“We can do this,” Connor says, looking straight into my eyes.

My heart jumps a little, whether at the way he’s looking at me or at the fact that what he said could very possibly be untrue, I’m not sure.

I give him a small smile and hope he doesn’t see the fear I’m hiding.

We are up against 20 or more metal-hybrid soldiers. This could also very well be the last time I see any of them.

But still, I’m hoping. I’m hoping that somehow we’ll get through this. I’ve been doing this a lot. Hoping. Wishing. Praying. And sometimes I wonder why I’m even hoping at all. And this is one of those times.

I look at the seven faces looking at me. Connor, Dev and Lily, each with a foot on their skateboards, poles in hand. Jae, Kyl, Brion and Eryn have come to a stop on their bicycles, removing the poles they’d strapped to their bikes.

The heavy steps of the soldiers grow steadily louder, the quickening thumps matching my panicky heartbeat. I don’t have time to tell them what I’ve found out. You are the key to everything, my mom’s message had said.

I don’t want them to have to risk themselves in order to protect me even more than they already have. Kids with broomsticks against armed soldiers. We’re all worried. But no one is flinching. I feel my heart expanding in my chest. Never have I ever remembered anyone
standing by me like this. I don't know how I should tell them this, so I don't. Instead, I smile.

I look to Eryn, then to Connor and finally Jae. Jae... his green eyes are almost as dead as all the plants around us. But when we make eye contact, they soften infinitesimally. But I notice it.

Something else makes my heart flutter. Jae's arm is still bandaged but he is able to move it more. I hope it has been healing. There's that word again. Hope.

“They all have parts of them that are made of metal,” I tell them quickly, “usually their arms and legs. They do not feel pain there so the best option is to hit them in the head.”

Kyl nods. “I’ve heard about them. My father used to repair the broken human parts.”

They all have determined looks on their faces. We turn to the soldiers. We've been running for too long, hiding for too long. It's time we finally face them.

“One... two... three!”

And we charge.
The next few minutes are a blur.

Connor, Dev and Lily speed towards the soldiers on their skateboards, spinning their poles. Jae, Kyl, Brion and Eryn pedal furiously alongside them, poles held across their handlebars. I race behind them.

The soldiers don’t expect that and begin to scatter in confusion. Several of them reach for their guns but I hear a man’s deep voice shout, “No guns! We need her alive!” They draw batons and knives instead.

We are upon them. Connor, Dev and Lily bring down several soldiers with blinding speed before being forced to fight on foot. Jae rides his bicycle without holding the handlebars, pole in his hands, striking soldiers left and right. Kyl wrenches his bicycle sideways and skids his bicycle right into three soldiers in the front, leaping off and hitting them in the head to make them stay down. Brion and Eryn follow his lead and then they’re fighting back-to-back, holding their own.

My mind has switched to automatic. I swing, kick, jab. I am a whirlwind of blades, my pair of katana glinting gleefully in the sunlight.

I thrust the end of one sword into a guard’s stomach then whip it up against his head, using the side of the blade. The sword in my other hand enters a soldier coming up behind me. Something bitter rises up my throat.

I block out the thought that I might have killed them. But I don’t have the luxury of
trying to spare their lives. Not when my friends might get hurt. Both soldiers crash to the ground.

I turn, fake a stab at another soldier behind me but he doesn’t fall for it. In my head, I see three other soldiers planning to grab my limbs to immobilise me.

I twist myself to the side as they charge at me, jumping into the air and flicking both katana outwards. Two soldiers fall. The other two are advancing quickly and one already has a hold of my arm. I jerk my arm back suddenly, shoving my elbow into his face with a loud crack. He staggers back a step, cursing. I kick high behind me, catching him right in the chin and he collapses immediately. I whip around towards the fourth soldier and hit his head with the butt of my sword. He, too, collapses. I’ve taken down six soldiers and I look around to see who might need help.

Connor twirls his stick calmly, facing a soldier. Around him lie another four.

Jae thrusts his stick to bring down his fourth.

The rest of the kids are all engaged in combat. Kyl is fighting two soldiers but keeping them at bay. Dev is driving his pole into a soldier’s stomach. Lily smashes her pole downwards on a soldier’s arm, making him release his knife.

Brion is struggling against a baton-wielding hulk of a soldier. Where’s Eryn? A pang of fear seizures my chest. She isn’t with Brion. Then I see her, bravely fending off the blade of another soldier, but she’s limping and looking tired.

All of a sudden I feel that prickling sensation and I turn around just in time to block a baton that had been thrown at me. It clatters to the floor while the soldier who had thrown it gapes at me in shock. I smile sweetly at him.

I hear Eryn cry out. I whirl in horror and see the soldier pull his knife out of her shoulder and raise it again. Eryn falls, her pole slipping from her fingers.