

DAWN CHORUS by Mike Sizemore

DAWN CHORUS

The girl is asleep when the gun picks up the signal.

It hesitates for a moment before waking her, but only for a moment.

Movement from the town ahead. Lots of movement, the gun says.

She sits up and adjusts her eyes to the gloom. Still dark out. The plan was to walk into the remains of the town at first light. So much for that. She's awake now.

There's a signal too. Simple binary. Meaningless without further data.

Let's check it out.

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A long line of refugees are trudging away from the broken walls of the town. The girl and the gun watch them move along slowly. What scant possessions they carry are filthy and seem hardly worth the effort. One old man holds a broken wooden chair with only two legs to his chest, clinging to it like a life preserver.

The girl looks up at the broken sky. Still dark.

I thought this was supposed to be a safe haven, she says.

Maybe something changed, said the gun.

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They walk back along the line until they meet a hastily set-up checkpoint. Three soldiers sit around, watching the citizens leave. Two of them, infantry grunts, get to their feet as they spot the girl approach, but the third, a sergeant, continues to roll a cigarette. He's older than the other two by a decade at least.

What's the problem? the girl asks.

Road's closed 'til tomorrow. Sapper went rogue and now we're waiting on air support to take it out. Evac in full effect until we get the all clear.

The girl looks up at the first hint of a glow on the horizon.

Can't wait that long. Where's the Sapper?

One of the grunts, recognising her equipment, takes a step back.

Sarge...

Stow it, Dainty. Sounds like the lady is planning on solving the problem for us.

He still hasn't looked up, but now taps the radio at his collar. A burst of static and then machine language fills the air. There's a rhythm to the broadcast then static again before it repeats.

Damn thing's been jamming local comms with that crap for the last hour. Every time we try and get close it levels another building. And some idiot decided to armour the damn thing so our orders are to fall back and let Air Cav do its job before the damn thing takes out the other half of the town. So the road is closed unless you fancy wandering in there all alone.

Bringing the cigarette to his lips he finally looks up at the girl just as the sun begins to rise behind her.

She's young. No helmet. Hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Small backpack. Her distinctive red collar matches the red piping on the edge of the military jacket she wears. It's dusty and worn in places, but clean. He takes in the patch on her shoulder and the cigarette falls from his mouth.

On her breast pocket, where he'd expect to read a name, is a white on black symbol that could be a B or a 13.

Eyes wide with surprise he knows its neither.

In her arms she carries what looks like a rifle. It's not. The hollows in its barrel match the red details of her uniform and a sensor embedded in the forestock pulses softly when it speaks.

She's not alone, says the gun.

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Twenty minutes later she's overlooking what used to be a street with the sergeant at her side.

Below them a blur of yellow straight edges and glistening silver metal is pummelling a wall to dust.

Sapper, the sergeant explains redundantly. Our variation on construction exo-skeletons, but twice the size as the human element is significantly reduced. Handy to have 'em cleaning up behind you, but tricky to take out when they have a mind of their own.

The body is a dull green over faded yellow, but both fists are exposed, scarred chrome. The right one, a modified jackhammer, beats the remaining structure down into the road as if to make the sergeant's point for him.

As the sound of the collapsing building fades, the Sapper stands, allowing a view of the dull marks from small arms fire that scar its back. It looks towards a single low building that was hidden behind the now destroyed block.

It's a school, says the girl.

Don't worry, says the sergeant. Area's evacuated and that building hasn't been used by children in years.

The Sapper turns its head towards the sun and suddenly the machine code is in the air, playing from somewhere deep in the machine's chest unit. The sergeant's radio begins too squark the

same noise before he turns it off in disgust. But elsewhere the call is heard and taken up by civilian radios through shattered windows and empty cars.

A cacophony of machine singing that fills the broken town.

A regular dawn chorus, marvels the sergeant mockingly.

It's a standard non-combat unit normally deployed to blow and build bridges or take down unstable structures, the gun says. Dumb as dirt processor. Probable glitch in the organics.

Organics? asks the girl as she watches the Sapper begin to walk slowly towards the school.

Why waste high functioning positron networks when its cheaper and easier to wetware a cadaver? replies the gun.

Ick, says the girl. How do I stop it?

I can punch through the armour if you can get us in a little closer.

Wouldn't recommend that, begins the sergeant.

Fall back, Sarge, says the girl.

He does as he's told.

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The girl stands and fires.

The round PINGS off the Sapper's head.

Got its attention, says the gun.

In a blur the machine charges their building and suddenly the girl is riding a wave of rubble down towards her target.

The Sapper is already turning back to the school, ignoring the masonry collapsing around it as the girl lands on its back and swings a leg over its shoulder.

The non pile-driver arm raises and the giant fist comes up to meet her as she pushes the gun below and under the Sapper's faceplate, pulling the trigger to blow the back of its head out.

Blood mixes with oil as the giant hand clutches at the damaged areas and falls to one knee.

The girl and the gun, thrown clear, watch as the machine crawls towards the brightly coloured building.

This thing really hates schools, says the girl.

She casually hops up on its back and walks towards the large exit wound.

The machine carries them to the edge of the school where its hand reaches out and shatters a large window. The town behind them has fallen silent now, but they can still hear the low growl of machine language above the sound of straining gears and falling glass.

Does this seem a little weird to you? the gun asks as she lowers it into the torn metal and takes a bead on the pink matter held together between four wetware plates.

PHUT.

The gun destroys the brain with a single shot. The machine stops moving. Falls silent.

Putting a human brain into one of these things, weird? Sure.

She walks away from the dead machine and looks at the path of destruction its wreaked through this quarter of the town. A more or less straight line of demolished buildings and overturned vehicles.

Weird that it was heading for this building in particular I mean, explains the gun.

The girl pauses to pull her backpack from the rubble.

This was just the next building in its path. What the hell would a demolition mech want with a school?

The machine code plays from the gun once. She looks down at the rifle in her hand curiously.

What was it saying?

01001011 01010100, says the gun.

They move around the Sapper and past the shattered school window.

Binary? asks the girl.

Same two letters over and over, says the gun.

As they walk away they don't see the cluster of brightly painted paper caught by the breeze flutter amongst the broken glass, splattered oil and blood. One piece unfurls and lands against the cold metal of the Sapper's cold hand. A child's drawing of a smiling crayon family. A cartoon girl and adult in matching dresses hold hands while a third figure hovers above them on crude angel wings. Printed in a slightly messy but legible scrawl are the words MOMMY, DADDY and ME next to each character. It's signed at the bottom; KATIE ANDERSON, AGED 7.

KT, says the gun. Just that. KT. KT. KT. Over and over and over again.

The sun climbs into the broken sky.

They follow it.