

CHILDREN OF SORROW

She laid across the back of a medical bed, her torso bare save for her bra as the attending nurses treated her wounds. She patched herself up in the field, along with the help given to her by January and the others. She'd received three gunshots, two in her arm and one in her lower side. Along that was a litany of shrapnel damage and various cuts and bruises. Her armored coat did well at stopping everything from turning lethal, but aramid weave could only do so much. She closed her eyes and took a breath, letting the dull sensation of the painkillers drape over her. A few moments passed, feeling the faint pressure of wounds being stitched shut. She opened her eyes and let her head fall lazily to the side. Beside her, receiving much the same treatment, was Yan. A tired smile barely crossed her lips, her chest rising and falling with her breath.

He was on his chest, most of the wounds he received across his back. His eyes were shut too, until he felt something touch his hand. They opened, to see the woman he'd fought and nearly died with over the longest night of his life. He returned the look and the gesture, both of their hands tangling up in each other, never saying a word. Nyx had specifically requested one Yan Hayamoto, Pararescue Operator I, to stay at her side throughout both of their treatments. It wasn't a clinging to romanticism, more like a blood-forged bond they had both made. Even then, Nyx knew full well how bad it was to isolate recently discharged or wounded veterans from each other. Trauma bonding was a very real thing, and the odds were high they would both get in their own heads over everything that happened to them. Instead, she chose to stay close. With both their beds so close to each other, such a small gesture wasn't difficult.

Just under an hour had passed, and the attending nurses and Autodocs finished their work, leaving them both be. Of course, without even requesting it, one of the androids brought Nyx her dataslate, knowing her proclivity to work at all times she was conscious. She pressed the buttons at the side and raised her bed up, already tired of laying flat. She tapped away at her slate, before looking to Yan again. His eyes were fixed on the TV mounted high against the wall, fixated on some show about car mods. Hearing the sound of her bed rise up, he rolled his head across his pillow, looking at her.

"Feeling okay?" His voice was flat and calm, sounding almost like it did when they had all holed up in the empty storeroom.

“*Oui, mieux,*” She responded, voice soft and dark as she tapped away at her pad without looking. “You?”

“Pretty sore but... Eh, just feels like I worked too hard,” he chuffed.

She giggled lightly, watching what he was watching for just a moment. “I’ll never be able to say it enough, but, th-”

“Ah- Nope. Team effort, I wasn’t gonna leave you and I know you weren’t gonna leave me,” He said, already taking the valiant position.

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Oh shut up, I’ll say it anyway. Thank you Yan. For keeping me alive and keeping me from going insane.”

He feigned a groan of annoyance before it faded into a chuckle, “Hey, if you would’ve told me a year ago- Hell, a *week* ago that I’d be fighting for my life with my boss’ boss’ boss’ boss, owner of the company, and signatory of all my paychecks in a blown out winter hellscape of urban warfare... I would’ve been trying to think of what action movie you were ripping off.”

She smiled, rolling her head back forward, sitting in silence for a few more moments. Her foremost mind began to wander, thinking of the past, present, and future. Her idle smile faded away as she finally began to catalogue her thoughts. She let her eyes drift close, focusing her mind just a bit better. The faint light coming through her eyelids began to fade at the edges, like an induced sleep was overtaking her before it was all black.

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She floated along on her back, feeling a thick warmth encompass the edges of her body. Her eyes opened, facing into an eternal void just barely tinged with dull red warmth. It was the dark place at the very base of her mind, that place where It rested. She leaned up from the ichor bathing her, the thick black blood-like liquid falling away from her. Her lungs vacated, breathing out the breath she held for seeming eons. Taking in her surroundings was pointless, knowing there was nothing to be seen.

Even still, what she was looking for, she felt pressed to her back.

She felt another back much like her own resting against her, the two of them using each other as support as they sat up in the endless void. She didn’t look back, barely casting a glance rearward.

“...We lived.”

“ ”
...

“I would have expected some modicum of satisfaction with that.”

“ ... ”

Nyx never ‘spoke’ to her minds- It didn’t work like that. It wasn’t a gathering of consciences forming coalitions and taking votes on what the Primary should do, they were just *her*. There would be no differing opinions, or renegade options. The way her mind was divided, The Self, The Personage, The Waking Mind, and... The Other.

The unity of all things, her self through all her life.

The part of her that loved, that cried, that would give it all away to save another.

The internal calculator, the Nobel Prize winner, the section that unraveled genetic material like it was a moderately challenging puzzle.

The Multithreaded Mind project was far from aimless, but attempting to neatly isolate and cordon off certain aspects of herself was beyond their capabilities, even now. It was best to let it form by itself, to let the traits emerge on their own. For all intents and purposes, it was a roaring success. The first few months were difficult, trying to isolate and interpret the simultaneous trains of thought from each other, to utilize it all to its fullest potential. The first true outing in which she experienced this new unity was on the tricked out motorcycle Nix had bought her for stress relief. She really did try and take it easy, her first outing on two wheels in so long, but once she realized how many actions she was making per second, every millisecond correction, every shift done perfectly, every imperfect patch of road dodged, every escape route from pursuing law enforcement thought through with tactical precision... At the end of the night, she realized exactly how much it had done for her. Without it, she would have been dead ten times over at minimum.

The fourth mind didn’t emerge until her ride home.

A dark whisper in the back of her mind as she stopped for fuel.

It made her put the nozzle back into the dispenser quickly, and reignite the engine’s four cylinder fury.

It said left.

Someone was walking out from the right, against the dark edge of the fuel dispenser at the end of the dimly lit concrete pad. She wasted no time, broke the rear wheel loose and spun in place, leaving the lot in six seconds after she put the nozzle back into the holster. She had no idea who or what was lurking out from the darkness, but that new voice could not be ignored under any circumstance.

That Other voice.

The Other.

Survival instinct. The primordial mind, whose only purpose was to survive. The drive to fight, to claw, to kick, to scream. To burn in rage against the warring void of death. It was a voice every living being had, one created long before the ruination that was consciousness ever took shape. Every twitch, every flinch, every spiked heartrate. It was there. It always was, and it always will be. Normally resigned to sleeping in the darkest corner of the mind, only emerging in times of emergency, now... Now it had an equal seat at the table.

Now it took a more formal form, less a reactive feeling, more like intrinsic knowledge. Most would be familiar with it as the 'gut feeling'.

The warmth around her felt like a beating heart, like the pulse of reality enveloping around her. Nyx felt it ripple through the ichor and into her spine, like a dull reminder that here she would not receive a nightmare, nor a sentence of judgement, but a call. A deep seated thought that was always there, and that this place was the most base level representation of her being. It was dark, and it was drowning. She felt her throat tighten. She swallowed, regardless of the fact she didn't need to here. Her voice came out small, almost embarrassed by its own presence in the eternity.

"...I know what you want from me. What you want me to say," She murmured into the red tinged nothing. She barely turned her head back as if to look at It.

"..." It didn't answer, nor move, nor breathe.

She exhaled shakily. "I stood firm, never breaking despite how close I may have come. I... Saved who I could, and did everything I could do."

Silence.

Her jaw clenched. "I did..." She felt her own hands clawing into her legs, only now realizing she was about to draw blood. She lifted a hand up, staring at the black liquid as it dripped from her fingers like heavy ink. "I- Made a promise. To myself, and to everyone that... Everyone. I wasn't going to be another person to deal their own judgement of life and death. Never again." She felt her voice tremble, like the words had never felt less certain to her before than they did right now. "*Never...*"

She felt the weight at her back shift forward, the quiet sloshing sounds echoing into oblivion as she watched.

She watched it walk from behind her. Its hooves sank into the black halfway up her shin.

It was bloodied. It was brutal. It was missing a hand. An eye. Its horns.

She saw half of her own skull.

It held out its hand to her, as if to pick her up.

She felt her heartrate quicken, picking up like an ensuing panic attack as It stood before her. She didn't *want* to look up, to look it in the eye.

Into that void that held nothing, save for a deep, pinprick of red. A pupil made from a single ember, staring straight through her.

"I- I- I thought it meant something- I thought- That I should be the shining example, to lead others on from myself and to help themselves." Her words began to crack along with her voice. She looked at her own hands, nearly clutching them to her face in fear before she focused on that hand again. Just as she did, it firmly took one of hers in it. It wasn't harsh, nor was it forced. It was a firm command. It felt like metaphor standing before her, that if she doesn't help herself, then she could never help anyone else. "I needed to be better- If I let it slip then- Then- Then how am I any better than them? Than the killers that roam the streets and do what they please?"

She felt The Other's grip tighten just slightly.

Nyx clamped her eyes shut. "I have so many things to do... To solve... To be that shining light in the dark that will..."

She heard more steps, others sloshing through the dark. She looked up, back between them all to see. The Waking Mind, and The Personage both stood before her. Her kinder self knelt down behind her and wrapped its arms around her back, like it was half hugging her, while also trying to lift her up. “-That will save everything,” It spoke, finishing her words.

The Waking Mind took Nyx’s other hand. Together with The Other, they all lifted her up to her hooves, Nyx now coming eye to eye with the emaciated thing that was her most primal instinct. Into its eyes, it was not anger or malice. No hidden urge to murder and damn all who fought against her, and no anger at Nyx’s thoughts of saintlike salvation. It was simply resolute, as though it had long known what she had denied for so long.

Nyx’s hooves sank into the ichor as they lifted her, the black liquid clinging to her legs like the weight of every failure in her life, only to be severed from it by the combined might of her entire mind, body and soul. She stood trembling, knees shaking and her hands doing the same. “I... I wanted to be better,” She whispered, voice cracking like thin sheets of ice. “If I wasn’t- Then what’s left? What’s-?” She stopped, staring at the three other aspects before her. Her question was answered. She would still be kind, she would still be wise, and most of all, she would not let another fall from lack of action ever again. She would love, live, and fight for everything that was left, no matter how small it may be. “January... Susanne... Kara...” She clenched her eyes shut.

She felt the arms around her back tighten, as though steadying her with a firm hug.

“...what good did it do them? My ego, my naivety, my... My only promise to myself...” She spoke just above a whisper. Tears fell from her eyes.

“...it isn’t saving anyone...”

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Dahlia leaned against a data console, watching the setup process for a new genetic template designed to better integrate an ocular implant into the central nerve. She watched as the reams of code flew by, eyes barely flicking about as she checked over the outputs as fast as they were generated. Past her focus of vision,

she caught a reflection in the black space in the monitor. She glanced behind her to the white coated doctor.

“Doctor?”

Nyx looked up from her slate, barely startled as if she had forgotten she was not alone. “Ah- Yes, Miss Chambers?”

“Are you feeling alright?”

Nyx craned her head just a bit, furrowing her brow. “I- Of course, did something look wrong?”

Dahlia gestured a bit at her own face, fully turning around to face the goat woman. “You have this distant look on your face, like you’re staring through everything.”

She almost looked like she didn’t believe her, looking at her own reflection in the now darkened screen of her dataslate like she was trying to prove Dahlia wrong.

“Doctor Leroux, you were just at the front lines of an all out ground war, only to have to fight for your life to escape it. I would be concerned if you *didn’t* suffer some kind of long lasting effect from it.” She leaned back against the edge of the terminal’s control stack, giving her full attention now. Her long ponytail was draped across her shoulder, resting over the yellow accented black uniform technical shirt provided to Leroux Medical engineers. They were both alone in the room, working together separately. Over the months of Dahlia’s tenure abandoning Ultratech and working at Leroux, she’d grown very close to working with Nyx personally. It seemed like such a rarity in her life that she finally found someone that she could learn from.

“It’s alright Dahlia, I’ve been through worse,” Nyx dismissed.

“Just because you’ve been through worse doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to take a moment. I hope you don’t mind me being pushy about it, but I get the feeling you’re quite burdened by your mind right now.” She held her hand out, like she was beckoning her to speak. “Please, I’m more than willing to speak about anything you have to say.”

Nyx took a moment, glancing to her side before giving in. She sighed and set her slate behind her. “I assume that you know what happened, right?”

“I do, I read through both your and Yan Hayamoto’s debriefs once you returned. It was... Quite a harrowing experience.”

Nyx nodded silently a few times. “All I can think of is the actions I didn’t take... Every mistake, big or small... And the lives lost because of it. Kara and

Susanne... The world was never kind to caretakers, but now it feels like it's making a point to crush us into dust."

Dahlia pursed her lips for a moment, thinking of a response. She glanced down to the floor and spoke. "You still carry yourself like a protected medic, no? That you will never carry a lethal weapon, nor take a life ever again?"

Nyx nodded.

"And you feel like the universe is taunting you because of that?"

"There's already been so many times where I feel like... I've already broken that promise, just by proxy. Sure, I may not be the one to pull the trigger, but what difference does it make if I'm the one to issue the command?"

"What, you mean ordering someone to kill?"

"Well- Not explicitly. Nowhere in Leroux Medical's equipment is there a provision for a lethal weapon, and January... Made an explicit point to *not* use lethal force, at the cost of its own life."

Dahlia paused, reading between the lines of Nyx's words and drawing interest in the gaps left between. "But... You're saying that like something did."

Nyx looked up to her, first staring at her above her glasses before raising her head up just a bit more. She didn't speak immediately. She folded her arms across her chest, gaze falling back down to her hand. "There were moments, moments where a simple action would have saved someone. Someone whose life should have... Should have gone on, who would make the world a better place for us all."

"...It's eating you alive, isn't it? That thought?"

Nyx nodded.

Dahlia took a step, a few catlike steps that were eerily quiet against the calm din of the machines and computers around them. "Nyx... You are one of the smartest people alive, and despite all that the world has done to destroy you, one of the kindest. You've been a dove trapped in a hurricane that has nearly been swept away countless times." She was close to her now, less than a foot from her face.

Nyx tilted her muzzle upward, staring into the icy blue of Dahlia's illuminated eyes.

"But you'd want nothing less than to stop the storm, to quell the destruction and annihilation of everything caused by our own misdeeds," The redhead took Nyx's hands in hers, holding them together between both their chests, their hearts. "You are no monster, and you never will be. Monsters are the ones who would see no other way than bloodshed. They choose it willingly, eagerly each time. They've

never been backed into a corner, never forced to make a hard decision. They've only ever decided the fate of others as it best suits them."

She looked down, almost in shame before Dahlia beckoned her face back up.

"It's been a few months since I worked under your tenure Nyx... But I already know you well enough to know that you're never going to feel like you're doing enough. But I need you to know-" She said, keeping her hands held together. "I'm with you every step of the way."