

Limited Allison Mulder



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By Allison Mulder

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I clipped together the exposed wires connecting my wheelchair's battery to Rek's game. It played a triumphant melody and lit the night shadows under the old bridge. I blinked in the sudden brightness.

"You've got one hour," I said, leaning back as Rek grabbed the game away from me. "Unless you pay for more, of course."

He was already sitting against my chair, glasses glinting as he hunched over the game, making his character run and jump and punch things. Frin and Gavvin watched, tracking the movements. I pulled my hair back in a ponytail and closed my eyes, hoping to snag some extra sleep before sunrise. Or at least before Gavvin started complaining again.

"It's not fair," Gavvin muttered about three seconds later. "He plugged in yesterday. I haven't gotten an extra charge in a week."

"Sorry, hon," I said without opening my eyes. "You got outbid."

"He wouldn't have outbid me without Frin's chocolate ration."

"If he were your brother and you heard him complain every time he ran out of power before he could finish a level, you'd have given him your chocolate ration too."

I opened my eyes just enough to catch Frin's half-smile. He faced me rather than the game and had one elbow resting on my knee. I couldn't feel it.

Gavvin clutched his own game, pressing dead buttons harder and harder. Frin glanced at me and counted off on one hand, reaching one just as Gavvin said, "I'm going home."

The younger boy pushed himself to his feet and climbed up the dry riverbank, leaving Rek to his game, and Frin to watch, or babysit, or... whatever it was that he came for each night.

"Passed it! New boss!" Rek said.

Frin lurched forward to look over his brother's shoulder, grinning. They started babbling about attacks and stamina points. I turned my head away to try to block out the blips and beeps.

I didn't care what they did with the energy they siphoned off my wheelchair as long as I got something out of the deal, but after almost a year of the same old sound effects...well. Sometimes I was tempted to yank the wires apart and use the extra energy for all the rolling around the government *thought* I was doing.

I'd almost fallen asleep when the thud of sneakers against clay announced Gavvin's return. He was paler than usual, holding back his heavy breathing like I'd seen him do playing games that involved running.

"What's wrong with you?" Frin asked.

"You didn't rat us out, did you?" I asked, curling my fingers around the arms of my chair. My parents were not above pulling charge from my chair to run the fans for an extra hour on hot days, but that didn't mean they'd be okay with my little nightly business venture.

"I'm locked out," Gavvin said, clutching his game so hard the plastic creaked.

"How could you be locked out?" Frin asked.

"The door wouldn't open for my chip," Gavvin said, rubbing his wrist. "I tried ringing the doorbell to wake Mom up, but it was dead. I knocked on the door and Mom came, and I could see her through the glass but she couldn't get the door open either. I ran to Uncle's, but his garage was all shut up, and I kept hearing this banging like he was trying to get out from the inside."

"The *Unc* couldn't get out?" I asked, fingers straying to my chair's control panel. He'd helped me rig the power siphon in exchange for the occasional charge for some of his tools. He was not the type to get locked in.

"I think all the doors might be broken," Gavvin said.

I yanked the cords free of my chair. Rek shouted, his character dying again as his game switched to battery.

"Hey. Pay attention." Frin tapped his fingers on Rek's head. "The power might be out. My chair can open doors, but not with a drained battery. We're in conservation mode, starting now."

Rek adjusted his glasses, scowling, but unfolded himself and stood up silently.

"If we let the *Unc* out, he'll know what to do," I said, rolling to the edge of the dry riverbed.

"Need help with your throne, Queen Carris?" Frin said with a mock bow.

"Just to get up the bank."

He and Rek wrestled my chair up onto the old bridge, tipping up the front wheels as I clung to the chair arms. Then I pushed myself toward the main road, using the strength of my arms to propel myself forward on the cracked pavement.

The government issued me an extra charge thinking I needed it to get around. What they didn't get was how good it felt to move under my own power. I'm sure some people with wheel chairs needed the

power supplement, but I didn't. I even tried telling them that when they granted me the additional energy allotment. They'd said it was completely automated. Opting out would be a hassle and I should just enjoy it.

And I had to admit, I usually *really* enjoyed the extra chocolate rations.

We headed toward Uncle's, silence honing an edge onto my awareness as we walked past dark house after dark house. It wasn't just the locks. Everything was as dead as the scrap metal outside Uncle's garage. All the lights were out. Only the moon lit our way. Even the Beacon that rose up in the center of town was silent, its usual drone notably absent

"If the Beacon's out, communications are down too," Frin said, walking a little faster.

The other boys lengthened their stride to keep up, but I hung back, still staring at the Beacon.

It pulled a constant stream of power from the generators in our area and doled out power as allotted. It couldn't just go out. Not unless something was wrong with it...or something was wrong with the generators.

And if something was wrong with the generators...

Something zipped over my head, whirring.

"Whoa, Gavvin said as it flashed past the boys' faces. It hovered in front of Rek, a small light blinking on top of a bulb that ended in a sharp spine. Its wings blurred together like a hummingbird's as it hovered in front of the boys.

"It's like a giant mosquito," Gavvin said, ducking behind Rek.

"What the heck *is* it?" Rek asked, raising his game like a shield between him and the mechanical bug.

"Guys..." I said. I didn't like the way it turned its bulb of a head back and forth, like it was sizing us up. I didn't like the look of that sharp spine.

And I really didn't like the spark of electricity flashing in its wings.

With a shrill beep, the mech-bug darted forward and plunged its spine into the center of Rek's game. Rek dropped it with a cry and the bug fell, the game still impaled on its spine. A growing spark of electricity looped around its body and the game's sound effects went wild as all the power in its batteries was sapped away.

"Back up!" Frin grabbed Rek and dragged him backwards.

I rammed the game and the bug with my chair. It skittered away from my wheels and the treads hummed under my fingers. The bug wiggled its spine out of the dead game. I raised my hands. "Guys, squash it!"

Frin tipped my chair on its back wheels and positioned the others over the bug. I hunched over as he dropped me, putting all my weight on the front wheels as I landed. A crunch filled the air. Sparks against my spokes made the hair on my arms stand on end.

Frin shook out his hands, wincing, then reached toward my lap belt like he was going to pull me out of my chair, but I waved him off, shaking my head.

“I’m fine. Really. I’ve gotten worse shocks hooking up your stupid games.” I leaned forward and examined my legs, trying to figure out if they were supposed to be hurting. “Just fine.”

“It...it murdered my game,” Rek said, toeing the wreckage.

“What was that thing?” Gavvin asked.

“I think I’ve heard of them before,” Frin said, pulling his younger brother back by his shirt collar. “Sappers. They can grab electricity and feed it into something else. Raiders use them-”

He stopped, looking sharply at me. I rubbed my arms, a sick feeling growing in the pit of my stomach. We heard a motor - a big one, like when the ration trucks came into town - and it was getting louder.

“Off the street. Now,” I snapped.

They ran, and Frin pushed my chair without asking, which would’ve annoyed me except my fingers still felt numb. We swung into the alley behind Morran’s Ration Dispensary. A minute later a huge truck rolled right past us. It was bigger than the ration trucks, loaded down with more batteries and cables and energy monitors than I’d ever seen in one place. It was like Uncle’s back room had been loaded onto a flatbed and multiplied.

Men clad in boots and long rubber gloves clambered over the truck, shouting at each other. One man hopped off and strode toward the Dispensary door. Sappers swarmed above their heads, droves of them flying off empty and returning ringed with electricity to feed the batteries on the truck.

I rolled myself backward, deeper into the shadows of the alley, and the others followed. When we were a block away, I turned to Gavvin. “Tell me your game is turned off.”

He nodded, his thumb brushing across the switch.

“Leave it here.”

He looked at me sharply, eyes pleading.

I stared at him. “We need to go. The game needs to stay. Or they will find us.”

Slowly, he set the game on the pavement. He followed us, looking back over his shoulder. “What about your chair battery?”

“We might need it,” I said.

To open a door. To start a get-away car. To...

To send for help.

“We need to get the Beacon running,” I said as Frin peered around the corner to check for raiders. “If we don’t send for help, it’ll be days before the government figures out what’s going on. The raiders will drain us dry.”

“Of all the locked doors in town right now, that is the ultimate locked door,” Rek said. “Even if you charged it with your chair, we don’t have access. Does *anyone* in town besides the Unc have access? The Beacon’s supposed to be tamper-proof.”

“Well the raiders are tampering with it somehow,” I said, pushing myself in the direction of the Beacon. “If they can find a way, we can too. We just have to get communications back up long enough to send a distress call.”

“Maybe we should try to get Uncle again,” Gavvin said, resting one hand on the back of my chair as he walked.

“There’s more tech at his garage than anywhere else in town. The raiders will be all over it, and so will the sappers,” Frin said. “We can’t just keep opening doors until we find someone who can help. Who knows how much power the Beacon will need for a jumpstart.”

“Why do they want so much power, anyway?” Rek asked, shoving his hands in his pockets. “What are they trying to run?”

“Everything and everybody,” I said.

“How would you know?” Rek asked.

“Think about who ends up with your chocolate rations every week. Trust me, I know how much control you can get with some extra electricity.”

We stopped talking after that, moving along the edges of buildings so we’d be ready to disappear if the raiders or their sappers came around the corner.

“Carris,” Gavvin said. “If they’ll be swarming around the Unc’s garage... won’t they be swarming around the Beacon too?”

“Since the power’s out, maybe they’ve finished with it,” I said, forcing a smile.

I hoped they’d finished with it. I *had* to hope that. I was still just worried my chair battery would draw sappers before we ever got close.

We made it all the way to the base of the Beacon before we saw any raiders. They were fixing some kind of clamp on the doors to keep them open. Apparently the raiders were on conservation mode too.

“I don’t suppose any of you picked up martial arts from those games of yours?” I asked.

“Nope,” Frin said. “Don’t suppose you can squash them with your chair?”

“Nope.”

Frin thought for a second, tugging on his bangs. “Maybe we could bribe them with Gavvin’s videogame.”

“Or my chocolate rations,” Rek said.

“Or we could use the service entrance,” Gavvin said. We looked at him. He frowned. “You don’t know about the service entrance?”

“How do *you* know about it?” Rek asked.

“The Unc fixed my game last month and needed someone to hold doors for him while he brought in new equipment,” Gavvin said, grinning. “I helped out as payment.”

Something told me Uncle hadn’t really *needed* anyone to hold the doors for him. But if it made Gavvin happy, and it got us into the Beacon, I wasn’t about to comment. Revoking Gavvin’s access seemed like the kind of step the Unc would skip.

Gavvin led us through the shadows to the back of the Beacon’s base and pointed out the door frame set into the steel. It blended into the textured surface and was difficult to spot if you didn’t know where to look. Gavvin lifted a small plate of metal, revealing a hidden security panel. He waved his wrist across the chip scanner, but nothing happened.

“No power.” Frin grimaced. “Let me try something.”

He worked the panel back and forth, cracking it off and pulling a few wires loose from the wall. The boys scraped the rubber coating back, and I came forward and hooked up the wires from my chair’s battery, gritting my teeth as they sparked. Gavvin held his wrist above the chip scanner again and the doors slid open. We crammed into the building and the door shut behind us.

We stood in the hallway that circled the service elevator at the core of the Beacon’s stem. Coils and cables dangled along the walls, tied together in clusters. Some of the cables were marked with the colored tape that the Unc used during most of his projects, but it looked less vivid than usual in the amber emergency lights.

We could hear the raiders just a few doors away, still cranking at their clamp, trying to keep open doors that were always meant to stay shut. The squeal of metal sliding on metal helped cover the noise of Frin and Rek dragging open the elevator doors. Frin stuck his head in and looked up and down as air whistled through the shaft.

“Elevator’s stuck further down,” he said.

“Communications and wireless power should be at the top,” Rek said, pushing up his glasses. “Wired dispersal - to the doors and houses and stuff - is in the underground levels.”

Gavvin stared down into the shaft, his hair ruffled by the cool air. “How deep does it go?”

“As deep as it is tall,” Frin said.

“So don’t start screwing around,” I said, pulling Gavvin back from the edge.

I double-checked the brakes on my wheels as the boys argued over whether to go up or down - to send out a distress call or unlock all the house doors.

“Up,” I said. “I don’t know if my chair battery’s got enough power for all the doors, and the second they unlock, the raiders will know someone’s in here.”

“Yes, Queen Carris,” Rek said with a salute. He hung into the shaft again, and I itched to pull him back. “There’s a ladder here right by the edge. We can climb all the way to the top.”

“*Almost* a great plan,” I said. “Like, three-fourths of a great plan. But this fourth can’t really climb.”

The boys looked at each other. Frin slid open the door of a supply closet. “Your majesty can wait here.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, crossing my arms. “Not while you guys-”

“We don’t have time to argue,” Frin said. “The raiders could wander in here any second.”

“Exactly,” I said, crossing my arms.

“If they find you, just scream. I’ll come back right away,” Frin said, nudging Rek toward the ladder. “We won’t be gone long.”

“Fine,” I said, staring at my knees.

He unstrapped my chair’s battery from its undercarriage and slung it around Gavvin’s torso, urging him next onto the ladder. He rested his hand on the arm of my chair for a second, frowning. “Stay safe.” He started up the ladder and I backed my chair into the closet, sliding the door almost all the way shut in front of me.

I leaned toward the wall of the closet and could hear the raiders talk about their next stop, about where they’d been. About prying a house door or two open to have some fun.

About how they’d go check the control room in just a second.

I jerked open the closet door and rolled to the edge of the shaft, darting a glance over the back of my chair. The boys’ hands on the ladder rungs resounded with each impact, echoing down to me. That was loud enough; if I yelled a warning, there was no way the raiders would miss it. Darkness drowned the shaft, blotting out the boys as I looked upward.

I took a deep breath, undid my lap belt, and rolled to the very edge of the shaft. The ladder rung on the wall beside the elevators felt cool against my fingers. Leaning as far forward as I could, I gripped the ladder with both arms as my limp lower body pulled my chair closer and closer to the edge. It teetered there, held by body parts I couldn’t feel, and I scowled down at my legs.

“If you get in my way here, I swear I will cut you off,” I said under my breath.

Tightening my grip on the ladder, I reached for the next rung and pulled myself up, muscles burning as I dragged my chair over the edge. It dropped away from my feet, falling quickly and - for an instant - silently. Then it crashed against the ladder, against the elevator cables, against the wall, and the raiders started shouting.

I dragged myself up the rungs, dull clangs telling me when my legs bumped against the lower bars. I was desperate to get out of the light before the raiders rounded the corner. Once I made it into the dark, I hugged the ladder with all my strength. I almost lost my grip when Frin’s beat-up boot brushed my

fingers. I grabbed his ankle, and he stopped, reaching down to touch my hair, to brush his fingers across my face. I squeezed his hand. *I'm okay.*

With difficulty, he slipped around to the rungs below me and supported my legs as I climbed, sweat soaking the back of my shirt. Far below, the raiders yelled at each other, and I tensed as they began to climb. After a few minutes, the sounds of climbing grew fainter. *They're going down.* I closed my eyes in relief, then kept climbing.

When we reached the hallway at the top of the shaft, Rek and Gavvin pulled me up off the ladder while Frin pushed my legs up. They got me past the top rung, and I sprawled on the floor beside the edge, arms like rubber. Frin grabbed my shoulder, squeezing it.

“Just couldn't wait for us?” he said, breathing as heavily as I was.

“No way,” I said. “I was sick of that chair anyway. Let's go send the distress call before they come looking up here.”

Frin carried me piggyback as Rek and Gavvin pulled the sliding doors of the control room open a crack, then wider when no one shouted an alarm. The Beacon's control room was all glass and wires and steel, and dark, dead monitors reflecting the amber emergency lights. The consoles were pockmarked with holes from sappers' spines, but meticulous labels made finding the communications station easy. An alert button rested front and center on the panel.

A Sapper flitted up from under the control panels. Then another. Then another. Too many to count. And all their spines pointed at the chair battery slung around Gavvin's waist.

“Go,” I shouted, clutching at Frin's neck. With me still on his back, he started running, dragging Gavvin by the straps around his shoulders. We dashed for the communications station. Electricity crackled around the bodies of the sappers in wider and wider rings, and a shrill beeping filled the air as they locked onto the battery.

They dove just as we reached the panel, and at least three spines impaled the battery's center as Gavvin screamed, clawing to get free from the straps around his chest. The sappers' rings of electricity widened in an instant. Frin staggered against the communications panel as I lunged half-off his back.

I snatched one of the sappers out of the air, energy zinging through my arm as I held the mech-bug by its smooth body. I plunged it into one of the holes in the control panel and the lights on all the monitors went crazy.

“Do it!” I shouted.

Rek slammed his fist down on the alert button. A droning siren began, drowning out the shrill beeping of the sappers as we fell to the floor of the Beacon.

My right arm buzzed from grabbing the Sapper. I couldn't move it. With my left hand, I grabbed onto Rek and forced his head down as the rest of the sappers darted above, blinking and beeping and aiming their spines at us. Frin rolled between us and the swarm.

The sappers stopped, blinking in sync. Every needle turned toward a point far below us. As one, they disappeared down the elevator shaft. We pulled ourselves under a control panel and huddled there, waiting as the siren blared and my chair battery sparked.

"They're leaving," I breathed, leaning against Frin. "They won't stick around now that the alarm's gone up."

We waited there, sitting shoulder to shoulder, until sunlight streamed through the windows and Uncle's voice echoed up the elevator shaft.

--THE END--