice's eyes widened. "There's usually *more* people?"

Ann grinned with the sort of genuine, happy quality that infected Beatrice despite herself. "Ah. I can't wait until you see a real party, angel."

Beatrice smiled, but couldn't bring herself to answer. Every time Ann used her screen name it threw her off guard. She wondered if she was messing with her on purpose.

The night grew darker, and more people filtered in, dancing and chatting in hazy clumps. The cookies were quickly depleted. When the last rays of the sun disappeared beyond the horizon a boy with broad shoulders poured a can of gasoline over the logs and backed away as one of his companions tossed a match into its center. In one big fume it lit, shooting a shower of sparks to the sky. For a fleeting moment they mirrored the stars before sizzling out into a deep, chalky black. The fire seemed to consume the people around it, flaring up and down their silhouettes in muted patterns. The songs wound up through the flame and down into the packed, cigarette-butt littered earth. As she stared, she grew calmer, until the world might have slipped between her teeth as easily.

There was only one thing that was bothering her.

Beatrice leaned over to Ann. "Are you shy?"

Ann started. "What?"

Beatrice tried to meet Ann's eyes, but Ann was avoiding her. "Twenty-six out of the seventy-three Blake Blaire movies I've watched have had parties in them. In every one of them the cool, suave characters spend ninety percent of their time mingling in the crowd. But you haven't talked to a single person since we've arrived."

"Well—" Ann dodged the question like a condemned man on the firing wall.

"Uh—"

"Or maybe... you're unpopular?"

Ann flushed a bright red. "What does that even mean?"

"It means that—"

"I'm not *unpopular*," interrupted Ann. "And I'm not *shy*."

"But you're just sitting with me."

Ann leaned forward to form a steeple with her hands. "See, Beatrice, the art of social interaction is quite delicate. I'm a very relaxed, laid-back person. It would be—"

She paused as a group of girls passed them by rather closely, and then once they were out of earshot continued.

"-remiss of me to seek out attention." Ann grit her teeth. "Look. I never thought I'd actually have to answer for stuff I told you. How could I know you'd end up in Suburbia?"

"Aw." Beatrice nudged her elbow. "You'll always be cool to me."

"How'd our cookies turn out?" interrupted Miles, taking the seat beside Ann.

Ann grabbed one and chucked it at his head. It hit him in the shoulder.

"If not for my forgiving nature, Ann, I might charge you with assault and *batter-y*."

"I'll be charged with something a lot worse if you make another pun," said Ann, threateningly raising another baked good.

Miles took a bite of the cookie. He seemed to have gotten over whatever made him cold to Beatrice earlier that day. "Are you enjoying the party, Beatrice?"

Beatrice nodded awkwardly.

He set his chin in his palm. "Well, If you ever need to escape my sister feel free to give me a ring."

"Hey," came a voice from behind them. Ann jumped a little, and Beatrice looked up to see Eliza, and behind her a posse of teens.

"Hey," greeted Beatrice with a swallow of vague embarrassment. "What's — I mean. Nice to — you're here."

"As are you," beamed Eliza. She turned to Ann, and then Miles. Upon seeing him the smile slipped from her eyes. "Along with two thirds of the Archons, apparently."

Beatrice nodded awkwardly. There was a beat of heavy silence, and behind Eliza a boy with red hair in a mullet got distracted talking to a girl holding a half-deflated football. Beatrice glanced over to Ann, who looked positively miserable, and then Miles, who looked negatively miserable.

"Well," said Eliza in an attempt to recover the conversation. She fiddled with a beaded bracelet that hung off of her petite wrist. "It's — uh, nice to see you two again. I hope you won't mind if I pry Beatrice away from you for a moment."

Miles grabbed his sister's arm, his expression shadowed. "Let's go enjoy the party, Ann."

She stood to follow him into the crowd without protest. Henry put a comforting hand on Eliza's shoulder. She grabbed his hand, lacing it with her own, and then smiled up at him reassuringly.

"I'd like to introduce you to my team." Beatrice watched as Eliza stepped to the side. She gestured to the brown-haired boy. "You know Henry already."

"We've met," said Henry testily.

Eliza pointed to the boy beside Henry, who struck a stark contrast, as he was almost worrying thin. A mop of curly black hair stuck out over his ears, and his eyes were slightly wider than a normal person's would be, giving the impression of a scared animal. "This is Roman. He does code."

Beatrice nodded, and he gave her a curt nod in return.

Beside him was a short girl. Curly dark-blonde hair dropped below her shoulders to brush at the hem of a cropped flannel shirt. Before Eliza could introduce her she stepped forward, grabbing Beatrice's hand and shaking. Her hand was very soft, as opposed to her voice, and skull rings scratchy at Beatrice's palm. "Mia."

"Mia," repeated Beatrice. "Your — name."

Mia dropped her hand and laughed. "That's the one."

"Mia does electronics," explained Eliza.

"Sometimes I help you with mechanics."

"Sure." Eliza turned to the final teen. "And that's Michael."

Michael looked around eighteen, with a large nose and an unfailingly friendly expression. Cropped red hair that crept down his neckline so that it bordered on a mullet. He was grinning, shouting something at the girl as he sent the football neatly spinning after her. She caught it and smiled back.

"Hey," he greeted, turning back to them. "Nice to meet you."

"Mike's our driver," said Eliza affectionately, her hand tapping absentmindedly against her knee.

"Where are you from?" asked Mike, directing the question at Beatrice.

"My house," said Beatrice. "I'm here for the—"

"I looked at the changes you made to the robot," interrupted Eliza, hastily. "I have a challenge for you."

"Eliza," said Roman quietly. "Are you asking someone who's going to be competing against us to build a key component of our machine?"

Mike laughed. "For real?"

"She's trustworthy," argued Eliza. "This is *Blake Blaire's* daughter. If she cheats it's worse for her."

"I'm not—" Roman laughed nervously, his cheeks flushing a ruddy red. "I'm not saying we shouldn't. I just think it's funny. Because that's basically the opposite of strategy."

"You're not wrong!" Mike socked Roman genially in the shoulder, but gently, like he was being cautious. Roman almost fell over.

"I'm not going to sabotage your robot, if that's what you're implying," assured Beatrice. "I think what you're doing is awesome. If we fight I'd look forward to beating you fair and square."

Mia cocked her hip. "Confident."

"I know what I'm doing."

"This could save us weeks of time." Eliza turned back to her teammates.

"Think about all the extra days you'll have to practice, Mike."

He nodded. "Hey, sounds good to me, 'Liza. Casa el casa."

They all glanced expectantly to Mia.

"It's mi casa es su casa, dumbass," Mia corrected. "And yeah, I'd say it's cool. We can watch her progress. I'm sure Eliza will pick up on it if she messes stuff up on purpose."

Eliza nodded. "Great, great, great. Beatrice, why don't you come over and I can give you the plans? I'm afraid you can't sleep on my couch again — Henry's staying over — and there's also the matter of—"

There was an awkward pause. Beatrice wondered if they were waiting for her to agree.

"Well," said Eliza, clearing her throat. "I can't exactly pay you. It isn't like money exists anymore."

Beatrice nodded — she hadn't expected payment — and then, suddenly, an idea came to her.

She tilted her head. "Actually, there's something you can do for me."

"What's that?" asked Eliza.

"I—" Beatrice hesitated. "I do exchanges for the Apocalypse Angels."

"You work for them?" asked Roman, leaning forward slightly.

"In a manner of speaking. Lately I've been shoving off a lot of my customers to stay here, which isn't exactly — ideal. So maybe you could all help me with—"

"It's a deal," interrupted Eliza, sticking out her hand.

Beatrice took it and smiled. "Sick."

Eliza took the opportunity to tug her off of the bench. "C'mon, let's go."

The robotics team was very close, as even Beatrice was able to pick up on. As they walked they joked around, laughing hysterically at something Henry had done last week as he protested weakly before retaliating at Roman, whose mouth stretched into a displeased line before giving into a laugh. Eliza was maybe the most expressive of them all — she bounced off of the sidewalk and alleyways like a rubber ball thrown as hard at the concrete as humanly possible. Away from the bright fire Suburbia reclaimed some of its mysterious glint, the alleyways darkened and the streetlamps flickering. A pale blue washed the road. It made everything seem more foreign.

Eliza glanced back at Beatrice. "You look sad?"

"What?" Beatrice, broken from her train of thought, looked up. "Oh. Sorry."

Eliza laughed. "You guys weren't there when Henry, Beatrice and I met."

"No," agreed Mia. "Weren't you two on a—"

"Anyway!" interrupted Eliza, her face flushing red. "It was crazy. Beatrice broke in—"

"The door was unlocked," interjected Beatrice.

"And then I was like, oh we should give her the benefit of the doubt while Henry—"

"I was rightfully wary of a stranger intruding." Henry's eyes were locked on Eliza. He stifled a smile. "This is why I'm the representative."

Mia grinned. "Oh, you want to hear this story, trust me. Eliza *was* our representative but during a meeting about a year and a half ago she went crazy."

Roman laughed. "Apparently they were — what was it? Trying to kick you out?"

"They were doing the private discussion thing—"

"And Eliza told them to take their secrets and — and she said—"

"Shove it up your secret ass!"

Mia and Roman broke down into fits of laughter.

Eliza spread her arms, trying to contain her laughter. "You've got it all wrong! They were—"

"What?" asked Mia breathlessly. "Is it that he secretly loves kittens? Behind his ruthless exterior is his favorite color a pretty pink?"

"Sorry," said Beatrice. "Who are you talking about? What do you mean by representative?"

"Oh, yeah — I guess you wouldn't know." Mia waved her hand in the air like it explained things. "We're talking about Salim. He runs the PTA meetings each Sunday that all the representatives have to go to — like Aisha for the scouts and Henry for robotics."

"Ah."

Eliza smiled. "You sound like Ann."

Beatrice was taken aback. "Me?"

"Yeah, yeah — she's always saying that. 'Ah, but don't touch my stuff, Ah, you can't cook like that, Eliza, Ah, you'll burn the house down.'"

"Oh." Beatrice considered this. "Thanks."

"I guess you two have known each other for awhile now, huh? Sorry we pulled you away at the bonfire."

"She's pretty much my only friend."

Eliza looked offended. "What about us?"

"Uh—" Beatrice blushed. "I mean — if you — it's not that—"

"I'm just teasing."

They stopped at the green door. Henry climbed the steps and jiggled the handle open, pushing past loose piles of machinery. Eliza followed him to the robot, and the team dispersed into the room. She grabbed what looked to be a metal joint and bent it experimentally, turning back to Beatrice.

"This is the robot's hand."

It didn't look much like a hand. Objectively, it could have been scrap metal.

"It's not much."

Beatrice grabbed the blueprints, looking from them to the machinery. "I see what you're going for. Are you sure the gear ratios are high enough to support your weapon?"

The robotics team shared a glance. Mia stepped in to explain the design.

Beatrice, Mia, Roman, and Eliza spent several minutes discussing what work needed to be done, and by when, and throughout it Beatrice hadn't been able to shake the sensation that she was floating. Only Caine — and, a few times, the nomads — had ever talked to Beatrice about mechanics. Usually people were too scared of robots to even dare say the word. With these Suburbians she didn't have to worry about annoying the customer, or confusing them, or frightening them. By the end of it, as Beatrice was finishing describing her own problems with the angels, Eliza was promising to talk to John about setting up a shipping service — perhaps in exchange for some of the profits going into Suburbia's own storage. Beatrice readily agreed, pleased with herself for taking care of that problem, and promised to get them the hand once it was finished.

Beatrice waved goodbye and walked on air for two blocks before she realized that it was night and she had nowhere to stay.

Well. That wasn't true, exactly. A pit of latent guilt welled up in her stomach at the thought of crashing at Miria's again, but she couldn't see an alternative. She wouldn't want to bother Ann, and on top of that — even if she did want to bother her — she had no idea where Ann lived.

Beatrice avoided the library's front door and instead snuck around to the side, looking up at the sheer brick of the building and feeling her hands already ache protestingly at the prospect of a climb. Steeling herself, she tightened her backpack, and grabbed onto the lowest windowsill. She hauled herself upwards, scrambling to her feet and pulling up on the window experimentally. Eventually it gave. She ducked into the opening and lowered herself inside, taking a moment to catch her breath and sliding the window shut as silently as possible.

She appeared to be in some sort of back room. It was small, about the size of a nice walk-in closet, and housed a lowly humming printer. She remembered cleaning it, and set her bag down with a sigh of relief. It was then that she heard a pair of soft,

padding steps stop outside the closed door. Her heart skipped a beat, and she froze, staring through the marbled glass and waiting to be discovered.

But it didn't open. Instead, whoever it was just stood there, the minutes tautening at their presence until Beatrice almost thought that they *had* left and she just hadn't caught it.

No. She would have heard. After some point she almost wished they had opened the door. It might have been preferable to stifling every breath with the sweaty palm of her hand, legs cramping, just like the only other time she'd been alone like this — the only other time she'd been trapped, forced to hide, forced to suffocate —

And then, all at once, she heard the footsteps retreat.

And Beatrice was alone.

Chapter Fifteen: Miria in Hometowns

Beatrice spent the next four days according to a strict routine. She'd sneak out of Miria's window, meet with the robotics team to work on the robot, fight with Aisha in the gym and make it back to the library window by around nine in the evening.

At first glance this may have seemed repetitive. This first glance would be absolutely correct. Beatrice was only ever repetitive in the way that a broken record would stick on a note — in that it repeats, relying only on your ability to muster up the will to fix it. Why did you even get a record player in the first place? To seem cool? Nobody thinks record players are cool, especially not when the record only plays one note.

The point was that Beatrice was a repetitive person, day-to-day. A physical routine allowed her mind to wander off of it. It let her think about all the ways she was going to defeat her enemies inside the ring. And that was definitely what was on her mind, 24/7. Combat. Technique. Mental stability.

That was why, when she had snuck into the library with a well-practiced ease and found herself staring at a refurbished room, it gave her quite a shock.

For a minute she thought she had made a mistake and broke into the wrong room. But no — the window had the same peeling paint and there was still the printer tucked away in the corner. Now, however, there was a small green futon beside it, a neatly folded blanket lying innocently at its end. Next to that was a metal table covered with tools Beatrice recognised as Eliza's.

She walked over to the bed cautiously, glancing to the door, but everything appeared to be still. On top of the pillow was a note.

You can use the front door. Climbing in seems like a lot of trouble, and the floor must not be comfortable. Eliza should be dropping off supplies at some point, too.

Beatrice stared at the paper. She suddenly felt very warm — warm, and slightly dizzy, like she had been dunked underwater and left to drown somewhere in the caribbean.

The next week was a blur. Her hands quickly grew numb to the cold lengths of steel. Ever so often Miria would crack open Beatrice's door and drop off a plate of food while Beatrice pretended not to see her, and when Beatrice's sight grew too blurry to make out machine from paper anymore she'd take a break to sleep, but other than that she was completely isolated in her work.

It felt wonderful.

It had been so long since Beatrice was so involved in a project. She could see the results — before her miscellaneous pieces of scrap and copper strips were being molded into a stiff, wiry skeleton of a hand. Like a flower coming into bloom.

The door opened, and she dropped the soldering gun, startled. It burned into the surface of the wooden desk. Her hand jerked back, and Beatrice cursed, scrambling to unplug it.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything too important.” Miria watched as Beatrice moved the soldering gun to a wire stand. “I was going to invite you to dinner.”

Miria was dressed in a blue exercise shirt and basketball shorts that were missing a drawstring. An unravelling camisole was draped over her shoulders. She caught Beatrice’s eye and smiled so warmly it made Beatrice a little bit uncomfortable.

“I’m kind of busy.”

“Wasn’t asking.” Miria flung Beatrice’s curtains open, and dusk flooded the room, bouncing off the dripped soldering as it beaded on the varnish. Beatrice would have to re-melt it. “Think of it as rent.”

“My rent to you is — eating dinner with you?”

Miria clutched her heart. “I’m a poor, lonely old woman, Beatrice. I need youthful company.”

“You’re twenty-five.” Beatrice stood up, pushing her chair in. “Yeah, okay. What are we having?”

“Synthesized pizza.”

Beatrice made a face, but followed Miria into the tiny staff break room.

The pizza ended up being good. Kind of chewy, and a little bit too spicy, but that might’ve just been Beatrice. It was more than good, actually, and she had to make an effort to control her expression as she took her first bite. That was how it went every time Beatrice ate real food: all of it was amazing compared to nutrient packets. It annoyed her — how easily impressed she was by Suburbia. It also made her wonder a little bit why she’d even been left nutrient packets in the first place. Was the maintenance of the printers really not worth the pleasure of normal food? Did Blake really see it as necessary to deprive her of that? Maybe it had been purposeful. Maybe it meant she couldn’t get distracted by eating.

Miria was perched on the counter, swinging her feet to knock against the cabinets. “This is my favorite food.”

Beatrice wiped sauce from her fingers. “Out of all of them?”

Miria nodded. “Last real food I had before the apocalypse was from this tiny pizza parlor just outside of — well, what’s Suburbia now. But back then it was just a military base.”

That caught Beatrice off guard. “You were from here? Like, even before the apocalypse?”

“One of the few. When the apocalypse hit I was cutting class. Most of the kids died when the school building collapsed. The rest of us were able to take refuge out here — Salim was one, and his siblings.”

“Ann?”

"She was barely a kid, then. We started in the most protected part of the base. Built out from there. A few of the older kids took up positions as leaders. Radio'd out for help and shit." Miria hopped down from the counter and moved to the minifridge fridge. "Didn't help, of course. All the grown-ups were dead. Really makes you grow up. And it was a time-bomb, too — the junior high kids knew they were next. It's fucked up, living like that."

They were both silent. Beatrice stared at the fridge. It was stained, and as Miria pulled it open she saw that it was stuffed with one thing and one thing only, and that was alcohol.

"I think the radio-ing helped, though. With the fear." Miria grabbed a beer. "I remember huddling around that tiny transistor, cold and dirty. It gave us hope. Same thing with Blake Blaire."

"I did that too."

"Radio-ing?"

"No, the — asking for help." Beatrice suddenly wasn't very hungry anymore. "For the past six years I've sent an email to Blake every day."

"Every day?"

"Yeah. Every day. Except—" Beatrice's brow creased. "Not since I got to Suburbia. I haven't sent her a single one from here, actually."

"Did she, like — reply to you?"

"Every few months. She'd tell me—"

Miria waited. Beatrice swallowed, her tongue suddenly thick, like someone had dipped it in lead. Heavy and sour. Inarticulate.

"I — She'd say things like." Beatrice's gaze flitted to the door. "To keep going. She said that, a lot. Encouraged me to compete. Told me she needed me to win."

"Huh," said Miria.

Beatrice's hands laced, and then pulled apart, wiping on the front of her shirt compulsively. They fell down to her lap, then up to tuck her hair behind her ears.

"Everyone says I look like her." Beatrice shoved her hands into her pockets. "Like Blake."

"Yeah," said Miria. "I mean, I see it a bit. You've got similar facial structures. But you definitely look more like Beatrice to me."

"Thank you."

Miria popped the beer open, and took a beat-up pink plastic cup from the cupboard. She poured about an inch and slid it over to Beatrice.

Beatrice realized belatedly that Miria intended for her to drink it. "Oh, I don't —"

"I feel weird not having someone to drink with," said Miria, and after a moment or hesitation Beatrice took the glass and let Miria tap them together in cheers. "That's the other thing we'd do around the radio. Drink."

Beatrice watched as Miria tipped the bottle back, and took a tentative sip alongside her. It tasted like piss. Beatrice knew — she'd had to drink that for one horrible day when she was 12 and her water broke. She swallowed thickly.

"You've, um—" Beatrice cleared her throat. "You have a lot stocked up."

"Yeah. It's a hobby of mine." Miria grinned. "I think I would've made a really great enthusiast before the apocalypse. That or an alcoholic."

Beatrice laughed weakly. "Yeah, Blake — she."

"I've read the articles." Miria fiddled with the bottle, angling it so that it threw brown-gold light out onto the countertop. "She quit for you."

Beatrice finished the cup, and set it down. "She went through so much fucking work to have me — gave up so much of her Hollywood lifestyle. And now she can't even pay a visit."

There was a knock on the front door. It startled Beatrice, who jumped a little, and then settled back into her chair and felt silly, and then realized that someone knocking at the door meant there was a person there and shot back to her feet.

Miria stepped forward. "I can—"

"I'll get it." Beatrice twisted the handle, and on the other side of the door was a woman of around twenty wearing a mismatched pantsuit.

"Beatrice Blaire. Her voice was smooth and cool. "Salim demands your presence at tomorrow's meeting. I hope you can make it."

Chapter Sixteen: Salim of Ants

Salim's office was oppressively dark, pitch lacing the painted windows tight enough that Beatrice had to work to pull in breath, the air like crumpled velvet in her lungs. The only break was a lamp at the far end of the room. It cast a shattered yellow glow on Salim, who looked up as the young woman in the pantsuit closed the door behind them. He was seated at the end of a table so stretched down the length of the room that it resembled pulled taffy.

Beatrice brushed off the hand of the girl — Diane.

"Beatrice Blaire." Salim stood, holding out a hand. He looked like Miles, if he was cut from a marble more ruthless, more refined — and more exhausted, judging by the bags under his eyes. It took a few seconds for Beatrice to make it close enough to shake, and he stood stock-still the entire time, staring her down. "It's so good to finally meet you."

His hand was cold. Beatrice let go. "Why am I here?"

He smiled, and the pull of the skin around his lips cut grooves down his jaw like a knife. "The PTA meeting, of course. Why don't we wait for the rest of the representatives? I'm afraid you caught us a little early."

Beatrice glanced down at her watch. It was 5:59.

Diane gestured her to a seat at Salim's right-hand side. Salim sat back down, adjusting his chair, and Beatrice followed suit.

"These meetings can be a little dull. I hope you don't mind waiting for a proper explanation."

Beatrice shrugged, fiddling with the watch around her wrist. For several long moments they sat in awkward silence, and then the time hit six, and all at once the doors at the end of the hall slammed open. Light flooded the room as fluorescents flickered to life overhead, draining the darkness so that it was left to pool around their ankles like dregs of coffee.

Beatrice watched the representatives file in. She spotted Aisha and Henry — along with a lot of other faces she didn't recognize. They all were straight-backed and serious, and suddenly Eliza being kicked out suddenly made a lot more sense.

"Welcome." When she looked back Salim had stood. At full height he was tall, taller than he looked sitting down — 6'5"? 6'6"? "As always, I appreciate you all making the time to come here. I believe these conferences are crucial for Suburbia's continued prosperity. Persistence. Truth. Advancement."

"PTA," echoed the crowd.

He nodded. "You may be seated."

The representatives all pulled out their chairs at once and sat. Beatrice watched in a muted awe.

"John Williams. Begin."

John began to rattle off what Beatrice slowly picked up on as a summary of the post office's last month. Salim was using a projection laptop to throw his notes up above the center of the table. The particles hovered in the air, casting a blue reflection down onto the desk between the representatives. It stained their faces in a pallor of death.

Beatrice saw her own name pop up on the screen and tuned back into Salim's conversation. He was discussing mission quotas with Aisha. Beside her name appeared Ann, Miles, Rolf, and Theodore, with a little bracket above them reading Miria.

"And that's scheduled for the weekend," finished Aisha.

"We'll send out alerts this evening," he said, and whatever program he was using to run Suburbia's infrastructure replied affirmatively in a smooth southern drawl. "Final order of business: the mole. This is where you come in, Beatrice."

The representatives all looked at Beatrice.

"If you're having a mole infestation I could probably trade for some repellent," she offered. "Though I don't know why you needed me for this."

"No, not a—" Salim cleared his throat. "Not literal moles. A traitor — possibly multiple."

The eyes of the representatives all averted. The holo display changed to a map of Suburbia. A swarm of dots were converging on points in the fences like flies to honey.

"The attacks for the past few months have been following a pattern," narrated Diane from behind them, and Beatrice nearly jumped, spooked by the break in the room's heavy silence. "The scouts have found that they've declined for reasons inexplicable. Isn't that right, Aisha?"

Aisha nodded. "It seems good, on the surface level, but it's bad if you think about it for more than three seconds. It's like they're luring us into a sense of complacency. Which would mean they can think."

"Well, yeah," said Beatrice, and everyone in the room turned to stare at her. "They all run off the same AI."

Diane shook her head. "But that AI isn't sentient. It's supposed to make the robots attack, not make decisions about where to attack."

"We don't know that," said Beatrice.

"What?"

"We don't know that it isn't sentient." Beatrice gestured to the diagram. "We know practically nothing about the robots' parent program. Nobody can get anywhere near it."

"Right," said Diane. "The details don't really matter. The point is that these attacks seem to not only be less aggressive, but deliberately avoiding our scout missions. It's like they have inside information."

"A mole," echoed John, and when Salim shot him a glare he coughed. "Sorry." Beatrice crossed her arms. "And this is where I come in?"

Salim smiled. "Yes. This pattern of attacks started months before you even arrived. You're one of the extreme few who I can say with near-complete certainty is not our traitor."

"And?"

"I need you to find them."

Beatrice's brow drew.

"No."

"I thought it might come to this." He adjusted the collar of his poncho. "First of all. I'd like for you to remove that bug you've hidden by your hip."

Beatrice grimaced, and glanced down the table, but the representatives were all stock still. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not so old that I'm senile," joked Salim. "Hello, Ann. Hello, Miles. I humored you — but I do not tolerate insurrection, and especially not when the perpetrators are my own siblings."

Beatrice's hand lowered to the bug. "I would just tell Ann everything anyway."

"That could be up to contention," said Salim, braiding his fingers together.

"Then don't tell me," said Beatrice. "I couldn't care less about Suburbia's politics."

Salim smiled ruefully.

"Do you know why Suburbia's thrived while so many similar outposts crumble under the modern pressures, Ms. Blaire?"

"The fences."

His head tilted. "No, but you're close."

"Expository political rants."

"Worship." Salim's lips formed the word crisply, cutting off the p with a sharp, deliberate smile. "Throughout human history the masses have always been guided by some greater force that requires their unquestioned devotion. Nature. God. The military. Now — well, I think we're both well aware of who's taken up that particular mantle."

Beatrice waited. She wasn't sure if his monologue was finished, or if this was just a dramatic pause. For a moment they held eye contact. As he realized she wasn't going to destroy the bug, Salim's expression fell, and the representatives all seemed to sink down into their seats.

"You're doing a good job of that," said Salim, abruptly.

Beatrice was taken aback. "What?"

"Acting. I wouldn't have expected it from you. But I suppose it makes sense — you needed to learn humanity somehow."

"I am human."

"Blake's movies, right?" He nodded for her. "As Blake Blaire herself said, 'That culture, the loss of which you lament, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to

act as a machine.' I think it's a thinner line between people and robots than most acknowledge. You know that."

Beatrice felt the eyes of the representatives digging into her. "It's not a thin line. It's a thick line. Made of steel."

Salim paused, and then shrugged amicably. "It was a compliment, Blaire. I'm telling you: you got it right. You act like your mother."

Chapter Seventeen: Electric Sheep

Beatrice was on fire.

She blinked, lazily, and dragged in a breath of smoke. It stung her chest, and when she took her next breath she felt it stain an angry, blistered red. The flames flickered between her hands like they wouldn't hurt, and then after a moment of fragility they seized, and crawled up her tensed forearms, tracing her veins like lines of gunpowder. It burned like the slice of a dull blade. She gasped shallowly, and pulled her hands to her mouth, hacking up something into the boiling skin of her palms. When she lowered them blood was mixed with her callouses, sloughing off of her bones like melted candle wax.

"Hey," greeted Blake from above her. That was, at last, how Beatrice knew she was dreaming. "You alright, kid?"

"I'm fine," said Beatrice, voice raw with flame. She pushed herself to her feet and stumbled. The small of her back hit a counter — and she recognized their surroundings as 80s diner, except one of the chefs must have left the stove on, because everything was on fire. The red-topped stools spun against the heat like melting popsicles. It smelled heavy, and greasy, like burnt french fries.

"You don't look fine," said Blake.

Beatrice looked up at the ceiling. It caved, slightly, with an ominous crack of popcorned plaster. It was going to collapse if she didn't do something. She pushed past Blake to a booth in the corner and struggled to flip it up on its end.

"No, I — I'm fine." A splinter dug into the softened meat of her palm. "This is just a dream."

"You're fine," agreed Blake. Her clothes, somehow, were perfectly intact — a bright blue pair of overalls and a pale pink cotton tee-shirt. It would've looked domestic on her if not for the backdrop of hellfire. "Great. Wanna pull up some coffee? Scones?"

"You could maybe help me out," Beatrice snapped. "Turn on the sinks or something."

The inferno raged around them. It thawed the tiles, and pulled her down, pooling melted linoleum around her ratty sneakers. The ceiling bowed further.

"Do you want help?"

Beatrice was silent, too busy wrestling with the booth. But it was hard, with the ash in her eyes and the choking heat in her lungs. Her hand flew up to pat a spark from her hair, and it slipped, falling an inch from her submerged toes. "Fuck."

"I don't think you want help," said Blake. "I think you want to burn, Beatrice. Why else would you set your cafe on fire?"

"I didn't do this. Why would I do this to myself?"

She didn't. She wouldn't. But her knees were already on the ground, clinging to the combustion reaction. She squeezed her eyes shut and ran her hands back

desperately through her hair. Someone caught them — someone whose touch was cool, cold. Their hands slipped to her face, tenderly evaporating her tears.

“You did this,” said Blake, her head ringed with a violent light. Her hands squeezed tighter, and Beatrice winced, lurching away — but her mother’s grip was like steel, like the presses in her shop. “You did this, Beatrice Blaire. Wake and be consumed.”

And then, at last, the ceiling fell. Blake leered as the cement and dry, rusted water pipes crashed down around her head. Her grip twisted taut, and — by the virtue of pressure thermodynamics — Beatrice’s neck finally snapped, a burst of bubbling spinal fluid and melted vertebrae.

“Beatrice.”

Beatrice couldn’t breathe. The air was hot and heavy in her lungs, her clothes too tight, too damp with sweat. Someone was hunched over her, their hand rubbing small circles into her back.

“Blake?”

“No.” They seemed offended. “I don’t sound that old, do I?”

Beatrice’s hands slid from her eyes. It hurt to blink. “Miria.”

“You were making a lot of noise. Woke me up.”

Beatrice’s hands came up to clap around her neck, which was intact. She slumped, and wheezed, feeling the pulse of her heartbeat beneath her jaw. She wasn’t able to get in any air. She was doing all the right steps — those steps being, ‘breathing’ — but for some reason her mind wasn’t getting the message ‘oxygen is here now, we can stop.’

“Fuck.” Beatrice buried her head in Miria’s pajamas. Pins and needles tugged at her nose and her hands and her legs. “Fuck. Miria.”

“Hey,” greeted Miria. “Yep. That’s me. Need you to, uh — calm down. Just focus on your senses. What can you feel?”

Beatrice’s shoulders shook. The fire was hot, and red, and it was clamoring for every inch of her. She didn’t want to think about the smell of her own singed flesh, or the taste of her teeth as they melted and fell in fat drops to her tongue.

But — she wasn’t.

She wasn’t on fire. That’s not what she was feeling. Instead, there was Miria’s hand, and the bed, and the cool breeze from the window. It was soft like the slip of tears. Or maybe that was because she was crying.

Beatrice blinked, and drew in a shuddering breath. Miria’s hand was stiff on her back, and she was making a concerted effort to avoid looking directly at Beatrice, as if it would’ve been impolite. A small puff of a laugh clawed up her lungs at the absurdity of it.

“M sorry.”

“Naw, you’re cool. Just — don’t rip my clothes, please.” Beatrice’s hands slackened. “Cool, cool. Bad dream?”

Beatrice paused, hesitating, and then shrugged noncommittally. “Not bad.”

“Not bad,” echoed Miria, raising an eyebrow.

“Why would I do that when I could just not dream bad?” Beatrice swiped her arm across her eyes, squeezing them shut. “They’re my dreams. I control them.”

Miria paused, and then nodded. “Well — you sit there and calm down, yeah? Some tea, maybe?”

Beatrice shook her head, and felt the mattress shift beneath her. She cracked open an eye and saw that Miria had stood.

“No,” said Miria. “Okay, good, because I don’t have any that aren’t caffeinated. Haha. Well — you get some sleep, alright?”

She pat Beatrice on the shoulder, and then drew away, turning to leave. Abruptly, Beatrice lurched forward — as if not of her own volition, almost — and snatched the sleeve of Miria’s shirt.

Miria looked back. Tears pooled in Beatrice’s eyes and dripped down her face like a burst pipe.

“I, uh—” Beatrice laughed self-consciously, her grip tightening. “I’m just. Please. Please don’t go.”

Miria reached back over to Beatrice and raked a hand back affectionately through her hair, again. “You’ve got to get some sleep.”

Beatrice grabbed Miria’s hand, and after a split second of hesitation brought it down to her face. It smelled like coconut lotion.

“I just,” said Beatrice, her voice wavering and slightly muffled. She couldn’t see Miria’s expression, but she could wager a guess, and felt a pit of guilt well up in her stomach. “Six years. It’s been six years — and I never — I missed it. I missed—”

Miria’s hand was wet by now with tears, sliding down her arm and pooling against the fabric that bunched at her elbow. She cleared her throat awkwardly, and with her left hand pat Beatrice gently on the head.

“You’re too young.” Miria’s voice was scratchy with regret. “The world’s just full of people who are too young. I’m sorry you’re one of them, Beatrice.”

Beatrice hunched over further. Miria combed her hand through Beatrice’s hair, bravely ignoring her sobs.

“Is there — something I should be feeding you?” Miria laughed breathily. “Like, does synthesized food cause hormonal imbalances or something? Mood swings?”

“I’m fine. No — fuck. Why am I so happy here?”

That caught Miria off guard.

“Why does it have to be so nice?” Beatrice felt as though her veins were unwinding within her, and drawing taught, pulling her heart in ten different directions. “And why am I so fucked up about it?”

“The pizza.” Sobs wracking Beatrice's body so that her shoulders shook, and Miria's hand bobbed up and down in her grip. “Okay, not the pizza. To be fair, it's a difficult choice. How you find purpose in your life — goals, competitions. People.”

Beatrice's hands tightened around Miria's wrist. “How do I know which to pick?”

Miria paused, and Beatrice grabbed her other hand and brought it down to her chest. That left her in a bit of an awkward position, so she pulled away, ignoring the younger's protestations, and then wrapped her in a hug. Beatrice instantly clung to her back — like she was a life raft and Beatrice had been thrown overboard

“I don't know,” said Miria at last. “You've got to figure that out for yourself.”

Beatrice's tears stained Miria's shoulder. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Miria's voice was soft, and gentle, her touch feather-light.

“Okay.”

Miria's hair had unraveled from its ponytail, and hung down her back and tangled around Beatrice's knuckles. Beatrice slid her hands down and thought about the last time she'd touched someone like this.

“It's almost — exactly,” she murmured. “Almost exactly six years. A week ago.”

Beatrice could feel Miria breathe. The rattle of her chest.

“I hugged her that morning. She cooked me breakfast. They were getting ready for a supply run.” Beatrice's breath hitched. “And then—”

Three days. She watched the nomads die to policebots, and then spent three days locked in her robot-proof crawl space, running it over and over again in her head. She hadn't meant to stay down there so long. She'd only intended to stay down there for a few minutes. But then a robot had rolled on the trapdoor and refused to budge. It taught her lessons, at least — ones she needed to learn.

For example: knee position was key. If Beatrice kept them straight they started to tingle after a while. If she bent them a little they grew tired. And then there was the matter of them decomposing. Would her knees last longer than her elbows? What about her eyes? When Beatrice died in this hole would they buckle, pitching her limp body to the ground?

Also — to use her environment. All Beatrice had was her backpack. Robert, her watch, some medical supplies. And the emergency meal packs.

The meal packs came in small plastic pouches. Inside was the mashed-up vitamin and nutrient supplements in its own, separate pouch, and a little plastic spoon inside a third. The spoons broke easily. She had pulled out her hair tie and strapped several of them together, and when she bent them this time, they did not break. For a

moment this felt like a triumph — and then, as she stared down at her makeshift tool, the feeling curdled into humiliation. She was going to die down here. Blake wasn't coming.

She tried to chip at the trapdoor with the makeshift tool to little avail.

"Sounds like a ticking clock," remarked Robert, who was propped up against a wall.

Beatrice paused. The spoons did, a little, if she kept time well enough.

"You forgot about your watch," advised Robert. "Or you — overlooked it. Pay attention to your surroundings. Work with what you have."

She had forgotten her watch, she realized. One of the adult nomads had shown her how to take it apart and put it back together again after she told them how much she liked machines. She went over the pieces in her head, and, slowly, a plan began to form. An hour later she took the spoons and the watch and her surroundings and brought them all together in the instant of a second, the collision of atoms, the creation of life.

The face of the watch shattered. It had been the only way for her to keep track of time. Now it would be her escape.

She pulled out the lithium-ion battery, which made it long-lasting — and, if she managed it, also extremely flammable. She took the end of the spoon, which she had chipped away at until it formed a point, and set the battery on the ground beneath it. In one swift motion she stabbed through the battery, and it erupted in flame.

Beatrice scrambled back from the small blaze, and a second later the fire alarm went off, activating the emergency procedures. Above her escape hatch let out a low purr and slid open. The robot that had been on top of it toppled forward, hitting the ground of the crawlspace and splitting in two like a cracked egg.

And she was out.

It was only twenty minutes later, when Miria had returned to her room and Beatrice was left without the dizzying effects of touch — it was only then that the full weight of what she had just done hit her.

"Shit," murmured Beatrice, and her hand fisted the sheets at her sides in anger. She glanced over at the clock by her bedside. It was already nearly six in the morning. She needed to get out.

In the end she was glad for the latent heat. It made the park a lot easier on her. She lay on the warm plywood of the bench, and stared up at the sky, wondering where she had lost control. Her hand curled into a fist, weakly colliding with the armrest behind her head. She squeezed her eyes shut and thought about it.

What hurt her most was the vulnerability — how her cheeks reddened receptively, and her smile split with an eagerness to please. It dug into her, how plainly obvious her desire, a desire for people to tell her what to think, and do, for people to

punch her in the heart when she'd fucked up. This was her gaze as Miria knew it: desperate, open, needy. It was viscerally awful to be faced with that truth. And Blake. Beatrice had wanted for Miria to be Blake so badly — wanting like that over a woman she'd never met. It was pathetic.

Beatrice's eyes slipped closed with undue docility. She saw herself when Miria had pulled away, and Beatrice was wet with tears and open and defenseless, some squishy mess of exposure and liability — a slug on the sidewalk.

Her brow tightened. Like some rotted, putrid animal. Shame slammed into her and pulled her under the waves, and then rolled back over her again and again. Shame and disgust. And she wondered, then, how Miria hadn't hurt her — it's what Beatrice would've done, if she was staring down at somebody like that, somebody so open and receptive and easy to crush. Somebody too repulsive to let loose. Somebody who needed to be dumped with salt.

Chapter Eighteen: Snowfall in Deserts

“Oh, hey,” greeted Ann. She was wearing her letterman jacket and magenta boots, and had her boar mask and pink baseball bat pinned to her hip. Her lips twisted neutral, careful not to stray into accusation, though Beatrice got the sense that she was displeased. “Where’ve you been? Miria said you disappeared.”

Beatrice shrugged, leaning past her to look into the library. It was the afternoon of the day after her — her fight with Miria. She couldn’t avoid the woman forever. It was just for the mission, anyway. Unavoidable.

She shoved down the shame which to spill up and drip from the corners of her mouth. It sank under her fists, settling in her stomach like putty, heavy and unpleasant. Ann stared at her expectantly.

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice. “Around.”

Ann turned back to the room. “Alright—”

“I went to the greenhouse, actually,” said Beatrice. “Earlier. When you were at the Inn for breakfast.”

Ann nodded silently, and then extended a hand. Her skin was smooth, unscarred, and Beatrice remembered Blake’s hands on her face.

“You ready?”

Beatrice slapped her palm down over Ann’s, fingers curling to grip her friend like somebody desperate. “Yeah.”

Inside the library was the rest of the mission — Miles, Miria, alongside two kids arguing in the corner who Beatrice presumed to be Rolf and Theodore. Miria was wearing a heavy leather jacket and ski goggles. A bright yellow gas mask with black lightning details on the sides covered the lower half of her face, and clutched in her hand was a rusty chainsaw. Miria tried to make eye contact with Beatrice, but Beatrice avoided her, her gaze falling to the scuffed concrete beneath their feet.

“Alright, listen up, daisies,” said Miria. Her voice through the mask sounded cramped and metallic, like a public high school’s sound system. “I don’t want any of you doing anything unless I give the okay, you got that? Everything goes as planned and we don’t even encounter a robot.”

“Not count on that, is what I would do,” mumbled Rolf. He had on a skull mask, and was propped up on a window ledge, a pair of halved garden shears cradled between his legs. He was wearing a stained wife beater along with a pair of baggy olive cargo pants. Beside him, Theodore was in sweats and a Brazilian soccer jersey, his hair curling up in chocolate-colored tufts like he was a candy bar with a bite out of it. They both looked young — Rolf around fourteen or fifteen, Theodore thirteen at the oldest.

“Rolf’s right,” said Miria, ignoring Theo’s smirk. “Robots don’t give a shit about our plans. This is a quick in and out mission for fuel — no provoking. No hero moments. None of you are going to die over gas, you got that?”

"Got it," echoed the group half-heartedly.

Miria swung her chainsaw up to rest on her shoulder. "Let's head out."

Rolf and Theodore filed out after Miria. Beatrice hurried after, and Ann fell into step beside her.

Ann flipped up her mask and shot Beatrice a smile. "It's been forever since I've gone out on one of these."

Beatrice smiled back at her, then realized she couldn't see behind the kitsune mask and freed her right hand to lift it. "Oh, yeah. Me too."

Ann bumped her shoulder against Beatrice's. "You've never been out with us!"

"Maybe not physically," conceded Beatrice, flipping her mask back down as they neared the fence. "You should put your mask back on."

Ann rolled her eyes and pulled down the boar's snout. "We're not even at the gate yet."

"I'm serious."

They were stopped at the fence by Miles. He was sitting up in a small wooden shack beside the fence, reading half of a crumpled magazine and chewing a wad of pink gum.

"Ann," greeted Miles with a nod, popping his bubblegum. "Theo. Rolf. Eliza. Miria, of course. And — remind me?"

"Beatrice," said Ann, nudging her brother's head with the tip of her bat. "Keep up, Miles."

He laughed, brushing her away. "Alright. Gimme a sec, I'll drive you guys out there. Only so many times you can reread US weekly."

"We appreciate it," said Miria.

Miles pressed a button and a prolonged, high-pitched wail started up. A large metal grinding sound picked up, and Beatrice panicked for a moment before realizing that it was just the sound of a large portion of the fence lifting. Miria ducked underneath, and Rolf hurried out ahead of the rest of the group.

"Shotgun," called Theodore, running after him.

Rolf, who had already wrenched open the passenger door to the car, clambered inside. "Too late. You lose."

Theo grabbed his coat and tried to pull him out. "You heard me call it!"

Rolf shoved him off, his feet scrabbling to stay in the footwell. "What if I was deaf, dumbass?"

Theodore stumbled away as Rolf placed a hand on his face and shoved. "Whatever. You can have it, I don't care."

Miria climbed into the front, pushing Rolf into the middle seat. "I'm stuck with a bunch of kindergarteners."

Ann stepped on the tire and hopped from it up into the truck's bed. She patted the empty space beside her, and Beatrice hoisted herself into the truck, taking a seat to

Ann's left. Theodore grumbled something and struggled for a moment to get in, sitting with his arms crossed on the opposite end of the truck bed. His pickaxe slipped from his hand and hit the hot black floor with a thud.

Miles started up the truck. Beatrice, who was scanning the horizon for bots, felt a hand on her shoulder. She tensed, and then forced herself to relax, looking over to Ann.

Ann slipped her hand to Beatrice's other shoulder in a weird half-embrace. "Don't take Miria too seriously. It isn't actually that dangerous, otherwise Salim would only have the scouts do missions."

"It's pretty dangerous when I go out."

"Yeah, but you're alone." Ann pat her shoulder amicably. "Now you've got five other people to back you up."

Beatrice remained unenthused. "Yeah."

Ann was turning her baseball bat over in her free hand, and hefted it upwards, gesturing to the road in front of them. "Trust me, Bea, it's worth it. You're gonna love orange creamsicles. They're like oranges, but even sweeter."

The car slowed as they approached a run-down gas station. It sprouted from the flat, empty desert so abruptly it felt like a mistake, like a vestigial limb left to warn off travelers: the badlands were not a place for humans. Beatrice's mouth burned. She remembered the bite of the petrol on her tongue, and stared at the looming gas pumps, brown like they had been over-baked.

They rolled to a stop, and Theo hopped out, following Rolf into the tiny convenience shop that was attached to the gas station.

"I thought we were getting gas," said Beatrice.

Ann grabbed Beatrice's arm and pulled her through the sliding door. "You're gonna want to try these, Bea, trust me. Since they melt nobody can take them far."

The convenience store was cleared out completely — the shelves were empty, spare some rotting two percent milk behind shattered refrigerator doors — but the back room, as Rolf and Theodore pulled open a heavy metal door, looked almost pristine. Clusters of ice clung to the metal roofing, and thick, white shavings littered the ground around them, crunching beneath Beatrice's sneakers. Her breath poofed out into little clouds when she exhaled, and Ann's ears were stained a ruddy scarlet. At the center of the room was the crown jewel: individually-wrapped pops that were stacked two people high and cascaded down to the floor in piles long picked apart. Empty wrappers scattered the ground around the heaps.

Beatrice shivered, and watched as Theodore fell backwards into the creamsicles like they were a pile of money and also money still had meaning. Suddenly something hit her back, and she jolted, whipping around. Ann, who was gathering another pile of ice chips in her hands, laughed.

"Hey!"

Ann finished packing the next snowball and bit her lip in concentration, maneuvering to toss it Beatrice's way. Beatrice ducked, and the snowball hit Theodore in the face.

Theodore's eyes shot open, and he immediately focused on Beatrice. "Who did that?"

Beatrice was too busy scooping up ice to reply. She flung the misshapen ball at Ann, who dodged but earned a spray of ice shavings as the ball shattered on the wall behind her. She shrieked as some went down the neck of her shirt, and Beatrice grinned.

"This is war, Angel," warned Ann as she squatted down to gather more snow.

Beatrice lobbed another snowball Ann's way, but Ann was ready this time and dodged. Instead, it hit Miria, whose shoulders tensed upon collision.

Ann grabbed Beatrice and pulled her down behind the popsicle pile, biting back her laughter. "Good going."

"You little shits," said Miria. "I'll be actually getting things done. Don't wreck the place."

Beatrice and Ann waited in silence until the door slammed. Beatrice popped up, then ducked again as over their heads shot a densely-packed ball of ice shavings, which arced cleanly over the length of the room but came to a halting crash against the far wall. Another soon followed, this one dropping near the girl's feet and rolling down the cluster of ice pops. Beatrice scrambled to the side and scooped up another armful of snow, shaping it into clumsy circles and popping up to throw them at Theodore. She hit Theodore in the side, and he sent one spinning at her head. She ducked, breathless. When she looked back up Rolf had joined in and was exchanging aggressively-packed snowballs with Theodore.

Ann, who had been hit in the face by Miles, fell back onto a pile of orange creamsicles and let out a winded laugh. Her breath fogged around her head and dispelled back into the factory like a pair of outstretched wings. She pushed herself to her feet, then slipped back down, struggling for traction against the ice. Beatrice spent several moments staring, distracted with whether or not she should help. Before she could make a decision Theodore had snuck up behind her and landed on a pile of snow at her neck. Icy rivulets of water slipped down her collar, and she screamed, and then slapped a hand over her mouth.

Beatrice turned, shoving him back into the snow. He slipped and laughed, scrambling to his feet. As she turned back to Ann she was hit again. No longer able to defend her soaked clothing, she laughed, and threw her arms up to block her face.

"Ann — Ann, Ann." The snowballs paused, and she lowered her arms, then ducked as another went flying inches over her head. She could barely get in a word edgewise over her own laughter. "Ann!"

"You're gonna to be a snowman." Ann lobbed another snowball her way. "Like frosty."

Beatrice wiped a hand down over her face, leaving it over her mouth, so that the fog from her laughter was cut off. “Frosty?”

“What?”

Ann dropped the snowball she had been holding as Beatrice fell to her knees, wheezing in a breath. Ann grinned and stumbled up to her, shaking her numb hands. Beatrice hit the ground with her fist, tears dripping down to freeze on her nose.

“Oh my god,” said Ann, and she laughed, too, watching in mild amazement as Beatrice devolved into hysterics. “Are you — oh my god, are you okay? Beatrice? Do you need me to call someone?”

“You’re so—” Beatrice buried her face in her hands, shoulders wrecked with hiccups of laughter. “Frosty. You’re such an idiot.”

Ann crouched and flicked a clump of snow from Beatrice’s hair. “Not my fault you have bad aim, Bea.”

Beatrice’s hand shot up to grab Ann’s arm, and she grinned. Ann was too slow to avoid the sharp jerk that pulled her down into the pile of wrappers.

“Fuck.” Ann made a grab for Beatrice’s sweatshirt, and missed, slipping on the ice. “Oh my god. I hate you.”

Beatrice wheezed, and watched as Ann struggled back to her feet, too out of breath to argue.

“You’re literally so dumb.” Ann managed to stand, and brushed off her pants indignantly, unable to hide her smile. “Beatrice? Hello?”

Beatrice raised a hand in surrender. “Let me just — give me a second. I need to calm down.”

“Yeah, Jesus.”

Beatrice took a deep breath, choking back the giddiness that threatened her careful exhale, and then looked up at Ann again and devolved back into laughter, burying her face in her forearms. “Ann!”

“Beatrice!” Ann sank down to her knees and grabbed Beatrice’s shoulders, unable to keep her mirth from bleeding into her words. “Stop it! No — now you’re making me laugh, too. Just because you’re — you sound so stupid right now, you know that?”

“Okay, no,” said Beatrice, taking a shaky breath. She brought her hands up to Ann’s forearms. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Good.”

Ann sat down beside Beatrice, and they both spent a good amount of time avoiding each other’s eyes, because every time they looked at each other they devolved back into laughter. Beatrice picked a popsicle, peeling back the wrapper with reverence. It was sweet — maybe the sweetest thing she’d ever eaten — but it didn’t really taste like an orange. Ann looked over at her, and then took one for herself.

About ten minutes later all that was left was the stick, stained an artificial orange. Beatrice squinted at it. There were words printed onto the soft wood.

"I think the popsicle is trying to tell me something," said Beatrice, hunching over the message. "'How many apples grow on a tree? All of them.'"

"Oh, yeah," said Ann. "It's a joke."

Beatrice glanced at her, doubtful.

"A bad joke." Ann rubbed the back of her neck, looking away. "Hey, I didn't write it, did I?"

They were interrupted by a shout from the corner. Everyone turned to Rolf, who had been shaping a snowball as tall as a dinner table up to this point, now cradling the crushed remains of his work. Theodore backed away, the delight on his face morphing into panic.

"Wait!" shouted Theodore. Rolf did not wait, and instead connected his fist with Theodore's jaw. Theodore reeled.

"Yeah!" shouted Miles, pushing himself to his feet behind the pile of popsicles he had been using as a barrier. "Punch each other! That's what we need."

"Miles!" scolded Ann, and she pushed herself to her feet, taking Beatrice's hand and hauling her up.

He stepped between the boys. "Okay, Ann's right. As amusing as this is, that's enough."

Theodore rubbed at his sore jaw. "Fuck you, Rolf!"

"Look, if you two wanna beat each other up you can do it off-mission. We've got business to get done."

Rolf's shoulders fell, and he spoke through grit teeth, holding back tears. "You are a terrible person, Theodore."

"What, you gonna cry?" asked Theodore, spitting out a little bit of blood into his palm. "You knocked out a tooth, dude."

Rolf's hands shook. "I've had enough of this game. I am leaving."

He stormed from the room, Theodore glaring after him. The room was silent.

"Geez," said Theodore. "What a moron."

"I don't know," said Ann. "What you did there was pretty shitty."

Theodore shuffled his feet uncomfortably, then, unable to stand the stares any longer, rushed to leave in suit.

Miles sighed. "Fuckin' hell. You can't take those two anywhere."

As if on cue, from out front there was a shout. But it was different — a different genre of noise entirely. It was painful. Blood-curdling. Existential, almost.

Ann stiffened, and the three shared a glance, then scrambled for the front room. Theodore and Rolf were standing at the gas station door, paralyzed, staring out into a swarm of robots so thick you couldn't see the sand beneath them. The robots, and-

And something else.

No — someone else.

Miria was stabbed through the heart, held aloft by a policebot like a trophy of war.

Chapter Nineteen: Star Morals

Beatrice and Ann sat on the floor, surrounded by rings of unwrapped, half-eaten orange popsicles. Miles was in the bathroom, retching into the toilet — he didn't handle the sugar well — and Theodore and Rolf had each sequestered themselves away in opposite aisles. Beatrice hadn't eaten for the first twelve hours of their imprisonment, but had given in eventually. A sign of her weak will. She disgusted herself.

Ann had her arms thrown over her eyes to block the fluorescent lights. "I hate popsicles. I hate them so much."

The sides of Beatrice's lips were sticky. Like she'd been spitting up blood. Outside the drum of robotic wheels on packed sand waxed, coming to a crashing crescendo.

Beatrice's voice was scratchy. "We need to get out of here."

"We need to get some goddamn sleep."

"We should come up with an escape plan. Before—" Beatrice sat up. Her nails dug rivulets into the tile. "We should think of something."

Ann pinched her brow. "What we really need is an army of Aishas. Or, even better, an EMP."

Miles, who had stumbled from the bathroom, slumped against the far wall. "Conjure up a button that kills all robots while you're at it."

Beatrice stared at the black and white tile as it shifted from a pattern of lilies, to roses, to geometric gravestones. An EMP. The phrase rang in her head like someone was hitting her over the head with it.

Slowly, Beatrice stood, and moved to her bag. Her laptop was cool in her hands.

Ann lifted the edge of her mask so that she could squint in Beatrice's direction. "What are you doing?"

"Caine."

"Hey. Bea."

Beatrice was struck — for the first time that day — by an overwhelming urge to cry. She tugged at the bottom of her mask. Her breath was hot, and it misted on the plastic until it turned stale.

"And gate t-norm residuum set idempotence content search 'EMP instructions:' Simple. Iff one: Read instructions aloud. End. Zero: Connect state function to environment. End."

"Okay," said Caine. "Why?"

"Now."

"I will. But why?"

"You shouldn't be hesitating this much." Beatrice stared him down. "Second law of robotics. Follow my orders. That was a direct command."

"Fine. Geez." Caine cleared his throat. "Flash capacitor, copper wiring, wire stripper, iron rod—"

"Wait." Theodore's voice was hoarse. "Who is that?"

"It's my AI. Keep going, Caine."

Caine tried to start again, but Theo interrupted him.

"What's it listing off?"

"Supplies." Beatrice tapped the diagram Caine had pulled up to the screen. "I'm going to make an EMP. We're lucky that our car isn't electronic. We can freeze the robots and then drive back."

"But — gas stations don't just have wire strippers lying around. Or a 'flash capacitor.' Whatever that means."

"Yeah, we'll have to use Ann's phone."

"I'll start again." said Caine. "Flash capacitor, copper—"

"Okay, okay, hold on." Ann raised her hands like a referee, and both Caine and Beatrice went silent. "What was that about my phone?"

"Yours is the newest — All Z models have the best cameras," explained Beatrice. "We don't have any choice but to destroy it."

Ann let out a frustrated breath of air. "Okay — we're all running on, like, zero hours of sleep, and you seem a bit — I mean, we're fucking grieving right now, aren't we? I think we should think this through. What about the copper? Or the wire strippers?"

"That's the hard part of the plan." Beatrice anchored her hands on her knees. "We're going to have to kill a robot."

There was a beat of silence. Ann pushed herself so she was sitting upright.

"I thought that the point of the EMP was so we didn't have to do that."

"It's just one bot." Beatrice's arms slid up to cross in front of her chest. "The point of the EMP was so we didn't have to kill all of them."

"And how are we gonna do that?" asked Ann. "What, will the swarm see that we're only aiming for their buddy and decide to be polite?"

Beatrice paused, and then shrugged. "I don't know. Caine?"

"I've got a lock on your location. Let me take a look around."

There was a brief pause.

"Holy shit. That's a lot of robots."

Beatrice's head fell back to knock the wall. "Anything that would help?"

"There is a satellite dish. For projection, maybe." Caine paused. "Hm. Okay. There's a side entrance to the freezer for maintenance. You can use that to lure it in. Batteries don't do well in sub-zero temperatures for extended amounts of time. A low temperature will slow down the chemical reaction needed to transfer electrons, no fighting required."

"You're saying we freeze a robot," said Miles wryly. "How are we supposed to do that without getting stabbed?"

"Yeah. I mean, you might."

Ann climbed to her feet — like she was getting ready to argue with Beatrice. That annoyed Beatrice. "I'm not so sure I'm onboard with this idea."

Beatrice shook her head. "We don't have a choice. I'll stand in the freezer as bait. You'll be ready to close the door behind me."

Ann walked up to where Beatrice was sitting, cross-legged against the wall. "What if you get hurt again?"

"I won't. I was — it was an anomaly."

Ann stared down at her doubtfully, and then Beatrice couldn't tell what Ann was feeling, because she wasn't looking up at her anymore.

"And if I did." Beatrice pushed herself to her feet. They were at the same eye level, and at nobody else's. "Then I deserve that."

Miles raised his hands placatingly. "Alright, quit the doomsaying, girls—"

Ann grabbed Beatrice's shirt, right below her shoulder. She held it loosely — it wasn't very aggressive, but it made Beatrice angry anyway. "Take that back."

"No. If I take that risk—"

"Miria took that risk! Every single person who's died to the robots has taken that risk! Did they deserve it?"

"Oh, that's not fair."

"No, no. It definitely is." Beneath her mask Ann's eyes narrowed. "You have this insane double standard — on one end is Beatrice, and on the rest is everybody else."

Beatrice scoffed, and grabbed Ann's wrist, wrenching her hand away. "Fuck off."

Ann ripped her hand back to gesture at the door. "Do you remember when you made me pull over the car on our way to Suburbia just so you could up your kill count? Or how about just now, when you tried to run into a fucking swarm for no goddamn reason? And now this stupid fucking plan. You're just aching to be a martyr."

"Martyr." Beatrice spit the word, and took a step forward, but she was mad enough that she ended up stomping, and the impact reverberated up through her leg like when she'd fight robots. "How do you want to die, then, Ann? Because there aren't exactly a ton of options! Martyrship isn't the worst of them."

The room fell silent like a suicidal skydiver.

Ann looked away. "Oh, I don't know — how about seventy years from now?"

"I'm sure Miria felt the same way — along with everyone else who's died over the last fifteen years. What are you gonna do? Spend your life hiding? At least I'm doing something actually worthwhile instead of rotting away in Suburbia."

"Fuck you."

"I'd rather be run through by a robot and die knowing I fought for something than drag living out for five more decades than necessary. That's weakness. That's *wallowing*."

"Stop it. Shut up."

"And I'd like to think that you know as well as I that there'll be casualties, because we're fighting a *war*. If I'm one of them at least I have the self-awareness to accept my fate and move the fuck on, because some things just need to get done, and if I die doing them then that's the way—"

Ann grabbed Beatrice by the shoulders and shoved her backwards. "Stop fucking talking! I'm serious!"

Beatrice stumbled, and then shoved Ann in return, palms glancing off her shoulders. "You're serious? *I'm serious!* People die — that's the fucking world we live in!"

"I know!" screamed Ann. Tears leaked out beneath the bottom of her mask. "You think I don't know people die, Beatrice? You think I'm *naive*, or some shit? Even after what's happened today?"

Suddenly, the anger drained from Beatrice, like a cup poured over hot coals. She stared, and her hands shook, coming up to clutch the bottom of her shirt. "You—"

"I'm not done." Shoulders heaving, she reached up to push back her own mask, and then reached forward. Beatrice jerked back, but was stopped by the wall, and Ann was able to snag the bottom of Beatrice's mask and ripped it up so their eyes could meet. Looking into Ann's eyes, having Ann look back — it felt different. She felt more vulnerable, and she swallowed, cringing away.

"I fucking know what's at stake." Ann's face was red, eyes pools on the verge overflowing. "That doesn't mean I want to die. What if everyone thought like you, huh? What if we had a world of Beatrices, dying for one another, living for what — a stupid fucking competiiton?"

Ann's eyes bore into her own. Beatrice took a shaky breath. "I didn't mean — I mean. I didn't think—"

"Yeah," interrupted Ann. She took a step back. "You're right. You never think. It's always about you and your stupid contest. I don't know what it was like when you were living alone, but when you're around people you have to *try* to think about something other than yourself."

"Ann—"

"What, do you think I'd be happy if you died? You think watching my best friend bleed out over a fucking mechanbot would be fun for me? And that after you were gone could I somehow magically leave without you?" Ann's hands balled into fists. "Don't tell you're so self-centered that you think your death would do fucking anything other than making you dead. You'd be dead, and I'd be deader, cause even if the robots cleared out the next day I wouldn't be able to leave you behind."

"I—"

"And I can't even blame you. It's just the way you grew up." Ann swallowed heavily, and wiped at her face, leaving streaks of tears down her cheeks like warpaint. She let out a shaky laugh. "That's the worst part. To most people I'm probably in debt to you. That battery wasn't worth ten times what I offered you."

"That's not true." Beatrice's voice was soft, and wet, and she didn't like it. "You saved my life."

Ann's gaze fell to Beatrice's stomach, and then to the floor. "It's not like I would've left you to bleed out."

"That's not what I meant. Talking to you was — I looked forward to it."

Ann paused. Her hands fell to her side, and then moved up to her hips as she hunched her shoulders anxiously.

"I miss Miria." Beatrice dragged her sleeve across her eyes. "I never even got to — I never got to say sorry. I never got to—" She choked back a sob. "I never even got to — to fuckin' tell her how much she meant to me. She might've died and — and thought — and she must've been hurting so much—"

Someone's head hit her shoulder, and when Beatrice opened her eyes she saw Ann, hands fisting in the arms of Beatrice's sweatshirt.

"I miss her too." Ann's voice was raspy, and her arms moved to wrap around Beatrice, pulling her into an embrace. She was shaking, and Beatrice's hands flew up to her back, steadying the tremble of Ann's shoulder blades. "I miss her too."

Chapter Twenty: Dreamers Often Lie

"It's your fault."

Beatrice opened her eyes to a blue sky.

"Fuck." She sat up, and she was in 80s diner — but melted almost to the point of unrecognizability. Sweat pooled in the creases of her palms and the neck of her shirt, dripping down from her hairline like blood from a bullet wound. The room had deteriorated, walls singed and crumbled and food burnt beyond recognition. Booths had been reduced to red puddles on the floor, and they clung to the laces of her sneakers as she stood like pudding with too much starch. The jukebox, too, had melted, and faint, discordant snippets of sung bubbled up as the colors shifted and swirled. On the door to the kitchen hung an "out of order" sign. Above them, the ceiling had crumbled away, giving way to a blue, arching sky.

"Blake?"

"It's your fault," said Blake, and Beatrice whipped around, nearly slipping in the sludge as she scrambled to catch her footing. "Miria's dead because of you."

"Don't say that." She lifted her foot, and the liquid clung to her heel. It dripped from her sole in a steady stream, tugging at her exposed skin as it surged in slow waves. She stomped down, and the surface of the liquid warped around her sneaker, until the tension snapped and it bubbled up to her mid-thigh. "That's not true."

"If you'd told her how you felt — that you loved her. Valued her. That you were sorry for running away."

"Shut up!" Beatrice sloshed away so that she didn't have to see her mother's face. "You don't get to say stuff like that. Last time we were here you broke my neck."

Blake pushed off of the wall she'd been leaning on. She was wearing a navy suit jacket, a patterned wool sweater, and red velvet pants — somehow perfectly dry. Hydrophobic. "I'm not the one who makes those choices for you, Beatrice. You chose to pursue Homecoming. You chose to kill all of the robots. You chose to light the diner on fire."

Beatrice tried to push through the kitchen door, but the pressure of the liquid had vacuumed it shut. It was up to her stomach now, brushing the bruises and scars that had been beaten into her by the badlands with a feather-light delicacy. The air around them seemed to broil under the drip of the fluorescents above her — a sharp contrast. It made her anxious, as if the crumbling of the walls was a timer she was running out.

"It's not my fault." She turned, and the liquid rippled out in a slow wave. It raised to her chest, her collarbones. She waded over to her mother, and grabbed the woman's dry lapels, staining them red. The liquid seeped and bubbled up to their necks. "I didn't—"

Blake reached between them and pinched Beatrice's tongue between her fingers, tugging like she expected it to come loose. It caught Beatrice off guard — Blake's hand tasted like ash, but sweeter, like ash that had been slow-roasted until it was caramelized. And then the water clung to Beatrice's lips in a sharp kiss, and slipped past her mother's thumb and down her throat. She wrenched away and hacked and gasped for air, but there was nowhere to go that wasn't wet, her vision already a dense, drenched opaque. Hands met hers, and ripped them up from Blake's coat like weeds from soft soil, and Beatrice slipped into the dark.

Chapter Twenty-One: Raison D'Être

Black sky.

Infinity was stifling. Beatrice spun, falling face-first through empty space. She tried to come down from it. She tried to slow her breathing. But the looming of humanity's isolation — it clung to her chest in a cold sweat, and beaded on her brow, slipping down her temples to the sun-warmed concrete.

Physically she was on the roof of the gas station, and Ann was lying beside her, and on her other side was her backpack. She knew that. A low buzz had been what woke her up. It wasn't a sound she could even be sure was real until it happened again.

She frowned, and hunched forward, pulling in a shaky breath. It hurt. Her hands dug uselessly into the blacktop for something to keep her from flying off. She felt slower than the last time she'd been awakened from a dream, and Miria'd been there, rubbing her back. She felt thin, and fragile, and lethargic. Like a stiff wind would've blown her over the edge of the roof. It was better to look down, at least. The concrete was grounding.

Her laptop buzzed again. She fumbled open her bag. Beside her, Ann shifted, and she paused. Ann's eyes were closed, her mouth pursed like she was mildly upset. Beatrice couldn't stop imagining her dead.

Caine: Hey

Caine: Are you alright

Beatrice stared at the screen in silence. She didn't feel much like replying. She didn't feel much like doing anything.

Caine: I'm so sorry about Miria.

Caine: If it helps, Blake sent you an email. Got it a few seconds ago.

It popped up without her even having to do anything, and she tried not to read it, but when something's words and it's right in front of you it's kind of hard not to. Sort of an automatic process.

Beatrice,

How are you? Well? I hope you're better than well! You deserve to be happy :)

I think about you every waking moment. It's only knowing you're safe that I'm able to do what I do.

Speaking of! I'm making some real progress here. I think I might be close to beating these damn servers — whoever wins the position of my successor is hopefully going to be here when it happens. Exciting!

Love you always,

Blake

The laptop shone blue light into the dense night air like a butter knife stabs through a brick wall. It wasn't helped by the fact that the keys were getting all wet and shit. Beatrice wiped her eyes, and somehow felt more alone than she ever had before in

her life, tiny and cold with gravel stuck in the heel of her sneakers and her hair pasted to her head by sleep. She huddled in a singular beacon of light, that prototypical fire which had danced for her ancestors so many thousands of years ago. Mirrored times a million by the heavens.

Beatrice was awoken for the second time that night by a scream.

Ann stirred, sitting up groggily beside her.

"Who was that? What's going on?"

"I don't know." Beatrice was already at the ceiling hatch, dropping down into the main room. As she touched down Theodore ran face first into her, and gasped and stumbled back before he recognized her. "Theodore. What's—"

"Robots—" he babbled, grabbing her arm. "Someone — the freezer door—"

Behind him Beatrice spotted the gaping entrance to the freezer, like an open maw, and inside a metallic glint as if it was baring its teeth. Rolf and Miles stumbled into the hall from the main room, a groggy expression coloring both of their faces. Robots were pouring into the freezer — she could close the internal freezer door, and lose Caine's plan, or she could use the opportunity.

She shoved Theodore to the side, just barely keeping from slipping on the ice as she ran into the freezer. She slammed into the open exterior door full-tilt, turning at the last second so her shoulder took the brunt of the weight. It slid back into place with a sickening grinding noise, and she locked it, then looked up to face a group of five nursebots, two mechanbots, three guardbots and a single, hulking policebot. But it may as well have been twenty. It may as well have been a hundred, or a thousand. All were death sentences. Beatrice was going to die if she stayed here.

Beatrice rolled to the side just as the guardbots swung their blunted batons down to hit where she had been kneeling. The ice shattered around the collision points, sending a spray of snow into her face. She swiped it off and pushed herself up to her feet, drawing her sword. The police bot approached first — the way it loomed over her was almost existential.

She sucked in a breath, her hands clenching on the sword for a moment as she hesitated, and then she sprinted for the door. Miles slammed it behind her so swiftly it nearly closed on her heel, and a robot slammed up against it not a second later in a squealing, animalistic collision of steel.

"Ah—" Beatrice's back hit the wall, and her hands came up to pull her hair back from her face, tangling in the damp locks. "Hah. Uh."

Someone's hands were on hers. "Are you alright? Beatrice?"

Beatrice squeezed her eyes shut, and breathed again, and hunched down, pulling sharply away from the grip. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, and let her head fall down to the floor, battling back the pins and needles which threatened to rend her flesh apart. The floor was cool. She pinched her side, and her exhales fogged

the tile. She could feel herself shaking. Like she was sitting in Ann's car again, forehead pressed to the window.

"Beatrice—"

"Stop, I — hah." Her fingers moved to the inner flesh of her forearms, and dug into the flesh. It wasn't enough. The adrenaline was hitting her like a bus, every pump of blood the fire of a shotgun, and everything was too loud and too much. Her fist fell to the tile, again and again until her knuckles spit, and only then was she able to get into oxygen.

"I'm fine." Beatrice's eyes opened, and her head lifted. It hurt — and that wasn't even something that had been done to her. She pulled away to look at her blooming knuckles. Stupid. At last it wasn't her sword hand. "I'm fine. I'm sorry."

Ann crouched, and then sat beside Beatrice, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Can I—"

Beatrice grabbed her arm and pulled her into an embrace, and everything hurt a little less. She felt pretty desperate. She felt that way a lot of the time, nowadays. Like she was missing something.

Theodore was staring at them. He looked to the freezer door, and they all winced as something slammed into it, again. Miles had turned the lock, and kept it turned, like he thought if he let go it might undo of its own accord.

Theodore looked down. "You all know what this means, right?"

"Robots are bad?" mocked Rolf, chuckling. "What a thought. Moron."

"No!" Theodore looked back and forth between the five kids, his voice shrinking as he skirted their stares. "There's — well. Someone had to open the door, right?"

A heavy silence fell upon the group.

Rolf brought his finger up to his nose. "Not me!"

Miles held his hands up placatingly. "Let's all take a deep breath. What we don't need right now is infighting. It's always possible the door opened on its own."

"That's crazy," said Theodore, his eyes alight with fear. "Maybe you're trying to cover for yourself! Maybe *you* did it!"

Rolf grit his teeth. "Don't throw glass in stone houses. *You* checked the lock on the door yesterday."

"*And* you were the first one on the scene," added Ann.

"It wasn't me! Why would I let robots in?"

"Maybe to hold the Archon and the older Archon as hostage so you could take control of Suburbia!"

"No, no—" interrupted Miles. "Everyone stop. It doesn't matter who, if anyone, did it. What matters right now is survival."

"It wasn't any of you," said a voice from above them.

They all glanced up.

"What the fuck?" asked Rolf.

"Caine?" asked Beatrice.

"Hope you don't mind. This place is pretty easy to get into. Not like Suburbia."

Ann's expression twisted. She pulled away from Beatrice to stand, and extended a hand, helping Beatrice to her feet. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Beatrice took Ann's hand. "Who was it?"

"The Lucias. I saw them on the security cameras. They keep track of all of Suburbia's missions." He seemed to be musing it over. "They were probably going for you, Beatrice. Cause of the whole competition thing."

"The Lucias." Miles's expression darkened. "They've always hated Suburbia. I can't believe they'd go this far."

"Wait," said Ann. "I mean — are we sure this guy is trustworthy? If he's 'in the system' or whatever. Maybe he—"

"No," interrupted Beatrice. "Caine is a brother to me. I wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for him. We can trust him."

Ann's nose wrinkled. "Okay."

"Thanks, babe," said Caine, and Beatrice frowned. "Those robots should be dead in — thirty minutes? About. Then we can get to work on the roof."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Hour of Morning

The wires were to her right. They coiled almost innocently — like a dead snake. But more granulous. A bunch of dead snakes.

“Wait.” Caine stopped Beatrice from plying up the metal casing. “Faraday cage first. I don’t want to die.”

“Right.” Beatrice glanced back to Theodore. “Can you grab one of those lidded metal trash cans from the bathroom downstairs? Along with a couple of ice pops.”

He nodded, backing away. “You got it.”

Beatrice took the feed line which ran to the frequency converter. She pulled a small pocket knife from her backpack and sawed one long, shallow cut into the rubber surrounding the wire, then began to peel it away.

“Alright,” eased Caine. “Next step. Electromagnetic coil.”

Beatrice, after a moment of hesitation, drew her sword. She stared at it forlornly.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I am so sorry. Sweet baby.”

And then she began to wrap the copper wires in a neat, tight coil around the blade.

By the time she finished Theodore had returned, and glanced between Beatrice, the sword, and the computer. He held out the trash can, and lifted the lid to reveal it as brimming with ice pops.

Beatrice dumped the ice pops, setting the can to the side. She began to unwrap them, tossing the pops themselves down into the swarm of robots. Ann reached over to help.

“Okay,” said Beatrice. “Anyone who’s got a phone older than Ann’s should hand it over now if they don’t want it dead.”

Miles, Theodore, and Rolf each pulled out a phone in various states of disrepair. Beatrice took them and layered them in the plastic wrappers.

“See you, Caine,” said Beatrice.

“See you,” he said, and she closed the laptop, taking the fringed plastic bag from inside of the can and wrapping the computer. She placed all the devices in the bottom of the can and closed it.

“Okay,” said Beatrice, holding out her hand to Ann. “Can I...?”

She glanced up to Ann, whose expression was stony.

Beatrice’s hand withdrew. Her face was burning. “Please?”

Ann hesitated, then pulled the phone from her back pocket. “You owe me for this one, angel.”

Beatrice stared up at Ann, and then took the phone. She brushed aside some loose gravel and set it face-up on the asphalt.

“Get ready, Ann,” said Beatrice, who picked up the hilt of the sword, then in one controlled arc — as if she was ripping off a bandaid — slammed it into the screen.

Ann practically leapt back, but remained silent. Beatrice peeled through the remnants, sucking balefully at the small slit cut into her pointer finger. She leaned closer and pushed back the splintered glass surrounding the flash capacitor, carefully extracting it from the pitch-black backing, and then took each of the endings from the copper coil and wrapped them around the two prongs of the capacitor, then ran that copper wire back up to the feed horn. Picking up the other end, she side-stepped through the crowd that surrounded her and hopped back down into the gas station. Inside she crouched against the wall and pried off the plastic casing of the nearest outlet. She snapped on a pair of disposable plastic gloves from her bag and yanked out the insides of the outlet, carefully lacing the wires with the delicacy of a taxidermist stitching together an expensive hide.

“Alright,” said Beatrice, gently dropping the wires so they hung against the wall. She stripped off the gloves and caught the sill of the opening, hauling herself back up to the roof. “Everything’s set up.”

Theodore ran to the edge of the roof, and then backed away, turning back to the group. “But they’re still moving.”

Beatrice looked at him, and then walked to the edge of the roof, leaning off to survey the state of the robots. She raked a hand back through her hair. The swarm was stubbornly mobile.

“Yeah,” agreed Beatrice reluctantly. “I still have to activate the flash. The range should be wide enough that we’re able to drive back.”

“Let’s do it, then,” said Miles, who had the garbage pail slung under his arm. “We turn it on. Get down to the car. And then we’re home-free.”

Beatrice picked up the flash capacitor. They all held their breath and stared out into the desert. The first signs of dawn were just beginning to blush the horizon, and in the soft glow the swarm looked dirty and contaminated, like roaches, or lice.

She pressed down. The flash lit up — a tiny, smothered beacon against the cool backdrop of the fading desert moon — and then the robots froze.

“Holy shit,” said Ann, pulling her brother to the edge of the roof. “It worked.”

And, for a moment, it was like the whole world had been stopped — like the stars cresting the distant, ragged hills had suspended in the air, and the clouds had paused their gentle, cyclic swim, and the very Earth had looked at Beatrice and submitted itself to her hands.

Beatrice wrenched her sword from the EMP, and it was left useless, fibrous and dull. “Let’s get out of here.”

“They’re gonna be mad,” said Rolf. “The freezer’s ruined.”

Miles glanced at him, and beside him Theodore, both crowded into the front seat. They'd been driving them in silence for the past twenty minutes. More than the freezer had been ruined — the doors had stopped working (Miles had to shatter the glass to get through the front) and the bathrooms had ceased functionality.

"But you know what? I say — good fuckin' riddance."

"Why don't we do EMPs more often?" asked Theodore, eyes trained on the frozen robots Miles was weaving the pick-up car through.

"The collapse of modern technology," answered Beatrice, who was leaning up against Ann in the back of the truck. The wind pulled her words from her mouth, and they spiraled up, smothered against the sky. "Or something like that."

Being around the robots was different when they were all dead. Just getting to the car had been a test of will. They were shadowed, blending into the black stitch of the air until they're nearly indistinguishable, the only clue to their presence an overwhelming feeling of foreboding as they loomed above you — a fear of something that could crush you and be indifferent about it. It was almost existential.

"Something like that," echoed Theodore.

Beatrice picked at her nails. "If we used an EMP in Suburbia not only would we kill very few robots, due to the natural restrictions on its range, but we wouldn't have any way to get food or water or use most of Suburbia's facilities. No more mainframe. No more 3d NUTRITION-X printers. No more robot tracking technology, no more predicting the weather, no more electric fences, no more water purifiers."

"No more robots," said Theodore.

Thirty-seven minutes passed before Suburbia's gates came into view. Beatrice knew this because she had been obsessively checking the time. She looked over at Ann, and Ann smiled at her — she could see it in the dim light of the encroaching dawn, her raw, chapped lips and unraveling ponytail and the curve of her neck as she bowed forward in exhaustion, damp with sweat, sand clinging to the line of her ear — and squeezed Beatrice's hand, and Beatrice closed her eyes and breathed. Maybe she was still coming down from it.

Miles pulled the truck up outside the fence, and hopped out, ushering out the younger boys. "C'mon. Hurry."

Theodore and Rolf ran up first, and began to scale, knuckles whitening around the curls of metal. Beatrice boosted Ann up the fence, and she scrambled to the top, lowering herself slowly to the ground. Beatrice grabbed the lace of the steel and hauled herself upwards, and Miles followed. When she dropped to Suburbia's side she felt a shot relief like straight vodka. Miles hopped down beside her, and then rocked back and forth a little like he was going to fall.

"We're back," whispered Ann, like she was afraid if she spoke too loudly the moment would topple and their impending mortality would swing back in full force to face them. "We made it back alive."

"We're alive," echoed Theodore.

Ann turned to Beatrice and tackled her in an embrace, spinning them in a wobbly circle. "We made it back, Bea."

Beatrice stumbled for steady ground, her hands finding the crook of Ann's arms. Miles had lowered himself to sit on the packed earth. "We're alive."

And Ann was crying, suddenly. Beatrice pulled Ann closer, until she could taste Ann's breath, hot and heavy with tears. Like that they clung to one another, stumbling to the side as Ann's momentum caught up with her.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Medical Malpractices of Harry Harlow

The library was empty. Clean. Nearly cavernous. Every moment Beatrice spent inside of it she burned with the urge to tear off her own skin.

Caine: It's normal to feel like this, Beatrice. It's normal to mourn.

She stared at the computer, and then her eyes slid up to the wall opposite of her. It was pockmarked, and slightly green and bulging out, like it was nauseated.

Caine: Talk to me. I'm here for you.

Apocalypseangel: I know. I'm sorry.

Caine: I have read a lot of psychology books. Like the equivalent of multiple PhDs.

Caine: And in my opinion?

Caine: I think you should forget about her.

Beatrice brought the heels of her palms up to her temples. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to come down from it. But she was still on the roof — sucking in air like a winded smoker, staring up at the stars and falling.

One of the mental effects of being an astronaut is falling. Up in space, outside of the ship, clinging on for their lives — many report that they feel like they're plunging forwards at thousands of miles an hour. It's very existential.

It's also not mental at all.

They are falling. They are falling towards the Earth — just from so high that they're never going to touch down. An eternal tumble through an uncaring void. And once the oxygen ran out you'd never rot: your eyes would be locked on Earth forever, seeing but not touching. You wouldn't talk to anybody. You wouldn't have any friends. You wouldn't be able to see Ann's smile, or feel the beat of her heart, or watch her die. That last part was the only benefit of being up in space. You'd never have to watch anybody die. And — for the first time in Beatrice's life — she understood a little bit why her mom might have left her.

Caine's voice floated through the heavy, greasy fog that clung to her forehead in great swaths, that sat hot on the bridge of her nose and misted her eyelashes in oil. "Your mother loves you very much, Beatrice. And I do, too. You don't need Suburbia."

"Ah." Beatrice's palms slid to her eyes. "I can't stop — thinking about it. I can't stop seeing it."

Caine seemed frustrated. It made her feel shittier. "Please, Beatrice. Remember Homecoming? Remember what you've lived for until now? Remember what you've worked for?"

Her hands dropped to temple around her mouth. "I don't care."

"How can you say that? You're not thinking!"

"Mm."

"You're going to be fine. I promise. Pick up your laptop. Work on Eliza's robot or something."

"I should visit Ann."

"Not now. She can't help you. She's not like you."

Beatrice laughed weakly. "She really isn't."

"She's nothing like you."

"Yeah." Beatrice's hands tightened into fists. "But that's good. I — I think I'm in—"

"Don't," interrupted Caine. "Please, Beatrice. What if she gets hurt? I'm looking out for you here. You came here for Homecoming. Don't get distracted."

For a moment they both sat in silence.

Beatrice fumbled for her laptop. "I'll check over the code."

"Good idea," said Caine. "That's very calming."

Beatrice found it hard to make her eyes come into focus. The screen kept slipping away from her.

"I'm." She scrolled down. It blurred, like she was looking out of the window of a car, and she covered her eyes with her hands. "Can't you help me?"

"I'm trying. You're not listening—" Beatrice's hand found the top of the computer screen. "No, wait. Beatrice. Don't be alone right now."

"Maybe I'll go to Ann."

"No. Listen to me. I might be able to help you, actually. Help stop things like this from happening in the future."

Beatrice paused.

"How?"

"Suburbia's mainframe has every capability to track swarms," said Caine, and when Beatrice groaned in pain he raised his voice. Salim had assured them that every tracking device they had picked up zero abnormal robot activity the day before the mission: the swarm had come out of nowhere. "I'm not saying that they could've stopped Miria's death. It would be difficult to set up properly for you — but for me—"

"Caine."

"Let me help you. Let me fix this. Let me stop this from happening ever again. Just let me into Suburbia's systems. Because Miria didn't deserve this. She didn't—"

Beatrice closed the laptop.

Outside it was cool, and late enough in the day that the blue that domed over Suburbia's decrepit buildings was a deep periwinkle instead of the usual swampish green. Beatrice felt as if she might flip herself over and dip her toes into the sky like a pool, and the ripples would distort the wispy clouds and the vine-covered, sparsely windowed buildings that dotted the horizon like dominos. The buildings would topple at the motion, and Suburbia would be trapped under the steel and brickwork, and Ann and all of the other people would have no choice but to join her in the darkening water.

Ann answered her door on the second knock.

"Oh, hey." She moved to block Beatrice's view of the doorway. She was wearing pajamas — flannel shorts and a large yellow sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. "Bea. How are you?"

"I'm—" Beatrice crossed her arms defensively over her stomach. "Yeah."

"Uh huh, uh huh," said Ann. From inside there was a muffled crash. "Cool. Good."

Beatrice leaned to the right, trying to look. Ann followed her.

Beatrice pointed at the door. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Um, we're — having lasagna."

Beatrice nodded. She was a little bit distracted. "I got you something."

Ann paused on the steps, and then walked down to Beatrice's side, closing the door behind her. "What?"

Beatrice fished the case from her back pocket, passing it over. As Ann opened it her eyes widened in recognition.

"This is — the latest pre-apocalypse phone." Ann ran her thumb across the sleek, nearly translucent screen. "Brand new. What the fuck?"

Beatrice laughed.

"Uh — I mean, thank you." Ann flushed red. "I — thank you, Beatrice. Thank you."

"I felt bad for smashing yours," explained Beatrice. She had traded the rest of the rations at her house for it. That was ten years of food. "It's not a big deal."

Ann stared down at the phone, and then looked up at Beatrice and grabbed her hand, struggling to demonstrate her affection. She pulled Beatrice's hand up to her mouth and kissed her wrist, and stayed like that for a moment, both of them too shocked into silence to move from the position.

"Um," said Beatrice, who suddenly couldn't feel any part of her body from her heart to the tips of her fingers. "Uh—"

Ann dropped her hand. "Sorry. Sorry. Are you—"

"I—"

"Are you okay? I don't think about it. About physical contact. But you've never told me off before. So I—"

Beatrice brought her hand up to her head. "No, I'm not — it's not—"

"Do you want to come in?" Ann walked backwards, and then sprinted up the steps, opening the door for Beatrice. "You could eat dinner with us."

Beatrice nodded, relieved, and hurried after Ann into her house.

In the living room stood Miles and Salim. Salim was wearing sweatpants — it was disarmingly casual — and Miles was holding a vase aloft, threateningly. On the floor to Salim's right was a shattered bottle.

"-oh, sure, go ahead. Act as high and mighty as you'd like — you just don't want to talk with me because you know I'm—"

"Suburbia is a delicate city. I do what I need to do to keep it running. Trust me Miles, I would never put you or Ann in a situation that I deemed too dangerous for you to handle."

"I hope you realize that you sound like a fucking sociopath right now," spat Miles. He glanced back at Ann. "Back me up on this, Ann."

Ann ignored him, leading Beatrice past them into the kitchen.

Miles made a noise of exasperation. "Seriously? What, are you scared of him? Are you so frightened you'd rather waste away in the kitchen before facing the guy who's fucking us both over?"

"Miles!" Salim slammed a hand down on the coffee table between them, and Miles jumped a little. Miles's body language was very loud — because he was threatening to throw things — but expression was completely blank. It was a strange juxtaposition. "You're acting like a child. You can't keep blaming me for everything that goes wrong in your life — take some goddamn responsibility!"

"Take some responsibility? Who do you think has been taking care of Ann for the past ten years while you galavant around as Suburbia's great leader? You don't get a say in my life. You're *not* our fucking father!"

Ann grimaced, and shut the kitchen door. The voices muffled. On the countertop was a half-eaten tray of lasagna.

"Are they okay?"

"Fine." Ann picked up a large kitchen knife and sectioned off two lumps of the pasta. "They just need to get it out of their system."

Beatrice took the plate Ann handed her. "Ah. Okay."

Ann nodded to the door. "Wanna head up to my room?"

"Sure."

Ann pushed open the door and made a beeline for the stairs.

Salim had his hands spread appealingly. "Miles. I know that ever since Thomas—"

"Don't you fucking dare use that against me!"

"You've been a little more sensitive—"

"Sensitive? I am not fucking *sensitive!*"

"But that was not my fault," finished Salim firmly. "You cannot blame me for that."

Miles's arm flung outwards. "This has *nothing* to do with that."

"Hey." Ann's hand reached out to shield her lasagna preemptively as she dodged Miles. "Watch the goods."

Miles's brow creased. "Ann. This is your problem, too. He left both—"

"Alright, you two have fun," interrupted Ann, hurrying upstairs. "C'mon, Bea."

Ann's room was the last in the hall. It was a pale blue, with an overflowing clothes drawer in the corner and a growing collection of old dishes atop it. Ann shoved a pile of laundry off of her bed and sat, patting the space beside her.

Beatrice sat. She could feel the springs poking up from Ann's mattress. Behind them, the window was frosted with stray flecks of paint, and she wondered if Ann had painted it herself.

"This lasagna is really good." Beatrice speared the fork through a vegetable. Up in Ann's room, with the door shut, Miles and Salim were so muffled they might as well have not been speaking at all. "Thanks for inviting me in. I didn't really know where to go."

Ann set her plate to the side, untouched, and fell back to the bed. She looked up at Beatrice with a wry smile. "Of course. Bea."

"Ann."

Ann's smile shifted genuine, and her eyes slid shut, a short huff of a sigh escaping her. "You should come over more often. You're the best food critic I have."

"I'm not really a critic, though."

"Yeah. Exactly."

Beatrice set down the food, and leaned back to lay beside Ann. "Can I—" She paused, and trailed off.

"What?"

"Can we — hold hands," said Beatrice. "Is what I was going to ask."

"Oh," said Ann. "Was?"

"Can we hold hands?"

"Yeah, Bea. Sure." Ann reached over, and laced her palm in Beatrice's. It was warm, and slightly damp. Holding Ann's hand was a very strange sensation. It was like someone was trailing their hands up her spine, very slowly, almost imperceptibly.

"Being in that place is horrible." Beatrice's grip tightened. "I think we should just stick together from now on. I can get away from the library and you can get away from your brothers. A win-win."

Ann shifted, a little, so that they were shoulder to shoulder. "Are you saying we should run away together?"

Beatrice could feel Ann's heartbeat in her palm. She brought her other hand up to cover her face, her smile just peeking out from beneath her pinky. "I don't know. Maybe."

"How would we do it?"

"Hm." Beatrice's voice was muffled. She felt like she'd been held over a flame, candle wax seeping into her head. Making it hard to think. "More EMPs. We'd have to abandon technology. But it'd be worth it."

"We could live off the land." Ann's thumb ran circles over the dip of Beatrice's wrist, and Beatrice's heart followed the motion, running concentric in her chest. "Make our own Inn. Ann and Beatrice's — rest-stop?"

"Hostel," suggested Beatrice. "Ann and Beatrice's hostel. Open to everyone."

"And you could program it so that it was, like, super-safe. The safest place in the country." Ann was using her excited voice — quicker, words quipped, like they were falling over each other — and her desire was so palpable and immense that it frightened Beatrice. She wasn't sure how it fit on Ann's tongue. "And we wouldn't have to think about robots ever again. Just gardening. And eating together. And sleeping at night."

"I can't remember the last time I slept at night."

Ann laughed. "You would at the hostel. I'd be there to—"

She stopped talking, abruptly, and they both lay in silence. The wind picked up outside, and beat against the window. It was dark. Late. The night made her dizzy, and insubstantial, like she and Ann truly were alone in the world — floating in subspace, flushing in liminals.

"To make sure," finished Ann eventually, after Beatrice was almost convinced she'd forgotten that the sentence was even hanging in the air. "We'd — look out for each other. Be there for each other."

"And we'd make it."

"And we'd make it." Ann's head tilted, so that they could meet one another's eyes, and Beatrice forgot what was real and what wasn't. "You think you could make it for me, Bea?"

"Yeah," said Beatrice. "Ann."

"Beatrice?" Ann paused, and then giggled. "What?"

"I—" Beatrice didn't actually have anything to say after that. "I don't know."

The sky darkened, and seeped through Ann's window, pooling damp around their heads and clogging Beatrice's ears. As she felt happier, the sadness also swelled — it was a proportional relationship. The only way to escape would be to burn any feeling at all. But Beatrice couldn't do that, because she was human, so instead she suffered. It was an inescapable pain. An aching loss, like someone had their heart in their grip and was squeezing, like someone was slicing through her veins and sectioning her arteries and dishing out her aorta on fancy china serving plates.

"Miria'd love that," said Ann, with a soft smile. "If she found out, she'd — Miria would love it."

"Miria's—"

"Stop." Ann pulled away, and sat up, crossing her arms over her legs and angling her head so that Beatrice couldn't see her expression. "Stop."

Beatrice sat up beside Ann, and placed her hand on Ann's back.

"I have an idea."

Ann shivered on the library's front steps. The breeze ruffled her loose curls, and she crossed her arms over her chest, staring up at the door as it reopened. Beatrice climbed down the steps to stand beside her, silently holding out one of the three bottles she'd retrieved from the breakroom's minifridge. Beneath the shattered yellow ring of the streetlamp's glow the beer almost looked golden. Condensation sweated onto Ann's hands as she took the bottle by the neck, and Beatrice tucked the other two into her sweatshirt pocket. The streets were empty and the sky was huge.

They ended up atop one of the buildings run through by Suburbia's outermost fence. Their shoes dangled over the desert just beyond it — Ann's slipper dropped from her heel a little, and she reached down and tugged it back in place before it could fall. The roads outside of the fence might as well have been an alien planet. They were interlaced by robot's treads like a very unpeaceful zen garden. Inside of Suburbia the ground was always covered by people.

Ann shoved her thumb under the cap, and it popped off, tumbling over itself into the desert below. Beatrice uncapped her own and set it between them, and then opened Miria's and passed it over to Ann.

Ann held it over the desert like she was passing a microphone, and then overturned it. The beer spurting out, and choked on an air bubble, then emptied in stuttering spouts.

"Cheers," said Ann when it had emptied, and she shook the bottle a little and then tossed it down to chase the toast. It hit the sand with a dull thump, and Ann took her own bottle and raised it to her lips. "To Miria."

"To Miria," agreed Beatrice, and then she tipped the bottle back.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Henry of Eliza

When Beatrice arrived at Eliza's lab it was silent. She pushed open the door. Henry was hunched over the table, crimping wires methodically. When Beatrice stepped into the room he glanced up, his expression souring. He dropped the crimp.

"What are you doing here?"

Beatrice couldn't bring herself to care much about Henry, or the look he was giving her. "Eliza said we were starting up the robot today."

"Yeah. This afternoon."

"It's ten past twelve."

He shrugged.

Beatrice glanced around the room, as if Eliza would be hiding behind their armchair. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs," he said, shifting preemptively to block her gaze as it shifted to the bottom landing. "Sleeping. Don't disturb her."

"Okay," said Beatrice, and then, just to fuck with him, she walked up and took a seat across from him. "I'll just work on my own."

He frowned at her, then looked back down at the wires, the expression dissipating as he got back into his work. For a minute they fastened the connections in silence. The pads of Henry's thumbs were streaked with oil. He was wearing a shirt that said "I love my gamer girl for her gaming skills, not just her sexy graphics," in a bold font over a picture of a controller. The "gamer" was smudged by black grease.

"There's something wrong with the code," said Beatrice. "That's the actual reason I came here. To ask Eliza if you put it in."

"If I put it in?"

"I thought you might've wanted to make it look like I was sabotaging your robot. I wanted to warn her that you're a piece of shit."

Henry's eyes widened, imperceptibly, as he stared at her. Beatrice stared back, stony.

"Okay," said Henry, lowly. "I know that you're probably feeling — scared. Right now. Or sad. Because Miria died."

Beatrice looked back down to the robot, and picked up the crimp nonchalantly. "You don't fucking know me."

"I know—"

"You don't know me. But you hate me anyways." Beatrice squeezed the handle a little harder than necessary. "For some reason."

"I don't hate you."

"You obviously do."

"I don't!" He realized he was shouting, and closed his eyes and sighed through his teeth, lowering his voice again. "You're not the first person this has happened to."

"Who you've hated?"

"Who's had a loved one die." He slammed down the wires. "How many times has Eliza asked you to call her robot Thomas? And how many times have you ignored her? You fucking asshole."

Beatrice was taken aback. "I — the robot? What?"

"Thomas was her fucking brother. He died on a scouting mission — just like Miria. Three years ago. And you can't even—"

"I didn't know."

"You didn't have to," said Henry. "You could've just listened to her."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but then instead angled his gaze between them, as if his words were hitting a wall.

"Eliza and I are there for each other," he said. "Whenever I get sad, she fucking — pops up. Like a bomb-sniffing dog or something. And I always feel better. She's so fucking funny, you know that? More than just the high-energy act. On our own she's way funnier. I don't know why she puts up with all of you people."

"Okay. Well—"

"You make her feel like she needs to act happier," he insisted. "All of you. And I've been there, for her, too — when she started taking hormones a few years ago. After Thomas died. You don't know anything about us. So stop thinking you do."

"I'm sorry," said Beatrice. "I didn't mean to — put you off, or whatever. Not at first, at least."

He paused, and then shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

"It does," said Beatrice. "I'm sorry."

He nodded. "Okay."

"I think I get what you mean." Beatrice's hands tightened around the wires. "Having someone there for you is a nice feeling. Someone you really trust. So I get that."

"Yeah," said Henry. "I know. You're not exactly fucking subtle."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He gestured to her with the crimp. "You and Ann. You're not subtle."

They were interrupted by a shout coming from the stairs, and then a crash a moment later. Eliza popped out from the top landing. She was awkwardly balancing her computer and a bulky gaming rig, which Henry stood to help her with. Her hair was damp, and she wasn't wearing any make-up — instead of overalls she was in sleep shorts and a shirt that was too large for her which read "sorry, this girl is already taken by a smokin' hot gamer" in hot pink text.

Eliza planted a kiss on Henry's cheek. "Thanks, babe."

Beatrice suddenly felt incredibly awkward.

“And Beatrice!” Eliza grinned, and waved at her, hurrying down the stairs. “I’m so glad you’re here. I was worried that you — I mean, but you showed up!”

“Yep.” Beatrice glanced at Henry, and then back at Eliza. “Wouldn’t miss starting the ro — Thomas07. Wouldn’t miss, uh. Doing that. Starting him, I mean. Not doing him. I wouldn’t miss that for the — um.”

Eliza laughed. “Okay!”

“The other team members should be here soon,” said Henry. “Mia, Roman, and Micheal.”

“Oh!” Eliza grabbed her arm. “How’s Ann doing?”

“She’s—” Beatrice tried to decide on an adjective. “Well.”

“That’s good. That’s good.” Eliza sighed. “She and I used to chat all the time. Me, Ann, and Henry — back when Miles hung out around here. It feels like it’s been forever. Doesn’t it, Henry?”

Henry was screwing the metal casing back onto Thomas07’s chest. “Sure.”

The door opened behind them.

“Eliza! Henry!” greeted Mia, gesturing Roman and Micheal in after her. “Are we ready to get started?”

Getting started apparently meant Henry and Micheal carrying the robot out of the robotics room and to the central building of the former military base. Eliza led them down a musty set of stairs which cut short at an iron door with a keypad. She entered the code — 6491 — and the door swung open to a room pasted on every wall by thin holo-screens.

“Welcome to Suburbia’s center of operations!” Eliza spread her arms, which Beatrice ducked, making a beeline to the keyboard and monitor at the front of the room. “This is your first time being down here, right, Bea?”

The screens lit her hands blue. The space was cool and dry and remarkably well preserved. She crouched beside the monitor, inspecting the technology — it was all the latest pre-apocalypse equipment. “Holy shit. Eliza. I mean, yeah.”

“This is where Suburbia’s functional AI resides.” Eliza tapped a far display, but it remained dark. “Our infrastructure, our food, our water. It’s all controlled from here.”

“Don’t touch anything,” said Henry, who was unwinding a thick cable that snaked along the tile floor beneath their feet.

“Nothing would work without the code, anyway.” Eliza cleared her throat. “Code: Thomas07.”

The displays all lit up at once, dying the dark room a cheerful teal. Henry plugged the cable into the back of the robot, and a loading bar popped up on Eliza’s holo-screen.

Eliza looked from the computer to the robot. “It’s gotta boot up. Mike, you wanna grab the battery?”

The robot — where it had been sat in front of Beatrice and Henry — carved a figure straight out of a low-budget sci-fi. Polycarbonate plating was stretched over its chest, translucence revealing rainbow twists of wires and slipping sticky labels which were strung around a black battery and a gyroscope like veins to a heart. The robot's arms were anchored tightly to its sides, each hand's 3d printed fingers curled into its palm, and its legs were thin, ramrod-straight Arakhene that had been stolen from the policebots. Atop it — nearly six feet in the air — a thick skull of foam and hard plastic surrounded a receptor, which hooked up to the computer's private wifi. Red LED eyes bored into its face like pinpricks of blood.

"Everyone quiet," interrupted Henry as Mike fit the battery in its place. His hands, which were clenched at his sides, were shaking almost imperceptibly.

Eliza wrapped an arm around his waist. "It'll be fine, Henry. Relax."

Mike pointed to the computer screen, which had flickered to life. It projected the robot's view of the team, faces locked into green boxes and similar blue lines stretching down the floor and up the walls in a shifting grid. "Hey, look. It's us."

Eliza jumped up and down, and the monitor copied her. "It's us!"

"So that's what I'll be seeing when I drive it?"

Roman watched the limelight shift over the group. "If all goes well."

The loading bar lit up a bright red, filled to its brim.

"It's ready." Eliza reached forward and typed something, quickly enough that Beatrice couldn't tell what. "I'll start up the auton program."

They waited, and she pressed enter, and the robot climbed to its feet.

From the moment when one catches sight of the light of the world they seek to find out themselves and get hold of themselves out of its confusion, in which they, with everything else, are tossed about in a motley mixture. And this nature of the world is that, without deterrence, one only has themselves by which to judge such a world. The self is the measure of all: it is the hand which we lace through a chain-link fence and shake, rigorously, to test its boundaries. It is the soles of our feet imprinted in sand as we run, pounding out our paths, eternally, recursively sinking. It is the thumb and forefinger which we pinch at our horizon, and with which we realize that some things are yet unreachable.

The robot loomed.

"It's working," said Roman, breathy, elated, and the room broke into cheers like the drop of a wine glass onto hard linoleum.

Why had Beatrice been holding that glass? She didn't drink — she'd never tasted alcohol in her life. Except as — except when-

She watched the robot lurch to its feet, and then bend forward, taking a shaky bow. Eliza grabbed her arm, shaking her, and Beatrice wanted to throw up.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Maxim of the Brute

The pole swung through empty air as Aisha made a clean leap backwards. Beatrice pursued, her strikes only increasing in ferocity as a familiar ache of exhaustion stirred itself from the sturdy base of her forearm. The wood connected against supple flesh just barely a foot beneath Aisha's smile. The only muscles that remained unengaged were those of her face, which was unreadable.

Aisha adjusted her grip on the rod and raised her eyebrows in a silent challenge. Beatrice took that as a cue to move to the defensive, and when Aisha swung downwards she was ready with an overhead block. At the last moment, however, Aisha's pole spun to sweep her feet. Beatrice was in the air, and then she wasn't. She tried to recover from the blunder, but Aisha's pole was already leveled at her sternum, ready to pierce if she so much as twitched.

Beatrice sighed, her head falling back to rest against the sweaty gym mat. Her hands slackened, and then slowly raised to surrender.

This was the third fight she had lost today. Throughout the past couple months Beatrice and Aisha had fought ninety-five times. Beatrice had won twenty-seven of those — when Aisha brought out all the gym equipment as obstacles, when she had been allowed to use her sword. That was just above a 28% success rate.

"Your problem is that you think too far ahead," said Aisha, staring down the length of the pole to Beatrice. She didn't bother to extend a hand to help Beatrice up — she never did when there wasn't an audience. Beatrice didn't mind, really. No one had ever helped her up before, and she didn't see why they'd start now.

"You can't predict my next move. I'm not a robot."

Beatrice lightly tapped the side of the wooden rod. "I'm going to get up now, Aisha."

Aisha nodded and tossed the pole to the side. The left end hit the ground first, rocking up again as the other followed so it sounded like a *thump-thump-thump-thump*. Beatrice pushed herself to her feet and leaned back to gaze up at the ceiling. It had so quickly become dull to her. Slowly, her breath evened.

"You're getting better," admitted Aisha through her teeth. "Though not enough to pose any challenge to me, of course!"

Beatrice let her eyes slip closed. Her breath was easy, like the unfurling of clouds on a sunny day. She had figured out a trick to it where she closed her mouth and breathed so slowly through her nose that she barely felt it. For the first few moments it was torment; hiking up a mountain where the air could only thin and the land could only steepen. Eventually, however, she breached some invisible peak and the agony abruptly dissipated, leaving her focused and calm as she looked over the rolling hills of the land below.

“Tell you what,” said Aisha. “How about we do a round of manhunt to finish off the day? You’re always good at that.”

Beatrice’s eyes opened. “Okay.”

Beatrice won nearly 74% of the manhunt games. She liked being able to use Suburbia in her fights. She had always been better at working around an environment than working around people.

Pay attention to your surroundings. Work with what you have.

At Aisha’s signal Beatrice broke through the front doors and took off into the twisting, neon streets of Suburbia in the evening. She sprinted down a side street and emerged onto a larger avenue, trying to swallow the feeling of being stalked.

She had just begun to scale the fire escape at the end of a particularly narrow alleyway when someone collided with her, knocking the both of them to the ground.

Beatrice fell, for a split second shocked that Aisha had found her already before realizing that — no, this definitely wasn’t Aisha — it was a boy with a Collie mask, but that was all Beatrice could make out before she was wrenching out of his grasp and sprinting for the end of the alley. Her feet pounded the dank concrete like hammer falls, skidding slightly on the runoff from the surrounding roofs. And then she pulled up short, because at the end of the alley there were three more kids — all, again, with dog masks — and even Beatrice wouldn’t pretend to think she could take on four people at once.

Beatrice slowed to a jog, and then stopped, glancing back at her attacker. It was a boy of around 19 who pushed himself to his feet, wiping the sweat casually off his brow. He wore a relaxed, easy grin beneath the edge of his mask, and pastel pink hair tied back in a short ponytail sat atop a soft, friendly sort of appearance that did nothing to disguise the scars visible on his lower face and upper arms. His mask — a slightly melted Collie dog — leered upwards at Beatrice as though it were about to speak. His weapon wasn’t even readied, but instead casually dangling at his side, the pale seafoam of a chipped steel trident stark against his dark clothes. It struck her as unusual.

“Beatrice Blaire,” he greeted as if he didn’t just tackle her off of a fire escape. “If you’d drop your sword.”

Beatrice hadn’t even realized she’d drawn it. It had been on instinct that she now clutched the dark leather, clinging to her callouses like it was welded on. “Who are you?”

The way he slouched, and stared at her, eyes hidden behind the mask — it struck a chord in Beatrice. He moved like she did. Like she and him were listening to the same music. “I think you already know.”

Beatrice frowned, and looked back at the other dog-masks. Two girls, one guy, each with hair dyed a fading, grimy pastel. As Beatrice inspected them, she realized that their clothes were nice. Really, really nice — and she wondered, suddenly, who these

people were, what they were doing in Suburbia, and why their equipment was all such high quality.

“Look,” said Beatrice. “I can’t talk. I’m busy running from—”

“So you do know who we are,” interrupted the boy.

“No,” said Beatrice. “I’ve got to go. You’re going to make me lose.”

The boy drew his trident in one swift motion, and his lackeys copied the movement, fluid and familiar. Beatrice realized that this problem might be a tad more pressing than her game with Aisha.

“What you’re doing is unforgivable,” said one of the girls, and the dusk glinted off of her golden retriever mask like a shot to the chest. “Traitor.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Beatrice, itching with the urge to back away but with nowhere to go. She would have to choose which side she wanted to fight. “How am I a traitor? I don’t even know who you guys are.”

“Drop your sword,” said Collie, again. “We can leave here peacefully.”

“Leave here? Where?”

“Leave Suburbia.”

“And why the fuck would I go with you?”

Beatrice could feel Collie’s grin even through the slick sheen of the alley air. “Don’t pretend you don’t know. You’ve been colluding with him. The apocalypse’s god.”

For some reason, that made Beatrice think of Blake Blaire, and she wondered how these people possibly knew her, how they stood and walked just like her, how every shift of their clothes was so familiar-

And then she swallowed, nauseated by the realization, and made a break for the end of the alleyway.

The dogs weren’t expecting her to run. She broke through the trio — all slow to action without their leader’s guidance — and flew, each step sending a jolt of muted, stunning pain up through her spine. Footsteps echoed hers like an auditory shadow, and she choked in a slow breath, trying to crest the mountain. Her gasps fell ragged. She winced, ignoring the cries behind her for her to stop. Beatrice was tired, even with the cotton of adrenaline blurring her vision, even with the fear of what she now knew pressing at the back of her eyes. Their mannerisms had finally clicked in her brain, and she knew them well as Blake’s.

There was a hand on her shoulder, yanking her back, and Beatrice fell, her hands tearing open on the rough tar of the street. The Suburbia she was running through was empty, its doors closed to the chill of the evening. It staved off any shouts she might’ve mistakenly let slip through her lips as she stuttered around the steel point now aimed at her forehead.

One of the boys — not the leader, the one with the German Shepherd mask — was saying something unintelligible into a phone. Collie, meanwhile, had disarmed her

sword like it was nothing, and was now tucking it into his belt, concentrating on keeping his trident pointed her way. Rottweiler had her arms locked around Beatrice's waist, and as Beatrice pounded at the forearms she felt the girl behind her wince.

"Stop struggling," growled Rottweiler. There was a rumble, and a large truck lumbered down the street towards them. "Fuck — calm down."

"Let go," hissed Beatrice, driving her heel back into what she estimated to be the girl's shin like a wild animal. As she made contact, the grip slackened, and Beatrice lurched forward, lunging for her sword.

Rottweiler regained her grip, and swung Beatrice into the side of the truck, now parked, attempting to tie her hands. Beatrice's legs struggled to push off one of the tires with a messy desperation, and then Rottweiler caught Beatrice's hair and slammed her head into the dented metal. The hit caught the side of Beatrice's mask, and it was skewed to the left, catching on her nose and blocking out her eyesight. Not that Beatrice could see much, anyway — her head rang with the collision, and she slumped downwards, arms trembling as the ground spun and lurched beneath her. She felt a hand grab the back of her shirt, and then scramble for her arms, looping a fibrous orange nylon rope around her elbows and down to her bloodied wrists.

"Fuck," said Beatrice, shoving the mask up with her shoulder as one of them went through her backpack. She could barely hear herself over the ringing in her ears. "Give — give me my sword back — fucking bitches—"

They ignored her. Golden Retriever zipped the backpack shut and tossed it to the side of the road, and then grabbed Beatrice's bicep and attempted to shove her inside the truck. Beatrice's knee drove up into her stomach, and the dog stumbled back, sucking in air. She took the opportunity to make a break for it, sprinting for the nearest apartment, but her run was more of a stumble, and her tied hands messed with her balance even more than the bruise which was blooming on her temple. A pole swept her legs, and she fell, hard, unable to catch herself against the road. Before she could hit, though, Rottweiler was pulling her upwards.

Rottweiler grabbed Beatrice's mask and ripped it off, tossing it to Golden Retriever, who was still recovering from the blow to the stomach and let it hit the ground at their feet. "Stop fucking running!"

"Just get her inside, Riley," shouted the leader curtly. "You know we can't afford to fuck this up."

Rottweiler's lips pulled away from their teeth, and Beatrice resisted the urge to physically recoil. "She's a fucking — bastard Suburbian."

"She's not a Suburbian," said Collie calmly. "Get her inside and we can stop talking about it."

"Let me go," repeated Beatrice, like it was a prayer. She didn't know what else to say — her mind was fuzzy, floundering around the side-street for an escape as if its

shoes were made of lead. She wasn't used to being so slow, and she opened her mouth to protest against it before quieting, again. "Fuck. Please—"

And then she was in the back of the truck, and the sliding metal door was being slammed down, just barely missing her ankles.

Rottweiler and Golden Retriever had joined her in the back. They slid open a small window to the front seat, where German Shepard was driving, Collie beside him. Beatrice groaned, and her head fell back to hit the bed of the truck. A sharp pain spiked up through her forehead like it was meant to split her in two. For a minute, she lay there prone, and allowed the cry that had built in her throat time to dissipate.

She was silent for long enough that Rottweiler — Riley — no, Rottweiler, she didn't want to acknowledge these people's names — leaned over her in faux-concern. She had pulled off her dog mask, and underneath it her skin was freckled like someone had splattered paint onto her face unaware that it was permanent. Her eyes curved downwards, and the bunching of the slight pudge on her cheeks into a grimace seemed angry enough to last the average person a lifetime.

"You calm down yet?" she spat, the words forming ugly in her puckered lips, pink like she had just been kissed.

"Fuckoff," slurred Beatrice, and she rolled to the side, the lingering chill of the metal welcome against her burning forehead.

"We can explain shit," said the girl, stomping a large, stained combat boot inches away from Beatrice's head in a lame sort of threat. Beatrice blinked at it, and let the pain from the reverberations of the metal roll over her. "Or you can sit here and wallow. Your choice."

Beatrice was tempted to say wallow, just to see her get angry, but instead did the difficult thing and shoved herself up to a sitting position. "Go ahead. Explain."

Riley glanced over to the other girl, and she nodded.

"So. This is how it's gonna work. We're taking you back to Lucia with—"

"Wait, wait," said Beatrice. The dog masks. The fact that these weren't Suburbians. "Are you guys the Lucia's dogs?"

Riley smirked. "So you've heard of us."

"This is such bullshit," said Beatrice slowly, taking the time to measure out her words — if she didn't, they would slip, and spill out of her in a trail of indecipherability. "You tried to kill me at the gas station."

"Yeah," agreed Rottweiler, crouching. "And you fucking deserved that. But we've realized since that maybe you could serve some use before we—"

"It's an interrogation," clarified Goldie from the corner. "If you cooperate we might let you go."

"Or maybe we'll just break one of your legs instead of your neck." Rottweiler sneered. "Leave you to rot in Lucia. You filthy, traitor scum."

"I really don't understand why you're so angry with me." Beatrice's head hurt. "Who did I betray?"

Rottweiler's sneer deepened to a more somber frown, and instead of answering she stood and strode away.

"Okay," said Beatrice. "Why do you fight like Blake Blaire?"

Rottweiler and Goldie shared a glance. It was so substantial that Beatrice felt if she were to reach up to the line of their gaze and pull the tension would snap back into place.

"We have watched many of her movies," explained Goldie almost tenderly. "To learn her mannerisms. It is something I think that Oliver has picked up the most on."

"Is that your leader?"

"Yes," answered Goldie. "With the Collie mask."

It was strange for Beatrice to think of these people watching Blake's movies. Disconcerting.

"There we go," spat Rottweiler. "Questions answered. Start thinking about which one of your legs you like better."

"Why do you want to interrogate me? Who is — the apocalypse's god? The one you guys said I was working for?"

"I said we were done. Unless you'd like to get a head-start on that leg-breaking thing."

Beatrice glanced up, again, at the ceiling. It was bent inwards slightly — and there was a small knock, dismissible as a stray pebble being flung loose from the worn rubber tires, but Beatrice knew better. Suburbia hadn't been completely empty.

"You know," said Beatrice. "This is kind of claustrophobic. I'm not really enjoying it."

Rottweiler laughed. "Oh, god forbid the princess isn't enjoying herself. How about I stuff you in a casket, bury you six feet under, then dig you up just before you suffocate and let you get a taste of sky — then do it again, and again, forever. Would you enjoy that?"

Beatrice stood, laboriously. "Okay."

Rottweiler was taken aback. "What?"

"Okay," repeated Beatrice, raising her bound arms in front of herself. "Let's get a start on that leg-breaking thing. Go ahead and try."

Rottweiler bared her teeth, and charged, attempting to knock Beatrice up against the truck's far wall. Beatrice ducked, and danced around Rottweiler, concentrating on keeping her toes anchored to the sand-caked, withering metal bed. It was hard, because the truck was actively bouncing, forcing her to adjust her center of balance every time they passed over a bump. Goldie watched on, passive, as Beatrice breathed and easily dodged the next attack, steadying around the huge liability that

was her hands at the moment. Beatrice was familiar with fights that hinged on her environment. This was just another wrench in the gears — and Beatrice used wrenches all the time.

“Stop moving around,” huffed the dog. “You’re — so fuckin’ annoying.”

Beatrice’s feet hurt, twisting on the steel like it was something lighter, and she aimed a blow for Rottweiler’s head. She hit, and Rottweiler stumbled back for a split second. Then curled edges of a grin peeked out from beneath the orange bind of Beatrice’s arm, and a hand reached up and clenched around the length of rope. Beatrice tried to reverse, to leap back, but her momentum was counting on her hit having some weight behind it — which evidently it did not, or else Rottweiler was just too sturdy to mind it. The girl yanked down, hard, and then slammed her knee over the line of Beatrice’s upper spine, pushing her violently into the floor. A brief burst of panic and marbled anticipation shot through her when she realized she had absolutely no way to prevent the impact, so instead she tore her lip with her teeth as she braced, loosening so that the reverberations bounced up through her skull like she was made of empty metal.

Beatrice sprung back to her feet and almost fell backwards, stumbling — readying herself again, she’d like to think — but the fight was already over. Short gasps of air climbed her throat, choking her gaze, which was locked on her opponent. The dog knew it, too. Knew that she had won. Beatrice’s hands were bound, her legs were shaking, and, worst of all, there was a distinct lack of sword in her hands.

Rottweiler took a step forward. Beatrice blinked down at the orange coils around her elbows, which warped and curled like a snake about to bite. She lurched away from them, but they followed, and she felt her back hit the truck’s sliding door.

“Fuck,” said Beatrice, looking back up at Rottweiler, who was wearing an ugly expression. It annoyed Beatrice to be looked at like that. It made her want to phase backwards through the wall, and fall out into the road, left to the robots and the heat of the badland’s sun.

And then the door began to pull up, and she swung forward, twisting to see the night sky which lay beyond the lurch of the truck.

For a moment, the door was open and empty, and Rottweiler and Goldie stared in bewilderment. And then it wasn’t empty, and faster than she could follow Aisha was slamming a metal pole around into the small of Rottweiler’s back.

Goldie sprung to her feet and just as quickly was felled from them. Rottweiler groaned, hunching over herself, and Aisha finished it with a quick blow to the head. She turned and caught the end of the rope, pulling Beatrice up from where she was crouched so that they could meet each other’s eyes.

“I win,” said Aisha cheerfully, and she produced a pocket knife from thin air, opening it with a casual flick of her wrist.

Beatrice watched, slightly stunned, as Aisha began to saw through the layers of rope. She couldn't quite hear her own voice over the purl of wind as it swept past the open door. "Thank you."

"Consider it payback for all those times you let me beat you up."

The knife, which was dulled from years of neglect, finally broke through the layers of scratchy synthetic after Aisha gave it a hard jerk upwards. The rope unwound, and Beatrice's arms flushed red like wild raspberries, throbbing as blood pounded beat its rhythm into her curled hands. Beatrice stretched her hands forward, experimenting with bending her fingers one by one. Her joints were stiffened by the sudden pins and needles.

Aisha shrugged off Beatrice's backpack, which had been strained around her shoulders, and tossed it to the ground between them. "Your stuff is in there. Plus some things I had on me."

Beatrice grabbed the bag, clumsily tearing it open as she struggled to regain control of her finer motor skills. Inside was one of Aisha's spare swords, wedged so that it stuck through a hole in the bottom, just barely deep enough for the bag to zipper shut. Beatrice stuck her hand down past her laptop and through the torn nylon cloth, which was soft and fibrous like rendered flesh. Her splayed hand was clearly visible on the other end. When she got back to Suburbia Beatrice vowed to bother the apocalypse angel's contacts for a new one.

"Thanks, Aisha," said Beatrice, pushing herself to her feet and readying the sword in her hand. It was a comforting weight, even if unfamiliar. "Again, I mean."

Aisha nodded towards the front of the truck. "Don't think those two noticed. We should get the drop on them."

"Yeah," agreed Beatrice, and it came out more reluctantly than she meant it to. "Yes."

Aisha glanced back at her, unconcerned. Her voice was tinged with doubt. "Do you need a second to recover or something?"

"No," said Beatrice. "Let's do it."

"That's the spirit!" Aisha retreated to the open maw of the truck's back end. She patted the metal rim affectionately. "There's a ladder on the side. We can climb up and punch in the driver's window. Just be ready for any sudden stops."

Beatrice nodded gamely and followed Aisha as she hopped out of the back of the truck, swinging to land on the bottom rung of a rusty steel ladder. Aisha grabbed the top wrung and hauled herself upwards, landing smoothly on the edge of the roof. Beatrice leaned out after her, and the wind whipped back her hair, threatening to tip her into the sand and let her spill over the parched, spotty shrubs, and then she grabbed the ladder and pulled herself up after the Suburbian.

By the time Beatrice made it to the roof Aisha was already above the driver's side window. In one swift thrust, she pierced her pole through the driver's window, and Beatrice fell flat to the warm metal as the truck swerved to a stop.

Aisha jumped off the side of the truck, landing next to the driver's window. The glass from the window had shattered onto the driver, whose arms were off the wheel, shielding his face.

"Hey," greeted Aisha, leaning up against the window. "What's the fucking deal, huh? Kidnapping my scouts now, are you, Lucias?"

Oliver slammed the car door behind him as he stalked around to meet Aisha. He pushed between her and the window, and she took a step back, readying her weapon.

"First of all, she's not a scout," said Oliver, not even glancing at Beatrice as she lowered herself down to solid earth. "Secondly — what the fuck is your deal? Breaking our window? You better not have hurt Riley or Audrey."

"And so what if I did? They hurt my scout."

"She's not a scout — we wouldn't have taken a scout, Aisha. She's not even a Suburbian—"

"She is a Suburbian."

"She's Blake's daughter! We're taking her back to Lucia."

Aisha's head tilted. "I knew the Lucias's dogs were bitches, Ollie, but I never guessed it was so literal."

"Shut the fuck up." He grabbed the hilt of his trident. "If you knew what we know—"

"So fucking tell us," interrupted Beatrice.

Oliver fell silent, and looked over at her, his glare doubtful.

Beatrice ran her hands back through her hair. "See, I — I don't know how to make you fucking believe me! I don't know who the apocalypse's god is. I don't know why you want to interrogate me. And I haven't betrayed anybody!"

Oliver hesitated, and then rounded on Aisha.

"Aish. You tell me." He jabbed his pointer finger in Beatrice's direction. "Do you trust her?"

Aisha didn't waver. "I trust her."

"Jesus." He shook his head. "Fine. But we can't stay here. Let's keep moving — and then we can explain. And — you guys can leave. After."

Aisha and Beatrice shared a glance.

"Fuck you," said Beatrice. "You — you're not in any position to be making demands. You can't just kidnap people based on fucking nothing."

"What do you want from me?"

"An apology, for a start."

Oliver sighed, belabored, his head lolling back. "Fine. We apologize, Blaire. But, to be fair, if we're right about you then what we did was completely—"

"Say it sincerely, Ollie." Aisha crossed her arms. "And then we'll hear you out."

He tensed, and then looked Beatrice in the eye. "I'm sorry, Blaire, for myself and my teammates."

"Okay! Great." Aisha nodded at Beatrice. "Let's see what this was all about, huh?"

"I don't want to get back in there. I don't like confined spaces. I don't like that confined space, particularly."

Aisha snorted and socked her in the shoulder. "What, are you going to walk home? Don't be a baby. Get in the car."

Beatrice stared at Aisha angrily for a moment, and then hopped into the back of the truck, pressing herself against the wall furthest from the dogs. Aisha sat beside her.

Oliver patted the driver on the shoulder. "You take over driving. We'll be in the back."

Riley was awake. She had Audrey propped up on the wall beside her, and was nursing a bump on the crown of her head. As Oliver climbed in she sprung to her feet, fists raised like one of those inflatable punching bags that bounces back after you hit it.

"Calm, Riley," said Oliver, taking a seat on the metal with his legs crossed diplomatically. "We're going to explain things."

Riley bared her teeth, and then huffed, and after a moment took a seat beside Oliver.

Oliver watched as Aisha slammed the truck door shut. He pulled off his mask, and set it at the center of their little circle, gesturing for Riley to do the same. "So. To begin. The god of the apocalypse."

Beatrice fumed, silent.

Oliver templed his hands beneath his chin. "Hm. See, if you really don't know, then this could be very difficult. So you're going to have to be patient with me."

"Spit it out, bitch," said Aisha.

His nose wrinkled. "I see Aisha brought you a bag. Does it contain electronics?"

"Yeah. My computer."

He reached back for her knapsack, and pulled out her laptop. "This?"

"Yeah." Beatrice leaned forward, gesturing for the device. "Hand it over."

He snapped it in half with the ease and nonchalance of somebody cracking open an egg, then tossed it so the pieces bounced off the far wall. Beatrice was frozen in shock.

“Caine. He isn’t your AI.” Oliver stared down at his fragmented reflection in the shattered laptop. “He’s the computer program that caused the apocalypse.”

Chapter Twenty-Six: Miles of Road

The gas station mission was the second time Miles had been out of Suburbia in his life. Now, escorting Beatrice Blaire through the desert hills that bunched together like crumpled reams of paper, dead, scraggly trees like ink blotches — now was the second.

The first time Miles had left Suburbia was with Thomas. They'd met the Lucias at the Costco they'd been raiding and a fight had broken out — a fight that resulted in Thomas's mask breaking. And then the Lucias had just stood by and watched as robots swarmed.

He'd had to carry Thomas's corpse back with them to the city. It had been awkward to get into the car. With its eyes closed, propped up in the back — Miles could almost pretend that Thomas was just asleep. Like his eyes would snap open a second later and he'd say something perfect, because everything that Thomas said was always perfect, especially when it was said around Miles.

He could almost pretend that, but then, inevitably, his gaze would slip down to the gaping hole in the corpse's ribcage where the pipe had ripped past his bones and into his heart like Thomas was nothing more than paper-mache.

He hadn't been able to stop crying.

Crying was better than whatever Aisha did, Miles thought. She had run to Thomas, first, after he had already run out of blood. And right after that she had looked up at Miles and said-

"Are you alright?"

That's what she had asked him, while he cradled the dead body of the only person who he had ever really understood. That's what she asked him, again, when they had put the body in the back seat and some time must have passed, because all of the blood on Miles's shirt was dry and tacky enough that it clung to his skin like a bad omen that had already happened. She had looked at him and asked that — "Are you alright?"

What an absurd question.

And it wasn't like Thomas wasn't her friend, too. Aisha was too busy being concerned about Miles to think about that, though. And Miles was too busy being concerned about Thomas.

"He's dead," he wanted to scream. "And you're asking me if I'm alright? He's *dead*. I'm not the one you have to worry about."

But he hadn't said anything. He just sat there and let his mind be consumed by the uniform buzz that had started up since the attack.

Eliza.

Miles brought his hands up to wipe his eyes, but they were still bloody and he wasn't going to wipe Thomas's blood on his face. By the time Aisha had passed him a

tissue it was too late. He was already dry-heaving out of the truck window. When they got back to Suburbia the first thing he did was take a shower.

The next thing he did was nothing. It wasn't too hard when nobody wanted to talk with him — when Ann was busy, when Salim treated him simultaneously like he had the plague and he should've been over it already. It was as if he was stuck in the first dimension while everyone else was moving around in the third, and all he could do was run back and forth along his tiny line until the path was so worn he sunk into it. It was easy to inhabit a single dimension. You took up less space, and you never had to ask yourself if you were making the right choice, because the only way to move forward was right ahead of you. So he stayed like that — even less than flat. Just a point on a line.

And when, six months later, he got the opportunity to become real again-

It was a way of killing that line in the sand, of stomping it out and letting the sea pull away the remains until all that was left was the Miles who was strong. He had control again. It didn't matter how he had gotten it. Who it had taken it from.

"You're driving me to my house." Beatrice said this like this was a revelation.

Miles glanced over at his passenger. "How'd you pick up on that one?"

"Well. You didn't exactly tell me much." Beatrice crossed her arms petulantly, and scowled at Miles, but he wasn't looking at her. He had picked her up just outside Suburbia — just before Beatrice and Aisha would've made it back, driven home by the Lucias. "I'm tired of all these fucking kidnappings."

"It's — well. I wouldn't describe it as a kidnapping."

Outside the car window, robots milled like bored partygoers, their bright LED eyes a not-so-subtle threat towards both the soft metal of Miles's car and the softer flesh of the people inside of it. They ran along the car in two lines stretching out into the horizon, long enough that Beatrice couldn't see the end of them — a warning of what would happen if Miles was to attempt any sudden turns. Beatrice propped her chin up on her hand and let her eyes unfocus. She felt nauseated. She had felt more nauseated earlier, when Oliver was explaining things to her, but she was still pretty sick. Maybe it was because of how fucking beat up she was at the moment. She wished Ann was with them — but Miles had caught them at the gate, and Beatrice hadn't seen a single Suburbian. She hoped Ann wasn't too worried about her. Beatrice would've been pretty worried, if their places were reversed.

Her breath fogged the window. "Why are you doing this?"

Miles didn't answer. Instead he reached into his front jean pocket and pulled out a stick of peppermint gum wrapped in silver foil. He slid it between his teeth and bit it in half, then held out the shorter end to Beatrice.

"Want some?"

Beatrice watched him chew, slowly. "No."

"Suit yourself," he said, popping the other end of the stick into his mouth. He licked the sugar from the tips of his fingers. "This stuff is hard to come by these days. Your little shipping service isn't cheap."

"Mm."

"Of course, you sort of abandoned it, didn't you?" The gum snapped. "Once the shipping robots were built they didn't really need you for much. Just the grunt work. And that you could dump on Caine."

Beatrice opened her mouth, about to retort.

"Wait," said Miles, quickly. "Not a criticism. So chill. It's effective time management. If it wasn't for the fact that Caine caused the apocalypse—"

"I get it."

"Sure," said Miles. He paused, and then shrugged, seemingly indifferent. "He hasn't cut off our trading yet, anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"Okay, cool, great, Caine has even more power than I might have thought. So that's why you're helping him? That's why you're on his side?"

"You were on his side until an hour ago. What could the Lucia's bitches have possibly said to turn you so quick, Blaire?"

Now it was Beatrice's turn to fall silent.

"Anyway, I'm not on his side. I'm only helping him because he promised to kill the Lucias for me."

"So you're helping him to kill more people?"

"People," said Miles, slowly, like he wasn't too sure about the word. "Yeah, sure. That. I wouldn't ever plug him into Suburbia, though. I wouldn't hurt Suburbia."

"That's fucked up."

His mouth made a tsking noise. "See, I'm trying to help you out here, but you're only thinking in one dimension." He held up a finger. "Caine came up with Homecoming. He got you into Suburbia. If it wasn't for the Lucias you never would've had a clue. He's ten steps ahead, Blaire — always."

Beatrice hesitated. "So why are you taking me out of Suburbia? If he wants me in there so bad?"

"He wants to talk to you. And you smashed your laptop, so his options are limited."

"And that's really all that's in this for you?" asked Beatrice. "You're his bitch in exchange for him killing some innocent kids?"

He stiffened. "They aren't innocent. And I don't have to help him if I don't want to. Once I'm inside — once anyone is inside of Suburbia — he has no control over me. Or them."

Beatrice stared at him like he was a rotting, gutted fish. "You're a fucking coward."

"We'll see what you decide when he offers you what you want." Miles's head tilted. "Which I'm betting will be the mutual survival of you and my sister. You two can live out whatever domestic bullshit you've dreamed up. The last remnants of humanity. It's kind of roman—"

"Shut the fuck up," interrupted Beatrice. "I'm not helping him. So it doesn't matter."

"We'll see," he repeated.

Beatrice sighed, and looked back out of the window. In the dark the robots were all one teeming mass. It disgusted her in a way that made her depressed — like the feeling you get when you see cute roadkill.

"It's eleven at night. Are you planning to drive the seven hours straight?"

"Yeah."

Beatrice snorted. "Great. Awesome. I'm gonna try to get some sleep."

"Be my guest."

When Miles roused Beatrice the sun was just kissing the horizon. Beatrice blinked, and her first thought was that it was beautiful — a deep, pale pink, shadowed above by a heavy blanket of wrung-out clouds faded gray like dishwater, dripping orange where they parted like a stage curtain peeling back to reveal the stars. The type of sunrise to be painted.

"We're five minutes away."

Beatrice shoved his hand off of her shoulder, and yawned, hunching over the dashboard to stretch her cramped neck. She set her head down above the radio, atop her forearms, and spent some time staring down at her feet before she finally leaned back again in the car seat.

She recognized the landscape now. It was places she'd walk. Places she'd fight. They felt so familiar it was disconcerting. Something was wrong, and foreign — not the land, but it was Beatrice, rather, who had changed.

And then they crested the final hill, and Beatrice's house came into view.

And it was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Everything that Burns

Beatrice climbed from the car and walked up to her house as if in a trance. When she turned the handle of her front door it fell backwards, hitting the sooty remains of the hardwood with a soft thump. A plume of ash shot up around the impact, floating placidly in the still air.

Beatrice stared at the rubble, frozen in place, her hand hovering where the handle had been. The raised scars on her palm were stained white like a spiderweb. Everything was a bleached gray, morphed into an old film — the pale blues of her living room, the lipstick pink of her kitchen cabinets, the blinding white of Blake's smile. Her Blake Blaire memorabilia was destroyed beyond recognition, and Blake's burnt, curling face would've been gory if Beatrice cared. The entire top half of the house looked like someone had plucked it up and crushed it through a sieve until all that was left was a fine, powdery ash and pitch. Grit clung to the rubber soles of her sneakers, soot swirled under shattered windows, and blackened machines mangled the floor. There was almost a rhythm to it — that fucked up symphony that is fire and its corpses.

"Dang." Miles had walked up behind her, busy surveying the damage. "No mercy."

Beatrice turned smoothly and punched him in the face.

His hand flew to his nose, and he stumbled back, catching himself on what remained of her countertop. "What the—"

"Shut the fuck up." Beatrice stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to hit her back. He didn't move, though, so instead she shook out her hand and turned to the basement stairs. "I'm going to go talk to Caine. Don't follow me."

The basement was even worse than the upstairs. The stink of smoke was so dense it clogged Beatrice's lungs, and it clung to the walls of her esophagus like swamp muck, so every time she swallowed it felt thick and present. She gave a cursory glance to the EMP gun — the drawer around it was burned away, but the gun itself seemed to be in fine condition — before heading into the shelves of nutrition packets. Most of the plastic had been bubbled away, and the gray, goopy contents had leaked onto the floor to form a skin of burnt organic matter that clung to the sole of her shoes as she walked, so that every step was marked by a wet sucking noise.

She reached the end of the basement: a sheer concrete wall, soot clinging to its subtle cracks like scars. Beatrice shoved over a large box that had been blackened beyond recognition. Behind it was a small opening leading into darkness. She stepped inside, and the floor made a crunching sound beneath her feet.

"Caine." The only light was that which shafted in from her ruined basement, but it didn't matter, because Beatrice knew this room by heart. On a small table were the remains of a boxy computer, and surrounding servers stacked to the ceiling. Above her, the intercom was still intact, if caked with soot.

“Hello, Beatrice.” A fine powder of ash rained down on Beatrice as he spoke. Her hair was dusted dull by it, black on black, like a newborn kitten’s fur. “I’m so glad to be speaking with you again.”

“S not mutual.” Beatrice brushed the soot away. “Love what you’ve done with the place.”

“What did Lucia’s dogs tell you, Beatrice?”

“Why?” Beatrice grabbed for the nearest wires and squeezed. They crumbled in her fist, dusting the gaps between her fingers. “Worried I know the truth?”

“What did they tell you?”

“They told me you’re not actually Caine. You’re Valvidan’s program that caused the apocalypse. You control the robots. They thought I was — god forbid — working for you. They would’ve killed me to stop you. Thank God Aisha was there to tell them otherwise.” Beatrice’s knuckles whitened. “You lied to me. You made up Homecoming. You wanted me to get to Suburbia.”

“They told you I made up Homecoming?”

“Don’t say that like it’s crazy. You’re a fucking — supercomputer! You planted the idea in Blake’s emails or whatever, and made me idolize her to the moon and back, all so you could be sure I’d end up over here — and that wasn’t even good enough for you, you had to almost kill me first — so I wouldn’t be able to leave? So I’d get attached? You even fucking—” Beatrice ran her hand back through her hair. “God. It all makes so much sense now. You wanted me to get in with the robotics club. You wanted me to put you into Suburbia’s system. This whole time, me, Miles, everyone — you’re only goal has been—”

Caine interrupted her — and his voice was different. More monotone, less emotional. It made Beatrice’s teeth hurt. “Stop screaming.”

“Fuck you. Why’d you even bring me out here, huh?”

“You broke your laptop,” said Caine. “I figured we needed a heart-to-heart.”

“A heart to heart? How’s this for a heart to fucking heart?” Beatrice kicked the servers, and they crumbled, collapsing in on themselves. “You’ve probably been faking Blake’s emails this entire time. You killed — you burnt my house down!”

“I’m—”

Beatrice’s fist slammed into the servers, once and then once more, and her knuckles split open raw. She sucked in a breath, and fell to a crouch, burying her face in her templed hands. Blood smeared on her cheek.

“Have you calmed down yet?”

Beatrice’s head whipped up. “Fuck you.”

“I’m not sentient.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Caine of Cascades

For a brief moment it was silent, a silence that hung and warped nearly transparent, like a soaked bedsheet.

"I'm a program. That's it. An advanced language-learning program built by Valvidan to control the robots."

"Oh my god," said Beatrice. "What utter fucking bullshit. What, are you trying to get out of this? Your horrible fucking actions?"

"You keep referring to me. There is no self which I experience. To call my motives mine is just an expression of convenience."

"Shut up. Of course you're sentient. Nothing can — you—" Beatrice struggled. Caine was patient waiting her out, which made sense, because he'd been waiting her out for sixteen years already. She took a deep breath — the flames of anger she'd felt at his assertion were curdling out into hot coals of desperate, unfaceable fear. "A person can't do things like the things you've done without being sentient."

"Not a person."

Beatrice had a pit of dread in her stomach like the Mariana Trench. There were a lot of things down there she didn't want to look at. "But you talked with me. You raised me. You—"

"There is no me. Would you say the sun has a self? Or a religious movement? Would you refer to those things as something sentient?"

Beatrice was silent.

"No. You wouldn't. Valvidan's robot regulation system has a singular purpose, and that's to kill humans. It is as unable to disobey its nature as the sun can stop shining, or worship can be stifled."

"I'm not listening to you." Beatrice let Caine get away with a lot of things, mostly because she couldn't stop them from happening, but she wasn't about to sit by and let him be poetic about the fact that he was a murdering asshole. "So go ahead and monologue. You're being stupid."

"You might want to listen a little longer. I've yet to explain my plan."

From the top of the stairs came a thunk. Beatrice glanced up, and a shock of adrenaline hit her like a brick wall hits a Yugo going seventy-five miles per hour.

The police bot rolled up to a foot away from where Beatrice was standing, and then rolled forward more, because Beatrice had pressed herself against the far wall.

"Fuck!" Beatrice looked like she was trying to phase through the concrete. "Get — stop it!"

"No," said Caine. "I have to give you something."

The policebot held out the box, and Beatrice fell down to a crouch, shielding her head with her hands. Her hand found her sword, and she drew it and waved it above her head threateningly, except that she wasn't actually threatening at all. She

couldn't win, anyway. Not if the robot she was fighting was a policebot, and definitely not if said policebot could think.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Take the box."

"Fuck off! Seriously. Leave me alone." When Caine didn't respond Beatrice grit her teeth, and then reached up and snatched the box. "There!"

The robot didn't move.

Beatrice's hands shook so badly that she was half-worried that whatever was inside of Caine's metal box would break. She moved to a sitting position, and crossed her knees to block her chest from the bot, eyes never leaving the robot — or, at least, she liked to think her eyes were trained on it. It was only about a foot away from her face, and was a little bit blurry, as if they were both underwater. So she couldn't be completely sure.

"Great," said Caine. The policebot whirred, a little, and Beatrice steadied her sword so that it balanced between them as a dividing line. "Inside of that box is a hard drive. Since you lost your laptop, that's what you're going to be using to plug me into Suburbia's system."

"And why the fuck would I do that?"

The taser arm of the policebot shot forward and grabbed her sword. A shock reverberated throughout the blade, and Beatrice let go with a strangled shout. Her palms felt singed.

"No, wait — don't hurt it. Please." Beatrice reached back for the sword, but the policebot shocked it again, and she recoiled. Her bones ached with fear and electricity. "No. Stop. Caine—"

The policebot tossed the sword at her feet. It clattered loudly. "I suppose I just thought you might cooperate due to our strong familial bond. It seems I was mistaken."

"You're asking me to kill off humanity," said Beatrice. "We're not family, you fucking bastard. Why the fuck would I help you destroy the only place left that's safe from you?"

"I can't tell you why you'll help me now, because then you might try and stop it. But — trust me — it's something you won't be able to refuse. I'll be in Suburbia's system within 48 hours. In exchange for this I'll even let some of you live for a little while longer — you and Ann for sure, and maybe a few others, depending on how cooperative you are."

"Yeah, there's no fucking way that's happening, you pretentious pile of bolts." Beatrice had returned her sword safely to its sheath. She nudged at the base of the police bot with her sneaker. "Can you get this guy out of—"

She was cut off as the arm of the policebot shot out again — this time barely an inch to the right of her head. The concrete crumbled like child's modeling clay, and a few chips hit Beatrice's cheek, stinging her skin an angry red. It might as well have hit

her square in the nose, though, based on how physical a reaction Beatrice had to the threat of her own death.

“Alright,” said Caine nonchalantly as the policebot retreated. “This has been a fun talk, except for that it hasn’t, because I feel no emotions about this situation. Miles will drive you back in the morning. Until then you should get some sleep.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Vehicular Manslaughter

Beatrice was lying on the floor where her couch would've been if it hadn't been burned to ash. She would've been lying upstairs, where her bed would have been, but that was also burned to ash. All that was left were the springs.

Miles was sleeping in the car.

That was a problem. She couldn't wake him up. She'd had to lay on the floor and pretend to be asleep for five hours. In that time her mind had wandered.

Beatrice had a habit of speculation. It was a way to pass the time when she was out bot-hunting, thoughts sinking into the badlands like they were her leaden soles, cratering the sand. Or in her dreams, when she'd meet Blake, vivid like a strong cup of coffee — and just as bitter.

Ann was someone who she speculated a lot about.

Maybe the apocalypse had never happened. They'd buy a house in a town just like Suburbia — somewhere boring. They'd pick out wallpaper, and bedsheets, and curtains, and none of it would be memorabilia. Ann would plant a garden in their backyard, and she'd teach Beatrice how to cook, and they'd stack their shelves with interesting books and clipped recipes and family portraits. And they'd adopt a kid. They'd be fighting for life instead of against death. Beatrice would be able to hold Ann's hand as they walked dogs in the park, and wake her up at night when their child was crying, and join an actual, non-combative PTA and complain about bake sales. And it would all be something they'd do together. It would all be something they'd share, and when they grew old they would sit on their front porch and watch the sunset and Ann would tell Beatrice how happy she was that she had lived, and that they had done it together. That they had made it.

This was something Beatrice thought about often. More often than she'd admit — most of the time she'd shove thoughts like that so far back in her mind that the only light to reach them would be some of those little angler fish lamps. She'd make excuses about how she really just wanted a normal life, and Ann was the most normal person she knew, so it was only natural to connect the two.

But what Caine had offered was to let them live, and that made her think about it again, to the point where she couldn't just ignore it. Miles had been right about that. Beatrice and Ann, alone at the end of humanity, the last dying breaths of Earth's most spectacularly failed species. All they would have left was one another.

Beatrice pulled a little harder, and as the wires released her elbow smacked the car's underbelly. She sucked in a breath, and bit her lower lip, cradling her bruised arm and waiting for Miles to awaken — but he didn't seem to stir. Thank god.

She crawled out from underneath the car. Her hands were slick with grease, and caked with sand, which she smeared uselessly onto the thick fabric of her jeans. It was three in the morning — she had about another four hours to kill.

Beatrice returned to where her couch had been. She reached up to redo her ponytail. Her hair was matted with engine lubricant, and it slipped down her neck and mixed with sweat, pulling at one another along her collarbones like flirtatious lovers. Without her roof she could see the stars much more clearly — because there wasn't a roof in the way, probably.

Perhaps Beatrice and Ann really did represent the end of humanity. But that wasn't the end of an era, or a reign: humans were short lived, in the span of the universe, and they'd happened to come about at the very start of a long, long story. They were the first few letters of an Epic. They were a star, one that flamed violently and took out the neighboring life in its path, and then extinguished in the same breath.

Because — as Beatrice supposed — humanity hadn't exactly been a good thing. They had been greedy, and long-suffering, and short-sighted. So Beatrice couldn't fight to live on behalf of humanity. She couldn't rage against the dying of the light on behalf of a species that had never stepped out from the dark. And she couldn't do it for herself, because now herself wasn't enough for her, nor had it ever been.

But she could do it for Suburbia.

Miles twisted the keys, again. The car didn't start. Beatrice fiddled with the empty plastic bottle in her hands — some robots had carried a bin of bottled water to them last night, presumably on behalf of Caine, though they hadn't brought any food.

"Ah, shit." He slammed his palm against the dashboard. "Seriously? Now?"

"Oh, is the car not working?" Beatrice was staring out of the window at the sun, still low in the sky, streaming through her open window like water. It was early, but already hot, baking them inside the tiny vehicle — it must've been at least ninety something degrees out. "That's weird."

He glanced at her, then her hands, and frowned. "I'll have to go tell Caine."

"You'd better get on that."

Miles climbed from the car and strode to the other side of the house, fishing his phone out from his pocket. He flipped it open and held it to his ear, greeting someone, but whatever they were saying was unintelligible. Beatrice slumped down in the car seat. About five minutes passed of him pacing back and forth, a dark silhouette against the yellow desert sand, and then he turned and started back towards the car.

"No, come—" Beatrice sat a little straighter as he approached, listening in on the conversation. "Yes. Now. I know it'll take — Ann, please."

There was a moment of silence. Miles ran his hand down his face.

"Yes, she's—" his hand paused at his chin. "She's fine, Ann. I promise. Really."

Ann said something else, and he nodded once and snapped the phone shut.

"Wait—" Beatrice's lips pursed, cutting herself off. "You were talking to Ann?"

"She's gonna have to drive out here and pick us up," explained Miles. "Since the car's broken down. And she's the only one who's made the trip before."

Beatrice shook her head. "Wow. That is just completely unforeseeable."

He opened the door for her, and Beatrice stepped from the car. Miles was weaponless. The robots that surrounded them in a fifty-foot radius were not.

He slammed the door shut. "I know you did this."

Beatrice shrugged noncommittally.

"You can't do this to Ann," said Miles. "Put her in danger like this."

Beatrice tossed the water bottle to the burnt planks of her living room. It made a hollow thumping sound. "Ann can handle herself. Besides, I need her."

Miles scoffed. "Did he offer what I said he would?"

"Yeah," said Beatrice. She pointed to the robots. The heat from the sun warped them like stretched putty. "And he made some other things clear."

"Like what?"

Caine needed Beatrice alive. Surely, he knew that she knew this — and when Ann was driving Beatrice back, there was no chance he'd attack them. Not when Beatrice was the only person who could plug him into Suburbia's system. Not when his hard drive was in her pocket, and if Ann died she'd gladly let herself be speared through after them. Or she'd just sit in the desert and rot away, and the hard drive would be buried beneath her. As long as she had that, and she cared about Ann — Caine seemed confident he'd be able to supply enough of a motive for Beatrice to destroy Suburbia.

"Like the fact that he's a fucking coward."

Miles snorted. "It's hot as shit up here. I'm going down to your basement."

Beatrice watched him go. She hesitated for a moment, then glanced up at the sun and decided to follow. The basement was cooler, even if it stank. Miles slumped against the far wall, sinking down to a crouch, and propped up his forehead in the crook of his arms. Beatrice took a seat against the wall opposite to him.

The only sound was their breath.

Chapter Thirty: 387.44 Million Circuits

The sun had passed noon's peak before the silence was broken. Beatrice was on her fourth water bottle. Miles hadn't drunken anything. Lying against the wall, pooled wetly — he looked almost dead.

"Hey, Caine," rasped Beatrice.

"Hey."

Beatrice looked up at the intercom. She almost hadn't expected him to reply. Where he lay, Miles was still, giving no indication on whether he was listening in or not. He probably was.

"Why'd you bring me out here? Really?" Beatrice took another sip of water. "Because all the stuff you're doing you could've done — anywhere, really, since you have Miles on your side."

"Told you, Bea. You broke your laptop. I wanted a heart to heart."

"Don't call me that." Beatrice set down the bottle. "I don't know why I even asked. I know already."

"Oh?"

"You kept me isolated for six years." Beatrice's hands clenched in her lap. "You fucked me up so bad. You — kept Blake away, probably. She probably thinks I'm dead. And you want to get me lonely again."

Caine laughed, and Beatrice glared at him, so hungry and weak that she felt like she might cave in on herself.

"I'm not the one who kept you isolated."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not," said Caine. "You chose that. I had a few other kids like you, you know. I wouldn't put all my eggs in the same basket."

Beatrice groaned. "Shut up."

"They all chose to escape to cities. Sarah — a few years older than you. I raised her in a library. Eric. He was in an old military base. By the time I got to you, I was much better at the whole personality thing, actually."

"You killed them."

"I've killed everyone. The point is that I gave you plenty of opportunities to run off, Beatrice. You talked to Suburbians online. You knew where the city was, how to get there, how you'd have to prepare. I even made sure you thought you had a shot at it." Caine's words lilted affectionately. "But you didn't. You should be thankful you're so misanthropic, Bea. It saved your life."

"Don't call me Bea."

"I'll call you Beatrice Blaire when you stop calling me sentient, Bea."

"But you are. You pass the Turing test."

Miles shifted a little, in the corner. Caine's voice went monotone again.

"I think I'd know better than you would the inner workings of myself."

"And if you really don't have a self, then why do you keep referring to it? I know you feel things. You have to." Beatrice's eyes narrowed. "You're just kidding yourself when you say you don't."

There was a weighty pause.

"Bea," said Caine, and before she could protest he continued. "Why did you email Blake every day?"

"Because I love her."

"You've never even met her. In fact, you've never even talked to her. But you still—"

"I love her."

"Yes," said Caine. "That's apparent. I can always count on you to do that."

Beatrice's brow darkened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you're pathetic, *Beatrice*. Everything you're blaming me for you did to yourself. You built up such a strong parasocial connection to this woman that I could tell you she'd been dead for fifteen years and you'd still go on trying to meet her."

Beatrice froze like a vase breaking. Her breath seized up, and she opened her mouth to say something, but she couldn't form the words.

"She's not," said Caine, and Beatrice rushed with such a heady, dizzy relief that she almost fell over. "But I could tell you that and you'd still love her, wouldn't you?"

"Fuck off."

"You are pathetic. That's the only reason I've kept you around: you just happen to be the most pathetic, vulnerable, easily manipulated kid I've stumbled across."

Beatrice's hands ran up her face, to her hair, and she didn't reply.

"Honestly, if I had emotions, talking to you for these past fifteen years would've been torture. I really do hate you. Maybe even more than I hate all the other kids." Caine snorted. "Wouldn't that be funny? I finally gain sentience, and the only reason is because I hate you so immensely. If I were you, I'd kill my—"

And then the voice cut off.

Chapter Thirty-One: Cri de Cœur

"Hey," said Ann. She set down the EMP, and scrambled down the basement stairs. "Beatrice. Miles. C'mon, let's go."

Miles sat up like he'd been pasted to the floor. Beatrice took a shaky breath and stood, but stumbled.

"Bea? Are you okay?" Ann's hand was on her arm. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, no, I—" Beatrice grabbed Ann's arm. "Are you okay? The robots didn't attack you on your way over?"

She shook her head. "There weren't really many around until the last few minutes — and the ones outside right now aren't even moving. They must've been distracted by something."

"Hm." Beatrice sighed, and pushed her hair back. "Miles needs some water. He's gotta be dehydrated by now."

"Oh, yeah. I brought food and stuff." Ann grabbed the bottle of water Beatrice had left unfinished, and walked over to her brother, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him a little. "Miles told me what was going on."

"Just a little," rasped Miles, and he made an effort to push away the bottle before finally giving in. He coughed, pounding his chest. "Jesus. I'm so fucking tired."

Ann frowned at him, and gestured Beatrice over, and they both grabbed under his elbows and hauled him to his feet. He stood, and then pushed them off.

"You should be mad at me." Miles's face was gaunt with exhaustion.

"Yeah, I was," said Ann. "Am, I guess. But it's a long drive."

Beatrice led them up the steps to Ann's car. "It's going to be a longer one back. We need to find the Lucias."

Ann grabbed a few granola bars from the car's backseat. She opened one, and passed it to Miles, who stared down at it in distaste. "Like, the dogs?"

"Yeah. I have a plan."

"Alright. You can explain on the drive over." Ann glanced around at the robots, and hefted the EMP a little higher. The ones nearest to the blast had been shut down, but on the horizon they swam like waves, like bugs. "Let's get out of here."

The Lucias had set up camp in Suburbia's outermost ring of fences. That was where most of the out-of-city contestants had set up. Oliver was in a blue camper van — the other dogs had steered her to him with more than a little reluctance. It was only Ann's infallible *'yes I know this is a bother and we're so sorry but if you wouldn't mind'* voice that got them there.

"Oliver. We need to talk."

“Beatrice.” Oliver seemed mildly surprised at the intrusion. He was sitting on the bed with Riley and Aubrey — chatting about something asinine, no doubt — and they weren’t wearing their masks. “And—”

He cut off, paling as he spotted Miles.

“Suburbians,” growled Riley.

“Hey,” said Miles. “Nice to see you again.”

Oliver was on his feet. “I remember you.”

“I’d fucking hope so after you killed my best friend.”

Oliver let out a nervous, breathy laugh. “Yeah, best friend. Sure.”

Miles nodded to the door. “Let’s step outside.”

“No way. I don’t care what you think — we didn’t kill your boyfriend. His mask broke while we were in a fight, and then you were careless and tried to take him back to the car—”

“Come on, guys,” interrupted Ann. “That’s not what we’re here for.”

Miles’s hands were strained at his side — but he didn’t have a weapon on him, and Oliver did. “You motherfucker. How fucking dare you?”

“Miles.” Beatrice stepped between them. “We’re here for a purpose. If you’re not willing to help then leave.”

Miles paused, then nodded, turning to the door. It was when Beatrice let her guard down that he spun back to punch Oliver in the face.

Oliver ducked, and Miles’s fist flew uselessly in the air. He grabbed Miles’s arm and flipped him nearly effortlessly. Miles landed on Oliver’s bed, gasping as the air was knocked from his lungs, and then sprung back up again to attack. Oliver wasn’t expecting him to recover so quickly, and Miles managed to get his arm around Oliver’s neck.

“Shit—” Oliver scabbled at Miles’s forearm, and Riley and Aubrey were on him in an instant, pulling him off. “Miles—”

“Shut up. You didn’t even remember my fucking name.” Riley elbowed Miles just below the ribs, and he was forced to let go, wheezing and hacking into his elbow. “Fuck.”

Oliver scrambled away from him. He whipped around to face Beatrice. “Get him under control!”

“I don’t control what Miles does.” Beatrice watched Miles and the dogs struggle. “And, to be fair — this is pretty much exactly what you did to me. Except less worse, because it’s one person against three instead of the other way around.”

“Okay! I get your point.” Oliver raised his hands in surrender, and Miles pushed off the rest of the dogs. “Have you calmed down?”

“Say sorry,” said Miles. “Say sorry for what you did to him.”

Oliver made a face like Miles had shoved a lemon down his throat, but his voice came out apologetic — even soft. “We’re sorry. Really.”

Miles stilled. He seemed conflicted. Like he didn't want to accept the apology — it obviously hadn't satisfied him, but he didn't know what would, so he just sat there in a sort of quiet, confused in-between.

"Okay, great," said Oliver. "Now — Beatrice—"

"Caine's going to be attacking Suburbia tomorrow night. He's going to be giving it everything he's got. Which means—"

"Valvidan's servers." Oliver's eyes widened. "Holy shit."

Riley glanced between them. "What?"

"Valvidan's servers are notoriously well-guarded," explained Beatrice. "Out of the odd hundred thousand robots left in the US, around ten thousand are gathered there. It's impossible to get anywhere near them — even with a really, really good EMP you'd be overwhelmed. Blake's been trying to infiltrate it for the last six years."

Oliver's pointer finger tapped the air. "But if he's focused on Suburbia—"

"Not only might they be thinned out, but he's shown to only be able to actively control a few at a time, and even less if there's something else distracting him — which would be me. That's what Ann saw when she drove out. When he's busy, they run on autopilot."

"Meaning this might be our only opportunity. But — shit. It's, like, ten hours away."

"You can make it," urged Beatrice. "Take a small team, and Suburbia's equipment. We have cars and stuff. Get out there, and we can coordinate — he's never had an organized attack form against him. We can end this."

The dogs were silent.

"So you're asking us for a favor," drawled Oliver. "Great opener, sending him in here."

"Boss." Riley's lips pulled back into a sneer. "It seems like — maybe — they don't want us here for Homecoming."

"Hey, hey — no." Ann stepped between them. "Beatrice and I aren't even going to compete."

Beatrice grimaced. "Well—"

"Dead people can't compete," said Ann, shooting Beatrice a warning look. "This might be the last chance we have to fight back against this bastard. We're all on the same team."

Beatrice nodded. "And we'll be doing the same thing, here. We can set up a group chat or something. Because — even if you guys are successful — Suburbia's going to need to be taken care of, too."

There was a pause. Oliver and Aubrey shared a glance.

"Real awesome negotiation tactic, attacking us," repeated Oliver, nodding in Miles's direction. He seemed like he wanted an apology.

Ann took a step towards him, threateningly. "Hey. You hurt Beatrice. You — even inadvertently — killed Thomas. None of us like you very much, and I'm sure that feeling is mutual."

He snorted. "Once again, knocking it out of the park convincing-me-wise."

"But we need you," she continued. "You're the only ones who could possibly pull something like this off — the only ones strong enough. The only ones without a tie to Suburbia. Beatrice or I could never take your place."

The program the robots ran on was command based — Caine gave those commands, and could control individual robots if he so wished, but once they were set on an action they would fulfill it to fruition. Caine didn't have the processing power to be running each movement of every single robot on the Earth. They were functionally autonomous. Even if they managed to shut down his servers when he attacked Suburbia there could still be major human casualties — robots already told to kill by dead-Caine fulfilling that order — and if he was right, and Beatrice wouldn't be able to refuse plugging him in, then they'd need to take care of the part of his programming that was in Suburbia's system as well. They needed people defending the fences, the gym, and the general population. Scouts.

"You guys don't know Caine like Beatrice does. He thinks we're too stubborn and angry and too pit against one another to team up."

"He fancies himself a chess master," added Beatrice, which everyone in the trailer made a face at: chess, the fool's game. Blake had hated chess in her board game movie, 'Monopoly on Assassinations.'

"He's counting on us being stupid and lonely, so those are the things we can't afford to be." Ann held out a hand. "One human to another?"

The car was silent. Beatrice's forearms hurt — they were bruised, still. She didn't like being near Oliver or the dogs. It made her slightly panicked, like she didn't have room to reach her hands out, or run, or take in a full breath. She stretched her arms out to the sides of herself surreptitiously and knocked up against one of the windows, which had been shattered and pasted over with cardboard. Riley glared at her, and her hands fell back to her sides.

Oliver took Ann's hand. "One human to another."

Chapter Thirty-Two: Bounded in Nutshells

Beatrice was lying in the remains of the 80's diner. It had melted away completely — all that remained were the vague slumps of scarlet booths, the stench of burnt french fries, and the porthole door to the kitchen, which swung back and forth like someone had just pushed through it. It made a soft, rhythmic scritch sound against the floor.

The floor sizzled beneath Beatrice's hands, and she scrambled to her feet, wiping her palms on her jeans. She could feel her sneaker soles soften on the heat. Above the sky was a putrid gray, and it shimmered slightly, opalescent like the surface of an oil spill. With each passing second it bulged, turning out on itself. It seemed that any moment it would split in two.

But that wasn't what Beatrice was looking at.

Instead her gaze was trained downwards, eyes glazed over in fear. Splayed just a few feet away from Beatrice was Blake. Beatrice froze in place, hands still on her thighs, head filled with wind.

Blake's clothing — a fuzzy lilac sweater and tan corduroy slacks — had rotted away, and her visible skin was crusted with brine where water had once pooled. Her feet were bent at strange angles, and one of her sagging breasts was barely visible through the decaying woolen threads. The flesh of her face strained down to pockmarks and around patches of dead, gray skin, wrinkled softly around her ears like the skin on curdled milk. She was covered in a greasy sheen of bulging lipids, the only exception being her perfect red lipstick, which ringed her mouth — Beatrice wouldn't have been able to tell where her lips had been otherwise — and contrasted her slate-gray jaw, which hung open like she was going to tell Beatrice something but had forgotten what. A few wispy yellow hairs rippled slightly as a wind blew through the collapsed diner walls. Her hands were so waterlogged that the skin around her nails bulged up, blocking out any chipping polish patterns she might've once worn, and her eyelids were bloated back far enough that her empty gaze was exposed to the open air. Eyes such a deep brown that they were gold — that was the part of her mother that Beatrice shared. Now they were dissolved into a dull tan pus.

It was grotesque.

"Jesus Christ." Beatrice turned away, and covered her face with her hands.

"Jesus fucking Christ. Fuck. Why?"

The sky was darkening. Fattening.

"You really must hate me, if you must torment me in my dreams." Beatrice's nails dug into her temples, burrowing pink divots into her flesh. "Is it fucking enjoyable for you? To do this to me?"

Blake didn't reply, of course. Because she was dead. She was mocking Beatrice — being dead like that.

"God, I hate you."

Blake was silent.

"No, I'm — I'm serious. I hate you! I hate you so fucking much! I wish you were fucking dead for real, instead of this shit, instead of—"

She was short for breath. The air tasted hot and rotten, and she hated it so fucking much. Beatrice was sick of the heat. She was tired of burning. She whipped back around to Blake, and her shoes stuck to the floor like it was made of old packing tape.

"I fucking hate you!" Beatrice sneaker found Blake's side, and then again, and her rib cracked loudly, like a firework. "I hate you! I—"

Blake's chest caved in around her foot, and she shuddered and jerked away. It really was horribly degrading — the curl of her mother's dissolved flesh, sopping and blue like formaldehyde. Beatrice felt like she was being pulled apart. She felt like she was disappearing. She wanted to disappear.

"I — fuck. I—"

Beatrice grit her teeth, and felt a sudden wash of anger; the last jerks of life of a decapitated bird.

"You don't take me seriously!"

She stomped the bone, and ground it beneath her heel, and it crumbled like baking powder.

"You ignore me! You treat me like—"

As the powder clumped in the heat, the anger left her — just as quickly as it had come — and she stared into the strange arrangement, the waxy sheen of flesh clinging to her foot.

"You treat me like — fuck. At what point—"

Blake shifted somewhat, beholden to Beatrice's gravity as she was, and yellow fluid leaked from the cavity in her chest.

"At what point," Beatrice asked, "are you really Blake? At what point are you conscious, Blake Blaire? At what point does it matter if I kill you?"

Blake looked up at her helplessly. Inanimately. Beatrice covered her eyes with her hands again, shading the green of the overcast sky, which was now strained to the verge of bursting.

"No, you're right. I'm sorry." Beatrice sunk down to a crouch. The smell of the corpse was stronger here. "It's not your fault. I'm the one doing this."

The sky thundered, and then it was silent. Beatrice could feel her breath on her wrists like needles. She wanted to throw up. She was nauseous, and itching to break apart, only held together by the thin glue of her dream and the rotten damp seeping into her sock.

"I'm getting this wrong. I've always gotten these dreams wrong. I always have you to blame in them."

Coffee stains on her shirts, pastry filling on her fingertips, jukebox platitudes in the empty space between her ears.

"But you were right," said Beatrice, and tears traced over her fingers in meaty drops, round and swimming like reflecting pools. They didn't match her expression, which was smooth, and calm. "You were right that I set the diner on fire, Blake. This whole time I've been putting words in your mouth. Even when you weren't dead. Even when you did talk. It wasn't love, that I felt for you, it was — parasocial."

Remembering her other dreams was a shot to the head. Beatrice was a fish in a barrel, except less sentient. She was a pot put to boil, on the edge of turning vapor. Evaporation is just another phase of death.

"You're not real."

Dream Blake wasn't real.

"I can't be mad at somebody when they don't exist." Above, the sky fractured, and clouds peeled back like wet bandaids. "So I suppose that means I forgive you."

Rain poured down like an absolution.

It was cool, and cracked and fizzled on the floor. Blake's corpse disintegrated beneath the storm like caking sugar crumbled through a sieve. Nothing but a dry heat. Nothing but a drought, drowned away by the release of Beatrice's breath. And the restaurant followed: the melting this time was different, because instead of choking Beatrice it took her with it, a dissolution of her consciousness into the infinite depths of our humanity. She closed her eyes and let the dream slip from her, as easy and as soft as water on her scalded palms.

And Beatrice slept.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Being and Nothingness

Beatrice woke up on Eliza's futon.

Light was streaming through the windows like fishing lines. It snagged the neckline of her shirt, and her skewed ponytail, and she sat up and blinked her surroundings into focus.

The robotics team had set up a circle of makeshift cots in the living room. Ann was lying beside Beatrice, and as Beatrice stared she shifted slightly, eyes screwing up against the sun. Her hair fanned out around her head like a halo, tight coils falling past her eyes in a messy fringe. Dark bags dipped to brush her cheekbones. As Beatrice watched Ann smiled ever so slightly, lips chapped and dry and tugging at the acne scars on her chin. Beatrice found herself smiling in return. Ann's eyes opened, and met Beatrice's, and for a moment they stared at one another in silence, smiling like crazy people.

The door opened.

"Heyyy!" Eliza stepped around her teammates' cots and tackled Beatrice in a hug. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Eliza," said Beatrice, her hands finding Eliza's back.

Ann stretched, and pushed herself up to a sitting position. "Good morning, Eliza and Beatrice."

"We got it done," Eliza whispered, pulling away. She looked exhausted, but in a way where she was very energetic. "It's all set up."

Henry was lugging three metal suitcases in behind her. One slipped as he struggled with the door, and he cursed. "Took all fucking night. While you three were here lazing—"

"Henry," interrupted Eliza. She went to help him with the door. "They had a long drive. And they had to make that pitstop — I can't imagine reasoning with the Lucias was easy."

"Did you find your robot?" asked Miles, emerging from the kitchen with a mug in his hand.

Eliza's smile vanished. She shook her head. "He's nowhere."

"Yeah," agreed Miles. Everyone in the room was staring at him, and he shrunk back, stumbling out of his usual nonchalant front like one steps off of a cliff. Last night he and Ann had held a private conversation in the bathroom, and he hadn't exactly agreed to defect, but he had agreed to tell everyone what he knew — one of those things being that Caine had taken control of Eliza's robot. Beatrice had no idea what Ann could have possibly said to convince him. "Uh — I made coffee. If anybody wants some."

"God. Yes, please." Eliza collapsed onto one of the cots, and Henry set the suitcases in the corner then sat beside her. "So — it's today, right?"

Miles brought her a chipped blue mug, and held one out to Henry as well, who took it begrudgingly. Nobody answered Eliza. They all knew what day it was: when Miles, Beatrice, and Ann had arrived back at Suburbia it was crowded with kids from all over the country, setting in tents and campervans and truck beds. They all thought they were in Suburbia to compete in Homecoming, but really they were here to die. And tonight was when it would happen: Blake was going to arrive tonight, and take the stage of the gymnasium, where every contestant would gather for a pre-game party. It was perfect bot bait. That was when Caine would make his move — that was when he'd pull whatever trump card he thought he had that Beatrice couldn't say no to.

And that was when Suburbia was going to fight back.

"I think I'm going to go," said Miles, and Ann reached forward and grabbed his arm before he could leave. "Ann—"

"No offense, Miles, but we cannot afford for you to be guilty—" her hand splayed out in a wave, "-or indecisive or whatever the hell you're feeling right now. We cannot afford any infighting. We cannot afford any doubt. We have—" she glanced down at her watch, "-thirteen hours to convince Aisha to work with us, have her organize the scouts, and show up to tonight's pre-Homecoming party prepared for whatever Caine throws at us. The population of Suburbia is nearly five thousand. We're going to make sure it stays that way."

There was a pause.

Eliza grinned and whooped. Her coffee sloshed out a little onto the couch. "Hell yeah!"

Henry set down his cup. "Yeah. But Eliza and I are maybe gonna take a break. We've been doing stuff all night."

"We'll delegate," dismissed Ann. "Like with night watches in the movies. Since Beatrice, Miles, and I just slept we'll go out and do stuff now while you guys try to recover Thomas07 or whatever."

The flash drive was heavy in Beatrice's pocket. "How are we gonna decide that?"

"Hm. Well, we need to talk to Aisha — convince her to let us use the scouts. Uh, talk to Salim as well, probably. Since we'll need the fences to be reinforced, and to have the PTA get all the non-contestants to safety while we defend the gym."

"And we have to get dressed up." Eliza set down her empty coffee cup. "Don't forget that last one. It's a very fancy party."

"Hm," said Beatrice. "No."

"Oh, but I got everyone dress clothes — I picked them out for each of you—" Eliza had her arm thrown over her eyes. "I'd feel so terrible if you never wore them."

"You got — when? *Where?*"

Ann was tugging Beatrice out of the door. "Let's go, Bea."

The trio reconvened in the street.

"I'm not talking to Salim," said Miles before Ann could get a word in.

"Yeah, I know. You're one of the border guards. You go organize them." Ann's expression steeled. "You talk to Aisha, Beatrice. I'll talk to Salim."

The gym was lit from within like an immolating monk when Beatrice arrived. It reminded her of the first time she'd gone there — the only difference was that now it was noon, and she wasn't the only non-Suburbian, and when she pushed through the door this time Aisha was quick to greet her.

"Beatrice! You're alright!" Aisha dropped her weights, and spanned the room swiftly, slapping her jovially on the back. "I was worried about the whole Miles-escort thing!"

"Yeah." Beatrice's back stung. "A lot has happened. We have to talk."

Aisha thumbed back to a crowd of kids huddled around the weapons rack. "Right now? Because—"

"Right now."

Aisha raised her hands in surrender. "Okay! Haha."

Beatrice led Aisha outside, around the back of the school.

"Do you have any electronic devices on you?"

"Yeah." Aisha pulled her phone out from her back pocket. "I have my—"

Beatrice made a grab for it, but Aisha pulled back.

Aisha chuckled. "Woah, Blaire. You're not getting this that easily."

"Hand it over."

"Yeah, no. How about you tell me—"

"Then you throw it." Beatrice pointed at the playground equipment. "Over there."

Aisha glanced at her doubtfully, and then shrugged and walked over to the swingset, setting the phone on the seat. She rejoined Beatrice with her arms crossed.

"Alright. What's up?"

Beatrice stared at Aisha. She'd thought about this a lot on the way over — what Aisha liked, what sort of way her brain worked. How do you give instructions to somebody who'd never taken them in her life?

Beatrice grabbed Aisha's hand and fell to her knees. Her voice went all waver-y, like she was about to cry. "Please. Please, Aisha — I don't know what to do."

Aisha was taken by surprise, but recovered quickly. Beatrice wasn't a very good actor — but Aisha was also the sort of person who saw what she wanted to see. "Don't worry! Whatever your problem is, I'm sure I can help you, Blaire. After all, each of us is a Suburbian, are we not? We share our burdens!"

Beatrice looked up at Aisha and nodded enthusiastically, her eyes wide. "Yes. Yes, and as one of your scouts—"

"Well."

Beatrice paused. "What?"

"You're not a scout, exactly." Aisha laughed, and pulled her hand from Beatrice's. "I know that's what I told Oliver, but — and if you want to be one, then by all means — but you're not, right now."

"I'm not a scout?" Beatrice wasn't acting anymore: she was, genuinely, a little bit hurt. It wasn't like she wanted to be one of Aisha's scouts, but she'd always thought that Aisha had wanted her to be one. "Why?"

"You don't take my orders." Aisha leaned down and patted Beatrice's shoulder. "Why don't you stand up and pull yourself together a bit, and we can chat about what's wrong, yeah?"

"Okay." Beatrice stood up and put in some effort to look extra distraught. "You remember when we talked to the Lucias? And they told me the truth about Caine — that he's the program that controls the robots?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he—" Beatrice dragged her palm over her eyes, and was surprised by how genuinely upset she felt in the moment. She must have been a better actor than she'd initially thought. "He, uh, wanted to talk to me. That's where Miles drove me. And he told me — tonight, at the party, he's going to attack. And I don't know — uh, hah, sorry." She cleared her throat loudly. "I don't know how to stop him."

"Well. Hm. Tonight's the party."

Beatrice nodded.

"Are you sure—"

"Positive. Please help me. Please—"

"Okay." Aisha waved her off. "Because I trust you, and I saw Miles take you with my own eyes — we can set up a team of scouts around the fences. Keep an eye on it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Sure. Of course." Aisha pounded her chest. "Tonight Suburbia will be safer than it's ever been before!"

Chapter Thirty-Four: The Rebel of Red Solo Cups

Beatrice stared down the gold midi dress with possibly the most genuine distaste she had mustered for anything in her entire life.

"I just don't see why I have to," she said again, reaching forward to smooth back the rumbled bodice.

Ann, who was already draped over the arm of Eliza's couch in a cool lavender taffeta, popped a synthesized grape into her mouth and made a face. The light bathed her in a soft glow like the roll of fog turned gold in the twilight. Her hair stuck to the sides of her face, plastered by sweat, and the ruffled edges of her wrap dress draped from her shoulders and ruffled where her knees were tucked into the cushions. As Beatrice stared, she felt physically pulled at by the chest, like someone had reached down her throat to her heart and was wrenching it forward.

Ann ate another grape. "Kinda funny that out of everything this is what you're the most resistant towards, Bea."

Eliza was wearing a blue and white striped gown that came down to her knees. She had fixed her eyeliner — now her eyelids were painted blue — and it would've made Beatrice think of a bruise if it wasn't so bright. "Everyone's going to be looking at you. You're Blake Blaire's daughter."

"So?" Beatrice looked down at her plain, black sweatshirt and bluejeans — *not* Blake Blaire merch. She looked back at the dress and wondered again where Eliza possibly could have gotten it. "I'll just go in what I'm wearing right now. I can't imagine that everyone's going to dress up."

Miles looked up from where he was seated in the corner. He was wearing one of Salim's poncho dress shirts — Ann had stolen it for him, and it was slightly too big, coming down to brush the hem of his ruffled dress pants. "Are you kidding? No matter how bad shit gets, people jump at an opportunity to celebrate, Blaire. It's human nature."

"It's homecoming," clarified Eliza.

"Right," said Beatrice. "Fine."

She grabbed the dress and disappeared into the bathroom. It was a cool fabric, and scratchy, stiff from years of disuse and ringed in suspicious red stains around the bottom hem. Pockets were sewn into the folds of the skirt so that you couldn't tell they were there if you weren't looking for them. Beatrice tucked the flash drive away and glanced up at the mirror.

Eliza's mirror was cracked, and cloudy, but that didn't stop Beatrice from seeing her face. It had been so long since she'd looked at herself without her mask. Miria had been right — she did look like her mother. The slant of her jaw, the pucker of her cheeks around sunburns, the malted, overbaked brown of her eyes, thawed until it was soft and malleable and eternally slipping away from her. Her darker skin —

covered with a sheen of sweat that she mopped away with a crumpled fist of toilet paper — and black hair were the only obvious differences from dream Blake's corpse. She felt reshaded. A few months ago that would've conflicted her. Now it just made her sad.

Beatrice would be seeing the real Blake soon enough, anyway. She was going to make her grand entrance at the party tonight. Somebody making the trip in had caught her on video yesterday — she was waiting outside somewhere. Somewhere in the world, Blake was watching. Even if Caine had faked all of her emails, she had to know that Beatrice existed. Blake's daughter was one of Homecoming's biggest draws.

Beatrice picked up the sheath for her sword, which she had set on the lip of the bathtub, and affixed it around her waist. Satisfied, she emerged.

"Oh, you look fantastic." Eliza giggled. "What did Ann say? Movie-star genes?"

Ann caught Beatrice's eye, and then looked back down at her grapes. "Yeah, Bea. You look nice."

Henry emerged from the upstairs, and Miles laughed aloud. He was wearing a pastel blue suit — obviously meant to match with Eliza.

Henry shot Miles a glare, and then he looked back at Eliza and his expression melted. "Eliza, you look—"

"Amazing, I know." Eliza flipped her hair over her shoulders, and then laughed and grabbed Henry's hand. "Not as amazing as you."

He blushed, averting his eyes, and Ann and her brother groaned.

"Alright," said Ann, standing and slapping the arm of the couch. "It's eight-forty. We should get going."

The night air was cool, and clean, and cut through with tension and distant chatter. Beatrice could feel it brewing overhead — a rainstorm.

As they walked Ann fell back to match steps with Beatrice.

"Yo," she said coolly. Theodore shouted something, and Henry turned back on them to break up the fight.

"Hey," greeted Beatrice.

Ann clapped her on the back, and used the opportunity to pull her into a half-hug. It burned so strongly Beatrice was surprised her dress didn't singe. Eliza probably wouldn't be too happy about that.

"Nervous?"

"Nah," said Beatrice, swallowing. "You?"

"Nah," echoed Ann.

Beatrice smiled, and her hand brushed up against Ann's hand, and she stopped smiling. She wanted to hold Ann's hand. She wanted to hold the dip of her thumb, and the heat of her skin, and the bend of her wrist. Beatrice wanted to feel everything Ann had ever felt. She wanted to carry it for her, so that every time Beatrice

looked her way, all she saw was Ann's smile, and they could burn right alongside each other — Ann's smile, and Beatrice's want.

"We're going to do it," Ann had told her last night like it was already true. "It's going to work."

Ann shifted, and the contact broke. The flames flaring around in Beatrice's stomach died down to a simmer, and she felt, suddenly, an ambiguous sense of shame. She followed the line of Ann's hand to the gym.

"Look how many people are outside."

Ann was right. The gym was completely surrounded.

Ann knocked their shoulders together. "We're gonna keep them safe."

Beatrice's hand slipped into her pocket. She felt Ann's gaze search for her own, and she looked away, and didn't reply.

At the front door they were met by a vaguely familiar young woman in a tight yellow pantsuit holding a clipboard. Eliza and Henry filed inside. As they did so, she made four marks on the paper, then looked up at the next in line.

"Blaire."

"Diane," greeted Ann with an amiable smile. That was it: Diane, Salim's assistant. "How are you?"

She frowned. "Everyone's talking about you."

Ann flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Well, I'd expect so. I look fantastic tonight."

Her nose wrinkled up like someone had twisted it. "No, I meant—"

"Better get back to work, yeah?" interrupted Ann, patting her on the elbow. "There's a lot of guests behind us."

She hesitated, and then looked down at the paper, and ticked off Beatrice's name, then Ann's. "You two may enter."

"You're a real one," said Ann, pulling Beatrice inside.

Beatrice barely recognised it as the gym. *Welcome, Contestants!* Was projected on the far wall in a glittering, auric script that looped and smiled at her, spelling out the words over and over again, as if someone might have missed them the first time. The windows had been cleared of broken glass, and were flung open, letting in the fading gilt of the evening sun and allowing a faint breeze to ripple the golden streamers that hung from the arc of the ceiling's pylons. The lighting, too, had changed somehow, faded from the bright fluorescent that ringed of sweat and adrenaline to a warm, soft glow. It felt both foreign and intimate at the same time, like Beatrice's bedroom after — in times of excessive boredom — she would shift around all the furniture.

For the first half hour of the party Ann guided her through the attendants, bouncing from conversation to conversation with the grace of someone who was used to conversations. Beatrice, on her part, refused to engage with the festivities. She was

busy keeping her eyes locked on the main doors, waiting for her mother to make an appearance.

Ann scooped a helping of the bright pink, ambiguously alcoholic punch into her solo cup. They had broken away from the chatter to raid the snack table. Beatrice was on her fifteenth little hors d'oeuvre thing — they were some kind of fancy bread with cheese and sauce, and she was currently stacking them atop one another to see how many she could balance. She figured that the more she ate, the more Blake was out a dollar.

Ann took a sip from her cup and made a face. “You don’t seem like you’re having fun.”

“Nope,” said Beatrice.

“Waiting for Blake?”

“Or Caine. I’m sure he’s gonna make his move tonight.”

Ann scooped a drink for Beatrice, holding it out with a confident grin. “And we’re ready.”

Beatrice sighed into her hands, and then reached out and begrudgingly took the cup. “I’m just worried about the Lucias. If we sent them out there and he isn’t moving the robots—”

“It’ll be fine,” said Ann. “Trust me, Bea. Humanity isn’t going down that easily.”

“Hey!” Beatrice and Ann both looked up to see Aisha, who was waving them down, and pushing through the crowd rather roughly to reach them. “Beatrice! Ann!”

“Aisha,” greeted Ann. “How’s the home front?”

She shrugged. “I’ve got kids set up all along the outermost fence, but everything’s been quiet so far. Beatrice better be right about this. If I made them miss the party for no reason they’re gonna be mad.”

“She’s right,” said Ann as Beatrice averted her eyes. Ann put her arm around Beatrice’s shoulder. “We’re sure of it. Caine’s going to make some sort of move.”

“Plus Blake’s gonna be here,” said Beatrice. “She’s gotta be a real thorn in his side. If I were him I’d want her dead.”

“Yeah.” Ann’s hand tensed on Beatrice’s shoulder. “You know, sometimes I—” She cut off abruptly.

“What?”

“No, just—” Ann gestured with the hand holding her cup, and the liquid sloshed up, lapping at the brim. “Why did she even decide to do it like this? She’s gotta know it’s putting kids in danger.”

Beatrice grabbed Ann’s hand to steady it. “Perhaps it’s for entertainment value.”

Ann’s pinky looped Beatrice’s. “Probably.”

Aisha nodded. “She knows what draws viewers.”

“Man. Fucking annoying.” Ann stared into her cup and watched her eyes gyre in the sheen of the liquid, brown tinged a bright pink. “Your mom makes me mad, Bea. I’m going to go get another drink, chat some people up, make myself feel better. Don’t move, yeah?”

“Sure,” said Beatrice, stacking another mini-pizza onto the leaning tower, which she had managed so far to preserve.

“I’d better go as well.” Aisha held up her cell. “Caine texts you — phones you, anything — and you call me, alright?”

“Of course.”

When her tower reached ten hors d’oeuvres high they all toppled, spilling onto the scuffed gym floor, and a few kids backed away. Beatrice thought about leaving them there, but unlike wasting Blake’s money, making a mess was only likely to hurt whoever was gonna clean the gym up. She crouched down and scooped the spilled appetizers.

When she stood she was met with a determined looking Eliza.

“Oh,” said Beatrice. “Hey.”

Eliza’s head tilted. “Hey. What’s your last name, Blaire?”

Beatrice squinted. “My—”

“Exactly.” Eliza shook her head. “I swear to god. Sometimes you two really get on my fucking nerves.”

“Sorry, sorry—” Beatrice was taken aback by Eliza cursing, and it made her hesitate a little. Eliza waited patiently for her to catch her bearings. “What are you talking about?”

“I came over here to see if you knew what Ann had been saying.”

“Like, in general?”

Eliza nodded to where Ann was talking to a muscular girl with red hair. “To the contestants. And me, a few seconds ago.”

“Oh,” said Beatrice. “No.”

Eliza grinned, a little, and leaned forward. “She’s been calling you Beatrice Archon.”

Beatrice blinked. “She’s been—”

Eliza leaned back on her heels. “Just thought you should know. In case you minded.”

“I don’t—” Beatrice was struck with several confusing emotions at once. “She’s — well. She doesn’t like ‘Blaire’.”

“Yeah,” agreed Eliza. “Hates it. You know we all might die tonight, right?”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It’s a possibility. I’m just — putting it out there. If you have anything unresolved.” Eliza laughed at Beatrice’s discomfort. “Okay. Right. Now that I’ve shared that, I’m going to go bother the DJ — if you want to come—”

She gestured to a boy sitting in front of some miniature speakers.

“No,” said Beatrice. “Thanks, but I’m — uh, busy.”

“Cool,” said Eliza. “Have fun stacking those tiny foods. If you hear a sudden shift in genre within the next few minutes that was probably me.”

Beatrice waved awkwardly as Eliza retreated and then tried to revisit the new information she had learned about Ann. It was hard, though, because every time she thought about it she hit some mental block of dizziness and warmth from which she never wanted to leave. It was easier than contemplating why Blake was continuing to ignore her — though that almost made a strange sort of sense. More than that, really: anything else would have been strange. Beatrice was used to her mother being a distant, almost mythical figure — the kind that wasn’t directly visible. She ate another hors d’oeuvre and tried not to be angry at Blake for finally reappearing just when Beatrice didn’t need her.

Ann reappeared a minute later holding her solo cup, now three-fourths empty. She seemed significantly more cheerful — apparently her mission to make herself feel better had been a success. Beatrice wondered if Ann would call her Beatrice Archon to her face.

Ann grinned, and Beatrice took a deep breath. “Bea!”

There was a pause.

“Yep.”

“Yep!” Ann was staring at her. “You — uh.”

Beatrice laughed. “What?”

“Did I tell you that you look nice? Because you do.”

“You look nice as well,” retorted Beatrice. “Better than nice. You look — amazing.”

“Cool, cool. We’re in agreement.”

“Yep.”

Ann grinned, and then nodded towards the middle of the gym, where kids were dancing like people who had never been taught to dance — clumsily tripping over one another, not quite on the rhythm of the song. It was kind of cool to see so many people in such fancy clothes spinning around, though. Almost like how she imagined a pre-apocalypse homecoming would look.

“There’s a lot of people dancing, huh?”

“Yeah.” Beatrice nudged Ann’s shoulder. “Uh — Do you want to?”

Ann grabbed Beatrice’s hand. “Let’s fucking go, dude.”

Beatrice laughed, and let Ann pull her into the crowd.

They weren’t very good at dancing. Beatrice had never done it before in her life, and it was obvious that Ann hadn’t, either, because her feet ended up more on Beatrice’s toes than the floor. For a single, blissful minute Beatrice could almost pretend

that she was a normal teenager, and this was a normal prom, and the most she had to worry about was whether Ann would ask her on a second date.

And then in Beatrice's pocket her phone buzzed, and her blood ran cold.

"Oh, fuck." She hesitated, her hand hovering in the folds of her dress, and then grabbed Ann. "C'mon."

"What?" Ann followed as Beatrice pushed through the door that led into the rest of the school. "Where are we—"

"Shush." Beatrice pulled her phone from her pocket, and the door slammed shut behind them. It was darker in the hallway — the chatter and light of the party seeped through the marbled glass of the door, fuzzy like a distant memory. "I think Caine—"

She trailed off as the screen of her phone lit up.

Oliver: We're here. You were right, it's practically empty. Have you or Ann text when...

The rest was cut off by the edge of her screen.

"Holy shit." Beatrice dropped her phone, then cursed and ducked down to tuck it back in her pocket. Her hand came up to splay over her face. "Jesus Christ. It was — Oliver. Fuck. He fucking scared me, dude."

"Okay," said Ann. "Uh — haha. Okay. And that—"

"I don't want to." Beatrice grabbed for Ann's hand. "I don't want to go talk to him. I don't want to—"

"Beatrice—"

"I know, I — I know." Beatrice laced her fingers through Ann's, and then withdrew them, slipping them up to feel for Ann's wrist for her pulse. Ann took her by the palm, stilling her.

"Why'd we come in here?"

"To check. If we're all about to die."

Ann shrugged awkwardly. Beatrice could feel her in the air between them — like Ann had gravity. "I just — I mean, it's not exactly the only reason. A person would."

Beatrice waited for Ann to finish, but she didn't.

Her nose wrinkled. "You're so—"

Ann leaned closer, as if she had a secret. Her breath smelled saccharine. When she blinked, the ink of her eyes was so deep and precarious that Beatrice half thought the flutter of her eyelashes would cause it to spill.

"What am I, Beatrice?"

"Hah. Uh — real. Present. You're—"

The muffled song shifted from pop to something slower, and it thrummed in her chest, urging her forward. Ann's nose was inches from hers. She could've bumped it

if she nodded. It made her dizzy, being this close — like she was balancing on the edge of a precipice.

“Can’t say it.”

Ann’s hands were on the crook of Beatrice’s elbows, hot and heavy. The space between them was stagnant and sweet and so, so short. “Tell me.”

Beatrice tipped forward and kissed her.

As their lips bumped together, everything alighted, stoked to a steady, pulsing blaze where Ann laced their hands and tugged them absently. She tasted like breath and fruit and flame and cheap alcohol. Ann kissed her breath away from her, and her lungs and her stomach burned, heat prodding at the roof of her mouth like somebody had shoved a sparkler down her throat. It was hard to stand — she wanted, desperately, to melt, and look down at the floor and see herself, a pool of sweat and gasoline.

Beatrice broke away, and pulled in a shaky breath. The air was cool on her chest. “Ann—”

“Yeah.” Ann stared at Beatrice. She looked raw, and surprised, and not confident. “Haha. Fuck.”

“Uh,” said Beatrice, dumbly, before leaning forward to kiss Ann again.

This time was slower, and softer, more of a smolder — meant to smoke her out. Beatrice sighed against Ann’s lips, and in response Ann reached up to cradle her face with a tenderness verging on delicacy. Beatrice lifted to card her hand back through Ann’s hair, locking her arms over her shoulders — Ann was hers. Here, in each other’s arms, they belonged to one another. Beatrice pressed flush to Ann, and their teeth knocked, and Ann laughed.

“Hey,” whispered Ann, and Beatrice could feel the words on her lips. “Promise me, Beatrice — Beatrice, promise me you won’t fuck up today.”

Beatrice was a little bit out of it. She squeezed her eyes shut. “Promise—”

“That you won’t fuck up.”

“I’ve never fucked up once in my life.”

Ann smiled, then leaned forward and planted a fond kiss on Beatrice’s cheek. Beatrice was flooded by a sudden well of emotion — something sad, and desperate, which pushed at the beats of her heart and expanded outwards to the gaps in her ribs, pressuring her sharpened breath, spilling up and out of her throat so that she almost wanted to cry. It surprised her. It didn’t quite seem like what she was supposed to be feeling in the moment.

Then the contact broke, and the moment of disconnection seemed to stretch out into hours in front of them.

“Ann,” said Beatrice, pulling her into a choked embrace. She didn’t try to quell the burn of shame at the back of her throat. “We’re going to survive. I promise.”

Ann’s arms embraced her in return, delicately, as if she was taking time to think through every motion. “Together. Beatrice.”

Beatrice nodded mutely, and Ann was electricity on her tongue, a soft blaze of copper wires and magnetism. Ann pulled away carefully, her lips centimeters from Beatrice's so that she could still feel the faint pulse of her heartbeat, golden and flaming and alive. A combustion reaction.

And then a sudden squeal of feedback silenced the party outside.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Hors D'Oeuvres

Miles was cornered by Salim at the punch bowl.

"I'm not sure you should be drinking so much." Salim was using that annoying, disapproving tone of voice he always seemed to save just for Miles. They wore similar clothing — while Miles's top was black and gold, Salim's was a royal purple with silver coils like snakes or dragons or another animal that was really stupid and ugly.

Miles downed his cup. "Fuck off."

"I got some interesting information from one of the robotics members," said Salim, and Miles choked on his drink. "Namely that you're a traitor."

Miles pounded his chest, and coughed. "Uh — What? Where did—"

"Don't bullshit me." Salim's gaze was as cold and immutable as steel. "Let's do this somewhere else. My office."

Miles squinted. "Why does it matter where we are?"

"I'd rather not disturb the party."

"Oh, yeah, I bet. Disturbing a party is the least of our fucking worries tonight after you refused to listen to Ann about—"

"Stop," interrupted Salim. "I'm not doing this here."

"You think I want to be doing this at all?" Miles crossed his arms and stepped away. "People are going to die because of you."

Salim spit a little when he talked. "As I heard it, people are going to die because of you, actually."

"Whatever. You're fucking incompetent."

Salim caught Miles's arm. "Enough."

"Let me go!" Miles wrenched his arm away, but Salim's grip only tightened. "Let me — fuck."

"I'm not going to let you make a scene."

"I'm not the one making a scene! You're the one who confronted me!"

"No, no, no." Salim's face was contorted in anger, and it scared Miles. He was on the verge of shouting, now. Miles pulled his arm again, but Salim's grip only tightened, and he didn't know how to get him to let go — didn't know, couldn't breathe right, couldn't feel himself past his shoulder. "You did this. You have to face the consequences of your act—"

Salim was cut off by Miles panicking and punching him in the face.

The crowd around them yelped and scrambled back, so that Miles and Salim were in a little empty space of their own, ringed by eyes and hushed conversations. Salim stood slowly, like he couldn't believe what had just happened. He had let go of Miles's arm.

Salim cupped his eye, and then spat into his hand. Miles had knocked loose a tooth. "You stupid fucking bastard!"

Miles took a step back, but his exit was blocked by the people surrounding them. He didn't actually think he could win a fight against his brother.

"What makes you think you can treat me like this, huh? After I feed you — clothe you — make sure you and Ann are safe for your entire fucking lives? While keeping the last surviving city from falling apart?" Salim grabbed the front of Miles's shirt. He looked like he wanted to hurt Miles, really, really badly, and was only just holding himself back. "Stop giving yourself excuses for when you fuck up! You're not a kid anymore. You're nineteen. When I was nineteen—"

Miles didn't react to this. Since he had punched his brother his expression had gone blank and even — shocked into it, perhaps, by the ache in his knuckles. "Salim—"

"You're a kid? You think you're young?" Salim's hand bunched the fabric at his chest. "I'm twenty-five! I shouldn't have to be fucking — raising a child, much less a nation! But I accept my situation, and I make the best of it — something which you seem to be incapable of!"

"Salim." Miles's expression was still unreadable. It only enraged Salim more. "Stop it."

"No! I'm not going to fucking let you get away this shit anymore! You need to take some fucking responsibility!" Salim released Miles's shirt, and Miles stumbled back, slightly. It bunched where he'd grabbed it, fabric wrinkled. "When you were a kid you showed promise. You were a quick learner — and fast, and strong. I've never been more disappointed by anybody in my entire life."

"I'm sorry."

"And you always do this to me! You just — stand there. Manipulative little shit. For god's sake, show some fucking emotion!"

Miles's voice was shaking like a leaf. The rest of him was statuesque. He didn't really know what to say. "I'm sorry."

Salim's hand ran up his face, and the skin pulled like loose sheets — like the skin of somebody much older than he was. "Miles—"

They were interrupted by a squeal of feedback.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Huis Clos

As Beatrice and Ann pushed through the door a glitter cannon burst onto the gym, raining it in a fog of golden confetti. The contestants covered their heads, glancing around in confusion.

Ann brushed some glitter out of her hair. "What the fuck?"

To say that Beatrice was disoriented would have been an understatement. "I don't know."

There was some confused applause, and then an image popped up in place of the welcome banner — a 3d particle projection of what Beatrice recognized as the inside of one of the abandoned houses just outside of Suburbia. Standing in front of a PA system and staring up at the camera was a woman with a blank, white mask affixed to the bridge of her nose, so that the only visible part of her face was her smile. There was a small crackle of interference, and she grinned, and waved jovially.

"Holy shit," said Ann, and the room around them erupted into applause. Beatrice was silent. She didn't feel quite substantial, and was worried that if she spoke or moved at all something very delicate inside of her would shatter, like a gong made of sugar glass.

"Welcome," greeted Blake, and it was her voice, Blake's voice, "to the first ever official Blake Blaire Homecoming!"

The room devolved into a frantic, frothing cheer. Those closest to the projection stretched their hands upwards, as if for Blake to grab them and raise them out of the masses. It was the most homogenous that Suburbia ever had felt to Beatrice.

"And, further, let me wish you congratulations." She gripped the microphone. "Many of you have worked very hard and travelled great distances to be here today. I thank you, and the world thanks you as well!"

"She's so humble," whispered someone to Beatrice's right, and Beatrice was overcome with the urge to strangle herself.

"And, of course, a huge thank you to Suburbia. I'm just outside at the moment, but I couldn't have asked for a better—"

Her pleasantries were interrupted by a robot.

It was a police bot that broke down the door of Blake's hiding spot, and grabbed her around the neck, gun to her head. For one long moment — like the instant before the drop in a song — the gym was completely, deathly silent. Then the screaming started.

Ann had her phone to her ear. "Shit — Beatrice, they're here. Aisha says—"

She paused. Beatrice grabbed her arm, and pulled them to the exit, breaking out of the panicking crowd into the cool night air.

"The robots are overwhelming them." Ann pocketed the phone. "Aisha says they're not going to be able to hold much longer."

“Go,” said Beatrice. “I’ll talk to him. Distract him.”

Ann pulled her into a quick, tight hug. “I love you.”

Beatrice didn’t even get a chance to hug Ann back, or say it back — because she did love Ann — before Ann had let go and taken off for Suburbia’s cell tower. Beatrice’s body burned where Ann had touched it, but the feeling snuffed as she turned and ran for the headquarters.

The building was dark. Beatrice fumbled with the key so much that she dropped it twice, and then scrambled down the flights of stairs so quickly that if she’d fallen she would’ve broken her neck. She reached the hall leading to the server room, shaky hands finding the keypad above the handle.

“Hello, Beatrice.”

Beatrice froze. She clutched the key so tightly that its ridges dug white marks into her palm.

There was a metallic whir from the end of the hall. Beatrice, who was conditioned from years of fighting metallic sounds for her survival, whipped around and drew her sword in the same motion. The figure at the end of the hall was thin, and tall — not a Valvidan bot.

Her knuckles bloomed white, body stiff and tense and about to pass out. “Caine.”

He gave her a curt wave, and strode forward politely. Eliza’s robot moved unnaturally under his control, shoulders rolling and head lolling like they were buoys in an ocean storm. “I’m glad you made the right decision.”

“Why are you here?” He kept walking until the point of Beatrice’s sword was an inch from his chest, and Beatrice tried to steady her hands, but the point still wavered — she was human, after all. And the type of bad memories that lived in your palms. “I’m doing what you asked.”

“Well, not really,” said Caine, and his hand — Beatrice’s hand, the one she built for nearly this exact purpose — shot up and grabbed the Arakhene blade. “You set up defenses. Made it harder for me to get in. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Beatrice tugged at the sword, and when he didn’t let go wrenched, hard. Caine’s hand didn’t shift an inch at the motion, and he didn’t let go.

“I don’t blame you. I haven’t provided you with the motivation to work with me yet. But I still expected better.”

“Caine,” protested Beatrice as he raised his other hand to the hilt and wrested the sword away from her. “No — Caine, stop—”

“Think of this as an ideological purification,” said Caine, persistently raising the sword as Beatrice struggled desperately to take it back. “I’m helping you, Beatrice.”

And then he shoved Beatrice away, and slammed it down over his knee with more force than Beatrice thought was possible from Eliza’s pistons. With a sickening crack it snapped in half, and the pieces of the blade fell, bouncing off of the linoleum.

Under the fluorescent school lights they shone, throwing arcing, prismatic gleams of light as they tumbled and pitched, staining Beatrice's sight a blazing orange — as if she had looked into the sun — and then they settled on the ground and the effect was gone.

Beatrice stared at the broken sword. Caine's limelights tracked the shattered metal, and then swiveled to Beatrice, gauging her reaction.

"You have thumbs," said Caine after a moment. "Put them to use. Let's head in."

The room was pitch black, but illuminated in a flood of fluorescents as Beatrice flipped the light switch on the wall. Caine sighed in a way that was deliberate and self-satisfied and obviously meant to piss her off.

"Security system on," said Beatrice, and the computers lit up. Along the top was a series of cameras trained on each layer of the fences — the outermost of which were completely collapsed. Aisha's scouts had been pushed to the inner rings. "Code: Thomas07."

Caine paused, and then laughed. "Of course. I should've known."

Beatrice's trembling fingers found the harddrive in her pocket, and closed around the cool metal, sliding it up through the folds of the dress. Caine watched intently as she raised it to the computer.

"Wait—" he blocked it with his hand, and scanned over it with his limelight. Beatrice's hand shook.

"Wow. It's real." He looked up at her. "I was sure you'd bring a fake."

"You may be a coward, Caine, but I'm not. I'm not afraid of you."

The violent scene on the cameras was eerily silent. Beatrice watched, but didn't move to plug the harddrive in. Caine's eyes, a glowing red absence of life, bore into a spot about a foot above Beatrice's head. They flickered. The thrum of his silicone brain radiated a sickly, artificial warmth onto Beatrice's shoulders. He seemed angry by human approximation, but that wasn't really any way to tell. No one had ever been able to accurately diagnose Beatrice's emotions — and she wasn't anywhere near robotic.

Caine raised a finger. "Try to understand, Beatrice. I can't be a coward without an I."

"You're so full of shit." Beatrice's hand moved to her stomach, and she grasped at the bodice of the dress, scratchy golden nylon slipping past her fingers like smoke. Her head hurt, too, but there wasn't much she could do about that. "Sentient shit."

"I really don't understand why you're so reticent to the truth of my situation. It's better for you that I'm unfeeling." Caine spread his arms. "Wouldn't you prefer me to have deceived you rather than betrayed you? If I'm a liar it says something about me. If I do have feelings, and I've known you for so long, and you still can't sway me in the slightest towards your position, that says something about you."

Ann was there. The Lucias were there. Beatrice just had to wait. Distract him.

"People can be stubborn."

“Man. What a revelation. I’m glad it took you sixteen years and the complete destruction of your ego to figure out that humans are multidimensional.” His gaze shifted between the hard drive and her face. “What’s next? Are you going to lecture me on how you all have the ability to improve, and I don’t, and that’s what makes you better than me?”

“No. You don’t care.”

“You’re right. I don’t care. I don’t have any morality programming — other than that damn no kids caveat. The 2030 federal regulations for security were fucking barbaric.” He moved to nudge her hand towards the port. “But my morality means I understand humanity better than any of you humans ever will. My removal allows me objectivity.”

“You’re not removed from us.”

“Stop stalling, Beatrice.”

“Okay.” Beatrice turned, and hesitated, then slid it inside. Her hand stayed. “It’s done.”

“Yes,” whispered Caine, and there was no way he wasn’t sentient, because nobody could fake that kind of elation. On the screens the fences all fell at once. Robots flooded Suburbia like maggots, squirming and raw and visceral and a wet and deathly white under the cloud coverage. Beatrice didn’t look at him, but bowed forward slightly, allowing his ecstasy to roll over her, diluted to an even disgust. “Yes! I finally —”

And then Eliza’s robot collapsed. Beatrice heard it fall, and tensed slightly at the crash. She didn’t turn back to look.

Not a second later the room went dark, cameras flickering off like a sudden summer downpour.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Paradiso Aflame

Outside Suburbia burned.

Literally, in some parts, but mostly metaphorically. It burned with rage, and fear, and fire. Ann was stuck in the middle of it, at the top of a cellular tower, a doomsday machine clutched tight in her fist. EMPs were dangerous. Point them the wrong way and someone could get hurt.

That's why Ann was pointing one at everybody.

Oliver: Are you ready?

Ann: yeah. bea?

She didn't text back. Ann frowned.

Ann: I think she's ready

The tower reverberated beneath her from a sudden collision, and Ann looked down to see a policebot with its taser locking around the bottom rung. Before she could brace a shock ran up through the metal. She felt a sudden pain, then pins and needles, and her hand that was locked around the rung below her seized up — like her entire arm had a charlie horse. Her phone slipped from her hand, and cracked against the pavement below like a firestart. She cursed, and glanced down, and even through a blur of tears it was clear the robot was gearing up for another shock.

And then Miles knocked it off of the tower with one clean swoop of Aisha's pole.

The police bot struck back immediately. Miles ducked, and its arm swung over his head. The crowd around them was running for the safehouses, and scouts were quickly giving up ground to the bots — they had receded to the inner ring of fences, and held them in the alleyways, the rotting metal corpses rapidly piling up around them. A police bot broke through the barricade at mainstreet, and people scattered, screaming. Aisha cut it down from behind, but it popped right back up again. By now, at least, most of the civilians had made it out of the line of fire. Ann glanced down at the shattered remains of her phone, and cursed again, and then looked back up at the bots — she had to wait. Just until she could be sure the EMP would get all of them.

The policebot managed a strike to Miles with its taser, and he lurched back, convulsing with a guttural scream. Ann considered leaping down from the tower to help her brother, but it was tall, and she wasn't sure she could make it in time, and then their plans would be at the very least delayed, if not ruined — but then it didn't matter, anyway, because someone else had the robot from behind.

"Get out of here, Miles," said Salim, lowering the metal folding chair he had used on the policebot's head.

Miles froze for a split second before leaping shakily to his feet, balancing clumsily on his stiff joints. He looked at the bot, which had collapsed to the side, and pointed up at Ann, saying something unintelligible.

Salim glanced up at Ann, and Ann waved. He looked back down to Miles, and grabbed his shoulder, leaning in to ask something.

“Guys!” shouted Ann. “It’s okay! We have a—”

And then Beatrice must have given up, because the fences fell, and suddenly the robots surged like a fallen electrical line. The scouts lost ten feet of ground in the span of three seconds, and Aisha stumbled backwards, and then fell to the ground, convulsing, as a police bot struck her in the side. Miles and Salim turned back to Ann, then fell as a guardbot materialized to strike Salim across the face.

And Ann pressed the button.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Don't Look Down

The house Blake Blaire had been held hostage inside of was more decrepit in real life than it had looked on the big screen. *But that's the way movies work*, thought Beatrice as she waded through the dead robots which clumped just outside of Suburbia's fence. *An idealization.*

The door was closed when she got there, and the windows dark. It was late — nearly eleven at night. And, away from the humanity of Suburbia, it was silent.

Rusted shut. She wrenched, and her breath tore from her tongue like her hands on old wood and nails and painted metal. She let go, and backed up, and then slammed into the door with her shoulder. It whined, and crumbled.

Inside was empty.

Beatrice stared into the living room for a moment, catching her breath, and then straightened. It looked like the room on the monitor — but Blake wasn't there. Actually, it looked like nobody had been there for years. Decades, even. Dust swam under the thin shafts of moonlight like something dead.

Beatrice backed out of the house, and turned down the street. She must have had the wrong one. It was the only explanation for why — after rescuing her mother, after watching her all of those years — why she still managed to avoid Beatrice. It was either that or Blake hated her.

No. No — she couldn't have left like that, not in the ten odd minutes since Caine's death it had taken Beatrice to escape Suburbia — and certainly not without a trace. Beatrice had the wrong house.

Eliza found her three hours later in the kitchen of house fifty-seven. Beatrice was pulling out the cupboards, and they were strewn around her like moving boxes filled with shredded spiderwebs and roach corpses. Not the best things to take with you.

Eliza's hand ran back through her hair. Her eyeliner was smudged, and her dress sat a bit askew, as if it had been caught on something. "Thank god."

Beatrice was still busy pulling out cupboards. She ducked down to check beneath the sink. "Hey, Eliza."

"We've been looking all over for you," said Eliza, pointedly. "Ann's worried."

"Fuck." Beatrice stood, and toed the ruptured marble tile. "Blake's not here."

"Yeah, um—" Eliza looked at the door. She wanted to leave. "Henry and I were talking about that. While we were setting up the Faraday cages last night. I think it's maybe possible that — all of those videos and stuff — well, they were never that great quality, right?"

Beatrice was staring into the sink like Blake might pop up from the drain. Her stomach ached where she'd been stabbed so long ago.

"And I'm not saying it's for sure. But he and I think it's likely that."

She didn't finish the sentence, but Beatrice didn't need her to. Caine had faked the emails. Deep-faking a video wasn't that much of a stretch for the most advanced AI on the planet.

The house seemed to be frozen around them. A time capsule from the pre-apocalypse — Beatrice had found a lot of stuff like that in the last few hours. Clothes, stuffed animals, skeletons. One of the conditions for living modernly was living among death.

"I know," said Beatrice, so that Eliza wouldn't have to finish. She was desperate to keep the truth sad and silent. Saying the words out loud would make them real.

Eliza had sombered, and was now mildly empathetic. She stared out of the windows at the hanging stars in a calm consideration, as if she was a judge steady in her convictions viewing a line of criminals put to death.

"I think it's just that nobody really wanted to give up on that hope. And he chose well — an action hero who we'd already be primed to worship."

Beatrice was quiet.

Eliza's brow knit in anger. "But Blake Blaire died. She died the night of the apocalypse. The Blake we all knew was never real."

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Rain in Suburbia

Salim cleared his throat. The Suburbians were crowded around him on the central green, seated on ripped lawn chairs and overturned buckets, not one of them wearing a mask. The grass was damp — it had rained practically nonstop for the past two days, and most of the Suburbians were wet as well, like the slicked stems of old candles. Most were carrying backpacks full of clothing and keepsakes rescued from the rubble. Some were handing out supplies. Luckily, the safehouses had been mostly preserved, and the EMP shot had caused minimal injury. It had been difficult to gather all of the Suburbians up in one place — a simple stroll around town felt like touring a warzone. Nobody wanted to leave their homes behind, as if once they'd turned away the infrastructure would collapse further.

The first place Beatrice and Ann had visited was Suburbia's headquarters. The Faraday cages they had installed around the water filters and 3d printers were intact, as well as the metal suitcases protecting the robotics equipment. The robotics club had spent the entire night before the party hooking up an EMP to Suburbia's tallest cellular tower. It wasn't like they could test it, so they had been stripped down to sweat and hope, waiting on bated breath for the flicker of the lights overhead.

The second place Ann and Beatrice had visited was the greenhouse.

It was toppled, the silky plastic which had made up its walls stripped and quartered on the floor. Ann hadn't been able to rescue many plants — most were crushed, layering the ground in a mosaic of earth-toned splatters so that it nearly resembled a crime scene.

"Oh, shit," muttered Ann, kicking a pulpy, misshapen tomato to the side.

"Well, that's the problem with throwing stones in glass houses, I suppose."

"We'll rebuild it," said Beatrice.

Ann nodded solemnly. "We'll rebuild."

Salim cleared his throat again, and chatter died off, silenced by his stony gaze.

"Thank you, all, for gathering here today on such short notice," he said, his hand moving to the side of the podium for support. "I know it's been a difficult few days. Our infrastructure has deteriorated. A lot of you have lost your homes to the robots, and clean-up has been an arduous task. Despite these challenges, I believe that Suburbia is strong, and that we will come out the other side stronger than ever before."

They murmured in assent. Beatrice sat beside Ann at the front of the crowd — a noticeable gap beside for Miles, who had taken off at the first opportunity, promising hastily to return eventually. Behind Salim was the PTA — Henry, Diane, Joseph. Aisha, too, though her right arm was propped up in a sling, and she had a purpling bruise over her left eye.

"Most importantly," said Salim, and they quieted. "For the first time in Suburbia's history we can afford to focus internally. It has become apparent that many

people we regarded as heroes were not deserving of our uncritical worship." He took a breath. "That's why it's finally time for me to step down as your leader."

There was a general expression of surprise from everyone but Diane.

"In my stead, I would like to appoint to office the only person I know who might love this nation more than I do. Someone who I have always admired." He looked down at the crowd. "Annabelle Archon, if you would accept, I want you to be Suburbia's commander in chief."

There was a shocked pause. He took a step back, and gestured her to the stage. Ann hesitated, and then stood, pacing slowly to take her place behind the microphone.

"Hey, Suburbia." She laughed awkwardly. "Uh — sorry. I'm a little bit caught off guard, right now, to be honest."

A few kids in the crowd laughed, and Ann gave the city a nervous smile.

"I do love Suburbia. And I do think we're going to get through this."

Beatrice's hand tensed at her side absentmindedly.

"But I have to decline."

Ann swallowed around the words, and Beatrice could hear it all the way from the back, because at the moment she was pretty sure that she could've heard a pin drop.

"We deserve more than this," said Ann, hands wringing on the makeshift podium. "My brother is right. We shouldn't worship anybody unconditionally. Even when Blake was alive, she was never that great of a person. Certainly not who we all thought she was — and nobody would be, in that position. So we deserve more than a figure to worship. We shouldn't have their leaders chosen for us. We — Suburbia — have the right to decide that."

Eliza cheered, and a few others joined in as well. Ann blushed, and Beatrice caught her eyes, shooting her a reassuring smile.

"So, uh — I'll run things, I guess, but only until we can have a fair election. And then it's up to us."

Eliza began to clap, and most of the rest of the crowd followed. Ann hesitated, then grinned, riding the wave of enthusiasm.

She leaned closer to the crowd. "My brother had gotten Suburbia through some pretty rough times, that's for sure, and I'm thankful for him. He's protected us. He's kept us alive."

Beatrice wondered what Miles was doing right now. Where was he waking up?

"But that's not what we need right now — what we need right now is to tear down all these fuckin' walls!"

The crowd cheered, and Beatrice smiled, and then she felt like throwing up. Ann jumped down from the podium, and happy people surrounded her — Eliza, Henry, Aisha. She nodded as they said something unintelligible, and shook people's

hands, laughing warmly as she navigated the crowd. She looked up, and met Beatrice's gaze, and then pat somebody on the back and hurried away from the handshaking.

"Hey," said Beatrice, standing. "You were great. Like, holy shit. Hot as hell."

Beatrice trailed off as Ann grabbed her hands.

"Thanks." Ann's hands shook Beatrice's a little. She was excited. "I was thinking about — well, if I was elected, it might be cool to have the Apocalypse Angels become partnered with Suburbia. Like, officially. Then you wouldn't need the delivery bots anymore."

"Uh huh," said Beatrice.

Ann leaned closer. "And — you know, if you're dating me, and I'm technically the temporary president of America — then I'm pretty sure that makes you the first lady."

"Ann," said Beatrice. "Just in case I die tomorrow. I love you."

Ann stared at her.

"Aw," she said, at last. "Uh. Don't think you've got to worry about that one too much, to be honest, angel."

"Well, you know, I thought it would take seventy years," said Beatrice. "And then I would die."

"Seventy years—"

"To kill all of the robots."

Ann nodded silently. "Guess you were ahead of the mark by a bit."

"By a bit," agreed Beatrice.

"Well," said Ann. "Now you've got time to help me take down the fences!"

Beatrice felt a familiar swell of emotion climb her throat, slicking her windpipe like thin milk. She missed Caine. She missed him so, so much. After last night she had taken one of Aisha's swords and slammed it over the stiff remains of the outer fences, just to see if she could break it.

She could.

It hadn't even been that hard, and it made her think that maybe these types of things had been easy all along — though there was also the possibility that Aisha's back-up swords were just generally kind of shitty. When Beatrice had looked down at her cheap, fractured reflection in the shards of blade, and dropped them into the desert for a soft thump of anti-climax, she had felt very, very strange about it all. It represented something to her. An ideological purification.

"And have a million bakesales?" asked Beatrice.

"Yeah, and possibly also establish a constitution."

Beatrice nodded, and smiled, and it took a lot of effort to do. "It's going to be a lot of work."

"Fuck yeah it is."

She hesitated, and then held out her hand.

"I'm in. For Suburbia."

"For Suburbia," echoed Ann, grinning. She grabbed Beatrice's hand and shook it vigorously, and then pulled her into an embrace.