

Her 0

Chapter 1

Tonight, I'd become obsolete.

Man, Zee, I thought to myself. When put that way, you really do sound like a computer program.

Fifty stories above New Dodge City, I crouched lower on the penthouse's balcony. A downpour of acidic rain melded with my sour mood, hissing and popping as it dissolved any exposed organic matter.

I wasn't ready to become obsolete. I was only sixteen years old! But it wouldn't do any good dwelling on the future. That sort of speculation belonged only beneath a hot shower.

Mmm, a hot shower.

I forced the idea from my head and focused on the penthouse full of criminals. I hadn't had time for a shower. I also didn't have any hot water at my apartment. I actually didn't even have an apartment, mostly because of what I'd done to my landlord's pet turtle, but that hadn't been my fault. Not entirely...

I took a deep breath, regaining focus. There was work to do tonight—justice to be served. And I was the only one who could do it—at least for a few more hours.

I studied the occupants inside the penthouse, clenching my fists as they ate, drank, laughed, and schemed. It was all too simple.

The hairs on my neck stood as something bright approached from my right.

I turned with raised fists, ready to sock whoever thought to sneak up on me. I was disappointed, though, as a small white cat approached. It stumbled and fell, revealing a long gash along its side. Its chalk-white fur was now soaked a deep, dark red. Bitterness boiled in my gut.

Who would do something so cruel?

No doubt the criminals I had come to keep tabs on.

I glanced at the occupied penthouse, then back at the cat. There was no saving the suffering creature. Not in this rain. Not in this uncaring world. And the acid was already eating through its fur and the flesh beneath. It was an excruciating way to die.

Unless I helped it.

I removed my glove and held out an exposed hand. The downpour singed my pale skin but I ignored the pain. Suffering was my burden to bear in our ever-progressing city.

But that didn't mean I enjoyed it.

With a soft exhale, I gently brushed the cat's face with the tips of my fingers. I savored touching something organic and warm. I just wished it didn't come with such a price.

The cat closed its eyes and lowered its head.

"Be at peace, little one," I said, hoping to sound compassionate. My deep voice probably sounded the exact opposite. Eon would have laughed.

The purring ended. The cat was gone. One brush of my hand and its suffering was over.

Terminated.

Maybe I should be happy to become obsolete. No more dealing out death.

I sighed and replaced my glove, fighting against thoughts of self-loathing. I wasn't a computer program, or a security system, or a death machine—despite what the news holograms might slander. Nope. I was simply a sixteen-year-old kid born with an unusual power. An ability many would kill for—which was ironic.

I turned back to the penthouse, trying to regain focus. That was when I saw her.

She passed on the other side of the glass, not noticing me. I scowled as she went by, wishing neither of us were here. But she had arranged the party tonight. *My* party, as she kept reminding me. I couldn't blame her for wanting to do it. She was my best friend.

She was also my opposition.

A preened black cat sat in her arms as she walked about the room. I couldn't help but think of the white cat, now lifeless beside me. Black and white. Opposites. Just like Eon and I.

One will thrive while the other survives.

And Eon did more than thrive. Her elaborate white dress and diamond ancillaries were proof enough of that. Rows of diamonds laced her platinum hair, crowning her as though with stars. Much of her onyx skin was adorned, leaving only her face, neck, and upper arms exposed.

I turned my attention to the other guests, hating how good she looked. Especially compared to me.

I tapped a console behind my shoulders, initiating my AR contact lenses. The crowd inside was growing. Blue outlines appeared around the men and women, bringing records and citations into my view. I couldn't help but give a low growl. They were all criminals. They were also my closest associates, which was why Eon had invited them. I didn't have the luxury of friends, so my old enemies had to suffice.

I continued to scan the congregation, noting the familiar faces. Mayor Bibbs, Lady Luxen, Dr. Philorodemy. They were all here, along with dozens of others. Tuxedos, sparkling dresses, expensive drinks—everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. What I wouldn't have given to punch some sense of morality into each one of them. Gloves on... or off.

But tonight I wasn't supposed to use my fists. I wasn't supposed to sulk and brood as I wanted. What I was supposed to do was smile and act pleasant. This party was for me, after all.

But I had no desire to go back inside. This was a forced retirement. A slap in the face after all the work I'd done over the past four years.

I spread my palms and inhaled. The moist air smelled of a putrid, salty brine. An effect of the discarded waste and refuse that hissed and popped in the rain. The smell was stronger than usual. Had this been my first night out, I definitely would have barfed. I almost did anyway, but due to a non-existent dinner, there was little left in my gut.

I focused on my targets within the penthouse. So many felons in one place. It felt too... coordinated. Most were tied to heinous schemes from over the years—some as recently as six months. Well, I should clarify. They were accomplices in *attempted* crimes. My fists had managed to get in the way, taking out their former bosses just as I had the suffering cat.

I'd been more gentle with the cat.

Eon continued through the room, laughing and greeting the criminals with gloved hands. I again grimaced at the contrast of our outfits. My usual baggy, cargo pants and hooded, carbon fiber jacket were nothing compared to her dazzling dress and sparkling hair.

The only thing similar between our attire was our gloves. I glanced at hers again. Elbow length, but the skin beneath the shoulder was exposed. Impudent girl. She knew better than that.

We both did.

She carefully moved about the crowd, welcoming more guests, and laughing at their jokes. It made me sick. Didn't she realize who she was associating with? They certainly knew who she was and what she could do. Her gift was far more powerful, and therefore more dangerous than mine.

And while she was celebrated as a hero, I was seen as, well... a necessary evil. Which was why the city sought to replace me with their own, more approachable guardian.

My eyes were drawn behind her, toward the center of the large, open room, where stood an archway covered in blue satin. That was my replacement. A new AI that was said to be perfect.

But I knew it would only be second-rate. The best AI already existed, and I owned it.

My wet pocket buzzed and I slapped it with my gloved hand.

“What did you find, Mo?”

A digital rendering of a greasy garage mechanic, overweight and unkempt, yet brilliant, appeared in my view, projected through my contact lens. It was Datamonger—Mo for short—my only *real* friend in the world.

“Not sure yet, kid,” he growled in my earpiece. “Can’t trace a single weapon on any of them. No indications of poisons. Not even a butter knife.”

I frowned. Someone inside was armed. I was certain of it.

“Keep searching,” I said. “This opportunity is too rich for someone not to see it. We could quickly have a gang war if things go sour...”

“On it. I’ll reroute the tra—” His voice cut out as the rain fell harder.

“Mo?” I slapped my pocket again. No answer. I reached behind my neck to the console on my upper back and tapped Mo’s main chip. “Datamonger, can you hear me?”

“Sorry, kid,” his voice cracked through the static. “I’ll reroute my scanners to see what comes up. The rain is slowing me down, though.”

I nodded. My connection with Mo hadn’t been reliable during downpours. It was a new bug that neither of us could remedy. And there was no controlling the weather.

Tonight’s rain meant I could easily be on my own in an instant. And that would be disastrous—not just for me, but for everyone inside that building.

Including Eon.

“I’ll reserve power for now,” I replied. “Ping me if you find anything.”

I slapped my pocket to end the call. Keeping a constant line with Mo would only drain my already depleted batteries. It was smart to save for when I really needed him.

“And just how is that old AI doing?” a gentle voice asked.

I turned and my heart skipped a beat. Eon.

With a mischievous smile, she strode toward me, deflecting the rain with a white umbrella.

“Not telling you to run away, I hope? Dameon won’t like knowing his creation is encouraging hooky.”

I stared longer than I should have. Her sly grin caused a dimple to pinch one cheek, making my ears grow hot. I both loved and hated it when she smiled. Her cheerful countenance was an inverted reflection of my own permanent scowl. Her form had also matured over the last few years, and her soft curves opposed my angular frame.

But what drew me in most was her eyes. Those radiating citrines took me back to when we were kids, running through corn fields, chasing our imaginations. Back before our powers had been realized.

I should have been used to seeing her, as her image was plastered everywhere in the city as the most-loved person in the world. But the electronic billboards and holograms never did her elegance justice.

I swallowed hard as she approached. She must have been upset that I hadn’t come back inside to the party. A party she’d planned for me, without my permission. I would have declined, which was why she hadn’t asked.

I loathed those people, but I loathed even more that Eon chose to associate with them.

“You shouldn’t go back in there,” I said, pointing at the penthouse window. “Do you know how many of them have tried to kill me? I have the scars to prove it. Knife wounds, bullet holes, electrocution burns, traces of rare poisons, you name it, I’ve had it. And all from the people you convinced to toast me.”

“Good thing we can’t die, I guess,” she shrugged.

I scowled back. “We don’t know that. And I feel every ounce of the pain. Do you know how much a broken femur hurts?”

“I’m sure at least a dozen people in there could tell me.”

More like two dozen. “I only fight them because they won’t listen to words. They’re criminals.”

“They *were* criminals. Thanks to you, they’ve all been reformed. Shown the errors of their ways.”

I rolled my eyes. She always saw the best in people. Of course, she did. That was who Eon was. I, however, disagreed in every way possible.

“Those people are greedy morons who would light the world on fire to get what they want.”

“Well then good thing it’s raining.”

I scowled and turned toward the city. These arguments never went anywhere. Our opposing views were exactly why both of us were essential for humanity’s survival. At least, that was what we’d been told by our former mentor.

Every *One* needs her *Zero*.

Humanity seemed to have other plans. I glanced back at the draped archway inside the penthouse. A new protective AI system. My replacement. Incorruptible. Perfectly just. A better version of me.

I wasn't ready for that.

I clenched the balcony's wet railing, drinking in the city's neon lights. Skyscrapers and smokestacks loomed above me, painting the night sky with dark clouds painted pink, purple, green, and blue. To think that only five years ago this place had been little more than another rural town in the middle of nowhere. Now it was the largest city in the nation, having just surpassed Revised New York. The furious progress had brought massive amounts of pollution with it, causing new problems like deadly acidic rain.

But this was still my town. Yes, it had grown rapidly under Eon's guidance, but *I* was the one who kept it from overgrowing.

"I was impressed, you know," Eon said, taking a spot beside me. "I expected a fight within the first handshake. You made it through the whole crowd, never once losing your cool."

I nodded. I had expected a fight to break out, too. It had taken all my self-control to refrain from twisting each hand and forcing its owner to the ground. Somehow, I hadn't even balled a fist. It was a true accomplishment.

The glass door behind us opened, and an oily voice called through the air. "There you are, Darling."

I turned and scowled. Dameon strode toward us, wearing a sleek tuxedo and polished shoes. His thick black hair peaked upward above a pointed face and chiseled jaw. You would have never guessed how much of a nerd he was by his looks.

But he was also our oldest friend.

Well, former friend.

He stopped beside Eon and placed an arm over her exposed shoulders. “You’ll get a chill out here, Love. Everyone is wondering where you went.””

My hands clenched the rail tighter, bending it. So much for not making a fist.

“Just a few more minutes, Dame,” she replied. “I’ve got to get grumpy pants here to come back inside.”

Dameon turned and nodded to me. “I know this isn’t what you wanted, Zee, but you must realize it’s going to make your life better, too.”

I scoffed and turned back to the city. He was right, but I still didn’t like it. Or him.

I hadn’t always hated the guy. This was a new development, like the rain affecting my link with Mo. He was our same age, and we’d known him most of our lives. The lanky, shy, hunched-over kid with glasses had grown up to become one of the most influential programmers in the city. His systems had made him billions of dollars, giving him everything he could ever want.

But I didn’t care how rich he was. Nor did I care how smart he was. Heck, he had created Mo for me, and I’d never complain about that.

No. What I didn’t like was how much time he spent with Eon. It was changing him, unnaturally so. The scrawny kid was now bulkier and heavier than most bodybuilders. And he knew it too, judging by how tight his tuxedo was on him.

It felt like he was trying to compete with me, which was also why he’d made this new Security AI to replace me. I just couldn’t understand why. The guy had everything.

Including the girl I cared about more than anything.

“I’ll give you five minutes,” Dameon continued, kissing her on the cheek. His body quivered with the contact, almost like he’d been shocked as a fresh dose of Determination filled his body. Whatever he was trying to accomplish, he would find a way to get it done. No matter the cost.

“Then I demand you both come back inside. We’re about to start up the program.”

Eon nodded, beaming. Of course, she would agree with him. They were dating, after all. Well, basically dating. Eon always denied it, but I preferred to call a spade a back-stabbing knife whenever it fit.

Dameon left, and I released my fists. I so wanted to fight the guy, but it wouldn’t be justified. He was as clean as they come, never once breaking the law. The guy even drove five under the speed limit! Well, his self-driving car did, but he was the one who programmed it.

Eon walked beside me, the top of her head coming just below my shoulders. Apart from Dameon, I was taller and broader than most in the city. Maybe too big. It was hard to find clothes that fit. But I didn’t have a choice. My size and strength were an insurance the city couldn’t go without.

Eon stopped beside me and the tingling aroma of jasmine cut through the rain. “Why do you hate them so much?” she asked, pointing inside the penthouse.

“One of us should,” I replied, flexing my back to maintain my composure. It was all I could do to keep myself from pulling her into my arms in an attempt to protect her from the dangers of our world.

But her only real danger... was me.

I caught another whiff of her perfume and scowled. Did she have to stand so close?

“Let the local authorities handle the bad guys for once,” she said, moving her hand along the rail closer to mine.

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh sure, once you inspire them to do their job better.”

She snorted. “No, you won’t. You like what you do too much. Besides, the reason they don’t do their job is because you keep doing it for them. Stop and take a night off, then they’ll realize they’re needed again.”

I leaned forward, looking at the busy street below. I was also hoping to get away from her intoxicating smell. “A night off? And do what?”

She placed a delicate finger on my gloved hand. The insulated contact froze me in place.

“Spend time with an old friend,” she suggests. “It won’t kill you.”

I scowled and turned away, freeing my hand beneath hers. She was flirting with death. We both knew how dangerous a single touch between us could be. Any contact with my skin and, well... we weren’t sure what would happen but we knew it wouldn’t be good.

“It might kill you, though,” I replied, checking that both my gloves were secure.

“We don’t know that,” she said, that same mischievous grin on her face.

“Shouldn’t you be with your boyfriend?” I ask, pointing through the glass at Dameon. He was smiling and waving at the guests as they formed a circle around the draped archway. I wish I’d shaken his hand earlier—gloves off.

She rolls her eyes. “He’s not my boyfriend... he’s only my favorite.”

“Uh-huh. One that takes you out to dinner every night.”

“Have you been spying on me?”

I grunt in response. The truth was I had been spying on her. But only to know who she’d been inspiring, as that often brought calamity with it.

“Sulk, sulk, sulk. Don’t you ever get tired of brooding?”

“We can’t all be Miss Sunshine.”

That struck a chord. “And here I was, hoping to check on a friend. Aren’t you at all happy about tonight?”

The way she said *friend* pierced my chest. We were barely friends, though. Nothing more. And we never could be, no matter how much I wished. “Sorry to disappoint.”

I turned around to focus on the people inside. They were about to unveil the new system. My time was almost over.

Beside me, I noticed her breathing had grown louder. I frowned. She had every right to be upset. Setting this up took a lot of work, and I was acting ungrateful. But I had never wanted it, and she had never asked.

I wished she would hit me, make me feel sorry for being a jerk. But, again, any contact with my skin could be catastrophic for us both. We weren’t sure what would happen. Both of us could die, or, worst case, only she would terminate. My heart jolted at the thought.

“What about Mo?” she asked, forcing a change of subject. “How is he handling it?”

I sighed. The new AI was a sore spot with Mo. “He still doesn’t think it’s real. I don’t know why, though. Dameon created Mo, so why couldn’t he make another?”

Eon pursed her lips while fingering something in the sash around her waist. At last, she sighed and removed her hand, empty. I could have sworn I’d seen the shape of a computer chip, about the same size as Mo’s.

“Well, I doubt this AI will be as proficient as he is,” she continued. “Mo is special, though perhaps not unique.”

“Not unique?” I asked, again wondering what was tucked inside her sash. “What does that mean?”

She shrugged and turned, then her shoulders dropped. Dameon was waving us both in. I felt a thrill for a moment. For once she didn’t seem thrilled to go be with him.

“All right, fine, we should go back,” she said. “Come on. Your retirement is waiting.”

I wasn’t sure how her powers worked on me, but I knew that resisting her when she asked me to do something felt impossible.

Even if it meant following her to her boyfriend.

I turned after her, hoping the next few moments would pass in a flash.

To my surprise and alarm, that was more or less what happened.

As Eon approached the door, a deafening blast erupted behind the glass. Before I could react, the explosion engulfed Eon.

Just before everything went dark, I realized something.

Mo had missed this. The building had been rigged to explode, and he’d missed it.

For once in his existence, Mo had failed.

Chapter 2

“Zee?” Dameon’s voice called, sounding far away. “Zero, can you hear me?”

I opened my eyes. A bright room swirled in and out of focus. I clenched my eyes shut again, willing my head to stop spinning.

“Oh good! You’re awake!” Dameon said. “I was worried you wouldn’t come to.”

I kept my eyes shut. His suave tone from earlier was gone. He genuinely sounded worried.

I opened my eyes again and this time my surroundings remained stationary. Only I didn’t recognize anything around me. Plastic curtains formed four walls around us, with a large

spotlight hiding the ceiling above. Cardboard covered the ground, hiding whatever floor lay beneath. Only Dameon was with me. There was no sign of anyone else.

My arms and legs were spread out, secured by thick white cuffs against what looked like an arched wall. The restraints held me in a standing position, with clamps around my waist and legs doing most of the support.

I scowled at my imprisonment. I had no idea where I was or who had done this. For all I knew, we were miles away from the penthouse.

I pulled on my arms, hoping to break the restraints. They wouldn't budge.

"It's no use," Dameon said, nodding to a pair of simple handcuffs attached to his chair. "The masked men said those cuffs are powered by your gift. The more you try to fight, the stronger their hold becomes."

"They?" I asked, not understanding. "Who's they? What happened?"

"It's my fault," Dameon said. "I should have known there would be a plot against the new AI. Someone didn't want it released. The blast destroyed everything."

A blinding light. An explosion. The memories swam back into my mind. It had happened right as I'd tried to re-enter the penthouse with Eon.

Eon.

"Where is she?"

Dameon dropped his shoulders and sighed. "I don't know. She was with you, last I saw her."

I stared him down, trying to judge his sincerity. Some people only cared about what they got from her. I was glad to see Dameon was at least saddened that she had been caught in the blast.

I took a deep breath. "She'll be all right. She can't die, after all."

"But you two can feel pain, right?"

I winced at this. I hated the idea of her in pain. I decided to change the subject. "And the others?" Not that I really cared. But Eon would.

"Probably dead. Most of them, at least," Dameon said.

I pursed my lips. The city would be better off without most of them, no doubt about that, but part of me felt sorry for them. What if Eon had been right? What if they hadn't been criminals anymore?

I shook the feeling away. I didn't have time to mourn. Someone had planned this attack. But who? Mo might have had an idea.

Mo.

A nagging feeling told me I was forgetting something about him. Had I forgotten to tell him something?

Reaching him might help me remember.

I pulled against my arms, trying to reach my pocket. The cuffs wouldn't let me budge. "I need to contact Mo. He might know who did this."

Dameon nodded. "Aren't you always in contact with him?"

"Not tonight. If you can tap my right pocket, that should connect me to him."

"Gotcha," he said, raising his foot with impressive coordination. He brought it down on my leg with a firm tap.

I waited for Mo's voice. Nothing came.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"Try again."

Dameon tried again with the same admirable agility as before. Again, nothing happened.

My contact lenses still worked, and a battery display showed enough juice to connect. So why wouldn't Mo answer?

"Kick it harder," I said, getting frustrated.

He swung his foot down again--this time, with enough force to bruise my quad. Man, the guy had built up some serious muscle over the last few months. He was not the scrawny dweeb he used to be.

Again, Mo didn't answer.

"Why won't he pick up?"

"Your signal must be jammed by someone."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's the rain. It's been interfering with our connection."

Dameon raised an eyebrow. "The rain?"

I nodded, but he still frowned, uncertain.

"What?" I asked, annoyed by his face.

"It's just that, the rain never interferes with other coms. And when I programmed him, I never saw any blockage."

A sinking feeling dropped in my gut. I realized how odd it seemed. Neither Mo nor I had understood it, nor had we found a way to fix it as we blamed it on the weather. So we had gotten used to it. Too used to it, apparently.

"Well, it's blocking me now," I sighed.

Dameon pursed his lips and tapped his foot, eyes focused on something behind me.

I wished he hadn't done that. I hated it when brainiacs like him thought in silence. Share with the class, please. "What is it?"

“It’s just that,” he began, choosing his words carefully. “It’s odd, isn’t it? A plot to take down a new AI, and Mo gives you no warning about it, claiming the rain has blocked his connection. Now he won’t answer your call.”

“And?” I shrugged, but the sinking feeling was growing stronger.

“Well, I’ve been puzzling over who would make such a bold attack tonight. Who would want to destroy the AI? My immediate suspicion was someone in the room with us... except they were all searched before entering. No one had anything even remotely dangerous on them.”

I nodded as the pain in my leg still stings. *Your foot should be considered dangerous.*

“So, with them ruled out, what other entity could plan the attack?”

“Are you saying Mo is behind this?” I asked, wishing he would make his point.

Dameon raised his palms. “It ticks the boxes for motive and ability.”

“No. Mo would never do something like this. You should know that. You programmed him.”

“I programmed *most* of him. There’s still that part of his code I don’t understand, nor how it seemingly appeared on its own.”

I smiled at this. Yes, Mo’s soul was what I call it. It was what set him apart from all other programs. And up until tonight, he had been the only true AI in the world because of it.

“I thought you figured it out?” I asked. “You made another one.”

Dameon frowned. “Only, that one was blown up.”

I nodded. Whoever had done the attack had destroyed the new AI. Now it was my turn to think. Who’d go after an AI like this? All the city had been excited about it. I hadn’t heard one negative review... except for the ones from Mo.

A wave of realization collided with my gut. Mo had been relentless in his negativity toward the new AI. He'd claimed it wasn't even real. Was that out of jealousy?

My head started to spin again. Was Mo behind this? Was he somehow jealous of the new AI? His soul did make him do odd things now and again. Human-like things. But would it make him jealous?

"But, why would he trap me?" I asked, again trying to free my arms and legs. "What does he gain?"

Dameon nodded. "It could be that he wants to do things without you. Or force you to do things his way. He might wish to reverse the role of master and servant."

The thought stank. I had never considered Mo a servant. Had I treated him like one?

Dameon continued. "And to create a trap that works against your powers would take a lot of research. That person would have to know you as well as you know yourself."

This made sense. No one understood my powers better than Mo. Maybe he was responsible for this... maybe, Mo had gone rogue.

"Well, if he has gone off the rails, there's no way to stop him."

Dameon grinned. "Not quite. I created an emergency kill switch in his initial chip. All you need to do is use your powers to terminate his chip and he'll delete himself."

I frowned. "He's downloaded on multiple servers. Killing the chip won't do anything."

"Don't be so quick to doubt my foresight," Dameon said. "I had worried something bad might happen, so I included a termination protocol. He will terminate himself if he can't detect the chip is intact and you're the one who destroyed it."

"And how do I do that?" I asked, nodding toward the console on my back. "I can't even reach it."

Dameon smiled wider. "I've always wanted to do this."

He suddenly leaped into the air and came crashing down on the chair. The chair breaks into pieces against the cardboard-covered floor, freeing him.

He scrambled to his feet and raced around me. His heavy hands pressed against my neck and then pulled. A small click sounded, and then he held a small, square chip in front of my face.

"Ta-dah!" he cheered. "Now, destroy it."

"How? My hands are covered. Unless you think I can headbut it."

He shook his head. "There's another option."

"Yes?"

"Your teeth."

"What?"

"Chomp it. That would do it, right?"

"You want me to eat Mo?"

He shrugged. "Or we never see the light of day again. Though, maybe you wouldn't mind that."

"Fine, fine. I'll do it. Just be careful—"

He brought the chip toward my mouth. "Careful not to touch your skin, I know."

I nodded and opened my mouth. Dameon slowly placed the chip onto my lower lip.

"Now bite."

I shook my head, gagging at the thought of tasting a greasy mechanic. Gross.

"Come on. We haven't got all night!"

"Here goes," I said bracing it between my teeth, trying not to taste it again.

Crunch!

I chomped down on the small rectangle, breaking it in two. Its little solder spikes pricked my tongue, tasting like sweat and oil, just as a real Mo would.

I gagged at the thought as a piece of me died. Mo had been my only friend for the last four years. Now he was gone.

If only he hadn't gone off the rails.

"Yes!" Dameon cheered, taking a breath and closing his eyes. "Well done."

I nodded and spat the remains of Mo's chip from my mouth. "Now how do we get out of here?"

"We?" Dameon asks, raising an eyebrow. "Who said anything about getting you out of there?"

"Very funny..."

It was at this second that I realized something was wrong.

"I say a lot of things," Dameon continued. "Few of which are true anymore. Isn't that right, Darling?"

He raised his hand and snapped. The plastic curtains around us flew up, exposing the rest of the penthouse. The balcony windows were broken and scattered across the floor, destroyed by the earlier blast, but the rest of the room appeared intact. Intact and still full of criminals.

Worst of all, Eon stood at the front.

Let me rephrase that. At the front stood Eon, gagged and held against her will.

Dameon walked to her, grabbed her by the chin, and pulled her face toward him. "I have so much to say thank you for, love. Truly couldn't have done all this without you."

My mind was reeling. Why would Dameon do this? Why go through the trouble of subduing me when I was about to become obsolete?

Unless...

“There is no AI to replace me, is there?” I asked.

Dameon turned to me, still wearing that awful smile. “Ding, ding! Of course, there isn’t. Creating that sort of AI is all but impossible. No system can think for itself and remain incorruptible.”

I searched for the chip now in pieces on the ground. *Mo*. Mo had been that sort of AI. Now he was gone.

“Ahh, yes, your little Datamonger,” Dameon continued, kicking the pieces across the floor. “He was the trickiest part of this whole plan. The only sure way I could keep you imprisoned was to get rid of him. And I can’t describe the pleasure of watching you destroy him yourself.”

I turned my head, unable to look at Dameon. He’d tricked me. He’d made me destroy my best friend.

“Uh, Boss, what do we do now?” Asked one of the men from the surrounding crowd.

Dameon turned to the crowd and spread his hands wide. “Whatever you like. The city is in your hands. Go make your futures bright.”

A buzz settled on the crowd, and then, as they realized they were free to leave, they all rushed for the exit. Eon was left behind, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Dameon chuckled as he watched them go, then turned to her. “Don’t cry, my sweet. They are, after all, only doing what you’ve inspired them to do.”

Tears continued to fall. Perfect tears from perfect eyes. If only I could stop all this.

“Why, Dame?” I asked. “Why do this?”

He turned to me and frowned. “Payback.”

“Payback? I never hurt you.”

He pointed out the window. "For them."

"Them?"

He nodded. "For the terror you bring to children in their sleep. For all the people who are too afraid to go out at night. For those who think their only chance for survival is to keep their heads down so you won't destroy them."

I hadn't expected this. But, then again, Dameon had everything money could buy, so I hadn't been sure what to expect.

"You, Zero, are the nightmare of this city," Dameon continued. "One I take pleasure in subduing. This city will finally grow as it desires. Fear will no longer keep us back."

I shook my head, disappointed. He wanted to see a world without me. He didn't realize how crucial my job was. "The city will destroy itself. Surely you realize this."

He shrugged. "You will not be our judge and jury. Our natures will lead us, and, as always, the strong will survive."

I shook my head. He didn't understand. With Eon still able to inspire, the city would overrun itself, like a forest with too many trees. It would burn itself down.

Dameon's frown turned to a smile. "Can you imagine my delight when I discovered a way to confine you with your own powers? The power of termination used against the terminator.

Genius, am I right?"

I turned back toward my shackles. The covered archway at the party wasn't the new AI. It was this metal prison that bound me, arm and leg. It hadn't been Mo. It was him. "So everything you said about Mo is a lie?" I asked.

He nodded. "Oh, the whole rain thing was also my doing. Despite your best attempts, I do know all your *hidden* communication towers. I needed a way to stop you from communicating

with him from time to time, so I blocked you whenever it rained. And to my delight, you both fell for it.”

I scowled. Why hadn’t we tried to discover why the coms cut out in the rain? If we had, we could have avoided all of this. But we never had considered Dameon. He’d always been as straight as a dataline. Or he *had* been, until tonight.

“I should have known someone was blocking us.”

“But you didn’t. You and that second-rate AI were no match for me.”

I dropped my shoulders, crestfallen. Dameon was right. Mo and I were no match for him. At last, I’d been defeated.

Eon choked on one of her sobs. “Second-rate?”

Dameon turned to her. “Yes, darling. Haven’t you been listening? I’ve won, and your friend here has lost.”

Eon wasn’t listening. She was thinking, and her hand went back to her sash. Something heavy occupied her mind. I could only hope it was a way out of here.

She slowly stood, then began walking toward me, still holding something in the sash around her waist.

“You can’t free him, love,” Dameon said, sighing. “He’s locked by his own powers.”

She glided toward me with her usual grace. I swallowed hard as she came within reach. The smell of jasmine cut through my senses.

“Eon,” Dameon growled. “Come back and enjoy my victory with me.”

She stopped and turned her head over her shoulder. “I just want to see the defeat in his eyes.”

“I suppose that’s fine. He’s completely helpless.”

She continued forward, pulling something small and rectangular from her sash. Her eyes had a longing look, as though she was about to do something she'd wanted to do for a long time. Still, she came closer. Dangerously close.

Her jasmine perfume was swallowed up by the smell of her breath. Peppermint. A warmth flooded my chest as her face inched closer, and closer.

No. Don't. Please don't do it.

I tried to pull back. We hadn't been this close in years. If she got any closer, she might...

She placed her hands on my shoulders and pulled herself up, that longing look only growing.

"I hope you know you were always my real favorite." Eon smiled, just inches from my face. "Say hi to Mo for me."

Then, she grabbed the back of my head and pulled me in for a long-dreamt-of kiss.

Chapter 3

"Eon, no!" Dameon yelled.

Her soft lips were already pressed against mine. For a fleeting instant, I was absorbed in a spectrum of blinding emotions. And in the center was a calm sunrise of warmth. For once in the last four years, I finally felt peace.

Then, all too soon, the feeling was torn away. Her arms went limp. My heart followed. She fell to the floor, never to move again.

Terminated.

Dameon raced to her body, showing the fear I felt. He shook her. Nothing. Shook her again.

She didn't move.

Finding it futile, he stood and kicked her side. I growled at him like a lion defending a lamb, writhing against my bonds. They cut the skin around my wrists, but I didn't care. He'd pay for disrespecting her.

"A worthless sacrifice," he said, turning away. There was no sadness in his tone. The part of him that had once cared about her had been completely overrun by greed. "Her power is already mine. I have no further use for her."

I turned back to her, wishing to do something. Cradle her. Protect her. But what good would it do? She was gone. And I didn't get to say goodbye.

Say hi to Mo for me.

Her words repeat over and over again in my mind. She must have thought we'd both die. But I hadn't. I was still here, more alone than ever.

A soft static noise filled my ears as my blood pounded. Whether he had cared for her or not, I couldn't help but glare at Dameon. This was all his fault.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Dameon said as a small computer sprang up from the floor. He began typing quickly. "She isn't worth the heartache. She was only good for one thing. You'll see."

I looked back down at Eon. Her beautiful face, eyes closed, full mouth curved up in a smile. A smile? Had she wanted to die?

I strained against the cuff around my right wrist. To my surprise, it suddenly hissed and then opened. My arm was free.

Dameon looked up from his computer, mouth ajar.

"How did you—"

The cuff around my left ankle hissed and fell like the other, freeing my foot.

Dameon blinked several times. I wobbled in place, then flexed my core to stabilize myself with my two still-secured limbs. What was going on? Why were the cuffs falling off?

I looked back at Eon. That smile. It wasn't her usual smile. There was something deceptive about it like she had known something no one else did.

Dameon stepped toward me, still dumbfounded.

"Bugs," he said. "Always bugs with the launch of these things."

Something soft brushed up against my ankle. I looked down and saw the black cat Eon had been holding earlier. Its tail was brushing the skin beneath my pulled-up hem.

The feeling of its soft fur tickled. I scrunched my face to ignore it, then realized something wasn't right. The cat had touched my leg. My direct skin.

The static in my ear got louder.

I shook my head. Something *was* wrong. That cat should have been dead. But there it was, still brushing up against my leg.

I turned back to Eon. She had died from touching me, but somehow I was still alive. At least, my body was. But it felt different... I felt different... almost like I was normal.

Realization dawned on me. Without a One, a Zero wasn't needed. My ability was off.

"No, Dameon," I called to him, now understanding why the cuffs had fallen off. "I don't think you understand. You see, without her, we are all ordinary. All of us. Myself included."

The cuff around my left ankle hissed and fell, leaving me hanging only by one arm. I continued to strain to stay in place, forcing myself not to swing back and forth.

Dameon's eyes grew wide. "That can't be! You were isolated incidents!"

So much for being a genius.

“That's where you're wrong. We were inverted from each other. We balanced the world together. Without her, my power is nothing.”

The cuff around my left wrist hissed and fell. I landed on the floor and slowly stood.

“I'm not a Zero.”

Dameon reached to the side of his computer and pulled out an electrogun. I cringed. Without my power, I wasn't immortal. One fatal shot would end me too.

“—ey—“ a distant voice hissed in my ear. “I—“

Damon's finger was on the trigger. I closed my eyes and braced for the shot.

Click.

Nothing happened.

Click.

Nothing again.

Click, click, click.

I opened my eyes to see Dameon waving the gun around in frustration. I sighed in relief. Something had disabled the gun. But what?

“--so don't worry, kid,” a greasy voice rang through the static in my ear. “That gun is as worthless as a toothpaste-filled radiator!”

“Mo?” I sputtered, unable to believe it could be him. “Is that you?”

“Don't get your chickens in a stir,” Mo grumbled.

I exhaled. Mo was back. I wasn't sure how—had something gone wrong with the failsafe protocol?

I couldn't have cared at that moment. He'd kept the gun from working. He'd stopped Dameon from killing me. I hoped that meant he didn't have hard feelings about me crunching his chip.

"We've got work to do, kid. I'm not letting Eon's sacrifice go to waste. Are you?"

I shook my head and stepped forward.

"You can't stop me," Dameon growled, throwing the gun to the side. "I've already won. The city is mine, and you are obsolete."

"I am obsolete," I agreed. "But I have the best AI money *can't* seem to buy."

Mo's face appeared on the screens in the room, looking as disheveled and grimy as ever. I couldn't think of a more beautiful sight.

Except for Eon being alive again. That would beat it.

Dameon turned as Mo gave a gap-toothed grin. "Miss me?"

"It's not possible!" Dameon yelled. "You were deleted. I watched it happen. He didn't make any copies. I would have known."

I reached for the console on my upper back. To my amazement, I felt a chip inserted where Mo's had been.

I looked to the floor, eyeing Eon's dress and sash. The memory of her arms around my neck replayed in my mind. She must have placed the new chip while she'd kissed me.

"Not unique," I replied, now understanding Eon's earlier words.

"What?" Dameon yelled.

I shook my head. "I didn't duplicate him. And there's only one other place a copy can be made. On your own computer."

"I never would have done that."

“You wouldn’t.” I pointed to Eon’s body on the floor. A body I wished would stir back to life. “But she might.”

Realization filled Dameon’s eyes. He whipped around to the keyboard and began typing again.

Onscreen, Mo grunted. “It’s no use,” he says. “Your rain trick won’t work anymore. And you’re not going anywhere.”

Dameon turned to me, livid. He straightened to his full height and raised his fists. I did the same.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time, Zero," Dameon said.

Comprehension again dawned on me. That was why he'd spent so much time with Eon. He'd been using her powers to inspire himself to bulk up all in hopes of fighting me.

I narrowed my eyes behind my fists. Bigger or stronger, it didn't matter. Fighting Eon's boyfriend was going to be a dream come true.

We first circled each other, carefully watching how the other stepped. The first sign of a decent fighter was careful footwork. One can only hold their own in a fight as well as they hold their balance.

After almost a half turn of the room, Dameon sprang. It was sooner than I'd expected, which must have been his intention. His movement caught me off guard, and I suffered for it. Two blows to the ribs on either side and one blow to the head before he stepped back out of my range. I swung through the air, just missing him, and now with aches in both my sides and a cut just below a swelling eye. He was faster and stronger than I'd expected.

He began bouncing on his feet, lowering his fists in an attempt to goad me into attacking. I quickly realized my disadvantage. He had studied not only fighting but he had also studied me. He must have researched my fighting techniques, while I had nothing on him.

My only hope was to fight differently than I ever had before... easier said than done.

I had to force myself to not take advantage of his dropped defenses. He would be expecting that. Usually, I would barrel in regardless of what might happen. Punch first, ask questions later. That was who I had been.

Dameon raised his fists again, apparently bored that I hadn't attacked. I had to do something quickly though. He was a genius, and probably already realized I was changing my strategy. It was like playing chess against both Dameon and myself at the same time. And I hated chess.

I also hated grappling, due to how easily it was to accidentally terminate my opponent, which gave me an idea.

Hey, Zee, I thought to myself, that might surprise him...

I rushed forward, dropping my head as my shoulder collided with his gut. Dense as he was, I lifted him and drove his back into the ground, keeping myself on top.

That should have worked, but, like I said, he was a genius, and could think faster than most computers.

He applied pressure on my arms, forcing me to let go as he wriggled just enough to get on my back and lock his arm around my neck. Now I was in trouble.

"You can't beat me, Zee," he said through clenched teeth. "I know what you will and won't do in every situation. So, even if you do what you normally wouldn't, I'll be ready to counter."

I strained to breathe as his arm squeezed harder against my neck. For the first time in my life, I could be killed. The thought harrowed my soul. Eon had died to save me. I had to avenge her.

"You can't win," Dameon hissed.

I caught sight of Eon's lifeless body. What would she think if I lost the first real fight I had ever been in? She probably would have laughed... or cried. It would have been one or the other, but I never seemed to guess correctly.

A new idea suddenly came to mind. Dameon didn't *know* what I would do, he was only guessing. Highly educated guessing, but guessing all the same. As long as I did one move or another, he would counter. But what if I did both?

Anxious to try out my new idea, and to breathe again, I did what I normally wouldn't do to get out of a chokehold. I opened my mouth, ready to bite his arm, and raised my hands to gouge his eyes. Except I didn't do either of those things. That was the key. Make him think I was going to do one thing, and then do the other.

And for a split second, he fell for it.

As he anticipated my cheap shots, I dropped my chin down, freeing my neck from his arm. I then pulled down on his elbow with both hands, holding all my weight on that arm. He dropped back, and I forced my momentum to continue in that direction and throw him off balance. He fell backward with a crash to the ground.

The next move would be to put him in an armbar. That was what I would usually do. But I needed to keep him guessing.

I feigned to begin to move his arm between my legs but allowed him to pull it free by kicking me.

Wrong choice.

I grabbed his leg and quickly spun around it, locking his body with my legs, and pulling against his ankle with my arms against my chest. My momentum carried my motions with enough weight that a loud *crack* split the air. He yelled out in agonizing pain. The pain of a broken femur.

This fight was over. He was done.

Chapter 4

“If you’re watching this,” Eon said, her bright eyes staring at me through the screen. “It means we answered the fateful question: What happens if we touch?”

I stepped back from the screen, holding an ice pack over my bleeding eye and cut cheek, excited and saddened to see Eon’s face.

The local authorities had arrived shortly after my fight with Dameon, thanks to a call from Mo, and were now sorting through the mess. They’d taken Dameon away in handcuffs, let him rot forever, and draped a cloth over Eon’s body, leaving me with Mo in a side room, where I stood wearing a blanket over my shoulders. Mo had pulled up the video of Eon on a nearby screen.

I hadn't expected to see her again so soon. It was bittersweet. To the depths of my soul.

“Now,” her video continued. “I’m going to assume our one and only touch was something dumb and inconsequential. Like brushing shoulders when we weren’t paying attention or something even lamer than that. Nothing like the sort of romantic touch a girl dreams of sharing with her lifelong crush.”

The memory of her lips on mine cut me to the core. I hoped I hadn’t botched our first and only kiss.

“Anyway,” she continued. “You must be wondering why I have another copy of Mo. Well, you know when you send a text and then immediately regret sending it? That’s what happened with this video. I uploaded an earlier version to Mo with specific instructions on when to give it to you. But, not even five minutes later, I regretted everything, deleted my copy of the video, and then tried to get Mo to give me back his copy. Well, you know Mo. He wouldn’t give it up.

“So I had to download him, restore a copy of him from an older version, and then re-upload. I was going to delete this Mo as well, but then I got thinking. This Mo could help me make my video for you. And so here we are, with two copies of Mo in the world. Hope you can sort them out.”

I looked at Mo’s face on the other screen. He gave a gap-toothed smirk. There would have been two of him had I not destroyed the other.

“But, Zee, I really made this video to thank you... and to say goodbye.”

These were the words I’d been dreading. Hopes of her somehow reviving herself dissolved in an instant. She was gone and gone forever.

“And, Zee, I hope you can say goodbye, too. Not just to me but to the life you currently live. I hope you can go out and make people better, not just stop them from getting worse. The world needs its defenders, yes, but it also needs its heroes. People who inspire goodness. And to me, Zero, you are just that. You are my hero. And I will always be grateful for everything you’ve done cleaning up my messes.

“Everyone needs a second chance. Everyone needs a new beginning. Every One needs a place to start, and what better place to start than Zero? Remember that for me.

“And remember that I love you, Zee.”

The video ends, and I spy a tear dripping down Mo’s digital face.

His screen went dark, and I gave a soft grin. It was the closest I'd come to a smile in years.

I had Mo replay the video again and again until we were dismissed by an officer.

My thoughts were heavy as we left the room. "Well, Mo," I said, turning to leave the penthouse. "What do we do now?"

Mo took his time to respond, then replied in my ear. "The blues caught most of the criminals, but others resisted. You can still fight, as long as you don't die."

I thought about this as I descended the elevator to the ground floor. Chasing and locking criminals up sounded so pedestrian now. Without Eon, everything did. This city needed her. It needed its hero.

Officers filled the elevator as I left.

"Nah, give the feds all the data you have from the party and let them handle it. I'm obsolete, remember?"

"You sure, kid?" Mo asked, sounding surprised.

I nodded as I stepped into the morning light. "Yeah. I think it's time I do something else in the world. Not just stop the bad. Make a difference for good, you know?"

"Where do you want to start?"

I shrugged, stopping outside an abandoned retirement home. "I'm retired, right? I'll start by finding others who feel the same."

"Old people," Mo grunted.

I laughed. It felt good to laugh. "Not just old. Young, rich, poor, sick, healthy. Anyone who needs a little boost in life. I can be one to help."

I entered the dilapidated building and surveyed the overturned front desk. A black and white cat raced through my legs, disappearing out the door.

Every One needs a place to start, I thought. And what better place to start than Zero?

“I agree, Eon.” I smiled and lifted the desk back to its feet.