



Stop Killer Robots Future 2045 Youth art contest winning submission

“Honest hardship”

By Ditmer de Heer

Shiddah dared a glance over the top of the broken remains of what once was a church. Or so they assumed from the fractured outlines of its remaining walls. Once religion had been important to them, but now their focus was solely on surviving the automatic machine prowling the rubble a hundred meters away. And on Sadiqa of course.

She sometimes called these robots AM's. Shiddah didn't. To them 'AM' sounded too much like morning complaints instead of a name for a weapon designed only to kill. Through the gloomy mist Shiddah caught the dull metallic gleam of the robot's dead eyes. Its tin canned head turned slowly, scanning for any sights of movement. Then came the signal: A high-pitched whistle cutting through the silence of the empty capitol city, leaving a lingering echo in its wake.

Move.

Shiddah darted away from their hiding spot, trying to keep their steps quick and featherlight. They weren't the only one that moved though, the AM shifted its metallic limbs, hunting the origin of the sound. A small glare of light from a collapsed building further away ensured Shiddah that Sadiqa had moved as well. For now, the plan was working. Or as much as you could say things were 'working' when your goal was to simply outrun certain death in a broken world.

The Third World War had ended three years ago, but the solar powered batteries of the weapons that were deployed at the time hadn't run out. Autonomous machines roamed the European ruins endlessly, hunting down anyone who didn't fit their creators' definition of 'ally'. Shiddah knew that she would be a target, regardless of the origin of the AM that was now marching in their direction. Their slightly darker skin color than the long-erased average European citizen made them stand out. Sadiqa, though stunningly beautiful, was no different. But Shiddah? They defied easy classification entirely, a walking anomaly among machines steeped in obsolete data.

That was why Sadiqa had wanted to be the one to distract the AM, she had a higher chance of surviving the AM than Shiddah. Still the AM didn't seem to leave the both of them alone, regardless of their plan to confuse its sensors. Shiddah cursed Denmark and its ruins but kept moving. Scandinavia was their only hope now. The last place in this forsaken world where humanity still held meaning, where three countries still believed in working together to make the future better rather than tearing seemingly logical rights down. For how long that would last anyway.

Skirting the slope of a small hill, Shiddah kept out of sight. The AM's deadliness was precise – if it saw you, you were done for. Years of surviving in Morocco's rugged mountains had trained them to move silently, to walk over uneven ground like it was flat. Living in the mountainous areas of their home country had been the only way to stay out of any conflicts. Most of them at least. It certainly hadn't helped being named Shiddah in a culture where names should carry a positive meaning. The sound of collapsing bricks stopped them cold.

Sadiqa.

Shiddah's heart thundered. They knew that Sadiqa wouldn't dare call for their help, not with the AM being so close. Still the machine headed directly towards the remains of the building where the sound had come from. Was she pinned? Or wounded? Shiddah wouldn't – no – couldn't bear the risk of losing her. They hadn't crossed thousands of kilometers of devastation together just for one of them to end like this.

Breaking cover, Shiddah moved towards the building, hope and dread intertwined. They had to reach her before the AM did. But as they drew closer it turned out to have been idle hope. The machine was already at work, sweeping away debris with its iron finger digits. Its eyes were glowing a faint yellow. It had picked up some form of life underneath the wreckage and was now doing everything it could to reach it. A mechanical predator excavating its prey.

Shiddah grabbed a rock the size of their own head and raised it to their chest. Taking out an AM with nothing more than a rock and sheer will. It had been done before if they had to believe the stories that were told. Yet that was the problem. They didn't believe the stories. They didn't believe much of anything anymore.

With trembling steps, they moved towards the AM and slammed the rock into its head with a hollow clang. Before Shiddah could process what had happened they were slammed into the ground. Cold metal was piercing the warmth of their neck. They gasped as the machine's gun barrel hovered only a few inches from their face. A scream from Sadiqa pierced through their daze, bringing them back to senses.

The sound of gunfire split the air.

Shiddah blinked. The AM toppled beside them with a creak. For a moment they stared at it, not understanding what just had happened. Then they noticed the drone high above them, the letters 'SA' – Scandinavian Alliance – carved in its underside.

Before relief could fill Shiddah a second loud crack filled the air. This time it wasn't a machine that fell. A dreadful gurgling noise came from the rubble a few meters further.

Sadiqa.

They stumbled to their feet, ears ringing from the shots and legs unsteady from their heart that was breaking. The truth was pressing heavily on their mind. One final gunshot shattered that as well. Shiddah fell face-first into the dirt.

A last thought filled their mind. Which cruel mind deployed a drone to save them, only to just kill moments later?

The drone, now drifting almost silently towards the North after taking care of the two unwanted would have been refugees, carried the answer. A mind who had long forgotten about human dignity.