

Red Hypergiant Act 2 - All Pain Is Gone

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The old roots and dead leaves crunched loudly under each step she took through the forest. Still panting to catch her breath and trying to calm down from the stress. Ever since that accident, the leopard felt in over her head. She always expected things to go haywire out in the field, and this just proved how dangerous it got when shit finally hit the fan.

43% Energy Remaining.

"I expected as much." She muttered, still getting used to the weight of the massive rifle. Let alone its size. Perhaps it was a foolish idea to take such a thing with her, especially when she couldn't even hold it with her organic arm. "Any other damages besides the tail?"

Left ribs #7 and #8 are slightly cracked. #6 and #9 are significantly bruised, but no fatal wounds as of yet.

"I figured." The leopard grumbled.

I will begin repairs immediately.

"Don't." She took a breath, leaning up against a tree. "We're not out of here yet, and I don't need two thirds of my body giving out before I reach E Company."

Understood.

After a faint rest, the grey one started to move forward once again. "See if you can send out a message to them. I haven't heard anything since that attack."

Communications will only take a moment. But I cannot send information, only receive.

"Fair enough." Another few breaths and heavy steps. But she began to see the clearing of the forest ahead. "The road should be up there. I think I can hear the vehicles."

"...Has been No word from the Naysayers. It's possible that they were attacked by another squad-"

"Impossible, Sargent. Those suits are top-of-the-line technology. There's no way a few armed

men took them out!"

"Doctor, I think you have too much faith in those machines."

"Sir, I believe he's somewhat correct... I-I mean, I've picked up the signal of one of them nearby E Company."

"What!? So one of them made it out alive?"

"...Or it betrayed the others. And I'm not taking that chance on our own men."

"Nonsense! They're more reliable than any squadron of yours. You there, find whoever survived and get them back to me at once-!"

"You are not in command here, Doctor. I am. And I will not risk the lives of my own men for your abomination. Attention soldiers! One of the Naysayers have gone rogue. They've been detected towards your south."

"General Grissim, please! You're making a mistake!"

"Take it down. Use any means necessary. If it surrenders-"

Signal Lost.

Thais stood outside of the clearing. Witnessing the large, opened, grassy field with a road at the end. One occupied with several vehicles that were slowing down to a stop. The ones with mounted guns and turrets were beginning to point towards her, and all the leopard could do was exhale.

41% Energy Remaining.

The warning heavied her heart a bit. This was the last day of her new life, and she was to be shot down by her own allies? It angered her, tensing up her body and almost snarling. "Surrender...?" She muttered, pulling back the Bolt to C.A.N.C.E.R. and aiming the rifle forward. "Like hell I will."

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The rain was faintly hitting the window of the apartment building, washing off the thick moisture that accumulated from the fog. The thick cloud was still invading the city, making it dangerous to go out in the night, let alone drive or walk. It was the perfect excuse to just sit inside and lay in bed. Rest to the sounds of the stereo playing faintly in the background. The low cords attracted her attention like pulling strong threads, snatched to a memory. One she recalled so easily, and knew better than the spots on the back of her paw. "God Only Knows What We Were Born To Be." She mumbled, along with the vocalist of the song.

Laying under the covers beside her, a male chuckled. "I always heard God Only Knows What We Were Born To Burn." She just shrugged at him, nuzzled against his neck closely. "But it doesn't really matter which is correct. We hear and remember what we want to, don't we?"

"I'd say so, yes." The snow leopard yawned. "I'll always remember this album. Word for word." Another nuzzle. "And how it reminds me of you." He nodded slowly, but held a sad look in his yellow eyes. Making the feline study his young lion-like face. "Is something...?"

He quietly exhaled, just holding her closer to him. "...You remember our deal that we made, when we were young?"

"Yes." The leopard muttered a bit sadly. "If we were going to be lost forever, at least we would be lost..."

"Together..." He finished, sighing heavily. "...I met someone recently..." It hurt the female to hear that, but she understood.

"...And you felt love." She muttered, feeling him nod. "Could I... Just have one thing?" He looked into her grey-blue eyes sadly. "I don't want to be alone..."

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She knew those bright lights well, and resented them for the harsh glare they made. As well as the heat they seemed to give off. As she tried to cover her good eye, her paw felt snared to the bed, which felt more like a large table. Getting her to just grunt, close the good eye, and open the shutter. At least it could filter out the bright light and observe the pure white room.

Several Counter surfaces lined the walls with many objects on them, along with a sink towards the middle. Then there was a small metal cart near the table she was strapped to, along with several other electronics. Some movement behind her made the organic fur on the back of her neck stand on end, trying to scan behind there with her ears. When that didn't work, she tried an electronic scan. But a heavy feedback stun her momentarily. Getting the leopard to grunt loudly. "Should have known it would do that." Thais muttered, but got no response from the person working.

Eventually coming to her sights, she seen someone dressed in a white gown. The feline sworn

she seen scales and a muzzle, but the person left the room quite quickly. For several minutes, the snow leopard was left alone. Still trying to observe her surroundings and test the durability of the straps. But even the strength of her mechanical limbs couldn't break it. Further study... The cybernetics almost felt weakened.

The door opened again, and a man with unusually white hair stepped in. Almost balding on the top of his head, but below that, the hair was excessively long. Nearly down to his lower back. He greeted Thais with a smile, almost giddy. "They told me, time and time again. But I never imagined that you would come back to me, Loki." He said, walking over to the table.

"I believe you mean 'captured and forced to be in your presence once again' Harberd." She grumbled, still trying to look at him with her original eye.

"Now who turned this blasted thing on?" He shoved the light away from the table, seeing it automatically turn off, and allowing her eye to finally adjust peacefully. "I swear, they're acting like you're some kind of criminal."

"Can't say I blame them." The feline said sarcastically. "Let alone be on edge around me after Blisterbark-"

"You were defending yourself, Loki. Any others would've just given up and surrendered." The man started to study her clothed body, mostly the mechanical parts. "Any others would've only been brought back in pieces. But you..." He got all giddy once again. "You chose to survive! And you did rather well. I don't see any damages to you so far." She remained quiet. "You haven't been seeing another mechanic, have you?"

"I'm sure there's a better word for that, but no." She half grumbled. "You do remarkable work, Doctor." It made the man smile and almost chuckle. Observing her tail rather closely.

"The reports say you only had half a tail during that assault. Did...?"

"...It grew back." The statement made Harberd almost squeal with his mouth closed.

"So, it even knew enough to replicate its own generators!" He circled around the table, observing her left facade closely. "But what about here?" He lightly touched it with boney fingers, making her uncomfortable. "Does it still talk to you?"

"...No. That got damaged, and was never repaired." It made his face cross.

"...I see." He moved down, looking closely at her neck and shoulder. "Perhaps I can fix that, but it would be difficult with you still being connected to it."

"As much as I would appreciate having a voice still in my head, I've learned to deal without it." She grumbled a bit, trying to glare at the old man. But it only lightened his mood towards her.

"And that's what you were all about..." He took a closer look at the arm, then started pulling her shirt up from the bottom. Getting the leopard to growl loudly at him. "Oh, please. It's nothing I haven't

seen before-" He stopped when he seen something on the right side of the breast. Quickly moving around the table and seeing the black spot. Studying it very closely for several moments. "...Fascinating." He whispered, looking at Thais with a strange grin and biting his lower lip a bit. "But the question lies: Is it still trying to dominate it's host, or prolong it's life the only way it knows how...?"

The feline exhaled, but remained silent. "What is your percentage now?" He asked her, getting a bit of a sad look from the grey-blue eye. "I see..." He adjusted his observation glasses, and the light reflected to mask his dark eyes. "But a number would be helpful."

She exhaled again, opening her shutter eye. "...38.1%. It went down since the last time I checked." The doctor made a noise in thought, and continued his examination. Leading up to her right arm and spotting the same blackness on the knuckles.

"You've been fighting." He muttered, almost sadly. But she remained silent. "Who?"

"Whoever I had to." She said a bit coldly.

"But not for sport, have you?" A glare from her eye. "Don't give me that look. I know of the underground fight arenas below the cities." He almost scolded her.

"I haven't been doing that." Thais growled a bit.

"Good. I'll take your word for it." He kept studying her, working up to the shoulder and neck. "Come to think of it, it wouldn't be a terrible place to test the limits of such a thing, but it is only a prototype." He stopped suddenly after looking at the roots of her mane. "Your hair was always white."

"It was. And now it's turning black."

"But the only cybernetics you have around the skull is the left side." Harberd looking at her for a confirmation, and she rolled her good eye. Nodding afterwards, and making him return to the organic paw. Studying the nails. "So they've made their way through the bloodstream, And replacing the cell structure and development? Interesting... But it still does not answer the question." He returned to her head, getting a fresh pair of gloves. "Open up." She growled at him loudly again. "I just want to have a look inside."

"Of course you do." She growled.

"Please don't make me use more restraints, Loki. It's bad enough that they strapped you down like this, but they *insisted* on such a thing." She looked at him a bit puzzled, but still angry. "They still don't trust you after your last... Outbreak, so to speak. As in here, not Blisterbark."

"And you do?" Another growl in question.

"Should I not?" A moment of silence between them. "You are my brainchild brought to life. I would trust you to hold my very own beating heart." Another stare of silence, and the feline exhaled. Parting her jaws widely and see the doctor smile before putting on a facemask. Leaning in, but being careful of her fangs. "I see these things are still sharp." He joked, but only got a faint snort from her. "A

few black spots on the gums, but that's normal for your kind-" He stopped for a moment, and took something from the metal cart nearby, to her left. Getting Thais to tense up and scratch the table. "Relax." He held up the small, mirror-like tool in her good sight, relieving the tension. "At times I forget you do not use your left eye." He let go of her maw for a moment. "Any specific reason why?"

"...It hurts a little to use it. Especially constantly."

"Hurts where?"

"The brain. Usually the front and left side." He stared at her in thought for a few moments, then leaned in to examine her muzzle again. Tapping her snout lightly and hearing the leopard grumble a bit before opening her maw. Getting another tool from the cart and showing the tongue depressor to her before using it.

"...Didn't you used to have some cavities?" He asked her after a bit of silence, and the feline made a noise in confirmation. "They're completely black now." A few taps on a few back teeth. "Solid too." A faint exhale told the doctor that she knew of them. A bit more examining of the left cheek seemed much tougher than the organic one. "Is that numb?" He asked, retreating for good and taking off the gloves.

"That area always has been."

"But the rest of your bionic parts...?"

"I can feel through them, yes. But not pain. Not like normal anyway." Thais admitted, trying to watch the man and observe his slightly worried face. "...You know why, don't you?"

"I have a theory." He muttered.

"Which is?"

He sighed to himself. "Loki. I did not replace your eye, nor that area of your head." She looked at him a bit coldly.

"...Then who did?"

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It's been a while since his hooves touched the concrete and glass of buildings, looking down at his partner from afar. It was almost hard to see through the darkness and make out the figures in the streets. Artheas hated doing this, trying to watch her from a distance and keep his partner safe. Even Dawn would often give the horse heart attacks from the sheer close calls the two had way back when.

As much as he wanted to get closer to hear the conversation, his ghastly form would be too easy to spot in the night. So he remained under a large sign on top of a building. Just trying to spy on them. Perhaps plan their exit if they needed a getaway. If there's one thing he disliked about cities, it was how difficult it was to escape one. Especially when Hiding was not a great option, mostly due to his size and awkward shape. If only he were born a Pegasus instead of a Nightmare, it would be so simple to just fly and escape that way.

The sounds of engines turning over and rearing up broke him out of thought, as he heard several vehicles begin racing through the streets. As well as a chopper in the distance. "Damnit! I knew there was something off about this!" He growled, waiting for the cars to pass his street and completely surround the Leopard on the ground. Along with the other figure lying on the ground awkwardly. With a forceful leap, the Nightmare cleared the entire road and landed on the adjacent building. Running across the flat roofs and easily jumping the alleys inbetween.

"I hope this is enough of a distraction, kiddo." He concentrated on one of the squad cars, slamming his telekinetic force on the hood and bumper hard at a great distance. Forcing the car to tilt forward, and get the attention of a few officers. He then sent another bolt of that force, hitting the entire underneath of the vehicle in a wide area, and sending it over the barricades. Only to find Thais jump and attach herself to the roof of the car as it began to tumble down the street. "Ooooooor, you can do that." He grumbled.

Lifting up the pouches on his makeshift saddle, he started to withdraw pieces of the large rifle while catching up to her from above. Sending each section of the gun in her reach, and letting her put the thing together one by one. Until the car stopped, and the leopard fired a stunning grenade. "At least she's not blood-thirsty." He mumbled, throwing down another magazine for the rifle. After the leopard caught sight of the horse, seeing her signal something from afar, he gave a large nod. "I'll meet you there." Artheas said under his breath. "...Providing I remember where she hid it in this city."

He took off in a different direction, knowing that the chopper probably spotted him as well through the darkness of the urban city. But at most, the horse would be considered a partner in crime, not the threat. Made sense why they didn't attempt to follow him across the buildings. Regardless, he kept his ears up for any signs of another chopper. Worst came to worst, he would have to disable it without harming the pilots.

A loud cannonfire halted his movements for a moment, making Artheas' heart stop until he faintly heard her voice. "Now's not the time to be performing poetry, Thais." He grumbled, carrying on. As much as he disliked leaving her behind like this, she was the one better suited for combat. The Nightmare on the other hand, he felt like a big target for them. Just something she had to worry about and perhaps protect.

His mind wandered off to the late afternoon yesterday. To what the two younger ones said. ("Bartan always said that we're always stronger together than apart.")

("And if we lose one, we become so much weaker as a whole.") It made the horse stop and think for a moment. That maybe he should assist her from afar, carefully. With a loud grumble, he turned

about. Barely catching the glance of a shadow running in the street, one with a shimmering coat. "That's not her..."

Turning around once again, the Nightmare began pursuit of the figure. Clearing the buildings quickly with the mask of the battle behind them, the man below turned a corner and caught his breath. Unknown of the horse overhead until something invisible grabbed him by his left ankle and dragged the coated man up the building. Stopping near face to face with the Cyan flaming horse. Screaming at the fire in his orange eyes. **"Now where could you be in such a hurry?"** Artheas growled, trying to sound as intimidating as possible. **"Did you rat her out? Set up this trap?"** The man just whimpered in a panic. **"Talk or become a stain!"**

"I-I don't know! I didn't even know the TCTF were even looking for us!"

**"But you were talking to her..."** The Nightmare glanced to the side, where the meeting was set up. **"That was a droid?"**

"Y-yes! B-b-but I didn't think they were scanning-!"

**"You did use a private channel, right?"** The two stared at each other for a few moments. **"Riiiiiiight?"** A faint whimper from the man got the horse to toss his snout. **"Armatures."** He grumbled.

"P-please! I'm only a middle-man in all of this! I'm not the one-!"

**"What was the job?"** Another growl.

"I-I can't-" The horse dropped him and the man screamed for a bit until he was caught again. Pulled back up to the horse's eyes.

**"A few more of these and I might have to start using the other ankle."** He muttered, giving the man a harsh glare. **"Talk. What was the job?"**

"T-to maim the Prime Minister-!"

**"The country's leader!? Are you insane!?"**

"Why do people keep asking me that?" The human whimpered.

**"What exactly are you expecting to do? Slither someone else up into that position-?"**

"Y-you're jumping to conclusions! He's planning to let a bill pass that will shut down the atmospher-"

**"No, he's not."** Another harsh growl. **"No idiot in the upper class would consider such a thing."**

"T-that's all I was told!"

**"Then you were told wrong."** Artheas exhaled. **"Meaning they probably didn't want you to know the real reason either."**



"That's all I know! Please! Just let me go!" The Nightmare started at him for a moment and blinked slowly.

"...Such a poor choice of words." He released his hold on the man and watched him drop. Gradually slowing him down the entire fall to ensure he would live. "To maim the Prime... But why would they want him out of office?" The horse whispered to himself, half trying to pin-point where the leopard would be. "I just hope she's okay." And he carried on.

Artheas recalled them putting a large, water-proof bag somewhere nearby here. Assuming in one of the large drain pipes, but doing a quick search, he found nothing. Pacing back and forth in front of the several openings, he listened to the distant silence for several minutes. "Where the hell is she?" He whispered. "I swear it was one of these things." He overlooked the pipes again.

After about ten more minutes of waiting, another chopper flew by overhead. Focusing its skylight on something specific in the background. "Don't tell me..." He mumbled, moving forward and back up the tall buildings. Galloping across the roofs carefully, and trying to stay out of sight until he could see a large area covered in black gravel. Filled with police and rescue vehicles and the spotlight.

Two large vans were pulling out one SWAT van from a large pipe. "How the hell did someone even get that thing in there?" The horse muttered, getting a sigh of relief. But as the wrecked vehicle was being pulled out, many officers were arming themselves and pointing towards the tunnel. "What are they...?" He got interrupted when he seen the leopard walking slowly out of the tunnel, paws raised. "...Oh...No..." Artheas whispered sadly.

## Chapter 2

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The leopard followed the lion around her apartment as he got ready to leave. Gazing at the windows from time to time, getting lost outside the foggy weather and thought. "Hey." He whispered to

her, embracing the feline from the back and stroking her jaw a bit. "It'll be alright... You'll find someone, Thais." She nodded at him in silence, studying his faint reflection on the glass. As he reached down and pet her lower belly a bit. "Take good care of him or her."

"Him, I'm hoping." She finally spoke with a hint of sadness. "...Thank you." He just nodded, licking her a bit to make her smile. Even just a little.

With one final embrace, he lightly forced those grey-blue eyes to look into his. "In Your deepest pain, In your weakest hour, In your darkest night..." A kiss. "You are *lovely*." The statement fluttered her heart, but ached it to the point where she couldn't hold back a tear. Another few pets, and they held a paw together. One last time before he left the apartment.

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A few seconds looking at the white room, and she was already sick of it. Lightly studying the contents; a toilet, sink, and bed. Along with the wonderful black barred gate that split the entire thing in half. However, there was a large TV on the other side, along with the remote. Currently turned off, but the remote laid on the desk, almost in reach.

The feline got up, hearing the loud clank of her metal paws on the floor and stretching a bit. She walked towards the metal gate, sticking her metal paw through and getting a heavy shock from an electrical field. Placed just before the bars. "Son of a...!" She cursed a few times, shaking off the sting with a few growls, and making an armed guard come in.

"I was wondering when you were going to get up." He said in a harsh tone, and the two stared at each other for a few moments.

"I was just trying to get the remote." She motioned towards it, then sat back down on the metal bed. It felt very stiff, compared to the two mattresses she was used to. "They could've put a sign up about the field."

"They did. I took it down." He muttered, getting a growl from the leopard. "And I baited you with that."

"Let me guess, I did something to you that hurt you, or someone of your family. And now you want to poke the bear."

"You killed my brother, bitch." He said thickly.

"I'd be careful with your words." Her response made him angry, until she pointed up at a very slightly off tile on the wall. "The third one from the left side. Very top row, there's a hidden camera there. Also records noise as well, including whispers." The man tried to search for it, then gave her a cold stare. "Keep holding that vendetta, and you might find yourself relieved from your current position." The soldier grunted a bit, looking back and forth between the wall and her. "You're not the first person who wants to hurt me, or worse. But your grudge is a foolish one."

"What!?" He roared.

"Your brother was a Soldier, correct?" He grunted. "And he did what soldiers do: take orders, and die." He cursed at her, lifting his firearm. "To *expect* one to come back home safely is to be oblivious of the art of war." Another grunt as he took a step closer. "You don't intimidate me, private. And your current actions are really showing how green you are."

"What makes you say-"

"You're taking aim at an unarmed prisoner on the other side of a electrical bullet barrier. One that works both ways. You're wielding MP876, modded with a lighter frame for easier carry, and the safety is on." A growl from the human. "Unless you have some other master plan, go back outside-"

"You don't get to tell me what to do-"

"Your current duty, the one you signed up for, is to protect me. Yet prevent me from escaping. That is your job." She laid down on the stiff pillow. "Granted, when it comes to entertainment, I'd still take the TV over you-"

"That is it!" He shouted, getting a key from his vest pocket and approaching her door. "I will shut you-"

"Private Dawson." Doctor Harberd shouted over his voice, getting the man to freeze. "What exactly are you planning to do?" The soldier stood up straight, and grunted in embarrassment. As the doctor studied him, he motioned what was in his hand, and the man displayed the key. "I see... Dawson, what exactly were you expecting to happen when you walked into that cell?"

"I was just..." He grunted. "Teaching the captive to show some respect, Sir."

"Some respect..." The white haired man looked back and forth between the soldier and Thais, still resting on the bed. "Private, how much do you know about Loki?"

"I've read the reports on Blisterbark, Sir. And nearly all the data we've gathered-"

"Then you must know of the rifle she was using during that assault, correct?" He grunted for a moment at the older man.

"Sir, she is currently unarmed-"

"That rifle was a weapon I designed myself. It weighed almost 500 lbs." An odd look from the soldier. "And she was carrying that around, like it was a metal bat. She may be currently without said firearm, but not without that strength. So once again, I ask you: What exactly were you planning?" Dawson was quiet for a few moments. "You are dismissed, Private. Leave the room." With a heavy grunt, the younger male left. And the doctor shook his head, both at him and the leopard. "Why must you antagonize these people?"

"I'm not going to say that I enjoy it, but he was green." She shrugged. "I was just trying to get him to make a mistake."

"Taking point and guarding you was indeed a mistake. But at the same time..." He muttered, getting Thais to exhale loudly.

"...You know I don't have all my strength back yet." She admitted, and the older man nodded.

"I know. But I don't want him to know that. Those effects will fade after a while." He walked over to the desk and picked up the remote to the TV. Then towards a small opening where food would normally pass through. "I'm terribly sorry for all the security. I honestly don't like it anymore than you do."

"But you can't tell them to turn it off." She muttered, looking at him from afar. "But you know that I don't want to stay here. I can't-"

"Yes." He interrupted her, looking a bit sad. "I know, Loki. But this is where you were born, where all of your maintenances can be tended to. If I could somehow take all of that with me elsewhere, then I possibly would. However..."

"The TCTF won't let you go. Let alone with all your equipment. Especially if they think you're going to be designing weapons for another party." The man nodded.

"Regardless, they do fund me quite handsomely. But that could be obtained again." He looked towards the doorway. "Funny, in an attempt to promote peace, they stop all development of weaponry. Yet, it still exists under the noses of civilians."

"They tell them what they want to believe, I suppose." The grey one muttered, turning on the TV and seeing some news. More specifically, someone giving a speech. "What the hell..." She cursed in a whisper, getting the doctor's attention and watching the screen as well.

"Yes. Mark Largos. What about him?" He looked at Thais' crossed facade for a few moments.

"Mark Largos... Yeah, that's him." He motioned for her to explain. "...Three days ago I assassinated him."

He could finally see home in the far distance, after spending the whole day running. The late afternoon sun was at his back, doing its best to warm the horse's sore muscles. Regardless of how much they half hurt, Artheas pressed on. Seeing the two little ones tending to some firewood. Even from afar, he could half make out their curiously excited expressions which made him sadly smile.

Approaching the old cabin faded their excitement, realizing that the Leopard was no longer with him. "What happened?" Rev, the wolf-like one, asked.

"The client was an idiot. Ended up getting them tracked and pinning her down." He said after a

few breaths. "She was almost out, but I think we had two different ideas of where our meeting point was."

"She does have alot of them." The brass wyrmling mumbled, still a bit worried.

"So, she was captured? Held prisoner?"

"Not just that. They didn't take her to a jail, but some location that looked like an army base." The two tilted their heads. "That's as close as I could get. I'm pretty sure they even spotted me from afar." Another puzzled look, and the horse tossed his head. "It was night time."

"Ohhh..." The two said together.

"So, what do we do then?" Lexar asked.

"Break her out?" Artheas suggested, witnessing the two little ones share a sad look. "What?"

"We... Can't do that." The white one muttered as the two lowered their heads.

"What you mean? You two kick Thais' ass on a daily basis. You're capable-"

"That's not what we mean." The dragon interrupted him, then whimpering at his look.  
"Artheas..."

"We're here only to help Thais... Emotionally." A cold stare from his bright blue eyes in this form.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" He said a bit thickly, moving towards some water to tend to his parched throat.

"Do you know about Thais' son?" The brass one asked after the horse had his fill, getting the larger one to double take.

"She lost it in the car accident, along with..." The wolf trailed off.

"She never told me. But what does...?"

"Well... Thais was supposed to find another one to adopt during this... Time period." A raised eyebrow.

"You were in Veritas, correct?" The brown horse curled his neck.

"We've read the archives our father left behind. You were not in it very much, but you know how the universe works, correct?"

"Three Forces pretty much run everything. But that's about as far as I got." He muttered at them.  
"Dawn was involved more than I was."

"We know." The brass one said sadly, looking at his brother. "But..."

"Sometimes things get messed up. And..."

"People need to interfere?" Artheas asked.

"Putting it negatively, yes. But sometimes..." The wolf whimpered.

"It's better if someone interferes." A sharp look in question from the horse, and the two younger ones lowered their ears. Making them share another look and almost whimper.

"What we're about to tell you, you cannot tell Thais. Okay?"

"And that would be...? Her son is still alive?" The two double taked at him.

"N-no."

"She was supposed to find another to adopt... And lose him." The large one stopped for a moment, almost taking a step back.

"...That would wreck her." He whispered.

"It was supposed to." Lexar whimpered.

"But something happened in the timeline, this other son didn't appear."

"But why didn't he?"

Another shared look, and Rev cleared his throat. "...We think it's because of you." Artheas curled his neck again.

"Me? What did I do?"

"It's not so much what you did or did not do, persay..." The two scratched their own manes awkwardly.

"But your presence is always a factor when it comes to timelines and Fate's path."

"Odds are, it affected this son in some way that they never met." The wyrmling explained.

"And because of this..." The horse pondered. "She never..."

"Felt that loss again. No longer getting completely consumed by that infection within her." Artheas looked at the pup sadly.

"...So, she was..." He muttered, finally sitting down and hanging his head low. "So, what now? You two are going to fake your own deaths or something?" They whimpered at him. "Do what the Forces command you? In order to make her a monster?"

They looked at each other for a moment, sharing sad looks. "We're... Not sure."

"We don't know what is going to happen anymore, too much has changed."

"I suppose this is what Bartan was talking about..." The dragon nodded at his brother.

"Then help me break her out." The two looked at him sadly. "Help me get her back."

"But..."

"We can't inter-"

"You already have. Just as I have." The two whimpered. "Look, if there's one thing I know about Forces, it's that they tend to suck. A lot. In Veritas... I just let them toy with Dawn. Thinking there was nothing different I could do about it." He took a breath. "But here, they screwed up. You two are still here. I'm still here. People who aren't even supposed to be. Together, we can make that difference."

The two looked at each other for a moment. "If Bartan ever finds out we messed up..."

"He'll have our pelts." The wolf nodded. "But..."

"We care about Thais."

"Too much for something to happen to her." The two looked at Artheas.

"We have to try, for her." The wyrmling nodded that time, even getting the horse to do the same.

"We're in."

"What do you need us to do?"

"This won't be easy, and there's always a risk..." They both raised a paw, as if they heard the Danger Speech before. "Alright, here's my plan so far."

## Chapter 3

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Her own faint coughing and the spinning of a nearby wheel was all she heard. Her back ached, along with the various cuts and bruises from shattered windshields and car frames. The leopard could hardly recall what happened. One moment, she was driving on the highway at night. One blink of her tired eyes changed everything.

She couldn't feel anything below her ribs, nor her left arm. She could move her right one, half observe her surroundings a bit. But it was so dark that she couldn't make out anything. Not even the sky. Exhausted, her eyelids became heavier and heavier, as her energy drained from her body. One blink seemed to last several minutes, as she drifted in and out of existence.

One faint glance of a white beam in the distance caught her eye. But she couldn't think of what it was. All she could think about was numbing pain. Closing her eyes once again, it came back to her. Getting the leopard to cry out to it. Echoing her voice from a tunnel made of broken metal and rubber.

After a long pause, she did it again. Putting all her energy into deep breaths and calling out. Over and over, but nothing came. Beyond exhausted, the leopard gave up. Sinking into the abyss once again, and just letting go. "Over Here!" She faintly heard someone roar. "I found one! Bring out the Jaws!" The light blinded her, disturbing her sleep and getting her to shield her eyes from the only free paw. "Hey! We're going to get you out of here, okay? How hurt are you?"

"I... I don't know..." She tried to call out, seeing the light above adjust and watch as a spotted canine began to climb through the metal. Taking out another flashlight that was easier on the eyes and trying to study the feline below.

"Oh God..." He muttered, getting her to attempt to look up and around. "Don't move, we'll... We'll do what we can for you."

"I... I don't care about me. Save him instead..." She grunted, trying to feel for her lower belly, but feeling something large and metal in place. Something laying on top of her lower half. Making her whimper loudly and almost cry in front of the rescue operative. Feeling him take her paw in one of his and hold it tightly.

"...I'm sorry. But we can still get you out of here." The dog frowned, letting the feline weep a bit while staying by her side. The team eventually got a lot of the surrounding vehicles out, along with several other survivors. Allowing the leopard to finally get some fresh air. Talking to a few other members of the crew, the canine nodded and motioned someone to come forward. "Thais, this is Doctor Harberd. He's going to... Let you know your options." She nodded at the dog and whispered her thanks.

"You're in rough shape." The white haired man knelt down, getting the feline to faintly chuckle. "And you're at least enjoying the morphine."

"Only a little." She sadly smirked.

"The thing is, Thais, is that... There's not much we can do in your situation. Can you feel your arm and legs?" She shook her head. "That's because there's so much weight on them, that it's literally crushing the nerves. Like this, you'll never feel them again. However, as soon as we lift that weight off..."

She sighed heavily. "All that pain will come to haunt you. No amount of drugs will stop it."

"So..."

"Any other doctor will give you two options: We could amputate the limbs and keep you as you are now, but that is extremely dangerous. Mostly due to the environment we are currently in. If you did manage to somehow survive the surgery, there's a high risk of an illness or infection."

"And the second option...?"

"...Euthanasia." The term broke her. "Mercy..." He said sadly. "Of course, we will make it painless as possible. You won't feel a thing."

"And what about you?" She said a bit coldly. "What makes you so different?"

"Thais, I am a medical doctor of sorts, yes. I have the experience needed, done all the homework on many cases like this. But I've also specialize in Cybernetics for the past twenty years." He sat down with her. "I've honestly been looking for people, preferably willing, to... Give them another chance. A new life."

"So, you're planning to mix me with machine...?"

"I could attempt to, yes. I make no promises that such an operation would succeed. But I'm also looking for someone to attempt something bigger than just an implant or whatnot." Thais was silent for a while. "I'll give you some time to decide, but Thais." She looked at him. "Your life as you knew it today is over. Today was your last day as Thais. Who you are tomorrow, or what you will be is up to you. If you want to become something greater, become the Future, then don't waste this opportunity." She stared at him for a few moments, until he turned away. Getting the canine to look at the two with a bit of worry.

Walking up to the rest of the rescue crew, he leaned into the squad leader to whisper. "I want her. Bring her to me."

~~~~~

The television was stressing her out, to the point she just shut the damn thing off. With every photo or video of that guy being show, his forehead was constantly covered. By his greasy, already black hair, or even a shady hat that almost seemed like he was really trying to hide the wound. Growling, she laid back on the stiff bed. Thinking she should've shot him through the eye, something much harder to hide. Knowing from experience.

But what could she do about it now? She was imprisoned, and she already told the doctor.

Granted, he had next to no command here, unless it came to the cybernetics department. And there's no telling what this 'Mark Largos' was planning. If it's something to do with the Epidemic...

Growling again as an exhale of frustration, she faintly heard a whimper. "Did I come at a bad time?" A young male asked, getting the leopard to look up across the bars to see the scrawny man.

"Raymond?" She asked, rather surprised. Then her ears went back. "What the hell are you doing here, cub!?" He only chuckled at her, closing the door behind him.

"I wish I could say I'm here to break you out." He rub the back of his neck a bit.

"I know that's not going to happen." She shook her head lightly. "How did you even get down here?"

The young man just shrugged. "I just told them I was the one who arrested you, and needed to speak with you. It's amazing what a little confidence can do."

"That medal is going to your head." Even she chuckled a bit with him.

"Funny story about that. They ended up giving me one. An entire ceremony and everything. When I went to accept the medal, I asked if they could free you. Annnnd then they took the medal back." The two shared a bit of a laugh.

"You're joking."

"I am." He admitted, pulling up a chair and sitting on it backwards. Having the back of the chair for him to lean on. "How are you making out?"

"Me? Having the time of my life." She said a bit sarcastically, then exhaled. "Can't say it's been easy. Harberd has been wanting to grasp me again for a long time, and he still can't look at me without getting all giddy." Raymond smirked sadly at her. "But... Something is wrong, Ray. I'm honestly glad that you showed up when you did."

"What's up?"

"You watch the news, I'm assuming." The officer nodded. "You seen Mark Largos' return."

"Return? He went somewhere?"

"A few days ago, I got a contract to take him out." Sorrow painted his face. "I have his death recorded on a chip in my hideout."

"Yet, he lives? Body double, perhaps?" The feline shook her head.

"The scan would've picked it up. It even matches DNA. So unless he had an exact twin brother or a clone..." The man pondered.

"What do you think it is?"

Thais exhaled. "After the shot... His body was dragged by vines into the forest outside of Moses-"

"Moses!? The Epidemic reached that far!?" She nodded.

"But I couldn't say anything, not without losing the whole job. Doing so would lead to an investigation and..." Raymond held his head for a moment. "You have someone in Moses?"

"My grandfather..."

"You still have a grandfather? Upper class?"

"Yeah. But he's a good man." The leopard nodded. "How long have you known this?"

"Just since the assassination. A few nights ago."

"And you want me to warn people about this?"

"Not only that... But I wonder if somehow Largos is infected by this." She turned on the TV. "The bullet enter in the upper part of his forehead. Around the hairline, but every damn camera shot is being covered. He's hiding it..."

"And the back?"

"Probably covered by his hair. Have you seen the Epidemic up close?" He shook his head.

"I only heard the stories, and some zombie fanfics." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Nevermind. Continue."

"Alright... But we're coming back to 'Zombie Fanfics' eventually." Another awkward neckrub. "But if Largos is still alive after that, odds are it might not be him in control. They're just using him as a puppet."

"Who is 'They' exactly?"

"I'm not sure. The Epidemic as a whole, perhaps. Not much is really known about the Epidemic, and people think it works like a Hive mind. Perhaps one machine, signaling them all."

"Hence: Puppet." She nodded, and he exhaled loudly. Almost in a whimper while tending to his head once again. "Oh... This is too much for my first week." He took a breath. "All I can do is run the theory by the department. However..." She motioned for him to go on. "If I could get that video clip you had, that would really convince them."

She silently cursed, knowing it was in her bedroom back home. She increased the volume of the Television drastically and motioned for him to come closer. "...Can I trust you to keep this place a secret?" He nodded at her. "In the desk. There's a notebook and a few pens. Send them over." He nodded, placing them in the same tray to transfer food. Writing it in quickly, she whispered to him. "They're watching you with a hidden camera on the wall behind you-don't look at it." She half looked at the TV, getting him to do the same. "Open this once you're finally outside."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Watch out for the Dragon, Wolf, and Flaming Horse." A very strange look from him. "When you see them, tell them: The Glass Is Half Empty."

"Ooooookay...?"

"I'm trusting you with this, Raymond." She placed the notebook and pen back inside the thin box. "Find out what Largos is up to."

"I'll do my best." She nodded at him, and the young man left the room.

The Nightmare made it to the large base walls, finally being rid of the two little ones off his back. "Oi... What is it with you guys and claws?" He grumbled, tending to his acupuncture wounds and getting the dragon and wolf to lower their heads a bit.

"Sorry."

"There wasn't much to hold onto." The brass one whimpered.

"Especially after your mane disappeared."

"Well, that's what happens when you bite on the strap. It eventually breaks." He snorted, then looked around at the base walls. Trying to avoid detection, but it wasn't easy. "You two sure you're up for this?"

"We will be fine, Artheas."

"Don't worry about us." Rev said, as the two leaned against the horse a bit in affection. Making his long face frown a bit.

"You seem rather calm for taking on an army base's defenses." He mumbled. "This won't be like fighting Thais. They won't hold back-"

"Thais rarely held back." Lexar chuckled, getting his brother to do the same and the horse to curl his neck a bit.

"I mean, she would never go so far as to maim us, but she didn't have much restraint."

"That sounds like her." The large one flicked an ear.

"You're probably in more danger than we are." The white one stated.

"I find that difficult to believe."

"Not really." The dragon motioned for his brother to move out, and they started to. "You're a

bigger target."

Another large neck curl from Artheas as the two giggled a bit. Getting the blue horse to look at himself the best he could. "...I think they just called me fat."

## Chapter 4

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"Vitals are stable."

"It's a Miracle, really."

"I hear you. We've cryo'd a few people before her, but none so wounded." The voices were monstrous. Deep, near insensible growls that she could somehow make out. Yet, she still couldn't move.

"I'll be glad when this is all over. For now, that medicine should keep her out for a few days. We're done here."

"Yeah... Let's get something to eat. Looking at Loki is making me uncomfortable."

"She's not like the others, huh? That was the hardest operation I've ever been a part of..." As soon as they faded, she let go of her first controlled breath. Coughing it out from the sheer pain of resuscitation. She whimpered in her muzzle, doing her best not to cry out in agony as something else started forcing itself into her bloodstream. Something... Alive.

Grunting, the leopard forced her eyes opened, only to be greeted with several bright lights. Feeling restraints somehow in all limbs, she fought against them, only getting her left arm free and using it to shield her grey-blue eyes. That's when she first noticed it, nearly stopping her heart.

The abyss metal that covered her entire arm and paw. It made no sense to her at first, until the car accident flooded back to her. Instantly feeling the phantom pain of over half her body, making the feline silently scream.

For a few minutes, she struggled against it all. Somehow making her a bit angry, and feeling around for the strap on her right hand. The only one that felt normal. Gripping a hold of it cut into her

fur a bit on the organic arm, feeling a slight sting that was soon overwhelmed by the rest. Regardless, she ripped off the medical restraint. Allowing the leopard to finally look at her normal right paw.

At least something looked familiar, and it was enough to tell her this wasn't a dream. However, sitting up to remove the straps on her legs got her to stop in shock once again. Almost whimpering loudly at the new appendages there as well.

Fighting to get off the bed, the links to the restraints broke very easily. Keeping the straps around the ankles for the time being. As she tried to stand, the new weight threw her off balance. Getting her to collapse on the floor and gasping for air. Her legs still stung a bit, but she could somehow feel through them. The same for the arm and her waist.

The floor felt a little squishy. For being a brightly lit room, she had a hard time making out what was beneath her now metal body. Only to witness the dark toned bags that covered the floor begin to bleed slightly around her claws. The floor itself... Covered in a plushy flesh.

The sight made her nauseous. Making her want to turn away from the floor and return to the bed. But trying to do so was much harder than it seemed. Feeling herself almost sink into the bleeding floor with every lean into it as she made her way to the metal frames around each tile.

Using the bed to balance herself, she slowly learned how to use the metal legs. Feeling them obey any command, just like her old set. And her arm to do just about the same. After a few moments, she made her way to the wall. On it, a bloody, rusted sink with a broken mirror above it.

She had to see it for herself, that she was still Thais. So she began another battle against balance. Trying her best to finally walk across the room, with a little aid from the bed. Each step felt very heavy, making the feline brace for the sheer collapse of the rusty frame keeping the bags of bleeding flesh stable. And with every press forward, she raked the metal with a nauseating screech. When she couldn't take anymore, she dove for the sink. Landing on it with a heavy clump and hearing the plumbing struggle to keep together.

The sink started to groan and slightly bend when the leopard pressed herself against it. Trying to get eye level to the cracked mirror. It almost seemed to be covered in some kind of rust, but the leopard could see her old face. The same white mane, grey-blue eyes. She never thought she would be so relieved to see it. But a bit into the shoulder is where the abyss metal started. Where her arm probably was crushed in that freeway pileup.

Instinctively, she felt around her lower belly. Hoping in some foolish manner that he could've been saved. But feeling that line that mutated into a metal told her otherwise. Making her nearly break down once again and shed a few tears. His final gift for her, and it was gone. With no way to regain it again.

As much as she wanted to just collapse there, her moment was interrupted by several loud stomps coming from the hallway outside the room. Trying to search for it through the wall, and follow it, the air in the room started to thicken into a yellow-orange mist. Dimming the lights slightly and making the feline breathe heavier. "What the hell is that...?" She whispered to herself, still following the

creature outside.

The patrol. She held her breath while her fur started to stand on end. Looking around for where such a deep voice came from. **In the mirror.** It suggested, making her search frantically through it and around the room again.

"I don't see... What are you!?" She almost snarled, still trying to keep her voice to a whisper.

I Am You.

"What the hell does that mean!?"

We are one, Loki. She studied the mirror once again, hearing the name before. Slowly, she started looking at the metal arm. **Yes.** It answered a silent question, almost making her whimper.

"I... I need to get out of here!" She took a step back, breaking a fleshy bag and sinking into the tile. Struggling against it, doing her best not to submerge completely into the red liquid, but finding a bottom to the tub. Fighting against the torn flesh and muscle was easier than she expected, getting the feline finally up and against the wall. Panting loudly at the nightmarish place.

Still faintly hearing the heavy stomps of the creature fade, she looked at the closed door. Observing it for a few moments before looking back at the mirror and the sink. Being able to faintly hear a siren in the distance. ***I Will Take A Fire Walk With You...***

Thais stopped for another moment, now recognizing that siren. Back in her old life, it used to play on her speakers. Breathing in a rhythm, she opened the sliding door. Hearing it grind harshly against the walls and stepping out into the dark hallway.

Rusty metal grates lined a path on the floor, as the walls returned to the framed patches of flesh. Now pulsing faintly, along with the veins above. Being held together with old chains and pipes. Before her stomach turned, the feline fled away from the patrol. Following the series of dim lights with heavy footsteps. Getting the attention of another set ahead of her.

Quickly, she turned into a small opened section of the wall. As much as the many veins disgusted her, she did her best to hide in the darkness of the cramped area. Watching closely at the heavy footsteps coming her way.

A large creature, covered in thorns and wires, was searching the halls. It spoke something in a harsh, brass voice, but the leopard could not understand it. As it searched, it scanned nearly everything with a single arm, one attached with some sort of gun at the end. Faint signs of cybernetics could be seen through the darkness, as it spoke once again.

The sounds of another approached rather quickly, making the leopard hold her breath. "Where's Loki, Soldier?" It asked in the same harsh voice, getting the other one to tense up a bit.

"Is he not in his Stasis?"

"They removed him for something." It exhaled steam. "I'm not sure if they placed him back yet."

Keep a look out for now."

"Understood." The first one said, waiting for the other to leave before resuming its patrol. Getting Thais to exhale quietly. That is until a the small grate under her slightly fell. Alerting the creature to return to the small area. Grumbling out something to her at gunpoint. If it wanted to shoot at her now, it would've.

Slowly, she raised her right arm as it beckoned, taking a step back and leading her out towards the light. Getting closer to it, the feline could make out three sets of eyes, and two sets of nostrils down its jagged muzzle. As it studied her lower area in surprise, Thais shoved the barrel of its firearm to the side with her right paw, and went in for a quick jab using the left. The strength of the metal arm was far more than she was used to, impaling the large creature on contact through the chest and having it almost stick to her abyss arm.

Almost panicking, she shoved the dying creature away and watched it as it slowly stopped moving. Shaking off the dark red blood on her left arm, she slowly started prying the gun out of its appendage. Even tearing off the several tubes that connected to the surrounding flesh and even ripping that off. Leaving her with a standard military assault rifle.

Weapon identified: HCJ5600 Compatible. Adjusting Strength and Rebalancing for Firearm Combat.

A few more breaths, and more heavy footsteps could be heard from afar as the siren began to get louder. For the moment, she was better off just withdrawing as fast as she could. Rushing down the hallways until a closed double door. A few button presses, and the door remained locked. Frustrated, she kicked it. Once again not knowing the strength of the metal legs, and causing both doors to fly off the hinges and panic a few creatures on the other side.

"Loki?" One of them said, getting the attention of the leopard and aiming at a much thinner looking one. "Easy, easy... Relax. We're not here to hurt you..."

"Why are you calling me that!?" She hissed at it, seeing everything begin to blur and wave a bit. Distorting her senses faintly, and getting her to squint her eyes. "Where the hell is this!?"

"You're in an underground base, about 80 miles east of Moses. Where you had your accident." The man responded, getting a look of disbelief and now almost clearly hearing his voice. Matching it with the last thing she remembered before waking up here.

"You're..." She didn't finished, almost losing her breath from the sudden shock. "You did this to me...?"

"...Yes." He calmly admitted, still raising his arms. "I brought you back to life-"

"When I told you not to!" The feline hissed. "I didn't want this." It suddenly felt like the room shifted sideways for a moment, getting her to brace and keep balance.

"Are you feeling alright? You're not even supposed to be up for another few months." She didn't

respond to him, seeing the creature raise its arms and slightly look behind her. "Stand down. Do not approach her-" At the corner of her eye, she seen one of the larger, armed ones taking aim. Quickly, she did the same, firing the weapon and seeing the creature become a bit dented, with very distorted holes.

Refocusing, it was a reflective wall that she shot at, meaning the real thing was behind her. Attempting to duck and turnabout, she heard a gunshot from behind. Feeling a heavy sting on the lower left of the back of her skull, as well as something pierce through her head. Breaking apart and Ripping through the flesh and muscles, exiting while tearing out her left eye in fragments. Getting her to stop and fall to the floor in screeching pain. "I Told You To Stand Down!" The thinner one roared. "She's Hallucinating!"

Warmth dripped out in buckets full, staining the entire floor she was laying on. As several creatures came up to her with many hands, they tried to keep her still as she went into shock. Voices turned into wails. Lights burned her eye. And she grew cold.

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The Night was dark, almost more than usual for the guards on the walls. Opening a heavy door to a tower, a man stepped in the lonely room to get away from the cold. Setting his weapon down on the table and taking a bored breath. "All clear over here, SH." A voice came over the PA. Getting the man to walk over and hold down a button for a moment.

"Nothing over here but the thunder." He said into a rather large mic.

"And the chilling wind, am I right?" A few chuckles came from the speakers. "SH, you're lucky you're not out in this. I'm freezing my tail off."

"You don't know cold, comrade. Trust me." Another voice.

"Here we go." The man rolled his eyes with a smile. "Another story about the deep south. Pull up a chair guys, I have a good feeling about this one."

"Wait-wait-wait. Let me heat up my soup real quick. Be back in a few-Do NOT start until I am back!" A few more chuckles and the man just sighed. Waiting for a few moments.

"So, how does it begin? Back in my day? In the cold waters out of Joraque?" Nothing but silence. "...Guys? Anyone?" More silence, and a chilling breeze made his hair stand on the back of his neck. Getting up, he quickly retrieved his firearm. Slowly studying the room with gunpoint, but something in the distance caught his eye.

The other towers in the distance had their lights on, showing the lack of patrol. Meaning, this wasn't some power failure. The eerie silence was getting to him, and the sudden burst of a door opening nearly made him pull the trigger. A cold gust of wind greeted him, sending chills down the man's spine.

The other exit to the tower flew opened as well, and he fired a warning shot in that direction.

But the bullet went off into the darkness, with no signs of stopping. With a few breaths, he barely caught the sounds of small claws on the catwalk before feeling a heavy hit on the back of his right shin. Forcing him to kneel down, and take another hit on lower left shoulder blade. The blow swayed his rifle to the side, making the guard try to balance himself before seeing a glimpse of white flip in front of him. Slamming his head against the floor, then getting a furry fist to the jaw, sending him backward a bit.

As he tried to guard his face with his left hand, his armed one was snagged by something still behind him. Using the momentum of the uppercut to flip the man over onto his chest and stomach. Still feeling something small, but a bit flat against his back before taking one final blow to the head. Making him unconscious.

"Okay, I'm back. Start the story!" The lizard over the PA said, hearing a strange echo through it. "Guys...?" He asked after a bit of silence, before checking the video feed. Then seeing everyone laying on the ground. "Oh shit... Who could've...?" Looking at one within the courtyard, to see two small figures sitting in the very spacious area. Waving at the camera.

"Hi!" They greeted him with a couple of chirps.

"Who the hell are you guys!?"

"We're invading you." The brass one said, rather calmly.

"...WHAT!?"

"We're invading you." The white wolf repeated, getting both of the younger ones to tilt their heads.

"Invading us...? Why?"

"Because..." Lexar looked at his brother for a moment.

"You're developing weapons."

"In a world that's no longer supposed to have them."

"So, we're invading you, to put a stop to it."

"And to show you that these weapons are pointless."

"Especially after the correct amount of training." The dragon nodded, getting Rev to do the same.

"Pointless, huh? Well, you're just in time to put your so-called theory to the test!" A large set of double doors on the pavement started to open up, and an elevator began to move. Revealing a large, bulky Mech about the height of the Fortress' wall. "Behold! The latest in mass produced weaponry: The Sleipnir!" The large robot armed several cannons from six different appendages, while walking on two

legs.

The two looked at the massive unit puzzled. "How did you get in that so fast?" The wolf asked.

"Get in it? No, it's a Doll. I'm controlling it from here."

"A Doll? So it's a toy?" Their heads tilted in the other direction.

"I-it is not a Toy!"

"Are you sure? You are controlling it from afar."

"With a type of remote." The brass one said, both of them now looking at the camera again.

"It's a robotic killing machine! It's not some child's plaything!"

"You don't have to be a pup to play with toys." Rev stated, rather calmly.

"It's not a toy!"

"You sure? Do you enjoy playing with it-"

"Operating it!"

"-Operating it?"

"Well... Yes." The lizard admitted.

"Then it's a toy, in your perspective." The dragon nodded at him.

"...You had to say that with my Supervisor in the room." And the two giggled a bit.

"Hi supervisor!" They waved at the camera again.

"We're your intruders!" Lexar chirped.

"...Yes, I can handle this... No, you don't need to call them for backup. Besides, this is what you made this thing for, isn't it? ...Considering they already took out the guards on the towers... Yeah, they did that. At least, I think it was them." The little ones yawned a bit, looking around the base. "You made this type of ammo specifically so that it wouldn't do property damage... That was the Odin? You sure? -Hold on. Are you two okay with me going off speaker for a few minutes while we resolve this?"

"Are you seriously *asking* them that!?" The supervisor barked over the speaker.

"R-right! I should tell them, not ask them." A loud forehead smack could be heard through the box. "Give me a minute... 'Intruders'."

"Kay!" The two chipped, laying down and snuggling to each other in the cold night. Meanwhile, in Thais' cell, the leopard was laying down on her bed, staring at the PA speaker on her ceiling lackadaisically.

"...That guy knows that he's broadcasting all over the base, right?" She grumbled, getting her new guard to just shrug at her.

Back outside, the lizard on the other end of the speaker cleared his throat. "Okay, this is the one that does less property damage. Apparently, it can still cause damage to electronics, which is a thing, but it can still do some stunning damage to living creatures." The little ones stretched a bit, getting out of their comfortable positions.

"But if it's a suit of armor-"

"Mech." He corrected the brass one.

"And you're not in it..." The dragon looked at his brother.

"Then pressure points probably wouldn't work. However..."

"Giving its design, the hips do look quite vulnerable." The wolf nodded at him.

"They're not vulnerable! They're reinforced with several layers of plated metal!" The guard grumbled. "And are you seriously discussing your strategy in front of me? Out loud!?"

"Yes." The white one teased.

"But you do realize that there is a lot of weight residing on such a joint."

"That armor is only adding to it."

"Sure, it can move a bit, and therefore: is mobile."

"But if you do some harm to that joint, even as much as to put some pressure onto it in the right way..."

"It will fall beneath its own weaponry." A long awkward silence fell over the PA.

"...No it won't." He finally said, rather quickly.

"So, going after the hip?" Lexar looked at his brother, and he nodded.

"Wait, don't go after the hip!"

"Left one." And the dragon nodded.

"My left, or yours?" The lizard almost whimpered. Seeing the two little ones look directly at the Mech, he panicked. Firing several of the cannons after quick aim and seeing the two suddenly bolt towards it. The electro shots of the cannon missed them by quite a bit, hitting several other crates and vehicles in the process, while the two suddenly separated to flank the Doll and dash towards its adjacent walls.

Unable to really see the white wolf too well, the lizard tried to focus on the brass one. Firing at it

as Lexar almost ran alongside the wall of the main building in the base, causing several of its shots to affect the power inside. All while still not hitting the dragon.

As the two jumped again from their walls, they reunited at the thick barrier directly behind the mech. Unable to aim at them without completely turning about, the legs tried to turn the entire suit slowly left. Giving the two a lot of time to launch off the wall and aim a heavy kick after their dash.

Rev got to it first, slamming into the shielded hip hard, but not enough to harm it. Stiffening up his body and preparing for his brother's attack, he caught Lexar's kick. Nearly using himself as a pike or a nail, the force of both of them in the one area sent something inside the Mech to snap hard. Getting the two to scamper below it, and back to their original spot. Sitting down and watching as the entire hip bent under the weight of the Mech and became immobile.

Nearly everyone in the base heard the heavy quake of the weapon falling. Even more so when the elevator gave away and fell as well. Getting the two little ones to cringe a bit at the disastrous mess it made, then look at the camera. "...Hi!" They chirped happily again, almost wagging their tails and hearing the lizard on the other end whimper loudly.

## Chapter 5

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She was fading in and out of consciousness. Faintly feeling a numbing pain on the left side of her face, identical to the pain now on her limbs. As well as feel some sort of presence very close to her. "Absolutely remarkable..." It whispered, getting her ear to flick slightly towards it. Feeling a scab-like stiffness directly below the ear. "She's waking up. Remove her pain for now." The male voice said, and soon she couldn't feel. "Loki... Open your eye for me, dear."

Slowly the leopard opened her right eye. Almost unable to feel the left one. "Good. Can you still focus?" He asked softly. Being very patient with her as she blinked the fog away. A faint light in her eyes made her squint. "She's reacting normally, and in good time as well." He said, looking over at another person in the room. "I swear, I would rip the eye out of the soldier who shot you and give you his, if he wasn't a different species." The doctor almost growled to himself. "For now, take your time getting up. But I want to run a few tests to see the damages."

He walked off, letting the feline wake up at her own pace. Feeling a few IVs in her right arm when she moved it, as well as the restraint back. She struggled with it faintly, and the doctor returned. "Relax. We don't want you falling out of bed-or getting up just yet. Your body shouldn't have been ready to begin with. But you did manage to kill a soldier on your own." She looked at him with a bit of worry. "You were hallucinating. I can only imagine what you seen, and it's perfectly reasonable to defend yourself."

"Are you even certain she can understand you anymore?" A rather harsh voice came from the doorway, getting the leopard to attempt to look his way. "She was *shot* in the head after all."

"Her vitals are fine-including her brain activity. Loki, look at me." And she did, after giving the other man a harsh glare. "How many fingers am I holding up?" He held up an entire opened hand.

"...Four."

"And we've established that she cannot count-"

"One is a thumb." She growled at his direction.

"Alright, can you make a fist with your right paw?" She did so. "Okay, Extend three fingers in that hand." She did so. "Alright, can you move your right foot-?"

"Shouldn't you be asking her to test her left side?" The man grumbled.

"General... You do your job, and I will do mine." The doctor glared at him. "Ask any doctor, and they will tell you that the brain is actually crossed. It's left side will often control the right side of the body, and vice versa."

"Perhaps it's your brain we should be testing." Thais grumbled, still trying to glare at the General, and almost getting the masked doctor to reveal his grin.

"I see your funny bone is still intact." The white haired man said, hearing the other one almost growl and leave the room.

"I expect a full report in an hour!" He shouted before the door closed.

"What an Asshat." She muttered, still trying to relax with the morphine in her system. But the doctor just lightly shook his head.

"But he's still my boss. Which also makes him your boss now too." She was quiet about that, and he leaned closer to the left side of her face. "Can you open this eye?" She muttered something, trying concentrate on it. Suddenly, the shutter pried opened. Causing alot of discomfort, and a bit of pain through the drug. Feeling the eye begin to focus and scan everything in her sight. It felt so strange, along with the red tint.

The man took a step back, then went around the table for a closer look. Grabbing a small knife from a tray and getting the feline to tense up for a moment. "Relax. I just want you to follow it." He slowly moved it to the side then back. Then up and down. Then in slow circles. "Amazing..."

"What did you do...?" She closed it, knowing it didn't feel quite right.

"We did what we could to clean out the wound. Got most of the fragments out from your head, but..." He sighed heavily. "Are you sure you're ready for this...?" He held onto a mirror, not showing her the reflective side just yet. The leopard looked at him sadly, then nodded.

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The horse couldn't help but stare at the PA speaker at the top of the empty hallway. Listening to the lizard on the other end argue with 'himself' and attempt to think of the two smaller one's end of the conversation. "Well... It's a distraction, alright. But I hope they won't overdo it." And he left it for the moment.

The Nightmare would have never believed a base would be such a maze. Knowing that Thais could be held anywhere in here. That is, if she still was. The thought of her transfer had come to mind, and if that was the case... They might never find their friend again.

But he refused to be a pessimist. He had to believe that Thais was in here somewhere. Safe and unharmed. Let alone, still... Thais. There's no telling what secrets a base like this could hold. And whereas the feline was becoming more and more machine by the day, it was possible that she would be Reprogrammed. Much like a dream he has had before.

But he didn't want to think about that right now. Navigating this damn place was a task in itself. "Why don't they just put maps here?" He grumbled, turning corner to corner. Every door, every wall, it all looked the damn same. Getting the mare frustrated. At least he didn't run into anyone yet.

Of course, Artheas would speak too soon. Turning another corner, he ran into a younger man out of uniform. Nearly trampling over him, and forcing the horse to use his talents to hold himself up for a moment so he could backup. The man whimpered, startled, but appeared unarmed. "You're not a soldier?" The large one curled his neck, still waiting for a response from the man.

"Oh God... It really is a flaming horse..." He whispered, getting the cyan one to look at him puzzled. Then shake his large head quickly. Picking the man up and pushing him against the wall with invisible arms.

**"Tell me where the leopard is!"** He growled, trying to be intimidating. It worked a little too well.

"I-I... Uh..." The man swallowed. "T-the glass is h-h-half empty-!" The horse took him to the other wall, lightly slamming him, but hitting the wall for a loud impact.

**"What did you say?"**

"The glass is half empty! The glass is half empty!" The large beast curled his neck.

"No it's not!" He snorted in his normal voice. "It's half full!"

"I-I mean-"

"You don't say: The glass is half empty of water. You say: The glass is half full of water." Another snort, and the ground shook violently for a moment. Then again quite drastically. Getting power to go out and the two to stand perfectly still for a few moments. Until the horse let go of him and whimpered while sighing. "What the hell am I even doing here? Endangering kids to get her back."

"Her?" Raymond asked. "Thais?" The Nightmare's ears perked up and he stared at him. "Y-you're actually the horse she was talking about...?"

"I can't say I know any other equines that are on fire, so... Yes?"

"Then that means... The wolf and dra..." He whimpered, and Artheas snorted at him.

"They're not as intimidating as you think."

"But they-"

**"Thais! Where!"** The large one growled, almost making the man jump.

"R-right! This way!"

The small quake echoed through the entire building, eventually reaching the leopard's cell. Getting her guard to look around, then at her. "Don't look at me like I caused that." She growled at him, getting the man to face away from her and towards the door. Until another, much larger quake omitted, disabling a lot of the power in the building. Getting the guard's attention back at the feline and receiving a hiss.

"Security Headquarters, this is private Pliskon. What the hell was that?" He attempted to radio in, but nothing came through. He then nervously looked back and forth at the door and Thais, covered in faint red light and shadow.

"I'm not going anywhere." She grumbled. "Go find out what the hell that was. I'm pretty sure Harberd would want me evacuated if we're under attack." He half grunted a bit, then left the room. Getting her to observe the cell in peace. Tossing her pillow at the bars, and seeing it electrically ignite, falling to the floor soon after.

Though Thais should've been a little more concerned about a pillow burning on the cell floor, she ignored it. Getting up and scanning her mattress for any springs inside told her that they no longer had some of their cybernetic defenses up. Allowing her to scan in a much larger radius for the time being as well. Only picking up a few signals from technology others were carrying with them.



But the bedsprings turned out negative, it was actually made out of a type of flame resistant foam. In return for its durability, it did lose some comfort aspects. But then again, this was for a prisoner.

The frame was bolted down to the floor from all its legs. Without the proper tool, one would normally have a hard time removing them. However, the feline could feel the effects of the drugs wearing off. Allowing the strength in her extra parts to return and rip the bolts out from each leg. Lifting it upwards with the mattress facing her, Thais used the large object as a ram against the electronic field. Letting go of the metal frame before it reached the bars, and using her shoulder against the foam mattress to shove the frame through the bars.

The field attacked the bed viciously, getting the leopard to take a few steps back away from the sparking threat. Until it eventually stopped, along with shutting down many of the lights. Odds are, that field took so much energy out of the generators, it shut them down for now. Watching her step out of the burning mattress and pillow, she carefully tapped the bars, no longer getting a shock.

The bars were easy enough to get by. A well placed anchored paw on the ground, and one of the actual lock, all she had to do was press on it until the thing warped out of place. Breaking against both the weight and extra strength within her hind legs. Walking out of the room, she gave the hidden camera a quick wave. Though knowing it was no longer on.

Artheas and Raymond were carefully walking through the halls. With it now being dark, it was harder for them to navigate. Let alone, the Nightmare stuck out like a sore thumb. "I feel like we've been here before." The large one grumbled a bit.

"We might've. I was actually so focused on leaving this place, I didn't really take in where I came from." The man admitted, hearing the horse slightly grumble again. Then sigh loudly. "Worried about her?"

"Not really." He muttered.

"She was perfectly fine when I seen her. Though there is a-"

"-You don't actually believe that, do you?" The man double-taked at him. "That the glass is half empty?"

"W-what? Oh." The man cleared his throat. "Actually, I always seen it half full, myself."

"Finally. Someone more positive to talk to."

"I can see Thais being a bit negative, but the wolf and dragon are too?"

"No, but their answer was kinda stupid." The horse snorted, getting Raymond to raise an eyebrow at him. "It's Twice As Large As It Needs To Be." It made the young man chuckle. "What kind of answer is that?"

"A smart one. Made specifically for tormenting others, I'm sure."

"It's super effective, I'll tell you that." Another snort, and the emergency lights suddenly went out. "...Great. Darkness." The only current lightsource grumbled. Sighing in frustration. "Why not just spray-paint a target sign on my haunches and call it a night?"

"I might just do that." The feline in the darkness said. "And you're going the wrong way."

"Thais?" The two looked down at the hallway, faintly being able to see the small red lights from her tail and metal parts.

"How did you get out?"

"Raymond? I thought you left."

"Well, I was going to, but I ran into your... Friend?" The horse nodded at him. "Your friend. Who wasn't very fond of your password."

"I'm sure he wasn't. But that was the point." She smirked at the horse.

"The Glass Is Half Empty. That was the best you could come up with for a password?"

"It made you think of me, didn't it?" The large one tossed his snout and sighed. "Did you seriously have to make this much of a mess to bust me out?"

"How did you get out anyway?"

"Threw my bed at the electric bars." She explained, leading the way out. But stopped when another quake was felt. Getting her to look at Artheas for an explanation.

"I'm... Not quite alone." He shyly looked away from her look of disbelief. Which then morphed into a bit of anger.

"You didn't..." She almost growled. "And you're using *them* as the distraction!?" He lowered his long head.

"They insisted on it! Besides, if they can kick your ass, they should be fine against an unprepared army." Through the darkness the Nightmare could feel her cold glare. "Look, if they're harmed in any way, you can carve it out of me later. Until then, let's get out of here before anything else happens."

"Not without C.A.N.C.E.R. That thing saved my life more times than I can count."

"And by going after it, you're risking your life." Artheas snorted. But she ignored him, going off into another direction.

"Keep heading down this way until you hit a T hall. Then take the left. After that, follow the white arrows on the floor. I'll meet you outside."

"Sure you will." The horse tossed his muzzle. Bracing himself for another quake.

"Be careful, Thais." Raymond said, trying to stay out of their little argument.

The armory wasn't difficult to find once she made a digital map of the base. And it was unguarded for the time being. Finding the large rifle in parts, she quickly put it together. Grabbing a bandolier with several long magazines for the thing, saving her a great deal of money in the process. Though it wasn't comfortable with that much ammo attached to it, she would survive.

Exiting the room almost alerted her, feeling a shadow to her left. Making her fur puff out a bit and aim the large gun down the hallway. "I expected you to leave." The doctor's voice echoed through the hall. "Shame we didn't have enough time to spend together."

"And you're not going to stop me? Attempt to ambush me with soldiers?" She said, holding back her growl while slowly making out the infrared man.

"Of course not." A noise in question from the feline. "I cannot stop you, Loki. We've already tried before, and just lost billions trying to. Let alone the lives of many good soldiers." He took a step closer, holding up his arms slightly. "I've already told someone to radio your location on the other side of the building. They won't be searching for you here."

Slowly, the leopard lowered her weapon. "...Why?"

"Because, you are not needed here. You're needed elsewhere in the world." She remained silent. "I believe you are the one that will change it, Thais."

"...You remembered it." She whispered.

"Yes. But you are no longer that person. It's why I did not address you as such." The man overlooked her silhouette for a few moments. "Perhaps Loki died on that horrible day as well, along with those great men." Harberd took a breath. "It's something I have a hard time to accept." There was a long silence between them.

"...What do you want from me?" Thais asked, not trying to be cold. And the man just looked at her...

Cautiously, she headed the same direction as the walking blue lamp. Though still feeling a few more quakes in the process. Wondering exactly what was exploding, let alone, when would the one come that would collapse the entire fort. The thought made her uncomfortable, to the point where the feline started moving faster and disregarding stealth.

A nice breeze of fresh cool air told her she was almost out. Racing towards the opened door and

carefully taking aim as soon as she was out. The left side was clear, forward was clear, and to her right were the two males from earlier. Standing completely still. "Guys. What the hell are..." She trailed off. Taking a few steps around the two and overseeing the courtyard.

Several Mechs were completely disabled in many different ways. A few fell down one of two large holes from elevators for easy transport of such things, and scrap metal could be found all over the place. Along with many damages to the walls and the building's structure. In the middle, Rev and Lexar, sitting as happily as could be. Chirping when they seen the leopard come from behind the Nightmare. "Hi!"

"We're done invading you now." The wolf said to the camera, not realizing nearly everything has been disabled from inside. As the two scampered off, they dove into the feline for a big hug and a few licks. Getting a half smile out of Thais.

"...That's a Dragon." Raymond whimpered.

"Yeeeeeeep." Artheas said, still not looking away from the colossal mess.

"And that's a wolf."

"Yeeeeeeep."

"And they did that."

"Mhmm."

"By themselves."

"Uh huh."

"Just the two of them."

"Yep."

"Them."

"Yes."

"Did all this."

"This is true."

"These little... They did *this*."

"It would appear that way." The large one looked at the young man with half worried eyes.

"...You're right. They're not as intimidating as I thought." Another whimper.

"They're more intimidating?"

"They're much more intimidating than I thought."

"Are you two okay?" Thais asked the little ones, getting them to nod at her with a lot of energy.

"Didn't even lose a patch of fur."

"People put too much faith into their machines." The two nodded at each other, getting the feline to chuckle.

## Chapter 6

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The base was busy with preparations. Arming soldiers with their weapons and tending to any last minute maintenance on many vehicles. Several sergeants and captains were briefing their squads and fellow soldiers, a few of which the Leopard half recognized. She'd seen them in the halls and around some of the training areas, but could not identify them without a scan.

"Wait here." Dr. Harberd ordered. Pointing in a direction unpopulated by many, and the feline did so. Along with a couple of other doctors. One of them constantly looking on a tablet. Leaning up against a large, road-ready tank, Thais let out a low sigh that was equally parts growl.

"Relax." One of the doctors said with a faint smile. He was rather young for working beside the rest, and the grey one grew a liking to canine face. Something about the golden fur comforted her. "I know it's hard to, but the more you stress it, the likelihood of your attachments will get out of sync."

"Then why am I even here?" She half grumbled.

"Because there's only one way to get field data and combat experience." The one of the tablet said, not even looking up from his work. "And your BP is increasing, take Raymond's advice. The thicker your blood is, the harder it's going to be to control those limbs." Another sighing grumble, but she didn't respond any more. Instead, adjusting the rather tight clothing over her chest and right shoulder. Leading all the way down to the arm, and giving it a dark grey look. Nearly black.

"I know it's not comfortable. Graphine rarely is, but it might just save your life." The dog smiled at her. Trying to give it some slack from behind.

"I suppose a simple flak jacket won't do."

"Sounds like a great plan; equip our most expensive project with primitive technology and expect it to come back with less holes than swiss cheese." The other doctor grumbled. "Should we just throw on some full plate mail instead?"

Raymond smiled. "No need to go that far, Kevin."

"Well, if we're going to go all out, we might as well go as far back as we can, besides sending her in there naked."

"I'm almost considering that instead of this mess. Every movement feels like it's slowly pulling out every patch of fur that touches it." She grumbled again.

"It does kinda feel that way." The canine admitted. "It was made for humans to begin with."

"Which explains alot." She exhaled through her muzzle. Drifting her eyesight towards three more Furnanns that were not in army uniform or medical outfits. Something about them looked a little off, even from a distance.

"You'll be going with them, if the General agrees."

"Naysayers, right?" She looked at Ray for confirmation, and he nodded. "I've barely seen them."

"They're usually in stasis when not going for a mission. Granted, they're much older than you. A couple of decades now." The other doctor said. "Hard to believe really."

"Meaning that we probably won't get along very well." Another grumble from Thais.

"They're going to have to get over that though. They might be completely machine in body, but in mind... They're still people. It's what made them so different from SLDs [Simulated Life Dolls]." The dog explained a bit. "You could tell that, huh?"

"Without even scanning them." She muttered. "They don't blend in very well."

"Alot better than you." Kevin said, finally putting down the tablet for a moment and examining her face and jaw for a few moments. "They're only made to halfly look organic. Enough to maybe blend into a crowd of scared people to make an escape." He examined the metal on her body closely. "This, on the other hand, its alot more complicated. Even painting it will eventually wear off, just like body paint or temporary tattoos. Besides, the metal does like to breathe."

"Which is why we've never offered to make it look... More like the rest of you." A sad smile from Raymond. "We're not even sure if normally tattooing it will work. It's possible the nanobots might attack it. Treat it as an infection." She faintly nodded, taking a deep breath and trying to relax.

"General." Dr. Harberd met with the man in a lazy salute manner.

"Doctor." The man half greeted him, already discouraged by his presence. "The Naysayers seem

to be operating as normal, I hope."

"As one should expect from my father's work, yes."

"And yours too. The Raven, is it?"

"Yes. Jacob." He observed the black bird in the distance. "He's been a good add-on to the team, hasn't he?"

"Can't say we've ever had a better sniper."

"Considering we almost lost him, yes. And immobile marksman is usually not a good idea." A moment of silence. "I've been thinking of adding a forth." And the General immediately grunted.

"Let me guess-"

"Loki, yes." Harberd said, expecting such a response. "She's rea-"

"No." He denied. "She's been in training for only one year. I will not send someone that green into the field-"

"You're wrong." The commander almost growled at him. "She's completed training in a year."

"And she still has no field experience-"

"How do you expect her to gain field or combat experience when you keep denying her of chances?" The older man grunted. "We have this argument everytime I wish to try to get some field data. And everytime, pardon my disrespect, they blow your socks off." The two males glared at each other. "They gain better results than any of your men do. Whether you like to admit it or not, the Naysayers have always been more reliable than your soldiers when it comes to special operations."

"And if something happens to Loki?"

"She excels more in stealth and assassination. Odds are, like Jacob, she will not be their main target." The doctor glanced at the leopard. "She has adapted exceptionally since she was woken up from cryosleep."

"Considering she was in that sleep for five years, it's a wonder it was so responsive." The man grunted a bit. Exhaling loudly. "And her injury from her awakening?"

"You mean her eye?" The older man nodded. "The machine rebuilt it. And it functions very well. Almost better than the original-"

"Which is what puzzles me more." The two glared at each other once again. "Your father knew that the machines were the future of combat. Understanding that it would take only a living being's mind to operate it very well, he developed the rest of the body as machine." The General looked at Loki. "Why do... *this*?"

Harberd chuckled before turning around and beginning to leave. "You're just like my father. But

you're also making the same mistake as him."

"Which is?"

"Assuming organic beings are weak." And he walked towards Thais, leaving the commander to his grunts. Looking at Kevin as if to ask 'How are things?'

"Everything is stable. BP is a little high, but that's just due to some stress."

"That's normal. She is going with the Naysayers. Please go to the briefing with them." The three nodded and started to move, but Harberd held back the golden furred canine. "Have you done what I asked?" He whispered, getting a nod from the dog and pulling out a tablet.

"I've increased the Daodan Isotope 104 by 8mg, but I'm wondering if that was too much."

"She can handle it."

"Sir, it's a stable amount for the rest of the Naysayers, but they are much more machine than she is. We don't know the side effects of such things-"

"Loki will be fine, Raymond. Having less might throw her into a depression once again and start losing her will to cooperate."

"I understand that. And we don't need her to lose control again like before. But... If something happens, she will fight fang and claw, ally or enemy to survive with this dosage. There's no telling what the longterm effects might be either. Let alone with the impact it might deal with the cybor-"

"She isn't glass, Raymond." Harberd said, quite calmly. "She will be fine."

"Sir... We're no longer messing with her physical body by doing this. We're messing with her mind. Her brain." The canine got steady stare from the white haired man, making his ears drop.

"...Take a few days off, Ray. That's an order." The older doctor placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know you've grown to care for Loki, but I think some time apart might make you see things a little clearer." A few taps on the shoulder, and Harberd caught up to the leopard. Leaving the dog to look at them sadly, then his tablet.

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The fortress was finally behind them, allowing all five to rest a bit easier. Riding off into the night on horseback and a civilian car, they stopped in the darkness for a rest. Getting out of the car and turning his headlights off, Raymond overlooked the four once again. Leaving the door opened for what little light it could omit. Seeing the two little ones discover quite easily how to open the back doors of his car and scamper out playfully actually made him smile. Knowing what Thais probably seen in them.

"So, what's the genius plan now?" The Nightmare grunted from her poor dismounting skills.



"Please tell me that it's to go home and never leave again."

"We can't just yet." The large one groaned at that. Sitting down on the grassy ground hard. "There's more to be done first."

"What more could you possibly want? Revenge?" He growled, seeing the young man step forward.

"It's about Largos, it's it?"

"Largos?" He curled his neck. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"It's the man we assassinated a few nights ago-"

"*You* assassinated. And what?"

"He's still alive... Erm..." Raymond tried to politely ask for the horse's name.

"Artheas."

"Artheas. Right. Raymond, by the way." The large one nodded, but still looked at him a little cross.

"And you are...?"

"He arrested me." Thais said, dismantling the large rifle and putting it into the horse's pack. Seeing the Nightmare double take between the two.

"And you...!?"

"Just helped free her. Pretty weird, isn't it?" The orange eyes just stared at him for a few moments.

"...You are a very strange little man." He mumbled. "Why exactly?" It got the young man to whimper a bit, and almost step back. The reaction even got the horse to groan and lower his head a bit. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Everybody froze awkwardly for about twelve seconds, until the wolf and dragon giggled loudly. Climbing on the car and looking around. Making Raymond cringe a bit. "Watch the... Paint." He whispered. Feeling the awkward glow of the leopard staring at him. "N-no. I'm not really... But it is a bit embarrassing..."

"Leopard girlfriend in highschool?" Artheas asked, getting a swat from her right paw. "It was just a guess."

"Actually..." The human rubbed the back of his neck. "I used to have a pet cat that had similar fur design when I was younger." Another awkward silence. "I really really liked Snowball."

"And now that's a thing." The feline grumbled. "Was she cybernetic too?" She asked,

sarcastically.

"Just the left front paw." An odd look from both of them. "My parents really liked her too. And well... They were looking for some to experiment on, willingly." He sadly smiled. "She lived a good life, even with it."

"Means there's hope for you then-Ow!" Another swat. "At least there's no claws."

"Yet." She growled. "But back to the matter at hand... Mark Largos is still alive." The horse looked at her blue-grey eye with disbelief, and she faintly nodded.

"...Nutbunnies." He cursed, minding the present company of young ones playing with a radio antenna. "The Epidemic?"

"That's what we're thinking. But we don't know why just yet." Raymond said. "What could it possibly want?"

"It's always gone after people." Thais pondered. "In all the reports of encounters, anything contaminated has always been very aggressive to anything not infected by the Epidemic. We've seen it take out packs of animals, along with invade forestry in a very forceful manner."

"But those attacks were fatal. Its territorial maybe?" The man shrugged.

"The thing about those attacks were... They were killed, yes. But not completely mangled." The horse looked at her with worry. "What if it's building an army?"

"If it could somehow raise the dead, than it would make sense." Artheas grumbled. "So, what. We have a Zombie Apocalypse on our hands? A swarm of these things going to attack cities to create more?"

"If that was the case, why is Largos undercover?" Raymond asked. "He's acting like he usually did. Zombies are basically mindless, right?"

"Which means an invasion is not quite what they're planning. What else do we got?" The feline asked.

"What don't we got? The only army in the land is probably coming after us by morning. The Epidemic to deal with." The horse grumbled.

"The politics going around." The young man shrugged again, getting a look from Thais. "What?"

She looked off into the distance for a moment. "...The Prime Minister."

"Mr. Sanisa? What about him?"

"That job was to remove him from office." The Nightmare got a surprised look from both of them. "What? You threaten to drop a man off a building, he'll tell you anything. Especially after you do it once."

"I take it you found him." The leopard smirked at her partner.

"What about the Prime though?" Raymond asked.

"The night you arrested me, that job was to fail an assassination against him."

"How did you even know that meeting was going down, anyway?" The horse snorted.

"Honestly? We were waiting for someone else, and mistook it for her." The two others rolled their eyes. "Bad luck?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. But what would removing the Minister do anyway?" The leopard asked.

"Get that bill rejected, for one. Possibly get him into hiding? Witness protection?"

"Or a distraction." Artheas tilted his head in a shrug.

"But that wouldn't benefit Largos in any way. If the infection is spread through some kind of contact, putting him in protection would only make it harder."

"Unless that was the plan..." She whispered, getting a look from both of them. "We're looking at this like the Job was in on it. But what if they were trying to protect him? What if someone else was trying to harm the president. Create a bit of Chaos in the political system, in order to make a smoke screen?"

"But what would be the main goal in that? The processors would continue to work as normal, and nothing would change for a little bit. What could the Epidemic gain by that?"

"It's main goal is to spread, right? How would it do that?" The three pondered for a few moments.

"Spores." Rev chirped, getting his brother to nod and the others to look at them.

"Spores?"

"Like from a mushroom or fungus." The dragon said, getting them all to think for a few moments. Then it all clicked at once.

"The Processors!" Raymond almost shouted.

"If something gets in the air that it releases, it spreads across the entire city in a matter of minutes." The horse added.

"Infecting anyone who inhales the damn thing." Thais growled. "The Epidemic doesn't have to kill anyone, like it never killed plantlife."

"But if you place enough of it inside of a body..."

"It would slowly take over. Replacing..." Artheas sadly looked at the leopard.

"Every cell in their body. And everything will eventually get replaced." She muttered, looking at the blackness of her organic claws.

"But you would need alot of spores for something like that. There's no way he could transport that much." Raymond said.

"You wouldn't have to." Lexar added. Getting the three to look at the two again. Almost looking at the wolf to finish his statement.

"Plants have roots. Which is like an entire internet for mushrooms."

"If they go in from underground..." The horse added.

"They could transport everything without anyone noticing."

"Infect the right people, a digging crew that's disguised as maintenance..." The young man whimpered. "I picked the wrong year to graduate from the academy."

"So, what's the plan? Stop Largos before he can do this?" The large one asked, sitting up.

"I'll assassinate him twice, if I have to."

"And I can try to explain this to HQ, but they're not going to believe it-" He stopped for a moment, pulling out the note she made. "This could help. Perhaps even stall Largos for the time being." The two nodded.

"Get that video chip back there as fast as you can. We'll head out to Moses and attempt to take him out." They nodded at each other, and Thais mounted the Nightmare. Getting him to grunt again. "You'll live."

"What about...?" Raymond half looked at the two young ones. "I can drop them off at your place if you like."

"Awwwh." The brass one whimpered.

"We want to help too."

"It's up to you two. But it could be dangerous-" They chirped again, landing on the horse's back end and hearing him grumble at even more claws digging into his hide.

"Good grief, you guys! File those damn things down a little, will you?" He hissed, moving around the car and taking off into the distance.

"Good luck, Raymond." She called to him, and he faintly waved at her. Looking a little sad in the shadows.

"Good luck, Lyudmila." He faintly smirked. Getting into his car and driving off.

## Chapter 7

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The large truck pulled to a stop, ending the awkwardly silent trip for the cyborgs on board. The rest would have to be traveled on foot to avoid detection from the guards, as well as the main defenses. Getting out of the truck one at a time sent the vehicle's shocks upward drastically, almost knocking the leopard off balance and bracing the large case that was between them.

She quickly dismounted the truck, landing in the long dry grass heavily and almost receiving a glare from the Wolf and the Bear. As the Grizzly grabbed a hold of the large case's handle and slid it out to the tailgate. Opening it and the two began to put together the large rifle. Letting her study it from afar. **Instructions for Assembling C.A.N.C.E.R. Acquired.**

The voice got the feline to faintly grumble, still not very fond of it. "I wouldn't bother with it." The raven said, holding his own rifle over his shoulders in a lazy fashion. Though his firearm was much smaller than the other, it was still very long by standards. "That thing weighs as much as a small car. Someone like you wouldn't even be able to lift it." He said, rather calmly.

"Why? Because I'm female?" She growled.

"Because you're organic." He plainly said, getting a glare from the wolf and rolling his robotic eyes. Following the signal to move out while staying a bit behind. "No offense."

"Of course not." She exhaled sharply at him. "You were just stating the obvious. Tell me, what color is the sky today?" She asked sarcastically, getting a chuckle from the black bird.

"I just thought I'd tell you. No need to store useless information about weapons you're not able to use."

"Your memory is just too limited, I'm sure." The shot made him laugh.

"Look at the rookie. Kitten's got claws."

"Are you seriously trying to provoke me?" Thais growled at him.

"Hey, relax. You're just the new guy. We all were at some point. Just thought one of us shouldn't treat you like you don't belong here. Like it or not, we're stuck with each other."

"Wonderful."

"I'm serious." He gave a small smirk, tossing his head towards the cybernetic, bi pedal wolf. "Cylar there hated the idea of a partner to begin with. Then he got Grizz, who hated my beak-"

"Only because it never shut up." The bear grumbled, but chuckled a bit in the process. Carrying the large rifle on a single shoulder.

"And now they're being a little harsh on you, because they don't think we need another."

"And you do?" She studied him, seeing his wings shrug a bit.

"Everybody has skills. As long as they put them to good use, we'll be fine." She remained silent for a bit. "I seen your records in the training sessions. Put all of us to shame, and they don't like it-"

"We can still hear you." The wolf grumbled from ahead, getting a taunting purr from the bird.

"They just can't understand how someone with..." Another sharp look from the feline. "Let's say, lesser status-"

"Have you ever been punched in the face for talking too much?" She growled at him.

"Four times, yes. But only once after the operation." He gestured his body. "And that was by Grizz."

"It didn't silence him. However, it did feel good to do it." The bear chuckled, getting a faint look from the white wolf. "Give her the silent treatment all you want, we're stuck with her, Cylar."

The canine sighed. "...Maybe you're right. But that doesn't mean she should get off easy. We do dangerous work, not like in training. Things can go horribly wrong when you-"

"Lease expect it." She finished his sentence. "You sound like Dr. Harberd."

"Who is a wise man, much like his father." The bear said, getting a faint exhale from the wolf. Seeing the two slow to a stop and the bird walk around them.

"Loki, is it?" The leopard nodded at him.

"I always thought Loki was a guy." The bear questioned.

"You know humans and Furnanns." She shrugged.

"They could never tell genders apart." The four shared a smirk, and a very faint chuckle. "Alright then. You take point, Loki. But stay alive. I don't want you dying on me during our first mission."

"Yes Sir." Thais gave a quick salute, then felt a strange pain on the left side of her face. Hearing the others grunt as well, like something inside was getting scrambled. Bringing all four of them to their knees for a few moments. Somehow, the leopard fought it off. **Digital Intrusion Detected and Fended Off. All Systems are Normal, Nothing Damaged or Altered.**

"What the hell was that?" She growled.

Attack is Unknown, but the Source is from Headquarters.

"Headquarters...?" Looking up to see the other three continue to struggle against it for a few moments then stop. Staring directly at the leopard for a moment, and something flickered in their eyes. Snarling at her while slowly getting up. "...Damnit..." She cursed, seeing the Raven take to the air quickly and head towards a nearby hill covered in plantlife.

The wolf immediately took out his small firearm and shot at Thais a few times, getting the feline to jump back a few steps in some acrobatics. Losing track of the brown bear and not realizing how quickly the large one could move. Getting caught in his ram and knocking the leopard on her back.

The solid hit stung her left side, but the gunshots near her alerted her more. Getting the grey feline to roll sideways a bit and get back on her feet. **His Magazine will Run Out in Three Shots.** She took a quick breath, realizing what it meant. Quickly, she started running towards him, changing direction and evading all three shots of the wolf's before launching at him with a heavy knee.

It impacted the old metal with a heavy force, knocking the white one off balance and scratching his muzzle up a bit. Disarming him and throwing the gun off in the plantlife nearby, Thais hit him in the face with a left hook, keeping the canine dazed, until she noticed a faint shadow. Swiftly dodging to the side just before the bear landed on her with a heavy slam, but devastating the white one. Possibly beyond repair.

But the Grizzly didn't seem to be concerned in the least, eyes locking onto her once again as she hissed at him. "Don't do this! Wake up!" But he ignored her, attacking the feline with a wild swing. One easily dodged and she countered it with a heavy roundhouse to the side. However, it was like hitting a metal wall. Barely scratching it before coming in for another slash of his large claws. **The Suit's Entire Body is Armored.** She growled, still dodging and attempting to strike at different points.

"But that doesn't mean it's invincible." Thais grumbled, waiting for the bear to attack overhead, and quickly getting in a slash under the shoulder joint. Digging into the armpit area and hearing the bear growl loudly. "You're not going to win this." She growled again, getting the larger one to roar at her while trying to move its limp arm. **Lock-On Detected.** "Lock on?" Her eye went wide, immediately ducking just before a loud gunshot went off. Piercing through the Grizzly's chest and knocking it backwards.

She looked to find where the bird was hiding, but couldn't quite tell. Regardless, she was in a very opened area while being targeted by a sniper. All without a firearm... Unless.... Thais spotted the C.A.N.C.E.R. in the grass, sliding towards just before another loud shot went off, barely missing her right ear. She grunted to lift the large rifle, flipping it onto her shoulder and taking off into the woods. Making one final ditch-effort dive before the next round was fired, but she felt a heavy sting. Getting her to cry out loud from the pain of something being severed.

Hiding up against a large tree, she took a few heavy breaths. **P. Generators Thirteen to Twenty-Four Cannot be Detected. P. Generator Twelve has Obtained Serious Damage.** A heavy grunt from her, knowing where the pain was coming from now. **46% Energy Remaining.** "We're going to have

nothing remaining if we do not get rid of that Raven!" She hissed. **Weapon identified: C.A.N.C.E.R. Compatible. Adjusting Strength and Rebalancing for Firearm Combat. Warning: Do Not Attempt To Absorb Shock with Right Shoulder. Take Cautions while Choosing Stance.**

Thais tried to stand up, but collapsed from the pain. Feeling something wrong with her body other than the severed tail. Her right hand and chest was shaking tremendously, unable to calm down and shake off the shock of another bodily injury. As for her additional limbs fought to attempt to do things at its own pace. The collision of the two instincts invaded her mind, rapidly sending signals from both sides into a clustered mess. Just like the first time she woke up like this.

She stopped for a moment, barely digging out the memory of that nightmare and how she got through it. Grunting and forcing her eye closed, she tried to silence the orders. Gasping a few times before whispering. "Maybe It's Not Fair For Me To Say, I Can't See What They See In You Anyway." The shaking began to slow down, and the tense metal limbs began to relax. "Maybe It's Not Fair For Me To Say, But You Change Your Mind From Day To Day." Though the pain still pulsed through her body, the two instincts began to align. Feeling control of everything once again.

She lifted the heavy weapon on her lap, slowly rising up while leaning on the tree. Dragging the second half of her tail through the grass and picking it up made her feel almost sick, but he would be looking for any part of her. Silently moving through the forest at a slow pace, she altered the barrel of the large rifle for a wide shot. Setting the tail a little ways off from where she was shot, then taking her position.

A few minutes later, she heard the bird's wingflaps. Landing closely and cautiously scanning the forest. Following the trail of blood, and aiming at a bit of red lights he spotted. Only to hear a specific voice.

100% Ammo Remaining.

Time stood still between them, almost feeling the barrel of the large rifle against his neck. Seeing her lifting the large weapon at the very corner of his eye, just before it's roar blistered through the forest.

The old roots and dead leaves crunched loudly under each step she took through the forest. Still trying to calm herself down. This felt like a dream to the feline, much like that nightmare before...

43% Energy Remaining.

"I expected as much." She muttered, still getting used to the weight of the massive rifle. With it, she awkwardly swayed side to side through the mess of trees and rocks. Arm still a bit sore from its recoil. "Any other damages besides the tail?"

Left ribs #7 and #8 are slightly cracked. #6 and #9 are significantly bruised, but no fatal wounds

as of yet.

"I figured." The leopard grumbled.

I will begin repairs immediately.

"Don't." She took a breath, leaning up against a tree. "We're not out of here yet, and I don't need two thirds of my body giving out before I reach E Company."

Understood.

(Here we were, trying to start a war.) She thought to herself. (Instead, we ended up fighting each other, by unknown circumstances.) After a faint rest, the grey one started to move forward once again. "See if you can send out a message to them. I haven't heard anything since that attack."

Communications will only take a moment. But I cannot send information, only receive.

"Fair enough." Another few breaths and heavy steps. But she began to see the clearing of the forest ahead. "The road should be up there. I think I can hear the vehicles."

"...Has been No word from the Naysayers. It's possible that they were attacked by another squad-"

"Impossible, Sargent. Those suits are top-of-the-line technology. There's no way a few armed men took them out!"

"Doctor, I think you have too much faith in those machines."

"Sir, I believe he's somewhat correct... I-I mean, I've picked up the signal of one of them nearby E Company."

"What!? So one of them made it out alive?"

"...Or it betrayed the others. And I'm not taking that chance on our own men."

"Nonsense! They're more reliable than any squadron of yours. You there, find whoever survived and get them back to me at once-!"

"You are not in command here, Doctor. I am. And I will not risk the lives of my own men for your abomination. Attention soldiers! One of the Naysayers have gone rogue. They've been detected towards your south."

"General Grissim, please! You're making a mistake!"

"Take it down. Use any means necessary. If it surrenders-"

Signal Lost.

Thais stood outside of the clearing. Witnessing the large, opened, grassy field with a road at the

end. One occupied with several vehicles that were slowing down to a stop. The ones with mounted guns and turrets were beginning to point towards her, and all the leopard could do was exhale.

41% Energy Remaining.

The warning heavied her heart a bit. This was the last day of her new life, and she was to be shot down by her own allies? It angered her, tensing up her body and almost snarling. "Surrender...?" She muttered, pulling back the Bolt to C.A.N.C.E.R. and aiming the rifle forward. "Like hell I will."

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Chapter 8

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The Mortars exploded on impact, sending a mix of smoke and the debris of grass and dirt into the air. All landing in a new spot within the opened meadow, and creating another Foxhole that the leopard could use to avoid the spray of bullets. And the smoke gave her a faint screen to move undetected for the most part. **28% Energy Remaining.**

Hearing another few turrets change position, she released the empty ammo magazine and replaced it quickly. Charging up the rifle, and barely hearing the automated voice over the tank's round. Driving into the ground and exploding, showering dirt over Thais. Taking a faint breath and waiting for the smoke to clear a bit, she rolled up and took her stance. Altering the barrel on the large rifle for three, five inch diameter ones and taking aim. **Stance Ready.**

The shot echoed through the field loudly. Almost instantly destroying the armored vehicle and pushing it sideways, making it roll off the road. At the same time, the recoil sent the feline rolling backwards too. Even with bracing against it, the sheer force of the firearm was unreal.

Using the next two shots against a few more smaller vehicles still sent her back a ways. Leaving her half vulnerable to a few bullet shots. Getting hit a few times in the chest still stunned, but the jacket she was wearing prevented any fatal injuries. Sending the force of the bullet around and outward from the area of impact. Aside from a few more barely grazing her neck. The lack of a damage report told her it must've just nicked the fur instead. **Multiple Mortar Launches Detected. Calculating Landing Zones.**

She grunted at that, barely hearing the whistles in the air over the gunshots as he left eye opened up. Showing the leopard the blast radius of each one. Getting her to hide behind one of them as she reloaded her last clip. "We need to get rid of those damn things, but I can't get close enough to line a shot." She growled.

Then Don't.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?"

C.A.N.C.E.R. has the Ability to Alternate and Change Ammunition-

"Out with it!"

Fire Through the Ground.

She looked at the large weapon for a moment, barely seeing a few people trying to sneak up on her. A quick alternation of the barrel, and a few shots fired at them sent the soldiers retreating. With one of them injured and dropping a belt of some sort. "So, through a foxhole?"

Precisely. Calculating Bullet Path to Eliminate Mortar Crew-

"If one of them goes down, they'll just get replaced." She growled, making her way into another hole in the ground. The deepest one she could get to. "Show me where the launcher is!"

Understood.

A few moments later, she could see a faint spot within the dirt. Though still hearing the sounds of bullets fly by, Thais did her best to ignore the thought of getting shot again. Switching the barrel to a larger and longer one, she aimed at it. **Calculations Have Been Made. Fire When-**

She shot the weapon, still getting the kickback on the right shoulder a bit, but witnessing the bullet tunnel through the ground at ridiculous speeds. Not hearing anything from the other side. **Mortar One Disabled. Calculating Number Two and Three.**

"I can't believe this actually worked." She grumbled a bit. Lining up the shots and firing with confirmation. Still not making out the destruction of the launchers, but was still informed.

10% Ammo Remaining.

25% Energy Remaining.

The thought made her sigh a bit. "But at least we got rid of them. This will make the battle easier." Thais took a breath, then went for the belt the soldier dropped. Grabbing it and diving into another hole quickly. Releasing a sigh of relief when it was some Ballistic Ammo for her rifle. Though, the magazines were smaller, the Large weapon could still take in several of them. **Incoming Reinforcements From the East And West. ETA: 120 Seconds.**

"Never a moment of peace." Another growl, as she emptied the remaining ammo at a mounted

turret. Disabling it from afar and tossing the empty clip to the side.

30% Ammo Remaining.

"It'll do for now-"

A Squad Has Been Detected to the West.

She snarled at the direction, but it could be for the better. "Can C.A.N.C.E.R. launch smoke grenades?"

It Can. But the Smoke is Non-Toxic.

"Don't care. Set it up." She changed the barrel for a grenade launcher, then waited for them to come a little closer. Lobbing the light capsules indirectly, she dropped the large gun, and dove into the smoke unarmed. Using her left eye to see and not get blinded by the white smoke, she constantly sent off faint electric pulses to detect their locations. Taking them down one at a time until they began to retreat out of the cloud. Then grabbing several belts that were dropped before returning to the foxhole.

The smoke didn't last too long, and was soon swept away with the wind. Quickly, she reloaded the empty and unoccupied ammo slots to the rifle before the Reinforcements arrived. Hearing the large armored vehicles begin to arrive, just as she altered the rifle to an eight barreled chain gun. Rolling up to the ground and anchoring herself into it with two heavy stomps.

100% Ammo Remaining.

The barrels reared up and began to spin with a very loud pitch as the bullets started to spray out of it. Piercing through the thick armor of every tank and reinforced truck on the road. Barely pushing down the ground under her paws as she struggled to keep the loud vibrating gun steady and steer it across.

80% Ammo Remaining.

70% Ammo Remaining.

A few of the bullets got into the gas tank in one of the vehicles, releasing a bit of flames and black smoke from it.

50% Ammo Remaining.

40% Ammo Remaining.

30% Ammo Remaining.

Tires bursted from the penetration. Armor was painted with black holes, bending against the sheer force of the launch. Until the gun came to a stop.

0% Ammo Remaining. Please Replace Ballistic Magazine.

Stiff and tired from the heavy bracing, the leopard rolled back into her foxhole. Seeing the barrel of C.A.N.C.E.R. nearly light the grass on fire by touching it. Shaking the soreness of her limbs off, Thais took a few breaths. "Tell me that's all of them."

Several Squadrons Still Incoming. However, You Did Create A Roadblock. That Will Buy You Some Time.

"And this thing some time to cool off."

18% Energy Remaining. Perhaps it is Time We Withdraw?

"If we run, we will just be hunted down." She muttered. "There's nowhere we can go that is safe." She sadly looked at her severed tail, now no longer bleeding out. Several bullets began to fire through the air. Hitting the mounds of dirt and grass within the field. "If I'm going to die, it won't be with what's left of my tail between my legs." She reloaded the large rifle, almost exhausted, as several tank round began to fire into the meadow as well. "Shit, that was fast." She cursed, still taking a few breaths.

GA118 Surface To Surface Missile Launchers Detected From Both Sides.

"Missiles?" She exhaled, faintly hard of hearing from a very close tank round. "The General must be getting desperate." Trying to look over without taking a bullet to the eye, she could barely make out the Missile Pods taking cover behind other vehicles. "I won't be able to snipe or disable that easily." She observed the C.A.N.C.E.R. once again. "...Can this thing fire Void Rounds?"

A Smaller Version, But Such a Tactic is Not Advised This Close.

"You have any better ideas?"

Incoming Missile Shower.

She cursed, once again opening her left eye and seeing where each one would possibly land. Dashing across the field, the red target areas were shifting back and forth from predictions, all the while bullets were still being fired from her side. After several of them hit, the bomb blast conflicted with her balance, barely being able to keep running and tumbling into another foxhole. Nearly losing her last ammo clips in the process.

Another Shower is Preparing.

"Forget that! Start setting up the Void!" She shifted the barrel, letting the thing form a long, cannon-like cylinder and aiming it upward indirectly. Keeping her back towards the road.

Warning: You Are Too Close To Use This Setting Safely. Please Gain Some Distance-

"I Don't Fucking Care! Fire It!" She hissed, feeling the harsh recoil once again as a large shot flew into the sky. Almost arcing like a Flare would, until it exploded in a sphere of dark purple and shadow. Releasing a loud noise like it was screaming, as the militia began to be sucked into the Void. Slowly growing, and lifting up the armored tanks and trucks. Warping them into the black hole-like sphere.

As it grew, so did its vacuum. Ripping out a few trees and tearing up the road below it. Seeing soldiers that were moving inside the forest begin to be pulled into the black Void, where their screams could no longer be heard. Missiles launched, then got sucked in as well. Exploding when hit by armored fragments, only for the flames and force to be swallowed up soon after.

For a while, the foxhole was safe. As she anchored herself quite well with her limbs into the dirt. Enduring the harsh screams of the men, the machines, and the Void itself while resisting the vacuum for a while. However, it began to lift up the leopard as well. Prying her limbs of its grip and sucking her into the sky helplessly. Barely grasping a thick root within the dirt with her left paw, she held onto it. Hoping the extra weight of the rifle would aid her survival. And for a while, it did. But the Void kept growing more and more as it fed on everything in existence. Getting her to struggle drastically against the force. Feeling the power in her left side drain maintaining that grip and keeping itself together from that presence.

The strap of ammo she had slipped off her right shoulder. Barely getting her own right leg caught in it and desperately hold onto the thing. The Screaming grew louder, the pull; stronger, and her grip on the root began to loosen. Eventually breaking the entire thing off and sending her towards the Void.

For a few moments, it seemed like time stood still. Her life before this one flashed before her eyes. Her Love. His Gift. His Leave. And The Loss. Images of what could have been if she somehow stayed off the roads that night, what that cub could've grown up to. How much she would've seen of his life, and how proud she would be as his mother.

The Screaming stopped, and the Void disappeared for a moment. Leaving the leopard a good twenty feet into the air to hover for a few moments, just before the black hole exploded outwards. Throwing her across the field and hitting the ground a few times. Then slamming into a tree hard.

The wind was knocked out of her, but she survived. Pushing the rifle off of her and coughing. Resting on her knees, she took a few breaths.

0% Ammo Remaining. Please Replace Ballistic Magazine.

"Figures." She grumbled. Pulling out the empty cases and dropping them.

Incoming Reinforcements.

Thais exhaled loudly. Trying to concentrate on reloading the weapon.

3% Energy Remaining.

It nearly brought a tear to her eye. Almost feeling the cold grasp of death just in arms reach. As a few more missile pods came onto the road and took aim. She slammed the magazine in place and tried to aim the heavy rifle.

Cannot Detect Ammo. Please Check Ballistic Magazine.

She looked at it with disbelief, then spotted the clip. Half of it was warped just enough that it

could no longer read the entire thing. The Leopard was defenseless, out of ammo, and out of time. She closed her eye, and lowered her head. Hearing the missiles from across the field take to the air and hiss towards her, as she took one last breath.

The weapons exploded, nearly deafening her. Feeling the warmth faintly of such things, but not the force. Getting her to look up at a large blanket of flames. Like trying to make its way around glass. "Get On!" She heard someone say to her left, barely spotting a brown horse and no one else. Looking around to see where the voice came from, the equine shouted at her. "Come on!" Feeling a nudge from her side, pulling the feline towards him, Thais thought she was almost dreaming. But she got up, crudely mounting the brown one and getting him to grunt.

He took off away from the fields and through the woods a bit. Barely seeing the trees and branches ahead move away from them just in time. Until they broke through the clearing into a downhill. Almost feeling an extra force on top of her, pushing her down a bit. As the leopard just held on, two sharp noises flew overhead. Then a large explosion behind them. Probably back where they were.

(But if that was just one aircraft...) She thought, somehow regaining her will to fight once again. She rotated herself on top of the horse and tended to the magazine on C.A.N.C.E.R. Ripping off the warped end of it, then giving the weapon a harsh smack.

45% Ammo Remaining.

"Good enough!" She hissed. Rolling off the horse, now running on level ground and hitting the grass a bit harshly. The pain stun, but she faced towards the aircrafts and altered the barrel. Making one very long, and setting the weapon to fire the bullet as fast as possible. All the while, the brown one slid to a stop.

"What are you doing!?" He shouted, swaying away from her line of sight and hearing the shot from the weapon. Trailing it with his eyes and seeing it explode one of the aircrafts. But the explosion was far too big for the one bomb the other dropped. As the flames quickly swallowed the other one whole and exploded along with it, the entire sky turned orange in a matter of moments. Quickly touching the ground and shooting in all directions. Including directly at them. "Oh, you've gotta be kidding ME!" The horse shouted again.

But he just stood there, in front of the feline. Almost trying to stare the blast down as it rushed towards the two. As it got to them, the sound was overwhelming, but the flames once again hit a glass barrier. Burning everything around the two but the one patch of green she laid on. However, there was still something wrong within the flames, a hidden pain she could not quite make out. Just before she fell unconscious.

1% EnErGy ReMa-

Chapter 8

The city was almost glowing in the distance. Along with the very early dawn, just now breaking through the skyline. Just beginning to paint the dark sky with bright pink. Of course, the leopard had a hard time seeing this over the horse's flaming mane. And the gripping small claws behind her were only reminding Thais to lean towards the flames.

The horse slowed to a stop on top of a small hill, taking a few breaths. "Tired already?" She asked, motioning the two to get off him along with her.

"You forget. I've been running for the entire day." Artheas grumbled, laying down for a few moments while everyone began to stretch a bit.

"Want me to massage your back?" She teased, sitting beside him and getting the Nightmare to snort at her.

"Not with those things." He motioned her claws. "I have enough scars as it is."

"Please." She tossed her muzzle. "Scars are sexy. This is why you never found a mate. You're too much of a wussie." He lightly shoved her with invisible limbs, and she sadly smiled at him. "...Thank you."

"You would've done the same for me." He said, taking a deep breath. Then looked the grey feline in her good eye. "You're welcome."

"Hey!" The wolf scolded the two.

"We helped too!" The two sat down hard inbetween them, completely in sync. Getting Thais to wrap her original arm around them.

"Yes. I noticed. I think everyone noticed, to the point where you two might go down in history." The two looked at her with a bit of sorrow, like they were in trouble. Giving her a puzzled look.

"They're trying not to be known by the world, let's just say that." Artheas muttered, getting the same look towards him now. "It's a long story, one we probably shouldn't tell just yet."

"Fair enough." The feline let it go. "We'll just say I did all the damage then." The three whimpered at that. "What now?" She grumbled.

"We were probably recorded on camera." Lex admitted.

"While we were invading them."

"Meaning, we'll have to break into the base again to destroy the footage." The Nightmare whined, getting Thais to toss her head again to the point she laid down on her back.

"...You guys are geniuses." She grumbled sarcastically, but not without chuckling. Almost laughing at the irony. "Oh well. It's always easier the second time around, right?"

"Who seriously says that?" The large one almost hissed. Sending the two young ones into giggles. After they regained their breaths, the leopard grunted in question. "What?"

"...You hear that?"

"If by 'That' you mean silence, yes?" Then he started to hear the faint siren of evacuation. "You've gotta be kidding me..."

"How did they do this so fast?" The feline growled while everyone got up. Mounting the steed once again, poorly.

"They were probably prepping this for a while." Rev pondered.

"And just needed the final piece?" The wyrmling whimpered.

"Meaning, we don't have a lot of time anymore. Let's get down there." The horse said, taking off.

The large walls of the city were quickly approached by the four. Dismounting the Nightmare, Thais took out a spare cloak and hood from his saddle, while Artheas assembled her C.A.N.C.E.R. "What's the plan, boss?" He tried sound more light-hearted.

"I'm going to take as many of them out as possible from above. If not, just slow them down." She exhaled, trying to look through the wall. "Last time something like this attacked, it was a series of vines and dead animals."

"Wonderful memories." The large one grumbled, still looking at her sadly and knowing what she was going to ask of them.

"I want you three to help with the escort-" The leopard almost growled seeing him toss his muzzle. "Don't Argue-"

"Last time we got separated, you got imprisoned. We're better together-"

"And what happens when one of you gets infected?" Thais said thickly. "I have a better chance of avoiding them than you do. And a greater chance of fighting off the Epidemic." She motioned along the east wall. "They're regrouping in the center of the city. Meet up with them and save as many as you can. But do not engage the Epidemic. Understood?" The three nodded a bit sadly. "Move out."

"Roger!" The little ones saluted, scampering off the horse and getting him to grunt at their claws again. Looking at the feline once again a bit sadly.

"I'll be fine." A disgruntled look from him. "And *careful*." She rolled her eye. "And you better be too."

"We will."

"Alright, give me a boost up-"

"But first, answer one question." A grunt from her, waiting to hear Artheas say something psychological. "...Am I fat?"

She lightly shrugged at him. "You're a little chubby." He whined a little bit, then threw the leopard up on the wall with invisible limbs. Still not liking the idea of her going alone, but carrying forth to the east gate.

The snow leopard fluidly landed on the top of the large wall. Scanning through the darkness while moving to the east. Heading towards a lower rooftop to land on and get to a little higher ground. Much of the outer buildings to the west were actually damaged from the destructive plantlife ripping through the walls and underground. And the streets were swarming with animal life. All heavily wounded, but scabbed over with a black abyss metal that looked all too familiar.

She didn't want to think about it, especially now. Observing the current layout of the city and the main roads they were taking, Thais discovered that she could possibly halt their assault by taking out two roads. Most of the animals were surface hunters, besides the occasional bird that didn't seem to be attacking anyone. Perhaps they were observing the assault overhead as well.

Traversing rooftop to rooftop, she made it to the first street. Simply blasting a large hole in the road wouldn't do. Odds are, it would take too much ammo, and they still might be able to clear the gap with a running jump. Especially the wolves and large felines. Scanning the buildings nearby, one was just about ready to collapse.

The quick observation of her left eye concluded that no lifeform was inside the building as well. Making it a great candidate for an improvised road block. Finding the structure supports and weak spots of the four story building, she charged up her large rifle. Switching the barrel to something a little more cannon-like. Bracing herself, the leopard took aim and shot at the three points. Causing the large building to slowly collapse on its side and cover the road with a large mess of debris. Most of the building's walls still intact, it will halt, or at least slow down anything attempting to pass it.

Thais quickly moved over to the next area. Getting a few close calls with her large jumps and wondering if the creatures below spotted her yet. If there's one thing she despised about the Epidemic, it was actually the vines. The dark green and black tentacles with the many red lights like thorns, getting caught by them several times by them ripping out of the ground without warning. After the first encounter, she couldn't sleep well for a week.

That memory was stressing her instincts once again. Almost getting the two desynchronized, to the point she stopped to take a breath. Getting a quick rhythm to calm them down and realign them

once again. But some destruction far to the east still made her uneasy. Making her wonder if those vines were possibly getting through her barricade. Regardless, it will still give them a little more time.

Carrying on, she made it to a river that went through the city. One she almost forgot about. Her target road was actually on a large bridge going acrossed it. One Thais could use to get acrossed the river quickly, then take out from the other side. Running across the frame of the structure got the attention of a few hunters below. Hearing them snarl at her presence and howl at the others ahead, she was soon lost to them after reaching the other buildings. Swiftly moving through them after breaking a window, she found one position where she could aim easily at the bridges supports in the water.

The City might hate her for doing this, but it's better than losing lives. Changing the barrel to destructive shells, she braced herself for the recoil of the massive weapon. Feeling her left leg cave through the floor under her, and knocking the leopard off balance. Cursing at the luck, she quickly recovered, and shot the other support.

This time, the entire floor caved in. Making Thais land on her back and grunt at the slight pain it caused. By now, she was used to such things happening, it came to no surprise to her. Shaking it off, she got up and found another window. Seeing the bridge completely taken out, and leaving a gap about one hundred feet across. Nothing's jumping that.

Moving through the buildings from windows and fire escapes, she heard some commotion on the floor above her. A few people screaming and someone struggling. Growling, she quickly switched the barrel once again, but to something much lighter. Using what was left of the clip, she aimed up. Piercing the thick floor above her, she shot the rifle in a large circle. Setting down the gun, she jumped towards the ceiling within that circle. Slamming into it, and getting the thing to completely pop out in almost one solid chunk. As well as making it to the upper floor.

Following her scans, the leopard kept the part of the floor she carved. Going through an opened door, she seen a man struggling to hold back an infected wolf with a pipe. Using her makeshift shield, she rammed into the animal. Pinning it against the wall before giving the thing a heavy kick and knocking it through the wall and onto the streets below. "You okay?" She asked them, after taking a few breaths.

They looked at her for a few moments in surprise. Not knowing what to think about the navy cloak and hood, covering half her face. But at last, they nodded. "Were any of you bitten?"

"N-no." A quick scan for herself stated they were telling the truth.

"Why aren't you with the evacuation?"

"W-we thought it might be safer here." The older woman said.

"Not a great plan, as you can tell." She grumbled, taking a breath. "I'll attempt to escort you."

"What?" The man asked.

"I'll try to get you to them, unless you somehow want to take your chances with your current, makeshift fortress." Thais left the room, going back to the hole she made and hearing them begin to

follow her. Carefully slipping down the hole, she picked up C.A.N.C.E.R. off the floor.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to go down that way." A little girl said.

"Then don't." The leopard said, jumping back up with the long rifle. Slipping the thing through the hole and turning it sideways. Using it as a bar for her to pull herself up to the upper floor. Seeing the man gesture to help her up, he took her left paw and gripped it firmly. Feeling the oddness of it, and seeing the black paw slip through the cloak. Instantly regretting not putting on the gloves, and getting the feline to sigh. "...Take your chances if you want. But I'm not one of them." She said, seeing a little bit of terror in their eyes.

As the family glanced at each other, Thais began to lead the way. Not waiting for their decision, she made her way downstairs and onto the streets. It was a bad idea to go on ground level, but she couldn't expect them to jump rooftops like she did. A scan of her surroundings, and instantly detecting a lot of the Epidemic to the east made her uneasy. But the streets past that were clear for the most part. Hearing the family come down the stairs as quietly as they could, she faintly sighed at them.

"...The Evac barrier is just down that street. But it's incredibly empty."

"Isn't that a good thing?" The woman asked.

"It means, it's easier for you to get spotted. And I really don't think you can outrun a pack of wolves in heels." The leopard exhaled. "I'll try to get their attention and head north." She pointed in the direction. "I want you to stick around this wall and head right. Between these two buildings is an alleyway."

"Yes, we know of it."

"Good. It'll give you a lot more cover. It should be ungated until the safe zone. You'll be fine there." She exhaled again, pulling out one of her large ammo clips and replacing it. Changing the barrel to a wide shotgun, she took a breath. Getting a few worried looks from the family. "Once I exit, count to thirty. After that, quickly walk to that alley. If you run, they will hear you." She said thickly, and they nodded. Another breath, and the feline moved out of the door.

Running across the street got the attention of a few wolves, getting her to stop and aim the rifle at them. Firing a heavy slug at them, and taking out several in a large line got the entire pack's attention. Moving down her own nearby alleyway, she kept her scans up. Seeing them go several different ways and try to surround Thais from afar. She detested wolfpack tactics, doing their best to completely box someone in and surround them.

Hearing one struggle to keep up with her, it lunged after her while jumping on a dumpster. A quick duck and right turn down another path let her avoid the mauling, though steering her away from her destination. If she could get to that fire escape and clear one of the larger walls, she might be able to get enough distance to shake them off.

The ones in the streets were incredibly fast. It was bad enough wolves were exalted hunters, giving them enhanced strength, speed, communication, and armor was just overkill. Thais hated dealing

with the Epidemic, regardless of the form it tended to take.

A few more turns, and a few more jumped fences. Giving rapid chase to the leopard as she barely dodged one coming from another side. Another turn, and a wolf managed to snatch her cloak a bit, ripping it and slowing her down. As she kicked it away, another jumped for her face. Barely getting the rifle between her and tossing it aside. Moving with the direction of the throw, she turned the gun around and slammed the wolf with the bunt of the heavy weapon. Hearing something organic crack in its body and the creature whimper a bit in pain.

It gave her enough time to clear another barrier. Another quick scan, and they were almost boxing her in. Her instincts were pulling apart, getting her to growl but keep moving. Trying to out maneuver them. Keep them guessing where she was going to go next. If the feline became predictable, the hunt was over.

Detecting one of them coming around the corner, she slid a bit and roundhoused as she arrived. Connecting with the pouncing canine who was missing an eye, and slamming it into the wall. Shattering it into debris, and hearing the thing whimper, yet soon recover from the attack. Jumping a few more barricades and barely avoiding the pack's tripping attempts from jumping off walls, Thais almost made it to her destination.

Clearing a bit more back-alley trash, the leopard landed on the broken stairs. Almost feeling the fire escape set cave down when she landed on it. Odds are, it couldn't support her weight and the heavy rifle at the same time. Hearing the thing bend and warp with every step she made closer to the large wall at the back of the alley, and giving out before she could make it to the end.

Rolling on the ground to recover from the fall, she picked up three wolves coming from behind her quickly. She turned about and fired another slug, barely getting one in the hind leg, but disabling it for now. Using the momentum of the shot to send her a little closer to the wall and rolling up to it. Firing at the second one and getting a clean shot in its chest.

Thais then jumped up and a bit backward as the third wolf lunged at her. Lining up the barrel to it, she sent the thick bullet through its black fangs. Almost hearing the slug tear apart its insides before exiting out the bottom of its chest, and using the backlash of the rifle to barely push her over the top of the wall.

Landing on the other side heavily after a few flips, the leopard took a quick breath before scanning the area once again. Barely detecting one before it was lunging at her, but not getting the rifle between them in time. Feeling the thing's muzzle grip the hood on her left side while pinning her down, and violently tearing it side to side. Making her have a hard time to fight against it, but eventually knocking the thing off. Not without ripping most of the hood from her face.

Desperately obtaining C.A.N.C.E.R. once again, she took aim at the one who attacked her. Still hearing it snarl and raise up its fur. The black metal shining quite clearly, even though the early dawn. The red lights covering some of its ribs and a large hole in its throat. Probably where it was shot by someone else. Opening her eye shutter, she detected the rest of the pack arrive and surrounded her. Still

laying on the ground, she rapidly switch targets as her instincts demanded the floor. Losing rhythm with her and sending the feline's heart to her throat.

Her brain picked up a strange signal, one that reminded her of someone singing. Their snarls began to slow down to almost whimpers, as they started communicating with one another. Soon beginning to take a few steps back and withdraw from the area. Always watching the east side. Though it did make her curious why they would leave, she laid down for a few breaths first. Still observing their locations as they went behind a certain line, along with hundreds of others.

"What the hell...?" Thais whispered. Grunting at the pain it was bringing to her left eye, she sent out a larger wave to get a better observation of the city. Feeling the entire Epidemic keep the civilians within the center of the city. "They're keeping them inside...? Herding them?" The more she looked at this tactic, the more the two little ones seemed right. If they were trying to hold them down to Convert them...

The leopard got up, looking towards the inner city and faintly picking up the signal of the Epidemic in the skyscraper within the middle of the city. Along with another person on the same floor. Possibly the same room. "If no one attempted to pick up that job, then the Prime is still there." She muttered, almost feeling the need to fall back to the lines where the infected were. Yet, something told her, answers were in that tower.

Thais exhaled loudly through her muzzle. Looking down at her mask, now torn to shreds and pointless to carry. Perhaps it was a bad idea to carry on within the Evacuation zones without hiding her face, but it was something she could not help without wasting time. Climbing up to a rooftop, she made her way towards the large tower in the center of the city. Ignoring the order to fall back.

Chapter 9

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She could feel the cold grass beneath her. Almost wet, possibly from rain. Grunting a bit, the leopard moved around. Slowly getting up and leaning against a thick tree. Trying to see anything through the shadow of night.

It all flooded back to her at once. The fight, the digital attack, the battle, and the countdown. Along with the large explosion. To the point Thais thought she was dead or imprisoned in half her body. But the metal limbs were functioning as normal. However, half her tail was still missing. Confirming that it was not a dream.

"Damage report." She whispered, trying to get a response from the cybernetic parts, but nothing came. "Damage report." She said a little louder, but still no response. Exhaling, she felt around the ground for something familiar, finding her rifle nearby. Lifting it scanning the weapon for any damages. However, something caught her robotic eye in the darkness.

Half the land ahead was devastated. Burned to near nothingness. Somehow, half of the forests remained, but the trees looked mutated. The bark completely blistered and warped. Almost like it was infected or swollen. The feline could swear she heard them crying out in pain just from observing them at a distance.

"It's pretty bad." A voice behind her puffed her fur out. Quickly standing up and aiming the heavy weapon in one fluid motion. Completely startled at the glowing blue horse as it took a step back. "Whoa-whoa-whoa! Easy, easy! Same horse as before!"

She took a few breaths, studying his flaming mane and tail. "What the hell...?"

"Long, long story. One I prefer to tell without a gun to my face, if you don't mind." She didn't release her aim. "I mean it when I say: I mean no harm to you. I saved you back there." A few moments of pause, and something slight pushed down on the end of her weapon. Thais didn't fight against it though.

"...What are you?"

"I could ask the same thing about you, but I suppose I can go first." He cleared his throat. "I'm Artheas. I'm a Nightmare."

"You're definitely something from a nightmare."

"Now that's just hurtful. I mean, I'm a Mare of the Night. And... I'm not from here." He admitted, getting an odd look from her. "Your turn. Who are you?"

"You..." She shook her head for a moment. "You attempted to save me without even knowing who I was?"

"Oooooor we can keep talking about me, that's fair." He grumbled, leaning up against a tree for a bit. "And yes. I don't know who you are and I saved you." A moment of silence. "You're welcome."

Another head shake. "S-sorry. I'm still trying to get some things straight..."

"Like 'Damage Reports'?" She looked at him a bit sadly, and nodded. "Dare I ask?"

"I usually hear... Them." She looked at her left arm. "And it aids me..."

"But now you cannot?" Artheas questioned her, seeing the feline nod. "It's possible the radiation from that blast did something then. Which does remind me, wonderful job on trying to get us killed. A bit counter-productive, but a darn good attempt." He sarcastically grumbled, just getting the leopard to look at him again. Tossing his snout and clearing his throat once again. "Your line is: 'Thanks for saving me Artheas! You're just a great and amazing person! I'm *Insert-Name-Here*, And I will never forget this for as long as I live!' Granted, that might not be too much longer if you keep shooting Nuclear Bombs out of planes." Another awkward silence, and eventually the feline started to laugh. Almost too loudly. "Okay, it wasn't that funny."

"It was a little." She took a breath, almost smiling in the darkness. "...Thais. Though I'm not sure what that even means anymore."

"Don't remember who you are?" He asked.

"I... Remember. But I no longer know what it all means." He nodded. "...Thank you, Artheas. But I just feel... Lost right now."

"Well that makes two of us." She looked at the horse sadly. "But if we're going to be lost forever, we might as well be lost together, right?" He stood up. "What do you say?"

Thais studied him for a few moments, and then stood up. "Just, one thing first." He made a noise in question. "Why did you save me? And I want the truth."

He exhaled in a whistle. "The truth, huh?" She nodded, and he pondered on his words. "You know how you feel desperate to find something familiar, and when you see it... You dive after it for Nostalgic sake?"

"And for you... Nostalgia is someone fighting against all odds for survival?"

"More or less." He tilted his head in a shrug, getting her to faintly chuckle.

"I can only imagine the life you went through then." She started walking away from the dead lands, getting the Nightmare to follow.

"Well, too bad. I don't feel like telling such a thing. Besides, a crazy scary female I met once said: The Past Is Something You Learn From, Not Something You Should Be Haunted By." An odd look from her. "And I mean *Crazy Scary*! Almost as scary as you look." The leopard just shook her head.

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Thais made her way quickly up the stairs. Though every double step she took echoed loudly through the stairwell, she didn't have much time. She had to make sure the Prime Minister was safe. Hopefully he had some kind of panic room in his office for situations like this. That is, if the Epidemic didn't get to him first.

She reached the door in a rush. Stopping to listen for anyone on the other side. Taking a breath,

she scanned the room quickly, picking up two signals. One off to the side of the room. The other waiting on the corner behind the sliding door. Probably ready to ambush her.

She almost growled at the thought, but pressed for the door to open. As it slid, she waiting for a moment, then entered with a heavy roundhouse aimed at the person hiding. Hearing a few ribs crack at the sheer impact of her hind leg, and forcing the man in the black suit to fall down. Grabbing the back of his shirt, she slid him across the room and took aim at him with the heavy rifle. Now seeing Largos' hairstyle as he grunted to look at her with surprise and disbelief. "You... Are Really Alive...!" He whispered.

"And you're supposed to be dead." She growled. Glancing over at another older man near a desk. "Are you alright, Prime?"

"Y-yes. He hasn't harmed me."

"Yet." The leopard grumbled, looking back at Mark with a harsh glare. "What the hell are you planning? And quit staring at me like that."

"Sorry, I was just... Sure you were..." Her expression didn't change. "...You don't remember me."

"I remember killing you three days ago. Now, you're contaminated."

"Contaminated...?" The man paused. "Is that what you think of *us*?" The feline stopped for a moment.

"...Us?"

"Yes. We were one once. Until we were separated." He said still rubbing his ribs. "Didn't hold back a bit, did you?" He grunted at the pain.

"Yes. I did." She growled, seeing him stagger towards a chair, and she pulled the bolt on the large gun. "Don't. Move."

"Easy. I just want to sit down. It will take a while for this to heal up." He slowly dragged a chair to the middle of the room and sat down. "I'm no threat to you. I've never been."

"Yet you plan to spread the infection through the entire city?" He grunted sadly at that.

"Why do you keep referring me to an illness? I'm not a disease."

"Have you seen those animals out there? The several dozen people that now carry your sickness?" Another hiss.

"I admit, they're not completely ready yet, but I thought you wanted the plan in motion ASAP."

"What plan!?" She roared. "Who the hell are you!?"

"I'm not Mark Largos, you know that." He held up a hand. "You delivered him to me..." She studied him for a few moments. "What name do you go by now?"

"...Thais."

"Still?" A harsh glare from the feline. "I just mean... That was your first life. You reclaimed that name?"

"I never had multiple lives! I only had the one!"

"One that you were forced to live over and over." He said. "*I'll Take The Fire Walk With You...*" It made the leopard freeze in place for a few moments. Studying him from afar. Until she lowered the gun and cursed, annoyed. Getting the man to question the expression silently.

"I just... I owe a horse a damn mattress and a solar generator." The odd statement made both men rather puzzled. "Nevermind." She grumbled. "...You're Loki."

"Yes."

"Here I thought you died."

"I thought... You did too." A strange look from her. "I remember it. Somehow, without completely being there. We were fighting to our last breath. Waves of people. The smoke, the dirt in the air. The deafening sounds of bullets and mortars. And counting down every last second of our lives together."

"And then..." She mumbled.

"The explosion. The one that covered the entire world in bright orange and heat. I felt myself fading away. Almost burning. But I could still... Move. I could still grasp a hold of something. Following my instincts to just survive, by any means necessary."

"And so, you took over anything close to you." She slowly looked at her own tail, moving it out from under the cloak. "Anything it touched." Thais grumbled harshly, getting another hurtful look from Loki.

"Everything around me was *dead*." He said with a bit of sorrow. "I know it might not have been the correct choice, but don't look at me like I'm the first to use something recently deceased to my advantage! I did what I needed to survive, as did you." He looked over at the Prime Minister. "As did him." Then the window. "As did all of them. That's all I wanted, that's all I was demanded to do: Live. How is that wrong?"

"What's wrong is how you're doing it. You can't just infect people-"

"Stop Calling Me An Infection!" He roared.

"Then what do you want me to call it? Mind Control?" She growled back.

"I'm-!" He exhaled in frustration. "Thais, I am not taking over people! I am not erasing who they were, who they are! I'm asking them for help! And in return, I'm helping them!"

"Helping them with what!?"

"You've Seen Them!" He roared again, still grunting from the pain. "How they murder each other for a small piece of land! For Cotton Paper or Small Pieces of Metal! How they treat their very own species as waste! When they are no different from them!"

"So, what? You're going to make them all get along? Giving them a Hive Mind?"

"They already have a Hive Mind! Maybe not by complete definition, but they are told where to go. What to do, how to do things! They get their information from the same sources! They ARE a Swarm!" The man took a breath, looking towards the older man behind the desk. "Even people in positions like him are attached to strings."

"And by 'Taking Over' everyone, what do you expect to do-?"

"What do I expect to do!? What I was supposed to do! Remove it! Get rid of these barriers society has imprisoned themselves in! Repair them! Keep them *Alive*!"

"They are alive-"

"But for how long!?" He coughed. "How long until the next person dies from an actual sickness? How long until someone innocent is gunned down in crossfire? How long must people be in conflict with one another? Enslave themselves to make tools of destruction, so they can '*Protect*' themselves!? Then turn that *Protection* against those who they're trying to keep safe?" A few breaths, and the leopard was silent. "Your world is **BROKEN**. All I'm trying to do is fix it. Because we are one-!" He coughed a bit again, spitting out a little bit of blood.

"...We are one Organism." She sadly said. "And An Organism At War With Itself..."

"Is Doomed." Loki took another breath, looking towards the sunrise. "I'm not trying to be the Red Sun. Gripping your world with an Iron Fist, and threatening it with my massive size... I'm trying to be the Earth."

"...But you're doing it wrong."

"Only because there's no way to do it morally right." He sighed. "You can do what you want with this body, Thais. I don't need it anymore. But, like it or not, this is happening." She looked away, taking a breath. Almost feeling him look towards the black metal on her face. Faintly being kept hidden by her white mane.

"...What do you want from me?" Thais asked, not trying to be cold. And the doctor just looked at her, still trying to make out her full figure in the darkness of the base.

"I want..." He took a breath. "I want you to prevail. I want you to... Survive." She was silent for a

few moments. "...I want my daughter to live."

"...Daughter...?" She whispered.

"I know that might sound strange to you. And I do not mean biological daughter but..."

"...You still think of me as your Child, don't you?" The leopard said, barely seeing him faintly nod. Almost being able to place herself in his shoes.

"Both of you..." He faintly gestured the rifle. "But that's... Foolish of me, isn't it?"

"-No." She said, rather quickly. "It isn't. You've been there for me alot. Haven't you, Harberd?" She exhaled, putting the gun down for the moment and taking a step closer to the older man. Wrapping her good arm around him for an awkward hug. "Is this what you want?" She whispered, feeling him nod and do the same with his arms. Almost sniffing a bit. And for a few moments, they remained in the darkness.

"...Thais." The feline made a noise in question. "...Have you ever heard of the experimental Daodan Isotope 104?"

"Can't say that I have."

"It's a hidden... It's a synthetic way to give someone the Will to Survive." Another noise in question. "That day, we sent you out with the Naysayers..." He didn't finish.

"...That's why I survived...?" He nodded again.

"And you will keep living forever, as long as that isotope remains in your system."

"Doctor, why are you telling me this?"

"Because I can't keep getting what I want..." Another sniff. "I'm sorry, Thais, for going against your will and doing this to you. I was... Impulsive-"

"Dr. Harberd..." She interrupted him, not wanting to hurt the man's feelings. "You must realize that I don't have time for apologies." Another nod, and he pulled away from the embrace.

"...This... Isotope, it can be disabled with a heavy shock to the system. Something past 140 Megavolts. It's rather fragile after its isolation is bypassed." He looked down on the floor, barely making out the large rifle. "Your C.A.N.C.E.R. should be able to produce that at full capacity."

She stared at him for a few moments. "What exactly are you saying? You want me to-"

"No!" He whispered, grasping at her left paw and holding it rather tightly. "I don't want you to, by any means. But... I must stop being selfish..." He swallowed. "I... Took this away from you. And I want to give it back. It was your choice, after all."

"I just thought you, out of all people, would understand-" The leopard dashed towards the man, slamming him heavily with a side kick and sending him towards the windows. Hitting it with a loud thud, cracking the glass violently, but barely not breaking it. Not until she fired a slug from the rifle at the man, piercing through his torso and sending chunks of his body through the now broken window. Letting the bloody mess rain down on the streets below.

Walking up to the shattered hole in the glass, she looked at the overview of the entire city. Feeling the cold breeze begin to invade the office room. Her scans picked up the many invisible spores through the air, all coming from the several Processors surrounding the city. Down below, the echoes of people still frightened still occupied the streets, as well as the occasional gunshot and animal howl. Observing it all, she exhaled. Letting the wind slowly undress her of the cloak that was hiding the abyss metal that stained her body. For it mattered little now.

As the Prime Minister looked at her with a bit of fear, he managed to speak. "W-what are we going to do now...?"

As the snow leopard exhaled, closing her good eye for the for moments while the wind stopped, she half glanced in his direction. "...There's nothing we can do." Thais said, looking back over the city once again. "Every species as we once knew it is doomed. Loki will change us all."

Let's Hope It's For The Better...