

Strive City

I make my way to Strive City via an overland transport, a caravan of trucks guarded by The Resistance, which is still operational in this part of the country. There are many other people traveling with the transport as well, many of them women or children travelling alone, fleeing the advance of The Bionics, who have gained control of the lands to the east and south. The northwest corner of the country, Strive City, is the last place that is still fairly safe. The Bionics will be coming soon, though. That's why it is imperative I get to Strive City and convince my brother however I can to go with me into the mountains. The Bionics won't bother to look for us there since they need a constant power supply and have always centered themselves in a large metropolis.

I jump from the truck onto the hard packed dirt of the road; dust rises along with the earthy scent of home. I haven't been here in so long it seems like a dream.

Chris rushes from one of the large, dirt colored tents along the road and I smile as he engulfs me in a stifling hug.

"Come on, Mary," he says, pulling me towards the tent. "You gotta see what we got."

Inside he shows me crate after crate of plasma guns, pulsar guns, electromagnetic grenades... everything he thinks he needs to fight The Bionics. I was in the first city they attacked and I know none of this will matter. Everyone there died. My escaped was pure luck. At least, I think it was luck. It was some sort of anomaly anyway, I can't possibly have some kind of gift to silence the Bionics, even though that would come in handy right now.

"I'm so glad you're here," Chris says, grinning. "This is Torres." He points to a short but strong looking woman wearing a bandana and black stripes under her eyes like a football player. She glares at me and I nod at her without smiling.

"Can we take a walk?" I ask, looking outside the tent.

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“No time. We have to pack up and head into the city.” He says, loading his pockets with grenades.

“Chris. Let’s take a walk,” I insist, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him outside, away from the others. “We need to leave.”

“We need to fight,” he says warily. “I thought you came home to help.”

“No. I came to get you. We can’t fight.” I tell him. “Can’t we go into the mountains? Take all your people and we’ll head there. We’ll set up camp and we’ll all be safe. We’ll survive.”

“What are you talking about?” He asks, looking genuinely confused. “We can’t run. We have to fight for our home.”

“We can’t win. You have to know that,” I say. “Our only chance is to make it out before they get here.”

“Well, too late,” he says. “The first wave is only a few hours behind you. If you want to run and hide, go ahead. I have to stay here and fight. There isn’t even time to announce an evacuation.” He watches me and shakes his head slowly, looking disappointed. “I thought you were here to help.”

“Chris, please listen to me. We can win, we just can’t do it here and now. If you just get your people to leave with us, we can come back when we’re prepared and take back the city.”

“There are innocent people in the city who can’t leave now. There’s too many of them. We could never get them all out. Hell, we couldn’t get a quarter of them out. We’ve been promising to protect them, we can’t abandon them now. Stay or go. It’s your choice.” He turns back to the tent and I follow him. I understand why he wants to stay but I can’t imagine facing the horror of a machine war again. Never mind a fair fight, it’s not even a fight at all. It’s total domination by metal predators engineered to efficiently kill humans. Or worse – to capture us. He doesn’t understand the reality of coming face to face with a ten foot tall, eyeless metal Killman programmed to destroy you. No one does. No one but me has ever faced one and lived to tell about it.

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Chris hands grenades to the others and they load their pockets with false safety. Torres gives me another dirty look and I almost turn away. I don't want to be here for the slaughter that is coming. The machines will turn us all into piles of quivering carrion. I can't face it again. My heart races with fear just at the thought of being alone with no defense against the army of machines on their way to our city. I start to turn back to the caravan but Chris looks up at me. He might be leathered and greyed but I can still see the big brother who once pulled a tiny me from the wreckage of a bomb blasted garage and ran, carrying me, until we were hidden by the woods. Then he sat with me until I could hear again and held me until I stopped shaking.

"Fine. I'll stay."

He tosses me a grenade, smiling like he knew all along I'd stay, and shoves a repeating plasma gun into my hands. I tuck it into my waistband knowing how futile it will be when faced by a Killman with full defensive armor.

I plead with Chris as we are loading the trucks to head into the city but he is as obstinate as always and I can't leave my brother no matter how afraid I am. I would rather die with him than leave him alone to a death like that. A glimmer of hope still resides in me, though. Maybe I can do something to save Chris and myself. Maybe something like last time. I can't tell the others because they'd never believe me. I don't even believe me.

We climb into the trucks and I take a seat by myself. The fear is overwhelming and I can't promise myself I won't break down and cry; I can feel the tightness in my throat waiting to choke me. Torres is nearby and I see her watching me distrustfully but I can't pull myself together. I had no intention of ever facing the Bionics again but here I am on a truck headed to certain death at their hands.

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The city looms ahead of us, grey, soot covered and seemingly vacant. It's not long before we arrive at our destination, a sky scraper in former downtown where they've rigged up a generator and gotten the elevator working. The Resistance is scattered throughout the city, and there are still many civilians living and hiding here, but this is the best vantage point they could find. From the top floor they can see nearly 360 degrees around the city including all major roads leading in and out, even the one that leads to the mountains and safety. But that isn't where they are focused.

As soon as the truck stops a man in heavy combat gear grabs Chris and leads him to a monitor showing the view from the top floor. The Bionics are reaching the city just as we arrive downtown. The first wave is the Creepers, lizard-like, dog-sized machines that creep into every opening they can see to find life, marking anything they come across for death by the next wave of the invasion. The next to come will be the Killman and then the Cleaners. The Killman, in impenetrable armor with anti-electromagnetic blast fields, will lead, destroying any life they find and seeking out those marked by the Creepers. The Cleaners will be close behind them. Smaller, they will search and find anything left alive or missed by the Killman. The Cleaners will ensure the city is cleaned of the living so the Bionics can take it for their own, absorb all power and convert any raw materials.

I follow Chris and watch the monitor as the first Creeper enters the city. Behind it, maybe a hundred follow, slinking their way into buildings and alleys and sewers. Panic quickly rises in me. I remember the last time I was face to face with a Killman, staring at its eyeless metal face as it came forward to kill me, the cold metal that I dreaded touching, the sadness in its human core.

"Please, Chris. We can still leave."

"Yeah? And do what, coward?" But I'd rather be a coward than be here. At that moment a Creeper passes on the side of a nearby building, shining its light on Chris as it goes. Marking him for death. Torres arms her weapon and it hums to life, ready to defend him, but I know it will do no good.

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The Killman will be here in a few moments and they will exterminate Chris right in front of us, no matter how hard we fight or what we try to do. Then they will exterminate the rest of us.

Chris hands out more guns and screams orders to his men, sending them into the sky scraper and into the surrounding buildings. Chris, Torres and I are left by the truck.

“Chris, get in the truck. We can go,” I say. Before he can answer, a ten foot tall metal Killman steps quietly around the back of the truck. I see him first and time seems to stop. The Killman moves in slow motion, knocking Torres to the ground on his way to Chris. It aims its guns at Chris and in the split second before it fires, I step forward. I face him. It’s the same as last time. Me, small and unarmed in front of a killing machine determined to destroy my entire world. My fear and insecurities overwhelm me. All I can do is reach out my hand and send a silent mental plea to the humanity inside the machine. ‘Let me offer you the peace you seek.’ It’s enough to make the Killman pause. In the moment it hesitates I feel its intense desire and I offer it more. ‘Let me give you the rest you deserve.’ I move forward and touch its cold metal arm. It relents and opens the service compartment on its back, dropping to its knees at the same time. I circle it, my hand tracing the way along its chillingly cold exterior, and reach its back. Inside are the fragmented remains of the man the Bionics used to create the Killman, white and decrepit with wires piercing the skin. This man hasn’t slept since being turned into the Killman. He is exhausted and desolate and he readily accepts my offer of rest. I place my hand on the cold, soft, lumpy white remains of his forehead and relax him so he can sleep. Through the mental connection I have with him, I feel his pain and his fear and his loneliness. He shares with me how he received each scar he has and how they put in each wire and how they took his humanity. He shares with me his loneliness and fatigue. Finally he sleeps and I look up. Torres and Chris are watching me with fear in their eyes.

“Please help me give him peace.” I say, still mentally connected with the Killman and not wanting to alert him to my intention to kill him. Chris looks confused but Torres pulls her gun. Then she shakes her head and tucks it back into its holster. She takes a paper packet out of her pocket and opens

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it. Inside is a teaspoon of yellowish powder which she blows onto a portion of the Killman's exposed brain. His eyes open and I sense that he feels the betrayal. I offer him sleep and he closes his eyes as the powder begins to bubble and his brain collapses into itself, a frothy disintegrated mess. His pain stays with me.

I stand and look at Chris but another Creeper has come up behind me. He raises his gun and fires but the pulses don't affect the armored machine. I reach out to it. 'Let me offer you the peace you seek.' It lowers its weapon and approaches me. I hear Chris behind me, firing up his weapon, and I raise my hand to stop him.

'Let me give you the rest you deserve.'" Like the other, this creature is tired. Its service compartment opens, revealing the pale, partial body within. Myriad wires enter the skull and the arms are completely integrated with a control panel, nerves exposed and fused to metal. The body terminates in a clamp just below the belly button. As a machine it never gets to sleep. The brain is used as a computer and is never allowed to be offline. It functions until it degrades and needs to be replaced by another. As I give it peace, it tells me of the pens the Bionics keep captured humans in to wait until they are needed. I feel its fear and anger and how much it misses its family, who wait in one of the pens. It sleeps and I call to Torres to bring her gun and give it peace. It hears me and feels the duplicity. It starts to rise up, this one is strong and smart, but my offer of peace is too tempting. After a brief resistance, it sleeps and Torres puts a bullet in its brain, ending its misery.

I walk forward, away from the trucks. I'm alive with feeling sharpened by the hurt shared with me by the Bionics. If the Resistance knows The Bionics are using humans in their machines, they don't seem to realize some of them are our friends and family. Chris certainly doesn't know that the Bionic Torres just shot was Jay, his friend who lived on our street when we were growing up before Strive City was called that. Jay was his friend when it was called Independence and our biggest problem was finding something to do on a long, hot summer day.

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I make my way down the street but before I get far, I can sense them coming. They are looking for me. I must be stronger than I thought because they are coming for the respite that I offered the others. It's dark on the street and the buildings around me are grey with age, soot and neglect. I couldn't feel more alone if the city was actually as empty as it looked. Chris and Torres and all the others, they can't do anything against the machines without me. I don't want to feel any more of their pain but there's nothing I can do now. The only alternative would be to die, to let Chris die.

They make a circle ten deep around me, Creepers and Killman and Cleaners. I know as long they are here with me, they aren't hurting anyone. I give them each peace and rest and they mostly wait patiently for their turn. I don't know if they understand that peace and rest means death but I suspect they don't care.

I don't know how long they encircle me but the sun is shining and there's a trail of lifeless machines a quarter mile long behind me when I realize I've done the last one. I should have become numb to their pain but somehow I didn't. I can remember each of the stories they shared with me as I sent them to rest. I don't know where any of the others are. For all I know, they could be all be dead. I need rest and peace myself so I lay down on the broken black top of the street in the small space at my feet where there are no dead machines. I close my eyes and the hard ground becomes a soft and comfortable bed as I lose consciousness.

When I wake I'm in a bright hospital tent and it's hot. Flies swarm and men scream. My throat feels parched and burns with every breath I take but I'm so exhausted I can't move to find water. I lay for a moment, listening to the screams of pain and death, before I pass out again.

I wake slowly, hearing wails and complaints before I can open my eyes. When I finally get them open, I see it's night. I'm in a warehouse of some kind now. There are many people here suffering from wounds and dying, laid out on the floor. There are so many of them. I drag myself up to a sitting position. There's a jug of water on the floor next to me. I grab it and guzzle until I think I'll suffocate.

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Then I look at the man next me. He's cut on the face and has bandages covering most of his body. It looks like he was burned. It was his screaming that woke me.

Now that everyone knows what I can do, now that I know what I can do, I can help him. I put my hands on his head and offer him peace. He accepts it gratefully and I give him relief from the pain. He sleeps. This time it's rewarding to help. This time I don't have to put a bullet in his brain. I know he will wake up and be in pain again but for now he can rest uninterrupted and be stronger when he wakes.

I move from bed to bed, giving the wounded soldiers what they need. Painless sleep. After a while I hear someone approaching behind me. I turn, hoping it's Chris, but it's not. It's Torres and she's pointing a gun at me.

"You monster! What have you done?" She asks. She doesn't wait for an answer. I see the blue pulse as she fires the gun and I'm knocked back. Blinding pain comes an instant later. The sleeping men wake and start wailing again but she doesn't notice they are alive. She sees only me. I hear Chris screaming in the background but Torres stands over me and pulls the trigger again. She hits me square in the chest and I can't draw breath. I see Chris tackle her but he's too late. He becomes a pinpoint of light and I know it's over. My last thought is how tired I am and how I would do anything for some peace.