

# Crossed Wires

*by /a/non*

# I

## Installation

A bead of sweat ran down my cheek, and I realized the sun had decided for me that today was not a day for long distance walking. I gave a heaving grunt as I pulled my satchel off my shoulder, setting it gently onto the sand at my feet. It had grown pretty heavy over the past couple of weeks, and I wondered if the town I was heading toward to sell my finds hadn't moved since I last visited. I went through the bag's contents once more, counting all the pieces in my head and comparing the running list I kept to what was actually in the bag. All the important stuff – that is to say, valuable parts – were there. I triple checked the microchips and storage drives, confirming whether they were all still functional after rustling around in my bag and knocking into one another.

It was times like this that I really wished I could get my bike out of the impound, but until I sold these parts I wouldn't have enough money and there was no way anyone back home would take parts from me at anything resembling fair value. I took a few deep breaths, thankful for the shady spot I found next to the rotting remains of an old airship that had run aground some time during the war.

After taking a break for the afternoon I thought about whether I should try to scavenge the wreckage I was using for shelter. On the one hand, my bag was heavy enough, and the components inside were surely more than valuable enough for me to get my bike back. On the other, if I put it off until I'd freed said bike, some other buzzard would get to dig around in here before I could – if one hadn't already, that was – and I'd miss out on some potentially valuable goods, or, even better, old military tech. That stuff fetched a pretty penny with both collectors and

rebels, and it could also help me curry favor with one (or more, if I was clever) of the governments trying to establish a functional state.

I'd talked myself into it before I even finished that last thought. It was a D-class, so it wouldn't take me much time to pick it clean anyway. I'd cleaned out my fair share of these so, knowing my way around, I headed straight for the cockpit. There I found the controls and computers mostly intact, at least physically, and I pulled up my portable terminal to start digging around. The first thing I did was a basic systems check.

That's when I heard, just barely, the sound of footsteps. Had someone been in here the whole time? I drew my handgun and took cover behind the seat of the cockpit. I started sweating again – this time a cool one. I did my best to still my breathing and listened for any other noises.

To my surprise, I heard a female voice. “Captain, have you returned from your scouting mission? I've been guarding the ship for days.”

Great. A dysfunctional military bot was not what I wanted to deal with today. I chagrined my greed and peeked over the back of the seat to get a better idea of what I was dealing with. To say I was surprised to see a young-looking, human-looking woman in the doorway would be an understatement. I was so surprised, in fact, that I didn't duck back into cover and instead locked eyes with her. If I were a hair less lucky she'd have killed me right there, but she didn't seem to perceive me as hostile.

“You aren't the captain. Where is she?” It took a second for me to respond – I was counting my lucky stars once again.

“The captain...couldn't make it. The scouting mission was a failure.”

“How do you know?” Shit. How smart was this thing? Should I say, “well, this ship went out of production before the war ended, which was decades before I was born, and even if the captain was alive she'd long decided not to return for one reason or another?”

Sure, that will go great. “Well, uh...”

“My name is Unit 00007 Model Number 0000007, Designation: Nana,” she said, apropos of nothing, unblinking blue eyes staring right at me.

I tried using the time she took to ejaculate her serial number to cook up a lie, and, unable to do so, decided to go with the truth after all. She blinked, then looked down.

“I...see. I'm to believe that the war has ended?”

“Sure has, Nana.”

“I received no report of this.”

I glanced at the terminal. The ship's communication system had malfunctioned a long time ago. I guessed it was when they crashed – probably why the captain had to scout outside in the first place. “I don't think you will, either. It's been a long time.”

She sat silent, processing the information. I decided she wasn't a threat for now and went back to the terminal. There wasn't a lot of meaningful data here – the ship was in too poor a state. A functional war-era cyborg was an incredible find on its own, though – and would fetch a pretty penny.

“How...did it end?”

“What?”

“You say the war ended. Did we win?”

“Do I look like an alien? Yeah, we won.” I left out that almost all of the world was destroyed in the process, and that there were still alien holdouts left in certain places on Earth, and that really you could hardly call it a victory when the population went from billions to scarcely ten million in the span of a decade, but hey – you should see the other guys.

She smiled, and her green eyes shone. I wasn't sure whether she'd be able to do that. “And now? Who is the leader of the International Federation?”

That was a term I hadn't heard someone say aloud in so long I had to think hard about what she was even talking about. The international federation collapsed a few days (yes, days) after the war ended – turns out the high of beating back an existential threat by the skin of your teeth wears off fast when your people start wanting answers about “strategic” city-nuking.

Once again, I decided on the truth. Her smile was wiped off in an instant, and I wished I'd lied. "I see..."

"Sorry." I was amazed that her emo-sims were so effective. Current-era bots can hardly put on a convincing neutral tone, let alone run the gamut of emotions so genuinely like Nana was doing – I was *apologizing* to a *machine*. I almost felt bad that my plan was to sell her off to a mercenary company for reprogramming and front-line warfare. Speaking of which...

"Nana, what is your primary function?"

"Combat."

"Why didn't the captain take you on her scouting mission?"

"The imminent threat at the time of her departure was an attack on the ship. We couldn't let the enemy have the cargo."

Interesting. "What's in the cargo?"

"Classified."

"Alright, just a second." I searched the terminal for clearance codes and read one off to Nana. She didn't respond, so I read another, a bit more forcefully.

"Classified documents are secured by rank, clearance code, and in some cases they are individualized. Knowledge of a clearance code and one's rank can be mutually exclusive. Also, raising your voice does not raise your clearance." Damn. That would have worked on any robot I knew. Anyway, did she just tease me?

"Alright, tell me more about you. What are your combat capabilities?" I pretended to listen while I looked for information on the ship's cargo.

"Enhanced strength, speed, accuracy and reflexes. Tactical analysis support systems to allow for quicker, better decision-making during battle. Metal endoskeleton increases durability significantly. Self-charging nuclear battery with backup solar and wind power allow for nearly infinite runtime."

That helped explain how she stayed functional for so long. I wondered what kind of price a self-charging nuclear battery would fetch these days...then I wondered just how rare a model Nana was.

"You say you're unit 00007...where are the others? How many of you are there?"

"14 were created."

"Why did they stop at 14 with such a long space for units?"

"The facility was destroyed by invaders."

"...how many units are there now?"

"When I began my guard duty, all units were still in service."

Not very useful information by itself, is it? I guessed they were shut down, scrapped, or hiding somewhere – judging by Nana, I decided they were smart enough to figure out that openly being what they were was dangerous.

I kept poking around the terminal, ignoring her glare over my shoulder – obviously Nana wasn't a terribly independent robot. "Shouldn't you be, you know, defending the ship?"

"You are neither aggressive nor likely to gain access to the cargo hold. There's no need to defend the ship from you."

"What if I suddenly attacked, though? Say I was an alien in human skin, biding my time until your guard was down."

"Negative. My guard is never down." She was a cyborg. I guessed that line of questioning was going to get dangerous if I kept pushing it so I changed the subject. I realized halfway through that I hadn't spoken to one person at such length...maybe ever? Since I was a boy at least.

"So what did you do while the captain was gone besides stay on guard?"

"What did I do?"

"You know, to pass the time."

She went silent for a moment. "I didn't consider the time it was taking until you got here. No contact was made, so I made routine patrols of the ship and regular checks for communications." I was really starting to feel bad for her.

Not bad enough to turn away the price she'd fetch, though.

"Well, what would you have liked to do, if you realized how long it was taking? You ever get bored?"

"Not when I have a mission."

"What about when you don't?"

“I have always had a mission.”

I rolled my eyes. She say it in the reflection from the terminal.

“What do you do to pass your time, intruder?”

“My name’s Ed. And I like to ride my motorbike, when I have the gas.” Or the bike.

“Gas? As in, gasoline?”

“I guess you wouldn’t know that we had a gasoline renaissance after the IF went down. A lot of tech was lost, most of it for good. Compared to all the research that would need to be replicated, drilling for oil was easy. Besides, with how few of us there are left—”

“How few humans?”

“Yeah, with how—”

“How many?”

Oh, right, I didn’t mention it. “The world over, about 10 million.”

“How?”

“Toward the end of the war, the IF started getting desperate. I guess they figured, if we make ourselves look insane the aliens will leave us alone. It worked – but invader-occupied cities were destroyed outright, casualties be damned.” Maybe if I kept talking about this stuff she’d be too distracted to see that I was getting really close to unlocking the cargo hold remotely.

“There is no way they killed billions of people.” They even programmed her to be incredulous?

“No, but looking at the records it almost seems like they were trying. Anyway, after the IF collapsed, the rebel government fell due to infighting and the people were left without leadership. This led to, well, what you’d expect – violence, hunger, and so on. Anyway, with so few people remaining, we aren’t in much danger of running out of fossil fuel these days.”

“So people went to war with one another again?”

“I wouldn’t call it something so noble as war. It was more like a worldwide, sustained riot.”

“How long did things take to calm down?”

“Depends on who you ask. I don’t think they have yet.”

“What do you mean?” I pretended to continue working, but the cargo hold was open – no alarm sounded, thanks to my forward thinking. I still couldn’t get around the encryption that masked what the contents were, but my eyes would be good enough for that. As for getting to the cargo hold itself..

“Have you been outside the ship since the captain left?”

“Yes.”

“How far?”

“Only the immediate vicinity.”

“And you didn’t notice?”

“I wasn’t out there sightseeing.” Sarcasm too, huh? Whoever made these was ahead even of his time, let alone mine. Forget the power system, her personality program would make me a rich man on its own...if her AI wasn’t smart enough to figure out what I was planning. Since it probably was, I changed gears. That cargo hold was calling my name.

“That’s why you don’t know. Go take a look.”

“I only take orders from my commanding officers.” She narrowed her eyes.

“It’s not an order, I’m just asking you to. Seeing it will make my point much clearer than if I explained it.”

She sat silent while I disconnected my terminal, pretending to have given up. I’m not sure how convincing my act was – usually I didn’t have to deceive anyone about what I was doing. I wasn’t even sure I would get her outside the ship.

“I’ll come with you.”

Nana nodded. “Alright. We’ll go.” She turned without another word and headed for the entry I used. I got more and more nervous the closer we got to the doorway. She stood there for a second, scanning the surroundings.

“Which season is it?”

“Summer.”

She took a tentative step forward, then another. *Take a nice, long look, Nana.* I thought as I shut the emergency door behind her and bolted toward the cargo hold. My heart skipped a couple of beats when I heard her *catch the door* before it could snap shut. The



hydraulics struggled against her unexpected resistance, sounding like a garbage disposal with a fork in it played through an amplifier.

I covered my ears, which didn't help at all, except that I couldn't hear her surprisingly vulgar threats over the sound of the crunching any longer. I wasn't far from the cargo hold and made sure to shut as many doors behind me as possible to buy me more time.

The crunching stopped and I had the impression it wasn't because Nana decided to write off getting inside. When I started hearing distinct metal *thumps* behind me I picked up the pace. It occurred to me that I was probably going to die not long after I found out what the cargo's contents were.

Before I could resolve to quit this line of work for something less imminently deadly I rounded the last corner and stood face to face with the cargo hold's open door. What I saw surprised me so much I didn't even bother to hide.

"I said, stop at once!" yelled Nana as she ran through the last metal door in her way. If I wasn't so shaken by the contents of the cargo hold I'd have been impressed by all the Nana-shaped holes she left in her wake. She grimaced when she saw where I stopped, but the grimace was replaced with distress when she saw what I was looking at.

The cargo hold was empty. There was a hole cut into the side of the ship and some scuff marks on the floor, suggesting someone sliced his way in and dragged the contents out with Nana none the wiser. The cuts looked new – some were still red-hot from the torch.

"I guess you failed your mission, huh?"

"Not yet."

"What?"

"I check the hold daily. The cargo was here at 0600, so the perpetrator can't be far."

I glanced at my watch. "That was 14 hours ago."

She started walking back toward the cockpit.

"Where are you going?"

“Checking the security footage.” She stopped, turned, and grabbed hold of my arm. “You’re coming too. You’re under arrest.”

“For what? I obviously didn’t get whatever was in there.”

“Attempted theft military equipment is no minor offense, intruder.”

“I told you my name already. And anyway, what kind of military equipment?”

“Classified.”

“It’s already been stolen!”

“Not for long.”

Begrudgingly I let her drag me to the cockpit, not that I had any hope of breaking her death grip on my wrist. She was taller than me, so I fit through the holes she left in the doors. Back in the cockpit, Nana pulled up a monitor and started scanning the footage from the cargo hold’s camera. Around the same time that I started to investigate the ship – about 1900 hours – the cutting began. Nana grimaced.

“I’d have noticed it right away if you weren’t distracting me.”

“If you’re implying I was sent in as a distraction, you’re mistaken.”

“I’m not making such an implication. You’d have known the cargo was missing and run from the makeshift exit the thief made if that were the case. What I am saying is that this is your fault.”

“I’m surprised they programmed you to shift blame.”

“I’m not shifting blame. And, my personality wasn’t programmed.”

“What?”

“My personality is based on a real person’s, not an algorithm.”

“Then why do you follow orders and protocols so rigidly? No person would stay on this ship for how long you have if they were left to their own devices. Unless they were insane, I guess.”

“Do you think it would be safe for cyborgs like me to be fully independent?”

“I don’t think it’s safe for you to be self-aware like that.”

“I have no intention of breaking protocol so I and my sisters can be dismantled and a new project started from scratch.” Suddenly, I felt pretty stupid for being impressed with her emotions. I also realized that deceiving her and selling her off might be too hard to be worth it.

She started dragging me back to the cargo hold. “I’m going to follow, you don’t need to pull me along.” I wanted that cargo as badly as she did.

“I do. Until further notice you aren’t to be left alone in this ship, and until you can be taken to the proper authorities you will remain in my custody.”

“There are no proper authorities anymore. I already told you the IF doesn’t exist.”

“Then you will remain with me.”

“Can I at least get my stuff from outside?”

“No.”

## II

### Execution

I decided to keep quiet for a while after that. What choice did I have but to follow her? Strong as her grip was, my arm was coming whether I was attached or not. She wasn't much for conversation after refusing my request for my things (which left me in a worse position than the one I started in when I set out four months ago – now, in addition to being penniless and bike-less, I was bound to a war machine on a mission that I was beginning to want no part in), anyway, so I spent my time thinking.

The first thing I thought was, "I'm going back the way I came." The thieves set off from the downed ship in the same direction I'd come from, meaning before long Nana and I would be back at my home town. Without the goods left behind it did me no good to go back this early, but I did have another prize. Two, if we caught the thieves before they dumped the cargo.

I considered and reconsidered whether I should try to take her to a military connection of mine – they were *technically* IF holdouts, so she'd fit right in there, and I'd make a tidy profit from offering up a remnant of an apparently top-secret project involving warrior cyborgs. On the other hand I wanted to take the first opportunity I could to get away from her. The sooner she found the cargo the sooner I figured I would be free to go. So, I thought, should I delay her until we reached town, or should I earnestly help her find whatever it was we were looking for so I could get away?

I contemplated my choices silently for a long time – meanwhile, Nana followed the trail she'd picked up. Whoever had stolen the precious cargo left a set of footprints behind, and I thought my choice would be made for me before the day was done, considering the blinding pace it felt like we were walking.

Maybe that was just the pain in my shoulder. Of course, that isn't what happened – at some point the trail stopped completely, like the owner of the footprints took to the skies.

“They must have gotten a ride somehow. Maybe there was a planned rendezvous here.”

I spoke up for the first time in a while. “Given that they knew about the cargo, that’s a safe bet.”

“That means they’ve ridden far already. We’ll need transportation.” She turned to me. “You said you had a motorcycle. Where is it?”

“Back in my hometown. It’s in the direction we’re heading.”

“Then we’ll go there.”

“But my bike is in the impound. I can’t get it out without money.”

“How much money?”

I pulled up my portable terminal and did some math. The old IF holdouts liked to use their currency so I kept the calculation handy. “In modern coin, the equivalent of about eight-hundred IF dollars.”

“How much do you have?”

“None, since you didn’t let me get my stuff back at the ship. Not that it would matter – all I had was raw materials, and I need to go further North to get a fair deal for my findings.”

She thought for a moment. Processed, I guess. “The prices aren’t standardized?”

“Where do you think you are? The prices aren’t even standardized between neighboring food stalls. The fact is, in Pylon the merchants all know me and my situation – I’m in a disadvantaged bargaining position. That’s not the case in Jeep.”

“Pylon? Jeep?”

“Cities. Are you paying attention?”

“I know of no such cities. They aren’t present in any of my memories.”

“That makes sense – they were founded after the war.”

“Why those names?”

“This is a weird time to get curious about a small detail.”

“In any case, you’re saying we must go to the ship, collect your items, travel North to another city, exchange those goods for currency, *then* return to your home town to retrieve your motorcycle. Correct?”

How very astute. “That’s all correct.”

“Impossible. We’ll have to find another way.”

“Okay, what’s your plan?”

She processed for another few minutes. We kept walking in the direction the footsteps had previously been heading, unsure if we were on the right track. I guessed Nana was concerned about losing whatever trail she could make if she stopped to rest.

I was more concerned with resting and she was taking a long time to answer. “Nana, I’m not sure if the other members of your crew were also cyborgs—”

“They were not.”

“Then you’re aware of human limits. I need to sleep. Feels like we’ve been walking for hours.”

“That’s because we have been. If the thief has been on a vehicle for this amount of time—”

It was my turn to cut her off. “Then there’s no point in trying to follow a trail. We’re better off asking around for suspicious persons or if anyone’s seen the cargo based on a description. What is it, anyway?”

“Classified.”

“I think you can afford to break protocol in this case.” She stopped, turned her head, and stared blue daggers into me. “You’ll never find it by yourself.”

“Fine. We’ll stop for now so you can sleep.” She released my wrist, which I rubbed reflexively.

“What, right here?”

“What’s wrong with right here?”

“There’s no shelter. It’s out in the middle of nowhere. What if it rains, or something worse?”

“If it rains we’ll be wet. You’ll survive.”

I wondered whether she was stupid or mean. “I’ll get sick if I’m out in the open like this. I could be attacked, too. Let’s find somewhere on the way that at least has a roof over my head.”

I started walking the same direction we were heading before, Nana just a foot or so behind me the whole way. Eventually we found the place I rested the night before. Or, was it two nights before? I decided I should start paying a little more attention to the time once I was away from this mess.

It was a burnt-out pre-war house, one of the few still somewhat intact after the aliens made a mess of things. “Intact” meaning it had a roof and at least one functional door, but the windows were gone and I was pretty sure I saw a skeleton out of the corner of my eye on the second floor.

“I’ll wake you when it’s time to move.”

I counted on that.

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My sleep was troubled, to say the least. Try going from sleeping alone to sleeping with a cyborg with dubious intentions for your future watching you intently the whole time – it’s not easy.

“Can I help you?”

“What?”

“You’re staring at me. It’s hard to relax.”

“I’m making sure you don’t try to make a break for it.”

“Don’t worry. You’re way too fast for me to try that.”

“Nevertheless, I don’t intend to let you out of my sight until I have confirmed you weren’t in cahoots with the thieves.”

“If I was, what would you do?”

I could tell she was going over the procedure in her “mind” for a moment. “As an accessory to the crime, you’d be faced with prison time. Lacking the facilities to properly imprison you, I’d keep you in the ship’s brig.”

“Is that what awaits the thieves?”

“That depends on whether they use the cargo.”

“You still never told me what it was. Won’t it help us find it if I know what we’re looking for? Besides, how could the thieves have known what – and where – it was if you’re the only surviving member of the ship’s crew?”

She looked down. I guessed that was a little blunt...but she implied I didn’t need a roof over my head earlier. I didn’t feel *that* bad.

“It’s possible they found the captain and got the information from her somehow.”

“Nana, it’s been a long time.”

“I don’t mean like that. Maybe they found her body and with it some kind of data about the ship and its cargo.”

“She’d keep that kind of thing on her?”

“She was intending to have a replacement ship come to pick up the cargo while *Midnight* was aground. She needed the exact specs to make sure the replacement could carry it. The ship’s location, too.”

“*Midnight*?”

“The name of the ship.”

“What if the aliens had found her and taken the data? Wouldn’t that have been extraordinarily bad, if this cargo was so critical?”

“I was there to defend the ship – the Captain had records about me as well. Had you not infiltrated the ship, I’d have noticed something going on with the cargo hold and taken care of things right away.”

“Infiltrated? The door was open. Besides, why didn’t you arrest me on sight?”

“Without a vehicle there was no way you were taking the cargo. Plus, you’re a human – I was only expecting extraterrestrial intrusion.”

I sat silent for a moment, thinking back to my first moments on *Midnight*. “By the way, is something wrong with your chronometer? The captain was gone for a long, long time, but you acted as if you were expecting her.”



“Yes. My internal clock was going to be repaired after we completed our mission.”

“Don’t the computers on the ship keep track of time?”

“Without a timekeeping mechanism, I couldn’t have known it was taking long – do you check your watch when you *don’t* feel like you’ve been waiting a while?”

Fair point. “You keep avoiding my question. What is it we are looking for, exactly?”

“That’s privileged information.”

“I’ll be better able to help you if I know what we’re looking for.”

She just went silent, seeming to think for a while. I decided to roll over and fall asleep.

I woke up later – I don’t know how much sleep I got – with Nana on top of me on all fours. I became keenly aware in that moment of how much of a woman she was, but I had a feeling this wasn’t one of those “I must have you, I can’t resist” situations. Mainly because I woke up to a horrible ringing in my ears and a room full of smoke.

Nana said something to me but I couldn’t understand over the high-pitched din in my head. She was covered in some kind of black powder. I just lay there silently, eyes wide, staring up at her.

“Can you hear me?” My hearing was starting to come back, at least enough that if she yelled I could hear her from a few inches away.

“What happened?!” I shouted louder than I meant to.

“We’re under attack.”

“Why?!”

I don’t think she was expecting that response, and I don’t really know why I said it, but it gave her pause. I thought of some better questions, but didn’t have time to ask them before she stood, pulling me up and dragging me along with her.

“We need to take cover and regroup.”

I didn’t argue the point. I remembered that just outside the back exit of the house was a cellar door, so I frantically tried to

lead Nana there. Some bullets whizzed past our heads and, when I turned to see what the source of the fire was, I was struck in the shoulder. I stumbled forward with a start and a scream, only managing to stay on my feet thanks to the momentum of being pulled along by my captor. Nana cursed, pulling me forward and standing in the way of more fire. Seeing a relatively normal-looking woman withstand gunfire must have lowered the attackers' morale, since they stopped after a few metallic dings rang out.

Meanwhile, I ducked into the house's kitchen and scooted up against the far wall. I found my gun was returned to me after Nana had confiscated it earlier – she must have slipped it into my holster when she mounted me earlier, I thought. I tried not to think about Nana mounting me, which wasn't a great feat given the blinding pain in my shoulder.

I could hear the inhuman grunting of our attackers as they honed in on our position, Nana standing in the doorway and myself hidden behind an open cabinet. It wasn't much for cover but the false sense of security – and the knowledge that the excruciating pain from my wound would soon be over – helped me cope with the fact that I was probably going to die in a few minutes. Nana was tough but from the sounds of it there were at least five attackers.

While I was hoping my bike wouldn't have unspeakable things visited upon it because I couldn't get it out of the impound, the first of the aliens attacked Nana up close. I'd seen one in person before, but their visage always made me feel a little queasy. In as much pain as I was, being a little queasy was enough to make me want to hurl outright. I choked it back.

The alien's pale-blue skin glimmered in the moonlight from the kitchen window, a trail of slime left in its wake as its serpentine tail slithered across the tile floor. Four gorilla-sized arms pawed and struck at Nana, who took the would-be deadly blows stoically when it managed to hit her at all. Most of the time, she dodged out of the way and countered with a sharp jab of her own. After a few seconds of this dance she landed a clean blow on the

invader's beak-like mouth, cracking a piece of it off. Its agonized cry was nightmare inducing.

While he clutched his face his comrade attacked Nana from her flank. She caught a cruel blow to the side of her head; I could tell even she was shaken by such a force. Her blue eyes narrowed before she rebutted, sending a knee to the attacker's abdomen. It doubled over and Nana, expecting to be met with the same cheap shot as before, stepped away from the two hostiles. Still keeping her guard up, she scanned the area for the others we both heard.

"Ed, are you okay?"

Don't draw attention to me! "No, I'm not."

"Stay there. The others are patrolling the house to look for more of us." With that, she returned to her stunned foes. I won't describe how she killed them other than that it was with her bare hands and slow enough that they could call for help. Maybe that was on purpose, but I was hoping we could escape under their noses.

In fact...

Some might think me stupid for attempting to flee from a war machine who was protecting me from certain torture and death at the hands of hostile alien invaders with a grudge, and they would be right. In my defense, I hadn't slept much, I was under duress, I had a lot of adrenaline running through me, and I am not a wise man. So, when the third alien arrived and starting brawling with Nana, I made for the nearest window.

It hurt a lot to pull myself up and through the opening, but I managed to clear it and landed on the ground outside with a soft thud. That also hurt a lot. I heard the clash of bone and metal sound from inside; I couldn't tell who was winning, but after watching Nana's earlier performance I had a feeling it wasn't the alien. At least, I hoped it wasn't.

I couldn't move very fast on account of the trembling in my legs and the searing bullet wound, but I could move. I limped forward, not paying much mind to where I should go. Vainly I hoped my bike would appear before me, like an angel from heaven, to take me away from this place. That was when I felt

my feet come up off the ground. I really hoped Nana had caught me.

Of course, I knew she hadn't. The alien's grip on my collar was such that its cool, slimy skin touched mine, sending a shiver up my spine. I remembered that I had my gun – right before the hostile delivered a vicious strike to my stomach. I managed to reach into my coat and grab it. I vomited immediately, bile running down my chin and splattering on the ground next to – and onto – my weapon. The alien laughed, its compound black eyes shimmering under the stars. It said something to me in its tongue. I couldn't understand it but had a feeling it was not a friendly greeting.

The alien's mirth was cut short as the back door to the old house was blown open, revealing a very angry blonde charging forward, three broken corpses behind her. Knowing I wasn't much of a threat he dropped me – again, very painful – and faced her, catching her punch in his hand. It was hard to see, but Nana had taken some real damage in that last brawl. Parts of her skin, synthetic or not, were missing, revealing a metal endoskeleton.

The alien held fast to her fist and pulled her forward, elbowing the back of her neck. Against a normal human this would have been sufficient to at least render her unconscious, but it just seemed to aggravate the cyborg. As he tried to twist her arm, she used his grip against him and pulled him off balance. He released her, but she took hold of his arm and delivered a one-arm shoulder throw, sending him to the ground with a sickening crack. He writhed, arching his back, but she gave it no mercy, sitting on its chest and savagely pounding its head until it seemed like she was hitting the ground beneath.

By this point I managed to get onto my back, leaning against my good arm. I'd finally caught my breath, but it was still labored. Nana finished her frankly excessive punishment of the offending alien and glared at me.

"That was stupid." Yeah, I already went over that.

"Sorry."

"You would have died out here. That wound needs dressing."

I was going to reply when Nana was caught up from behind by the fifth of the alien attackers. He put her in a full nelson with two of his arms, then used the other two to punch her sides. She struggled, but surprise and the position gave him too much of an advantage. I could see the fight leaving her, but to her credit she held on for a lot longer than anyone else would have if faced with something similar. Her kicks landed feebly against the alien's torso thanks to her lack of leverage. The gears in her endoskeleton started to grind audibly, *trying* to resist the unnatural direction they were forced into.

I could pretend I didn't hesitate, but the truth was that I hurt, my eyes were bleary, it was dark, and my gun was covered in fresh vomit. Even if I took it up, there was a chance I'd hit her, or miss entirely – maybe it was better to take my own life and spare myself from being this freak's plaything for god knew how long. I considered that option longer than I'm comfortable admitting.

I decided I owed it to Nana to give it a try. It wasn't like it would hurt her if I struck her by mistake, right? I ignored the smell and wetness as well as I could, narrowing my vision down the sights. I held my breath as I pulled the trigger.

I missed the first shot. The bullet rang out as it ricocheted off the side of the house. The alien took notice, though, and that split-second of slack was all it took for Nana to free herself from its grip and drop to her knees in front of it. She used her hands to vault herself up, sending a bone-shattering kick to the alien's solar plexus. It lurched back, and I took the chance to unload the rest of my bullets in that direction. Most of the seven shots I fired went wide, but I managed to land three – two to the stomach and one to an arm.

These shots sent the monster reeling, and Nana took care of the rest. She mounted the alien's back, wrapping her legs around its torso for stability. Her heels acted as hooks to keep her in place while she choked the invader with a lion-killer. It fought fiercely to break her grip and get some air, slammed her back against the ground, and used its tail to try and pry her off, but her will was too much and, after what felt like far too long, the life faded from

the alien. The last thing I saw was her jumping off its back and running toward me.

### III

## Shutdown

I shook Ed for twenty-eight seconds. His eyes fluttered open twice in that interval before he became unresponsive. He lacked a pulse and on further examination he lacked a heartbeat entirely. I laid him down gently and returned to the still-unconscious surviving alien. His breathing was slow and labored. I estimated it would take him several minutes to regain consciousness and used that time to ensure he wouldn't be able to fight when he awoke.

I checked the bodies of his four comrades. Other than weapons, the only item of interest was a tracking device that used radio frequencies to hone in on its target. I found the source of the signal right away. It was near Ed's body, covered in vomit. I assumed it was on his person before he was caught up by his assassin.

But why were the aliens tracking him? It would be a little while yet until the alien could be interrogated, so I considered what their reasons could be. It was better to go into interrogative situations with a line of questions in mind, after all.

If they wanted to kill him, they wouldn't have bothered with the tracking device at all. If they were close enough to put it on him, they were close enough to rip him apart. What did they need from him, then? And how long had they been tracking him to get it?

I pondered longer than I realized and the alien started to stir. I was sitting nearby. Naturally, it panicked when it realized it was bound and immobile, struggling against the restraints in which I placed it.

"Don't bother. I've dislocated your shoulders. Without functional arms, even if you escape you're as good as dead." It seemed

surprised to hear its own tongue.

“What do you want, machine? I have nothing to offer you. Give me a proper death.”

“I need you to answer my questions.”

“Iron dog, I will do no such thing.”

“I beg to differ. Answer my questions or I will make you my prisoner. You’ll end your miserable life old, decrepit, and away from war. I’ll laugh each time you beg me to kill you, and when you have reached your expiration I will ensure you die in a warm bed with a full belly.”

Had he normal eyes, he would have narrowed them. I could sense he was scanning my face for dishonesty, but he found none. I was lying, of course – if he truly persisted in refusing to answer me, I’d have left him for dead, but he would prefer that to my threat of a peaceful life of servitude.

“Damn you. Very well. I will answer your questions, but I expect to be slain properly by my enemy in return.”

“Why were you tracking that scavenger?” I gestured to Ed’s corpse.

“We weren’t intending to track him at all. Our true targets were the same thieves that stole your ship’s cargo.” For the first time since I put him to sleep, I felt panic wash over my face.

“You know of it?”

“Yes. The two thieves we were *trying* to follow found the datapad on your captain’s bones. We happened to capture them, looking for dinner, when one made a bargain with us.”

“And you accepted?”

“When he told us that your ship housed a power source that could win our race the war, it was impossible to refuse.”

“You made a foolish choice.”

“I know this now. We underestimated your persistence.”

“You didn’t expect me to follow them?”

“We didn’t expect that you were still functional, machine. You were sitting on that ship for decades, awaiting a master who would never return. If decay didn’t overcome you, surely despair would have...or so we thought.” He snarled.



“Maybe that is what should have transpired. Had I known how long it was taking, I might have done as you say.”

He stopped. “You were unaware of the time?”

“My internal time-keeping systems were not functional until a few moments ago. The beating you and your comrades gave me turned it back on, somehow.”

He laughed. “How unfortunate. What a fitting end to our war. Humanity wins not by ability or will, but luck. As usual.”

I ignored his comment, changing the subject. “Your intention in tracking the thieves was to keep them from sneaking away with the cargo under your noses, then.”

“Precisely. However, they must have discovered how we were tracking them and left him with the burden,” he said, gesturing to Ed with a grunt. I thought, if Ed were alive, he’d say something about that being typical – his being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“And where are they now?”

“If we knew, we wouldn’t have bothered with the two of you.”

“Do they tend to stay in any one place for a long time? A base of operations?”

“None we would know about.”

“What do they look like?”

“Both are humans. Fair of skin and dark of hair, with dark eyes. One much larger than the other, and stronger. But fat. The other, skinny and frail. Ygthfx nearly broke his bones with a gesture when we first caught them.” The invader laughed at the memory. I nearly killed him then out of disgust.

“What kind of vehicle do they use?”

“One of ours, but modified to suit their sensibilities. A hoverplat, as your race called them during the war.” That explained the tracks suddenly disappearing. They must have abandoned ship, approached on foot, slipped Ed the tracker while he slept, and waited for their chance.

“If you were to guess, what would they try to do with the stolen goods?”

“They were simple, even by human standards. They would wish to sell it quickly.”

“Did you ever learn their names?”

“The fat one is called Charlie. The skinny one is just ‘boss’ to Charlie.”

“Do you have other allies?”

“All my race are my allies.”

“Do you have any other companions in your group? Or were you five the last hope of your doomed race in this part of the world?”

He looked down shamefully in silence. That was all I thought he would be competent to answer.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” I pressed Ed’s gun to the alien’s temple and fired the last round in the magazine.

\* \* \*

While I searched for the thieves and the stolen machine, I considered the implications of my failures up to that point. Not only had I failed my mission to protect the super-generator, I’d also failed my primary objective of keeping humanity safe from the alien menace. I could rationalize that Ed died by his own foolhardy attempt to escape or that I was outmatched, but it was just that – rationalization. At the end of the day, even a single human dying under my care was an unacceptable blunder, never mind the theft.

I was surprised about how heavily Ed’s death weighed on my mind, at first. Many of my comrades had died by my side before; I’d been on ships that were shot down and fought losing battles to defend a critical position. I was no stranger to death in combat. So why this particular person? Was it the personal nature of our brief relationship? Was it that, rather than losing a comrade, I lost someone I was meant to protect?

Was I just lonely on that ship after so long? Did I connect with him because he was the first person I saw in years? I won-

dered how he felt about me. He probably didn't like me much, given the circumstances, and I couldn't blame him.

But, even so, he saved me. Maybe he was intending to save himself. Maybe he hoped he would survive his injuries and get on with his life. Speculating about his motive was useless, though, and more rationalizing. I was saved by the one I was supposed to be saving. The least I could do, I thought, was avenge him properly. That meant finding the thieves, and with them the super-generator.

So, how to proceed? My information was limited and my time even more so. Should I go from person to person and ask, "have you seen this thief?" Besides taking too long, that would only serve to bother people. Considering their track record, they've probably been arrested before. That meant a record, which meant I could figure out their connections. With that information, finding them would be trivial.

The police in the nearby city of Pylon were surprisingly uncooperative at first. They balked, as I thought they might, at my International Federation credentials and said police records weren't public information unless I paid taxes. Given that I wasn't a citizen of Pylon, and that I was barely a citizen of any place in this new world, that wasn't on the table. I tried to explain the importance of my mission in practical terms: if the thieves are successful in giving the machine they stole to a criminal enterprise that knows how to use it, they will have sufficient power to usurp any government they please.

That just made the police laugh. I gave up on asking them the "right" way after that. In the dead of night, after the front office was closed, I broke in and searched the records myself. The task was surprisingly trivial and I wondered at the fragility of this authority.

Given what happened to the International Federation, I supposed all authority was fragile.

At any rate, the layout of the arrest records allowed me to search for every "Charlie," "Charles," "Chuck," and other derivatives until I found one with a criminal connection to the "boss"

matching the alien's description. His real name was Hugo. Both had been arrested multiple times for burglary, grand theft auto, arson, and even one murder. Each time they managed to escape from prison.

I checked into who else they might be connected with that I could coax their current location out of. It would take time to track them down, but one lead was all I needed to get the ball rolling.

Rolling...while I was in the computer I checked for Ed's records. His motorcycle was impounded here, and the reason for it was nebulous to say the least – the record simply said, "traffic violation" with no further elaboration. I did Ed – and myself – the favor of expunging the record.

His motorcycle was a good ride. I could tell he cared for it; it was customized and even after a period of being stuck in the impound it shimmered when the sun struck the chrome. I didn't know if he would appreciate that I appropriated it, but I thought that he might not mind. Not that I knew him that well.

\* \* \*

"Boss, are you sure we should just keep this thing?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, Charlie. Those aliens wanted it bad, remember? I'll bet they already caught and killed that patsy we found at the ship. If they come for us, we can use it against them and save our own necks. *Then* we'll sell it."

"But boss, how do we use it? It's just a big power box, right? We don't have anything to hook up to it."

"Not yet, Charlie, but get this – those aliens aren't at their home base, right? Meaning they left their uncharged weapons unguarded. We can grab one, charge it up with this, and blow 'em away when they come through the door to the hideout!"

"If they even find us. We never told them about this place."

"Yeah, they probably won't. Stupid bugbirds. Imagine 'em slithering around out there, sniffing the floor to try and find us. Pathetic!"

The two goons laughed at the non-joke, blissfully unaware that I was in the same room and had been for about four minutes.

It was no mean feat to finally pin down their current hideout. Several times I'd found abandoned places they used to haunt and several more times I "interviewed" friends of theirs. Over the course of months I'd suffered critical damage to an eye thanks to a black-market engineer trying to kidnap me, been forced to wrap my face in bandages to protect the exposed metal from the elements, and my clothes were those of a vagabond scavenger – my uniform had been discarded long ago. The captain would have been embarrassed to see the state I'd put myself in...that these two put me in. I didn't consider my task frustrating, though. Rather, with each failure I anticipated the catharsis of success all the more.

"Pathetic is right," I said, stepping out of the shadows to face them.

They each jumped about a foot. "Huh? When did yo—who are yo—get out of here," stuttered Hugo. Charlie approached, his meaty hands raised in fisticuffs.

"Please, try." He indulged me, swinging a massive hand in an arc to my head. Without a modicum of effort I deflected the blow, sending him reeling to my side.

Hugo wasn't one to waste time. He took up his weapon – a submachine gun he'd affectionately nicknamed "Sarah," after his first girlfriend – and released a volley of 9mm rounds into me. I simply walked through the fire.

"You'll need more than that," I said over the simpering "click" Sarah spat out from her empty magazine, "if you want to stop me."

Charlie attempted to grab me up from behind, hooking his arms under mine. I swung my head back and broke his nose for trying. It reminded me of that fight with the alien, to be attacked like that.

"L-look," spat Hugo. "I don't know what you want, but I can get it for you! We can! Just let us go, okay, and we'll do whatever

it is you want us to.”

I narrowed my good eye at him. “I have endured much because of you two and your greed. There is nothing you can do to make up for it.”

“What are you talking about?”

I pointed to the super-generator.

“What...that thing? What do you know about it?”

“My name is Unit 00007 Model Number 0000007, Designation: Nana.”

He was confused for seven-eighths of a second. Then it clicked. “The damn guard dog on the ship? You came out all this way? The aliens didn’t kill you?”

“They tried.”

Fear washed over Hugo’s ugly countenance. To a typical human, surviving an alien attack was considered a Herculean feat. To best one in combat? Unbelievable.

Charlie valiantly tried attacking me again in spite of the news. I almost admired him, until I remembered that were it not for him Ed would not be dead and I would not be a renegade cyborg on a mission I was about to find out was mostly pointless. I caught up his hand and twisted his wrist so he lay on the ground beneath me.

“I’ll offer you two the courtesy of last words to one another.”

Hugo, ever the great friend, tried to run. I threw Charlie at him. The crack of their bodies together was like music.

If the captain heard me talking like that, I’d have been shut down.

“So long.” I wasted no time putting them down, like one would cull an infestation of vermin.

I turned toward the super-generator after that. They’d damaged it beyond repair. At some point in their travels the two had tried tinkering with it, and destroyed a valuable and irreplaceable component.

I almost wished I could have shown the aliens. I *did* wish I could have told Ed. He’d have thought that was funny, I thought...

With that, I departed the dank cave they called a home, mounted Ed's bike and rode off. I went back to his burial ground – just outside that old house – and parked the motorcycle there. She was out of gas anyway.

I spent a while at that spot, thinking about why I came here. I couldn't come up with a good answer, so I left the bike by Ed's grave and went on, not sure where to go next.

## Afterword

Thank you for reading my story. As you can probably tell, part three is rushed and I didn't edit it very much at all. There are probably spelling errors, grammatical errors, syntax errors, tense inconsistencies and plot holes all over this story.

I spent an inordinate amount of time considering what I wanted to write about for this challenge. In the past I would discover a good idea in the first couple of days and write a little each day of the challenge, usually completing the story a while before the deadline and spending the remaining time on editing. This time, though, I just could not decide on a good story to write for a while. That was probably because of the abundance of themes we had to choose from; I bounced between a number of them for a while and even still have the beginnings of one comedy story about a kid getting isekai'd by the apocalypse just to end up in a post-apocalyptic fantasy world because the damegami wasn't paying attention (after all, she had to send a lot of kids to other worlds given all the deaths all at once). Other than the premise, though, I struggled to make that funny.

A few weeks back, I settled on a story that came to me in a dream. That dream was about a boy that lived in some kind of compound post-apocalypse and met a robot girl. She inspired him to escape the compound and the two traveled the outside world, which turned out not to be destroyed at all. The compound was some kind of experiment or something, I guess. Anyway, they explored for a while, boats were involved, and they came to the robot's (who was actually a cyborg) mother's house. She had gone insane for some reason and attacked the boy (me in the dream) with an axe, so he killed her. Then the cyborg hated him, then I woke up. That story turned out to be un-writeable (not sure why, I just couldn't do it), but the basic idea – man meets



cyborg post apocalypse and then they travel – stuck with me, and so I ended up here.

I wasn't sure how far I wanted to take this story, and with more time I think Ed would have survived and things would have ended on a happier note. In fact, until recently the plan was to have him live and remain the star of the story with Nana acting as a secondary main character. They were going to, after much difficulty, find the thieves and have a satisfying scene of beating the shit out of them. I hit a roadblock, though, and couldn't decide how to proceed within the time constraints I was facing after the alien fight, which I wanted to keep in because I wanted Ed to have a reason to stick around Nana rather than dumping her off at the aforementioned International Federation holdouts at the first opportunity. Owing her his life would do that, right? But the mystery element to the story – which I didn't even decide on until the very moment it appears in the story (the missing cargo) – necessitated a much longer sequence of discovering who stole the precious thing in the first place. I didn't have time for that and didn't particularly want to write it, though.

I also realized that up to this point all my stories have had happy endings, at least for the main characters (sometimes, like in my old sci-fi submission, *only* for the MC). I thought I should challenge myself to write something that would leave a more bitter taste in the reader's mouth, and to that point I think I succeeded, but in a cheap way. If I had more time I would have went deeper into Nana's struggle with her purpose, but I procrastinated too much for that to work out. Then again, if I had more time, Ed might have lived after all.

Anyway, that's enough rambling from me. I hope you could enjoy the story despite its flaws, and again, thanks for reading, anon.