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Palshaw
English 4

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Hot Pink Fire

 The uniformed guard waved at me, signaling to turn off my headlights as I came to a stop under the stone archway of the entry. I rolled down my window and handed him my ID.

 “You’re early today,” he said. “Have a nice day, Miss.”

Fog hung to the edges of the stone buildings on the Naval Postgraduate School campus and the summer moss that covered the oak trees glowed white. I drove through the grove of oaks and came into the view of Herman Hall---four stories of Spanish style architecture that had perfectly manicured rose gardens. Driving past the building, I pulled into the nearly empty student parking lot.

I shivered in my dress and sandals in the morning fog, but typical of Monterey, I knew it would be sunny by lunch. From the lot I took my morning walk, past the beautiful gardens of Herman and towards the three story stone fortress that I worked in. This building is actually the one that towers over the Pacific Coast Highway, embodying the bleak military reputation, giving my friends a reason to question why I would willingly spend my time there. There was a simple answer: I was paid to. I walked past the glass front door of the dark building and took a hidden flight of outdoor stairs down to the basement where my lab was.

At the bottom of the stairs was a hallway that ran the length of the building, over 100 meters long, and it was lined with LED runners that never turned off. The basement of the hall was for building---building anechoic chambers, revolutionary electron microscopes, and synthetic muscle to create an Iron Man suit. Many doors along the hall opened into the labs where these innovations were being used, and at the end of the long hallway was a three-room metal shop, filled with devices I was unfamiliar with.

I walked down the hall to the lab, and the door was already open because it temporarily had no form of closing. The week prior, Jack Brewer, another intern, and I had tinkered with the lock and accidentally broken the door. Jack wanted to fix everything all the time, and if there was a better way for something to work, the UCLA student would find it. In my defense, my job was to run cameras, not to fix locks or build things.

The lab was cozy, as far as labs go. It was a small carpeted room with a few desks and a six-foot tall tool box, but mostly otherwise empty because our actual research was done at an off campus testing facility where we could get a little crazier with what we were colliding. Light filtered down from near the ceiling where little windows showed the feet of people upstairs.

The entire floor of the building was silent and most of the hall doors were closed. My phone buzzed and I listed to a voicemail from my professor:

“Hey Madi, I’m so sorry you got there early and I can’t even make it to the lab. I also forgot to tell you that Jack went back to school for an event, but I need you to build the transport cart that he was going to. The welding gear is in the metal shop and I bet you can use the side room for it. Anyways, thanks! I should be back on Friday but call me at any time if you have questions.”

*Who the heck just knows how to weld? Shit.*

Jack hadn’t told me he would be gone.

Walking down the hall I noticed that Hooper’s lights were on--I’m pretty sure that guy never actually went home or stopped working. I got to the end of the hall and pulled the key card for the shop out from under a table in the hallway where it was velcroed. I unlocked the door and walked in.

Sitting on one of the main tables were four slabs of enormous sheet metal and a set of four wheels on a piece of paper. I picked up the paper and looked at a scribbly diagram that my professor had drawn.

I knew how to put on the wheels, so I tackled that first. I got out a suction screw threader and spent a couple minutes attaching the wheels to the top piece of metal. When I was almost done, the lights in the room flicked on--which I hadn’t even realized were off--and Matt, an assistant in the shop, walked in.
 “Why are you here so early?” Matt was sporting a sling on his right arm.

“What happened to your arm?”

“Railgun accident.”

“Damn that’s rough. I thought Gamache was going to be here early before he left on a trip, but he wasn’t.”

“What’s this project?”

“A storage unit for the other lab, but I have two major problems: I can’t move these sheets by myself and I have no clue how to weld.”

“Hey I can help you out with that. I’ll move them into the side shop right now and if you come back around noon I can talk you through how to do it, but I can’t exactly show you.” He gestured to his arm.

“Thank you so much!” I finished attaching the last wheel.

Matt walked back into the side room of the shop a little after twelve o’clock with his sling hidden under a thick work jacket. Even though he was well into his twenties, Matt was no taller than five feet, but the thickness of his flame retardant clothing made him much larger than he actually was. I had already driven and changed into old jeans and work boots, but I had left my pink headband on--if I was going to weld, I was going to look good doing it.

 The room was dark, and dusty work benches lined three of the walls. The back wall was taken up by a large ventilation system and a yellow hazmat cupboard.

 “So you’ve never welded?” Matt asked.

 “Nope.”

 “No robotics?”

 “Nope.”

 He grabbed a long hose-like object from one of the benches. “So this right here is the gun. Essentially an electrode runs through here and back into the supply box, and the electrical heat bonds the metal. I’m gonna set the box to the levels you need so you don’t have to adjust it once I leave.”

 “You’re gonna leave?” I panicked.

 “You’ll be fine. I’ll tell you the steps now and I’ll try to show you.” We lifted one of the metal sheets perpendicular to the other and told me to put on one of the tinted masks that sat on a counter. “So you hold it about an inch or two from the metal and work your way down the connection slowly,” he yelled over the loud crackling noise that came from the gun.

 In the dark shop, sparks flew everywhere, but unlike sparklers, they came in sporadic bursts and the sound they made rang in my ears. Through the darkened mask, all I could see was a tiny green glow, but I could smell the ash in the room.

 Matt eventually stopped welding and showed me the smooth connection he had made between the piece with the wheels and another sheet. We lifted all the other pieces into places where I could more easily move them as he got ready to leave.

 “So I have to head out to a meeting at the railgun lab, but um, just a few safety things first. Don’t ever take the mask off while welding or you’ll blind yourself. Also, maybe run the vent every few minutes, this isn’t safe to do in an stuffy space, OSHA doesn’t like it. . . And uh, grab one of those thick jackets and a pair of gloves.”

 I pulled on one of the jackets and the long gloves, covering myself from neck to knee.

 “The gun is going to be a little tricky at first, but you’re not at any real risk. If any sparks get to you, pat them out. Mr. Jacobs is down the hall if you need anything or you screw anything up.” Matt winked and then walked out the door. “See yah later, Madi!”

 I looked down at the gloves I was wearing; my hands felt awkward and clumsy in all the fabric. I flipped the mask down and reached for the gun, still on and crackling on the table. The metal electrode stuck out of the nozzle just a bit, providing an anchor for the electricity to jump from the gun to the sheet metal.

 The handle was hot in my hands, even through the padded gloves. Kneeling down next to the forming cart, I found the line where Matt had left off. I positioned the gun about an inch away from the metal, but I craned my head away from the spark zone.

 When I pulled the trigger down, the electrode shot out and stuck to the sheet. That definitely wasn’t supposed to happen. I clicked the trigger again and wiggled the electrode free.

 *How did Matt do this with one hand?*

Trying again, I started on the other side of the sheet and slowly moved the gun up the ridge as a bond formed between the two pieces. After thirty seconds I let the trigger go, pulled off my helmet, and looked at my work. A not-so-straight connector ran inbetween the sheets for about six inches. I grabbed the tops of the sheets and pulled with no avail. The two pieces were connected, but I still had two feet to go on that one ridge.

 I lowered my helmet and continued the connection, but right before the end of the ridge, the electrode got caught in the metal again. I had already dealt with this once, so I figured the same thing would work to fix it: give it a little heat and it would wiggle right out. I hit the trigger and sparks shot everywhere. They sizzled on my jacket and singed my shoe laces as the ash got thicker. The gun was still stuck to the metal but I set it on a block of wood and sat back on my heels and gave the vent time to run.

 Heat flickered on my forehead and sweat ran down my face, so I took off the mask. As I pulled the mask down, I saw small sparks on the inside of it, burning the liner. I quickly patted them out but then realized where the heat was coming from . . .

 “Shit, Shit, Shit!” I slammed my glove on my head and patted it for a few moments before using my other hand, free from the glove, to pull off my headband. On the top of the band, the hot pink color had turned black, and pieces were crumbling off of it. Grabbing at my hair, I felt a short section sticking up from the top of my head that definitely wasn’t there before.

 “Holy crap.” I hit the switch on the power supply, burst out of the shop, and made a beeline for the bathroom.

 I looked in the mirror at my hair. Right above my left temple a short piece stuck straight off. The tips of it were black and in the rest of my hair I was finding the burnt ends that had fallen off.

The pink headband laid in the sink; it was charred on a whole side. Tears welled up in my eyes, but as I stared at myself in the mirror I started to laugh.