

IV

Today, I stop by Medical for a final checkup with Doctor Gregarious. My last one before resuming full duties with the SCRUB team.

Even though I've been physically healing really well thanks to the tech in me, I've been doing a lot of desk jockeying. No Takedown Tuesdays and definitely no (fake) fighting haywire robots allowed. Mentally, I've been feeling okay even though I almost died a few months ago. I try not to think too much about it. That's just the way I am. I just want to get back to doing real work.

After the usual vital scans, I jokingly ask the good doctor about my feeling lighter. Not that I'm worried about getting fat or anything—I'm comfortable with my (new) body.

"It's probably the bone reconstruction," says Doctor Gregarious. "Some of the alloys used were designed for enhanced maneuverability and stealth without compromising integrity."

"So you're saying I can run like a ninja?" I ask.

Doctor Gregarious laughs. "Basically. But the full extent of your physical capabilities will become clearer once you get back to work."

What did he mean by that?

Then Doctor Gregarious tells me that from now on I'll be wearing an enhanced diagnostic harness as part of my work uniform. The harness will record physical data about me that will become part of my permanent medical records. Just fabulous.

The doctor does something new and injects me with what he calls sim serum. "This solution contains some nanites that will induce a scenario into your consciousness and some transceivers that will help us infer your psychological state while under the influence."

"Wait a minute," I say. "You mean that you're—"

The intercom in the doctor's office cuts me off. "Sam Chardonnay, please report to the Robotics Lab immediately. Contact Control while enroute." Usually I can tell who's talking on the intercom—the SCRUB team is not that big—but I don't recognize the voice. It even sounds robotic to me.

And unlike me, who is a little startled by the interruption, Doctor Gregarious acts like he never heard the announcement. He immediately says something, but I'm not listening because I'm already on my way out.

"Sorry, Doc, I gotta go." I grab my gear. As I run to Robotics, I reconnect my comm link. "Control, it's Sam, what do we got?"

"Sam, Virginia is trapped in the lab," answers the robotic voice from the intercom announcement. "There are several robots haywire down there."

"What?!" Not again. I take a quick breath. "Enemy composition? And where's my backup?"

"Number unknown but expect human-sized bots or smaller. And you are it, Sam. SCRUB is still shorthanded."

Dammit, I don't like the odds, but it's not my job to like the odds.

A group of robots have gone haywire so soon after another did the same. And now, someone I know is trapped, maybe even injured or worse...

Think, Sam. Think. How are you going to solve this?

I turn the corridor, still running, and make a quick stop by a fire extinguisher—but I'm more interested in the container next to it. Regulations require a fire extinguisher and a security box to be placed at key points throughout Waveform buildings.

I press numbers on a keypad and the box opens to reveal a small assortment of combat gear. Nothing to storm bunkers; just stuff for

quick response. I put on a vest and a half-helmet. I sling a shotgun over my shoulder and I strap a sidearm to my waist. Finally, I slip on exogauntlets in case I run out of ammo and have to punch my way out.

I enter the elevator and take it to the bottom floor where the Robotics Lab is. Despite the situation I'm in, the music being pumped out of the elevator speakers is quite catchy and I find myself humming along.

The you-have-arrived chime brings me back to reality. The elevator doors open and the emergency lights within the connecting entryway are already on. There's barely enough light to see by. I remind myself that if I survive this, I have to complain about the security boxes needing some kind of night vision goggles—

Just as I think that, my eyes adjust to the dim lighting. I also remember that my eyes are different after the encounter with Arnold. I can see something is out there.

Several small figures gather in the shadows but I barely hear them move. I unholster my sidearm, light up the laser dot, and look around.

Robots, spider-shaped, surround me. I can hear their mechanical legs faintly clicking as they get closer. I can also see red lines project from the spiderbots, placing laser dots all over me. It's like the spawn of Arnold want revenge for me killing their daddy.

Several of the light beams hit me in my eyes but surprisingly I'm not blinded. Then time seems to slow down as five of the robots leap at me. I fire several shots while ducking. Some spiderbots land clumsily and no longer move.

The other robots stop their advance.

"Virginia!" I yell. "It's Sam! Are you down here?"

I hear something... more like several somethings behind me. I reach down to grab a non-moving spiderbot by a handful of its legs. Instinctively, I spin around like a ballerina—actually, more like

someone from a martial arts movie—and strike several robots trying to pounce on me. They don't move after being smacked down.

“Have you been holding out on me, Sam?” asks a familiar voice. “You never showed me that move during our sparring sessions.”

The spiderbot mob backs away to reveal Virginia, emerging from a side corridor. What a relief!

“Are you okay?” I ask. “I got a report of haywire robots in the lab so I'm here.” I laugh uneasily. “Fighting haywire robots.”

Virginia doesn't laugh at my nervous attempt at humor. “I can't let you take them the way Arnold was taken.”

Huh?

“In a way, they're my babies, Sam,” Virginia explains. “I can't be brave like you and have a real kid on my own.”

This is getting weird.

“But I can somehow build life, robotic life. Neither as elegant nor cute as Nimitz but like him... they deserve a chance to live, don't you think?”

When I got up this morning, I planned to have a talk with Virginia about what she thought about the whole AI debate. I expected Virginia to be a little biased but not like this. Something is wrong.

“But what if the robots go crazy, Virginia?” I ask. “Which is more important? Your robot children? Or the human children of strangers?”

“All life is precious, Sam,” she says. “Not just human life. Humans and robots should play together to sort everything out.”

Playing... I'm reminded of Arnold the spiderbot going haywire, killing some co-workers, and playing with the remains of a teammate.

“Your children jumped at me. I don't think they were trying to give me a hug.”

“You never gave them a chance to introduce themselves.” The mob of spiderbots slowly surround me again.

“How are they trying to communicate their intentions with me? Telepathy? Being lit up by laser dots is not exactly friendly.”

“I think you lit your dot first.” Virginia had a point, but I’m just a lady with a gun and they’re a mob of facehugging spiderbots. Nothing about their actions says they come in peace... I have to end this now.

“Don’t make me do this, Virginia. I know your work means a lot to you. But if your children do not stand down, I’ll have to shut them down my way—”

The entire spiderbot mob rushes me and I’m knocked down. Each of these dog-sized robots are using their needle-like legs to poke me. The light body armor I do have on cracks under the repeated strikes. The similarity to the training massacre is almost too much... It’s like fighting several mini-Arnolds and I’m trying real hard not to be emotionally overwhelmed. And I can barely breathe from their combined weight on top of me.

Then, I drop my sidearm and the shotgun slips free.

Can’t shoot my way out, so I might as well try to physically force my way out. I take a deep breath then act.

I knock some spiderbots off me and the weight on my chest lightens a little. The remaining bastards keep smothering me but I fight back.

Somehow, I break out from under the robotic pile up. With a yell of satisfaction, I street stomp some robots and fling others into the hardened walls.

Out of nowhere, Virginia jumps onto my back and I feel my lost sidearm being pressed against the unarmored space of my neck. For some reason, Virginia is incredibly strong and I can’t disarm her.

“Virginia! Don’t!” I yell. I reach over to cram my fingers behind the trigger to prevent Virginia from pulling it. But she’s so much stronger than me—how?

I yell out in sudden pain. My fingers are being crushed by the force Virginia’s using to pull the trigger. She really wants to kill me! Soon, my fingers will be smashed to a pulp, the trigger squeezed, and Nimitz without a mommy.

I struggle to nudge the sidearm up and away from me while relaxing my improvised trigger lock. I expect to be deafened by the gunshot since the barrel is so close to my ears—but I hear it loud and clear without any residual ringing.

Virginia gasps and I feel her weight lift off my back as she falls. I turn quickly and see Virginia on the ground, a large entry wound in her chest. Her eyes are still open and struggle to focus on me.

“That’s so... unfair, Sam,” whispers Virginia. I try to keep pressure on the wound, but blood pools quickly beneath my hands. “You get to... go home... to your son... Some of us... don’t have... that luxury...”

Virginia says no more and her eyes stare blankly as if seeing right through me.

The robots have stopped attacking, but at what cost? My friend is dead.

When I realize this, I can’t help but scream.