Chapter 13

SIGMA SHOOK OUT *her arms and legs at the starting line. This was going to be her year. Not that she had any idea what year it was or when that year might have started.*

The annual Not the Death Race wasn't so much "annual" as semi-random. Sigma hosted it whenever she felt like it had been long enough since the last one. This time, it felt like it had been several lifetimes. In a way, it had. She spent her days living and dying in a virtual world dominated by homicidal kangaroos. The race would be a nice change of pace. It offered the mere possibility of death as opposed to the absolute certainty of it in the simulations. Even real death beat another day at the Table.

"On your mark!" Kappa said.

Sigma crouched in the starting position. She had to be fast off the line. If she wasn't, Iota might catch her and lock her in a utility closet—again. The first rule of the Not the Death Race was: anything not expressly forbidden was implicitly allowed. The second rule was: know how to break out of a utility closet.

Kappa raised his arm. "Get set!"

Beta put his toe on the starting line. Iota leaned forward.

"What do you think you're doing?" Epsilon asked.

Sigma sighed. She had picked this start time specifically because Epsilon was supposed to be busy at the Table. She must have gotten her civilization wiped out faster than usual.

"It's not what it looks like," Sigma said.

"Super," Epsilon said, "because it looks like the Not the Death Race."

Despite making the organics face their simulated mortality at the Table on a daily basis, SCASL had forbidden them from engaging in real-life risk-taking behavior, which included roaming the outer halls, whistling while chewing, death races, and—after reviewing Edubot's files—Not the Death Races. That made Sigma want to have one all the more.

Epsilon looked at the three runners, who were clearly ready to start a race, and Kappa, who was about to send them off.

"What would you call this?" Epsilon asked.

"The Not the Not the Death Race," Sigma said.

"That's a double negative," Epsilon said. "That just makes it the Death Race."

"No, it makes it the Not the Not the Death Race," Sigma said.

They glared at each other.

"It's okay, babe," Kappa said. "This is practice for the landing."

Epsilon whirled to face him.

"Don't you dare," she said.

"Seriously," Kappa said. "I'm training to be a doctor. Where better to practice than at a death race?"

"A Not the Not the Death Race," Sigma said.

"That's what I meant," Kappa said.

When she first started it, Sigma simply called the event the Death Race, but not a single other organic signed up. Then she changed the name to Not the Death Race, and a handful of brave souls volunteered. It was exactly the same race. It all came down to branding. The Not the Not the Death Race continued in that proud tradition.

"If SCASL asks, I was never here," Epsilon said.

"We all wish you were never here," Sigma muttered.

Kappa gave Epsilon a quick kiss on the cheek. She shot Sigma one last derisive glance and left.

Sigma was surprised to feel sad to see her go. More than anything, Sigma wanted an audience. In years when the Not the Death Race wasn't banned, all of the organics would be at the starting line to watch. It was Sigma's only chance to show off, even if no one could see her past the first straight away. Most of the action took place in the outer halls, where Sigma could jump and tumble her way through a seemingly impossible series of obstacles. She wasn't smart like Rho or a leader like Epsilon or even a fashion diva like Tau or Omicron. All she had was parkour, and the only chance she had to use it was when she created the opportunity herself. After weeks of getting torn apart by hostile marsupials, she had never wanted to hurdle inanimate objects more.

Kappa dropped his arm.

"Go!"

The racers surged across the starting line. Sigma gave Iota a wide berth so Iota couldn't drag her off and lock her in another closet. Sigma was confident she wouldn't let that happen to herself again, but she had spent months practicing how to hack open locked doors just in case.

The three ran down the hall on deck twelve, then hit the first stairwell. Iota was in the lead, with Beta not far behind. Sigma brought up the rear. She wasn't worried. She hated the non-obstacle portion of this obstacle course. Her time to shine was when stuff was in her way.

As they ran, Sigma couldn't help but feel like the course was empty. In previous races, Phi and Omicron would sometimes participate, but this year, it looked like SCASL's warning had kept them away. Either that or they just didn't feel like risking life and limb for nothing more than bragging rights, even if Sigma knew those were the greatest prize of all. Pain was temporary, but gloating was forever. Or until the next Not the Not the Death Race, whichever came first.

Two stories down, Beta exited the stairwell and nearly collided with Upsilon, who dove against the wall.

"Sorry," Upsilon said.

Beta kept going without comment. Sigma shrugged apologetically at Upsilon as she passed, even though she didn't have to. Not the Not the Death Race participants always had the right of way.

Finally, the course took them through a bot maintenance bay. Sigma hurdled large pieces of equipment while Iota and Beta carefully maneuvered around them. Sigma took the lead. Her heart pounded. She felt alive.

Two corridors later, Sigma reached the edge of the colony ship. Beyond the final doorway were the outer halls, where the real danger began. Sigma flung open the door and launched herself through it. Iota was half a stride behind her.

Their footsteps echoed down the empty walkway. Sigma couldn't hear Beta. Either he had gotten lost or had deliberately taken an alternate route. As long as he got to the turnaround point, that was legal, just like pretty much everything else.

Sigma skidded to a halt. Iota ran into her back.

"Hey, what gives?" Iota said.

Then she saw it. Straight ahead, a scorpion-like science bot took up the entire hall.

"Don't move," Sigma whispered. "I think it sees us."

The science bot's many legs clattered in their direction. Iota turned and ran. Sigma charged forward and planted one foot on the science bot's back, springing over it.

The science bot swung its pneumatic stinging tail, narrowly missing Sigma as she sailed past. She hit the ground running.

"No fair!" Iota yelled from somewhere far behind.

"Go whine in a utility closet!" Sigma shouted back. She had this race in the bag. She slowed down a little.

Around the next bend, she hit a section of hall where the floor had collapsed, revealing the level below. She could drop down to the next floor and run, or she could swing across the pipes on the ceiling like monkey bars. That was a no-brainer. She always went with the option that took more upper body strength.

Her shoulders burned as she moved hand over hand across the gap. She looked down.

Beta jogged underneath her on the level below.

"Where did you come from?" Sigma shouted.

"Your nightmares!" Beta shouted back.

Thanks to all his distance runs, Beta knew the outer halls better than anyone but Delta. Leave it to him to find a short cut. Or, more likely, a long cut that involved more running and less jumping and sliding, which were never his strengths. Sigma pushed on. She would win this the right way or not at all.

She landed on the other side of the gap and ran. One staircase and two hallways later, she reached the turnaround point. It was a wall of colorful vending machines, all of which were empty and heavily damaged. One was smashed completely flat. It must have mouthed off to the wrong digital. It never paid to argue with a lifting bot, even if you were right. Sigma always came out in advance to place the unique items each racer had to recover to prove they made it this far. This year, she opted for large, green carbonized bolts. She didn't tell Iota, but she found them in the same utility closet where she had been locked the previous year. Winning with one of those in her hand would be the ultimate revenge. But first she had to catch Beta. One bolt was gone, and Beta was nowhere to be seen. She had to make up ground.

Sigma started back by a different route. She couldn't take the monkey bar pipe section right then. Her arms needed a break. Hallway after hallway, she hurdled obstacles, but she still couldn't see Beta. She was going to lose for a second year in a row. Unless…

No. She couldn't do that. Winning wasn't worth dying for.

What was she saying? Of course it was.

Sigma took a hard left.

She found herself in complete darkness in what she knew was a massive room. With soft, hesitant steps, she began to cross. She held her breath. If she was quiet enough, she might make it to the empty elevator shaft on the other side without getting caught. She was overdue for some good luck.

A beam of light burst into existence, blinding her. She held up her arm to shield her eyes.

Something hit Sigma from the side. She cried out as she fell to the floor. A heavy mass landed on top of her.

Half a second later, Sigma heard a deafening crunch of metal on metal. It was the bulldozer bot that called this room home. It had missed her by the slimmest of margins.

Sigma looked up to see the faint outline of Iota's face staring back at her. Iota had tackled her out of harm's way.

"You saved me," Sigma said.

"Shhh," Iota said.

The bulldozer bot backed up from the wall. Iota rose to a crouch and darted across the room. Sigma followed. They ducked behind a pile of crushed metal. The beam of light swung wide as the bot pivoted, searching for them.

The beam hit the pile of crushed metal. Sigma closed her eyes. The light moved on.

Iota hurled a rubber ball across the cavernous room. It landed behind the bulldozer bot and bounced. The bulldozer bot whipped around to chase it.

"Now," Iota whispered.

Iota and Sigma ran to the elevator shaft. The bulldozer bot turned around. Iota hit the button to open the double doors.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, crap," Iota said.

The bulldozer bot charged.

Sigma popped off the panel beside the door and began twisting wires. She had practiced this obsessively, but mainly on utility closets. Hopefully elevator doors worked the same way.

The bot's beam of light lit up the doorway. It was right on top of them.

The doors slid open.

"In!" Sigma yelled.

She jumped through the door, pulling Iota with her. Sigma hammered the console on the other side. The doors snapped closed.

WHAM.

A giant bulge formed in the metal doors as the bulldozer bot smashed into them.

"Climb," Sigma said.

Sigma's arms were still exhausted, but her adrenaline gave her renewed strength. She and Iota scampered up the sides of the empty shaft. Sigma had no idea where the elevator had gone. It didn't seem like the kind of thing that could leave on its own, but as with the science bots with stingers, she found it was best not to ask any questions.

The bulldozer bot rammed the doors again and again. On the fourth strike, the doors blew off their tracks. The bulldozer bot squeezed into the bottom of the shaft.

Sigma climbed onto a ledge at a doorway three stories up. She reached back and pulled up Iota. They sat on the edge with their feet dangling off, breathing heavily.

The bulldozer pivoted in place angrily. It rotated its searchlight up to face them.

Iota hit the light dead center with her green bolt, shattering the glass.

"Nice shot," Sigma said.

"Thanks," Iota said.

Slowly, the bulldozer bot backed out of the elevator shaft to await the next lifeform dumb enough to cross through its lair.

"You were crazy to take that short cut," Iota said.

"You were crazy to follow me," Sigma said.

Iota shrugged. "It was that or lose."

Sigma hacked the panel next to the door. It opened easily. She realized she was good at this, even in the dark. Maybe parkour wasn't her only skill.

She squinted as her eyes adjusted to the bright hall.

"You sacrificed your rubber ball for me," Sigma said.

"I have more," Iota said. "Drives Edubot nuts. She'll never find them all."

The two stood silently for a moment.

"Well," Sigma said.

"Yeah," Iota said.

They sprinted down the hall.

It was a photo finish. Kappa said it was a tie, but Iota gave the win to Sigma. Sigma was gracious in victory. She only bragged a few dozen times. Kappa did his best to treat their cuts and bruises, and for the most part,

he did a decent job. He was the only organic Sigma knew of who could ply his trade at the Table and in real life.

"Where's Beta?" Kappa asked when he was done with them.

"He'll be here," Sigma said.

Two hours passed. Kappa left for his next session at the Table. There was still no sign of Beta.

"Do you think he's okay?" Sigma asked.

"No," Iota said.

Finally, when they were ready to form a search party, Beta limped into view, supported by Delta. She was the last person Sigma expected to see.

"Did you lose this?" Delta asked.

Sigma ran up and hugged Beta.

Beta pushed her off.

"I'm fine," he said. "Really." He was dragging one foot.

"You had a huge lead," Iota said. "What happened?"

"A mobile cold storage unit," Delta said.

Sigma punched Beta playfully in the arm. Beta winced.

"You got beat up by a fridge," she said.

"They're smarter than they look," Beta said.

Delta helped Beta sit down.

"That was dumb," Delta said. "Really, truly, utterly, completely dumb. You guys have no business being in the outer halls."

Sigma and Iota exchanged a glance.

"We handled ourselves okay," Iota said.

"One-third of your racers almost died," Delta said.

"But they didn't," Sigma said. "Thanks to you."

"Yeah," Iota said. "You're, like, the lifeguard of the outer halls. First Gamma, now Beta."

Sigma gave Delta a friendly push. Delta didn't budge. That girl was solid.

"If you're not careful, you'll get a reputation for helping people," Sigma said.

"Good thing no one will find out about this," Beta said from the floor.

"I don't care about my reputation," Delta said.

"I care about mine," Beta said. "I'm training for defense. I can't let everyone know I got beat up…"

"By a walking fridge?" Iota finished.

"Technically, it was a freezer," Delta said. "And it didn't have legs. It rolled."

"Seriously, guys, you can't tell anyone," Beta said.

Sigma and Iota exchanged another look.

"Fine," they said together.

"Delta?" Beta asked.

"You're awfully demanding for someone I just saved."

"Please," Beta begged.

"Fine," Delta said. "I won't tell anyone. Under one condition."

"What?" Beta asked.

"No more Not the Death Races," Delta said. "That goes for all of you."

"This was the Not the Not the Death Race," Sigma said.

"No more Not the Not the Death Races," Delta said.

"No more Not the Not the Death Races," Sigma agreed.

Until next year.