

Metallic Souls

Part 1

Sample chapters

By

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Chapter 3: Hard to Kill.

“You are listening to K-98, the Number One radio station here on Mars. We would like to welcome all of our new listeners near Valhalla Point. It was one of the remaining battle sites of the Great War between our now good friends, the United Earth Government.

Speaking of Earth, we are going to celebrate the treaty between our grand worlds, which was signed a hundred years ago this weeken...sszzzzzzzz!”

An unexpected explosion ripped through the serene atmosphere surrounding Valhalla’s Point, tearing apart the newly constructed communication tower in a violent display of destruction. The ground quaked beneath the fiery roar, sending shockwaves for miles in all directions. A monstrous mushroom-like cloud billowed into the sky.

Out from within the encroaching inferno came a police truck, Anna at the wheel desperately trying to make an escape as the flames of the explosion nipping at her like a ruthless predator. The towering firestorm cast a hellish glow over the landscape, casting sinister shadows that danced in the flickering light. The deafening explosions of collapsing debris, a symphony of destruction that threatened to swallow her whole.

With each passing second, the inferno closed in, an unforgiving force of devastation that left little room for error. Desperation gripped Anna as she fought to maintain control, her only goal survival in a landscape consumed by the fiery chaos. As she looked around her, and only saw flames she thought that this was it for her, until another explosion shook the landscape.

With unforeseen luck, the blast sent the truck soaring away from destruction. Partly relieved from the fiery escape, the danger wasn’t over as the truck was about to hit the ground. The shock suspension on the truck’s wheels nearly came apart as it brutally landed onto the rocky surface of Mars.

In the face of encroaching peril, her defiance shines through with a mischievous smirk dancing on her lips, a daring sparkle in her eyes revealing a thrill that only danger can ignite. Gripping the wheel with an intensity rivaled only by the fiery inferno trailing behind her, she seizes a sliver of control just as the truck hurtles towards the yawning abyss ahead.

With intended precision, she executed a sharp right turn, narrowly avoiding a fate that seemed to beckon her in with eager jaws. The truck skidded and groaned, protesting against the unmoved terrain as Anna pushed it to its limits in a bid to cheat death. With inches away from having a really bad day, her

wheels caught the ground and skidded back to the road.

The fleeting moment of relief vanished quickly as a flicker of blue light from the epicenter of the explosion caught her attention in the rearview mirror. With a flash of light as another explosion erupted in the same spot with a dazzling display of white flames. The blast unleashed a violent shockwave that surged in all directions.

The exhilaration of her narrow escape fizzled into a gnawing sense of urgency as she realized the impending danger. "You gotta be kidding me! What, what kind of bomb do they try to kill me with?" screamed Anna as she braced for the impact.

The explosion's immense power flung debris into the air like a festive explosion of confetti. Despite her daring maneuvers to escape the turmoil, the scorching wave raged upon her, unremittingly striking her vehicle, and sending it careening wildly off its intended path. She relinquished her grip on the steering wheel, recognizing the futility of fighting for command in the face of such chaotic upheaval.

Accepting the inevitable, Anna abandoned the struggle to salvage the truck, her survival instincts started kicking in. With a swift motion, she kicked open the door and hurled herself into the unknown. She plummeted into a nearby ditch just in time to narrowly escape the scorching heat and devastation that followed.

From the merging forces of velocity and explosion, the front of the truck collided violently with the jagged boulder, triggering a chain reaction that caused the fuel cells to erupt in a cacophony of fire and smoke. Like a phoenix rising from its ashes, the vehicle propelled high into the air, a fiery comet against the darkening sky. Anna could do nothing but bear witness as her police truck careened into the rocky mountainside.

As the earth settled and the air grew still, Anna emerged from the ditch, shedding her helmet to reveal a cascade of fiery red hair that gleamed with the hues of the surrounding flames. Her elongated ears, freed from their confinement, twitched with a mix of adrenaline and instinct, attuned to the bedlam that engulfed her. She looked up to the sky and laughed with defiance as she escaped death's grasp.

The frenzied dance of fire and destruction cast an eerie reflection in Anna's crystal sky blue eyes. The stifling heat enveloped her like a suffocating blanket, prompting her to unzip her armor-plated jacket emblazoned with the insignia of the New Dicon Police Department. The moment that she unzipped her jacket, her badge pops out from the left pocket.

Anna surveyed the aftermath before her with a blend of exhaustion and exasperation etched across her five-foot-five with a frame flaunting light muscle tone body. Retrieving her badge, she safely tucked it away in the back left pocket of her pants. Her fingers instinctively checked the familiar weight of her gun snug in its holster, reassuring herself in the midst of the destruction that enveloped her.

The explosion's impact had left a devastating mark, obliterating everything within a two-mile

radius. As she mopped the sweat from her brow, a wry chuckle escaped her lips at the sheer scale of devastation before her.

"Talk about overkill," she muttered to herself, hands planted firmly on her hips as she assessed the wreckage.

The Red Skulls had made their intentions clear – a thirst for revenge so potent it bordered on a desire for her demise with ruthless efficiency. Anna's extensive list of adversaries in her line of work had never daunted her, but the overdone brutality of this attack left her unnerved, questioning the lengths her enemies were willing to go to. She hoped that they wouldn't go this far if they were inside the city's gate

Her assignment was to check out the communication towers on the outskirts of New Dicon City for a possible terrorist attack by the local cyber gangs that plagued the highways outside the city. She had no doubts that what had been detonated was military grade. If this had been in the middle of a populated area, many innocent lives would have been lost. Fortunately, the communication towers were unmanned, and no one was around.

She confidently removed her jacket, revealing a striking light aqua tank top underneath. "Well, this is just great," she muttered to herself as she surveyed the wreckage of the truck she had been assigned to on her very first day back on active duty. She knew Chief would not be pleased.

As she turned away from the flames, it became apparent that the rough landing had taken its toll on her equipment. The communication device in her helmet visor was fried, and the secondary earpiece remained unresponsive. She was stranded, with no way to contact the command base for assistance, in the middle of nowhere, at least thirty miles from New Dicon City.

Taking a few steps in the opposite direction, she was suddenly jolted by the explosion of the truck's remaining fuel cells. Despite the deafening noise and the calamity scene unfolding around her, she maintained her calm demeanor. With a sly smirk playing on her lips, Anna continued to walk away, unfazed, until a burning tire from the wreckage landed mere inches from her feet.

As flames danced around her, casting eerie shadows on the pavement, she clutched her helmet with white-knuckled intensity. Once more, a strange sensation prickled at her ear, a harbinger of misfortune. Frustration boiling over, she flung the helmet into the smoldering wreckage. Collapsing to the ground, she gazed up at the vast expanse of stars, their brilliance offering a calm contrast to her current turmoil.

The twin moons of Mars cast a mesmerizing glow over the plush red landscape, bathing the desert in an eerie yet enchanting light. Anna gazed at the dwindling flames flickering on the horizon, a sense of foreboding creeping into her mind. Suddenly, the communication unit in her ear emitted a sharp, urgent beep.

"Anna, are you there?" The voice of Sergeant Simms crackled through the static.

"Yeah, Serge, I'm here," Anna replied, her voice steady despite the tension in the air.

"We can't get a fix on you. What is your..." The voice trailed off into static, leaving Anna in intense silence. Minutes passed like eternity, the weight of the situation bearing down on her. With a deep breath, she composed herself, her mind racing with possibilities.

Memories of her days at the police academy flooded back, the lessons ingrained in her mind. Mars, once a proud nation was now shackled by Earth's restrictions following the devastating war a century ago. The scars of conflict still marred the landscape, breeding lawlessness in the form of cybernetic gangs vying for power in the desolate regions.

Earth's sanctions were enforced by their security forces to prevent Mars from regaining its military might. The divide between the bustling cities and the lawless outskirts was stark, the highways becoming dangerous territories ruled by the ruthless gangs. To maintain order, strict curfews and travel restrictions were imposed, forcing civilians and even local law enforcement to navigate a treacherous path in the darkness of the Martian night.

Because of this, she will not have anyone looking for her until morning. Anna brushed off the dirt from her pants, her gaze fixed on the foreboding road ahead. The lone path out of Valhalla's Point stretched out like a ribbon through the unforgiving landscape, daring her to venture deeper into the heart of the Badlands. The signpost, adorned with graffiti that mocked the dwindling population, only added to the sense of isolation that surrounded her.

"Welcome to the Badlands, population minus 1500," the words on the weathered billboard seemed to whisper a warning to Anna, but she met them with a defiant smile as she set off down the desolate terrain.

About half a mile down the road, Anna's solitude was interrupted by the sight of the road splitting into two diverging paths. Perplexed by the choice before her, she stood at the crossroads, her gaze shifting between the unknown routes that beckoned her onward. The absence of a guiding GPS system left her adrift in a sea of unfamiliarity, her next steps shrouded in ambiguity.

Fingering the smooth surface of the old 1975 US half-dollar coin, a keepsake from a friend that held a piece of her past within its tarnished metal, Anna turned to it for guidance. "Okay," she whispered to the silent expanse of the Martian landscape, "Heads, I'll go left, and tails, I'll go right." With a flick of her wrist, the coin soared through the air, a glint of hope in the fading light as it twirled in a graceful arc.

As the coin landed with a soft thud against the dusty ground revealing its verdict, illuminating the path she was destined to follow. She took the coin and placed it back into her pocket. With nothing left to lose she squared her shoulders as she embarked on the chosen route. "Right, into the mouth of madness, I go." She said with a slight chuckle.

Under the ethereal glow of Mars's moons, the crimson radiance painted the barren landscape with

an otherworldly hue, casting long shadows across the desolate terrain. A parked vehicle perched atop a distant hill caught Anna's attention, its presence a stark anomaly against the backdrop of the Martian night. The eerie stillness that enveloped the hill in the aftermath of the explosion raised a sense of disquiet within her.

Despite the magnetic pull of curiosity drawing her towards the vehicle, Anna's intuition guided her to take the road veering to the right, away from the scene on the hill. With each deliberate step along the middle of the road, she made sure to present herself as an open target to whoever lurked within the confines of the vehicle. If no one takes the bait from there, then it's possible that they could be closer than she realizes, moving within the shadows of the rocky terrain.

With limited options of routes in and out of the desolate badlands, she scanned the landscape and pinpointed the perfect spots for an ambush other than the hill. The road leading up to it was strewn with massive boulders, providing ample cover for anyone who wanted to attack her. She wondered how many more locations like this were on her way to New Dicon City.

Trying to be as nonchalant as possible, Anna's eyes gleamed with anticipation, silently praying that the vehicle parked near the hill was deserted. Functional or not, it mattered little to her. With her extraordinary abilities, she could effortlessly bend and shape the metal components of the vehicle to her will, transforming it into a fully operational machine.

Regrettably, luck was not on her side. Parked on top of the hill, the truck was adorned with menacing Red Skull symbols on its sides—a chilling signal of the ruthless Red Skull Society's presence. Rather than inspecting the explosion's aftermath, they lurked on the hill, patiently biding their time in anticipation of a showdown with the fiery-haired cop who had dared to challenge their infamous gang.

The gang member known as Razor, seated in the driver's position with his leather vest and ripped jeans. A distinctive metal plate adorning his forehead exuded an aura of danger. His cybernetically enhanced eyes glowed with a mesmerizing shade of emerald, hinting at the advanced technology pulsing beneath the surface. Forty percent of his body had been upgraded with cutting-edge enhancements, meticulously calibrated for speed and precision, making him a force to be reckoned with behind the wheel.

As Razor casually flicked a glance to check the time, a flash of red hair caught his attention. A woman, walking away from their vicinity, stirred a hint of recognition within him. His companion remained oblivious to the unfolding situation. Razor, curious and determined, activated his cybernetic eyes to zoom in on the woman, scrutinizing her with keen focus to confirm her identity. A surge of elation washed over Razor as the enhanced optics confirmed his suspicions.

A sense of glee bubbled within him, manifesting in a triumphant bash on the steering wheel. However, his exuberance unwittingly jolted his slumbering comrade, Bone Crusher, seated in the

passenger seat. He was twice the size of the other. His hands were like sledgehammers with retractable spikes on his knuckles. He was over seventy percent enhanced with one purpose and that was to kill anyone who posed a threat to the Red Skulls. His eyes glowed yellow as he woke up, and said, “What... Damn, we bombed that place hours ago, and now she shows up.”

“Bra, it’s only been twenty minutes,” said Razor.

“Oh, who cares, finally she’s here,” said Bone Crusher as he saw a woman with red hair in the distance and continued, “I knew she wouldn’t fall for that.”

“And now, it’s our turn,” replied Razor.

The trap had been set and revenge was in sight. In some ways, they were happy that the explosion did not work. Now, they will have the glory getting revenge for their gang.

“When I heard that she took down the Butcher,” said Bone Crusher, “I couldn’t believe it. She must have tricked him, or something. I mean look at her, my thigh is bigger than her. There is no way she could have knocked him out in one shot.”

“I heard,” said Razor, “that she was cybernetic enhanced and...”

“Enhance my ass,” said Bone Crusher, “She would need to have my strength, and size to have any chance with the Butcher. No, she had helped... I’m sure of it.”

“Then lets proved to the others that she’s a fraud.” said Razor.

Bone Crusher rose up and grasped the front of the dashboard with anticipation. For them, there was nothing better proving their strength to their enemies. With excitement in his voice, Bone Crusher said, “Yeah and we are getting paid to boot! The boss was wise to choose us to make sure that she is dead.”

With a maniacal laughter Razor bellowed in as he started the truck’s custom-built engine.

“We are like his avenging angels of pain!”

Bone Crusher, glanced at him, and thought that was a bit on the corny side. He shook his head and said, “Whatever man, let’s just do it!”

With a simple press of a button on the side of the steering wheel, the truck underwent a dramatic transformation. The front bumpers extended to reveal a menacing metal plow, embellished with a crimson skull meticulously painted at its center. Metal spikes protruded from the top of the plow, seemingly reaching out menacingly, a deadly omen hanging in the air.

The thunderous roar of the engine pierced the air, drawing Anna’s attention. Unfazed, she continued to stride ahead, her demeanor betraying none of the apprehension swirling beneath her facade. A quiet intensity gleamed in her eyes as she meticulously awaited the opportune moment to strike back with deliberate precision.

In a sudden burst of speed, the vehicle careened down the hill, its tires screeching in protest

against the rough terrain. The realization dawned on Anna with chilling clarity—this was no mere figment of her imagination induced by oxygen deprivation. The imminent danger raced towards her was all too real, an immediate threat that demanded her attention.

Turning to face the blinding lights emanating from the oncoming truck, Anna shielded her eyes against the blinding glare, catching a glimpse of the sinister crimson skull adorning the plow. In that fleeting moment amidst the impending collision, Anna stood her ground as a formidable force of defiance against the encroaching tide of metal and malice.

The truck ripped up the asphalt of this lonely road. Within seconds, it quickly closed the distance to the Skulls' coming victim. The headlights shone brightly onto her, marking their intent.

Feeling irritated, she softly muttered to herself, "Let's hit her with a truck! Geez, these idiots have no originality. I guess I'm going to have to teach them a little lesson."

The truck raced over the hill like a lion chasing after its prey through a wheat field. The gang members were able to see her back facing them. Razor started laughing at the thought of an easy kill. She looked helpless in their path of destruction.

"Ha! Brother, we have her now. Prepare to strike if she evades me," declared Razor, his voice charged with anticipation and assurance, ready to seize the moment alongside Bone Crusher.

"Understood, I'm moving in," Bone Crusher acknowledged, leaping out of the still-rumbling truck with a smirk and determination in his eyes. Adopting a flanking approach to the right, he promptly positioned himself, ready to deliver the decisive blow should his partner's initial strike falter. Driven by his overconfidence, Bone Crusher was certain that Anna would not elude their grasp.

The truck hurtled towards its target with tremendous speed, its impending threat casting a sweltering heat over the scene. Despite the imminent danger, Anna remained unshaken by the threatening peril. With a designed calmness, she braced herself for the imminent clash, her confidence unyielding.

In a heartbeat, as the truck closed in mere inches from impact, Anna's lightning-fast reflexes sprang into action. With a swift twist, she planted a hand on the hood, effortlessly vaulting onto the truck's surface. The seamless movement showcased her agility and prowess, her acrobatic maneuver culminating in a controlled pivot that brought her to a commanding position atop the speeding vehicle.

Eyes widening in shock, Razor teetered on the edge of control as Anna crouched before him on the hood, a knowing smile gracing her lips as she tapped the glass with her gun. The advantage was unmistakably hers, yet Razor's nerves trembled with the weight of Bone Crusher's impending strike.

Unexpectedly caught off guard by Anna's audacious move, Razor's fear surged as he slammed on the brakes. He hoped to dislodge her from the truck. To his astonishment, Anna remained steadfast on the hood, presenting a riddle that challenged the laws of physics. Peering down at the hood, a sense of dread crept over Razor as he spotted Anna's feet seemingly fused to the truck's metal frame.

Determined to lose her, he shook aside this inconceivable move by her. All he wanted now was for her to be dead. Just then he had an impulse to veer towards the boulders lining the road taunted his mind, a reckless thought that could tip the scales in their favor. However, Bone Crusher's strategic movements on the side halted Razor's reckless plan. He saw him coming in view behind Anna.

"Damn it!" he cried in frustration as he wanted to be the one to take her down. The sound of a gun tapping against the windshield shattered the tense silence, pulling his attention back to Anna as she leveled the laser-tip handgun directly at his forehead. With the threat of his comrade moving within the shadows, Razor understood the stakes of this perilous standoff.

Choosing to feign surrender, he raised his hands in a mock gesture of submission, a ploy to catch Anna off guard amidst the rocky terrain. As the scenario unfolded, Bone Crusher's hulking form bore down on Anna from the left, his intentions clear, yet she remained unfazed, her keen senses anticipating his every move. Promptly evading Bone Crusher's assault, Anna leaped above him with cat-like grace, landing on a boulder behind him in a seamless display of agility.

Enraged by the turn of events, his wild strike shattered the windshield, missing his target and hitting Razor square in the face. In that moment of confusion, Bone Crusher dawned on him that he had missed his mark. In a fit of frustration, he seized Razor's jacket collar atop the truck, pulling him violently through the shattered windshield in a desperate bid to locate Anna.

"Where...Where is she?" Bone Crusher's voice boomed with fury, the repercussion of the confrontation left Razor reeling from the throbbing pain, his senses dulled by the impact of Bone Crusher's fist against his face. Struggling to focus, Razor's vision cleared just in time to glimpse a shadowy figure closing in on them.

"Behind you, you freaking idiot!" Razor's warning pierced with urgency echoing through the turbulent air. Bone Crusher whirled around just as Anna leaped off the boulder, hurtling towards him with a powerful dropkick. Her feet connected solidly with the side of his face, a testament to her combat prowess.

Undeterred by the impact, he retaliated, catching Anna in a choking grip with his formidable right hand. "You'll need to do better than that," he sneered, his tone laced with arrogance. "My body is forged from aluminum titanium."

Bone Crusher's brutal strength propelled Anna backwards, crashing her against a rough boulder with a forceful impact, his grip merciless as he sought to dominate her. Determined to witness her struggle and exact a twisted payment for the perceived sins of the past, he reveled in the moment, his eyes ablaze with malice.

A devilish grin played across Anna's features, catching him off guard and momentarily breaking his hold. She saw the surprised look on her adversary face and moved in forward. Ready to capitalize on

the opening, she executed a simultaneous precise inside block to the elbow joint and palm strike to the wrist going the opposite way. Instantly she freed herself from his grasp and turning the tables on her assailant.

In a seamless display of combat prowess, Anna unleashed a series of swift and planned strikes. An uppercut to Bone Crusher's gut was promptly followed by a powerful left elbow strike to the side of his head, driving him back with a stunning force. An open palm strike to his throat sealed his retreat, as he staggered under the onslaught of her retribution.

Dazed and disoriented from the flurry of Anna's unremitting assault, Bone Crusher's senses blurred with confusion as he perceived a surreal sight - Anna's arms appearing to transform into glinting metallic armor. Before he could comprehend this strange vision, Anna's final onslaught left him reeling as his body succumbed to the relentless barrage of blows.

The decisive impact of Anna's final punch sent Bone Crusher's head on a collision course to the metal of the truck's hood. With a resounding finality, the battle came to an abrupt end, marking the conclusion of one-sided confrontation, Bone Crusher lay defeated at her feet.

Smiling, she placed her right boot on top of his head. Again, he just looked up at her in disbelief. Anna stood tall and smirked as she pointed her gun to the side of his head, "Now now, boys, we can do this the easy way or the hard way? I really hope your choice was the hard way."

Anna descended lithely from the truck and removed the metal bars from the hood. In a fluid motion, she expertly bound Bone Crusher's hands with them before compelling him to take a seat a short distance from the vehicle. From Anna's beating he offered no resistance, just grunted as he sat down.

Anna's keen ears pricked up at the distant sound of the other individual disembarking from the truck. With a confident stride, she turned on her heel and swaggered towards Razor. Gripping the back of his neck firmly with one hand, she guided him in the direction of the daunting front bumper.

"Where do you think you're headed, skull boy?" Anna's voice dripped with sarcasm as she locked gazes with Razor.

"If you must insist, my name is Razor," he retorted, his tone defiant despite his predicament.

A wry smile tugged at Anna's lips as she quipped, "Razor, huh? Let me guess the other schmuck over there is Shaver?"

Surprised, he yelled, "How dare you mock us? You bit..."

Anna shoved his face onto the hood. "Aw, what's the matter? The big bad Red Skulls can't take a joke?"

"Joke all you want, lady," said Razor. "When he wakes up, you will be in trouble. Do you know who he is?"

Unimpressed she said, "Nope, and I don't care about your silly little titles. What I do care about

on the other hand is why you bombed that tower out here."

While Anna handcuffed Razor, she found a big hunting knife in the back pocket of his pants leg. It was a foot-long with ridges running down the blade. Anna took it out of its leather cover.

"Nice knife," she said, twirling it in her hand.

Once he looked up at her in disgust, she stabbed the hood of the truck right in front of Razor's eyes, and said with authority, "Okay, I am only going to ask you this one more time. Why did your gang bomb that communication tower?"

Bone Crusher woke up and overheard her.

"You cannot interrogate us without a lawyer present," he said. "This is police brutality. You won't get away with..."

Anna paid no attention to him as she placed Razor over and forced him beside Crusher. Without saying a word, she walked over to the other side of the truck. As she leaned against the front bumper, she looked in the direction of the desert landscape and said to herself, "This is going to be a long night for me."

Bone Crusher screamed out in anger, "Hey, are you listening to me?"

Anna looked back with a nonchalant stare at Crusher and calmly said, "I thought I had gagged you."

The impudence of Anna's comment left him momentarily speechless. Bone Crusher stared at her with utmost hate, and as she passed by, he said, "You think that you have won? Don't you know where you're at?"

Anna just smirked as she opened the passenger's side door.

"This is THE RED SKULL'S TURFF!" He screamed, "We are everywhere...Yeah... that's right, and don't even think that your police buddies are going to rescue you. You're all alone and..."

Anna steadfastly focused on her task, paying no heed to Bone Crusher's simmering anger as she methodically unloaded items from the truck. His right eye twitched with suppressed fury, his teeth gritted in a silent vow of retribution.

"That's it," he seethed to himself. "I'm escaping this place, and when I return, you'll pay for ignoring me, little miss badass. Oh, you'll pay dearly!"

Overhearing Bone Crusher's muttered threats, Razor's words, tinged with apprehension, "Bra, are you out of your mind? Wait for our crew to arrive." Ignoring the caution, Bone Crusher noticed that she didn't bind his legs and smiled.

"I can bide my time, but once she's occupied with that truck, I'm making my escape," he declared, his eyes fixed on Anna as she clambered into the driver's seat, attempting to start the vehicle. Seizing the fortunate distraction, he leaped to his feet in a burst of defiance.

A twinkle of hope crossed Razor's mind as he thought that his friend was going help him to escape. Instead, Bone Crusher paid no attention to him, and he raced towards freedom. A look of shock and dismay as Razor's smile turned upside down with gritted teeth betrayed a sense of camaraderie,

"Bra... No, that bastard!" yelled Razor.

Anna's elongated ears twitched with acute awareness as she emerged from the truck, her sharp gaze fixating on Bone Crusher as he vanished into the war-torn expanse of the desert. Without a sense of urgency, she approached Razor, a quiet intensity emanating from her every movement.

"No loyalties, huh? Do you honestly believe he can escape from me?" said Anna nonchalantly.

Meeting her piercing gaze with a mixture of defiance and discomfort, Razor muttered under his breath, a flicker of fear briefly crossing his features. With deliberate care, Anna circled around him, securing the ropes around his legs methodically, a facade of calm masking the storm beneath.

"Now, I'll be back for you. So, don't get any ideas about escaping. Because then, I'll have to do this the hard way." Anna's gentle smile belied the gravity of her words, her eyes blazing with a baleful intensity, a silent promise of retribution.

A vivid shade of blue seeped into Anna's gaze, casting a mesmerizing glow that conveyed the depth of her resolve. Razor, grasping the weight of her unspoken threat, swallowed hard, a bead of sweat trickling down his brow as he closed his eyes in apprehension, a nod of compliance sealing his fate.

When he opened his eyes, she was gone, leaving Razor in stunned silence, grappling with the weight of her warning. Bewildered, he pondered on her cryptic message, a sudden awareness dawning on him like a thunderclap.

"So, this was the easy way?" Razor's cry of disbelief echoed into the desert.

Chapter 4: Between a Rock and a Hard Place.

Across the crimson, haze-veiled desert of Mars, Anna chased after Bone Crusher, her polished strides carrying her through the caverns scarred by the remnants of Earth's violent history. Exposed blast scars bore witness to the planet's tumultuous past, a bleak landscape that mirrored the shadows of their pursuit. With a quick maneuvering he slid into a series of caves connected together like a maze in hopes to shake off his pursuer.

Emerging from the caves into the open expanse of the valley, he slowed down to catch his breath, a momentary respite inviting a needed pause in his desperate flight. His wary gaze swept the crimson horizon as he sought a confirmation of his perceived freedom, a fleeting hope nestled within his cautious relief. With a quick rest he continued his escape.

Yet, Anna lingered close by, a silent figure perched upon a rocky ledge near Bone Crusher. Her poised stance bore an air of calculated anticipation as he turned, unwitting of the imminent danger poised to shatter his false sense of escape. With an expertly timed leap, she closed the final gap poised to claim her quarry and yet she let this game of hers play out a little bit longer.

As his laughter of false victory echoed through the silent expanse his elation was abruptly halted by the shadow that presented before him. Alarmed, he spun to confront the apparition of a figure on the rocks, dismay clouding his senses before the revelation of its illusionary nature loosened the grip of fear from his pounding heart, the once sinister shadow now a mere reflection of the treacherous landscape that whispered both the dangers and the illusions of the Martian desert.

With a burst of hearty arrogant laughter, Bone Crusher turned his attention back on escaping from his captor. His amusement came to a screeching halt as his eyes gazed upon Anna standing before him with her arms crossed, leaning against a boulder a few steps before him. With eyes wide in disbelief, he doubled back into the rocky caves.

His cyber enhancements gave him great agility through the jagged boulders. Giving nothing to chance, he then used his massive cyborg legs to jump over a small ravine. Bone Crusher landed into a network of grottos and continued to run, zigzagging back and forth through the caves, hoping to confuse his pursuer, convinced that she could not follow.

To his fearful reality, Anna was there waiting for him as he exited the last cave. With teeth gritted in anger, he backed up a few paces. He quickly looked back and forth, trying to find another way to flee. Just as he was about to run, Anna yelled with a smile on her face, "That's right, big guy. Are you ready to give up?"

Bone Crusher refused to give in and screamed out of frustration. "What the hell are you woman?"

There is no way that you should have caught up with me."

"Maybe you are not as great as you think you are Bub. But, whatever..." said Anna as she started to walk in his direction.

"Whatever! I'll show you whatever." He bellowed, his eyes wild with fury as he wheeled around to face Anna. Charging straight to her like a man possessed, he roared, "I got you! I GOT YOU!"

Anna, cool and collected, effortlessly sidestepped his oncoming assault with a graceful dance of evasion. Instead of simply dodging left or right, she decided to up the ante with a playful wink at Bone Crusher, goading him further.

Enraged beyond reason, as a raging bull fixated on its target, he circled back and charged at Anna once more. This time, Anna stood her ground, a sly smile playing on her lips as Bone Crusher lunged towards her with a malevolent laugh. But to his dismay, his expression twisted from anger to sheer panic as she delivered a strong double-handed smack to his face.

In a swift motion, she leaped over his back in a graceful arc, leaving him stumbling forward in his uncontrolled momentum. Adding insult to injury, Anna executed a sharp mule kick to the back of his shoulders, causing him to reel and stumble uncontrollably into a nearby ditch. As Bone Crusher tumbled down, his tied hands rendering him helpless, a stream of colorful curses filled the air.

Laid face first sprawled on the ground, once again he was defeated by her hands. Anna, stood a safe distance away, couldn't contain her laughter at the spectacle unfolding before her. She knew this humiliating fall would sting his pride more than any physical blow ever could.

"Hey Bub, I bet that hurt!" she said with sarcasm, "So much for the Great Bone..."

Anna's laughter abruptly ceased as a forceful gust of wind buffeted her, causing her to brace herself against the onslaught. "What the... hell?" she exclaimed with a mixture of disbelief and unease. Raising her eyes to the Martian sky, she beheld a massive oval ship with four expansive wings and a menacing Vulcan cannon trained directly at them, descending rapidly from the heavens to hover unpromisingly overhead.

Struggling to discern the insignia adorning the ship's side amidst the blinding glare of its searchlights, Anna's instincts screamed a warning. The desolate Badlands were a forsaken wasteland, devoid of life and activity. The unexpected presence of an Earth Security Force vessel in such a desolate location aroused a deep sense of foreboding within her.

As the ESF ship unleashed the full might of its weaponry, deploying the remaining gun ports and activating blinding searchlights that pierced the Martian gloom, the gravity of their predicament became apparent. A voice came from the ship, its authoritative tone cutting through the tense silence, "Freeze! You are under arrest for violating the restricted Earth zones! Non-compliance will result in immediate action!"

As Bone Crusher saw what he believed to be a fleeting chance to escape, Anna remained vigilant, and her gaze fixed on the imposing Earth Security Force vessel overhead. Out of the corner of her eyes she noticed his movements. "Hey, where do you think you're going?" she interjected sharply, halting Bone Crusher's attempted flight in its tracks.

A confident grin adorned Bone Crusher's face as he sought to make a break for it, convinced he could outwit the impending danger. However, his hopes were suddenly dashed as the ESF ship rapidly closed in on him, cutting off his escape route with unwavering precision. Once more, a commanding voice resonated from the vessel, delivering a final ultimatum, "Last warning. Do not proceed."

Caught off guard by the abrupt turn of events, Bone Crusher stumbled forward in a panic, his demeanor evolving from smugness to palpable terror. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as he lifted his gaze, only to meet a fatal bullet aimed squarely at his head. In a grim finale, Bone Crusher fell to the ground, a macabre stream of blood seeping forth to pool at Anna's feet, the grim aftermath of a life cut short.

With a sense of surreal disbelief washing over her, Anna's attention was drawn to a warm sensation on the side of her face. Tentatively, she lifted her hand to inspect the source, a sinking feeling taking hold as her fingertips came away stained with crimson. The harsh reality of the situation dawned on her as she gazed in stunned silence at the blood on her hand. Anna raised her eyes to meet the unrelenting gaze of the ESF ship above, its presence casting a chilling shadow over the desolate Martian landscape.

She was about to go for her badge in the back pocket of her pants when the ship began to land. It transformed for ground assault. The wings separated, then reconfigured into legs, spreading like a spider and the Vulcan cannon extended as the secondary gun ports attached themselves to the searchlights.

"Put your hands up, now! This is your only warning."

With her hand raised and palms out, she showed that she was complying. With the searched light blaring at her Anna tried to be as civil as possible. "Look, I am a New Dicon City officer and right now you're interfering with my invest..."

The voice interrupted her. "I don't care who you are, lady! If you come any closer, you will be fired upon just like your so-called prisoner!"

The standoff between her and the ESF's Mech continued. Anna's patience was running thin. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck with an Earthier with an itchy finger.

Okay, no problem here, she thought. I can take on this asshole. As long as there aren't any more of these..."

Just before she could finish her thought, Anna noticed little red dots appearing all over her body. Out from the starry night, more of the ESF mechs came down and hovered around them. Armed with

heavy arsenal, the ESF troopers began to surround her, cutting off all escape routes.

As her ears twitched downwards, she then finished her thought, guys... okay, and I guess it is still not a problem. As long as they don't find my other prisoner, I can finish talking my way out of this quickly.

Due to the firepower that these troopers were handling, Anna's suspicions grew that these were not just ordinary security units. What she had stepped into was above her pay scale. Since she left New Dicon city's limits, her jurisdiction had ended. There was not much she could do right now.

What was strange to her was that they didn't try to kill her at the moment of Bone Crusher's attempt to flee. Hopefully, it was due to her telling them that she was a cop, or they did not want to deal with the paperwork. In any case, if they don't find the other prisoner, then her mission wouldn't be a complete failure.

Suddenly, she heard a distant gunshot. One of the other troopers in the background spoke loud enough for her to hear. "We got another one. He tried to escape."

Frowning, she raised her voice while going after her badge, "Again, I am saying that you are all interfering in police business. So, you can do this the easy way or..."

The main Mech who stopped her fired a warning shot before her feet. The red sand of Mars fell on top of her head. By now, all of the Earth's security troopers were pointing laser-tip rifles at her. Their targeting lasers were covering every part of her vital organs. Smirking, Anna looked up to the troopers and mumbled to herself, "So, y'all want to do this the hard way."

Just out of their sight, Anna's back muscles started to tense up with the anticipation of the coming fight. She could feel her body transitioning from flesh to metal. Her long, flowing red hair covered most of the parts that were transforming. It was a matter of time before they figured out what she was. As she tensed her forearms and then triceps, her metallic form was about to be revealed.

Her back was metaphorically against a wall, and she almost gave in to her anger when her earbud began to buzz. Anna's communication device was finally working. This made her stop before she could act. She checked it to see if it was Sergeant Simms.

"Anna, this is Lieutenant Mitchell. Please stop! Do not take them on!"

"Stacy, get the Serge on," said Anna as quietly as possible.

"Okay, but just..."

"Stacy, don't worry, I can handle this, just get the Serge."

Just before Sergeant Simms was about to answer, Anna chimed in, "Sir, what the hell is the ESF doing here?"

"Anna, do not en...ga..., and ... Shhhhh!"

With gritted teeth, Anna stood there, her fists clenched tightly, wrestling with the frustration bubbling

inside her. She couldn't believe how her predicament had worsened, spiraling beyond her control. Long ears twitching slightly, she caught snippets of hushed conversations around her. The troopers had recognized her from the underground fights that she regularly visited. There had been rumors of a female cop taking on multiple fighters and winning without a scratch.

"No way, that is her."

"Man, I saw her fight the other day. She was the one who took down the Butcher of Dicon with one shot. If we don't hit her first, we're as good as dead."

"Shit, I don't think I want to do this. She is a cop after all."

"Doesn't matter, we have our orders."

Anna could hear the fear in their voices and tensions were now wearing thin.

"Anna, do you read me?" said Simms as the communication device in her ear reconnected.
"Stand down!"

"Serge, they killed the perpetrators that I just arrested," said Anna.

"I know," said Simms, "Since we lost contact with you the first time, our people have been trying to reach you. We've been monitoring your situation by piggybacking onto an Earth Security Force's satellite. Again, do not proceed or take any action."

"I'll try...but they are making it very difficult for me."

"Hate to say it, but they have authority here. If you do attack them, this could give them enough reason to shut us down. For now, cooperate with them."

Knowing that she could take them on with no problem, Anna decided not to take any action that could harm her fellow cops. "Okay, boss, I won't."

"Sorry that we couldn't give you any backup," said Simms.

"Yeah... I get it," said Anna as she closed her eyes to calm down. Her body reverted from metal to flesh. Reluctantly, she surrendered. The security forces were apprehensive. They knew who she was, and they were not too sure if this was a trick.

Without an incident, Anna allowed them to handcuff her. She smiled at them as they placed her into the holding truck. As soon as they shut the door, she quickly unlocked her hands and threw the cuffs out the barred window. It tagged one of the ESF troopers on the back of his helmet. Angry at her actions, he started to turn back around. His fellow troopers held him from doing something stupid. He wasn't going to win this one and the others knew that.

Her momentary enjoyment fleeted away as Anna sat down with her arms crossed. All she could do now was to wait for the long ride to the Earth's government holding cells. This was not a good day for her.

Out of the opposite window of the holding truck, Anna noticed someone at a distance looking

down at the scene. She got up and leaned over to see if she could make out who was running this operation. As she focused her eyes on them, she could see two men standing on top of a hill. Like her body, her eyes augmented to see further than human capability.

One of the men was watching her with binoculars. He had a goatee with slick black hair and was dressed in a long silver-gray trench coat. On the right side of his coat was an emblem of the Earth's Security Force. His name was Lance Storm, the newly promoted Earth's chief of security for Mars.

Standing by the car in a sleek deep blue suit stood Dr. John Lorick, his demeanor exuding an air of planned composure. Alongside him, Lance, equally attired for the confidential operation, glanced towards Anna with a quizzical expression. "Who is this woman?" he inquired, casting a curious gaze in her direction.

Seizing the opportunity to deflect suspicion, Dr. Lorick feigned ignorance, masking his true awareness with a practiced nonchalance. "I think she is from the New Dicon police," he responded smoothly, his voice betraying no hint of uncertainty.

Perplexed by Anna's presence in the restricted zone, Lance probed further, "But she didn't know that this place was a secured zone and off-limits to everyone?" Dr. Lorick subtly steered the conversation to a darker possibility, insinuating, "Maybe she was the cause of that explosion."

As Lance's thoughts swirled with uncertainty, a sudden sense of flustered admiration washed over him, finding himself momentarily captivated by Anna's charm. He blushed faintly, only to be abruptly jolted from his reverie as he realized that Anna had not only noticed but had boldly gestured with a flick of the middle finger in his direction him.

Caught off guard by Anna's audacious display of defiance, Lance found himself at a loss for words, torn between amusement and embarrassment. In a bid to diffuse the tension, he awkwardly returned her gesture with a hesitant wave and laughed. "She is going to be a handful."

At that time, John opened the door and got inside. He looked at his watch. It was around six pm Earth's time.

John's smile deepened, a glint of calculation gleaming in his eyes as he unraveled the intricate threads of their covert plan. The explosive distraction had served its purpose, paving the way for his CTC operatives to seize control of vital information and technology that held the key to their past technological advancements.

The shrill ring of the car phone pierced the tense atmosphere, signaling the relay from the retrieval team who had seamlessly infiltrated the abandoned lab under the guise of security personnel. Their cryptic message echoed through the receiver, outlining their progress as they navigated the labyrinthine corridors to their elusive target.

With a subtle glance towards Lance, his gaze lingering for a moment before returning to the

phone, John's voice was a whisper of authority. "Go ahead and proceed as planned," he instructed, a note of steel underlying his calm demeanor. "Secure the main package and sweep clean any trace that may lead back to us."

"Will do, but what about the scientists in the upper levels?"

"Well, you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

"Ahh, sir?"

"We cannot have any witnesses. Do you copy?"

"I copy that, sir."

As John hung up the phone, Lance surprised him by opening the vehicle door and said,

"I guess we can head back now."

"Yeah, but before we head back, I would like your men to recheck the perimeter one more time. I am not convinced that she is working by herself."

"That is fine. It will give me a chance to run a background check on our cop friend."

John smiled with a cocky expression and looked at his watch. Other than the Red Skulls improvising by trying to kill this cop with the bomb that he gave them, this was going almost exactly as planned. No one in the Earth's Government was the wiser that this was his doing.

Chapter 5: Not Going as Plan.

On the outskirts of the abandoned laboratory that resembled an archaeological site, Cindy Brice, a young cybernetically enhanced woman in her twenties, positioned herself stealthily by a ventilation shaft. Her jet-black hair neatly parted to one side and clad in all-black attire, she remained on high alert as she observed the Earth Security Forces scouring the area for clues following the explosive disruption in the desolate Badlands.

With nerves of steel, Cindy waited patiently until the last ESF unit departed, their patrol vehicles fading into the distance. Moving swiftly, she circled around to the front of the ventilation shaft, her duffle bag containing essential climbing gear securely slung over her shoulder. As she prepared for the ascent, she deftly activated the pair of smart devices adorning her ears, their transformation into holo-like visors enhancing her vision and providing tactical information of her surroundings.

When it was all clear, she quickly dove into the air shaft while latching a safety line onto the bottom of the opening of the shaft. Cindy's climbed down through the blackness of the airshaft in the old, abandoned laboratory. Her enhanced body made the climb easy. But there was still a long way to go. Luckily, it was a straight shot to her destination.

As she cautiously descended further down the narrow shaft, the dim light played tricks on her eyes, casting eerie shadows across the rugged walls. Suddenly, she came to a halt as her gaze fell upon a daunting blockage of debris ahead. Straining to see through the darkness, a sharp gasp escaped her lips as the silhouette of what appeared to be a lifeless figure appeared before her.

"Is that a body?" she blurted out, her voice echoing in the desolate space. Alarmed by her own words, she planted her legs firmly on either side of the shaft, halting her descent, her hands instinctively flying to cover her mouth. With bated breath, she scanned her surroundings, relieved to find no one approaching in response to her unintentional outburst.

With a trembling exhale, she attempted to compose herself; she activated her visor for night vision. Her cybernetic eyes readjusted to the shadows and revealed a humanoid robot blocking her path. In the faint light, its outstretched arm seemed in desperate need of help as its visage etched with a haunting expression of suffering.

Taken aback by the unexpected sight, Cindy hesitated, her mind swirling with questions. Why was this solitary robot here, abandoned and in distress? Empathy welled up within her as she saw a reflection of her own struggles mirrored in the mechanical being before her.

This unexpected encounter stirred strong emotions within her, reigniting her passion for change and fueling her commitment to an independent political party called, The Neo Ameras. Their goal was to

have an independent Mars government free from the oppressive grasp of the United Earth Federation. Her disdain for the current regime and the CTC Corporation only strengthened her resolve further.

However, now wasn't the time to reflect on the past. Her friend Alex, who was their insider waiting for her down below. She reached out her hand and sympathetically touched the robot and said, "Sorry for this."

She was about to kick the robot and stop. Doing this would make a lot of noise and possibly could attract any security personnel to her location. "Damn it, I don't have time for this," she mumbled to herself as she disconnected her climbing gear and connected the damaged robot to the safety line.

Carefully, with the use of her tactical visor to show the right spot to hit she was able to dislodge the robot and squeeze her way through. She knew that coming back this way might not be an option now due to the added weight of the robot's body on the safety line.

Even without her climbing gear her cyber enhancements made her descent an easy climb. But in this close space her mind was beginning to wander. After seeing that mangled robot, she started to fear this was going to be a mistake that would cost the Neos greatly.

There were too many factors about this operation that could go wrong, like ending up getting killed by the security troopers to a cave-in from a hundred-year-old bombed out laboratory. She had to stop halfway down the shaft to clear her head. Her imagination was getting out of control as she could see robot zombies waiting for them in the lab.

Cindy had to stay focused on the mission. She knew that the Neos had plans for multiple scenarios and remembered Alex saying that they will a head start over CTC's plan. Once inside, he said that they could avoid any direct confrontation with troopers. She hoped he was right and took focused on meeting with Alex.

At the bottom of the ventilation shaft, she popped open the vent and jumped down, landing quietly into the darkness. With a gun in one hand and a small flashlight in the other, Cindy as her visor identifies the layout before her turned around to make sure she was alone. There was no one around, only remembrances of old storage lockers for heavy explosives with thick blanket of dust covered the area.

Relieved that there were no problems greeting her, she placed her gun back into her holster and turned off her visor. It appeared that they have made it before the CTC. With that in mind, she went to the back of the room behind one of the storage lockers, and called out on her communication implant in her ear, "Hey, Glen, you read me?"

"Yeah, loud and clear," said Glen as his voice crackled through the com device.

"I'm at the spot to meet with our contact."

"Okay, be careful. We're in position. I will be waiting for you here. Mark is heading to the computer room. Remember, we have only a small window of time to do this."

“Don’t worry. As soon as he gets, we’ll be on our way.”

“Cindy don’t forget that there is still a skeleton crew above us. Also watch out for the CTC’s troopers.”

“Troopers! I thought the CTC were just sending a retrieval team.”

“Yeah, I thought so too. But from the arsenal they were carrying, it looked like they are ready for war.”

“Ahh...Do they know something that we don’t?” asked Cindy with a concerning tone.

“I wish that I could tell you something. But from our Intel we have some space between them. Just get here as soon as you can.”

“Will do Glen, over and out,” said Cindy as she clicked her communication device to silent mode.

Alone in the darkness, she impatiently waited for her contact, who was now running late. She moved around the room to scout for a place to hide. This night’s mission was too important for the Neos to scrub. Still, she could not shake the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that this would go badly for them.

Finally, after five minutes of waiting, her enhanced senses picked up someone heading her way. Her ears were sonic enhanced like a bat hears an echo of sounds and calculated how far away it was. One little sound from within three hundred yards away she can tell exactly where the sound came from.

Cindy rose to her feet and made her way to the door. She saw light flickering through the cracks in the wall next to her. The light stopped in front of the door. She hoped this was Alex but prepared for the worst.

She stealthily jumped up to the ceiling and grabbed a hold of hanging wires. She swung over to the center support beam as the door opened. The tips of her short black hair glowed with a tint of red as her body gave off a chameleon-like camouflage to blend with the background.

She then clicked on her visor to identify any exposed support beams strong enough to support her weight. Her eyes gave off a quick light blue spark as they were reconfigured to see in a broader spectrum of light. The person she saw was a medium-sized about five-foot seven man in a white trench coat.

She watched him going further into the room and closed the door behind him. Just before she jumped down to subdue the person, she saw the shine off his glasses, and backed off, sighing in relief of recognition that it was Alex.

Still, she didn’t say anything as he fumbled around in the room. She wanted to test his reactions and to see what he will do. She clicked off her visor and stealthy repositioned to a better spot.

“Huh, hello, is there anybody there?” Alex called out hoping to find his companion. Cindy saw that he was a bit fluster as he swerved his flashlight up and down.

“Come on.... Cindy, are you there?” He called out again as the glare of the flashlight moved up

toward the ceiling, and back down. Cindy started to make her move as she saw him coming her way. Just as light caught her position, she silently dropped down to the floor a few feet away. Her state-of-the-art cybernetic body gracefully came up and spun around to his back. Her speed caught him off guard.

With one clean motion, Cindy grabbed him from behind and held him in a one-arm chokehold. Lightly, she held onto his neck and playfully pointed her finger like a gun at him. "Gotcha!" she said as she turned of her camouflage.

Alex looked back at her and sighed in relief "Jesus, you scared the living crap out of me."

"Sorry, I was just teasing you. Besides, you should keep up your guard. You know I can't protect you all the time."

With a goofily looking smile on her face, she held onto Alex and enjoyed the moment with him. However, Alex with a confused look wondered what she was doing and asked, "Huh, can you release me?"

Flushed red in the face, she said as she released her hold, "Oh, sorry."

She turned away and picked up his flashlight to hide her embarrassment, "Here, you dropped something."

Alex as he tried to regain his composure scooted his glasses up, "Why did you have to be so rough on me?"

As he took back the flashlight, Cindy playfully pouted and said, "Well... I knew it was you all along. I'm just excited about sneaking in here. We haven't done this in a long time but..."

"But?"

"But... I have this lingering feeling that this could be a mistake, a big mista..."

Caught off guard by the warmth and pressure of Alex's fingers against her neck, Cindy couldn't help but flush red with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment. She felt a small port behind her ear open, connecting to her synapse, eliciting a ticklish sensation that made her squirm slightly. "Hey, what are you doing?" she protested, trying to suppress a smile at the unexpected touch.

"Just a quick diagnostic check to ensure all your systems are functioning properly," Alex explained, his tone reassuring yet methodical. Cindy's curiosity piqued; she couldn't help but question the need for such scrutiny. "Why the sudden interest?" she inquired.

"I want to make sure you're not damaged in any way. It's unlike you to be so preoccupied with potential risks," Alex replied, his gaze fixed on the task at hand.

Feeling a bit apprehensive, Cindy took a cautious step back, putting some distance between herself and Alex. "This is uncharted territory for you, Alex. You have access to the CTC special project rooms, and if you're implicated with us, the consequences could be severe. Have you ever considered the risks involved?" she voiced her concerns, the gravity of the situation weighing heavily on her.

“Yes, it has. On the other hand, you guys need me in this one. I am the only one who could get access to the computer room. Plus...” Cindy interrupted him as she placed her finger over his lips. She felt that Alex was getting too worked up, and for his sake she said, “I know. It’s just...”

She realized that she was still touching his lips. Her creamy white cheeks gave off a reddish glow as she faintly blushed. She then turned away from Alex. Cindy did not want him to see her acting like a schoolgirl.

Alex didn’t see her reaction when she turned away. What he did pick up on was the concern in her voice, “Cindy, how about I promise that I won’t hex this operation?”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” said Cindy as her head pivots slightly in his direction. Her gaze focused on his face, seeing any type of reaction, and continued, “I’m just worried. Anyway, let’s go. Like I said before, we don’t have much time.”

Cindy opened the door as Alex flicked on his flashlight, casting a beam of light that pierced the darkness. The corridor they stepped into was a graveyard of fallen girders and shattered pipes, remnants of a tumultuous past scattered about like forgotten relics. Despite the bombing and the weight of a century of wear and tear, the building oddly remained structurally sound. Cindy noticed Alex’s curiosity about the structure. But instead of him get distracted, she took him by the hand and led the way with a smile on her face.

Down the corridor they both maneuvered their way through, Cindy walked a few feet ahead to make sure it was safe for Alex to follow. She noticed by the light was flashing something had caught Alex’s eyes. She saw a glimmer of an old, small floor generator. It was a few feet away from them, nearly hidden from the corner wall.

It had three hookups still connected. The closer he came to it the more he noticed it fused to the left side corners of this room. It seemed strange to him that the generator was so warped as if it was also fused into the floor, and walls of the room.

Two of the connections of the main lines resembled human like veins coming out of the floor panels rather than regular connection cables. Alex knelt down to get a better look.

“Hmm, this generator looks to be active. But no one has been here for a long time. This doesn’t make any sense. Almost if someone or thing had manipulated this place.”

“If that was the case,” said Cindy, “who or what could do this and why?”

“I don’t know, but I bet this why CTC set up this ruse with the bombing.”

“Speaking of that, you never said how you came by this information,” Cindy remarked, her eyes narrowing in curiosity.

“Well, I’ll explain on our way to meet up with Mark and Glen,” Alex replied, pushing his glasses up his nose as they both resumed their journey down the dimly lit corridor. “A few weeks ago, while sneaking around the research facility after-hours, I overheard my boss, Dr. Lorick, conversing with the head of the CTC special projects. They were discussing the discovery made by two of their field scientists—a substantial deposit of mysterious underground crystalline in the quarantine zone near Valhalla’s Point.”

Cindy’s eyebrows raised in intrigue. “So that’s how they found this place?”

“Partly,” Alex answered, tightening his grip on his backpack strap. “The two scientists were apprehended by the Earth’s government, but not before managing to clandestinely relay crucial information back to the CTC.”

“I suppose that explains why the government didn’t obliterate this place,” Cindy mused, gesturing for Alex to join her as they quickened their pace.

“This structure is nestled within the rugged mountainside, likely shielding it from the full brunt of the previous war,” Alex explained, his steps quickening to match Cindy’s urgency. “It could be a strategic move, a public relations gesture to maintain the fragile alliance between our governments.”

“Do you think they won’t hesitate to destroy it if necessary?” Cindy inquired, her eyes darting around for any signs of surveillance.

Alex frowned, his mind racing with possibilities as they navigated through the maze-like corridors. “It’s hard to say. Politics can be unpredictable, especially when powerful interests are at play.”

“What about those crystalline the scientists uncovered?” Cindy pressed; her voice hushed in the echoing hallway.

“Interestingly enough, I did some digging and found out that a project called ‘Living Metal’ used this type of crystalline.”

“Living Metal?”

“Unfortunately, the data wasn’t in CTC’s mainframe computer, so I had to hack into Dr. Lorick’s computer to get the info. All I could find were brief mentions in a file marked as ‘XY projects. It was a program to unlock metallic properties within the human DNA. I believe that this was some type of super soldier program to fight against Earth’s military.”

“What, how is that possible?” asked Cindy.

“I’m not sure,” said Alex as he repositioned his glasses, “But, did you know that at least ninety-five percent of our DNA is so-called junk or non-coded? I’m guessing that what we called *Junk*, the

scientists who created this Living Metal program founded a way to use them. Maybe, they unlocked something within the genome that can create a mutation that humans could control or something with metal.”

“Well, if that was the case,” said Cindy, “it would be useful to have metal armor that could grow from your skin. With a few of these super soldiers, they could wipe out a large garrison of soldiers by themselves.

“Yeah, it is a game changer for Mars, or should I say was,” said Alex, “Unfortunately, the person who created it supposedly died during the war. I am not sure who he was, but it seemed that he might have taken the research to his grave. Because almost everything about how to create this technology was destroyed.”

“So, you think this lab has some significance to this project?” she asked as she removed some of the fallen girders out of their way.

“I am ninety percent sure that this location has cryogenic storage rooms,” said Alex.

“Let me get this right, someone could be still alive in one of those cryogenic chambers?”

Alex shook his head and said, “The best cryogenic system we have now could only keep a person alive fifty years, not a hundred. If we’re lucky we might find a frozen corpse or something. Other than that, I don’t know what we will find. I just hope we will find something worthwhile.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Cindy as she helps Alex over a three-foot hole on the floor.

“I think that’s why the Earth security force is here,” said Alex.

“What, to make sure nothing could get in or out?” asked Cindy.

“Precisely.”

They moved on into a larger room across the hallway. Alex pointed the flashlight to the left and back to the right. He saw in front of him were fallen girders and broken support beams riddled from rust.

Cindy spotted an opening to the left and grabbed onto his hand. She happily led him through to the other side. The breach they went through opened out to a section that had a staircase connecting to a room linked to the next level. By Alex’s calculation, they should have been close to their friend’s position.

As they got in front of the stairs, they saw a huge generator in an unnatural position.

“Wow, look at that,” said Alex taking the lead and heading towards this peculiar arrangement.

“Hey, you know, once you get us inside you have to get back with...” Cindy sighed, as she knew with all this forgotten technology, Alex would be like a kid in a candy store. She looked at her watch and they were a little ahead on time to meet with the others. So, a little sightseeing couldn’t hurt.

Alex walked pass the dormant sentinel robots at one time guarded the laboratory against intruders. Cindy looked at them as she passed by, and mumbled to herself, “It’s like a technological

graveyard in here.”

“Check this out,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes, and marveled over the complexity of the machine’s still pristine order. Apparently, this was the power system for the entire lab. The main line went all the way up through the mountainside. Cindy was near the main generator and looked closer at the fallen sentinel robots.

“Hey, Alex, have you noticed these sentinels’ condition over here?”

Curious, he came over to see the sentinels. He knelt down beside one and touched the back panel to reveal that the bots were no more than husk. Just as he pressed down onto the latch, the body nearly disintegrated.

Within the fragments of the body were small metallic tubing intertwined within this sentinel robot and sheet metal floors. It was facing away from the generator lying face forward. That was not the only robot that had the same condition. Alex looked around and flashed his lights around the other sentinels. It seemed as if these connections were linked to the generator like a leash.

“This is unreal,” said Alex. “This whole room shouldn’t be here. Take this generator, for example...”

Cindy did not know how to answer. She just nodded, hoping his comment was rhetorical to make his point and walked over to the area of interest.

“The generator should be ten floors down connected to the thermal chambers, and yet it’s here fused into the floor with this wiring,” said Alex. “If you look around, they all have the same type of connection throughout the other rooms.”

Cindy looked around and saw the connections. “It looks like they all lead to this room.”

“You noticed it as well. Just think what we could find by this...”

“Ah, Alex, don’t get too caught up in here,” she said as she checked her watch. Sightseeing was over, “We still need to meet up with the others, and we have only a little bit of time left.”

“Yeah, I know. But you don’t understand I want to know what moved this generator here.”

“What do you mean by ‘what moved the generator?’”

“Like I said before, the generators should be at the base of the lab. It looked like it was moved or pushed through the floor here. I wish that I had more time to study it but...”

Cindy finished what Alex was about to say, “We have to meet up with the others. Maybe there are some answers in the computer room.”

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his glasses up and took out the stolen schematics of the lab that he had lifted from one of the guards.

“I know you’re right. Let’s see here. Oh, okay we are close. The map said that the way to the computer room was up those raggedy stairs and down the corridor. Then it should be dead-end to the right

at the entrance of the computer room.”

“Ah, are you sure no one else is down here?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I took the only copy. No one except for us should be down here.”

As soon as he said that they heard a voice yell down from the second level. “Hey! Who’s down there?”

It was a man dressed in a light-colored armor battle suit with a duffle bag on his right shoulder. The light from the man’s flashlight blinded Alex’s sight. Like a deer in front of headlights, he froze.

“Alex, put your hands down. It’s Glen,” said Cindy as she waved back at him. Alex’s heart skipped a beat, as he was sure that the trooper had found them. He sighed in relief as they made their way up the stairs. Glen turned off the flashlight and leaned against the rail. “For a second, I thought you weren’t going to make it.”

“Sorry, got held up. He was looking at the broken toys.”

Alex scoffed. “Oh, ha, ha, anyway, where’s Mark?”

“He’s down the hall,” said Glen, “I think he needs some help getting the computer room’s door to open.”

“Okay, I’ll give him a hand,” said Alex

Glen pulled out a cigarette from a compartment on his right forearm armor’s compartment and lit it.

“Hey, Cindy, how much time do you think we have?”

“Not long. The explosion happened about thirty-five minutes ago, and this place isn’t more than twenty miles away.”

Cindy turned around and grasped onto the rail. Below on the first level about ten yards away was devastated by a cave in. They were lucky that the stairs weren’t affected. She saw the magnitude of the cybernetic decay as the area was littered with broken technology. It was a somber reminder of how Alex found her in a dismal place similar to this filled with broken machinery.

To the world, she was only an experiment on cybernetics that went wrong. Alex was the only one who gave her a new life. She turned back around and smiled as she watched Alex leave to help Mark.

“You know, I just hope what we are doing is worth it,” Glen said as he took a puff off his cigarette.

“From what Alex had told me about this Living Metal program, it would have been our trump card during the war with Earth,” said Cindy.

“It was that important?” asked Glen.

“Yeah, and believe me, if we find any proof of its existence, I am sure our government would listen to us,”

“Proof or not, we will be lucky to get out of here alive, more or less than anything of value to our cause.”

Cindy leaned against the rails. She understood his worries about this mission. They never did something so risky like this. She looked over to Alex and saw how excited he was.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” she said. “If he thinks there is something to this place, then, it is worth coming here. Besides...” Cindy paused for a second before continuing with a softer voice. “I would go anywhere with Alex. Huh, you know if he wanted me to.”

Glen gestured to her if she wanted a drag off his cigarette and said, “I hope Mark and Alex were right about this.”

She kindly smiled, and shook her head, “Me too, but I do have the utmost confidence in those two.”

Glen took another puff and nodded.

“Well, I am going to see if Alex needs any help,” said Cindy as she left.

Moving her way through the poorly lighted corridor, Cindy didn’t notice the cables on the floor were like the ones from the generators. The blast marks on the walls indicated an internal fight had caused the corridor to decay so rapidly throughout the years. However, what was so strange to her was some of the substructures of the wall.

The titanium support beams had fallen so brittle that when she tried to move them, they shattered into pieces. This caused a cascade effect with the other fallen beams. One by one, they all shattered. Slightly freaked out, Cindy backed to the side of the corridor and called out on her communication device, “Mark! Alex! You guys, okay?”

“Yeah, what’s going on back there? It sounded like glass breaking,” said Mark.

“I don’t know...,” said Cindy as she brushed off some dust from her face and clothes. “I touched one of the support beams, and it all crumbled.”

“Hey Cindy,” said Alex, “can you get me some samples of the alloy in the walls. We’ll try to figure it out when we get back.”

“Oh, sure,” she said as she chipped a piece of metal off and proceeded carefully through the corridor. She looked back at the shattered support beams and wondered why this place didn’t continue to cave on top of them.

“Cindy,” said Mark on their communication devices.

“Oh, right, I’m coming,” said Cindy.

When she got to Mark, he was looking at the schematics of the area while Alex worked on a control panel to the doors. Cindy went over to Alex and lightheartedly placed her forearm on top of his head while he was connecting the service wires to the main port.

“So, you know the blue wire goes with the blue hole.”

Alex smirked at her comment and continued to work. Time was a factor, so he did not respond. She sat right beside him and held the flashlight up for him.

“Thanks, I think I’ve almost got it,”

Glen arrived a few minutes later. He casually sat back on a fallen girder and observed Cindy’s interaction with Alex. Her eyes glittered with affection for Alex. As much as she was blatantly flirting with him, Alex did not have a clue. He kept working on the doors.

Glen shook his head with a smirk of how Alex didn’t catch on how Cindy was flirting with him. Mark walked up to Glen with the map.

“Come on, I think we’re ready.”

“Cool, because the quicker we find what you guys are looking for, the quicker we can get the hell out of here,” said Glen as he flicked his cigarette to the ground.

Cindy turned around as she heard him and sarcastically asked, “Wow Glen, no taste for adventure?”

He smiled back and replied, “Only if the rewards outweigh the risk.”

She was about to respond back when sound “Beep!” went the doors as they unlocked. Alex motioned for them to come. As they did, Alex stood up from the control panel and said confidently, “Now open...”

The doors to the computer room opened. Standing right in front of them were at least ten men with blue and white armor that had the CTC emblem on the right side of their chest plates. The troopers already had their guns and rifles pointed right at them; with the laser tip beams targeted their heads. Alex finished saying, “Uh, sesame.”

There was no choice but to surrender. The CTC unit forced them to a sidewall near the main computer system. An older man with a scar on the right side of his face slowly approached them with a grin.

His reddish-blue armor reflected their worried looks. He stopped in front of Cindy and laughed, “Well, well, well, looks like we have some opportunists here. I know you are not from the research group upstairs. So, who are you folks?”

Alex’s eyes widened as he saw some of his fellow scientists all tied up and unconscious on the

floor. The troopers dragged some of the scientists who stayed behind downstairs to open up this computer room on the other side. What were most puzzling to him was that the troopers and scientists were all employed by CTC.

His nervous fidgeting caught the attention of the troop leader. He came up to Alex and stared angrily at him as he watched his reactions, "Except for you. I believe that I have seen you from somewhere."

"What, me? I never...have, I meant uh..."

Cindy interrupted him, hoping to bring the troop leader's attention back to her.

"He's, our hostage. We were going to use him as a bargaining chip if needed."

Hastily, Mark agreed.

"That's right. He is not with us. We're just using him to get inside here."

The troop leader paused for a moment and again laughed.

"Do you think I care? I am not here for any hostage negotiations. No more games, missy! Who are you guys and what are you doing here?"

Cindy stood there silently and smiled.

"Lady, what in the hell are you smiling about?"

In her left hand was a little surprise for them, concealed from the CTC's pat down on them.

"I'm smiling because I have the answer in my hand."

Curiously, the troop leader looked at her and asked, "What do you have?"

"This!" said Cindy as she threw a timing smoke bomb shaped like a small grenade. Instinctively, he grabbed onto it and opened his hand to reveal what she had thrown. A look of fear shot through his eyes as he thought it was a real bomb and he screamed, "What the f...!"

With a big flash of light, the grenade went off in his face. The smoke flushed the entire room. The disarray quickly spread throughout the troopers. When the grenade went off, Cindy first took her gun back and grabbed Alex's coat. She quickly tugged him out of the room. Mark and Glen furthest away from the blast ducked down and quickly followed her. As they ran down the hallway, Cindy laughed loudly.

Hey guys, how did you like the show?"

"Show? You brought a grenade!" shouted Mark.

"It's just a smoke grenade, nothing more," Cindy explained as they turned the corner.

Because of the abrupt disastrous meeting with the CTC, the smoke veil did help the Neos to escape. What they didn't know was that they were going the wrong way. At this point it did not matter, getting away from the heavily armed men was only thing on their mind.

One of the outraged troopers stumbled out of the room and accidentally fired his grenade

launcher towards the fleeing Neos. Just before Glen could finish his words, an explosion erupted behind them. Debris nearly decapitated him.

Freaked out by this, Glen scrambled up past Mark muttering, "Okay, just what I wanted to do on a Saturday night. Attack a heavily armed right-wing military group and let them chase us."

Glen then screamed out of fear as another bullet zipped by his helmet, "We're going to die. You do know that RIGHT!"

The cacophony of gunshots boomed through the desolate hallways as the Neos fought for their survival, each frantic step bringing them closer to the edge of danger. The persistent pursuit of the CTC's troopers drove them deeper into the labyrinthine lab, leaving no margin for error in their desperate bid for freedom.

Cindy, determined to shield her companions from harm, activated her visor, scanning the environment with a sharp focus that belied the urgency of their situation. Spotting subtle weaknesses in the floor beneath her, she acted on instinct, unleashing the full force of her cybernetic enhancements with a calculated stomp that split the ground asunder, creating a barrier that momentarily halted their pursuers in their tracks.

Content with buying them a precious moment of respite, Cindy rejoined her comrades, their breathless gasps punctuating the tense silence that enveloped them near the stairwell. "What are you all doing? We can't afford to linger. We need to keep moving," she urged, casting a wary glance over her shoulder to ensure the CTC forces remained at bay.

"Wait, Cindy," Mark interjected tinged with curiosity. "Where did you even get that grenade?"

With a deft leap over the railing to secure a vantage point at the foot of the stairs, Cindy flashed a grin as she replied, "A girl's gotta have her secrets. And that little secret saved our asses back there."

"I'm not one to complain," Mark quipped laced with relief. "I'm just thankful that someone here was quick on their feet."

Amid the turmoil, Cindy's eyes met Alex's fleeting figure, a silent exchange of shared concern passing between them as he hurried past, the weight of his distress evident. "Mark, do me a favor and catch up with Alex," she implored as she gripped Glen's armored shoulder to stop him. "Glen and I will hold the line a while longer."

"You got to be kidding me!" Glen retorted as his skepticism rang out through the narrow corridor,

his reluctance echoing in his words, "You're our heavy hitter. Why should I be the one to risk my neck?"

"Because you're the one armored, and right now, I need your help," Cindy responded as her gaze steady and resolute.

In a moment of reflection, Glen's eyes fell upon the littered volatile canisters that dotted the hallway, a spark of ingenuity igniting within him. "Fine, I've got an idea," he mumbled as his mind started to formulate a plan that could turn the tables in their favor.

As Glen unveiled his idea, Alex raced from door to door down the corridor, his hope diminishing with each fruitless attempt. The echoes of distant gunfire whispered a haunting tune of imminent danger, wrapping him in a cloak of urgency and dread. A sense of hopelessness crept over his mind, each door a bleak reminder of the challenges that loomed ahead, either locked or obstructed by debris from a recent cave-in.

Mark threaded his way through the hallway, aiming to assist Alex in their search for an exit. Catching the sight of Alex relentlessly kicking at the final door on the right, a wave of fear and desperation clouded his features. Images of captivity, torture, or worse clouded Alex's mind, his resolve dwindling with each fruitless attempt. Frustration mounted as the weight of his predicament bore down, leaving him adrift in a sea of doubt.

"It's another dead end. Damn it, if I can't find my way back to the other scientists, my cover will be blown. Why can't I find an exit?" Alex exclaimed tinged with a mix of panic and despair as he pounded his fist against the unyielding door. Sensing Alex's escalating distress, Mark gently grasped his shoulders, offering reassurance in the face of uncertainty. "Hey, just relax. We'll find a way through this."

Alex looked up at Mark and took in a deep breath to steady himself, he then replied, "Yeah, I know... you're right." Mark released his shoulders and leaned back against a nearby door, unknowingly causing the rusted hinges to give way. With a resounding creak, the door swung open, sending Mark tumbling backwards. "See," he exclaimed, "I think I've found another way out."

Alex hurried over to help Mark up, but as he neared, he was struck by a larger-than-life sight. The area was littered with non-functional defense robots, grouped in threes, their features stoic as they faced away from the back of the room. The atmosphere felt off as the metal floorboards were warped like distorted ripples on a newly formed puddle creating an unsettling illusion before him.

Kneeling down for a closer look, Alex noticed connecting wires reminiscent of those from the previous generators, scattered amidst the plastic and rust. As he brushed off the debris, his eyes widened at the sight of more wires snaking towards the back of the room, as if leading to a hidden secret buried within.

"They're warm too. Could this be?" Alex mused; his voice hushed with a sense of foreboding. The discovery of the peculiar wires hinted at a deeper mystery, triggering a surge of curiosity and

apprehension as he pondered the implications of this unexpected find.

Mark took out his flashlight to see what was ahead of them. The light reflected off was a huge, warped mass of metal standing six meters high. It stood in the middle of the backside wall. Alex looked on in disbelief and said, "Whoa, no way. I would have never imagined that I would be seeing this."

"Seeing what," asked Mark as he took a better look and saw the CTC insignia in the middle of the lump.

"Wait," said Mark, "Is this a cryogenic tube?"

Alex scooted his glasses up and said, "Or what's left of it. It's so warped I don't know how it could be active. We talked about the possibility of finding something relating to the Living Metal program, but this is way more than I expected."

Mark nodded and asked, "Do you think someone in there is alive?"

Advancing cautiously, a faint, eerie sound caught their attention before Alex could formulate a response. Mark's gaze sought Alex's as he questioned, "Hey, did you hear that?"

Alex nodded in agreement. "It sounded like a heartbeat, or at least something resembling like one." his voice trailed off, laced with a hint of apprehension.

Moving closer to investigate, Mark tapped the outer hull, the hollow echo resonating ominously in the confined space. "Could there truly be someone—or something—lurking inside?" he mused as they both glanced at each other with concerned eyes.

Cindy and Glenn swiftly joined them at the doorway, closing it nearly shut, leaving only a slim gap to monitor any potential pursuit. Trapped with dwindling options, a wave of despair washed over Cindy, acknowledging the harsh reality that escape seemed impossible. This moment marked a critical juncture where they might have to brace themselves for a final stand against the CTC.

Beside her, Glen struggled to catch his breath, hunching over with his hands on his knees. Looking up at Cindy, he inquired, "Do you think we've lost them?"

Cindy shook her head, her expression grim. "I doubt it. They'll track us down here. We need to keep moving."

"But we are moving further into this lab? Shouldn't we need to go towards the exit," Glen question with doubts stressed in his voice.

"Damn it, Glen, unless you've got a tank hidden away..." Cindy paused, composing herself before adding, "Sorry. Please, go check on them. See if they have any insights."

"Ah...Sure," Glen responded, reluctantly tearing his gaze away to glance back at Alex and Mark. Their focus was fixed to the back of the room, hidden from his view. Pressing further into the decaying laboratory, he bore witness to the unsettling sight that had captivated his companions. Behind them, a twisted deformity marred the wall, a grotesque aberration that defied explanation.

"What the hell is that?" Glen whispered as he confronted the disturbing anomaly that awaited them in the depths of the abandoned facility.

Perplexed, Cindy turned to Glen's alarmed outburst and beheld Alex standing still, her gaze fixed on something before her. A hushed silence fell over the group as the unmistakable sound of a faint heartbeat reverberated through the eerie surroundings.

"It's here, and I can't believe it," Cindy murmured, her voice laden with incredulity and a trace of apprehension.

With cautious steps, Glen approached Mark and Alex, retrieving a small sensor device from his duffle bag that snugly fit onto his hand like a glove. As the sensor began to register data, the readings surged, overwhelming its processors with unprecedented anomalies.

"Weird... look at this, Mark," Glen remarked, pointing to the device's display. "The readings suggest it's some kind of cocoon or similar structure."

Accepting the device from Glen, Mark scrutinized the data closely. "The external radiation levels seem normal, but inside the 'egg,' there's a concentrated hotspot at its core."

"How hot are we talking about?" Alex inquired, joining Mark to examine the readings for himself.

With a confused look on Mark's face as he relayed the unsettling information. "This can't be right. It's indicating temperatures of approximately twelve hundred degrees Celsius within the containment."

As Alex extended his hand toward the enigmatic object, Glen's quick intervention halted his action. "Dude, you saw the readings. This thing is like a pressure cooker. Touching it could set off a chain reaction. We need to prioritize our safety above all else."

Unfazed by Glen's warning, Alex assured him, "I've got this under control."

With a sense of curiosity and caution, Alex made contact with the protruding lump, running his fingers along the wall's surface. "It feels warm, not searing hot... similar to the cables from the generators. This must have been the storage area for the cryogenic tubes, explaining the cocoon-like structure we're observing."

Glen's unease grew obvious as he scanned the room. "But where are the other cryogenic pods? Surely they wouldn't have left whatever or whoever is inside that cocoon unattended."

Mark had a puzzled look on his face. He had heard of the CTC's involvement with experimental warfare for Mars' military during the war, but all he was expecting were data files. He hoped to find a treasure-trove of DNA samples that could have survived a hundred years, but not something like a living human in a cryogenic chamber.

"Wait a minute, Alex," said Mark. "Do you think there's someone alive in that so-called cocoon? If this is what we were looking for, how do we know for sure? For all we know, it could be a radiation

backwash that warped this metal.”

“No, it’s more like a womb. If we could open this up, we could. This might be...”

The faint sound of a heartbeat was swallowed up by the commotion that came up the hallway.

Cindy peeked through a crack on the side of a rusted wall and saw four heavily armed men approaching them.

“Here they come!” said as she backed away from the doors. There was nothing much to block the doors. Each time she grabbed onto the fallen support girders, the metal crumbled in her hands. After that, she gave up on blocking the door and ran over to Alex.

Both, Mark, and Glen frantically looked around for another exit. Too caught up in his curiosity, Alex refused to leave. Mark noticed his reaction. On the other hand, the circumstances outweighed their mission parameters, and there was nothing they could do but to flee.

“I am sorry; we’ll have to find another way.”

“There’s a person in there. We can’t just leave...”

There was no other way. It was too dangerous to anything but to flee. Just before he got up, Alex stumbled in front of the tube. A part of the dirt that blew off revealed a letter ‘S.’ He continued to brush off the rest of the dirt. He noticed a name engraved close to the bottom side of the tube. He wiped off the rest of the dirt to reveal the name, Sara.

“Damn it, this is not fair. I am sorry Sara,” said Alex.

Cindy ran toward the rest of the Neos. To the left of the cryogenic tube a few feet away was an opening which led behind the chamber. This was not an exit, but a possible hiding place for the Neo Ameras. This was their only means of protection.

“Mark, look to your right.”

Mark leaped behind the wall. Cindy turned to Glen who was in a panicked state frozen in his tracks. He looked at her with a pale face and shook his head. “Are you freaking nuts?”

“Damn it! This isn’t the time to panic.”

“Unlike you, I still have my original body, and I want to keep it that way. We only have your guns, and they have an arsenal. Mark, come on, I don’t want to die for this.”

“If we surrender to them now, they’ll shoot us for sure. It’s too late now to back away from this.”

Cindy came up to Alex and clutched his jacket.

“Come on Alex. If they realize you’re more than a hostage, you’ll be in bigger trouble than all of us.”

