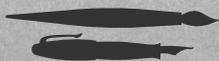


M. P. KOZLOWSKY

FROST



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PART ONE
THE OUTSKIRTS

ONE

In the middle of the bombed-out room flickered a small fire, and near it sat Frost. The girl of fifteen—or was it sixteen now?—turned her head and watched her shadow against the battered wall. The wind blowing in from the broken windows set the flames dancing, creating a display of strange silhouettes around her. It was as if, after all these years, she was momentarily surrounded by other humans. She wasn't alone anymore.

“Hello,” she said to the shadows. She'd never met someone new before and felt it'd be a good idea to practice, just in case. “I'm Frost. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Have you been in the neighborhood long?” Frost frowned. The words sounded cumbersome. She rarely heard anyone speak aloud and didn't know whether what she'd read in her books was correct. She reminded herself to ask her father when he returned.

The shadows didn't answer, of course. Once again, there was only silence.

I'm lucky to have Dad, she thought. It was a weak attempt to convince herself that she wasn't really alone. Not technically.

Frost glanced through the rippling flames at the slumbering beast warming itself opposite her. Romes's breathing was

getting worse each day. It was garbled, hoarse. Too much wheezing, too much spitting of blood. He could barely walk and his tail remained still. Frost had had him for nearly as long as she could remember. They grew up together. He'd always been there for her, but now . . .

She was well aware that she could barely take care of herself. How was she supposed to care for Romes too? Where was her father?

Frost stood up and walked over to the far wall, half of it blown away and exposed to the elements, and gazed out at the crumbling city. She was thirty-two floors up, the top floor of the building, and had a tremendous view of the devastation. Hundreds of thousands of cars were overturned and abandoned—most of them at the bridges and tunnels—some crushed by falling streetlights and debris from on high. Buildings were toppled over or burned out, skeletal; some looked like melting candles, their facades peeling away. Nature was returning to the streets, ripping up sidewalks and tearing holes in the ground. There were no lights whatsoever, not even from the stars or moon. In fact, Frost hadn't seen either in years through the persistent gray haze. Sometimes she thought she saw the flames of fires in building windows or on street corners or in an abandoned bus, and wondered if there were other people out there, people like her, waiting for something better. If she could only reach them! Even if there was just one person hiding somewhere in the city, a potential friend.

But it was far too dangerous to leave this gutted apartment. In her entire life, Frost had never left, not once—a promise she

had made to her father, a promise she regretted more and more with the slow passing of each repetitive day. What kept her most curious of all was the strange blue glow at the far end of the island, nearly eight miles away. From such a distance, she wasn't sure if it was an illusion or some heavenly anomaly or . . . Her father had told her about what was being built down there, just before the Days of Bedlam. Could it be true? Did they succeed? If they did, it would mean a better world was still possible—security, medicine, community. Everything.

Her thoughts were interrupted by noises out in the hall, and it wasn't the continuous falling away of the building like she was used to. Her stomach dropped as she eyed the closed door. Had the Eaters finally found her? She had forgotten to lock the door. Not that it mattered, not if it was them.

The sounds grew louder. Frost closed her eyes. She wasn't ready.

The footsteps ceased. With a creak, the door slowly opened. And there, standing before her, was a robot.

“Dad?”

“No.”

Frost exhaled, a mixture of disappointment and relief. “Bunt. You were gone so long, you had me worried.”

“It is becoming more and more difficult to find supplies, Frost. And there are more and more dangers to evade.”

Bunt bent down and lowered his box of loot to the ground. Then, on one knee, he placed a hand on Romes. The broot did not stir beneath the metallic touch.

“He is getting worse.”

“You’re supposed to tell me he’s getting better.”

“I do not lie. You know that. Your broot is dying. He has a month of life left. Two at most.”

“I was sick, too, once. Don’t you remember? I used to always be sick when I was little. Dad told me so. He said it was bad, very bad. Worse than Romes. And look, I got better.”

“He will not.”

The brutal honesty was too much for Frost. Her eyes filled with tears. It was a day she had been dreading for years, and all she wanted to hear was that there was hope, just a glimmer of hope. “I wish my dad were here. He would never say such things to me. He would comfort me.”

“I have no control of when your father comes and goes. He is a defect.”

“He is not a defect, *you’re* the defect. Do you hear me? He should be here right now, not you!” The words spilled out before she could stop them, but she refused to take a single one back. After so many days of silence, it felt good to shout.

“Alas . . .”

“Alas . . . Alas . . . What do you think you are? You’re not human, Bunt. Never will be.”

She thought about this constantly. She’d been reminded of it just yesterday, when she asked Bunt to pretend to be a boy her age in the hopes that if Frost ever met a real one, she’d have some idea what to say.

“Pretend?” the bot had asked her.

“You know what it means, Bunt.”

“I am unable to pretend.”

Frost sighed in frustration. “Just talk to me like you’re someone else. Someone real. Say your name is . . .” She picked up a severely weathered book from the top of a large pile and flipped through it. “James. Say your name is James.”

“My name is James.”

Frost felt a bolt of excitement course through her. “Good,” she said. “Good.” Hurriedly, she flipped through more pages. “Okay,” she said, under her breath. “Okay. I’m supposed to . . .” After rereading the lines three times, she awkwardly crossed her legs and attempted to curtsy, nearly falling over. “How do you do?”

“I hunt for food and slay Eaters.”

“Bunt!”

It was impossible with him. That was why she needed her father to tell her about boys. At least he’d been one once. A human boy. Something Bunt could never be.

Although Bunt did have the shape of a human. A silver construct, rings of dulled metal wrapping around him from head to toe. There was no face, just the outline of one. A bump where the nose should be, soft indentations for the mouth and eyes, raised loops for the ears. A mold without features, and when he looked at you, there was only the faintest of violet lights where the eyes should be. And when he talked another violet light surged through the area designated for his mouth. Frost had been around him so long that she had begun to see a face there. A sad gentleman, a man out of time and place, a soul removed. He reminded her of everything wrong with the world.

Bunt sifted through the box he’d set down and retrieved

something Frost hadn't seen in ages: an actual can of food. After ripping off the lid, he handed the can over to a wide-eyed Frost. She had finally gotten used to eating small animals.

"Beans?" she asked, jumping to her feet. "Are those beans? Thank you. Can you heat them up?"

Bunt closed his hand around the can. In seconds, the contents were warm.

Frost fetched a spoon from a drawer in the kitchen. She once tried to keep everything as neat and orderly as her father had left it, but that had become increasingly difficult. After all, supplies were short and the periods of rain were few. Dust and debris covered everything. If she wiped them away, by morning there was more to replace them. Even with all the time in the world, keeping things clean would be a challenge. And besides, who was she straightening up for? Who cared if everything was everywhere and nothing had its place? The shadows she talked to certainly didn't mind. So she spent most of her time reading the vast collection of books she had acquired through Bunt's excursions and, upon completion, instead of returning them to their shelves, she placed them in large piles throughout each room, as if rebuilding the city in miniature.

As she ate the beans, consuming them like a stray brood, she eyed Romes. The sight gave her pause. Had he stopped breathing? She crawled over to him, the can clattering against the warped and moldy wood floor, and placed her head against his protruding ribs. No, he was still alive. Barely. She placed the can in front of his snout.

"Eat. Just a little, Romes. Do it for me."

Romes's nose twitched, but other than that he didn't budge. Frost, her body suddenly limp, looked him over. The animal was nothing like the one she found outside their door all those years ago, scratching and crying to be let in. He was a puppy then and full of life, unlike everything else around her. She was seven years old and her father was slowly dying, like her mother a year before.

"We can't keep it," he told her.

"But, why?"

"Well, for many reasons. One is that the thing is wild. Wild and dangerous."

"It doesn't look dangerous."

And it didn't. The broot nuzzled against Frost, nibbling at her fingers. Its tail, slick and ringed like a rat's, was longer than its body and its feet were abnormally large, so big that the animal kept tripping over itself every time it tried to run. Its eyes were humanlike, round and watery and constantly tearing as if it was sad about something. It had the slightest of snouts and a massive lower jaw. And then there was that color. There was nothing intimidating about a pink animal.

"Not yet. It will grow up to be, though. Look at the size of the paws. Broots grow to be very large and very aggressive. If we were to care for it, it would most likely turn on us one day."

"Not this one. It thinks I'm its mommy."

Her father shook his head. "It doesn't think that, Frost."

"It does. It won't hurt me, not ever."

He crouched down before her, a hand running through her short, choppy hair. "I don't want you getting attached to

anything. There's no place for attachments anymore." He caressed his daughter's face, then quickly looked away, coughing into his sleeve.

"He can be my friend. I need to have a friend."

"You have Bunt," he said, pointing to the robot in the corner sharpening a set of long knives.

"Bunt's a robot. He's not alive like Romes."

"You named him already?" her father asked, exasperated.

Frost nodded. "Romes."

Her father let loose a long sigh, his hands deep in his pockets. "Then I'm afraid we're going to have to keep little Romes, aren't we?"

But Romes wasn't little any longer. Even in his sickened state, he was massive. From snout to tail, he measured close to six feet, as long as Bunt was tall. His teeth were the size of adult fingers, though no longer very sharp—they were once like razors, much like Bunt's knives, the sharpest teeth of any animal on land. His ears were pointed straight up, two dark triangles atop his head like a bear's. And those large paws displayed nails longer than his teeth—several times Frost was merely grazed and her clothes had been torn open—the fact that her skin wasn't shredded to the bone was a small miracle.

Frost and Romes had been through so much together. When they were hungry, he brought them large rats to eat—not counting the handful of times he caught robotic critters that roamed throughout the building. He curled up in her lap every time the earth shook; he licked her face whenever she cried; and

whenever she suffered, he seemed to suffer, too. They were linked. He was her constant companion, her constant comfort and the one constant source of love in her life. He never left her side. If she lost him . . .

Frost stared out of the hole in the wall, across the city and toward the distant blue glow. That's where she had to go. There were people living there, she was sure of it. People who'd managed to create real lives for themselves, who'd be able to help her and Romes.

"It's time to leave," she told Bunt, breaking from her reverie.

"Is there something you need? Something I forgot?"

"No. I'm not sending you out, Bunt. We're all going together."

"That would be a poor decision. There are far too many dangers out there, and your broot is nearly dead."

"That's why we're going," she said, already gathering supplies for their trip. "We're going to save him."

"That is an impossibility."

"It isn't. There are ways. Humans are capable of great things, Bunt."

"That was before the destruction."

"The technology still exists."

"There is no escaping dea—"

A strained voice slowly faded in. "Frost . . . Frost . . ."

Bunt's blank face flickered like a malfunctioning screen, an image appearing and disappearing. A different voice emerged

from the robot now, something human. Then, finally, the image held and, like every time before, Frost lost her breath. It was her father.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

As difficult as it was, she looked away and continued packing a bag. “I can’t just sit here anymore. I have to do something. I have to get Romes help.”

“There is no help, Frost. You take him out there and he’s just going to die even quicker. You have to stay here to survive. Both of you. You have to remain hidden. Let Bunt help you.”

“I can’t lose Romes,” she said. “Not like I lost Mom. Not like I lost you.”

“But you didn’t lose me. I’m here.”

She looked at him standing there, a human face on a robot body. He didn’t move, not an inch. Her eyes lowered to the floor. “I see you less and less now.”

“I can’t control it, you know that.”

“And neither can I. All I can control is what happens to Romes. Maybe.”

“I won’t let you go out there. I refuse.”

A wave of indignation swelled within her, and she snapped her head up to look at her father. “All I have to do is wait for you to go away. When Bunt returns, I’ll order him to take me. And he’ll listen. He has to.” It was one thing she loved about Bunt. He would always do whatever she said—the beauty of programming.

His voice grew stern. “I am your father, you have to listen to me.”

“You are my father’s memories. You are his personality. You are not him.” It was something she had wanted to say for a very long time now, but once the words left her mouth, she immediately regretted them.

“Frost!” The way her father recoiled, the pain in his voice, it made everything even worse.

She turned away and kneeled beside her pet, stroking his matted and dulled fur so she wouldn’t see the hurt in the projection of her father’s face. “I have to help him, Dad. I have to. You keep disappearing back into Bunt and I can’t be alone.”

“You have Bunt.”

“I need something living. I need my friend.”

“I want to protect you, Frost. That’s all I want to do. I’m afraid of what will happen out there. It’s not safe.”

She lowered her head, balled her fists, and gritted her teeth. “Dad, what about what’s happening in here? Every day I eat less and less. We’re running out of water, and Bunt has to leave for longer and longer stretches of time. All by myself, I have to keep fighting off falcons and hawks that fly in here looking for a meal, and sooner or later this building is going to collapse. I can’t stand it. I’m going crazy. The days pile up; I’d have no idea what month it even is if I didn’t have Bunt. My world is this box. This ugly and stinky box. I want to be out there. I don’t care how dangerous it is. I want to be out there in that world.” She paused, her voice growing quiet. “The Eaters are going to find me in here. They’re going to find me and tear me apart.”

Her father gazed at the ceiling and exhaled. “Where are you going to go? Where do you possibly think you will find help?”

“The Battery.”

His eyes fell on her as he shook his head. “No. No way. Absolutely not. I should have never told you those stories. There’s nothing there, Frost.”

“I see a glow coming from that direction.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“You said that was where the hope would be found,” Frost insisted, refusing to let him make her feel foolish.

“Yes, before the disaster. Before. It didn’t work. It was a failure.”

She didn’t believe that, and she had a strong feeling her father didn’t believe it, either. Why else would he have filled her head with the images she could no longer shake? For years he had told her that world governments had been preparing day and night for something like the Days of Bedlam. It was the new space race, he said. Only they’d begun building small cities within cities. Fortresses. They weren’t looking to leave, they were looking to stay. It would be a place where life would survive, where it would go on thriving. Her father told her that there would be no sickness there, no death. Utopia.

“I’m going,” Frost said, her resolve hardening. “Romes doesn’t have long. And if I lose him, you’re going to lose me.”

Her father closed his digital eyes. For a moment, Frost thought he was going to disappear again. But then, very softly, he spoke. “Frost, you tell Bunt—you tell him to watch over you, to do whatever it takes to keep you safe. You hear me? You tell him to give his life for you if he has to.”

Frost paused. “It’s your life, too.”

“And I’d give it over for you in a second.”

She always knew he would, but she didn’t realize how much she needed to hear him say it until just now. Frost sighed. “You’re going to leave me now, I can feel it.”

He looked away. “I know. I can, too.”

Something cracked inside Frost’s chest. She ran to him and threw her arms around his waist.

“I can’t feel you,” he said. His face displayed signs of strain, and yet the robot’s arms barely moved. “I’m having more and more trouble controlling his body. I’m so sorry, Frost. I wish it wasn’t like this. I wish I was still there with you. Really there. But there’s nothing but—”

Her father faded, his voice drifting away and Bunt’s face going blank. Seconds later, the soft violet lights of the robot’s eyes returned.

“Get our things together,” she told Bunt. “We’re leaving now.”