

Long Hard Road Out Of Hell

She sat in the dim light of the room, the only light source the projected screen against the large back wall. Windows were shuttered, and the only door was locked tight and guarded. There was no discussion of top secret materials or plots to overthrow governments, but distraction and intrusion was most thoroughly filtered out.

“Never would’a thought you showing up to the main pantheon of the Senate would be such a shitty situation.” Nix said, sitting at the end of the long rectangular table, looking at his sister. “Guess that’s my optimism set on fire... Again.”

Austin Mason, his Chief Security Officer was beside him in another chair, remarkably absent of his chrome aviator shades in the dimness of the room. His snow white hair and beard glowed faintly with the backslash of the projected light. He elbowed his boss in the arm. “Ey, she’s still goin’ in’t’she? ‘S how y’know she’s a good person.” He chided.

Nix rolled his eyes, chuckling.

Opposite from them, Nyx sat beside her red framed assistant June. “I’m sure someone will still seek to make an example of me wherever they can.”

“We’ll burn that bridge when we get there-” Nix said, standing. “Right, on track.” He cleared his throat, flicking on a laser pointer at the screen. “The US Senate has arranged a post-war trial panel. Maybe it’s a 21st century Nuremberg trial, maybe it’s the usual useless fist shaking and saber rattling that goes on in there. Regardless, you’ll need to know as much as you can to bring who you should to justice, and get out the other side unscathed.”

“Easy goin’. While you were down there fightin’ for y’life, blue eyes ‘n I were skyward runnin’ recon and directing android movements. Y’brother won’t brag but I sure as Hell will- It would’ve been a lot worse without us. One GT2 delivery kept a water treatment plant from gettin’ turned into smoke by a buncha’ opportunistic twats.” The Kiwi quipped.

Nix cleared his throat again, with purpose. He glared at Austin. All he got back was a cheeky grin. Nyx chuckled.

Austin leaned back in his chair, boots crossed at the ankle with his hands folded over his stomach like he was settling in for a rugby game. “Point is, we saw a lot from up there. Enough t’know they’re gonna ask you about things you had no control over.”

June sat quietly beside Nyx, her own hands folded in her lap and the pixelated red eyes of her visor dimmed to match the brightness of the room. “I have processed the contents of your presentation as well as other bits of data collected from the war-event. As a result, I have compiled a list of likely lines of inquiry.” Her voice was calm, level, robotic in delivery but not her tone. “Most... By your perception, practically all, will be emotionally motivated with little concern for fact finding.”

“Lil Red’s right. If they were objective and logical, wouldn’t ‘a had this war in th’first place. Buncha tantrum-throwin’-toddlers needin’ someone to toss into a cell or make into a scapegoat.”

The two goat exotics and the goat-like android stared at him for only a second.

He waved a hand like he was swatting a fly. “Oh come off it. You know what I mean.”

June spoke again. “Mister Mason is correct. They will not be seeking clarity, more likely they will be seeking catharsis.”

Nyx sighed, slumping back in the faux leather clad office chair a bit. “Wonderful...”

Nix clicked a remote at the end of the table, advancing the slide. A satellite image of a bombed out district came up, a thin grid overlay laid across it with a litany of descriptors, arrows, and stats near various points of interest. “First up, Falkner and Water Street, or Echo-12 as we’ve got it mapped out.” He waved the laser pointer around a center point halfway up the street, the white tops of medical aid tents visible. “I can imagine they’re going to pester you asking why you didn’t evacuate sooner.”

She narrowed her eyes only for a split second, before remembering these were not accusations by her brother, but him playing Devil’s Advocate and preparing her for much more impetulant questions. “I made the decision to delay evacuation because the weighted odds were that we would lose more souls if we stopped treatment and left earlier. There was no outcome where fatalities were nullified, so I picked the least tragic option.”

Nix nodded, half-satisfied. “Right. Most importantly though, *who* was pushing you out of there? If we want out of this we have to play their game. We’ve got the high ground, so let’s kick ‘em in the teeth while we’re up here.”

Austin chuckled.

“I don’t recall who it specifically was, or that I ever got a positive ID on them at any point. I presume this was more of a leading question to get to the fact that you *do* know who it was?”

“Bingo.” He pointed at the screen again, other hand clicking the remote. A small emblem popped up near the bottom of the screen. “Black Meridian Security, most likely on hire from Helion Strategic Solutions- Energy generating megacorp I’m sure you’ve heard of but the details aren’t necessary. While the attack wasn’t specifically directed at Leroux Medical, they sure didn’t care about the fact you were in the way. Crap intel most likely told them that a sec group- One ‘Silverline Solutions’, on behalf of Axiom Forge Robotics-” He could see on Nyx and Austin’s faces that the constant name dropping was going to get tiring. Nyx could remember, but Austin was already losing his focus to anything else. He snapped his fingers at him. “Wake up old man.”

“Oy! I’m wide awake despite y’best efforts!”

Nyx really couldn’t help but giggle despite the importance and severity of the situation.

“Anyway- You were caught in the middle, and Black Meridian clearly didn’t care about the non-combatants in the middle.”

“Is there a possibility our defense is nullified by the fact that some of the androids- The GT-5s on security as well as January- Were combat capable?”

“A hammer can be a tool or a weapon. None of them were equipped with things intended to be used as weapons. A medic doesn’t lose Geneva protections if they throw a fist at someone.”

“I can’t punch hard enough to leave a dent in a car door.”

“Quitter talk-” He joked. “Regardless, we’re not trying to mount a legal defense. This isn’t the ICC and we’re not going the The Hague. We’re just making a case, and making sure those responsible get their shit pushed in. After you packed up and cleared out, your convoy made it about eight blocks north before being struck by a roadside bomb. We’ll... Ignore the casualties for now, forgive the callousness- But you had succeeded in escaping the crossfire, and fell right into a new, much worse one.”

“*Headhunters...*” She growled.

“Yyyyyyep. Anti-corporate terror group that *might* have a good case, if they didn’t have such a habit of going after families, civilians, and all sorts of easy targets in a crap attempt to decapitate the ruling class. You were forced out of a moderately defensible position into a trap, resulting in numerous deaths... Until December engaged.”

She was silent for a moment.

Austin didn't speak either, but he was less in shame and more like he was beginning to actually focus now. He took his boots off the tabletop and leaned in, staring at the board. Nix flicked to the next slide. It was a looping video taken further up the street from the perspective of his AVs loitering the area. There was smoke, fire, and the sudden appearance of a flash of light darting from point to point in the midst of the Headhunters. December's work viewed from an outside perspective. "First and foremost-" He pointed with the laser harder for emphasis. "Self defense. I'm hoping that the subject won't even come up, given that bystanders had all fled and ducked under cover, and we made *damn* sure that no other recon was happening over you."

Austin made a whistling sound, gesturing with his finger from up in the air to another point in the air, concluding with an explosion sound.

"Thanks Austin," He said sarcastically.

"Anytime Blue Eyes."

"The most that's escaped is rumors, but there's no shortage of rumors from this entire debacle," Nix added.

June chirped up. "That is the intent of this hearing, ideally. To separate truth from rumor."

"Worst comes to worse, claim NDA, confidential information, deflect, deny blah blah blah- The usual tactics from corporate lexicon," Nix continued. "Now we'll have to zoom out, because after this point, you and four survivors broke away from the hot zone for your own survival. Your next severe encounter after the blackout was with another group-" He looked to Austin.

"Intel team says it was Red Harvest- Commie-Agrarian faction that looks at 'ol Teddy Kazynski as a paragon. Industrial society 'n all that garbage."

"That- As we also found out, had rather suddenly received a substantial equipment upgrade. A couple freshly-scrubbed APCs. Wreckage showed scraped off VINs, lack of identifying serial information. Now, Red Harvest is no stranger to on-site procurement, but this required more prep than would be allowed in a warzone- And they were clean, but not quite."

Austin jumped in again, the two clearly engaging in a rhythm they took part in many times during tactical work, "Outside was fresh and clean- 'fore December blew a hole in it- Like they'd just been scrubbed down, literally. But there's other signs. Grease buildup around the balljoints in the suspension, dirt 'n crap building up around door gaskets from the *top*-" He said the last bit with emphasis. "They weren't fresh off the assembly line, but they were still scarcely used. But y'know

what it reminded me of? Our own APC's we got sittin' in the back of the shop that no one's got around to fixin' yet. Mostly fine, but startin' to rot."

"You're not implying that they had these for a long period, right?"

"No ma'am. Just the opposite. They were just given to them, on behalf of an 'anonymous benefactor'."

Nyx raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

"God I love havin' spy sats," He chuckled. "We corroborated enough intel to get a *verrrrry* solid idea of who gave it to 'em. One 'Ordis Biotechnica' might'a shook the tree branches a bit and caused them to fall in their laps."

"Ordis? They're a primary competitor of ours, surely they wouldn't..." Her benefit of the doubt just had a fit and died.

"Well, don't know if they'da done all that *just* for you, but that was the intention. Leroux Pararescue bein' there wasn't a very hard guess t'make. Send out the commie gang with some fresh guns and armor, take out some competition in the city."

She stared for a moment, piecing it together in her head. "It's... Very probable, but this is a very severe accusation-

"Not askin' y't'make accusations. I am saying that you know that certain groups were moving far too conveniently to leave it to chance."

Nix nodded, shifting his look from Austin to Nyx. "Whether they were targeting you, or anyone else, they were supplied arms and armor by corporate benefactors to the detriment of their competition. Vehicles like that are tracked way too hard to just have them go missing or get commandeered. You just happened to be the one caught in the middle of it, but through the intel collected by your eye, January, and retroactive satellite and drone footage, we've got a picture painted here. On to the next," He said, clicking the remote again.

The room was quiet, filled with a warm static given by the projector. It was a rather nostalgic sound, the small fan inside the box keeping the laser lamp cool, and the skeuomorphic sound of the **ka-chunk** sound of the slide advancing in the entirely digital device. The next slide was a piece of marketing material for a security walker made by Cyberdyne. Nyx's eyes widened and her pupils shrank imperceptibly. Her breath caught for just a moment.

It was the model of walker that gunned down Susanne.

Nix looked at his sister, and he knew from the expression on her face that she was fully aware what was next. "We can hold off on this if you-

"Keep going," She spoke coldly, tone rigid.

Any look of joviality or incoming-wit was totally absent from Austin's face. It was serious now.

Nix nodded, continuing. "The Cyberdyne DR-12. An automated security walker with onboard threat analysis and IFF linkup. Designed to act without external input on hostile or potentially hostile forces. A be all and end all solution designed to make beat cops and law enforcement useless."

"Mm." She mused, tenting her hands in front of her lips, eyes fixated on the robot.

"Thing's a piece 'a shit in the best of times. Threat matrix is slapped together with spit and duct tape, and has an automatic 40mm launcher and backup gun that's got no business bein' anywhere close to civilian corridors."

June chimed in again. "Public record shows multiple incidents of questionable engagement involving the DR-12 line, such as protests ending in bloodshed for no verifiable reason, and hostage situations being ended with zero survivors."

Nix himself almost looked angry as he looked at the piece of marketing material. He had poured so much blood sweat and tears into his androids, to ensure they would never cause an ounce more harm than necessary, only to see some pathetic excuse of a biped roam the streets like a deviant Terminator. "And that's with the piece of shit in 100% health. Cyberdyne insists that various software and security updates have ameliorated any potential 'security incidents', and have only been fined..." He thought for a moment, then looked at June.

Her visor flickered for only a moment. "Total summation of fines levied by various international courts against Cyberdyne involving the DR-12 is \$1.2 million, most of it coming from the European Federation."

Nix nodded at her in thanks. "Fuckin' slap on the wrist is more harsh..." He growled. He shook his head afterwards, returning his focus. "Errant or not, one of their models roamed the city with faulty parameters that led to it putting holes in at least twelve different civilian structures. You were the last one, before--"

"Before the Red Eyed Monster blew it t'kingdom fuckin' come." Austin said with a mix of pride and punch. His comment hung in the air for a moment. It wasn't offensive or inappropriate, simply spoken by a man who had seen enough to know when a wild animal needs to be put down.

"This is where you go on the offensive. Someone on the panel with a vested interest- Probably some shareholder-" He bit. "Is gonna say that they shouldn't be held responsible for errant hardware. And yet-" He flicked the slide. It was a collage of every generation of GT, from first gen to fifth gen, various

flying drones made by other corps, and even competing walker models. “LR, Apex, Ultratech, Charon- Everyone *e*/se has in-built policies in their robotics that when enough safety checks are failed, the on board logic initiates an emergency shutdown. Nobody wants a rogue on their hands, so none of us risk it. Cyberdyne are the *only* ones that have implemented an ‘on-the-fly logic processing core’ that they SAY is to enable it to fight to the last scrap. Again, horse shit.”

“Y’brother did it ‘cause he was paranoid and watched too many movies as a kid-” He smirked, side eyeing him before continuing. “Other corps did it ‘cause the lawsuits and PR nightmares outweighed whatever benefit havin’ a blind Rambo-bot would give.”

“Emergency shutdown protocols are a de-facto standard across the majority of the robotics sector. Despite typical opinions on civilian care by said corporations, there are lines even they will not cross,” June added.

“We don’t know who deployed it, but we do know who made it, and they should bear the brunt of the responsibility of its actions, fully. That being said, don’t linger on it. Shock and awe, Nyx. Crush them with facts, appeal to emotion, move on. And don’t keep your emotions 100% in check. Don’t lash out at the first motherfucker that questions it, but don’t sound robotic,” The blue eyed goat at the screen rested his free hand atop his belt when he finished.

“I know how to work a crowd, Nix,” She added with the faintest look of offense.

“I know you know. Just wanted to remind you. Cyberdyne has long had the knowledge that their threat matrices are flawed, and has refused to fix them.”

She nodded. Nix clicked the remote. The next slide was another aerial shot of a street near the outskirts of the city in a much poorer section of town. A top down view of a power station was on the top left, three colored dots were near it, and an armored wall of men and APCs were opposite to it. There it was, the last scene. The site of January’s last stand.

Nix let it linger for a moment. “...Thanks to January’s sacrifice, there were no deaths in this sector. We’ve got IDs on the corp responsible, names, and likely motives. Again, not a trial, but still. We know who did it.” A click, and a logo flashed up onscreen. “Redline Interdiction. Fast response PMC specialized in containment and extraction.”

Nyx had leaned forward, resting her head on her hand in a so-tired-of-this expression. “...How many of these war criminals are there...”

“Toooooo many,” Austin mused.

“They were hired by Terramax Energy Consortium. Near nationwide power conglomerate that owns nearly 60% of the infrastructure this side of the Mississippi. Your phone, my datapad, and that projector-” He stared at it for a short moment as if he were going to shoot it if it moved. “Are all drawing power from their grid one way or another. The only reason they would have a PMC group guarding a still-functioning power grid, was they were using it as leverage. Denying power to many city blocks of poor people in the middle of a winter storm, and using violence to keep it that way until they get... Whatever the hell they wanted.”

“And we triple checked. No ongoin’ maintenance or restoration on the powerlines- Wasn’t shut off to keep a lineman safe. Whole thing woulda worked the whole time. Bastards were freezin’ people ‘cause they wanted to,” Austin added.

Nix spoke again. “When January arced itself across the transformer, our sensors got a flash we could see all the way up there. We vectored to it on a hunch, and my hunch was proven when you and Mister Hayamoto fully flipped the breaker. We wasted no time and had intel drones swarm the airspace above while January was tearing them down. Intercepted comms, emergency signals, allllll sorts of good stuff. Safe to say, we’ve got enough to *actually* put a criminal case against them, but that’s not for this. Clear acts of malicious intent, and direct orders to prevent any and all personnel from entering the area. The worst part, as evidenced by the fact that the three of you just wandered in unopposed, was that they were explicitly told to hide and strike, rather than set up a perimeter. They wanted blood-” He smirked. “But they didn’t get it how they’d have liked.”

“Feel like this is y’prime subject here, to wrap up the whole hearin’ in a nice pretty bow. Massively unchecked corporate power, blatant disregard for human life, and knowingly malicious acts. Only reason y’got out of it was ‘cause y’brother’s paranoia keeps ‘m up at night,” Austin stroked the edges of his beard. “Here’s y’stickin’ point Nyx.”

She nodded a few times, taking a breath and leaning back. “Out of the frying pan.” She mused.

“You know the drill Nyx. You’re not alone, spiritually and physically. You know June will be close by to run remote fact checking and bullshit-defense whenever some-” The look on Nix’s face was that he was running through a *slew* of curses and words to use against the average politician. “*Jackass* questions you or tries to make you a villain.” With a different flick of the remote, the

projector shut off and the lights brightened back up, the shutters rolling up as well in the conference room. “Thoughts? Questions? Snide remarks?”

Austin only had his mouth opened partway before Nix shot his finger at him.

“Not you Gandalf.”

He snickered.

June stood up from her seat first. “I will go over any missed points in the interim with Doctor Leroux until the last moment.”

Nyx nodded her head, standing as well. “Nothing of note, though, as you and June both have said, I’ll have good contact the entire time.”

“Oy, don’t rely on all that tech the whole time. Yer a smart girl so I know y’don’t need it. Just can’t imagine you freezing up there ‘cause y’lifeline got cut,” Austin added in an actually constructive manner.

She smiled at him. “Good thinking, I will. Thank you Austin.”

“’S no trouble, y’know it,” He waved her off.

Finally, she looked to her brother. She sighed. “And here I was... Relishing the fact things were about to be normal again, and that I could spend time with my family.”

He wrapped her up in a hug, patting her back. “It’s only another day. Done and gone in a flash. Now... Get your bags, I’ll have the jet warmed up in no time.”

She nodded, walking towards the exit. “*Tomber de Charybde... en Scylla.*” She mumbled.