

Red Hypergiant Act 1 - Edge Of Black

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

Stupid. It was possibly the worst decision he ever made to leave the city's borders in order to hide in the darkness of night. As the man stumbled out into the forest, his heart raced drastically. Pumping every last drop of adrenaline into his veins. Still, that didn't defend him against the thick branches, sharp leaves, and the roots growing out of the ground. Making him trip constantly, but barely keeping his balance. Trying to make his way into the blackness.

Blackness. It all seemed too perfect to him. How the night itself closed it's shutters and offered no assistance. Forcing him to hide in the woods to get away from his assassin. All he seen was the dark navy cloak in the streets, watching over them like a raven, and the man knew who he was after.

Oh, how he wished he was wrong. The things he had to do, is still doing, in order to survive such a terrible economy. As much as he wanted to believe this person could be reasoned with, these assassinations have been displayed on the news constantly over the past few months. Hired hands are like dogs; only listening to the sound of paper bills and the jingle of coins. Those holding the bells were like whistles to them, commanding to end the life at the very tip of their finger.

Exhausted, the man stopped for a break. Leaning up against the tree, trying to control his lung's demands. Trying desperately to hear anything over his heartbeats, but the forest was completely silent. After a few moments of catching his breath, the man knew he wasn't safe. Walking a little bit deeper into the forest, to see if he could catch the assassin following him.

His head throbbed, making him feel almost dizzy and disorientated at the world around him. The air felt heavy, almost stinging his lungs. Faintly seeing red lights through the shadowy trees made him hold his breath a bit. They were almost like eyes at first, but soon later could trace more and more of it along the bark of the plants. Faintly glowing like they were breathing. "...No...!" He gasped. "It even reached here!?" He almost shouted in a whisper, stepping back a bit more and turning away from it, only to suddenly stop. Not even hearing the echo into the sky before a bullet pierced his skull, right through the forehead.

The Witness showed the man falling backwards through the scope. Exhaling quietly, she continued to watch as the vines of the forest dragged the body further into the Red Zone before pressing

a button on the rifle's add-on. Stopping it from recording whatever its user was observing. "When we all fade away," She spoke in a whisper, raising up from her dark Navy cloak. "And this world cannot bare another day. There will be no fight in broken bliss." With a heavy sigh from her cat-like muzzle, she heard the hooves lightly walking on the thick grass behind her.

"...How do you feel?" A voice behind her asked, not getting a reply. "I ask, because you just ended another life-"

"Not now, Artheas." She muttered, not really sadly or angrily. Just getting the feral horse to exhale through his nostrils. As she got up and turned around, she placed a small computer chip in her pocket, then started dismantling the large rifle. "Once I turn this in, we can finally afford something else to eat. I'm tired of dried vegetables."

"They're not so bad. A little bland, but." The blue Nightmare slightly tilted his head in a shrug, trying to study the snow leopard's good eye. Little feeling was shown, but enough to still call the grey one humane. As she placed the large pieces of the rifle in the several packs around his back and sides, she got on him. Trying to be careful with her hind claws. "You're getting better at the mounting part. Though, still a little rough then the last partner."

"You can't expect too much from me in that department." She tapped the side of his dark cyan neck, still a bit wary of the bright flames that formed his mane. Flowing under the blanket she rested on, and trailing down to his haunches. Spreading outward in a tail-like motion, getting longer as the horse started to pick up speed.

"Where to first, Thais?"

"Back to the city for now." The leopard said, gripping the strap that wrapped around his thick collar. Feeling the horse look towards the city nearby. "Not that one. Derrilum."

"Back directly to the snake, huh?" Artheas muttered, turning about and lightly galloping into the darkness.

"I know you don't like me seeing him in person." The larger one snorted at her. "Hell, even I don't like seeing him in person."

"I just don't want you getting hurt." Thais rolled her eye. "And don't give me that. Heffur is a conartist. He'll deceive you any way he can. Especially if he thinks he can get away with it."

"And you have this much faith in me, I'm touched." The sarcasm made her smirk. Attempting to smile, but the left half of her muzzle remained still. "I can't exactly send it in the mail. The police often scan and observe any digital chips for possible crimes. If they suspect something, they can forward it to the TCTF." [*Technology Crimes Tactical Force*]

"Sounds like an invasion of privacy to me."

"Invasion of privacy?" She seriously questioned him, making the Nightmare double take quickly, then nod. "I still don't know where you get these ideas from. We've never had privacy protection against

the law enforcements."

"Just like back then." The blue one muttered, getting the feline on his back to half grumble at the evasion. "So, are you going to answer my question?" She remained silent. "How did you feel?"

"You answer one of mine, and I'll answer one of yours."

"...Deal. But you answer first." Another faint grumble, as she slightly looked behind her right shoulder.

"...It gets easier. But it's still painful. It's not like he was innocent-"

"He did nothing towards you."

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you." Thais rested her left arm on the horse's shoulder. "Hey. No claws. I'm just keeping track of you."

"Of course you are. Because I'm that much of a threat." She growled at him. "I'm not inhumane, Artheas."

"But you're not exactly humane either. You're getting to the point where you're past half machine. There's nothing wrong with a little question about one's morality."

"You mean 'a little analyzation' I'm sure." A slight toss of his snout. "Your turn. Where did you come from." The Nightmare slowed to a stop, not really sure how to answer that question. If it could even be called that. "Was it the same place as them?" He looked off to the distance, slightly away from where they were heading.

"...No. I'm not sure where they came from. At least, I've never heard of them until you did."

"I wouldn't describe 'cuddling up next to me in bed' as a form of hearing information." He slightly chuckled at her offensiveness. "So where did you come from?"

"...It was a place called Veritas." He started moving forward again. "It was... Complicated, to say the least."

"And you were roaming about with other Nightmares, I take it?"

"...No. I was the only one. And She was the only one that wasn't afraid of my... More ghastly form."

"As if. You're a kitten if I've ever seen one." The horse snorted at her. "I never heard of Veritas."

"Even if you did, it would've been the wrong one." She made a noise in question. "It is a different universe. That I'm sure of."

"What makes you say that?"

"...Because pain exists here." The two remained quiet for the rest of the trip, as she tried to completely understand what her friend meant by that. There was no doubt that the Nightmare was very different, both mentally and physically to her. Horses rarely even existed in this world anymore, replaced by a much larger creature able to endure and carry more weight. It's no wonder Thais barely recognized him when they first met.

"Hey... Hey...! Claws-claws-claws!" The leopard startled awake, hearing the horse grunt and his a bit.

"What happened?" She asked, still looking around in the very early morning. Barely making out a small area they made the evening before as a camp.

"You started clawing at me again. I'm guessing you feel asleep." Thais looked at her left paw, the eerie shimmering darkness that covered it like an abyss metal. Sustaining most of its previous shape well, but the claws were replaced with sharp nails instead. reflecting a small bit of red that almost glowed with the slights over her mechanical arm.

"Must've gripped the strap too tightly then. Did you go across any rough terrain?"

"Don't try to pin this on me." He grumbled. "You probably had another stress dream."

"What makes you think that." She got off, getting her uncomfortable back to move and flex a bit.

"You were raking me too." His dark orange eyes glared at her.

"Well, I don't remember dreaming, so-"

"Doesn't mean that side of you was." The Nightmare laid down to rest a bit, after she took out another cloak. This one black and a bit ragged. "It's very possible that they can have dreams too. Besides, I didn't feel anything from your right arm."

Taking off the worn cloak let her body breathe a bit easier in the warm night air. But the statement made her less relaxed. Without the long clothing, there was alot of her body that could be seen. Even with the black pants, it was quite certain that the cybernetic legs could be spotted from afar. And the lacking of footwear only made it more obvious really, both inner claws slightly dipped in red.

Sitting down on a log, the Feline took off the black mask that hid half her face. Letting the thick white mane with black roots finally spread out over her neck and shoulders. As well as doing its best to hide the left side of her face. From the entire left eye and cheek, back to just through her left ear and down the shoulder, it was all robotic. Metal, like the entire arm. All of it connecting down the spine, which was hidden by a black sleeveless shirt. One turned inside out to hide the logo on it. "You need a haircut." Artheas teased.

"And your hair needs to be put out before we start moving again. So we have time to relax."

Taking off the glove on her right paw revealed it's more natural, organic form. However, a faint blackness, much like the metals on her body, could be seen around the knuckles. Even most of the claws seemed to have tinted black, as she rubbed the back of her right neck. Trying to tend to the stiff muscles.

"Turn around." He said, getting a mixed look from the grey one. One of almost insult, yet sorrow. "It'll help a little, if you want it."

"...Fine." She grumbled, turning about on the log and leaning forward a bit. Revealing the last mechanical part on her display; the tail. Almost skeleton-like, but a little larger than it should be. Covered in the same red lights, and flowing like it had a mind of its own. With a deep sigh, she started feeling slight presses on her back. Letting her try not to completely resist them, but it almost always made Thais a bit uncomfortable.

"You are rather tense, still." The horse said, still laying down from afar, but concentrating sight on her back. "It's likely even the add-ons are responding or learning stress."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Going a bit lower, around her waist, she grunted. "That's the Line."

"I swear it was lower." He muttered, refocusing a bit higher. "It still flexes quite well with the original tissue. Quite remarkable, really."

"The doctors said the same thing." She muttered. "Back when I used to visit them."

"That's been a long time, I suppose?"

"Very long time. Before the bounty." The feline sighed through her muzzle, resisting the urge to attempt to purr again as her back started feeling alot better. As much as she hated to admit it, he did rather well at massages. Giving the lack of actual limbs capable of such a thing. "Did you ever do this with Her?"

He stopped for a moment, then continued. "...No. Not really. Dawn never liked me doing anything good for her, really."

"Define good." That made the Nightmare chuckle.

"Buy her flowers, lick her wounds, massage her feet. The usual stuff." Even she half smiled at that. "She was too strong for her own good sometimes. Always wanting the bottle to cure her pain, not another person. Heartache does that to people."

"Yes..." Thais mumbled. "It really does."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're softer than she was." The leopard glared at him with her right eye. "See? That's taking it the wrong way." A faint growl from her, and she left it. "I don't mean that you're soft and pliable. Far from it, in fact. But you only point a gun in my face occasionally."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" The grey one lightly chuckled.

"I mean, Dawn had a bigger arsenal... Kind of. Granted, you could argue with your Cancer-"

"It's C.A.N.C.E.R. Collapsible Anti-vehicle Nano-versatile Calibrated Electroheart Rifle. You can't call it anything else."

"But it basically spells-"

"It's not a crab that was trying to snip at someone's toe while he was fighting a hydra. Your foolish tales have nothing to do with my rifle." Artheas laughed. "Besides, there's already something called a Cancer Rifle, so you'll confuse people if you keep calling mine that."

"Does it... Actually give people Cancer?" He tilted his head.

"No, but it stings like hell. Regardless of the name, it's quite non-lethal." The feline rolled the black cloak in a ball, and set it on the fallen tree she rested on. Laying down on her back and using it as a pillow.

"Going to get some rest?"

"Going to try. Nothing should be around here anyway."

"Alright, when the sun rises, I'll get you up." Artheas said. Not getting any response from Thais other than a sigh of trying to relax.

Chapter 2

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*"God Only Knows What We Were Born To Be."*

*"Could I... Just have one thing?"*

*"Save him instead..."*

*"Absolutely remarkable..."*

*"Where's Loki, soldier?"*

*"I didn't want this."*

***"I am You."***

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"Thaaaaaiiis." A small nudge was all it took for her left arm to grab the side of the horse's head. Making him almost yelp a bit. "Easy-easy!" The tense arm started to relax a bit, as her eye adjusted to the light. The sun was overwhelming, forcing her to keep her eye shut and open the spherical shutter of her cybernetic eye to observe her surroundings. Seeing the dark brown horse with black hair towering over her. "It's okay, everything's okay. Just waking you up." He flinched, trying to shake off the grip of the robotic arm.

A few moments of study, and she let go. Getting the mare to step back and shake off the scratches. "You could've just used your talents and save you the beating." She grumbled, sitting up and rubbing her right eye with the familiar paw. Letting it slowly adjust so she could use it instead, closing the left eye and tending to the slight headache it usually caused.

"But where's the fun in that?" He snorted sarcastically. Still feeling a little bit of warm stickiness leak out around his ear. "Remind me not to do that again. Everytime I attempt to show you affection, you bite." He chuckled, then noticed her staring at him. "What?"

"Nothing." She said, halfly looking away. "I just... Missed it again, that's all."

"It's nothing exciting. The light touches me, my mane goes out, and turns into this wavy mess." He shook his head a little, letting the mane flow freely. When the horse looked back, the leopard was smirking a bit. "Someday, that'll turn into a full smile."

"You'll be waiting for a long time then." She got up, wrapping the dark navy cloak from last night into a bundle, and placing it into one of Artheas' bags. "Speaking of manes, I want to do something with mine before it gets too warm." He looked at her with an eyebrow raised. Though the rest of his body seemed to change during the day, his iris still remained a dark orange. "The stream nearby."

"I could use a refreshment." He motioned for her to get on, but she got the black cloak and mask first. Riding a little ways off the road to a rather large brook. "There shouldn't be too many people out just yet, but be careful. You don't want people seeing..." The grey one nodded at him, patting him on the side with her mechanical arm, and getting the brown horse to almost flinch.

"Quit being a wussie." Thais bluntly said. Scooping up some water with both paws and washing her mane with it. Still somewhat surprised that the cyborg parts were quite resistant towards liquids. Even the areas on the side of her head, around the eye and most of the cheek were protected quite well. Though it did worry her a little everytime she did it, the leopard had completely submerged herself in water before, and come out perfectly fine. The question did remain; how deep and how long could she do it before damage occurred?

It was a question she didn't really want to think about. Along with many others that she still had about the add-ons. Let alone the similarities these parts seemed to share with the Red Zones. Not much

was known about them, barely anyone has gotten a good enough look at the corruption within the forests, but every living creature was afraid of it. "Something wrong?"

The horse's words snapped her out of thought. Finding herself staring into the trees in the far distance. "...No. Just..."

"Thinking about it again." She exhaled. "Not much you can do about it now. He'll probably get a search team for a bit, keep an eye out for any ransoms. And after a few weeks, they'll expect that he is dead."

"Not exactly what I was thinking about." Artheas double taked at her. "I'm not having regrets about killing a politician."

"Of course you're not." He said sarcastically. "After all, they're only human beings."

"Human beings that are asking for trouble. Sticking your neck out to attempt to morph a society that cannot be changed is more than a foolhardy idea. It just makes you a target for those in charge." Thais grumbled, getting some more water and drinking it out of her paws.

"It's a foolish thing to do to believe in people?"

"To believe that people can change. Let alone with some half assed leadership." A scratch of her white mane to get it to breathe a bit. "Especially if you start off dirty to sneak your way up the ranks. He had it coming."

"I'm not arguing that he didn't. But you have to believe that people can change, right?" She was quiet for a bit, then got a telekinetic nudge. "Riiiiight?"

"You can't change something in a broken system. It's made so change isn't viable, allowing the rich to reap rewards while the poor are punished further for being just that: Poor. It's disparity by design." Thais half sighed. "If they reset the entire system, give the people a reason to trust each other; trust their leaders, then maybe they can start a path towards a better future. A more fair one. But until they can rely on one another, they'll always remain in despair."

"I notice you're using the word 'They' alot." She didn't reply. "I know you're now... Different from them, but that doesn't mean-"

"I made the choice myself." The grey one muttered a bit coldly. "The day I decided to make a career out of murdering them." A concerned silence fell on the two. "I don't like them, if that's what you're wondering, but I don't loathe them."

"Then why...?"

"To be the Antagonist." Artheas made a noise in question, while the feline slipped the mask back on. "I'll be their reason. Their common enemy to fight against the bionic kind. Push them away from the pain of cybernetics, and give them a reason to reject such a way of life." The black cloth stretched around her neck and the top of her head. Hiding most of her mane and falling across her robotic eye.

Burying any trace of the black metal that seemed to invade her facade.

"But it's not..." The horse lightly whispered, then sighed. "It's making you walk again. It's letting you able to do so much-"

"It's also an infection, Artheas. Don't forget that." He remained quiet for a few moments, while Thais studied her left arm once again. "Some would consider this some sort of blessing, yes. I can understand that. But you need to realize one thing."

"And that is?"

"...I didn't ask for this."

The sun greeted the large city with a bright warmth, the upper half anyways. Large highway overpasses seemed to flow out of it as if they were the city's limbs. Now slumped down and exhausted, while many of the upper class used it to stay away from the lower areas.

Derrilum was one of the oldest cities still intact. A few of them were taken out somewhat recently due to unknown reasons. Many were theorizing that it had something to do with the Epidemic within the forests, because when they were found, it was like it swallowed the entire city.

But the forests here were quite distant, granted that resulted in a double edged sword. The lack of natural cleansing made a cloud of pollution within the city. Nearly visible from looking at it on the outside. Of course those on the upper plates had an issue with this, to the point where their scientists constructed large towers known as Purifiers. They spoon fed everyone the lies that it filtered out the pollution and restored the good air to the city. That way there were no need for nearby plants and forests, to the point where such things were completely banned out of fear.

The grey leopard sighed angrily, make the horse she was riding on slightly nervous about getting another clawing. Angry, because what those towers actually did was make the cloud heavier. Pushing it down to the lower level. It was bad enough the population could barely get by with little jobs, and even less good food. Illness was a very common way to depart. It wasn't out of the ordinary to walk about and see those who collapsed, either doing their jobs or even on their ways home. The human race were quite adaptable though, given enough time and resources to survive.

Sadly, no one understood why many were dying randomly. It could've been the lack of a decent education within the lower level. The slums barely had a language class for children, and the middle plate was lucky enough to get a decent amount of knowledge. Many thanks to those brave enough from the upper class to come down day to day and teach these things. It was dangerous for them though, but once in a while, you'd still find a decent person living up there.

The two entered from the lower plate, where many on Makalins would often come through and find a place to keep their large animals. Whereas next to no one was actually able to afford a vehicle

down here, let alone the fuels to upkeep such a thing. She parked by a saloon, getting off Artheas and re-adjusting her clothing to ensure nothing metal was being shown too easily. Though doing so almost startled a Makalin beside her, making the mule-like small elephant yelp slightly in fear. "I'm just going in for a small drink. Then I'll head up."

"I'll be here." He snorted, half teasing her and making the feline shake her head a bit while she placed the straps in a small contraption. Lowering a metal plate and locking it after putting in a coin. Giving her a small key in return to place in her pocket.

"GMG." She muttered lowly at him, and the horse nodded. Finally understanding the phrase Guard My Guns. Not something you really want to say out loud in a crowded area already full of scared people.

With a faint sigh, he looked left and right at the two larger animals with similar packs on. "So. You guys come here often?" He asked them, getting faint mutters from both, but clearly not a real answer. "Thought so. I came for the wings, myself."

The saloon doors creaked opened as Thais passed through them. Expecting the Smokey smell of the place, as usual. Walking up to the bar and trying to make out any conversations. Most of them were just faint venting, or talks about older days. And, of course, the old television that always seemed to be on the political stations. If there was one thing she dreaded about this place, it was that damn TV.

Taking a stool and making sure the cloak covered it, she ordered a single drink. Leaning on the bar almost made a loud metal clink, nearly wondering if anyone caught on just yet. Foolish thing to believe, honestly. 'Suspicious' was barely scratching the surface of her outfit, but not like she had much choice. Half the reasons why they never seemed to report the leopard's whereabouts were because of two main reasons: They didn't want any more violence in the lower class than they already had, and they didn't want anyone getting hurt. Be it their loved ones, family, or even themselves. It wasn't necessarily the damage that she alone could do, but the damage a panicked amount of people could do as well. Their weak structures, along with their unsafe environment.

"Back already?" The rhino asked, handing her a strong drink.

"Yeah. Business." She muttered, studying the drink a bit, and scanning it through her mask with the robotic eye. Mostly out of precaution than anything. When it cleared, she faintly sighed and took a big gulp.

"As usual. Went well, I take it?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?" The large one chuckled. She still finding it strange how his skin was more of a black than a usual grey. Granted, one of the reasons why this bar stayed opened was because of the massive size of the bartender. No one wanted to mess with an eight foot, 700 pound rhino. No matter how much they had to spend on reinforcing the floor under him.

"That's what I always liked about you, Thais. You're crude sense of humor and you know how to

get a job done." She muttered faintly in response to him while taking another thin drink.

"It's not because I'm a Furnann?" He lightly shrugged at her.

"You can't be a discriminate bartender. Even though I tend to like our own kind a bit better..." Another shrug, and she nodded. Understanding completely, and noticing the amount of humans occupying the tables. None of them seemed to be listening to the two, and seeing the rhino talk to her, let alone laugh a bit probably put them at ease.

"So, your plan is to force the people to change?" The leopard's ear flicked towards the television.

"Force is violence. The supreme authority from which all other authority is derived. Naked force has settled more issues throughout our history than any other factor. The contrary opinion: Violence Never Solves Anything, is wishful thinking at its worst. People who forget that always pay." The man said on the screen. completely suited up in black and white. Probably ever since Thais' appearance in the media, they've turned away from the color Navy.

"I can't say I disagree." The bartender said, looking at her as if to ask her opinion.

"He does have a point, yes. But regardless, he's still another vulture posing as a dove. Talk is cheap, regardless of your ammunition. A few harsh words are not enough to make a difference in the government's decisions. Let alone the world's." Another drink. "You have to wonder if they're actually speaking as if they're attempting to win a war, or if they're playing a sport. Jabbing passive aggressive insults that hide safely behind the rules of the game. Yet, remain unmaimed like it was somehow all staged to begin with."

"What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "We haven't had a conflict in years. Almost a decade. It's not because we're at peace either. It's because no nation has the funds to support an army anymore."

"But the united nations made a treaty nearly ten years ago stating everyone to disengage any military budget. No one is allowed to even make an army of any kind now." He said, drying off a large glass and wiping the bar. Attempting to restore its new shine.

"On the surface, you mean." She muttered, getting him to stare at the leopard for a moment. "You're not allowed to sell weapons. You're not allowed to even show your weapons. Yet people can still purchase them with the right contacts. They're still being manufactured and designed. Mostly for the Police and the TCTF, but alot of that is just an excuse."

"So you think someone is trying to start another war? Against who though? The Epidemic?"

"...Against Themselves." She got up, drinking what little remained from the glass, and leaving a few coins. More than enough to pay for the drink. "You didn't hear it from me though, Luther."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I was only talking to my shadow." He smirked, getting Thais to nod as she turned about and left the bar.

The sun was a double edged sword, brightening the day quite well. But also revealing the poverty that surrounded the district. People, both human and Funnann alike, constantly digging through the rubble, debris, and trash looking for something of value. Granted, Value was very flexible at these times. Sometimes it could mean something to trade in for a few extra coins, other times it could be just plain food or water. Sometimes a clean bottle to carry or catch good water from above, be it the rain or just from the streams coming from the upper platforms.

Most who were digging were actually children. As usual, making a small game out of it with their friends. At least they no longer resorted to stealing anymore. Thais has caught a few pickpockets, mostly trying to steal from her thick cloaks. One catch, and sight of the black metal arm was all it really took to frighten and scold them. After a while, rumors go around not to mess with certain people. If they wish to live, that is.

Granted, the leopard has never threatened them herself. The media does that for her. It was hard to believe that such information could travel so quickly, especially in a place that lacked TV sets. Radio stations went obsolete years ago, and no one's gotten a tower up and running for the public since then. They were all converted and reclaimed for the upper class to use for their own devices, and for the Law Enforcements.

It didn't really affect her too much though. The less these people knew about what she did, the better. For now, all she needed to do in this city was collect her pay. Then head out to bring back some better food for those two cubs. Passing by a reflective window got her to get a faint look at her wardrobe. As much as she really wanted to get another cloak to replace the ragged one, it camouflaged well in these areas. Even just faintly scanning through the crowds, she spotted several of them. Not all of them black, most of them darker versions of different colors. But it made it much easier to hide out in plain sight.

Making way through the crowd wasn't a difficult task, and she finally made it to the aerial tram station. Seeing a small number of people enter the cable car told her that they were loading up to go to the middle plate, meaning she got here just in time. "I don't know what happened to it. I must've lost it." A small boy explained.

"That's not my problem. If you don't have a card, you'll have to buy another one." The conductor argued with him, tending to other passengers and punching a hole into their cards as they boarded.

"But I don't have enough on me to buy one-"

"Then you'll have to find enough work to do so. But for now, I cannot help you, brat." The tone made the feline grumble a bit. Feeling for her own card, barely used.

"My parents can buy another one, I just need to get a hold of them-"

"Not my problem. And the station's telephone is not for personal calls, so don't bother thinking of that." He double took at Thais when she approached. Even after all this time, people still tend to

stare at the black mask covering half her face. She held up the card with her right paw, but didn't let go of it when the man attempted take it.

"The kid's with me."

"What?" The two double taked.

"You cannot be serious." The man said. "Stepping into other people's issues grants you nothing."

"I didn't ask for your opinion." She glared harshly at him with a grey-blue colored eye. "Just stamp it twice, that way it just comes out of my pay." She looked at the human boy. "You want to get back home, right?"

"Y-yes." Her attention returned to the conductor, who only grumbled.

"Fine." And she let go of her side. Seeing him punch two holes in it. "Get on." He almost ordered the boy, and he scampered in before the leopard. Getting the two adults to glare at each other for a moment.

"Card." She said, and he hesitated for a moment. Leaning it closer to the feline's left arm, but the right paw took it instead. A faint growl left her throat as she boarded. Seeing the boy in the corner slightly waving her to sit beside him. He at least picked an uncrowded seat. With very step she took on the tram's floor, a metal clunk seemed to echo. No matter how gentle she was trying to be.

Carefully, Thais tried to sit down while concealing her tail. Hoping it was buried in the darkness of the cloak. She couldn't see it from her position, so it was good enough. Slightly glancing at the boy looking out the window, overlooking the rooftops of the slums made of rusty steel plates. A few were already caved in, and many more on the verge. It's what happens when people try to makeshift their homes.

The boy looked at the feline with a faint smile, then fear struck him when he looked down at her left arm. Slightly out of its sleeve and reflecting some of the daylight with a dark shine. Trailing his eyesight, she covered it up quickly. Slightly looking around to see if anyone else spotted it, and the scan resulted in a negative. "What happened?" He whispered, getting the leopard to look at him for a moment.

"...Car accident. A long time ago."

"So, they gave you a new arm?" Still whispering it, at least he had the intelligence to do as such. Possibly even knowing who she actually was from that glance.

"...And a new pair of legs." She lightly lifted the cloak and showed the lower paw. Armed with rather large claws that threatened forward.

"And a tail too. Cool." His expression made her lightly chuckle.

"Don't think I've ever thought of it as such, but..."

"Are you...?" He looked around a bit. "Him? Simo?"

"...I'm her, yes." Another faint look of fear. "I'm not here to hurt anyone."

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with us." The feline raised an eyebrow. "You've never hurt or went after anyone of the lower classes. Always the uppers. You actually do help us quite a bit." A slight noise in question as the tram began to move, omitting a loud buzzer overhead. "Several of your... Jobs, you gave us things we needed to survive. You take out people who intend to hurt us, or... Get rid of us. To the slums, you're like..."

"Robbin Hood?" The boy nodded. "Granted, Robbin Hood didn't steal from the rich and give to the poor."

"He didn't?"

"He stole back from the rich what the rich took from the poor. Returning those lost belongings. It's slightly different."

"But he's still an icon all the same, right?" She nodded. "In a way, they took alot from us." That statement made her heart ache.

"...They took alot away from all of us."

"But you're going to stop them, right?" Her eye closed as she exhaled. "You're the only one who can."

"It's difficult to explain what I'm trying to accomplish... Erm." The grey one looked at the boy a bit awkwardly.

"Brix."

A faint nod. "Thais."

"Is that your real name?" She nodded again, and he smiled at her.

"I'm trusting you with it." The feline gave a faint smile back, but it faded soon after.

"You're safe with me."

"It's difficult to explain what I'm doing, Brix. I guess you could say I'm giving you and your people the tools to build your own future, by breaking down the walls that captivate you."

"Captivate?" He asked, not knowing the word.

"Holding you prisoner." A look in question. "It's a metaphor."

"Oh."

"I can attempt to arm your people, by disarming Them. But it's up to you guys what you tend to

do with those tools."

"And you're doing this by..." He didn't want to say it in a public place.

"I'm stopping them from gaining power over you, possibly maiming your kind further." She looked out the window, seeing the massive amount of steel, trash, and broken vehicles dividing the slums from the middle plate. "Derrilum is not the only city that's like this. Every one of them tends to have... 'Classes'. They're just not all on separate platforms."

"I've rarely been outside the city. People say it isn't safe."

"It's not." He looked at her concerningly. "Especially in the woods."

"So the Epidemic is real?" She nodded. "Have you seen it before?"

"...Yes." Thais muttered. "It's quite terrifying up close as well. Hope you never encounter it, Brix. It'll haunt you for the rest of your life if you somehow survive."

Chapter 3

Going their separate ways, the boy thanked the feline again. Giving her an unexpected hug as well, one she felt a little uncomfortable with. And it couldn't have been too pleasing holding onto metal limbs tightly, but Brix didn't seem to mind. Once again, the leopard swallowed down that pain in her heart and hardened it the best she could. She would need it for her next destination.

There always seemed to be a drastic difference between the lower and middle platforms. Though this one was still rather crowded, the streets were mostly clean. The pollution wasn't nearly as bad, but still lacking the fresh air of the outside world. The buildings had this interesting retro look to them, trying to keep the older style alive for younger generations to experience, she supposed. Even looking at it herself brought back memories.

But now wasn't the time to reminisce. Thais needed to keep her guard up around here. The streets were often populated with Officers to keep the crimes down. However, instead of making the people living there feel safe, it often made them afraid of being accused of nearly anything. In the lower regions, the Police could often get away with harassing others, as long as they claim it was in the line of

duty. Which often lead to jailing of the innocent without a trial, framing and blackmailing the people. Or her personal favorite; placing possessions under arrest, stating they have suspicion that it is being used for illegal activity. Meaning, they claim and take the citizen's items. Ranging from their hard earned coin to survive on, or even go as far as their entire homes.

It always made the feline uneasy to even pass one of these officers, especially when they rarely were seen without at least two comrades. And Thais being Thais... She had enough of their 'Cooperation.' Not to mention they often started asking alot of questions when they observed her, which only lead down to one bad road.

The lack of black cloaks in this crowd wasn't aiding her much, but she eventually got towards a thin alleyway between two tall buildings. Completely shading the narrow space and filling it with shadow. A few turns lead to a thick door, slightly underground and leading into a basement of another building. A heavy knock on the door echoed through the other side loudly, and a small slide opened up. Along with a pair of eyes to greet the feline. "Let me see Heffur." She said, looking down the alley where she came.

"Let me see your face." The male voice demanded, getting a glare from the grey-blue eye. "All of it."

"Open the door, or I will." The two had a staring contest for a bit until she raked the metal door with a leg, getting a good grip on it. The strength of the metal limb started to warp the door as it creaked loudly.

"Okay-okay!" The man cursed at her while shutting the slide. Unlocking the large door soon after, feeling the barrier give under her raised leg and almost shove the door opened. "You wait here-" Thais shoved the thug out of the way and against the wall as she passed. The noise and aggression got two more guarding another door to raise out of their chairs.

"I'm here to get paid." She growled, getting the two to look at each other.

"The boss is on the phone right now-"

"You say that as if I should care. Move." Taking a step forward, the two taller ones blocked the door in front of her. Feeling the first one stand closer behind the leopard, giving the sense of being surrounded. "You really want to get into an assassin's way?"

"You threatening us, furbag?"

"Please, Heffur won't give a damn what I do to you. Considering the job market nowadays, all three of you wouldn't be hard to replace in the least. That door is worth more than all three of you combined." She slightly motioned behind her with her head. "Now I can either step between you, or over your corpses. Your call."

The three looked at each other for a moment, and she grumbled in impatience. Getting the thugs to roll their eyes and step aside. "Don't try anything-"

"Save it." She opened the door to see three more thugs standing around a rather round fellow sitting at the desk. As Heffur looked a bit surprised to see the grey one, he motioned her to wait a minute. Stepping to the desk, she hung up the retro style phone on him, instantly getting a harsh look from the fat one.

"That was an important call-" She dug something out of her inner cloak pocket and half slammed it on his desk. For a moment the two just stared at each other, noticing the other men in the room place their hands on their pistols. Raising herself back up revealed a small video chip from under her paw. "Already?"

"When I get a job, I get it done. And I expect to get paid for it." The snow leopard crossed her arms. Getting another look of study from Heffur. "Do you have my money?"

"Yes. I always set it aside when I hire someone for a job. I'm a man of business, not a fool." He took a look at the chip, then placed it in a small slot within the wooden desk. Getting a hologramed screen to pop up and play the video. Showing everything that the scope displayed on the rifle. Following a stumbling man rushing through a forest. "It's not a very clear picture."

"Wait for it." She demanded, as the scope followed the man until he couldn't run any longer. Leaning up against a tree, it zoomed in, getting a good look at his face. Scanning it and getting a correct profile to appear with all his information. "Unless you're telling me that the entire system itself malfunctioned, I believe that's him." She got another glare through the hologram.

"...Fair enough. But how about the body-" A raised paw silenced him. Telling him to just watch it. As the man on the video looked into the forest, he took a few steps back.

"What is he afraid of?" A thug faintly asked. As the man turned around, getting another clear view of his face, a loud *Clink* could be heard and a bullet entered the man's head. Sending him falling backwards. Laying down for a few moments, some vines began to drag him deeper into the forest. A better zoom started to show some red lights in the darkness, merged with the bark and stems of the plantlife.

"Holy..." Another gasped. "How far away from Moses is this?"

"Just outside." This replied, getting a few thugs to hold back their chuckles.

"Man, that city is so screwed..."

"And you didn't report this?" Heffur asked her.

"It's not my job to report these things. They don't know about it." She said coldly, getting him to grumble. The feline knew what he was trying to do; reporting the forest might've resulted in an investigation. And therefore a possibility of the body being found, thus it might lead it back to Heffur.

"And how do you know that they don't know about it yet-"

"Because they would've burned the damn forest to the ground already. Especially something

that close to the city." Another glare from the leopard. "Stop trying to wiggle out of paying me. You can't find anything." The man studied the remains of the video for a bit until it ended. Getting him to exhale in thought.

"...You know, video editing is getting very good these days-"

"Which is illegal, and impossible to do in less than twelve hours-"

"But you could've scratched out some hiccup-" She gripped the wooden desk sharply with her left paw, getting deep scratches and startling the thugs to draw their weapons.

"We had a deal, you cow! Now Pay Me!" She growled, getting several guns pointed at her. "You can't squirm out of this, Heffur."

"Looks to me that you're at a disadvantage, Thais. I would be careful with what I say." The round one said, slightly pushing her metal paw off his desk and scowling at the damage. "But fine. You will be paid, cat. However, if I somehow get tied into this, I'm ratting you out for your outbursts." A faint growl from her, but she took a step back. Almost feeling the metal barrels brush against her cloak. As she stared at Heffur pulling his chair back to reach under his desk, she stretched out her left arm and shoulder a bit. Hiding the slight noise her left eye shutter made when it opened within the metal movement. Scanning through the wooden desk to see two briefcases; one with the contents of used bills that were legal. The other only contained a fake bill at the top and bottom per bundle that were traceable. Inbetween were just cotton papers. As he took the fake one and brought it up to the desktop, the man opened it for a glance, then closed it quickly.

She exhaled loudly, glaring at him again. "You're an idiot."

"Excuse me-?" The sudden turn of the leopard and disarm of the back right thug got him to squeal. The hook with her left paw shattered the thug's face nearly on impact, tearing some of his skin from the shear blunt force as she clawed the pistol from his hand. Spinning to her back against a wall, she covered her chest with the metal arm and shot two thugs in the torso as they shot at her. A couple of bullets hit the wall around her, and a few hit the metal areas on her shoulder and thigh, but nothing threatening. But it was the fourth one in the room that got lucky, getting her in the right breast while she took aim at him.

The bullet stun harshly, but didn't feel like it went all the way through. Carrying on, she retaliated with a shot in the leg, and then to the head before getting another few bullets to hit her left side. Luckily in armored parts. Covering her left eye just in case, she emptied the rest of the clip into the hallway. Getting the man in the hallway with a few of the bullets.

Dropping the weapon on the floor and crushing it with a heavy step, the round man tried to escape from behind the desk. Only to have it shoved against him and pinning him to the wall. A slight give, and then tilted upward a bit on him as Thais reached down for the real case. Once again letting the desk fall back, then shoved up against Heffur, she stepped on it with a single leg. Glaring at him. "This would've ended differently if you just kept your end." She said, hearing the man wheeze a bit, and holding up an arm to surrender. "And I know you'll rat me out for your own benefit." A cough from him.

"Wait-wait." He tried to say. "I-I won't! I promise! You'll never hear from me again." She pressed a button on the desk to pop out the video chip and place it in her inner pocket. "Please!"

"Everytime I trust you Heffur, I get screwed over. And I'm tired of it." She slammed into the desktop, wrecking the data stored in the computer within. "I've always been loyal when it came to business." Pressing down on the desk with her leg got some of the wood to split upwards. Enough to get a small but sharp pick to break off, making the human whimper at the sight of it. As the leopard wielded it, she studied his face a bit.

"Thais... You don't need to do this!" Another whimper turned into a cry when she stabbed at him with the small pike. Getting him to hold his breath and freeze for a few moments, then not noticing any pain. Seeing the wooden splinter dig into the wall beside his neck.

"From this moment on," The feline whispered harshly. "Every breath you take is a gift from me. One I Expect to be repaid." One last shove of the desk while turning about set him free from it. As Thais left, she shut the large metal door a bit loudly, knowing it was a bad idea after the impulse. As the adrenaline started to slow down, she felt the pain in her right side once again where she was shot. Feeling around the area stunned, but she could feel the bullet just barely in the skin. Gritting her teeth, she pulled it out. Examining it's rather crude make.

It was to be expected really, the man was often so cheap that he would probably arm his protection with bad weapons. Bullets probably made of something like tin or another weak metal. Good for inflicting pain and scaring people off without being terribly lethal. Her memory flashed back to the days when the people fought against the manufacturers, demanding something like this that wouldn't bankrupt someone if they were shot and survived. With all the medical bills, therapy sessions, and recovery expenses, it's no wonder they rallied against such a cause.

Her thoughts snapped back to the present, the wound was getting her tired, but she could feel the bleeding had stopped quickly. Tending to the rest of it here would be a bad idea, so the leopard carried on. Placing the used bullet into a pocket so she could drop it somewhere far outside the city.

The streets were a bit tense, odds are hearing the gunshots from earlier. Several groups of Officers were overlooking the buildings and different areas nearby, which only unsettled Thais a bit more. Readjusting her cloak a bit, she tried to blend in with the crowd, briefcase in her right hand. But turning around the city block corner was a slight barricade where people were being scanned.

Trying to keep the growl to herself, she turned around towards a different stairway. One that she hoped would lead down below near the Station once again. "You there!" An Officer from a different squad called, getting him and two others to head towards her direction. As she slightly glanced at him, their eyes locked for a moment. There wasn't any getting out of this without a scene.

Her left eye opened up under the mask, sending out an electrical shockwave that did no harm or could not be detected. Instead, it scanned for every Police radio nearby, counting twenty seven within the block, but thirteen within eyesight. Too much to take on her own, especially with such a crowd. "Let me see some ID, Furnann." He said to her while several other people started to move out of the way.

"And take off that hood."

With the two other officers following him closely, resting a hand on their personal firearm, Thais exhaled. "Hey, listen to him." Another one said.

"What's in the case?"

"Just some possessions." She finally answered them, getting the lead officer to gesture to see inside. Bringing it up to chest height, she unlocked one side of it, then quickly tossed it at the front officer. Getting him to catch it in surprise as she jumped at him with a knee, knocking him down. Seeing the right man draw his firearm, she caught his wrist, then kicked him in the ribs with her left leg. Continuing the attack on the left officer who was trying to do the same, connecting with his helmet and scratching it deeply with the hind claws.

Spinning around with the scratch, the leopard lifted the man's wielded arm, and managed to kick him in the face with the same left foot. Pinning him down to the ground with one fluid step and bringing the pistol, now being held with three hands, to his head. Though the man currently holding the briefcase was in her blind spot, her robotic eye caught his movement. Squeezing the trigger shot a stunning bolt that got the man to brace. Being in direct connection with him, Thais also felt it, but was able to shrug most of it off.

Prying the gun from the man's hand, she pointed it at the first one with her right paw. Trying to fire it, but the trigger locked. "*Unauthorized Personnel.*" The gun omitted, getting her to grunt and block the electrical nightstick. Rolling away, she placed the pistol in her cybernetic paw, getting the weapon's lights to start changing colors.

The man swung a bit wildly at her, trying to just connect the club with some organic matter on her body in hopes it would incapacitate the feline. After about ten seconds of evading, the pistol spoke up once again. "*Authorized User.*"

"W-what!?" The officer gasped loudly.

"*Enforcement Mode Active.*" Thais took aim at the man, and he immediately dropped his weapon. Raising his hands and stepping back.

"Whoa... Easy now. Don't do something you're regret in front of a lot of witnesses."

"I think we're past that point." The leopard said coldly. Keeping aim at the man while she picked up the briefcase. "Get on the ground." He half grunted at the feline, but slowly did. Finally having a clear shot, she left for the stairs. Throwing the abducted firearm off the plate before she headed down to the lower level.

It was rumored that such things were given to the Police, identification weaponry. They had such things in the TCTF, but that was to be expected. (Who would authorize the standard police to carry such things? Unless they were expecting something...) She thought while trying to make her way through the busy, uneasy crowds. Seeing a few groups of officers patrolling and searching the crowds. (They probably have a decent description of me right now. And I'm too far away from my spare disguise in this city...)

Just then, she heard a slightly buzzer go off in the distance. "Damnit." She cursed in a whisper, the Tram was already moving down.

However, it wasn't too late. There was another way or two down, they were just a bit risky. First, she needed to get to an upper level. With a single turnabout, another officer called at her in the distance. "You! Cat! Halt" Just what she needed, but this time she didn't stop. The crowd would likely aid her a little bit, but...

She looked down at the case she was carrying, getting an idea birthing. Quickly unlocking it while moving, Thais managed to get out one small stack of bills. Pulling off the small band with her fangs, she threw the free money in the air. Watching it instantly scatter and the surrounding people desperately scavenge for it. Creating a very difficult cloud of both paper and grasping hands.

It lasted long enough to make her escape. But taking the crowded stairs the way she came would be too slow. Instead, the leopard made her way to the balcony. Jumping from the railing, and digging her metal paw into the concrete ceiling above while swinging herself to the side of the upper level. Grounding her hind legs into the smooth rocks and snaring them inside to brace her weight. The feline then released her grip with her left paw, and swung herself to grasp the upper floor. Half worried that her hind claws might not hold.

The railing was just above her, and with her synthetic arm secure, Thais pressed off the side of the concrete wall. Launching herself upwards, and just over the railing above. Taking a breath, and faintly looking over the edge at the insane drop, the leopard grunted. She never liked heights too well, but it worked. Another quick scan, and the only nearby Officers were those on the floor below. There were a group or two to the far back, but they wouldn't be able to catch up to her now.

Quickening her pace through the viewpoint and food courts, She started heading towards where the station would be below her. Seeing the cables in the distance fairly easily, and the tram just starting to take off. With a cross between a frustrated grunt and a whine, she started to run towards the edge. Putting more power into her legs, to the point where they were cracking the floor below her. With one strong jump clearing the railing, the grey one took to the air. Startling several people who witnessed the stunt from the balconies.

It seemed like she was almost flying for half a minute before she landed on top of the cable car. Denting the top of it and making the thing bounce. Causing the feline to tumble and roll a bit before grasping a metal chunk of it. Slamming herself in the front of the car and grunting at the sting of it. With a few breaths, she started climbing back on top of the tram, scratching the paint and windshields with her hind claws before resting a bit.

Enjoying the ride down, the car came to a sudden stop about halfway down. Looking at the retreat, she barely spotted the Royal Blue and White Police Uniforms at the station. "They never give up, do they?" She growled out loud. Pulling herself up, her natural eye caught the tram's left stability cable nearby, within a small jump's reach. With another frustrated whimper growl thing, she lunged towards it. Grabbing it somewhat loosely with her cybernetic claw and used it as a zip line for the way down. Slightly worried about the damage it may cause, either to the paw or the cable, she released before she

got to the station. Landing on one of the steel roofs and causing it to cave in, along with a wall.

Another few deep breaths, Thais got up. Seeing an alligator who was sitting inside the remains of his makeshift home. Sighing, she started to open up the briefcase, worrying the male a bit to the point where he started to get up to flee. "Wait." The feline demanded, pulling out a small bundle of bills, then the Tram ticket from her cloak pocket. Handing it to the gator who only looked at it and her for a few moments. "I'm not coming back here. Start yourself a new life." She put it down in front of him, then walked off. Hearing him scamper to take it and whisper his thanks.

Getting out in the streets once again, the feline picked up a few signals coming from the tramway. (There's no way they got down here this fast. Unless they were down here for another reason...) It was something she really didn't want to think about, and picked up her pace. Heading towards the saloon where she entered the city.

"So then I told her, Dawn, I can't help you murder your sister. That's when she put a gun in my face and says, if you want the ability to keep talking, you will. I just always thought it was a bit of an overreaction for such a thing. But then again, at the time, I didn't know what Ilizabeth actually did to her. She was never an opened book, and to really discover that Furnann's past was almost impossible." The horse said to the beast beside him. "You know what I'm saying?" The larger creature just moan what was almost in frustration. "You totally know what I'm saying."

"Artheas!" The leopard called, getting the brown horse to double take at her, and seeing the key fly through the air. Catching it with his talents, he placed it in the slot containing his reins. Freeing them from the contraption and flipping the strap on his back.

Turning about, he double took at the Makalin.
"JustSoYouKnow,It'sNotYou,It'sMe.IJustReallyWantToFocusOnMyCareerRightNow.ButThere'sPlentyOfFishesInTheSea.We'llAlwaysHave..." He looked at the Saloon's entrance, but couldn't find a name of the pub. "...Thiiiiiiiis Place." He backed away awkwardly, noticing the creature's owner just staring him strangely. "Promise you'll take care of her? For me?" The beast made a moan in almost mourning as the steed ran off.

Catching up to Thais, she mounted on him while moving. Getting him to grunt at the claws and crude mounting skills. "Did you just break up with that Makalin?"

He sighed in defeat. "Alas, we just were not meant to be. It felt like all I was doing was giving, and she; taking."

"Sounds harsh." She grumbled sarcastically. "I'm sure you'll live."

"Providing we're not running from someone wanting to kill us." She didn't reply, making the brown one double take behind him. "...Are they?"

"Likely not. Still, let's not take the chance to find out."

"Fair enough. I'm guessing you got paid, so where to now?"

"Let's Finally get something to eat."

Chapter 4

It was the sight of the fields where she now called Home that finally got her body to relax a bit. Sore from all the tension of being completely ready for something else to strike, some obstacle to appear that would force her to escape or stand her ground once again. But at least alot of the lower classes tended to have the same opinion about the law enforcements within the nation.

But now, the leopard was back home. All she wanted to do was cook a nice meal, and sleep away the afternoon. Though, there were a few things she needed to tend to first. One of them was constantly stinging her side, worrying her about infection a bit. But only slightly.

"We're almost there." Artheas said to her, probably noticing how quiet the feline was being. Even in the distance, she could still spot out the two little ones without using her left eye. They were rather distinct from the green and brown landscape; A bright white, the shade of a cotton cloud with the occasional black streaks on him. And a metallic Brass, mixed with red here and there. Neither were creatures she or the horse has ever seen, let alone heard of.

It seemed like no time, they were pulling up to this wooden cabin the two adults built. Well, more like claimed and fixed up. There was never any sign of who actually lived here beforehand, let alone no one had ever returned to the habitat. It was just a great hideout spot, away from just about everything. From the smog, media pollution, the law, and the infected forests. Though there were some in the far distance, they would never become a threat unless they grew legs and migrated closer.

"You're back!" The brass dragon chirped at the two as they finally came to a stop.

"Did everything go well?" The white wolf-ish one asked. It was hard to really tell if the two were always mocking one another, or just almost perfectly in sync. They honestly reminded Thais of a single mind in two bodies. Closer than just a set of twins.

"Ask her. She really hasn't spoken of it much. But we did manage to get some food for tonight." The horse began to set down the bags with his ethereal limbs, getting the two younger ones rather excited and help bring them inside.

"Is everything okay, Thais?" The wolf asked, getting a face in question from the draconic one as well that read the same.

"Fine, Revoros. Just a little bit of trouble getting paid, that's all."

"I told you Heffur would try to screw you over." Artheas nudged her from afar.

"We all told her that." The brass one joked. "You even got some ginger roots? Haven't seen those in a while."

"Yes, the market was quite variable today. Maybe we just beat the afternoon crowd and got first picks. I kept saying that we should go earlier, but you know how Thais likes her sleep." The brown one teased, walking through the large double doors into the cabin. They had to retrofit it so that he could live inside, but Artheas did most of that work. It wasn't until that project that the leopard could see the near-limitless uses of his talents. Let alone, how dangerous they could possibly be if used for offense.

Granted, the horse was a pacifist, for the most part. He never seemed to be willing to harm others, but would go out of that comfort zone to assist the ones he cared about. At times, it frustrated the feline to no end. The constant battle of wits about morality and right or wrong. Everyone was almost a puzzle that he needed to take apart to clean before he could put them back together. "You okay?" The brass one whimpered while leaning up to her, using a paw on her metal knee to keep balance easier. Almost asking for some attention with almost sad green eyes.

"Yeah, just a long day. Help them put things away for now, I'll get some wood out back." He nodded at the grey one, receiving a few scratches from the organic paw. Getting the small pup to come over and ask for the same. A few minutes of that, and she took the back door. Getting greeted by the cool shadowed air that was lingering behind the house. Caressing her to take that black cloak and hood off and let the spotted fur breathe. As much as she disliked the metal areas showing, it felt nice to get them out in the open. Just another positive thing about this home.

Taking off her gloves and putting the clothing on a covered barrel, the slight sting reminded her once again. Taking off the sleeveless shirt, she found the bullet hole in it. Matching where the pain was coming from on her body, completely cased in a dark black, crusty mess. Digging through her cloak pocket, she found the chip first and placed it in her pants. Moving out to the sunlight, Thais examined the bullet a bit more.

It's shape was more warped than she recalled, and somehow still slightly moist. Oily, really. Giving the impression it was covered in engine oil, one with a very dark red tint to it that only concerned her more. "Was it in someplace bad?" Artheas' voice almost startled the leopard, coming from behind and making her cover the below average size lumps.

"...How long were you watching me." It was barely a question, really stressing out her irked tone.

"Relax, I'm not interested in your naked figure. Dawn ruined that for me, really." She only glared at him with her good eye, slightly masked by her black and white hair. He sighed, stepping down from the deck and coming a bit closer to her. "Not long. But I knew you were shot." A look in question made him smile at her raised eyebrow. "Call it a sixth sense. I just know."

She exhaled, turning to the bullet in the light again. "...Nowhere important. Just the right side of the chest, but it didn't get in far. Barely broke through the skin."

"Can I see?" Another sharp glare made him toss his snout. "I'm serious, they don't interest me. Cover them if you like, or even put on a shirt. I'm only concerned, Thais."

"Sure you are." She grumbled, still covering her breasts, but turning more towards him. A few steps closer, and he got a good look. "You want to lick it clean too?"

"Don't think I'll take that risk." A slight chuckle. "It's scabbed over, if you even want to call it that. Gotta give them credit, they work real fast."

"...They do." The feline gave half a grumble.

"How much was it?" She looked at him for a moment, then sighed. Opening the round shutter of her left eye.

"...About another percent."

"You don't seem to have too many percents left." He tried to make it sound like a joke, but it worried both of them. "So, this makes you...?"

"38.4% Furnann. According to the scan." A heavy exhale made him place a brown muzzle on her shoulder. "...It makes sense really."

"Just seems to be getting faster. I guess your blood eventually needs to be replaced... Seems like yesterday, you were at 45%."

"That was about five months ago."

"You've been shot alot these past few months then." He teased, getting her to slightly break a smile for a moment. Then toss the bullet into the distance. "Not going to keep this one?"

"...I'm getting tired of doing it. Only to know that the more I get shot at, the more I become that matter." A slight whimper at that from the horse. "This only ends one out of two ways."

"Then why are you doing it like this?" She didn't answer, nor give a response until she got a wet lick. Getting the leopard to growl at him, using the arm she was covering herself with wipe off the wetness. "Gasp! Nipples-!" Thais slapped his snout with the mechanical arm, getting him to whimper loudly and grunt for several moments. "Why the metal arm!?"

"You deserve it!" She growled, but couldn't help to laugh a little. Putting her shirt back on. "Keep being a pervert around me, next time I'll use claws."

"Yes, Ma'am." He whimpered, playing along and nudging her when she got the clothing covering her. "But seriously, I didn't see anything if it makes you feel better." A slightly angry look from her, but she sighed it off. Feeling a faint push leading towards his larger body, she leaned against him.

"...How often did she...?" Artheas made a noise in question for a moment, then connected the dots.

"Dawn? She was almost always naked around me." A strange look from Thais. "It's true. She was far from shy about her natural figure. Half the time she would ride me without clothing."

"Perv." He chuckled at that.

"You know what I mean." Another telekinetic nudge. "But that planet was very different. Was so much hotter than this one was, often enough..." He lightly tilted his head in a shrug. "It wasn't uncommon for people to wear less clothing. More common for males than females, but they did it once in a while. Dawn was no exception."

"And this somehow ruined it for you?"

"Eh, we were entirely different species, much like us. I had no interest in such things, and she was about asexual as they came. Though, sometimes she would surprise you."

A long silence between the two as they enjoyed the cooling shade. "You seem to like talking about her alot."

"I just miss her a little, that's all. I guess I felt... Safe with her. Much like I do with you."

"Safe?"

"You don't see me as a Nightmare. Neither did she. You don't see me as something that needs to be preserved or something endangered. You just want to live, and are willing to survive with another wanting just that."

"Survive, but not live." Another shrug from the horse.

"Sometimes they can be the same, even without knowing it. Living doesn't have to be defined as surviving in luxury. It's just a matter of opinion when it comes to happiness." The two little ones came out of the front door and started tending through the garden playfully. Making the adults smile a bit. "Often enough, that change can shift without you even realizing it."

"Just because they're happy, doesn't mean that anything's changed."

"Doesn't it?" It made her quiet for a moment. "I mean, yes. 'Cubs' as you call them, are often very easy to please and tend to be blissfully ignorant. But those two... They seem to be more aware of their surroundings than we think."

"Perhaps a little."

"Have you ever noticed that they never offer to go with us? Even into town or for a simple visit? They're so content to be here, with you, that they know when not to ask for too much. That, or they somehow understand exactly how dangerous things can get on our... Missions." Once again, the feline was silent. "They're alot smarter than they lead on to be. I get the feeling that they're doing this... Because they are needing to."

"What do you mean?"

"As in... You need them to be here, for you. Not for themselves." It was a painful thought, one that almost wanted to make Thais turn away from watching them. Yet, a slightly brush from the side of the horse's talents kept her otherwise. "You're not alone in this, Thais. Neither of us are." He left it at that, going back in and taking her clothing with him to be washed. The two smaller ones spotted her staring at them and waved. Shyly, she waved back and proceeded to get some firewood.

"Thais." They called at her, getting the leopard to look at them from a distance again.

"Can we spar a little bit this afternoon?"

"We'll see after supper. I've kinda had a rough day as it is, I don't need you two beating on me." The little ones giggled a little bit, and tended the garden happily. Though it was a joke to them all, it was also the truth. One would think with their small size that they would be rather weak, but with the two of them together, they were a nightmare. Attacking in routine, like they were completely linked in the mind and body, it was almost impossible to really defend against them. Though, Thais has won a few matches, it was only a pawful.

They were so good about such things though. For caring cubs, they never let a loss get into their head. The same thing for a win. Whoever taught them to fight unarmed like that, they definitely did it correctly. It's one reason why she was completely okay with leaving the two alone here while her and Artheas went out. If anyone underestimated them, they would probably get wrecked.

At the same time, it was comforting to know she didn't have to worry about her home getting invaded either. Though, there was hardly anything considered valuable in it, the furniture made from old wooden chairs, tables, and cabinets, as well as car seats, basically spoke for themselves. Everything in it was scavenged over the years. Including the garden outside that the cubs attended to daily were almost considered 'Stolen'. Mostly the seeds, taken from farmlands far away.

Granted, *that* worried her. The garden outside and the food that grew there. There was no real telling whether or not this plantlife was actually infected by the Epidemic or not. Even through her scans, she's never really detected anything wrong with it. It didn't halt her concerns though, it very well might be contagious someday. And the last thing she wanted was them, her fami- "Everything okay?"

Artheas' voice got her fur to almost puff out a bit. "...Yeah. Was just..." The leopard trailed off as he nodded in understanding. "How's supper coming along?"

"Well, I got the fire started for the stove, but I'll leave the cooking expertise to them. They seem to really enjoy it." She nodded faintly, getting a bit of a sad look in her eye. "What's wrong?"

"...They keep speaking about their fathers. I almost wonder..."

"I know. But Rev and Lexar both claim they're here on their own will. Even told me that they needed to beg their parents to be out here, whatever that really means." A faint exhale from Thais. "Don't worry about it. I know what you're thinking. But there's worse places to be in this world right now than here. If anything... Perhaps this is the best place."

"I find that hard to believe." He chuckled at her answer.

"Go get some rest. You need it." A slight sigh in defeat, but the idea of being dismissed comforted her. "I'll get you up when supper is ready, okay? And at a range this time."

"At least you learn." She chuckled, patting the horse on the neck while she passed him. Down the hall and opening the door to the main bedroom, containing two mattresses stacked together, she closed the door behind her. Faintly seeing her reflection in a broken mirror, the small hole on her side really stuck out. Getting the feline to take off the shirt once again to look at the black spot. Still containing a shimmer of red, like hundreds of very small lights trying to shine through.

("How do you feel? I ask, because you just ended another life.")

("But regardless, he's still another Vulture posing as a Dove.")

("God Only Knows What We Were Born To Be.")

"So, I'm sitting in my room. It's 8 am, I've been up all night and just exhausted." Thais said while eating the rather flavorful meal the cubs cooked. The sun was starting to set already, and a nap was just what she needed to revitalize herself. "I hear my father almost stomp down the hallway, and my heart stops. For what felt like hours until he passed my door and threw opened my brother's." The horse chuckled. "My father, he's always had this voice, especially when he was angry. It was almost a bark, really. And it echoed through our house everytime one of us got into trouble. I thought he was coming after me after sneaking out, but he goes to my brother, and he says: 'Hey! I want you to tell me why the car's parked at such an odd angle. On the Porch. Across the street!' And it was everything within me to not lose it." Everyone in the room laughed at her story.

"That sounds like fun." Artheas commented.

"At times, yes. Usually when you were not on his radar. But wow, was he ever pissed. He never let that go, and my brother had to end up getting his own car because my father wouldn't ever let him drive that one again. Even after he forced his son to fix any damages on it." Again, the group chuckled, even putting a smirk on the leopard's face.

"Our dads never did anything like that." The brass one said.

"Though they could be very strict when it came to training." Rev informed, getting the dragon to nod.

"When exactly did you start your training?" The grey feline asked.

"And how old are you two again?"

"We're the same age, but..." They looked at each other.

"We're not sure how old we are. We were never given a type of calendar when it comes to age." The wolf said. "They said that it just encouraged people to look forward towards a mere number."

"Rather than be judged on maturity. We're the ones who often ask if we're ready." It made Rev chuckle.

"And when we did ask, they often reply with the same thing: *Are You?*" Lexar chuckled that time.

"Sounds like they were pretty laid back." The leopard's opinion made the dragon's wings shrug. The short red fur covering the tarps of them almost fluff out a bit.

"They were when they need to be. And that wasn't too often." The white wolf one said.

"You two don't get into trouble that much, huh?" They shook their heads at the brown horse. "What about on your own?"

That time, they looked at each other with a bit of sadness. "We're... Rarely without one another."

"A long time ago, we had the same nightmare." Lexar started to explain.

"One with one of our dads disappearing, then the other looking for his mate."

"With no word from either of them for years, we decided to look ourselves, with the help of our mother."

"I knew you had a mother somewhere." Artheas teased them, getting the two to shake their heads.

"She's more of a Step-Mother. But she's still in the same family." Rev answered.

"We didn't come from her, like you would think. But in this dream..."

"We were doing well together, but something separated us when it came to morals. I can't remember what it was anymore."

"Neither can I." The wyrmling said. "But it ended up being our downfall."

"That explains alot." Thais said, taking a drink. "The only times I've actually won against our spars

is due to me separating you two. But it's not easy."

"Bartan always said that we're always stronger together than apart." The wolf looked at the Brass one, getting him to nod and carry on.

"And if we lose one, we become so much weaker as a whole. We must be kept in harmony, and within reach of one another."

"But not literally." The horse half asked, getting the two to nod at him in agreement about his statement. "No wonder you have such a bond."

"We love each other." Rev said, looking at his brother with brown eyes.

"Just like our father's do."

"And that's perfectly normal." Artheas said, taking the empty bowls from the soup and bringing them to the sink to be washed. "Not saying it's a bad thing, but what's going to happen when you two are going to find your own mates?"

"Simple."

"We'll all live under the same roof." The dragon chuckled at the brown one's snout toss. "Feel like some sparring?"

The leopard stretched herself out a bit, feeling the mechanical limbs almost dense up much like real muscles would. "A little bit, sure. While we still have some sun. Just watch the right side." They nodded and scampered out the door. "You okay on dish duty?"

"I'm fine. Rather do this than be a punching bag for them." The horse snorted. "Go get your ass kicked."

"Shut up-" She stopped for a moment, feeling a message getting picked up in her left eye. Though, it was in the form of an advertisement, there was a hidden message decoded within.

"What's wrong?"

"...I got another job. They want to meet in Briston City." She got a less than pleased look from him. "I know, but..."

"We're fine right now, Thais. You don't need to take another job for a few months."

"And what happens if I can't find another one by then?" The two stared at each other for a bit. "It's better to have something to fall back on, just in case. If it's fishy, then I won't take it, okay?"

"...Just... Be careful. We'll head out in the morning." She nodded at him, then went outside.

Chapter 5

A heavy shadow fell over the city. From the look of it, it was only late afternoon. Though the two had been traveling all day, the hours melted away when the leopard was riding the steed. Granted, the faint arguments over this job ceased, they kept resprouting from time to time.

She half agreed with him. Perhaps it was a mistake to attempt another job so soon. She didn't even get time enough to clean out her rifle, let alone fully rest up. That was one good thing about being half mechanical, though. She could borrow out of its supply of energy if she needed to.

Granted, the idea of it almost scared the feline still. Remembering that professor bragging about some discovery over perpetual motion generating, and using it within the Exoskeleton armors. Allowing them to near indefinitely run without needing to recharge. Well, by normal means. It would run out of 'Stamina' if it was stressed enough. But all it needed was a few minutes of rest for the generators to recreate the energy that was spent.

Thais', as much as she still got butterflies in her chest just thinking about it, was in her tail. The entire length of it was dozens of these generators, working together to power the rest of the body. It was in a place that could tap into the middle of the body, even if it had to climb up the spinal cord. Which always left a constant hum of pain within her.

Though the design was still imperfect, regardless of how the professor boasted. Sure, the generators got their cooling from being outside of the main current, and exposed to the air around her. But it was often in a state of danger that way, always at risk of being harmed or even severed.

The idea worried the grey one. Getting her to command the appendage to curl around her waist to ensure it was still there. It came when she beckoned, though she always felt uneasy about it. The red lights glowed with a bit of sadness, as if it could sense her pain of the previous limb. A Phantom Pain, so they called it. One of her nerves still trying to command and move an appendage that was no longer there.

Though, there was a little bit of comfort, knowing that those demands were heard and still followed through. It's like the tail knew it was a stand-in to what she once had. It wasn't trying to replace her old tail, per say. But it was trying to ease the pain of its loss for her, all the while fulfilling its own

duties.

The leopard's natural paw graced over the tail slightly, unable to feel it apart from the organic appendage. Though the skeletons of most feline tails tended to be rather long and thin, this one almost looked like a series of large spades. All pointing downward and fitting into a nice, smooth series of links. Surprisingly flexible, despite of its chrome look and sharp design. Though it was never to be used as a weapon or form of defense. She made that mistake a long time ago.

Even in the darkness of the setting sun, Thais could still make out where it was severed. It seemed to have a different tint on the metal than the rest of it, giving it a lighter grey than the abyss stain of the other parts. Though her mind still wondered what happened to that lower half, it was something she was expecting to be lost forever. But, after several days of rest, the tail began to grow back. Spade by spade. It was unreal... Behaving like it was a living creature, not a machine.

From then on, the bad news kept coming. Every little injury of her natural body would be fixed up, but in the form of her mechanical side. From a few bar fights that bruised and scraped her right set of knuckles, to being shot from time to time. Small cuts, claws, hair regrowing, or even just losing blood... Every day she was becoming one step closer to being called Machine rather than Furnann. Mechanical, as in heartless. A soldier being commanded what to do. Designed for a single purpose, and nothing more. "We're here."

Once again, the horse restored herself by coming back to reality. "That took a while." She said, trying to make it sound like she wasn't too deep into thought.

"What were you thinking about?" (Damnit.) She cursed in her head.

"...Just what happened to my tail."

"Your first one? I thought you said you lost it with your legs."

"Not that one. The mechanical half."

"Ah." He was awkwardly silent about it, and she rolled her eye, sighing.

"Just do it-"

"I've been thinking about that." Artheas started rather quickly, getting the feline to grunt. "You said you lost it just before we met. Inside of some forest?"

"Yes. It was shot off by a sniper." Thais exhaled. "...He expected it to be the end of me, that was the mistake that ended his life."

"Y-yeah... But your current tail is a series of perpetual generators, right?" She made a noise in conformation. "Ones that do not need to be linked with one another to work properly."

"I'm not scientist, if that's what you're asking."

"Neither am I about this stuff. But you still must have some design blueprints or something

within your... Mechanical Memory, right?" A slight brush on his neck motioned him to carry on. "Well, is it possible for it to continue to grow from that side? Whereas it had an energy source and a form of regeneration?"

"Where are you going with this? That there's possibility of another one of me running around?"

"I'm not saying that exactly, but..." The horse exhaled. "You've seen the Epidemic in the forest, right? It has the same red lights you do."

"...I know. But I'm not sure if it caused all this. I'm not even sure if it's possible." Another loud exhale. "No one knows where it came from. Some people even claim it was some alien infection that some idiot released to the surface."

"Stories, I'm sure."

"Well, after seeing you and the two cubs, I'm not so sure it's that farfetched."

"I'm not an alien." Artheas grumbled at her, getting the female to smirk.

"Sure you're not. You're just a talking horse with telekinesis that happens to set himself on fire when it turns to night. Not alien at all."

"But I'm believable. Not some bald thin grey humanoids going 'Beep, Boop, Boob' and sticking Epona-knows-what into people's anus." It got Thais to laugh a little bit. "There's no such thing as some ancient infection that likes to target trees."

"You're taking this rather lightly." He slightly tilted his head in a shrug. "Tell you what, let's make a wager."

"I'm listening."

"If it's an alien infection or something else off the planet, you get to find me a new mattress and carry it back home."

"And if I win?"

"If it's something that was originally started on the planet, be it synthetic or whatever-"

"You get to buy Me a new mattress. Something with massaging vibrations, and possibly thermal heating."

"...You realize that we don't have power at our cabin."

"...And a solar-powered generator."

"Deal." They shook on it, Artheas using his talents to grip the metal paw.

It wasn't much longer until the city of Briston was in their sights. Standing at the viewpoint, the two gazed at the tall skyscrapers that were illuminated in the distance. Creating almost a light blue halo over it, separating itself from the skies. "Looks like we're here." The horse muttered. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"You always have a bad feeling about everything."

"Well, it's worse this time." He snorted at the leopard.

"And that means anything could go wrong. The ground could open up and swallow us at any given moment." Artheas took a moment to study the grass he was standing on, and she tossed her muzzle.

"Don't say things like that!"

"You're just being paranoid." She grumbled, lightly shoving his neck a bit. All of a sudden, his mane ignited in a bright blue flame. Burning its way across his entire body, slowly transforming the brown fur into a cyan as if it were a burning sheet of paper. All the way down to his hooves, even keeping a small bit of fire on the heels of them. "...Wow."

"See? Nothing special. It just happens." He shrugged while looking back. Seeing her rather thrallled expression and chuckling at her.

"Seriously... That was amazing." Another chuckle, and he shook his head. "And that doesn't hurt?"

"Don't even feel it. Though, it does give me the feeling of a fresh breeze through the mane. That's about it." He continued on, the flames on his neck moving closer to her, but not threatening her position. They didn't even give off alot of heat, just the normal warmth that his mane would normally give.

"And nothing else changes with this? No strengthened powers, no extra abilities? Pyrokinesis?" He chuckled at that.

"Notta. Just some cool looking cosmetics and a slight craving for strawberry pancakes." Artheas tried to look back at Thais and give her a smirk. "I find it amusing how you're so interested in this." A bit of an embarrassed grunt from her. "Almost like a kitten, really."

"I would rephrase that if I were you."

"Cat?" A growl from her. "Feline?"

"Close enough." She grumbled.

"So, where are we headed exactly? Away from the crowds, no doubt."

"As far as I can tell. Towards the northwest, there's a large series of storage warehouses that's said to be empty 80% of the time."

"I don't like those odds."

"Neither do I, but it's something. Odds are, if there's another group of people around, they're doing something just as shady."

"Good point. To the Lycanthropic Storage Buildings then." He teased.

"...That's not..." The leopard grunted, pressing a paw against her eye.

The streets were unusually calm and quiet. Almost eerie to her, making the remaining fur on the back of her neck rise. It was like a strange fog of silence, with the mix of being watched by the shadows. Once again, Thais scanned the area for anything that carried an electric field. She got the usual, being any lights within the buildings or on the streets, but also got two others. One of them quite far away and somewhat faint compared to the rest, the other felt like it was more powered like the lights. "Odds are that's my contact." She muttered, getting her mount to flick an ear behind him.

"So, is it a trap?"

"Not that I know of." The leopard half grunted as she turned off the scan. Feeling the slight pain still echo through her body. "Stop here for now. I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Thais, this feels uneasy-"

"I know. So, just in case, I want you to stay out of sight. Watch over me in case something does go wrong. No use in both of us getting caught." He sighed as she dismounted, giving her a small nudge as if to say 'Be Careful.' The feline nodded and walked forward. Getting close to where the meeting spot was, between two buildings.

Another long-coated figure moved out and towards her. "Excuse me, miss." It almost sounded like it was coming from a speaker. "It looks like rain, and I'm without an umbrella. Would you happen to know somewhere I could get one?"

"Personally, I'd suggest Mc Allister & Gibbins on Graham Street. They should have something appropriate for you." Thais replied in a British accent.

"You got here quick. Much quicker than expected." The man replied. Stepping a little closer, she could see he was an SLD; Simulated Life Doll. A robotic puppet to be used a medium.

"An android? That paranoid around me, huh?" She glanced in the direction at the fainter lifeform she detected before.

"You need to realize that we play a dangerous game, Assassin."

"I don't disagree, but at least I have more balls to show up in person." The feline growled.
"Enough small talk. What's this job about?"

"Long story short, we need Mr. Sanisa removed from his position." She stopped and gave the figure a very sharp glare.

"...You want me to take out the Prime Minister? The Country's Leader?" The leopard hissed at the doll, trying her best to be thick but not too loud. "Are you insane!?"

"Let me finish-"

"The man is just a figurehead. A puppet. If you cull him, they're just going to find a replacement within a couple of days."

"We're not requesting your opinion, Simo."

"You're just asking me to inflict Chaos in the entire nation for a while. In an economy that cannot remain stable if that happens." She growled. "Now I know why you didn't want to meet me in person."

"Again, we're not asking for your thoughts. You're a soldier, keep them to yourself."

"I've never joined any militia-"

"Thais Norris." The feline halted, staring at him. "Confirmed death, over twenty years ago. Or so the media says." She remained silent. "But really, you were taken in as a cadaver and revived. Replaced the limbs you lost during that accident with... Well..." The SLD gestured her left side. "From there, you were trained to use them in an experimental defense force against unknown threats."

"Someone who grew up on Saturday morning cartoons." She grumbled, almost getting the man on the other side to chuckle. "How much more do you know?"

"I know the outcome. I know the Vow you took, as well as the Betrayal of said Code." Her muzzle scrunched up a bit. "And from there... The battle of Blisterbark. Where over 600 good men fell... In two hours." Another long silence. "To those who hated the military, you were quite the civil war hero. To others..."

"A terrorist. Or a few steps above that." She glared at the direction of the man in hiding again. Showing the left side of her face that was covered by the black mask.

"It's no wonder people referenced you to the White Death from the old times." Thais didn't reply. "Perhaps it's out of term to request this, but..." Her attention drew to the doll again. "Could I see the damages?" It gestured to her face.

"...It wasn't from that fight." The leopard muttered, exhaling before taking off the hood and the mask. Letting her white mane flow out a bit, barely showing the black roots and the shutter of the left eye open.

"Remarkable." It took a step closer.

"No touching." She growled, and the android lifted its hands. Studying her facade from afar.
"You're getting off topic."

"Perhaps. But I've been looking forward to seeing you for a long time."

"And now you're getting creepy." She growled, and the doll took a step back. "Why do you want to take out the Prime?"

"He's planning to pass through a bill that will force the Atmospheric Processors to be shut down. We need to stop that."

"That doesn't mean we need to kill him."

"Once again, you jump to conclusions. We want you to Remove him."

"I'm not a kidnapper." She crossed her arms. "Abduction is not on my resume."

"But if Sanisa thinks he is a target to an assassination, they will place him in hiding."

"Wait. You want me to fail an assassination. On Purpose?" Another thick statement.

"Judging from your record, you haven't missed a shot. We would trust your aim quite well. Especially with your... Enhancements. Afterword, we will arrange a message to be brought to him, telling him to reject this bill. Letting him live if he does-"

"And if the Puppetmasters tell him to push through it? What then?"

"We have a backup plan for that. And it does not involve you, Thais. I'm sorry." She growled at the doll again. "I wish I could tell you more, but I've already given you more than enough information. More than I really should have." He sighed on the other side of the speaker. "Will you take this job?"

"You put me in a corner, you realize this." The leopard grumbled. "If I refuse, and this plan fails. You'll think I had something to do with it. Meaning, you could come after me next." He remained silent.
"How much does it pay?"

"I have 700,000 hidden nearby currently. We will pay you between 400,000 and 800,000 after. Depending how well the shot is done." A heavy exhale from the feline.

"...What about injuring him?"

"If you trust your shot enough, you may maim him. But do not put his career in harm." Another long silence. "You may take a few days to consider it, if you like."

"...No. I'll-" Heavy screeches of several tires could be heard from a distance, then their entire surroundings. Seeing lights flicker off in the distance. "Did you set me up!?"

"What? No! They must've tracked your vehicle somehow-"

"I ride a horse, asshole!" She turned to the alley between the warehouses, but a bright light stunned her right eye for a moment. Several scans of her Electriclocation went off, even picking up units hidden in that direction. A loud clunk could be heard over the roaring of engines and the propulsion of a skychopper. Getting her to barely make out the android laying on the floor. "Coward." She grumbled, getting the squad cars screech to a halt and hear several dozen men exit their vehicles and take aim. Shouting at the leopard within the bright spotlight.

She was surrounded.

Chapter 6

"...In Your Deepest Pain...

...In Your Weakest Hour...

...In Your Darkest Night...

*...You Are **Lovely**."*

There was this strange silence that nearly muted the Officer's shouts at the leopard. Ordering her to raise her hands in the center of a circle of squad cars. She could barely make out the multi-colored lights through the large funnel of white above her. It felt heavy, like Thais was lifting a large weight while everyone almost shouted at her to stop struggling. Stop fighting and just give in.

But through it all, she could still hear her own heartbeat. Racing faster as her instincts demanded to claw her way out. Use any means necessary, take any amount of lives that were thrown in her direction, as long as it meant her survival. Her freedom. All the while, her mechanical 'Programing' was demanding the same. Both completely out of sync with one another, until she took a breath. "We know," She mutter through the shouting voices. "But we'll never change. It's true, it's what we became." Through the bright light, she caught something blue running along the side of a building. Something almost on fire. "Standing on the Edge..."

"Shut up, Murderer! Get Down On The Ground!" One distinct shout from a TCTF Officer got through her thoughts. Just before one of the squad cars in front of the leopard forcefully flipped forward and was thrown at her. Thais slightly jumped and grabbed a hold of it as it flew over the barricade that

was behind the feline. Gripping the airborne armored car as it started flipping and slamming against street. A series of parts started to fling towards her, as she rooted her hind legs on the top of the vehicle and caught them with her left paw. Connecting them together as the car rotated and crashed into the road. Gaining a bit more momentum with the aid of the leopard.

As it finally started to scrape on its right side, Thais got off and hid behind the damaged car. Using it as a barricade against the enforcement she just escaped. With the final piece caught over it, she attached it to make the complete Rifle. Loading in a large red Magazine and it powered up.

100% Ammo Remaining.

The gun spoke to her, as she adjusted the barrel to a Grenade Launcher-like tube. Throwing the heavy weapon on the car's now upper side, and taking aim. "We'll Never Change." The feline growled, firing a loud pipe that lobbed quickly down the street. As the men and women started to retreat, the ammo landed in the very spot they held the leopard captive. Detonating a very large, electrical sphere that made a thunderous impact throughout the city. However, her scans indicated that no one was killed during the attack. Either unconscious, stunned, or completely unharmed.

80% Ammo Remaining.

Her gaze returned to both the chopper in the air, and the horse still around the top of the buildings. Throwing down another large magazine for later use, as if to say: "There's More Coming." She motioned something to him, and Artheas gave a large nod. Running off and trying to stay out of sight.

It was time for Thais' retreat for now. She'll have to lose the spotlight when she got to higher grounds. Running down the streets and turning a corner, she met with a large, heavily armored, six wheeled vehicle further down the street. The thing was basically a road-friendly tank, turret and all. Grunting, perhaps she could sneak around it. But the turret began to move.

Cursing, she rolled away from the building, and tried to find some cover. Other than a few mailboxes, and very thin streetlamps, there wasn't anything of use besides the buildings. It was like they planned this. Everything, everyone deserted the entire section, and then some for her possible capture.

Her only choice was to fight then. Changing up the rifle's barrel once again into six circular barrels, the turret fired at her. Barely getting out of the way and feeling the large bullet touched the fur on her right neck, it exploded in the distance. If there ever was a time to retaliate...

Adrenaline started to mess with her instincts once again. Getting two different sources of intuition to go by at the same time. Growling, she loaded up the first round with a heavy pull on the weapon's chamber while taking a few steps forward. "The Destroying Angel Shall Arise!" She shouted, taking aim at the tank's wheel, and stopping in place for the impact. The recoil of the massive rifle cracked the road under her metal legs, as a large ball launched to its destination. Exploding in a concentrated concussional force that dented alot of the lower armor. Pushing the vehicle almost to its side.

"To Give Salvation To A World Of Lies!" Another shout from the leopard while loading up

another round and taking a few steps forward. Taking aim once again as the turret tried to do the same. With another stop, she fired a second round near the same place. Once again cracking the road beneath her greatly as the metal ball flew forward and exploded. Breaking the front axle to the tank and disabling two wheels. Almost three.

Another few steps forward, and she could feel herself once again become one with the machine she was forced with. It's hyperactive senses could feel the three officers within the tank as it started to fall sideways. With a few heavy breaths, she took aim once again. "We Will Drown In An Ocean Of Black, And We All Deserve It... There's No Way Back-" Her left ear flicked, barely catching the large hammer of another turret slam against the back of a shell. Warning the leopard to duck, barely feeling the round touch her white mane as it detonated down the street.

Turning towards it while baring her fangs, she hissed. Giving into her want to rush towards it and fire another shot at the new one. But once again, her hearing provided another warning. Another tank round, a bit further down past this one, was firing. Stopping her dash now would only result her getting hit. Instead, Thais slid on her left side, just under the large bullet trail and hitting a building very nearby.

She cursed again. One tank, she could handle. But two; they could have continuous fire. As long as one of them was prepped to fire while another reloaded. She needed another advantage, and her sights went towards the large building to her right.

Though C.A.N.C.E.R. was very heavy, she was used to putting a lot of effort in carrying it around. Running to the building and sending a lot of her energy into her legs for a high enough jump was a bit risky. But it worked. Digging her claws into the concrete, and once again thankful that this building wasn't mostly glass, Thais took aim at one of the turrets overhead. Her current height advantage was too high for the barrels to aim without repositioning. However, when she took the shot, the building could not hold the recoil. Pushing her into the wall and caving it in.

The force of it stunned her a bit, but she was mostly unharmed. Coughing out some of the dust it created, she found herself in a hallway next to some stairs. This was a good time to try to eliminate that spotlight.

Taking the stairs up until the locked door, she listened for the chopper overhead. Circling around the building and trying to find her. Once again changing the barrel of the rifle to a long one designed for sniping, the weapon spoke to her again.

40% Ammo Remaining.

"More than enough." She panted. Breaking the lock to the door as quietly as she could, the leopard took aim. Waiting for the aircraft to circle around and reveal its light. When she got a good line-up, she fired a rather weak bullet. Just enough to take out the light and force it to die out. She sighed with relief, for the moment, she was safe. But staying in one place too long would be too dangerous. Especially somewhere so narrow.

38% Ammo Remaining.

Quickly, she changed the barrel back to the Six Shooter she used before. Her biggest threat at the moment were those tanks. But she needed to get elsewhere, hopefully undetected. The feline browsed the streets quickly after jumping roofs. The aftermath to her last victim disabled the armored vehicle, and made the operators unconscious. One of them with a possible head injury, and they were sending in Officers within the building to search her out. For now, she was once again a shadow.

Pulling up her hood sent a white powder through her fur, making the feline uncomfortable. Odds are it was just some debris from that building. But it would make her stand out a lot more. She needed to either get rid of it, or replace it for now. At least Thais was prepared for such things.

Over the years, she's placed emergency disguises in nearly every city in the nation. Sometimes they were other clothing, along with first aid kits and other useful items. Sometimes it was an entire locked down, or hidden safehouse. Though, the last two were difficult to place in a city like this. But a change of clothing would do just fine for now. Possibly even letting her escape the city.

Artheas knew about these things as well. Her signal was for him to find that place and meet her there. Off to the nearby water tunnels, or at least she hoped the horse remembered this city's Kit. Now, she just needed to make it over- "There! On The Roof!" The feline cursed at the officer's shout, taking aim towards him and firing a warning shot that echoed through the night.

"Rookie... Rookie... Rookie!" The young man was dragged out from the tank, struggling to get his helmet off and breathe easier. He never knew how much those things pressed against the throat until he wore it today.

"You okay, youngster?" His captain asked.

"Yeah, just wasn't expecting it." He muttered, getting up.

"No one was. Jesus that thing packs a punch. He tore up Beckie real good." The man brushed away his brown hair, looking concerned at his blonde superior. "As in, your vehicle. Officer Karreen is fine, from what I know of."

"Oh, that's a relief." He said, getting pulled up to his feet by his larger partners. "Everyone else okay?"

"Yeah, but we almost lost the target-" A large explosion nearby got everyone to take cover. "Oooor they found him again."

"By the sounds of it, the Target found one of us." The younger one sighed. "This was supposed to be a simple arrest. Who knew he could put up so much resistance." A few more explosions into the distance.

"How's your head?"

"Fine, Sir. Perhaps a little dizzy, but I'm fine."

"I'd rather you get checked up, just in case. We haven't lost an Officer yet, but I want to keep it that way." The larger man got him up and started leading him towards a medical van.

"For someone that's been assassinating people, they're not doing a very good job of it tonight." Another one said.

"That's because the TCTF doesn't go down that easily."

"...Do you think he's trying not to kill anyone?" The rookie asked, getting a lot of strange looks from the others.

"Raymond, you're such a buzzkill." The young one chuckled at that.

"Yeah, I think you hit your head harder than you thought."

"Maybe." He looked at his captain for a moment, and he gave Ray a signal to be dismissed. Though, the medic was not around the van, he just sat down on the bumper. Trying to rest his chest, and go through his thoughts once again. Especially what the target was saying before, while firing at his vehicle. Something about an Angel of Destruction? Drowning in an ocean of black? Why did it sound familiar to him?

With a heavy sigh, his eyes started to wander. Trying to follow the battle from afar. But after a bit, everything just stopped. Making him wonder if the target was finally captured. Perhaps he surrendered? Ran out of ammo? Another sigh, and he caught some movement in the distance. What almost looked to be a cloak in the dark running. Barely being able to see the faint amount of white on it.

The young man got up. "H-hey...!" He looked at his comrades, but then wondered... What would happen if he caught the target? They wouldn't call him a rookie anymore, pull pranks on the 'runt'. He lightly smirked at the idea, and started moving towards it. Catching a glimpse of a squad van with a large trailer nearby and getting an idea.

The Industry section nearby was completely abandoned, or at least the Leopard hoped. Constantly scanning for any electrical signatures, she didn't find anything out of the ordinary. Leaning against one of the large cement tubes that began to make the sewers to the city, she took a few breaths. Thankful that the smell didn't quite reach out here. Odds are this was mostly for the drains that tended to the weather.

After a little bit of rest, and no sign of her mount, she took off her cloak. Still holding the massive

rifle with her left arm. A slight stream of water was still moving as she entered one of the large tubes, big enough almost for a car to fit through. But it was heavily gated towards the back to keep out any civilians. Searching through the darkness, Thais cursed. Not being able to find the waterproof bag she left here, containing the kit for this city. "Where the hell could it have gone?" She whispered.

Odds are someone discovered it. Possibly keeping it for themselves. It wasn't an absolute need, it would just help a little bit right now. She remembered the cloak being distinctly blue, getting people to at least second guess it before pursuit. But for now, she'll just wait for Artheas to arrive. Already detecting something approaching her. Something rather strong on the Electro scale, and moving too quickly.

As a large vehicle slid across the gravel grounds, it's headlights blinded her for a moment. Coming right for the tunnel the feline was in at great speeds. Too fast to be able to stop on the black gravel, and crashing straight into the tunnel.

Chapter 7

The grinding of metal against the cement walls worried the leopard, but soon came to a stop. The headlights were trashed and left her in darkness. And for a few minutes it was just silence. Then some coughing out of the driver's seat. She took aim at it with her rifle and watched the human man with her robotic eye, as he started to pry himself out of the wreckage. Seeing him struggle with some fractured ribs, a small cut on the side of his head, and quite a few bruises, he seemed to be fine.

Cursing a little bit, he started to search the seats. Scanning them with his limbs, and trying to make out the area around him. Pulling out a container from under the seat got the feline to tense up for a moment, until he took out a flashlight. Turning it on and searching around the wreckage he was in, he sighed in defeat. "Annnnd, I'm fired."

Struggling out of the seat again, his light glanced the leopard, making the younger man double take. "...Nope... I'm dead." He whimpered loudly, making out the large rifle pointed at him. "I-I know what it looks like, but..." He raised his hands.

For a few moments, they two were quiet. Only hearing the remaining sounds of the mechanical beast, until one very distinct voice echoed through the tunnel.

0% Ammo Remaining. Please Replace Ballistic Magazine.

A few moments of awkward silence, and Thais growled, lowering the weapon as the man gave a

sigh of relief. "...What the hell." She grumbled at him.

"I... Can't drive stick?" He faintly lowered his head, then studied the windshield a bit. carefully popping it out of place enough for him to get out. "You can come into my new clubhouse if you like. But only if you don't rip me to shreds."

"And if I plan to?"

"I-I know you won't." It was a bold statement that got her almost curl her neck. "You haven't had a single casualty all night-"

"That you know of." The feline growled. Leaning the weapon she had against the side of the tunnel.

"And I know you did it because you didn't want anybody killed."

"Yeah, well, that's about to change." She took a step forward and made him whimper again. But realizing that she was studying the wreckage. Growling at the beam in her eyes, she glared at him. "Lay off with the light, will you?"

"R-right..." He cleared his throat, and pulled out some glow sticks. Snapping them against the dashboard and getting rather surprised at the amount of light they gave off. "So, can I get a confirmation about me surviving my first night as a TCTF Officer?" She didn't reply. Sighing, he just took his chances. Slowly climbing out the window with the box of light sources. Grunting at his ribs, he felt a slight pull on one of his legs. Looking down, he met with a grey and white paw, offering to help him out.

Taking it, the man got down safely. "Thank you." She didn't reply, kneeling down. "Raymond, by the way." It didn't break the leopard from studying the totaled van. "And you're Simo-"

"I never understood why you people called me that."

"Erm... You're a sniper? One with a near impossible kill record-"

"Yes. But a Female sniper."

"Female?" He blurted out, getting a harsh glare from the mechanical left eye. "And that is beyond creepy." She growled at him again, but resumed her study. squatting down to make out the broken axel underneath.

"Lyudmila, I could understand. Clearly mankind still cannot tell the difference between Furnann genders."

"To be fair, it is difficult to tell with the cloak, and next to no one actually seeing your face."

"Means I did my job well then." She grunted, raising up once again and placing her paws on the dented hood. "And now you can see why I was hiding my face."

"Not because you were worried about other... Snow Leopards?" Another glare, but this time

much softer towards Ray. "I take that as a yes."

"I didn't care if they knew I was one. Let alone Furnann. I almost wanted them to know who it was. Who was still alive."

"You mean... That report actually happened?"

"Have you seen Blisterbark? What's left to it?" The feline looked away from him.

"We've never..."

"...Yes. It's true. I did that entire battle, just so I could survive." She sighed. "I only wanted that. But that General was so determined to put me down, he sent waves after waves of soldiers and..." After a bit of silence, he placed a hand on her shoulder, now noticing it was like a mechanical muscle. "Think of me as a monster or an animal that needs to be put down, if you want. I know most humans do."

"I can't say I've ever thought that."

"Did you seriously trap us in a tunnel to tell me that?" Though the question was serious, it made him laugh.

"Actually, I thought it would be a great place for some cards. Maybe made some of my infamously terrible Macaroni & Cheese. If one thing leads to another, we could always arm wrestle... Wiiiith your right arm." It made her chuckle very slightly. "But seriously... 'Lyudmila'. I honestly never thought you were..."

"Then what did you think of me?" She braced herself, trying to push the large vehicle back a bit, but it was no use. "You broke the axel. How the hell did you break the axel?" She cursed, getting him to chuckle as she took a few steps away, and sat down by her rifle.

"I honestly didn't know what to think. They told us that you were some killer cyborg from the action movies that was hell bent on human destruction, yadda yadda."

"So, instead of protesting or making some propaganda, you want to lock me into a pipe and talk my ears off?"

"Um..." The man scratched the back of his neck. "You see all this?" He gestured the van. "That is just dumb luck at its finest." It made Thais chuckle a bit at the irony. "I didn't even know you were in here. I *thought* I seen you come this way, but I couldn't drive that thing."

"What do you mean you couldn't drive it? They're supposed to teach you that stuff in the academy."

"Iiiiiif you're in the SWAT, yes... Not so much when you're in the Tank division." She looked at him with a raised eyebrow, then it morphed into disbelief.

"...You stole a SWAT Van." He slowly nodded, awkwardly. "You *Stole* a SWAT Van, and totaled it. Trapping me in the tunnel in the process... By *Accident*."

"Did I mention this was non-intentional?" He started to laugh.

"You're in just as much shit as I am, and you think this is funny?"

"Uncontrollable Laughter; Absolute Terror. It's a very fine line." That one made her chuckle a bit louder as well. Making Ray feel a bit easier about sitting down across from her.

"And let me guess, I wrecked your tank?"

"I want to say we were the first one. We were the first to report it anyway." Recalling how the night played out. "You're quite the poet, aren't you?"

The leopard double taked at him. "What?"

"When you were... It wasn't so much 'Fighting Us' as it was 'Beating the crap out of us for shooting at you.' You were saying something about angels and drowning in black." She covered her face with a paw and nodded.

"The Destroying Angel Shall Arise, Giving Salvation To A World Of Lies." Thais grunted, slightly embarrassed.

"We Will Drown In An Ocean Of Black..." He finished, getting a look from her. "It sounds so familiar to me, but I can't quite place it."

"...Caliban." A look from him this time, and after a few moments, it half clicked. "Edge Of Black."

"...It's a song." He whispered, finally recalling it. "Yeah, I remember now. So wait, you sing to us while kicking our ass?" Another chuckle, but this time he could make out a smile. She sighed, looking at her left arm.

"...They like to fight against each other sometimes. Wanting me to do run two different paths at the same time." The man studied her for a few moments. "Music always helped me cope. To the point where I memorized so much of it growing up."

"Wait, what? But they're just parts, aren't they?" He motioned the metal limbs. "My aunt got one as well, and it's just like a glove you put on, then operate."

"That's what most are, yes. Mine..." She exhaled, looking at the metal arm again. "It's like the cross between mechanical and organic. It heals itself, repairs damages even outside it's 'territory,' if you will." She sighed. "It recognizes that we're a single organism. And an organism that is at war with itself is doomed."

"So it works with you, for the most part. But when stress enters the equation..."

"They like to have two forms of Instincts."

"So you sing to them?" The leopard rolled her eyes, getting a chuckle from the man who was still a bit weirded out by the mechanical eye.

"I don't really sing to them, rat bag. I know the songs by memory. And everything I know-"

"They know as well. So they follow the rhythm, letting them both line up and function better as a pair. Or a Trio, I guess."

"At times, I wonder."

"And by doing so, you can concentrate on multiple things at once. Like using... Didn't that thing used to have six barrels?" He got up, looking at the weapon.

"I wouldn't touch that."

"Is it hot?"

"No. Just heavy."

"Please, I'm not that weak." He tried moving the thing, just getting it to stand on the hilt took most of his strength. "How the hell!? What does this thing weigh?"

"About 480 lbs." Ray looked at her in disbelief. "Have you ever heard of a C.A.N.C.E.R.?"

"A Cancer Rifle?"

"It's not a Cancer Rifle." She growled at him, picking it up rather easily with her left arm. "It was an experimental Rifle that could shapeshift it's barrel for various uses. I don't think they ever made another one."

"Not that I know of."

"It took about four men to use, that was on an equally heavy Tripod. It consumes a ridiculous number of Ballistic Ammo Clips, about twelve per Mag-"

"Twelve? So... Twelve guns worth into one gun?" She made a noise in agreement. "Sounds like our scientists have gone mad."

"It was basically a vehicle mounted gun without the vehicle. Horribly inconvenient for any militia."

"Yet, you use it? Over any other weapon?"

"I use it because I can, and others cannot." He made a noise in question. "Many weapons nowadays do have the ID security, but that can get hacked into. I use a weapon that no one else can even lift, hardly transport, And will probably break something if they attempted to fire it. Call it my own personal security."

"And if you come across someone that could use it?"

"There isn't." Thais muttered, exhaling. "...I've already killed them." There was a long silence between them, then the sounds of a skychopper overhead.

"...It won't take them long to find that." Ray looked at the remains of the truck. "What are you going to do...?" No response from the leopard. "I don't suppose you have some kind of cloaking device?"

"Seriously?" She asked him, rather surprised.

"Well, considering the rest of your arsenal-"

"I meant... You finally captured me, and you are willing to let me go?" The young man rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you an idiot?"

"You want to be imprisoned?"

"No, but that's besides the point. Regardless, they wouldn't take me to a prison." She said, rather calmly.

"...Dismantling?" A glare from the feline. "O-or... Y'know..."

"They probably wouldn't execute me either. They'll probably..." She exhaled. "Study me. Find out how things progressed since the last time, and that'll make for some great reminiscing over a few drinks." She grumbled. "...No ammo left. Even if I did, fighting would only do more damage. If I attempt to take you hostage, it wouldn't get me anywhere." Another sigh. "Surrender seems like the only choice."

"And there's no way of getting through that?" He looked at the gate within the tunnel, and her eyes followed.

"I'm strong, but the most I could do is warp it a little. But not enough to squeeze through. Even then, odds are there's a second gate down the line. And there's no telling where it might lead." Her gaze returned back to the man. "So, Officer. Are you going to remind me of my rights?"

A faint chuckle from Ray, then a bit of a louder one. "My first night on the job, and manage to get a surrender from the most wanted assassin in the nation. I've been on the force for three hours. I literally just got done my graduation when they pulled me for this mission." Even she smiled at that a bit. "...Well then...Erm... Lynda?"

She exhaled, pulling down her rifle and started dismantling it. "Thais. Thais Norris. You'll know it soon enough, I'm sure."

"Well then, Mrs. Norris-"

"Miss Norris. I never married." He nodded at her.

"It's an absolute privilege to have met you, as well as a pleasure to arrest you on my first day on the job. I appreciate that you did not blow me up, shoot me, or rip out my spleen and beat me to death with it." She chuckled. "Lord knows, I deserve it after trapping us both in here because I cannot handle an armored van."

"No Medal of Honor for that."

"I'm just a dweeb that's had the worst, yet luckiest, night of his life. Thank you, Thais. I would like to give you a hug-"

"Mother of God." The leopard tossed her muzzle, almost laughing. "Worst arrest ever."

"I'm not hearing a No." He laughed, getting a playful growl and a head shake from the feline. She stood up, helping him up too, and Raymond hugged her.

"You are such a wussie." He laughed at her again. "Happy?"

"Very. You're quite soft." He teased.

"Don't get any ideas. Only about 15% of me is soft." A loud series of bangs came from the van, getting both of their attentions.

"Hello? Is anyone alive in there?"

"Captain!?" The young man yelped, feeling incredibly awkward still in the hug.

"...Rookie!? Did you do this!?"

"Uh..." He cleared his throat and swallowed. "...YES." Only getting a series of curses and grunts from the older man outside. "But I did it for a good reason, Sir!"

"That you want to die!? Either by your own hand or mine!?"

"Sir, I've arrested her."

"Her who?"

"Simo, Sir." A very awkward silence fell over the area, as Ray stood completely still. Trying to make out anything outside. "I don't think he believes me."

"Stop hugging me."

"-Okay." He took a quick step back. "Sir?"

"Are you Joshing me, boy?"

"No, Sir."

"He's serious." Thais spoke up. "Your little dweeb has alot of dumb luck." The rookie looked at her shocked.

"I told you I was a dweeb in confidence!" He whispered, almost getting a full smile out of the feline.

About thirty minutes later, they started getting preps to remove the Van. Attaching three others

to the back of it, and removing the heavy trailer. Hearing the wheels spin on the gravel outside, the leopard stood back up. The young officer behind her. "...You sure you want to do this?" He asked, concerned and almost saddened.

"You got a better way out?"

"Nope. But..."

"Don't worry about me kid. I'll find a way to bust out." She assured him. Truth was, she wasn't sure herself. It was the last place she wanted to go back to, the very edge of the abyss that stained her this way. Cursed her with a new afterlife. But that was also the place that held those responsible.

To Thais, that place was Hell. Yet, for some reason, she wasn't afraid of it. Always knowing that someday she'll have to confront it. Return to it. Even if it meant staring into the void once again.

As the van began to pull backwards, a steady stream of blinding light filled the tunnel. Hearing a series of guns at the ready, the leopard raised both her hands up. Slowly walking to the very edge of the tunnel and barely making out the black stone gravel the ground was covered with. Feeling the slight rub of Raymond's hand on her back, almost supporting her, Thais Norris took a breath. "...No way back..." And she stepped forward.