

Metallic Souls: Part One

Sample chapters

Chapter 3: Hard to Kill.

“You are listening to K-98, the Number One radio station here on Mars. We would like to welcome all of our new listeners near Valhalla Point. It was one of the remaining battle sites of the Great War between our now good friends, the United Earth Government.

Speaking of Earth, we are going to celebrate the treaty between our grand worlds, which was signed a hundred years ago this weeken...sszzzzzzzz!”

An unexpected explosion ripped through the serene atmosphere surrounding Valhalla’s Point, tearing apart the newly constructed communication tower in a violent display of destruction. The ground quaked beneath the fiery roar, sending shockwaves for miles in all directions. A monstrous mushroom-like cloud billowed into the sky.

Out from within the encroaching inferno came a police truck, Anna at the wheel desperately trying to make an escape as the flames of the explosion nipping at her like a ruthless predator. The towering firestorm cast a hellish glow over the landscape, casting sinister shadows that danced in the flickering light. The deafening explosions of collapsing debris, a symphony of destruction that threatened to swallow her whole.

With each passing second, the inferno closed in, an unforgiving force of devastation that left little room for error. Desperation gripped Anna as she fought to maintain control, her only goal survival in a landscape consumed by the fiery chaos. As she looked around her, and only saw flames she thought that this was it for her, until another explosion shook the landscape.

With unforeseen luck, the blast sent the truck soaring away from destruction. Partly relieved from the fiery escape, the danger wasn’t over as the truck was about to hit the ground. The shock suspension on the truck’s wheels nearly came apart as it brutally landed onto the rocky surface of Mars.

In the face of encroaching peril, her defiance shines through with a mischievous smirk dancing on her lips, a daring sparkle in her eyes revealing a thrill that only danger can ignite. Gripping the wheel with an intensity rivaled only by the fiery inferno trailing behind her, she seizes a sliver of control just as the truck hurtles towards the yawning abyss ahead.

With intended precision, she executed a sharp right turn, narrowly avoiding a fate that seemed to

beckon her in with eager jaws. The truck skidded and groaned, protesting against the unmoved terrain as Anna pushed it to its limits in a bid to cheat death. With inches away from having a really bad day, her wheels caught the ground and skidded back to the road.

The fleeting moment of relief vanished quickly as a flicker of blue light from the epicenter of the explosion caught her attention in the rearview mirror. With a flash of light as another explosion erupted in the same spot with a dazzling display of white flames. The blast unleashed a violent shockwave that surged in all directions.

The exhilaration of her narrow escape fizzled into a gnawing sense of urgency as she realized the impending danger. “You gotta be kidding me! What, what kind of bomb do they try to kill me with!” screamed Anna as she braced for the impact.

The explosion's immense power flung debris into the air like a festive explosion of confetti. Despite her daring maneuvers to escape the turmoil, the scorching wave raged upon her, unremittingly striking her vehicle and sending it careening wildly off its intended path. She relinquished her grip on the steering wheel, recognizing the futility of fighting for command in the face of such chaotic upheaval.

Accepting the inevitable, Anna abandoned the struggle to salvage the truck, her survival instincts started kicking in. With a swift motion, she kicked open the door and hurled herself into the unknown. She plummeted into a nearby ditch just in time to narrowly escape the scorching heat and devastation that followed.

From the merging forces of velocity and explosion, the front of the truck collided violently with the jagged boulder, triggering a chain reaction that caused the fuel cells to erupt in a cacophony of fire and smoke. Like a phoenix rising from its ashes, the vehicle propelled high into the air, a fiery comet against the darkening sky. Anna could do nothing but bear witness as her police truck careened into the rocky mountainside.

As the earth settled and the air grew still, Anna emerged from the ditch, shedding her helmet to reveal a cascade of fiery red hair that gleamed with the hues of the surrounding flames. Her elongated ears, freed from their confinement, twitched with a mix of adrenaline and instinct, attuned to the bedlam that engulfed her. She looked up to the sky and laughed with defiance as she escaped death's grasp.

The frenzied dance of fire and destruction cast an eerie reflection in Anna's crystal sky blue eyes. The stifling heat enveloped her like a suffocating blanket, prompting her to unzip her armor-plated jacket emblazoned with the insignia of the New Dicon Police Department. The moment that she unzipped her jacket, her badge pops out from the left pocket.

Anna surveyed the aftermath before her with a blend of exhaustion and exasperation etched across her five-foot-five with a frame flaunting light muscle tone body. Retrieving her badge, she safely tucked it away in the back left pocket of her pants. Her fingers instinctively checked the familiar weight

of her gun snug in its holster, reassuring herself in the midst of the destruction that enveloped her.

The explosion's impact had left a devastating mark, obliterating everything within a two-mile radius. As she mopped the sweat from her brow, a wry chuckle escaped her lips at the sheer scale of devastation before her.

"Talk about overkill," she muttered to herself, hands planted firmly on her hips as she assessed the wreckage.

The Red Skulls had made their intentions clear – a thirst for revenge so potent it bordered on a desire for her demise with ruthless efficiency. Anna's extensive list of adversaries in her line of work had never daunted her, but the overdone brutality of this attack left her unnerved, questioning the lengths her enemies were willing to go to. She hoped that they wouldn't go this far if they were inside the city's gate.

Her assignment was to check out the communication towers on the outskirts of New Dicon City for a possible terrorist attack by the local cyber gangs that plagued the highways outside the city. She had no doubts that what had been detonated was military grade. If this had been in the middle of a populated area, many innocent lives would have been lost. Fortunately, the communication towers were unmanned, and no one was around.

She confidently removed her jacket, revealing a striking light aqua tank top underneath. "Well, this is just great," she muttered to herself as she surveyed the wreckage of the truck she had been assigned to on her very first day back on active duty. She knew Chief would not be pleased.

As she turned away from the flames, it became apparent that the rough landing had taken its toll on her equipment. The communication device in her helmet visor was fried, and the secondary earpiece remained unresponsive. She was stranded, with no way to contact the command base for assistance, in the middle of nowhere, at least thirty miles from New Dicon City.

Taking a few steps in the opposite direction, she was suddenly jolted by the explosion of the truck's remaining fuel cells. Despite the deafening noise and the calamity scene unfolding around her, she maintained her calm demeanor. With a sly smirk playing on her lips, Anna continued to walk away, unfazed, until a burning tire from the wreckage landed mere inches from her feet.

As flames danced around her, casting eerie shadows on the pavement, she clutched her helmet with white-knuckled intensity. Once more, a strange sensation prickled at her ear, a harbinger of misfortune. Frustration boiling over, she flung the helmet into the smoldering wreckage. Collapsing to the ground, she gazed up at the vast expanse of stars, their brilliance offering a calm contrast to her current turmoil.

The twin moons of Mars cast a mesmerizing glow over the plush red landscape, bathing the desert in an eerie yet enchanting light. Anna gazed at the dwindling flames flickering on the horizon, a sense of foreboding creeping into her mind. Suddenly, the communication unit in her ear emitted a sharp,

urgent beep.

"Anna, are you there?" The voice of Sergeant Simms crackled through the static.

"Yeah, Serge, I'm here," Anna replied, her voice steady despite the tension in the air.

"We can't get a fix on you. What is your..." The voice trailed off into static, leaving Anna in intense silence. Minutes passed like eternity, the weight of the situation bearing down on her. With a deep breath, she composed herself, her mind racing with possibilities.

Memories of her days at the police academy flooded back, the lessons ingrained in her mind. Mars, once a proud nation was now shackled by Earth's restrictions following the devastating war a century ago. The scars of conflict still marred the landscape, breeding lawlessness in the form of cybernetic gangs vying for power in the desolate regions.

Earth's sanctions were enforced by their security forces to prevent Mars from regaining its military might. The divide between the bustling cities and the lawless outskirts was stark, the highways becoming dangerous territories ruled by the ruthless gangs. To maintain order, strict curfews and travel restrictions were imposed, forcing civilians and even local law enforcement to navigate a treacherous path in the darkness of the Martian night.

Because of this, she will not have anyone looking for her until morning. Anna brushed off the dirt from her pants, her gaze fixed on the foreboding road ahead. The lone path out of Valhalla's Point stretched out like a ribbon through the unforgiving landscape, daring her to venture deeper into the heart of the Badlands. The signpost, adorned with graffiti that mocked the dwindling population, only added to the sense of isolation that surrounded her.

"Welcome to the Badlands, population minus 1500," the words on the weathered billboard seemed to whisper a warning to Anna, but she met them with a defiant smile as she set off down the desolate terrain.

About half a mile down the road, Anna's solitude was interrupted by the sight of the road splitting into two diverging paths. Perplexed by the choice before her, she stood at the crossroads, her gaze shifting between the unknown routes that beckoned her onward. The absence of a guiding GPS system left her adrift in a sea of unfamiliarity, her next steps shrouded in ambiguity.

Fingering the smooth surface of the old 1975 US half-dollar coin, a keepsake from a friend that held a piece of her past within its tarnished metal, Anna turned to it for guidance. "Okay," she whispered to the silent expanse of the Martian landscape, "Heads, I'll go left, and tails, I'll go right." With a flick of her wrist, the coin soared through the air, a glint of hope in the fading light as it twirled in a graceful arc.

As the coin landed with a soft thud against the dusty ground revealing its verdict, illuminating the path she was destined to follow. She took the coin and placed it back into her pocket. With nothing left to lose she squared her shoulders as she embarked on the chosen route. "Right, into the mouth of

madness, I go.” She said with a slight chuckle.

Under the ethereal glow of Mars's moons, the crimson radiance painted the barren landscape with an otherworldly hue, casting long shadows across the desolate terrain. A parked vehicle perched atop a distant hill caught Anna's attention, its presence a stark anomaly against the backdrop of the Martian night. The eerie stillness that enveloped the hill in the aftermath of the explosion raised a sense of disquiet within her.

Despite the magnetic pull of curiosity drawing her towards the vehicle, Anna's intuition guided her to take the road veering to the right, away from the scene on the hill. With each deliberate step along the middle of the road, she made sure to present herself as an open target to whoever lurked within the confines of the vehicle. If no one takes the bait from there, then it's possible that they could be closer than she realizes, moving within the shadows of the rocky terrain.

With limited options of routes in and out of the desolate badlands, she scanned the landscape and pinpointed the perfect spots for an ambush other than the hill. The road leading up to it was strewn with massive boulders, providing ample cover for anyone who wanted to attack her. She wondered how many more locations like this were on her way to New Dicon City.

Trying to be as nonchalant as possible, Anna's eyes gleamed with anticipation, silently praying that the vehicle parked near the hill was deserted. Functional or not, it mattered little to her. With her extraordinary abilities, she could effortlessly bend and shape the metal components of the vehicle to her will, transforming it into a fully operational machine.

Regrettably, luck was not on her side. Parked on top of the hill, the truck was adorned with menacing Red Skull symbols on its sides—a chilling signal of the ruthless Red Skull Society's presence. Rather than inspecting the explosion's aftermath, they lurked on the hill, patiently biding their time in anticipation of a showdown with the fiery-haired cop who had dared to challenge their infamous gang.

The gang member known as Razor, seated in the driver's position with his leather vest and ripped jeans. A distinctive metal plate adorning his forehead exuded an aura of danger. His cybernetically enhanced eyes glowed with a mesmerizing shade of emerald, hinting at the advanced technology pulsing beneath the surface. Forty percent of his body had been upgraded with cutting-edge enhancements, meticulously calibrated for speed and precision, making him a force to be reckoned with behind the wheel.

As Razor casually flicked a glance to check the time, a flash of red hair caught his attention. A woman, walking away from their vicinity, stirred a hint of recognition within him. His companion remained oblivious to the unfolding situation. Razor, curious and determined, activated his cybernetic eyes to zoom in on the woman, scrutinizing her with keen focus to confirm her identity. A surge of elation washed over Razor as the enhanced optics confirmed his suspicions.

A sense of glee bubbled within him, manifesting in a triumphant bash on the steering wheel. However, his exuberance unwittingly jolted his slumbering comrade, Bone Crusher, seated in the passenger seat. He was twice the size of the other. His hands were like sledgehammers with retractable spikes on his knuckles. He was over seventy percent enhanced with one purpose and that was to kill anyone who posed a threat to the Red Skulls. His eyes glowed yellow as he woke up, and said, "What... Damn, we bombed that place hours ago, and now she shows up."

"Bra, it's only been twenty minutes," said Razor.

"Oh, who cares, finally she's here," said Bone Crusher as he saw a woman with red hair in the distance and continued, "I knew she wouldn't fall for that."

"And now, it's our turn," replied Razor.

The trap had been set and revenge was in sight. In some ways, they were happy that the explosion did not work. Now, they will have the glory getting revenge for their gang.

"When I heard that she took down the Butcher," said Bone Crusher, "I couldn't believe it. She must have tricked him, or something. I mean look at her, my thigh is bigger than her. There is no way she could have knocked him out in one shot."

"I heard," said Razor, "that she was cybernetic enhanced and..."

"Enhance my ass," said Bone Crusher, "She would need to have my strength, and size to have any chance with the Butcher. No, she had helped... I'm sure of it."

"Then lets proved to the others that she's a fraud." said Razor.

Bone Crusher rose up, and grasped the front of the dashboard with anticipation. For them, there was nothing better proving their strength to their enemies. With excitement in his voice, Bone Crusher said, "Yeah and we are getting paid to boot! The boss was wise to choose us to make sure that she is dead."

With a maniacal laughter Razor bellowed in as he started the truck's custom-built engine.

"We are like his avenging angels of pain!"

Bone Crusher, glanced at him, and thought that was a bit on the corny side. He shook his head and said, "Whatever man, let's just do it!"

With a simple press of a button on the side of the steering wheel, the truck underwent a dramatic transformation. The front bumpers extended to reveal a menacing metal plow, embellished with a crimson skull meticulously painted at its center. Metal spikes protruded from the top of the plow, seemingly reaching out menacingly, a deadly omen hanging in the air.

The thunderous roar of the engine pierced the air, drawing Anna's attention. Unfazed, she continued to stride ahead, her demeanor betraying none of the apprehension swirling beneath her facade. A quiet intensity gleamed in her eyes as she meticulously awaited the opportune moment to strike back

with deliberate precision.

In a sudden burst of speed, the vehicle careened down the hill, its tires screeching in protest against the rough terrain. The realization dawned on Anna with chilling clarity—this was no mere figment of her imagination induced by oxygen deprivation. The imminent danger raced towards her was all too real, an immediate threat that demanded her attention.

Turning to face the blinding lights emanating from the oncoming truck, Anna shielded her eyes against the blinding glare, catching a glimpse of the sinister crimson skull adorning the plow. In that fleeting moment amidst the impending collision, Anna stood her ground as a formidable force of defiance against the encroaching tide of metal and malice.

The truck ripped up the asphalt of this lonely road. Within seconds, it quickly closed the distance to the Skulls' coming victim. The headlights shone brightly onto her, marking their intent.

Feeling irritated, she softly muttered to herself, "Let's hit her with a truck! Geez, these idiots have no originality. I guess I'm going to have to teach them a little lesson."

The truck raced over the hill like a lion chasing after its prey through a wheat field. The gang members were able to see her back facing them. Razor started laughing at the thought of an easy kill. She looked helpless in their path of destruction.

"Ha! Brother, we have her now. Prepare to strike if she evades me," declared Razor, his voice charged with anticipation and assurance, ready to seize the moment alongside Bone Crusher.

"Understood, I'm moving in," Bone Crusher acknowledged, leaping out of the still-rumbling truck with a smirk and determination in his eyes. Adopting a flanking approach to the right, he promptly positioned himself, ready to deliver the decisive blow should his partner's initial strike falter. Driven by his overconfidence, Bone Crusher was certain that Anna would not elude their grasp.

The truck hurtled towards its target with tremendous speed, its impending threat casting a sweltering heat over the scene. Despite the imminent danger, Anna remained unshaken by the threatening peril. With a designed calmness, she braced herself for the imminent clash, her confidence unyielding.

In a heartbeat, as the truck closed in mere inches from impact, Anna's lightning-fast reflexes sprang into action. With a swift twist, she planted a hand on the hood, effortlessly vaulting onto the truck's surface. The seamless movement showcased her agility and prowess, her acrobatic maneuver culminating in a controlled pivot that brought her to a commanding position atop the speeding vehicle.

Eyes widening in shock, Razor teetered on the edge of control as Anna crouched before him on the hood, a knowing smile gracing her lips as she tapped the glass with her gun. The advantage was unmistakably hers, yet Razor's nerves trembled with the weight of Bone Crusher's impending strike.

Unexpectedly caught off guard by Anna's audacious move, Razor's fear surged as he slammed on the brakes. He hoped to dislodge her from the truck. To his astonishment, Anna remained steadfast on the

hood, presenting a riddle that challenged the laws of physics. Peering down at the hood, a sense of dread crept over Razor as he spotted Anna's feet seemingly fused to the truck's metal frame.

Determined to lose her, he shook aside this inconceivable move by her. All he wanted now was for her to be dead. Just then he had an impulse to veer towards the boulders lining the road taunted his mind, a reckless thought that could tip the scales in their favor. However, Bone Crusher's strategic movements on the side halted Razor's reckless plan. He saw him coming in view behind Anna.

"Damn it!" he cried in frustration as he wanted to be the one to take her down. The sound of a gun tapping against the windshield shattered the tense silence, pulling his attention back to Anna as she leveled the laser-tip handgun directly at his forehead. With the threat of his comrade moving within the shadows, Razor understood the stakes of this perilous standoff.

Choosing to feign surrender, he raised his hands in a mock gesture of submission, a ploy to catch Anna off guard amidst the rocky terrain. As the scenario unfolded, Bone Crusher's hulking form bore down on Anna from the left, his intentions clear, yet she remained unfazed, her keen senses anticipating his every move. Promptly evading Bone Crusher's assault, Anna leaped above him with cat-like grace, landing on a boulder behind him in a seamless display of agility.

Enraged by the turn of events, his wild strike shattered the windshield, missing his target and hitting Razor square in the face. In that moment of confusion, Bone Crusher dawned on him that he had missed his mark. In a fit of frustration, he seized Razor's jacket collar atop the truck, pulling him violently through the shattered windshield in a desperate bid to locate Anna.

"Where... Where is she?" Bone Crusher's voice boomed with fury, the repercussion of the confrontation left Razor reeling from the throbbing pain, his senses dulled by the impact of Bone Crusher's fist against his face. Struggling to focus, Razor's vision cleared just in time to glimpse a shadowy figure closing in on them.

"Behind you, you freaking idiot!" Razor's warning pierced with urgency echoing through the turbulent air. Bone Crusher whirled around just as Anna leaped off the boulder, hurtling towards him with a powerful dropkick. Her feet connected solidly with the side of his face, a testament to her combat prowess.

Undeterred by the impact, he retaliated, catching Anna in a choking grip with his formidable right hand. "You'll need to do better than that," he sneered, his tone laced with arrogance. "My body is forged from aluminum titanium."

Bone Crusher's brutal strength propelled Anna backwards, crashing her against a rough boulder with a forceful impact, his grip merciless as he sought to dominate her. Determined to witness her struggle and exact a twisted payment for the perceived sins of the past, he reveled in the moment, his eyes ablaze with malice.

A devilish grin played across Anna's features, catching him off guard and momentarily breaking his hold. She saw the surprised look on her adversary face and moved in forward. Ready to capitalize on the opening, she executed a simultaneous precise inside block to the elbow joint and palm strike to the wrist going the opposite way. Instantly she freed herself from his grasp and turning the tables on her assailant.

In a seamless display of combat prowess, Anna unleashed a series of swift and planned strikes. An uppercut to Bone Crusher's gut was promptly followed by a powerful left elbow strike to the side of his head, driving him back with a stunning force. An open palm strike to his throat sealed his retreat, as he staggered under the onslaught of her retribution.

Dazed and disoriented from the flurry of Anna's unremitting assault, Bone Crusher's senses blurred with confusion as he perceived a surreal sight - Anna's arms appearing to transform into glinting metallic armor. Before he could comprehend this strange vision, Anna's final onslaught left him reeling as his body succumbed to the relentless barrage of blows.

The decisive impact of Anna's final punch sent Bone Crusher's head on a collision course to the metal of the truck's hood. With a resounding finality, the battle came to an abrupt end, marking the conclusion of one-sided confrontation, Bone Crusher lay defeated at her feet.

Smiling, she placed her right boot on top of his head. Again, he just looked up at her in disbelief. Anna stood tall and smirked as she pointed her gun to the side of his head, "Now now, boys, we can do this the easy way or the hard way? I really hope your choice was the hard way."

Anna descended lithely from the truck and removed the metal bars from the hood. In a fluid motion, she expertly bound Bone Crusher's hands with them before compelling him to take a seat a short distance from the vehicle. From Anna's beating he offered no resistance, just grunted as he sat down.

Anna's keen ears pricked up at the distant sound of the other individual disembarking from the truck. With a confident stride, she turned on her heel and swaggered towards Razor. Gripping the back of his neck firmly with one hand, she guided him in the direction of the daunting front bumper.

"Where do you think you're headed, skull boy?" Anna's voice dripped with sarcasm as she locked gazes with Razor.

"If you must insist, my name is Razor," he retorted, his tone defiant despite his predicament.

A wry smile tugged at Anna's lips as she quipped, "Razor, huh? Let me guess the other schmuck over there is Shaver?"

Surprised, he yelled, "How dare you mock us? You bit..."

Anna shoved his face onto the hood. "Aw, what's the matter? The big bad Red Skulls can't take a joke?"

"Joke all you want, lady," said Razor. "When he wakes up, you will be in trouble. Do you know

who he is?"

Unimpressed she said, "Nope, and I don't care about your silly little titles. What I do care about on the other hand is why you bombed that tower out here."

While Anna handcuffed Razor, she found a big hunting knife in the back pocket of his pants leg. It was a foot-long with ridges running down the blade. Anna took it out of its leather cover.

"Nice knife," she said, twirling it in her hand.

Once he looked up at her in disgust, she stabbed the hood of the truck right in front of Razor's eyes, and said with authority, "Okay, I am only going to ask you this one more time. Why did your gang bombed that communication tower?"

Bone Crusher woke up, and overheard her.

"You cannot interrogate us without a lawyer present," he said. "This is police brutality. You won't get away with..."

Anna paid no attention to him as she placed Razor over and forced him beside Crusher. Without saying a word, she walked over to the other side of the truck. As she leaned against the front bumper, she looked in the direction of the desert landscape and said to herself, "This is going to be a long night for me."

Bone Crusher screamed out in anger, "Hey, are you listening to me?"

Anna looked back with a nonchalant stare at Crusher and calmly said, "I thought I had gagged you."

The impudence of Anna's comment left him momentarily speechless. Bone Crusher stared at her with utmost hate, and as she passed by, he said, "You think that you have won? Don't you know where you're at?"

Anna just smirked as she opened the passenger's side door.

"This is THE RED SKULL'S TURFF!" He screamed, "We are everywhere... Yeah... that's right, and don't even think that your police buddies are going to rescue you. You're all alone and..."

Anna steadfastly focused on her task, paying no heed to Bone Crusher's simmering anger as she methodically unloaded items from the truck. His right eye twitched with suppressed fury, his teeth gritted in a silent vow of retribution.

"That's it," he seethed to himself. "I'm escaping this place, and when I return, you'll pay for ignoring me, little miss badass. Oh, you'll pay dearly!"

Overhearing Bone Crusher's muttered threats, Razor's words, tinged with apprehension, "Bra, are you out of your mind? Wait for our crew to arrive." Ignoring the caution, Bone Crusher noticed that she didn't bind his legs and smiled.

"I can bide my time, but once she's occupied with that truck, I'm making my escape," he declared,

his eyes fixed on Anna as she clambered into the driver's seat, attempting to start the vehicle. Seizing the fortunate distraction, he leaped to his feet in a burst of defiance.

A twinkle of hope crossed Razor's mind as he thought that his friend was going help him to escape. Instead, Bone Crusher paid no attention to him and he raced towards freedom. A look of shock and dismay as Razor's smile turned upside down with gritted teeth betrayed a sense of camaraderie,

"Bra... No, that bastard!" yelled Razor.

Anna's elongated ears twitched with acute awareness as she emerged from the truck, her sharp gaze fixating on Bone Crusher as he vanished into the war-torn expanse of the desert. Without a sense of urgency, she approached Razor, a quiet intensity emanating from her every movement.

"No loyalties, huh? Do you truly believe he can escape from me?" said Anna nonchalantly.

Meeting her piercing gaze with a mixture of defiance and discomfort, Razor muttered under his breath, a flicker of fear briefly crossing his features. With deliberate care, Anna circled around him, securing the ropes around his legs methodically, a facade of calm masking the storm beneath.

"Now, I'll be back for you. So, don't get any ideas about escaping. Because then, I'll have to do this the hard way." Anna's gentle smile belied the gravity of her words, her eyes blazing with a baleful intensity, a silent promise of retribution.

A vivid shade of blue seeped into Anna's gaze, casting a mesmerizing glow that conveyed the depth of her resolve. Razor, grasping the weight of her unspoken threat, swallowed hard, a bead of sweat trickling down his brow as he closed his eyes in apprehension, a nod of compliance sealing his fate.

When he opened his eyes, she was gone, leaving Razor in stunned silence, grappling with the weight of her warning. Bewildered, he pondered on her cryptic message, a sudden awareness dawning on him like a thunderclap.

"So, this was the easy way?" Razor's cry of disbelief echoed into the desert.

Chapter 4: Between a Rock and a Hard Place.

Across the crimson, haze-veiled desert of Mars, Anna chased after Bone Crusher, her polished strides carrying her through the caverns scarred by the remnants of Earth's violent history. Exposed blast scars bore witness to the planet's tumultuous past, a bleak landscape that mirrored the shadows of their pursuit. With a quick maneuvering he slid into a series of caves connected together like a maze in hopes to shake off his pursuer.

Emerging from the caves into the open expanse of the valley, he slowed down to catch his breath, a momentary respite inviting a needed pause in his desperate flight. His wary gaze swept the crimson horizon as he sought a confirmation of his perceived freedom, a fleeting hope nestled within his cautious relief. With a quick rest he continued his escape.

Yet, Anna lingered close by, a silent figure perched upon a rocky ledge near Bone Crusher. Her poised stance bore an air of calculated anticipation as he turned, unwitting of the imminent danger poised to shatter his false sense of escape. With an expertly-timed leap, she closed the final gap poised to claim her quarry and yet she let this game of hers play out a little bit longer.

As his laughter of false victory echoed through the silent expanse his elation was abruptly halted by the shadow that presented before him. Alarmed, he spun to confront the apparition of a figure on the rocks, dismay clouding his senses before the revelation of its illusionary nature loosened the grip of fear from his pounding heart, the once sinister shadow now a mere reflection of the treacherous landscape that whispered both the dangers and the illusions of the Martian desert.

With a burst of hearty arrogant laughter, Bone Crusher turned his attention back on escaping from his captor. His amusement came to a screeching halt as his eyes gazed upon Anna standing before him with her arms crossed, leaning against a boulder a few steps before him. With eyes wide in disbelief, he doubled back into the rocky caves.

His cyber enhancements gave him great agility through the jagged boulders. Giving nothing to chance, he then used his massive cyborg legs to jump over a small ravine. Bone Crusher landed into a network of grottos and continued to run, zigzagging back and forth through the caves, hoping to confuse his pursuer, convinced that she could not follow.

To his fearful reality, Anna was there waiting for him as he exited the last cave. With teeth gritted in anger, he backed up a few paces. He quickly looked back and forth, trying to find another way to flee. Just as he was about to run, Anna yelled with a smile on her face, "That's right, big guy. Are you ready to give up?"

Bone Crusher refused to give in and screamed out of frustration. "What the hell are you woman?"

There is no way that you should have caught up with me.”

“Maybe you are not as great as you think you are Bub. But, whatever...,” said Anna as she started to walk in his direction.

"Whatever! I'll show you whatever." He bellowed, his eyes wild with fury as he wheeled around to face Anna. Charging straight to her like a man possessed, he roared, "I got you! I GOT YOU!"

Anna, cool and collected, effortlessly sidestepped his oncoming assault with a graceful dance of evasion. Instead of simply dodging left or right, she decided to up the ante with a playful wink at Bone Crusher, goading him further.

Enraged beyond reason, as a raging bull fixated on its target, he circled back and charged at Anna once more. This time, Anna stood her ground, a sly smile playing on her lips as Bone Crusher lunged towards her with a malevolent laugh. But to his dismay, his expression twisted from anger to sheer panic as she delivered a strong double-handed smack to his face.

In a swift motion, she leaped over his back in a graceful arc, leaving him stumbling forward in his uncontrolled momentum. Adding insult to injury, Anna executed a sharp mule kick to the back of his shoulders, causing him to reel and stumble uncontrollably into a nearby ditch. As Bone Crusher tumbled down, his tied hands rendering him helpless, a stream of colorful curses filled the air.

Laid face first sprawled on the ground, once again he was defeated by her hands. Anna, stood a safe distance away, couldn't contain her laughter at the spectacle unfolding before her. She knew this humiliating fall would sting his pride more than any physical blow ever could.

“Hey Bub, I bet that hurt!” she said with sarcasm, “So much for the Great Bone...”

Anna's laughter abruptly ceased as a forceful gust of wind buffeted her, causing her to brace herself against the onslaught. "What the... hell?" she exclaimed with a mixture of disbelief and unease. Raising her eyes to the Martian sky, she beheld a massive oval ship with four expansive wings and a menacing Vulcan cannon trained directly at them, descending rapidly from the heavens to hover unpromisingly overhead.

Struggling to discern the insignia adorning the ship's side amidst the blinding glare of its searchlights, Anna's instincts screamed a warning. The desolate Badlands were a forsaken wasteland, devoid of life and activity. The unexpected presence of an Earth Security Force vessel in such a desolate location aroused a deep sense of foreboding within her.

As the ESF ship unleashed the full might of its weaponry, deploying the remaining gun ports and activating blinding searchlights that pierced the Martian gloom, the gravity of their predicament became apparent. A voice came from the ship, its authoritative tone cutting through the tense silence, "Freeze! You are under arrest for violating the restricted Earth zones! Non-compliance will result in immediate action!"

As Bone Crusher saw what he believed to be a fleeting chance to escape, Anna remained vigilant, and her gaze fixed on the imposing Earth Security Force vessel overhead. Out of the corner of her eyes she noticed his movements. "Hey, where do you think you're going?" she interjected sharply, halting Bone Crusher's attempted flight in its tracks.

A confident grin adorned Bone Crusher's face as he sought to make a break for it, convinced he could outwit the impending danger. However, his hopes were suddenly dashed as the ESF ship rapidly closed in on him, cutting off his escape route with unwavering precision. Once more, a commanding voice resonated from the vessel, delivering a final ultimatum, "Last warning. Do not proceed."

Caught off guard by the abrupt turn of events, Bone Crusher stumbled forward in a panic, his demeanor evolving from smugness to palpable terror. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as he lifted his gaze, only to meet a fatal bullet aimed squarely at his head. In a grim finale, Bone Crusher fell to the ground, a macabre stream of blood seeping forth to pool at Anna's feet, the grim aftermath of a life cut short.

With a sense of surreal disbelief washing over her, Anna's attention was drawn to a warm sensation on the side of her face. Tentatively, she lifted her hand to inspect the source, a sinking feeling taking hold as her fingertips came away stained with crimson. The harsh reality of the situation dawned on her as she gazed in stunned silence at the blood on her hand. Anna raised her eyes to meet the unrelenting gaze of the ESF ship above, its presence casting a chilling shadow over the desolate Martian landscape.

She was about to go for her badge in the back pocket of her pants when the ship began to land. It transformed for ground assault. The wings separated, then reconfigured into legs, spreading like a spider and the Vulcan cannon extended as the secondary gun ports attached themselves to the searchlights.

"Put your hands up, now! This is your only warning."

With her hand raised and palms out, she showed that she was complying. With the searched light blaring at her Anna tried to be as civil as possible. "Look, I am a New Dicon City officer and right now you're interfering with my invest..."

The voice interrupted her. "I don't care who you are, lady! If you come any closer, you will be fired upon just like your so-called prisoner!"

The standoff between her and the ESF's Mech continued. Anna's patience was running thin. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck with an Earthier with an itchy finger.

Okay, no problem here, she thought. I can take on this asshole. As long as there aren't any more of these..."

Just before she could finish her thought, Anna noticed little red dots appearing all over her body. Out from the starry night, more of the ESF mechs came down and hovered around them. Armed with

heavy arsenal, the ESF troopers began to surround her, cutting off all escape routes.

As her ears twitched downwards, she then finished her thought, guys... okay, and I guess it is still not a problem. As long as they don't find my other prisoner, I can finish talking my way out of this quickly.

Due to the firepower that these troopers were handling, Anna's suspicions grew that these were not just ordinary security units. What she had stepped into was above her pay scale. Since she left New Dicon city's limits, her jurisdiction had ended. There was not much she could do right now.

What was strange to her was that they didn't try to kill her at the moment of Bone Crusher's attempt to flee. Hopefully, it was due to her telling them that she was a cop or they did not want to deal with the paperwork. In any case, if they don't find the other prisoner, then her mission wouldn't be a complete failure.

Suddenly, she heard a distant gunshot. One of the other troopers in the background spoke loud enough for her to hear. "We got another one. He tried to escape."

Frowning, she raised her voice while going after her badge, "Again, I am saying that you are all interfering in police business. So you can do this the easy way or..."

The main Mech who stopped her fired a warning shot before her feet. The red sand of Mars fell on top of her head. By now, all of the Earth's security troopers were pointing laser-tip rifles at her. Their targeting lasers were covering every part of her vital organs. Smirking, Anna looked up to the troopers and mumbled to herself, "So, y'all want to do this the hard way."

Just out of their sight, Anna's back muscles started to tense up with the anticipation of the coming fight. She could feel her body transitioning from flesh to metal. Her long, flowing red hair covered most of the parts that were transforming. It was a matter of time before they figured out what she was. As she tensed her forearms and then triceps, her metallic form was about to be revealed.

Her back was metaphorically against a wall and she almost gave in to her anger when her ear-bud began to buzz. Anna's communication device was finally working. This made her stop before she could act. She checked it to see if it was Sergeant Simms.

"Anna, this is Lieutenant Mitchell. Please stop! Do not take them on!"

"Stacy, get the Serge on," said Anna as quietly as possible.

"Okay, but just..." Stacy was interrupted by Anna saying, "Don't worry, I can handle this."

"Anna this is..." Sergeant Simms was also interrupted by Anna. "Serge, what the hell is the ESF doing here?"

"Shhhhh!"

Damn it, not again, thought Anna.

Her long ears twitched a bit as she could hear some of them talking about her. The troopers had

recognized her from the underground fights that she regularly visited. There had been rumors of a female cop taking on multiple fighters and winning without a scratch.

“No way, that is her.”

“Man, I saw her fight the other day. She was the one who took down the Butcher of Dicon with one shot. If we don’t hit her first, we’re as good as dead.”

“Shit, I don’t think I want to do this. She is a cop after all.”

“Doesn’t matter, we have our orders.”

Anna could hear the fear in their voices and tensions were now wearing thin.

“Anna, do you read me?” said Simms as the communication device in her ear reconnected.

“Stand down!”

“Serge, they killed the perpetrators that I just arrested,” said Anna.

“I know,” said Simms, “Since we lost contact with you the first time, our people have been trying to reach you. We’ve been monitoring your situation by piggybacking onto an Earth Security Force’s satellite. Again, do not proceed or take any action.”

“I’ll try...but they are making it very difficult for me.”

“Hate to say it, but they have jurisdiction here. If you do attack them, this could give them enough reason to shut us down. For now, cooperate with them.”

Knowing that she could take them on with no problem, Anna decided not to take any action that could harm her fellow cops. “Okay, boss, I won’t.”

“Sorry that we couldn’t give you any backup,” said Simms.

“Yeah... I get it,” said Anna as she closed her eyes to calm down. Her body reverted from metal to flesh. Reluctantly, she surrendered. The security forces were apprehensive. They knew who she was and they were not too sure if this was a trick.

Without an incident, Anna allowed them to handcuff her. She smiled at them as they placed her into the holding truck. As soon as they shut the door, she quickly unlocked her hands and threw the cuffs out the barred window. It tagged one of the ESF troopers on the back of his helmet. Angry at her actions, he started to turn back around. His fellow troopers held him from doing something stupid. He wasn’t going to win this one and the others knew that.

Her momentary enjoyment fled away as Anna sat down with her arms crossed. All she could do now was to wait for the long ride to the Earth’s government holding cells. This was not a good day for her.

Out of the opposite window of the holding truck, Anna noticed someone at a distance looking down at the scene. She got up and leaned over to see if she could make out who was running this operation. As she focused her eyes on them, she could see two men standing on top of a hill. Like her

body, her eyes were augmented to see further than human capability.

One of the men was watching her with binoculars. He had a goatee with slick black hair and was dressed in a long silver-gray trench coat. On the right side of his coat was an emblem of the Earth's Security Force. His name was Lance Storm, the newly promoted Earth's chief of security for Mars.

Standing by the car in a sleek deep blue suit stood Dr. John Lorick, his demeanor exuding an air of planned composure. Alongside him, Lance, equally attired for the confidential operation, glanced towards Anna with a quizzical expression. "Who is this woman?" he inquired, casting a curious gaze in her direction.

Seizing the opportunity to deflect suspicion, Dr. Lorick feigned ignorance, masking his true awareness with a practiced nonchalance. "I think she is from the New Dicon police," he responded smoothly, his voice betraying no hint of uncertainty.

Perplexed by Anna's presence in the restricted zone, Lance probed further, "But she didn't know that this place was a secured zone and off-limits to everyone?" Dr. Lorick subtly steered the conversation to a darker possibility, insinuating, "Maybe she was the cause of that explosion."

As Lance's thoughts swirled with uncertainty, a sudden sense of flustered admiration washed over him, finding himself momentarily captivated by Anna's charm. He blushed faintly, only to be abruptly jolted from his reverie as he realized that Anna had not only noticed but had boldly gestured with a flick of the middle finger in his direction.

Caught off guard by Anna's audacious display of defiance, Lance found himself at a loss for words, torn between amusement and embarrassment. In a bid to diffuse the tension, he awkwardly returned her gesture with a hesitant wave and laughed. "She is going to be a handful."

At that time, John opened the door and got inside. He looked at his watch. It was around six pm Earth's time.

John's smile deepened, a glint of calculation gleaming in his eyes as he unraveled the intricate threads of their covert plan. The explosive distraction had served its purpose, paving the way for his CTC operatives to seize control of vital information and technology that held the key to their past technological advancements.

The shrill ring of the car phone pierced the tense atmosphere, signaling the relay from the retrieval team who had seamlessly infiltrated the abandoned lab under the guise of security personnel. Their cryptic message echoed through the receiver, outlining their progress as they navigated the labyrinthine corridors to their elusive target.

With a subtle glance towards Lance, his gaze lingering for a moment before returning to the phone, John's voice was a whisper of authority. "Go ahead and proceed as planned," he instructed, a note of steel underlying his calm demeanor. "Secure the main package and sweep clean any trace that may lead

back to us."

"Will do, but what about the scientists in the upper levels?"

"Well, you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

"Ahh, sir?"

"We cannot have any witnesses. Do you copy?"

"I copy that, sir."

As John hung up the phone, Lance surprised him by opening the vehicle door and said,

"I guess we can head back now."

"Yeah, but before we head back, I would like your men to recheck the perimeter one more time. I am not convinced that she is working by herself."

"That is fine. It will give me a chance to run a background check on our cop friend."

John smiled with a cocky expression and looked at his watch. Other than the Red Skulls improvising by trying to kill this cop with the bomb that he gave them, this was going almost exactly as planned. No one in the Earth's Government was the wiser that this was his doing.

