

PART ONE

“The Princess of Mercenaries v. The Blind Assassin”

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“Marquis, why are you here?”

There was no doubt that he heard the question the first time she asked. Lauren was standing only an arms length away, but the consternation that engulfed Marquis the instant he spotted Lauren making her way through the dense crowd of protestors gathered outside the Union Station entrance, and then noticing a security guard, in a uniform different from standard station security, being pulled along by Lauren was still a sight that had left Marquis speechless.

Lauren, who initially was thrown aback the moment she realized it indeed was Marquis she recognized from across the parking lot waiting at her car, had since then let her face rest in her hand as she shook her head unable to hide her embarrassment any longer. In addition, the prying eyes of people passing, either heading to their cars or preparing to maneuver their way through the rowdy crowd of picketers to enter the station, were making her feel even more uncomfortable about the unprecedented situation she was in.

“Bro! What’re you even talkin’ about!?” Marquis shouted. “Why is this nigga followin’ you to yo car?!” He grilled Lauren but was staring Rondel sized daggers at her security guard escort.

“First off,” Lauren darted back, “you really need to calm down yellin’ at me like that. Secondly, didn’t you—“

“Humans Are Cops! Robots Are Not!” “Humans Are Cops! Robots Are Not!”

The sudden outburst of the simple chant from the protesters after seeing two police cars pull up to the red light to make the left turn into the parking lot had startled Lauren and caused her to flinch.

“Even after the warning of arrest from the Sheriff’s Department on the news last night, these idiots still gathered to protest.” Lauren’s companion remarked. “How can a PA-90 unit be racist? If Isiah Johnson wasn’t in violation of his parole, he wouldn’t have gotten hurt.” He continued in such an unremorseful tone that it made the couple who were passing at the time visibly uncomfortable to hear him say it.

He had been vigilantly keeping close surveillance on every individual in the crowd under the brim of his company baseball cap ever since he and Lauren exited the station. As a result, he was showing no signs of interest in what was transpiring in front of him.

“I promise, it’s always our people.” He groaned as he shook his head in disappointment.

“Bruh, what!?” Marquis was so thrown off and upset by the unrelated response that, he unconsciously released his grip on the bouquet of sun-colored roses he was already holding carelessly at his side, letting them fall to the ground, and ending up standing on the buds as he took a threatening step forward. “I asked what’re you doin’ followin’ my girl to her car! You don’t think she’s capable of finding her whip herself?!”

“Marquis! Cut it out! This is just Donnell!” Lauren shouted and unable to hold in the anger that was beginning to overtake her disconcertment. She had stepped in front of Marquis, blocking his path towards Donnell, and putting herself in between the two.

“I knew who it was the moment I saw the damn rent-a-cop uniform!” Marquis whined.

The insult had caught Donnell’s attention. He then turned his focus to Marquis, lifting his head slightly to make sure that Marquis could see his glare under the brim of his cap and sized up his opponent.

Marquis had never met Donnell in person, but Lauren had incessantly spoken so highly of him on numerous of occasions that, the instant she said the name, it had affirmed Marquis’s suspicions of who the unknown guard was when he first saw him and caused Marquis’s heart to sink into his stomach.

“You know what,” Donnell chuckled, “I’m gonna go ahead and remove myself from this picture. You two obviously have some things y’all need to talk about.” He said to Lauren but continuing to glare at Marquis. Donnell was a few inches taller, and although neither one of them could survive a round in a heavyweight fight, Donnell was more athletically built due to his aspirations of becoming a highly decorated officer of the law.

“Yeah, that’ll be best. Take yo punk ass to yo own car.” Marquis darted.

“You just gon’ keep on, huh?” Donnell replied as he smirked.

“Marquis! Please, shut up!” Lauren shouted again but immediately calming herself as to not draw any further attention to the three of them. “You’re always trying to judge the full picture through a peephole.” She then turned to Donnell, who she was certain she would need to settle as well, but to her surprise; for the second time today within a matter of minutes, which in that moment made her question what she thought she knew about men, rather than be triggered, she witnessed a composed Donnell who seemed to be staring in amusement at Marquis. “I am so sorry about this, Donnell. I had no idea he was going to be here.”

“Wow!” Marquis stepped back and threw his hands up to the sky. “Are you seriously apologizing to this nigga right now?!”

Lauren just rolled her eyes in response.

“You good.” Donnell replied in such a comforting tone that Lauren subtly exhaled in relief and relaxed her shoulders. “I just got the best news any young black man could get, so nothing is gonna kill my joy today.” He remarked while gazing in Lauren’s eyes with an inviting smile.

“Take yo happy ass on then.” Marquis mumbled under his breath.

The sky had become completely blanketed by the veil of gray clouds compiling to obscure the suns rays and the pleasant earthy smell of oncoming rain began permeating the air. The picketers, which had no participants within the group who were either dressed or prepared for the approaching storm, seemed to not be bothered by the drizzles of rain as they became even more rowdy as the two squad cars pulled up in front of the steps of the Union Station entrance.

Marquis, who was even more less of a fan of the rain than the great Tina Turner hearing it up against her window, was also, to Donnell’s amusement, unprepared. Consequently, the navy blue and white limited edition, NBA Playoff, suede black and yellow trimmed Bronny James sneakers he was adamant on peacocking around, were gradually being ruined by the almost mist like drops of rain, but Marquis could care less. The weather and the horrible condition it would leave the porous material of his lavish footwear was of little concern. Because at that very moment, as officers attempted crowd control on the uproarious picketers throwing random trash at the offline PA-90 android units in the passenger seat of each squad car, and as Lauren kissed her teeth while she searched her duffel bag for her hoodie, what gripped Marquis’s attention so tightly, causing his eyebrows to lower and come together halfway, to watch with silent indignation and confusion, was Donnell walk two feet to the passenger side of Lauren’s car, grip the door handle, and then hear the system recognition indicator ding for the doors to unlock.

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“This nigga’s chip credentials are programmed into the car that I pay the note on! I can’t believe dis bruh?!” Marquis might as well had been shouting to himself. He was yet again futilely attempting to yell over Trae’s vocals that were blasting at high volume through every speaker in the recording studio.

“This is crazy bruh!”

“Uh-huh!” Trae answered, but not entirely listening. He had returned to bobbing his head in unison to the beat, and slowly adjusting one of the small knobs or channel faders on the six-foot long mixing board whenever his head bobbing quickly transformed into a disapproving shake.

“The whole thing got me hot bro!” Marquis yelled in a somber tone, handing over the blunt, and then plopping down on the couch. Since the moment of his impromptu arrival, Marquis had been pacing from one end of the studio to the other, furiously illustrating the scene from earlier, and only stopping every few seconds to honor the rules of the rotation.

“It is! I on’t know about the second verse though!” Trae replied. The lit backwood was bouncing in the corner of his mouth with every word he spoke as he continued to utilize both hands to work the mixing board. “It gotta be more than hot, ya feel me! It gotta be fuego!”

“What?! Bro! Turn it off for a minute I can’t hear you! I came to talk bruh! I’m goin’ through it right now!” Marquis whined.

Trae, then, with an aggressive tap on the twenty-four-inch monitor mounted atop the mixing board, abruptly stopped the music, and left his holographic image in a candid frozen state in the booth. This was not at the request of Marquis, on the contrary, Trae hadn't understood the last few sentences Marquis yelled, and the reason for the sudden silence in the studio was due to Trae's trepidations of the song.

"Yeah. Imma have to redo the verse." Trae said glaring at his holographic counterpart.

"Bro, what is you talkin' about? Have you not been listening?" Marquis questioned in an irritated tone.

"What is *you* talkin' about? Of course, I was listening." Trae replied as if he were offended that Marquis would even ask as he passed the blunt. "I just didn't hear the last thing you said."

Marquis sighed and took a hit.

"I was sayin' that Lauren has some random's chip credentials programmed into the car that I pay the note on." He reluctantly repeated.

Trae then sighed.

"Bro, you still on that?" Trae replied.

"Nigga! It just happened like an hour ago!" Marquis replied hysterically and then passed the spliff.

Trae shook his head in obvious disappointment.

"Where you leave off again?" He asked.

"Bro! I knew you weren't even listenin'!" Marquis whined.

"To keep it one hunnid witchu, I was barely listenin' nigga!" Trae remarked in an exploding tone of brutal honesty and continuing to drop a barrage of truth bombs. "You show up here bein' all melodramatic like you two don't go through some kind of something on a regular bro." Trae paused to take two hits of the blunt, hand it back to Marquis, and then continued after he exhaled. "You and Lauren been with each other three years, and you two have broken up and gotten back together more times than any dysfunctional black couple in the history of dysfunctional black couples bruh. I gotta be honest, I'm low-key kinda tired of hearin' about it. I know Shantae is tired of hearin' about it from Lauren. 'Cause after she talks to Lauren about y'all bullshit she come grills me about some bullshit. I ain't got time for that. I'm tryna ride this wave from my mixtape, these labels is callin', and I just can't right now bro. You know it's ride or die for life, but you gon' have to ride solo on this one for a bit."

Marquis passed the blunt and just stared at his childhood friend with an expression of bewilderment plastered on his face.

“His chip credentials were programmed into the 2035 Tesla that I put the down payment on and that I pay the note on.” He reminded and enunciating every word as if he were speaking to someone who wasn’t native to the English language.

“I hear you, and that’s messed up, but you ain’t gon’ be able to pay the note no mo’ no way.” Trae replied.

“Why I ain’t?” Marquis challenged.

“You definitely ain’t movin’ a damn thing for P-Lo no mo’, we both know that. And working at the warehouse loading and unloading them self-driving sixteen wheelers mos def ain’t gon’ do it and pay yo rent bruh.” Trae reminded his friend in a smug response as he took another puff.

“Who says I ain’t runnin’ wit P-Lo anymore? Dey a damn lie.” Marquis snapped back.

“Okay. When was the last time you talk to him?” Trae inquired and passing.

Marquis inhaled a substantial amount of smoke into his lungs this time around. Although he knew the answer, Marquis still put on the façade of seeming like he was thinking on it.

“I on’t know. It has been a minute. But I’ve only been back a few weeks though. Or did you forget I was locked up too?” Marquis retorted as he exhaled and delivered the blunt back to Trae.

Trae scoffed at Marquis’s question.

“Nigga,” Trae said with a blank stare, one raised eye-brow, and then took another quick hit before continuing, “You was in county for thirty days, stop actin’ like you were away at San Quinten or some shit. Also, you were there for getting caught with P-Lo’s product. Or did you forget that too? Don’t try and play me bro. You’re avoiding Skip and Meech.” Trae retorted back and then taking another quick puff before handing the spliff back over to Marquis.

“Bruh I ain’t avoiding *no* damn body.” Marquis snapped back and offended by the assumption. “And no, I haven’t forgotten anything.” He then took a quick puff in the same fashion as Trae and continued, “I ain’t never been pulled over goin’ down Western. Ever. The one time I do,” Another quick puff and, “It’s not a PA-90, it’s a pastey ass warm blooded idiot, who decides he’s gonna search my whip because I looked suspicious.” Marquis answered and keeping the rotation going.

“Bro, yo tags were expired.” Trae reminded, inhaling deep, and then adding while still holding in the smoke, “And you still ain’t fix it.

“Regardless of all that, they only got me for possession, not distribution. And It was only two grams anyway. They probably ain’t even hear about it.” Marquis remarked as he received the blunt from Trae.

“Bro, it don’t matter if it was a quarter of a pill. You think they don’t know you got hemmed up wit P-Lo shit? You honestly think P-Lo don’t know? There’s no way he one of the biggest suppliers in LA of the most wanted drug in the cities underbelly and not have eyes and ears everywhere.” Trae forewarned.

Marquis scoffed as he took another quick puff.

“There you go again acting like Percy is some untouchable drug kingpin. All three of us were raised in the same damn group home. We protected this nigga when the Johnson twins would bully his ass on the way home from middle school, and we were both just sellin’ with this nigga three years ago. Granted he hadn’t gotten his hands on tilt yet so we wasn’t really making much, but we were still pushin’.” Marquis answered and passing.

“Bro that was back in high school and since then Percy has gotten both of his hands on tilt bruh. He damn near has the whole LA drug game in a choke hold. You say I’m actin’ like he’s untouchable, when was the last time you saw him in person? Nobody has seen him in the flesh for a year. Ever since he got tilt, bro been like an unseen general, commandin’ his soldiers from an undisclosed location, and raking in the profits— which, honestly, I think is smart with the way people is dyin’ over the shit.” Trae said.

“Well, good thing we know his lieutenants.” Marquis remarked arrogantly. “I’ll just go holla at Skip and Meech, ‘cause ain’t nobody scared, tell’em front me a few packs like normal, get this money, and get shit back on track. Me and Lauren didn’t have issues when my pockets were on swole.”

Trae was so taken aback by Marquis’s response that he put out the blunt, sat back in his office chair, and stared at him with a disgruntled expression on his face and said:

“Bruh, you don’t need to smoke weed no more.”

He then shook his head and continued, “Did you not hear anything I just said? How you gon’ ask them to front you when you owe’m?”

Marquis chuckled at Trae’s question as if the answer were obvious.

“Bro, Percy is not trippin’ about a couple dozen pills.” Marquis exclaimed. “I mean sure, if it were some other nigga, then yeah, they’d probably would’ve gotten dealt with in county, but it’s me. And if Skip and Meech gotta problem, I’ll just hit up Percy, if it comes to that. I doubt it will though.” Marquis paused to think for a moment and then continued, “Yeah, it’ll be smooth. Get my pockets off anorexia ‘cause that’s the only reason why Lauren trippin’. It’s the first time a nigga ever been locked up, she’s just scared, and I can understand. I on’t know why you actin’ like I can’t get shit back to normal.”

Trae shook his head. It was clear that he was not getting through to his friend.

“Look Marquis, I’m not gonna tell you what to do with yo life, but remember, I was sellin’ with an end goal bro. Fund studio time and purchase beats from producers. As soon as I saw a little money comin’ in I got out and never looked back. Us knowing Percy allowed me to do that. I know you only a part-time distributor, and I hope you understand that you knowing Percy is the only reason you’re even able to be that, and I hope you recognize Skip and Meech don’t like that shit. They gave me shit when I was doin’ it. That’s why I kept it cool with them niggas, put up with they shit, as long as it wasn’t anything overboard, because I knew that I needed things to run smoothly for my plan to work. You owe Percy money now, you in the system now, you know Skip and Meech was waiting for you to slip up,

and you gave them the satisfaction. I think you should just let yo funds come from this warehouse job your P.O. appointed you bro.” Trae insisted.

Marquis immediately cursed himself at the mention of his probation officer. With everything that happened; seeing Lauren together with Donnell, the long trip to the flower shop downtown to purchase the expensive flowers that ended up on the ground, and the overwhelming feelings that he was carefully navigating without any guidance, it had slipped Marquis’s mind that he was scheduled to meet with his probation officer earlier today.

“You good?” Trae asked of his friend. He had noticed and heard Marquis curse himself.

“I’m cool, Keep going. I’m hearin’ you.” Marquis replied.

“I think you should just lay low, and just get yo mind right bro.” Trae continued, “Check in witchya P.O. every month like you suppose to, which is all self-serve, and over the monitor when you get there since your chipped now. And I hate to remind you, but you were sitting in that same spot on the couch a couple of days ago tellin’ me that you just got through explaining to Lauren how y’all needed a break.”

“Yeah, and I guess in 2037 that’s code for go fuck the guy that works security atcho job.” Marquis darted.

“Just do me a favor,” Trae sighed. “before you do anything, sleep on it. That’s why God gave us night.” He advised.

Marquis had no response. He sat back on the couch, laid his head back, and watched the smoke dance above as he contemplated what to do about Lauren, how he was going to justify his absence to his PO, and now more importantly, what he was going to do about Skip and Meech.



One thing Trae was inexplicably correct about, in Marquis’s opinion, contrary to all the other statements Marquis was on the fence about, was that once Percy had solidified himself as a reliable source and supplier of tilt, over time he became increasingly more difficult to meet with in person. The last time Marquis had a face to face with Percy was almost two years ago today. It was the day after Trae mentioned he was going to re-up for the last time, and Marquis, after having an argument with Lauren for the hundredth time regarding her ill feelings towards the way he was making money, had made the same decision to re-up for the last time as well. Trae stuck to his word, but as for Marquis, Percy had made his first major financial transaction with tilt and Marquis saw an opportunity to make even more money at an even faster rate. And so, as Percy’s underground and illegal pharmaceutical business expanded, and tilt began to gradually spread throughout the city’s urban communities, Percy’s street army of young foot soldiers grew, allowing him to disappear into the background of his lucrative enterprise, and resulting in Marquis eventually having to stop picking up his restock from Percy personally and receiving them from Skip and Meech.

“Aye! I know y’all fools hear me!” Marquis yelled as he angrily banged on the door.

It was going on five minutes and Marquis was getting tired of waiting outside. Although his shoes were already ruined, he still wanted to salvage them as best as he could before the rain really started coming down. The drizzling had stopped but the gloomy weather kept residents inside and the neighborhood silent all except for the buzzing of the patrol drones, which Marquis watch with disdain and a little fear as they departed and returned to their outpost at the Watts Towers. He wasn’t too certain how he would be reprimanded for missing his appointment with his probation officer, and so he inched a little closer to the door to be out of whatever sight of the drones he could.

“Hey there friend!” A staticky voice spoke and catching Marquis’s attention. “I don’t think they’re home!” The voice was coming from the facial screen display of a standard Honda helper bot. The year-old model was walking its owners brown and white fluffy Pomeranian.

“You’re here for Terrance and Clifford, right?” The face of a middle aged and well groomed white man asked.

Marquis didn’t answer immediately but rather responded with a glare.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be nosey,” He continued, “I’m Steve, by the way, and I just thought I’d tell you that I don’t think they’re home. No one on the block has seen them all morning. Clifford usually walks his dog every morning and this little guy makes his attempts to woo. Cliff’s the only one on the block that physically walks his dog. Showing all of us how lazy we are.” Steve said as he chuckled.

“Fasho. Good lookin’ out.” Marquis replied and still having the expression that, without a doubt, asked the question: “Why are you talking to me?”

The screen on the bot then suddenly switched to an all-white display, blending in with the color of the bot and seeming as if there was no screen at all until the words: WALK COMPLETED, appeared on the display in black boldened letters.

“Whoops. Looks like ol’ Blazer’s walk is up.” Steve’s face had reappeared on the monitor. “It was nice chatting with you friend. Tell those two crazy guys Steve and Janet said Hello and that we’ll see them at the dinner party next week.” The bot then glided off with the Pomeranian leading the way as if it knew it was time to go home.

It was neighbors like Steve that made it difficult for Marquis to believe that Watts was once, as the Mayor stated, a harsh urban community of gang violence and other debauchery that they don’t want to return to. Although Skip and Meech had their issues they were never the types to, as rumors of gang members of the past would state, flamboyantly broadcast the fact that they were gang affiliated. With the recent announcement of governments and monarchs around the world focusing on the advancement of technological security for the safety of their countries, it was hard for Marquis to imagine gangs or crime syndicates allowing themselves to be easily identified by law enforcement with the colors they wore, or by just being ignorantly conspicuous with their criminal endeavors.

Another drone buzzed by, this one flying slightly lower than the previous, and making Marquis even more anxious. Tired of waiting, Marquis walked to the side of the house and made his way to the

backyard down the narrow sideway path. He held his nose as he walked past the overstuffed trash cans with flies and roaches surrounding it. The backyard was just as a mess and a complete difference from the upkept front yard. The small patches of high grass the surrounded the empty pool looked as if they could have been hiding a hunting animal ready to pounce at any moment. The pool was a quarter filled with rainwater that mixed with leaves and debris which made the water a dark brown color.

Marquis was surprised to see that the back door was ajar as he made his way passed the scattered plastic folding chairs and weight set.

He stood at the white rusted screen steel door examining the handle to make sure it hadn't been tampered with. Satisfied with the results, he then entered the house cautiously and as soon as he was completely in the door, he was overtaken by the eerie silence. The kitchen was vacant except for the roaches scattering around the linoleum floor. The sink was piled high with dishes that, from the looks of the remaining particles of dry food, definitely hadn't been washed for some days, which wasn't uncommon, but the running water that filled the sink to the point of spilling over onto the floor heightened Marquise's suspicions. He walked over to the sink, being careful not to slip, and turned the faucet off. Immediately after hearing the commotion that Marquis was making, Spike, Meech's year old Bulldog pattered into the kitchen. Spike stopped just at the doorway into the kitchen and stared at Marquis for a moment with what seemed like to Marquis as a look of a crest fallen puppy. Spike then turned to disappear back further into the house and Marquis was shocked when he noticed the trail of little red footsteps left behind by Spike. Marquis reluctantly followed the trail. The moment he exited the kitchen and gradually made his way down the hallway, he caught whiff of a familiar pungent aroma. The rusted metallic smell was so strong that he could taste a hint of copper in the back of his throat the closer he got to the living room.

What Marquis saw as he stood in the doorway of the living room was such a horrific and gruesome scene that, immediately upon sight, Marquis's stomach violently tightened, and was almost unsuccessful to keep down his breakfast. The three bodies laid out on the blood-soaked sectional were so mutilated that they were hardly recognizable.

The first person he was able to discern after having to force himself to keep looking was Meech. He had been cut, or rather sliced from his waist to his forehead and was split open like a bloody butterfly cut roast. Both his hands were missing half of each finger, except for the right hand, which was only missing half of the index and thumb. Next to his right hand, which Marquis had to squint to make sure what he was seeing was correct, was a 9mm pistol with the barrel diagonally cut in half and the top portion of index finger gripping the trigger.

Although he was unable to see the faces of the other two bodies, Marquis was sure one of the bodies was Skip, but he took a guess of the other. The unknown person, who's upper body was face down on the coffee table, while his bottom half was seated perfectly on the couch, was more than likely Skips cousin Tyrell. The last body, Skip's, was leaning forward, facedown, with a bloody cut that extended from the back of the neck, continued in a perfect straight line up the back of his head, to the top, and seemed to resume with no end.

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The dog hadn't stopped barking since Marquis left the house. Why he even brought it along with him was beyond his understanding. He didn't even care for animals, but he felt that no living human nor animal should endure what he just witnessed. He couldn't get the horrifying images out of his head. It was as if they were chiseled into his brain like the name on the tombstone above the grave he imagined he would soon be in. His heart continued to palpitate, and his hands were still trembling so much so that, against his own rule, as the car pulled up to the red light, he let the steering wheel disappear into the dashboard and allowed the auto-drive to take on the responsibility of getting him the rest of the way to his apartment. Marquis thought about how for someone to go that far, it had to have been personal, and if they were willing to go to those extremes, there was no need for Marquis to be dubious in believing that anyone affiliated with Skip, Meech, or even Percy would succumb to the same fate. He began to make a mental list of all possible enemies Percy could have, as well as the one's Skip and Meech, accumulated over time, and the enemies he had made himself during his time pushing with Percy. It wasn't a secret the underground Los Angeles drug business had a reputation for being dangerous, but with the introduction of tilt, things were slowly returning to the dark times of the heroin epidemic of the seventies. Bodies were turning up left and right, from uptown to downtown, mainly bodies of young and affiliated guys trying to make a name for themselves with tilt, but either not knowing or arrogant in thinking that they are the exception to the consequences of attempting to push on someone's established territory. Marquis then thought about all the shooting over the years that involved tilt in one way or another, and he realized that's all they were, shootings. None of the murders were even in the same category of what he had just witnessed.

"Come on dog, shut up bro." Marquis pleaded with the barking animal.

The car phone then began to go off, silencing the Bulldog, and giving Marquis a little bit of peace to think straight.

It was an unknown call, and Marquis of course didn't answer unknown calls. But with everything that had been happening, Marquis was fed up with being in the realm of the unknown, and so,

"Who dis?"

"Yes. Hello? Can I speak with Marquis please?" A rough and scrappy voice asked.

"Yeah. Who dis?" Marquis demanded.

"Marquis?" The voice asked

"I'm about to hang up. I asked who this is?" Marquis demanded.

"This is Dan, your supervisor." Dan darted.

Marquis cursed himself under his breath, but it was just loud enough for Dan to hear.

"It's six fifteen." He pointed out "I'm assuming you're pulling into the parking structure."

“Nah, I called ol’ girl earlier and told her I wasn’t gonna be able to make it in today.” Marquis explained. He honestly couldn’t remember if he did call in to let them know that he wasn’t coming in. He was already on the fence about coming in to work because he wasn’t too sure of how the situation with Lauren would turn out. At the time he was hoping that things would have turned out so well that he’d have an excuse for not coming into work.

“What girl? No one in the warehouse or the front office was aware that you weren’t coming in Marquis. You didn’t call anybody.” Dan accused.

“So, you callin’ me a liar bruh!?” Marquis questioned as if he were truly offended.

“You know what, don’t worry about it.” Dan said.

“We good then? I ain’t gotta come in?” Marquis said with relief in his voice.

“You don’t have to come in anymore. It’s all the same with you ex-cons. The courts send y’all over here and you last for about as long as it takes for me to piss and you right back in jail.” Dan remarked with disdain.

Marquis was shocked which left him speechless for a bit. Dan was an old tall stocky and usually stoic white man, and so Marquis was not expecting the response he received from Dan.

“I’ll go ahead and contact your probation officer and let her know that it didn’t work out.” Dan remarked.

“Hol’ up bruh!” Marquis quickly yelled. “Why you takin’ it so far bro? It ain’t even all that serious. I’m just not able to come in today.” Marquis explained.

As he glared at the screen on the dashboard, he saw that an incoming call from Lauren was coming through.

“Yeah, I know. It’s today and then it’ll be another day and another. It’s just best if we cut ties now. I do wish you the best of luck. You honestly did seem like you were one of the good ones. I’m gonna—”

Dan abruptly cut out and all the lights inside Marquis’s car immediately began to flash red and blue.

“Please remain calm. You are being pulled over by your local law enforcement.” A soothing female voice spoke out from the car speakers.

“For what?!” Marquis yelled as his car slowly pulled to the right of the vacant industrial street, came to a stop, and then shut off.

The dog cowered in the backseat and whimpered while Marquis watched in the rear-view mirror as the metal anatomical human like android exited the patrol SUV that pulled up and parked behind Marquis. The headlights from the SUV were so bright that they were almost blinding, and all that Marquis could make out was a silhouette of a male figure approaching his car in ominous delayed steps. Marquis felt a cold chill fall over him as he watched the android inch closer. This fear was normal for

anyone who was pulled over by a PA-90 unit. The reputation of the police android preceded itself by ten-fold. A chrome human like machine that was the superman version of humans themselves. Marquis had many friends, including himself, that had encounters with a PA-90 that had left lasting impressions. From attempting to out-run one and witnessing the unmatched and terrifying speed and agility of the unit, to those attempting to attack them with bullets that have just as much effect on the PA-90 as a foam ball has the affect on a metal bat. The only thing that had proven to show some minuscule damage, although not physical, were the constant protest and the myriad of petitions that attempt to dismiss the androids as law enforcement.

“Please remain still for scan.” The unit demanded. It had made it to the car, positioned itself in front of the driver side door, and bent forward slightly to be face to face with Marquis. The unit then froze in place as it started to scan. On the screen where its facial features would be, red dots cascaded down like drops of lava, and continued for a few seconds before the mesmerizing display ceased and the unit straightened its stance.

“Marquis Thompson.” The unit remarked coldly.

“Nah, I’m just wearing a Marquis disguise.” He replied sarcastically

“You are in violation of Vehicle Code 14601.1. Please exit your vehicle and await further instructions.” The unit ordered.

Marquis was shocked for a moment, but it quickly turned into regret. Marquis had made the choice to spend the only money he had left on Lauren’s past due car payment rather than paying the renewal fee for his driver’s license.

“Hol’ up real quick, I just forgot to pay it. I can pay it right now. Just gimme a second.” Marquis pleaded as he reached for his phone.

“Marquis Thompson. You are in violation of Vehicle Code 14601.1. Please exit your vehicle and await further instruction.” The unit repeated as if it had never said it the first time, and in the same monotone voice.

Marquis then angrily stopped his attempts to fix the problem and pay his fee online. He knew that there was no pleading with a soulless machine and the unit asking a third time and beyond wouldn’t be a good choice for him to go with.

“Move! I can’t get out if you in the way!” Marquis yelled with an attitude.

The unit took a step back at the same time Marquis opened the door and he almost hit the unit.

“Aight, now what?” Marquis asked impatiently.

The unit paused for a moment once again as if it froze in time.

“Please remain where you are. A human Officer and tow truck have been contacted and will arrive shortly.” The unit responded.

“Wait, what?!” Marquis was only expecting an insanely expensive ticket at worst. “Bro, you not takin’ my car! I can pay the fee right now just let me!” Marquis demanded.

The PA-90 unit paused for a second as if it were considering the command.

“Please remain where you are. A human Officer and tow truck will arrive shortly.” It repeated.

“Bro, what the fuck?!” Marquis shouted in anger.

“Please remain calm or you will be detained.” The unit warned.

“Fuck you!” Marquis snapped back. “If you’d lemme—” Marquis stopped. The abrupt sound of a revving engine from, what Marquis assumed was an approaching motorcycle, caught him off guard.

“Please remain where you are. A human Officer and tow truck will arrive shortly.”

Marquis paid the unit no mind and stared ahead in anticipation at the entrance to the street tunnel with a bewildered expression. The sun had laid to rest and the tunnel lights illuminating the street tunnel were few, and so it was as if the deeper the view into the tunnel the darker it became. Although the motorcycle was still not in view, the echoing of the engine accelerating even further indicated to Marquis it was fast approaching.

Then, suddenly, without any time for the android to react, a midnight black sports bike, with illuminated white trim, had burst out of the tunnel, and was speeding towards Marquis and the PA-90 unit. Marquis was shocked, the bike was coming towards them at an alarming speed, but on the wrong side of the road. Before Marquis could really comprehend what was going on, sparks flew as the motorcycle sped pass, and causing Marquis to quickly shield his face with his forearms. The tires then screeched as the biker hit the breaks and swerved to a stop. Marquis was stunned by the flamboyant entrance, but his attention was immediately taken away when what felt like hot grease popping from a skillet sizzling bacon had hit him on the side of the face. He turned and was shocked when he witnessed the PA-90 unit still standing, but completely headless, and with exposed severed wires violently sparking, and spewing a thick white colored fluid. He looked down to see the head of the unit next to his feet with a pool of black liquid pouring out its neck and surrounding him.

“Marquis Thompson!” The biker yelled out in a stern but scrambled voice.

Marquis was so astonished by what had just happened that his whole body stiffened as he stared at his reflection in the pool of black liquid. It was the first time he, or anyone for that matter, had seen a PA-90 unit be taken down so easily. It was the first time he’d seen one taken down period and he was still trying to accept it.

“Hey! I don’t have time for this!” The mysterious biker yelled while stomping towards Marquis.

Marquis, still in a daze, continued to stare at the puddle he was now standing in.

“Yo!” The biker had shoved Marquis in attempt to jolt him out of his catatonic state. “Just tell me where the sword is so I can go.”

“If you gon’ kill me just go ahead and get it over with.” He said with a dejected tone in his voice.

“Kill you?” The biker took a step back.

“Bruh, I already know about Skip and Meech.” Marquis remarked. “Just get it over with.”

The biker then removed the helmet.

“What’re you talkin’ about? Just give me the sword so I can go.” She demanded in an aggressive tone.

Marquis stared at the biker with a gaping expression. She had to be no more than a year older than him. If she were older than him at all. Marquis was also taken aback by how attractive she was, and, despite the fear that was mounting, he was inexplicably drawn to her by her dangerous and confident energy that she so effortlessly exuded.

“Sword? Wait, so you not here to kill me? Who are you then?” Marquis asked with a tone of relief in his voice

The biker sighed.

“Look, whatever ruse you’re tryna attempt, just stop it. Gimme the Dark Blade and I’ll be on my way. Nobody has to get hurt.” She warned.

“Okay. I’m lost. If you’re not here to kill me, then what do you want?” Marquis questioned and genuinely confused about what was going on.

“Did you not just hear me?”

“Hear what? You somehow takedown a damn PA-90 like it was nothing?” Marquis subtly kicked the severed head and took a few steps back to remove himself from the puddle of black liquid. “Who are you bruh?” Marquis then demanded. His fear had begun to subside, and frustration began to creep in.

“My name is Nihari.” She sighed while shaking her head in disappointment. “And you’re clearly oblivious. So that means coming to you was a waist of time and your father *does* still have it.”

Marquis’s eyes widened, “My pops?!” He quickly replied. “You do know that nigga’s been dead since I was four? Who are you?”

Before she could answer, the sound of the patrol car door opening diverted their attention to the intimidating silhouette of another PA-90 unit exiting the SUV.

“Another one?!” Marquis yelled as he squinted his eyes to be sure that the figure standing idle and being obscured by the bright headlights was not flesh. But before he could confirm, a small emblem began to glow red on the left side of the figure’s chest, and when Marquis saw that, not only did it validate his assumption, but he also began to hyperventilate. Marquis didn’t need to focus his attention anymore because the black color was fitting for the figure. He knew that the illuminating Los Angeles Police Department badge engraved into the chest meant that this was no ordinary PA-90 unit. It was

similar in design to the standard unit but rather than be fitted with a police uniform, it was bare, with a midnight black finish. This was a PA-90 combat android.

“A combat droid?! What is a combat droid doing here?! I’m on probation bruh!” Marquis whined placing his hands in the air as if to surrender.

“Please remain where you are! You are being arrested! Thank you for your cooperation!” The unit stated.

Nihari, as if it were instinct, had immediately responded by getting into what Marquis recognized as a martial art’s front stance. This unprecedented reaction to a combat unit confused Marquis so much so that he had to ask her straight out,

“Bro, what the hell is wrong with you?”

In which Nihari simply replied,

“Just shut up and stay out of the- “

She suddenly stopped and squinted her eyes.

“What’s wrong now?” Marquis questioned, but then averted his eyes back towards the PA-90 combat android just in time to see the unit fall to the ground like a pile of discarded metal scraps, and revealing a sinister figure standing behind it.

“BRUH!! WHAT IS GOING ON!!” Marquis shouted hysterically.

“Who are you?!” Nihari questioned the mysterious figure.

The headlights of the SUV then cut off abruptly and Marquis was able to make out the man standing in front of the downed android. He was wearing a formal gray kimono that looked as if it hadn’t been washed for centuries. His dreads were long and covered his face, but Marquis was able to see that his eyes were covered by a tattered cloth. With both hands, he was clutching a tall wooden staff that had a curve at the top, and three small jingle bells hanging. He was leaning on the staff as if it were the sole reason for him being able to stand while he subtly rocked his head back and forth.

“I asked you a question! I won’t ask again!” Nihari warned.

There was an awkward silence and then the bells jingled.

“Good evening, Young Thompson. Please forgive my intrusion, but I will need you to come with me. My employer has business with you.” He replied in such a civil tone that Marquis relaxed enough to allow his curiosity to rise.

“Who is yo employer?” Marquis asked.

Nihari then kissed her teeth.

“I told you, I ain’t got time. Shit is getting too real to be playing with you, and whoever he is.” Nihari darted. She then reached over her shoulder as if to grab something holstered on her back, which confused Marquis when he witnessed this because he wondered if she knew that nothing was holstered

on her back. But in that same instance, Marquis's eyes were diverted back towards the mysterious man by the sound of what seemed like a gust of wind whistling pass, and instead of seeing the blind man, what Marquis saw and heard simultaneously, before he could finish blinking, was the sight of the staff alone, suspended in the air, split open as if it were containing something, and then suddenly hearing the sonorous clang of steel striking steel which made him cower in fear. It all happened in a matter of seconds. Marquis could only watch in utter amazement as Nihari, with all her strength and a middle-aged knight's sword, attempted to hold off the blind man who was now baring down on her with a katana. Marquis frantically examined Nihari's body trying to figure out where she could have hidden such a large weapon. He felt completely helpless as he watched Nihari struggle to keep the blade of her sword in between her and the blade of the katana that looked as if it would eventually cut through the steel it was pushing against. The two engaged warriors were only a few inches away from Marquis, and he could see how the dirty brown cloth wrapped around the man's head and covering his eyes was so tight that it dug into his skin leaving dry blood stains and scabs around it. He then turned his head towards Marquis, still effortlessly applying pressure to his sword, and began to subtly rock his head back and forth.

"I would like to avoid further bloodshed. I will admit she is stronger than your other two companions, but I fear the outcome will be unpleasant for the both of us if this confrontation continues any further." He remarked as the blade of his katana pushed an inch into the steel of Nihari's sword.

The images of Skip and Meech's mutilated bodies began to flash into Marquis's head again. Their unremorseful murderer was standing right in front of him and as much as Marquis wanted to, he was unable to react. His fear was mounting yet again, and as he began to envision a stress-free way of living in the afterlife, his body froze, and he was unable to move. Even after hearing Nihari shout at the top of her lungs,

"Run, you idiot!!"