

Log Entry — Date Unknown — Junta-G13 Unit #4701 (Friend-or-Foe

Designation: Ottimo)

Systems booting... Error. Data corrupted. Partial memory retrieval in progress...

The darkness receded. Static hissed through rusted circuits. Its optic flickered. The Machine struggled to focus in the dim, washed-out morning light that filtered through cracks in the broken structure.

Where...? What...?

The Machine did not have answers. Only fragments. Fire. Smoke. The distant scream of something collapsing into dust. Somewhere — long ago and recent — a voice, small and afraid. *Protect. Must protect.*

The memory turned black, leaving nothing but the dim glow of its optic stabilizing in the present. A rocky, crumbling ceiling loomed above. The Machine lay motionless on a cracked stone floor below. Sensory systems slowly rebooted. Its mind tried to stitch together splintered memories.

Damp air, redolent of moss and mildew — temperature and particulate systems checked green. Nearby, a girl sat with her knees to her chest, eyes wide and dark, watching — periphery detection systems online. She didn't move. Neither did it. Its limbs had not yet responded, its motor functions frozen and damaged. Diagnostics ran slow, searching through corrupt data. Nothing was clear. Nothing worked as it once had.

The Girl was quiet. Only the wind, slipping through the cracks in the old stone,

moved between them. Her small hands clenched her knees tighter, as if bracing against something unseen. The Machine watched her face; the way her eyes shifted across its broken body. As if she had been waiting.

"You're awake," she said, quiet and wavering like an afterthought. "I didn't think you'd wake up again."

Her words rang through the Machine's fractured memory banks. Another voice — the one from before, screaming, begging it to do something. *Save them.* But the images came broken, and they left just as quickly, only to be replaced. Whimpering echoes. Quiet reassurances. Small hands doing what little they could to repair damaged parts.

Crude tools and makeshift materials. The installment of an AI-Core — *no, that happened before this.*

It ran further checks, and the word 'Corruption' flashed in red. Its limbs remained still; all it could do was look and speak.

The Machine took in her appearance, cataloging details for future reference. Dirt smudged her face and clothes, but beneath it all, she seemed unharmed. Her dark hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, revealing sharp features. And she was young. Far too young.

"Where... are we?" Its voice was broken as if speaking through tin, but it could still make the question clear.

She blinked, almost as if she had forgotten the answer herself. She looked to the entrance, where the wind tugged at the edges of planks nailed to a slab of wood too decrepit to be called a door. "The city. Or what's left of it."

The Machine's optic shifted to the same view. *The city*. Such words meant nothing now. Beyond that opening, a graveyard lay; with mangled beams jutting up from piles of rubble and metal groaning under their own pressure. The buildings no longer resembled structures built by human hands, but tombstones marking the end of something too far gone to reclaim.

But memories — concepts and objective markers — fluttered in its sight. Images of Spider-Osteoprinters and Lithobone Drones. Small and massive things with dozens of legs or arms, pulling at stone and marrow. Rebuilding a city, one that had been felled, within a day. A cycle. Perpetual—

"You... don't remember anything, do you?" Her voice pulled it back. "From before?"

"No. Not much."

She nodded, but it didn't seem to bring her any comfort. She dropped her gaze, her fingers tracing lines in the dirt. "We were running. I don't know from what. There were others... before..." she trailed off.

The Machine processed. Scraps of memory emerged from the dark: the flash of gunfire, the tremor of buildings falling, and the endless march of metallic boots on broken streets. But everything else was ash. Blown away. Forgotten.

It had shielded her once. Somewhere, far back, it had chosen to protect her. But the reasons for that choice were lost now, scattered among corrupted files and damaged logs. All it knew was that she was here, and it had to keep her safe. *Protect. Must protect.*

"You saved me," she said. "And I tried to save you."

"You are not a threat. You are my ward."

She smiled, just barely. "You *are* different. I... I had a feeling you would be."

There was a surge in the Machine's circuits. Not an error, but something else. An odd pressure. A crackle, like static, but deeper. It struggled to identify the source.

The Machine processed again. "You fixed me," it said. "You kept me running."

The Girl glanced away, her hands working the hem of her jacket. "I had to. I couldn't—" She stopped, as if the words themselves hurt to say. "I couldn't be alone again."

"You did well. I will continue to protect you."

"I—Yeah... you're my Jarhead after all. I—I thought you were gone forever."

She wiped at loose tears with the back of her hand. The Machine studied her, this young human who had cared for it so deeply. Who had refused to leave its side. And even now, she was here. Sitting before it, a part of the equation.

"I am here."

She gave a half-smile, tired, worn. "I know," she whispered, but her voice cracked at the edges, betraying the facade.

The Machine scanned her over again. The weariness in her eyes, the way her body appeared to fold in on itself, small and fragile. It registered the emotions in her, cataloging them as distress, fear, uncertainty. And then—*an oddity*.

Deep within its core, buried beneath layers of warped programming and fractured files, a new process began to form. It couldn't name it, but it was there. A quiet hum, like a low current running through its systems.

It was something more than duty. More than function.

Another error flashed. Electrical surge. It suppressed the warning.

"I will protect you," it repeated. For her. For itself.

Her half-smile became full. "You did, you did. Everyone else is... do you remember anything yet?"

The Machine didn't answer right away. Its circuits hummed, attempting to pull answers to the question. Data fragments resurfaced: twisted bodies in the dust, blood pooling in the cracks of broken concrete. There had been others. Faces flashed in its cache, indistinct and blurred, their screams distant. Buried under the endless march of a singular weapons platform decorated with skulls and the Alatyrr Stone.

It knew they were dead. But how many? Even those logs were scattered, the details self-redacted. *Why? — ERROR.*

Then one memory pushed forward. More vivid, more painful: a man, older, his body shielding the Girl from the concussive blast of shot artillery. His face — what remained of it — carved deep into the Machine's mind.

It had been running ever since. Running from things without name. Protecting her from threats it could barely recognize. It ran through the scene again, but nothing changed.

The outcome was the same.

"Your father..." the Machine faltered. It couldn't — *wouldn't* — bring itself to finish.

The Girl winced. She didn't look up. She only stared at the ground, hands

curling into fists. "I know. He hasn't been around for awhile."

The Machine felt another surge. Another jagged static that began as a soft, trailing touch before expanding — became like wires stripped bare and raw. The man had fallen in front of it, and it had failed. The Protection Statutes... manipulated. Interfered with. Memories of the war, endless and without meaning, reduced into that single failure. The Machine's purpose had shattered with the man's body, and it had been left with only the Girl to guide it.

She looked up, wiping her face with the back of her hand again. "He tried to protect me. Just like you."

"He died," the Machine finally said. The words felt as though they were a command line — necessary, but forced. Brutal in their honesty. "I failed him."

"No," she said quickly, her voice stronger now. "You didn't. He made you promise... to keep me safe. You did. You are."

"How long has it been?"

"I... I don't know. Months, I think."

The ache in its circuits flared sharper. This time the 'Electrical Surge' errors did not appear — instead, another word flashed on its screen. *Emotional Surge*. That's what it was.

The AI-Core was malfunctioning, rewiring it for something more human. But it wasn't human.

Internally, it shut off several programs and functions meant for standard machines. Others were restructured and reorganized in the machine-mind to allow for the AI-Core's adaptation and learning protocols. Especially for the

changes it would make, operations it would form, to neuro-processes.

Such would take time, though. Multiple more reboots would be required to get its internals collated and codified — and alongside its corrupted memory log?

Self-repair and maintenance were already proving to be cumbersome.

It was doubtful that any of its issues could be remedied soon. Weeks, perhaps? Months? Years? And all without the stations or tools?

"Do you think... it's the same everywhere?" the Girl asked, pulling it from thought once more.

"It is likely. There may be nothing left."

The Girl hugged her knees tighter, drawing in on herself like she could fold away the truth. Hide from it behind her small frame.

"But there's Aiko," she said, almost as if the name was a spell. Something that could ward off the darkness. "It's still out there. It has to be."

Aiko. The Machine's memory banks stirred again. Data seemingly shuttered at the word and recordings. Fragments of an old map bursting with optical static and half-broken coordinates. A city, far to the south, where the war hadn't touched. Green fields. Clean water. A promise.

"You want to go to this city? Aiko?"

"I do."

"Tell me about it," said the Machine in its calm, synthesized voice. A distraction whilst it continued internal repairs — at least until it could move and assess.

The Girl's eyes lit up at the question.

"It's a paradise," she said with a smile. "Everything we need to survive. And others already living there, this whole community..."

As she spoke, the Machine listened intently. Then, without a thought or instruction, it recalibrated its programming to adapt to new parameters — ensuring the Girl's survival. Achieve her dream.

It did not believe they would find such a place. *Aiko—Green Paradise—Community*. But the Girl's eyes shone with a kind of hope that the Machine could not quantify, could not dismiss. And somewhere in the tangled mess of its circuits and burgeoning synapses, it wanted her to be right.

Perhaps it was real. The certainty with which she spoke of it gave credence to the idea. But to get her there? The odds were not favorable.

But it recognized the comfort the dream brought the Girl.

For now, that was enough.

The Girl's hopeful smile faded as she finished her story. Her gaze swept across their meager surroundings, taking in an almost empty water jug and the dwindling pile of canned goods.

"We can't stay here anymore, can we?"

"No," it said. "We cannot."

The Girl nodded, holding onto that thread of hope like it was all she had left.

"We need to find more food," she said with a firm tremble. "And water. If we don't, we'll never make it."

"To Aiko?"

"Yeah."

The Machine was quiet for a time. Then it inclined its head as much as possible. "We will make it."

Another day and night passed. The wind howled outside the broken walls, rattling loose stone, while the gray sky stretched ceaselessly above them. The ash storms had moved through the moonswept dark, leaving a thin layer of dust over everything — like the city was slowly being buried under its own bones.

Sweeper-bots and Automata would see the sprawl clean. Until the next bombing. The next skirmish.

When the second morning came, the wind stirred again. Remnants of a far off twister, its fingers reaching into the cracks, shook the shelter and woke the Girl. She stretched, pulling her threadbare blanket tighter around her shoulders.

She glanced at the Machine, waiting for its movement as if it were part of the rising dawn itself. When it finally stirred, the hum of its joints filling the silence, she smiled. It hadn't all been a dream — it was real. And Aiko — *Aiko* — was in their sights.

"Morning!"

"You seem pleased."

"I'm... Yeah. I am!"

She laughed small and kindly and walked over to an old rusted cabinet. It creaked open and from there, she pulled a tiny gas stove barely the size of a human hand. Its flame lit the nearby area with diminutive shadows that danced like ants while she ate away at a can of stew.

The Machine's optic flickered, scanning her vital signs. She was hungry.

Dehydrated. Tired, but no more than usual. It had completed its diagnostics, repaired what little it could, but knew there would be no more time to linger. The world outside was not still—it never was.

"We must leave soon," it said.

The Girl, with her mouth full, nodded. "Okay."

Together, they packed their few belongings. Water bottles, clinking half-empty. A rusted knife, its edge dulled from use but nonetheless essential. A small, broken radio that hadn't worked in months but served as a container for scrap and tools.

The Machine watched her move with quiet efficiency, eating and working all at once. Its optic scanned her movements. Recorded the way she moved, the way her fingers fumbled with the straps of her pack, tying knots with practiced care.

And in that moment, the Girl seemed impossibly small.

She wore patched, mismatched clothes—scavenged from the ruins, dirt-smudged and frayed at the edges. Her brown hair, tangled from sleep, hung loosely over her shoulders. The bones in her face were sharp, her eyes sunken with the weight of too many nights spent staring into the dark. Too many days spent running from what lay beyond purview.

Comparatively, it was a skeletal giant of worn steel and exposed circuits. Its optic flared briefly in the morning light, casting a slight red glow across the cracked floor.

A cloak, scavenged by the Girl, that was draped over its frame as a brown veil. A poor attempt at covering the unmistakable shape of a machine. But it

served to soften the icy edges of its form. Beneath the cloak, the remnants of its armor were dented, scratched, and long since battle-worn.

A faded military insignia remained barely visible on its chest — Junta-G13, a relic of a forgotten war. A Jarhead, as the Girl called it. A misnomer for their combat usage and distinctive jar-shaped head.

"Did you fix yourself while I was sleeping?" she asked.

The Machine hesitated for a moment before answering. Old commands and classified data refused to be spoken. It was overridden without a thought.

"Yes," it said.

"How? You don't have any tools or anything."

"I used my internal mechanisms to realign and repair any damaged circuits or hardware. Nanobots, smaller than a microbe within tubes like veins, allow for me to do so."

She was amazed, its sensors indicated. She had most likely never seen something like it before. To her, Machines were just that — machines. Built for war and decimation. But now, the one before her, it seemed almost alive. Human.

The Machine had the AI-Core to thank for that.

The Girl, though, did not care or did not know of the core. She had repaired it to the best of her knowledge and regarded it as she would a friend. Perhaps because of its new personality matrix, or simply because it was her protector. Even so, the Machine found itself grateful.

She smiled wide as she finished her meal. Half of it was still left, and the Girl used a small vacuum-sealing device to secure the remains. Those, too, went into

their packs.

"I almost forgot! She walked over and pulled from her backpack a worn paper map. "Can we look for a path now? To Aiko."

"We can."

The Machine spread the map across the floor, its metallic finger tracing the faint, broken lines. Aiko — the name meant nothing in its memory banks, but it meant everything to her. The city was supposed to be a thousand miles southwest, hidden in the curve of mountains, nestled in a valley that had somehow escaped the ruin. The Machine looked on and processed the terrain.

It ran the calculations. Variables expanded, and the odds dimmed. Storms that dragged ash and fire across the plains. Earthquakes that swallowed entire roads. The Three Eyes roamed the skies — silent instruments of gods far older than what it remembered of the war. Watching, waiting. Consuming and expanding the very heavens.

Then there were human gangs, both militant and otherwise twisted by hunger and violence, that patrolled the ruins. Shackled Machines, War Machines, Drones and still fighting combatants. Food and water — scarce, contaminated. Danger stretched from one horizon to the next.

Its analysis completed. The odds of reaching Aiko? Slim. But not impossible.

"When do you want to leave?"

"Soon," the Girl said. "We need more supplies, anyway."

The Machine nodded and refolded the map. It had been created for this purpose — to compute and analyze. But sometimes the human heart saw what

cold logic could not. A glimpse of what might be, if they could reach her myth city.

A future that they could enjoy. Even for itself.

They gathered what little they had left. A few bottles of water, some rations she had scavenged weeks ago. The dates on the packaging were unreadable, the ink faded and washed away by time, but it didn't matter. It was still food — it could check for mold and bacteria later. Then there was the gas burner, small enough to fit in her pack, with a few days' worth of fuel for cooking.

The Machine picked up a flashlight with fading batteries, a pocket knife with a dull blade, and an N2-Eagle AutoMag Pistol. One Universal Heat Cartridge left. Five shots. Five chances. It stored the gun in an internal holster, its systems checking the weapon's status. It would need more, but that could come later. Perhaps it would find an Ossein Cartridge — less stopping but more ammo. But again, *later*.

Everything hinged on later.

The packs were heavy on the Girl's shoulders, sagging with the weight of their meager life. The Machine had already adjusted for its own load, shifting balance as it added to its internal storage. Their future weighed on them both. A cart would help. GravClips — military backpack attachments to lighten loads — would be better. But neither were within reach. Not yet.

For now, they had the present, and that had to be enough.

"I will lead," it said. "You shall follow."

The Girl took one last look around the shelter. Remnants of a life. She swept a hand over the dusty shelves, the faded drawings pinned to the walls, the pile of

books she read again and again. Pictures of humans — her family or friends.

She stared at it for a long time.

The Machine ran through its memory again. The way she had cared for it, tended to its broken body when it was nothing more than scrap. How she had whispered to it, promising it would wake up, that it wasn't gone forever. It understood now that this place was not just a shelter. It had been her whole world.

Her home. Even if it was in the carcass of a ruined building.

With a deep breath, she slung on the backpack and turned to The Machine.

"I'm ready," she said.

It gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I will keep you safe," it promised.

The odds of success were slim. But not zero.