

BURN THE CANDLES

She stepped out onto the roof, her jacket wrapped in her arms, hair flowing freely in the wind.

"June, comms check." She spoke, eyeing just to her side. Sunset fell across the sky in streaks of fire and flame, red and orange embers scorching the sky. On the ground, the same scene. Fire, flame, scorched earth. Interceptor jetcraft, drones, AVs shot across the sky while gunfire and explosions ripped the streets below apart.

"Communication successful Doctor." JUNE's monotone delivery came through her earpiece loud and clear.

"Good. Keep January prioritized on me, and scramble the AV to the rearmost triage center."

"Right away."

Just above her on the roof, atop a service house overlooking the cityscape stood a diamond visored android, scanning and taking in as much of the scene as it could. Its red horns nearly blended in with the fire in the sky as it glanced down to look at Nyx. She slung her coat over her shoulders, the wind catching the long garment along with her hair, casting it tempestuously along with the breeze as she slid her arms through the sleeves and over the top of the armored vest worn over her shirt. Nix had picked out a set of armor for her to help her out as best he could, along with making an uparmored version of her longcoat, ballistic aramids sewn throughout the body and partly through the arms. It was far from war attire, but shrapnel and a stray bullet would at least be slowed down, if not have its flight arrested entirely. She and the android both stepped into the side of the AV perched atop her tower, the sidegate raising up from the ground and sealing shut, taking off deeper into the fray.

She sprinted through the ransacked alley, the usual refuse of destitute city life half-buried by the dust of concrete and fine glass from the inter-tower fighting going on far above her. Her searing red eyes glimmered faintly through the pitch black of her visor. Hino hooked her boots into the wall beside her, and leapt up a level, catching an inset window frame and vaulting forward further. Just as she flew through the air, a four-strong squad of tactically armored men filed through the alleyway. The optic suite embedded in her corneas- The incidental source of that rosy glow they carried- quickly ran scans over them, the IFF softs confirming that the men beneath her ambush were indeed, foe.

Their urban camouflage shifted between dark and dull shades. Grays, blues and reds, all in an effort to make them become fuzzy silhouettes against their backdrop. Their gear was standard; Ballistic helmets and vests, plate carriers hauling magazines, sidearms, and a patch on their shoulders that bore their corporate alliance. Even

amongst the efforts to fade their soldiers into obscurity, every corporate security provider still couldn't help but lay their branding upon their cannon fodder.

Hino's investigation firm had entered a sort of "fire sale" stage in the past few weeks, going exponential in the past day from a litany of corporations needing dirty work done fast and frequently. Intricate investigation and espionage had been replaced with tactical judgement and execution. Currently, she was tasked with removing an air defense platform from the roof of a nearby building that was knocking planes out of the sky. She was just a block away, perched above a squad that was by all means fair game. Her pistol glided free from her holster with a quiet slide. She leveled the suppressed end at the rearmost soldier, a simulated sight appearing in her vision to give her perfect perception of where the bullet would land. Right at the base of his neck, between the armor. She steadied her breath, and squeezed. The suppressed round flew to its mark, putting him on the ground in an instant. She already dropped the second one before they had turned around, the other two getting a bullet to the face for their troubles. She holstered her weapon, and flung herself forward from her perch, making for higher ground.

He stood in a dimly lit room, the fuselage of the aircraft illuminated only by the light of the screens, the overheads all turned off. He stood over the back of one of the operators as they worked the controls. The systems held within the AWACS aircraft ran a mix of things, all linking up to dozens of other aircraft in the airspace. They were far from the action, the sensors functioning far beyond visual range let them stay well out of harm's way. Even from this distance, the war felt close, right beneath his fingertips. The deck hummed beneath his boots with the vibrations of engines resting in their cruising altitude. The canned air inside the plane smelled of ozone, countless computers within operating at full tilt to simulate the flared-up war beneath with as much accuracy as possible.

Displays shifted with blues and reds, individual flickers moving across as signs of life, friend and foe. Lights went out, and others fled. Some fought, some fled, some died. He watched it with the same calm forged on the surface of the Moon some years ago, but his eyes wandered. There was a single, yellow highlighted glyph pulsing faintly at the edges of the fray. Nyx. LaRoche Robotics' aerial platforms were airborne to give aid and direction to allies across the field, but it was no secret that Nyx herself had de facto priority. He tapped into her comms, placing a finger to his ear and his eyepiece switching to a feed from Nyx's cybernetic eye.

"Doin' alright down there girl?"

She held open a plastic curtain as a two medic deep team wheeled in a stretcher with an explosively amputated man passed out on top of it.

"As well as I can be. I've settled into position at Triage Echo-One. How far away is the fight line?" She asked, staring out into the horizon.

"There's a skirmish four blocks down from you. The hot zone is bigger two miles east, but it's contained for now. I've redirected a squad to close off a line and prevent any of it from spilling over to you."

"**Merci.**" She said, dipping back behind the curtain and donning a pair of latex gloves. She snapped the gloves tight to her wrists and moved into the cramped triage bay. The air hung thick with antiseptic, smoke, and the coppery bite of blood, a moribund cocktail Nyx became familiar with decades ago. The medics were already cutting away what remained of the man's pant leg, the stump a mangled bloom of charred flesh and exposed bone.

"BP?" She asked, moving to the head of the stretcher.

"Eight over fifty, falling."

"Push another unit and have another waiting. Clamp the femoral. We've got a max of sixty seconds before he crashes."

Her voice was steady, almost gentle, but her hands moved with the speed and certainty of someone who had done this a thousand times in worse places. She glanced at his chest, her eye flickering as it took a fast scan. His body temperature was dropping. Shock was already setting in. A distant thump rattled the aluminum frame of the tent. Something big went off a few blocks away as dust fell from the tent's seams overhead, and one of the junior medics flinched. Nyx didn't.

"Stay with me." She murmured to the unconscious man. "Not today, not today." She affirmed as though she was speaking an incantation to deny Death's grip. She reached to her side, taking an Electrocauterizer, the metal end humming with a shrill shriek. Another explosion, ever closer. The LED lights running through the fabric flickered, a ripple of shouts echoing from outside the tent.

"Doctor? Should we evac-" One of the medics asked, voice tight.

Nyx didn't look up. "Patients. We aren't the target, bare down."

"But-"

"**Focus.**"

The cauterizer shrieked as she sealed a ruptured vessel, the scent of burnt tissue curling into the air. It had been a while since she had blinked. Her earpiece crackled, Nix's voice coming in. Low, grim.

"Nyx I'm seeing movement on your western approach. Not a lot, but enough to be a problem in a minute. I'm vectoring a team to cut them off, but you need to get ready to move."

"...Understood," She spoke back, continuing her work. She knew that if Nix gave her the order, they had no time. She set the cauterizer down and reached for a pressure bandage. Her hands were steady, but her pulse began to tick upwards, beat

by beat by minute. No one else noticed, but Nix inevitably did. He had her biometrics permanently pinned to the corner of his eyepiece's display today.

Something else was watching it too.

"Doctor-" One of the medics said, a faint flickering tremble in her voice. "Are you sure we shouldn't evac?"

Before Nyx could answer, one of the androids glided past her, its movements smooth and quiet against the low roar of war. Its white chassis was streaked with soot and blood, but its hands were rock steady. It reached the stretcher, braced the patient's leg, and took over from Nyx's position. "Manual compression stabilized. Continuing treatment." It spoke in soft monotony.

"Thank you," She said, backing up.

The junior medic who had been trembling a moment ago let out a shaky breath. "I- God I wish I was as calm as them."

Nyx gave a small smile. "It's a lot easier without all that 'conscience' and 'fear of death' we're all burdened with." She joked, fittingly dark in her humor given the medical setting. The medic snickered. The goat's earpiece crackled again.

"Nyx. Movement's pickin' up. You need to move, now." He commanded.

She let out a breath, staving off a swear lingering beneath it.

"Echo One prep for evac!" She barked out over the din. "Autodocs, prioritize patient stabilization and load bearing. Medics, stay between them and the exits. Move with purpose, go!" She concluded, as the entire atmosphere within the tent shifted into its new priority. The androids responded instantly, calm affirmations sounding out in unison as they set to work, the medics moving as well with steadier hands now. The action of the tireless machines and the conviction of their present leader and matriarch gave them poise.

Nyx peaked past the tent flap, coat billowing gently behind her as she scanned the streets beyond. War was coming, and it was picking up as she watched a new plume of smoke rip up through the skyline from a recently slung missile. Another tick, her heartrate climbed.

The rooftop was quiet, eerily so. The disabled missile battery lay half embedded in its mounting cradle, smoke curling from the ruptured rails where Hino's shaped charge had just gone off. Surrounding it were three bodies, dispatched silently with one round each. In the corner of her eye, her HUD sparked. A notification saying that her contract cleared, and that the remaining funds were distributed to her account. She multi-tasked, getting back under cover and out of the open view of the roof, while quickly scrolling through other pending contracts. They were sorted by a weighted average of recency, proximity, and payout. The one that caught her eye the most at the moment was posted mere seconds ago with ultra high priority. A platoon was moving in towards a side street, likely trying to enforce a perimeter and capture a

few blocks, some 30-40 soldiers as indicated by the intelligence bundled with the contract. It was a tall, tall task, routing that many soldiers only as a solo operator. As a result, the payout was obscene, enough to let her take a multi-year vacation and take her husband along with her.

One second later, she poured through the objective's location and its surroundings. Pulling intel from as many sources as she could from friendly operators, public information, and a few lines running from LaRoche's SkyEye, she evaluated the scene and what would get snared in the opposing army's capture. Evacuation lanes. High civilian presences, and no real armed opposition. She blinked the map away, accepting the contract. She reached to her side, pulling out her wire-gun, a lightweight zipline launcher that held a hair thin coil of wire packed impossibly tight inside a canister that would let her form spiderwebs all across the city and never lose her rooftop advantage. She leveled it across the street, and fired it into an opposing rooftop. When the wire went taught, she clicked on the motorized accelerator and snatched herself across the sky at a speed that would cause spinal injuries for the untrained and unprepared.

Her current objectives: Identify and eliminate commanders, comms operators, and heavy units. Crossing a few more buildings, she finally came into sight of her target. It was a smattering of squads, spaced out and half-armored, six APCs, and the rest of the crew out on foot or riding on top of the armor. It was heavy, but spaced out like they at least knew the minimum to do. She quickly scanned over the surroundings, looking for options. Across the street, a roof with a water tank. Down below, countless cars abandoned or destroyed, most of them electric. Electric cars had battery packs that burned like hell and refused to go out.

She marked that option down. The ruptured water tank could pour onto the flames and cover the street in steam and smoke, giving her a few moments to move on. The road itself was her next sight, looking over weaknesses and pock marks, comparing it against municipal maps with sewer lines imposed against her optics to give her an X-ray view. Hopefully, a well placed explosive would drop an APC or two into a sinkhole, and bar the rest from continuing. Once the chaos truly began, she could start picking off the rest one by one, darting from roof to roof.

She scanned around for escape routes, planning her movement before the shooting began again. Her lines were placed, and her precision rifle was ready, the integrally suppressed barrel and subsonic rounds waiting for their time to shine. She hung over the edge of the building, pinning the handguard down against the ledge tight and sighting her first party popper. With a tense of her finger, her show began. A quiet pop, a trio of rounds sank through the roof and into the belly of an idle car, a jet of fire quickly ripping up through the floorboards and engulfing the interior in flame. The lithium smoke was thick and horrid as she scanned up, setting off two more near it. She unloaded her weapon, switching to the precious few explosive rounds she kept

and leveled her scope with the rooftop water tank across the street, above the car fires. With one more crack, she burst the tank open and released a torrent of water on top of them, almost instantly burying the platoon in the acrid fog. Not a moment later, she clipped herself on to a line, and moved to the next building. The show had begun, and the streets were her stage.

"Romeo-Two, shift to gridsquare Hotel-Twenty, capture the mounted gun and destroy it. Godspeed." He clicked the side of his headset, switching to another channel as he paced up and down the fuselage. "Jenny, how's Nyx doing?" He said, stopping at the brunetted operator.

"Her team's picking up and moving. They're just beyond the sightline of the merc group, but they might- Wait." She paused, watching the red indicators shift, scatter, some blinking out.

"Switch to color." Nix commanded.

She pressed a button beside the screen and the simulated view switched into a live camera feed. The entire street was bathed in fog. "Uh- Sir? Did- Did you call in air support?"

"Nnnnooo..." Nix said, narrowing his eyes. "Go to IR."

She did so, clicking another button as the screen shifted to blacks and grays, with blinding whites showing individuals and other sources of heat. They could both see the panic in the array, gunfire lighting the place up as they tried to regroup and counter whatever was hitting them. "Hey-" He said, tapping Jenny's neighbor on the shoulder. "Scan over Echo-One and try and pinpoint what's causing this."

"Roger."

Nix watched as they both panned around, working to isolate the cause of the consuming chaos. He watched as the platoon tried to regroup, only to split again as another environmental hazard forced them apart. Their comms traffic spiked, a tangle of overlapping calls and panicked responses. Someone down there was reshaping the battlefield to their liking, and with remarkable pace. The complete absence of a visible presence confounded him most of all, expecting a sizable force on the rooftops or in surrounding streets, but there was nothing. At this point, it looked more like the work of a solo operator working their best-

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Atta girl..." He muttered.

"E- Excuse me?" Jenny said, turning back in unbridled confusion.

"Oh- No no not you- You're- You're doing good but I meant- Uh-" His stoic calm was quickly deflated with his accidental HR violation. "I- Think I know the cause."

"Sir?"

"Personal friend. How's Tango-Two looking?"

"They're closing in on the fray. They're liable to get caught in this crossfire, should we tell them to hold back?"

"No. Tell them to flash IFF skyward and keep moving in. Someone's sprung their trap, and they might be kind enough to let us clean up the scraps."

"...Sir?" Jenny asked, digesting Nix's action-movie schlock of a field assessment.

"Ignore the prose," he sighed. "Relay the rest of the orders. Flash IFF, keep moving in."

"Yes sir."

He looked at another monitor nearby, zooming out to gather a grander scope of the scene unfolding far below. Things were escalating, buildings were overrun, some collapsed. Pockmarks littered the streets, and smoke billowed from the shattered glass of skyscrapers. He took a breath, and got back to work.

She sat in the back of a field ambulance, a large tractor trailer with the rear end replaced with a complex array of hospital equipment, capable of performing tier 1 trauma care anywhere it could set its wheels down. All around her were more medical vehicles, and the androids outside running with pace and purpose as their unarmed but hard to kill escorts. They were heading to another designated support point to link up with a different medical corp. Detailed information was getting more and more difficult to acquire due to the sheer chaos unfolding around them, and the airwaves were nearly jammed shut from activity. From one of the windows of the truck, she watched a new plume of smoke rise in the distance, darker than the rest. It curled upwards, lingering in the sky like a primordial warning. The ground beneath them trembled, coursing through the truck's suspension and causing the instrumentation and machinery within to rattle. The vibration traveled up her legs and settled in her chest, laying heavy inside of it. Somewhere far off, something heavy collapsed. Perhaps a building, perhaps two.

Her breathing slowed as she forced herself to take a moment to reassess. Her earpiece crackled through static.

"Nyx, status?" Her brother chirped.

"Moving, we're clear of the western pressure. What's ahead?"

There was a pause. A pause that lasted only a second or two but felt far longer. "The sector ahead's compromised." He said like he delivered bad news.

Her stomach tightened. "Define compromised."

"Delta through Kilo are currently buried. A block just collapsed, and the whole place is a hellzone."

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat, tightening her shoulders. The androids outside jogged alongside the convoy, their silhouettes cutting through the smoke like lingering memories. The medics inside the other vehicles were quiet, save for the terse chatter required for care. They all felt it. "Is the corridor still open?" She asked.

"Technically, but not for long. Fronts are collapsing and the whole field's changing."

The ambulance lurched as the driver swerved around debris. Nyx braced herself against the wall, her other hand slamming against the stretcher mounted into the floor as if she would steady it from tipping over, despite there being no need to do so. Her pulse ticked upward.

"Nyx," He continued. "This isn't a localized push- Corpos and mercenary bands are slamming together across every range, and it's turning into a real shitshow every time a second goes by. I've already launched GT-2s from orbit into the worst of it, but I have to wait ten minutes for each squad."

She could feel the tone of his voice through the struggling comm line, an ardent pressure that was preparing to tell her something she would refuse to hear.

"You need to be ready to pull out entirely at a moment's notice. I know you think you're invincible but you and your team dying out here will result in tenfold more casualties than you cutting losses and evacuating entirely."

The world felt thin. Fragile. The new plume of smoke she'd seen earlier was thicker now, rising like a pillar into the burning sky. Sirens wailed in overlapping waves. A drone spiraled out of the sky in the distance, sparks trailing behind it before it vanished behind a building. Before their eyes, the city was coming undone.

"Understood," She said quietly. She pressed her hand to her sternum, feeling her own heartbeat just to make sure she was still alive.

"I love you Nyx." Her brother spoke into her mind. She knew he could see her vitals, and could probably feel her stress through the numbers alone.

"I love you too." She replied, eyes closed again. For a heartbeat, the ambulance felt still, contained. A vacancy against the storm. Then the world moved again. The convoy rumbled forward through the deconstructing streets, robotic escorts jogging alongside with tireless effort. The medics murmured to each other in short tonality. The low hum of the ambulance's engine filled in the background. Another tremor quaked through the ground, harder than the last. The ambulance jolted, cabinets rattling, a tray of instruments clattering to the floor. One of the medics cursed under his breath. He had his helmet off, resting it in his lap and his forearms rested atop that. She watched as his leg jittered up and down nervously. He looked young, early to mid 20s at most.

"It's okay. We'll be okay. Keep your head up, we've made it this far." She said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"I- God I hope so. I just-" His words were clipped, struggling to keep it together. "I'm fuckin' scared Doc. Like- The world outside is fucking exploding and we're just- Stuck in a box where we can't do shit-"

"Breathe, Yan, breathe." She didn't need to ask for his name, the patch on his chest and ID badge dangling from his waist told her everything. Leroux Medical Paramedic, Yan Arkovsky, hired this year.

"Doc I am *trying* to breathe." He said, leg jitter worsening. "How are you so calm right now? Like- *How?*" He asked with desperation, like Nyx held a key to solve all his woes.

"Because if I panic, he dies-" She said, pointing at the unconscious patient strapped down to the secured stretcher. "And if you panic, someone else dies. If we both panic, everyone dies." She leaned forward, resting her hand on his knee now. "You have to push past it, and look further ahead than the next five seconds. We'll get out of this, we'll all go home, have dinner with our families, or just pass out on the couch with an empty beer bottle. Then, we'll dust ourselves off in the morning, and keep more people alive."

He clasped his hands together, clamping his eyes shut and looking down as though he were saying a prayer. "I'm tryin' Doc..."

"We're all here for each other, most importantly of all. I'm here for you, and you're here for me. We stumble, trip, fall, someone else will drag us back up. When they fall, we'll do the same for them. We're a light that won't go out, because there's far too much fire." Her voice was steady and calm, like she was comforting her daughter after a nightmare.

Yan nodded slowly, repeating the mantra in his head over and over again. "... I got it Doc..." He looked up, faint steel and determination in his eyes now. "Thanks."

She smiled, pulling her hand from his knee and leaning back into her seat.

From the corner of her eye, caught by her cybernetic, a sudden spike of heat surged ahead. Something bright, something violent, something-

The world went white.

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The world was dark.

Pitch dark.

There was a texture, a taste to the dark.

She felt herself floating again, in between time, outside of space.

Inside her own head.

"No... No, not again... Not this- Not now..." She weakly protested.

She put her hand to her face, almost reflexively. She felt what she should, fur, her flesh beneath. Again, down at her body. She was bare, but she was whole.

She looked up, like there was a shade behind her hand she failed to notice until now.

She was there too.

Battered.

Bloodied.

Gored.

It stood, half its face obstructed by the crimson shadow it drifted in.

It stood like it was holding its wounds, its hand clenched around its wrist, its bloodied stump that once ended in her right hand.

Her ears began to burn, a deep rumble and a shrill static growing, lurching, flooding forth.

Her thoughts began to swim, her competing minds failing to grasp a course of action or even a place in reality.

She felt words, meanings, actions in the back of her head, the back of her mind where she had no control. Where no being had control.

Base, primal instinct.

Run.

Everyone else is a killer.

Not safe.

Fight back.

Claw.

Scream.

Destroy.

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A concussive blast tore through the street ahead, a shockwave slamming into the convoy like a giant's fist. The lead truck was peeled apart like paper thrown behind a jet engine. Fire blossomed outward in a violent boom, swallowing the road in a wall of heat and shrapnel. Her ambulance lurched violently, the tires screaming as the driver fought to evade the force. The wheels on the side picked up from the ground, a split second shift in gravity slamming its occupants against one wall, before it slammed back down and threw them to the other. The other side of the truck's wheels gained elevation again, just as they crested over some obstacle. The upset in the precarious gravity sent them over, the truck slamming down onto its side and skidding across the pavement. Delicate machinery and metal tools flew through the air, overcome from their mounts in the extreme disruption. Her vision faded in, ringing in her ears and her sense of direction momentarily vanquished. She clutched her hand to her head, feeling a wet warmth as blood stained her head and her hands. Through the muffled sounds of pain and delirium, her vision was bleary for only a moment as her eye recalibrated. She heard the muffled sounds of Yan, the nearby medic shouting to her, picking her up and helping her back to her hooves. Her hearing slowly faded in as he helped her free, the sound of urban warfare flooding into the disabled truck and the air a poison composed of former buildings and explosives.

She coughed, covering her mouth against the toxicity. The patient in the stretcher was still tied down, though his body hung limp against the restraints. In her

moment of hesitation, her white and red android pushed past her, January severing the mounts of the stretcher and setting it upright, attempting to restart the machines keeping him alive. She snapped back, shouting ahead into the fray.

"T1, status!" She barked.

"Cl- Clear!" A reply came through as she looked out to another truck,

"T2! Status!"

Nothing. Three moments passed, before a choked voice called out through the smoke. "**H- Help...**" She could barely hear the moans against the din, before she and a squad of Autodocs rushed towards it.

War is war, and Hell is Hell. Hell is full of those deserving, of those fit for punishment and damnation. War is full of innocent bystanders.

Nyx sprinted through the smoke. The street was a nightmare of fire and twisted metal. The lead truck was nothing but a shredded carcass, its frame peeled open like a sardine can. Burning debris littered the road, embers drifting through the air like dying fireflies. The shockwave had torn open storefronts, shattered windows, and scattered bodies. Some moved. Some didn't.

Her boots skidded on broken glass as she reached the overturned ambulance. January was already there, its white chassis streaked with soot as it ripped through the wreckage like the jaws of life.

"T2! Status!" She shouted again, voice cut raw.

A groan answered her, faint, nearly buried under the roar of the flames. She didn't hesitate.

"Autodocs, with me!"

The androids surged forward, like a swarming hivemind of guardians making way to their rescue. Nyx followed, as did a few of the other able bodied medics. She coughed against the toxic air and her coat whipped behind her as she sprinted into the core of the devastation. Heat embraced her as she stepped into the remains of the twisted wreckage, gripping at misshapen and warped sheet metal to throw it to the side, before the androids came and supplanted her. The thing beneath was so much meat and blood, a twisted amalgamation of the components needed to make a human being, but arranged in such a great lie.

She stepped back as the other androids rushed past her, pulling out the yet living wounded from the caravan's carcass. She saw amputations and hemorrhaging. She saw end stage shock where the body simply gave up and flooded the brain with chemicals to make death peaceful. Her focus shifted further, at first ahead, then behind. The wretched realization came to her, that there was no safe direction. The soundstage of the city broadcast its war from every direction and to every participant, willing or not. Gunfire, bombs, the wail of sirens, the scream of rockets and missiles, drone swarms blanketing the sky with death multiplied by hundreds. She took her breath sharply, forcing the acrid atmosphere into her lungs to pry what little oxygen

hung between as she forced herself back together. Thirty-two seconds passed since she had stepped out from the wreckage of her truck. The sounds of warfare marched closer.

She coughed, a retching cough that lasted six seconds. "T- T3! Status!" She screamed again. In response, an inarticulate call back that belayed at least some sense of urgency. It was alive, and it was conscious, whatever the words said. "Jan- January-" She coughed again. The pearl white droid was at her side in a gust of wind, cutting through the poison through mass and drag alone. It chirped, awaiting her command. "Evac- We're pulling out and-" Another cough. "We're disabled. Order the rest of your team to-"

January's helmet twitched, its attention darting forward beyond the veil of chaos. Bullets whizzed by her, entirely too close for comfort. Ricochets sparked off the steel frame burning behind her, only a few meters away downwind. The diamond visored guardian quickly took her in its arms, shielding her from the impending onslaught. Fourteen seconds had passed since she confirmed T3's status. She heard bullets crash into its ceramic plated armor. She heard a call, a cry, a shout from beside her, someone from the other team.

"HEADHUNTERS!"

The radical terrorist front whose pride and dream was to slaughter every executive class citizen they could find, had indeed found them. Found her. Their ideals were bloodied enough, they cared not for bystander casualties. All that served the executive would die with the executive. The warning shout of whatever medic announced their arrival punched through the air like a chapter marker in her life. "Sh- Jan- Phalanx-" She struggled out. The guardian chirped, its visor flashing as all the support droids not actively carrying or keeping someone alive without assistance halted their tasks, forming beyond them in a wall of steel. They weren't armored, any protection incidental from their metallic-composite construction. Most had barely moved closer to their newest front before heavy gunfire cut many of them to pieces. Five seconds had passed since January issued the command for defense. It pushed her back, keeping her close and guarded as it tried to gain distance. The ceramic fins at its waist deployed, and the shrill electronic whine of power sang into her ears atop the pervasive tinnitus. With a leap, January flew forward with its charge in its arms. Mid flight, time seemed to drag, to crawl. Flames licked at her backside, tempting her to join them in their freshly awakened Hell.

Through all her minds, through her cybernetic, through her adrenaline riddled senses and her flow state of disaster, she felt it. She heard it. Through the wall of smoke, she saw it.

A low tone, a deep rumble, a great spear dragged across time and space shook her perception. The death call of perception, a name spoken scarcely in whispers by its creator and mythical among myth. The thing that should not be, but the thing that

awoke. A lingering curse against the whole of mankind, a sworn oath drowned in blood of second chances burned.

The smoke drifting through the air stopped in her eye. It pushed it away like a reactive force that cast out anything that would hinder its purpose. She saw it. In stale reflections and mismatched shimmers. The shape, the form of a being whose arrival was scorn unto life.

The automaton whose purpose was to annihilate.

The machine whose existence was born from tears.

The weapon whose form was lightning stolen from the Gods.

The last GT.

LAROCHE ROBOTICS /// GT-X
D E C E M B E R

One second had passed since January's boots left the ground.

Red arlight rended the air, turning atmosphere into plasma as Something airborne opposed to January's flight cast lightning into the wave of murderers. Their cast-away equipment, scavenged and stolen loot from successes on past was torn asunder by the inconel rod hurdling through the air at hypersonic speeds. January's boots met the ground at the same time the Unyielding Force's did. The cloaking field that once shrouded it faded away, its Vantablack coated armor murdering all light that dared touch it. All that remained, the heat roiling from its accelerating nuclear core and out from micromesh vents positioned across it, was its neon-lit visor, its searing glow antithetical to the black armor that shielded its body. With a high scream, the rail-launcher on its shoulder recoiled, motors and wheels recalling the electrified fiber wire spooled out from inside. In two seconds, its lightning rod returned to its hand with a deep breathy clang. In an instant, in a blink, it was gone. The Machine launched forward into the depths of the fray as weapons fire continued to chip away at the medical convoy's still-forming position.

She heard screaming, she heard explosives, she heard the rip of thunder and saw the crack of lightning as a suicide drone was banished from the sky. The tone of screams was different from the constant din of panicked civilians. It was sharper, as though it was snatched from lungs. It was the sound of men who believed themselves predators realizing far too late that they had become prey in an instant. The air cracked again, a second bolt of red arlight tearing across the street. The armored vehicle caught in its path spewed molten metal from the freshly melted hole on both

its sides. January continued to carry her along, Nyx's mind left fried from the Armageddon unfolding ahead. A rocket flew through the air towards the Will Given Form, only for the Form to cease to exist in that space. The man carrying the launcher's head ceased to be as the white and red fire trailed the Machine, its fist going straight through him. The spear screamed again.

She felt the echo of that psychic darkness, the one she had only escaped from mere minutes ago, rising and taking her like a tide. That desecrated face she wore in her worst nightmares staring into her through a mirror.

It spoke again. It impressed upon her truest thoughts, the ones her other minds knew but denied. Through the agony and ash, through the carnage of total war erupting in a day, through the destroyed lives of those who hoped for tomorrow, she knew it. Against the thoughts of mankind's nature being good, against her desperate pleas to gods that were slain long ago, against her own carvings of her mind and morality, she knew it.

She. Knew. It.

Judgement arrived.

Hino exhaled once, slow and controlled. The tension fell from her shoulders as the corner of her HUD signed the completion of her contract. The force beneath her was scattered and torn to the wind, the survivors collecting who they could and turning tail. She crouched on the lip of a shattered rooftop, the city burning beneath her in a patchwork of orange and black. Smoke curled upwards in thick, roiling columns. Sirens wailed, electric voices never tiring. Somewhere in the distance, a building groaned as it folded in on itself. She was about to begin lining up her next contract, but her feed was just reduced to a graveyard of static. She flicked through channels, listening out for anything. Nothing, from no one. Her focus was torn from her as an explosion rang out from the street beyond. Nine, ten blocks ahead, a plume of fire ripped upwards like a bomb finding its mark. She narrowed her eyes, attempting to zoom in towards the source, but could see nothing. Against better judgement, she sent another zipline across a rooftop and began closing the distance towards the source of the detonation.

The frigid winter skyline bit at her armor, the hard plating stopping most of its purchase but still letting it snake through in joints and gaps. Her helmet's visor ran continual scans, ensuring she wouldn't crash into a hostile force, or any force at all preferably. Three, four, five rooftops flew under her, hop after hop. The differential in heights required her to keep thorough track of her momentum, hitting the brakes and skidding across roofs before launching a line far upward and keeping her forward vector as she ascended in altitude. Once atop the tallest building in the grid, she scanned ahead again, having marked the estimated direction the explosion came from.

The sight before her was decimation, a hapless convoy that looked far too civilian, overturned and seemingly overrun. She zoomed in again, trying to get an ID on the victims. Fires and embers poured and flicked across the ground, survivors pulling each other out from the carnage as she continued to scan.

Her blood turned to ice, and her stomach dropped out from under her.

There were colors. There were uniforms. There was a great ensign marked across the side of one of the overturned heavy ambulances.

Leroux Medical.

"Nyx-" She interjected her own thoughts, speaking aloud for the first time in ages. Almost on instinct, she fired her zipline launcher into the roof beside her, its barbed ends sinking past the composite rooftop and attaching itself to something far beneath. In a leap, she swung down the glass sides of the building and kicked herself from it- A disconnect and another fiberwire driven into her landing spot. She kept her pace. Hino hit the next rooftop at a sprint, gravel scattering under her boots as she vaulted a collapsed HVAC unit. The city below was a burning maze, but she'd mapped enough of it in her head to keep moving without hesitation. The Leroux Medical convoy was only a few blocks ahead now. Limping, scattered, but still moving. Her visor flickered with static again. She ignored it. Her sole focus was currently pulling bodies from wreckage.

By the time she crossed to the next building, her eyes caught down low. Another scattered entourage, though unified and tracking a bead towards the wounded convoy. She zoomed in, tracking IDs. She sucked air through her teeth, recognizing the bloodied skull patch as the Headhunters, and leveled her rifle again. She didn't need a contract, or any further idea. She knew what they did, and she knew who they were coming for. Trigger presses sent rounds downrange, picking off the rear line like a turkey shoot- The ones ahead having no idea they were losing numbers. Before she popped the fourth one like a cherry, something ripped the field apart. A flash of light that her optics scarcely had time to compensate for tore a squad apart, before going again, and again, and again. The source was from the midst of Nyx's team, a haphazard defensive position against an impending onslaught.

"What... Is- Oh my God..." She realized. She knew. Nyx had shown her, told her once. Her revenant protector, her secret weapon she did not want. She knew the conditions it had to reach to come to use.

She had never actually seen it happen. The sight ahead of her was awe-inspiring, but her thoughts were caught on another line. Though not by her hand, Nyx was in a position where she was the cause of untold death, something Hino knew would eat the woman alive in no time. Everything was going sideways, the airspace both physical and digital was a catastrophe, and reinforcements, backup, or evac were all but hopes and dreams dashed against a rocky shore.

"I'm comin' girl- Just hang on-" She murmured to herself.

Icons on the display winked out in waves. At first it looked like mass death, but the rate and waves in which they vanished said something else. He stepped around, looking to other monitors to check for faults. Sure enough, they were telling similar stories. Entire sections of the city blacking out one by one. The operators all tried to cut through it, changing frequencies, sending out signals to other airborne stations to confirm, but all to no avail. Nix had not yet spoken, but they had begun to change to color vision, relying on the high powered cameras positioned solely on their own aircraft. The sky beneath them was blanketed with aftershocks. Air power had fallen away, the sun sinking beneath the horizon as the fire-lit sky gave way to the ground below.

He placed his fingers to his earpiece again. "Break break break this is SkyEye 1, I need any and all friendly aircraft to give me a sitrep. Comms to ground have failed and we're flying over a graveyard."

A moment passed before a static-y voice came through. "Talon 2 to SkyEye 1, visuals above the flight deck indicate exoatmospheric debris clouding the waves."

"Say again?" Nix spoke to the responding aircraft.

"By my eye it looks like ASATs have been deployed- There's debris scattering across space and it sure looks like anti-satellite weaponry."

Nix took a breath, steadying himself. "Thank you Talon 2." He put his hand down, recomposing himself. His sister along with the entire battlefield had vanished. He steadied his breathing, clenching a fist in front of his face.

"Oi." A voice punched through his thoughts, along with a hand on his shoulder. Austin stood beside him, snow white hair and beard illuminated by the dim glow surrounding them. "Y'worried 'bout her aren't ya?"

"Very." Nix said, words terse.

Austin Mason, LaRoche Robotics octogenarian Chief of Security stood beside his boss, some thirty years his junior. His New Zealand accent and natural tone of voice did well to ease most situations, but the one they all stood in- Or above- Was dire. "Keep y'head on straight. We still got eyes, and our flightline just rotated back from a refuel so we got an hour plus of airtime."

Nix nodded, steadying himself once more.

"Right-" Austin looked up, speaking louder and clearer to the rest of the cabin. "Stay on IR and visible light- Use smoke plumes to track activity and movement."

All at once, he was back. Nix straightened himself out and spoke to his crew and across comms. "Interceptor craft, flight leads, designate quadrants and sectors across the sky. Burn fuel and mark smoke trails in the sky. Drop speed, tighten corners. City blocks that are lost and burning, smoke an X. High activity, active fighting, a single straight line. We can't talk to ground and ground can't talk to us, but we're still visible."

Austin smiled, glad to see his boss back in his stride. "E-War, stay spaced out across the ground. Match frequencies to SQUAWK 1276, we'll try and wire up something to get comms back to the ground. Over and out."

All at once, the deck's din resumed with renewed fervor. They had their charge, and they had a plan. Nix gave a haggard smile towards Austin. "Thanks old man."

"Eh, 's nothin'. Someone's gotta stay upright while you're out here takin' bullets."

The goat snickered, returning his focus to the display beside him and taking control. He followed closely, scanning the area where Nyx's convoy lost contact. He could see the red streaks ripping the ground apart. His work, was at work. He put his fist to his mouth, unblinking as his mind began to dwell on what that meant. On what it meant to **her**.