

DARKAGE

Her mind whispered, giving her scarce thoughts, dull feelings, creeping realizations. The blurry haze that made up the remnants of her dreams thrummed quietly in the back of her head. Her eyelids flickered, the thick, primordial soup of consciousness still stuck to the edges. The pulse was still there. The foil cocoon trapped their warmth while January's dwindling flywheel generator whirred silently, maintaining their warmth. Through the haze of her fresh wake, she amplified what little light hit her cybernetic and looked ahead. Through the unfocused fog, she saw two, bright, pinpricks. She blinked a few times, clearing the sleep from her eyes to fully see it. It was a rat. A single, fat, city-dwelling rat. It was munching on some remnant on the floor, its grabby little hands fussing with it as it munched away. She barely adjusted her neck, righting her head before she spooked it, scurrying away quickly out of sight, out through the doorway into the store. It was barely cracked open, a decision she had made upon their entry to try and dissuade further investigation. A closed door might imply there was still space not picked clean, while an open one all but confirmed there was no loot to be had.

She smiled faintly, barely amused at the sight of the city's wildlife carrying on as if nothing happened. Her eyes began to fall back shut, the creeping warmth of sleep pleading for her return. She breathed out, resting her head against their cardboard and paper bedding, resigning herself to a few more hours of rest. Just barely at the corners of her ears in the dead quiet, she could barely hear the rat's feet skittering across the tile floor. The skittering quickened instantly, scrambling away again before she heard much louder shuffling, followed by a sickening crunch and a shrill squeak. Her eyes bolted open, flicking out towards the door, towards the source of the sound.

The wet, sopping sound of flesh and bone being quietly ripped apart came in through the crack in the door. Sickening sounds of something being eaten, of a predator catching its meal. Was it a dog? A stray or a pet that broke free and started wandering the lull in the concrete jungle, scavenging for food? As she thought, the sound of teeth

cracking bone dwindled, and ended with something licking its chops. The sound almost triggered a primal fear in her, something hardcoded into all of humanity tens of thousands of years ago. She scarcely moved, knowing the foil cocooning them would crinkle and sound out through the entire building at the slightest motion. Her eyes kept on the door, turning her head just barely. January was doing the same, still active, still keeping watch. The door just barely budged open, a sniffing black nose nudging its way in. Its long, narrow snout cleared the rest of the door, its black eyes catching the faintest bits of reflection as it entered their room. The moment it caught sight of the room's contents, it too, froze.

They both stared, the coyote, and Nyx. It didn't seem to register January's non-human appearance, but one thing most certainly did.

Blood.

They had all taken injuries over their tourney, and the coyote could smell it. It peaked its nose up just slightly, taking in the air without moving its paws. Its ears flicked, nosing ever closer towards Yan, closest to the doorway. Her muscles tightened, ready to fight it in an instant, but still not wanting to startle it and make things worse. It leaned back, keeping its eyes locked on Nyx. Once, only once, it licked its chops again with a wet shlop sound. It carefully took one step back, then another, then another, before it left the doorway, just barely pushed open from its curious entry. She breathed out, shoulders relaxing as she heard its pawsteps click away quietly on the tile. It weighed its risks and rewards, and decided it wasn't worth it. She didn't let her eyes fall back shut, the encounter still chilling within her as something to not turn her back on. Moments slipped by with nothing happening, like the two were testing each other to see who would make a move first, before she heard the canid's steps grow further and further away. She relaxed, finally resigning herself to her return to sleep. Her head began to drift on its own, slipping back against the wall in a struggle for an ounce more of comfort.

Her third attempt at rest was stolen from her when she heard the sound of a suppressed gunshot, and the yelp of the dog hitting the ground. The threat had changed, and it was infinitely more dangerous. She flinched, hand snatching to her holster. The foil cracked like thunder under the hasty motion, and January's visor light returned, barely, only

for a moment. A single dim pulse to let her know it was alert and ready. Beside her, Susanne jolted, startled awake by the sudden harsh sound. Nyx heard her gasp, before she shushed her as quietly as possible. Carefully, she lifted her cover as delicately as possible, faint foil crinkles reaching outward into the rest of the room as she prayed that was as far as the sound got. She slipped from beneath it, getting to her hooves with her gun in one hand. January stayed still, buried deep in the center of it. Any movement it tried to make to escape it would jeopardize all of them and it knew that all too well.

Susanne stared upward at Nyx in the dimmest light possible above total darkness, seeing a thin slit of moonlight coming from the door and laying itself across Nyx's face. Her pupils were constricted, shoulders tight. Carefully, she leaned down to gently jostle Yan's shoulder. For a few long moments, nothing. He seemed to be quite the heavy sleeper. Continuing her rustling, she finally got him to wake.

"Wh... Mmf-" He grumbled.

Nyx responded with another whispered shush, pressing her finger to her lips. She held her breath as Yan blinked blearily up at her, confusion still fogging his face. She leaned down closer to him to try and drive the gesture home further before he made a critical mistake. He froze, the last remnants of sleep evaporating from his face as he registered her expression. The room was silent. The wind outside even seemed to hold its breath.

A soft mechanical click pierced the room. A tiny, precise adjustment of a high power servo making an action. Susanne's breathing quickened. She clutched her hands against her chest beneath the blanket, eyes darting toward the door. Nyx reached out, steadying her as she placed her hand on her shoulder.

"Stay calm... Don't move..." She whispered. She could feel her trembles through her arm, her nerves run raw from the events taking place.

Another sound, a soft deliberate step onto the tile. Not human, and certainly not human sized. Nyx's heart hammered from inside her chest. A faint red glow pulsed across the crack in the door- A scan, a lightspeed measurement that may have just snatched them all in its grasp.

“UNNNNNNIDENTIFIED HEAT SIGNATURES DETEC- TEC- TECTED. DROP YOUR WEAPON. STTTTTAND. EXIT- THE BUILDING. HANDS VISIBLE,” It spoke with broken, machine-like doom. Whatever it was had taken some amount of damage in the conflict, and likely wasn’t operating properly. “DROP- DROP- DROP-” It repeated again.

Susanne flinched, a tiny jerk of her shoulders and a small gasp. It was the instinctual response of someone waking from a nightmare.

The drone saw it.

Nyx heard a heavier sound, something large pivoting in place, before it stopped. Susanne leaned forward, clutching the mylar to her chest and rising up.

“Sus-!” Nyx tried.

The heat signature made by the flare of the space blanket surged against her own vision, the optic suite still enabled by her eye. The movement of her cover flashed up in a great orange wall, swathing all definition in obscurity for little more than a moment.

“UNKNOWN THREAT ENGAGING.” It thundered.

With a trio of heavy thumps, the concrete cracked through, bullets piercing straight through it and the mylar, the holes punched through it by the rounds and the shrapnel from the wall making deafening thunderclaps inside the confined room.

Susanne whimpered, a choked breath forced out of her.

She fell to the floor, her hand clutched to her chest with the blanket still wrapped around her.

Nyx’s blood turned to ice in an instant, her eyes bolting wide as she watched in abject horror. Her shoulders heaved, her breath heavy. Beside her having not even stood yet, Yan, stared with the same disbelief. The second felt like years, before Nyx’s hands clenched hard enough to crush steel. The Other spoke in her hindbrain.

It demanded an act.

Her breath hitched. A sharp, broken sound she didn’t recognize as her own. Her hands shook, sheer violence within and without trying to rip her apart at the seams. She stared at Susanne’s body, the blanket still curled in her fingers and blood pooling beneath her.

Her throat tightened.

Her vision tunneled, like the world collapsed in on her. Her heart felt like it was trying to claw its way out of her chest. She wanted to scream, to sob, to tear the machine apart with her bare hands, to rip out its wiring with her own teeth. She wanted to hold Susanne in her arms, to cradle her, to beg her to stay. She wanted to run. To fight. To die.

To kill.

It gave her an order, refusing ignorance.

END IT.

Nyx's lungs tear open with the scream. The raw, shredded sound of her vocal cords ripping the errant stillness of the night to pieces.

"DECEMBERRRRR!!!"

She bolted forward, crashing her forearm into the barely opened door and smashing it against the wall with a thunderous crack. Her pistol was fully extended, shot after shot after shot flying from it and striking the enforcer bot's armor.

The room they stood in flared with heat. One instant ticked by. The room was bathed in red. The fur on Nyx's body stood up from static, and her ears prickled with a low thrum, the sound of the Machine God enacting its task. The enforcer had barely even turned to her before a blinding streak of light shot straight through it. With a sharp recoil, Nyx's Wraith snatched itself forward past her, casting her hair and coat backward from the boiling breeze of jetfire as it used the recall of its spear to drag itself into the target. Its black metal boots crashed into the armor plating like a truck into a wall. With a swift jerk, it ripped its spear upward and split its enemy in half in a strike of superheated metal.

Nyx watched as time was dragged into a crawl again. Her gun fell from her hand, twisting herself backward to quickly rush back inside the room, her knee skidding across the floor as she landed beside Susanne. Yan had picked her up into his arms, January slicing the blanket loose from her to treat her wounds as fast as it could manage. She coughed, blood rupturing from her mouth as her eyes lazily drifted towards Nyx.

"Susanne- Susanne it's okay- We're safe now it's okay. You're gonna be okay- We're not gonna... Not gonna let-" Her eyes filled with tears and her

words struggled to form. January was working as fast as it could, precise and dexterous as could be despite the damage. Even the android seemed to push past its damage and save the bloodied girl. Nyx cradled her head in her arms, a tear falling free from her face as Susanne's eyelids flickered shut. *"Don't- Don't go to sleep. Susanne- Listen to me Sus' don't-"*

Her words dwindled to a choking whisper.

"Don't go... Don't go..."

Yan was quiet, still cradling her body in his arms as tears fell down his cheeks, the stinging cold drifting in numbed by his own grief. He sniffled, clenching his eyes shut. January slowly stopped, taking its hands away from her as it ceased its treatment, a half spun ream of bandages still in its hands. Nyx's jaw trembled, her cheeks stained with sorrow as she fell forward, wrapping her arms around Susanne's bloodied body. She sobbed, a retched, wracking cry that ripped the breath from her lungs. Yan broke, a sob cracking through his cold as he leaned down as well, wrapping his arms around Nyx and Susanne, physically unable to speak or move.

Beside them, January observed, its visor a dim glow against the night. Its servos strained as it got to its feet, walking past the two and into the doorway. It stood, staring out into the destroyed path December had carved. The white and red medical droid's fists rested at its sides, staring directly into the space beside the annihilated chassis of the enforcer. It had no way of detecting the Vantablack Machine as it had already vanished, but it knew. It knew where it stood.

January stood, staring forward as if it were casting judgement itself. On to December, to Nyx's sole protector. To the thing that protected *only* Nyx.

If the cold, emotionless GT1 could feel hate in any moment, it did now.