***I Won’t Be Cut Out For This***

I loved walking down these halls. They were lined with tile, and I’d play hopscotch all the way to my room. The fluorescent lights above left a shadow beneath me, so I never played alone.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just answer the question. I’ve already told you the

answer,” said Arabella comically, but slightly frustrated.

“I am not going to admit that I need help in front of a bunch of people. You already know too much.” I continued to play hopscotch.

“Guess you’re gonna have to kill me then.”

“Why?”

“I know too much, isn’t that in the fine print,” she said. Her voice shook as she skipped a couple squares, playing along.

“Yeah, I guess so… watch your back.”

She chuckled.

“Stanley!”

“Yeah.” I turned around facing a tall, lanky man. His beard was whiter than milk, and I

think his wrinkles hung lower than my curtains. “Jesus old man, time does not look good on you.”

Arabella punched me in the shoulder. “Ouch.”

“Much appreciated. I heard a complaint that you pulled the fingernail of a highly sensitive patient during dinner last night,” he said, hugging his files close to his chest, or belly. You can’t really tell the difference between the two.

“I think you heard wrong, old man. That’s a new level of torture, I don’t do that stuff anymore, and besides what use do I have of a fingernail,” I chuckled slightly, accompanied by Arabella.

“Only my friends call me old man. Padded room, now.” Dr. Haldrud pointed towards the room at the end of the hall.

“No, man, not the crazy cube. I already told you, I didn’t pull out no fingernails.”

I don’t actually mind the crazy cube that much, gives me time alone. Better in there than out here. Gets kind of lonely sometimes.

The room was filled with the smell of bleach and new leather. The cushions on the walls met in corners, looking like grandma’s quilts, minus the flowers and yarn. *Too many memories.*

Time seemed to fly by, hours I’d say. I curled into a ball in the corner of the crazy cube, thinking and thinking. I replayed scenarios in my head, trying to keep my mind distracted, trying to keep out the voices.

“Are you done with your little outburst,” asked Haldrud, sounding as bad as he looked. The intercom could tell you all you needed to know about him.

“Outburst? Sure, if that’s what you’d like to hear.”

“I’d keep you here all day if I had a choice, keep the rest of the patients safe.”

“If I am such a danger, then why don’t you put me in private care?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

I shot up, and skipped towards the door. The lock clicked as it opened. *Sweet, sweet music.*

Haldrud was standing on the other side of the door, waiting for me to walk out.

“Aww, how sweet of you to walk me home,” I said confidently, strutting down the hallway, giving a quick side-eyed glance at the doctor. I got under his skin. *I love being annoying.*

“Nope, not today, sorry honey. Someone is here to see you,” Haldrud gargled.

“You mean someone is alive out there? You’d think if you’re gonna send a bomb, you’d try to kill everyone.”

We continued to walk down the hallway to the common room.

“They did this for control over the world. Can’t control the world if there is no world left.” Haldrud kept a straight face, but you could see the worry in his eyes and behind his voice as he spoke.

“Lookin scared, old man.”

“Nothing to be scared of, we’re safe here.”

The doors swung open and a man dressed in a tattered army uniform stood infront of three 7 foot AI’s.

“What the….” I ran my eyes up and down the giant robots standing infront of me. They held guns close to their chests, and their backs were straighter than my grandma’s cane. “At ease gentlemen, jesus,” I said, with fear in my voice.

I glanced at Arabella, who eventually stood next to me. She stood wide eyed at the AI’s, all I could do was laugh at her expression. Again, she punched me in the shoulder, without changing her gaze.

“Are you Jacob Francis Stanley,” asked the military man. His voice was deep and kind of intimidating. I puffed my chest out, and folded my hands behind my back to match his energy.

“Haha, Francis,” Arabella laughed.

“Shut up.” I kept my figure. *Force of habit, I guess.* “Yes sir.”

The soldier brought his hand to his forehead in a salutatory manor, and the AIs coppied. *Weird.* I did the same.

“We are under the impression that you not only have military training as a sniper, but you were also formerly a paid assassin. That’s how you found yourself here, correct?”

*Insulting.*

I carried on with confidence. “Haha, yes sir, top of my class, as well as my profession, in my own opinion.”

Arabella rolled her eyes. “Jesus.”

“May I ask what the historical run down is for,” I asked.

“The president has a mission for you.”

“Ooooo, how fancy? What’s the mission?”

“I’m the retriever, sir, not the messenger. You’ll find out when we get there. My personal opinion, your a bit soft for this mission, but the president thinks otherwise.”

“Ouch. I don’t think you have enough background on me. I was good at my job. Softies wouldn’t have succeeded like I did.” The soildier’s eyebrows frowned slightly, making my manner change. “I’m sorry. Yes sir, my bad, sir.”

Two of the three AI’s walked to my sides, grabbed my arms, and pulled me through the doors. The ash and burnt rubber filled my nose, almost too quickly, leaving a headache. There was no sun, when I came through the doors, just ash and smoke.

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The gear was just as heavy as I remembered. My belt was lined with two nine millimeters on each hip, two packs of ammo for each hand gun, and another two for my rifle, which hung over my shoulder by a strap. I tucked as many knives as I could into the leg straps, and a machete attached to my left leg. The all black clothing soaked in more rays from the sun, causing me to sweat. I’d say I missed this but I didn’t, the sweatpants and hospital slippers became comforting.

I walked through the trees for what seemed like hours. The man never told me how far east I was going before I hit the gate.

The wind blew through the trees, making a loud rustling noise, which was soon accompanied by another sound, a lot less calming than the trees. The sounds of gurgled over voices came from behind the bushes lining the pathway. I pulled my rifle to my shoulder, searching the forest around me.

Once I turned, facing the direction I came from, rapid footsteps came from behind. I twirled on the balls of my feet, facing a man with tattered clothing and stringy hair. His face seemed to droop lower than Dr. Haldrud’s did. His eyes were bloodshot, almost matching the colors of tomatoes, and his skin was an olive green.

“Ew,” I said, as I backed away from the running man.

Blood streamed from his ears and down his neck, pooling in the crevices of his drooping skin.

I threw my gun to my side, grabbed the machete, and took a swing at the diseased. A deep cut through his chest busted open, but the man kept running. Shock went over my face.

“How do you kill these things,” I questioned.

I dropped the machete, running back the way I came. My feet slipped from beneath me when the diseased bounded onto my back, causing me to hit the ground.

I rolled to my back, and his pooled blood dripped on my face. The olive green teeth chomped and chomped at my face, but my forearm kept the distance.

“Oh my god, this is disgusting.” I wanted to hurl. I looked around the ground for anything to hit him with, continuing to push him away. I could feel this skin detach and slide up towards his chin with my arm.

I pulled the handle of my hand gun from the harness. I slipped the barrel under his chest, meeting his chin. Turning my head away from the diseased teeth, I released a bullet through his jaw and it came out through the top of his head. Blood splattered over my face, and his head fell between my neck and shoulders.

Pushing the diseased off of my body, and sitting up, I let out a loud rush of air. *That was exhilarating.* *Maybe I am cut out for this.*