



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— VR ZONE —**

**M**adison reeled back, shielding her eyes from the glaring neon displays. A maddening assault of noise followed, no less invasive.

*“Winner!”*

*“Game over!”*

*“Play again!”*

Boisterous hollow voices struck out from unseen speakers, all in sporadic, rapid chants. The disordered clamor of beeps, grunts, gunshots, and melodic synths were enough for Madison to consider turning around and leaving the chaotic arcade behind.

A clientele ranging from late teens to early thirties were spread throughout, all focused on the latest virtual reality gaming stations. Most wore VR helmets and skintight gloves, while some stood at much older-looking game cabinets.

*That Rookie*, Madison thought, her fists tightening, *of all the places she could've picked to meet, she ends up choosing this one!* She perked up, her mind racing at the abrupt realization that the Rookie's desire to meet at VR Zone may have had an ominous purpose.

*Could the Rookie have stumbled onto some illegal activity going on here? If a place like Fantasy Funland could secretly run a human trafficking ring, anything's possible...*

“Madison,” an exuberant voice shouted, loud enough to be heard among the din, “you've made it!”

Her train of thought derailed, Madison turned to the dark-haired girl. “So what's the deal, Rookie? Found any leads?”

“Leads?” Reena scratched her head, visibly confused. She was dressed in casual clothing, a white tank top and blue miniskirt.

“Yeah, *leads*—you know, involving a *case*,” Madison barked. “Why *else* would you tell me to meet you here on my day off? What'd you find? Anyone dealing Afterlife on the premises? Or maybe this place's a front for black market firearms? What is it?”

“B-but that's not why I invited you here,” Reena stammered, eyes wide.

“Then why?”

“So we could play some games,” Reena replied, with an innocent tilt of the head. “Isn't that the reason people go to arcades?”

“Huh?” Madison blurted out, fingers grasping at her white hair in frustration. “Are you serious?!”

“I figured you knew,” Reena said with a frown, gesturing to Madison's black tank top and denim shorts, “that's why you wore your regular street clothes, right?”

“Just great!” Madison swung her hands down, slapping her legs. “My day off and you waste my time in *this* madhouse! Why would you *ever* think I'd want to go to an arcade?”

“Oh no, VR Zone isn't just *any* arcade, Madison—it's the most talked about one in Pallad City!”

“I'm out of here,” Madison sighed, turning around.

“Wait,” Reena pleaded, rapidly pointing to various sections of the arcade, “this place has everything from vintage games to brand new VR simulators! I was thinking we could try out the Reality Revolution system—it'll be just like training!”

Madison paused before reaching for the exit. “You think some stupid video game's the same as training? If you want to train so badly, go use the department's combat simulator. That has VR too.”

“But this is so much better,” Reena protested with a childlike whimper. “I'll even pay for the session! Come on, only ten minutes. If you hate it so much after that, you can leave. *Please!* You're already here anyway, right?”

“Fine!” Madison bit her lip and took in a deep breath. “Ten minutes, but that's it! And for doing this, I want *you* training in the firing range—*every day*—for the next week! Got it?”

“Got it!” Reena offered a playful salute. “I'll show up to work an hour early each day for practice!”

Madison rolled her eyes, motioning for Reena to lead the way. “Well, go on—show me where this dumb game is. Let's get this over with.”

\*\*\*

Madison finished putting on her wired gloves, then grabbed a helmet from the display stand in front of her.

“Those are haptic gloves, so it'll feel like you're *really* holding weapons in the game,” Reena explained, while tugging at the cuff of her own glove. Once certain it was on tight, she stepped next to Madison.

“Can we just get started?”

“Oh, one more thing,” Reena began, tapping her foot on the circular base they stood on, “this platform functions with our VR helmets, so don't step off it.”

“Okay, okay, enough with the details!”

Madison's attention shifted to the arcade's rowdy occupants. Most were preoccupied with various gaming stations, sporting expressions of excitement and awe as they let out victorious cheers or exaggerated cries of defeat. Even those playing the vintage games seemed enamored with the archaic button layouts and rigid knobs. It was impossible to argue against VR Zone's popularity—the place was growing more crowded by the minute.

Madison sighed. “It's a menagerie in here.”

“You say something?” Reena asked, taking a helmet into her gloved hands.

Without reply, Madison put her own helmet on. Her vision went dark as the cumbersome gear covered the top half of her head, fully shielding both eyes and ears.

“Hey, wait for me, let's do it at the same time!”

“Ugh,” Madison groaned. The helmet was tight and not particularly comfortable. “Why's everything black? Aren't we supposed to *see* something?”

“There, got mine on,” Reena declared. “Give it one sec and it should start up.”

“The hell?” A near blinding flash of light caused Madison to wince. The darkness was gone. In its place morphed corroded concrete walls, broken-down machinery, and rusted steel. It took her a moment to recognize the new setting, but it appeared to be an old factory, complete with a labyrinth of industrial equipment, conveyor belts, and laser cutters. Sparks flared to life as lasers sliced through metal, the grinding of machinery echoed across the building, and small unmanned drones flew overhead—leaking oil down onto the grimy linoleum floor.

“I know this place!” Reena shouted with glee.

Madison turned to the Rookie, realizing that the girl was no longer dressed in her casual attire, but outfitted in some sort of skintight combat suit. Various firearms were strapped to her body. Madison looked down, seeing that she too had been equipped with similar gear. An assault rifle, unlike any she had seen before, was slung over her shoulder. Her fingers brushed against the sheathed combat knife attached to her belt. Thanks to the haptic gloves, the physical sensation of touching the weapon was as *real* as she could imagine. Like the Rookie, she also had a sidearm, several grenades, and numerous pouches affixed to her belt and legs.

“This is the factory level from *Mad Mech 5: Digital Dystopia!*” Reena announced with a jubilant hop. “I loved that game! I set the levels on random—so we never know which KlonaCom game it puts us in.”

“KlonaCom?”

“Don't tell me you've never heard of them? They're best game developer ever!”

“Whatever.” Madison shrugged. “So what do we do, just stand here?”

“N-no,” Reena replied, voice wavering. She spun around, fumbling with her assault rifle. “We have to shoot them—”

“Shoot...*who?*” Madison asked, turning.

A mechanized army of combat androids were gathering within the factory. Each were devoid of clothing, leaving their gray metal bodies fully exposed. Their faces were devoid of human features—no mouths, noses, or ears were visible—except for glowing circular eyes.

Madison made a quick head count, estimating that there were around thirty androids in total. None appeared to be armed with weapons—not any that could be *seen*, at least. She watched as they clattered and shifted forward. She had observed combat androids in the real world before—ones that easily mimicked human movement. These models were different. They took jerky, convulsive steps, and shambled along without much sense of physical control. Even simple motions, like raising an arm, appeared disjointed, giving their actions a static, eerie quality.

“Whoa, those are skin-stalker models—designed to hunt down human remnants,” Reena gasped. “They really threw us into the deep end, didn't they? Those androids were created by Dr. Diabolus during the Third Great Cyber War, after the neo-mutant purge, and just before the orbital strike that decimated most of...”

“Cyber war?” Madison spat. “Neo-mutant purge? What are you even *talking* about?”

“It all happened in *Mad Mech 3: No Tears for Tomorrow.*”

“Sheesh,” Madison yawned. “All right, we just need to blow these things away and then we're done, right?”

“Y-yes, but—”

“Fine. They don't look that tough.” Madison took hold of her assault rifle. A virtual overlay blinked to life, flashing text near the bottom of her field of vision.

### *Hyper Assault Rifle NR-39*

*So, that's what this weapon's called?* She looked over the NR-39, determining that it had no real-world equivalent—it was an assault rifle *strictly* designed just for the game. It felt weightless in her grip, a sensation Madison didn't care for. After years of handling firearms she was used to a weapon's

*feel*. She had been so familiar with her Halvok-99 that she could tell how many bullets were in the magazine by its weight alone. But this NR-39 felt...*unnatural*.

"Here they come!" Reena yelled, aiming her assault rifle, a slightly different model from Madison's.

The lumbering mob of androids advanced. Every new step brought forth the sound of clanking metal. Dozens of soft *clicks* and whirring *tics* emanated from the lumbering mass of mechanical limbs.

Madison took aim and fired a few three-round bursts. A salvo of bullets tore through the first line of mechanical creatures. Her aim was perfect, every hit a headshot. As expected, there had been no recoil. That was something else she didn't appreciate. She was used to taking weapon's 'kick' into consideration.

The six androids clattered to the ground, deactivated. The others continued their advance, simply stepping atop their fallen companions.

From the corner of her eye, Madison watched Reena fire her weapon. The bullets struck their targets, but with far less precision than Madison had achieved. Instead of headshots, the Rookie had hit the robots legs. Still, two more androids fell.

"Yay, look at that!" Reena cheered.

Madison half expected the downed androids to continue crawling, but the Rookie's leg shots appeared to be enough to take them out of the fight. *Big difference from reality. No way you'd put a combat android out of commission with a leg shot...*

Reena perked up. "You should make sure you—"

Madison fired her NR-39 again, cutting the Rookie off. "Just focus on your aim. Don't worry about me."

"Yeah, but—"

"You're a *better* shot in this game than you are in real life," Madison continued, squeezing off a few more rounds. "At least you managed to *hit* them. *Barely*."

"Heh," Reena chuckled. "Too bad we can't bring these guns back into the real world, huh?"

Eight more androids dropped and, for the first time, Madison noticed numbers flickering onto a new virtual display screen—one locked to the top of her field of vision. It was her score.

*Figures*, Madison thought, *this is a video game, after all...*

"Be careful, Madison, they'll start getting more aggressive soon." Reena felled two more androids, again taking them out at the legs. "The first ones are always the easiest."

Madison sighed. "Aim higher, Rookie—and you *might* hit something other than their legs!"

"I'm not—" Reena began to protest, but stopped mid-sentence as an android stretched out its arm, fingers spread. "Madison, look out!"

The android's five mechanized fingers detached from its hand. They rocketed across the factory, each digit propelled by a miniature thruster, spewing trails of black smoke in their wake.

"Avoid those fingers!" Reena yelled.

"What the—?!" Madison leapt for cover, landing with her back against a thick steel beam. She watched as Reena dropped to her stomach. The fingers shot over her and continued on their path until colliding into a piece of machinery. Five explosions tore the machine to pieces, sending scraps of metal crashing onto the ground.

Reena rolled on the floor, narrowly evading a rain of screws, bolts, and springs.

"So, they *do* have weapons," Madison hissed. She jumped up, her NR-39 aimed towards the advancing androids. She switched the weapon to full-auto and dispatched another four robots, including the one equipped with rocket fingers.

Reena climbed to her feet, firing. This time, instead of hitting just the android's legs, a few stray bullets struck arms and shoulders.

"Getting a little better," Madison scoffed. "At this rate, maybe you'll end up getting *one* headshot."

Reena shook her head. "Well, that's not exactly—"

“Where's the extra mags for this thing?” Madison barked as her NR-39 clicked empty. She seized the spent magazine, removing it from the bottom of her assault rifle and tossing it aside.

“You should have a few more on you, check the pouches!”

Reaching into a pouch attached to her belt, Madison pulled out a spare magazine and slapped it into the NR-39.

The remaining androids—about ten left, by Madison's count—all held their arms forward. With a series of sharp *clicks*, their hands detached, sending the appendages clattering to the floor. They continued their approach, arms still pointed forward.

Madison took a step back, her eyes darting to the androids' wrist stumps, each emitting a pulsating, scarlet glow.

“Watch it!” Reena shouted. “They're about to fire!”

Beams of crimson energy streaked out from the stumps, blazing forward with a radiant array of light.

Madison and Reena dashed for cover, evading the incoming bombardment. Several blasts struck the surrounding machinery, instantly transforming the metal surface into searing liquid. Molten steel dripped to the floor.

“Did you know they could do that?” Madison asked.

Reena nodded. “But they'll need to recharge before they can do it again.”

“We'll have to take them *all* out before they do! I'll handle the five on the right, you take the others on the left.”

“Gotcha!”

Madison rushed at the androids, firing her NR-39 as she drew closer. A volley of bullets struck one android, tearing it apart at the torso. Madison leapt sideways, rolling to the floor as an android aimed its wrist cannons.

*Spraazzk!* An electric sizzle pierced the air and a scarlet energy beam lashed outwards.

*Damn thing recharged quicker than I thought*, Madison cursed to herself, narrowly evading the blast. She shuffled to her feet, launched herself towards the android, and stuck the rifle barrel under its chin. She snapped the trigger. A short burst of gunfire blasted the android's skull into mechanical fragments.

Madison spun around, slamming the butt of her NR-39 into the forehead of another nearby android. The front of the robot's skull caved in, its glowing eyes blinking out and shattering into tiny shards. Before the skin-stalker could fall, Madison ducked beneath an incoming streak of energy. Her next attacker was so close, Madison didn't even bother taking aim—she jerked her NR-39 upwards, spraying a manic stream of bullets into the mechanized adversary.

Smoke ascended from a dozen newly made holes in the skin-stalker's body. For a moment it stood still, then teetered to one side, then to the other. Finally, it collapsed—landing at Madison's feet.

Reena emptied her assault rifle. Five androids crumpled to the floor, all targeted in the arms and legs.

The sole remaining android thrust both arms forward. The sparkling glow of its wrist cannons preparing to fire.

Madison wasn't sure how many bullets she had left, but figured the NR-39's magazine was close to empty. She tossed the assault rifle aside, unleashed her sidearm from its holster and planted four rounds into the android's head at point-blank range. Sparks flared, oil spat, and circuitry scattered into the air. The android fell onto its back, decapitated.

The points continued racking up on Madison's virtual display.

“We did it!” Reena said, offering a playful 'thumbs up'.

“So, we done then?” Madison asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Level one,” a mechanical voice boomed through the factory, “complete! Level two, begin!”

“Level two?” Madison groaned. “How many levels are we gonna have to play?”

Reena fumbled to get a fresh magazine into her assault rifle. “The game mode I picked only has two levels...but I think we might've made it to the second level a little *too* fast.”

“Isn't that a *good* thing?”

“Yes...and *no*. We received a massive time bonus, so we have great scores! But...the game's going to *up* the difficulty because it'll think we're *really* skilled. Whichever randomized level they give us, it'll be *super* tough!”

Light burst forth and the factory was gone.

“Now *where* are we going?” Madison asked as their surroundings morphed.

The light faded and they were no longer in a building. Instead, they were standing on a barren, frozen tundra that stretched on for as far as the eye could see. Moonlight bathed the snow-covered plain in an ethereal blue luminance. Faint outlines of white mountain peaks were just a blur in the remote distance.

“Yikes...” Reena muttered. “I think this level's the...*no way, they wouldn't...*”

“Yeah?” Madison pressed. “Spit it out.”

Reena turned, locking eyes with an approaching figure, female in appearance. “It's her—Malva, the Cybernetic Queen!”

Madison scratched her head. “*Who?*”

Malva stopped amid the gentle snowfall, standing motionless as if she were a porcelain statue. Her entire body was covered from head to toe in glistening chrome which shimmered and gleamed beneath the pale moonlight. Her face was elegant, but possessed an unsettling forlorn expression, incapable of betraying any trace of compassion. Her eyes were aglow—two white voids that peered into absolute nothingness. Her hair was draped past her shoulders, twisting and turning like living, wired tendrils.

“So, *now* what do we have to do?” Madison asked. “Just shoot her?”

Reena shook her head, panicked. “No, this is the final boss from *Femme Fighter: Target Victory*. It was the *only* VR shooter in the *Femme Fighter* series—which, up to that point, had been a traditional fighting game franchise! But the last level of *Target Victory* was controversial, since you *couldn't* use your weapons. The developers brought the game full-circle by having the player face the boss in hand-to-hand combat!”

“I don't really care about all that,” Madison said, slouching her shoulders. “So, I *can't* just shoot her?”

“No! But if I remember right, Malva's weak spot was the back of her neck. There *should* be a miniature power unit there—that's where she was vulnerable in the game. At least, that was in *Target Victory*. They released another game a year later titled *Malva's Revenge*, where that attack wouldn't work, but that title's considered non-canon by *Femme Fighter's* legendary creator, Amijo—”

“Ugh! *Focus!*”

“R-right.”

“Eh, screw it,” Madison sighed.

“Wait—!”

Madison lifted her sidearm and fired. The bullet struck Malva between the eyes, ricocheting off her chrome skin. The projectile deflected back at Madison, striking her in the shoulder. She winced, expecting to feel pain—for an instant *forgetting* that it was a VR game. Instead of any physical sensation, Madison's vision turned red. A health gauge blinked into existence, signifying that twenty percent of her 'life' had been lost.

“Seriously?” Madison snapped. “What a load of—!”

“Madison, look out, she's—”

It was too late. Malva had propelled herself forward at deadly speed. The Cybernetic Queen's hand plunged *through* Madison's stomach. Instead of blood, red pixels drifted into the air near the point of impact.

“Oh, no!” Reena cried. “Your health bar!”

Madison's eyes widened, again expecting to feel pain—but none came. Instead, her vision and virtual display turned red, just as Malva retracted her hand. A display blinked, her health bar rapidly shrinking. Within a fraction of a second, the gauge had dwindled to nearly nothing, stopping just short of disappearing altogether. *Three percent remained.*

Reena held onto her assault rifle by the barrel and charged at Malva from behind. She swung the weapon, smashing it with all of her strength against the back of the Cybernetic Queen's head. The rifle splintered into pieces.

With one swift move, Malva turned—thrusting her hand out, fingers extended, and slashed across Reena's stomach. Red pixels spurted out from the diagonal gash across Reena's body.

“Awww!” Reena staggered back. “I only have ten percent health left! We'll never beat her now!”

“Wanna bet!” Madison yelled, driving the blade of her combat knife into the back of Malva's neck—*piercing* her power unit. Madison pushed the knife in deeper until the hilt tapped against Malva's chrome skin. “Shouldn't have taken your eyes off me!”

Malva dropped to her knees, the blade's tip sticking out from the front of her throat, slick with black fluid. She plopped down into the snow, her body digitizing out of existence.

“You did it, Madison!” Reena shouted.

“Eh, she wasn't so tough,” Madison shrugged with a half smile. “I could've kept going.”

“Oh?” Reena couldn't help but grin. “Sounds like *someone* might've enjoyed playing a VR game after all!”

“N-no!” Madison stammered, feeling her cheeks flush. “I-I just wanted to get this over with, that's it!”

“If you say so,” Reena laughed.

A triumphant musical chime blared out.

### *TOTAL VICTORY!*

The words blinked in front of Madison's eyes, quickly replaced by her score:

*4,202,292*

She removed the VR helmet, causing the world around her to go dark for a split second. With the helmet lifted, the familiar environs of the arcade returned.

“That was so much fun,” Reena said, taking off her helmet. “We should, *aaah—!*”

Madison was caught off guard by Reena's sudden wail, but even more surprised by the crowd that had gathered around them. Dozens of voices came at her all at once.

“Whoa, they hit the new high score!”

“Did you see that? They beat Malva in less than three minutes!”

“They cleared the android level that fast...?”

“What are they, professional players or something?”

“Maybe they're training for a tournament!”

Dumbfounded, Reena turned to Madison. “Whoa, what's going on?”

“Amazing work,” a man with dark sunglasses shouted. He worked his way through the mass of onlookers.

Madison noticed the man wore a vest with the arcade's name sewn on the front. “What's the deal with this crowd?”

“I'm the manager of VR Zone, and your gameplay was simply *incredible*—some of the best I've ever seen,” the man replied, gesturing to a large monitor near the front of the arcade. “I hope you don't mind, we featured your gameplay on our main screen.”

“That's awesome,” Reena squealed.

"If it's okay with the both of you, I'd *love* to post it on the Net," the man continued. "Gamers would be thrilled to see professional players like you two in action!"

"Professional players?" Madison repeated, confused.

"B-but this was just for fun..." Reena admitted.

"No need to be so modest, it's obvious you're seasoned vets at this!" The manager took an eager step in Reena's direction. "And *you*—your score was the highest I've seen."

"Highest?!" Madison blurted out. "You must be getting your wires crossed. I had a score over four million!"

"True," the manager confirmed, "but your friend here had over *five* million..."

"How?!" Madison tossed her helmet aside, giving the Rookie an icy glare. "You just shot all those androids in the arms and legs—how the hell did *you* beat me?"

Reena offered a weak smile. "I-I kept trying to tell you...we were playing in *non-lethal* mode."

"What? When did you tell me *that*?"

"I was trying, but you kept interrupting me," Reena explained. "I figured you'd be more into playing if we used the game as a training simulator. I set it so that we didn't *purposely* have to kill anything. It's an officer's duty to protect life, right?"

"You idiot!" Madison leaned in towards the Rookie. "Those were *killer* machines! You don't *arrest* killer machines! You destroy them! I even killed that stupid final boss!"

"Eek!" Reena recoiled back. "I tried to tell you, I swear!"

Madison pointed an accusing finger at the girl. "You cheated!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"No way!"

"Ugh!" Madison through her hands into the air. "Forget it. This is why I *hate* video games!"

"Aww," Reena moaned, "you had fun—I could tell."

"Whatever—I *played* your goofy little game," Madison relented. "Now I'm going home."

The manager watched as the white-haired woman walked off the platform, pushing her way through the crowd. "Wow, now that's a *real* player! She achieved a score most players only dream of and *still* isn't satisfied. Imagine having such serious dedication?"

"Heh, heh," Reena nervously laughed. "Y-yeah, that's Madison, all right..."

The manager's eyes gleamed, his attention returning to Reena. "What are your player names? I'll post them when I upload the video!"

"Uh," Reena hesitated, "Sailor Justice for me and, for my friend..."

"Yes?"

"You can call her the Ice Queen!"

\*\*\*

VR Zone came to life in a sparkling burst of neon and noise. The manager unlocked the front door—the arcade was now open for business. He didn't expect anyone to enter for at least another hour. People would typically start flooding in during mid-afternoon, after school was out. Regardless, he enjoyed that first hour of peace. It allowed him time to check the games and prepare for the impending bedlam.

"Hey, *you*!"

The manager tensed, turning as someone kicked open the door and rushed into the arcade with a sense of purpose he'd rarely seen. "Y-yes...?"

The white-haired woman slammed her hand against the front counter. "That game I was playing yesterday—I wanna rent time on it for the next hour!"

"W-wait a minute," the manager stuttered, "I remember you! You had the second highest score on



—”

“Second highest, my ass! No way I'm letting some *rookie* beat me. I'm topping that score of hers—  
*today!*”

\_end