

Walking along the shoreline quickly slowed down, as the ground shifted from stable gravel to larger stones. As we walked, we were forced to move carefully, lest the rocks shift under our feet and cause one of us to roll an ankle, or worse, land on our packs filled with highly flammable blaze.

After about twenty minutes of struggling to walk on the loose stones, we gave up and climbed further from the shoreline, eventually walking through the thin underbrush that surrounded most of the lake. It wasn't fast by any means, but it was better than almost falling every five feet. We were frequently forced to circumnavigate thick clumps of bramble or other thicket, slowing us down significantly. Thankfully, the distance itself wasn't that far.

Eventually, as we walked, we reached a swampy area, which meant we had finally reached the outskirts of the sawtooth patrol. According to Toando, the pair of dangerous, feline-like machines would patrol the swamps during the morning and afternoon, before moving further around later in the day. Periodically, they alternated to other areas further away from the lake, so there was a chance they wouldn't be in the area. Considering it was just about noon, the dangerous zoomorphs should be somewhere...

"Over there," Carlos said, his head barely above the thick reeds and grass that filled the slightly soggy swamp. "I can see one of them..."

"The other is over there," Joseph pointed, looking in a different direction.

Pulling out my monocular, I slowly peeked above the reeds, immediately spotting both of our potential targets. They were walking along a slowly rising hill on the other side of the swamp. As I watched, they split up, moving to cover more of the swamp.

"Okay, we need higher ground," I said, crouching low under the cover of the surrounding plant life. "We have a few more hours of them walking around here, and I need to see what sort of land we are working with."

Both of my soldiers nodded, and we stepped away from the swampy area, walking around the outskirts until we reached one of the hills that surrounded it. We quickly climbed up, and not a moment too soon, as not long after we had found a new place to hide, one of them walked through a patch of reeds just a few feet from where we had been hiding.

With the slightly higher vantage point, I was able to see the layout of the swamp, as well as the surrounding area, much more clearly. The swamp itself varied from thick mud, raised sandbars, patches of reeds, and pools of stagnant water. Save for a little area along the lake, it was almost completely framed by raised hills, though they were broken up in several spots, some of which led out of the swampy area. Altogether, it was a significant amount of space, a little more than two football fields, clumped together against the lake.

One of the breaks in the ring of hills was marked by a pole set into the ground. At first, I mistook it for an old tree, but after a closer look, I realized it had no root base and was covered in frayed rope and wire. The cordage was strung in a way that would have once been pleasing

to the eye, but was now a moldy, dirt-soaked ward against those dumb or unlucky enough to stumble into the area.

As we watched, the first sawtooth was carefully making its way around along the furthest line of hills from us, while the other pushed directly through the swamp, walking along a dry area that we couldn't have seen from the ground. There were several dozen paths like that through the soggy, muddy, wet patches of the swamp, though maybe half of them were wide enough for the sawtooths to walk.

We observed them for a while, watching as they stalked through the reeds. As we did, we noticed several other bits of man-made remnants. There were another few poles, what looked like the tip for a canoe, and even a small burned-out hut on top of the hill opposite ours. It looked like there was once a significant human presence here, but they had long since left. Despite that, the sawtooths still stalked the area, almost like they were hunting through the reeds for humans that had long since died or abandoned the area.

After about twenty minutes of observing, it was finally time to come up with a plan.

"Sir, I think our best bet is to put our IED there," Joseph said, pointing across the swamp to the gap in the hills where the worn pole was. "Then wait for the robots to be far enough apart that we can get the attention of one without the other."

"We could mine two of those gaps, since they will likely leave through one of them," I pointed out. "We don't have to risk either of you."

"There is no way to predict that they will go through either of the two we pick," Carlos responded, Joseph nodding his head in agreement. "We can set both of them up in one spot and get two chances at one robot."

I chewed my lip, scanning the area, watching the robots stalk around. They moved deceptively slow while not alert, but I knew that once they caught onto our proverbial scent, they would suddenly become a lot faster. Still, it was hard not to be intimidated by the loud kachunk sound they made as they moved.

"Sir, I'm glad that you're so hesitant to throw us into the fire," Joseph started. "But we are soldiers. Danger is what we do. You cannot shield us from every source of it. Sometimes we will need to put our lives at risk."

"But I can make sure that what danger you are put in is worth it," I shot back. "I know that there are a lot of dangerous things in our future. But I refuse to spend your lives like cheap change."

"Sir. Connor. If we thought you were spending our lives cheaply, we would say so," Carlos responded. "We may have to ultimately follow your orders, but you haven't pushed nearly hard enough to constitute something we can't refuse. We *would* let you know."

I held back my retort, looking between the two men, chewing on their words. Eventually, after about a minute of internal fighting, I let a growling sigh.

"Fuck. Fine, we will set up a trap and one of you will lead them through it," I finally said, both of them nodding. "Let's move closer to the gap and get into position. When we get the chance, we will set up the IEDs. Then we wait again for the opportunity to lure one into the trap. We don't have infinite time, so we need to move now."

Again, they both nodded before all three of us moved back, climbing further along the hill so we could use it for cover. Then we moved along it, making our way to the most stable and suitable gap for our attack. It was wide enough for the sawtooth, but not so wide that they could sneak by without getting hit by the effects of our trap. The ground also looked stable enough for Joseph or Carlos to run along without having to risk tripping or sinking into the ground.

Once we had settled into our new hiding spot, after crossing two gaps in the hills, we were forced to wait until the two targets were focused elsewhere, giving Joseph and Carlos enough time to plant the two bombs. A length of cord trailed up to my hiding space, the uprooted base of a tree, tall enough to hide me completely, while Carlos carefully hid the amateur firebomb among a pile of rocks, covering it with a loose bit of brush. Across the gap, slightly past the point of my bomb, Joseph nestled the second bomb against a log, pinning it in place with a rock, partially covering it with leaves to hide it completely.

When both of the explosives were in place, they quickly rushed back up the hill, hiding behind the same upturned stump as me. Then, it was back to waiting, watching the two large zoomorphs walk around, hunting for humans that had clearly long since left the area. Eventually, after another ten minutes, our chance arrived. One of the zoomorphs was partially obscured behind a curve on the far side of the marsh, while the other was approaching the side.

"It's now or never, Sir," Carlos said, all of us watching the approaching robot.

"... alright, go," I said, closing my eyes for a moment, before looking at the pair.

Before I could pick one of them to send into danger, my two soldiers looked at each other and quickly played rock, paper, scissors, a single attempt that had Carlos winning and Joseph losing. Joseph bit back a curse as Carlos pumped his fist, before both of them left our cover. Carlos put down his rifle before heading right down the hill, keeping low and heading towards the Sawtooth, while Joseph did the same, though his target was the second bomb. He grabbed the cord attached to the trigger and carefully carried it up the hill on the other side of the gap, partially disappearing behind a rock. Both of us peeked around our cover to watch Carlos as he kept moving towards his target, staying hidden in the reeds.

When the sawtooth was just about ten or fifteen meters away from him, Carlos burst out of cover, threw a rock at the robot killing machine, and watched just long enough to see it bounce off the zoomorph's head before turning to run. The zoomorph paused for a moment, letting out an electronic growl that grew to an almost low howl, like the sound of whirring blades, pitched through a poor-quality speaker. It then lowered its head and charged, moving like a chasing tiger as Carlos ran as fast as he could, jumping over fallen logs and plowing through clumps of reeds.

Unfortunately, the sawtooth could jump to, leaping forward to close in, forcing Carlos to take a risk. The soldier turned sharply and leaped over a patch of wet, soggy ground, clearing at least seven meters, hitting the other side running, just barely dodging the large robotic hunter.

Carlos moved faster and faster, jumping over debris and chunks of stone, clearing another gap to stay ahead. He stumbled once, but managed to recover and dodge the swipe the sawtooth took at him. Closer and closer he got to the gap, the sawtooth closing the gap behind him.

Somewhere along the point that Carlos was running, I realized something terrifying. The grenade my cord was attached to had a five-second timer, a large enough gap that, if I wanted to hit my target, would require that I pull the cord before Carlos even ran by. If I timed it wrong, the bomb would go off with my soldier close by, potentially killing him instantly. And if I waited too long and missed, then the sawtooth might survive Joseph's bomb intact and continue to chase down Carlos.

I pulled the cord before watching Carlos run through the gap, running full tilt, the sawtooth right behind him.

An explosion detonated in the gap, two stages that were almost too fast to even separate. The grenade went off, exploding into a ball of shrapnel that shredded the cans of blaze. A practically indiscernible moment later, the super volatile fuel, a fuel designed to be frighteningly more efficient than gasoline despite its humble origins, ignited, exploding into a bright, searingly hot explosion.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, my timing was slightly off. Rather than detonating under the robot's chest, it only caught the robotic hunter's legs. Still, fire engulfed the metal beast, blowing off chunks of armor, tearing off the bouncing antenna attached to its back, and splattering its undercarriage with burning fuel, which quickly started to melt its internals.

The zoomorph stumbled, slid, and tried to look around for whatever had just attacked it. Unfortunately, stopping was the exact worst thing it could have done, as a second later Joseph's bomb exploded, this time going off almost directly under its chest.

As the second fireball expanded, even more armor was blown off, curled and charred by the force of the explosion. Even more fire began to burn inside its frame as the blast rocked it to the side, throwing the burning robot off even more.

But it was still standing.

Rather than wait to see if the fire would finish it off, I immediately stood, pulled out my grenade from my pocket, twisted the pin and pulled it, letting the spoon flick off I underhanded the explosive device down the hill, landing right alongside the sawtooth. Before the grenade even went off, I pulled out my rifle, and just as the explosive ball of shrapnel detonated, tearing into the large robot, I opened fire.

Bullets tore into the now exposed internals of the zoomorph, punching through wires, framing, and more. A secondary explosion of fire erupted from its belly, its own load of fuel cooking off, blowing its hind left leg clean off, as well as damaging its internals even more. I could see Joseph on the other side of the gap, standing behind his cover and firing down into the wounded metal beast.

This was not the calm, calculated shooting we usually employed, trying to conserve ammo while taking down our targets. Both of us emptied our mags in record time, and were busy loading in our second when the robot finally collapsed, fire spreading more, the plastic parts burning hot. Sparks shot out from every angle, and finally, after what felt like ages, its head slumped to the ground, all of its lights going out at once.

Joseph and I quickly slid down the hill, Carlos running back to meet us. I handed him his weapon, before all three of us beat a hasty retreat, leaving the swampy area behind, giving it a wide berth. We could hear the thumping and whirring of the second heavy combat robot as it approached its burning partner, already searching for whatever had attacked it.

Thankfully, we were well out of sight, running full tilt through the woods, using the dark rising cloud of smoke behind us to orient ourselves. We didn't stop running for a good ten minutes, our vitality boosted by the sun shining down on us. By the time we did stop, we were nearly all the way back to the river.

"That was insane," Carlos said, shaking his head, breathing heavily but not quite gasping for air. "I have some strong words for Toando next time we see him. If I had been any slower taking those jumps, I would not have made it. Out run them, my ass."

"He has been fighting zoomorphs all his life," I pointed out. "To him, something like that might not be all that strange."

"Still a crazy thing to undersell," Carlos responded, shaking his head.

"You made it, can you really complain?" Joseph asked, Carlos looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "Right, fine, fair enough."

We continued to move quickly around the lake, soon following the river up, crossing over on the hunter's bridge, before walking all the way back. As we stepped onto the path that led back to the connection point, I looked back, spotting the very distant streak of smoke still rising into the air. After a moment, I shook my head before following after my soldiers, jogging to catch up.