

THE LAST ONE

What a waste.

BY IULIA GEORGESCU

I crash-land amid a cloud of shattered glass. The deserted pedestrian tunnel that runs beneath the streets of Kensington stretches ahead of me. A second later, I am running fast into the walkway's murky depths, thanking science for my light exoskeleton and my employer for paying for it. How did people manage to do their jobs without enhancement prosthetics? The question flits through my mind as I rush past an array of adverts that would have been invisible in the darkness, but for my smart contact lenses. I catch a glimpse of the poster promoting *Extinct! Objects That Are No More*, the new exhibition at the Science Museum. The very place where I have just acquired the item ordered by my employer.

I check my sensors without slowing my pace. No pursuit. Not yet. I tighten my grip on the box in my arms. It had been a risky job. The security at the museum was tight. Very tight. And for what? A gift for his lovely granddaughter, he says. Such a valuable resource wasted as a toy for a five-year-old! Like having a water fight in the desert. I despise my filthy rich employer and his eccentric job requests, but then, he did pay for all of my enhancements. *And* he got me out of jail. Twice.

I reach the end of the tunnel and stop abruptly. Sensor check. There's some movement at the far end, where I came through the roof. No time to waste. With one hand, I lift a heavy manhole cover and slide into the gap, pulling the lid closed behind me. Hastily, I climb down the ladder, hurrying to the disused tunnels that link to the London Underground system. As I hit the ground, I head for one of the larger passageways and start running again.

Even with all the muscular implants, I am getting tired. No time to stop. It's been a hell of a night. I've been lucky to make it this far. Who would think that a museum would have so many layers of security? Cameras, sensors, drones, guards in the finest exoskeletons. The

irony, of course, is that the objects on display, now worth risking your skin for, were once ubiquitous. The most common things in the world. Even I remember seeing much of that stuff when I was a kid. But after decades of overconsumption and a planet stripped of



resources, stuff that once was worthless is now worth a fortune.

I recheck my sensors. Five pursuers. *Damn.* Perhaps others that are shielded? Should I risk a deeper scan? Better to try to outrun them. If I make it to the meeting point, I might even survive the night. Lucky the box is light.

Run.

Back at the exhibition I think I saw a plastic bottle like my mum used to have. She said that all drinks came in such containers and that cities overflowed with plastic garbage. Hard to imagine that anyone would throw away such valuable material. But that was in the age of waste, before people figured out how badly they needed such resources for the 3D printing industry.

My sensors tell me that the pursuers are closing in. They've brought three drones. I can't outrun those. Desperately, I scan the map on my retinal display. I switch direction and enter another tunnel. Three minutes till the District line train reaches this section. Perhaps I can make it. My muscles

are screaming, my vision is getting blurred, but I keep moving.

Part of my mind keeps going back to the exhibition. We made so many wrong choices, wasted so many opportunities, exhausted our resources, lost so much. Just like me and my life. Somehow I never had the strength to do the right things.

I hear the Tube train long before the lights break into the tunnel. A few tens of seconds till it reaches me. I stop and face the oncoming lights. *Focus.* Counting. Three. Two. One. Just before the train hits me, I use my last drops of energy to jump high.

I land on the roof of a carriage. The exoskeleton on my legs cracks badly. I cling to the train with one hand and grip the box with the other. I see the numbers on my retinal display. One minute forty-five seconds to the next stop.

I jump to the platform before the train stops. The badly damaged exoskeleton somehow manages to keep my legs from breaking. Praise the maker. I start running, slower now. I don't even need the sensors to feel my pursuers closing in. I struggle up the stairs and see the faint light of

morning outside. I've made it!

But there's no rescue waiting for me as I emerge into the dawn's rays. Drones close in from behind. Ahead are four armed cops and a little bald man with old-fashioned glasses, whom my retinal display identifies as the museum curator. I spot a different style of drone descending slowly towards me. My bastard employer is abandoning me, but has sent his toy to recover his prize. Fine. Perhaps it's time to quit this job anyway. I gather my little remaining strength to throw the box to the approaching drone.

"Noooo! Don't shoot you idiots!"

I hear the little man screaming and the guns firing. The box shatters and I fall on the cold, wet pavement. Blood tastes warm in my mouth as I hold out my arm. The red helium balloon rises gracefully into the morning sky. ■

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