The Hunt

Dust swirled in the air as wind howled through a nearby shattered window. The burnt walls of the derelict apartment shook in protest, as a corner from one of the ceiling panels cracked and fell into the mangled skeleton of what was once a bed frame. Whatever colour there once was replaced with a sea of gray and charred black. Stale ash stirred, shining in the dull rays of gray light that pierced the ravaged windows. The building creaked. The tired groan of strained metal and wood reverberated through the floor, before it fell silent once more.

A new sound soon took its place. The dull, muffled warbling of two people talking in another room. It seeped through the stripped walls as it approached the ajar front door of the apartment.

“Last one.” One of the voices muttered through the doorway. The wooden door creaked in its frame as it was lightly pushed open. The makeshift muzzle of a firearm entered the room first, followed closely by the rather short individual carrying it. Their boots thudded against the crispy floor. The person was dressed in thick, brown pants with a matching parka and a rucksack. The parka’s furred hood was pulled up over their head and framed the polarised goggles and breather mask that covered the individual’s face.

“Helloooooo!” a garbled voice boomed, causing the person to jump as a little blue light flared up from a hunk of electronics tied under their pack. The sound echoed slightly, but was quickly swallowed up by the dust.

The person’s left hand tightened on the grip of their rifle as they aimed around the room. There was a loud squawking shriek from the floor above, which pulled the person’s aim to the ceiling. The sound of footsteps from one of the floors above caused another panel to fall from the ceiling. After a few moments, the building was silent again. The person sighed out their held breath.

“Asshole.” The person hissed through their filters. They thumped the metal junk on their back with a gloved fist.

“Ahh c’mon,” the junk protested as its cracked screen flickered and tried to display something amidst the spiderweb of cracks and dents,” at least we know somethin’s upstairs!”

“That is not funny, Blink.” The scavenger reminded him as they finally lowered their rifle from their shoulder. The scavenger removed their over-stuffed rucksack from their back. They checked underneath a tarp tied to the side, and ran their thumb over the smudged gunmetal beneath.

“Right, gotta be serious about this,” the junk shot back. Its synthesized voice skipped and garbled together as it adopted a slightly higher pitch tone, “hi I’m V-V-Val, there’s danger around every cor-cor-cor – no time for fun!”

“Don’t hurt yourself…” the scavenger huffed as they unfastened the hunk of junk from the bag, “and I do not sound like that!”

“Sure y’don’t darling.” Blink chirped as she wiped some grime off its mistreated screen. A trio of metallic, spike-like legs unfurled from a sloppily welded harness on the bottom of the junked robot. Val all but dropped the glitching head as soon as the legs were unfolded. The little bot dropped onto the gutted remains of an armchair with a synthesized scoff. The little droid shook its head and stabbed a crunching cushion in protest, “hey hey hey, easy on the merchandise there lady!”

“Butterfingers.” Val offered with an elaborate shrug as she wandered over to the windows. Blink sent a plethora of glitching mumbles after her. She leaned against the chest high wall and looked out through the windows and holes that went from corner to corner in the room. She pulled her goggles down off her face, revealing a mismatched set of green left eye with a gray right. She let the eyewear and her breathing mask hang around her neck as she leaned her head out of the window to get a better look outside. Her mismatched eyes washed over the scene below.

The block was somehow in even worse shape than the office-building turned apartment complex. Upturned cars, the skeletons of buses, melted pavement, and mounds of rubble that almost looked like anthills from ten stories up. The ground was more a collection of destruction than something that could have ever been recognized as a street. Her gaze rose to the neighbouring building.

It was a hulking mass of crumbling siding, the roof of which was about as high as Val was at the time. The dull gray husk of a building was splattered with some sort of writhing, black goo. Every so often a tendril of the thick slime would pulse and squeeze the shell of a building like an octopus trying to engulf a mollusc. Val’s emerald left eye followed the black mass of slime, to the plethora of tendrils spanning the massive gap between the two buildings, like a film of mucous stretched between two fingers. Some were relatively thin, while some were as thick as she was tall. The thickest pillar of slime must have been at least forty feet thick, and had burrowed into the top few floors of Val’s building. She watched as the mass shuddered and swelled at her end. The swollen bulb of black goo slowly slunk down towards the opposite building as the apartment complex groaned in response.

“Still no sign of it?” Blink asked behind her as she pulled her hood down off her cropped, black hair. She tapped with a small panel of metal grafted to her temple, which caused her right eye to light up blue. The eye’s iris and pupil visible rotated and shifted as she kept looking around.

“Not even a little.” She replied. She ground her teeth together, revealing that her left incisor was missing.

“Maybe it’s on vacation?” The little droid huffed as it jumped up onto the windowsill to look for itself. Val reached out to keep the bot steady.

“Don’t know,” Val sighed as she tapped a finger against one of Blink’s legs. She pulled out a crumpled notebook from one of her pockets, “we better not have the wrong place though.”

Val shook her head.

“Whatever, we can take inventory in the mean time.” She decided as she pushed herself away from the window. She knelt by her pack, pulling a tarp off the bottom to spread out on the floor. After a few minutes her rucksack was pulled inside out. Its contents were laid out on the tarp. Food, water, a few handfuls of gun magazines for her rifle and a handgun, various pouches were laid out depending on contents and size. She placed her rifle, her handgun, and a blanket wrapped firearm under their respective ammo. She placed the tarp-wrapped contraption tied to the side of her bag on the floor next to the tarp.

“That everything?” Blink asked as he stomped his way over to the display.

“Yeah,” Val replied as she lightly clapped her hands together. Blink tapped a spiked foot against the tarped contraption to the side, “hey, no touching yet.”

“Ohhhhh of course,” the droid chirped, swinging its head around in lieu of eyes to roll, “you get to get your toys out, but I don’t. I see how it is!”

“What, no that’s – “

“Whatever you say madam, I guess *you’ll* take care of it for me.” Blink scoffed as he rather blatantly stomped away.

“Well maybe if you didn’t shoot me that one time.” Val shot back as she pantomimed inspecting her gloved nails.

“Hey!” Blink snapped, shaking a claw in her direction, “that was one time and it didn’t even hit anything important.”

“Important to me!”

“Oh please, I kissed it better for ya,” the little droid huffed as Val rolled her eyes, “besides that’s basically why you have *two* kidneys!”

Before Val could reply a low, rumbling call echoed through the block. The apartment shivered as the muted wail passed through its bones. Blink and Val locked gaze before heading for the window. Val poked her head back out the window, immediately thumping her fist against the windowsill as Blink scratched a large gash into the wall as he misjudged his jump.

“What. The. Fuck.” Val all but spat.

“What, is it the guy?” Blink chirped as he jumped up again. He hooked his legs around the windowsill and leaned his flickering face out the window, “oh….”

A few blocks over a massive, mangled hand pushed a wave of rubble down to the devastated streets. The twisted, white knuckles crunched the metal frame of a building as it pulled whatever it was attached to forward. Footsteps resonated through the street. A pair of colossal antlers bumped against the frame of the building, sending shards of metal skipping across what remained of the street. Multiple flocks of birds immediately fled the area. Val even spotted a few animals dashing across the street just to get away.

The creature was massive. Carrying itself almost in a crouching position, the behemoth dragged itself out of the mangled building on its club-like hands. Its legs were covered in a thick, white fur and ended in thick slabs of coiled flesh that served as feet. The shoulders were mismatch. The right was a hulking mass of muscle while the left looked almost atrophied in comparison. The thing loped forward with a lopsided gait, less walking and more using it massive right arm as a crutch as it tiptoed forward. It crushed a car beneath its thundering weight. It took the time to stoop down to get a better look at something inside what used to be an armour van.

Val could practically hear the vertebrae in its back cracking and snapping as the disks visibly shifted to allow it to get so low. Its squashed skull of a head prodded the van, and even nudged it with the gnarled forest of antlers that were sprouted from its head. Val turned on her right eye, using it to zoom in as the beast grabbed a hold of something inside the van with its left arm. She watched as the creature passed what looked like a writhing mass of bleeding gelatin to its belly. She looked the beast up and down as it passed the prize to the large collection of arm-like tendrils hanging beneath its ribs.

“’Oh, don’t worry,’” Val parroted in a mocking tone, “it’s still young, it’s twenty max! It’s absolutely not a full-grown fifty-fucking-foot pain in my ass!”

“They were offerin’ a lotta scrap now that I think about it…” Blink agreed. He scratched a few lines in the ash as Val groaned and planted her face in her arms. “Hey now, don’t be like that.”

There were a few moments of relative silence in the room as the thing meandered further from them. Val peeked out of her sleeves.

“What the hell are we going to do…?” She asked, whether to Blink or herself was hard to discern.

“We still got that C4?” Blink wondered aloud.

“Yeah, but it’d have to be planted on it…” she replied, turning her head to rest on her arms sideways, “I got a few grenades but not enough to knock *that* over.”

The silent booms of footsteps filled the air again.

“Think we can brain’em?” Blink asked warily.

“With my caliber?” She shot back with a wave of her hand, “weak point is under the skull at the neck… I’d have to get a little *close*.”

“Could we push him over?”

“Not unless you’ve been working out.” She shrugged as she flicked a fleck of ash off the windowsill.

The silence returned.

“Bail?” Blink offered.

“Think your battery’s going to last another trip with no pay?” Val shot back. She raised an eyebrow at the droid.

“Probably not.”

“Didn’t think so.” She sighed, “I’m rationing food as it is, we need this job.”

It was Blink’s turn to sigh and shake his head.

“There’s gotta be somethin’ we can do!” He groaned with a stomp of his claws.

Val rolled her eyes and looked across at the building opposite to them. She stared off into space at the gutted husk of malformed metal. She sucked air through the space between her teeth. It took her at least a minute to realize she was staring at a giant hunk of concrete embedded in the corner of the building’s roof.

“Well… there might be one thing.” She muttered to herself as her head turned to rest her chin on her sleeve. Her gaze was fixed on the rebar-skewered boulder.

“Talk to me, Val.”

“I say, our best bet is that right there.” She continued. She gestured towards the concrete chunk with one hand as she adjusted her eye with the other. Blink followed where she was pointing as she pushed off the wall. She soon returned with a large block of C4, “one of us, gets over there and plants this with a couple grenades over on that, pop it, let it fall off the building and onto our friend.”

The droid looked from the hunk of concrete to the streets below.

“Way up there…?” He muttered to himself.

“It’s better than wasting all our ammo on him.” Val reminded him.

“I guess…” Blink agreed. He waggled a dented claw in her direction, “what’s the catch?”

“Well, if we take too much time,” she sighed as she leaned out of the window to check on the beast, it was at least a few more blocks away, “it’s gonna wander too far for us to lead it back and we’re back to square one.”

“No scouting then,” he huffed. He looked up at Val, “there any good news missy?”

“That was the good news,” she scoffed. She pointed towards the thing with the block of explosives, “these things are dumb as hell, so whoever is leading it is going to have to stay in the street as much as possible to lead it down here.”

Blink leaned out the window to look the path up and down.

“That’s a lotta street…” He muttered.

“That one of us will have to kite that thing down,” Val continued, “while the other plants the explosives.”

There were a few moments of silence.

“I thought you said you had a good plan.” Blink hissed. He nudged her with one of his claws.

“It is either that,” she mumbled, she gave his flickering screen a poke, “or we go street level anyway and try and find some other massive chunk of rock to brain it with.”

“…Doesn’t seem like the best’a plans.” Blink admitted with a shake of his head.

“So, we agree then.”

“Yeah yeah, let’s do it.”

“Now… who does what?”

“…Good question…” Blink wondered aloud, “rock-paper-scissors?”

“Dude, you don’t even have hands anymore.” Val reminded him.

“Oh right…”

The two glanced from the explosives to each other.

“Wanna draw straws or…?” Blink offered.

“Oh for fu- just take the damn thing!” Val huffed as she leaned in and placed the block in a compartment inside Blink’s make-shift body.

“Alright alright, easy!” He protested as she briefly shook him to get it to fit.

“You go over there, take your scaling kit so you can climb up outside,” she instructed. She was already over by the other equipment getting things ready, “the detonator’s pretty short range so you might have to be on the roof for it to fire. Do not get me killed just because you stood too far away.”

“Yeah yeah, and how’re you gonna keep yerself in one piece?” He shot back, “you’re not exactly a gold medalist runner.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m faster than you anyway and I can’t climb up to that roof.” She muttered as she inspected a few grenades, “best case scenario I can lure him a few blocks with some explosions and take it from there.”

“Y’know this isn’t exactly the greatest idea you’ve ever had.”

“So you keep reminding me,” she agreed as she unwrapped what looked like a bundle of spare parts, “now get over here, we need to get you ready!”

Blink sent one last look outside. His cameras focussed on the behemoth wandering aimlessly down the street, to the mangled path Val would have to run, and finally up to the concrete boulder stuck in the side of the opposite building. He shook his little head, but a weary chuckle wheezed its way out of his dented speakers.

“Let’s get to work!” He beamed as he hopped off the windowsill and scampered over to Val.

[End of First Instalment]