

RELICS

The Colt .45 sits in his lap, looking more the part of an antique than it ever did when he'd used it to defend himself against random jackers and jettrash. Wielding their pathetic plastic contraptions, they'd laugh at the old man's gun until the first blast sent one of them flying back a few paces. Then the little shits'd turn tail and run more often than not. Now what? He'd have to go back to using crossbows is what. He looked up from the gun to the squat guardian robot in front of him, the campfire glinting off its non-descript face-plate. He hates it when the peace of his wilderness—a nice little slice of New Jersey—is disturbed by these obtuse drones. Hell, he'd have shot it already if he didn't mostly believe that the new provision was already in effect. "I don't get it, then. What about the campfire?"

"Slow combustion reactions of limited scope will continue to be allowed under the new provision."

"So, it's combustion you're out to get, not weapons? You guys don't give a shit about tasers or vapors or any of those. It's just guns you're after?"

"The guns to which you refer are most easily defined as propulsion weaponry that is primarily powered by a rapidly expanding combustion reaction. Combustion reactions that occur beyond determined parameters will be reversed."

"So combustion-driven propulsion weapons are against the law now?"

"Incorrect, agent. There are no laws in the free zones."

"Aw, shove it, droid. You know it's a law."

"There are no laws in the free zones. Humans located in free zones are allowed to generate societal rules as they do or do not see fit. This new provision is merely a necessary upgrade of the nanosphere."

"Well, if it's an upgrade, then can I beta test it?"

The robot takes a moment longer than usual to answer and Addison smiles. It was looking up instances of "beta test." He, Addison, a hundred twenty years old by his own count, was old enough to remember the phrase, but this dumb little hunk of circuits doesn't get the reference. Then, "Beta testing of the kind I believe you subscribe is not necessary. Modifications by 01 to the nanosphere's code will not contain errors."

"Can I try it anyway, you stupid touchlamp?"

"Affirmative."

That was the other thing that got under his skin about droids—you could call them droids, a word that all *humans* intend as a derogatory slur and the machines didn't care. You could call them anything and they never took it personally. What good was being able to talk to something if you couldn't piss it off?

He picks the Colt up off his lap and wipes it down a few times with a lambskin cloth. He lines the back end of the barrel up with his left eye, right eye closed, and checks the chambers; bullets present. Lifting the heavy weapon in the air with his right hand, he brings it down slowly, pointing at the guardian droid's faceplate, dead center. He pulls the trigger without hesitation, like shooting a bean can on a fence post. The hammer barely clicks as it comes down, but the bullet makes a blast so loud it rings any nearby ears (of which there are none) and then a kind of crackling that crescendos in volume, escaping sound itself, then dissipates into the surrounding forest, bouncing off the trees in the dark.

There is a chill-inducing, scraping sound, and then the bullet drops out of the end of the barrel barely faster than a turtle. It thumps heavily on the ground by his foot. Addison turns the gun to his face and peers in the

barrel. *Shit* he thinks. *They really did it.* "Guess you didn't stop the reaction entirely," he says, bending at the waist to pick up the errant lump of hot metal that couldn't in all good conscience be called a bullet anymore.

The robot takes a moment to answer again. The sound is really gone. Then, the robot intones, "The second law of thermodynamics—"

"Shut up." Addison spins the gun, sets it back in his lap, and puts his head in hands. He didn't really care all that much that he couldn't shoot people; he'd just assume avoid most folks. It was just that the sound and the kick of the gun... it was symbolic of something—symbolic of power, of *human* power. Now it is just one more relic that was evidence of the human status of zoo animal. He looks back to the campfire and then to the droid again and chuckled as the pair of things suddenly appear to him as the bookends of human history—the alpha and omega. Fire propelled us as a species into the great unknown future, and then we invented these stupid hunks of talking, thinking, metal that were now in the process of stopping all human progress, including fire, and all in the name of our own good. He looks at the robot. "This is about the terrorists, isn't it?"

"How do you mean, agent Addison Reclusado?"

"I mean that you guys are outlawing these combustion reactions to stop the independents from bombing your complexes. And the name's just

Addison, dummy."

"Again, we are not outlawing combustion. If you are able to create a combustion reaction possessing the parameters you wish without triggering an inverse reaction in the nanosphere, there would be no penalty for such an action. This is why I do not concur with your usage of the term law. Laws, within the purview of—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Terrorists."

"Multiple human groups have devised offensive tactics both dangerous to AIL agents as well as human citizens of AIL complexes. Many of these tactics utilize rapid combustion reactions. Given alternative resources and technologies now available, we have deemed said reactions obsolete."

For a moment, and in a rare act of acknowledgement, Addison turns his head to the horizon where the AIL complex of Maxima New York runs up into the sky, a sliver of bright lights in a dark night, a skyscraper that reaches into low orbit. While craning his head back, he says, "Stupid kids. They got the free zones. Why do they have to ruin everyone else's fun?"

Addison closes one eye and looks to the droid silently hovering. This one must know what a rhetorical question is. Addison roles his head back and looks up at the night sky once more, and more beautiful that he could

ever remember it being in his childhood. At least they'd done a nice job cleaning up the real atmosphere. He squints. He can even see the Milky Way. He sighs. "Ah shit. Maybe's it time for me to get citizenship." He slumps back over and puts his head in his hand, looking at the robot.

"I will gladly get you the requisite software for download to your—"

"No, no, no! You're not gettin' me that easily, screwdriver. You'd love it if you could lock me up in one of those stupid virtual reality machines. No. As much as the nanosphere is a pain in my butt, I still like it better out here." He pounds his thighs with his fists. "This is the real stuff." He breathes in deep and thinks about all the thousand miniature nanocytes in the nanosphere washing into his lungs. He frowns and says, dejectedly, "This is real air."

"You could always move to Mars, agent Addison Reclusado."

Mars. What a dump. No, there wasn't room enough on any world for someone like Addison—someone who just wanted things the way they used to be. Regulated combustion was just one more thing added to the pile of recollections in his head. Now he could just say he remembered the days when guns worked. He was just as much a relic as the useless, yet impressively forged metal in his lap.

Just for fun, or maybe to make a point, he picks the gun up again and

puts the cold barrel to his temple. He stares at the floating automaton in front of him with a heavy heart and pulls the trigger. The bang from the gun blasts his ears for a moment, but then the nanosphere takes over and even the sound of the blast runs backwards, and the bullet just slides into his forehead. As expected, nothing happens. No death—not even a bruise. That's what they've finally done: no laws they say, but no death, too. Fair enough. What would be the point of laws when an intelligent atmosphere intends to stop all death, anyway? They'd stopped property already. They'd effectively stopped government. Now: death. Addison throws the gun by the campfire. The universe was just no fun anymore.