



SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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This sample contains the first two chapters.

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## The Rebels

Nestled between an electronics repair kiosk specializing in phones, computers, and robots, and a bio-hacking health salon offering the latest health and longevity techniques, the Creatrix Gallery's exterior was decked out with cracked neon signage and an eclectic charm. Behind its unassuming steel door, the gallery smelled of spray paint, sass, and rebellion. The shelves were filled with banned manga, forbidden books on surveillance hacks, radical climate activist zines, Eco-science studies, anti-fascist manifestos, and handmade jewelry made from crystals and recycled metal. Within the vibe decorated with erotic sculptures, exotic plants, a dolphin-shaped fountain, and art-covered walls celebrating nature, three rebels prepared for a different kind of artwork.

In the art studio tucked away in the back, which served as both altar and battle bunker, *Disco Inferno by the Trammmps*, one of their warm-up songs from fifty years ago, slapped through the air. Gemini Moon grooved to the beat and leaned over a protest sign. The sharp swish of aerosol filled the room as she sprayed in violent pink across the warped canvas:

RISE UP! PERIOD!

Gemini, their natural and unelected leader, always felt as if she came from everywhere on Earth and from ten thousand light-years beyond language. Her appearance only reinforced this otherworldly quality. From afar, Gemini looked mid, but up close, her skin was light blue and softly glowing under the gallery's UV track lighting, shining like the inside of a conch shell. Gemini covered her face with streaks of purple and yellow protest paint, and her long orange seaweed-like dreadlocks stuck out like wildfire from beneath her signature white top hat. Imprinted on the chest of her hoodie were the colorful characters from the children's TV show *Sesame Street*, standing together under a banner that read:

THE RESISTANCE

Lastly, but not least, Gemini's mismatched eyes sparkled like David Bowie's long-lost star cousin or a cross-bred, bluish-green sea creature, or both. That was legit, her overall aura.

Gemini held the protest sign aloft, made some odd clicking sounds between her teeth and her cheek, and sang out, “You like?” She tossed the line away with the confidence and childlike innocence of someone who had created these on the reg.

Lucia Sky, deeply immersed in her dance moves, beamed at the sign, her lips wrapped around a blunt she wasn’t supposed to smoke indoors. But what was rebellion, after all, if not ignoring or breaking the rules? That was her motto. Lucia looked like a riot wrapped in glam-punk and a schoolgirl fantasy-nightmare. Short tartan kilt, mesh sleeves, scratched combat boots that screamed “try me.” She was radical and had the sharp bullshit detector of a street-smart alley cat. If she had a strain of Northern California coastal weed named after her, it would be called ‘Truth Serum,’ because that’s what it would bring out in those who got too close to her smoke.

She dance-stepped over and handed the joint to Rachel Lamont, who took a long, practiced inhale, shook her booty, and raised her middle finger in appreciation of Gemini’s sign. Her deep red beret angled over her forehead, daring gravity to defy it, and she pulled out her phone, setting her location and the anti-AI surveillance app to ‘Fuck off!’ With the joint still between her fingers, Rachel raised and adjusted her phone’s focus, then snapped a group selfie. She grinned, her eyes sparkling, and shouted over the music, “You know I have to say this,” her voice lilting with her thick French-American accent.

Lucia groaned, “Uh oh, gurl. Here we go again.”

“Like clockwork,” Gemini mouthed.

Rachel inhaled, posed proudly, shimmying her shoulders, turning down the music slightly, and exhaled her lines like a manifesto. “More than I love the planet. More than j’adore la vie. Even more than I like red wine on Wednesdays, there are no two people I’d rather storm the Bastille with than the two of you, *chéries*.”

She passed the blunt back to Lucia, who took it and inhaled, belly deep. Out of plain curiosity, Lucia exhaled, rolled her eyes, and asked, “You never did say exactly what happened at that Bastille thing, anyway? Spill.”

Rachel's riff turned righteous. "Well," she declared, "my French ancestors stormed the fortress, which was a symbol of the bloated power of the king, and sold the rubble in the markets. And with that, *La Révolution commença*."

Gemini raised her sign and called out, "*La Révolution* works for me. Ready?"

Lucia nodded, stubbing the last of the weed into a ceramic ashtray shaped like a swirling mermaid. Rachel was already slipping gas masks into her tote bag, along with a camcorder, a bundle of compact protest signs and stickers, and illegal drone disruptors. The trio rolled out of the gallery, mounted their scooters like brujas on silver brooms, and started their engines, which purred with purpose. They synced their rear-mounted speakers and cranked up the volume on *Can't Hold Us by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis (Feat. Ray Dalton)* because what was a revolution if it didn't have beats to remix? That was their motto. This was their 20s, and this was their moment.

They tore through the city as if they were flying on the wings of an omen: past LED-lit Korean noodle bars and shuttered AI confession booths, past blinking surveillance drones spiraling through the sky, past hunchbacked pedestrians with faces buried in their screens and carrying ineffective, dusty umbrellas, past roaming gangs of coyotes, and past rolling delivery robots wearing Santa hats strung with festive icicle lights—the bots didn't ask for or particularly need.

Ahead of them, a wind rose from nowhere, carrying a burgeoning dust storm that spiraled between the mirrored buildings like a spirit conjured by the protest itself. The three amigas didn't slow their roll and rode straight into the storm. Like everyone else, they were used to the dust. Its bland taste and acrid smell had become a near-daily vibe kill, coating their mouths, eyes, and hair like a second skin. The dust rose slowly at first from the earth's increasingly parched and poached landscapes, but now it could, on a whim, sprinkle, shower, blanket, twirl, cut, or clear the atmosphere—all as if it had a mind and meaning of its own.

## The Bounty Hunter

The lone desert highway simmered under the blazing eye of the midday sun, and a mirage of heat peeled off the asphalt in slow, hungry swirls. In the distance, the sound of a slow grind began to rise, mechanical and predatory. A coyote paused at the edge of the highway, ears perked and nostrils flaring, sensing that an infrequent, loud intruder was approaching.

A black motorcycle with a sidecar punched through the haze, its torque trailing heat and attitude, and its fairing-mounted speakers blared *Gone Surfing by Sixteen Wheelers* at full volume. On the bike, a lone figure rode, wrapped in dustproof armor, a face masked tightly under a scratched retro helmet. An unmistakable tribal bear claw insignia stretched across the back of the rider's cracked leather jacket. On the sidecar platform, a man crouched, shirt torn, eyes hidden behind antique motorcycle goggles, wrists lashed and bound with heat-cured rope. He shifted uncomfortably, sunburned and restless, but he didn't dare complain. The rider didn't seem the type to tolerate chit-chat or chatter.

The motorcycle sped past the spot where the coyote had already vanished and headed toward a concrete outpost that loomed on the horizon. The structure stood alone and partially concealed in the desert, surrounded by razor wire and sagging military tents—serving as both a temporary prison and a checkpoint. On its rooftop, a security turret spun. Its camera lens zoomed, locked on, and tracked the approaching subject. The rider slowed, turned off the engine, and dust curled around its wheels like smoke rings.

They dismounted, quickly removed their helmet and face wrap, revealing a Skrillex side-cut and the sharp, weathered features of a Métis biker baddie. Her eyes, those eyes hunted prey that didn't necessarily bend, bleed, or break easily. A single feather earring gently swayed from her left ear, hinting at her Cree roots and her femininity—both kept close to her chest but not entirely hidden. She looked up at the scanner device on the roof turret. It beeped, and her profile appeared on its screen.

ALASKA RAINMAKER – Bounty Hunter #11.16.85

The door swung open, and Alaska yanked the man from the sidecar as if he were a bundle of butcher's meat, dragging him toward the entrance. Before stepping inside, she pointed her key over her

shoulder and pressed a button. The bike rattled, and the sidecar folded like an accordion, snapping flat against the chassis and locking into place with a metallic clack.

Alaska entered to meet a wall of stale air, trapped by its artificial coolness seeping from a squeaky AC hanging from the room's only window. Bounty hunters of various shady backgrounds loitered like sun-lizards at a wooden table cluttered with greasy playing cards, half-empty ashtrays, and day-old sandwiches. She knew and nodded to all the bounty hunters passing through the outpost, not by name but by their distinctive features: the old cowboy hat guy with the face scar, the rookie kid with a permanent plastered-on smile, the one-eyed discharged army vet who hunted with his trained doberman which slept loyally at his feet, the guy who couldn't stop coughing up his frequent dust-storm runs, the cocky-cuck with the missing earlobe she tore off for crudely propositioning her, and the new bounty bots who always seemed predictable and inadequate, though they were becoming increasingly deft at the gig. To enhance the surreal vibe, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* elevator music played instrumentally from a lonely speaker that had seen better decades.

Alaska led her catch toward a dark-tinted wall that had all the warmth of a steel shark trap. Her fingers hit a button, and a robotic arm unfolded with goggles attached to the spot where its hand would be, if it had one. "Eyes open," the robot commanded, its voice emotionless and cold.

The prisoner ducked, then instantly lunged, headbutting the goggles and bumping Alaska off balance.

Bad move.

Alaska spun him like a drunken doll and slammed him against the side wall. Her fist cocked back, but it shook and activated a subtle tremor that betrayed a deeper wound. She clenched her hand, rubbing her thumb against her forefinger, trying to control the shaking which, if left unchecked, could rumble into a full-blown seizure and leave her helpless. He noticed, and his eyes darted to the door, but she clocked it, grabbed him by the hair, forcing his face toward the goggles. Still, he resisted, and he squeezed his eyes shut like a child afraid of ghosts, or playing the game of *'I can't see you, so therefore you can't see me.'*

Alaska's tremor had now lowered, threatening her hips and legs. She desperately steadied her arm, reached down behind her prisoner with her free hand, and without ceremony or concern grabbed his balls in a punishing grip, squeezed and demanded, "Open sez me."

He grunted, and his eyes flew open.

The robot voice barked, "Bill Perkins – Domestic Violence and Rape."

A green light beeped and flashed above a side door, which slid open. Without untying the rope, Alaska shoved her prisoner through, and it slammed shut, taking the man and his restrained future with it. Above the door, a digital bounty display scrolled out: \$2,192.58. Alaska looked up and scoffed, "Cheapskate," then quickly waved her wrist device over the display. It zeroed out, and the robot arm retracted through its slot like a bored bank teller.

Alaska stepped back, her body now trembling fully, leaned against a cool pillar, and pulled a well-worn pill bottle from her belt pouch, dry-swallowing one. Her breathing slowed, and limb by limb, her body calmed, but her teeth remained clenched as she steadied herself. Her eyes drifted to the 'Most Wanted' bulletin board, cluttered with faces: some monstrous, some normal, hung alongside posters of rogue and untethered robots.

Alaska generally only hunted the AWOL humans, as they were easier to catch and paid more than their mechanical look-alikes. The world, her world, didn't give her much time to linger. It only presented targets, then new ones, then the next. So she pushed off the pillar, quickly peeled a few of the fresh bounties from the board, tucked them under her arm, and headed for the exit, nodding to the bounty hunters and new bounty bots as she passed. As she neared the door, she glanced up at the blinking television in the corner. The volume was low, but the face of a news anchor filled the screen—smooth, polished, and utterly detached.

*"In national news, with the melting of the A-78 iceberg, evacuations continue throughout the Florida Keys and Dade County as rising sea levels worsen, and Hurricane Harry sweeps through the Carolinas. Meanwhile, the drought and heat wave persist across the Midwest. Seniors are advised to stay indoors. In other news, border crossings through Tijuana and Buffalo have reopened momentarily – permitted goods and vehicles only."*

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