

“Backup! Requesting backup! Luna Unit is in pursuit, I need an evac, a strike team, anything, please! Someone answer me, fuck!” The rebel screamed into his shortwave radio as he fled through the dilapidated streets of the abandoned district. Block after block of crumbling industry flashed by, his sneakers skid across the shattered asphalt as he darted around the corners of defaced structures. He could hear it behind him, his trained ears picking up on the whooshing of the air, the muted pounding of its feet, the whirr and hum of its joints. He dared not even look back. “If anyone can hear me, I’m headed to the dump to try and throw it off my scent!”

The fleeing rebel grabbed hold of a rusty lamp post and used it to spin himself around a sharp corner, but the corroded bolts pulled up from the concrete and the pole tipped over, flinging the boy around the corner and across the broken street. He rolled to a stop, his radio skidding away from him. He froze, prone on the floor as it burst from an alley and slammed to a halt.

The creature, this machine, looked like a doberman made entirely of metal, except it was far larger. Its head alone was larger than an adult human, leaving it towering over the rebel even as it crouched down on its four legs. Its eyeless head swung around, olfactory sensors sweeping the air for the scent of its prey. Metal spines like hackles raised along its back, rattling as they sensed for motion. A hollow growl exited its metal mouth, the rattling sound seeming empty, fake. It prowled forward, the shock absorbers in its legs keeping its heavy footfalls nearly silent. It sniffed the air again, nearing its prey, jaws parting as it stopped just feet from the rebel. Lubricating oil dripped down its razor fangs, like a thick drool that was heavy with the anticipation of a kill.

His breath froze in his lungs as he gazed down the metal tunnel set at the back of those menacing steel jaws. The air that wafted out was warm, and accompanied by the scent of automobile exhaust. The expressionless machine took a step forward, the motors of its joints whirring above the muted thud of its footfalls. The boy recoiled from the advance, setting off the motion sensors that covered the mechanical canine's sleek body. It lunged forward as speakers in its jaws played a lifeless recording of a snarl. He slid past a row of interlocking metal fangs and into the cavern of those huge jaws. His body barely squeezed into the cavity as the mouth closed, the teeth locking into a gapless cage, shutting out all the light.

The metal beast reared back, tossing the boy to the back of its jaws. He braced his hands and feet against the metal walls of his prison, holding himself unsteadily above the shoulder-width tunnel that gaped below him. He held for minutes, but his sweaty palms and tiring limbs couldn't hope to outlast the tireless motorized joints that had locked themselves in place. One well-timed shake of its streamlined metal head sent the boy sliding down the ridged drop of the metal beast's throat.

His landing was rough, his tailbone slamming on the metal mesh that made up the synthetic stomach. The stomach was a network of carbon-fiber nanotubes suspended in a gel matrix and kept in alignment by a weak electric current that tingled through the boy's body,

pacifying him. He groaned and bit his lower lip as he struggled to sit up, only to be flipped head over heels as the large robot crouched back down and prowled off to find more rebels.

A soft beep sounded in that dark stomach, and it became illuminated by the blue light of a bio-scanner that assembled the identity data of the captive. Once collected, the lights turned red, and a thick, clear liquid began to seep through the nanotube matrix and fill the stomach; a strong enzyme designed to target the proteins of animal cells. He recoiled on a reflex as his skin started to burn, but there was nowhere to go to get away.

He pressed up against the sides of his malleable metal prison, managing to keep all but his feet above the rising pool. A bulkhead slammed down over the opening that led back up the throat, sealing the tunnel to keep any liquid or captives from escaping. Adrenaline filled his bloodstream, making his heart pound in frantic rhythm with his short and panicked breaths. He grit his teeth and grimaced as his feet were digested down to the muscle, all the skin burned off.

The digestive fluid continued to rise, and the displaced air was pumped out, making each breath harder than the last. Pain shot up his nerves from his feet, making him jerk his legs back and lose his footing. He slipped down into the stinging pool. Blood seeped from the fabric of his shoes as the liquid was disturbed, and it began to drip out from around his fingernails. The tank was half full now, making it almost pointless to try to stand back up on his eroded feet. He took in as deep a breath as he could manage and screamed for help as he pounded his bloody fists those metal stomach walls, making his prison ring like an empty metal dumpster.

The fluid had filled near the top, and the remaining pocket of air was unbreathable. He gasped for breath before becoming too light-headed to remain upright, and he slipped below the acrid waters. Everything below his ankles had been stripped to the bone, and his remaining skin floated off his body in bloody chunks. His fingers had withered, and as his body settled at the bottom of the digestive pool, the enzymatic soup poured into him through his nose and mouth, filling his stomach and lungs and eating him from the inside. Within the next several minutes, he would be hollowed out until his remaining muscle split open, filling the stomach chamber with a gross slop of partially digested meat suspended in a broth of blood.

Detecting that no life signs remained within it, the quadruped robot shifted its directives from "hunt" to "return home." It dashed off, joints whirring as the wind rushed over its aerodynamic form. Its feet pounded through the abandoned district, the machine creature just light enough to avoid breaking the rotting asphalt roads more than they already were. The metal beast turned a corner around a crumbled building, and vanished into the darkness of a sewage tunnel.

An hour later, the machine was propped up on its hind legs on a dais in a pristine white laboratory. A scientist approached, clipboard in hand, and glanced up at the eyeless metal face. "Unit 247, reporting home with one prisoner in containment. Confirmed rebel messenger. Alright boy, open up."

The robotic canine obeyed, retracting the panels on its abdomen that protected its insides. The nanotube gel split apart like the inner membrane of an egg, and the sopping contents spilled

out onto the floor. A shirt and a pair of pants filled with human bones clattered down, along with a pair of bloodstained shoes. The scientist grimaced at them and checked some boxes on the papers attached to her clipboard. “Lovely...” She circled the machine and plugged a cable into one of the ports on its tail, attaching it to the computer database. She downloaded all of the biomedical data the machine had collected on its deceased prisoner, and uploaded it.

“Rebel messenger... useless. At least we got a decent 15% fuel from his body. Bones can be sold for jewelry.” She grabbed a shortwave radio from her belt and held it up near her mouth. “And can someone decontaminate his clothes and check them for intel? We’ve got a job to do here people.” She rolled his eyes as she set the radio down, and snapped on a pair of rubber gloves. Stooping down, she picked up the shoes and turned them upside down, letting synthetic digestive fluids pour out along with a collection of bones that were once feet. “Well that’s just repulsive.”

She placed them back down as the cleanup crew entered the room, garbed in protective rubber suits. “About damn time. Get that thing cleaned up and cleaned out, it’s got another run in fifteen. Move it!”