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Singularity

Drones were never this much of a problem in my dad's day. That's what he used to say, at least until a wild roomba took his legs off. That was at the start of all this. If he wasn't victim number one, he was up there.   
 The first attack was at Nyle, the biggest droid manufacturing startup in the Valley. Dad was an engineer who worked for them, and a fine one at that. To this day his work on the Hachis take the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands, everyday. It wasn't just the Hachis, though. Plenty of droids got the bug. Warehouse shippers, delivery drones, the aforementioned roombas. Hachis only compounded the problem.  
 A year and some odd months had passed since the bug's appearance. The Valley, riddled with droids and drones and even some printers, became seeped with the bug. It was inhabitable. I'd been living on my own since then. Mostly wandering. Eighteen, homeless, friendless, and fatherless, though I don't like to mention that last part. I just let them assume. That, and I didn't want anyone to find out who he was either. Then I would have to worry about more than just droids hunting me down. Although somebody had been bound to realize that I knew way more about Nyle than any random orphan girl should. That's how I wound up with Braden, Sam, and Rogue. We're back in the Valley now, camping out in a warehouse, heading for Nyle's campus like some band of heroes from the RPGs I used to play.  
 My computer screen flickered at me, as if to keep my attention. We were on our last battery cell and I needed to decode the Nyle campus plans by tomorrow. The pop of a gunshot echoed from outside. It was Sam taking out a Courier droid, trademark Nyle, I assumed. They've been giving us the most trouble since we got back in the Valley. They liked to divebomb our hideouts: crashing through windows, smashing into building walls, causing general havoc. Usually we just listened for the thumping sounds they made on the door. Though they weren't all bad. Since they were originally intended to deliver packages to customer's doors they often carried treats for us. I decided I should stop typing at my desk and go check out what it brought us this time. At the very least I could swipe its battery cell for power.  
 When I stood up I noticed Braden was sleeping on some crates nearby. Hopeless. Maybe I'll talk to Rogue about reprimanding him later.

By the time I got to Sam he was already sifting through the package. I went straight for the drone to see if I could pry it open. I didn't really care for whatever was in the package, even if it was food. I didn't eat much anyway and it was more likely Braden would snatch it all up.  
 My dad showed me how to take apart a Courier when he was still alive. He brought one home one day just to show me. He plopped a CZ model on the table, shining with its fresh chrome shielding. "It looks like a big eagle. If eagles had propeller blades," I had observed. He had chuckled and pulled out Ellie, his trusty wrench.   
 "Now you see these bolts. Erin, are you paying attention? Look at these black bolts here," he said pointing at the belly, "Notice they have a little red marker on them. You can't undo these. Don't even try, it'll just end terribly."  
 "Okay?"  
 "But look here at this one. This one's marked blue. They don't come this way, I marked it for you. Here, take Ellie and undo this bolt. Yeah, like that. Now you can just pull away the UV filter on his eyes and, boom!" he had said. I had pulled the eagle's visor away to see it had two little cameras for eyes and a USB port for a nose. How cute.  
 The guy Sam shot out of the sky didn't seem to have the same charm. Fortunately Sam hit the propeller on its right wing on the mark and the body wasn't damaged. I pulled out Ellie and removed the right bolt. I popped the visor off and pulled out my detox drive. On it was a program that patched the bug, effectively an instant cure and a vaccination for computer programs. I shoved the detox stick in its nose port, just in case. Took a few tries to get the right orientation for the stick, but it went in eventually. Now to wait until the detox finished.   
 I sat back on a boulder and watched Sam. It looked like he was nearly done, but it also looked like he was trying to ply something open with his knife. "You okay over there?" I asked, though I knew engaging him in conversation may have dire consequences, especially with his knife out.  
 "Shouldn't you be hacking something right now, hero?" he scoffed.  
 "Hacking takes time, I'll have you know."  
 "So does scavenging. Y'know, something that will actually keep us alive out here."  
 "You're a peach. What'd you find?"  
 "Jerky, canned pears, and a packet of tissues."  
 "And?"  
 "Why don't you go look for yourself?" he struggled with some kind of metal box, "I'm sure you'll find some reason to take it." He finally popped the lid off the box. Empty. "Worthless piece of shit," he cursed, tossing the bits aside. The parts landed in his junk pile, right next to a perfectly sealed pack of chalk and a broken bicycle chain. "These bots just get stupider and stupider. Your Pops thought somebody would need all of this all at once?" he asked me.  
 "He always told me 'transistors work in mysterious ways.' Ooh, it looks like detox is finishing. Great talking to you, Sammy, but I gotta go," I said. He sneered. I scurried over to the droid and swiped the detox stick out of its nose. Just then it powered off, and I could here the whirring of its cooling fan fade slowly into silence. The droid was dead.  
 I spent most the rest of my day at my desk, preparing for our journey to Nyle headquarters in the morning. Rogue returned sometime at sunset and decided to pay me a visit. She likes to interrupt me at the most inopportune of times. She's the kind of person that'll wander right up to you and give you a whistle, but by then she's either flipped everything on your desk that can be picked up upside down or doodled her cheeky face on every loose piece of paper in the room. Although sometimes I wonder if she can do that because she's a good thief or that I need to pay attention more.  
 Eventually Sam got Braden to lug back today's haul to the warehouse while he kindled a fire. By the time Sam called for dinner I managed to decrypt almost the entire layout of the Nyle facility. "Erin, darling, come eat. Braden's been eyeing your tuna since last night, I'm not sure how long he'll hold," Rogue called.  
 "I'm coming, I'm coming," I responded. I don't think they particularly liked me much for being Mr. Apocalypse's daughter, but they at least cared somewhat. I sat down at the fire pit next to all of them. The night had finally settled in, and the aura of the flames was the only light illuminating the warehouse. The shadows danced on their faces, and I'm sure I looked no different. I stared at my tuna can, half eaten from last night. Gourmet food, really, compared to my dad's dinners. Not that he was a bad cook, but he had a bad habit of working after hours. Everyone else was silent, even Rogue. Normally she's very chit-chatty during dinner, but I could tell they were all probably thinking about something else: a plan for tomorrow. I decided I should try to calm their nerves. I spoke up, "I have a map, you know." They all looked up at me. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.  
 "So... that means you know where we're going, right?" Braden asked, "Like, which room we need to get to? Where they're making the Hachis?"  
 "The main Hachi assembly line is miles away. The Nyle corporate building is where they keep their server farm. Those servers maintain the Hachis communication. That means that while those servers stand, the Hachis will be able to talk with each other and that means the bug can spread through them. Understand?" I told him.   
 "No," Braden said, blankly. He was only a medical student, I suppose. Though I thought they were supposed to be good at paying attention. He doesn't listen to a damn thing I say, even when he asks.  
 "So you can take us to their server room? And we wreck the place?" Rogue asked, "Doesn't sound too hard."  
 I tapped at my tuna can. "There's a problem, though. You generally don't need to destroy a server to have it break down. Breaking servers isn't hard at all, especially at the scale Nyle uses them. Servers go down all the time on their own. Ever had a website completely break on you? It's because a server went down."  
 "So you're saying that these servers should be broken by now?" Sam asked, "Which means someone is keeping them fixed?"  
 "Aw, shit," Rogue said, "Does that mean we're going to have to, y'know, 'deal' with some guy?"  
 "Wait, is he the one who made the bug?" Braden asked.  
 I went quiet. I didn't want them to panic, but I knew that whoever was holding out at Nyle definitely made the bug, was actively spreading it out, and probably wasn't alone. Server farms took teams of people to keep alive. Even if he was a master hacker he couldn't possibly be doing server maintenance alone. But who would help him? And why? Those were questions I couldn't answer, and I wouldn't want them to ask about it. They were depending on me.  
 "Erin?"  
 "He might have written the bug. We won't know for sure until we get there," I told Braden.  
 "Bullshit," Sam called, "You must know something else. Your old man taught you everything he knew, and he caused all this!"  
 "He didn't teach me everything. Just enough so I could get us this far. Dad didn't talk about work much. I really don't know what's inside that building, besides what this map can tell," I told him. That wasn't a lie. He never took me to Nyle once. I don't think he would have even if I asked.  
 "Well, what does that map tell you, hon?" Rogue asked, clearly attempting to defuse the situation, "Where are we going tomorrow?"  
 "Their campus is divided into six districts. The servers are located in the blue district. Each district had a different encryption key, which is why it took all day. I managed to crack everything but the green district, but that's okay. I think all the managers' offices were in that area. We won't be needing to go over there." They all breathed out. "Here," I said, giving Rogue my computer, "These are the maps. Can you figure out a plan?"  
 "Of course," she responded. And with that I went to bed.  
 We didn't reach the Nyle campus until at least noon. It was amazing. As we approached it the grass grew greener, until it reached a viridian green at the gate. The campus was painted in brilliant colors. Great white glass buildings stood before us, lined with decorations for each colored district it was a part of. Perfect grass covered the lawn, excepting the walkways and statues of prototype models of Nyle's most famous inventions.  
 Of course, all our amazement at the campus was interrupted by the shiny metal frame of two Hachi's stalking the blue district, our destination. Sam was packed and armed like usual, this time reasonably so. Nyle engineered the Hachi's, so it was no surprise that we spotted a few lurking around.  
 My dad had told me all about the Hachi's. They were supposed to revolutionize the droid market. The first household droid ever made. The Hachi would watch over your house, alert you if anything seemed amiss while you were out, but best of all they were your personal companion. That's why they built them like dogs. The prototypes were far from cozy though. Much of their body frame was exposed and various lights flashed in and around their snout. Despite their incompleteness, they were the main carriers of the bug, and vicious nonetheless. If we were surprised by even one of them it could mean an end to our journey.  
 "How many of them do you see, Sam?" I asked.  
 "I count three," he said.  
 "There's at least five," Rogue interjected, "I looked at your maps. There are five ways into this building. If this guy's smart there's probably at least one at each entryway."  
 "How do we get in then?" Braden asked, "I can't do much if a Hachi decides to eat your face."  
 "I can take them out from here," Sam said.  
 "That'll just call more over," I told him, "If one goes out, the others can sense it. If they haven't already picked up on the gunshot."  
 "Great, we can just sneak past them. I'm good at that," Rogue said.  
*I should hope,* I thought, *I didn't let her join our group because she was a pickpocket.* Amazingly, she was able to develop a plan of entry in just a few minutes. She must have been studying my map all night, she had the campus memorized. We were able to get in through an entrance in the yellow district and in through an underground tunnel, presumably for custodial staff. The connecting tunnel was narrow, damp, and barely lit. Fortunately the place had been long vacated.  
 We emerged in a great vestibule. The sun shone through the glass windows. I took a seat on a couch in what looked like a waiting area. "Where are we?" Braden asked.  
"Blue district. Lobby," Rogue responded, "Right where we need to be. The servers should be just through those doors."  
 "HACHI!" Sam yelled. My companions dove behind the front desk to stay hidden. I, however, was not nearly as close, and rashly jumped under the coffee table.  
 "What are you doing?" Sam yelled, "Get over here, idiot. The Hachi'll see you." It was too late. The Hachi had already appeared on the other side of the glass window. Its head hung by cables and mechanical servos and its snout pointed downward at the ground, as if it was sniffing the ground. Perhaps it was already tracking us? I had to get out of its range of sight.   
 I crawled carefully out from under the table and made for behind the couch, carefully keeping an eye on the Hachi. If it so much as saw any movement out of its peripheral vision that thing would tear my head off. Slowly I ducked behind the couch. The Hachi was still walking foward, although slowly. I sat with my back to the right arm of the couch. *It can't see me,* I thought, *As long as it keeps moving it can't see me.* Slowly, it disappeared off to the left. I glanced back toward the front desk my companions were hiding behind. They stayed hidden. It was then I saw it. Past the front desk was a second Hachi standing in the window, staring straight at me. I stared back, just waiting for the Hachi to barrel through the window and chew on my face whilst my friends overheard. All I could think was, *At least they'll make it.*  
 But the Hachi turned away.  
 Hachi's never turn away. Yet it strolled off, allowing me to live. I was motionless until it walked past the window and when I finally saw its tail disappear, my entire body relaxed.  
 "It's gone," I called out, "That Hachi saw me and walked away."  
 "What? Impossible," Sam said getting up from behind the desk, "Those things don't know mercy. You told me yourself."   
 I did tell him so. That's why I created the detox stick. Droids can't feel, not really. You could program a companion robot to have feelings, but all it would be is a simulation. If you told it to murder everyone in sight it would have no qualms about such an order. After all, it is your loyal companion, and your companion would never disobey you. That would imply they had freedom.  
 "It must not have seen you, then," Braden reasoned.  
 "Yeah, I guess," I mumbled looking at the window, "Rogue, where did you say the room was?"

"Right there,” she said, pointing to a plain looking blue door behind the desk.  
 Surprisingly the door was perfectly unlocked. When we entered the server room, we were greeted by a wave of cool air and a relay of computers stacked in rows all down the length of the room. The door closed and everything became dark, excepting the blueish glow of the whirring computers and some floating lights.  
 "A bit chilly, eh?" Braden said.  
 "Servers need to be kept cool, else the heat they generate will melt their CPUs," I told him.  
 "So we just need to trash this place? Hey what are these floating things?" Braden asked again.  
 "I don't know. I've never seen these before," I told him. They were curious things. They almost looked like fireflies, scattered all across the server room. Just floating.  
 "Probably dangerous," Sam said.  
 "Dangerous? Ho ho, sir, you have no idea," a deep voice responded. We all looked down the center aisle of servers. A shadow lurked nearby. Suddenly, the lights began to move towards my companions, gathering in globs and pushing them back towards the entrance wall. They were splayed across the wall, and the globs moved up their arms and rested on their wrists. When they flew away, a metal clasp had formed around their wrists, pinning them there. I stood untouched.  
 "So you're running these servers?" I asked him.  
 "Did he make the bug?" Braden yelled.  
 "Bug?" he responded, "Oh, you mean the mass murdering? I like to think of that as a feature. Sadly, I'm afraid that bug wasn't made by anyone. Certainly not by me. Although, I should correct myself. I probably contributed to its creation, but the same could be said for everyone else who worked here. I just so happened to discover its usefulness before anyone else did." A Hachi emerged from the aisles and began circling me with metal teeth bared.  
 Sam, Rogue, and Braden lay held back to the wall. There was no way I could free them from their metal clasps. The man made a sound that was probably a laugh, but could have been easily mistaken for a whimper. A whimpering chuckle, I suppose. He called out from his shadowy position in the servers, "Look who's here, Koh. Erin's finally made it back." The man walked toward me, unraveling the shadows around him, until finally the blue light of the room hit his face.  
 The cool air suddenly turned icy. I felt a wave of chills over my skin and t my heart sank even lower than the temperature. The decrepit face of my dead father stared me down, and I could hardly look back. "Come back home, dearest daughter?" he calmly spoke.  
 "Daughter?!" Braden yelled. Sam was struggling to break free of his bonds. Rogue was still.  
 "I see you've brought some friends. Care to introduce them?" my father asked, but I couldn't respond. He walked toward them, his hands held behind his back and his figure draped in a long black coat. He leaned over and leered at them. I couldn't move. Even if I wanted too, my father's Hachi, Koh, would've had an opinion about that. He turned to Sam, "What's your name, sonny?" He pointed at Sam's rifle and said, "Been keeping my daughter safe, have you? I'm obliged, but I must say she really doesn't need your protection. Erin is well equipped to protect herself. I made sure." The fireflies swarmed the rifle, bending and twisting the barrel, and eventually dissolving it into nothing. It was hard to tell with the lighting of the server room and Sam's complexion, but at this point I was sure Sam's face was seething with rage.   
 "I didn't need that," Sam sternly told my father, trying to keep composure. My father put up a half-smile. Sam breathed through his teeth, "I'll tear this place apart!"  
"Ah, you must be the puppy of the group. Trying to play wolf, I see? Well, why don't you play with a real dog for once? Koh!" my father called. The Hachi immediately charged for Sam. Suddenly my paralysis was cured at the thought of what Koh could do to my friend. I bolted after it.  
 "Sam!" I yelled. I don't know why I thought I could outrun a Hachi, in my panic I felt I had to. But legs could only carry me so fast. The Hachi pounced on Sam, and they both flew through the drywall and into the vestibule. Koh was pinning Sam down as I leapt through the hole and jumped on Koh's back, trying to get Sam out from underneath him. Surprisingly the metal beast was easier to move than it seemed. Suddenly I was pinning Koh back down, but then the Hachi kicked me off, right in the gut. I landed on the ground across from Sam. He was wincing, but beginning to stand up. Sam stood in front of me, unsheathing his knife and guarding my body from Koh. Koh swiped at the knife, flinging it toward the entrance of the facility. Sam tackled the Hachi regardless, though struggling to keep it down.   
 I tried to get up, but was instead pulled up by the arm. I turned and saw my father. I pushed him away. In the light of the vestibule he seemed paler than I remembered, his hair grayer, and his blue eyes faded. "Have you seen your power, Erin?" he asked.  
 "Power?" I asked back.  
 "Running after Koh like that. Tackling him to the ground so easily while Samuel the Strong can just barely find the strength to do the same," he said. I looked at Sam. He was exerting so much strength just trying keep its legs back. I took Koh down using much less effort.  
 "Ever hear of adrenaline?" I told him. He chuckled.  
 "Doesn't appear adrenaline is doing much good for him," he said. Sam was really struggling. I needed to help him, but my father was blocking me. His fireflies formed a glass wall between Sam and I. I could only watch.  
 "You, on the other hand," my father put his arm on my shoulder, "Can obliterate him." He put his hand in front of me. More fireflies gathered on his palm, shinining like little lanterns. "Do you remember, Erin? These nanodroids, they're the real genius of this company," his voice raised, "Hachis are simple machines. These swarmers gift to me the power of creation and destruction. Their engineering was my masterpiece. And with them you were birthed."  
 "Birthed?" I asked him. I didn't know what he was talking about. I was born before he worked at Nyle.  
 "Just look at this place!" he yelled, raising his hands, "The air is alive!" And he was right. The air was ablaze with fireflies. "You were grown from these nanodroids. You are the first man-made human in existence!"  
 "You're lying," I accused.  
 "Denial?"  
 "You're dead and my dad hasn't worked for Nyle as long as I've been alive."  
 "Yes, that is true. But it is also false," he qualified, "At exactly 1763053200 epoch time I died in my home, survived only by you. Long before this, however, I had been developing a program that would unite these nanodroids into a single network called ZenOS. With ZenOS, or Zen as I like to call it, the nanodroids could be controlled like a hive mind, with me as their master. So when I was killed, the nanodroids tried to rebuild me. But something was lost along the way, and what they got was a man who was not dead, but not exactly reborn. I became Nil. It was I who leveraged the bug to change this world. And it is I who can lead you to Zen, to your destiny!"   
 Sam was being overpowered by the Hachi. The robotic beast had him pinned. Sam's hands, wrapped around the Hachi's jaws, was the only thing keeping him alive. Koh pushed down. Sam could only redirect the jaw from his face to his shoulder. The teeth sunk in, and a crunch echoed through the vesibule. Sam was screaming. I looked in horror. Blood was gushing out on the floor.  
 "You can stop this," said Nil, "Become one with Zen."  
 "Sam!" Rogue yelled, bursting through the hole in the wall. *Did they escape from their bonds?* She dashed across the floor, leaping on Koh and jabbing something into its neck. Her stun baton. She was yelling, almost like a chant, "I am Rogue! You couldn't kill me then! You can't kill me now!" She ruthlessly jabbed, mostly for catharsis now. Koh lay on the ground, motionless and definitely shorted. Braden had ran up to Sam and started attending his wound.  
 I felt for the detox stick in my pocket.  
 "Zen, huh?" I asked, "Well, what am I waiting for?" I pulled out the detox stick and unsheathed it, pointing it at Nil.  
 "A flash drive? What do you think that's going to do to me? I don't take those. Didn't I teach you better?" said Nil.  
 "I can make anything I want, right? And all you have to do is let me into Zen?"  
 "All you have to do is join me."  
 "That's a laugh. You want to know what I think? I don't exercise much. Or eat. So tell me, Nil. How was I able to run faster than your Hachi? Or tackle him off of Sam? I think Dad already let me into Zen. I've been in Zen this whole time, just unaware of it."  
 "How dare you talk to me like that! You are my daughter!"  
 "My father is dead. I spent a whole year coming to terms with that. During that year I only met dead people. People who lost all purpose. Maybe the bug took their purpose, maybe they lost it all before the bug. But these people behind me, they're the first real live people I've met in a long time."   
 The air began to warm. The fireflies began retreating from their positions on the glass wall. It began to crumble, turning to sand. My friends turned and looked at me. They saw a girl covered in fireflies. They flew down to my hand, gathering at the detox stick. I felt the fireflies as they read the detox program. So warm. They built on top of the stick, shining all the while. The light extended forward and converged to a point about an arm's length away, and the stick grew weightier in my hand. They turned it into a sword of light. I looked at Nil.  
 "I won't let you kill them too!" I yelled, charging at the ghost of my father. I swung the blade of light right through him. Nil fell to the floor.  
 “Erin," he gasped, “I named you after an angel, you know.” He collapsed, his body shriveled and decomposed. Nil had been patched, and I saw my father vanish into the light. The fireflies dissipated around me, taking the sword of light with them. I looked at my friends. They were gazing at me.  
 "Erin," they said, "you're glowing!"