

FREE TO DIE

Her breath fogged faintly in the frigid air as she stared down a quiet street. Snow drifted in heavy, lazy flakes, gathering in soft mounds atop wreckage and bodies alike. Her coat was pinned shut and her collar pulled high against the stray gusts that sliced through the district. The cold found every tear in her armor, every bruise, every cut- A second blade pressed into already open wounds. The bodies were disappearing beneath the growing blanket of white, reduced to barely visible shapes as nature turned the street into a morgue. No neon blues. No corporate purples. No warm orange glow from the skyline. Dusk had smothered the last of the daylight, and the blackout had finished the job. Only the occasional vehicle fire cast a flickering orange across the glass towers above, their shattered windows reflecting the carnage like silent spectators.

The fighting had dwindled, but the echoes remained, distant gunfire bouncing between the high-rises, the city acting as a funnel for every dying scream and ricochet. Still, she straightened her shoulders, letting out a breath that quickly turned to frost.

"Headcount..." She murmured, voice low enough not to disturb the fragile quiet. "Yan."

"Here," The medic whispered, leaned against a wall, breath hitching in the cold.

"Susanne."

"Here," Another answered meekly, clenching herself tightly through her coat to try and trap any warmth she could.

"Kara."

"He-" Kara's answer dissolved into a fit of coughing. She turned into her elbow, trying to muffle the sound, shoulders shaking as she fought the chemical burn still lingering in all their lungs.

"...January," She said with a lingering finality.

The guardian droid didn't speak. It knew better. Instead, its visor flickered weakly, a dim, white pulse aimed toward her. The light stuttered, the machine barely holding itself together. Its ceramic plating was gone,

shattered into gravel. Exposed servos steamed in the cold. One arm hung at a stiff, unnatural angle even for an android. Snow gathered in the cracks of its frame, melting instantly against the heat of its overtaxed systems.

She felt the plastic grip of her shock pistol dig into her palm, the less lethal weapon tucked away in the large recesses of her coat pocket along with her hands. It felt familiar, all of it, in a discordant fashion. She was cut off, nearly alone, and a hair's breadth from an unknown death at all times. Her minds swam with the stained images of earlier, when the light still shined through the city. From when Judgement tore the street apart all in her name. She swallowed hard, compartmentalizing the thoughts to deal with later. The snow continued to fall. Thicker. Heavier. The dampening powder that muffled everything, amplifying the silence to a haunting echo. The buildings swayed gently back and forth against the wind, glass and steel frames groaning quietly in the space between.

They sounded like sleeping beasts.

She listened for patterns, subtle rhythms of movement, the cadence of boots on concrete. Anything that might give her a warning.

Nothing.

She hated it. The cold, the dark, on their own or even together was nothing. Ordinarily such a scene would give her such serenity. The part that drove nails into her back was the silence. A city with millions of people, suddenly quiet as the grave.

There were others.

They were doing the same as her.

She shifted her weight, wincing as pain flared through her ribs. The cold had numbed the worst of it, but every breath still felt like a knife sliding between bones. She kept her face still, and her breath steady. The others didn't need to see her hurt.

"Yan..." She whispered. "How's Kara?"

"Stable... Mostly-" He murmured back. "She needs heat, and air. The gas tore her up."

She nodded once. "Keep her close to January. It should radiate some warmth to keep her stable."

January's visor flickered again. A weak, stuttering pulse as it made its position in the group better known. Its systems were failing, through the combination of sustained damage, exhausted power, and the biting cold making its joints stick. Its sentinel's watch was at risk of coming to an end.

Her grip tightened on her pistol. They needed shelter. They needed warmth. They needed to move. Everywhere she looked was a gamble, surrounded by unknowns. Every alley big enough to hide a patrol, every rooftop bearing a sniper. Every shadow obscuring a trap waiting to rip them apart. The unknown destroyed all trust in everything. A footstep could be another survivor. Or a scavenger. Or a merc. Or a Headhunter. Something that the GTX had already marked for death. It was like she felt a lingering presence breathing down her neck. She knew it was close, somewhere, like a predator tracing the edge of a firelight.

"Stay tight," she murmured. "No talking unless you have to. No lights unless I say. Yan, keep track of Susanne. Susanne, keep track of Kara. Kara, stay on January. January to me. Lock arms, hold hands if you have to. If we get separated... It'll just get worse."

Her survivors nodded, huddling closer together. Their fear was like a living thing. Sharp, metallic, contagious. She felt it pressing against her spine. Her lone cybernetic changed modes, switching to thermal overlay to better take the lead. The colors shifted from eternal black to a sea of blue, darker spots indicating colder, lighter oranges and reds meaning heat. They all stood out proudly against the creeping blues, but so would others. The survivors glowed faintly, Yan a trembling orange, Susanne a flickering yellow, Kara a weak ember clinging to January's side. January itself was a fractured constellation of heat signatures, its internals running hot while its limbs froze. The buildings were monoliths of deep navy. The snow was a shifting sea of pale blue. The street ahead was a tunnel of darkness broken only by the occasional dying fire, each one a brief flare of orange swallowed by the storm.

She swept her gaze across the street. Nothing. Bodies froze, engines frosted over, scavengers huddled in doorways. Cold crept in like the primordial death it always was, eagerly reminding this gathering of man that its comfort was temporary, that it could all vanish in an instant.

Her breath fogged again, drifting upward in a thin plume that vanished into the falling snow. She lowered her center of gravity, shifting her stance without thinking- Old habits sliding back into place like decades old muscle memory.

“Move,” She whispered.

The group shuffled forward, boots crunching softly in the snow. Every sound felt like an earthquake, every breath a beacon against the embers of moonlight cast down upon them. Every heartbeat felt like a timer. Nyx took point, keeping her weapon tucked tightly just inside her coat, ready to deploy in an instant but still stowed to not let her silhouette give her away. Their fragile chain lingered forth, the crunch of bootsteps and the quiet whine of damaged servos.

A gust of wind tore through the street, carrying with it a faint metallic rattle.

Yan froze. “Doc-”

Nyx raised a hand, the only sound of her silencing him the rustle of her fabric against her. The sound came again. Metal, concrete- A soft scrape, then nothing. Her overlay showed only cold. It was either debris shifting in the wind, or whatever caused it wasn't warm enough to register. Her pulse quickened.

“Keep moving,” she said.

They obeyed. The fires behind them dimmed, swallowed by the storm. They hugged themselves tight against the walls of the closest building, the eaves shielding the sidewalk from the falling snow. She scanned across the street again. She froze, snatching her fist up and putting it down, crouching down with the others following suit.

A shape. Faint. Orange. Moving. January's visor blacked out as it readied itself, prepared for any threat that may cross them. Nyx narrowed her eyes, adjusting the gain of her vision. There, at the far end of the street, half-hidden behind a collapsed bus. A cluster of heat signatures. She counted between four and five, their shapes blurred and melded together against the blur. They were all low, huddled. Odds were fair it was another group of survivors- A family cast out from their destroyed home, evicted by war to die in the street. It may have also been a

detached squadron from some now dead security team. Either way, they were alone, shivering, and twitchy.

She kept her gaze fixed. They weren't moving towards them, nor were they retreating. They just stared, like animals caught in their stare. The difference between predator and prey was destroyed in the haze. One of the blurs moved, shifting out from beneath the huddle, trying to peak out at them. They were seen. Her grip tightened, wrist shifting just barely from inside her coat. She reconciled that if she were to get a shot off first, to disable a threat before they could act, that would be it. The Thing That Followed Her would stay silent. The voice in the back of her mind would starve.

The figure stumbled, slipping on the ice in a stifled cry. Another grabbed them, steadying them. A third turned sharply, scanning around for anything that may have heard. Nyx's shoulders tightened. She kept her eyes pinned, one of them raising something. A weapon, a flashlight, or just a hand. The details of her thermal fuzzed out any detail, and switching to IR would shine a spotlight to anyone else using it. She had no choice but to assume it was a weapon. She felt the whispers of the mechanical heartbeat stalking her. She would give it one last try.

"Friendly!" She called out in a shouted whisper, raising her free hand up into the air. Cautiously, timidly they raised one in response. She continued walking, every step like she was feeling for a tripwire hidden in the white. The others followed her, almost tracing her footsteps in the snow. They crossed the street, the two lanes feeling like straddling a tightrope across a ravine. She crested the edge, seeing the rest of the group, the orange blurs now made out into human beings. Her overlay dimmed to a dull glow, as she took in their faces. Red, flushed from the cold, warning signs of frostbite creeping in against the eldest one's fingertips. Two men, one in his thirties, and the other in his early fifties, and two women. The eldest, a woman in her sixties or seventies was as bundled up as possible, swaddling the young girl who could have been no older than ten tight against her in the desperate hope to stay warm.

"...You a doctor?" The old man asked, stowing his hand back in his jacket. She couldn't see anyone's hands. Something in the back of her mind stirred.

"We are. I am Doctor Leroux and this is my team... The remnants of it." She spoke in a low murmur, still not wanting to disturb the silence.

The younger man's face twitched imperceptibly, the mention of her name registering with him.

"The hell you out here for?" The oldest said again, voice gritty against the cold.

"We were evacuating wounded," She said flatly. "Our convoy was hit by a roadside bomb... Then we were attacked by a rogue group. We're trying to reach a safe zone."

The old man snorted. "Ain't no safe zones left. Think we'd be out here dyin' in the god damn cold if there were?"

She nodded softly, not arguing. Between the silence, Nyx's ear flicked. She quickly put her hand up, stifling any further comments or sounds. At the far end of the street, a few blocks down, a squadron in black armor crept on. They were hunched, keeping low as they moved across the street. Nyx looked at January, locking eyes with its visor and making a few gestures, pointing to it with two fingers, then out towards the squad, then to her eye. The android nodded, knowing its task. Despite the damage sustained, its sensors still far outclassed Nyx's. It linked its cameras with her cybernetic and let her see what it saw as it hid low behind a snowbank, just barely peaking out to see. Through the frayed static, she could see a ragtag mismatch of equipment, no consistent colors and no clear order. Scavengers, emergent from the blackened ruins of the city. The story told by the diaspora of their gear made it clear as well, they held no qualms with killing to take what they wanted. She pressed her back against the snowbank, her team and the family doing the same against it and the upended bus. Their breath lingered, crystalline fog appearing and vanishing across the agonizing moments. They waited, the squadron pilfering the entrances of the buildings and unburying the recently deceased from their icy blankets for whatever they could find.

The ringing in her ears grew louder, the quiet beyond clamping down around her as her heartbeat rose.

The second of silence was broken, cracked in two by Kara falling into another coughing fit. Susanne tried to help her muffle it, but the girl's

spasms broke through. She buckled over, clutching her arms to her chest as she fought desperately for air. When a beam of light from the lurking scavengers flashed over the top of their snow mound, the younger man spoke, voice a sharp whisper.

“*Shut her up!*” He hissed.

Susanne tried her best, trying to soothe the girl in any way she could, to no avail.

“*I said- Shut her UP!*” He barked through broken words, lunging at her. She saw a glint in his hand.

Nyx pulled her pistol from her coat, just as Yan dove at the man. The medic shoved him back, sending him slipping again. January diverted its attention towards them, but the swiftness of the motion knocked something out of place, the bot locking up and falling into the snow. Yan intercepted Kara’s attacker, shoving him back. He slipped, flailing backwards onto the ice as he grabbed at anything he could. Kara’s coat, Susanne’s arm, the old woman’s sleeve.

The child screamed, and the older man shouted. The young one lunged forward again, clawing against the ice with a shiv pointed at Yan.

The tip, and his hand, were already drenched in blood.

She fired.

The crack of the shot split the night, an arc of electricity snapping across the snow and straight into his chest, convulsions gripping his body and sending him crashing to the ground. Time slid to a crawl, as if Nyx suddenly had time to see the flash of yellow light bounce from the head of the bus just before Kara fell to the ground. A gunshot. The top of the snowbank detonated in pops and steam as more shots followed behind. Yan was trapped, mid scream of blind fury as he drove his fist into the man’s head, prone and mid-convulsion on the asphalt. Every life was happening to her at once, so many fates crushing her instantly. Her stomach dropped.

Time snapped back into motion.

“DOWN!” She barked, voice cracking through the cold. The scavengers opened fire, the top of the snowbank erupting in a spray of ice as rounds tore through it. Shards of frozen slush stung her cheek. The family screamed. Susanne threw herself over Kara. Yan didn’t move-

Crashing his fist down into the convulsing man's skull again and again in a burst of blind fury. Nyx lunged forward, grabbing Yan by the collar and yanking him down just as a round snapped through the air where his head had been. "MOVE!" She snarled, dragging him behind the bus. He hit the ground hard, the breath knocked out of him.

The scavengers kept firing, rounds chewing through the snowbank, ricocheting off the bus frame, whizzing past her ears. The sound was deafening. Metal on metal, gunfire echoing between the buildings, the hiss of snow vaporizing under muzzle flash. January struggled to move, finally knocking itself back into place as it grabbed Susanne, diving forward to the other side of the bus with her wrapped in its arms. Nyx's breath came in sharp, controlled bursts. Her mind was split, one looking for angles, cover, firing arcs- The other looking out where Kara was.

She lay on her side, curled in on herself. Her arms were wrapped around her chest, blood seeping through and pooling on the ground where she lay.

Her coughing had stopped.

Nyx felt every muscle in her body ignite, and a voice in the back of her head spoke to her in a way that only she could hear.

It told her to do something she hadn't done in a third of a century.

She stood, uncrouching from behind the bus as time slowed to a crawl again. She clamped both hands to her pistol, steady as steel as she swung around to get a shot on the wave of fire. It was an impossible shot, especially with the onslaught of gunfire she just walked into. The air seemed to grow colder as soon as she stood.

She knew she didn't need to fire a single shot.

Sparks bounced off the space in front of her, hitting something that wasn't there moments ago. The Thing in front of her shimmered, the snow closest to it melting almost instantly. Before it fully coalesced, red arcs of power jumped from it, crawling across the air like veins of lightning.

Its weapon manifested from nothing just as the rest of it did, cracking with impossible voltage before a supernova bolt of lightning split the bank, the light, the city.

The world split open.

The blast hit the scavengers before their bullets could reach Nyx. The plasma ignited the air, and then them, in the same instant. Carbonized gore erupted outward in a blackened spray, the supporting scavengers thrown back, bodies nearly torn apart by the shockwave.

The night went white.

The snow turned to steam.

The street fell silent.

Nyx didn't flinch.

She didn't blink.

She didn't breathe.

The world was still ringing from the blast. Steam rose from the crater where the scavengers once stood, ash drifting down with the snow and settling on her coat like gray frost. Yan knelt over the man with his fists buried in the ground beside his head, no longer convulsing. Susanne scrambled forward to pick Kara up in her arms, shattered sobs and cries pouring out of her as she whispered her name like a prayer, cradling her head in her arms as she rocked back and forth.

She still held her pistol out level, as though she were ready to pull the trigger at a moment's notice. Her shoulders rose and fell, eyes unblinking. With the same shrill scream, The Machine's spear raced back to its launcher in an instant, the glow of its hellish visor the last thing visible before its chassis faded back into nothing again. She turned her head, just barely, eyes locking on to the family. The man that Yan had pummeled, the man that took Kara's life, lay on the ground, sickening gurgles and stunted breaths coming from his bloodied face. Her eyes never wavered from the rest of them, same as her pistol hung motionless in space.

She looked at Kara again. Her body lay lifeless, her blood covering Susanne's arms. The sobs were the only sound that stitched through the night.

"I wanna go home- I wanna go home- I wanna go home..." Susanne whispered.

—

They couldn't carry her, nor bury her. The fallowed ground of the city gave no ground soft enough to take her. They all moved in silence, the

weight of the night and day pressing heavy upon them. They were tired, beaten, and desperate to mourn. Each block passed them like another trap waiting to spring. They kept themselves alone, risking no more encounters with any other soul, friendly or not.

"N- Nyx..." Yan shivered. "We- Gotta find somewhere to hole up. I feel like my bones are about to snap every time I take a step."

The process in her minds gave her an advantage in times of restlessness, like one of them would take shifts in mental slumber. While one slept, the others kept her up. The same didn't hold true for her body. She was still flesh and bone, and no amount of higher thinking would stop the full body aches that persisted across her. "I know..." She said quietly, fatigue evident in her own voice. The snow slowed their already slow trek across the city, each block taking longer than the last as the accumulation climbed. She looked into a broken apart shop one street ahead, its windows already blown out and its contents picked clean. "We can see about setting up for the night in there- I'm sure there's a storeroom or office that could give us shelter."

Yan nodded, wasting no more energy than needed, not even on speech. They made their way inside, carefully stepping through the destroyed window frames. Nyx held her pistol close to her chest again, January at her side as Yan helped Susanne through. The sound of broken glass and debris crunched beneath their feet, the interior quiet. The marble furred woman nodded towards a door at the rear, January taking point. It quietly but quickly opened it, sensors feeding into Nyx's eye. Empty, half-destroyed. In the looting that took place after sunset in the beginning of the blackout, every bit of the place was ransacked and sucked dry. There was no food, and little protection than what the building alone gave. She stepped in behind it, pistol still drawn as if something was bound to jump out any second. Both her and January found nothing, and she relaxed. Finally.

Her shoulders dropped, and so did her pistol. She slipped it back into the holster against her side beneath her coat, quickly buttoning it back up so as to not let out any more heat than necessary. "In here." She beckoned the other two. They soon followed, stepping into the encroaching darkness. The temperature inside was still cold, but like any

building during a winter blackout. It was infinitely better than the polar conditions outside. "Jan- A little light, please."

The droid chirped, static floating beneath the sound. Its visor glowed, its white light fading to a less eyestrain inducing tone as it warmed from white to a dull orange.

"We could... Tear apart some of these boxes to try and make bedding." Yan said, crouching down and picking up a smashed box of styrofoam cups.

Nyx nodded, picking through as well for more material. "January, you still have space blankets right? Tape them together so we can use them for insulation while Yan and I work."

January kept their work lit while fashioning a larger mylar sheet from the emergency blankets kept within its stash of equipment. Its light flickered occasionally as the reminders of its damage continued. As the other two kept on, it glanced at Susanne. She was crouched, huddled against a wall with her knees to her chest. It stepped closer, crouching down beside her, servos groaning from stress. It had both the collective knowledge of every major iteration of GT, as well as a suite of medical care procedures for all situations. Including grief. It wrapped an arm around Susanne as she breathed quietly, carefully taking her into its care and giving her the little warmth its power core shed.

She didn't say anything, but her lip trembled. Her breathing struggled, her chest heaved, and she broke. Sobs rang out as she finally had a moment to grieve. She clutched her hands to her face to stop the stinging cold from finding her tears. Nyx and Yan both stopped for a moment, looking at her. Nyx closed her eyes for a few moments before letting out a heavy sigh. She took her arm full of broken down cardboard and began laying it along the floor and against the wall, layering them atop each other in an effort to give some kind of padding. Yan did the same, taking crumpled up lengths of packing material and discarded paper towels and fashioning them into something loosely resembling a pillow. They both made their collective bed, before helping Susanne over on to it, January already waiting with their thermal cover.

She laid with her back against the wall again, clutching herself tightly as the foil blanket crinkled over the top of her. Yan sat next to her,

seemingly taking over January's role as a comforter and heater. Nyx looked at January, before reaching down to another one of the pouches in its densely packed kit and popping it open, the metal latch pinging open and revealing its contents. Within its confines, red and white boxes of emergency food. A hyper dense, nutritionally loaded brick made of soybean paste, protein concentrate, and a mix of vitamins and other nutrients. Its main purpose was to stop starvation and to take up as little space as possible. She took out the boxes and opened them up, snickering lightly.

"Suddenly lamenting the fact January doesn't have enough room for an MRE..." She mused, crouching down and slipping beneath the foil, handing out the wax wrapped bricks to the other two. "It's just the three of us, so you can eat the whole thing." She said, munching down on it. It was firm, and its taste was notably devoid of any features whatsoever.

"...Chass' like sand," Yan said with his mouth full.

Nyx chuckled again, swallowing. "Hey- 'least it's vegan."

"Ohhh so THAT's why it tastes like sadness," He retorted.

Between them all, their source of heat, January shuffled around before emerging with another box Nyx didn't retrieve. It was more nutrient bricks, but this time in chocolate flavor.

"Ohhh man we're *royalty* now!" He said, quickly taking the box from the droid, sharing the rest with the girls.

"Easy- Two bars is half your daily calories. They're dense, but not that dense," She unwrapped hers and nibbled at it as if she didn't care what she just said. She looked to the bot beside her, questioning it. "Any other surprises you're keeping from me in there?"

January shook its head, visor still flickering with an amber glow.

She chuckled, resigning herself to the lightly flavored bar. It softened against her pallet, leaving behind a taste of chalk and artificial sweeteners. She'd hold it dead last in a ranking of her preferred foods, but at the moment, it felt like a feast. Susanne sniffled beside her, pinned between her and January. Letting out a pained and exhausted breath as she stared down at her foil covered legs.

"...I wish we could have buried her..." She whispered.

Nyx pursed her lips, looking down almost in shame. She knew there was nothing they could do, but that never helped. "We... I'll recover her. I promise. When the fog lifts and the smoke clears... We'll lay her down how she deserves." Her oldest mind ran flush with the thoughts of so many of her comrades, her brothers in arms whom she was forced to watch perish in the fields of war, and the heavens and earth movements made to get as much of them back as possible. "I promise."

A moment passed, quiet lingering against the sounds of their collective breathing.

"...Doc?" Yan asked, breaking it.

"You're well within your right to call me Nyx at this point Yan," She gently affirmed.

He gave the faintest laugh, exhaling from his nose. "Right- Nyx. Uh..." He paused. "...what's... That thing that keeps showing up? When- Shit gets *real* bad. It literally comes out of nowhere and starts throwing lightning bolts around and- Fuckin' killing *everything* it wants."

She knew the question would come, and at this point she had no right to keep it from them. "That's... Another android, like January."

"January doesn't shoot lightning."

"I know- It... It's another GT, at least. Built by LaRoche Robotics."

"That's- Your brother's company, isn't it? The one with the... Exact same name as you?" He trailed off for a moment. "That's gotta be confusing as crap."

She chuckled. "You get used to it."

"But- What- What's it's *deal*? January's... Well I mean, Jan's right here, being a space heater and a fireplace for us. It's tough as nails despite it all but... Whatever that other thing is."

"That's... December. A one of a kind experimental android Nix built for me after the Conference Bombing. He..." She swallowed. "Said he didn't want to see me come that close to death ever again, and wasn't giving me a choice in the matter. As a result, it's invisible, nuclear powered, and... Practically omnipresent."

Yan looked around, as if he were expecting to see it jump out from a corner like a cheap monster movie prop at the mention of it being everywhere. Sure enough, nothing. "...That's creepy. Wait- *Always?*"

"Mhm," She nodded.

"Even when like-"

"I don't think about it." She intervened, feeling the uncomfortable question of just how much of her privacy the droid violated. "It's completely self contained. Nix can't see through it, and even I can't. It has a very precise set of rules, and it boils down to keeping me alive no matter what."

Susanne's words were little better than a murmur. "So that's why it didn't save Kara..."

Nyx sighed again. She felt the weight on her shoulders press down a little more, guilt creeping in like the tide.

"I don't... Have any control over it. If I did I- I wouldn't have let any of that happen."

"I..." Susanne sniffled. "I... I'm sure..."

Yan was quiet for a moment, thinking back on what transpired. The primal rage he felt as his fists crashed into her killer's face. The regret he wasn't fast enough. It began to pile on, to bury him like the snow surrounding them outside.

Nyx felt it. "We'll keep going. We've got no other choice. We'll make it to safety, reconnect with the world outside... Hopefully the skies will clear and we'll stop being in this warzone. Yan, Susanne, you're both strong." She said, reaching over and beneath the blanket to rest her hand on Susanne's leg. "I've been through this before... Alone. There's nothing I wouldn't have given to have someone like either of you by my side back then."

Susanne sniffed once, then whispered, voice raw, "...Thank you Nyx..."

Yan's arm slipped ahead of January's chest and onto her shoulder, giving the girl another bit of comfort. They weren't shivering anymore, the cocoon surrounding them trapped the heat they had, and January's idle warmth started to creep through their skin and into their bones. Exhaustion settled on to them like sand, heavy and all encompassing. Nyx shifted, tightening up the sheet over the top of them all. She let her head rest back against the wall. The cardboard's insulation helped a bit, but the foil made up the rest of the difference. Her eyelids felt heavy, all of her

minds practically unifying against her to order her rest. Her muscles were like stones against her, demanding her rest without interruption. She shifted closer, making more contact with the girl beside her. She had slipped out from her great coat earlier and draped it across her shoulders, and now she draped it over the both of them like an additional blanket. Her own fur gave her a slight edge in warmth, enough that she could spare it.

"...worst camping trip of my life," Yan quietly joked as his words ran together like he too was at the edges of sleep.

Nyx smiled, wordlessly agreeing. The android turned towards her just a bit as she fought her eyelids from closing. She could practically hear it demanding she sleep. She huffed a quiet, humorless breath. "...tryin' to..."

She closed her eyes, letting the darkness envelop her, the false warmth of the room holding them in a delicate moment. Outside, the wind howled. The city groaned. Far off rumbling told them not all was safe, but in here, the four of them, they were. They clung to the last scraps of warmth the world had yet to steal from them. Their rest was haggard, ramshackle, and destitute... But it was all they had.

And for now, for this fleeting moment, it held.