

Part 2: The Not-So Super Station

The sun was just beginning to crest the tall pine trees that blanketed the area when Robert parked the car on the crumbling side-road. The tall, dying grass that had sprung up around the rusting metal “Super Station” sign swayed in the early morning wind. The gun concealed under his gray suit coat weighed heavily.

Sue reached for the door handle.

“Wait,” Robert said.

She paused.

“We don’t want to let them see us approach—if they’re even there.” He sighed. “Chances are we’re not going to find anything.”

“Well, we got to try, right?” Sue smiled a little.

“I’ll take the front. You go around to the back. Keep low and don’t start anything, got it?”

Sue nodded. “I got it.” She took a quick pull off her vape pen and brandished her HPPS issued pepper spray.

“Not in the car, Sue.”

She made a face and put the pen away. “It was my car first!” She mumbled.

“Right, and now it’s ours. Let’s go.”

Robert watched Sue disappear through the undergrowth. For once he was thankful that she was so undersized. It made it easier for her to squeeze into tight spaces and reduced her chances of being seen. He pulled the .357 revolver from its holster and regarded it for a moment. Robert was a decent shot at the range, and he could still be accurate under pressure, but he usually preferred never to have to shoot at all. At that moment he realized he was aching for the opportunity—for the excuse—to use it. He didn’t like the feeling that was overcoming him, but he didn’t have the time or the desire to think about it. Using the dry undergrowth, trees, chunks of broken concrete and piles of random junk for cover, he made his way towards the station.

There were tire tracks, fresh ones, in the patches of mud in the broken blacktop in front of the rusted, overgrown, but still intact, building standing lonely in the middle of the clearing. The shriveled vines that coated much of the building’s exterior were broken around the front door. Someone was definitely there. Robert steadied himself and licked his lips pensively. It

could have been those F.E.R.A.L people, or it could have been a rare hermit, or even some teenagers looking for a place to party and screw.

There was only one way to find out.

Robert stalked up to the front door, finding more cover where he could. It wasn't a long way, but it sure felt like it. He kept his focus on the door, but his eyes darted routinely to the roof and the whole face of the building looking for movement of any kind. His body was loose, but also tense. He was ready to drop to the ground at a moment's notice.

His eyes snapped to movement in the trees. The sound of the shot, the burning feeling of the bullet grazing his arm, and the sudden impact on his knees and elbows when he threw himself behind a large, weed-choked engine all seemed to happen at once. Robert swore under his breath. His arm hurt like hell, but it still moved and he didn't see that much blood. He'd be okay, at least, for a while. He popped up and returned fire back into the forest where he'd seen the motion and the muzzle flash.

Back behind cover, with his ears ringing, he tried to listen for a reaction from the shooter. Gritting his teeth he called out, "This is the Central City P.D. You are surrounded! Drop your weapon and come out with your hands up!"

A shot ricocheted off the corroded metal of the engine.

"You're full of shit!" He heard a girl's voice call. "You're alone."

Robert shrugged to himself. Apparently one theater class an actor did not make. "Okay...you got me. I'm alone! Do you feel like talking, Ms. Critic?"

"Fuck you!"

Another shot rang out.

Robert took out his handkerchief and tied it around his arm. He stifled a groan as he tied it around his bleeding bicep with one hand and his teeth.

A shot struck the ground just beyond the cover by his side. Wet earth and gravel peppered him. He hoped that Sue had the good sense to stay back.

He popped up and shot again, but the wound was making him unsteady.

Two more shots whizzed overhead.

"You keep this up you're going to run out of bullets, lady!"

"I can do this all day, asshole!" The girl's shrill voice broke through the ringing in his ears. "I can—" Her voice stopped and so did the shooting.

Robert hesitated and listened. The stinging in his ears from the gunfire slowly started to fade.

“Robert!” Sue called out. “Robert, I got her!”

Robert furrowed his brow and carefully peered over the engine. Sue was standing behind a tall girl dressed in black “tactical gear,” the kind that a weekend warrior would get at an army surplus store. The girl was red-faced and panting with her hands in her air, one of which was bandaged, while Sue had one hand against the woman’s back and the other raised and playfully waving at him.

Robert stood with a groan and pulled a pair of handcuffs from the holster on his belt. He wondered how in the hell had little Sue managed to take the girl in black prisoner. He grabbed wrist and slapped on a cuff. Robert glanced down and noticed that Sue was holding her pepper spray canister horizontally against the woman’s lower back like a gun barrel. What a clever little thing she was!

Once the girl in black was securely cuffed, Robert sat her on the wet grass. She looked up at Sue’s hands and her face said she realized that she’d been duped.

“You little bitch!” She spat half in hate and half in surprise.

Sue shrugged. “I’ve been called worse.”

“You’re a fucking traitor to all women!”

Sue visibly colored a bit. From the bits and pieces Robert was able to get out of her in past conversations and from what he knew about her background from other sources, he knew that being called a “traitor” probably stung her quite a bit.

Robert stepped between Sue and their prisoner. He looked down at her “No. You talk to me, honey.”

The girl screwed up her face. “You’re a sexist pig! You can’t tell me what to do!” She spat.

Robert did everything in his power to maintain a cool, calm exterior. De-escalation was a part of his police training, but in such situations he routinely fell back on some of the tenets of his ComPet handler training. He knew that if he lost control in front of the prisoner, she would have won. Besides that, having reviewed the security footage himself, Robert could tell by her bandaged hand that she wasn’t the one that did the shooting. That made staying calm just a little bit easier.

“You know what, you’re right. I can’t tell you what to do...” Robert’s voice was low passionless. “All I can do is ask you some questions, and maybe you can be a good girl and give me some answers.”

She pressed her lips together and scowled up at him.

"All right, you can choose not to cooperate, and then we can hand you over to the FBP."

"...So? You think that scares me?"

"I think it does." Robert stood up to his full height. "I think you saw the news reports like everyone else. You know happens to captured terrorists like you..." Robert referred to the "re-purposing" of F.E.R.A.L agents into helpless, desperately hungry, and blind piggy girls that served in a "recycling" role among "other duties."

She looked ill, clearly knowing exactly what he meant. Normally, what they did to captured F.E.R.A.L agents made him sick too, but after she and her friends did to Ed the punishment didn't seem harsh enough.

Robert continued. "But it doesn't have to be that way. If you answer a few questions..." He glanced back at Sue. "...then we'll cut you loose. How does that sound?"

The girl looked pensive for several long seconds.

"The clock is ticking, darling."

"I don't know anything!"

"Wrong answer." Robert pulled out his phone.

"Fuck you!" she spit up at his face, but the spittle fell woefully short.

"You're acting like an animal already. I bet you'll fit right in with the other pigs in the pen!" A look of fear flashed across her face. He relished it; just like she probably relished the look on Ed's face while he bled to death right in front of her.

"Robert..." Sue said from behind him, bringing him back to his senses.

Robert sighed. Trying to talk to a fanatic was like trying to argue with the wind. He unzipped the girl's black jacket and plunged his hands inside. The girl snorted.

"Get your hands off of me!"

"Relax, girl, I'm searching you, not groping you. I like my girls pretty and *not* crazy..." Robert's hands felt around until his fingertips touched the stiff, laminated paper of a passport. He flipped through the pages rapidly, comparing the picture inside to the handcuffed girl at his feet. "Going on a trip, Miss Chloe Vance?" He asked. The booklet fell open to a page marked with a folded piece of paper. There was an address written on it in Suden, the southernmost town of the country, located conveniently right by the border. Beneath the address someone else had hastily scrawled, "Destroy after reading." Robert looked up from the note. "Well, I guess I don't need to make a deal with you after all."

“Wait! I...” Chloe struggled in her handcuffs.

“Unless you have something to add?”

“If I tell you...you’ll let me go, right?”

Robert nodded.

“They’re going to make the crossing tomorrow night.”

“Which crossing? What time?”

“I don’t know!”

Robert paused. He couldn’t be sure, but he felt she was telling the truth, and feelings were all he really had to go on at that time. He pocketed the passport and the note.

All eyes turned to the sound of tires crunching on broken pavement. A black, boxy van wound its way down the road towards the station. The red symbol of the “Catchers” was emblazoned on its reinforced sides. Robert cursed. There was a part of him that said: “Stay. Explain your way out of the situation.” Then there was another part that said: “If they catch the two of you here, then you can forget about getting Ed’s killer.”

Robert started for the woods. For Sue’s sake he knew he should stay. She didn’t deserve to be punished, because he couldn’t let things go. To his surprise though, she was right next to him, following him unflinchingly.

“Hey, what about me?” Chloe called after them as she scrambled to her feet.

Without stopping, Robert called over his shoulder, “Better start running!”

Robert and Sue reached the tree line, hunkered down, and watched as Chloe ran for the opposite tree line. Moments after she disappeared into the woods, the van pulled up and the reinforced doors on the back flew open. Several men in urban camouflage and light body armor spilled out and onto the overgrown circle drive. They were armed with tranquilizer, net, and lasso guns—weapons made to capture and pacify rather than to do permanent damage. In their hands these non-lethal weapons somehow seemed more sinister.

Their most novel pieces of “equipment,” however, came in the form of a pair of so-called “bloodhounds.” Robert had only seen a bloodhound once before when the FBP R&D people did a presentation about the future of suspect tracking. In an effort to avoid dangerous situations for old-fashioned canine units; the proposal called for bloodhound ranks to be made up of girls who had been sentenced to community service for non-violent crimes. They called the bloodhounds “a perfect marriage of woman and machine.”

Robert doubted that the girls doing service would agree.

Unlike the ComPets with their soft, yet restraining, paw mittens and slippers, bloodhounds had their arms and legs encased in sleek, dark blue metal up to the elbows and knees. Each bloodhound sported a heavy metal shock collar around their throats, with round numbered ID tags hanging from them making it easy for handlers to identify them, which was necessary as their faces were entirely obscured by the rest of the gear. Their heads were obscured by a metallic mask made to resemble the head of a German shepherd, making them very “uniform” in appearance.

The metal ears and the snout weren’t merely an aesthetic choice to rob them of their humanity and their dignity—though they definitely did that. They were a main component of that “marriage of woman and machine.” The ears enhanced hearing, while the snout improved the power of scent. Sounds and smells would travel through the mask components and into the bloodhound’s brain, which would signal the mechanical limbs, which were also connected to the brain, where to go. When put into “hunt mode” they had absolutely no control over wherever the gear took them. Their bodies and minds were merely the crossroads that connected all the components of the heavy-duty gear.

During the FBP presentation, after Robert had gotten over the shock, he couldn’t help but notice that the “unit” was extremely swollen and dripping between her hind legs. One of the other police officers had joked, “Ah, all women are animals anyway! This one? Well, she’s just not afraid to admit it!”

The joke wasn’t out of line with how he’d been raised, but Robert couldn’t help but wonder what was going on under those dog-shaped hoods.

The thud of the heavy metal paws on the worn pavement and the mechanical baying that issued from the metal muzzles filled the air. The bloodhounds sniffed about on the ground while one squad of the Catchers forced their way into the old building.

“Let’s make for the car.” Robert whispered.

Sue nodded. They slipped back into the undergrowth and made their way back as quickly as they could. To their dismay they found a second van blocking their car into the drive.

The baying of the bloodhounds grew louder.

“They must have gotten our scent.”

“What do we do?”

“No choice. We gotta hoof it!” Robert grabbed Sue’s hand and pulled her deeper into the woods with him. They ran and ran, brambles tore at their clothes and exposed skin, but eventually the baying faded into the background. Slowing their pace to something more sustainable, they walked for hours. The sun was starting to set when they reached a stream swelled by the recent rains. Robert looked back at Sue who was chewing on the end of her vape pen. She only did that when she was nervous.

“What’s the problem?”

“Nothing, it’s just...that looks awfully deep and the water is running really fast.”

Robert picked up a long stick and tested the depth towards the center.

“It looks about waist-deep.”

Sue stepped up next to him. “Ahem. That’s relative.” She motioned with her hand showing the water would be creeping up to her collarbone.

Robert furrowed his brow. “Well, we could try to find a bridge or at least a shallower spot...”

They both gave a start at the distant baying of the bloodhounds.

Robert took off his shoes and socks and handed them to Sue.

“Hey, what are you...?”

Robert took her hand. “I’m going to carry you, come on!”

In the fading light, Robert thought he saw her blush and her retort seemed stuck in her throat. Not waiting for her to find her voice, Robert grabbed his shoes and hefted her effortlessly over his shoulder.

She kicked in the air a bit and quickly found her voice. “What? No! Put me down! I—”

“Just enjoy the ride, doll!”

“For the last time you are *not* a 1930s gumshoe. Don’t call me ‘doll!’”

“Do you want to stay dry or not?”

He winced as the icy water ran over the tops of his feet and the sharp stones dug into the soles. He gritted his teeth. “It’ll be over before you know it!” He wasn’t sure if he was reassuring her or his feet.

Thankfully, Sue stopped struggling and became still.

“There’s a good girl!” He laughed and carefully took another step forward.

“Oh, shut up!” She mumbled.

The baying grew louder and louder as Robert inched his way carefully forward, feeling his way across the rocky streambed with his toes in the dim light. Suddenly the baying stopped. Robert glanced over his shoulder at the bank and saw the metal head of the bloodhound staring at him with its sightless eyes. The body encased inside the metal pet gear was scratched from

the brambles and undergrowth. It dripped with sweat and heaved with exertion. Yet the gear remained rigid and uncompromising.

A low mechanical growl issued from the metallic muzzle and Robert felt a pang of fear in his chest.

“What—what’s happening?” Sue squirmed over his shoulder until she was able to raise her head and presumably got a good look at what Robert was seeing. “Oh, crap...”

The mechanical limbs whirled as the bloodhound crouched back as it prepared to pounce. The maw of the muzzle opened revealing a row of razor sharp teeth. Robert felt the weight of the gun in his holster again, but he couldn’t bring himself to draw. He couldn’t shoot someone who was helpless—even if she was about to tear him apart. The bloodhound launched into the air with unnatural force and Robert’s only recourse was to try to dodge it. The tender sole of his foot came down on something sharp. He couldn’t tell if he was bleeding, but it sure felt like he would have attracted a dozen sharks if he’d been in the ocean.

The metallic teeth latched onto the sleeve of Robert’s suit coat and thankfully not his arm. Robert stumbled as he was pulled forward. He couldn’t do anything to free himself while also holding Sue.

“I’ll make this up to you!” Robert yelled over the rush of the water before tossing Sue towards the opposite bank. She didn’t even have time to scream before hitting the water.

Free to move, Robert pulled back against the bloodhound’s vice-like maw until he felt his sleeve tear. The bloodhound fell backwards into the water with a splash, the torn sleeve still in the metal mouth. Robert could see it struggling in the water, the weight of its heavy metal appendages weighing it down. Robert spun around. He didn’t see Sue on the opposite bank. His eyes darted frantically over the surface of the water. He saw her waving her arms frantically further downstream as she was swept away.

Robert tore off what was left of his jacket and dove into the water to swim after her. He barely felt the pull or the iciness of the current. The stream widened and grew deeper with every stroke, but he didn’t care. His whole mind was on getting to Sue. His heart leapt when he saw that she’d managed to stop. She was clinging desperately to a half-sunk tree in the middle of the raging stream. He let the current carry him to her and he latched onto the tree right next to her.

“Fancy seeing you here!” He grinned. “Do you need help getting to the shore?”

Sue’s forehead was pressed against the tree trunk. Her eyes were shut tight. “Yes! I—I can’t swim”

Robert kicked himself for not realizing why she’d seemed so concerned about the height and speed of the water. He tilted her chin up and her eyes tentatively opened.

“Don’t worry! Just hold on to me,” he said, offering his back to her.

After a moment’s hesitation, she reached out and grabbed a hold of him. Robert took off for the other shore only to be yanked back.

“Wait!” Sue cried out. “I’m stuck!”

Robert pulled himself back to the tree and took stock. Sue’s blazer and skirt were both caught in the twist of branches. Knowing that it was only a matter of time before the bloodhound or the Catchers would find them, Robert acted fast. He tore the blazer from Sue’s back and then plunged his hands down into the water to go after the skirt. He groped blindly over her pert behind as he searched for a zipper.

Seeing Sue’s embarrassment, Robert quipped, “I don’t usually go this far on the first date!” To his surprise, his stupid joke seemed to calm her down a bit.

Freed from the branches, Robert beckoned her onto his back again. Her small, wet frame pressed against him as he let the current take them further downstream before he started making a diagonal path towards the opposite shore.