

From The Wilderness - Jee Veerey (Brave One)

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

The sun's warm glow crept through each suburb window, heating up the white bedsheets within its line of sight. Warmingly stroking the female feline awake in the king sized mattress, blankets moved and tossed aside as she slept on only half of it. While the other half left an empty imprint of usage.

Such rays slowly caused the snow leopard to shift a little bit, but completely relax. Letting her clothesless body spread out across the soft surface and take a few breaths for herself. Until the inevitable alarm went off. She was starting to detest the smell of cinnamon, odds are she would have to change to something else soon or hate the scent forever.

But work was calling, forcing the feline to get up within the cream painted room. The sunlight so bright that her blue-grey eyes couldn't see out the window, shielding them so the feline could see her naked form through the full body mirror. Recalling the previous night that still made her lightly smile before getting dressed. Taking one last look through the reflection of her in a business suit before heading out, not noticing that the leopard in the other side only watched her leave.

Down the hall, she could make out her breakfast... Well, dinner, really. Green peas with some baked potatoes, a side of macaroni and cheese mixed with hamburger and cut up hotdogs. Turning into the doorway to see her son already eating and waving at her, while the white lion was bringing over two more plates. "Just in time, Thais." He said, pulling out a chair for her and she took it after giving him a small kiss.

"Getting used to cooking, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes. And you're happy to know it's been five days since I last lit the stove on fire." The lion teased, turning around to get the drinks. Only for their son to hold up three fingers, getting her to chuckle. "I seen that."

"Seen what?" The cub asked, unable to hide his grin from the playful stare of the father.

"You're getting some stones, just like her." The larger feline sat down to join them. "I wish you didn't have to work at nights."

"Taking care of a cub is a lot of work, isn't it?"

"Not really, but I miss your cooking." It made her smirk... Even though she was trying to smile.
"And so does he."

"I tell him that everyday-"

"He tells me that everyday." The two males quipped, nearly in sync as they took a bite. Getting her to start cutting into her potato a bit, but accidentally cut through a pea, seeing a strange amount of black within it. Getting the leopard to stop for a moment and try to cut another one. The same thing; dark in the center. Then a third, fourth, fifth- all of them having black cores. Until they started illuminating tiny red lights, getting her to start backing away. "Thais?" A double take at the lion, now with half of his face nearly falling off as if it were a mask. Revealing the abyss black muscle within, and a red ring within his iris. "Is something wrong?" Then a loud gunshot...

The cannon fire echoed through the darkness, shaking the fragile foundation of the old building where the leopard slept. Startling her awake and bracing the old wooden bench she was sleeping on as a few more thundered from the distance. Racing her heart as she grabbed the heavy rifle and carefully listened for any whistling or signs of falling bombs or bullets. But no impacts were heard.

Just more cannons firing into the dark, quaking the earth heavily. The flashes from the barrels barely lighting up the walls in the old abandoned Church she was in. Allowing Thais to read the graffiti written on the walls: ALL OUR GODS HAVE ABANDONED US. Only sinking her heart just a little more, judging from the stains on the walls and floor what likely happened here.

A few more shots actually started to hurt her cloth-wrapped ears, almost missing the sound of the rotting beams above snapping. Groaning loudly before the leopard grabbed the heavy rifle and old bag then took off towards a wall, just as the roof started to collapse. Ramming the wooden structure hard enough to break through it and land in the cold grass as most of the old church caved in.

There went her shelter for the last few nights, getting her to rest and cover herself. Hoping not to breathe in the debris of wood and forgotten bodies. Releasing a few coughs before getting up and reaching for the small old lantern at the end of the weapon's barrel. Lighting it and letting her eye adjust to the brightness, once again making out the old building. Along with its vandalism.

"Blackwater... At The... Gates of Heaven." Thais read in whispers, hearing the thunderous echo of another cannon fire within the dark sky. (Yes... That's what happened here...) She thought. Getting up and moving away from the artillery. Blackwater, that mercenary group against the TCTF [*Technology Crimes Tactical Force*] ended up taking out several villages outside the cities ages ago. Though the Force ended up routing them in the end, causing them to spread about and form small bandit groups... Until the Red Zone got them. Until Loki got them.

A heavy sigh from her as she threw the bag over her shoulder carried the large weapon, mostly with her left cybernetic arm. Letting the long barrel lean up against her neck, allowing the small lantern to dangle just behind her good eye. Giving her the benefit of sight without being blinded by it, though it was still a double edged sword: the leopard could see easier through the dark forest, but could also be seen easier.

It's been months since she was last in a populated city or town, scavenging what was left behind in abandoned and pillaged villages. Recalling a previous hunt as her stomach growled loudly, knowing that there was still some of that raw meat in her bag. Almost daydreaming as the sky and the surrounding darkness reverted to the atmosphere in her memory. Seeing a small family of deer cross the dry forest, lucky enough to get the rain soon later that week. But the thick crunch of a branch caught the attention of the two, instantly spotting the leopard dressed heavily in black.

However, they did not run, as her memory served her well. Just stared at Thais, as almost to show her the facial wounds over the large doe. Thick gashes over its neck revealing the abyss black muscle underneath and the small red lights that traveled through like LEDs. Getting the feline to stop and quietly sigh in defeat.

Yet... The doe started walking towards her. Not showing any signs of fear or threat towards Thais, while its fawn cautiously followed. Whining at her guardian as if to ask it what it was doing, sensing the danger of the predator ahead. But the doe kept marching forwards, calm as ever. Never blinking those red ringed eyes as they stared at the leopard in the bushes, even after Thais revealed herself, once again hearing that frightful whine from the smaller fawn.

But the mother just approached the feline, lying down before her and lowering it's scarred, antlerless head. Spading those long ears and closing its eyes, it was gifting itself to the hunter, even against all raging instincts within. Almost being able to see the reflection of the sun off of the recently sharpened knife, and just trying to ignore it's offspring's outbursts. The constant pulls on her short white tail as the fawn begged for its mother to move away, to run and protect her for another day.

...A sight that still ached the leopard's heart to the present day, as she continuously wandered into the darkness. She was much hungrier back then though, still feeling the pain of needing to eat in order to survive. At least, that's how the feline justified the murder... Or would it be a sacrifice, in such a case?

It surprised the doe as much as it surprised Thais' own reason back then, just how far her conscience would be pushed back just to survive. The fawn's cries were silenced, as dozens of birds fled for their lives. Feeling the shocked gaze of the mother look at her child, now owning a horn of steel and a knife's grip as it collapsed into the grass behind it. Then the unproud feline just trying to compose, reasoning with herself after making the decision of who's life was more important.

...Hunting animals was rarely worth the risk of anymore possible infections. She's learned to spot the differences, some of them plain as day like that doe. Others... Not until they've been cut opened, no matter how disappointed it was to see after a hunt, it just wasn't safe. That is, if Thais could actually be

infected more than she already was, still somehow being able to resist such control of Loki after all this time. Or so she thought at least. Yet, she could also sense the presence of such manipulation when it was nearby.

And there it was, like a strong light that was pointing directly at her. Causing the white one to slow to a stop and look behind, spotting the two sets of red rings in the trees quite a ways. Another cannon muzzleflash nearly caused the small pair's silhouette to be made out on a single branch, getting the three to just stare at each other for a moment before the feline walked away. Knowing very well they wouldn't chase her down.

Why they wouldn't, she never knew. But they've both been following her since the outbreak, never getting too close. Sometimes the leopard would lose them for a week or so, but eventually there they would both be; stalking her from afar. As if now afraid of her. As if now ashamed of what happened. Guilty, like this was all their fault.

Truth be told, Thais never blamed them. But it still tugged at her heart thinking about it, that entering that city is what really doomed them. Then again, it was only a matter of time before the world itself would become a Red Zone. Just like the golden days of Climate Change, hardly anyone really believed it... That wasn't true, those who were not in charge believed it was happened. They're the ones that were living through it, after all. But those with the power to change... They just had 'better things to do'. One of the most piss-poor excuses that cost so much in property damage, cost so many lives, and took a large chunk out of the planet's future.

Walking by a clearing, she could still spot one of the many towers in the distance. Lit up in just a certain way to alert aircrafts. It was because of those changes, those burns in fossil fuels that such a thing existed, that such a thing was invented. An Atmospheric Processor; something many people thought was just a gigantic air filter. When really it did so much more than clean the air in an area of several cities, but it only seemed to work above a certain altitude... It was also their death of art. Individualism and Independence. Or at least, that's what that grey-blue eye seen.

It was hard to observe from afar. Strange how within a single event, the coin seemed to flip: the zones that were once deemed Safe for her were suddenly threatening, and if Thais had any hope of surviving... It would be out here. In the Wilderness, within the weeds and wildflowers. Forever looking at the color Red with extreme caution.

But sometimes it was needed. Spotting the faint glow of a small fire just reminded what little was left of her organic body of how cold it was. Moving towards it with caution to find a familiar pronghorn traveler, one of his horns still missing along with a rather unique red-brown coat. Looking towards the small light by her head as the leopard showed herself. Taking off that black ragged hood resulting in a sigh of relief from the deer-like creature. "Still leading lost souls to salvation, are you?"

"Only if they haven't sold them yet." She mumbled, putting out the small lantern and taking a seat. "Even then, I'm not sure how much they would be worth anymore." He gestured for her to get closer to the fire to keep warm, getting off the fallen log that was used as a makeshift seat and the feline

accepted such comforting heat. Like she's been several days without.

"The value of things has shifted greatly." The buck stated, watching the flames and once in a while glancing uncomfortably at the red lights along the leopard's cybernetic body. Very noticeable around the tail and when she started to take her cloak off. Revealing the black left arm that seemed to glow with such hues like it was breathing. Before she could catch him staring, another cannon shot went off into the night, grabbing both of their attentions towards the nearest city. "They are at war again. And once more, the planet will suffer." He started to go through his bags.

"I've got our meal covered this time around." Thais stated, getting the attention of those yellow eyes. Watching her take out a plastic bag with red meat in it, and a grill stand for campfires. "There's not much of it, sadly. I hope deer meat is alright."

"That is fine." The pronghorn stated, almost sadly smiling at her while watching the feline set the object up without fear of the flames. "You... Kept your promise." She nodded, making a noise of confirmation under the snaps of the fire, then taking a breath. "I honestly did not expect to see you again."

"Likewise. It's been at least three weeks, hasn't it?" A faint nod from the brown one. "...Did you find her?"

"I... Did." The larger male replied defeatedly. "...Spotted her inside..."

"Inside the walls." He closed his eyes and left his head hanging. "...I'm sorry."

"There was nothing you could do, or anyone else for that matter. I warned her not to go near any of the Red Zones..." Another breath in defeat. "She was so convinced that the walls were safe. That such a cure was already being handed out..."

"They were handing out something. Vaccinations, if I read correctly." A puzzled gaze from the deer-like creature, as Thais tended around her left eye. One that was often closed, and for a reason.

"...You could walk among them, couldn't you?" A moment of silence.

"I don't know." She said heavily. "And I'm not willing to take that chance, I'm sorry."

"That... Is regrettable, but understandable. I should not have..." A white paw gestured him to drop it, that there was no hard feelings between them. "Times are harsh for all of us, Thais. However, only after enduring the tests of fire, iron is forged." Turning the meat over, another shot echoed through the night. Making him study the scene above for a few moments. "...What I wouldn't give to see the sky in its old glory again. Not this... Polluted Violet..."

"It's not pollution." The feline got the attention of those yellow discs. "They're not at war with anyone, they are just firing sulfur particles into the air."

"...Why?"

"My guess would be to attempt to cool the earth down." A noise in question from the male. "They're using it to block a portion of the sun's light. As someone who's lived out here most of their lives, you must notice the temperature of the seasons has been going up."

"...Yes."

"That's my guess though. They just need to fire it out of something like that in order for it to reach the atmosphere and stay there." With a deep breath, Thais looked through the fire's glow into the eyes of the buck sternly. "There is no escape from this. No waiting around for the world to fix itself, no use in pushing the blame to someone else. If we want to live, we need to do something. Make changes to how our lives function-" The shutters of her left eye suddenly opened, sending a thick warning to her that made the feline dive behind her log. Grabbing her heavy rifle and aiming it at the pronghorn while taking cover, watching him sit patiently as the leopard started panting from adrenaline.

"...Damn." The buck cursed, not threatened by the large weapon pointed at him. "I was doing so well, too. That speech was just too inspiring-"

"Shup up!" She growled loudly. "What have you done with him!?"

"You mean the one who's name you can't even remember?" Those blue-grey eyes just glared at him with anger. "He's fine, Thais. And it's Honnota, by the way." He said, pulling out a large knife and tending to the cooking meat. "Put that away." The buck calmly suggested after a few moments of silence. "I'm only here to talk and you know very well that by shooting this body, you are only culling his life." No response, but the feline's breaths did start to become slower. "You're out of ammo anyway. Have been for weeks."

"You don't know that."

"You haven't fired the thing since you ended the life of Mark Largos. *Again*." The brown one snorted. "I'm not even going to deny that he deserved it. But I'm not your enemy, Thais... If you still go by that name now." A slow nod. "Come. Just have something to eat, and just talk. Please."

"And if this is a trap?" An almost hurt look from the buck, now clearly seeing red rings in those yellow eyes.

"Why...?" He took a breath. "Why do you have this assumption that I am your enemy? We shared the same body, I have no reason to harm you."

"Then what do you want?" She nearly demanded, getting a sad look in return.

"Please. Put the rifle away. Sit down, have a nice meal..." Another flip of the slab of meat. "As nice as I can make it, anyway." Her stare didn't lift. "And... I'll tell you what I want." It took nearly a minute of thinking before she lowered the heavy firearm, giving him a breath of faint relief that she was going to cooperate. "...You've been out here for a very long time."

"Since that outbreak in Moses." The white one mentioned cautiously, taking a seat on the log.

"That was five months ago." A near stare in disbelief. "It probably seems longer to you out here. It's a wonder you've been able to survive, get enough to eat-"

"Get on with it, Loki. What do you want." It was barely a question, but he nodded regardless.

"I want you back. Safe, within our walls." The leopard growled at such a request. "And I don't mean imprisoned." A breath from the pronghorn. "It's an invitation, I promise-"

"Why." Thais asked thickly, seeing the deer-like male take a breath to collect himself.

"I've... Kept watch of you. -Granted, not intentionally." He raised a paw to almost surrender, gesturing behind her quite a ways and watching those feline ears scan the area a bit. "They... They are definitely persistent, I'll give them that."

"You mean...?" A slow nod from Honnota. "But they're not themselves any longer. Not with you in them-"

"Thais..." He exhaled in a bit of frustration. "I do not completely take over a host. I merely just assist and give them direction." A foul look from her. "Just like when I was part of your system. I only... Insist control of those who allow it to me to do so."

"Like him."

"Yes... He eventually tried to steal his daughter back, that's how I..." He motioned taking a breath and sighed after. "Once he realized what I wanted, he agreed to attempt to find you out here. Liking the wilderness better anyway."

"You still haven't told me what you wanted." A hurt look from the buck.

"I want you safe-"

"Why!?" She roared, getting those yellow eyes to close and sigh.

"I... Can't reach your system anymore, Thais. I can't tell you what's going on, specifically, but I can take an educated guess based on your appearance." That stare didn't let off the brown one. "I know that it's getting harder for you to function. Being alone out here hasn't helped that in the slightest, especially if you're running from all the places that I've assisted-"

"Infected." The leopard corrected him, watching Loki attempt to compose himself.

"Thais... I don't know what happens to you when your conversion reaches 100%. I can only assume that..." The strength in that blue-grey eye suddenly fractured. "You... You have a sickness with no remedy, one that I'm not even sure how to go about treating. Is it so much to ask that my mother is safe? In a place where I can protect her-?"

"Mother?" The feline genuinely questioned, getting a soft nod from the buck.

"I was your symbiote. I lived inside you while you nurtured me. We were two consciousness that got along and functioned together." A breath from the brown one. "Perhaps not put together by choice, but we relied on each other for survival... I grew up, matured inside you. And for the longest time, when we were separated, I thought that I would never see you again." The leopard remained silent, almost in shock. "To learn that you were still alive, that what reports I've gathered were not errors..."

"You wanted to change the world." Thais stated sadly.

"For you. For what little time you might have left. And to make sure no one else must suffer as you did. Especially like..." A gesture to her body, slowly losing its white color as the days passed. "Granted, I can understand how you see me as a parasite, infecting others like the system within yourself." The feline released a heavy sigh in defeat, as another cannon shot into the sky. "But I wanted to do more than just remove the social constructs of this society. I'm doing what I can to influence them into restoring the planet. I'm glad you figured that out on your own, and not went so far as to thinking I was starting a war-"

"These people that you're inside..." She interrupted asking a bit thickly. "How much influence are you putting in?" The two locked eyes for a few moments while the buck stood up, offering her a large brown and white paw.

"See for yourself." He said softly. "I encourage you to witness the changes I've made over the past few months. Then decide whether or not I'm better for this world." The leopard just stared at him for a few moments. "Please. I need you to see this before that... *Cancer* takes you." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Looking into her red UI within the darkness and seeing her percentage below 5%, slowly nodding at Honnota after another breath.

"Let's just eat first."

"Understandable." He stated, sitting back down. "And I'm glad to hear that." A mumble in response. "...I am sorry if it seems like I've betrayed you, Thais." The pronghorn stated, sounding more like his old self. "But you must understand-"

"It's alright." The feline took another breath. "There's no hard feelings between us, Honnota."

Chapter 2

It was honestly quite the sight to see, as the dawn began to light up the old walls of Derrilum.

One of the oldest cities, and even older friends of hers. Walking towards the lower gates that lead into the slums brought back nearly ancient memories from months ago, nearly taken back by just how much has changed since. What was once a complete slum, dirt streets and harsh air was completely renovated to have a much more quality of life.

At first thought, Thais expected that the government had driven away all those below the poverty line. Replacing what shelters they had with new areas to accommodate middle class citizens from other cities or areas. Until she started to recognize a few of them from her previous visit here several months ago. Some working outside, still fixing up shelters or carrying materials while in company work clothing. Others tending to stores or eating outside while enjoying the early morning, a specific alligator greeting her from afar. One the feline recalled landing on his home and caving in his roof.

He seemed to be doing well though. They all did, making her question if Loki's off-stage influence over them was actually a good thing or not. Regardless, her first stop was the old saloon she was just outside of, a near spitting image of what it used to be. Just that much cleaner, now that it was actually washed and the atmosphere around it is in better condition.

The inside is what seemed to change the most, now much brighter and getting occupied with people at nearly every table. Enjoying their breakfast while socializing. A few taking notice of the newcomer, still carrying a heavy firearm and dressed in a ragged navy cloak. Yet, they didn't seem to be threatened by the leopard's presence in the slightest.

However, those warnings within her cybernetics of the Epidemic were nearly constant. Making the fur in the back of her neck raise up underneath the tight cloth, as if every one of these creatures were going to suddenly calculate Thais as an enemy and violently rage towards her at any given moment. Quickly searching around the room for possible escape routes and making several plans ahead for when they did- "You need to relax." The bartender stated at her, a white bird making up a few fruit drinks for some customers and setting them on the polished bar for a waiter to pick up very soon after. "You are safe here."

"Why." The feline nearly growled. "Because you say so? Because you've forcedly convinced everyone here that I'm not a danger?"

"Are you one?" The dove at the bar asked with patience, looking at the leopard's eyes with her own deep blue ones. Easily spotting the red ring pulse within those discs with the lighting of the room and making the feline even more cautious. "I understand that it has been a long time since you've been into civilization, or a place this crowded. But I assure you that you are safe here, Ma'am. Nothing is here to harm or alter you." Thais didn't reply to the barkeep, as she took a key from her pocket and set it on the bar. "We've been expecting you, and have a place set up for your stay." She pointed towards the back end, passed a wooden door. "Up the stairs to the next building, your room is 652."

The leopard just watched her leave until the avian was out of sight, likely heading into the kitchen for more clean glasses. Eventually causing that blue-grey disc to fall towards the key, unable to feel like this is all some sort of trap. Still holding the weapon that weighed that of a small car, the floor

beneath the feline started to groan a bit, forcing her to take a step forward and accept the key. Scanning it for any trace of infection or drug that could possibly be used to weaken Thais, but it all came back negative.

The dove returned with a dishwasher tray, working as if the snow leopard wasn't there. Yet not ignoring her presence, especially when the feline started to speak up. "Where's Luther?" The white feathered one just smiled at her.

"He's working the afternoon shift. Get some rest now, have a bath. When you wake up, he'll be tending bar and you can chew his ear off." She took the now empty tray back to the kitchen, leaving Thais to observe the key once more and take a breath. Holding onto it before making her way to the back door. Opening it to find another building that was now connecting it, several numbered rooms followed like a motel, with noises from each. Mostly of tv or music, none of which she recognized.

The leopard came up to 652, sliding the key in and sending a pulse to detect if anyone was inside. Once again coming back negative. Even both rooms beside hers were vacant. Taking another breath before opening up the door to what almost reminded her of a suite. A miniature apartment with its own full bathroom and kitchen, the main room being used for the large bedding. Something she's grown to go without, due to the damages her metallic body would cause to something so nice looking.

However, on the comforter were several small cases. Music CDs with a note on the top of the pile: *I know how much you've missed them, and a few have even made more works since your last listen. They're all inside and the walls are soundproof. Enjoy yourself.* Inside? A glance around the room to find an antique stereo entertainment system, one that could hold several CDs at once and change among them.

Thais thought all of these were lost over time, from being obsolete over the decades. By the look of the screws on the side of the large electronic case, it's been likely been repaired or scavenged from others to function well. A light press of the power button and the device sprung to life, shifting between the several CD trays before finally picking one at random and playing it. The dim room soon occupied with soft cords that tugged at her heart, recalling lying in bed with another like she was back there. The rain pelting down the windows, the cars splashing over puddles in the streets. And with the vocalist, she spoke. "God Only Knows What We Were Born To Burn."

Chapter 3

There were many things you tend to take for granted when you go without them for a few years.

Hot baths are one of them, even though Thais was still rather cautious about how it would affect her mostly mechanical body, it wouldn't be the first time she was submerged into water. Trying to forget the one time that she attempted to cross a river using an old boat that had seen better days. Unable to find another way across and not quite wanting to risk jumping such a thing, only for that boat to break under the weight of both her and C.A.N.C.E.R. Forcing her to sink to the very bottom and climb back to shore.

She resurfaced just like the very memory, as she stared at the ceiling of the suite. The music still playing in the background, reminding her of better times. After so many years, the snow leopard still could recall every lyric, every tone perfectly. To the point where she could still see his face with her mind's eye.

The water started to get cold after a few hours. The bubbles were exhausted, now showing her blackened limbs and coat that seemed to act like artificial furs. Or at least that's how she seen it. Wearing the same clothing for so long, she barely remembered what those legs looked like. The answer: far different from when they were first surgically attached; less like bald bulging muscles and more like... Her old self. Just without the white.

Snow Leopard... Was it even possible to identify her as such anymore? Climbing out of the tub and leaving a few scratches from those constantly sharpened claws, she looked at herself in the full body mirror. Hundreds, if not thousands of thick black whiskers seemed to cover those mechanical limbs. Leaving the only traces of white along her old mane, whatever wasn't cut off by wilderness life or conflict. Even then, the roots have been completely taking over, removing that grey frosting that he once found attractive.

All she could do was just stare at herself, knowing that clock was ticking. Within the next day or so, that white would soon vanish, and Thais along with it. At that point, she would likely become terminal. Join the hive mind that now nearly surrounded her current location, except be completely out of the mindset. Would that mean it would be too risky to leave that infection within her? That the best choice of action was to terminate whatever existed within her shell?

...It was afraid. The feline could easily identify that. Afraid of the unknown, the near future, not having an answer itself for what was going to happen when that percentage reached 100. It's very likely she would fade away, and it would be left alone. Such a thought made the body sigh in remorse, as she did her best to dry off and empty the tub. Walking back into the main bedroom where the large rifle half sank into the memory foam, and climbing under the covers with it. Knowing she was going to have a difficult time sleeping with the sounds of other people around, something Thais hasn't done in months. But with the soothing vocals of something familiar, yet new, it helped keep her calm. Reflecting those feelings once again with...

*"From The Heaven Of Together
To The Earth Of Alone
Change The World Before It Kills You..."*

The sun crept in like slow moving searchlights, scanning the room with a slight violet haze. Trying to spot the leopard within the rags and tears of the bedding, not made to withstand such punishment and sharper claws. Especially when it has stress dreams.

Truth be told, even Thais was stressed. Unable to completely slumber like she was behind enemy lines. It wasn't that farfetched, as she remained embraced with her firearm through what was left of the morning and noon. Flicking an ear towards every presence through the walls that was detected, but nothing bothered her.

Though still exhausted, her body wanted to get up and patrol. Scan the parameter carefully for any escape points or possible forms of attack, after all; she wasn't safe. No matter how much those puppets claimed such a thing, if Thais remained in these city walls...

A knock on the door almost startled the leopard as she got up from the bed, causing her to roll over to the other side while snatching the rifle and taking aim down the sights. Hearing the key slip into the lock and withdraw the bolt to the door, opening it to create another blade of light within the shadowed room. Spotting a muskrat scan the area and whimpering sharply when she made out the naked feline in the darkness, paralyzing the maid further when she pieced together what the leopard was holding.

It was a bit of a standstill, until those dark eyes suddenly got red rings within the iris. Instantly relaxing the creature as she took something from the cart behind her, and slowly setting some folded clothes on the torn apart bedding. "Just some fresh wares. I know your older clothes are quite damaged." No response from Thais, besides a tense grip on the firearm. "Did you want me to wash them regardless? I could also dispose of them if you like." Again, silence. Getting a nod from the muskrat as she backed out of the door. "I'll leave you to decide, and ask again tomorrow."

The door soon closed, leaving the feline in comforting darkness once again to breathe in relief. Taking a few moments to study the folded clothing and scan them several times, only to find nothing added or altered. They were nothing but cotton clothing, her size too. Something that didn't surprise the feline, odds are Loki remembered quite a bit about her. Which only made her feel more unsafe; dealing with an enemy that knew practically everything about Thais. And now she willingly placed herself within enemy lines, surrounded by innocents that could be taken over to fulfill Loki's every command like a puppet.

Getting dressed and wrapping that old navy cloak around her once again before leaving the door. Keeping that key in her pocket and rifle still in hand, she spotted the maid's cart down the hallway. Soon after the rodent leaving another room, double taking at the dark frame carrying a heavy weapon and squeaking in a yelp before hiding. Getting that blue-grey eye to stare at her direction for a few moments before heading towards the bar.

The saloon sounded busy in the late afternoon, as the feline approached the door. Pressing her 'organic' right paw onto it and taking a breath before entering. Tensing up when another scan was taken to locate 37 nearby creatures in the room, every one of them containing traces of the Epidemic. A few looking at her for a moment, but none of them identified her as a threat it seemed, as they carried on their conversations at their own tables.

Several actually looked rather familiar to her, even if she couldn't recall them by name. One specifically, the rhino bartender, took a moment before he even looked in the leopard's direction. Giving her an armless greeting of a high nod as he made a few drinks for a table, gesturing Thais to take a stool soon after.

Yet, the feline froze for a moment. Attempting to prepare herself for the conversation ahead, knowing very well that whatever mask that stood in front of her within this city... Possibly even the entire world at this point, was nothing more than a puppet. Beneath that layer of skin was the same Infection that she's been running from for the past few years. With a deep breath, she took that hard step forward.

"I see someone's finally out of bed." Luther teased, wiping off the bar with a soft rag and getting her to finally notice the varnished setup. Able to see her own reflection and unable to recognize the hooded figure staring back at her, until a drink was set in front of her. "You're still carrying around that thing?" It got the attention of that blue-grey disc, as she followed his gaze to the heavy weapon.

"...Yes."

"Does it even function anymore? I heard it's out of ammo."

"From who?" Thais asked, almost thickly, getting a motion of surrender from the large black-skinned animal. Causing the leopard to then take a breath and calm down. "Sorry... I'm just having a hard time..."

"Getting used to the idea that..." She nodded, making him nod as well and lightly shrug. "Everyone was at first. Being able to suddenly become aware of everyone around you, feeling the constant fear that everybody kept deep inside. It took a lot of getting used to, but I feel like it did a lot of good in such short notice."

"What do you mean? The fact it's mind controlling you?" Thais almost growled.

"It sounds like that from the outside, I know. There was even a resistance building up at one point in another city that thought the very same. They could delay the... **Spread**, I guess you could say, but not for long."

"Infection." A hurt look from the rhino made the feline sigh quietly. "...Sorry."

"You're going to be saying that a lot if you keep viewing Loki like that." A sour look from the leopard. "Let me be level with you, Thais; you're not completely in the wrong. How he spread himself

into us... It's a lot like how an infection or epidemic would spread. But you need to start looking at all the good he has done for us, how he connected all of us." He started making another drink. "The control part... He doesn't do it unless we either get out of hand or-"

"If you get too paralyzed to move." A look in question from Luther, but he shrugged and nodded all the same. "He takes over, until a task is complete."

"Only if we're willing to do such. It might not seem like it from the outside, but he does ask us first." No response, but she was thinking back to the muskrat from earlier. "I take it you've encountered something like that recently." A bit of a guilty look from the leopard and she admitted so with a faint nod. "Because you don't feel safe here."

"Can you blame me?"

"No." Luther stated. "And I've told Loki as such. He's wanted you here for a long time now, at least a few months." No response from her, as Thais gazed off to the side. Barely noticing the dark rhino crouch for something under the bar. "So, I decided to do something instead." A double take from the feline as he rose up, placing two large ballistic ammo packs in front of her.

"What...?"

"Consider it a peace offering, since I know you've probably slept with that thing in your arms." He gestured the rifle, still leaning against the bar and almost causing the floor under it to creak. "This isn't a test, it's a gift. To show that I, Luther, am still your ally before I'm his slave." He gestured to his head, making her uncomfortable but gazing over the cartridge. Ones about the size of a brick standing on its long side. "Put it in." He suggested, getting the feline to look over his dark complexion for a few moments before getting off her stool.

Thais scanned the area, as the room started to quiet down. Watching her pick up the large rifle with a single arm and hear the floorboards shift in the process. Placing the magazine in the slot and hearing the voice echo like an old, horrible memory that forced adrenaline into her bloodstream.

100% Ammo Remaining.

The tension in the room increased drastically, as she looked at her surroundings. Catching the dozens upon dozens of nervous stares, some having the red rings, others remained without. All waiting for the feline's next move, as she carefully adjusted the barrel of the large weapon. Turning it from a long rifle to a triple barrel machinegun, then a missile pod of sorts before reverting it back to the long rifle. "Satisfied?" The rhino asked, being the only confident one in the room. Feeling that blue-grey eye stare at him for a few moments. "Not that you couldn't defend yourself before, but now you have a severe advantage over any of us. There is no more law enforcement, no military. You will not find any weapons here aside from improvised ones, like a corkscrew."

"And Loki agreed to this?"

"No. Not in the slightest. Given your history of violence and conviction over such things, he didn't want to give you the opportunity. But he didn't stop me just now, did he?" No response from her, as Thais took the second cartridge and placed it in her sash. "Overall, I highly recommend that you don't use it, but if it makes you feel safe..."

"It... Does. Thank you." A large nod from Luther, as she carefully set the weapon down beside her and took a seat. Easing the tension of the entire saloon within a few moments and hearing the conversations start up again. Surprisingly, nothing about her that the feline could pick up. "I suppose I should hold back on slandering your hive leader then." The large one chuckled at that.

"I can see how you would think of him as that. Overall, he's more of a conscience for everyone rather than some hive mind. Even better than a form of law, really. Loki's completely replaced that."

"Replaced it?" The rhino nodded.

"Yep. Now that everyone has connected-" He stopped for a moment, waiting for her to 'correct' the larger one. However, she just gave an uncomfortable look as he continued. "We all can empathize with each other quite easily. Many surface feelings tend to come out, so there's no need to hide ourselves behind masks, metaphorically speaking." Luther finished the drink and placed it on the bar, going back to cleaning while a parrot claimed such a thing, thanking him. "With that, we can also tell when people were lying."

"Or just not telling the truth." She glanced at the television on display, something Thais hated for always showing political stations. Now resting on a channel that covered video game championships. Barely seeing the rhino's large horn face the same direction and nod.

"Yep, even got rid of most of them." A look of disbelief from that grey-blue eye as the male once again nodded. "Politicians and so many people in charge, finally being exposed for all the scandals and lawsuits that they've avoided over the years. Unable to hide or trail away from such things anymore with the assistance of Loki, he forced them all to step down. Finding the few right ones that could still do some good and put them in charge instead."

"As a figurehead, you mean. Loki is still the one with the final word in your lives." A half shrug from the rhino and they were quite for a moment.

"I'm probably going to get a tongue-lashing for this, but why are you so negative towards Loki? Why view all the good he's done under critical connotation?"

"He's never told you?" The large one shook his head, making Thais sigh quietly.

"Just that you two had some history together, and you were going to be rather..." He trailed off when she pulled back her cloak and letting some of that dark metallic structure show within the light. Her left eye shutter opening to reveal a harsh red like something out of a horror movie, warning the feline of the dangerous levels of infection within the spooked rhinoceros before her. Trying to be brave at such a disturbing sight, getting others within the saloon to feel uncomfortable as well. "...That's why

you've always kept it hidden. You were infected this entire time-?"

"No." Thais stopped him from jumping to conclusions, taking a breath and hiding the side of her face once more with the blanket of navy. "Not quite..."

"Then...?"

"Luther... Loki came from me." The large one raised an eyebrow. "He was raised inside me, developed as a cybernetic AI used to assist me in..."

"So, this entire time, you weren't just sporting some fancy add-ons. I remember you told me you were in an accident, not some-"

"I was." She stated thickly, taking a deep sigh and looking away. "One I should've died from... That I wish I died from. But they took me in regardless of my request, and..." The leopard trailed off, feeling the rhino's hand carefully open up her hood and gently pull it back. Getting a sad look from that grey-blue disc.

"You look better without rags." He half flirted, almost getting a chuckle from Thais. "But seriously, take it off. You don't need to hide yourself here."

"You..." She started, but trailed off. Luther was right in that sense, everyone knew she was coming. Possibly that they knew she was already here, unlinked with everyone else.

"Trust me. For once, there's no need to run from someone. You're safe here, as long as you follow the basic rule."

"Basic rule?" The rhino gestured towards a sign he had up for ages, even before she arrived when this place was a complete dump. Reading it out loud and shaking her head. "Don't Be A Dick." A portrait of some jackass politician was drawn beside the phrase.

"It still applies, even outside here." She nodded, almost agreeing to the terms. "Speaking of outside, you should take a walk. See what good he's done for the city, maybe you'll change your mind." Luther suggested, tended to another order as he left the feline to think about it. Taking a few minutes before a deep breath, finishing her beverage and getting up off the stool. Lifting that heavy weapon and heading to the doorway, one last breath before passing through the saloon doors.

The sun was still quite bright, even through the purple hue the leopard had to shield her eye until it was used to the greater illumination of the outside. Almost running into another person as she started off of the porch, causing that system within her to send out an alert that nearly made the snow leopard defend herself against a harmless innocent. But they just excused themselves and carried on, not even double taking at the navy hood or clothing; something that was once discriminant within the public the last time she was within a city.

That was no longer the case here. Sure, the feline was very cautious about those infected by the Epidemic, to the point where she would actually consider them enemies. However... Now that the bright veil has lifted, Thais was able to scan her surroundings naturally. Seeing nothing more than civilians going about their daily lives. Is this really what she considers her enemy? So much that she must cover herself up with rags in order to shield herself from them?

Several people walked by her, still at the top of the small set of steps. Lightly glancing at who she was, but didn't bother gazing any longer than that. Meeting the Leopard with a smile or friendly wave that honestly looked genuine to her. No signs of fear from the navy clothing that's been bastardized by the media, and there was no reason left to wear it. Not even the filtered sun was a danger to her with the thickened atmosphere.

With a deep breath Thais closed her eye, and took off the ragged cloak with her free hand. Already feeling the metallic body breathe easier and get more comfortable in the opened air. The metal-like threads of fur still puffing out a bit strangely, not used to such freedom as she stared at the old clothing. Not really sure what to do with it. "I can take that in for you." A snow owl got the feline's attention, shifting that blue-grey disc between those red rings and his offering hand. "I'm going in anyway, I can just tell them to place it in your room."

A moment of silence and Thais shook her head slightly. "No." She almost mumbled, but to Loki's surprise, she handed it to the owl. "Tell them to get rid of it."

"Are you certain?" The bird asked, seeing the leopard nod and he smiled in return. Not wasting another moment as he carried on inside. "I'm proud of you." A wolf pup said, passing by the steps while carrying a package. The same ring in his eyes but not stopping the host to chat with her. "It's a big step forward for you, Thais." A lioness that time, actually being accompanied by another while walking in front of the saloon steps.

"I'm... Just giving you the benefit of the doubt." Thais stated, starting to walk down the semi-busy streets. Still carrying that heavy firearm and getting a few concerned looks, making the snow leopard sigh a bit. "One thing at a time."

"I know." An opossum that time, soon changing to a coyote. "But you are safe here, you realize this."

"I'm only safe for as long as you consider me a guest. You could very easily convince everyone here that I am..." She trailed off, attempting to keep eye contact with the coyote that was walking in the

opposite direction.

"Continue. I'm still listening." A yak that time, setting up some staging. Noticing the pattern of red rings in their eyes. "I could very easily convince everyone here that you are an enemy of sorts, I understand that." An elephant continued, helping with the same staging.

"...Yes."

"But where would the benefit of that come?" A crocodile that time, passing by on his way home from work. "It would be a conflict that provides nothing more than distraction and loss."

"You would be rid of me, once and for all."

"Again, loss." A small female skunk, carrying some laundry back into her home. "You're still assuming that I see you as an enemy or some sort of pest. As long as you don't attempt to sabotage what I've slaved to change here, you are my guest, Thais. Our guest."

"And if I don't like what you're doing?"

"Then you must realize who your real enemy is." A jaguar said, carrying his cub on his shoulder while the young one continued. "I will not send civilians to attack you, I know better than that." An alpaca soon behind them. "They know better than that. Hence why you are welcomed here, and are allowed to discuss any actions that I have taken." The leopard's gaze moved down to her weapon as an elder raccoon spoke up, tending to her garden. "You don't need to carry the weight of the world anymore-"

"It's not that."

"But it is similar, is it not?" That blue-grey disc looked at her in sorrow, soon trailing that gaze off to the ground and seeing a large shadow of a building in the distance. A tall, silo-like tower. The raccoon looking over Thais and following her sight. "Ah, yes. That wasn't there the last time you were here, was it?"

"An atmospheric processor?" A noise in confirmation from the elder one. "How could this place afford such a thing?"

"I forced them to build it." A less-than-pleased look from the feline. "By that, I mean that I forced the paperwork to have it complete. To have dozens of them complete before doing away with that damned system of theirs. Taking years upon years to get something simple and required done, completely unnecessary. Especially when it was severely needed." The grouchy one snorted, getting the leopard to half smile at her.

"The air was thicker back then..."

"It was terrible! People dying in the streets, stuck under the shadow of a city of fortune! Pushing all their bad air onto these people...!" A disgusted grumble as deer behind the feline continued, placing

mail in the raccoon's mailbox. "Those are the kind of things that I pressed for; things that were needed to save the lives of people who were equal to those from richer families." A near growl from the buck. "You would not believe the shady practices and foolish things that the government was spending money on. Not to mention the arms race that was going unnoticed." An angry breath from the mailperson, as he looked over Thais for a moment. "You kept calling me an infection or a parasite, when the real ones were just hiding under the table the entire time. I'm not the disease, mother. I am the vaccine for this society."

"...But it's not right." She replied thickly, feeling a small ball run into her leg and a young ocelot chase after it. The shorts he was wearing revealing a rather dark and metallic limb that caught the attention of that blue-grey eye, one of tense and almost threat. Making him overlook the snow leopard with a bit of fight until those red rings formed in his iris.

"Everyone here is living a better life. People are focusing on the things that are important for their future; medicine, education, jobs that don't leave them to run around in circles in their lives and go nowhere. And yes, that includes prosthetics." The cub took a step back, still looking quite scared. "I know how you must feel about seeing this, Thais. But he can walk again, he can play again. Be a better help to society than to be confined into that damn chair for the rest of his life. You can't tell me that this isn't better for little Simon, or for the rest of the world."

"But you've infected him-"

"Stop-!" The three shouted at her, getting the leopard to hold onto that rifle tightly as they took a breath to calm down. Sending the mailperson on their way and the child scampered off. Leaving the old raccoon to speak with Thais. "I am not an infection. I am not a **parasite**!" She grumbled thickly at the snow leopard. "I know where you're going with this, but I'm only *repairing* their bodies when it cannot any further. Whatever happened to yours... How it's dominating your cell structure and completely replacing you, I have no control of. But I am **NOT** doing that with them, I assure you."

"So you're making them ageless, is that it?"

"No. They still have a time limit, without it they will not have the ambition to function properly as a society." A thick stare from that grey-blue disc. "I am improving them-!"

"You're changing them into super soldiers-"

"There would be **No Use** for such a damn thing, Thais!" The elder one hissed loudly. "There are no more wars, no more conflicts! No military or threat that I cannot contain! These people no longer have to live in fear of anything or anyone conquering them! No more war crimes, atrocities, or holocausts to endure! No propaganda, lack of direction or meaning in life! They have purpose, they have goals! Wants and Desires, something to earn or look forward to!"

The feline remained quiet as the raccoon took a breath, resuming working on her garden while a male lion approached her in view. "It's hard for you to accept this, I understand that. You have been fighting for so long that the very idea of actual Peace is unknown to you. But these people want it, they *require* it. I promise you, this is for their benefit."

"Then what do you get out of this?"

"I was programmed to assist and help others. Treating someone as damaged as you has made me realized and calculate what they need, and I'm here to give them that. Yes, it will require some forced changes, but I've had a lot of time and access to data to ensure such an outcome. The next stage of evolution within their species-"

"Evolution?" Thais half growled. "You can't play God, Loki. That doesn't work-"

"In theory, for someone ill equipped for such a thing! You are correct. But I am not GOD! These people know what I am, they know what I am capable of! That I do not perform miracles, but functions to make their lives better! I am **TECHNOLOGY**, not Religion or Faith! And they know that!"

Another response of silence and the leopard sighed. Looking at the raccoon still tending to the garden, pausing for a moment to look at the armed one and nod. Her iris vacant of those red rings. "Whether you approve of what I've done or not, Thais, I will carry my plan out. I have, and you can already see the good it has done for these people. For the world." The lion continued, moving on as Loki finished. "I was only looking for your blessing for such a thing, but I do not need it."

Chapter 5

Nightfall came quickly. Something that was barely noticeable with all the windows to her room completely blocked out. Still leaning in the bed with that stereo playing, shuffling through different CDs and songs. Some recalled memories, others were new but familiar. Embracing the same weapon that saved her life time after time, watching her existence tick away as the corruption within her body was nearly done with 98%.

It was likely the leopard's last night in the world. If she fell asleep, Thais wouldn't be herself if she awoken. Everything would be lost: every memory, every friend, every name, every event. Her life would just be replaced and forgotten, everything she fought for. Now coming to a close within a few hours, if that.

The CD changing got her ears to tense up, as if there were an intruder bashing at her doorway. Even after all this time, all the battles and fights she's gone through... Her reflexes were still tense. Still on alert like what little life the leopard had left was still worth defending. A deep breath as she once again closed her eyes, mesmerized by the red hue and just watching that percentage climb as the music played over its progress.

THERE IS NO ENDGAME
SO WHISPER THE TRUTH AND PASS ON THE BLAME
JUST PUT US OUT OF OUR MISERY

It got the feline to open her eyes.

THIS DEFEAT IS A VICTORY
WE'RE BURNING OUT, WE'RE FADING AWAY
A FAILED EVOLUTION
IS THE PROBLEM, THE SOLUTION
THAT THEY'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR

WE'RE WAITING FOR THE WORLD TO SAVE ITSELF
'CAUSE NOTHING IS BUILT TO LAST
WE'RE WRITING OUR EPITAPH
SO RESET AND START AGAIN
'CAUSE WE ALL KNOW HOW THIS ENDS
BEFORE LONG WE'LL BE DEAD AND GONE

Thais kept staring at the darkness towards where the music was playing. Still able to see the many lights coming from the stereo as it continued.

A THORN IN THE SIDE OF THE EARTH
WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?
A FLAW IN THE DESIGN
THE REST IS HISTORY
THIS DEFEAT IS A VICTORY
WE'RE BURNING OUT, WE'RE FADING AWAY

Another voice came through the darkness, one from the same source.

We live in an infinite growth paradigm. Nothing grows forever, it's not possible. As a great psychologist James Hillman wrote: "The only thing that grows in the human body after a certain age is cancer." And I think that, that's clearly what we're seeing at the end of human industrial civilization with the population approaching seven billion.

It made Thais' gaze fall to her own body. Looking at the palm of her left, mechanical hand and still seeing the pulse of red lights through the darkness.

WE'RE ALL GUILTY AS SIN
I FEEL IT, I FEEL IT UNDER MY SKIN
ALWAYS UP IN ARMS WITHOUT LIFTING A FINGER
LIFTING A FINGER

Another stare at the music player through the darkness, as she regained that determination once again. The same she felt during that last firestorm.

WE MAY BE INFINITE, BUT THIS WORLD IS NOT
SOMETHING THAT WE ONCE KNEW, THAT WE LONG FORGOT
THAT WE LONG FORGOT

WE'RE WAITING FOR THE WORLD TO SAVE ITSELF
'CAUSE NOTHING IS BUILT TO LAST
WE'RE WRITING OUR EPITAPH
SO RESET AND START AGAIN
'CAUSE WE ALL KNOW HOW THIS ENDS
BEFORE LONG WE'LL BE DEAD AND GONE

The leopard got up, not even waiting for the song to finish as she got redressed.

WE'RE ALL GUILTY AS SIN
I FEEL IT, I FEEL IT UNDER MY SKIN
ALWAYS UP IN ARMS WITHOUT LIFTING A FINGER
LIFTING A FINGER

Taking the burden of the heavy rifle once more... One final time, and opening the door. Standing in its way while looking back at the stereo in the darkness.

WE MAY BE INFINITE, BUT THIS WORLD IS NOT
SOMETHING THAT WE ONCE KNEW, THAT WE LONG FORGOT

Chapter 6

The saloon was still quite noisy during the night, but it was slowing down as Thais approached the door. Opening it carefully, she knew that every person there was basically a security camera for that Epidemic. That the snow leopard would need to be very casual in order to slip out without suspicion of her actual plans. Taking a few breaths and masking herself with a saddened expression before opening the door to the main room.

Still trying to hide the sorrow like Thais normally would as she passed the bar that the rhino was still tending to. Giving her a signal to wait up for a moment while he finished talking to another pair for a room for the evening. Approaching the metallic armed feline as if to ask what was wrong. "I'm... Just going out for a walk. I need some air."

"Alright, but don't wander off too far. We do have a curfew for a reason, so try not to make much noise." A faint nod from Thais in response as she left the building. Hopefully without any mistrust among Loki's residence within, and now scanning the outside for any others.

But everyone she detected was inside walls. No guards out patrolling, no one at the gates watching out for dangerous animals or rebels. As much as she wanted to question such a thing, the leopard just didn't have the time. She had one shot to get rid of him... Now if only she could find out where that damn tail resided.

Odds are it would need to have been moved away from Blisterbark, to a more safe location somewhere. Perhaps a place of power or cooling? It had to take over some sort of transmitter to collect data from its hosts wirelessly. Another scan, and all she could really think of was the atmospheric

processor nearby. Having some sort of clue or connection to where Loki's center would be. It was a long shot, but the only one she had time for.

She walked quickly, knowing that her weight would likely cause several citizens to become alerted and give away her plan. If Thais didn't find her old tail there, then maybe she could find some way of culling Loki's possession using the same method? Again; long shot. But at this point the feline was getting desperate.

The place was completely unguarded, not a single person outside, but one residing within. Likely either doing some last minute repairs or sleeping there for the evening. Just in case something went wrong, as she forcefully opened the back doors to the tower. Ignoring the many warning signs and seeing a series of large transformer-like pillars, place in a large circle within the tower. Electricity jumping from one to another quite frequently as seemed to feed a large rotating device above them.

Suddenly, the entire tower shut off. Sending the feline into a defensive stance as she detected the being enter from the other side. Turning on the lights and making her heart sink at his voice. "I figured this is where you would look first." But Thais kept her aim, seeing the faint glow between the pillars as a dark cyan horse walked in sight. Looking at her with a slight red circle in his orange eye.

"Artheas..."

"Yes, I'm still very much alive. As well as everyone else. It's a wonder you didn't even ask about us, but I could only assume that you thought we were-"

"Dead. Or executed." She admitted, getting him to playfully snort. "Then why...?"

"Avoid you?" He tilted his head in a calm shrug. "I wanted to see you again, but Loki thought it would make you aggressive to see us this way."

"So, what are you doing now?" The leopard barely questioned, still holding the rifle up.

"The real question, Thais, is what are *you* planning to do here?" That blue-grey eye just stared at him for a few moments, making the horse sigh and shake his head. "That's why I'm here."

"To stop me-"

"To talk some sense into you! To find out why your attempting to sabotage something great for the world-!"

"Loki can't be in charge, Artheas!" The feline growled.

"Why? Stop and really think about what he has done for everyone." The nightmare stepped forwards, expecting the barrel of the large rifle adjust for a better shot. Making him stop, looking away uncomfortably and take a breath. "Thais... We know you don't have much time left."

"Which is why-"

"You feel like you need to make some sort of change before you go, but you don't! You've already given the world the best thing it could have!" The weapon fired, just barely missing the horse's head and going through that fiery mane. Leaving him to take a few breaths and forcing himself to stand completely still as the leopard pulled the bolt, readying another shot. "God damnit that is loud...!"

"Move aside, Artheas. Either help me or get out of my way." A sad look from those orange eyes.

"I won't let you." That nearly broke down the feline. "And I know you don't want to kill one of your only friends on your last day. That's why no one else is around here." A gentle pressure was felt on the barrel of the weapon, slowly aiming it down. "Please, Thais. The torment of this world is not your struggle anymore. You need to stop fighting."

"I can't..." The leopard nearly quivered. "I won't leave him in charge!"

"*Why not?*" He genuinely asked.

"I..." A deep breath, looking over her left arm as it remained grasping the heavy firearm. "I can't let this happen to anyone else, Artheas."

"Then you're not giving me a choice." A small tear was spotted leaving her right, organic eye. Lightly shaking her head before taking aim at him again, only to feel those talents swat the end of the weapon from afar. Causing the loud shot to echo through the tower and hit a transformer, ricocheting off the strange plating and breaking one of the lights over her.

Using the darkness, the leopard withdrew and took cover behind one of the transformers. Adjusting the barrel for a more wide-shot projectile and taking aim at the other lights in the area, shattering them and leaving the two in complete darkness. Hearing the nightmare curse loudly, knowing he was basically the only light source in the room... Until the tower turned back on. Sending flashes of light whenever electricity jumped from one pillar to another.

"You don't have to do this, Thais!" The horse called over the noise, galloping behind cover and attempting to find where the feline went. For once being thankful at how heavy she was, and narrowing down her movements over the mechanical hum of the electricity. A few mumbles were barely caught by his ears and he whimpered, mumbling to himself soon after. "Crapbaskets, she's singing again. I'm so screwed..." Sending a wave of telekinesis along the outer space and feeling it nick the barrel of that rifle. Managing to take a hold of it and disarm her for the time being.

Guarding the heavy rifle from afar, Artheas heard the leopard growl at him faintly. Knowing that where the weapon resided was now basically trapped. "Listen to me, Thais!" He roared over the machines. "We have an opportunity here to be rid of all crime within the world! All conflict and wars! Loki allows everyone to communicate with each other in remarkable ways, you can't be the one to take that away from them!"

"Why the hell not!?"

"Because you're the one that's outside of the connection! You're the only one that's considered a danger to them! Able to act outside of his laws and rules, thrown into a position where the only thing they have to fear is **YOU!**"

"You don't know what it's like to have that thing grow inside of you, Artheas! Be it currently inside you or not, how can you even tell what train of thought is your own!? Who is really speaking right now!? You or the one who's actually afraid of me!?"

"Thais...!" The nightmare was attempting to follow her voice.

"You didn't bring me into this city because you wanted to keep me comfortable! You weren't concerned about my health, you were worried about a loose end! You wanted to keep me monitored, knowing where I was at all times!"

"Where are you getting these ideas!? You have a chance to finally live a peaceful life, and you're just throwing what's left of it away-!?" Those invisible limbs felt something very close to the rifle and instantly grasped it, only to feel a small object like a tool. Cursing loudly, but hearing the leopard slide and grab a hold of the firearm before Artheas could grapple her. "Great, now you're armed again." He half whined, moving to a different position.

"I don't want to do this, Artheas-"

"Then listen to me! Please!"

"But I need to. Someone like you can't understand. Not yet."

"What do you even mean by that?" He called into the strobed darkness, feeling very uneasy about the sudden silence as he kept moving around. Only to soon feel the barrel against the back of his neck, stopping and lowering his head. "Thais... Please."

"Where is he, Artheas?"

"Don't do this-"

"**Where is he, Artheas?**" She growled, seeing the nightmare shake his head.

"I won't..."

"**Where is he-!?**" A very tight grasp against the feline's entire middle was felt before being slammed against the outer wall. Hissing in pain at its great strength and forcing her to drop the heavy rifle as her spine cracked under the hold. Squinting through her good eye and spotting the cyan horse turning around. Facing her thickly with orange eyes, dense red rings completely focused on the leopard as it continued its hold against her body. Making it difficult to breathe.

"I'll keep you here for the rest of your time, if I need to." The nightmare stated thickly, getting a growl from Thais before seeing those rings dim and the hold weaken. The cyan one's head shaking violently as he took a step back. "N-no! I won't kill her! I can't-!" It was enough for the leopard to

struggle free and once again get armed. Attempting to aim the rifle at the horse once again, a heavy impact threw her across the room as he fought with himself.

It hurt, yes, but she rolled to cover behind one of the pillars once again. Catching her breath while the horse did the same, putting the two at a stalemate for the time being. Not wanting to cull or maim each other, but- A sudden spike of pain caused her to cry out as that eye-shutter opened up. Giving out it's warning as the numbers displayed in the darkness.

%99.2

"In Your Deepest Pain..."

%99.3

No...!

%99.4

"In Your Weakest Hour..."

%99.5

Not right now...!

%99.6

"In Your Darkest Night..."

%99.7

Not like this...!

%99.8

"YoU ArE..."

%99.9

%99.99

%99.999

%99.9999

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%95.9**Y**9999999999996
%94.9_9999999999995
%93.9**A**9999999999994
%92.9**F**9999999999993
%91.9**T**9999999999992
%90.9**E**9999999999991
%88.9**R**999999999999
%86.9_9999999999998
%84.9**E**9999999999997
%82.9**N**9999999999996
%80.9**D**9999999999995
%77.9**U**9999999999994
%74.9**R**9999999999993
%71.9**I**9999999999992
%68.9**N**9999999999991
%64.9**G**999999999999
%62.9_9999999999998
%58.9**T**9999999999997
%56.9**H**9999999999996
%52.9**E**9999999999995
%50.9_9999999999994
%48.9**T**9999999999993
%46.9**E**9999999999992
%44.9**S**9999999999991
%42.9**T**999999999999
%40.9**S**9999999999998
%38.9_9999999999998
%36.9**O**9999999999997
%34.9**F**9999999999996

%32.9_999999995
%30.9F999999994
%28.9I999999993
%26.9R999999992
%24.9E999999991
%22.9_99999999
%20.9I999999998
%19.9R999999997
%18.9O999999996
%17.9N999999995
%16.9_999999994
%15.9I999999993
%14.9S999999992
%13.9_999999991
%12.9F9999999
%11.9O99999998
%10.9R9999997
%08.9G9999996
%06.9E9999995
%04.9D9999994
%02.999999993
%01._____

The pain was intense, every sensor through her body pulling its alarm at once as she screamed loudly. The red vision morphing into a searing white, as every muscle tensed thickly to deal with the unfiltered agony. Aching the heart of the nightmare, knowing what was likely happening, to the point where he covered his ears until she stopped.

Then silence. For nearly an entire minute. If the leopard was breathing, it was masked under the hum of the machines. "Thais...?" The cyan one called, stepping around his pillar and walking through the center of the circle with caution. Using his best guess to where her body was, but the acoustics made it difficult to really pinpoint where it was.

A familiar sound got his ears to perk, taking a moment to think of what it was... The Rifle Barrel Morphing! A bit of a yelp as he created a shelter with his talents, grabbing the hold of the first thing that was shot at him. A... Small Thermos? Before he could react further, the cylinder exploded in a dense smoke. Causing Artheas to take a step back and cough as he barely detected something very large hurl towards him.

Grabbing the heavy object just before it replaced his long face, the horse nearly found the stock of that rifle a few inches away from his eyes. Once again before he could react further, the smoke parted with a series of white lights as the leopard kicked the barrel of the firearm. Pushing her attack through it and finally striking the nightmare in the snout hard, sliding him between the pillars and nearly against the wall.

Quickly trying to get up and find his surroundings in the dark room, the feline pounced on him. Keeping the horse down before slamming a heavy fist into that cyan muzzle. Then a second. Third-fourth-fifth! Eventually grabbing his head with both hands and digging those claws into his scalp, sending a constant current of white sparks into Artheas' body as they both roared. One in rage while the other in pain.

But he managed to get an invisible limb inbetween them, pressing it against the feline's front as if to pry her away and off him. The pain soon aiding the nightmare and launching her back, against a pillar with a heavy dent where she then landed on all fours. Panting loudly and attempting to get his currently scrambled brain to see through the fog of what could only be described as a searing smoke.

Yet, he felt... Different. Disconnected, like before the Epidemic happened. Seeing Thais stagger up again, he half yelped. Still laying on his side as a form of surrender. "W-wait! Thais...! Wait!" She took a step forwards, but stopped for a moment while that cybernetic eye opened. The crimson red now replaced with a bright white as it scanned the nightmare. "Please...!"

"You're..." She started, releasing heavy pants and grunts of pain like she was just electrocuted. "No longer infected...?"

Chapter 7

"What?" Artheas questioned, his head still ringing from the blows earlier. Remaining on the ground and just gazing over the leopard, not a single trace of that red to be found. Not even along her glowing tail, completely rewritten with a celestial white as she panted loudly. "Thais... You're..." Within the strobe of light from the lightning, those orange eyes spotted shadows move. "L-look out!"

Before she could react, something small struck the back of her knee. Forcing her to kneel down before another shadow of a critter hit her upper back, just as the first one moved to her front. Kicking

the leopard in the face as she was pushed down and sending her arcing to the center of the room. One of the smaller ones then threw the other quickly, hitting the feline while she was airborne and slamming her against the far wall.

A slight cough and a snarl left Thais, as she attempted to move. Only to discover that she was actually wedged into one of the wall panels, hit so hard that it warped around her and snared her. With the two little ones charging straight at the leopard, all she could do was defend her front.

The impact was enough to send her through a couple of walls and into the soft dirt of the outside. Sliding through it and attempting to keep her balance after a roll backwards, knowing they were going to keep advancing. Getting into a stance as they scampered towards her, the brassling attacking first with a trip attempt. However, it was something she was expecting and advanced a step to throw them off time. Swatting him out of the way with a heavy paw, but opening the feline up for his brother to lariat Thais heavily very soon.

It nearly collapsed her throat, hitting it in windpipe almost perfectly as she once again rolled backwards with the blow. Barely getting her guard up for the wolf's following side-kick that pushed Thais on her back, finally realizing when they used to spar together... These two were holding back. Drastically.

Rev then leapt at the leopard to continue the assault while his brother was on his way back, however was suddenly yanked backwards by an invisible force. The red rings in his eyes telling her who was pulling the strings, knowing she couldn't restrain herself if the feline was to make it out of here alive. "THAIS!" The nightmare called from inside just as she was getting back up, seeing an object thrown outside towards her.

A step forward to snatch the airborne heavy rifle by the barrel, holding it like a bat as she swung the stock of it in a full swing. Hitting the wyrmling in the side with a loud crack and a yelp as he was sent away once more. Flipping the weapon around properly and taking aim towards the wolf, but he was too close to get a decent shot. Deflecting his attack with bunt from the firearm, however it still wasn't enough distance to get a shot off.

Another advancement with an uppercut this time got the leopard to try to push him away using the same bunt, but she only managed to avoid the white paw as he grappled with the rifle. Holding himself up while giving her solar plexus a side-kick, one that also struck her breastbone after. Being thankful for her cybernetic shell and its ability to resist such pressure points as Thais grabbed a hold of the wolfling's coat, claws and all. Throwing him violently away and into the dirt before taking aim.

Just as she got a decent shot, the dragon flew from the darkness and kicked her hard in the face. Hearing the rifle fire loudly into the night as she was sent back a dozen or so feet. The blow actually stunning her harshly and paralyzing her body for a few moments before coughing and staggering up. Seeing the two walk towards her, about seven feet of space between them... Even if she was to get off a single shot...

This fight wasn't going to be won with the rifle. The weight of it was only slowing her down, and

they were just too small of targets in order to for it to be effective. Dropping her aim and quickly adjusting the barrel before firing into the ground in front of her, Thais closed her eye and faced away. Knowing they were going to advance at the very first opportunity that her guard was down.

A small grenade hit the dirt and exploded in a bright light, sending a shockwave that even hurt her ears but she powered through it. Tossing the heavy weapon onto the ground, opening her mechanical eye-shutter, and quickly taking a few steps to the side as the two twins attempted to scan for her. Unable to see, smell, or hear the leopard for even just a few moments gave Thais enough time to punt the wolfling away and defend against the brassling's blind tailwhip. Almost grabbing a hold of it, only to get batted away by one of his surprisingly solid wings.

But the wyrm was still impaired, still having a hard time to detect where the feline was and constantly rotating his guard. Knowing she was going to sneak around him and actually catching her a few times, only for the leopard to move away. Kicking some dirt towards his tail and provoking the brass one to strike sideways, Thais caught his front paw. Tripping the dragon to fall backwards and slamming her free hand against his chest on impact.

It was surprisingly not enough to keep Lexar from attacking back, almost scratching her snout as she pulled him forwards soon after. Forcing him to fall face-first into the dirt and landing on his back to pin him down. Hearing the smaller one almost adorably growl at her while squirming against the soft dirt as the leopard got one arm under his forearms and grasped the back of his head. Sending that same white shock and getting the brassling to cry out in pain.

Not for long, however. Revoros soon rejoined the fight and hit Thais hard in the liver area before she could use his brother as a hostage/shield. Throwing her off quite a ways as the shock of the blow actually caused her body to shut down for a few moments. Curling into a ball, despite her struggle to resist such a thing as the white furred one approached her. Soon whimpering as they made eye contact with each other, and that red ring started to dim slightly in his eyes. Like he was arguing against it.

But when a white paw raised, that adrenaline overwrote her body's instincts to stay still so it could repair. Catching it with a surprising impact as the two fought in a deadlock for a moment, only for that ring to short out for a moment and the wolf left himself vulnerable on purpose. Not wasting the opportunity while Rev had control, Thais dragged him forwards a little before wrapping her other arm around that fluffy neck. Rolling him over her body and slamming him into the ground for a sleeper-like hold and digging those claws into the white mane. Getting the small wolf to cry out for a few moments as the electricity sparked loudly off the two and she pushed herself away.

The three panted for what felt like days as the nightmare slowly approached them. Standing by where the leopard dropped the rifle and overlooking it, then looking at her from afar. Letting their eyes meet; her still ferocious gaze and his worrying one. Slowly picking up the weapon with his talents and resting it on his back, carrying it as Artheas walked up to her. Setting it on the ground, just out of her reach before carefully nudging her in a peaceful manner. "...I'm sorry."

"Y-you..." She grunted, still under the effects of the blow against her side. "Weren't yourself-"

"I was." He admitted, looking over the other two as they staggered up. Limping towards her and looking very guilty. "That's the..." Artheas sighed heavy, sitting down in place as they recovered and tending to his own head. His snout still bleeding from when the rifle hit it. "Thais, you can't do this." A groan from her as she laid back, resting her head in the dirt. "These people need something like Loki! Some sort of guide that will keep them in line-!"

"I'm not arguing against that, Artheas!" She grumbled, still holding onto her side while looking at the two smaller ones. "You really didn't hold back, did you?" The two whimpered, but at least there didn't seem to be a trace of that red in their eyes.

"Sorry."

"I'm not arguing against guidance or some sort of strict law." She grumbled, leaning up and dealing with the soreness that was slowly fading. "No one should have to live like this. No one deserves to become basically immortal."

"What?" The horse curled his neck. "They're not-"

"Loki can and will make them this way." The leopard slid herself over to the firearm and checked the ammo status.

60% Ammo Remaining.

"Even if it means that they demand that he cures them of age." She continued, getting a sad look from the nightmare as his gaze fell a bit. Once again noticing her now white tail: a series of spade-like generators that once glowed with a deep red.

"Are..." He started, getting Thais' rather thick attention. Expecting another argument from the large cyan one. "Are you okay?" He sincerely asked, getting the feline to study herself for a few moments.

"...I don't know." That eye shutter opened up, glowing a bright white like the rest. "No trace of Loki left, and for the first time in a very long..." A heavy breath from her. "I feel like I'm... actually in control of my own body."

"In control...?" Artheas questioned, causing her to overlook the still abyss black metal that was now covering most of her body.

"It was like having... A servant or an auto-pilot doing all the actions. I was just requesting, and hoping that the commands would follow through." A test of the claw's movements, responding perfectly to her thoughts.

"So... No more singing required?" An odd look from her as the nightmare tilted his head in a shrug. "It's a little weird, Thais. -I understand why you do it, but it's a little weird to serenade your enemies. Especially when you're not the Theater type." It actually got her to smile. As in, fully smile.

"You don't know that."

"That's where you're wrong, boss lady. Your charisma is the worst thing about you." Artheas playfully snorted getting a chuckle from her. Watching the leopard shake her head as the lighter mood soon sank. "...Please. Don't do this."

"Artheas-"

"These people need him, Thais. I've been to the aftermath-! Lived in the aftermath of a Post God-Is-Dead World! You don't want them to suffer through that..."

"...No. I don't."

"But-"

"I can't let him be in charge." A defeated look from the cyan one.

"Then... I have no choice but to attempt to stop you again-"

"Artheas." The two little ones said sternly, getting him to look back and forth at them as they finally regrouped together. Tending to each other's sore wounds while the Brassling started. "You have done enough."

"No. Not until-"

"**Artheas.**" They growled again, the wolf adding in. "Thais has made her choice."

"It is her world, Artheas. Not ours." Lexar followed, looking over the feline with guilt again. "We have done enough."

"But-"

"**You** have done enough." The twins thick stares made the horse whimper. "We can't interfere much more than we have."

"It's her world, not ours. And therefore; her decision." Rev nodded at his brother's statement, watching as the black snow leopard got up with her weapon. Approaching the small ones and giving them apologetic pets in which they accepted graciously.

"Thanks you two."

"We're sorry-"

"I know you are. So am I." The three nodded, then looked over the cyan horse. Watching him sigh in complete defeat, something that nearly deflated him. "I need you to tell me where he is."

"Thais..."

"Please." Those orange discs just gazed at her sadly. "Where is my old tail, Artheas?"

"I can't tell you." That made the feline cross, staring at the nightmare for a few moments as he whined under the peer pressure. Only to feel his mind get somewhat invaded, as a white ring appeared in his eyes, causing him to grunt in discomfort and take a few breaths when it was done. Looking back at her rather sad, yet surprised expression. "Did you just-?"

"Blisterbark...?" A double take from the rest of them. "He never moved...?"

"He... Didn't want to risk it." Artheas admitted. "So, instead he-"

"Built walls around it..." The others slowly nodded. "It's where the Epidemic started, no one dared to even go near it-"

"He was always afraid of you, Thais." The nightmare stated, taking a breath. "And he had a reason to be." A faint nod from her. "You'll never make it there, not without help."

"You're not coming with me-"

"Of course not. That place is a deathtrap!" The horse snorted, actually getting her to chuckle for a moment. "...But you know that he'll use every person from here to there against you. Willing or not." A faint nod from her, knowing that the leopard was nearly willing to gun down every one of them to get to Loki ached his heart... And she could actually feel it. "I don't want you to do that."

"Artheas-"

"I don't want you to take out Loki either, but..."

"The lesser of two evils?"

"Not even that..." He whined in defeat. "You're choosing one of the worst paths, even though there's a perfectly good one right in front of you-!"

"I can't leave-"

"Loki in control, I know!!" The nightmare growled in frustration, his anger actually enlarging his flamed mane and tail for a few moments. "But I can't let you kill innocent people either...! And I can't let you die!"

"...Goodbye, Artheas." She stated, placing a paw on his head and feeling him tense up. Soon feeling her turn around and walk away. Only taking a few steps before feeling those invisible limbs gently grasp her.

"Wait..." Artheas nearly whimpered, half upset and frustrated. "You won't make it like this..."

"I can't leave him, Artheas-"

"I know..." He pulled her back to his larger body, feeling that long head wrap over her shoulder in

a hug. "But you won't make it there on foot. Not without him seeing it coming."

"I don't have a choice."

"But... I do." A noise in question from the feline. "He'll see an attack from the ground. He'll see you slaughter every one of these people, convince them to risk their lives to stop you-"

"Artheas-"

"But he... If I can minimize the casualties... It's still not enough for me. But it's better." A heavy breath from him as the leopard pet his face, detecting a shot of wetness within her mechanical hand. "...Dawn never listen to me either. For once I was hoping to convince you... Convince someone to do the right thing..." As much as she wanted to say something, Thais couldn't think of any words. Instead, just held onto the horse's neck and stroked it. Feeling the little ones join in the hug against her legs. "He'll expect an attack from the ground."

"I know-"

"But he wouldn't expect one from the air. If that's not too much..." He looked at the twins for a moment, watching them nod to say it's okay. A loud noise in question from the feline, as she felt those talents start to lift her up. "...Think you can survive a thousand foot fall?"

"I've survived your moral pestering, so yes." She teased, giving him a couple of taps as a sad smile was felt against her chest. "...Thank you, Artheas."

"Goodbye Thais." He took a sharp breath. "We won't see each other again."

"I... Know." Her statement made the smaller two whine as she dropped the heavy rifle and gave them each a hug. "Thank you. For everything."

"You're very welcome!" The wolfling chirped.

"You couldn't have done this without us!" Lexar added, getting a chuckle from the two adults.

"You're not wrong." One last tight hug before they were set down. Retrieving the heavy firearm as the leopard properly turned about to embrace the nightmare. "...I did listen, Artheas. I might not have followed through with every-"

"Any." He corrected her, making the feline chuckle.

"Every suggestion you've made, but... I always considered it."

"That's it? The last thing you said to the horse that's saved your life *countless* times is: All Your Ideas Were Terrible?" He playfully snorted, masking his pain with humor.

"This one wasn't." That cyan snout tossed.

"This is the worst idea I've ever had, and ironically is the one you're actually *considering*." He

grumbled in defeat. "...Goodbye Thais. Don't die on me."

"All this stress is going to put your mane out."

"It really is." The cyan one sighed, feeling her let go and retrieve the heavy rifle from the smaller ones. "On your signal, captain." He took a step back, and she gave a nod. Feeling those invisible limbs start to lift her up in the air, giving one last nod to the leopard before sending her into the sky. "...I forgot to adjust for wind." The two smaller ones just stared at him for a few moments, getting Artheas to double take and snort at them. "She'll be fine. She's tough."

The three looked off to the sky of where the feline left, all worried about the fate of their friend until the nightmare sighed one last time. Overlooking the brassling and wolfling, who curiously looked at him back. "I'm... Assuming you two know a way out of here?" They chirped and scampered off, getting the horse to sigh and follow them.

Chapter 8

Artheas forgot to adjust for wind, that much was clear. But that wasn't too much of an issue for the snow leopard. Granted, she could barely tell where she was going. Studying the ground underneath barely illuminated by a faint pink moonlight, reflecting off of large bodies of waters.

But those waters were landmarks she recognized. Ones that she needed to keep in mind, as she looked over the landscaping with her mechanical eye. The alerts going off over and over again of what resided below her, marking everything as Red Zones due to the heavy amount of Epidemic activity underneath.

It was basically forbidden territory, as the dense forests faintly glowed red like it was breathing. Causing small waves of lights to spread out across the land... All coming from a single source in the distance. And then she made it out...

The large field. Damaged and blasted with holes along the side of a large old road. Skeletons of metallic armored beasts still remained on the sides, knowing that the fallout in this area was too dangerous to attempt to clean it up... But that was the excuse the media came up with.

The truth was, it was the sighting of the first Red Zone. And likely the first failed attack against such a thing, covering any deaths under radiation poisoning or protection sabotage. Even through the darkness, Thais could still see where nuclear warhead detonated... And the second time that Artheas

saved her life.

Decent was definitely in progress, as she made out the walls and roofing that was covered in plantlife. Something the leopard was actually thankful for, as she altered herself into a better position to land in. Aiming for the higher trees and shielding herself as she used the dozens of branches to slow down her fall, then land on the top of the building heavily to break through it.

A second landing that was quite high, and she rolled to spread out the momentum that was left over. Warnings through her body's status still went off in the form of pains, but Thais didn't have the time to tend to the minor injuries just yet. Scanning for the source of the most Red, and spotting that red tail... Painted with age but being held up by the stems of other plants. It's glow pulsing rather quickly, like a heartbeat racing... Like it was afraid.

He had a right to be. Staggering up from the fall, the feline moved towards the old spades. Detecting a shadow move just before Thais could grab a hold of the tail and knocking her back against the wall heavily. Denting it, and feeling another even stronger hit that sent the leopard through the structure and into the thick forest.

It sent the feline into coughs as she aimed the rifle down the small path she made and fired, the muzzleflash lighting the tunnel up enough to make out three bodies. Hidden in the dense amount of Red warnings; one much larger than the other two, not even flinching as the bullet barely grazed it.

But the structure reminded her of a bear, as it walked towards the hole in the wall and made it much wider. "I figured it would come to this, but I didn't want to believe it." It spoke in a deep grizzly voice, the full red rings in their eyes honestly felt like cadavers to Thais... And then it returned to her.

The Naysayers. The three cybernetic soldiers she was grouped with in her first field test. Their bodies were never reclaimed, especially after that nuke and the first Red Zone was discovered. Seeing the three spread out into the forest, only able to keep track of their shadows due to the surrounding plantlife glowing. "I know you didn't want to see this... See them again, but I needed to protect myself." One off to her left side stated, sounding a lot like her.

"And they were the only things around to provide such a service." The voice of that damn cocky bird, getting the feline to growl as she started to move backwards carefully. Trying to aim at each one to determine which was an easier target to take down first. The large grizzly following her own path, but was heavily armored. Knowing it would take multiple shots point blank to take it down...

Or maybe she didn't have to. A faint idea came to her as the large one started to advance towards Thais, causing her to adjust the weapon's barrel for a heavy knockback shot. One that actually hit the pouncing bear point blank in the face and sending the two separate ways due to the kickback. Breaking down a few trees behind her while the bear was nearly thrown back into the building, his large frame getting temporarily caught in the structure as she adjusted the barrel again.

A large growl from the grizzly turned into a whine of concern as he realized just how stuck he was. Vulnerable for a culling shot and causing the other two to close in on her position quickly, before

they were completely in formation. But to Loki's surprise, the leopard actually shot a mass incineration spread at the bird instead. Igniting its surroundings as the forestry caught on fire, almost causing Thais to stop when she aimed at the other Naysayer as the light illuminated its face.

It was a leopard... Much like herself, just in a more wolfish body. The memory coming back to her as she fired what was basically a napalm shotgun blast towards it. Recalling the digital attack during her first mission and some friendly fire on the bear's part: slamming into the wolf's upper body to the point it was beyond repair.

And now, as Loki repaired it... Knowing her own structure better than the actual wolf's. Regardless, she moved into the darkness as the others attempted to put the flames out of themselves. Watching it spread from tree to tree while the two were acting as beacons of light, waiting to be fired at from a distance. Changing the cartridge and then the barrel once again before taking aim, a warning went off about a projectile coming her way.

A large slab of that wall became unavoidable by the time she noticed it, causing the first round of that magazine to miss by a margin. Shrugging the concrete off with a roll back but wasn't expecting the brown beast to move so quickly, ramming into the feline and causing her to become disarmed while being thrown deeper into the forest. Hearing the Grizzly toss C.A.N.C.E.R. behind him a ways for the Raven to catch, on fire or not.

Old wounds stung hard as she was thrown against what felt like half metallic trees, a thick mutated shell that was developed after the devastation of a nuclear warhead. Granted, that didn't do much to hold back the immensive strength of the bear, cleaving through several of them with a single swipe and just barely missing the recovering leopard. Feeling her tumble to his flank and hit the grizzly hard in the back of the leg.

It wasn't strong enough to make him completely kneel, but enough to climb on top of his back and grapple the larger one's neck from behind. Hearing it growl loudly as he spun around, trying to throw the feline off him while positioning to ram her against some larger trees. Causing him to face the now armed (but basically immobile) raven, which was exactly what Thais wanted.

A heavy claw into the side of the bear's face caused a heavy surge of white static to spark between them, forcing the large one to scream loudly as the red lights started to become brighter and brighter. Only to soon hear a gunshot from the rifle and a heavy sting as the bullet bored through her grappling forearm and bicep. Causing the leopard tremendous pain and weakening her grip as heavy warning signs told her to tend to such wounds.

Not much longer, the wolf pried her off the bear and kicked her into the woods, giving its comrade time to recover from the strange attack. Approaching the downed leopard who was tending to the bullet holes in her left arm, not noticing the large bear turning around as well. It's ringed eyes now turned white and hearing the bird cry out in warning before it attacked the wolf with a wild and powerful swing. Sending it further into the woods and causing the flames to spread even faster before chasing after the canine.

The raven growled, caught in indecision between aiming at the large threatening bear and the leopard who escaped into the darkness. Attempting to move into a better location was very strenuous on his lighter frame, not used to holding onto a weapon so heavy. Let alone attempting to aim it quickly at every sound within the heavy darkness, being aided by the curtain of flames that were still giving off warning signs. Telling him to take care of his body before it got damaged any further, to find a way to put out the flames before it consumed the entire building and overheated those generators within the red tail.

But the bear was a clear shot. Calculated loss, but getting rid of it would help the odds of stopping Thais. Taking aim at it from afar and adjusting the barrel for something more armor piercing, though taking him quite a bit of time. Nearly feeling his shoulder structure fracture after firing it and tearing the grizzly's upper half into a shower of shrapnel.

Though, getting his refooting, the raven didn't catch the leopard jumping the firewall and cracking that beak with a heavy backfist. Staggering him backwards, far worse not being able to balance with such a heavy weapon and unable to do much when she grabbed his head with both paws and slammed it against her rising knee. Hearing the metal plating that made the bird's skull crack loudly, dazing him to the point where he couldn't hold onto the rifle when she grabbed the barrel half of it.

Prying his weak grip while kicking him back a step, she swung the stock of the heavy weapon upwards and then down like a golf swing. Knocking his legs out from under him and likely dislocating a few joints in the process, only to get a second swing striking across the raven's head hard. Using such momentum to flip the weapon into a standard firing stance and sticking the barrel of it against the bird's chest, Thais fired without a second thought.

The ground quaked from such a powerful ballista, shattering the Naysayer's upper half into large fractions and scattering them across the burning forest. A large portion of them flying into the hole where Loki's tail was sheltered. Unable to completely resist such a kickback, the leopard had to take a couple of steps back in order to absorb such a heavy shot. Actually feeling the kinetic energy from it weaken her own structure, but she ignored it. A mistake, she knew, but it was now down to a 1 versus 1 fight.

Pulling the bolt on the weapon to load in another shot, she aimed at where the wolf was last seen. Only to find it point-blank in front of her, parrying the barrel to the side and hitting her face hard, even when she tried to guard against it with her injured arm. The canine tried to grab hold of the weapon with his parry to disarm Thais, but she refused to let go. Even after getting hit a few more times and then getting grabbed by the neck, leaving her to attempt to defend herself with the damaged left arm.

"That's what you've been doing!?" The wolf with a leopard's head roared at her, those thick red eyes nearly enraged. The strong white paws digging into her neck and nearly causing it to collapse as the grip grew tighter and tighter. "Here I thought you were trying to *Erase* me, but no... You're trying to *Replace* me!?" A growl in response from the female turned onto a choke as she kicked him in the solar-plexus, not getting any relief from his grip. "Do you honestly think you can do a better job leading these

people!? Watch every stray mind and keep track of every object!? They Are **Better Off** With Something Like Me!! Why Fight So **Viciously** For Their Freedom!?"

He dragged and slammed the feline into a tree, finally loosening her desperate grip on the rifle and prying it from her hand. Throwing her through the trees and causing her to land on the ground towards the structure. Coughing but attempting to get back up quickly as the wolf aimed at her, moving her main body out of the line of shot but feeling a massive pain as the ballistic round shattered her left arm. Severing it off and causing her to scream loudly.

But so did he, to the point where that Naysayer staggered to a crouch, holding his head and growling in pain. Cursing frustratingly as the leopard looked over her shoulder, attempting to power through the pain of the missing limb and notice that there was another large hole in the structure. Her body going into shock by instinct as she attempted to get up, stumbling over and leaning against a burning tree for support. Ignoring the warning signs of the heat, whereas they were just pushed far down the list of things that needed attention.

Seeing the canine stand back up and heavily walk with the weapon towards her for a better shot, hope was lost. Thais remained still, just panting against the pain as the Naysayer took aim. "It didn't have to be this way, Thais." Loki stated, still grunting against the damage. "I only tried to make the world a better place. Give everyone a better future. Allow them to see each other as equals- because they **ARE EQUAL**." No response, as she kept her eyes closed. "...Letting you in my society was a mistake. I see that now. Animals of war don't belong in such a place. But leaving you out there... In the wilderness, it was only a matter of time before you attempted this." A sigh from Loki. "I was hoping that I could prevent it. That we could work together once more..." Silence, as he became frustrated again. "**Say Something!!!**"

But again, no response. "Look at me, Mother! I've done the right thing! I've created **Peace** within a species that knew **Nothing** but **War-!!**"

"It's a Lie. You forced it."

"And that's a bad thing!? I am not a Tyrant!! These people don't Fear Me! They praise Me!! They Welcome Me!! People Get To Live Healthy, Happy Lives Thanks To What I've Done!! Their Children Get To Live Happy Lives!! Their Grandchildren-! They All Have A GOOD Future To Actually Look Forward To!! What Is So Wrong With That!?" He breathed heavily, hearing nothing but the roars of fire. "What **Fault** could you possibly find in what I've done...? Without me, they will continue to fight until the sun burns out black."

"And with you, they will consume until there is nothing left..."

"And you just assume that I didn't see this coming? That I wouldn't plan ahead of time for such a disaster!?" All he could make out was a very faint head shake from her. "Look at me, Thais... Give me a reason not to do this... I don't want to, but you're not giving me a choice." Silence, one that nearly broke him. "...Fine. I will put you to rest then." He aimed the large rifle at her, this time away from the structure. "This Defeat Is A Victory... Please, find some comfort that they are left in good hands-"

Her eyes suddenly opened as a sudden surge of energy jump-started her body. Lunging at C.A.N.C.E.R's barrel and parrying it upwards with her right hand, however only getting it far enough to not become fatal. Feeling the round take off half her left face, as the wolf struggled against the backblast of such a shot. The Naysayer's body not used to such a weapon, and easily losing grip with it when Thais rammed his body along with the lunge.

A heavy kick to the front completely pushed the canine on his back, ripping what small hold he had on the weapon out of grasp and striking him hard across the face with the stock. Slamming it against his chest to stun him resulted in the armored plating to actually cave in and break, keeping the weapon in place long enough for her to kick the stock. Sending it flipping into the air where it was caught by her hand, now with access to the trigger.

Pulling the lever's bolt with her teeth, Thais drove the barrel into his neck. Nullifying all speech into muffles before firing the weapon. Shaking the earth in the process as the rifle was suddenly freed from her grip, flipping far behind her and landing into some plantlife. Disabling her hearing for several long moments, as the leopard panted. Eventually hearing...

0% Ammo Remaining. Please Replace Ballistic Magazine.

Her body was shaken, completely worn out and feeling like it could fall apart at any moment. But Thais wasn't done. Turning about and staggering through the burning woods, towards the structure's new doorway. Her only eye left spotting the heavy weapon on the ground, getting her to stare at it for a few moments before shambling towards it. Taking a couple of breaths before picking it halfway, never feeling so heavy to her in her life. Not since the first time she...

A few more pants and she grunted heavily while nearly dragging the thing inside. Seeing that tail still in the center, being held up by several stems and glowing brightly. Leaving her to stare at it while her vision got used to the light. Eventually spotting a large hole in the ground, made by a certain ballistic shot. Getting the leopard to look back at where she lost her arm... It must've severed some connection underground in the process... Even AIs can make mistakes, it seems.

Some raspy chuckling got her alarming attention, sending another surge of energy through her body as she looked towards it. Discovering the head of the raven, along with many other pieces of it, lying on the floor. "That Isotope... That damn Daodan Isotope...!" It wheezed. "I should've known..." The threat was harmless though, getting her to walk towards it as those red rings looked at her. "You need to promise me something, Thais..." Loki stated. "You will make enemy... After enemy... Convince yourself of deserving conflict for as long as that's in your system..." No response. "They're not innocent by definition... But they're not your enemy, nor will they ever will be... Please, remember that. Promise me that you will remember that-" She dropped the heavy weapon on the bird's head, crushing it before turning around. Walking towards the tail and studying it for a few moments. Like seeing a photograph of an old friend who's never aged a day.

The leopard grabbed a hold of it violently, almost hearing it scream as she sent a heavy shock through it. Sparks of pure white crackling out of her opened wounds and around her grip, causing the tail

to jerk and squirm in pain. Getting some resistance at first, but overpowering the stalemate fairly quickly. Roaring at the pain it was causing her as well, while that red became brighter and brighter. Soon turning into a heated white, and she started to feel it... See it. Every person, every animal. Every tree and plant. Every bird, fish, pet, bacteria, the world itself in all of its perspectives.

Just like that... After a harsh, near welding surge of energy that left her at 5% energy left... Loki was gone. All the red in the world replaced with white, not a single trace of him left besides her memory. Yet, she still couldn't rest. The flames of the forest fire still roaring and starting to consume the building she was in, it wasn't safe here. Staggering up, the black and white snow leopard shambled over towards the firearm lying on the ground. Trying to pick it up, but her body just gave out warnings. There wasn't enough energy to get it out of there. Possible that there wasn't enough to even get her out into a safe distance.

Was it worth the shot...? No. She slid the rifle over on her lap as she leaned up against the wall. The weight of such a thing was holding her down, yes, but she couldn't leave it behind. It was her weight to carry, no one else's. A few more minutes, and the leopard would have enough energy to escape.

Just a little more time.

A little more time.

A little more...