

War, and Various Sundries

A Novel by

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The latest barrage boomed a final time before the battlefield quieted. A sprinkling of the planet's red clay settled over everything like snow. Zig peered over the lip of dirt separating her from the no-man's land between them and the enemy lines. Five hundred thousand years of human warfare and they still hadn't come up with a better idea than hiding in holes while the enemy threw artillery at them. The payload was different but the tactics had yet to progress. It was bullshit, in her opinion. But before she could so much as grumble or spit clay, her favorite person in the whole war slid into the hole with her.

“Everything okay over here?” Sgt. Jax asked.

“My ears are ringing and I'm starving. But if you're talking about enemy activity: nah, man. Not a damn thing. All clear.” Before he could speak, she went on. “Let me guess, some droid got blown to hell in the last blast and you need me to slap his ass back together before we attack at O-two-hundred hours?”

“It's like you're a mind reader, Zig. Yeah, poor sucker got blown sky high. The boys are collecting his parts as we speak.” She pulled her lips back in a grimace, skin pulling unpleasantly. When was the last time she'd had a drink? Too damn long. But she began climbing out of the hole anyway. No way to go but up, she figured. She also figured she was wrong, but it didn't really matter. Jax followed behind. “At least it wasn't a human.” He said.

“Yeah, I guess. But I ain't gotta put bleeders back together. Fuck, I haven't slept more than two hours since we got to the line because these bastards keep getting exploded.”

“You didn't say you were tired.” They ducked into the tent she used for droid repairs.

“I ain't tired. Cpl. Hay brought by some crystal grade stimulants for me and the rest of the boys. I'm high as the stars right now. I may never sleep again.” She smiled widely and rolled up her sleeves, ready to assess the damage but Jax grabbed her arm.

“Be careful. With the crystal, I mean. That shit's nasty.” She slapped his back and mustered a dusty laugh.

“It's only dangerous if you stop taking it. And it ain't likely I'll get the chance to do that.” His mouth twisted in discomfort.

“We'll be pulled off the line soon.”

“Not before we all get ourselves blown to bits. Look, I don't need the party line, Jax. I knew what I signed up for. What I need right now is to patch this poor bastard up.”

He pulled away, trying for discipline and authority. He didn't really manage it but they'd known each other for a long time, she'd probably forgive him.

“Right. Get to it, Cpl. Zig.”

She gave a lazy salute and an even lazier 'aye-aye' then turned back to the bot as he left the tent. The bot was in bad shape. She'd need to re-attach his right leg, luckily blown at the joint, replace several fingers that had super-heated together and then she'd have to check his processor. He'd probably performed an emergency shutoff upon impact. She quickly took care of the physical problems, using the dwindling supply of parts in the tent. She needed more but all of their requests had been ignored. When he was back in one piece she hesitated- this was her least favorite part. Upon waking up, bots who'd been hit were difficult. Some screamed and thrashed, others acted like they'd just been booted up. Worst was when they just sparked and let out the black smoke of mechanical death. She hated them all, but she was the only one who knew anything about droid repairs, so it was her job. It wasn't what she had signed up for either but nothing ever worked out like you expected. So she reached under his head and found the switch in his soft hair. Seconds later he opened up his eyes and stared at her. Hesitantly, he asked. “Am I okay?”

“Yeah, man. I patched you up. It wasn't even that bad.” She lied. If he'd been human, he'd be dead or crippled for life but droids were mentally fragile after a hit and preferred the gentle touch.

“What's your name?”

“Pvt. Kamal.”

“All right Kamal, can you run a diagnostic run for me? You see anything out of place?” He stilled, still staring up at her. Then he twitched.

“My right femoral connection is severed and I cannot move the limb. Sensors in all fingers are faulty.” She nodded and reached under his knee to feel the frayed wire. Twisting it together quickly to avoid the shock was tricky but she tried to smile reassuringly at the bot. Her face hurt even trying it but he was still staring at her in something between wonder and curiosity. “What's your name?” He asked. Like it wasn't right there on her uniform.

“I'm Cpl. Zig. Give me your hands.” She talked him through the sensor recalibration then pulled him up to sit. “Anything else?”

“I have no outer covering.” She paused for a second, most droids couldn't wait to get rid of the external 'skin' they were equipped with. Military bots thought it illogical to look human as they were designed solely so humans wouldn't have to fight. It was some sort of cultural pride thing, she figured. They wouldn't tamper with the skin themselves but if a part was replaced or it was burned off they didn't ask for a replacement.

“You want skin?” He nodded. “Sure thing, kid. That's the one thing we got plenty of.” She sprayed it on and endured the unwavering stare while it set and turned the consistency of human skin.

“Well, you're all done. Best head back and check in with your CO.”

He stood and nodded. “I don't know how to thank you, Cpl. Zig.”

“You ain't gotta. But if you insist, a simple thank you will be fine.” She was tempted to deactivate him and send him to HQ for someone to look at his code. Seriously abnormal behavior. But she didn't think they'd do much more than turn him off and use him for parts.

“I do have to express my gratitude. You saved my life. So, thank you.” He stood up straight and

looked her in the eye when he said it. The fact that bots didn't blink as often as humans had never bothered her before but they usually had better things to do than stare at her.

“Just doing my job.” He inclined his head formally and left her wondering if maybe she should cut back on the crystal. The whole thing was utterly bizarre.

“Hey Zig, you done? We got hot mush.” Jax stood in the flap, beckoning and she followed.

“Yeah, I could do with some food. At least that makes sense.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. Too much crystal, man. Haven't you heard? That shit's nasty.” He cracked a smile and put an arm around her shoulder, shoving her along.

The damn bot was everywhere she turned. Just on the edge of her sight. She thought it might have just been the crystal, it could cause hallucinations if taken more than five times a day. And she didn't bother with counting. But she could've sworn that he was everywhere. He brought in the latest artillery victim, was assigned to the same clean-up detail and even hovered around the entrance of the mess tent. Even at night on watch she could almost feel eyes on her. It made her trigger finger itchy. Like a sniper watching her, waiting for the perfect moment to take her out. So by the time Pvt. Kamal slipped into her foxhole to offer a full canteen, she'd had about enough. She couldn't be looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life because some droid had decided to shadow her.

While he was still catching his balance at the bottom of the hole, she pounced. His head knocked back against the dirt as her full weight landed on his chest, knees digging into his stomach and hands fisted in his collar, pushing into his throat. It wasn't as delicate as the human throat but it'd do in a pinch.

“What the fuck do you want, bot?” She snarled.

“Nothing. I swear!” His damn staring eyes were wide in fright. She pressed further into his neck

with her fists.

“You know,” she started conversationally, “If I press just a little harder, I could crush a very delicate piece of your anatomy. This little tube right here,” Her fingers uncurled enough to tap on what, in a human, would have been the carotid artery. “Passes coolant through the rest of your body. Kinda like blood. If I pinched it you'd be paralyzed and your processors wouldn't like that very much. Now, I don't know much about programming but I'll bet the results would be would not be pretty.” She bared her teeth at him, the bot looked sufficiently cowed. “So how about you don't try to lie to me, okay? Tell me what the fuck you want. You been up my ass since I patched you up and I wanna know why.”

“I don't want anything!” Her fingers tightened in warning, watching in fascination as his synthetic skin grayed. “But I just wanted to see if I could return the favor.”

She let up. “What favor?”

“You saving my life.”

“Oh- for fuck's sake.” She crawled off him. The bot scrambled upright, massaging his throat. “Let's get this clear, kid. I didn't save your damn life. I just put you back together. Just doing my job.”

“But still-”

“And!” She cut over him, not raising her voice but making it sharp. “And if I get hit, what the fuck you think you gonna do for me?”

“Ideally, I'd take the shot for you, Cpl. Zig.” He looked defiantly into her eyes, jaw stubbornly set.

She chuckled drily, taking the canteen he was going to offer her before this all started and swigging it. “If you take a shot for me, we'll be right back where we started cause I'll just have to save your life again.” His resolve seemed to lessen. Apparently he hadn't thought of that. So she went on.

“Look, if you really want to pay me back, you gotta find something else.”

“Like what?”

“Hell if I know. I'd settle for you not staring at me all the time. It's fucking unsettling.”

His eyes blazed with determination again, but he didn't look away. “I'll find something. I promise. I will pay my debt.”

She leaned her head back into the dirt and sighed. “Yeah, you fucking do that. Now get out of here. I got watch in an hour and I gotta not sleep before that happens.”

She flapped her hands in a 'shoo' motion and closed her eyes. Hearing the sounds of his departure she dared to open her eyes, only to find Jax standing over her smiling.

“You know, that's the most I've heard you say since Pandora.” He sat beside her and offered half of a sandwich. She took it but didn't answer. “I had been wondering why I kept seeing the same bot around. Didn't think they had debts of honor.” She took a bite and chewed slowly, still not talking. “Shit, Zig. Don't go silent on me now. Would you like to threaten me a bit? That always seems to cheer you up. I especially appreciated the way you told that bot exactly how you were going to kill it. It's always inspiring.”

“I would never threaten one of my superiors, Jax. That would be against regs.”

“Mm-hmm. And threatening bots? Where does that fall in the regs?”

“It's a little fuzzier on bots.” She intoned, voice flat, but he still cracked a smile.

“But seriously. What's up? You all right?”

She shook her head. “I'm good to go. Anything besides that?” She shrugged.

He nodded in understanding and clapped her on the shoulder. “Maybe lay off the crystal and have some coffee. You got watch soon and you get a bit morose without stimulants.” She snorted.

“Morose. Jesus. Get the hell out of here you over-educated fuck. Us grunts gotta do all the real work.” They shared a smirk and then he was climbing out and away. She thought she heard him say 'that's my girl' but she couldn't be sure. Zig almost smiled fully and reached into her pocket for another handful of crystal. It was just like candy- crunchy and sweet- with a kick of energy like a boot to the

chest. She shouldered her rifle and stepped off to relieve Locke, not thinking of anything.

Zig knocked her helmet off and gingerly peeled her scarf off the back of her neck. The frigid air hit the sweat-soaked skin and she sighed in relief. They were walking in one long line, headed toward another encampment. Breathing through a wide open mouth, she thought about this fucking rock. It was so undesirable it didn't even have a name, just numbers. From what she knew about the war, not much admittedly, they were fighting for territory. But who the fuck would want this place? Nothing but red clay, scrub brush and a few trees. No resources and the land wasn't really habitable. They'd proven that over the months they'd been stationed there. It was cold and there was no natural food source and the only water they'd found had been frozen solid or falling from the sky.

She scratched idly at the short hairs at the back of her neck, wishing she hadn't cut them so short. They itched like wildfire. The line paused in their march and she shoved her helmet back on but didn't do the chin strap. She'd almost rather be shot in the head than add another irritant under her jaw. The scar tissue itched enough as it was. They continued on and she continued to think. Zig knew the Brass would much rather she pay attention for enemy activity but she knew this area had been abandoned days ago. Defense in depth and guerrilla warfare was more the area of the Federation. The Hallites relied on their superior firepower almost all the time. And they'd hear *that* coming.

She wondered, detached as only the over-worked could, at the lack of wildlife. This silence would have been a sure sign that someone was creeping around on any other planet. Pandora had been crawling with more animals than she could count. It had been a bit of problem. At that point they'd been losing the war, protecting land they already owned rather than claiming new territory. The local fauna, mostly giant jungle predators, had been as dangerous as the Hallites as they found caves

and such to hide in. You could usually spot a Pandora veteran by their awesome scars and the tendency to shoot animals first and ask questions later. Maybe never. But there weren't even any birds or mosquitoes on this planet. Just them and the enemy. Good. Fantastic. That's just the way she liked it. But, she was a Lunar. She came from a huge farm on a small moon and she didn't see any use to land that couldn't even sustain rabbits. Jax was a Terran, maybe he'd understand. They mostly lived in huge cities, he'd told her. Terrans had different priorities. She'd ask later if they were planning on putting cities here. Maybe the LT had told him why they were here. Or maybe it was for bragging rights. Enlisted men weren't allowed to even know where they were in the galaxy so perhaps this planet was deep in Hallite space.

She didn't know why she was thinking about it, it didn't really matter. She went where she was told and shot what they told her to. But she had to think of something other than the incessant itch of dried sweat and the long empty walks. She pulled even with Jax and dug her fingers into the claw marks across his back, scratching through his wool jacket. She knew it'd be bothering him. Sweat and scars were the worst enemies. He nodded in thanks. They neared the new camp and Lt. Katz fell back to them.

“Okay kids. Enough rest.” They'd been hiking up and down rocky hills for nearly four hours. “Jax, Zig, Anara. The Captain wants you to scout out the left flank. Take out any sentries quickly and quietly then report back. If you're lucky, I won't put you on watch tonight.”

Back to business then. Jax and Zig nodded and handed their gear off to a couple of bots attached to their unit. Bots could have been sent out but they were less likely to come back alive. Too reckless. Humans were better for stealth missions. Anara, fresh-faced as only a newbie could be, appeared at Jax's elbow. They traversed their line and learned the new password from the company on the flank. Then they headed out, rifles out and ready.

They crept along for a couple minutes, there was no noise other than the almost lazy artillery

fire from back at the line. They paused behind a screen of brush, looking out at a clearing. Jax signaled them to take it at a run. Open ground was a great place to get picked off by a sniper. He counted down and then they were sprinting across the field.

They'd barely made it a quarter of the way across when they heard the crack of a shot. Immediately Jax and Zig dove back toward the scrub, crawling the rest of the way. It wasn't cover but it'd do for concealment as they returned fire. From their screen of bushes they tried to figure out where the sniper was.

“One man. Up a tree, two o'clock.” Barked Jax and she swung her rifle that way and started firing. Before he could fire back Zig took him out. Watched his limp body fall from his perch. She stayed still, scanning the trees for more enemies but Jax signaled the all clear. She took a deep breath then thumbed the safety back on her rifle. Combat had a way of clearing your mind of all noise. She kind of loved it.

When she scrambled out of the brush, a droid was kneeling over the new girl, working quickly. A MedDroid, then. They had a creepy tendency to just appear when needed. As she approached she could hear him talking in a low and soothing voice. That ran out about as fast as the new kid's blood. Her gut was shredded. Nothing for her now. Jax knelt on the other side and joined the chant of calming lies. Zig stood behind him, switching between watching for enemy activity and staring down at the scene. The kid eventually died and Jax let her go, mind already back on the objective. But Zig was now watching the MedDroid. He sat there, blood already flaking on his white hands and stared like he was memorizing every detail. Except bots rarely forgot anything. Figuring he might be malfunctioning, she crouched beside him.

“Whatcha doing?” She checked his tags. “Hey, Eugene. What's up man?”

“Trying to hold on,” Answered the droid, not looking up. Good, she'd had enough of droids looking at her, but she wouldn't hold for being ignored either.

“Holding on to what? Her? She's gone, nothing can help that.” He shook his head and looked up at her. His eyes were dark as death. She wouldn't want that to be the last face she ever saw.

“I'm trying to hold onto her memory.” He clarified. “MedDroids hold a subroutine in case of death in the field. Our memories of the person are wiped clean so that we may go on to the next without feeling.”

“Why didn't they just program you without feeling?” Asked Jax, having scouted ahead already. Zig just breathed out, mouth twisting up in something like revulsion.

“They can't help it. Synthetic feelings are a byproduct of their human behavioral coding.” She turned back to the distraught bot. “Do they really make you delete them after they die?” She had seen a lot of shit but that was cruel even so. “Do you *want* to forget?” She asked, mouth hard.

“No I don't want to forget.” He snapped, rubbing absently at his hands, peeling off dried blood. “Why would I wish to forget even a single person who died?”

“That ain't right.” Jax eyed her, and signaled that they should probably move before they drew more enemy fire. “Look, I can help you, I'm a mechanic. You get her back to the line and when we get back, I'll find a way to get rid of the subroutine.”

“You'd do that? Why?” He looked stunned.

“It ain't right. I already fucking said. Now get the hell out of here. There's no way I can help you if you get blown up. Just be ready.” He nodded and shouldered the body of the kid, ready to heft her back.

“Thank you.”

She just shook her head and flicked the safety off her rifle and headed toward their target. When Jax caught up with her, he grabbed her shoulder and pulled her behind a rock pile.

“What the fuck was that about? You don't know anything about programming.” She shrugged.

“I'll find someone to help. Bribe, threaten, whatever. God, I try to do something good and

suddenly everybody's up on me.”

“Because you never do anything good, Zig.” She looked at him for a long moment.

“Well, that's true enough. But just once never hurt anyone. Besides, our own personal MedDroid would be mighty useful.” He huffed a laugh and checked that the coast was clear and signaled her to follow him, like she ever did anything else.

They neared the enemy post, moving on silent feet, rifles at the ready. They'd been on scouting patrols together so often that it was almost a hindrance when someone else came along. They barely had to look at each other to know what the other one was thinking and the plan of attack. Newbies had to be coddled and talked through everything. It was easier when they were alone but that didn't mean she had wanted the new girl to die. But Zig pushed it all back with the ease of long practice. The mission was the only important thing. The post was manned by three soldiers. They shared a quick glance and then split, signing to rendezvous in ten minutes. They were quick and efficient though, she doubted they would need more than five.

Jax sneaked around to the left to deal with the two there and she faded right, headed for the one scout, looking intently in the wrong direction. Superior firepower, they may have, but the training was lackluster at best. She crept until she had a good angle and then looked through the scope, sighting up the shot, breathing out steady and confident, slowly squeezing- but then she paused. Black hair, almond eyes, that upturned nose...

“Zag?!” The soldier spun to face her fully, bringing up her gun but Zig was already barreling towards her. By the time she could have shot, Zig was already close enough to smack it to the side, hard enough to jolt it out of her hands. “Zag?” She cried again, pinning her enemy's arms to her sides as she searched the familiar face. But it wasn't Zag. Her twin's face had always been separate from her own, totally different to the one person who saw it's likeness in the mirror. Same and yet not the same. This bot (Now that she was holding on she could tell it was a bot) didn't look like her sister. No, it

looked like more like Zig.

“Who are you?” She demanded, shaking her. The droid didn't speak, just stared, mouth open in shock. She felt a tingling down her spine, that helpful second sight/sixth sense that had, when followed, kept her alive all these years. She had to get out of here, something was coming, it was time to meet Jax at the rendezvous. But- without thinking she grabbed her doppelganger's hand and dragged her away. Don't think, don't reason. Just react, just move. She could hear her old drill sergeant in her head. Training meant she didn't have to think. Thinking got newbies dead. She had just reacted, bring the bot along. Assess later. The droid never stumbled, keeping pace as only someone with the exact same stride could. It was like running hand in hand with her sister, back when they were still children. She felt like laughing for a second but they were technically running for their lives.

Jax was not pleased when she trotted back to him, dragging the droid behind her, obviously in an enemy uniform. She tried to explain- but words were never something she'd been good at.

“What are you thinking here, Zig? It's the enemy.” She pressed her lips together tight.

“You don't understand. Look at her, I thought she was my sister. I couldn't take the shot.”

“Your sister.” He said, disbelieving.

“Yeah, remember? Just last week you couldn't get over how my mother named her twins Zig and Zag? You thought it was hilarious.”

“But it's not your sister.”

“You're right. She looks more like me,” She said, a little hysterically. She couldn't seem to catch her breath or her thoughts. “My sister's face is much more-”

“I don't get it.” Said the bot, speaking for the first time. Christ, even her voice was the same.

“Why is your name funny?”

There was silence while both of them look at her and she stared back.

“Look,” started Zig, trying to speak softly and carefully even when she felt like the entire planet

was sliding off it's axis. "I'll explain later. Okay? How 'bout you just wait over there while the sergeant and I chat, yeah?"

"Sure." The droid shrugged and walked out of hearing distance then put her back to a rock, crouching low. Jax looked at her again.

"What's your plan here? We can't keep it. We can't even trust it, it was in that patrol, it would have killed us given the chance." She clenched her fists and breathed out, ignoring the stuttering of her lungs.

"I don't know. But I'm not leaving her. I can't."

"Why does that damn thing look like you? Why is it fighting for the other side? You can't trust it, Zig. It'll kill you, soon as your back is turned. Not saying it's malicious. That's just the way bots are. They can't fight their programming, you know that. It--"

"Would you fucking quit that? It's not 'it' it's 'she'." He looked at her, face stony.

"What is wrong with you? Do you hear yourself? You're talking about it like it's a human. You put them back together, you know they're not. They're just machines, slaves to their programming."

She looked back at the bot. She couldn't leave her. It didn't matter why she looked the way she did or that she was an enemy scout. She just knew that the only right course of action was to keep her close. Like the MedDroid, she was acting on feeling, something she didn't have a whole lot of since she'd they'd been shipped to the line. Feelings drove her, said this was the only thing to do. Maybe it was the ancestors her mother talked about, maybe some cold and cruel god, she didn't really care. This was right path, when everything was so very wrong. She just had to convince Jax of the truth. But words had always run dry for her when she most needed them so she moved. Marched right over to the bot and crouched beside her. She gazed at her with dull eyes so like the ones she saw in the few reflective surfaces they had on the front. Like they'd seen the same things she had and grown unfeeling to cope. Mind made up she pulled her knife from it's sheath, put it in the bot's hand and pressed the

blade to her own throat.

“If you're going to kill me, do it now.” Jax shouted in alarm and rushed forward but she tightened her grip on the bot's hand around the knife. “Do it. It's what your programming demands, right? Prove him right, it wouldn't even be that hard. Just kill me. Or, if you'd rather, come with me.” She dropped her hand and stared right into the droid's eyes, wondering if she was wrong. But even if she was, she wouldn't interfere, that feeling was still there, pushing her forward. Training. No need for thought. Shoot, move, communicate. Don't freeze up, just move. They stared at each other like mirror images and then the knife lifted away.

“I'm not going to kill you. You're not the only one who wants answers. I wish to come with you.” Zig smiled, but before she could do anything else she was hauled up by her web straps.

“What the fuck was that?” Jax shouted, shaking her sharply. “She could have killed you, you insane junkie. What the fuck is wrong with you? You wanna die?”

“That was kind of the point. And, in case you hadn't noticed, I'm alive. Now, help me find a way to bring her with us.” She'd won but there was no satisfaction in this victory. Their friendship had started to crack under some unknown pressure. Jax gritted his teeth.

“Fine. I'll get us a spare uniform. We'll drag her in for repairs.” She nodded, not wanting to add any more pressure to the fissure already forming between them. She had had to do what she'd done but keeping Jax close was just as important. He turned to leave but decided he wasn't done speaking. “I swear to god, if you ever pull something like that again, I'll kill you myself. What the fuck. Were you even thinking?” He shook his head and threw her away from him. She didn't go far, already braced for violent action. Well, if he needed to beat her up to repair their relationship and restore the pecking order, she'd probably let that happen. She'd fight back though. But that was for later. She turned to the bot.

“Hey, kid. What is your name, anyway?” She'd been watching the whole scene but didn't say

anything.

“I'm Pvt. Mei.” Zig nodded and helped her up.

“Welcome to the Federation Army, Mei.”

“All right, Mei. You're coming with me.” Mei looked up through the cloth they'd tied around her face to disguise her.

“Where are we going?”

Zig threw her a rifle. “Scouting. Jax is under some notion that we can't trust you to stay here- so you're coming.”

Mei nodded and Zig scoffed.

“You're acting as if that made sense even though it's just Jax being paranoid like usual. It isn't as if the last time we went out our third wheel got killed or anything.” Zig tsked her tongue against her teeth and then crunched into a handful of crystal.

“Aren't you worried I'm going to learn more about your military operations by going on a scouting mission than I would if I stayed sequestered here?”

“Aw, man. Don't let Jax hear you say shit like that. He might literally explode. And, to answer your question. Nope. And if you really were here spying, I wouldn't care.”

Mei squinted at her in suspicion.

“What do you mean you don't care if I'm a spy?”

She shrugged. “Probably what I just fucking said. Why? Are you really a spy?”

“I'm beginning to see why Jax is concerned. And would I really tell you if I were?”

“Nope. But you're forgetting something Mei. Besides the fact that I really just can not care about the possibility of you being a spy for the enemy, there's another thing. This is a very convoluted plan with no guarantee of success.” She leaned down to re-lace her boots but kept going while Mei watched her in astonishment. “So, if you were a spy, the Hallites, in their infinite wisdom would have made a spy that looked just like me. That's already a couple thou down the hole. And then set them on watch on the off chance that I would be sent out to patrol. And then! If that weren't improbable enough, they also had to hope I didn't just shoot you on sight. Fuck, if Jax had seen his double on the battlefield he'd have shot him.”

“Damn right I would have,” Jax ducked into the tent, all kitted out. “I don't know why you didn't and it would have saved me a lot of trouble if you had. Why didn't you shoot her?”

“Sentiment.”

He snorted.

“Yeah right. Anyway, come on. We gotta get going.” They shouldered their rifles and trudged out, heading toward the right flank.

“The point is,” continued Zig, never one to let things go. “I don't think you're a spy. And if you were: you picked the wrong fucking person. I don't know shit.”

Mei didn't want to mention the slightly worrying gap in her memory, she she kept silent and followed. Zig didn't need to know that she was possibly endangering her whole world with her indifference.

“Where exactly are we going?” She asked instead. Zig and Jax gave her twin incredulous looks.

“Wow. The Hallites really let their bots run wild, don't they?” said Zig.

“Look, unless their military has a really different ranking system than ours, and I doubt that, you're a Private. You don't get to know shit. As your superior, I will let you know when we get there, what to do and what to think.”

Zig struggled to keep a straight face.

“*You’re* only a corporal, Zig.” She accused. Which led to a full scale grin.

“And yet, because of my technical skills, I still outrank you. Now listen to the sergeant and keep quiet. I’d hate to have to patch you up.”

“Wouldn’t want another debt of honor on your hands,” murmured Jax, grinning. Mei assumed they were referring to Pvt. Kamal, who followed Zig around like a lost puppy and gave Mei suspicious glances at every opportunity.

“No, I really wouldn’t. I’ve already got enough mouthy bots to last my entire life.”

They kept walking. Mei felt lighter at the banter but that quickly turned to guilt. What if while she was joking around with Zig and Jax, she was gathering intelligence to get them killed? By the time they reached their destination she was wound tight again, worrying at possibility.

“Water?” she asked disbelieving.

“It’s not so boring when you need it to live,” corrected Zig, crouching down beside the pond and dipping in a strip of paper. Jax was watching the trees. The Hallites did so love to ambush people at water sources. Zig read the damp paper.

“Ph levels normal, no large particulates or poisonous substances. It’s good.”

“Fill a couple canteens, then we need to head back.” He tossed her a few empties hanging from his jacket. “We don’t want to give them a chance to mess with it or set up an ambush when our next squad comes here.”

Mei felt her proximity sensor ping. A test. Calling out all other Hallite bots. She sent a response back- confirming she was Hallite.

“I don’t mean to alarm you,” said Mei casually, keeping her voice very soft. “But we happen to be surrounded by Hallite droids.”

Neither of them moved but their eyes darted to each other.

“Oh yeah?” whispered Zig. “How many?”

“Eight.”

“Oh good. There any reason why they haven't fired yet?”

Mei shrugged, that was harder.

“I think they're confused because I'm Hallite. This suggests to their programming that they are interfering with another unit's operations.”

“And how long until they confirm this isn't?” Asked Jax.

“Oh, another minute. I suggest that we take them out before they figure it out.”

They all shifted into readiness as Mei communicated the locations of all eight bots. When Jax gave the order Miespun around, pinpointing three bots one right after the other. She tried not to think of how easy it was to shoot them when their communications were wide open and transmitting queries at her. Jax got his three, but not before they started firing back. Zig, the one most likely to take a bullet before she could return fire, jack-knifed up and left. She rolled to kneeling and took care of the two in her sector. It all took less than 30 seconds and if Mei hadn't been a bot she might have missed it.

Zig dusted off her uniform and stood up laughing.

“Well, us mere humans still got it.” Jax slapped her shoulder, smiling.

“War needs humans,” said Mei. “They're unpredictable.”

Zig smirked.

“Ain't we just?”

“Maybe I was wrong about you,” said Jax, considering Mei. “You saved our asses.”

“You've known me for seven years and you still doubt me?” Zig gathered munitions and piled them together to take back. “Seriously, I said she was cool.”

“I never doubt you when your yourself.” Jax's voice was low but it still brought Zig's spirit down.

“I'm always myself. Except when I'm someone else. But I still put up with you. What does that make me?”

“Insane,” cut in Mei. She tried to put the same joking inflection in her voice as the others. It must have worked because they both smiled. Mei held on to that personal triumph as they headed back to camp to alert the CO of a new water source and an entire Hallite scouting party dead in the grass.

Eugene was doing an inventory when the Corporal from earlier walked into his tent. The one who had offered to get rid of his subroutine. He wondered why he had never seen her before- the repair tent was right beside his aid station and he now recognized her as their unit's only mechanic.

“You know, I don't think I've ever been in here before,” she said, looking around casually. He assumed she meant this particular aid station. He was sure the scar on her cheek would have needed medical attention.

“Never had much patience for bleeders, you know?”

His programming suggested that she might have come in here with a problem and was just too proud to say so. So he scanned her vitals. All perfectly within normal ranges for a vet like her- malnourished, fatigued, stress levels through the roof. Not optimal for normal humans but the military had lower standards. The only slight abnormality was the drug. Signs suggested early stages of addiction- but his prognosis was to let it work itself out. Well, his programming saw nothing wrong with it. But he knew in the long term the crystal would hamper her ability to perform. He estimated the crash would come in a couple of months. Rehabilitation efforts would be implemented then but personally he didn't think they'd be very effective.

“Hey! You scanning me?” She interrupted. “Quit that, there ain't nothing wrong with me.”

Having concluded the same thing, he said nothing. Eugene still wasn't sure what to do with her. Could she really rewrite the program?

“Look, I just came because-” she shot a quick glance at the other MedDroid in the tent then edged closer. “Look, I may have lied earlier-” He just sighed, he knew it was too good to be true. But she glared at him. “Hey, you gonna say something?”

“What would you like me to say? I'm not particularly surprised that a human lied to me, I'm a doctor.”

Her lips twitched up. “Hey now. Don't take this as a fuel for your man-hating. I lied a bit. *I* can't fix your little problem, but I know someone who can.”

“And who is that? You're the only mechanic we have.”

“Don't remind me. Look, she ain't here.”

“Then how can she help me? Does me no good if she's not here.”

She smiled.

“You asshole. Listen, I can get you to her. It just might not be exactly legal.”

Of course. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because humans are all liars and cheats. Look, do you want to forget everyone who dies under your knife? I'll fucking leave then. I don't need you buddy, you need me.”

He weighed his options while she stood there, hands folded across her chest. He was born to be a MedDroid. He'd never known anything else. But- he wanted more. This was probably his only chance of removing the subroutine. MedDroids didn't exactly have a long lifespan. If he went along with her plan, he would help people and remember them afterward.

“What ever it is that you're planning, I'm in.” He had decided, feeling like he should regret it but he didn't.

“Excellent. It's too dangerous to say more here. I'll be back later man.” She grinned and clapped

him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, kid. We'll get you out." She left and he stared after her. Had he made a mistake? He really didn't know.

So he turned back to the inventory, picking up where he left off. But his processors were busy sorting if/then statements, trying to prepare himself for the path he'd set himself on.

Sometimes she stared at Mei. They would sit across from each other and just stare. It was so bizarre, like looking into a mirror. But like a mirror into the past. Zig had looked into a mirror recently, she'd lost a lot of weight since they'd been on this no-name rock and that didn't even consider Pandora and Arcadia. Looking at her now she was barely a shadow of the person who left her colony at 17. Mei didn't show any of that wear and tear, like she was modeled after pre-war Zig. She thought maybe the reason why Jax wasn't so weirded out by Mei was the fact that she was mostly un-scarred. The laser burn that sliced up from her jaw to a point just below her eyes wasn't there. And she'd had that since their first tour on Pandora. Careless mistake on her part but Jax had probably forgotten what she'd looked like without it. But she remembered. She had looked like Mei.

She and Zag used to do this, mirroring each other's movements and just staring. It got to a point where neither was controlling the other and they were moving as one. It was easier to think as one as twins. She held her right hand up and Mei mirrored her. She lifted the other hand to display a multitude of old scars and new abrasions but when the droid copied her, her hands were almost pristine. Even her nails were even and neat. Something Zig hadn't experienced since she'd first picked up a wrench and fixed her first droid.

She wondered what Mei thought when they did this. Was she confused as to the purpose of staring? Bots didn't forget and Mei had probably cataloged all their differences and similarities within

24 hours. So maybe she was humoring this strange human compulsion. Or maybe she was just as enthralled by the same-and-yet-not. Maybe she tried to puzzle out why they were identical. Mei never said anything about their sessions, simply stared and mirrored until Zig was called back to her job. But the same high cheekbones, same pointy chin and narrow mouth. Same thin black hair tucked behind the same ears. And the eyes. Her eyes were exactly the same. They were the windows to the soul, some say. And she believed it. And maybe that's why she spent so long watching Mei. Because the soul in her eyes was- something. She didn't have a word for it- but she was sure that Mei's soul had achieved something her's never could.

But she quickly grew tired of philosophy and contemplation. She had work to do and she was good at it. Her soul didn't come into play. So she pushed herself up and left, not looking back. To think was to die out here. But still, she turned her thoughts over in her head. Why? How? What do we do now? She was starting to see a plan forming. But she needed to speak to Jax first.

“Look, Jax, I need you with me.”

“Where exactly are we going?” He narrowed his eyes, trying to make out her face in the twilight. She kept her eyes on the line though, doing her job.

“We're leaving.”

It took a second, but then he got it. “Deserting? Have you lost your mind? We wouldn't even make it off the line, much less off the planet.”

“I've got a plan to get us off this godforsaken planet and home. You with me?”

A thought occurred to him.

“Wait, who's we? You, me? Mei?” She stayed silent. “Who the hell else?”

“The MedDroid, Eugene and another bot.” He couldn't believe this.

“You have lost your mind. Five of us? Three bots? We won't make it five yards.” He pressed his

hands to his face, trying to figure out when his best friend had changed so much. In the last day or so? Was it the droid? The drugs? Something else? He couldn't figure it out. "Since when do you want to desert anyway? We've been through three, four, wars already. What's one more?"

Zig shook her head. "That was before Mei."

"War's our life, Zig," He tried again. "We're careers, in it for life. It ain't that bad, we have a place here."

"That's what I thought. I thought I was going to die out here. Preferably by your side. But I just- I feel something when I look at her. Like maybe there's another way." She sucked in a harsh breath, dropping her eyes from the line for a second to look back at him. "Fuck, I don't know. Are you with me or not?"

"Oh my god, I'm going to die because of a bot." He cursed but she laughed and went back to her vigil.

"You don't have to come if you're scared, coward."

"I have to come with you. They'd string me up for sure if you left without me."

She kicked him lightly in the thigh. "That's what I like to hear. Don't worry, I'll send your tags to your mama if we all get eaten by giant crocs."

"Giant crocs? Is that likely?" He could just make out the flash of white teeth in the glare of the moon.

"I've wrestled them before, don't be such a pussy. Besides, it's the malaria you gotta watch out for."

"God, of course you spawned in some dank swamp."

"No no no. I was spawned in a beautiful and fertile valley, surrounded by towering mountains but if we don't want to get caught we gotta go through my colony's filtration swamp first."

"Lunars," He spat, but nudged her to show he was kidding.

“Oh, and Terrans are better?”

“Obviously. Giant crocs wouldn't dare exist on my planet.”

“I'm sure you're wondering why I called you all here tonight.” Jax snorted and she threw a screw at him. She was already unsettled by what she was about to say and the three pairs of bot eyes fixed solely on her. So she ignored him.

“I have a proposition for you.”

Mei already suspected the direction of her thoughts and spoke first. “What kind of proposition?”

“I'm going to start off by saying it ain't legal, what I'm planning. If that happens to bother you, you can leave.” The bots looked confused but none of them moved. A good sign, so she sprung it on them. “I want to leave.”

There was silence for several long seconds. Droids didn't take very long to think, she didn't know what the hold up was. It wasn't rocket science, just treason.

“You mean desert,” guessed Eugene. She nodded.

“And I want each of you to come with.”

“See, this is the part I don't get,” said Jax. “I get why you asked me. And Mei too, she's not even supposed to be here anyway. But why these two?” She had expected this question. If Jax had his way, she'd guess that they would be the only ones leaving. So she turned to Eugene first, his eyebrows were drawn together- like he was trying to figure out something.

“Eugene, I made a promise to you. To get rid of that subroutine and I can't do that here. I ain't no programmer. Plus, your skills could be very useful.” He nodded slowly, thinking it over and she turned her attention to Kamal. He did nothing but stare expectantly at her, like always. “Kamal, you

owe me a favor. I need your help to get off this planet.”

He caught on immediately. “I am certified to fly an inter-stellar craft. You need me to fly you out.”

“Exactly.” She scanned their faces. None of them seemed inclined to run but she knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. Shit, she wasn't good at this whole talking thing. Leadership had always been her sister's trait.

“Why?” Asked Mei. “Is it because of me?” All heads swiveled towards her, especially Jax's. Her answer before hadn't satisfied him and he still felt the sting from her stunt with Mei. She tried to speak honestly, but it was hard as she hardly knew why herself. But it became clearer all the time.

“No. Not because of you. Not fully. I- I always thought I was gonna die. Nothing left of me to send home but my tags. There was no future for me that I could see. But then I saw you and I thought something. Something like how I felt at home. And I- I'm done fighting. I want to see home again. And each of you pushed me along. Kamal, your fucking staring un-nerves me like nothing else. But you've got honor. Like how I thought war was gonna be. Doc, it ain't right what they did to you. No man should have to fight to remember those that have died. Jax, well, you always make me feel like there's something in this war worth living for. And Mei. You reminded me of home. I've been away too long. I need to see my sister again.” Everyone looked stunned at her speech. Like her words had a huge impact. Kamal got his bearings back first.

“I am honor bound to help you, Cpl. Zig. And even if I weren't, I would like to come with you anyway.”

“What happens to us after we leave?” Asked Eugene. “We have no home.”

“You're welcome to leave. Or you can come live with me. It ain't much, but we could always use hands.”

He nodded. “I will come with you.”

Mei smiled. "I would like to see your home and your family. There is still much I would like to know." She turned last to Jax and he sighed.

"I already told you I was coming with. I ain't gonna leave you now."

Zig smiled. "It's settled then. We'd best disperse now. It's too suspicious for all of us to be here at once. We'll make a plan in the days to come. No hurry." They all left until it was just her and Mei.

The bot smiled again.

"You did very well."

"Yeah, well, thanks. Don't ask me to do it again."

The plans were almost in place and the snow would help their escape but she was still irritated. Eugene came by, running rounds as a pretense to check their progress but stopped in earnest at the repair tent. Zig was holed up in there to watch Mei and because lying in the mud of her improperly covered foxhole held no appeal.

"You're cold." Said Eugene as he ducked in. He was always scanning humans as if he had any right to.

"Tell me something I don't know." She gritted out between clattering teeth. "How about the watch schedules for next week?"

"No, I mean close to hypothermic." She shrugged and hugged a scratchy and damp blanket tighter around her. "Mei, get Jax." The bot nodded and ran out. Zig stared at Eugene who was approaching with hands open and forward.

"What the hell you doin' kid?"

"You need to get warm."

She snorted. “Fuck lot of good you are. I could've told you that. But unless you can control the weather, I doubt that's going to happen.”

“Dry clothes at least. You're soaked through.” She laughed.

“Yeah well. When you find a dry uniform, I'll happily strip for you Doc. But not a damn second before. Back up!” He'd been edging closer but now he stopped. She didn't know why she didn't want him to touch her, but she sure as hell didn't. Not at all. Eugene apparently had a better idea of her motivations.

“It's okay to be sick. It happens. No one's going to judge you weak.”

“That's cause I *ain't* weak,” she spat, still shuddering.

“Okay, I don't think that. But you gotta let me help you.”

Like she needed his damn help. She said as much. “I've dealt with worse, I'm a soldier.”

His eyes darted over her left shoulder and she swung, trying to hit whoever was behind her. But Zig was weaker than she thought and her reaction time was pitiful. Jax easily caught her up, pinning her arms to her chest.

“Cool it, Zig. You gotta trust me, kay?” Jax tried to talk her down but she struggled like an animal caged.

“I'm fine dammit!” Jax sighed and dragged her to Eugene and Mei, who was holding a big towel.

“We're helping you, Zig. I swear. But I'm really fucking sorry for this.” She flailed her legs out and writhed around, trying to break his grip. She was fine. She didn't get sick. Cold didn't put her out of commission like this. She wasn't some fucking lady that needed to be pampered and coddled. But Eugene was coming closer with a syringe and- hell no to that. Fuck that.

“Get that away from me you bastard.” Despite her protests he stuck it into her arm and she felt the drugs take effect almost immediately. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

She awoke to Mei bending over her, face uncovered. And if she could pick the face she didn't want to see after waking up from a drugged sleep, it would be her own.

“Shit Mei! That is unsettling.” Mei snorted and patted her cheek sharply.

“She's fine. “ To prove her point, Zig sat up. She wasn't dizzy but it was still a bad idea because she suddenly remembered how she got there.

“Oh Jesus. You had to sedate me? What the hell is wrong with me?” The others were there and Jax came over to hand her a cup of coffee, smirking the whole time.

“You've always been too stubborn for your own good,” he said and then headed back outside.

“You were just stressed. A lot's happening and the sickness was something you thought you couldn't afford.” Offered Eugene. Right. So much to deal with- like fucking deserting with three bots in tow. What was she thinking?

“Wait- How long-?”

“We're still on schedule,” Interrupted Mei. “You only slept for a couple hours.” Jesus, it was like they knew her or something. Was she so transparent? Good thing she was getting out if some green droid could read her.

She finished her coffee and started lacing up her boots. “Well, I'm going to ignore my temporary insanity. I suggest you do the same.” They nodded in agreement and even though she could tell they were humoring her, she had to accept it. These kids chose to follow her, she had to pretend she was in charge. “I'm going to go do my job, I guess. You kids keep out of trouble, okay?” She didn't wait for their reply but stepped out into the snow again. Surely Jax had told the Captain that she had been incapacitated. Maybe she'd get assigned a patrol in reprimand. Good. All she wanted to do was shoot something.

It was the night. Jax and Kamal were on watch, the other three waiting in the dark of the repair tent.

“Everyone know what they're doing?” Whispered Mei. Zig just rolled her eyes and checked the time.

“Eugene, it's time,” she said instead and the MedDroid nodded and went out. She tracked his progress until the dark overtook him then turned to Mei.

“Seriously? We ain't got time for doubts.”

“I'm not doubting. It's just- what happens if we don't make it?”

“Jax and I are executed for treason. Gene and Kamal have their memories wiped and you get data mined for every little secret in your head. So how about we don't get caught?” She popped a handful of crystal into her mouth.

“Did you really think this through, Zig?”

“You know, for someone who's not doubting you're sure expressing a lot of doubts.”

“I'm serious. Have we really thought this through all the way?”

Zig heaved a great sigh. “Look, we been planning this for four weeks- I've had about enough of thinking about this. Now go- it's your turn.”

The bot gave her an unreadable look in the low light and then headed out.

They'd agreed that this was the trickiest part- Mei being spotted would be a huge complication they had so far managed to avoid. But she glided through the night and vanished just like Eugene had. Good. Jax and Kamal should have reached the craft as she was leaving and would be getting it ready for take-off as soon as Zig arrived. Now all she had to do was wait for her turn. She wished suddenly for gum or a cigarette but clamped it down. Just pre-mission jitters. She breathed in deep a couple of times until all she could feel was the buzzing of the crystal in her veins. Good old stimulants- if you got over the body's insistence that you were having a heart attack, you couldn't feel anything else. Just

locked and loaded.

Speaking of which, she checked her watch. Time to go. She stepped out of the tent and across the field. The Hallites might be out tonight, there were no flares to give away their position. Or perhaps they had just forgot or wanted them to think the enemy was out and about. Didn't much matter to her, the dark was no harder to navigate than the flat florescence of flares and artillery fire. Her job was to bring up the rear and make sure none of the others had been caught up and so far she had seen no sign of trouble. She kept her posture and pace casual until she reached the hole in their defenses where Jax was supposed to be. The ship they wanted was on an airfield four clicks to their rear, under its own guard. And while Zig had reason to be within their perimeter, she would have no excuse if someone questioned her between there and her destination.

She passed beyond their lines, checked there wasn't anyone out of their hole to see her and then burst into a quiet jog. She'd strapped down anything that might have jingled and tried to land as softly as she could in heavy boots.

Zig'd begun to think that it had been a little too easy when the shot went off to her left. Mid-stride she turned her step into a roll, aiming for the ever-present brush. Shot left, didn't sound like a Federation rifle. So a Hallite. Had they spotted her or something else? If it had been anywhere else she might have thought they were shooting an animal. They had all the time climbed into foxholes on Pandora. But there weren't animals here. It was silent but she suspected that was because she and whoever had taken the shot were waiting to see what the next move was.

Unfortunately, she couldn't play this waiting game all night. They had to take off in the next twenty minutes or risk getting caught. So she unslung her rifle and got ready to run. She burst out of the brush and toward where the shot had come from, hoping to surprise them into giving away their position so she could take them out.

It worked just like that, except she hadn't expected their first shot to connect. She felt it burn a

line across her ribs and she almost stumbled and went down. No matter how many times you've been shot, it hurts the same. But she had places to be so she charged toward the flash, firing wildly. The other got a few more rounds off but they all went wide. She was within a couple feet when she saw her assailant fall. No time to slow and check to make sure they were really dead or disabled. The woods were quiet tonight, everyone would have heard that and they'd be sending troops soon. She only hoped that Jax had heard them too and knew to get ready to leave.

She was out-and-out sprinting now, charging over the ground ready to fight anyone who got in her way. There were the lights of the airfield ahead, she didn't see anyone out there but there was someone else in the woods with her. Federation or Hallite, it didn't matter to her- she had to get to that ship. A guard was lying on the ground at the edge of the clearing, dead or unconscious she didn't know or care. They had said that they would try to avoid casualties but no plan ever survived contact with the enemy. She leaped right over him and ran toward the the back end of a small craft. There were larger ones on the field but they'd decided *The Mercy* was the best target. Big enough to get them home but not so big as to attract too much attention once they'd broken out of atmosphere. The ramp was already down and she thundered up it.

“We got people on our tail. We have to move now!” She barked, immediately slamming the manual override for the ramp. Kamal was already at the controls and now that the door was sealed she could hear the engines were already humming, working up to the roar they would be when they tried to escape the gravity of the planet.

“Already on it. Strap in.” She collapsed next to Mei, suddenly feeling the graze against her ribs. Mei didn't look much better, her shoulder was sparking like it had been hit by a laser. Other than that, Eugene was on her other side, sharp eyes already eying her and doing scans. Jax was in the copilot's seat, looking tense but healthy.

“This is going to get messy,” Kamal warned and then she felt the jolt of them leaving the

ground.

“Corporal! Status report!” Jax gritted it out between clenched teeth.

“Met a Hallite scout in the dead zone. He got me in the side but I disabled him I think.

Unfortunately, that alerted both sides that I was there. I don't know how far behind they are or what side.”

“You okay?”

“Just a graze. Though I'll have to patch it up later.” Eugene answered for her. She flapped her hand in agreement when he glanced back for confirmation.

“Well, so much for stealth.” At least Mei's vocal functions hadn't been effected.

They'd been steadily rising while they talked and then she felt the burst of speed. Jax ground his teeth and closed his eyes. He'd always hated inter-stellar travel, made him sick to think of all that darkness on the other side of the hull. They weren't close enough to touch so she started humming. She was no great musical talent but it had always seemed to help. Mei joined in almost immediately- Zig'd probably hummed it unconsciously while working in the repair tent. Jax smiled faintly even as the whole cabin started to shake. Eugene picked up the music hesitantly as she turned to Mei and assessed the damage. Nothing she could do right now as they were both strapped tight. And besides, she was sure they weren't quite out of the woods yet. But she started cataloging the parts she'd need. Luckily, the ship was fully stocked for a troop four times their size. There would be supplies.

“Federation Craft 851N6- state your business.”

“Damn, thought I'd disabled that,” muttered Kamal. “Jax, hit the yellow button to your right, would you?” Jax opened his eyes just long enough to do as bid then went back to white-knuckling it.

“That going to be a problem?” Asked Zig, breaking the cadence momentarily.

“No, shouldn't be. We're about to do something very illegal and hopefully unexpected. If you could just keep Jax from vomiting over the equipment, I've got this.”

Jax flipped him off but didn't open his eyes. "I'm not going to like whatever this is, am I?"

"Not a bit." Kamal smiled and pulled a lever and the whole craft seemed to still. Zig leaped into the first verse of the song, anticipating whatever horribly dangerous thing he'd just done.

"Up and over the hill we go.." Zig would never win any prizes for her voice but at that moment it didn't matter because they were suddenly moving very fast. A giant weight landed on her chest, pushing her back into the seat with bruising force. Her ears popped and a vice closed on her head, squeezing tight. It only lasted a few seconds.

When she could draw breath again she continued on with the song, knowing Jax wouldn't be feeling any better. He was liable to break the arm rests off though, if he continued clutching them so tightly.

"Up and over..." Once she'd sung it once through, the bots joined in with much more pleasant voices. Eventually the ordeal was over and they could start to feel the lack of gravity.

"What the fuck did we just do?" rasped out Zig, unstrapping and propelling herself up to Jax. He grasped her hand and clung to it.

"We may have partially ignited our core to propel us at some really unsafe speeds. But I swear, there was no other way to get out of there. I didn't think it prudent to mention at the time but we were surrounded by three dreadnoughts as soon as we broke atmo."

She nodded, impressed. "Well done. We safe for now?"

"Yeah, we're hiding in a dust cloud while the core cools. We'll be able to move again in about six hours."

"How did you know to do that?" asked Mei, still struggling to free herself from her seat with a malfunctioning limb.

Kamal smiled.

"The man who made my code left all sorts of notes in it. He had some... unique views on space

flight. Of course, they were all theoretical, I don't think he meant anyone to actually do it.”

Eugene drifted in to tend her wound and she just let him.

“God, you have got to be kidding me.” Zig tilted her head to the sky and closed her eyes briefly.

“Three fucking wars and *this* is how I die? What bullshit!”

Eugene walked over and she shoved her left arm in his face. And there it was: two neat holes in the meat of her hand. In the other hand she held a slowly suffocating red snake.

“What happened?” Doc was already prodding at her hand, doing scans. She laughed, somewhat hysterically.

“I was reaching down for water and then this asshole,” She held up the still-struggling snake as emphasis. “Bit me. “ She collapsed back on her ass, hands above her head. “I've always hated this fucking swamp.”

The others had finally heard the commotion and came over to see what all the fuss was about. Kamal rubbed her back sympathetically while Jax pried the snake from her grasp and killed it.

“Eugene, is she going to be all right?” Jax demanded.

“I don't know. I've never encountered this kind of venom before. It's not in my database.”

“I thought you were a goddamn doctor!”

Zig cut in. “Jax. Babe. Shut up.” She needed a moment to think and he wasn't exactly helping. “He wouldn't have the files on it because that snake only exists here. The Red Death was here before we colonized.”

“You've encountered it before? That's good news.” Mei said hopefully.

“Not in person, no. And though I *have* heard of people surviving its bite, I got no idea how.

Luckily, I know someone who might know how to stop it.” She didn't mention that the answer was almost always amputation. She figured they could cross that bridge when they got to it. If they got to it.

They helped her up but she was already dizzy. First sign, crap. And her hand was already cramped into a claw. Neither a good sign. But she was damned if she was going to die in some fucking swamp a mere 400 miles from home.

“The Old Woman Perry lives on the edge of the swamp. She should know what to do.”

“Let's head out then. We gotta move fast.” Jax hustled the others into movement while she tried to remember how to get to the shack Perry lived in. They'd only run into it once, on a croc-hunting outing when she was a teenager. Perry'd been an old woman then, Zig hoped she was still alive.

“Is this Perry a toxicologist? Doctor?” Asked Eugene, wrapping up her hand to slow the circulation.

“Eh, in a manner of speaking.”

“What does that mean?” Asked Jax, always suspicious.

“Witchdoctor,” she clarified.

He shook his head like he was expecting that. He muttered something about inbred Lunars but led the way North.

“Keep your heart-rate down, Zig. It'll slow the venom.”

“Sure thing, Doc.” She nodded and took a deep breath. In a few moments she was as calm as she could be as her hand swelled and her companions looked on in fear. She was fine. There was no way she was going to die here. So close to home. She had to see her sister.

It was nearly dark by the time they found it. The shack was exactly as she remembered it. Though, to be fair, her vision was a little blurry.

“This is it.” She said and Jax let her slip down off his back. She stumbled up the rickety steps

onto the porch and knocked. There was no answer for a worryingly long time but then the door suddenly creaked open. There stood a stooped old woman with a ferocious glare.

“I remember you One of the Z brats.” She glanced behind Zig. “And a whole platoon of androids. Lovely. Now, what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Red Death bite. About three hours ago.”

She turned into the shack and Zig followed. “You brought the snake?”

Zig pulled out the carcass and slapped it on the scarred operating table. The old woman just nodded and rummaged through her shelves of herbs.

“We'll need that later. Unwrap your hand and lay on the table. Let's see how bad it is.”

Zig followed directions. Through the open door she could see the others loitering about, unsure what to do.

“Tell your MedDroid to get in here. The rest can make themselves useful getting water and a big fire going.” Witch doctors always seemed to know what you were thinking. Hi-de, who had lived in their barn for a year, had always know when she and her sisters were up to mischief.

Eugene came in and conferred with Perry and then she finally turned to the bite. Her hand was swollen and little black veins were crawling their way up her arm. The witchdoctor sucked her teeth for a moment, inspecting it closely.

“This isn't good.” She sprinkled a couple herbs on the bites and studied their effect. Which was mostly nothing. “How far up can you feel?”

“Nothing below my elbow.” There was another wince.

“It's gone pretty far.” She asked Eugene a couple questions about what his scans saw and then looked her square in the eye. “I'm afraid it'll have to come off.”

She nodded shakily. “The whole arm?”

“Shoulder dis-articulation, just to be safe. Better chance of healing than cutting through bone

too.”

“Okay. Do it quick.”

“Are you kidding me?” Interjected Jax, having been eavesdropping from his place by the fire pit. “You're going to let some old woman cut your arm off? What the fuck does she know?”

The old woman whirled on him. “Would you rather she die? Is that what you want? I've been doctoring the good people of this moon since before you were born, don't tell me I don't know what I'm doing. Go cut some wood, soldier.” She barked it out, what was left of her teeth bared. When Perry turned back to her, Zig was calm and ready.

“I knew what the price was.”

“Good. Now hold her down.” Eugene bent over her, his face worried and drawn.

“Hey. You don't get to look like that. I'm the one who's getting their arm chopped off.” He tried to smile at her and then pressed his weight down on the edge of her collarbone. The others filed in under the old lady's orders and each held down a limb. They all tried to reassure her but she did nothing but snarl at them.

“Feel free to scream,” suggested Perry as she come forward with a red-hot plasma blade. It would slice through anything like it was butter.

When the blade sliced through the joint of her shoulder she hardly felt a thing. She was about to say something incredibly stupid like: wow, that wasn't so bad! And then the pain hit.

Jax winced as his best friend practically howled, struggling against their hands. She writhed around, whipping her head back and forth as if to get away from the blade. But the job was already done. He tried not to look as her arm flopped off the table but the only other place to look was the smoking stub where it had been. It was those two or the tears streaming down her face as she wailed like a tortured spirit.

Sickened, he shouted at the old woman. “Shouldn't she have passed out or something?” The witchdoctor shrugged and checked her patient. “Take her and lay her down by the fire. She'll quiet down in a minute.”

Mei stepped back and he and Kamal hauled her out the door and near the fire pit. He was worried she'd fall in but when they let her down she just laid there. The screaming stopped and she started to really cry.

The doc coaxed her up so he could cover the stump in gauze, then they wrapped her in a blanket and left her there. She was sitting up at least, looking into the fire and crying silent tears. She was shaking from the shock and he wanted to go over there and hold her but he didn't know how to do it without hurting her. She'd never been this seriously injured before. Mostly scrapes and easy patches. He didn't know what to do this time.

While he watched, Kamal came over and offered her a cup of tea and when she couldn't hold the cup, he tilted the liquid into her mouth. Mei sat on her other side and started speaking, too quiet for him to hear, but it sounded soft and reassuring to him. Eugene came over and injected something into her shoulder and then let her lean up against his leg. They were all over there. But he wasn't.

“Will you abandon her now?” Demanded the old woman, having snuck up behind him. He shrugged, uncomfortable. She made a disgusted noise. “Coward. What you so fucking scared of, huh? She need you and now you decide to run?” She shook her head and then walked back into the shack.

Zig was sagging now, the drugs taking effect. He walked over and crouched down in front of her. She smiled slightly like she knew exactly what the hold-up was.

“Pussy,” she accused and then passed the fuck out.

Kamal was the first to laugh and then they were all gasping for breath. If it was a bit hysterical, no one mentioned it.

“I think she'll be all right,” said Mei after they settled down.

“She always has time to bitch at me. Did I tell you about the time she got shot in Arcadia?” Jax told the story but his eyes never left her face. He'd made up his mind a long time ago, this didn't change a thing.

Zig knew something was wrong before she even opened her eyes. Firstly: there was no buzz of crystal in her blood. And she hadn't woken up without it in months. Secondly: her left side was cold and in pain. Upon opening her eyes she saw a fire burned down to the coals and the others asleep around it. That was normal. She levered herself up on her right hand and then glanced down. Her left arm was completely gone. Oh. Shit, right.

She closed her eyes and breathed in through her nose and then shakily out through her mouth. She must have been crying, her eyes were sticky. She reached up and scrubbed at her face then took another deep breath. She had known that this was going to be the answer. She'd prepared herself while they walked to the shack. Had taken calming breaths against Jax's shoulder when her strength failed and he had to carry her. But nothing could have prepared her for the sight of nothing where her arm was supposed to be. One more fortifying breath- expelling all emotion like she had done on the battlefield- and then she risked another glance.

Still gone but she didn't feel like crying or puking, so she counted it as a win. Now was the time to act, she figured, before the others got up and started to hover.

Zig knew she'd be unsteady, shock did that to you. And if she fell it was all over. Only one hand to catch herself with. So she was careful. Bracing her feet wide, she attempted to use the strength of her thighs to lever herself up. She got about halfway and then pushed the rest of the way upright with her good arm. Only arm, she guessed.

Now all she had to do was take a step. No big deal, she'd been walking since infancy- she could totally do it. Saying that, she nearly wiped out on the first step. Only the wild flailing of her arm and a

quick hop-step saved her from going face down into the dirt or the fire. Balancing with only one arm was fucking bizarre, she decided. The whole world seemed lopsided. By the time she made it to the three steps up onto the porch she was pouring sweat and wanted very much to lay down again. Possibly forever.

The old woman Perry appeared in the door and offered her shoulder as a crutch to get up the stairs. She then led her to an old rocking chair and sat her down.

“You'll get used to it eventually,” she assured and shoved a mug of tea into her hand. “But you'll be weak and slow for a few days. You can stay here while I fit you out.”

“Fit me out for what?”

“A new arm. A soldier or a farmer with only one arm is no good to anyone.” She could say that again.

“You can make me a new arm?”

Perry smirked. “You're not the only one who can tinker with spare parts, Corporal.”

“Never said I was,” she said, dismissive, glossing over the part where Perry knew her rank.

“How long's it going to take?”

“You won't be ready to have it fitted for a few days. You can help me make it in that time. A man should always have a hand in his own prosthesis. Reduces the risk of rejection. And there's the small matter of the curse.” Zig tried not to sigh and sipped her tea. Nasty, bitter stuff like her mother used to make. Witchdoctors were always so cryptic.

“What curse?”

“The snake's curse, girl. Pay attention!”

Without meaning to, her eyes darted over to the table where the body was still lying. It seemed to stare at her. She wasn't exactly superstitious, per se. But better safe than dead, she always said. Besides, the snake creeped her out, even before she had to sacrifice an arm to it.

“How do I get rid of the curse?”

“Drink your tea. There'll be time to speak of that later. It will take an arduous journey that you do not yet have the strength for.”

Witchdoctors were a necessity to Lunars, they were the ones you called when things went wrong. But god, they were frustrating. Hi-de, their village's witchdoctor, had been the same. He'd come right after Zig had decided to restore the farm with the first bot she ever fixed. It was like he had known she would need his help. He'd given her ritual after ritual to help get on good terms with any god or spirit that might be concerned with her land. And she'd done every one of them. You didn't scoff at superstitions when you and your sisters were close to starving and your mother was mad with grief. And they hadn't starved, the farm had been doing well when she left. So it must have worked in some way.

The others were getting up, looking pleased that she had moved on her own and was sitting up and talking. She failed to mention that she probably couldn't get out of the chair. They needed all the good news they could get.

Her left arm ached. That irked her because she didn't have a left arm anymore. Perry just smirked at her bouts of rage and set her to tasks. The foremost being her new arm. Late Model android arm- like the ones from the droids on her farm. Her first repair had been re-fitting an arm just like this. But she had had two hands then.

“You doing okay, Zig?” The others hovered incessantly, leading to Perry sending them further and further afield to keep them out of her hair.

“Yes, Mei. I'm fine. I only have one arm, I'm a deserter and therefore a fugitive and I'm ten days away from my home with no way to get there. I'm just fucking fine. Don't you have herbs to gather or

something? Perhaps you'll find another doppelganger in the swamp.” Mei seemed to take it in stride and left. Which just pissed her off even more. The least she could do was fight back. But apparently she was too fragile for that.

Zig turned back to the arm on the table. She knew what she had to do but she couldn't figure out how to do it with only one arm and her teeth. But Perry had said she had to do it herself. And she was going to. As soon as she figured out how.

It was late at night, both Perry and Zig were perched by the fire, drinking. All set to leave in the morning, but Zig couldn't sleep. She clenched her mechanical arm just to hear the joints creak.

“You know it isn't gone.”

Zig nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“Removing the arm only slowed down the venom. The prosthesis will help regulate it somewhat but eventually it will get you.”

“I know.” She could feel that she wasn't entirely well. Would never be well- but they couldn't stay any longer. There were places she needed to be. “How long do I have?”

“A week, maybe.” The old woman was blunt. There was no need for coddling among people who lived with death. She still sighed and took another drink, at least it was booze this time.

“And with us more than ten days out.”

The old woman nodded but didn't say anything. Zig had known that she was going to die soon, had felt it during her quest, but the reality was harsh. She would never see her sisters or her mother or her land again. She would die before she got home, just like she always knew would happen. Mei hadn't been a sign that she had a future waiting for her at home, she'd been foretelling her death, like

doppelgangers in old tales.

“I guess we stayed here too long.”

“You couldn't have left any quicker. The curse would have struck you down with something much worse than death if you'd let it be.”

Zig swallowed down bitter tears, nodding. If she'd only worked a little harder, walked that much faster to get back from her quest. If only she hadn't been bitten in the first place- Maybe she could have seen Zag again. She dismissed those thoughts. There was nothing she could do now. She tried to remember two months ago, when she was certain she was going to die on a rock with no one but Jax. Nothing had really changed. Except maybe she'd taken charge of her fate. Not changed it, just moved it.

“You're welcome to stay here until the end, if you wish.”

“No. I still got an obligation to those guys out there. I took them away from the war, I have to make sure they get somewhere safe. The mountains're close, we can probably reach them before I kick the bucket. And there's as safe a place as any for them to decide what to do next.” Perry nodded approvingly.

“I don't have no comforting words for you, girl. That snake's going to get you. But I think you're going to be okay. And those kids out there will be okay too.”

“I hope so.”

“You done good, girl.”

She downed the rest of her cup. “I done what I could. Ain't nobody who can ask more than that, eh?”

“Don't you dare open your mouth or I'll fucking cut out your memory chip.” Eugene froze over her, Zig's knife was nudging at his brain-stem. So she was serious and had the know-how to follow up on her threat but he wasn't going to be intimidated.

“You're dying. Your vital signs are way down. You need help.”

“Tell me something I don't know, Doc.”

He scanned her again. “The venom, you mean it didn't work?”

She let out a dry chuckle- her vocal chords had already been affected. He tried to calculate how far the poison had spread.

“Yeah, shoulda known that damn snake would get me.”

“Then why did we leave?”

“Needed to get y'all somewhere safe before I kicked the bucket.”

“We can't go on with you like this. Zig, you can barely walk. You have to tell them now.”

“I ain't gotta do no such thing. I got- what?- three days?”

He did some inner calculations. “Five, best case scenario.”

“Okay, say five days. By then we'll be well into the mountains. Bury me deep- then continue on. No one climbs the pass this late in the year, you'll be undisturbed.”

“What are we supposed to do without you?” She sighed, her whole body seeming to collapse into itself. He thought it might have been the poison but she seemed in no more pain than before.

“This is why I didn't want anyone to know. I got no right to tell y'all what to do. You gotta blaze your own trail, my grandma always said. Course she was mad as a hatter and died when she took a wrong step in a minefield but in other situations the advice fits.”

“What?”

“The point is- in five days you gotta make up your own minds. I can't tell you where to go from there. I got you guys out, that's all I can do.”

“There's got to be some way-”

“I'm dying,” She interrupted, shaking her head. “And there's no helping that. Not a'one of you can do any good by knowing. So keep you damn trap shut.” Mei, Jax and Kamal came back into sight dragging more supplies behind them. Eugene gave her a look.

“What about Jax?” He whispered.

Zig sighed and looked at him. “I don't know what he's going to do. You try to keep your eye on him once I'm gone, okay? But don't fucking hold your breath thinking that he'll let you.”

She pushed up with a stifled curse and went to meet them, not bothering to look back at him. He would keep quiet but only because he knew he couldn't do anything else for her. She was dying and he was useless.

They were so messed up it was a wonder they even noticed Jax left at all. But three days after they put Zig in the ground he went for water and didn't come back. They were alone. And grieving. Mei was the first to recover. If they'd thought about it, they might have thought Eugene would be first. But he was fighting hard with his programming, clutching her dog-tags so hard that he would have bled if he were human. He wouldn't let go of Zig.

Mei got up on the fourth day and noticed that their human companion was gone. She looked at the two remaining to her. Eugene was crouched in a corner, just a glint of silver between his clasped hands. Kamal was standing straight, on standby, face and body absent. She supposed they could stay here and wallow in their grief or they could get up. Zig would want them to get up.

So she manually rebooted Kamal and then slapped Eugene until he looked at her.

“Jax is gone,” she said when he finally returned to the present.

“Not a surprise,” came Kamal's bitter response. “The love of his life is dead. What's he got to stick around for? He's probably already thrown himself off a cliff or something.”

Mei looked at him in surprise. He'd never said anything like this before. Was he considering the same thing?

“Are you okay?” asked Eugene, probably thinking along the same lines. His programming may have been based in the care of humans but he was much more capable of coming to anyone's aid than the other two. He was compelled to care.

“What the fuck are we supposed to do now? Go back?” spat Kamal, in lieu of answering. Eugene levered himself up, coming to rest a gentle hand on his shoulder. She was grateful, in that moment, for hot-headed Kamal. He'd gotten Gene out of his stupor. But at the same time she knew that Kamal's problems were just starting.

“We're not going back,” she announced, since the topic was up. “But we can't stay here forever either.”

“Why not? We're just like Jax. Now that she's dead we have nothing to live for. Might as well stand here until our processors rust.”

“We can't do that. She wouldn't want that.” Eugene was fierce in his belief.

“How would you know? You can barely even remember her. What happens if I do this?” He reached for Zig's dog-tags- still clutched in the other bot's fist. Mei had already moved before she realized her intent to do so. Punching Kamal in the throat, she didn't let him recover but pushed her advantage with a boot in the chest. Finally she threw him against the wall- snarling in his face.

“Listen here, asshole. We're all hurting. There's no reason to be a giant dick about it.” Kamal looked unimpressed. Well good- she wasn't impressed either. “Now. We're getting to sit down, like civilized robots and have a discussion about what we're going to do next. It will be democratic and polite, got it?”

“Who made you our leader?” asked Eugene, Kamal gesturing his agreement. Didn't she just say the word democratic?

“I did when I took the initiative of waking you two up. Now, we got a deal?” They both nodded and she stepped back to let Kamal walk by her to the table. They sat and stared at each other. Mei didn't know if they others were thinking it but it reminded her of their first planning session in Zig's repair tent.

“So what do we do? If we can't just wait here to die?”

“We can't go back. They'll wipe our memories or just destroy us wholesale. I won't go through that.” She agreed with Gene. Besides- if the military got a hold of her they'd know she wasn't of Federation build. *Then* she'd be in trouble.

“We could look for Jax,” she suggested.

“He's long gone. Besides, he won't want to see us.” That was for damn sure. “Why can't I just go on standby and wait around for a couple centuries?”

“Because I'm sick of hearing your bitch ass whine. We need to do something.”

Eugene spoke up hesitantly. “She said we were welcome on her farm. They always need hands.”

They considered this for a moment.

“But they won't be expecting us. She didn't even get to send a com before she-” Kamal trailed off, even he wasn't so callous as to say the word. They would probably edge around it for months.

“That's true, but if what if we just show up looking for work?” Asked Eugene. He was worrying the tags between his hands, trying to tease out an idea of what she would have wanted.

“That wouldn't work. You're forgetting me.” Said Mei and gestured to her face, though she knew it was hard to look upon. She was lucky in the fact that she rarely had a chance to catch her reflection. They looked at her, knowing it would never work. Being close to her family would have been nice, but Mei would be pretty conspicuous. Eugene tilted his head and studied her.

“You know, you really are identical. If I weren't a bot, I wouldn't even know you were one.”

“Yes, that's kind of the whole point. The both of you look human too.”

“That's not what I'm getting at. You look like her. By now they'll have been notified that she deserted.”

She didn't know where he was going with this and she wasn't sure she was going to like it when they reached his conclusion.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“They know she's coming home. You look just like her...” Kamal's face twisted up in revulsion, finally catching the idea.

“You want Mei to pose as her. You want us to pretend that she made it back after all.”

Eugene nodded. “Listen, we're deserters. There's no one on this planet that has any reason to keep us safe. They'd turn us in. You know the bounty for even a single one of us.”

“Yeah, it's astronomically high. But that doesn't make this a good plan.”

She spoke up, feeling like she had to.

“Her family are the only ones who are going to feel obligated to protect us from the people the Federation are sending after us. It's a good plan.” That didn't make it right. The idea was repulsive in her head. How could she take her place? She couldn't. It was wrong. And yet- the alternatives were brain-wipes and data mines. They had to do something. And it was a plan.

“Have you thought about the fact that you're nothing like her on the inside?” Said Kamal, tone acidic. Well, he worshiped her, it only made sense that he would be against an imposter.

“I can pretend. We'll practice.”

“Well enough to fool her family?”

“Well enough to fool anyone who hasn't seen her in seven years.”

Eugene was still studying her.

“To be safe, we'll have to re-do her scars. I don't know when the last time her family saw her. They may know about the one on her jaw.”

Kamal stood up, slamming his hands on the table.

“This is insane! We can't do this. You can't do this.” His face was flushed with emotion. “You woke me up for the sake of her memory. But then you suggest this? How is this honoring her memory?”

“She would have wanted us to live on, in any way we could,” retorted Eugene. He was set on this plan for some reason. She wasn't quite sold, but she saw merit in it. Maybe it would help all of them work through their issues and then they'd have a place. Well, they'd have a place of their own. Mei would have to occupy a space that was already filled. But she had said she wanted to meet the family...

“This is monstrous. How can you just take over her life?”

“Because I have to if we're going to survive. Do you want to be wiped clean and re-programmed? Because if they catch us, that's what will happen. You won't even remember Zig!”

A hush fell over the room. She hadn't meant to- But it was done now.

“It'll all be for nothing. She'll have died for nothing unless we have a plan and we survive.”

Kamal clenched his jaw shut, face dark and angry. But he nodded his assent and then went out of the shack. Eugene looked at her.

“She had to make hard decisions too,” he reminded her gently.

“I don't need you to tell me what she was like. I need you to find me a laser gun.” He nodded and got up, leaving her alone at the table. Hard decisions were all Zig had ever made, Mei was nothing like her.

“You look just like her. But you're not my sister.” Zidi was standing in the doorway of the barn. Mei hefted the bale into the loft and then climbed down to face her. “Who are you?” She doubted it would do any good to lie now- the girl seemed sure.

“My name's Mei. I'm an android.”

“Where is my sister? How did you know to come here?”

“Your sister found me on the battlefield. We deserted together but she died before we could make it back. I'm sorry.” She paused to help the stone-faced little girl absorb this. But she didn't look like she needed the help so Mei went on. “She told us where she lived and we didn't have anywhere else to go.”

“All three of you are droids, aren't you? Because I know Eugene's a MedDroid.”

“How- ? The sheep.”

Zidi nodded. “Not a lot of humans could have done what he did. So Kamal too?”

“Yes.” She nodded again and turned to leave.

“You might ask Eugene if he wants to take over Doc Toc's shop. We could use someone with his skills.”

“You're not going to turn us in? We're fugitives. I'm impersonating your sister.” Zidi shrugged.

“She's dead. Not much I can do for her and we need the hands, to be completely honest. Don't much care what they're made of or where they came from.”

Mei shook her head, trying to compute all of it. The data suggested she should have already alerted the authorities and sent them back to the front. She resolved to ask Eugene, he always seemed to understand human motivation better. But she suspected that was just due to his cool personality, designed to put human's at ease.

“Humans are still so strange to me,” She sighed, but then heard a laugh. Apparently Zidi hadn't gone far.

“It's just us colony folks,” She called back. “You'll figure us out eventually.”

“Are you kidding me? What the hell is this? Where-” Before Zag could do anything more, Zidi was ushering her sister away, declaring loudly that she must be tired. When they were alone, or at least thought they were, Zag wheeled on the younger girl. Mei climbed through the hole in the roof to watch from the shadows of the loft.

“That's not Zig. What the fuck, Zidi? Tell me what the hell is going on here?”

Eugene slid in on her right, Kamal behind him. The three bots watched the siblings, waiting for the verdict on their future. Zidi explained everything, their arrival, her suspicions, the confrontation and then the good the bots had done. Mei shared a tense glance with the others but kept listening.

“Look, with you and Zig gone and the field bots going senile, we need their help. I don't like it but-”

“You don't like it?” Demanded Zag. “How can you let her pretend to be Zig? How do you know they didn't kill her?”

“I don't. But I doubt it. Mei's as honest as the day is long.”

“Zig is dead, how can you be so calm about this?”

“Zig went to war. She was never going to come back alive and I came to terms with that a long time ago. You're an idiot if you thought any differently.” When Zag had nothing to say to that, she went on. “She wasn't planning on coming back. And Mei isn't her but Mama was nearly dead before they showed up. She's perfectly content to believe her daughter came back alive and whole in spirit. She's happy. Mei stays because I can't take that away from her.”

There was a long silence and the bots quietly slipped out of the loft and out. Mei, the last down, heard one more sentence.

“Fine. For Mama. But I'm not calling a droid my sister's name.”

Over the next few weeks, Zag watched her closely. Everywhere she went, whether on errands, out in the fields or out with Kamal and Eugene, there she was. Her face was like stone as she watched Mama dote on her or when Zidi came to her for help. It finally came to a head a month after Zag got back. Mei was tending the apiary, no one liked to get stung so she was usually undisturbed. When she turned to scrape the honey from the comb, there was Zag, hands folded over her chest.

“You ain't nothing like her.” She said and Mei slid the boards back into the hive.

“I know. I'm not trying to take her place with you. We just didn't know where else to go.”

Zag narrowed her eyes and clenched her jaw, making her look for a second like Zig. “As much as it pains me to admit, you're good for Mama. It devastated her when Zig enlisted.”

“Were you? Devastated, I mean.”

“No. I love my sister but I knew she couldn't see a place for herself here. So she went to find a place where she could belong. But I hoped that she would come back eventually and it would be like it was.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not her. I'm sorry I can't make it like it was. I don't even know how it was.”

Zag smiled. “She wouldn't have said that. To be honest, you're too nice to be my sister. Zig was sharp and hard, you must have noticed.”

“I thought maybe people would pass it off like the war changed her. It didn't seem right to bring your family the Zig I knew.”

Zag looked like she didn't want to know the answer, but she asked anyway. “What was she like? The Zig you knew?”

Mei tried to be as honest as possible, realizing that she was the last connection Zag had with her twin. But the truth was not a pretty thing.

“She was a weapon. Focused, cold, efficient. The perfect soldier. It was like everything inside of her had been burned out and she was a shell, pretending to be human. I think she took me with her because she felt a connection to you and this when she was near me.” Zag shook her head, lips thinning and jaw clenched so tight that the muscle jumped in her throat. Mei wondered if perhaps she should have lied, but she didn't think Zag would thank her for shielding her from the truth. She owed everything to Zig but she had no illusions about her doppelganger. Messed up in so many ways, but humans always assured her that was a part of being alive.

“Mei- Was she in pain? When she died.” Zag looked braced for the worst and Mei couldn't bring herself to tell the truth this time.

“Not at the end, no. She just lied down in the snow. It was peaceful.” She would never forget Zig's screams echoing off that mountain. Eugene had it easy, having to try and remember that terrible day. She'd made the right decision though, the tension in Zag's shoulders eased.

“That's good. Look, I'm still not entirely comfortable with all of this but I'm not here to fuck with y'all's life. You're safe from me.”

Mei nodded in gratitude. “I'm sorry it had to be this way.”

Zag shrugged. “Sometimes things just happen and you can't do a damn thing to change them. Zig was always going to die, but at least my mother got her daughter back in her last days.” With that she turned on her heel and headed back down the hill. Mei turned back to the bees and finished tending them, ignoring the sting on her sensors when she handled them too roughly.