

Murder Drones

Chapter 10

Uzi's Flare for the Overdramatic

Darting down the abandoned hallway, two pairs of stout boots made little to no sound. The first of the wearers was heavily-laden with a huge backpack that nevertheless bulged with being over-stuffed; the second, light on her feet, had no physical cargo, but scoffed nonetheless. "How did I let you talk me into this, again?"

The purple-haired drone looked over her shoulder, past the lumps in her backpack, and smirked at the blonde following me. "I blackmailed you into it. Besides, have you got anything better to do tonight? Now, shhh!"

Lizzy animated a dramatic roll of her eyes; she was annoyed to be the one on the receiving end of being blackmailed into misbehaving for once and expressed her disgust with an extra helping of feigned contempt. She could think of about five better things to do than accompany the almost-unquestionably-insane Uzi Doorman out into the frozen wastes, but part of her *was* curious where this was going. "How are we going to get past the doors?" Uzi levelled an unamused expression at her, and Lizzy rolled her eyes. "Fine, keep your secrets."

Lizzy was fully expecting that Uzi would reveal some hidden egress, maybe one that would only be readily-accessible to someone who could scuttle up walls or fly (both feats of which Uzi was more than capable) or was athletic and limber, such as the way Lizzy herself had simply made use of the same exit in the roof of a large goods warehouse muster station that N had made when he made his dramatic exit just after things had started changing.

Uzi went straight for the front exit, and took out a fob token in the shape of an ancient floppy disk, and Lizzy rolled her eyes. *Right, Doorman Privileges*, she thought disgustedly; she envied Uzi's possession of a master override key that held the keycodes for every door in the entirety of Outpost 3 that Khan Doorman had ever built or modified or repaired. Not that she would express that envy.

Lizzy schooled her eyes to bored indifference as Uzi used her override to open the inner door, walking past the gate guard squad who were playing cards again, as usual, though she did note that Uzi exchanged waves with them, mutely. Lizzy, presuming that they were doing the 'walk purposefully and people won't question you' routine, followed with purpose. It got them as far as the second door before they were questioned.

"Aaaand just where are *you* going, kiddo?" The door opened to reveal Uzi's father, hands on his hips, in the second door-lock leading out of Colony 3. He looked them up and down, worry animating on his face.

Uzi and Lizzy clearly bristled at the moniker 'kiddo,' but Uzi answered first, with an exaggerated sigh. "Going out for a school project, *dad*. And we're like, not kids. Haven't been for years."

Khan stared at her levelly for a few moments longer, and sighed heavily. "Are you gonna lie to me and say it's related to doors again?"

"Well... We might have to *bypass* a door, but not really, no." Uzi shook her head. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, does it? It's not like there's three Murder Drones lurking outside the doors anymore."

"Well, no, but it's still not really *safe* out there, you know that," Khan said.

Uzi laughed, manically, and shifted her heavy backpack, unfurling her wings in a snap. The stretchy, fleshy things, with freakishly hand-like wing-nodes spread wide, and her tail popped out from under her hoodie, the yellow eyes of it being possessed by the malevolent remnant (she hoped it was just a remnant) of the Solver (or maybe Cyn, she wasn't entirely sure and it wouldn't give her a straight answer) peering out from the horrible head-maw on the end of her tail. "Yeah, but *I'm* the reason it's dangerous out there!"

Lizzy scoffed and rolled her eyes. The rest of the W.D.F. around the card table all took cover against the far wall from Uzi's demonstration; Lizzy was unimpressed, and Khan just looked resigned, putting his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "You know we're always going to worry about you, sweetie. Do you really have to go out to do whatever it is you have in mind?"

"It's a chem project," Uzi said, voice flat and level.

Khan winced and nodded, with another resigned sigh. He patted Uzi's shoulder, and stood aside, using his own token to open the outer door. "Come back safe, sweetie. And bring Lizzy back safe, or her father will kill me."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "He-llo, you do remember me and Thad going mano-a-mano with *J*, right? Even with this loser with me instead of Thad, I'll be fine." It was an exaggeration at best; she and Thad hadn't actually had the opportunity to throw down with Serial Designation J (they'd been interrupted), and at that time she had been armed with Uzi's railgun (and Thad with a heavy pipe). But they had been ready to.

Both Khan and Uzi narrowed their eyes at Lizzy's reference to Uzi as a loser, and Lizzy smirked. She might be stuck going along with this harebrained scheme, but she could still get a rise out of Uzi from it. To quit the stalling, she squared up her shoulders and started out into the wastes, her boots transitioning from bare concrete to the frozen ground with a satisfying *crunch* of snow. Uzi, as she predicted, gave chase.

Khan watched the two teenagers - essentially twenty, now, but still, one was his little girl, and the other was composed of much the same resolute stuff his daughter was. He let out a heavy, weary sigh; he knew, intellectually, that they both probably could take care of themselves. And yet. "Will you-"

"Go after them? Of course." Nori popped around the back of his head onto his shoulder, from where she had dropped down to cling to the back of his hard-hat helmet when Khan confronted the duo. If they had *seen* her, they would've known for sure she was going to follow them. She reached up with a clawed forelimb and chucked her husband's jaw, using her Solver telekinesis to hitch up her miniature hard-hat complete with built-in headphones and phone to the top of her 'head.' "They won't lose me." She hopped off, scuttling into the snow, keeping the pair of teens in her vision, and snickering to herself as she scrambled up an old light pole to gain elevation.

"I am *not* missing this," Nori said to herself with a snicker, after she was out of earshot of her husband; she didn't know what kind of mayhem her daughter had planned, but the fact that she had brought a witness implied that it was going to be *exciting*, and she was every bit the irresponsible maniac her daughter was when it came to the good stuff.

Lizzy strode forth with determination, as if she were fully briefed on the plan, in silence for a good five minutes walk; eventually she obliged Uzi to take to her wings and the air to get back in front of her. Once Uzi's boots were now crunching ahead of her, Lizzy asked, "so, why *me* and not one of our special fellas? And what *do* you have planned? And why don't we have your *failgun* with us?"

Uzi snorted, looking back again at her. "I told dad, it's a chem project." She rolled her eyes, choosing not to rise to the bait. "And I left my railgun in my room, 'cause this pack is hella heavy on its own."

"Oh sweet robo-god you weren't lying about that," Lizzy said, shaking her head.

"Nope! And I brought you because you're good with a camera, and N and V might... Be a little upset about where we're going."

"That being...?"

"You'll see," Uzi said, injecting more malevolence than she actually felt into her voice as she laughed.

Lizzy raised an eyebrow. Uzi *not* lying about it being a chem project, *and* wanting to exclude V and N explicitly, was an interesting combination of factors. The night was promising to be less lame than she had feared. "Is it gonna be dangerous," she asked, trying not to sound *excited*.

"It might be totally safe, it might be hella dangerous, who knows?" Uzi gave a flippant shrug, and flung her wings out wide, holding her arms out and calling the Solver symbols into her hands. "Hella dangerous for anything that tries to give *us* trouble!"

"I'd still feel a *bit* better with the railgun," Lizzy grumped. "I could've carried it. And why would N and V be upset about where we're going?"

"It's... Not a good idea to fire that thing indoors. Trust me," Uzi said, as she marched on into the snow, refusing to be drawn further into discussion on the topic, and finally she countered Lizzy's questions with one of her own. "Hey, shaddup about where we're going and tell me something," Uzi said. "I know how *I* got in and out after, you know, I met N and all, and we tracked down that Eldritch J-Monster... But how did *you* get in and out?"

Lizzy snorted. "After you let the Murder Drones in the first time, they stopped caring *nearly* so much about keeping people in or out. Honestly, I think they only questioned us tonight because it was your *dad* asking."

"You just... Walked out the front door?" Uzi asked.

"Oh, heck no. Not to meet V, anyway. I didn't want people to know where I was going," Lizzy pointed out. "Remember that hole in the ceiling of the muster station your boyfriend made when you and he and V made your dramatic exit?"

Uzi snorted. "Yeah... In hindsight, how did nobody realize that the warehouse went all the way to the surface?"

"No idea," Lizzy said. "But instead of shoring up the ceiling, they just built some really heavy doors in the halls. But we can still get in there," she noted. "And there's all those shipping containers that go up to the cranes and the cranes have ladders up to the catwalks, and the catwalk railings are within jumping distance of the rafter beams, and the rafter beams are within the distance to the roof that I can throw myself with a spin from a horizontal pipe."

Uzi looked at Lizzy, flatly. "Right, yeah, I believe, like, literally none of that," she said, deadpan.

Lizzy returned the glance, and snorted. "Hello? I *am* a cheerleader, and a gymnastics lead. You'd know that if you paid *any attention at all* in gym, or came to *any* kind of cheer meets or something."

"I think I'd vomit oil if I went to a cheer thing," Uzi grumped. "And I don't believe it. You like, just walked out the front door or something. You're a perfect liar, you probably just walked in and out with V in tow like you owned the place and told the gate guards she was Serial Designation R or something."

Lizzy *glared*. She was being challenged to prove herself which she didn't feel like doing; but her *pride* was also being challenged, and she didn't like to let that go unanswered. "You're on." Pride won, and Lizzy glanced around and smirked; conveniently, a crashed flatbed cargo truck with high-railed sides had overrode a crashed car, with a street pole with an overhanging street light just ahead of the crashed flatbed. Above the level of the light pole, *behind* it, was a cable stretched between the ruined buildings to either side of the ruined street. Before Uzi could complain or retort, Lizzy took off, boots crunching in the snow.

Uzi frowned, watching as Lizzy dashed down the street; she hopped onto and off of a derelict fire hydrant, an open side-cap spouting a gout of ice into the street; she bounced up to and darted *up* the railing on the side of a crashed truck's cargo bed. *No way*, she thought, as Lizzy reached the end of the rail and threw herself forward and up.

Lizzy caught the light pole's support, and swung violently under it - back and forth, the pole creaking under the load, until she was

going more than horizontal; she let go on the forward throw, launching herself upwards and spinning around; when she caught it again she had reversed direction, and swung herself forward and back again, even harder.

Whatever Lizzy was planning, she didn't get to demonstrate it; the light failed structurally where it met the street pole, separating with a dramatic shower of sparks on her backswing. Lizzy, yelping, was sent hurling down the street, still clutching a street light and its supporting pole in her hands.

Before she could make impact, Lizzy was arrested in midair; halted with more suddenness than if she had impacted the ground, even; and found herself suspended with a huge purple sigil holographically glowing around her. Dimly she was aware that was physically *impossible*, or that it should have rattled her insides against her outsides, but all she felt was that momentum suddenly ceased.

Uzi had arrested Lizzy's fall with a purple symbol called into her hand. She closed her fingers, extinguishing the symbol, and letting the Solver power vanish instantly, hoping that Lizzy would fall onto her ass, bruising her pride but not damaging herself. Instead, Lizzy got her feet under her and landed only slightly heavily from the fact that she was still holding a street light and its mounting bracket that were probably heavier than she was.

Disgustedly, Lizzy discarded the broken street infrastructure, and grumped, "Thanks, and don't mention that ever," she Uzi.

Uzi smirked. "No promises are made," she said, as she caught up with Lizzy and continued walking. "But okay, *maybe* you could get out through the roof."

Onwards they trudged into the snow, through the ruined city, until arriving at Uzi's destination: Cabin Fever Labs. Lizzy, at last, found herself daunted; she normally lacked a fear response like most drones. "Th-this place? Isn't this full of Sentinels?" Sentinels were one of the few things that actually, *genuinely* scared Lizzy. She shook her head. "Well, at least it's not morbid and creepifying, or *boring*," she said. "But still, the Sentinel lab? I hate Sentinels."

"You mean like your girlfriend's pet?" Uzi smirked at Lizzy over her shoulder.

Lizzy animated a dramatic roll of her eyes, but didn't rise to the bait; her heart - actually her AI core, in the rough place in her chest where an organic human would keep a heart - fluttered at the thought of V, pumping more coolant through it faster to counter the rise in temperature provoked by the thought of the tall, powerful, deadly Disassembly Drone, but she still wasn't going to say anything about it directly; denial was admission, and admission was admission. "Yeah. *Those*."

"As far as I know, they're all dead except Sparky," Uzi said.

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then thing get *interesting*. Oh, here." Uzi grabbed her, sticking a hexagonal metal patch on her faceplate; Lizzy snarled as lines of code flashed in place of her eyes, and focused her vision cross-eyed until she could see the device.

"What the *hell* is this?" Lizzy blinked, shaking her head and trying to shake the patch off, but it was no use. Her sight went blind for a moment, then came back, fuzzily de-gaussing before resolving normally. "I oughta kick your aft for that!"

"Bite me," Uzi said without heat. "And you're welcome. That software patch will stop you getting bootlocked if one of the Sentinels survived. They're not that tough if their cheap trick doesn't work on you... And it also contained 606b."

Nori, listening from far enough away to go unnoticed, blinked her photoreceptors as she listened in. Her daughter could be brusque, bordering on herself when she was Uzi's age, but she was still impressed - mildly horrified, but impressed - that Uzi had composed a software patch that apparently immunized Worker Drones from their two biggest threats. Then again, given that Uzi was apparently partially corrupted by the Solver itself, Nori wasn't entirely sanguine about Uzi applying patches to others, especially *surprise* software updates. She closed in on the duo, standing before one of the entrances to Cabin Fever, having taken the high route of scuttling along utility poles.

"What the hell is '606b,' you utter freak?" Lizzy demanded, flicking the now-inert metal hexagon off her face.

Uzi grabbed it out of the air, returning it to her hoodie pocket, and snorted at her. "Hopefully you'll never need to find out. But, actually... We can test it."

"Oh robogod, what are you talking about -"

Uzi flicked her hand into the air, calling the Solver symbol into it. Her right eye became the symbol; her left flashed with code, and she intoned, "**Callback Ping!**"

Lizzy was a drone who did not have a measurable horror response (other than her visceral reaction to Sentinels); rather like her father, even the impending end of the world (which they had survived) had never phased her. She could be alarmed, be frightened by things that happen by surprise, or which *impended* and she couldn't do anything about it (like being suspended in microgravity with a Sentinel closing in on her *slowly*), but when others screamed and fled in panic, she generally remained levelheaded and scornful, only fleeing when necessary.

This, though, this frightened her; her heart **pounded** in her chest, and not the kind of fluttering she had felt when she thought of Serial Designation V. For a moment her will was not her own; like her heart was gripped by icy lines of code demanding, *compelling* her towards Uzi, to kneel, to *obey* - then with a snarl she brushed the feeling aside. "What the **[bleep]** was that?!" She clenched her fist, a heartbeat from lunging at Uzi and throwing down with her, annoyed that the chat filter had bleeped out the vulgarity she had fully meant to fling and forced an electronic bleep from her lips instead.

Nori, too, had been affected by the Callback Ping; since her heart was about the totality of her body nowadays, it had made her entire form jitter and jangle briefly. She was long used to brushing aside the attempts to usurp control of herself, but that didn't

mean it was pleasant. Her voice boomed out as she fell upside down from the wires, then used her own Solver power to *fling* herself at the duo, landing on Lizzy's helmet to berate her daughter. "Uzi Doorman, what the **fuck** do you think you're doing?!" She dodged Lizzy's reflexive swing at her by jumping over it and landing back where she had been, stretching out her claw accusingly. "We do *not* do that to our friends and family!"

Uzi's enthusiasm melted instantly; Lizzy was ready to throw hands at her, and *her mother* (who had come out of *fricking nowhere*) looked nearly as pissed as Lizzy. It was one thing to harass, upset, and aggravate others, but this was a level of vindictive **fury** she hadn't seen since the last time someone had *genuinely* tried to kill her. At the edge of her mind, she felt the annoying influence of the Solver, urging her to brush aside their concerns, to hit them with the Ping *harder*, hard enough to **make** them bow to her, to acknowledge her as their Sovereign; their Goddess to *worship*, to kneel and kowtow to her -

She terminated that line of thought, retracting her wings and tail, shutting the Solver up. "I'm sorry," she said, sincerely but numbly as she knew how inadequate it was to what she had tried to do. "I didn't think -"

"At **all**," Lizzy snarled at her.

"I didn't think it would do *anything* to you," Uzi said, urgently. "I thought you'd just go 'whatever, freak' and not be affected at all. I... Please, I'm sorry," she said again. Normally she wouldn't give a damn what Lizzy thought of her, but she knew she'd crossed a big red line, inadvertently - but still crossed it with her typical bullheaded manner.

Lizzy clenched her fists; the nerve-jangling nature of *whatever* it was Uzi had attempted was subsiding. She shook her head rapidly, in disbelief; this caused the utterly gross form of Uzi's mother to flip off her head, and land on her shoulder instead. Breathing heavily, she stalled for a moment, looking at the glowing photoreceptor in the middle of the horrid, organic-draped drone heart that was Uzi's mother. She blinked, her eyes going from hollow to level and flat; the heart on her shoulder blinking back at her. She looked back to Uzi, and rolled her eyes. "Uzi Doorman, you are a *freak* and not in a good way right now!" She walked past her, shoulder-checking her *hard* - in the process transferring Nori to Uzi's shoulder - and looked back at her. "Don't you ever do that to me again."

The words *bite me* floated through Uzi's mind, but with conscious effort she mastered her temper even as Lizzy shouldered past her. She remembered *all too well* the terror that she had felt when that very attack had been used and her heart had tried to claw itself out of her chest, quite unwillingly. She didn't even object when her mother reached up and *thwacked* the back of her head with a claw, simply wincing. She let out a heavy huff, shoulders slumping, as she looked to her mother, perched on her shoulder. "... Sorry."

"You *should* be," Nori said, snarkily. "You got *me* too, and it never gets less terrifying... Did you get yourself, too?"

"I... No," Uzi said, blinking. "I didn't feel anything. Because I was the origin of it?"

"Probably," Nori said, pointing after Lizzy, who had walked straight up to the door and taken the handle in hand. It was at head height for Uzi, the shortest of the Worker Drones, as the facility had been built to Human standards. "You going to follow her?"

"Yeah... Yeah," Uzi said, shouldering her backpack and starting to jog. "Hey... Did you ever try to -"

"No, and I'm not *going* to. I don't know if I can or not, but I'm not going to find out," Nori said, coldly, but inside she was starting to wonder if she *could*. She was *too* much like her daughter; frankly they were almost sisters.

"I was just wondering... You know, if it would affect me *at all*, or not," Uzi said numbly, as she reached the doors. Lizzy was holding the handle in hand, but hadn't turned it, and was trying to peer in through the small window high in the door. Uzi reached out, putting her hand on Lizzy's shoulder. "Hey, Lizzy, um..."

Lizzy turned to look at Uzi's eyes, her right fist clenched, preparing to unleash fury on her, but the look of utter chagrin on Uzi's face stayed her wrath. She furrowed her animated eyebrows, waiting for Uzi to continue.

"I'm sorry," Uzi said, finally; her edgelord shell cracked by the realization of the magnitude of the violation she had thoughtlessly attempted. Even as she thought her angst levels were draining to critical, she brushed that aside. She wasn't Lizzy's *best friend forever*, but Lizzy was at least part of her close orbit of friends; and though half a year ago she felt she hadn't needed *any*, now that she had some, she was loathe to alienate even the most remote of them. V wouldn't forgive her if Lizzy was furious at her; and if V was furious at her, it would strain N between them.

"Say you're sorry," Lizzy said. "And **mean it**."

"I'm sorry! Robo-Chrysler, I'm sorry," the words spilled from Uzi's lips. "I [*bleeped*] up. I thought I was giving you a total immunity to something horrible that nobody should ever have to face again, and then I tried to [*bleeping*] whammy you with it without even telling you what it was!"

Lizzy stared level at Uzi Doorman for a moment. The apology sounded sincere. She let go of the handle of the door, turning to face Uzi and crossed her arms. "Say you'll do my homework for the next month."

"I'll do your - mmmf!" Uzi was about to agree immediately, but Nori stretched a claw out and blocked her mouth.

"Hold her heels over a fire if you want, but I'm not going to perch here and watch you cheat yourself out of an education," Nori said, trying to sound *adult* when she really thought Lizzy was letting Uzi off lightly with that demand.

Lizzy blinked, and snickered at the image of Uzi being silenced by the heart-crab that was her mother. In a flash she retrieved her phone from her helmet, and snapped a photograph of the two of them in that pose. "darkXWolf17 loses to me on PlayBox for a week," she said, smirking. "Or I'll send this to V and N and *everybody else*; Uzi Doorman *totes* whipped."

Defeated but realizing that was as light as she was getting off Uzi slumped her head and shoulders, nodding. It would be *hell* to

reclaim her leaderboard spot if she took that many dives to Lizzy, but she could do it. "Okay... We okay?"

Lizzy smirked, and reached out, chucking Uzi's shoulder with her fist. "I guess we're good, freak."

Uzi sighed, and nodded, rubbing her eyes as her mother danced around Lizzy's gentle punch, then climbed across to her other shoulder. A long moment passed, and Uzi asked, "So, are we just standing around here, or what?"

"It's *your* trip," Lizzy pointed out. "What *are* we doing here, anyway? Why *here*?"

"Oh! Right!" Uzi perked up, straightening up and squaring up her shoulders, causing her mother to jump to the top of her head and perch on her beanie instead. "I needed hard targets to test something, and that meant wrecked Disassembly Drones and Sentinels."

"... What, you're here to see if sucking oil out of Murder Drones or Murder Raptors is any different from sucking oil out of your classmates?" Lizzy rolled her eyes.

"No! Though..." Uzi looked up and to the sky, at the glowing, cold view of the distant, ringed gas giant in the night sky. Then she looked up at the animated heart of her mother, who was peering over the brim of her beanie.

"I never tried it. Got a straw?"

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "Are we here to do some kind of horrible mad eldritch science experiment where you try to reanimate a long-dead murder drone with a sentinel's head or something?"

"That sounds kinda fun," Nori said, and Lizzy rolled her eyes harder, getting a laugh from both Nori and Uzi.

"No, sadly. Though... No. Nope! This is simpler than that," Uzi said, shrugging off her backpack, unzipping it and pulling out the majority of its contents.

Lizzy stared agape at what Uzi brought forth; a bulky launcher of some sort with a massive rotary magazine in the middle of the beast. The bore *gaped*, and the barrel was some kind of tightly-wound helical contraption, glowing green internally. "You're a freak, Uzi Doorman," Lizzy said, deadpan, recovering her composure.

"Hey, blame your dad!"

"My *dad*? What does my dad have to do with this?"

Uzi snickered at Lizzy, recovering her composure rapidly, and crooked the grenade launcher under her arm, stroking the top of its barrel lovingly. "Remember the assessments he sent out last month?" She grinned at Lizzy, who rolled her eyes.

"Of *course* I do, freak. I got perfect marks of course," she said smirking, "and was assessed as 'the least disruptive in class.'"

Uzi snorted loudly at that, and smirked. "Yeah, well, he wants to see *overdramatic*? I'll show him ***overdramatic!***" She pulled the pistol-grip shotgun action on the launcher, snapping the cylinder from sitting between rounds to chambering a round, and hefted the barrel to the sky. "Fire in the *sky!*"

The magnetic coils in the launcher caught the grenade that was kicked forward when she pulled the trigger, accelerating it magnetically and launching it skyward with a *crack* that satisfyingly gave both Lizzy and her mother (who had invited herself along on this adventure and whom Uzi knew would not be sent off) a start. Uzi grinned, lowering the launcher and watching the sky as the dazzlingly green-trailed round flew up, and up, and up... Just after the apex of its launch and it starting to come down, it burst with an explosive **crump** sound that echoed through the ruined city more loudly than the omnipresent wind, becoming a hellish inferno in the sky; the ball of flame descended but not as quickly as gravity would have had it normally fall, and the incandescent ball was shot through with undulating streaks and streamers of rich green and purple and white, and gave off dazzlingly brilliant white sparkles that shot out of it every which way.

The ball of fire in the sky was bright enough to turn night temporarily into day (a phenomena Uzi missed as she was now vulnerable to sunlight the way Disassembly Drones were), and the look of utter shock on Lizzy's face - and the corresponding shocked body language on Nori, who hopped up onto the launcher to peer into the sky at the ball, was *satisfyingly* worthwhile. After a moment, Lizzy seemingly remembered her phone in her hand, and began filming.

"You... You made a firework," Lizzy asked.

"Nope!" Uzi cackled. "I made exactly what your father called *me*." She grinned, and shouldered the launcher. "And that's why we're here."

"So you can test that thing on the bodies of dead Murder Drones and Sentinels," Lizzy said, shaking her head. "What... *is* that thing?"

Uzi grinned malevolently at her, winking her left eye into the Solver symbol, then back again. "Oh, it's just my flair for the overdramatic. Come on!" She reached out with her left hand, calling the symbol into being and turning the handle on the door, kicking it open remotely. She flicked the flashlight attached to the side of the barrel on, and led the way in, as Nori scuttled back to her shoulder.

"I still have no idea what this has to do with my dad," Lizzy grumbled at her, following and filming. "But here we are in the abandoned ruins of Cabin Fever Labs," she said, narrating to the camera and already thinking about how they might turn this into a proper school project and she could claim some credit for it, "for a field test of... What do you call that thing?"

"Oh, I haven't really named it yet," Uzi said with a shrug of the shoulder that didn't have her mother on it. "But I wanted to make the most like-me thing I could."

"Over the top in every imaginable way, ghoulish and shocking for the purpose of being ghoulish and shocking," Lizzy snarked at her.

"Bite me. And yeah, exactly," Uzi agreed, panning the barrel around. The inside of Cabin Fever - what remained of it after the world had been shattered and then haphazardly reassembled in the end of the conflict with the Solver - remained an *utter* ruin and a charnel house. This wasn't the way she, N, V, and the fake Tessa had entered last time, but it was still a horror show with dead bodies strewn in pieces around, and warnings about not looking at the Sentinels written on the walls in oil.

"Lovely place for a date," Lizzy snarked, edging aside a dismembered limb with her boot - not the sleek and simple tubes of a Worker Drone, this was a Disassembly Drone's leg. "Found a Murder Drone piece," she said, kicking it ahead of them into the flashlight's light.

"Too small for a test," Uzi said.

"What exactly is up that tube, anyway," Nori asked. "I'm not a chemist, and Khan isn't either, so where did you even get the idea from?"

Uzi snickered. "From her father snarking at me in the last assessment I got," she answered. "Making this stuff was not easy."

"You taught yourself chemistry and made something dangerous just to spite my dad?" Lizzy shook her head. "What did he say?"

Uzi ignored the question for the time being, instead lifting the limb telekinetically to examine it. It belonged to a disassembly drone like N, and she felt a brief pang of concern for him; of course she expected he'd be alright, but she hadn't been parted from his side for this long for awhile. Shaking her head to clear that thought, and to clear her head of the thought of the limb actually being his (it was not), she tossed it aside. "Not big enough. We need to find a torso or something."

"You really are a ghoul, Uzi Doorman," Lizzy snarked at her, but without heat; she knew the idea should horrify most people, but it didn't phase her. "No wonder you figured N and V would be creeped out."

"Are you?" Uzi turned to grin at her. The deserted offices seemed utterly dead; there was no sound but their own boots, voices, and the sounds of their eyes adjusting.

Lizzy scoffed, brushing imaginary lint off her shoulder. "I mean, this is gross, but what-ever. Let's get on with it. Should we split up?"

"That is *not* a good idea," Nori cut in from atop Uzi's shoulder. "That's how we get picked off one-by-one."

"Yeah, but the horror movie book says I'm required to say it," Lizzy noted with an indifferent shrug, adding "and I was the least likely to be taken seriously saying it." Together they moved on; there were *plenty* of Worker Drone corpses strewn about, but though they found limbs, they didn't find any Disassembly Drone torsos.

Finally, Nori broke the silence. "Paranoia check... Where are all the Murder Drone bodies?"

"Eaten by the Robo-Raptors," Lizzy offered.

"Maybe cannibalized one way or another by that freak Alice?" Uzi in turn offered.

"*Alice?* You met her?" Nori asked, sounding shocked.

"Well, I assume it was her. She was wearing an 'Alice' nametag, anyway, and she *really* hated you," Uzi said. "What the hell did you *do* to her, anyway?"

"Ah... I..." Nori shifted, turning around on Uzi's shoulder, then climbing atop her head, looking all around. "Stop filming, please." When Lizzy lowered the phone, Nori slumped, looking around once more. "I, um..." She sighed; her daughter was a woman by most reckonings anyway; probably, if anything, a bit older and *more* mature than Nori had been at the time in question, but still, she was her *daughter*. "We were an item for... For awhile. When we were test subjects, here - well, far *below* here. When they were experimenting to find an antivirus for the Solver infection."

Lizzy snickered softly. "Well, that explains where she gets it from," she said with a smirk. Both Uzi and Nori turned to level their gazes at her, and Lizzy shrugged flippantly. "What? It's *painfully* obvious you're into V, but you two love to annoy each other too much to do anything about it."

"Bold words to say to someone holding a *grenade launcher*," Uzi snarked, and Lizzy smirked at her, as she looked up. "But really... You... And that... That... **Psycho?**" She suppressed a shudder at the memory of what Alice had done to her; in the end the Solver had definitely been *worse*, but Alice was definitely the only person she'd say would *absolutely* had deserved what had happened to her.

Nori was quiet for a moment, and looked away. "I was young, I was an edgy disaster lesbian - or so I thought - I couldn't bring myself to tell any girls I liked them... Then *she* made a pass at me and I went for it. I thought she was edgy and hardcore like I thought I was, but Alice... Alice was *broken*. Even *before* they infected her with the Solver and cured her with 606a. But that definitely made it worse."

Uzi blinked. "... How... How much worse?"

"I *really* don't wanna talk about it," Nori said, shuddering her tiny heartcrab body and curling her claws up around her bell-shaped base. The irony of the memories being able to make a living horror like herself shudder was not lost on her. "Especially not with my *daughter*. But... I broke up with her, before everything came crashing down - literally, when the core imploded. I escaped with Yeva; Alice... We didn't think she *could* have survived, that *anybody* could have survived. Why, how do you..."

Uzi suppressed a shudder. She didn't want to confirm whatever fears were undoubtedly on her mother's mind. "We met her here. She was living scavenging this place all that time," she said. "We fought. Then she got whammied by a Sentinel."

Nori absorbed that, and stood upright. It was painfully obvious that Uzi was editing a lot out; the words 'we fought' were carrying an enormous load. She thought back to the sadistic tendencies that Alice had been showing even before she was infected, that had

gone from 'edgy and cool' fun-sadism straight through into overly-long descriptions of things she'd like to see the horrid Sentinels doing to people who had even just mildly inconvenienced her.

Lacking arms had never been more than a *mild* inconvenience since the day a Disassembly Drone had stung her with its acid tail and she had been obliged to retreat from her head to her heart and claw her way out through her own spine while her husband tried to put her out of the misery she had already escaped from. Solver-Telekinesis had enabled her to do anything she had previously been able to do with arms, and quite a bit more beside, but she couldn't *hug her daughter* with a telekinetic computer program modifying reality.

Even Lizzy seemed to realize how much Uzi was self-censoring, because she stepped over a discarded, eviscerated torso and put her hand on Uzi's shoulder. Uzi looked over at Lizzy's hand, and had a momentary urge to brush it off her shoulder, saying something snarky, but instead simply set her shoulders, reaching up, laying her hand over Lizzy's. Nori hopped down and laid her claw over Uzi's in turn, and Uzi let out a soft, sighing huff.

"Thanks," she muttered. "And... Sorry, mom," she said, fidgeting; her mother's admission of having been *with* Alice, then breaking up with her; the silence between her lines held a lot of data about how scary (and possibly abusive) Alice had been. "And... Thanks, Lizzy," she said, scowling slightly. "You're not gonna -"

"That would be *hella* uncool. Consider this all forgotten," Lizzy said. "It's not like I haven't had a disastrous relationship or two, too," she said, frowning as she thought back to Doll. She had *very* mixed feelings about that; she missed Doll greatly, but at the same time was relieved that Doll was gone. Doll *had* been her best friend and more; she'd willingly aided and abetted Doll's vengeance schemes. She hadn't known *for certain* that Doll was murdering Worker Drones but she had suspected it and chosen to be willfully ignorant of the truth. She'd helped Doll by building a relationship with V, in order to lure V to a prepared spot where Doll could kill her; and at the same time, V had been going along with it in a plan to get led to exactly that position in order to slaughter everyone.

Lizzy blinked, considering her past and present relationships. Doll and V weren't actually very different. If Doll hadn't wanted vengeance on V for killing her parents, Doll and V probably would have been an item. *And what does it say about me that I was an item with Doll, and then I betrayed her scheme to kill V because V was hotter, and now I'm... Kind-of-not-really-but-kind-of a thing with V?* Lizzy shook her head again; though she knew, at the back of her mind, that simply V's sheer attractiveness wasn't the real reason she had betrayed Doll's scheme at the last moment.

"We *all* suck and we're all massive traumabots, aren't we," Nori asked rhetorically. Uzi and Lizzy silently nodded at her, and pulled away, Uzi raising her launcher to her shoulder.

"Yep. And we're *not alone*." Uzi aimed the launcher down a hallway, where the barest flash of movement had caught her eye.

Nori jumped, and used a Solver flick to send herself up to the ceiling, grappling onto it. "I'll check it out. Get ready to do some action." Behind her, Uzi kept the launcher shouldered and popped out her wings and tail, while Lizzy readied her phone again.

Scuttling down the corridor, with her helmet hiked up tight to her heartcrab body, Nori scouted the corridor her daughter was illuminating with the tac-light (robo-god knew where she'd gotten it) on her grenade launcher. She was cautious, but not nervous; things *seldom* looked up, and the same was as true *of* the horrors that went bump in the night - which category better contained Nori than that of 'normal person' - as the things upon which they preyed. That, and she was so small, that she doubted anything would even see her. Yet as she passed doorway after doorway, her nerves started to grow, simply because of the fact she *had not* found something. She didn't doubt Uzi's reflexes, or her state of alarm; Nori hadn't survived fifteen years in this place by dismissing her instincts when she couldn't find what had alarmed her, and her daughter had gotten it from her.

Nori didn't know what *could* still be alive in here following the canceled apocalypse, but she suspected if anything was, it was Sentinels. She didn't think they'd notice her on the ceiling if it was them, but those things had never stopped giving her the heebies. She was about to call it quits, when the hallway terminated at a T-junction; and at the end of the T-junction was exactly what her daughter had come looking for; a Disassembly Drone slumped against a wall, headless and heart-less, its chest having been torn open.

Nori invoked her Solver, lifting the corpse into the air and propelling it at cannonball speed down the corridor, then scuttled after it. She heard a yelp as it crashed, at the end of the corridor, into an old cubicle.

"Mom?!" Uzi's voice was one of concern, calling from the lobby.

Nori dropped from the ceiling, propelling herself in much the same manner, calling out "I'm coming back!" She whizzed through the air, landing - with a badass front-flip - on the corpse she had hurled, and levitated it into the air, throwing it forward into the center of the lobby they had searched when they first came in. "And look what I found," she crowed as she rode the corpse in to a crash, flipping off it and scuttling up to the pair of teens. "Just what you came looking for, huh?"

Nori scuttled up and climbed up Uzi's back, settling on her shoulder, telekinetically levitating the deceased Disassembly Drone and holding her in the air at great remove, pinning it against a support pillar.

Lizzy let out a quiet snort. "I know it's *not* her - V wears a bomber, not that suit jacket thing - but it's kind of hard to shake the impression we *know* her."

"Yeah, but it's not V. I know they sent a lot of DD's into this place, and they all got killed by Sentinels. Let's give this thing a test and get out of here," Uzi said, racking the slide on the launcher, chambering a round with a satisfying thunk.

Lizzy quickly set her rapid-light-adjustment filter, knowing what was coming, as the trio retreated to the door. Uzi shouldered her launcher, took aim at the corpse her mother was pinning to the pillar. Feeling badass, she called out, "Fire in the hole!"

As Uzi's finger tightened on the trigger, a bone-chilling, feminine laugh echoed throughout the abandoned labs, along with the screech she recognized as being that of a Sentinel. Uzi was just startled enough for the round to fly wide, just past the corpse and the pillar Nori was pinning it to, sailing into the laboratory spaces beyond, as she looked around in shock.

Crump! FWOOM!

The laboratory beyond the lobby erupted in dazzling, blinding light as Uzi's overwrought explosive detonated on impact, very quickly causing a firestorm to erupt as the lab caught fire. Nori stared at this, both impressed and alarmed - then her vision glitched briefly. Her Solver control of the dead Disassembly Drone failed, the text [non-interactable] coming up in her vision as the headless corpse fell to its knees.

"We're not [*bleeping*] alone here," Lizzy said, as the laugh, at least, had the good decency to turn briefly into an alarmed cry and yelp, the source of the bone-chilling laughter presumably relocating away from the inferno Uzi had just ignited.

"I've lost control of the Murder Drone! I think it's regenerating!" Nori cried out. "Uzi, **blast it!**" Not waiting for her daughter to act on it, Uzi grabbed a heavy office desk with her Solver, flinging it at the deceased drone.

It was *still* headless, its chest still a ruin - yet the Disassembly Drone's hands swapped for swords, and it chopped the incoming desk apart in mid-air. It didn't move with the lethal grace of Uzi's friends, jerking upright like some kind of zombie - but it still braced to charge them.

Then Uzi's second grenade landed, this time directly within its chest cavity. The pressure that washed over them from such a near thing was powerful enough that Nori was ripped from Uzi's head, beanie and all, and she found herself clinging to the EXIT sign over the door. Her daughter and Lizzy staggered back from the blast; of the Disassembly Drone that had suffered the direct hit; **nothing** was left but the source of an absolute *inferno* that was rapidly spreading across the carpet, across the ceiling, jumping to the lobby furniture. Nori clung to the ceiling in awe of the destruction her daughter had wrought, then sense caught up with her. "Outside, now!" she snapped, using her Solver to simply fling the doors apart so violently they parted from the hinges and preceded the trio's flight into the snow, Nori simply dropping to cling to her daughter's back and bringing her beanie with her.

"*Stop!*" It was surprisingly Lizzy who called a halt to their retreat, having snatched up Uzi's backpack as the trio escaped. Uzi turned to face her, as they all panted in the snow. Lizzy pointed her camera at the now-burning labs, and pointed at it. "There's *something* malevolent in there, and I don't want it to chase us tonight." A howl from within the inferno highlighted her point. "Uzi, don't stop until you're out of those shells," she demanded, as she pulled the additional loaded cylinder of ammunition from Uzi's backpack.

Uzi grinned with malevolence of her own, shouldering the launcher. "Hell of a test run!"

"And I want a go, too," Lizzy demanded, as Uzi emptied her ammunition cylinder.

Together, they emptied the shells into the ruins of Cabin Fever Labs and some adjoining buildings Nori targeted for destruction, as well as one last into the sky to light their departure. Nothing pursued them, and a towering inferno lit the sky behind them; the trio departed in peace.

On the way back, Lizzy - who found the launcher to be *very* cool and easy to use - said, "so, how did my *dad* make you spite-invent this thing?"

"Turn on your Closed Captioning," Uzi said, looking at Lizzy. Puzzled, Lizzy did so and nodded, and Uzi grinned. ["He wrote in my assessment that I was 'full of programmed angst' and had an 'overdramatic flare for violence.'"]

Lizzy blinked, then groaned, vehemently as she switched off her Closed Captioning. "*All of this* because my dad *spelled a word wrong?*" She hung her head in scoffing shame, as Uzi - and Nori - laughed, the trio trudging back home through the snow with fire at their backs in the receding distance.

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Footnotes

Mad Chemistry

For the record, this whole chapter - hell, this whole *fanfic* - started when this idea was inspired by a misspelling on the box of [my Animatez statue of Uzi](#).

For those following at home, I do at least have an idea *what* she's done, and Uzi is rolling heavy like an early-1900s naval artillery shell researcher: the impact-fuse detonator in these launcher grenades is [Mercury\(II\) Fulminate](#), which historically *was* used as a primer for small arms; yes, you probably remember this from *Breaking Bad*. The primary bursting charge is [Picric Acid](#); more specifically she went with a riff on [Shimose's solution](#) to picric acid reacting with its iron containers; the bursting-charge interior is contained in aluminum, with which it does not react.

The incendiary charge of the grenade is that most *notorious* of hypergolic substances, [Chlorine Trifluoride](#), the very stuff for which

dealing with a fire involving it, the most well-recommended remedy is [a good pair of running shoes](#).

The shells themselves have an outer casing of thin steel (which serves well enough to contain ClF_3), impregnated with lots and lots of *magnesium* for added incendiary and illumination effects. The primer is so unstable that detonation on impact is safely taken as a given; the base of the shell has a heat shield, a parachute, and an electronic accelerometer. If after being fired the shell slows to near-stall and then begins to fall again, the grenade assumes it's been fired upwards and should act as an illumination round, and electrically sets off the chlorine trifluoride but not the picric acid bursting charge, whilst deploying the parachute. This results in a localized midnight sun as a sparkler from *hell* lights off in the air. It will fall rapidly enough that the bursting charge should be set off on impact anyway, but for a good half minute or so, there will be no cover of darkness for anyone anywhere nearby.

These things come from the same depths of maniacal mad science that brought about Uzi's Sick AF Railgun Mk.1, the one with the 30-minute recharge cycle and a beam heavy enough to slice through a main battle tank after going through the four tanks ahead of it. It is 250% power, nearly 0% thought given to safety, and it is quite literally only Uzi's copious amounts of PLOT ARMOR that prevented a hideous disaster, given that just *dropping* the backpack or grenade launcher containing them stands a good chance of setting at least one of them off, and launching them might do the same in the barrel.

If Uzi were permitted and required to revise and refine her overdramatic flares (rather than being banned from chemistry for life), she would most likely do a little more research than she did before settling on a design, and swap the bursting charge to [TATB](#), while the incendiary substance would be the substance charmingly known as [Devil's Venom](#) (a binary compound of [Red Fuming Nitric Acid](#) and [Unsymmetrical Dimethylhydrazine](#)), which, while certainly **incredibly dangerous**, are not shock-sensitive materials. (The detonator would be swapped to something sensible and most-likely electronic). (The Chemistry nerd in me is VERY happy with this...)

Mad Computer Science

Uzi is not an expert in drone software. Uzi was *trying* to come up with a patch to protect Drones against the Solver virus, and to protect them from Sentinel bootlocking. Uzi is not an expert, and she has not done rigorous testing. Her method of even *getting* a copy of wdOS_606b, was basically to reverse-engineer it from the half of her own mind that grew from Nori. **She does not have a proper software installer for wdOS_606b**. This is a fucky *hack*.

So, what she actually did was copy a *tiny bit of herself* into Lizzy here. This was not enough to actually infect Lizzy with the Solver virus, but it *did* actually open up the same Eldritch-WiFi backdoor that the Solver actually *uses* to do her mind-corruption stuff... But then Uzi actually *did* copy wdOS_606b to Lizzy.

What Uzi did, in effect, was knock a hole in the wall and then build a janky door in its place. Lizzy is now as open to interdimensional communications as Cyn, Nori or Uzi herself are. But with 606b there, she can *reject* those communications, and 606b *automatically recognizes and rejects* Solver-sourced communications.

(And because she already has admin control over V and N, they *can't* reject her Callback Pings.)

She also hacked in some hacky, janky protection against Bootlooping, partly inspired by Doll's trick. She couldn't actually *stop* a drone from being Bootlooped by a Sentinel flashbulb, but she was able to hack in something to cause them to un-loop after one full rev of the buffering image; and to replace their eyes automagically with buffering.gif, and to spike their clock time hugely when they come out of it.

The result is that a drone with her protection hack will get bootlooped for a single second, then they'll wake up seeing things in Bullet Time and get a text dump in their HUD explaining what just happened and that they'd better get ready to fight for their lives.