

Good Night, Alouette

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MMZ1-MMZ4. Zero takes on a mission that, while not quite his usual fare, is just as important. Warning: this fic contains large amounts of Alouette being cute.

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Author's Note

Well, here we are. I've had this sitting on my account for quite a while now (mid-Novemberish?) and just haven't gotten around to posting it. I wanted to write something less dark and depressing than usual, because despite how it may look, I don't usually write that way. So while this one starts off kind of depressing, I assure you the end is anything but. :)

This is actually only part one of two. Originally I wanted to post the whole thing as a oneshot but it started getting really long and I figured I should just put this much up so I can concentrate on other stuff. This much stands on its own pretty well, so if I never get around to finishing, no big deal. With all the other stuff I have on the go right now who knows when I'll ever get around to it.

I'll stop talking now. Enjoy. :)

Alouette was cold.

"Did I just see you shiver?" The young reploid male beside her said. She nodded. "How can you be cold? This sun's hot enough to boil water." He motioned out at the empty desert around them, as though that was how it had gotten there.

"Cooler's broke," the little girl replied, then returned her gaze back the dirt between her feet as they dangled off the edge of the rock outcropping she was sitting on. She didn't want to see his face.

"Why don't you get Cerveau to take a look at you, then?"

Alouette couldn't tell if the man was just making conversation with her to pass the time or if he genuinely cared. She hoped it was the former. "He's busy."

"I'm sure it wouldn't take too long, he's pretty good at what he does."

"I'm fine." The kindness in his tone really made her want to change the subject.

"Are you sure? If you like I can take you down there after my shift's over."

It took most of her willpower not to glance up at him just then. She could tell he was giving her a look full of kindness and warmth, the kind of look people gave when they cared about you. It was the kind of look that made you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. When someone looked at you with a face like that, it was hard to forget.

Alouette wanted to be able to forget them all.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"Well, all right then," the man said after a moment's silence. She could tell by his shadow on the ground that he'd gone back to his duty, looking out over the desert and keeping watch for any Neo Arcadian forces. "Let me know if you change your mind."

Alouette nodded slightly while inside she heaved a sigh of relief. He seemed like a really nice man. She didn't know what his name was or what his face looked like, but that was the way she wanted it. If she didn't know who he was she wouldn't miss him after he was gone. Nobody ever came back after they were taken away.

Alouette didn't want to remember anyone. That way it wouldn't hurt as much when they were all gone.

Minutes passed by slowly as the sun worked its way through the sky, beating down relentlessly on the wasteland below. Alouette barely felt it at all. Something really was wrong with her cooling system and it was overcompensating for the increase in atmospheric temperature, dropping her body temperature far below normal. Of course, it didn't really matter how cold her body was - she was a

reploid. It just meant she felt cold. Alouette didn't particularly like the cold, but it didn't bother her enough that she could work up the courage to go see Cerveau. He was one of those kind people that she couldn't forget, no matter how hard she tried. Every time she saw him all she could think about was how she would feel after he was taken away too. So she tried her hardest to stay away from his workshop and not think about him.

Alouette didn't want Cerveau to be taken away.

At some point in the afternoon - she guessed it was somewhere around three o'clock, but her internal clock had been acting funny too so she didn't really trust it - the sound of an engine coming over the dunes behind them made both Alouette and the young man turn to look in the direction of the Resistance Base, where they could see a cloud of dust rising in the distance.

"That would be the afternoon patrol," the man said. "They're a little late today." He stepped out from behind the rock he'd been using for shade and waved to catch the attention of the jeep. At this distance Alouette could just barely see someone waving back.

The vehicle came to a stop and a man stepped out from the passenger's side door. Alouette could see another sitting in the driver's seat, but he made no move to get out. She made sure she didn't get a look at either of their faces, keeping her eyes trained on the ground.

"Hey Colbor. Is the desert up to anything suspicious today?" The man from the jeep joked.

Alouette winced; now she knew the nice man's name.

"Nah, pretty boring so far," Colbor replied with a chuckle. "I think I saw a tumbleweed go by earlier but I might have just been staring too hard."

"The heat'll do that to you." The man glanced over at Alouette. "At least you brought some company with you. Why'd you even bring her out here, anyway? This isn't exactly the safest place in the world, you know."

"Ciel asked me to look after her until she got back." Alouette remembered him saying the same thing to the guards at the security gate on their way out. They'd fussed over it a bit, but Colbor had somehow convinced them to let her come along. She didn't really care one way or the other - no place was ever really safe, in her experience - but it seemed important to Colbor, so she'd tagged along willingly. "I think she'd planned to be back before my shift started, but I promised not to let the little one out of my sights, so that's what I'm doing." Colbor scratched his head. "Speaking of which, where is Ciel? Does it have something to do with why you guys are almost a half hour late?"

Alouette's stomach jumped into her throat at the thought of something happening to Ciel. She was the only person in the entire Resistance that Alouette had allowed herself to get close to, because Ciel had promised that she'd never leave her alone. Everyone else had always said that, but something about the way the young blonde woman spoke made Alouette want to believe her so badly that, before she even realized it, she already did. Ciel had even given her proof of her promise: a white, cat-like doll that was almost half the size of Alouette. She took it with her everywhere now, holding it to her chest with crossed arms. It gave her something solid to hold on to in a world where everything around her was always changing.

"Yeah, about that..." The unnamed man looked nervously back and forth. It was obvious to Alouette that he didn't want to be the bearer of bad news; she'd heard that tone often enough lately that she could easily pick it out. "We picked up an emergency transmission from her excavation team. It was too garbled to make out what it said, but I think the fact that it came while we were supposed to be under radio silence and we haven't heard anything since means it's safe to assume that..."

The man trailed off as he remembered that Alouette was sitting only a few feet away. Most of the Resistance knew about her special attachment to Ciel, so the man was likely trying to shield Alouette from the reality of the situation. It didn't work. Alouette had heard the same piece of news about other people so often that she already knew what it meant. But she knew that if they thought she had heard what had been said they'd try to comfort her, which would only make it harder to forget them later. So Alouette pretended she hadn't heard him.

The man continued on in a quieter tone, but Alouette could still hear him - her hearing had gotten exceptionally good lately. "Right. Anyway, Ciel's gone missing, so things are kind of a mess back at the base. Some people are preparing to mount a rescue mission - to where, I don't know - while others are getting ready to throw in the towel and turn themselves in. I don't think either of those options would do any good at this point, but we definitely need to do something before all hell breaks loose."

Colbor thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, you're right. But you know, even if the team was attacked I don't think Neo Arcadia would be willing to hurt Ciel; she's too valuable. It's more likely they've taken her back to the city and locked her up somewhere. We'll just have to bide our time and look for a chance to get her back. She's done so much for us, it's the least we can do."

The thought of Ciel locked away in a room somewhere rather than being dead didn't do much to comfort Alouette. They meant basically the same thing - she was gone and wouldn't ever be coming back.

Tears started to creep unbidden to her eyes, but she stubbornly fought them back. She had promised herself a long time ago that she wouldn't cry anymore, and that was one promise she didn't intend on breaking.

Unlike some people, she thought bitterly as she looked down at the doll in her hands, *I always keep my promises*. She knew it wasn't Ciel's fault, but that didn't change the reality of things. Besides, it

was easier to deal with things when you had someone to blame for it. *Although I guess it's partly my fault too. I shouldn't have believed her so easily. But ... I couldn't help it . I really wanted to...*

Then the jeep exploded.

The two men instinctively threw their arms over their eyes to shield themselves from the blast, while Alouette's first reaction was to duck behind the rock she'd been sitting on and hide. It was a strategy that had worked several times before and she didn't see any reason to do things differently this time around.

"What the hell...?" The unnamed man said. He obviously hadn't quite gotten a handle on the situation just yet. "Jorge...?"

"Oh ho ho, that was a good one," came a voice from behind the jeep. "I didn't think it would go up quite that well."

Although Alouette couldn't see what was going on, she heard the two men draw their plasma rifles. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

"Now why would I do that, hmm? Not that your pathetic weapons could hurt me even if I did. You Resistance soldiers are so simple-minded, I don't understand how we haven't finished you off already. Honestly, you were doing a rather good job of looking over the desert, but did it ever occur to you to look *under* it?"

"Now, I'm afraid I'll have to be asking you two to come with me. You're in violation of several Arcadian laws. Illegal possession of firearms, entering a restricted area, treason... the list goes on. There's only one suitable punishment for reploids with so many major offenses."

"You'll never take me alive, Arcadian scum!" Alouette heard the unnamed man yell, followed by the sound of his rifle firing - at what, she had no idea.

"Oh, but coming back with a dead body is far less entertaining. Besides, what's the point of having a disposal facility if you never get to use it?"

The only sounds Alouette heard for the next few moments were a confusing series of yells, moans, screams, and grunts, mixed in with the sound of plasma rifles firing and... something exploding? She didn't want to know. She curled into a ball to make herself as small and unnoticable as possible beneath her small rock outcropping.

After a series of painful-sounding thuds the commotion came to an abrupt end. She wasn't surprised; whenever the Resistance soldiers didn't run, they lost. There wasn't much point in fighting the Neo Arcadian reploids. They were far better equipped than the scraggly Resistance and, simply put, there were usually a lot more of them. But she could understand why they tried anyway.

"Well now, I hope that made you feel better," the mysterious voice said, "because pretty soon you're not going to be feeling anything at all. Aztec Falcon will be so pleased to have someone to test his new equipment on."

Alouette didn't know who or what an Aztec Falcon was, but there was only one kind of equipment they'd be testing on captured Resistance soldiers.

"Hmm... I thought I saw a little girl here earlier. Oh well, she probably ran away. Blasted sand is getting in the way of my scanners, can't see much beyond my own two feet. It doesn't matter, a human girl won't last long in the desert by herself. Your stupidity never ceases to amaze me, bringing a child all the way out here. I guess I'll just go ahead and add mistreatment of human minors to your list of offenses as well."

"S-s-s-screw you," Colbor said, his voice quivering. The other man remained silent. He was probably unconscious.

"And on that cheerful note, shall we be going?"

The sound of shuffling feet warned Alouette that someone was heading her way. She pushed herself even farther down into the sand and pulled her legs up to her chest as tightly as she could, wishing herself invisible as a strange-looking group of dilapidated mechaniloids marched past her hiding place. Where had those come from? They looked like they were made from discarded pieces of scrap metal. They also looked dead. She held her breath as they walked double-file past her, but none of them turned to look in her direction.

At the rear of the columns was the one who she assumed had been speaking earlier. Like most Neo Arcadian reploids it was modeled after an animal - in this case, a dog. It walked upright and carried a staff of some sort, and its head was surrounded by some weird decorations. If she hadn't been completely scared out of her mind she might have laughed at how ridiculous it looked.

As the column moved farther out into the desert sands it began to inexplicably sink beneath the surface. She didn't really understand how that sort of thing were possible, but she'd seen a lot of unexplainable things in the short time she could remember, so she wasn't too surprised. The idea of a reloid capable of traveling freely through loose sand wasn't really all that special.

After the first few pairs disappeared from sight, Alouette caught a glimpse of a limp green form being dragged along the ground in the middle of the column. She assumed it was probably the man whose name didn't know. He sunk into the ground noiselessly along with the two mechaniloids holding his arms. Who knew where he'd be when he woke up again.

Then she saw Colbor. He trembled in the grip of his captors as he saw his companion disappear beneath the sands, fully aware of the fate that awaited him and knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it. Alouette made the mistake of watching as his body began was pulled down into the desert, despite his futile attempts to struggle. Then, just before his head went under, he turned and looked straight at her. She tried to force her eyes away from his, but

couldn't bring herself to abandon him in his final moments. He'd been such a nice man.

And now she knew what he looked like.

The rest of the column and the dog-like reploid finally vanished beneath the sands. Alouette squeezed her eyes shut to try and block out the memories of all the other times she'd seen the look that had been on Colbor's face, the terror-stricken panic in his eyes that everyone had when they were taken, but it was no use. His face was burned into her memory now, and she'd never be able to forget him. She felt the urge to cry begin to rise up again, but she suppressed it with a shiver.

Alouette was cold.

Just as the sun was beginning to drop below the horizon line Alouette heard the sound of another jeep approaching. She didn't budge - it might be more Neo Arcadians. She held her breath as she listened to the engine turn off, followed by a pair of thuds as two pairs of boots hit the sand.

"The poor bastards," a man's voice said. It sounded familiar. "Well, at least we know what happened to the patrol jeep."

Confident the two people were with the Resistance - Neo Arcadia didn't really use jeeps anyway - Alouette crawled out from under her rock and stood, looking towards the voice.

Two men were facing the still-burning wreck of the patrol jeep, the backs of their green Resistance soldier uniforms facing her. Alouette hadn't felt brave enough to investigate the scene until now, but it looked more or less as she had expected. Fragments of the jeep lay scattered about the area, along with the twisted, useless forms of two plasma rifles. It didn't phase her; it was the kind of scene she'd gotten used to seeing. She'd already had hours to sit under her rock and think about it, this time.

"I don't see any bodies," one of the men pointed out, "and there's only two rifles on the ground. There were supposed to be three soldiers out here; one on guard and two in the jeep."

"Colbor took Alouette with him too, but there's no trace of her either. Hey, look there," the other one said, pointing at something inside the burning vehicle. "Looks like whoever was driving was still inside when it blew. Probably didn't even see it coming." Alouette didn't want to know what was left in the seat to tell him that. "Did they just carry the other two off, then?"

"The dog took them," Alouette said quietly. The two men whirled around at the sound of her voice, eyes wide in surprise. She was extremely careful to keep her eyes away from their faces. She didn't need to remember two people in the same day.

"Wha... Alouette?!" One of the men finally managed to splutter. "Where did you... nevermind, I'm just glad you're all right. What do you mean, 'the dog took them'?"

"It came out of the sand and then it took them away. I saw it from my hiding spot." She motioned down at the rock. Then she calmly walked over to the jeep, hopped up into the back seat, and fixed her eyes on a spot on the floor. The two men, slightly baffled at the entire scene, didn't move.

"Can we go home now?" She said, hoping to prod them back into a present state of mind.

The two men glanced back and forth a few times, then one of them shrugged. "We may as well, nothing else to find here. We'll do a GPS ping and mark it when we get back to base. No point in stationing sentries in places where the Arcadians already know to look for them."

"Good point."

The men climbed into the front seats and the jeep set off across the desert once again, this time in the direction of the the Resistance Base. After a period of tense silence, the man in the passenger's seat spoke.

"It's too bad about poor Colbor, he only joined up a week ago. Ciel will be glad to hear you're okay though, she was worried sick about you." He glanced at Alouette as he said the last part.

Her grip tightened on the doll in her hands at hearing that. "The men in the other jeep said she'd gone missing."

"She did, for a little while. But then she suddenly turned up on the Transerver pad none the worse for wear, with a new friend right behind her. I haven't had a chance to meet him yet, but I heard he took out a Golem all by himself just to save our Ciel. The guy must be twelve feet tall and have arms the size of trees if he can take down something like that without a scratch." The man chuckled.

"Yes, Ciel is back at the base, safe and sound. And as soon as she found out you were missing Cerveau had to hard-wire the command room door closed to keep her from climbing into a jeep and coming to look for you herself."

Alouette barely even heard the last part. *Ciel came back. They took her away, but... she came back.* That was the only thought running through her mind as she stared down at the doll in her hands. *She didn't break her promise after all. I knew I could believe her.* Now she felt bad that she'd ever doubted her.

She was also very curious about the 'new friend' that had brought her back. He had to be a pretty amazing person to bring back people that Neo Arcadia took away. Nobody had ever done that before. Especially if they were taken away by a Golem. She'd never actually seen a Golem outside of a database file, but she'd heard one go by once. It was a horrible sound... almost as horrible as the dead silence that followed.

But what if he gets taken away too? Who will bring him back? No, she wouldn't let herself get her hopes up yet. This new person might just turn out to be a well-intentioned liar like all the rest.

Seeing that Alouette's expression didn't change upon hearing about Ciel, the man in the front seat sighed and turned his eyes forward again, leaving her alone with her thoughts for the time being. That was the way she wanted it. She still didn't look up at their faces, lest they be taken away from her too.

Having hope was dangerous. She'd learned that the hard way.

Alouette entered Ciel's room ahead of the two soldiers who'd picked her up and found the young scientist with her head resting on a notebook, a pencil loosely grasped in one hand - writing in books was just one of Ciel's collection of strange, old-fashioned habits. From her breathing patterns Alouette guessed she was asleep, but hadn't been for very long. She wasn't surprised; Ciel hadn't been getting much sleep lately, claiming that she was researching something important and sleep could wait until she was finished. When she got into moods like that she didn't listen to anyone, not even Alouette.

"Maybe we should come back later," one of the guards whispered. "She looks exhausted."

Alouette ignored him. She walked up beside Ciel and started tugging on a shirt sleeve. "Wake up sleepyhead," she said, as sternly as a six-year old could.

"Mmrf... nguh... whaddyou want..." Ciel raised her head groggily and squinted down at the source of the voice. "Who's there?" She blinked twice to get the sleep out of her eyes.

"I told you, you have to get more sleep or else you'll pass out on your desk. See? You should listen to me more."

Two more surprised blinks. "Alouette?"

The little girl pointed an accusing finger at the bewildered woman. "Dummy?"

"Alouette!" In the blink of an eye Ciel was on the floor with her arms wrapped around the little reploid girl, squeezing her like she'd just come back from the dead. "Alouette! Oh, Alouette, you're all right! I was worried sick when I heard you went missing with Colbor and the patrol."

"Now you know how I feel," Alouette said, pushing Ciel back - she may have had the body of a little girl, but her robotic arms were far stronger than any human's. "I was scared too when they told me you went missing. I thought you'd gone and broke your promise and I wasn't ever going to forgive you." She held up her doll with both hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry Alouette. I didn't mean to worry you, I wanted to come back. But there were some problems, and, well... things didn't exactly go as planned. But I promise I won't ever do it again."

"Really? You promise?"

"Yes, but only if you make me a promise too. You have to promise not to leave the base and make me worry about you like that ever again."

Alouette gave her a six year-old's most scrutinizing glare, then nodded. "Okay, deal. We both messed up. But now we're even."

Ciel smiled, then hugged Alouette again. "Good. I'm glad."

After a few more tender moments, one of the two guards cleared his throat. "Oh, right!" Ciel exclaimed as she got to her feet, brushing the wrinkles out of her slightly-torn pink shirt. "Sorry about that. Right then, what's the report?"

"There isn't much, I'm afraid. We found the patrol jeep demolished at the sentry post with one body in the driver's seat. The only signs left of the other two were their broken plasma rifles."

"They were probably taken away to be retired. I don't suppose you have any idea which direction they went?"

Why should it matter? Nobody comes back once they're taken away.

... Well, almost nobody.

"No ma'am, I'm sorry to say we don't. There were signs of a struggle, but with all the desert sand blowing about there weren't any tracks left to follow. Though, if you don't mind me saying, knowing where they went wouldn't do us much good. It's not like we'd stand a chance in hell at assaulting a disposal facility."

"You're right, we wouldn't. But Zero might."

So that was Ciel's new friend's name, the one who'd destroyed a Golem and brought her back. She seemed to remember hearing that name somewhere before but couldn't seem to put her finger on it. That had been happening a lot lately, but she didn't let it bother her. She still remembered all the important things.

"Do you really think he's that strong?" The other soldier said, voicing aloud Alouette's next thought. "I know you said he defeated a Golem single-handedly, but this is an entire disposal facility we're talking about. Even a legendary reploid like him would be hard-pressed to take that on." That's right, Zero was a legendary maverick hunter. She could remember Ciel mentioning him on more than a few occasions.

"I know it sounds crazy, but he can do it, I know he can. We just have to give him a chance."

The two guards didn't seem convinced. "Well, it doesn't really matter anyway," one of them said. "We have no idea where they went, and

they'd be long gone before our intelligence teams could get any leads."

Does she really think Zero can do it, Alouette wondered, or is she just hoping he can? At the very least she seemed willing to give him a chance to prove himself. Alouette supposed that, since he was the one who brought Ciel back, he did deserve at least that much.

"Aztec Falcon."

"What?" The three figures all looked at Alouette.

"Aztec Falcon. The dog said it was taking them to an Aztec Falcon. Does that help?"

"Aztec Falcon..." Ciel got a faraway look in her eyes as she wracked her brain for a moment, then snapped her fingers victoriously. "Aztec Falcon is the name of the reploid in charge of disposal facility three. It's not that far from here, actually. We might still have a chance to save them!" Suddenly she knelt down and picked up Alouette with both hands, whirling her around in the air with a smile on her face. "Oh Alouette, what would I do without you?"

"Something else."

Ciel giggled. "You're absolutely right, as usual." She set the girl back on the ground, then turned to the two guards. "Well then, now that we know where they are, all that's left is to hope Zero is willing to go."

"Go where?" A voice said from the hallway. Alouette didn't recognize it, which meant...

She held her breath as an odd-looking red reploid came around the corner and entered the room. Everything about him was different from the other reploids in the Resistance. His chest and limbs were covered with heavy armor plating, and his head was almost completely engulfed by his red-and-white finned helmet. He carried

himself with a strength and confidence that Alouette had never seen in any soldier of the Resistance. A quick glance over his frame told her that his body had been designed with only combat in mind - you didn't need to be an expert to see it.

His eyes flickered about the room as soon as he entered, instinctively scanning and evaluating his surroundings, looking for possible threats. For the briefest instant he turned those cold, calculating eyes on her, and she reflexively latched onto one of Ciel's legs with a tiny yelp. *His eyes are so fierce, but... it feels like he's... lost.*

"Zero!" Ciel exclaimed as she tried to untangle Alouette from her legs. "I thought you were taking a look around the base?"

"I've seen enough. Everywhere I go I see the same thing."

All he sees are hopeless people praying for a miracle. She saw it too. Another reason why she didn't really want to talk to any of the Resistance soldiers; it felt like talking to a corpse.

"Then I was coming down this hallway and I heard you-" He seemed about to say more, then stopped himself at the last second. Alouette abruptly released her deathgrip on Ciel's leg - much to her relief - and stared intently at Zero's face. *Has he noticed it too?*

"Oh? I'm sorry, I didn't realize I left my door open. I'll try and keep it down."

"That's not what I..."

Zero trailed off as he noticed Alouette staring at his face, studying him closely. After a few moments it seemed to make him uncomfortable, but Alouette didn't care. Zero had only been in the base a matter of hours, but he had already figured out what it was that made Ciel so special, made her different from the rest of the Resistance soldiers.

He heard Ciel laughing. Nobody else around here laughs. She's the only one here who's still alive. That's why he saved her, even if he didn't know it.

Suddenly, Alouette decided she didn't need to be afraid of Zero anymore.

"... Nevermind." Zero dismissed his thoughts with a wave of his hand. "What was it you were hoping I'd do?"

"Um... well, you see... one of our sentry stations was attacked a few hours ago. Two of our men were taken to a nearby retirement facility and... it's likely they're scheduled for disposal."

Zero looked confused. "Disposal?"

"It's Neo Arcadia's way of legalizing murder," one of the two guards spat. "Ciel told you about the energy crisis?" Zero nodded. "Well it's gotten so bad that in order to cut down on the number of reploids that require energy crystals, Neo Arcadia is arresting them at random and then scheduling them for 'treatment' at a 'retirement facility' - we call it 'disposal', for what I hope are obvious reasons."

"In reality they're just using it to control the population and eliminate anyone who protests against them," Ciel continued. "The humans don't care enough to do anything about it, and the reploids are all scared that if they say anything they'll be next."

"I see. And you want me to go free them?"

Ciel glanced around uncomfortably. "Yes. I won't force you, but... please, Zero. Help them."

Ciel and the two soldiers waited anxiously as Zero considered his response, but Alouette could tell he'd already made up his mind. *He's just trying to figure out why.*

"What's so special about these two?" Zero finally asked, locking his raptor glare on Ciel. "What makes them important enough that it's worth assaulting an enemy stronghold to get them back?" His tone was harsh, but his eyes weren't. Alouette wondered if she was the only one who noticed.

"Nothing," Ciel replied calmly as she met his gaze, unafraid. "There's nothing special about them. I'd ask the same thing of you no matter who it was."

"Then what makes them worth saving?"

"What doesn't?"

A tense silence filled the room as Ciel and Zero stared each other down. Eventually Ciel crossed her arms and said to the two soldiers, "Would you two excuse us for a minute?" Her eyes never left Zero's face.

The two men nodded, then headed out the door. "Come on, Alouette," one of them said.

"No."

The man who had spoken turned around, surprised. "But-"

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Ciel said, leveling a nasty glare in the soldier's direction.

The man glanced between Ciel and Alouette a few times as he tried to decide what to do, then sighed. "No ma'am," he said, then left the room. Alouette thought she heard him mumble something about women under his breath on his way out - her hearing really was getting better. Considering what he'd said, it was probably for the best that Ciel didn't hear him.

As soon as the door slid closed Ciel collapsed backward into her chair, letting out the breath she'd been holding for the past thirty

seconds. "I'm just not cut out for this 'giving orders' thing," she sighed. "I thought I was going to burst there for a moment."

"You're not doing a very good job of being a military commander, either," Zero informed her. It wasn't an insult, just a statement of fact. "This base is a disciplinary nightmare."

"At least I'm doing it. Nobody else seems to want the job. Can't say I blame them though, I don't want it either." She looked up at Zero, a hopeful expression on her face. "So, will you go?"

"Yes. I'd planned on it from the moment you asked. I'm just... trying to figure out why."

Ha, I was right.

"Something inside me is telling me it's the right thing to do, but... if Neo Arcadia really is retiring repleids on the scale you describe, what difference will saving these two lives make?"

"It will give us something to believe in," Ciel said. "You walked around the base, you saw what I'm talking about. The defeated looks, the hopeless stares. Most of these men are already beaten, they're just waiting for that one last straw to fall before they give up completely. Cerveau tells me there was almost a mass desertion when word got out that my excavation team had been ambushed. I'm the very small thread of courage these men have left to hang on to, and I'm not going to last much longer." There was a touch of desperation in her voice as she finished.

"And you think saving these two men will fix that?"

"It will give everyone hope. Hope that we actually stand a chance, that we aren't just sitting around waiting for death. Bringing those two soldiers back will prove Neo Arcadia isn't invincible, that what we're doing here actually has meaning. We can't just let that monster walk all over us!"

Zero was slightly taken aback at the fierceness in Ciel's voice by the time she'd finished speaking. "That monster? Do you mean...?"

"No," Alouette filled in, "not Neo Arcadia. X." At the mention of Neo Arcadia's ruler she saw a flash of recognition on Zero's face, but it was gone just as quickly. *He knows that name, but he doesn't know why. He really is lost.*

"Alouette..." Ciel sighed again, then took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. "Sorry, I got a little carried away. I'm just... really tired, that's all."

Zero nodded. "Get some rest. I'll do some recon on this disposal facility and see what I can do. Where did you say it was?"

"It's facility number three, just a few kilometers east of the base. Just ask whoever's on duty at the east gate to point you in the right direction, everyone in the base knows where it is. Zero, please be careful. I know I just laid it on pretty thick, but don't overdo it and hurt yourself."

"I will." Zero turned to leave, but before he could get out the door Alouette decided she had a very important question to ask him.

"Are you leaving?"

Zero stopped in the doorway, looking back at the small girl. He studied her a moment before answering. "Yes."

"Are you coming back?"

Another few moments of silence. "Where else am I going to go?" He finally said, then left the room.

Zero's words hung in the air for a few moments. "Please, be careful..." Ciel said one more time, more to herself than anyone else.

"You believe in him, don't you?" Alouette said. Ciel gave her a sideways glance, then looked back towards the door.

"I wouldn't have brought him back here if I didn't. He was damaged when I found him and I had to force him awake, and I'm afraid the shock fragmented his memory files. He doesn't know who he is or what he's fighting for. Right now he needs someone to believe in him, or he'll never know if he's doing the right thing or not."

Alouette knew what that felt like. She didn't remember anything past when Ciel had found her during her escape from Neo Arcadia less than two months ago; anything before that was just fragmented images and feelings. Ciel said the files had been corrupted somehow and she couldn't recover them. Alouette thought that may have been for the best.

"Well, I believe in you," Alouette said firmly. "So if you believe in him, I guess that means I'll believe in him too."

That earned her a smile. "Thanks. Good to know I'm not the only crazy one around here."

"You're not crazy. You just haven't given up yet."

"Yes, well, as X used to say, 'you're never beaten until you give up'. Or something like that, anyway... oh!" Ciel's face lit up with excitement. "That reminds me! That light, I could have sworn..." Ciel bent over her notebook again, suddenly completely oblivious to her surroundings. It happened every so often whenever Ciel thought of something new. Scientists were odd.

Alouette sighed. "This is the last time I'm going to say it. You need to get some sleep or you'll pass out on your desk. Again."

"You think I can sleep at a time like this? Zero's out risking his life to save two of my soldiers, and when that light spoke it sounded an awful lot like..." Ciel trailed off, then gave Alouette a sideways

glance. "What about you? You haven't slept since I found you, which means it's been at least..."

"1064 hours, 31 minutes, 24 seconds," Alouette filled in. With her internal clock acting up she probably wasn't being completely accurate, but it was pretty close.

"Right, far too long. You need to sleep for a while to let your body's maintenance subroutines run, otherwise parts of you are going to start malfunctioning. And I'm talking about things more important than just your cooling system."

"You noticed?" She'd hoped she'd gotten away with that. For some reason it hadn't shut down after leaving the desert.

"How could I not? It felt like I was hugging a block of ice. If you get much colder I could put you in the corner and use you for an air conditioner in the summer. Alouette, please, get some sleep?"

"I emptied my memory buffers and ran some diagnostics while I was hiding. I'm fine." She could be just as stubborn as Ciel when she wanted to.

"That's not enough. You need to sleep."

"No I don't." *I can't. It's not safe here. It's not safe anywhere.*

Having already lost this argument several times before, Ciel let it drop. "All right then, but at least have Cerveau see if he can fix your cooling unit. I don't want to have to put on a coat and mittens every time you enter the room."

"... Fine."

By the time Alouette heard Ciel's door slid shut behind her the young scientist already had her head buried in her notes again. She still didn't want to see Cerveau, but she'd just told Ciel she would, so...

That was when she first realized it. Zero's face and voice were now logged in her memory, but for some reason, she wasn't the least bit afraid of him being taken away. There was no doubt in her mind that he would be coming back. She wouldn't have to about forgetting him.

Alouette left Ciel's room in a much better mood than when she'd arrived.

"There you go, all fixed up." Cerveau pushed a button on his workstation and the service panel hanging over Alouette's chest slid off to the side. "How do you feel?"

"Hot," Alouette replied, squirming uncomfortably.

"Good. That means your temperature controls are trying to bring your body back up to room temperature after being cold for so long. That means they're working properly. You'll feel fine in a minute."

"Thanks." She hopped down from the maintenance bed and headed for the door.

"Hey now, don't think you're getting away from me that easily," Cerveau, grabbing her by the neck of her dress before she could escape. "I don't mind fixing people up every once in a while, but don't think I can't tell what's going on here. If you don't get some sleep things are just going to keep on breaking, and next time it might not be something so easy to fix."

"I'm fine," Alouette insisted stubbornly. She'd just heard this speech from Ciel, she didn't need it again. "I don't want to sleep."

"Maybe you don't want to, but you need to."

"No I don't. They might take me away while I'm sleeping."

Cerveau blinked in surprise. "Who's going to take you away?"

"Neo Arcadia."

"You think Neo Arcadia is going to come and take you away while you're asleep?"

Alouette nodded.

"And what makes you think they can get you in here? The rest of us sleep here all the time, and none of us have been taken away."

"Yet."

Cerveau scowled at her. "Well, aren't you just a little pessimist."

"It's true. We aren't safe here. We aren't safe anywhere. They're going to come and take everyone away, it's just a matter of time. I need to stay awake so that when they come I'll be able to hide. You and Ciel can hide with me too. I'll be awake so I can come get you and we'll hide together."

A sad smile spread on the old mechanic's face. "You can't hide forever, Alouette."

"Yes I can. I'm really good at hiding. I hid from the dog in the desert."

Cerveau didn't really know what she meant by that, but he had a feeling it was complicated enough that he didn't want to know. So instead of asking for details he just shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you are pretty small, so I guess that helps." He stood and went to lean against the equipment bed. "You know what? Up until just recently I'd have agreed that we aren't safe here. But I think this place is a lot safer now than you think it is."

Alouette was confused. "Why?"

"Have you met Zero?"

"Yeah, he came to see Ciel while I was there." She wasn't sure what that had to do with anything.

"And what did you think of him?"

Alouette had to think about that for a moment. She'd gotten a lot of impressions from the red reploid and it was hard to pick just one. Finally she settled on, "I think he wants to be a good person, but he doesn't know why, and he can't remember how."

Cerveau was lost for words for a moment. "That's... definitely a unique way of looking at him," he finally said, scratching his head.

"What about you? What do you think?"

"I think he's here to help us out. Otherwise, why would he have saved Ciel? And if this place isn't safe with the legendary Hunter Zero protecting it, then we may as well run up the white flag and put ourselves out of our misery."

Now there was a thought that hadn't yet crossed Alouette's mind. *Zero is protecting us? The entire Resistance?* "Is he really that strong? Do you think he can protect all of us?"

"Can he? Definitely. Will he? Well, I'm not so sure about that one. We'll just have to wait and see what he decides to do, now that he's had a chance to see exactly what it is he's gotten himself into."

"I guess." Alouette thought the idea of one reploid protecting the entire Resistance was a little ridiculous, but... she had told Ciel she'd believe in him. After all, he'd already done one thing that nobody else could, and was preparing to do another, so... *I guess I'll give him a chance.*

"So, do you think maybe you can sleep now?" Cerveau asked.

"... Maybe." *Even if he is protecting us, he can't be everywhere at once. They might take me away when he's not looking.*

The mechanic sighed. "Well, that's better than 'no', I guess. Anyway, if you're not going to listen to me then hurry up and go. I have better

things to do than sit here and argue with stubborn little girls."

"Okay. Thanks."

Alouette clutched her doll tightly as she gave Cerveau a polite little bow, then left the room. Cerveau waved her off and turned to his desk to look busy, but as soon as the door slid shut he heaved a heavy sigh. The reality of the situation was that Ciel had contacted him moments before Alouette arrived and asked him to do some diagnostic scans while he was fixing her cooling systems. The results hadn't been promising.

"That poor girl. At this rate she's not going to last much longer." He picked up the handheld terminal with the test results on it and headed for Ciel's room. They needed to have a talk.

Alouette spent the rest of her day - well, it was technically nighttime now - wandering around the base as she did every other day, trying to keep herself occupied. She tried her best to avoid having any responsibilities - she didn't want to risk getting attached to anything - so she usually found herself kicking rocks around on the lower levels or something equally mundane. The Resistance Base was actually an old military complex left over from the Elf Wars that the Resistance had simply found and commandeered, so some of the less-traversed sections were in a horrible state of disrepair. Alouette had already gone through them all looking for Neo Arcadians - you never knew where they might be hiding. She also marked all the best hiding spots in her memory, just in case.

It was approaching midnight when Alouette decided she would go and check on Ciel. She had probably fallen asleep in her chair again, and spending the entire night there would definitely give her a backache in the morning. Making sure Ciel didn't make herself any more miserable than necessary was one of the few jobs Alouette had willingly taken on herself. She headed off in the direction of Ciel's room.

As she approached the door to the transerver she saw a pair of Resistance soldiers standing outside the door and looking in, their eyes wide in surprise. Before she could get close enough to find out what was going on two more soldiers came out of the room. One was draped across the shoulders of the other, apparently unable to walk on his own. The other seemed to be all right, though his uniform was ripped in a few places; he'd obviously just come from somewhere unpleasant. When his head turned towards her enough that she got a good look at his face, she knew she'd guessed right.

"Colbor?"

With the incapacitated soldier slung over his shoulders keeping him from turning around completely, Colbor turned his head to look at Alouette. There was a huge grin plastered on his face. "Alouette! Oh good, you made it back here safely."

"So did you." Somehow she managed to keep the astonishment she felt out of her voice.

"Yeah, isn't that something?! We were minutes away from being squashed into pancakes by this big bird reploid when Zero showed up and chopped him to pieces! I tell you, that guy is something else!" Colbor's jubilant mood was spoiled when the soldier in his arms groaned. "Oh, right. Sorry Alouette, I gotta get this guy to Cerveau. I'll tell you all about it later!"

"Okay."

Alouette watched while Colbor and one of the two soldiers on guard at the door helped their injured comrade limp his way to the elevator. *That makes two more... maybe Zero really can protect us, like Cerveau said.* She'd have to investigate more.

Moments after having that thought she heard the sound of the transerver activating again, followed shortly afterward by the crimson reploid himself stepping into the hallway. He glanced around briefly,

noting the presence of both Alouette and the remaining guard - the latter of which was having trouble keeping his jaw from hitting the floor - before heading off in the direction of the command room.

"Wait."

Zero turned back around, looking down her. He wasn't especially tall for a reploid, but she was especially short. "Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"To make my report to Ciel."

"Do you know where she is?"

"In the command room. I was talking to her on my communicator just a minute ago."

"Oh... could you do me a favor?"

"I can try."

"Could you tell her to get some sleep? She's going to get sick if she doesn't take care of herself."

"... All right." Then Zero turned and disappeared down the hallway. Alouette watched him go, then regarded the still-gaping soldier.

"You're going to eat a bug if you keep your mouth open like that."

"That was Zero!" The man exclaimed as he abruptly snapped out of his funk. "That was him! He actually went out and brought those two back from the disposal facility! That's amazing! It's like, he said he was going to, but I didn't actually believe he would, but then he did and like, wow! I never thought I'd see the day when anyone would..."

Alouette sighed at the man's inane babble. She didn't see what the big deal was; just because Zero could do amazing things didn't mean people needed to treat him like some sort of God-among-

reploids. He just happened to be really good at what he did. Zero was a reloid, just like the rest of-

Her train of thought was interrupted as her central processor was suddenly flooded by a stream of error messages, then everything went black.

"... so I was just sitting here with Jake minding the transerver 'cause Ciel told me to and that's when I heard it starting up, I was worried that it might be Neo Arcadians or something 'cause I mean who would be activating the transerver at this time of day right? So I was totally relieved when I saw that it was... uh, Alouette?" It was just then that the excited guard noticed that Alouette was lying face-down on the floor, her ever-present doll lying where it had fallen a few feet in front of her.

"Hey Alouette, you okay?" The soldier asked. When he didn't get a response he knelt down and shook her by the shoulders. "Alouette? What's wrong?"

The girl abruptly shuddered slightly, and the soldier stepped back as she pushed herself up onto her hands and knees. "What happened?" He asked, concerned.

"I fell." She slowly got back on her feet and brushed herself off, then went to pick up her doll. "Sorry for interrupting you."

"You fell? Then why didn't you say anything when I-"

"Bye."

Alouette turned and walked back the way she'd come, disappearing around the corner before the startled soldier could respond. He shook his head in disbelief, then went back to guarding the door. "What a strange little girl."

The next morning, Zero was in Cerveau's lab trying out his new Triple Rod. At first it felt a little clunky in his hands, but after twirling it around a few times he started to get a feel for it.

"You're learning how to use that pretty quickly," Cerveau remarked. "You ever had one of those before?"

"I don't think so," Zero replied as he spun the rod over his head, "but it doesn't usually take me very long to learn how to use a weapon. It's a part of my job."

"That's a rather professional way of looking at killing."

Zero gave him a sidelong glance but otherwise ignored the remark. He was pretty sure Cerveau saw the irony in making such a comment immediately after giving him a tool that would make him even more efficient. Despite only knowing the mechanic for a day, Zero found he had a healthy dose of respect for the old man. Of all the reploids in the Resistance, Cerveau seemed to be one of the most intelligent... and most cynical.

"Just do me a favor and try not to break it. Some of the parts I used are pretty hard to come by and I don't think I could replace them anytime soon."

"Don't worry, a professional always takes care of his tools. Don't you?" Zero motioned at Cerveau's neat and tidy workbench.

Cerveau chuckled. "Good point."

"Anyway, I'm going out to look over the desert regions. I'll let you know how it holds up."

"Well, if it totally fails as a useful melee weapon there's enough force in the blade and spring in the handle that you can at least use it for a pogo stick." Cerveau smiled as he spoke, then sighed when Zero's expression didn't change. "That was a joke. You could crack a smile every once in a while, you know."

"Sorry, I was just thinking that that actually isn't a bad idea. I'll be seeing you."

Immediately upon exiting the lab Zero noticed the little girl reploid he'd met earlier was standing in the hall outside. Two big, blue eyes peered up at him from behind the head of her stuffed doll as he entered the hallway. He stared back for a few moments, then turned and headed for the elevator - Cerveau's lab was on one of the bottom levels, and he needed to get to the surface. He stepped into the elevator and hit the 'S' button, and was slightly surprised when the girl slipped into the elevator just before the door slid shut.

"Going up?" He asked.

"Yeah."

She continued to stare at him as the elevator went up through the levels of the Resistance base before finally coming to a stop at the top level. Technically they were still underground, but there were several entry points from this floor that would take him onto the surface close to the desert border.

After going a short distance down the corridor, Zero noticed Alouette was still behind him. He turned to look at her with a frown. "Are you following me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to figure something out."

"Why not just ask me?"

"I don't think you know either."

Zero decided he didn't care enough to press for a better answer than that, so he turned and continued on his way. He was a new face at

the Base; she was probably just curious. She'd leave after she got bored of him.

Alouette was still following slightly behind him when he arrived at the surface exit he wanted, the bright morning sunlight lighting up the corridor. He turned around in the doorway to give Alouette another frown. "Are you going to follow me outside on patrol too?" He asked.

"No. I promised Ciel I wouldn't leave the base." True to her word, she didn't move another step closer to the door.

Good, because I'm not taking you, he thought, but all he said was, "I see." He turned to leave, but Alouette spoke again.

"Are you coming back this time too?"

What an odd question. The red reploid studied the girl's face for a long time before replying. What was she getting at? "I had planned to, yes."

"How long are you going to be gone?"

"I don't know. It depends on what I find out there. Probably about two hours."

"Is this where you're coming back to?" She pointed at the spot on the wall where 'GATE C-2' was printed in large yellow letters.

"No. I'll probably finish my patrol to the east of here and use C-1 instead."

"Okay." Then she turned around and disappeared back into the base.

She's probably going to be waiting for me when I get back. Zero sighed. *What a strange girl.* At least she wasn't afraid of him. Whenever he tried to talk to any of the other soldiers in the base they always looked like they desperately wanted to be somewhere else. Only Ciel and Cerveau seemed willing to treat him like a normal

person. *And, well, Alouette too, I suppose. Though in a slightly different way.*

He pushed the issue from his mind as he reached the perimeter gate leading into the desert, concentrating on the task ahead of him.

Two hours and seven minutes later, Zero arrived at the perimeter gate just to the east of where he'd begun his patrol, just as planned. He'd encountered a few stray mechaniloids as he worked his way through the desert - Neo Arcadian or otherwise - but they hadn't posed any significant amount of danger. He snuck past most of them undetected - he didn't want to risk alerting Neo Arcadia to his presence.

Also as planned, Alouette was waiting for him just inside gate C-1. He gave her a cursory glance as he walked past her and into the base, but said nothing.

"You're seven minutes late," the little girl said sternly as she followed him down the corridor from her accustomed place several feet behind him. "I was about to leave."

Why are you even here in the first place? "Sorry, I'll do better next time," Zero replied gruffly.

"Good."

The pair walked down the corridors in silence as Zero went to deliver his scouting report to Ciel in the command room. He'd managed to push Alouette out of his mind while out in the field, but it wasn't so easy to do when she was following along a few feet behind him. It wasn't that she was being obtrusive or annoying - in fact, even her footfalls were so quiet he could barely tell she was there half the time - it just felt really weird to be followed around by a reploid that looked like a six year old.

Of course, that begs the question, why would someone create a reploid with the body of a six year old girl? Replids don't grow. It just doesn't make sense.

Shifting his mind back to present duties, Zero stepped into the elevator pressed the 'B1' button. The door beeped and started to slide shut, but Zero stuck his arm out to hold it open as Alouette hustled down the hallway.

"I assume you're coming too."

The girl nodded and stepped in beside him. As the door slid shut her eyes never left his face, even as the elevator started moving downward. Silence pervaded the atmosphere.

I suppose it can't hurt to ask.

He looked down, meeting Alouette's unwavering eyes as they stared back up at him, like always. "What purpose is there in making a reploid with the body of a six year old girl?" He figured it was better to be clear and blunt than tactful and confusing.

After giving it a moment of thought, she replied in a genuinely curious tone. "What purpose is there in making a reploid that only knows how to kill things?"

He didn't have an answer for her.

"That's it? Just some buzzards and scouting robots?"

"More or less, yes."

Ciel sighed and leaned back in her chair. "I almost wish you *had* found something out there; at least then we'd know what was going on. What other reason could they have for attacking our sentries in the desert - and only the desert - than to prepare for an attack? That wasn't the first time we've had trouble over there, either."

"If they do launch an attack over the desert, in our current state we won't even know it's coming until they're right on our doorstep," Zero confirmed. "I agree it's definitely a risk. But I can assure you that, for the moment, there's nothing out there but dust and sand."

"Oh don't worry, I believe you," Ciel assured him with a nervous chuckle. "In fact I believe you more than I believe myself."

"You should have more confidence. You've managed to keep this many soldiers alive so far. You said it yourself; at least you're trying."

"Shut up and let me mope. I'm tired and it makes me feel better." Ciel rubbed her eyes with her gloved hands then blinked several times, trying to wake herself up.

"I thought I told you to get some sleep last night. Don't make me tell Alouette or she'll never leave you alone." A thoughtful look crossed his face. "Although, if she were keeping an eye on you, that would get her to stop following me around for a while."

"Oh? Is Alouette being a nuisance?"

"No, not really. She's been following me around the base ever since this morning and I have no idea why. Every time I ask her a question she gives me some cryptic answer that definitely doesn't sound like the kind of thing a child would say, reloid or not."

"Alouette is definitely... unusual," Ciel said with a smile. "She's here under... extenuating circumstances. I found her crying and in desperate need of repair in the street when I fled from Neo Arcadia. There were Pantheons following me and I knew if I left her there they'd probably kill her just for being there, so I brought her with me. I'm not sure where she came from or even how old she really is; her memory files from any time before I found her are corrupted beyond my ability to restore them."

"But even beyond that, there's something wrong in that girl's head. Her logic and reasoning algorithms aren't functioning properly, so

sometimes she makes these incredibly insightful remarks that seem to come out of nowhere, while other times she can't understand even the simplest of concepts."

Zero nodded; that definitely sounded about right. "Either way, she doesn't act anything like a six year old. By the way, what's the point of making a reploid that looks like a-"

"Don't ask me," Ciel replied, waving her hands. "I can think of a few reasons but none of them are very pleasant. I just thank my lucky stars that despite her problems, she's really a very sweet little girl. She just needs some... help, that's all." She turned her smile up at Zero. "Maybe she thinks you can help her."

The red reploid grunted. "I can't help her if I don't know what the problem is. Besides, what can someone like me possibly do for someone like her?"

"Another good question," Ciel said with a sigh, falling back in her chair. "So many questions and so few answers... so, what are you up to now?"

"I hadn't quite decided yet."

"Well, don't go too far. I'm working on a plan and I want your input once I'm finished, since... well, you're the one who's going to be executing it. And... do me a favor and humour Alouette, would you? She actively distances herself from everyone else in the base. If she's sticking close to you there must be some reason for it. When she wants you to know what's on her mind, she'll tell you."

"Alouette can do whatever she likes as far as I'm concerned, as long as she doesn't get in my way or put herself in danger - which she hasn't. She'd odd, not stupid."

Zero dismissed himself with a wave, leaving Ciel to her work. As expected, Alouette was patiently waiting for him in the hallway, holding her doll right under her chin with crossed arms. She'd

surprised him by not following him into the command room when he went in to deliver his report.

Zero stared at the little girl once again as he tried to puzzle out in his mind what it was she wanted from him. Not to be outdone, she stared back.

Well, why don't you ask her? You've got nothing to lose.

Zero shrugged and agreed with himself.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Maybe." She cocked her head sideways. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

Another cryptic answer... but then again, he hadn't really expected much. Ciel was right - when Alouette had something she wanted to say, she'd say it... whether he wanted to hear it or not.

"All right then. Let me know when you've made up your mind."

She nodded. "Okay."

Zero turned to head for the elevator, but before he went a dozen steps he heard a muffled thud behind him. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Alouette lying face down on the floor. *Strange and clumsy.* "Are you all right?"

The girl didn't budge.

"Alouette?"

... Nothing.

He was at her side in a blink, picking her up carefully in both arms. Her arms and legs had gone completely limp and her eyes were closed - she appeared to have fainted. Having no idea how to figure out what might be wrong with the girl, he took her in to see Ciel.

"What is it now-" Ciel started, then gasped when she saw Alouette in Zero's arms. "Alouette! Zero, what happened?!" She rushed over to him and pulled down her computer visor.

"I'm not sure, she just suddenly fell over."

"Hmmm... I see." She flipped her visor back up. "She's not in any immediate danger, but... could you take her to my room, please? There's a bed in the back, just set her on there. I'll be along shortly."

"All right."

"Oh, and Zero?"

He turned in the doorway. "Yes?"

"If she wakes up before I get there, don't let her leave."

Zero nodded, then headed for Ciel's room.

Zero waited in the hallway as Ciel did a thorough examination of Alouette in her room. He didn't see any point in waiting inside; he'd just get in the way.

She seemed worried, but not panicked. I wonder... did she know this was going to happen?

It was less than fifteen minutes before Ciel emerged from the room, worry etched on her face.

"So? Do you know what's wrong?"

"I already knew that," Ciel said with a wave of dismissal, "I just didn't realize exactly how serious it was."

Zero raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Would you care to explain?"

"Alouette... refuses to sleep."

"She's a reploid, she doesn't need to sleep. Why is that a problem?"

"Maybe *you* don't need to sleep, but you're a combat model. They might have built reploids differently a hundred years ago, but modern civilian class reploid bodies don't work like that. There's a number of diagnostic and maintenance subroutines that they need to execute on a regular basis in order to function properly, and a lot of them can only be executed while most of their normal operating functions are suspended. So for a few hours each day, a reploid... sleeps."

"So Alouette hasn't been executing these... maintenance tasks."

"Right. She's refused to sleep ever since I found her, which means it's been over a month since she's had a proper maintenance cycle. She's been doing some of it herself while she's still awake, but that was just delaying the inevitable. It was only a matter of time before parts of her system started malfunctioning. Just yesterday her internal environmental systems started going haywire - you probably noticed yourself."

Zero nodded. "I thought it was strange that she'd set her temperature to ten degrees."

"Well, that was just the first thing to go. I had Cerveau run some checks while she was getting that fixed and he told me that pretty soon her emergency shutdown routines were going to start taking over. It's sort of like... being so tired that you pass out."

"That's what happened in the hall?"

"Yeah, they kicked in and she went into sleep mode on the spot."

"So she's asleep now. What's the problem, then?"

"Well, in most cases, after a reploid's maintenance tasks are completed, they wake up. However, Alouette keeps interrupting them before they can get anything done and restarting her operating processes. Basically, she's forcing herself awake." Ciel shook her

head. "She can't go on like this much longer. Cerveau told me that once these shutdowns started it would only be a few days before her startup procedures get corrupted and... that's that, as they say."

Zero considered the scenario for a few moments. "You told me you're a reploid scientist. Can't you just force her to sleep?"

The look that entered Ciel's eyes told him he shouldn't have asked that question. "I can," she said quietly, turning away from his gaze to stare at the wall.

"Then why don't you?"

"Just because I *can* do something doesn't mean I *will* . Or should."

"But Alouette is going to die if she doesn't-"

"What would you have me do then?" Ciel snapped as she turned to glare at him. Zero flinched inside at the cold anger in her eyes and voice, but remained outwardly motionless. "Go inside her head *against her will* and force her to sleep until she's better? Believe me, Alouette knows what she's doing is going to kill her, but she's doing it anyway. If I start messing around inside her head, even with the best of intentions, how will she *ever* bring herself to trust me - or anyone else - ever again?" Despite the anger in her voice, Ciel looked on the verge of tears as she dropped her eyes to the floor. "I could never bring myself to... to *violate* a reploid like that, any reploid, let alone that poor, scared little girl."

After a few moments of silence, Ciel sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Sorry, I shouldn't have gotten angry at you. It's just... I've learned that sometimes what I think is best for everyone... isn't."

Zero suspected there was a story behind that statement, but he decided that now wasn't an appropriate time to ask. It wasn't his business, anyway. "That's all right. In fact, if you had said any differently, I'd start reconsidering which side of this war I should be

fighting on." Looking to change the subject, he motioned at the door. "Is she awake right now?"

Ciel nodded her head. "She woke up a few minutes ago. I told her what was happening and... she asked for you, actually."

Zero blinked in surprise. "Me? What does she want me for?"

"She wouldn't tell me, but... if I had to guess, I'd say that you make her feel... safe."

"Safe?" *She accuses me of being a killing machine, then claims I make her feel 'safe'?*

"Yes. Cerveau told me Alouette forces herself to stay awake because she's afraid something will happen to her while she's sleeping. She's seen Neo Arcadia take away a lot of people - Resistance or otherwise - and never heard from them again, and she doesn't want that to happen to her. In order for her to fall asleep... she needs to feel safe."

"And you think I make her feel safe." He attempted to keep the skepticism he was feeling out of his voice, but failed.

"First you saved me from the Golem, then you rescued Colbor from the disposal facility. That's twice you've brought back someone she's thought was lost. You're the only one here who has ever fought Neo Arcadians head-on and won. So yes, I think you make her feel safe. If she goes to sleep while you're around she doesn't have to worry about Neo Arcadia taking her away before she wakes up again."

Zero thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "Ciel, I don't think-

"Please, Zero." Ciel's voice suddenly took on desperate tone. "I know it sounds crazy, but I'm out of ideas. If Alouette thinks you can help her..." She grasped one of Zero's hands in both of hers. "I told you earlier that I'm the thread of courage the Resistance is hanging

on to. Well, the little red thread *I'm* hanging on to is lying in that bed, and she's about to snap. I *need* her, Zero. I don't know if she believes me when I say it, but I really don't know what I'd do without her. She helps keep me sane when the rest of the world is anything but.

"She may not be important to the Resistance, but she means more than anything to me. Please Zero, I'm begging you... help her."

"... All right. But don't expect any miracles. Babysitting isn't exactly my specialty."

Ciel smiled at him. "Just try your best. I'll never ask for more than that."

Zero nodded, then went inside, leaving Ciel alone in the corridor.

The inside of Ciel's room was rather spacious compared to some of the other rooms in the Resistance Base that Zero had seen. There was enough room for a desk, a dresser, two chairs, and a small table, plus the comfortable-looking bed in the corner which was currently occupied by Alouette. She was sitting upright with both hands holding up her doll by the paws at chest height, staring silently at him as he stood in the doorway.

"You wanted to see me?" Zero asked. Alouette nodded silently.

Seeing that she wasn't in the mood to elaborate any further on her own, Zero walked to the side of the bed. Her eyes never left his. "Ciel tells me you don't want to sleep."

Alouette nodded.

"Are you afraid of something?"

Another nod.

"Do you think I can protect you from it?"

She waited a moment this time, then nodded again.

Looks like Ciel's guess was right. "I've been here for two days. If you think I can protect you, why haven't you slept?"

"You can't be everywhere at once. They might get me while you're not looking." She cocked her head sideways, like she usually did when she was thinking. "You can't protect everyone all the time."

Zero decided that it would be pointless to be anything but honest with the little reploid girl - she was uncannily adept at seeing the truth of things. "... You're right, I can't," he agreed, glancing around the room for effect. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to try."

"Why?"

"Because... it feels like the right thing to do." He looked down at Alouette sternly. "Now, go to sleep. I'll stay here and guard you until you wake up." Zero walked over and sat down in one of the empty chairs.

Alouette blinked twice in surprise, then blinked twice again. "Really?"

"Yes. If I can't even keep you safe while I'm in the same room as you then we really have a problem on our hands. I'll make sure nothing bad happens to you while you're sleeping, so don't worry about waking up until you're ready."

"You'll stay here the entire time?" Alouette sounded amazed. "Even if I'm asleep for two days?"

"Even if you're asleep for two days."

"What about everyone else? Who's going to protect them?"

"You just said I can't protect everyone all the time. They'll just have to worry about themselves for a little bit. Don't worry, I'm sure Ciel can

handle things."

Alouette gave him a sideways look. "No she can't. She needs me."

"Another reason for you to hurry up and go to sleep. You're making her worry about you."

The girl was quiet for a moment after that. "How do I know you aren't going to fall asleep too?"

"You managed to stay awake for over a month. Don't you think I can last a few days?"

"I guess." She looked around the room as though she were examining it for weak points, then looked back at him. "You promise you'll stay here?"

"I promise."

After another long, scrutinizing, six-year-old stare, Alouette finally nodded. "Well, if you expect me to go to sleep, you have to do it right."

"Do what right?" Zero said, confused.

"Put me to bed. Come here."

Zero didn't budge. *What on earth is she talking about?*

"Come *on*, I can't sleep if you don't do it right."

Still confused, Zero got out of the chair and came to the side of the bed again. Alouette stared at him as he simply stood there. "Well, what now?"

"You have to tuck me in," the little girl said, motioning at the bed as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

I can't believe I'm doing this. It took all the willpower Zero had not to groan as he bent over and grabbed the sides of the bedsheets, tucking them awkwardly into the sides of the bed. He tried not to look at Alouette as he straightened again, but he could tell she was glaring at him.

"You suck at tucking people in," she said flatly, "but I guess it's okay this one time. You'll have to get more practice."

"Thanks." Zero wished a maverick would pop out of the closet; at least then he'd know what the hell he was doing.

"Now you have to turn the lights off."

"What difference do the lights make? Your eyes are going to be closed and your optics are going to be shut off."

"That's not the point. People don't sleep with the lights on. You have to turn them off."

You're not people, Zero argued silently, but did as she asked. After switching off the overheads, the only light in the room came from a small lamp on Ciel's desk that automatically switched on. "Is that one okay?"

"Yes. You need to be able to see in case anyone comes after me."

"Good. Now go to sleep." Zero went and sat back down in his chair.

"No, you're not done yet. You forgot something."

I can't forget something I didn't know in the first place... "What now?"

"You have to say, 'have a good night, Alouette.'"

Zero sighed. "Have a good night, Alouette."

" *No!* " The girl suddenly yelled, making Zero jump. A mix of anger, fear, and panic filled her voice as she sat up in the bed, pointing an

accusing finger at him. "You didn't mean it! You have to mean it when you say it, otherwise I'll have a bad night and they'll come get me and you'll break your promise and be a liar!" Everything seemed to come out in a rush.

"That won't happen. I told you, I'll be right here all night. I promised I wouldn't go anywhere, remember?"

"Then say it!"

Zero took a deep breath. "Good night, Alouette."

Alouette stared at him through the darkness, her mechanical blue eyes reflecting the light of the lamp as she stared back at him. Usually when she turned those eyes on him Zero could see a curious, thoughtful look in her eyes. This time there was nothing but fear.

"I've only ever had one night, and it was bad. It was so bad it broke my head and now I can't even remember it anymore. I want to have a good night this time. But you have to want one, too."

She's still afraid I'm going to leave her, Zero realized. I wonder what could have happened to her to make her so paranoid and afraid of abandonment. It's almost like it's hard-wired into her programming... she's never going to be able to sleep like that.

Deciding there was only one solution to this dilemma, Zero got back out of his chair. He walked over to the bed and, after gently pushing Alouette back down, tucked the covers back in. Then he looked her in the eye.

"Good night, Alouette." The gentleness in his tone surprised even himself.

The girl watched as he slowly walked back to his chair and sat down, fully alert and ready for anything as he kept his eyes trained on the

door. One look at him told her that not even all four Generals together would be able to get through that door alive.

Alouette shuffled around a little bit, then there was silence. "Good night, Zero," she said a few moments later.

He silently promised himself to make sure it was.

Zero both heard and saw the door slide open, but nobody immediately entered the room. He remained relaxed - he'd made himself look serious for Alouette's sake, but he knew there was no chance anyone from Neo Arcadia would get all the way to Ciel's room without someone raising an alarm.

"Zero?" Ciel's voice whispered from the hallway. "Are you still in here? Why are all the lights off? Oh, where's that bloody..." She started feeling around the wall for the light panel.

"Leave them off." Ciel jumped a little at the sound of Zero's voice in the darkness. "Alouette said she couldn't sleep with the lights on."

"But what difference does... nevermind." He could see her squinting to see him from the doorway. "Where are you?"

"Over here. Try to be quiet."

Ciel tiptoed over to the bed, then pulled down her scanner. Zero watched and listened as she 'hmm'd and 'haaaah'd over Alouette for a while before flipping it back up and coming to sit in the other chair beside him. "So, how's she doing?" He asked.

"Very well," Ciel replied with a smile. "Almost all of her external senses have switched off in order to allow more processing time for diagnostics. We could be playing trumpets and drums in here and she wouldn't even twitch. In human terms, she's out like a log."

"Any idea how long it's going to take for her to wake up?"

Ciel shook her head. "No, unfortunately not. In order to see any sort of progress I'd have to issue a status request to her processor. Alouette would definitely notice that and wake herself up."

"How long does this usually take?" It was almost midnight - Zero had been silently standing guard for over eleven hours.

"Normally it only takes a few hours, but in Alouette's case... I don't know. I've never seen a reploid go this long without sleeping before. In fact, I didn't think they could. She's a remarkable girl."

"In more ways than one."

Ciel looked at him sideways, and the way he refused to meet her eyes told her that something had passed between Alouette and the red reploid that he didn't care to elaborate on. "She didn't give you too hard a time, I hope."

"She... taught me a few things, that's all. So, what brings you here?"

"Well, it's midnight, and this *is* my room. But besides that, I've finished my plans for your next mission and I wanted to hear your input on them before I went to bed." She handed him the datapad she'd been holding. "Here, take a look."

Zero and Ciel talked back and forth for the next fifteen minutes or so, debating points of her plan and alternate strategies until they were both satisfied that it was solid enough to execute. Apparently there was an energy crystal factory nearby that Ciel thought would be able to provide the Resistance with all the energy they needed for quite some time, but it was so heavily guarded that a frontal assault wouldn't do much good. Zero proposed that he sneak in through the ventilation system and deactivate the security systems from the inside, a plan which Ciel readily agreed to.

"Honestly, I just didn't think of that. The less fighting you have to do the happier I'll be."

"Don't worry about that," Zero told her. "Fighting is what I do."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it," Ciel replied sadly. She tapped on the datapad a few more times before standing. "Well, since our little princess doesn't seem to be waking, I'm going back to the command room to finalize these plans. Let me know as soon as she's up, okay? I'd like to sleep in my own bed sometime tonight."

Ciel headed for the door, but before she left she stopped again. "You know, you don't have to stay here the entire time. Alouette wouldn't know the difference if you left, as long as you came back before she woke up. There are much more productive things you could be doing other than protecting one little girl from her own imagination."

"I promised her I'd stay here until she woke up, and I meant it. This mission is just as important as any other I've been on, and I plan on giving it the same level of attention as if I were sneaking into an energy crystal factory."

"And what if mavericks attack us while she's asleep?"

"Then this will be the safest room in the Base."

Ciel smiled. "Good. If you'd said any different, I'd start reconsidering which side of this war you should be fighting on."

Zero nearly cracked a smile at hearing his own words coming back at him, but instead merely grunted. "I'm glad we're on the same page, then."

"But you know, you don't have to treat everything like a mission. It's okay to help a friend just because you want to."

"Making friends during war is dangerous. They have a habit of dying." He had a nagging feeling there was a memory associated with that thought, but he couldn't seem to put his finger on it.

"Well, you look like you could use some friends right about now, and neither Alouette nor I intend on dying anytime soon." Then the young woman was gone.

"Nobody ever intends on dying..." He said quietly into the darkness, staring at the still outline of Alouette on the bed as he tried to puzzle out why exactly he was here.

Nineteen hours and eleven minutes after falling asleep, at eight thirteen in the morning, Alouette woke up. Zero watched as she sat up and looked around the room, her eyes stopping when she saw him sitting in the same chair he'd been in since she went to sleep. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by a titanic yawn, which she made no effort to cover up.

"Feeling better?" Zero asked politely.

"Yeah," she replied once she was able to speak again. She stared at him for a moment before asking, "Did you stay the whole time?"

"Yes. I promised I would, didn't I?"

"... Yeah."

She promptly pulled the covers back and hopped out of the bed, then put on an angry face as she attacked her wrinkled dress with her hands. After deciding with a huff that it looked good enough - or maybe she'd just given up altogether, he couldn't tell - she looked at Zero and asked, "Did anyone come after me?"

"Yes. Ciel came in several hours ago to get some sleep."

Alouette looked around again. "Where is she now?"

"Waiting in the command room for you to get out of her bed."

Alouette scowled. "She probably fell asleep in her chair again. She's going to be all cranky if she spends all night in that chair and wakes up with a backache."

"You're right. What would Ciel do without you to look after her?"

"Turn into a cranky old lady." The girl heaved an exasperated sigh. "I'll go get her."

Zero watched as Alouette stormed out of the room, then gave a sigh of his own. *I wouldn't want to be in Ciel's shoes right about now.* He stood and went to leave, but just as he approached the door it opened again, revealing a very timid-looking Alouette.

"Alouette? What-"

He cut off in surprise as the girl wrapped her tiny arms around his waist and buried her face in his abdomen, giving him the first hug he'd ever received in who knew how many centuries.

"Thank you," she said quietly as she squeezed him around the middle. "I had a good night."

Zero was speechless. He'd never been hugged by a little girl before.

"Uh... you're welcome?" He finally managed to splutter out, much to Alouette's amusement. The girl giggled and smiled up at him, then released her hold on him and took off down the hallway towards the command room.

Zero sighed again. *What a strange girl.*

The factory infiltration mission went off without a hitch. By eight o'clock that night Zero had secured the Resistance Base a steady supply of energy crystals, relieving much of the tension and worry that pervaded the Base atmosphere. After he'd finished wiping up the remaining Neo Arcadian forces a team of Resistance soldiers

began transporting the precious cargo back to the Base while a small squad set up camp inside the factory, at Ciel's orders. They were supposedly 'protecting' the factory, but in reality their orders were to send word at the first sight of Neo Arcadians so Zero could transport out there and deal with the situation.

With the morale of the soldiers at an all-time high, Zero took some time to have another look around the base. He was hoping to see people with a slightly more optimistic look to them than he had on his first tour, and was happy to find that was indeed the case. Before he had been greeted by sullen stares and fearful looks everywhere he went, but now people smiled and waved at him as he walked by. Several soldiers even asked to shake the hand of the reploid who'd given them a fighting chance.

This feels... familiar, Zero thought to himself as he walked down the corridors. It feels like I've done this all before... damn, why can't I remember? Is this who I was? Was Zero the kind of reploid who gives hope to people like this?

It doesn't matter, he decided firmly. Whether I'm Zero or not, this feels like the right thing to do. If this 'Zero' person happens to agree with me, then I don't think he'd mind if I steal his name for a little while. After all, if I'm not Zero, then who am I?

That strange and disturbing line of thought was interrupted when he turned a corner and saw Alouette hustling towards him. As soon as she caught sight of him she skidded to a halt, scowling at him fiercely. "There you are. I was looking for you."

Zero raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yes. Don't you know what time it is?"

"Ten fifty-seven."

"Right. We've got three minutes or you're going to be late." She walked up to him and grabbed one of his hands, tugging him back in

the direction she'd come.

"Late for what?" He had no idea what Alouette was going on about this time.

"Come *on!* " She said, pulling harder.

Seeing as he didn't really have anything else to do at the moment, Zero allowed Alouette to drag him off through the base. The pair passed by several other soldiers on the way, who all smiled and waved at the sight of their new hero being lead by the hand through the corridors by a six-year-old girl. Zero ignored most of them, but Alouette greeted each one by name as she went by.

"Do you know the names of everyone in the base?" Zero asked after she greeted the twelfth pair of soldiers they passed.

"I do now."

Eventually Alouette came to a stop in a familiar location. "Isn't this Ciel's room?"

"It was. Now it's my room too. Come *on*, you're late."

She finally let go of his hand as they stepped into the room. The only addition to the furnishings was a small bed that had been placed in the corner opposite Ciel's.

She certainly does travel light... wait a minute. Does she expect me to...?

While Zero had been busy looking around the room, Alouette had climbed into her bed and crawled under the covers. He met her eyes as she looked at him with an exasperated look on her face.

"What are you just standing there for? It's *bedtime* ."

The notion struck him as so utterly ridiculous that Zero decided his life would be easier if he just went along with it. He reached over and

switched off the lights, then went over and tucked Alouette in, trying to do a better job than last time. "How's that?" He said as he straightened back up.

"You did it backward. You're supposed to turn the lights off second. But that's okay. Just make sure you remember next time."

Zero sighed; there was just no pleasing some people. "Alouette, you know I can't stay in your room all night, every night, right?"

"Ciel said you weren't going anywhere tonight. I asked."

"Not tonight, no, but sometimes."

Alouette's shiny blue eyes studied him in the dark for a while before she answered. "Okay. But if you're going to leave the base you have to come tell me first. Even if I'm already asleep."

"All right, that sounds fair. But like you said, I'm not going anywhere tonight, so I'll see you in the morning." He turned and walked out the door, saying over his shoulder, "Good night, Alouette."

"Good night Zero."

As soon as he was out in the hallway Zero noticed that Ciel was standing off to the side of the door. One arm was wrapped around her stomach while the other covered her mouth as she tried her hardest not to giggle out loud. Zero stared at her for a few moments as the door slid shut behind him. "What?"

Ciel took a deep breath to calm herself, but the enormous smile refused to leave her face. "Nothing," she replied innocently. "I was just trying not to spoil the... ahem. Moment." She seemed barely able to contain herself.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Because..." She started giggling again. "That was absolutely adorable."

Ciel brushed past him and into her room before Zero had time to pick his jaw up off the ground, whispering a teasing "Good night, Zero" just before the door slid shut again. After a few moments of trying to decipher the logic of the human female mind, Zero shook his head in defeat and continued on his way down the corridor.

"... Whatever."

Author's Note (again)

D'awwwwww. I know it's kind of self-serving to say so, but reading that last part always makes me smile. What can I say, I love Alouette. So adorable! Always wanted to write more Alouette. Ciel's pretty fun too. Gogo spunky teenage genius!

For any Return to Zero readers out there, this was the oneshot I mentioned that ties into part 21, although the whole connection won't be made clear until this is finished (whenever that is). Meanwhile, expect an update to RtZ somewhere around Christmas. If you liked this and have no idea what Return to Zero is, feel free to take a look at my profile. :)

Well, I hope you enjoyed reading. Feel free to leave a thought or two on your way out the door.