Prologue

The woman was running through the warehouse, occasionally looking behind taking shots at the person chasing her. She was carrying a MiTalar-30, a submachine gun with a magazine that could hold 30 bullets and was known for its high rate of fire. But no matter how many shots she took at her pursuer, she couldn’t slow him down at all…

“Warning, critical damage taken. Emergency Escape is highly recommended.”

The woman frowned and continued to run, reloading her gun as she did so. The man behind her continued to run, his hands free of any weapon: “It’s over! Give up while you still can, and I’ll make this quick!”

The woman turned to look at him and scowled: “You really did earn that title of Automi Hunter, didn’t you… But we both know you’re a traitor to your kind!”

She came to a dead end, and the man slowed down, seeing she couldn’t run anymore: “A traitor? No, you don’t seem to understand how any of this works. I hunt down the most dangerous criminals, and they happen to be Automi. But you? You’re no Automi… You’re just a defective model. Hearing you call yourself an Automi is disrespectful to the rest of us.”

The woman fired her gun, quickly shooting all 30 bullets. And once again, all of them missed, as if the man was faster than the bullets. He continued to approach her, finally pulling out his own pistol, a Falcon Shroud. The woman finally panicked and closed her eyes, tilting her head up to the ceiling: “Activate Emergency Escape!”

There was a sudden flash of light, and then the woman was gone. The man walked over to where the woman had once stood and nodded, understanding what had just happened…

Chapter One

The woman woke up in some kind of hospital room, surrounded by a doctor and another man. The doctor nodded at the man, who turned to face the woman. The man was a raccoon, and he kept a stern look as he spoke to the woman: “You’re awake… We found you on the street, bleeding out and holding a submachine gun. It’s on the table if you want it, but you’re not in any danger here. We’re doing what we can to help you recover, and then you can leave. But before you do leave, I have some questions for you.”

The doctor went to the door and stepped out: “I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

The woman watched the door close, and then watched the raccoon man. He was still sitting at his chair, but was looking directly at her: “My name is Allister Brexley, but I’m known here as Mr. Raccoon. You’re currently in the Gray Syndicate’s infirmary, about twenty feet underground. We’re located in Palavera City. Today is the 3rd of May, 1904, and you’ve been here for two days now.”

The woman shook her head: “It can’t be 1904. When I activated the Emergency Escape, it was 1941. Ask anybody who saw the parade, and they’ll tell you all about it.”

Mr. Raccoon shook his head and looked up at the TV: “There hasn’t been any parade recently, and it’s as I tell you. The year is 1904. Now, what is your name?”

“Verdia Milenne.”

“Verdia… That’s a beautiful name. Now, Verdia, you mentioned an emergency escape. What exactly is that?”

“It’s a feature I was manufactured with that allows me to escape difficult, life-threatening situations. I activated it during my most recent fight, and by the looks of it, it brought me to the past… Tell me, where is the Maxol Family right now?”

Mr. Raccoon stared at Verdia with confusion: “The Maxols? Aren’t they Revertian? This is Palavera City, in the universe of Conaton. Nobody’s been to Revertianni since the Gangster Wars broke out, let alone speak with their royal family.”

Verdia sat up in her bed: “I was there, Mr. Raccoon. I was so close to taking them out! And then the Automi Hunter showed up…”

“…are you an automi?”

“Yes, I am. And I was the best! My creator made an entirely new classification for me, Maximum Series. She had created me for combat, to be the strongest and fastest soldier in the universe. And yet, the Automi Hunter was still able to defeat me twice…”

Mr. Raccoon nodded: “From the looks of it, you were close to death. Thankfully, this Automi Hunter you speak of doesn’t exist yet. In fact, few automi exist in the first place.”

Verdia slowly began to smile: “You’re right! He wasn’t manufactured until 1928! If I can figure out time travel, I can-“

“Time travel? Verdia, are you sure you want to go back? After all, the man you’re speaking of nearly killed you. Why not stay here for now and try to recover? We have a sophisticated medical center, and our payroll’s good, too.”

“Payroll? What, are you trying to hire me for something?”

“Can you fight?”

“Of course I can fight! It’s that damned Automi Hunter that messed me up…”

Mr. Raccoon shrugged and smiled: “Well, why not work with us as a bounty hunter? We need more people, after all. Room and board are covered by us, and we pay well above the minimum wage. It’s entirely optional, of course, but I would appreciate it if you at least considered my offer.”

Verdia thought for a moment and looked up at the TV screen: “What about food? I’m hungry, and I could use a burger right now.”

“Sure, we cover food costs, too. I’ll go get you a burger.”

And just like that, Verdia found herself employed by Gray Syndicate. For the first month, she remained in the infirmary while the doctors helped her recover, but also gave her physical exams to determine her capabilities. For some of these tests, she could see Mr. Raccoon in the observation room, speaking with the doctors and checking up on her. Sometimes, they would have lunch together, or she would be invited to attend the weekly conferences. This was a boring matter for Verdia, but it was better than sitting in the infirmary, doing nothing.

A month later, Verdia was finally released from medical care and assigned her own room in Gray Syndicate. This was a fairly small room with just a bed, a wardrobe, and a desk, but it was enough for Verdia. It was then that Mr. Raccoon came to her room to speak with her: “I’m going to be away for a few weeks. One of our escaped test subjects had been found, and Mr. Fox and I are being dispatched to capture him.”

“But you *will* be back, correct?”

“Of course. What, will you miss me?”

Verdia shrugged and smiled: “A little.”

Mr. Raccoon smiled back: “Well, don’t you worry about me. I’ve met Mr. Spider before, and I know he won’t be much of a problem. He was one of our best, most loyal agents in the past. Chances are he doesn’t remember what happened to him, and we just need to guide him back! So, I expect this mission to be over within a day or two, but we’ve been cleared for a month, just in case.”

Two months had passed since then, and Verdia now found herself alone in Gray Syndicate. Nearly a month into Mr. Raccoon’s operation, Verdia watched as the majority of the remaining agents got together and climbed into multiple vans. One of them stopped Verdia from going with them, saying that she wasn’t ready for an operation of this magnitude: “We’re even taking the rune dragon and the platabird for this mission because it’s that dangerous. It was Mr. Raccoon’s decision, and he also decided that you should stay here.”

“But I’m a combat automi! This is what I live for!”

The agent shook his head and climbed into the van. Verdia watched in frustration as every van left the headquarters. She didn’t realize it yet, but that would be the last time she saw anybody on the vans again… Verdia now found herself mostly alone in Gray Syndicate, with only the support staff remaining on site. There were also some people in the infirmary, but Verdia didn’t care for them in the first place. In fact, the only person she had ever felt anything for was Mr. Raccoon, and he hadn’t come back from his mission…

It was then that Verdia decided to go down to the labs, where the test subjects were being kept. Most of them had worked for Gray Syndicate before, but there were some that she knew were from outside. There were two in specific that she was interested in, a turtle and a beaver. Both had severe burns, and the beaver was also blind, her eyes were stained red from an accident she had during a mission. The beaver rarely spoke, but the turtle did sometimes: “If you’re going to kill me… do it quickly…”

Verdia had entered the turtle’s cell, bringing a chair with her so she could sit across from him. The turtle was chained to his bed, but even if he wasn’t, he was in far too much pain to bother moving at all. Verdia simply stared at him in silence, waiting to see what else he would say. After a few minutes, the turtle finally spoke: “What do you want with me?”

“Nothing. I’m just bored, and you’re the only interesting person here.”

“What about me makes me interesting?”

“You’re badly hurt. Who hurt you?”

The turtle spat at her, but missed by a lot: “The fox and the raccoon did. They killed our friends and set the bus we were on alight. Natalie and I barely survived… but what good is it when we were then captured and brought here?”

Verdia shrugged and leaned back in her chair: “You and I are alike in that sense, nearly being killed by another… But here we are, alive.” A few more minutes passed, and Verdia got impatient from the turtle’s silence: “I’m going to go now, but I’ll come back tomorrow. Hopefully you have more to talk about by then.”

The next week went just like this, with Verdia going down to the laboratory to speak with the turtle. But on the eighth day, Verdia was disappointed to find that somebody else had been there. As Verdia stepped off the elevator, she noticed the doors to all the cells had been opened. Some test subjects had escaped, some were still running around the lab, but some were dead. Verdia rushed to the turtle’s cell, hoping he was still there: “Mr. Turtle! Mr. Turtle, are you still-“

Verdia froze, seeing that the turtle was on the ground, the chain broken off. He was laying on his damaged shell, a bullet wound directly over his heart and a smile on his face. Verdia fell to her knees as she saw this, her favorite test subject now dead… She didn’t cry, but simply stared at the body for a few minutes. A few of the other test subjects would walk or run past the cell, see Verdia, and then scream and run away. She didn’t care. All she cared about was the fact that her only friend was now gone.

Eventually, she got up and sighed, turning around to face the remaining test subjects: “Back in your cells, or I shoot you.”

Most of them ignored her, and she ignored them back, instead continuing to the cell where the beaver had been. Much like the turtle, the beaver was also dead, lying on the floor with a bullet hole in her head. But just like the turtle, she was smiling. Verdia sighed and decided she had seen enough, returning to the upper floors of Gray Syndicate. By then, much of the support staff had also run away, having heard of the security breach downstairs. The receptionist was still there, staring into her portable TV as Verdia approached her: “It’s over now, Verdia…”

“What do you mean?”

“Gray Syndicate was supposed to be impenetrable… We had hundreds of agents working together to keep us, and by extension Palavera City, safe from outsiders. All of our agents are gone. Somebody just broke into the labs and freed the test subjects. Nobody is safe anymore…”

“I could have done something! I could have stopped them!”

The receptionist shook her head and stared at Verdia: “Don’t you understand? This is bigger than all of us. We had a platabird and a rune dragon on that mission, when all the agents left for Veria! Those are mythological creatues, Verdia! They should have been invincible! And yet… they’re gone, just like the agents…”

“And just like Mr. Raccoon…”

The two of them stood in silence, the only sound coming from the TV. Finally, the receptionist sighed and spoke: “I’m staying here until the end of my shift, and then I’m leaving. I suggest you do the same and find a new home.”

“What am I supposed to do? I don’t know anybody out there, and I’m lost in this world.”

“You’re capable in combat, Verdia. Somebody will want to recruit you as a bounty hunter, I’m sure of it. Just give it time.”

“Do you happen to know who broke into the labs?”

The receptionist shook her head: “They didn’t announce themselves. Why? Do you plan on investigating every bounty hunting crew until you find the culprit? Even if you narrowed it down to the Fixer that assigned that bounty, there’s no knowing which crew they assigned it to. Sure, the Fixer could have been Dahlia from the Desert Sweepers, and now you know the exact crew. Or more likely, it could have been a Fixer like Varlow, who works with hundreds of crews. No, you’re better off moving on and finding a new place to stay.”

“Fine… do you know where I can start looking for work?”

An hour later, Verdia Milenne was walking along the streets of Palavera City. The sun was just beginning to set on the city, so Verdia could still see the sky clearly. But from what she had been told, it was once normal for it to only be nighttime in this city, and so the city lighting was designed to run 24/7. As a result, it would still be easy to see during the night. But even so, Verdia didn’t want to be out at night. She would much prefer to find a new place to stay, rather than have to retreat to Gray Syndicate for the night.

To the east of the Gray Syndicate building was Faraway Lane, a stretch of road with older and decrepit buildings. It had once been a rising project in the city, planned by Radioaesthetica, only for it to fall apart after their leader had been arrested following the Radioaesthetica Incident. Now, the buildings lay abandoned and forgotten, some of them having never been completed. But Verdia noticed one building was still standing, and it was even illuminated. This was the Chapel of the Lonely Mask, and there were some people entering the chapel as night fell upon the city.

The person standing outside noticed Verdia and beckoned for her: “It’s getting cold soon, Miss. Wouldn’t you like to come inside to stay warm?”

Verdia looked at the figure, seeing he was carrying a pistol at his side. The man noticed her looking at it almost immediately: “Oh, this? I’m guarding the place. You can never be too careful after the recent events. First, there was the shooting in the Lunarium, over in Veria. And then, there was the fire at Loris Valley. We’re expecting something big to go down in Palavera City, so we’re trying to prepare ourselves for it. But please, come inside and warm yourself up. Our leader’s here tonight, too!”

Verdia stepped into the chapel, seeing a few other people were also joining her. At the front row of the pews was a group of who appeared to be bounty hunters, all of them wearing white robes and masks. Standing near the altar was their leader, also dressed in white robes and a mask: “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am the Matriarch of the Lonely Masks, and today we bring terrible news from the rest of the world: Veria and Loris Valley have indeed agreed to wage war against Palavera City, yet we have not heard back from Mezzalannica yet. In addition, there is a third city as yet unknown to us, which will be fighting alongside Veria and Loris Valley. We must, therefore, prepare for this incoming war, and we must do so by destroying the infrastructure leading to our city.”

Verdia raised her hand, and the Matriarch called on her: “Ah, we have a new guest! What is your name?”

“My name is Verdia Milenne, and I have some news that might be of use to you.”

“Is that so? And what news is that?”

“The outsiders attacked Gray Syndicate today. They broke in and killed some of our people. I am here because Gray Syndicate is no longer safe.”

The Matriarch frowned as she heard this: “I wasn’t aware of that… Well then, I appreciate you coming to me about this. You said you’re here because it’s not safe there anymore. Does this also mean you no longer have a home?”

Verdia thought for a moment and then nodded: “Precisely.”

“In that case, I would have words with you after this meeting. Now, does anybody else have news to share with us? If Gray Syndicate was attacked, then there’s a good chance other places were, too.”

Half an hour later, the meeting was over, and the people began to make themselves at home in the chapel. The Matriarch called Verdia over and led her up a spiral staircase, leading up to the second floor. There were small rooms here used as bedrooms, but the Matriarch was standing by the balcony, leaning over to look at the people sitting or laying on the pews: “I’ve heard of Gray Syndicate before, Miss Milenne. Bounty hunters, yes?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“We Lonely Masks are also bounty hunters, and we are in need of people. If you are in need of a job and shelter, I am more than happy to offer both to you.”

“Gray Syndicate did the same, and now they’re gone. How do I know that your offer will last longer than theirs did?”

The Matriarch shook her head: “In times like these, no promise is going to be enough. So, let me ask you this: What do you want, and how do you plan on getting it?”

Verdia stared at the Matriarch for a moment, and then responded with, “I want to get back home, to Revertianni. But I need to figure out the physics behind getting there.”

“Revertianni! You’re Revertian?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“I am also Revertian. Perhaps it’s fate that we meet each other…”

“Are you one of the Maxols?”

“No, absolutely not! Are you their friend?”

Verdia shook her head and smiled: “No, I’m not their friend. But from your reaction, I’m sure I’ll be yours…”