
Defending Fidere

Lilliana followed her commander into the stolen territory being called the ‘peaceful’ nation of Fidere.

She could spit that word: *Fidere*. Such a stupid name for a nation, not that it was one. A false prophet, this Shadow. A traitor. A broken Buranian, no less. Anyone who followed him was a fool.

Each step into the once flourishing city was a dangerous one. The Elite bastards were always ready for an attack it seemed. Shadow had once been a Buranian commander, and it showed. He was always a step ahead, outwitting Commander Elroy and making Lilliana’s team of higher-ranking Royal Guards look like whelps.

She kept her radio transmission off so they remained invisible to the radar systems as they traveled stealthily into the city. She followed Commander Elroy’s hand signals, her violet-tinted diamond bot shimmering in the sunlight as evening turned to twilight.

It felt strange, sneaking through the streets they had once defended. She could barely recognize them from their former glory, however. The buildings were still violet, gold or silver, but

were now decorated with unaltered propaganda, making the skyscrapers a mockery of what they had once stood for: victory for Burania.

Red, white and blue flags hung from windows. Relics of a forgotten world. She turned her blowtorch on them, turning each flag to ash. *Let them all burn. Vermin.*

Elroy waved his silver-tinted diamond bot's hand in a discrete command for her and her platoon to prepare their weapons for attack. She quickly materialized her machinegun in front of her, ready to regain some of her honor.

After the fall of the city, General Winston was demoted and reassigned because he had been forced to eject from his bot during the battle with that strange diamond dragon bot The Elite had somehow procured. Commander Elroy and General Lilliana were also demoted, their points deducted.

Lilliana was now the third general rather than the second. The lowered ranking stung her pride. The second general was only a step away from Commander status, third general was nothing.

She would regain her status and then some, however. The Elite swine may not be visible just then, but they would come to defend their little 'nation', and when they did, Lilliana would be ready.

AT FIRST IT was difficult to form a foundation for this newly governed nation surrounded by the enemy. Everything Matthew predicted would happen, happened, but Shadow was always ready.

At first it was small inconveniences, things only a pampered Buranian would find to be evacuation worthy. They started by cutting the water supply, and Shadow initiated a water restriction and reuse policy.

As Matthew suspected, the unaltered used to living in the slums had no issue with this. It was the Buranians that didn't follow the decree at first. They didn't complain, however; there were some positives to having citizens who were completely numb inside, he supposed. Though he pitied their lack of free will that had been taken from them before birth. Neera had told him the process of implanting the emotional block into the temporal lobe as part of the prenatal procedure during pregnancy. A 'normal developmental procedure' she called it. Apparently without this 'normal procedure', Buranian babies would be born unaltered. They would be born normal with their emotions intact. It had sickened Matthew.

Within a week, Shadow had water pumped from the Hudson River to be filtered through the plant located in central Manhattan, which used UV reactors to clean it. Matthew suspected the Buranians had no idea where they were obtaining their water since it wasn't public knowledge; otherwise Burania would probably have had the river poisoned. Not an easy task, but he wouldn't put it past the empire to manage to poison them all.

Burania cut the electricity next, but that hiccup was dealt with even quicker. The city was filled with backup generators, some from the fear of terrorist attacks and others to power things such as the Rockefeller tree. They were powerful enough to light two thousand square feet for a month with the lights constantly on. Though there was a curfew and a 'lights out' time, they had had no outages.

So far that had been all, just mild attacks against them. No bombs had been dropped much to Matthew's surprise though he suspected they were coming. As soon as they found a way to twist the media to their advantage to make it look justified to sacrifice both Buranians and Americans, they would.

Shadow was prepared for that too, however. Though the bridges were destroyed, the subway system and tunnels out of the city were left intact for evacuations. They were heavily guarded,

but Shadow performed drills every week to enforce an evacuation procedure. Teams were assigned and summoned for drills at random. Over time it had become a part of their daily life it seemed. Routine, and Matthew liked routine.

Now that New York was theirs, Matthew had laid claim to an apartment. Maybe wishful thinking, but he needed consistency. He'd been moving around with The Elite for a long time, now all he wanted was to stand still.

He hadn't claimed an especially elaborate apartment; he was a modest man with modest needs. A one bedroom suited him fine. He had come up with the rehoming initiative and the larger apartments were reserved for larger families, which made sense to him.

He didn't get to spend much time in his new home. He was always out helping Shadow create a foundation for this new nation. Lots of work to be done, with no end in sight. It's always the ones who want peace who make the most difference in war. The ones who wish they didn't have to be a part of it at all. Those who want out but can't because the leadership role they somehow found themselves thrust into demands they stay and fight regardless of how hopelessly tired they are.

Matthew was very tired.

As most of the more realistic Elite, Matthew hadn't believed he would get this far with their resistance. He expected to die fighting, had welcomed it, yet The Elite had sparked a full rebellion with their efforts and had successfully freed a whole city. None of that had seemed possible, and probably wouldn't have been without Shadow's leadership.

Matthew had joined him and followed him loyally because on top of being the best military strategist he had ever seen, The Shadow also didn't breed hate. He protected Buranian citizens as well as American, and the rest of the unaltered. Later Matthew learned why, because The Shadow was Buranian himself, a once infamous war commander at that. Matthew wasn't surprised by

his military ties, he hadn't asked so as to grant Shadow the privacy he preferred but had always suspected he must have had a military background as Matthew did.

Matthew Bennett had been a marine once, so he could recognize another man with a military background. He'd joined when the war reached his small town of Amarillo, Texas. He was seventeen at the time. He'd watched the world fall apart, and he never once thought it would fall on him to rebuild it.

The world was unrecognizable, especially with ever-evolving technology. In many ways technology had advanced, but now that the world had been taken over the only real connection Matthew had to the past was technology from it. CDs for instance were his only source of music. The Buranians didn't listen to music, he figured it was because music produced emotion and since Buranians didn't have emotions they saw music as a waste of time.

Country music seemed to be the easiest to find, which suited him. That had been his music of choice once upon a time. He could sing each song without missing a single word he had heard them so many times, but they brought him back to his few years of life before the war. When he had a family and a home. For a long time, the music made him sick with sadness, he would lay in bed and cry to the words and the instrumental symphony he knew by heart. Now, however, the songs comforted him. They gave him the memory of a better time.

He had just put on a CD and was settling into his chair to have a listen. The maroon chair was the only furniture in his space because it was just small enough to fit crammed into the corner facing the door. Often, he would just sleep in that chair, a machinegun to his right, ready and loaded. Perhaps he still didn't trust this newfound security, even with eight locks bolting his door.

As soon as he had laid back against the cushions, the music

transporting him away to a simpler time, the alarm outside sounded. They were under attack.

He suppressed a sigh, knowing he needed to get into gear immediately or people could die. Or it was just another drill; there was no way to be sure.

He had perfected the method of shedding his clothes and pulling on the skin-tight bot-suit in a short amount of time. For the first few weeks he had kept the suit on twenty-four seven, not trusting Fidere to be theirs for much longer. After a month however, he became comfortable enough with the drills and fast enough at changing that he was out the door in forty-five seconds flat, so he left the bot-suit off unless the sirens blared.

Which was good, the bot-suit was suffocating, and his gilets needed to breathe.

He broke into a full sprint down the steps of his complex, running out into the street where his bot sat folded along the curve to conserve space. The hatch dropped, sensing his proximity as soon as he approached it. The machine bonded to him, and in a strange way he felt bonded to it too.

He didn't need to see his own features reflected back on him to know which bot was his. The fighter bots looked identical to the other bots of the same color, except for their faces. The bots adopted the features of their riders once bonded to them, but he could recognize his bot regardless. The silver metal unnervingly similar to Neera's Buranian eyes called to him, the two recognizing one another through their strange bond.

He jumped through the hatch located in the chest of his bot, and the coffin-like chamber slid open. It would protect his unconscious form as his conscience was absorbed into the bot. He melted into the squishy mesh found inside, his forearms instantly sucked into the material along with his legs up to his calves. The suction cups attached themselves to his forehead and temples, and a breathing mask was secured around his mouth and nose. He almost immediately felt himself fading, his nerves

deadening as they became one with the bot, as his conscience was pulled into the machine.

He awoke with new vision. The bot's vision always started as heat-vision, which he always quickly switched off to being the regular lens. He never had adjusted to the heat-vision. When he went back to his own body, his real eyes were always extremely sensitive to light after using the heat-vision for long periods.

"This is not a drill!" was the first thing he heard from Parker through the radio transmission they all used to communicate. "We're under attack!"

Matthew was already moving to where he knew Private Parker was stationed for his watch when Shadow clicked online and demanded, "What are the coordinates to your location, Private?"

Matthew knew the names of every recruit, but he knew Shadow didn't bother to get to know them. Matthew was pretty certain Shadow only knew his and Devon's names. The rest he would communicate with only to give orders, and he would only refer to them by their status within The Elite. Matthew wasn't really surprised when Shadow announced he was Buranian, it actually explained his lack of feeling and his cold approach in battle. Shadow knew the recruits mostly followed Matthew and since Matthew supported and believed in Shadow, they followed him too.

Parker reported his coordinates, and the bots that weren't already moving with Matthew activated their rockets and jettied towards the Hudson River.

There were no civilians out on the streets. They knew the drill by now, once the attack sirens sounded, lockdown began. They, of course, didn't know it wasn't a drill. He would expect more disobeyers amongst the panic if they did. That was the upside to all the mundane drills he supposed, get them used to the routine so even the real sirens blended with the drill sirens.

When he reached the battlefield, many bots littered the

streets in disarray. Most had their hatches missing, so the drivers had ejected in time before being crushed inside their fighter bot. Though some bots did still have their hatches intact, the metal caved in. Matthew would be the unfortunate commander to gather the names of the soldiers they had lost, deliver the news to their families, then make a public announcement of their bravery in battle. He could already tell the death count was substantial, and the fury it caused fueled him.

He launched into battle, zooming through the battlefield, deflecting, striking and dodging as he made his way to the center. He fired his machinegun with precision, aiming for the vulnerable spots on each bot. Some burst into flames, forced to eject from their damaged bot before they too burned.

“Groups three and six, circle around, gather Intel on the surviving forces,” Shadow was ordering over the radio transmission. He didn’t bother to leave it off anymore, which would have concealed them from the rival bot’s detection. To have the transmission off kept the frequency from being traceable, and The Elite’s bots from being detected on the Royal Guard’s software. The Elite were no longer underground rebels, using the element of surprise to cause mayhem with the government, this was their territory, so they did not hide their numbers anymore.

“On it!” came the voices of groups three and six, echoing through the radio.

“Matthew, what is Commander Elroy’s position?”

“Center, hiding behind his best soldiers,” he said, spitting with disdain. At one time Matthew had respected the Buranian commander’s frontline fighting style. He was a gifted bot fighter who led his platoon from the frontline like a true leader, but lately he had changed tactics and now remained in the center of his platoon, sacrificing some of his lower ranking bots just to get a clean hit and demolish a few of the enemies.

The cowardly strategy shift hadn’t worked well for him so far, but it had done well at pissing Matthew off.

He beat back a few of the lower ranking Royal Guard bots, so focused he almost missed the violet-tinted diamond bot of a general or commander coming up behind him. It almost had its diamond sword through Matthew's back, but he twisted in time to see it and dodge. He was just fast enough to block the next strike with one of his forearms coated in diamond armor, compliments of Devon and the material from the first battle they had won against the very same team.

The Elite crowded in on the violet-tinted bot. One downside to having shiny armor, no one could mistake you for a lower ranking officer. They knew the diamond bots were close enough to the head of the snake that destroying them meant certain victory.

The violet-tinted bot was forced back beside Commander Elroy.

"Devon, cut me a path straight through," Shadow commanded.

"With pleasure," echoed Devon's gruff voice, and in flew Devon's diamond dragon bot unlike anything either side had ever seen. Well, she couldn't fly yet, but she glided from an overhanging skyscraper that was still improvement.

Her bot was designed by an overly ambitious engineer. The controls were unnatural to a bot driver. Bots were usually built like humans so they could control it the same as their own body when their conscience was absorbed. Devon literally had to learn to become a lizard to drive the dragon bot. The Buranians even deemed it un-drivable and trashed it. Lucky for The Elite, none of them had ever met Devon.

She was the best bot driver Matthew had ever seen. Her people skills were questionable, but when it came to machinery there was no one parallel to her skill.

At first it appeared that Devon would be able to swoop in on Elroy herself, but the violet-tinted bot blocked her path at the last second. The high-ranking Royal Guard's diamond sword came

up and Devon twisted to lash her diamond spear-tipped tail into its path. They clashed and the screech of two equally matched materials meeting filled the air around them.

Matthew had faced the violet-tinted bot before in battle. She was swift, using her speed to overpower her opponents. He figured she was female due to the feminine features on her bot. This bot's expressionless face held a feminine jawline on a heart-shaped structure, large eyes that stood empty on the bot, and a cute button-nose that gave the bot a false appearance of innocence.

She was far from innocent as she circled her opponent, clearly much more comfortable in controlling her bot than Devon. She was faster, but the barrel holes along Devon's torso made up for the lack of speed as it fired onto the enemy bot and blasted her back with radioactive gel capsules encasing fire.

This was a weapon the Buranians had designed; it had been a cannon Matthew had managed to commandeer. Devon had dissected and reinvented that cannon into a more portable option. Now all The Elite had radioactive fire encased in sticky gel to shoot from their guns instead of bullets. The gel would stick to the bots then split open so the radioactive fire encased inside could spread and burn. It gave his troops the edge they needed.

It wasn't effective against the diamond-armored bots, but it still surprised the violet-tinted bot enough to slow her down for a moment. Just long enough for Devon to find the opening she needed and ram her spear straight through the breastplate of the Royal Guard's diamond bot. Probably straight through the person protected inside.

The violet-tinted bot went still, further convincing Matthew that Devon had speared straight through the heart of the driver as well as the bot.

Devon seemed convinced too as she reported triumphantly, "Your path has been cut, Shadow," before twisting and flinging

her tail with all the force she could muster. The skewered diamond bot slid off the tip of her tail and flew, twisting end-over-end and landing in the Hudson River. The water quickly devoured the bot, which sank down deep. "One down."

"We could have used that material," Shadow grumbled disapprovingly.

"We can go fish it out later," Devon snorted as she swiped her way through the non-diamond Royal Guard forces, batting them away like flies.

"I hope you're right," Shadow said as he launched for Commander Elroy.

Matthew followed pursuit. "Keep the regular bots back," he ordered his forces. "Limit the casualties."

"Roger!" they obeyed.

Shadow advanced on Elroy's silver-tinted diamond bot and Matthew came around behind. Their bots were still the inferior metal; one strike from Elroy's diamond bot and both of their bots could be demolished. They did each have a diamond sword however, and a diamond plated forearm to block his attacks, they would just need to pay attention. Two against one, Matthew liked those odds.

Once the violet-tinted bot had hit the water, Commander Elroy had already started to fall back. He struck at Shadow who evaded, leaving an opening for Matthew to come in with his sword and strike. Elroy took that hit, stumbling back at the force of it. Shadow crossed his path again, this time blocking his next strike and when Elroy blocked Shadow's next advance, it left an opening for Matthew to hit him again.

Sparks flew as the diamond sword struck the diamond armor of his bot. A regular bot would have caved in, but that's what made the diamond bots so superior, and so brilliant.

"Stop playing with him and just *finish* him!" grumbled Devon as she forced the rest of the Royal Guard back towards the river.

The next well-choreographed hit dislodged the breastplate as

Shadow advanced, evaded another strike, then left an opening for Matthew to come between the two and lodge his sword against the breastplate of Elroy's bot. It flew across the street and left Elroy's chamber where his real body was locked, completely exposed.

Matthew had no doubt his bot was urging him to eject. To save himself. Instead he fell back, ordering his troops to retreat. He was not a stupid man, he knew ejecting would mean capture, and he knew continuing to fight would mean certain death without a breastplate as armor to his most vulnerable and essential area.

Shadow let him go as he enabled antigravity and jumped over the Hudson River, the boarder between Fidere and Burania.

"You're letting him go?" Devon demanded.

"We can't very well follow them into Burania," Shadow explained, turning to order The Elite forces to begin cleaning the streets of bots. They would split into their previously designated teams, extract the bodies and make a list of casualties for Matthew before delivering their forces to the morgue for further identification, and for cremation preparations to be made. "We need to find that diamond bot," Shadow went on to say. "We could use that diamond armor for our own forces. What do you say, Matthew?"

If Matthew could sigh through his nose in the form he was currently in, he would. He looked to the sun as twilight descended into dusk and wished he could be back at his tiny apartment, but duty called. It always called. "I say Devon shouldn't have thrown the Buranian bot into the river," he grumbled, and Devon snorted.