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Chapter 27

"I've got Smith and the robot, should I come by and pick you up?" Shomik Chandra asked Mike over the phone. He paused as she replied. Jenny couldn't hear what she said, but Shomik closed the stream right after saying. "Very good. See you soon."

"She says she's sorry she couldn't be here in person, but that you're in good hands." He accelerated the "CSVV" (Chandra Super Versatile Vehicle" into 'traffic,' only 'traffic' was water.

"Sounds fine," Jenny said. "Oh! And don't go east on Houston—it was raining fire over there, earlier, so you probably want to avoid that."

"Ah, yes, good point." He turned the wheel, taking the next right. Jenny climbed into the front seat as Domo looked around the back, finally sitting on a metal, fold-out chair. Essentially, the VV (as I'll refer to it), is best thought of as a minivan that is air and water tight.

"So, you design boats," Jenny said.

"Yep."

"Here in the city?"

"Yeah."

"Why New York?"

"Do you know how many times we get that question? Everyone expects us to be down in Florida, in Los Angeles or in the Caribbean or someplace. Everyone forgets that Manhattan is an island."

"Sorry," Jenny said smiling.

"And where there's an island, there's water and where there's water..."

"People need boats," Jenny finished.

"It makes perfect sense if you think about it," Domo said loudly from the back.

"He's a robot?" Shomik asked.

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Yeah!"

"What?" Domo asked.

"Nothing, Domo," Jenny said.

"Is there anything I can be doing?" he asked.

"Monitor MIIS. Give me a summary of what's going on once we've picked up Mike."

"Very good."

Shomik shrugged. "That's a high-end robot."

"Truly," she said.

"So, what does a high-tech boat designer stumble across that is so dangerous?"

"I don't know. I just know what I promised not to tell people."

I have my theories what it all means, but evidence-wise, I'm not so sure."

Jenny looked out the window as they passed City Hall. She saw water surrounding the building.

"Good thing that's just a museum, now," Jenny said.

"And Roosevelt Island is a fortress."

"I've heard, but I haven't been over there since the new stuff got built."

"No, it's really a fortress. Even underneath—it's reinforced. It's a completely closed system."

"Wow," Jenny said as they approached a police officer with rain gear on. By now, the wind had died down substantially. It was still raining though.

Shomik lowered the driver-side window. "Hi, Dr. Shomik Chandra, I'm supposed to be cleared to travel inside the flood zone."

The cop paused and stared at the graphic in front of him (he was wearing glasses). "OK, you're good. Sgt. Tardi is just on the edge of the flooded area—by the old Fed."

"That's Liberty and William or is she on the Nassau side?"

"William."

"Thanks!" Shomik said as the cop wave them on.

Minutes later, Jenny could see that the water level had risen several inches.

"Are we floating?" she asked Shomik.

"Not yet. The wheels are still touching a bit but I have dropped the hydroturbines."

"Wow. I don't know what those are, but they sound really neat."

"Oh, they are."

As they turned onto Liberty Street, Jenny could immediately see a cluster of small police boats that looked capable of holding five or six people each. They were moored at a lamp post. She saw a few cops on each, all of them wearing rain gear.

"She must be one of them," Shomik said.

"I didn't know NYPD had so many boats."

Shomik shrugged and exhaled.

"Right! Sorry, it's an island," she said smiling.

"Thank you. Besides, this scenario has been something people have considered for a generation now."

"But I thought the protection walls were supposed to prevent something like this," she said.

"Me, too. Oh and we're floating now."

"Truly?" she said, looking out her window to see that the water was now just halfway up the side of the VV. She looked around and saw ancient buildings with water up to their windows.

"Oh, no..." she said. "These buildings are all so old."

Shomik lowered the window again as they floated up to the group of boats. "Hey, is there a Sgt. Tardi who needs a lift to her vacation?"

"Yeah!" Mike turned and saw Shomik and Jenny in the VV. She waved, smiling.

"Hey, you're not really gonna go on vacation now are you?" one of her fellow cops asked her.

"Of course!"

"But look around you!"

"The man upstairs demoted me to here. If I was that important, he'd have left me where I was."

"What does God have to do with it?"

"Not God, Mayor Breit!"

"Oh."

"You were kidding, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Beat cops aren't that dumb." They hugged as Shomik moved to the middle section and opened the top half of the driver-side side door. It flipped outward and created a sort of step you could stand on before climbing all the way in. He climbed back into the driver's seat as Mike climbed onto that step and gave one last wave.

"If you see the mayor, give him love from the boys on Wall Street," her fellow officer called.

"I will!" she said smiling and lowering herself into the VV as Shomik pulled the VV away from the police boats.

"Can you believe this? Breit wanted to protect the water supply from terrorists by making the island water-tight and built the

protection walls to keep out rising sea water, but now all this hurricane rain has got Wall Street under water! For real!"

Jenny smiled as she slid from the passenger seat and moved to the middle holding out her hand to Mike. "Pleasure to meet you," Jenny said, smiling. Mike took it immediately.

"So, you're Jim's Jenny?"

"Yeah, well, no, but yeah."

"You are adorable," Mike said. "If you weren't Jim's I'd ask you out."

"Um, thanks! But I'm not Jim's. But I only like boys."

"Damn it!" Mike said dramatically as she sat in the passenger seat of the VV. "All the good women are straight, taken or bitches."

"Jenny, what is she talking about?" Domo asked.

"Do you have an alternative lifestyles database, Domo?" Jenny asked.

"No. Should I?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, hey, robot. Sorry, didn't see you back there."

"It's OK," Domo said.

"Shomik, thanks for doing all this."

"It's the right thing. So, I do it. Let's just save my brother."

"Right." Mike smiled and looked back at Jenny. "When's the last time you had an open stream to Jim?"

"Last night? Around ten or eleven, I think."

"Have you tried since?"

"No, but Domo has."

"How many times?"

"Forty-three, including one just ten minutes ago," Domo said.

"He didn't answer any of them."

"Shit," Mike said, slumping back in the passenger seat.

"Where to?" Shomik asked smiling.

"Hm, where's the last place you--" Mike stopped as Domo started talking.

"I suggest we go to the Harlem Shelter. That is where I saw Jim last."

"All right," she said smiling at Domo. Mike looked to Shomik.

"You heard the robot, To the Harlem Shelter and step on it!"

"You got it, lady!" he said, spinning the wheel and taking the VV in a different direction.

"But don't take the FDR—traffic is terrible this time of day!" Mike said, clearly joking.

"Well, we've lucked out since it looks like 536 is moving past as finally," Shomik said.

"Actually," Domo began, "Jenny has had me monitoring the MIIS streams and there is another hurricane approaching. It has slowed, however, and won't arrive for six hours."

"Great," Shomik said, adding, "bad weather or not, the fastest

way to get someplace in Manhattan is to go around."

"What do you mean?" Jenny asked.

"My company rents a dock down by South Street. We use it for high-profile demos of new vehicles."

"We'll have to give you the tour," Mike said, adding, "Figuratively, of course."

Jenny didn't understand what he meant, but Domo distracted her with his next question.

"Should I continue with my news summary?"

"Yes, please," Jenny said.

"More reports are coming in about loud thunder," Domo said.

"But it's barely even raining," Shomik said.

"There have also been vandals setting fires to iLine hubs around the city."

"Around the city?" Jenny asked.

"That's garbage," Mike said. "You can't set fires to the iLine—those hubs are having plasma leaks."

"That's just what Domo said—plasma!" Jenny said.

"What do you mean leaks?" Domo asked.

"We've been getting reports of hubs all over the iLine getting unbearably hot for weeks now. There have even been a few small fires, but vandals?"

"And we saw the East Houston Street iLine hub on fire," Jenny said.

"It was raining plasma down on SoHo," Domo added.

"Christ... Breit's going to have to show his hand soon..."

"What do you mean?" Jenny asked.

"First things, first—cabbie? How we doin'? We close?"

"Almost there," Shomik said as they turned a corner to see the protection wall at the south end of the island. The street lights illuminated it from below making it look even more imposing.

"Wow," Jenny said. "I don't think I've ever seen it that high before."

"Uh-huh," Shomik said. "It goes higher, too—I've seen it on the outside.

"Outside?"

"Yeah. This Chandra Super Versatile Vehicle isn't just for riding on top of the waves," Shomik said as he drove out of the water, onto a driveway leading to a large hatchway in the protection wall, itself. He pulled up to a small kiosk, swiped some card and the door slid open. He pushed the accelerator lever forward, speeding the VV up, sending it racing through the hatchway and onto a long, metal dock. "I forgot to ask if you guys were strapped in. If not, do it now."

Jenny quickly helped Domo get strapped into his fold-down seat as Jenny found another fold-down seat opposite his and followed suit. Jenny sighed with relief just as the VV zoomed off the end of the dock, into the East River.

Immediately, Jenny pressed herself against the window and tried to see out into the river.

"It's night time, so there's not much you can see," Shomik explained. "We're pretty much on GPS and sonar down here."

"Wow."

"Even if it wasn't night time, it's pretty murky and even disgusting."

Jenny saw some sort of wall through the windshield of the VV. "What's that, then?"

"Computer simulation. I've got hyper-sensitive sonar scanning the area. Then a high-end graphics processor renders a 3-D version of the sonar data in real-time, displaying it on the Heads-Up Display."

"It looks like it's mid-afternoon out there," Jenny said.

"Yeah, you don't want it too bright."

"Truly," Jenny said sarcastically.

"Now for the tour," Mike said.

"Right! The tour." Shomik sounded very enthusiastic as he maneuvered the VV around so that they now traveling with a wall to the right, about twenty meters from them.

"Every window in the vehicle has a HUD, so have a look," Shomik said. Jenny looked out the right side window as he continued.

"That's the island of Manhattan right there."

"That looks really smooth. What kind of rock is that?" Jenny asked.

"It's not rock. That's a bit more of the protection wall."

"Oh."

"So, the East River is pretty shallow compared to the Hudson."

Suddenly, Jenny saw Manhattan pull away from view.

"Whoa—where are we now?"

"Coming around the southern tip of Manhattan. If you look to your left you'll see Governor's Island and beyond it, the Statue of Liberty," Shomik did his best tour guide impression.

Jenny looked to her left to see... nothing.

"At least, you would see those things if we weren't a hundred feet under water."

Feeling a little dumb, Jenny shook her head and looked through the windshield to see the southern tip of Manhattan.

"Oh, look! There's Battery Park!" Jenny said, jokingly.

"Where?" Domo said.

"Now, I'm going to take us down a little more and I'll show you what I know, so they can threaten your family if you talk, too."

"Oh, thanks!" Jenny said.

"It's OK, I won't let anybody hurt ya," Mike said.

"Oh. Thanks."

"OK, now without my sonar, you couldn't see this stuff—look there." Shomik pointed to the right side of the VV. Jenny looked out at the CG simulation and saw a thick line that moved through the stone that held up Manhattan. "See how straight and uniform that

is?"

"Yeah," Jenny said. "Hey, Domo, get some video of this so Jim can see it later."

"Very good," Domo said. "Recording now."

"What is that line?"

"I don't know. But as far as I can tell, it runs the entire length of the island on this side. Based on the sediment that has fallen on top of it, it's not even been there that long. Maybe five or six years."

"And you're sure it's nothing to do with the protection walls?" Mike asked.

"Definitely not. They're up higher."

"What do you think it is?" Jenny asked.

"I don't know. I'm not a rock guy, my brother and I, we build boats."

"But look at this." He tapped at a display mounted in his dashboard. A video image appeared on the windshield. "It's ground-penetrating radar data and look at the difference."

Jenny looked and saw in three sections in a cross-section of rock. "Is that Manhattan?"

"Yeah, a part of it. But look—the first section is the natural rock right here. I think it's Manhattan Schist. Then here, it's all smashed up. That's just a few meters from the Hudson. Then, here's the line and it's more reflective than armor plating."

"In fact, that's what we think it is," Mike said.

"What's the other stuff?"

"That's the schist above the line."

"But it doesn't look like the other schist."

"Same schist, different day," Shomik joked.

"Huh?"

"Would you stop with the funny?" Mike asked.

"Sorry. Look, seriously? That schist is more dense. It looks like it's actually older than the stuff below. It reflects a lot more than the lower stuff."

"I have a question," Domo said. "What happens if the 'smashed up' schist comes in contact with the water in the Hudson River?"

"We're not sure," Mike said. "We're guessing the entire island will just drop down, compressing the schist more."

"What is causing the "smashing up" of the schist?"

"We don't know," Shomik said.

"But the floods, the iLine plasma fires, the homeless people massacres and now—the tremors!"

"Tremors?" Shomik asked.

"That's right!" Jenny said. "Mike, what did people say when they called you guys?"

"Well, I don't answer phones, so I got it all second hand, but people said they felt tremors—like San Andreas-style, stuff shaking off the shelves, whoa, that's a big-ass truck driving by, tremors."

"They've got to be connected, Mike," Shomik said.

"Yeah, but how," Mike said, rubbing her face.

"And what does this have to do with with killing homeless people?" Jenny asked.

"And robots?" Domo added.

"Good questions, all," Mike said.

Minutes later, Shomik had made landfall on a portion of Manhattan that was actually outside the protection wall. He drove along until he reached another hatchway. He swiped again and the massive door opened. It was obvious that Shomik knew important people. Not just anyone could waltz through those hatchways on his own.

Within minutes, Jenny had guided Shomik to the shelter.

"You'd better stay here, Domo," Jenny said as she and Mike climbed out."

"Oh yes, those two girls think I killed their mother."

"You what?" Shomik asked.

"I didn't do it."

"Oh, good."

"At least, I have no record of doing it."

"Huh?" Shomik gave Mike an awkward look.

"He's a robot! Just tell him to switch off," Mike said. She and Jenny turned to walk away when Domo saw something through the window of the VV. "Look—another hub is suffering from a plasma leak."

They all looked toward the West 116th Street Hub to see it looking just like East Houston Street Hub—engulfed in white flames. Thanks to the weather clearing substantially, the wind wasn't blowing it all over Harlem.

Inside the shelter, Jenny and Mike eyed the room for anyone who looked like me. Obviously, they didn't find me.

"Can I help you ladies?" it was Janet talking from behind the counter. She stuttered and then added: "...and Officer."

"It's OK, I'm a lady, too."

"Hi," Jenny said, stepping forward, "we're looking for a Jim Conant?"

"Oh, yes, there was some confusion about that."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked.

"Well, I called the police because Mr. Conant had lied to me and those two young girls seemed convinced his robot had done something horrible. But the police came twice."

"Twice? What do you mean?" Mike asked.

"The first cops weren't cops," Jenny said. "Domo told me they were PriNCE."

"Right, which is why he dropped off our GPS."

"Do you mean that literally?" Jenny asked.

"No, I just have friends almost everywhere but inside PriNCE. They're pretty much impenetrable."

"Oh," Jenny said.

"So, I don't know what happened to him or his robot," Janet said. "And if you don't know, Officer, where he is, I don't know what to tell you."

"What about Ahsanul?" Jenny asked. "Is he around?"

"Yes, he's sleeping it off. He got into a fight yesterday and he's been popping Aspirin like it's candy."

"Can you wake him, please?" Jenny was trying to sound as sweet as she could (which was really very sweet).

"Oh, are you sure? He really got beat-up good."

"It's an emergency, ma'am," Mike said, finally.

"Oh, OK," Janet said. "You two wait here, then."

Janet vanished into the kitchen and then appeared in the gymnasium. Jenny watched as she found Ahsanul's bed and leaned over. He sat up after a moment rubbing his head. He held up his hand and nodded. Janet turned to Jenny and Mike and waved for them to enter.

"I haven't seen him," Ahsanul said, minutes later, still sitting on his bed. "The cops took him away, the second cops came, asked a bunch of questions and then left. I was going to do something but I got this splitting headache."

"Hey, you know Van, don't you?" Jenny asked.

Ahsanul sighed. "Yeah... why?"

"He's a friend of mine," Mike said, "and we can't reach him either."

"You're a cop—can't you get him on Xnet?"

"He's not answering any of my streams and he's not returning them later on."

"Shit," Ahsanul said under his breath. He made a pained expression and then ran his fingers through his loose, long hair. "All right. Let me get some coffee and some more meds and we'll go down to Bushville."

Minutes later, they were driving south in the VV, toward 110th. They hit a bump causing Ahsanul to spill coffee on his arm. "Ow!"

"Sorry, this thing handles better on the water," Shomik said.

"So, he's your informant, but you don't know where his 'ville is?" Ahsanul asked Mike, as they climbed out of the VV.

"I know where it is. I know where all the 'villes are."

"Oh yeah? So, why'd you come get me?"

"Because we hoped you'd know where Jim was."

"Well, why am I taking you to Van, then? Every time I see him he wants to kick my ass!"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Mike said, smiling.

"I don't need you to protect me. I just don't feel like getting into another fist fight with the man."

"Fine, then stay up here—go hang out with Shomik in the SCVV."

"SCV—what?" Ahsanul asked as they reached the gate.

"That thing we rode here in." Ahsanul opened the gate and let everyone through. He followed suit and as they approached the stairs down, he decided to stop. "There's no way I'm facing that asshole

again. All right, fine. I'll just wait here, then. It's a nice enough day now."

Jenny glanced up and saw mostly blue sky.

"Fine. See you in a bit!" Mike said as she started down the steps. Jenny saw Ahsanul cross his arms and lean against a tree just before she turned and descended the steps.

As they reached the 'living room' as I initially called it, they saw much the same view I saw when I first visited—a comfortable room, with a couch, a table, and the general look of a modern living room. There was even that old wall display that wasn't built in to the wall. A woman looked up from her old-fashioned book. "Can I help you guys?"

"Yeah, I'm Ser---Mike Tardi. I'm a friend of Van's."

"Oh yeah, I'm Isadore, I'm, well, I'm the doctor around these parts."

"Ah, nice to meet you," Mike said, shaking Isadore's hand. "Let me guess, you're Mrs. Van, too, right?"

"No, no," Isadore said. "I don't think Van is a 'one-woman' kind of guy."

"So you're available?" Mike asked.

"Jim never said you were such a lecherous--"

"What? You said you like boys, no fair getting jealous now."

"I'm not jealous," Jenny said defensively.

"I need to see Van," Mike said to Isadore.

"What's this about... Officer?"

"Oh, yeah, the uniform... uhm, it's cool. He knows me. And I'm not here to arrest him or anything."

"Good to know," Isadore said smiling at Mike. She then moved down the steps from the platform. "You can either have a seat or come with me. Van's just helping with dinner."

Mike looked to Jenny and Domo and nodded. With that they followed Isadore.

In the kitchen, Van stood at a counter, wearing an apron, with a fist full of stuffing and a cigarette dangling from his lips. In front of him was a huge turkey.

"Hey, Van, some people are here to see you," Isadore said. He looked back and smiled.

"Ah, and who might you three—hey, you're that robot guy."

"It's good to see you again, Van," Domo said.

"You bring that brat, Oz, with you?"

"Van, it's me, Mike."

Van looked surprised and happy. "No way!"

"Yes!" she said smiling as Van jammed the stuffing into the body of the turkey in front of him and immediately approached Mike.

"Gimme a hug, you!"

As they hugged Van kept his hands from her back, but pressed hard on her shoulder blades with his arms.

"Oh, my god, you know," Van said, pulling away from Mike, "I

always thought you sounded hot on the phone. You're even hotter in person, Sgt. Mike."

Isadore let out a chortle that Jenny noticed. Jenny looked to Mike who smiled back at Isadore. "It's OK, Van, I'm not a one-woman kind of guy, either."

"Huh?"

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Ohhh..." Van said. "I couldn't tell by your voice."

Jenny leaned toward Domo and whispered. "This is a good example of the old phrase 'takes one to know one'."

Domo nodded and replied softly. "I'll tag it as such."

"I've got some reading to do," Isadore said. "Van holler if you need help with the turkey."

"Thanks, Izza!" Van said as Mike turned to Jenny.

"You've already met the robot," Mike said. "And this is Jenny."

"The cute one, I remember you—you're Jim's Jenny, right?"

"Um, no, she isn't," Mike said, quickly.

"Isn't she the one with that Jim Conant guy I was supposed to hide... up in NorMa the other day?"

"Yes, but she's not Jim's Jenny. You know what I mean?"

"Oh... OH." Van thought about it for a moment and then gave her a look. "Well I..."

Van paused and then held out his hand to her, "Pleased to meet you...oops--"

Just as Jenny was about to take his hand he pulled it away, wiping it on his apron and then reaching out again. "Sorry, Jenny. I was stuffing the bird."

Jenny smiled, shaking his hand. "Good to meet you."

"It's cool—nice to finally meet you in person," Van said.

"In person?"

"Yeah, I had Van waiting to pick you guys up after the PriNCE gunship took apart Jim's apartment," Mike explained.

"And then you guys decided to think for yourselves!" Van was being overly dramatic.

"Sorry," Jenny said sarcastically.

"We did alright without your help," Domo said, flatly. "No disrespect meant."

Van eyed Domo for a moment with a suppressed grin on his face.

"All right, so you two ladies won't go out with me," Van said, shrugging. "What other reason could you have for coming to see me?"

"A couple of things. First, we can't find Jim."

"Jim? I just saw him last night. Beat up a friend of his."

"Yeah, I know, but he was taken off by some goons from PriNCE who pretended to be cops."

"Damn. I'm sorry—I haven't been in touch with anybody over there in months. My last contact quit."

"Why?" Jenny asked.

"Cuz he had morals," Van replied. Jenny wasn't sure what that

meant since what little she knew about Prince was what I had told her.

"Keep talking," Van said, "but I've got to keep prepping this bird."

As he turned back to the turkey, Mike continued. "So, can you ask around and see if maybe any of the other Hoovervilles have found him? I figured that Carol Phillips woman ended up here, perhaps..."

Van stopped stuffing. His shoulders sank. "Right. I can send somebody down to Hydesville and see if Aibo has seen him. Aniki's better connected to the other 'villes than me."

"I know, but he won't talk to me because I'm a cop."

"Right, no problem," he said, starting to shove cloves of garlic underneath the skin of the huge turkey.

"How soon can you do it?" Jenny asked.

"Soon as I'm done here. In fact, sooner. Can you stick these garlic cloves under the skin and I'll go find my best guy."

"Uh, sure," Jenny said approaching the counter. He wiped his hands on his apron and moved to the doorway. "Hey, Izza! Can you find Nose and bring him here, please?" Van turned around and looked to Mike. "What are the specifics?"

"Nose?" Jenny asked.

"He's smart and he's a runner," Van said, quickly. "Short for 'Runny Knows' like 'knows' with a 'k'. Why am I explaining myself? Mike? What were you saying?"

"Specifics—we were called because a resident, a little girl at the shelter he was staying at accused Mr. Robot, here, of murdering her mother."

"Was the girl's name Donna?" Van asked.

"Yes, it was Donna," Jenny said.

Van's face became tense as he pointed to Domo. "She said this robot killed her mom?"

"Yes, she accused him," Jenny said.

Van turned and threw a punch at Domo's head. He immediately dodged it, grabbing Van's hand while using his own left hand to push against Van's back, shoving him against the wall and pulling his arm backward.

"I don't have data that confirms I killed anyone," his voice was calm as always, but that only seemed to make his actions more serious. "So, until you have evidence that I did, I will fall back on your practice of being innocent until proven guilty. Do you understand?"

"What about the girl's eye-witness account?" Van managed to say through his teeth.

"Do you really think a fourteen year-old girl can tell the difference between me and other robots? Especially when we all come off of the same assembly line?"

"You're right," Van said.

"Domo, let him go, honey," Jenny said, finally. Domo relaxed

his grip and Van pulled his arm back. "Shit, robot! How am I supposed to stuff the turkey if you break my arm?"

Domo looked to Jenny. Jenny shook her head. "I apologize for the violence, Mr. Bush."

"It's all right. I guess you're just protecting yourself, am I right?"

"Yes."

"I know what that's like, being on the outside, discriminated against. I'm sorry—Mike, you were saying you had other reasons to be here?"

"Yeah—I think Breit is finally making his move."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of things are happening—floods, hooverville violence, plasma fires in the--" Mike stopped talking as Isadore appeared in the doorway. Van looked over. "Where's Nose?"

"Got another runner for you," Isadore said, motioning for someone to enter. "This is brother Keith—he's a runner from Hydesville."

"Really," Van said.

"Truly," Jenny said.

"All right, what's the good word from brother Aniki?" Van asked.

"I've got a message here—hang on," Keith said, digging through a bag and pulling out a phone. He tapped the display and it started to play a message. "Oh, uh, OK—This is a message to Van Bush, leader of

the Bushville community."

"Hey, that's Jim's voice!" Jenny said.

"OH SHIT!" Keith said making a very upset face. "I forgot to disguise the voice!"

"Where is he?" Jenny said, getting in Keith's face. "Is he alright? When was this recording made?"

"I-I-I'm not sure—maybe a few hours ago?"

"But he was alive, right?"

"Yeah!"

Jenny sighed.

"Maybe she's not Jim's Jenny, but he's Jenny's Jim?" Van asked, looking at Mike.

"No, it's not like that. I just... don't want to lose someone else is all."

"I can understand that," Van said. He looked to Keith. "Could you give us a couple of minutes, we've got a message for you to take back to brother Aniki, but we need to figure out what it is, first."

"Sure, yeah, and sorry about the voice thing. Oh, hey, you haven't listened to the whole thing yet--"

"Just one sec, brother Keith."

Keith nodded and started to step through the door, but stopped and turned back. "Hey, did I hear someone say something about plasma? Because, brother Aniki found a--"

"Brother Keith. One moment, please." Van was making a "shoo"

motion with his hand. Keith nodded and stepped through the door as Isadore stepped forward. "Van, shouldn't we at least listen to the damn message?"

"Look, I just want to eat my damn turkey, all right?" Van said. Isadore gave him a look and then nodded toward the door. "All right, I'll go get him."

Van stepped into the doorway and looked both up and down the platform. "Where'd he? Brother Keith, where'd you go?"

"Maybe he sat down at the table?" Isadore suggested. Van looked down into the trackwell and saw Keith lying in a pool of blood. Instinctively, Van jumped back into the kitchen as all of the cubicle walls in the trackwell in front of the kitchen doorway began to splinter and shatter almost silently.

"FUCK!" Van spun around and got Isadore back on her feet. "IZZA! Take Mike, the 'Bot and Jenny and get them up to the farm, you got me?!!"

He was yelling over the sound of screams and explosions coming from the rest of the 'ville."

"But--

"NO FUCKING BUTS! JUST DO IT, IZZA!"

Isadore turned, clenched her jaw and pointed toward a door in the corner of the kitchen. "This way, come on!"

"Jenny—I'm asking permission to put Van and the others here at Bushville on my task list under protection."

"Permission granted!" Jenny said.

"Record updated, engaging defensive/offensive mode."

End of Chapter 27

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