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STRAY STFRUIT

RAVENS DAGGER

STRAY CAT STRUT

BOOK 2

RAVENS DAGGER

Podium



To Molly

*From the day we met, you have been my closest friend, my confidant,
and one of the people I cherish most. You've helped me bounce around ideas
and walked quietly by my side, and your eternal optimism has kept me going
when times were rough.*

Who's a good girl? You are, yes, you are!

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CHAPTER ONE

HEARTWARMING

I shifted.

Something poked at my back, above my ribs. Had Lucy snuck into my bed again? I loved the girl, but sometimes she was all elbows and knees and a real pain to sleep next to.

Twisting a little, I found myself rolling onto my stumpy side, only to run into a problem.

I had an arm.

Or rather, a second arm.

Some of the sleep-addled grogginess faded as I turned onto my back and blinked up at an entirely unfamiliar ceiling. There wasn't any cracked drywall above me. Instead, I could see a ceiling with recessed LEDs through the gauzy curtains of a four-poster bed.

There was no way in fuck I was back at the orphanage.

"What time's it?" I mumbled as I looked around. I was still dressed. At least I had pants on, plus a jacket that left my stomach bare. My uncovered feet felt just shy of chilly.

It's six forty in the morning. Your daily allotment of points has come in. Your total is sitting at 9,283 points.

I started a little at the voice that . . . had come from somewhere in my head. Memories came back. The museum, the sky tearing open, and aliens raining down around us. Getting impaled and becoming a samurai. Myalis guiding and trolling me. The kittens flying off to safety. A few interminable and stressful hours spent trying to save people.

"Crap," I said as I sat up on the edge of the bed. I'd made a mess of the topmost blankets. My invisibility jacket was covered in alien blood and nonalien blood and a lot of dust and crap. It's a miracle Lucy even let me into the room with it on.

Another memory returned.

"Did I sleep through sex?" I asked with mounting horror.

You didn't get far enough to make your statement even remotely true.

"Fuck me."

That is, in fact, what didn't happen.

I groaned as I got up. Whisper, my stealth crossbow, rested against the wall next to the door. None of the kittens had grabbed it, at least. I still had my back-mounted guns and tail on, and a hand cannon tucked under my new cybernetic arm.

"I'm a mess," I said.

I'd offer you a self-cleaning system, but the washrooms in this place are . . . adequate.

I took off my jacket and flung it onto a sofa. Someone would need to clean the sofa—someone who wasn't me. "Yeah," I said. "Let's see if we can get some food first. And check on the kittens."

The penthouse we had was divided into little rooms. Lucy had dumped me in the big suite the night before, but from the open doors I passed on the way to the kitchen area, the other suites seemed pretty damned luxurious too. The wide-open living area, with its sofas and curved television, took up a space longer than a bus.

Everything was done in marble and wood, with a pinch of gilding here and there. I would have called it ostentatious, but somehow it wasn't.

Obviously, they'd hired some decorators to make the place look like an old-money palace.

Nose and little Tim were knocked out on the couch, the TV playing some samurai cartoon on mute.

I elected not to bother them as I moved around an island bigger than my room back at the orphanage and yanked open the fridge. The damned thing was stocked. I grabbed some cereal of the colorful sort from one of the cupboards and an expensive glass bottle of genuine cow milk from the fridge door.

I poured myself a bowl of Longb'O's for irony's sake, then watched as all the little rings glowed on contact with the milk. "Neat," I said.

This food provides literally negative nutrition.

I munched through a mouthful of sugary goodness. "Tastes great, though." We could never afford the cool junk food back at the orphanage. I set the box on its side and watched the ads for neat toys scroll under a grinning image of a familiar samurai.

The bastard had been airbrushed—I just knew it.

"Cat?"

I looked up to see Bargain standing next to the island. He was a bit short, only his head visible above the benchtop.

"Hey," I said.

He looked at me, shrewd little eyes taking me in. "What would you give me not to wake everyone up?" he asked.

Some things never changed. I smiled big and wide at him, pulled my Trench Maker from under my arm, and let the heavy handgun clunk onto the top of the island. "This gun can be loaded with any kind of bullet," I said. "Samurai magic shit, you know? How much do you wanna bet there are some specifically made to deal with annoying little shits?"

"That's a good deal," he said before running off.

I think we're going to have a weapons safety lesson in the near future.

"The safety's on," I muttered before returning to my cereal. I had the enviable problem of running out of glowing rings before running out of milk, which meant I was obligated to refill the bowl.

The next ones to show up were the Twins, and while I was pretty cool with Alpha and Omega, the two of them took one look at me before squealing, “Cat’s awake!”

Before I could eat any more of my cereal, they were joined by bleary-eyed kittens spawned from all over. Spark and Tim came over, then Nemo and Nose and Bargain, who still seemed cowed. It was too bad the others weren’t.

I listened to their babbled questions for all of a minute before I felt a stress headache coming on. “Would you all shut up?!” I shouted.

That worked about as well as it usually did, which was not at all.

“Kittens, be quiet,” a soft voice said from behind the lot of them.

They clamped shut like mousetraps going off.

“How about everyone pull up a chair and we can get some breakfast?” Lucy said as she pushed Tim toward one of the seats around the island. It was a little awkward, what with her still holding on to her crutches under one arm.

“You’re going to cook?” I asked.

“Hell no. They have room service here,” she said. “I bet it’s better than those.”

“These,” I said, raising my spoon, “are great.”

She scrunched her nose at me.

“I actually met Longbow, you know,” I said, gesturing my spoon toward the box art. “He’s . . . kinda insane. Nice, though.”

“Showing off?” she asked.

I grinned back at her. “Just you wait,” I said with a purr.

She smiled right back. “I waited plenty last night, but someone decided to fall asleep.”

Much to my annoyance, a few of the kittens caught on and laughed at my reddening cheeks. “Oh, shut up, you guys. I had a long day.”

“Is that your excuse now?” Junior asked as she came around and took a seat on my side. She slid the box of cereal over, then huffed and got up to fetch a bowl. “You still owe me a knife,” she said as she fished for a spoon.

“Might as well,” I sighed. “Lucy, you wanna order that breakfast? Also, where’s Dumbass?”

“Sure,” Lucy said as she clacked her way over to an old-school phone on a pedestal nearby.

Nemo ran off, returning a minute later with one of my little drones clutched between both hands. It was Dumbass the First, sans gun mount.

I had the drones disarm when the children started playing with them.

“How responsible,” I said before clearing my throat. “All right, you little shits. This is Dumbass. It’s got some fancy medical scanner doodad in it. You let it scan you, and then Myalis, my wonderful brain worm AI buddy, will tell me how to cure the stupid out of you.”

If that were possible, wouldn’t you think I’d have tried to talk you into curing yourself a long time ago?

I saw Lucy pausing by the phone, and a few of the kittens were looking at the drone with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Th-thank you,” Bargain said.

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “You know I’m just doing it to impress Lucy.” Lucy snorted before picking up the phone.

Junior barked out a laugh next to me. “You’re a shitty liar,” she said. “And don’t think curing some incurable sickness will let you off the hook.”

I rolled my eyes while Dumbass got to work. “For . . . fine. Myalis, we got any knives available?”

You do. In your Sun Watcher Technologies catalog. The cheapest is a survivalist knife with an extendable monofilament blade. It will cost you five points.

“Perfect.”

A cheap plastic box appeared on the table before me, and I slid it over to Junior. Her eyes lit up as she tore the package open and pulled out a long knife.

“Monofilament blade,” I said. “Don’t kill yourself.”

“Awesome,” she said, and then her smile froze and she turned the knife around. “Wait, why’s it got a cat on the handle?”

I blinked and leaned over. There was, in fact, a feline on the handle. But it wasn’t a cat, it was a kitten. “I think it’s the button to retract the blade.”

“Why’s it shaped like a cat?”

“A kitten,” I said. “Just like you!”

She glared, which warmed my heart.
“All right! Time to pull a Jesus.”

CHAPTER TWO

A SLICE OF HAPPINESS

Times of peace aren't uncommon. But they never really last.

—Deus Ex, June 2057

“What’ve you got for me?” I asked Myalis while looking over at Dumbass the First.

I suppose I could start with the youngest and work my way up.

“Sure,” I said. “So we’ll start with Nose, or is Spark younger?”

I believe that Nose is the youngest, judging by the scans Dumbass has taken.

The kittens were all gathered around the kitchen island—even Lucy, who’d returned from ordering breakfast with a sly smile on her face. Daniel had spun around on his chair and waved me hello before deep-diving into his phone.

Nose and Spark were both standing near the edge of the table and looking at me without blinking.

Nose—and that is an awful name I’ve no doubt you had something to do with—seems to suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. It’s at the third stage. It’s rather surprising that he can still function moderately well. He

has a few other conditions, mostly centered around his nasal cavity and esophagus.

“Nose is a tough little shit,” I said.

Nose nodded seriously. “Yeah.”

“Got a cure?”

Obviously. A Nano-Regenerative Suite should be sufficient to cure the ailment.

I grinned. “Don’t keep us waiting, Myalis. And tab it all up for me in one go at the end.”

A box appeared on the island, small and cheap. Inside was an inhaler with a tank the size of a soda can and a red button on the top. Its front was shaped like a rather basic oxygen mask.

Spread out the use over the course of the day. Tell Nose to drink a lot of water and have a big, varied meal later. He’s got a few nutritional deficiencies. In fact, all of them, you included, do. There are also traces of heavy metals in your blood and in some of your organs, and some nitrates, plastics, and a few other chemicals that I suspect were used as fertilizer and pesticides. It’s fortunate humans are so resilient, or you’d all be tumorous masses by now.

I slid the inhaler over to Nose. “Take a puff every hour or so. And then eat a lot tonight. Oh, and down a couple of glasses of water, all right?” I’d need to get some sort of detox thing for all the kittens later, but that could probably wait a day.

“Yeah!” he said before taking the inhaler. Everyone watched as he took a deep breath from it, then coughed a few times. “Tickles.”

“It’ll get better,” I said. “Spark, you’re up next.”

“All right!” Spark said. “Hit me up, Doc Cat.”

Spark has an interesting one. It seems like a sort of prion disease. I suspect he came into contact with something while very young. It has mostly kept to his parietal lobe, reducing his ability to feel touch.

“Right,” I said. “It’s why he’s called Spark: he likes licking power outlets.”

“I don’t!” Spark protested. “It just feels weird.”

A simple Neuro-Regenerative should do.

Another box, this one with a red plastic nib and drawn instructions on the side to place it against the crook of the arm. “Can you figure it out?” I

asked.

“I’m not an idiot,” he said before fumbling with the injector. He didn’t even wince as he pulled back his sleeve and jabbed it in. “When’s this going to work?”

It will take approximately an hour for the first signs of regression to show. Six for a complete cure. Also, he’s far too thin. I suspect that he can’t feel hunger pangs at all.

“Give it until this afternoon,” I said. “And eat more. You’re too damned thin. Tim, you’re too thin too.”

Tim here is missing a leg. That much is obvious. Otherwise, he’s in decent health.

“Tim’s new to the kittens,” I explained. It was kind of shitty that being new meant he hadn’t collected a bunch of problems yet.

“Will you regrow my leg?” he asked.

“Do you want a new leg or a prosthetic?” I asked, wiggling my metal fingers around.

“Can I have one like yours?”

“Only if you want to lose an arm,” I snarked back. It earned a few laughs, which was nice. The mood with the kittens was about as high as I’d ever seen it. “But nah, just a normal samurai-grade prosthetic. Mine can fire rockets. Yours . . . won’t.”

“Aww,” he said.

His current prosthetic is rather pitiful. I’d suggest a Sun Watcher replacement. There are some that are inexpensive, require little to no maintenance, and are far superior to what he has without needing complex neural links. They can also expand over time so that they won’t require replacing for some years. I’d also suggest a skin irritation cream.

I tapped the table. “Come on, Myalis, don’t keep us waiting.”

Tim’s new leg came in a little case, and next to it came a small jar of some sort of cream with instructions printed on the side. “Spark, Nose, wanna help him put it on?”

The three rushed off with the couches in the living room, with Tim demanding they be careful with his new leg.

“Bargain,” I said.

“Cat,” he replied.

Bargain has a few smaller issues. Chemical burns on the lower half of his body, a slight defect in his heart, and a minor case of cerebral palsy as well. The skin issues can be relieved with a cream. I'd advise the same for your own burns if you ever want to repair them, actually. The lung issue will require a Nano-Regenerative Suite. The cerebral palsy will require a Neuro-Regenerative. It won't disappear instantly. He will need to exercise, stretch, and straighten his posture over the course of several months.

“All right,” I said. “Lay it on the table.”

The boxes appeared. Bargain looked at them, then up at me. I could see the gears turning behind his eyes.

“No more wheeling and dealing,” I said. “Not with me or Lucy.”

He nodded slowly. “And the others?”

“Do as you want with them, but be fair to the other kittens,” I said. “Oh, and you'll need to stand taller and exercise to fix yourself up properly. And probably eat something other than the shit we usually have.”

“All right, deal,” he said.

“Nemo?” I asked.

Nemo popped her head up and blinked at me.

Very mild autism, some selective mutism, and a terrible diet. A Neuro-Regenerative would aid with the issues with her brain, but most of Nemo's problems are due to a poor diet and some psychological issues.

I nodded and flicked the next box that appeared her way. “You need to eat better too,” I said.

Nemo nodded, smiled, then ran off to see Tim and Spark and the others.

You are aware that the Twins aren't genetically twins at all, right?

“Yeah, they're just missing the same bits,” I said.

The Twins—who did look like each other, with the same shitty haircut, brown hair and eyes, and too-pale skin—leaned forward at the same time. “We want rocket launcher arms,” they said as one.

“No,” I vetoed.

Two new, non-rocket-equipped arms later, and they were off helping each other install their new prosthetics and playing around with the features on their new arms over in the living room.

“Okay, so, for my final acts . . . Daniel, you’ve got some sort of muscular fucked-up-ness, right?”

“That’s the medical term, yeah,” he agreed with a grin.

Muscular dystrophy. Chemically induced at that. A simple fix.

I flung the next box over to him, and he saluted me back. “Thanks, love.”

“Don’t try.”

“How long until I can start dancing?”

Two to three days.

I snorted. “Your pasty white ass will never be able to dance,” I said. “But in a few days, you’ll be able to traumatize the kids by trying.”

He flipped me the bird, but he was still smiling. “We’ll see.”

And finally, we have Junior. She . . . is merely malnourished, with traces of contaminants in her blood that will pass eventually.

“Junior,” I said.

“Yeah?” she asked as she looked up from her bowl.

“You’re too fucking skinny.”

“Fuck you,” she said.

I felt a shy, tentative hand touching my shoulder. “What about me?” Lucy asked.

Lucy has multiple sclerosis. An easy thing to cure.

A fresh box appeared on the table.

Give her those. Then allow for a few hours to restore all of her cognitive functions. It might be mildly unpleasant. Afterward, she’ll need to practice walking and running once more.

“You’ll need to take these,” I said. “But they’ll make you feel all tingly.”

She smiled up at me. “Tingly, huh?” she asked. “Will you help me get rid of all my tingles?”

I leaned down and our lips met while I fiddled with the box with my free hand. I had the tablets out soon enough and was carefully pressing the single pill between her lips.

“For fuck’s sake, get a room,” Junior said. “Don’t do that in front of my cereal.”

Lucy and I happily complied, though it was a bit hard to make it back to the room with our faces practically glued together.

“Oh, oh man, it really is tingly,” Lucy said as she sat on the edge of the bed. “My feet are all . . . You know when your arms go to sleep and then they come awake?” She wiggled her legs, then wiggled them some more as she slid off the pajama pants she was wearing to expose two beautiful dark legs.

I got to my knees to capture one of her feet. Carefully, I massaged it, just a bit of pressure in the way she always liked. The pleased little noise she made said a lot.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss onto the top of her foot.

And then, before I could lean back, a pair of panties dropped down and came to rest around her ankles.

I looked up to meet Lucy’s bright eyes. “You said you’d take care of *all* the parts that tingled.”

“So I did,” I agreed.

INTERLEWD

I trailed kisses up Lucy's leg while my hands fumbled with the zipper of my autoloader jacket. Her hands fell onto my head and scratched into my scalp in a most delicious way, and by the time I'd reached her thigh, I was tearing the coat off.

"Cat," Lucy said.

Her voice was breathy and husky and sent shivers down my spine. "Yeah?" I asked.

"When's the last time you took a shower?"

"Uh."

"You smell like . . . rubber and smoke," she added.

"Yeah, I was a bit busy yesterday with that kind of thing," I admitted. I leaned down and gave myself a sniff and . . . yeah, I needed a shower. That splashed some cold water onto my libido.

"You know, the showers here are really big," Lucy said. "And I'm already dressed for a shower."

I looked up to see her casually slip out of her top.

"Oh," I said. I got up a little awkwardly, then extended my hands to Lucy to help her onto her feet. She was so light I barely felt the strain of lifting her,

and the little two-step she did to slip her panties off her feet made the blood rushing to my ears sound like a pulsing waterfall.

“Let’s go?” she asked.

I nodded, bent down, then scooped her up into a bridal carry while she squeaked. “Always wanted to do that,” I said.

“Give a girl two arms and all of a sudden she’s all gallant,” she said before bending forward to kiss.

For a moment I forgot we were supposed to be going anywhere.

But Lucy reminded me by trailing a hand behind me and pinching my rear. “Get moving,” she said. “Your new arm is cold.” She wiggled her legs, both currently draped over my new forearm, for emphasis.

The en suite bathroom was huge, with two sinks—why?—and a shower that was bigger than the entire bathroom back at the orphanage, with glass walls and a tiled backdrop covered in little carved flowers.

I set Lucy down only for her to push against me and seal her lips against mine. Her hands fumbled at my belt while mine slid down her back and pulled her closer.

She pulled back, then gestured at my shoulders. “You’re wearing that into the shower?” she asked.

I swallowed. “Oh, right. Uh.” I couldn’t recall how to remove the back-mounted guns, not through the haze in my mind. “Myalis, how do I get this off?”

You only had to ask.

The mounting running along my spine undid itself with faint little pops, and it fell to the floor, tail and all.

Lucy looked up to me. “Is, um, Myalis . . . watching?”

If it reassures her, I have performed full-body scans of her already. There’s very little to hide.

“That really doesn’t help, Myalis,” I muttered.

“It’s okay,” Lucy said. “It’ll be my first threesome.”

“I really don’t think it counts,” I said.

Please inform Lucy that I’m very much not interested in procreating with a human.

“What’s that even mean?” I asked.

“What?”

I feel like a third wheel here.

“She’s being a pain,” I said. With my hands now a bit more free, I tossed my pants down and bent my legs up one by one to tear my socks off. “So, uh, I don’t think I can shut her out? Is that . . . a problem?”

Lucy shrugged. “I guess not.”

I felt my shoulders relax. I was worked up enough that Lucy calling it off would have been disappointing, to say the least. “So, how good is this shower?” I asked.

She grabbed onto my hand and pulled me toward it. “Alone? It’s all right,” she said. “Shower, on. Hot.”

The shower came on behind her, its door silently sliding open. “Fancy,” I said before ducking down for another kiss. We stumbled into a dozen jets of water so hot it almost hurt. My hair plastered down around me and I had to move it out of the way.

That allowed me to take in Lucy in all her splendor, dark hair against dark skin, her eyelashes fluttering as water collected on them, her lips wet and curved up in a genuinely happy smile. “Look at this,” she said. “Shower, soap!”

The water turned into a stream of warm bubbles that fell down around us and turned the world white. I laughed. “Does it do shampoo too?” I asked. The amount in the water alone . . . that was such a waste. A decadent luxury I couldn’t imagine getting used to.

“That’s for later,” Lucy said before she pressed herself against me, all wet and smooth and soft. “You need to scrub up first.” Her hands, cooler than the soapy water around us, pressed against my ribs, then slid around to my back while moving in little circles.

I reciprocated, my flesh-and-blood hand touching her almost timidly at first before I recalled doing this kind of thing with her. I reached up a little and gently grabbed at her breasts.

“Cat! I’m not the dirty one here,” she admonished. Then because she liked down there, she pinched my rear again before pulling me so close I had to let my hand drop. Her arms wrapped themselves around my chest and she tucked her head in against me. “I was afraid, you know?”

The sudden turn left my mind spinning for traction. “Oh?” I asked.

“You left and . . . I guess it doesn’t matter now.” Her lips pressed down on my clavicle, then my neck while she kept rubbing little soapy circles across my back.

When her hand came around and squeezed my breast I had to hold back a little moan. “Am I clean enough yet?” I asked.

“Hrm?” she asked, turning the purr into a question. “I don’t know.”

I was about to ask something, but the question was lost when Lucy pushed me back and I encountered the cold tiles of the shower wall. I gasped at the sensation and pushed forward, only for Lucy to meet me with another kiss.

Her hands wandered down, grabbing at my hips.

“Lucy,” I said.

“Cat?” she asked as she pulled back a bit. She was still close, very close.

“I love you.”

She grinned, big and happy and a bit silly. “I love you too,” she said.

Then her hand reached down between my legs and carefully ran down my thighs.

“So dirty,” she said.

“Lucy!” I squeaked as she pressed her thumb in small circles around me. I forgot all about the cold seeping into my back and the warm water running between us where our skin didn’t meet.

Lucy knew me, from well-earned experience and a few too many hours spent in closets, in showers much smaller than this one, and just cuddling in bed. She knew which buttons to press, how to play with me with just a few strokes, and when to push in so that I ended up on the tips of my toes, breath coming in raspy and hard.

Climbing to my toes was a mistake; it brought her face closer to my chest. She pressed kisses down my clavicle and to my breasts, then latched on and did something with her tongue.

I bit my lip until it hurt to stop from making any noise. Junior had once informed me, after a rather pleasant evening, that I was very loud, and since then I’d always tried to keep a lid on it.

Then Lucy's hand sped up and I lost that battle with a throaty noise that set her to giggling. She stopped, bending almost double as she tried to keep the laughter in.

"Lucy," I pleaded.

"Sorry," she said, but her smile suggested she was anything but.

I fell back onto my feet and reached for her, intending to return the favor, when she pushed me back.

"I wasn't done," she said. "Shower, a bit warmer."

The water turned a notch hotter, enough that it started to hurt just a little, but then she did something with her thumb and fingers and I forgot all about that.

"I really do love you," she said before a wave of heat shot through me and I felt myself shivering. "Oh, getting close?"

I made a noise that I think sounded like a yes, or something akin to that. She laid kisses around my neck and cheeks, then captured my mouth in hers while her hands kept on doing frankly magical things.

A minute passed while our tongues slid around each other, and Lucy's concentration around my core slipped a little as she focused on the kiss. I moved my hands around her, pulling her closer and bringing my real hand down to grab her ass.

She gasped into my mouth, a sensation that stole my breath in the best way, and then she returned the favor by tweaking something below that had me making another embarrassing noise.

"Faster?" she asked.

I hadn't said anything remotely like that, but she didn't seem to care. Her fingers moved faster, a lot faster, and I felt another wave of heat pass through me, making my abdominal muscles contract and my back want to bend.

Lucy took that as a challenge and pushed into me, stretching and rubbing while she peppered kisses across my upper chest.

And then the dam burst, my legs wobbling and my abs contracting. I felt Lucy's fingers squeezing together in me before she slid them out and left me feeling empty even as my head spun.

I might have fallen if she hadn't held me up and kissed me to within an inch of my life.

“Was it good?” she asked with a knowing grin.

“You’re the best,” I said between pants. The warmth was sinking away now, leaving in little shuddering waves. I might have been sweating, but there was no way to know with the water coming down around us. “I’ll have to return the favor,” I said.

“I doubt you could manage,” she said. “I’m the best, after all.”

I kissed her again and wondered how long it would take for the water to run cold here.

“H-hey, Myalis?” I asked. “You remember mentioning that catalog, with the toys?”

CHAPTER THREE

POSTCOITAL INTERRUPTIONS

Do you know what kind of opportunity the average person has?

Fuck-all. If you're not born in the right family, have the right connections, and go to the right schools, you're pretty much stuck kissing the ass of anyone one rung above you on the ladder while hoping they'll slip up badly enough you can take their spot.

Worse, your fortunes can turn in a blink. Spent ten years working your way up to middle management in your department? Too fucking bad, some shareholders decided your entire division needs to be pruned to meet some elusive goal or to make the curve on their graphs look smoother.

Good luck starting from the bottom again. There's no one to blame but yourself for failing to read the room.

—Anonymous Reddit user, June 2029

I couldn't decide *how* I was feeling.

Parts of me that I didn't know could tingle were tingling, and I had sore muscles across my everything. Not a bad sore, but the sort from exercising a

lot, which was probably fair.

I decided, after a moment's reflection, that what I was feeling could best be described as "good." I was feeling really good.

A giggle escaped, one that was soon echoed by the person lying down next to me.

Lucy shifted, then brought her head to rest on my stomach. "That was . . ."

"Yeah," I agreed as I continued to stare at the ceiling. Eventually, I got enough energy to bring a hand down and brush it through Lucy's hair, her very sweaty hair.

"I didn't know I could do that so many times," Lucy said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sore."

"Yeah," I agreed.

We weren't alone on the bed. There was also a very rumpled and probably unsanitary pile of blankets and pillows spread around here and there, and more importantly, there was a machine.

It was a horrifying machine, like something out of some madwoman's worst nightmares. It was eldritch and tentacled, and it looked wet and almost alive.

It was the best hundred points I have ever spent, even if it had made me question my own sanity a few times. I wasn't even sure what time it was anymore. For all I knew, a day could have passed. The details were certainly hazy enough.

Shifting my hips, I got into a slightly more comfortable position where Lucy's head didn't dig into my stomach quite so much. "That was something," I said.

"It was," Lucy said. "Think we can go at it again?"

I considered that. "The mind is willing, but the flesh is . . . not."

She snorted, the motion bouncing her head up atop me. "Yeah."

I smiled and continued to run my hands through Lucy's hair, content to do nothing but that for the rest of my life if need be.

And then some jerk knocked on the door. "Hey, are you two done fucking?" Junior asked.

"Urgh" was the most coherent response I could manage.

“I sure hope so, because there are people here for Cat. Like, lots of them. And some androids too. Shit’s annoying.”

“Tell them to go away,” I called back.

“Yeah, I tried that, you moron,” Junior said. “They’re real insistent. Some of them look important-like and they won’t fucking leave.”

I sighed. I didn’t want to leave. This place was a happy place and the world outside wasn’t. “Tell Dumbass to shoo them away.”

“Yeah, no,” Junior said. “Look, I’m coming in. Some of the kittens are getting scared and it’s annoying.”

“Oh shit,” Lucy said as she scrambled up and off me with a sudden burst of energy. I did the same, looking for my clothes, only to find that I’d left everything on the floor in a trail leading into the en suite bathroom.

The door clicked open just as Lucy and I bumped into each other by the base of the bed.

Our friendly eldritch tentacle machine seemed to notice the excitement because it started wiggling around too, especially when the door handle wobbled.

Three very confusing minutes later, I was slipping out into the corridor outside our room while doing up my belt. I didn’t actually have a shirt, just the autoloader jacket, and despite having taken a very thorough and long shower with Lucy, I knew that I smelled a little.

I’d have to take another once things were dealt with.

The tentacle machine could join too.

“Where’re these assholes?” I asked Junior, who looked exceptionally unimpressed by me and my antics. Her nose wrinkled up and she gestured down the corridor a ways.

“They’re by the entrance. The kittens are all off in their rooms. I knocked earlier, but you didn’t reply, just made these weird-ass donkey noises.”

I felt some warmth gathering in my cheeks and looked past her and toward the entrance. “Right,” I said. “I’ll go see what they want, I guess.”

I left Whisper in the bedroom with Lucy, which was probably for the best. That meant that all the armament I had was my Trench Maker, a shoulder-mounted railgun, and a plasma-firing gun on the other shoulder. And a tail with a thagomizer.

That . . . was probably enough to convince some less-than-wholesome people to vacate the area.

I tugged my jacket on straighter and stomped toward the living room and kitchen area. What I found there were three groups of people.

The first were a pair of serious-looking men in black suits, standing ramrod straight and wearing sunglasses indoors. The second were also wearing suits, but these were patterned and more colorful. They were smiling as if their cheeks were tacked in place that way. And the third were a pair of soldiers in dress uniforms with little maple leaves on their shoulders.

The three groups all elected to talk at the same time, a cacophony of noise that I couldn't make heads or tails of.

They seemed to catch on that if they all talked at once, they wouldn't make much sense, but instead of taking their time, they turned on each other and bickered.

It was like something out of a particularly unfunny comedy sketch.

"Okay, everyone shut up," I said.

I was still getting used to the idea that people respected me, adults especially, but it was incredibly amusing to see adults snapping their mouths closed just because I'd told them to. "You, with the shades. Who are you?" I pointed to the guy in between the pair in black suits, the one that looked in charge.

"Miss Leblanc, we are an organization charged with the protection of American assets. Upon seeing that you became a samurai we thought it appropriate to inform you that, were you so willing, our organization could assist you in coming to your own an—"

I stopped him with a raised hand. "Just send me a fucking email. Now, who are you guys?" I asked the next bunch.

They all started talking over each other, and I could feel my postcoital bliss draining away as they prattled on.

"One at a time, you fuckwits," I said.

As it turned out, all of them were representatives of one corporation or another, every one of them eager and excited to sign me on and use my likeness to promote . . . everything from cereals to soft drugs, and one sleazy guy said that they mostly dealt in deepfake pornography.