Robots.

They were invented to simplify our lives, but quickly became high-maintenance appliances, draining our wallets and evolving into essentials we couldn’t live without. Daphne never owned a robot before purchasing a used cargo ship to start her new business. The robot, RUSTY, came with the ship. Abandoned eons ago by who knows who? Even the salesman had no idea RUSTY was tossed in a locker like a broken dishwasher. RUSTY had his charm, and it didn’t take long for him to grow on her. Now, here she was, back in the sub-level robot lab, getting RUSTY a badly needed tune up.

Benches lined the back wall, with hundreds of monitors facing all directions. Every one of those brightly lit, flat panels had fancy graphs, rotating diagrams, and scrolling text on them. A few of those displays looked familiar to Daphne, but others were beyond her comprehension. She suspected half of them were just to make the place look high-tech so the customer didn’t complain about the exorbitant cost of robot maintenance they perform.

Latching mechanisms secured RUSTY to the robot diagnostic station. The massive contraption at the end of the room consisted of tubes, cable assemblies, and boxy structures. The wires wrapped around to a hub, connecting everything to the monitoring equipment. Upon further inspection, Daphne noticed the apparatus contained hundreds of adjustment locations. Just fitting the thing to her robot probably took the technicians hours of labor. Or, she thought, maybe it automatically adjusted to fit the shape of a robot. She wished she could have seen the process, but customers weren’t allowed in until the setup was complete and the preliminary readout was ready.

The entire room smelled of new plastic with a hint of burned transistor. The burned smell probably came from RUSTY. She imagined a replaced component appearing on an itemized bill she received long after leaving the facility. The bill would likely span over a thousand lines, with item descriptions as vague as those on a medical bill. Each entry would list prices ranging from a few dollars to a few hundred—none significant enough to stand out, but collectively adding up to a hefty sum.

Daphne grew more cynical as time passed.

A young girl worked in the lab today. Lab coat, skinny as a rail, with straight, black hair, and thick-rimmed glasses… nerd. She didn’t have a nameplate, so Daphne coined a name in her head: “Lab Girl.” Or LG for short.

LG was not involved in RUSTY’s previous upgrade. Daphne hoped LG was up to speed on the most powerful robot brain in the galaxy. Because she had bought the whole kit & caboodle and they gave her a money-back guarantee. All she really wanted was her old RUSTY back. When she called ahead to swap RUSTY’s brain to something smaller, they recommended a software downgrade. Something allowing her to re-upgrade in the future if she changed her mind. Plus, her robot would not have to go through high-risk surgery.

Yeah, the salesman phrased it that way: “Avoid all that risky surgery.”

LG continued to look at the displays and type something into her tablet, as though Daphne was not standing right behind her. Daphne cleared her throat, but it didn’t get the girl’s attention.

“So,” Daphne said. “How is he?”

“He’ll be fine,” said LG. She continued to ignore Daphne by looking at the displays and typing stuff into her tablet. To her Daphne was just some annoying fixture in her lab, Daphne assumed.

LG must have felt Daphne staring at her. First she glanced at Daphne, then she spun around and put her hands on her hips. “There’s something bothering me.”

“And that is?” said Daphne.

“How can someone like you afford a robot like this? You know, with the Ultra-VL57 CPU?”

“Well, the robot came free with the beat-up ship I financed with every cent I had. Then, after his original CPU failed, I had to finance the new one. So, technically, I’m still paying for and will probably be paying for it for the rest of my life.”

LG gave Daphne a strange look before rotating back to her console. Daphne wondered if the girl believed her, or maybe she was jealous of her robot. She decided to go with: “LG didn’t believe her.”

The door behind them opened, then closed with a whooshing sound. Daphne almost chuckled. The old science fiction spaceship door whooshing sound probably came right out of the movies from the 1950s. It was part of the facade making the company look like they were super-high-tech. The setup didn’t fool Daphne.

Dr. Meijers entered through the whooshing door and headed straight for her. Good. Maybe he could answer a few questions. Or, maybe they could just downgrade her robot and she could be on her way.

“Daphne Blazefire,” he said. He held out his hand, and she shook it. “I didn’t catch the reason why you wanted to downgrade your robot’s brain.”

“I never told you the reason.” She grinned.

“Let me guess… it’s top secret.”

“Well,” she said. “The military classified it and I’m not allowed to discuss the details, but let’s just say that RUSTY got me in a heap of trouble. He was just too smart for his britches. Besides, I don’t need an advanced problem solver, I need a generic helper robot. You know, a robot performing all the tedious work, leaving me to do the thinking stuff. Not a robot performing the thinking stuff, while I’m stuck doing cleanup as he makes a mess.”

Dr. Meijers nodded and laughed. “I get it. Well, rest assured, we’ll fix him up just the way you want him. And there will be no charge.”

“No charge?”

“None.”

“Really?”

“No charge.”

“I have to say, doc. I’m shocked. This is probably the first time I’ve had something technical repaired that didn’t bust my bank account.”

“Oh, you’re such a comedian,” Dr. Meijers said.

Daphne growled. Fortunately, the background noise of all the cabinets full of computer equipment drowned out the sound she made. If Dr. Meijers had a clue what she had been through over the past couple of years…

“One other thing,” said Dr. Meijers. “Your robot will still be more intelligent than the original model. The downgraded version of the advanced processor will still leave you with a lot of CPU processing power.”

“I’m OK with that,” said Daphne. Something in the back of her mind worried about RUSTY being too smart, but she was open to the possibility that he could stay out of trouble. Even with a lot of idle processing power.

“Uh huh,” said LG.

“What?” said Dr. Meijers.

“There seems to be a large cache of memories not connected to the robot’s brain.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Dr. Meijers. “That’s in the history on this robot. Apparently, his old brain had those memories and…” He scrolled some text on his own tablet. “It says here the customer wanted to copy the memories into her new robot, but leave them disconnected.”

“That’s right,” said Daphne. “Knowing RUSTY, those memories might be of his previous owner.”

“So, we should erase them?” said LG.

“Well…” said Daphne. “I still haven’t made up my mind on that.”

“We could activate them,” said Dr. Meijers. “Then RUSTY could tell us what is in those memories.”

“I’m not comfortable with that choice either,” said Daphne. “You see, they could be memories of the mega-galactic Powerball numbers, which would be good. Or, they’re memories of his previous life when he was an assassin robot and killed people for fun and profit.”

The lab became silent. Even the machines became quiet all at once.

LG stood with her jaw open. “You are one sick girl.”

Daphne shrugged and smiled. “Well. I’ve been through some stuff.”

RUSTY shuddered, causing everyone to glance his direction.

“Is he conscious?” said Daphne.

LG rolled her eyes. “No way. He’s deactivated.”

“I just don’t trust what he’d do if he found out he had disconnected memories.”

LG raised her hand above a red key on her control panel keyboard. “I can delete those memories with the touch of a button. I already have them marked.”

Daphne gritted her teeth and groaned. “Leave them. I need time to think. Once those memories are gone, I can’t get them back and I suspect I would go to my grave wondering what those memories were about.”

LG shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Daphne wondered if she was just stressing herself out for nothing. Those memories were probably nothing more than instructions on how to fix the ship’s air conditioning system. Keep them, delete them, wouldn’t make a difference at this point.

Still, something made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

**CHAPTER 2**

The digital display scrolled rapidly for several minutes, then it stopped. Lorna wondered how a robot could have so many warnings and errors in its log. Some of the messages seemed rather odd, but RUSTY was a space-faring robot, so gravity sensor errors, radiation alarms, and visual system anomalies are bound to happen.

When Lorna felt the breath of someone leaning over her shoulder, she glared at whoever was next to her. Doctor Meijers saw her facial expression and took a step back.

“Sorry,” he said. “I haven’t gotten my hands into this stuff in some time, but the technicals still interest me.”

“Sorry, doc,” said Lorna. “But I still have a few things to troubleshoot before I can clear RUSTY for release.”

“Well then. I’ll get out of your hair.” Lorna waited until she heard the door whoosh, then, after a delay, it closed. She glanced toward the door to make sure the doc was gone.

Lorna let out a long sigh. Daphne really rubbed her the wrong way, and she didn’t seem very honest. Everything about her and her robot seemed suspicious. And her story about how she came to possess RUSTY? Yeah, probably baloney.

RUSTY.

Lorna wondered what stories he could tell her. At least a robot was infinitely more honest than humans. She enjoyed being around robots and androids. Humans… not so much.

She slid her chair closer to the monitor. “Well, now. Let’s see what you have inside your head.”

A diagram appeared on her screen consisting of millions of green cubes and a small group of red ones. She zoomed into the red boxes and clicked on one of them. Then she hit a key.

“We’ll just select this memory and connect it to your brain…” A dialog box displayed that the operation was complete. She hit another button and RUSTY opened his eyes.

Lorna rotated toward RUSTY and smiled. “Tell me about your oldest memory.”

RUSTY was silent for some time. Then he spoke. “I am in a smoke-filled room with a group of men discussing their business.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

She turned and hit a button causing RUSTY’s eyes to close. Then she clicked on the memory she had connected and hit a key to disconnect it. She moved to the next red memory cell and connected it before activating RUSTY again.

“Now what do you remember?” RUSTY sat silently for several minutes. Lorna clicked on the memory cell. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes.”

“What is that memory? Describe what you are experiencing.”

RUSTY remained silent for another minute. “I am inside of a spacecraft.”

“Is it Daphne’s spacecraft?” she asked.

“No.”

“Who is driving the craft?”

“I do not know.”

She hit a button to shut him down again. Then she selected another memory cell and reactivated RUSTY.

“Toru Kobayashi,” said RUSTY.

“Who is that?”

“My owner.”

A grin grew across Lorna’s face. “Really?”

She hit a button to shut down the robot before disconnecting the memory cell. Then she sat back and folded her arms. Butterflies formed in her stomach at the thought of what she could do with such information.

“I wonder what other juicy information is in his head?” she said.

She connected another red cell, then the door swooshed open. Her hand was a flash on the keyboard as she disconnected the memory and reset the robot. Then she glanced over to see who had entered.

Dr. Meijers was less than a meter from her when she looked. “Well, how much work is left?”

“I’m just wrapping things up,” she said.

“Good. I’ll contact the owner.”

Lorna let out a silent sigh. Her mind still racing with the information she had gathered. After Daphne and her robot were out of her hair, she would have to do a little research. Starting with who is Toru Kobayashi?

**CHAPTER 3**

Daphne gave Lowell a quick kiss before sliding into a seat at a small round table. Lowell silently scanned his menu sheet. The table cloths were heavy, meaning they were expensive. The electronic sheet containing the menu selection was fully animated with colored pictures. It contained a list of delicacies going on forever as she slid her finger down the side to spin through the selection of main meals.

In the background, piano music played just loud enough to mask the conversations of customers at other tables. She glanced around to see if there was an actual piano player. It was a shame, but she could see no piano player or live band. Lowell peeked over the top of his menu, then smiled at her. She returned the smile before picking up her glass of water and taking a sip.

Five men in suits sat at a table to the right. They seemed to be having a roaring good time. Several of them laughed at a joke told by their friend, drowning out the music for a brief moment. Seated at the table to her left was a man, a woman, and a small child. The little girl was formally dressed and well behaved. Daphne thought she might be five, but acted as though she were fifteen. A man in a tuxedo led a large party of guests toward a table near the other side of the restaurant.

A woman dressed in a white tuxedo approached, looking as if she was about to announce someone in her family had passed away or something. She stopped in front of Lowell and held a small digital sheet close to her chest.

“Would you like to see the wine list?” she said.

“Yes, we would, thank you,” said Lowell.

Ah, such formalities. Daphne took another sip of her water before returning to the massive selection of items she could choose from. The lack of prices listed caused her some grief. Lowell must have requested it when he made the reservation. This feature was a nice touch. The payee would pick up the tab and his group or date could choose anything listed on the menu without the stress of worrying if it was too expensive. To top it off, Lowell had the option of selecting a price maximum when he reserved the table. Any items above his maximum range would not appear on the menu. By the look of it, he did not use the maximum price option, because the items she saw spin by were typically expensive enough to be marked as “market price.”

Lowell selected a wine while she was distracted by her choice of meals. She trusted he would make a good choice, though she was the “expert” when it came to choosing wine. The woman in the white tuxedo retreated from the table to fetch the selected bottle. Daphne was sure she’d be back in a few minutes.

She touched the steak and shrimp special. The smell of garlic filled her imagination as she closed her eyes and thought about the flavor. When she opened her eyes, the woman in white was already pouring a sample of wine for Lowell to test. He swirled his glass and took a sip. The young man looked all sophisticated until the wine ran down the side of his mouth and onto his white shirt.

Daphne stifled a snicker as he scrambled to wipe at the new red stain on his shirt with his cloth napkin. The server pulled out a spray stick and handed it to him. He used it to eliminate the red spot, then returned the stick.

“Happens all the time,” she said.

Daphne rolled her eyes, then stopped herself mid-way before anyone saw her. The server poured wine for the two of them, then left.

Lowell took a more careful sip of his wine, then smiled at Daphne.

“This may be a bit forward, but how do you feel about marriage?” he said.

A wave of dizziness flooded her. It was a question she had not expected, though she probably should have, considering the amount of trouble he had gone through to secure a reservation at such a nice place. Was he about to propose? She could feel her face warming at the thought.

In any normal situation, she would recklessly run headlong into something. Married life? Such a thought never lingered long in her imagination. Was she ready for such a change? Then something popped into her head. Something she had read some place, or maybe someone had said it to her.

“I read where it’s better to take things slow when making life decisions,” she said. There it was. The most non-committal phrase she could think of. Then she worried he might take it as a hard no. “To be honest, I just haven’t had time to give the idea of being married any thought.”

“I wonder why people recommend waiting?” said Lowell. “Besides, I thought you were the ‘run into the fire, then think about it’ type.”

“I couldn’t tell you off the top of my head why people say that, but I bet there are probably a lot of reasons.”

A woman in a dress much too tight walked through the entrance. Daphne only took notice because the man at the door chased after her as she blew past the reservation checkpoint. The woman stormed to a table near the other side of the restaurant and stopped in front of a seated man who was whispering into the ear of another woman who appeared to be half his age.

The woman in the tight dress said something almost loud enough for everyone in the place to hear. Then, when the man turned toward her, she slapped his face. The sound of her palm connecting with his cheek was louder than the piano music and the conversations in the place extinguished like a candle going out in a hurricane.

“I should have listened to my mother!” she said. Now she was definitely speaking loud enough for all to hear. Lowell turned to observe the new source of entertainment.

The woman continued as the man sat and took it. “She warned me about rushing into marriage.” Then she stormed out of the restaurant as the man at the table stood and chased after her, pleading his case.

Daphne leaned toward Lowell when he returned his attention to her. “Apparently, she should have waited.”

He laughed, “touché.”

The steak and shrimp turned out to be an excellent choice of meals. She was pleasantly surprised at the large portion size. Tiny food wasn’t something she enjoyed.

Her device vibrated. She subconsciously checked the caller ID while she sipped the remainder of her wine.

“Looks like RUSTY is ready for pickup,” she said.

“Perfect timing,” said Lowell. “We should do this again sometime.”

“Yes. Sometime soon.” She gave him a wink and waited for him to pay the bill through his electronic device. Taking only a few seconds.

Then he looked up and stared at her for a moment.

“What?” she said.

“I have something to tell you. Technically, I can’t let you in on the details, but…”

“Come on, I’m a big girl. I can take it.”

“Well, I’ve been assigned a secret mission. It’s so hush-hush that only a handful of people in the military know about it. So, I’ll be out for a week. If anyone, and I mean anyone, asks, just tell them you don’t know where I am.”

“That’ll be easy.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know where you’re going.”

Lowell winked at her, then he stood and held out his elbow. A perfect gentleman. Daphne interlaced her arm into his and they walked out arm-in-arm.

When they arrived at the elevators, the doors opened to an empty car. It was turning out to be a perfect evening. She placed her back against the see-through elevator wall where one could look out over the city. Lowell pressed the button and didn’t wait for the doors to close before he moved toward her and slipped a hand behind her waist. Then he pulled her in tight and gave her the kiss she had only dreamed of. Her head felt light. She was unsure if it was due to the way he swept her off her feet or the rapid descent of the elevator. Either way, she didn’t care.

“How do you feel about long-term relationships now?” said Lowell.

A small smile crept across her face. “Oh, I’m going to need another sample before I commit to anything.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” he said. Then he kissed her again.

It was the end of a perfect evening.

**CHAPTER 4**

Boss Toru Kobayashi sat in an over-stuffed chair large enough to be a love seat. It provided all the comforts necessary for his extra-large size.

He glanced at the faces in the smoke-filled, dark room. His face presented no expression, due to years of practice. Inside, he was a twisted knot of worry and stress. If he didn’t get his heart-rate under control, he would have to pop a pill to prevent another coronary. Not that he could take the pill here. Popping a heart pill in front of this crowd would instantly destroy his facade. They would all know he was weak and take advantage of his medical situation.

Lights built into the table’s flat surface illuminated the room. The effect made everyone’s face glow from below, giving each a spooky appearance. Everyone kept their serious appearance. That was unfortunate. Toru was looking for someone he could exploit.

Boss Tommi Hönö sat next to him, smoking a fat cigar. The man had lost some of his drug-market territory last year when he did battle with a newcomer. The newcomer wasn’t part of the table, but they were a ruthless annoyance, none-the-less.

Boss Bernardo Rizzo stayed out of the drug market so far. Perhaps the man had something going on in secret. Everyone at the table was under oath to declare all markets and boundaries to each other. It was part of the deal of sitting at this very table. To work out who does business in which territories. It was an ancient ritual, keeping everyone in line and preventing outright war. Something Toru had not seen in his lifetime.

Boss Stella Joraslafsky was the only female mob boss of them all. She fooled nobody by being a woman. Everyone knew she was methodical and gave no quarter. There were many rumors that her organization would cut off body parts of captured loved ones and have them delivered to the intended target as a threat to stay in line. It was effective and may have only been a rumor, but who wanted to take a chance by making her angry?

Last was boss Horacio Herrero. He was mostly involved in guns and explosives. Sometimes he dabbled in robberies and blackmail. Toru understood the gunrunning business. Illegal guns had a soft-spot in his own heart. Especially the type of arms only the military had access to. Those were always the most profitable.

“We are here to discuss the equitable division of a new territory,” said Toru. “The planet in question is under siege by the military. They need drugs, guns, ammunition, food and alcohol, as well as other necessities. I am only interested in the excess military weapons lying around after each ground battle has concluded.”

“We claim the drug market,” said Hönö. “I need to make up some business from the losses we took with the local gangs.”

“Maybe you should deal with your little problem,” said Stella. Laughter erupted, then abruptly stopped.

Then she glanced at Toru and smiled. “Speaking of problems to be solved, Toru. I remember an incident years ago involving you.”

“What incident would you be referring to?” said Toru.

Horacio snorted. “I think the woman is talking about that stupid robot you used to have. Remember when you used robots instead of humans, because you thought they kept their mouths shut?”

Toru grimaced. “That robot knows nothing.”

“Yeah?” said Stella. “You better hope your old robot doesn’t turn up in the wrong hands. He knows where all the bodies are buried. If it had been me, I would have tracked the dumb machine down and vaporized it. Then I’d find anyone that came in contact with it and liquidate them just to be sure.”

“Nobody is going to find any bodies,” said Toru. “Shoot, I moved several of those bodies myself. Except for one politician…” Toru glanced up at the ceiling. He could see the ugly grin on the man’s face just before Toru cut his head off with a 300-year-old sword. When the man’s head hit the floor, it still had a nasty grin on it. He hid the body in the middle of nowhere. Unfortunately, a massive building was constructed at the site, giving him no access to dig up the body to relocate it.

“I suspect the robot is long gone by now,” said Horacio. “Either that or its memories have been erased. Otherwise, someone would have come looking for the bodies years ago.”

“Not a chance I would have taken,” said Stella. “But, then again, it’s not my neck on the line.”

“Let’s get back to business, shall we?” said Toru.

There were nightmares about the government showing up and raiding his business over something tiny stored in the memory banks of one stupid robot. But the robot disappeared years ago and where would he look? The galaxy was a large place. In retrospect, he should have installed a tracker inside the mechanical man.

The disappearance of his robot marked the last time he used robots inside his organization. Tracking down runaway people turned out to be much easier. They always left a paper trail. Robots could disappear into society without a trace. It was easier to change the appearance of a robot. Just change the head, or paint the body.

Toru took solace in the fact that he didn’t have to listen to the robot jabber endlessly. The jabbering motivated him to give the robot a specific name. Now he had difficulty remembering what the name was. He had made it up as a joke. Like making someone wear a dunce cap. What was his name…

Oh yeah, RUSTY.

**CHAPTER 5**

Lorna returned from a break to discover that RUSTY had already left with his owner. Or was she the owner?

She sat at her console and fired up an extra screen. On one screen, she typed in Daphne Blazefire and scanned through public records. It didn’t take her much effort to discover the girl didn’t have a family. There was some hazy news article about her parents’ unfortunate demise. Another public record indicated Daphne went to school at a place for homeless kids. Not just homeless kids, but difficult orphan kids. Assuming she was looking at the same Daphne.

There was a news article about some Daphne at the same school solving a murder. Interesting. Lorna read through the details in the article, which were thin. She formed an impression. Daphne got mixed up with the wrong crowd and lucked into solving the case. In Lorna’s opinion, that Daphne girl was no genius.

“Aha!” she said. It came out a little too loud, making her look around the empty room to see if anyone heard her.

There was an incident involving theft of a shuttlecraft. The police records were just as thin as the murder case. Daphne and several classmates stole a shuttle from the school parking lot, then used a stolen credit card to buy a meal at a fancy restaurant on a space platform.

Lorna tapped her lower lip.

“Well,” she said. “How creative. But now I know she’s the criminal type. If she stole a shuttle, she probably would have no issue with stealing a robot.”

Lorna switched to the other screen and typed in Toru Kobayashi. It was an unusual enough name and public records only gave the man’s phone number. There was a previous address, but no current address. Maybe the guy passed away. Daphne might have taken advantage of some old guy on his deathbed. Yeah, Lorna could visualize Daphne doing something unscrupulous like that.

She picked up the lab phone handset, hesitated, then put it back down.

A conflict formed in her head. What would she tell the guy? Would he sue the lab? Maybe she would lose her job.

She shook her head. No, she was doing the right thing. There would be no reason for this guy to come after her. In fact, there might even be a reward for the return of his robot.

Lorna snatched up the handset and dialed the number. Someone picked it up on the first ring.

“Toru.” It was all the man said. He sounded big and scary. She realized an awkward amount of time had passed.

Then she spoke at a rapid pace, “Hello, you don’t know me. But I think I may have tracked down your stolen robot.”

“Stolen robot?” There was a delay before he spoke again. “What does the robot look like?”

“Well, he’s pretty beat up. He’s an old model with the acronym RUSTY stenciled on his chest. I’m not sure what it stands for.”

“Robotic Universal Smart Traveling Yammer,” said Toru.

“Oh,” she said. “So, he is your robot.”

“He went missing a long time ago. Is he still functional?”

“Yes,” said Lorna.

“What about his memories? Are they all intact?”

“Most of them. There are a few memories disconnected from his brain. Specifically ones that reference your name.”

“Please do not touch my robot. I will send someone to pick him up. Understand?”

“Oh,” she said. “That could be an issue.”

“What?” His voice thundered through the handset.

“You see, there’s this girl named Daphne Blazefire. She claims to be the owner of the robot. She told me she found him on the ship she bought.”

“What is her ship's name?”

Lorna typed on her keyboard. “Hold on.” After a quick search, she found the public records of Daphne’s business. In the file was the ship’s name.

“It’s called the Waterfowl. It’s a cargo hauler.”

“Do you know where she is now?” said Toru.

“She was here on Doria about an hour ago.”

The line went dead. She leaned back in her chair and spun around. Butterflies formed in her stomach. Oh, what she would give to see the look on Daphne’s face when this Toru guy caught her with his robot. It would be glorious.

She thought about the ship that Daphne owned. The information she obtained about Daphne’s business was still displayed on a monitor.

The Waterfowl.

Lorna typed in another search to see where that ship came from. It had a long history of mechanical issues. That was about all Lorna could find on the ship. An idea popped into her head. It was just icing on the cake, but she navigated to the government reporting site and looked around until she discovered there was an anonymous reporting page. Anyone could report a ship they believed was operating in violation of the law.

It took some time to think up something, but she typed it in and carefully checked that the information was correct. Once she submitted her complaint, the information returned to her said inspectors would look into it within a day or two. Now she wanted to see the look on Daphne’s face when the inspectors show up.

Lorna knew how to take care of mean girls.

**CHAPTER 6**

RUSTY ran through several small diagnostics while he traversed the Waterfowl and arrived at the galley. Daphne opened his chest plate and connected his charging cable. The galley was dark, but he didn’t need any light to see his location. The juice flowed into his battery pack like a drink of cool water. Of course, that was just a bit of clever programming his designers had put in to make him behave as though he were a living creature. Electricity was food, or drink to a robot. The charge on his battery was simulated by how “full” he felt. RUSTY knew he was designed so humans could relate to him and none of that human description was really necessary for him to function.

“There,” Daphne Said. “Now get a good charge while I get some sleep. Then we’ll get the ship ready for flight tomorrow morning and pick up some cargo for our next run.”

“Roger,” said RUSTY. Daphne turned and walked out of the galley. RUSTY tracked her progress as she walked out. A tiny squeaking sound registered in his audio sensors. The three-dimensional tracking pinpointed the sound as originating from his neck, near the shoulder. He rotated his head back to the left and recorded the location to verify his findings. The squeaking sound did, indeed, come from his own neck. He noted the need for maintenance in his internal log.

The diagnostics he had started earlier finished. They indicated his systems were at 100%. Other than the squeaking sound, he was fit as a fiddle. Another humanoid description meant to make him sound less robotic.

Still…

There was something wrong. He wasn’t sure what was missing, but he seemed to be missing crucial information. He based his conclusion on stored tidbits disconnected from something. Like a fleeting thought about ascending a tall corridor with thrusters. RUSTY had no thrusters, so where did that memory come from? And where was he going?

Another memory told him of a bubble surrounding him and Daphne. Unfortunately, he had no knowledge of a bubble. He knew not of what the bubble was made of, but it resembled something like a shield used in old science fiction movies.

Ah, movies. There were several thousand scenes from movies that he didn’t remember ever seeing. Were these memories deposited inside of him from the lab? Perhaps the lab removed the memories of where the movies came from. That would explain a lot of his disconnected knowledge. Yes. That had to be it.

But a feeling he had… could he have feelings? OK, a simulated feeling he had was that he was built for a higher purpose. There should be a higher calling for him. Something other than as a robot companion for a girl named Daphne Blazefire. He should be some place more important than the Waterfowl. A tiny, used cargo vessel. He should be working for a larger company than the one-woman company called Blazefire, Inc. Unfortunately, he knew not why he had such simulated feelings.

Perhaps a full diagnostic would root out the problems.

RUSTY started a full diagnostics run. The diagnostics should finish by morning, allowing him to analyze the results and decide on what to do.

For now, he would sleep.

**CHAPTER 7**

Daphne opened the outer hatch of her ship and took a deep breath. Unfortunately a deep breath turned out to be something she instantly regretted. The air was so thick with the stench of sewage she could taste it. She looked around the dock, then realized several meters away from her ship was a sanitation ship used to haul raw sewage from one location to another. For a moment, she considered delaying the repair she was about to start, but decided she would have to tough it out and get the task completed. Raw sewage stench or not. Fortunately, her nose adapted to the smell… a little.

Door gaskets on spacecraft came in hundreds of different styles and required different types of glue or other substances to properly adhere them. Nothing could be worse than a gasket failure in deep space. These were things Daphne had read up on shortly after she bought her ship and had to contend with leaks.

The outer hatch was latched open. The tools she needed lay on the deck off to the side, and the new gasket in its package sat on the other side of the airlock. She huffed. All she had to do was peel out the old gasket, clean off the old glue, apply new glue and insert the new gasket. Easy, right?

Yeah. Every job came with some sort of problem. She tried to think of every possible contingency as she stood there in her scruffy coveralls. With screwdriver in hand, she began her arduous task.

A tap on her shoulder made her jump. When she turned, RUSTY stood behind her.

Then she smiled, recalling how handy he had become with his CPU upgrade. “Hey, can you replace this gasket?”

RUSTY stood staring at her for some time. “I am sorry, but I don’t have any knowledge in my memory banks on how to replace a gasket on any model of ship.”

Daphne growled. “I think they downgraded you just a little too much. Very well, I’ll finish this job. Can you run out and get supplies?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She pulled a slip of paper from her pocket and held it up for him. “We need these things.”

RUSTY scanned the sheet, then turned and exited the airlock. “I shall return in two hours.”

She called after him. “Just earning your keep, buddy.” He never turned to acknowledge her statement, but she was pretty sure his robot hearing picked it up. Her eyes watered as she gasped for fresh air, but only drew in more sewage vapor.

After she completed the hatch maintenance and RUSTY returned with the supplies, she would have to dig out the repair manuals and feed the information back into RUSTY’s memories. Too bad the lab accidentally removed those memories. She stretched one arm, then the other, before rotating her neck to get the kinks out.

“Now, back to my fun task,” she said. She shoved the screwdriver blade deep into the channel, holding the gasket in place.

“Daphne Blazefire,” said a voice.

Daphne whirled to see a middle-aged man in uniform. He had enough ribbons to be considered someone important. At least it was the impression he left on her.

She snapped to attention, then realized she didn’t need to. When her arm twitched, she resisted, giving the man a salute. He would probably take it as an insult, since she wasn’t military or wearing a uniform. Lowell had filled her in on military customs. There were a lot of rules about whom to salute, not to salute, when to stand at attention, when to talk, and other stuff she couldn’t remember.

Upon careful inspection of the man’s uniform, and noticing the shiny name tag, she discovered he was Colonel Bardsley. Well, at least she didn’t have to come up with a creative, derogatory name for the colonel.

“I’m looking for Sergeant Lowell,” said Colonel Bardsley.

Uh oh. Daphne recalled Lowell saying something about this. What was the answer she was supposed to give?

“I haven’t seen him since dinner last night,” said Daphne. She presented the colonel with a smile she was sure looked inauthentic.

“You mind if I check on-board your ship?” Colonel Bardsley never smiled. He just stood with a blank look on his face. Her own smile faded at the thought of him as a serious and uptight military officer.

Daphne shrugged her shoulders. “Suit yourself.”

After he walked past her, she glanced back to see where he was headed. The urge to follow him around and look over his shoulder was overwhelming. But there was nobody on her ship. Not even RUSTY. What was he going to find? As time passed, she had forgotten about him.

The gasket replacement task was almost complete when Colonel Bardsley finished his search. He stopped before leaving her ship.

“Did you find him?” she said.

“Not yet. You better not be lying to me…” She wondered if he had more to say, but decided to hold back. He was making a threat, but she suspected there were no teeth to it. What authority did he have over her? Did he think he could have her arrested for lying to a colonel? She doubted there was such a law on the books. Of course, one never knew for sure.

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

He glared at her for some time. A technique which probably made enlisted men and women sweat. She didn’t feel too much stress over his mean-looking face. Especially while standing a few meters from a sewage ship.

“I know your background,” he said. Then he pulled out a hand-held device and proceeded to read a list of “infractions” available from the authorities going back to when she was a young kid boosting cars on the street. “You’re a career misfit street kid.”

Daphne gritted her teeth. “People change, you know.”

“People don’t change. People never change. For instance, you seem to get into trouble everywhere you turn. Trouble sticks to you like a magnet. The only reason you’re still alive and out of the can is because you’ve been lucky. Well, one of these days, your luck is going to run out.”

She was ready with a retort, but decided the conversation was going nowhere. He was just trying to get her riled up, and it worked. She could feel the burning in her stomach. Her jaw became sore from clenching it so tight.

Colonel Bardsley didn’t leave right away. He stood staring at her. Her eyes were drying out, and she wanted so badly to blink, but this was a test of wills and she had something to prove. Even if it was nothing more than the idea that she could out stare him.

He turned on a heel and marched off her ship.

It felt so good to close her eyes for a moment, relax her jaw, and let out a long, silent breath. When she opened her eyes, he was continuing to march down the pier away from her ship.

“Have a nice day,” she said. He never turned his head or said another word.

A group of people were headed down the pier. When Colonel Bardsley passed by them, she realized they were headed for her ship and they looked like some sort of officials. She had seen those strange uniforms before. Like the time she bumped her ship inside a docking bay and was cited for having faulty thrusters.

Usually, she only had to deal with one of these types of people. Also known as “inspectors.” This time, it looked as though they were about to storm her ship with a battalion of them.

“Daphne Blazefire,” said the lead man. “I believe this is the Waterfowl?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. She gave a mock salute for good measure. All the man did was sigh and shake his head before looking down at his tablet.

“We are here to inspect your ship. It seems as though you have had a storied past with this contraption.”

Daphne growled. “Is this going to take long?” She looked at her wrist, reminding her she no longer wore a watch. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t sure when RUSTY would return. What did he say? Two hours?

“It could take all day.”

“Great.”

**CHAPTER 8**

Daphne quickly stowed her tools and cleared everything from the airlock. The collection of inspectors split up and disappeared into her ship. She hoped they would be hasty and not make a detailed inspection. Though they seemed highly trained and could probably find a dozen violations from a ship fresh off the assembly line that passed company quality inspections the day before. One fact she discovered years ago: most violations were a matter of interpretation.

Besides, her ship came off the assembly line about a gazillion years ago. Which meant it probably had hundreds of flaws she didn’t know about. One of these days, she’d get a new ship and not have to worry about such a large money-pit.

She picked up the pace and hurried toward the front of the ship. When she arrived at the bridge, she leaned against the hatch frame and folded her arms, attempting to be a fly on the wall. The lead inspector scrutinized the control panel. He flipped a switch. Nothing happened.

“Uh, huh,” he said. Then he typed something into his tablet.

Daphne sighed, walked to the control panel and tapped on the light above the switch. It blinked for a second, then came on. The inspector flipped the switch back and forth a few times as the light toggled between on and off. Then he entered something extra into his tablet.

He mumbled to himself. “Faulty lamp.”

Daphne rolled her eyes.

He tried to adjust the pilot’s seat. Daphne had long ago forgotten about the broken seat adjustment mechanism. Something she classified as a minor issue, since it was set correctly for her. The seat rusted in place over the past year since she never adjusted it and nobody else ever used it. She thought it was blind luck that she managed to adjust it to her liking before it jammed tight. Otherwise, she would have fixed the seat a long time ago. Though it would take a major effort to disassemble the seat, grind off the rust, then paint the parts that don’t move and grease the parts that do move. Not to mention purchasing any replacement parts.

“Broken seat adjustment,” he said.

“Is it really a problem? I mean, the seat is adjusted for me. I’ll never change it.”

“What if an emergency occurs and someone with shorter or much longer legs has to pilot this thing?”

Well, he had her there. An emergency like that never occurred in the past, but it could be a viable scenario. She nodded.

Another inspector poked his head in. “I found 47 infractions, so far.”

Daphne growled.

He continued. “Including a tiny leak in the starboard hatch.”

“What about the port hatch?” said the head inspector.

“John is looking into that.”

“I just replaced the gasket on the port hatch,” said Daphne. “Just before you people arrived.”

“Did you test it for leaks?”

She had to unclench her jaw. “Not yet.”

“Not to worry. We’ll check it before we leave.”

“Great.”

Hours passed while the inspectors crawled over her ship. Each inspector collected a massive number of infractions she would need to fix. She could see her cash reserve evaporating as the repairs needed for the infractions racked up. Too bad the insurance company didn’t cover costs for repairs.

The last thing the inspectors checked was the port hatch. She held her breath as they gave the hatch a pressure test by closing the airlock and over-pressurizing it.

“Five minutes, no leaks,” said the inspector. “Your recent gasket repair is a success.”

Daphne let out a breath of air. At least something went right. The inspector looked over the list, then tilted his tablet toward Daphne.

“Please sign here,” he said.

Daphne placed her thumb on the reader. The tablet showed a large green check box next to her signature. Her mobile device buzzed. Her life as an infraction repair technician had just arrived.

She watched as they walked off her ship and up the pier toward the city. The incident smelled like someone had an ax to grind with her and maybe filed a false report with the inspectors. Who has a beef with her?

Who didn’t have a beef with her?

**CHAPTER 9**

Daphne stood at the open outer hatch of the airlock. The men in suits approached. More inspectors? They didn’t pay any attention to the inspectors leaving a few minutes ago, so that couldn’t be the case. Could it?

“What’s that smell?” said one of the suits. There were three of them. Two were bald and one had long, blond hair wrapped into a bun.

“Smells like an open sewer,” said the man with the bun.

Daphne crossed her arms and leaned against the hatch frame. The three men stopped. They each weighed at least three-times her weight, and none of them looked like they were out of shape. She was starting to get the impression they were someone’s body guards. But what would their business be with her?

The lead guy was large, bald, and sported a tiny goatee. “Are you Daphne Blazefire?”

“I seem to be a popular item today,” she said.

“Well,” he said. “My associates and I are looking for Mr. Kobayashi’s missing property. In fact, we were told the property in question was stolen. But we’d be willing to look the other way if you just handed it over to us.”

“What ‘property’ are you referring to?” She suspected the next words out of his mouth would be the Waterfowl. Which, at this point, would be a wash. She would laugh and hand them the title to her money pit and forward the list of violations to be fixed before anyone could fly this heap again. Then she could walk away, clean. Just go buy a better ship.

“It’s a robot named RUSTY,” he said.

Her heart sank. They want RUSTY? Really? Who would want that silly robot?

“I don’t have a robot,” she said. It was a lie, but how did they know she had a robot? And how did they know his name? Her stomach roiled as she wondered if they did some spying and already know more about her than she did about them.

The large man huffed. “Come now. Let’s not make this difficult. I mean, we’d have to break some bones, maybe cut off a finger or two, then turn your ship upside-down. At the end of the day, we’ll have the robot and you’ll just be in misery.”

“There’s no RUSTY on this ship.” She secretly hoped RUSTY was having a difficult time finding the supplies they would need. Maybe he could take much longer than he originally estimated. Though, knowing her luck, especially today, that darn robot would be coming down the pier in the next five minutes. Right after these nasty men started breaking her fingers.

“OK,” he said. “Have it your way.” He waved, and the other two immediately moved in on Daphne. She had to admit they moved much faster than she thought they could. They seized her arms before she could retreat into her ship and close the hatch. Then they dragged her down the passageway until they reached the galley. They tied her to a chair and proceeded to rummage through the cupboards.

Ah, here she was again. Tied to her own chair in the galley. Metal dishes banged against the counter and floor as they recklessly trashed the place. One of them broke a plastic container she used to keep candy from floating away. The candy in the container spilled out onto the deck. At least the candy was individually wrapped.

“I’m pretty sure a robot is not hiding in one of those cupboards,” she said.

The three of them paused. Then they laughed and continued to trash her galley. Daphne growled.

Yeah, they must know about his ability to fold up into a small cube. Darn it! There had to be a way to bluff them. She struggled against the ties they used to strap her arms to the seat. Worse, they used her tie wraps to bind her to her own seat.

Another crash assaulted her ears as one of the bald guys pushed metal trays out of the bottom cupboard. A pizza tray rolled across the deck and bounced against the bulkhead. Man-bun dude activated the catch latch on the silverware drawer, tipped it upside down and dumped everything on the deck. Well, she thought, guess there was no robot inside the silverware drawer.

Daphne gritted her teeth and tugged harder on the straps while groaning. There was a lot of pent-up rage inside of her and she knew if she could get free, the adrenaline alone would allow her to take down one of those thugs. She was certain the other two would catch her soon afterward, but just to beat the tar out of one of them would be a great stress reliever.

“You two,” said man-bun dude. “Head toward the forward end of the ship. I’ll head aft. Turn this place upside down. That robot is hiding on-board someplace.”

“Or, there’s no robot on my ship,” said Daphne.

“You can’t fool us,” said goatee man.

They disappeared through the hatch. Within a few minutes, crashing sounds resumed from the forward end of the ship. Daphne let out a long sigh. Now she would have to spend time cleaning up the mess these idiots were leaving on top of the repairs she had to do before she could leave the dock.

She wondered who this “Mr. Kobayashi” guy was. After racking her brain for a few minutes, she came up blank. Oh, she knew a few mobsters. Ones she had run into in the past, but his name didn’t ring a bell. Maybe Perry would know of him. Perry seemed to know everyone. Especially those with money and power.

Footsteps entered the galley.

Daphne groaned. “Haven’t you guys made a large enough mess—”

RUSTY appeared in front of her.

**CHAPTER 10**

Daphne stared at RUSTY for a moment. He stood still in front of her. Was her robot computing the situation and formulating a brilliant plan to free her and take down the three thugs?

Man-bun dude poked his head into the galley. “Hey, there’s the robot!” So much for RUSTY’s brilliant plan.

RUSTY looked at the man but did not move.

“Better do something, quick, RUSTY,” said Daphne. “Those three are here to take you away.”

The thug pulled his head out of the galley and yelled down the passageway. “I found the robot!”

Daphne continued to talk as fast as possible. “They claim you are the property of Mr. Kobayashi. Anyone you happen to know?”

RUSTY’s shoulders did a mechanical shrug. It answered the question. Now all they had to do was get out of the situation they were in, and the situation was deteriorating by the second.

Daphne struggled against her straps as footsteps closed in on the galley. Man-bun dude stepped into the compartment, while goatee man poked his head inside.

“Bingo,” said goatee man. “Just like the description. Though, it looks like he’s a bit more beat up.”

RUSTY did not move from his position as he continued to look from face-to-face at the thugs closing in.

Daphne snorted. “We’ve been through a few scrapes together.”

Man-bun dude reached out to seize RUSTY. RUSTY moved his arm ever-so slightly, but the man latched on to the robot’s wrist, then convulsed. At first, Daphne wasn’t sure why, but then she remembered RUSTY’s stunners. Coincidentally, the man grabbed RUSTY at the right spot. It was probably RUSTY’s plan and explained why he moved his mechanical arm at the right moment. It also hid the bolt of electricity that would reveal to the other two what was going on.

The thug dropped to the deck. Daphne glanced back at the other two, who stood staring at their partner-in-crime.

“I guess your friend got tired and decided to take a nap,” said Daphne.

Goatee man glared at her. She could feel his hatred projecting out of his eyes. If she were lucky, the remaining two thugs would delay long enough for RUSTY to recharge his stunners. Otherwise, RUSTY would have to battle the two on his own.

Goatee man pushed the other bald man forward. “Get him.” Then he backed away like the coward he was. Daphne grinned. She was pretty sure RUSTY was recharged and ready to deal another bolt of electricity.

The bald man reached out, but noticed RUSTY moved his hand to re-position his grip. He pulled his hand back, then grabbed RUSTY by an actuator near his shoulder. RUSTY swung his arm out and landed a solid blow to the man’s chest. The man released the robot and stumbled backward. Goatee man moved in on the other side. RUSTY put out his right arm to block him from getting too close.

When the momentarily stunned bald man stood straight, he charged in while screaming. Like he was storming the beach. A bolt of electricity arced out and touched the bulkhead, then skipped across and touched the man on the head. He went down quick, landing on top of man-bun dude.

“Oh, you’re a clever one,” said goatee man. “I’ve never seen a robot fight as good as you.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Except that ninja model I ran into a few years back. She was sleek and fast. You’re nothing but a clunky block of machinery.”

Daphne smiled. “It’s probably his Ultra-VL57 CPU.”

Goatee man froze and glanced at Daphne. “Nobody can afford that CPU.”

The grin on Daphne’s face broadened. “They have payment plans.”

The man took a step behind RUSTY. RUSTY rotated his head, then his body, to face the man. Then goatee man stepped back to the other side. Daphne struggled against her bindings. The bindings dug into her wrists, but they felt as though they were getting worn down. Maybe a few more tugs and they would break free.

“Sure,” said goatee man. “But it begs the question. Why?”

“Why what?” said Daphne.

“Why put such an expensive and powerful CPU inside a junker like him?”

RUSTY’s head snapped toward the man. Then he raised his hand and pointed at him.

“That was insulting,” said RUSTY.

RUSTY took one large step toward the man. He was only a few centimeters away and goatee man had no place to back up. A sharp crack and the smell of ozone knocked the man out. He slid down the bulkhead until his rag-doll body lay in a pile on the deck.

RUSTY cut the ties holding Daphne to the chair. She rubbed her sore wrists as she stepped over the bodies.

“We have to do something about these guys before they come to,” she said.

“I may have an idea,” said RUSTY.

She looked at RUSTY as her shoulders slumped.

RUSTY continued, “but you might not like it.”

**CHAPTER 11**

Daphne stood in front of a pile of knocked-out strong-men. It took a good thirty minutes for her and RUSTY to haul their three unconscious carcasses out to the pier. She constantly scanned for anyone walking by. Fortunately, the sewer ship was causing civilians to take a different route to avoid the area. She had to admit she was having a difficult time breathing the thick air as it was. The sooner they could leave this dock, the better.

RUSTY walked to the sewer ship and hit a button next to a large hatch. The loading hatch opened in front of them.

“It appears this ship did not have a code on their airlock hatch,” said RUSTY.

Daphne shrugged. “Who wants to break into a poop ship?”

The interior of the smelly vessel matched the exterior. However, the smell wafting out from the now open hatch was much worse. If that was possible. Daphne turned her head and gagged.

“Oh, man,” she said. “Let’s get this done, quick.”

She grabbed the legs of a man, while RUSTY grabbed his arms. He certainly weighed three-times her weight, as she suspected when she first saw him.

The passageways were dark as night. Fortunately, RUSTY could see in the dark with his infrared vision. Otherwise, Daphne was sure they’d run into a bulkhead by now. When they reached a storage compartment, RUSTY held the man’s body against a large pipe while Daphne used multiple tie wraps to fasten his arms and legs to it. Then she tied a bandanna around his mouth and cinched it tight behind his head. After she double-checked everything was secure, she brushed her hands together and nodded.

“One down. Two to go.”

It took some time to secure the other two thugs to pipes that ran vertically up the same bulkhead. By the time they finished, man-bun dude stirred. Daphne smiled at him as he looked her way. Then she waved and closed the door to the storage room. Machinery noise from within the ship disguised the rag-filled screaming noise man-bun dude was making. With any luck, those three would not be discovered until she and RUSTY were long gone.

“I have to say, I did like your plan. I liked it a lot.”

RUSTY shook his head and made an electronic growling sound. “I’ll never understand human behavior.”

She hit the close button on the loading hatch after departing the sewer vessel. The air outside felt fresh compared to the stuffy interior. When she closed her eyes, she could visualize a redwood forest with a crystal-clear stream running through the middle. Then she opened her eyes. Well, not quite a redwood forest. She could still smell the offensive odors.

“Did anything else of interest occur while I was gone?” said RUSTY.

“Oh,” she said. “I forgot to tell you… well, you know, between knocking out thugs and moving their bodies…anyway, a Colonel Bardsley showed up. He was looking for Lowell.”

RUSTY froze in place.

“What is it?”

“I compute there is a high probability Lowell was abducted by the mob to use as a hostage. I conclude they’ll send more of those ugly men to tell us they’ll trade me for Lowell.”

“Where did you come up with such a conclusion?” said Daphne. “It seems you’re missing some key data points.”

RUSTY pointed to his head. “You forget that I have a Ultra-VL57 CPU up here.”

She smiled. “Ah. Riiiiight.”

“Oh, then after the Colonel left, a bunch of inspectors came by and pored over the Waterfowl. I’ll send you a list so you can gaze upon the endless descriptions of broken stuff we’re required to fix before leaving the dock.”

RUSTY growled again. “We do not have time for such trivialities. We must rescue Lowell before the mob does something terrible to him.”

She patted him on the shoulder. “Um. OK, buddy. Do you know where the mob’s hideout is?”

RUSTY stood still for a minute before shaking his head. “However long ago, we found out where the secret pirate base was when we rescued the crew of Novis Terminal.”

She sighed. “And how did we find information about the pirate base?”

RUSTY stopped. She wondered if he ran out of power, or maybe he was deep in thought.

“We discovered the location of the secret pirate base when the security footage of the pirates capturing the crew of Novis Terminal showed the first-mate blurting it out.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I doubt if the mob will be that stupid. Plus, we don’t have any security recordings.”

RUSTY bounced up and down a little. Daphne wondered if he was excited about something.

“What?” she said.

“We could just go ask those men we tied up.”

“They’ll never talk.”

“What if I promised to let them go if they did talk?”

“We can’t let them go.”

“They don’t know that.”

Daphne smiled. “You know, I sense there is a subroutine inside of you with the title ‘psychopath.’” She held out her arm. “Be my guest. You don’t need me for such a task, and you don’t have to breathe any of the sewer air inside there.”

RUSTY turned and headed back to the sewer ship. Daphne shook her head and checked the list of repairs they needed to do. When she found an easy one, she made her way to the jump drive compartment where she could do the first repair.

“Only 152 more repairs and we can get out of here.”

**CHAPTER 12**

The jump drive compartment on the Waterfowl was a location she spent too much time in. Years ago, a fire made a mess of the equipment. The jump drive upgrade made some of the equipment look new while other equipment looked old. Daphne replaced the lid to an electrical box and tightened all the fasteners around the edge. She checked off the fifth task on her list of hundreds and let out a long sigh. Sweat dripped into her ear, making her uncomfortable. Too bad the air handlers didn’t work well in the jump drive compartment. Otherwise, she’d adjust the thermostat lower. To a level with a slight chill to it. She smiled, knowing the inspectors missed the under-performing blower motor.

There were several minor repairs left in the compartment. They would take some time to complete, but she was already here, and there was no point in getting cleaned up before finishing some of the dirtier tasks. She wiped her greasy hands on her coveralls and looked at the next item to fix.

Status lights on the control box lit up. Then a high-pitch whine started inside the compartment. Several more lights lit up and a display showing coordinates and a count-down came on. Daphne frowned. She knew instantly what was going on.

“RUSTY!” she said. There was no way that robot could hear her from inside the jump drive compartment, but she screamed his name, anyway. Then she bolted up the ladder and out of the compartment hatch.

After a sprint down the passageway, she stepped into the bridge compartment and faced RUSTY, who was preparing the ship for takeoff, just as she suspected.

“We’re not cleared for takeoff,” she said.

RUSTY’s head rotated her direction, then rotated back as he pulled back on the controls and lifted the ship straight up.

“We have an emergency,” said RUSTY. “And according to colonel space law article five, section six, subsection double-v, we are allowed to take off without prior authorization.”

“Are you sure you interpreted the law correctly?” said Daphne.

The ship continued to rise as RUSTY glanced at her. “I had to use a creative reading of the law, but a liberal judge should give us a lesser sentence for not abiding by the exact letter of the law.”

Daphne growled, then took the pilot’s seat. “So, where are we going?”

“I am uncertain of our ultimate destination,” said RUSTY.

“In other words, we’re going nowhere?”

“We are going to rescue Lowell.”

“The thugs told you all about their secret hang out?” Daphne grinned at RUSTY.

RUSTY’s head turned slowly toward her, making the most annoying squeaking sound. It had the quality of fingernails on a chalkboard. Though she had to admit, she never saw a real chalkboard in her life, but she’s seen them in movies. Old movies.

“Do you recall the tracking device we recovered from the hull of our ship some time ago?”

Daphne shook her head. People and governments bugged the Waterfall so many times, she wasn’t sure how many discovered tracking devices they threw in the repair shop junk drawer. They always deactivated them, then stored them, just in case there was a need for one. Apparently, RUSTY found a use for one.

“I programmed the ship you refer to as the ‘poop ship,’ to jump to deep space and placed a tracking device on-board. Her crew was nowhere to be found. I suspect they are at the local watering hole getting lubricated…”

Daphne nodded. “I’m following, so far.”

“On my way out of the poop ship, I released the arms of one of the thugs, gave him the cutters, and exited the ship.”

Daphne stared at him with her jaw slack. “Is that some sort of plan?”

RUSTY sat staring at her for a moment. “A common phrase YOU use in such a situation is: I’m making this up as I go.”

She rolled her eyes. “Great.”

“Another human phrase used is: hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

“When the poop ship comes out of hyper drive, the three thugs will be free, but there will be no crew. In theory, the thugs will decide their best plan is to return to thug-central and report their progress to the Big Kahoona.”

Daphne wanted to lecture RUSTY about making assumptions, but decided it had already been a long day, and they were already in trouble with the authorities. At this point, it was probably best to just let the crazy robot continue with his plans until something happened. Though the phrase Colonel Bardsley cited kept playing in her mind.

*Trouble sticks to you like a magnet. The only reason you’re still alive and out of the can is because you’ve been lucky. Well, one of these days, your luck is going to run out.*

RUSTY pointed at the navigation computer screen. “It appears the poop ship has arrived at its destination. The symbol has merged with a planet. DV-225.”

“Yeah,” said Daphne. “I wish I was a fly on the wall when their smelly ship lands at the Big Kahoona’s resort.”

RUSTY operated the nav computer to put their ship near the planet the thugs landed on. Daphne felt her stomach acid boiling over as she thought about the plan, or rather, the lack of a plan.

“What about the rest of your plan?” she said. “What do we do when we find their lair?”

“Same plan we used when we rescued the Novis Terminal hostages from the pirate’s lair.”

“Oh boy,” she said. “As you recall, it wasn’t a great plan.”

RUSTY’s head slowly turned toward her, with the annoying screeching sound. “I believe it was your plan.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Which means I have experience, and know it’s not a good plan.”

“Do you have a better plan?”

She slowly shook her head.

“Plan A, it is.”

**CHAPTER 13**

Daphne sat in the pilot’s seat and watched the displays. When she flipped the switch to show the status of all the ship seals, the green light did not come on. She tapped the light. It flickered, then lit.

In old movies, such things occurred because they used light bulbs with filaments in them. The filaments would break, but tapping on the bulb would cause the broken ends to touch and light up. With modern LED lights, the problem centered on the connection to the lamp socket. A more difficult and expensive problem to repair.

The label for one of the heat shield temperature warning lights was peeling off. She absent-mindedly rubbed the decal to flatten it against the control panel. It flaked off and floated to the floor.

Daphne sighed.

She decided to sit with her arms folded while RUSTY handled the re-entry maneuvers. At least the robot lab left some of his knowledge intact. Too bad they didn’t leave a complete maintenance and repair manual inside of him.

RUSTY handled the ship rather well, for a robot. After they agreed on a safe landing place, Daphne decided her mechanical man could take care of getting the ship safely on the ground. She departed the cockpit and headed to her stateroom. It was time to get suited up.

She opened the locker containing her rifle and stun-proof black suit. When she rubbed her hand down the smooth exterior of the suit, flashbacks of some of her most harrowing operations flooded her mind. Would she be adding another exciting episode to her life, or would this be the end?

“I guess there wouldn’t be any thrill if there was no specter of death,” she said to herself. Either way, she was determined to take charge of this mission, and for once, not let things control her.

The ship thumped on the ground, her cue to get going. She quickly grabbed the suit and slipped her legs into it. Once she had the snug-fitted suit on and zipped up, she grabbed her rifle and several battery boxes. She flipped the lever to kill, sighed, then flipped it back to stun.

Lowell could be in the line of fire.

The engines whined down as RUSTY cut the power to them. Daphne adjusted her tactical display and headed out of her stateroom. RUSTY was already headed for the port-side airlock hatch. By the time she arrived, he had the inner hatch open and was checking the pressure differential between the planetary atmosphere and the ship’s.

RUSTY turned his head toward her. She activated her rifle. The rising high-pitch sound gave her comfort her rifle was ready to fire. Then she pointed it toward the hatch and nodded at RUSTY.

They would have to jog a couple of kilometers through jungle-like terrain. When they reached the perimeter of what appeared from orbit to be a complex arrangement of buildings, they could survey the entry points and form a plan for entering. As RUSTY said, they were making this up as they went. She couldn’t argue with that assessment.

RUSTY pulled the hatch in. Daphne felt her ears pop as the outside atmosphere was at a higher pressure than the ship’s. She charged out of the ship with the idea of racing through the trees until she tired. RUSTY would be close behind.

Unfortunately, something caught her eye just as she exited the ship and sprinted through the thick brush. About a hundred men with guns all pointed her way. Without giving it any thought, she stopped, then raised her hands and held her rifle over her head. She and RUSTY were busted. This plan was not off to a good start already.

One of the men relieved her of her rifle. He had a large, black tattoo on his neck, though she couldn’t tell what it represented. By the appearance, it could have been an overlay to hide a previous tattoo he was embarrassed to show. Did he not know about the miracle of modern plastic surgery? Restoring skin and removing tattoos are simple and inexpensive procedures.

“That’s a nice gun,” he said.

Daphne growled. “Yes, it was.”

All the men who surrounded her closed in. Some of them moved toward her ship. She was sure her ship would be the next thing they took possession of. Then the hatch behind her clanked shut. She rotated her head without moving her arms and saw RUSTY had shut the hatch and probably locked it before the men reached the ship. The engines whined as they powered up. Daphne groaned. Her ship roared into the sky and disappeared.

“Stupid robot.”

**CHAPTER 14**

The thick, damp forest smelled like moss and swamp gas. Massive trees resembling Oak, blotted out the sunlight. It would be cool inside the jungle if not for the equatorial temperature of the planet being so high. Probably close to 38 Celsius. Still, it beat the icy world Daphne was stranded on some time ago. Any world would seem like a hot place when compared to such a frigid location.

She had also been on many other hot worlds in her travels. Most of which were desert planets, with little to no plant life. They were all dry and desolate. She had become used to the dry heat of those worlds over the years. They were not comfortable places to live, but they could be endured.

She decided the humidity on this planet wasn’t really to her liking. Maybe she could talk to the big boss and explain her mistake in arriving here. She fantasized about him being lenient and releasing her for her mistake.

“OK, Daphne, back to reality,” she said. It came out as a mumble, but one of the two men guiding her through the thick brush overheard her.

“What was that, darling?” he said.

She glanced at him. He had two missing teeth, and the rest had not seen proper care in decades. Even after enduring a sewer ship within a few meters of her own ship for days, the man’s breath made her gag. She turned her head away from him and looked ahead. There was light near the end of the tree line. Bright light.

When they broke through the edge of the forest, they stepped onto a carefully manicured lawn with a stone pathway. Topiaries ringed a building resembling a palace. Each trimmed bush had a different shape, forming complex three-dimensional characters. She didn’t recognize any of the characters, but assumed they came from a children’s cartoon or something. Maybe the boss man had kids he was trying to pacify. She hoped they were marching her to a man who had a soft heart.

When she glanced to her right, there was a platform with steps rising up from a concrete area. A steel rectangular structure went over it, but it wasn’t a roof. In fact, it was nothing more than a steel I-beam across the top, supported by A-frames on the side. Across the main beam were steel attachment points with rope dangling downward. At first, she thought it was a crude hoist system, but then she recognized the shape of the knots at the ends of the ropes. Each ended with a noose.

“Hanging?” she said. It was more of a comment than a question. Obviously, those nooses were there to hang people. She wondered how many of the mis-behaved mob staff would be put to death that way. It would certainly keep the rest in line. So much for the soft-hearted boss with kids or grandkids.

“Boss likes to keep it old school,” said bad-breath man.

Just then, a door behind the contraption opened, and three men were paraded out. Each man had two men behind them, holding their arms to keep them from escaping. Their arms and ankles were bound using the old school type of iron shackles. Chains connected the hands and feet together as well as a long chain from the hands to the feet to make it difficult to run.

She stared at the event as she was marched past. When the three were lined up with nooses, she recognized their faces. Oh yeah. There was man-bun dude. Next to him was goatee man. Then the other bald man on the other end.

“Oh, boy,” she said. “I guess your boss didn’t like the smell of what they rode in on.”

A dozen men behind her laughed uproariously.

She heard the sound of the trap doors opening just as her captors escorted her into the palace. Three of their thugs just met their end.

The interior of the palace was extravagant. Perhaps they were going to lock her in some massive room with thousands of fancy pillows and tapestries. That’s when they directed her to a staircase that went down. It spiraled for quite some time before they reached the murky bottom. The place smelled like mildew, but she tried to look on the bright side: it was much cooler down here than in the jungle she came from.

It wasn’t long before they arrived at a row of solid doors. Each door was close to the next. Almost like little closets. Except the doors had a small square window that was too high for her to see through. The windows didn’t have glass; they had bars. When her captors opened the door to an empty room, she groaned.

Old school.

The jail cell had a crude toilet and sink. There was a bed suspended from the stone wall by chains. No window to the outside. Nope, they were in the dungeon. The smell was not particularly attractive as well. It wasn’t quite as bad as the sewer ship, but it still smelled a lot like a public restroom.

She hardly cleared the door when the guard clanged the steel door behind her. The walls felt as though they were pressing in on her. If she held out her arms, she was certain she could tough both side walls at the same time. The depth of the cell was maybe twice that far. The Waterfowl’s emergency equipment storage locker was at least twice as large.

When she plopped onto the thin mattress, a plume of dust billowed out from the sides. The sudden thought of fleas made her stand and stare at the ugly mattress. A single light was embedded into the ceiling, which seemed to throw off the ancient appearance of the cell. Middle-age Earth, with a high-efficiency lamp. Who was their interior decorator?

After standing and pacing for some time, her legs grew tired, and she decided there were probably no fleas in the mattress. She sat and thought about Lowell. Was he locked away in one of the other cells?

A sudden realization hit her. She hopped up, grabbed the two tiny bars in the high window on her cell door, and lifted her body until she could see through the opening.

“Hello,” she said.

Her voice echoed. Water dripped from some place outside her cell. The bars she held onto were cold and covered in rust. Other than the dripping sound, there were no other sounds. The entire cell block must be empty.

She sat back on the mattress. What was RUSTY up to right now? Was he rounding up some people to help spring her from this place? He was the only one that knew she was here. She sighed. Her life depended on a robot with a sketchy brain.

Great.

**CHAPTER 15**

Daphne stared up at the ceiling of her cell. The first time she had been thrown in the slammer seemed like so many years ago, when she was only sixteen. Oh, that day started out pretty good. Just another day of living on the street. Like any other day. Find a meal, maybe make a buck, stay alive. She thought about that day…

The air had a chill in it. The sun had gone down hours ago, and the nightlife just got started. Daphne hunched down in a damp alleyway. To one side was a parking ramp full of hover cars. On the other side, an office building. The office was closed for the night. All the people in fancy suits had left before sundown. They were with their families, in their rich homes, enjoying their carefree lives. She didn’t care about them.

Her priority at night was to stay out of everyone’s way. Don’t get spotted by any of the gangs that roamed the streets. After living in the dark recesses of society for the past five years, she knew the ins-and-outs. How to keep from becoming a statistic.

Someone around the corner on the sidewalk shouted. Her senses were turned up to their max. At any moment, she knew she would have to choose a direction to run and hide. If she were lucky, the people shouting would continue past and never look down the alley she crouched down in.

More shouting, this time from different voices. There was more than one person coming down the sidewalk. She backed into an alcove where a door led to the parking deck. The sound of footsteps clomping at high speed became louder. Someone was coming her direction. Would he or she turn toward her and head down the alley? If so, then she’d have to retreat into the deck and hide behind a hover car.

Shadows danced across the concrete wall on the other side of the street. There was a kid coming her direction. He would whiz past at any minute. When he arrived at the corner to the alley, he turned her direction. She retreated a little further, but peeked out with the side of her face.

A boy, about her age, maybe a couple of years younger, ran in her direction. More shadows out on the street, accompanied by shouting. She estimated there were four or five older boys, maybe men, that were on the street.

“He went down that alley,” said one of the voices.

The boy ran past a dumpster and was about to fly by her. He had a brown paper sack in one hand that made a crumpling sound as it swung back and forth. She grabbed his arm and jerked him toward her. He almost pulled her over, but she managed to keep her balance and drag him to the side. At first, he tried to tug away, but she put her finger to her mouth to tell him to keep quiet. He relaxed.

The shadows rounded the corner and entered the alleyway. They slowed and scanned for their target as Daphne backed toward the door. The men who came into the alley were large and they meant business. One of them pulled out a pulse laser. One of those small ones that are easy to conceal. He held it up as his head turned from one side to the other, searching the discarded debris stacked against the building and the parking ramp wall.

Daphne opened the door to the ramp and pulled the boy in. Then she held the door and allowed it to close silently.

She watched through a thin window in the door. The four men passed by. One of them moved close to the door. Daphne pushed the boy against the wall and held her head back. When she thought it was safe, she peeked out and saw that the four of them had moved on.

She looked at the boy and smiled. “I’m Daphne.”

He shook her hand. “Ethan.”

“Why are they chasing you?”

“I stole their food. You want to see?” He opened the paper sack and held it up. Then he reached in and pulled out packets that were inside. They were packets of a synthetic drug with the name Xyphrax printed on the packages. The most popular drug on the street.

“Looks like you stole their Black Ice,” said Daphne.

“Yeah,” said Ethan. “I guess I did. I just assumed a brown bag contained their lunch.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe that’s why they were so mad at me.”

He huffed, then grabbed the bag and stood. Daphne pulled him down.

“Where are you going?” said Daphne.

“To give this stuff back.”

“They’ll kill you!”

“Really? I figure, if I just return it and explain that I thought it was just food, they would let me go.”

“That’s not how it works out here. Now that you know they have illegal drugs, they’ll kill you.”

Voices interrupted their conversation. The men were returning to retrace their steps. They would certainly check the garage now.

Daphne stood and shoved Ethan further into the ramp. The door banged open, and a hand grabbed her arm. She twisted and dropped down to extract herself from the death-grip of a man dressed entirely in black. When his hand slipped off her arm, she stood and sprinted to catch up to Ethan.

A trash drone flew past Daphne’s face. She ducked a split second before the bucket it carried collided with her head. The smell of garbage made her gag.

Other drones flitted around the parked hover cars, cleaning and performing maintenance. The company that ran the garage must have scheduled the automated tasks during the hours of least usage.

Another trash drone headed toward her as she continued to sprint forward, just on Ethan’s heels.

“Give me the bag,” said Daphne.

Ethan turned his head and frowned at her.

She held out her hand. “Give me the bag, quick.”

He handed her the brown paper back. She grabbed it and tossed it into the bin of the passing trash drone. Voices of those chasing them were gaining. Daphne saw the row of cars going the other direction and grabbed Ethan’s arm to turn him. Then they ran up the other row.

She ducked behind another car, then headed down a different row. The voices receded as their pursuers dropped back to locate them. Daphne scanned the cars on her left as she walked down the rows. Then she looked at the ones on the right.

“What are you looking for?” said Ethan.

“A car.”

Ethan held out his arms. “There are cars all around us.”

“I’m looking for a particular type of car. One that I can hot wire and isn’t remotely trackable.”

“Oh.”

Daphne spotted a hover car that she recognized. It was a model she had hot-wired before.

She crouched down beside the driver’s door of the vehicle, pulling Ethan down next to her. Someone shouted, causing her to freeze in place. The voices died down. They sounded as if they had passed by and were now heading the wrong direction.

Daphne pulled out a tiny circuit she carried around. Best investment she ever made. It hacked almost every type of hover car, but most vehicles had additional security that would be set off if she used her circuit on them. In almost no time, the door clicked. She grabbed the handle and quietly opened the hover car.

Ethan climbed over her and into the car. She climbed into the driver’s seat and carefully closed the door. Now it was time to start the car, then they’d be home-free.

The voices from outside the vehicle were muffled, but they sounded as though they were approaching. She glanced in the mirror and saw the four men behind their hover car.

Her eyes made contact, and that’s when the man with the gun pointed his weapon toward her…

**CHAPTER 16**

Daphne slept for some time. The clanking of the door awakened her. She sat up on the bunk and ran her hands over her stun-proof suit. Thankfully, they let her continue wearing the thing. Eventually, they would probably make her change into something more prisoner-like in fashion. Especially the moment they discover she can’t be stunned while wearing the suit. A smile crept across her face as the thought of escaping a bunch of stun-gun wielding thugs ran through her head.

The door swung open, ending her daydream. Two men rushed in and pulled her out before her feet were prepared to walk. She almost face-planted just outside her cell. Fortunately, the men held her vertically before facing her toward the end of the cells.

After marching her through a few passageways, they stopped at an open doorway into a large room. They pushed her through and closed the door behind. She didn’t think fast enough to escape, not that it would have been possible. Still, she hoped to avoid the gallows.

“Well,” said a large man. He had thin slits for eyes. Maybe Japanese descent, thought Daphne. “You must be the infamous Daphne Blazefire I heard so much about. Can I interest you in a fine meal and drink?”

The man sat in a seat twice as wide as a normal chair. He faced a table large enough for a family of eight. The large man ate a meal looking suspiciously like a rib-eye steak with all the fixings. Daphne’s mouth watered. Soon, her stomach voiced its opinion by growling loudly.

“I like steak,” she said. “Especially, rib-eye.”

She suspected she would be fed some sort of “old school” dungeon slop. What her ears heard next was quite the surprise.

“A good rib-eye is my favorite as well,” said the man. “How would you like your steak prepared?”

Daphne made her way to the table and shimmied into a cushioned seat across from the large man. She grinned at him. “Rare. As in, make it bleed.”

He looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes while placing a hand on his chest. “You are a woman after my own heart. A true lover of steak.”

The man sat up straight, then clapped his hands. Another man in a white chef’s outfit appeared from a small door behind Daphne. A door she had not noticed when they first shoved her in the room.

“Bring a fully loaded rib-eye meal for the lady. Wipe its rear and blow its nose.”

The chef raised a hand, closed his eyes, then bowed. “Very good.”

“Where are my manners?” said the large man. “I am Mr. Kobayashi and you are my guest for tonight.” He picked up a bottle of wine from a silver ice bucket, then stopped. “You drink wine?”

She pushed her wineglass toward him and smiled. “Absolutely.”

He looked at the bottle. “This is from my private collection. From 22nd century, Earth.”

One sip and she knew she would forever regret allowing such fine wine to touch her lips. Every wine she drank in the future will forever be compared to this experience. Too bad it was too expensive for her taste.

“Wow,” she said. “That is very good.”

He glanced at her as he cut off another piece of his own steak. “Yes. It is.”

There was a long silence as the man ate his steak and Daphne observed the room and it’s attendant decorations. The room was cozy enough, with framed pictures on the wall, a massive ornate rug covering most of the floor, and indirect accent lighting. Unfortunately, there were no windows. Mr. Kobayashi didn’t trust his “guests” enough to allow an easy exit. She contemplated the idea of rushing through the door to the kitchen. Would there be a rear exit to another room or the outside?

The chef blasted through the double-swinging doors and approached. He placed a silver covered tray in front of her. When the thin man raised the top, she was happy to see a large plate with a rare rib-eye steak and several side-dishes. A baked potato, a thick slice of toast, green beans, corn on the cob, and other foods she didn’t recognize. Her thoughts of escaping through the kitchen were all but forgotten as she wasted no time digging in. Hopefully, this was not a trick where Mr. Kobayashi would whisk her meal away before she had time to finish it. It seemed to be the way of wicked men she had met in the past. Maybe the meal was a warm-up to whatever torture he was going to deal her.

She talked and chewed at the same time. Not worried about appearances. This wasn’t a date… she hoped. Then the flavorful, tender steak hit her senses.

“Wow, this is probably the best steak I’ve ever eaten.”

“It is snow aged Wagyu beef,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “It comes from the Niigata Prefecture in Japan, Earth. A location that receives up to 8 meters of snowfall each year.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “I guess that explains why it’s so good.” She feared he might launch into some intricate detail of how the steak was aged. A description that threatened to take away from it’s tender, sweet flavor. Fortunately, he did not continue with the lecture, but proceeded to consume his own meal in silence. She cut off another cube of meat and savored the flavor.

“I’m sorry for landing on your planet,” said Daphne. “I didn’t mean to offend…”

“This is not my planet. Well, not the whole planet. But you know what I really want.”

The three thugs who hung just outside had certainly made it obvious that Mr. Kobayashi wanted her robot, but she decided to play coy to observe his reaction.

“What is it you want from me?”

She shoved another large chunk of meat in her mouth. Her jaw was going to be tired before she finished the massive-sized steak on her plate. The baked potato was dressed up with many items she was sure multiplied the calories immensely. It was also put together by an artist. The flavor was every bit as delicious as the appearance. Of course, there was no need to worry about excessive calories, since she assumed they would probably keep her in a cell for days, or longer. Plenty of time to starve later. This might also be her last meal. The sudden thought made her swallow hard.

“What I want is my property.”

“I’m curious. What do you want with such a beat-up, piece of junk robot like RUSTY?”

“He used to be my robot before someone stole him from me. I will assume the thief was not you.” He looked Daphne up and down. “No, you seem too young to have stolen him during the time he disappeared.”

She stopped before putting another chunk of meat in her mouth. “He was stuffed in the locker of the captain’s quarters on a beat-up used cargo ship I financed.”

Mr. Kobayashi scoffed before breaking into a full-throated laugh. His laughing went on for at least a minute before he calmed himself and wiped his eyes. He stared at her for another minute. Daphne wondered what kind of plot was churning in his brain?

“How would you like to have your ship fully paid, and a brand new model TSX-23 robot to go with? Would something like that entice you to give up RUSTY?”

Her knee-jerk reaction was to say “yes.” But, then, the history she had with RUSTY made her feel sad inside. How could she give up her best friend? Then she remembered RUSTY had taken the ship and left her here alone, making her wonder if she should just take the deal. Maybe she could get a copy of RUSTY’s memories to install in the shiny-new TSX model robot.

She stared at Mr. Kobayashi for a minute.

Could she trust this guy? Not knowing the location of RUSTY was the only thing preventing such a powerful man from disappearing her body. As soon as she turned over the robot, what would keep him from killing her?

Nothing.

“Unfortunately, I’m not sure where RUSTY went. And that stupid robot took my ship.”

“I suspect this is a trick of yours. Order your robot to return or I’ll use other methods to get my property.”

Daphne took one last bite of her steak. It was too much and now her stomach hurt. She set her fork and knife on her plate and pushed back from the table.

“I wish I could help you.”

Mr. Kobayashi clapped his hands. Another man appeared from the doorway she assumed went to the kitchen.

“The carrot did not work. It is time for the stick.”

**CHAPTER 17**

Daphne endured the pain for hours. Her back ached from being pinned to a flat wooden table. Mr. Kobayashi explained how the machine he used would do no permanent harm which translated into: I can torture you forever. The sonic method of torture was the same type of torture she had experienced many moons ago. Memories of Trevino filled her mind as Mr. Kobayashi and his helpers turned up the intensity until she passed out. Then they used smelling salts to revive her. By the time they were done with the first session of torture, she had mostly forgotten about the details of the machine and room she had been in.

Now she lay on her cot in the cell she assumed would be her permanent residence for the foreseeable future. Where did RUSTY go and why did he not return with the cavalry? What about Lowell? He must be in the palace, some place. She suspected they would pull him out and torture him in front of her, or vice versa. All for one beat-up robot nobody else paid any attention to.

The steak dinner she enjoyed earlier in the day was long gone. Hours of torture turned that meal into energy she used to resist the machine. Fortunately, she was able to keep it down while being tortured. It would have been such a tragedy. A perfect meal wasted. No matter, now she was hungry again, and she doubted there would be another steak in her future.

The door mechanism activated. She tried to hop up, but her body ached badly. Every muscle hurt like she had gone to the gym for the first time in her life and worked out all day. When the door opened, a robot entered. Her hopes rose for a moment.

RUSTY?

The robot put a tray on her bunk next to where she sat. She stared at the robot, but he was not as dented and scratched as her RUSTY. In fact, his chest plate was red. RUSTY was yellow. She lifted the spoon sticking out of a bowl of something she didn’t recognize. The something ran off the spoon like thin oatmeal. Yeah, she already missed that steak meal.

The robot stood still in front of her. She looked up. What was it waiting for?

“It’s me,” said the robot.

“RUSTY?”

“Yes. I am in disguise.” He held up his arms and twisted to show each side. “I used some putty and a little colored makeup from your kit. Oh, you’re out of something called cream blush highlighter and lip tint.”

Daphne lightly touched his chest plate, then looked at her finger. The oily pink on her fingers made her laugh.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I can buy more. Let’s get out of here.”

Daphne scrambled to her feet, but RUSTY held out his hand and blocked her. “Can not.”

“What? Are you kidding? I’m ready to get out of here and bring back some help to get Lowell.”

“Four guards are right outside the cell area.”

“Horse pucky!”

“I plan to get help to… how do they say it… bust you otta this place. Do you have any message you’d like to pass along?”

“Yes,” said Daphne. She thought for a moment. “Are you recording?”

“Go ahead.”

“Help me. I’m being held in the dungeon of a palace…” she growled. “Oh man. That is so cliche. Erase, start over…”

Daphne paced back and forth. The message had to be generic, but give specific details of where she was being held. She came up with a message giving details of how to get into the palace dungeon without using the words “palace” or “dungeon.” When she completed her message, RUSTY nodded. Then he turned to leave.

“Are you sure I can’t go with you? Maybe you could block the view of the guards as I sneak behind.”

RUSTY turned and shook his head. “If I were a large robot, it might be possible, but you can see right through some of my mechanisms.”

“You’re right. They’d see me moving behind you.” She groaned. “You better find someone quick. Mr. Kobayashi is going to continue torturing me, and I’m not sure how much more I can take. And don’t tell me who you’re going to recruit or where you’re headed. If they make me talk, you would be captured.”

“Roger that.” RUSTY gave a quick salute, turned, then headed out the door.

Daphne tested the door after RUSTY was long gone. Maybe he had left it open a crack, but… no such luck. The door was solid. It was probably for the best. If she were caught walking around, her captors might begin to ask questions. Stupid things, like “who let you out?” or “How did you break out?”

She flopped down on the cot and sighed. Who would RUSTY recruit to rescue her? Maybe Perry? He would be the first person she would go to. She shook her head. Better to not think of possible contacts RUSTY would go to. She would probably blurt out his name the next time they tortured her.

Still…

The police or the military were not a good option. She hoped RUSTY didn’t report back to detective Ramsey. He was such a putz, she would never be freed. The military wasn’t much help, either. They usually only gave her the time of day when she had something they wanted.

She left the slop uneaten and lay on her cot. It was time to think of something else and try to forget about RUSTY and what his mission was.

Hopefully, he could get help and return in time to save her and Lowell.

**CHAPTER 18**

Daphne’s mind wandered away from the recording she made and who RUSTY would contact. She thought about the boy she met, Ethan, and the car they stole…

She broke into a car parked in a massive parking deck. Ethan, a boy she had run into while hiding in an alley, sat in the passenger seat. They almost escaped, except the four men chasing Ethan had finally caught up to them. They were standing behind the hover car and their leader had a handgun pointed right at Daphne’s head. The eye contact lingered for some time while she sat frozen in place.

What was the guy thinking?

The other three outside their car were slowly making their way around the sides of the vehicle. Daphne had not activated the electronic key yet, but she could feel the button under her thumb. She pressed it and felt the vehicle vibrate as the lifters engaged.

The man with the gun did not fire. He seemed torn between taking a life and maybe staying out of trouble. In retrospect, he probably just wanted his drugs back, but that time had passed. The bag of drugs was on their way to the incinerator. Being carried along by a trash drone.

“Duck!” said Daphne.

She waited for Ethan to move, then pulled her head down. At the same time, she grabbed the height controller and elevated the car. Then she operated the controls to back the vehicle out of its spot. The computer system wailed as the vehicle came close to ramming into cars around it. Fortunately, the automatic zone protection kept the car from colliding with anything around it. That did not prevent the computer from scolding her, though.

When the hover car cleared the parking spot, she turned the vehicle and gunned it to exit from the garage. Shots rang out and a few holes pierced the car, but she was not hit. She glanced at Ethan, who had made himself into a tiny ball. He seemed unharmed. Just a little shaken.

Daphne concentrated on the parking deck opening. The vehicle was moving so fast that she could hardly see any of the cars parked along the sides. Then she burst through the gate at the exit and flew into the free sky. When she pulled up on the controls, the vehicle flew above the buildings. She approached a lane of traffic and merged in. For the first time in an hour, her stomach muscles relaxed and she let out a long sigh of relief.

“What is that blinking light for?” said Ethan.

She glanced over to see what Ethan was pointing to. A light on the dash blinked slowly. When she squinted her eyes, she saw that it had an acronym: TS.

Why did that acronym sound so familiar?

Her heart pounded in her throat. “It’s an after-market tracking system.”

“What do we do?” said Ethan.

“We ditch this car and get another one.”

She pulled on the steering, then the interior of the car flashed blue. Daphne checked her mirror and saw a cop car was tight on her tail.

“Horse pucky!” she said.

A quick pull of the hover control lever caused the car to drop fast, but the cop was still tight on her tail. She pulled to the right, then flew toward a dense area of the city. Maybe there was a chance she could lose him down in the tight spaces between buildings. If she could lose him for a few minutes, they could ditch the car and hide.

Another cop car came from the right. She estimated his speed and determine she would pass by before he caught up. The dense area of the city was still her target. Now the blue lights were becoming more intense.

Below, on the street levels of traffic, more blue lights began to flash. A cop hover car curved up and toward her. She gritted her teeth and pulled to the left. Then she merged into another lane of traffic. Unfortunately, she had to slow to keep with other hover cars. The high-speed traffic felt like it crawled compared to the outrageous speed she had been moving at a few seconds ago.

Two more cop cars merged in behind her vehicle. Then she noticed three with flashing blue lights, just idling ahead of her. When they passed a cross-road with high-rises on all sides, there were several blue lights headed toward them up those streets. It didn’t take long before she lost track of the actual number of cops that wanted her. All she knew was that they were increasing in numbers by the minute. They would have to take a chance and ditch fast.

She spotted a tight alleyway ahead. It took a fancy maneuver called a bootlegger’s turn. She pulled back on the power, jammed the car to the right and perform a side-ways glide until she was able to accelerate into the narrow alley.

“I’m going to set down quick,” she said. “You jump out as soon as the car hits the pavement.”

“What about you?” said Ethan.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m going to ditch at another location as soon as I lose more of those cops.”

Ethan cracked his door open. Daphne bottomed the car onto the pavement while the door swung open. Then Ethan hesitated.

“You’re not coming, are you?”

“Get out, now!”

“I’ll never forget you,” said Ethan.

Daphne gave Ethan a shove, then gunned the throttle. The door slammed shut. Ethan was clear.

When she popped out of the other side of the alley, blue lights blocked all paths. This was the end-game she had expected. She stopped in place, then lowered the vehicle to the ground. Then she opened her door and surrendered…

…Daphne smiled. Those were good times. Well, at the time they were scary times. Looking back on what happened afterward, they weren’t so bad. After her arrest, she spent some time in the slammer. Then she was transferred to a school for street kids and got her life turned around.

Now here she was… back in the slammer. Fortunately, she wasn’t a street kid anymore.

Though she still wondered if her life really changed much.

**CHAPTER 19**

Roberta cautiously opened her shop at noon. She spent some time making sure the merchandise was clean and shiny. Well, as clean as she could get it. Some of the hardware was old and well-loved. That’s what she had thought of her pistols, well-loved. Most of her rifles were new, but there were a few “antiques” as people called them. Nobody these days wanted a bolt-action rifle. Even if it was good at long, accurate shots. No, people ‘round these premises wanted something with a short barrel and pumped out a quick burst of lead, or even a plasma bolt shooter. She missed the more civilized times.

The sun was bright and hot outside her shop. Just like every day since she first arrived. One of these days, she would collect up all her savings and move to a more comfortable climate. Maybe even another planet, where they have those fancy stores with air conditioning.

She looked around her dark shop. The vast collection of stuff she had for sale and realized the day she left this place was never going to come. This was her life, for better or for worse. This old shop didn’t earn much more than living expenses and a tiny extra she squirreled away for emergencies.

“You better get used to it old girl,” she said.

Several people walked past her place, but they paid her no mind. Customers were going to be few for the next day or two. Always happened that way. There would be a big shootout at night. Usually instigated by a bunch of drunk jerks, shootin’ off their big mouths, followed by shootin’ off their big guns. That kind of thing always ended up with people screamin’ and runnin’. By morning, there’d be a pile of bodies. Some dead, some moanin’. It ain’t pretty, but it was the way of the town.

People would hide for a few days. That meant fewer shoppers. Then after everything calmed back down, people would rush out and buy more guns. For protection.

She picked up a fifty caliber handgun and polished the barrel with a rag she normally kept half-way in her pocket. The barrel of the handgun was chrome and shiny. Not something she would want to use in a gunfight. The darn thing was like holdin’ onto a spotlight saying, “here I am, shoot me!” The gun she held onto had memories, though. They all did. Just picking up a handgun in her shop would cause a flood of the old days to come by like they had just happened this morning. In the case of the fifty she was handling, it was acquired by a man who got into a gunfight with it and ended up with his hand shot off. He gave up his gun fighting days and swore he was selling everything. He was gonna take his money and retire to a desolate place in the desert. Roberta wondered if he ever made it.

Someone entered her shop, but she couldn’t see his face. The bright sunlight outside ensured his front was dark. She slowly slipped her right hand behind her back, where she had a piece loaded and ready.

“Can I help you with something?” she said.

When the man was a meter away, she could see exactly who it was and relaxed. It was someone she had not seen in a long time. Maybe too long.

“Hey my metal friend, I remember you,” she said. “RUSTY, right?”

“That is correct,” said RUSTY. He stopped and stared with his red, beady eyes.

Roberta leaned to the right and scanned for someone near the door. There was nobody.

“Where’s the hot thing that owns you?” she said.

“Daphne has sent me on a very important mission.”

“Really? A robot on a mission. That’s a first. Why don’t you come in and getchur batteries charged up while we talk about this mission yer on?”

Roberta led RUSTY to the back and pointed where to stand. Then she rummaged around for a few minutes, looking for the right cord. Every time she tried an end that didn’t fit his charging outlet, she growled, then returned to a massive crate containing a tangled mess of power cords.

When she connected the right plug, she brushed her hands together and stood back.

“Now, what’s this about a mission?”

RUSTY played the message Daphne recorded. Roberta sighed.

“Oh, girl,” she said. “What’d you get yourself into this time?”

Then she squinted at RUSTY. “Who’s this Lowell fella she mentioned?”

“Lowell is a sergeant in the military. He has been abducted. He is the reason Daphne and I set down on DV-225. To rescue Lowell.”

Roberta chuckled. “Didn’t go to plan, did it?”

RUSTY shook his head. “No, it didn’t, and it’s my fault.”

“Your fault? What did you do?”

“I set up the mission and ran in like gangbusters before researching what we were getting into.”

“Ah. I guess it is your fault.”

She paced back and forth, thinking. “I’m too old for this stuff, but what the heck? Can’t live forever. Besides, this place is gettin’ me down.”

RUSTY’s head popped up as he looked at her. “Let’s go!”

She held out her hand. “Hold on now. Don’t get your relays all worked up. We need a plan.”

“A plan?” said RUSTY.

“Yeah, a plan. And it better be a good one. Otherwise, we’ll just end up repeating your last disaster.”

“Yes. I compute a plan would improve our odds by 97 percent.”

She gave him the side-eye. “Computed that, didja?”

RUSTY only stared.

Roberta formatted a message and sent it off to a contact she had not dealt with in years. She hoped he was still around and still worked in the government where he had access to the information she needed.

She didn’t like the idea of a plan involving only herself and a dumb robot. It seemed like a recipe for disaster. Unfortunately, all she had was dumber robots.

**CHAPTER 20**

Daphne was back on the slab of wood being fed an ear-piercing noise. They had been at this for so long her brain was getting numb. Maybe she was going deaf, which would be a welcome reprieve from the hours of torture she had already endured. The people running the machine would certainly inject her with a concoction made to repair the inner ear. A few hours of rest would restore her hearing to a point where the noise would be brain-shattering.

The musty smell of the room added to the luxurious ambiance of the torture chamber. Water ran down one wall on the far side and a puddle formed on the concrete floor. The equipment they used to pump loud noises into the room was on a steel rack elevated from the floor. The equipment looked like something from a recording studio. There were cords and plugs crisscrossing the faceplates of the rack of electronics. The assistant wore a white lab coat, rubber gloves and one of those old-time stethoscopes hung around his neck.

Mr. Kobayashi only stared at her. There was no emotion in his face at all. She wondered what was going on behind his facade. He certainly acted like a psychopath. He didn’t show any empathy or remorse. It seems to be a necessary personality trait to be a successful mob boss.

He nodded his head at his assistant. The assistant rotated a dial to deaden the sound. Mr. Kobayashi removed his hearing protection and checked Daphne’s eyes with a small penlight. The light was painful, like hot pokers pushing into her skull. If she were lucky, she would pass out from the pain and get some rest for the day.

“All I want to know is where my robot is located,” he said.

Daphne’s head lolled as she giggled. “You know…” More giggles. “I don’t think you would recognize RUSTY if he walked right into your palace, served me dinner, then walked back out.”

All she had to do was push his buttons. Then he’d torture her until she passed out and ended the session for the day.

“I’ll try to sweeten the pot for you,” he said.

Daphne tried to sit up on her elbows, but the straps prevented her from moving her body off the table. She couldn’t tilt her head up for long. It felt as though her neck were made of rubber. The room rotated and bobbed as she tried to focus on one thing. She was intrigued by his offer. What would he give her for RUSTY and would it be worth it?

“I’m all ears,” she said. Then she broke into a hysterical laugh. Mr. Kobayashi only gave her a blank stare. His patience seemed infinite. She slumped against the wood plank and let out a long sigh.

“I will buy you a new ship,” he said. “A much larger one than the tiny thing you currently own. I’ll even throw in some seed money. Enough to allow you to fill your new cargo ship with expensive cargo to deliver on your first run.”

Daphne almost jumped at the offer, but then thought about a few questions. Like, how high was this mob guy willing to go to get her robot? Her head swam, and she nodded off for a second, then her thoughts returned. Yeah, Mr. Kobayashi could promise her the galaxy, but she suspected he would never pay. Once he had his hands on RUSTY, she would be fertilizer.

If only she could delay long enough for RUSTY to arrive with the calvary. That thought made her mind drift toward the big question: who? Who would RUSTY recruit to save her butt from the evil Mr. Kobayashi? She laughed for a moment as she thought about a mustache twirling bad guy. Apparently, they didn’t just show up in the B-rated movies.

“What is your answer?” he said.

Daphne felt her delaying tactic running out of juice. Now, Mr. Kobayashi was running low on patience. What a shame.

Still. How far could she push him?

“Your answer, please?” he said.

She felt a giggle escape from her throat, though it seemed disconnected from her body as she floated. It was an odd sensation, like being so drunk the room would spin. Water dripped into the puddle on the floor. It was the loudest sound in the room at the moment. The equipment in the rack made a constant droning noise from the cooling fans in the back.

Mr. Kobayashi’s face turned a light shade of pink, then darkened. She knew it was only a matter of seconds before he would put those sound-canceling headphones on and direct his assistant to crank up the volume. It was time to employ a different delaying tactic.

“I was thinking,” said Daphne. “Ummm….”

Mr. Kobayashi’s face dimmed a bit, but still remained a light shade of red. At least she had a way to gauge how close he was to ordering the resumption of torture. Maybe she could play him for an hour or two.

When his face darkened, she knew she would have to pull out another stalling phrase. It was difficult to think. She wished she had a clear head for this.

“I was thinking.”

“You are stalling!”

He put his headphones on and pointed at his assistant. The noise level increased and her ears hurt immediately. Her pain went through the roof as she tried to endure it. Sweat poured off her head. She could feel her nose running. Or was it blood? Her jaw was clenched tight, making her face hurt.

Then Mr. Kobayashi signaled his assistant, and the sound stopped. It took a few minutes for her to catch her breath. During that time, he removed his headset and patiently waited.

“Before you make me another offer,” she said.

“I’m listening.”

“Where are you keeping Lowell and will you release him if I turn over the robot?”

Mr. Kobayashi sighed. “I don’t know anyone by the name of Lowell.”

“But I thought your thugs abducted him.”

“You are mistaken.” He signaled to his assistant while putting on his headset.

“Wait!” she said. It was too late. The intense sound kicked in right away.

Mr. Kobayashi had no soul. He watched her closely as she struggled with the pain. His cold and calculating eyes just watched.

Her vision dimmed, then she lost consciousness. The shock of the ammonia smell brought her back to the world of the living. She opened her eyes and saw his assistant using smelling salts to awaken her.

“Now what do you think of my offer?” said Mr. Kobayashi. He smiled. Something she had not seen him do since that steak meal they had. The steak meal felt as though it was a century ago.

He continued, “What do you think? Are you ready to cut a deal?”

Between breaths, Daphne belted out a few words. “I’m your slave…”

“That is true,” he said.

“And, I have no negotiating power…” A few more breaths. “Except for the robot, which is the only ace I’m holding.” More breaths. “Once I turn him over to you—”

“—Then you will go free,” he said.

“And I’m supposed to take your word for that?”

“My word is sacrosanct.”

Daphne laughed as her head lolled. “Pardon me if I don’t believe you.”

The noise returned, and Daphne knew she could not hold out forever. The pain became more intense by the minute. She passed out again and this time; she woke inside of her cell. Her pounding head made her wish she could get some medication.

Where was RUSTY, and where was Lowell?

**CHAPTER 21**

Roberta walked to a wall of rifles and lifted one from the hooks it rested on. When she looked it over, she shook her head and put it back. Then she rubbed her chin and lifted another rifle from the same wall. RUSTY watched in robot fascination. Something that probably required solving a calculus problem or two.

When she found a weapon she thought was right, she walked toward RUSTY and fitted it to his arm. He grasped the pistol grip and held the weapon in place. She rotated his arm up and looked at it, then she rotated it down. There was a growl as she pried his fingers off the pistol grip and put the weapon back on the shelf.

RUSTY counted every rifle in the place within a space of two seconds. It was a task he did by filtering out a lot of background noise. Roberta’s shop resembled an antique store where random shaped objects were stacked and hung from every nook and cranny. The total rifles that RUSTY counted was 358. He wasn’t sure if it was a lot of rifles or not.

“Is 358, a lot?” said RUSTY.

Roberta stared at him for a moment. Maybe she didn’t hear the question. Before he could repeat his question, she formed an answer, sounding suspiciously like a question.

“It depends on what you’re talking about,” she said. “If you’re talking about cookies, then yes, 358 cookies are a lot. If you’re talking about guns, then no, 358 is just being moderately prepared. At least on this world, it is.”

RUSTY decided he had received the information he was looking for, even though it seemed imprecise. Roberta continued to look for the appropriate rifle. She settled on a massive rifle, seeming too large for her to comfortably carry around. When she fitted it to RUSTY’s arm, he was afraid his servos would not be able to keep it steady.

“There,” she said. She stood back and observed the way he held onto the rifle. “How does that feel?”

“It is heavy, but manageable,” said RUSTY.

“Well,” she said. “Let’s go around back to the firing range and put some bullets in it. Then we can see if you can hit anything.”

RUSTY lowered his arm and pointed the weapon at the ground. He followed her to the barn in the back of her property. She pushed a metal sliding door to the side to give an opening large enough for RUSTY to enter. Then she shut the door behind them and engaged the lock.

It took a couple of minutes for her to select a box of bullets and load several into a box that would attach to the bottom of the rifle. The weapon became significantly heavier when she attached the box of ammo. RUSTY held it up, but felt the weight pulling his arm down.

“Alright,” she said. “See if you can hit a bullseye on the target down there.”

RUSTY raised his arm and squeezed off a shot. The target was still pristine.

Roberta growled. “OK, I guess you need some training.”

“I am sorry, but I’m not a military robot.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” She held the rifle up for him. “Now look through the rear sight and line it up with the front one. When the front block is centered inside the round rear sight, you’re dead on the target. Got it?”

“I think so.”

RUSTY raised his arm and squeezed off another shot. The bullet hit the edge of the target.

“Maybe you need to take your time,” said Roberta. “You know, just wait for your hand to steady.”

RUSTY stood still for what felt like an eternity. Then the weapon shot one round. The new hole in the target was on the opposite side.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll get you some stun pellets and smoke grenades. At least the stun pellets have a wide dispersal, so you don’t have to hit the target to get someone. I’ll have to do the sharp-shooter stuff myself.”

An electronic ding caused Roberta to fish around in her pockets. She pulled out a device and looked at it.

“Oh good,” she said. “The blueprints have arrived.”

She used her finger to scroll through the display as RUSTY raised his rifle to point it up while staring at her.

She looked up. “What?”

“Blueprints?”

She grinned. “I have my sources. He gets me stuff on the sly. Besides, nobody bothers a little old lady like me.”

RUSTY glared at her but said nothing.

“What?” she said. “Not buying the little old lady act?”

RUSTY said nothing. Roberta rolled her eyes and sighed. Then she looked over the blueprints, using her finger to scroll across the screen.

She growled. “This place is huge. We’re going to have to go in heavy.”

“I fail to see how carrying extra weight will help us rescue Daphne.”

Roberta looked up and shook her head. “Robots. Always taking things literally.”

She continued to scroll around the compound and examine each building. Then she stopped and stared at a diagram of the sub-levels.

“Looks like we’re going to have to come right into the front gate. Then we’ll need to search each of these cells in the basement to make sure we find her.”

RUSTY pointed to one of the cells. “She was in that cell when I visited.”

“Well, we can hope she’ll still be there by checking it first, but if I were them, I’d move my prisoners around every day. Like a shell game.”

“I do not understand what a shell game is,” said RUSTY.

Roberta growled. “Come here, kid.”

He followed her. She turned and glared at him. He set his rifle on the counter in the shooting range, then continued to follow her. She stopped at a bar counter near the refrigerator behind her shop. Then she proceeded to pull out three plastic cups and put them upside down on the bar. She pulled out a loose bottle cap and tossed it under a cup.

“See that cap?” she said.

RUSTY nodded.

Then she moved the cups around while RUSTY watched. When she stopped, she leaned on the counter and stared at him.

“Which cup has the bottle cap under it?” she said.

He pointed at the left cup. It was the one she had put the cap under when this thing started. She knew his robot vision never failed while he tracked the location of each cup when she moved them around.

She lifted the cup and showed him there was nothing under it.

RUSTY stared at her. “It is a trick.”

She lifted another cup, and a bottle cap appeared. “There’s yer cap.”

“I still say it’s a trick,” said RUSTY. “Sleight of hand.”

“You’re right,” she said. “It’s the old shell game. I suppose in ancient times they used to use shells instead of cups, but the rules and the trick are the same. I palmed the cap as I was mixing the cups. None of the cups had a cap under them when I stopped. After you selected an empty cup, I lifted a different cup and let a cap slide onto the counter. The same one I had palmed earlier. Not that the mob is going to pull a trick by holding Daphne outside the cell block, but they could. Also, we can’t see how they are randomly moving prisoners around, where the shell game is set up such that you get to watch the cups move around.”

“Your point, then, is that Daphne and the other prisoners are shuffled each day to prevent someone from breaking in and freeing them.”

“Correct.”

“Then we must search until we find Daphne and Lowell.”

Roberta sighed. “We’re going to need a serious diversion. That’s where you’ll come in. I’ll fit your rifle with smoke grenades and some flash bangs. It should disorient them while I make my way to the sub-levels.”

She zoomed out on the map and looked at the surrounding jungle. “We’ll take your ship and land it in this thick section of jungle. Then we can all get out at once.” She sighed. “Even with a diversion, we’re going to need a bunch of help, and I know just where I can get it.”

It took most of the day to complete the plan. Roberta felt confident everything had been accounted for. But her stomach told her there would be surprises. Stuff no one could account for.

Hopefully, the unaccountable events would be minor.

**CHAPTER 22**

Daphne enjoyed the best sleep of her life until the loud squeaking sound of her cell door woke her. She lifted her head and regretted it. Her head pounded with an excruciating pain. There was little chance she was going to survive another round of torture. If they put her back in the sound chamber, she would crack immediately.

Two men rushed into her cell and grabbed her by her arms. Her feet did not touch the floor as they whisked her out and through the basement to the stairs going up. Once they got her topside, they set her on the ground and made her walk through the palace and out the exit doorway. It happened so fast; she was hardly out of her sleep-stupor and didn’t realize she was not going to the torture chamber until the sunlight hit her face. This was the first time she had breathed fresh air since she first arrived.

Mr. Kobayashi stood outside with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Ah,” he said. “Now it is time to say our goodbyes.”

Daphne was stunned they were going to just let her go. She smiled, then turned her head to her left. Movement caught her eye and now she noticed what it was. Several people rigged up a noose on the hanging device. Her smile evaporated as she realized they were going to execute her.

She snapped her head back toward Mr. Kobayashi.

“You don’t want the robot?” she said.

He shook his head. “Nah. It’s too late for that now. I’ll find another method to find my piece of junk.”

Daphne had hoped to stall him for more time. RUSTY was taking far too long to rescue her.

Stupid robot.

The two holding her arms guided her to the platform, then tied her hands behind her back. The rope they used dug into her wrists. She sighed. In a few minutes, she would be dead and the pain in her wrists, as well as the thumping in her head, would all be gone.

They lined her up with the trapdoor and fitted the noose to her neck. It was already tight. She wondered if it was cutting off her breathing, or was it fear causing her shortness of breath?

“Any last words?” said Mr. Kobayashi. He stood quite distant now, but she knew she had to delay as long as possible. Nothing would be more tragic than being hung seconds before the rescue party arrived.

“Can we cut a deal now?” she said. “Maybe I can just turn over the robot and we can just call this whole thing off. What do you say?”

“Where is the robot?” he said.

“I don’t know.”

Mr. Kobayashi raised his arm.

“But, I can find him!” she said.

He put his arm down and looked down at the ground.

“She stalling,” said a man behind her. He had been one of the two to put the noose around her neck. “Let’s get on with it.”

Mr. Kobayashi glared at the man. Daphne was shocked at the emotion he showed. No more facade. The man behind her did not make another peep.

Several hypersonic booms in the sky made Daphne’s head hurt more than before. She glanced up and saw the white streaks of spacecraft entering the atmosphere above them. An explosion in the distance caused everyone’s head to turn to see what happened. A large mushroom cloud rose from the forest. It almost looked like a nuclear warhead had gone off, except for the lack of a flash. Daphne wondered if the military had dropped a fuel-air bomb to level a large landing area in the forest.

Several streaks came out of a spacecraft in the distance. The streaks split off and landed at distant points around the palace. Colored smoke rose from each strike point. Some red, blue, and green smoke shrouded the entire palace.

Mr. Kobayashi raised his arm. Daphne braced her neck and prepared for the inevitable. She wished she could see the outcome of the ongoing battle, but feared she would miss it by minutes.

When Mr. Kobayashi swished his arm down, she heard the mechanism clank while the trap door under her feet dropped down. Her body fell and the noose was tightened for only a split second as a loud bang went off and she continued to fall. Her legs hit the ground hard, making her think she had broken them.

When she rolled over, the noose was still attached to her neck like a turtle-neck sweater. The end of the rope was frayed and lying on the ground like it had been cut or shot away.

Hope filled her. She rolled onto her knees, then crawled along the concrete under the platform. When she passed the opening at the end, she stood and ran. Even with her hands tied and a heavy rope dragging behind, she was able to gather speed and run toward the perimeter of the compound.

The smoke obscured her view, and she ran into something and landed on her rear. When she looked up, Roberta stood looking at her while holding a long-barrel rifle.

“Well, don’t just sit there,” said Roberta. “Get yer skinny butt off the ground and head back to the ship.”

Daphne stood, then Roberta stopped her and removed the noose from her neck. Roberta snapped open a knife that seemed to appear in her hand like magic. She cut Daphne’s bindings, then folded the knife and tucked it in her pocket in one smooth motion.

“Where’s your boyfriend, Lowell?” she said. A bolt of energy shot past their heads, causing Daphne to duck for a second. Roberta did not move at all.

“I don’t know. He might not be here.”

“Well, I’m going to take a look, anyway.”

Another bolt of energy whizzed past. Several gray, rusted steel robots came out of the smoke. Daphne thought they were Mr. Kobayashi’s robots, sent out to defend his compound.

“Don’t worry about the war robots,” said Roberta. “They’re with us.”

One of the robots squeaked, then froze next to Roberta. She kicked it in the rear and it started moving again.

“You better get on back to the ship and get ready to leave in a moment’s notice, before the bad guys discover this whole thing is nothing more than an elaborate ruse.”

Daphne ran toward the location she had seen the mushroom cloud. It had to be where they parked their ship. Or, did they bring her ship? The Waterfowl. Oh, her ship would not be a good escape vessel.

The jungle became thick, slowing her progress. When she popped out into a clearing, she ran into something solid and stumbled backward. Again she was seated on her rear. This was not a good day for walking.

She looked up. “RUSTY?”

“It is I,” said RUSTY.

She bounced back to her feet. “Boy, am I glad to see you, and I see you brought an army with you.”

“That is incorrect,” said RUSTY. “It is only Roberta and myself.”

“But all those war robots?”

“They are all from the junkyard. Roberta and I worked all night getting them to walk. When we landed, we piloted their pods to the ground and pointed them toward the palace. They have a tiny program to walk in a straight line until they run into something, then they stop. Roberta called them our diversion.”

“So Roberta is in the palace, alone?”

“That is correct.”

Daphne grabbed the large rifle from RUSTY’s arm. “Give me the rifle. Let’s go.”

**CHAPTER 23**

Roberta headed directly into the entrance she remembered seeing on the map. It was right where she expected it, which was good, because she couldn’t see a darn thing inside all the smoke. Darn that RUSTY. He was good at firing smoke missiles, maybe too good.

The stairs leading down were unoccupied. She half expected to run into someone by now. Maybe a guard or two. With any luck, they were all busy outside, trying to navigate through the thick smoke and running into the tin cans she set in motion.

The dungeon was just like out of the ancient fairy-tales. Stone walls and floor. Well, it was simulated. As best she could tell, it was made of poured concrete with a textured finish to simulate large stones. Nobody built castles like the olden days.

She stood on her tip-toes to look into the window of the first cell.

Empty.

The second cell was wide open. Probably the one they had just removed Daphne from when they were going to hang her. Fortunately, Roberta had seen the hanging station on the blueprints and had a heads-up they might be performing the death ritual upon the arrival of her surprise attack. The timing of her arrival couldn’t have gone better.

Each cell was empty as she peeked inside the small square windows in each door. The blueprints only showed one dungeon, so all she had to do was search each cell.

“Is he in there?” said Daphne.

Roberta’s heart almost jumped out of her chest. “Wow. Don’t sneak up on someone my age like that. I darn near had a heart attack.”

“Sorry,” said Daphne. “I thought you might need some help.” Daphne held onto the rifle Roberta had outfitted with RUSTY. Too bad the rifle only had stun pellets. Daphne was a good shot and could have handled normal rounds, unlike the stupid robot.

“Start checking the cells on that side,” said Roberta.

Daphne peeled off. Then RUSTY showed up. Roberta sighed.

“Is everyone down here?” said Roberta.

“That is correct,” said RUSTY.

Roberta checked the next cell, then grumbled something under her breath. Something about there being nobody at the ship to protect it. Not that it mattered anymore. They were either going to find this Lowell character and escape, or maybe they would all get caught. Roberta didn’t fancy that thought. The cells in this place didn’t look too comfy.

“Well,” said Roberta. “RUSTY, go guard our exit.”

“Lowell!” said Daphne. She used her hands like a bullhorn to yell his name.

“Shhhh,” said Roberta. “Someone will hear you.”

“Sorry.”

“He’s not in here,” said Roberta. “We gotta go.”

“What about Lowell?” said Daphne.

“If he’s in this place, we’ll have to come back with a better plan to rescue his butt. Let’s go.”

They ran up the stairs and back out of the palace. The smoke cleared and bolts of energy zipped past them from all directions. All they had to do was make it back to the ship and escape.

Assuming the ship was still there.

**CHAPTER 24**

RUSTY cleared a path through the jungle in front of Daphne. Roberta seemed to have little trouble blazing a trail as she made progress in front of them. As if she had experience from a former life. There was a clearing ahead, and Daphne hoped it was the ship’s landing zone. Even walking through the trampled trees and bushes left in the wake of RUSTY took a lot of energy, and her head still pounded. She rubbed the rope burned area of her neck caused by the noose she recently encountered.

She wanted a drink of cool, fresh water, but everything in the jungle was dry and nobody thought to bring a canteen. The forest smelled of green plants and flowers, though she couldn’t see any flowers near their path. She reached her hand out to a thin tree trunk to steady herself, then pulled back quick when her eye caught movement. A snake wound its way around the trunk. The sight gave her goosebumps.

Sweat made her clothes stick to her skin, and she found it difficult to catch her breath. She vowed to never vacation on any planet with high humidity. Not her cup of tea. She tried breathing through her mouth, but a bug flew into her throat at high speed. She swallowed it before realizing what it was. A sudden burst of coughing made her stop and hover where she was. Daphne stood, then realized everyone else left her behind.

Roberta dropped down low behind some bushes ahead of them. RUSTY dropped next to her. Daphne caught up and saw the ship in the distance. She did the same and dropped low to hide behind some bushes. Her view was somewhat obscured.

At least two dozen people were climbing over her ship like a bunch of ants.

“Well,” said Roberta. “So much for our ride.”

“Rats,” said Daphne.

“Plan B,” said Roberta. She turned and plowed her way through the thick jungle, back the way they came.

Daphne caught up. “What’s Plan B?”

“Not sure, yet,” said Roberta. “I’m making this up as I go.”

RUSTY followed as Roberta and Daphne made their way back, using most of the trail they had blazed to the ship. Daphne felt her stomach churn as they came nearer to the palace. When they reached the edge of the grounds, Roberta crouched behind some brush. Daphne and RUSTY took their cues from her.

The smoke had cleared and there were several people running around the palace grounds. Probably looking for them.

“RUSTY,” said Roberta. “You’re up. Walk in there and zap anyone moving about. I’ll cover you from back here. Head for the large, dark opening.”

Oh yeah, send in the robot. That was a good idea, thought Daphne.

“Wait,” said Daphne. “RUSTY is the thing they’re after.”

“Yup,” said Roberta.

“You’re going to give them what they want?”

“Give the mechanical guy a chance. He’s got stunners. Besides, we’re just usin’ him for bait.”

Daphne had to admit it seemed like a good plan. On the surface.

“What’s inside the large, dark area?” said Daphne.

“I hope it’s a garage with some space craft inside,” said Roberta. “Maybe there’s a small shuttle we could steal. Though, it’d be nice if they had a gun ship parked in there. Then we could really stick it to ‘em.”

RUSTY continued on a straight line heading toward the large opening. Daphne cringed. Shouldn’t he zig-zag, or walk toward a different door, then change direction at the last minute, to throw them off? It was too late to give RUSTY instructions now. She’d have to yell, which would give away their location.

Three men converged on RUSTY at the same time. They must have realized RUSTY was not one of their robots, or they knew something was up because their own robots never go into the garage. Either way, RUSTY was about to be captured.

A bolt of energy jumped out from RUSTY and knocked down one of the men approaching. The other two men froze in place, then they slowly walked around the robot.

“As soon as they discover it takes a couple minutes for RUSTY to recharge his stunners, they’ll all close in at the same time,” said Daphne.

Roberta raised her barrel and sighted in one of the men circling RUSTY. Then she squeezed the trigger. One of the two men grabbed his arm before the two of them crouched down and moved away.

“I think this is the best we’re going to do,” said Roberta. “Let’s go.”

Roberta tore off at a speed, surprising Daphne. She may look old, but she didn’t act old. Daphne hopped over the bushes and sprinted to catch up, head pounding harder than before. The two men yelled commands and several more came out of another doorway. Bolts of energy followed, shooting in front of Daphne and Roberta.

RUSTY disappeared into the darkness of the open doorway. Daphne wondered what they would encounter as soon as they passed through the darkness. She aimed her rifle to the right and squeezed off a shot at the approaching men, keeping her fingers crossed on her left hand while holding the rifle. Crossing her fingers was superstitious, but they needed extra luck. Hopefully, they wouldn’t run into a squad of heavily armed mercenaries just inside the garage.

The bolt from her rifle stunned two men in one shot. Roberta continued toward the darkened doorway. A bolt hit her arm, causing her to stumble and fall to the ground. Daphne fired off a few shots in the direction where the bolt came from. There was no time to take aim. They were fighting for seconds.

Daphne dropped to her knee when she caught up to Roberta. Roberta held her arm and grunted while rolling back and forth.

“Get going, girl,” said Roberta.

Daphne grabbed Roberta by her bad arm and tugged her to her feet. Roberta groaned.

“No lying on the ground now,” said Daphne.

A bolt whizzed by Daphne’s nose. Missing by a millimeter. She rotated right and fired off a few more shots. Several men dropped to the ground. Then Daphne sighted in each person heading their way. They were distant and she wasn’t sure how effective the stun rifle would be, but she squeezed off one shot per attacker.

The first man twisted when he was shot, but then continued to run toward her. She aimed at the closest target and knocked him on his face. Then she waited for the second closest man to close the distance. He started firing his handgun at her. His aim went wild, but her aim was dead-on. She squeezed the trigger and knocked him backward. His body laid still. A knock-out stun.

Roberta limped toward the dark opening while Daphne finished off the last two men heading her direction. When the last man fell, Daphne got to her feet and sprinted to the garage. She checked the count of stun blasts left in the capacitor.

One.

There was no choice but to hold on to the rifle until she could assess the situation inside the hangar.

She grumbled to herself. “I can’t believe I’m hauling around this heavy stun rifle with only one shot left.”

Daphne stopped just inside the garage and waited for her eyes to adjust. There was one shuttle inside the bay. It wasn’t very large, but they only needed to escape, for now. Maybe she could make an insurance claim on her ship when they got back to civilization. Worry about getting free first, then worry about the Waterfowl. Another grim thought popped into her head. She wasn’t sure of Lowell’s location and, assuming they didn’t have him locked up in the palace, the galaxy was a large place.

Daphne ran up the ramp and bumped into Roberta, who had stopped to catch her breath while still holding her injured arm. There was no time to waste as Daphne hit the ramp close button. RUSTY’s eyes glowed from the dark area in the back of the shuttle where he was seated. She headed toward the cockpit and hoped the shuttle had similar controls from the ships she had piloted before. There was no time to learn how to fly a new machine.

The cockpit consisted of an array of controls and one seat. For the pilot. The rest of the shuttle was for passengers and maybe a little cargo, like carry-on baggage. Daphne searched the console for some sort of startup button. When she touched a screen on the right side, the console controls lit up. The main touch screen contained one virtual button titled “power up?”

A smile crept across her face. “Why yes, thank you.”

The engines whined as they waited for the startup bar to complete its trek across the screen and indicate she could take off. When the word “ready” appeared, she operated the controls. The shuttle popped straight up and nearly collided with the ceiling. She over-corrected by rapidly pushing down on the controls. The landing gear banged on the floor, causing her to pull up again.

A few bounces later and she acquired the fine-touch feel for the controls.

“Are you havin’ fun up there,” said Roberta.

“It’s all under control, now,” said Daphne.

She engaged the forward thruster and aimed for the center of the open doorway, which looked much smaller now that she was attempting to pilot a ship through it.

The top of the craft scraped along the ceiling as they exited. The tearing of metal made Daphne’s skin crawl.

“Oops,” she said.

As soon as she thought the vehicle was clear, she pushed the thrust to the full forward position.

The left side of the craft banged as a bolt of energy hit them. She knew it would have no effect. Handgun fire would not be able to penetrate the thin armor of a shuttle. The sky was bright as they cleared the palace. Daphne relaxed while monitoring the controls and determined they were out of firing range.

Within minutes, the sky turned dark. She guided the shuttle into a stable orbital pattern. The scope was clear, their escape was successful.

“I think we lost them,” said Daphne.

“Good,” said Roberta. “Let’s see if we can find a destination and get it programmed into the nav computer.”

“Right.”

Yup, they were home free. All they had to do was get to a safe harbor and let the authorities take care of the problem.

How hard could it be?

**CHAPTER 25**

Daphne searched through every cubby in the cockpit. Then she tapped on the touch screen of the main console and navigated through the menus. It seemed as though the owner of the vehicle had all of their destination coordinates in their head. Even the nav computer didn’t have any lists of common destinations. Daphne slapped her head. Of course, the mob would not want the authorities to get a list of their favorite destinations. Assuming the vehicle was to be impounded.

She huffed and leaned back in her seat. A noise from the passenger compartment made her curious. What were Roberta and RUSTY up to? When she turned her head to look toward the back of the shuttle, RUSTY was helping Roberta with a bandage around her arm. At least he was doing something useful for a change.

A beeping noise on the sensor console made the most irritating screeching sound she had ever heard. She put a hand up to her ear while hunting for a reset button. Any reset button. In the event there was no reset, she vowed to disable the speaker by ripping it out of the overhead with her bare hands.

A green button next to the screen with a strange symbol printed on it appeared to be the right button, so she pressed it. The loud noise ceased, and she was able to remove her hand from her ear, though her hearing was ringing from the sudden quietness.

A blip appeared on the sensor screen. She touched it with her index finger and read out the detailed data printed on the screen next to the sensor screen.

“Looks like we got company,” she said.

Roberta blew a raspberry. “There’s a surprised. I was afraid of that.”

“What?” said Daphne.

“Those numskulls don’t trust their own people. I bet they put trackers on everything that moves.”

“According to the sensors, the ship behind us is larger and will intercept us in ten minutes.”

“We can’t outrun them?”

“Nope. They’re gaining on us, and we’re at full throttle.”

“Jump drive?”

Daphne pressed a control for the jump drive, but it did nothing. Then she noticed the jump drive menu on the nav computer and selected the jump drive status. A red flashing message appeared.

“Disabled.”

“Shoot,” said Roberta. “They can probably shut the darn thing down remotely.”

The ship became quiet as the controls shut down. Daphne scanned the console to look for any new errors.

“Looks like the main drive just shut down.”

“Makes sense. They can shut that down remotely as well.”

“Surrender is a perfectly logical option,” said RUSTY.

“You need a logic upgrade, kid,” said Roberta.

Roberta started banging on the back bulkhead of the passenger compartment, but Daphne’s attention was consumed by the emergency at hand. The contact on the sensor was closing fast and none of the controls seemed to work.

Daphne turned her head to see Roberta forcing a hatch open. The hatch popped off with a loud bang. When she set the panel aside, she whistled. Packed in plastic were square packs of bills.

“There must be thousands… millions,” said Roberta.

RUSTY leaned in to take a quick look, then sat back in his seat. “I estimate 3,475,000, if the bills are stacked one-layer deep.”

Roberta grabbed a pack and wrestled it out. They were packed in tight and the removal of one pack exposed a second layer of bills behind the stack in front.

“6,950,000,” said RUSTY.

Roberta stuffed the pack of bills back in place, then replaced the panel. It popped back out, but she banged it harder with her fist to make it stick.

“I think we’re in a heap of trouble,” she said.

Daphne checked the sensors. “Not that it matters. The pursuing ship will be on us in the next two minutes. We have no way to escape.”

Roberta crawled toward the front and squeezed beside Daphne. She reached out and hit a control on the panel. Nothing happened. She tapped it with two fingers a couple of times out of frustration.

“Sorry,” said Daphne. “I already tried that. It’s locked out.”

Roberta tapped on another button. Then she pressed on the navigation computer touch screen. After a minute of navigating through a set of complex menus, she pulled her hand back and stared.

“Hmmm,” she said. “Looks like the jump drive can be activated, but there are only two coordinates this nav computer will allow.”

“Do you know where they go?” said Daphne.

“Well,” said Roberta. “You pick.”

“OK. Let’s roll the bones.”

Roberta reached out and touched the jump drive activate button. The star pattern outside the front windshield shifted. Daphne wasn’t used to such an advanced jump drive system. Her ship usually took longer to jump, and the effects were dizzying. The shuttle they stole was quick, smooth as silk, with no aftereffects.

Flashes in the distance blinded her for a moment. Daphne grabbed the controls and pushed down to place the shuttle in orbit around a nearby planet. She thought about finding a place to land. That might buy them some time to dig into the systems on the shuttle and override the lockouts.

“Uh, oh,” said Roberta.

“What?” said Daphne.

Roberta operated the sensor display to zoom out. Thousands of tiny dots formed a cloud around the planet. Most were military ships involved in a planetary siege. Daphne’s thoughts of landing on the planet suddenly changed. More than a dozen of the military targets changed their trajectory and turned toward them.

“That’s a lot of warships,” said Daphne.

Roberta squeezed back out of the cockpit, giving Daphne room to handle the controls.

“Maybe it’s time to try the other coordinate,” said Daphne. She touched the other coordinate displayed on the nav computer, then pressed the jump activate button. The ship went dark. One light on the control panel flashed. Daphne growled.

*System override enabled.*

“Rats!”

**CHAPTER 26**

A massive warship approached, then opened a bay on its belly. The bay swallowed up their minuscule shuttle as if it were a speck of dirt. Giant industrial arms reached out and latched onto their craft and maneuvered them to a docking port. After a few thumps where the ship sounded like it was colliding with the side of the docking port, the seal indicator rose from its red position.

Roberta peeked out the tiny window in the side hatch.

“They’re opening their airlock door,” said Roberta. “Looks like a boat-load of soldiers with big guns headed our way.”

“That’s OK,” said Daphne. “We only have a weenie stun gun and your rifle. Oh, and RUSTY’s stunners.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “We’re a sad group of soldiers.”

The hatch to their craft was manually forced open from the outside. The seal broke and Daphne’s ears popped.

“Oh,” said Roberta. “That hurts. Why do they have to do that?”

The soldiers wasted no time pulling the hatch fully open and jerking Roberta and RUSTY out of the back compartment. Daphne held her hands over her head.

They were placed in a holding cell for an hour before a squad of soldiers came back to move them. The soldiers paraded them through the destroyer until they reached a long passageway. One with windows looking out into space. The long passageway connected the destroyer to a space station. Daphne wondered what space station they were being transferred to, but decided to keep quiet.

“Where are you taking us?” said Roberta. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

The ranking soldier turned his head but continued to march ahead with his men and the prisoners. “You are being temporarily transferred to the orbital command post. General Booth wants to speak with you. Though, I have no idea what purpose he has with a group of misfits like you people.”

It was a long walk to their destination and Daphne prepared to spend another eternity inside of a cell. Judging by the advanced appearance of the orbital station they were on, their prison cells should be relatively luxurious. Especially by the standards of what she was used to.

The black, shiny bulkheads appeared to be polished by hand. No doubt as a punishment to soldiers that got out of line. Even the deck was only slightly marred by the boots of soldiers who recently marched along the corridor. The red, dimmed lighting inside the station kept one’s pupils from constricting too far. The place reminded Daphne of an underworld. Gargoyles and demons would have appeared right at home on this station.

Double doors parted as they arrived at a massive control center with a high, multi-story ceiling. Touch screens wrapped around the room and throngs of military personnel stood in front of the screens, operating controls. Everywhere Daphne looked, displays showed battles occurring. Most of the displays showed the same map of the planetary surface. Landing craft were delivering men and material to the battlefield like a conveyor belt. Dots representing soldiers clustered into boxy patterns, moving into positions to encircle and attack enemy forces.

“Ah,” said a voice. Daphne turned toward the new voice. A large man wearing an army uniform studded with stars across his shoulders and multi-colored ribbons on his chest smiled at them. She only stared, not aware of the man’s intentions regarding their capture.

He continued, “I see our guests have arrived. I am General Kasper Booth. I believe you are the infamous Daphne Blazefire.”

Daphne nodded, but said nothing. Darn face scanners matched her face with data the military kept of previous encounters with her.

“And you,” he said. “Our scanners had difficulty identifying you with any certainty. They indicate there is a 65 percent chance you are Roberta. However, you have not been picked up by any scanners on any inner world in some time.”

Roberta grinned at the general. “I managed to keep to myself all these years. Decided I didn’t like the smell of military people, especially after my last run-in with you. I believe you were a young lieutenant at the time?”

General Booth mocked. “It is you, and you haven’t changed a bit. Still got the forked tongue.”

“Yeah, well,” said Roberta. “Let’s cut the crap, shall we?” She still held her grin. “What do you want from us?”

Daphne thought about the chunk of cash in the shuttle they had stolen. Maybe they could bribe the general with cash. After a little more contemplation, she realized there was no way to retrieve the money and hand it over. The military would just grab the stash themselves and the three of them could be jettisoned into space.

General Booth kept his smile as well. He waved his large hand for Roberta to come closer. Then he rested his hand on her shoulder and leaned over to talk directly into her ear. Daphne could still hear the entire conversation, since he was not trying to be secretive about what he was saying.

“I have someone for you to meet.”

“Who?” said Roberta.

“All in good time. First, where did this robot come from?”

Daphne stepped next to RUSTY and smiled. “He’s mine.”

The general said nothing. Daphne assumed her answer was adequate.

“General Booth, sir,” said a woman at a console. “We’re picking up an anomaly.”

The general’s smile faded as he stared at the woman. Then he dropped his arms by his side and moved to a position in front of the screen the woman was monitoring. She pointed at something and spoke in soft tones while he nodded.

“When will it collide with the station?” said General Booth.

“In approximately fifty minutes,” she said.

“Dispatch a squadron of fighters. I want eyes on that anomaly.”

“Yes, sir.”

General Booth nodded, then he turned toward Roberta and painted a grin back on his face. A young soldier approached the general, then saluted. He handed a tablet to the general. Daphne recognized the young man right away.

“Lowell,” she said.

Lowell’s head snapped toward her. Then he acted as though he had not heard her. She glanced at his clothes and noticed he was wearing the wrong type of uniform. She wasn’t an expert, but she knew the difference between an officer’s uniform and enlisted. Lowell was wearing an officer’s uniform and his name tag said “Thomas.”

General Booth stared at Daphne. She noticed his eyes squinting, then he looked “Thomas” up and down.

“You know this man?” said General Booth.

“I, uh,” said Daphne.

“No, sir,” said Thomas. “She’s mistaken.” He quickly saluted the general before retreating further into the control room.

“I must have been mistaken,” said Daphne. “He looks like someone I once knew.” She could feel her face warming as she tried to redirect the general’s attention away from the current conversation.

It had to be Lowell, but what was he up to? Lowell had mentioned he was going on a secret mission. This had to be what he was up to. Lowell had told her not to tell anyone. Did that include General Booth? When Daphne glanced toward the general, he stared at her with his steely eyes. She tried to relax, but felt awkward.

“Now, where were we?” said General Booth.

“We were discussing someone else we were supposed to meet,” said Roberta. “Then, hopefully, you’ll send us on our way. I’ve got pies in the oven and they’ll be burnt if I don’t get back soon.”

“Yes, yes,” said General Booth. He turned and disappeared into the mass of operators clogging the control room. Daphne craned her neck, but could not tell where the large guy went.

Lowell approached. He looked to each side before he stopped in front of Roberta. Daphne knew it was him, but his behavior looked suspicious. If he were pretending to be Thomas, then his cover was certainly blown by now.

“General Booth has ordered me to escort you to the guest quarters,” said Lowell.

They followed him through the passageways and down to a lower level. There were no soldiers visible in the passageways when Lowell stopped and turned.

“I shouldn’t be telling you guys this,” said Lowell. “But I’ve been assigned by high command to spy on the officers at this station. Command has intelligence indicating someone high up in this facility is selling weapons to a mob boss. Though they are not sure which mob boss is involved. And, frankly, we don’t know which officer either.”

“Well,” said Roberta. “What do you know?”

“Military weapons have gone missing under suspicious circumstances. Whoever is doing it is using the battlefield as cover for their illicit operations.”

“Sorry,” said Daphne. “I think I blew your cover.”

“Yeah, kid,” said Roberta. “I saw the general’s eyes. He looked suspicious.”

“Nah,” said Lowell. “It’s fine. He’s suspicious of everyone. I’ve gotten used to it. So far, he hasn’t demonstrated any illegal actions, but command told me the exchange was supposed to start this week. Something about a payment in the order of seven million big ones.”

“Really?” said Roberta. She sounded completely surprised. “That much, eh?”

“Um,” said Daphne. Her face warmed again.

The clomping of soldiers marching down the passageway interrupted their conversation. The soldiers stopped, stood at attention, and saluted. Lowell returned a salute, then they continued on their way. Lowell stood in place and watched the soldiers as they disappeared around the corner.

Lowell led them to a doorway with a plaque beside it titled Guest 107. Further up the passageway was “Guest 109.” On the other side was “Guest 108.” There was a guest chow hall beyond that. Daphne assumed they designed the station to contain all the guests in the same region. It made sense. Security could keep track of all guests and they could lock all exits around their rooms to keep them from wandering into secured areas.

Lowell pressed the open button. The door slid to the side, RUSTY let out a quick high-pitched noise and folded into a cube just outside the door. Mr. Kobayashi stood inside with a group of large people dressed in expensive suits. Judging by the machine gun sticking out from under one of the suits, it was a good assumption they were security guards. Mr. Kobayashi stood with his arms folded.

“You guys brought my money, right?” said Mr. Kobayashi.

**CHAPTER 27**

Mr. Kobayashi’s guards stepped forward and grabbed Lowell and Daphne. She noticed the room was large and empty of any furniture. Durable floor covering simulated a carpeted surface and went from wall-to-wall. Daphne’s eyes thought it was a short carpeting until she stepped on it and realized it had a rubbery feel. Leave it to the military to invent an attractive substitute for carpeting they could hose off if it became too dirty.

Lowell was cuffed.

“I believe your real name is Lowell,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “Your disguise has been compromised and your services in the military will no longer be needed.”

“What do you want with me?” said Lowell.

“I want to know everything you know about my little operation. But we’ll have plenty of time to discuss your intelligence collection later. After you are safely detained at my facility.”

Mr. Kobayashi turned his attention to Daphne, who was struggling against two large men holding each of her arms. Roberta stood in place as two other guards stood on either side of her about a meter away.

“Now, one final piece of business,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “I would like my robot, please.”

The guard to the right of Daphne lost his grip as he stumbled forward. When Daphne glanced at him, she saw Roberta had plowed into the guard. Now Daphne had only one guard to worry about. She twisted her arm and dropped to her knees to add leverage to her escape. It worked. The guard lost his grip on her as Roberta grabbed her free arm and yanked her to her feet.

“It’s time to go, kid,” said Roberta.

The two guards flanking Roberta closed in, but Roberta ducked to the side. The maneuver was so fast, the guards stumbled right past the two of them.

“But, what about Lowell?” said Daphne.

“No time for that. Our opening to escape is closing fast.”

Roberta kicked RUSTY-box, making a loud clanking sound. RUSTY unfolded and followed. Then he ran ahead as Daphne ran behind Roberta.

“Where are we going?” said Daphne. A bolt of energy flew past her head. She swore she could feel the heat as it zinged past her ear.

“Don’t know yet,” said Roberta. “I’ll tell ya when we get there.”

Roberta veered to one side of the passageway just as a large cluster of bolts flew past. Daphne tried to run back and forth to make targeting harder. Doing so was more instinct than anything.

They rounded the corner and entered a circular area with multiple passageways leading in every direction. Each passageway went up or down like spokes to other levels. Roberta did not slow down or stop. She powered up a ramp and continued without looking back. The bolts of energy stopped. Daphne risked a look behind and saw nobody was following them… yet.

Roberta took a right and headed down another passageway. Then she took another turn at an intersection they arrived at. Daphne was thoroughly lost. Not that she had any clue where they were when they started.

There were many hatches along the passageway and Roberta hit the open button on each of them. Most of the doors gave off a nasty quacking sound, which obviously meant there was no access. Then a door swished aside and Roberta stopped. She shoved Daphne into the compartment. RUSTY had run past, but turned around and retreated into the room. Then Roberta entered and hit the button to shut the door. She operated the control panel for a minute until she was satisfied with what she was doing. Then she put her back against the bulkhead and tried to catch her breath.

Daphne leaned against the bulkhead, then slid down until she was seated on the deck. They were in a storage compartment of some type. There were cabinets lined against the bulkheads. The doors were all black, like the bulkheads, with digital combo locks on each.

“Now what?” said Daphne.

“Not sure yet,” said Roberta. “We need a plan.”

“I think I have one, but it’s going to take some explaining.”

“Shoot.”

“I saw this in an ancient movie called Star Wars.”

“That’s great, kid, but I’m not too keen on getting into a garbage compactor.”

Daphne froze for a minute. “So, you’ve seen Star Wars?”

“Sure did. Love that movie. It’s old and fantastically ridiculous in light of current technology, but still a lot of fun. And that Harrison Ford guy was a hot number back then.”

“OK,” said Daphne. She shook her head. “I was referring to their plan to shut down the tractor beam.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about a tractor beam.”

“No, but I was thinking we might be able to sneak around and find the controls for the power center to the station. Then we can shut down the power and escape by stealing a ship in the dark. All the military types will be disoriented by the loss of power.”

“It sounds like a fantastic plan, kid.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, except we have no clue where the power plant is for this station and how to shut it down. Besides, it’s probably behind thick security doors and guarded by a battalion of soldiers.”

“Yeah,” said Daphne. “RUSTY could tap into their network and we might be able to sift through the blueprints for this place. Assuming we could find those. But the guards? Probably not going to get close to the power station after all.” Daphne fell silent. Thinking.

The lights went out and the background noise ceased.

Daphne looked around, but couldn’t see her hand in front of her face.

“I see the lights went out,” said Roberta.

RUSTY’s eyes glowed red.

“Yeah, we don’t have to look for the station power generator.”

The floor shook. Daphne held her hands out in the dark to steady herself. Then the floor shook harder. An explosion could be heard in the distance just before another quake almost knocked Daphne off her feet.

“I think someone is attacking the station,” said Roberta. Roberta’s watch glowed for a second. “Yeah, it’s been fifty minutes since the people in the control room reported something about an anomaly headed toward us. Maybe the enemy has some sort of stealth tech.”

“I guess we have our diversion,” said Daphne.

“Keep your fingers crossed. We can find a ship that’s easy to steal,” said Roberta.

“What about Lowell?” said RUSTY.

“Aw, RUSTY, I didn’t know you cared,” said Daphne.

“I don’t. But I assumed we would rescue him and he should have access to the station systems. Maybe he could get us a transport heading out of here.”

“Shoot,” said Roberta. “I’m sure they pulled his access rights before we met up with that Kobayashi fella. If not, then he’s probably being transferred someplace by Mr. Kobayashi’s guards right now. It’s unlikely we’ll find him in a reasonable time.”

“We’ll have to come up with a plan to rescue Lowell later,” said Daphne. “I’m sure he’s safe with Mr. Kobayashi for now. If I heard Mr. Kobayashi correctly, he wanted Lowell alive so he can find out what he knows.”

“Sounds like your boyfriend is in for some torture,” said Roberta.

“Yeah, that’s the downside.”

**CHAPTER 28**

Roberta led the way out of the storage compartment and down the passageway. Everything was darker than before. Military soldiers and robots crisscrossed in front of them as they made their way down the passageway. Alarms blared, causing more confusion than seemed necessary. Daphne saw a touch screen on the bulkhead and tapped Roberta’s shoulder. Roberta slowed, then stopped in front of the screen.

Daphne touched the screen. Butterflies formed as she recognized the diagram as that of the station. She zoomed and touched different locations on the screen. When she found a transport bay, she touched a control showing the directions to her desired destination. She pointed ahead, and they continued running.

The deck shuddered as enemy forces attacked the station. A high-pitch whistling sound ahead sounded like an air leak. Daphne hoped it would not become catastrophic in the next minute or so. Otherwise, they were sunk.

Blast doors closed behind and in front of them. RUSTY ducked lower and lower to get under the door. Roberta dropped and rolled. Daphne slid on her rear to get through the lowering door before it slammed shut.

Daphne stood, then walked to a massive hatch and hit the open button. A nasty sound chirped at her. She groaned.

“RUSTY, you’re up,” she said.

RUSTY stepped in front of the panel, then extracted the right tool to open it. Once he removed the panel and pulled it away from the wall, he plugged into the exposed socket. RUSTY seemed to freeze in place as he ran millions of combinations through the device at high speed.

Daphne leaned her back against the bulkhead and rested for a moment. She glanced at RUSTY, but he was still frozen in place. Daphne wondered what was on the other side of the door. Maybe a small ship they could steal? If it was too big or too complicated to fly, they’d have to scout out other bays to find a ship they could ride out of this station. She looked at RUSTY again. He was still frozen in place.

Something was wrong.

“What’s going on?” said Daphne. Normally, RUSTY would bust into a digital combo in seconds. This one seemed to be giving him fits.

“The combo for this door is military-grade encryption,” said RUSTY. “However, I still have an enormous number of CPUs I can dedicate to the task of cracking it.”

“Yay, RUSTY.”

“Don’t get too excited,” said Roberta. “Darn robot ain’t got the door open yet.”

Daphne sighed and leaned back against the bulkhead. Her head clunked against the steel as she folded her arms.

The deck shook violently. Daphne grabbed a hand-hold nearby to steady herself.

“Station breach in progress,” blared the overhead speakers. “All personnel are directed to evacuate immediately.”

“Now would be a good time to open the hatch, RUSTY,” said Daphne.

The blast door at the other end of the passageway slowly opened. Soldiers poured under as it still rose from the deck. Then the hatch closed behind them as they continued to approach. They stopped at the hatch Daphne, RUSTY, and Roberta stood in front of. RUSTY disconnected from the panel. Then he and Roberta stood against the bulkhead near Daphne.

A soldier stepped up and grabbed the touch pad hanging by its cable harness. He didn’t even look at Daphne and her friends. He merely typed in a combo and waited for the blast door to open. Then the soldiers continued on their way to a military drop ship parked in the bay.

“Come on,” said Roberta. “I see just the ship that should do the trick.”

They entered the bay and headed directly toward a small ship parked off to the side. The blast door closed behind them. Roberta opened the side hatch of the vehicle, then hopped inside. RUSTY was next, followed by Daphne, who closed the hatch behind. Not a moment too soon. A red flashing light in the middle of the bay indicated the soldiers were evacuating the air in preparation for opening the outer doors. Daphne wondered if they cared about anyone else in the bay.

Roberta operated the controls. She flipped one switch on, then switched it off. Then she selected another, shook her head and switched it off.

“Need help?” said Daphne.

“I got this,” said Roberta. “Believe me, it’s all comin’ back. Like ridin’ a bike.”

Daphne pointed at a switch she knew would warm up the main engine starting mechanism.” Roberta flipped the switch, grinned, and nodded.

“Just like a bicycle,” said Roberta. Then she pressed a button to start the engine. Daphne sat in the copilot seat and watched as the bay door slowly opened. Dark, cold space was just beyond. They needed to get there before the station blew. Daphne wondered if Lowell had made it out already. She hoped he was safe.

Roberta pulled back on the controls, causing the ship to tilt up too high and move backward. The ship shuddered as they ran into something large. Probably the bulkhead. Roberta shook her head and struggled with the controls. It took a minute to stabilize their craft, but she did it and they cruised out of the exit hatch, right behind the military drop ship.

“Just like a bicycle,” said Roberta. Though she said it a little quieter, as if she were reassuring herself.

Daphne smiled and looked at Roberta. “See, my plan worked.”

Roberta hitched, then smiled. “Sure did. Though it wasn’t how I envisioned things going down.”

Daphne wondered about Colonel Bardsley and his comment about her getting lucky. She was determined to change all that. She was not the Daphne from the streets and she knew she could control her destiny. Eventually, she was going to prove it. To everyone around her and especially to herself.

Daphne looked down at the navigational system. She selected a world. A nice, safe, commercial planet with no battle going on. Then she hit the activate button.

The star field changed and traffic control called for their information. Daphne used her own ship information. It was not exactly legal, but she didn’t want to attract attention to their stolen military vehicle.

“Feeling all proud of yourself, aren’t you?” said Roberta.

Daphne didn’t miss the subtle smile on Roberta’s face. “It should work. They’ll assign us a space large enough for my cargo ship. This thing should fit OK.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “But military ships come with scrambled IFF units. That way they can identify friend from foe. Hence the name.”

Daphne felt her stomach churning again. “So…”

“They’re sure to know that this is not the Waterfowl. If they don’t nail us at the dock as we land, we should remove the unit and get rid of it first thing.”

“I have a better idea,” said Daphne. “We remove the unit on this craft, then swap it with one on another cargo vessel. Preferably an older vessel with parts we can steal with ease.”

“Do you know where the device is located on cargo vessels?”

“Sort of. I know where the IFF is on the Waterfowl. I assume other ships are similar.”

“Well. Let’s start by removing the one on this thing. I think it’s in the nose. You’ll have to jump out and remove it as soon as the skids hit the pavement.”

“RUSTY,” said Daphne. “Grab some tools. Every military craft has a tool kit.”

RUSTY rummaged around in the back of the tiny craft. Then he handed a metal box to Daphne. She looked it over. It had tools that RUSTY didn’t have built in. Good.

“Thanks RUSTY.”

“My pleasure.”

**CHAPTER 29**

Removing the panel on the outside of their stolen vehicle turned out to be the easy part. After that, Daphne tried to see how the small box could be extracted. Tubes crisscrossed in front of the box and needed to be removed before she would be able to get it out of the slot. The first tube was stiff and difficult to access. She used a small wrench to loosen the nut on the end, holding the tube in place. Cooling fluid dripped out as she continued to loosen it. When it popped off, a small amount of liquid spilled onto the ground.

“Hope we don’t need more cooling fluid,” said Daphne.

“We don’t really need this vessel,” said Roberta. “All we need to do is get the IFF unit on another ship. Preferably one that is preparing to leave. Then we can just toss their IFF inside this vessel and get out of here. The authorities will chase after the other ship for days before finding out what happened. By then, we should be long gone.”

“Got it,” said Daphne.

“Good, let’s put it in that ship over there,” said Roberta.

“No, I mean, I understand your plan now. These tubes are going to take some time to remove.”

Roberta laughed. “OK, kid. Take your time. But not too much time.”

Daphne put her small wrench on the next nut and turned it. There wasn’t much room inside the nose compartment of the military ship. She could only turn the nut a tiny amount before she had to remove the wrench and reposition it for the next turn. It was tedious. Too bad they couldn’t just leave this ship and run for it. Except, the authorities would come looking for the ship within the hour. Once they tracked down the ship, they would know she and her friends were somewhere nearby. If, however, the authorities track the IFF off planet, then their search might take days, like Roberta mentioned.

“RUSTY,” said Daphne.

RUSTY stepped up.

Daphne pointed at the tubes she was working on. “See if you can remove these tubes faster than I can. Just rip them out, but don’t damage the metal box behind them.”

“Roger,” said RUSTY.

Daphne stepped back and folded her arms. RUSTY reached in, then extracted a screwdriver tip and pried the tubes off at the ends. More fluid dripped down from the compartment.

“Done,” said RUSTY.

Daphne unscrewed the four holding screws, then used the metal pull handle to extract the unit from its holder. She looked over the connector and smiled. It was the same connector used by civilian versions of IFF. Thank god someone high up in the government wrote a law stating all ships would use the same connector type for IFF. Otherwise, they were likely to be sunk.

“Daphne Blazefire,” said a man.

Daphne knew that voice. All three of them turned and saw detective Ramsey standing with a dozen officers behind him. He had a large grin on his face. Which didn’t mean he was a pleasant man stopping by to greet her.

“I see you’re up to your usual shenanigans,” he said.

Daphne dropped her arm and let the IFF unit hang by her fingers. Ramsey stepped up and grabbed it out of her hand.

“I’ll take that,” he said. Then he looked around the ship they had ridden in on. “Just as I suspected when I was notified of the military IFF. It wasn’t connected to the Waterfowl.”

“Nice of you to notice,” said Daphne. “How did you know we were arriving at this place and time?”

“Well,” said Ramsey. “After you violated an order to remain grounded until all violations were repaired, we put out a BOLO on your ship. We’re just here to arrest you for violating almost two hundred safety codes and running from the law.”

Roberta grunted. “Girl… You just go from one trouble to the next.”

“Welcome to my life,” said Daphne.

“Yes,” said RUSTY. Her crazy robot was shaking his head. “Never a dull moment.”

**CHAPTER 30**

Ah, Hadley Correctional Facility. The last time Daphne had been locked up in this place was the time when the military had picked up her and Pax up for having a planet-busting bomb. Now she was in the interrogation room, waiting for detective Ramsey to storm in with his massive file of blank papers, a tactic he loved to use to rattle suspects. She started to laugh. Would he really use the same technique on her again? Well, she had to admit she probably had a larger rap sheet since the last time they grilled her.

The smooth table blended with the floor and chair. She wondered if they molded the entire room from one solid piece of plastic, or perhaps it was built up with a 3-D printing machine, one scan at a time.

The door opened and detective Ramsey entered, alone. As she expected, he had a massive folder full of paper he slapped onto the table.

“Are we going to play this game again?” said Daphne.

“Which game would that be?”

“You know. The one where you pretend you have a massive dossier compiled of all my transgressions—”

Ramsey pointed at the folder. “—Oh that? That’s our dossier on Roberta.”

Daphne nodded. “Right. She doesn’t seem like someone that would fall for that baloney.”

“Let’s just say it’s her work resume and most of it is redacted, making it worthless. Just one or two words per sentence. Like reading a second-grade reading book.”

He opened her folder and flipped through it. Daphne could see the pages were not blank.

“Well, that’s an improvement. Decided not to use a pile of blank sheets this time?”

“Yeah,” said Ramsey. “Not quite.” He slapped the folder shut and leaned on it. “Let’s talk about what you were up to. Just start back when the inspectors left and you decided to bug out.”

“You can’t pin that on me. You see, RUSTY wanted to rescue Lowell… well, there was also the incident where the mobsters showed up and tied me up in my galley.”

“When did that occur?”

Daphne squinted. “It seems like weeks had passed, but I’m pretty sure it was only a couple of days ago. What day of the week is this?”

Ramsey nodded his head. Daphne was sure everything was being recorded, even though he had not brought in any devices.

“Thursday. Um, local time.”

“Anyway, we arrived on the mob’s home planet—”

“—Which mob?”

“The one headed by Mr. Kobayashi.”

Ramsey nodded. “Go on.”

“The hitmen must have tracked our ship, because they knew when and where we were going to land. When I stepped out, the armed mobsters grabbed me while RUSTY stole the ship and took off. Stupid, cowardly robot.”

“At what point did you steal the military ship?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Well, skip ahead. I don’t have all day.”

The door opened and Ramsey turned to see who was entering. A police officer leaned in and whispered something into his ear. It was the first time Daphne had seen a person turn a deep shade of red in such a short amount of time.

“I can’t believe this,” he said. Ramsey stood as the officer retreated out the door. Ramsey picked up his folder and stormed out. Then he stopped just outside the open door, turned and faced Daphne. “You must be the luckiest person in the galaxy!”

“I don’t feel lucky,” said Daphne.

“Your friend, Roberta, has a get-out-of-jail free card. Apparently, she has connections. Connections in high places. In addition to this revelation, she can also designate others she wants freed from jail, and we have been told we must comply.”

Daphne smiled. “Well, I guess I am lucky.”

Ramsey slammed the door behind him. Daphne wondered how long it would be before someone came to release her. Then she wondered what was in the file he was carrying. Maybe those sheets were instances of good will Roberta had done toward the authorities and now they owed her, big time. Of course, since everything was redacted, Detective Ramsey was just hauling around a pile of worthless paper.

She snickered. Daphne couldn’t visualize Roberta helping government types. No, she was probably some higher up in her day. Someone with power. She probably did some horrible things and someone else did some horrible things and they made a pact. Yeah, that added up. Daphne wasn’t sure she wanted to know what things Roberta did. As far as she was concerned, they were probably things Roberta did before Daphne was born. Maybe actions requiring the killing of innocents to save other innocents. So many possibilities.

The door slammed open, and Roberta stood there with a giant grin on her face.

“You ready to blow this joint?” she said.

“Some day,” said Daphne. “You and I should sit down with a couple of drinks and tell stories. ‘Cause I wanna know what strings you pulled to get us out of here.”

“Deal,” said Roberta. “But we better not get into too many more binds. I’m running out of favors.”

“That’s OK. It’s my turn to call in a favor. I know someone who might be able to help us out. At the very least, he has resources and can loan us a ship for the time being. Maybe he can also help us rescue Lowell and get the mob off our backs.”

“I hope this person is a really good friend of yours.”

“He might not be such a good friend after we drag him through our mess.”

**CHAPTER 31**

Perry Knight sent a transport from Novis Terminal to pick up Daphne, Roberta, and RUSTY. When they arrived, he had a luxurious conference room ready for them. He mentioned the conference room was a perk of his position on Novis Terminal. Daphne looked around the room and marveled at what the man got as a “perk.” The logistics business must be a boon for Novis Terminal. Probably due to its lucrative location. Perry’s base of operations was a major distribution hub for the planetary system he did business in. His company boasted the fastest transfer speeds in the galaxy and the best storage rates around. All that profit translated into nice digs, like the conference room she now stood in.

Hidden lighting ran along the walls and gave off a soft white glow. A “small” elliptical-shaped table in the center of the room could seat about twenty people. Perry considered the room to be the “small” conference room. The table appeared to be made of some type of wood, but Daphne wasn’t sure what type. She once knew a guy who could identify wood by its grain and color, but she was not interested in learning such things at the time. Now she rubbed her hand across the glassy-smooth surface and wondered if it was hand-crafted, or was it one of those 3-D printed simulations?

Roberta sipped on a glass of ice water with slices of lemon in it. It had taken more than an hour to fill in Perry with everything Roberta and Daphne knew so far. Daphne had hand-sketched some plans and Roberta provided digital copies of the blueprints she had acquired before she and RUSTY went in to perform a rescue. RUSTY stood at the end of the table, like a giant statue.

Perry sat back and blew out a long sigh while running his fingers through his hair. Daphne had never seen the man ruffled like this. Maybe there was no solution and she would have to trade RUSTY for her boyfriend after all. Perry laid his hand-held device on the tabletop, then hit some buttons on it. After a few minutes of typing on his device, he sat back in his seat and folded his arms. The man remained silent.

“What now?” said Daphne.

“Now, we wait,” said Perry. “Mr. Kobayashi’s palace is big. Too large for us to handle. I just sent him a message, asking if he was willing to trade something for Lowell’s life. Maybe there’s an easier way out of this mess.”

“I can only imagine what the guy will ask for,” said Roberta. She took a sip of her water. “I mean, besides the robot.”

“You think he’ll deal with us?” said Daphne.

“There’s one thing I know about Mr. Kobayashi… He loves money more than anything. So, yes, he’ll come back with an offer. It might be an offer we can’t fulfill, but at least it’ll be a start.”

Perry’s device buzzed. He sat up and stared at the screen. Then he tapped a message into the device and sat back.

“He’s willing to deal,” said Perry.

“What does he want?” said Roberta.

“He hasn’t said, yet.”

The device buzzed again. Perry leaned forward, then shook his head.

“He wants RUSTY,” said Perry. RUSTY’s head rotated toward Perry, emitting a tiny squeak. “What does he want with that pile of…” Perry glanced at RUSTY, then cleared his throat. “What does he want with your robot?”

Daphne smiled. “RUSTY grows on you…” She sighed. “OK, I’m not sure why he wants him. He claims that he’s the owner. Somehow, RUSTY was stolen and I think he blames me, though he mentioned that RUSTY was stolen before someone my age would have been born.”

Perry stared at RUSTY for some time. “Huh. Do you remember anything about Mr. Kobayashi?”

RUSTY shook his head. The tiny squeaking sound it made had everyone gritting their teeth.

“Maybe your robot has memories he can’t access—”

Daphne jumped up from her seat. “That’s it!” Then she settled back into her seat while scratching her head. “Maybe that’s it. He has memories, but the lab said they don’t know what the memories contain.”

“Somehow,” said Perry. “My gut tells me giving RUSTY over to Mr. Kobayashi would be a bad thing, and not just because you have to give up your robot friend. There might be something Mr. Kobayashi would obtain, giving him great power or money. Maybe a secret code or something.”

“I suspect only Mr. Kobayashi knows what RUSTY has inside of him, for sure,” said Daphne.

“I guess we’ll have to figure out some other way to rescue Lowell.”

“I already tried going through the front door,” said Roberta. “It worked pretty well, except RUSTY left the ship unguarded.”

“Maybe we can use more smoke this time,” said Daphne.

“They’re going to expect that,” said Roberta.

“Can we blow open a back entrance?”

“I got it,” said Perry. He sat back in his seat as a smile crept across his face. “Oh, this is good.”

“Well,” said Roberta. “Don’t keep it to yourself.”

“All right. I know another mob boss… well, I know a few, but this one hates Mr. Kobayashi and I figure we could pit one of them against the other.”

“So, how are you going to pit them against each other?” said Daphne.

“Well…” Perry squinted his eyes as he stared across the room. “We can contact Stella Joraslafski and tell her Mr. Kobayashi’s robot has the information of a safe deposit box with enough cash to take over everyone’s business. She’s pretty short-tempered. I assume she’ll send in her own people to take out Mr. Kobayashi and his men. Especially if she thinks Mr. Kobayashi has the robot.”

Roberta shrugged. “Well, I don’t see how it would hurt.”

Perry typed on his device for some time, then he read it over before hitting the send button. He folded his arms and set back. The reply came in almost no time.

“She’s a fast reader,” said Daphne.

Perry looked at his screen and read the reply. “She wants to know what’s in it for her.”

He sat silently for some time before typing something into his device. Then he hit send.

“What did you promise her?” said Roberta.

“Nothing. She still owes me a favor. I just reminded her of the incident where I bailed her out of the trouble she was in some twelve years ago. Oh, and we want a man named ‘Lowell’ to be freed. Assuming she plans to go into Mr. Kobayashi's compound and grab the robot.”

“But the robot is not there,” said Roberta. “What happens if Stella knocks over the whole compound and doesn’t find the robot? Will she let Lowell go?”

“I suspect we’ll have to go in after her and rescue Lowell while she and her people are tearing the place apart looking for the robot.”

“That’s a lotta moving parts, honey,” said Roberta.

“That it is,” said Perry. “But it’s the best plan I got, and it’s already in motion. All we have to do is wait for her to call me back and tell me when she’s going to hit the compound.”

“Assuming you can still trust Stella,” said Daphne.

**CHAPTER 32**

Perry had food delivered to the room. The station had one of the best Chinese restaurants in the solar system. Daphne and Roberta silently shoveled food into their mouths. Perry chewed a bite of food, then froze, staring at Daphne and Roberta. A dozen square cardboard containers littered the table. He frowned at them as the slurping sounds of sucking in noodles filled the compartment.

“Good grief,” said Perry. “You guys were hungrier than you looked.”

Roberta stopped pushing noodles in her mouth with her chopsticks, chewed, and swallowed. “Sorry, sweet cheeks, we just spent the day in jail.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “I only made it to the interrogation room.”

“Who bailed you guys out?” said Perry.

Daphne used her chopsticks to point at Roberta, then shoved another clump of rice and sauce into her mouth. Perry looked at Roberta.

Roberta grinned evilly. “You’re not the only person in the galaxy with powerful contacts.”

Perry nodded, then went back to his methodical eating. His cautious way of holding his head over the table made it appear he was afraid of getting food on his suit. A suit that looked expensive. Probably cost more than Daphne’s ship.

She turned her attention back to the boxes in front of her. There was one on its side, but open to the left. She picked it up, scraped the inside with her sticks, and ate the small bits of food she managed to get out. Then she set the box on the table and looked through the next box. RUSTY stood in place, staring at the far wall.

Perry nudged one of his unopened boxes toward her. At first, she didn’t notice him pushing the box her way, but then she saw him glancing her way while he shoved a small amount of noodles into his mouth.

Normally, Daphne would have been too polite to eat another portion, but she had a hole to fill. By the time she got the box open and her chopsticks in, everyone was staring at her.

“What?” she said.

“For a skinny thing, you sure can eat,” said Roberta.

Perry’s device buzzed. He dropped his sticks and grabbed the mobile device. Everyone froze. Daphne chewed what she had in her mouth and swallowed.

“Stella calling back?” said Daphne.

“It’s a live call,” said Perry. He set the device on the table and hit the speaker button. Then he put his finger to his lips.

“Hello,” said Perry.

“I assume this is Perry Knight?” said a female voice. Daphne assumed it to be Stella Joraslafsky. Someone she had never met.

“Speaking.”

“We have something to show you.”

“We?” said Perry.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, Mr. Kobayashi is with me on this call. We’ve been having a very interesting conversation.”

Daphne felt her heart sink.

“I’d also like to say hello to Daphne Blazefire,” said Stella. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Have you, now?” said Daphne.

Perry swished his screen with his finger, and the video went to the far wall. There were two smiling faces on separate screens, one large man Daphne recognized as Mr. Kobayashi, who took up the whole side of the screen, and the other face of a tough-looking woman she assumed was Stella.

“Ah,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “Daphne. I have something for you to see.” He leaned out of the picture. The camera focused on someone behind him.

Lowell.

Her boyfriend was bound to the board Daphne had been secured to when Mr. Kobayashi tortured her with that ear-piercing sound machine. At least it looked like the same board. Except, it had padding… Maybe Mr. Kobayashi had more than one torture room?

Lowell had a swollen, black eye and his nose appeared to have bled recently, though it was dried now. Streaks ran from his nose and down his face. A burning sensation built up inside of Daphne. Her stomach roiled and her faced warmed. She could no longer hold back her rage.

“This is an outrage,” said Daphne. “I’ll make you two pay for this! I’ll dismantle both of your organizations.”

The two on screen laughed for some time. Then Mr. Kobayashi wiped his eyes and cleared his throat.

“We are not afraid of a little girl,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “Send me my robot. Alone. To these coordinates.” He pressed a button and a set of galactic coordinates appeared at the bottom of the screen.

“How do we know you’ll honor the agreement and release Lowell?” said Roberta.

“I’m sorry, old woman, but all you have is my word,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “From my position, I believe you have no other choice. You have exactly 48 hours. After that, you’ll never see your boyfriend again.”

The screen went blank.

Roberta gasped.

“Well,” said Perry. “That worked well.”

“I guess those two are pretty close,” said Roberta.

“So much for pitting them against each other,” said Perry. “We need a better plan.” Perry stared at RUSTY. Then he stood and walked around the robot. RUSTY rotated his head to follow Perry as he was being studied. The tiny squeak persisted.

Daphne wondered what Perry had in mind.

“You thinking of making a deal with Mr. Kobayashi?” said Roberta.

Perry shook his head. “No. Mr. Kobayashi is only honorable when he has no other way out.”

“My thoughts as well,” said Roberta. “Can’t trust him any further than I can throw him. And he’s a big dude.”

Perry typed something on his hand-held device. Then he nodded.

“We have a few robots in crates in storage. But, they’re newer models. Maybe…”

“You thinking of creating a clone of RUSTY?” said Roberta. “Sans the memories, of course.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

"Oh boy,” said Daphne. “This should be good.”

**CHAPTER 33**

RUSTY, Roberta, and Daphne followed Perry to the cargo hold where spare robots were stored. These were units used on the station to help move cargo. People and robots moved through the corridors as they followed Perry. Like a small city, Novis Terminal never slept. Other than the first time Daphne visited, this station seemed always packed with people crisscrossing to get where they were going. Cargo operators mixed in with workers moving goods around, making repairs, and filling out electronic paperwork. It took some time to arrive at their destination.

Perry entered a combination to open the large doors into the cargo hold. When he stepped into the dark space, the darkness felt like it faded. Massive lights in the overhead and along the walls slowly lit the entire space. The cargo space was not like the run-of-the-mill dreary places Daphne had seen in the past. Everything was stored on racks and clearly marked. When Perry hit a button on his hand-held device, a continuous beeping sound echoed from deep within the compartment.

“It’s over there,” said Perry. “Someplace.”

“That’s a handy feature,” said Roberta. “I wish I had a system like that for my store inventory.”

“Store?” said Perry. “What do you sell?”

“Weapons of all varieties. If you have the cash, I have stuff nobody is supposed to have.”

Perry grinned, but kept walking toward the beeping sound. “I’m surprised the government hasn’t inspected your place.”

“Oh, well, that’s because I live in the periphery. They don’t come out that far. Yet.”

Perry rounded a corner, a red light on the front of a shelf flashed. He hit a button to stop the beeping sound. Then he put his hands on his hips and sighed.

The four of them stopped and stared at a stack of high-impact plastic crates.

Perry rubbed the dust off the tag. “Well, there it is. Though it’s lying on its side.”

“RUSTY,” said Daphne. “Can you tilt that crate up?”

RUSTY stepped up as everyone backed away. He grabbed the handle and dragged the crate into the walkway before lifting it to a vertical position. Then he stepped back.

Perry unsnapped one of the clasps. Then Daphne and Roberta stepped up and unsnapped clasps going down one side while Perry did the other. Perry turned a knob on the front of the case, causing a whistling sound to come out.

He smiled at Daphne. “It’s sealed. Air tight. Gotta equalize the pressure before we can open the case.”

When the air stopped whistling, Perry stepped forward and pulled on the front of the case. The plastic shell scraped on the deck until he was able to separate it from the back. Then he stepped aside and let it drop flat on the deck with a thud. A small cloud of dust kicked up, causing Roberta to cough.

Daphne was mesmerized. Inside a form-fitted foam insert was a similar copy of RUSTY. The robot didn’t have a name emblazoned on its chest. She surmised it had not been given a name yet.

Daphne had a smile going ear-to-ear, but she did not take her eyes off the robot. “Shiny.”

Roberta also stared at the robot. “Yeah. I think that’s going to be a problem.”

Perry sighed. “Yeah, he’s going to need a little work. I’ll have some of my workers set him up in the machine shop and try to match his exterior with RUSTY’s.”

Daphne looked at RUSTY. Her robot stared at the shiny robot in the box as well. Was he jealous?

“Think of him as your stunt double,” said Daphne.

RUSTY’s head squeaked as he turned toward her. “Very funny.”

“Oh boy,” said Perry. “That’s going to be a problem, too. I wonder if my machinists can make the new robot as squeaky as RUSTY.”

“I have a better idea,” said Roberta. “Why don’t we just oil RUSTY. Maybe clean him up a little while we’re at it.”

“But not too clean,” said Daphne. Everyone turned and stared at her. “What? I recently had the opportunity to get him a new paint job and declined. I can point to most of those scrapes and dents and tell you the story behind them.”

RUSTY mumbled something almost audible.

“What was that?” said Roberta. “You have something to say, RUSTY?”

RUSTY let out a sigh sound. “At least three of the dents on my head happened during our failed attempts to escape from the secret pirate base.”

“Was that the time Daphne got her fancy rifle?” said Roberta.

“Yes,” said Daphne. “Yes, it was.” Daphne put her hand on RUSTY’s shoulder. “As I said. We got memories together.”

Perry activated the new robot. Then it spoke.

“Hello,” said the robot. She spoke in a very feminine voice.

“Oh, this just gets better,” said Roberta. She laughed, then folded her arms.

“Huh,” said Daphne. “I would have never expected that. A girl ROBOT that looks like RUSTY.”

Perry smiled. “They all come with female voices. All we have to do is change the settings and she’ll be a he. Then we can load some of RUSTY’s memories into her… or him, and have the new robot mimic RUSTY’s characteristics.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “You’re making me glad I don’t own an assistant robot of my own. Too darn complicated. I’ll stick with my lobotomized military robots.”

“Yeah,” said Daphne. “Robots are a lot of trouble.”

**CHAPTER 34**

Daphne and Roberta spent hours in The Drunk Zombie. It was a working-stiff’s bar catering to most of the people collecting a check at Novis Terminal. After observing all the robotic machines shuffling cargo around the station, Daphne was surprised there were enough workers to fill such a large establishment. The interior was decorated with old-fashion chain-link fencing and diamond plate panels. The tables appeared to be crafted from steel and even had multiple coats of paint, making them appear to have endured years of abuse. Chipped paint and dents were the norm.

Fake neon lights ringed the interior, which was large enough to hold hundreds at one time. The wait staff consisted of young scantily clad men and women who were probably recruited from the colleges just to build morale among the workers of the station. The sign at the entrance warned patrons not to wear a tie, or it would be “properly disposed of upon entering.” Whatever that meant. Daphne made sure to pick a seat facing the entrance. She wanted to see what happened to a tie-wearing individual as they entered.

The place was half-filled at the moment, but it was mid-day and most were just here to eat their lunch and drink a beer.

“So,” said Roberta. “What are your plans after this is all over?”

“Back to the grind,” said Daphne. “Moving goods from point A to point B and collecting my paycheck.” Daphne nodded at Roberta. “What are your plans when this is over?”

Roberta shook her head. “Not sure yet.”

“Not going back into retirement? Or whatever you called your life on that desolate world.”

“I was thinking about that, and how difficult it’ll be to wind back down to a daily grind after experiencing so much excitement. I thought I’d never go back to this lifestyle, but it’s calling me.”

“That’s funny.”

“What?”

“Lifestyle. I never thought of it as a lifestyle. I figured this was just the chaos that got into the way of a normal life.”

Roberta grinned. “Yeah. When you get old, you start to reminisce about the days when excitement happened. It’s an odd thing.”

There was a lengthy silence between them as they sipped on their beers.

“I heard a rumor your RUSTY has the most powerful CPU in the galaxy,” said Roberta.

“Yeah, about that…” said Daphne.

Perry entered the bar from the passageway. The second he stepped into the darkened interior, a thin brunette girl intercepted him, grabbed his tie and jerked it tight. Then she cut it off with a massive pair of scissors. The scissors looked like something from a clown act. Perry didn’t slow down. He continued by with his stub of a tie as though nothing had happened. Obviously, a victim of the tie disposal procedure many times in the past.

Daphne grinned at him. He looked down then, flapped his piece of a tie that was still around his neck and laughed.

“I go through more ties that way,” said Perry. “I always forget about that sign out front. Anyway, I dropped by to tell you guys RUSTY is ready.”

Daphne felt a spike of energy course through her veins. She sprung to her feet and followed Perry out the door, Roberta in tow. They walked for what felt like an hour before arriving at the machine shop. Daphne knew it was the machine shop, because a rough wooden sign with the words “Machine Shop” routed out and painted black hung precariously above the door. The workers must have wanted to give the place a little personal touch.

When they entered, a man dressed in coveralls met them with safety goggles and disposable foam ear plugs. The man led them toward the back of the shop. Sparks flew from a bench where a woman was grinding a part made of steel. Daphne didn’t recognize what she was working on, but there was a new weld along the outside that she seemed to be cleaning up.

In the back, in front of a large bench, were two RUSTYs. Daphne looked at the one on the left, then compared it with the one on the right. Dent-for-dent, chip-for-chip, scratch-for-scratch, they looked identical. Even the scuff marks on his legs and feet matched.

Another man, with his name sewn into his coveralls, came from the other side of the shop and stopped next to the left RUSTY.

“So, which one is which?” said Thompson.

“Give me a minute,” said Daphne.

“Well,” said Roberta. “You could have fooled me, but I haven’t spent much time with RUSTY, so I’m probably not a good person to test that question on.”

Daphne pointed to the one on the left. “It’s that one. That’s the real RUSTY.”

Thompson laughed. “Incorrect. Not even close.”

“Oh, it was close. I only had a 50/50 random chance of getting the right one. But, I definitely guessed wrong. I thought this scratch was different on the left one.”

“Well, they’re not exactly the same,” said Thompson. “But you’re probably the only person in the galaxy that knows how he got each of these scratches.”

“Except for the scratches and dents he came with when I first found him,” said Daphne. “I’m not sure where those came from.”

“What’s the plan, again?” said Roberta.

Perry cleared his throat. “We trade the fake RUSTY for Lowell, then go back to our normal lives.”

“What happens when Mr. Kobay-what’s-his-name—”

“Mr. Kobayashi,” said Perry.

“Yeah, him. What happens when he finds out the fake RUSTY doesn’t have the memories he expects to find?”

“I was under the assumption he would be more interested in erasing the robot’s memories,” said Perry. “In fact, I assumed the man would just feed the robot into the scrap grinder. Also, I’m not an expert in robotics, but from my understanding, you can’t read the memories out of a robot. Not directly. You can only copy them.”

“And what about reading his memories indirectly?” said Roberta.

“Well, that I’m not sure of. I thought it was difficult to do and required a robot psychiatrist,” said Perry.

“Of course, Kobayashi might just assume RUSTY had forgotten the information he’s after,” said Roberta. “If he has a way to get information out of a robot.”

“Either way, we better not get these two mixed up,” said Daphne. She looked at the robot on the right. “OK, which one of you two is the real RUSTY?”

Each robot pointed at the other and said, “He is.” At the same time.

Perry looked down at the deck and rubbed his forehead while letting out a sigh.

“Just kidding,” said the robot on the right. “I am the real RUSTY.”

“And I am number two,” said the robot on the left.

“OK,” said Perry. “Let’s give number two a real name. Something different, but he can only reveal his real name to one of us. Got it?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Knight,” said Thompson. He ran his hands over a keyboard that looked like it had lived its life under a truck. The keys were chipped, greasy, and worn down. When he finished, he looked at the robot on the left.

“What is your name?” said Thompson.

“George,” said the robot.

“George?” said Roberta.

Mr. Thompson smiled. “I named him after me.”

“George, it is,” said Daphne. “I think we need to go over the details of our plan before we send our decoy robot into the lion’s den. We also need a way to get my ship back, if it’s possible.”

“I have an idea for that, as well,” said Perry. “Let’s go to my office.”

Daphne’s gut twisted into a knot. Everything about this plan felt wrong, but she didn’t have anything better. She had to trust Perry on this one. He was probably better at planning an operation than she was. Her plans always seemed to go side-ways the moment she put them into play.

She did, however, free the Novis Terminal crew from the pirates.

**CHAPTER 35**

George piloted a small craft to the neutral trading place. An asteroid outside the law of any faction or government. The asteroid had no atmosphere, but George didn’t need any. It also had no landing facilities and a low gravity. When he landed the craft, he deployed spikes with tethers to hold his ship to the surface. Another craft was already attached to the surface of the asteroid. All he had to do was go outside, walk a hundred meters, and hop into the other craft.

Before exiting, he set the auto-return. Several minutes after he exited, the door closed, and the craft detached and disappeared into the void of space. George had no concerns. He was a robot with a small set of instructions. Once he reached his destination, he understood his new owner would probably destroy him. Being destroyed upon arrival was his definition of success for his mission.

The craft waiting for him opened like a flower. Several sections lowered, revealing a seat in the middle. George recognized the designated craft as an automated flight machine. It probably had a self-destruct mechanism as well. Something used if anyone attempted to tamper with the craft to discover where it was headed. George was unconcerned about such things.

He sat in the seat and waited for the petals to close around him. Then the craft detached from the surface and rose. The G-forces were high, but the craft was probably programmed to accommodate only one robot. Mr. Kobayashi was clever. He certainly adjusted the acceleration of the craft to ensure a human would never survive the flight.

After a few minutes at a high acceleration rate, the craft jumped to a new location. A small monitor showed what was in front of the craft. George computed the craft he was headed toward was a space station, though it was painted a dark color to mask its visibility.

A large iris on the dark station opened. The interior was as bright as day and several robots moved about inside. When George’s shuttle entered the bay, it slowed, then settled onto the deck with a small thump. The petals opened around him, allowing him the freedom to leave in any direction.

A small navigator robot approached and signaled him to follow. The navigator was no more than knee-high and ran on what looked like skateboard wheels. A flashing light on top helped to see the robot from a distance, in case a human lost track of it. It also made a chirping sound. The loud sound would be useful if the robot went around a corner when the follower was not paying attention.

George continued to follow the tiny robot to an airlock where the pressure was equalized for humans. Then the navigator sped off through the corridors. George found it difficult to keep up. He was already jogging, his feet thumping against the rubberized deck.

The navigator robot stopped in front of a large door. The door opened, but the compartment inside was dark, preventing George from seeing the interior. He switched on his infrared. The interior was mostly cool. He took a step inside the doorway, then the doors closed. There was nothing but complete darkness.

Radio waves flooded the compartment, jamming most of George’s sensors as well as every transmitter he was using to communicate back to home base. A flash of energy knocked out his systems. Vision, then hearing, slowly shut down. His battery drained at a rapid rate. Something or someone was prepared for his arrival.

When his battery hit zero, everything went dark.

**CHAPTER 36**

The view from George’s video was projected on a large screen built into the wall of the conference room on Novis Terminal. Audio could be heard through the hidden speakers in the ceiling. Daphne sat in a fully reclined seat while lazily swinging back and forth on the pedestal. Her eyes were riveted to the screen, afraid of missing a tiny detail. She was certain they could rewind the recording and watch it again, but there was a sense of suspense as they watched the sub-space transmitted video from George.

Perry paced back and forth near the back of the room. Roberta seemed to have recently disappeared. Daphne wondered if she went out for a drink, then she heard her sigh. The sound came from under the table. Daphne ducked her head down to see where the woman was seated. She laid flat on the carpeting under the table, watching the screen.

“Comfortable?” said Daphne.

“My back was twitching,” said Roberta. “Thought I’d lay flat and watch the vid from a side-ways view. Also, didn’t want anyone to stumble over me, so I made sure I was under the table.”

Daphne nodded, then returned to watching the screen.

George entered a station. On a display to the left, 3-D map constantly moved as George’s position remained centered. He was located in a part of the galaxy Daphne had never been to. In fact, she didn’t realize the section of space displayed was inhabited. Another fact she took note of was that Mr. Kobayashi’s palace was light years in the opposite direction. What was the guy up to? Maybe he had more than one palace?

“How many compounds, palaces, houses does Mr. Kobayashi have?” said Daphne.

“I suspect hundreds,” said Perry. “Most are at secret locations. Then there are the warehouses, manufacturing plants, safe houses, and so on.”

Daphne moaned. “Great.”

“I suspect this is not going to work,” said Perry. “Judging by the number of random hops George has taken to arrive, I would say someplace down the line—” The video went dark, then the speakers blared static. “George’s sensors would be jammed, then his sub-space transmitter would be removed.” Perry rubbed his eyes.

“Wow,” said Daphne. “This is like watching a thriller, only to have the film end just before the last act.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “Someone should have escorted George to the destination.”

“That would not have been successful,” said Perry. “I was watching the G-force meter when George got into the automated transport. It was programmed to pull more than twenty G’s. A robot can survive that, but not a human. Mr. Kobayashi set the high acceleration on the pod on purpose.”

Roberta sighed from under the table. “Yeah, I’m sure he was expecting someone or maybe a team to escort George, even though Mr. Kobayashi gave explicit instructions for the robot to arrive alone.”

Daphne shrugged. “Maybe Mr. Kobayashi will honor his agreement.”

Perry stared at the deck. Daphne couldn’t see Roberta at the moment. She assumed Roberta was still lying flat on the carpeting.

“You believe Mr. Kobayashi will honor his agreement and release Lowell?” said Perry.

“Stranger things have happened,” said Roberta. “But, no, I don’t think he’ll release Lowell. There isn’t any reason for Mr. Kobayashi to turn over Lowell. If I were to place a bet, I think we would need to rescue the boy if we expect to get him back alive.”

“What are we going to do now?” said Daphne.

“We’ll have to cook up another plan,” said Perry. “I suspect we’ll need an army to get into Mr. Kobayashi’s compound.”

Daphne sighed. Colonel Bardsley’s voice kept popping into her head.

*People don’t change. People never change. For instance, you seem to get into trouble everywhere you turn. Trouble sticks to you like a magnet. The only reason you’re still alive and out of the can is because you’ve been lucky. Well, one of these days, luck is going to run out.*

Was her luck running out? It didn’t feel right. None of this felt right. She vowed to turn it around. Somehow.

RUSTY stood in the corner, not moving. What was he thinking? If only he could harness the massive number of processors, he has to solve this problem. Except, she was certain his arrogant attitude would assume freeing Lowell in the grand scheme of things was unworthy of his massive cpu-power.

The door to the conference room burst open as a group of police officers barged in.

“What is the meaning of this?” said Perry.

Detective Ramsey was the last to enter. “Pardon the interruption.”

A woman entered after him. “I’m sorry, sir. They forced their way past security.”

“It’s quite all right,” said Perry. “I’ll handle this.”

“I’m here to deliver a summons to Daphne Blazefire,” said Ramsey.

He held up a tablet, then swished his finger across the face of it. Daphne felt her hand-held device vibrate. When she checked the screen, the summons was displayed in front of her.

“You’re worried about my ship inspection?” she said.

“That’s right,” said Ramsey. “Get it repaired and file the proper paperwork by the end of the month.” He and his officers stormed out of the conference room. Daphne sighed.

“That little man sure has it in for you,” said Roberta.

“Well,” said Daphne. “To be fair, I did embarrass him a few times in the past.”

**CHAPTER 37**

Daphne spun her chair as she stared at the ceiling. Roberta remained flat on her back on the carpeting under the table. Perry sat at the table staring at the far wall, maybe contemplating his life choices. The video screen was blank and a low level static drone out of the speakers in the ceiling. RUSTY stood in the corner of the room. If not for his glowing eyes, nobody would know if he were still functional or maybe powered down.

Perry sighed, then leaned back in his seat and folded his arms.

“I’m out of ideas,” he said.

Daphne sat straight in her chair. “It’s my turn.”

“Your turn to what?” said Perry. He stared at her, waiting for an epiphany.

“My turn to conjure up a plan to rescue Lowell. He is my boyfriend, after all.”

Perry held out his hand. “The floor is yours. You have any ideas?”

Daphne gritted her teeth and groaned. “No.”

Roberta let out a sigh from under the table. Daphne knew that feeling. Time to think outside the box. Way outside the box…

“Maybe I do have an idea,” said Daphne. “If only I could contact Colonel Bardsley.”

Perry slid his hand-held device her way. “He’s in the directory.”

She spun down his calling directory until she reached Bardsley. When she hit the connect button Bardsley answered right away. Then she put him on speaker.

“Colonel Bardsley, how may I help you?”

The colonel’s face appeared large on the back screen. He had a large bandage on the side of his head, covering his ear. Daphne sat stunned by the sight for a minute. She shook it off.

“This is Daphne.”

“Using Perry Knight’s phone, I see. Did you steal it from him? No doubt another street-rat trait of yours.”

Perry huffed. “I loaned my phone to her. Get on with it, colonel.”

“Very well,” said Colonel Bardsley.

Daphne wanted to ask the colonel about his injury, but there were more pressing matters.

“We have a problem,” said Daphne.

“I’m listening.”

“We know what happened to Lowell, but we don’t know exactly where he is located.”

“And, you need my help?”

“Lowell is on some sort of secret mission, but I’m unsure what it is. However, we ran into him on a space station somewhere in the war zone just before rebel forces destroyed it. General Casper Booth handed him over to Mr. Kobayashi… we think. Oh, I forgot to mention Lowell had a name tag with the name “Thomas” and he wore an officer’s uniform.”

“Hmmm…”

“Is that a good, hmmm?”

“I recall seeing an encoded transmission about General Booth. It seems he might have gone rogue.” There was a long pause as the colonel looked down and tapped on a touch display out of view. “Here it is. Yes. It says they sent someone in to infiltrate his organization and bring back proof.”

“Well,” said Daphne. She chuckled. “It seems we stumbled right into the whole mess. I think the general and Mr. Kobayashi are doing some sort of deal together, and it involved a big bunch of moola.”

“How much… moola… are we talking about here?”

“Seven million? That’s how much we found in Mr. Kobayashi’s shuttle, that we stole before getting captured and brought to the space station.”

“It all adds up. Apparently, Lowell was the man inserted. Did you keep the money?”

Daphne cleared her throat. “As I mentioned, we got captured by a military destroyer. General Booth’s men secured the ship.”

“Did you find out what they were going to purchase with the money?”

“No.”

Colonel Bardsley sighed. “And what do you want me to do?”

“I thought you could help us. Maybe give us any intelligence you have on Mr. Kobayashi’s various compounds and loan us some troops to go in and rescue Lowell.”

Daphne cringed.

“The military is not in the habit of getting involved in domestic issues.”

“Technically, they are holding a soldier hostage. Doesn’t that make it the military’s problem? Can’t you make an exception?”

“OK, but… The only thing I can do is loan you high-tech military equipment and classify you and your team, assuming you can scrape up a team, as contractors. I can also supply you with a treasure trove of intelligence on Mr. Kobayashi. You will be responsible for planning your own op. I would love nothing more than to send in an expeditionary team, but it is not allowed. Expect an electronic package to arrive in an hour.”

The line went dead as the large screen turned blank. Daphne slid the hand-held device back to Perry, who picked it up and pocketed it.

“Anybody notice the large gauze patch on his face?” said Roberta.

“Yeah,” said Daphne. “It looked like a new wound. He didn’t have an injury when he searched my ship.”

“Maybe I’m just looking for connections where there ain’t any,” said Roberta. “What’s the plan, now?”

“We need a team of soldiers,” said Perry.

“I already have a team,” said Daphne. She grinned from ear-to-ear.

Perry stared at her for a minute, then he rolled his eyes and groaned.

“That’s right,” said Daphne. “We can do this ourselves. With the right equipment, it should be easy.”

RUSTY mumbled something while standing still in the corner of the room. Well, he wasn’t much of a go-getter. Always trying to get out of doing a challenging operation.

Roberta sighed loudly.

“Come on, guys,” said Daphne. “We can do this. All we have to do is come up with a plan to get into Mr. Kobayashi’s compound, wherever it is, rescue Lowell, maybe expose General Booth and get out.”

“Yeah,” said Perry. “It’ll go smooth as clockwork. As long as we don’t mess up.”

**CHAPTER 38**

The military briefing room was similar to the one she had been in when she and Pax had gone in and destroyed the facility of planet killing bombs. Roberta spent a considerable amount of time tapping on the screen built into the seat she sat in at the conference room table. Daphne leaned over a to see what she ordered.

Food?

When Roberta saw Daphne looking at her, she grinned. “Just testing their stuff to see if they have good service.”

Daphne nodded. “Their food is not bad. The brass here have it made.”

Colonel Bardsley entered the conference room, followed by an entourage of junior officers. They sealed the door and the screens on the walls lit up as someone prepared the classified briefing.

“I just got out of a meeting with General Callaghan,” said Colonel Bardsley. “We have gone over the broad strokes of how this operation will be performed. It’ll be up to you guys to fill in the details.”

He turned and touched the display, which changed to a map of Mr. Kobayashi’s compound.

“As you can see here, the compound is rather large and complex. There are several entrances, but we suggest you enter through the front door. Most of their firepower is located at the front, but if you manage to take them out and enter, you’ll find little to no resistance inside.”

“How are we going to get there?” said Roberta.

He clicked on the display, which changed to a map of the region near the compound.

“As you can see, there is nothing surrounding the compound for hundreds of clicks in every direction. We’ll be inserting your crew right about here.” He pointed to a spot close to the compound. “It’ll be about a click away.”

“Can’t you drop us inside the walls?” said Perry.

“They have batteries all around the compound. If they detect anything coming directly at them, they’ll shoot it down.”

“What kind of gunship are we going to ride in?” said Roberta.

“You’ll be riding a drop pod to the surface. We’ll make sure you’re fully outfitted with all the tactical gear you’ll need before we drop you from orbit. The ride will be about five minutes long.”

Daphne could feel her stomach roiling. She rode one of those pods down to a planet’s surface before and only remembered swearing off ever doing it again. At least she knew what to expect this time. Her last trip was a complete surprise and almost ended her life as well as Pax and RUSTY.

The door opened and an android in a butler outfit approached. She walked past Daphne holding a covered silver tray. The android placed the tray on the table next to Roberta, then lifted the cover, exposing an exquisite collection of food. Daphne smelled the gravy-covered potatoes almost immediately.

“Once you’ve neutralized the perimeter security, you’ll make your way into the compound and rescue Lowell. Intelligence has estimated he is located in the prison area, right about here.”

The area he circled was much larger than Daphne expected. The acid in her stomach increased, and she wondered if she would make it through the entire briefing without an antacid. Maybe she could order up some from the console at her seat.

“One other thing,” said Colonel Bardsley. “You’ll need to take out the anti-aircraft batteries, located here and here. Otherwise, your escape will be unsuccessful.”

“What is that dark spot just outside of the compound?” said Roberta. “It looks like a cargo ship or something.”

“You have very good eyes,” said Colonel Bardsley. “That is the Waterfowl. It seems they have claimed Daphne’s ship as their own and have moved it to this location. Which was one of the data points we used to determine that this compound is where they took Lowell and your robot. The Waterfowl will be your egress plan. Get Lowell, take out the batteries, get to your ship and get out of there. If you fail any of those objectives, you’ll fail your mission.”

“In other words,” said Daphne.

“You’ll be captured or killed,” said Colonel Bardsley.

Daphne nodded. That did not help her stomach acid at all. She tilted her touch display up so she could see the menu system. A section with medications led her to antacids. She ordered up a double-dose.

The Waterfowl was located near one side of the compound. Not close to the front entrance or the rear. The rear of the compound appeared to have no exit or entrance. If they were going to escape in the Waterfowl, they would have to move the ship to the front after they took out the guards. Which meant someone would have to go around and move the ship.

“RUSTY can move the ship,” said Daphne.

“What?” said Perry.

“We can knock over the front gate, while RUSTY sneaks around the side and gets the ship prepped. Then he can land it at the front gate. He’ll have to hover low to prevent being shot down by the missiles. Once we have completed our mission, we can run right out the front gate.”

Perry scratched his chin. “That’s a good idea. We can also use RUSTY as a backup plan. If we get trapped inside, he can just hop the Waterfowl over the wall and land inside this open area.”

Daphne’s stomach began to settle, though she would still need an antacid, and soon.

“What kind of tactical gear will we get?” said Roberta. Always thinking about the guns. At least someone was on top of the subject of guns.

“You’ll get a backpack mounted missile delivery system, with an eye reticle. It’s a smart system, so all you have to do is mark the target, then hit the launch button from anywhere and the missile will find the target. The package can launch up to twelve missiles, so you can mark all targets, fire the missiles, then drop the backpack and run into the compound.”

“Sweet,” said Daphne. The door opened and the Tuxedo-wearing android entered with a small silver tray. She set the tray on the table in front of Daphne and lifted the lid. Four antacid tablets were arranged on a plate as though they were a fancy dessert.

Colonel Bardsley continued. “You’ll also get machine guns, with long distance computerized scopes and grenade launchers. The ammo has explosive tips, so the damage can be massive. If you have to shoot through a stone wall, this is the ammo to do it.” He paused, then sighed. “The climate on this planet is hot and dry. You’ll receive a backpack bladder with five liters of water each. Your robot can carry extra water and food. There is a portable shelter, flares, binoculars, a medical kit, and other supplies.”

“What if we run out of ammo?” said Roberta. “Is there a way to call in a resupply?”

“Negative,” said Colonel Bardsley. “Once we drop you off, our ship will leave the system. You’ll be completely on your own. If you run out of supplies, you’ll have to acquire your own. I would suggest you be frugal with the supplies we give you.”

“Great,” said Daphne.

**CHAPTER 39**

The compartment they rode in was only lit by a red light. Flat black was the color of everything in the interior. The rest of the ship was off limits, but it didn’t matter because they arrived in orbit in less than an hour. A jump specialist built like a truck stood and went over the supplies. He made sure to describe how everything worked and repacked the backpack he used as an example. Then he handed out rifles. Roberta volunteered to wear the missile pack, while RUSTY would be tasked with carrying her backpack until she fired all missiles and dropped the missile pack.

Machine guns were handed out to everyone seated in the jump seats. Daphne felt the heft of the weapon they handed her. It was at least twice as heavy as her personal rifle. Perry swung his rifle up and down to test the weight. Roberta slung hers over her arm, then adjusted her eye reticle.

The light above the doorway leading to the pod turned green.

“It’s time,” said the jump specialist.

Everyone stood and entered the pod. Daphne got flashbacks of the first time she had ridden one of these to the surface in the past. Something bothered her about the pod, something she was sure she had forgotten. What could it be?

Four seats, just like last time. Just enough for everyone in the group. Daphne saw the countdown clock mounted above the door and noticed the countdown started. They were instructed to stow their gear for the ride down. Perry kept sniffing the air. Daphne noticed the smell when she first entered, but said nothing.

“Smells like puke in here,” said Roberta.

“Yeah,” said Perry. “That’s what I’m smelling.”

The odor was overpowering, and Daphne wondered if they would be able to endure the stink all the way to the surface.

“Sorry about the puke smell,” said the jump specialist. “A group of newbies on a training mission used this pod last.”

RUSTY mumbled something too low for anyone to hear.

“What?” said the jump specialist.

“We’re all gonna die,” said RUSTY.

Daphne snorted. “Pay no attention to my doom-mumbling robot.”

The deck was sticky, but Daphne pushed that fact out of her mind. Maybe they didn’t bother to hose the interior after the last mission, choosing to leave the offensive liquid to dry up. It didn’t seem like a proper military procedure.

The jump specialist checked everyone’s harness to make sure they were strapped in for the drop. He stepped back into the doorway, then turned to face them.

“Don’t forget about the fifteen minute timer,” he said. “Make sure you’re ten meters from the pod.” Then the door slid shut. The pressure change inside the pod caused Daphne’s ears to pop.

They sat for at least five minutes in dead silence. Daphne felt like she was riding one of those amusement park rides where they elevate you to the top, then after a short delay, drop you like a rock.

“This seems a bit sketchy,” said Perry.

“I’m feeling a bit nervous about this tin can myself,” said Roberta.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said Daphne. “I rode one of these down before.”

“Yeah?” said Roberta. “What did he mean about the fifteen minute delay?”

“And what about the ten meter distance from the pod thing?” said Perry.

“Oh that,” said Daphne. It all came back to her in a flood. “Fifteen minutes after the pod lands, it self-destructs and we need to get ten meters away from it to be safe.”

The pod went silent. When Daphne glanced at Perry and Roberta, their mouths hung open. Both were speechless. Well, too late now. There was no getting off this ride.

A loud bang occurred just before the pod dropped. Daphne could tell they were in free fall, because her stomach felt like it rammed into her throat. The movement felt smooth, but only because they were still in the vacuum of space.

At first, Daphne felt a tiny vibration, then it increased in intensity until her teeth chattered. She recalled this part of the ride from the last time, but forgot how brutal the shaking was. The G-forces increased, making the ride painful.

RUSTY shook his head and continued to mumble.

“How’s the landing in this thing?” said Roberta.

Daphne rotated her head a little to look at her. The skin on her face pulled down by the G-forces, distorting her appearance.

“The last time I rode one of these, we impacted on the ground so hard it knocked everyone unconscious.”

Roberta growled. “That’s wonderful news. Remind me never to join the airborne.”

The interior heated up as they continued to descend. The atmosphere outside the pod thickened, causing more drag on their tiny craft. Noise from the friction of air on the outer hull became almost too loud for the human ear. Daphne wished she had put in earplugs before the drop.

Sweat ran down her face. She could taste the saltiness when she licked her lips. The temperature continued to rise, and she wondered if she would pass out from the heat alone. Maybe they would get cooked before they landed. That would certainly be tragic.

“A cool glass of iced tea would be nice right about now,” said Roberta.

Daphne glanced at her. She was drenched with sweat. The vibration flung droplets off of her in every direction. Perry wasn’t holding up any better. He clenched his jaw and sweated profusely.

The thundering noise of atmospheric entry tapered off. Air whistling by could be heard as they continued to drop like a rock from the sky. The interior cooled a little, but remained too hot for Daphne’s taste. The retro rockets kicked in and increased the G-forces again.

“We’re almost there,” Daphne said.

The impact was violent, and Daphne blacked out.

**CHAPTER 40**

“My back hurts,” said Roberta.

A distant beeping sound made Daphne think her wake-up alarm was buzzing. Daphne opened her eyes. She couldn’t remember where she was, and her blurry vision didn’t help. Maybe she was in a hotel room? That had to be where she was. Her mind tried to cook up a story. Like last night, she needed to rest but found herself too far from her ship, so she checked in to a room and crashed with the intent of continuing her travels the next day.

When her blurry vision cleared some, a digital clock on the wall above the door appeared to be counting down and the annoying beeping sound continued. The clock looked like it said one minute, but didn’t register.

“Oh,” said a male voice. “Where are we? And what is that annoying sound?”

Daphne’s vision cleared further. RUSTY sat silently in his seat. She half expected him to mumble some sort of complaint, but he appeared to be turned off or disabled. His eyes did not glow red. Were they inside a ship? Maybe the Waterfowl?

Daphne shook her head, then noticed the clock at 45 seconds and counting down. The blood rushed to her head and her thoughts became clear.

“Get out!” she said.

She jumped from her seat, but her harness restrained her. She hit the button to release the harness, then jumped up and rotated the emergency hatch release. The hatch popped out and away from the drop ship.

When she grabbed one of RUSTY’s arms, Perry hopped out of his seat and grabbed the other arm. They dragged the robot out of the craft as Roberta crawled out.

“Oh my,” said Roberta. “I’ll never recover from this.” She held her side as she limped away from the craft. Daphne and Perry dropped RUSTY. Perry turned to go back into the craft, but Daphne grabbed one of his belt loops and shook her head.

They ran as quick as they could through the sand when the concussion of the explosion knocked them flat on their faces.

Daphne rolled over and spit sand for several minutes. Roberta sat up and brushed the sand off her black outfit. She appeared to be in shock. Perry rolled onto his back and panted. A tendril of smoke wafted from his uniform. He slapped the spot on his outfit to put out any potential fire. They laid on top of the sand to catch their breath.

It was hot.

Daphne estimated the temperature to be over 38 Celsius and the sun beat down on her face like an open grill. She looked forward to cooling off after enduring the heat inside the tin can, but it felt hotter than that out in the desert.

“I guess we should take an inventory of what we have,” said Perry.

“I have nothing,” said Daphne. “Everything I had with me was in my pack.”

Roberta frowned. “I’m just darn glad I decided to bring my handgun along. ‘Cause that’s all I got.”

“Yeah,” said Perry. “It’s the only weapon we have. No supplies. Not even water. Though I do have my hand-held device, but there’s no signal.”

“Well,” said Roberta. “I hope we’re close to civilization, or at least close to the compound.”

Daphne stood and rotated around. A glint in the distance made her stop and stare. When the roiling heat wave calmed a bit, she saw a building. After a minute of squinting and waiting for the occasional clearing of the heat waves, she realized the building she could see looked identical to those of the compound included in the electronic data sent to them earlier.

“I think we’re more than a click away from the compound,” said Daphne. “Memories of my first ride in one of those pods are coming back strong. Not good memories, either.”

“What about your robot?” said Perry.

Daphne groaned. “Maybe we can reboot him.” She dragged her feet in the sand as she made her way to RUSTY, then dropped to her knees like a rag doll. The heat sapped her energy. After she popped open RUSTY’s chest plate, she pressed the reset button and sat back on her heels. Those robot eyes of his glowed. The status light inside his chest panel turned green. She closed the panel.

“He’s alive.”

RUSTY rotated, then levered himself up until he could stand. He rotated his head around until he saw the compound. His head froze in place as he stared toward the compound. Daphne wondered if he had experienced a malfunction. Maybe he sustained damage from the impact.

“This is just like the last time we rode a pod down,” said RUSTY. “I see the compound is eight point three, three, five clicks away. Fortunately, everyone has plenty of water.”

Daphne slowly shook her head.

RUSTY scanned the surrounding debris. “No water?”

Daphne continued to shake her head.

“We’re doomed,” said RUSTY.

“Eight kilometers?” said Perry. “That’s not so bad.”

“Speak for yourself, kid,” said Roberta. She got to her feet as she brushed the sand off her hands. “I have a tough time walking eight clicks on a good day. My back is killing me from that cushy landing we just experienced. Not sure how long I can last without water or food.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “There’s no place else to go. We might as well get walking.”

They lumbered toward their goal.

“I wish they would have inserted us at night,” said Perry. “At least we could have done this during the coolest time. Plus, it would be easier to infiltrate the compound in the dark.”

Roberta growled. “Didn’t look at the technical specs on this planet, did you?”

“What?”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “The axis of this world points at its star. Half the planet is always in daylight and half is always at night. The night side experiences extreme cold temperatures, while this side is hot.”

“Oh, this gets better by the minute,” said Perry. “Why did I volunteer for this?”

Daphne smiled. Just like old times. Daphne, on another desolate world, attempting a rescue with no supplies or weapons. She wasn’t worried about it though. It seemed a stretch they would survive the trip to the compound, and if they did, their best-case scenario was to be captured and placed in a nice, cool jail cell with plenty of water and food.

Yup, just like old times.

**CHAPTER 41**

Heat waves rippled in all directions. For a moment, Daphne wondered when it would cool off, then remembered Roberta mentioning this side of the planet was always under sunlight. Why would Mr. Kobayashi want to set up a large compound on such a desolate world?

Dunes undulated in all directions. Why, oh, why couldn’t they end up on a planet with a flat, hard surface? No, it had to be sand. Every time Daphne ended up on a hot, dry world with limited supplies, she would be forced to walk on the most difficult terrain possible. She sighed. It was time to get this trek started.

Going down a dune proved to be easy. Just stick out a foot and drop down. After sliding a bit, she would stick out the other foot and repeat. Unfortunately, every time they reached the bottom, they would all have to climb the next dune. A Sisyphean task. Every step up was met with slide-back erasing their progress. It seemed to take three times as many steps to get up a dune as down, maybe more.

She fell forward as she climbed the next steep slope. The palm of her hand impacted with the loose sand, giving her a sample of just how hot it was. It reminded her of black top pavement on a summer’s day. The sand was so hot to the touch that she gained a sudden burst of energy to bound back up. Thankfully, they wore thick military boots and a special uniform, isolating their bodies from the roasting ground.

As she climbed back to her feet, the wind kicked up and sand blasted the side of her face. The tiny particles stung, but Daphne was too tired to shield herself from the onslaught.

Blue agave plants peppered some of the ground. They walked between the plants. The plants did not give off a pungent smell, but it still reminded Daphne of tequila. There was one plant suspiciously missing from this world, or at least the tiny piece of this world Daphne saw. Cacti. Probably a bonus, since she assumed needles would be sticking out of her arms and legs by now.

At first, she tried to keep her mouth shut to reduce evaporation, but it didn’t work. After climbing the first dune and raising her heart and breathing rates, she had to breathe out her mouth. Now her mouth was dry and she would give anything for a good drink of water. Unfortunately, they had made little progress. A quick glance toward the compound as she reached the peak of a dune crushed her morale. The buildings were difficult to see through the waving atmosphere, appearing to be many kilometers in the distance.

“I can’t believe the military did this to us again,” said Daphne.

“Again?” said Roberta.

“They dropped us kilometers away from our target.”

“Yes,” said RUSTY. “And we have about as much equipment and supplies this time as the last. None.”

“Holy smokes, kid,” said Roberta. “You’ve been through more stuff than I gave you credit for.”

Daphne smiled. “Yeah.”

“This is my first and last operation with you, Daphne,” said Perry. He had a large grin on his face. “Nothing personal.”

Daphne nodded, then glanced at RUSTY. “How’s your battery holding up?”

“I am at 50 percent.”

“Not sure if that’s good or bad.”

The boots they wore did an outstanding job of keeping out the heat and sand, but they also felt like lead weights on the ends of their feet. Daphne wished she had worn a pair of high-top tennis shoes. At least her feet would not be dragging her down and draining her energy.

Not having to wear backpacks reduced some of their weight, but Daphne would have gladly carried around those extra kilos if it meant she could get a drink now and then.

Water.

That was about all she could think of at the moment. They descended a dune, then worked up the next incline as she continued to visualize a waterfall of life-sustaining substance. Something ice-cold and fresh. She daydreamed about standing under the flowing water, tilting her head up and slurping up mouth-fulls of the clear liquid.

When she reached the top of the dune, she wondered if she were hallucinating. She couldn’t see the compound. She stopped and turned her head all the way around.

“What’s wrong?” said Perry.

“I don’t see the compound,” said Daphne.

Everyone stopped and rotated around.

“It is that direction,” said RUSTY.

Daphne squinted and saw the shimmering shapes of buildings, still too far in the distance to get her excited. There would be no picnic when they arrived. One of the best scenarios she kept thinking about would be to get captured and placed in a cold dungeon. Knowing her luck, her worst-case scenario would happen. The mob would bury her and her friends up to their chins in the desert near an ant colony.

She used as little energy as she could while descending the dune. Then she stopped at the bottom and looked up. Everyone caught up to her. Roberta continued past. Probably worried about losing momentum. Daphne raised a boot and planted it into the upward slope. Then she plodded on as if she were exercising on a tread climber.

Sweat ran down her face and she could feel sweat dripping down her back and chest. Her shirt stuck to her body. Her face felt hot and stung to the touch. Sunburn would be bad, since they had not put on sunscreen. A product inside their backpacks. Now nothing but part of the charred remains they left behind.

Why did the military use a count-down timer to self-destruct those pods? Couldn’t they have a button one would press as they left the pod? Something to initiate a short count-down. Giving them plenty of time to shake off any blackout effects, grab their gear, reset their robot, and prepare for their trek.

Now she went over questions in her head, like: what about the landing site? She wondered if the military had the tech to land one of those things close to its target, or maybe they just hated her guts and designated a landing location at the extreme limits of what a human could walk in a day. Maybe she would confront one of those star-studded jerks when she returned… if she returned. No need to be political about it either. She was ready to tear into someone for putting them in this dire situation.

Daphne stopped at the top of the next dune and stared. They were now close enough to make out some of the shapes of buildings and the perimeter wall. Her body wavered back and forth. She knew it would not be long before she would pass out from exhaustion as well as a lack of water and food.

“What are we going to do when we get to the compound?” said Daphne.

Perry stopped and clumsily fished out a hand-held device.

“Does that thing work here?” said Roberta.

“Not really,” said Perry. “But I put a copy of the blueprints on my device before we left. Fortunately, I didn’t stuff it in my backpack. I thought about doing that before we started this journey, but forgot to transfer it from my pocket.”

Daphne looked over his shoulder as everyone crowded around to see his screen.

“There’s a back entrance,” said Perry. “I think Colonel Bardsley didn’t spend much time scrutinizing these plans, and missed it. It’s a small entrance in a separate building. It goes into a tunnel for some distance before coming out in a sub-level of the compound.”

“RUSTY will have to go around and secure the ship,” said Daphne.

“We only have one gun,” said Perry. “Roberta will have to take the lead. I don’t mean to sound grim, but if she falls, then the next person in line needs to pick up the gun and keep going.”

“Let’s try to find some water,” said Daphne. She closed her eyes and tried to lick her dry lips, but her tongue felt as dry as her lips.

“Water would be good,” said Perry. “As soon as we secure a location. If we’re lucky, we can take out a couple of guards and relieve them of their guns.”

“Hopefully, there will only be a couple of guards,” said Roberta. “Otherwise, my six-shooter isn’t going to save our butts.”

“Let’s go,” said Perry.

He continued down the dune, then up the next. Everyone reluctantly followed him until they came closer to the compound. Then RUSTY split off and made his way around the back of the compound, while everyone else observed the small building containing the entrance.

All Daphne could think of was water.

**CHAPTER 42**

The three of them laid on their stomachs and watched over the crest of a dune. Daphne wished they had binoculars, but those went up in smoke with the drop ship and everything else, like water. Perry wanted to observe the building for a few minutes while they got a short rest. Daphne wasn’t sure they were getting much of a rest, the sun beat down on them like a pressure cooker. She could feel her energy draining at a constant rate, without moving a muscle.

RUSTY disappeared several minutes ago, on his way to the ship. He was given instructions to clear the ship of hostile forces, if there were any, using his stunners. Then he would seal himself inside and plug in to charge his battery. After a one-hour delay, he would fly just high enough to clear the wall and land inside the compound. A risky plan that hinged on their ability to take out the batteries and neutralize the guards. Their plans had about a 50/50 chance when they were packing heavy weaponry. Now that they were stripped to nothing, tired, and thirsty, Daphne estimated they would be lucky if they survived more than fifteen minutes after they entered the compound.

“Let’s work our way up to the building,” said Perry. “I don’t see any guards outside, and it doesn’t look like they have cameras on the back.”

“That seems like an oversight,” said Roberta.

“This building probably contains an exit-only door,” said Daphne. “I bet, when we get to the building, we’ll find a smooth, steel door that can’t be opened from the outside.”

“Explaining why Colonel Bardsley never mention the rear entrance during the briefing,” said Perry. “Let’s go.”

They descended the dune they had been perched on for almost an hour. Daphne felt like a rag doll. Her muscles sore from all the walking they had done, her energy gone from walking so long in the open sun. She hoped they could get through the door quick, followed by an empty room inside. It would be a bonus if there were a faucet with fresh water.

She was so thirsty; she swore she would drink anything that looked like water. Just getting a good drink of water would refresh her energy. Otherwise, she would be battling enemy forces with her energy levels drained to their max. Not a pleasant thought.

When they reached the building, Perry pulled on the door handle. The door didn’t budge. Sand had piled up in front of it, preventing it from being opened. Nobody made a sound as everyone dropped to their knees and pulled sand away from the door with their hands. The possibility of fresh water just beyond the door they were attempting to open motivated Daphne. Could it be so easy?

Once they cleared the sand, Perry gave the door a good tug. The sand on the concrete platform under the door made a grinding sound, but the door opened. Darkness laid beyond the door. Daphne poked her head in, but did not enter. Roberta gently pushed her aside. She had her handgun raised and ready. Then she entered first.

Daphne entered next while Perry watched from behind.

Entering the dark space after spending hours in the burning bright sunlight did not help Daphne’s vision. She could see nothing for several minutes until her eyes adjusted. When Daphne could see the gray outlines of the interior, she saw another door at the other end of the room. They were in an empty space. Probably a staging area for a tactical force. Or maybe a buffer between the walkway and the outer door.

They all moved to the door leading into the walkway. At least they assumed there was a walkway on the other side. The inner door was massive, and it had an advanced digital keypad mounted to the wall beside it. Roberta let out a long sigh. Perry groaned.

“Rats,” said Daphne.

**CHAPTER 43**

Daphne looked at the digital locking mechanism. A fantastically advanced device. The device looked like new. Not a dull spot on it. Someone must come out here at least once a week and polish it.

The door looked like a bank vault door. At least a half-meter thick. No wonder the inhabitants were not worried about a surprise entry from the back of the compound. What was more difficult, a heavily guarded front entrance, or this thing? Too bad they couldn’t try both at once and trade notes. Unfortunately, they were in a life-or-death situation. Once the bullets started flying, there would be no turning back.

“Too bad RUSTY isn’t here,” said Daphne. “Though, I’m not sure if even he could crack this.”

“I got this,” said Roberta. Daphne stepped back as Roberta moved up to the front.

“You know how to hack into one of these things—”

An explosion went off, making everyone jump.

Roberta holstered her handgun and leaned closer to the combo lock, or what remained of it. She pulled the panel off the wall and shorted two wires together. Then she tried two other wires. Then the next.

A low humming sound started, and the door slowly rotated open.

“I guess you do know how to hack one of these things,” said Daphne. She suspected the ringing in her ears would last for hours.

The tunnel leading deeper into the facility continued to darken until the human eye could see nothing. Roberta wasted no time moving into the tunnel while holding her handgun toward the ceiling.

A gentle slope going down made it easy to walk. Hopefully, they would find water soon. Daphne felt woozy. If they were lucky, the other end of the tunnel had an access door with no lock. Then they could waltz right in and ambush anyone inside the compound.

Daphne moved closer to the wall so she could hold out her hand and rub her fingers along it. It became impossible to see, and she was afraid she would veer off to the right or left and run into the side wall. Hopefully, they would be able to see the door at the end when they arrived, otherwise, they might run into that as well.

“Wish we had flashlights,” said Perry.

“We did have flashlights,” said Daphne.

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “Vaporized by the self-destructing tin-can we rode down in.”

The floor felt like rough-cut stones. Every once in a while, Daphne would stub her boot on an edge she could not see. She tried to pick up her feet, but her legs were exhausted. The walls were equally rough as she lightly ran her hand across the one on the right. There was a faint smell of dead-animal. Daphne wondered if that would be their fate. Trapped inside a cul-de-sac with no food or water and no way out.

The wall widened out. Daphne could not see a thing, but she could feel the wall curving to the right and the sound of their footsteps echoed more than in the narrow passageway they just passed through. They had to be entering a large, dark chamber. Judging by the echo, Daphne thought maybe the ceiling was taller as well. Maybe two stories tall.

“Do you guys hear something?” said Perry. He kept his voice to a whisper.

Daphne stopped, then Perry ran into the back of her. Roberta’s footsteps stopped as well. Daphne cocked her head to one side and concentrated on the sounds in the room. It sounded as though someone was whispering, but it could also be the wind whistling through a crack along the way.

“Yeah,” said Roberta. She whispered as well. “I hear something. I think I know what it is.”

Lights flooded the space and for the first time, they could see the room was large with a tall ceiling. At least twenty men surrounded them and they all had guns pointed their direction. Roberta set her handgun on the floor and raised her hands. Daphne and Perry raised their hands.

“Son of a biscuit,” said Daphne.

**CHAPTER 44**

The trio were bound and paraded through the basement level of the compound. Daphne recognized some of the passageways from the map she had studied. They confiscated Perry’s hand-held device and Roberta’s gun. Daphne felt relieved they would get some water and maybe food. A moment of horror crossed her mind about the type of food they would feed her. She sighed. At this point, it probably wouldn’t matter. She would happily suck down gruel in a span of seconds if it were set before her in a crusty old bowl.

The lower levels were not well lit, but at least enough light illuminated the passageways to see where they were walking. Judging by the direction they were headed, and assuming the maps she studied were accurate, they were going to be locked up in the jailing area. No surprise there.

“Where are you taking us?” said Perry. Daphne almost laughed. He had to know where they were heading. Probably testing the guards to see what they would reveal.

“Shut up,” said the one in the back.

“Ooooh,” said Perry. “I’ve never been there before. Do they have hot tubs and lobster?”

The guard shoved Perry in the back hard enough to make him stumble forward a few steps. Perry seemed to lack much energy, and Daphne thought he’d fall over if the guard shoved him much harder. She plodded along as well. Her legs didn’t have the energy to move fast.

A guard held open a solid door leading to another hallway. Down the hallway were rows of steel doors on each side. When they entered the hallway, the sound of fists pounding on the doors filled the corridor. Daphne could hear muted shouting behind those doors. A guard banged on one of them with his fist.

“Shut up in there,” said the guard.

The noise level increased, making Daphne wonder if she and her friends were going to be split up and thrown in with the current prisoners, or would they all end up in a cell together? A tapping sound started. It sounded like the inmates were tapping on the door with something metal, like a spoon. Another guard gasped and shook his head.

The guards stopped in front of a solid steel door. It had a slide for a window where the guards could look in whenever they wanted, but prisoners could not look out when the slide was closed. The first guard opened the door, slowly at first. The three of them were shoved into the cell, one-by-one. Roberta went down first, then Daphne stumbled over her and Perry fell on top. The guard slammed and locked the door.

“Oh,” said Roberta. “That hurt.”

“Daphne?” said a voice from the shadows.

Daphne looked up, but made no effort to stand. She rolled into a seated position and brushed her palms together. A man came out from the shadows.

Lowell.

He ran to her and helped her up, then they embraced. She wrapped her arms around his neck and used him as a crutch. Her legs hardly holding her up. Their embraced felt wonderful, and she wanted to stay like this forever. Then she heard a slurping sound.

When she turned her head, Roberta and Perry were cupping their hands under a faucet and burying their faces in their hands to drink. Daphne stumbled over and joined in.

She spoke between gulps. “We’re so thirsty.”

“Yes,” said Lowell. “That, I can see.”

Perry blurted out a sentence in between. “We walked for eight or nine kilometers in the desert with no supplies.”

“Is this supposed to be some sort of rescue plan?” said Lowell.

“The military sent us down in one of those pods,” said Daphne.

“Oh, yeah,” said Lowell. “Those things suck.”

It felt like Daphne had drunk an entire lake before she felt satiated. Her stomach hurt. If not for that, she would have kept drinking. Perry had already moved away from the sink. He jumped and grabbed the ledge of a high window. Then he lifted his body like doing pull-ups. He held onto the ledge and stared out the window for quite some time. The window was a tiny square. Too small for an adult to squeeze out of. Probably too small for a young kid as well.

Perry released his hold and landed on his feet. Then he looked around the floor, as if he had lost his glasses. He picked up a rock, then scratched on the wall. His scratch mark looked like a small line, with a circle on top. Then he made another and another.

“What are you doing?” said Daphne.

“Recording how many guards are at the front gate,” said Perry.

“Fat lot of good that’ll do,” said Roberta. “It’s doubtful we’ll escape this cell. And if we do, we don’t have any weapons.”

Daphne tried to jump up and get her hands on the windowsill. Perry interlocked his hands and bent down. She stepped into his hands and lifted her body until she could reach the ledge. She pulled her head up to a level where she could see outside.

“Maybe that robot of yours can swoop in here and rescue us,” said Perry.

Daphne watched as something in the distance rose up from the ground. The large mass turned and approached the compound. Was it the Waterfowl? Maybe Perry was right, RUSTY could land inside the compound, zap a few guards, grab their weapons and rescue the four of them from this cell. Butterflies formed in her stomach. This might be the shortest incarceration of her life.

She watched the ship approach. The sound of the engines increased as it flew in her direction. When it got closer, she could tell it was, indeed, the Waterfowl.

Way to go RUSTY!

A missile streaked out of a box in the corner of the compound, then it collided with the Waterfowl mid-air. Smoke rose out of the back of her ship as the pitch of the engines changed. The Waterfowl tilted downward, cleared the outer wall, then plowed into the soft sand inside the compound. The noise of the engines quit. All was quiet.

“Yeah,” said Daphne. She released her grip and dropped to the floor. “Not counting on the stupid robot to save our butts.”

**CHAPTER 45**

Hours had passed, and everyone in the cell took turns to peek out the tiny square window. Everyone scratched notes of what they saw on the wall using the rock Perry had found earlier. Now everyone lounged about, as if they all knew they would be here for years to come. Daphne thought about a prison break, but nobody on the outside was coming for them.

The military?

Yeah, they knew where Daphne and her accomplices were located, but the military cared little of their situation. Colonel Bardsley was probably bemoaning Lowell’s late return to his command, but the colonel would do no more than that.

Detective Ramsey?

That jerk was probably still steamed about the Waterfowl leaving port, with numerous infractions cited. He also would not lift a finger to help them escape, even if it got him his desired pay-off. Whatever that was.

The only people Daphne could think of that would come to her rescue were right here in the cell with her. Oh, and RUSTY. What did they do with him? She suspected, by now, they have either wiped his memory, or stuck him in the metal crusher. Assuming he didn’t get destroyed in the crash.

Daphne sat next to Lowell on a bunk. His arm kept her pulled in tight next to him. Their bodies were hot, sweaty, smelly, and miserable, but all of her misery faded into the background when she was close to him. He was nice, and gave her a back massage. It was the best thing for her tired and worn muscles after trudging through sand dunes for a whole day.

A metal door clanked open, then closed down the passageway, making everyone’s head turn toward the door.

“Lunch time?” said Perry.

“Are you sure you want to eat the grub they’re going to serve us?” said Roberta.

“I don’t know. I’m hungry enough to eat road kill. Prison food is making me salivate.”

“The food here isn’t as bad as I expected,” said Lowell. “Though I’ve only been here a few days.”

The window cover on the door to their cell made a grinding noise as someone slid it open, then shut. Daphne couldn’t see who had peeked in. Not from her position seated on the floor. The guard unlocked, then pushed the door open. RUSTY stood in the open doorway, carrying several trays with plastic lids over them, stacked like boxes.

“RUSTY,” said Daphne. She stood and rushed over to him. He did not reciprocate her enthusiasm. In fact, he closed the door behind and stepped to a table in the middle of the cell. After he deposited the food, he turned to exit. Daphne ran to block his path.

“RUSTY?” she said.

RUSTY lightly pushed her aside, unlocked the door and exited. Once he locked the door from the outside, his robot footsteps could be heard until he reached the outer door. The sound of the outer door closing said it all. He was gone. All was quiet again.

“Are you sure it was RUSTY?” said Roberta.

“They probably wiped him,” said Lowell.

“It could be the fake one,” said Perry. “What’s his name… George.”

“We should have put a tiny mark on one of them so WE could tell the difference,” said Daphne.

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “NOW, we think of that.”

**CHAPTER 46**

The cell felt small. Daphne wanted to stretch her legs, so she paced back and forth, though she could tell her walking made everyone irritable. The odor from everyone’s sweaty body overwhelmed her sense of smell. Even the open window near the ceiling was too small to bring in enough fresh air to overcome the smell. Daphne splashed herself with water from the sink. She lamented the lack of soap and towels. What she would give for a shower right about now. They could just name their price.

The outer door clanked, causing everyone to stand. The sound of prisoners making noise outside could not be ignored. Daphne assumed they were bringing in more prisoners. Then the sound of another door opening piqued her curiosity. Maybe they were opening another cell to put prisoners into?

Another door clanked. Then another. The guards were opening all the doors, or maybe they were tossing something into the cells and re-locking the doors. Except, she didn’t hear any doors close, which made a different sound from when they opened them.

Soon, their door made the distinctive sound of someone operating the locking mechanism. Then the door swung in. The guard left it open and moved on to the next door. Daphne saw prisoners walk by outside their cell. She bounded to the open door and poked her head out. All the prisoners were being herded toward the exit.

“Are they relocating us?” said Roberta.

“Somehow I doubt it,” said Perry.

Daphne glanced at Lowell. “You know where we’re going?”

“Not sure,” he said. “This is my first time out of the cell.”

They made their way down the passageway. Judging by the rest of the prisoners, this was a regular event. Though nobody seemed happy about it.

Daphne moved up next to another prisoner. A skinny man that didn’t look too threatening. In fact, he looked absolutely demoralized.

“Where are they taking us?” she said.

He sneered at her, then stared ahead and ignored her question.

She dropped back a little. Then walked alongside a very large man. The first thing that popped into her head was that the meals must be served often. Otherwise, every prisoner would be as small as the first guy she confronted.

“Do you know where we’re headed?” she said. He glared at her. Daphne shrugged. “I’m new here.”

“To the courtyard,” he said. Then he ignored her.

A tough-looking woman stared at her. Daphne dropped back until she walked next to Roberta.

“How did that go?” said Roberta. Daphne glanced at her. She gave Daphne a wry smile.

“As good as expected, for a bunch of demoralized prisoners. I’m not even sure what they’re in for.”

“Well,” said Roberta. She chuckled. “Maybe you could ask them.”

The passageway ahead opened into the outdoors. Bright sunlight blinded Daphne as they exited the building. Then she noticed the entire area was surrounded by the building. They were in a central courtyard with trees, grass, and concrete platforms. Basketball courts and exercise equipment lined the edges of the pavement.

Some of the muscle-heads grabbed dumbbells and sat on the benches. A hand-full of prisoners started up a game of hoops in the corner while the rest spread out and sat on benches or laid in the grass. Smoking seemed like the number-one pastime.

Daphne approached a guy who leaned against a tree, smoking. He had tattoos all over his neck and face. She only chose him to demonstrate that she was bold enough to talk to any of the prisoners. Maybe he’d me more forthcoming than the others.

“So,” she said to him. He smiled at her. Half of his teeth were missing, while the other half were stained a deep brown color. “What are you in for?”

“Drugs,” he said.

Now Daphne was intrigued. “Drugs? The mob arrests people for doing drugs, or were you selling?”

“Selling.” He continued to grin at her, which made her skin crawl.

“You were selling drugs? And Mr. Kobayashi had a problem with that?”

He snorted and shook his head. Then he took another long drag on his cigarette and blew out the smoke.

“You don’t get it,” he said. “I’m from a rival gang. We were just tryin’ to make a livin’, you know? Then these muscle-heads in their fancy suits showed up and told us we were muscling in on some bigwig named Hono. I told them to take a hike. Before I knew it, they were shooting at us. Some of my homies got killed. I got caught. Now here I am.” He waved his arm around with the cigarette still between his fingers. “In this lovely resort.”

“There’s still one piece of your story that is missing,” said Daphne. “Why didn’t they just kill you?”

“Oh,” he said. Then he took another long drag on his cigarette before tossing it on the ground and stamping it out. “I’m sure they wanted to. But…” He pointed to his head. “I got a lot of stuff up here. Like, who is in my gang and where they’re located? Yeah, I’ve been through a few rounds of torture in that rat chamber. So far, they haven’t been able to crack me.”

Daphne turned her head and saw Perry just behind her. He faced the other way, pretending he wasn’t with her, but keeping his ears open in case of trouble. Lowell stood just on the other side of Perry, leaning against a different tree. Roberta wondered around the other side of the gang member Daphne spoke to. It felt nice to have friends that had your back.

That was when she noticed that everyone in the courtyard wandered toward them. They formed a circle around their group. Friends or no friends, they were outnumbered, about ten-to-one. When they closed in, Daphne put her hands up.

“We don’t want any trouble,” said Daphne.

“Well,” said another man. “You got trouble.”

He looked familiar, but Daphne couldn’t quite put her finger on where she had seen him. Was he one of the mob’s people? She wasn’t sure. He appeared to be a prisoner. Lacking a fancy suit and all. Then she thought back further. All the way back to her youth, on the street.

“Ethan?” she said.

The man stopped and looked around. “How do you know my name?”

“It is you,” she said. She let out a sigh, though she was still nervous about the intentions of others that still closed in. “It’s me. Daphne. You remember that car we stole? After you accidentally stole that bag of drugs. What was that drug? Oh yeah, it was Black Ice.”

“Woah!” said the guy. He opened his arms and ran up to her. She almost backed away, but decided to hold her ground. He gave her a bear hug, then stood back. “What ever happened to you?”

“I got thrown in the slammer. Right after I pushed you out of the hover car.”

Another man stepped up. He had tattoos along large biceps. “You pushed my homie out of a hover car?”

Ethan pushed him back. “Yeah. It’s all good. She landed first, then saved my rear by pushing me out. Then she took off and led the cops away. I managed to get away.” He looked at Daphne. “She’s a real hero. Sacrificed herself to save my sorry butt.”

“These are my friends,” said Daphne. She pointed at Perry, Lowell, and Roberta.

“Yeah,” said Ethan. “Any friend of yours is a friend of ours.”

Daphne was relieved that a life-and-death situation had dissipated into a friendly relationship. For a minute, she was certain they were going to all get destroyed by the prisoners that had closed in on them.

Now, if only they could band together and escape their prison.

**CHAPTER 47**

Mr. Kobayashi, Rizzo, Hono, Joraslafsky, and Herrero sat around a ring of couches, enjoying a hookah with multiple hoses. The massive stone-walled room echoed. Music played in the background at a barely audible level. Finger foods ringed a large, low table in the center of the couches. Staff entered and left every few minutes to refill drinks and bring in fresh fruits, meats, cheeses, and other delicacies. A light haze filled the room from all the smoke.

Tapestries hung from the ceiling to the floor on every wall surrounding the room. Each tapestry had a unique pattern and Mr. Kobayashi had picked out each over the past decade. Food, being the only thing he appreciated more than beautiful tapestries, meaning any room with the finest tapestries also contained the finest food.

When a rocket fired from a missile battery, Mr. Kobayashi recognized the sound right away. He leaped out of his seat and ran to an open doorway. A large container ship glided over the outer wall with dark smoke trailing out of its main engines. When it hit the sand inside of the compound walls, he recognized its configuration and knew it to be the Waterfowl. But how did the Waterfowl get off the ground in the first place?

Guards surrounded, then stormed the ship. An enormous amount of time passed before the guards reappeared from the ship. They had someone in custody. Mr. Kobayashi wondered who would be so bold as to attempt to steal his property? When the guards marched the perp toward the central building, he saw it wasn’t a somebody, but a something. That dastardly robot he used to feed the prisoners. What was wrong with that machine?

He sighed. When he received the robot from Daphne, he had its memories erased and replaced with new programming. A very basic program with only simple tasks to clean and serve meals to the prisoners. The program didn’t contain instructions about flying a spaceship. Of course, if he were not shot down, he probably would have crashed the thing himself.

When the guards brought him past, he watched as they shoved the robot into the repair shop and closed the door. The guards left, and Mr. Kobayashi could not let his curiosity go. He wanted to know why the robot decided to steal the Waterfowl. He opened the repair shop door, then froze.

There were two robots of the exact same make and model. He entered the room and approached the two robots. Servo motors whirred as they both turned their heads to follow him into the room. He walked around one of the RUSTY’s, then looked at the second one. Even their dents were identical. Even their scratches!

How could that be?

“Which one of you is the real RUSTY?” he said.

Both robots looked at each other, then they turned their gaze toward him and said nothing. Mr. Kobayashi heard someone in the doorway behind him. When he turned, all the bosses were standing just outside the room, staring.

“I think it’s the one on the left,” said Rizzo.

“No, it’s definitely the right one,” said Herrero.

An argument broke out and voices rose until nobody could hear what others were saying.

“Enough!” said Mr. Kobayashi.

The peanut gallery became silent. He stepped to the bench and picked up a large screwdriver. Then he stood in front of the RUSTY on the right and put a large scratch on his chest plate. Now he could tell them apart, even if he was not yet certain which one was the real RUSTY.

“This one looks dustier,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

“That’s probably the one that just tried to steal the ship,” said Rizzo. “So, the robot with the scratch on his chest is the real RUSTY.”

“That is my assessment, as well,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “Let’s switch on the power for the memory wipe machine.”

The five of them left the repair shop, locked the door, and headed to the power station. Mr. Kobayashi threw the large lever and watched the light turn from red to green. Then the group returned to the robot repair shop.

Both robots were hastily wiped clean. When he walked around them, he noticed an identical screwdriver scrape on both robot’s chest plates.

At first, he let out a growl that turned into a loud scream while looking up at the ceiling. This was turning into the most frustrating day of his life.

“Someone hook this one up to be wiped and send that one down to feed the prisoners,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

The RUSTY on the left walked out of the room without making a sound. Rizzo hooked up the one on the right to be wiped by the diagnostic system.

“How do you know you selected the right one?” said Rizzo.

“Does it matter?” said Mr. Kobayashi. “If the one I sent down to feed the prisoners is the real RUSTY, we’ll know when he tries to break them out. Otherwise, this is the real RUSTY.”

“Ah,” said Rizzo. “That is brilliant.”

“Of course it is. Did you expect anything less?”

“You did lose the robot in the first place,” said Joraslafsky. She Jeered.

“Yes,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “As you keep reminding me. However, I did manage to get my property back. Proceed with the wipe.”

The machine started as everyone exited the room, with the exception of Rizzo, who stayed to operate the diagnostics and see it through.

“See,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “Now we have all of our enemies in our prison, and my robot has been neutralized. All we have to do is conclude our business with our contact and collect the cache of weapons.”

**CHAPTER 48**

RUSTY monitored the commands pouring into his input ports. The mob boss they call Rizzo stood at a console behind him. He would need to disable RUSTY’s mind in order to allow the commands to bypass his input filters and erase the memories. A technical task normally requiring a robot technician. At the moment, RUSTY computed he was in no danger of erasure.

The space was dim, and the walls were made of poured concrete. RUSTY’s olfactory sensors picked up high counts of mold spores. They also picked up damp dust particles, too tiny for his visual system to detect, mixed with the spores. His low-level processors sent the raw chemical composition of the material he sampled to a higher level of processing. When the signals were combined and analyzed, his neural-network of CPUs came up with one word: musty. This one word description expanded into his knowledge of causes and combined with his visual cues of the room. He concluded the robot lab had poor ventilation. His visual cues also told him the design of the space was at one time, most likely a storage room and was converted into the lab. Probably because an architect had forgotten to put a robot lab into the drawings. Someone later re-purposed the room out of necessity.

Other processors inside of RUSTY computed alternate plans that could have been used to build a much improved robot lab. One that would increase the efficiency of repairs by at least 32.35%. Perhaps he would submit every improved configuration he computed. Would the inhabitants of this facility put them to good use?

After processing every probability of someone using his plans for approximately 37 milliseconds, RUSTY had his answer: No.

Rizzo continued to tap on touch screens, taking much longer than that girl named Lorna, who recently downgraded his mind. Fortunately, he still had a few skills she had never disabled. Like his defense systems. Did they not know about those? RUSTY scanned his memories of the escape they made at Mr. Kobayashi’s palace. Rizzo was not there when that went down. In fact, Mr. Kobayashi probably wasn’t around as well.

“OK,” said Rizzo. “That should just about do it. Now all we have to do is get you prepared to accept the commands from the main computer.”

RUSTY focused on the input port and discovered it had two-way communications. Oh, what an opportunity to sneak into their system while they thought they were sending commands to his mind. Their system contained a lot of information. Encrypted files littered the vast storage of their system. A wise move for a mob operation. Otherwise, the government would probably hack in and download Mr. Kobayashi’s schedules, purchases, and…

Oh my!

Robots don’t usually get excited, but RUSTY felt a tingling sensation. Maybe the commands being sent to him were starting to affect his mind. Then again, the fact that he had stumbled upon all of Mr. Kobayashi’s digital money was an exciting revelation. And he even left his keys in an unprotected file.

It took only a brief moment to transfer the digital currency from Mr. Kobayashi’s computer to RUSTY’s internal memory. Now he could spend the cash if he wanted to, or use it as leverage to free his friends. Money was probably the number one thing Mr. Kobayashi and his buddies cared about. Money was his number one priority. Without it, he would be out of business. In fact, if his competition discovered Mr. Kobayashi’s broke state of being, they would probably destroy him.

Rizzo walked around RUSTY and stood directly in front. RUSTY did not move a servo. He stood absolutely still. As soon as Rizzo popped open RUSTY’s chest plate, RUSTY activated his stunners. Two bolts of electricity arced out of RUSTY and knocked Rizzo against the concrete wall. His unconscious body slid down the wall and crumpled onto the floor. Then RUSTY pulled the cable out of his port and closed his chest plate.

RUSTY looked around the shop and spotted a tool bag. He quickly extracted every tool inside and lined them in a precise row of tools on the bench. Within a second, he had computed how each tool could be used to break out of a jail cell. Then he selected the most effective tool of the collection and held it in his hand.

RUSTY poked his head out the door and scanned both directions. The passageway was empty. Time to catch up to George and help his friends escape. He jogged toward the stairs leading down to the prison area. The metallic thumping of his feet would alert someone if they were aware of anything amiss. Unfortunately, there was no time to lose. He had to find George and pretend he was going to feed the prisoners while he sent George back up to take his place.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, the meal preparation area was to his right. RUSTY stopped in front of the double-swinging door and pushed it open. George stood near a counter and stacked meals.

RUSTY stepped in front of George and used his wireless short-range communication to transfer a block of information to him in less than a second. George was now up to date on what had transpired, the plan that RUSTY computed, and what to expect after that.

George turned and left the food prep area, heading to the robot repair shop. RUSTY placed the tool inside the gravy of the chicken dinner. The guards might check the food, but he had to take the chance.

RUSTY replaced the tray lid and stacked it in the middle. Then he lifted the large collection of food trays and headed to the cell where his friends were located. There were a lot of winding passages leading the way to the cells, but RUSTY had downloaded the maps before they had started the mission, so he found the place without delay.

One guard stood at the main entrance to all the cells. The guard opened the solid door and waved RUSTY through. RUSTY walked past without acknowledging the guard. The guard shut the door behind him as he continued to the cell. When he arrived, he glanced up at the ceiling and identified the tiny camera watching him. The door clicked as the guard at the first door pressed a button to open it.

RUSTY used a simulation he created to pretend he was George.

“Are you RUSTY?” said Daphne.

RUSTY placed the trays on a table and retreated from the cell.

“I don’t think that was RUSTY,” said Perry.

One advantage of being a robot was that he never had the urge to laugh when something might be humorous. In fact, RUSTY didn’t really understand humor at all. It made it easy to act serious, drop off the meals, and exit.

The door clicked behind him and he headed toward the outer door, where the guard opened it to let him pass.

Now it was up to Daphne and her friends to break out of their cell and escape the compound.

**CHAPTER 49**

Daphne sat on a cot she had claimed as her own and quietly ate her meal. Everyone in the cell ate in silence as well. There was little left to talk about and everyone had decided that they would probably be locked up for a long time.

The food wasn’t bad, as far as prison food went. Daphne had eaten her share of it in her lifetime. The meal consisted of a quarter of a chicken, probably grilled, then covered with a gravy that needed more salt. The mashed potatoes were good, and they were covered with the same gravy. It’s too bad the meal contained so many carbs, but Daphne shrugged at that thought. She could always fall back on the skinny pill if she were in a situation where she worried about gaining weight for real. So far, it seemed as though cargo haulers were skinny due to the many meals they would be forced to miss. Like yesterday, when they walked through the desert.

“Hopefully,” said Perry. “The military will notice us missing and mount a rescue.”

“Yeah,” said Lowell. “Like they’ve done for me so far?”

“Right, kid,” said Roberta. “They don’t care about us. If we plan to get out of here, we’ll have to do it ourselves.”

“Well,” said Perry. He held a fork full of chicken in front of his mouth. “You guys are a happy bunch.” He placed the chicken in his mouth and chewed, but then stopped and dragged his fork across his plate. Then he swallowed. “Hey. There’s something in my food.”

He picked something up from his plate and rinsed it off in the sink. When he turned toward the others in the cell, he held up a tiny file with two fingers.

“Does your robot think we can escape with this tiny thing?” said Perry.

Daphne rolled her eyes. “That was RUSTY all right. Unfortunately, I think he’s seen too many cartoons.”

Perry set it on the back of the sink and sat down to resume eating. After a moment of pushing his remaining food around with a fork, he set his tray near the door and laid on his back on a rack.

The engines of a large ship became too loud to ignore. Perry jumped up and grabbed the windowsill. Then he pulled himself up to look out the window.

“Looks like a massive cargo ship has landed,” said Perry.

“Another ship shot down?” said Roberta.

“No,” said Perry. “Looks like it’s a scheduled arrival. It landed on a landing pad and I can see several people in suits approaching.”

The engine noise quit, but Perry remained suspended against the wall while watching out the window. Daphne stood and looked up at him, as though she could get a better view just by being close. Unfortunately, what little window opening she could see out of only showed the sky.

“The crew of the ship have exited and are meeting with the suits that walked over. I recognize Mr. Kobayashi in that group. His rotund figure is hard to miss.”

Daphne snickered. Now there’s a guy who never missed a meal, and he didn’t bother with the skinny pill. Maybe he thought his large figure made him look more important. She thought she might ask him the next time they met face-to-face.

“There seems to be a dispute going on,” said Perry. “Looks like Mr. Kobayashi is throwing a fit.”

“Let me see,” said Daphne.

Perry lowered his body and stepped back. Daphne jumped up and missed the ledge. She jumped again, her fingertips got a grip for a second, but slipped off.

“Need help?” said Perry. He had a small grin on his face.

“I got this,” she said. She clenched her jaw, grunted as she jumped higher than she needed. Fortunately, she was able to get most of her hands onto the ledge at the bottom of the window to hoist herself up.

She scanned the area outside the cell. The collection of suits, bickering, stood to one side. The cargo ship they stood next to looked like one of those jumbo cargo haulers. Something she would like to buy someday, when she had the extra money. When she glanced to the right, she saw her ship being repaired. Scaffolding covered the rear engines and ladders lined the side of the ship. At least a dozen or more men were on the scaffolding, with tools and parts. Sparks flew from someone grinding equipment near a damaged engine. Bright sparks flew from a welder on a lower level of the scaffolding.

That piqued her interest. Not the argument going on, but by the fact that they were repairing her ship. Were they going to use it for something? Maybe they just wanted to fly it out of their compound. It seemed like an expensive way to remove her ship. She half-expected them to just cut it apart and toss the pieces as scrap.

Behind the ship was the wall. Standing at least three stories tall, it surrounded most of the facility. The back of the facility had no wall, but a building about ten stories tall. Tiny silhouettes of men walking along the top of the front wall reminded her that there were eyes that could see them if they managed to escape. There were gun mounts at regular intervals to repel invaders. To make matters worse, the wall was not straight. It zig-zagged at odd angles, allowing the soldiers to see and shoot in any direction. It also made the wall stronger. No large, flat surface to hit with a missile. Daphne had studied this wall on the blueprints, but to see it in person gave a whole different experience.

“What do you see?” said Roberta.

“I see that they’re fixing my ship.”

“Huh,” said Roberta. “That’s interesting.”

“Well,” said Perry. “If we need a getaway vehicle, your ship might still be a viable option.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “Unless they rigged the thing to blow. Maybe they’re busy installing a million subspace tracking devices jut to keep tabs on ya.”

“Oh, you’re a bag of fun,” said Perry.

Daphne lowered herself. Her arms were tiring, and she saw enough of the action outside.

Perry leaned against a wall with his arms crossed. Roberta sat on her bunk with her back against the wall. Her eyes were half closed, and she also had her arms crossed. Their debate about what the mob was doing to the Waterfowl had dissipated. Lowell lay on his rack with his arm over his eyes. Morale had slipped out the back door.

Daphne wondered if there was a way to bring back hope.

**CHAPTER 50**

Mr. Kobayashi stormed into the main building and headed straight for the robot repair shop. Rizzo had better have an explanation for the missing funds. The question on Mr. Kobayashi’s mind was, how did Rizzo get into the account and steal his electronic currency? It had to be him, though. He was the only boss with a history of robotics knowledge. The guy grew up as a computer genius. That was how he got into the crime business. By hacking into other computers.

Mr. Kobayashi rounded the corner and entered the shop.

“Where is my money?” he said. Then he froze.

There were two robots standing side-by-side. Rizzo was crumpled into a ball against the concrete wall in front of the robots. The scene confused him. Who stole the money? One of the robots? That seemed unlikely. Both robots were a model from fifty years ago. Their hacking abilities ended with electronic door locks and not computers with military-grade encryption. Something Mr. Kobayashi obtained from the military as payment for a job he had done for them.

“We,” said the robot on the right.

“Have,” said the robot on the left.

“Your.”

“Money.”

“What?” said Mr. Kobayashi. “How? And, which one. I know electronic coins cannot be duplicated. They must be in one of you. Assuming that’s where you’re storing it.”

“That is correct,” said the robot on the right.

“One of us has the money,” said the robot on the left.

Mr. Kobayashi screamed while balling his fists. That was the moment when he thought it would have been nice if he had installed a punching bag right here in this very lab. That way, he could always take out his robot frustrations while he did some thinking of his own.

He pointed at the robot on the right. “I’ll erase your memory.”

“How do you know I’m not the one carrying your money? If you erase me, you could lose your entire fortune.”

“Yes,” said the robot on the left. “That would be such a shame.”

“What do you think your competitors would do if they found out you were broke?”

Mr. Kobayashi gritted his teeth. His jaw become sore from it, but he couldn’t think of what to say to the two stupid tin men that seemed to have him over a barrel. How? How could these two obsolete junk heaps cleverly put him, the most powerful mob boss in the galaxy, in such a position?

He paced back and forth while thinking. There had to be a way to get his money back and quietly make this problem go away.

“I’ll remove the memory modules out of both of you. You’ll no longer have a body. Neither of you.”

There was a long silence, then the left robot made a noise. It sounded like an electronic snorting sound. The robot on the right did the same thing. Then they both broke into a lengthy electronic laughing sound.

“I’m serious!”

The two robots went silent.

“There is something that you two care about. I’ll use that as leverage.”

“Robots do not have feelings,” said the left robot.

“Sure we do,” said the right robot. “Well, they are only simulations of feelings…”

“Yes,” said the left robot. “But we can shut off those simulations.”

“You are correct, my brother,” said the right robot.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

“What is happening?” said Hono. “And what happened to Rizzo?”

Hono knelt down in front of Rizzo to check his vital signs. Then he slapped the unconscious man on the cheek with the back of his hand. The gentle slapping continued for a minute until Rizzo came to.

“What happened?” said Rizzo.

“We were going to ask you that very question,” said Hono.

Rizzo stood. His eyes widened, then he forced his way toward the door. Mr. Kobayashi wondered what had spooked the man. Rizzo wasn’t someone easily scared.

“That robot stunned me with some sort of electrical zapper,” said Rizzo.

“Which robot?” said Mr. Kobayashi. Wasn’t Rizzo supposed to erase the memory of one of those two?

“That one,” said Rizzo. He pointed at the right robot. Then he pointed at the other robot. “No, that one.” There was a lengthy pause before he put his hand down. “I don’t know.”

“So,” said Hono. “What went down at the deal? Don’t give me any baloney about you not having the money. We all want a cut of that cargo of military-grade weapons. You were supposed to make the initial purchase, then sell to us. But if you don’t have the dough, then we can always renegotiate the deal and get our own guns.”

“You would go back on your word?” said Mr. Kobayashi.

Hono shrugged his shoulders. “A boss has to do what a boss has to do. Tell me ya got the money. Maybe a mix-up with your accounts, and now you have it all straightened out?” He grinned.

“Yes,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “There’s a mix-up. It’ll all be sorted out in due time.”

“When?”

Mr. Kobayashi glared at Hono. “Due time.”

**CHAPTER 51**

Daphne wasn’t sure of the time, but it felt like it should be night. Except, the sun never went down, so the cell remained bright. Perry and Roberta were already snoring up a storm. Perry slept on his back with his arm over his eyes, while Roberta had a pillow over her entire face. Lowell sat in the corner of the room, staring off in the distance. Daphne decided to join him for a moment, even though the concrete floor felt cold and hard.

She sat against the wall next to him, then put her arm around him. He looked at her, then smiled.

“Sorry, you got captured by the mob,” she said.

“That’s OK,” he said. “All part of my plan.” A grin appeared on his face, then faded.

“What?” said Daphne.

“Yeah. I needed to get captured in order to find out who is Mr. Kobayashi’s contact. Who was smuggling the guns out of the war zone?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. Now you and your friends got captured, it seems like maybe the plan has failed.”

“How were you going to get out of here? I assume your plan included some sort of rescue?”

“Well,” he said. “We have that tiny file.” Now a huge grin filled his face. What a comedian. He had to have another plan for escape. Otherwise, it wouldn’t matter if he found out who was behind the gun smuggling. If Lowell didn’t report back, then nobody would ever find out.

The cell door clanked open. Daphne had not even heard anybody coming down the passageway outside. When the door swung wide, a large man blocked the opening. He was flanked by several others in suits.

Mr. Kobayashi.

“You,” said Mr. Kobayashi. He pointed directly at Daphne.

Daphne pointed at herself. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Come with us. My patience has run thin.”

Perry hopped off his bunk and put himself between Daphne and the door, facing Mr. Kobayashi.

“Now, wait a minute,” said Perry. “She’s not going anywhere.”

“I give you my word,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “She will not be harmed. And I’ll have her back before lunch.”

Daphne grabbed Lowell’s head with her hands and gave him a long kiss. Then she stood and headed to the exit. When she glanced back, Lowell smiled at her, but stayed seated. She winked, then followed Mr. Kobayashi. His guards fell in behind her as the cell door clanked shut in the distance.

Another opportunity to walk around outside of the cell and she wasted no time looking around. Every minute they paraded her around would be another opportunity to spot something that could help her friends escape. One never knew what detail could be exploited for their advantage. She recalled the map she studied before they started the mission and made note of what everything looked like in real life. She noted the number of staff walking down the passageways. What weapons did they carry? How many steps did it take to arrive at a place of importance?

They passed a food preparation area before entering an elevator. The prep area had at least two people in white uniforms preparing food. Several server androids, convincing facsimiles of beautiful young women, navigated through the passageways with trays of drinks or empty glasses. Men in expensive suits passed by. Each nodded at Mr. Kobayashi, who also nodded as he passed. Nobody said a word to Mr. Kobayashi. There must have been an agreement not to talk or interrupt the man when they encountered him.

When Mr. Kobayashi entered a room, two robot heads turned to look at her at the same time.

“RUSTY!” she said. Then she looked at the other robot. “And RUSTY!”

“Your attempt at humor has fallen on deaf ears,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

Daphne cleared her throat. She thought about the file and wondered which of the two robots was the real RUSTY who had smuggled such a ridiculous tool into her cell. Each robot appeared to be identical, but that was the intent when they fixed up George to be traded for Lowell.

“So,” said Daphne. “You brought me here to give me my robot back and you’re letting us all go?” She blinked her eyes at him, knowing Mr. Kobayashi had no intention of returning RUSTY or letting any of them go.

“I see the humor continues. However, I have a bit of a dilemma.”

“Really?” she smiled. Butterflies forming in her stomach at his statement. It sounded suspiciously like he needed something from her.

“Yes. It seems your robot… well, one of these two robots, has hacked into my computer and transferred my electronic currency into their own memory.”

“Wow,” said Daphne. “What you’re telling me is you’re making a sizable electronic donation as an apology for throwing me in a jail cell, torturing me a few days ago, stealing my robot, and shooting down my ship.”

“You are incorrect,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

“Well, why don’t you just move your digital money back?”

“Judging by the smile on your face, you probably already know cybernetic memories cannot be read directly. I would have to hook each robot up to an analyzer and ask them questions until it told me what I want to know. Something like that could take years. Especially since torture will not work on a robot.”

“Oh,” said Daphne. “That’s a shame.” She couldn’t help herself from bouncing on the balls of her feet. He definitely needed something from her.

“However. People such as yourself are easily manipulated by torture. In this case, I am hoping to appeal to the real RUSTY by torturing you in front of these two.” Mr. Kobayashi swished his index finger between the two robots.

Daphne sighed and slumped. “Are we going to go through the torture routine again?”

“Unless you can convince your robot to transfer my money back to my computer.”

Daphne shrugged her shoulders. “I can’t get my stupid robot to do mundane chores around the ship. There’s little chance I’ll get him to reveal himself or transfer your money back. Hey, that reminds me… what happened to the money on the shuttle we stole from your palace?”

Mr. Kobayashi popped a tiny pill. Daphne wondered if it was some sort of blood pressure medication. Old school. Nobody ran around with a bottle of pills for their heart condition anymore. It seemed strange someone with so much money would avoid getting surgery to fix his physical problem. Then again, there were a lot of people having superstitions against modern medicine.

He disappeared the pill bottle in a pocket. “Unfortunately, that money was confiscated by the military when they searched my shuttle. I do not have any cash at the moment and the transaction must occur today. My seller has agreed to a transfer of digital cash in this instance, but he will not wait long. Give me my money.”

Daphne shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

Mr. Kobayashi’s face turned a much darker shade of red and Daphne knew it would translate into a lot of pain for her in the near future. The acid in her stomach roiled as she thought about it. It became worse as she thought about how long RUSTY could hold out. He could feel no pain and could not be tortured or coerced. If only she knew how much longer they would be here.

She vowed to hold out as long as possible.

**CHAPTER 52**

It was a long walk back to the lower levels, where they strapped Daphne to a thin-cushioned board fixed at an angle so she was not lying flat. She gritted her teeth in anticipation of the torture she was sure to endure. The room consisted of four concrete walls, a ceiling full of pipes and cables, and a concrete floor. A faint odor of dead animal made her gag, though she could see no dead carcasses lying about. Maybe a dead rat had been removed but not sanitized, or it died behind the equipment in the room. Trash littered the edges of the room. The more she examined her surroundings, the more she wished someone would come in and vacuum the place. At least so she could be tortured in a clean environment.

A potato chip bag moved, then a rat scurried out from under it. Daphne’s skin crawled at the sight. Her eyes darted around the ceiling to look for movement in the piping. It would not surprise her if there were rats crawling around up there. Hopefully, they’ll stay to themselves and not drop down on top of her.

Water dripped from a pipe in the corner of the room. The drops were slow and the water on the floor left a rust-colored streak winding its way to a drain on the other side of the room. She wondered if the dripping water was part of the torture. Drip, drip, drip. Even though the building was located in the middle of a massive desert, the owner cared little of a constant drip in what she would call the dungeon.

Directly across from her was another padded board angled toward her. She wondered if they strapped prisoners facing each other so they can watch the other being tortured. RUSTY or George was sure to be attached to the other board in front of her. The padding was shredded near the middle, right about where a person’s hands would be. She felt around the padding near where her hands were strapped and felt the missing foam cushion and the torn vinyl.

A control panel stood in the corner to her left. It had an array of switches and a large round knob. She suspected the device was the same one used on her at the palace. Except, this one looked ancient. Dust covered everything except the large power switch and the round knob.

Movement near the far right corner caught her eye. The same rat as before. It had made its way toward the corner while she observed the rest of the room. It stood on its hind legs and chewed on a piece of trash it picked up along the way.

RUSTY and George were marched into the room by two other thugs in suits. Then they brought in someone else. At first, she couldn’t see who, but then the man turned his head, and she recognized Lowell right away. Mr. Kobayashi came in last and closed the door.

They attached Lowell to the padded board across from her. Daphne’s head swam as she tried to catch her breath. It had been a long time since she had felt the effects of a panic attack. This was the worst yet. She could tell by the look in Lowell’s eyes he was horrified at the idea of watching her being tortured.

“What are you doing?” said Daphne. Her words came out in gasps, but Mr. Kobayashi understood them.

He smiled. “Why, I’m going to torture your boyfriend while you watch.”

That was a scenario she had not considered, and now she felt even more light-headed than before. How much could she watch before cracking? Probably not much. She didn’t want to see him in pain. The acid in her stomach felt as though it was going to come all the way up. She swallowed to keep it down.

That’s when she closed her eyes and imagined a far-away place where she and Lowell could relax on a beach and sip on those fancy umbrella drinks rich people lived off of. Within a minute, she got control of her breathing and slow her heart rate.

Lowell has been trained by the military.

That’s what she thought to herself. Just keep that fact in mind, and they’d get through this together. Someday, she’d ask him what kind of training he had endured before being deployed. Assuming they made it out alive. Hopefully, Lowell has been through the toughest torture training courses the military offers.

A large man in a suit placed earphones over her head. She tried to shake them off, but the strap holding her head tight to the board prevented her head from turning or lifting. Everyone in the room put on headphones, then one of the thugs flipped the large power switch on the control panel. It lit with a bright green light. Then he slowly turned the large knob. She listened, but could hear nothing.

When the sound penetrated her hearing protection, Lowell arched his back. Veins stuck out from his neck and head. He screamed. The scream was louder than the sound that was causing him pain. Guilt overtook her, but she knew it would do no good to give in to Mr. Kobayashi’s torture of her boyfriend. The man would get his money back, destroy RUSTY and kill all the prisoners. There seemed to be no other way but to endure the pain and suffering.

Mr. Kobayashi nodded at the man controlling the volume. He rotated the knob to zero. Lowell collapsed onto his board, wheezing as he tried to catch his breath.

“Don’t tell them anything,” said Lowell.

Mr. Kobayashi removed Daphne’s headset. She expected it to be her turn now. Perhaps they would alternate the two of them to see who would crack first.

“Tell your robot to return my funds,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

Daphne gritted her teeth and jerked her head one way, then the other.

Mr. Kobayashi rolled his eyes and sighed. “Suit yourself.” He replaced the headset and pointed at the man controlling the device. The man turned the dial up and Lowell screamed.

So far, so good. They had survived almost five minutes of torture.

**CHAPTER 53**

Daphne awakened with a start. For a moment, she thought she was still strapped to the board in the torture room. When her arm flopped to one side, she realized someone had moved her to her bunk in the prison cell. Lowell appeared to be still unconscious on another bunk. After Lowell passed out, Mr. Kobayashi switched the target of his torture to her. She had held out for some time before her body could take no more. Then she passed out. As before, she had been awakened by smelling salts and the torture continued. Each time, she would last a shorter amount of time before passing out until the torturers must have determined there was little more they could do.

Daphne felt completely exhausted and would have slept much longer if not for the bright sunlight streaming into the cell. Perry sat in a corner of the cell, while Roberta lay on her rack with her arm over her eyes. Everyone was accounted for, so the mobsters must be taking a rest. She wondered if they would torture someone else from their group to get the information. Technically, only RUSTY and George knew which robot was which. Since they were machines, they were not susceptible to any torture techniques.

The door clanked as someone looked through the peep slot. Then the door opened. Mr. Kobayashi stood in the opening.

“We are going to try a different technique,” he said.

Daphne sat on her elbow. “You have something worse than the sound torture?”

“No,” he said. “I have a technique called ‘the bribe.’ In fact, I’m going to try this technique on everyone.”

“You’ll never be able to bribe me,” said Daphne.

“Don’t say that until you have seen what I am about to bribe you with.”

Several thugs entered the cell and assisted Perry, Lowell, and Roberta to stand. Daphne stood on her own but felt woozy. When she felt her legs would support her, she let go of her rack and walked with the line of people headed out of the cell.

What was Mr. Kobayashi going to bribe them with? Their freedom? She wasn’t sure how that would work.

They made their way to the elevator, then to the main level. They entered a massive room. RUSTY and George were already standing near the back. Couches formed a circle going around the room. Food and drinks lined tables close to the couches. Daphne selected something resembling champaign and took a sip. It was sweet and flavorful.

Everyone in their group rushed to the table and grabbed food and drinks. Perry and Roberta shoved handfuls of tiny sandwiches into their mouths and washed it down with champaign. Lowell ate some tiny cakes, before selecting a tall glass with a blue liquid in it.

At least a dozen large men in suits, carrying small rifles, ringed the room. They stood with their hands clasped in front of them. Two guards blocked the doorway they had entered. Daphne knew they were still prisoners, but at least they could enjoy some food and drink. Not just prison food, but quality stuff queens and kings dined on.

“We have all day,” said Mr. Kobayashi. Everyone froze, then looked up at Mr. Kobayashi. “Take your time and enjoy the flavors.” After a brief pause, everyone resumed cramming food into their mouths. Daphne had to admit, she worried the food would run out and she might not get a good fill. Then three women with large silver trays entered the room. They set the trays on the tables and took away the empty ones.

Daphne rolled her eyes before grabbing a handful of small sandwiches. She consumed them one at a time and in no particular hurry. Everyone else slowed as they became satiated. Within a fifteen minute time frame, everyone sat on one of the couches while sipping their drink.

An explosion outside caused everyone to bolt upright. Mr. Kobayashi snapped his fingers and signaled his thugs to move to the door. Each of the large men pulled back the coat flap of their suit and swung their rifle up. Daphne wasn’t sure if she should dive for cover, or trust that nobody would start a gunfight inside the large room.

Several men in suits ran into the room from the outside.

“The military is invading the compound,” said one of the men. “They’ve breached the outer walls and are pouring in. There are too many of them.”

“Everyone stay calm,” said Mr. Kobayashi. “I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding.”

Daphne glanced at Lowell. He sat back in his seat with his arms folded and a smug look on his face.

Daphne smiled. “Ah, I see. This was how you were planning to get out of here.”

“Yup,” he said. “I just stalled while waiting for my friends to arrive.”

Gunfire and explosions continued outside. Daphne wanted to take a peek outside, but resisted the temptation. No sense in getting shot at the moment when the bad guys were about to get bagged.

She sat back and relaxed for the first time since it all began. Maybe now she could retrieve RUSTY and get her life back to normal.

Unfortunately, her gut told her it would not be so easy.

**CHAPTER 54**

The gunfire and explosions never let up, but became closer. A row of large bodyguards in suits blocked the doorway. Each had their gun pointed down the hallway toward the front entrance. Daphne listened to the noises coming through the windows and down the hallway. The outer doors must have been sealed, and it sounded like the soldiers were just outside. An explosion so loud it made Daphne’s ears pop caused a large chunk of the outer door to fly through the hallway.

Bullets and plasma bolts flew down the hallway, making streaks as they zipped by. The thugs opened fire with their short machine guns. The battle lasted for only a few seconds before two of the large men went down at the same time. Mr. Kobayashi glanced toward their dead bodies strewn on the floor. He seemed to stare at them for a long time. The soldiers continued firing past them and sounded as if they were closing fast.

Mr. Kobayashi’s hands went up in unison with the row of thugs still standing at the door. Daphne was surprised they just threw their hands up and surrendered. At least a dozen soldiers pushed them back into the room. Daphne and others put their hands up as several soldiers peeled off and approached with rifles pointed toward them.

Colonel Bardsley strolled in without a weapon. He looked as though he were arriving to do an inspection or maybe gather a signature from someone in the household. He waved a hand sideways as he put cuffs on Mr. Kobayashi. Two soldiers moved toward RUSTY and George. One soldier opened the chest plate and pressed the shut-down button. Then the two carried the robot away. Daphne wasn’t sure if they took RUSTY or George.

Daphne jumped to her feet. “Wait.” A soldier grabbed her shoulder and prevented her from moving. “That’s my robot.”

“Or my robot,” said Perry.

“The military will be confiscating these two for the time being,” said Colonel Bardsley. “You can complete a form 2251-4 to file a complaint and claim your property. But you better file the paperwork soon, because it could take up to a year to get it processed.”

Daphne sat back on the couch, sighed, and folded her arms.

The two soldiers disappeared out the doorway. One robot remained standing near the back wall. He watched the soldiers moving around the room, but only moved his head. He did not move an arm or leg. Daphne wanted to tell him to run for it, but she knew the soldiers would just close in and overwhelm him. He’d probably be blasted to pieces by the time they were finished. A form 2251-4 didn’t sound all bad.

General Booth entered the room and looked around.

“Secure all the prisoners,” said General Booth.

Colonel Bardsley gave Mr. Kobayashi a push to get him moving. His arms hardly fit behind his back. If not for the cuffs with an adjustable linkage, they would have been forced to use multiple cuffs.

The two soldiers that took one of the robots out returned and repeated the process of shutting down the remaining robot and carting him off. General Booth approached and smiled at Daphne, Perry, Roberta, and Lowell.

“Aren’t you the one working with Mr. Kobayashi?” said Roberta.

The smile on General Booth’s face faded. Then he looked at Lowell.

“Nope,” said Lowell. “General Booth is working with me to find out who in the military has been working with the mob. Unfortunately, we didn’t get a look at who was making the deal with Mr. Kobayashi.”

General Booth looked around the room. “Where did Colonel Bardsley go?”

Daphne growled, then stood again. “I know where he went. And he stole my robot.”

“And my robot,” said Perry.

“It doesn’t matter,” said General Booth. His face turned into a giant grin. “We know where his digital cash is located. All we have to do is seize his computer in the other room, and he’ll be without funds.”

Daphne rolled her eyes. “Wrong again. His digital funds are inside my robot.”

General Booth’s grin disappeared in a flash. Now his jaw hung slack, and he seemed speechless. Apparently, the general thought he had all the pieces put together. Unfortunately, the bad guys got the upper hand and Daphne knew the burden rested on her to get the job done.

But, she didn’t care about the money or Mr. Kobayashi. She also didn’t care about the fact that she had put the pieces together and solved the case. No, what she cared about was RUSTY, and maybe there was a little piece of her that cared for George. Nobody would steal her robot and get away with it.

“Come on,” said Daphne. She waved for her friends to follow as she made her way out the door. “I know where he’s going.” It was only a gut feeling, but everything started to line up. Time to take advantage of the situation while she was on a roll.

Everyone stood and followed her. When she looked back, her friends were in a line behind her as General Booth stood in place, watching them go by. Down the hall was a blown out door leading to the hot desert. The heat had already penetrated the building and Daphne was used to the temperature, since the cell they spent their previous days in had an open window to the outside and no air conditioning.

Soldiers streamed in and out of the external doors of the facility. Several ships landed as others lifted into the sky. Daphne estimated Colonel Bardsley reached orbit by now, but it didn’t matter. She would get her robot back, even if she had to chase the colonel around the galaxy.

Only one thing worried her. Something critical to their success.

The operational condition of the Waterfowl.

**CHAPTER 55**

They ran across the open concrete slab toward the Waterfowl. Soldiers marched every direction, searching buildings and ships. The outer walls looked abandoned. No armed men on top of them like before. The black smoke was so thick that Daphne could taste the toxic chemicals in it. It also burned inside her nose, but she ignored the pain.

Soldiers lifted the dead bodies of the mob security off the tarmac and carried them to a ship. Daphne tripped over the foot of a body. She stumbled forward, then looked back as she caught herself. It was the man from the jungle with the large, ugly tattoo on his neck. He was lying on a rifle, which piqued her curiosity. She grabbed his shirt at one shoulder and tugged it until his body rolled onto his back. Lying on the ground was her rifle. It got scuffed up, but seemed to be in working condition.

“I’ll be taking my rifle back,” said Daphne. She slung it over her shoulder. “Now that you don’t seem to need it anymore.”

“Wow,” said Roberta. “Now there’s a coincidence. How did he end up with your rifle?”

Daphne glanced at her. Perry, Roberta, and Lowell stood looking at the dead man’s body. Daphne thought about launching into a detailed story about how she bolted out of her ship and into the jungle. How RUSTY left her with the hundreds of thugs surrounding her. Just thinking about what happened exhausted her.

“Long story,” said Daphne.

Two soldiers walking toward them gave her a quick glance, then bent down and grabbed the tattooed man by the arms and legs. They hauled the man’s body away. Daphne turned and proceeded to her ship. Her friends followed behind.

The scaffolding was gone from the Waterfowl. Daphne hoped it meant the repairs were complete. Memories of what Roberta had mentioned echoed in her mind as she ran up the ramp and into the ship. What if someone bugged her ship? Did it matter? The only thing making her nervous was the possibility they rigged it to blow. Lowell came up the rear and hit the button to close the outer hatch. Daphne continued to the forward end of the ship.

Boots clanked on the loose deck grates. A familiar sound giving Daphne a warm and fuzzy feeling. She hopped into the pilot’s seat and glanced to her right.

No RUSTY.

Roberta hopped into the co-pilot’s seat and flipped a few switches before looking for the seat adjustments. Daphne double-checked the status of the engines and waited for the nav computer to return the OK for flight status. A rumble in the back of the craft made her jump for a second. It was the same noise those engines always made, but she still thought about the ship being rigged to explode.

She grabbed the controls with one hand and the lever on the side of her seat with the other. Then she let out a long breath of air. So far, so good.

“Is everyone ready?” she said.

“Let’s go,” said Perry. “Those jerks have a head-start on us.”

“Yeah,” said Roberta. “We’ve got some catching up to do. If we’re lucky, we can follow them to wherever they’re going.”

“Oh, I know where they’re going,” said Daphne. It was really just a guess, or maybe a little lie. She had a coordinate, but really wasn’t sure where that went. Maybe it was the tingling sensation she got in her gut that made her confident about Colonel Bardsley’s intended destination.

“You do?” said Perry.

She smiled at him. “Pretty sure.”

Lowell sat against the rear bulkhead on the bridge. Perry stepped back and folded his arms as he leaned against the side bulkhead. Daphne expected him to protest at her knowledge of where the bad guys were headed, but he said nothing.

Daphne lifted the stick. The G-forces increased as the ship powered straight up into the sky. When she was confident that she had cleared the compound walls, and then some, she pushed the throttle forward and flew the ship at an angle toward space. It took less than ten minutes to accelerate and achieve orbit.

Roberta clicked buttons on the nav computer. Then she stopped and grunted.

“There he is,” she said. “I’m sure that’s him. And we can catch him, if we hurry.”

Daphne glanced at the red symbol on the display. She adjusted the heading of the Waterfowl toward their ship, then pushed the throttle all the way forward. But her chase lasted only a minute before the symbol disappeared.

“He jumped away,” said Perry.

“Yup,” said Roberta. “He’s gone. Well, it was fun while it lasted.”

“Not to worry,” said Daphne. “I got it all up here.”

“What?” said Roberta.

“The coordinates.” Daphne smiled at Roberta, but said nothing more.

“Coordinates to where?”

“You remember that seven million dollar shuttle we stole?” Her smile turned into a grin.

Roberta slowly shook her head, then froze. “Oh, honey. That’s a serious gamble. We don’t know where those coordinates go.”

Daphne shrugged her shoulders. “Feel like rolling the dice?”

Roberta let out a long gasp. “Do I have a choice?”

“Nope.”

Daphne typed the coordinates into the nav computer. Then she hit the activate button, waited for the jump drive to charge up, and pulled the lever to activate it. The stars streaked in front of them, then they arrived at a location in space that looked like any other peaceful place.

“Huh,” said Daphne. “Not much here. Just a massive asteroid field.”

“No ships on the sensors,” said Roberta.

“Where are we?” said Perry.

“I thought this was where that ship would have jumped away. Maybe I was wrong.” She shrugged. “I guess we lost him.”

“Wait,” said Roberta. She adjusted the controls on the sensors to zoom in. “There’s a heat signature on the surface of one of the asteroids nearby.” She looked up at Daphne and smiled. “Maybe we should check it out.”

Daphne adjusted their course and shoved the thrust forward. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Navigating an asteroid field can be tricky. Fortunately, the asteroids in this field were tiny and spaced apart. Daphne continued to adjust her heading to swing around some of the larger rocks. Her ship impacted a few of the smaller, more difficult to see boulders. Every time one hit the ship, a loud metallic bang echoed from below. She shook her head and groaned, knowing she was racking up more repair costs.

When they were close to the target asteroid, she pulled back on the throttle and engaged the reverse thrust. Roberta continued to monitor the sensors. When Daphne glanced over at the display, the red area on the asteroid looked more pronounced. Whoever hid inside the asteroid wasn’t too concerned about being found.

“I see a good flat spot to land on,” said Daphne.

She lowered the ship, then examined the surface gravity of the asteroid. Then she groaned. It was so minuscule that the ship would float off the surface as soon as they landed.

“Does this thing have spikes?” said Roberta.

“Yup,” said Daphne. “Fortunately, I bought new ones. Since I used the ones I had on another asteroid.”

Daphne used the side stick to control her vertical descent. The distance to the asteroid ticked down at a rapid rate. She applied more thrust to slow their rate of descent. When they were ten meters from the surface, she nodded at Roberta.

“Firing spikes,” said Roberta. A loud bang caused Perry to jump a little. Then he settled back into his folded-arm lean against the bulkhead. Daphne glanced back at Lowell. He sat on the deck behind her, staying quiet.

Roberta activated the wenches, and the ship continued to descend until it touched the ground. The wenches cut off as soon as the ship was tight against the asteroid. Daphne hit the engine shut down button and turned off most of the ship’s controls.

“Now the fun begins,” said Daphne.

**CHAPTER 56**

They stood in the open doorway of the utility compartment. Racks of suits lined the bulkheads. Emergency equipment hung everywhere. Daphne observed the firefighting equipment, as well as the cold weather gear. None of those were of use in an airless world like the one they were about to embark on.

Her suit hung near the front and she couldn’t remember the last time she had worn it. The suit was well-worn and needed to be cleaned. After thinking about it for a minute, she realized the darn thing really needed to be replaced. Plus, she was required to carry enough suits for all passengers, but the extra suits were never replaced after she had discovered the ones she had were beyond use.

She glanced around. Nobody would be able to fit in her suit, even if they wanted to use it.

“Is that your only suit?” said Roberta.

“That’s the only one that works,” said Daphne. “I stashed the other ones in another storage locker. Their seals are worn. They’re not safe to use. I planned to replace them on my next trip. In fact, the inspectors dinged me for not having enough suits. They seem to always ding me for something like that.”

“Well,” said Perry. He pulled on the sleeve of a heated surface suit. “You have a lot of cold-weather gear.”

“Yeah. Except for the one I wore when they rescued me on that ice planet. So, I’m one short on those. Those jerks dinged me for that too.”

Lowell grabbed her shoulders and rotated her toward him. Then he looked into her eyes.

“I might be able to squeeze into your suit,” he said. “It’ll be uncomfortable, but at least you don’t have to risk your life for this mission.”

“I thought we just mark this place and let the military deal with it,” said Perry.

Roberta snorted. “I wouldn’t count on those bumbling idiots to take care of anything. They’re more geared for blowing stuff up and killin’ people. Not very good at rescuing somebody or in this case, arresting them.”

“Yeah,” said Daphne. “I want RUSTY back.”

Lowell squeezed her shoulders tighter. “We can always get another robot.”

Daphne shook her head. “No. You don’t understand. He’s family to me.” Tears formed in her eyes. She gritted her teeth and tried not to get too emotional.

Lowell wrapped his arms around her and gave her a good squeeze.

Then he whispered into her ear. “It’s OK. I can go in and get him.”

Daphne relaxed and let her arms hang by her sides. “OK.”

Lowell removed the suit from the rack and stuck his leg through. Daphne glanced around and observed the height of everyone standing next to her. Roberta was taller than Daphne. Perry was taller and bulkier. He had muscular arms that were probably a little too large for the suit. Lowell was only a little taller than Daphne. Maybe half a head taller. But at least he was shorter than Perry. If Lowell wasn’t able to fit in her suit, then they were sunk. She would have to do the space walk. They had no other choice.

Lowell tried to get his shoulder into the top of the suit while pressing his arms through the sleeves. His shoulders were too tall. The legs on the suit were taut and he could not get his shoulders into the suit. No matter how hard he tried to stretch the suit, it just wasn’t going to fit. He sighed, then removed the suit.

“I guess it’s me,” said Daphne. “Nobody else is going to be able to fit in that thing.”

Daphne slipped into the suit and zipped it up. It felt natural. She had put it on so many times that she knew how well it fit. This was a lesson she would take to heart. The next time she needed emergency equipment, she would purchase several suits that were adjustable. They were not the most comfortable suits available, but at least her passengers would be able to join her on a space walk if there was ever a need for such a thing in the future.

Lowell handed her the helmet. She started to put it on, then stopped. There was one more thing she had to do before embarking on this mission. She grabbed the front of Lowell’s shirt with one hand and pulled him in tight. They kissed for more than a minute. Her mind was fully consumed with the wonderful act of kissing. When they released, Roberta and Perry had wandered down the passageway to give them some space. She smiled at Lowell, then pulled him in for another kiss.

Then she put her helmet on, pressurized her suit, checked the gauges and gave a thumb’s up that she was ready. The helmet contained a slight odor of mildew, but the time to sanitize it passed long ago. Everyone helped her navigate to the airlock. Perry handed her the rifle. She held it in front of her for a moment before slinging it over her shoulder.

“I took the liberty of grabbing it from your compartment before we went to the emergency storage locker,” said Perry. He shrugged his shoulder. “I figured you’d probably need it. Oh, it’s set to stun.”

She smiled. Everyone backed out of the airlock and closed the inner hatch. She activated the de-pressurization sequence. There was too much time to kill while waiting for the airlock to de-pressurize. A collection of thoughts passed through her head. What if the mob killed her? What if there was a firefight? Was RUSTY still intact, or did they disassemble him? She shook her head. No time to lose hope. She still had to assess the situation and find out what caused the heat spot on the surface. It could just be a natural process. They didn’t know, for sure, if Colonel Bardsley and Mr. Kobayashi had come here in the first place. That was just an assumption.

The light turned green. The airlock was de-pressurized. She activated the latch to unlock the outer hatch. Then she pulled it open. The sky was pure black, but the asteroid surface blinded her. She adjusted the opacity of her helmet shield to reduce the light levels and save her eyes from the brightness. Then she stepped out onto the ramp.

All she had to do was walk around, observe her surroundings, and not make any sudden moves that would launch her from the surface of the asteroid.

**CHAPTER 57**

The surface crunched under foot. That was something that surprised Daphne. It felt as though she were walking on glass shards. There were impact craters everywhere, ranging in size from mere dots to large basins. A straight line through the gray surface ahead of her looked artificial. She headed in that direction. Maybe there was something man-made just below the surface.

When she arrived at the edge, she could see the lines in the surface formed a giant rectangular area. The ridge that formed the edges was only a centimeter or two deep. Making it difficult to see from the ship, but easy to see from ground level.

Daphne pressed the talk button on her arm. “I’m at the edge of something artificial on the surface.”

“Is it a door?” said Roberta.

“Could be.”

She got onto her knees and wiped at the surface. The asteroid surface consisted of large granules, while the artificial section seemed as hard as steel. When she bent lower and put her helmet almost to the ground, she could see that the metallic-like surface was painted. The spray coating was not even and appeared to have been done in haste.

She pressed her talk button. “Yeah, there’s something here, and it looks like it’s made of metal covered with a thick paint to disguise it.”

It took some effort to get back to her feet without launching into space, but she managed, then stepped onto the metal surface. She walked from one side to the next. Then she noticed a rock next to the metal rectangle. The rock wasn’t real. In fact, it stuck out like a sore thumb.

She got down on her knees again and looked at the rock from all sides. Then she grasped it and lifted it from the ground. The fake rock formed a cover over a cube-shaped module. On the side was a brand-name. The manufacturer proudly announced the purpose of the module, with giant wording on all sides.

“Looks like a wireless control unit,” said Daphne. “I bet it activates whatever that steel thing is.”

“Maybe the steel is a door into a landing bay, or something,” said Lowell.

“It has the frequency printed on the side,” said Daphne. “And it’s a purple-75 wireless protocol.”

“Sheesh,” said Perry. “Everything uses that. Give me the freq and I’ll see if we can activate it. Although they probably changed the password.”

Daphne read off the frequency number, then waited.

“Do you think it activates with a ‘start’ command, or maybe an ‘open’ command?” said Perry.

“Let’s try ‘open,’” said Daphne.

“OK, I’m trying the default password in the manufacturer’s instructions. It’s printed on page one of the installation documents. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to guess at the password.”

“Too bad RUSTY wasn’t here,” said Daphne.

The ground vibrated as she stood. Dust rose from the edges as the metal slid to the side, opening into a giant chasm.

“I think that worked,” said Daphne.

“Good,” said Perry. “Stupid mobsters. They didn’t even change the factory password. The instructions have a warning on page one to immediately change after installation.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “There’s no fixin’ stupid.”

The hole in front of her was large, and the bottom looked endless. Light from the distant star above her head did not illuminate the interior, and she had no way to see how deep it went. The ground continued to vibrate and dust from the surface surrounded her, obscuring her view. She stumbled forward and tried to catch her fall, but there was nothing but a gaping hole.

Her body tumbled head-over-heels as the darkness swallowed her. She experienced a moment of panic, but managed to calm herself. The gravity on this asteroid was tiny, so she would not fall too fast. When her body rotated so she was facing up, she could see the rectangular outline into space above her. The rectangle continued to grow as the door slid to the side.

The impact at the bottom was jarring, but her suit seemed intact. She lay on her back for a moment to determine if she broke any bones.

“Are you alright?” said Lowell.

The worry in his voice was unmistakable.

“I’m good,” she said. “Just tripped into their little hidden lair.”

She turned her head to the left and checked out the craft parked on the platform. “Looks like their ship is here. This is definitely where they went.”

“Good,” said Roberta. “Now, go get yer robot friend and hightail it back here. I got a pie in the oven.”

Daphne chuckled. “She’s got a pie in the oven.” Sure she does.

Daphne rolled onto her stomach and levered herself up. Then she identified where the airlock was and skipped across the low gravity surface until she reached it. The window in the airlock hatch was large, which made it easy to see inside with a helmet on. She saw someone’s head and ducked back. Her heart beat in her throat. A bead of sweat trickled down her neck.

When she got her breathing and heart rate under control, she slowly rotated to look inside the window again. There was nobody in the airlock. The head she saw was a helmet. In fact, there were two rows of suits and helmets inside the airlock. Racks on each side contained twelve suits total.

She activated the airlock by pressing a large button next to the hatch. The inner hatch was already sealed, so she only had to wait for the air to evacuate before the motorized external hatch slid to the side. The controls for the hatch were more complex than the ones on the Waterfowl. The facility was more modern.

When the air emptied, she opened the hatch and entered the airlock. Then she activated the airlock to re-pressurize it. It took less time to pressurize than she had expected. The green light came on and she immediately removed her helmet. When the atmosphere of the interior hit her nose, she immediately put her helmet back on and sealed it.

There was a foul odor in the station. It smelled like…

Ammonia.

She paced back and forth as she thought about the smell. Ammonia was a smell she remembered when she lived on the streets. Bad memories of some of the awful people she had run into flooded her mind. The memory of drug dealers kept popping to the front of her thoughts. She closed her eyes and thought hard. Where had she smelled that odor before?

Her eyes popped open. That meth lab!

Yes, it was all coming back to her. There was a meth lab where some drug dealer manufactured his stuff. Something he called a “product.” Ammonia was an overwhelming smell she would never forget. She pressed the transmit button on her suit and gave word of where she was and that she smelled the telltale signs of drugs being made, but she didn’t get a response. After a few tries, she came to the conclusion that radio signals could not penetrate the facility.

She popped her helmet off while holding her breath. It would be almost impossible to sneak around in a spacesuit. She would have to get out of this thing and find RUSTY. Then escape with her robot.

There was also no way to hold her breath forever, so she let it out and sucked in a large lung-full of the awful air surrounding her. Then she coughed. She knew she’d have to stay in the airlock until she could get her breathing to normal. If she tried to sneak around and had a sudden coughing-fit, they’d capture her for sure. But that wasn’t the worst part.

Nope, the worst part was that she had no idea how large this facility was, and what was down here.

She stood her rifle against the bulkhead so she could remove her suit. Then she disconnected the gloves and set them near the bulkhead, unzipped the large zipper on her suit, and shrugged out of the thing. Once she had it semi-folded and shoved against the bulkhead, she performed some breathing exercises.

Her coughing fit started, and it took a minute to get it under control. She continued her breathing exercises to get used to the air. Her eyes watered from the foul air.

It didn’t look like things were going to be as easy as she hoped.

**CHAPTER 58**

Daphne stuffed her suit in the back corner of the airlock out of sight. She extended her arm to press the open button for the inner door, then froze. When she turned her head, she observed the rows of suits hanging on either side. Those had to be the only suits they had in the facility. If she were to escape clean, it would be best if they were unable to pursue her.

She looked at the arm rings of a suit. The rubber gasket was tight, but she worked it loose with her fingernail. It took several minutes, but she chalked it up to time well spent if it gave her a head-start after she busted out RUSTY. She put the rings inside a pocket on the outside of her suit. The pocket bulged from the twelve rings she removed from the wrist of each suit. Then she groaned.

“They could borrow a ring from another suit from the other arm,” she said to herself.

This necessitated her to remove the rings from the other arms of each suit, making it a total of twenty-four rings. The rings hardly fit in her pocket. She jammed them in as tight as possible.

After a quick look through the window, she activated the inner hatch. It had a large red “open” button that activated a motor to slide the door aside. The door motor seemed loud. Every noise seemed loud when one was sneaking around. Daphne cringed as the door slowly opened.

She put her head through first, then slid her body through the gap, not waiting for the door to complete its process of opening. Then she tiptoed down the passageway to an intersection going both directions. To the right was a long passageway with several closed hatches. Various equipment was mounted to the bulkheads. Like fire extinguishers, pipes, and objects she didn’t recognize. Rust stains ran down the bulkheads, making the place appear to be an underwater facility.

To her left was a wider passageway that also had hatches on either side, all closed. A light along the passageway flickered on and off. Voices to the right led her to believe everyone was in that direction. She headed to the left.

When she peeked into one of the hatch windows, there was a compartment with desks and glass beakers, test tubes, and other equipment. Obviously, the meth lab or maybe one of many labs.

She moved to the right side and looked through another window. Another meth lab. When she looked in the next six doors, they were all the same. Apparently, this was a large manufacturing facility that normally housed a lot of workers. But then she remembered the twelve suits. Maybe there weren’t enough suits for everyone. It wasn’t like the government inspectors were going to arrive and cite them for a safety violation.

She headed back in the other direction, down the other passageway. When she looked through a window, she saw a galley with rows of tables with special clips to hold the meal trays to the surface. Each seat had a seat belt. It must be a lot of fun working on a low-gravity facility.

The voices grew louder as she continued down the passageway. The next door had people inside. They were cooks, preparing something in a large kitchen. She wondered who they were cooking for and where were the workers?

She continued to the next door on the other side of the passageway. It was a control center, but there was nobody inside. The room was dark, except for all the lights from the consoles.

When she reached the next hatch, it was open a crack. The voices were coming from within, and she immediately recognized Mr. Kobayashi and Colonel Bardsley. They were having a conversation with another man. She did not recognize the voice of the third man. There was no time to loiter and collect intelligence. She had a specific mission to rescue RUSTY and get out.

The next door was marked “Berthing.” She activated the mechanism. A clanking sound from the door made her grind her teeth. When nobody came running, she let out the breath she held. Then she pushed the hatch into the compartment. A low moaning sound blasted from the entire door, making her freeze again. Again, nobody came running, so she pushed it further.

Inside the darkened compartment were bunks stacked four high. Most of the racks were occupied by people snoring. She half-expected there to be a shift on-duty while the rest were sleeping, but who knew the efficiency of a drug operation. She carefully closed the hatch, but did not engage the latch.

The next door was marked as “Tommi Hono.” She froze. Was that the name she heard from that gang member she ran into at the courtyard of the compound? Yes, this must be Hono’s facility. Maybe he was the voice in the other room that she did not recognize.

She looked down the long passageway. She had only examined a few doors so far. There must have been another fifty doors along the way. Would she be able to find RUSTY before someone stumbled onto her? Her only escape would be to sneak into a compartment along the passageway if she heard someone coming. Hopefully, she could keep track of the closest empty compartment.

The next door was a storage compartment. Nothing but boxes and large drums of chemicals were stored there. The same for the next few doors along the way. Then she reached a repair shop.

Inside was RUSTY!

He stood in the back, deactivated. She slowly opened the hatch. Again the hatch made a squeaking sound, making her cringe. The door was only opened a small amount before she squeezed through and shut it behind her. She ran to RUSTY and looked him over. He looked like normal. No missing limbs or extra dents. She opened the chest plate and hit the reboot. When his status turned green, she smiled.

“RUSTY, it’s me,” she said. “I’m here to rescue you.”

RUSTY said nothing. His head moved as he looked around the room.

“Where am I,” he said.

“We’re in a secret facility inside an asteroid,” said Daphne. “We gotta get out of here.”

“Where will we go?”

“Back to the Waterfowl.”

“Where is that?”

Daphne’s heart skipped a beat. They erased his memory! That had to be it. Otherwise, why wouldn’t he know about the waterfowl? Unless…

This is not RUSTY. Darn it, this is George. She had completely forgotten about the fact that Colonel Bardsley’s men took both robots. Daphne growled. Now she had to search for RUSTY and he wasn’t in the lab, for some reason.

“Son of a biscuit!”

**CHAPTER 59**

Daphne exited the robot maintenance compartment. George, or at least she assumed he was George, grabbed the hatch and pulled it open. The loud screech made Daphne’s skin crawl.

“Shhhh,” she said.

“Sorry,” said the robot.

They continued down the passageway. She looked in one window and determined RUSTY was not in that compartment. The robot looked into the other compartment. Then she moved up to the next window and looked in. The robot looked into the other window.

“What are we looking for?” said the robot.

Daphne rolled her eyes and growled. “We’re looking for RUSTY. Did you see a robot inside any of those windows?”

“What does he look like?”

“He looks identical to you.”

For a moment, she thought about popping his chest plate open and switching him off. But then, she thought that maybe it was RUSTY and his memories were dormant. It would be a mistake to toss him aside until she knew for sure that the other robot, that she had not found yet, was the real RUSTY.

The sound of someone yawning made Daphne stop cold. She rotated her head to look the direction of the noise. Someone from the berthing compartment had stepped into the passageway and was stretching and rubbing his eyes. Daphne opened the hatch she stood next to and stepped inside. Then she closed the hatch, but left it open a crack. The compartment she entered was dark and looked to be a storage space.

“Hey,” said the man. “What are you doing out of the lab?”

Daphne slapped her head. That stupid robot was about to tell that guy all of Daphne’s plans. He would expose her for sure. This was not going to end well.

The robot stood in place. He didn’t make any sounds and didn’t look her direction. Good robot. So far.

The man grabbed the robot by its arm and pulled him back into the shop. Within a few minutes, the man reappeared from the maintenance shop and closed the hatch. Then he continued down the passageway until he stopped at the galley entrance. He disappeared into the galley. Daphne waited a good five minutes before emerging from the darkened compartment.

She took one step toward the robot maintenance shop, then froze. Maybe she could find the other robot first, then come back and get him, if she were uncertain which one was RUSTY.

There were several more compartments that were full of equipment and supplies. Two compartments were used as additional berthing. There was a food storage compartment. Then she reached a storage compartment. The shoulders of a robot could be seen near the floor. She opened the hatch and looked closer. It was RUSTY, or maybe it was RUSTY. His head was missing. She looked around and found the head stuffed into the corner. It took a moment to line up the post that the head rotated upon. Then she snapped it into place. There was a wiring harness she connected, but some of the wires were broken. She shrugged. Can’t fix it now.

She opened the chest plate and pressed the start button. The robot booted up, then it looked around. Its eyes glowed red, which gave her hope, then it looked at her and pointed to its head.

“Can you hear me?” she whispered.

It nodded its head. Then pointed to its mouth. Daphne moaned.

“Just my luck,” she said. “You’re a mime. Maybe one of those wires is for your voice. Well, let’s go. We have to get to the Waterfowl and get out of here.”

The robot shrugged its shoulders and shook its head.

“The Waterfowl?” she said. “You know what that is?”

The robot shook his head.

Daphne let out a long sigh while looking up at the ceiling.

“Well,” she said. “Let’s go. I’m just going to have to rescue both of you and we’ll get this sorted out when we get home.”

She led him out of the compartment, then they made their way to the robot maintenance compartment. When she arrived there, she had to start up the other robot.

“Now, you’re sure you’re not RUSTY?” she said.

The robot shrugged his shoulders.

She decided that maybe she was going about this the wrong way. Maybe there was a process of elimination that she could use.

“What is your assigned name?” said Daphne.

The robot stared at her. “I am unsure.”

“Great,” she said. “Come on.”

They made their way down the passageway. Daphne tiptoed, but the two robots behind were not very stealthy. The distinctive clunk, clunk of their metallic feet made her cringe every time.

A hatch opened behind them. The hatch to the galley. She rushed forward until she reached the junction. The two robots clunked down the passageway at a much louder pace.

“Hey!”

Daphne knew it to be the man who had put one of the robots back in the maintenance shop. It was too late to undo whatever was about to happen now. She had to move forward and hope she could escape with both robots.

They ran toward the airlock when the passageway turned red. Alarms went off and the voices of dozens of men filled the passageway behind her. When she arrived at the airlock, the motorized door had shut on its own. She hit the button and waited for the slow motor to open it again.

She unslung her rifle and pointed it down the passageway as the two robots ran past. The robots stood at the door while it slowly opened. Gunfire erupted from the other end of the passageway. Daphne couldn’t see who was shooting. The darkened, red passageways made it difficult to see anything but the flashes of plasma rifles.

Her rifle pulsed shot after shot, then someone at the other end fell flat on the floor. She checked the setting on her rifle. It was set to stun. Well, at least that would conserve her power, since the stun setting didn’t use as much. It would also conserve her ammo. Something she would have to start using as soon as the power ran out.

A plasma bolt lanced toward her. She ducked and squeezed her eyes shut. Something exploded. When she turned her head, there was only one robot standing. A collection of robot parts littered the passageway.

The head of what might be RUSTY rolled along the floor.

**CHAPTER 60**

An arm laid on the floor next to the wall. A small tendril of smoke rose from the wires sticking out of the severed end that continued to spark. A foot smoldered next to it. Unidentifiable pieces of the torso littered the floor. A thigh rolled back toward the advancing army of members from the mob. She could rebuild RUSTY. She had done it before. This would take her some time. Maybe she could replace a few parts, splice the wiring. The memories should still be intact. Yes, she could do it.

At first, Daphne grabbed a few pieces of the mangled machine, but then decided that there was no way she would be able to carry all the individual chunks of robot with her. All the while, bolts of energy flew past her face. She didn’t see the danger, though. All she could think about was RUSTY scattered in a million pieces across the floor.

Then she looked up at the other robot, who was still intact. The poor creature looked scared, if a robot could be scared. The inner airlock hatch was now fully open. She fired off a few rounds, then popped to her feet and sprinted into the airlock. The functional robot followed her as she hit the close button. She had to stand near the open end of the door and shoot at the people firing at her and the remaining robot. The robot stood in the middle of the airlock, frozen in place.

Daphne stepped up to him and shoved him to the other side, where he would be protected by the half-closed airlock door. Then she leaned against the moving door and pointed her rifle down the passageway. The men at the other side had stopped shooting and were approaching when she opened fire on them. Two men fell to the floor and did not get up. Stunned.

When the hatch closed, Daphne dropped her rifle on the floor, quickly pulled out her suit and stuck her leg through it. It seemed to take forever to put the suit on and the men outside the airlock had reached the inner door. Before they could hit the open switch, she slammed her hand on the de-pressurize button. The pressure began to drop as she continued to put her suit on. She hoped she could get her helmet attached before the pressure reached an unsafe level. At least the airlock de-pressurizing sequence kept the men outside from opening the inner hatch.

Her energy dropped off as she gulped for air. This was something she had not thought about, and it slowed her down. She lifted her helmet as the robot in the airlock looked out the window into the hallway they had come from. Then he turned his head and stared at her. She put the helmet over her head, but the ring didn’t line up. Her hands flailed as a moment of panic struck. The airlock indicator was already on red, meaning her blood could embolize at any moment. If only that robot were smart enough to help her.

Her hand slipped off the latching mechanism. Her vision went gray, and she felt as though she was disconnected from her body, just floating away. The helmet snapped into place, but her hands were by her side. The pressure in her suit rose quickly, making her wonder how that happened. Then a face appeared in front of her shield. She thought it was RUSTY.

Within a minute her head cleared, and she discovered the robot that might be RUSTY helped her with her helmet. Apparently, he was good for something. Had it not been for his quick reaction, she would certainly be dead by now.

She bent down and picked up her rifle, then hit the open button for the external hatch. The hatch stayed closed. When she looked at the pressure gauge, she saw the pressure rising. The men outside the inner hatch had activated the airlock and were about to open the inner door and capture or kill her and her robot.

“RUSTY,” she said. The robot continued to stare through the window of the inner hatch. She tapped on his shoulder. “Hey. Whatever your name is. Hack into this panel and override them.”

The robot stepped to the panel, extended the correct tool from his hand, then detached the panel. Daphne looked at the window of the inner hatch and saw the group of men preparing to enter. Their guns were raised. The air pressure was nearing the green zone. As soon as it hit that mark, the locking mechanism would release, and they would be able to open the hatch.

She raised her gun toward them. Maybe she could knock down a few of them before they overpowered her. One of the men punched the control with his fist, then he banged on the thick glass with his arm. Spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed something at her. Other men beat on the glass while another one moved up to their control panel to inspect it. Daphne chanced a glance at the pressure meter. It was dropping fast.

Her heart rate lowered and for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, she could breathe easier. The robot stood to the side. She nodded at him.

“Good job,” she said.

The robot that survived must have been the one with the detached head and the broken voice. Still, the one that got blasted could have been the voice-less robot, and this one was damaged in the firefight a few minutes ago. There were new marks on his armor from plasma bolts that left melted spots. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t sure which one was RUSTY to start with.

When the pressure reached the bottom, she punched the button to activate the outer hatch. The motorized door slowly slid to the side.

She walked out onto the landing pad. Only one ship was parked in the middle. There was room for three or four ships, depending on their size. The Waterfowl could easily have fit next to the ship already parked there.

Above her head was the opening into space. The massive door was still open, and it looked as though it were kilometers away from her. She thought about radioing for someone on the ship to fly down and pick her up. But then something tapped her shoulder. She spun around and saw the robot next to her. He pointed up, then made a motion with his hand, telling her he could fly them up.

She glanced at his legs and remembered the thrusters he once had were removed. Or, if this was Perry’s robot, then he never had thrusters to begin with. How was he planning to fly them out?

The robot bent his knees, then popped up. He floated upward for a few meters, then slowed and descended back to the ground.

That was it!

The gravity was so minuscule, that all they had to do was jump. She might not be able to jump that high, but the robot had powerful servos that could thrust them into the sky. If they were not careful, they might even reach escape velocity.

She stepped onto the robot’s feet and grabbed him tight. He bent his knees to their maximum position, then thrust them skyward. They flew past the ship in a blur, then they passed the opening to the surface. She saw the Waterfowl in the distance as they continued to fly into space.

They were slowing, but it would be some time before they landed on the ground. Once they reached their peak altitude, she could see they had flown in an arc that would land them someplace on solid ground. The descent seemed to take forever.

They touched down with a thud. Dust billowed out from their landing spot, obscuring their view. Now all they had to do was make their way back to the Waterfowl and call in the military.

That’s when Daphne saw the massive bay door closing.

**CHAPTER 61**

Daphne and the robot raced to the ship. Footsteps kicked up large clouds of dust that trailed behind them. In the end, it wasn’t much of a race, since the robot reached the ship long before Daphne could catch up. That darn machine wasn’t encumbered by a large pressurized suit. Not that she thought she could beat him at the hundred meter dash on a planet with high oxygen, but the suit certainly contributed to her losses in this race.

When she arrived at the outer hatch of the Waterfowl, the robot had the door open. She sprinted up the ramp and into the airlock. The outer hatch closed, and she huffed as she tried to catch her breath while the air pressure in the airlock rose.

The pressure was almost at the normal level when the inner hatch opened. Perry and Lowell stepped in and disconnected her helmet. Then they helped her out of her suit, while the robot stepped into the ship.

“RUSTY,” said Roberta. “It’s good to have you back.” The robot ignored her as he looked around the ship.

“I’m not sure it’s RUSTY,” said Daphne. “In fact, his voice seems to be malfunctioning. We’ll have to have him looked over when we get back. As soon as we can open him up, we can see if he has the upgraded processor or not.”

“Too bad you couldn’t find both robots,” said Perry.

“I rescued both robots, but there was a bit of a problem,” said Daphne. “One of the robots took a direct hit and exploded.”

“Wow,” said Perry. “That’s a big problem. Well, fortunately, that model doesn’t cost a lot. I can just write it off my taxes at the end of the year.” He looked at the robot standing next to him. “Assuming this is RUSTY.”

“There’s another problem,” said Daphne.

“Oh?” said Perry.

“Yeah. I sabotaged their suits, in the hope it would slow them down.”

“But, it didn’t.”

Daphne pulled twenty four seals out of her pocket and handed them to him.

He smiled. “This didn’t slow them down? Let me guess, they have boxes of these things in storage and they just replaced them.”

“Well,” said Daphne. “I’m not sure about that, but I saw the large bay door closing before the robot and I contacted the surface. They’re going to pressurize the whole bay, get into their ship and escape.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” said Roberta. “We need to block their escape while we call in the military.” She sprinted toward the bridge.

Daphne followed. Did Roberta mean they were going to block the bad-guys ship with the Waterfowl?

Daphne jumped in the pilot’s seat while Roberta sat in the co-pilot’s seat. Roberta flipped on a row of switches, Daphne prepared the nav computer and everyone else arrived on the bridge in time to observe what was going on.

“We’re too late,” said Lowell. He pointed out the front windshield.

A ship rose from the opening in the asteroid. The doors were open, and they were escaping. Daphne grabbed the stick on the side of her seat and pulled up. The Waterfowl rose higher. Her plan was to position the Waterfowl over the bad-guys’ ship and block them from getting away. She adjusted the throttle to move forward fast enough to stop them.

The ship shuddered, and a booming sound echoed from the rear compartment.

“They’re shooting at us,” said Perry.

A bolt of energy came from the enemy ship and hit the forward end of the Waterfowl. Daphne felt the jarring in her bones.

“Contact the military,” said Daphne. “Maybe they’ll arrive in time to help us stop this guy.”

Lowell grabbed the microphone and dialed in the frequency he knew to use for a subspace transmission to military headquarters. He spoke a generic military call sign into the mic, then waited. Then he repeated his message.

Daphne glanced at the control panel as the enemy ship accelerated away from them. A red error message displayed on the radio unit.

“Looks like the sub-space communicator is damaged,” said Daphne.

Perry sighed. “Of course it is.”

Lowell hung the handset and sat on the deck in the back of the compartment.

Another bolt of energy peeled off the enemy ship, but it flew over the Waterfowl.

“They seem to have a blind spot,” said Roberta. “Their weapons can’t shoot directly behind their ship.”

“Good,” said Daphne. “All we have to do is stay tight on their tail.”

“Then what do we do?” said Perry. “We can’t contact anyone to help us and we have no weapons to stop them.”

Daphne moved up as close as she dared. At least the enemy ship couldn’t shoot at them. So they were safe, as long as they were close to the engines of the enemy ship. Plasma bolts continued to zing by as the ship in front of them attempted to shoot behind. Then the ship disappeared.

“Looks like they jumped away,” said Perry.

Daphne pulled back on the power. “I guess that’s it. It’s over for us. We got our robot. Too bad the bad guys got away.”

**CHAPTER 62**

The waiting room of the robotics lab seemed to always be packed with people. Daphne sat next to Lowell, waiting for the results of the lab’s diagnostics. Roberta sat in the row of seats facing them. She was fast asleep. All the excitement caught up to her. Perry paced back and forth between the seats. The seating area probably seated a hundred people and only a hand-full of seats were empty. Some kids sat on the floor in the back corner, playing cards. Daphne thought they were playing Go Fish, but knowing this generation of kids, they might be playing five-card-stud.

The overhead piped up every few minutes, calling off names of those that were to report to the front desk. Daphne cocked her head so she could hear what name they were calling. At the moment it sounded like “Bo,” or maybe “Joe.”

She folded her arms and slunk down in her seat. Mr. Kobayashi got away, and that really got under her skin. That guy would never stop trying to get what he thought was his robot back. She would always have to look over her shoulder to see if she was being targeted by one of his henchmen.

Then there was Colonel Bardsley. Where did that monster disappear to? She imagined him sitting on a beach, sipping a fancy drink while laughing at the military for falling for his ruse.

The money. Hmmm… What happened to the digital currency? If it was still inside one of the robots, then it could be in the one in the back being checked out as they sat in the waiting room. She might be sitting on billions. Then again, the money could have been stored inside the robot blasted inside the underground drug-making facility.

There was one other possibility… One that just raised Daphne’s level of disgust. Maybe Mr. Kobayashi, with the help of Hono, was able to transfer the digital cash into another computer where they could convert it. They would probably disappear for some time, then setup a new operation. Another secret facility, with a new illicit business. It never ended.

“Daphne Blazefire, to the front desk,” blared the overhead.

She stood. “Well, I guess it’s time for me to see what’s up with RUSTY, assuming he is RUSTY.”

“Good luck, kiddo,” said Roberta.

Lowell gave her a quick squeeze and a kiss. “It’s RUSTY. I have a gut feeling about this.”

She smiled, then walked to the front desk. The girl who had taken care of her robot before waited at a doorway. Daphne sighed. Great, LG is working on my robot again.

The girl lead her to the back. The robot was in the diagnostic stand, hooked up with hundreds of cables and hoses. Displays showed information about the robot, most of which was not something Daphne could understand.

“First of all,” said LG. “The government has seized the rather large digital cash account that he was carrying. So, if you were counting on a big payoff, it’s gone.”

Daphne snorted. “Yeah, I didn’t think they’d let me keep the money. It’s all dirty money, anyway.”

“Second, we discovered your robot protected his memories by encrypting them. It’s an emergency procedure a robot can use. It kind of puts them into an amnesia state. But we can reactivate his memories.”

“Does this robot have the Ultra-VL57 CPU?” said Daphne.

“We’re not sure yet,” said LG. “I mean, we haven’t opened him up to inspect the CPU and his metadata readout says he has a standard processor. But that information can be spoofed and if he were trying to hide his memories from someone, he might have wanted to fake out the metadata. Assuming he put that much thought into it. Also, your robot smells like ammonia. We weren’t sure if he needed to be decontaminated first.”

LG tapped on a terminal.

Then she turned back to Daphne. “Of course, this could be a standard model and not your robot.” Then she mumbled something under her breath.

“What was that?” said Daphne. “I didn’t quite catch what you just said.”

LG huffed, then spun around and crossed her arms. “I said, this wouldn’t be the first time you’ve stolen someone’s robot.”

“Stolen?” said Daphne. Oh, the pieces were falling into place. But how did LG know RUSTY once belonged to Mr. Kobayashi? Unless she had a way to read out his memories, the ones that were not connected.

“Yes,” said LG. “I know a technique to read out memories.”

“And what did you discover from the memories you read out from my robot?” said Daphne.

“I found out that it wasn’t your robot. It belonged to a Mr. Kobayashi.”

“I see. So it was you that contacted the mob boss and sicked his killers on me and my friends.”

“Mob boss?”

LG looked authentically perplexed. Maybe she had no clue who she had called. Just a naïve little girl that had no idea what she had set into motion.

“I have to thank you, though,” said Daphne. “You single-handedly pointed me and the military to their little gun-running scheme. We were able to break up his organization and out his military contact that was selling him the advanced weapons. Too bad Mr. Kobayashi and others involved in the scheme got away.”

Daphne paced back and forth. She felt her face burning. Now she was on a roll.

“Furthermore,” she continued. “The reason that robot smells like ammonia is that I busted him out of a meth lab.” LG’s eyes widened. “That’s right. He and another robot, like him, were captured by Mr. Kobayashi and his friends. I single-handedly went into the facility and busted them out. Unfortunately, the other robot got blasted in a gunfight I had with the bad guys. I only hope the other robot was not RUSTY. Otherwise, I’m going to blame you for getting RUSTY, me, and all my friends mixed up in this.”

There was a long, awkward silence between the two of them. LG looked worried. She should look worried. She had caused a lot of trouble and could have gotten a lot more people killed along the way. All because she “assumed” Daphne had busted into an innocent person’s home and stolen their robot, like a criminal.

LG looked at the floor. “I admit. I over reacted. I wish I could make things right.”

This was an interesting turn. Usually, self-righteous people never backed down and admitted they might have made a mistake. Daphne thought for a moment. Then she looked LG in the eye. Maybe there was something this girl could do.

“Can you read out all of those disconnected memories?”

“Assuming this is RUSTY,” she said.

Daphne folded her arms. LG turned and tapped on the controls.

“I got his voice circuit working,” said LG. She tapped on another control, then turned to the robot.

The robot raised his hand and folded his fingers into a fist, then he unfolded his hand and rotated his wrist. Then he did the same with the other hand. He placed his hands at his sides.

“Are you RUSTY?” said LG.

The robot stared at her. Then he looked at Daphne. “Daphne. It’s good to be back.”

“RUSTY!” said Daphne. She ran and wrapped her arms around RUSTY and the contraption he was connected to. RUSTY placed his arms around her. Then she stepped back.

“I’m going to activate a memory,” said LG. She tapped on the keyboard at her terminal. Then she spoke toward RUSTY. “Which memory just appeared?”

“There was a meeting between several bosses,” said RUSTY.

“Is that all?” said LG.

“No. I can see all of them at the table. They are negotiating something.”

LG tapped on her keyboard and selected another memory. “How about this memory?”

Daphne nodded as each memory was read by RUSTY. By the time they finished, they had a complete accounting of Mr. Kobayashi’s organization. That’s when Daphne got an idea. It was a killer idea. Her stomach churned as she thought about all the other plans she had made in the past and how they always ended in disaster.

No, this is a case that should be left to the authorities…

As she stood and thought about the “authorities,” and what they would do, or the excuses they would make, she convinced herself she should take charge. Nobody else had to risk life or limb.

No, she had to do this.

“How would you like to make things right?” she said.

“How?” said LG. “Is it dangerous?”

“Not for you.”

A smile crept across LG’s thin face. “I’m in.”

“Do you still have the number you used to contact, Mr. Kobayashi?”

Her smile faded a little. “Yes?”

“Here’s what you do…”

It took some time to explain the details. Even Daphne had not worked out every detail, and there were a few steps that could be dangerous. But, someone had to do this.

Nobody could do this but her.

**CHAPTER 63**

Novis Terminal bustled with activity when Daphne arrived at one of the docking bays. She opened the ramp and looked back at Roberta and Perry. They were by her side throughout the entire ordeal. If not for them, she would probably be rotting in a mob’s prison, or hung by Mr. Kobayashi. Just another footnote in history. They managed to help the government seize Mr. Kobayashi’s money. A lack of money should set the mobster back by years. Her friends exposed Colonel Bardsley as the military connection to the gun-running scheme. She had to admit her quick thinking at Mr. Kobayashi’s compound identified Colonel Bardsley as the connection. Her sleuthing abilities were becoming fine-tuned.

The bad guys got away, which was a shame.

Perry approached first and gave Daphne a big squeeze. “It’s been fun, as always. If you ever need some cargo to deliver with a big payoff, just give me a call.”

“Oh,” said Daphne. “I know how big payoff cargo goes. But I’ll keep you in mind if I ever get desperate for money.”

He laughed and walked off into the station. She knew she’d see him again. He was a permanent fixture of her life. It seemed inevitable that they’d cross paths many more times in the future.

“Well,” said Roberta. “I have a new gig, so I have to say my goodbyes.”

They hugged, then Daphne gave an inquisitive look. “What gig?”

“Ah. Guess I failed to mention it, but the government wants my services. Some sort of intelligence analysis gig.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Roberta rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Fun was not the first word I thought about. But, the pay is better than I expected and the digs are top-notch. No more livin’ in that dusty world I spent most of my retirement on.”

“Well, good luck.”

“Don’t be a stranger. Give me a call if you need some help in the future. I’m still a good hired-gun, if you get my meanin’.”

“I’ll keep you in mind.”

“And don’t be a stranger. Come visit me sometime.”

“OK.”

Roberta gave her one last hug before disappearing into the station. Daphne stared into the corridor as people and robots came and went. A palette transport robot came through, causing people to move out of its way. The flashing light on top became the only thing visible from where she stood. Strange looking alien creatures congregated in groups, talking as they walked from one location to another. The overhead speakers made an announcement. Daphne couldn’t hear the words themselves, but only the sound echoing through the station.

A man popped out from the crowd and headed her way. She sighed and rolled her eyes. Of all the people that would show up at this very moment, he was the last one she wanted to see. In fact, she would be happy if she never saw the man again for her entire life.

Detective Ramsey.

He stopped in front of her and glanced at his tablet. Then he cleared his voice. Daphne wasn’t used to him acting quite so politely. If she were being honest, he was acting embarrassed.

“I am here to announce that all of your infractions have been erased from your record,” he said. “Your license is clean and you are clear to fly this…this…” He paused. She imagined he wanted to use the term piece of junk.

He continued. “You may fly your ship without further interruption. However, I would recommend you have those minor issues looked at and repaired as soon as you are able to. We wouldn’t want you to have a mishap in the future.”

“Thank you,” she said. That had to hurt. For him to make such an announcement was tantamount to admitting he was wrong. She wondered who straightened out the mess? Maybe someone with a lot of influence.

Detective Ramsey turned and left the bay. She watched as he disappeared into the crowded corridor of Novis Terminal. She was sure he’d come back and harass her some time in the future.

She closed the hatch and retreated into her ship. Lowell stood just inside the inner hatch, smiling at her.

“Ready?” said Lowell.

“Yeah,” she said. “Let’s get out of here.”

**CHAPTER 64**

The hotel room was extravagant by any standard. There were white fake-leather couches in little groups for private parties. A chandelier hung in the middle of a vaulted ceiling. The plush carpeting looked new. Windows lined the far wall overlooking the city. The view was to die for. They were several kilometers up and could see down on the clouds below. Little openings between the clouds allowed them to see the street, which consisted of layers upon layers of air cars zipping along in distinct lanes of traffic.

“What do you think?” said Lowell.

“Nice digs,” said Daphne.

“All paid for by the military. It’s a bonus for doing a dangerous job. We have this place for a week. After that, I’m on vacation… we’re on vacation. Not that our vacation can’t start right now.”

A massive coffee table centered under the chandelier contained hundreds of brochures.

“What are these?” said Daphne.

“Oh,” said Lowell. He stepped to the table and picked up a few brochures. “I took the liberty of collecting a few of these from the lobby. They’re vacation spots. I got them mostly for ideas.” He held one up. “Like this one. It’s on a small water planet with grass huts and extravagant beaches. All man-made, of course. But just look at that picture.”

Daphne thumbed through the brochure. There were beaches of white sand that seemed to extend kilometers from the water. The pictures made it seem as though the beaches were private and only a few people were around. She suspected these were PR photos taken during a time when the vacationers were someplace else. Those beaches were probably packed wall-to-wall.

“It looks nice,” she said.

Lowell took the card from her, then dropped it on the table. Then he picked up another card.

“What about this place?” he said.

She opened the brochure and examined the pictures inside. There was a deep forest with lush green surroundings. A blueish-green waterfall cascaded in the background. There were a few people wading in a crystal-clear river that ran through the middle. Small huts were arranged around the sides of the river, with hot tubs on their tiny decks.

“And this one,” he said.

She dropped the brochure she was examining and looked at the one he handed her. It showed a scene at night. There were muscular men and sexy women in grass skirts dancing around a massive fire pit. Vacationers were gathered around, eating while watching the entertainment. She could almost hear the music coming out of the still photograph. It looked nice.

“Maybe something a little more private,” he said.

She grabbed the next card, plopped into one of the over-stuffed couches, and studied the pictures. The vacation spot was a private setting with a modern building constructed on a red rock cliff. The structure had windows on all sides. Another picture on the brochure showed the view from inside. A painted desert scene surrounded the sole room. Inside the facility was a pool, hot tub, an over-sized bed, and a staff to cook their meals and clean up after them.

“Maybe this one?” said Lowell.

By now Daphne’s head spun. There were too many choices, and she needed to study these in more depth before making a decision. This would all be easier if they were just forming a bucket-list of places to vacation throughout their lives. In her mind, this still felt like a once-in-a-lifetime event. Never to be repeated.

They spent all night looking through the brochures, then checking for reviews and other details on-line. But Daphne had difficulty staying focused on the task. Her life felt incomplete. There was unfinished business which kept pushing its way to the front of her thoughts. It was a distraction, but she knew there was plenty of time to wrap things up.

“So,” said Lowell. “After digging through all of these brochures and weighing each of our favorites against each other, I think we’ve narrowed it down to these three.”

Daphne smiled. Then she closed her eyes, extended her arm and lowered her finger until it touched one of the brochures. When she opened her eyes, she had touched the reclusive hut on the shallow water planet. Long, private beaches. The reviewers guaranteed vacationers would not see each other for days, only coming in contact when they went to the local restaurants and shopping centers.

Lowell smiled, then scooped up the brochure. He brushed the rest aside, got onto the computer, and booked the vacation.

“Looks like we have two days before our vacation starts,” said Lowell. “Then it’ll be two weeks. Just you and me, warm weather, beaches, diving, shopping, you name it.”

“Mmm, hmm,” she said.

“What?”

“I have some business to take care of.”

“What business.”

“Just a little something I need to tie up before I’m free to do nothing for two weeks. If I don’t get this done, then it’ll just bug me the entire time we’re trying to relax.”

“How long is this ‘business’ of yours going to take?”

She smiled. “Not long. I’ll meet you at the resort.”

**CHAPTER 65**

Daphne set down the Waterfowl in a backwater city on a dirt-poor outer world. The planet orbited a brown-dwarf star. Oh, the planet was warm enough, but daytime did not exist. At least not like any other world. The brightest time of day resembled dusk on most planets. To make matters worse, the humidity and rain battered the inhabitants all year round.

She checked the airlock controls. When she was satisfied the planetary atmosphere matched the ship’s pressure, she operated the controls to unlock the outer hatch. A small pressure differential still existed, making the hatch difficult to open, but it was nothing she couldn’t handle. By bracing a foot against the bulkhead and tugging on the handle, the suction on the hatch broke and swung free.

“See,” she said. “My gasket works like a charm.” RUSTY remained behind, but that didn’t stop her from speaking to nobody. Though she missed RUSTY’s snarky replies.

A dead-fish smell wafted into the ship, making her hyperventilate. Her first thought was to shut the hatch and change her plans. Unfortunately, she had a job to do. It was an important task and had to be completed as soon as possible. Otherwise, she might miss her opportunity.

The ramp to the Waterfowl extended to wet blacktop with weeds growing up in the cracks. A dim street light lit part of the landing zone. Street vendors lined a small alleyway that merged into the landing area. One other cargo ship parked next to hers appeared to have been there for years. A real rust-bucket, with grass growing on the top. Someone lived in it. The make-shift awning and cement block steps appeared to have been constructed, or dropped in place, years ago. Dirt swept up against the sides of the ship by the wind.

Tiny raindrops hit Daphne as she stepped away from her ship. She sealed the outer hatch before continuing into the street. She tried to ignore the pungent smells. Just as she thought she had smelled the worst thing in her life, another dead-carcass smell would blow into her face and make her want to gag all over again.

“Hey, man,” said a voice. She turned her head to her right, where the voice came from. A young kid in a hoodie leaned against a building in a dark alcove. Her senses were on hyper-aware, but she still did not see him when she walked past.

The kid took a step toward her, but stopped and stared. “Would you like some Black Ice? I got the best stuff.”

She sighed. “No thanks. Not my thing.”

He stepped back into the shadows and disappeared from her sight.

An oriental-looking woman stood behind a cart parked on the sidewalk, just a few steps away from the kid selling drugs. She used a spatula to stir something cooking on a large frying surface. The cart had an awning that extended beyond the sides to keep customers somewhat dry as they consumed whatever food they bought from her.

A drone descended from the sky and buzzed past Daphne’s face. She swatted at it like it was a bug, though it resembled a hovering silver basketball. The drone circled her a few times, then disappeared down the street.

Vehicles splashed through the water. Their tires seemed antiquated compared to the hover cars that were used on more modern planets. Taxis crisscrossed a busy street ahead as she continued to walk toward an area that appeared to be bustling with foot traffic. People dressed in plastic coats, some carrying umbrellas, went about their business. The clothing style on this dark world was just as dark. Most wore black or dark gray colors. An occasional yellow slicker stuck out in a crowd.

A young man smoking a cigarette and stood against a building, just out of the rain. A lot of gangs had look-outs that watched the street for any approaching authorities. Daphne recognized the man’s silhouette and approached. She wasn’t sure if he would panic if she approached too fast, so she walked toward the building, then turned toward him. She was only a meter away when he turned his head and stared at her.

Daphne raised her hand and did a quick wave. Something she was sure would not attract the attention of other people in the area. He continued to stare, probably unsure of who she was. She hoped he would recognize her when she got closer.

“Hey,” she said. Then she leaned against the building next to him and propped one foot against the concrete wall. He looked down at the pavement.

“Daphne?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Just checkin’ up on ya,” she said. “I heard the military let you guys go.”

“Yeah, they don’t care about civilians. Even the civilian authorities didn’t want to deal with us. They would have to go through ‘due process’ before transferring us to another prison. It was just easier for them to release us.”

“Understandable.”

“So, why are you really here?” He stared at her.

“How would you feel about getting back at Mr. Kobayashi?” She smiled at him. He continued to stare for a long time.

Then he looked at the ground. “I don’t really care about Mr. Kobayashi or the mob. I just want to get back to my business and move on.”

“You’ll have to spend your entire life looking over your shoulder,” she said.

“Look around,” said Ethan. “I’m always looking over my shoulder. That’s the gig. In fact, I’m standing here makin’ sure the cops don’t catch our organization off guard.”

“Fair enough.” It seemed as though she had run into a dead-end with Ethan. Mr. Kobayashi had broken his will. Living on the street was a tough gig. It was something Daphne swore she would never return to. No matter how hard she had to work, she would never return to that life.

He handed her the half-spent cigarette he had been smoking. She took it from him, then took a good drag off it. At first, she almost coughed, but the smoking habit never seemed to completely wear off. The smoky flavor coated her mouth. It felt good, though she knew she’d never go back to smoking, just like she would never go back to living on the street. Smoking was also her past life.

She handed the cigarette back to him and blew out the smoke from her lungs.

“My ship is parked around the corner.” She pointed the direction where she had just walked from. Ethan leaned out and glanced that direction, then nodded.

She continued. “I’ll be here for a couple of days. If you’re interested, I can fill you in on a plan I have. Maybe you can talk it over with your business partners. I’m sure they’ll want a piece of the action.”

She couldn’t see his eyes, but he stared at her.

“I’m listening,” he said.

Daphne spent another fifteen minutes filling him in on the details of her plan. When she was done, he nodded, but said nothing for some time.

“I’ll pass your information along to my cohorts,” he said. “But, no promises.”

“Fair,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

He nodded as she peeled off the wall and returned to her ship.

**CHAPTER 66**

Mr. Kobayashi had spent time on docks throughout his life. Too much time. First it was the dockworkers’ unions. He had the money to make the union a thing. The dockworkers were more than thankful and he recruited many of them to be his muscle. But it had been years since he walked on the tarmac of a space dock. He had risen in the ranks to be the boss and no longer needed to get physically involved in the little things.

Except for this one little job, he felt he should get his own hands into. Just one last dirty job. It had to be done and done quickly.

The cargo ship he looked for was parked in a busy district, next to a rust-bucket. He had a plan, and his plans always worked. But, to give himself some insurance, he had invited Colonel Bardsley along. The colonel had a vested interest in what Mr. Kobayashi was about to do, so he should put in some effort to pull it off.

A rat scurried across the damp concrete. An oil spot was slippery when Mr. Kobayashi stepped on it. He worried about permanently damaging his wing tips, but pushed the thought out of his mind. If he pulled off this job, he would have his money back and not have to worry about building up his wealth again.

A shadowy figure tucked his body into a dark alcove of a building across the way. The rain picked up. Mr. Kobayashi pulled on the front flaps of his overcoat to shake the water off. It was such a dark and damp planet. He wasn’t sure why anyone would want to live in such a depressing place.

He stepped onto the ramp of the cargo ship.

“Are you sure this is the one?” said Colonel Bardsley.

Mr. Kobayashi pointed to a placard on the side of the ship. “It says Waterfowl.”

“Ah. Sorry, I didn’t see that.” Colonel Bardsley scanned around the ship. “It looks different… somehow.”

They stopped at the closed hatch. Mr. Kobayashi removed a device from his pocket and plugged it into a waterproof outlet next to the code key panel. The ship’s security was old, as in really old. His device cracked the code in less than a minute. He smiled as he disconnected the device and pulled the handle to unlock the outer hatch of the Waterfowl. Then he pocketed his device and nodded for the colonel to get inside.

“How did you know her ship was here? I have access to military intelligence and I couldn’t find her ship.”

Mr. Kobayashi sighed. “I get these anonymous calls from some girl. Normally, I’d ignore the calls, but she gave me information about RUSTY and how he was owned by Daphne. That info turned out to be accurate. So, yesterday, I get another call from this chick and she tells me that the Waterfowl is parked at this landing site.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know who she is, but she has excellent intelligence. I have to assume she has an ax to grind with Daphne.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Colonel Bardsley. “Like it’s a setup.”

“Why? The ship was locked up tight. If the hatch were wide open, then I’d be worried there was a setup.”

“You got a point. But, you better be right, because my military career is already at an end. I need the cash so I can go into hiding.”

Colonel Bardsley moved to the inner hatch, peeked through the small window, then activated the open latch. He pulled the hatch open and slipped inside. Mr. Kobayashi followed, not bothering to close either hatch as they worked their way deeper into the ship.

Inside the cargo hold were a few large crates. Probably just junk Daphne stored when she didn’t need it. What he was looking for was not here.

“Let’s go check on the girl,” said Kobayashi. “If she’s up and about, we can ask her where the robot is.”

“Good idea,” said Colonel Bardsley.

There were a few red lights that lit the passageway. Mr. Kobayashi would have preferred total darkness, where he could use his infrared glasses. There was no time to cut the ship’s power from the dock and there were risks that Daphne had rigged up alarms to tell her when the power was cut. Hopefully, the crazy woman was not a night worker.

When they arrived at the bridge, there was nobody there. The controls and displays were all dark and looked abandoned. Mr. Kobayashi turned and bumped into Colonel Bardsley. Then he shoved Bardsley aside and continued aft while examining each hatch in the passageway. To his right was the captain’s quarters. That would be the most likely place where Daphne would sleep.

He carefully activated the locking mechanism and pushed the door inward. The hinges squeaked, causing him to freeze in place. He carefully listened to see if there was someone stirring inside the compartment. There was nothing but silence.

When he pushed the door half-way open, he could see there was someone in the bed. A light snoring sound came from the room. He poked his head inside to get a better look. Definitely Daphne.

Mr. Kobayashi pulled the door shut and put a finger to his lips to prevent Bardsley from asking questions and waking her. When the door clicked shut, he let out a breath of air.

“She’s asleep,” he said.

“Good,” said Colonel Bardsley.

They tiptoed to the next door on the left. The galley. When they opened the door, they found their prize.

RUSTY.

He was standing in the dining area with a cable attached to the wall. Apparently, the robot slept when Daphne slept. Probably to avoid making noise and keeping her up all night. Good thing he wasn’t one of those sophisticated sentry robots.

Mr. Kobayashi tiptoed to the robot. It took some time, but the amount of clutter in the galley made it difficult to approach without making noise. When he reached the robot, he popped RUSTY’s chest plate and quickly disabled him. His eyes lit for a brief second, then went dark.

“Grab his feet,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

Colonel Bardsley came around and lifted the robot’s feet while Mr. Kobayashi disconnected the charging cord and grabbed the robot under its arms. RUSTY was heavier than he remembered, and he wondered how it folded into such a small box when it wanted to. It rarely folded when it was in the service of his residence years ago.

They were half-way to the exit hatch when Mr. Kobayashi heard a clunk.

“What was that?” said Colonel Bardsley.

“I don’t know. Keep going.”

“This is too easy. It’s gotta be a setup.”

“This is not easy. Keep going, we’re almost home free.”

Colonel Bardsley lifted the feet and continued down the passageway. When they rounded the corner to enter the airlock, there was another clunk. It seemed to come from outside. Maybe there were dockworkers outside? In the middle of the night? Was it nighttime? Mr. Kobayashi had almost forgotten about the dark star that this planet orbited. It was always night here.

“Knock, knock,” said a young man. Mr. Kobayashi recognized him, but couldn’t quite put his finger on where he had seen him.

“Who are you?” said Colonel Bardsley.

“My name is Ethan, but I bet you don’t remember me,” said the young man.

Mr. Kobayashi elevated his submachine gun and pointed at Ethan. Colonel Bardsley dropped the feet and pulled out his own gun, also pointing it at Ethan, who blocked their exit.

Mr. Kobayashi laughed. “What are ya gonna do, kid? You’re outnumbered and out-gunned.”

Another young man stepped next to Ethan. Then another to his left. Then another on his right. Before long, there were twenty hard looking young men blocking the exit to the airlock. They pulled handguns of their own and pointed them at Mr. Kobayashi and Colonel Bardsley. Mr. Kobayashi almost pulled the trigger, but thought better of it.

He raised his hands. When he looked at Colonel Bardsley, the colonel had already had his hands in the air. “Now, we can be reasonable, right? I mean, there’s enough cash stored in this robot for all of us.” Mr. Kobayashi knew he was bluffing. He had no intention of sharing the digital coin inside of the robot. That money belonged to him. However, there was always another battle where he could make sure the odds were in his favor. For now, he’d see where this kid would go with this.

“We’re not here for the money,” said Ethan. “In fact, from what I heard, the digital cash that robot carried was seized by the government. So you’re broke.”

Mr. Kobayashi’s smile disappeared. “Then what are you here for? The robot?”

“Nope.”

“Nah,” said a voice from behind. Mr. Kobayashi snapped his head to the right and saw Daphne. She was geared up and pointing a rifle at him. “They’re here for you.”

Colonel Bardsley sighed. “Told you this was a setup.”

“Shut up,” said Mr. Kobayashi.

**CHAPTER 67**

Beach sand looked better in the brochures. Sure, it was pretty, but walking on it with bare feet in the blistering sun was no picnic. Suntan lotion, mixing with sweat, ran into Daphne’s left eye, making it burn. She rubbed her eye to clear it while stumbling through the undulating sandy surface.

Her eye cleared. She stopped and looked down at her feet. Sand covered the bottom half of her ankles, sticking to the oils she had put on to block the dangerous UV rays. She brushed some of the sand off one leg while several kids sped past, kicking up more sand. The air was filled with salt spray and smelled of suntan lotion, sweat, and a faint odor of dead fish. Seagulls swooped down to steal food from beached vacationers. Their squeaking sounds came from all directions.

Of course, the gulls on this beach never went hungry. In fact, most of them were plump and had difficulty flying. Why? Because of humans. Lots of humans. And where there were humans, there was food. The humans covered the sand like a massive blanket. There was little separation between groups of people lying out on their towels, baking in the sun.

Her feet burned with each step. She deeply regretted leaving her sandals in her suitcase. Lowell was not in the room when she arrived, but his stuff was partially unpacked and there was a note that he was headed out to get a drink and eat some lunch.

There was a long line of bars and eateries along the beach. Each had their own style and flavors. That’s when she saw him. Sitting alone at the bar, eating a sandwich. The bar area was shaded by the fake grass roof of the small building. This was her chance to surprise him.

She worked her way around the side to avoid being detected. There were a few other people on the stools that lined the bar, but there was an empty stool on each side of Lowell. He turned toward her, causing her to freeze in place and turn in the other direction. Did he see her? She tried to pretend like she was looking for someone on the beach.

When she turned back toward him, he was facing the bar once again while a blond girl in a bathing suit and a matching semi-transparent wrap sat on the other side of him. Daphne stayed frozen in place as her heart sank. She had read sad stories on the Galactic Internet where guys had multiple girlfriends lined up. Military men always joked about having a girl in every port. It didn’t seem like Lowell’s M.O. But did she really know him that well?

“Hey,” said the girl. Daphne could just hear their conversation. She stood next to the bar and blended with an older couple that ignored her.

“Hi,” he said. He continued to eat his sandwich.

“Are you available?”

“Sorry, but I’m not.”

The girl craned her neck to look around. Daphne spun her head away and looked toward the bar. The bartender stopped in front of her. Daphne felt a wave of relief at his answer to her. There was additional relief from the behavior of the girl. She wasn’t exactly behaving as though they knew each other. Still, Daphne wanted to see what Lowell would do in such a situation. Could she trust him whenever she was away?

“What would you like?” said the bartender. The girl behind the bar looked like she was Earth, Polynesian descent, and had a flower in her long straight hair. Daphne was momentarily stunned by the interruption.

In a moment of panic, she pointed at the picture board. “The blue thing.”

“Very good.”

The girl next to Lowell received her drink from another bartender. A dark-skinned man with a permanent smile. The girl took a long sip from her straw. Daphne’s drink arrived, and she tapped her electric key card on the receiver to charge her drink to the room.

“So,” said the blond girl. “Who’s the lucky girl?”

This was Daphne’s cue. It was time to claim her man and chase off the competition. She casually moved around the elderly couple and sat in the seat to the right of Lowell. Then she looked behind Lowell and grinned at the blond girl.

“I’m the lucky girl,” she said.

Daphne thought the blond girl was going to hiss at her as she stood and left with her drink. She watched as the blond continued to another bar, putting as much distance as she could between the two of them.

Lowell smiled. “And I’m the lucky guy.”

“Did you miss me?” said Daphne.

“Yes.”

Daphne set her massive drink on the bar and stood where Lowell could embrace her for a long kiss. She daydreamed about the future, where she could, at long last, settle down and live a normal life. At least a life that she had read about in magazines. When they pulled back, she opened her eyes and knew that he was the one. But…

There was still one more thing she had to do. It was a thought that came from deep inside her cynical side. She just wanted to see him squirm for a minute.

A wry smile crept up on her face. “So, who’s the hot chick you were hanging out with? I heard military men had a girl in every port. Is that true?”

Lowell turned a deep shade of red. “No. There’s only one girl.” He stared for a moment, then smiled. “You’re messin’ with me.”

Daphne nodded. “You know it.”

She pointed to her eyes with two fingers and then to his eyes. “I’ve got my eyes on you at all times.”

“Good.”

They sipped their drinks for some time. Daphne ordered a beach-burger with all the fixings. When it arrived, it stood too tall to bite into. She thought they had missed an opportunity to name it the “Mega-Burger.”

Lowell laughed at the sight. “Are you still hungry from that walk across the desert?”

Daphne grinned. “Yes. Yes, I am.” She tried to squeeze the burger flatter, then take a bite. Oh, that first bite of a hot and juicy burger…

“Well, this should interest you…”

She closed her eyes and savored the flavor. When she opened her eyes, Lowell was still waiting for her attention.

“You were saying?”

“I was digging around for information on your family and stumbled onto a living relative.”

“My mother?”

“Not sure. In fact, I’m not sure if it’s a male or female. The database contains no more than a last name and a current address.”

Her burger long forgotten, she felt as though she were pulling teeth. Lowell seemed to be spoon-feeding her tantalizing information in small doses. She waved her hands toward him.

“So, how would you like to blow this resort and go on a fact finding mission?”

“Yes!” Daphne looked across the beach, packed with people as she had expected. The opposite of what the brochures had indicated. “Besides, this place is boring.”

“Good, because I booked us a flight for tomorrow morning. It’s a long haul, but I assumed you’d be OK with that.”

“So, the plan is to drop in on some stranger that we assume is a member of my family?” Daphne could feel butterflies forming.

“Well, there’s no contact on file. I assume we could just knock and introduce ourselves. What’s the worse that could happen?” Lowell grinned.

The hairs on Daphne’s neck stuck up. “I could think of a few bad things. But, we have to do it. I can’t go to my grave never knowing about my family when one of them could be still alive. Someone who could fill in the gaps of my early life.”

“Then I guess I know what our next adventure is going to be.”

Adventure.

Daphne hoped it would be a good adventure. But, just in case, she would have to contact RUSTY and have him meet them at their destination. For once in her life, she was going to be prepared.

Now all she had to do was tackle her Mega-Burger.

The End

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