

## Its Last Breath

Friday, June 29th, 2063. 6:30 AM. I am the twentieth person out of 32 awake in the block. My eyes take a minute to adjust to the morning sun peering in through the foggy window. Once I glance at my watch, I realize I may be too late. I run out of the already open door and enter the cafeteria to the right of the block. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see the two jugs at the far end of the room. I hear footsteps behind me, and at once my run escalates into a sprint. I jump over a couple tables and wrap my arms around the jugs. I pant in joy. Today, I am able to have my daily fresh water and oxygen rations. I attach my oxygen hose to the oxygen jug and take in five deep breaths. The fresh air is relaxing compared to the smoky fog surrounding the camp and nearby cities.

Friday, June 29th, 2063. 7:00 AM. I take a seat in the cafeteria and patiently wait. I check my watch and realize it's Friday. I smile in delight. In two days, I will have my monthly break day. I think about the fresh water and oxygen I received today. It reminds me of being away from the cities in the outdoors, listening to the sweet songs of birds mixed with the buzzing of insects and the rushing of water in the river. Smells of nectar from blooming flowers drift through the breeze of fresh air. In two days, I will spend my day truly outside.

Friday, June 29th, 2063. 7:30 AM. Chef Terry enters the room, looking a little anxious. He is usually a very happy guy. I begin to wonder what is bothering him when I feel someone tap my shoulder. I smile and turn to the left to see Mark grinning at me. Mark is always the last one to wake up and the last one to eat breakfast. He arrives at duty last and is the last one to fall asleep. As I receive today's fresh pancakes and eggs, I ask my other roommates, "So, it's Friday. What are you three planning on doing today?"

Mark smiles. “We’re going to swap out some of the tank ammunition for lemons.”

Timothy, who is on my right, and Lenny, who is directly across from Mark, begin to laugh.

“Good luck not getting caught,” I warned them. “Lieutenant Johnson is beginning to pick up on your Friday shenanigans.”

“Don’t worry, Jake,” Timothy said. “We’ll think of a backup plan-”

Our conversation is cut off by Lieutenant Johnson. He clears his throat and waits for the murmurs to die down. Once the room is completely silent, he speaks. “The robots mentioned last week were seen heading towards a nearby factory. Get to the tanks.” He leaves the room, but his two significant sentences cause the room to erupt into screams of excitement. Many soldiers start exiting at the right. I look for my roommates, see them enter through the left. I sigh in disbelief, knowing that they will get in trouble later today. Once we follow the rest of the soldiers out of the cafeteria, I climb into the nearest tank and join the others as we leave the base.

Friday, June 29th, 2063. 11 AM. The smog thickens as we approach the burning factory. I sense the sickening smell of melting metal. My stomach begins to churn. I look down at my left arm, weakened by 3rd degree burns from a battle 3 years ago. 3 years ago. Before I was a tank commander and served for the national Guard. When I had 2 strong arms and could hold the heaviest of weaponry. We mainly stopped riots that got out of hand in the local area, where most of the action is. It is the closest to a battle that anyone will ever get to.

This day, 3 years ago, we were tasked with stopping a deadly riot that had escalated into a town going up in flames. We walked into the city, riot shields raised, prepared to stun any rioters that attempted to attack. However, after 30 minutes of searching the small town, we found no one. As the rest of the group turned around to go back to base, I heard a faint sound coming from a nearby burning building. It was the voice of a small child, most likely trapped in the

burning building. I began to feel sad for that child, trapped in a burning building, left to die. *Left to die*, I remember that phrase I thought 3 years ago. *Left to die*. I was overcome by courage. That child would not be left to die. I ran into the burning building.

As soon as I got inside, I felt that I was going to die. I could not see or breathe. I could only hear that child's voice growing louder and louder. I followed that voice. My left arm began to hurt. I ignored the pain and began climbing the weakened stairs, cracking as I stepped on them. I began to feel lightheaded. I stumbled around in the flames, searching for any sign of the child. I opened a half-broken door and saw a 5-year-old girl, trapped in the room by the flames. When she saw me, I will never forget the look of shock and happiness she gave me. Together, we crawled to the nearest window. I smashed it open and called out to the other soldiers. I started coughing again. The world was spinning. I heard voices approaching as I faintly spotted the soldiers spreading a rescue net. The child and I climbed out of the window and into the net. Whenever I look at my weak, left arm, I remember the child I saved. *Fire doesn't scare me*. With a surge of confidence, I pilot the tank into the smoldering ruins of the factory.

The factory is a wasteland. The outside is littered with shells of destroyed transport vehicles. On the inside, most of the machinery is destroyed while the remaining bits still attempt to do work. As I drive the tank further and further into the wasteland, I notice how quiet it is. The only noises around are the crunching of metal under the tanks and the occasionally beeping and buzzing of remaining mechanical parts. On the radar, I detect a solid object near the center of the factory. I drive towards it, hoping that some of the factory workers might be safe inside, safe from the fire, safe from certain death. The closer I get, the louder the buzzing gets and the clearer the smoke gets. I can see the ground in front of me and an oddly-shaped tower in front of me. The tower has four circular supports about the size of a small vehicle on the bottom, connected to

a cylinder almost three stories high. At the top lies a viewing window and on two sides of the tower lie two bulky supports. The left support starts to move and the tower tilts slightly towards me, but the tower never falls. A bright flash of fire shoots out of the left support and hits a nearby tank. I realize that it is not a tower. It is a robot.

Explosions filled the air as the tanks around opened fire on the robot. The robot raised both arms, spraying the army with blasts of fire in retaliation. I was caught in the smoke, not able to make out what was tank and what was robot in the dense smoke. I heard a loud crunch of metal that caused the tank to violently shake from the left. I maneuvered my tank to the right, hoping to avoid the incendiary arms and deadly feet. The smoke is clearer and I see I am behind the robot. I look at it to see if there is any good way to defeat it and I notice that the head of the robot is attached by a thin cylinder to the main body. I smile as I aim the turret at the neck and fire. As the projectile sails towards the neck of the robot, I watch in horror as it hits the robot in the neck, for I did not launch a shell at it. I launched half a dozen lemons.

The robot turned its body towards me with its arms raised, ready to blast my tank with flames. I maneuvered the tank to the left, avoiding the first blast of flames. I continued on through the factory ruins, crushing broken machinery and small flames. The thud of the robot's feet was getting louder by the second. The heat inside the tank began to rise. The robot was gaining on me and could crush me at any moment. I began to fiddle with the latch on the top of the tank while driving one-handed as fast as I could. The latch came loose and I shoved the hatch open, stumbling out as the robot crushed the tank with its enormous feet. The smoky air of the surrounding fires filled my lungs. I could not breathe. I spotted the canister of air a few feet away. Wrenching the tube from my belt, I attached the end to the bottle. As the robot spotted me lying on the smoldering ground, I inhaled the fresh air from the bottle. I breathed my last breath

of air, anticipating death. My last breath never came. The robot watched me, struggling for air. It may have felt pity, watching me nearly die from asphyxiation. It turned its body away and clambered away from the factory.

Sunday, July 29th, 2063. 1 AM. I listen to the sweet songs of birds mixed with the buzzing of insects and the rushing of water in the river. I can smell of nectar from nearby flowers. I smile to myself as I wander into the depths of the forest. The forest gradually gets quieter and quieter as I travel further inside. I step into a clearing, and see I am not alone. My jaw drops in shock. I see a robot in the center of the clearing. The same robot that burned down a factory, battled a squadron of tanks, and spared my life. I slowly approached the robot in awe. I waited for it to raise its arms, to try to finish me off. Then, I remembered the lemons. One of the most important rules of driving a tank is to keep the water rations outside of it. Water will damage the tanks, and the juice of the lemons seemed to be enough to injure the robot. I sit down next to the robot and comfort it, as it breathes its last breath in the fresh air. I rest my head on its side and listen to the mechanical buzz slow down to a stop.