

In her time, Toru had dealt with plenty of Working Joes on mines spread throughout the Weyland Isles. The Davids, with their human-presenting faces, were a new wrinkle.

Toru was fine with synthetics—her daughters might have said *too fine*—but these Davids weren't standard issue for anything. Their makers, Weyland-Yutani, had recalled all seven models many years ago. These six units, turning up for rescue duty, should have been composted with the rest.

The recall wasn't compulsory, and the official memo had said they were "fixed" and "fully compliant." Just a way for the company to deny responsibility if they went rogue and murdered a bunch of folks.

The company line. That made it bullshit.

Kozak must have picked these up on the black market. It wasn't illegal, but it skirted close to the edge of unacceptable. Toru would have much rather seen the blank stock standard, statue-like faces of the Working Joes, rather than the human—yet somehow more eerie—Davids. Still, they were in working order, and the toxic gases below would mean nothing to them.

Carter, skilled in reading the subtle flickers of her face, shot the Davids an appraising glance.

"I will be in full control. Have no fear."

The corner of her mouth quirked for a second. "Don't be afraid to bash in their heads if you need to. The Combine can bill me."

He nodded.

"Go." The miners trapped below didn't have time for her reservations. "First find the folks that Medical can save. Get the other synthetics to locate and remove them." She paused, then added, "The emergency scrubbers are on the schematics, I hope?"

"Indeed, but I cannot speak to their condition."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek for a moment. "Knowing the state of the rest of the mine, I'll be grateful if they're there at all."

She motioned at Nathan and Bianca, who helped make a path for the synthetics. Though the resident workers grumbled and swore, they also recognized the experience of the Knot. Contractors sent by the Combine, they held more sway than Kozak did, even with the short time they'd been in residence. Reflected on the faces was concern for their comrades. Every one of them knew it was simple luck that they hadn't been on that shift.

She addressed the synthetics. "Follow my unit, Carter, below. Listen to his instructions as you would mine." Synthetic networks could become twitchy unless there was some kind of human direction. She didn't want them fritzing out.

Carter's eyes blinked for a moment as he hooked into the network to take the lead. Toru liked to keep him separate from Combine bullshit, but this was an emergency so she made an exception. She hoped he wouldn't pick up any viruses.

"Where the fuck is the mine manager?" The androids and Pinar loaded into the cage to begin their descent. Toru shielded her eyes from the spotlights, looking through the crowd for any sign of Kozak. "He should be here by now..."

Huddled at the deck entrance, the miners grumbled louder.

"New Luhansk," Nathan informed her with a jerk of his head. Her nephew showed an enviable ability to slot into any new situation. He'd gathered gossip while the Knot was still in orbit. "He's set up his family in a pretty little house down there."

The crowd shifted, and Toru sensed a tipping point. Tragedy often set off resentment: sometimes more. Gooseneck George, the oldest miner on site, shared a knowing look with her as he wiped sweat from his eyes. Like Toru, he knew the dangers. She'd lived through five mine riots, and as much as she understood the anger, she didn't want to deal with another such uprising.

Spotting Jīn Huā's dark head of hair among the helmets of the miners, Toru gestured her over. Jīn Huā's Chinese father grew up with one of Toru's nieces in Melbourne. Toru might not have birthed her, but in the way of her family, that meant nothing. The Knot adopted her before the attack on Canberra, when things became a nightmare in Australia. Jīn Huā took that kindness and passed it on to the two children she had adopted.

Also, she was a hell of a comms cipher.

Toru wiggled her way through the burly miners to reach the older woman.

"Get back to the office and locate Kozak... fast as you can."

"Yes, Ma." Then she was away, melting into the crowd. She'd been some kind of high-powered executive in Australia before the Great Rebellion against the Three World Empire, yet she never challenged the older woman's leadership. Another reason Toru was glad she'd picked her for this mission.

"Bianca, take a few Joes, and maybe a David, over to the vehicle pool. Send a couple of trucks down the decline tunnel. If the cave-in hasn't taken it out, it'll be a good way to get the dead and injured to the surface." Toru stepped out from the deck and took some long, deep breaths.

The rest of the miners lingered, coagulating in small groups, trying to decipher what had happened. Toru didn't need to listen to their conversations. Only the presence of the armed security guards contained that simmering resentment.

Medics and Joes had already taken six workers to the medical dome, but another three were still waiting to be transported. Friends crouched next to them, trying to offer them some comfort. All three screamed, or sobbed, or moaned.

“Teeth... fuck me... the teeth.”

“They’re in the walls!”

Toru pulled her grey braids from the sweat gathered at her neck. Carbon monoxide poisoning was a beast, and the effects were terrifying. Time would help them escape its clutches—she hoped.