The Long Night at the End of the World

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Summary

After one last battle with Dracula, Alucard awakens to find himself in a world far bleaker than he could ever imagine. On Earth, there is not a single human to be found; the crumbling ruins of civilization are ravaged by hordes of machines built by alien invaders. But machines are the least of his worries—the dark forces he is all too accustomed to are brewing once again, poised to unleash a terror the likes of which the world has never seen before as the sun sets and the long night begins.

What will Alucard fight for in a world without humans to protect? Who will join him? And who will oppose him?

Notes
Time for yet another Qubeley Quossover™!

This fic will be taking quite a few liberties with both Nier and Castlevania continuity in order to combine the timelines, which will be elaborated on in further detail in later chapters. But what else is new?

It also takes some liberties with the Earth being tidally locked in Nier Automata, although, to be fair, 99% of Nier fics do that. Instead of being tidally locked as it is in the game, the Earth simply no longer spins at all as it orbits the sun, which means night and day both last for six months.

Although plants still grow normally (for the most part) and the Earth still has a functional magnetic field, neither of which should be possible in either situation, because if Yoko Taro didn't feel the need to think about those things when he decided to fuck up the Earth's orbit without any explanation, then I don't have to, either. But I digress.
Requiem of the Sunset

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Adam makes a new friend, Eve makes a new enemy, A2 gets dunked on, and Popola and Devola run into a familiar face.

The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, painting the shifting sands and undulating dunes of the vast desert orange and violet as the sky took on a deep purple hue. A haphazard ring of stone orbs, some up to twelve feet in diameter, cast lengthening shadows which flowed and merged into the rippling shadows of the rolling terrain.

Sand began to trickle underneath one of the stone orbs as though a sinkhole had opened up underneath it. As the shadows waxed and the sky slowly darkened, a conical divot like an antlion’s lair formed next to the orb. A hand wrapped in a black glove, its fingers curled like claws, burst out from the ground, sand trickling from its fingertips.

A man in a black cloak dug his way out of the pit, narrowly pulling himself free before the now-unstable stone orb shifted and rolled on its side, sealing the hole he had dug.

He stood tall, the last light dyeing his silver hair orange and violet as a cold wind blew across the dunes. Windswept sand speckled his black clothes. His hand softly caressed the leather-bound hilt of the sword that lay sheathed at his side, then fell farther to brush against the coiled leather whip clipped to his belt.

Eve’s brother, Adam, hadn’t been himself lately. And it was all because of his fascination with humans.

Adam liked humans. He liked them too much. He was utterly, completely fascinated with them in a way that Eve just couldn’t understand. He did all kinds of things Eve just couldn’t understand or see the value of simply because “that was how humans did things.”

Normally, Eve didn’t mind his brother’s obsession with knowing how humans looked, behaved, and lived, although he was always annoyed when Adam insisted he behave like a human, too. Machines like them didn’t need to wear clothes, especially not those uncomfortable undergarments humans were supposed to wear to hide their “unmentionables” (they didn’t even have “unmentionables,” by the way, Eve kept reminding Adam). Machines like them didn’t need to eat plant matter or animal flesh, let alone spend so much time experimenting with different ways to heat and burn it. Machines like them didn’t need to waste time reading books when they could just assimilate and transmit terabytes of data per second.

But Eve put up with it—put up with Adam dressing him (he would never, never get him to wear a shirt, though), put up with Adam’s daily culinary experiments, put up with Adam’s requests to help him style his hair (Eve was glad he kept his short), put up with all of the dense and impenetrable piles of paper Adam kept telling him to read—because Adam was his brother, the only machine like him in all the world, and he loved him. And Eve didn’t mind subjecting himself to Adam’s passions because no matter how buried Adam got in his obsessions, he always still made time to indulge in Eve’s interests, too.
But all that had changed.

And it was all because of that stupid human Adam had found.

Eve remembered how excited Adam had been. The sparkle in his crimson eyes, the spring in his step. How he’d talked for what had seemed like hours about the questions he had for the human… and how eager he was to vivisect it and find out how it worked on the inside.

Every day that passed with Adam so engrossed in his interrogation that he didn’t even have five minutes to play with Eve made him wish he would just get to the vivisection part and get it over with already. And Adam was a bit more terse around him now, a bit more irritable, quicker to snap at him when he asked when they’d make time to do something he liked for a change.

Stupid humans. Adam was too fascinated with them, and it extended far beyond wanting to study one’s enemies. And that’s what humans were. Enemies. Nothing more.

So why did Adam love them more than he loved his own younger brother?

What had humans ever done for Adam? Eve had been the one who had carried him away from those two violent androids who’d attacked him. Eve had been the one who’d always been there for his older brother. Eve was the one who tolerated all of Adam’s quirks and foibles. Eve, Eve, Eve. Eve did everything for him, everything he asked for. And what did humans do? Sit in their little colony on the moon twiddling their thumbs as they sent those androids down to kill machines for them.

As the sun continued its glacial descent to the horizon to herald six months of night and Eve grew impatient and frustrated waiting alone in Adam’s silicon city beneath the ground, he decided to find his brother and give him an ultimatum.

The human or Eve. Adam couldn’t have both.

Finding Adam was easy enough. Eve had his half of the worldwide machine network at his disposal and easily triangulated his older brother’s location. He and the human were meeting in the ancient castle in the forest not too far away from Adam’s city; the machines there had disconnected from the network long ago and were neutral, at least in the sense that they attacked androids and machines alike with equal ferocity. Of course, Eve didn’t fear for Adam’s safety—not from the rogue machines, at least…

Eve closed his eyes, focused on Adam’s location, and in a flare of golden light, disappeared from the spartan, ivory-white town square of the underground city. An instant later, he was on the periphery of the castle, standing on its crumbling ramparts. A cold night wind ruffled his short, silver-white hair and prickled the bare skin of his chest and arms. The full moon was rising overhead.

A rogue machine detected him and charged at him, brandishing a ramshackle spear in its spindly arms. Its medieval armor clanked with every step. “Intruder! Kill the intruder! Glory to the Forest Ki—”

Eve glanced in the machine’s direction and flicked his wrist; a bolt of amber light tore the machine’s spherical head in half. The force of the blow knocked the machine’s helmet into the air; it fell to the cobblestone flagstones in the castle’s courtyard with a hollow clatter. With the machine dispatched, he stepped off the ramparts and touched down on the ground, striding into the castle.

There was Adam and the human, standing in the little garden in the center of the castle. Eve hid
behind a pillar so that Adam and the human would not see him; he wanted to shock and surprise the two of them. Adam would definitely be more willing to compromise if Eve caught him off-guard.

The human was an impressive specimen, Eve had to admit. It wore a black hooded cloak with ornate bits of red and gold embroidery on it and some sort of furry scarf; the hem seemed to roil and curl as if it were made from the flickering shadows cast by a fire on a wall. Underneath the hood—and it became more apparent when the human lowered the cowl—the human looked quite a bit like Adam and Eve themselves: its hair (about shoulder-length, somewhere in the midpoint between Eve’s short cut and Adam’s waist-length locks) the same shade of silvery-white, its skin just as fair and free of flaws and blemishes. It could have easily passed for a second brother to the two of them.

Eve found himself seething with jealousy, his hands curling into fists, as Adam and the human conversed in hushed tones. He couldn’t contain himself anymore. He had to call out to Adam and demand that he choose who was more important to him, although a part of him just wanted to lunge at the human and rip its head off.

Just as Eve took a single step away from the pillar he’d hidden behind, the human did something unexpected and insane.

It leaned forward, tugged the collar of Adam’s shirt down, and placed its mouth on his bare neck. Eve saw the glittering of ivory fangs in the moonlight before the fangs sank into his brother’s neck. Red began to stain Adam’s white shirt.

Were his eyes deceiving him? Or was this human—

No, it couldn’t be—

It was biting Adam! And he was letting it!

Eve was frozen for a moment as his mind struggled to process what his eyes were seeing. The data traveled through his optical sensors and into his central processor at lightning-fast speed, but even then, he couldn’t quite comprehend what he was seeing.

Nevertheless, he came to a conclusion.

Adam was in danger.

“Brother!” Eve called out, throwing himself at the two of them. He pushed the human back with one hand, his open palm colliding with the human’s chest with a loud and resounding snap, and pulled Adam away with his other hand.

Adam collapsed limply to the ground, his arms and legs flapping as he fell, his long silver hair spilling out around him; the human barely even staggered back a single step, its hand clamping around Eve’s wrist. Its grip was ice-cold. There was no warmth to its flesh, not an iota; Eve felt the human’s frigid fingers dig into his skin, its sharp fingernails lacerating his skin and making scarlet blood well up against the ebony tattoo that coiled up his left arm.

Eve looked the human dead in the eyes.

Its eyes, like Adam’s and Eve’s, were bright scarlet. But so, too, were the whites of its eyes. Its blood-drenched fangs, two of them, poked out from its pale, bluish lips; blood trickled down its chin.
And the look in its eyes... there was an alien intensity, a wet warmth that seemed to seep through Eve’s mind and dull his circuits, slowing and dampening his thoughts. It made him feel...

What was this?

He felt the way he had when he’d just been born, thrust into an overwhelming and confusing maelstrom of pain and blood.

_Afraid._

The human licked its lips, its tongue darting out to wipe away the blood, and smiled. “Ah,” it said, its voice deep, low, sonorous, and dripping with more contempt than Eve thought was possible, “you must be Eve. Your brother has told me so much about you.”

Eve was torn. He didn’t know whether to shout out _What did you do to my brother?_ or _How dare you hurt my brother?_ or _Who are you?_—so when he wrenched his hand free and threw himself at the human yet again, he let out a garbled battle cry of _“Who did you dare to hurt my brother?!”_

Adam was the intellectual one; of the two of them, Eve was the fighter. That wasn’t to say he enjoyed fighting—just physical activity, in general—but he had to be strong enough to look after his older brother. So he fought.

The human chuckled as Eve’s fists slid off its skin without leaving so much as a bruise. “I beg your pardon?”

Eve was mortified. He could feel a chill running through his chassis even as his processor and motor systems kicked into overdrive. Nothing he did seemed to leave the human with so much as a scratch. Was this what humans were really like? If they were like this, why did they even bother sending androids to fight their battles for them?

With a wordless snarl of rage, Eve drew back his fist, wreathing it in an aura of amber light, and threw a punch at the human.

_This_ one, the human dodged, sidestepping the blow—evidently, it was worried that golden light might have been able to hurt it. Eve grinned as he righted himself and spun around, aiming a sweeping kick at the human and wreathing his leg in the same golden light.

The human disappeared, vanishing into the shadows. Something fluttered past the full moon; an instant later, the human reappeared in front of Eve. The back of its hand collided with his cheek with enough force to knock him to the ground.

Eve hit the ground hard enough to shatter the cobblestones beneath him. Distortion flared up through his optical sensors.

The human ambled over to Adam’s prone body and lifted him up with one hand, tossing him over its shoulder.

“What are you doing to him?” Eve hissed.

“Merely what he asked for. It does not concern you,” the human said. Its tone of voice was the same one Adam used when he was admonishing Eve for misbehaving, but far more derisive. “Begone, Eve. Leave with your life—while you still have it.”

Eve pulled himself to his feet. “I’m... not leaving,” he snarled, spitting out a mouthful of blood and coolant, “without my brother.” He glanced at Adam’s prone body. He hadn’t stirred at all. He
couldn’t be gone, though—his data was backed up on the network. But what if it wasn’t? What if the human’s bite had… *done* something to his data, corrupted it?

The human smirked. “Then, as I implied, you shall not leave at all.”

“*Give him back!*”

Eve rushed forward, summoning all his strength. The human raised its pale hand and conjured a flaming obsidian orb that hung in the air, sparks and fiery light pouring from cracks in its rough and uneven surface. As the orb flew toward him like a bullet, Eve drove his fist into it, his knuckles cracking against the scalding stone, steam rising from his synthetic flesh.

This human, this man in black with the silver hair, had taken Adam from Eve.

He’d taken *everything* from Eve.

And Eve would gladly return the favor. The silver-haired man in black would die for this!

The moon hung in the air, a silent observer, watching with a cold and indifferent eye.

The same moon lent its light to the forest in which A2, former YoRHa attacker unit, lone survivor of the first experimental YoRHa squadron, deserter, outlaw, and widely-renowned cryptid, lurked.

The first thing one would notice about her would be the stench. A2 was not a particularly well-maintained android, which was an understatement if ever there was one. That was to say, she had not had any maintenance work done on her body in the three years since her disastrous trip to the surface of the Earth, and hiding in a hot, wet, humid forest during all that time without so much as a bath had done her no favors. Grime, oil, dirt, blood, and every other kind of fluid lent a particular scent to her body; a cloud of gnats and flies followed in her wake like a baleful aura. If pestilence had a name, it was probably A2.

The second thing one would notice about A2 would be the blade poking through their chest.

The third thing a particularly lucky android or machine lifeform would notice, had they dodged or survived that sword strike, would be that *dead* androids tended to look more lively than her.

A2’s skin was filthy—what little there was *left* of it. Most of the hard black endodermis beneath her thin layer of synthetic skin was clearly visible, though just as crusted with dirt and grime and grease; the only remaining scrap of clothing adorning her shapely body was a patch of black cloth that covered what little skin remained on her midriff. Her snow-white hair, straight as an arrow and long enough to reach her hips, was relatively unscathed by comparison (by some miracle of happenstance), but still had tangles and knots in it the likes of which would stymie the nimblest of hands.

Assuming one survived long enough to take all that in, the fourth thing one would notice would be that A2 knew how to put up a fight better than anyone else. In battle, she was as scrappy as she looked and fought as dirty as she smelled. YoRHa had sent many members of its Type-E division to the forest to exterminate her (they didn’t look kindly on deserters, and the concept of “live and let live” meant nothing to them) and all had failed.

The first thing A2 noticed about the man strolling through her forest as she observed him from atop a thick, mossy tree branch far above the ground was the airy, ethereal grace with which he moved, the way his sable cape and greatcoat and his silvery hair that shimmered in the moonlight billowed behind him; though his steps were slow and thoughtful, A2 couldn’t help but notice that...
his boots left no impression on the grass and soil beneath.

With the silver hair and ornate black getup, the man sure did look like YoRHa, but there was something off about him. A2 couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Maybe it was because he was a man. Had YoRHa started producing male combat models again? Hadn’t they tried that before and scrapped it?

Nevertheless, if it looked like YoRHa, A2 reasoned, it was probably YoRHa, and it was probably here to kill her. So she readied her blade—a wickedly curved YoRHa Type-4O sword scavenged off of the last poor hunk of synthetic flesh who’d tried to kill her—and leaped off the branch, disturbed leaves raining down in her wake.

A2 wasted no time to strike at the strange man from behind—but with a flash of red light, he had vanished; her blade whistled through thin air.

She whirled around just in time to parry a strike from a long, thin blade the strange man had drawn from a sheath at his side. She’d barely recognized the sound of the metal blade sliding out of the sheath; YoRHa units used their NFCS to effortlessly draw and handle their weapons. Why was this one using his sword manually?

And for that matter, why wasn’t this YoRHa unit wearing a combat visor? Instead of wearing a strip of black cloth, his eyes were naked… and were such a bright amber-gold they nearly sparkled.

“Foul beast,” the strange man intoned, the force of his strike knocking A2 back a few steps. “Think you I could not smell your stench for miles downwind?”

A2 rushed forward to attack; the strange man parried the rest of her strikes with ease and vanished yet again, leaving the faint red outline of a silhouette in his wake before reappearing steps away, flanking her. She tried to sidestep the next swing of his sword—

But the blade sliced surprisingly easily through her arm, severing it at the elbow, oily red blood spurted from both severed ends as a wave of static rolled across A2’s visual display.

“Who the hell are you?” she growled as she dashed out of the way of the strange man’s next strike. Waves of heat cascaded off her body, her heels leaving a scorch mark across the grass as they dragged against the ground.

“What manner of creature are you?” the strange man asked in reply. He had a strange way of speaking—an odd accent and odder speech patterns. “A doppelganger, summoned from the flames of hell?” He raised A2’s severed forearm and ran it under his nose, sniffing the bare endodermis. His displeasure was written all over his face as his nose wrinkled from the odor. “Or are you a golem? A living doll of sorts?”

“Give me back my arm!” A2 shouted back, lunging at the strange man at full speed. He did not block the next strike from A2’s blade quite so easily.

In a fluid display of acrobatics only a YoRHa combat model could pull off, A2 swept the legs out from under the stranger, then delivered a kick to his chin, the force of the blow lifting him up off the ground. Her sword materialized in her hand with a flurry of orange and amber sparks as she closed in for the kill.

The strange man tossed her severed arm aside and parried her next strike, but with an agile flick of her wrist and roll of her elbow, A2 ripped the sword from his hand; it sailed through the air, embedding itself up to its hilt in a tree trunk.
The strange man drew two long knives from within his thick black coat and rushed forward; A2 swung her sword in a great arc with all her might. Her foe changed course and slid backward in the nick of time, the tip of her blade severing only a lock of his silver hair and leaving a short, shallow scar across the bridge of his nose. He vanished the next time A2 struck at him; a chill ran up her spine, despite the heat and the humidity of the forest.

A2 dropped to the ground in a low crouch and held her blade defensively in front of and above herself, expecting the strange man’s next attack to come from above; as expected, he reappeared in midair above her, but his descent to the ground was halted as he balanced with a single boot daintily planted on the flat of her blade.

His other boot slammed against the side of her head. As A2 reeled, the strange man lashed out and buried both his knives in her arm, one piercing her bicep from below, the other running through her forearm from above. Her fingers jerked and spasmed as the synthetic musculature and nervous system running through her arm was disrupted, but she kept a tight grip on the curved hilt of her blade nonetheless, the skinless knuckles of her hands creaking.

The strange man withdrew his knives and darted away just as A2’s leg lashed out, her heel narrowly brushing against his chest; carrying the arc of her swinging body through, A2 brought down her sword, only for the strange man to lock the blade between both knives and hold it in place. He gritted his teeth, his brow furrowed and dripping with sweat, as his arms trembled and shook under the force of A2’s blade.

He swept her legs out from under her, elbowed her in the face, and leaped into the tree above, crouching on the mossy bough overlooking the grassy path through the forest. Flinging out his hand, one of his knives sailed through the air; the blade sliced cleanly through A2’s cheek on its way to embed itself in the gnarled roots winding through the ground.

The strange man ran across the bough and leaped off the end, diving down to the ground and landing on his feet in front of the tree trunk where his sword had been buried; he yanked it free effortlessly, parried A2’s next strike with his remaining knife, and thrust the long, straight blade of his sword at her.

Muttering a curse under her breath, A2 darted away and threw her sword at the man; he knocked it aside, only for it to vanish in a flurry of sparks and reappear in her hands.

Her next strike buried her blade up to the hilt in the strange man’s side.

The strange man backed away, hunched over, his pale face growing paler as he clutched at the sword running him through. Tossing his weapons aside, he gripped the hilt with both hands and started to slide it free; the blade inched out stained dark crimson.

A2 held out her hand; the sword vanished in a flurry of sparks and reappeared in her waiting grasp, teleported via her NFCS. With nothing to plug the wound tunneling through the man’s side, blood drained from his torso, staining his heavy black coat, and he staggered yet again. His every move liberated more blood from his wound, yet he seemed unconcerned.

A2 leveled the sword at him. “C’mon,” she taunted him. “Tell me you can do better than that.”

The strange man sniffed the side of his glove. “Your blood… it carries the stench of…” He furrowed his brow. “…Petroleum?” He licked the blood off his glove. “Ah, I see. An android. What is your name or designation, pray tell?”

Whoever this guy was, A2 figured, he wasn’t with YoRHa. He didn’t know who she was, which
was evidence enough on its own, but taking into consideration the weird way he talked, the way he fought, and the lack of a combat visor or any NFCS capabilities… this guy was just some random asshole, wasn’t he?

A2 made her way to where her severed forearm lay on the ground and surveyed the damage to the limb, keeping her foe in the corner of her field of vision and eyeing him suspiciously just in case he tried to get the drop on her. The cut had been very clean, fortunately; she lined up the two halves of her arm and firmly reconnected her forearm to her elbow. It hurt like a bitch; steam poured from where the two halves were joined as the inner mechanisms of her arm began to reacquaint themselves with each other and the nanomachines in her blood closed the seams. “Who wants to know?” she grunted, gritting her teeth to block out the pain.

The strange man, who’d just taken off his boot and poured a small pile of sand out of it, stood up straight, the hem of his cape and greatcoat swirling over the ground, and bowed. “You may call me Alucard.”

A2 flexed her newly-reattached arm. “Huh.” Well, that definitely wasn’t the designation of any sort of YoRHa model. Weird name for any other kind of android, too, but there were a lot of weird things going on with this guy. “Okay, Alucard, here’s the deal. You’re obviously too stupid to be a part of YoRHa, or maybe you’re not stupid enough, but either way, I don’t really have a beef with you. Just get the hell out of my forest before I change my mind.”

“Your forest? Excellent! Then perhaps you can answer my questions.” Alucard put his boots back on, collected his sword, wiped the blood staining its blade on the grass, and slid it back into the sheath buckled to his hip. He cleared his throat. “First off, what year is it? Second, have you seen any strange castles around here, perhaps ones that weren’t there before? Third…”

A2 rolled her eyes, flipped Alucard off, and promptly vanished into the forest, leaving his weird questions all unanswered.

Unfortunately, Alucard seemed to be a skilled tracker, and it wasn’t long before he was at her side once again, pestering her as she hiked through the woods.

“Fuck off,” she told him after he’d repeated his line of questioning for the umpteenth time.

Alucard merely chuckled and kept following her.

“Aren’t you injured?” she asked.

“I heal quickly. What year is it, madam?”


“Can you repeat that?” Alucard asked. “It sounded like you just said… No, no, that’s absurd.”

“The only thing absurd here is you.” A2 tried to pick up speed, sprinting through the forest, leaping from tree to tree across burbling streams and brooks, disturbing animals where they rested. But Alucard pursued her doggedly.

“Wait! I still have questions!” Alucard called out as the distance between him and A2 began to grow.

A2 kept running until the strange man had disappeared. And good riddance to him. The last thing she was interested in wasting her time doing today was babysitting some weirdo.
Just when she thought she’d lost him, Alucard materialized out of the shadows in front of her, kicked her legs out from under her, and grabbed her by the arms, pinning her to the ground. “Excuse me. Don’t you recognize me? Aren’t you an android?” he asked.

“Of course I’m an android. What kind of stupid question is that?” A2 gurgled, struggling to break Alucard’s grip.

“That makes you a steward for Project Gestalt.”

“Never heard of it.”

Alucard loosened his grip on her arms. “You can’t be serious,” he said, clearly surprised.

A2 slipped free, kneeed her captor in the face, and made a mad dash for freedom, tearing through the underbrush with reckless abandon.

She skidded to a halt as glaring red optical sensors blazed through the gaps in the trees.

*Machines.*

The bullet-shaped automatons poured out of the forest, some wielding primitive, cobbled-together weapons, others merely windmilling their spindly arms in the hopes of hitting something. Simple creatures, simple-minded—and simply dangerous, despite their simple, almost *cute* designs. These were the enemies A2’s people had been locked in a stalemate with for thousands of years.

A2 cut them down one after another, but they had the advantage of numbers. They *always* did. Damned machines! Hot motor oil sprayed through the air, staining what remained of A2’s skin and splashing her exposed chassis as her blade sliced through their rusty, moss-streaked hulls.

A ramshackle halberd dug into A2’s right thigh, seizing up her motor systems and sending her to her knee. She disarmed the machine wielding the polearm and drove her sword through its simple, spherical face; its crimson optical sensors dimmed and turned off.

A2 limped to her feet, pain shooting up and down her right leg. She clutched at the gash in the patch of skin circling her thigh as blood seeped out. She was still surrounded on all sides, outmanned and outmatched.

This was all that asshole Alucard’s fault! If she hadn’t been trying to get away from him, she wouldn’t have stumbled headlong into this machine jamboree. And to think, just a few hours ago she’d counted herself lucky a run-in with a boar twice her size would be the worst of her problems today.

Still, A2 did her best to strike a defiant pose. She had something these filthy machines didn’t have—a really sharp sword. “Had enough yet?” she sneered at them.

The machines all froze, their round heads swiveling on their stubby torsos, and ran away.

“Yes, that’s right!” A2 crowed, waving her sword at them. It wasn’t the cleanest victory, but she took what she could get. “Run away, you fucking tin cans! You don’t want any of this!”

A branch snapped behind her. Expecting another machine, A2 glanced over her shoulder just in time to see a pair of shining red eyes—and a set of talons swiping at her.

A2 blocked the creature’s strike with her sword as it bore down on her. This was not any kind of animal she had ever encountered in this forest. It was vaguely humanoid, but with long, spindly
limbs and a smooth reptilian grace to its movements. Hissing at her through the ragged fangs lining its broad, fangsome snout, it leaped into the canopy above, flinging out its arms to reveal thin, tautly-stretched skin running from its wrists to its hips.

It grabbed A2’s shoulders in its talons, scraping against her bare skin. She slashed upward with her sword, cutting through one of its thin, fleshy wings and tearing it like a sheet of cloth; the creature screeched in agony and curled over, wrapping its talons around A2’s head and squeezing. Hot spit dripped from its maw onto A2’s hair as well as her skin and exposed chassis; it stung where it made contact with her skin, and wispy curls of steam rose where the drops of spittle landed.

She got the creature in the belly next, and a stream of hot blood poured out, stinking of copper. The creature lost its grip and fell to the ground, scrabbling at the cut in its abdomen as it tried to scoop up long links of its own intestines in its claws and shove them back into its body.

A2 smirked triumphantly, raising her sword overhead and preparing to swing. “Had your fill, ugly? Well, I haven’t!”

The creature opened its mouth with a wretched screech; the inside of its throat glowed orange. It hacked up a ball of fire, catching A2 on the shoulder, scorching and blackening her skin.

The fire didn’t bother her much, but the force of the blast was strong enough to knock her back; trying to keep her balance, she pivoted on her injured leg and felt the mechanisms inside lock up. She hit the ground and the creature rose to its feet, one hand holding its stomach together, the other reaching out for her. A2’s head pounded, her black box running hot in her chest. As she tried to pull herself up, her injured leg locked up, pain signals running up her thigh and rooting her to the ground.

A long, immaculately-shining sword flew through the air, impaled the creature through its head, and swooping through the air as if wielded by an invisible hand, carved up the beast until it lay in pieces on the ground; the pieces began to smoke and, before A2’s very eyes, burst into flames.

Alucard descended on the impromptu arena, his cloak billowing behind him like a pair of dark wings, and plucked the floating sword from the air.

“You looked like you could use some help,” he said.

“Go fuck yourself,” she growled at him. “What was that thing?” She forced herself to her feet, ignoring the pain running up and down her leg, and kicked at the pile of ash the creature had left behind.

“A demon,” Alucard replied as he crouched down and wiped his bloodied blade on the grass. “This is good, though. If Slogra and Gaibon are here, then perhaps he has indeed returned…”

“Pfft. Tell me what it really was.”

Alucard gave her a look—A2 wasn’t sure how to describe it as anything else—and simply repeated his answer.

“You can’t just say something’s a demon,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no such thing!”

“E pur si muove,” Alucard said, rolling his eyes. “And that was likely not the last of them. We
need to move.”

“Suuuure.” Part of A2 figured Alucard had something of a point there, but she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of admitting it.

Something shifted in the canopy above, rattling the branches and shaking the leaves; heavy boughs swayed.

And then another so-called demon leaped out into the clearing, moving far more fluidly than any machine; sinews stood out on its taut skin like cables as it brandished a rusty spear in its talons. Its long neck swayed back and forth, carrying a tiny head with a curved, sharp beak. Two blue-black, marble-like eyes on either side of its beak glimmered wetly in the dappled moonlight. It screeched as A2 grappled with it, jabbing at her with its spear.

“Hellfire!” Alucard cursed (weirdest curse A2 had ever heard), drawing his sword. “I forgot—these demons work in pairs!”

“Wow! So helpful!” A2 grappled with the spear at the same moment it pierced her side, trying to yank it free as the demon screeched and shrieked at her. She tore out the spear and swung her sword, the slender, wickedly-shaped blade clanging against its leathery skin. The demon reared back its head and lashed out, its long neck coiling and then unfurling like a snake; its knifelike beak stopped a hair’s-breadth from A2’s neck, Alucard’s hand clamped around its neck.

Gray and black dead pixels flickering past her eyes, A2 soldiered on through the pain and drove her blade between two of the bird-like creature’s ribs; it would have screamed and screeched in pain if Alucard hadn’t been crushing its windpipe.

Just like the first one, this demon burst into flames, too.

A2 took a deep, pained breath and clutched at the wound on her side, feeling blood seep through her fingers. She felt dizzy and lightheaded; the forest around her swirled and swayed like a ship in choppy waters.

Alucard sheathed his sword, then stepped nearer to her. He reached out with a gloved hand.

“You’re injured, so—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey!” A2 staggered back, dragging her leg against the forest floor; the stiletto affixed to her heel (why the fuck had YoRHa made its initial models with built-in high heels?) dug a furrow in the dirt. “The hell are you doing?”

“We can’t stay here. There might be more of them.”

“What, so you’re just gonna sweep me off my feet and carry me away?”

“That’s my intention, yes,” Alucard said. “Just tell me where I can take you.”

“Not happening.”

“Direct me to your base of operations and I’ll make certain you get there safely for repairs.”

A2 laughed. “Yeah, sure, whatever.” She gestured to the forest surrounding the clearing. “‘Base of operations,’ huh? You’re looking at it, weirdo.”

Alucard’s face fell. “…Are you all alone here?”
“Yup.”

“Why?”

“None of your business.”

Alucard sighed. “Well… you still need repairs. I may not be a mechanical specialist, but…”

“It’ll take care of itself,” A2 insisted as she tried to walk off the injury to her leg.

She couldn’t.

Alucard caught her as she collapsed, keeping her from hitting the ground.

“Let me go,” she growled, pulling herself free of the strange man’s grip and floundering on the ground. She picked herself up through sheer willpower and threw herself into the forest, stumbling and limping through the coarse underbrush. She’d just retreat into a quiet place, tuck herself away, wait for the nanomachines to repair the damage to her servos and muscles, and live to fight another day.

She didn’t need this weirdo following her around asking bizarre questions and attracting god-knows-what. She didn’t need him trying to get all touchy-feely. She didn’t need anyone; she was perfectly fine on her own. If this “Alucard” guy wanted a friend that much, then that was his problem.

Her breath grew short. Maybe her injuries were worse than she’d thought. No problem. Just had to… find a quiet, hidden-away place… to curl up… and lick her… wounds…

The swaying and swirling of the world around her turned into a vertigo-inducing whirlwind; her limbs felt leaden, her eyelids heavy. The blood trickling between her fingers was warm and thick…

She barely felt herself hit the ground.

Are you all alone here?

Why?

YoRHa models weren’t designed to dream—one of the few ways they were made to differ from their human creators. In rest mode, though, consciousness data from their black boxes still ran through their brains, picking at recorded sensory data and sifting through memories.

Whenever A2 found a safe place to spend a few hours in rest mode—which was rare—her memories came bubbling up. She saw old friends and old foes and people she’d never see again. And sometimes, she saw the ocean.

The endless, boundless ocean, stretching in every direction to the flat and barren horizon. Blue on blue, gray on gray when clouds blanketed the sky, and black on black after sunset. A2 remembered watching the sun dip below the horizon so, so slowly, as it did on its yearly circuit across the sky. It had taken over twenty-four hours for the sun to sink into the ocean as its light shifted from a blinding white to a dim and dusky orange, the sky shifting from heavenly blue to deep purple as it completed its descent.

And then the night had come.

The Earth no longer spun on its axis. Nobody knew why—it had happened a long, long time ago.
Day and night both lasted six months. The sun had set and A2, clinging to a raft of scrap metal for
dear life, had feared she would never see it rise.

*Are you all alone here?*

*Why?*

The sea had been her enemy. Lapping at her at all hours of the day, incessantly reminding her of
the abyss that awaited far below as her raft bobbed in the water. She couldn’t float, let alone swim.
To capsize, as she came close to doing hundreds of times as she drifted to the mainland, would
condemn her to an eternity drifting to the seabed, salt water worming its way through her skin and
into her chassis until, eventually, she would stop thinking…

The sea was her enemy. An enemy vaster, more implacable, and more inescapable than any army
of machines could ever be.

The machines had taken everyone else. YoRHa had taken everyone else (knowing the truth, there
was barely a difference between the two). Number Sixteen, Number Twenty-One, Number Four.
They’d taken everyone but her. Her, Attacker Number Two, they had left for the sea to devour.

*Are you all alone here?*

*Why?*

A4… why had *she* had to die? The sea would not have been so daunting a foe if someone had been
there to brave it with her…

No. *Everyone* had to die. That was the plan. No one was meant to come back alive. Not even cute,
kind, friendly, bubbly A4 who kept her white hair in a messy ponytail and wore her visor over only
one eye as a fashion statement.

Even A2 had to die, although she hadn’t.

Anyway, the sea would take her, too.

In her dreams, A2 felt the cold, salty spray of brine on her face roughing her skin and matting her
hair, and she felt the rolling waves toss her to and fro, and she felt herself slip against the slick
surface of her raft as her fingers lost their hold and the sea gleefully devoured her leg, eager for its
next meal, tugging her to her grave.

The sea was her enemy. It was hungry. And she was its food.

The sea was rushing to embrace her, claim her, consume her—

A2 woke up screaming as a torrent of hot water cascaded over her head and down her back,
thrashing and flailing in a desperate attempt to free herself, throwing herself over the side of a
shallow ceramic tub onto a damp, slick tiled floor. Her pulse pounded as blood rushed through her
chassis to draw heat away from her black box; she gasped for air, her breath catching in her throat,
her chest heaving.

She slid out of the tub and rolled over onto her back, still panting, her sodden hair clinging to her
body, her damaged leg trailing along like so much dead weight. The water pooling on the floor
around her was foamy with soap suds and slippery.

Alucard stood next to the tub, an upended bucket in his hands. Water still dripped out of it, droplets
gently plopping onto the ceramic and echoing through the room. He’d removed his heavy cape and coat, appearing oddly small with only a white collared shirt draped over his shoulders.

“What the fuck?” A2 screamed at him, scrabbling at the slippery, soap-slicked tiles as she fruitlessly tried to sit up. Those were the only coherent words she could manage.

Alucard set down the bucket, gesturing to a lump of soap, a washcloth, and what looked like a hunk of pumice. “I had to clean you off,” he coolly explained.

“Well, you shouldn’t have,” A2 replied, still struggling to catch her breath.

“I know,” he said, reaching for a towel. “You have my sincerest apologies.”

“Yeah, that’s right, you slimy—wait, what?”

“I wasn’t aware you suffer from aquaphobia.”

“Aqua-what?”

“Fear of water.”

“What? I’m not afraid of water,” A2 shot back. “Maybe I should dump a bucket over your head while you’re sleeping and see how you like it!”

“Point taken. I only ask that you accept my apology.” Alucard crouched down next to A2, towel in hand. “And if it’s all right with you, I’d still like to examine your wound and see if there’s anything I can do.”

A2 snatched the towel from his hands and started patting her chassis dry. “Sure, fine. Just… don’t do it again.”

“The rest of your body seems to be in extreme disrepair as well. Why have you gone so long without maintenance?” Alucard asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” A2 tried to dry as much of her tangled, sodden hair as possible, then threw the towel aside.

“You know,” Alucard said, reaching for a box of tools and examining her wounds, “you remind me quite a lot of an old friend of mine.”

“Really?” A2 asked. “Did your friend constantly tell you to shove your sword up your ass, too?”

“As a matter of fact,” Alucard countered, “he did.” He let out a wistful smile, his lips parting to show a sliver of teeth, and for the first time, A2 noticed that at the corners of his mouth were two long, slender fangs. Newer models of android were getting weirder and weirder, she supposed.

She gave the room a cursory glance. It didn’t look like the inside of any buildings that could be found in the forest. Dark, a little dingy and dilapidated, boxes heaped unceremoniously in the corner. “Where am I?”

“I found you where you fell and carried you to the nearest encampment,” Alucard explained. “Their medical specialists are out running an errand, but should be back in the afternoon. I was told it would make their job easier if you were cleaned first, considering…”

“You dragged me… to a Resistance camp?” A2 asked, a pit growing in her stomach. This was the last place she wanted to be right now. She was a deserter, there were standing orders for her
She tried to stand up, but could barely pull herself to her feet. Here she was, a fugitive marked for death (since it had so kindly passed her by so many times before) who couldn’t do jack shit to defend herself.

Alucard held her down, exerting a gentle pressure. “Be still.”

“These people,” A2 hissed through gritted teeth, “are going to kill me.”

“If they wanted to do that, they’d have done it already,” Alucard replied, gently worming a tool into the gash in her thigh. “Tell me if anything I’m doing hurts.”

“It hurts,” A2 lied.

Alucard immediately withdrew the tool. “My apologies. I’ll wait for the experts to arrive.”

Experts. A2 laughed inwardly (it was a bitter laugh—she didn’t know how to do any other kind anymore). Sure. The ‘experts’ were probably Executioner models. Maybe even that one they made that had the same face as her (they sure liked sending that one against her).

“Now, why do you say these people want to kill you?” Alucard asked. “You’re all androids. Ostensibly, on the same side.”

“I was supposed to die a while ago. I didn’t.” A2 crossed her arms. “They’re still salty about it.”

“Ah. Your own kind wished for you to die, and yet you continue to confound them.” Alucard’s mouth formed into a bit of a half-smile. “That, I can relate to.”

“And what do you mean, ‘you’re all androids?’ We’re all androids here.”

“Oh. Pardon me, I misspoke.”

The rusty gears in A2’s head turned (under great duress). If this weirdo wasn’t an android, then what could he be besides…

Someone knocked on the door, jolting A2 out of her musing. “Oh, shit.” She took out her sword—not like she could do much without being able to stand, anyway, but she might still be able to throw it at someone.

Alucard stood up and went to the door. “I’m sure it will be fine. I don’t believe anybody here intends to harm you. Unlike my family reunions.”

“Famous last words.”

“If it comes to that,” Alucard replied, “I’m quite good with a sword… as I’ve quite adequately demonstrated.”

The door swung open. A2 really wasn’t prepared to face the person who walked to the room.

Neither did she.

The head of the Resistance camp, an olive-skinned woman clad in dirty fatigues and a worn, dark green cloak, took one look at A2 and gasped. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped as if she’d seen a ghost.
She had. 
And so had A2. 

“Number Two,” she gasped.

“Anemone,” A2 whispered, her voice catching in her throat.

The both of them were ghosts. Because just as Anemone was looking at YoRHa Attacker Number Two, the only remaining survivor of the Pearl Harbor descent (who shouldn’t have survived), A2 was looking at Anemone, one of the last remaining veterans of the Eighth Machine War’s front line forces, who had presumably perished in the same doomed military operation.

“Do you two… know each other?” Alucard asked, reaching for the sword sheathed at his hip just in case.

A2 didn’t answer.

“Yes,” Anenome said. “Pearl Harbor, three years ago.” She crouched down in front of A2, bringing herself down to eye level, and lowered her hood. Her face was careworn, her hazel eyes shrouded by weary shadows. “I thought I was the only survivor.”

A2 looked away. Something about the way Anemone looked at her felt acidic and corrosive. It ate away at her and she couldn’t tell why. Another survivor of that doomed operation… all that time she’d spent alone, she thought she’d been alone… but right here in this very camp she’d avoided like the plague, there’d been someone just like her.

But that didn’t make her feel relieved or grateful at all.

“I’ll leave you two to catch up,” said Alucard, stepping over the threshold and closing the door behind him.

“You look horrible.” Anemone laid a hand on her shoulder, cringing as her gaze traveled down A2’s body and traced the visible seam lines in her skin, lingering on the coal-black patches of exposed endodermis. “I have so many questions, Number Two… Where have you been all this time? What happened to your skin? How did you cross the ocean? Did anyone else make it…”

“No,” A2 said, pulling away. Anemone’s touch was warm and soft and sent an almost-pleasing prickling sensation through what little remained of her flesh, but she didn’t like it. And she didn’t want it. “No one else made it out.”

“But if you and I both survived, then—”

“Then what difference does it make?”

Anemone had been about to reach out to A2 again, but froze at the coldness of her words.

“You were here all this time and it didn’t matter to me at all,” A2 said. “We were so close to each other all this time, but you might as well have been dead.”

“I couldn’t… I didn’t know you were out there. I’d heard rumors of a feral android that lived in the forest, but I never thought it was you.” Anemone’s mouth curled in a bitter smile. “I’d have done whatever I could to help… if I’d known.”

“YoRHa knew just fine. Every time they caught my black box signal, they sent another hit squad
“But I’m not YoRHa.” Anemone raised her hand to A2’s cheek, brushing lightly against it with her knuckle as she tucked away a long lock of silvery-white hair. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you, Number Two, but I’m here for you now. If there’s anything I can do for you—”

A2 stiffened. “You can leave,” she spat.

Anemone opened her mouth but, her words having failed her, she simply closed it again. She did this a few more times, gaping like a fish, before she finally stood up and drew her cowl back over her head. “If you need anything from me, just ask.” The enthusiasm over having seen A2 again had completely vanished from her voice. A2 felt a little bit of triumph over having driven that away from her.

“Sure,” A2 said, letting sardonic sarcasm drip over her words. “I’m sure your bosses are gonna love it when they find your camp is harboring their biggest mistake.”

“I’ll tell them you requested asylum.”

“Unless you lost all your logic circuits at Pearl Harbor, you can’t possibly believe that’d work.”

Anemone didn’t respond to that. Instead, she just lamely said, “I’m just glad you’re alive.”

“Am I?” A2 asked.

Anemone bowed her head and left the room without saying another word, leaving A2 with nothing to keep herself company with except for Alucard’s cape draped over a chair.

Once Anemone had left, she leaned back and laid herself down on the still-wet floor, sighing. She felt something welling up inside her. She rolled onto her side and curled up as best she could, trying to keep her feelings from leaking out. Exhausted, her mind began to fog up, and for a split second she thought she saw another person materialize out of one of the room’s gloomy, shadow-wreathed corners.

A4 knelt before her, reaching down to lay her hand on A2’s cheek. Her eye, bright blue even in the darkness, twinkled.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry, Two…”

A2 grasped at her illusory hand and almost felt it; she tried in vain to lead it down her neck and across her chest, wishing so badly she could feel that hand brush against her breast in a way it never had and never would.

She remembered A4’s final moments like they had been yesterday. The bittersweet smile on her face. The raw, rough feeling in A2’s throat as she kept screaming, begging her to find another way. The way A4 had closed her eyes as though filled with great inner peace before an eye-searing light had engulfed her and left nothing behind but cold ashes… She wasn’t sure if it was a memory or a nightmare anymore.

“It was an honor to serve with you…”

A2 stared blankly at the palm of her hand. Not a shred of skin remained: her armored black endodermis, barely sensitive to any sort of feeling save for pressure and pain, was all she had. If she could hold A4’s hand right now, she would hardly feel it. Modern YoRHa androids and many other models of combat androids had far more complex innards with synthetic musculature and
organs, but the prototype YoRHa Attacker models like her were more like living dolls with thin skin over subdermal armor and visible seam lines around the joints; simply toys to be played with and broken and thrown away, their ephemeral nature baked into their design.

Four… if you’d known I’d end up like this, she wondered for the umpteenth time since the day she’d come ashore, would you still have thrown away your life for mine?

The door swung open and another android walked in—a woman with long, wavy red hair. She crouched down next to A2 and set a box of tools down on the floor.

“Hi there,” she said, rolling A2 over onto her back. A2 was too exhausted—mentally and physically—to put up much of a fight. “My name’s Devola, and I’ll be conducting your repairs…”

She ran her gaze up and down A2’s body, clucking her tongue and shaking her head.

“Well,” she said, “let’s see what I can do. Tell me if it hurts and I’ll try to do it softer, but I can’t make any promises.”

Alucard felt a chill run up his spine as he explored the Resistance camp outside. It wasn’t from the brisk night air whistling through the winding corridors formed by the crumbling and skeletal skyscrapers. The world was always unfamiliar when he awoke from his hibernation, but he had never seen it like this. Not a human in sight, only androids created in their likeness—and only a handful of them clustered in this camp here, huddled under tarpaulins stretched across alleys, tending to swords and guns and other androids.

He meandered through the camp with his coat slung over his shoulders. At a glance, the camp’s inhabitants seemed perfectly human. He’d almost been able to forget they were androids at all—until he’d seen one with the skin of its torso removed and mechanical innards similar in design and placement to a human’s organs exposed for all the world to see.

If not for these mechanical descendants of humanity wandering about, it would be the world Alucard’s father had dreamed of—a world without humans.

Had Dracula really returned before him? How soon? Centuries? Millennia?

He had to know exactly what had happened to this world. If only there were a single familiar face in this camp! But nine thousand years was a long time; even if a mere handful of the androids he’d been acquainted with before reentering hibernation were still around, they could be anywhere on Earth. His chances of running into someone he knew were slim to none.

And what could he do to procure information without looking conspicuous? Asking anybody in the camp simple or obvious questions about this world would make him look like a fool.

Despondent, Alucard found a wall to lean against and stared up at the sky, watching the twinkling stars shine with cold and ancient light. Now that he had time to study it, the sky looked markedly different—the constellations were all a little off, and the shining disk of the full moon was much larger than it had been in his time. Even the sky was unfamiliar and alien.

He knew that light took years, decades, or even centuries or millennia to travel from the stars to Earth; those stars in the night sky could already be long gone for all he knew. Alucard wondered if he, too, was the lingering starlight of a dead world.

He always started from zero whenever he woke up, seeking the descendants of the friends he’d left behind to age and die. Here, though, he had less than zero. He had nothing but the clothes on his
back and the sword at his side.

A large black device standing against the wall whirred to life, hissed, and opened up; a young, boyish-looking android in a black frock coat stepped out, yawned, and stretched his arms and legs as though he’d awoken from a long and restful slumber. A black blindfold covered his eyes.

“O-Oh, hi,” the boy said, seemingly startled by Alucard’s presence at his side. Evidently, he could see quite well despite the black cloth over his eyes. “Did you come down here from YoRHa, too?”

“YoRHa?” Alucard parroted. There was that name again—the almost-feral android he’d dragged here had mentioned it as well. Perhaps it was a place, or the organization that commanded this army, or both. “Yes,” he answered. “I did come from YoRHa.”

“I thought they stopped making male combat models after that coup,” the boy said. “Nice to see ‘em give it another shot; always fun to have more guys around.” He held out his hand. “I’m 86S. What about you?”

Alucard gingerly shook his hand. These androids seemed to have an alphanumeric designation; the number could indicate just about anything and the letter was likely to denote type or division. Therefore, to avoid being put in an awkward situation or getting caught in a lie by his new friend, he figured he should avoid choosing “S.”

“Fifteen-V,” he said, choosing the number and letter completely at random.

“15V?” 86S scratched his head. “Never heard of a Type-V before. What’s it stand for? What do you guys do?”

“I’m afraid that’s on a need-to-know basis.”

86S gave him a funny look—Alucard could feel his bemused, slightly-suspicious glare beneath the black cloth hiding his eyes—but simply made a little more awkward small talk before running off to gather information. Type-S models were probably scouts of some kind.

“Alucard? Is that you?”

Alucard’s ears naturally perked up at the sound of his own name, and he couldn’t help but turn his head in the direction of the woman’s voice. It was a familiar one, too—not quite the voice of a dear friend or loved one, but recognizable nonetheless, and thus music to his ears.

A female android with long, rail-straight scarlet hair slunk along the length of the wall and sidled up next to him. There was a smile on her face that grew brighter the closer she drew to him. This was one of the twin android models constructed to oversee Project Gestalt. Alucard had met several pairs, fresh off the assembly line, just a few weeks ago—from his perspective, at least. He was glad to see this one still remembered him after such a prolonged absence—then again, shouldn’t remembering things be trivial for androids?

Alucard returned the smile. “Guilty as charged, Popola. It’s good to see you again.” He laid his hands on her shoulders. “I’d say something like, ‘my, how you’ve grown,’ but you haven’t. How’s your sister?”

“Tending to the girl you dragged over here,” Popola told him, leaning against the wall just as he did and adjusting the black shawl layered over her blouse. “I told her I’d be right behind her, but then I saw you, and figured… you probably have a lot of questions for us.”
“You’ve been around since the start of the project,” Alucard marveled, hardly able to believe his luck. “And you’re one of the several models I met personally back then. Fate certainly does smile on us… when it wants to.”

“Well… not really,” Popola admitted. “The memories the ones you met had of you were copied into all of us so that any of us could assist you when you woke up.”

Alucard nodded. That was a very wise decision by the androids’ creators. “I’d welcome your assistance, Popola; I’m afraid there’s a lot I have to catch up on. First things first… I need to know what happened with Project Gestalt. No one I’ve talked to seems to know about it at all.”

Popola bowed her head and lowered her eyes, clasping her hands together and kneading them anxiously. She took Alucard by the hand and led him into an empty alleyway, dropped her voice to a low whisper, and told him everything.

The closer Popola’s account of humanity’s last-ditch attempt at surviving the disease which had swept through it came to its doomed last days, the deeper and hollower the pit in Alucard’s stomach grew.

Humanity, which he had pledged to give his life protecting in defiance of his father, was completely and utterly extinct.

If only he’d woken up sooner… if only he’d been there…

Alucard bowed his head and felt a cold tear roll down his cheek and drip off his chin, then another one. All the centuries of his life he’d given up to his crusade had in this moment proven a waste. He’d given up friends and family time and time again to defend humanity and now, now that it was all dust and ash, there was nothing left to show for all his efforts.

_Congratulations, Father. You have triumphed over me at long last._

“…Eventually, all of the Replicants and Gestalts relapsed, and humans—their bodies and their souls—all died,” Popola concluded. “Production on our models was halted due to our culpability. Some people saw fit to… dispose… of the rest of us. Over time, we dwindled until… until only the two of us were left.”

“You don’t sound culpable to me,” Alucard said, his voice a hoarse whisper as he forced his words past the lump in his throat. “You two weren’t the ones who…”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Popola, her voice cracking and wavering. “I know what you’re thinking. Any one of us could have found you and woken you up for help. We didn’t know where you were, but we could have scoured the Earth for you.”

_The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing._ Alucard felt that those words would be little comfort to her (merely thinking them tightened the knot in his own chest), so he kept them to himself. Instead, he said nothing and laid his hand on top of hers and curled his fingers inward, threading them in between hers.

“I’m sorry. I wish we had better news for you.” Popola snaked her arms around him and pressed herself close to him, resting her cheek on his shoulder. Alucard could hear her softly whimpering, her quiet voice muffled by his dampening shirt as she dried her tears on it. Struggling not to weep himself, he gingerly returned the hug, prompting her to squeeze tighter. His cold fingers found purchase in her hair as he cradled the back of her head, easing his heartache.

She was as warm and soft as any human woman would have been (perhaps warmer); the only
indication Alucard had that he was embracing a machine was the unfamiliar rhythm of the motorized pumps driving blood-like coolant through her chassis and the muted, muffled whirring of her core.

“I’m sorry, too,” he said. What else but those empty, insignificant words could he say to comfort her when he himself felt just as guilty as she did?

Another familiar voice rang through the air.

“Hey, Popola!”

He and Popola broke apart as Devola, Popola’s doppelganger right down to her choice of attire (save for her wilder, wavier hair), strode across the camp toward them. The asymmetric elements of her outfit were reversed so that she looked like the exact mirror image of her sister (again, save for the hair).

“Sis, have you taken a look at the android they brought to us?” Devola asked. “How she’s even still alive I can only guess. I’ve done all I can on my own, but this is gonna be a two-person job if we’re lucky.”


Alucard gave a slight, polite bow. “Good evening, Devola. A pleasure to see you again.”

“Oh, hi, Alucard,” Devola said, barely taking the time to glance at him. “C’mon, Popo, let’s—”

She did a double-take.

“Alucard?”

“The one and only.”

“ Took your sweet time getting here,” Devola said, crossing her arms. Alucard figured she was well within her rights to have a frostier reaction to his presence. “Where was your coffin?”

“There must have been some upheavals in the past few millennia. I was buried under five hundred feet of sand and a very heavy stone… orb of some kind when I woke up.” Alucard tried not to think about those half-buried spheres that had littered the desert in which he’d found himself, especially not the grinning faces they’d all sported. Perhaps they were idols of some god which had been imagined, worshiped, and completely forgotten all in the time he’d been asleep.

“No wonder we couldn’t find you.”

Alucard didn’t blame her for giving him a frostier reception than her sister had. “Popola told me everything. For what it’s worth, you have my deepest apologies.”

“Well… it’s not like you chose to oversleep.” Devola sighed and twirled a lock of her scarlet hair around her finger, not quite looking Alucard in the eyes. “I mean… you’re only human.”

“Half,” Alucard corrected.

“Well, I guess we’d better get to work,” Popola said. “Alucard, if you’d like to help—”

“I think I need some time alone.”
“I understand. It’s a lot to take in.” Devola said. “Take all the time you need.”

“If you need anyone to talk to, you know where to find us,” Popola told him. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

Alucard wasn’t sure he knew how to be anything else, but appreciated the sentiment. Wrapping himself in his coat to ward off the cold, he strode off into the empty city to be alone with his thoughts.

The city had mostly been reclaimed by nature; gargantuan trees had taken root, curling around and tearing through the foundations of its worn skyscrapers and cracked concrete roads and highways. Rusted husks of cars and buses littered the overgrown streets. A massive sinkhole had opened up in the center of the city, exposing a deep pit lined with the precariously-tilted remains of ancient buildings; on the periphery sat the hulking wreck of what seemed to be a massive construction machine.

Alucard wondered if some magic in the air or soil had caused the trees to rival these buildings in size as he climbed one of the more stable-looking skyscrapers, leaping up the gnarled limbs of the tree holding it in place until he reached the roof. Or perhaps they had been able to grow this large without humanity around to pollute and poison their air and soil.

A red-eyed machine took notice of him and lunged at him, windmilling its spindly arms; Alucard drew his sword and with a single swipe of the shining blade, he cleaved it down the middle.

Now alone and granted some welcome peace and quiet, he stood at the edge of the rooftop and looked down. The sheer drop from the roof all the way to the bottom of the sinkhole where moonlight faintly reflected off the puddle of brackish water down below was almost dizzying.

Alucard wrapped his coat tighter around himself, trembling like a leaf in the wind. A tear rolled down his cheek and dripped from his chin, glistening as it fell into the abyss. Another one fell, and another one, and another one.

He kept mulling over what he’d learned, the words tumbling over in his mind like detritus from a wrecked ship caught in a whirlpool.

*Humanity is gone.*

*Everything I’ve fought for, everyone I’ve sworn to protect, is long dead.*

He wept. For his mother; for his friends; for those people who had grown as close to him as family in those final days before all had been lost; for every last man, woman, and child. He wept for the weight of his failures, choking on his anguish as the tears became a torrent. Wracked with pitiful, ugly sobs, he buried his face in his hands, fingers burrowing through his hair as his fingertips dug into his scalp, his palms pressing against his eyes in a vain attempt to stem the flow of tears.

*It’s gone. It’s all gone. They’re all gone. Julius, Yoko, Soma, Mina, they’re all, all gone and they left nothing behind, left no one behind. Everything, everyone, all of it…*

Eventually, the tears subsided, for no other reason than that there were no more left to shed. Still aching with hollowness, Alucard looked down into the abyss yawning underneath him.

He could glide on his coattails, transform into a bat or a cloud of mist, or perform any number of tricks to slow or halt his descent if he were to stumble and fall off the edge of the roof. But what if he simply took another step and…
“Enjoying yourself, Young Master?” a cold, bone-chilling voice drawled behind him.

Alucard turned his head; the fluttering of a black hooded cowl caught his eye—as did the bleached skull underneath it.

Death, Dracula’s right-hand man, hovered just off the edge of the roof, lazily resting the long shaft of his scythe against his shoulder, his cloak swirling and waving in the breeze. His permanent grin seemed to mock Alucard. “A curious world we’ve ended up in, is it not?”

“I expected that Dracula had returned.” Alucard’s words were as frosty as the bitter wind that tossed around his hair. “That’s why I’ve awoken, isn’t it?”

“Perceptive as always.”

“Well. Just tell me where his castle is so I may end him again.”

“Oh, Young Master, we have no intention of letting you cut our fun short.” Death shook his head. “You see, I am having a ball here. The androids and machines here are… interesting. I suppose Master Dracula and I will get bored with them soon enough, but until then, we won’t take kindly to your interference.”

Alucard leveled his sword at the spirit, moonlight glittering off its polished blade. “Tell me where Dracula is. I’m prepared to beat the information out of you.”

“Oh, no, we can’t have that.” Death snapped his bony fingers; Alucard felt his fingers curled around the hilt of his sword close over his palm as the sword vanished and reappeared at Death’s side. “Your father will thank you for returning his beloved’s sword.”

Alucard hissed and clenched his fists, his cool blood heating to a boil. “Cur!” he snarled. “Mother bequeathed me that sword!”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Death sighed. “But Master Dracula would like it returned to him so it may hang on the mantle above his fireplace. I’m sure you of all people understand how much sentimental value it has to him.”

Alucard threw himself at the cloaked apparition, drawing two knives from their sheathes on his belt; Death gave one last parting laugh and disappeared. Flying off the edge of the rooftop, Alucard swiftly regained his bearings and glided to the ground.

He clenched his fists so tightly he could feel his fingernails bite into the meat of his palms through his gloves; his jaw clenched so tightly that he nearly felt a tooth crack.

With a bitter laugh, Alucard started on his way back to the camp. He spared a passing glance at the edge of the sinkhole.

_Not tonight_, he told the abyss. _Not while Dracula still lives._
In this chapter, 2B and 9S encounter bizarre new foes. Alucard foils a robbery.

There was an ancient human saying that the definition of insanity was when one did the same thing over and over again and expected different results every time. 2B knew that she wasn’t insane, then, because she did the same thing over and over again and never expected anything to be different.

Every day was the same. Run morning diagnostics, pretend not to panic when a message from YoRHa Commander White (that would inevitably not be the message she’d been expecting and dreading) appeared in her inbox, make contact with Operator 6O, run errands for and lend support to the local Resistance cell with 9S, run evening diagnostics, perform chassis and weapons maintenance, enter rest mode. The days blurred into one another; the lack of the day/night cycle the Earth had once had in its antiquity (and which still formed the basis of the calendar system in use today) made discerning one day from another even harder.

Sometimes the days were different, but in the same ways. Sometimes 2B would receive the execution orders she’d always feared seeing in her inbox. Sometimes she would creep up behind 9S, silent as a phantom, and run her sword through his back so swiftly, the blade piercing his chassis like a knife through warm butter, that he wouldn’t feel a thing. Anywhere from a few hours to a few days later, she’d see him again and he would say hello to her as though he’d never met her.

It was always the same. 2B never expected it to end any differently.

That was how she knew that she was still in full possession of her wits. She’d been insane for a while, the first few times she’d had 9S as a partner, afflicted by a painful sickness of the mind called ‘hope.’ Hope that the next time would be different; that the next time, 9S would be less foolish; that the next time, she could afford to relax around him and perhaps even intentionally call him by his silly little nickname. But that illness had run its course; 2B no longer found herself compulsively indulging in its bittersweet whispers in her ear that tantalized her with the life she and 9S could never have.

Every day, every week, every year of 2B’s life was the same. There was nothing new under the sun.

Or so she thought.

Every once in a while, something unusual happened. Something that surprised 2B. Something unusual… like the machines in the desert that had somehow given birth to those two humanoid machines who’d called themselves “Adam” and “Eve,” or the oddball machine named Pascal who led a pacifistic village, or the sinkhole that had opened up to reveal a graveyard of the machines’ long-dead alien progenitors just a few weeks ago.

This morning, it seemed as though today was going to be one of those strange days.

2B’s partner, 9S, knelt down next to three savagely-mauled android corpses lying in a moonlit
glade, the grisly scene before him illuminated by the lights from his tactical support unit Pod 153 hovering at his side. “They can’t be rebooted,” he gravely proclaimed, placing his hand over each android’s chassis in turn. “IFF signals match 17B, 41D, and 2H. I hope they backed up their data recently…”

2B crouched down next to 9S, observing the corpses and paying special attention to 2H. She hadn’t recognized that one of the three of them was built upon the same template as she was; upon a closer inspection, she still couldn’t recognize it. The android’s face had been clawed at so savagely that it had been all but torn away, leaving ragged shreds of synthetic muscle and scraps of skin dangling from its—her—ivory skull plating. Tufts of its silvery-white hair had been torn out by the roots as well, so violently that the skin of the android’s scalp had broken in places and blood seeped from it, dyeing the remaining hair scarlet. Next to the horrific violence enacted on the poor android’s face and head, the gaping hole in its chest revealing the pulverized remains of its black box was nothing to get squeamish about.

*This corpse used to look like me,* 2B thought. She suppressed a shudder. It was an overreaction—she’d seen (and scavenged equipment from) her own corpse dozens of times before. It was just a natural part of warfare. She’d seen her own body torn limb from limb, burned to a crisp, mangled, beheaded…but something was chilling about this corpse, and the fact that the fate that had befallen it seemed—somehow—like it could befall 2B just as easily.

“Observation: It appears the damage to this unit’s head,” Pod 042, 2B’s support pod, said, “was caused prior to the fatal damage to her black box.”

That did nothing to make 2B feel better. This poor Healer unit—a support unit, not even meant for direct combat—hadn’t just been killed, she’d been tortured to death.

“I’ve collected as much data from their systems as I can,” 9S said, standing up. “I’ll send it to the three of them the next time I get a chance. We should probably spare poor 2H the gory details, though, huh?”

“She’s a Type-H. Healers aren’t squeamish.” 2B stood up as well, rolling 2H’s corpse with her foot so it lay facedown.

“Hmm…” 9S stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Don’t you think it’s weird that whatever did this only mutilated 2H’s body? The others were just killed.”

“Maybe the killer had a personal vendetta against her,” 2B theorized as she and 9S went on their way and navigated the dark labyrinth of the forest. “The other two were killed for getting in their way.”

“That’s it?” He seemed almost disappointed.

“The simplest explanation is usually the most correct.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“No need to repeat yourself, 9S.” She knew she was being harsh to him. Harsher than usual, even. But she couldn’t deny that she was on edge. Many 9Ses lasted days before they stuck their nose where it didn’t belong and the order came down for his termination; none lasted longer than three weeks. This 9S was six weeks old; the wait for the inevitable was becoming interminable.

2B and 9S hadn’t made it much farther from the site of the grisly murder before a machine leaped out at them from behind the rusted husk of a car that hung in the Y-shaped fork of a massive tree’s
gnarled trunk. It was a large one, a biped model that stood about a meter taller than the two androids with thick, powerful arms and legs.

“Black coat… white hair!” it gurgled in its electronically-tinged voice, heading for 9S. “Kill! Black coat! White hair!”

For such a large machine, and for a type that typically lumbered wherever it went, this machine was fast on its feet. 2B felt slow and sluggish as the machine closed the gap between itself and 9S and she summoned her sword.

9S threw out his hand to hack the machine; a beam of white light lanced out from his palm into the machine’s torso. But the seconds he needed to establish a handshake with the machine’s programming and subvert it were seconds he didn’t have; the machine slapped 9S’s hand away, breaking his concentration, and grabbed him by the head, its thick, stubby fingers squeezing the sides of his head as he let out a muffled wail.

It was going to do to him what it had done to 2H.

It was going to take his face and kill him.

2B’s sword cut through the machine’s arm, severing it at the elbow; she aimed a kick at its barrel-like torso and hit with enough force to lift the heavy machine off the ground and toss it through the air.

It staggered to its feet. “Black coat… white hair… must… die…”

2B ignored its drivel. Machines like Pascal and his villagers were one thing, but machines that were connected to the globe-spanning network had no will or intelligence of their own. They only mindlessly parroted words.

She didn’t give it time for a second wind. Another stroke of her curved, ivory-white blade took its other arm, and then both its legs, then cut a diagonal gash through its torso. Its optical sensors flickered and dimmed as what little remained of it writhed on the ground. “Bro… ther… Bro… ther… You took… brother…”

2B plunged her sword into the machine’s head all the way up to its hilt, pulled it out, then drove it back in. She did this again and again and again. Oil spurted from the growing wounds littering the machine’s remains as she reduced it to a heap of useless scrap.

It had wanted to kill 9S. Mutilate him. Violate him. Such things were forbidden. No one was allowed to hurt 9S but her. He had a hard enough life already. So if anyone hurt him, if anyone so much as touched him, 2B would pay them back a thousandfold. A spray of oil dirtied her face, spattering her skin and staining her visor, as she kept methodically, mechanically stabbing the machine. Oil stained its moss-streaked chassis; sparks flew where steel met iron.

“2B! 2B! Hey!”

2B came to a sudden halt when 9S’s hand fell on her shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’m all right. That thing just got the jump on me, that’s all.” There were faint bruises already ringing his soft, boyish face where the machine’s fingers had clamped down; a trickle of blood dripped from both nostrils over his lips and down his chin, but he still managed to smile. “Good to know you care, though.”

He was dead. He was already dead four dozen times over and didn’t even know it. And that
thought, which 2B simply couldn’t help but think whenever she saw him smile that innocent smile, clamped down on her black heart like a vise.

“Uh…” 2B sheepishly dispelled her sword, realizing that she’d probably spent a minute or more pulverizing that machine. “Threat neutralized.”

9S wiped his nose on his sleeve and sniffled. A fresh trickle of blood ran from his nostril and rolled down his chin to trace the pinkish-red stain remaining on his face, its flow terminating when it reached the black choker he wore around his neck.

2B resisted the urge to wipe the fresh blood off his face with her glove. She wished so much that she could just shower him with affection if only to make up for all the pain he had suffered and all the pain he had yet to suffer—but treating him like that would only make things more difficult when his time came.

So instead of doing anything, she simply said, “9S, your nose might be damaged. Let’s head back to the camp and have someone look at it.” And with that, she took off, and 9S did his best to keep up.

“On the bright side, looks like we’ve solved that mystery!” 9S said, lagging behind 2B as she ran through the forest. “And you were right about it, in a way.”

“What do you mean?”

“‘Black coat, white hair,’ it said. That machine was probably the one that killed 2H,” 9S said. “It must have mistaken her and me for someone else—if you weren’t in that dress, it might’ve gone after you, too. But… why? Why only go after specific YoRHa units?”

“We’ll inform Command and leave the speculation to them,” 2B said. “Don’t fall behind, 9S.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Over six weeks and he still didn’t get it. “Don’t call me that,” 2B snapped. ‘Ma’am’ was far more formal a title than she was comfortable being addressed with, and 9S just kept calling her that out of politeness. He was too polite (although he wasn’t above making snide comments about people behind their backs—if 2B ever let him out of her sight, she was sure he’d have some choice words about her).

“Sorry, 2B.”

“Incoming transmission,” Pod 042 announced, “from the machine lifeform Pascal.”

2B halted in her tracks. Pascal was calling her? What could he want with her? “Put him on,” she told the pod.

An amber-colored panel popped up in her peripheral vision, hanging in the air just to her side. It wasn’t physically there, or even a hologram—simply an augmented-reality construct fed to her optical sensors through the visor that covered her eyes. Pascal’s face appeared on the panel—his bug-eyed optical sensors protruding from his rusty, tin-can-shaped head.

“Hello, Pascal,” she said.

“2B, hello! It is good to hear from you again,” Pascal said. He had a soft, high-pitched voice relatively free of the grating synthesized artifacts that other machines’ voices had. “I know you and 9S must be very busy, but I am afraid I must ask you two for help.”
“What’s wrong?”

“I am not sure how to describe it, but if you come to the village, I can show you.”

“Hmm…” 2B glanced at 9S, who sniffled as another little trickle of blood ran down his chin.

“If you cannot, I understand. I do not wish to impose on you, but… I have to admit,” Pascal said, “this trouble in my village has me… unnerved. I fear greatly for our safety.”

Just a few short weeks ago, 2B never would have rushed to a machine’s aid. But Pascal wasn’t just any machine. He, and the inhabitants of his village, were avowed pacifists and intellectuals; they also, much to 2B’s shock, had been trading supplies with Anemone’s camp for decades without YoRHa or the Army of Humanity’s high command being the least bit aware of it. They were, in fact, staunch allies. And with allies, of course, you helped them when they needed it.

“9S and I will be on our way,” 2B said.

“Thank you, 2B. You have our gratitude.”

The transmission halted; Pascal’s face disappeared from the projected panel, then the panel itself flickered and folded away into nothing.

“We’re going to Pascal’s,” 2B told 9S, reorienting herself and plotting out the fastest route to the village.

“Why? Is something the matter there?”

“Yes, but he couldn’t say what,” 2B said.

“Seems we’ve got another mystery on our hands.”

But what could be plaguing Pascal’s village that he couldn’t talk about in a one-on-one transmission?

The wind howled over the rooftop in swirling updrafts. Alucard’s coat fluttered, buffeted by the strong gusts and vortexes. The man standing across from him—no, not a man, scarcely more than a boy—stood on the precipice, as if preparing to jump from the top of the skyscraper to the street dozens of stories below. His white coat whipped around him wildly. His shoulder-length white hair was wild and unkempt, his eyes ringed with weary gray, his soft face ravaged by weeks’ worth of unshaven stubble.

White flakes fluttered from the pitch-black heavens, carried in graceful helices by the wind. Snow in summer—a “snow” that carried with it a sharp saline scent. The air had a briny odor like the air over the sea, but was cold and dry as a bone. Carried across the world by the wind from city to city, from nation to nation, were the remains of millions of humans who had succumbed to the disease sweeping across the Earth.

“Get down from there,” Alucard called out. Sternly, like a father admonishing an unruly child. He realized the irony of that. “I know how you must feel right now. But things will work out. I’ve pulled enough strings with the government to get all of you signed onto Project Gestalt. Julius and Yoko have already undergone the procedure. As for you and Mina—”

“Mina doesn’t want it—she’d rather die human than have her soul ripped from her body.” The boy glanced down at the dizzying depths and outstretched his hand; a glittering necklace hung from his
grip, swaying in the wind like a pendulum. “I’ll die with her.”

“Soma! For God’s sake, don’t jump!” Alucard rushed to the edge of the rooftop.

Soma laughed. His laugh was so cold and bitter—so uncharacteristic coming from this young man who could easily be labeled, in colloquial terms, a “dork,” that it stopped Alucard in his tracks. “Jump? Who said anything about jumping?”

One finger uncurled, then another finger uncurled, then another, then another. And the necklace slipped from his hand and was lost to the half-empty city below. The amulet, that shining jeweled necklace blessed by a sweet girl’s love to hold darkness at bay, fell to join the piles of trash and debris that littered the empty streets of the plague-ravaged ghost city.

“Soma!”

Soma looked at Alucard with eyes that had turned blood red, his mouth curling into a wicked grin.

“Why…” Alucard took a step backward, stumbling. He felt as though his heart had been ripped from his chest and crushed. “After everything we’ve been through… after how hard we’ve fought, after how hard you’ve fought… why renounce your humanity?!”

“Don’t ask questions,” Soma said, his voice dropping to the deep and contempt-filled voice Alucard knew all too well, “you already know the answer to…”

The boy standing before Alucard stepped away from the precipice. No, not a boy—not even human, not anymore. The listless, morose way he had slumped his shoulders and hung his head had given way to a tall, proud stance.

“Soma!”

He stepped closer. Alucard felt his limbs freeze. His veins were filled with ice.

“Say my name, Alucard.”

“No, Alucard. My name.”

Alucard said nothing. He couldn’t say it. Even with his father’s eyes boring into his, all he could see was the face of the boy he’d taken under his wing only a scant few years ago. Soma Cruz, the reincarnation of Dracula and a brave, kind, strong-willed young man.

A cold, pale hand clenched around Alucard’s throat. “Say it,” the boy hissed, baring his fangs and staring him down as the two of them stood so close that their noses nearly touched. Red eyes met gold.

Alucard came to with a start, his eyes flying open, his breath catching in his throat. He shuddered, his limbs spasming, as though he’d just awoken from one of those oh-so-common “falling dreams.”

His eyes burning with fatigue, he sat up and got his bearings. He hardly remembered falling asleep
at all. He poked his head out of the tent (whose tent? Devola and Popola’s, perhaps? He seemed to be the only person in it) and looked up at the inky black, star-studded sky. If dawn hadn’t arrived yet, then he couldn’t have been asleep for long.

Alucard noticed that the moon had fallen much lower in the sky, but the eastern horizon showed no signs of brightening at all. A chill ran up his spine as he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled out of the tent, looking around for someone to explain to him what was wrong with the sky.

“Excuse me,” he asked a passing soldier—86S from the night before, in fact. “What time is it?”

“Oh, hey, 15V.” 86S didn’t even look up from what he was doing, which was apparently tapping on thin air and staring at it intently. “0842 hours.”

This late in the morning, the sun should be up. “Ah, I see,” Alucard replied. “So... when will the sun rise?”

86S gave him a bemused look. “Hold your horses, pal. We just had sunset yesterday. It’ll be another six months.”

“What?” Alucard glanced again at the perpetual night sky. Is this your doing, too, Dracula? he wondered. Or is it simply a happy coincidence that this world has been turned into your perfect playground?

“First time on Earth, huh?” 86S asked, smirking. “Thought YoRHa would’ve at least told you what to expect before they sent you down here. I mean, I’ve heard of the Commander throwing people to the wolves, but man, that’s embarrassing.”

“Must’ve been an oversight. I’ll have to take it up with the Commander,” Alucard said.

“Your funeral.”

“By the way, have you seen Popola and Devola around?”

“The twins? They’re off in the factory, scavenging for parts.” He eyed the tent Alucard had emerged from. “Both of them at once, eh? You lucky dog.”

“It’s not what you think,” Alucard insisted, fidgeting with his collar.

“Well, be careful with them. They’re friendly enough on the surface, but we’re all taking bets on how long before they...” 86S traced a circle around his temple with one finger. “Snap.”

“That was a long time ago, was it not? And not even the same models—”

86S brushed his mussed, sandy blonde hair out of his face. “Oh, I’ve heard otherwise. Before those two came here, they were stationed in a camp just on the other side of the desert. I’ve heard those two were holy terrors there—had to be run out on a rail.”

“Then we’ll have to hope their good behavior continues,” Alucard replied, doubting 86S’s words but still feeling a pit in his stomach. “Thank you for the suggestion.”

“No problem,” 86S said. “Glad to help out. See ya round, 15V.”

As his YoRHa compatriot strode off into the alley linking the camp to the rest of the city ruins, Alucard headed for the room the wild woman from the forest was resting in. The leader of this camp—Anemone, as he recalled—was pacing in front of the door.
“Excuse me, ma’am,” Alucard said as he approached, “If it’s all right with you—”

Anemone was so lost in her own thoughts that she took a few seconds to notice him. “Oh! Hello, um—what did you say your name was, again?”

“I don’t think I told you. It’s Alucard.”

“No wonder I couldn’t remember it. What can I help you with, Alucard?”

“I left some of my clothing in there last night. I’d like to retrieve it, if possible. Unless the girl I brought here…”

“Be my guest.” Anemone let the door open a crack. “Thank you for bringing her here, by the way,” she said. She didn’t sound particularly thankful, though.

“You knew her, didn’t you?”

Anemone tugged her cloak closer, pulling down the hood. “Can you keep a secret?”

“I find I’m very good at keeping them,” Alucard assured her.

“I’ll… keep that in mind,” Anemone said, walking away. Perhaps, Alucard mused, she would be more receptive to explain things when she was less distressed.

Alucard opened the door and slipped into the room, spying the sable cape he’d left behind immediately. It was wrapped snugly around the android, who seemed to be fast asleep. He wondered if that makeshift blanket had been Popola’s and Devola’s doing, or if the girl had taken it herself.

He kept his distance, remaining at arm’s-length as he observed her. ‘Number Two,’ Anemone had called her. Number two of what, he didn’t know and couldn’t say. Without the dirt and grime that had clung to her body like a second, third, fourth, and fifth layer of skin, she actually looked quite handsome. Or perhaps he was just biased—she bore a surprising resemblance to him, although it was mainly the hair.

He wasn’t sure how long it took, but he stayed at her side until she awoke.

Number Two cracked open her eyes, glanced at him, and groaned. “You again?”

“Me again.” Alucard nodded. “It seems that despite your insistence otherwise, nobody here has tried to kill you. Good morning, Number Two.”

“Fuck off.”

“I should have expected that.” Alucard chuckled. This woman really was just like Trevor. “How do you feel?”

“Why do you care?” Number Two snapped, sitting up. She glared at him as she picked up the cape that had covered her body. “Do you want this back? Is that it?” She all but threw it at him; the cape ended up falling over his head. “Go ahead. Take it.”

“Thank you,” Alucard said, pulling down the cape and letting the bundle of smooth, silky fabric droop in his hands. “If you were using it, though, by all means, keep it.”

Number Two stood up, her surprise at being able to do so lasting only a second. “What’s wrong with you?”
“Beg pardon?”

“How messed up do you have to be to look at this,” she said, gesturing to the patchwork of skin and exposed chassis that made up her body, “and decide to start following it around like a lost puppy or something? Is it pity? Is that it? Do you feel sorry for me, Armacard, or whatever your name was?”

“It’s Alucard. Do you honestly think that’s the only reason someone would want to help you? Does the phrase ‘out of the goodness of one’s heart’ ring a bell?”

Number Two rolled her eyes and made for the door.

“Wait!” Alucard hurried over to her and placed his hand on the doorknob before she could grab it. “I thought you said those people out there would kill you.”

“At this point, I’d rather take my chances with a firing squad,” she spat. “Again, Alamode—”

“Alucard—”

“I don’t care. Why, out of all of the androids on this planet, are you so obsessed with me?”

“To be honest… you remind me of…” Alucard hesitated, his mouth drying out. “A-A friend. A good one.”

“A friend.”

“Yes. His name was Trevor Belmont. When I met him, he was a drunken lout who could barely see straight, let alone stand up. The first thing he did when we met was insult me to my face and knee me in the groin.”

“I like him already.”

“He was a good man at heart. A great man, in fact. A diamond in the rough, one might say.”

“I bet it’s been a long time since you’ve seen him.”

Alucard nodded. “Ten thousand years.”

“Sorry, Alkaline, but I’m not Trevor,” Number Two said, not sounding the least bit sorry. “I’ve lost friends, too, but I don’t go around finding people who remind me of them and forcing myself on them!” She shoved Alucard away from the door and pulled it open. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to the forest. Don’t go looking for—”

She paused with one foot raised over the threshold, turned her head, and looked straight at Alucard. “Ten thousand years?”

“Yes.”

“That’s…” Number Two counted on her fingers. Alucard could almost see the gears turning within her head. “You were around, uh… four thousand years before the aliens invaded?”

“Um… ‘aliens?’” Alucard hadn’t remembered Popola or Devola mentioning anything about aliens.

“You’re human,” she whispered, awestruck.
“Half,” he corrected.

“Wow. You know, for a god, you’re really disappointing.” And with that, Number Two walked out of the room and into the camp, ripping the cape from his arms and wrapping it around herself like an oversized shawl. “Thanks,” she said brusquely, picking up the pace.

Seeing her from behind, the cape fluttering in the breeze that swept through the camp and her silvery-white hair flowing behind her, Alucard found himself reminded of… himself. The sight of Number Two with such a purposeful stride was that of an adventurer and warrior who would be perfectly at home storming Dracula’s castle, as Alucard had done himself so many times before.

“Number Two, wait,” he called out, following behind her. “There’s something I need to explain to you. I…”

Amid a throng of laughter, Popola’s voice rang through the campsite, harsher and angrier than Alucard had ever heard it before.

“Whoever’s responsible for this, get out here right now!”

Alucard trailed off as he caught sight of a semicircle of a half-dozen androids crowded around Popola, who stood in front of the camp’s shower stalls clad in nothing but a towel she’d wrapped around herself; her scarlet hair was lank and sodden, her damp skin glistening. She had the look of a cornered animal about her: equal parts a snarling mongoose surrounded by vipers and a rabbit staring down a hungry fox. Recalling what she had said about the fates of the other twin models after the catastrophic failure of Project Gestalt, Alucard feared for the twins’ safety and pushed himself to the front of the crowd, poised to leap in and intervene at the slightest notice, though he hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“I’m only going to say this once,” Popola snarled. “Whichever one of you stole our clothes, get out here or I’ll—”

“Sis, please, I probably just misplaced them,” Devola called out from behind one of the shower curtain. “At least we still have our towels. Let’s just go…”

“No,” Popola called back, “I’m not putting up with this anymore, and you aren’t either!”

“Welp, looks like I lost the over-under,” one of the onlookers muttered to a friend.

“Look,” 86S said, stepping forward to be a voice of reason. “Your sister’s right. She probably just lost track of where she put them. There’s no need to make a scene or make any wild accusations; I’m sure they’ll turn up once you start looking for them. No need to lose your heads.”

Alucard scanned the crowd, wondering which of the roughly half-dozen androids who’d gathered here, if any, had the air of a thief about them. While there was likely only one culprit, very few people in the crowd seemed sympathetic toward the twins; he heard a few mumbled epithets from his neighbors amid the laughter, including words like paranoid and victim complex.

“Shut up! I know some of you think this is funny,” Popola said, clenching the fist of her free hand to compensate for the wavering note of distress that crept into her voice and undermined her anger as she clutched the towel preserving her modesty tighter around herself. She was trembling, and Alucard was certain it wasn’t due to the cold air on her wet skin. “It isn’t! Everything we do for this camp, all the dirty jobs we take on for you… Is it too much to ask for some dignity in exchange?”

“Yes!” someone shouted out, snickering. Alucard was aghast. Did any of these people who were laughing and watching on with amusement even know why they were treating the twins with such
disdain, or were they simply mindlessly parroting the prejudices of bygone generations?

Alucard felt his chest tighten as the phantom scent of burning wood filled his nostrils. Was he witnessing the onset of the same outbreak of prejudice-fueled violence that had claimed his mother’s life. The twins, with their fey appearances making them look so much like witches compared to the uniformed soldiers of the camp, wouldn’t look out of place at all on a stake like the one his mother had been tied to. How much longer would it take for the men and women here to take their torches to the wood, metaphorically or not? Who would cast the first stone?

He patted himself down for weapons. He still had two daggers with him, and the Vampire Killer—which he supposed now was just a useless leather rope now that no more Belmonts existed to wield it and wielding it himself would likely kill him on the spot. It would be enough, though, these meager armaments—were he not rooted to the spot, transfixed by the looming memory of his mother’s final moments.

“Look, even if someone did steal your clothes,” said 86S, “you’re just making the problem worse by making a fuss, you know. They’re just clothes.” The others mumbled in agreement.

“I-It’s not about the clothes,” Popola said, “it’s about how you’ve all been—”

86S laughed; the rest of the crowd joined in. “It’s not about the clothes? So why do you even care, then?”

“This needs to stop now.” Anemone strode between Popola and the crowd just as Popola had seemed poised to lunge at 86S and rip his head off. “This is unacceptable behavior from all of you.” 86S sputtered some limp-wristed protests about how he was just trying to calm everyone down, but his words fell on deaf ears as Anemone turned to address Popola. “Popola, we have plenty of spare uniforms and fatigues; you and your sister can make do with them for now.”

“If there’s a thief in this camp—” Popola protested.

“If there’s a thief in this camp, we will find them in due time,” Anemone assured her. “Everyone else, I’m sure you all have work to do; get to it,” she told the crowd, heading back across the camp to her post.

Alucard eyed the crowd as it dispersed, looking out for any suspicious lumps or bulges that could denote a hastily-hidden set of clothing or two. Of course, though, even if one of these soldiers was the thief, there was no guarantee they’d have the clothes on their person.

He narrowed down his cursory examination to those androids carrying bags or knapsacks, of which there were only two; one of them seemed to be in a hurry to leave. As luck would have it, it was 86S—who, despite his claims to playing peacemaker, had been doing as much to exacerbate the situation as anyone else. Plenty to pique Alucard’s suspicion. And he had said he’d been betting on how long until the twins would ‘snap’—perhaps he’d committed the theft to increase his odds of winning.

Although 86S made a hasty retreat, Alucard was much faster and lighter on his feet; in no time at all, he had caught up to 86S, stepping in front of him and cutting off his retreat.

86S skidded to a halt. “U-Uh, hi, 15V. What a mess, huh? I told you about those twins…”

“Excuse me,” Alucard said, immediately noticing the android’s twitchy, edgy body language. “I have a bag just like that.” He gestured to the pack slung over 86S’s shoulder. “I think you may have grabbed mine by mistake. It had standard supplies in it, so you probably didn’t notice, but I
had a few important keepsakes in there at the bottom that you likely didn’t see.”

“Huh? N-No, this bag hasn’t left my side all day,” 86S stammered, taking a few steps backward.

Alucard took a few steps forward. “What a coincidence; my bag went missing this morning,” he said. “I am sure it’ll turn up if I keep looking for it, but if you could just open up yours and make sure those mementos of mine are not inside it…”

86S bolted for the exit to the camp, only to trip over a well-placed ankle and fall flat on his face.

Number Two withdrew her leg and reached down to pluck the bag from the prone android, ripping it open and pulling out a bundle of clothing. “What a surprise,” she drawled, tossing the now-empty bag aside and tossing the clothes over to Alucard. “Here you go, Alucard.”

Alucard caught and fumbled with them a little more than he’d expected.

86S picked himself up, clutching at his nose. “I-I don’t know where those came from, I swear. S-Someone, the real thief, must’ve swapped my bag…”

“Oh, so now there’s a thief,” said Number Two, smirking mirthlessly.

86S’s line of sight traveled up Number Two’s cloaked body until his blindfolded eyes met hers. Even behind the strip of black cloth, Alucard could see his eyes widening.

“Oh, god. You’re the Forest Devil!” he gasped. “Please don’t kill me, I’ll never steal a woman’s clothes again!”

Number Two decked him in the face with enough force to knock him off his feet. 86S didn’t get back up. “Okay.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Number Two,” Alucard said, thumbing through the clothes to make sure everything was accounted for. Two white blouses, two black shawls, two pairs of red trousers, and a few intimate articles of clothing he hadn’t thought androids wore at all.

Number Two glared at him. “A2.”

“Pardon?”

“My friends call me ‘Number Two,’ Alucard. You? You call me ‘A2.’”

“Thank you, A2,” Alucard corrected.

“Tell the twins we’re even now,” A2 said, turning her back on Alucard and striding out of the camp. The darkness beyond the lamplight illuminating the area swallowed her whole.

*There she goes, Alucard thought. A diamond in the rough. I hope we’ll meet again.*

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Devola gently admonished Popola as the two of them dressed themselves in the comfort and privacy of the spare room they’d repaired A2 in (Alucard, ever the gentleman, kept his back to them and his eyes closed). “What if they’d gotten violent? What if you’d gotten hurt?”

“I’m sorry, Dev,” Popola sniffled, her words coming out as a hoarse croak. “I just… something inside me snapped, I couldn’t take it…”
“Is this a regular occurrence for you two?” Alucard, who couldn’t help but overhear them, asked.

“Just irregular enough that we don’t get used to it,” Devola muttered. “The worst of it is, it’s just a harmless prank to them. There’s nothing harmless about standing there freezing your nipples off while you’re trying to hold a towel over your chest! And they act like we’re just supposed to take it lying down…”

Alucard kept his surprise that androids even had nipples to himself. The thought that androids were anatomically correct was not one he felt like entertaining at this moment.

“It’s better than the alternative,” Popola insisted. “Remember the last camp we stayed at? We’d have been lucky if they’d only stolen our clothes…”

“That was a nice place. They’d had a piano.”

“You loved that piano.”

“And that library, too. You loved that library.”

“It was almost like home.”

“What happened there?” Alucard asked, almost afraid to intrude on the twins’ reminiscence but incurably curious.

For a few seconds, neither twin spoke.

“One of the soldiers,” Popola said, speaking in quiet and measured tones, “made a snide remark at Devola.”

“I talked back,” Devola added. “I was quiet, I was polite, but I still talked back. So he… broke my leg. Almost snapped it in two.”

“I couldn’t control myself, seeing her like that,” said Popola. “I lost my temper. But Dev talked me down before things got too bad, and we fled across the desert here, to this camp. We knew things would get worse if we stayed.”

“The last time you’d committed that much property damage,” said Devola, injecting a little bit of levity into her voice, “you’d been drunk as a skunk.”

“I only broke a few windows,” Popola countered. “Oh, Alucard, in case you were getting bored, we’re all dressed now.”

Alucard opened his eyes and turned around. The twins were dried and dressed, although their hair was still wet enough to dampen their collars. “Everything in order? If anything is still missing, I can go after that thief again…”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Devola said. Popola nudged her in the side. “No, nothing’s missing, fortunately. If anything was, I think I’d rather just replace it. Who knows what that perv would do with it?”

“We can’t thank you enough,” Popola said, giving Alucard a hug. Her cheek brushed against his; although he was certain such luxuries as scented shampoo or conditioner were not abundant in this camp, he could catch the distinctive scent of wildflowers as her damp hair clung to his skin. He felt warm in her embrace; he was still so unused to it that it almost didn’t feel right to him. “No one’s ever stood up for us like that before.”
Six thousand years, Alucard thought, and nobody has stepped between these two and the mob? Nobody has stood up and said, ‘Enough?’

“Their loss,” he replied. “None of the other androids in the world remember Project Gestalt, do they?”

“The rank-and-file? No.” Devola shook her head. “The higher ups do, of course, but for the most part, everyone thinks humans vanished when the aliens invaded.”

“Most of them have forgotten that humans went extinct at all,” Popola said.

“They even believe that claptrap YoRHa spouts about the refugee colony on the moon,” Devola said. “I can’t blame them. If we hadn’t seen the whole project collapse with our own two eyes, we’d have believed it, too.”

“They don’t even know what your original roles were, then, or even have an inkling why they would hate you at all.” Alucard scratched his chin thoughtfully. “You’re the Cagots.”

“The what?”

“A persecuted minority from southern France and northern Spain. From the medieval era through the Industrial Revolution, they were hated and shunned,” said Alucard, “but nobody could say why. They weren’t an ethnic or religious minority. They didn’t speak a different language. They weren’t more susceptible to diseases. They didn’t have any unique cultural mores or practices compared to their neighbors. In fact, they had no distinguishing features at all. They were simply despised for centuries. If there was an inciting incident or factor that led to them being treated differently, it was forgotten so quickly and so utterly that no historian was ever able to determine what it was. Not conclusively, at least.”

“Yeah, that sounds like us,” Devola said. She took Popola’s hand. “Ready to head back out, sis?”

Popola nodded. “Yeah, if you are.”

“Aren’t you worried?” Alucard asked. “Perhaps you should lie low for the rest of the day.”

“It’s not even noon yet,” said Devola, “and we have plenty of work to get done. But…” She took a second to think. “Maybe we should table some of our chores around the camp for another day.”

Popola’s fingers curled tighter around Devola’s. “It’s dangerous out there.”

“I’d almost rather take my chances with machines today. At least they don’t hate us.”

Alucard felt a pang of jealousy seeing the twins holding hands. No matter what they had to suffer through, neither of them had to face it alone. Horror, guilt, persecution, neglect—no matter the source of the pain, they always had each other as a balm. But he had nothing but himself. Himself, and transient companions who would cross his path but a few brief times and vanish forever.

How many had he loved and left behind? How many peoples’ lives had he changed, for better or for worse, before exiting theirs forever and leaving them to wither and grow old? How many times had he started over and over again, returning to see brief snapshots of the lives of his old friends’ children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren? How many times had his heart ached with longing to rekindle those old bonds with each new generation, only for him to hold everyone at arm’s-length? As if such protective measures had mattered… he’d gone too far last time. He’d been too much to too many people.
Now he was alone again, and this time there was no fresh-faced Belmont brat for him to befriend, no people with familiar names, no people whose faces carried those subtle traces of their ancestors only Alucard could notice. The same loneliness that had spared him the pain of loss left him with no one to share his pain. Especially now, when that pain clung to the back of his mind, whispering in his ear at every moment of silence. He envied the twins’ constant companionship.

“I’ll go with you,” he offered. “Many hands make light work, after all, and I doubt you’ll need to fear for your safety with me around.”

While Alucard certainly longed for companionship, there was a practical reason for his offer as well. Some time outside of the camp would also help him discern the spread of Dracula’s demonic forces. Wherever the concentration was highest, Dracula and his castle could not be far away.

“You’re too good for us, Alucard,” Popola said.

“Don’t put yourself in harm’s way for our sake,” Devola said. “We’re programmed to want to protect humans, you know. So if you make that job too hard for us…”

“Ah, but you forget…” Alucard grinned wryly, taking great care to show off his fangs. “I’m only half human.”

Devola returned the grin. “Then we’ll only protect half of you.”

Surrounded on all sides by the lush and primeval forest that had engulfed the world in humanity’s absence, Pascal’s village was a rustic, ramshackle cluster of wooden huts and shacks arranged on tiers around the trunk of a gargantuan tree. Wooden bridges and platforms linked the central hub of the village to smaller outlying structures built into the forest. White flags waved from every open window; every machine that stood guard on the village’s perimeter bore the same flag in lieu of any weaponry.

On the periphery of the village sat a well-tended garden ringed with bright lamps; the machines were using artificial lighting to recreate the planet’s old day/night cycle in order to grow delicate plants and flowers. Much to 2B’s surprise, the machines tending to the garden were leaving and turning off the lamps behind them, and doing so in a hurry. She wondered if the village feared an attack.

9S still flinched a little as he walked past the guards, although he’d long gotten over his initial suspicions that this village was some kind of elaborate machine trap. 2B relaxed, loosening her shoulders, and recalled her sword to its virtual storage, but stayed alert.

The village seemed more serene than ever. In fact… it seemed quieter than ever. 2B couldn’t hear even a single machine child’s giddy shrieks of merriment. The children—the machines who had disconnected from the network soonest after their manufacture and whose consciences had not yet fully developed—typically played in the clearing, gamboling around the roots of the great tree, but the lights illuminating the clearing showed quite clearly that not a soul was down there.

Pascal greeted the two androids, waving his spindly arm as they approached. “2B! 9S! Thank you for arriving on such short notice!”

“It’s fine,” said 2B. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, it’s… something most bizarre,” Pascal said, shivering. “I feared you would not believe me without proof. After all, the great skeptic philosophers do say, ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.’”
“Well, what’s this claim?” 9S asked. “You’ve piqued my interest.”

Pascal led the two of them into the hollow of the tree. Electric lights strung across the tunnel revealed a large space inside, a cavern containing piles of supplies and machine parts. In the center of the cavern stood a lone machine, one with a short and stubby torso perched on long and spindly legs. Its limbs were in shackles; the chains ran tautly to the edges of the cavern, holding the machine in place. It was shivering; its optical sensors glowed a bright crimson. Its dirty hull was streaked and smeared with black oil; great holes in its chassis exposed its inner machinery.

“So… you guys take prisoners now?” 9S crossed his arms. “Gotta admit, Pascal, I’m not…”

“That machine,” Pascal said, “is not like any other machine. I can scarcely even bring myself to describe it…”

“Observation: There are no active machine lifeforms in this area other than Pascal,” Pod 153 announced.

“What? That can’t be,” 9S said. “That thing’s standing right in front of us. Pod, run your scans again.”

Pod 042 spoke up. “Observation: Pod 153’s scans are accurate. The entity standing right in front of us is not a machine lifeform. It is inert.”

“Inert, my foot. I’ll get to the bottom of this,” 9S said, raising his outstretched arm. “Pod, ready a logic virus vaccine, just in case.” An arc of light shot from his open palm to the machine’s torso as he began to hack the machine.

A split second later, he stumbled backward, jerking back his hand as if it had been burned. “What the—”

2B summoned her sword. “What’s wrong, 9S?”

“There’s nothing for me to hack!” he sputtered. “That… That thing isn’t even turned on! It’s just a dead pile of metal!”

As if to disprove his statement, the machine turned its head and looked directly at him, then focused on 2B. Its eyes did not just glow, they burned, and 2B felt something churn within her as her eyes connected with its eyes.

“This was… it was once one of us,” Pascal said. “Flamel, he called himself. He went out into the forest a few days ago… and we found him lying in the clearing early this morning. His core was completely inert—there was nothing we could do to reactivate it. Just as we were preparing to bury him, he came to life—but his chassis was still cold!”

“Analysis: None of the machine lifeform’s systems are online. It not emitting any electrical or radio signals, nor does it appear to be emitting any ambient heat,” Pod 153 said.

“Flamel—that thing—didn’t seem to recognize us, and attacked us,” Pascal said. “Our guards managed to subdue him and bring him here, but in the process, one of the guards drove a metal pole through his torso. I was terrified he had gravely injured or even killed him and was prepared to reprimand him, but the… thing was completely undeterred. I do not think this machine can die. And I am worried…”

“You’re worried there might be more,” 2B concluded. It was a fear she and Pascal shared. The machines already had the advantage of numbers in the war; if they could produce immortal
legions, there would be no chance that the Army of Humanity could retake the Earth, even with the elite soldiers of YoRHa on their side.

“I do hope that this is some kind of fluke,” said Pascal. “If there are more machines like this out there, none of us will be safe.”

“This whole thing is impossible.” 9S took a step toward the undead machine. “This has to be a trick. Any machine that moves has to expend energy. That means heat and electricity. It can’t just break the laws of physics!”

“Yet here it is,” 2B said.

9S took another step toward the machine, summoning his sword in one hand and lifting his other hand. “It’s a hologram, I bet. That’s why there’s nothing for our sensors to pick up. It’s not even real.”

“No,” Pascal insisted, “that thing is very real. I think I might have a theory about what it might be—what might have happened to poor Flamel—but I am afraid it would sound even more ridiculous…”

“9S, get away from the machine,” 2B ordered, walking up to the machine to assess it herself. The closer she came to it, the more unnerved she felt. The ambient temperature of the room seemed to drop with every inch closer she came.

She took her sword and tapped the flat of the blade on the top of the machine’s head. The muted clang showed with perfect clarity that the machine was, in fact, real.

Emboldened, 2B placed her hand on the machine’s chassis. Just as Pascal had said, it was cold.

The machine cocked its head, setting its red optical sensors askew, as if it were curious about her. 2B had a strange feeling… as though the inside of her body were filled with soft lead, weighing her down…

And then it spoke. Its voice was a slow, stuttering electronic drawl, deep and gravely.

“Thiiiirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrry…”

The machine’s blank faceplate cracked and sloughed off; 2B quickly withdrew her hand and stepped back as the machine writhed and tugged on its chains. The inner mechanisms of its face were clearly visible, along with two long, sharp protrusions among the tooth-like rows of tubes that formed its vestigial mouth. The chains broke away from their moorings, whipping through the air as the undead machine lunged with surprising speed and grace at 2B. 9S and Pascal both leaped back to avoid them—although Pascal, not quite so agile as the nimble Scanner, more stumbled than leaped.

Regaining her senses, 2B ducked under a whipping length of chain and struck the machine across the torso with her sword, tearing a gash diagonally in its body, then followed up with another strike that cut deeply into the machine’s unprotected inner mechanisms of its face. The machine screeched and gurgled as it fell back, rolling across the floor until it came to a stop in the corner.

The machine stood up on shaking legs. “Paaaassssssss…. caaaaal. Twoooooo… baaaaaaaaaa… Niiiiiiine… eeeeeeessss…” It twitched its arms and rustled its chains.

“F-Flamel!” Pascal stammered. “That’s right! It’s me, Pascal! W-We brought you home!” He stepped forward; 2B held out her arm and held him back.
“I’m… sssssoooooo… thiiiiirsty…” the machine moaned. Its sharp teeth—fangs—that flanked either side of its scrap-metal mouth twitched and clacked like an arachnid’s mandibles. Shutters closed and opened on its optical sensors, the visible mechanisms of its head undulating with each blink.

It twitched its arms and rustled its chains again, then flung out its arm, the chain flying along with it. 2B felt the chain graze the side of her neck, then the other one; realizing immediately what was happening, she raised her left arm to keep the chain from wrapping tightly around her neck. Pascal screamed.

As she struggled, the machine whipped the other chain at her, catching her right wrist; 2B yanked it back with enough force to pull the machine off its feet and send it tumbling toward her. The chain wrapped around her neck and arm grew slack; 2B drove her sword into the machine’s torso and pinned it to the floor.

“Pod! Open fire!”

Pod 042 obliged, pummeling the undead machine with a barrage of gunfire. The cavern was bathed in flickering light as the deafening roar of the pod’s weaponry echoed off the walls. After a few seconds that had felt like an eternity, the pod’s gun fell silent and folded back into itself.

Bullet holes riddled the undead machine, steam curling from the myriad perforations as the edges of the coin-sized holes sizzled and glowed orange-hot.

The machine’s eyes still glowed bright crimson; 2B stumbled backward as the machine slid itself off her sword and stood up, hunched over. Black oil trickled from its perforated body.

“B-Bloooood… thiiiirsty…”

Pascal had been right—this machine was unkillable. 2B had never encountered anything that could not be killed. Everything living died, sooner or later. But this thing… was not alive to begin with.

She couldn’t kill it. But maybe, just maybe, if she could just overwhelm it with force, 2B could render it immobile. “9S, take Pascal and go,” she said. “I’ll lead this thing out of the village and find some way to destroy it.”

The machine let out a hiss and steam poured from its mouth—or, at least, what 2B had thought was steam before realizing that the air it was exhaling was so cold that it was freezing the air around it and creating a cloud of ice crystals.

“Wrrrrrryyyyyyyyyyyy,” it hissed.

“Are you gonna be okay, 2B?” 9S asked, backing away with Pascal in tow.

“I’ll be fine.” 2B took a step back to cover the exit as the machine eyed her yet again. There was something otherworldly about the way its eyes glowed—something that overwhelmed her senses, making her feel oddly weary.

The machine attacked her again and 2B sidestepped it, severed one of its spindly arms, grabbed one of the trailing chains out of the air, and wrapped it tightly around the machine’s torso. Once she’d gotten a secure grip, she grabbed the chain with both hands and dragged the machine out of the tree’s hollow, throwing it off the wooden platform ringing the tree with all her strength. The machine hit the ground with a loud thud.

9S was waiting for her outside. “What do we do now, 2B?” he asked.
2B took a deep breath. “Stay here,” she said, and she leaped down to the ground.

The machine was waiting for her and lashed out with its chains, letting out a mechanical screech. 2B’s sword deflected the chains as they whipped through the air; she buried its length in the machine’s forehead. The machine backed away.

2B pulled the sword out and struck again, driving the machine deeper into the dark forest. She struck again and again and again, each time pushing the machine farther and farther back.

The machine absorbed all her blows, and though she whittled away at its chassis, 2B didn’t feel like she was coming any closer to rendering it inert. It was guarding its remaining limbs well to preserve its remaining mobility, and for all the holes 2B put in its chassis, nothing she did seemed to impede its motor functions.

This isn’t a machine, 2B realized. It looks like a machine and talks like a machine and feels like a machine, but it isn’t one. It’s something… something else.

She thought about the way she’d felt when its eyes had bored into hers.

It’s something… that doesn’t belong in this world. More otherworldly than any alien. Compared to whatever this thing came from, another planet might as well be next door…

2B threw up her arm as the machine attacked, burying its fangs in her forearm. After the initial jolt of pain which twisted her fingers into claws, she felt her arm almost immediately start to grow numb, as if the machine was draining some vital energy from it; her fingers spasmed and went limp. In the dappled moonlight, she thought she could see the holes riddling the machine’s chassis begin to shrink—but it could have easily been her imagination.

As the numbness crept up to her elbow, 2B took her sword and drove the blade under her armpit and thrust upwards, liberating her arm right at the shoulder before the numbness could spread any further through her body; she clenched her teeth to hold back a pained outcry. At the very least, it was a clean cut.

The machine held the arm closer to its mouth and dug into it as if feasting on it, its fangs tearing through her sleeve and shredding the synthetic flesh underneath. As it stepped back, engrossed in its meal, Pod 042’s light shone upon it, revealing to be true what 2B had thought she had just imagined—all of the structural damage to the machine was fading away. A new arm was even sprouting from its side, the metal growing and flowing like a plant in a time-lapse video.

“Good… gooood… I… feel… sooo much better now…” The machine raised its arm and tilted back its head, dangling 2B’s severed, gnawed-on arm overhead and letting synthetic blood drain from the arm into its malformed gullet. “Sweet… nectaaaaaar…”

“Pod,” 2B hissed, staring on in horror as the machine in front of her ate and drank of her discarded limb, “spear.”

“Affirmative.” Pod 042 lit up and channeled energy into the ground; a second later, spears of light tore through the soil and impaled the machine, raising it off its feet as the spears pierced its body and limbs. It hung from the spearheads, limbs splayed, its meal torn from its hand. Its fingers twitched, its spherical head swiveling on its torso.

“Oh… it almost huuuuuurtts…” the machine said, squirming. Its struggles only caused its body to slide further down the spears. “You… you are fun. I like you.”

2B stepped backward, swallowing a lump in her throat. She didn’t know what to do. Pod 042’s
normal ordinance wasn’t enough, let alone her sword, and its special attack programs were on cooldown, for all the good they would do.

And the way this thing looked at her… its eyes that glowed with such an eldritch light, one she’d never seen shining from a machine’s eyes before…

*I can’t be this unsettled by a single enemy,* 2B told herself. *Get it together.*

The machine’s red eyes remained trained on her, piercing her with its baleful gaze.

*Emotions are prohibited. Fear, too, is prohibited. Fear has no place in this body… in this mind… in this programming…*  

Why was she having so much trouble moving? Why did her body feel so sluggish?

“A fine meal… you would make.” The spears faded in a shower of white sparks, freeing the machine and letting it drop to the ground. It picked itself up. “A fine addition… to our legion.” The way it spoke had changed—it was far more articulate now. Had its feeding repaired its mind the same way it had repaired its body?

The machine wiggled its fingers as they lengthened, a fine mesh membrane stretching out between them as its arms became like the wings of a bat. Its entire body shifted, metal shaping itself as though it were as soft and malleable as clay. It slowly rose on growing, thickening legs until it was nearly half a meter taller than 2B.

“Die,” the beastly machine said, “and join us!”

2B knew fear. She’d felt fear when staring down Goliath and Behemoth-class machines outgunned and outmanned. But this fear was different. The terror she felt from this unknown, unknowable enemy rooted her to the spot.

*What can I do?* 2B asked herself, struggling to keep her legs from buckling beneath her. *I can’t set off a black box reaction by myself. Even if I could, the explosion would be large enough to destroy the village. I haven’t backed up my data in almost eight hours, anyway…*  

*I have to think of something… I have to get a hold of myself… Whatever this thing is doing to me,* I…

“2B! Keep pushing that machine back!” 9S called out from the woods ahead of her. “Follow the sound of my voice! Pascal and I have an idea!”

Snapped out of her fugue by the sound of 9S’s voice, 2B pressed onward and attacked the machine with renewed vigor and ferocity. She pushed it farther and farther back, just like before, striking with enough fury to leave it with not even a split second to retaliate.

Fresh wounds appeared on its rusty and oil-stained chassis as 2B pushed harder and harder and harder and harder. The beastly machine dug in its heels, its new metal talons grasping a tree root that snaked across the ground.

“Mortal fool,” the machine cackled. “Look at what you could be if I were to feed upon you…” With a single swipe of its bat-winged arm, it knocked 2B off her feet and sent her sprawling, her spine arcing and cracking on an exposed root as the back of her head hit the ground. Feedback streamed through her visual processor.

A beam of light from 9S’s pod shot out from the forest, tearing through the machine’s shoulder and
severing one wing from its torso; cables snaked out from both severed ends and threaded around each other, pulling the wing back up.

Still, the machine was distracted—for now. 2B stood up and took hold of her pod, her fingers clasping its metal arm. “Pod! Wire!”

A thin beam of light shot from the pod to the machine’s torso, yanking 2B off her feet as the wire drew itself taut and then contracted. She let go of her pod, momentum keeping her flying on the same trajectory as she summoned her sword and grasped it with a white-knuckle grip.

She hit the machine with enough force to knock it backward just a little more, slicing across the seam between the machine’s torso and head. As oil sprayed in an arc through the air, she hit the ground and attacked again and again and again, harder and harder, bit by bit, strike by strike, pushing the machine backward along the tree-lined path.

A hot, blinding light engulfed her, searing her eyes; 2B threw her arm up over her eyes to block out the light. It felt like the sun—even though dawn would not be for another six months here.

The machine screeched and let out an electronic wail; 2B cracked open her eyes and squinted, making out—just barely—the form of the machine as it writhed and burst into flames. The metal of its hull and chassis seemed to droop and flow like molten glass as it fell apart into soft, white-hot globs that crumbled into black ashes, its legs collapsing and wings crumpling.

2B let her eyes adjust, raising her hand to her brow to block the hot light beating down on her. She was standing in the middle of a garden, and ringing the cultivated plot of land were upraised lights.

Pascal approached the pile of ash that had once been his friend, bowing his head. “So… that is it, then, I suppose…”

“He’s in a better place now,” 2B assured him.

“2B!” 9S ran over to her from across the garden, taking care not to trample on anything. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Wh… What did you two do?”

“I had my suspicions,” said Pascal, “that Flamel’s behavior matched ancient human folklore I had read about, but I couldn’t make any conclusions. But then it said it was ‘thirsty…’ I wondered if perhaps it was a vampire.”

“What’s a vampire?” 2B asked.

“Vampires were undead creatures said to have a lethal allergic reaction to sunlight. Dawn might be half a year away, but 9S reminded me that we had the next best thing,” said Pascal, gesturing to the lights. “I don’t know what we would have done if I had been wrong. But… you are right, 2B. Flamel must be in a better place now. It was said that killing a vampire with sunlight or holy weapons was the only way to bring peace to its tormented soul.”

“Glad to be of service,” 2B said. The garden spun around her, the bright lights leaving residue of corrupted pixels in their wake as she struggled to steady herself on weakening legs. She felt lightheaded, dizzy, short of breath; 9S and Pascal both rushed to steady her before she could fall. Pascal’s metal arms were hard and cold, but 9S’s… his were soft and warm, so much so that 2B could fall asleep in them.

She wouldn’t. It was forbidden to feel this way, and although she couldn’t stop herself from
feeling, she could bar herself from acting on them, from letting those feelings be known.

So she did.

She placed her hand on 9S’s chest and pushed him away. She could see his face fall and hated herself for it, but the more she welcomed little moments like this, the harder it always was in the end. 2B just didn’t want to struggle anymore.

She caught her breath and forced herself upright once more. “I’m okay. I don’t need any help.”

9S held up his hands. “All right. Fine. Sorry.” He sounded petulant, and 2B couldn’t blame him.

The three of them headed back to the village. On the way, Pascal picked up 2B’s severed arm, but gasped and nearly dropped it. The flesh on the arm—what little remained that hadn’t been shredded by the machine’s teeth and fangs—had withered and discolored, turning pale and ashen. Dark veins stood out on the surface of the skin.

“Oh, dear!” Pascal exclaimed. “I was hoping we could simply reattach this, but I think I speak for all of us when I say this shouldn’t go anywhere but in an incinerator!”

“I’ve never seen any part of an android’s body do that,” 9S said, poking and prodding at the withered, wrinkly flesh.

“You were very smart to cut this off,” Pascal told 2B. “In folklore, vampires convert others to vampires by biting them and draining their… fluids. Blood, in the case of humans.”

The machine’s words ran through 2B’s head. Look at what you could be if I were to feed upon you.

“It… wanted to turn me into a vampire?”

“A disease that spreads like that could spread exponentially.” 9S took the arm from Pascal. “I’d like to do more research on this, if you don’t mind, Pascal. I’ll use it in my report to Command about these ‘vampires.’ Hopefully, YoRHa will be able to do something before this problem worsens.”

Pascal nodded. “You have my gratitude, 9S. 2B, will you be able to make it back to Anemone’s camp with only one arm?”

“I’ll be fine,” 2B insisted. She spared another glance at the withered, desiccated arm 9S was clutching and suppressed a shudder.

This time, it was 9S who stayed ahead of 2B as the two of them headed back to the camp. 2B was sure that 9S thought she was being haughty and proud by refusing to let him help her walk to the camp or carry her there, which were both things he’d probably have no issue doing for her (although, with his lighter and weaker chassis, carrying her might have presented him with a few problems). Better for him to think that of her than to know the truth.

“So… serial killing machines out for vengeance, blood-sucking monster machines… what’s next?” 9S asked. “It’s not even that far past noon. We still have plenty of time in the day to run into some really weird stuff.”

“For both of our sakes, I hope the worst is past us,” 2B answered. She stopped to catch her breath. That vampire machine Flamel had taken more out of her than just her arm, and she began to worry if perhaps she hadn’t cut it off soon enough. Was she fatigued from the grueling combat and loss of blood, or… was she going to become a monster, just like Flamel?
She recalled the machine’s behavior. How it had been near-catatonic and almost mindless at first, but had gained more and more of its intelligence the more it fed—yet still, it was plainly evident that the mind that had returned to it was nothing like the original Flamel, the one Pascal had known and considered a friend. A day before, 2B had thought that a logic virus infection was the worst fate that could befall an android. But this… this made her blood run cold and her black box run hot.

They hadn’t made it far out of the forest when a figure appeared before them in a flash of golden light. When the light had faded, a bare-chested man with short, silver-white hair stood before them. 2B recognized him immediately. One of the two humanoid machines she and 9S had run into in the subterranean alien graveyard weeks ago.

Eve.

Eve’s crimson eyes locked onto 9S, a rictus-like snarl twisting his face. “A silver-haired man with a black coat. I’ve found you…”

In one swift, lightning-fast movement, his hand clasped around 9S’s throat and lifted him up off the ground. 9S’s feet dangled in the air as he impotently kicked his legs and clutched at Eve’s wrist, his fingers scrabbling helplessly against the humanoid machine’s skin.

“What have you done,” Eve hissed, “with my brother?”

2B remembered both her encounters with Adam and Eve well, especially the first. In the desert, Adam had learned and grown through battle (not entirely unlike the vampire machine she’d just faced, she realized); then, after she and 9S had both run their swords through his torso, Eve had appeared, emerging from Adam’s wounded body surrounded by a golden aura like the progeny of some ancient god. In their second encounter in the alien graveyard, 2B had fought against Eve, while 9S had faced Adam. It seemed this humanoid machine was extremely protective of his ‘brother’—was that what this was about? Did Eve want vengeance against 9S for hurting Adam?

Pod 042 and Pod 153 trained their guns on Eve, but with 9S in the way, they didn’t dare fire. 2B, though, threw herself at him.

The flat of Eve’s palm collided with her forehead with such force that her visual processor crashed; blackness engulfed 2B as she hit the ground. Static flickered and distorted snatches of images played in front of her eyes as her optical sensors rebooted and rerouted themselves through her eyes. But she didn’t let a little temporary blindness deter her, nor did she allow her fatigue to give her pause. She rolled, righted herself, and attacked once more, flanking Eve.

He bludgeoned her with 9S’s body, knocking her aside. 2B felt the rough bark-covered surface of a tree trunk crack against the back of her head; the trunk shook and branches shivered, letting loose a shower of dying leaves that fluttered to the ground.

9S gurgled unintelligibly; Eve’s hateful glare grew less severe, and just as suddenly as he’d grabbed him, he dropped 9S and let him crumple in a heap on the ground.

“You’re those two androids from before,” Eve said. “The ones who hurt us… the ones who hurt Brother…”

2B pushed herself to her feet, her fist clenched around her sword. If Eve wanted to pay 9S back for hurting Adam, she would repay him in kind for hurting 9S. Nobody got to hurt 9S except…

“But you’re not him,” he said, clearly disappointed. He turned his back on the two androids and
vanished in a blossom of golden light.

2B’s jaw dropped.

“What?” she whispered.

“Statement: the machine lifeform Eve is no longer in the area,” Pod 042 announced.

After a few seconds to overcome her shock, 2B trudged over to 9S and knelt at his side, laying a hand softly on his neck. She could see the fingertip-shaped bruises, black and blue, already blossoming on either side of his neck. He weakly turned his head in 2B’s direction at her touch; 2B felt warm relief blossom in her chassis.

9S groaned, coughed, and hacked, spittle flying from his mouth as his chest convulsed; he sucked in lungfuls of air and expelled them as if he feared he would never breathe again.

“What the hell was that?” he gasped.

86S was having a bad day. In fact, he was having a day so bad that he would definitely never have one as bad again. Once, he’d had a life. Once, he’d had dreams. Now, he was just the guy who’d tried to steal those witches’ panties. And that was what he’d be forever—he’d never, ever live it down.

There wasn’t even anything perverse about what he’d done! Stealing their panties was incidental to the plan! And their clothes had to be stolen in the first place so he could start a fight and win the over-under bet! The rest of the guys had laughed at him for picking such an early date and for putting so much money on it, but his plan had been foolproof—if only he’d managed to slip away to the garbage incinerator to dispose of the evidence in time…

Of course, that tall, silver-haired man, that 15V (was that even his real name, or was he just some crazy asshole?) had to butt in and play white knight, and then on top of that, that lunatic wild woman had socked him in the nose! His face had been as ruined as his pride.

And then the rest of the guys in the camp had started taunting him. They were the worst, because at least all the women were doing was turning their noses up at him.

You steal two women’s clothes, and everyone ignores the shirts and pants and goes right for the panties, even though you didn’t care about the panties, but the more you said you didn’t care, the more they all thought you did! Laughing at an elite YoRHa soldier… that was beyond the pale! YoRHa was the vanguard of the Council of Humanity!

He’d never been so ashamed in his life. So, of course, he’d done what he always did when he was stressed out: he went fishing.

The coast was near here; a large section of the city ruins had fallen into the ocean a long time ago, the crumbling buildings and isolated segments of highway forming little islets. He’d simply executed a few perfect leaps from island to island until the city ruins were to his back and the inky black water stretched out in front of him.

And he’d sat down on the rooftop, fishing rod and flashlight in hand (his tactical support pod was in the shop), and waited for something to tug on the line.

Some people said fishing was ‘boring.’ Some people said it was ‘lame.’ Those people were stupid. Nothing felt better than the absolute peace that came from waiting, waiting, waiting for something
to take the bait. It was the ultimate in relaxation, and boy, did 86S need it.

“Is it true that I can no longer eat... garlic, master? I do quite enjoy it in my culinary experiments.”

“Hmm? Oh, of course not. That is a common misconception; one of many. But why do you ask? I was under the impression that you did not need to eat.”

“...That, too, is a common misconception, Lord Dracula.”

86S glanced over his shoulder, sweeping the flashlight in a wide arc. “Hello? Someone there?”

The beam of light fell on two silver-haired men in black cloaks standing on the island directly behind him. Men just like 15V. Were they the same above-top-secret YoRHa model as him?

One of the men gracefully leaped onto 86S’s island. He did it so effortlessly that it was as though he’d simply taken a single step. This one had shoulder-length hair and his cloak had a furred collar; his companion, who held back, had waist-length hair and wore strange panels of glass over his eyes. “Good afternoon, young man. You seem... troubled.”

86S laughed. “Boy, you don’t know the half of it. Your buddy 15V ruined my day!”

The man with the furred collar cocked his head. “15V?”

“That was a fake name he gave me, wasn’t it?” 86S groaned. “Of course it was fake…” He thought back to when he’d been laying on the ground half-conscious after the wild woman had punched him. She’d called that man something else… something like…

“You probably know him as Alucard,” 86S said.

“Oh?” The man with the furred collar smiled, showing ivory teeth. On either side of his mouth were pointed fangs. Alucard had fangs like those, too, didn’t he? “Indeed? Is Alucard still alive and kicking?”

“I guess.”

“He’s been troubling you, hasn’t he?” The man laid a pale hand on 86S’s shoulder. His hand was ice cold—it was so cold, he could feel it through his coat, and even through the sweater he wore under it! It was like this strange man’s body didn’t produce any heat at all… “What if I told you that I could help you get your revenge on him?”

86S sighed. “Forget it. I’m done with him and that woman.” His nose still throbbed whenever he thought about doing anything to get even with those two. Whatever he tried, they’d probably gang up on him together and give him a thrashing he’d never forget. “I’ll just keep my head down and —”

Wait a minute.

That wild woman. She’d said something else while 86S was down for the count. She’d told Alucard to call her ‘A2.’

A2.

The A2. The fugitive YoRHa soldier. The wanted fugitive YoRHa soldier! That A2!

Vengeance suddenly looked a whole lot more possible. A team of YoRHa executioners could
definitely take her down, and if she hung out with Alucard, he’d be in hot water, too. The arc of justice was long, but it bent toward annihilating the assholes that made you look like a pervert in front of all your friends!

With a smile, 86S changed his tune. “Y’know, thanks and all, but I’ve already got a plan to take them down.”

The fur-collared man’s smile didn’t shrink. “Well, then, my friend, we’d like to be part of it. Vengeance is sweeter when you share it, isn’t it?” He glanced at his companion. “And you could help my friend here, too. He’s doing… research.”

“Research?” 86S’s ears perked up. “I like research. What’s he studying?”

“Ancient human folklore. And as it happens,” said the strange man, “you are just the test subject he’s been looking for…”

The other man vanished; a split second later, 86S felt a pair of ice-cold hands grab him from behind, frigid fingers like talons digging into his midsection. He squirmed in a futile effort to free himself, took a deep breath, and prepared to scream, but then his eyes met those of the first strange man.

That withering glare quelled his struggles and sucked every morsel of air out of his mouth. 86S found himself utterly helpless as something cold dug into the side of his neck; something warm started to seep out, dampening his collar and spilling down his coat. Every part of his body went limp; he ragdolled, his legs crumpling under his weight, his body propped up only by the icy grip holding him in place.

His eyes rolled back as a strange, almost warm blossom of ice spread through his chest, driving all thought, even fear, from his mind in a wave of bliss he could not even begin to describe, let alone understand.
Minuet of Moonlight I

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Anemone goes after A2 while Commander White reacts to 9S's disturbing report on vampire machines.

Chapter Notes

Thanks wordbending for doing an excellent job beta reading!

Alucard’s sword ran through a gap in the reptilian beast-knight’s rusty breastplate and between its ribs; with a deft flick of his wrist, the blade severed its spine, and another graceful slice slid the blade through flesh, scales, armor and all. Both halves of the scaly beast fell to the ground. The upper half pulled itself with its arms across the rooftop, its severed spinal column and exposed entrails dragging behind it like the tail it had once had a few seconds ago and its long, thin tongue flicking out of its bloodied snout. Not one to leave a job half-done, Alucard planted his boot squarely on the beast’s head and crushed its skull, shards of bone piercing its flesh from the inside out.

“Rrrrrevenge!” a four-legged machine growled, bounding at Alucard; it was nearly upon him by the time he whirled around to deal with it, his sword digging into its forelegs as its scorpion-like tail curled up and lashed out at him. “Rrrrrevenge! Silverrr hairrrred muuuurrrrdererrrrrrr!”

A shot rang out—the loud, full-throated bark of a shotgun—and a hail of bullets peppered the beastly machine’s metal hide. While barely damaged, it flinched and diverted its attention to the source of the blast—Popola was wrist-deep in one of the machines’ guts, taking control of the gun turret affixed to its torso.

Alucard took welcome advantage of the distraction to overpower the machine, sever its forearms, and cleave its head in twain; the metal beast collapsed, twitching and sparking in its death throes.

Devola yanked her sword free of the machine chassis it had become embedded in, panting with exertion. Both machines and monsters littered the cracked and moss-streaked rooftop, sparks flying from exposed and severed wires. Popola rummaged through the innards of the machine she’d felled and placed whatever undamaged components she pulled out into a knapsack hanging from her side.

“Mark these ones on the map,” he said to Devola and Popola, motioning to the smoldering piles of ash that had once been Dracula’s hellish minions and wiping his sword clean on the hem of his coat. Ichor from the several other monsters he’d slain, mingled with oil from the machines, stained the coat and left behind stubborn streaks on the blade. “Do you see a pattern yet?”

Devola pulled up a portable computer—it looked remarkably like one of those “smart phones” humans had all carried around back in the twenty-first century—tapped on it a few times, and shook her head. “We haven’t checked enough places. We haven’t even looked in the amusement park yet.”
Alucard nodded, only half paying attention as he tended to his sword, which he’d bartered for with the camp’s weapons merchant the other day. It wasn’t up to par with his mother’s sword, not by a long shot, but it was sharp and seemed to hold together well for an artless hunk of metal that had come off an assembly line. “Well, then, that should be the next place on our— I beg your pardon, did you say ‘amusement park?’”

“Yeah,” Devola said.

“As in roller coasters and teacup rides and such.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why wait?” Popola asked. “The amusement park isn’t dangerous. Most of the machines there just ignore everyone. We could go there right now.”

Popola’s and Devola’s errands took them all across the city ruins and surrounding regions; by accompanying them, Alucard not only lightened their burdens, but also became more acquainted with the area, aiding him on his quest to pin down Dracula’s location. Unfortunately, after a few quote-unquote “days” of sticking virtual pins on a digital map whenever the three of them ran afoul of these hellish creatures, Alucard felt no more knowledgeable about the spread and concentration of Dracula’s forces than he had when he’d started. He was starting to lose track of time. He wondered, was Dracula intentionally obfuscating his location to toy with him and wear him down?

How does one hide an entire castle, he wondered, and where?

Dracula’s castle, like Dracula himself, was a creature of chaos—or, rather, Chaos. The very embodiment of entropy and the darkness at the end of eternity was the origin of both Dracula’s dark powers and of his home. The castle shaped itself, growing and changing to suit the whims of its master. The castle could be anywhere. Or anything. Depending on how long ago Dracula had awakened, it may be more of a seed waiting to sprout than a flower ready to blossom. Or perhaps it was a fungus, with its extensive root network hidden from sight…

“It’s getting late,” Devola said.

Alucard looked up at the black sky, featureless save for the twinkling stars spread from horizon to horizon. In this world of endless darkness, the passage of time was almost impossible to gauge. The only thing that distinguished night from day was that the moon would pass overhead, making daytime feel utterly interminable (he did not look forward to the oncoming new moon and felt a twinge of despair seeing the waning moon diminish night by night).

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Because,” Devola said, rolling her eyes, “we’re androids. Our systems keep time perfectly.”

“I don’t suppose anybody has a watch I could borrow,” said Alucard. No one seemed to have a use for one save for him.

A dark shadow blotted out the waning moon; feeling a chill run through the back of his mind, Alucard raised his sword defensively as a massive flying machine swooped down; the compound machine seemed to be comprised of five smaller flying machines, four arranged like spokes around a central hub with blades jutting out from their sides.

“Brother!”
The flying machine turned itself sideways and spun like a giant sawblade, its bladed spokes grinding against Alucard’s blade and pushing him to the edge of the rooftop; he’d dug in his heels, but soon enough found his heels digging into thin air as they slipped off the edge. Before he could be pushed off the edge, he transformed himself into a bat and slipped away, allowing the machine’s momentum to fling itself through the air.

Alucard returned to his human form as the machine slowed itself down, turned itself around, and righted itself.

“Brother… Brother… Brother… Brother…”

“Are you all right, Alucard?” Popola asked.

Alucard fingered a small, stinging slit in his sleeve that hadn’t been there before. “Nothing to be concerned with. But if this machine—”

The machine attacked again, sparks flying as Alucard parried its whirling blades once more. This time, he barely managed to divert the heavy machine’s course and send it flying off at an angle, avoiding him by a hair’s-breadth.

“—treats someone it calls its ‘brother’ like this—”

The machine soared in an arc around the rooftop like a buzzard circling a corpse and let loose a salvo of crackling spheres of energy. Alucard found them easy enough to avoid—they moved slowly enough—but Devola and Popola scattered less readily. Alucard batted one of the energy pulses out of the air before it could hit either of them.

“—I’d hate to see what it could do—”

The flying machine spun on its axis and charged again, retaining its horizontal orientation; Alucard turned around, wrapped his arms around the twins, and leaped off the rooftop. The machine passed overhead as he touched down on the broad surface of a branch jutting from the tree curling around the crumbling skyscraper; without wasting a second, he threw his sword straight up, blade first.

“—to its enemies!”

The blade slipped through the central hub of the spinning machine, impaling it; the machine rocked and waivered, lost altitude, and careened into the sinkhole in the center of the city ruins, exploding against the rock walls.

“I think they like you,” Devola told Alucard. She turned to Popola. “You’ve salvaged everything we needed, right?”

Popola hefted the laden rucksack hanging from her shoulder. “Should be enough… I think.” A gust of wind blew through the city. She shuddered and shivered, clutching reflexively at her arms. Almost by pure instinct alone, Alucard hastily removed his coat and laid it over her shoulders. She smiled at him.

“Ever the gentleman, aren’t you?” Devola asked him.

“Are you cold, too?” Alucard asked, half-jokingly lifting the hem of his shirt.

“Keep your shirt on,” Devola said. “We should head back to camp.” With a hand over her mouth, she tried in vain to suppress a yawn. “I’m sure no one’s gonna bite our heads off if we’re a few sprockets short…”
Androids were curious creatures. They were strong, they lived forever, they didn’t need to eat, they kept time better than the most well-crafted watch could, yet they still grew tired and shivered in the cold. Alucard often had to remind himself that the twins had been birthed from a factory, from crucibles and molds and assembly lines, not from a mother’s womb.

Then again, were they really that different from him? He, too, only looked human.

“Alucard, wouldn’t it be easier if it wasn’t just the three of us?” Popola asked, jolting Alucard out of his musings as the three of them headed back. “We could enlist help from anyone in the area to search for Dracula’s castle. One Scanner could probably cover as much ground in a day as we could in a week.”

“We can’t just drag people away from their assigned posts to go monster-hunting,” Devola countered.

“We ask 2B and 9S to go off and do stuff for us all the time,” said Popola.

“You ask 2B and 9S to go off and do stuff for us all the time. Besides, do you really want to go to Anemone hollering about a ten-thousand-year-old evil monster named ‘Dracula?’ Everyone already thinks we’re nuts.”

“Most humans didn’t believe in Dracula, either,” Alucard said. “You can thank one Bram Stoker for that.”

In his heart, Alucard knew that three people on their own would struggle to find Dracula if he did not wish to be found. He might not have any choice but to appeal to a higher authority for extra manpower. And the android army had its hands full with those deceptively-adorable machines infesting the Earth—it was hard to believe they’d have many resources to spare for an insane-sounding crusade against humanity’s old myths and superstitions, if they took him at his word at all.

Alucard was still mulling over how he could broach this subject when he reached Anemone’s tent; to his surprise, though (he’d grown quite accustomed to the natural rhythm of the camp already, after only a few days), it was empty.

Anemone clutched her cloak tighter around her as a cold wind blew through the outpost on the edge of the forest zone. The temperature always dropped precipitously around nightfall, but even after two hundred years, it still caught her off guard when that first bitter gust rustled the leaves and howled down the decrepit alleys. The buildings gave way to gargantuan trees here, cracked and upended foundations poking out from underneath gnarled roots.

This was where A2 had been living these past three years? No wonder she’d looked—and smelled—so awful when Alucard had carried her to the camp.

“Number Two?” she called out, her voice vanishing into the depths of the forest. She raised her rifle, just in case whoever or whatever answered her call wasn’t who she was expecting, keeping her finger a safe distance from the trigger but ready to pull it at the first sign of danger.

Was it foolish to come here by herself? Was it foolish to come here at all? Of course it was. But…

“Number Two!” Anemone called out. “I need to talk to you! I know you have every reason to be upset with me, but…”

No one answered her but the chirping of crickets, the faint rustling of leaves in the distance, and the
faraway sound of rushing water.

Anemone didn’t serve on the front lines anymore. Not since Pearl Harbor. Now, she occupied more of an administrative role than anything. But she kept her hands steady and her eyes sharp. And sweeping the flashlight mounted on her rifle over the ground, she spied telltale footprints depressing the thick grass and mossy carpeting blanketing the ground. A few snapped twigs here and there…

The footprints were humanoid in both size and shape. Nothing like the flat, broad, flipper-like feet the smaller machines walked on.

“Anemone?” The voice of one of her lieutenants, fuzzy and crackling with static, lit up her headset. “You’re needed back at the camp.”

“I won’t be long,” Anemone said. “I’ll be heading back soon.”

“What are you looking for out there, anyway?”

“An old friend.”

“And you can’t just delegate it?”

“I’m the only one she’d talk to.” Anemone doubted her own words. A2 probably wouldn’t want to talk to her, either. “You don’t have to worry about me. I’ve been at this for a long time.”

“That’s why I’m worried, ma’am… just put up a distress signal if things get too hairy.”

“Will do.” Anemone followed the trail deeper into the forest and switched off her headset. After all, if A2 would even deign to speak to her, she couldn’t have anyone listening in.

She heard the soft sound of light feet touching down on the ground a second too late; by the time she’d whirled around and brought her rifle up to bear, her finger ready to curl around the trigger, there was already a sword leveled squarely at her throat.

The long, voluminous cape wrapped around A2’s body lent her an amorphous silhouette; she nearly blended in perfectly with the deep shadows engulfing the forest save for her uncovered face and long white hair, which all but glimmered in the light of Anemone’s flashlight.

Her core still burning, Anemone slipped her finger away from the trigger and lowered her rifle.

“What do you want?” A2 snarled.

Anemone backed away and let go of her rifle, letting it dangle from the strap slung over her shoulder, and laid her knapsack on the ground. “I wanted to make things up to you.” She unbuttoned the pack and pulled out a rolled-up set of clothes, a portable self-repair kit, and a canteen of distilled water—not much, but plenty enough for a show of good faith. A2 eyed the offerings with a melange of suspicion and disdain.

“Clothes,” Anemone explained, “so you won’t be cold. A self-repair kit in case you get hurt again. And pure water for—”

A2 drew closer, setting aside her sword. She picked up the canteen, popped it open, sniffed it, and upturned it, emptying its contents onto the ground. The water poured out and splattered on the ground, turning a patch of the soil to mud. When the flow slowed to a trickle, she threw the canteen against the trunk of a tree with enough force to rattle the tree’s branches.
Anemone watched on in dismay as A2 did likewise with the repair kit, dumping tools, sutures, splints, and rolls of gauze into the mud before throwing the box into the forest. The rolled-up clothes she unraveled and stomped into the mud. All the while, she never broke eye contact with Anemone, who shifted uncomfortably as she bore witness to A2’s petty display of property destruction.

“Goodbye, Anemone,” A2 said, walking past her into the forest.

Anemone sighed and reached into her knapsack again, withdrawing a half-filled glass bottle. “I have something else,” she called out before A2 could vanish into the shadowy underbrush.

“Shove it up your ass.”

“Actually,” Anemone said, “I was hoping we could share it—Mint’s whiskey.”

A2 stopped in her tracks, her cape swirling around her as though it was trying to go on without her.

“You remember, right?” Anemone brandished the bottle, letting the clear liquid within swirl around. “The day before the attack, she poured half of it out for all of us to share. We were going to split up the other half among whoever made it out the next day.”

A2’s voice dropped—low, hushed, and hoarse. “...But the next day never came.”

“Let’s finish it,” Anemone said. “Just the two of us.”

“I’m surprised you held onto it.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Anemone caressed the bottle. She could remember that day like it had been just yesterday—the combined YoRHa and Resistance strike teams huddled together, passing around the bottle for each to drink from it. Nobody got more than a sip, though, and there were more than a few jesting remarks from both factions that it would be in anybody’s best interest to make sure as few people survived as possible. Twenty-four hours later, the gallows humor of those jokes had worn off completely.

“Let’s go back to the camp, Number Two. And finish it like she wanted.”

“Fuck off and drink it yourself. Or pour it into the ocean. I don’t care.”

“I think you do.”

A2 fell silent.

“You haven’t changed. You can pretend all you like, but what you did for the twins the other day shows it.” Anemone knew that A2 was wearing being a petty bitch like an ill-fitting suit. “You’re still a good person, a kind person, and you deserve more than...” She gestured to the forest.

“This.”

A2 stayed silent.

“Please.”

“Your pity is gonna get you killed,” A2 said. “YoRHa wants my head, and if you stand between me and them, you’ll lose yours, too.”

Anemone smiled faintly. “I knew you still cared.”
A2 let out a groan; Anemone could tell, even though her back was turned, that she was rolling her eyes. “...If you come here again,” she said, vanishing into the underbrush, “I’ll kill you.”

A2 vanished.

Anemone clenched her fists, letting out a frustrated snarl. “Fine!” she shouted after A2. “Be like that! But if you ever need help again, you won’t get it from me! And it’ll be your fault, you idiot!”

No response.

With a heavy heart and leaden limbs, Anemone turned and set off in the opposite direction. She’d known that it had been a fool’s errand to come here. She’d known that she and A2 were no longer sisters-in-arms. She’d known how much A2 resented her, how broken and bitter she’d become in her lonely exile. But she’d tried to make herself ignorant. It had been the only way for her to believe that A2 might have longed just as much as her not to be the lone, lonely survivor of that doomed mission.

Anemone looked up through the forest canopy at the starry sky as moonlight filtered through the gaps in the foliage. The Bunker hung in geosynchronous orbit over this part of the Earth; it was one of the stars staring coldly down at her.

Had the YoRHa commander really put out an order for A2’s execution? Was that any way to treat a survivor of YoRHa’s first mission? It just didn’t make sense. It didn’t seem right. Anemone wasn’t supposed to question it, but she couldn’t help but be rankled by the injustice. Would A2 be more willing to come back with her if she didn’t fear for her life?

Perhaps if she spoke with the Commander, Anemone could have that execution order rescinded. YoRHa and the Resistance were not part of the same hierarchy, and Anemone had no rank she could pull on Commander White, but all the same, if they talked, from one leader to another...

No. Anemone shook her head. It was just wishful thinking, just as the impetus for her journey here to the forest had been. It was time to toss aside such childish optimism and rejoin reality.

Sighing heavily, she reached up to turn her headset back on. But her arm froze halfway there as the underbrush to her side rustled and shuddered. She reached for her rifle and brought it to bear, her flashlight cutting a beam through the darkness.

With any luck, it would only be a wild boar or elk—dangerous, but not malevolent, and unlikely to pay any heed to her.

Luck was not with Anemone tonight.

A snarling wolf twice her size tore through the underbrush, scarlet eyes glittering from within a long, thick pelt of matted, mottled fur. Its fangs were long, sharp, and yellowed; ropy strands of saliva dripped from its slavering maw.

Anemone squeezed the trigger and fired at the beast as it pounced on her; the recoil from the gunfire and the butt of the rifle digging into her shoulder barely registering compared to the pain of hitting the ground under the beast’s crushing weight. She jammed the muzzle of her rifle into the wolf’s hairy belly and kept firing until the rifle ran empty. A few seconds of deafening noise that felt like an hour.

The wolf reared back on its hind legs, letting out a loud and anguished howl as it raised its head to the moon. Freed, Anemone scrambled to her feet, fumbling with a fresh magazine for her rifle while keeping her distance from the anguished beast.
Every single soldier knew the danger of megafauna. An angry boar could be just as deadly as any machine in the right (or, rather, wrong) circumstances. But this wasn’t an angry boar. It was something else. Anemone could feel it emanating from this creature—and it wasn’t just the stench of carrion clinging to its fur and hanging in its hot breath. It was a sense of wrongness.

The wolf remained standing on its hind legs as it lowered its head, taking a few halting steps forward. Its forepaws curled and twisted before cracking and curling, lengthening into wicked talons.

Anemone slammed a fresh magazine into her rifle, aimed, and pulled the trigger, keeping a tight and steady grip on the rifle as it struggled to escape her grasp; resounding vibrations ran up her arms, nearly numbing them.

Absorbing the bullets like a sponge, the wolf grabbed the rifle’s barrel with its bare claw, bent it almost ninety degrees, and yanked it forward, pulling Anemone off her feet; she felt her insides lurch and churn as she was flung through the air head over heels. Before she’d fully processed being pulled off the ground, she found herself reacquainted with it. Intimately reacquainted with it.

She ate dirt, scraping her cheek against an exposed root. The heavy body of her rifle pinned her arm against the ground and twisted it uncomfortably; the servos beneath her artificial skin whined and moaned in protest as her nervous circuits lit up.

Not satisfied, the wolf picked her up by the leg, lifted her upside down, and threw her into the nearest tree. Reams of static filled Anemone’s sight as her head pounded and throbbed from the impact.

*Wild animals don’t attack unless you provoke them,* Anemone thought as she hit the ground yet again. *What did I do to provoke this creature?* Her hood fell over her eyes; she tried to bring up her right arm to pull the cowl back, but gasped and winced as a jolt of pain ran through her elbow. The servo was broken—probably twisted, hopefully just a minor sprain.

The giant wolf lowered its head, bringing its cold, wet nose so close to Anemone’s face that it nearly brushed against her cheek, and exhaled through its nostrils. Its breath was so hot it was nearly scorching and rank with the stench of decay.

Still dizzy and reeling, Anemone reached down to her waist, pulled an emergency knife from its sheath at her hip, and drove it up through the bottom of the monstrous wolf’s mouth. The beast screeched as she wrenched the blade downward, cutting a swath of ragged, torn, and bloodied flesh down its gullet all the way to its collarbone. Blood gushed from the gaping wound in a spewing torrent.

At the same time, the wolf’s long talons tore into Anemone’s side and ripped through her chassis, leaving ragged fissures in her flesh and deep scores in the metal endoskeleton underneath. The spreading flood of warmth flowed out from the lacerations like a numbing wave, pulsing and throbbing as her own blood cascaded down her leg.

The wolf reeled backward, sliding itself off the blade and clutching at the wound in its neck. Anemone pulled herself up to her feet as best she could, hunched over as her head pounded and ached, unwilling to risk standing taller with the way her head was spinning and pounding.

She reached up and turned on her headset. “This is… Anemone…” she gasped, panting for breath. “I’ve run into… a…”

A squawk of white noise and earsplitting frequencies answered her, hammering itself into her ears;
grimacing and gritting her teeth, she turned the headset back off. It must have been damaged in the fight.

The beast lunged at her again; Anemone readied her blade. Was this how she would end up after two hundred years of service and struggle, two hundred years of scrabbling and scavenging for every tiny advantage against the machines? Not even killed by her enemy, but by some random cryptozoological specimen…

A flurry of black and silver planted itself between Anemone and the monstrous wolf; with a single sweep of a shimmering blade, the wolf’s head fell from its neck; the body slumped over and collapsed.

“Number… Two…”

Anemone’s legs buckled and she collapsed, only for A2 to catch her and keep her propped up.

“Dammit… Why’d you have to go and make me do this?” A2 hissed, dragging her along through the woods.

With the adrenaline from combat fading, Anemone began to feel the throbbing, pulsing aura of pain enveloping her arm, head, and waist. She could feel her own blood-slicked chassis beneath her lacerated flesh as she prodded absentmindedly, almost in disbelief, at the furrows torn through her skin from navel to hip.

“Take me… back to camp…” she gasped, feeling warmer and warmer as more of her blood—her coolant—drained from her body. It wouldn’t take long before her core burned itself out in this condition. “We’re going…”

“You won’t make it to camp like this.” A2 dragged her back to the clearing where they’d met and laid her down on the grass. “Hang on. God dammit, you asshole, I can’t believe you…”

Anemone weakly turned her head as A2 pulled away from her, spying the fugitive gathering the tools from the repair kit she’d thrown away and frantically cleaning them up on her cloak. She lost track of time as A2 clumsily worked with the tools, sending intermittent jolts through her nervous circuits, grumbling all the while. The fugitive android’s hands shook and fingers trembled, the tools slipping from her hands more than once.

Anemone drifted in and out of consciousness as her systems rebooted again and again; at last, after what felt like an eternity, she felt most of the pain recede and the feeling return to her arm and legs.

She felt the lip of a glass bottle press itself against her lips, a trickle of burning liquid dripped into her mouth. She coughed and sputtered as A2 tilted the bottle and pulled it away.

“Hey. Hey, this was your idea.”

Anemone swallowed. It burned on the way down. “My…?” She reached out and laid her hand on the bottle. “Oh. Right. The whiskey…”

A2 held the bottle to her lips again. “Drink up. It’ll help.”

Anemone drank her fill, then gently nudged the bottle away. “You remember how good it tasted, huh?”

“Shut up. I hate you.”
“No, you don’t.”

A2’s mouth curled in a wry, self-deprecating grin. “Guess I don’t.”

Anemone smiled back. That, there, was another shadow of the old Number Two bleeding through this bitter husk. “Thank you,” she said. Her throat burned, but her head felt lighter and the remnants of the pain from her wounds had dulled considerably.

A2 took a swig of whiskey herself—more like a mouthful, downing it as if it were water—and doubled over and nearly spat it out, her eyes bulging.

“Stronger than you remember, huh?” Anemone asked.

With great difficulty, A2 forced down the mouthful. “Humans drink this stuff?” she gasped.

“Yeah.”

A2 capped the bottle and slipped it back into Anemone’s knapsack. “Thanks,” she said, “for the gifts. Sorry I, uh, threw them all away.”

“I owe you one.” Anemone struggled to sit up, her head spinning. “Anything you want, Two… I’ll even call up the Commander and go to bat for you.”

“What are you, crazy?”

“Maybe,” Anemone said, “all that head trauma scrambled all my logic circuits…”

“Yeah, sounds like it.” A2 helped her up, supporting her weight like a living crutch. “I’ll walk you over to the camp, but that’s it, okay? I’m not gonna hang out with you, you’re not gonna do something stupid like tell YoRHa not to keep trying to kill me. Got it?”

Anemone wearily nodded.

“Good.” A2 pulled her along through the woods.

A forest-full of red eyes flickered on in the shadow-wreathed underbrush, one by one, more monstrous wolves emerged from the depths of the forest, circling the two androids.

“Wolves hunt in packs…” Anemone muttered.

“All right.” A2 wrapped her arm around Anemone’s waist to keep her steady.

“Two… Don’t engage… just force an opening and run…”

“Not so fast. I’ve got a lot of steam to blow off tonight.” She brandished her sword. “I’ve had a bad day,” she called out to the throng of monstrous wolves. “Anyone here wanna try and make it worse?”

Androids weren’t supposed to dream, but that didn’t stop 2B.

She’d long since cast aside her waking dreams—her aspirations, her hidden longings—but in rest mode, she couldn’t control what a few lingering sparks running through her circuitry chose to piece together from her memory banks.

She was in the desert with 9S, walking into the dilapidated remains of an ancient temple hewn
from sandstone and half-consumed by a sand dune as the wind made it crawl across the desert at a
glacial pace. There were no machines near here, but 2B’s nerves were screaming at her that danger
was drawing nearer with every passing second.

Oblivious, 9S ambled through the ruins, passing through bands of light and shadow as sunlight
streamed through holes in the temple’s high ceiling. He muttered and mumbled to himself in
fascination, lost in his own little world. 2B saw him wipe a thick layer of sand off a carving on the
wall, inspect the sand coating his fingertips, and press one fingertip against his tongue, as if by
tasting the sand he could divine some knowledge of this place’s purpose.

2B ran her hand aimlessly across the wall as she followed him; her finger grazed the rough stone
and sank into a little hole hidden by the dust and sand.

She withdrew her hand and wiped the sand away, revealing coin-sized bore holes riddling the wall,
and felt her black box burn inside her chest. The edges of the holes were deformed and covered
with a sheen of dirty glass where the impact from a tactical support pod’s bullets had melted the
sand.

She knew what this place was.

It was one of 9S’s many graves. And he was wandering right into it.

She was powerless to do anything but follow 9S as he headed deeper and deeper into the temple.
As though the ruins were bigger on the inside than the outside, the labyrinthine corridors stretched
on for what felt like miles and miles, the walls growing closer and closer together, the ceiling
growing lower and lower.

9S said something to her. His voice was nothing but muted gibberish, strings of random syllables
spoken with random tones and inflections.

2B clenched her jaw as a sharp ache ran from one of her teeth up to her sinuses. She said something
to 9S and he responded with more gibberish. Whatever he said, it frustrated 2B, and she stomped
over to him, closing the distance between the two of them, and grabbed his shoulder with her hand.

Her heavy, metal hand, its surface rusty and pitted and scored, its fingers thick and simply-
ar ticulated claws.

At the sight of the inelegant machine hand in place of her own, 2B recoiled in shock, the machine
hand’s fingers creaking andgroaning as the exposed servos in each joint protested. With her other
hand, she clutched at her wrist and found an exposed metal joint, and exploring down her forearm
she could feel—and see—sand-clogged hydraulics, exposed wiring crawling on her skin like ivy,
round rivets drilled into the metal.

She couldn’t look away or shut her eyes as the changes leaped from one hand to the other, flesh
roiling and fabric tearing as her left arm reshaped itself in kind with her right. But she could fall to
her knees. She could scream. She could double over, moaning in agony as a seam split her face
down the middle, running from her forehead to her chin, and peeled away her skin, blood and oil
dripping from the exposed mechanisms underneath and pooling on the floor, where the hungry
sand greedily lapped it up. Something tore itself from her shoulderblades, shredding the back of her
uniform; they curled around her, metal arms with long, spine-tipped phalanges and taut netting
stretched between each long fingertip. She screamed until her voice went hoarse and a harsh,
electronic tinge seeped into it, and all the while, 9S stared at her, his soft and kind face twisting in
horror and disgust.
2B pulled herself to her feet, her legs buckling, and reached out to him, her thick and ungainly
machine hand taking a fistful of his collar and yanking him off his feet. She buried her face in the
crook of his neck, that exposed and oh-so-tantalizing curve of soft, smooth, unblemished skin that
ran from the collar of his coat up to his jawline. The warm and intoxicating aroma of his skin filled
her nostrils as she buried her fangs in his skin. Flesh parted easily; blood filled her mouth, oily and
coppery and thick and unctuous as it flowed down her gullet and cascaded down her chin. His
blood, sweet ambrosia, nectar of the gods, more delicious than the purest and freshest water, its
taste and overpowering odor irresistible.

He didn’t fight back; he never fought back. He even had a blissful smile on his face as 2B drained
his body of every last drop of blood, leaving him a withered, ashen husk that hung limp in her
monstrous embrace. She drank until her thirst was quenched and her hunger sated and her skin
boiled and bubbled and sloughed away like a chrysalis to reveal the monstrous chassis underneath.

2B opened her eyes and found herself staring at the ceiling of her quarters on board the Bunker,
YoRHa’s orbital base of operations. The room was dimly-lit; faint moonlight from the porthole
provided just enough light that 2B could just barely discern detail from shadow.

Of course it was a dream, she thought as her black box cooled and her pulse normalized. Of course
it was a dream. Just like last night. And the night before that. Just a dream.

Pod 042 was by her side in an instant, of course. “Good evening. The time is 2304 hours. Unit 2B
requires five point nine hours of rest mode to operate at peak efficiency.”

2B sat up. Her body felt heavy, her mind sluggish, her eyelids leaden. She had to probe her right
arm, gingerly pressing her fingertips against the smooth, pristine flesh to make sure it was there.
No wires. No rough, rusting metal. No rivets, no exposed servos.

2B sighed, laid back down, and sank into bed. The fatigued fog blanketing her brain and clogging
her circuits didn’t dissipate, but beneath that fog, her mind was still crawling from thought to
thought, distracting her from reentering rest mode.

The same dream, minor variations aside, two nights in a row now.

It all came back to her battle with Flamel. That harrowing encounter with the unknown. The
mesmerizing light of its crimson eyes that had left her feeling so vulnerable, so exposed… The way
its metal body had molded and reshaped itself like soft clay, twisting and warping… No machine
had ever inspired such lasting terror in her.

But that thing had been no machine.

And it wasn’t just that machine that frightened her, but what it could have done. What it could
have done to her. What it might have left in her body. Three days and one replacement chassis later,
and 2B couldn’t shake that fear that she’d been too slow to remove her arm.

She tossed and turned fruitlessly, her mind unable to shut itself down. After what felt like an
eternity, she pulled herself out of bed and leaned against the wall, resting her arm against the rim of
the porthole. Beyond the thick glass, the surface of the moon was clearly visible, every pockmark
and scar on its grayscale surface standing out starkly. In a few hours, as the Bunker spun on its
axis, this window would show the night side of the Earth instead.

Usually, watching the moon’s surface calmed her. There, somewhere among those dark seas of
hardened magma and soaring white mountain ranges, was the human refugee colony YoRHa
protected. There, on the moon, that cold satellite, was 2B’s entire purpose. The reason she had for
everything she did, good and evil alike. Tonight, though, the lunar surface brought her little comfort.

“Proposal: Unit 2B should return to rest mode,” Pod 042 said. “Unit 2B can request this support unit to forcibly initiate rest mode.”

2B knew that. It was probably the right thing to do—a soldier needed their sleep—but her nagging, lingering anxiety told her differently.

“I’m going out for a diagnostic,” she said, hastily slipping her blouse on over her singlet, tying her skirt around her waist, and slipping into her boots.

“Advisory: Unit 2B has requested diagnostics three times already. Zero abnormalities have been found. Further diagnostics are a waste of resources.”

“I know,” 2B said. The door to the hallway outside slid up as she approached it; she stepped over the threshold and into the corridor. Pod 042 had no choice but to follow her.

As she strode down the hallway, passing a few other androids milling around who were either assigned to the opposite side of the Earth or just as insomniac as she was, 2B felt a harsh chill run up her spine like ice melting onto the back of her neck. Panic flaring up in her mind, she quickly glanced in all directions to find its cause, but could see nothing but a few stargazing Operators and a couple Scanners conversing casually with each other.

She headed to the maintenance clinic, passed through the decontamination chamber, felt a hot and prickly tingling run through every inch of her skin as the chamber’s cleaning systems bombarded her with high-energy photons to sterilize her body, and walked up to the maintenance android on duty.

The pristine, antiseptic maintenance clinic was far from the most inviting locale on the Bunker; 2B hated being here. Typically, it was 9S who performed maintenance on her and ran diagnostics, but she’d not wanted to disturb him in the middle of his own rest mode. YoRHa soldiers only got so many hours allotted for rest and leisure per month.

“I’m here for a high-level maintenance checkup,” she told 12H, the lone Type-H android manning the front desk for the night shift.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“Walk-in, huh?” 12H suppressed a yawn. “Good for you this place is pretty dead right now. Take a seat over here. I’ll get you hooked up.”

2B stepped behind the desk and sat down in an uncomfortable chair she was finding herself all too familiar with as 12H pulled aside a few patches of skin on her forehead and the nape of her neck. She ran a bundle of wires from a handheld interface to the exposed ports on the back of her neck and each temple and got to work. As the wait dragged on in silence, 2B began to wish she were back in bed. Seemingly bored out of her mind as well, 12H absentmindedly mussed her curly white hair and sighed.

2B stared up at the ceiling lights until her eyes hurt.

“Hmm…” 12H mumbled, looking at the results of 2B’s diagnostic. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. Yep. We’ve got a big problem here.”
2B stiffened and snapped to attention. “Wh-What is it?”

“You’re… hmm… I’m not sure how to say this…” 12H tapped on her chin. “You’re… oh, dear, I do hate to be the bearer of bad news…”

“What is it?” 2B repeated, her fingers digging into the armrests of her chair.

“You’re sleep-deprived. Rest mode is very important for androids,” 12H lectured her. “It’s the only way to clear your cache and flush out your RAM. Going without at least six hours in rest mode per twenty-four hours will result in massive decreases in cognitive capability and reaction time, dramatically limiting combat effectiveness. Essentially, your software and hardware desyncs. You should be blocking out eight hours in your schedule and using as much of them as possible to make up for the rest you haven’t been getting these past few days. Remember, your pod can force rest mode if you’re having trouble.”

“Yes,” 2B said. Her tense muscles relaxed, her mind eased by the reassurance that the vampire machine hadn’t passed its nightmarish disease on to her. She hoped that this time, that reassurance would stick. As Pod 042 had said, all these useless diagnostics were wasting YoRHa’s resources.

“If you’re sleep-deprived, you can’t just upload yourself to another chassis like you would if you were injured or had defective hardware,” 12H chided her, pulling out the wires from 2B’s head and neck, closing the open data ports, and readjusting the flaps of skin that covered them. “There’s no cure but sleep. So remember, six is for kicks, but eight is great.”

2B got up, thanked 12H for taking the time to look at her, and made her way back to her quarters. The corridor was empty now, save for one of the Scanners she’d passed by on her way to get her diagnostic. He stood in front of one of the large floor-to-ceiling windows that showed the moon, hands clasped behind his back.

By the time 2B got back to her quarters, the anxiety that had propelled her mind to resist her fatigue had mostly disappeared, and she’d scarcely managed to undress herself before retreating to the alcove containing her cot and collapsing onto the mattress.

“Pod,” she murmured, “forcibly engage… rest mode…”

She didn’t need the pod’s help; she was asleep before her eyes even closed.

Popola still remembered the good old days. The days when she and Devola had still had beds to sleep in. Before everything came crashing down, long before the aliens invaded, when there had still been some semblance of civilization on the planet. For the Resistance cells scattered across the Earth, luxuries like beds and blankets were unimaginable. For Popola, though, the memory of a comfortable mattress sometimes made it hard to sleep rough; it was for that reason that she woke up in the middle of the night, groggy and weary yet at the same time restless.

Devola clung to her, arms wrapped around her waist, head nestled on her shoulder. Unlike Popola, she slept like a log; nothing could disturb her. When she entered rest mode, she remained in that state for a solid eight hours to the minute. She was the kind of person Popola could set her watch to, if she had one.

Alucard sat curled up in the corner of the tent, knees tucked into his chest and head bowed, mumbling something faint under his breath. The tent scarcely had room for three people to rest in, but Popola and Devola simply couldn’t deny one of their old masters a place to lay their head, even if Devola was a little more begrudging about it. At any rate, he was an exceedingly polite and
unimposing guest… even if he did occasionally talk in his sleep.

“Alucard?” Popola sat up, slithering free of her sister’s grasp. “Are you awake?”

A little portable lamp cast a dim and weak light in the tent, illuminating things just enough so that no one would have to fumble blindly in the dark; the lights of the camp outside, dimmed for the evening to recreate at least somewhat the old day/night cycle, bled faintly through the canvas walls of the tent. It cast just enough light on Alucard’s face to contrast the shadows as his lips moved silently.

At last, a small sound came out. A word that sounded like soma. One that carried a soft, fragile trickle of rue and regret in those two faint, weakly-mumbled syllables.

It wasn’t a word Popola recognized, but she could guess that Alucard was still in distress from the shock he’d had upon reawakening. After all, it had taken thousands of years before she and Devola hadn’t gone to sleep weeping over their loss and their failure every night; he’d only had three days to accept that he was the last remaining person in the world with even a little bit of human blood in his veins. And unlike Popola and her sister, who’d always had each other to soothe their mutual pain, Alucard had nobody. It was no wonder he was so adamant about accompanying the two of them on all their errands.

Popola’s eyes fell to the coiled leather whip hanging from his belt. The Vampire Killer, the same one passed down the Belmont family tree through the generations. The magic embedded in its coiled leather was so strong that nobody outside of that bloodline could wield it without putting their very lives at risk; Alucard had admitted that for a creature like him, laying so much as a bare hand alone on the whip could kill him on the spot. Before his long sleep, he had decided to keep it on his person, nonetheless, in the hopes that when the human race had been restored, he could entrust it to that clan once more. Now, though, it hung at his side with no use other than to serve as a reminder of what had been lost. That, and…

*I suppose, if nothing else, it would make a fine noose,* Alucard had said with a bleak, sardonic bark of laughter when Devola had questioned him about it the other day.

Popola padded toward him on her hands and knees, which didn’t take long, considering how small the tent was, and reached out to brush away a stray lock of his long silver hair. She froze, though, when her finger met the smooth skin of his cheek, and recoiled as though she’d been shocked.

Alucard wasn’t entirely human, true, but he was *half,* and Popola instantly wondered if she was crossing a boundary the likes of her were not supposed to cross by being so open and affectionate to him. Or perhaps the only reason she had been acting like that in the first place was because she’d been programmed to love and long for humans…

It had been so long since the fall of Project Gestalt that Popola honestly didn’t remember what it meant to “love and long for humans.” Was she supposed to show them deference and respect them as she would a god, or was it appropriate to love them in an *earthier* way? If only there was a human around who could tell her…

Her hand trembling, she tried again, tracing underneath his eye with her fingertip. Emboldened, she cupped her hand against his cheek. His pale skin was soft and cool to the touch, warmer than a corpse but not by much; yet it was still unmistakably human.

In the flesh. After more than nine thousand years. She was laying her hand on the skin of a real, living person. She hadn’t felt so warm, so effervescent, in thousands of years—
“Popola?”

Popola nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of Devola’s voice, hastily jerking her hand away. “Ah! D-Dev,” she yelped. “Wh… You’re awake? What time is it?” She could feel her cheeks reddening. Of all the things her sister could catch her doing…

Devola rubbed her eyes. “About five thirty. Wanted to get an early start to the day. Were you, uh… What were you doing?”

“N-Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Devola looked like she didn’t believe her at all. “All right. Let’s get started. We were gonna do some work around the camp this morning, right?”

Popola glanced back at Alucard. “We could do a little more field work…”

“Nah, we can get to that in the afternoon. Let the poor guy sleep. I’m sure he’s had enough of you fawning over him.”

“W-What?” Popola stammered, her cheeks growing hotter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Devola said, shrugging.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Hey, you! Twins!”

A2’s voice rang through the sleepy camp like the cry of a rooster heralding the dawn. At the sound of it, Popola and Devola hurried out of the tent and saw her stumble into the camp with Anemone at her side. The two of them could barely stand. Anemone’s right arm stuck out at an odd angle and blood darkened her cloak; A2’s long white hair was stained red, a bloody gash running across her forehead. The cape she’d taken from Alucard was torn and ragged, revealing an exposed chassis that appeared to have been vigorously chewed by something with a lot of very large, very sharp teeth. Deep scoring and ragged scratches marred the black armored endodermis beneath her thin layer of skin, so deep in places that they revealed the mechanisms within. The longer the two of them stood, or rather leaned, the larger the pool of blood formed by A2’s open and dripping wounds grew.

“Anemone’s kinda hurt,” A2 said, swaying like a punch-drunk boxer before she fell flat on her face.

2B’s sleep, this time, was dreamless, and she awoke to the sound of a soft knocking on her door. She sat up and slitted out of bed, feeling much lighter and more limber already.

“Unit 9S is at the door,” Pod 042 announced.

2B stretched, yawned, and started getting dressed. “Morning already?”

“Affirmative. The time is 0557 hours.”
After wrapping her combat visor around her eyes and tightening her boots, 2B made for the door and opened it. 9S was waiting on the other side, rocking on the balls of his feet, proverbially bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Hey, 2B! You sleep well tonight?”

“Mostly,” 2B said, stepping out into the corridor. She decided not to inform him that she’d gone in for another diagnostic; he’d probably feel hurt she hadn’t gone to him for it. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“The Commander wants to see us. In private. Looks like she finally got around to reading our report on that vampire machine. It’s about time,” he grumbled.

“In private? As in, in her quarters?” 2B asked.

“Hope so,” 9S said. “I wanna see for myself if the rumors are true.”

It was a well-traveled rumor throughout YoRHa that despite Commander White being a prim, proper, no-nonsense boss, she was an utter slob in private. They said she never had maintenance done on her chassis until it began to interfere with her motor systems, rarely showered, and left her clothes strewn all about her quarters in crumpled heaps.

2B had been in Commander White’s quarters. The rumors had a kernel of truth, albeit highly-exaggerated. It was true that she only got tune-ups once a month, and it was true that she didn’t make a habit of picking up after herself, but she did not wallow in her own filth—as amusing as that mental image may have been.

“YouRHa Commander White requests Unit 2B and 9S’s presence in her office,” said Pod 153. 9S’s face fell. “Oh, well. Maybe another day.”

The two of them, their pods in tow, made their way to Commander White’s office on the Bunker’s lower deck. White’s office maintained her neat and tidy facade; there was nothing out of place and not even a speck of dust. She was sitting at her desk, scrolling through a holographic readout projected in front of her, when 2B and 9S stepped in. Her ash-blond hair was elegantly styled and tied back, her white dress spotless. The tall, thin strips of mirror on the walls that stretched from floor to ceiling created two doppelgangers that flanked her, both with the same stern scowl on their faces. If 2B turned her head to either the left or the right, the two mirrors reflected each other. As 9S had once said, it was perhaps the sole part of the Bunker’s architecture with any artistic merit.

“You wanted to see us, ma’am?” 9S asked.

“Yes.” White looked at them through the hologram, then dispersed it. “9S, I read through your report on the machine you encountered in the forest zone. 2B, did you sign off on this report?”

2B nodded. “I trust 9S to be accurate to a fault in his reporting, ma’am. Every word is true.”

White frowned. “That’s what I was afraid you’d say.” She snapped her fingers.

9S stepped forward. “I’m glad you recognize the urgency of the—”

A black-gauntleted hand belonging to an armored soldier clamped down on his shoulder and drew him back. 2B glanced over her shoulder and saw another armored YoRHa soldier standing behind her; the two of them stood on either side of the door. Their presence wasn’t unusual: of course, White had guards in her office. But 2B hadn’t expected them to intervene.
9S squirmed as the armored guard reeled him in and placed a sword against his throat. “Hey! What’s going on?” he cried out, but when the sharp metal brushed against his throat, he fell silent and ceased his struggles.

2B nearly drew her sword. “Commander, what’s the meaning of this?” she asked before she, too, was detained; she had the good sense to go all but limp as soon as the guard got hold of her. Her captor’s blade grazed her throat with just enough pressure to remind her that it was sharp.

“You can’t expect me to believe this drivel. If you stand by this report, then it’s clear that your judgment can no longer be trusted,” White said, standing up to her full height and towering over the two androids. “Do you expect me to believe that such things are even possible?”

“It’s what we saw,” 9S countered.

“I was the one who fought Flamel,” 2B said. “I know what I saw, and 9S does, too. It was undead. It drank blood. It couldn’t be killed except by sunlight. And it—”

“It transformed into… some sort of gargoyle?” White finished, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“Our pods can corroborate! They were there!” 9S turned to his pod. “Pod 153, you must have video recorded of Flamel! Show her!”

“Statement: Unfortunately, reviewing footage taken of the incident, the machine lifeform identified as Flamel does not appear,” Pod 153 said, wringing its claws.

Pod 042 projected a holographic panel showing video footage of 2B’s fight against the vampire machine into the air; true to Pod 153’s word, there was no machine in the footage, merely 2B swinging her sword wildly against empty air.

“What?” 2B gasped. Her jaw dropped. It couldn’t be possible… how could she have hallucinated that entire incident? And 9S and Pascal, too… What was going on here?

“How is that possible?” 9S asked.

“I suppose it’s as possible,” White said, “as a machine putting up such a fight without even so much as a power source. It’s obvious that you two are compromised; your pods as well.”

9S struggled against his captor. “What? We aren’t infected!”

“I’ve undergone three diagnostics since then,” 2B said, “and nothing has come up. We’re clean!”

“Logic virus or not, it’s clear you’ve become afflicted with something,” White said. “Perhaps a new machine logic weapon: one we can’t yet detect. We’ll have to quarantine and study you two and your pods.”

“And all the while,” 9S hissed through gritted teeth, “machines like Flamel will be feeding on others and growing their ranks exponentially! If we don’t act on this yesterday, you can forget about winning the war!”

“9S, calm down,” 2B told him, hiding her own worry and confusion behind an impassive mask. Deep down, she was already beginning to doubt herself; perhaps that machine had only been as real as her subsequent dreams. Perhaps the Commander was right—maybe the machines had developed a new, undetectable logic virus that caused mass hallucinations. It was more believable than living dead machines that drank blood and turned into monsters.
“Calm down? Calm down?” 9S tried to tear himself free of his captor; the armored soldier pinned his arms behind his back. “Dammit, Commander, this is serious! We’re serious! Please, you have to believe us…”

“9S, I understand that this is serious,” White said. “These hallucinations and this hysteria could cripple us if we don’t take every opportunity to understand what’s causing it and how to cure it. Guards, take these two and their pods to quarantine.”

2B winced as the guard holding her back pinned her arms roughly behind her back and dragged her away. Knowing her resistance was futile, she allowed the guard to frog-march her out of the office, catching a pity-filled glance from Commander White on her way out. She wanted to keep protesting, but deep down, she wasn’t sure herself what the truth was. She knew what she’d seen, but did that mean what she’d seen couldn’t have been a lie? After all, when she’d stared down Flamel and looked it in its fiery red eyes, hadn’t she felt her strength falter and her resolve weaken? Hadn’t that machine’s gaze affected her mind? Could that have been a smokescreen for something else altering her perception?

“You’re making a huge mistake, Commander!” 9S cried out as the guard holding him down dragged him back.

“You’re quiet down,” 2B told him. “You aren’t helping by making a scene.”

He dug in his heels fruitlessly, his boots skidding and squeaking against the smooth floor. “You have to believe us, you have to trust us!” He was crying out so loudly that his voice cracked. “If you sit on this, we’ll all be dead by dawn!”

The door slid shut behind him. 2B kept her head bowed and tried to tune out 9S’s protests as best she could as the two of them were led through the corridor to the quarantine bay.

Commander White already felt exhausted as she traced her well-worn path to the Bunker’s main deck and took her position on the floor of Ops. It was going to be a long day.

She couldn’t help but feel sorry for 2B and 9S—especially 9S. He above all had truly believed the delusion he’d been afflicted with and thus his distress made perfect sense. White knew full well that one possible outcome of quarantine, should their affliction prove incurable, was disposal of the unit and deletion of its backups… a fate 9S had suffered so many times already.

2B and 9S were good soldiers. 2B was loyal to a fault and followed every order she got to the letter, no matter what; 9S, though a bit scatterbrained and easily distracted from his duties at times, was skilled enough to warrant being kept around even after forty-seven reset-inducing infractions. For them to end up like this was enough to break one’s heart.

The morning dragged on in its typical monotony. White stood in the center of Ops, surrounded on all sides by Operators sitting at their terminals and advising their assigned field units as she kept her eyes glued to the massive two-story viewscreen stretching from floor to ceiling that displayed the status of all units active on the surface. Reports poured in from every corner of the Earth, constantly pulling her attention in one direction or another. Occasionally, an Operator rushed over to her with breaking new information from the surface. It was a struggle to stay focused, but one that White, over her years in the Bunker, had grown quite accustomed to.

A Scanner approached her from across the floor, gently nudging himself past the armored guards flanking White. “Excuse me, Commander?” he asked. He had a thin, pale face and sandy blonde hair that White guessed was meant to be ‘stylishly-disheveled’ rather than a rat’s nest. “There’s
something I’d like to speak to you about.”

White’s eyes narrowed. “Ah… 86S, was it?” she asked. This Scanner she was familiar with. Mainly for his disciplinary record—nearly long enough to stretch from the Earth all the way to the Bunker. She was considering retiring his personality model should he continue to cause trouble. And according to what she’d heard from his assigned Operator, it seemed he was. “What a coincidence. I need to talk to you as well. I hear you were in an altercation at Anemone’s camp the other day…”

“Well, don’t pass judgment until you hear both sides of the story,” 86S said with a rakish smile. “You’ll be interested in knowing who punched me in the face… Why don’t we talk in private?”

“We can talk in private later.”

“I think you need to hear this now,” 86S said.

White crossed her arms. “And why,” she asked, “do you think that?”

“It has to do with a certain, uh… ‘Number Two.’”

Number Two.

Now that was a name to pique her interest. The lone, accidental survivor of what had been intended to be a suicide mission. The surprisingly-tenacious obsolete model that had become YoRHa’s second-dirtiest secret.

White left her post at Ops with the Scanner in tow, retracing her steps back to her office. She didn’t speak until she’d closed and locked the door behind her.

“So…” she said, “do tell. How was A2 involved in the ‘altercation’ at the camp?”

“She came out of nowhere and assaulted me,” 86S said, sniffling. “Anemone let her into the camp! I warned her that she was a dangerous fugitive, but… You know, Commander, I’m beginning to suspect that maybe Anemone’s been harboring her all along…”

“That’s a serious accusation,” said White. “And troublesome.”

This would, if it were true, strain relations between YoRHa and the Resistance. And with the machines growing more and more aggressive as of late—they’d recently started profiling YoRHa soldiers based on hair color, which White couldn’t even begin to understand—disunity was the last thing she wanted.

“I can’t act on it without proof, of course,” White admitted, “and besides, we haven’t detected A2’s black box signal in months.”

“You’ve got to believe me, Commander. How many other dirty, stinky, old prototype YoRHa models are running around in the woods punching innocent people like me in the face?”

Black box signals were tricky things. Sometimes they blared their locations for all the world to see, or at least all of the Bunker’s sensors. But anything from location to air temperature to cloud coverage could muffle or block the signal. Not detecting a signal was not proof the signal wasn’t there. But…

White glanced at the mirror spanning the wall of her office. The way it reflected its counterpart on the opposite wall, catching her both ways and duplicating her ad infinitum, was often calming to
her, but something seemed off about it today. She barely paid it any mind, though, as she refocused her gaze on 86S. “I’ll talk to Anemone myself later today,” she said. “86S, go back to your…”

Feeling a strange sensation like a splinter in her mind, White glanced back at the mirror and saw herself. Herself, repeated a thousand times over before her infinitely-repeated reflection grew too indistinct to see.

But among those infinite Commanders, not even once did she see the Scanner standing in front of her.

She turned to face 86S, just as shocked to see him standing right there as she would have been to see that he had suddenly vanished.

86S smiled widely, ivory fangs poking out of either side of his mouth and brushing against his bottom lip; a puff of cold, frozen air formed a faint and short-lived cloud in front of his face.

“From the look in your eyes,” 86S said, eyeing his lack of reflection in the mirrors flanking him, “you’ve heard all about my predecessor from 2B and 9S…”

White’s synthetic heart skipped a beat. “So… you, 86S, are…”

86S bowed in a mockery of good manners. “A vampire.”

White used the distraction to draw her riding crop from her side, strike 86S across the face, and make a mad dash for the door; 86S’s hand clamped around her wrist with a frigid grip so tight that White felt her chassis creak and groan in protest; she halted in her tracks. Somehow, this Scanner was at least twice as strong as a typical model of his type; if she tried to pull herself free, she’d sooner rip her arm free of its socket than his hand.

“Ah, ah, ah…” 86S wagged his finger at her. The bloody welt running across his cheek faded away, leaving pristine skin behind. “You’re not going anywhere, Commander.”

White realized that she was seeing the same thing 2B and 9S had seen. Had they been right all along… or was she under the same hallucinogenic spell?

“And no,” 86S said, as if he could read her thoughts, “you aren’t seeing things. You aren’t having a nightmare. I’m as real as the nose on your face.”

“What do you want, 86S?”

“Ah, what I want is simple.” 86S walked in a slow arc and placed himself in front of the door, only letting go of White when he’d blocked off the room’s only exit. “Vampires have a hierarchy, you see. I obey the one who turned me, and he obeys the one who turned him in return. But me…” He stripped off his gloves and pulled his combat visor away from his eyes.

His eyes were bright red. Not red the way a logic virus would turn eyes red—not a pinprick of searing crimson light shining behind the pupils—but red as though it was the natural color of his eyes. Blood-colored irises ringed inky black pupils.

And they were bright, too, shining as though they gave off their own light; when White stared into them, she felt her muscles lock into place, rooting her to the spot. Her mouth went dry, her throat closed up, a chill ran all the way up her back; she couldn’t help but shudder.

Was this how 2B had felt facing down that monstrous machine? White knew that she’d had every reason to scoff at the two androids’ testimony at first, but she had to admit, now the evidence was
mounting in their favor.

86S gave her a rough shove; in her dazed and mesmerized state, White put up no defense and staggered backward, falling head over heels over her desk. “I don’t want to be at the bottom rung of this hierarchy,” he said. “I’d like some subordinates of my own, you see… and I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather start with than you.”

White picked herself up, smoothing out her dress. Freed from eye contact, she felt the strength return to her limbs. She took stock of her office furtively, searching for something to help her escape. 9S had written in his report that Flamel had only died upon exposure to ultraviolet light; anything less had only slowed it down, and only just barely. Was there anything she had on hand that could produce that?

There was a dagger tucked into a band circling her thigh, hidden by her flowing dress. White reached down and curled her fingers around the cold, flat handle. But the blade was short—only about ten centimeters—and she couldn’t think of much she could do with it besides stabbing him (which, according to 9S’s report, wouldn’t do much to deter him).

“How do you feel about that, White? After all the times you’ve reprimanded me, after all the times you’ve disciplined me, after all the tongue-lashings you’ve given me,” 86S cackled, the look of ecstasy that twisted his face into a ghoulish mask showing quite clearly how much he was enjoying his newfound powers, “I’ll be the ones giving the orders!”

Ultraviolet light was a no-go. For once, White regretted ignoring her old friend Jackass’s exhortations to install a blacklight in her office (though, of course, she could never let her know that). She had to think about how she could disable 86S, even if it would only distract him for a second.

With a single sweep of his arm, 86S upended the desk and threw it against the wall, clearing away the meager obstacle between himself and White. “If you’re looking for something you can use to fight back against me, it’s no use. Vampires are the pinnacle of evolution, stronger and faster than any android, and our mental faculties are beyond your very comprehension—See how my gaze alone reduces your limbs to jelly!”

White averted her eyes. How pathetic she must look here, cowering on the floor in front of this power-mad little manchild.

“You’re going to be my thrall,” 86S drawled giddily. “All I have to do is say the word, and you’ll even lick my boots clean and love it! And everyone under your command will be under my command! I’ll be…” He stroked his chin. “I’ll be in charge of all of YoRHa!”

White smirked. This was why YoRHa didn’t produce male combat models anymore. All the power went straight to their heads. “Enjoying yourself, 86S?”

“Keeping a brave face, I see.” 86S crouched down in front of her and took her by the chin, his icy fingers digging into her cheeks as he forced her to raise her head. White looked away, focusing on a little statuette that had fallen in the corner of the office. “Let’s see how long you keep that up, Commander, once you’re turned… I think I’ll order you to cower in front of me, just as you’re doing now, and beg me to spare your life. Only you’ll do it right in Ops, in full view of all the Operators on duty!”

Struggling to avoid meeting his gaze, White squeezed her eyes shut, clenching her jaw and trying to will the fear out of her mind as he yanked down her collar and exposed her neck, his fingertips dancing lightly against her skin.
“Oh, don’t be afraid, Commander,” 86S whispered in her ear, brushing aside a lock of her hair. “It doesn’t hurt. In fact, it feels good... better than anything you’ve ever felt before...”

White gritted her teeth. “You always were quite dull for a Scanner,” she said.

86S had opened his mouth wide, baring his fangs, but upon hearing White’s words, he drew back, his mouth hanging just a little less agape. “Excuse me? I’ll make you apologize for that soon enough!”

White laughed, catching him even further off-guard. His grip on her chin and cheeks loosened. “Mental faculties beyond our comprehension,’ you said?” she asked. “I suppose that makes you almost as smart as the second-dullest Scanner!”

86S smacked her, his backhand slamming her against the floor; her lip split open against her teeth, her blood speckling the pristine white floor. Her cheek throbbed. “Watch your tongue,” he snarled.

“If I were you...” White coughed and spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor. “I’d have enthralled as many people as I could before I went after me. I’d have turned the army to my side before challenging its leader.” But then again... if I were you... I’d be an idiot.

“W-Wh—H-How do you know I haven’t already done that?” 86S stammered.

“Because,” White said, rising to her feet, “you incompetent layabout reprobate, you told me that!”

“H-H-How do you know I w-wasn’t lying?”

White looked him right in the eyes. Unsurprisingly, with his confidence shattered, 86S’s eyes no longer had such a mesmerizing effect on her. However, he cowered under her stern glare. “You couldn’t lie your way out of a paper bag, 86S.”

She took her riding crop and struck him across the face over and over again, paying him back tenfold for what he’d done to her. Bloody welts healed as quickly as they were made as 86S reeled back under the onslaught. Soon enough, his body no longer stood between White and the door, at last giving her an avenue for escape; however, White continued to lash out at him.

“This is the pinnacle of evolution? Imbecile! The entire point of evolution is that there is no pinnacle! Call yourself a superior lifeform all you want—the only thing you’re superior at is making an utter fool out of yourself!”

86S lashed out and grabbed her by the wrist, crushing her chassis like tinfoil. “You bitch!” he howled.

White wasted no time for chatter; she withdrew the dagger from her side, brought it up in one forceful sweep, and severed her hand just below the wrist. Freed, she rushed for the door, closed it behind her, and locked it with her personal access code, her remaining hand flying across the terminal as she held the bleeding stump of her wrist to her chest, ruining her dress. The cleanly-severed edge of her chassis dug into her chest, red blossoms blooming against her breast.

As soon as her office had been locked down—she could hear muffled pounding from within as 86S struggled with the door—she staggered down the corridor, leaving a trail of blood in her wake, little crimson splatters dotting the white floor like tiny footprints. This would certainly be one for the rumor mill, she thought, as she passed a few androids who gawked at her, too intimidated to offer any assistance.

How long would the door deter 86S? She couldn’t say. Who knew what these vampires were fully
capable of? Perhaps he had enough strength to simply tear through the door as though it were made of tinfoil…

“Commander!”

Finally, someone came to her aid. And of course, it was Operator 6O. The blonde, pigtailed girl was far from the most competent Operator on the Bunker, but she was without a doubt the nicest by an order of magnitude.

6O got a firm grip on White’s sides and helped her stay upright. “Commander, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” White insisted. “Why aren’t you in Ops?”

“I took a break to stretch my legs.”

“I don’t remember authorizing that.”

“Y-You were gone,” 6O stammered. “A-And I r-really needed to…”

“Fine,” White said. “I’ll let you off for now.”

6O blanched, her face turning ashen. It was obvious she was wondering what kind of dire situation White must have been in if she couldn’t bring herself to reprimand her for shirking her duties. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t explain.” White gingerly rubbed the bleeding stump of her wrist, then summoned her single-use security credentials from virtual storage, amber sparks flying around her hand and forming into a translucent card. She thrust it into 6O’s hand. “6O, I need to go. While I’m gone, I want you to use this and initiate a lockdown. Shut down the access terminals and seal off the hangar bay. Have every single android here, everyone, retreat to their quarters and lock their doors until I come back to override the lockdown in person. Is that clear?”

“Everyone? But—”

“Everyone, 6O.”

“Do you need help getting down to the—”

“Now, 6O!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” 6O squeaked, scurrying away.

White hurried into the deeper levels of the Bunker. She had to go to 2B and 9S and release them from quarantine. The three of them together could surely put their heads together and find a way to kill 86S. 2B and 9S were the only ones on the Bunker—perhaps in the entire world—with more experience with vampires than she had.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the true threat vampires pose makes itself frighteningly clear.

Chapter Notes

GAAAH! This chapter wasn't supposed to be 17k words long, but I wanted to resolve the whole 86S plotline in one chapter and it took way longer than I'd anticipated to fit in all the cool stuff I wanted to throw in. Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alucard stumbled down the corridor, fighting against his weary and leaden body with every step he took. His legs threatened to crumple under his own weight; he was so unsteady on his feet that he swayed and wavered like a drunkard who’d just been thrown out of a bar. Leaning against the wall for support and ignoring the pressure on his burned, bloodied, and limp right arm, he pushed himself along. His left hand left bloody handprints on the wall like Hansel and Gretel’s breadcrumbs. The hall felt like it went on for miles and miles. The elevator he’d taken down to this underground compound felt like it was miles behind him… but he knew that if he were to glance over his shoulder, he would only see it a mere few feet away.

As the sound of his own raspy, shallow breathing filled his ears, his vision blurred and doubled. The domed lights lining the ceiling split and swirled, orbiting around each other.

He hit the floor, his cheek pressed against the cold linoleum. He’d fought long enough, and now it was all finished. No one left to fight. Nothing left to fight for.

No… There was still work he could do.

He picked himself up off the floor, wheezing and groaning with exertion, and fell again before he could even get off his hands and knees; for the first time in his life, he felt old, at least in a physical sense, as he wallowed on the floor.

Once more, he pulled himself up to his feet. He stayed upright this time. With each painful step, the door at the end of the hallway drew closer, beckoning him with taunting promises of safety.

He reached the door and all but fell against it. There were two muted voices on the other side. His trembling fingers reaching out for the biometric keypad affixed to the wall; an access code, fingerprint scan, and retina scan later, the locks whirred and clicked. Alucard curled his fingers around the doorknob and turned it. The door swung inward, none too gently depositing Alucard on the floor.

“What the—Alucard!”

One of the two voices, or rather its owner, rushed over to him. “You could’ve rung the doorbell or
something!” Devola chastised him, hoisting him up. With his head resting on her shoulder, Alucard could hear the android’s steady, throbbing pulse as synthetic blood pumped through synthetic veins; the resonant humming within her vaguely called to mind the purring of a cat.

The android’s sister, Popola, tended to a strange beast at the opposite side of the room in front of a pair of doors leading to a larger chamber of the facility. It was a Gestalt, a human soul severed from its body; roughly humanoid in its shape, it seemed to be composed of loosely-connected shards of shadow and light. She was patting its ‘cheek,’ for lack of a better word, as a mother might do to console a distressed child. Whispering some parting words to the creature, Popola hurried over to join her sister at Alucard’s side.

“Forgive me. I didn’t wish to interrupt your work.” Alucard slumped over, resting his good arm on the table and his forehead on his forearm.

“Are you okay?” Popola asked.

“Does he look okay?” Devola asked her, rapping her knuckles gently on her forehead. Alucard nearly laughed at the sight. These automatons truly were sisters. Humans had made incredible strides in artificial intelligence in spite of the plague that had laid waste to the species for these past thirty years; the fruits of their labor were truly admirable.

Alucard spared a glance at the limp and ragged remains of his right arm; beneath the tattered sleeve of his suit was skin so badly burned that it smelled almost like a slab of roast beef (and looked somewhat like one as well). Below that, clipped to his belt, was the reason for the horrific burns. There on his hip hung the Vampire Killer, coiled like a snake waiting to strike, its oiled leather hide glistening.

The Vampire Killer exacted a heavy toll in the hands of an unworthy wielder. A human with no relation to the Belmont clan would find their life drained quite benignly as they held it. But a half-breed like him, on the other hand—the whip had set his body aflame. If the fight with Soma—Dracula—had worn on any longer, Alucard was certain the whip would have claimed much more than an arm. If only its proper owner had put off Gestaltization for just a few more months…

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “…Eventually.” Dhampyrs healed quickly, after all; even these grievous wounds would patch themselves together soon enough. “I need the coffin.”

“I’ll get it,” Devola said. She hurried off and slipped through the doors, giving the Gestalt waiting in the corner a pat on its head on her way out.

Popola gently took hold of Alucard’s burned arm and lifted it up, pulling out a small pair of stubby trauma shears to cut away what was left of his sleeve.

“Oh, please—no, no, I’m fine—this is a good suit—” Alucard weakly protested (even though his suit was far beyond ruined anyway), feeling oddly vulnerable as the android cut away his sleeve.

“Standard medical procedure, sir,” Popola said, cutting away the rest of his tattered jacket, shirt, tie, and waistcoat to reveal a tapestry of scars and blossoming bruises on the canvas of his pale skin. The cool air of the facility wreathed his body and sent a chill up his spine.

“That was an Eldredge knot,” Alucard muttered as his bisected tie slipped from his neck and draped itself over his knee. “It took forever to get it right.”
“This will all heal, right?” Popola asked, her eyes darting from scar to scar as she analyzed each wound.

“Yes. I merely have to sleep it off.”

“Good… it’ll be nice to have you around.” She smiled. “And… Dracula’s gone, right?”

Alucard swallowed hard. “…Yes. Once more… and hopefully, forever—”

Soma Cruz, once-unwitting, once-unwilling reincarnation of Dracula; that fey young man, scarcely more than a boy when he’d discovered his heritage. For so long, those dark eyes framed by snowy white hair had belied such a kind, innocent heart. Now he was dead. Dead and damned; the second chance his soul had been given was lost. And it was all Alucard’s fault.

It had felt strange at first, being around that boy, being his mentor—a father to his own father—but soon enough it had felt right. Having Soma had felt like having a family again. Yet Alucard, in his foolishness and carelessness, had let it all slip through his fingers. What more could he have said or done? Where had he gone wrong? What hidden darkness, what unsaid hatred or unspoken anguish, had brought that poor boy to this fate, and what more could Alucard have done to see and hear it?

By whichever means the darkness had sprouted and blossomed in Soma’s heart, Alucard had taken on his wellbeing as his personal responsibility; the failure was his and his alone.

“He… He could have been saved…” His fist clenched, his fingers curling inward and scraping against the tabletop. He was shaking, trembling like the last leaf on a tree’s branches, barely able to choke out his confession to the promise he’d failed to keep. “The light… in his dark soul… it was my duty to keep it shining…”

“There, there.” Popola laid a hand on his shoulder. “It must be so hard, having to do that to your own father. Not that I would know anything about that, but… you have my sympathies.”

As she tended to his arm with some sort of quick-drying salve, she began to talk about the bright future of Project Gestalt, obviously hoping her enthusiasm would rub off on him and soothe his heartache. Her bedside manner could use some work, but Alucard figured it was very good for an android, and it did start to make him feel a little better. It was strange, after thirty years of watching civilization crumble like a pillar of salt, to hear somebody speaking of hope.

Soon enough, Devola returned, hefting a large black coffin over one shoulder as if it weighed nothing. She set it on the floor at Alucard’s side and opened it. “So are you just going to… get in?”

Alucard stood up on unsteady legs and pulled a change of clothes out from the coffin, draping his old coat and cape over his shoulders.

“Yes,” he answered, gingerly lowering himself into the coffin as he would into a hot bath. The interior of the coffin was scarlet velvet padding and a smattering of soil from his homeland; the latter would give his slumber greater restorative properties. “I’ll be as good as new when I awaken.”

“And when will that be?” Popola asked.

“It will be when I’ve returned to my full strength. Shouldn’t be more than a century,” Alucard answered. “But you’re more than welcome to wake me up sooner if you have need of me.” He laid back, resting his head against the soft and familiar cushioning of his coffin, and let his leaden eyelids fall over his eyes. “I look forward… to helping you steward Project Gestalt. Take care and good night…”
The lid of the coffin swung shut, enclosing him in a blissful darkness that soon pressed all thoughts from his mind; he fell into a dreamless sleep.

A dreamless, timeless sleep, one which went on far too long, a free fall into a thoughtless abyss where centuries ran by like seconds, until eventually…

He woke up.

Alucard typically woke up on his own without any need for alarm clocks or tolling churchbells or the like. Typically, the natural rising and setting of the sun would suffice to guide his circadian rhythms—after all, he still remembered vividly the old days of candles and lamplight and bells ringing in the hour, unlike modern-day human who’d barely even known what sleep was at all, let alone what night truly meant. But there was no sunrise in this world—not for a long, long time, at least.

In the absence of the sun to guide his waking, he found himself jolted out of his sleep instead by the sound of gunfire—a great deal of it ringing out from many directions throughout the camp. As the deafening roars assaulted his ears, Alucard gritted his teeth and clenched his jaw to will away the sounds, picked up his sword, and swiftly exited the twins’ tent.

Amid the cacophony, he heard a smattering of panicked voices.

“Can’t you get a signal to the Bunker?”

“I-I’m trying—but they’re refusing all signals!”

“Damn! The machines are jamming us?”

“No… I think something’s gone wrong with YoRHa!”

“Try to get a signal out to earthbound units! There have to be some in the area!”

He didn’t need to ask around to learn what was going on. Machines had overrun the camp, climbing over and tearing through its barricades. Bullets pinged off the stubby, bullet-shaped toy soldiers’ stained and discolored metal hulls as they advanced. Without hesitation, Alucard leaped into the fray, cutting through the machines’ ranks with the grace and strength afforded to him by his dark powers. Sparks flew as steel cleaved steel and gurgling electronic death-rattles filled the air.

Once alerted to his presence, the machines, Alucard noticed, seemed interested particularly in him. They gravitated toward him, almost ignoring the androids shooting at them. Just like the machines the other night—the ones who had screamed of revenge and brotherhood.

They were targeting him.

Armed with this knowledge, Alucard pushed through to the outskirts of the camp and the machines followed. After what felt like an eternity, the machine forces began to lessen as their dead crowded the oil-stained ground.

At last, silence fell over the Resistance camp. Now that he could hear himself think, Alucard took stock of the situation. Anemone was nowhere in sight; he couldn’t even hear her shouting out orders, which seemed odd to him, considering she was the leader of this cell of the Resistance. Neither were Popola and Devola anywhere to be found—although he took no small amount of comfort to know that he hadn’t tripped over their corpses.
Tension still blanketed the camp; no one knew whether to expect another attack. From what Alucard could glean from overhearing the androids pick through the detritus, it had been years since machines had openly attacked the camp like this. No one else seemed to have picked up on the fact that the machines had singled out Alucard—perhaps they had even come here in the first place because he was here. Alucard was beginning to wonder if it was prudent for him to remain here, or if it would be better for this camp’s denizens if he were to take up residence in the wilderness of the ruins engulfing the camp instead.

Wishing to inquire about Popola and Devola, he approached one of the android soldiers picking through the fallen machines in a search for spare parts and tapped him on the shoulder. At that exact moment, though, the twins emerged from one of the dilapidated buildings enclosing the camp as if on cue. Their clothes and skin were smeared with black grease and oily synthetic blood. Alucard smiled, relieved to see them unharmed despite the blood. It looked like they had simply been occupied with some triage work, which had mercifully kept them out of danger.

“You’re responsible for this, aren’t you?” Devola asked, eyeing the carnage and kicking at the torn-open hull of a stubby machine.

“Guilty as charged,” Alucard answered, the quip leaving an acerbic residue on his tongue.

“Devola and I need to head over to Pascal to pick up some parts for a fuel filter,” Popola said. “Would you like to come with us?”

“I’m sure they’d rather have Alucard here in case there’s another attack,” Devola said, chastising her twin.

Alucard raised his hands. “No, no, I’m certain this camp can look after itself. I’d be glad to accompany you.”

Before Alucard and the twins could set off, a shout rang out through the camp.

“You…!”

Alucard glanced over his shoulder in the direction the outcry had come from. A fountain of golden light, bright as sunlight, blossomed from a pile of machine carcasses; it faded away to reveal a young man with short, close-cropped silver hair standing atop the mound of debris. He was clad in nothing but a pair of pants lined with razor-sharp scales; his bare skin showed off toned, well-defined muscles, giving him the look of an ancient Greek statue brought to life. A black tattoo of twisting geometric shapes enveloped his left arm; one of his hands was covered by a black glove with thick red claws capping each finger. He stared at Alucard with hatred in his crimson eyes, and Alucard realized that just like the machines, this strange young man had come here for him.

One of the android soldiers still standing brought his rifle to bear; in an instant, the bare-chested man stood in front of him, placing a single finger against the barrel of the rifle at the exact moment the soldier squeezed the trigger. The rifle exploded, shrapnel spraying as its wielder staggered backward and fell to the ground.

No one else was foolish enough to point their guns at the intruder after that display of strength.

The strange, silver-haired young man refocused on Alucard. “The silver-haired man in black,” he snarled, taking a step toward him. His voice was caustic enough to strip paint. “Are you the one I’ve been looking for?”

Silver hair and a black coat. The rallying cry of every machine that had attacked Alucard these
past few days.

This man, it seemed, was their leader.

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To say the quarantine bay was boring was an understatement. It was, in fact, so mind-numbing in its utter blandness that it could drive one mad. The walls were white and featureless. So was the ceiling. So was the floor. There were two doors on opposite sides of the vast white room and nothing else save for 9S, his pod, 2B, and her pod.

Shimmering curtains of translucent light stretching from floor to ceiling wrapped around all four of them, cutting them off from each other. 9S sat cross-legged in his little cylindrical cell, tapping absentmindedly on the wall of light and watching ripples spread where his fingertip met the hard light surface. 2B simply stood in her little bespoke cell as still as a statue, her back turned to him. He’d tried shouting at her to attract her attention, but the sound hadn’t carried.

He kept shouting for a little bit more, though, just to blow off some steam.

Usually, 9S inwardly marveled at how cool, calm, and collected 2B could be, but considering their circumstances here, it just frustrated him. It made him feel as though she of all people didn’t understand the gravity of the situation—a whole continent full of nigh-invincible vampire machines within a week! She should have been yelling and screaming her head off, too! After all, she was the one who had fought with that monstrous machine. She hadn’t fallen for the Commander’s gaslighting, had she?

9S tried to take his mind off of… well, everything, by making a game out of tapping on the wall. First, he tried to see how many times in a row his fingertip could land in exactly the same spot. Then he started experimenting with different rhythms. He ran his hand up and down the shimmering curtain in ascending and descending patterns, imagining his tapping corresponding to different tones. He played a few little ditties and then got too restless to concentrate.

He sighed and looked over at Pod 153, which floated in its own, much thinner tube, completely inert. He wondered how long it would take before anyone came down here to do ‘research’ on the four of them… and what would be done to them when the researchers couldn’t find anything wrong. Would he and 2B have an opportunity to free themselves then, or would they both be wiped clean and rebooted, ignorant of the danger brewing back on Earth?

If they did manage to run away… they’d be fugitives from YoRHa. Marked for death. Just like that one android, A2, that he and 2B had encountered not too long ago. Reflecting on that filthy, disheveled, half-skinned mess of an android, 9S was loath to think about fighting to survive not only against machines, but against his fellow androids—vampires notwithstanding. He didn’t want to end up looking—or smelling—like her.

It was hopeless.

9S bowed his head and leaned forward, resting his head against the barrier. It was warm, hard, and sent a prickling sensation through his skin.

This was the end, then. The dawn of the age of vampires.

He chuckled.

Well, at least until the sun rose and burned them all to ashes. But by then, there probably wouldn’t be anything else left, either.
The door slid open, much to 9S’s surprise. Commander White strolled into the quarantine bay, again much to 9S’s surprise; and much to his surprise, she did not look well. She held one hand close to her chest against a blossoming flower of blood on her elegant white dress—no, not a hand, but a severed wrist stump. Her eyes were wide; her breath was ragged and labored, as though she’d run a hundred kilometers to get here.

9S stood up, his shoulders brushing against the force field holding him at bay. “Commander?”

2B was stirring, too; 9S could see her resting her hand on the force field and moving her mouth, although no sound came out.

Taking a moment to catch her breath and brush an unusually out-of-place lock of pale hair from her brow, White tapped on 2B’s force field and disengaged it, then did the same for 9S’s.

“Reconsidering locking us up, huh?” 9S asked as the shimmering curtain surrounding him flickered and faded away. He couldn’t help but sound a little smug.

“Commander, are you okay?” 2B asked.

“I’m fine,” White said. She turned to 9S, wearing a stern scowl on her weary face. “Unit 9S, I have reconsidered the contents of your report and have concluded that you and 2B are not delusional.”

9S figured that White wasn’t used to eating crow and felt oddly triumphant to have been proven right, although he was certain whatever proof had swayed her mind was something he wouldn’t want to hear. Nevertheless, despite that worry festering in the back of his mind, he crossed his arms and basked in his correctness. “Oh, so now you take us seriously.”

“Watch your tongue. It sounds like you’re eager to clean every window on this station from the outside,” she said, glaring coldly at him. “I made the best decision I could given the information at my disposal,” she added, sounding (oddly enough) proud rather than defensive or apologetic, “and changed my mind when confronted with new information, as any rational person would.”

“Apology accepted, Commander.”

“I can put you back in quarantine any time I like.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

White nodded. “That’s better. Now, you two, I need your expertise. There’s a vampire locked in my office.” With a flick of her remaining wrist, she disengaged the force fields holding the pods in stasis. “You need to help me kill him.”

9S supposed he’d gotten as much of an apology as he could ever get from his commanding officer. The three of them, followed by the two pods, hurried out of the quarantine bay and into the ring-shaped corridor spanning the lower decks.

On the way, 9S had an idea. Pascal had recounted to him a great deal of lore about vampires from the old books on human folk tales and mythology he’d collected in his little library—some of which were things so outlandish that 9S had omitted them from his report so he wouldn’t sound like he was nuts (in hindsight, though, it probably wouldn’t have done him any further harm).

“Commander,” he said as White led him and 2B through the eerily-empty and silent corridors, “I have an idea. We need to stop by R&D.”

“Is that really necessary, 9S?” White asked.
“Trust me,” 9S said. “Who’s the vampire expert here?”

9S held a glass jar full to the brim of millimeter-scale bolts close to his chest as he and 2B left R&D and followed White to her office.

“I put the entire Bunker on lockdown,” White explained. “The hangar bay is sealed off. The access points are shut down. We’ve even blocked communications between the station and Earth. Every single android here should be locked safely in their quarters.”

9S had never seen White so rattled. This was the third time she’d told them that as the three of them had hurried across the Bunker’s empty and silent decks, as if she were trying to convince herself that her decisions were sound through repetition.

“You’re sure,” she asked 9S, “that vampires cannot enter a room without permission?”

“That’s what Pascal said. They can’t enter somebody’s home unless they’re allowed in.”

White’s tone soured. “Why did you put that in your report and not…” She shook her jar of bolts. “This?”

9S shrugged. “Eh… It sounded a lot crazier than the others.”

“Do not omit anything from your reports next time,” she snapped.

“Like you’d have believed me, anyway,” 9S muttered under his breath.

The three of them reached White’s office; its door was savagely bent and crumpled like tinfoil, demonstrating 86S’s unnatural strength. 9S wondered how much stronger a vampire android must be than a vampire machine. It, like everything else about these horrifying undead creatures, defied belief.

Within the office, 9S saw the exact kind of mess all the rumors about White’s hygiene (or lack thereof) spoke of. If he hadn’t seen for himself how neat and tidy the office had been just earlier this morning, he’d have believed everything people had said about how slovenly she was.

White digitized the jar in her hand and tucked it away in virtual storage. It vanished in a flurry of amber sparks. “I didn’t expect him to stay cooped up in there, really,” she sighed.

“Looks like we’ll have to go looking for him,” 2B said. “Pod,” she asked, “you can’t track his black box signal, can you?”

“Negative,” Pod 042 answered. “Vampires do not produce any ambient heat or give off any electromagnetic radiation. They are untraceable.”

“We’ll have to hunt for him the old-fashioned way,” White said. “Ops is closest. We’ll check there first.” She turned around and led 2B and 9S back down the way they’d came.

“Analysis: Four black box signals detected on the Operations deck,” said Pod 153.

What? 9S felt the bottom drop out from his stomach. “I thought you said you put the Bunker on lockdown,” he said to White.

“I did,” she replied.

Sharing a growing sense of unease, the three of them wasted no time storming into Ops, barely
even waiting for the door to slide all the way up before barging into the room. 9S tucked his jar of bolts under his armpit and drew his sword; 2B did the same. White held back behind the two of them, following at a close distance and using the two of them as living shields.

9S looked around Ops. The terrace lining the inside wall of the chamber opposite the floor-to-ceiling viewscreen, while mostly empty, still had half a dozen Operators tapping away at their terminals as though nothing was wrong. On closer inspection, though, of the six Operators still here on duty, only half of them were doing any work. For each one whose fingers were flying over her keyboard, there was one sitting next to her and watching her like a hawk.

_They’re hostages. And that means…_

_“Commander White!”_

A fair-haired Scanner stepped onto the center of the floor, dragging another one of the Operators on duty along with him. 2B clenched her fists so tight that 9S could hear the leather creaking. It was her assigned Operator, 6O—9S could recognize those braided pigtails anywhere. Her movements were sluggish and stiff.

“I always _was_ quite dull for a Scanner,” 86S called out, “wasn’t I, Commander? Isn’t that what you said?”

White stepped in front of 2B and 9S, standing on the edge of the elevator platform leading to the floor but stopping just short of walking onto it. “86S! Let her go!”

86S laughed. “If I were you, I’d have enthralled as many people as I could before I went after me.’ Do you remember saying that to me, Commander? Well, it gave me a _great_ idea!”

“No…” White whispered.

With a snap of 86S’s fingers, half of the Operators shot up to their feet, dragging their captives up with them, and laid the fangs beneath the veils on their necks. They were all perfectly in sync, their movements choreographed like ballet dancers.

“I’ll release this one,” 86S said, giving 6O a rough nudge, “and all the others… but you have to come down here, White, _alone_, and submit to me!”

“Don’t do it, Commander!” 9S shouted out, reaching out and grabbing her by the arm. “You can’t…”

His voice fell silent as his eyes flitted to the side and he caught sight of one of the three captives on the terrace below.

21O, his assigned Operator, stood in the clutches of the vampire which had once been one of her coworkers. Their eyes met. 21O didn’t look so stern and stoic as she usually did. Her expression was blank, her emerald eyes foggy and glazed over. She barely seemed to acknowledge 9S’s presence at all.

“Is _that_ what this is about?” White asked. “Did you really abandon your cause— _our_ cause— because of an inferiority complex?” White snarled. “3O, 8O, 5O, what about _you_?”

“Our cause is our master’s cause,” the three vampire Operators answered in unison.

“And my cause,” 86S said, “is to deliver the finest of banquets to _my_ masters.” He shrugged. “I won’t lie and say I don’t have any personal motivations. But _they_ couldn’t care less about my
grudge. What they want is the location of the human refugee colony… and our goals just happened to align so neatly! So go ahead… give in, and—"

“What will you do if I refuse to become your loyal servant?” White asked.

“I’ll turn everyone else here into vampires,” 86S answered matter-of-factly, “and then one of us will make you one of us. Either way, I win. Unless you can cut down and kill each and every android in this room…"

“Do you think I’d abandon my commitment to humanity to spare my subordinates’ lives? If the last vestiges of humanity are wiped out,” White said, “then there’s no point in any of us surviving at all! I won’t give myself up, and I’ll die before I’m turned!”

As if on cue, Pod 153 fired on the vampire holding 21O captive, its bullets riddling the vampire’s torso; Pod 042 did the same to the two vampires stationed on the other side of the terrace. The three vampire Operators held on fast to their captives, soaking up the bullets like a sponge even though the gunfire reduced their uniforms to tatters and tore through their flesh. Their faces contorted in pain, blood pooling at their feet—and yet they clung with a death grip to their hostages.

86S held up his hand and both pods were thrown against the ceiling with enough force to leave two spiderwebs of cracks in the featureless white surface; they both fell to the floor with a loud clang and picked themselves up, hovering slowly and unsteadily.

“And yet you criticize me for poor judgment, White!” 86S shouted out, baring 6O’s neck and licking his lips in anticipation as he prepared to feast on his hostage’s blood.

“Wait!” White cried out, rushing onto the elevator platform. “Stop!”

Stopping in his tracks, 86S drew back, cocked his head, and smiled as the platform descended and brought his prey closer to him. “Ah… I knew you cared about your little harem here. Welcome to the family…"

White stepped off the platform, summoned the glass jar to her hand, and smashed it against the floor before 86S’s feet.

Desperately hoping Pascal’s stories hadn’t been just stories, 9S raised his jar above his head, poised to throw it down at the feet of the vampire who’d taken 21O captive.

And then his eyes met the vampire’s.

Down on the floor, 86S’s eyes widened, his mouth hanging agape. His grip on 6O loosened and his hands fell away from her as he fell to his knees. 6O stumbled and swayed on her feet once the vampire had lost his hold on her; White reached out and grabbed her by the arm and roughly pulled her back onto the elevator platform just as it began to ascend and carry the two of them back to safety.

All 9S had to do was throw down his own jar to distract the other vampires. But his body wouldn’t obey his mind. Every muscle and servo in his body froze as the burning red eyes of the vampire holding onto 21O locked with his. His blood ran cold; he felt his black box stop in his chest.

Had 2B felt the same pressure pinning her down when she’d fought Flamel? The fear gripping her, digging icy talons into her mind, paralyzing her limbs, driving brave thoughts of resistance from her head? Was she feeling it right now, staring down two more vampires after so narrowly defeating just one?
At his side, 2B tossed a jar of her own at the other two vampires on the terrace. The peals of shattering glass and clatter of hundreds of tiny metal pieces against the floor rang out and echoed through the cavernous room. Had she felt that same indescribable terror 9S was stricken with now, and had she overcome it through sheer force of will?

But 9S still couldn’t move. All he could do was watch helplessly, just as frozen as 21O, unable to do so much as choke out a frightened gasp as the vampire plunged her fangs into her immobilized prey. 21O went limp, collapsing like a ragdoll and falling into her captor’s arms, her head lolling back and eyes rolling up as her skin blanched and turned as pale as milk.

While 9S looked on, paralyzed, at the horrific sight, 2B grabbed him roughly by the collar and yanked him off his feet, smashing the jar he’d been holding on the floor. “Let’s go!” she shouted, dragging him along as White ran past her with 6O and the two other captive Operators in tow.

Seemingly no longer interested in the world around him, 86S crouched down in front of the pile of glass and metal littering the floor and pecked at each piece with his fingers, setting them aside one at a time. “Dammit… Damn you, White…! When I’m done counting these,” he snarled through gritted teeth, “you’re all going to die screaming!”

The door slid shut, closing off the den of vampires from the rest of the Bunker. For good measure, White keyed in her access code to lock the door just as she’d locked her office door; while it wouldn’t keep 86S and his thralls at bay forever, it would at least buy some time.

They rushed down the corridor, passing by locked door after locked door until they reached 6O’s; White opened the door and ushered 6O into her quarters with the other two Operators.

“Stay here. Keep the door locked. Don’t open it for anyone except for me,” White told them as the door slid shut.

As the danger-response programming that kept him on high alert ran down, 9S fell to his knees, gasping for breath as the full magnitude and intensity of the encounter he’d had with those vampires bore down on him.

“With all due respect to Pascal,” 2B said, gingerly rubbing her forehead, “I can’t believe that worked. How long will the mess back there keep those vampires occupied?”

“A Scanner and three Operators? They’ll have the whole mess counted in a matter of minutes,” White said. “But… it did buy us some time, nonetheless.”

“Four Operators,” 9S found himself muttering. The sight of the vampire taking 21O and draining her blood was seared indelibly into his memory; that split second was still playing on a loop in his head—the split second when his body and his wits had both failed him. He’d been utterly powerless to do so much as lift a finger.

“9S, what other weaknesses of these things can we exploit?” White asked. “And this time, don’t leave anything out because you think it might sound ‘ridiculous.’”

“I…” 9S racked his brain and tried to focus, but nothing came up. Nothing except 21O staring at him with blank, glassy eyes while he stood there with all of the means to save her and none of the willpower. The same image blocked every other train of thought he tried to follow, standing as an impassable barrier wherever he turned. “I… I c-can’t… I couldn’t… I…” The words he tried to say vanished off the tip of his tongue before he could say them as he choked out what little he could manage to speak between short, shallow, ragged breaths. “I just… S-She…”
“9S.” White crouched down and clamped her hand down on his shoulder, giving him a rough shake. “Focus. You need to tell us everything you know.”

9S bowed his head and averted his eyes, feeling hot tears soak into his visor. He shuddered and shivered, wrapping his arms over his chest and shrinking away. He’d failed. White and 2B had kept their wits and remained strong, but he alone had fallen short. He, a Scanner, a model of android designed to have sharp wits and a strong mind, had found himself bereft of both when he’d needed them—when 21O had needed them. He’d failed himself and her...

“9S!” White smacked him across the face in an attempt to jolt him out of the feedback loop his mind had fallen into. “You’re a high-performance model! Act like it!”

Her hand left a stinging red mark on his cheek; in spite of that, though, 9S couldn’t help himself. He’d failed. He’d failed. He’d failed. He’d failed—

“Commander, let me try.” 2B knelt beside White and raised her hand to 9S’s cheek, resting her palm softly over the same spot that still smarted and stung from the slap. “9S, look at me.”

Her voice cut through the noise. 9S turned his head as 2B pulled up her visor, revealing her pale blue eyes. “Look at me, 9S. Breathe. Slowly.”

9S tried to breathe, and as he focused on 2B’s face and let that familiar, comforting image replace the waking nightmare filling his head, it began to come easier to him. Her gaze, like that of the vampires’, was potent, but in an entirely different way. The force it exerted on his mind lifted him up instead of weighing him down. Looking into those eyes, he felt safe. He felt calm.

Her eyes. They still seemed so familiar. 9S wondered if he’d ever seen them before. No, that wasn’t possible. 2B never would have taken off her visor while on duty. She, like 21O, was a stickler for rules and regulations. Like 21O...

No. No. No, it was all rushing back, he—

“Nines,” she whispered, her voice low enough that only he could hear her.

The white noise filling his head faded away; 9S felt 2B’s thumb run over his cheek in a slow, soft circle, her fingertip brushing against the contours of his ear. It wasn’t the kind of gesture he’d ever have expected from her. She was being so gentle, so kind, almost nurturing…

“2B…” 9S coughed and took a deep breath, and then another. He still felt hollow inside, but he could breathe now, and he could think again. “2B, I…”

2B withdrew her hand, lowered her visor, and stood up. “Emotions are prohibited,” she brusquely told him. It seemed she was reminding herself just as much as she was reminding him, castigating herself for exposing the side of herself the rules demanded she kept hidden.

9S slowly nodded. “…Right,” he mumbled, and he stood up and followed White, 2B, and the others as they set off down the corridor.

“You seem to have an idea who I am,” Alucard said, flourishing his sword as he stared down the shirtless man who’d emerged from the machine wreckage. “But… I cannot say the same about you.”

“You know who I am.” The shirtless man clenched his fists, a golden light blooming around his forearms, and charged at him. “My brother told you—before you killed him!”
Alucard narrowly sidestepped the man’s first strike, feeling his knuckles and the golden aura engulfing his fists just barely graze his nose. There wasn’t much grace or elegance behind that punch. Fury, yes, but finesse, no. Nevertheless, he was thankful he’d dodged the blow. “I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

The man let out a frustrated growl and tried to knee Alucard in the stomach, golden energy wreathing his leg. Alucard staggered backward, well out of range; the distance between him and his foe rapidly closed. Fortunately, the man’s lack of finesse made him an easy foe to steer clear of; every punch he tried to throw came with a clear wind-up that made predicting his moves child’s play.

“I can’t say I recall killing anyone these past few days, your little toy soldiers aside.” Weaving around the shirtless man’s next few jabs, Alucard probed his defenses with his sword. “Least of all, your brother…”

Before Alucard’s sword could even nick his foe’s bare skin, a golden barrier sprang up between flesh and steel; the blade bounced harmlessly off it. Nonetheless, the shirtless man snarled and screamed as though he’d been struck, lashing out and driving his shin into Alucard’s midsection. This hit connected. Alucard was knocked off his feet and lifted into the air, his breath down to the last gasp ripped from his lungs. He hit the ground and barely managed to remain upright, teetering on his feet as he stumbled backward.

To say he’d regretted taunting this man was an understatement. He could already feel his ribs bruising—another kick like that could rearrange his ribcage.

“My name,” the man said, glaring daggers at Alucard, “is Eve. You’re going to remember it as long as you live, monster!”

“Okay… Listen to me, Eve.” Alucard hurriedly backed away from Eve’s furious flurries of punches and kicks. “You may have mistaken me for someone else. Perhaps we should bury the hatchet—”

“Shut up!” Eve threw another wild punch; Alucard deftly danced past his swinging fist and slipped behind him, drawing a dagger from his hip and readying himself to bury it in Eve’s bare and unprotected back. Eve spun around, kicked the knife from Alucard’s hand, and vanished in a blossom of golden light.

A spark ran through Alucard’s mind, a jolt of alertness spurred by his honed and sharpened instincts; he whirled around just in time to see Eve’s gloved fist headed straight for his face. Alucard caught it, his fingertips scraping and sliding on the leather as he struggled to hold back the force of the blow. Eve threw another punch with his right hand, which Alucard managed to catch as well; the two of them grappled fruitlessly against each other, neither willing to give an inch.

Eve’s crimson eyes narrowed. “You can’t fool me… you even smell like him…”

“I’ve never been told I smelted like someone before,” Alucard said, gritting his teeth as he struggled to push Eve back. The man’s raw strength continued to surprise him. Heaven forbid somebody actually teach him how to fight—he’d be utterly unstoppable if he knew how to apply all that power properly. “Should I take that as a compliment or an insult?”

It was a strange thing for Eve to say to him, though. What scent could be so distinctive that Alucard could share it with one and only one other person? What person on this war-torn post-apocalyptic planet could he possibly have a scent in common with—
That single lapse of concentration was all Eve needed to gain the upper hand, push Alucard back, and deliver two crushing blows to his jaw and his ribs. As the pain washed over him, the ripples building on each other where they crossed paths, Alucard saw stars. In fact, he saw entire galaxies swirling before him like a time-lapse video of the universe.

Those two mighty punches were followed by a flurry of blows which Alucard hardly even felt, overwhelmed as he was by the first two already. He stumbled backward, windmilling his arms to keep his balance, as Eve vanished in a flash of golden light.

Eve reappeared behind him and drove his knee into the small of his back, knocking Alucard into a pile of dismembered machines. Alucard flopped over onto his back, if only to prevent a poorly-placed elbow from digging into his already-tender ribs.

_Don’t push me into changing into a bat or mist_, Alucard thought, glancing at the ragged soldiers looking on from the sidelines at his sparring match. _I’m not prepared to answer the questions that would raise_...

Eve cracked his knuckles, then his neck. “Get up. I’m not done with you.”

“The man who killed your brother,” Alucard said, wincing as the pain from the bombardment he’d endured began to catch up to him. “Was his name… Dracula?”

“I’m not interested in your name. Just in how much it’ll hurt when I kill you.” Eve wrenched a ragged spear from the claws of a dismembered machine, twirling it like a baton.

“I’m not him. And trust me, I want him dead just as much as you do—”

Eve threw the spear like a javelin, narrowly grazing Alucard’s ear as the spearhead buried itself in the mound of mangled machines. Alucard pulled himself to his feet as Eve rushed at him yet again, kicking up a shattered half of one machine’s spherical face; Eve snapped his fingers and a bolt of amber light shot out from his hand and blew the metal hemisphere to pieces.

Alucard hooked his ankle around Eve’s, tripping him, and drove his elbow into the small of his back, knocking him to the ground. Eve hit the ground, lashed upward with his leg, and nearly caught Alucard on the chin, the heel of his boot scraping his cheek.

Eve righted himself, completely undeterred, and charged again, letting out an enraged war cry. Scattered machine parts lifted off the ground and hovered close to him as though magnetically attracted to his body. Alucard backed away and pulled free a rusty, wickedly-shaped sword made from scrap metal from the mechanical hands of its former wielder, batting the orbiting machine parts out of the air as Eve threw them at him.

“First you poison my brother against me…” Eve snarled, “then you kill him in front of me… And now you change your hair to make yourself look just him, all to mock me? I’ll kill you!”

It didn’t take long for Eve to close the gap between himself and Alucard, try as Alucard might to keep his distance. The fight was dragging on, and the hits he had endured were beginning to take their toll. Alucard’s head was spinning, the world swirling around him. He was starting to struggle to keep his footing, stumbling across the shrapnel-littered ground as he weaved unsteadily and drunkenly through Eve’s blistering offense. He managed to get a few hits in here and there, but every blow he tried to land glanced harmlessly off of the golden barriers that sprung up close to Eve’s body.

Alucard brought his sword down on Eve; a pane of amber light shimmered into existence just in
front of his chest and bore the brunt of the strike. While the shield was occupied, he took his knife and shoved it between Eve’s unprotected ribs, giving it a savage twist.

Eve howled and fell back, clutching at his side as oily blood gushed from the wound. He wrenched the dagger free and crushed its hilt in his gloved hand, letting it fall to the ground in pieces.

“Well…” he growled, heaving a mostly-intact machine body over his head, “Useless, useless, useless!”

The inert machine sailed through the air; Alucard cut it in two and used it as cover to transform—briefly, for less than a single second—into a cloud of mist and slip past Eve’s flank. But Eve noticed him out of the corner of his eye as soon as he had solidified and brought up a bare, tattooed forearm to block his sword. He planted his boot squarely on Alucard’s chest and kicked him into the air, vanishing in a flash of light.

The shadowy ground and pitch-black sky spun around Alucard as Eve reappeared behind him to drive his foot into his back, then reappeared in front of him to kick him in the chest again, repeating the pattern in a dizzying zigzag motion. Alucard pinballed through the air under Eve’s onslaught, slamming into the wall of a teetering skyscraper; the concrete crumbled under his weight and the force of the impact.

He slid off the cracked concrete and hit the ground, his ears ringing from the force of the impact.

“You’re not him,” Eve spat, taking slow and heavy steps toward Alucard. “It’s so clear now. I don’t feel that pressure around you… and your eyes—I don’t feel so scared looking at them.”

Alucard was too busy catching his breath to make any sort of wry quip or observation as he struggled back up, yanking a long spear from the grip of a disemboweled machine and planting it in the ground like a cane to prop himself up.

“So I’ll just kill you,” Eve said, raising his arm and levitating a cluster of mangled machines into the air, “for wasting my time!”

A slow clap rang out through the air.

“Bravo, Eve. Good show! But don’t you think your efforts are a little… hmm… misdirected?”

A chill ran up Alucard’s spine at the sound of that voice.

Dracula, still wearing the young body of Soma Cruz like a bespoke suit, stood at the very periphery of the Resistance camp, the toes of his boots a hair’s-breadth away from the edge of the soft glow of lamplight that marked the boundary of the camp.

Alucard’s heart pounded against his sore and aching ribs, drumming a furious, nervous beat. Dracula had at last revealed himself—Why here? Why now? Was Alucard strong enough to confront him again? Was he ready?

“It’s me you’ve been looking for, isn’t it?” Dracula asked, grinning wickedly as Eve slowly turned around to face him. “Leave the whelp over there to rot. I’m the one you want.”

2B pulled off her boots, untied her dress, and pulled her blouse up over her head. The cool air of the armory prickled against her skin. The black suit of heavy armor she slipped into was even colder; she suppressed the urge to shiver as she strapped herself into it. It would warm up once its systems came online, but until then, it was like wearing a suit made of ice. She was in too much of
a hurry, though, to bother with the bodysuit meant to go underneath the armor, or any of the parts meant to protect her arms or legs save for boots and gauntlets. Nor did she have time to grab a helmet. It would have to do.

9S poked at one of the full suits of armor mounted on the walls. “None of this stuff fits me,” he pointed out.

“It’s not supposed to,” White said. “Heavy armor is for combat units.” The armor didn’t fit her, either—she was a full head taller than the tallest combat model—but she had at least managed to find a breastplate to put on over her dress that kept her neck guarded from anyone who’d want to sink their fangs into it.

“If you were converted to a Type-B, you’d have no problem filling one out,” 2B told 9S.

“Uh…” 9S set down a black helmet. “I’m not sure I wanna wear one of these things that much.”

With at least some modicum of protection equipped, the three of them hurried out of the armory. The trouble with hiding, of course, was that now none of them had any ideas about the positions of their foes. Perhaps the vampires in Ops were still indulging in their compulsions, or perhaps they’d spread out throughout the Bunker…

“Holy weapons, a stake of ash wood through the heart, and ultraviolet light,” White said, repeating 9S’s earlier report. “Those are the only things that can kill a vampire?”

9S nodded. “Y-Yes, ma’am.”

2B could tell from his subdued behavior that he was still struggling with what had happened to 21O, and she couldn’t blame him. She’d have been just as out of sorts if 6O had met that fate as well (though she’d have done a better job bottling up her feelings and keeping her composure). On top of that, this had been his first face-to-face encounter with a vampire. The fear 2B had felt staring down those other two vampire Operators and looking them in their mesmerizing red eyes had been strong enough to freeze the breath in her throat, but she hadn’t felt quite as overwhelmed as she had during her encounter with Flamel. To some degree, she’d been inoculated by her first encounter—the unknown was always infinitely more terrifying the first time.

“Ridiculous,” White scoffed. “2B, what if we simply destroyed their bodies? Vaporize the head or the torso. Your pod should be up to the task.”

“Statement: The vampire machine designated ‘Flamel’ continued to function despite severe damage to its chassis and internal mechanisms,” Pod 042 explained. “This support pod lacks sufficient data to assess the efficacy of your suggestion.”

“Hmm.” White laid her hand on her forehead, deep in thought. “Ash wood… I don’t think even you, 2B, have the strength to puncture an android’s chassis with that. Not that we have much wood to spare up here, ash or otherwise…”

2B tapped on the glass of one of the bay windows lining the corridor. If there was a way to position the Bunker so the windows faced the sun, the outpouring of natural sunlight would turn the station’s hallways into a death trap for vampires. “Could we…”

“We’re on the night side of the Earth. Even if we shift out of geosynchronous orbit,” White said, as though she could read 2B’s mind, “and re-position the Bunker, we’re still hours away from the terminator line. Besides, the glass is polarized.”

“There has to be something here that produces ultraviolet light,” 9S said. “Maybe a tanning salon?
What about the maintenance clinic?”

White snapped her fingers. “That… might work,” she said, tempering that initial moment of excitement. “We’ll have to lure the vampires to maintenance, though, and if they figure out they’re headed there, they might get suspicious.”

“They’ll go wherever you go,” 2B said. “They need your authority to access records on the colony. Lead them to hell and they’ll follow.”

White gave her a wry smile. “Are you suggesting I act as bait?”

2B opened her mouth, but wasn’t sure what to say.

“Fortunately for you, I can’t think of a better plan.” White looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “Very well. We’ll wait for them to give chase, then burn them alive.”

“Have you decided not to run away? Or are you all paralyzed with fear?”

86S walked down the hallway, his footsteps echoing with each step. Flanking him on each side were two of his vampire Operators—3O and 8O. The red light in their eyes could be seen from across the hall.

“Either way,” 86S said, “you’re just prolonging the inevitable. We vampires are simply a higher class of being.”

“Is that why you guys just spent ten minutes sorting through a bunch of spare parts?” 9S asked.

86S briefly lost his composure. “3O, 8O, darlings, kill those two. Leave White to me.”

The two Operators removed their veiled headsets and hissed, baring their ivory fangs.

The Virtuous Contract materialized in 2B’s hand, her fingers gripping the cloth-wrapped hilt firmly. The sword’s curved, single-edged white blade caught the light from the ceiling and gleamed. “9S, draw your weapon.”

9S nodded and hastily summoned a katana of his own, one with a black hilt and bronze blade.

The two Operators barreled down the corridor, so graceful and lightfooted they all but flew. 3O caught 2B’s blade with her hands, nearly twisting it out of her hands, and kicked her in the chin, knocking her off her feet. The floor and ceiling rapidly exchanged places with each other, then her back slammed against the floor. 2B rolled out of the way as 3O lashed out with her hand; the vampire’s curled, talon-like fingers embedded themselves in the floor, puncturing the metal and ceramic paneling.

White took hold of Pod 042. “Pod, fire a laser at 86S!”

“Negative. Probability of hull breach is—”

“Commander override! Do it!”

Pod 042 unfolded its silvery hull to reveal its laser cannon and fired, aiming straight for 86S. 86S easily sidestepped the blast, which kept traveling and hit one of the large bay windows lining the outside wall of the corridor.

The glass was reinforced, but not enough to stand up to such an energetic blast from the inside; some of it melted, some of it shattered, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. The air in the Bunker
began to blow into space, tearing 86S off the floor and flinging him into the void.

He screamed and flung out his hand, a blossom of light unfolding around his palm as he tried desperately to hack something that could save him—to no avail. He clung to the lip of the window, shattered glass digging into his hands, as bulkhead doors slid shut around him to seal off the breach.

2B felt her armor seize up, sparks flying from the seams as electricity surged through its circuitry; fighting the suit, she drove her armored boot into 3O’s gut, knocking her back, and lobbed her sword at 8O just as the vampire’s fingers tightened around 9S’s neck. The sword pierced her neck with a spurt of blood so dark it was nearly black; taking advantage of the momentary distraction, 9S thrust his blade into her neck at an angle to 2B’s blade, grabbed both swords by the hilt, and twisted, severing her head at the neck. He pulled away from 8O as she slumped over, her fingernails leaving livid, shallow parallel scratched on the side of his neck.

When 3O reeled backward, a chunk of floor paneling came with her, remaining anchored to her hand; she used it as a bludgeoning weapon, the ragged chunk of ceramic and metal shattering against the side of 2B’s head. Warm blood matted her hair and trickled down her cheek as 2B struggled to remain upright, static and bursts of muted color playing across her vision from the force of the impact.

2B summoned the Virtuous Contract back to her hand and slashed across 3O’s chest, cutting through her sleek, form-fitting dress and the sheer bodysuit beneath it and leaving an oozing gash. 3O grabbed her roughly by the arm, twisting her wrist just so and breaking the grip she had on her sword, and hurled 2B over her shoulder. 2B hit the floor face-first, her nose crunching against the floor from the force of the impact. She wished she’d taken a helmet from the armory, but she’d been in too much of a hurry to suit up properly.

For vampirism to make an Operator stronger than an Executioner by such a degree… they were truly a terrifying enemy, perhaps worse than any machine.

3O drew back her hand, which was still embedded in the now-bloodstained chunk of floor paneling, and grabbed 2B by the back of her collar just as 9S attacked her, embedding his sword in the top of her head. He pulled the blade free with a shower of blood; 2B took the opportunity to right herself and lop 3O’s arm off at the shoulder.

2B stood up, blood streaming from her nose and running down her chin, as the now-disarmed 3O backed away, clutching at her bloodied shoulder. “Ow,” the operator moaned, “that really huuurt…”

“Suck it up, 3O,” 8O’s severed head spat out as her headless body staggered to its feet, fumbled blindly for her head, and picked it up.

9S’s jaw dropped as 8O planted her severed head back on her neck, leaving a bloody seam that faded away within seconds.

“You guys are mean,” 3O whined. She picked up her arm and reattached it the same way her counterpart had reattached her head. “Being a vampire is great! Just let us drink your blood!”

2B and 9S backed away and ran past White before the two vampire Operators could give chase again. “Commander! This way!”

White glanced at the vampires and took off after the two. She cleared her throat. “Typically, in a game of chess, you put your rook between the king and the enemy, not the other way around!”
“Our apologies, ma’am,” 2B said. “It’s just that you’ll draw them along better bringing up the rear.”

“I suppose I will,” White grumbled. “Good thinking, 2B.”

The three of them skidded to a halt in front of the elevator leading to the other decks of the station and piled in. White nervously jammed her thumb on the button for the habitation deck; the doors slid closed and the elevator began its descent just as 3O and 8O caught up. The vampire Operators stared out in dismay before the door hid them from sight.

White sighed, slumping her shoulders—something 2B had never seen her do and couldn’t imagine her doing. “So… how,” she asked, catching her breath, “are they going to follow us now? Haven’t they lost our trail?”

“You want us to follow you?”

The three of them all looked up at once in the direction of the voice and saw the third of 86S’s vampire Operators, 5O, clinging to the ceiling of the elevator cab like a spider. Her head had rotated 180 degrees. “I don’t get it,” she said. “You aren’t trying to lead us into a trap or something, are you?”

9S gasped. “Oh, sh—”

5O dropped to the floor, her head spinning on her neck to right itself, and pinned White against the wall. “People like you who never cut loose piss me off! C’mon, White, pull that stick out of your butt and join us! It’s a party, and you’re all invited!”

2B tried to wedge her sword between White and 5O, but at such close quarters it was hard to do much of anything without endangering White’s safety. Dammit… She gritted her teeth. Had 86S really planned ahead and sent 5O to lie in wait in the elevator, knowing his prey would try to make it off the command deck? By all rights, he was supposed to be an idiot, at least according to White. Perhaps vampirism had made him smarter, or perhaps whoever his ‘master’ was had a direct link to his mind…

9S dug his sword into 5O’s arms and severed them both at the elbow, the tip of his blade nicking 2B’s armor. As 5O gasped and reeled back, 2B pushed her against the far wall of the elevator cab, putting as much distance between her and White as possible in this cramped chamber, and buried her blade up to the hilt in her stomach.

The blade pierced both the wall of the elevator car and the elevator shaft. The earsplitting squeal of metal on metal mingled with 5O’s screeching howls of pain as the elevator cab jerked, rattled, and lurched.

The elevator cab came to a shuddering halt and the squealing stopped; 5O’s hoarse screams, which grew quieter by the second, and a subtle hissing noise were the only sounds filling the air.

“I think,” White said, “this is our st—”

She gagged; 2B glanced away from the captive vampire and saw 5O’s severed hands crawling over her as though they had a life of their own. They’d undone the clasps on the collar of her armor and now had their fingers wrapped around her throat, squeezing the life out of her.

“It’s gonna be so boring, turning you while you’re unconscious,” 5O laughed, squirming as she tried to shimmy her way off the sword pinning her to the wall. “You’ve just got to feel that bliss, that pleasure, that power, that ooohhhhh flowing through you! Oh, you’re gonna miss out, White!”
2B and 9S both grabbed onto the cold hands, trying to pry them away from White’s neck. Androids didn’t need to breathe, but they did need to regulate body heat, and there was only so much their coolant could do. Their most efficient heat sinks were their lungs, and with her windpipe blocked, the heat building up in White’s chassis had nowhere to go.

One hand came free, popping off in 9S’s grip and scuttling up his arm like a giant spider. Before he could throw it off, it grabbed him by the throat. 5O laughed louder.

“9S!” 2B shouted out, still struggling with the other hand strangling White. She wanted to rush over to him and free him, but one look at White’s hazy and unfocused green eyes bulging in their sockets rooted her to the spot. She couldn’t leave her commanding officer behind, not even…

9S gave her a weak thumbs-up, took his sword, and laid the blade at the base of his neck, his chest heaving fruitlessly as he tried in vain to expel the air growing hot and stale in his lungs. The sharp steel nicked his skin, drawing blood just underneath the black choker that encircled his neck.

5O’s howling, shrieking laughter grew even louder as the three androids all struggled against the disembodied hands, assaulting 2B’s ears.

2B forced herself to look away from 9S’s peril, trying harder to pull the disembodied hand away from White’s neck. Her skin was growing hotter by the second; it wouldn’t be long until she overheated and shut down. She tried to worm her fingers between White’s neck and the cold, dead flesh of 5O’s disembodied hand.

Nestling his sword between his own neck and the hand wrapped around it, 9S yanked the blade upward, severing the hand’s fingers. The blade cut into his jaw, skinned the flesh from his cheek, and severed his ear—but the hand, now devoid of all its fingers, flopped to the floor. Free to breathe once more, the first thing 9S did was scream.

2B summoned her sword back, removing it from 5O’s gut, and tried to do the same, wedging the blade under the hand’s clammy, dead fingers. She struggled to gain enough leverage—the blade was too long and there wasn’t enough space to maneuver it; the blade was too long and the hilt too far away to be an effective fulcrum for delicate, subtle, surgical movements. White’s eyes rolled back as her lips turned blue.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” 2B whispered, doing exactly what 9S had done and leaving the left side of White’s face a bloody mess. Freed, White collapsed to her knees, coughing as she inhaled as much fresh air as she could.

5O stopped laughing.

2B then realized that there was nothing pinning 5O in place. She whirled around, readying her blade—

And found 5O right where she’d left her. The vampire Operator was still pinned to the wall and had a look of faint confusion—and moderate discomfort—on her face, replacing the mirth she’d displayed just a few seconds earlier.

“What’s going on?” She squirmed and wriggled in place, but didn’t move. “I—I’m—I-I can’t—”

“Analysis: Hull breach detected,” Pod 153 announced. “Due to Unit 2B’s actions, the elevator shaft is exposed to vacuum, as is the elevator cab.”

5O’s red eyes widened. “O-Oh, no…” She doubled over and lurched, gasping and sputtering as the void of space outside began to pull her, bit by agonizing bit, through the pinhole opened by 2B’s sword. The more her chassis diminished, the more it crumpled, her flesh ripping and tearing just as easily as her tattered uniform, and the louder she screamed.

White pressed the button to open the elevator doors. “I don’t want to see the end of this,” she told 2B and 9S, her voice raspy and hoarse. “Let’s get out of here.”

The three of them wearily exited, all struggling to catch their breaths and regain their composure, and let the doors to the elevator cab slide shut behind them, leaving 5O to her grim fate.

Pod 153 began to apply staunching gel to the wound on 9S’s face, smearing it over the raw layer of synthetic flesh on his cheek. 9S winced and sucked air through his gritted teeth as the pod administered to him. Pod 042 was similarly occupied with White, stemming the flow of blood from the cut on her neck and smothering her raw and exposed nerve circuits.

2B leaned against the wall, shivering. If 9S hadn’t been able to free himself on his own, what would she have done? Would she have come up with a way to free White? Or would both of them have died while she stood by helplessly and watched? She steeled herself, clenching her gauntleted fists. Now was not the time to show weakness. Not around these two. Emotions were prohibited.

“Ah! There you are!”

3O and 8O jogged down the hall. “You sure gave us the runaround!” 3O called out. “We thought you were headed for the hangar bay!”

“But you can’t fool us!” 8O added.

“So, Commander White,” 86S said, emerging from the opposite end of the corridor, looking none the worse for the wear despite his trip through the vacuum, “where, pray tell, are you going to lead us next?”

“86S!” White gasped. “How did you—”

“I opened another window,” 86S said, picking a few shards of glass out of his palm and letting them fall to the floor. “You’ve got to stop underestimating us vampires, White. I suppose you’ll stop once you know what it’s like…”

2B backed up against White and 9S as the distance between the three of them and the vampires grew shorter. She could feel all three sets of burning red eyes boring into her, filling her mind with fog, leadening her limbs.

They had to run while they still could. The closer the vampires came, the harder it would be to slip past them. “Commander,” she whispered to White, “you have to run…”

“I know,” White said, remaining rooted to the spot.

“No!” 9S thrust out his arm, a black cube materializing in his hand with striated lines running across its faces lighting up amber. His black box, the core of his chassis, his central power source
and processor. “Don’t take another step…” His hand was shaking, a noticeable tremolo in his voice. “Or 2B and I… we’ll set off our black boxes!”

2B nodded and summoned her own black box, holding it out in front of her as its faces lit up. “We’ll blow this station to kingdom come if that’s what it takes to get rid of you!”

“Nice bluff.” 8O crossed her arms. “But after all the trouble you went through to guard your precious White, are you really just gonna atomize her like that? Morons!”

“Oh, they’ll do it,” White said. “Like I said, I’d rather die than be turned.”

“But… What about everyone else?” 3O asked. “All the people huddling in their quarters right now with no idea what’s going on…”

“And if you blow up the whole Bunker,” 86S said, “that’ll be it for YoRHa. Commander White, do you really want to sacrifice their lives?”

“Their lives don’t matter,” White said, so blunt and brusque in her cold-blooded proclamation that 2B felt a chill run up her spine.

86S winced. “Oof. I may be a vampire… but you, White? You’re a monster. 2B, did you hear that? What about you, 9S? White doesn’t care about either of you! You’re just mere pawns to her. If you join us, you can serve under a master who cares, who wants you to feel the greatest of bliss…”

“Pods!” White shouted. “Shut this fool up!”

Both Pod 042 and Pod 153 unfolded their hulls and fired on 86S, their laser blasts converging on 86S’s head and vaporizing it utterly, leaving nothing behind but a charred stump and a wisp of steam. The blast had left a hole through several decks, but failed to breach the Bunker’s hull; the hole’s glowing edges formed concentric halos around the empty space where 86S’s head had been.

“Master!” 8O shouted out, lunging at the three androids. 2B met her, bringing her sword to bear; 8O grabbed it by the blade and ripped it out of her hands, then tackled 2B. She pried her hands into 2B’s breastplate and pulled the armor apart, splitting it in half and tearing it away, throwing both halves aside. The redness of her eyes had grown stronger in intensity; now her eyes were like floodlights, burning floodlights, bright enough to be blinding, overwhelming…

Squeezing her eyes shut but still feeling—still seeing—the blood-red light burn through her eyelids, 2B kicked at 8O and forced the vampire off her, scrabbling to her feet and grabbing her sword as Pod 042 fired a salvo of bullets into 8O’s body.

3O grabbed 2B from behind, her arms tightening around her chest, tight enough to crack her chassis as they squeezed… and 2B felt a cold breath on her exposed neck as two fangs pressed against her skin.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, hundreds of thoughts racing through 2B’s mind before 3O could puncture her skin and feast on her blood.

She couldn’t let herself become one of those things. She couldn’t. What would she do to 9S if she became a brainwashed thrall of 86S’s nebulous ‘masters?’ She couldn’t let herself hurt him…

But there was nothing she could do. She was powerless. Mere androids truly were inferior, vastly so, to vampires…

A blade slid between warm flesh and cold flesh, slicing through 3O’s head at the jawline. 3O
staggered backward, arms flailing, a fountain of blood spurting from her bisected head.

9S kicked the flailing body of 3O to the floor and wiped his blade clean on his coat, helping 2B back on her feet. “It’s gonna be okay, 2B,” he told her. “I got you—urk!”

8O ripped him away with a feral screech, grabbing him by the head and dragging his face against the wall. 9S screamed in anguish, leaving a bloody smear on the pristine wall as his raw, skinless cheek ground and scraped against it.

A newfound strength welling up inside her, 2B roared and lunged at 8O, chopping her to pieces with a flurry of strikes. Blood reddened her hair, splattered against her skin, stained the thin white singlet she’d had under her torn-apart armor. She didn’t stop until there was nothing left of 8O that was large enough to harm anybody, not until she’d gouged out both of those demonic red eyes with her sword.

3O fixed her head back together. “Ugh… 8O…” She let out a horrified gasp when she saw what 2B had done—the pile of mincemeat 2B had reduced her fellow vampire to. “Wh… What did you do to her…”

“The same thing,” 2B snarled, leveling her sword at 3O, “I’m about to do to you.”

86S’s headless body grabbed 3O from behind before she could stand up, laying his pale, bloody hands underneath her jaw, and with one smooth, fluid motion tore her head from her body and placed it onto his own charred stump of a neck. The look of shock and surprise on 3O’s face vanished and 86S, now with a new and much different head, smiled.

“This,” he said in 3O’s voice, playing with a lock of her auburn hair as the color leeched out of it and turned a pale platinum blonde, “is interesting.”

He plunged his fangs into the exposed skin of 3O’s body, sapping every last drop of blood and leaving her a withered husk. Her body crumbled away, and a flurry of orange sparks escaped from it and sank into 86S’s arms.

The mass of bloody synthetic flesh and metal that had once been 8O quivered as 86S approached it, struggling to rebuild itself into a suitable body. “Now, now,” he said, “you must serve your master, mustn’t you?” He did what he’d done to 3O’s body to it, reducing it to dust and absorbing some sort of vital essence from it.

2B, 9S, and White all looked on in horror as a pair of pitch-black bat wings burst free from 86S’s back, shredding his frock coat; a pair of long, curled horns grew from his forehead as his fingernails lengthened into long, wicked claws. Black scales sprouted on his skin, growing in misshapen and irregular patches.

“Oh…” 86S observed his new body, furling and unfurling his wings. “And I thought it felt great before…” He laughed, pirouetting on one heel. “This… is a level beyond vampire! This is a super vampire!”

86S’s eyes met 2B’s.

He licked his lips.

“And now to indulge,” he said, in a much quieter voice, “in dessert…”

White grabbed 2B by the shoulder. “Run.”
They ran. 86S kept up easily, his wings flapping lazily to catch the air and glide, their tips brushing against either side of the corridor. The maintenance clinic wasn’t too far away—2B just had to pray that the three of them would make it inside. And that the decon process would still work. After all, Pascal hadn’t told her or 9S anything about a ‘super vampire.’

The three of them piled into the decontamination chamber leading into the maintenance clinic, huddling inside. 9S pounded on the door to the clinic. “Oh, no! It won’t open! W-We’re stuck!”

“Can’t you hack it?” White asked, breathless, her voice drenched with desperation.

“No… I can’t spoof the authorization codes! We’re…”

86S caught up to them, grinning as he stepped over the threshold. He had to wrap his wings around his chest like a cloak to fit through the door. “What’s this? Sounds like you three have nowhere else to go…”

“Oh, god, we’re all gonna die!” 9S bawled, pounding his fists on the door. “I don’t wanna die!”

“Take me,” White told 86S, stepping forward as the harsh white light engulfing the decontamination chamber flickered, “and spare these two. I’m the only one you need.”

“Oh?” 86S cocked his head. “A change of heart, huh? I’m surprised you even have one to change.”

2B hung back and laid her hand on 9S’s shoulder. “Great acting, 9S,” she whispered to him.

“Who’s acting?” he whispered back. “The maintenance clinic’s on a closed system and I can’t get in! I can’t trigger decon either!”

“Well…” 86S put his hands on White’s cheeks. “I promise not to lay a finger on either of your stooges, White. Of course, once you’ve turned, you’ll have instincts of your own… hunger of your own…” He forced her to her knees; White made no attempt to resist him. “I can’t guarantee that you won’t drain those two dry of your own free will…”

“What do we do?” 2B hissed at 9S.

“Nothing! We’re doomed!”

2B’s blood ran cold. 9S couldn’t give up this easily. He was stronger than this, more resilient, more perseverant. How could he falter here? Had the vampires broken his will? Was the pain from his wounds so great that he couldn’t concentrate on hacking?

“Ah…” With a gentle touch, 86S ran his hand up and down White’s neck. “It doesn’t feel right right not hearing one last bit of defiance from proud, indomitable Commander White of YoRHa. Well? How about it? One last stand?”

White mumbled something.

86S cupped a hand around his ear. “Hmm? Sorry, I couldn’t hear you. Speak up!”

2B couldn’t watch any more of this. She couldn’t stand by. Even if it was hopeless, she had to keep going.

Because she knew how to keep going when it was hopeless. It was simple.

Forget about hope. Just do.
She drove her sword into 86S’s chest. “Go to h—”

86S slammed the back of his hand into her stomach with enough force to crack her armored Type-E chassis beneath her skin, lift her up her feet, and throw her against the wall hard enough to leave behind a sizable dent and a crack running through the ceramic composite.

“I said,” White said, looking up at 86S and glaring, “I hope you’re wearing sunscreen.”

The harsh white lights overhead flared, filling the tiny decontamination chamber with a fleeting pulse of warmth; 86S screamed and recoiled, trying to cover himself with his leathery wings as holes began to burn themselves through the thin skin.

White stood up. “Again,” she said. The look of contempt she had in her eyes was peerless—2B could believe that no one else in the past or the future was capable of so much raw, unbridled hatred.

At the corner of the chamber, 9S nodded, shifting to reveal a panel he’d removed from the wall and a mass of cables trailing into his wrist. His helplessness had been an act—all this time, he’d been covering up that he was hardwired into the system so 86S wouldn’t notice.

The lights pulsed again. 86S’s skin burned, the holes in his wings widening.

“Again.”

86S screamed and clawed at his face as the upper levels of his skin burned off, skin sloughing beneath his bloodied claws.

“Again.”

86S’s hair turned pure white, brittle, and dry, and began to fall from his scalp, catching alight. He kept screaming and wailing, tears running down his cheeks, cheeks running down his flesh, flesh running down his skull, revealing the bleached, bone-like surface of his ceramic composite chassis.

“Again!”

Falling to the floor, he curled into a ball, trying desperately to cover himself with the tattered remains of his coat. But there wasn’t enough to cover everything. The flesh sloughed off his legs, his arms, liquefying and pooling out of his boots, staining his coat and his shorts.

“Again!”

What little remained of 86S’s flesh burst into flames. The fire fed on the liquefied, oily remnants clinging to 86S’s chassis until the oil had been devoured to the last drop. At last, his skeletal chassis crumbled into a fine grayish powder.

Sensing the fire, the sprinkler system overhead went off, drenching 2B, 9S, and White with cool, soft rain.

With a hoarse roar, Eve flung himself at Dracula, who easily sidestepped the enraged machine-man’s furious lunges. “Keep trying,” he said, almost absentmindedly weaving around Eve’s attacks. “You’re doing much better than last time, boy.”

Gritting his teeth, Alucard ripped the spear free of its mooring and pushed himself into battle once more. That bare-chested buffoon wasn’t going to accomplish anything fighting like that.
A grin split Dracula’s face, his eyes lighting up. Dodging Eve’s reckless attacks was so easy for him that he could focus all of his attention on Alucard. “Ah, my darling prodigal son! Thank heavens! Things were getting boring!”

“Step aside, oaf!” Alucard shouted to Eve, jostling him out of the way as he lunged forward with the spear. The shaft of the spear was somewhat flexible, and thus with a simple twist of his hand he could trace a circle in the air with the spearhead.

Dracula’s eyes met his. Alucard felt his chest tighten as icy tendrils wormed their way through his mind.

Long ago, Alucard had set aside any feelings for his father that might have stayed his hand in their battles. Dracula’s face held no sway over him.

But Soma…

He could still see Soma in those eyes. Eyes, ears, nose, lips, hair, all of it, it was all him. There wasn’t a single trace of Alucard’s father there, and yet…

If the world needs a dark lord, it will emerge, Alucard had consoled Soma once long ago. Even if it's not you…

The words drifted ruefully through his head now.

He hadn’t had to choose this.

He’d never wanted to choose this.

What made him change his mind?

Clamping his hand down on the spear shaft, Dracula quashed the spearhead’s erratic and unpredictable movement before it could connect with his body; at the same time, Eve aimed a gratuitously-telegraphed spinning kick at his head.

With a wicked cackle, Dracula snapped the spear in half and jammed the jagged end of the truncated shaft all the way through Eve’s calf. Taking advantage of the distraction—likely the only one he’d get—Alucard plunged his sword into Dracula’s side.

With a wordless, angered snarl, Dracula leaped backward, pulling himself free of the blade and leaving an arcing trail of spilled blood through the air. A pair of fiery black orbs materialized in his hands, his fingers clutching them like talons; he lobbed the two of them at his two foes with all the speed, force, and grace of a world-class pitcher.

The first flaming orb collided with the remains of Alucard’s spear and flew off into the sky; the second Alucard caught with his bare hand and whipped back at Dracula, who dismissed the orb with a snap of his fingers. “Good, good!” Dracula shouted out. “That looked like a home run to me!”

Alucard struggled to remain upright, hit with a sudden wave of nausea and vertigo as his injuries throbbed and burned. He glanced over at Eve, who was preoccupied with trying to pull the other half of the spear out of his leg. The two of them were utterly unprepared to handle Dracula in his prime.

Nobody had told Eve that, though, and with a ragged shout, he ripped the spear free and charged yet again at Dracula.
Eve’s fist collided with Dracula’s cheek. Dracula did not budge an inch. “Ah, yes,” he drawled, “because that worked so well last time.” He grabbed Eve by the throat, lifting him off his feet, and drove his fist so deep into his gut that it tore through his flesh and burst out of Eve’s back in a shower of blood. Eve’s legs spasmed, kicked, and went limp.

“Your brother told me to spare you,” Dracula told Eve, who sputtered and choked angrily in response. “But I can’t keep acquiescing to his wishes. So for your sake and his… don’t try this again.”

Dracula ripped his hand free of Eve’s midsection, then threw him into the shadowy labyrinth of the city ruins, letting the darkness swallow him whole like a treat tossed to a hungry dog.

“Unfortunately for me, and fortunately for you,” Dracula said to Alucard, absentmindedly glancing at his wrist and pantomiming checking an imaginary watch, “I have business to attend to elsewhere. Ta-ta for now, sonny boy. But before I go…”

He vanished, engulfed for a split-second in a column of blinding white light.

“I have a few more parting gifts for you,” he hissed in Alucard’s ear.

Alucard spun on his heel, his sword at the ready, looking into Dracula’s stolen eyes and stolen face, both twisted in a grotesque masque of sadistic glee—

And felt Dracula’s icy hand grip his wrist, clamping down on it like a vise. Dracula raised his other hand and brought it down with a vicious chop, a sickening crunch and wet ripping noise heralding the splitting of flesh and bone. The side of his hand was blunt, chewing through flesh and sinew and bone rather than slicing through them, sending a paroxysm of agony through Alucard’s body as he severed his arm at the elbow.

Alucard screamed.

“Think of this,” Dracula said, kicking him aside and grasping the severed forearm with both hands, “as some long-overdue parental discipline.” He gave the arm a savage twist, wringing it as one would wring the water out from a sodden towel, splattering blood on the ground as the pale flesh twisted and tore open.

And with a parting smile, Dracula vanished, taking the form of a great bat as white as a dove and taking to the air, leaving Alucard alone.

Though not for long.

With 86S and his trio of vampire Operators vanquished, 9S followed 2B and White back to Ops. He felt his breath grow short, the skin of his palms cold and clammy underneath his gloves, as he ruminated over what might await him in there. The other two were similarly on high alert; they knew that there was likely one more vampire left to destroy in this station.

How long did it take to for a vampire’s victim to turn? Would 9S find 21O in that chamber, sprawled on the floor like a corpse? Or had she awoken as one of those things and run off to some other part of the station?

The door to Ops slid open. 9S’s black box whined and burned, his chest growing tight around it as cold sweat dripped down his brow. He was the last to step into the room, barely able to will his legs to move.
21O was lying there where the vampires had left her, next to a neatly-sorted pile of bolts, screws, and shards of broken glass. Her short blonde hair fanned out in a halo around her head, the translucent veil hiding her mouth askew.

9S found himself standing over her body, his hands shaking, his black box whirring madly as his pulse pounded. She was still unconscious, looking for all the world like she was only sleeping if not for the ashen hue of her skin and the two bloody holes on the side of her neck. 2B and White consulted in hushed tones behind his back; when the two of them were finished, 2B stepped out in front of 9S, her sword in her hand.

“Black box signal detected,” Pod 153 announced.

“She’s still alive…” 9S mumbled, feeling his spirits lift. “Maybe she wasn’t bitten long enough, maybe they didn’t infect her…”

Without a word, though, 2B plunged her blade into 21O’s chest, splitting her black box in two with a clean, straight stroke.

“What?! 2B, wh—” 9S stumbled backward, shocked, desperately averting his eyes to spare himself the sight of the white blade protruding from his Operator’s heart. “Wha—Why did you…?”

“Dead or not, she was still bitten,” White said coldly. “She still might turn. 2B, take her body and burn it like the others.”

2B nodded, wrenched out her sword, and picked 21O up, flinging the limp corpse over her shoulder.

“Wait!” 9S grabbed her by the wrist before she could walk away. “2B, wait! You can’t just…”

2B wrenched her arm free of his grip, but said nothing to him.

“9S, step back and stand down,” White ordered, glaring daggers at him. “Your behavior is inexcusable. We’ll simply reload 21O’s personality data into a new chassis and reassign her as your Operator.”

“B-But her memories—” Operators didn’t back up their data the way field agents like Battler and Scanner units did; since they lived lives of safety here on the Bunker, it was seen as an unnecessary waste of storage space. So when 2B burned that body, there would be nothing left of the 21O 9S had known. “You’re getting rid of everything that makes her—her!” 9S protested. “You… You can’t do that! It’s like—like you’re killing her!”

2B flinched.

“2B, please,” 9S said, grabbing at her again, “she’s my Operator—”

A sharp crack rang through the air as Commander White’s riding crop lashed against his chest, cutting a ragged gash through the front of his coat and knocking the wind out of him. He fell to the floor, the air stinging the bloody welt running across his chest, coughing and panting.

“Just give me a chance,” he wheezed, “to pull whatever data I can off her before—”

“9S.” White loomed over him like the idol of a malevolent god. “I’ve had enough of your insubordination. Return to your quarters; you’re relieved of duty until further notice.”
“Commander…”

Her green eyes burned with a fury the likes of which 9S had never seen before. “Now, 9S. Or will I have to drag you to your quarters myself?”

“No,” he muttered, thankful his visor was hiding the tears welling up in his eyes. “I—I’ll go.”

He and 2B went their separate ways.

As he lay curled up on the ground, clutching what remained of his right arm as blood oozed between his fingers, Alucard saw out of the corner of his eye a skeletal hand rise out of the puddle of blood Dracula had wrung out from the severed forearm. Its knobbly carpals and long phalanges were as red as the blood it had bathed in and glistened sickly in the half-moonlight as the hand grasped at the edge of the puddle and dug into the dirt. As though rising from the depths of a deep pool, a crimson skeleton emerged, hauling itself up from the shallow puddle and standing upright as blood dripped from its sodden bones onto the ground. Another followed it, and another, and another.

Somebody called out Alucard’s name.

Hardly able to think through the foggy haze of pain washing through what was left of his body, Alucard sat up as the blood-red skeletons loomed over him, his single remaining hand shaking as it came closer to the forbidden weapon holstered on his belt. The only other weapon he had at his disposal.

The Vampire Killer.

Used by a human with none of the Belmont clan’s blood, it would drain the life from their body. Used by him, though…

As his vision blurred, the four skeletons split and became eight, their phantom images shimmering as the world swirled around him. His thumb brushed against the smooth leather coil, his heart pounding like a jackhammer in his chest…

There was a red blur in front of him; something tore the whip from his belt before he could take it.

The long length of coiled leather unraveled with a thunderous, supersonic crack, its tip streaking through the air and tearing through the crimson skeletons’ glistening bodies, reducing their ribcages to shards and powder. The whip continued onward in a wide arc, whistling shrilly through the air before losing its momentum and falling limply to the ground. The remains of the skeletons crumbled into dust before they could hit the ground.

Popola collapsed on top of Alucard; the Vampire Killer dropped from her hand and fell to the ground, lying there like a venomous serpent in waiting. Without saying a word, she lifted her head and looked up at him with her pale aquamarine eyes. Her eyelids fluttered, her eyes rolled back, and she went limp, pinning him to the ground like three hundred pounds of dead weight.

A week passed by; between the time he’d had to spend cooped up in his quarters with nothing to keep him company (not even Pod 153) and the degrading menial chores he’d been assigned to wile away the days, 9S was more than ready to return to active duty.

The first thing he wanted to do was stretch his legs and take a stroll down the hall, if only just to clear his head. After that… incident, he hadn’t been able to think of much else, and in solitary
confinement, he’d had no distractions. 2B hadn’t even visited him, not once—White had probably forbidden her (it was meant to be punishment, after all). Neither had anyone else stopped by to see him, not even any of his fellow Scanners, although 801S had managed to sneakily slip a data chip with some ancient human videos into his pocket while he’d been cleaning the training halls.

As he walked down the ring-shaped corridor that formed the backbone of the habitation deck, 9S spied a phantom out of the corner of his eye.

He looked again. No, it wasn’t a phantom. It was…

“21O?” he asked. Struggling to contain his excitement, he all but ran up to her. It really was her—that stern, stoic Operator, staring through the bay window at the surface of the moon with one hand resting on the glass and the other absentmindedly wriggling through a lock of her short blonde hair.

She blinked and looked at him when he called out her name. “Hmm? Oh, you must be Unit 9S.”

“Um…” 9S skidded to a halt and looked down, his words drying up in his throat. “Yeah,” he croaked. “I—I’m, uh, Unit 9S.” For some reason, though he should have expected it, the way she’d looked at him and said his name as though she’d never met him before (because she hadn’t, after all) had hit him harder than he’d expected.

21O crossed her arms. “I hear you’ve been under disciplinary review this past week. I hope I won’t have to put up with any irregular behavior from you.”

She’d always been cold, but 9S couldn’t remember her ever being this cold. If she’d had a stick up her ass before—and 9S meant that in the nicest possible way—now it was more like a titanium rod. Was this the same personality template the old 21O had started out with, or had White made some adjustments to her programming to spite him?

“Well, I mean, irregular behavior’s about all you can expect from a Scanner, uh, isn’t it?” 9S asked, anxiously rocking back and forth on his heels and trying to moisten his mouth. “But, uh, don’t worry. I’ll be good. Within reason, anyway.”

21O turned her attention back to the window. “That’ll have to do. Nice to meet you, 9S.”

“I’ll find plenty of data for you to analyze,” 9S said, recalling one of 21O’s hobbies. Putting a couple terabytes of files gleaned from old human computer systems in front of her was like giving catnip to a cat. “You’ll, uh, never have to worry about being bored with me here.”

He thought he saw her eyes brighten, and could see the barest hint of a wry smile beneath her veil as well.

“And, uh, one more thing,” he added. “People who know me well… they call me ‘Nines.’”

“Hmm.” 21O looked his way, then took off down the hallway. “Well, 9S, maybe when we know each other better, I’ll call you that.”

“Thanks,” he said, his voice coming out a bit squeakier and mousier than he’d intended. “Appreciate it.”

On the inside, though, he felt as though his black box had been ripped from his chest, crushed into shrapnel, and shoved back into him. Meeting her had been the final nail in the old 21O’s coffin.

As much as he’d wanted to stretch his legs and revel in his freedom before, now he only wanted to
retrun to his quarters and sink into his bed and stay there forever. He didn’t want to go back on
duty. He didn’t want to have an Operator again. He didn’t want to see her again.

His throat and chest aching, 9S trudged back to his quarters, only to find 2B standing in front of his
door with Pod 042 hovering at her side. She was as cool and collected as ever, looking just as she

She turned her head as he approached. “Oh, 9S.” She held out her hand and conjured a couple of
data chips in her palm. “6O asked me to give these to you.”

“Oh.” 9S took the chips. “Tell her I said thanks, I guess.”

“You’re back on active duty, right?”

“Don’t tell me… we have a mission already?” 9S groaned. How like the Commander.

“No, we aren’t scheduled to return to Earth until tomorrow morning. It’s just that my last few
assignments have been boring,” 2B said. She walked past him. “See you tomorrow, 9S.”

“Uh—okay,” 9S said, making an about-face as 2B passed by. “Actually—”

2B walked away, her heels clacking against the smooth white floor of the hallway.

“Wait, 2B.”

She stopped in her tracks and glanced over her shoulder.

“Can you, uh…” 9S kneaded his hands and stared at the floor, falling silent as the words caught in
his throat.

“Yes?”

He took a deep breath, so deep he nearly choked on it. “Call me ‘Nines’ again. Please?”

Nines. He wanted to hear her say it again. He wanted to feel something good today, anything, and
knew that if she’d just call him that the way she had a week ago, his heart wouldn’t hurt so much.
He wanted her to treat him with the kindness and softness he knew she was capable of just one
more time. One more time. He’d never ask for it again.

Instead, she walked away without a word, her pod trailing behind her. She didn’t even bother to say
goodbye. Nothing broke the silence that had fallen when he’d meekly squeaked out the word
please save for the sound of her footsteps.

9S sniffled, suppressing a whimper as hot tears welled up in his eyes and dampened his visor. “2B,
make up your damn mind!” he shouted out, his hoarse cry carrying a frustration and venom within
it he had neither intended nor expected.

He stormed into his quarters and curled up on his bed, wrapping his thin, rough sheets tightly
around himself, and smothered his anguished sobs in his pillow.
Alucard and Eve vs. Soma! Dracula:

Meanwhile, 5O:
Twilight Intermezzo

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Alucard reflects on his first encounter with the boy who would become Dracula. Meanwhile, A2 gets stuck in a very hairy situation and has the worst week of her life.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to wordbending for general beta reading and MeetTheTank for help with the body horror scenes

“So you’ve decided to join us. Did you have a pleasant nap?”

Soma Cruz stirred and blearily cracked open his eyes, rising from his slumber hesitantly and reluctantly. His silvery-white hair was a disheveled mess; his white trench coat was already dirty from the grime clinging to the overgrown cobblestones lining the ground. Alucard watched him intently as he sat up. There was something intensely familiar about this young man, though he couldn’t put his finger on it—a sense of deja-vu that clung to him like an aura.

Dracula’s castle loomed before the three of them. This was Alucard’s ancient childhood home, albeit warped and twisted beyond all recognition; its spiny, irregular, and nigh-impossible architecture, wreathed with heavy black clouds and tendrils of mist, called to mind a ragged sea urchin with spines of metal and masonry.

Soma looked around until his gaze focused on the red-haired girl kneeling at his side. The girl was Mina Hakuba, caretaker-to-be of the shrine in a small town in the Nagano prefecture in Japan. A few minutes ago, that was where the three of them had been; now they were all gathered here, in the courtyard of Dracula’s castle, though Alucard doubted either she or Soma were aware of that. The shrine’s link to this castle was a closely-guarded secret.

He rubbed his head. “Hey, Mina. What happened?”

“You’d better ask Mr. Arikado,” Mina said, gesturing to Alucard.

“What?” Soma looked where Mina was pointing, his eyes meeting Alucard’s. Again, Alucard felt that strange sense of deja-vu. He blinked and jolted fully awake at the sight of him. “Huh? Who the f—who are you?”


Soma shrugged. “Dunno. Last thing I remember, we were watching the eclipse… Uh, wait, where is ‘here,’ exactly?”
“Dracula’s castle.”

“Oh.” Soma nodded along, then gave the courtyard a cursory glance. “I see. We’re in—Dracula’s castle?”

“Yes.”

“Dracula’s castle.”

“Yes.”

“As in…” Soma crudely pantomimed Bela Lugosi, raising his coat over his face. “Bleh?”

“Yes.”

“How’d we get to Europe?” Soma focused on the roiling black clouds filling the sky from horizon to horizon. The clouds moved and twisted, contorting into swirling shapes as though dragged and pushed by impossibly strong winds; yet here in the courtyard, the air was still. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of a breeze. “Huh. Must be England. Weird place for casa de Dracula.”

“We aren’t in Europe,” Mina said. “We’re inside the solar eclipse.”

Soma laughed and patted her on the shoulder. “Mina, I think you must’ve hit your head or something. Maybe you should lie down…”

“No, it’s true,” Alucard said. He was surprised for a moment that Mina knew, but it made sense that her parents would have told her when she’d come of age. It was simply that the fact that she’d come of age was proving hard for him to grasp. Alucard had been visiting the shrine every spring for the past ten years to check up on the seal binding Dracula’s castle to the eclipse. A part of him still couldn’t think of her as much more than eight years old.

“That’s…” Soma looked from Mina to Alucard. “That’s insane. You guys sound insane. You know that, right?”

“Insane as it is, it’s the truth,” Mina insisted. “Soma, I’ll explain everything. You see, thirty-five years ago…”

“You see,” Alucard said at the exact same time, “thirty-five—Oh, no, sorry. You go ahead.”

“No, no, you should tell it, Arikado. I’m sure you know more than me.”

“Very well. Thirty-five years ago, there was a—”

Alucard stopped short, alarms blaring in his head as every muscle in his body tensed.

“Arikado? It’s okay,” Mina said, “you’re not stealing my thunder.”

Unbeknownst to Soma and Mina, a trio of winged skeletons armed with shields and long javelins were gliding down from the castle’s crumbling, vine-choked ramparts in lazy, vulture-like circling arcs, seeking easy prey in what seemed like three normal, defenseless humans gathered in the courtyard below. Alucard reached for his sidearm, drawing it from within his black suit. “Both of you! Get down!”

He wasn’t at home with a gun, but in his current guise as a secret agent, he couldn’t very well carry a sword around. Nonetheless, his quick reflexes and supernaturally keen eye made him more than an excellent marksman: he squeezed off three shots in rapid succession, nailing each winged
skeleton between the eye sockets. Two crumpled to the ground, and Alucard called on his dark powers to siphon the vital essence from their bodies, absorbing the dark forces that bound their bodies together into himself; they collapsed into heaps of bleached bones.

One skeleton, though, remained in flight and divebombed the three of them, swooping down on its skeletal wings and drawing back its javelin. This one was faster and stronger than the others; Alucard managed to shoot it in the shoulder and pulverize its joint, severing its arm, but the skeleton still drew nearer.

Mina screamed. Soma did too, but rather than allow himself to be paralyzed by fear, he pulled out a pocket knife in a futile display of defiance against the creature. “Go back where you came from!” he shouted out at it, waving the knife wildly at it.

Alucard aimed for the monstrous skeleton’s angular, goatlike skull, wrapped his finger around the trigger…

The skeleton clashed with Soma as a bullet tore through one of its curled horns, and much to Alucard’s surprise, the pitiful pocket knife in Soma’s hand sliced through its ribcage as if those bones were nothing more than soft butter. The skeleton flew apart, its bones clattering on the cracked and overgrown flagstones, and a glittering orb of light flew out from it and arced through the air before sinking into Soma’s chest.

His eyes wide and breath short, Soma staggered and stumbled backward, patting himself down frantically. “What—What was that? D-Did that thing… That thing just went inside me! What the…”

In shock, Alucard slowly lowered his pistol. He couldn’t believe his eyes. This young man, hardly even a boy, had just absorbed the soul of that dark fiend.

“Arikado, what the h—What was that?” Soma asked.

“You’ve stolen the soul of that creature…” Alucard worked hard to cover up the nervous tremolo in his voice.

At last, he understood. Soma had been called here for a reason. He was the vessel of Dracula’s wandering soul.

This boy was the reincarnation of Alucard’s father and inheritor of all of his dark powers.

“Death will most certainly find those who stay here too long.”

Soma had gone off into Dracula’s castle: Alucard had told him that reaching the throne room was the only way to return the three of them to Earth, although he obviously hadn’t told the boy why. While Alucard had business of his own in the castle, he remained behind, at least for now, to keep Mina company. For what seemed like hours, he watched the castle’s convoluted, labyrinthine mess of towers and crenelations with a gut-churning mix of hope and trepidation. Soma would discover the truth himself when the time was right… but would he be strong enough to face his dark heritage without falling victim to it?

Soma emerged from the castle, his white coat streaked with blood and a rainbow of other bodily fluids. “Don’t worry,” he preemptively told Mina as she gasped in horror. “Only some of it’s mine. Arikado, you didn’t tell me you had friends in this castle.”

“Oh, you mean Miss Belnades?” Yoko Belnades, his cohort, had taken off into Dracula’s castle in
pursuit of the leader of a little-known vampire-worshiping cult, who had been sighted in the town of Hakuba-cho in the days leading up to the eclipse. Alucard wished her the best of luck; his priority was now Soma’s fate. “Tell her I said hi.”

“Will do. Mina, you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Mina answered as Soma knelt beside her. “Arikado’s looking after me, so I feel safe enough…”

Alucard stepped back a few paces and turned around to give the two of them some privacy as they caught up with each other, but his sensitive ears picked up their conversation well enough. He tried to no avail to hum a little tune to block them out.

“Speaking of… Who is that guy? National intelligence, right?”

“That’s right. But for a spy, he’s a little… strange.”

“Hmm? Strange? How so?”

“Well, for starters… normally, people’s faces change as they get older, right?”

“Yeah. That’s how time works, Mina. Are you sure you didn’t bump your head on something?”

Mina let out a weak laugh. “Arikado’s been visiting the shrine since I was little… but he hasn’t changed at all.”

“Are you sure it’s not just your imagination?”

“Maybe… but his face is… well, it’s perfect. Too perfect. You think so too, right, Soma?”

“So you’re saying he’s your type.”

Alucard hummed louder.

“What are you talking about? S-Soma! I’m… He’s not my type! My type is… N-Never mind. That’s none of your business!”

“Not into gorgeous guys, huh? Well—”

“That’s not what I meant at all!” Mina sputtered.

Alucard cleared his throat and turned around. “Soma, the dark miasma pervading the castle is not good for young Mina’s health,” he called out. “I can only hold it at bay for so long. If you wish for her to see Earth again, I suggest you make your way to the throne room posthaste.”

“Oh. R-Right.” Soma stood up, his cheeks flushed, and let out a sheepish, nervous laugh. “Sorry.” He gave Mina a quick hug, then sauntered back toward the castle to face its grotesqueries once more.

“Take care of yourself!” Mina called out. Soma gave her a thumbs-up before vanishing into the castle’s depths.

Alucard drew closer to Mina and crouched down beside her. “So, Mina… how long have you known Soma?”

“He’s an exchange student in my class,” Mina explained. “He started just after the winter break,
but his family’s been visiting the shrine for about four years now. So I’d say we know each other pretty well.”

“Curious. I’ve never run into him before.”

“They usually come for New Year’s.”

“Ah. That explains it.” Alucard nodded. “We’ve just missed each other.”

Mina reached into her shrine maidens’ robes and produced her phone, pulling up an album of photos and swiping through them. Alucard watched as progressively-older images of her and Soma scrolled by. “He’s very nice, Arikado, although he gets in trouble sometimes,” she said. “Nothing major. Sometimes he gets into fights. He doesn’t start them. I don’t think he’s ever done anything illegal.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, I mean, you’re a secret agent,” Mina said, cringing, “and you seem interested in Soma, so I just want to put it out there that he shouldn’t be under investigation or anything like that.”

Alucard chuckled. “Very well. I believe you. I’ll close the case I’ve opened on the two of you.”

He had given up on his father long before their final confrontation. He’d seen the last spark of Dracula’s decency and morality extinguished; with each time he was resurrected, he’d grown further and further from the anguish that had prompted his descent into cruelty until he had simply become evil for evil’s sake. But this Soma… he had a pristine mind and heart, it seemed, not yet wracked by love and loss and dark thoughts of vengeance. Alucard could believe that he was Dracula’s second chance.

As the endless night engulfing Dracula’s castle dragged on, Mina sat by Alucard’s side. Occasionally, she scrolled through her messages and pulled up social media, irrationally hoping that a signal could reach her phone here in this netherworld within the solar eclipse. Unfortunately, Dracula’s castle did not have wifi.

“Arikado… how exactly are you connected to what happened thirty-five years ago?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Alucard lied. “How old do you think I am? I’d have to be in my fifties now, at least, to have played a role back then.”

“Maybe you are in your fifties. I hear plastic surgery can do amazing things,” Mina teased him, smiling for the first time since Soma had left. “Or maybe you’re…” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “An android?”

“Is that what you think?”

“A couple years ago, when the government announced Project Gestalt, they said they were making androids to oversee it, right?” Mina shrugged. “Maybe androids were actually invented a long time ago…”

“I’m not an android.”

“‘You’re in a desert walking along in the sand when all of the sudden you look down and you see a tortoise. It’s crawling toward you. You reach down, you flip the tortoise over on its back…’”
“I’m not,” Alucard insisted, “an android.”

“Plastic surgery can do amazing things, then,” Mina said, going back to messing with her phone. It let out a bell-like chime; at the sound, she fished out a little bag from her robes and pulled out a small plastic syringe filled with a clear liquid.

The syringe’s contents weren’t hard to identify. It was Luciferase, the most ubiquitous drug in the world. Everybody took it—anyone who wanted to live, anyway (and, in some crueler parts of the world, anyone who could afford it). It was the only medication that held White Chlorination Syndrome at bay.

Mina’s hand shook. “This is really embarrassing, but I’m not good with needles,” she confessed. “Usually, Mom or Dad helps me, or Soma, or one of my classmates…”

Alucard took the syringe. “Allow me.” He rolled up her sleeve, slipped the needle gently into the crook of her elbow—Mina closed her eyes and gritted her teeth—and emptied the syringe’s contents. It all took less than a second; he slipped the needle back out and placed the syringe back in her hand, dabbing away a dot of blood that welled up on her skin. “All done.”

“Thank you.” Mina set the syringe back in her bag. “What about you?”

“I took my dose this morning,” Alucard lied. In truth, he was one of the few people in the world with a natural immunity to the disease that had been ravaging the world for nearly two decades now… as a blood relative of its source.

White Chlorination Syndrome had been Dracula’s final weapon against humanity, unleashed at the instant of his destruction. For the first seventeen years, it had spread slowly, then it had engulfed the world like a wildfire. Some who caught it became mindless red-eyed ghouls, almost akin to vampires themselves; others grew sicker and sicker until their bodies dissolved into pillars of salt, like Lot’s wife.

Luciferase kept the degenerative symptoms at bay, but gradually decreased in effectiveness as the victim aged. Project Gestalt, which sought to separate humans’ souls from their bodies, appeared to be the only way to preserve the species, putting humanity in stasis while the contaminants that spread the disease were collected and contained. But there was no cure and no vaccine. The world was drowning in salt.

Alucard considered that Soma was likely immune to the disease as well. He wondered if Soma even knew.

“Come out, Arikado. I know you’re here.”

Soma’s voice was hoarse and quiet, yet echoed through the gilded ruins of Dracula’s den.

Alucard had felt it the instant Soma reached the throne room. A pang in his heart and a cold trickle down the back of his neck, a sound like the faint tolling of a distant bell, a scent on the wind that smelled of him…

He’d rushed through the castle’s twisting corridors, his heart pounding and blood singing in his ears; when he’d made it to the apex of the castle, he had found Soma huddled in the throne room, knees tucked into his chest, face tucked into his knees, the furred collar of his coat drawn up to his ears.

Soma barely lifted his head. “Why… Why did you force me to awaken?”
Alucard kept his distance, hesitating as he put one foot over the threshold, then took another
cautious step. He didn’t know what to expect, nor did he know what to do or what to say. His hand
slipped under his jacket and found his pistol, though he knew it wouldn’t do much good.

“I was just fine as I was…”

“That’s true. You weren’t supposed to come to this castle in the first place. Once you came here,
though, your path would lead you here. Inevitably.”

“I… I don’t understand…”

“You’d have found out eventually. Your soul and Dracula’s powers are one and the same. If not
today, tomorrow. If not here, some other font of darkness in the world.” Alucard swallowed a
nervous lump in his throat and regained his composure. “When I saw you for what you were, I sent
you on this quest so that when you awakened, I would be there.”

“To do what?” Soma stood up and lifted his head, revealing bright red eyes and wet cheeks. “To…
to *kill* me?”

Alucard’s voice caught in his throat as his fingers curled around the cool grip of his sidearm.

“Maybe,” Soma said, shivering, “you *should*…”

Alucard removed his empty hand from his jacket and let it fall to his side, his gun still snug in its
holster. “Not if I don’t have to. Mina tells me you’re a good man. You have Dracula’s strength, but
not his heart.”

Soma took a deep, ragged breath, his chest heaving. Bowing his head again, he laid his hand over
his heart. “It hurts…”

“I imagine it does.” Alucard took a step closer. Fear and stress radiated from Soma as an aura as
palpable as the thin cloud of darkness wrapping itself around him. The wispy tendrils of black mist
filled the room with an oppressive pressure that made even the slightest step forward feel like
wading through a sea of tar.

“It’s too much… I can’t… I…” Soma clenched his fist. “Damn you, Alucard!”

Hearing Soma use his true name, Alucard recoiled as if struck.

“I can’t… believe what you’ve done to me!” Soma doubled over, clawing at his chest. “Why did
you bring me here? Why did you make me feel this way? Why did you fill my head with these
thoughts, these memories… Why did you turn me… Why did you turn me into *Count fucking
Dracula*?!”

Soma lunged at Alucard and grabbed him by the arms, his face twisted in a feral, bloodthirsty
snarl, his teeth bared. Fangs protruded over his bottom lip. But just as suddenly as he’d attacked,
Soma pulled himself away, clutching at his head as if in great pain and reeling backward
drunkenly. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

Alucard could sense the raging turmoil within him, the black tide threatening to consume him, the
pain, the rage, the fear, confusion, betrayal. But in the eye of that storm was the kindhearted young
man Mina spoke so highly of. As frightened as Alucard was to see Soma become the conduit of
Dracula’s lingering will and as hard-pressed as he was to think of a way to *stop* it, he would put his
trust in *her*. 
“Soma.” Emboldened, Alucard held out his hand. “After everything you’ve been through and how hard you’ve fought… you don’t have to renounce your humanity. Take my hand.”

Soma peeked at him through a gap in his fingers.

“Take it.” Alucard took another slow, cautious step forward, extending his arm. “The power inside you… It doesn’t make you a monster. It doesn’t make you evil. As you might have figured out by now, we’re the same. We’re not exactly what you would call… human.”

“I… I’m not…”

“You can master your powers or let them master you. You can let his voice fill your head or shut it out. You took one path here, but this is where the road forks.” Alucard took another step closer, fighting against the pressure enveloping the room, the pressure which only seemed to bore down on him and him alone. “Let me help you, Soma.”

Soma shook his head.

“Let me help you bring Mina back home.”

At the sound of her name, Soma let out a loud, heartrending sob. Then, slowly pulling his hands away from his face, he laid them over Alucard’s, closing his eyes and taking a deep, ragged breath as Alucard drew as much of the energy running through Soma’s body into himself as he could handle. There was more than he expected. Enough that it hurt.

“Dracula’s will lies in every last brick of this castle,” Alucard said, struggling to remain stoic as the energy coursing through his veins stung and burned. “Now that your powers are at their height, as long as you dwell within this accursed place, his influence will be inescapable.”

“Just like Frodo and the ring,” Soma mumbled, his voice slow and low as if he were in a trance.

“Yes, exactly. Destroy this castle and you destroy Dracula’s lingering will along with it. It’s the only way you can be free.”

“Just like Frodo and the ring…”

Alucard pulled his hand away and took Soma by the shoulders. “You are the Ring-bearer, and we are in Mordor. Travel to the heart of the castle. Find the chaos that gives this place form and destroy it.”

Soma looked up at him, opened his red eyes, and smiled weakly. “So… does that make you Sam?”

“I always considered myself to be more like Gandalf.” Alucard let out the tiniest hint of a wan, weary smile, then put a hand to his head as the fraction of power he’d siphoned away from Soma pounded at the inside of his skull.

“You okay there, Arikado?”

“Go. Mina and I will be with you in spirit. And trust me, Soma… I mean that quite literally.”

Soma picked up a discarded sword from the floor of the throne room. He held it like a baseball bat. “All right. Tell Mina I’m coming back. And if I don’t… I mean, I will. But if I don’t…”

“I’ll tell her you went to live on a nice farm upstate.”

Soma chuckled dryly. “Thanks. And if I don’t see you again… come up with a better codename.”
A bitter undertone more than simply reminiscent of Dracula’s sardonic wit crept into his voice. “Good heavens, ‘Arikado.’ I’m almost ashamed to call you my son.”

Unnerved, Alucard glanced away. “Good luck and godspeed, Soma Cruz.”

With a defiant grin, Soma gave Alucard a thumbs-up and walked away to face his final challenge alone. Now alone in the throne room, Alucard pulled out his wallet and stared at the ID badge inside.

“Yoko told me it was a good name,” he muttered to no one in particular, snapping his wallet closed and slipping it back into his pocket.

“I’m so glad that your experience didn’t change you.”

Soma gingerly rubbed his head as he sat up. The aura emanating from him, the pressure, was gone—that was the first thing Alucard noticed. The second thing he noticed was that the boy’s eyes were no longer blood-red, but had returned to their natural brown hue. “But… it did change me,” he told Mina, who knelt beside him on the grass. The sun, no longer eclipsed by the moon, illuminated the Hakuba Shrine, its golden rays making the dew clinging to each blade sparkle and glitter.

Mina cocked her head. “…In what way?”

Soma glanced up at Alucard, and as a devilish smile slowly spread across his worn, haggard face, he looked back at Mina. “I’m a lot cooler now!”

Mina clasped her hand over her mouth and suppressed an involuntary snort of laughter. “Yeah… you have changed. You’re twice the dweeb you used to be.”

“What you mean to say is, I’ve finally caught up with you.” Soma threw his arm rakishly around her shoulders, and the two of them giggled and laughed like schoolchildren.

It was hard for Alucard to believe that this boy—no, this young man—was the same person who not too long ago had been wracked with such anguish within and without. A great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, though, and with the castle gone and its dark forces sealed away once more, he was sure to be just a little giddy and euphoric as the adrenaline wore off.

Soma gestured at the sun. “Looks like we missed the eclipse. Sorry about that.”

“You owe me another one,” Mina said, giving him a playful shove.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll get right on it…”

Feeling awkward intruding on the young couple, Alucard took his leave, turning away from them and setting off down the steps leading up to the shrine. For a man who made so many exits, he could never get the hang of saying goodbye.

“Wait! Arikado!”

Alucard stopped in his tracks as Mina called out to him. He glanced over his shoulder.

“Don’t you want to stay for lunch?” she asked.

“Let him go,” Soma told her. “He’s a secret agent. I’m sure he’s got a drug kingpin to bust or an evil mastermind to thwart this afternoon.” He waved. “Bye, Aluc—Arikado! Don’t forget to
Alucard smiled, held out his fist to Soma, and slowly raised his thumb.

Someday, inevitably, somebody would elect to follow in Dracula’s footsteps sooner or later, and with the unfolding catastrophe gripping the world, it would certainly be sooner. A new standard-bearer of darkness would rise so that good could triumph over it.

But that future dark lord wouldn’t be Soma. Alucard was sure of that now.

He was sure that his father’s soul was at peace in its new home.

“Farewell… In my mother’s name, I send thanks to you.”

Alucard cracked open his eyes, turning his head to shield himself from the searing white light shining above him. It took him a few seconds for his head to clear and for him to get a sense of his surroundings.

He had no idea where he was.

With great difficulty, he sat up. He was lying on a gurney, which was far from the most comfortable bed in the world, in a room with no windows and only one door. His right arm—no, what was left of his right arm—was swaddled in bandages. And all of his clothes save for his pants were gone. No, correction, they weren’t his pants. They were too short and left his ankles bare, and they were an ugly shade of khaki and had far too many pockets for his tastes.

The room swirled around him as the light pounded against his head. His mouth was arid; his shriveled tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth.

Still reeling, Alucard tried to get his bearings. The year was… when was the last time he’d fallen asleep? 2038? No, a few centuries after that. A few millennia.

The year was 11,945, the human race was extinct, and Dracula had just ripped his arm off.

Alucard slid his legs off the side of the gurney and sat up, bowing his head.

The first time he had ever fought Dracula had been one of the most difficult things he’d ever had to do. After all, the man had been his father, and at that point, he hadn’t even been that bad of a man. He had merely been grieving the loss of his wife. Emotionally, physically, it had been taxing beyond imagination. He’d barely been able to look his own father in the eyes.

That last encounter with Dracula… It had felt like that all over again.

Alucard spied a glass of water on the tray propped up at the gurney’s side, eagerly swiped it, and gulped it down in a matter of seconds, drinking so quickly that it hurt his chest. It was tepid and had a vile chemical aftertaste, but it was sweeter and more delicious than any other glass of water he’d ever had. He set the glass down, gasped for air, and licked his cracked, dry lips.

Then he noticed the slip of paper lying beneath the glass. He tried to pull it free, but then remembered when he saw his elbow wiggling haplessly in the air that he didn’t have a right hand anymore. With an exasperated sigh, he pulled the paper free with his left hand.

Good morning/afternoon/evening/night/etc. Alucard,

Press this button when you wake up, please.
Since Popola had written that note, Alucard could infer that she was okay. That was a relief. He’d had no idea what wielding the Vampire Killer would do to an android, considering what it could do to humans.

He read the letter again.

What button?

Alucard examined the tray. Next to the glass he’d set down was a red button on a wire, like the kind one might find in a hospital.

Of course. This was a hospital.

Alucard jammed his thumb against the button and waited, gingerly rubbing his elbow as a phantom ache ran through the empty space where the rest of his arm was. It was a pity Dracula had ripped it apart so thoroughly; otherwise, it would have been a cinch for Popola and Devola, with their extensive knowledge of medical science (both for humans and androids) to reattach.

How long would it take for him to regrow his arm? Another ten thousand years in his coffin?

How long had he been asleep this time? Days? Months? Years? A few centuries? Another ten thousand years?

Alucard shook his head. No, that was silly. It had probably just been a few days, or possibly a month at the most. Any longer and the passage of time would have shown on the paper. That, and the room would smell as dead and musty as a tomb.

The muffled sound of footsteps faded in, growing louder until they stopped at the door; three soft knocks rang through the room.

“Come in,” he said, his voice coming out as a hoarse rasp.

The door opened and Popola poked her head into the room. “Good morning, Alucard. Are you feeling okay?”

“I think that’s relative, Popola. It’s good to see you.”

Popola stepped forward and let the door swing shut behind her. She looked tired, to say the least; her clothes and hair were unkempt and disheveled, her skin ashen and eyes dull.

“I should be asking you, clearly,” Alucard added.

“I’m fine. Does anything hurt?”

“My ego, mostly.” Alucard smiled. “Was this monstrosity the best you could do?” he asked, pointing at his pants.

Returning his weary smile with one of her own, Popola sat next to him. “Your clothes are in the wash. They were… well, filthy.”

“The shirt is dry-clean only.”

“Yes, we read the tag.”
“And the cravat needs to be treated very delicately.”

“Yes, we know.”

“And the waistcoat is silk.”

“We know how to do laundry, Alucard.” Popola chuckled. “You’re awfully vain for someone who’s saved the world so many times.”

“I know how it must sound,” Alucard said. “Would you believe me if I said those clothes were what I remember my mother by?”

“Really?”

“Well… they’ve been through so many tailors that I’m not sure how much of the original fabric is left. But yes, the originals were a birthday present.”

“That’s sweet.” Popola put her hand to her chest. “I’ve had just about every piece in here replaced at least once. I guess we’re all just ships of Theseus, huh?”

“Part of a great fleet, I’m sure. Are you certain you’re okay?”

Popola rubbed at her eyes. “Yes. I know how I look. Dev and I have just been really busy these past few days.”

“You could take it easy every once in a while, you know. I’m sure no one would think less of you than they already do if you two gave yourselves more, uh… ‘me time.’”

“You time?” Okay, then, little prince. I wasn’t aware we were your personal servants now.” Popola grinned.

“You know what I meant. More to the point,” Alucard said, “I really do want to make absolutely certain you’re okay. Wielding the Vampire Killer shaves years off a human’s lifespan. Me, it nearly burned my arm to a crisp.” He put his hand on Popola’s shoulder. “I have no idea what effect it might have had on you.”

“I was unconscious for about four days,” Popola told him.

“And how long have I been out?”

“About a week.” Popola massaged her forehead wearily. “It’s only been a few days since I woke up.”

“And they’ve been working you like a dog ever since.”

“Well, that’s just the way things are,” Popola said with a weary sigh. “Other than that, I don’t feel any worse than usual.” She sighed. “Four days isn’t a very fair trade-off for wielding the Vampire Killer for a few seconds, is it?”

“I don’t think the whip has a concept of fairness.”

“But you’re safe.” The levity drained from Popola’s voice. “That’s what matters. That’s all that matters. I just wish I could’ve come to your aid sooner, but the instant Dracula appeared, I just couldn’t move. I—It was like I was frozen…”

In many ancient legends, serpents and basilisks had the power to hypnotize their prey. Vampires
had the same power, though it tended to only work once before their victims began to build up an immunity. In most cases, though, the victim wouldn’t escape the vampire, so it didn’t really matter that it only worked once. The font of dark power Dracula drew from was the most potent in the world; it stood to reason that his very presence could immobilize people from such a distance.

“I’m sorry.” Popola sniffled. “If I’d jumped in just a few seconds earlier…”

“Dracula would have torn you to pieces. You would have died, and then I would have died, and then Dracula… I suppose he would have thrown a victory party of some sort.”

“Alucard, you’re human. You’re the last human. Devola and I, we—we have to protect you.” Popola wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. He could feel her shaking as she struggled to keep her composure. “It’s the only way we can make up for what we’ve done… for what we’ve failed to do…”

Seeking to comfort her, Alucard combed through her silky hair, letting her scarlet tresses flow between his fingers like wine. “I keep telling you and your sister, I’m only half human. That makes me only half of your responsibility. Does that help?”

Popola shook her head.

Alucard pulled her closer. “I have a story to tell you, Popola. Once upon a time, there was a boy. A kind boy, fearless and selfless. When he came of age, he was led to a dark place, where he discovered that he was descended from a great evil. He grappled with that knowledge and confronted his heritage… and through his courage and the strength of his friends, he overcame the darkness that lay dormant within him.

“A year passed. The boy took his first steps into adulthood. He was approached yet again by the dark forces he had rejected. Some wished to entice him into embracing the will of his predecessor; others wished to rip the power he held away from him and use it for evil. Again, through his courage and the strength of his friends, he overcame that darkness.

“More years passed. The boy became a young man. The world began to fall apart around him. The next time the darkness whispered to him, all he had was his courage.” Alucard closed his eyes, fighting back tears. “Thrice he was tempted. Thrice the darkness called to him. The third time, he listened. And I… I had to face the consequences of my negligence.

“The boy I nurtured,” Alucard said, his voice barely a whisper now, “who inherited the soul of my father, whom I treated as my own flesh and blood, cast aside his own will and became the man you saw take my arm. He is my cross to bear, more so even than your failures are to you and your sister.”

“I’m sorry,” Popola said, her voice small and muffled.

“Knowing what I’ve done, what I’ve created…” Alucard sank into Popola’s embrace, nestling his face in her hair (he hardly heeded the scent of motor oil that clung to her); his hand shook as it curled around the back of her neck. Her warm cheek pressed against his chest, the soft and muted purring of her internal systems resonating through his skin. “Would you still have thrown yourself in front of me the way you did?”

“I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Somehow, that only made Alucard feel worse. “Why?”

“How are you going to fix your mistakes if you’re dead?” Popola asked.
“Hmm.” Alucard took a deep breath. “I… suppose that’s a good point.” He let go of her and wiped at his eyes. “But should the need ever arise, I want you to heed my advice. Don’t feel obligated to put yourself in danger on my behalf.”

Before he could help himself, before he even knew what he was doing, he brushed the bangs from Popola’s forehead and planted a soft kiss on her brow. Reflecting on that moment as the day wore on, he found himself unable to explain why he’d done such a thing.

Commander White really was a slave driver. On his first day back in action, 9S found himself pushed to his limits as a Scanner, leaving no stone unturned as he and 2B scoured the area within twenty kilometers of Anemone’s camp. The city ruins, the half-sunken skyscrapers littering the coastline, the decaying amusement park on the city’s outskirts, the forest to the west, the desert to the north… the itinerary was vast enough to make his head spin.

Usually, Scanner units were responsible for reporting on the positions and numbers of machine forces, but that took a backseat to his current mission. Right now, priority number one was finding and rooting out any additional vampire machines before they could multiply into an unstoppable force; as a secondary priority, he was tasked by Anemone with reporting on the positions and numbers of the strange, hostile creatures that had been cropping up lately.

2B had been at it all week without him. And she didn’t slow down on his behalf, even though he’d been out of the game for a whole seven days and felt as rusty as the machines he and 2B had just cut to pieces.

“Try to keep up, 9S,” 2B reprimanded him as he lagged behind her on their way to the next area to search through. Dividing the whole twelve hundred square kilometers of area to cover into one-kilometer parcels made the whole thing seem much more manageable; at the rate they were going, and with other field agents on the case, they’d be done in a few months.

9S groaned. “Can’t we just take a day to run some errands at the camp or something?” he asked. As hale and hearty as the fresh chassis he’d uploaded himself into this morning was, his mind was having trouble adjusting to the sudden workload; he just wanted to ease back into the normal routine.

“You of all people should know how serious this is,” 2B said.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Of course, vampires were a big deal. 9S was, after all, the one who’d made the most fuss about them in the first place. But would one day to catch up be too much to ask for?

Of course. This was YoRHa, not daycare. Not that 9S had any experience with daycare.

“Mail notification received from access point,” Pod 153 announced.

“Uh, excuse me, Toobs. I’m gonna take a sec to check my mail,” 9S announced.

2B stopped in her tracks and stretched. “Make it quick.”

Was it just him, or was she being frostier toward him than usual? Maybe his little outburst yesterday had offended her.

9S made a slight detour to the nearest access terminal and pulled up his mail inbox. The latest unread email in there, received less than a minute ago, was from 6O. He hadn’t been expecting to get any sort of message from her; Operators didn’t usually communicate with other field operatives than the ones assigned to them.
It took him a second to remember the data chips she’d asked 2B to give him yesterday. She probably wanted to know if he’d taken a look at them yet (he hadn’t).

The email read:

_Good morning, 9S!

I know it’s irregular for me to contact you out of the blue like this, but I have to thank you for everything you’ve done. 2B told me all about everything you did, and I think I speak for everyone when I say we owe you a HUGE debt of gratitude!

27O, 13O, and I are going to get together tomorrow for a little support group meeting, and you’re welcome to come with us if you want. We did it last week and I feel like it really helped us process our feelings about what the vampires put us through. I already asked 2B if she wanted to join us and she said she was doing fine on her own. You know how she is. Maybe you can convince her to come, though. I’m sure she’d tag along if you came.

Oh, also, the three of us are going to hang out with 21O this Wednesday and tell her about all the good times we’ve had with her so we can get her up to speed. Since you’re her assigned unit, I figured it would only be right to invite you! I know you’ve got plenty of stories to tell her!

2B told me how harsh the Commander was on you, so I know you’ve been going through a lot and haven’t had anyone to lean on. So I just want you to know you can stop by and chat whenever you want. Next time you visit the Bunker, I’ll give you a big hug!

“Operator 6O has attached a read receipt to this email,” Pod 153 noted. “Confirmation of reception will be sent.”

Feeling just a little bit warmer and a little bit lighter, 9S exited out of his inbox. “Well, that was ni —”

“Incoming transmission from Operator 6O.”

9S blinked. “Already?”

A translucent holographic panel projected itself in front of him through his visor, displaying an icon of 6O’s face and an audio waveform. “Hi, Nines! I saw you got my message!” the bubbly Operator chirped.

“Uh, yeah, I just finished reading it. Literally. Thanks.”

“So, what do you think? We’re going to meet in my quarters tomorrow for the support group. Also, you’re never gonna guess what happened! 27O and I are un-breaking up! After the vampires took us hostage, she and I did some trauma bonding, I guess, and we both felt that spark again!” 6O sniffled as though she were about to cry. “I’m so happy to be with her again…”

“That’s, uh… great, 6O,” 9S said, trying to muster a little more enthusiasm than he actually felt. “But I’m probably gonna be too busy down here on Earth to stop by tomorrow.”

“Right, yeah, I totally get that. What about 21O? Are you gonna make it to our little party for her?”

“Uh…” 9S’s mouth went dry. “I—I don’t know…” he said, teasing out the words slowly. The idea made him feel slightly nauseous for reasons he couldn’t articulate quite as well as he wanted to. He just… didn’t really feel comfortable around the new 21O. She was like a cardboard cutout of the
person he’d once known, and seeing her face and hearing her voice just reminded him that she was gone.

“But you know her so well! You could really help her get to know herself…”

“She’s, uh…” 9S swallowed hard, his voice hoarse. She’s gone, he wanted to tell her. She died because of me. She died and I did nothing. How can I look her in the eyes again?

“Nines?”

“Yeah,” he said, resigning himself to his fate. In his current state, he just didn’t feel up to saying ‘no’ to anyone who treated him the way 6O was right now. “I’ll show up.”

“Great!” 9S could almost hear 6O jumping for joy back in the Bunker. “It’s gonna be so fun! Thank you, Nines! Oh—I gotta go! Let’s chat later!”

“Y-Yeah, sure. Oh, and thanks for sending those data chips.”

“What data chips?”

“Huh?”

“Gotta go! See ya!” 6O disconnected as suddenly as she’d called.

9S’s brow furrowed as he pulled out the chips and held them in the palm of his hand. If 6O hadn’t sent these data chips with 2B, then who had? And why had 2B lied about it?

“9S!” 2B called out, starting him out of his musings. “Let’s get going!”

9S hastily squirreled the chips away. “Coming!”

After over sixteen hours of nonstop work, 2B and 9S retired to a tarp-covered lean-to erected in the Resistance outpost in the outskirts of the forest for the night. It was a small tent, and save for two simple, hard cots less comfortable than the beds on board the Bunker (but not by much), it was sparse and barren.

9S was the first to lie down, slipping out of his boots and curling up on the cot he’d picked out, one arm hanging over his pillow, the other dangling over the side of the cot. His fingertips brushed against the floor. He wasted no time entering rest mode, and 2B could see the rise and fall of his chest slow and diminish to something barely perceptible as his systems slipped into hibernation.

Oddly enough, now that 2B had gotten here, she didn’t feel so tired anymore, so she sat on her own cot and watched him sleep. She still felt her chest tighten as she reflected on how cold she’d been to him yesterday. He’d been so despondent. How hard could it have been to just call him ‘Nines’ one more time?

But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t bring herself to let him get closer. She had to keep pushing him away, hoping he’d learn his lesson and stop trying to get so close to her, so that when his time came and she had to drop her disguise and do what had to be done, it wouldn’t hurt him as much.

Hurting him now to spare him the pain later. It was hard, but it was the right thing to do. Always. Forever.

9S twitched and shuddered in his sleep, a dark expression passing over his face. 2B watched him like a hawk as he rolled over, tossing and turning and tangling the cot’s thin, rough sheets around
himself as jumbled and barely-audible words poured unconsciously from his lips. His fingers dug into the thin, hard mattress, his cheek pressing against his pillow as he curled up and shivered.

2B slipped off her cot, nudged him aside, and made a space for her to sit next to him. The anxious whirring of her black box, she felt, was loud enough to wake the dead; she held her hand over her heart as though that alone could silence it.

Shaking with apprehension, she laid her hand just barely on 9S’s forehead, his hair brushing against and faintly tickling her palm. She wanted to touch him, to console him with the warmth of her skin, but this was as far as she could go. It was the most she felt she could get away with. It would only be for a minute. No one would have to know, least of all 9S.

9S continued to writhe, still beset by the phantasms of his trauma. 2B wondered, when he’d been cooped up in his quarters on Commander White’s orders, had he slept this fitfully every night? He’d had no one to speak to and no one to comfort him. Not even her.

For such a strong and admirable woman, White could be inestimably cruel. She never backed down from a decision she made, for better or for worse. No one’s sentence was ever commuted: when you broke the rules, you suffered all of the consequences, no matter what.

2B took a deep breath to quell her racing pulse, hoisted 9S up, and let him lean against her, putting her arm around his waist and letting his head rest limply against her shoulder. It would only be for five minutes, she told herself, long enough to put his unconscious mind at ease, and he would never have to know about it.

It would only be for ten minutes.

It would only be fifteen minutes.

It would only be twenty minutes…

2B felt a leaden weight tug at her brow, forcing her to bow her head as her heavy eyelids closed and a soft, almost numbing warmth washed over her.

“Priority One transmission received from the Commander,” Pod 042 announced, its smooth electronic voice jolting 2B out of the slumber she’d been about to fall into.

2B shook her head and laid 9S down, drawing the sheets up to his chin and tucking them in. Nothing could change her mood faster than a message from Commander White. Her hands were already shaking as she handled the sheets. 9S looked calm, even happy; she couldn’t bear to kill him like this.

Of course, if the Commander told her to do it, she would. There was a chain of command and 2B knew her place in it.

“Answer it,” she whispered, her voice coming out hoarse and small.

The Commander’s voice rang in her ears as her visor projected a holographic display in front of her. “Unit 2B, Satellite scans have just picked up the black box signal of Unit A2… within Anemone’s Resistance camp.” The way White paused there filled 2B with unease. As if she were relaying a fact that was unthinkable because the consequences of that fact were beyond what she wanted to consider…

“We can assume that A2 is hiding within the camp, although the situation may be… worse than that.” White seemed unwilling to say how it could be ‘worse,’ leaving 2B to fill in the blanks. “2B, you and 9S are ordered to find and terminate her before her position changes.”

2B glanced at 9S, who finally seemed to be sleeping peacefully. “Commander, 9S expended an unusual amount of energy today and must remain in rest mode. I’d like permission to complete the mission myself.”

White sighed. “Permission granted. Do you have any further questions about your execution orders, 2E?”

At the sound of her real name, 2B shuddered. “No, Commander.”

“Good. Glory to Mankind.”

2B stepped out of the tent and looked up at the moon climbing across the horizon, its rise marking the only difference between day and night. “Glory to Mankind,” she repeated, raising her hand to her chest.

To say A2 had not been having a good week was perhaps the worst understatement in history. It had been a catastrophic, painful, utterly humiliating week that had seemed to last an agonizing eternity.

And it had all started with Anemone and those damn wolves.

Those overgrown mutts had blunted their fangs on A2’s chassis like she was a goddamn chew toy before she’d cut them all to pieces, and on top of that, she’d had to drag Anemone all the way back to the camp, alone, while her innards threatened with every step to rip through her weakened chassis and spew all over the ground.

The redheads had spent all morning piecing her and Anemone back together. In the meantime, A2 had missed one hell of a skirmish in the camp between the Resistance and a battalion of machines and while the twins poked around in her guts. She’d heard the sound of combat, muffled as it was, through the walls of the medical center the Resistance had set up in one of the empty, dilapidated skyscrapers and inwardly lamented not being able to take down any of the bastards herself. She didn’t have much of a reason to live other than ripping as many of those buckets of bolts apart as possible and each missed opportunity left her disheartened.

That had been bad. Inaction, lying fallow, helpless on an operating table with her chassis cracked open like a crab’s shell and her innards on full display, was embarrassing enough to be painful.

What had happened next, though, had been worse. Worse than A2 could have possibly imagined.

A2 cracked open her eyes. Everything was hazy and just a little out of focus, speckled with static and dead pixels, but she could make out Anemone standing in front of her. Anemone looked small and almost naked without the heavy hooded cloak she typically wore; swathes of bandages and patches of temporary skin grafts covered the damage to her chassis.

“I’ve got some… bad news,” she told A2, not quite willing to look her in the eyes.

“What? Something wrong with you?”

“Uh, n-no, I’ll be fine. It’ll just take a few days for us to contact the factory that makes parts for my
model. But as for you…” Anemone lowered her head. “The twins can’t find enough parts to fix your chassis. You’ve been totaled. And your model type isn’t in production anymore, so we can’t…”

“Bullshit. I can’t be in that bad shape!” A2 tried to sit up, only for every servo in her body to start whining and screaming. She gritted her teeth and flopped back down. “Figures,” she spat. “I do one good thing…”

“Don’t worry. Jackass has an idea.” Anemone gestured to the hooded woman standing beside her.

“That’s right, I have an idea,” said Jackass, the camp’s resident mad scientist, as she crossed her arms proudly. The disheveled (as though A2 had any room to talk) mechanic, clad in a ragged cloak and reeking of gunpowder and nitroglycerin, stood over A2 with a wicked smile on her face showing quite clearly that the idea she had was particularly unpleasant.

“Shoot.”

“So you know about access terminals, right?” Jackass asked. She didn’t bother to wait for an answer. “They dismantle and reconstruct every model of YoRHa android currently in service. It’s how they ‘fast travel’ between terminals. That means we can get spare parts from them whenever we want.”

“Yeah? Well, too bad. I’m an obsolete model,” A2 reminded her, trying again to sit up.

“Well, yes,” Anemone said, “but the modern combat-type units are based on you and the other Attacker models. And you’re based on template number two, or, rather, you are template number two, so it’s just a matter of constructing a Type-B chassis with the Number Two skin…”

A2 felt her stomach drop.

…”Then we just have to transplant your black box and logic circuits into the 2B model and—”

“Nope.”

Shocked by the suddenness of A2’s response, Anemone furrowed her brow. “But A2—”

“Nope. No, no, no, no. Absolutely not. Don’t you dare transplant me into one of those.”

“But… But she looks just like you did back then. Although,” Anemone admitted, “you look better with long hair…”

“We can just take off her scalp and put it on the 2B model,” said Jackass, scratching absentmindedly at the patch that covered one of her eyes and brushing away her lank black hair from her forehead. “’C’mon, A2. It’s this or stay a complete wreck for the next, oh, forever or so.”

“I despise you,” A2 told her.

“Yeah,” Jackass said, “I get that a lot. So, what’ll it be?”

“No,” A2 insisted, pulling herself up and standing up at the side of the operating table through sheer strength of will. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine,” she said, trudging out of the room and leaving behind a bewildered Anemone and disheartened Jackass.

“Uh… Number Two, a-are you sure—”

“Fine!” A2 barked as she picked up her cloak, wrapped it around her shoulders, and stormed out of
the medical center into the open-air camp. The air outside was cooler, the camp nearly dead as the majority of its denizens began to pack up and retreat to their beds save for a skeleton crew that formed the night shift. Stepping lightly across the piles of dead machines littering the ground, A2 picked up a broken spear to use as a walking stick and set out alone.

However, A2 didn’t end up being fine that night, but not for the reasons she’d expected.

She’d barely managed to leave the camp by the time the moon had begun to rise over the black horizon. A tiny sliver had been shaved off of the silvery disk, rendering it a little lopsided. A2 looked at the moon, thought about the human refugee colony stationed there that gave YoRHa all their orders, and shook her fist angrily at it. She felt queasy as she did so, as if something was churning and writing inside her, and she wondered if she had been programmed to feel bad about resenting her masters. She probably had been.

And then a wave of nausea that couldn’t possibly have been caused by that swept over her.

No, not nausea. Worse. A cocktail of sensations running all the way through every inch of her battered and weary body, from the surface of what little skin she had left to the depths of her bitemark-riddled chassis. Prickling, aching, cramps, blistering cold, unbearable heat. All of these sensations bled together, all contributing to a mind-numbing blend of utter agony.

It was the worst pain she’d felt in years, and more than that, it was the most afraid she’d ever been since the first time she’d seen the sun set, adrift in the middle of the ocean all those years ago.

A2 dropped her makeshift walking stick and collapsed, wracked by spasms that twisted every aching servo in her body. She pulled herself up on all fours, gasping for air as her chest heaved; sharp aches ran under her skin from the tips of her toes up her spine.

Her first thought was that she was more badly injured than she’d thought, despite all the twins’ hard work; part of her wanted to reconsider uploading herself to that fresh body, but that part was quickly silenced by the churning, gut-wrenching, nauseating throbs worming their way through her chassis and under her skin. It felt as though a thousand tiny, scurrying rodents were chewing through her guts.

She wasn’t sure how to describe it. But she was sure of one thing. It was worse, far worse, than any pain her half-repaired wounds might have given her.

Gagging, she looked down and through the hazy, static-filled fog clouding her vision saw something small and white fall onto the ground. And then another little white thing and another. She poked at one of them and realized it was a tooth. Her tooth. With mounting horror, she probed her mouth with her tongue and felt sharp fangs. She sputtered, choking on her own shock as her new and pristine teeth, razor-sharp, ached and throbbed in her jaws, the deep twinges running all the way into her sinuses.

As her internal temperature spiked and sweat clung to her skin, A2 shrugged off the cloak draped over her back, gritting her teeth as the pressure in her sinuses, deep-seated behind her nose and pressing against her brain to produce the mother of all migraines, grew stronger. Her servos creaked, whined, and screeched, the sound of the labored machinery taking on a sickly, wet tone. She felt her skull crack, the hard layer of carbon and metal ripping itself apart and realigning itself beneath her skin.

As another pulse ran through her body, A2 arched her back, letting out a sharp outcry and digging the claws sprouting from her fingertips and toes into the ground as her body throbbed and ached. A prickling sensation washed over her skin, and for the first time, A2 felt something on the patches
of exposed chassis stretching across her body.

It stung.

Coarse, thick fur, as white as her hair, was sprouting from her skin. She grabbed at it, tearing fistfuls away from her skin, gritting her teeth to block out the scream trying to tear itself free. No matter how quickly she tried to rip the fur out, it grew back too quickly, blanketing what little of her skin remained.

Desperate, A2 began to claw at her flesh, frantically ranking her sharpening fingernails—curved, black, and as wicked and sharp as knives—across her shoulders, her upper arms, her thighs, her neck, burying them in the growing forests of white fur and ripping into her flesh.

She rolled onto her back and tore at her stomach, desperately hoping that somehow, the violence she inflicted on this body would be enough to placate whatever thing was doing this to her. A sacrifice of her own skin, her own flesh, her own blood. Her claws scraped against her chassis, leaving faint white lines on the black surface lying beneath her skin.

The joints in her arms and legs, her hips, her knees, her ankles, her elbows and wrists, all jolted and spasmed, curling and bending in ways they weren’t meant to curl, metal grinding on metal, the hellish sound of her body reshaping itself from the inside out barely muffled by her flesh. Throwing her head back as far as it could go as her spine cracked and kinked and unkinked itself bit by bit, she gagged and choked and gurgled, spitting up blood and oil and acid and god-knows-what-else that ran down into her nose and stung.

She sat up, trying to reorient herself as she cleared her mouth of bile, panting and gasping for air; a sharp, bestial cry tore itself from her throat as a surge of lightning ripped down her spine and kept going to the tip of her... her...

Something. Something new. Something that didn’t belong, extending from the base of her spine and twitching between her legs, covered in long white fur. A tail. Her tail.

A2 reached for the broken spear she’d dropped, grasping it clumsily with fingers that refused to bend the way she wanted. She got a loose grip on the shaft, raised the spear, and drove the scrap-metal spearhead down, slicing the tail in half.

An anguished scream wrenched itself from her throat; tears welled up in her eyes. Through the blurry veil, she saw the severed tail regrow what it had lost in a matter of seconds, writhing and wagging as though it had a mind of its own. She curled up on her side, whimpering pitifully as she blinked away her tears.

Her skin was fully blanketed in white fur now, from the tip of her tail all the way to the tips of her ears. As for her exposed chassis, something was wrapping itself around the scratched and battered black shell. A new layer of skin, red as fresh meat and streaked with white striations. Naked muscle, exposed to the open air and as sensitive as her chassis wasn’t.

And the same air that ruffled the fur blanketing her skin pierced that exposed flesh with stinging needles like hornets’ barbs. Wracked with pain, A2 raised her head to the heavens and let out a long, loud, baleful howl that rang and echoed through the deep crevasses formed by the towering buildings littering the ancient city ruins.

A2 tried to stand up, teetering precariously as her tail curled between her hind legs and her long, sharp ears swiveled to catch the faint and distant sounds of the city ruins. She barely lasted a second before falling back on all fours, the gravelly ground stinging her skinless forepaws.
Sniffling and choking back a pathetic whine, she took off for the only place she knew would be safe, heading back to the soft lights of Anemone’s camp.

The way everyone in the camp treated her that night was jarring. No one recognized her—not a single person looked at her and saw anything other than a severely-injured wild animal. The outpouring of sympathy she found herself subjected to from everybody, especially from Anemone, was overwhelming; she hadn’t been in the camp for five minutes before someone had started trying to swaddle her half-skinned body in bandages.

Between that and the hazy waves of pain and sensory overload washing through her, the night passed by in a blur. She ended up so fatigued that she didn’t even have the energy to feel embarrassed when she fell asleep in Anemone’s tent, curled up on a bed of old blankets next to the Resistance leader’s cot.

A2 awoke the next morning relieved to find her body just as it had been before moonrise. She’d never been so happy to see her scuffed, scratched endodermis, nor had she ever been so relieved to find herself with thumbs. And Anemone woke up to find that the poor half-dead dog she’d slept next to had transformed overnight into A2.

Anemone, apparently now a firm believer in the supernatural, wanted to talk about it. A2 didn’t.

She tried to leave again, loath to stick around the camp, especially considering that during the so-called ‘day,’ when the moon did not hang in the sky, she was in constant danger of being recognized by someone. It irked her that Anemone was dumb enough to keep begging her to stay, as though she didn’t know what YoRHa would to her do if A2’s black box was detected in the camp’s vicinity.

She covered a lot of ground and put a lot of distance between herself and the camp before the moon, a little slimmer than it had been the night before, breached the horizon yet again and lifted up into the sky. At the sight of it, that all-over throbbing pain swept through her again as whatever force had reshaped her body the night before returned.

But it did not linger as long and did not hurt as much, and when the changes had subsided, A2 could stand up for almost half a minute.

Tonight, a week after her first transformation, the moon was about three-quarters full.

A2 huddled in the corner of a little room in one of the buildings adjacent to the camp, her ragged cloak wrapped tightly around her. The inner lining of the cloak was silky and soft and seemed to be one of the only things that didn’t make the raw and naked flesh covering her chassis scream.

This little room—something that felt to her like both a prison and a sanctuary at once—had become far too familiar to her over the past week. This was where Alucard had dragged her when the two of them had first met. It was almost a little home away from home.

Each night, it seemed, left A2 a little more like her old self than before. Tonight, her fingers were longer and much more dexterous, her dewclaws more like thumbs; her hands were something in between paws and hands. Her legs, too, weren’t so oddly-shaped anymore, and she could actually stand upright with little trouble, although walking around on all fours still came naturally to her. She didn’t want to cling to the hope that eventually the changes would lessen until they stopped altogether, though, as optimistic as Anemone and the twins were.

The worst part of this whole thing, really, other than the biting hollow feeling inside her whenever
she transformed, was that the patchwork of thick fur and hairless muscle made her look like the world’s ugliest poodle. There was no way A2 would debase herself by taking a spare body from the android who kept trying to kill her, but maybe someday the twins could look into developing skin grafts. More skin would make this transformation less intolerable by half.

The door to the little room swung open, but only a crack. “A2,” Anemone called out from the other side, poking her head out from behind the door. “Mind if I come in?”

“A… nem… uhn…” A2 rasped, choking out each syllable. Tonight, her snout was short enough that she could actually talk—up until now, she hadn’t been able to get her mouth and tongue in the right shapes while transformed to make any coherent sounds.

“I’ve brought someone who can tell us both more about what’s happened to you,” Anemone said, glancing over her shoulder at whoever was standing behind her. “Alucard, why don’t you take a look?”

A2 groaned. Not him of all people. This day, no, this week couldn’t possibly get any worse.

Alucard stepped out from behind Anemone so smoothly he all but glided on the floor, a flash of bemusement passing across his face as he caught sight of A2. He adjusted to the sight of her gnarled mostly-lupine form far more quickly than Anemone had at first, though. He hardly seemed shocked at all.

“Oh, goodness,” he said, his casual and unfazed tone belying his words, “you’re a werewolf.”

A2 curled up and drew her cloak tighter around herself as he crossed the floor and crouched down in front of her, studying her intently and cocking his head. He reached out with his left hand, tapped her on the forehead, and traced a line between her eyes and down her snout to the tip of her nose. “Color me surprised…” he muttered, belying his detached and clinical observations.

She snapped at him and tried to bite his finger off, her jaws snapping shut around empty air as he quickly pulled his hand away.

“Careful,” he said, gently admonishing her. He clucked his tongue as he looked her up and down, muttering something that sounded a bit like ‘three-quarters turned.’ “Well,” he said after analyzing her for what seemed like forever, “I have good news and bad news.”

A2 let out a halfhearted growl. She’d had enough bad news.

“The good news is that the moon is waning, so your, er… condition,” he said, “will gradually improve. By the time the new moon has risen, you will not exhibit any symptoms of lycanthropy at all.”

“Huh?” A2 wrinkled her nose. “Ly… ca… ruh…”

“You won’t transform at all,” Anemone explained, translating Alucard’s insufferable supernatural jargon. She turned to face him. “So we just have to let it run its course? That’s great news!”

Alucard shook his head. “That brings me, I’m afraid, to the bad news. Afterward, when the moon begins to wax, the changes will begin again, this time growing in intensity until the full moon,” he told A2.

“What?”

“It’s a cycle,” Alucard explained, “like the tides. If it’s any consolation, in the coming days, you’ll
find it much easier to walk on two legs.”

Anemone frowned, evidently just as disheartened by his diagnosis as A2 was. “I’ve been trying to convince A2 to upload her consciousness to a new chassis, on account of all the damage to her old one. If we do that—”

She looked straight at A2, as if to silently say, *please, just do it already.* A2 shook her head and stuck out her tongue, which evidently didn’t have the effect she’d intended, since a little smile flickered across Anemone’s face.

“—will that cure her?”

“Lycanthropy isn’t an *infection,*” Alucard said. “It is not a disease that ravages flesh or a ‘bug’ that infests programming. It is a *stain on its victim’s very soul.* You could exchange this body for a thousand new ones and each one would still transform with each moonrise.”

Hearing that pronouncement, A2 felt trapped between vindication and disappointment.

“That said…” Alucard lifted up the ragged hem of A2’s cloak and examined the livid patches of exposed muscle. “These parts of your body without any skin. I assume they’ve carried over from the exposed chassis in your human—er, *android* form, correct?”

A2 nodded.

“All these exposed nerves… they must hurt quite a lot,” he said. “Is the pain too much for you?”

A2 didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of answering yes, especially since he’d asked the question with such a sanctimonious tone, so she did nothing.

“I see.” Alucard stood up. “Moving to a new body would fix that problem, at least.”

If Alucard wanted her to do it, too, then that just made A2 all the more certain that she wouldn’t. She was stubborn as a mule and damn proud of it.

Anemone sighed. “A2, I’ve watched too many people run their bodies until they broke. You’re getting close. Please think about this.”

“You’ve led her to water,” Alucard consoled her as the two of them left the room. “It’s up to her to drink. Give her some time.”

The door swung shut, leaving A2 alone to sleep off the transformation. For some reason, every time she transformed, she was left with an odd, hollow feeling inside that made her feel weak and faint; it was always easy to fall asleep and stay asleep until the moon set and her body returned to normal. Maybe she should ask Alucard what was going on with that, since he seemed to know a lot about how werewolves worked. On the other hand, fuck Alucard.

Her ear itched. She tried to ignore it at first, but irritation eventually got the better of her; she dragged herself over to the chair sitting in the other corner of the room and rubbed her head against its corner. She was right-handed and wasn’t covered with constantly-screaming exposed nerves, she’d have used them. Degrading as it was, a chair was a much better option.

A hollow, whispering sound fluttered through the room like an errant moth; A2’s sensitive ears perked up as the sound—a voice—brushed past them.

“H-Hello?” she called out. That ghostly hint of a voice—it sounded oddly familiar, though A2
couldn’t quite place it. It was too quiet, barely on the periphery of her hearing.

She sniffed the air, her nostrils flaring. There was a scent she couldn’t place, too. Something savory and woody, but very slightly briny; though she couldn’t identify it, it reminded her of home.

A2 didn’t have a home. She never had; all she knew of what a *home* was like came from the fuzzy, faint, indistinct memories she’d inherited from whoever had contributed their psyche to her personality template. This didn’t quite feel exactly like those memories did, though. A different kind of home—something, or maybe someone she’d known better.

*“Can you hear me, Two?”*

Restless, A2 loped through the moonlit camp as the night wore on. She wasn’t sure if it was wanderlust or boredom or simply some way for her to clear her head. In this form, with her senses so much stronger, enclosed spaces became monotonous quickly. Out in the open, though, distant sounds drifted to her ears and faraway scents wafted to her nose, the rich bouquet of sensations enough to clear her mind.

*“Hey, look, it’s that dog again,”* one of the few soldiers stationed at the night watch said to another.

A2 wasn’t sure if she liked the idea that she was becoming the camp’s mascot. The sooner she started looking more like herself again, the better.

*“That’s a fuckin’ ugly dog,”* the other soldier said.

*“Shut up, Coriander. All dogs are beautiful.”* The first soldier whistled. *“Here, girl!”*

A2 scoffed at the soldier’s call and kept walking, but stopped in her tracks as she caught sight of Anemone leaving her tent. She yawned and pulled her cloak tighter around her as a gust of cold wind blew through the camp. A2 winced as the wind sent needles through her skin.

She followed Anemone at a distance as she made her way to the open center of the camp. Approaching from the opposite direction was another android, one wreathed in shadow. The other android wore all black; her short white hair stood out like the moon against the sky.

A2’s hackles rose at the sight of her doppelganger standing before Anemone in the center of the moonlit camp. 2E, her face the same shape as A2’s (though, obviously, not at this moment) right down to the ears, the nose, the lips, the mole under the left corner of her mouth. 2E, whose short white hair framed her face the same way A2’s once had. 2E, whose ornate black uniform was nearly unchanged from what A2 and her fellow soldiers had worn on their first and last mission. 2E, her mirror image and most dangerous adversary.

2E, the woman who was meant to replace her, the reflection of her past and vision of her future. The woman who was here to kill her.

“I’m looking for a fugitive android known as A2,” 2E told Anemone. “The Bunker’s scans picked up her black box signal here.”

Anemone fidgeted with one of her braids. “A2… I haven’t seen her in years. I’d assumed she’d died a long time ago.”

A2 crouched behind a stack of small bins, peeking around the corner to keep 2E in her line of sight.
“Do you know if she could have passed through here?” 2E asked.

Anemone shook her head. “I suppose she could have, but I can’t say for certain.”

“Wouldn’t you know if someone who wasn’t from your cell passed through the camp?”

“Today was an exceptionally rough day,” Anemone said, gesturing to a few piles of mutilated machines still littering the ground. “If she passed through here, she might have done so during the chaos this morning.”

“We picked up her black box signal about fifteen minutes before moonrise.”

“If she sneaked in this morning when everyone was distracted,” Anemone admitted, “she could have found somewhere to hole up until it was safe to leave.”

“So, assuming that,” 2E said, “she would still be here now, wouldn’t she?”

“I suppose…”

“Pod.” 2E tapped on the chrome-hulled support pod hovering at her side. “Scan the area for black box signals.”

“Scanning.”

A2 froze. Did she even have a black box in her wolf form? She hadn’t thought to check these past few nights.

Panting with fear, she pressed her hand over her heart. It stung when the raw flesh of her palm met her chest.


Anemone bit her lip.

“Black box signal detected. Unit 31D, distance nineteen meters at seventeen degrees northeast. Status: Rest mode.”

Still searching for the familiar hum of her black box, A2 closed her eyes and tried to focus her ears only on her own body, tuning out even her own breathing.

“Black box signal detected.”

A2’s spirits fell. Beneath the thin fog of irritating stimulus from her raw nerves, she could barely pick up the slight vibration and muffled whirring of her black box.

“Unit A2, distance three meters at five degrees south. Status: Active. Scan complete.”

Anemone gasped. “-She’s here?” she exclaimed, feigning surprise. She was a terrible actor.

2E’s head turned in A2’s direction; A2 pulled her head back and hid behind the storage bins. This was why she hadn’t wanted to stay here. She could say all she liked it was because she found other people annoying, especially busybodies who couldn’t keep their noses out of other people’s business, but the truth was that she didn’t want people to suffer because of her. She’d put everyone here, especially Anemone, in danger. Especially considering that Anemone was a hair’s breadth away from doing something stupid, like she’d done a week ago…
2E’s sword vanished from its electromagnetic sheath at her back and appeared in her hand in a shower of sparks as she turned in A2’s direction and took soft, swift steps toward her. The silent, purposeful gait of an assassin. The visor obscuring her eyes joined the shadows blanketing her face and made her expression inscrutable.

To A2’s dismay and horror, Anemone drew a pistol from within her cloak, the gun’s polished barrel glinting in the moonlight, and pointed it at 2E. “You’ll take Number Two over my dead body.”

2B did an about-face to meet her, presenting her back to A2. She was nonplussed, but didn’t lose her grip on her sword. Her fingers curled tighter around the hilt and her pod hung menacingly at her side. Either the sword or the pod could cut Anemone to pieces without any trouble. What was Anemone doing?

“I don’t care what she’s done. Whatever she might have done to deserve this.” Anemone kept the gun pointed at 2E, but her hand was shaking. She knew how outmatched she was. It was easy for A2 to see. Anemone’s fear even had a distinct smell to it. “A2 and I watched our friends sacrifice their lives for humanity. The two of us were the only survivors of our mission. I’m not going to let you add to that body count!”

A2 felt something hot sting her eyes as her chest tightened around her black box and muffled its frantic whirring; ignoring how hard it was for her to move in the shape she was in, she threw herself between Anemone and 2B. Her claws dug into Anemone’s cloak and tore through it, leaving ragged strips fluttering between her fingers as she all but threw Anemone to the ground behind her.

She held herself upright on two legs, hunched over in a feral, brutish stance and bathed in moonlight. 2E’s white sword flashed, catching the moonlight as the blade stabbed forward; it slid through the palm of A2’s hand and kept going, digging into her chest. A2 bared her fangs in defiance.

“What are you?” 2E hissed. A2 realized that despite the many times they’d met and crossed blades, she couldn’t possibly recognize her in the shape she was in.

“You…” A2 shivered as the exposed nerves pierced by the blade filled her head with screams. “Won’t… hurt… my… friend…”

2E ripped her sword free; A2 nearly collapsed, but held firm. “You won’t… hurt… my—”

The blade cut through her. A2 cried out, clutched at her bleeding chest, and stumbled backward as ripples spread across the raw nerves beneath her cloak. But she kept herself between 2E and Anemone.

Throwing herself at her doppelganger, A2 fought with all the strength she could muster, pushing herself through the screaming electric shocks that rippled through her skin. She wasn’t sure if it was just a trick of perception or not, but despite the pain doing its best to cripple her, she felt stronger in this form than she did normally.

The two of them grappled, and even now, A2’s raw strength forced 2E’s knees to bend and buckle before she broke free and lunged forward with her sword in hand. Beating her back, A2 screamed and snarled and snapped at her, claws ripping through her black uniform and drawing thin ribbons of blood that streamed through the night air, weaving through swinging blades and lashing limbs to strike her down.
A2 had fought 2E dozens of times in the past three years; 2E had only survived their most recent encounter and had no memory of the many battles she'd lost. As a result, A2 knew every move in 2E’s repertoire, every trick and technique at her disposal. She knew how to catch her off guard, to destabilize her, to break her stance and cut through her defenses. Even with her severe handicap, A2 was still a match for 2E.

Fighting through a crimson haze of equal parts ambient pain and sheer animalistic bloodlust, A2 tore 2E’s sword from her grasp and ripped a long metal pole from one of the lean-tos set up around the camp, causing the destabilized shelter to crumple and collapse. She swung the pole vigorously, catching 2E on the side of her head. The end of the pole crumpled and bent, but the force of the blow tore at the skin of her scalp, leaving a massive crimson bloodstain in her hair and running down the side of her face.

A2 pressed onward, bludgeoning 2E with the pole. Each impact between the improvised weapon and 2E’s chassis sent a hollow, high-pitched ringing noise through the air. She crushed one of 2E’s elbows and swung the pole into the crook of her knee, forcing her to kneel.

As A2 brought the pole down for one more blow, 2E latched onto it and wrenched it out of A2’s grip, the friction scraping and burning her sensitive palms.

“A2! Stop!” Anemone shouted out from the sidelines.

A2 barely managed to duck as 2E swung the metal pole overhead with a hollow rush of wind and snapped at the pole, catching it in her jaws and clamping down on it. The strength of her bite shocked even her; she had no clue she could do so much with just her mouth in this form. 2E was equally surprised by the show of strength and soon lost her grip on the improvised weapon. However, 2E’s sword came back to her; with one smooth and swift flick of her wrist, the pole became two much shorter poles.

2E’s pod locked onto A2; she bolted, scurrying out of the path of the pod’s gunfire as its bullets riddled the ground, still carrying one half of the metal pole in her mouth. She threw the pole at the pod, knocking it askew just as it opened up and fired a searing laser beam—the beam veered off-course, lancing into the night sky with a deep, buzzing roar.

2E shook her head, grabbed her injured elbow, and gave it a savage twist until the joint realigned properly; she did the same with her knee, gingerly standing up and testing her weight on the injured joint.

With 2E distracted, A2 grabbed the other half of the pole and rammed it into her cheek, splitting her skin. 2E reeled back, blood gushing from the wound that had ripped her cheek open, as A2 lashed out with her claws. She tore into 2E’s flesh just below her collarbone, rending her clothes and leaving ragged parallel scores in her skin.

Wounded by the deep lacerations across her chest, 2E fell on her back; A2 pounced on her and pinned her to the ground, snarling in her face and flecking her skin with specks of spit and blood.

There was something enticing about the patch of bare, blood-streaked skin where A2’s claws had widened the keyhole on the front of 2E’s blouse—something that called her to sink her teeth into the soft and yielding flesh.

A feral thrill ran through A2’s body; as her stomach rumbled and growled, she licked her lips with hunger and anticipation. It would be so fitting to bite into her perfect, oh-so-superior clone’s flawless skin and make her suffer this curse, this so-called ‘stain’ on her soul. It would be so much fun to watch 2E the perfectly-composed soldier, 2E the consummate professional, 2E the
unflinching assassin have to deal with turning into a mangy mutt every time the moon rose. She
even could maul 2E to death right here and erase her memory of this encounter, and for the rest of
her life, 2E would never know why she transformed into a beast each night!

A2 opened her mouth, only for 2E to reach up and hook her fingers into her jaws, holding them
apart.

“You… You’re…” 2E struggled, her arms shaking as her fingers slipped against A2’s razor-sharp
fangs. Oily, metallic blood trickled through A2’s fangs and down her muzzle. “You’re A2?”

A2 ripped herself free, nearly taking a few of 2E’s fingers with her. “Surprised?” she growled.

2E drove her knee into A2’s chest and then kicked her away, her stiletto heel burying itself in
tender flesh as A2 reared up and reeled back, squeezing her eyes shut as a pained, whining howl
tore itself from her muzzle.

The tide of battle turned in an instant. A2’s vulnerabilities grew and multiplied: with every hit 2E
got in, she made certain the next two hits would connect as well, and the longer the offensive blitz
went on, the harder it became for A2 to defend herself, let alone mount a counterattack.

“Stop…”

2E’s pod fired on A2, the bullets chewing through her cloak, through her skin, and through the
warped and malformed chassis underneath.

“S-Stop…”

The next time 2E attacked, A2 tried to grab her blade with her malformed, paw-like hands and rip it
away from her, only for a sharp, searing pain to run through her hip and all but immobilize her as
the blade came down on her unimpeded.

“S… Sto… p…”

The sword came down again. A2 fell to the ground on all fours, warmth spilling from the gash
running up her chest as blood pooled beneath her. She looked up at 2E, hissing through her
clenched fangs and growling, before her legs gave out and she collapsed. The puddle of blood
beneath her stained her white fur, leaving crimson blossoms as the world grew dark and hazy
around her.

“2B, stop!” Anemone cried out from behind her. “Don’t hurt her! I—I’ll do anything, but
please…”

A2 broke down, tucking away her face as tears streamed down her muzzle and dampened her fur.
She couldn’t protect Anemone. She couldn’t even protect herself. Because she’d been unwilling to
leave behind this battered, beaten, broken chassis even when a better option had been practically
staring her in the face.

She did not like her body. In fact, it was easy to say she hated it. She hated the patches of missing
skin that covered her chest, hips, and most of her arms and legs (especially now). She hated how
hard and rigid her exposed chassis was and how little she was capable of feeling through it. She
hated the way dirt and grime crusted up the seams and got into the servos. She hated everything
about this body.

But at the same time, she hadn’t been able to bear the thought of tossing it aside and reducing it to
scrap. And not just because she’d be trading it for the same body as that of the woman who’d been
trying to kill her these past three years.

She was, in a way, proud of it. She was proud of the body that had carried her across the Pacific Ocean. She was proud of the body that had spent three years fending off machines with no maintenance. She was proud of the body that had time and time again overpowered state-of-the-art Type-E killing machines, the strongest androids in the world, despite being obsolete and inferior in every way.

For all its ugliness and inelegance, this body was her oldest friend. And now, here, as she lay defeated in a pool of her own blood in between her would-be assassin and her only other friend, it had failed her. It had abandoned her when she’d needed it the most.

A2 looked up at 2E as the Executioner’s blood-streaked white sword hung over her neck. Ever since she’d crossed the ocean and set foot on the mainland, she hadn’t thought she’d ever be afraid to die. The only reason she’d clung to life since then had been to take out as many machines as she could before the end; all that time, she’d thought only about all the friends she’d lost and how much she wished she could join them in whatever awaited them after death.

Here, now, though, for the first time in three years, it struck her.

She didn’t want to die.

A sword crossed 2E’s blade before it could fall, wrenching it out of her grasp. “Excuse me, ma’am!”

That voice…

No, it wasn’t…

It couldn’t be…

Alucard stepped between 2E and A2 with a flourish of his sword. “Attempting to harm a dog is simply shameful, no matter how unsightly of a dog it might be. What do you have to say for yourself?”

2E summoned her sword back to her hand, unfazed by Alucard’s sudden appearance. “I have my orders. Step aside or—”

“Try me.” Alucard held his arms out to his sides; part of his right sleeve drooped. A2 gagged. The moron was missing an arm and still trying to piss off a YoRHa executioner?

2E took his advice and pulled back her sword, prepared to plunge it into his heart—

Until the sword vanished in a flurry of sparks, leaving her wielding nothing but thin air.


2E’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“Statement: YoRHa protocols dictate that should an android encounter a living human, its assigned support pod must temporarily deactivate all combat features.”

A2 could see in 2E’s face that she was considering foregoing weapons and just punching Alucard in the face, which, to her credit, was a very relatable thing to consider.

Alucard sheathed his sword. “You have your orders, do you? Well, I have orders, too. Orders for
you, in fact.” He lazily examined his fingernails. “As I’m sure you’re aware, my status as a human sets me at the very top of the chain of command. I’m ordering you to spare A2’s life, and Anemone’s as well. Furthermore, I would like to have a word with your superior.”

A2 wished she had some way of recording the growing melange of emotion reflected on 2E’s usually-impassive face. Awe, disappointment, shock, resentment…

“That is all,” Alucard said. “You are dismissed.”

To A2’s utter amazement, the ploy worked: 2E turned around, albeit reluctantly, and left.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Alucard muttered, sharing A2’s unspoken shock.

“A2!” Anemone called out, rushing over to her. “Are you… Are you all right?”

A2 could really use the rest of that bottle of whiskey she and Anemone had shared, but when she tried to ask for it, her words all tripped over each other. It was hard enough to speak through a snout when she wasn’t bleeding out from half a dozen wounds.

She didn’t remember closing her eyes, but when she opened them, she wasn’t in the same place. She was under the lean-to and canvas overhang that formed Anemone’s tent, lying on a pile of ragged old blankets with bandages plastered over her wounds; her head was resting in Anemone’s lap. Anemone, shaking from nervousness and softly crying, was stroking her hair and gently scratching behind her ears in a way that felt good, as much as A2 didn’t want to admit it. Nevertheless, A2 could feel her tail thumping against the ground no matter how hard she tried to rein it in, because the new body parts she had in this form didn’t care at all about her rapidly-dwindling dignity.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another flash of movement; for a second, she thought she could see someone else reaching out to bury her fingers in her fur. But it was just a trick of the moonlight and A2’s own haywire sensors playing tricks on her. There was no one else there.

Alucard glanced over at A2, saw an empty patch of air shimmering at her side, and squinted, his curiosity piqued. There seemed to be an invisible cloud hanging in the air there, intangible, colorless, odorless, formless. It registered only to his sixth sense, and even then just barely, buzzing on the very periphery of his senses; if anything had distracted him in that moment it had caught his third eye, he wouldn’t have noticed it at all.

As he focused his gaze, something only he could see coalesced in that spot where the air faintly shimmered, slowly unblurring and wavering into focus until it resolved into the misty, translucent image of a young woman. She wore an ornate black dress and a hooded black cloak, with a blindfold wrapped around her head that only covered one eye; beneath the hood, loose and wispy strands of white hair framed a round, soft face. She was petting A2 and softly cooing to her, as one would with a dog. Her fingers raked through A2’s bloodstained white fur yet did not stir so much as a single hair. In fact, her fingers sank into skin and flesh and passed through them as though they weren’t even there.

The apparition glanced up and noticed that Alucard was staring right at her. With a small note of shock playing briefly on her face, she vanished.
9S’s eyes flew open. He stared up at the thin canvas roof of the little lean-to he and 2B had been spending the night in. Groggy, he sat up and licked his lips. His mouth was dry and felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton; his head spun and throbbed and pounded.

“Hey, 2B,” he croaked, looking over to her cot. “Is it morning ye—”

She was gone. So was Pod 042. The thin sheets covering her bed weren’t even the slightest bit disturbed, as though she’d never gone to bed at all but had simply left the outpost as soon as 9S had entered rest mode.

“Uh… Pod?” He looked around for Pod 153 and found it hovering just over his left shoulder, as always. “Where’d 2B go?”

“Unknown,” the pod replied.

“Just like her to get up and get more work done while I’m asleep,” 9S grumbled, slipping out of bed and stretching the sleepy aches out of his limbs. “Sheesh, what a workhorse. Can you contact her?”

“Negative.”

“Why not?” A leaden lump settled in 9S’s stomach.

“Unknown. Proposal: Unit 9S should search the surrounding area for Unit 2B.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” 9S poked his head out of the lean-to and looked around the outpost. There wasn’t a soul around. “Hello?” he called out.

No answer.

Funny. There’d been a few soldiers here when he and 2B had arrived. Now, though, the outpost was empty. An eerie silence save for the wind rustling the leaves had taken hold over the entire forest area.

9S had good reason to feel creeped out. From the machine that had tried to kill him for having
silver hair and a black cloak to the vampire Flamel, it seemed like all of the weirdest and most dangerous things lurked in this specific part of the world, as though the forest was cursed. What would he find out here next?

His concern for 2B’s well-being mounting by the second, 9S pressed onward into the dark forest, hoping to find her before some horrible fate befell her… or himself.

“2B?” he called out, wandering deeper and deeper into the dark and twisting corridors of the forest. The trees formed an arched hallway around him, their gnarled trunks and branches seeming to pulse and writhe in the slightly-flickering light projected from his pod. He passed by a bent and thoroughly-rusted lamppost sprouting from the ground amid the trees. “2B, are you in here?”

There was no answer save for the whistling of winds through the tiny gaps between trees and the rustling of shriveled, crinkled leaves; the wooden walls of the tunnel through the forest creaked and groaned like the foundations of an old house. If this forest was trying to answer him, 9S understood none of its language.

“Black box signal detected,” Pod 153 announced. “Unit 2B is fifteen meters straight ahead. Proposal: Unit 9S should proceed deeper into the forest.”

“2B!” 9S’s voice rang out through the woods, but nobody answered him. His pulse raced, his black box whining as it burned a hole in his chest. He threw himself deeper into the dark heart of the twisted, labyrinthine woods, stumbling over the knobbly and twisted roots that snaked along the mossy ground.

He kept calling her name until he found her. When he finally spied her silvery-white hair standing out in the darkness like a full moon, his voice died in his throat.

With her back to him, 2B stood over the torn-apart remains of a machine nearly twice her size, her gloves stained completely black with its oily fluids. As Pod 153’s light fell on both 2B and her fallen foe, 9S noticed that the machine’s torso, which had been split and cracked open like that of a bloated week-old deer carcass, was covered in glittering scratch marks—as though 2B had torn it apart with her bare hands.

“2B… a-are you, uh… okay?” 9S asked, stammering slightly as he crept closer to her.

2B’s shoulders shook; 9S felt an odd sound waft through the air. It was such an unfamiliar noise, unrecognizable at first, that he hadn’t even realized it was coming from her.

It was laughter. Bright, glittering laughter, like wind and sunlight streaming through glass wind chimes.

Normally, 9S would have considered it a welcome sound. He’d always wished 2B could loosen up, after all. But this… felt wrong. So, so wrong.

2B turned around to face him, and 9S felt his breath freeze in his throat. She sported a wide, wicked, mad grin that stretched from ear to ear, splitting her face; her eyes, visible between the locks of white hair that fell over her forehead, were wide and wild, and her pupils had constricted to tiny points resting in the center of engorged, pale irises. Blood and oil in equal measures covered the entire lower half of her face, running from her mouth down her chin and neck and staining her front all the way down to the hem of her skirt.

She cocked her head, her eyes boring into his, and licked some of the blood and oil off her lips. “Niiines,” she hissed, drawing out the nickname he’d spent weeks badgering her to no avail to use.
Much to his dismay, 9S had to admit that hearing it didn’t make him feel any better.

“2B?” 9S took a cautious step toward her, holding out his hands. “Um… do you need maintenance or something?”

“I… I’ve never felt better…” 2B wiped some of the blood from her chin and then ran her hand through her hair, leaving a vivid red streak against the white. “It’s wonderful… it’s so wonderful… it’s so, so wonderful…”

“W-What is?” 9S found himself stammering as 2B stepped closer toward him. Was something wrong with his vocal processor? He seemed to be having trouble speaking.

2B let out a little laugh and reached out, laying her hand on his cheek. 9S felt what little breath was left in him leave his mouth. Her hand was frigid, so cold it nearly burned his skin, and he wanted to recoil, to pull himself away in shock and pain and revulsion, but—

“It’s so wonderful, Nines.” 2B’s hand crept around to the back of his head, her icy fingers crawling like spider’s legs over his ear and through his hair until they reached the knot of his visor above the nape of his neck; with one deft flourish of her fingers, she undid the knot and let the visor flutter to the ground. “Why did we think he was our enemy? Why were we ever so… afraid of him?”

“Af—Af-fraid of wh-who?” 9S gulped down a knot that had formed in his throat as his teeth chattered. His feet were rooted to the spot. It was just like back on the Bunker, the scene that kept replaying in his mind’s eye, the data that occupied every unused block of RAM in his systems whether he wanted it to or not.

“The master.” A dot of color, bright crimson, appeared in 2B’s pale bluish-gray irises; it diffused and swirled like a droplet of dye in a glass of water, spreading across her eyes and darkening until they were blood red. She licked her lips again and grinned even wider; long and wickedly sharp incisors poked out over her lower lip, a hollow and dry chuckle bubbling up from deep within her chest. It was the most genuine smile 9S had ever seen—the way it dragged up the corners of her mouth, the way the skin around the corners of her wild, mad eyes crinkled. But the only reason she was smiling and laughing so much was because…

She was a vampire.

“Pod,” 9S choked out, “f-fire everything you ha—”

2B softly pressed her index finger into the hollow of his throat, digging into the hard lump of his Adam’s apple; instantly, he became completely mute, unable to let out even a wordless squeak or gasp.

“It’s so wonderful,” she repeated. Both of her corpse-cold hands now drifted across his face, caressing his skin; even as 9S felt the warmth drain from his cheeks as if she were sucking it out of him through her fingertips, he felt his chest grow warmer, warmer, uncomfortably warm, and the warmth spread down, deeper, deeper…

“It’s okay to be afraid, Nines.”

A new voice. This one came from behind. Until its owner walked in a slow half-circle around him. It was 21O, her eyes just as red as 2B’s, her pale skin just as smeared with blood and oil, her normally-carefully-maintained short blonde hair ragged and disheveled and streaked with red.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” 21O repeated, drawing close to him and resting an icy hand on his stomach
as she slipped back behind him. 9S felt what little remained of his body heat retreat and pool between his legs as though it were trying to flee her touch. “The fear is the first thing to go. And it’s so wonderful. It’s so wonderful.”

21O’s hand clasped the buckle on the strap that ran over his shoulder and across his chest to hold the satchel at his back in place; with a single deft finger, she undid the clasp and let the satchel fall from his back to the ground. 2B went to work on the rows of brass buttons holding the front of his frock coat in place, parting his coat and revealing his soft, vulnerable chest.

Without wasting a second, 21O gently pulled the coat off of him, leaving him unclothed from the waist up. 9S didn’t put up even a token resistance. He couldn’t. All he could do was stand there, shivering from both the chilly wind buffeting his naked skin and the hands of his captors. Without his coat to insulate him from the cold, the two vampires’ touches burned like fire. But he couldn’t scream or cry out. Even that had been taken from him.

“Good boy,” 2B whispered, running a single fingertip under his chin, down his neck and chest, and in a slow circle around his navel. 9S’s legs gave out beneath him, his knees buckling as he felt a wave of warmth rush up through his chest and flood his body. The only thing that held him upright were his captors now.

2B buried her fangs into the right side of his neck; 21O buried her fangs in the left side of his neck. 9S gasped, his eyes widening as he threw back his head and craned his neck skyward, a low moan crawling up from his throat. The vampires lapped at the blood trickling down his neck with equal thirst, pressing themselves against him, wrapping themselves around him, their icy bodies and carrying him away into an unfeeling oblivion.

9S sputtered and panted, his breathing ragged and shallow, every inch of him trembling as the vampires took more and more and more from him. Not just his blood, not just his warmth, but all the fear, all the hatred, all the loathing, all the impotent rage born from rue and fear. They sucked him dry and left him with nothing but bliss, nothing but utter happiness.

They were right.

It was so wonderful.

9S’s eyes flew open. He stared up at the thin canvas roof of the little lean-to he and 2B had been spending the night in. Groggy, he sat up and licked his lips. His mouth was dry and felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton; his head spun and throbbed and pounded. His bedsheets were tangled around his legs. A musky, metallic odor stung his nostrils.

“Hey, 2B,” he croaked, looking over to her cot. “I just had the freakiest drea—”

She was gone. So was Pod 042. The thin sheets covering her bed weren’t even the slightest bit disturbed, as though she’d never gone to bed at all but had simply left the outpost as soon as 9S had entered rest mode.

“Uh… Pod?” He looked around for Pod 153 and found it hovering just over his left shoulder, as always. “I—is 2B okay? Where is she?”

“Response: Unit 2B was contacted by Command for an emergency solo mission,” Pod 153 answered. “She is currently near the Resistance camp within the city ruins.”

9S sighed in relief. “Oh, god. Thanks.” He slipped out of bed, stretching the sleepy aches out of his still-tired limbs and trying to excise the weird feeling of deja-vu that had come over him.
He poked his head out of the lean-to and surveyed the rest of the outpost. Two soldiers stood on watch while another one crouched beside a small bonfire with a glistening haunch of meat held over the flames.

“Hey, guys?” he called out to them. “Seen anything weird lately?”

One of the soldiers yawned. “Uh… yeah. Some scrawny white-haired Scanner kid moaning all through the night like he was—”

“O-Okay, all right! No need to be, uh, like that!” 9S called back, his entire face reddening with embarrassment as he hastily cut the soldier off.

The soldier roasting meat in the fire glanced at 9S. “In all seriousness, there’s been this weird shirtless dude running around the forest these past few days. Caught a glimpse of him through the trees a couple hours ago and he looked so beat up he could barely stand.”

9S stepped out of the tent, perking up at the sound of the gourmet soldier’s report. “Weird shirtless dude? Did he have a black tattoo on his left arm and short silver hair?”

“Yeah. Have you seen him too?”

“Uh… yeah. We’ve run into each other a few times.” 9S stroked his chin thoughtfully. What was Eve still doing around here, and what entity in this area was strong enough to hurt him so badly?

He was still tired, but his curiosity was insatiable and a mystery beckoned, so 9S pressed the soldiers for more info and set off into the woods once he’d had some more leads to go on.

The woods were as dark and as sinister as they’d been in his dream, the towering trees just as gnarled and misshapen, the subtle language of the rustling branches overhead and crinkling leaves underfoot just as inscrutable. 9S wondered, if he encountered a vampire out here, would he be paralyzed the way he’d been in his dream? Or would he have the strength to fight back?

It didn’t take long before he found Eve lying spread-eagle on the ground in a moonlit clearing, facedown, one leg tangled up in a cluster of vines lying across the ground like a natural tripwire. 9S approached him cautiously, keeping his sword gripped tightly in his hand just in case, and knelt at his side.

Faint amber sparks occasionally leaped across the tapestry of bruises and oozing cuts and gashes littering Eve’s bare skin; the machine-man’s body was trying to repair itself, but the damage to his systems seemed to be inhibiting its built-in healing functions.

Shame the machine-man was unconscious. 9S would love to know what had happened to him to put him in this kind of condition.

Wait a minute. He was a Scanner. He could figure that out easily.

He stretched out his arm and laid his hand just barely over the back of Eve’s neck. As humanoid as Eve looked—as humanoid as any android—he was still just a machine, just like the hundreds of machines 9S had hacked in his short few weeks of life. Especially in this condition, where he couldn’t fight back, his mind and his memories were an open book.

Closing his eyes and gathering up his willpower, 9S projected himself into Eve’s systems, his data compressing itself into a virtual cursor in the two-dimensional landscape of his mind. He ambled through the twisting passages of the machine-man’s operating system and file system, blasting his way through what feeble defenses mounted themselves against his intrusions, until he found Eve’s
memory region.

Amber screens projected themselves around 9S’s cursor, all of them showing Eve’s most treasured memories. They all had something to do with his long-haired twin, Adam. Visions of them talking, playing together, reading together, eating together, sleeping together.

The wave of emotions accompanying these images struck 9S so hard it nearly jolted him out of hacking space entirely, all but bowling him over with their intensity. They were… bittersweet. These memories were all ostensibly happy ones, but what 9S felt most of all was a deep and gut-wrenching sadness—sadness, regret, loss, loneliness, self-loathing—that pervaded every single one of them.

9S recognized this melange, this juxtaposition of happy memories drowned in sorrow. It was the same way he felt about 21O.

Something horrible, incredibly horrible, must have happened to Adam to taint all of these memories like this.

Machines didn’t think or feel. They imitated emotions sometimes, but there was no rhyme or reason to their behaviors—they were just snippets of human language the machines picked up and mindlessly repeated as they trawled the broken surface of the Earth. That was what 9S had once believed. That was what every android had once believed. Of course, the existence of machines such as Pascal and his odd villagers had turned that commonsense belief on its head, and now these memories and emotions swirling through Eve’s unconscious mind put the final nail in its coffin.

*Are machines really all that different from us?* 9S wondered. The architecture of Eve’s mind didn’t even seem that dissimilar from that of a typical YoRHa model.

He pushed the thought aside for now. There would be time for musing when he was finished here. Collecting himself, 9S took Eve’s memories and sorted them in descending order by date, rather than by priority. He scrolled across snapshots backward through time until he came across what seemed to be the relevant memories regarding Eve’s current state and dived in.

In an instant, the monochrome plane of hacking space vanished and 9S was seeing the world through Eve’s eyes.

Eve huffed and panted, stumbling deeper into the commercial facility—a ‘shopping mall,’ according to ancient human records—that marked where the city ruins ended and the thick and verdant forest began. In front of him, wreathed in the deep shadows cloaking the ancient structure, were two people. The first was Adam, his long silver hair rendering him instantly recognizable; the second was a man 9S didn’t recognize, one with shoulder-length white hair who wore a long black coat with a furred collar.

9S felt Eve’s feelings in a detached, clinical way—something that registered intellectually rather than psychologically. When Eve saw Adam, he was overcome with joy. But when he saw the other man, he was overcome with hatred. The two conflicting feelings swirled around in his head; agonized, Eve bellowed a name 9S had never heard before.

“Dracula!”

Dracula—the man with the furred collar and shorter white hair—glanced over at Eve, disinterested. There was something, 9S noticed, familiar about his face, though he couldn’t put his finger on it. “Oh. You again.” He spoke with a deep and sonorous voice that carried an intensely bitter and acerbic tone. “What brings you here?”
“Get away from my brother!” Eve shouted out.

“Ah, I see. How’s this?” Dracula asked. In the blink of an eye he was in front of Eve; his hand lashed out and curled around Eve’s throat, squeezing. 9S felt the pain, but at a distance; it was as though his own neck were wrapped in a thick bundle of gauze. “Am I far enough away for you now?”

9S could get a much better look at Dracula’s visage now. The white-haired man’s boyish, soft face belied a cruel, sardonic sneer; the eyes beneath his wild white bangs were the same blood-red color 9S was becoming very familiar with; two long fangs protruded from his mouth. But looking past those details, 9S could see something _else_ about that face. It was—

“Master, please,” Adam called out, dropping onto one knee and bowing his head in a show of fealty. “Do not hurt him. He will not learn any lessons from you, I’m afraid.”

It was Adam’s smooth, sly voice, but he didn’t speak like himself. Even 9S could tell that. The deference in his words made him seem like an entirely different person.

“Very well.” Dracula acquiesced and dropped Eve to the mossy, cracked floor, wiping his hands as though they’d been soiled from touching Eve’s skin as he took a few steps back. “Of course, though, he’ll learn a lesson from _you_, won’t he, Adam?”

Adam nodded. “Please allow me, Lord Dracula, to see to it he will cease his pursuit.”

Dracula stepped back, unfurling his arms and holding them out. “Very well, Adam. Do what you must.”

As Adam stood up and approached Eve, 9S felt a nauseating swirl of conflicting emotions in Eve’s mind. Confusion, betrayal, despair, yet above all—_hope_. The closer Adam came, the more Eve tried desperately to beat back the other emotions with the thought, the _hope_, that Adam would help him up and the two of them would crush Dracula and go back to playing and reading and eating and sleeping together like they once did.

9S did not share Eve’s hope—because he saw the foggy, supernatural glow in Adam’s eyes and the telltale sign of fangs in his mouth and knew that Adam now obeyed his new master without the slightest question or hesitation, just like the other vampires.

The hope Eve felt was snuffed out immediately as Adam drove his boot deep into his ribs with a savage kick. Eve curled up, doubling over, and clutched at his aching side, whimpering as Adam dug his heel into his collarbone and twisted.

“Why are you still following us?” Adam asked, his voice sharp and harsh.

“I… Brother, I want…” Eve reached out to try and grab Adam by the ankle; Adam kicked his hand away and stepped on it, grinding it into the shattered tiles of the ruined floor.

“I made my choice to separate myself from you,” Adam sneered, looking down at Eve with a glower of contempt. “The path of the master is one you are not worthy to follow, Eve. Understand that I left you behind!”

Each word cut through Eve like a knife, hurting worse than any savage kick could, shattering what little flicker of hope still remained in his heart into smaller and smaller pieces until nothing was left.

“But… but Brother…” Eve tried to pull himself to his feet, only for Adam to drive his boot into the
side of his head with a sickening crack; Eve’s vision went gray and distorted from the force of the blow. A few droplets of blood splattered against Adam’s billowing white shirt, staining it with sparse and tiny red blossoms.

“I-I was made to protect you…” Eve tried to stand again and was beaten down again. “Remember? In the desert… where I was born and you were—”

“I no longer need your protection,” said Adam. “I no longer need anything you have to offer. You, a part of myself which I no longer require, are worthless to me. So I’d rather you don’t tag along.”

“No!” Eve cried out, scrabbling onto all fours. “You… You’re my…”

Adam hooked his leg underneath Eve and launched him into the air, the dilapidated architecture of the crumbling mall spinning around him; a swift kick hurled him through the air and into the rusted remains of a moving staircase which crumbled and fell to pieces under the weight of the impact. Eve hit the ground and was half-buried under debris from the staircase, struggling to throw off the weight.

“This,” Adam said, “is the last time my master will allow me to spare you. Go away, Eve. Learn to live alone. Learn to bear the solitude. If you continue to pursue us, you will die.”

“Then I want to die!” Eve cried out, pulling himself free of the rubble and lunging at Adam.

With an exasperated scowl twisting his handsome face, Adam flung out his arm in Eve’s direction; Eve halted in midair, flailing his arms and legs comically in an attempt to regain some forward momentum that was as futile as it was desperate.

Tendrils of black and violet light curled around Adam’s outstretched arms and latched out, impaling Eve several times over; the tendrils curled around him and bound him tightly, raised him up, and then slammed him into the ground again and again and again until everything went black.

9S pulled himself out of hacking space and returned to his body. He’d seen enough.

“Poor guy,” he muttered, withdrawing his hand from Eve’s head. Looks like he’d lost someone he cared about to the vampires, too.

Sympathy for a machine. And not just a machine, but an extremely advanced machine that seemed to embody a large portion of the machine forces’ tactical network. 9S could hardly believe himself. He could probably kill Eve like this and strike a mortal blow against the machines—but instead, here he was feeling sorry for him. What would 2B think if she saw him like this? What would Commander White think? (She’d probably lock him up and put him on cleaning duty for two weeks this time, if he was lucky.)

“So, what do I do with you?” 9S wondered aloud. “Take you to Pascal’s, maybe? At least you’ll be among your own kind there, and I hear he’s added a ton of anti-vampire defenses to the village in the past week…”

“Bro… ther…” Eve stirred, one eye fluttering open and his fingers curling into the slick moss blanketing the ground.

9S stood up and backed away. He was well aware that Eve was a brute and wasn’t very interested in sticking around long enough for the bereaved machine-man to turn all his pent-up frustration on him, no thank you.

“All right, Pod,” he said, turning his back on Eve, “let’s mosey. I—”
He stopped in mid-sentence as a leaden weight settled on his shoulders and in his chest. Twin red lights burned through the shadows of the forest, foggy pinpricks shimmering within the underbrush.

The lights were the eyes of a machine—and the eyes of a vampire.

His breath freezing in his chest, 9S readied his sword. His hands were shaking, but at least he could move. Maybe 2B was right. Maybe whatever mesmerizing force a vampire’s eyes exerted became easier to resist with repeated exposure.

The machine stepped out of the underbrush. It was a tall one, the kind YoRHa records classified as a ‘medium biped.’ Taller than the usual stubby models (a full head taller than 9S himself), with thick arms and legs supporting its barrel-shaped torso. This one was covered in ramshackle plate armor, identifying it as one of the off-network machines belonging to the ‘forest kingdom’ that claimed most of this area; curved horns sprouted from its askew helmet and a long spear with a broad spearhead hung from its hand. The bottom half of the machine’s featureless face had been ripped open, exposing long and dripping fangs.

“A morsel…” it hissed. “Delicious…”

How many more machines like this one lurked in the forest? How many had this machine turned? 9S felt a chill run up his spine, but took a deep breath and kept his composure. This was it. This was the creature he was assigned to destroy. He couldn’t flounder like last time.

“Pod…” 9S’s fingers tightened around the black hilt of his sword as he slipped into a combat stance. The machine drew back its spear and charged at him, its heavy feet thudding on the ground and leaving deep imprints in the slick moss. “Engage anti-vampire ordinance!”

Pod 153’s boxy hull split down the middle and unfolded, revealing its internally-mounted laser cannon; there was a faint flash of light that hit 9S’s skin with a prickling wave of heat as a deceptively-thin lance of light shot out from the pod.

The lance cut through the vampire machine’s shoulder just as it pulled its arm back; at once, the shoulder joint turned white-hot and melted, the arm pulling away and tumbling to the ground as globs of molten metal flew through the air. The machine let out an electronic screech and reeled backward, rivulets of white-hot liquid steel running down its armor and catching the ragged cloth that formed the cloak over its plate mail alight.

Yes! The new pod programs designed specifically to destroy vampires worked like a charm! Now it was just a matter of holding the machine at bay until Pod 153’s cooldown meter ran down…

The machine charged at him, bringing down its thick metal hand to flatten 9S like a bug; 9S raised his sword and parried the blow, sparks flying as the bronze blade slid across the machine’s palm. Forcing the machine backward, 9S pressed onward, slipped under the machine’s swinging arm, and plunged the blade deep into its chassis.

He darted away, calling the sword back to his hand as the machine whirled around to face him. He felt so… light. He felt free. With the new pod program at his disposal, 9S felt so much stronger than this vampire. Stronger than any vampire.

They were enemies that could be killed just like any other, as long as you knew how. There wasn’t anything scary about them. They were just another target.

“Damn you… little scurrying rodent…” The machine grabbed its discarded spear, its exposed
innards jostling with every step, and threw it at 9S. It just barely grazed him, slicing through the side of his coat and leaving a short, shallow cut on his skin just below his ribs.

“Stay… still…” the machine growled, lunging for him again. 9S dodged, but the machine’s hand got a fistful of his collar and pulled him off his feet, throwing him to the ground and pinning him down. “I hate… food that fights back…”

“Not too fond of you myself,” 9S spat. As the machine bared its fangs, he watched the cooldown meter on his HUD as it filled up, alerting him that Pod 153 was ready for another ultraviolet beam. “Pod!” he shouted out. “Anti-vampire ordinance—widen beam aperture to thirty degrees!”

Pod 153 unfolded again. This time, the beam took the form of a faint cone of light that bathed the front of the machine; immediately, its entire front surface glowed white and sloughed off, globs of molten metal pooling around its feet and catching the moss and grass blanketing the ground on fire. Screaming, the machine backed away, writhing in pain as its innards were exposed.

“One more shot ought to do it!” 9S crowed, exhilarated, as he scrambled to his feet. He pumped his fist. “How’s that for a meal?”

Then something careened into him, knocking him off his feet and throwing him across the clearing; he skidded to a halt, digging a furrow through the mossy soil until his shoulder slammed into a thick, rock-hard oaken root half-buried in the ground, sending a jolt through his arm.

The unexpected assailant was a small machine lifeform, nothing but a limbless torso and head mounted on a ring-shaped propulsion device. Its eyes had the burning eldritch light of a vampire’s gaze as well; its face was torn apart to expose its fangs.

9S tried to pull himself up as the vampire flyer turned itself upside-down and swooped down at him with a vicious hiss. The machine had completely blindsided him—vampires, since they were dead, didn’t show up on his HUD’s radar at all. They were impossible to track except visually.

He rolled out of the way of the vampire flyer’s attack, his shoulder throbbing as it pressed against the ground. The joint might have been damaged, which was just his luck.

The flyer swooped down again; Pod 153 activated a bubble shield around 9S that the machine bounced harmlessly off of. It saved 9S’s skin, but reset the pod program cooldown timer—meaning now he had to hold out even longer before he could use the ultraviolet beam again.

9S pulled himself up only for the damaged biped to grab him roughly by the shoulder, its fingers squeezing and digging into the weakened joint. Pod 153 fired its machine guns into the machine’s face, its bullets tearing into the exposed machinery to no avail, the light and sound right by 9S’s head nearly blinding and deafening him. His ears ringing, he tried to pull himself free, ramming his blade into the machine’s exposed neck and twisting, weakening the joint until its head came loose and fell to the ground.

The headless machine stumbled backward, groping blindly as 9S pulled himself free, clutching at his throbbing shoulder and popping the joint back into place. The head rolled across the ground, its eyes flaring, as it made a beeline for 9S’s ankles. Flipping his sword upside-down, 9S plunged it right through the orb-shaped head and into a sturdy tree root, pinning it in place.

There were more lights in the forest. More piercing vampire eyes. Half a dozen lights—three more vampires emerging into the clearing. 9S barely had time to register them before the vampire flyer flew at him again; he grabbed it by the edges of its propulsion device and struggled to hold it at arms’ length, his elbows threatening to buckle under the strain as the vampire gnashed its teeth and
flecked his face with oil.

The headless machine jabbed its thick metal fingers into 9S’s side, breaking his grip on the flyer, which hit him in the face and knocked him to the ground, blood streaming from his nose. The other three vampires were closing in on him; still in a daze from the impact, 9S tried to focus on the cooldown timer as it inched closer to zero.

“I don’t think he has enough blood for all of us,” one of the vampires hissed as it peered down at 9S. “What will we do? I—”

A pair of thick metal hands wrapped around its head, twisted, yanked it free of its chassis, then ripped it in two. The machine’s body slumped over, revealing another machine—one with pale yellow eyes—standing tall behind it, its chassis spattered with oil. Its next target was the flyer; with a bellowing electronic roar, it snatched it out of the air as it swooped down, crushed its propulsion device, and bludgeoned one of the other two vampires with it. With the flyer disabled and battered to the extent that it barely resembled a machine anymore, the heroic machine tossed it aside and laid into the vampire with its bare fists, each punch leaving deeper and deeper dents in the machine’s hull.

Taking advantage of the confusion, 9S pulled himself up and backed away from the one other vampire machine. “Pod, anti-vampire ordinance! Twenty degree aperture!”

Pod 153 dutifully opened up and fired, burning a hole through the vampire machine’s torso. Lacking supports, its upper body crumpled inward and the machine fell to the ground. It twitched and stirred along with the two headless machines and the grounded flyer, all four of them struggling to right themselves—all injured, but all very much still active and still a threat.

As for the one vampire the heroic machine had singled out, the machine ripped its arms off and bludgeoned it with them until its head caved in, then threw the arms aside and kicked it so hard that when it collided against the thick trunk of one of the gargantuan trees lining the clearing, it broke into pieces.

“Uh… thanks,” 9S said to the heroic machine, gingerly rubbing his still-aching shoulder. “Dunno what I’d have done without you.” He’d never thought he’d ever feel so grateful to a machine, but the anti-vampire pod program, it seemed, wasn’t quite so effective against a mob of enemies. His black box fluttered in his chest, running hot as the magnitude of the peril he’d been in began to sink in.

Five vampires. If he hadn’t had a single effective weapon against them, they would have easily drained him dry. It had taken so much just to keep them at bay, hold them at arms’ length, while he’d waited for the ultraviolet beam to become usable again. In those vulnerable periods, he could have died a hundred times.

No, he wouldn’t have died. He’d have gone the way of 86S, twisted and sadistic, with nothing on his mind but to serve the master of all vampires. He’d have ended up the way 21O would have ended up if 2B hadn’t incinerated her body. Like Adam, who no longer seemed to care a whit about his own ‘brother’ (insofar as machines could have brothers). What if 2B found him like that? What would he do to her?

The heroic machine stomped off in a huff, barely paying 9S any attention, and stood over Eve’s body. “Uh—Wait!” 9S shouted out after him. “They’re not dead yet!”

The machine paid him no mind, though, as it picked Eve’s limp body up and slung him over its shoulder, then walked away. 9S was left alone with the remains of five vampire machines strewn
around him, disembodied heads struggling to roll, lopped-off arms and hands crawling through the
grass with their fingers.

Still on high alert, 9S scoured the clearing, making sure to burn away every mangled piece of the
mutilated vampires with his pod. It was slow going; waiting for the cooldown timer to run down to
zero each time he used it, 9S felt shifty and anxious, constantly looking over his shoulder and
maintaining a safe distance from the other still-living remnants. But at last, the job was done and
the last bit of vampire had melted and crumbled into ash.

He collapsed and fell flat on his back, letting out a long, relieved sigh as his combat programming
wound down and the aches in his muscles began to throb. Grass tickled the back of his neck and
ears as he stared up at the moonlit sky.

Five vampires down. That’d look good in the mission report. And he’d done it all by himself, too!

Well, mostly.

“Bet you wish you were here right now,” 9S mumbled, “don’t you, 2B? Missed all the fun…”

Aching and fatigued, he left the clearing and headed back to the Resistance outpost; even the hard
and uncomfortable cot laid out for him felt welcoming to him.

After a long and shockingly-restful sleep, 9S’s eyes cracked open. He stared up at the thin canvas
roof of the little lean-to he and 2B had been spending the night in. Still a little groggy and ach ing
all over, he sat up and licked his parched lips.

“Hey, 2B,” he croaked, looking over to her. “You won’t believe the night I’ve had…”

2B sat up, cradling her head in her hands as her bedsheets sloughed away from her shoulders and
pooled in her lap. There was a lot of dried blood crusted on her skin and hair; her black blouse had
been torn open, revealing bare skin crisscrossed with parallel scratches. 9S gasped at the sight of
her disheveled state.

“That,” she said, “makes two of us.”

Devola could tell when there was something wrong with her sister.

Ten thousand years they’d been at each others’ sides. Ten thousand years they’d had no one to
confide in but each other. For many of those ten thousand years, they’d had no one to trust but each
other. When Project Gestalt had failed, Devola and Popola had lost their world, and ever since then,
their entire world had been each other.

The strange behavior Devola noticed from Popola was something she hadn’t seen in over eight
thousand years. She was scatterbrained, absentminded—much more so than usual. She’d drop
things, forget things. She’d freeze in the middle of a task, as if she were in a trance, her cheeks
lighting up as red as her hair. And when Devola asked her what was wrong, she’d clam up,
sputtering a quiet, flustered, noncommittal non-answer.

At first, Devola worried that Popola was still reeling from the coma she’d languished in for four
days. But that couldn’t explain everything that was wrong with her. Worst of all, sometimes Devola
would wake up in the middle of the night (which was rare for her, but lately, worry had been
keeping her from sleeping) and not feel her sister at her side.

She figured it out soon after Alucard had awakened. That afternoon, the two of them had fitted him
for a prosthetic forearm, struggling to make sure the device’s circuits were properly lined up with his nervous system.

The first test had been an unmitigated failure. Though Devola and Popola both had extensive knowledge in both robotic engineering and medical science, where the two disciplines—the science of androids and the science of humans—intersected was still a blind spot. No one in the Resistance was qualified to perform cybernetic surgery, not even the two of them.

When Alucard had tried to curl his replacement fingers and screamed, both Devola and Popola had leaped into action to remedy the situation. Devola had rushed to send an emergency shutdown command from her terminal to the prosthetic’s software. When the signal had terminated and the screams had died down, she had looked up from the monitor. And there she had seen Popola with one hand on the dhampyr’s cheek and the other running through his long silvery hair, her gentle touch easing his pain.

And at that exact moment, all of a sudden, all of the pieces had fallen into place. And Devola had nearly kicked herself for not seeing it earlier. For not making such obvious connections when she’d seen him give Popola his coat or offer her some other chivalrous token. For not noticing when the two of them had traded coy, awkward, furtive smiles when they thought no one was looking. She should have figured it out long, long before Popola had thrown herself in front of Alucard and nearly sacrificed her life for him.

She was in love. And more than that, Alucard returned at least some of those feelings—or at least acted like it.

Devola had always thought she could tell at first glance when her sister was in love. But it had been a long, long time since the last time. One or two thousand years ago, perhaps. That was the last time she could remember seeing Popola swooning over someone (and, of course, things being as they were, that someone had not returned poor Popola’s affection in the slightest). It had been even longer, long ago when Project Gestalt had still been underway, since someone had actually fallen in love with her. Of course, that hadn’t worked out, either.

That next morning, she thought about the man her sister couldn’t stop fawning over. She thought about the way Popola had leaped to his defense and the price she had paid for it. The price both of them had paid for it. The price all of them had paid for it.

She thought about how hard it had been to see Popola lying inert, despite nothing being physically wrong with her (and Devola had checked and double-checked and triple-checked to make sure). And how much harder it had been to not see her, to tear herself away from that bed to attend to both her daily duties and her sister’s, to be forced to spend even a minute away from her side. Working herself to the bone never felt so intolerable than it did when she’d had to do it alone.

Whenever he could, Alucard tagged along with the twins no matter where they went or what they had to do, eager to lighten their workload. Even down one arm, he still pulled his weight with the same fanatical devotion Devola and her sister put into their daily tasks. As the three of them set out on their daily tasks, Devola looked at Popola as she smiled nervously, coquettishly, at some wry, witty remark Alucard had made. And she asked herself, why him?

Freed from the burden of a cumbersome parcel he’d just handed off to Jackass (nobody knew what was inside any of the packages Jackass received and nobody wanted to ask), Alucard separated himself from the twins and ambled past the camp’s weapons merchant, walking just casually enough that it seemed he’d stumbled across the merchant’s kiosk by accident.

Devola followed him, with Popola trailing close behind. Alucard was plenty well-respected in the
camp after that show he’d put on last week, and that respect seemed to surround and radiate off him like an aura. When Devola stayed by his side with her sister, the two of them didn’t hear any snide comments from other people in the camp or feel any uncomfortable stares fixed on them. When they stood at Alucard’s side, there were times when the two of them could feel like… normal people.

Devola wasn’t sure how she should have felt about it. Relieved. Grateful, perhaps. But she couldn’t put her finger on how she actually felt, either.

“Good morning, sir,” Alucard said to the merchant, leaning on his elbow on the countertop of the little booth. “I’m terribly sorry, but as I’m sure you already know, I need to replace the last sword I bought from you. What do you recommend? I’m looking for something strong, but light. And a one-handed blade would be preferable,” he added, raising his severed arm and letting the half-empty sleeve droop over his elbow to demonstrate his disability.

“Say no more,” the merchant said, raising a hand before darting into the piles of assorted weaponry heaped around him. “Are you looking for a rapier, a saber, a knightly sword, single-edged, double-edged, Damascus steel…?”

“Oh, I’m not picky. As long as it puts up more of a fight than the last one.” Alucard chuckled, but his light laughter died as he fished around in the pockets of his coat. “Oh. Oh, dear. My good sir, I’m not sure if I can afford…”

Popola immediately started taking stock of her own finances; with a heavy and resigned sigh, Devola did the same. Alucard couldn’t just not have a sword, after all. Given her and Popola’s extraordinarily bad luck, though, she wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if his spending spree left them all financially destitute. It was a miracle they were even paid pittances for the work they did, after all.

“Don’t mention it!” the merchant said, not even looking up as he continued to rifle through his wares. “For you, sir, I’d be more than happy to offer a discount! And a hefty one, too!”

“Such generosity,” Devola muttered, crossing her arms. So what was the catch going to be? Another sojourn into the machine-infested sinkhole for ‘combat data,’ maybe?

“There’s just one thing you’ve gotta do for me in exchange.” The merchant handed a shining saber with an intricately-forged handguard of woven silver to Alucard. “How’s this?”

“Hmm. Not sure about this one.” Alucard scratched his chin. “It lacks a certain… joie de vivre.”

“Not sure about a ‘zschwa duh veev,’ whatever that is,” the merchant said. “But it’s sturdy and purdy. Give it a test drive.”

With an intrigued, curious look on his face, Alucard took the sword, peered closely at its long, thin blade, and gave it a few experimental jabs. His opinion of the sword quickly changed; a smile lit up his face.

“She’s a beaut, ain’t she? Five hundred G for that work of beauty.”

“It would be a steal at five thousand,” Alucard said. There was a twinkle in his eyes. “So… what is the catch, then?”

“I was wondering,” the merchant said, clearing his throat as Alucard parried imaginary foes with his usual supernatural grace, “if you could… tell me what it’s like where you’re, ahem, from.”
“Pardon.”

“You know…” The merchant pointed up at the pitch-black morning sky. “Up there.”

Alucard wrinkled his brow.

“The colony.”

Alucard blinked. “Ah, yes! The colony! Where I’m from. Exactly.”

Up until he’d gotten his arm torn off, Alucard had just been an odd android from some faraway Resistance cell as far as the rest of the people in this camp had been concerned. But quite a few people had seen that there wasn’t any machinery under his skin, and while no one really said that Alucard was human (as far as they knew), everyone spoke around it, greeting him with winks and nods, knowing smiles, and (in some cases) barely-restrained awe.

“The colony is actually quite nice,” Alucard explained to the merchant, who listened with rapt attention. “Sterile, though. Terribly sterile. No scenery to enjoy. But we’re all hale and hearty, and we keep ourselves occupied. Tuesdays are movie nights. The night before I left for the surface, we watched… er… *2001: A Space Odyssey.*”

“Ooh. What’s that about?”

“…I don’t know. I fell asleep.”

“So…” The merchant rested his elbows on the counter. “Are they, I mean, are you all… proud of us?”

“Oh, yes, inestimably. I can’t describe how proud they are of all of the hard work all of you are doing.” Alucard gave the merchant a warm smile. “When they—we return to the Earth, you’ll all be treated like heroes.”

“Heroes, huh?” the merchant said, letting out a wistful, almost forlorn-sounding sigh.

“So, how much do I owe you for this fine piece of craftsmanship?” Alucard asked, sheathing the silvery saber at his side.

“That?” The merchant waved him away. “That one’s on the house.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But take care of that one. The next one’ll cost you.”

“Thank you, sir. I will treat this sword as I would a precious heirloom.”

“You buttered him up so he’d give you that for free, didn’t you?” Devola asked Alucard as the three of them drew out of earshot of the weapons merchant.

“Oh, heavens, no,” Alucard replied. “I merely told him the truth… from a certain point of view.”

“Whose point of view?” Popola asked.

Alucard grinned. “His, of course.”

Something about that warm smile Alucard had given the merchant, as well as his response just now, worried Devola. It was a fake smile—of course it was a fake smile—but it looked real. As
real as the smiles he shared with everyone else. As real as the smiles he shared with Popola.

Devola knew what a practiced liar looked like. After all, she and her sister hadn’t exactly been able to tell the replicants they’d supervised back in the day that they were androids (although those were more lies of omission than anything else). Nevertheless, it worried her that her sister was falling for that kind of person.

She and her sister needed to talk.

“Let’s get back on track, you two,” Devola said, mentally consulting today’s list of tasks. “The pipeline running through the desert needs some sludge cleared from its filter. Sounds high-priority to me.”

“Delightful,” Alucard muttered.

“Yeah, you might wanna put on some clothes you don’t mind ruining.”

“While we’re there, we could pick up some desert roses,” Popola pointed out, perking up.

“You know how hard those things are to find,” Devola sighed, not relishing the prospects of rifling through the desert in the pitch-darkness of the afternoon for any longer than necessary.

“C’mon. It’ll help you relax!” Popola tugged on her arm. “You know you need it!”

“Are desert roses your favorite flower?” Alucard asked. “I’m sure we could pick up a few. It won’t be any trouble.”

Devola let out an embarrassed groan.

“Well, sort of,” Popola explained, much to Devola’s mounting displeasure. “You see, I distill the roses in a liqueur. Dev loves it! You know, she gets really huggy when she’s—”

“I mean, love is kind of a strong word,” Devola protested, growing more flustered by the second, “and besides, we’ve got too much to do to mess around with booze…”

“Loosen up a bit. After this week, you’ve earned it!” Popola replied. “It’s no skin off our noses, right, Alucard?”

“Look, forget about it. How about we go to the—”

Alucard, unfortunately, had perked up at the word liqueur and was now instantly enamored with the idea. “Excellent idea! I haven’t had a good drink in ten thousand years…”

“—forest and collect… tree sap… instead…” Devola sighed and hung her head. “Fine. Let’s head out to the desert.”

Alucard patted her on the back. “Your sister is right. You’ve earned a fine reward for everything the two of us have put you through. Especially me,” he added, flashing a self-effacing grin.

Devola crossed her arms. “All right.”

“Desert it is!” Alucard strode off to the tent to change his clothes. “I won’t be long.”

Popola took off her shawl and stuffed it into her knapsack. “Ready to get messy, Dev?” she asked, clearly mustering as much forced enthusiasm for the job ahead as she could.
“Actually, sis, before we head out… Can I talk to you? In private?”

“Sure,” Popola said, furrowing her brow slightly with concern. “How private?”

“Very.”

“All right.” Popola followed her sister to one of the crumbling buildings lying on the outskirts of the camp. “What’s wrong? You’ve been acting weird since yesterday. I mean…” She laughed nervously. “You’ve never met a pint of my desert rose liqueur you haven’t liked.”

Devola stepped over the threshold, led Popola inside, and closed the door behind her, pulling an electric lamp from her knapsack to light the room and setting it on the floor.

“Um… I didn’t embarrass you back there, did I?” Popola asked. “I… guess I kinda did. Sorry. I’m not sure what came over me, I didn’t mean to overshare…”

“You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

Even though Devola’s line of questioning was already bringing a tinge of scarlet visible even in the dim lamplight to her cheeks, Popola played dumb. “Who?”

“Alucard.”

“What? Me? No!” Popola insisted, tripping over her words. “I mean… can any of us really fall for a human?”

“Look, how you feel is up to you.” Devola laid a hand on her shoulder. “But I’m… concerned.”

Popola looked away. “Honestly, I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“Cut the shit, Popola. I’ve seen you two. You can’t keep your hands off him.”

Popola recoiled from those harsh words, her mouth agape, her eyes flitting back and forth. “There’s… nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“I… I mean,” Devola stammered, trying to express the right words to express her concern.

“Do you have something against him?”

“It’s nothing like that.” Devola glanced down at the floor. “Okay, it’s kinda like that. He said he’d be there for us if things went bad, and…” She sighed. “He wasn’t.”

“That wasn’t something he had control over. And we had no clue where he was.”

“I know. I know it’s not rational. I’m trying not to hold it against him,” Devola said with a resigned sigh. “But there’s that,” she added, “and on top of that, well, it’s like… Popola. Sis. Think about it. We were built and programmed to serve humans. You can love him all you want, but… I’m afraid it’ll be an unequal partnership. You’d be at his beck and call. I don’t… I don’t feel good about that.”

“That’s… I mean…” Popola fidgeted nervously, twisting a lock of her hair around her fingers. “Alucard isn’t the kind of person who’d take advantage of that.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know him.” Devola held out her arms. “Neither of us do. No one does. All we really know about him is from the personnel files we read ten thousand years ago. Sure, he’s a good guy, he’s nice, he’s a gentleman… but he always shows up, does his thing, and
leaves as suddenly as he came. He doesn’t stick around when he’s done with his job. He’s not a… you know. People person. And not just that. You saw back there, he knows how to use people…”

“I know, but…” Popola anxiously scratched at the side of her neck, her teeth tugging at her bottom lip. “I, uh… I think we really do understand each other. The three of us, we’re all—”

“I don’t want you falling in love with someone who’s going to use you up and throw you away when he’s done with you,” Devola blurted out, cutting Popola off and silencing her under a torrent of words that poured from her mouth like a long stream of vomit. “When Dracula’s been dealt with and Alucard’s gone, whether he’s asleep or dead or he’s fucked off to Antarctica or something,” she said, trembling from the sudden flare-up of wrath within her, “he’ll break your heart. Or worse. What would I do if you died for him?”

“I—I wouldn’t, uh—I wouldn’t let that happen,” Popola insisted, taking Devola’s hands and kneading them with her own.

Devola ripped her hands away. “You came awfully close!”

Her words echoed through the empty room, bouncing off the walls and returning to her; Popola opened her mouth to issue a response, but no sound came out. It was as though her outburst had cast a spell of silence on the room and everyone in it.

“I…” Popola looked away, cringing.

“You almost died. For four days I was afraid that you had! I didn’t want to leave you, I didn’t want to lose you, and every second I had to spend away from you, it felt like—like my heart was splitting in two! You stupid, careless—”

She wasn’t aware of when in her tirade she’d started crying, but now the tears were streaming down her cheeks, dripping and rolling off her chin. She couldn’t stop them. Before she knew it, she could hardly see; her sister had become nothing but a shimmering reddish blur in front of her.

“I can’t believe what you did. What you did to yourself, what you did to me! You’ve always been there for me—through the night, through the day, when we slept, when we worked. You carried me when I couldn’t walk, you dried my tears, you made me laugh. They made us twins because our burdens were too great for one person to shoulder all on their own, and you—and you were just going to leave me? To face all that alone?”

“Dev…”

“And I’m supposed to look after you, too, so if I lost you… if I lost you…” She fell to her knees. “You’re everything to me, Popola,” she sobbed, “you’re everything in the world that matters, you’re my world, and I don’t want anyone to steal you away from me, I don’t want anyone to keep you from lying next to me at night, especially if they’re dangerous, especially if they get you killed and I have to be alone forever…”

“Dev…” Popola knelt beside her; Devola felt one of her hands fall on her back and the other gently curl around her neck as her soft, kind voice cut through the sound of her own barely-coherent blubbering and rang in her ears. “Oh, Dev. I’m so, so sorry, Devola…”

Stifling the last of her tears, Devola laid her head on her sister’s shoulder, her ear picking up the soft and resonant hum that served as her pulse. “Sis…” she croaked, clasping Popola’s hand and threading their fingers together, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at you…”

“There, there.” Popola held her tighter and gently rocked her in her arms, nestling her cheek in the
crook of her neck. “It’s my fault. I didn’t realize you worried so much about me.” With a kind, gentle touch, she ran her fingers down Devola’s back in an infinitely-practiced gesture, one she’d done countless times over the past ten thousand years. “I worry about you, too. I know that if I lost you, I’d go ballistic. Like the time that man broke your leg, or the time our clothes got stolen, but worse. So much worse. I... I think about how angry I get about people who hurt you and, honestly, it scares me. And I guess... if you met someone, and I wasn’t sure if they were good for you, I’d be just as afraid as you are...”

Devola let out a weak chuckle. “I think I’m just being jealous, really. For once, there’s someone in this world you like who likes you back, and for once, I can’t have you all to myself. And you—you’re my heart, Popola, so if someone stole your heart, then...”

“Aw, it’s okay. I understand. I... I got so carried away, I forgot how much you needed me. How much I needed you.” Popola said, holding her closer, tugging on her sleeve with her thumb and bringing it up to wipe the remaining tears from Devola’s eyes. “Alucard’s not stealing anything from you, all right? He’s one of us, and the three of us—the three of us—are going to stick together.”

“You think so?”

“I think so.” Popola kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, Dev, and I won’t do anything that would leave you alone. I’ll take better care of myself from here on out, okay?”

“You’d better.” Sniffling, Devola returned the kiss. “I love you, too.”

The two of them knelt in the dusty old room and embraced, silently clinging to each other.

After a long time, Devola spoke. “We should, uh... get going soon, shouldn’t we?”

“Yeah, probably. Just get it over with.”

“Sooner we get started... sooner we can take a shower.”

Alucard folded his clothes as neatly as he could considering his handicap and packed them away, sighing and shaking his head as he looked down at the set of fatigues he’d laid out. It was, to put things lightly, not his style in the slightest, but he’d have to grin and bear it. Cleaning sludge out of an oil pipeline was hardly the kind of work he wanted to busy himself with, but it was the least he could do to help the twins. On top of that, he hadn’t spent much time scoping out the desert yet. Who knew if Dracula had set up his lair somewhere within those shifting sands?

Lacing his boots ended up being harder to do with one hand than he’d expected, so Alucard left them untied for the time being. Missing a hand was a greater inconvenience than he’d expected at first. But until Devola and Popola developed a prosthetic that didn’t set his brain on fire, he would have no choice but to deal with it.

Not quite feeling up to the work he’d taken on, Alucard left the tent with a nebulous sense of unease about the rest of the day. He scanned the camp for Devola and Popola, but could see neither hide nor hair of either of them. He frowned. Maybe they’d left without him. Had he offended one or both of them? Devola hadn’t seemed to be in a good mood this morning...

“Alucard!”

Alucard turned his head to find Anemone, haggard and unkempt and hastily struggling to tidy up her outfit in mid-walk, heading toward him. “About last night,” she said, sounding more than a
little tense. “A2 and I are in a lot of trouble and—your shoes are untied.”

“I know.”

“Okay. Anyway, considering you’re the one who sent 2B away last night, you’re as much a part of this as A2 and I. We need you to speak with the Commander.”

“When?”

“Around now.”

Alucard cast another glance around the camp for any sign of Devola and Popola, found none, and decided that the two of them must have gone off without him. He had nothing better to do than help Anemone and A2, and besides, he had inserted himself into the drama unfolding between them and the Resistance’s chain of command, so he owed them this much at least.

It would be easy, he assured himself. That android from last night—2B, as Anemone had called her—had fallen in line shockingly quickly once Alucard had introduced himself as a human. Surely her commanding officer would fall in line as well, although they might need a little more cajoling.

He followed Anemone past her tent and into the camp’s fenced-off storage facilities, into a tucked-away office set up in one of the towering buildings enclosing the area. One wall of the room was filled by a floor-to-ceiling monitor currently tuned to a blank channel; the screen was black with an ornate logo and the phrase ‘YoRHa: For the Glory of Mankind’ emblazoned across it.

A2 was already there, her arms crossed over her chest and a persistent scowl on her face as she sat on the scratched, stained, and scuffed wooden table in the center of the room. She still had Alucard’s cloak draped over her shoulders. Seeing it in its sorry state nearly brought him to tears. Perhaps he’d find a tailor someday… and manage to convince A2 to part with it long enough to sew it back together. She seemed to have grown quite attached to it.

Jackass, the camp’s science officer, was also present, standing proudly beside a gurney with a roughly human-sized figure hidden by a white sheet (not the one Alucard had delivered to her earlier that morning) atop it and a tray stacked with tools. She’d subbed out her usual filthy gray cloak for a slightly-less-filthy red cloak.

“Has the Commander tried to contact us yet?” Anemone asked as she led Alucard into the room and took a seat.

“Not yet,” A2 growled, tapping her skinless black fingers restlessly on the table. Alucard tried once more to detect the spirit haunting her; however, as soon as the faint fog hovering at her side began to take shape under his scrutiny, it vanished. The spirit, it seemed, was exceptionally shy.

“Don’t worry, Anemone,” Jackass said, holding up her hands. “White and I go waaay back. I’m sure I can smooth this all out.”

Anemone smiled mirthlessly. “Thank you, Jackass. But by dint of his, er, species, I think Alucard is the best person to vouch for us.”

“Maybe you should’ve dressed for the occasion,” A2 muttered, eyeing Alucard’s clothes.

“Maybe you should have dressed,” he shot back.

Jackass chortled. “A2, if you wanna look your best….” She grabbed a fistful of the sheet draped over the humanoid lump occupying the gurney and pulled it aside, revealing the naked, pristine
body of a young white-haired woman. It was then that Alucard realized that the assassin from last night was just about an exact replica of A2, right down to the slightest details of her face.

A2 barely even looked at the body of her doppelganger Jackass had prepared for her. “Fuck off.”

“It’ll only take a minute,” Jackass said. “What are the odds White’s gonna call us within the next minute?”

“Jackass, put that thing away,” Anemone admonished. “Can you imagine the trouble you’ll be in if the Commander sees that?”

“I think she’ll be impressed.”

“Impressed?”

Jackass grinned. “This was a stroke of utter genius, Anemone! Spoofing a transmission signal to the access terminal to make it produce a Number Two Type-B chassis without transferring any data from the Bunker’s servers took me all night to get right, yet it was so elegant in its simplicity!”

“Er, Jackass, was it? If you are going to insist on acting like your namesake,” Alucard told her, sharing Anemone’s concern, “perhaps you should step out for this call.”

Jackass rolled her eye. “Oh, please. Listen. White and I used to date, okay? I know how her mind works. Let me do all the talking and—”

The screen flickered once and displayed a pristine, sterile room that was, to put things mildly, much more well-kept than this one. Behind a desk in the center of the room sat a woman clad in a flowing, form-fitting white dress, golden ornaments adorning her long ash-blonde hair. Her face was frozen in a stern scowl, her emerald eyes cold and radiant. From her posture and expression alone, this woman, commander of the YoRHa forces, was the first person Alucard had met here who seemed to truly act the part of an android, cold and implacable and unmovable by anything except pure reason.

“Jackass.”

A fake grin plastered on her face, Jackass slowly turned to face the Commander. “Uh… hey there, Whitey…”

“Commander White.”

“Commander Whitey. Hi. Long time no see.”

Unamused, White crossed her arms. “It has been a long—what is that?”

Jackass sidled in front of the gurney in a futile attempt to block it from sight. “What’s what?”

Anemone shook her head and plastered her hand to her forehead.

“Why is 2B on a table… naked… at this meeting?” White asked.

“Oh, this? That’s not 2B,” Jackass said. “That’s just a spare body.”

White pursed her lips. “For A2, I take it,” she said, her voice dripping with contempt.

“Just listen to how I got my hands on this body. It’ll knock your socks off!”
Anemone glanced at Alucard and frantically slid her finger across her throat.

“You see, White,” Jackass said, beaming with pride, “I rerouted the access terminal to a private server and used it to spoof a—”

Alucard dragged her by the scruff of her neck to the door, tried to open the door, then remembered that he couldn’t open it and hold onto Jackass at the same time; all the while, she struggled to pull herself away and explain herself to an increasingly exasperated-looking White.

“You, whatever your name is,” White called out to Alucard, “let her go.”

Not wanting to make the situation worse, Alucard obliged and let Jackass tear herself free.

“And that was the easy part,” Jackass said, babbling excitedly. “Next, I—”

“Jackass.”

“…Yeah?”

White closed her eyes, took a deep breath, exhaled through her nose, and stood up. Either the screen magnified the image of her office and its occupants or she was two and a half meters tall.

“Jackass…”

“You’re impressed, aren’t you?” Jackass crossed her arms. “I know. I am, too.”

“You…” White pinched the bridge of her nose. “You astound me, Jackass. I never would have taken command of YoRHa, she sighed, “if I’d known that this was how you would behave without me. You are hapless to a degree I could not bear imagining and your bad judgment is almost mythological in its scope. Legends could be passed down for thousands of years and songs could be sung about how you always manage to choose the worst option possible out of any two choices presented to you. In fact, if neither choice available is sufficiently bad, you invariably discover a third option to hasten your meteoric descent. You are, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the absolute dumbest smart person I have ever had the utter misfortune of knowing. This camp, as well as the entire Earth and all the solar system, and perhaps the galaxy itself, is worse off in every single way for having you in it.”

Jackass looked over her shoulder at Anemone, whose mouth was agape with shock and horror, and Alucard. Slyly, she held her hand up to her mouth.

“That’s just how she does pillow talk,” she whispered to the two of them.

“You are dismissed, Jackass,” White said. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Forlorn, Jackass covered the body with its sheet and wheeled it out of the office.

“Where’s Alucard?” Popola asked, scanning the bustling camp. There weren’t many men here who were six feet tall and had waist-length platinum blond hair, so Alucard should have been easy to spot no matter what. There was no sign of him at all, though. “You don’t think he left without us, did he?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure he’s really champing at the bit to spend the afternoon waist deep in sludge.” Devola crossed her arms. “Let’s just go. I’m sure he just ran into something else he had to take care of.”

“Right.” Popola retrieved some light weaponry from the tent (encountering hostile machines out
there was always far more than a possibility) and flashlights, then set out across the city ruins toward the desert.

Devola lagged behind her all the way, struggling to keep up. Popola hadn’t realized just how 

exhausted she was these past few days. Both of them had worked themselves down to the metal, 

and while Popola had energy to spare (just barely), Devola was running on fumes.

Concerned, Popola made sure to walk slower so the two of them were side by side. The beam of 

Devola’s flashlight cutting through the darkness bobbed as she stumbled; she used her old, battered 

sword as a makeshift cane, propping it against the ground.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Popola asked, grabbing Devola’s shoulders to steady her as she 

lost her balance in spite of her improvised walking stick.

“I’m fine,” Devola said. “I’ll get my second wind when we get to the desert.” At that exact 

moment, as though her body sought to spite her words, she yawned and clapped her hand over her 

mouth to stifle it, letting her sword fall to the ground.

“You’ll lose your footing on the sand. It gets slippery over there, you know.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll manage.”

“We can go back to the camp. We don’t need to clean out the pipeline today.” Nobody forced 

Popola and her sister to take the hardest, dirtiest jobs, after all—they simply volunteered for them, 

as the constant toil was the only way either of them knew how to atone for their failures. The 

reason Alucard usually joined them, more than that he was probably wanting for companionship, 

might have been that he didn’t know how else to atone, either.

“Nah. I’m good. Besides…” Devola patted her on the shoulder, smiling wearily. “You promised 

me booze.”

Popola laughed. “That I did.” She picked up Devola’s sword and handed it back to her. “But if you 

fall again, or if we run into any machines or monsters who have it out for us, we’re turning right 

around, okay?”

“Fair enough.”

Alucard wasn’t the only person to breathe a sigh of relief when Jackass exited the room, but he was 

the only one who made any attempt to hide it.

“I am so, so sorry about that, Commander,” Anemone said, shaking her head half in disbelief, half 

in dismay in the aftermath of Jackass’ painful rapport with Commander White.

“Hm. I’m sure you are.” White surveyed the room. “Number Two!”

A2 nearly leaped out of what little skin she had left and hastily reoriented herself to face the screen. 

“Hi, White.”

“Commander White.”

A2 said nothing.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” White asked, her scowl deepening the wrinkles cutting 

through her eternally-youthful face.
In an incredible show of restraint, A2 kept her mouth shut, slowly extended her right fist toward White’s projection on the screen, and with quiet dignity raised her middle finger.

This was going nowhere (which, granted, was a massive improvement from wherever Jackass had been taking it), so Alucard stepped forward. “Commander White,” he said, bowing politely before her. “These two would prefer I speak for them. Consider me their defense attorney.”

With an intrigued raise of her eyebrow, White turned her attention toward him. “Right,” she skeptically drawled, sizing him up and seemingly finding him lacking. “And you are?”

Alucard spread out his arms. “Human.”

The corner of White’s mouth twitched ever so slightly into something that almost might have been a smile. “Human,” she repeated, skepticism dripping from her lips.

Alucard nodded. “My name is Alucard. I came down here from the colony to do my part for the war—”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon…”

White shook her head. “No, you didn’t. And you are most certainly not human. It’s simply impossible, so please, don’t attempt to mount such a feeble charade against me.” She turned to face Anemone. “Is this the best you can do to justify your egregious defiance, Anemone? An ex-girlfriend and an obvious fraud? I was disappointed in Jackass, but to be frank, I didn’t expect much from her in the first place. You, though, Anemone, have a reputation, and a favorable one at that. So please, explain to me before I lose my temper and order an entire Type-E squadron to wipe your camp off the map, why you saw fit to harbor a dangerous and wanted fugitive in your camp and violently threaten one of my soldiers who had orders to exterminate her.”

Anemone clenched her fists. “Because A2 is my f—”

“Because,” A2 shouted out, sliding off the table and rushing over to grab Anemone in a chokehold from behind, ‘I’m a ‘dangerous and wanted fugitive,’ and I threatened to snap her scrawny neck and kill everybody in this goddamn camp if she didn’t grant me asylum!”

“A2, what are you doing?” Alucard and White both shouted out, nearly in unison.

“A2, please,” Anemone gurgled as A2 pressed her forearm against her throat, “you’re going to—”

A2 grabbed Anemone by the hair. “Not another word out of you! White, rescind the orders for my execution, or else!”

“Oh, for god’s sake!” Alucard shouted out. It was hard to believe someone with such a pathetic sense of self-preservation had lasted as long as A2 supposedly had; she seemed to be constantly trying to get herself killed. “A2, let go of Anemone’s hair and stop talking before you embarrass yourself further. As for you, Commander White…” He drew his saber, laid it against his severed arm, gritted his teeth, and sliced off another inch or so.

To say that piqued White’s interest was putting it lightly. It piqued everyone else’s interest, too, to say the least.

Choking down a muffled scream, Alucard let his sword clatter to the floor as he mopped up some of the blood spurting from his arm with his sleeve. “Commander White,” he grunted, stumbling
past the table and holding the stump of his arm up to her. On the other side of the screen, White stepped around her desk and drew closer to get a better look, part curious, part perplexed, and part aghast. “Tell me, what do you see? Any metal, any circuits? Or do you see flesh, real flesh, and bone, real bone, and blood, real blood?”

White, taken aback, gasped, her already-pale face turning even more ashen. She looked as though she’d seen a ghost.

“I hope this demonstration,” Alucard said, “has proved sufficient.”

White glanced away, cleared her throat, and regained her composure. Though the screen made her look like a giantess towering over Alucard and company, she suddenly seemed much smaller. “You’ve... made your point, sir.”

“Good.” Alucard glanced over at Anemone, who stared at him in shock. “Let’s try to get things back on track now, shall we? Anemone. Why, in your professional opinion, is A2 unworthy of execution?”

Anemone cleared her throat and put up her hood. “Well,” she said, her voice a little raspy from A2’s chokehold, “for starters, she’s saved my life at least twice in the past week, if you’d like evidence that she’s a good person.”

White crossed her arms.

“And she is a good person. She always has been. From the beginning, she’s always been a kind, caring, tender person who has always wanted to do right by her friends, no matter what,” Anemone said, “and even though she’s a little rougher around the edges and she’s missing most of her original skin, she’s still the same person she was before. The same good person. And she deserves to live. Whatever she’s done to warrant her execution, she’s more than made up for it.”

“Well put,” Alucard said. “A2, do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“Um…” Meekly, A2 bowed her head, curling a strand of her long white hair around her black fingers, seemingly humbled by Anemone’s heartfelt defense. “Uh... what she said. I-I guess.” Her voice grew quieter with every word.

“So, Commander White, now explain to us why you ordered that A2 be executed,” Alucard said, looking White straight in the eyes.

White folded her hands behind her back, staring ahead coldly, her face returning to an impassive mask of judgment. “I respect that you have vouched for her like this, Anemone. However, whether or not she is a good person is irrelevant. I put out the order for A2’s execution because,” she said, “she was not meant to survive in the first place.”

Anemone gasped; A2 looked shaken. Alucard, too, was taken aback by the brutal coldness of White’s brusque response.

“White,” Alucard said, “would you care to, er, elaborate on that...?”

“‘Not meant to survive?’” A2 snarled, clenching her fists. She gritted her teeth and scowled at White; were she still a wolf, her hackles would be rising and fangs would be bared. “Then all of us... Number Twenty-One, Number Sixteen, Number Four... Number Four...” She was trembling with rage. “We all struggled to survive, we all mourned the dead and feared for our lives as we were picked off one by one, but... we were supposed to die all along!!”
“Yes,” White responded. “The prototype Type-A squadron was not meant to succeed in its mission; that it did was a happy accident. The true aim of the Pearl Harbor Descent Operation was to gather combat data and utilize it for the main production line of YoRHa soldiers.”

To Alucard, that was perhaps the most damning answer White could have given. In a more civilized age, someone like her would be called in front of a tribunal at the Hague.

“God damn you!” A2 howled, lunging at the screen as though White were right in front of her. “I’ll kill you!”

Before A2 could plunge her fist into the screen and cut her own trial short at the worst possible moment, Alucard and Anemone both rushed to restrain her, pinning her arms behind her back and pinning her to the table.

“I knew it,” A2 spat. “I knew you’d betrayed all of us. I knew we were nothing but dolls to you, toys you could play with and throw away when you were done. I knew that while we all died, while we all tearfully sacrificed ourselves, tearfully sacrificed ourselves because we all thought we were throwing away a chance to come back, you, you, you were up there in your cozy little office making sure we all died anyway while we bled, while we died, while we did what you bastards were always too cowardly to do!”

White opened her mouth to explain herself, but A2 just kept shouting and drowned out her voice.

“Number Four killed herself so I could live! And you’re saying that sacrifice was meant to be pointless?!?” A2 screamed. “You’re a monster, White! The worst of the worst! You’re a demon and a devil and a witch! You’re worse than any machine—you, YoRHa, and the whole goddamn Council of Humanity! At least machines don’t kill their own kind!”

“Are you finished?” White asked.

“I’m only getting started,” A2 said with a savage and feral snarl. “I won’t be finished until you’re —”

Anemone clamped her hand over her mouth, stifling A2’s next proclamation. It was easy to tell what she was going to say next, after all.

“A2, as your defense consul, I implore you to choose your words carefully,” Alucard said as A2 gnawed on Anemone’s fingers. “White, were you about to say something?”

“Yes.” White took a deep breath. “I was about to justify my decision to have A2 executed in light of her unexpected survival. The logic behind my decision was perfectly sound.”

A2 hurled a muffled epithet at White.

“The existence of her squadron was highly-classified,” White explained. “Allowing A2 to roam wherever she pleases on the surface, therefore, constitutes a dangerous security breach. In addition, if she were to be captured and compromised by the enemy, the consequences could be beyond our wildest imaginings. This is true of all YoRHa units. A captured unit is expected to destroy itself should it fall into enemy hands, and if it does not, a Type-E disposal team is dispatched to eliminate it before the enemy can reverse-engineer our technology and distribute it among its forces.”

“So you’re saying that A2’s crime is that she hasn’t killed herself yet?” Anemone asked, horrified.

“In a manner of speaking,” White replied. “So, you see, it doesn’t matter that she is a good, kind, or caring person. Next to the threat her continued existence poses to the war effort, the content of her
character has no bearing on my orders.”

“Couldn’t there be a solution to that issue,” Alucard asked, “that doesn’t involve killing?”

“I’ll look after A2,” Anemone said, still struggling to keep A2 pinned down and silent, “if that’s what it takes, Commander. I’ll make sure she’s kept out of danger and doesn’t leak anything confidential.”

“I won’t rescind the order.” White crossed her arms. “These are hard times. Hard times make for hard decisions and harder men and women must make those decisions without flinching or thinking twice. Call me a monster or a witch, but I stand by every action I’ve ever taken with no apologies and no excuses.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Alucard couldn’t conceal the disdain he felt for White based on her answer. “If you start regretting one decision, who knows where else your pesky little conscience might rear its ugly head?”

He knew White’s type far to well. The ones who, when the choice they made took them far enough, would never admit they had made the wrong decision. The ones who poured their entire lives, come hell or high water, into their own sunk costs. The ones who never strayed from the paths of their own making because they were afraid to consider where other paths might have led, afraid to give up all they had gained, afraid of what it might have meant to make amends.

Perhaps White had no regrets. Or perhaps she lived a life that was overflowing with regrets, but had papered over the rot in her soul by resigning herself to the thought that in all things she had made the best of all possible choices.

“At any rate,” Alucard said, “I believe I know an impasse where I see it. I won’t bother trying to change your mind; it seems rather inflexible. But I, exercising my authority as a human, have taken A2 into my custody and will see to it she is not harmed. You’re welcome to continue sending assassins after her…” He held out his arms. “But each one of them will find me standing in front of them. And I do not think you have any soldiers under your command who would be willing to harm one of their own creators.”

White’s brow furrowed as she considered Alucard’s ultimatum. For a long time, she was silent.

Don’t make this any harder on me, Alucard pleaded inwardly, clutching at what remained of his arm as the fresh wound throbbed.

“I won’t rescind my order,” she eventually said, “but I will issue a temporary hold on its enforcement.”

“And how long is ‘temporary?’” Alucard asked.

“Meet with me in person,” White told him, “at the Bunker, and I will give you my answer, Alucard. I’ll arrange a flight for you as soon as possible. That’s all I have to say for now.”

The screen turned black.

With a relieved sigh, Anemone loosened her grip on A2, who immediately wriggled free and lunged at the screen, burying her fist in it and creating a spiderweb of white cracks reaching from floor to ceiling. As the screen flickered and fizzled, sparks flying through the cracks, A2 pulled her fist free and kicked at it again and again and again until the whole wall-sized pane of glass crumbled to the floor. She then spat on the pile for good measure.
“We, uh…” Anemone cradled her head in her hands. “We use that for other things than contacting Commander White, A2.”

“Not anymore.” A2 cracked her neck. “Damn, that felt good.”

Alucard’s head ached. A2 was the only werewolf he had ever met who was more respectful of people’s property as a wolf.

Devola and Popola kept going until the city ruins gave way to the desert, concrete megaliths sinking into the windsweped sand. The desert was vast, the pitch-black sky bathing it in darkness (it was always funny, and a bit disconcerting, Popola noted, that during the six months of darkness that enveloped this half of the Earth, the days were darker than the nights—at least in the nighttime, there was the moon). It was only a week and a half since sundown and the sand, normally scalding after the sun had beat down on it for six straight months, was already cold. The sun made the desert an eternal summer—but its absence made it an endless winter.

“Always winter and never Christmas,” Popola muttered.

“Huh?”

“It was from an old book. Remember? The one with the lamppost in the forest.” She sighed. “Back when we were overseeing the replicants, I’d read it to children who were sick.”

“Ah.” Devola’s eyes twinkled. “The one with the faun holding the umbrella.”

“You know, the author wrote that story because his friend once said that no good fantasy story would ever have a lamppost in the middle of a forest.”

Devola snickered. “His friend was right.” She planted her boot in the sand and her foot sank in it up to her ankle. Grimacing, she sucked air through her teeth. “Wanna head back? I kinda hate the desert.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” Popola pulled her out of the sand and back onto the cracked asphalt and concrete of the ancient freeway that formed the road into the desert. “C’mon. Let’s go. We’ll go flower hunting tomorrow—”

A glint in the desert caught her eye. A crystalline spike of white quartz protruded from the bottom of the shallow valley between two rolling dunes, its short spines curved to form an elegant helical spire. It looked almost like a little shrine. It was catching the light from something, somehow—perhaps something inside whose glow was diffused through the crystalline structure, or maybe the crystal itself was luminescent.

“Hang on.” Popola hopped off the road.

“Popola…”

“Stay right here. I’m just gonna check it out.” Popola slid down the sandy slope to the shrine. She barely regained her footing once she reached the bottom of the valley, kicking up plumes of coarse and gritty sand that immediately found purchase on her clothes and hair. She coughed and rubbed at her eyes as Devola rolled to a halt beside her.

“What did I say,” Devola said, shaking the sand from her hair like a waterlogged dog, “about running off into danger?”
Popola shrugged sheepishly. “Not to do it without you?”

Devola smiled in spite of herself. “You’re incorrigible. Let’s climb back up and let Anemone know about this. She’ll send someone to look at it. Like 9S. Let 9S handle this.”

Popola drew closer to the spire. The foundations were splattered with black ichor and a few twisted, mangled bodies littered the ground. Some of them were machines; some of them were not. The ones that weren’t machines, though, weren’t androids, either. They had scales and claws and, in some cases, hooves. A machine knelt beside one of the corpses, repeatedly shoving a broken spear deeper into its punctured chest cavity, ichor spurting onto its chassis with each blow. It didn’t seem to notice either of the twins.

“I’m gonna take a peek inside the spire,” Popola whispered.

Devola put her hands on her waist and grabbed fistfuls of her shirt. “No, you’re not.”

“It’ll only take a sec.”

“No, it won’t. What happened to ‘taking better care of yourself?’”

“I think there’s something important in there.”

“Then let someone else get it.”

“Okay, we’ll go in together.”

Popola and Devola, who knew when she’d been defeated, trudged through the sand in unison, their cores anxiously whining in unison as they stepped past the disinterested machine, and stepped over the threshold into the spire.

The interior, a room with the same conical shape as the outside of the spire, was made of the same white quartz, which seemed to glow with a cold white light just faintly enough to barely illuminate the little room; a few lanterns hung from the walls and illuminated a rack of spiny black armor, a circular porthole of opaque black glass embedded in the floor like a reflecting pool, and a hooded figure sitting at a small wooden desk. A guttering candle, misshapen and surrounded by a lumpy pool of hardened wax, cast flickering shadows on its faded blue cowl.

“Um… hello?” Popola tapped on the figure’s shoulder. “What is—”

The hood sloughed off the figure’s head, revealing a skull grayed by thousands of years of built-up dust and cobwebs; its rolled off the hooded figure’s neck and shattered when it hit the floor. Devola yelped in surprise; Popola stumbled backward as the rest of the robed skeleton slid off its chair and collapsed.

Popola took a deep breath and drew closer to the desk, gingerly stepping around the robed skeleton. On the desk’s ink-stained surface was an old, yellowed hardcover book wrapped tightly in rusty chains, its ornately-decorated and gold-trimmed blue cover faded and discolored. The cover and spine had been defaced long ago, erasing the book’s title, and the padlock on the book’s chains kept it shut tight.

She picked up the book and held it aloft; the padlock popped open and fell away, dragging the length of chains wrapped around the book with it. They jangled and chimed when they hit the floor.

“Well?” Devola asked. “What’s in it?”
Popola turned the front cover and fanned out the book’s yellowed pages. It was completely blank from front to back. Hundreds of pages, and not so much as a single word.

Devola peered at the book from over Popola’s shoulder. “Real page-turner, huh? You don’t think it’s one of the grimoires, do you?” she asked, referring to the thirteen magic books—all now lost—that had been created as a part of Project Gestalt. “Grimoire Caerulus, maybe?”

More than just a little disappointed, Popola flipped back to the first page and clapped the book shut. “I dunno. I’ll ask Alucard to take a look at it.”

The two of them headed out of the spire and climbed back up the dunes on their way back to Anemone’s camp. Devola berated her all the way through the city, but her repeated admonishments fell on deaf ears as Popola found her thoughts circling around the empty tome tucked away in her knapsack over and over again. She couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something written in there that was hiding itself away from her.
In this chapter, Popola starts learning magic, Jackass breaks her promises, and A2 gets a new leash on life. Have I already made that pun? I think I’ve already made that pun somewhere else.

Jackass’ workshop, cordoned off from the rest of the camp by three walls of scrap metal and heavy canvas and a sheet of metal for the ceiling, was an abattoir of machinery and circuitry; limbless torsos and arms and legs with no owners filled cluttered bins, littered the ground, and hung from the ceiling. The lifeless remains of androids damaged beyond repair and scavenged machine lifeforms in the line of duty hung from racks lining the fence that served as three of the workshop’s walls, stripped down for their chassis and mined for parts. Pieces of scavenged machine lifeforms, too, littered the walls.

A human might have considered it morbid (Alucard had poked his head inside once and the look of sheer revulsion on his face had been pretty hilarious), but androids had a bit of a different relationship to their bodies. As long as your data could still be downloaded and placed into a new chassis, your body getting totaled wasn’t a big deal. It was just a hunk of metal and polymers filled with coolant. Sure, some people got unreasonably attached to theirs—like the guy in the camp with a bum leg who refused to replace it on the grounds that it was the only ‘original’ part of his body—but those YoRHa types, whose bodies were broken down and reconstituted whenever they needed to travel through the access terminal network, had the right idea.

Jackass flopped down on the cot nestled between her operating table and a bank of computer terminals. Those computers were her real job, although one wouldn’t know it from looking at her humble abode. As Information Analysis Officer, her job was to sift through all the data gleaned about the machine lifeforms and hand off her reports to the military’s tactical specialists. Her real passions, namely demolitions and messing with android bodies, were just side gigs.

But you couldn’t just do what you loved when there was a war ongoing.

As she laid down and prepared to end a day that had been far too long to begin with, Jackass heard an unwelcome chime from the tablet sitting on her desk and let out an exhausted, frustrated groan. Dammit, more work at this hour? As if she didn’t have enough shit on her mind tonight…

She fumbled for the tablet, her fingers scrabbling across its scratched and battered screen until she got a hold of its edge, and held it over her at arm’s length as the screen lit up to reveal—what else but—White’s perfect face.

“Hey, White,” Jackass mumbled.

“I’m glad you picked up, Jackass. I—”

“I know, I know.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re disappointed in me. I know. I got the whole spiel. Contrary to what you might think, I have a very rich vocabulary.”

“I’m worried about you,” White said, foregoing the barbed comments she and Jackass typically...
traded in a rare moment of naked concern. “You’ve done horrific things before. The time you combined those two androids into a single unit…”

Jackass laughed in spite of herself as she reminisced about the good old days. “Yeah. That was fucking awesome.”

“It nearly got you kicked out of the army, Jackass.”

“Yeah. Because the top brass has no imagination.”

White kept talking past her. “Your unauthorized ‘upgrades,’ your bizarre ‘experiments’…” She let out a weary sigh. It was the kind of weary sigh Jackass remembered so well from all the times White had chastised her and meant it. “And now I find you aiding and abetting a fugitive.”

“Aw, c’mon. A2’s harmless.”

‘Harmless?’ This is…” White shook her head, holding her palm to her forehead. “Jackass. I know your mind runs too quickly sometimes, so I’m going to speak slowly to make sure the words sink in. The Resistance is a military organization. YoRHa is a military organization. As disheveled and disorganized as Anemone’s cell is, it is still expected to observe its place in the Army of Humanity’s hierarchy, just as YoRHa is. Are you with me so far?”

“Yeah,” Jackass grumbled. White had many ways to tell people that they were so smart that they looped all the way back to being stupid.

“There are rules to every military. If there aren’t, then you don’t have an effective fighting force. You have a ragged band of idiots with guns. You can’t just disobey the rules if you don’t like them. There are consequences.”

Jackass thought back to the raids on machine factories the two of them had carried out singlehandedly in the good old days before White had gone off to space. Whenever they’d had explosives to plant, White had been there to make sure they went off in the right place and at the right time instead of whenever Jackass had felt like it. And as overbearing as White’s strict and hidebound attitude had been, a big enough kaboom, even if it was against regulations, had been able to put a goofy smile on her face all the same.

But White didn’t smile at people who broke, or even bent the rules anymore. Jackass wasn’t sure she knew how to anymore.

“What happened to you?” Jackass asked.

“You did.” White glanced away, her gaze falling elsewhere in her pristine office. She’d dispensed with the playfully-hyperbolic rhetoric she’d spat out earlier that day.

“I’m going to be brutally honest with you,” she continued. The phrase ‘brutally honest’ was redundant to her—in Jackass’ experience, when White was honest, it tended to be brutal by default. “If it were up to me, I would have decided on some other way of dealing with A2. But I didn’t make the rules.”

Jackass was taken aback. Had White just… admitted that she regretted what she had to do? She could count the number of times she’d heard White go back on her decisions on one hand. The last time White had voiced any sort of doubt whatsoever about anything she signed off on had been years ago.

“Well… what if the rules are wrong?”
“That’s not for us to decide,” White answered. “Do you think that just because I’m in charge of YoRHa, I don’t answer to any higher authorities?”

“Alucard’s a higher authority,” Jackass pointed out.

“I have my doubts about him,” White huffed, crossing her arms. “At any rate, he doesn’t seem to have any affiliation with the Council of Humanity, so I don’t see what leverage he could possibly have over our operations, human or not. While I recognize there’s little I can do with A2 in his custody, I won’t just accept that he can override the chain of command so casually.”

Jackass’ head hurt. The last thing she wanted to do tonight was re-litigate this morning’s trial. “Look… why don’t you just tell the Council how useful A2 could be?”

White pursed her lips. “I have a feeling that won’t exactly prove fruitful.”

“Are you kidding?” Jackass sat up. “White, listen. A2 is an obsolete model who went three years without any maintenance and tune-ups! But she’s held her own against your strongest models!”

She was starting to actually get excited. A2 was a fascinating research subject, after all. Even without factoring in the werewolf thing, which was itself one of the most interesting conditions Jackass had ever encountered. “I could research her—”

“I understand your reasoning. I’ve considered having her imprisoned instead of terminated,” White replied. “However, I’m certain she would rather face down the entire Type-E division than spend the rest of the war in a cell… or a laboratory.”

Jackass couldn’t really find fault in that argument. A2 didn’t seem to be a pretty big fan of the whole ‘self-preservation’ deal.

White’s expression colder, her green eyes narrowing and her mouth forming a narrow, tense slit. “This is my last word on A2. You and Anemone can say what you like, but at the end of the day, she’s a deserter. She has no place in either YoRHa or the Resistance—and cannot be allowed to exist outside of the military. If you and Anemone keep helping her… sooner or later, you’ll suffer the same fate she will.”

White’s stern glare sent a chill up Jackass’s spine.

“Every day, I worry that someday you’ll go too far without me there to slap your wrist,” she said. “If we’re being completely honest… I think you might have already done it.” Her glare softened, her mouth curling upward into a world-weary, bitter half-smile. “Things are so busy up here that I don’t think I’ll ever have time to come back to Earth until the war ends. When that happens, I want you to still be here. So toe the line, keep your head down, and follow the rules.”

“Uh… thanks?”

“Promise me. Promise me you won’t do anything rash from now on. And especially nothing involving A2. If you so much as replace a single one of her circuits, your career will come to an end. That’s not a threat, it’s a warning, and I suggest you heed it.”

Jackass sighed and swallowed a lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “Uh… I promise.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“You, too. When was the last time you had any maintenance done?”

White looked away.
“Don’t make me come up there.”

“Goodbye, Jack. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Please.” White ended the transmission, forcing the screen to abruptly turn black.

Jackass groaned, threw back her head, and tossed the tablet aside as she stared up at the cluttered ceiling and watched the limbs dangling from it slowly sway and twirl. White was right. She did go too far sometimes, especially when she was alone, and one day it was all going to come back and bite her in the ass. If only the two of them hadn’t parted ways, if only White hadn’t fucked off to her new home on that fancy satellite…

White had always been pretty strait-laced, a stickler for rules, stiff as a board, ever the cautious and sensible one. But she’d always been earnest, too, and deep down, she was a kind person to her friends. But now, in spite of White’s concern for her well-being, it didn’t feel like she and Jackass were friends anymore.

Jackass glanced over to the lifeless 2B chassis bundled in a sheet and laying on the ground next to her cot. Getting the access terminal to spit it out without actually downloading 2B’s data from the Bunker’s servers had been a stroke of genius that White just wasn’t allowing herself to appreciate! Jackass didn’t often say something was her crowning achievement, but…

Toe the line, keep your head down, and follow the rules.

Okay. Starting tonight, Jackass was going to clean up her act. Do everything by the book. Be the camp’s least-creepy, least-unkempt, most-squeakiest-cleanest information analysis officer. Just her job, done as best as she could do it, with no crazy shit on the side. She’d break down the 2B chassis first thing in the morning, recycle/blow up its parts, and speak of it to no one.

But before she went straight, she needed a stiff drink. Did the twins have any of that flower shit they distilled stockpiled?

The canvas curtain that formed a makeshift door in one of the walls pulled aside as A2 poked her head inside the workshop. Rattled by the sudden intrusion, Jackass almost rolled off her bed and onto the 2B chassis. “Jeez, fucking—knock next time, dammit!” she swore.

“Nice to see you too. I need the new body.”

“Getting right to the point, huh?”

“Yeah.” A2 slipped inside, letting the tent flaps close behind her. “Goddamn fingers stopped working,” she grumbled, raising her other hand and struggling to uncurl the misbehaving digits, which had frozen in a curled, clawed grip.

“It’s because you punched the TV, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“Coincidence, then?” Jackass winked. “Well, you’re lucky I’m prepared. Figured you’d come around to it sooner or later.”

“It’s almost moonrise. I’m not going another night looking like the world’s ugliest dog. So just get it over with.”

Jackass rolled off her cot, gingerly stepped around the chassis, and struggled to lift it onto her operating table, then pulled the cloth away with a grandiose flourish. Reaching down into the crate
of supplies under the table, she pulled out a can of an ancient human beverage they’d once called ‘gamer fuel,’ popped the tab, and chugged the effervescent, sickly-sweet elixir, crushing the empty can’s thin aluminum shell and tossing it aside when she was finished.

One more crazy experiment. *Then* she’d go straight. She promised.

A2 flinched when Jackass pulled the cover away from the new body.

It was *hers* in every way. It was what A2’s body had looked like at the very beginning. The same height, the same weight, the same measurements, the same slender curve of her jawline. Even the mole on her chin was still there.

But at the same time, it wasn’t hers. It belonged, literally, to the woman who’d been trying to kill her for the past three years. The woman who had been designed to replace her, the woman who had made her obsolete and unnecessary. That was *her* face with the mole on the left side of her chin. *Her* short white hair cut in a simple bob. *Her* closed eyes, *her* pink lips, *her*…

This was the body of her enemy.

But it was the body she needed if she wanted to be able to look after herself. It was the body she needed to keep fools like Anemone from damn near getting themselves killed on her behalf. This one was failing and there was nothing she or anyone else could do about it… nothing except jump ship.

A2’s gaze drifted along the naked body and settled on the chest; her hand reflexively rose to feel the hard black carapace of her own chest, fingers curling—despite the whines and sparks flying from her failing servos—around the numb, hard lump of black alloy that formed a mockery of a breast.

Fuck 2E. That was *her* body, too, and goddammit, she *wanted* it.

With a flurry of tools, Jackass worked her magic and popped the 2B unit’s entire chest and abdomen off, revealing a chassis far more complex and richly detailed than A2’s own. It went without saying that A2 felt a little inadequate comparing the subdermal armor of her chassis to that second-generation endoskeleton. She could already see how much flexibility it boasted compared to her own, how much swifter and more agile it would make her, and nearly felt jealous.

Jackass plunged her fist into the body’s chest cavity, fished out a black box, and tossed it aside into a bin filled with inactive power supply units. Next, she set to work on the head, peeling off the face and scalp and tossing them both aside. She popped open the 2B unit’s cranium, her tools surgically splitting the metal skull, fished around, and pulled out a handful of plugin chips. She sifted through them one-by-one and tossed a few of them aside, then slotted the remainder back in.

A2 decided not to ask for details about what Jackass was doing. She knew all that technical bullshit would just fly right over her head.

“This is gonna be *real* easy from here on out,” Jackass said. “See, you YoRHa types have your consciousness data in your black boxes and your memory and operating system data in your heads. So, uh…” She reached under her crimson robe and withdrew a short black staff with two metal prongs on the end. “I’m gonna have to knock you out to transfer the data. I mean, you kinda expected that, right?”

“I, uh… well…” A2 wheedled, looking around the charnel house that was Jackass’ workshop and suddenly no longer sure if she felt comfortable letting this mad scientist manhandle her while she
was unconscious.

“There’s just one thing. Your current body runs YoROS 1.0.3; these newer models run 3.0.59. I’m not one hundred percent sure all your memory and personality data is going to be parsed perfectly by the new OS,” Jackass said, her tone surprisingly casual considering the message. “So your memories and personality might be a little jumbled…”

“What?”

“I mean, I’m ninety-nine point nine nine percent sure it’ll go off without a hitch.” Jackass said, shrugging as she backtracked. “Now, I know you’re not a cautious person, so what’s point zero one percent in the grand scheme of things?”

“I swear, if you try to reprogram me in any way—”

“Reprogram you?”

“Maybe I’m paranoid… but if I wake up and the first thing on my mind is how thankful I am toward my best friend Jackass…” A2 curled her good hand into a fist. “I’ll…”

“…Give your best friend Jackass a big hug?” Jackass laughed. “Relax. I wouldn’t do that to you. Now what do you say we get this done before moonrise?”

Shuddering, A2 recalled how much it hurt to transform with so much of her chassis exposed. She’d always thought of herself as the kind of person who had a nigh-unlimited tolerance for pain, but… she was almost willing to risk Jackass rewiring her brain to spare herself that experience.

“…Fine.”

With an elated grin, Jackass rammed the staff into A2’s forehead before she could say another word. Everything went black.

White’s face appeared in a projected panel on both 9S and 2B’s visors, her typical scowl ever-so-slightly more deeply entrenched in her face than usual. “2B. 9S. I have a special mission for the two of you. 2B, I’ve gone over your report regarding last night and received the alert from your pod regarding your encounter with a human—”

“You met a human?!” 9S exclaimed, his jaw dropping in shock as he turned to face 2B (the augmented-reality panel with White’s face turned with him).

The only thing 2B did in response was nod.

“Wow.” He felt his mouth dry up just thinking about the prospect of actually meeting a real live human being. What would he say to them? What would he ask them? He’d found so many things in the ruins spanning the Earth’s surface he’d kill to learn more about. “Did… I mean, what was it like?”

2B sighed. “I didn’t have time to process it. He told me to go away, so I did. That’s all there was to it. I haven’t thought much about him since.”

“Haven’t thought about him? 2B, you saw a human! You met a human! He talked to you! That’s —”

“9S, don’t interrupt,” White chided him. “We don’t know how this human managed to travel from
the lunar colony to Earth, but we need to return him at once.”

“Of course,” 2B said. “Earth is no place for humans.”

White nodded. “And I need to speak with him personally as well. For that reason, I’ve requested
that the next colonial supply shuttle stop off at the Bunker before heading to the moon. 2B, 9S,
I’m removing you from your current duties and assigning you to escort this human to the shuttle.”

“We… We get to work with a real human?” 9S still struggled to process what White was saying. It
was beyond belief. Was he really going to have a chance to see and talk to one of his creators?

“Yes, 9S,” White said, letting out a terse, impatient sigh. “Do try to show him the proper amount of
respect and deference.”

9S untied his tongue. “Y-Yes, ma’am,” he stammered. “You can count on me.”

“Your operators will send you the shuttle’s coordinates. Its current takeoff is scheduled for roughly
ten hours from now; I expect you two and our human interloper to be onboard before then. He was
last sighted in Anemone’s camp; the name he goes by is ‘Alucard.’ Hopefully, he hasn’t been
allowed to leave.”

“Got it.”

“These orders,” White continued, “come directly from the Council of Humanity. The Council’s
orders are supreme; if the human attempts to issue contradictory commands to either of you, you
are under no obligation to obey him. I don’t want a repeat of last night, 2B.”

“We will take care of everything, Commander,” 2B assured her.

“Good.” On the screen, White held her left hand over her chest. “Glory to Mankind!”

2B and 9S both returned the salute. “Glory to Mankind!” they shouted in unison.

Galvanized into action, 9S took off, sprinting through the city ruins and leaving 2B in his dust
(although with her superior specs, it only took a few seconds for her to not only catch up to him but
also overtake him).

“2B!” he cried out as the two of them weaved through the ruins, deftly skirting the edge of the deep
and vast sinkhole filling the center of the ruins. “Can you believe it? We’re going to meet a real,
live, in-the-flesh human!”

“Keep your voice down,” 2B said. “We don’t want machines to catch wind of this.”

“Right, right. Sorry.” 9S grinned sheepishly. “I’m just… I guess, a little carried away. I mean,
who’s ever had a chance like this? White’s the only one who gets to communicate with the
Council, so this… it feels a bit above our pay grade, doesn’t it?”

“We don’t get paid.”

“I meant that as a metaphor.” 9S sighed. “So… you met this human and weren’t impressed, huh?”
he asked, making sure to drop his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“I’m not sure how I felt,” 2B said.

“Do you get the feeling the Commander doesn’t like him, whoever he is?” he asked. “I never really
thought we had the capacity to do that. If I were a human, I’d have had all us androids programmed
to love me unconditionally. Why do you think they didn’t do that?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.” 2B took a slight detour to slice a machine that had just spotted her and 9S in half with a single stroke of her blade. “We’re obligated to obey them. That’s enough.” There was a bitter edge to her voice, a note of resentment almost as sharp as her sword.

“I can’t blame you for being dumbfounded,” 9S admitted. “Me, I’d be too starstruck to say anything, too. Or think anything, really.”

“You, at a loss for words?”

“Don’t tell me you find that hard to believe.”

“Of course I do.”

“Point taken. I guess I’m pretty predictable, aren’t I?”

“More than you realize.”

“But you… I can’t ever predict you, 2B.”

2B’s pace slowed just a little. “…What does that mean?”

“I mean…” 9S was pretty good at reading people (or at least, he thought so). But 2B defied explanation. She blew hot and cold with the same breath. Which was the real 2B? The one who called him ‘9S’ or the one who called him ‘Nines’? Was she an outwardly stoic person who occasionally let her sweet and caring center slip out? Or was she cold inside and out, and her brief moments of kindness merely tools to manipulate him?

Who was 2B, anyway?

“Never mind,” 9S said, unsure of how to vocalize all that. “Don’t sweat it. It’s a compliment.”

“Hmm. I… I suppose unpredictability is a powerful asset in combat. Thank you, Nines…ess.”

“What did you say? Did you just call me—”

“No.”

9S picked up the pace and tried to pull in front of 2B to see if she was smiling. Even a half-smile from her (which was the most she seemed to be capable of) was rarer than platinum and twice as precious. “You said it!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did! You called me Ni—”

His boot hit a patch of loose gravel lining the edge of the abyss and slid, throwing him off his balance; as the shadow-wreathed monoliths of the ancient city ruins spun around him, he felt nothing but open air replace the solid ground first beneath one foot, then the other. He let out a panicked shout, reaching out desperately for something to grab hold of before he plunged tens of meters down to the bottom of the pit, his fingers brushing against the burnished metal arm of his pod but slipping away.

2B caught his arm, her fingers curling tightly around his wrist; he swung into the craggy wall of the sinkhole. The rough, rocky wall scraped against his skin as 2B hauled him back up onto solid
“You need to watch where you step, 9S,” she told him as he sat up and caught his breath. “Come on. We’ve almost reached the camp.”

“Yeah… Hold up just a bit.” He checked his boots in the beam of his pod’s flashlight, laced them tighter, and took off behind 2B. The soft glow of the camp was barely visible in the distance through the gaps between the roughened and skeletal remains of buildings jutting from the earth like rotting teeth from a diseased gumline.

Alucard had often imagined living in a world where Dracula had won, but he had never imagined it would be like this.

He’d known his father’s dark ambitions well. Dreams of an Earth without sunlight, its derelict cities ravaged by creatures of darkness, the greatest works of art and marvels of technology in the world crumbling to dust with no humans to steward them. In the wake of Dracula’s final curse, the world had become that dream—and Alucard, as punishment for his failure, had been banished to it.

In his younger days, moments of fitful rest had shown him visions of that fate—alone, drifting through a dead world, wandering aimlessly, bereft of hope. A thousand times he’d dreamed this future. The question he asked himself in the worst of times—What will become of this world should I fail—had always haunted him; now, he haunted it. Now he lingered in this world as a phantom lingered in the dilapidated ruins of its former home.

And yet…

Never had he thought that he would have companions should the worst come to pass. Never had he thought there would be moments when the weight of the ruined and broken city surrounding him felt lighter. Never had he thought there would be moments when a smile or a wry remark made the melancholic tide ebb, if only for a little bit. Never had he thought that in the worst case, he would have anybody at his side. But he did, and for that he was grateful.

In the twins’ cramped tent, he and Popola knelt over the dusty old tome she had found in the desert shrine earlier that day, its frail and yellowed pages illuminated by the light of a flashlight Devola held as she stood over the two of them.

Popola opened the book up to a blank page somewhere in the middle—about three hundred pages in, by Alucard’s reckoning—and thumbing through the book all the way to the last page, then to the first page, then back to the middle, demonstrating that each page was indeed completely blank. She jabbed her finger at the book, her fingernail leaving a crescent moon-shaped imprint on the paper.

“There’s something here, isn’t there?” she asked. “It’s a magic book. I can feel it. Unless I’m going crazy.”

“Can’t rule that out, sis,” Devola said, standing over Popola, flashlight in hand.

Alucard couldn’t see anything either. But, then again, that was hardly unusual. Magic books were wont to conceal their contents to outsiders. “Flip back to the first page.”

“All right,” Popola said, sighing, “but I’ve looked there a thousand times already—”

Alucard smiled as a spot of black ink welled up in the center of the first page and blossomed into an elegant and ornate glyph as though an invisible hand were writing the book before his very eyes.
Beneath the black glyph, in perfect handwriting, was a title.

**GRIMOIRE ECCLESIA**

**THE COMPLETE COMPILED SPELLBOOK**

**OF CHARLOTTE AULIN**

~1999~

“Ah, here we are. See,” he told Popola, tousling her hair, “it’s much easier to read books when you start at the beginning.”

“There’s still nothing there,” Devola pointed out.

“Can’t you see it?” He looked to Devola, then to Popola, who both stared bemusedly at him.

“No,” Popola said.

“No,” Devola said.

Alucard turned to the next page, where elegant handwriting quickly traced the instructions for casting a simple conjuration spell—the more complex ones, he gathered, were further on in the book. He flipped to the next page, but it remained blank.

He flipped back to the conjuration spell. “Do either of you see this?” he asked the twins.

“No,” Popola said.

“No,” Devola said. “Maybe if we write something down in it, something will happen?”

“There are words,” Alucard said, tapping on the page, “right here.” He read the instructions aloud, running his finger under each line as he recounted the spell. “Beginner’s level spell for conjuring a single flower.”

He ran through the motions, recited the incantation, and produced out of nowhere a silver rose, its verdant stem pinched between his forefinger and thumb.

“See?” he said, handing the rose to Popola, who smiled as she took it. “It’s right there, clear as crystal.”

“You read some invisible words and made a flower. Wow.” Devola rolled her eyes. “If we find a five-year-old who’s having a birthday party, it’ll really come in handy!”

“The more advanced spells are further in,” Alucard pointed out more than a little defensively. He turned to the next page and watched it populate with the instructions for a slightly more advanced spell, but saw nothing on the third page. A textbook and a teacher in one package. Very convenient for a neophyte; rather inconvenient for someone like him who could probably skip ahead a dozen pages.

“You’re just reading off a blank page,” Devola sighed, taking a step backward. “C’mon, Popola. It’s late and we’re all tired.”

Popola didn’t budge. “Why can you see it,” she asked Alucard, “and we can’t?”

“The text is magic,” Alucard theorized, “and if one’s second sight is not fully developed and their
senses not attuned to magic, one will be unable to perceive it. It is on a completely different wavelength.”

“Well, that solves that.” Devola yawned, clicking off the flashlight and dropping it to the ground. “They didn’t build us androids with second sights and third eyes. I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Popola said, picking up the flashlight and turning it back on as Devola curled up in the corner and pulled a worn, patchwork blanket over her head. “Alucard,” whispered said to him, taking him by the shoulder, “there’s got to be some way I can read it.”

“You’ve become quite invested in this book,” Alucard noted. He flipped back to the first page and read the name of the author once more.

Charlotte Aulin. The Charlotte Aulin, one of the greatest witches of the twentieth century, who had herself devised the three-part sealing spell—book, whip, and shrine—that had imprisoned Dracula’s castle in an eclipse. This was her spellbook, the compiled wisdom of seventy years of arcane knowledge, lost in the castle in the final battle of the Demon Castle Wars. How had it appeared where Popola had claimed to have found it? Was that little shrine somehow connected to Dracula’s castle?

“It might have something useful in it. There has to be something we can do to read it. How,” Popola asked, “do you open your third eye?”

“Well, as a dhampyr, of course, mine’s always been open. I’m no great spellcaster, and hardly even an adequate one, but I am a creature of magic.”

Popola’s face fell. “Right. Well, I guess that’s it…”

Alucard glanced over at the blanket-covered lump in the corner as Devola poked her head out of it and scowled at him. “But, if I recall,” he added, lowering his voice to Devola’s approval, “tapping into one’s second sight requires that one see with one’s heart.”

“What does that mean?”

“You see with your brain, correct?”

“With my eyes.”

“Yes, but your brain does all the heavy lifting. Or your visual processor or such. But there are things,” Alucard said, “that cannot be understood by the mind. Take, for example, our lycanthropic friend A2.”

“What about her?”

“Think about it. What is the catalyst for her transformation?”

“The moon?” Popola replied, giving her answer without any confidence in her voice—no doubt certain it was too simple to be correct.

“And how does the moon transmit that signal to her?”

“…Moonlight?”

“Yet moonlight is not required for her to transform,” Alucard said. “An overcast night or a roof over her head does not spare her that ordeal. And besides, moonlight is only reflected sunlight, so
why don’t werewolves transform under the light of the sun?”

“Maybe it’s a gravity thing. Like the tides.”

“Perhaps. But how does that work, mechanically speaking? How does gravity turn an android into a beast?”

Popola rested her forehead in her hand as she mulled over Alucard’s example. “I don’t know… it doesn’t make any sense…”

“Of course not. *None* of it does,” Alucard said. “If you wish to see this book as I see it, you must stop thinking. Instead, start *feeling*.”

Popola placed her hand on the page, her finger blindly tracing words that were invisible to her eyes. “I mean… I’m feeling something right now, aren’t I? Everyone always feels *something*.”

“Yes, but your so-called third eye needs a good shock to jolt it awake. Recall your strongest feelings—fill your heart with the memory of someone or something whose presence burns like an unstoppable flame in your mind.”

Popola squeezed her eyes shut. “But you told me to stop thinking.”

“Don’t overthink it. That was a metaphor.”

After a few seconds of utter silence and stillness, Popola opened her eyes again. “I still don’t see it,” she said, looking down glumly at the first page of the ancient spellbook.

“What were you thinking about?” Alucard asked.

“I wasn’t.”

“Don’t think so literally. What were you *feeling* about?”

Popola shrugged. “Dev, of course.”

“Hmm.” Alucard stroked his chin. “Well, that’s hardly a *shock*, is it? You two have been at each others’ side for ten thousand years. All that love spread out over such a long time… Of course, I can’t discount the magnitude of it, but it is a bit like how an elephant’s foot exerts less pressure than a stiletto heel, despite an elephant weighing much more than a human.”

“So…” Popola teased out, speaking slowly and deliberately, “I need a strong emotion… that I feel quickly, suddenly, and that I can recall with… perfect clarity?”

“I suppose that would do it,” Alucard said, somewhat loath to disappoint her by telling her this was all guesswork on his part. For him, explaining to someone with no natural aptitude for it how to perceive magic was like a fish telling a man how to swim.

Popola looked at him, her face starkly shaded in the light from the flashlight. The subtle glint of reflected light was all he could see of her pale aquamarine eyes, yet she could see—or rather *feel*—her giving him not a look, but a Look. It was half the deer-in-headlights look of someone who was hopelessly lost and half the determined, purposeful look of someone who was precisely the *opposite* of lost.

“I’m assuming it must be a positive emotion,” he went on, “but I could be wrong. Maybe you could tap into how you felt the day that fellow from YoRHa stole you and Devola’s—Popola, why
are you looking at me like that?"

She reached out, planted her hands on his cheeks to hold his head in place like a vise, and lunged at him, locking her lips against his. Alucard went cross-eyed.

After what felt like an eternity, Popola pulled away as suddenly as she’d pulled in. Her eyes were wide, her cheeks (and most of her face) almost as red as her hair. “It worked!” she cried out, her breath ragged and shallow, tapping excitedly at the page. “Look, Alucard! It worked!”

Still reeling, Alucard raised his hand to his mouth. His lips were tingling. Ten thousand years. Ten thousand years since anyone had ever kissed him like that. And even then, how many times had that happened to him? Twice? Thrice?

“It’s amazing! I can see it now! It really worked!”

Alucard blinked several times. “Um… That’s, er… that’s very good, Popola,” he mumbled, his voice coming out as a dazed half-whisper.

“And all I had to do,” she gasped, breathless, “was, um… was… uh… aah…” She looked at Alucard, her wide and wild eyes meeting his, glanced at the book, and then fixed her gaze on nothing at all.

“Well,” she said, clapping the book shut and tucking it hurriedly under her arm as she scrabbled over to Devola (who, somehow, had managed to sleep through Popola’s outburst just fine) and planted herself at her sister’s side, “g-goodnight, Alucard!”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll just, er… take a walk and clear my head. Good night.” He stood up, the top of his head brushing against the peaked top of the canvas tent, and stepped out into the camp, still reeling inwardly as sparks flew inside his head and a hazy warmth swelling up within him.

She’d kissed him.

Why had she kissed him?

Of course she’d kissed him. Had he been blind, or stupid, or both?

A cold and bitter wind blew through the camp; Alucard shivered and bundled himself up in the heavy greatcoat he’d draped over his shoulders. It was still cold. He nearly regretted letting A2 take his cape, although he wasn’t certain he wanted it back now that it was ripped and torn and reeked so strongly of dog. The sky was streaked with roiling clouds moving in quickly from over the ocean; the air smelled and felt as though rain was imminent.

Anemone strolled through the camp, issuing a few last orders of the day to the soldiers posted to the night watch and extinguishing the lights illuminating the clearing one by one so that the soft glow suffusing the area would dwindle to a few pinpricks. When she caught sight of Alucard, she took off in his direction, a large bundle tucked under her arm.

“There you are, Alucard. I’ve been looking for you.” She presented him with the bundle, which turned out to be a rolled-up blanket. Worn, frayed all along the edges, and all but falling apart in places, but soft and thick. Alucard took it from her, handling it as though it were an ancient relic lest it crumble to dust in his hands. It looked as though it had once been some shade of blue. Now it was some shade of… something. The dying light of the camp made it difficult to discern, even though Alucard could see in the dark quite well.

“It’s something I found in the city a while ago. I’d like you to have it,” Anemone said, “as a token
of my appreciation.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Alucard handed it back. “But I can’t simply take the only soft blanket in
the camp away from its leader.”

Anemone smiled. “I’d give you a hundred more if I could,” she went on, “for what you did today.
A2 would be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

“Today we won a battle, not a war. And even so, I’m not sure I can call our conversation with
Commander White a victory just yet. Perhaps you shouldn’t be so hasty with your gift-giving.”

“If nothing else, at least your pedigree entitles you to some amenities.”

“You make a valid point.” Alucard relented and draped the blanket over his shoulders. “Thank you,
Anemone.”

“On the subject of this morning, I’ve received another communique from White.” The levity both
on Anemone’s face and in her voice faded. “She’s arranged for a supply shuttle to carry you to the
Bunker and for 2B and 9S to escort you. It leaves in about nine or ten hours.”

Alucard wasn’t surprised. That had been the arrangement he’d made, after all. That said, he hadn’t
expected the meeting to be set up so quickly. He’d expected some sort of bureaucracy to stand in
his way. The kind of bureaucracy that put so much distance between leaders and their subordinates
that it was easy to throw their lives away on a whim.

He glanced upward to the heavens, the moon and stars partially blotted out by the tendrils of clouds
massing in the sky. “Will A2 be safe outside of my custody?”

“It’s occurred to me that since you pledged to look after her, White would have a golden
opportunity to send another unit after her once you’ve left the planet,” Anemone said. “But A2’s
decided to take the new body, so I don’t see her having any problems defending herself.”

“Or the camp?”

“You might find it hard to believe from how she behaves today,” she told him, drawing her cloak
tighter and pulling up her hood over her head and covering her braided black hair as another gust of
bitter wind howled through the camp, “but I knew A2 when she was at her best. She looks out for
her friends.”

“I don’t doubt that,” he replied, “but it’s a matter of strength. Two or three or five units might be
more than she can handle.” He glanced over at the access terminal shrouded in shadows in the
corner of the clearing; Anemone followed his gaze. “They wouldn’t have a hard time getting here.
I’d hardly call your camp defensible.”

“We’ll work something out if it comes to that,” Anemone assured him, laying a comforting hand
on his shoulder. “Alucard, when you spend every day thinking of tomorrow’s battles, the enemy
that cuts you down will be the one you meet today. Tomorrow’s battle will be tomorrow. No
matter what it brings, I think we can take care of ourselves long enough for you to talk some sense
into White.”

“Would that I had your confidence.”

Anemone smiled and shook her head. “Two hundred years I’ve been fighting the machines. I don’t
know how old you are or how long you’ve spent away from the colony, but I doubt you can speak
to having as much experience.”
Alucard had to bite on his tongue to keep from laughing. It took all his inner strength to avoid making a wry remark such as, ‘You have no idea,’ or ‘You might be surprised…’

“Two hundred? You don’t look it,” he said.

Then again, nobody looked their age here. Androids’ hair didn’t turn gray. Their skin didn’t shrivel, their veins didn’t bulge in old age; no wrinkles creased their faces, not even crows'-feet. This was a world where each and every person was molded in doll-like, porcelain perfection. For two hundred years of hardship, Anemone didn’t show it in the least bit: her olive skin was smooth, her face blemishless (aside from some stubborn grease stains and a barely-perceptible seam winding across her cheek where days-old skin met years-old skin), her braided black hair glossy and lustrous, her posture tall and proud.

A world of beautiful, ageless men and women. Alucard supposed he fit right in.

“We didn’t know the lunar colony existed until a few years ago, when we started receiving transmissions from it,” Anemone went on. “For some of us, the war had already been lost thousands of years ago. Do you know what it feels like to keep fighting a war you’ve already lost?”

Alucard didn’t answer, but nodded slowly.

“But then YoRHa came. And we started receiving transmissions from humans who were still alive.” There was an awed, reverent tone in Anemone’s voice. “For the first time, we had hope. Those who’d already lost the strength to go on weren’t there to see it, but we were.

“Things will work out,” she said. “If you hang on long enough, things will work out. That’s what I’ve learned. Keep fighting today’s fights and one day, tomorrow will be different.”

“Quite the Pollyanna for someone in your circumstances.”

“It was that or stop fighting.” Anemone smiled. “Whenever you go back to the colony… tell the rest of humanity, ‘Thank you for holding on.'”

Alucard bowed his head, at a loss for words. His tongue cleaved to his throat. Suddenly, his ability to glibly adhere to the charade of the human colony fled from him. Wasn’t it cruel to give androids hope that they could win back the planet for their creators? “I’m flattered,” he whispered, his voice faltering. “But someday, you’ll all have to live for yourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you were two hundred years old. The average human lives to be eighty, perhaps ninety. If not for the war, you would live to see six, maybe seven generations pass you by. It hurts to grow attached to such… ephemeral people. You wouldn’t like it.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.” Anemone gave him a quizzical look. “Well, Alucard, how old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” he lied, forcing a sheepish grin. “But my peers tell me I’m wise beyond my years.”

It felt as though no time had passed at all once A2 cracked her eyes open again. But everything felt different now. Somehow, even the table she was laying on felt different. Softer. More padding.

Everything felt different.
As static rolled through A2’s vision, her sight slowly resolved from darkness to distorted blocks of grayscale pixels. Gradually, the long and undulating shadows cast across the workshop from the ceiling lights shining through the dangling arms hanging from the ceiling sharpened into focus.

A2 raised her arm tentatively, testing out her new body carefully, slowly—

Her hand smacked into one of the limbs hanging above her and ripped it from its moorings, sending it clattering noisily against its brethren before it fell to the floor.

“Whoa! Hey! Easy!” Jackass shouted out.

Her vision still a little blurry and plagued with patches of distortion, A2 lifted up her hands—slowly, carefully, she did everything slowly and carefully because she felt so light and uninhibited now that if she moved too rapidly she felt as though she’d careen off into space—and stared at them, watching her fingers furl and unfurl, her fingertips press into the meat of her palms, feeling skin against skin—

Oh, god.

She could feel her hands. She could feel her fingers. She could feel!

A2 wrapped her hand around her forearm and gave it an experimental squeeze, digging into the flesh with much more force than she’d intended and actually leaving bruises. Everything was squishier, too. There was synthetic muscle underneath the skin instead of a hard shell; it was yielding, far more so than she’d expected, but firm.

“One thing in there?” Jackass asked. “If you can’t hear me, don’t say anything.”

At the sound of the camp’s resident mad scientist’s voice, A2 sat up, but shot up like a bullet; her forehead cracked against Jackass’ nose, sending her reeling backward with blood pouring down her chin.

“Jeezus fucking goddamn…”

“There. Now we’re even.” A2 took a deep breath, feeling her synthetic lungs expand against her chassis’ sturdy, yet flexible ribcage.

She knew the Type-B models were more advanced than her, but… this was so much more than she’d imagined. Then again, she’d never had much of an imagination.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a body lying crumpled on the ground. It took her a second to realize that it was her own body. Her former body. She hardly recognized it—it wasn’t like she’d ever seen it from outside, anyway. Its scuffed, dented, and hastily bolted-together exposed chassis, the ragged skin barely covering it—all a testament to years of struggle and hardship.

A2 took a second to realize that the head of her old body had been defaced—literally. Its face and hair had been removed, along with the front of its skull, revealing that the circuitry and machinery inside had been completely scooped out; with so much taken away, the head looked comically small.

As she leaned forward to take a closer look, her long hair fell over her eyes; she brushed it back, her fingers catching against her cheek. The skin here felt different from the rest of her skin. Or, rather, it was the rest of her skin that felt different. Falling down to her jawline, her fingers dug ever so slightly into the seam line partitioning her jaw and neck.

“Figured I’d let you keep your old face,” Jackass said, a proud smirk lighting up her face in spite of the blood trickling from her nose. “Just in case it had any sort of sentimental value. That, and we
can’t have you looking *exactly* like 2B. That’d make for some… interesting situations around the camp.”

“Thanks. Now give me a minute and step out for a moment.”

“Yeah, sure.” Jackass her hand up to her nose. Blood seeped between her cupped fingers as she hastily turned around and exited the tent.

Confident that no one was watching, A2 took a finger and prodded her chest. Also very squishy. Very squishy. Intrigued, she took one of her breasts and cupped her hand around it. It wasn’t just a metal lump. It was the softest thing she’d ever felt, almost *pliable*. Maybe they were meant to act as shock absorbers?

She closed her eyes and sighed. It was euphoric. For the first time in nearly three years, she felt like hugging someone, or at least *something*.

A horrible chill ran through her entire body from head to toe as though something had filled her insides with ice. She shuddered, curling her legs and pressing her arms to her chest as she clutched at her shoulders and shivered. A puff of steam drifted from her mouth, as though the air around her had suddenly dropped below freezing. Her fresh and pristine skin twinged from the cold.

Jackass poked her head back in. “By the way, that body came with a uniform and everything. We can’t have you wandering the camp naked now that you’ve got your skin back, so—”

“You’re not putting me in a fucking YoRHa uniform,” A2 snapped, her words so vitriolic and forceful that Jackass stumbled backward as if the words themselves had injured her.

“Okay, then. I’ll find you something else to wear.” Jackass shrugged. “So how long are you planning on sitting there fondling yourself? I kinda need my workshop back.”

Flushed with embarrassment, A2 slipped off the operating table and pulled her cloak away from her old body, wrapping herself up in it both to ward off the chill and to cover up as much of her pristine body as possible. “You were *watching* me?”

“You’re my experiment. I need to assess how you’re adjusting to—”

“Do yourself a favor and don’t ever spy on me again.” A2 tugged the cloak tighter, as though gripping it firmer could erase whatever Jackass had seen from her mind. “How long until moonrise?”

“Uh…” Jackass tapped her forehead. “About… now-ish?”

“Huh.” A2 didn’t feel any different. Not that there was ever much lead-up to the transformation—it just tended to *happen* as soon as the moon rose.

Jackass sighed. “Maybe Alucard was wrong about the curse passing to your new body.”

“…Why do you sound *disappointed* about that?”

“Well, you know, um… science and all that…” Jackass anxiously fiddled with a lock of her lank black hair.

“I’m not your guinea pi—”

The words caught in A2’s throat as a sharp bolt of pain ran up her spine, waves of blistering heat
and frigid cold washing over her body as every muscle beneath her pristine skin began to churn and roil. She fell to her knees, cradling her head in her hands. Each night, the transformation seemed to get a little less painful—whether that was due to the changes themselves lessening in magnitude with the waning of the moon or she was getting used to it, she couldn’t tell. This new body, though, was unprepared for the unique sensation of every inch of her chassis reshaping itself, synthetic tendons and muscles unspooling themselves around metal bones and realigning themselves, joints cracking and snapping, flesh flowing and molding itself like soft clay.

“It’s happening!” Jackass cried out. “It’s happening!”

“I know it’s happening,” A2 growled as a sharp pain ran through her jaw, coughing and spitting out her teeth as sharp fangs grew in to supplant them. Spit and blood dripped down her chin.

“You have to describe what it’s like,” Jackass hissed, crouching beside her.

A2 winced, baring her fangs, as sharp claws tore through her fingertips and dug into her forehead. “You’re… r’cord’n dis… ar’n you?” she slurred, her chest heaving, her tongue draped lazily over her fangs as her nose and mouth pushed out into a short, stubby muzzle.

“Of course! It’s for science! What’s it feel like?”

“Ish like… f-fuh… fuch you. Dash ha if feels.” A2 shivered as her fur began to grow in, every single hair threading itself out from beneath her skin like a needle through cloth. One of her hands clutching at her head slipped, dragging its claws through her skin and leaving four bloody scratches down from her forehead to her jaw that healed immediately in the wake of the fur flowing across her skin.

The changes ran their course; her tail grew in last, as it always did, curling and twitching as though it had a mind of its own (A2 was certain that it did). As the agony that came with having every part of her body reshaped subsided to a dull, throbbing all-over ache, she took a deep breath and panted for air. The sounds and smells of the camp filled her ears and nose, the stench of grease and oil from Jackass’ clothes stinging her nostrils.

“Happy?” she asked, glowering at Jackass.

Jackass peered at A2 from every angle, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “Oh, yeah. Very. Can you stand?”

A2 stood up with relative ease (at least, compared with her previous transformations), stumbling a little bit on unfamiliar legs but keeping her footing. Just as Alucard had said, the more the moon waned, the more humanlike her wolfish form became. It felt like she’d finally reached the tipping point where standing on two legs became easier than standing on four.

It… didn’t feel so bad. Not missing any of her skin made a world of difference—she wasn’t in agony every time the wind blew and wasn’t constantly trying to think through a haze of pain. She had to admit, now that she could move more or less normally, this whole ‘werewolf’ thing wasn’t so bad. Maybe it was even something she could get used to—at least, while she wasn’t stuck running around on all fours.

Then again, though, there was that horrible empty, hollow feeling that stuck with her in this form, as though there was nothing but thin air inside her—a feeling that left her so worn and fatigued that it was difficult to do anything but sleep until the moon set, although sometimes the pangs running through her abdomen hurt enough to keep her awake.
“Nice! How about talking?” Jackass asked. She had an exuberant, toothy grin that stretched from ear to ear. “You any better with that tonight? Give it your best shot!”

A2 took a moment to get her tongue working properly. Fortunately, the shorter her snout, the easier it was to wrangle her mouth into making the right sounds. “Go… fuck yourself,” she finally answered.

“Look, I’ll delete the recording if I can just get some testimony from you—”

A2 reached down, took a fistful of Jackass’ collar, and tried to lift her up off her feet, only for her claws to rip the front of her cloak to shreds; Jackass fell to the ground, leaving A2 with shredded red fabric dangling between her furry fingers. “If you’re so curious,” she snarled, baring her fangs, “then how about I just bite you right here and give you some first-hand experience?”

With a smile so bright it was almost unnerving given the circumstances, Jackass rolled up her sleeve and presented her arm to A2, her bare skin glistening in the light from the ceiling. “All right. Go ahead.”

“What?”

“Bite me.”

“You want me to bite you?”

There was an eager glimmer in Jackass’ eye. “Yes, ma’am!”

“Ugh. No. Not if you want me to!”

“On second thought…” Jackass said, “that really did look like it hurt a lot, so please, please, whatever you do, don’t bite me. I’d hate it. There’s nothing you could do that would be worse than turning me into a werewolf…”

“You don’t think I’m too dumb to know what reverse psyth… psysh…” A2’s tongue, unused to its length and the shape of the mouth it occupied, stumbled over the word too many times, so she gave up. “You can’t fool me!”

Jackass pouted. “C’mon.”

“No. You made it weird.”


Fearing the worst, A2 nevertheless crouched down and crept closer.

With a mischievous smile, Jackass reached out and buried her hand in A2’s thick white mane, scratching vigorously at the back of her ear. “Who’s a good girl?”

With an irate snarl, A2 snatched Jackass’ arm out of the air and wrenched it aside, her fingers wrapping around her forearm and claws digging into her skin. “If you ever touch me like that again,” she growled, her hackles rising, “I’ll—”

“You’ll what? Bite me?”

A2 squeezed just firmly enough to leave a bruise; Jackass swallowed a strangled scream as her chassis crumpled under the pressure. “Okay, okay! L-Let go of me!” she shouted. “I think you broke something!”
“Serves you right.” A2 let go.

Jackass examined the injury and cringed. Blood ran down her skin in thick rivulets from puncture wounds going all the way down to her endoskeleton, which was sporting some nasty dents. A2 was taken aback by the extent of the damage. She hadn’t clamped down *that* hard, had she?

“Oh, I’ve learned my lesson,” Jackass said. “You are *not* a good girl.”

Hardly one to dwell on whatever Jackass might have thought of her, A2 picked up her old body and tossed it over her shoulder. It felt like it weighed almost half of what it should have; she lifted it easily with only one hand. How was her new body *this* strong?

A2 wasn’t one to question such a gift, though, so she set that question aside as she slipped out of Jackass’ workshop. The night air was cold but heavy and humid, the breeze ruffling the fur that kept her warm. Her eyes, keener and sharper than before, picked out the shape of the camp even as the lights dimmed and went out.

She picked up Anemone’s scent on the breeze drifting through the camp seconds before the Resistance leader’s voice reached her ears.

“A2? Is that *you*?”

A2 turned to find Anemone hurrying across the clearing toward her, coming to a halt just a few paces away from her, her weary eyes brightening. “You’re standing up!”

“Yeah. It’s about time. Four legs gets old. I don’t recommend it.”

“You look good. Is this the new body?”

A2 hefted her old body, its limp and lifeless limbs swaying.

“Oh.” Anemone let out a self-deprecating half-laugh. “I see. You must feel a lot better.”

“I’ve felt worse.” A2 clutched at her stomach and doubled over as another cramp stabbed at her insides, twisting her innards into sharp knots.

“It’s still happening?” Anemone’s brow furrowed with concern as she reached up and laid a gentle hand on A2’s forehead. “Come to my tent. You can lie down there…”

In spite of the pain, A2’s tail began to wag (much to her displeasure). “I’ll be fine,” she insisted, taking a few steps on her own and nearly falling to her knees. Her old body slipped off her shoulders and crumpled in a heap on the ground. Her claws dug into her skin; she half-considered ripping herself open to remove whatever was stabbing at her from within. More than that, she felt lightheaded, dizzy, and fatigued, struggling to keep her eyes open.

“What seems to be the problem?” Alucard asked, emerging from the shadows bathing the silent and sleepy campsite as though he had appeared out of thin air.

“Just some ab… andombinable cramps,” A2 choked out.

“You certainly *look* abominable.”

“Abdominal,” A2 corrected, wrestling with her tongue to sound out each syllable.

“Sorry. That joke was cruel of me,” Alucard said. “There are some humans who would find you quite beautiful in the shape you’re in now.”
“Thanks; I don’t care.” A2 gritted her fangs as another invisible knife twisted itself inside her.

“Hmm.” Deep in thought, Alucard stroked his chin.

Oh, great. Here was Mister Know-It-All Half-Human, the pretentious jerk who knew everything about everything. A2 rolled her eyes in anticipation of Alucard’s answer.

“When was the last time,” Alucard asked, “you’ve eaten anything?”

“… ‘Eaten?’” A2 asked.

“Yes. Surely you’ve been hungry after your transformations.”

A2 wasn’t quite sure she understood the question. “‘Hungry?’”

Realization dawned on Alucard’s face. “Oh. Of course. You androids don’t eat.”

“But werewolves do?” Anemone asked.

Alucard chuckled. “Anemone, werewolves do practically nothing but eat! For many centuries, werewolves were thought to be evil creatures who devoured friend and foe alike out of malice… until it was discovered that they were simply too hungry after such a calorie-intensive transformation to be picky about their diets.”

“Werewolves would attack people?”

“Oh, yes. A lycanthrope could even devour his own wife and children on the night of a full moon, should they be the nearest source of fresh meat.” Alucard shook his head in a way that made it clear he’d seen such gruesome things firsthand. “But if he remembered to set a few goats in front of him that evening, he would have his fill of them and spend the night as docile as a lamb. I suspect that for you, A2, the idea never occurred to you to harm any of your friends here, as you have never been hungry before.”

“So how do we fix it?” A2 asked.

“Go out, find an elk or a boar or something,” Alucard said, nonchalantly gesturing to thin air, “rip its throat out, and feast on its still-warm carcass as it breathes its last breath.”

Of course he had an answer. Of course it was weird. Just her luck. “Yeah,” A2 said. “Sounds great. I’ll get right on that.”

“I could show you how,” Alucard said, “if you—”

“I know how to kill things, Alucard,” A2 said, turning away from him and Anemone and hurrying out of the camp.

She sniffed the air, caught the scent of something that smelled like food, and bounded off into the labyrinthine city, her pain momentarily forgotten as a flood of newfound instincts rushed through her mind and begged to be indulged.

It was going to be an interesting night, at least.

Alucard returned to the twins’ tent to find Devola sleeping like a log and Popola curled up beside her with the spellbook in her lap, the furthest thing in the world from asleep. A bouquet of desert roses, trumpet-shaped flowers with five starlike petals that faded from pale pink to the same vibrant
scarlet as her hair, lay at her side. She was too absorbed in the simple conjuration spell she was casting to notice him slip into the tent.

“Keeping yourself… busy, I see,” he remarked, suddenly struggling to muster his typical dry wit in her presence.

“Yeah, uh…” Jolted out of her concentration, Popola hastily set the book aside and cradled the last flower she’d conjured in her palm. “Just getting what I need to, um… make that liqueur.”

“Your priorities are certainly in the right place. Is that why you were so intent on learning to read that book?”

“Not really.” Popola glanced at the book again, stroking its cover. “I’m sure there’s something in here that I can use to keep you and Dev safe.”

Alucard sat down. “I did know the author. She had quite a few spells of… cataclysmic effect in there. But judging from the first few pages, it might take a while for you to reach any spells that are that powerful, I’m afraid.”

They both sat in silence, neither quite looking at each other.

“So…”

“So…” Alucard cleared his throat. “So.”

“Um…” Popola took one of the desert roses and rolled its stem between her finger and thumb, paying close attention to its splayed-out petals as they twirled around as she tried to avoid looking at Alucard, who was himself preoccupied with tracing nonsense patterns in the dirt with his finger.

“Your new cape looks nice,” she said.

“It’s a blanket. Anemone gave it to me for helping with A2.”

“Looks soft.”

Alucard shrugged it off his shoulders and handed it to her. “You can have it. It’s a nice amenity. An amenity from Anemone.”

“An amenity from Anemone?”

“Yes. We’re fortunate she isn’t an enemy, Anemone.”

“Well, you’ve never been on the receiving end of Anemone’s enmity.”

The growing smile on Alucard’s face shrank and vanished. “She hasn’t ever hurt—”

“Oh, no, no, no, no,” Popola insisted, “I-I was just keeping the thing going. Sorry. She’s actually really nice, even to us.”

“Oh, good. Well, it sure is nice that you can count on Anemone’s amity and not Anemone’s enmity.”

“You realize you’re trying to have a tongue-twister contest with a robot.”

“I think I can make you slip up.”
Popola chuckled. “Well, if you want my opinion, I think Anemone’s amity can be Anemone’s enemy.”

“I see what you mean,” Alucard said, nodding. “Anemone’s amenities might spur Anemone’s enmity if Anemone’s amity leads her to calamity against Amenome’s enemies.”

“You just said ‘Amenome.’”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I’m literally recording you.” Popola cocked her head playfully. “Do you want me to play it back?”

“I think that’s cheating.”

Alucard traded a few more tongue-twisters with her, but the whole time, he found himself reflecting again and again on a different sort of tongue-twister altogether. Brief and hastily-ended as it had been, he hadn’t been kissed like that in over ten millennia. Not since Maria Renard. That had been… how many years ago? Eighteenth century. Ten thousand, two hundred years. And that was the furthest they’d gone before, of course, he’d gone back to sleep again and broken her heart…

It was obvious she loved him. She’d spent almost every moment around him since he’d woken up acting like a schoolgirl struggling with a crush. Did he love her, too, or was he simply that starved for companionship? Was there even a difference?

“Something wrong?” Popola asked.

“No, nothing. I feel great.”

Another interminable pause stretched on.

“That was not a lie. About feeling great,” Alucard said. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Well, normally, at this time of day I’d be feeling quite morose, given the… end of the world and such.” His heart thumped against his ribs so rapidly that he almost felt human. “But your, er, surprise…”

“O-Oh.” Popola’s face turned red. “If it helps, I could… give you a—”

She clamped her hands over her mouth as if to cram her words back in, the desert rose falling to her lap.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Alucard raised an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

“Nothing!”

The walls of the tent shuddered as another gust buffeted the camp. The cold wind seeped through the gaps between the canvas and the ground with a quiet, yet shrill whistle. Alucard scuttled across the tent and draped the blanket over his shoulder, then handed the other corner to Popola. She took it over her shoulder as well, huddling under the blanket with him.
“Maybe tomorrow,” Alucard said, “we could try that again.”

Popola let a nervous, wobbly grin crawl across her face, but it faded quickly. Her eyes flitted downward. “Maybe tomorrow. I… I’m not sure.”

“Something wrong?” Alucard asked, attempting to reach out to her only to be reminded, to his embarrassment, that he was still missing his right hand.

“No, nothing. I feel great.”

He cupped her cheek in his left hand, her warmth bleeding into the cool skin of his palm, and slid his hand down to the side of her neck, picking up the unfamiliar, not-quite human rhythm of her pulse. She seemed stiffer than usual, her synthetic muscles tight with tension beneath her skin. “Is that so?”

Popola didn’t answer.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been wondering…” She didn’t look at him—her eyes remained fixed on her hands as they kneaded the hem of her grease-streaked blouse. “Do you think androids were built to love humans?”

Alucard laughed. “I hardly think so. Have you met A2? She all but despises me.”

Another brief smile played on Popola’s face.

“Besides,” he added, “as I’ve reminded you and your sister time and time again, I’m only half human. If you were programmed to love all humans, you’re only obligated to love half of me,” he said, smirking devilishly, “and the other half is simply your choice to make.”

He felt the tension melt away as Popola’s shoulders relaxed. “Thank you, Alucard. You’re too kind.”

“I’m glad. I’ve often been told otherwise.”

“You?”

“Believe it or not, I’m not known for relating to… people. Being an eldritch nobleman from the fifteenth century who’s slept through centuries of social and cultural upheaval will do that to you. Human lives are short. Their perspectives are small. Living among them, it’s easy to be… standoffish.”

He was lying. He had a harder time closing himself off from people than he let on. Otherwise, he wouldn’t still be mourning all the friends he’d left behind.


“Hmm?”

“Human lives were short.”

“Right.”

“Well… I guess you’re among your people now.” Popola pulled Alucard a bit closer to her, wedging herself between him and Devola. “Just a hundred years until Dev and I hit ten
“And yet you’re still six hundred years my junior.”

Popola laid her hand on Alucard’s, her fingers curling around his. “Alucard, it doesn’t count when you’re asleep for most of them. How many years have you actually been awake for?”

“Oh my god.” Popola giggled. “You’re a baby!”

“I am not. Dhampyrs mature quickly. I was fully grown at fifteen—”

She gave him a playful nudge. “I’m sorry, Alucard. I don’t think we can ever be together. I mean, your life has been so short, your perspective so small…”

“Please.”

“You are as a mayfly to me, who has walked in eternity and seen the tears of time…” She quivered like a leaf in autumn as her words broke down into bright peals of laughter.

“You’ve made your point, Popola.”

Purring, Popola nestled into Alucard’s side, resting her head on his shoulder and letting her scarlet hair spill over his chest. “I guess we can make it work. Not all May-December relationships are doomed.”

“I’ll never live this down, will I?”

“Maybe in a few thousand years, whippersnapper.” Popola’s hand left his and slipped under the blanket, then under his coat, then under his shirt; her palm pressed gently to his chest, heat radiating into his cool flesh. Alucard closed his eyes, basking in her warmth the way a snake would bask in the sun.

“You’re cold,” Popola murmured, cuddling closer to him. “Is that normal?”

“Shake hands with my father and you’ll see—”

His voice faltered; he fell silent. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as a chill ran down his back. At the moment he’d spoken, he’d heard something outside. Something he’d never thought he’d hear again.

Someone he’d never thought he’d hear again.

Popola lifted her head. “Alucard, are you okay—”

Alucard shushed her and listened.

“Knowing our luck, the shuttle launch is gonna get delayed due to rain anyway…”
That voice…

Alucard’s eyes snapped open. His heart pounding a tattoo against his ribcage, his languid pulse racing, he all but tore himself away from Popola and threw himself out of the tent, his boots kicking up dirt and sand as he followed the long-dead voice.

Two people stood in the center of the camp, lit by beams of light from the boxy machines floating at their sides. One was the assassin from last night, clad in a pristine black uniform to replace the one A2 had torn to shreds, her black skirt and the feathers sewn into her sleeves swaying in the wind. Her expression was blank and unreadable, and the black cloth wrapped over her eyes didn’t help. Not a single lock of her feathery silver-white hair was out of place. Two swords, curved katanas with oil-streaked white blades, floated at her back with golden halos of light circling their hilts.

The other could have been her twin. A fey-looking young man with a soft face framed by short white hair, the ends of his blindfold flapping in the wind at the back of his head. An ornate black frock coat, shorts, and boots, all in the same style and ornamented with the same embroidered patterns as those patterned across the woman’s clothes, clung to his boyish physique. His movements were looser and more casual than those of his companion, who stood at attention with the stillness of a statue.

Both of the white-haired androids turned to face Alucard as he emerged from the tent, alerted by his outburst.

“Alert: Human vital signs detected,” one of the floating machines said, speaking in a deep-voiced, robotic monotone.

“Proposal: Units 2B and 9S should take the human into custody,” the other machine said, its voice higher-pitched but just as flat as its counterpart’s.

Popola crawled out of the tent behind him. “Alucard? What’s going on?”

The young man raised his hand and nervously waved it at Alucard, a few anxious twitches of his lips curving his mouth into a series of slight, brief, faltering smiles. “Hi there. Um, I think you’ve already met 2B here, but I, uh… I’m her partner. My name’s 9S. It’s nice to meet you, uh… Alucard, right?”

Alucard opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Bereft of his voice, rooted to the spot, all he could do was stand and stare, mouth agape, fixated on the young white-haired man standing before him.

The young man who spoke with the same exact voice as Soma Cruz.
Dance of Pales

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Pascal makes a new friend, A2 gets some new clothes, and Alucard goes where no dhampyr has gone before.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to wordbending and ariosto for beta reading!

Pascal was almost always the first machine in the village to exit rest mode in the morning, since he needed to set an example for the villagers, especially for the children. But this early morning, so early that the moon was still high in the sky, he found himself jolted awake by the sound of metal knuckles rapping on his window.

His round, froggish optical sensors flickered bright green as he roused himself from slumber. His bedroom window, which usually gave him a wonderful view of the wooden walkways ringing the great tree that served as the foundation of the village, was crowded by an unfamiliar sight.

"Uncle Pascal! Uncle Pascal!" two machine children bleated, their round heads clanking against each other as they both tried to fit themselves in the frame of the window. One was a behemoth of a girl and wore a pink ribbon affixed to her head; the other was much shorter and wore a matching blue ribbon.

"Children…?" Pascal pulled himself out of bed, the wooden floor creaking beneath his metal feet. "You should not be up at this hour. You two need your sleep!"

"We couldn’t sleep," the smaller child said.

"So we went for a walk!" the larger child said. "We just went around the village!"

"Oh, my! You remembered to stay in the light, didn’t you?" Pascal asked, worried. He’d ringed the village with ultraviolet lights to fend against any future vampire attacks, keeping it well-lit at all hours of the day and night alike. But some of the more rambunctious children constantly had to be reminded to stay where it was safe.

"Yes, Uncle Pascal!" both children shouted in unison.

"We saw a wild elk!" the smaller child bleated. "It was huge!"

"And then a giant wolf ate it!" the larger child added. "And she told us to fuck off!"

"Children! That is a very naughty word," Pascal scolded the two of them, wagging his finger. "Where did you learn that?"
“I’m sorry,” the smaller child said. “The wolf said it.”

“She told us to fuck off!” The larger child ran off, shouting out her recently-acquired verbiage to anyone who would listen, her tinny and electronic voice ringing in the still morning air. “Fuck off! Fuck off! Fuck off!”

Pascal slid the window open and patted the smaller child on the shoulder. “Dear, please tell your little sister that while wild animals may say such vile things, us machines must hold ourselves to higher standards.”

The smaller child nodded. “Yes, Uncle Pascal!”

As the smaller child ran off to rein in her younger sister, Pascal leaned on the windowsill, gazed out at the warmly-lit walkways and ramshackle cabins as lights within each little wooden home came on one by one, and sighed. First vampire machines, now swearing wolves. What was this world coming to?

Rain began to roll and drip off the eaves, droplets tapping on his head. As the low rumbling of thunder rolled through the black clouds overhead, Pascal retreated and closed the window. Within a minute the sprinkling of rain became a downpour, loudly dancing on the roof and pattering on the window.

Pascal turned to his bookshelf and rifled through the dozens of works of human literature he’d collected over the centuries. There was no better backdrop to a productive day of reading than the ceaseless tapping of rain, he had found. His metal fingers skimmed the edges of the shelves, brushed gently against the painstakingly-restored spines, as he pondered what to read today. Friedrich Nietzsche was always an interesting read. René Descartes had his moments. Michel Foucault was quite fun. And if he was in the mood for a laugh, Ayn Rand was available.

“How…” Pascal murmured to himself, his finger stopping to rest on Writing and Difference. “Perhaps today is the day to tackle Jacques Derrida…”

Pascal slipped the book from its resting place and took it to his desk. But before he could get past the first page, something banged loudly on his door, rattling it so violently he was shocked it was not torn from his hinges.

“Excuse me,” he called out as he trundled over to the door. “Please be gentle when knocking on one’s door; it is quite rude—”

He opened the door and found, of all things, a machine he didn’t recognize on the other side. The machine’s optical sensors glowed amber amid a splash of machine oil streaked across its orblike head. It towered nearly a head taller than Pascal himself and had a battered, unconscious android slung over its shoulder.

Pascal wasn’t sure what to make of the guest at first. A machine that wasn’t from the village. Was it still connected to the network? Was it hostile? Was he in danger? Had this machine harmed anyone in the village? Would it harm him?

The stranger shrugged the android off its shoulder and with surprising gentleness laid its limp body on the floor. The android was, like most YoRHa types, silver-haired, but dressed himself like no other android Pascal had met. He wore only a pair of pants and a pair of boots, leaving his well-muscled and bruise-covered chest bare and exposed. A black tattoo ran all the way up his left arm, its angular geometric designs flowing across his shoulder.

“I—I suppose,” Pascal mumbled, still quite flustered as the machine turned around and stomped back out into the pouring rain. The rain made hollow, metallic ringing sounds on its chassis. A fork of lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating it even after it had leaped off the wooden walkway and into the pitch-black forest below, and seconds later, another booming crack of thunder shook the heavens.

Pascal crouched beside the injured android, the servos in his spindly metal legs creaking and whirring. The android’s short, sodden hair, darkened from silver to gray from the rain, was speckled with little red blossoms, blood still oozing from a few open cuts on his face. There were long, slender V-shaped bite marks on his bare skin and a few sharp, almost sharklike teeth embedded in the flesh.

“Oh, dear,” Pascal said, clapping at one of the fangs by its forked roots and gently pulling it free. The android’s muscles tensed, fingers twitching, lips curling back for a moment to reveal gritted teeth. Pascal pulled the rest of the fangs out, setting them on the floor, and went to his shelf to pick up a pack of staunching gel from his supply cabinet.

His nerves were still jittery from the sudden intrusion, but as the initial anxiety faded away, Pascal felt invigorated. Were more machines and androids outside his little village learning to set aside their differences and live in peace?

He tended to the android’s wounds as best he could with what little he had on hand, then laid him on the bed to rest and went back to his book. It occurred to him that he should entertain his guest, so he began to read aloud.

“If it recedes one day, leaving behind its works and signs on the shores of our civilization, the structuralist invasion might become a question for the historian of ideas, or perhaps even an object. But the historian would be deceived if he came to this pass…”

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Popola woke up to the sound of rain pattering on the outside of the tent, rolled over, and curled up, not even bothering to open her eyes. A soft, thick, warm, heavy blanket was wrapped around her—the softest and warmest blanket she’d ever slept under in the past seven thousand years. There was no sense in waking up now. It was cold and wet outside, but it was warm and dry in here, and Popola wanted nothing more than to sleep the day away—or at least the morning.

She rolled over onto her back, tugged the blanket tighter around her, and reached out, fumbling blindly for—

Oh, right. Alucard had left with 2B and 9S that night. Of course he wasn’t there. Popola’s hand plopped down on the cold patch of dirt where he would have been laying down if not for that. Suddenly, the tent felt colder, the blanket just a little less soft and insulating.

And where was Dev—

Something poked her in the cheek.

“Hey. Hey, sis. Psst.”

Popola cracked open one eye, making out her sister’s blurry silhouette through slitted eyelids. She let out a displeased groan. “Deeev…”

Devola poked her again. “Wakey, wakey. Big day today. We’ve gotta head out to the desert and
unclog that pipeline like we were supposed to do yesterday.”

“Ugh... nooooo...”

Devola took her by the shoulders and hauled her into a sitting position, letting the blanket draped over her slough off her shoulders and pool in her lap. “Yeah, we gotta do it. It’s important.”

Popola’s head lolled to one side, heavy as lead. “…S’cold.”

“I know. Anemone’s really gonna scold us if we don’t get this done.” Devola gave her a light wake-up tap on each cheek. “C’mon, sis. Up and at ‘em.”

“It’s rainy...”

“Yeah, well, we should’ve done it... yesterday...” Devola said, stifling a yawn of her own.

“There’s Dracula monsters there...”

“Yeah? Well, you weren’t so scared of those guys yesterday, were you?”

Popola shook her head. She just didn’t feel like waking up today. “’Cuz they were dead. Let’s go back to sleep.”

Devola sat beside her and wrapped an arm over her shoulder, keeping her upright. Resigned at last to the fact that she was awake, Popola blearily rubbed the fatigue from her eyes.

“I get it,” Devola said, grinning slyly as she gave Popola a coy little nudge. “You already miss Alucard, don’t you?”

“No! I-I mean yes! But it’s not that—it’s just cold and wet out...” Popola tucked her knees against her chest. It was cold and the tapping of the rain on the tarp was growing even louder as the rain came down harder and harder.

And what did it matter, anyway? She and Devola did all the dirty jobs and it didn’t make a whit of difference how any of the other androids treated them. The’d only ever been treated like normal people when Alucard was at their side, and now that he was gone, there was nothing to shield them from the casual, offhand, seemingly-insignificant little instances of bigotry that ate away at their resolve bit by bit...

Why did she and Devola have to want so badly to do right by people who would never reward them for it? If only they didn’t have to bear such a punishment for their failures...

“I know there’s a war on, but...” Popola sighed. “I don’t feel like working today, Dev.”

Bowing her head, Devola reached out and laid her hand on top of Popola’s. “Okay, what’s wrong? Alucard didn’t leave without saying goodbye, did he? Hate to say I told you so,” she said, shaking her head in dismay, “but I told you he wouldn’t treat you right...”

“No, he said goodbye. It’s not that.”

“Bet he didn’t kiss you goodbye, though,” Devola teased.

“He did!” Popola curled her fists. “H-He kissed me right on the cheek!” she blurted out, the memory of his parting gift—the way he’d threaded his cold fingers through hers, the way he’d leaned in, his eyes closed and pale lips pursed, and nuzzled her ever-so-gently on her cheek—turning her face as red as her hair.
“Ooh, what a gentleman!” Devola squeezed her tight. “You know I had my doubts, but… I’m glad he’s treating you right. My little sister finally found a man…”

“‘Little?’ We came off the assembly line at the same time!”

“Nuh-uh. I was thirty-five milliseconds early.”

“How do you remember that?”

“So you admit it!”

“Dammit, Devola! I hate you!” Popola shouted, trying in vain to keep from laughing.

“I hate you, too, Popola,” Devola replied, giggling. She took a moment to catch her breath. “So, uh… good news. I was lying about going out to the desert.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Anemone has a special job for us. She wants us to look after A2’s old body while she’s out and make sure Jackass doesn’t get her hands on it.”

“Oh. That sounds…” Popola furrowed her brow. “Uh… Why would Jackass want A2’s old body?”

“Anemone said, ‘don’t ask questions you’re not prepared to hear the answer to.’” Devola dragged a sodden bundle into the tent and unwrapped it, revealing the headless remains of A2.

Inert and lifeless, the old chassis showed its age and the trials it had suffered much more clearly. The eroded, smoothed, and softened edges of its doll-like joints, the scratches and scrapes that roughened its black endodermis, the ragged borders where skin stopped and metal began, the patches of newer material bolted on top of older material, gaps in the chassis showing the worn-down mechanisms within…

“Can’t believe she was walking around in that ‘til last night,” Devola muttered. “What do you think she wants to do with it?”

“Dunno.” Popola shrugged. “Funeral service, maybe?”

“Maybe she’ll give it a sky burial.”

“That’s when they’d leave a corpse up in the mountains and let the birds eat it, right?” Popola asked.

“Yep.”

“Birds can’t eat android parts.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Devola tapped on the body’s lifeless arm as though she expected to wake it from its eternal slumber. “What about a good old-fashioned funeral pyre?”

“Anemone said A2 lost her friends over the Pacific, right? Maybe she’d like a burial at sea.”

“Huh. Yeah, that might be nice. Or, who were those guys who put their dead on boats, set them asea, then burned them?”

“Vikings?”
“Yeah, those guys. I think A2 would really appreciate a viking funeral.”

As the rain started tapping with greater vigor on the canopy of the tent, Devola rested her head on Popola’s shoulder. It was easy to see that as responsible as she was, ready and willing as she was to get up and do her chores, she was just as weary right now as Popola; Popola weaved her fingers through her hair and held her closer, draping Alucard’s blanket over the both of them.

Popola flipped open her spellbook to the last page she could read. “If I get a little farther in this book, I could do something really nice,” she said, “like transmute the body into flowers…”

“Sounds a little advanced,” Devola mumbled. Her eyelids began to rebel against her, threatening to fall over her eyes as she nestled closer. “You sure something like that is even in there?”

“Yeah. Alucard and I just got to the table of contents before he had to leave.”

“What do you mean, ‘just got to the table of contents?’ Isn’t that the first page?”

“The author put it after the first twelve spells,” Popola explained. “I think it’s so that only people with real talent can see what the rest of the book is about.”

“Huh.”

“And it’s not even the whole table of contents. It’s just the first hundred pages or so.” Popola traced her fingers along the words only she could see.

“You really like that book, huh?” Devola pawed at it. “Does it remind you of Al?”

“‘Al?’”

“Alucard.”

“You can’t call him ‘Al,’ Dev.”

“Why not? Because he’s your boyfriend?” Devola asked, a silly grin on her face.

“What? No! It’s disrespectful.”

“Fine. I won’t call him ‘Al,’” Devola said. “While he’s around,” she added, muttering under her breath.

“Thanks.”

Devola leaned back. “So… is he a good kisser?”

“Dev!”

“Can he tie a cherry stem with his tongue?”

“Dev, are you drunk?”

“I don’t have to be drunk to tease my little sister.” Devola nudged her. “Well? Can he?”

“Okay, he’s bad at kissing. I don’t think he’s ever done it before. Romantically, anyway.”

“Oof.”

“He just needs practice.”
The tent flap fluttered as Jackass poked her head into the tent. “When I needed to teach my girlfriend how to kiss, I charged her for lessons.”

Popola and Devola both screamed, mostly from surprise, partly from horror.

Jackass flicked away a lock of rain-slicked black hair that had gotten plastered from her forehead. “Hey, girls. I was studying the spare black box I had left over from A2’s body transplant and thought I saw something interesting. Can I see her old body and run some tests on it?”

“No,” Devola said.

“Please.”

“No,” Popola said.

“The fate of the world is at stake.”

“Anemone told us you’d say that,” Devola said.

“I’ll pay you,” Jackass said.

“No,” Popola said.

“How much?” Devola asked.

“Dev!”

“I know what I’m doing, sis,” she hissed at Popola.

“I’ll give you twenty thousand,” Jackass offered.

“T-Twenty thousand?” Devola sputtered.

“Dev…”

“A2’s body isn’t for sale,” Devola insisted on Popola’s urging. “Unless she says so. Go ask her.”

“All right. I will.” Jackass forlornly withdrew back into the rain.

Devola sighed and flopped onto the ground, the blanket unraveling from Popola’s shoulders and falling on top of her. “And yet we’re the pariahs,” she muttered.

With the downpour as heavy as it was, the last thing 9S wanted to do was leave the truck he and 2B had taken to the launch site; he wasn’t sure Alucard was quite so keen on getting out either. Then again, it was hard to tell with the guy, who was currently curled up in the corner of the tarp-covered flatbed, nestled between crates of munitions and snoozing the day away.

As far as humans went, Alucard wasn’t what 9S had expected. If he was telling the truth, he had stowed away from a supply shuttle that ferried ores from the mines on the Moon down to Earth to fight in the war—and fight he had. He’d even held his own, somehow, when a troop of machines had leaped out at them on the way to the transport hub a few miles north of the camp. Some of the folks at Anemone’s camp had said he’d gone toe to toe with Eve and hadn’t been turned into a bloody paste! The way they’d talked him up, he was as fast and as skilled with a sword as an android and seemed to be nearly as strong as one too, if not just as strong. What was the point of having androids if humans were so good at fighting their own battles?
But those weren’t the only questions Alucard’s existence raised. For starters, how could he have stowed away in an ore shipment? Those shuttles didn’t have any life support: the only atmosphere they had in their interiors was meant to keep the crew air-cooled and wasn’t fit for humans to breathe.

So perhaps he’d been on Earth the whole time. Where, though? Was there a hidden colony of humans on the planet that had survived the past seven thousand years of warfare? Had he been cryogenically frozen before the invasion? Why would he concoct such a flagrantly false backstory instead of telling the truth?

So many questions. And yet 9S could count on one hand the number of questions he’d had that Alucard had actually taken the effort to answer.

Maybe he was just expecting too much from one of his creators… but he had to admit, it was a bit of a letdown. Then again, humans needed their sleep, and the three of them had left in the middle of the night. Even 9S had gotten some time in rest mode while the car drove into the mountains.

A blustery gust of wind blew the rain sideways the instant 9S hopped off the back of the truck and set foot on solid ground, his boot sinking into the muddy rut left in the wake of the truck’s back tire. As graceful as 2B was in dismounting, the needle-like hail of rain did her no favors.

As soon as he passed the gate into the underground shuttle launch complex, he took off his boots and upended them right there onto the floor, hoping to get rid of the water that had built up in there, only to find that there was nothing in there. His socks had absorbed everything.

2B walked past him, looking surprisingly well-composed despite the torrent she’d ran through. “There’s an access point in here,” she told him. “It’s useless for travel, but at least you can change your clothes.”

9S nodded and set his boots aside, then took off for the access point. His socks squelched with each step he took.


Irritated, 9S leaned against the rust-streaked wall and crossed his arms. “Answer it.”

A panel appeared before him, lit with 21O’s face. “Unit 9S, it’s time for your regularly-scheduled report.”

“No issues to report. We’ve made it to the launch complex; the silo’s just up ahead.”

21O was silent for a second; 9S could hear the faint sound of her fingers flying across her keyboard. “Positions updated. The shuttle is set to launch on schedule and 6O and I have brought down your flight units for aerial support.”

“Good. Thanks.” 9S saw 2B glance at him, bemused at how curt and terse he was being. He’d never been so laconic while talking with his Operator. But then again, 21O wasn’t exactly his Operator. Or, at least, he didn’t feel like she was. This one was still a stranger. Rather, he was a stranger to her. “This concludes my regularly-scheduled report.”

“Wait, 9S.” 21O took a deep breath. “You’re an inquisitive type, aren’t you? Have you been asking Alucard… questions?”

“Uh… yeah,” 9S said, taken aback by 21O’s inquiry.
He took a look at Alucard, who was busy tousling and wringing the water out of his long, rain-darkened hair. The guy wasn’t really the talkative type—he even looked away whenever 9S tried to strike up a conversation with him. Maybe he was antisocial. Or maybe he just found 9S annoying. Either way, Alucard had only given brief answers to a few of the many questions he’d asked. It was almost… disappointing. Certainly frustrating. Couldn’t the guy say a single complete sentence to him?

“When he comes to the Bunker, I’d like to ask him a few questions of my own,” 21O said.

“Yeah, you and everyone else. You’ll have to get in line.”

“Hmm.” 21O glanced off to the side. “While you’re down there, maybe you can ask him for me.”

“I dunno. Shoot, but I can’t promise he’ll answer.”

21O got a strange, faraway look in her eyes, the kind 9S had never seen from her before—not even from the original 21O.

She shook her head. “Never mind. This ends our regularly-scheduled correspondence.”

“Uh… okay,” 9S said as the connection broke and the panel flickered and folded out of existence.

He changed his chassis, wondering all the while what 21O could have to ask Alucard about. Of course, any android would have questions to ask a real, live human, but what could she have on her mind that she’d be embarrassed to tell 9S?

His pod chimed again, this time with a transmission from Operator 6O.

“Hi there, Nines,” she whispered, a twinkle in her aquamarine eyes. “I heard that 21O had a question she wanted you to ask the human!”

“You and 21O are on opposite sides of the room,” 9S noted, recalling the floor plan of Ops. “How did you overhear her?”

“I may have been, uh, stretching my legs.”

“You mean, taking a break.”

“She!” 6O’s eyes darted back and forth. “I still get all my work done, anyway! If I don’t goof off a bit, I finish faster than everyone else…”

“And you don’t wanna get saddled with more work than your peers. Got it.”

“Anyway… I think I know what 21O would want to ask about. I’m sure she’d love it if you came to the party this afternoon and gave her the answer!”

“T-This afternoon? Is it already Wednesday?”

6O smiled beneath her veil; though her mouth was hidden, the smile reached up to her eyes. “I’m really happy with how things are working out. The flight’s about four or five hours, so if there aren’t any delays, you’ll arrive just in time…” Her brow furrowed. “You can make it, right?”

“Uh…” 9S swallowed. “I, um… I mean, yeah, if there aren’t any delays. But the rain’s pretty bad…”

“I understand. Well, whenever you arrive, just head over to my quarters. It might be a little
cramped, but I think we’re going to have a lot of fun!”

“Yeah. Fun.”

“I’m so excited for this, Nines. It’s really gonna be a healing moment, I think, for all of us, after what we all went through together…”

“Yeah, I guess. So what do you think 21O wants to ask Alucard?”

“Oh, right. That. Well, as long as I’ve known her, she—” 6O halted in mid-sentence, nearly leaping out of her chair as her eyes widened. “Oh, uh, C-Commander! I was just about to contact 2B for our regularly-scheduled contact!”

The transmission terminated as abruptly as it had begun; across the room, Pod 042 alerted 2B to an incoming transmission from 6O.

9S sighed, stretched, and followed 2B and Alucard through the complex, metal stairs clanking beneath their boots as they descended deeper below the ground to the bottom of the silo in which the shuttle, a sleek white obelisk with stubby tailfins and a dartlike nose, lay in wait beneath a steel sky. When the time came, the hatch would slide open and the shuttle would rocket into the atmosphere, breaking the bonds of gravity and trading the night blanketing the Earth for the vast darkness of space.

Shuttles weren’t the fastest way to travel: flight units made the trip from the Bunker to the Earth in under an hour compared to the shuttle’s projected four hours. The ride wouldn’t be particularly luxurious, either, especially for the human—the shuttle had to have been hastily retrofitted at the last minute with a breathable atmosphere for his sake.

Two flight units were perched beside the shuttle, one painted in standard black, the other resplendent in command-coded white. Both units’ cockpits gaped open, ready to accept their pilots—2B in white, 9S in black. The machines had a significant atmospheric presence and supply shuttles had limited defense; it would take elite YoRHa pilots to break through the machines’ blockade and pass through the stratosphere. Fortunately, the machines had no significant numbers in space, although the flight units would have to cling close to the shuttle for all of its four-hour journey, given the sensitive nature of its cargo.

While technicians milled about around the shuttle to prepare it for launch and 2B inspected the flight units, 9S took a seat on the same bench Alucard had sat down at. He spared another glance at the human; their eyes met and Alucard quickly turned his head and looked away.

“Hey, are you okay?” 9S asked, scooting just a little closer.

“I’m fine,” Alucard said, holding a hand over his mouth.

“I bet you made some friends at the camp, huh?” It wasn’t wrong or improper to speak to a human like this, was it? Was he being rude? “I’m sure you’ll be able to keep in touch on the colony.”

Alucard muttered noncommittally. This guy was more standoffish than 2B was, and that was no small feat.

“We’ve got four hours or so of travel ahead of us before we reach the Bunker,” 9S said. “Plenty of time to get to know each other. But why don’t we get a head start right now…?”

Alucard barely turned his head. For the first time, 9S noticed that his eyes were a bright, pale golden-brown, like amber. It wasn’t a color he thought human eyes came in. Brown, green, blue,
hazel… that was it, wasn’t it?

The closer he came to Alucard, the more 9S noticed his little imperfections. The tiny red threads winding their way across the whites of his eyes, the random and irregular pattern of pores on his skin, the fine and nearly-invisible dusting of pale hair on his cheeks and jaw, the cracked and dry skin on his knuckles, the nearly-imperceptible slight crook of his nose and asymmetry of his face.

Compared to an android, he had an uncanny, overwhelming, almost unsettling overabundance of detail to his face, but it was impossible to see unless one was close enough to see the subtle differences that created the wide gulf between human and android. This man, this beautiful man, this human, was just… more. Radiant in his imperfection, gorgeous in a way that was utterly, fundamentally, and above all subtly alien.

“Can you take off your blindfold?”

“Huh?” The words barely registered to 9S as he found his eyes tracing the strong, elfin contours of Alucard’s face. There were so many little things to focus on that 9S could feel himself getting lost in the weeds.

“Your blindfold,” Alucard repeated. “I’d like to know if you can remove it.”

9S tore his thoughts away from the perfect man sitting beside him. “M-My blindfold?” He blinked and cocked his head. “I don’t… Oh, you mean my visor, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not actually a blindfold,” he said, reaching behind his head to undo the knot. “YoRHa visors are actually a sort of… advanced visual processor that wirelessly connects to our optical systems. They display tactical information, vital signs, environment and enemy analysis, they widen our field of vision, and they adjust automatically to changes in lighting and visibility…”

Struggling to stop himself from babbling, he pulled away the visor and folded it in his lap. He felt almost naked without it; the sight of the world around him without a HUD laid over it just felt wrong.

Alucard was silent, his mouth hanging just slightly agape as he studied 9S’s uncovered face. 9S felt as though he were under a microscope, being scrutinized and studied by a being so far above him; although he had more to say about the visor, his voice was snuffed out.

And then, through the haze of anxiety fogging up his systems, a flicker of recognition ran through his mind. Something about one of the many small details of Alucard’s face…

“Thank you, 9S,” Alucard finally said, turning away once again. “I hope it wasn’t too much trouble. I wanted to see how… similar you were to an old friend of mine. You sound just like him.”

“Oh, uh…” 9S fumbled with his blindfold. “No, no trouble at all, sir. Out of curiosity… did something bad happen to him?”

Alucard lowered his head. “…Yes.”

“Sorry to hear that.” 9S swung his legs nervously, kicking his heels against the crate’s side. Something was still sticking in his mind, something he’d noticed but not figured out yet, something his subconscious had picked up and wasn’t telling his conscious mind. “So maybe I should submit all my questions in writing.”
Alucard smiled, his pale lips parting—and that’s when 9S saw it.

Fangs.

He tried to keep his composure. There had to be a logical, rational explanation for them. A birth defect or mutation or something. Alucard couldn’t be a vampire. His eyes weren’t even red…

“Alucard,” he said, hiding a tremor in his voice, “do you mind if I… take your pulse? Just make sure you’re doing okay?”

Alucard presented 9S with his upturned hand, allowing 9S to plant two fingers in the hollow of his wrist. 9S’s movements were slow. His hand was shaking as it picked up the telltale throbbing of blood pumping through veins. Could Alucard tell something was wrong? What would he do if he was a vampire and 9S had learned his secret?

Vampires were dead and their bodies were frigid. But Alucard’s skin was cold, but not dead cold. And he had a pulse. Slow, but extant.

“Your body temperature and your pulse,” 9S said, “are…”

“Observation: Optimal human body temperature is thirty-seven degrees Centigrade. Optimal heart rate is between sixty and one hundred beats per minute. Alucard has a body temperature of approximately thirty degrees and a resting pulse of twenty-eight beats per minute,” Pod 153 chimed in.

9S’s hand fell away from Alucard’s in shock. “Are you… dying?”

Alerted by 9S’s outburst, 2B abandoned her cursory inspection of the flight units and rushed over. “What’s wrong?” she called out.

“Statement: A body temperature below thirty-five degrees is a symptom of hypothermia,” Pod 042 explained. “Proposal: Alucard should be removed from wet clothing and moved to a warm, dry location immediately.”

“I don’t have hypothermia,” Alucard insisted as he fought to keep 2B from disrobing him. “I have a naturally low body temperature. It’s nothing to be concerned of. Simply a congenital defect.”

“But… everything I’ve read says that a human’s organs just can’t function at those temperatures,” 9S pointed out.

“You haven’t read everything,” Alucard answered. “There’s nothing to be concerned of.”

There was a brief, quiet note of relief that played across 2B’s face. “Good. 9S, if everything is in order here, it’s time for us to take off.”

“Right.” 9S nodded. “Good luck on the trip, Alucard.” As 2B turned around and headed back over to the flight units, climbing into its cockpit, 9S spared one last glance at Alucard.

His genetic code was a match for a human’s, according to his pod’s analysis, and he was definitely alive, but his cold skin and languid pulse, and the sharp fangs at the corners of his smile…

This man was a living, healthy human. 9S couldn’t deny that. But he was the furthest thing from a normal human.
And while he wasn’t suspicious enough of him yet to do anything rash, 9S wondered…

Was it smart to bring Alucard to YoRHa?

Being caught in the rain was even less fun for A2 than usual now. Her fur soaked up water like a sponge and clung to her skin as she hurried across the bridge spanning the ravine that split the forest apart from the overgrown ruins of the ancient human city.

She cast a glance up at the cloudless sky. There was no way to tell how close the moon was to setting. Surely it was close to morning now, after the hours she’d spent hunting and reveling in what few benefits the shape of a wolf offered her.

To be fair, there were more than a few benefits—her claws and fangs were almost as sharp as a sword, she could hear and smell farther than she could see, and everything in the darkness of the night was nearly just as visible as it was in the daylight—but she’d only entertained that thought begrudgingly. Getting hungry was still a pain, even if it was satisfying to tear into a wild elk’s flank and feel ribbons of muscle parting between her teeth and blood rushing to fill her mouth…

Another jagged flash of lightning breached the darkness, lighting up the thick and roiling clouds overhead for an instant. Moments later, a booming thunderclap tolled, lingering and ringing for far longer in A2’s long, sharp, sensitive ears than normal.

She rushed across the rickety rope bridge, holding up her cloak over her head to keep her from getting any wetter, her claws digging into the soggy and rain-softened wooden planks that creaked and swayed underfoot with every step. Before she could make it even halfway across the bridge, one of the long-suffering planks that had for years strained under the burden of androids and machines alike and their heavy bodies, shattered into splinters and cast her into the ravine.

For the instant she spent tumbling through the air, A2 reflected on the way she’d seen YoRHa androids leap from the tops of buildings with their support pods in hand and glide safely and gently down to the ground. As annoying as those pods seemed to be, she could use one right about now—

She hit the water with so much force that it felt like concrete, and as she sank, her thrashing limbs tangled themselves in the current. Her heart pounded and pulse raced as the hungry pool in the depths of the ravine swallowed her up, water rushing over her eyes, down her throat, into her ears and nostrils, slithering around her and through her and inside her, eager to devour her.

A2’s feet sank into the ground, mud and silt worming its way between her toes, and as her head spun and her lungs pressed against her ribs and her black box whined and screeched from the panic, she trudged through the pond to its muddy shore, struggling to keep her footing on the half-buried bodies of machines that had fallen in here just as she had, spitting and sneezing out the muddy water that had filled her mouth and nose and struggling to catch her breath. Her cloak floated in the center of the pond for a moment before dipping below the surface and sinking to the bottom. She didn’t bother going back for it.

In hindsight, it wasn’t much of a pond. The water wasn’t even waist-high even with the rain feeding it. It had just seemed so much deeper and more treacherous when she’d been in the middle of it. The fall, not the water, had killed most of the machines that had ended up down here.

A2 hurried to the wall of the ravine and hid under a rocky outcropping that formed a little shelter from the rain. She was soaked to the bone now, her sodden fur plastered to her skin and stained with mud, her bruised and tender muscles aching and throbbing.
The rain wasn’t letting up. The downpour left a forest of ripples spreading across the pond that grew stronger and more crowded as the rainfall became heavier. The curtain of water running down from the edges of the outcropping grew thicker; even huddled as far away from the edges as she could get, A2 felt thick mist settle over her.

Growling with frustration, A2 picked herself up and bounded into the torrential rain, clinging to the steep side of the ravine until she found an opening she could dip into. At last, she was surrounded by dryness. Relieved, she shook herself dry, splattering the dark walls of the cavern she’d found with droplets of water and mud, and cleaned the water out of her ears with her fingers. It was a start.

Once she’d gotten herself at least a little less waterlogged, A2 took stock of her surroundings, the gloomy and dark cavern keeping no secrets from her sharp eyes.

In fact, it was easier to see than A2 had expected, mainly because just a few meters away from the entrance, the smooth and water-hewn curved wall of the cavern gave way to glowing, faintly-luminescent white stone, straight and smooth—too smooth to be natural—with a door set into the wall formed of the same glowing material.

A2 rapped on the door with her knuckles, then kicked it. It didn’t open. She kicked it harder, the force sending a tremor up her leg, the blow shattering the stone and knocking the door off its hinges.

As she limped over the threshold and the fragmented remains of the door, gingerly favoring her leg, A2 noticed a doorknob amid the rubble and wondered if she could have just pulled the door open.

She pressed deeper into the twisting, labyrinthine halls of the underground structure she’d discovered, her bare feet shuffling across the white crystal floor tiles, claws clacking and tapping on the stone. A more curious person than her might have paid more attention to their surroundings, taken in the ornate and elegant masonry that shaped these gloomy hallways, the cathedral-like archways and flying buttresses, the statues and busts lining the walls, all hewn from the same faintly-luminescent white crystal. The weird growths protruding from the walls and ceiling like geometric tumors, clusters of perfect cubes of all shapes and sizes.

It was wrong to say A2 didn’t notice any of these things, just that none of them intrigued her. All she cared about was finding a way to the surface.

Soon, though, she came across something that piqued what little curiosity she had.

She stood in a large round chamber filled with human-sized dolls standing on short pedestals: mannequins carved from wood, their metal joints gleaming in the faint, gloomy light that filled the room. The dolls all wore strange clothes. One wore a heavy fur coat draped over its shoulders; some wore ancient metal armor lined with leather and furs; a few had outfits not unlike the kind of fancy stuff Alucard wore. In fact, one was dressed exactly like Alucard. Only a handful of pedestals were empty.

Every single mannequin, A2 noticed as she waded into their midst, was frozen in its own twisted, grotesquely-anguished pose. Some crouched down, cowering; some were on their knees, backs arched and arms outstretched as though frozen while writhing in agony. None of them had faces, only smooth, polished wood—but if they had, their faces would have been contorted in terror and pain.

A2 approached one of the mannequins that caught her eye. This one wore armored knee-high
boots, a flowing backless dress midnight-blue on the outside and crimson on the inside, a bronze breastplate, and nearly-shoulder-length gloves adorned with black feathers. Its arms were thrown up in front of its head as if to ward something away.

She liked the outfit, so she immediately set to work undressing the mannequin, knocking it aside in her haste to purloin its costume. After all, she *did* need clothes—once the moon set, she'd be naked. She got the dress and breastplate on easily enough, but had to squeeze into the boots and gloves—the fur and claws got in the way.

“I see you’ve taken a liking to the Master’s gallery,” a deep, sonorous voice rang out through the room.

A2 raised her head, her ears perking up and twitching in the direction of the voice. At once, her nose caught the scent of something vile—a bit like rot and decay, but with an oddly malevolent edge to it, as though the scent itself had a dark will to it.

A masked man stood at the far end of the room, clad in sharp, sleek armor that clung to his slender body, violet with white trimming along the edges; set within the high collar that ringed his neck was a sleek helmet of opaque black glass completely encircling his head.

A2’s hackles rose, her sharp ears flattening as a low growl rumbled in her throat.

“Care to spend more time in it, she-wolf?” The masked man cocked his head and crossed his arms.

“'Scuse me?”

With a self-satisfied laugh, the masked man snapped his gloved fingers, the brisk crack ringing through the air. A2 felt something clamp around her arm, glanced over her shoulder, and saw the mannequin she’d disrobed clinging to her, gripping her with hard, firm wooden fingers.

“What the—"

A2 barely pulled herself free of the naked dummy as the Alucard-dummy swung its glittering broadsword down at her, the tip of the steel blade nicking her side. Three whip-wielding dummies charged at her—one wearing steel and leather armor, one wearing a white fur cloak, one wearing a blue jacket.

“Belmonts!” the masked man shouted out, his booming voice filling the room. “Restrain her!”

Three braided leather whips cracked through the air; A2 grabbed the naked mannequin and pulled it in front of her to act as a shield. The whips scored the dummy’s front, biting deep into its wooden torso and slicing cleanly through its head.

A2 narrowly dodged another swipe of the Alucard-dummy’s blade as a spear of ice shot from the hands of a robed mannequin and glanced off her collarbone, leaving a bloody furrow across her shoulder.

She dived under another flurry of icy knives, ducked underneath the Alucard-dummy, and swept its legs out from under it, raking her claws across its forearm and cutting deep into its wooden flesh. The dummy dropped its shining sword, which A2 grabbed and threw at the robed dummy, impaling it through the head. The Alucard-dummy drove its sharp elbow into the small of her back, knocking her to the floor, as one of the three whip-wielders—the one wearing the leather and steel armor—closed in on her, drawing a double-edged hand axe from its belt and swinging it at her.
She rolled on her back and caught the axe bare-handed, her claws digging into where the steel head of the axe met its wooden handle, then forced the dummy away. A2 wrestled the hand-axe from the dummy’s grip, split its wooden head down the middle with a single chop, and buried it into the Alucard-dummy’s thigh, nearly severing its leg.

One of the two remaining whip-wielders—the one in the blue jacket—drew back its arm and lashed out with its whip, the leather tip wrapping itself around A2’s bicep and wrenching her off her feet as the Alucard-dummy pulled the axe out of its thigh and hobbled forward. Struggling to regain her footing, A2 dug her heels into the stone floor, leaving black scuff marks on the shimmering tiles, and tried to yank her arm out of the loop of leather biting into it. The loop sank down her arm and tightened around her elbow, tearing through her sleeve and ripping the skin from her arm, splattering her fur and the floor with blood.

The fur-cloaked mannequin rushed at her, whip in hand; A2 grabbed at the whip coiled around her arm and sliced through it with her claws, raking them across her own flesh—nothing compared to the smarting, throbbing, electric pain of the degloved patch on her arm—and freed herself. She drove her shoulder into the Alucard-dummy’s chest, bowled it over, and threw it at the two approaching dummies, knocking them to the floor.

This was nothing to her. It was exactly like fighting machines. They weren’t smart. They didn’t think. They only had the advantage of numbers, and all A2 had to do was whittle them away one by one.

“Grant!” the masked man called out.

A2 was too slow on the uptake—before she could react to the masked man’s proclamation, a trio of short throwing daggers buried themselves in her back. She glanced up and saw a mannequin clad in a ragged longcoat scuttling across the ceiling like an insect, pausing to draw another handful of daggers from its pockets. She held up the remains of the robed dummy’s body and used it to block the next salvo of knives as she ran for cover.

The knife-wielding dummy scuttled to a new vantage point and threw another knife from its seemingly-bottomless supply, its tip slipping across A2’s forehead; blood trickled into her eyes, blinding her.

The fur-cloaked and blue-jacketed mannequins were still on her tail, both lashing out with their whips, the long and sharp lengths of leather twisting and flailing in the air in a synchronized dance. A2 could hear them, her keen ears tying the sound of their movements to actions, her keen nose pinpointing their shifting positions. One lash caught A2 across the jaw, sending a jolt of pain through her head and down her neck as hot blood soaked her chest; the other left a long and narrow dent on her breastplate.

A2 collapsed, claws scratching against her armor as blood poured down her front and soaked into her already-waterlogged fur. “Is that the best you can do?” she growled as the three remaining mannequins closed in on her.

With a furious burst of strength, she lunged for the nearest dummy, planted her foot on its chest, grabbed it by the wrists, and tore its arms off, then tossed both arms at the other two. As the disarmed foe fell, she tore a knife from its belt, drove it into the next dummy’s groin, and wrenched it upward, tearing up through its head and leaving a long, splintered furrow all the way up the length of its body. The third and final dummy was next—A2 slipped past its next volley of throwing daggers, pinned down the knife in its fist with her own, and clamped her jaws around its neck, biting with all her strength and roughly severing its head from its body.
As the final dummy collapsed in a lifeless heap of mangled wood, A2 wiped the blood from her eyes, spat splintered wood out of her mouth, and yanked the knives out of her back one by one. She focused her attention on the masked man. “You were saying…?”

The masked man slowly spread out his arms, then brought them together. The booming clap of his palms colliding echoed through the room. “Very, very good!” he cried out, his slow clapping reaching a crescendo before his hands fell to his sides. “You’re a fine beast indeed. More than worthy to join our ranks!”

A2 bristled at the remark. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m—”

“A lone wolf?” The masked man shook his head and chuckled. “Please don’t say you were going to call yourself that. It’s embarrassing.”

“…What’s your name?”

“Olrox.” The masked man bowed. “But you, she-wolf, may call me—”

A2 drove her fist into Olrox’s stomach, plunging him into the luminescent white wall—the stone behind him cracked in a spiderweb pattern and gave way, crumbling behind him as she drove him deeper into the stone. Once again, she was shocked at her newfound strength.

“Olrox… I don’t like you. You talk too much.”

Olrox peeled himself out of the crater, still swaying drunkenly as he reeled from the force of A2’s blow. Pale blue flames flickered around his gauntleted hands. “Let’s try this, then—”

A2 charged at Olrox again, only for him to vanish into thin air. She whirled around to find him lunging at her from behind, clawed fingers splayed like the talons of a bird of prey. She braced herself, throwing up her arms to block a frontal assault, only for Olrox to vanish once more.

His cold metal hands clamped down on her shoulders, worming their way through her fur, as he drove his knee into the small of her back. The sharp kneecap of his armor dug into her flesh as he bent her spine. A2 felt her legs go numb.

Olrox threw her to the ground; A2 tried to stand up, but her legs, tingling as electric jolts ran through her muscles, crumpled beneath her, unable to support her weight. She fell down on all fours, panting with exertion as she pulled herself onto her knees and then onto her feet, willing life back into her failing limbs. Stars and static danced before her eyes.

“Oh, don’t give up so quickly.” Olrox waved his hand, conjuring four orbs of shimmering blue flames. “I want to know how much of a fight you can give me! Won’t you oblige my simple request?”

Weaving through the winding patterns the fiery orbs traced in the air, A2 closed the distance between herself and her foe and immediately tried to punch him in the face again.

“Oh, yes! Nothing excites me more,” Olrox said, narrowly avoiding A2’s swinging fist, “than a ferocious opponent, one I can fight on equal terms! Thank you so much for obliging me, she-wolf!”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Then tell me your name!”
“Fuck off!” A2 replied, picking up one of the fallen dummies’ whip and cracking it.

The whip, wild and chaotic in the path it traced by her untrained hand, cut across her snout, stinging her nose; the smell and taste of her own blood became omnipresent, overwhelming one of her keenest senses. It was like being blind.

With a laugh, Olrox vanished; A2 swung her leg in a wild arc where she thought he might reappear and managed to catch him, sending him flying. He touched down on the floor and skidded to a halt, his metal claws screeching as they raked the stone. A2 hastily wiped her nose.

“So many vampires live to destroy…” Olrox swiped his hand across the air, firing a salvo of bolts of blue flames at A2. “But me, I live to understand! To know firsthand the pleasures and dangers the world has to offer! To know every enemy deeply, intimately—"

A2 leaped out of the path of the bolts of flame and let them explode against the wall behind her as she ripped the fake Alucard’s sword free of its lodging in one of the mannequin’s heads.

Olrox disappeared yet again.

“What better way is there to understand people than to fight them?”

Olrox dropped from the ceiling and landed on top of A2 before she could swing her sword at him, knocking her flat on her back.

“But to understand something is to have power over it,” he continued, his knees digging into A2’s chest, the scalloped armor of his kneecaps scraping and screeching against her scratched and dented breastplate. “So it could be said that defeating an enemy in combat allows you to understand it!”

“How hard,” A2 wheezed, “do I have to kick your ass… to make you shut up?”

“Oh?” Olrox responded. “You want power over me?”

A2 obliged and drove her fist into his mask. The glass gave way under the force of the blow, shards lacerating her knuckles; Olrox pulled himself to his feet and reeled backward, clutching at his marred helmet as violet smoke poured from the breach.

“Ah,” he gasped. “Very good…”

“You’re still talking!” A2 drew her sword and slashed at him, the steel scraping his violet armor and leaving flurries of sparks and silvery scratches on the metal.

Olrox caught the blade with his hands, the segmented metal armor covering his fingers grinding against the sword’s honed edge, and hooked his foot around A2’s ankle, pulling her off her feet. She hit the ground, rolled back onto her feet, and lashed out, burying her foot in his stomach—only for her attack to pass through his body as it faded into mist.

“Show me more!” Olrox taunted her, reappearing across the room. He still had one hand plastered to the gash running through his glass helmet. “Show me what you are!”

A2 attacked again, driving her blade into the masked man’s stomach through a gap between two halves of armor plating; Olrox sputtered and gasped as she gave the blade a savage twist and thrust it deeper.

“Pity you’ve got that helmet on,” A2 snarled. “I wanna see the look on your ugly face…” She
licked her lips as crimson blood trickled in slow rivulets from the wound she’d inflicted. Would this guy taste good if she ate him?

Being a wolf made her think some weird things sometimes…

Olrox planted his free hand on A2’s chest and shoved her, pushing both himself and her away from each other; the bloody blade slid free, loosing a spurt of blood into the air from both sides of the perforation running through his body. His hand traced an arc in the air, a lattice of bleached skulls wreathed in flames appearing in its wake and shooting out toward A2 like homing missiles.

A2 dashed out of their paths, avoiding them as best she could and taking every opportunity to draw closer to Olrox. He avoided her furious strikes with ease, but when he pulled the old standby and disappeared so he could reappear behind her, the orbs of bone and fire that had been chasing her all slammed into his back instead, knocking him off his feet.

Before Olrox could rise again, A2 leveled her sword at him, the tip of the blade resting on his collar. “Gotcha.”

Smoke still poured from the gash running across Olrox’s mask, obscuring his face. But some part of A2 could tell he was smiling. “She-wolf,” he asked, “do you know what time it is?”

“Time for you to make good on your promise?”

Olrox laughed. A2 felt the room spin around her, the sword in her hand suddenly heavy as lead, her shoulders drooping, her knees threatening to buckle as something beneath her skin began to throb and twist itself into knots.

She stumbled backward, letting the sword fall from her hand and clatter to the floor—the noise tore through her ears like a knife. “Ngh… Wh… What did you… do to…”

“It is morning,” Olrox said, rising to his feet. “The moon has set.”

A2 doubled over as the first pangs of her body reorganizing itself from the inside out rippled through her, clutching at her stomach as the thick, fine fur beneath her purloined clothes retracted into her skin and her claws sank back into her fingertips. She felt her bones snap and crack as they realigned themselves, sharp pains running across her jaw and up her nose, pressure pooling in her sinuses as her shrinking tongue prodded at her loosening fangs, which began to fall from her mouth one by one.

No, no, no, of all the times she could change back! Dammit! Not now—

Olrox drove his metal-coated fist into her jaw, knocking her off her feet. A2 barely even felt herself hit the floor—the pain of her transformation was the only thing on her mind. Of all the things that could make her not want to go back to normal—

A2 arched her back, cracking her spine, and let out one last pained whimper as the last of the changes spread across her body and her tail receded into her backbone, struggling to pull herself to her feet as her muscles and joints all ached and throbbed.

Before she could regain her bearings, Olrox’s fingers curled around her neck and she felt herself leave the floor, her feet dangling in thin air as he hoisted her up. A2 weakly scrabbled at his wrist, bloodstained fingers and blunt fingernails sliding off smooth and polished metal cuffs.

Olrox pulled his hand away, yet somehow, A2 stayed put, suspended, the tips of her boots inches from the floor, her hands falling to her sides and dangling uselessly as an invisible, intangible vise
clamped down on her and held her in place.

He reached out and laid both hands on her forehead, pressing cold metal thumbs against her temples. At his touch, a warm fog filled her head; faces, names, voices, thoughts, feelings all sprang to the forefront of her mind, all rushing past her before she could fully comprehend them. She saw, flickering past her mind’s eye, Anemone and White and A4—

“There we are,” Olrox said, pulling his hands away as A2’s head cleared. “I believe I understand you perfectly now, Attacker Number Two.”

A2 struggled again to free herself, but every part of her felt heavy, sluggish, and slow. She could barely even lift a finger.

“Goodness, what a life you’ve had. But you’ve more than proved your worthiness to us.” The wisps of violet smoke pouring from the crack in Olrox’s helmet curled almost like a hundred flowing smiles. The pompous, overbearing edge to his voice had softened; for a moment, A2 could believe that he felt sorry for her… that he wanted to help her. “You are welcome to join us and leave behind forevermore your cruel, callous master.”

His sharp fingertip lightly, loosely, gently traced the seam of her jawline, the partition between old flesh and new flesh. “The pain, the suffering, the loneliness, the running… It all ends today,” he told her, “when you join your monstrous brethren here as a part of this castle.”

A2 squinted as she looked over Olrox’s shoulder. Something was coming up behind him—the beige, faceless face of one of the mangled mannequins as it hobbled toward him, a hand axe clasped between its wooden fingers.

Olrox lifted his left hand and splayed his fingers; the tips all glowed orange-hot, wisps of smoke twirling lazily in the air.

He pressed two fingers and a thumb against A2’s left shoulder; the sizzling sound of cooking flesh and the sickening, acrid smell of skin burning and synthetic polymers melting under his touch assaulting her nostrils. She choked down a scream as a pulse of burning, acidic pain snaked through her body—pain worse than any transformation, pain like her synthetic muscles were peeling from her chassis and unspooling into loose, limp threads, pain like her eyes were melting and draining into her skull, pain like every metal bone in her body was rusting away and crumbling into powder.

“Welcome home, Two,” Olrox hissed, pressing a third finger into her skin and branding it. “Your new master will be—”

His words died in a shocked, wet-sounding gurgle as the rogue mannequin buried its axe in his back; A2 fell to the floor in a crumpled heap as his fingers splayed out in shock. The mannequin wrenched the hand-axe from his back.

“What is the meaning of this?” he snarled, whirling around to face the traitor in his midst, flinging out his arms and engulfing the mannequin in a whirlwind of fire. “Shanoa, how dare—”

The mannequin buried its axe in his helmet, cutting through the glass dome encircling his head with ease; thicker and larger plumes of smoke billowed out and swirled around the room’s vaulted ceiling.

Colors flickered in and out and bled through the grayscale world as A2’s overtaxed body struggled to power her visual processor. She gazed up at the naked mannequin standing over her, its figure
marred by rolling waves of static and flickering tongues of flame caressing its wooden skin.

For an instant, she didn’t see a dummy. She saw…

Someone…

Someone she thought…

Her head clearing, A2 scrambled for the longsword she’d dropped, her fingers wrapping around its leather-bound hilt and grasping it firmly, and jammed it between the armored collar wrapping around his neck and the remains of his helmet, pushing the blade down through flesh and sinew and bone until its tip hit metal. A geyser of nearly-black blood spewed into the air and slowed to a trickle.

With the sword still embedded in his neck, Olrox slumped onto his knees, shoulders flagging and head lolling, and collapsed facedown.

“Your recruitment pitch needs work,” A2 told him, ripping the sword free of his corpse.

At last, Olrox was silent.

The brand he’d left on A2’s shoulder, though, throbbed and burned as though his fingers were still pressed into her flesh. She clapped a hand over it, fingernails scraping against her skin, and gritted her teeth.

The charred and battered mannequin took hold of her as her legs buckled beneath her, its polished wooden fingers clasping her tightly and digging into her sides. Static filled the world as everything went dark and silent as a grave.

A2 craned her neck and looked skyward, rain pouring down her face, and caught sight of three parallel streaks of light diving into the black clouds shrouding the sky.

“So, uh, 21O… There was an old saying among humans,” 6O said as she joined 21O on the way down to the hangar. The starlit void of space slid past the two Operators through the windows lining the Bunker’s outer wall. “It went like… ‘Working hard, or hardly working?’”
21O gave her a quizzical look.

“Is it a question.”

“I know.” 21O pulled up a holo panel, tapped on it, dismissed it, all without breaking her stride. The percussive rhythm of her heels tapping on the floor never slipped. “What’s the point of asking it?”

“I dunno. Just some… casual coworker bonding.”

“Does the person asking expect a truthful answer?” 21O asked. “If I were slacking off, I don’t think I’d be foolish enough to admit it.”

“Maybe it’s just supposed to be a rhetorical answer,” 6O said. “Like you’re just supposed to shrug and say, ‘haha, yeah.’”

“Oh. Haha, yeah.” 21O shrugged. “Or perhaps humans were exceptionally proud of their laziness.”

“Maybe you can ask the human when he gets here.” 6O checked the time, then pulled up a panel to track the shuttle’s position. Both the shuttle and its escorts were about to dock with the Bunker.

“You’d fit in well with them.”

“Huh?” Caught off-guard by 21O’s icy tone, 6O slowed a bit, allowing 21O to overtake her. “With humans?” she asked, picking up the pace a bit to get back in step with 21O.

The old 21O would have meant something like that as a compliment, but this one’s comment was more acerbic. The new 21O had far less patience for 6O’s attitude than 6O was accustomed to.

“That’s really nice of you,” she said, undeterred. “Anyway, when this is all over… how about you stop by at my quarters later this afternoon?”

“Why?”

“Oh, nothing. Just to hang out.” 6O wondered why she’d waited so long to ask 21O to come to her own surprise party. She wrung her hands anxiously, braiding her fingers as tightly as her hair, awaiting an answer.

“I have some enemy positional data to sift through this afternoon,” 21O said. “Sorry, but I don’t have time to hang out.”

“I’ll take care of that data for you,” said 6O, desperate to clear 21O’s schedule. She couldn’t let the moment she’d planned for a week to fall apart right now. “You know I always finish my work quickly, so I’ve got the time.”

The two of them reached the elevator to the hangar and stepped into the cab. There was a slight lurch as the cab began to descend.

“Hmm. I’m not sure….” 21O looked at another few reports. 6O’s heart sank. In many ways, she was the same old 21O. She never stopped working, and her idea of ‘relaxing and unwinding’ was also work. But she was also more immature than the old 21O had been and hadn’t yet learned to make concessions between the time she put toward her duties and the time she had to herself.

“Please, 21O. You’ve just started out, and you’re already putting yourself under a lot of pressure. Can’t you take some time for yourself?”
“I don’t think the Commander would approve. Emotions are prohibited, after all.”

“C’mon, 21O, those are really more like guidelines than rules!” 6O insisted, patting her on the shoulder. “Look, people who are new here always have trouble loosening up and realizing which parts of the job they’ve got to take seriously…”

“We have a duty to mankind. Don’t we have to take all of that seriously?” 21O swiped through another few panels as she continued her work. “By the way, what was the human’s name? ‘Alucard’…?”

“That’s what we were told.”

21O squeezed her eyes shut and cradled her forehead in her hand, her fingers sweeping back errant locks of her short hair as a quiet, yet pained grunt escaped her lips.

“Huh? 21O, are you okay?”

Pulling away her hand, 21O shook her head as if to shake off something that had tried to cling to her. “I’m fine,” she said, opening her eyes and dismissing the holographic panels she’d been looking through with a deft flick of her wrist. “I’ve just been getting minor headaches from time to time.”

“See? You’re working too hard.”

“No, I’m sure it’s just a misaligned logic circuit. I’ll see the maintenance clinic about it later today.”

“Come to my quarters and rest a bit first,” 6O insisted. “You’ll feel a lot better.”


The elevator gently shuddered to a halt, the doors sliding open to reveal the hangar bay. Normally, there were at least a few people in there—combat units waiting for their flight paths to clear, Operators performing last-minute touchups to flight units for their assigned field agents—but there was no one here today but Commander White, who stood in the center of the room with her arms crossed expectantly.

The wind began to blow as the two corridors on the left and right sides of the hangar bay opened up and two flight units, one black, one white, slid on the rails lining the corridors into position alongside a dozen other flight units mounted in racks on the walls, their cockpits unfolding to disgorge their pilots. The hatches exposing the launch corridors to the vacuum closed, allowing the air in the room to settle as 2B and 9S got their bearings.

“Well, that was a whole lot of nothing,” 9S said, stretching. “Still, better safe than sorry, I—” He stopped in his tracks upon seeing the Commander and snapped to attention. “Commander!”

“At ease, Unit 9S.” White unfolded her arms. “What is the shuttle’s status?”

“It’s docking as we speak,” said 9S, eyeing the port on the far wall of the hangar. “This human isn’t very talkative, is he?”

“Maybe you’re just overeager,” 21O told him.

“Perhaps not to you,” White replied. “I hope he proves less laconic in my office.”
6O found her breath freezing in her throat as the port opened, the little hatch leading to the corridor linking the Bunker with the shuttle yawning open like a gaping mouth. This was it. A real human was setting foot on the Bunker for, as far as 6O knew, the first time in history!

The leather of her gloves creaked as she threaded her fingers together and kneaded them so tensely that she could feel her knuckles turn white. A human. A real, live, breathing human, not the disembodied voice of the Councilman who spoke to YoRHa through radio transmissions.

Alucard’s long coat, black with elegant gold filigree, and his long hair, so pale blonde it was nearly white, swirled around him as he took his first steps onto the hangar bay’s expansive floor. 6O wanted to say he was haunting in his beauty, but it was more that he was haunting in his everything.

Or rather, haunted. His eyes were haunted, his lips were haunted, the long and slightly-curled locks of silvery hair that furled around his face were haunted, the conspicuously empty sleeve that should have contained his right arm was haunted. The man was lousy with ghosts. Never in her life had 6O seen anyone save for Commander White herself who carried so many invisible burdens on their shoulders.

“Good afternoon, Alucard.” White bowed deeply and reverently, her voice ever-so-slightly hitching—even she, with her stature, was cowed by his presence. “I hope your trip was pleasant.”

“It was uneventful.” His gaze roved across the hangar, stopping when his eyes met 6O’s. 6O felt her black box burn in her chest, whirring so loudly that the high pitch of its whine stung her ears.

Alucard’s face softened and went slack when he saw her, and 6O saw the icy, purposeful glint in his eyes melt and give way to something she almost couldn’t describe. It almost looked as though he felt sorry for her.

“G-Glory to Mankind!” 6O stammered, hastily saluting as Alucard drew near.

The others snapped to attention, standing tall and straight and repeating the salute, the sound of their hands clapping against their breasts resounding against the hangar bay’s walls.

Alucard returned the salute, holding his left hand over his heart. “Yes, er… Glory to me, I suppose,” he bemusedly mumbled.

As the Commander led him out of the hangar, 6O and Alucard shared one last glance. In her whole life, she’d only ever met one other person who had such sad eyes and such a forlorn face.

Olrox pulled himself up to his knees, gingerly rubbing at the wet wound marring his neck. Blood had run into just about every joint of his armor, squelching with each movement.

There was a flash of black fire in front of him; he raised his head, his gaze traveling upward as hooded man in a long, flowing black cloak materialized before him, looming over him like a colossus.

Death’s grinning face, locked in an eternal rictus, angled downward, the red pinpricks in his eye sockets flaring with bemusement. “Well, well, well, Olrox… this is embarrassing.” He glanced at the wreckage of Dracula’s trophy gallery, the monument commemorating almost every so-called hero, every righteous vampire slayer the Master had outlived in spite of their best efforts. “I take it you’ll be repairing the damage, of course?”

“I daresay,” Olrox said, probing the wound with his finger as its edges began to shrink and the
scaly skin beneath his armor began to knit itself back together, “I have better things to do with my time.”

Death’s eye sockets flared; in a glittering flash of light, his scythe materialized in his bony hands and he hooked the curved tip of the blade into Olrox’s collar, primed to rip out his throat. “You are here, Olrox, by my power. You live now because Lord Dracula wills it and only because he wills it.”

“And he will continue to will it.”

“Will he?” Death cocked his head. “Do you think you are the only one of Dracula's lieutenants to be revived? Do you think Dracula has not already lined up your replacement?”

The grin under Olrox’s shattered helmet shrank. Surely there was nobody he could be replaced with… but one never knew with Dracula. He was a fickle friend. And Olrox had challenged his authority once before, a long, long time ago… and Dracula was known to nurse bitter grudges, to say the least.

“I’ll give Dracula something far, far better,” he told Death, slowly rising to his feet (the tip of the scythe followed him up), “than a repaired trophy room.”

“Ah?” If Death had eyebrows, he would have raised them. “And what is that?”

“The woman who ruined it, handed to him on a silver platter!”

Ignoring Death’s skeptical gaze, Olrox snapped his fingers and summoned a succubus to his side in a vortex of blue flames. The succubus stood tall and proud, striking a figure of ethereal beauty, her perfectly-proportioned and generously-curvy physique tailor-made to awaken the greed and envy that lurked in the hearts of any man or woman; her pale blue hair trailed from her head like a comet’s tail, its tips flickering and guttering like candlelight; long, twisted horns like a ram’s split the bangs framing her elfin face as they curled around the sides of her head. Her eyes were haunting rings of glittering ruby surrounded by black sclera, pools of darkness resting in a doll-like, ashen-skinned face.

A thin, whiplike tail plumed with a flickering tongue of fire coiled itself in a loose spiral orbiting her legs as her hooves, cloven like a goat’s and as glossy and black as polished onyx, tapped on the floor and the small batlike wings sprouting from her shoulderblades flexed and fluttered.

The succubus bowed in deference, bending her knee and lowering her head. “Lord Olrox. What is thy bidding?”

“You are to find ‘Number Two,’ take the shape of her beloved,” Olrox told her, putting a hand to her head to feed her the relevant memories he had pulled from A2’s mind, “and use whatever methods you see fit to convince her to join our ranks.”

“Yes, sir.” The succubus pulled away from him and stood up, her skin bubbling and frothing like boiling water as she began to transform.

Her cloven hooves split and softened to form bare feet, her wings and tail receded into her body and vanished under her skin, her black claws shortened into blunt fingernails; her horns unspooled and retracted, sinking into her temples and vanishing behind her hair, which rapidly shifted from powdery midday-sky-blue to snow white and slithered like a mane of snakes to contort itself into a loose, messy ponytail reaching down just past the base of her neck. Color came to her cheeks as the black sclera of her eyes turned white and her scarlet irises faded to a cool, pale blue, the shape of
her face subtly shifting to form the kind, soft visage of her disguise. An ornate black dress uniform materialized over her nude body.

In a matter of seconds, standing where the succubus once had stood was now a perfect duplicate, right down to the last pore on her skin and thread on her dress, of the woman Olrox had seen within A2’s mind.

He would give Dracula the woman who had vandalized his precious trophies for him to do with as he pleased—and led along by her lost love like a dog on a leash, she would go to him with neither complaint nor resistance.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was mostly an excuse to make this commission I got from a friend canon to the fic:

"I will become the blade to banish all evil."

A2 cosplaying shanoa from castlevania: order of ecclesia, commissioned from @geistbox pic.twitter.com/va2xFSBW9j

— wellmanicuredma'am (@wmm_ebooks) April 21, 2019
March in Ivory

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, A2 makes new friends, White figures out what Alucard really is, and 9S parties hard.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to the usual suspects for beta reading this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heavy rain lashed at the ruins. Holed up in one of the dilapidated buildings that rose from the overgrown ground like headstones, A2 sat down and inspected the burn mark on her left shoulder —three black ovals pressed into her bare skin. It had been hours since she’d killed Olrox and escaped that strange underground facility, yet the marks still ached and throbbed. Even though her body was fully capable of self-repair when it came to minor wounds, they hadn’t diminished even a little.

She’d have to ask Alucard. He was bound to know something about this brand—and maybe even the creep who’d made it.

And then there was the wooden mannequin that had come to her aid. A2 had carried it with her and kept it by her side, but it hadn’t come back to life. Perhaps it was dead for good now, though how it had come alive in the first place was still a mystery. She’d have to ask Alucard about that, too.

Wait. Ask Alucard? Was she losing her mind?

Maybe she was. After all, she’d lugged a wooden person through the desert and across the ruins in the pouring rain for no good reason other than some vague sense of gratitude and camaraderie.

A2 absentmindedly scratched at an itch on the side of her neck, almost expecting to find fur there instead of bare skin under her fingernails. For a split second, she’d almost felt it. Maybe it was her new hardware and software not aligning with each other properly, like Jackass had warned her about, or maybe just because she was getting used to the transformations—but ever since last night, she had found herself occasionally feeling less like an android who became a wolf by night and more like a wolf who became an android by day.

For the third time that morning, she leaned forward, lifted her head to gaze straight up at the ceiling, and howled.

She wasn’t sure why she did it. It was a compulsion she just hadn’t been able to resist. Some sort of instinct. Stress relief, maybe—but it hadn’t been making her feel any less stressed out. In fact, it had been having the opposite effect. When she lowered her head and let the last ringing echoes of her voice fade into the background noise of the rain drumming against concrete and steel, she was left feeling oddly hollow inside.
A2 closed her eyes and curled up against the crumbling wall of her shelter. How was this supposed to make her feel? Disappointed? Let down? Abandoned? Alone?

Get a grip, she told herself. Abandoned? Alone? She ought to have been used to that after what she’d gone through over the past few years. Why was it bothering—upsetting—her now?

And what was the point of that damn howling if caterwauling like that just made her feel worse?

And then, all of a sudden, a welcome sound drifted through the heavy drumming of the rain. Faint, fading, its last echoes struggling not to be drowned out in the downpour, was the unmistakable lyrical sound of another howl responding to hers.

A2 leaped to her feet, water sloshing in her boots and trickling between her toes as she rushed to the crumbling doorway, straining to see through the darkness (once again, something her wolf form had that she lacked here). Her hand drifted to her back to grab onto her tail and stop it from wagging, recalling just late enough to make herself look dumb that she didn’t have a tail anymore (even if sometimes she still felt it). Her black box was warm in her chest, her pulse singing with excitement.

A reply. All she’d wanted every time she’d called out was a reply. And there it finally was.

She let out another howl—the long, lyrical wail pierced through the heavy rainfall—and listened for a response. Seconds ticked by as she waited to hear it.

As soon as the answer came, A2 took off in the direction of the sound, the rain prickling her face and shoulders as she threw herself into the storm.

It took her a few minutes to realize that she had no idea where she was going. And with the rain pouring down in thick sheets and the black clouds overhead blocking out even the stars, she could hardly even see her own paw—hand, she mentally corrected herself—in front of her face. She skidded to a halt just a few meters outside her shelter, sniffing the air to try and discern something besides the cloying, omnipresent scent of wet earth.

Another howl cut through the air and A2 barely waited for it to subside before adding her voice to it. She ran after its source, charging down the city’s labyrinthine alleyways (stumbling and nearly tripping over debris from the skyscrapers looming overhead and the leftovers of long-dead machines), crossing nearly half a kilometer of winding roads by her reckoning before staggering to a halt and wondering who exactly she was chasing and why she was running after them.

What if it was an enemy?

She didn’t know.

But what if it was a friend?

She rapped her forehead with her knuckles, irritated at how easily her thoughts kept spiraling around that sort of thing. If this kept up, she’d have to (god help her) ask Jackass to take a look at her programming.

No. Anything but that.

“Hey, knock that off.”

A2 caught the voice drifting through the rain and stiffened, adrenaline programs firing her nervous circuits and buzzing beneath her skin. It was coming from one of the ruined buildings surrounding
her.

“Oh, come on, Cap. What’s the worst that can happen? I’m just making animal noises. It’s not like I’m screaming my head off about a bunch of fu—”

“Shh! You want to get us killed, 64B?!”

“I hate to agree with 8B, but she’s right.”

“Aw, 22B, not you, too!”

What if a Scanner got curious about all those howls and came looking for us?”

Three voices. Three people. Androids. YoRHa androids. A2 clenched and unclenched her fists again and again, nails biting into her palms, her instincts screaming at her to attack them right here or run away.

The mood within the building shifted. “Girls, quiet,” 8B said, lowering her voice. “The radar’s picked up a black box signal. Put your visors back on and keep your weapons ready.”

“Just one? Let’s just—”

“Loudmouth! It probably has a pod!”

“We’ll sneak out the back…”

Relieved, A2 loosened up. All she had to do was stay put and the three androids would run away themselves…

“We’re not running away from one android!” 64B shouted out, shattering glass punctuating her bold declaration. “Let’s take her out! Who’s with me?!”

The android leaped out the window she’d broken, flying right over A2’s head. Crackling blue electricity leaping in arcs off the thick combat bracers around her fists and the battery pack on the back of her black armor lit her up in intermittent flashes.

64B had an imposing, bearish physique from what little A2 could make out in the darkness, but she moved as swiftly as the most waifish of field units. It took A2 all of her agility to evade her swift jabs, arcs of electricity dancing through the falling rain and singeing her hair and clothes as the sharp, lightning-wreathed claws of the braces wreathing 64B’s hands moved in for the kill.

And here A2 was without a single weapon—she hadn’t even managed to loot so much as a knife off of that Olrox prick.

“Take that, YoRHa! You’ll never take the three of us alive!”

“What?” A2 backed away from another one of 64’s jabs, one of the bracers’ thick claws glancing off her armored breastplate hard enough to dent and scratch the metal. As the claw slid across A2’s chest, sparks and flashes of lightning flew through the air, raindrops glittering around them. “J-Just leave me alone!”

“Why’d you have to come after us, huh?” 64B asked, throwing a haymaker at A2’s head. “All we want to do is leave! What’s wrong with—”

A2 caught her by the arm and twisted it so viciously and violently that the elbow joint twisted and sheared apart. Gritting her teeth to dull the pain, 64B drove her remaining fist into A2’s stomach,
the bracer’s claws leaving three deep dents in the armor and nearly puncturing it; the force knocked A2 back and into the slick, cold mud coating the ground.

The two other androids rushed to 64B’s side, leaving the safety of their hideout. “Look what you’ve gotten us into,” 22B scolded her, crouching down to tend to her mangled arm.

8B—the leader of the bunch, judging by the nickname 64B had for her—stood up, leveling a long, thick broadsword at A2. “You! You hurt one of us, you hurt all of us! I’ll make this quick…”

A2 had barely managed to pull herself upright when 8B closed in on her and drove her armored knee into her chin. While she reeled back, her feet lifting off the ground from the force of the impact, 8B landed a spinning kick, the side of her boot colliding with her cheek and throwing her through the air.

8B lunged after A2 before she had a chance to land, her heavy broadsword cutting through the air with a low and heavy whistle. A2 was lucky enough to right herself and land on her feet, allowing her to slip through 8B’s offensive barrage. Fortunately, such a large sword was unwieldy and slow —

Just as A2 had begun to weave around the long, thick blade, it vanished in a flash of light and a flurry of amber sparks, replaced by the wickedly-curved profile of a slender, light Type-4O blade. The blade rent a deep furrow in A2’s armor, nearly cutting all the way through it. Freed of the heavy weight of the broadsword, 8B pressed forward, her movements far swifter.

Still squarely on the defensive, A2 gritted her teeth and kept backing away until she found herself with her back to the wall. Cornered and still unarmored, she lashed out with her leg and drove it into 8B’s side. The blunt force of the impact was softened by 8B’s heavy combat armor, but still enough to give her pause, giving A2 time to leap up and drive her fingers deep into the crumbling concrete wall, clinging to it like a spider. She caught her breath and launched herself off the wall, sailing over 8B’s head and out of reach of her sword—

A spearhead crackling with electricity nicked her shoulder, its superheated edge charring and sizzling her skin. How many weapons did this woman have?

A2 hit the ground, gingerly clasping a hand around the shallow—yet smarting—wound on her shoulder. She glanced behind herself over her shoulder and saw the third of the androids—22B—with two long, curved katanas drawn and splayed out at her sides.

Weaving between spears and swords, A2 did her best to fight back against 8B and 22B with her bare hands, but even with her strength, she could do little to break through their armor. If she could just take one of their weapons… 8B had plenty to spare…

A2 braced her arm against 8B’s, pinning her down, and wrenched the sword away from her, gripping it so tightly that she felt the plastic composite of the hilt crack. Lightning crackled along the length of the sword’s silvery blade, its aura casting a blue glow on her face.

With an enraged roar, 64B rejoined the fight, drawing back her fist. “Don’t you hurt Cap!”

“No, wait!” 8B shouted out, setting aside her spear and throwing out her hand. “That’s enough! This one’s not our enemy!”

The sword vanished from A2’s grip, no matter how tightly she clung to it, and reappeared hovering at 8B’s back.

“I know that face,” 8B said. “She’s A2—the Forest Demon!”
Commander White struck an even more imposing figure in person than she had on the other side of a television screen. Pixels alone could not capture the cold, hard, merciless light in her green eyes, nor the steadfast and stern scowl etched onto her eternally-youthful face. Wearing a pristine ivory-white dress resplendent with gold detailing much like Alucard’s own coat and with elegant golden ornaments framing her head and holding in place her pale blonde hair, she looked nothing less than angelic.

“2B, 9S, you two are dismissed. Return to your quarters and await further instructions,” White said, motioning the two soldiers away to the elevator on the far side of the hangar bay. She turned to the veil-clad women. “6O, 21O, return to your stations and get back to work.”

“Actually, um…” The woman with braided hair timidly raised her hand. “Commander, I put in a time off request for this afternoon earlier last week…” She chuckled nervously. Her counterpart was staring at her as if she’d grown a second head. “I-I thought you’d have see the request by now, ma’am…”

White was nonplussed. “Time off requests should be made at least two weeks in advance, 6O,” she said, her fingers tapping in an irritable pattern on the handle of the riding crop hanging from her belt.

“I know,” 6O said, her eyes darting to the side to avoid meeting White’s. “I’ll remember that next time.”

“Give her the afternoon off,” Alucard said, hoping his status as a human (or partially human, although no one here knew that) continued to carry weight here. It was strange having such power to wield. The fact that he was half-human carried little weight among humans, after all, and whatever authority he had typically came less from his humanity than by his ability to bench-press at least two adult humans. “I’m sure she has done enough to earn it, hasn’t she?”

White pursed her lips, shot him a half-second icy glare, and relented. “Very well, 6O. You are dismissed to your quarters as well.”

6O took the other woman by the arm. “And 21O’s been having headaches. I should lead her to the maintenance clinic.”

White nodded. “Do so.”

6O and 21O departed into the same elevator 2B and 9S had disappeared into, leaving Alucard and White alone in the hangar bay, flanked by the inert hulks of inoperative flight units mounted on the walls.

“Follow me to my office,” White said, taking off. Her white dress’s hem rippled like lakewater around her ankles with every step as she led him through the sparse white corridors of the Bunker. With each step she took, the slit running up the side of her dress to her waist shifted to allow a glimpse of the bare, flawless skin of her uncovered thigh.

Recalling Jackass’ statements regarding her relationship with White, Alucard wondered what on Earth White had seen in that gremlin.

The Bunker was claustrophobic in spite of its wide and empty halls. The omnipresent hum of pressurized air and buzzing of electricity behind each wall was oppressive. Muted, indistinct sounds of distant conversations rang through the station, bleeding through walls and doors, making it clear that one could hope for only the faintest shred of privacy here. The spartan décor called to
mind a hospital… or perhaps an immaculate prison.

It reminded Alucard of a movie he’d been coerced into seeing back in the twenty-first century. He struggled to recall its name.

White stopped in front of one of the many doors set into the inner wall of the station opposite the portholes that revealed glimpses of the moon’s pockmarked face, keyed in a code to the numberpad on the wall beside it, and slid the door open, dismissing two black-armored stormtroopers who stood inside with a muttered order. The soldiers’ boots clanked against the floor panels as they filed out into the corridor.

*Star Wars.* That was it.

“In here, sir,” she told Alucard, motioning him inside.

Alucard stepped into White’s office. It was as orderly and devoid of personality as the rest of the Bunker, save only for two thin floor-to-ceiling mirrors that striped the left and right walls, reflecting each other into infinity.

White closed the door and walked past him, countless doppelgangers springing into existence and vanishing just as quickly as she strode past the mirrors to her desk.

“Should we get down to business?” Alucard asked, looking for somewhere to sit. There was nothing save for White’s desk—and he supposed taking a seat there would be a faux pas. He hung back, standing awkwardly with the door at his back, not quite knowing what to do.

“Not yet,” White said. She rummaged in her desk for something. “I have a few questions I’d like to ask you first.”

“I’d be happy to oblige, ma’am.”

The lights in the room flashed, growing sharper and warmer. No, not *warmer*—hotter. Alucard could feel the heat seeping into his skin, pressing against his coat, heat like that of the midsummer sun at midday. He gasped, stumbled, and squeezed his eyes shut, throwing up his arm to block the light; the light bled through his eyelids nonetheless, bathing the darkness in a throbbing orange hue.

“Excuse me,” he said, regaining his composure. “I—I’m sorry, did you install tanning lights in here? I have very pale skin that burns quite easily…”

He cracked open his eyes and found himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

Although she seemed shaken, White held the pistol in an iron grip with not even the slightest tremor in her arm. “Did you think I couldn’t tell what you were?” she asked, squeezing the trigger and punctuating her question with a sharp and deafening gunshot.

The slug buried itself in Alucard’s right shoulder just beneath his collarbone and burned like hellfire; his legs crumpled and dragged him to the floor as searing tendrils trickled and wormed along his muscles and around his bones. He clutched at the wound, his clawed fingers digging into his skin as though they could rip the poisonous bullet free of his body and cleanse him, as White returned from behind the desk and stood over him, the barrel of her gun leveled at his head.

Alucard’s eyes widened in spite of the searing light pouring down on him as he realized that White hadn’t brought him here to discuss what should be done about A2.
She had brought him here to kill him.

“When we spoke to one another, I saw your fangs,” White said, keeping the gun trained on him as he writhed weakly on the floor and clutched at the gunshot wound in his shoulder. Blood seeped through his fingers; his veins were on fire, his muscles stinging, his skin tingling and burning. “I was confident in my theory, but wasn’t certain until 9S’s pod reported your vital signs to me: Your cold skin, your slow pulse—as though you were a walking corpse. Then, I was glad I had acted on my intuition.”

Alucard curled into a ball, tucking his knees against his chest, as the venom continued to eat at his body from the inside out.

“I’m well aware,” she went on, “of the hypnotic powers you vampires possess. It’s clear to me that you used your powers to enthrall Anemone, Jackass, and A2 and bend them to your will. I had no choice but to work as quickly as possible to remove you from the camp and bring you to the one place where you could be contained and destroyed—here, in the Bunker.”

Gritting and grinding his teeth, Alucard struggled against the pain. “You’re making a mistake,” he spat out, a sharp ache running deep through his jawbone as he teeth clenched. “This isn’t—what you think—it is…”

“I’ve done my research on your kind. The lights in my office can be tuned to produce the same range of radiation as the sun and can be increased in intensity. The bullets in this gun are hollow-pointed and cast from silver for maximum stopping power. There is no way for a vampire to leave this room. Like the rest of your kind, you were too assured of your own overinflated sense of intelligence to avoid falling into such an obvious trap.”

Silver. That explained why a single bullet was making him feel this way. Alucard sat up, his back slumping against the wall, struggling to breathe. A single silver bullet wouldn’t kill him, but he was on the verge of passing out.

“I can continue to dial in the level of ultraviolet light in this room,” White said, “until it roasts the flesh off your bones. I have more than enough silver bullets to kill you outright. Answer my questions. Where did you come from? How is your genome a match for a human? What have you been doing in Anemone’s camp?”

“You’ll kill me… if I don’t answer your questions, correct?” Alucard asked, panting for breath, his aching chest heaving.

“Yes.”

“What if I do?”

“I’ll spare you,” White said.

“Remove this bullet from my shoulder…” Alucard gasped as another sharp, electric twinge ran from the wound down to what was left of his arm and past that, down to the tips of the fingers he no longer had. As his vision blurred, the lights beating down on him split into orbiting pairs swirling like dancers in the air; two Whites trained their guns on him. “Give me medical treatment. And then I’ll talk.”

“Talk first.”

“You must be aware that a captured enemy cannot be guaranteed to answer truthfully under torture. Or threat of torture,” Alucard said. Then he realized that neither White nor any other android had
ever had to deal with an enemy who could not simply be hacked to retrieve whatever data was contained in its brain. Living creatures were much harder to extract information from—but White had no experience with that.

“We don’t capture our enemies.”

“Well,” he muttered, mustering a weak smile through the pain, “that’s one war crime you haven’t committed, then…”

The two Whites coalesced into one. “I don’t appreciate snide remarks,” she said. “Talk or die.”

“Look, White…” Alucard closed his eyes. “Listen. You cannot use pain to coerce somebody into telling the truth. They care only about stopping the pain. Instead of the truth, their obligation is to telling you what you want to hear. Do you want that? Or do you want to know who I really am?”

He reopened his eyes to see White back away and lower her gun, though her finger still hung close to the trigger. “You’ll get your medical care,” she said, relenting. Without turning her back on him, she leaned over her desk and activated a holographic display. “Unit 2H, report to my office immediately.”

9S had been so bored escorting Alucard’s shuttle to the Bunker that he’d spent most of the four hours the journey had taken with his flight unit set on autopilot. If there was one saving grace to having such an uneventful trip, though, it was that he’d finally had time to look through the contents of those data chips 2B had handed him a few days ago.

She had told him the chips had come from 6O. 6O hadn’t known anything about them. When 9S found out what was on them, he only found himself more confused.

The chips were filled with video recordings copied over from Pod 042’s internal memory. Videos of him. Videos of six weeks’ worth of lame jokes, snappy comments, and all the interesting factoids he’d told 2B in his attempts to engage her interest. Usually, she only reacted to admonish him or remind him to stay on task. Those responses weren’t included in the compilations.

All the times he’d reached out to her on full display and a few times he didn’t even remember— comments he was sure he’d said but couldn’t recall when and remarks he’d completely forgotten he’d made.

It was heartwarming. Without her laconic and standoffish replies, each of his offerings to her were still filled with the hope that they’d coax a smile or a laugh out of her. If 9S ignored his own memories, he could believe the lie the videos left implied—that every time he’d told her a joke, she’d laughed.

As he trailed behind 2B on the way back to the habitation deck, 9S found himself staring into the back of her head and wondering…

She couldn’t have put those videos together, could she? That just wasn’t her. But who else had access to the internal memory of her pod?

“Hey, 2B.”

2B slowed down a bit and allowed 9S to catch up to her. “What is it, 9S?”

“About the videos on those chips you gave me…”
“Oh. Right. 6O thought they would make you feel better. Did they?”

“6O didn’t give you those chips.”

2B bowed her head and began to study the floor.

“Did you make those videos for me, 2B?”

“No. Why would I?”

“Because you always act like you care about me when you want something from me.” It was just like the time she’d taken off her visor and called him ‘Nines.’ She hadn’t done it because she liked him. She’d done it to keep him from having a panic attack and freezing up, nothing more. What was the video for? What did she want to coerce him into doing for her now?

2B stopped dead in her tracks, frozen mid-stride.

“What do you want from me this time?” 9S asked.

“I don’t want anything from you outside of your responsibilities to YoRHa,” she answered. “You’ve been doing a good job. I’m pr—”

“You can just tell me if you don’t like me,” he blurted out before he could second-guess his words.

2B’s lips parted, a fleeting deer-in-headlights look flashing across her face for nearly an instant.

“Just say it.” 9S felt his mouth go dry as his chest tightened around his black box. “Tell me you don’t like me, you don’t want me, tell me I’m nothing to you but your assigned partner and I’ll… I’ll stop trying so hard to be your friend.”

2B was silent for a moment. Then she said exactly what 9S was expecting her to say.

“Emotions are prohibited.”

Scarcely before the words had even left her mouth she took off and headed for her quarters, her quick and graceful stride quickly carrying her beyond the curvature of the ringed hallway that circled the Bunker’s axis.

“Can’t you be honest around me, just once?” 9S asked before she vanished completely.

No use. There she went.

9S let out a heavy, forlorn sigh and leaned against the wall, laying his hand over his chest as if to collect the pieces of his broken heart. He wondered if he was starting to get used to that feeling.

“Statement: Unit 6O has invited Unit 9S to a social function,” Pod 153 reminded him. “Proposal: Unit 9S should go to Unit 6O’s quarters.”

“Yeah, yeah…” He looked out at the cold void of space that lay outside the windows. “At least there’s one person on this station who likes me.”

Operators’ quarters weren’t on the habitation deck—they were one level above, on the same deck as Ops. It took one short elevator ride for 9S to reach 6O’s quarters.

9S knocked on the door and immediately regretted it, realizing that behind it was another woman he wasn’t in the mood to meet. He shouldn’t have told 6O he’d come…
The door slid open and 9S found himself buried under a veritable avalanche of hugs; he was nearly
thrown off his feet by the force of 6O’s crushing embrace.

“Nines! You made it!” 6O released him just before he felt his spine crack and pulled him into her
room. “Come in! Everyone’s here!”

9S rubbed his back gingerly. 6O was shockingly strong for an Operator. If she’d been the same
model as 2B instead, he’d be in pieces right now.

The tiny room was packed. 13O and 27O, the two other androids who’d been rescued from the
vampire attack, sat on the side of the bed shoulder-to-shoulder, while 21O stood in the corner and
leaned against 6O’s computer terminal. She seemed bored.

“Hey, 27O, can you scoot over and make room for 21O?” 6O asked. “She’s been on her feet all
day and now she has a headache.”

“I’m fine standing,” 21O replied. “Also, I should be going.”

“Just stay and hang out for a little bit,” 6O begged her. “We’re all your old friends, aren’t we?”
9S cringed. This ‘party’ didn’t seem to be going well.

“Oh, 27O? Did you bring those drinks 11S brought from the surface?” 6O asked.

“Yeah, uh…” 27O rummaged in a bag she’d kept at her side, withdrawing a few canteens and
passing them around. “11S brought these over from Hyacinth’s camp. I forget what it’s called, but
it’s fifty percent alcohol by volume.”

6O handed the last of the five canteens to 9S. He uncapped the canteen and held it up to his nose,
niffing it. It had a faint fruity scent to it, almost like perfume.

“Analysis: This beverage is alcohol distilled from sugarcane byproducts. It has been infused with
various fruits to improve taste,” Pod 153 told him. “Proposal: Due to alcohol’s detrimental effect
on neural circuitry and motor systems, Unit 9S should refrain from drinking this beverage.”

“Cheers to 21O!” 13O shouted out, raising her canteen. The other Operators followed suit, and 9S
had no choice but to do the same, clinking the side of his canteen against the others in the center of
the rough circle the five of them formed.

Everybody downed the contents of their canteen in a single draught. 9S nearly gagged on the
unexpected bitter, burning sensation the alcohol left as it cascaded down his throat. 21O’s cheeks
and eyes bulged as she struggled to swallow the mouthful she’d imbibed, just as taken aback by the
alcohol’s sharp taste as 9S was.

9S and 21O stood across from each other while the other three androids began to chat about the
somehow-enthralling ins and outs of the Operator life. Tedious as it was to listen in, 9S was riveted
by all the talk about who was dating or breaking up with whom, the delicate black market of
trading shifts and days off for extra time remote-controlling flight units, which favors were best to
exchange for favors of a far more private nature, backstabbing, nailbiting, nailstabbing, backbiting.
Being an Operator wasn’t quite so boring, apparently, as 21O had made it seem.

21O shifted uncomfortably, her gaze aimlessly wandering around the room. 9S wondered if she
was uncomfortable relearning that all of her old friends were scoundrels.

“So, uh,” 6O said, maneuvering carefully through the crowded room. “How about we all go in a
circle and talk about fun things we’ve done with the old 21O? You know, catch her up on the good
times?”

“Like the time 801S helped us sneak into the Commander’s quarters and we all tried on her spare
uniforms?” 13O asked.

“No, not like that,” 6O said.

“Or the time the Commander made you and 21O clean all the windows from outside?” 27O asked.

“No, not like that,” 6O said.

13O drained the rest of her canteen. “Or the time you flooded your room so we could have a pool
party?”

“No, not like that,” 6O said.

“Um…” 9S shifted uncomfortably. “I think 2B once told me something about you and 21O
sneaking a red sock into the Commander’s laundry…?”

6O’s face turned as pink as the Commander’s uniform had been the following day.

“Don’t forget the panty raid,” 13O chimed in. “Hey, 6O, don’t you still have some of 27O’s—”

“What about, uh,” 6O all but shouted, trying to drown out 13O’s voice, “9S, tell 21O about, uh—the
time you brought a killifish back from Earth and put it in an aquarium tank for her as a pet!”

“Huh?” 9S scratched at the back of his head. “I don’t remember that…”

“Oh, fuck,” 6O muttered. “What about the time we snuck into Ops after hours and played cat
videos on the big screen?”

“Yeah, I remember that!” 13O shouted out. “21O, you liked the kittens with those little triangle
tails the most.”

“Oh. I did?” 21O asked.

“One time,” 27O said, “a certain someone sent a shipment of E-drugs to the Bunker and we had to
physically restrain you from selling your OS chip to her for another sample.”

21O held her hand up to her mouth. “O-Oh…”

“I don’t think she wants to hear about that,” 6O told 27O. “Nines, do you have any funny stories
about 21O?”

“Did we really once break into the Commander’s quarters and steal her clothes?” 21O asked 6O,
raising an eyebrow. The icy tone in her voice suggested that she was less than pleased to learn
about her old self’s less-than-permissible antics.

“N-No,” 6O stammered, her face going from pink to beet-red. “That was just, uh—13O was trying
to embarrass me with a fake story.”

“That deadpan expression of yours made you a dead ringer for White,” 13O said, grinning
wickedly. 27O buried her face in her hands to keep herself from laughing. “When the real White
barged in on us we almost didn’t know who was who!”
“No,” 6O insisted, “it didn’t happen. It just didn’t.” She glanced back at 9S. “Nines,” she whispered, hissing through gritted teeth, “memorable story, now!”

“Uh… Memorable story, huh…” 9S shuffled and rocked on his heels uncomfortably as every pair of eyes on the room turned on him. He felt hot. Was he the only person in the room that felt hot? The choker wrapped around his neck was choking him.

Huh.

Choker. Choking. Was that why it was called a choker?

He glanced at 21O and looked away just as quickly so that he couldn’t see her helpless emerald gaze. It was still too easy, all too easy, to see her with two holes in her neck and a sword in her chest, no matter what his eyes and visual processors told him—his trauma superimposed that horrible sight on her, overriding his optical sensors. She was a ghost to him. And it was all his fault.

“Well, uh, there was the time you died,” he told 21O, “and I just stood there and watched like a useless piece of garbage while a vampire sucked out all your blood.” His breath grew short. He knew from the tightness in his chest, the stinging heat in his eyes, the lump in his throat as though his black box were trying to pull itself out through his mouth, and the way 6O’s eyes went wide that he was doing the wrong thing—but he couldn’t help himself. The words spilled out against his better judgment, his tongue unraveling against his will the twisted knot of painful memories filling his head.

“The funny thing is,” he added, biting his lip just a little bit, “was that you didn’t die right away and after we killed all the vampires you were still alive, just barely, enough that we could’ve saved you, but the Commander ordered 2B to kill you just to be sure, and I couldn’t stop that either, so if you think about it, it’s—it’s—k-kind of like…” He bit his tongue as laughter began to bubble unbidden up through his throat. His shoulders quaked.

“It’s almost like—I stood by and let you die twice!” he cackled, hot tears leaking out from under his visor as they spilled from his eyes. “You died two times in the same day because of me! Isn’t that a funny story? Isn’t that memorable? I know I’m never gonna forget it!”

Everybody in the room stared at him, jaws slack, mouths agape. 6O had gone from embarrassed to mortified; her face had turned sickly, ashen, pale.

“Holy shit, 9S,” 13O muttered.

21O held her hand to her forehead. “I just got another headache,” she said. “I’m leaving.”

6O held out her hand. “W-Wait, no, don’t—”

21O left.

“—go…” Her face fell.

The room was utterly silent; the vacuum of space was noisier than the sad little aftermath of 6O’s grand disaster.

Crestfallen, 6O looked around the room. Nobody met her eyes. 9S sniffled and stared down at his boots, trying to count the threads in the laces to keep his mind off his outburst.

“So,” 6O said, “a-anyone up for an impromptu vampire survivors support group meeting? Girls?
9S?" Her voice cracked. Her eyes were misty. She seemed to be on the verge of tears.

13O stood up. “I, uh, just remembered. I have some… weather data… to sift through to plan 43D’s route through the… Appalachian mountains.”

27O stood up next. “And I’ve got a… similar thing.”

“I thought I told you to block out your afternoon,” 6O mumbled weakly, wiping her eyes on her glove. “C’mon, girls…”

“Sorry, these things pop up, y’know,” 13O said, heading for the door with 27O on her heels. “We had fun. See ya in Ops, 6O!”

6O hung her head. “Yeah. See ya.” As the door slid shut, she trudged over to her bed and sat on its side, folding her hands in her lap.

9S took as deep a breath as he could. Although he was ashamed to admit it to himself, unlike 6O, he didn’t feel like crying anymore. He didn’t even feel sad. He just felt empty, as if he’d vomited out his chassis in his outburst and was now just a vacant shell of thin, fragile skin in the shape of an android. “I-I’m sorry I ruined the party, 6O.”

6O shrugged. “Eh… it was already ruined. I don’t think 21O liked hearing about the crazy stuff we all did together.”

“She does seem stricter than before.”

“It took her a while to loosen up back then. I just tried to force her to be her old self too quickly. She’s—”

She started to weep, tears streaming down her cheeks; she hurriedly clasped her hands to her face to muffle her sobs.

“Proposal: Unit 9S should comfort Unit 6O,” Pod 153 chimed in.

9S sat down on the bed next to her and patted her on the shoulder. “Uh… there, there.”

“You were right, 9S,” she wailed. “She’s gone and she’s never coming back, just like—” She cracked her fingers apart, peeked at him through them, and then started bawling even harder.

“I’m so, so sorry,” 9S said. “If I’d known you two were so close, I’d have—”

He’d have what? Done nothing twice as hard?

6O’s tears were contagious. Before he knew it, 9S had his arms wrapped over her shoulders and was crying into her hair. It hurt—each wretched sob dragged from his throat and every heave of his chest burned and ached like a fresh wound. Like a wound, it drew all focus toward it, his thoughts circling his pain like water down a drain until it all faded away.

“2B never has this problem,” 6O whimpered. Her tear-stained cheeks glittered like dew-dappled grass. “I wish I were more like her…”

9S dried his eyes. “Be careful what you wish for.”

He looked around the room, idly studying the contents of 6O’s quarters. Since Operators never left the Bunker, their rooms were often more personalized than other units who spent most of their time on Earth; unlike his own spartan quarters, 6O’s room was adorned with holographic photos of
flowers projected into thin glass frames. They were the photos, he noted, that 2B had taken for her.

He felt a wave of jealousy wash over him. Why did 2B constantly do more for her than she did for him? He’d be lucky if she gave him the time of day, but 6O got a picture from her twice a week by the looks of it.

“Speaking of her…”

“Are you and 2B still—” 6O hiccuped. “Still struggling?”

“Y-You know?”

“I’m her Operator, Nines.”

9S stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, I guess. Just… I need to ask you something. About her. It’s, well…”

6O put a hand on his shoulder.

“I just don’t get her,” he blurted out, fixing his gaze at the floor as the flowers adorning the walls, symbols of 2B’s affection that did not belong to him, stared down at him with indifference. “She’s just… Sometimes, she’ll be nice to me, but the rest of the time, she acts like she hates me. Is she just using me, or…”

“2B doesn’t hate you, 9S. She could never.” 6O gave him a gentle pat and reached for his hands, wrapping hers around his and pulling them free of his pockets. “I know this might sound hard to believe, but… she cares a lot. About you. About each of you.”

“What do you mean, ‘each of me?’”

“Oh, uh…” 6O let go of 9S and played nervously with one of her braids. “You know… each of 2B’s partners.”

“She’s had partners before me?”

“Yeah. But…” 6O looked away, choosing to focus on one of the flowers on the wall. “None of them lasted very long. Some of them weeks, some days.”

“What do you mean?” 9S furrowed his brow. “They backed up their data, didn’t they?”

“It’s complicated,” 6O said. “The point is, she’s lost a lot of people she’s cared about, and you’re the longest one of her companions has lasted so far. If she seems uncomfortable around you, that’s why. It’s a bit like… how we both feel about 21O, I guess.”

“She really cares about me, huh?” 9S asked. “Sounds fake, but okay…”

“Look, don’t, uh… don’t tell her I told you this,” 6O said, dropping her voice to a furtive whisper as she leaned closer to him, as though someone could be listening in. “But whenever she loses—one of her partners, she comes to me. I’ve seen how much she suffers. She just… falls apart when she’s alone. You’re important to her, 9S. You really are.”

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. “Take care of yourself, okay, Nines? And don’t let 2B tough it out by herself. She needs you a lot more than she could ever say.”

9S hugged her back. “Thanks a lot, 6O.”
“No problem.” 6O sighed. “Try to make it to next week’s support group meeting. I think you really need it.”

“Yeah, I will.” 9S stood up. “Sorry again about… everything.”

He left 6O’s quarters. He didn’t feel so empty anymore, but he still felt awful—both over how 6O’s party, which she’d planned for so long, had gone sour and for how he’d spoken to 2B beforehand. Also, he felt a little queasy and the light hurt his eyes.

“Pod, can you locate 2B?” he asked Pod 153.

“Affirmative. Scanning. Analysis: Unit 2B is located in the training hall on Deck C.”

“Training hall, huh? Guess combat units need to keep in shape from time to time.” He patted Pod 153 on its hull. “Thanks.”

“Observation: Unit 9S is still adversely affected by alcohol. Proposal: Return to your quarters until the effects wear off.”

“I’m fine,” 9S said, stumbling a bit on his way to the elevator. The corridors didn’t feel quite as straight as before, but he made it down to the training hall with few major incidents.

He entered the training hall and felt his foot slide out from under him as the sole of his boot squeaked against a slick puddle of oily blood. Pod 153 was agile enough to catch him and clamp its claws around his arms to keep him from falling.

The training hall was a mess. The walls and floor were stained with streaks and spatters of blood and gouged from errant blades, blackened spots blossoming on the walls where pod fire had missed its mark. Sparks flew from steel grinding against steel as the two combatants within locked their blades and fought with no regard either for their surroundings or themselves.

2B leaped backward to avoid a vicious counterattack from the foe she’d just wounded, her white blade crossed in a defensive position across her chest. Blood streaked her hair and skin and flowed freely from a deep gash in her arm that left her forearm connected to her elbow by a thread. Her opponent loomed over her, her long and curly whitish-lavender hair struggling to break free of her pigtails as she readied her two-meter-long blade and panted with exertion. With each breath the other combat unit took, a thin spurt of blood lanced out from her side and speckled the floor.

“Uh… Go, 2B!” 9S shouted out, shaking his fist as 2B lunged forward, danced around the massive blade that ground against hers, and slid her sword up to the hilt into her opponent’s chest.

2B turned her head and looked straight at him. “9S…”

Her opponent slid herself off 2B’s blade. “Nice job!” She dismissed her giant sword in a flurry of amber sparks and clapped politely. “We should really do this again sometime, darling.”

“2B, are you okay?” 9S asked, rushing over to assess her wounds. He could already see a few perforations in her chassis in addition to her nearly-severed arm.

“I’m fine. What are you doing down here, 9S?” she asked. She asked him as though he wasn’t allowed to be here. As far as 9S knew, he was, but maybe this place was for combat units only.

“Well, I’m headed back down to the surface!” 2B’s opponent chirped, remarkably cheery for someone who’d just been skewered several times over. “Plenty of vampires left to kill, right Tooi—er, 2B?”
“Have fun,” 2B told her, her tone utterly and completely mirthless, as her vanquished opponent loped over to the access terminal in the corner of the room and climbed inside.

“You two… friends or something?” 9S asked.

“I don’t have friends.”

“Right. Right, no, of course. 2B, I wanna…”

“Hold that thought.” 2B headed for the access terminal, climbed inside, and reemerged a few seconds later in a fresh and undamaged chassis, not so much as a single hair out of place. “What is it, 9S?”

“I…” 9S anxiously clasped his hands behind his back. “I, uh… just wanted to apologize for what I said to you. I didn’t mean to accuse you of being manipulative or anything. I was just frustrated.”

“I understand. Thank for apologizing, 9S.”

“I won’t ever do anything to hurt you, I promise.”

“I know. You aren’t a combat model. Nothing you could do can hurt me.”

Before 9S knew what he was doing, he lifted his arms and threw them around 2B, holding her close enough that their cheeks pressed together. 2B was completely still and stiff as a board.

“You’re my best friend, 2B,” 9S murmured, patting her on the back.

“9S…”

“And I’m glad you’re my best friend, too,” he added.

“9S.”

“6O told me you like me, but you’re afraid to get close to me because of what happened to your other partners. I get it.”

“9S.”

“I promise I won’t let anything bad ever happen to me. Ever. No matter what—”

“9S!”

9S let go of 2B, who backed away and crossed her arms, turning her head to avoid his gaze. “This is inappropriate,” she said.

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

She walked past him. “If you need me, I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Oh, and… thanks for the videos,” 9S called out to the back of her head. “I, uh, I really liked them!”

2B pretended she hadn’t heard him as the door closed behind her.

The fugitive YoRHa androids’ hideout was dimly lit by the soft light of a dying electric lamp that sat in the center of the room, its weak glow casting long, yet fuzzy shadows. A2 stepped inside
after the three fugitives, resisting the urge to shake herself dry as they milled about.

“I can’t believe it,” 8B muttered as she rifled through the canvas bag languishing in the corner of the room. Her serious expression, framed by her white hair, couldn’t hide her excitement; nor could her voice. “YoRHa’s legendary fugitive in the flesh…”

“And you wanted me to stop howling,” 64B said with a mischievous smirk, roughly running a gloved hand through her short, bristly silver hair to dry it as 22B helped her out of her armor. “Told you we wouldn’t attract trouble.” She was shockingly good-humored considering A2 had nearly ripped her arm off—in fact, she barely seemed to take anything seriously.

8B pulled a battered repair kit out of the bag and tossed it at 22B, who caught it and set to work on 64B’s broken elbow.

“You’re really A2, huh?” 22B asked as she brushed her long, cherry-red hair out of her eyes. “I thought you were a myth. Or dead.”

A2 gulped and shuffled nervously on her feet, uncomfortable to be the center of so much attention. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“Disappoint? Are you kidding?” 8B crossed her arms, her serious mouth curving into a slight smile. “Running into you is a dream come true. You’re the reason we’re here!”

“How have you been surviving out here?” 22B asked. “They say the Commander’s been sending Type-E units after you for years.”

“Luck and pluck.” A2 sighed and leaned against the wall. “Take this as a warning. Being a fugitive isn’t fun or healthy.”

“Well, we’ve kinda burned our bridges already,” 64B said, taking the repair kit from 22B and packing a little more staunching gel into the split and bloody skin around her elbow. “We can’t exactly go crawling back to YoRHa now.”

“And I’m sure Anemone’s already put out some bogus statement about us stealing supplies from the camp or something so we can’t find shelter there.” 22B rapped her fingertips on the sheaths of her blades. “It’s the first thing the Commander would do.”

A2 wondered if she should tell her that Anemone and White weren’t exactly on great terms now.

With her wound treated, 64B hefted the remainder of the squeeze bottle full of staunching gel she’d been using and tossed it at A2. “Here you go.”

A2 caught it, her fingers curling around the bottle with such force that the bottle ruptured and blew out the bottom, covering her entire forearm in the sticky transparent gel.
“That’s all right,” 64B said, unfazed by A2’s accidental show of strength while the other two fugitives looked on in surprise. “We’ve still got one or two more bottles of that stuff.”

A2 crossed her arms. “How long were you planning on running from YoRHa?”

8B shrugged. “The rest of our lives, or at least until the war’s over.”

“Your lives won’t be very long if you’ve only got two or three bottles of staunching gel,” A2 pointed out, ignoring her own hypocrisy (she hadn’t had anything she could use to treat her wounds when she’d made it to the mainland and it had been weeks before she’d managed to scavenge anything).

“See, this is why you’ve got to stick with us!” 64B said. “You’re an expert at running away! We don’t have a clue what we’re doing!”

“I told you two we wouldn’t last a week,” 22B muttered.

A2 had to agree with her. These three knuckleheads made her feel like a genius.

“Well, A2, what do you think?” 8B asked, offering her hand. “I think the four of us would do just fine together.”

A2 looked at each of the three fugitives in turn. A week or two ago, she’d have told them to get lost and pray it took more than a few days for someone like 2E to cut them to ribbons. But now, here, she struggled to muster that attitude. Especially when her gaze crossed paths with 64B and she recalled how elated she’d been when she’d first heard that howl drifting through the air.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. What was wrong with her? What was changing her? Why was she acting and feeling so strangely—and what did it mean? How much could she change—how much could the wolf inside her dictate her moods and her behavior—before she wasn’t herself anymore?

“You’ll have to do what I did,” she told the three fugitives, speaking as harshly and brusquely as she could muster even as it tore her up inside. “Learn by trial and error. That’s the choice you made when you left YoRHa.”

The fugitives’ faces fell.

“But,” A2 added, “White and Anemone aren’t on the best terms with each other now. There’s probably still time to stock up on supplies at the camp before word reaches them.”

There. She’d done her part. She spun on her heel and made for the door, leaving the fugitives behind.

“And one more thing,” she added, glancing over her shoulder before she fled back into the storm raging outside. “The city’s too busy. The forest is the best place to hole up—more places to hide, and the canopy makes it harder for satellites to pick up your black boxes. Just my advice.”

“Thanks, A2!” 64B called out, waving goodbye to her as she stepped into the curtain of rain pouring across the threshold of the crumbling building, the rain pelting her face and soaking her to the bone.

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With a deft hand and a delicate set of instruments, 2H withdrew the silver bullet from Alucard’s shoulder. The bullet’s tip had deformed, flattening into a mushroomlike cap. Blood glistened on its
silver surface.

Alucard was amazed these healer units were programmed with the knowledge to treat humans, although he supposed it was necessary to keep up appearances. No one here knew or could know the truth. Even Commander White probably didn’t know.

“It’s been an honor to treat you, sir,” 2H told him once she’d finished bandaging his shoulder. The almost-religious reverence in her quiet, soft voice—like A2’s and 2B’s, only more demure—stung like a wasp’s tail. She probably entertained the fantasy that one day her skilled hands would treat other humans. That when the war was over, her life would be devoted to ensuring the good health of her creators. It broke Alucard’s heart to know that he would be the only human she would ever mend, and he was barely one at that.

“Thank you, 2H,” Alucard mumbled.

2H folded her hands in her lap. “Commander,” she asked, turning to face White. “May I suggest a prosthetic for Alucard’s arm? I believe I could connect YoRHa unit nervous circuitry directly to his nervous system.”

“That won’t be necessary for now,” White told her, her tone suggesting that it wouldn’t be necessary ever. “You are dismissed, Unit 2H. Thank you for your service.”

2H stood up, bowed, and saluted to Alucard before exiting White’s office.

“Now,” White said, glaring at Alucard as she loomed over him, “tell me everything.”

Alucard sat up, gingerly prodding at the bandages wrapped tightly across his numbed shoulder, and put his coat back on. “For starters, White, you’re right about me, but only by half. I am Alucard Fahrenheit Tepes, vampire by my father and human by my mother—a rare hybrid, a dhampyr. I was born in the fifteenth century in Wallachia, Transylvania, and I have been asleep for roughly nine thousand, nine hundred years.”

White’s expression was utterly deadpan. She crossed her arms. “That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“If you can believe in vampires, you can believe me.”

“I believe what I’ve seen with my own eyes.”

“Do you believe in humans?”

White stared at him.

“Have you ever seen one?” he asked.

“What do you know,” she asked, her voice laden with suspicion and indignance as her eyes narrowed, “about humans?”

“I know,” Alucard said, “about Project Gestalt.”

With those two words, White’s resolve collapsed. Alucard could see it in her face. Her stony attitude crumbled as though her slackening jaw was the foundation of a mighty wall; a lost and vulnerable look dulled her hard eyes as a river’s swift current would blunt the edges of jagged rocks and reduce them to smooth pebbles.
She knew the truth. She knew that the lunar colony was a sham, that the motivation of every android under her leadership was motivated solely by a false and fragile hope. And she was the one who defended the lie.

“How do you know about that?” she hissed, clenching her fists. There was a slight tremor in her voice and an even slighter tremor in her shoulders.

“I was there. I saw plague wipe the marvels of human civilization off the map.” Alucard bowed his head. “I watched the strength of men fail… my own as well.” He held out his hand, palm-up, his eyes tracing the lines in his palm that some said could be used to divine the future. “Through my veins flows the accursed blood of my father… but also that of the last human in all of creation.”

“That’s impossible.”

“How much documentation do you have on Project Gestalt?”

“Extensive.”

“Are you the only one in YoRHa who knows about it?”

“Of course,” White said. “Nobody would fight if they knew the truth.”

“Bring up the documents on the project,” Alucard told her, “and look me up.”

Still shaken and unable to piece her stoic mask back together, White conjured a holographic panel, tapped on it, and scrolled through it.

“They might even have a picture. I wore my hair differently back then, but…”

White dismissed the panel without a word. Dazed, she slowly walked over to her desk and sat down, laying her hands on the blank white surface and staring down at them, entranced.

Alucard stood up. “White?”

She didn’t even lift her head.

“Commander White.” He took a cautious step closer to her, wondering if he’d somehow crashed her programming—he’d never had great luck with computers. “I understand that I’ve given you a great deal to mull over, but… we still have business to discuss.”

“Get out,” she said, her voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

“White…”

“Get out!”

Taken aback by the sudden resurgence of White’s hostility, Alucard backed away. “But what about A2…”

White stretched her arm across the desk and reached for her gun again, prompting Alucard’s hasty retreat from her office. It was plain to see she was not in a productive mood; he had little choice but to leave her alone for now to process what he’d told her.

The corridor that ringed the main deck of the Bunker was empty and lifeless. As unnerving as it was to be in such a sterile place (he’d never felt comfortable in hospitals, either), it was easy for him to get lost in his thoughts. The window Alucard stood in front of showed a clearer and more
splendid night sky than he had ever seen before. With no air, no pollution, no obstructions, the stars were brighter than ever and their light constant and unflagging.

He’d never been to space before. As it turned out, there was something new under the sun. Pity he had such little opportunity to take in the experience.

If White wasn’t willing to talk to him, how was he to arrange a flight back to Earth? He couldn’t teleport through those access terminals the androids used, and their flight units had no life-support systems.

How long could he spend here? Was there any food here on the Bunker? Did they have water? What would he do if he had to—

“Alucard!”

Startled out of his musings, Alucard glancing over his shoulder to find a woman standing a few meters behind him and wearing the tight, form-fitting uniform and face-covering veil of one of White’s assistants. In fact, this was one of the two women who’d been waiting for him down in the hangar bay when he’d arrived. As he recalled, her name was 21O.

“Pardon,” he said, turning to face her as she closed the distance between the two of them. “I don’t believe I know you…”

“You don’t know me,” 21O said, carding a gloved hand through her short blonde hair. “But,” she added, a lower, deeper voice threading itself underneath her own, “I know you, Alucard…”

Alucard’s blood, cold as it was, ran colder. The other voice bleeding through the woman’s was one he knew all too well. “How are you doing this, father?” he asked.

Beneath the veil, the mouth of Dracula’s hostage curled into a smile, and he walked with an unsteady gait toward Alucard, struggling with the high-heeled boots 21O wore. “I gained the power to borrow this body,” he said, “when this woman was bitten by one of my thralls, but killed before she could become a vampire. The stain I left on her soul remains even though her body and memories have been made anew. And it is through that stain, small though it may be, that I can fill this vessel, see through her eyes, and act by her hand.” He removed one of 21O’s gloves and casually examined her fingernails. “Androids are curious creatures indeed…”

“Soma’s power of dominance.” Alucard’s hand fell to his sword. “You’re using it to puppeteer her?”

Dracula laughed. “What is that?” he asked, his eyes lighting up with mirth at the sight of the sword at Alucard’s belt. “As if you could cut me down here, son. You would only end this poor woman’s life, and despite your pedigree as half-human, I doubt the androids here would let you get away with cold-blooded murder. Then again, isn’t that all you’re good for? Ending innocents’ lives in your Sisyphean quest to rid the world of me?” He spread out 21O’s arms, making her chest an easy target.

“You monster!” Alucard’s eyes flashed; with an impulsive, angered snarl he drew his sword and swung it. “Innocent as your host is, I am certain she would gladly choose death over being your spy!”

Dracula easily stepped out of the path of the saber’s shimmering blade. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. I didn’t raise you to have a temper.” He wagged 21O’s finger at Alucard. “And neither did Lisa…”

Alucard regained his composure and sheathed his sword, glaring daggers at Dracula. “Don’t you
dare invoke her name,” he growled. “You betray her memory with every breath you draw!”

“Besides,” Dracula said, “do you think this woman is the only pair of eyes I have in this station?” He grinned. “Oh, Alucard, I raised you better than that…”

“What are you doing here?”

“For now? I am watching,” Dracula said through his living mouthpiece, “and waiting. That is all.”

“Waiting? For what?”

21O’s eyes went wide and glassy, her stare blank and lifeless, as she froze in place. A second later, her limbs went limp and she crumpled to her knees, blinking and reaching up to rub her forehead as she regained control over her body.

Alucard took a wary step closer. “Excuse me, ma’am, are you feeling unwell?” he asked.

Disoriented, she looked up at him and glanced around the hall as though she didn’t recognize her surroundings. “I’m fine,” she said, speaking in her voice and hers alone. “I’ve just had a little headache. I’m going down to maintenance to get it checked out.”

Alucard’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t recall…”

“I don’t remember falling down,” 21O admitted. She staggered to her feet, clinging to Alucard’s arm for support. “You… You’re the human, aren’t you? Alucard?”

“Yes,” Alucard replied. “Here, allow me to escort you to maintenance.”

“Thank you. You’re too kind, sir. The clinic is on the habitation deck one level down.”

Alucard nodded. “Which way to the elevator?”

“The deck is a ring. Either way.”

“Ah. Right.”

“This is a transmission from the Council of Humanity,” a gruff and gravelly voice announced over the intercom, booming and echoing down the corridor as Alucard guided 21O to the elevator. “One hundred thousand human refugees salute you, the YoRHa forces, for your tireless service in liberating the surface of the Earth. The road ahead is fraught with peril, but with every battle fought, we inch closer to seizing our ancestral homeland. Although a new enemy has presented itself as a clear and present threat to human existence, the machine forces have fallen into disarray and have begun to fight among themselves. It will not be long until the human race returns to rebuild the Earth, but until that point, all androids must be ready and willing to sacrifice everything for victory. Glory to Mankind!”

Alucard reflected on the broadcast. In ancient prehistory, the human race had once recovered from a population bottleneck of as low as two thousand people. One hundred thousand people were more than sufficient to jumpstart a new civilization, especially with the benefit of space-age technology. Dracula, who was as ignorant as his unwitting spy as to the nature of YoRHa’s deception, surely had no other goal but to find and destroy the alleged lunar colony.

“Glory to Mankind,” 21O repeated, reciting the words with the dull monotone of rote repetition. “Alucard… may I ask you a question?”
“Go ahead, ma’am.”

Alucard led 21O into the elevator, located the button for the deck below this one, and pressed it. As the elevator lurched and began to slide down to the next deck, Alucard felt the bottom drop out from his stomach.

“I found my… the previous 21O model’s private logs,” 21O said, her forehead cupped in her hand. “She… I… was curious about how humans formed families.”

“Well, usually, when a man and a woman feel a certain way about each other…”

“I’m aware of how humans reproduce.” 21O sighed. “Sir, if I may ask… what was your mother like?”

Alucard’s mouth went dry. “She was… well… I lost her a long time ago. My father and I had a falling out.”

“You have no family?”

“I am sorry to disappoint.”

21O slowly shook her head. “I didn’t mean to upset you, sir.”

The elevator slowed to a halt and the door slid open.

“Miss 21O,” Alucard said as he guided her to the maintenance clinic, “would you mind telling me what you do here?”

“No, not at all,” 21O replied. “I work in Ops with the other Operators to monitor YoRHa units’ progress on their assigned missions and keep them up-to-date on their objectives. My assigned unit is 9S. I’m also responsible for performing data analysis on the positions and capabilities of the machine lifeforms and the Resistance forces for the tactical specialists—Are you okay? You’ve gone pale.”

Alucard frowned, his brow furrowing. So that was what Dracula was getting out of her. As long as he could use her eyes as a window to the Bunker, he could know where any given YoRHa soldier was at any given time. “Take the rest of the day off,” he told her. “Don’t go back to Ops at all today, not even to collect whatever knick-knacks you may have at your desk.”

“I don’t have any.”

“Good. That’s one less excuse.”

“But the Commander—”

“I’ll deal with her. You have my explicit permission to remain in your quarters for the day.”

“If you say so…”

“Oh, hi, Alucard! Hi, 21O!”

Alucard turned white as a sheet as Soma’s voice cut into his ears. Suppressing a shudder, he reminded himself that 9S’s voice was simply a coincidence.

9S stumbled toward the two of them, weaving across the hallway, his steps halting, his cheeks flushed. “I, uh… Is it just me,” he asked, “or did the Bunker tilt a bit on its axis? It feels a little
wobbly…"

“It’s just you,” Alucard assured him. It was plain to see that 9S was drunk.

The boxy machine floating at the boy’s side wrung its claws helplessly. “Observation: The Bunker’s axial tilt has not changed. Hypothesis: Inebriation has adversely affected Unit 9S’s motor systems.”

“9S…” 21O rubbed her forehead wearily. “Please go to your quarters.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” 9S said, his petulant tone calling to mind a child being disciplined by his mother. “What about you? I thought you were gonna get maintenance…”

“I’m escorting her there,” Alucard told him.

“Oh, um, yeah, uh, by the way,” 9S said as he sidled up to the two of them and started walking in lockstep with them on their way, “21O, I’m really sorry for freaking out at 6O’s.”

“It’s okay.” 21O reached across Alucard’s front to pat 9S on the shoulder. “I understand it’s been… difficult.”

“Did you enjoy the party before I started yelling about watching you die?”

“To be honest, no. I felt uncomfortable.”

“I’m gonna tell 6O you had fun anyway so she doesn’t feel bad.”

“Please don’t,” 21O said, breaking away from Alucard and 9S as they reached the doorway to the maintenance clinic.

“Bye, 21O! Hope they fix your headache!” 9S called out as 21O vanished behind the door. “Y’know,” he said to Alucard, “we used that clinic to kill a vampire once.”

“Did you.”

“Yeah! We trapped him in the decontamination chamber and pelted him with UV light until all his skin melted off.”

“What a sight.”

9S took off for his own quarters, tripped over his own feet, almost fell flat on his face were it not for his pod, and leaned against the wall, grinning sheepishly as he tried to regain his footing. It seemed he was quite the lightweight when it came to alcohol. How much, Alucard wondered, had he drunk at the party he’d been talking to 21O about?

“Proposal: Unit 9S should request assistance from Alucard,” the pod told him.

“I got it,” 9S insisted, taking a few halting steps. Alucard caught him by the collar before he could slip and fall again. “Thanks,” he said.

“Hmm.”

“So, uh…” 9S yawned. “You said I look like a friend of yours who’s dead, right?”

“Right.”
“So when you look at me, is it like—like, uh, his ghost just sorta floats on top of me?”

“Um…” Alucard forced himself to study 9S. Soma’s cheeks and jawline weren’t quite as soft as 9S’s, but the resemblance was still uncanny. Twins, but not identical twins. But Alucard’s imagination could easily fill the blank space created by 9S’s blindfold with Soma’s dark, intense brown eyes with only the slightest bit of coercion.

It was just as 9S said. Ghosts superimposed over the living.

“That’s how I see her,” 9S said. “21O. I wasn’t good enough to, uh. Um. She died in front of me. Twice. Kinda. Sorta. Well, uh…” He kneaded his hands, the leather of his gloves squeaking. “And 2B… you know, you’re a lot like her. She sees ghosts when she looks at me, too. Or so I’ve heard…”

Soma Cruz was never so talkative. 9S was an exceptionally chatty drunk.

“Don’t worry, though,” 9S said, stumbling to a halt in front of the door with his name on it and knocking on it. It slid open before his fist could collide with it, and only Alucard’s swift intervention prevented him from falling again.

“Don’t worry,” 9S repeated, a loopy grin stretched across his face. “Promised her nothing bad would ever happen to me. So she wouldn’t have to worry. And you don’t, either!” He made gun shapes with his fingers and pointed them at Alucard as he walked backward into his quarters. “So don’t—”

The door slid shut before 9S could finish his drunken rambling, leaving Alucard once again with no company save for the omnipresent background noise of the Bunker’s hidden machinery.

A2 hadn’t gotten far from the fugitives’ hideout before running into more YoRHa units—ones she doubted would be as friendly to her.

The sweeping flashlight beams from the two androids’ pods lit them up—one with a cherubic face and long, pale lavender-white hair darkened and weighed down by the weight of the rain, the other with a thin, severe face framed by lank locks of gleaming black hair. They wore black armor; their assortment of swords hovered at their backs.

A2 plastered herself to the nearest wall. These units weren’t runaways. They might have even been Type-E units sent out to find and kill her—or the other fugitives. It wouldn’t be hard to run away. The two were oblivious to her presence and she still had time to slip out of range of their scans. But if those two were going after 8B and her laughably-underprepared friends…

She clenched her empty fists, angry at her own impotence—she was still unarmed (she kicked herself for not taking at least one weapon from the arsenal that floated at 8B’s back). Could she kill two combat units, two possible Executioners, with her bare hands alone? If only she still had fangs and claws—then she’d never be without a weapon.

The lavender-haired android pulled up a holographic panel and jabbed at it as if she were trying to stab it to death. “Hello? Operator 27O! You didn’t tell me it was storming down here! My hair is ruined!”

“Calm down, 6E,” her partner spoke up, her tired-sounding monotone making it clear she was very much fed up with 6E’s particular brand of bullshit. “It’s only cosmetic.”

6E ran a hand through one of the sodden pigtails drooping over her shoulder. “If you had hair like
Irked by 7E’s dismissive response, 6E ripped her curled and talonlike fingers free of her hair and growled in frustration, swiping the holographic panel away. “Let’s just find some vampires to melt already.”

“Hold on,” 7E interjected, consulting with her pod. “I’m picking up some black box signals nearby.”

“So?”

“My operator says there aren’t any other units officially assigned to this sector…”

“Ohh…” A sly grin replaced the scowl on 6E’s face. “Someone’s not where they ought to be…”

Just as the flashlight beam from 7E’s pod began to sweep near her, A2 bolted. No sense sticking around to fight—survival meant knowing when to be cowardly, pride be damned.

A black blur slid past her, skidding to a halt just in front of her before she could react, yellowish lamplight glinting off a silvery blade.

“Hi there,” 7E said, sweeping A2 off her feet and kicking her into the air.

A2 struggled to right herself in midair, if nothing else than to soften her landing—but her new foe had no intention of letting her reach the ground peacefully, leaping up to meet her in mid-fall and kicking her into a crumbling wall. Her body tore through the concrete facade as though the wall were tissue paper. She hit the floor and rolled onto her back, gingerly picking herself up and taking stock of the aches running anew through her body.

She was on the second or third floor of the building, standing in between two columns out of the grid of pillars that kept the ceiling up. The floor had collapsed in places, creating gaping pitfalls nearly entirely hidden by the shadows.

7E jumped through the opening in the wall created by A2’s body, the light from her pod illuminating the motes of dust hanging in the cavernous and empty room. “A2, huh?”

A2 spat an oily, frothy wad of blood and spit onto the floor. “What am I, famous?”

“I hear,” 7E said, “you’ve evaded us for three years.”

“Going on four.”

“I don’t believe you.” 7E readied a pair of long daggers, holding them both crossed over her chest. “But if you’re for real, you’re an insult to our profession.”

The Executioner was lightning-fast; in the blink of an eye, her knives both came a hair’s-breadth from A2’s throat. A2 slipped back, lifting her leg to block one of 7E’s strikes on the armor lining her shin and narrowly twisting out of the path of 7E’s next attack.

A2 weaved through the varied arsenal of 7E’s pod, struggling to avoid the hail of bullets and laser blasts as she inched closer to 7E. She didn’t want to fight in close quarters, especially not unarmed and against someone well-suited to it, but she had little choice.

Barely managing to dodge the flashing blades of 7E’s daggers, A2 closed in and jabbed her elbow
into her throat, then drove her fist into her midsection with all the strength she could muster. Knocked off her feet from the force of the mighty blow, 7E crashed through several support pillars before flying out the window, her pod struggling to keep up with her.

With one Executioner out of the way, A2 leaped into one of the pits in the floor and made her way to the ground floor. There was a chance the other one might have been waiting for her outside—but if she could slip out the back…

A long katana nearly two meters from tip to pommel flew right under her nose, the razor-sharp blade close enough to her lip to cut her a second mouth. It embedded itself in the support pillar behind her, vibrating slightly until it came to a stop. The second Executioner was already here.

The sword vanished and reappeared in 6E’s hand. “I hear you gave a dear friend of mine some horrible trouble the other day,” she said, speaking with an unnervingly casual tone. “Strange, though—I heard you were, well… *mangier.*”

“*Excuse me, mesdames…*”

The light of 6E’s pod’s flashlight swept through the air to focus on the intruder walking into the building, dazzling A2’s eyes as the beam flashed past her.

A woman in a lacy red dress so sheer it was nearly transparent (although it didn’t cover much to begin with) stepped over the threshold emerged from the darkness before them, protected from the rain by an ornate, lace-trimmed black parasol resting against her shoulder. A white mask with a single streak of red running down one of its cheeks hid her face; silken gray hair reaching down nearly to her ankles billowed out behind her like a cape with every step she took.

She twirled her parasol, rainwater spitting from the edges of the canopy. Her long and thin fingers, tipped with sharp crimson nails, tapped on the parasol’s gleaming shaft. “I was told I would find two adorable little automatons here. Care to point me in their direction? I’m new in town, you see…”

6E hefted her sword, resting its long blade over her shoulder. “Sorry, miss, there’s just me.” She glanced over at A2. “Well… give me a minute, and there’ll be just me.”

The masked woman giggled coquettishly. “Well… one will do. You’re 6E, right?”

6E fumbled with her sword, taken aback that this mysterious figure knew her name. “Er, yes, I—”

“My name is Carmilla. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She looked over at A2. “And you… oh, you’re not 7E, are you?”

“Sorry to disappoint,” A2 said. There was something awfully disquieting about Carmilla. She was too much of a ditz to be a Resistance android (never mind the definitely-not-regulation way she dressed) and definitely didn’t belong to YoRHa. A2 could barely make it out with such a dulled sense of smell, and it was masked by the heavy rainfall outside, but… this woman smelled like Olrox.

“Well,” Carmilla said, giving her umbrella another twirl, “I’m pleased to meet you two, nevertheless. What are you up to, 6E?”

“We’re looking for vampires,” 6E said, brandishing her sword. “Have you seen any lately?”

“Vampires?” Carmilla cocked her head. “Hmm… I believe I have!” She gave her parasol another spirited and vigorous twirl, water droplets flying off its wide and lace-trimmed brim, lowered it and
folded the canopy in on itself. Leaning on the parasol like a cane, she raised her free hand to her
mask. “The last vampire I saw…”

She tossed the mask away, revealing a thin, pale face with a high forehead and cheekbones and a
sharp, elfin chin. Her plump crimson lips parted, the corners of her mouth curling into a coy smile.
Her eyes were just as red as her lips and glittered in the beam of light that illuminated her.

“…was staring back at me,” she concluded, “in the mirror this morning, darlings!”

6E lunged forward, but her sword vanished before it could cut into the vampire woman’s flesh,
much to her surprise. Taking advantage of the confusion, Carmilla jabbed her parasol into 6E’s
stomach and caught her in mid-charge, twisting her arm behind her back and pinning her to the
ground with her knee.

“Pod!” 6E growled, straining and struggling against her foe’s iron grip as Carmilla’s sharp nails
dug into her armor and peeled the black plating away from her bare and vulnerable skin. “Fire anti-
vampire ordinance!”

“Negative,” her pod replied as it orbited her. “YoRHa support pod protocols dictate that all
offensive functions of both support pod and assigned unit be deactivated when used against a
human.”

“Human? It’s a vampire!”

Carmilla tore off the armored collar covering 6E’s neck, her tongue darting out to lick her lips in
anticipation as more and more of her prey’s bare, pale skin was revealed.

“Negative,” the pod replied. “Human genome detected. That its heart is not beating and no brain
activity is detected does not—”

“Oh, do shut up, you flying refrigerator,” Carmilla snarled, snatching the pod out of the air and
ripping through its hull. Sparks flew as her pale fingers tore through the metal plating like tinfoil,
leaving ragged furrows. Badly damaged, the pod flagged and began to float erratically, smoke
pouring from its inner machinery as rainwater seeped into its hull.

This was, as far as A2 knew, the first vampire she had seen. But she’d heard of them. YoRHa was
focusing harder on destroying them right now than it was on defeating the machines, according to
what she’d overheard while holed up in the Resistance camp. And what she’d heard was true—they
were an enemy worth taking deadly seriously.

A2 noticed 6E’s long sword laying on the grass, the edge of its blade faintly glistening in a faint
ray of light cast from one of the pods. Those two androids couldn’t use weapons against Carmilla
because of her human genetics, but A2…

Alucard was human, or half-human, or whatever he was, but A2 hadn’t had any problem locking
blades with him. She didn’t have any pod blocking her combat functions on its whims.

But she couldn’t move. Carmilla still had an eye on her—and A2 had never been under the
paralyzing influence of a vampire’s gaze.

“You androids… you really do look just like humans!” Carmilla marveled, her clawlike fingernails
gently raking 6E’s naked back. “I’m amazed those miserable little creatures could create such fine
toys! I think… I’ll collect you all!” With wonder and excitement glittering in her crimson eyes, she
opened her mouth wide and plunged her frames into 6E’s neck.
6E choked and coughed, a gurgling scream tearing itself from her mouth as the vampire began to feed on her. Her fingers scrabbled weakly against the floor, nails tearing against the dirty concrete; as foam began to spill from her mouth, her skin turned so pale it was almost blue. As the vitality left 6E’s body, Carmilla’s skin began to shine; her gray hair darkened and turned a shiny, lustrous black.

Feeding broke Carmilla’s eye contact with A2, liberating her from the numbing terror that had rooted her to the spot. Seeing her chance to put an end to both the vampire and at least one of the two Executioners, A2 made a mad dash for 6E’s discarded sword, snatching it up—and drove the long, nearly-two-meter blade all the way through Carmilla’s chest. The force pushed Carmilla onto her feet, tearing her away from her hapless prey as she stumbled backward. The sword plunged deeper, the entire blade sliding neatly and easily into her flesh, its hilt coming to a stop nestled amid her lace-covered cleavage as A2 pinned her to the wall.

Carmilla’s eyes bulged as A2 planted her boot on her stomach and yanked the sword out, blood spraying in a torrent from her mouth like a waterfall. She pulled herself the rest of the way off the long blade that had skewered her, gagging, and began to frantically spit out wads of blood and frothy saliva. “Ugh! Vile little—!”

Nonplussed, A2 readied her blade for another strike.

“I wanted to drink both of you,” Carmilla spat, her face twisted in horror, disgust, and gut-wrenching nausea, “but I can barely stomach one!” She reached down and grabbed 6E, dragging her limp body off the ground by her hair, and staggered drunkenly. “You vile little dolls have the foulest blood I’ve ever tasted! I think I’m going to vomit…"

“How about I give you something to vomit about?” A2 snarled, cutting into Carmilla’s midsection. Blood spurted out and trickled down the length of the long blade.

“Oh,” Carmilla said, curling her fingers around the blade lodged in her side, “your awful blood has given me more than enough!” With just her bare hands alone, she snapped the blade into three jagged pieces, leaving A2 with barely a quarter of the sword’s impressive length.

Her clawed hands lashed out, striking A2 across the cheek and leaving four long, deep, oozing cuts in their wake. A2 leaped backward, clutching the remnants of her sword tightly and raising it defensively just in time to parry another strike from Carmilla’s razor-sharp fingernails.

“Lord Dracula told me the world was full of funny little toys who looked and acted just like humans!” Carmilla spat, driving A2 against the wall with a furious flurry of blood-red claws. “Why can’t you taste like humans, too?”

A2 tossed aside her broken sword and caught Carmilla by the wrists, her fingers digging into the vampire’s wet, ice-cold skin. She squeezed with all her might, knowing she had the raw strength to shatter an android’s chassis as long as she applied it right. How much stronger could a vampire with a human body be?

But Carmilla’s wrist bones, thin and delicate though they were, did not yield, no matter how much force A2 applied.

Grinning wickedly, Carmilla pinned A2 even harder against the wall, the tips of her nails inching closer to her face. One fingernail hovered so close to A2’s eye that her eyes began to water.

A2 drove her knee into the oozing wound in Carmilla’s side, but even though she could feel ribs crack and shatter under the force of the blow, her attack had no effect but to destabilize her stance,
allowing Carmilla to gain another fraction of an inch on her.

“I wonder,” Carmilla mused, “if I ate an entire raw onion beforehand, would it mask the taste of your disgusting blood?” Her mad eyes widened, her blood-red irises sparkling.

A2 felt her strength falter, her fingers twitching and loosening. It was as though this vampire’s gaze alone was sapping the strength from her body. How much longer could she hold on?

Carmilla sniffed the air, her nostrils flaring. “But maybe,” she mused, a wry smile twisting up the corner of her bloody mouth, “yours tastes more like a dog’s… which, I’ll admit, isn’t much better, but—”

A spearhead burst through her chest in a spray of blood, its stained edge protruding from between Carmilla’s breasts. She gasped, blood gushing from her mouth and running down her chin and reddening her throat. Then, the thick blade of a broadsword, crackling with arcs of blue lightning, buried itself in her shoulder.

As Carmilla’s arms went limp, A2 pulled them aside, wrenching her shoulders from their sockets, and kicked her in the chin with enough force that her head snapped backward, a sickly wet crunch indicating her neck had been broken from the blow.

Carmilla reeled back, stumbling as her eyes gazed blankly up at the ceiling and her limp arms swayed at her sides, the sword and spear still rooted in her body.

A familiar howl cut through the air, echoing through the cavernous building. All three fugitives had barged into the building, weapons drawn.

“A2!” 8B shouted out, driving one more sword into Carmilla’s back to add to the broadsword and spear she’d already planted. “Take these!” She took the pair of sheathed katanas from her hip and tossed them over to A2; A2 didn’t waste any time snatching them off the floor, sliding them free of their sheathes, and plunging them up to their hilts in Carmilla’s neck.

A2 and 8B pulled their swords free of the vampire pincushion, allowing Carmilla’s mangled body to crumple into a limp pile on the floor, a pool of blood growing underneath her.

“Thanks,” A2 said, falling none too gently to her knees. “Meant to ask you for a sword or two before I left…”

8B smiled and helped her back onto her feet, sheathing and picking up her swords and handing them back to her. “No problem.”

A2 bundled the gifted swords under her arm. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“We noticed you ran headlong into two black box signals,” 64B said, “and figured, hey, maybe you’d be in trouble without any weapons and stuff.”

Carmilla’s eyelids fluttered and cracked open. “You… upstart automatons,” she mumbled, gurgling wetly as blood trickled from the perforations in her body. A crimson bubble grew from one of the holes in her neck and popped. “Toys like you… should know your place…”

She rose unsteadily to her feet, her bones snapping as broken ribs, shattered vertebrae, and dislocated joints popped back into place. “You have no respect for your betters,” she snarled, backing away from the four androids and sweeping the limp and lifeless body of 6E off the floor, cradling it to her chest like a child.
“We don’t have anything that can permanently kill a vampire,” 22B hurriedly hissed to 8B. “We’d better put as much distance between it and us as we can—while we can!”

“Right.” 8B readied her blades. “I’ll bring up the rear and hold her off. The three of you—”

Carmilla laughed bitterly and vanished in a pillar of flame, leaving nothing behind but a black scorch mark on the concrete floor and a matching scorch mark on the ceiling.

“Yeah, that’s good, too,” said 64B, taken aback by the vampire’s sudden disappearance.

White rolled the malformed bullet around in her palm, leaving faint streaks of blood—human blood—on her hand. Blood on her hands normally didn’t bother her. It was the price of leadership. She was numb to it, blind to it; red was a color she’d taught herself not to see.

But this blood did not belong to an android who had died on the altar of their fabricated god.

YoRHa’s purpose was to create for androids a god worth fighting for, a god worth dying for, to rekindle their guttering fire that was their will to live. The Council of Humanity, the lunar colony, one hundred thousand human refugees huddled in hermetically-sealed shelters on the dark side of the moon—all lies dredged up from the dark ages of history to cover up the long-forgotten truth that humanity’s last-ditch effort to survive a devastating plague had failed. Those who had previously lived without hope or meaning were all too happy to embrace the noble lie. Everything White had done, good and ill alike, lives saved and lives ended, was to preserve that falsehood, to preserve the happiness and hope of her people.

Except now it wasn’t a lie.

There was a human left alive in this world. A remnant from the old world, the world before the alien invasion and machine scourge.

And White had tried to murder him.

The traces of blood on her skin left a more indelible stain than anything else. She could scrub and scrub and scrub, she could trade this chassis for a new one a hundred times over, but nothing would change it. She had met the dead god she had pretended to revive and she had shot him.

The bullet slipped out of her hand and hit her desk, rolling off the edge and onto the floor. It rang like a bell.

White recalled the Gestalt Report. In the years since she’d first taken command of YoRHa and had gained the appropriate clearance to view all of the remaining data on the project, she’d never had the time to read anything more than the occasional snippet.

In the thousands of pages detailing the program, Alucard’s name had appeared only once—but once had been enough.

Alucard, born Adrian Fahrenheit Tepes to Dracula and Lisa Tepes, on December 3, 1453 CE. Aliases include Arikado Genya. Responsible for slaying Dracula in 1476 and 1797 as well as leading a military task force in the Demon Castle Wars of 1999. Previous employers include the Catholic Church and Japanese Secret Intelligence. Employed by the World Purification Organization to assist with Project Gestalt on August 17, 2041. His coffin, which held his body in stasis, went missing in 2349 due to seismic activity and was deemed unrecoverable, resulting in the loss of Alucard as an asset to the Project.
White cradled her head in her hands, so overwhelmed by the weight of her actions that she could hardly breathe. It felt as though her mind was crumbling, her thoughts slowing and falling to pieces; a self-inflicted logic virus poisoning her circuitry and turning her brain into rust.

Her hand shaking, her fingers crept over to the handgun lying on her desk. The thought of picking it up had barely crossed her mind before she found the barrel of the gun, still warm from the shot she'd fired at Alucard, pressing into her temple.

White squeezed her eyes shut, her breathing shaky and labored, her trembling finger brushing gently and lightly against the trigger.

After what felt like an eternity with her feverish, all-but-incoherent thoughts swirling in her mind, her grip loosened and the gun slipped from her weakening grasp, clattering to the floor with a bang so loud compared to the utter silence engulfing her office that for an instant she thought that she had actually shot herself.

White collapsed over her desk, resting her cheek against the cool and hard ceramic surface. As she began to breathe again, something hot and wet trickled across the bridge of her nose.

For the first time in a long time, for an instant, not a single one of the hard decisions she had made as the commander of YoRHa seemed as though they had been worth it.

Jackass did her best to focus on her work, but with the utter cacophony of the rain drumming madly on the scrap-metal roof of her workshop, it was impossible to hear herself think. Unless she shut down her audio sensors, which was seeming like a better idea with every passing second.

Letting out a frustrated growl, she leaned backward in her chair, tipping it onto its two back legs, and tried harder to focus on the words swimming on the surface of her tablet.

Huh. A new text message. She tapped on the notification icon.

It was from White.

Jack.

I hope you are staying well out of trouble, you embarrassing trainwreck in humanoid form. If I hear one more complaint from Anemone about your special brand of Frankensteinian mischief I will make a trip to Earth myself and rearrange your internal systems personally. In fact, I may do so anyway.

Take care,

White

Jackass smiled.

Love you too, asshole, she texted back.

Chapter End Notes

If you're not familiar with my other fics, 6E was an OC I came up with to serve as a
major antagonist for Ghost in the Machine. You'll probably see her again in this fic. The other YoRHa units are the three deserters from the YoRHa Betrayers side quest. You'll probably see them again, too.
Every single inch of Carmilla’s room was white. The walls, floor, and ceiling was white. The hardwood floor was white. The beautifully-detailed rug was white. The elegant molding lining the ceiling and the windowsill were white. Ornate patterns on the wallpaper were just barely off-white to distinguish themselves from the white background. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling was lustrous as gold, but pure white as well, and the crystal lights were translucent and milky. The curtains hanging over the bay window were white silk, as were the sheets and canopy of the enormous four-poster bed in the corner of the room. The hearth, too, was white, as was the armchair set at an angle beside it. The bookshelf, as well as all the books on it—yes, those, too, were without the slightest hint of color.

White like milk, white like paper, white like eggshells, white like undyed silk, white like a ghost, white like pale smoke, white like snow, ivory, alabaster. A veritable rainbow of every shade of white imaginable. It was all so monochromatic that it hurt to look at it.

“Oh dear, Dracula,” Carmilla muttered, thinking aloud as she trudged over to the bed and laid her newest toy, the lovely doll-like 6E, to rest. “Is this what passes for interior decorating these days?”

She wiped blood away from the healing cuts in her neck, letting errant droplets trickle across the side of her pale hand and drip onto the carpet. A little bit of red was just what this room needed, although she would have to bleed quite a lot to make it easier on the eyes.

Her shoes left bloody tracks across the floor as she made her way to the vanity in the corner of the bedroom. Of course, she didn’t have a reflection in the ornate silver (or perhaps white gold) mirror. She wondered why Dracula kept mirrors in his castle at all. Perhaps it was his idea of a practical joke.

She ran a finger lightly, gently, gingerly across the stinging gash running across her shoulder. Those automatons put up quite a fight, even though they’d been aware they had no way to kill her. She’d been smart to take one of them for herself—what a strong vampire 6E would make when she woke from her slumber!

Part of her wished she’d taken more of those androids—just a handful of strong vampires serving as her handmaidens could enslave fifty weaker people for her. But the rest of her still knew all too well the utterly unpalatable taste of that android’s blood coating her mouth. How many real humans would she need to drink to wash that down? Pricking that girl’s throat had been like
drinking kerosene.

It would be slow going, but she would make do with one.

She cleaned her face as best she could in the washbasin, the water turning rosy pink and then pale red as the signs of battle washed away from her alabaster skin. It was demeaning to do this herself. Next time, though, she’d have a proper servant. And perhaps if she were to find some humans, she could have more. How many had she had in the old days? Dozens? Hundreds? It had been so long ago…

After spitting liberally in the basin in a vain attempt to drive the odious aftertaste from her mouth, Carmilla took to the cabinet at the side of the vanity and rummaged through it for something to wash her mouth and teeth with.

She vigorously scrubbed her teeth with a salty paste and rinsed her mouth with vinegar and mint, but the taste still lingered, faint but maddening in its presence. It was like a ghost haunting her mouth.

She winced. This would not do at all! If androids and animals were all she had to subsist on, she would starve to death!

Then she noticed a strange device, an odd tube, a bottle of bright blue liquid, and a handwritten note in the back of the cabinet. She dried her hands, took the note, and smoothed the rumpled sheet of paper with her thumb.

Dearest Carmilla,

This is an electric toothbrush, toothpaste, and mouthwash. It is a far superior way to clean your teeth and mouth than the primitive means we grew up on. Keep your fangs sharp, fresh, and white—you will have plenty of cause to use them soon enough.

Fond regards,

Dracula

Carmilla set the letter aside and picked up the strange device. She pressed a button on its side with her thumb and nearly dropped it in shock as it began to whir and vibrate, its bristly tip spinning like a drill bit.

“Excuse me?” she asked, as though Dracula’s cheeky hand-written letter could answer. “Which orifice is this supposed to go into?”

She was supposed to rub this against her teeth? Madness! It would surely grind her fangs to dust—and then where would she be? Sucking futilely with her soft and useless gums against her would-be prey’s neck? Perish the thought! She would never suffer such indignity.

But then she ran her tongue across her gums once more and picked up more of the faint traces of vile blood and decided she would take the risk. She squeezed a dollop of pale blue-green paste from the tube onto the brush head, shoved it into her mouth, and began to scrub. The paste, so minty it burned, frothed up, spilling from her mouth and dripping down her chin into the washbasin. She spat it all out when she’d had enough—and after a minute or so she had had quite enough—and for good measure, drank nearly half of the bottle of mouthwash.

The taste of mint was overpowering, so cool it nearly burned, and left her mouth tingling—and mercifully freed of that horrible oily aftertaste at last. She had been right to trust Dracula.
“Finished freshening up, Lady Carmilla?”

So shocked that she spat out the dregs of mouthwash still lingering in her mouth, Carmilla did an about-face and found Death hovering at her door.

“Oh, hello, Death. Don’t you know it’s rude to enter a woman’s room uninvited?” Carmilla asked, clutching the back of her chair as she regained her composure.

“I enter everywhere uninvited, Lady Carmilla,” Death replied, bowing curtly.

“Right. Of course.”

“Dracula wishes to see you… along with the others.”

“Others?”

Death nearly smiled. “You don’t think you were the only one Lord Dracula asked me to retrieve from oblivion, do you?”

Carmilla took a satin robe (white, of course) hanging from the rack at her side and wrapped it around herself, hiding her torn and bloodied dress. “Fine. Take me to him. But first…”

She made her way over to the window, eager to see what view Dracula had given her in his new castle. What vista awaited her when she threw open the window to gaze upon the wonderful vistas of this world of endless night—

She threw back the curtains and found herself staring at a craggy wall of brown, untamed stone and dirt.

Death let out a wheezing cackle, mocking her surprise. “It’s a work in progress, I’m afraid, milady,” he said, chuckling.

“We’re underground?”

“For now.”

Letting the curtains fall closed, Carmilla came to Death’s side and followed him through the castle. Here and there, throughout the ivory corridors, were signs that Dracula’s precious Castlevania was in fact a work in progress, just as Death had said. At times the elegant masonry broke down into uneven and irregular blobs of cubes; here and there were shimmering, chaotic masses of bismuth, iridescent rainbow-streaked layers forming mesmerizing concentric squares. Parts of the castle were vast and untamed chambers of crystalline white stone so large that the floors and ceilings vanished in the shadows and mist; naked and half-finished corridors snaked through the chasms, bridges winding through the empty spaces.

“How long has it been, Death?” she asked the grim apparition as he led her deeper into the castle. A few monstrous minions of Dracula, birthed from the same dark forces that produced this castle, lazily milled past her, along with strange, stubby steel golems she had never seen before.

“Ten thousand years.”

“A century’s worth of centuries…” Carmilla mused. “And still you follow Dracula?”

“To the ends of the Earth, milady,” Death replied, quite matter-of-factly.

“Why?”
“He has always interested me.” Death bowed his head as the ragged hem of his fluttering cloak swirled just above the floor. “All lives come to me in the end but his. Since I cannot bring him to me, I must remain at his side.”

“So it’s greed that keeps you loyal.”

“I suppose. What is it that keeps you loyal?”

Carmilla suppressed a laugh. Her, loyal? She respected Dracula, yes, and she followed him, yes, but only because he hated humanity as much as she did. They shared a common goal and she recognized that the best way to meet that goal was to put her strength at his disposal. But she only served him as long as she needed to.

“When the man who turned me was slain, I inherited his estate. I had more slaves than I could count, every single one of them loyal to their last breath. They knew no other life, as any human should, but servitude. They had no cause but my satisfaction and pleasure in all things.” She picked specks of dried blood out from under her fingernails. “It was the perfect model of the natural order. With us on top and them on the bottom. Humans have no purpose but to serve their superiors without question or complaint.”

“I see,” Death said.

“And then… one of those wretched Belmonts came.” Carmilla clenched her fist, seething at the memory of that man with his horrid whip tearing through her manor with such ease, such grace, such ferocity. Flames licking at all the artwork she’d commissioned from the great painters of the age, statues crafted by the masters lying in pieces in the courtyard. “I barely escaped with my life. My own servants tore my home down to its foundations and stripped it of anything of value. I lost everything. My jewelry and precious gems drifted down the river—I had to throw them away myself so that the mob would not sully them with their grubby paws.”

She clenched her fist harder, clawlike nails digging so deeply into her skin that blood seeped between her fingers and trickled down her knuckles. Even now, after so long, the pain and humiliation remained fresh in her mind. The anguish, inside and out, of being powerless as the rightful social order turned itself on its head and crushed her under its upturned weight…

“It was after that,” she said, “that I found Dracula. When I had nothing and he had everything. What few humans we do not kill will serve me with unyielding devotion and love me with all of their hearts, and the world will be as it should be. That is what he has promised me.”

“Ah,” Death said. “So it’s greed that keeps you loyal.”

“I suppose.”

Death made no more small talk, drifting along in silence until he and Carmilla reached Dracula’s inner sanctum at the heart of the castle. The great double doors to the chamber slid open of their own accord, revealing a room unlike any other part of the castle.

Dracula’s chamber was a circular room with jet-black and gunmetal-gray walls, ceiling, and floor lined with thin strips of glass that glowed with a hard blue light. A segment of the curved wall was a sheet of curved glass revealing a stony cavern filled with metal vehicles the likes of which Carmilla had never seen—like boats designed by someone who had never seen a body of water before. Mummified husks of squidlike creatures sat in alcoves lining a raised platform in the center of the room. On the platform was a long table with Dracula’s ornate throne at its head.
Olrox, commander of Dracula’s legion of monsters, stood up to greet Carmilla as she climbed the staircase onto the platform. “What a pleasure to see you here,” he drawled, bowing deeply. His voice echoed within the confines of his helmet.

“Hmm.” Carmilla looked him over as he supplicated himself before her. His lustrous violet armor was scuffed, stained, and scorched in places; faint wisps of violet smoke curled around his black glass helmet, seeping from a spiderweb of cracks that spread across his face. The shards of glass his helmet had been reduced to were hastily pasted together. “You certainly look well-put-together, Olrox.”

“The donkey calls the pig long-ears,” Olrox retorted, gesturing to the ragged scraps of her bloodstained dress which poked out from under her robe. “You’ve met some of the denizens of this world already, haven’t you?”

“I have,” Carmilla admitted, stroking the nearly-healed stab wounds in her throat.

“The one I met was an ornery little she-wolf with hair as white as snow. Pray you never meet her,” Olrox said. “You may not be able to survive her.”

Carmilla smirked, well aware that the girl Olrox was describing seemed to be the same one whom she had fought. “Oh, she sounds dreadful. Did she do that to your helmet?”

“She would have done far worse if I hadn’t exhausted her first. Count your blessings.”

Carmilla crossed her arms. “I’m sure she would have.”

Her eyes roved across the room, spying two more guests. One wore an ornate robe and gilded cowl, the richness of his outfit contrasting sharply with his shabby appearance. His skin was sickly and ashen, his face gaunt and thin, cheeks hollow, eyes yellowed by jaundice and nose whittled down by syphilis to nothing but a rotting nub. He was certainly not a vampire—he had no fangs. In fact, he had few teeth to speak of at all. He was out of place among Dracula’s most trusted lieutenants, looking more like he belonged with the lowliest of the monsters defending this castle than here.

The second one looked more like he belonged to the high court. His white shirt and black pants, though simple in their designs, were as finely-tailored as any nobleman’s clothes. Silver hair spilled down his back and over his shoulders, framing a haughty face and noble brow. A pair of spectacles were perched on his nose. He was preoccupied playing a game of chess against himself, and yet he seemed to be keenly observing the others in the room at the same time. When his eyes met Carmilla’s for a split second, she felt as though he were reading her like a book: one he found very, very interesting.

“Don’t you worry, though,” Olrox boasted. “One of my minions is already on her tail. And even if that doesn’t work out, I’ve marked her with my sigil. If you stay at my side, both of us will be quite safe from her…” His gauntleted hand slipped from his sides and made for hers; she jerked her hand out of the way, burying it under her robe.

“I would sooner consort with one of your beasts, Olrox,” she spat. The shabby man laughed at Olrox’s romantic misfortune; the chess-playing man pretended to be unaware that there was anybody else in the room at all as he slid a black piece across the board to put the white king in check.

A flurry of ebony fire swirled in a vortex around Dracula’s throne, predicating his arrival; black and violet sparks flashed and fluttered in the air like fireflies as the air in the room grew bitter cold.
and oppressively heavy.

“Be seated, friends,” his booming voice echoed through the room before the flames had died. Dracula always knew how to make a bold entrance.

At Dracula’s order, everyone hurried to be seated before his form manifested in the room. The shabby man sat up straight, removing his elbows from the table and folding his hands in his lap. The chess-playing man snapped his fingers and the chessboard, pieces and all, disintegrated into a cloud of golden sparks. Olrox hastily took his seat, as did Carmilla; Death hovered over the chair at Dracula’s right hand.

The whirling flames died down, revealing Dracula as Carmilla had never seen him before.

He was young. His body, physically, couldn’t have been past his mid-twenties, but he looked even younger—he didn’t come close to filling his own throne, his elbows barely managing to sit on the obsidian armrests. Yet he radiated the same intimidating aura he always had and his presence still filled the room, regardless of his diminutive size. His cheeks and chin were as smooth and hairless as an infant’s, and feathery white hair framed his face—yet this boyish and angelic countenance belied the smoldering intensity of his dark eyes: Eyes that spoke to the horrible sights he had seen and deeds he had done. The rest of him notwithstanding, the eyes alone made it clear that he was unmistakably, undeniably Dracula.

“Welcome to Castlevania, Carmilla, Olrox, Shaft,” Dracula announced, spreading out his arm and waving it over his guests. “I am grateful to you, Death, for returning these indispensable allies to me from the abyss.”

“We are just as grateful to be brought here as you are to receive us, m’lord,” the shabby man—Shaft—said, bowing as if in prayer.

“Exactly. What a pleasure it is to revisit our old haunts,” Olrox chimed in. “Isn’t that right, Carmilla?”

Carmilla crossed her arms. “Where are the humans?” she asked Dracula.

“Excuse me?” Dracula asked, cocking his head.

“The message you gave me when Death woke me up said that the world was filled with wonderful toys here that looked and acted just like humans,” Carmilla said. “But I will tell you this much—they most certainly do not taste like humans!”

Dracula raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“We must feed on something,” Carmilla said. “I refuse to lower myself to subsisting on those automatons’ disgusting oily blood. So where are the humans?”

“I see.” Dracula leaned back, kicking his feet up on the table in a flagrant show of disrespect that belied his graceful words. “Fret not, Carmilla. My newest lieutenant, Adam—” he gestured to the chess-playing man (who was, of course, no longer playing chess)—“shall explain everything.”

Adam bowed and rose to his feet, and in his silken voice he explained the history of this world.

As he finished his story, Carmilla sank back in her chair, feeling as though she had been struck across the face. There wasn’t a single human on Earth? How disheartening—Would she be resigned to feeding on beasts and machines until she found a way to reach the moon?
“Oh, but don’t despair,” Dracula said, as though he had read her mind. He grinned, baring his fangs. “That is why you three have been brought here. Together, we’ll drag the cowering remnants of humanity from their heavenly respite. And we,” he said, looking Carmilla straight in the eyes, “will make them ours again.”

A2 led the pack of fugitives just up to the edge of Anemone’s camp, at the borderline where the warm and inviting lights faded away into the shadows. She shivered, her sodden clothes and hair clinging to her cold, wet skin. The downpour had calmed to a light, misty drizzle that nonetheless was just as unpleasant to be in as the torrential rain had been.

“Wait here,” she told the other three androids. “Anemone and I are on good terms, so I’ll collect the supplies for you. Then we’ll head out.” She doubted Anemone would have the means to take in three more fugitives—she was firmly enough on YoRHa’s shit list for harboring A2 as it was.

8B nodded. “Right. That’s the safest way to do it.” She handed the bag slung over her shoulder to A2. “Anyone want anything?” she asked 22B and 64B.

“You could pick up some overclock and evasion plugin chips for the three of us,” 22B said.

“Some spare clothes would be nice.” 64B rapped her knuckles on her breastplate. “I can’t wait to get rid of this…”

“You’re keeping your armor,” A2 said. “You need all the help you can get to survive.”

“Okay. But what if it gets dirty and I need to wash it out? I can’t just lounge around naked,” 64B protested.

“Those are luxuries you can’t afford anymore.”

22B crossed her arms. “You can get three spare uniforms. They won’t take up much space.”

“Every bit of space you waste in here on clothes is space better spent on things that will keep you alive,” A2 said, hefting the bag 8B had given her.

“What’d you do? Run around naked?” 64B asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“Yes.”

“Well, we aren’t going to do that,” 8B said. “Besides, we might need clothes like that to disguise ourselves.

“Thank goodness,” 22B muttered.

“Fine. I’ll get your stuff. Stay here,” A2 said, slinging the bag over her shoulder.

8B held out her hand. “Wait, A2.”

A2 paused. “Yeah? What is it? Want me to see if I can get you some booze, too?”

A smile crossed 8B’s face. “That’d be nice, I guess, but no. Can I talk to you in private?”

“Sure.”

“All right.” 8B gestured at 22B and 64B. “Give us some space, girls.”
“Yes, ma’am!” 64B said, saluting. She and her counterpart slunk away into the shadows, and as they retreated, 8B leaned in closer to A2.

“I’m not sure how to say this,” she said, her voice a low and nervous whisper, “but… well, I’ve been looking after those two for a year now, and I’m proud of the way they look up to me, but…”

“Yeah?”

“What I mean is…” 8B bit her lip and shook her head, the slight curls of her damp white hair bobbing. “Sorry. I—I’m just a little starstruck, that’s all.”

A2 had the feeling she was being talked to in circles. “I’m no star. Out with it.”

With a sigh filled with trepidation, 8B went on. “I’m their leader. Their big sister, I guess. Sometimes I feel like those two won’t even breathe unless I tell them. Of course, the rest of the time,” she added, smiling, “getting them to do anything is like herding cats.”

“What’s a cat?”

“Dunno.” 8B shrugged. “Anyway, I know they think I can do anything, but… I never really thought about how unprepared we were for living outside of YoRHa until now. We planned our escape, worked out how we were gonna ditch our pods and black out our operators, for months. We didn’t plan for what would happen next. Suddenly, it’s… really scary.”

A2 had to admit, 8B was right. It was terrifying being alone and having the whole world against you. Soon, and especially after YoRHa had started trying to kill her, that part of her that ached from loneliness and fear had started to grow numb, like scar tissue in her mind growing over a wound inside her head. As much as she hated to admit it, only recently had she begun to remember what it felt like to be set adrift and isolated, to have an uncertain and unimaginable future looming ahead in the darkness ready to swallow her up.

“If you decide to stick with us,” 8B said, “you’ll be in charge. We’ll all look to you for guidance.”

She attempted to lay a hand on A2’s shoulder; A2 reflexively flinched and stepped back, leaving 8B’s hand suspended awkwardly in the air. “I’d be honored to cede to your leadership.”

A2 shuddered.

The last time anyone had placed A2 in a position of leadership, it had been on that first and last fateful mission: The Pearl Harbor Descent Operation. Twelve YoRHa units were deployed to Oahu. Only four—Attacker 2, Attacker 4, Gunner 16, and Scanner 21—made it to solid ground. With the squadron leader, A1, reduced to cinders on the wind by the machines, command of the remainder had transferred to A2. She hadn’t wanted it. She’d been afraid of it. But she had taken on that mantle because it was expected of her. Because she was a good soldier who trusted and obeyed her superiors without question.

“I’m not interested in leading anyone,” A2 coolly replied, brushing 8B’s hand aside. “If you’re so good at it, keep doing it.”

“At least stay with us for a while,” 8B pleaded. “Teach us what you know.”

“I’ll think about it,” A2 said as she picked up the bag and headed into the camp. Mud churned under her boots, sucking at her feet with every step she took.

A fistful of enhancement plugin chips, a couple shirts and pairs of pants, and as many medical supplies as she could afford with the money the fugitives had brought with them only filled the bag
halfway. It turned out that money, not room, was the limiting factor. It would have to do.

On her way back out, she strayed just a bit too close to Anemone’s tent; Anemone, of course, noticed her and all but dragged her inside. The heavy canvas walls, which were usually rolled up and tied to the tent frame but had been let down to keep out the rain, fluttered as a gust of wind blew through the camp.

Anemone was as chipper as could be considering how gloomy and miserable it was outside; her eyes lit up nearly as bright as the lamp that illuminated her humble tent. “I wasn’t sure you were coming back,” she told A2, wrapping her up in a warm embrace. “Good to see you again.”

As Anemone held her, A2 found herself struck by the sudden urge to… lick her face? She did her best to push down those weird instincts and pulled herself free of Anemone’s grip.

“Uh… thanks,” A2 glanced at the map of the surrounding area projected onto Anemone’s desk. It looked like Anemone had been mapping out points of interest all around the area, one of which looked to be the same crystalline structure A2 had ended up near when she’d escaped the underground facility. “Am I interrupting—”

“Here’s a towel,” Anemone said, tossing her a towel. “How was the hunt?”

“Fun. Until the stuff I ate started coming back out. That wasn’t.” Suppressing the urge to shake herself dry, A2 toweled off and wrung the water from her hair. “Is Alucard around? I’ve got some… ugh… werewolf questions to ask him.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing,” A2 said, uninterested in telling Anemone that her thoughts were becoming less… her. She might worry, and A2 couldn’t have that. Anemone worried enough already. “I didn’t say the questions were about things that were bothering me,” she lied.

“I see.” Anemone nodded. “Well, unfortunately, you just missed him. 2B and 9S came by to escort him to the Bunker in the middle of the night.” She sat down at her desk, resting her forehead in her hand. “He’s probably meeting with White right now. I hope he can talk some sense into her, although knowing her…”

“Talk about an uphill battle.”

“Yeah. But either way… I’ll still be here for you. If she doesn’t budge, I’ll just have to be more discreet about it,” Anemone said, coyly raising a finger to her lips.

Once the towel was soaked and A2 was less uncomfortably wet (although still far from dry), she dropped it to the ground. “That’s, uh… thanks again,” she said, collapsing onto another chair and slouching against its back. She hadn’t slept all night, and on top of that she’d spent half the day running with fugitives and fighting weirdos; now that she’d settled in somewhere, she finally felt tired.

Anemone eyed the bag hanging from her shoulder. “A2, you’re not… leaving, are you?”

“Not like it’d be a bad thing.” Somehow, though, the idea of admitting it made A2 almost feel guilty. Was it that she didn’t want to leave, or Anemone didn’t want her to leave? Or was it both? Either way, this camp would be safer without her in it, and both of them knew it.

“Anyway,” A2 went on, “this bag’s not mine. It’s for a couple of people out in the ruins who need supplies.”
“They’re welcome to come here themselves.” Anemone shifted in her seat, resting her cheek on her hand. “What are you doing,” she asked, a coy smile tugging at her mouth, “running errands for a couple strangers?”

“They’re, uh… some friends.” A2 nervously played with a damp lock of her hair, coiling it around her finger and tugging on it.

Anemone sat up, invigorated. There was a brighter, more attentive look in her eyes. “You made friends? Bring them over!”

“They’re on the run.”

“From YoRHa?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said, her mood deflating.

“There’s three of them and they’re all dumb as rocks. They need all the help they can get, so…”

“You’re going to go with them.”

“I, uh…” A2 blinked, her words failing her. She hadn’t said she would, not to them, not to Anemone, not even to herself. But hadn’t that decision already been made? She couldn’t just leave them to die and she knew it.

Crestfallen, Anemone lowered her eyes, already expecting A2’s response. “Well… you’re still welcome to come here whenever you need anything.”

A2 leaned forward and placed her hands on the table. “Hold on, I didn’t—”

“No, I understand,” Anemone said. “I was alone too, at first. If I’d stayed alone any longer, I wouldn’t have made it. This place…” She gestured to the haphazard arrangements of tents and fences and barricades that formed the camp. “This camp, the people here—they’ve kept me alive.”

“I’d stay here if I could,” A2 insisted.

Anemone smiled so bittersweetly that it made A2’s stomach churn. “If you’ve found your own people, it’s for the best. A wolf needs its pack, after all.” She stood up and circled around the table, crouching at A2’s side. “Can I see what’s in your bag?”

“Sure.” A2 set it on the ground and unzipped it.

Anemone peered into it, frowning. “It’s only half full.”

“I know.”

She rifled through the bundles of clothing. “There are only supplies for three people.”

“There’s three of them.”

“Not four.”

“I know how to count, Anemone.”

“Was this all the four of you could afford?”
“Yeah, but—”

Before A2 could finish, Anemone hurried across the tent and collected up an armful of repair kits and clothes, then stuffed them into the bag. “I hope you won’t throw these out this time.”

A2 zipped the bag closed and hoisted it onto her shoulder. “I’ll try not to.”

“Are you going to take your old body with you, too?”

“Nah. Too much dead weight.”

Anemone chuckled. “True. Is there anything you plan on doing with it?”

“Dunno.”

“We could bury it.”

“Do what you want.”

“Actually, Jackass was looking around for you,” Anemone added. “Sounds like she wants to study your old body for some reason…”

“If you let her touch it, I’ll kill her and then you.”

Anemone smiled. “Figured you’d feel that way. So I told Jackass not to go near it. The twins are looking after it now.” She stood up and reached out, cupping A2’s cheek in her hand.

A2 reflexively flinched, but when Anemone pulled her hand away, she took it and guided it back to her cheek.

“I’ll hold onto it for you,” Anemone added. “When you’re ready, we’ll give it a proper sendoff.”

A2 smiled back. Now that she’d allowed it to rest on her cheek, Anemone’s palm was warm against her skin, its pressure gentle, its solidity oddly reassuring. “I’d like that, Anemone.”

“It’s good to see you smile again, Number Two.”

Flustered, A2 backed away, heat rising to her cheeks. Once again, she could feel the tail she didn’t have wagging. “I, um… I guess I’ll get going.”

Anemone lowered her head and let her hand fall to her side. “Yeah, I… I guess you’d better. I’ll find you if White decides in your favor.”

One of the camp’s soldiers, the pastel-haired woman who sold upgrade chips, poked her head through the tent’s entrance. “Excuse me, ma’am? Cell Commander Laurel is here to see you.”

“Laurel?” Anemone looked up. “Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. He’s in charge of the camp on the other side of the desert, right?”

“Uh… I think so?”

“Got it. I’ll be right out.” Anemone adjusted her cloak and pulled out a ragged umbrella. “I’ll meet with him outside. Two, stay in here until the coast is clear.”

A2 sank back into her chair and crossed her arms. She had a bad feeling about this, although she couldn’t say why. Animal instinct, maybe. “Holler if you need help.”
“Don’t be ridiculous. This is just a meeting between two cell commanders. I’m sure he just needs something.”

A2 watched Anemone head out, unfurling her umbrella and raising it over her head. Troubled by the anxious feeling in her gut, she crept over to the tent’s entrance and peered out from behind the canvas wall.

Commander Laurel (were all Resistance cell leaders commanders?) stood flanked by a cluster of roughly a dozen of his men, all clad in flowing, mud- and oil-stained beige and white robes and loose-fitting fatigues. The presence of so many soldiers had A2 suspicious, although it made sense that Laurel would need so many to cross the desert safely.

A2 slowly lowered her bag to the ground so as not to make any noise. All of a sudden, she felt a rush of electricity through her mind, tingles beneath her skin from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail. It was the same rush she felt that night when she’d caught the scent of her prey. But there was more to it. An alarm in the back of her head, tightening her chest, pressing down on her black box.

*Danger.*

Laurel himself was a short and stocky model, coarse stubble blurring stony and squarish facial features. A large patch of skin around one of his eyes didn’t match the rest of his face, neither in color nor in texture; clumsy and visible sutures that wrinkled with every word he spoke bound the patch to his face. Despite his ragged and harsh appearance, though, he had a warm and friendly smile.

“Cell Commander Anemone.” He reached out and offered Anemone his hand. “It’s been too long. Two years?”

“About as long.” Anemone took his hand in a firm grip. “Nice to see you again, Commander Laurel.”

“I could say the same. You look well.”

“You look, er…” Anemone paused. “Did you cross the desert safely? Your eye…”

“The trip was fine. We didn’t meet anything we couldn’t handle.” Laurel gingerly scratched at the stitches in his face. “As for this, it was from a few weeks ago, actually. My model’s been discontinued—you know, budget cuts, resource shortages, those sorts of things.” He shrugged. “Spare parts are hard to come by nowadays.”

“We have Popola and Devola models on staff who do good work as medics here,” Anemone said. “I’m sure they’ll do a better job with those stitches than… uh, whoever did those for you.”

“Popol—” A flash of recognition crossed Laurel’s face for an instant. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine,” he replied, his tone making it clear that he didn’t feel thankful at all for Anemone’s offer.

“So, what brings you here? It must be urgent for you to come all the way here without prior notice.”

“Without prior—” Laurel stroked his bristly chin. “Hmm. I thought I sent you an email.”

“Well, to be fair, I’ve been very busy. I must have not noticed it.”
Laurel nodded. “Yes. You must have.” His hand slipped under his coat.

A2 tensed up, her eyes narrowing. If she still had hackles, they’d have risen. She could almost feel herself growling. A sudden vile hatred for this man welled up within her. He wasn’t here for pleasant conversation. A2 could see in the telltale gleam in his eyes that he was going to—

A grim frown darkening his face, Laurel produced a pistol from beneath his coat. Reflected beams of the lights illuminating the camp flashed across its polished barrel as he leveled it at Anemone’s chest. The soldiers flanking him drew their guns as well, all aiming in the same spot. “I’ve received orders from Army High Command,” he told her. “Anemone, you’re being stripped of your rank and privileges. I’ll be assuming command of this area’s Resistance cell. Oh, and also, you’re under arrest for harboring fugitives.” A bitter half-smile tugged at his lips. “Honestly, though, I must admit I’m disappointed. I expected better from you.”

“I… I’m what?”

“Un-der ar-rest,” he said, gritting his teeth as he sounded out each syllable. “Now, will you come quietly? I still have enough respect for you that I’d rather not be forced to shoot you.”

Cursing the circumstances that kept putting her in these situations, A2 once again threw herself between Anemone and the consequences of her poor decisions, tearing through the tent and throwing her arm out over Anemone’s chest, her sword drawn. Quick on his feet, Laurel swiftly retreated, his men closing rank around him.

One of the soldiers aimed his gun at Anemone; A2 drove her sword through his elbow and destroyed the joint, throwing off his aim and forcing the shot to go wide. Before he could recover, she wrenched the gun from his hand, jabbed the barrel against the bottom of his jaw, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet ripped through his face and exited through the top of his head in a spray of synthetic flesh, bloody coolant, and shards of metal.

The eleven remaining soldiers began to roil around Laurel like an angered hornet’s nest. “Sorry for this,” A2 mumbled through gritted teeth as she kicked back and hit Anemone square in the stomach, knocking her off her feet and sending her flying into her tent. “Stay there!” she barked.

As the first soldier went limp, A2 threw the gun and his lifeless body aside, ducked, swept the legs out from under one of the other soldiers, and pinned him in a nelson hold; she stepped in front of Anemone to shield her and used the pinned soldier’s body to block a spray of bullets from the remaining soldiers.

Another soldier rushed past her; A2 pulled one hand free of the grip she had on her living shield, took one of her swords, and buried it up to its hilt in the living shield’s back. The blade burst out of his stomach and ran into the charging soldier, skewering the both of them.

A2 tossed the living shields aside and scrambled for the gun she’d discarded, her fingers fumbling around its cold grip, and brought it up just in time to knock aside the next soldier’s arm and throw off her aim just as she fired. The bullet grazed her ear, the muzzle flare blackening her cheek and the roar of the gunshot overwhelming her audio sensors.

Powering through the disorientation and the ringing in her ears that muted all other sounds, A2 swept the blade of her sword upward, severing the soldier’s arm at the elbow, and drove the blade into her chest. With his remaining arm, the soldier grabbed her, his fingers clamping down on her bicep, and kicked A2 in the side.

For an instant while she brought her gun to bear, A2 was just as pinned as the soldier she was
grappling with and barely managed to pull herself out of the way as another enemy trained his gun on her. His shots buried themselves in her thigh, burning into her flesh, the pain sending a jolt through her. She fired off a shot reflexively into her captive’s chest, blood blossoming on his white cloak. His grip faltered; she threw him to the ground and drove her sword into his neck, planting it upright in the ground.

Another bullet hit her in the shoulder, another grazing her wrist. One of the two soldiers A2 had skewered pulled himself upright and shot at her again; this bullet buried itself in her armor, leaving a deep dent that dug painfully into her clavicle. A2 fired back, her bullet leaving a neat and smoking hole between his eyes. The other one—her former living shield—rushed at her with reckless abandon; A2 knocked him flat onto his stomach and emptied three bullets in rapid succession into the back of his neck, severing the connection from his brain to his body. With the third shot, she squeezed the trigger so hard that it broke.

Two more of the dozen soldiers who’d accompanied Laurel lunged at A2, attempting to flank her and seize Anemone; A2 tossed the useless gun aside, drew both her swords in a reversed icepick grip, and drove both blades into the soldiers’ legs, hobbling them both. As they cried out in stereo, A2 reached out and thrust her hands into their robes, snatched their sidearms from the holsters on their hips, and shot them both. Bleeding from matching holes in the hollows of their throats, the two soldiers slumped lifelessly to the muddy ground.

A2 fired a few more warning shots at the remaining soldiers until the guns produced nothing but empty clicks, then threw away the guns. Darting back into the tent, she swept Anemone up, wrapping her arm around her waist and hoisting her under her armpit, and slung her bag over her other shoulder. With her friend secured in her grip, she cut her way out of the tent as Laurel’s men poured into it.

One of Laurel’s men who’d remained outside the tent caught up with A2 and skidded to a halt in front of her, pulling a rifle from under his robes and bringing it to bear; her hands full, A2 threw the bag at him and bowled him over. She kept running, planting her boot heavily on his chest and stomping him into the mud, and picked the bag back up.

Bullets whizzed past her as she made a mad dash for the sanctuary of the eternal night surrounding the camp, the cold and misty rain tapping against her face. The light surrounding her faded as she crossed the border into the ruins.

The three fugitives were waiting for her, all assuming combat stances, all drawing their weapons. “What’s going on?” 8B asked, her voice sharp and tense as she drew her broadsword.

A2 all but threw the filled supply bag at her and kept running. “Shut up. Explain later. Follow me.”

The four of them—five of them, counting A2’s passenger—hurried through the shadowy labyrinth of the city ruins. Each impact between A2’s foot and the uneven ground made the wounds in her leg scream out; she struggled to keep her footing and her balance.

“A2, let go of me!” Anemone cried out, struggling to escape A2’s crushing grasp. “Let me down!”

Gritting her teeth, A2 ducked into one of the hundreds of crumbling buildings filling the ruins, skidding to a halt as a dozen red lights belonging to hostile machines blazed to life in the darkness. She dropped Anemone none too gracefully to the floor (her bad) and cut into the machines, hacking them to pieces with her swords. 64B and 8B brought up the rear and finished off the last of the machines while 22B hung back and watched over the entrance to the shelter they’d found.
As her adrenaline ran low and combat programming ceased to drown out her pain signals, A2’s injured leg crumpled under her weight, pulling her down on her knee. She clutched at the torn-apart remains of one of the biped machines she’d destroyed and pushed herself up off of it, forcing herself back onto her feet. Searing twinges ran up and down her leg from the perforations in her thigh.

Anemone coughed and sputtered, clutching her stomach. “A2… what have you done?” she gasped.

A2 leaned against the wall, panting with exertion. “You’re welcome.”

“What the hell happened back there?” 8B asked as she fished through the supply bag for her lamp.

“They were going to arrest her,” A2 said, “so I brought her with us.”

“Five of us fugitives now, huh?” 8B shrugged. “Well, the more the merrier, right?”

“Fugitive? No, I’m…” Anemone trailed off, raising her hands to her forehead. “Oh, god,” she moaned, cradling her head in her hands. “Oh, god, I’m a fugitive…”

“Look on the bright side,” 64B insisted in a meager attempt to console her. “You’re in good company, at least!”

“But… I have duties, responsibilities,” Anemone protested, still fighting to avoid accepting reality. “I can’t just—

—who’s going to take care of the camp?”

“That Laurel guy seemed pretty eager to take on your responsibilities,” A2 said.

“But they’re mine…”

8B pulled the portable lamp from the bag and set it on the floor, illuminating the room the five of them had taken shelter in. This building had once been a home; the worn skeletons of furniture and scraps of decaying carpeting littered the concrete floor. A puddle of water surrounded the crumbling fireplace set into the wall; empty cabinets, their wooden shelves and doors riddled with tiny tunnels and holes bored by termites, hung over a dusty countertop.

Anemone took a deep, shuddering breath, still clutching her abdomen, and stood up. “I have to go back,” she croaked, coughing.

“Trust me, Anemone,” A2 said, wincing as she clutched at her thigh, pressing the stained midnight-blue fabric of her dress against the oozing gunshot wounds in her leg. “Going back is the last thing you want to do.”


—killed them!”

“They were going to kill you.”

“Kill me? They were going to arrest me!”

64B furrowed her brow. “Did you, uh, want to be arrested, ma’am?”

“I’d rather that than be executed! Which is what they’ll do to me now if they find us…”

“Join the club.” A2 crossed her arms. She’d expected some gratitude for helping Anemone out of yet another deadly situation. Especially considering this was the third time in less than two weeks that she had saved her life. And all three times, Anemone had only ended up in such peril because
she’d insisted on sticking up for her…

“How could you do that, A2?” Anemone asked, incredulous. There was a subtle, but loudening note of indignation in her voice; her brows furrowed and face twisted in anger. “My camp, my rank, my career—my life, A2, what have you done?”

“What have I done?” A2 shouted back. “What have you done?”

“Me?” Anemone jabbed her finger into her chest, then pointed it at A2. “You’re the one who—”

A2 clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. “You idiot!” she snarled, seething. Anemone shrank back, as if she were cowering before A2’s anger. “From the beginning, I told you not to stick your neck out for me. I told you not to help me, that you’d just end up hurting yourself—and look at you!”

“A2…” Anemone’s voice dropped to a trembling, timid half-whisper, the anger draining from her face as she clutched her cloak tighter around her shoulders. A flower of blood blossomed on her shoulder, leaving a subtle and nearly-invisible stain on her rainsoaked cloak. “I…” She glanced at the floor.

“This is where it got you. This is where I took you.” A2 choked out the words. She had ruined Anemone’s career. She had taken away her cell, her camp, her family, everything. But it wasn’t like she’d held a gun to her head and forced her. No. Anemone’s decisions had been hers and hers alone. This was her mess. A2 pulled her anger outward, focusing her rage like a laser at Anemone.

“You shouldn’t have lifted a goddamn finger to help me,” she told Anemone. “You should have let YoRHa execute me or put me out of my misery yourself.”

Anemone lifted her hand as though to reach out to her. “I couldn’t just—”

“You should have!”

Anemone’s hand sank and fell to her side, her mouth agape and eyes wide.

“This is all your fault. Everything. You threw away everything you had for me. I didn’t want your help! I never did!”

64B cautiously approached her. “A2, I don’t think now is a good time to chew her out—”

A2 smacked her hand away, nearly knocking her off her feet. “Shut up!”

“I didn’t throw away everything,” Anemone retorted, barely even murmuring her words as her downcast, crestfallen eyes fixed their gaze on the floor. “I still have y—”

“How did you even last this long with all the stupid choices you’ve made?” A2 asked. “How have you survived as long as I have? What gave you, you of all people, the right to last three years on your own when other people who knew how to fight for their lives didn’t? What gave you the right to survive instead of Four?!”

The words burned her throat on the way out. It was the truth A2 had tried not to think since the day Alucard had dragged her into Anemone’s camp. When A4’s name echoed through the air and faded away, all sound died with it, leaving A2 free to let the thought play uninterrupted in her mind.

The wrong people had died at Mount Ka’ala. Four should be here instead of Anemone. But if she
Anemone opened her mouth, but made no sound. A2 wanted to keep ripping into her, to keep lambasting her for her willingness to throw away so much for so little, but her voice, too, had left her.

“I don’t know,” she finally told A2, her voice hardly more than a choked, strained whisper as she slumped to her knees. Blood from the wound in her shoulder trickled down her arm, leaving blooming red stains down her sleeve, and ran in thin rivulets down her hand and dripped onto the floor. “I don’t know…”

64B spoke up. “Hey, there’s no reason why any of us live or die…”

“Don’t you start,” A2 snapped at her. “You and your pals didn’t even know what death was until yesterday! We didn’t have a backup system, we didn’t just keep coming back!”

“Let’s all calm down for a moment and table this discussion,” 8B said, banging the butt of her spear on the floor in a call to order. “The soldiers you two ran from are probably closing in on us. We need to find somewhere else to hole up until the heat dies down. 22B, get over here and take a look at these two. 64B, keep an eye on the entrance.”

“Will do,” 64B said, hurrying to exchange spots with her red-haired counterpart.

22B rushed to Anemone’s side and forced her back down to the ground, pulling off her cloak and tunic to examine the extent of the damage. There was a purplish bruise, roughly foot-shaped, stamped just above her navel and a bullet buried in her shoulder, blood smeared around the seared and singed hole.

“Just bring me back to camp,” Anemone muttered. “They’ll make repairs there. It doesn’t matter if I’m under arrest; they’ll still extend that courtesy…”

“With all due respect,” 22B said, taking up her surgical tools, “fat chance.” She peeled back the skin of Anemone’s shoulder and yanked out the deformed bullet buried in her chassis, then unpeeled her skin and sealed the wound with staunching gel and a light adhesive patch. She plastered the same patches over Anemone’s bruised skin. “A2, come over here. You’re next.”

“I’m fine,” she growled.

“You’re limping. Let me take a look at your leg.”

“Let her, A2,” 8B said. “The sooner we fix you up, the sooner we can take off and the faster we can travel.”

A2 relented, sat down, and lifted her dress to expose her bloodstained thigh. 22B did what she’d done for Anemone, cutting away the skin around the bullet holes, pulling out the bullets, and patching the wounds back up. Each incision burned like fire.

“Okay. We’ll head for the forest,” A2 said. “Best place to hide.”

“There’s a… hidden village there,” Anemone said. “They’re neutral. Pacifists. You four can seek asylum there.”

“Oh. Pascal’s, right?” 64B asked.

Anemone blinked. “Uh—You know about it?”
“2B and 9S did a full report on it a few weeks ago,” 8B said. “It was… kinda one of the reasons we decided to defect. We’d love to stay there if they’ll take us.”

“I haven’t heard of it,” A2 said, instantly suspicious. An entire village in her backyard that she’d never even accidentally run into before? It stunk.

“Well, you keep to yourself, they keep to themselves…” said 64B.

“We’ve been trading partners for about a year or so,” Anemone explained. “They make a lot of materials for us we can’t get through official channels. Obviously, I’ve kept it on the down low…”

A2 sighed. “All right. Anemone, you’ll have to lead the way.”

Anemone nodded and rose to her feet. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

The rain was beginning to die down. The path through the ruins to the forest was uneventful so far, but every fluttering shadow within the shadows presented another possible threat.

The beam of Anemone’s flashlight cut through the darkness, lengthening the shadows in its path. She was the only one who needed it; the trio of YoRHa fugitives had much better nocturnal vision than traditional android models, and while A2 couldn’t see as well in the dark as she could when she was a wolf, her eyesight was still the best out of the five of them.

A web of rubble and warped, twisted girders, turned a shaggy orange-red from decades of rust, blocked the path leading out of the city to the crumbling amusement park on its outskirts. Beyond the fragments of unfinished buildings, the distant multicolored lights of the park twinkled, fuzzy behind layers of mist, short-lived blossoms of color blooming in the sky and fading away.

The five androids pressed onward, climbing into the wreckage and worming their way through. Anemone’s flashlight jerked and bobbed along with her halting movements. She led the way. A2 headed in behind her, and the three fugitives brought up the rear. The girders groaned like the foundations of an old house, flakes of rust drifting from them like falling leaves or snowflakes as the androids disturbed their rest.

“I’ve never been to the park before,” 64B piped up. “I hear none of the machines there attack you, no matter what you do to them.”

“I hear their guns shoot bubbles and balloons instead of bullets,” 8B said.

“Bullshit,” A2 said. The idea of a machine that didn’t fight back repulsed her. Machines were meant to be destroyed, but ones that didn’t attack or defend… there couldn’t be any satisfaction in cutting them down. It was a perversion against the natural order. Or, rather, the unnatural order.

“They’re odd, but I wouldn’t get too close if I were you,” Anemone said. Her voice was quiet, her tone subdued, as though her shouting match with A2, brief as it had been, had drained the life from her. “A couple dozen androids have gone missing here over here these past few months. 2B and 9S killed the machine that was responsible, or… at least, they killed one of them. Who knows if there are more like it…”

“You can’t scare us with ghost stories,” 64B said.

“I heard from 17O the machine ate the androids’ skins off and decorated its body with their skulls,” 22B said.
“Yeah, right.”

“6O told her. And 6O is 2B’s operator, so…”

A2 stopped in her tracks, hanging between two roughly-parallel I-beams two meters off the
ground; her hands gripped one beam, her feet hooked around the other. She couldn’t explain how
she knew, but… something was in here with them.

“Shh,” 8B hissed, coming to a stop. “Do you hear that?”

A2 squinted and strained her eyes as if she could force herself to see better. Somehow, it worked.
There was something shifting in the darkness below, something writhing, something glistening.
“Anemone…” she whispered. “Point your flashlight at the ground…”

The flashlight’s beam arced across the floor, fluttering between the rusty girders, and its light
bounced off of dozens of shiny, oblique black eyes and a glistening carapace covered in bristly
hairs. On the hairy black shell was a familiar mark—three oblong fingerprints seared into the
chitin, the same mark Olrox had made on A2’s shoulder that morning, only chalky white instead of
black.

“What in the goddamn…” 8B whispered.

The thing on the ground shifted and scuttled, the sound of countless sharp legs scraping against the
ground and metal beams ringing through the tight maze. Thick, ropy strands of an enormous
spiderweb clung to the bottom layers of the forest of girders.

A long, segmented insectoid leg, capped with a wickedly-sharpened talon, lashed through the air.
A2 shouted out and pulled herself along, struggling to make haste and haul herself through the
claustrophobic maze. “Anemone, keep going!” she shouted out as she came to a halt behind her.

Another leg cut through the air; A2 rolled out of its path and nearly fell onto the spidery creature,
dangling from the I-beam, rust flakes shifting underneath her fingers. She kicked away another one
of the creature’s legs as it stirred and writhed. 22B let out a scream.

“Anemone!” A2 shouted out, kicking at the air as she tried to pull herself up. The creature’s legs
brushed against hers, its bristly hairs tickling her bare skin.

Galvanized, Anemone pushed forward, then cried out and lost her footing. Something was snaking
its way around her—a hard, segmented carapace like a millipede’s. Long, wicked, antler-like
mandibles capped its pill-shaped head.

A2 pulled one hand away from the I-beam, her fingers slipping as her grip faltered. She took her
sword and slashed across the millipede’s shell. Sparks flew where steel met chitin, but her strike
didn’t leave so much as a scratch.

Suddenly, her dangling feet met something solid—not the ground, but the rising carapace of the
beast below. Anemone’s flashlight swung wildly as she struggled to free herself, illuminating more
of the creature. The giant millipede wrapped around her legs and waist, A2 could now see, was not
a separate creature, but rather the beast’s tail.

Anemone screamed as the monster’s mandibles snapped shut around her wrist, severing her hand.
The severed hand, along with her flashlight, tumbled down and hit the ground, casting its light at
an odd angle across the metal forest. The beast began to drag her down; its movements and her
thrashing cast a wild, grotesquely-stretched shadow play across the iron beams.
A2 swung up above the spidery creature as it rose, metal girders bending around it. The frantic shouts and cries of her fellow fugitives filled the air as the creature’s carapace slid open to reveal a slavering maw filled with glistening black fangs and lined with wet black eyes. A slick tongue slithered out from the hellish mouth, thick slime dripping from it as it probed the area. The creature’s tail, with Anemone firmly in its grip, began to retract, drawing her closer toward its mouth.

“Anemone!” A2 cried out. She wrapped her legs around the girder and swung down from it, suspending herself upside-down with her swords in hand. One blade cut deeply into the creature’s lashing tongue and stuck so firmly she couldn’t pull it free; the tip of the other blade grazed a few of the clustered eyes and popped them like bubbles. Flecks of luminescent fluid flew through the air; the ones that landed on A2’s clothes began to sizzle and smoke. The creature’s tongue went wild, wrenching her sword out of her hand. As the now-armed tongue whipped around, its blade cut a deep gash across A2’s upper arm, numbing and deadening everything below her elbow.

“I got this!” 64B shouted, swinging down onto the creature’s back and drawing back her arm, one of her combat bracers materializing around her fist. “Take this, ugly!”

“64B, get away from that thing!” 22B shouted as 64B drove her fist into the creature’s eyes.

The combat bracer’s electrified prongs buried themselves into the creature’s eyes, popping dozens of the black capsules. Lightning coursed through its body; the creature began to jerk and flail, its spindly legs jabbing frenetically and at random through the air, its tongue—with the sword still embedded in it—flailing, the blade it had purloined slicing through the air.

64B let out an anguished, hoarse scream; the splashback from the creature’s burst eyes had splattered her arm and chest with the creature’s luminescent fluids, which quickly began to eat twisting, wormy holes into her armor like ravenous termites set upon a rotting log. 22B leaped down to her aid, only for one of the creature’s legs to puncture her armor and pin her to one of the girders through her stomach. Gritting her teeth, she shoved her sword into one of the leg’s knobbly joints, cutting into the gap in the creature’s chitinous armor. More luminescent, acidic blood spurted from the wound, eating through the blade and turning the steel jet-black before it decayed into nothing.

A2 let go of the girder she’d been hanging from and rushed over to the beast’s tail, prying her fingers between the curled tail and Anemone’s body. The underside of the tail was soft and fleshy, but covered with tiny legs tipped with tinier, razor-sharp blades. The razors skittered against her fingers, leaving hundreds of shallow cuts as she struggled to loosen the creature’s grip.

“A2!” Anemone cried out, squeezing her eyes shut and clenching her jaw as her fingers raked and scrabbled against the creature’s carapace. “Get out! Just—run! Stop… stop wasting your…” The creature squeezed the breath out of her; she punctuated her message with a pained, rattling gasp.

A2 let go of the creature’s tail, blood pouring from the stinging skin-deep lacerations on her fingers, and whirled around as one of the creature’s spearhead-tipped legs shot toward her. She froze. If she dodged, the sharpened talon would bury itself in Anemone’s body…

8B landed in front of her, cut the leg in half with her massive Type-4O broadsword, and hastily twisted the sword so that the wide flat of its blade shielded her from the splatter of acidic blood. As the creature’s truncated leg retreated, she raised her blade just in time to wedge it between the snapping mandibles of the creature’s tail.

“A2,” she said, pushing the mandibles back, “I’ve got an idea! I’ll—”
One of the creature’s remaining legs speared her in the side. Then another, and another, and three more, digging into her torso from all angles. Blood ran through the perforations in her armor and trickled down her legs.

“Cap!” 64B wailed, her voice hoarse from all her anguished screaming. 22B, who’d been busy ripping the corroded armor off her body before the acid could eat all the way through, stopped, frozen in shock.

The beast held 8B aloft over its maw, using the smoking blade embedded in its tongue to draw a deep gash through the side of her head and cutting away her visor. Willing to fight to the end, 8B took her spear and drove it as deep as she could into the creature’s mouth. The creature convulsed again from another electric jolt.

8B looked over at A2. Her eyes were blue. And in those blue eyes, A2 saw something familiar and realized with horror what 8B’s plan was.

At that instant before the beast dragged her into its mouth and swallowed her up, 8B looked just like Four.

She even smiled the way Four had.

The beast shoved 8B down its gullet, retracted its tongue and legs, and snapped its mouth shut.

A2 screamed until she went hoarse.

A low rumble shook the ground and a roaring, deafening burst of white-hot fire tore open the creature’s mouth. All of its clusters of eyes turned to vapor as shafts of light tore through them; when the light dissipated, thick and acrid plumes of smoke poured from the creature’s orifices. When A2 felt herself fall silent—the sound of the blast had deafened her—the creature’s lashing limbs went limp; its tail loosened its grip and fell slack, releasing Anemone from its grip.

“Let’s go,” A2 whispered, her words clinging to her raw and aching throat. She’d only met 8B earlier that day. But in that single act of bravery and sacrifice, 8B had bared the depths of her soul to her.

She helped Anemone through the forest of girders until they reached the end. 22B dragged 64B through. When the four of them had made it out, 22B stripped 64B down, tossing aside all the rest of the acid-eaten armor and leaving her with nothing above her waist but her grimy singlet.

Discolored blotches and singed pockmarks marred 64B’s arm and broad chest where the acid had eaten all the way through her armor and into her skin.

A narrow path along the edge of the ravine that separated the city from the forest led to the park’s open gates. The lights were brighter now; blossoms of color exploded in the misty air with dull, muted booms. The park’s whimsical skyline, the crumbling castle at its center, loomed overhead.

Watching 22B inspect her comrade’s wounds, A2 realized that they’d lost the bag of supplies. 8B must have dropped it somewhere, somewhere among that creature’s spiderweb-coated lair. Was it worth going back for?

“Dammit,” 22B muttered, shaking her head. “We lost the bag.”

“Let’s go back,” 64B snifflled, pulling off her visor and wrapping it around one of the worse burns on her arm. Her eyes were misty and rimmed with red.

“We can’t go back in there for the bag. We don’t know what else is in there.”
“No. Back to YoRHa. I want to go back to YoRHa.”

“We can’t do that.”

“If we apologize, if we say we’re really sorry, maybe they’ll reload Cap from her last backup.” 64B’s voice cracked as she buried her face in her hand. “But if we stay down here, she’ll be gone,” she added, her voice muffled. “She won’t ever come back...”

A2 knelt down beside her. She knew the girl’s pain. In the beginning, she had wondered if she could find White and apologize for whatever she had done wrong, and if they could give her back her friends if she did.

“She wouldn’t want you to go back,” she told 64B. “8B sacrificed herself so we could move forward. Come on. It’s not far now. Right, Anemone?”

Anemone didn’t answer. Instead, she staggered over to and slumped against the trunk of a nearby tree, her severed wrist resting in her lap. Even in the darkness, A2 could see a black stain blooming across the front of her once-white tunic.

Alarmed, A2 rushed to her side and pulled up the hem of her shirt. A wide swath of blood coiled across her stomach, her back, her chest, her arms, and down her legs like a spiral; beneath the slick and oily red coolant, Anemone’s skin was roughened and flayed, chewed by thousands of tiny blades that had made thousands of tiny cuts.

Anemone wheezed and grimaced, curling up and shrinking away from A2’s touch, the slightest pressure setting off raw and screaming nervous circuitry. “It’s better than it looks,” she gasped. “It’s only... skin deep.”

A2 laid her hand on Anemone’s cheek; the cuts on her own fingers left a bloody smear on her olive skin.

With a weak grin, Anemone reached up and rested her hand over A2’s, fumbling in the darkness until she managed to curl her fingers around A2’s palm. “I should thank you for saving me, but...” She pulled A2’s hand away. “I’m afraid... I’ve done it so much that the words are starting to ring hollow...”

“Whatever. C’mon, let’s go to that village. Pastel or whatever his name is.”

“Pascal.”

“Right.”

Anemone lifted her arm and pointed at the amusement park. “The rooftops on the left side. There’s a simple bridge across the ravine and a path through the forest. It’ll take you right there.”

“All right. Sounds easy enough.” A2 pulled Anemone to her feet. “Let’s go.”

“Go on without me.”

“You’re not dying, Anemone.” A bolt of worry ran through A2’s mind before the words had even fully left her mouth. What if she was? What if Anemone had sustained some horrible internal damage that neither of them could see? “And even if you were, I’m sure your pal Pedro has plenty of medical supplies,” she added.

“His name’s Pascal.”
“Right.”

“No, I’m not dying. I don’t want to hide in the village,” Anemone explained. “I want to go back to the camp… and hope that my sentence will be lenient.”

“What? You can’t go back!”

“They’re my people. My family. I’ll do what I have to do to stay with them. I’ll beg them to let me stay, even if it means being busted down to the lowest rank or letting them lock me in a cage.”

“And what if they kill you?”

Anemone rested her head on A2’s shoulder.

A2 glanced over at 64B and 22B, who’d huddled together in a quiet act of mourning, their heads bowed, their shoulders quivering. “You can’t go back,” she told Anemone. “None of us can. No one ever really goes back. Besides, if you wanted to turn around, you should’ve done it before the giant bug. I’m not letting you go through that again.”

Anemone hissed and sputtered as A2’s hand brushed too closely against her wounds. “You must be so sick of bailing me out.”

A2 adjusted the way she held her to avoid distressing her injuries. “Gimme a few more times and we’ll see,” she told her. “Besides, this was kinda my fault.”

Anemone let out a soft, weak sigh as A2 gently supported the weight of her tired, broken body and rested her weary head on A2’s chest. A2 found herself with a noseful of her hair. The scent of oil and blood and sweat permeating Anemone’s body was repulsive, but underneath it was the faint aroma of home, as indescribable as it was unmistakable.

“You were right back there,” Anemone concluded. “I’ve known since I came to on that island that I wasn’t meant to live. All these years I’ve been waiting for something to come up to me and take me away… to bring back someone more deserving in my stead. For a moment, I thought that monster back there was…”

Hearing Anemone agree with her invective from earlier didn’t make A2 feel justified or right. It just made her feel worse. The anger she’d felt earlier had long since drained away and left her empty. She wasn’t sure if she believed what she’d said anymore. If she ever had.

“I wasn’t right,” A2 told her. “I was just mad. I wish so badly that Four was still alive, but I—I don’t resent you for living. You’re…” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “You’re my only friend.” She placed her hand over the back of Anemone’s neck, cradling her head. Anemone’s skin, dotted with pearly beads of sweat, felt hot and was growing hotter by the second; A2 worried she had lost too much coolant to keep her chassis from overheating. “I’m… sorry for today. I know I ruined you back there, but I didn’t want to lose you, either, and when you hurt yourself so much for the sake of a piece of junk like me…”

She just wasn’t worth Anemone’s sacrifice. Anemone was somebody. She was a leader. She commanded respect. Or, at least, she had before A2 had fucked it all up. But A2? What was she but a tool that had outlived its usefulness? What made her worthy?

“I’m sorry you lost so much because of me,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking. He pulled out that gun and suddenly, I was an animal… All I cared about was keeping you safe.”

“It’s okay, Number Two,” Anemone said. “I… I understand now.”
“So… where do you want to go now?”

Anemone fell silent.

“I don’t know,” she said after a long pause.

“All right. Let’s go to your friend and get you patched up. Then you can decide.” A2 glanced at 64B and 22B again. “Come on, you two. We’re close.”

The two grieving androids helped each other back onto their feet and followed A2 into the park. The rainfall finally trickled to a halt and cold, indifferent starlight peeked through widening gaps in the heavy clouds.

The amusement park was a rare splash of color in the ruined world. Even though the park had been abandoned for so long, the faded paint on the walls of the buildings lining the street still popped compared to the bare gray concrete and rusted metal that comprised the city. Streetlamps glowed a soft amber and twinkling lights lined every door and the eaves of every building. Brightly-colored wagons and pavilions littered the cobblestone road. Off in the distance, a magnificent castle loomed, a vaguely-heart-shaped hole running through it too neatly for it to be natural. A shimmering crystalline structure poked out of the castle’s front like the blade of a sword. Rusting rails twisted around the castle’s crumbling spires; in the distance, an enormous metal ring lined with enclosed seats slowly rotated.

Machines marched and danced in the streets. Colorful stripes and polka dots were splashed in paints on their torsos. Some had painted their heads ghostly white and drawn crude red lips on their faces. Some wore colorful hats. A dozen distinct choruses of their grating electronic voices echoed through the air.

“Let’s dance and play! It’s so much fun! Let’s sing and dance!”

A tall machine loped down the street past the androids as they ventured further into the park; A2 reached for her sword, but the machine paid her no heed. It simply walked up to another machine, a stubby one with a black and white tuxedo print crudely painted on its torso. “PA-PA,” it said to the stubby machine, crouching down on one knee, “PLEASE BUY ME SOME COT-TON CAN-DY.”

“No sweets until after supper,” the smaller machine retorted. “You will ruin your appetite.”

A2 trudged down the festive, garishly-decorated street with Anemone tucked under her arm, the other androids following in her wake. Every machine fluttering in the corner of her eye all but screamed at her to draw her sword and start chopping, but she did her best to bury those animalistic impulses. They were surrounded, but as long as nothing attacked them, they were safe. They couldn’t afford to start a fight they couldn’t win; with the four of them injured, any fight, no matter how small, would be one they couldn’t win.

A tall machine with red and white stripes running up its legs and torso and a star-studded blue top hat perched jauntily on its head ran into the center of the road, raising its arm. A gatling gun was mounted on its right forearm, its barrels beginning to spin as it aimed for the androids.

A2 clutched Anemone closer to her side and drew her sword, awkwardly fumbling with her numb and weakened arm; 22B stepped to her side, but stumbled, clutching with her free hand at the oozing wound in her stomach. “So much for dancing and playing—”

The machine abruptly raised its gun straight up and fired; a torrent of bright blue, yellow, and red bubbles streamed from it and drifted through the air. The other machines cheered and clapped at
the spectacle.

22B slowly lowered her sword, sighing in relief. A2 sheathed her sword, but kept her hand resting on the hilt. These dancing and playing machines still unnerved her.

“Hear-ye-hear-ye!” a machine with a fancy feathered hat shouted out as it ran in front of the wrought-iron gate that blocked off the castle. A crowd began to gather around it. “May-I-have-your-attention! Due-to-the-castle-no-longer-being-safe, the-Park-Players-Troupe-will-be-performing-their-latest-play-here-in-the-park-square! You-will-all-be-charged-for-admission-when-the-play-is-done!”

“What’s in there that a machine would be scared of?” Anemone wondered. One of the machines passing by her muttered something and moved its arm, tapping on its forehead, chest, and both shoulders in sequence before joining its brethren in the audience.

A2 eyed the area, looking for a way onto the rooftops. “Don’t know, don’t care.”

“And-now-introducing-the-newest-play-from-the-Park-Players-Troupe, Barn-Stroker’s-Count-Dracula!”

The machines cheered and clapped as the announcer ran to the side. Another machine stepped onstage.

“Hello! I... am insurance adjuster Ralph Belmondo,” the machine said, turning to the crowd and bowing. “I have come… to this castle to write a tax insurance policy for… my new client, Count Dracula. But now that I am here… so far from home… I miss my fiancee, whom I am soon to marry… Mina Hakuba. I do hope… my business here does not take long!”

Another machine clad in a flowing black robe walked onstage from the other side. “Greetings Mr. Belmondo I am Count Dracula and I am very pleased to meet you will you please join me for some wine wine which is definitely just wine and not the human blood humans need to live which I definitely do not drink.”

A machine crouch-ran behind the two actors with a soggy cardboard bat on a pole raised above its head.

“Certainly, Count… Dracula. But I must insist we look over… your last tax statement first. What is your mortgage on this castle?”

While the two actors droned on about property ownership and rattled off an itemized list of all of Dracula’s belongings and their tax deductible status, A2 led the others away, weaving and jostling through the crowd of unusually-nonthreatening machines, until they reached a side alley with a rickety metal staircase running up the brick wall to the roof. The stairs shook and rattled hollowly with every step the four of them took.

There was indeed a bridge, a simple ramshackle collection of bolted-together sheets of metal and salvaged guardrails, running from the other side of the building across the ravine and into the dark forest on the other side. Deep within the woods, a faint warm light glittered through tiny gaps in the thick foliage.

“That way,” Anemone said.

64B lingered on the edge of the rooftop, staring down at the eccentric festivities filling the streets.

Overhead, another colorful explosion flashed behind the mist with a dull and muffled thud, short-
lived arcs of red and yellow light leaving ghostly trails in the dark sky.

“Come on, 64B,” 22B said, tapping her on the shoulder. “The sooner we reach Pascal’s, the sooner we can all get patched up. 64B nodded and turned away from the edge, her head bowed, her eyes dulled, cheeks glistening in the dim light.

“Two!”

A familiar voice rang through the damp, heavy air, cutting through the din from the open-air play. A2’s ears perked up. She turned around and rushed over to the edge of the roof where 64B had just stood.

A girl in a ragged black dress pushed her way through the machines milling around below, her frayed white ponytail streaming out behind her. A2 froze. It couldn’t be. It wasn’t. She had to be seeing things again.

“Number Two!”

The white-haired girl hopped on top of a machine’s head, skipped onto the head of a taller machine, leaped with catlike grace and balance onto a window sill, and jumped over the brick parapet lining the roof, handstanding over the edge and landing perfectly on her feet.

In spite of their injuries, 22B and 64B both drew their remaining weapons. A2 didn’t. She stood before the visitor, dumbfounded and rooted to the spot.

The girl adjusted her wavy, wispy hair and grinned, her single blue eye left uncovered by her unique visor sparkling. “Two… it’s really you! I knew you were out here!”

A2 glanced at Anemone, who stood just as frozen in place as her, her mouth agape and eyes wide. Neither of them could believe what they were seeing.

“Put down your weapons,” A2 told the fugitives. “She’s not with YoRHa.” 64B and 22B hesitated, but relented, lowering their weapons with bemused looks on their faces.

A4 rushed over to A2 and nearly swept her off her feet, wrapping her arms around her. “Oh, Two, I’ve been looking everywhere for you these past three years! I’m so glad I found you…” She kissed her on the side of her neck. “I’m so glad…” She kissed her again. “So glad…” She planted one more kiss on her cheek. “So, so glad…”

Hot and flustered, A2 pulled herself away. She still couldn’t—

Four was here. She was real. She was—

“How,” A2 stammered, her voice hoarse, “how did you—I… I mean…”

“We thought you were dead,” Anemone said.

A4 gasped. “A- Anemone! You’re here, too?” She hugged her, too, but let go as soon as she realized how injured Anemone was. “Wow… what a reunion!”

A2 hadn’t just thought A4 was dead. She’d known it. She’d seen A4 kill herself—

“You blew yourself up,” she told A4. “I—I saw it, you self-destructed to…”

A4 cocked her head, confused. “Er… um… huh?”
“I saw the way you looked at me, the way you smiled at me. You—you killed yourself and I—”

“Two…” A4 reached out, laying one hand over A2’s chest and tracing the scars on her cheek with the other. A2 involuntarily relaxed—feeling the warmth of her skin through her gloves eased and loosened every tense muscle in her body. She nearly fell over.

“I don’t know what to say,” A4 said. “I didn’t self-destruct.” She smiled nervously. “Trust me, I’d know if I had…”

“But I saw…”

A4’s fingers traveled up and brushed across A2’s forehead. “Maybe your memories were corrupted. You must have imagined it.”

“But—”

A4 slipped a finger over A2’s ear and gently scratched behind it. A2 melted. Every bit of disbelief running through her mind went up in smoke.

“I… I guess I must have.” A2 concluded. It was possible she’d made it all up. Memories weren’t perfect, even for an android. Trauma, software corruption, hardware damage… and like Jackass had said, her upgrade might have scrambled things a bit.

A4 laid her hands on A2’s shoulders, grinning as tears welled up in her misty blue eye. “Oh, Two…”

A2 felt her own eyes water, a lump forming in her throat even as she found herself returning A4’s smile. “Four…”

The two of them collapsed in each others’ arms, tears wetting each others’ cheeks, fingers raking through each others’ hair. Every doubt, each harsh and painful thought still running through A2’s head, the pain she’d felt, the pain she’d caused, all faded into a warm, soft haze filling her mind.

Four was back. Her heart was full.

White retired early to her quarters that day. She couldn’t focus on her work. Not in her office, not on the floor of Ops where she stood and monitored YoRHa’s operations in person. Every thought in her head was sluggish, as though it had to crawl across her circuits through a fog thick enough to cut with a knife. The thoughts that did run through her head were uncharacteristically volatile. When she’d set foot outside her office at last and instantly found herself mobbed by a swarm of Operators all begging for her to sign off on a resource requisition or approve a time-off request or accept a meeting with one of the other higher-ups in the military, she’d barely been able to avoid shouting at them.

Flirting with Jackass had helped, but only barely. She had broken the greatest taboo known to androids; it would take more than rekindling a long-distance relationship with an old flame to soothe her restless and overwhelmed mind.

When the doors of her room closed behind her, separating her from the rabble, White breathed for what felt like the first time in years, but did not feel at peace. Not at all.

The rumors about her quarters were true. Her room was a pigsty. Her rumpled dirty clothes, trampled underfoot so many times they were starting to turn gray, blanketed the floor. Her bed, the only bed in the Bunker with a proper mattress, was perpetually unmade, her sheets lying in a lump
at the foot of her bed. Her pillow was naked; the pillowcase hung over the headboard. Clean
clothes spilled out from her dresser, shoved inelegantly into the drawers. Her desk and computer
terminal were covered in stains of various beverages and of various ages, some years-old and faded
to a soft and indistinct beige, others fresh and slightly more brownish.

This was her respite from the orderly world she existed in every waking hour of the day. She
needed it now more than ever. In this tiny world, she could live like a…

Her computer terminal chirped, a message notification icon flashing across the screen.

Jackass.

White slouched in her seat, tapped the screen, and brought up the message.

**WHAT THE FUCK, WHITE?????

What happened? she typed back.

Jackass’ response took several seconds that felt like several minutes.

Some creep marched into camp with a fucking platoon and ARRESTED Anemone! What the hell!

Arrested? What for?

You know what for, White! Harboring a fugitive! Don't fucking play dumb!

You agreed you wouldn’t do anything about A2 until you worked something out with Alucard,
didn’t you?

Was this it?

Was this what you two fucking AGREED on?

I didn’t make any decisions about arresting Anemone, White responded. I informed the military
council of her actions immediately after our initial meeting and suggested they be lenient while I
negotiated with her representative.

holy shit White. Fuck

What happened? White asked.

Okay so

this Laurel guy, who I guess is in charge now, pulled a gun on her with a dozen of his men. A2
got full mama wolf, killed the fuck out of like half his guys, grabbed her like a sack of potatoes,
and ran out of there like a bat out of hell.

Where are they now?

Don’t have a clue. Even if I did, I don’t think I’d tell you.

Seriously, White… what the fuck?

Our superiors deserved to know.

Did you know they’d try to THROW HER IN JAIL for helping her friend?
White leaned back in her chair, plastering her hand to her forehead. She didn’t need this bullshit.

A testament to her fraying mental state was that she spent nearly a minute responding to Jackass. Her fingers kept hitting the wrong parts of the touchscreen.

I suggested they be lenient, she responded. In fact, I insisted. I suppose they interpreted my words to mean “arrest her instead of exile her.” The latter of which, I should add, they were well within their rights to do. Their interpretation, though, is not my responsibility.

Yeah. Nothing’s EVER your fault, is it?

Geez. Remind me not to help you if YOU ever run afoul of the law. You’d probably snitch on yourself out of principle!

Our laws are what separate ourselves from the enemy.

Are they? You think machines don’t have rules?

Because I’ve been studying them a LOT longer than you have, White.

They’re nothing BUT rules.

Is there really any difference between you and the machines?

You’re out of line, Jackass. White’s fingers shook as she tapped on the terminal’s touchpad keyboard; she had to take special care to make sure she made no errors. Jackass couldn’t dare speak to her, the commander of the YoRHa special armed forces, like this!

Yeah? Well you’re IN of line!

I mean

Jack calm down

are you a woman or a train? Do you just run on a track and explode if you go off it?

javk

Is it so hard to admit that YOU FUCKED UP?

this isn't so simple

Anyway, how’d things go with Alucard? Did you just fucking SHOOT him as soon as he landed for consorting with fugitives? Seems like a “you” thing to do

White tore the keyboard out of the terminal and threw it across the room.

Fuck.

I thought I loved you.

You know?

Really LOVED you.

We were best friends.
But the White I wanted to spend the rest of my life with blowing shit up…

You’re not her.

She’s gone.

White no longer had any means to retort. Her words had failed her—literally.

With a hollow ache stabbing at her heart, she powered down the terminal and buried herself in her bed, the weight of her sins heavier than any blanket. First Alucard, now this… Her orderly world, her world where right was right and wrong was wrong and doubt was prohibited, was crumbling around her.

Jackass was gone. Anemone was gone. Her heart was empty.

Chapter End Notes

A2 after rescuing Anemone:
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, A2 spends some quality time with A4, unaware of her true nature... but for how long?

Eve rebooted in an unfamiliar place. Systems flickered to life, first tactile sensors, then audio, then video. Little by little as drivers began running, the audiovisual bitrate increased and the voice faintly drifting over to him from across the room changed from a garbled and distorted mess of fuzzy and watery static to a soft, high-pitched voice.

“There can be an order of priority only between two determined things, two existents. Being, since it is nothing outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented on so well previously, could in no way precede the existent, whether in time, in dignity, et cetera…”

Blocky masses of pixels in incoherent earth tones coalesced and sharpened into the image of a softly-lit wooden room. Three walls and the floor were made from planks of wood, one wall from the bark-stripped surface of a tree trunk; the roof was made of metal shingles held in place by a wooden and steel lattice; a glowing lamp lit the room.

Eve was lying on something soft in one corner of the room; in the opposite corner, a machine sat at a desk with a book in its hand. He lifted his head to get a better look at it. It was a long-obsolete model of machine, barrel-chested with spindly limbs and a cylindrical head with two large optical sensors; its brown hull, despite some discoloration, showed surprisingly little signs of wear despite its age. The voice was coming from the machine. It was reading from the book.

It was reading to him, even though he didn’t understand a word that was being said. Eve felt a twinge of nostalgia and longing so strong it was almost painful. The machine’s voice was nothing like Adam’s, but if he closed his eyes and fought to ignore that, he could trick himself into feeling as though Adam was reading to him, as he often had.

“Bro… ther…”

The machine, hearing him stir, stopped reading. “Oh! You’re awake. I hope I didn’t disturb you…”

Eve shook his head and sat up, still getting his bearings. This machine wasn’t part of the network—he could feel it. There was no nebulous sense of connection between him and it.

“I suppose you must be wondering where you are,” the machine said. “My name is Pascal. Another machine carried you here to my village and left you on my doorstep.”

A jumbled sequence of images and sensations ran through his mind. He remembered dragging himself through the forest after his encounter with Adam in the commercial facility. An android had pried into his mind and looked through his memories. One of his machines had picked him up where he’d fallen and carried him deeper into the woods, guarding him as best it could from the sharp-fanged creatures nipping at him from within the underbrush, and had brought him to a part of the forest that was bright and warm.
Eve peeled a white adhesive patch off his chest, revealing a row of half-healed puncture wounds under the sticky residue of colorless paste left behind.

“You should keep that on,” Pascal told him. “You’ll repair yourself faster.”

Eve grunted and let the patch flutter to the floor.

“What’s your name?” Pascal asked, crouching down to pick up the discarded patch and sticking it back over Eve’s wound.

“Eve.”

“Eve… That’s a very nice name.” He checked a few of the other patches stuck to Eve’s skin. “The rest of your injuries seem to be almost healed. How do you feel?”

Eve didn’t answer.

What did it matter how he felt? What was the point of repairing himself? Adam was everything to him—had been everything to him. But he didn’t love Eve anymore. No, he hated him, hated him enough to beat him. What had Eve done to deserve that? Had Adam gotten sick of setting aside his books to play with him? Or maybe Adam had gotten sick of how visibly bored Eve was whenever he’d insisted they read instead of go out running or climbing the ruins. Eve would read a hundred books, no matter how dry or boring, if it would make Adam forgive him.

He’d never thought he’d been selfish. Humans played with each other, and Adam loved learning about humans, so Eve had never felt guilty trying to drag him away from his books. But maybe that’s exactly what he’d been. Selfish.

A bad brother.

No, this was all Dracula’s fault. He’d reprogrammed Adam somehow. He’d taken him away. But maybe that, too, had been Eve’s fault. If he’d been a better brother, maybe he could have stopped Adam from ending up in the clutches of that monster. Maybe Dracula had forcibly enslaved him. Or maybe Adam had left Eve of his own free will…

His eyes started to leak.

Pascal hurried to his desk and produced from the drawer a well-worn cloth rag, then hurried back and used the rag to dab at Eve’s eyes. “Oh—Oh, dear, I hope I haven’t upset you!”

“N-No, I—I’m…” Every word Eve tried to speak stuck in his throat like glue. It was hard even to breathe. “I’m okay,” he insisted, sniffling as he pushed Pascal’s rag away.

“That’s… good,” Pascal said, a doubtful tinge to his voice. “Nevertheless, you should probably stay put until you’re in better shape. You’re more than welcome to spend as much time here as you like.”

Eve mumbled his thanks.

“But if you’re well enough to walk, would you like me to show you around the village?” Pascal’s optical sensors brightened. “I believe it’s stopped raining.”

Eve nodded. He didn’t feel like going anywhere, but he didn’t feel like disagreeing either.
“Come along, then,” Pascal said, helping him out of bed. “This is a wonderful place. I’ve worked very hard on it for nearly two hundred years now!”

The two of them left the bedroom and stepped down a spiral staircase carved into the hollow of an enormous oak tree to the wooden and metal walkways ringing the trunk.

Pascal’s village was well-lit at every angle; warm lights on poles were spaced along each walkway and bridge at regular intervals and illuminated the ground below. Ramshackle huts protruded from the tree, some stacked on top of each other up to three stories high; other little homes were nestled in the boughs of the trees surrounding the central tree or built between its roots. The canopy overhead was sparse in some places, but thick in others; some parts of the paths leading through the village were almost completely dry in spite of the heavy rainfall.

Odd machines were everywhere. Some of them had painted crude approximations of human outfits and human faces on their bodies. None of them carried a single weapon. High-pitched electronic voices squealed in the distance as machines ran around the village for no reason.

“No one is on the network here?” Eve noted. He didn’t sense any link between the other machines and himself, just like with Pascal.

“That’s right,” Pascal said, leading him further down the trunk of the tree and past a line of kiosks selling hunks of polished metal that seemed to have no use at all. “Everyone here has been disconnected. Some, like myself, have been outside the network for centuries; some have only just been disconnected.”

“Why?” Eve didn’t understand. How could a machine want that? The network was everything—outside of it, machines had nothing. Even now, he could still feel the indistinct buzzing of the network in the back of his mind—if he wanted to, he could listen to it, discern the chatter, and even see through the eyes of nearby machines or issue commands to them. He couldn’t imagine not having that constant presence in his head. It would be like…

Like not having Adam anymore. If he lost the network, too, he’d truly be alone.

“We all had our reasons,” Pascal said. “Some were forcibly or accidentally disconnected due to programming errors or battle damage and chose not to rejoin. Myself, I became sick of the war. I suppose an android would have trouble understanding.”

“I’m not an android.”

Pascal cocked his head in surprise. “You aren’t? But…”

“I’m a machine,” Eve said.

“Oh. Are they making machines that look like androids now? That is interesting…” Pascal mused. “Perhaps if the network continues to develop machines like you, we will better understand androids. One can only hope that then, everybody will realize there is no reason for us to fight.”

Pascal’s ruminations were starting to bore Eve. None of it made sense to him. Machines were built for war. How could they want peace? Adam would have been fanatically curious about the whole thing, to the point that he’d probably dismantle everyone in the village just to see what made them tick. For Eve, though, the mystery just made him feel slightly dizzy.

Two very small machines ran past him, circling around Pascal. “Uncle Pascal! Uncle Pascal!” they chirped. “We’re bored! Play with us!”
Pascal caught one of the small machines and patted it on the head. “Not, now, little one. I am showing this new guest to our village. Children, say hello to Mister Eve, please.”

“Hello, Mister Eve!” the children droned in an electronic chorus.

Children? As in little humans who weren’t fully grown or matured? That didn’t make any sense to Eve either. How could machines be children? Even he had never been one.

“Will you play with us, Mister Eve?” one of the children asked.

Pascal laughed. “Please, dear, Mister Eve here was hurt on his way here and needs time to recover…”

Eve felt an ache in his chest too deep to have been caused by any of his wounds. That machine was pleading with him the same way he’d always asked Adam.

He didn’t understand peace, but he understood *that*.

“Yeah,” he answered the tiny machine, his voice hitching. “Sure.”

The machines cheered and started dragging him away in the opposite direction Pascal had been leading him.

“I-I suppose we will finish our tour later!” Pascal called out, waving as the distance between him and Eve grew.

Eve let the machines pull him along. He couldn’t help but wonder where Adam was right now. What was he doing? Was he thinking at all about the brother he’d cast aside?

After her meeting with Dracula, Carmilla had scarcely settled into her bedroom when somebody started knocking at her door. She considered simply not answering, but the knocking grew louder and more insistent.

Finally, she made her way through the door and peered through the keyhole. She could see a white shirt.

“May I come in?” Adam asked from behind the door.

“If you make it qui—”

There was a flash of light from behind her and the rush of displaced air; Carmilla did an about-face and found Adam standing in the center of her room.

“At least you knocked first,” she muttered.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?” Adam smiled. “Do you like your living arrangements? After Lord Dracula told me about his castle, I was quite eager to apply its design principles to my own work.”

“You designed this place?”

“Down to the last brick.” Adam pointed to the wardrobe sitting in the corner of the room and snapped his fingers; the wardrobe’s simple rectangular shape morphed into a bubbling, roiling mass of perfect white cubes and settled into a much grander and more ornate design crafted from gleaming, polished white wood.
“It’s a little bland,” Carmilla noted. “Can you only make white things?”

“I can do black things, too.” Adam noticed the lingering bloodstain on the rug, snapped his fingers, and magically erased it. “But is the bed comfortable? Does the fabric of the blankets feel right? Do the floorboards squeak the way they should?”

“Y-Yes, I suppose.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I will work on the color later.”

“Is that all you came here for?”

“Not quite. I’d like to get to know you,” Adam said. “Care for a game of Go?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Adam hid his disappointment well, but not well enough. “Chess, then?”

Carmilla crossed her arms. She didn’t have much else to do, and it would kill some time until something new came up… “That one, I know.”

“Excellent.” Adam snapped his fingers and materialized a table and two chairs. A black-and-white checkerboard with a full complement of chess pieces sat on the table. “I find that games are the best way to understand someone.” He took a seat and gestured over to the empty chair. “Since you are a guest, you may play white.”

“How gracious of you.” Carmilla sat down and grabbed one of the white pawns lined up on the board.

“Are you sure?” Adam asked. “Once you’ve touched a piece, you’re bound to move it. Are you certain you want to move that piece?”

“I know how to play chess,” Carmilla said, already frustrated by Adam’s attitude.

“I was just reminding you. I had the misfortune of playing your friend Olrox earlier today.” Adam sighed, then slid up a black pawn to stand toe-to-toe with Carmilla’s. “I think I spent more time explaining the rules to him than playing. And then when I demonstrated en passant he accused me of cheating.”

“Quite the buffoon, isn’t he?”

“Quite.”

“Still, Lord Dracula must see some use in him. I suppose he does a good job of keeping the beasts in line.” Carmilla brought another pawn forward, leaving it as tantalizing bait for one of Adam’s pieces. Olrox was a notorious hustler, ever playing the fool, but Carmilla would rather Adam learn that the hard way. “So, Adam, what brought you to Dracula’s side?”

Adam did not fall for the bait, instead beginning to mobilize his flank. “Curiosity. Humanity greatly intrigues me; when I met Dracula, I realized there was a form of life beyond humanity, beyond anything I’d known, and I had to understand it. I asked him to drink my blood and make me like him.”

“So Dracula turned you.” Carmilla couldn’t imaging how Dracula could have gone through with that, knowing how horrible these machines’ blood tasted.
“Of course. Didn’t he turn you and Olrox?”

She laughed. “No, no. Olrox was born a vampire; I was turned by another vampire long before I made Dracula’s acquaintance.”

“So neither of you are his servants.”

“Not in the same sense that you are.”

“You were once human, then.”

Carmilla stiffened, frowned, and took one of Adam’s pieces as retaliation. First blood had been drawn.

“I meant no disrespect. Obviously, vampires are a superior form of life.” One of Adam’s pawns avenged its fallen comrade. “It’s fascinating to hear that you transcended humanity. How did it happen?”

“A lady never tells.”

“Ah. I suppose we don’t know each other well enough to reveal such intimate secrets.” A wry smile crossed Adam’s face. “I, however, have a weakness I must confess to you,” he said as his finger hovered over his pieces.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow, a slight smile crossing her face. There was something refreshing about such naivete. Vampires never bared such private matters to other vampires, even ones ostensibly on the same side. One could never be sure…

“Oh? Do go on,” she said, eager to milk Dracula’s newest cohort for all he was worth.

“Lord Dracula has told me that the thralls I’ve created are weak,” he said, settling on his knight and leaping it over a row of his pawns. “Of course, considering how easily they were bested, I’m inclined to agree with him. My question is… should they have been stronger? And how could I make them so?”

Carmilla moved her bishop to take Adam’s rook. “Well, tell me about your vampires. How did they die?”

“My first,” Adam said, capturing her bishop with a pawn (what a fool she’d been, falling into such an obvious trap), “was one of my own machines. My second was an android.”

Carmilla gagged. “Your own machines? Those little tin cans?”

Adam nodded as he made his next move.

Carmilla contemplated her counterattack. “Do those things even have blood?”

“Oil.”

“Disgusting.”

“For you, perhaps.” Adam watched her slide her king behind her rook. “I’ve never tasted anything better.”

“I suppose that’s to be expected for a man whose insides go tick-tock.”
“But I digress. Each of my creations so far,” Adam said, sliding his queen into the center of the board, “has been destroyed by the same thing: Ultraviolet light.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“A range of electromagnetic radiation with a wavelength shorter than violet light, just out of the range of the visible spectrum.”

“Er…”

“Simulated sunlight.”

“Fake sunlight?” Carmilla couldn’t help but laugh. “Your thralls were destroyed by children playing pretend?”

“I suppose, if you wish to put it that way.” Adam gave her a disarming grin as he and Carmilla traded pawns, whittling away the defensive walls around their kings.

Carmilla returned the smile. This man was so, so stupid. And it wasn’t even an act, like Olrox’s ploys! He was just so earnest about it.

“Well, unfortunately, there’s nothing you can do about that. A naturally weak soul produces naturally weak vampires.” Carmilla’s queen did battle with Adam’s; as they traded turns, captured pieces mounted on the sides of the board. “Dracula might not have much use for you for very long if you can’t produce good footsoldiers…”

“Machines occupy eighty percent of this planet’s surface. The machine network uses my CPU to process tactical data for half of them. I can reverse the connection and slave fifty percent of Earth’s occupying forces to my command. I have plenty of footsoldiers.”

Carmilla halted in her tracks. Adam’s futuristic babble was insufferable, but she had caught the words slave, fifty percent, and command. Was it true that this man wielded such power? Was that why Dracula had such interest in him?

“Why don’t you have control over all of them?”

“The other half rests with my brother.”

“Brother?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow. “Why isn’t he with you?”

“When I joined Dracula, I had no further use for him. He was built to protect me; I no longer needed protection.” He shrugged. “I hoped that our separation would spur him to be more… independent.”

Carmilla silently contemplated how cold-blooded this machine-man must be to abandon his own brother. Perhaps he wasn’t such an unfit vampire after all.

“Check,” he announced.

Shocked, she looked down at the board. The duel between their queens had inadvertently opened a hole in her forces that let Adam place his remaining bishop on a direct path to her king. She hadn’t even noticed.

“If I can get you in checkmate,” he asked as she hastily moved her king aside, “will you tell me how I can make my vampires stronger?”
“Fair enough. But if you lose this game,” Carmilla replied, “what can you give me?”

“You think I would lose?” Adam traded blows with her over the board. “Humans created computers capable of beating their strongest players ten thousand years ago. Those computers, I assure you, are but pocket calculators to even the dullest machine.”

“Check.”

Adam growled and moved his pieces to protect his king. Carmilla took his queen.

“What will you give me if I win, Adam?” she asked.

“Twenty-five percent.” Adam slid a pawn to the end of the board and promoted it not to a queen, to Carmilla’s bemusement, but to a knight.

“Of what?”

“The machine forces. A full one-fifth of the planet’s surface for you to do with as you please.”

“That?” Carmilla laughed. “Wagered in opposition to me simply telling you how to shore up your weaknesses? My, my, aren’t you confident.”

“Then let us sweeten the deal. You will tell me how to make stronger vampires… and regale me with the story of your journey from human to vampire.”

“That’s more like it.”

Pieces vanished from the board at a dizzying rate until Carmilla only had her king left, and Adam his king and his knights. She moved her lone king across the board, one tile at a time, leaping out of check again and again and counting the turns, hoping to reach fifty moves and turn a devastating loss into a mere stalemate.

“Checkmate,” Adam said.

“What?”

Adam gestured to the board with a mysterious grin on his face. Sure enough, Carmilla’s king was pinned by his three knights.

Carmilla was dumbfounded.

“A great player must be capable of looking at least five moves ahead at any given time. In such a small world as this chess board, I, of course, can see much farther into the future.” Adam tipped Carmilla’s king over with a finger.

“Well… you win, I suppose.” Carmilla sighed. “What would you have done if I’d flipped over the board and declared myself the winner instead of allowing you to mate me?”

“I suppose I’d have flipped over the table myself and declared victory. Now, I believe we had a deal…”

“Very well. First off, a vampire is always lesser than its master. Lesser vampires feed to make even lesser vampires, creating a hierarchy—a pyramid with the master on top and the weakest and most pathetic thralls of its subordinates crowding out the bottom. You’ll never make a vampire as strong as yourself. But of course, you’ll want to get close.”
Adam nodded, paying rapt attention. He was clutching the edge of the table hard enough to turn his knuckles white. “Yes. Of course.”

“You need to put more of your soul into them, my friend.” Carmilla picked up one of her pawns and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. “It isn’t enough to drain them. Your essence, your willpower needs to pervade them, flow into their veins like the venom of an asp.”

“That’s just something I’ll have to concentrate on.”

Carmilla nodded. “Soon it’ll be as natural as breathing. Keep at it. Keep sucking those vile automatons’ disgusting blood. No offense.”

“None taken.” Adam leaned back. “Now, about the second half of my winnings…”

“Yes, er…” Carmilla swallowed, her throat dry. She was loath to recount her life story to a stranger, but rules were rules…

“For as long as I could remember, my family and I were indentured servants. Our master collected servants like one would collect fine china,” she told Adam. “He had a very large estate. We tilled his fields, grew his crops, cleaned his castle, cooked his food, fed him, clothed him…” She made a flippant gesture with her hand. “You get the idea.”

“He seems like a very lazy man.”

Carmilla smiled. “Haven’t you ever heard it said that one must work smarter, not harder? And he was a very smart man. We were all promised freedom when our debts were repaid—very standard servitude, I won’t bore you with the details. The genius of it was that our debt increased every passing year, every day, with every meal and every scrap of clothing, with every shingle over our heads and every blanket we wore to sleep.

“I resented him at first.” She tapped on her fallen king. “Oh, how I loathed him. We all did. We hated him for dangling our freedom just out of reach, tormenting us as the gods once tormented Tantalus. Until one night… he came for me.”

“And that was when you became a vampire?”

“Yes.” Carmilla leaned back and sighed, closing her eyes. “And I saw the world with new eyes from that day on. I was still his servant, but money was of no object. I could go wherever I pleased, whenever I pleased, and do whatever I pleased. I was like a daughter to him. He always picked the smartest of his servants to receive such a gift, you see. It was like…”

“A proving ground.”

“The world changed when I awoke.” Carmilla’s fingers crept along the side of her neck, tracing the spot where she had been bitten so many years ago. Of course, her skin was smooth as silk and utterly without blemish now. “My hatred for my master vanished. I understood him as intimately as I understood myself. And when I looked upon my former fellow servants, how stupid and slow and ugly they all seemed to me! Looking upon them was like staring at cattle—their dull, vacuous eyes…”

“Even your family?”

“Especially them.” She licked her lips. “My shrew of a mother; my lout of a father; my sister, my brother, those sniveling brats who forced their fair shares of the work on me every single day.” The words streamed out like vomit. “The day after I became a vampire, I drained them dry. From that
point on, just as I adored my master, they adored me. No one ever said a word against me or raised a hand against me. They did everything I asked without question or complaint, like a good human should. At last, I was the golden child.”

Adam had no snide remark. He simply stared at her with a neutral expression.

“You said you had a brother, didn’t you?” Carmilla asked. “Why didn’t you turn him? I can’t recommend it enough.”

Adam looked away. “I had my reasons.”

“What did you say his name was?”

“I didn’t.”

Carmilla leaned forward. “I suppose he must resemble you, doesn’t he? Does he share your noble brow, your strong chin? What about your silken, silver hair?”

Adam ignored her. “You said that when you became a vampire, humans looked like cattle to you. Is that truly how you think of them? As unintelligent beasts?”

“Of course. How do you see them?”

“Humans created art and science. They loved and hated in equal measure, protected and killed with the same hands. Their minds always seemed to possess such unfathomable depth to me.” Adam cupped his cheek in his hand, idly twiddling his queen between his fingers. “Yet you see nothing.”

“Perhaps you read too much into them,” Carmilla replied. “How much of that much-vaunted art and science was their creation and how much was ours? How much credit have they taken for what their hidden masters have done? How much of their exploits were simply their mindless attempts to imitate us? Leonardo da Vinci, Alexander the Great, Pliny the Elder, Genghis Khan… did you think they were mere humans?”

Adam lowered his head, deep in thought.

“Humans are our food and our playthings. Nothing more. Those of us who show potential may be inducted into the ranks of the ultimate, but the vast majority have nothing to offer us but sustenance and amusement.”

Adam smiled a knowing smile, then stood up and collected his board, dismissing it back into the ether. “Thank you, Carmilla. It’s been a pleasure getting to know you,” he said, making for the door. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Wait.”

Adam stopped.

“Adam…” Carmilla rested her chin on her hand. This silly, stupid man, unlike Olrox, had endeared himself to her. “A word of warning. Vampires do not expose their stupidity to each other.”

“Don’t mistake my ignorance for stupidity,” Adam said, his tone suddenly cold. “A seeker of knowledge is always willing to lay himself bare to learn the truth. If pride stops you from asking questions to better yourself, how can you surpass your betters?”

“In secret.” Carmilla flashed him a glimpse of her fangs. “Proper vampires take our pride very
seriously. Expose your weak point and you might wake up with a stake through it.”

“I see. Well, you’re welcome to come to my quarters whenever you like,” Adam retorted, a haughty and mirthless smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I’d be happy to teach you chess or Go or any other game you’d like. Unless your pride won’t allow it…”

And just like that, he vanished, leaving Carmilla alone.

A soft moan came from the four-poster bed as 6E began to stir. Carmilla rushed to her side, eager to check in on her new project. She pulled the black blindfold away from her eyes as they cracked open, gleaming crimson.

“Hello there,” Carmilla cooed, dropping to her knees at the side of the bed. “How do you feel, dear?”

6E glanced at her. “This isn’t the bunker…” she mumbled.

“No, it most certainly isn’t.” Carmilla smiled. “This is your home.”

She felt the automaton’s mechanical mind struggle, the pulsing and throbbing of old thoughts as they fought to assert themselves, and in her mind she curled her fingers around them and squeezed them until they stopped. 6E was hers and would think the way she told it to think. She filled the automaton’s head with new instincts, new desires, new strength; taught her to use her fangs, to know the name of her mistress; wiped out her old loyalties like chalk erased from a slate.

“No, no, you have the wrong idea,” 6E said, struggling to sit up as she resisted her mistress’ dominance. “YoRHa is—”

“They’re just a bunch of stupid toys.”

6E paused.

“You’re not like them.”

“They’re…” 6E’s eyelids drooped, her shoulders slumping. “Just a bunch of stupid toys.”

“But you,” Carmilla said, gently patting her on the cheek, “are a very smart toy, aren’t you?”

6E nodded.

“I want you to go find more of those stupid toys and… uplift them. If you understand…”

A wide, cheerful, yet wicked smile pulled its way across 6E’s disarmingly soft face, deepening the dimples in her cheeks. “Don’t you worry, Lady Carmilla. I understand perfectly.”

Carmilla grinned in turn. She liked this one. “And if you should run across a tall, strong, handsome man with silver hair… work especially hard to turn him, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” 6E slid out of bed and bowed deeply, her lavender curls bouncing as they framed her pale, moon-shaped face. “My desires are yours, Lady Carmilla; my hunger and thirst as well.”

Once Eve had been dragged away, Pascal went back to surveying his village. The thick forest protected the place from the heavy winds that storms brought with them, but some heavy gusts had broken a few smaller branches and disturbed a few houses. He set to work helping where he could to repair and reinforce the affected homes, but all the while, he couldn’t stop thinking about that
strange humanoid machine, Eve. If machines had been created to fight humans, then what did it mean that their forces were starting to look like humans as well?

Perhaps when there was no longer any physical distinction between human, android, or machine that the fighting would end—Eve might have been an olive branch created for that very purpose.

Though he had no evidence to back up his theory, Pascal took comfort in it nonetheless.

“Pascal?” a machine questioned him, interrupting his work and tugging him aside. “There are some new arrivals at the upper gate asking for you.”

Pascal thanked him and hurried to the bridge that wound through the upper levels of the forest—one of the village’s only two entrances and exits. The guards posted at the gate—the only machines in the city who carried weapons, though they all hoped they’d never have to use them—had already let the new visitors inside by the time he got there.

There were five of them: a tall, broadly-built YoRHa android with short silver hair and a slightly shorter one with long red hair, both wearing scraps of black armor; two more androids with white hair, one in a ragged black dress, the other wearing ornate, yet battered brass armor and a tattered midnight-blue dress; the fifth Pascal recognized as Anemone, leader of the nearest Resistance camp, by her dark skin and green cloak.

Beneath her heavy cloak, Anemone’s clothes were stained with glistening red coolant. She was panting heavily and could barely stand—the two androids with long white hair were propping her up. There was a dull look in her eyes, although an alert spark shone in them when she caught sight of Pascal.

“Oh, goodness, Anemone!” Pascal rushed over to the band of battered androids as fast as his legs could carry him. His temperature sensors registered that Anemone’s systems were running nearly five degrees above acceptable tolerance for an android. “What happened?”

“Hello, Pascal,” Anemone croaked, a faint smile flickering on her stained face. “Been a while since we met face to face…”

One of the two androids at her side spoke up. This one had wavy, slightly-curl white hair pulled back into a loose, messy ponytail and a soft, round face; her silent companion closely resembled her, but had long hair that ran past her waist and a hard-edged, stoic face. “Anemone needs help. Can you repair her?”

Pascal appraised the rest of the androids. Most of them, in fact, seemed quite badly damaged. The short-haired one’s arm, chest, and cheek were speckled with acid burns; the red-haired one was nursing an oozing perforation that ran clear through her abdomen.

“We have some repair kits,” he told them, “but our last shipment of specialized parts for androids went out to the camp earlier this morning, so we’re fresh out. I can stabilize you, but…” He reached out to steady Anemone, but the stoic, hard-faced android at her side clutched her tightly as though she were protecting her from him.

“That’ll do,” she growled.

“Why didn’t you head for the camp?” Pascal asked as he directed one of the guards to assist with the other two androids and led Anemone’s entourage deeper into the village. “Has something terrible happened to them?”

“It’s a long story,” the stoic android said. No, not quite stoic, Pascal realized—her laconic and curt
demeanor was holding back an intense anger. She couldn’t hide it in her eyes.

“You’re welcome to tell it,” Pascal said.

“No.”

Pascal sighed. “Suit yourself…”

“A2, be nice to Pascal,” Anemone mumbled.

A2 grumbled something under her breath. “No, thank you.”

There were too many androids here to fit in Pascal’s home, and he didn’t have nearly enough supplies to treat them all by himself anyway considering how much damage they’d sustained. Fortunately, even in a peaceful village, machines could be damaged—accidents happened, hardware wore down, software became glitchy—so there were ample facilities in the village to treat the motley crew’s vast collection of injuries.

Pascal brought the group to the nearest repair facility and cleared the nearest operating table for Anemone. “Lay her down here,” he told the androids holding her upright. A2 wrinkled her nose, her lips curling into a mute snarl, but she and her counterpart nevertheless laid her on the table with little reservation. “You two,” he told the two most visibly injured androids, “lie down on the other two tables. We will take a look at you as well.”

The short-haired and red-haired women sighed in relief and made their way to the other tables, where the other machines on staff rushed to attend to them.

Pascal picked up a repair kit and laid it on the table next to Anemone, then peeled away her sodden and coolant-stained clothes to assess the damage to her chassis. It was worse than he’d imagined. Thousands of tiny lacerations wound in a spiral pattern around her legs and torso, crossing her chest and back; the cuts were so small and so numerous that her skin looked as though it had been ground up.

Then again, examining more closely, the damage didn’t seem to extend beyond the dermal layer—the real danger was that several coolant vessels close to the surface of her skin had been severed, and more than enough fluid had been lost to cause her to start overheating. Anemone couldn’t be allowed to stay in operation any longer—she needed to be put into rest mode or shut down altogether.

He took a cutting blade and slid it under Anemone’s collar, consulting his records on the anatomical makeup of her model. There should be an emergency shutdown mechanism in her chassis just—

As the blade slipped under Anemone’s skin, Pascal’s tactile sensors registered the flat of a blade landing on his shoulder, the sharp edge resting against his neck.

A2 stood by him, her sword bared and leveled at him. A quiet fury blazed in her icy blue eyes. “Get the hell away from her,” she growled.

“Um… would you rather do the operation yourself?” Pascal asked, stepping away and holding the toolkit out toward her.

A2 snatched the toolkit out of his hand.

“She’s lost too much coolant,” Pascal explained as A2 took his place at the edge of the operating
table. “You’ll need to find and engage the emergency shutdown mechanism to prevent any of her parts from being damaged from overheating. There might have also been considerable loss of joint lubricant. I would be happy to walk you through the steps…”

A2 trembled, her shoulders quaking, as she held the cutting blade over Anemone’s breast with a quivering hand. She did nothing for a few seconds, then let out a frustrated snarl and threw the kit to the floor.

Her counterpart came to her side and pulled her away. “Two, step aside and let Pascal handle this. If Anemone trusts him, so can—”

“Let go of me! A machine isn’t laying a goddamn finger on her!”

Pascal sighed. He wasn’t surprised that at least one of these androids harbored ill will toward machines, but it still stung to hear such vitriol. Such invective was a painful reminder of the way most androids saw machines—there was a reason Anemone’s camp was the only one the village had contact with, and that such contact was kept secret from the rest of the Resistance. “I understand if you have something against machines,” he said, trying to appeal to A2’s better judgment, “but I assure you, Anemone is a dear friend of mine—”

“If I have something against machines?” A2 repeated, only further enraged. Her hands curled into fists; red coolant trickled between her fingers. Pascal might have been imagining it, but it seemed that her teeth were sharper than normal; her eyes caught the light in a way that was more like an animal’s than an android’s.

Her counterpart grabbed her and pulled her back. “Two, please! It’s okay. Anemone wouldn’t have led us here if it wasn’t safe. Let Pascal fix her.”

“Fix?” Machines don’t know how to fix anything! All they know how to do is destroy things!” A2 howled. Her partner struggled even harder to restrain her, grunting with exertion as she tried to drag her backward. “You won’t hurt her! I won’t let you! Let go of me, A4, I—”

A4 grabbed her by the shoulders, twisted her around, and pressed their lips together in what Pascal recognized as a very human act of intimacy; A2 immediately loosened up, all but going limp, and once she’d calmed down, A4 dragged her outside.

Pascal knelt down and collected the tools A2 had dropped. His body felt heavier than before, and even though he had not been physically harmed, pain and danger signals still flared in his logic circuits. It hurt, like always—a pain that seemed to be at once everywhere and nowhere—to have the sins of all machines laden at his feet. Some androids could understand, but perhaps the majority of them never would. Perhaps peace truly was nothing more than an idle fantasy.

As he stood back up, a weak and soft hand fell on his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Anemone whispered. “I didn’t tell A2 you were a machine before you got here. Seeing you and this village must have been a horrible shock.”

“I understand, Anemone.” Pascal took her hand and laid it back down on the table. “Please do not exert yourself. You’re overheating.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” Pascal once again positioned the surgical blade over Anemone’s chest. “I’m not sure it would have made a difference if you had told her in advance.”

“Once she’s calmed down,” Anemone said, “she’ll grow to feel more comfortable around you. Life
has hardened her, but she’s a good person at heart.”

“That would be nice.” Pascal cut away enough skin to open up her chassis.

“Today has been awful.” Anemone sighed. With her chassis open, Pascal could see her heat regulation systems swelling and fluttering in time with her breath. The air coolant system paired to her liquid coolant system was struggling to pick up the slack and keep her mechanisms within operational tolerances.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“A2 is a friend. She and those others… are fugitives. I protected them. I got in trouble. Two was so hell-bent on returning my kindness… she killed the soldiers who came to arrest me.”

“A friend indeed. But it sounds like she made things much worse.”

Anemone nodded weakly. “She did. Should I be mad at her?”

“I don’t think any of us should be mad at anything.”

“Of course.” She closed her eyes. “I’m not sure if I am.”

“It’s natural to feel conflicted.”

“I don’t know how I feel about anything now. I don’t know what to do or where to go now. It’s all gone. Part of me feels… I might as well have died.”

“Well, I for one am glad you didn’t.”

Anemone smiled.

“You’re always welcome to stay here,” Pascal reassured her. His fingers curled around the switch for the emergency shutdown mechanism. “I’m going to shut you down now,” he told her. “I’ll patch up your circulatory system and replenish your coolant while you’re inactive and power you back on once you’re no longer in danger of overheating. You won’t feel a thing. It will be like going to sleep.”

Anemone closed her eyes. “Thank you, Pascal.”

As Pascal flipped the switch, Anemone inhaled and exhaled, her chest rising and falling one last time before she became still. Her body slowly cooled to match the ambient temperature of the room, and Pascal set to work.

A2 couldn’t put into words how much she hated this place. Machines everywhere, crawling through the forest spouting gibberish. Machines Anemone said were her friends. Machines didn’t have friends. Machines didn’t make friends. They didn’t think or feel. They were the enemy. They were the ones who had taken everything from her, who had taken everything from so many people. They were enemies that had to be wiped off the face of the earth without mercy or special consideration.

Why was Anemone putting her life in the hands of her enemy? What was wrong with her?

A4 dragged her away, up to the edge of the so-called village, far away from the bustling machines. Far away from Anemone. Being wrapped in her arms and feeling her lips against hers had pacified her, filling her limbs with lead and her head with fog, but though she put up no physical resistance,
A2 still stewed and fumed, wracked with impotent anger.

“Calm down, Two,” A4 told her, laying her against the trunk of a tree. “It’s okay.”

“But Anemone—” A2 tried to get back up, but A4 put a hand on her chest.

“Anemone’s going to be fine, Two.” A4’s smile fluttered and flickered as the dim and gloomy edge of the forest swirled and swam before A2’s eyes. A2 felt the exhaustion she’d held at bay for hours rush forward to meet her. As everything went dark, she thought she felt cold hands clamp around her shoulders and sink into her flesh, chilling her down to her core.

“Two, please, I need to tell—”

She woke up wrapped in something warm and soft. No, in someone.

Four was clinging to her tightly to ward off the cool air. A2 could feel the soft, yielding, warm flesh of A4’s thighs pressed against her own, her cheek resting against the crook of her neck, the gentle rising and falling of her chest pressing against her back. Their black boxes were humming in tandem.

Her injured arm ached, the deep gash in her bicep stinging as the weight of A4’s body pressed it against the warped and uneven floorboards; her leg, too, was pinned in such a way that sent annoying jabs through the wounds in her thigh. Her injuries didn’t hurt much anymore, though; the wounds had been dressed properly with staunching gel and self-repair adhesive patches while she’d been sleeping.

She and A4 were in a little wooden hut with crooked windows and a tiny lamp in the corner. On a desk near the window was a can of oil and a collection of tools; opposite the desk was a dirty mirror and a shelf adorned with stained, half-empty cans of paint. A2 struggled to wriggle free of A4’s viselike grip as it sunk in—that she was still in the machine village.

“Four,” she hissed. “Four—!”

A machine with a bundle of fabric draped over its spindly arm and a collection of swords and armor tucked under its armpit threw open the door and stepped inside. A2 reached for her sword and found nothing. She was unarmed. Not only that, she’d been stripped down to her underwear.

And so, she realized as A4 mumbled softly and clutched her tighter, pressing bare skin against bare skin, had A4. She was wearing nothing but the white singlet every YoRHa combat unit wore beneath their uniforms.

In ideal circumstances, A2 wouldn’t be bothered by that. But right now, she and A4 were all but naked and completely defenseless.

She’d known not to trust machines. What had everyone else been thinking? Why had she gone along with them?

The machine spoke a mile a minute. “Hey android guests Pascal asked me to wash and mend your dang ol clothes because they were a mess and who was I to refuse I mean I’m the only dang machine in town who knows how to sew I tell you what who else was he gonna ask man Jean-Paul heh heh fat chance.”

It laid the bundle of cloth—the blue dress and black uniform A2 and A4 had been wearing, respectively—on the floor, along with the weapons and the battered breastplate and greaves that went along with A2’s outfit.
“Dang ol armor I can’t do anything about man but hey here’s a tip from me I tell you what if you go into the forest kingdom and go deep deep into the castle I mean really deep man you’ll find a blacksmith who can repair just about dang ol anything I think his name is Masamune or something anyways I gotta go thanks for not killing us.”

“…You’re welcome?” A2 mumbled.

The machine bowed and stepped backward. “No problem have fun doing whatever it is you two humanoids were doing wrapped around each other like that see ya in the morning.”

A2 pulled herself free, grabbed her sword, and swung it, stopping a hair’s breadth from the machine’s unprotected torso.

“Well man if this is how it ends this is how it ends I tell you what can’t say I wanted better but them’s the dang ol breaks man.”

Hissing as she sucked air between her teeth, A2 lowered her blade. It didn’t feel good to destroy something that wasn’t trying to kill her, machine or not. It wouldn’t be satisfying—it wouldn’t be right.

“Thanks man see ya later,” the machine said, stepping over the threshold and closing the door.

A2 sighed and dropped her sword. Peaceful machines. Fuck.

She dropped to her knees, favoring her injured leg. However long she’d slept, she still felt exhausted, so it couldn’t have been long. A bruise she didn’t remember getting throbbed just below her clavicle and above her breast; amid the cloudy brownish-blue patch of tender skin was a faint, wet sheen of a glossy pink substance. It didn’t look like any type of bruise she’d ever seen before.

A4 stretched, yawned, and cracked open her bleary eyes. Her hair, still slightly damp, was plastered to her cheek; her frayed ponytail had almost come undone, wild wisps framing her head like sunbeams. “Oh, hey, Two. Did that nice machine bring us back our clothes?”

“Yeah.” A2 picked up her clothes and put them back on. Now that she’d calmed down, she felt remorse for how she’d treated Anemone’s friend. She had to go back to it to—

Not to apologize, but at least to thank it for taking Anemone in.

“I’m gonna see how Anemone’s doing,” she said.

“Good idea.” A4 slipped back into her own uniform. “I’ll go with you.”

“I… I-I’m fine on my own.”

She rested her hand on A2’s shoulder. “Still having trouble, huh? Believing I’m really here?”

“Yeah, kinda.” A2 looked away, her cheeks and chest growing warm as her eyes briefly met A4’s.

“She remembered seeing her die.

She remembered the machines strike her down.

She remembered staring on in disbelief as A4 rose unsteadily to her feet, bathed in the crimson glow from dozens of pairs of optical sensors.

She remembered A4’s painful smile.
She had seen A4 vanish beneath a searing starburst of pure white light.

How do you *come back* from that?

“You remember wrong.”

“I can’t tell myself I just…” A2 took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to quash the image that had haunted her for three years. The flash of searing, blinding light reducing Four’s body to a stark silhouette, the shadow flying apart like dead leaves—“I just imagined it.”

“Then let *me* tell you.” With a warm and kindly smile—the kind of smile Four had always smiled best—A4 reached out and stroked A2’s cheek. “I didn’t die. What you thought you saw didn’t happen. I survived, and now I’ve found you, and nothing will ever change that. From now on, I’ll always be here for you, Two, and I’ll tell you that again and again, as long as it takes, until you believe it.”

“I, uh…” A2 reached up and rubbed at her watering eyes as her throat locked up. “T-Thanks, Four. I-I lo—”

The words wouldn’t come out. A2 had never once said them before; the shapes they made in her mouth were alien to her. But this was *Four*. She wanted to say them for her.

“Oh, I *know*, Two. I love you t—” A4 halted, her voice freezing and eyes widening as she shuddered violently, her shoulders quaking. At the same time, A2 felt a vicious chill plunge down her spine, as though she’d been stabbed in the back by an icicle.

“It’s getting a little cold in here, huh?” A4 asked, rubbing her arms. “C’mon, let’s go. The walk will keep us warm.”

The two of them left the hut and ventured into the village. A2 was unfamiliar with the layout of the area, but A4 effortlessly guided her down to the repair facility, holding her hand all the way.

“By the way,” A4 said, “I really like your outfit. It suits you. Where’d you get it?”

“Stole it from some asshole with a mask.” A2 shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like he was using it.”

“Bet he wouldn’t look half as good in it as you, either,” A4 said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

A2 wondered, had Four’s hand always been so soft? Her skin was pliant and warm, warmer than A2 remembered. But memories could fade. Memories could be wrong. Anyway, what was the problem if Four was squishier than before? It just made it more of a delight to be near her, to press against her, to sink into her warmth…

The more she accepted the truth, the more at ease she felt, the more she just wanted to throw herself at A4 and melt in her embrace. Tentatively, A2 curled her arm around A4’s and pulled herself closer, rubbing their shoulders together as the two of them descended to the ground. She resisted the urge to lick A4’s cheek.

She glanced down at A4’s side and noticed the slit in her skirt that bared the pale curve of her thigh, her gaze slowly traveling up to her waist. On A4’s hip, revealed for only an instant, was a mark A2 was starting to know well.

Three black fingerprints branded into her pale skin.

She didn’t know what to make of it. She didn't even know what the same symbol on her own
shoulder meant. Had A4 run into Olrox, too, at some point? Why had he branded her? Why had he branded A2 in the first place? What did it mean?

She decided she'd ask A4. “Uh… hey, Four?”

The skirt shifted, exposing for an instant more of A4’s naked hip, and A2 suddenly found herself unable to string together a coherent thought. A trickle of spit dripped down her chin.

“Yes, A2? Something wrong?” A4 asked, a coy, coquettish smile spreading across her face and a twinkle lighting up her eyes.

“Uh… leg.”

“Huh?”

A2 licked her lips and wiped the drool off her chin with her arm. “I-I mean, no, nothing’s wrong.” She felt so hot that she feared she’d start to melt any minute now. What was Four doing to her? The last time she’d felt so mixed-up, so incoherent inside, she’d been in the middle of turning into a wolf.

A4 giggled and pulled A2 along until they reached the repair facility. Pascal was still there, his metal claws moving with grace and precision across the exposed innards of Anemone’s chassis. His head turned as the two of them approached.

“Oh, hello, A2, A4,” he said, pulling away from Anemone. She was lying so still on the table that she might as well have been dead. “A2, I hope you are feeling… better?”

“Mostly.” A2 looked Anemone’s wrecked body up and down. With her chassis opened up like this, she looked even worse; A2 felt a pang of guilt as she reminded herself that she had done this.

“I’ve deactivated her for now,” Pascal said. “I need to replace the damaged portions of her two-tier coolant system. The air-cooling mechanisms are mostly still functional, save for some parts in the chest cavity that have been unduly stressed. The real damage is to the subdermal coolant channels. Once the cooling systems are repaired and we’ve replenished the fluid she’s lost, she’ll be fine.”

A2 sighed. Most of Pascal’s explanation had given her a slight headache, but she still felt relieved to know that Anemone would be okay. “Thank you, Pascal. It was wrong of me to distrust you.”

“I understand your earlier reaction, A2. I don’t blame you at all. After seven thousand years of war between our peoples, I wouldn’t trust me, either.”

What a pushover.

A2 stepped closer to the operating table and laid her hand on Anemone’s forehead, brushing aside her braided black hair. She knew the disgraced commander couldn’t hear her, and yet she felt compelled to say something.

But she didn’t know what to say. She’d already apologized to Anemone, but it didn’t feel like enough. But what could she say that meant more than ‘I’m sorry?’

A2 jerked her hand back as Anemone’s arm shot up and her cold fingers clamped around her wrist. Her eyes were still closed, not a single mechanism in the exposed interior of her chassis stirring, yet somehow she had moved. A2 tried to pull her hand away, but Anemone’s fingers dug in tighter, burying themselves in her flesh. Startled by the spasm, Pascal and A4 both yelped in surprise and lurched backward.
“A- Anemone?” A2 gasped.

With jerky, halting movements, as though every part of her lifeless body resisted every centimeter it moved, Anemone sat up, turned her head, and raised her other arm, splaying her fingers out and plunging them into the most blood-soaked part of her chassis to coat her fingertips like paintbrushes in oily red coolant. She smeared the blood on the table, leaving four parallel streaks across its surface as she rolled off the table and onto the floor.

As soon as she hit the floor, Anemone’s lifeless body went limp and her fingers uncurled from around A2’s wrist, falling and flopping at her feet; she lay facedown and utterly motionless on the floor. No one spoke a word; a heavy, oppressive, and fraught silence filled the repair facility.

At last, A2 willed herself into action and crouched down to lift Anemone back onto the table. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of three symbols scrawled in blood on the floor under the operating table:

\[4 \neq 4\]

“I th-think you upset her,” A4 stammered, grabbing A2 by the arm and pulling her away. “Pascal, we’re so sorry. A2 didn’t mean to…”

Pascal was still dumbfounded, his optical sensors flickering with surprise and confusion. At last, he spoke. “That was… very strange. But I do not think you or A2 were responsible at all. Perhaps there is an emergency activation trigger within her chassis that I tripped by mistake…”

“Is she okay?” A2 asked, still reeling.

“I think she will be okay.” Pascal leaned in and picked up his tools. “At any rate, I will endeavor to be much more careful from here on out.”

“We should give Anemone some space,” A4 told A2, pulling her aside.

A2 didn’t want to leave. She didn’t want Anemone’s cold and lifeless body to lie there without her after everything the two of them had suffered through today. And yet, just as she felt responsible for tearing everything Anemone had held dear away from her, so too did she feel as though she had somehow caused that unexplainable spasm, no matter what Pascal said.

Wracked with turmoil, she turned tail and ran.

Well into the late afternoon, Jackass stewed in her workshop. She didn’t have the presence of mind to continue her work—neither her job nor her hobbies. It was too wet out to set anything on fire. She didn’t have anyone to confide in. Her line of communication with White wasn’t exactly by-the-books, and the only reason she hadn’t gotten a stern rap on the knuckles about it was because White had enjoyed talking to her and Anemone had been sympathetic to her, so she had no one to complain to about how much of an asshole White was being.

After this, White would probably raise hell over Jackass’ unauthorized direct line to her office just out of spite.

So much for loyalty. So much for friendship.

So much for love.

Jackass lay on her cot, tablet in hand, still poring over her last—and probably last altogether—
conversation with White. The heavy, hollow pit in her stomach ached hard enough to sting.

Out of the both of them, how was it that Jackass had turned out to be the one with moral fiber?

With a heavy sigh, she set down her tablet and dragged herself off her cot, trudged over to her workbench, and rummaged through her stuff, pulling out the first bottle of drinkable-looking liquid she could find. She uncapped the bottle, brought it to her lips, and felt a sharp, musty odor stab at her nostrils hard enough to make her eyes water.

She took a look at the label. Isopropyl alcohol. Not quite the IPA she was in the mood for.

Jackass was angry and lovelorn, but it would take a few more shitty days in a row before she’d be desperate enough to drink solvent. With a frustrated groan, she put the cap back on and tossed the bottle into the corner.

The twins made booze. Maybe they had some. And maybe they’d be willing to sell—

Jackass checked her account balance. Yikes. Had her last resupply of raw materials for research really cost that much?

Maybe they’d take pity on her and give her some for an IOU.

The door swung open, squealing on its rainwater-rusted hinges as the camp’s new interim leader stomped through. “It’s me, Commander Laurel. Miss Jack… ass? I presume?”

Thankful she had her back turned, Jackass took the opportunity to roll her eyes. “It’s a type of clover.”

“How. Yes. I’ll keep that in mind. I—Good heavens, you live like this?”

Jackass turned around to see her new boss squinting in disgust at her décor. Gingerly, cringing and wincing as he did so, Laurel prodded at one of the limbs hanging from the ceiling. It started to gently swing.

“You’re, er…” He cleared his throat. “Sorry. I wasn’t aware you were in engineering. The camp manifest has you down as Information Analysis Officer for this region.”

“Yeah, I am. This is just a hobby.”

Laurel peeked at a crate covered by a ragged canvas tarp, lifting up the tarp. “Er… and these explosives?”

“Hobby.”

“Okay. Well, here’s just a little thought. Maybe you’d focus more on your work if your workspace were less oriented to your hobbies and more toward your duties.”

If this was a performance review, Jackass was certainly not in the mood. She crossed her arms. “Your point?” she asked testily.

“Oh, no point.” Laurel shook his head and flashed an awkward smile. “Just small talk. Although I hope you take my advice to heart.”

“I’m kind of, uh, busy,” Jackass said, hastily swiping her tablet from her cot and clearing away her conversation with White before Laurel could catch sight of it. She had the feeling this guy wasn’t as willing to look the other way as Anemone had been. “Not really in the mood for small talk.
Sorry."

“I’m not just here for small talk. I want to ask you some questions about Commander Anemone.”

Jackass tensed up. She wasn’t going to rat out Anemone. Someone here had to stand up for what was right around here, and if it had to be her, then so be it. Besides, Laurel had hardly endeared himself to her. “Yeah?” she answered, as laconic as she could be.

“Had she been acting strange, in your opinion, over the past week… or two… or three?”

“Strange?” She shook her head. “No.”

“Apprehensive? Worried?”

“No more so than usual.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“If you haven’t noticed, this camp is surrounded by machine-occupied territory.”

“Yes. I know. Mine is, too.”

“So, of course, she was a little worried.”

“I suppose. So, compared to her baseline levels of anxiety…” Laurel held up his hands. “Was she a little more… a little less… right in the center…?”

“I haven’t noticed anything, Laurel.”

“Commander Laurel.”

This guy was asking for a middle finger shoved up his nose.

“What are these questions about?” Jackass huffed.

“I think I might have misjudged Anemone’s situation,” Laurel said. “I—” He backed into one of Jackass’ dismantled android bodies hanging from the ceiling, jostling it, and let out a yelp. The smattering of parts dangling in the air swung and clattered like an ugly bunch of wind chimes.

He sputtered and gasped as he caught his breath. “Jackass, I will double your stipend if you get rid of this garbage and clean this place up by the end of the day!”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll get right on that,” Jackass muttered under her breath, confident that she would not get right on that.

“Anyway,” Laurel said, scratching at the loose stitching on his face, “our original preconception, based on Commander White’s tip-off, was that Anemone had been sheltering A2, a known fugitive, which I shouldn’t need to remind you is a severe offense.”

Jackass nodded along.

“But seeing how A2 behaved when we confronted Anemone, I’m starting to wonder if perhaps…” Laurel’s eyes narrowed. “Anemone was being coerced into helping her.”

“You think A2 was holding her hostage?”
He nodded. “And that changes everything. We can’t hold her accountable for something she did under such duress—or, well, at least, not as accountable.”

“So you’re saying she’s innocent?” Jackass was shocked. This was a twist she hadn’t expected. If Laurel could convince the top brass that his theory was right, Anemone could come back. Everything would go back to normal!

But to do that, she’d have to corroborate his story. And that meant saying that Anemone hadn’t been A2’s friend, but her victim…

She held her forehead in her hand. “Oh, god, Anemone’s gonna hate me for this,” she mumbled. “I think,” she said, “you, uh… might be onto something, Commander Laurel.”

Laurel closed his eyes and let out a long, relieved sigh, his tensely-hunched shoulders falling. “I knew it. I knew she couldn’t have gone rogue.” He took her by the arm and all but pulled her out of the workshop. “Come with me. I need you to record a statement backing up my theory. Anything you can say that will demonstrate that A2 is holding her against her will…”

“Uh… yeah, sure.”

“And can you think of any places A2 might have taken her?” Laurel asked. “I’ll want to get a rescue operation online as soon as we get the green light for it.”

He and Jackass passed by a YoRHa unit conversing with her pod.

“Analysis: Unit 6E’s black box signal still cannot be detected. Proposal: Unit 7E should send a signal to the Bunker to restore Unit 6E from her latest backup.”

“It’s only been a few hours. Pull up her most recent known location…”

“Excuse me,” Laurel interrupted. “7E, right?”

7E turned away from her pod, looking vaguely annoyed. Jackass could relate. “Yes?”

“How would you like to participate in a search and rescue operation?”

7E turned back to her pod to peruse the map it had projected. “Sorry. Not my purview.”

Undeterred and undaunted, Laurel grinned. “But terminating A2 is, I’m assuming?”

7E cocked her head.

“Analysis: Unit 6E’s black box signal was last detected in the area where she and Unit 7E encountered the rogue Unit A2. Hypothesis: Unit A2 terminated Unit 6E.”

“Shh.” 7E lightly pushed her pod aside. “I’m listening.”

A2 finally found a place to be alone in the highest branches of the oak tree that formed the village’s hub. Far away from cavorting machines down below, far away from Pascal and his eternally-accommodating manner, far away from Anemone.

Far away from her failure.

Maybe she would stay that way. Vanish into the forest. Become a legend again, a monster stalking the wilds, spoken of only in hushed whispers, glimpsed only by her pursuers. It was where she
belonged, what she deserved—to be out there, alone.

A2 imagined how much better things would be right now if Anemone hadn’t taken her in, if Anemone had been smart and had only cared about herself. She couldn’t undo what had happened today, or the day before that, or the day before that, but she could make things right starting today.

Anemone deserved better than a life saddled with her. She would be safe here with Pascal, but not if A2 stuck by her side and complicated things. At this point, even though she’d said otherwise, Anemone would surely be relieved to not have A2 in her life anymore. If any incident could compel that naive woman to put aside her sunny optimism and her foolish insistence on protecting her, it was this.

A2 had been right to think ‘I’m sorry’ wasn’t enough to say back there. She should have told Anemone ‘goodbye,’ too—now that she couldn’t insist otherwise.

She cried more than she’d cried in years over that revelation. Sobbed, wept, so hard and for so long that her chest ached and her throat burned. The only times she’d cried harder had been the first morning she’d woken up alone after her first and last mission and the first time she’d killed one of the assassins YoRHa sent after her. After those two times, she’d thought she’d used up all her tears.

She’d been so wrong.

As the tears stemmed their flow and the hollowness in her chest swelled, A2 lifted her head to the cloudy, pitch-black sky and let out a long, slow, mournful howl.

No answer.

She howled again. Only the echo of her own voice, hollow and insubstantial, responded to her outcry.

Of course, she couldn’t count on 64B to call back. That big idiot probably rightfully hated her for what she’d allowed to happen to 8B. For spewing that hypocritical nonsense over moving past the dead just before Four had popped up.

What had 8B been thinking? A2 couldn’t even take care of herself, let alone those two other hapless girls. As much as 22B looked like the reasonable one between the two of them, neither had any clue how to survive on their own.

“Number Two? Is that you?”

A2 coughed and caught her breath as A4 hoisted herself onto the branch, leaves rustling as she crept closer. “Uh… y-yeah,” she stammered, tripping over her words. “It’s, uh, s-something I do to relax.”

“You don’t sound relaxed,” A4 replied, reaching out and brushing a disheveled lock of white hair away from A2’s cheek. “You sound like a puppy that’s been kicked.”

“I just need to do it a few more times. Then I’ll feel better.”

A4 gave her a sympathetic smile and sat down beside her, kicking as her legs dangled off the side of the branch. “Would it help if I joined in?”

“I think I just want to be left alone.”
“Oh, come on, Two. You’ve been alone for three years!” A4 gave her a gentle shake and leaned closer, closing her eyes, pursing her lips, her head gently tilting as she prepared to—

An icy jolt ran down A2’s spine. “Four, please.” She gave A4 a firm, yet gentle shove backward. “I’m just going through a lot. I’ll be fine later.”

Crestfallen, A4 pulled back and bowed her head, folding her hands in her lap. “Two… you can push anyone else away, but… me? Really?” Her voice cracked. “After we were both alone for so long?”

“It’s not like that. I work through emotional stuff better alone.”

“Let me howl with you once.”

“No.”

“Just once.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

A4 leaned in, resting one hand on A2’s thigh as she curled an errant lock of her hair around her finger. “Please?”

“No, I… I’m embarrassed by it,” A2 confessed, her cheeks burning as she tried not to think about the gentle pressure A4’s hand was exerting on her leg. She wasn’t sure how red her face was or whether A4 could see it at all in the dark. “I don’t want other people around me when I… I, uh…”

How was she supposed to explain to a normal person that ever since this morning, she’d been filled with the urge to howl at the sky and run around on all fours and lick people’s faces and it made it even harder to be around people than it normally was?

“Oh. I’m sorry.” A4 pulled back. “I was just so, so happy to find you, I… I just don’t want to let you out of my sight.”

Just like Anemone.

“Maybe you should get over that.” A2 pulled up her legs, tucking her knees in against her chest. “You’re gonna end up in some pretty fucked-up places if you stick with me. It’ll be you on that table next.”

“Come on. You and me, two badass YoRHa prototypes? There’s nothing the two of us can’t handle together.”

“Change your tune now and save me the trouble of waiting, A4,” A2 huffed. “Just let me run off and—”

“But Two, we just got to know each other again—I know you were happy to see me again!”

“Just let me run off and if I die, I die, but at least I won’t drag anyone else down with me!”

A2’s outburst was loud enough to rustle the leaves.
“Two…” A4 laid a hand on A2’s shoulder. “I followed you to the end once. I’d do it again. You’re worth following.”

A2 bowed her head, sniffling as she choked on the lump in her throat. “F-Four…” she whimpered. “Please,” she whispered, her voice dropping to a hoarse squeak, “you…”

A4 leaned in closer, and once more, A2 felt a hazy, cloudy warmth fill the void in her chest. Her keen eyes traced the faint details of A4’s face in the darkness, the glint in her eyes, the twin wet streaks running down her cheeks.

“Deep down,” A4 said, “beneath the pain, beneath the scar tissue, you’re still the Two I followed into battle, and no matter what happens, I will always, always love you for that…”

A2 closed her eyes as she felt the soft, wet, oddly salty texture of A4’s lips as they locked against hers. The scent of sea salt, brine, and rosemary filled her nostrils. Something burned inside her, starting in her chest around her black box and sinking downward as she leaned in, her fingers clutching at the rough bark beneath her, a muffled moan struggling to force its way out of her mouth. A2 felt a puff of breath on her cheek from A4’s nostrils as the two of them remained connected. A4’s hand slid down to her waist, then to her hip, then to her thigh, slipping beneath the warm and fresh fabric of her dress to caress her bare skin.

A2 let out a muffled gasp. Her head was too hazy, too heavy for her to think clearly, but still she managed to ask herself…

How could she possibly have wanted to be alone when Four was here to give her everything she needed?

A4 grew more forceful, leaning in harder, pushing A2 back. Her tongue parted A2’s lips and probed her mouth, curiously brushing against A2’s tongue, weaving around it; their teeth clinked together. A2 squirmed and curled up tighter, one hand still digging into the branch to keep herself steady, the other threading its way into A4’s ponytail and brushing against her scalp, her fingers worming their way into curled and knotted wisps of hair. She had no idea what to do, what she should be doing, only that she wanted more of whatever Four was doing to her. And Four, to her delight, seemed all too happy to oblige her unspoken wish…

Another icy jolt pierced A2’s back, tearing down her spine; her limbs spasmed; inadvertently, she all but threw A4 off of her and lost her balance. She toppled over and fell from the branch. Shadows on shadows spun around her, leaves hissing and rustling as she fell through them and disturbed their rest, smaller branches bending and cracking against her back and waist as she tumbled through the air.

She hit the wooden walkway that circled the tree trunk with enough force to knock the wind out of her. The sensitive wounds in her leg smarted.

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“Two? Two, are you all right?”

A2 blinked and wrinkled her brow as she pulled herself up to her hands and knees. Four sounded a lot closer to her than she should have been.

She looked up and to her surprise saw Four staring down at her, her face twisted in a mortified expression. Her wet cheeks glistened in the light; the skin around her watery eyes was puffy and red. The warm lamps that lit up the village framed her head like a halo, light shining through her snowy hair. The light also seemed to shine through her skin and clothes.
“Two,” she gasped with a hushed and shaking voice, her chest heaving with exhaustion and worry, “Please tell me you can—”

And as suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished.

“Two! Two, are you okay?”

A4 leaped down from her perch, navigating the lower branches with catlike grace until she reached the walkway. She rushed to A2’s side and helped her up. “I—I’m so, so, so sorry, Two,” she babbled, “I—I must’ve g-gotten carried away and pushed you, I—You’re not hurt, are you?”

“N-No, no, I’m fine,” A2 wheezed, gingerly rubbing her aching stomach. “I’ve had worse falls.”

“You look pale. Like you’ve seen a ghost.”

A2 shook her head. “It was nothing. Just, uh…”

A4 cocked her head. Her face turned ashen, her brow furrowing with concern.

“It’s just a glitch,” A2 assured her. “Like those memories I made up of you dying. Just some messed-up data playing tricks on me.” It wasn’t like it could have been anything else. Four was standing right here beside her, after all.

A4 smiled. “I’m sure it’ll go away once you get used to having me around.”

“Yeah.” A2 nodded. “Yeah, I think… I think it will. So, um, what we were doing up there…”

A4’s smile turned coyer, her lips curling slyly to show a tantalizing sliver of her teeth. “Yeeeves?”

“I’m, uh… we could maybe do more of it?”

“Oh, Two…” A4 grabbed her by the shoulders, her grin widening. “All you have to do is ask.”

A2 felt her face, her chest, and her everything else start burning.

“But,” A4 said, glancing around, “maybe we could go somewhere a little less… public?”

A2 looked to her left and right, noticed a crowd of machines gathering on either side of the two of them, and agreed.

By the time she and A4 returned to the wooden hut they’d been allowed to spend the night in, A2 was starting to feel queasy and, sadly, not in the mood for the exciting things A4 could make her feel.

She glanced out the window. The sky was still cloudy, but she could tell that it was getting late. The moon had always crept up on her before… but this time, she felt a growing dread build up inside her, as though she were becoming more attuned to the natural cycle surrounding her transformation.

“Is… uh, is the moon coming out soon?” she asked A4.

“The moon?” A4 put her hand on her chin. “Hmm… yeah, soon, probably. But it looks pretty cloudy outside. Too bad—it’d be nice to go moongazing with you, Two,” she said, smiling.

A2 felt even warmer. “M-Maybe tomorrow. I’m gonna go, uh… do something. Uh. Alone.”
“But we just got here!” A4 protested, wrapping her arms around her and pressing herself tightly against her. She slithered around her like a serpent.

“I just remembered, uh, I always do this thing alone before I go to bed. Alone. It’s very important.”

“Why don’t we do it alone together?”

“Four…”

“Oh, is this like the howling thing again?” A4 asked.

“Uh… Um, I’m just…” A2 felt her forehead growing hotter. It was going to happen soon. She could feel her fur bristling under her skin, the tingling running from the tips of her ears to the tip of the tail she didn’t have (yet). This was most definitely not something she was comfortable sharing with A4—if her transformation was as gruesome to watch as it was to feel, A4 would be rightfully horrified. She couldn’t put her through that…

Her nose started to itch.

“Hey,” A4 noted, reaching out and rubbing her finger against the tip of A2’s nose, “There’s some, uh, dirt, I think? On your nose…”

The brand on her shoulder began to throb and burn, knifelike pangs stabbing into her flesh and twisting. Gritting her teeth as she tried to hide the sudden jolt of pain, A2 tried to pull herself away. “I—I have to go!”

“Stay here,” A4 pleaded, reaching out and grabbing her by the wrist. “Please, Two, it’s been so long…” She laid her hands on A2’s shoulders, her big blue eyes meeting A2’s. “Three years I spent trying to find anyone who survived, and I don’t just find anyone—I find you…”

“I—” A2 choked up. She felt the same way. She didn’t want to run away from Four, but still… “I have to go. I-I’m sorry, I need privacy—”

A4 wrapped her arms around her in a crushing grip. “We have privacy. Right here…”

A2 felt something inside her crack and a leaden pressure squeezing at the back of her nose, behind her eyes. She had to get away—

She pushed A4 off of her, staggering backward as her joints began to crack and twist, fire running through her flesh as her muscles unspooled from her chassis. A sharp cry of pain tore itself from her throat as she lost her balance and fell to the floor. “N-Number Four, run—you c-can’t”—Her tongue slipped across loosening teeth, fangs pushing them out of her mouth. “You can’t s-see me like…”

A warm, soft hand sank into the fur that had begun to sprout on her cheek. “Oh, Number Two…”

A2 gurgled and choked, spitting out her teeth as she shrank away from A4’s touch. She tried to pull herself away, to tear herself free, to escape somewhere cold and dark and private, a place where A4 couldn’t watch powerlessly as her body ripped itself apart and rebuilt itself into an animal, a monster…

She didn’t want Four to see her like this. Not like—

Four’s hands slid under her chin, along her jaw, and her fingers began to stroke the backs of her ears.
The agony faded.

“Shh, shh… Don’t be afraid.”

It was like a switch had been flipped. Her muscles stopped tearing, her nerves stopped screaming, her bones stopped crumbling into rust. A2 sank to the floor, panting for breath, as Four’s fingers continued to worm their way through her fur. The changes were still running their course, but it all felt—different. Like her body was soft clay being molded by a gentle hand, not flesh being ripped asunder. As though Four was guiding her, shaping her; dulling all the pain that ran deep into her chassis into warm, throbbing ripples that almost felt good…

A4 scratched under her chin. “Two? Are you all right?” Her voice was syrupy in its sweetness, cloying. Hearing it was like being wrapped in a warm, heavy blanket.

“F-Four,” A2 moaned, her tongue slipping limply across the row of fangs lining her mouth as she struggled to speak. “Why…”

Why did this, after nearly two weeks of all this pain and humiliation she’d had to endure night after night, did it feel so wonderful this time? How could this ordeal become so blissful? How could it be that—that as she felt her face, her ears, her fingers and toes all reshape themselves; felt thick fur pushing against the confines of her clothes; felt her tail sweep like the end of a broom, back and forth, across the floor as it sprouted from her spine—that a part of her never wanted it to end?

“Why’s it… f-feel so good?” she mumbled.

“Because I’m here with you.” A4 peeled away her clothes, letting the cool night air wash over her fur. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“You… no… noh ‘fray…”

A4 scratched her forehead. “Use your words.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“I’ve seen some strange things these past three years,” A4 assured her, burying her hands in her fur and raking her fingertips across her skin. A2 whined and curled up, resting her head in her lap as the tension and pain ebbed from her aching muscles like blood draining from a fresh kill. “Maybe I’ll tell you about some of them.”

A4’s scent was stronger now, almost overpowering as it filled A2’s nostrils, and on top of the familiar aroma of sea air and woody herbs, A2 caught the faint hint of another melange of scents: an earthy, almost metallic musky odor mingled with the faint scent of smoke and ash.

“What…” As usual, A2 had to struggle at first to sound out every word she wanted to speak. “What did you see?”

“Nothing half as incredible as you,” A4 said. Her arm curled under A2’s stomach and gently hoisted her up. “Can you stand?”

A2 nodded.

A4 helped her to her feet and pointed at a tarnished mirror that leaned against the far wall of the homely hut. “Look.”

“Ugh. Do I… have to?” A2 didn’t want to see what she looked like. If she was as ugly as the
transformation was painful, as she had tended to assume, then—

A4 fought to pull her along. A2 fought back.

With surprising strength, A4 dragged her in front of it, the stained and speckled surface of the mirror nearly touching the tip of A2’s snout. “Look.”

A2 looked at herself in the mirror and for the first time, she saw what her transformed face looked like. A sleek muzzle capped with a glistening, pebbly black nose, a pink tongue draped over rows of ivory fangs; brilliant blue eyes shining like jewels against the forest of her snow-white fur; and long and pointed ears protruding from her shaggy mane. The shape of her body was familiar, more or less, underneath her fur. Her tail started to sway back and forth behind her, swishing from her left to her right, as she watched herself lift her hand and trace with her clawed fingers the contours of her snout.

“You’re so cute,” A4 breathed, slinking behind A2 and laying her hands on her shoulders, burrowing them into her fur. A2 expected to wince in pain, but the bullet wound in her shoulder had vanished, as had the injuries to her arm and leg. Her ear twitched and flicked as A4’s breath disturbed it.

“I-I am?”

“More than that. You’re gorgeous.”

“I’m…” A2 ran her clawed fingers through her own fur, considering for the first time in her life that she actually might be. “Really?”

She looked closer at herself in the mirror, then to A4’s reflection, then back to her own reflection, then to hers, then to A4’s, then to hers. Something wasn’t right here, no matter what A4 told her. “Four…”

“Yes?” A4 pursed her lips worryingly. “What’s the matter?”

Alucard had said that the transformation grew less severe with the waning of the moon, and the past eight or so days had so far proven him correct. But tonight, her body hadn’t gotten any less wolfish. It was dismaying. Even if she was as gorgeous as A4 said, this wasn’t exactly a shape she wanted to stick with. She’d been looking forward to the new moon, the night when she wouldn’t transform at all, to at least feel normal for one night out of the month. A2 guessed even know-it-all humans didn’t actually know it all.

“It’s nothing. Just…” She leaned back and rested her head on A4’s collar. “I didn’t choose this.”

“But you wear it pretty well!” Her eyes lighting up, A4 yanked A2’s hand away and started to squeeze the rough, hairless patches of pink-and-black skin on her palm and the tips of her fingers. “And you have paw pads!”

A2 nearly bit her own tongue as she tried to liberate her hand from A4’s grip. Her tail began to wag even faster. “F-Four, stop, that—that tickles!”

“You’re even prettier as a wolf! No fair!”

Letting out a manic bark of laughter, A2 collapsed on top of A4, pinning her to the floor; before she could stop herself, she dragged her tongue across A4’s cheek.
A4 laughed. With an almost-sinister grin, she buried both hands into the fine, thick fur that blanketed A2’s chest, her fingers squeezing and kneading the soft, sensitive flesh underneath. “And all this fluff really pads out your figure!”

“Four!” A2 yelped, nearly leaping to her feet. Since when had A4 been so handsy?

Then again, A2 had changed a lot since they’d last seen each other, too…

“Not that you needed it.” A4 slid her hands down to A2’s hips, her fingertips igniting electric tingles across her skin as they raked through her furry hide.

A2 panted for breath, her skin burning, her senses overwhelmed, her systems running haywire. She was so excited, so filled with an indescribable heat, that she didn’t even feel hungry like she usually did. She didn’t know what she wanted to do to A4, but whatever it was, she wanted to do it badly.

And then with renewed vengeance, as though infuriated that A2’s exploding feelings had drowned them out, the cramps hit her—hit hard enough to wrest her away from A4, to pull her across the floor as if they had a hook in the scruff of her neck.

“A2! What’s wrong?” A4 gasped, rushing to her side.

A2 clutched at her stomach, her claws digging into her flesh. “Need food,” she gasped. Static and dancing spots of lights swirled through her vision.

“Wh—What do you eat?” A4 asked, her eyes wide, panic written all over her round, soft face. “I’ll get it for you!”

“Raw meat!”

A4 ruffled her fur, planted a kiss on her forehead, and stood up. “I’ll be right back!” she shouted out as she bolted out the door.

A2 hardly needed to close her eyes before everything faded to black. An instant later, she felt the heavy, overwhelming scent of fresh blood fill her nostrils and cracked open her eyes to see a red, sopping wet mass of meat lying on the floor in front of her.

Springing into action, she wolfed it down, tearing into the lean, gamy meat with ravenous energy, muscle and tendons tearing between her fangs, blood staining her muzzle and slicking her fur into red spikes. Within what felt like seconds, she’d eaten all of it save for the gristle she couldn’t chew.

A4 hacked another chunk of meat off the bloody, ripped-apart deer she’d dragged into the room and tossed it over to A2. “Is it good?”

A2 kept eating. It was.

With a satisfied smile, A4 cut another piece and tossed it into the air; A2 snapped it up in her jaws before it hit the floor and swallowed it whole.

A4 laughed. “Are you gonna eat the whole thing?”

A2 swallowed and cleared her throat. “Probably,” she replied.

“I don’t know how to cut this thing up properly,” A4 said, opening up the deer’s flank and cutting out more meat. “Humans had butchers who knew all that stuff, right? I wonder if any of the machines here have that kind of Old World knowledge…”
“Don’t bother. I got this,” A2 said before she buried her snout in the carcass’ side.

A4 sat back and watched. “How does it taste?”

Still occupied with her dinner, A2 raised her hand and gave a thumbs-up. “Mmnrgh.”

A4 smiled, then leaned in and cut out a strand of flesh about the size of her finger. She raised the dripping morsel over her head and lowered it into her mouth. A2 watched her chew it, expecting to see her jaws futilely churning up and down as her flat, ill-suited teeth struggled to grind the tough deer meat down to a paste. Instead, she made just as short work of it as A2 had. Blood spilled from between her lips and trickled down her chin, oddly unnervingly, as she casually swallowed the morsel.

A4 licked her lips, wiped the blood off her chin onto the side of her knuckle, and then licked the blood off her hand. “I think I’d prefer it roasted,” she said, her reddened teeth glistening as she grinned.

By the time A2’s stomach was full, she was beginning to feel fatigued; she and A4 settled into bed, although “bed” was a bit generous. The machine that lived in this little hut had no need for any sort of mattress, pillow, or blanket; all it had was a rough wooden bedframe that managed to be even less comfortable than the floor.

So the floor would have to do.

As she drifted off, A2 recalled the cryptic message Anemone had left. *Four is not equal to four.* What did it mean?

Maybe Anemone had noticed how much A4 had changed over the past four years. But A2 had changed, too. She had just as much of a right to say that A4 wasn’t herself as she could say that A2 wasn’t herself anymore.

So why the big deal over “four is not four?” And why would Anemone write it? And how could she have written it? She was deactivated. It literally wasn’t physically possible for her to move, but somehow…

It was probably nothing, A2 decided, as she curled up closer to A4 and nestled her head against her chest. She’d never had a pillow so soft as Four’s breasts, never a bed so comfortable as Four’s body, never a blanket as warm as the knowledge that she and Four were together again. How could she hold any troubling thoughts in her head with the woman she loved at her side?

Eve had had an exhausting day. Playing with the machine children had been… bittersweet. They weren’t like Adam. Nothing could fill that aching void in his system. But it had been nice to exercise, to at least try to enjoy himself. His heart hadn’t been in it at first, but it hadn’t taken long before he’d started to feel more at home with these strange, immature machines.

They reminded him of himself. What did that mean? *Was* he immature, too? Did that make him a child? Since he was only a few minutes younger than Adam, did that make him a child, too?

Eve liked this place, he decided. These machines weren’t part of the network, but he still felt some kind of connection to them—something nebulous, something he couldn’t put into words. It was a place that he felt shouldn’t exist, but was glad that it did.

Still, it would be nice if Adam were here, too. He and Eve belonged together.
If he was going to drag his brother back from Dracula, he would need to be stronger. He would need to be stronger than Adam, he decided as he made his way back up to Pascal’s home. He didn’t know how to do that, but he would start trying tomorrow.

He rubbed the black tattoo encircling his left arm. It was starting to itch. It might have been his imagination, but there seemed to be more of it than there had been before—it extended from his hand halfway up his bicep now.

He heard something as he passed one of the huts nestled in the branches of the tree the village was built on—the sound of light, muted laughter. He stopped just short of the window and carefully peered in from the side.

A white-haired android was sitting on the floor next to the bloody carcass of an animal with a curled-up wolf on her lap. She seemed to be talking to somebody, but no one else was there.

“You have my condolences. That was a good trick you tried to pull.” The android smiled. It was a strangely Adam-esque smile, the smile he got when Eve brought him something interesting to take apart. “Sadly, you overestimated how, er… mentally acute your dear friend is. Better luck next time.”

Eve suddenly felt cold. The frame of the window shook, rattling the glass panes.

“Oh, I won’t do anything to hurt her, I can promise you that. I’m going to take her with me.” She raked her fingers through the wolf’s snowy fur.

An empty can lying on a shelf on the wall teetered and fell, banging against the mirror resting against the wall and putting a crack in its silvery surface. The can clattered hollowly to the floor.

The android let out a bright, disarmingly cute little laugh. “Oh, yes, I’ll bring her back to the Master and we’ll live together, Number Two and Number Four, for the rest of our days… and you? You’re going to watch!”

Hearing this strange android’s voice sent a shiver up his spine. Eve recalled how he’d felt when he’d first fought Dracula—that he had encountered something that made him feel smaller than he’d ever felt before. Something that compelled him to run from the house and its sinister occupant.

That was not an android… just as Dracula had not been a human.

There was something evil in this village.
Barrister's Gavotte

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Alucard has fun on the Bunker and makes a few new friends, while Jackass gets drunk and appoints herself as Anemone's attorney.

Chapter Notes

Jackass: "I move for a bad... court... thingy."
White: "You mean a mistrial?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hidden arenas scattered across the area were simultaneously the Resistance’s best- and worst-kept secret. Whoever wanted to know about them did; whoever didn’t know about them wouldn’t want to. What had started as holding cells for captured machine units pending interrogation and dismantling had become something much more... for lack of a better word, entertaining.

The machines’ handler watched the proceedings from the highest row of seats in the arena, far from the bubbling chorus of voices from the attendees of the latest gladiatorial bout. He hoped these next few machines put up a fight.

The crowds circling the shrapnel-laden pit booed and hissed as one of the two gates in the walls opened and a pair of battered machine lifeforms stumbled into the light under the none-too-gentle prodding of their handlers, kicking up plumes of dirt and sand. It was easier finding combatants now that so many machines were beginning to act so oddly—some didn’t even try to defend themselves when they were captured. All they did was scream. The downside, though, was that it wasn’t as fun to watch them die when they didn’t fight back... but only slightly less so.

The machines cowered in the center of the pit, trembling as their optical sensors flickered.

“PLEASE LET US GO,” one of them bleated with its harsh electronic voice.

The crowd’s jeers turned to cheers as the second gate opened; with a confident swagger, a YoRHa battler unit strode out, windmilling her arm; the spiked gauntlet encasing her hand crackled with electricity. She basked in the admiration of the crowd, flinging out her arms and dramatically bowing. Her pod bobbed in the air at her side. YoRHa field units especially loved this place. It gave them a golden opportunity to practice—and show off—their newest weapons, techniques, and pod programs. Scanners in particular loved to take control of machines and force them to battle each other.

“WE DON’T WANT TO HURT YOU,” one of the machines whined as the YoRHa unit began her assault. She danced around it, peppering it with blows, leaving dents and puncture wounds in its rusted and mangled hull.

One of the machine squatted on the ground and raised its spindly arms above its round head in a futile attempt to protect itself. “PLEASE DON’T KILL ME!” it cried out. The crowd booed at it;
wads of garbage thrown from the risers bounced off its hull.

The machines’ handler shuddered, but suppressed it. The machines could beg all they wanted for mercy, but everybody knew that their words were as empty as their souls. Machines didn’t think. Anything they said was just a random string of words with no inherent meaning. Their meaningless drivel was something he had to learn to ignore.

With the machines refusing to fight back, the YoRHa unit’s grandstanding and showboating was the only thing that made the match any fun. She drew out the machines’ torment, slicing them apart bit by bit with a flashy and elegant display of weaponry, tossing them into the air, juggling them, pulling them into the destructive dance she had choreographed.

At last, when the two machines collapsed and failed to rise up, the match ended to the sound of joyous screaming and applause. This charnel house was a place of catharsis, a place where every soldier who knew the pain of loss could exorcise their demons and process their grief vicariously through the triumphs of the arena’s champions.

After the android fighter had left the ring, one of the two machines, the more cowardly of the pair, crawled on its spindly elbows to the edge of the arena and slipped down into the dry moat ringing the pit. Its escape was short-lived; two other handlers ran over to it, dragged it out, and took it back to the holding cells to await its next fight.

As the audience began to leave their seats and file out of the arena, the machines’ handler made his way down to the holding cells to check up on his stock. Even though the machines were all in cages, the sight of their flickering amber optical sensors cutting through the gloom still unnerved him. The sound of screams echoed faintly in his head—the screams of his own men as they were ripped to shreds. It had been a long time ago. But those sounds would never leave him. They came back every time he came down here.

Before he’d found this place, those flashbacks had terrified him. Now, they galvanized him.

He made his way to the cage that held the cowardly machine from the latest fight. It huddled in the corner, trembling. Gaping holes had opened up in its hull, exposing its motors and wires. Before this machine could fight again, it would be repaired. The handler was grateful somebody else took care of that in his stead. Not in a million years could he lift so much as a wrench to aid a machine.

He crossed his arms. “What do you call that display out there?” he asked the cowering machine. “You’re pathetic. If it wasn’t for your opponent, people would have asked for their money back!”

He knew the machine couldn’t understand him, but it felt good to berate it, just as it felt good to watch stronger fighters than him rip these metal abominations to shreds. He was running a show here, a morality play, creating a world within these hidden walls where good always triumphed over evil. But in any performance, both actors needed to play their parts.

“I DON’T WANT TO FIGHT,” the machine croaked, curling up tighter. “I WANT TO GO HOME.”

The handler walked around the cage’s perimeter; the machine tried to scurry out of its corner as he neared it, but didn’t get far. The handler took out his canteen, uncapped it, and swept it through the air; a whip of water cracked against the cage’s bars and the machine’s broken hull. Water splashed against live wires; the machine moaned and writhed in pain as its circuits shorted.

“We don’t always get what we want,” he snarled, spilling more water onto the machine’s exposed innards and watching it suffer. “But next time, give me what I want. Okay?”
He left the holding cells, still in a foul mood, and ran headlong into something soft, yet firm—firm enough to knock him down the stairs and flat onto his ass.

No, someone. A YoRHa unit, by the looks of it. In fact, it was one he knew well. He’d recognize those big, curly pigtails anywhere. “Oh. S-Sixie, hello there.” He picked himself up off the floor. “Suppose you’re looking for something to fight, eh? Well, we’ve had our last fight for the evening, but if you like, I can sign you up for the first fight tomorrow morning…”

“Oh, I didn’t come down here to fight anything,” 6E said in her usual sickly syrupy-sweet voice, undoing her visor and letting it flutter to the floor as she took slow, precise steps down the stone staircase.

The machine handler found himself paralyzed; his legs crumpled beneath him and sent him falling unceremoniously to the floor once more. He couldn’t breathe; he could feel heat building up in his chest even as his coolant turned to ice in his veins and his fingertips went numb.

6E’s eyes blazed with a crimson light the likes of which he’d never seen before. “I came down here,” she said, licking her shimmering, cherry-red lips, “because you’re the only one left.”

She laid a cold hand on his shoulder and pulled down his collar; her mouth split open to reveal two shining fangs that poked into her bottom lip.

For an instant before her fangs sank into his flesh, the sight of the machines’ cold eyes flickering in the shadows was not the most terrifying thing in the room.

With painstaking slowness and precision, Devola sheared away the torn and burned skin from the fallen soldier’s face and plucked out fragments of the ceramic alloy chassis underneath, gently removing the shattered remnants of his nose and jaw. She inspected the extent of the damage. The jaw was twisted and deformed, the nose nearly completely blown off, fragments of teeth jutting out at odd angles, shrapnel embedded in the soldier’s eyes and shattering the delicate lenses. He certainly didn’t have a pretty face anymore, but the circuitry within his cranium seemed to have been untouched. The bullet hadn’t penetrated that deeply into his endoskeleton, most likely because his chin, teeth, and nose had soaked up enough of its momentum. That meant it’d be safe to reactivate him right now… although he’d probably prefer to be awakened once he had a face again.

Devola consulted the model number printed on his chassis. “Popola,” she called out over her shoulder, “can you check in the storeroom and see if we have any Model GWM-5852-VFY38 Revision Two heads lying around? This one’s got some bad structural damage.”

“Hmm?”

Devola glanced at Popola and saw her sitting cross-legged on top of A2’s tarp-covered chassis with her nose stuck in that dusty old spellbook of hers, oblivious to the outside world as she licked her finger and used it to carefully, daintily flip its worn and fragile pages.


“GWM,” Devola corrected, sounding a bit snippier than she meant to. “And it’s the VFY38 batch, revision number two.”
“All right.” Popola brushed some dust off her lap and stood up. “And what did you need? The skull?”

“Yeah. And make sure it’s revision two. The older ones had a totally different port layout. Oh, and I’ll need a new right elbow joint, too.”

“Anything else?”

Devola looked over to the other fallen soldier unceremoniously dumped on the ground in the camp’s open-air repair station. She had one more member of Laurel’s entourage after No-Face here to work on. “Lemme check.” She crouched beside the inert soldier, hoisted him onto an empty gurney next to No-Face, and rolled him onto his back. Three bullet holes so close to each other they were almost touching were embedded in the back of his neck. He’d need a few of the spinal columns in his neck replaced. She peeled away a patch of skin to read the model number. “I need, uh… cervical vertebrae C4, C5, and maybe C6 for model number GXV-2986-PPH.”

With nothing to do now but wait, Devola sat down next to the remains of A2’s body, lifting the tarp to glance at its battered and time-worn chassis. “What the hell were you thinking?” she muttered at it.

Bad enough she’d gone feral and torn her way through these soldiers. Worse that these were Laurel’s soldiers she’d massacred, and the ones Devola and Popola had repaired so far hadn’t even taken a second to thank the two of them. Neckless and No-Face probably wouldn’t, either. They knew her too well.

Today just couldn’t get any worse, could it?

“Hey, twins!” Jackass shouted out, barging past the scrap-metal fence separating the repair station from the rest of the camp.

Devola hastily covered A2’s body and stood over it in a protective stance. “Oh, hi, Jackass.”

Jackass gave her a dismissive wave of her hand. “Don’t worry. I’m not here about A2. Well, I guess I kinda am. In a roundabout way. What’s a girl gotta do around here to get some booze?”

Devola crossed her arms. “Booze, huh?” The great equalizer. People who treated her and Popola like dirt every other day of the week changed their tunes whenever the two of them made a new batch… and went right back to business as usual as soon as the last batch ran out. “Popola, you haven’t started any batches, have you?”

“Actually, I started some this morning,” Popola replied. She smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I wanted to keep it a surprise…”

Jackass perked up. “Can I have some?”

“It hasn’t even been twelve hours,” Devola said. “The alcohol by volume of the batch probably isn’t even five percent yet.”

“Actually, I think it’s done,” Popola said, smiling mysteriously.

Distracted for a moment from her work, Devola furrowed her brow. “What? How?”

With a devious wink and a sly grin, Popola surreptitiously pointed at the spellbook. “Trade secret.”

Jackass threw her head back and sighed. “Oh, thank god. I almost drank fucking isopropyl alcohol
today.” She sheepishly dragged her heel in the mud. “I’m a little strapped for cash right now, but I swear I’ll pay you back for a drink or two tonight.”

“Oh, we’ll work something out,” Popola assured her. “C’mon, I’ll show you around the distillery.”

“Don’t,” Devola cautioned her. Alcohol was flammable, after all, and Jackass was a notorious fire hazard.

As Popola ran off to collect the fruits of her labors, Jackass leaned against the fence, letting loose a frustrated sigh.

“You seem pretty desperate,” Devola noted.

“Okay, so, this has been the worst day of my life,” Jackass said, pouting, “and I’d like to take the edge off. Just a little bit.”

“You, too, huh?”

“You, too, huh?” Jackass repeated derisively, shaking her head. “Your day couldn’t possibly be worse than mine. This Laurel jerk’s got it out for me!” She shoved her tablet in Devola’s face. “Take a look at this!”

Devola examined the spreadsheet on the screen. 0600 hours, Army of Humanity High Command meeting. 0700 hours, review document 046925C. 0900 hours, staff meeting. 1250 hours, review document 293450X. 1450 hours, mid-afternoon break. 1500 hours, staff meeting…

“Looks like a busy schedule,” she said.

“Notice anything, uh, unusual about it?” Jackass asked, fuming. She clenched her fist.

Popola peered at the spreadsheet over Devola’s shoulder. “He’s got you reviewing documents all day…”

“Exactly! And if someone asks me for help blowing stuff up or setting up some mods, I’m supposed to tell them it’s ‘not my department’ and turn ‘em away! And a half-hour break’s all I get…”

“Oh, it can’t be that…” Devola scrolled down to the bottom of the spreadsheet. 1700 hours, review document 0496X. 1900 hours, compile daily report. 2150 hours, rest mode. 0600 hours, review document 45046H… “Bad. That’s bad.”

“Everyone’s getting these schedules. He’s gonna micromanage us to death by the end of the week,” Jackass huffed, hunching her shoulders and crossing her arms. “You know Opuntia? The weapons salesman? He’s got a quota. Twenty thousand G in sales a day or he gets a performance review! Two performance reviews in a week and he gets ‘let go!’ What the hell does that mean? Let go to where?”

“Huh. Popola and I haven’t gotten schedules yet,” Devola said. Somehow, that felt worse of an omen than getting an unreasonable schedule would have been.

“Just you fucking wait.” Jackass buried her fingers in her lank, greasy hair and glanced over at A2’s hidden remains. “Fuck. A2, what did you do?”

Popola hurried back into the repair station, hopping over the fence with a pair of canteens dangling from a strap around her neck. “Here you go!” she chirped, pulling one of the canteens free and
handing it to Jackass, who swiped it greedily and uncapped it with such gusto she nearly dropped it. “Dev, I couldn’t find any parts for GWM-5852, but I got those vertebrae like you asked for.” She tossed Devola a burlap bag full of parts.

“Guess No-Face is gonna stay faceless,” Devola muttered, taking the bag over to Neckless and rolling him onto his back. She took a scalpel to the back of his neck and made a slit in his skin, exposing the bullet-riddled spinal segments. She’d been right to ask for C6—that one had born the brunt of the damage; the cables that ran through it and connected the soldier’s brain to his motor systems had all but disintegrated.

Devola finished installing the new spinal segments, relinked the severed cable segments, and patched up her patient’s neck, then rolled him onto his back and opened up his chest to reconnect his power supply. She pulled her hand free and sealed up his chest cavity just as the soldier’s innards whirred to life, his eyelids fluttering as his chest began to rise and fall.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to run a data consistency check first?” Jackass pointed out.

“Hey, don’t you have a couple androids to go make a centaur out of?” Devola retorted. The soldier opened his eyes and focused his gaze on Devola, a flash of recognition and shock fluttering across his face. Devola felt a chill run up her own spine. Among androids, faces were reused with reckless abandon, but nevertheless, this one…

“Where am I?” he asked.

“The repair station. I just replaced your broken spinal columns.”

The soldier lifted his head and rubbed the back of his neck, scratching at the edges of the patch sealing the incision.


He looked straight through her. “Oh, it’s you. How’s the leg?”

Devola’s breath caught in her throat; a familiar twinge ran through her calf, remembering where skin and metal had been sliced open, remembering the gentle pressure of tight bandages wrapped around it, remembering the regular ache of step after limping step through the slippery sands of the desert…

“It’s f-fine,” she stammered as the soldier slid off the gurney and stood up. “My leg’s fine.”

“Good to know,” he said, a nebulous malice Devola couldn’t put into words oozing from his voice. Or was she just imagining it? Devola glanced over at Jackass just to see her reaction, hoping for some validation, some confirmation that it wasn’t all in her head. No. She wasn’t even paying attention—she had her nose buried in her tablet.

Popola, though—though she hid it well, the horror and recognition gleaming in her eyes reassured Devola, in a twisted way, that what she was feeling was the truth.

“Take it easy,” the soldier added, resting too heavy a hand on Devola’s shoulder. The pressure filled her whole body, sinking into her head like molten lead pulled into her skull. His words felt less like a friendly platitude and more like a warning—an implicit *don’t cause trouble, or else* ringing in Devola’s ears, inaudible to anybody else like a dogwhistle.

“Thanks,” Devola squeaked as the soldier took his leave and walked past her and Jackass back into
Jackass loudly cleared her throat. “You’re welcome,” she sardonically called out behind him. “You know that guy?”

Devola nodded. “Wish I didn’t.”

“So is everyone from Laurel’s camp an asshole?” Jackass asked. She gasped, her eyes widening as her brain processed what she’d seen. “Wait, you two are from Laurel’s camp?”

“Yeah.”

“I can see why you left,” she scoffed. “Was he this much of a micromanager back then, too?”

“No,” Devola answered, still too shaken to say much more than a word or two at a time.

“He was pretty laissez-faire when we knew him,” Popola said. “Something must’ve happened after we left that changed his management style.”

Popola’s words were oddly muted, her voice muffled and fuzzy in Devola’s ears. All of a sudden, this place wasn’t safe anymore. It never had been, really, not entirely—there had always been people able and willing to cause them trouble—but under Anemone’s watch, the camp had been far from the worst place the two of them had put down roots in, both idiomatically and geographically. Now, though…

Devola wrapped one hand tightly around the other to keep them both from trembling. Why was it always like this? She didn’t want to leave—where would they go? Where could they go? The only other nearby camp was… how far away was it? And even if it was reachable, would it welcome them even half as much as this one had?

“Dev? Are you okay?” Popola asked, resting a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Devola took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. The air swelling in her lungs pressed painfully against the growing hollow pit forming in her stomach. “I’m fine.”

Popola gave her a knowing glance, a look that said ‘you’re definitely not okay and it’s embarrassing that you’d lie to me about it’ as well as words could, and pressed her canteen into her hands, forcibly uncurling her fingers to get it to fit in her grasp. “Let’s go back to the tent, okay?”

Dazed, Devola followed Popola as she collected the spellbook and A2’s body. Jackass trailed behind them, taking the first of what would be many swigs from her canteen. Normally, Devola would have said something or muttered some snide remark, but her heart wasn’t in it.

Popola sat down under the peaked tarp, tucking A2’s limp and lifeless body into the corner, and laid out a blanket. “Sit down here, Dev,” she said, guiding her with gentle hands on her shoulders to the ground. “It’s okay. I won’t let him hu—”

The twins both stared at Jackass as she crouched down and brushed aside the tent flap.

Jackass furrowed her brow. “What?”

“Oh, uh…” Popola fidgeted with the hem of her tunic. “Um… why’d you follow us?”

“Because,” Jackass said, taking a seat on the ground beside the twins without the slightest modicum of respect for their property, “if Laurel has his way, this’ll be the last chance I get to do
some social drinking before we all get killed by machines.” She took another sip. “This is some good shit, by the way,” she told Popola. She took another sip. “Magical shit.”

You have no idea, Devola wanted to tell her.

“Thanks,” Popola said, “but Devola and I, uh, maybe need some time alone tonight?”

“No, I’m fine,” Devola insisted, uncapping her canteen and taking a sip. The liqueur, with its vivid floral scent and delicate flavor, filled her with the sense of peace and belonging that no tormentor could take from her. Anywhere she could taste this and feel its warmth coursing through her body was still home, no matter what happened. She smiled as best she could. The drink made it easier. “See? Totally fine.”

“Why don’t you have some, Popola?” Jackass asked. She must have been halfway done with her drink already at the rate she was pouring it down her throat.

“Oh, I don’t drink my own stuff,” Popola said, shaking her head. “It’s a point of pride. I don’t want to waste anything so good on myself when other people can—”

“Popola’s a mean drunk,” Devola interjected.

Embarrassed, Popola turned away, folding a hand over her mouth.

“One mug of this stuff and you could point her in front of a troop of machines and let her loose,” Devola said.

“No way.”

“I saw her punch down a wall once. A whole wall.”

“How big of a wall?”

“Big.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Jackass took another deep, vigorous swig.

The three of them hung out in the tent, chatting idly for what felt like hours. Devola nursed her drink. Even what little she’d had was making her feel warm, fuzzy, and so tired she could barely think straight. Which was very nice and very welcome—if she tried to think straight, she’d think her way straight into a pessimistic fugue. How strong was this batch? One pint could probably bring down a Goliath-class machine. If they could get drunk. Could they get drunk?

Devola waved her canteen in front of Popola’s face. “Good stuff, Popo. Magically alcho-licious.”

“Uh… thanks.” Popola reached out and steadied her by the shoulder as she swayed, then placed her hand over the canteen. “It’s a strong batch, isn’t it?”

“You girls have no idea how much I needed that,” Jackass said, tossing aside her empty canteen. “Fuckin’… Laurel with his schedules, no more shit to blow up…”

“We’re happy to help,” Popola said. “So… what exactly happened to Anemone? Did A2 really kidnap her?”

Devola set down her canteen—Popola scrambled to put the cap back on before it spilled all over
the blanket—and plopped her head down on Popola’s shoulder. Jackass’s words as she explained to
the best of her knowledge what had happened that morning buzzed at her ear like a horde of
mosquitoes.

“So either Anemone gets arrested,” Popola summarized, “or A2 gets killed?”

Jackass shook her head so vigorously Devola wondered if it would topple right off her neck.
“Sounds dire, huh? I’ve got an idea on how to help them both out, but I’m so mad that I can’t
explain it right now.”

Popola’s face fell. “Yes, that’s… worth being mad about,” she said, crestfallen. Devola snuggled
up closer next to her, knowing she was wondering what this camp would be like without Anemone
to lead it—and those were definitely not happy thoughts.

“I’ll let you in on my idea tomorrow when I’m less mad. You might be able to help. But here’s the
fucking…” Jackass sighed and slumped over, twirling a lock of her lank black hair around her
finger tight enough to nearly rip it from her scalp. “Fucking king bullshit among bullshit here. You
know how they found out Anemone was hiding A2?”

“Didn’t 2B find her the other night?”

“Yeah, but that was an intestinal YoRHa matter.”

“Uh… what?”

“Internal matter.” Jackass pounded her fist into the soft, damp ground. “Anyway, the Commander
snitched to the top brass! And here’s the fucked-up thing,” she added, simmering. “When I called
her out on it, she dumped me! Or, uh… I dumped her, r-really… it was a mutual dumping.
Fucking…” She patted at her watery eyes with the hem of her ragged, dirty cloak. “White and I
broke up!”

“You were dating the YoRHa commander?” Devola asked, stifling a laugh. Was it just her, or did
that seem like the most unlikely pairing in the camp? “Even Sis and Alucard are a more believable
couple than—”


As Jackass broke down, Devola separated herself from Popola and glommed onto her, patting her
gently on the shoulder. “There, there. ‘S okay. You can do better.”

“Um… are you okay?” Popola asked.

“Uh, look at me, I’m YoRHa Comomder White,” Jackass drawled, making a stupid face that was
probably supposed to be an unflattering impression of her ex-girlfriend’s face. “I know what’s best
for everyone and have never done anything wrong in my entire life, ever! Fuck all y’all!!”

As Jackass broke down, Devola separated herself from Popola and glommed onto her, patting her
gently on the shoulder. “There, there. ‘S okay. You can do better.”

“I don’t want better,” Jackass sniffled. “I want her.”

“To hell with her,” Devola said.

“No, no, she was good once. Great once. Just an all-around…” Jackass lifted the hem of her cloak
to her nose and sneezed into it. “She was hot and cool and fun to be around…”
“…And now she’s just hot?”

Popola looked at Devola as though all her skin had fallen off.

“Not even that! She’s ugly on the inside!” Jackass raged. “She tried to have A2 killed for years and now Anemone’s caught up in her bullshit, too, and it’s all her fault! That’s not the White I know, not her. Not since she went off and took charge of YoRHa. Back then, she—she u-understood these things, things like caring about your friends and doing right by them, even if it wasn’t legal…”

Devola patted her on the head. Her slick black hair was so thick with grease and oil that it was almost wet. “Hey, plenty of fish in the sea, right?”

“No! There’s only one White. But… I let her turn into that!” Jackass sobbed. “I should’ve stopped her… I could’ve stopped her…”

Devola hugged her. It was something she never would have done if she wasn’t so buzzed that her the tip of her nose was tingling. For the first time, she noticed that beneath the haze of soot and grease that clung to Jackass’ skin, she wasn’t so bad looking. If she cleaned herself up more often and rinsed off more than twice a month, it wouldn’t be so surprising to hear that she and White had been an item.

“You two…” Jackass sniffled and clasped Devola’s hand. “You’re so nice. Why does everyone give you such a hard time?”

“Probably because we let the human race—”

Popola shushed her. “It’s a long story. Don’t worry about us.”

“You’re good people. I’ll do right by you, okay?” She laid her arm around Devola’s shoulders and squeezed. “Anyone messes with you, I’ll put their arms where their legs go and their legs where their arms go!”

Devola’s heart warmed. She and Popola had finally made a friend, and all it had taken was a free drink!

“That’s, uh… really nice of you?” Popola said.

“And if you ever want some…” Jackass winked. “Modifications…”

With a guileless grin still stretching from ear to ear, she closed her eyes and immediately fell asleep, slumped over against Devola’s shoulder, and started snoring.

Popola snickered. “And you were roasting me about Alucard?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She picked up her spellbook and buried her nose in it.

Suppressing a yawn, Devola crawled over to Popola’s side and curled up next to her. “No, what did you mean?”

“Nothing.”

Devola poked at the blank (to her, at least) page. “What’s on this page?”

“It’s complicated.”
Devola put her whole hand on the page. “What’s on it?”

Popola sighed and set the book down. “I’m reading a chapter on enchantment spells. Spells you’d cast on clothes or objects or weapons.”

“Or people?”

“No, those are charms. That’s next chapter.”

Devola laid back and leaned against A2’s body as Popola went back to reading. Then, after a while of silent study, Popola shot up, the top of her head grazing the canopy of the tent as her spellbook tumbled from her lap onto the ground.

“Oh, shit!” she exclaimed. “Dev, Alucard’s in trouble!”

“Huh? How do you know?” Devola looked up at her, resting her hand on her cheek and her elbow on the chest of A2’s old body.

“Well, it’s, um… Humans have to eat, right? But there isn’t any food on the Bunker! Alucard eats, doesn’t he?”

“I… guess so?” Devola furrowed her brow. Come to think of it, she’d never actually seen him eat anything… “I dunno. Maybe he goes out hunting when he’s not with us and just roasts some meat like a caveman.” She sat up, kicking up her feet and resting them on the shoulder of A2’s old body. “Anyway, I’m sure the Commander made arrangements for something. Maybe not good food, but something.”

“Yeah… you’re right,” Popola said, sitting back down and scooping up her spellbook, returning to the page she’d left off on.

“Oh, shit,” Devola said.

Popola dropped the spellbook again. “What’s wrong?”

The color drained from Devola’s face. “What’s Alucard going to do,” she asked, “if he has to go to the bathroom?”

Being on the Bunker was exhausting. Everywhere Alucard went, salutes and solemn oaths of “Glory to Mankind!” rang through the halls from somebody saluting somebody or something or other. Everyone here was an utter fanatic for humanity—which was to be expected given YoRHa’s purpose as the unwitting standard-bearer of that lie. But expecting it didn’t make it any less unnerving—or even painful.

Yes, painful. YoRHa, the vanguards of a grateful human populace that didn’t exist, oblivious to the truth that their gods were long dead. Expectant, optimistic. Hopeful for a glorious reconquista that would never happen, an impossible future in which humans set foot once again on a green and verdant Earth and lived, loved, grew fruitful and multiplied.

Yes, some philosophers had gone on and on about “God is dead” and so on and so forth back in the day. But belief in God was a matter of faith in the unprovable; if He were dead, it wasn’t as if the Vatican was holding onto His death certificate. Humanity, though, made a poor god, for its absence was demonstrable. If one merely looked in the right place, they could find records of Project Gestalt or see with their own eyes that the colony on the moon was a sham.
And it hurt Alucard immensely to see this lie bought wholesale by every single android on this station, it broke his heart, because the death of humanity was his cross to bear. He had no choice but to accept responsibility for not doing enough. He wondered, if he and Julius had struck the final blow sooner, would Dracula have been prevented from seeding the world with the disease that had killed it?

He had to get out of here. He had to finish his business with White, settle matters about A2, and get back down to Earth. His hidden failure permeated every square inch of this place, filling the air with a thick and cloying miasma only he could perceive.

He hated it here. But until White deigned to see him again, he was trapped.

The worst thing, though, wasn’t the ennui, shame, and guilt this place reflected back on him.

It was more that the Bunker didn’t have any bathrooms.

After his run-ins with 21O and 9S, he had spent most of the afternoon loitering outside White’s door either for her to exit or let him back in. Fortunately, although there wasn’t even a single morsel of food on the station, there was plenty of water he could drink, and he was able to resolve his other problem through creative use of a closet and a garbage incinerator.

As soon as he’d relieved himself and returned to his vigil outside White’s office, he’d been alerted that she had left the room and returned to her personal quarters while he’d been gone, so he’d decided to wait out there.

YoRHa, however, did not intend for him to wait in peace.

As he stood by White’s door, a reedy, nerve-wracked android nearly collided with him as she skidded to an ungraceful halt in front of him. “S-Sir! Mister Sir, sir!”

“Yes, Miss Ma’am?” Alucard asked.

“E-Excuse me, sir, uh, Mr. Alucard, your sir-ship,” the woman asked, trying very hard not to look at him (as though he were the Ark of the Covenant and to look upon his face would mean instant death) as she nervously kneaded her glossy black hair and smoothed out her rumpled black skirt. “My name is, uh… 4H, I-I’m going on a mission to the surface, and, uh, I heard you were giving out blessings…?”

Blessings? What was he, a saint?

“I, er, don’t know where you heard that,” Alucard said, uncomfortably pawing at the floor with the tip of his boot, “but…”

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of two other androids watching from down the hall, peering out from around the edge of an alcove. They were both snickering. Alucard looked back at the girl standing before him. The expectant, yet nervous smile on her face was beginning to fracture. Although a blindfold covered her eyes, the minute trembling of her lip and the almost-inaudible whine forcing its way up her throat made it clear that her eyes were watering. If he rebuffed her, it would break her heart.

He gave the other two androids another suspicious glance.

So that was what was going on.

He cleared his throat and raised his hand over the girl’s head, and with a solemn bow closed his
eyes and spoke to her. “I do not do this for everyone, but in light of your exemplary service and
devotion to, er, humanity…” He traced a hurried sign of the cross. “*In nomine Patris et Filii et
Spiritus Sancti, amen,*” he mumbled. Did that count as blasphemy? If there weren’t any clergy
around to hear it, did it matter? “Go in peace to love and serve the Lo—er, I mean, humanity.”

Her smile made whole again, 4H snapped to attention, her spine straight as a rail as she saluted
him. “Yes, sir! Glory to mankind!” she shouted in his face before running off.

The mouths of the two would-be bullies hung agape. Shocked, the girls slowly emerged from their
hiding place and crept over to Alucard.

“Um, hello, sir,” one of them said, giving him a polite bow. “We’re going on missions to the
surface, too, and…”

“I’m sorry,” Alucard said, “but I’ve given my last blessing for the day. Try checking back
tomorrow morning.”

The day dragged on. Just as on Earth, there was no clear delineation between day and night on the
Bunker. Alucard had nothing to go on but his own growing sense of fatigue to discern the passage
of time. His stomach growled. Food, like bathrooms, was scarce to come by wherever androids
lived, since they didn’t need it. At least back on Earth, Alucard could leave the camp to take care
of his material needs. When he needed to eat, it was a simple matter of going out into the wild
ruins, killing an animal, taking the form of a wolf (so the taste of his catch wouldn’t disgust him—
beasts had much less discerning palates than noblemen) and devouring it. Here, there was nowhere
to leave to.

On top of that, either White hadn’t set aside a room for him to sleep in at all, or she simply wasn’t
willing to show him to it. The former was most likely. After all, she’d initially meant to kill him.
Perhaps she still did.

Alucard was beginning to see why A2 disliked that woman so strongly.

So… what did he do now? It didn’t seem he’d see White again today. He supposed he could sleep
standing up in the hallway until morning (he could be a very sound sleeper when he put his mind to
it).

However, the last thing he wanted to be was alone with his thoughts.

Fleeing them as one might flee their house if it were haunted, he made his way to the only
amenities the Bunker had to offer—the gym.

Even androids needed to keep in shape, so to speak. Their combat programming could be
developed, honed, and improved just as a human’s natural skills could. Alucard found that sparring
with some of the bolder (or at least less reverent) androids did well to keep his mind off his misery.
Although no android was permitted to raise a weapon against him due to his human side, they were
not restricted from fighting him hand-to-hand; the two who volunteered to indulge him were a
Type-D, or Defender unit, and a Scanner similar to 9S, neither of whom were normally equipped
with weapons (9S was an outlier among his caste).

Alucard didn’t often work up a sweat unless his life were in danger, but by the end of the sparring
session, he was drenched with it. He’d long since sloughed off his heavy coat and let it fall to the
floor; after an hour or two, he’d shed every other layer down to his undershirt, which clung to his
back. On a more positive note, at least the exercise had smothered his malaise (for the moment).
The sandy-haired Scanner he’d been fighting let out a surprised and pained yelp as Alucard pinned him down, threw him off his balance, and sent him down to the floor hard enough that the sound of his spine smacking against the hard tiling echoed through the spacious room. Alucard stepped back, unclenching his fist and relaxing his muscles, as the android gingerly rolled onto his stomach and slowly climbed first to his hands and knees and then to his feet.

“H-How do you keep doing that?” the Scanner asked, incredulous.

64D, a mountain of a woman whose broad physique formed as impenetrable a shield as any of her pod’s programs could, crossed her arms. “You keep reflexively trying to hack him, 11S,” she told him. “It’s leaving you wide open.”

“Oh, is that what you’re doing when you keep…’’ Alucard pantomimed flinging out his hand just as 11S had kept trying to do throughout their matches.

“Sorry,” 11S sheepishly answered, scratching at the back of his head. “Force of habit. I’m not used to fighting things I can’t hack…”

“Alucard isn’t a thing, he’s a human,” 64D reminded him.

“Right, uh, sorry. No offense.”

Alucard rubbed his shoulder, which was starting to feel a little sore from the exertion. Having only one arm did make fighting much more difficult and strenuous, even notwithstanding the phantom sensations of the missing arm and the careful overcorrecting he had to do to prevent himself from trying to use it (not unlike 11S and his useless hacking). “None taken.”

11S chuckled wearily. “Gotta say, uh… this is kinda fun. Are you planning on staying long, sir?”

“Watch out,” 64D cautioned. “Get a taste for combat and you might end up like 9S.”

Alucard’s ears perked up. “9S? What about him?”

“Poor guy’s gotten himself killed like forty times,” 11S said.

“Killed?” Don’t you have backups?” Alucard asked. He’d been under the impression that hardly anyone here was even aware of the concept of death.

“Yeah, but sometimes you lose things you can’t get back,” 64D said. “Once, I went too long without backing up, got caught in a machine ambush, and lost an entire day. Or, at least, that’s what I’m told.” She walked over to 11S and patted him on the shoulder. “C’mon, let’s hit the showers. It’s getting late.”

Alucard picked up his discarded clothes and followed his sparring partners to the showers. After his experience with his jerry-rigged bathroom solution, he wasn’t sure what to expect. Perhaps an android’s idea of a shower was more like a car wash or a firehose.

“Once more, thank you,” he told the androids, “for sparring with me. You’ve helped me take my mind off of… many horrible things.”

“An honor and a pleasure, sir,” 11S shot back before slipping into a cubicle about the side and shape of a broom closet. A solid, opaque door slid shut behind him, which made Alucard feel no better about his prospects.

When Alucard returned from his shower—perhaps the most thoroughly unpleasant shower he’d
ever had, and *that* was quite a bold claim—he found himself surrounded. What seemed to be half the population of the Bunker was fanned out in rough concentric semicircles across the training hall, men and women—Scanners like 9S and 11S seemed to be the only male caste, with the other specialized units being exclusively female) staring at him expectantly, awe and reverence written on their faces even though their eyes were all covered by the same black strips of cloth.

Alucard held his hand over his brow and warily rubbed his eyes. “Oh, for heaven’s sake…”

A Scanner with a soft face and straw-blonde hair stepped forward, lowering himself onto one knee and bowing his head. “Um… I’m 6S, sir. I was wondering if you could give your blessing to—”

Another unit of the same caste grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back in the crowd, stepping forward to take his place. “I’m 801S!” he announced. “Do me first! My mission’s more important!”

A combat unit shoved them both aside. “We’re the ones who go on the *important* missions! He should give blessings to *us* first!”

“You Battler-types wouldn’t even know where to go without us!” 801S retorted.

“I’m not giving out any blessings,” Alucard said. Nobody seemed to hear him. The crowd began to writhe, each android in it jostling to be the first to step out in front of him. “*I’m not the fucking Pope!*” he shouted out, struggling to be heard over the din to no avail. His ears began to ache over the sound of so many people fighting over him; he started to look for an exit, his fingers tapping restlessly at the hilt of his saber as his chest squeezed against his lungs. Of all the things that would get him in the end, he thought it would be the forces of darkness, not a throng of mechanical people ready to trample him over his perceived divinity.

A familiar voice rang out in the din.

“All of you, shut up!”

A hush fell over the room. With the help of her ivory sword, 2B nudged the quarreling androids aside until they got the idea and parted before her. She walked up to Alucard without a single bit of deference or reverence writ either in her body language or her face—in fact, the dispassionate mask of her blindfolded face, if anything, seemed to belie a simmering anger. Alucard was grateful, in a way. It was better for his conscience for someone to be pissed off at him than groveling at his feet.

She grabbed him by the wrist, dragged him along, and pointed her sword at the crowd blocking the way to the door. “Move.”

The crowd parted like the Red Sea; 2B dragged Alucard through the path she’d made. “Go to bed already,” she called out to the crowd as it condensed behind her into a lethargic mass of bemused androids. “This is embarrassing.”

“Thank you,” Alucard told her once the crowd had thinned out and the two of them had gotten farther away from it. He could breathe again.

2B said nothing: Alucard could tell that underneath her blindfold, she was glaring at him. For the first time, he noticed that she really *was* A2’s twin, right down to the smallest detail, down to the mole on the side of her chin. She seemed to have the same attitude toward him as well, although A2 was much more… forthright with her feelings, whereas 2B simmered in silence. Alucard had noticed while being escorted to the Bunker that while 9S had been willing to pester him with
questions until he went mad, 2B seemed to have been hell-bent on ignoring him altogether.

“Did you want to speak with me?” he asked her when the silence between the two of them grew deafening. “Are you upset with me for stepping between you and A2?”

2B raised her sword, holding the tip of the ivory blade to Alucard’s throat, much to the protestations of her support pod. Alucard felt a bead of sweat drip down the back of his neck. He was well aware that the pod’s emergency overrides would engage and 2B’s sword would vanish from her hand if she tried to hurt him, but a sharp object inches from his neck was, after all, a sharp object inches from his neck.

“Oh...” he said, “were you looking to spar with me, too?”

“It’s disgusting,” she said, “the way the others are treating you.” It was the first time she’d actually spoken to him.

“I know. I don’t like it, either.”

2B spun on her heel and walked away, her sword vanishing from her grasp and reappearing floating in the air at her back in a flurry of orange and amber sparks.

“Wait,” he said, “I don’t suppose you know of any unoccupied quarters I could spend the night in...”

“No,” she said.

2B vanished behind the door, leaving Alucard alone once again.

Now, as before, he was faced with plenty of time to kill and a choice. Either lean against a wall somewhere and fall asleep and hope he didn’t awaken surrounded by a makeshift shrine or flock of praying androids, or...

Or he could check up on Dracula’s unwitting sleeper agent.

His mind made up, he took off for 21O’s quarters. It was easier to find than he’d expected—all the quarters were labeled and all the Operators seemed to live on the same deck of the station.

The door slid open as soon as he knocked on it, although not of 21O’s accord. The android woman was resting in the alcove in the wall and didn’t notice him standing at the threshold. Did nobody save for Commander White lock their doors in here? Was privacy simply unheard of among the lower ranks?

21O sat up. “Alucard. Sir, I wasn’t expecting you.”

Alucard bowed. “I’m sorry to intrude, ma’am. There was an oversight setting up my temporary lodging for the night, and...”

“That’s not like the Commander,” 21O said, sliding off her cot.

“Well, she’s very hard-pressed here. Even someone as fastidious as she can miss things.”

“You’re more than welcome to stay here until you’re given quarters of your own. It would be an honor.” 21O led him inside. The door automatically slid shut behind him as soon as he’d cleared the threshold.

“You have my gratitude.” Alucard looked around the room. It was as spartan as the rest of the
Bunker, save for the cluttered shelves resting against one wall. There he saw a curious collection of bric-a-brac: A stuffed animal so battered and threadbare it was nothing more than a grayish blob, a faded and tattered blanket, a cracked picture frame with no photo in it, and a tiny pair of baby shoes so worn they looked as though they would fall apart if he breathed on them.

“Do you like it?” 21O asked.

Alucard sat down on the chair by 21O’s desk. “Oh, yes, your decorations are… very nice.”

“No,” she said, “the Bunker. What do you think?”

“Nice place. It could use some color,” he answered. Now that the combat high and the exhilarating rush of a cold—if a little painful—rinse-off had started to wear off, he could feel his old troubled mind turning itself against him once more. “Bathrooms and food would be nice, as well.”

“I would have thought the Commander would have made sure your needs were met.”

“As did I.” He sighed. “But there’s a war on, and amenities are always the first to go…”

“First to go from what?”

“Just in general. The king declares war; the next thing you know, half your crops go to the soldiers and your children tighten their belts.” Alucard nearly kicked himself as he finished speaking—of course, none of the androids here, built and designed solely for the war effort, could comprehend such matters. Wartime was all any of them knew.

“Humans don’t enjoy war, do they?” 21O asked.

“Not the ones doing the fighting, no,” Alucard said. “Generally speaking.”

“Hmm.” 21O pondered Alucard’s answer. “We’re not so similar, then.”

“You enjoy war?”

“We don’t have anything to compare it to.” She shrugged. “We’re designed to fight, or at least aid the war effort in some way. I enjoy my job. Battler units enjoy theirs. Scanners enjoy theirs. I suppose we all enjoy war.”

Alucard bowed his head. The burden of androids was to have been made for an explicit reason. Humankind had devised thousands of branches of religion and philosophy to answer that eternal question—Why am I here? Androids never had to ask it. They were all here, except for Popola and Devola, for the sole purpose of fighting the battles humanity could no longer fight (or in truth, the ones humanity had never been around to fight). It was like being born without a sense of free will—to never need to doubt, to never need to ask why.

He wondered if any android had ever cursed their absent masters for their lot in life—or if they were all like Job, never willing to let their suffering turn them against their makers. A2 and 2B certainly didn’t seem to hold humanity in high regard. Perhaps they were two of a kind.

“Are you sick?” 21O asked him.

“Sick? Er—what do you mean?” Alucard asked, stammering, startled out of his reverie.

“Something I’ve read about. Humans became ill when they traveled too far from their homes.”

“Oh. That is homesickness. It is not a literal illness,” Alucard explained, shaking his head. “It’s just
an ache in your chest, a pit in your stomach, something that reminds you how far away everything you find familiar and comforting is… when you’re far away from home.”

Here Alucard was, in a space station hovering over the Earth, ten thousand years away and many times more thousands of miles away from that town in central Europe Dracula’s castle had lurked on the outskirts of. Nothing of that town remained. Nothing of its people remained. Nothing of the friends he made in the centuries to follow remained, not Trevor or Sypha, not Richter or Maria, not Julius, not Soma, not Mina. Nothing of any people remained, save for crumbling ruins and androids built by androids built by androids who all still believed with all their mechanical hearts that there were still people around for them to serve.

Yes, he was far from home. Farther from home than anyone had ever been—in time, in space. No man in history had ever been as homesick as he.

“I don’t think I can relate,” 21O said. “I’ve never left the Bunker. It must feel terrible.”

Alucard nodded. He meant to say, ‘It is,’ but his throat had grown so dry that he couldn’t even produce a raspy hiss.

“It would be nice to go to Earth someday,” she said, turning her head to gaze out the window at the vast emptiness of space. Right now, her quarters did not point toward the Earth; in a few hours, as the station rotated, the planet would slide into view. “I’ve considered asking to be converted into a combat unit. It’s the only way I’d be permitted to go. I wonder if I would feel homesick then.”

Alucard struggled to wet his throat. “You certainly would,” he mumbled, looking once more at the shelves laden with crumbling artifacts of domestic human life. He cleared his throat. “Oh, by the way, how did your maintenance go?” he asked, dragging his attention away from 21O’s personal belongings out of respect.

“They didn’t find anything out of the ordinary.”

“No, of course they didn’t,” Alucard muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” He wasn’t surprised by 21O’s so-called clean bill of health. Those who sifted through programming and circuitry were bound to miss matters of the soul. “But you’re still having headaches and blackouts, are you not?”

“Whatever the error is, I’m certain it went away on its own.”

“But you didn’t go back to work, did you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Good.” Alucard nodded. “However, I believe your issues might be a matter of psychology, not program errors. With your permission, I’d like to try and hypnotize you.”

21O squinted. “You’d like to… hypnotize me?”

“Yes. It’s a therapeutic technique humans often used. Considering that android minds were built by digitizing human consciousness, I think it will prove fruitful.” Alucard leaned forward. Of course, he wasn’t going to use the kind of bog-standard hypnotism a stage magician might employ—he had greater powers at his command.
He had a hunch he could use those powers to reverse the connection between 21O and Dracula—and turn his spy against him.

21O sat down on the side of her bed, sitting across from him. She folded her hands in her lap. “Very well. What do I do?”

“Just listen to me and do as I say.” Alucard took a deep breath. “Hypnosis is self-directed. You must want it; you must trust me. Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Then follow what I say,” Alucard said, lowering his voice to a soft half-whisper and speaking slowly. “Let my words wash over you. Allow yourself to sink into a peaceful, restful state.” He watched 21O’s hands sink deeper into her lap, the stiffness leaving her joints. “Take deep breaths. Fill your lungs and chest… er, your air cooling systems or whatever, and slowly let it out.”

21O took a deep breath, her chest swelling, and exhaled.

“I am going to count down from ten. With each number, you will breathe in as deeply as you can and exhale as slowly as you can. Focus your gaze on my eyes.”

21O nodded.

“Ten.”

Deep breath.

“Nine.”

21O followed his instructions, and with each number he counted down to, she grew more serene. Alucard kept a close eye on her to see if any unwelcome stimulus or restlessness was holding her back, but she was following his commands with ease. He’d never had an easier time leading somebody into a trance state. He wondered if all androids were so open to hypnotic suggestion.

“You are letting yourself dive deeper into peaceful serenity. The deeper you go, with every single breath, you feel the soft, warm weight on your shoulders growing stronger. You are safe. No thought that crosses your mind can trouble you. It is all above you, and growing farther away with every breath as you sink down, deeper, deeper, deeper…” He watched her eyelids droop, her shoulders slump; the glossy sheen in her glassy eyes turned dull.

“The world, your past, your present, your future, is open to you. You can view whatever you wish, confident in the knowledge that nothing you see can hurt you.” Alucard leaned forward until he was perched on the edge of his seat. “I am going to ask you a few calibration questions. Feel free to answer at your discretion. You need not do anything you are uncomfortable with.”

21O nodded.

“Tell me about 9S.”

Alucard blinked, dumbstruck by his own hastily-chosen choice of words. He hadn’t meant to ask that question—it had slipped out, as though he, not 21O, was the one whose mind had been opened and tongue had been loosened.

If 21O was surprised by his choice of topic, she didn’t show it. “He’s my assigned field agent. I oversee his actions, provide him with tactical data, and provide guidance on his missions.” 21O’s
voice was flat and even, betraying not a hint of emotion. “Personally, I’ve only met him a few days ago, after he was taken off of disciplinary leave. However, the previous 21O knew him far longer.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My chassis was destroyed about a week ago during the vampire assault on the station. None of my accumulated data could be restored, so I have no memory of my life prior to then. It’s been hard on 9S. It seems he felt very close to me.”

“And what about you?”

“I think I was very close to him as well.”

“Why?”

“My previous self kept a detailed self-reference log,” 21O said. “A diary. She was very protective of 9S. When he exposed himself to unnecessary danger, she would be angry with him and would often verbally berate him as much as, if not more than, the Commander would.”

Alucard recalled that earlier that day, 21O had wanted to ask him questions about his family. “Would you say you see yourself as… a maternal figure? Or an older sister?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m going to regress you back to your past life,” Alucard told her. “Picture in your mind a long staircase lined with doors. You are following the staircase downward. The first door on your left will take you two days into the past. Open it. What do you see?”

“9S meets me for the first time,” 21O said. “He’s happy until I speak to him. Then I see the pain in his face. I don’t know what to say. All I know about him is that he can be difficult to manage. My words hurt him. I feel an ache. I can’t say why.”

“Go six doors down. It takes you two weeks into the past.”

“I can’t go that far. My memories end there.”

“There is nothing stopping you.”

21O paused; Alucard wondered if she would refuse to regress to her past life. Perhaps he’d taken too far of a leap.

“9S is visiting me at my desk in Ops,” she finally answered. “He’s just done a favor for me and collected several dozen terabytes of data from the residential area in the desert for me to analyze. He did it without putting himself or anybody else in undue danger. I was proud of him.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“No. But I thanked him.”

“Why didn’t you tell him?”

“YoRHa units are not permitted to display emotion.”

“That doesn’t seem to stop most of you,” Alucard pointed out.

“No, but it’s not proper.”
Alucard probed a few more memories, bringing 21O deeper into her stupor and collecting more information about 9S. 9S, as 21O saw him, was a kind yet often brash man who wore his heart on his sleeve—in stark contrast to other units such as 21O herself or his partner, 2B. He was polite and respectful, yet all too often irreverent when he thought nobody was listening. For the most part, he did what he was told with little trouble, but wasn’t afraid to speak his mind. As Alucard had learned before, though, 9S’s curiosity, a zest for knowledge that all units of his type possessed but none had in as great a volume as he, was his most prominent trait.

There was a bit of Soma in there, but Alucard couldn’t tell how much. Not with so much of 9S’s caste informing his personality. If anything was there, was it a coincidence, along with his eerily-similar voice? How could it be anything else? No replicant or gestalt had been made from Soma’s soul and body, so how could the androids have obtained a record of his body and mind?

Was it simply coincidence, or was it fate?

Despite his further questions, Alucard moved on. “Now, 21O,” he said, “I’m going to ask something different of you. Close your eyes.”

21O closed her eyes.

“The door at the bottom of the staircase is white. But there is a stain on it. Visualize it. A white door with a black stain like an inkblot on a clean leaf of paper. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Look into it. Focus on the stain. Let it fill your mind’s eye. See nothing but darkness and hear nothing but my voice.”

There was a slight shift in the position of 21O’s dulled eyes as they unfocused. “I see it.”

“Look deeper. Deeper until you see the light within the darkness.”

“Yes.”

“What can you see now?”

21O licked her lips and swallowed. “I’m sitting in a throne that is too big for me. My arms are spread out to grip the sides. My fingers are tapping restlessly. I’m waiting for something.”

Alucard fought to mitigate his surprise, careful not to jar 21O out of her trance state. Was she seeing through Dracula’s eyes now?

“Where are you?”

“It’s a dark room. Circular. This room looks like part of… a ship, buried deep underground. Thin strips of dim blue light run along the walls. I’m the only one in the room.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“I’m going to meet with Olrox. He let an intruder destroy my trophy room. I expect him to do something about that.” A slightly-amused lilt broke through her slow, monotone voice.

Olrox. So Dracula was resurrecting his old allies. Whatever his plans were, he seemed to be pulling out all the stops to see it through to completion. “What else can you perceive?”

“I can hear something,” 21O said.
Alucard inched backward, surprised. “Describe it.”

Her lips barely moved; her voice was but a whisper as she sang a gentle melody. There was no inflection or emotion present in her voice—merely flat, lifeless tones arranged in order. “We passed along the stair... we spoke of was and when... Although I wasn’t there... he said I was his friend...”

Alucard felt a chill run down the back of his spine, like rolling water from a melting ice cube resting on the nape of his neck. These words sounded maddeningly familiar. Where had he heard this before?

Of all the things for Dracula to do in his downtime, was he listening to music? Like a moody teenage boy whiling away the afternoon in his bedroom?

“Which came as some surprise... I spoke into his eyes, I thought you died alone... a long, long time ago...”

“That’s... enough, 21O,” he said, leaning forward and concentrating, focusing his mental efforts on reining in her wandering mind, spectral tendrils of his will wrapping around and throttling the connection she had to Dracula’s mind.

“Oh, no, not me... I never lost control... You’re face to face...” 21O opened her eyes. “...With the man who sold the world.” A faint smile tugged at the sides of her mouth; an alert spark lit in her still-dulled eyes. She moved like a stop-motion doll. “Hello, Alucard.”

Alucard’s cold blood ran even colder. He had to pull 21O out, but he knew that trance states couldn’t be broken so suddenly or violently without risking an adverse effect—especially when he’d used magic to augment his hypnotic technique. “21O, I’m going to count back from ten, and —”

Dracula smirked. “Don’t be too frightened. I won’t be long.”

Alucard felt as though his bones were filled with ice. He couldn’t even blink.

Dracula cocked his head. “I can’t say I’m surprised about your interest in 9S,” he said. “He... triggers something within you, doesn’t he? I’m sure the same instincts this woman feels are straining at the confines of your guarded heart.”

Alucard gritted his teeth.

“Oh, don’t ruin your calm demeanor. It’s up to you to guide 21O back to the waking world, isn’t it?” The maddening smile never left Dracula’s face. “This is fun, but I’m soon to be very busy, so we’ll have to cut our meeting short again, I’m afraid. Don’t worry. We’ll meet again soon, and hopefully face to face. In the meantime, I’d suggest you not try this again.”

The sinister demeanor vanished from 21O’s face as Dracula’s mind left hers.

“Close that door,” Alucard told her, shaken, struggling to keep his voice calm and level, “turn your back on it, and walk back up the staircase. Breathe deeply, evenly, with each step you take. The air around you grows thinner, your limbs less heavy, with your slow and steady ascent. You crest the surface of the waking world slowly, carefully, like a diver ascending from the seafloor, and as I count from one to ten, you will gradually emerge from your trance state.”

He counted up, watching the bright, glossy shine return to 21O’s eyes; when he hit ten, she swayed as though she’d lost her balance.
“Are you okay?” he asked her.

21O caught her breath, as if winded.

“How much do you remember?” Alucard hoped the experience of having Dracula speak through her would be a blank spot in her memory, just like the other time he had possessed her. He’d been beyond foolish to try such a thing—to use this android as nothing more than a mere tool to gain a foothold over his enemy.

“Who was that man?” 21O asked, still dazed, still disoriented. Her fingers twitched anxiously, her muscles tensing—whatever the hypnotism had done to calm her had been completely erased already.

She remembered enough.

“That man,” Alucard said, taking a deep breath to regain his composure and leaning forward, hiding his mouth behind his hand, “is Dracula, master of vampires and lord of darkness.”

21O lowered her head. “Is he why I’ve been…”

“The headaches and blackouts are his doing.”

“He can see through my eyes.”

“He can do more than that.”

Shaken, 21O folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry,” Alucard told her. “It was wrong of me to expose you to that without warning you beforehand. Please forgive me.”

21O laid her palm against her forehead, her fingers burrowing into her hairline and distressing her short golden hair, eyes squeezed shut in consternation. “No, it’s good that we found this out now,” she said, fighting (and failing) to keep her voice as low and even as it had been in her trance state. “I’ve been feeding him information on all of YoRHa’s operations for a week…” she mumbled, her hushed voice laden with dismay.

“I’m sorry.”

21O shook her head, pulling away her hand to reveal that her ironclad composure had once more reasserted itself. Her eyes were clear and hard, her expression steely and cold. “No, sir. You were right to bring this to my attention as soon as you did. Thank you.”

Alucard was surprised by how well 21O was taking this. Androids, it seemed, were made of stronger stuff, mentally as well as physically, compared to humans.

“I’d rather not bother the Commander with this so late in the evening,” 21O said, nervously plucking at the hem of her glove with her thumb and forefinger, “especially considering how indisposed she seems.”

“That is likely my doing,” Alucard said. “Our meeting left her very shaken. Somehow, she was very distressed to have met a human in the flesh. However…”

21O nodded, as if she could read Alucard’s mind and shared his concern. “There’s no telling what this Dracula has been using me for… or what he might use me for tonight.”
“Scorched earth is well within the realm of Dracula’s capabilities,” Alucard agreed. He could easily find a way to bring the entire Bunker down if he could no longer secretly exploit it. It would be child’s play… considering what he’d done to the human race.

Unbidden, Alucard’s hand curled into a fist, fingernails biting into the meat of his palm hard enough to leave deep, bleached-white crescent-moon scars.

21O bowed her head. “Alucard, will you watch over me tonight?”

Alucard nodded. “I will. We shall confront the Commander first thing in the morning. Hopefully then she will be of sound mind.”

Relief spread across 21O’s worry-stricken face. “Thank you, sir.” She placed her left hand to her breast. “Glory to—”

“Don’t,” Alucard said, holding out his palm. “I did not come here to be praised and fawned over. A simple ‘thank you’ will suffice.”

“Thank you, then.”

21O went to her door and locked it through whatever magical-seeming means androids had of locking their doors, then materialized a translucent keycard in her hand and handed it to him. It was, Alucard had to admit (as someone who had dealt with many strange and esoteric keys over the course of his life) the oddest key he’d ever been given—it had no texture whatsoever; he could feel the skin of his thumb and forefinger meeting as he grasped it.

“Look after 9S for me,” she told him as she laid herself down on her spartan cot, not even bothering to pull her bed’s thin blanket over herself. “Please.”

Alucard nodded. “I shall. You have my word.”

With the room secured—21O insisted to Alucard that the door was linked solely to that holographic card and that no matter what happened, an android of her model would be unable to overpower him should the worst happen—she shut down her systems and entered so deep a slumber it seemed she might as well have been dead.

As weary as he was, Alucard kept watch over her all through the night, hunched over in his chair with cold starlight pouring down on him from the window to his side, the omnipresent droning of the Bunker’s mechanical systems fading into dull white noise. Not once did she stir. Perhaps it was because Dracula knew his puppet was being so closely watched.

The Army of Humanity’s council of generals had arranged a meeting early in the morning to further discuss the matter of Anemone and A2. White decided to attend the meeting in her quarters.

Not since her initial hearing to determine whether she was fit to take command of the newly-established YoRHa autonomous infantry had she felt so miserable, so lethargic, so drained of energy and vitality. She’d slept as long as was required for a model of her type and slept well (never before had she welcomed it so much, after how hellish yesterday had been), yet still felt as though she hadn’t slept at all.

It was all psychological, of course. Her power supply was at full capacity; all systems were green. The way her eyelids seemed to be made of lead, the stiffness in her joints, the dryness in the back of her throat—they were all just her imagination.
Willing away the grogginess, White put her terminal back together as best she could, leaving the keyboard just slightly askew, and tried to smooth out her rumpled dress and fix her bed-flattened hair. Hardly the ideal impression to make on her superiors.

One by one, six headshots appeared on the screen of her terminal. Four belonged to the generals who wielded supreme authority over the Resistance (all of the same model, all with the same face, all with the same voice, which made dealing with them individually very difficult and dealing with them as a group even more so), one to Commander Laurel, the Resistance cell leader who’d taken the reins from Anemone in her absence, and one to—much to White’s surprise—Jackass. White supposed she should thank Jackass for making sure she would not be the least presentable person in attendance.

“Good morning,” one of the four generals said. His portrait, as well as his voice, was fuzzy and shot with static—he was stationed on one of the twelve other space stations in orbit around the Earth, and his signal had passed through a heavy radiation belt to reach the Bunker. “I trust we are all familiar with the matter at hand. Commander Laurel, you and Officer Jackass Clover have claimed that in light of new evidence, we should re-evaluate our judgment against Commander Anemone. We’re ready to hear it.”

Jackass rubbed her bleary eyes, the effort making her look no less haggard. “Whi—uh, Commander White? I wasn’t expecting you…”

In his own panel, Laurel fidgeted with a pip on his collar.

“Commander White is here to ascertain the veracity of your evidence,” one of the generals replied. “I take it this will not be a problem.”

“No, not at all,” Laurel said. “Allow me to say it as simply as I can—Anemone is innocent.”

The four generals shifted uncomfortably. White pursed her lips in bemusement. She didn’t know Laurel well, but he was (as far as she knew) a levelheaded man, if a bit too fastidious (and for White to accuse someone of being too fastidious was rare). Had Jackass put him up to this?

“You are aware, of course,” one of the generals said, “of the magnitude of Anemone’s crime? Harboring a deserter is a serious offense.”

“We cannot allow members of the military, even high-ranking ones, to get away with aiding and abetting those who exit the military without permission,” another one added. “It sets a bad precedent for leadership and encourages the rank-and-file to desert.”

Jackass cocked her head. “Do you actually have any evidence of that?”

The general she’d spoken to shot her a sharp look.

“Uh, sir,” she hastily added. “Anyway, I get it. What Laurel and I—”

Laurel coughed into his fist.

“What Commander Laurel and I mean is that we don’t believe Anemone offered aid and comfort to the enemy of her own free will,” Jackass said. “The charges against her should be lessened.”

“Yes, that is the argument we’d like to present,” Laurel said, nodding. “The charges against Anemone for lending succor to A2 should be lessened.”

“Or dropped,” Jackass added.
“Or dr—” Laurel stopped nodding, paused, and shot Jackass a half-skeptical, half-irritated look, making it quite clear that unlike the rest of this meeting’s attendees, he and Jackass were in the same room. “Dropped, perhaps, if the High Command wills it. Certainly lessened, at the very least.”

“At the very least,” Jackass parroted.

One of the generals who hadn’t spoken up yet narrowed his eyes, squinting skeptically. “Are you claiming that A2 coerced Anemone into providing shelter and medical treatment?”

“I’m going one step further,” Laurel replied. “I have reason to believe that A2 was holding Anemone—as well as the entire camp—hostage.”

White closed her eyes and bit her tongue to keep from laughing.

“Think about it,” Laurel continued. “It was well known throughout the region surrounding Anemone’s camp that a dangerous fugitive stalked the ruins. This fugitive entered the camp and met with no resistance. Of the dozens of soldiers stationed there, not a single one attempted to apprehend her. She was even reported to have harmed soldiers stationed in the camp and suffered no consequences. As lenient as Anemone can be, she is not that lenient.”

“According to Commander White’s report, YoRHa Unit 2B made an attempt to terminate her, but was rebuffed,” one of the generals noted.

“That’s right,” Laurel said. “And isn’t it odd that not a single person stationed in the camp came to her aid? I propose that the entire camp was terrorized by this vengeful fugitive, fearful to do or say anything to displease her.”

Jackass cringed, her mouth stretching into a pained grimace, but she recovered quickly. “It’s, um…” Her gaze dipped downward, then flitted from side to side as she bit her lip. “It’s true. She was ruthless. She had the whole camp under her thumb. I was… threatened into repairing her. We have other medics on staff who can attest to the same thing.”

White was astounded at the extent to which Jackass was lying so blatantly and so obviously. She could pick apart a thousand holes in her testimony just from those few sentences alone.

“It is hard to believe that a first-generation YoRHa prototype could exert such influence, especially over an entire camp full of soldiers,” one of the generals replied. “Commander White, what do you have to say?”

“For starters,” White said, “Officer Jackass’ testimony is missing some key context. Anemone and A2 were close friends, as documented in the Pearl Harbor Descent Operation reports; it is much easier to believe that Anemone’s prior relationship with A2 led her to flaunt authority than it is to believe that A2 was threatening violence against her.”

“Commander Anemone was always extremely lax when it came to rules and regulations,” one of the generals chimed in. “Your hypothesis, Commander Laurel, Officer Clover, strains credulity when compared to the simpler story presented by Commander White.”

“Just because a story is simple doesn’t mean it’s right,” Jackass insisted.

“Then how do you explain A2’s violent outburst?” Laurel asked the tribunal. “She murdered six of my men and dragged Anemone out of the camp against her will.”

“How do you know it was against her will?” one of the generals asked.
“…Because if Anemone had wanted to leave,” Jackass replied, shrugging, “she’d have run away herself instead of having to be carried like a sack of spare parts?”

“Besides,” White said, “Commander Laurel and Officer Jackass are omitting a key event from their testimony.” She steepled her fingers. “I am speaking, of course, of Anemone’s meeting with me, in which she offered a passionate, spirited, and utterly earnest defense of A2’s conduct and all but begged me to rescind her termination order.”

Laurel’s eyes bulged; he shot Jackass a dirty look. “She what?” he snarled under his breath.

Jackass, White recalled, had exited the meeting early on, before Anemone or Alucard had made any earnest effort to argue on A2’s behalf. She was unaware of anything that had transpired in that room save for the fact that, obviously, something had happened.

White took a deep breath. “Anemone’s words were as follows, and I quote: ‘She is a good person. She always has been. From the beginning, she’s always been a kind, caring, tender person who has always wanted to do right by her friends, no matter what, and even though she’s a little rougher around the edges and she’s missing most of her original skin, she’s still the same person she was before. The same good person. And she deserves to live. Whatever she’s done to warrant her execution, she’s more than made up for it.’ End quote.”

As White recited the last words of Anemone’s testimony verbatim, she crossed her arms and watched Laurel’s and Jackass’ faces fall.

“That makes things about as clear as they could be,” one of the generals said. “Thank you for your added testimony, Commander White. It is clear that Commander Laurel and Officer Jackass have presented a testimony with glaring errors at every turn.”

“There will be consequences for your perjury,” another general said, giving Laurel and Jackass a pointed, stern glare.

“It isn’t perjury, it’s true,” Laurel insisted, his patchwork face reddening. “Every word of it. It may be true that A2 and Anemone were good friends once, but…”

“That just made it easier for A2 to take advantage of her!” Jackass shouted, banging her fist on something with a loud, hollow thud. “Don’t you see that? A2 had Anemone wrapped around her finger!” Her composure fractured further with every word she spat out (and she had never had much to begin with). “Forget what you think you know about A2 from those Pearl Harbor documents. Years of living in exile, hunted by YoRHa termination squads, has made her ruthless, violent, and manipulative! How do you think she, an ailing, broken prototype, survived against dozens of advanced, top-of-the-line androids designed specifically to terminate her? It wasn’t by being kind, it was by being a monster!”

It was an amazing stream of invective considering that every word of it was false.

Jackass huffed and puffed, panting and gasping for air, the wild, mad glint in her eyes fading. The generals had been stunned into silence. Laurel reached up and wiped away the flecks of errant spit that had landed on his cheek.

“She’s a monster,” Jackass repeated, her voice hoarse and cracked, her expression crestfallen; she looked as though she were going to burst into tears any second. White couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her so viscerally upset—if she ever had. “We have a duty to rescue Anemone from her. If we don’t… who knows who her next victim will be?”
The four generals all turned their gazes downward as they consulted privately with each other through text. After a few seconds in which Jackass and Laurel waited with bated breath, a line of text scrolled across White’s screen.

> Does this new testimony make sense?

It was a lie, of course, albeit a very plausible one if one made certain assumptions about Anemone’s behavior (assumptions White knew not to make). But it was still a bald-faced—and remarkably craven—lie; its only purpose was to exonerate Anemone at the cost of throwing A2 to the wolves. Considering how excited Jackass had been to lend her aid to A2 (itself a serious crime), it must have been quite a painful lie for her to tell.

White knew painful lies.

She pondered her answer. At this very moment, she held Anemone’s life in her hands. A single word would determine whether she lived and was given another chance to continue her career in the military… or died at A2’s side.

The answer was obvious. Anemone was far from innocent. She had made her choice knowing full well that the consequences for her would be severe. The generals were correct that harboring deserters was a crime as heinous as, if not worse than, desertion itself—those who did such a thing had to be taught a severe lesson, if not for their own sake then for the sake of the innocent bystanders who might have to be reminded themselves by example that right was right, wrong was wrong, and wrong was punished.

Jackass, too, had aided and abetted Anemone; she was not blameless. If White so willed it, she could end her career as well, just as she’d warned her. If she refused to vindicate Jackass’ testimony, then Anemone would remain marked for arrest or worse—and Jackass would be implicated in the same crime. The two of them would go down together, testify in the same trial, and receive the same punishment.

White’s head and heart ached. Part of her wanted to do it simply out of spite. The other part of her wanted to do it out of duty. She had felt lost, terribly distraught, when she’d first learned what had happened to Anemone, even in spite of the role she had played in causing all this. Part of her had hoped that Anemone would have come to her senses, cast A2 out, and swept everything under the rug so that once, just once, White could turn a blind eye. But it wasn’t meant to be.

Would she throw her friends aside for duty? Of course; if they stood in the way of her duty, then they weren’t friends, let alone people she had the slightest interest in rubbing elbows with.

> Officer Jackass’ testimony is

She stopped.

She knew the correct response. So why were her fingers frozen above the keyboard as if patiently waiting for her to come up with the next words, when those words were clear in her mind?

As her gloved fingertips hovered over the holographic keys projected over the touchpad, White glanced up and caught a glimpse of the plaintive look in Jackass’ eyes. If eyes could speak, hers would be shouting, screaming, please.

White lowered her head, refusing to make eye contact with Jackass; her fingers trembling, she entered her response, typing slowly and deliberately, and sent it to High Command.

The generals looked down at her response. One raised his eyebrows, but quickly quashed his
display of surprise and struck the emotion from his face. “Thank you, Commander White, for your input,” he told her. “You are dismissed. You may return to your duties on board the Bunker while we deliberate.”

White raised her hand to her heart. “Thank you, sirs. Glory to Mankind.”

Everyone returned the salute and the portraits of the meeting’s attendees all went blank and folded themselves away at once.

White bowed her head. Once more, just as she had yesterday after her meeting with Alucard and after she’d broken up with Jack, she felt utterly nauseated.

Still, she had a job to do and nobody else who could step in and do it for her, so she pulled herself together and made for the door. It slid open as soon as she stepped up to it, revealing—much to her shock—two people waiting for her.

Wreathed in his flowing black coat, Alucard stood before her on the other side of the threshold, a cold and purposeful bite to his golden eyes in spite of the pallid gray skin that traced weary arcs below them. 21O stood at his side.

White stumbled backward and struggled to regain her balance, the heels of her boots tapping erratically against the floor.

“Commander White. Thank you for seeing me again on such short notice,” Alucard said, a sardonic grin tugging at his lips and pulling them aside to reveal a flash of fangs. His eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed. “We have something urgent to discuss with you.”

“If it’s about A2,” White said, irately flicking away a stray lock of hair to keep her mussed and unkempt bangs in order, “you’re welcome to take custody of her, but you’ll have to find her first. She’s run off again; there’s no telling where she’s gone. I’m afraid I can’t spare any resources toward finding her for now, so you’ll be on your own.” Undoubtedly, 2E or some other Executioner unit would find her first and finish her off, which would neatly tie up that whole loose end Alucard was so keen on tugging on.

Bemused, Alucard blinked, his shoulders loosening and jaw going slack. “Oh. Right. That.” He glanced over at 21O. “Honestly, in the excitement, I’ve forgotten all about that. We have much more pressing matters to attend to. You see, Operator 21O is possessed.”

Jackass waited with bated breath and her heart in her throat, so to speak, while the top brass deliberated. She could barely move. She could barely speak. The most she could manage right now was to glance sideways at Laurel, who was similarly frozen in terror and apprehension. He knew, just as she did, that this gambit had failed and that the price of their failure would be severe.

Why had White shown up for this? To spite her? To punish her? Was she so upset about being dumped that she was willing to make Jackass pay in blood for it? Or was this just the culmination of years’ worth of never giving a damn about the rules as much as she was supposed to coming back to bite her in the ass?

“Commander Laurel, Officer Clover,” one of the generals announced, startling Jackass out of her terrified fugue. “We have consulted among ourselves regarding your argument. In light of YoRHa Commander White’s opinion regarding your testimony…”

She was dead. She was as good as dead. This was the end of everything for Jackass. Hundreds of years from now, some android would find her rusted and sandblasted chassis half-buried in a sand
dune and wonder what an idiot she must have been to—

“We have approved your request to clear Commander Anemone of any wrongdoing of her own free will.”

Jackass’ jaw dropped. So did Laurel’s.

“This is a temporary approval pending further investigation,” another one of the four identical generals said. “You have the full backing of the Resistance and YoRHa to send out a rescue team to retrieve Anemone for questioning and terminate the rogue unit A2.”

“T-Thank you, sirs,” Laurel stammered as he picked his jaw up off the floor.

Jackass barely mustered an anxious, excited bow, so shocked by the decision that her head was spinning. “We really appreciate your open-mindedness, sirs,” she added.

“Thank you for your time and your testimony.” The first general saluted; the other three followed suit. “Glory to Mankind!”

Jackass was all too happy to return the salute. She could hardly contain her excitement. White had pulled through for her after all! There was still some spark of goodness in that sanctimonious witch’s shrunken heart!

The connection terminated abruptly; the four portraits of High Command folded away and vanished into pinpricks of light.

“They really fell for it,” Jackass gasped, the tension draining from her body as though she were being wrung out. “We did it!”

She clapped Laurel on the shoulder. “Did you hear that? We’re in the clear! It worked!”

And all she’d had to do was…

Oh, god. They were going to be ruthless about hunting A2 down and killing her now, weren’t they? Fuck, what had she done?

Laurel stared at her. He no longer seemed quite so satisfied with the top brass’s decisions. “You never told me,” he snarled, jabbing his index finger into Jackass’ chest, “that Anemone said that about A2!”

Jackass took a step back. “Uh… I wasn’t in the room when that happened! I got kicked out.”

Laurel drew backward as well, shaking his head and wearily resting his brow in his hand. “I was wrong about A2 holding her hostage, wasn’t I?”

“Yup.”

“So she really did break the law of her own free will.”

“Yup.”

“So if we… rescue her…” Laurel lifted his head, his eyes widening, his jaw going slack. “They’ll ask her for her side of the story. She’ll contradict everything!”

“Probably,” Jackass said. Anemone was a woman of principles, not laws.
Laurel grabbed a fistful of her collar and shook her. “You idiot! Do you know what this means? If we don’t find Anemone first and convince her to play along and blame A2 for everything when the top brass interrogates her, all three of us are going to be arrested at best and executed at worst! Our careers are over!”

“Easy, Laurel,” Jackass said, wresting his hands away from her neck.

“Commander Laur—you, you’ve ruined me!”

“No one’s ruined yet,” Jackass insisted, inwardly wondering how much redder Laurel’s face could get. Any more and the mismatched patch of skin around his eye would blend right in. “We’ll find Anemone and get her to corroborate. That’s all we need to do.”

Anemone would never corroborate if it meant selling out her friend. Not in a million years. But Laurel didn’t have to know that. Jackass was going to fix all of this—somehow. She had a plan. A simple plan. Find Anemone and A2, find somewhere safe where A2 could hide indefinitely from the long arm of the law, convince Anemone to lie about A2 to protect the both of them from any consequences—

For the first time, she realized that her plan, the plan she had come up with while drunk as a skunk, was incredibly stupid.

“Okay,” Laurel said, taking a deep breath. He seemed to calm down, but only for a moment before his face began to redden again. “And how, he asked, “are we going to find her before a dedicated and professional tracking team does?”

Jackass swallowed hard, gulping down the lump in her throat. She took a deep breath.

“Okay,” she said, trying as much to calm herself down as Laurel, “I think I have a theory about where Anemone might be right now. You stay here and do, uh… commander stuff, and I’ll head out and find her.”

It was time to pay Anemone’s old friend Pascal a visit.

A2 slept well. Better than she’d slept in a long time. As it turned out, the uneven wooden floorboards of a ramshackle hut wedged atop the branches of a giant tree built by a machine that only had the vaguest idea of what a ‘house’ was meant to look like were more comfortable than most of the places A2 had taken shelter in.

That said, the real reason she was so comfortable here could probably be chalked up to the fact that A4, whom A2 had thought was dead for the past three years, was cuddling her.

She could barely move. Not because she was tired or weak, but because moving even a single inch would disrupt this blissful arrangement between the two of them: A4’s cheek resting on her breast and hand resting on her hip, the slender curve of her waist beneath A2’s palm, their tangled legs and their intertwined fingers pinned to the floor beneath their sides. If either one of them made the slightest adjustment, this single moment stretching into eternity would come to an end.

A4 was the first to break the stalemate, slowly lifting her head. The hut was dimly lit by the glow of the lamps outside bleeding through the window, the light just barely strong enough that A2, with her keen eyes, could make out the contours of her soft, round face and the glint of reflected light in her eyes. Only about half of her uniform was still attached to her body; the rest lay in a heap next to her.
“Good morning, Two,” she mumbled.

A2 slid her hand across A4’s back and reeled her back in. “Go back to sleep,” she mumbled back as she closed her eyes. A4 nuzzled her nose and let her fingers drift up A2’s back to the nape of her neck; A2 felt her lips twitch as the corners of her mouth pulled up.

But no—the spell had been broken. Eventually, A2 let herself open her eyes again.

“Did you sleep well?” A4 asked her.

A2 rolled onto her back and sat up, her stiff arms and legs mildly protesting against the sudden exertion. She laid a hand on her thigh, her palm settling over the spot where she’d taken a few bullets yesterday. The puncture wounds had healed completely overnight. Her leg didn’t feel as stiff as it had yesterday, and of course, there was no pain. However…

“I slept… great,” she replied. She ran her hand along her leg, then scratched at her shoulder. The bullet wound there had closed up as well. But what surprised her more than that was that her skin suddenly felt different. Softer—no, fluffy, like the skin of a peach.

She felt her tail sweep back and forth between her legs and chalked it up to phantom limb sensations before she realized she could actually feel its long, bushy fur brushing up against her thighs. Her black box’s frequency ratcheting up a few ticks, she reached down and grabbed a handful of the tail she was certain wasn’t actually there, only to actually grab it.

Her mouth hung agape. She was struck dumb with shock. This wasn’t supposed to happen. There were rules. She was a wolf when the moon was out and a normal android when it wasn’t. There were no half-measures. She’d transformed back into an android peacefully in her sleep, as usual (strange that becoming a wolf wasn’t something she could sleep through, but the other way around was), so she shouldn’t still have any of these lingering vestiges like…

She ran her tongue over her teeth and discovered that quite a few of them were much sharper than they should have been.

“What the fuck?”

A4 sat up and leaned forward. “What’s wrong?” she asked, pawing for the little floor lamp that would light up the hut.

“I have a tail.”

“Still?” A4 yawned and flicked the lamp’s light switch, bathing the room in a warm, soft amber glow. “Huh. So you do. Well, it suits you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean it’s cute.” She reached over and tweaked the tail’s tip. A2 jerked backward. “How about we check in on Anemone?”

“Yeah, uh…” A2 held the tail in her hand and watched it twitch as though it had a mind of its own. “Go on ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I’ll wait outside.” A4 put on the rest of her clothes and left the room.

A2 got up, grabbed her dress, and pulled it on, only to hear the fabric rip beneath her fingers. Her tail wasn’t the only thing that hadn’t gone away in the morning—her fingernails were still long,
thick, and wickedly sharp, and had left parallel tears in the dress. Grumbling with frustration, she put the dress on as carefully and gently as she could and stood in front of the mirror (since when had it had such a big crack in it?), adjusting it until it more or less hid her tail.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught her face reflected in the mirror. Her ears were still long and sharp, pointed tips poking out from between locks of her long white hair, gently glazed with a fine dusting of white fur; the tip of her nose was still vaguely discolored, slightly damp, and off-texture.

What was she going to do about that? It wasn’t like she was self-conscious about her looks—hell, she’d spent three years running around the forest naked, after all—but she was loath to explain to everyone else in the village what a werewolf was. It was just a pain in the ass.

There was still some blood on her face, darkened and crusted remnants of her dinner clinging to her mouth, nose, and cheeks. She tried to lick the blood off her nose, gave up once she realized how short her tongue was now, and wiped as much onto her sleeve as she could.

She’d just ignore all these changes as best she could and hope everyone else ignored them, too. If anyone didn’t, she just wouldn’t say anything. That was her plan.

While she dressed herself, she noticed another bruise on her chest—this one larger, more cloudy, resting on the slope of her breast just beneath the first bruise. Like the first one, there were remnants of a glossy, waxy pinkish substance clinging to the gray, brown, and blue-tinted skin. Weird.

“Something wrong, Two?” A4 called out.

A2 sighed. Stifling a yawn, she turned her back on the mirror and headed out after A4. She wondered how she could sleep so long and so well and still feel so tired, but dismissed it as just her body struggling to adjust to actually getting a good night’s sleep for once.

9S woke up to find his skull throbbing as his brain squeezed against it. He rolled out of bed and hit the floor, his thin sheets coming with him and tearing themselves free of his cot, tangled up between and around his legs. The ceiling lights had never been this bright—they stabbed at his eyes—and the background hum of the Bunker’s systems never this loud. His mouth was so dry that his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth.

“Good morning, Unit 9S,” Pod 153 said, swooping down and helping him up.

“Turn down the lights,” he croaked. “I, uh… I don’t feel so good, Pod.”

“Observation: Alcohol has had a deleterious effect on Unit 9S’s neural and sensory software, as expected. According to human records, this condition was known as a ‘hangover.’”

9S stuck out his tongue. “How do I cure it?”

“Statement: the best way to limit a hangover’s intensity is to consume less alcohol.”

“Too late for that.”

“According to this support unit’s records, one other effective hangover cure was ‘the hair of the dog,’” Pod 153 added, “which was an additional alcoholic beverage consumed in the morning. This tactic is not recommended. The following consumables are identified as lessening hangover symptoms: Red ginseng, prickly pear extract, ginger, cherries, pomegranates, spinach, dark
chocolate, and green and black tea. Proposal: Unit 9S should try to acquire these items upon returning to the surface.”

“I think the hair of the dog sounds easier to get a hold of,” 9S grumbled. “I’ll see if 6O has any more of that stuff.”

“Observation: Based on the ratio of the amount of alcohol consumed and the severity of its effect, Unit 9S can be classified as a ‘lightweight.’ Unit 9S’s course of action is not recommended. Furthermore, Unit 9S should not discuss the presence of contraband with Unit 6O while she is on duty.”

9S sighed and wrapped his visor over his eyes extra tightly, which accomplished absolutely nothing since he could see right through it. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Objectives recently updated: Unit 9S and 2B will be returning to Earth via access terminal. A distress signal has been picked up from an area close to Anemone’s camp. Vampires may be involved; YoRHa is requested to investigate and exterminate.”

“Oh, boy. Fun.”

“Further updates: Unit 21O has been decommissioned as Unit 9S’s Operator.”

“What?” 9S gasped.

“A new internal matter has arisen that renders Unit 21O no longer fit for active duty.”

“Wh-What is it?” 9S grabbed the pod’s arms. “What’s going on? Why isn’t she fit for duty anymore?”

“Statement: Documents pertaining to Unit 21O are classified. This support unit is forbidden from distributing them to Unit 9S.”

“But…”

“Unit 6O has been assigned to cover Operator duties for both Unit 2B and Unit 9S,” the pod added. “This is the most efficient solution to Unit 21O’s absence, given that both of you already exclusively work together.”

“Poor girl.” 9S wondered how hung over 6O was. “Is 21O… okay, though?”

“Unit 21O is being considered for other avenues of service,” Pod 153 said.

9S let out a relieved sigh. He’d been terrified at first that decommissioning meant… “C-Can I see her?”

“Inadvisable. Unit 9S must rendezvous with Unit 2B to investigate the purported vampire outbreak.”

“Right.” 9S patted himself down to make sure he wasn’t forgetting any part of his uniform and ran through his inventory. Everything seemed to be in order, save for his splitting headache…

He’d have to just wait for it to wear off. Even though the walls still seemed to be spinning around him, he took off down the hallway as Pod 153 projected 2B’s location marker onto his HUD.

As 9S hurried down the hall, he wondered if he’d ever see Alucard again. That man was probably on his way back to the lunar colony at this very moment and he’d probably stay there, though, until
the war was over and the Earth was safe. Maybe he’d even be disciplined or arrested for stowing
away and making his way to Earth. Unfortunately, Alucard probably wouldn’t be able to answer
the hundreds of questions 9S had for a very long time.

“H-Hey there, 2B,” he said as she appeared from behind the curvature of the hallway.

She stiffened. “Oh. 9S.”

9S fought very hard to remember what he had said to her last night. “Uh…”

“There’s no time to waste,” she brusquely told him as she climbed into the open access terminal set
into the wall. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night came out and I can't stop playing it, so the
next chapter might be delayed until I'm done with the game. It's just so fucking good.
Sorry not sorry.
Caprice of Blood

Chapter Summary

2B meets an old friend from the Type-E division. Alucard makes an emergency landing.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience! The new chapter is ready. I hope you enjoy it. Also Bloodstained is a great game and if you have any love for the Castlevania series you owe it to yourself to play it. Just... don't get the Switch version. Oof.

Unfortunately, A2 isn't in this chapter, but here's some concept art of her werewolf form a friend of mine made:

Fixed up this commission for @wmm_ebooks of A2 in various stages of Woof.

Based on this NieR:Automata /Castlevania fic she's writing: https://t.co/fj09F7YtAt pic.twitter.com/XokJH4jhVf

— [COMS OPEN] Hannah has logged in. (@sympolite) June 28, 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alucard stared at the mechanical fingers, off-white like bleached bones, hard and segmented like a crab’s shell, as they slowly and hesitantly curled inward and formed a fist. He felt a soft pressure in the back of his mind like a lead weight stuck to his skull that grew just a little harder with every attempt he tried to make the mechanical appendage move. It was far less painful than the attempt Devola and Popola had made to jerry-rig him a new arm the other day—YoRHa’s Type-H units and R&D specialists were much more well-equipped to handle these matters than a pair of outcasts playing with junk.

“Are you noticing any pain or discomfort?” 2H asked, her voice buzzing in Alucard’s ear.

“Nothing major,” he told her. The arm didn’t quite feel like his arm, and the constant weight in the back of his head reminded him of that; controlling it was like issuing mental commands to a familiar and required a level of concentration he wasn’t quite used to keeping up for this long.

“We’re sorry we couldn’t put any skin on it, sir,” 4H told him. “After my mission last night, I—I was still so excited from meeting you and receiving your blessing, 2H and I stayed up all night to make it, but we didn’t have time to...”

Alucard rolled up his sleeve to examine the stark border where the hard shell of his mechanical forearm met his elbow and the sleek, matte synthetic material gave way to scarred and burned flesh. The two Type-H units had worked fast—almost immediately after his meeting with White
this morning, they’d called him over with a prototype they wanted to test. He’d been leery at first, but their work spoke for itself.

“I’ll be returning to the surface in a few hours,” 2H said, “but until then, I’ll keep monitoring your arm’s performance for any irregularities. By the way... why are you heading back to Earth? Isn’t the colony safer?”

Alucard sighed and closed his eyes. “I’ve received permission from the Council to remain on Earth,” he lied. “My presence should significantly boost morale down there.” In truth, he was returning to Earth on board the same shuttle that had brought him to the Bunker because he couldn’t stand it anymore, and he suspected that White couldn’t stand him anymore, either.

The shuttle’s cabin shuddered, jostling him in his seat. “We’ve breached the stratosphere,” 6O told him from her desk aboard the Bunker. “Isn’t that exciting?”

The poor girl had her hands full now between 2B, 9S, and Alucard—White had, apparently, found out that she worked three times faster than other Operators and had therefore tripled her workload accordingly. Her voice hadn’t lost its chipper cheer for even an instant yet, though; Alucard suspected that the thrill of looking after a human being was far too great to be counterbalanced by the stress of overwork.

“6O, move aside. You’re blocking the diagnostic readouts,” 2H told her.

“Oh, sorry, 2H. I didn’t mean to.”

The shuttle shuddered again, this time more violently. Alucard felt thankful the cabin had no windows. He wasn’t sure he could handle the sight of the Earth’s surface from so high up. Seeing it from photographs was one thing. It wasn’t that he suffered from vertigo, but more that at heart, he was still a fifteenth-century man in a one-hundred-twentieth-century world, and there was a part of him deep in his brain stem, the most primitive depths of his psyche, that told him that the highest reaches of the sky, where even birds feared to fly, was God’s domain, and that all this business with airplanes and space shuttles and orbital satellites was simply the hubris of Icarus writ large. He hadn’t cared much for flying in the twenty-first century, either.

“Is everything all right out there?” he asked 6O as he leaned back in his seat and tried enjoy the flight as best he could. He wanted to close his eyes and doze off and dream of bread. God almighty, he hadn’t had bread since he’d dug his way out of his coffin. He’d give his humanity for a fresh loaf with a hard, crisp golden-brown crust and a fluffy white crumb that was warm and soft and chewy and slightly sweet in all the right ways.

His stomach growled and twisted itself into knots in protest of his vivid imagination. He’d even settle for that disgusting ‘fast food’ garbage—a trayful of greasy fries from some so-called ‘restaurant’ almost sounded more appealing than bread right now.

In fact, forget bread. He would trade his soul and give himself over to the darkness for a single french fry. That was how desperate he was.

“We’re passing through a machine blockade right now,” 6O told him, answering the question his whining stomach had made him forget he’d asked. “But I’ve got the flight unit on remote pilot outside, so you’re fine!”

A dull boom managed to seep through the shuttle’s thick hull. 4H let out a cheer.

“See? Nothing to worry about!”
Alucard slumped over and bit his lip. If it wasn’t for his strong dhampyr constitution, he’d have fainted from hunger a few hours ago. He’d have to go hunting as soon as he landed—take the form of a wolf, maul some creature in the woods to death, rip it apart…

What would happen to his prosthetic arm when he transformed? Would it vanish along with his clothes and equipment? Would it become a quaint little mechanical forepaw or bat wing?

“By the way, uh… Alucard, sir?” 6O asked. “Is… is 21O going to be okay?”

“I made some suggestions to your Commander; assuming she doesn’t refuse to follow them out of spite, 21O will be fine.”

It was a dangerous game, allowing someone with a direct link to Dracula to remain on the Bunker. From now until Dracula was slain, 21O would have to remain cut off from the outside world, fed false information within her quarters to run interference against the dark lord’s plans. Alucard wasn’t sure Dracula would fall for such a trick, but 21O had insisted on making herself useful even in her current state. If she couldn’t be useful, in her own words, then what was the point of her existence?

“It’s just that… our jobs are our lives, and without that, she… I-Is it okay if I visit her?”

“Certainly. So long as she does not leave her quarters and you do not share any information on current events with her. Not a single truthful fact about YoRHa’s operations must enter her head.”

“Got it! I’ll keep her company, then!”

“While you’re on triple duty?” 2H asked her. “Are you sure you can handle that?”

“Well, 2B and 9S are always together, so that’s really more like one and a half times the workload…”

“I will be hewing closely to those two as well,” Alucard said, recalling his promise to 21O. “I hope that makes things more efficient for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Devola, Popola, A2, and now 9S. He sure had ended up pledging his protection to quite a few people now. Was he overextending himself? Was he making promises he couldn’t keep? After what had happened to Soma, what right did he have to continue to play protector? What had he been thinking?

Just like his father, he never learned. That was why everything always happened over and over again and nothing ever truly changed. No lesson ever fully sank in, no matter how painful. Like his father, for better and for worse, no force in heaven or on earth could change his mind.

He faded into a fitful, all-too-brief sleep interrupted by visions of lavish banquets attended by people he would rather not have dinner with.

2B rolled the stone away from the hidden entrance to the coliseum. The stone had splatters of blood on it; the same splatters riddled the sand in the vague shape of bootprints. 9S crouched beside them, wiping his gloved finger through the bloody sand and holding his fingertip under his nose.

“Looks like one android managed to escape,” he noted.
“Just one?” 2B asked. She mashed the button on the access panel to the right of the metal door the stone had been obscuring, but the light above it stayed red and the door stayed closed. “How do you know only one person escaped?”

“It’s hard to tell in this sand, but there’s only one set of footprints.”

“That was probably whoever had sent the distress signal.”

9S grimaced and licked his lips. “Ugh. Why’d it have to be the desert?”

“Now is not the time to complain, 9S.” 2B tapped on the access panel again. “I need your help. Can you hack into the door and open it?”

“Can the Commander scowl hard enough to break her own jaw? Of course I can,” he retorted, pulling himself upright and stumbling across the slippery sand. “Stupid sand,” he muttered under his breath. “Coarse… irritating… gets everywhere…”

2B stepped back and crossed her arms. This was just what she needed—a partner who was still drunk.

He laid his hand on the access panel. “Open sesame.”

2B had to restrain herself from groaning. “9S.”

“Yeah, yeah.” A flash of white light shot from the palm of 9S’s outstretched hand to the panel; he placed his free hand on his forehead and groaned softly as the red light flickered and turned green. The door slid open, revealing a void even darker than the eternal night blanketing this side of the Earth.

Even 2B couldn’t help but recoil at the sharp scent of android blood and machine oil that wafted from the pitch-black hallway and filled her nostrils. It wasn’t an uncommon odor to expect from one of these secret killing floors, but its intensity was far beyond what she’d been expecting.

“Hey, 2B,” 6O whispered in her ear, her voice staticky and muffled from the distance between the Earth’s surface and the Bunker and the signal-dampening clouds overhead. “Be careful. You too, 9S.”

Bracing herself, 2B stepped over the threshold and summoned her sword to her hand. Her fingers curled against the cloth wrapped around its hilt. Vampires couldn’t be detected by her pod’s scans—as far as it was aware, the coliseum was empty. She knew better, though—the pressure in the air, worming its way into her chassis and pressing against her brain, told her that this place was infested.

“Pod,” 9S told Pod 153, “set anti-vampire ordinance to a sixty degree aperture.”

2B nodded. 9S still had sharp wits despite his handicap blunting them—the wider the spread, the more vampires it could take out at once, even if the effects were diluted. “Pod 042, do the same.”

“Affirmative,” her pod replied. “Beam aperture set to sixty degrees.”

2B delved deeper into the dark and quiet coliseum, heels tapping against the stone tiles beneath her feet with every step, the clacks echoing through the stone hall. Her pod’s lights and 9S’s threw shadows around the coliseum’s lobby. Crimson blood and black oil stained the floor and walls and even speckled the ceiling, soaking into the dusty stone. The wooden beams holding up the tunnels bored into the rock creaked and groaned as though they were weary. An ancient and battered
computer terminal hung precariously off the corner of the long receptionists’ desk, as though in the panic that had swept through this place it had been jostled just centimeters away from tumbling to the floor.

She knew this place. She’d come to this coliseum, and the other two like it in the forest and the sunken city, to blow off steam and raise money (YoRHa’s stipend didn’t quite cover the costs of some of the rarer and higher-end equipment the merchants down here on Earth sold). But like this, dead and dark, it was nearly unrecognizable.

She took stock of the entry and exit points to the lobby. Each gloomy hall led deeper into the coliseum, winding staircases leading down to the holding pens where the captured machines were kept, airy archways leading to the tiered benches that circled the arena in concentric rings. There was only one exit to the outside world; 2B and 9S currently blocked it.

9S took a step forward, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her. “You can feel it, too,” he muttered, “can’t you?”

2B nodded. It was as though there were bugs crawling through the soles of her boots and nipping at her feet. Although this place was still and quiet, it was far from empty.

She took a ragged breath; the pressure against her chest grew. Was she afraid? Impossible. She and 9S had the tools to kill these things easily and effectively. There was nothing worth fearing in this place.

Fear was prohibited.

The door behind the two androids slammed shut with a loud and echoing clang; the stone walls trembled, the wooden beams let out aggrieved groans, and dust trickled from the ceiling.

“What the—” 9S whirled around to face the door, putting his back to 2B’s. “The door!”

Well over a dozen pairs of crimson lights flickered on in the shadows as the floor began to shake and stomping feet—boots, skin, metal—bore a surge of androids and machines up the staircases into the lobby.

“9S, get the door open!” 2B barked, pushing him along the hall while she blocked the entrance. “Pod, ready…”

The vampires flooded the room from all sides. Machines, androids, all alike in the bloody light shining in their eyes and optical sensors and the mess of blood and oil streaked across their chins and cheeks. The machines’ smooth faces were marred, the bottom halves ripped away to reveal internal mechanisms lined with spiked teeth; the androids’ fangs were sharp and bloodstained, their faces pale and lips blue.

“Fire!”

There was a flash of light from Pod 042; 2B felt a faint wave of heat wash over her skin in a prickling wave. Smoke curled from the vampires’ metal hulls and synthetic skin, but nothing else happened.

The ultraviolet beam didn’t work.

2B hurried to bring up her sword and beat back the wave of enemies bearing down on her. She drove the Virtuous Contract’s white blade into a vampire machine’s chassis up to its hilt and kicked it into another android, skewering them both, then summoned another blade—the longer,
heavier Virtuous Treaty—and buried it in an android’s side, cutting through its skin and spilling blood all over its ragged and sunfaded fatigues.

“2B, use the ultraviolet!” 9S called out.

“I did! It’s not working!”

“What do you mean it’s not working? Focus the aperture!”

2B freed both of her swords from the skewered vampires and crossed them over her chest, blocking the advances of a bloodstained and disheveled android. She pressed the blades against his chest and forced him back as his cold fingertips scrabbled for purchase and scraped against her cheek.

“Pod! Ultraviolet! Ten degrees!” she shouted.

The beam Pod 042 shot this time was narrower, stronger, more focused; a patch of the vampire android’s cheek turned bright red and began to smoke, but nothing more happened. There was no significant damage to the android’s body, inside or out.

“2B, what’s going on?” 6O gasped, her voice ringing in 2B’s ear. “A-Are those things… immune?”

Undeterred, 2B kicked the android grappling with her away and sliced through his torso, cutting open his neck and spilling blood down the front of his ragged uniform. The distance she’d put between herself and the vampire was instantly closed by another, who drove his forehead into her stomach and knocked her onto her back, then wrapped his arms around her hips to pin her down.

As she hit the ground, 2B drove the pommel of the Virtuous Contract into the vampire’s face, knocking loose one of the two fangs poking out from either side of his mouth, and buried the long, heavy blade of the Virtuous Treaty into his head; the white blade sank into his skull and came to rest between his eyes. “9S! The door!” she shouted out as she tried to wriggle free of the vampire’s grip.

“The circuits! They’re fried! There’s nothing left to hack!”

As 2B struggled to free herself, 9S’s sword flew through the air and pierced one of the other vampire androids’ legs, causing her to stumble; a white-hot lance of light spewed forth from his pod and bored a molten hole through a machine’s torso.


The injured vampires picked themselves up and pressed onward as 2B wrenched herself away from her captor and scrambled down the hall.

“This was a trap,” 9S growled as he struggled futilely with the door. “It wasn’t a survivor who sent that distress signal…”

“…It was us,” one of the vampires answered. The rest all laughed in unison, the human voices of androids mingling with the harsh and electronic laughter of the machines. The vampires 2B had injured picked themselves up, undaunted by their grievous wounds; even the machine Pod 153 had blown a hole through was still fully functional. Fifteen vampires in total stood clustered together in the lobby, their ashen faces lit in ghoulish chiaroscuro by the harsh lighting from Pod 042’s flashlight.
More and more red pinpricks lit up in the darkness behind them. How many vampires were still lying in wait? How many more filled the depths of this bloodstained coliseum?

The vampires rushed into the narrow hallway. It was a bottleneck—they could barely fit in shoulder-to-shoulder, giving 2B a defensive advantage she was grateful for beyond words. She cut down the vampires one by one, two by two, slicing with surgical precision through the weakest parts of their limbs and joints to disable them. But the ones who couldn’t walk still crawled toward her even as their brethren trampled them underfoot, desperate to nip at her heels.

“Pod! Blast the door!” 9S shouted out. Pod 153 obliged, and with a high-pitched buzz from its inner mechanisms, it loosed another blast of searing light, this one aimed at the unmoving door. 2B glanced back over her shoulder and saw, to her dismay, that while the laser had easily burned through the door, there was a layer of stone flush against the thin metal door that had not been penetrated. A shallow dimple in the rock wall glowed a dull orange as the liquefied layer of stone cooled.

A Scanner with bloodstained ash-blonde hair and skin so pale it was nearly translucent leaped at her, flanking her; 2B swung her sword to intercept him, only for the vampire to vanish as soon as her blade touched his body. An electric jolt ran under her forehead and stabbed between her eyes as she swung at another charging vampire, and another, and another, only for all of them to flicker out of existence.

While 2B dealt with the illusions, a machine broke through the intangible ranks and sank its metal claws deep into her shoulder, hooked its fingers into her flesh, and pulled, tearing away a thick strip of her skin from her bicep down to her forearm. 2B screamed as white-hot pain ripped through her body and lost her grip on the Virtuous Treaty, letting it clatter to the floor. The machine plunged its exposed maw into her injured bicep, its fangs macerating her flesh. With her remaining sword, 2B cut through her shoulder to free herself and staggered backward, barely able to fend off another strike from one of the other vampires with only one weak arm clutching her sword.

A flash of light lit the hallway; a shot rang out. A sharp pain ran through the side of 2B’s head and half of the world vanished, replaced with a haze of static. Pod 042 returned fire, its hail of bullets ripping through the horde to no avail. Another shot grazed 2B’s shoulder; three more tore into her chest just under her clavicle, each one in quick succession knocking the wind out of her.

6O’s garbled, choppy voice still rang in her ears. “Two—Can y—e? A—kay?” 2B gritted her teeth and pressed forward, cutting off all but one of a vampire machine’s limbs with a single crescent-shaped strike and ducking behind it as another salvo of bullets pinged against the machine’s hull. The machine snapped at her and gnashed its mechanical teeth until 2B drove her sword all the way through its head and into the floor.

“Pod, fire at the door,” she growled at Pod 042. “9S, get clear!”

9S obliged just in time to narrowly avoid another laser strike against the stone barricade lying on the other side of the door; this shot penetrated even deeper, leaving a narrow aperture running through the rock. A telltale breeze of light, cool air from the outside blew into the hot and stuffy coliseum.

The deep and throaty roar of a shotgun blast filled the hall; 2B felt a cloud of hot metal pellets pepper her side, burrowing into her chassis. Her right hip joint locked up and she fell flat on her back, barely managing to conjure her sword quickly enough to throw it at the gun-wielding android and bury the blade in one of the barrels of his shotgun before he could squeeze the trigger again. The gun exploded in his hands, showering him with shrapnel.
Pod 153 fired again, widening the hole in the stone, and 9S scrambled forward to grab 2B by the collar and drag her away. “I think it’s wide enough,” he gasped, “to crawl through! You go first—”

“No,” 2B replied. She choked back a scream as she popped the dislocated joint back into place and kicked an android trying to nip at her ankle in the face, his nose cracking as her heel collided with it. There was some damage to the hip joint, some foreign material blocking its path—it didn’t set back smoothly, and she could hear it scream and squeal as she forced herself to stand, and that was to say nothing about the jolt of pain shooting down her leg and up her side with every movement. “You first.”

“But 2B…”

“You promised,” 2B said, beating back another wave of vampires as best she could. No, not another wave. The same wave as before. None of the foes she felled stayed down. None of them knew how to die anymore. Even if she cut them to pieces, they kept coming. “I can die here—but you can’t, 9S!”

9S had gotten enough coaxing; he vanished into the glowing tunnel through the rock. 2B heard him struggle to choke back pained cries as his bare skin brushed against the still-molten rock. As soon as he’d gotten clear, she threw herself at the tunnel and pulled herself through. The hot sides of the tunnel burned her fingers as she grasped at the walls scalding her stomach and searing her legs.

After what felt like an eternity, she fell onto the cold sand; the shock left her numb and shivering. She raised her hand to her cheek and felt the naked, bloodstained, bullet-studded contours of her skull. The ragged edges of skin clinging to her chassis stung and ached.

“2B… you okay?”

2B nodded and pulled herself to her knees. 9S was curled up on the ground in front of her, acrid smoke curling from the smoldering holes in his sleeves and the roasted skin on his elbows and knees.

“I’ll live. And you?”

A chagrined, yet roguish smile curled 9S’s lips. “I’m all right. Thanks for asking. And… sorry for making you worry like that.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t make promises like that while you’re drunk.”

A plume of sand exploded underneath 9S; a dark shadow burst up from underground and grabbed him by the leg. Pod 153 turned its flashlight on it and revealed a ragged, disheveled, pale, and bloodstained YoRHa battler unit, her silver hair stained scarlet and black from blood and oil, her visor loose and hanging from her nose to expose two shining red eyes.

With gauntleted hands the vampire yanked off 9S’s boots, sharpened fingertips ripping through his socks and leaving red ribbons running down his calves. While the pods floated helplessly, unable to fire without endangering 9S, the vampire opened her mouth wide, strands of saliva running across its teeth stretching and snapping, and sank her teeth into his thigh. 9S screamed and thrashed, kicking futilely at the assailant as she tried to pull him beneath the sand like a shark dragging its prey beneath the surface of the ocean. Blood dampened the ground, splattering and staining the sand.

2B rushed forward on weak and unsteady legs, conjured the Virtuous Treaty, and swung it as hard as she could with one hand, cutting through the vampire’s head. The vampire released 9S, and with
one more weary strike 2B cleaved her head from her neck.

She tossed aside her sword and scooped up 9S in her arm, tearing him free of the headless vampire’s grip as the pods blasted her into slag; knowing the two pods were only buying time, she fled, stumbling as her feet sank into the thick and slippery sand. She lost her balance and fell, rolling down the dune into a shallow valley, losing her grip on 9S and letting him fall away from her.

Alucard woke up what felt like an instant later with his mouth dry and cottony.

“Hey, 2B, be careful,” 6O whispered. “You too, 9S.”

He lifted his head, his reverie interrupted. “Excuse me?”

“Whoops, sorry. Forgot to switch audio channels,” 6O said, letting out a nervous chuckle. “This is gonna be harder than I thought…”

“May I inquire what are those two up to?”

“Oh, they’re just investigating a distress signal out in the desert. It’s probably nothing they can’t handle,” she reassured him.

Alucard went back to thinking about food, prompted by the pained squeal of his long-suffering stomach.

A cut of meat from a boar or elk grilled or roasted over a fire would be delicious if it were well-seasoned. He wondered if anyone in Anemone’s camp had any salt. Was salt of any use to androids? Pepper was right out. Onions, garlic, wheat, rice… Were any of the crops humanity had domesticated over the millennia even still in existence, or after ten thousand years had they evolved beyond recognition? Could these plants even grow on a planet where day and night lasted six months? Had they all gone extinct? What if corn didn’t exist anymore? Or rice? Or wheat? Or even potatoes?

It was a moot point. He was no survivalist, nor was he a farmer. He’d grown up pampered in the lap of nobility. He could probably catch a fish on his own through trial and error, but where would he find lemon and parsley to go with it? Was he doomed to never again have a proper meal?

It was such a stupid, trivial thing to be hung up about that he was almost ashamed of himself.

“2B, what’s going on?” 6O gasped, her voice ringing in Alucard’s ear and startling him yet again. “A-Are those things… immune?”

“You’re leaking again, 6O,” 4H pointed out.

“Is something wrong?” Alucard asked.

“Oh, uh, n-nothing’s wrong!” 6O stammered, her tone of voice making it clear that something was very wrong.

“They’re in a nest of vampires,” 4H said.

“The video signal’s decaying, but it looks like the ultraviolet beam’s not working,” 2H pointed out.

“Ultraviolet? Is that your weapon against vampires?” Alucard asked.
“It’s the only one that isn’t tied up in R&D,” 6O stammered. “They should have had silver-tipped bullets by now, but we’ve had issues with the supply chain…”

“A pale imitation of the sun’s rays,” Alucard scoffed, recalling that the worst White’s ‘trap’ for him yesterday had done, not counting the silver bullet, had been nothing a day at the beach without sunscreen wouldn’t do to a human. “You can’t expect that to work against anything but a vampire’s weakest and most pathetic thralls.”

“But it worked against those vampires who attacked the Bunker!” 6O answered, as if she were offended that the weapons weren’t working properly. “You can’t be saying those were weak and pathetic!”

“Evidently, they were.”

“2B, what’s happening down there? Why can’t I—” A loud whack sounded as 6O (apparently) resorted to the most primitive of all technological troubleshooting methods. “I can’t hear you! 2B? 2B! What’s going on? 2B!” Her voice was cracking.

“There goes our picture,” 2H glumly noted. “Is something throttling the bandwidth?”

“O-Oh, god I’m gonna lose them,” 6O wailed, on the verge of tears. “They—They’re gonna die and turn into monsters and I’ll—I’ll never s-see them again—”

“Calm down, 6O,” 4H said. “Those two are resourceful. They’ll find a way out!”

“2B? Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

“How far away from them am I?” Alucard asked, fumbling with the buckles holding him in his seat. If it was necessary to keep his promises, he was prepared to do something very stupid. Trevor would be proud of him.

“S-She’s gone and it’s a-all my fault,” 6O blubbered, her voice muffled. “We lost them and n-now there’s no more 2B or 9S b-because I was stupid a-and lazy. I deserve to be decommissioned and th-thrown into the incinerator like the useless p-piece of scrap I am…”

“We’re about ten klicks southwest from their last location,” 2H answered while 6O sobbed into her hands at her side. “But we’re still an hour out from landing and the landing strip is seventy klicks to the north…”

“We can’t alter the shuttle’s course or remote control its escape pod,” 4H added. “The flight unit is the only thing 6O’s hooked into. There’s no way you’d get to them in time…”

“6O, this is your god speaking,” Alucard said, standing up and steadying himself on the back of his seat as the shuttle rocked from a brief bout of turbulence. “Calm yourself and listen to me.”

6O hiccuped and sniffled, but at least she’d stopped babbling. As loath as Alucard was to admit it, godhood had its perks.

“Bring the flight unit as close as you can to the shuttle’s side door. I’m going to board it.”

“Are you crazy?” 2H and 4H shouted out in unison.

“You’re still at cruising altitude. The atmosphere’s too thin!” 4H said. “Flight units have open cockpits; you’ll get hypoxia and die in minutes!”
“Then we’ll descend quickly.”

“O-Okay,” 6O said. “I’m bringing the flight unit around…”

“If Alucard dies on our watch,” 2H cautioned her, “we won’t make it out of this room.”

“2H, don’t stress her out like that,” 4H chided. “Can’t you see she’s already freaking out over 2B and 9S?”

Alucard ignored the chattering in his ear and made his way to the airlock, picking up a single oxygen mask and an oxygen tank not much larger than a bottle of wine. Androids had no need for these things; this mask had been made bespoke for him in the case of an emergency descent. Looking at it now, it seemed doubtful it had anywhere near enough oxygen to keep a human alive at this altitude for very long.

He strapped the mask to his face and looped the hose running to the tank to his belt; then, one by one, he opened the airlock’s double doors and clung with a white-knuckle grip to the railing bolted to the wall as the thick, pressurized air rushed out of the room. The air was thin, and deathly cold to boot; he could barely take a breath at all, and what little he took into his lungs stabbed at him like a blade made of ice. The black sky and flashing red lights of the airlock swirled around him.

With his free hand, he pressed the mask to his mouth and took a deep breath. The air tasted like foul, like copper and wormwood; the bitter, metallic taste and stench was so strong he nearly retched. The tank flapped in the wind, clanking painfully against his leg. Through his lightheaded veil of dizziness and the tears welling up in his eyes from the bitter wind, he could discern the silhouette of the black flight unit like a distorted bird of prey against the darkness. Its engines let out a throaty roar as the blue-hot flames pouring out behind them throbbed, casting deceptively-cold light against the aircraft’s carbonized hull.

Steeling himself and fighting back the black miasma crowding the edges of his vision, his languid pulse pounding in his ears, he leaped out and caught hold of the flight unit’s wing. His head pounding from the exertion of moving his prosthetic arm, his chest aching where it had collided with the wing, he clawed his way across the fuselage, swung under the undercarriage, and climbed into the cockpit. The wind scraped across his face like sandpaper, his long hair billowing out behind him.

“I'm in!” he gasped with his last breath, pressing the mask against his face again and swallowing another bitter lungful of air. “Take me down!”

The flight unit broke away from the shuttle and let the glittering dart, now empty, continue on its preordained course. It dropped like a stone, its nose dipping and pointing itself straight at the ground. Its engines screamed until it reached to terminal velocity, leaving a keening ringing in his ears long after they’d quieted down.

In a dizzying maneuver that wrenched at Alucard’s stomach, the flight unit pitched and yawed, reorienting itself toward the desert. He used the oxygen tank sparingly, but still ran out sooner than he’d hoped; he tossed the useless mask and canister away. As the flight unit continued on its descending path, the air grew thicker and Alucard’s head grew clearer.

There were few lights dotting the Earth’s surface through the veil of invisible clouds below; scattered pinpricks that could have been camps like Anemone’s or factories for machines or androids were spread out like isolated islets in a vast and empty ocean. Alucard’s heart ached; his misgivings about flight aside, he had still treasured his first glimpse from above of the glittering sea of lights modern cities created at night. Those cities were all dark now, lifeless and silent.
“Alucard, with all due respect…” 2H said, “you’re just a human. What do you have that our combat units don’t?”

“Prior experience,” he answered, not quite lying.

His fists curled around the flight unit’s inert controls. This time, he vowed, he would not fail. Even if it meant revealing his true self and his true powers for all to see.

Sand stung 2B’s wounds as she picked herself up, her scorched palm and knees sinking into the cold ground. 9S had landed only a meter or so away from her and laid on the ground clutching at his bloody leg, his face stricken with terror. “No, no, no,” he whimpered, his chest heaving. “No, no, no, please, no…”

He had been bitten.

“That didn’t happen,” he whined, sparing only a glance at 2B before fixating again on his leg. “No, that didn’t… please, I—I don’t… I can’t…”

2B’s breath froze. Not him. Anybody but him. If he turned—if he became one of those monsters—she would never see him again. There would be no new 9Ses, no future in which she could have him by her side.

Ever since the first one had died, every subsequent 9S had been merely a phantom of the original, a ghost, a vision of might-have-beens and could-have-beens. That had been the lie she’d told herself to keep herself from growing too fond of him, to help herself keep him at arms’ length. The truth was that no matter how she rationalized it to herself, every 9S was precious, every 9S was special, because every 9S was him.

And if he became a vampire, there would never be another him again.

Fighting past the pain, 2B dragged herself over to him and fell onto him, bracing her shoulder against his chest. Planting her elbow on his stomach, she raised her hand and summoned her sword.

“2B… I—I’m so sorry… I’m so, so—please, I don’t know—What do I do? What can I do? I—I don’t want to…”

She plunged the blade deep into 9S’s thigh just above the blood-smeared pinpricks, ignoring the anguished scream that wrenched itself from his throat and echoed in the dry desert air, and sheared off his leg. It was a ragged, messy, inelegant cut that broke her heart, but as she watched the severed leg shrivel up and turn alabaster white, she felt relieved. She’d gotten to it in time.

“Are you all right?” 2B croaked, rolling onto her back and laying at his side.

“2B…” 9S wearily lifted his head. Sand encrusted his sweat-soaked hair and skin. “They sure… fooled us, huh? Talk about… taking the fight to them…”

2B felt a lump grow in her throat. “We had no idea our weapons would be so useless.”

Pod 153 tended to 9S’s thigh, dispensing staunching gel to block off the severed coolant veins pouring his blood onto the sand. The flow of blood slowed to a trickle and then stopped. Pod 042 did the same for 2B’s shoulder.

“How do we kill those things?” she asked, shuddering. “I… I thought I’d felt helpless before, but…”
“I’ll send our backup data to the Bunker. We have to detonate our black boxes.”

“Will that work?”

“We didn’t need sunlight to kill 5O,” 9S explained. “If we vaporize these things, destroy their bodies… even if they’re immortal, they can’t survive that.” A reaction between two active black boxes produced an explosion large enough to reduce everything within a radius of roughly three city blocks into a fine powder. It was the last resort for missions in which the enemy vastly outnumbered them.

The stone in front of the coliseum’s entrance wouldn’t hold forever—2B and 9S alone had been able to roll it aside, and the one vampire who’d waited outside to trap them inside had been able to roll it back all by himself—and when the vampires pushed it away from the door, they would be free to descend upon the world and grow their ranks exponentially. They all had to be destroyed down to the last atom.

“Wait… I can’t establish a connection to the Bunker,” 9S said, his voice shaking. “I think there’s… chaff in the clouds blocking our signals. We can’t back ourselves up…”

2B felt a pang of guilt stab her through the chest. Her fingers curled around the hem of 9S’s coat, the leather of her glove squeaking. She couldn’t let him lose any of his memories again. Not like his first descent…

“Keep trying.”

“But…”

“Just keep trying.” 2B raised her hand and summoned her black box, watching the glittering cube materialize within the cage of her fingers. “Don’t bring yours out… until you’ve at least backed yourself up.”

“What about you?”

“I can afford to lose… a little bit. It’s nothing.” 2B watched as a mass of shadows crested the top of the dune looming above her. “But you…”

“I’m… willing to sacrifice that if you are, 2B.” 9S forced himself to sit up and held his own black box in his hand, panting from exertion. “We’re soldiers. It’s… what we’re supposed to do. Like it or not…”

2B bowed her head. He was right. Like it or not, to serve humanity meant to sacrifice precious things for its sake. But even so… “Keep trying.”

“2B…”

“Keep trying!”

The vampires descended the dune and fanned out, circling around 2B and 9S. 2B counted over thirty of them.

*Thirty of them.* Practically an army. If they descended on a Resistance camp or outpost they could easily double their numbers—the monstrous foes encircling her and 9S were the makings of an unstoppable plague.

She held her black box out to 9S. Her hand was shaking. “Nines, please…”
The crowd parted in front of 2B; a YoRHa android she couldn’t help but recognize (although she wished she hadn’t) stepped out from behind them, tossing her curly mane of lavender-white hair over her shoulder.

“... of all people,” 6E said, grinning as her eyes glittered like rubies set in her shadow-wreathed face. “Darling 2… B, was it? Is that what they’re calling you now? And you, Nines… I’ve been looking for a strong, handsome, silver-haired boy, but I suppose you’ll do!”

The sound of her voice set 2B’s teeth on edge. Of all the people to be the ringleader of this little army, for it to be her…

6E snapped her fingers and the vampires flanking her rushed forward and seized 2B and 9S, dragging them both roughly to their feet (or in 9S’s case, his foot) and forcing them well apart from each other. Another set of vampires grabbed their pods and forced them to the ground. 9S futilely stretched his arm out, his black box clutched in his hand, but there was no way he could reach 2B’s black box, no matter how much either of them strained their aching limbs.

That wasn’t the end. Even if they couldn’t cause a black box reaction, the two of them could still self-destruct normally. At the very least, it would be enough to take out the vampires closest to them. “9S, engage your self-destruct!” 2B shouted out. “We h—”

An icicle plunged into the back of her head and buried itself deep into her mind, searing in its coldness; her muscles spasmed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the vampirized Scanner unit from before, the one with pale hair and sickly, glassy skin, lower his hand as whitish sparks fluttered up from his open palm. His mouth twisted in a mischievous, lopsided smile, lips stained cherry-red standing out in ghoulish contrast to his ghostly bluish-white face.

2B closed her eye and tried to self-destruct. It was a simple command, but one which required great concentration to send, lest combat units accidentally set it off by an idle thought alone. She gritted her teeth and doubled over, expecting the familiar searing pain that accompanied the cascading and catastrophic failures of every system in her body at once. But—

Nothing happened. As she opened her eye again, the Scanner coldly laughed at her.

She felt a puff of cold breath against her neck and froze, her joints locked up from the paralyzing fear. Any one of the several living corpses that had their arms wrapped around her could easily bite her and fill her body with that poison. She would cease to exist. Her backups would be scrubbed from YoRHa’s server. There would never be another Unit Two Type-E—not that there needed to be, but…

The thought of oblivion didn’t bother her—but what struck terror into her heart was the thought that she would be replaced by something so horrible, so monstrous, so evil… and that she would enjoy it. To have everything that was her, all of her previous loyalties, wiped away with the flick of a switch; to be filled with the same insatiable bloodlust that singularly motivated all the other vampires to the exclusion of everything else; to no longer feel any conflict in her heart when she was compelled to end 9S’s life yet again…

6E snapped her fingers again. “No!” she barked, stomping her foot on the sandy ground. “No biting!”

All of the vampires in the ring shared bemused glances with each other.

“NO BITING?” one of the machine vampires asked, prodding at its mechanical maw with a bloodstained steel claw.
“No. Not yet,” 6E said with a stern wag of her finger. “The distress signal ruse worked well once, but we can’t count on the same trick working twice.”

“So how do we get more androids, mistress?” one of the vampire androids holding onto 9S asked.

6E gleefully rubbed her hands. “With these two! When the Bunker detects their black box signals, they’ll send more Type-E units like me to investigate, and then we’ll drink them, too! But they have to be alive to give off those signals, so…”

2B felt an ice-cold hand clamp around the side of her neck, the vampire’s finger and thumb squeezing a thick and vulnerable vein of coolant that ran just under her skin.

6E’s grin became a scowl. “That means… no biting!” she shouted out, throwing her sword and skewering the offending vampire right through the eye. He released his hold on 2B and staggered backward, blood pouring from the perforated eye socket, letting out a pained screech. The long blade vanished in a flurry of sparks and reappeared in 6E’s hand. “How many times do I have to say it? Do you understand?”

The vampire profusely nodded, blood spraying with every vigorous shake of his head, and dropped to his knees. “Y-Yes, ma’am! I’m sorry, ma’am! I’ll never bare my fangs without your permission again, ma’am!”

“It’s a start.” She crossed her arms. “You and the others. Poor Tooie and Ninesie here are quite exhausted. Become their chairs.”

Before 2B could ask herself what 6E meant by that, the two other vampires holding onto her joined their one-eyed fellow and contorted themselves around her, their joints snapping and cracking as they popped out of place and realigned. They shoved her onto the back of the one-eyed vampire with the other two held her arm and legs in place. 9S let out a surprised yelp as his captors did the same for him.

2B squirmed uncomfortably in her living seat as the hands holding her in place dug deeper, fingernails poking through her shredded uniform and piercing her skin. The man underneath her let out a soft, disquieting moan; disgusted and reviled, she instantly stiffened and sat up straight, her muscles tensed and burning. Her seat let out a wistful sigh.

“Comfy now?” 6E asked. She gestured to four other vampires and snapped her fingers. “You four. My feet hurt and I’m sick of standing.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the four shouted out in unison, gathering around her and folding themselves into a throne for her to lounge on.

6E stretched, kicked off her boots, and slouched back, wriggling her toes. “And you.” She lazily waved her sword at one of the machines. “Footstool.”

The machine obliged, lying down on its side and allowing her to rest her feet against its hull. “YES, MA’AM. THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY.”

“No, thank you,” 6E told it, staking her sword in the ground. “Ah, that’s much better.”

“Wh… What are you doing?” 9S asked 6E.

“Waiting for your rescuers to show up, of course.” She licked her lips. “I hope YoRHa sends lots of them. This desert has me parched!”
He drew his mouth into a scowl. He didn’t wear anger well—it fit the softness of his face poorly, giving him the appearance of a child throwing a tantrum. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Excuse me? Wrong with me?” 6E cocked her head and licked her lips. “I beg your pardon?”

“You, 86S, the people you’ve bitten… what’s so great about being a vampire that makes you turn your back on YoRHa so easily?” The venom in 9S’s outburst took 2B by surprise. “What makes you turn your back on humanity, our creators—”

6E stood up, her spine as straight as a rail and head held high. 2B felt a pit form in her stomach. The harsh, cold light in the vampire’s crimson eyes boded nothing but ill will.

The Type-E division had been formed early in YoRHa’s history—only shortly after its first public military operation. 2B had been brought online less than three weeks afterward, yet even an early model such as her found herself among seasoned Executioners. 6E was one of those senior units and took to her role with a zeal no one else could match. She was the only YoRHa unit who treated her own kind with the same exact sense of disdain and disposability a typical android would reserve only for machines.

2B hated her.

“Do you know what vampires are?” 6E asked, stepping closer to 9S. 2B tensed up, clenched her fist, and strained against her captors in vain. “They are the next stage in the evolution of humanity—superior organisms to our pathetic, cowardly human masters.” Looming over 9S she bent her back just slightly and tweaked his nose. “In the face of true superiority, why shouldn’t we cast our weak old gods aside?”

“But humans created us! We have a debt to them!”

2B bit her tongue and wished that 9S would do the same. He had no idea who was holding him captive.

6E reached out and scratched under his chin. “And Mistress Carmilla recreated me, so I have a debt to her. Anyway, if you knew what it’s like to be blessed with vampirism, you’d understand.”

Her hand slipped down his chest, deftly unclasping the buttons holding his burned frock coat together with quick, smooth twists of her pale fingers.

2B leaned forward; the hands pinning her to the living chair gripped her even tighter and wrenched her backward. “6E, get away from him!”

“For example, if you were a vampire, Nines,” 6E said, her voice dripping with honeyed malevolence as a sharp fingernail traced a ring around his navel, “you would survive this.”

The scream that tore its way out of 9S’s throat lasted for only a few seconds before his overtaxed vocal systems faltered and the outcry petered out to a hoarse, weak whimper, but to 2B it lasted an eternity. 6E’s hand plunged into his stomach, piercing his skin like a pair of scissors cutting through paper, and ripped out a handful of intestinal coolant piping. The plastic tubes flapped and writhed in her clenched fist like hyperactive worms, their ragged severed ends spewing spurts of blood into the air and staining 6E’s face and clothes.

Oily blood poured in a fountain from the gaping wound in his stomach, soaking into his shorts and dripping in thick rivulets down his legs and forming a sodden pile of stained sand at his feet. As frenzied by the scent and sight of blood as sharks, the vampires forming the living chair that held him captive writhed and squirmed, pathetic and bestial moans and whines squeezing through
gritted fangs as their insatiable thirst warred with the ironclad commands 6E had given them.

Enraged, 2B let out a wild and angered howl, straining with renewed strength against her captors. One of the three vampires curled its arm around her waist and tightened it like a noose, his overwhelming supernatural strength straining her chassis. Undeterred, she pressed onward, her boots digging into the sand. Though the vampire chair had an unbreakable grip on her, they were far less anchored to the ground; though the three androids weighed well over five hundred kilograms combined, she dragged them behind her like millstones around her neck, their twisted bodies leaving furrows in the sand behind her.

“6E… I’ll kill you!” she bellowed, taking another plodding step as three more of 6E’s thralls dogpiled onto her. With the weight doubled, her knees buckled and she collapsed—yet even so, she kept crawling, spewing invective and bile until the weight piled on her back was so great that her legs sank too deeply into the frigid sand to move.

“So, uh, just out of curiosity for your well-being, Alucard, sir,” 4H said, “do you, um… have a plan of attack?”

“Yes,” Alucard replied. The rushing wind against his unprotected face pulled on his cheeks and squeezed tears from his eyes. He shivered; passing through the clouds had left him soaked to the bone and the wind did nothing to help.

He’d never flown so swiftly, and to say the least, he didn’t like it at all. If the distance was not so great and time not of the essence, he’d have loved to make this journey as a bat—significantly slower and much closer to the ground—so he could at least enjoy himself.

“Um… what is it?”

“You’ll see. Is 6O all right?”

“I’m f-fine,” 6O sniffled. “F-Focusing on the remote controls i-is… uh… h-helping.” A rime of static clung to her voice, just like the ice crystals forming on Alucard’s skin.

The flight unit jerked and shuddered, as though it had run into unexpected turbulence; the back of Alucard’s head smacked against cold metal.

“Sorry! I-I don’t know what that was!”

“If you give him a concussion, we’ll get in trouble,” 2H reminded 6O.

The flight unit shuddered again and pitched downward, the faraway dunes below rushing closer.

“Oops! S-Sorry again, I just lost the connection again. It won’t happen again!” 6O insisted as it happened again. Her rapid course-correcting proved just as nauseating as the sudden loss of autopilot.

“6O, how are you planning on maintaining control once the flight unit passes under whatever in those clouds is blocking 2B and 9S’s signals?” 2H asked, the static lacing her voice growing louder.

“Oh, no,” said 6O.

“Oh, no,” said 4H.
“How far away am I?” Alucard asked.

6O began to emit a high-pitched whine.

“Looks like you’re only about—icks out,” 4H said. “If we can kee—nection for jus—or...”

“Oh, god, I—I—sorry, Aluc—as just so wor—ut Two—at I pu—danger and now—made things wors...

—Oh, you’re—ersonal space!”

6O’s sobs and 2H’s protests devolved into a garbled mess of hissing static as the flight unit began to drop like a stone.

The uniquely discomforting sensation of one’s insides falling faster than their outsides spurred Alucard into action. Relieved, despite the peril he found himself in, to no longer be monitored so closely, he transformed into a cloud of mist and slipped out of the harness, then solidified as soon as he was clear of the aircraft; he dropped like a stone while the flight unit veered wildly off course above him.

Turning into mist didn’t hurt, but it wasn’t exactly pleasant. A cloud did not have eyes or ears; it could not see or hear or smell or feel. To be mist was to be nowhere for an instant—a disembodied consciousness that could only fumble blindly for a second or two before the experience became unbearable. It helped to know where one was going; otherwise, there was no telling where one would end up upon solidifying. Alucard had seen vampires who’d newly learned such skills embed themselves in brick walls and impale themselves on the bars of wrought-iron gates in their haste.

Better to be a bat, of course, when one needed a keen sense of one’s surroundings in flight. In the split second before Alucard took that form, he hoped he’d have two wings. If there was any form he wasn’t interested in taking, it was that of a splatter of blood on the ground ten thousand feet below him.

For the first time in what felt like decades, he prayed. To whom or what, he wasn’t sure. The wind tore his mumbled oaths from his mouth, the loud whistling in his ears drowning out his own thoughts. His heart had never pounded so rapidly.

And it kept thumping, hummingbird-like, as the rushing wind buffeted the taut, thin membranes stretched between his fingers and the cold air ruffled his fur.

With a few long, slow, powerful flaps of his wings, he slowed his descent and glided downward, elated to taste this freedom yet again, to use all of the powers at his disposal. Four paws hit the ground, scrabbling for purchase against the cold, loose sand as his keen nose caught on the breeze an unmistakable rank odor of rot and evil.

Alucard knew the stench of a vampire’s newly-turned thralls well. Vampires were vain above all, and most masked their natural musk of decay and death with all manner of cosmetics, colognes, and perfumes, but the dozens he was detecting by scent had been created far too soon for any of them to freshen themselves up.

He sprinted across the desert, over the peaks and valleys of the undulating dunes spread across the ocean of cold, dark sand, pouring his magic into his legs and spurring himself onward with all the speed of a silver bullet.

The oddly-dressed machines ambling about amid the dunes and crumbled remains of once-proud
cities must not have known what to make of the ungodly-swift wolf speeding across the desert, for none did anything more than stand stock-still and gaze after him as he passed them by.

With a sickly playful grin stretching from ear to ear, 6E turned to face 2B and crouched down before her, resting her hands on her knees. “How long do you think it’ll take for him to overheat in his condition?” she asked, sparing a glance at 9S as he exsanguinated in his seat. As his cooling systems slowly failed, his breathing grew shallow, ragged, and rapid; a pale bloom was spreading across his cheeks, the color draining from his lips; a patina of sweat coated his bare skin, glimmering in the light from the captured pods’ flashlights.

“If you bite him,” 2B growled, seething, “I… I’ll make sure you…”

“Bite him? Me?” 6E wiped flecks of spit and blood off her cheek. “Oh, no, I wouldn’t dream of it. He’s yours, after all—I want you to do the honors!”

2B went limp, the strength draining from her chassis and the knotted tension in her muscles melting away as her strained and hoarse voice caught in her throat.

“…What?” she choked out, barely even managing to whisper.

“Isn’t it what you’ve always wanted? To live forever?” 6E’s hand grazed her lips; the metallic, oily, sharp taste of 9S’s blood settled heavily in her mouth, the overwhelming odor clogging her nostrils.

2B felt herself shiver uncontrollably, her skin crawling over her beaten and battered chassis, as the recurring nightmare that had plagued her ever since her first encounter with that vampire in Pascal’s village played in her mind’s eye. Parched lips cracking as they pressed against warm skin, the vivid taste of blood pouring down her throat, skin splitting down invisible seams as grotesque and overgrown metal shapes broke free of her chassis. She looked away, blinking back tears.

“No…”

“Are you hoping reinforcements will arrive in time to save the both of you?” 6E glanced over at the horizon. “I think they might… but, of course, they won’t last long against us. Or are you thinking you’d rather let 9S die here and revive him from his backup with his soul unsullied?”

9S would lose his memories of today if he died here. Even though it was only a couple hours, and even though those hours included this torturous moment, to have those parts of his life torn away from him, for him as he existed at this very moment to be wiped away…

It was something 2B couldn’t forgive herself for doing. She never could. Even when it was so tiny and inconsequential and stupid…

The deathly pale Scanner vampire raised his hand. “Um, ma’am? I thought you were going to keep those two alive and let YoRHa track their black box signals…?”

6E blinked. “Oh, that. Right. I changed my mind.”

“Oh. Okay,” he mumbled, kicking dejectedly at the sand.

“Look at him,” 6E said to 2B, gesturing to 9S. “He’s suffering.”

2B looked at him. He was suffering. She could see his shoulders quaking, his hands trembling, the vampires growing more and more restless as his blood dripped down and stained their clothes and skin. Death from loss of blood, from failure of coolant systems, from overheating—it wasn’t quick,
pleasant, or painless. It was not a death of slow warmth muffling all thought until everything faded quietly and peacefully to black. Systems broke down slowly; circuits burned out one by one; broken thoughts ran in circles as the dead patches of neural programming grew larger and fenced them into ever-smaller enclosures; sensory systems reached their operational limits and shut down. If the vampires didn’t tear him to pieces from their own thirst soon, that slow and agonizing fate would be his.

One of the vampires holding him down reached out and undid his visor, letting it fall into his sodden lap. His eyes were gray and unfocused, gazing dully out into the middle distance, eyelids heavy and tinged blue. He was dying and 2B was powerless to do anything but watch.

She didn’t know if he could see or hear anymore. But she saw his lips move faintly, weakly, silently spelling out, 2B...

There was no way for her to know what he was asking for. Mercy? A quick death? To be bitten? To be left to burn himself out, to have a backup with no memory of today live out the rest of his (inevitably short) life for him?

“The night is cold, but not cold enough...” 6E’s eyes gleamed madly. “But you can’t bear to sit back and watch this run its course, can you? Even if you’re sure it’s the right thing to do?”

She pulled 2B out of the clutches of the vampires pinning her down, her fingertips ghosting down the side of her neck; as 6E leaned in closer and let her fangs hover over her exposed neck, 2B felt her frosty breath prickle her skin with thousands of needles.

“Don’t,” 2B choked out, her black box fluttering in her chest.

6E’s tongue dragged across her neck. “Oh, don’t worry, I wouldn’t. Not unless you ask. I want you to tell me you want it,” she whispered in her ear, her hushed voice as seductive as it was conspiratorial.

2B felt another cold, dead hand curl around the side of her hip, a numbing wave of cold sinking through the bare skin under her skirt and into her chassis, deadening the damaged joint and all but liquefying her muscles, forcing her leg to go completely limp and collapse under her weight.

“You know how powerful we are,” 6E told her, her icy hand pressing into her flesh, caressing the curve of her hip and sliding up to her waist, wriggling its way under the hem of her torn and ragged blouse. Clawed fingernails traced light furrows across pockmarked shrapnel wounds, blossoms of numbing cold blooming under her skin and driving away the stinging pain and aching pressure left by those wounds. “You’ve seen with your own eyes what little you can do against the least of us... and how strong you can be if you join us. How free you can be...”

2B glanced back at the three vampires who had folded themselves into a chair at 6E’s command without the slightest hesitation or indication of discomfort. “Free...?”

6E let out a coy, knowing giggle, as though she’d been caught lying and not only knew, but didn’t care. “A different kind of freedom, perhaps... but freedom all the same.” She leaned in closer, her fangs brushing against the side of 2B’s neck, the tips poking her skin just lightly enough not to break it. “The blessing of vampires is freedom to be superior, freedom from the curse of humanity...”

The curse of humanity.

Thoughts she had struggled not to think for three years boiled in her mind. Resentment. Anger. A
festering knot in the back of her mind, buried by terabytes of programming and years of indoctrination, that seethed and raged with every sincere utterance of ‘Glory to Mankind.’ The fury that had made her raise her sword of its own accord against a human.

Deep beneath the mask, deep beneath her psyche, rattling its chains as it howled against its impotence, at war with her infallible and unwavering sense of duty and devotion—hatred.

Sparing another glance at 9S, 2B clenched her jaw and ground her teeth.

6E’s fingers burrowed into her hair, gently scratching her scalp. “You’re thinking about how much you want to bite 9S right now, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” the pale Scanner butted in, the shock of his mealy-mouthed croak of a voice splitting 2B and 6E apart. 2B was relieved to be free, although she didn’t have the energy or willpower she needed to pick herself up, let alone grab 9S and escape.

“Yes? What is it?” 6E asked in terse, clipped tones, her eyes wide, her jaw clenched with impatience and irritation.

“Someone’s coming this way.”

“Just one?”

“Just one.”

“Ah, funny.” 6E spared a glance at 2B. “I’d have thought these two were worth more than that. Didn’t you, 2B?” She snapped her fingers again and gestured to her thralls. “Well, take care of them. I hope you don’t mind sharing…”

The vampires—those not preoccupied with detaining 9S or the pods—grumbled a bit, but did as they were told without fail, and 6E laid a cold hand on 2B’s shoulder. “Take a good look, my dear. This is what I have to offer you.”

The ragtag gaggle of vampires ventured out of the rough circle of light cast by the pods’ floodlights, save for the Scanner.

“Well?” 6E asked him.

“It, uh…” the Scanner scratched his forehead. “It doesn’t smell like food…”

An angry red blossom of fire lit up the darkness, the flickering flashes of light left in its wake briefly rendering the vampire army as silhouettes; a scattered collection of shouts and cries filled the air. 2B felt her spirits lift and strength return to her leaden limbs—had YoRHa sent down someone with weaponry that was actually effective against these monsters?

One of the vampire androids who’d rushed headlong into the endless night stumbled backward into the dim ring of light, reeling dizzily and clutching at a growing hole in its chest. A red glow flickered at the edges of the wound like the edges of a burning sheet of paper as the void ate away at the vampire’s body. He let out a faint, anguished gasp and slumped over, sinking into the cold, dark sand.

Shaken, 6E gestured at the two trios of vampires pinning the pods to the ground. “You! Get in there!” The six vampires obliged and leaped to their feet, swords and fangs bared as they rushed toward their mysterious enemy.
A streak of red shot past them, a glittering flash of silver caught in the pods’ lights. One vampire reeled back, screaming and clutching at the smoldering stump of his arm; one gurgled and collapsed, legs crumpling like thin metal foil, as blood and red sparks sprayed from a gash in his throat; one’s scream was abruptly cut short as he fell over in two neat pieces, bisected right down the middle. The other three beat a hasty retreat, nursing shallow—but still painful—wounds.

“What?” 6E clenched her fists. “Don’t run away! You’re vampires!”

Another streak of red, a flash of a black coat and billowing white-gold hair, weaved through the three vampires, elegant silver arcs cutting through them as easily as sunlight through glass, and the three of them collapsed. The man standing in the midst of the half-dozen felled vampires brandished in his left hand a curved saber streaked with blood and oil, channels of silver running in elegant patterns across the steel blade.

Could it really be him? Was Alucard, a simple human, more capable of dispatching over two dozen vampires than a top-of-the-line combat android? Was he really destroying these monsters that 2B and 9S had been utterly powerless against singlehandedly, in every sense of the word? There was no way it could really be him, but...

6E let go of 2B and took a halting step backward. “B-But…” she sputtered, “normal weapons can’t…” She turned to the scanner. “3S! Hack him or something!” She turned the other way, the lavender curls framing her face bouncing like springs. “The rest of you! Fight harder, damn you!”

The vampires forming 9S’s chair slithered away from him, their joints snapping loudly and wetly back into their proper positions; 6E’s living throne and the cluster of vampires who’d held 2B down joined them in their assault.

“I can’t hack him, ma’am!” 3S shouted out, his voice high-pitched and squeaky with panic. “He’s—not an android—”

With a flurry of his blade, Alucard cut through the thirteen remaining vampires, weaving through their frantic attacks with the grace of a dancer. 2B was awestruck by his speed and swiftness—he was on an even playing field with combat androids, perhaps even Type-E units such as herself.

“Pod! Wire!” 2B shouted out. Pod 042, freed from its captors, shot an electrical wire into the air and latched onto her chest; as soon as the wire had dug into her skin, hot lightning coursing painfully through it and into her chassis, it retracted and yanked her away from 6E and her Scanner cohort.

“Oh, no you don’t!” 6E snarled, drawing her long blade and charging after her, her boots kicking up plumes of sand in her wake.

2B dug in her heels as best she could, planting herself between 6E and 9S, and raised the Virtuous Treaty over her chest. As the long, slender blade of 6E’s odachi clashed with her sword and sent tremors down her remaining arm, 2B felt a sharp, stabbing pain behind her eye and squinted, stinging tears welling up and spilling down her cheek. Through the haze, she saw 9S darting past her in spite of his wounds, severed coolant cables streaming out from the bloody hole in his stomach like the ends of a crimson scarf.

“9S, no, stop!” she screamed, her voice hoarse, breaking off from 6E to run after him. 6E’s blade swung down, uninhibited, and cut a livid diagonal gash across her back from shoulder to hip. As 2B stumbled and fell, her head turned and out of the corner of her eye she saw 9S again, lying down where he’d fallen.
How could there be two 9Ses?

6E split into six, five of her leering, sneering doppelgangers flanking 2B on either side. Barely able to remain standing, 2B struggled to parry all of their attacks. Five were illusions, just like the ones that had feinted her earlier; only one was real. But they weaved between each other faster than 2B’s weary eye could catch up, rendering her incapable of telling which lashing blade would cut her and which would harmlessly pass through her.

It was the Scanner vampire, 3S—he was projecting false information into her visual processor! 2B tried to break 6E’s ranks and pursue him as he stood back to admire his handiwork, but 6E was her equal in strength and speed, superior in her ruthlessness, and filled with growing manic energy while 2B’s broken chassis weighed heavier and heavier.

Pod 042 fired a spray of bullets in a wide arc, forcing 6E and her doubles to scatter; in order to keep the illusion, all five doppelgangers struggled as much to avoid the gunfire as the real one. However, some bullets hit their marks, and out of the six of them, only one of them bled.

With a hoarse roar tearing at her throat, 2B charged forward, ducked under 6E’s swinging blade, slid across the sand, and stabbed upward, her blade sliding under 6E’s breast, piercing her chassis just underneath her sternum; the blade tore itself free at the nape of her neck. 2B knew her anatomy well, as an Executioner; she knew she’d sliced 6E’s black box cleanly in two. It didn’t matter to an undead monster, of course, but it was no less satisfying to her.

“This,” 2B gasped, pushing herself to her feet and forcing 6E to the ground, “is for 9S!”

6E grinned. “…And once again, you chose to let him die.”

Her heel slammed into 2B’s knee, snapping the joint; metal whined and squealed against metal as 2B hit the ground. 6E pulled herself up, slid the sword out of her chest, and snapped it over her knee as if it were a twig.

“Are you done?” 6E turned to the other vampires. “I hope you’ve taken care of—”

The thirteenth of the thirteen vampires to fall howled in agony as Alucard’s saber sunk up to its ornate silver hilt in his chest; Alucard ripped the blade out and with a flick of his elbow brought the blade’s glittering edge down on his head. The blade slid out as the vampire crumpled to the ground, red sparks playing around the edges of his wounds.

“They have not,” Alucard said, his deep, low voice dripping with smug confidence.

“How dare you!” 6E snarled, leaping at him. “Those were mine!”

Alucard parried and darted around her furious strikes, evading her attacks with a flexibility and fluidity that was almost unnerving—but he could not escape 6E’s enraged barrage unscathed. Her blade tore into his side; blood spurted from the wound and splattered on the sand.

“Statement: YoRHa units have a unique obligation to defend human life,” Pod 042 stated as 2B grabbed onto its arms for support and pulled herself to her feet, gingerly cradling her throbbing knee. “Proposal: Unit 2B should intervene.”

2B shook her head. Even in her current state, damaged and brutalized, barely able to fend for herself, she still had to fight? Not even for someone like 9S, not for someone she cared about, someone she loved—but for him?

Self-sacrifice was expected from all YoRHa units. All were expendable, all could be replaced, all
lives equally worthless next to the cause of humanity. She had no excuse not to leap into the fray and she knew it, and yet she had never felt so resistant to the very idea. At this moment, racked with anguish, she wanted nothing more than to sink into the sand and fall into a blissful, safe oblivion.

She wanted to run away. For the first time in three years of operation, she wanted to so much that it hurt.

“2B…”

Her weak, ragged breathing came to a halt. “N—”

She turned around to see 9S crawling across the sand toward her. Pod 153 hovered at his side, medical tools clutched in its claws. He pulled himself up to his knees. His eyes were still dull and glassy, almost gray.

“9S, you’re alive…” 2B gasped.

Or was it just another illusion? She looked around for another 9S, but saw no one else. 3S was running off into the distance, his form dwindling and vanishing into the darkness of the eternal night blanketing the desert.

“Pod’s right,” he croaked. “We have… to protect humanity. We have to help him.” He reached over to his shoulder, disconnected his arm, and slid the pale, slender limb out of his sleeve, setting it on the ground in front of 2B. “T-Take it… please…”

Pod 153 swooped down to pick up and handed it to 2B. She gingerly held it up to her shoulder, closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and pressed the severed halves of the shoulder joint together. Hot, hissing steam roiled around her shoulder as the circuits lined up and linked themselves together, sparks of white-hot pain lighting up 9S’s arm as her programming adjusted to the unfamiliar design of the foreign limb. She sucked air through her teeth and expelled it in a ragged gasp, collapsing on all fours.

Alucard continued to struggle fending off 6E’s assault; her blade left another gash on his leg, another just above his hip, forcing him to stumble and breaking his defensive stance. He narrowly avoided another diagonal stroke of 6E’s odachi, barely managing to stay clear of the long blade. 6E pressed onward, only to reel back in shock as her blade glanced off a metal forearm emerging from under Alucard’s heavy black coat.

“You should know,” he spat, the alabaster fingers of his prosthetic right hand taking hold of his saber’s hilt as he switched hands, “that I am not left-handed.”

2B conjured the Virtuous Contract and gripped it tightly with both hands, her knuckles whitening under her gloves as her fingers curled around the cloth-wrapped hilt. “6E!”

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Alerted by the sound of her voice, 6E whirled around as 2B charged at her and thrust her sword forward. 6E dodged the strike, but at the last moment, 2B let go of the sword, grabbed 6E by the throat, and drove her fist into her stomach, targeting the spot where her armored chassis was least protected. 6E wheezed and coughed, doubling over, as Alucard’s blade pierced her shoulder. Red-hot sparks began to fly from the wound as it grew wider, as though the saber’s glittering blade were acid.

6E pulled herself away and beat a hasty retreat, clutching at her wounded shoulder as the red sparks ate away at her chassis. “Wh… How is this... How can this be?”
“I was blessed with luck to be given this saber,” Alucard explained. “The merchant had no idea the silver detailing on the blade would prove more than simple ornamentation.”

“Silver…” 6E’s eyes widened. “How dare you!”

“I suspect it must hurt.” Alucard slipped back into a combat stance, hatred etched into his face. “Worry not. I will relieve you of that pain soon enough.”

6E snatched up one of her fallen minions off the ground and dug her fingers into the back of its neck; the limp vampire dissolved into a flurry of sparks that sank into her arm. The crimson glow in her eyes grew brighter and stronger. “Don’t think you can kill me with a toy like that!”

2B felt a pit in her stomach open up. She’d nearly forgotten that vampires could absorb their own kind to become stronger. Images of 86S greedily draining his minions to dust ran through her mind. And this one had already been so much more powerful…

Alucard charged at 6E, vanished, and reappeared behind her; she spun around, her leg catching him in the ribs and digging into the wound she’d given him earlier. He flew back and hit the sand, his saber flying from his hand. 2B ran after it, Pod 042 firing a salvo of bullets to cover her. 6E was undeterred, though, and soaked up the bullets like a sponge as she closed in on 2B.

9S’s fingers were weaker than a combat unit’s; as she scooped up the saber and clasped its hilt, 2B could feel that she had a much less secure grip than normal with his arm. She fell to her knees, whirled around, and thrust out the saber as 6E caught up with her.

With a wild, furious glare and grin, 6E grabbed the blade with both hands, smoke curling up from her hands as the silver-gilded edge of the blade burned her skin. The blade shattered into glittering fragments.

“So much for silver,” 6E sneered as 2B scrambled backward and struggled to keep her distance. Behind her, some of the fallen vampires—those who had only lost limbs and suffered glancing wounds from the silver blade—began to stir, rising to their feet, clutching at their wounds, all in great pain but all still very much alive as they staggered, limped, stumbled, and crawled over to their master’s side.

Alucard tore into the cluster of injured vampires with nothing but his bare hands, brilliant red flames wreathing his arms. Had he set himself on fire to combat these monsters? Was he insane?

A ball of roiling flame appeared in his hand; as a vampire opened its mouth wide and lunged at him, he shoved the ball down its mouth, tongues of flame ripping through the oozing wounds in its torso. Alucard vanished, reappearing over the vampire’s head; the vampire had no time to look up before Alucard’s boot shattered his skull, chips of metal and integrated circuits tearing through his skin.

The more Alucard fought, the more 2B was confused by him. Humans couldn’t conjure flames on command. Humans couldn’t move so quickly they were all but invisible save for eerily glowing afterimages. Humans couldn’t go toe-to-toe with the pinnacle of combat androids and last for more than a few seconds. Humans couldn’t—

As 6E swung her blade at him, Alucard vanished, a giant bat as large as a housecat appearing in his stead. The bat fluttered around 6E and her cohorts and transformed back into Alucard at 2B’s side.

That. Humans most certainly couldn’t do that.

Alucard threw another ball of flame at the vampires, hitting a mangled machine in the face and
reducing its spherical head to molten slag. He waved his hand and snapped his fingers; streams of blood poured from the injured vampires and coated his forearm, the unctuous oily fluid crawling up the armored plating and sinking into his skin. The ragged wound on his side and bloody scrapes marring his cheek shrank and vanished.

“Do you have a spare sword?” he asked 2B.

“What?”

“Do you have a spare sword?” he repeated as the vampires charged at them, a wall of slavering, bloodstained flesh and metal.

2B’s eye fell to the coiled leather whip hanging from his belt. “What about your whip?”

“It’s, er, broken.”

“You can’t break a whip!” She reached out and ripped it from his belt.

“2B, no, don’t—!”

She’d never wielded a whip in combat before. The closest she’d ever even came to seeing a whip had been the riding crop Commander White always carried at her side. But its smooth, sleek, polished leather handle fit in her hand as though she were meant to hold it—she supposed her combat programming had included whips, despite having so much less utility compared to other weapons, for sake of completeness.

The whip’s sharp leather length sailed through the air like an extension of 2B’s arm, leaving a deafening crack like thunder echoing through the air as its tip scored the vampires’ bodies.

The weaker vampires reeled back, screaming and howling; where the whip’s supersonic tip had cut into their bodies, their flesh and clothes burst into flames. Horrified and agonized, clutching at her side as her clothes burned and the blackening flesh sloughed off her skeletal chassis to reveal singed and charred metal ribs, 6E turned tail and ran.

2B lashed out with the whip again and again and again. Each strike lit up the vampires’ bodies, their flesh melting and running down their chassis like melting wax running down candlesticks; machines exploded in hunks of shrapnel as volatile chemicals inside their bodies ignited.

Before 2B could strike one final blow against 6E, the vampire crossed her arms in an X over her chest and vanished in a column of light; the polished leather whip passed through the empty space where she had been and hit the ground, kicking up a long, snaking plume of sand.

2B jerked the whip back; it let out one last earsplitting crack and snapped backward, pooling at her feet. She let it fall to the ground and headed straight for 9S, rushing to his side and turning him onto his back. Pod 153 had already begun to patch up the gaping wound in his stomach, but he’d lost far too much blood. His eyes, dull and gray, looked past her.

“Two…” he gasped, lifting his hand to weakly grasp hers.


“Is he okay?” Alucard asked, kneeling at his side and laying a hand on the sticky, gritty mass of adhesive patches, staunching gel, and wet sand that had adhered to the wound.

“Shut up,” she told him.
“Have either of you been bitten?” he asked, eyeing 9S’s missing leg and 2B’s replaced arm.

“I said, shut up!” she snapped, shoving him aside. She slipped one hand under 9S’s neck and another under his knee. If she could carry him to the Resistance outpost at the edge of the desert, she could bring him to an access terminal and rebuild his body. It wasn’t far—even in her condition, it wouldn’t be a hard journey to make.

“2B...”

2B lifted him up, struggling to keep her legs from crumpling under his weight, the damaged joint of her knee screaming in pain and protest. “Don’t talk to me…”

“Those vampires... their leader was 6E, right?”

She nodded.

“Type-E...? I’ve... never heard of it before. What is it?”

“You’ve never—? I-I don’t know,” 2B lied, looking away. It made sense there was Type-E shaped gap in his memory. If that knowledge wasn’t suppressed from his model, it would be too easy for him to put two and two together.

Damn 9S. Inquisitive to his last breath. “If their existence is secret,” she added, “it’s probably meant to be one. Don’t pry.”

“Where are you taking him?” Alucard asked.

“I told you to shut—”

“Proposal: Unit 2B should take Unit 9S to the nearest access terminal and upload his data to a new chassis,” Pod 042 said.

“I know,” 2B snapped.

“Let me take him,” Alucard offered. “You’re injured—”

2B’s legs gave out and she collapsed, the cold sand too gritty to offer any comfort to her aching muscles and straining servos. 9S was her responsibility, not his. “No! He’s my partner, and I—” She grabbed at his ankles. “I need to…”

“You have nothing to fear,” Alucard said, pulling 9S out from under her. “I made a promise to keep him safe.”

I made a promise.

Her black heart sank in her chest; her arms went limp and her grip on 9S slackened, allowing Alucard to pull him away from her.

The only promise she’d ever made to 9S had been to make sure that no one else but her ever carried out his execution. She’d never promised to protect him, to look after him, to keep him safe and happy—only to make sure that at every bitter end, it was her at his side and not someone else. Not someone who didn’t appreciate him, didn’t love him, didn’t treat him as just another notch in their list of YoRHa-sanctioned murders. His life would never be snuffed out by someone who was indifferent to or relished his suffering, like other Type-E units might have.

But here Alucard was, a human (strange abilities notwithstanding, according to Pod 042, he was
wholly genetically human)—human like the humans she tore herself apart to serve time and time again, human like the humans at whose whims 9S perished over and over in a cycle without end— flaunting in her face the privilege he had to make the promise she had never been allowed to make.

Disgusting.

Once Alucard had left with 9S slung over his shoulder and Pod 153 hovering at his side, 2B buried her face in the sand to hide her tears. 9S shouldn’t have been here. He shouldn’t have seen that. He shouldn’t have seen her like that, he shouldn’t have suffered through that, he shouldn’t have found out that…

“Observation: Based on recently-acquired data, Unit 9S has an approximately eighty-five point six percent chance,” Pod 042 told her, “of successfully discerning the true nature of Unit 2B’s mission within the next eight days.”

A hollow formed in 2B’s chest. “He won’t,” she insisted, but she knew that 9S was long overdue to put two and two together. “He won’t,” as though wishing could make it so.

She loved 9S, but sometimes she hated his curiosity.

As she silently cursed Alucard’s name, her fists dug into the ground and clutched at fistfuls of sand that, no matter how hard she squeezed, still slipped through her fingers.

Alucard was grateful to have 9S’s tactical support pod at his side to point him toward the access terminal; otherwise, he’d have easily gotten lost in this pitch-black desert wasteland. Thanks to Pod 153, he made his way to the Resistance outpost on the border between the city and the desert with little incident.

9S hung from his shoulder, his dense and heavy chassis—nearly three hundred pounds of limp, all-but inert dead weight pressing down on him like the albatross around the ancient mariner’s neck. If the poor boy were human, he’d have passed away from his injuries a long time ago; however, Pod 153 still detected mental activity within 9S’s logic circuits. Androids were remarkably resilient creatures—but even so, he was fading fast.

Sweat dripped from Alucard’s brow, running down his nose, trickling into his eyes and down his cheeks like tears. The soft sand gave way under his heavy boots, his feet straining to break free with every step.

As Alucard stepped into the sparse outpost—scarcely more than a few tents and a few crates of supplies clustered against the sides of a narrow ravine—Pod 153 informed him that total failure of 9S’s coolant system was expected within two minutes. Irreversible neural circuitry damage—damage that even transferring his mind to a new body wouldn’t heal—was already beginning to set in.

“Where’s the access point?” Alucard asked the lone soldier manning the outpost, his eyes roving across the area, hunting for any sign of the same boxy black machines installed in the Bunker and in Anemone’s camp.

“If you’re looking to use that thing, the clouds are blocking out its connection with the Bunker,” he told Alucard, gesturing at the rusty vending machine in the back of his sun-bleached canvas tent. “Couple thousand years ago, either us or the machines tried to seed the atmosphere with chaff to prevent contact between earthbound and spacebound forces. Don’t remember who.” He scratched his head, the bright green lenses of his night-vision goggles flickering like lightbulbs on their last
legs. “Anyway, it didn’t work out, but it’s been biting us in the ass ever since.”

“Er… that’s a vending machine,” Alucard pointed out. He hefted 9S’s weight. “Please, he’s— There’s not much time.”

“Yeah, no, outside the camp, we disguise our access points to keep machines from attacking them. Anyway,” the soldier reminded him, “the terminal’s not working right now. Wind’s picking up, so the cloud coverage should pass soon. Give it, uh… ten, fifteen minutes?”

“That’s immaterial,” Alucard told him. “I only need to download him to a new body. I shouldn’t need a connection to the Bunker.”

“Upload,” 9S corrected, his voice a weak whisper.

“Pardon me. I always confuse the two.” Alucard placed his hand on the black machine, feeling for any sort of button or switch that would activate it. “How do you work this thing?”

“Put in the code for, uh… New Coke, or something like that.” The soldier scratched at his scruffy chin. “E621, I think.”

“Many thanks.” Alucard tapped the buttons as instructed and stepped back as the vending machine’s facade hissed and slid to the left, revealing a dark cavity lined with spindly mechanical arms.

“Just stick your buddy inside and let the terminal do its work. It can do all the YoRHa models, B, D, E, H, S…”

Alucard nodded, gently slid 9S off his shoulder, and placed him inside the terminal, propping him up against the back wall. The boy’s eyes were open, even though he didn’t seem to be cognizant of anything he was seeing. Alucard was grateful for that—those pale blue eyes, even though the color had been drained from them, were what banished Soma’s ghost from that face.

“Alucard?” 9S mumbled, fumbling blindly, his fingertips grazing the cuff of Alucard’s sleeve.

“Don’t strain yourself. We’ve made it.”

“You’re… not really human, are you?”

Alucard focused his gaze on the ground, letting the fingers of his new prosthetic hand ghost across the control panel on the side of the terminal. “…No,” he admitted.

“I figured. With… the fangs and your pulse and… everything. What are you?”

Soma never asked so many questions.

“I’m… like you,” he answered, keeping his voice low enough that the soldier manning the outpost couldn’t overhear. “Not human, but a friend to humanity.”

“An angel?”

“If only.”

Alucard took a step back, ready to close the terminal. He imagined being in one of those things must have been much like taking to slumber in his coffin. “I’ll collect 2B next. Stay here.”

“As if I could go anywhere else,” 9S replied, a faint smile gracing his wan, corpselike face.
Alucard laid a hand on his cheek. Though he looked dead already, his skin was hot and clammy, almost feverish. “Take care.”

As soon as he drew his hand back, the terminal’s false front slid back to cover 9S. The machine began to vibrate and whirl not unlike a washing machine as it set to work dismantling and reconstructing its occupant’s body.

His stomach growled at the sight of the vending machine’s front. In the window were bags and cans, their labels long past faded away by the passage of time. “Is there any real food in this?” he asked the soldier standing guard.

The soldier shrugged. “Never checked to see if those things were legit, to be honest. I’d kinda assume no…”

Alucard curled his mechanical fingers into a fist, drew back his arm, and punched the glass, shattering it. He snatched a bag of what might have been chips and opened it.

Empty. Of course.

He cracked open a lukewarm can of soda. Flat as paper, and for good reason—the liquid inside was water. Just as he’d suspected, the access terminal’s facade was merely a Potemkin village of junk food.

Alucard prepared to venture back into the desert to collect 2B, but before he could put much more than a few steps between himself and the terminal, it opened up and belched a cloud of hot, moist steam.

9S, pristine and hale and hearty, with healthy color to his skin and not a speck of blood in his hair or on his face, with not so much as a single thread of his uniform out of place, stumbled uneasily out of the terminal, a cloud of steam following in his wake. He gingerly rubbed his shoulder and stretched his legs. “Phew, that was a close one. A few more minutes…”

“How do you feel?” Alucard asked. He considered telling 9S to remove his visor again. The blank black strip covering his eyes hid so much of what made him unique, what defined him to Alucard as a new individual and not a replica of the boy he’d failed to save.

“Fine… ish.” 9S craned his neck and looked around the outpost. “Where are we? The border stop?”

Pod 153 floated over to his side. “Analysis: Minor memory degradation has occurred as a result of extreme operating temperatures. Self-diagnostic measures are advised. Proposal: Unit 9S should initiate self-maintenance mode.”

“I’m fine,” 9S insisted. “It’s all just kinda… hazy and jumbled. Where’s 2B?”

“I couldn’t carry the two of you together.”

9S gasped, his intake of breath a sharp and shocked hiss. “Y—She’s still out there? We have to go get her!”

2B’s voice, as weak and frail as her battered and beaten body, still managed to cut through the quiet air, as sharp as her blade. “That won’t be necessary.”

She limped into the outpost, one arm curled around her pod’s clawed arm, the other hanging at her side with the Vampire Killer coiled and clutched in her hand. Her uniform was torn, her skirt and
2B stepped out of the terminal, restored just as 9S had been to perfect health. Alucard hurriedly
pulled his hand away from 9S’s shoulder as her eyes, hidden beneath her visor, met his. Even through the black cloth masking her face, Alucard could feel her glaring at her, but when his eyes connected with her invisible stare, she turned her head and broke eye contact.

Even A2 didn’t carry such hatred for him in her heart. What had happened to her to make her so unique among every other soldier under YoRHa’s banner, he wondered, in her cold animosity toward humanity?

6O’s job, career, and life (was there any difference between the three?) were all over. Her first time supervising three people on Earth, one of whom was a real, live, honest-to-goodness human being, and she had failed. All of them were probably dead by now—2B and 9S devoured by the vampires they had no weapons to fight against, Alucard buried in the smoldering shrapnel of a flight unit he had no means or expertise to control.

She’d killed 2B. She’d let 21O down. She’d murdered one of her gods. Words failed to describe how awful she was, how disgusting, how unworthy she was to exist. She was a horrible person. Incompetent. Useless. She wasn’t fit to serve humanity. She wasn’t even fit to take out humanity’s garbage.

Stupid. Worthless. Useless…

She’d flung her arms around 2H’s waist and buried her face in her chest, her endless streams of tears dampening her uniform, despite 2H’s protests about personal space and decorum. She was doomed. Why not seek comfort during what little time she had left before the Commander caught wind of this and had her melted down for raw materials?

“I don’t wanna die,” she sobbed, resting her cheek against 2H’s breast. The Healer unit looked just like 2B. She wanted to pretend she could beg her in 2B’s stead for forgiveness, beg her to tell her it was okay, even though she’d sent her to certain death. “I’m so sorry, I’m so, so, so, so, so sorry…”

She was so busy wallowing in her misery that she barely felt 4H pat her on the back. “It could’ve happened to anyone. Don’t beat yourself up over it…”

“But it happened to me! I let a human die! I’m the lowest of the low…”

“6O, I d—Please, d—You—” 2H squirmed helplessly in 6O’s grip and pushed her away as firmly as she could. Healer units were about as strong as Operators, albeit much more durable; she struggled to free herself. “6O, look at your monitor!”

6O clutched her tighter. “What’s the point? They’re dead and it’s all my fault! I’m a useless, stupid, lazy—”

“Uh, 6O,” 4H said, urgently grabbing her by the arms and trying to peel her off of 2H, “you should really, really look at your monitor right now—”

“Battler unit 2B to Operator 6O. Come in, 6O. Come in—”

6O lifted her head, hardly able to believe her ears. 2B was…

“2B’s alive,” she gasped.

Her spirits lifted so quickly that if she were on Earth, she could have reached escape velocity and flown all the way to the Bunker.
“2B’s alive!” she squealed, wrapping her arms around 4H and pecking her on the cheek. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!”

She hurried to her makeshift operations desk, nearly knocking over a shelf of flower photos in her haste and excitement. “2B, this is 6O! I’m here! Are you okay? And 9S? And Alucard?”

4H rubbed at her cheek, a pinkish hue growing under her skin. “Hey, 2H. Looks like we’ve got Alucard’s vital signs back online.”

“We’re all fine,” 2B responded. “Nine—er, 9S and I have replaced our bodies at the nearest access point. We’re fine.”

“Neither of you were bitten?”

“I was bitten on the arm,” 2B said, shuddering. “9S on the leg. We managed to sever the limbs before the infection could spread.”

6O sighed. “Ah, that’s good. I’m so glad to hear you’re alright…”

“We’ve got Alucard to thank for that,” 9S chimed in, his headshot popping up on 6O’s monitor. “His weapons were the only things that could kill those monsters.”

“Right.” 6O nodded. “I, uh—I heard, before we lost your signals, that the ultraviolet didn’t work. That must have been so scary…”

9S shrugged. “Between vampires and machines, I’d rather fight machines, yeah.”

“I’ll send a note to R&D and ask them to get better weapons into circulation as soon as possible,” 6O told them. “You guys… I don’t want to ever throw you into something like that again.”

“No matter,” 2B said, her tone flat and brusque. “We survived.”

“Thank goodness.” 6O leaned closer. “So… about the distress signal…”

“It was a trap,” 9S said. “There weren’t any survivors. The whole area was full of vampires.”

“We’ll have to be more careful next time. Did any vampires get away?”

“A few,” 2B admitted. “We’ll have to be on high alert for them. Tell Command to decommission 3S, 6E, and 31B.”

“Roger that. Shame we can’t track them… it’s horrible being blind like this.” 6O rifled through her list of tasks for 2B and 9S. “So, um, if you’re ready to get back to work, we’ve gotten some requests from the camp…”

“Actually, there’s something I’d like to tackle first,” 2B said. “We can’t expect ultraviolet light to have any effect on vampires from here on out. Places like Pascal’s village need to be warned so they can adjust their defenses.”

“Oh, right, Pascal. He supplies a lot of rare materials and components to the camp, right?”

2B nodded. “We need to keep that supply chain open.”

“Right. Take care of yourselves out there.” The connection terminated and 6O fell back onto her bed, exhausted. “Is today over yet?” she mumbled.
3S slipped on the slick sand and stumbled, nearly falling over as he crested the peak of the dune and fled deeper into darkness, plumes of cold sand nipping at his bare calves. The soles of his boots struggled to find traction against the ground, threatening to upend him with every fumbling step.

This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t have all gone like this. Vampires were the ultimate lifeform—beyond death, never tiring, never growing weaker. Stronger than android or machine, immune to all conventional weaponry, perfect in every way. That was what 6E, his liberator, his mistress, the woman who had granted him freedom from the chains of flesh and circuitry, had told him—the images she had filled his mind with, the new life she had passed on to him from the great vampire countess Carmilla.

And then for that man to show up and start wreaking so much havoc, cutting through flesh as though it were mortal, tearing through their ranks and showing them the weaknesses they were supposed to have transcended—

It wasn’t possible. Vampires were unassailable. Unstoppable. They couldn’t be—

He tumbled head over heels down the side of the dune, sand filling his mouth and mingling with blood as he landed face-first in the shallow valley below. It couldn’t have gone like this. No vampire could be put in such a—such an undignified situation! They were superior to this! They were supposed to be superior…

"Damn it… Damn her… Executioner Number Two…"

3S pulled his gaunt face out of the sand. Grit clung to his cheeks, adhered to his skin with sticky, half-dried blood. 6E knelt in the sand only a few meters away from him, hunched over and clutching at her charred and blackened side. Her pale whitish-lavender hair had come undone from its elegant pigtails and hung from her head like a wild, untamed mane.

"I can’t go back to Mistress… not with nothing… 2E, how dare you!"

"Uh… ma’am?"

6E looked up, her scarlet eyes flashing. "3S…"

3S crawled closer. "M-Ma’am, are you okay?"

"You ran away."

A vise closed around his mind. "I-I—I, I, uh, I—I, um, d-didn’t m-m-m-mean—"

She laid a bloody finger on his lips. His voice died in his throat, fog clouding his thoughts, impulses slowing to a sluggish crawl through his neural circuitry as her eyes met his.

"I’m s-s-sorry," he squeaked. "I won’t d-do it again, ma’am…"

Her hand slipped to the side of his neck. "You won’t."

A flood of ice ran through his body, colder than his own dead flesh; he let out a shocked yelp and stumbled backward. A sickly wet tearing sound rang in his ears as a wave of numbness ran through him. He fell on his back, shivering, as 6E clasped her frigid fingers around his throat and sank her talons into his flesh.

"You won’t ever leave me again."
Chapter End Notes

The "B" in 2B stands for "Belmont"
The "S" in 9S stands for "Soma"
The "A" in A2 stands for... "Awoo"

Also, check out this amazing little mini-fic KroneckerDelta wrote inspired by this chapter: Memory of the Whip
Rondo of Respite

Chapter Summary

2B, 9S, and Alucard are all left reeling in the aftermath of their battle against 6E. Meanwhile, Devola and Popola's situation in the camp goes from bad to worse. Carmilla redraws her battle lines in the wake of 6E's failure.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, so sorry for the month hiatus. It caught me by surprise, too. I was expecting to jump back in as soon as I finished Bloodstained, but once I'd 100%ed the game, I had a really bad case of writer's block with this fic and for the life of me I just couldn't envision the next scenes for the story.

That's not to say I haven't been busy, though. Just not busy with this particular fic.

Anyway, thanks for reading and thanks for toughing out that hiatus! Since I'm juggling two fics right now, updates on both are probably gonna be a little slow, but I'll try not to have too many month-long gaps between chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As was typical with YoRHa’s spartan accommodations, 2E’s cot—the thin mattress beneath her side barely any softer than bare metal would be, the rough sheets cocooning her and tangling around her legs—brought her no comfort. Nothing in the Bunker was designed to provide comfort. Units like her weren’t supposed to need it. She wished she could sink into this bed and vanish, but there was nothing for her to sink into.

The door slid open, allowing an unbidden shaft of light from the hallway to pierce the gloom enveloping her quarters. Only a portion of the light leaked into the little alcove that held her bed, yet it lay across her eye and burned like holy sunlight, her visor offering no protection. She squeezed her eyelids tighter and rolled onto her other side.

A shadow fell across the shaft of light, mercifully blocking it and allowing gloom to flood the room yet again. “Well, how was it? Your first time?”

Her fingers curled around the blue hairband resting in her palm and clenched into a fist as the hand clasping her shoulder shook her and roused her from her fitful false slumber.

“Come on, Tooie. Tell me everything. I want to know all the gory details!”

2E relented and allowed 6E to drag her upright and mold her into a sitting position as one would mold soft clay. There was no point in resisting or protesting.

“I looked over the records for the past week. Not bad at all,” 6E chirped, curling an arm across 2E’s back. Her fingers brushed against her shoulders like the tips of spiders’ legs. “You played
your part so well—it was almost as if you *liked* your target!"

2E’s fingers curled and tightened around her hairband. “Yes.” Her voice came out quiet, meek, barely even a whisper. Any louder and 6E would have heard her voice crack, heard her emotions—those forbidden things nestled in her mind that stung her for every thought—bleed through. “Almost… as if.”

“He couldn’t have suspected a thing with how chummy you two were. I’d never realized what a knack you had for duplicity.”

“That’s right. He never suspected a thing.”

“But what I’m curious about are his final moments.” 6E loosened her visor and let it fall to her neck. A hungry gleam lit her pale eyes as she leaned in. “Tell me… was he surprised? Shocked? Can you describe the pain and betrayal on his face when you ran him through?” One hand curled around 2E’s shoulder, the other on her knee, fingertips digging into her skin. “What were his last words? Did he cry? Did he beg?” Each question brought her closer until the tip of her nose nearly grazed 2E’s. “Did he *scream*?”

2E looked away. “No. I—stabbed him in the back. He died instantly.”

6E pulled back, disappointed. “Ugh. I’ll let you off easy this time, but here’s my advice. You’ll be killing people for a long, long time, so I suggest you start enjoying it. *Relishing* it. *Savoring* it. You’ve got to draw these things out so you can have fun with them.”

2E held her tongue, but wanted nothing more than to tell 6E that she wasn’t a sadist like her.

6E stood up. “Still, I’m proud of you, 2E. Make sure you’ve got a story for me next time, though. Glory to Mankind.” With a smile and a wink, she left the room and strode down the hall, the door sliding shut behind her.

“Right. Glory to Mankind,” 2E responded, long after 6E had left her alone.

With an ache in her chest, 2E looked back at the hairband clasped in her hand. This hand was not the one that had taken his life—that old chassis had already been recycled—but it still stank of the oily, sharp, metallic scent of blood.

In truth, she hadn’t stabbed him in the back. She’d tried, but he’d turned around at the last moment. He really hadn’t suspected a thing—even seeing her sword in her hand, he had still had an innocent smile on his face and a bright, expectant look that penetrated his opaque visor. That look had morphed slowly, agonizingly slowly, into confusion and despair as the blade penetrated his chest. It hadn’t been a clean cut; the blade had failed to completely pierce his black box. Beneath his visor, the invisible light in his invisible eyes had taken its time to fade away. Until the end, his limbs had twitched sporadically, convulsions and spasms keeping his blank gaze from focusing squarely on her. It had been a story 6E would have liked to hear.

The last thing he’d said had been the name that wasn’t hers. He’d died with it on his lips.

2B.

The name that hadn’t been hers, but had still rung pleasantly in her ears. The name that let her forget who she was and the company she kept. The name, she realized, she wanted to hear again.

Her grip on the blue hairband clasped in her hand tightened until the frail plastic under the colored fabric that gave the band its shape broke in two. When her fingers unfurled around it, it slipped
from her hand and fell to the floor, folded in on itself.

The ache in her chest grew stronger—so strong that she could hardly breathe. It was as though her black box, too, had been pierced, leaving her to die just as slowly and painfully as 9S had. Although as punishment for what she had done, she was being forced to feel what he had felt.

She bent over and picked up the hairband, both hands holding each end gingerly with the tips of her forefingers and thumbs. It could no longer keep its shape.

The fabric tore easily where the thin plastic frame had snapped; both halves of the hairband hit the wall. 2E pulled herself out of bed, the sheets pooling around her feet.

The Bunker spun in its slow rotation; the moon inched past her window, its pale and pockmarked face gazing back at her. Somewhere on that lonely satellite was the lunar colony, and within that colony was the Council of Humanity which commanded YoRHa from afar.

Was the Council pleased with her work? Had the death of one person been so vital to their cause? Were they looking down at her and smiling? Should she be happy to have done the bidding of her creators?

Her fist collided with the window. The thick, reinforced glass sheeting stretched across the window to hold back the yawning vacuum beyond did not so much as budge as it bore the brunt of her frustration, and the moon continued to watch her with cold, silent indifference.

2B’s fist slammed into the rock wall with enough force to spread a spiderweb of cracks from top to bottom. Jolts of pain lanced through her knuckles and ran down her arm, straining the synthetic muscle fibers and servos under her skin.

She didn’t hate humanity.

She didn’t. She couldn’t. It was wrong to hate her creators. It was wrong to hate the ones who gave her existence meaning. It was wrong to hate Commander White. It was wrong to hate YoRHa. It was wrong to inwardly seethe with every utterance of ‘Glory to Mankind.’ Emotions were prohibited. If she had to indulge in hate, it could only be turned toward mankind’s enemies.

Her fist hit the wall over and over again, shards of rock cutting ragged slits in her leather glove. When she drew her arm back again, a few telltale, smeared speckles of blood dotted shattered stone that formed the basin of the deepening crater.

If she felt hatred, it was only 6E’s poison worming its way through her mind, the enchantment of her words, the hollow promise of freedom from the curse of humanity. The will of mankind was not a curse but a purpose. Without it, YoRHa was nothing. Without it, 2B was nothing.

She didn’t hate humankind. She’d never hated humankind. Because to do so would make her lower than any other android, lower than the lowest machine. Even machines didn’t hate humanity—their programming, their network, lacked such capacity; their minds were too simple. To hate humanity made her just as bad as…

She forced the anger out of her mind, shoved it aside, only for it to evaporate and envelop her like steam. She didn’t hate mankind. If she did hold such hatred in her heart for her own creators and masters, then why did she obey their every command without complaint, without hesitation?

If she hated humans, then she would be insubordinate and disrespectful to them and to those who relayed to her their orders. She would talk back to Commander White, thumb her nose at Army
High Command, and show disdain for the Council of Humanity. That was what animosity toward humans would look like. But she didn’t do any of those things.

So why did she feel so repulsed around Alucard? Why had 6E’s words burrowed so deeply under her skin?

The scrapes on her knuckles became gashes; her skin split open and let blood run in rivulets down her fingers. The gleaming metal joints of her knuckles peeked out from underneath mashed and lacerated muscle.

“Observation: Minor damage to Unit 2B’s right hand has occurred. Proposal: Unit 2B should perform minor repairs to prevent further degradation of internal mechanisms.”

2B pulled out her hand and let it fall to her side. She’d punched a hole in the wall so deep that the rock had swallowed almost half her forearm. Droplets of blood rolled off her fingertips and dripped onto the ground.

She suddenly noticed that Pod 042 had been asking her to stop this whole time. She hadn’t heard it even once—drowned in her own frustration, she’d entered a fugue state where no outside stimuli had registered save for the pain signals running from her hand to her brain.

She gingerly cradled her injured hand, cupping her palm around her bloodied knuckles as her fingers curled back into a loose fist. It hurt. “Thank you for the suggestion, pod. Repairs will not be necessary.”

Pod 042 hovered just a little closer, its claws opening and arms stretching just a little, as though it were indicating that it wanted to take her hand and do the repair work itself. “Response acknowledged. However, this support unit’s proposal still stands.”

“I’m fine,” 2B insisted.

“Statement: This support unit has also received a priority one message from Commander White. Proposal: Due to the urgency of the message, Unit 2B should immediately ask this support unit to open Unit 2B’s connection to the Bunker.”

2B took a deep breath, desperately hoping that it wasn’t the message she thought it was. Now was the worst time she could be told to do that.

A holographic panel only she could see popped up in front of her; Commander White’s voice rang in her ears and hers alone, piped into her sensory processors directly through her visor.

“Unit 2E. You will continue to accompany Alucard on the surface until he makes contact with A2.”

“Yes, ma’am.” 2B suppressed a sigh of relief, knowing full well what White would say if she were to show any outward sign of emotion.

“Once you confirm A2’s location, you will execute her.”

“Yes, ma’am. But what about Alucard—” she added, recalling what had happened the last time she and A2 had fought.

“You are still forbidden to take the life of a human; Pod 042 will restrain you if an attempt is made.” White narrowed her eyes. “However, in this case, I am issuing a temporary executive override for Pod 042’s human safety protocols. You are now free to use whatever nonlethal force proves necessary for meeting your objectives. Hopefully, such measures will be unnecessary.”
2B nodded.

"Are the parameters of your mission clear, 2E?"

The sound of her hated real name stung her ears. "…Yes, ma’am."

"Very well. Glory to Mankind," White said, placing her left hand over her chest.

2B did the same. "Glory to Mankind," she repeated in a flat monotone, forcing whatever emotion tried to bubble up deeper down inside herself.

White disappeared and the connection terminated, leaving 2B alone to ponder her good fortune that she was being permitted, even encouraged, to treat Alucard as she saw fit.

He would never get in her way again.

"2B, are you all right?" 9S called out, his voice echoing in the cold air as he zeroed in on her.

2B let out a heavy, resigned sigh. She hadn’t gotten far away enough away from him, after all.

"I heard some loud noises over here, so…" 9S scampered over to her, his boots kicking up plumes of sand. His visor was tied loosely around his neck like a very short scarf. Once he’d drawn near, he instantly noticed how 2B was favoring her right hand; his brows furrowed and his lips puckered into a concerned frown.

"It’s nothing."

"Want me to take a look at it?"

"No, I’m fine." Her hands fell to her sides. "Why aren’t you wearing your visor?"

9S blinked. His bright blue eyes were wide and soft, but to her they carried an accusing venom. "Oh, uh… it’s just to make Alucard more comfortable. He really doesn’t like us hiding our eyes, and since he’s sort of our guest, I figured I’d oblige him. You should take yours off, too."

"No."

"All right. Oh, and…" He pulled out his satchel and rummaged through it. "You, uh, dropped this," he said, pulling out the tightly-coiled whip she’d used against the vampires and handing it to her. "Figured you should keep it, since it seems to be the only thing we have that can, y’know… kill vampires."

2B nodded and took the whip from him. It unspooled into a loose coil in her grip.

Pod 042 scanned the weapon. "Analysis: this weapon lacks an NFCS control circuit, limiting its utility. Proposal: Unit 2B should take this weapon to the Resistance camp and ask its weapons merchant to install the circuit."

"Alucard calls it the Vampire Killer. Not the most creative name, but it definitely performs as advertised, doesn’t it?" A cheeky grin lit up 9S’s face. "He said that only somebody special can use it—there must be some kind of tricky technique to it, because he said it’d probably kill him if he tried to use it. Guess that means you’re special, huh?"

"I suppose," 2B said. If she was special, it was a sick, cruel, painful kind of special—not something worth smiling like that about. 
“I mean, I always knew you were special,” 9S added, his smile turning a bit more coy, almost flirtatious. Despite the earnest look on his face, though, 2B felt a strange foreboding in his words. “Fancy whip or not. Weird thing is, there aren’t any exotic materials in that thing. At least, nothing we know to be effective against vampires. I’d expected some sort of silver composite interweaved throughout the thong, but…”

2B trailed behind 9S for once as he rambled, her steps still leaden. If he was still filled with lingering distress over this morning’s events, he hid it well. Then again, he usually hid those things well—whatever secrets his past selves had learned to warrant his repeated executions, his behavior had never betrayed his knowledge. She’d never had the luxury of seeing a change in his mood predict the arrival of the order for his termination.

Alucard was waiting for the two of them at the Resistance outpost nestled on the outskirts of the city ruins where crumbling roads gave way to sandblasted and windswept rock formations. The mutilated corpse of a deer lay on the ground about a meter away from him, blood pouring from a deep gash in its neck and pooling around its splayed and tangled legs. A chunk of the beast’s flank had been cut out; the hunk of crimson flesh and striated bands of glistening muscle lay on a metal grate propped up with scraps of a machine lifeform’s chassis, skewered by a metal rod. With a snap of his fingers, a ball of flame flared to life underneath the plate of scrap metal.

He looked up as 2B and 9S approached. “Oh, hello there,” he said. His voice was polite, yet curt. “I hope you don’t mind; I’m very hungry.” The alabaster casing of his prosthetic arm was stained red; speckles of blood dotted his pale cheeks. He turned back to his setup and watched the cut of meat sizzle and smoke, a savory aroma wafting through the air.

“We have to head to the camp—” 2B told him, only for Alucard to hold up his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“It is possible,” he said, “for one to be so hungry that their back starts to hurt. I can hardly stand up right now. And so I shall prepare a light brunch for myself.”

“How long will it take?” 2B asked, crossing her arms. “We shouldn’t waste—”

“Four to five minutes,” he said. “Each side.”

9S dropped to his knees at Alucard’s side. “You’re cooking?” he gasped. His eyes lit up.

“I am attempting to do so,” Alucard said. “I don’t suppose anybody here has any salt or pepper…”

“Is that necessary?” 9S asked.

“If you want your food to be palatable. Roasted meat by itself tends to be rather bland.”

“When it’s done, can I try some?”

Alucard stood up, strode over to the corpse, hacked off another chunk of its flesh, skewered it on a metal rod, and set it down on the grate. “Time that for five minutes, then turn it over.”

9S grinned. “Uh, th-thank you, sir!” He glanced back at 2B. “2B, do you want to cook some, too?”

“No.”

His smile shrunk. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”
For the next ten minutes, 9S peppered Alucard with questions as the meat they’d set over the fire browned. As she watched, 2B felt the ache in her chest grow stronger. She began to wish that she were in Alucard’s place. If she were in his position, a human returned to the Earth, 9S would be asking her questions like that, and she would respond, could respond, to him freely and openly, freed from the baggage of her secret mission.

And she was envious, too, of 9S: that he felt so comfortable speaking to Alucard; that that he, unlike her, treated humanity with the proper awe and reverence. That he felt and acted the way he should, while the best 2B could manage was a hollow facsimile. All she could do was stand at a distance and feel empty.

Once the meat had turned a gleaming dark brown and a black lattice pattern from the metal grate had seared itself onto both sides, Alucard picked up his portion and took a bite. His face scrunched up; obviously, the taste was not up to his standards.

9S handled his portion gingerly and cautiously, taking the smallest bite he could manage. His face lit up before he could even finish chewing. “It’s good!” he exclaimed, nearly dropping his food into the fire in his excitement. The next bite he took was larger, the next larger still. “And it’s better if you season it?” he asked Alucard, his voice slurred by the food still in his mouth.

“Swallow before speaking,” Alucard told him. “It’s proper manners.”

9S nodded and swallowed. “Sorry, sir. I didn’t mean any disrespect. So, uh, if you had all the ingredients you could ask for, what would you do with this instead?”

“First,” Alucard said, pausing to thoroughly chew and swallow another morsel as a demonstration of good manners, “I would marinate the venison in olive oil, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and oregano and leave it for several hours. Then, I would grill it until medium rare.”

“Venison? What’s that?”

“This,” Alucard said, gesturing with the remains of the steak he’d cooked to the dead deer lying in the center of the outpost. He took another bite, chewed, stopped, and spat out a hunk of gristle. “I’d also use a different cut of meat and make sure to trim the connective tissue.”

“Oh. Also, what’s medium rare?”

“When the meat is lightly cooked, mostly pink inside, with a faint red hue near the center. Personally, I enjoy rare meat, seared on the outside and bloody on the inside, although it’s an acquired taste. Most people prefer meat that is between rare and well-done. Cretins and boors prefer their meat well-done.”

9S nodded.

“I would also dice a few small potatoes, toss them in oil and fresh rosemary, and roast them,” Alucard went on, pausing a few times to take a few last bites and finish his meal. “Or perhaps mash them and prepare a gravy from the meat’s drippings…”

“Are we ready to go?” 2B asked, interrupting Alucard’s wistful fantasy. “We can’t afford to waste time—we have work to do.”

9S held the last bit of his meal out in 2B’s direction. Black flecks from the seared outer surface of the meat peppered his lips. “Try this, 2B. It’s really good.”

“I don’t need it.”
“You’re missing out,” 9S goaded her, a mischievous singsong lilt coming to his voice as his smile broadened. “Take a bite!”

“You can have the rest,” 2B insisted.

9S shrugged and popped the last bite into his mouth. “Your loss,” he slurred, mush-mouthed, as he closed his eyes to better savor the taste. He was so happy it almost hurt to look at him.

“Maybe next time,” she added, glancing down at the ground. “Let’s go. It’s a little out of our way, but I want to stop at the camp before we head over to Pascal.”

“Right.” 9S stood up and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Thanks, Alucard. I’ve never eaten anything before!”

“Yes,” Alucard said, “I could tell.”

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled for any of those other ingredients you mentioned. I’d love to try a proper meal someday!”

“As would I.”

Once again, 2B found herself trailing behind 9S as the two of them set out with Alucard in tow for the Resistance camp on the other side of the city ruins. As they traversed the labyrinthine ruins, 9S slowed his gait to keep up with 2B.

“Oh, 2B, there’s something I want to talk to you about,” he said to her, as though the thought had only just crossed his mind.

“Is it relevant to the task at hand?” she asked, not at all in the mood to talk. Anxiety crawled through the back of her mind, icy claws scraping against her skull. He knew about the Type-E division now. He’d seen how familiar 6E had been with her. Did he suspect her? If he found out and confronted her, would she have to kill him again?

“Uh… not really, I guess. But I wanted to say, back there, I… I mean, it was… it hurt, it was scary, but I’m glad… that I saw that side of you. Before today, I wasn’t sure if you really cared, or liked having me around, or if you… I guess what I mean to say is…”

He slowed his gait and cast an expectant, anxious glance back over his shoulder at 2B.

“No, never mind,” he concluded, shaking his head. “I-It’s selfish of me. Besides, it’s not proper,” he added, his voice suddenly stiff and formal as though he were stealing the words from 2B’s mouth exactly how she would say them before she could speak, let alone think them.

She knew the words he’d stopped himself from saying, though. She’d heard them too many times before. He was glad to have learned, despite how painful the lesson had been, that 2B did care about him.

That would make it that much harder to terminate him when the time came—not that it was ever easy.

She made a fist with her injured hand and squeezed until tears, mercifully hidden by her visor, welled up in her eyes.

The ground was still slightly damp from yesterday’s rainstorm—during these dark and sunless
months, nothing dried quickly—but that did not make it much softer than if it were dry. Popola fell over hard enough to knock the wind out of her, the muddy soil cold against her cheek; a heavy boot sank into her back and pinned her down before she could even think about trying to get back up.

“Mind sharing your reading material with the rest of the camp?” one of Laurel’s soldiers quipped, crouching down and collecting the tattered old spellbook where it had fallen. Popola reached out, her hand slipping across the boundary between the light engulfing the camp and the shadows surrounding it for only a moment before the soldier pinning her down dragged her past the partition of light and shadow and into the outskirts of the camp.

“Careful with her,” the thief said. “She might not look it, but out of the two of them, she’s the one who goes apeshit the easiest.” In response, Popola’s captor dug his heel in deeper, pressing it painfully into the small of her back.

Popola lifted her head; her hair fell over her eyes. Through her mud-stained bangs, she caught sight of the thief and one of Anemone’s men picking curiously at the book’s worn cover like magpies picking at discarded jewelry. “It’s nothing,” she told them. “There isn’t even anything in there. It’s blank.”

“Gotta be pretty riveting if you’ve had your nose stuck in it all morning.” The thief fanned it open. “Let’s see…”

“It’s blank,” the other one said.

“I told you—”

Her captor pressed down harder, the edge of his heel driving a sharp spike into her spine; her fingers dug into the cold, damp dirt as her jaw clenched and her teeth cut into her tongue. “All right, what’s the deal?” he asked her. “Invisible ink?”

Popola swallowed a mouthful of blood mixed with dirt and spit. She shouldn’t have left her sister’s side. She shouldn’t have ventured so close to the edge of the camp. Was the universe punishing her for shirking her duties and sneaking away to study that spellbook?

“Ultraviolet? Infrared?”

“No,” she insisted, her words coming out slurred as she favored her tongue. “It’s—just a blank book.”

The soldier holding the spellbook took a fistful of pages and tugged on them; the weak glue binding the pages offered little resistance and the frail paper easily tore away from the book’s spine. The torn pages, frail and yellowed, fluttered to the ground like fallen leaves.

“No!” Popola reached out and grabbed them, crumpling them in her fist. She couldn’t let them do this to the book. It was a relic of the old world, a relic of humanity—a connection to the world she and Devola had long since lost, a connection to the world everyone had lost. Even if they didn’t know about magic spells or arcane lore, how could they not understand how precious it was?

“Told you these models are defective, Hydrangea,” one of the soldiers spat, stomping on her hand hard enough to crack two of her fingers. “All this over a blank book.”

“Blank, my ass.” The soldier pinning Popola to the ground crouched down and wrapped a fistful of her hair around his fingers, tugging painfully on her scalp. “What’s in the book? Gossip? Getting dirt on everyone in the camp?”
“Maybe she’s writing stories about those two YoRHa units she’s chummy with,” the thief, Hydrangea, said. “You know… stories,” he added, punctuating it with a wink.

“Or maybe she’s writing down all the camp’s data to sell to the machines,” her captor spat.

“Hold on, Hyacinth. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t have to. You never know with these models. There’s a reason the rest of ‘em are all lying in a landfill somewhere.”

Her captor, Hyacinth, yanked on her hair again so hard she nearly cried, forcing her to lift her head. The cold, hard barrel of a pistol pressed against the nape of her neck, chilling her skin. “What’s in the book?” he snarled. “Tell us how to read it, or else I’ll—”

“M-Magic spells,” Popola answered. “You can only read it if you’re spiritually attuned—”

The gun dug itself into the back of her neck, pressing against her spine so forcefully that for an instant she thought she’d been shot; instead, though, the painful pressure lingered in her spine, throbbing, burning. Static flickered through her vision and white noise fluttered around her ears as the growing pressure began to disrupt the wires and circuits running up her neck.

“Magic spells?” the third soldier repeated in a mocking lilt. The steel toecap of his boot slammed into her cheek, cracking her jaw. “Horseshit. What the fuck is so goddamn important about this thing?”

“Popola!” Devola’s voice cut through the three soldiers’ invective. “What the hell are you doing to her? Get away from her or I’ll—”

Hyacinth pulled the gun away and stood back up, turning to face Devola while keeping his heel firmly in place on Popola’s back.

“You’ll what?” Hydrangea laughed and hefted the pilfered spellbook. “Itching to get your leg snapped like a twig again, are you?”

Popola craned her neck to get a better look at Hydrangea’s face and noticed that not only was he one of the ones Devola had operated on yesterday, he was the same soldier from years ago, the one who’d nearly severed her leg in a fit of cruelty. Popola had forgotten his name and his face—all the crude, bigoted soldiers she’d had to deal with over the centuries blurred together in her mind—but even out of a lineup of one hundred identical models, this one’s face had to be seared into Devola’s memory for what he’d done to her.

That was why Devola fell silent, faltered, and replied in an uncharacteristically timid voice, “I—I’ll inform your superior officers…”

“Oh, no. That would be terrible.” The three soldiers shared a knowing glance and chuckled to each other. “Please don’t do that. Anything but that.”

As if summoned by Devola’s quote-unquote threat, Jackass inserted herself between the three soldiers and the twins. “Hey. Don’t you clowns have a schedule to stick to or something?”

“Don’t you?” Hyacinth asked.

Hydrangea shrugged. “Wasn’t our fault, officer. We were out here minding our own business when this one here…”
“They tripped me and stole my book—” Popola blurted out, only for a sharp jab from her captor’s boot to crack her spine.

“We were out here minding our own business when this one here just up and punched Hickory over here right in the face.”


Hydrangea tucked the book under his armpit, turned to his compatriot, and slugged him in the nose. Hickory crumpled to his knees, cupping his hands around his nose; blood seeped between his fingers. “Looks like it now. See? She punched poor Hickory here right in the nose.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Jackass wrinkled her nose. “I literally just saw you punch your pal in the face.”

“No, it was the girl. I saw it.”

“Yeah, and I saw it, too,” Hyacinth said.

“Me, too,” Hickory whined.

“Besides, look at how suspicious she’s being over a book with nothing in it.” Hydrangea added, fanning out the book’s pages to her. “There’s got to be a secret, coded message in here. I think this girl and the other one are traitors!”

Devola tried to rush forward again, stopping in her tracks yet again when Hyacinth brought his pistol to bear on her chest. “You can’t just accuse us like that!” she shouted, fists clenched, eyes narrowed to hateful slits.

“You ‘think?’ That’s a good one,” Jackass retorted with a mirthless smirk. “Just let her go and give her the damn book back. You three are talking so much shit, I can smell it.”

As Hyacinth’s boot kept its pressure on her back, Popola dug her fingers deeper into the dirt, choking down her frustration along with the blood pooling in her mouth. Why had this happened now? Why now, and why here? Why couldn’t anywhere they’d gone have just remained safe?

Powerless as she was, bruises on her skin and cracks in her chassis throbbing and aching, she longed for the chance to rip these monsters apart. Devola, for all her talk, was an appeaser deep down. But when she was cornered, Popola wanted to fight.

A fragment of writing faded in on one of the crumpled pages in Popola’s hand—a magic ring for casting a spell burning itself onto the page with an invisible flame; the letters and symbols traced around the circle glowed orange-hot before fading to a strong, bold black that she alone could see.

“And ignore these security risks?” Hydrangea scoffed.

“They punched me in the nose!” Hickory whined. “There’s witnesses!”

“I’m a witness and I didn’t see that,” Jackass said.

“Well, we outnumber you!”

“Uh, yeah… and when I take this to Laurel,” Jackass said, “he’s gonna believe you chucklefucks and not me?”

“Probably,” Hydrangea said.
“Yeah, probably,” Hyacinth chimed in. “I mean, why the fuck would he believe you?”

Irked, Jackass rolled up her sleeves. “You guys want me to invert your waste processing units or what?”

“By the way, officer, I’ve been wondering,” Hyacinth asked, loosening his hold on Popola. “Is it true that you take broken androids to your workshop and fuck their corpses?” His cohorts punctuated his crude taunt with laughter.

He’d hardly even gotten the words out before Jackass had drawn a black baton from her hip and clubbed him in the side of the head; the polished metal split his skin and cracked loudly against his skull. He stumbled and staggered backward, relinquishing his grasp on Popola.

This was her chance. She rolled onto her back, flung out her hand, envisioned the magic circle—etched into her memory as only an android’s perfect sense of recall could—and let the incantation tear itself from her lips.

For an instant, the magic circle traced itself in the air over her palm, just as she’d imagined. The spellbook had taught her that she had to draw the circle to use it, but it hadn’t taken long for her to find a shortcut. She projected the runes directly into her visual processor and let the magic flow through it.

A jagged crystalline spearhead flickering with bolts of blue light shot out of the circle, pierced Hyacinth’s shoulder, and burst out of his back in a shower of blood and metal. With a scream of pain ripping itself from his throat, he went completely limp and crumpled to the ground, jerking and spasming as flickers of lightning arced along his body and sank into the churned dirt. The wound tunneling through his chassis was charred black; wisps of steam curled up from the singed edges of his clothes around the wound.

“Popola, what the hell?!” Devola hissed, clutching at her cheek, her jaw clenched and teeth gritted. Blood seeped through her fingers. The ragged edges of a scorch mark poked out from under her fingertips.

Adrenaline coursing through her circuitry, Popola stood up, ripped the spellbook out of Hydrangea’s hands, and called forth another spell: the same spell she’d used to speed up the distillation process of her liquor the other day.

But this time, she pulled all of her hitherto-impotent rage—all her frustration and hatred at these ungrateful androids she and her sister had spent thousands of years serving to assuage their compulsive guilt only to be treated like this—into the spell; she felt the magic she called upon course through her chassis less like a rushing river and more like a roaring waterfall as she envisioned a sphere ringing the interior of the thief’s skull.

She wasn’t simply trying to speed up a twelve-day distillation process into twelve hours. She wanted to amplify that spell a thousandfold, ten thousandfold, one hundred thousandfold. She wanted the single instant in which this man saw the fury in her eyes to draw itself out into years.

Instead of looking at her and having her face etched indelibly into his memory, he blinked.

And then, after years trapped in the darkness of that single instant, he let out a blood-curdling scream and all but threw himself backward as if a wire had attached itself to his back and yanked him away. His eyes were wide, wild, and unfocused, gazing out a thousand yards without catching sight of anything.
Hickory pulled his hands from his face, his palms and his chin drenched in blood, and scurried after him, dirtying Hydrangea’s white cloak with bloody handprints. “Hydrangea? What the fuck was that?”

Hydrangea did nothing but mumble gibberish under his breath, still staring blindly as though he’d forgotten how to see. His entire body was trembling like the last leaf on a dying tree. How many years had he spent alone in complete darkness, the slight movement of a single instant slowed to an almost geologic timescale, an instant’s worth of sounds stretched and deepened to a bone-rattling, omnipresent subsonic roar?

Popola didn’t know. But with venom surging through her chassis, she hoped it had been centuries.

Hickory collected his friend and beat a hasty retreat, sparing one look back at Popola before running with his tail between his legs. “What did you do to him? What the fuck are you?” he spat.

Devola whisked Popola up as the strength drained from her body, catching her before she could collapse. “Oh, god, sis, I—I’m so sorry, I could have done—I didn’t mean to just—A-Are you okay?”

With a leaden weariness pressing down on her, Popola slumped over in her sister’s arms and rested her sore, throbbing, mud-stained cheek on Devola’s shoulder. Every part of her felt heavy save for her head; even the slightest motion made her feel as though it was about to fly off her neck. The strength that had flooded her chassis was gone now; what little she’d had that was her own had fled with it, leaving her with nothing. “I need to lie down… don’t think I was ready for that.”

Devola squeezed her tight, her fingernails digging crescents into her back. Popola could feel in the subtle vibrations rising through her sister’s skin how stressed her hardware was: the normally-gentle whirring of her processor had risen in pitch and volume to a strained whine. “All right. Back to the tent with you, sis. Just—don’t pass out for another four days, okay? Please.”

“I’ll do my best,” Popola murmured. The lights strung across the camp swirled and danced around her like a garden full of fairies as static rolled across her line of sight and her leaden eyelids glued themselves shut. The torn and crumpled pages fell from her slackening grip as she passed out.

When she opened her eyes again, it was as if no time had passed at all. But she was back in the tent, lying atop the soft blanket Alucard had left behind the other night. A rolled-up canvas bag had been slipped under her head as a makeshift pillow.

Devola knelt at her side, her face grim. A shallow gash cut across her cheek, its edges surrounded by scorched and blackened skin. Popola hadn’t noticed at the time that the spell she’d cast to take care of her captor had grazed her as well. The sight of the wound—the wound she had inflicted—made her sick.

There was a flicker of a glad smile that played on the edge of Devola’s lips as she saw Popola awaken, but it was quickly quashed. “I scoured the camp looking for you,” she spat, her voice fragile and quiet. Her hands were trembling as she laid them on Popola’s arm, fingers clenching at her sleeve. “I—I was scared…”

“I’m sorry,” Popola told her. “I just wanted to practice some spells without burning down the tent…”

“Well,” Devola replied, glancing away, “you sure got your practice in, all right.” Her voice was bitter; Popola could tell that so soon after her misadventure with the Vampire Killer, this incident
cut too close to home. As if to confirm Popola’s inference, she snapped, “Is everything Alucard gives you going to hurt you?”

“I used the spellbook to—”

“You realize we’re not going to get out of this one, right?” Devola asked, cutting her off. Her fingernails bit into Popola’s forearm. “We caught Jackass on her way out. She’s gone now. There’s no one else in the camp we can turn to. If Anemone was here, she might look the other way, but sh—she’s—We’re…”

Her face crumpled, her eyes brimming with tears as she choked down a heaving sob. “We have to leave again. You get that, r-right? W-We have to—we have to f-find another…”

Popola reached over with her other arm and took Devola’s wrist in her hand, a hard lump forming in her throat. The sadistic pleasure she’d felt meting out justice to those two soldiers faded away, and now shame came rushing in to fill the void it left behind.

She and Devola were duty-bound, compelled by the alterations to their programming that had been made after the failure of Project Gestalt, to serve androids in all things beyond reason; it had been what kept drawing them to settlement after settlement, Resistance cell after Resistance cell, for thousands of years when they could have otherwise chosen to live out their days as lone hermits in the Earth’s vast wastelands. But she had put her obsession with a book before all that and harmed the very people whom she was bound to help. She had rebelled against her programming yet again, and yet again, the universe itself had struck her down for her hubris.

“I’m sorry,” she told Devola again, her words catching in her throat. “I—I didn’t mean to…”

“Of course you didn’t.” Devola wiped at her eyes. “Can you get up?”

Popola lifted her head. The effort made her dizzy. Clutching at her forehead, she sat up, then slowly, carefully rose to her knees, the top of her head brushing against the tent’s peaked canopy. Her neck and back both ached, throbbing waves ebbing and flowing like the tides up and down her spine; the two fingers one of the soldiers had stepped on stung and burned, bent at odd angles and stamped with the grimy pattern of the soldier’s bootprint. “I think so.”

“Good. Get your stuff. We’re leaving.” Devola tugged the blanket out from under her and stuffed it and her meager belongings—a few changes of clothes and set of tools bundled in small canvas bags—into a rucksack. “Get your sack and help me take down the tent.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’d rather leave on my own terms—” Devola sniffled and dried her eyes again on her sleeve. “Leave on my own terms than wait for them to kick us out… or worse…”

Popola sighed. “Right,” she said, grabbing her own rucksack and giving it a cursory look-through to make sure her stuff was there. “What about A2’s body?”

“We’re probably never going to see her again,” Devola said, “so I let Jackass have it.”

“But we promised Anemone—”

“Yeah. But we’ll never see her again, either.”

“What about Alucard’s clothes?”
“That’s been taken care of.”

“What, did you give those to Jackass, too?” Popola asked as she buried her hand in her pack. She counted her underwear—after that incident with the showers two weeks ago, she couldn’t be too paranoid—and rifled through her repair kit. She was out of staunching gel and thermal paste and dangerously low on solder, which wasn’t good, but what worried her more was—

“Where’s the book?” she asked Devola.

Devola looked away.

“Dev, the book.”

“You and that fucking book,” she muttered, just quietly that Popola could barely hear her.

“What?”

“Just let it go. It’s gotten you in enough trouble.” Devola slung her rucksack over her shoulder and started to crawl out of the tent.

Popola grabbed the hem of her blouse before she could leave. “Where is it?”

“I told you, forget about it.”

Popola yanked on her blouse and pulled her back. “Devola—!”

“Why do you care so much about it?” Devola snapped at her, brushing her hand aside and circling around to face her. “Does it make you feel special, a book only you can read? Do you feel like hot shit making flowers out of thin air and turning water into wine? Does it make you feel closer to Alucard?”

“Are you jealous?”

“Jealous?” Devola’s face flushed crimson. “I wish I was jealous! Popola, that book is going to get you killed!”

“But Dev—”

“Just forget about it and go back to being a normal android!”

“We aren’t normal androids!”

Devola’s words died on her tongue and her jaw hung slack, her mouth agape as Popola’s outburst gave way to silence. In the aftermath of her shout, only the muffled sound of distant conversations filled the air.

“We’re the last of our kind, two ten-thousand-year-old failures. There’s no one else like us in the world, not anymore. We aren’t normal and we’ll never be,” Popola said. “So why can’t I be abnormal in a way that that brings me closer to humanity?”

Devola’s stern glare softened, her brow furrowing. “Sis… what do you mean?”

“A human wrote that book. A woman named Charlotte Aulin.” Popola kneaded her hands, her chest tightening, her throat going dry. She chewed anxiously at her lip. “She put her heart and soul into it. She filled it with everything she’d ever learned about magic. Seventy years of devotion. For us… for us, seventy years is nothing, but for her, it was the culmination of her entire existence.
That’s what that book is. It’s an entire human life.”


“Can I at least look up something I can use to fix your face?” Popola asked, reaching out and letting her fingertips ghost across the edge of the cut running across Devola’s cheek.

“Okay.” Devola took off her rucksack, shoved her hand deep into it, and pulled the battered tome out from its hiding place. “But just this once,” she said, handing the book to Popola. “One spell. Then please, no more.”

Popola took the book from her. “Thanks, Dev. Does it hurt?”

Devola prodded the burned edges of the wound. “No, the nerve circuits are dead.”

“That’s good. Hold on, I know I passed by a good healing spell yesterday.” Popola flipped to the first table of contents, hoping to jog her memory. But to her shock, all of the pages she’d had no problem reading before were completely blank.

Noticing the look on her face, Devola leaned in, her frustrated glare melting away. “Sis?” she asked, furrowing her brows in concern, her voice softening. “What’s wrong?”

The book fell onto Popola’s lap, laying open but refusing to divulge its secrets. She flipped to another page, and another, and another, and finally went all the way back to the title page. It was all the same. The familiar words that should have been emblazoned in perfect, elegant handwriting on the first page—Grimoire Ecclesia, the Complete Compiled Spellbook of Charlotte Aulin, 1999—were nowhere to be found.

Had she used too much power? Had she burned herself out? Or had the spellbook rejected her, stripped her of her second sight, for the crime of using magic in anger and marring her sister’s face?

“I… I can’t read it anymore.” Popola felt two streaks of tears roll down her cheeks. “The words won’t show up.”

Crestfallen, Devola lowered her head and let her gaze drift down to the ground. “Oh, sis…”

Popola squeezed her eyes shut, her hand falling on top of the open book, fingertips running across its hundreds of frail, ragged pages, the rough and uneven edges scraping against her skin. All this pain, all this sacrifice, everything she’d put herself through to protect this book, and yet even so…

Devola’s hands slid across Popola’s hand, pulling it away from the spellbook. She cradled her hand gently in her palms. “Sis, I’m so sorry…”

“It really did make me feel special,” Popola whimpered.

“There, there. You don’t need magic to feel special,” Devola said, giving her a gentle, encouraging pat on the cheek. “You’re the last Popola in the world and my favorite sister in the world. That’s what makes you special.”

“But I wanted to have magic, too.”

Devola wrapped her arms around her and cooed softly, stroking her hair. “You probably just overexerted yourself when you broke that guy’s brain. It’ll be okay. It’ll, uh… come back.
“I’m sorry I hurt him. What if the book is punishing me?” Popola asked. Her cheek sank into Devola’s wavy, disheveled hair. The stench of ash and machine oil clung to each scarlet lock, but underneath the pungent odor was the faint and comforting aroma of family.

“Shh. That guy had it coming,” Devola said. “I was scared out of my mind when I saw him yesterday. But you protected me.”

“I trapped him in a void for a hundred years.”

“You were looking out for your big sister. It’s okay.”

“I was going to force him to look at my face for a century, but instead, when I slowed down time inside his head, he blinked.” Popola hiccuped. “So it was just darkness for a hundred years. I’m a monster.”

Devola started to laugh. “A monster? Pfft, that’s the most badass fucking shit I’ve ever heard.”

“But you’re still mad at me for… for costing us our home here. Aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, of course. But I gotta give credit where it’s due. You’re hardcore, Popola.” Devola planted a kiss on her cheek. “I love you. C’mon, let’s pack up. Then we can talk to your boyfriend about what happened.”

Popola’s eyes flew open. “What? Alucard?”

Devola flashed a bittersweet smile. “Don’t you try to tell me he’s not—”

“He’s here?”

Popola scampered out of the tent, cast her glance across the camp, her core whirring madly, her cheeks burning.

There he was, dressed to the nines with his freshly-laundered cravat and waistcoat, his ornate black coat draped over his shoulders, standing near the weapons merchant’s kiosk and admiring the way what looked like yet another new sword glittered in the light. One sleeve was rolled up to his elbow, revealing a gleaming ivory-white mechanical arm replacing the one he had lost.

Alucard noticed her immediately and sheathed the new sword at his hip, rushing over to her with an ethereal grace so otherworldly he almost seemed to glide above the ground like a phantom, his pale hair trailing behind him like a cloak of moonbeams.

“Alucard!” Popola squeaked. She glanced back over her shoulder at Devola. “You didn’t tell me he came back!”

“You didn’t ask.”

Popola punched her in the shoulder.

“Fancy running into you two here.” Alucard politely bent his knee and bowed, reaching out to take Popola’s hand in such a gentlemanly way that she nearly laughed. The cold, yet soft fingers of his left hand wrapped gently around her hand. While he was not much for emoting—or, at least, not much for showing positive emotions—there was a warm, happy half-smile (though laced with worry) lighting up his pale, thin face.
“What’s wrong?” he asked.

It would have taken less time if Alucard had asked the twins what was right. Anemone had been spirited away by A2 and was now considered a traitor to the Resistance (pending further investigation); Jackass, who for all her faults was more or less Anemone’s right-hand woman, had ran off to find her; the camp’s new leader was a micromanaging buffoon, and his men were all quite severely prejudiced against Popola and Devola; Devola was injured and Popola had all but blinded her second sight. Alucard wondered if somehow fate had waited to make a mess of everything until as soon as he’d left.

Now he was headed off to meet a man named Pascal, to whom Anemone and A2 had supposedly gone for shelter and sanctuary, flanked by a pair of pariahs fleeing their home after maiming one man and driving another mad and led by two soldiers who would most certainly be less than pleased if they were to run into A2 again.

On top of that, he was being surveilled, although the girl keeping an eye on him was mercifully bad at her job. 6O had kept asking him why he’d been turning off the receiver in his ear before every sensitive conversation until he’d explained to her that while androids did not seem to value the concept, humans preferred to have their privacy respected.

6O hadn’t tried to chat with him since. He wondered if he’d frightened her into silence or merely shamed her into being quiet. Alucard was well aware of how imposing he could be.

“She’ll be okay, right?” Devola asked, laying a hand on Popola’s forehead. The younger (by several milliseconds, according to Devola) sister was unconscious, cradled in Alucard’s arms.

“Oh, yes, of course. This is nothing a day or two of bed rest in a stress-free environment cannot fix,” Alucard told her. “Even her second sight will return to her.”

Devola looked happy to hear the first part and less than happy to hear the second part.

Alucard eyed 2B and 9S as they forged a path through the darkness about a dozen meters ahead of them, the lights from their pods bobbing in the air. He wondered how good their hearing was and how free he would be to discuss matters with Devola he didn’t want them to overhear.

“Her fatal flaw was attempting to perform magic without using the book itself as a power source,” he told her, lowering his voice to a half-whisper. “It holds the residual energy of the twentieth century’s most powerful witch, after all; one could say it is a battery of sorts. By casting spells by memory, without using the book…”

“So it’s what happened to her when she used the whip.”

Alucard nodded. “Not quite the same, but close enough.”

Devola frowned. “Speaking of the whip…” She gestured to the empty clip on his belt where he’d once kept it. “Where is it? Did you get tired of carrying around your own noose?”

“Well…” Alucard sighed and looked over at 2B. “She has it now.”

“But she’s—”

“Not a Belmont. Yes. I know.”

“I was going to say, ‘not unconscious,’ but yeah, that too. Why isn’t she in a coma right now?”
“Your guess is as good as mine,” Alucard said. “Do you have any, by the way? I do not, and it’s very irritating.”

“Hmm…” Devola bored a hole into the back of 2B’s head with her eyes. “Julius Belmont had a replicant, right?”

“I believe so. I pulled a few strings to get him on the list.”

“Some replicants were used in part or in whole as templates for later models of combat androids,” Devola proposed. “Maybe part of her combat programming comes from the replicant.”

Alucard nodded. A plausible scenario. 2B certainly didn’t have a *personality* informed by Julius Belmont, but her innate skill with that whip…

“But still,” he said, “Having programming derived from his copy does not a descendant make.”

Devola shrugged. “How do you know? You’re asking about what the *whip* thinks, not you. You adapted to the twenty-first century and learned to understand technology; the Vampire Killer didn’t. You know what androids and replicants and software are. You know that an android can’t *literally* be descended from a human. But I don’t think the whip does. It just senses someone who feels like a Belmont and acts accordingly.”

“You think it’s that simple?”

“Genes are just data, after all. Who’s to say we can’t be part of a human’s bloodline?”

“Or maybe the whip’s just given up. It knows that the human race is—”

Devola jabbed him in the side and held a finger to her lips, then gestured to the two YoRHa androids leading the way to Pascal. Alucard realized that the volume of his voice had been slowly, but steadily rising.

“It knows,” Alucard whispered, choosing his words carefully, “that the Belmont bloodline has long since died out. Perhaps it has become resigned to the fact that it will never have a proper owner again. Perhaps it is lonely and has decided to resign itself to the first able-bodied wielder it can find.”

His fingers curled around Popola’s shoulder as she lay draped over his arms in peaceful repose. Loneliness did make strange bedfellows—it was enough to drive an ageless half-vampire into the arms of the first android he saw; who was he to say that a lonely magical whip, bereft of any other option, wouldn’t likewise take solace in the grip of another mechanical person? Coolant channels for arteries and veins, circuits for nerves and neurons, metal and ceramic for bones, carbon fiber for muscles—in the absence of real flesh and blood, could even a magical weapon forged in and bound by blood simply throw up its metaphorical hands and say, ‘good enough’?

No wonder the whip hated him, Alucard mused as the burn scars on what remained of his right arm ached anew. They were too alike, *far* too alike, both weapons made to kill the unholy creatures of darkness who’d both failed when they were needed most and now wandered a wasteland partially of their own design.

“Well, if it’s happy with her,” Devola decided, “and it still kills vampires dead, then I guess it doesn’t matter *how* it’s letting her wield it.”

Alucard nodded. She was right. Accept the reality for now, worry about the reasoning behind it later.
“Can’t say I like all this supernatural shit, though,” Devola muttered. “Spellbooks and magic whips and monsters hiding in the shadows…”

“Me,” Alucard added.

“No, you’re not so bad. It’s all the craziness you bring with you.”

“I believe Dracula had already returned by the time I’d awoken,” Alucard said in his defense.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do now. Anemone’s camp was the last safe place we knew of here. We can’t risk crossing the sea, and…”

“Pascal seems welcoming enough, if Anemone and A2 have both taken up shelter with him.”

“That won’t work. It’s…” Devola shook her head. “Complicated.”

“What kind of a man is Pascal, by the way?”

“For starters, he’s a machine.”

“Ah.” Alucard gazed out at the shadowy ruins, spying the telltale amber glints of machine optical sensors in the dark. “And does that bother you?”

“It’s nothing like that.”

“Given what I’ve seen from your android peers, it seems perfectly understandable you’d want nothing more to do with them. Why put yourself through all those ordeals when you could just live on your own? Do you think the machines won’t trust you, either?”

Devola sighed. “You know what a geas is, don’t you?”

Alucard nodded. “Of course. A compulsion or prohibition, magically imposed on a person.”

“I suppose we have one, Popola and I.” Devola raised a hand to brush against the burn scar on her cheek. “When the rest of our models were terminated, the two of us—all of us that were left—underwent reprogramming. It was the only way they’d let us live. Our oath to devote ourselves to helping our fellow androids, no matter how much they loathe us, is hardwired into every circuit, every semiconductor, every microprocessor. If we don’t act on it, our guilt will crush us.”

“Androids can be as cruel as humans, I see.”

“We have to surround ourselves with people who hate and mock and abuse us. It hurts worse to avoid them. A village full of machines hidden in the forest… has,” Devola said, shaking her head sadly, “nothing to offer us.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And we lost Anemone’s camp because of that book. Because you taught Popola how to read it, she became obsessed, drew the ire of the others…”

“All our actions have unforeseen consequences.”

“She won’t listen to me,” Devola said, stroking Popola’s hair and letting it flow like a stream through her blackened, grease-stained fingers. “I think the geas is weaker on her, somehow. She’s more rebellious, more willing to fight it. But I want her to take all this magic shit and put it behind her. It’s a chapter of her life she never should have started writing. Tell her that for me.”
“Excuse me?”

“Tell her,” Devola said, turning her pale seafoam-colored eyes on Alucard and glaring at him, “no more magic. No more spellbooks. You know how she feels about you. If you tell her, she’ll listen.”

Alucard thought back to how quickly Popola had mastered so much of that book. Granted, her exploration of its contents had come with a terrible price for her and her sister, but… she had a natural gift for it. He couldn’t take that away from her. It would be like robbing Mozart of his piano.

“I can’t agree to that,” he decided. “I can teach her to use magic responsibly, but I cannot force her to cast aside genuine talent.”

Devola scowled and looked away, breaking eye contact. “If she gets hurt again, Alucard, I’ll make sure you die painfully and slowly. No matter how much of you is human.”

To Alucard, it was an empty threat, but he decided it wouldn’t hurt to heed it.

“You can expect me,” he told Devola, “to defend your sister’s life with my own. I owe you two that much, at least.”

As the five of them continued onward toward Pascal’s village, Alucard reflected on the promises he had made. 2B and 9S, Devola and Popola, and A2 and Anemone were all on different sides of an inter-android quarrel, and he had dedicated himself to protect at least one member of each party—he had promised A2’s life to Anemone, Popola’s life to Devola, and 9S’s life to 21O.

He had to be prepared that things would get much, much messier.

Pascal’s bulbous green optical sensors were the first sight to greet Anemone as she woke up. Returning to consciousness—returning to life, in her case—was a struggle; for the first few seconds, it felt from the stiffness of her limbs and the pressure in her chest as though she were drowning in tar. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been deactivated for so long.

“Anemone? All systems are registering within your model’s safety thresholds. Are you feeling well?”

Anemone lifted her head and took as deep a breath as she could. Her chest ached; her head spun. “Pascal?” Her breath hitched as she sat up. There was a sharp, stabbing pain through her chassis just above her breast. “Not to impugn your skills, but I don’t feel fixed,” she admitted as Pascal laid a claw against the back of her neck and helped her up.

The air was cold against her skin. She was naked from the waist up, she realized, save for a thick spiral of medical adhesive patches wrapped around her torso and chest. Her skin beneath the medical patches throbbed and ached; she could feel drying staunching gel settling into her wounds.

“I’m sorry. Most of your repairs have been completed,” Pascal told her, “save for a few unique components in your air-cooling systems I must fabricate. Unfortunately, I needed to reactivate you prematurely.”

Anemone knew the regretful tone in his soft voice. “What’s wrong?”

“You have a visitor. Judging by what she told me, it is a rather urgent matter.”

“What did she tell you?”
Pascal bashfully looked away, his optical sensors dimming a bit. If he were an android, he might have blushed. “Well, to tell you the truth, my friend, I cannot bring myself to utter most of the words she used.”

“So our unexpected guest is Jackass, huh?” Anemone tried to pivot and swing her legs over the side of the operating table, only for Pascal to take her by the shoulders and restrain her.

“Yes, Miss… Jackass.” Polite as he was, it sounded as though forcing himself to utter such an uncouth word was physically painful. “Please do not exert yourself; your coolant system is still only at eighty-six percent capacity. I will bring her in to see you.”

Anemone nodded and laid back down as Pascal hurried off to summon her visitor. If Jackass had come all this way to talk to her, then she either had very good news or very bad news—nothing else would be urgent. It all depended, she supposed, on how well Alucard’s meeting with Commander White had gone.

With the knowledge that a human was vouching for her and for A2, she should have felt at ease. However, this whole mess may have been catastrophic enough that one man alone, regardless of whatever godlike stature he possessed, couldn’t set things right so easily…

Jackass strode into the room, lowering the hood of her ragged red cloak. Her lank and greasy hair, snarled and peppered with twigs and leaves from her venture into the forest, hung over her eyes.

“Holy shit,” she said, brushing aside her unruly bangs and setting her eye on Anemone, “you’re actually here. I just made a lucky guess.”

“I didn’t expect to see you here.” Anemone took another ragged breath, pushing past the stabbing pain wrenching into her chest, as she forced herself to sit up. “But what a sight for sore eyes you are. I’ve never been so glad to see such a dirty face.”

Blushing, Jackass shrugged and grinned rakishly. “Imagine how screwed we’d be if I’d been wrong.”

“So, what brings you here?” Anemone leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Good news, I hope.”

Jackass scratched anxiously at the back of her neck. “Well…”

Anemone’s face fell. That one word said it all. “Things are bad, aren’t they?”

“I mean, the Resistance is prepared to drop all the charges against you and reinstate your command.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, it’s good.” Jackass nodded so vigorously that it seemed her head would go flying off any second now. “Really good. No punishment for harboring a fugitive, no punishment for getting six men severely wounded, everything just goes back to normal, pretty sweet deal.”

“If?”

Jackass wrinkled her brow. “Um… what?”

“If. There’s always an if.” Anemone could tell that Jackass was trying to avoid getting to that part out of sheer discomfort, so it must have been one hell of an if.
“Okay, so, the ‘if’ here is…” Jackass took a deep breath. “You gotta say A2 violently coerced you into helping her by holding you and your camp hostage.” She forced the words out so quickly that it was as if she was trying to make sure Anemone couldn’t hear any of them. If that was her plan, it didn’t work.

“So,” Anemone said, “let me get this straight. I get everything back and everything goes back to normal for me, for us, and for the camp, if I commit perjury and tell my superiors that every kind thing I did for A2 was under extreme duress.”

Jackass’s shoulders slumped. Anemone could see the confidence draining from her body like air from a balloon. “Well, when you put it like that, it sounds like a dick move.”

“I can’t do that,” Anemone snapped. The answer came to her so immediately that she didn’t even have to think about speaking.

“Come on, Anemone. You’re not ruining anyone’s life by taking this deal.”

“I’d be lying to High Command.”

“Big deal. I lie to High Command all the time. I lied to them this morning.”

“And A2—”

“She’s used to being a fugitive. She’s been hunted and hounded her whole life.”

“Which is why I can’t betray her like that!” Anemone’s hands curled into fists.

“Look, think about it. She’s got a brand new chassis and that whole werewolf thing going on now,” Jackass said, bristling in reaction to Anemone’s outburst. “She’s more well-equipped to defend herself than ever! She’ll be fine!”

“That can’t be her life forever!”

“We’re all stuck spending the rest of our lives fighting.”

“But not against her own kind; she deserves better. She should be fighting with us, against the machines, not against us!” Anemone forced herself to her feet; the room spun around her, the light overhead swirling and dancing like a mischievous will-o’-the-wisp. “I won’t throw her to the wolves for my own sake!”

“Come on. Things have to go back to normal,” Jackass insisted. “At least something has to go back to normal! Laurel’s a piece of shit and so are his men; the camp fucking sucks now!”

“I’m sorry, but sometimes you have bad leaders,” Anemone told her, fumbling for something she could grab onto to keep herself upright. Her fingers curled around the back of a wooden chair. Pascal hadn’t been kidding about her not being fully repaired; just a few steps and she already felt dizzy, lightheaded, and feverish. “Usually they die in a few months, and hopefully, then you get a better one. After two hundred years of service, you should know that by now. Not everyone can be a Rose or a White!”

Jackass’ face scrunched up at the sound of White’s name. “Please, Anemone,” she said, oddly subdued. “I need you back. You’re the only friend I have left.”

“What about…”

“Oh, Jack.” Anemone put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m… sorry.”

“Please come back.” Jackass hung her head and laid her hand on top of Anemone’s. “I need someone to tolerate me.”

The two of them were silent for a while; Anemone just didn’t know what else to say.

“I’ll tell A2 about this,” Anemone decided. “Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if she agrees with you. But I can’t have this decision weighing on my conscience unless she’s a part of it.”

“I get it,” Jackass croaked. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Help me over to her,” Anemone said, putting her arm over Jackass’ shoulder. “Pascal told me I shouldn’t exert myself, and… dammit, I think he’s right.”

“Yeah,” Jackass said, propping her up, “you’ve been through one hell of a ringer. Who did this to you?”

“Not ‘who,’ ‘what,’” Anemone said. “Some kind of… spider thing. One of those monsters that have been popping up. I’d been meaning to ask Alucard… By the way, how’d his meeting with White go?”

“Dunno. Hasn’t gotten back, as far as I know. I’ll tell you this, though—I really don’t think he softened White up at all.”

“Well, it was worth a shot.”

The two of them made their way through Pascal’s village. A2 wasn’t hard to find: Aside from 64B and 22B, she and A4 were the only other androids in the area.

To both Anemone’s and Jackass’ surprise, A2 was in a partially-transformed state: Sparse white fur, thin and light as peach fuzz, dusted her cheeks and shoulders; the pointed tips of her ears protruded from her long mane of silver-white hair; the tip of her nose had a slightly dark, slightly damp texture to it. Most notably, she still had a tail.

Anemone recalled how Alucard had explained lycanthropy to her—that the changes would be more or less pronounced depending on the phase of the moon. Judging from A2’s appearance, that would make it only a few days away from the new moon…

“How long have I been asleep?” she wondered aloud.

She didn’t get an answer to that question because as soon as A2 saw her, she bounded toward her and knocked her off her feet.

Anemone hit the ground hard enough to feel her chassis rattle; A2’s claws dug into her shoulders, her icy blue eyes glimmering. She’d never seen A2 smile so widely.

“Down, girl! Heel!” A4 barked, grabbing A2 by the scruff of her neck and hauling her away.

“Nice to see you, too, A2,” Anemone gasped as Jackass helped her back up to her feet.

“Digging the new look,” Jackass told A2. “It suits you.”
“Uh… thanks?” A2 sheepishly mumbled, her cheeks flushed crimson as she cowered in A4’s arms, clearly mortified and embarrassed by her behavior. “I’m kinda… stuck like this.”

A4 scratched behind her ear. “It’s okay, Two. There’s nothing wrong with being a little too enthusiastic sometimes.”

“God, I wish that were me,” Jackass whispered.

7E crept through the machine village with all of the stealthy grace afforded to her by her Executioner programming, clinging to the deep shadows left by the lights ringing the village’s perimeter. Shadowing Jackass had been child’s play—and Commander Laurel had been correct in his assessment that she’d lead her right to Anemone and A2.

There they were, in the clearing between two splayed roots of the gargantuan tree the village’s wooden scaffolding sprouted from—not just Anemone and Jackass, not just A2, but three other YoRHa fugitives to boot. 64B, the bullishly-built combat unit, and her lithe and scarlet haired compatriot 22B—both of whom had defected along with their de facto leader 8B just the other day—along with a third unit 7E didn’t recognize.

As she took her position in the shadowed grove, baring her knives, she reflected on her great luck. 6E, her perennial cohort, would be avenged. She didn’t know exactly what had happened to her—A2 had knocked her out before she and 6E could have fought—but given how abruptly she’d vanished off the map, it was easy to assume that A2 had destroyed her chassis.

Before 7E returned to the Bunker and reloaded 6E from her backup, she’d get her revenge on A2. It was only fair.

7E peered over the top of the gnarled root she was using for cover. Why, she wondered, was A2 so… hairy? Some kind of disguise? A piss-poor attempt at one, if that. At this distance, even here where the foliage overhead prevented most black box signals from reaching the Bunker, she could pick up A2’s signal clear as crystal.

So much for the legendary great fugitive of YoRHa, the shame of the entire Type-E division. In a few seconds, that shame would no longer exist.

7E crouched down, her synthetic muscles coiling like springs, and readied her knives. Glory to Manki—

A thick, heavy hand fell on her shoulder. “No fighting,” a man whispered in her ear, “in Pascal’s village.”

7E whirled around. “Wha—”

Everything vanished in a flash of golden light.

One blink later, she found herself standing on the roof of one of the leaning skyscrapers dotting the skyline of the city ruins; the lights from the nearby factory and Laurel’s camp fluttered and flickered in the mist.

“What the—” She whirled around, eyes darting left and right, trying to understand how she could have changed locations so quickly. Some sort of teleportation device?

“Pascal doesn’t want people to fight in his village. So we won’t.”
7E found herself looking up into the red eyes of a tall, muscular male android with short silver hair and a strange black tattoo spreading across his skin.

No, not an android. This was one of those two humanoid machines, Adam and Eve! She leaped back, readied her blades, and with the heady high of combat rushing through her chassis, she attacked.

The humanoid machines were high-end models, but they were not Executioners. 7E outmatched this one in speed and swiftness. It was easy to get the drop on him; she took aim at his unprotected left flank and plunged her dagger deep into his thigh.

Except the blade simply bounced off his skin.

The black tattoo had spread, somehow, and now covered the exact part of his body she’d tried to attack.

She struck again and again, dodging and weaving around the humanoid machine’s slow, weighty, easily-telegraphed attacks as she slipped her daggers through his defenses.

Each time she landed a blow, the tattoo splashed itself against his skin, staining it pitch-black. Hip, waist, solar plexus, sternum, thigh, neck, cheek, left or right—she couldn’t even draw a drop of blood.

The machine disappeared. 7E skidded to a halt, panting for breath, her black box screeching in her chest.

A sharp, overwhelming bolt of pain shot through her chest from back to front; static and dead pixels crowded her line of sight as everything went gray. A crimson-streaked hand cradling a black box rested in front of her.

Whose black box was that? Whose arm?

She looked down and saw that the arm was, in fact, protruding from her chest. And that meant the crimson liquid coating its shiny black skin was hers… And that meant the black box clutched in its fingers was…

“And don’t come back.”

The blood-soaked fingers curled around the black box and crushed it into jagged shards of shrapnel. Everything went black; 7E knew no more.

Carmilla stood in the castle’s underground ballroom, tapping her toe with impatience.

She’d given 6E all night. Plenty of time for a strong vampire to turn dozens of people. How long would she have to wait until she had an army of her own again?

At long last, the double doors in front of her flew open; with a confident stride (and, Carmilla noticed, a heavy limp), 6E, the first lieutenant of the new vampire army, walked across the checkered white-on-off-white floor.

6E was a mess. Her clothes shredded; her elegantly-curved pigtails frayed and loosened into a cascading mane of bloodstained, lavender-tinged ringlets; blood spattering her skin.

She smiled and bowed, her curls bouncing jovially. “Hello, Mistress Carmilla. I have returned.”
“Ah, yes. 6E. You have returned indeed,” Carmilla noted, noting as well the absence of any cohorts. She walked over to her, the clack of her heels on the marble tiles echoing through the cavernous ballroom. “You… and whose army?”

6E smiled disarmingly and let out a nervous giggle. “Well, you see,” she said, “I—”

Carmilla struck her across the face with such force that her fingernails tore long, deep, wounds in her cheek sharper and straighter than any sword; 6E spun on her heel not once but three times before collapsing to the floor, dazed.

“You will not,” Carmilla spat as 6E tried to pick herself up off the floor, “respond to any question from me with ‘Well, you see.’ Do you understand?”

6E swallowed hard. Carmilla could feel the thoughts in her head—*How could she hurt me like this? I’m so much stronger. A machine can’t even throw me off my feet with a single punch, yet all she has to do is slap me across the face!*

Little did the poor girl know, she was only as strong as Carmilla willed her to be. If Carmilla wished to floor her with a single blow, then floored she would be.

“Mistress—I know this looks bad, but—”

Carmilla’s heel dug into 6E’s back—deep enough to puncture the skin, to penetrate the chassis, to crush the spine. 6E lay spread-eagle on the floor, limbs splayed and twitching, fingers scrabbling against the polished white marble floor.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Carmilla spat, grinding the stiletto point deeper into the small of her back. “I told you to raise an army. And you *dare* return alone? When your mistress gives you an order—”

At that moment, 6E’s bravado finally cracked and she let out a pathetic wail. “*Mistress!***

Carmilla lifted her foot, granting her thrall a momentary reprieve, and then stomped down harder. “*You will speak when spoken to!*”

“Yes, ma’am!” 6E howled.

“When your mistress gives you an order,” she said, raising her voice so 6E could hear it above her whimpering, “you are to *obey* it. I figured obedience would be *simple* for automatons like you.”

“But you said I wasn’t—”

“You are a toy until I *say* you are not. *Where* is my army?” Carmilla asked.

“I don’t—”

“*Where* is my handsome, silver-haired man?”

“I didn’t—”

“I poured my soul into you. I made you second only to *me* in strength.” Carmilla pulled her blood-soaked heel out of 6E’s back and aimed a swift kick at her side. 6E clutched at her side with twitching, jerking fingers and curled into a ball, a muffled scream seeping through her clenched jaw and gritted teeth. Her pale, curly lavender-white hair splayed out in a halo on the floor. “So why, pray tell, are you such a *disappointment*? Why could you not turn *one* of your stupid metal
cohorts?"


“What happened to them? Why aren’t they with you?”

“There was a man… in a black coat… and h-he was strong…”

“You didn’t make them right,” Carmilla seethed, aiming another savage kick into 6E’s stomach, “if a strong man in a coat could kill them! You should be invulnerable to everything except silver and holy weapons! And there are no holy weapons in this godless world!”

“H-He gave 2E a whip and the next thing I knew, it—it hurt so bad, I couldn’t stay and fight—I had to—I had to run away…”

Carmilla froze in mid-kick, her leg swept back.

She lowered it.

“Did you say… a whip?”

6E lifted her head off the floor and nodded, sniffling.

Visions of fire and memories of pain flitted through Carmilla’s head.

The whip.

Memories of the sneering face of the Belmont clan brat who’d stormed her beautiful estate and laid waste to it, who’d razed her manor to the ground, slaughtered her thralls and lieutenants, freed her slaves—

And flayed the flesh from her bones.

Her frigid breath caught in her lungs. She could feel herself shaking.

“It h-hurt so much… like I was burning… crumbling to ashes…”

Carmilla dropped to her knees beside 6E and swept her up, cradling her in her lap. “There, there,” she cooed, running her fingers through her bloodstained lavender locks. “I’m sorry. Poor girl, you should have said that sooner…”

6E buried her face in her shoulder and sobbed.

“Oh, I know, I know. Even superior beings such as us fear the sting of the Vampire Killer. It’s alright, dear, it’s alright. I forgive you.”

“M-Mistress…”

“There, there, dear. You’re safe here from that odious vampire hunter. Now, tell me, who was wielding the whip?”

6E shuddered. “M-My old friend… 2E. We—We were supposed to be vampires together, but she —”

“And did it hurt her to wield the whip?” Carmilla asked. She was no fool; she knew how the Vampire Killer worked. To be not of Belmont blood and wield it exacted a heavy toll, and of
course, there was simply no way an android could carry within it the blood of that hated clan. “Was she weary? Did it burn her?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“That’s okay.” Carmilla smiled and wiped the blood and tears from 6E’s cheek. She had to suppress the urge to lick it off—she knew full well how awful android blood tasted, but it looked just like the real thing. “I will call upon Olrox and Adam. The four of us, we’ll hunt that whip-wielder together. With our strength combined, she’ll be our next plaything in no time!”

6E smiled, the dimples in her cheeks deepening. “Thank you, Mistress!”

Carmilla stood up and pulled her lieutenant up with her, watching the strength and vitality return to her bloody face as the will to fight returned to her.

Soon, the lingering ghost of the Belmont clan would be destroyed and the last gasp of that wretched bloodline would be driven from this world for good.

Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting for months to have Popola use her newfound magic powers to send a dude to the Shadow Realm.

Also, I’m going to let you stew in agony over whether or not this art is spoilers:

"hey 2B look! dracula gave me one of his old capes and he says he'll give us our own castle if you join us!"

art: @axe_drawings pic.twitter.com/V9KCvkpX68

— wellmanicuredma'am 🌹 (@wmm_ebooks) July 17, 2019
Fake A4 struggles to avoid blowing her cover as Alucard draws nearer to Pascal's village. 9S makes a new friend. 2B blows off some steam.

Alucard was coming.

The succubus could sense it. Could smell it in the air. There was nothing quite like the scent of a dhampyr—a man born of carnal relations between living and undead flesh, blessed and damned souls, holy and unholy blood, prey and predator—and there was only one dhampyr left in the world. It flew on the wind with leathery wings.

And he would be able to sniff her out in an instant. As soon as he set foot in this village, her cover would be blown—she’d never be able to take A2 back to Lord Olrox.

On the bright side, she would need not fear any punishment for her failure from Lord Olrox because Alucard would most likely burn her to ashes first.

She, A2, the other two fugitive androids, Anemone, and Jackass were all gathered around a wobbly wooden table in a rickety wooden hut, discussing what the others all believed to be a dire situation, but which bored the succubus to tears. All this nonsense about fugitives and betrayal. None of them realized that the pandemonium Alucard could unleash upon this village was infinitely more dangerous than whatever trouble A2’s stupid friend was in.

A2—the werewolf branded to serve in Dracula’s army of darkness, cured by that same brand to languish in the space between beast and woman. Her still all-too-human physique, minus the dusting of fur and peach fuzz clinging to her artificial skin and the bushy silver tail curled around her waist and resting in her lap, filled out the dusty old clothes of an ancient vampire hunter in what was (unbeknownst to her) a masterful stroke of irony.

She was a sentimental fool with not even two brain cells to rub together, in spite of her outer pretensions of gruff, world-weary cynicism. An idiot, in other words, who thought she was street-smart. She had no idea just how deeply she’d been ensnared and probably never would.

64B—a fugitive android built like a tank and just as slow, muscles like an ox. Bandages plastered to her cheek and swaddling her arm hid deep and no doubt incredibly painful acid burns. Her compatriot, the redhead 22B, was everything she wasn’t—small, lithe, definitely quick and nimble—but she too was nursing a deep and debilitating wound.

There was no doubt that 64B and 22B, or as the succubus preferred to think of them, the cow and the fox, would get in the succubus’ way, and her wiles would be much less effective on them compared to A2—she’d been tailor-made to wrap A2 around her finger like a piece of string, but these two were wildcards. For all she knew, they were straight as rails. She’d have to find some way to dispose of them before bringing A2 to Lord Olrox.
Jackass—an android who could be called a living grease stain if the issue of whether or not an android could be considered *alive* wasn’t so thorny. Her dirty red cloak hid even dirtier skin, her cowl hid hair so slicked with grease and oil that it would never dry. She carried a large bundle almost as big as herself wrapped in a ratty, tattered tarp. A sharp gleam of animalistic intelligence, shrewd and wily like that of a prey animal who’d spent years outwitting its hunters, lit up her eyes.

She was trouble, too. She observed everything; her keen and attentive stare laid bare the clockwork moving within her mind, iterating plan upon plan with every passing second. Out of all the androids in this room, she was the smartest—and thus likely the most dangerous.

Anemone—the most important person in the room, apparently, if the deference everybody seemed to be showing her meant anything. At the very least, she *dressed* like someone important; an ornate (though dusty and dirty) green cloak hung over her shoulders like the cloak of a barbarian king. Short pleats of glossy raven hair framed a handsome face with a sharp jawline, strong nose, noble brow, and bronzed olive skin.

She was quite pretty, or *would* be if these androids weren’t all so ignorant of such things as bathing and laundry. The greatest threat she seemed to pose to the succubus’ plans was that A2 was quite obviously deeply in love with her—almost as much as she was in love with dear dead A4.

Love triangles. Normally, the succubus *loved* love triangles, especially when they ended in blood and fire. Here, though, it was just another complication she hoped wouldn’t doom her to oblivion.

All of these people (save for A2, who’d fallen under her spell quite easily) were dangerous to the succubus, though none as dangerous as Alucard.

A2 crossed her arms. “So that’s the deal they want you to make, huh, Anemone?”


“Okay.”

“They’ll go back to hunting you.” Anemone rested her forehead in her hand.

“I’m used to that.”

The succubus laid her hand on A2’s shoulder and slowly ran it down her back, her fingertips grazing the fine dusting of fur speckling her skin. “You’re doing the right thing, Two. And don’t worry, Anemone. A2 will have the three of *us* with her. We’ll all survive just fine out there.”

She’d get rid of those two idiots the instant they were all out of the village, but poor Anemone didn’t need to know that.

Anemone sighed. “I know, but…” She tapped her fingers on the table; the table’s loose joints squeaked and creaked. “I… I’ll never see you again if…”

A2 looked down. “Well… it was fun while it lasted, getting to see you again. I’m actually… kinda glad that Alucard bastard dragged me into your camp.”

Anemone, too, turned her gaze downward. “Me too.”

“Don’t worry about me. Take your life back. You deserve it.”

The cow, the fox, and Jackass sat silently between the two of them with the mournful air of pallbearers about them. The succubus chewed on her lip and curled her fingers tightly around the
hem of her skirt as A2 and Anemone continued to drag out their morose, wistful goodbyes.

Would these two just fuck already? Either shit or get off the pot! she wanted to scream at them.

“You deserve better than this,” Anemone said.

“Yeah. But we don’t always get what we deserve.”

The succubus sniffed; the scent of that accursed half-breed was stronger now. Stronger with every second, with every step Alucard took closer to the village. Why was he headed here? Had he detected her?

A chill went up her spine. She was running out of time. She had to get A2 far away from this place now.

She gently dragged her fingertip along the curve of A2’s spine, tracing the bumps of each metal vertebral column beneath her oh-so-smooth synthetic skin. “I know this is hard, but you’re doing the right thing, Two. Let’s go. Goodbyes are like ripping off a bandage—you have to get them over with quickly, dear.”

A2 shivered, the ghost of a smile fighting against her dour demeanor. The succubus knew her touch was irresistible, and poor A2 just wanted it so badly. The things she could do with just a few fingers to this girl’s body and mind given the opportunity…

The succubus fought the urge to lick her lips as fantasies filled her mind’s eye. While A2 was definitely aware of the concept of cuddling, she didn’t seem to have a clue what sex was, which made her just that much worthier of a prize—like cutting through the rind of a spiny pineapple to get to the delicious fruit within. The innocent ones, the virgins, were always the most rewarding conquests.

A4’s ghost hovered between the two of them, her spectral image faint; light bled through her as if she were made of sheer silk. She glared at the succubus, a scowl marring her pretty face, her blue eyes behind her wispy silver-white bangs burning with fury and loathing.

The succubus winked at her as if to say, oh, you want this, don’t you? and massaged A2’s shoulderblades with the heel of her palm. A4 reached out and curled her spectral fingers around the succubus’ wrist; her grip was cold enough to burn. Struggling to not allow the pain to show on her face, the succubus relented and pulled away her hand.

She’d find some way to dispose of that bothersome ghost eventually. And when she did, she would fuck A2’s brains out—well, what little she had to begin with. After all, Olrox had marked her with his seal by virtue of her brawn and nothing else. He wouldn’t mind if A2 came to him drooling and scarcely able to string two words together as long as she still had fangs and claws and the instincts to use them, would he?

“Why do we have to leave now?” 64B piped up, scratching at the itchy bandages covering the acid burns on her face and chest. “This is a neutral place. Shouldn’t we stay here until we’ve gotten further along in our repairs?”

“No,” the succubus said, irked. “There’s no telling how the situation might change. We should leave. Now.” Damn these two hangers-on.


“Of course I’m tense, Two.” The succubus smiled bitterly, letting her growing dread seep into her
expression. “We fugitives are all in grave danger, after all, aren’t we?”

“I think 64B has a point,” Anemone chimed in, her voice still heavy with weariness and woe. “You four should take advantage of Pascal’s hospitality before you consign yourself to the wilderness. Jackass and I will return to the camp now. That way, we won’t be caught associating with each other.” She stood up, hunched over as though the heavy green cloak draped over her shoulders was made of lead.

“But A4 has a point, too,” 22B said, crossing her arms. “We don’t know how the situation might change. If by some chance we’re discovered here, this place might not be neutral for much longer.”

“And Pascal is a pacifist,” the succubus said, “so, of course, this village would be utterly defenseless if YoRHa wanted to attack us. Let’s go.”

“Ah, that’s a good point, too,” Anemone conceded. “I suppose it’s for the best if we all part ways now.”

A2 stood up. “Guess that’s it, then. I’ll miss you.”

A wave of relief washed over the succubus. Things were getting back on track. Now if A2 and Anemone just kept their goodbyes short and sweet, they could all be on their way—and she could be one step ahead of Alucard all the way back to Lord Olrox…

Anemone nodded. “I’ve never stopped missing you.” She wiped at her eyes. “I…”

She wrapped her arms around A2 and buried her face in her shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Two.”

A2 hugged her back. “Okay.”

“Be careful out there. Don’t go too long without maintenance. Ask your friends for help when you need it.” She patted A2 on the back; A2’s tail started to wag.

Oh, for hell’s sake.

The succubus crossed her arms. “While we’re young,” she muttered.

“What’s the hurry?” A4’s ghost asked her, drifting as far as she could from A2—bound to her by an invisible tether, she could not travel more than a meter from her side. The succubus stepped back, remaining just outside of arms’ length as A4 clenched her fists.

“Oh, I’m just an eager beaver,” the succubus whispered back, winking again. This was a wink that said, ‘I’m going to show your girlfriend such a good time that she’ll forget you even existed at all.’

A4 seemed to get the message. Her face crumpled as a hopeless malaise fought against her impotent anger.

“That’s right. I’d shuffle off to the great beyond now if I were you—so you don’t have to watch.”

“Y-You’re a monster!” A4 shouted out, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

A2 broke away from Anemone at last. “Goodbye, Anemone.”

Anemone swallowed the lump in her throat. “Right. Goodbye, Two,” she croaked. “If the war ever
ends…”

“Maybe. Who knows?” A2 took her place at the succubus’ side. “Until then.”

The succubus took her arm. “It’s time.”

With a silent and barely-stoic nod, A2 collected the other fugitives and left the hut. As she crossed the threshold of the hut with A2 in tow, the succubus once more caught the scent of Alucard’s presence, growing stronger with each second. It assaulted her nostrils like too much cheap cologne—sickening and cloying.

“Wait!”

Jackass’ harsh voice cut through the still air, her exclamation hanging like a stormcloud.

The succubus whirled around. “Oh, what now?” she snapped. “It’s not like we have places to be or anything!”

Jackass laid the giant canvas bundle she’d been carrying over her arm on the table. The table’s wooden legs began to buckle.

“For the last time, I’m not going to bite you,” A2 told her. “Find some other werewolf to maul you.”

“What? No, no, I just figured it all out!” Jackass began to undo the cables tying the bundle together. “I just figured out how you and A4 can stay here, A2!”

The succubus felt the blood drain from her face. “What?” she hissed.

“They aren’t even bothering to look for you, A4,” Jackass said, “since you were a confirmed kill at Pearl Harbor. You haven’t been on anyone’s radar. Because you’re, uh, you know. Dead.”

“Yes…” The succubus felt her stomach drop into her intestines. Where was this greasy bitch going with this?

“So all we have to do to get YoRHa off A2’s back…” Jackass pulled the canvas cloth away with a theatrical flourish and tossed it into the corner of the hut. “Is give them a corpse!”

The succubus gasped. A2 gasped. A4’s ghost clapped her hands over her mouth, but there was a strange look in her eyes that didn’t match the horror she was exhibiting.

A2’s old body, a mangled hunk of junk with a vague humanoid shape, ragged patches of skin with visible seam lines plastered to a black chassis that had seen and forgotten better days, laid on the table, sprawled across it with arms and legs akimbo. Its head was mutilated—its scalp and face completely removed and the interior of its skull scooped out, leaving behind nothing but a hollow metal bowl dotted with computer things the succubus couldn’t even begin to find the words for.

“You’re a genius, Jackass!” 64B shouted, pumping her fist.

Anemone’s face lit up, her eyes twinkling, a smile crossing her face; a rosy hue bled across her olive cheeks. “You and A4 could stay here, A2…”

No, no! They were going to ruin it! “That’s a—that’s a stupid plan!” the succubus shouted. “They’d see through it in an instant! It doesn’t even look like Two anymore!”

“A4 is right,” 22B said in a rare display of wit. “This’d fool a good Scanner for about a minute,
“Well, it’s still got A2’s RFID tag,” Jackass said. “And the hardware is obviously an Attacker model and there’s metadata associated with the Type-2 personality matrix in the firmware. Just beat the shit out of it and make it look like its black box was destroyed and no one will be the wiser.” She shrugged. “And you didn’t want me getting my grubby hands all over this body!”

“Come on, Two,” the succubus said, reaching out for A2’s arm. “This is getting ridic—Two?”

A2 walked up to the table, a frosty look in her eyes, her fur bristling. A4’s ghost trailed behind her like a shadow. She looked down at the body, then at Jackass, then back to the body, then back to Jackass. “I told you not to touch it,” she growled.

Jackass shrank away. “Well, uh, I-I didn’t do anything weird or creepy with it…”

“If you’re lying…”

The succubus felt dread anew trickle down her spine and turned her attention to A4’s ghost.

The specter grinned wickedly at her, winked, then threw herself at A2’s old body.

“No!” the succubus cried out, throwing out her hand and rushing at her in the vain hope she could contain the ghost before—

The headless body, now filled with and animated by A4’s spirit, leaped off the table and drove its fist into the succubus’ jaw.

The succubus was thrown backward, stumbling over the threshold. A sharp, knifelike jolt of pain shot through her neck as her vertebrae twisted and snapped, her jaw and cheekbone shattering under the force of the impact. Blood spurted from her mouth as teeth sprayed from her mouth like bullets.

She flew backward, out the hut, across the catwalk that lined the village’s great tree trunk, and hit the trunk so hard that she swore she could feel her skull split cleanly in half down the middle. To say she saw stars was an understatement. She saw entire galaxies.

Androids were hardy things, with metal bones and armor plating capable of withstanding punishment the likes of which would reduce any other living creature on the planet to a bag of jelly. Succubi, though fairly durable themselves compared to the average humans, were not.

True, succubi had magic powers at their disposal for offense and defense, but she couldn’t use hers without blowing her cover. True, succubi could heal rapidly from even the most mortal wounds if not staked in the heart, but she couldn’t rely on her healing factor without blowing her cover.

A4 clamped her cold, skinless hand around the succubus’ neck and let out a rage-filled, wordless bellow, the exposed motors in her knuckles grinding and whining as her fingers dug into her neck and crushed her trachea.

Hands shaking, the succubus clasped A4’s wrist in a vain attempt to loosen the ironclad grip on her neck. The world spun around her, lights dancing to and fro like fairies as the pressure grew stronger and stronger, flashes of color swimming in front of her eyes. She could see black claws sprouting from her fingertips and could feel her horns threatening to burst from her forehead—her glamour was starting to fail.

She gritted her teeth and clenched her fist, conjuring blue-violet flames that seeped between her fingers. If her glamour was lost, she might as well go all the way—
Glittering metal flashed through the air; A4 staggered backward, blood flying from the severed stump of her arm as 22B lashed out with her blade once more and tore through the living corpse’s midsection. A4 let out a mournful, anguished howl through the remains of her throat.

A2 leaped into the fray with the savagery expected of a werewolf, her claws tearing deep furrows in A4’s chassis as she split her apart from stem to stern.

In spite of the agony from her wounds, the succubus relished the sight—A4’s own ally, her own lover, unaware of her identity, tearing her to pieces!

Blood gushing from the gaping wound running all the way up her torso from neck to crotch, A4 toppled over and fell off the wooden catwalk into the darkness below.

Her aching head throbbing and pounding, the succubus struggled to collect herself and reapply her glamour before any of the androids noticed.

“What the fuck was that?” A2 shouted at Jackass.

“How should I know? Do I look like someone with experience bringing androids back from the dead?”

“Yes!”

The succubus struggled to lift her head. 64B rushed to her aid and helped her out. “Geez, pal. You got clobbered.”

“Thank you,” the succubus said, spitting out a bloody wad of teeth. “I hadn’t noticed…”

“Doesn’t look like you can take much punishment.”

“Ah, well, when one goes without maintenance for a while…”

64B frowned. “Y’know, maybe we should stay here a bit longer. You’re not up to scratch…”

The succubus shook her head. “No, no, I’m fine. We really should—”

Her breath caught in her throat, frozen solid into a rock-hard lump.

Slowly, achingly slowly, the slowly-realigning vertebrae in her spine screaming and wailing in anguish, she turned her head.

Walking across the catwalk that wound across the tree, flanked by two white-haired androids and a red-haired android and cradling another red-haired android in his arms, was a man with long, flowing white-gold hair and a thin, pale, elfin face; his long black coat swirled around him like a living shadow with every step he took, the golden finery lacing his clothes glittering in the light. A long, curved saber with a silvery edge and an elegant stained-glass pattern adorning the flat of the blade hung at his hip. His eyes were golden coals burning in ash-gray pits. His nostrils flared as he caught the succubus’ scent.

It was too late to escape.

Alucard was already here.

He handed the unconscious woman cradled in his arms to her twin. “Devola, take your sister somewhere she can rest. 9S, go warn Pascal about his village’s defenses.”
The red-haired sisters and the white-haired boy broke away from him and went off on their own.

“Now, what in God’s name,” the man asked, narrowing his golden eyes, “is going on here?”

What Alucard was looking at was so wrong that he was all but dumbfounded. So many questions had piled up in his mind that he simply couldn’t figure out which one to ask first.

First off, A2. Where to begin with A2? Why was she dressed like the ancient vampire hunter, the Blade of Ecclesia? And why, with the moon still on the opposite side of the planet, was she still transformed? How?

And who were those other three androids with her? Why did at least one of them reek so strongly of ashes and musk? Why, if this was supposed to be a peaceful place, was one of them so grievously and freshly injured, and why was that one so maddeningly familiar in her appearance? He could swear he’d seen her before, past the synthetic blood covering her caved-in face.

“Alucard?” Anemone asked, shock slackening her jaw. “2B?”

A2’s lip curled, baring her fangs. “You,” she hissed.

Alucard preemptively threw his arm out across 2B’s chest. “Now, now,” he said, “we have not come to fight.”

He glanced at 2B. She wore a noncommittal frown; her visor hid her eyes. Just in case she was hiding some latent bloodlust toward A2 behind that strip of black cloth, he repeated himself. “We have not come to fight.”

“We hope it won’t come to that,” 2B said, lowering Alucard’s arm. “Anemone, Jackass, step away from the fugitives.”

Anemone and Jackass distanced themselves from the others; A2 and her ragtag posse all tensed up.

“Boy, are we glad to see you,” Jackass said, wiping her brow. “A2 and her maniacs here had us cornered—”

Alucard cleared his throat. “2B, why don’t you look after Anemone and Jackass? I would like to have a word with A2 and her… maniacs.” Hopefully, everything would work out if he could just manage to keep 2B and A2 apart. It was like dealing with unruly siblings. Or cats.

To his relief, 2B collected Anemone and Jackass and led them both away, leaving Alucard alone with A2 and the three other androids gathered around her.

“A2, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?” he asked.

A2 helped the injured android to her feet. “Introduce your own damn self, Alucard.”

“This guy isn’t with YoRHa, is he?” one of the androids, the one with bright scarlet hair, asked. She eyed him skeptically.

“Good heavens, no, I’m not with them.” Alucard removed his coat and draped it over one arm, then bowed deeply. “I apologize if my attire has given you the wrong impression. My name, as A2 mentioned, is Alucard. I’m a good friend of hers.”

A2 scowled.
“A friend,” Alucard corrected himself.

A2’s scowl deepened.

“An acquaintance.”

The larger of the three other androids waved. “Hiya, Alucard. I’m 64B. My friend is 22B. A2’s friend is A4. Nice to meet you!”

Alucard sniffed and caught the scent of a demon yet again. It was the scent of sin, of pride and wrath and lust, of ash and noxious incense and musk. One of these three—64B, 22B, and A4—reeked of it, but at such close proximity, he couldn’t tell whom.

One of these androids was not who they claimed to be.

“A4, was it?” Alucard turned his attention to the injured android. “You’re the same model as A2, I take it?”

A4 nodded.

“Funny. I’d thought the rest of A2’s team had been wiped out.”

A4’s reaction was telling. She seemed to shrink just a little, hunching her shoulders and bowing her head as though she could hide herself.

A2 stepped in front of A4. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing. I’m just amazed that another survivor has turned up after… three years, was it?”

“So was I,” A2 replied testily.

“You two must have been very good friends.” Alucard crossed his arms. “Well, A2, I’m glad you found—"

Then he noticed it.

He cursed himself. He must have been blind not to see it right away.

Alucard grabbed A2 by the arm and inspected the seal on her shoulder. “Where,” he asked, “did you get this?”

A2 wrenched her arm free of his grip. “Shithead named Olrox. What’s it to you?”

“Not who, you fool, where. I know who Olrox is.” Alucard hid his surprise at the discovery that Dracula had brought his lieutenants back with him.

“Met him underground yesterday in some weird… castle place?” A2 wrinkled her nose. “Again, why do you care?”

So Dracula’s castle was underground. Alucard wondered if those strange crystal structures that had begun to protrude from the ground in the area were a part of it.

He glanced at the other three androids. “You three. I must speak with A2 in private. Leave us.”

22B looked conflicted. Evidently, she didn’t trust Alucard much. Was she the demon?
“Four, go with them to the repair facility,” A2 said, nudging her counterpart along.


“Oh, him? Don’t worry about me. I’ve kicked his ass before.”

“It was more of a tie, actually,” Alucard interjected.

“It was a tie and I won.” A2 patted A4 on the back. “Go on. Get your face looked at.”

The other three androids hurried away (A4 with some reservations—very suspicious, if one were to ask Alucard), granting him the opportunity to speak with A2 in private.

A2 crossed her arms, her pointed ears flicking. Alucard wasn’t surprised that she wasn’t happy to see him. Especially considering he’d brought her archenemy along with him.

“So, the meeting with White didn’t go so well, huh?” she asked.

“Well, she tried to kill me right off the bat,” he admitted, “and things didn’t improve much from there on out. She’s quite a loathsome person, isn’t she?”

A2’s tail swished back and forth behind her. The corner of her mouth twitched slightly upward into a bitter half-smile. “Dunno what you expected. The whole idea was stupid in the first place.”

“I did get a new arm out of it, so it wasn’t a total loss.” Alucard flexed the alabaster fingers of his prosthetic hand. They still felt oddly ghostly, detached from the real world; the mental exertion it took to move them had faded from a noticeable headache to a dull background throb, fortunately, and Alucard surmised that within a few days, using the prosthetic would be as natural as breathing.


“Oh, yeah, congrats on the new arm.” A2 rolled her eyes.

“Totally worth it—”

“Who’s that? Doesn’t sound like…”

Alucard held up a hand. “Shh. Sorry, 6O,” he said, turning his back on A2, “but I’m afraid our regularly-scheduled contact will have to wait. You see—kssshhnhhh—interference—kshhhhh—breaking up—kssshhh—try ag—kssshhhh—later—kssssssshhhhhhh—”

He yanked the earpiece out, pinched it between his forefinger and thumb, and crushed it. What a relief. He’d all but forgotten that he’d been connected to the Bunker.

“Sorry about that,” he told A2. “Now—”

A2 grabbed him by the collar, crushing his cravat in her clawed grip, and nearly yanked him off his feet, dragging him toward her until the tips of their noses were nearly touching. Hers was damp and discolored, her nostrils flaring.

“Careful with the cravat. It’s silk and freshly washed,” Alucard warned her.

“You came here,” she hissed, “with a wire in your ear?” Her breath was hot and stank of raw meat. “Did they put a camera in your eyes, too? Is White watching me right now?”
“Just the earpiece, and—”

A2 started sniffing him.

“No, er… do you know what surveillance devices smell like?” he asked.

She let go of him and pulled away. “Um… no,” she answered sheepishly.

“Well, it was just the one,” Alucard said as he tried to un-rumple his cravat, “I can assure you.”

A2 growled and scratched at one of her ears.

“Now, about that seal of yours.” Alucard reached out and gently prodded one of the three scorch marks that made up the seal. “Mind if I…”

“Don’t poke me, you…”

“This seal is the brand of Orlox, lieutenant of Lord Dracula, and it’s the reason you’re stuck like this.”

A2’s demeanor instantly changed. She cocked her head curiously. “What?”

“Orlox is the master of Dracula’s army. Of course, a werewolf isn’t any good to him,” Alucard explained, “if it’s only a werewolf during the night, so he brands his subordinates with magic seals such as this one to ensure that their powers are always at their height. In your case—”

“Hey, whoa, I’m not his subordinate. I punched him in the face.”

“Ah, well, it’s good that you did it when you could.”

“Implying I can’t do it again the next time I see him?”

“No. As a matter of fact, you can’t.”

A2 made a fist, a steely glint in her icy blue eyes. “Point me in his direction and I’ll show you.”

Alucard shook his head. “No, no. Now that the seal has triggered, you shall not raise neither voice nor hand against him.”

“You’re joking.”

“Vampires are masters of control. At the core of their very being is the desire to dominate utterly—body, mind, heart, and soul. If you find yourself in the same room as him, you will be beholden, not only physically but mentally, to him. Essentially, from the moment you transformed last night and the seal activated, you became his slave. You simply haven’t realized it yet.”

A2 looked surprisingly shaken and clapped her hand over the brand. “So how do I get rid of it? Since you seem to know everything about this magic bullshit.”

“Ah, well, that’s the hard part. To erase the brand, you’d have to kill him.”

A2 squinted at him. Alucard could all but see rusty, seldom-used gears turning in her mind. “But I can’t kill him,” she said, teasing out her answer slowly and deliberately, “as long as I have the brand, because he could just tell me to stop and I would.”

“Correct.”
“Shit.”

“Now…” Alucard reflected on A2’s three new friends. Whichever one was the demon would surely bear Olrox’s seal somewhere on her body, like the birthmark of a witch—the mark of the devil’s covenant. “Have you seen that symbol on anything else?”

“Hmm…” A2 scratched absentmindedly at her cheek. “There was this fucking spider… scorpion… centipede thing.”

“And?”

A2 wrinkled her nose and knitted her eyebrows. “What do you mean, ‘and?’”

“Is that it?”

“Um…” A2’s eyes darted to the side. “I… don’t think so,” she answered, her noncommittal response punctuated by an anxious flick of her tail.

She was clearly, obviously lying. She’d seen it on someone else. But who?

The succubus had avoided oblivion by such a narrow margin that even she couldn’t believe her incredible luck. Whatever suspicions Alucard had, he obviously wasn’t confident enough in them to peg her as the demon running amok in this village. It was such a relief. For now, she was safe. She could gather her wits about her and figure out what to do to further deflect his suspicions.

And on top of that, A2 would be an effective shield. If Alucard did try to kill her, A2 would surely leap to her defense no matter how he tried to explain his actions. Love was, after all, such an irrational and stupid thing, and A2 was nothing if not a terminally lovesick puppy.

But that would be a last resort. For now, the succubus needed a way to keep Alucard’s eyes off her. These other two androids, 64B and 22B, could prove useful. Obviously, enough of her scent had rubbed off on them that Alucard couldn’t tell which of the three was the demon. How else could she deflect suspicion onto them?

The three of them reached one of the repair facilities and slipped inside. The cow and the fox immediately set to work changing out their bandages and packing their wounds with staunching slime or whatever it was called; the succubus slipped into a back room for some privacy, took a seat on the workbench, leaned back, and turned her healing factor on.

As her face un-caved in, her vertebrae popped back into alignment, her jaw and cheekbones un-cracked, her blood sucked itself back into her veins, and her missing teeth sprouted anew from her gums, the succubus reached down, slipped her hand through the slit in her skirt, and absentmindedly scratched at the brand emblazoned on her hip. What to do, what to do…

Of course! That was it! Witch hunters always looked for the witch’s birthmark—and Alucard was no different!

She knew exactly what the next stage in her plan was.

The cow and the fox were shocked when she emerged from the back room.

“Wow,” 64B said. “You look… good as new! How’d you do that?”

“Oh, I’m very good at repairing things,” the succubus answered, coyly winking.
“Can you help us out, then?” 64B asked, gesturing to 22B as she redressed the gaping wound running through her abdomen.

“No, no, sorry. I’m only good at repairing myself.”

“Oh, too bad.”

The succubus took a seat next to 64B and slyly hiked up her skirt to show off the brand burnt into her thigh. “Say… you’ve seen this tattoo on A2, right?”

“Uh… yeah, she’s got one on her shoulder. You have one, too?”

“Yup. It’s a thing all of us Attacker models did before the Pearl Harbor descent operation. Marks us as a family of sorts.” The succubus sighed and cupped her cheeks in her hands. “Oh, it’s such a shame only the two of us remain… but,” she added, glancing at 64B with a coy smile, “if the four of us are going to travel together…”

For a stupid cow, 64B caught on quick. “You mean… you want 22B and me to get our own tattoos?”

The succubus snapped her fingers and grinned. “Exactly. Raise a new family from the ashes of the old one!”

“I love it!” 64B’s eyes lit up.

The succubus picked up a shallow tray filled with black grease paint from one of the workbenches and pretended to dip two fingers and her thumb into it. She didn’t actually need the grease paint—she could secrete ink from her fingertips—but the cow didn’t have to know that. “Okay, co—I mean, 64B, where do you want the brand—er, tattoo?”

“You’re gonna do it now?”

“Well, this is just paint. A temporary measure until we can burn it on.”

64B furrowed her brow. “B-Burn?”

“What’s the matter? Not tough enough? I thought you were YoRHa.”

64B glared at her for a second, then burst out laughing. “No worries, you just caught me off guard, that’s all. A little burn is nothing.” She pulled off the shoulderpad from her armor. “Right on the shoulder here, just like A2!”

The succubus planted her fingers there the same way Olrox did to his beasts. One decoy down, one to go.

64B grinned at the sight of the so-called tattoo as the succubus pulled her fingers away. “Wow… Thanks, A4!”

“Please, please, 64B. My friends call me ‘Four.’” The succubus winked.

“Y’know, you’re not so bad. To be honest,” 64B said, leaning back and sighing, “I kinda resented you a little. I mean… Cap’s corpse was still warm and A2 had just given me a speech about how you had to move on and let the dead stay dead when you showed up. Like you came back just to make her whole point sound like a bunch of bullshit.”

“Oh… you lost a friend on the way here?”
“Yeah.” 64B closed her eyes. “Cap was everything to me and 22B. We deserted because she did… we headed here to Pascal’s because she wanted to. It was her vision of setting aside this stupid war and living in harmony with other peaceful machines…” Her voice turned into a squeak as she sniffled and held back tears.

“That’s a shame. I wish I’d gotten to meet her.” The succubus reached out and laid a tender hand on 64B’s unmarred cheek. “Trust me, I know how hard it is to lose friends. You’re in good company. And I… I’d be happy to be your new friend.”

64 cracked open her eyes. “Y-You would…?”

The succubus leaned forward and kissed her. 64B didn’t react. In fact, she didn’t do anything at all. It was like frenching a blow-up doll. Were all YoRHa androids such bad kissers? What did they do all day when they weren’t busy chopping up robots, twiddle their thumbs and sing bible hymns?

Disappointed, the succubus pulled away, cutting the string of saliva that hung between their lips, and patted 64B on the head. “I’m glad you gave me another chance.”

“Um… okay, Four.” 64B turned her attention back to her repairs and put the shoulderpad back on over her new tattoo. Her face was as red as a boiled lobster.

Not bad, the succubus thought, considering she’d had to do all the work. “And 22B?” she asked, turning to the other android. “Where do you want your tattoo to go?”

“I appreciate your friendliness,” 22B brusquely said, sparks flying from the end of an arc welder as she sealed up one side of the hole in her chassis, “but I’m not really interested in tattoos.”

“Aw, come on, 22B! Live a little!” 64B needled her.

“Isn’t it what Cap would want?” the succubus asked sweetly.

22B groaned and set the welder aside. “Okay, fine.” She took a handful of her hair and lifted it up, exposing the back of her neck. “Here, please.”

“With pleasure!” The succubus pretended to dip her fingers into the paint once more and made a matching tattoo on 22B’s neck, then gave her a firm, warm hug and ran her fingers through the android’s vulpine-red hair. She made sure to slather her with her scent, just as she’d done to 64B. That made two decoys, and that would be plenty to throw Alucard off her trail.

Now, she wondered, looking around the room and taking stock of its tools, were there any bandages or anything else she could use to hide her own brand (it was the only part of her body resistant to her glamour)? That would be perfect—give up the stupid cow and fox up as sacrificial offerings and get out scot-free while Alucard patted himself on the back for a job well done!

The succubus had never before realized how much of a genius she was. But oh, what a genius she was! Olrox would be so, so proud of her!

When he’d just been starting out, 9S would have laughed if anyone had told him that he would someday feel sympathy or even empathy for a machine. But Pascal…

Pascal was different. His whole village was different. 9S couldn’t help but tell himself that the machines weren’t really self-aware, they didn’t really think and feel the way androids did, that it was all just cargo-cult play-acting, but he couldn’t believe it when he told himself that about Pascal and his pacifist friends.
When 9S told him the news—that his village’s defenses against vampires would do nothing to protect his people—Pascal bowed his head sadly, his shoulders shuddering, and 9S was overwhelmed by how forlorn he seemed. It was as though he were wracked with preemptive grief.

“Thank you for informing me, 9S,” Pascal said, not sounding the least bit thankful at all. “It is so very kind of you to warn us.”

“It’s the least we can do,” 9S answered. “I just wish we could do more. YoRHa’s working on upgrading our standard armaments to be more effective, but for now, everyone’s just scrambling to get their hands on anything with silver in it. None of us are prepared for this…”

“It’s frightening to think about how defenseless we all are, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

“I still think of Flamel. I think about the conversations we would have if… well…”

“I know how you feel.” 9S had never imagined telling a machine he knew how it felt, but… here he was. He still thought about 21O. The real 21O, the one he’d known, not her replacement. No one could replace her. No one…

“He was such an eccentric. He would devour anything he could find on ancient pseudosciences. Alchemy, astrology, economics…” Pascal sighed. “I don’t want what happened to him to happen to anybody else, but I’ll admit, I’m at a loss. I simply don’t know what to do.”

“The machines here are smart. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“I often wonder now,” Pascal mused, “if it is foolish to continue committing to pacifist ideals in the face of such a threat. But if there’s so little we could do to fight back anyway, does it even matter?”

9S shrugged. “I dunno.” He stood up and made for the door. “You do so much for us, I’m sure the Commander could be persuaded to station some guards here.”

“Ah!” Pascal’s eyes lit up. “Perhaps we could keep the fugit—”

“The what?”

“Oh, n-nothing. Never you mind.” Pascal shook his head. “Carry on, 9S. I do hope this ordeal comes to an end soon. I’m not sure the ones we’ve lost can rest until it does.”

9S stepped out of Pascal’s home onto the wooden walkway circling the center of the village. The lamps ringing every bridge, every balcony, and every house lit up the village with dazzling splendor, the light they cast warm like sunlight. Until today, Pascal had thought those lamps had formed an impenetrable barrier for any vampire attacker and would keep the village perfectly safe. 9S felt almost guilty for disabusing him of that notion.

Pod 153 hovered at his side. “Proposal: Unit 9S should discuss plans to provide defensive resources to the village with Anemone.”

“Right. She’s here. I thought she wasn’t in charge of the camp anymore, though…?” He’d only heard bits and pieces about whatever was going on with Anemone, and what he’d gleaned from the hushed whispers throughout the camp was that she’d run away with A2 and had been thus labeled a deserter.

“Response: This support unit has received updated information. Anemone is currently in good
standing with the Resistance pending further investigation into the situation.”

“Ah, that’s a relief. I liked her.” 9S slid down a ladder onto a lower tier of the village and put his visor back on, bringing up his HUD. “Pod, mark 2B’s location on the map. She’s with Anemone, right?”

“Affirmative. Unit 2B is currently ensuring Anemone’s and Jackass’ safety.”

A waypoint popped up on the little map in the corner of 9S’s HUD identifying 2B’s location. She appeared to be on the ground, not on the upper levels of the village, so 9S took a few more ladders down until he touched down on the soft grass sprouting between the central tree’s thick and gnarled roots.

“9S…”

9S stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder at where he thought the voice had originated from. “Uh… Hello? Who’s there?”

“Let us parlay. I have much I would like to discuss with you.”

The voice was a cold and deep hiss, oddly resonant. There was a strange bitter bite to it.

Its owner seemed to appear out of nowhere, but 9S quickly realized that it had simply stepped out of the shadows; thanks to its ragged black cloak, it had blended in perfectly with the deep shadows pooling around the ground where the lights dotting the village had been occluded.

At first, 9S thought it was an android; then he noticed a glint of ivory bone underneath the stranger’s tattered hood. The stranger’s hands, too, were devoid of skin, muscle, and even connective tissue. It was a skeleton in a humanoid shape.

9S had seen skeletons before—the bleached remains of long-dead animals—but never one which had a human shape. But how could this be the remains of a dead human, and how could it move? And speak? Some kind of puppetry? There must have been invisible threads binding the bones together, perhaps nanometer-scale servos to move them, a speaker hidden in the cranium…

“You want to talk to me?” 9S took an involuntary step backward as the skeletal puppet drew closer.

The closer it came, the more it impressed on 9S its height. He hadn’t been able to gauge its size before, but it was well over two meters tall. It didn’t walk—instead it glided just barely above the ground, its bony feet grazing the wild grass. Its cloak writhed around it like a living entity, and 9S noticed that it wasn’t just black—it was the color of the void of space stretching out past the Earth and the moon as seen from the Bunker’s windows. It was not black, but rather the color of absence, of nothing.

Someone had made this thing to make an impression. It certainly did impress 9S.

“I do wish to speak to you,” the skeletal specter said. It drifted closer and bowed its head to stare down at 9S. Its hooded, shadowed eye sockets were empty, but 9S still felt as though he was being stared at. “Allow me to introduce myself. I… am Death.”

“Death?” 9S looked up to face him and wrinkled his brow. “That’s… kinda pretentious, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I do not indulge in pretension, 9S. I am the genuine article.”
9S crossed his arms. Okay, so this guy was going to keep hiding behind his puppet. Fine by him. “All right, Death. What do you want?”

“First off, let me say that it’s a pleasure to speak with you at last. I don’t think there’s any other android on this wretched Earth I’ve grown more acquainted with, yet we’ve never talked.”

“Huh?”

“With that out of the way, let me get to the point.” Death leaned over, bending his spine until his head was directly above 9S’s and his gaze pointed straight down. “I’m sure you’ll agree with me that vampires are simply awful creatures.”

9S nervously nodded.

“How I detest immortals. They are the crop that was sown but can never be reaped. Their very existence mocks me. Vampires are the worst of them, and worst among them is their leader, the Lord of Chaos, the Prince of Darkness… Dracula.”

“D… Dracula?” 9S spoke the name as though he were tasting it. There was something very familiar about it. Had Alucard mentioned it once in passing?

“I want you,” Death said, lifting his hand and slowly, deliberately pressing a bony digit into 9S’s chest just under his collarbone, “to help me reap his soul. The oblivion that has been denied him for twelve thousand years howls to receive what it is owed.”

Death’s finger was so cold that 9S felt the heat sensors in his skin go dead, leaving a spreading numb patch on his chest as electronic nerves overloaded and became inert.

“Need I mention,” he continued when 9S failed to answer, “that with Dracula ripped from this mortal realm, his thralls and the restless souls of his victims will at last know peace?”

9S slowly nodded. “What do you need from me?”

“I need you to take my gift.” Death’s hand vanished into his cloak and emerged gripping a pendant on a thin metal chain. It was some kind of amulet—a gleaming violet stone set in silver which gleamed and shimmered in the light. “When the time comes,” he said, lowering it gently into 9S’s open palm, “this talisman will be the linchpin to my plan. Keep it on your person, but hide it. Keep it secret. Keep it safe. Let no one know about it. Let no one see it. Not even your closest friend.”

As the talisman dropped into his hand, 9S felt a strange tingling sensation ripple through his palm and run up his forearm. He could feel that it was important, somehow. It was a feeling he couldn’t explain. He just knew.

As Death had instructed, he stowed it away in his knapsack. He idly wondered… what could be the harm in telling someone about it? Surely Alucard, with his arcane powers and deep knowledge of these strange things, would have a lot to say…

9S felt a cold, sharp blade brush against his neck.

His eyes followed the curved, gleaming edge of a long scythe blade, traveled up its shaft, up Death’s bony arms to his forehead and then into the cold blue light gleaming at the backs of his empty eye sockets.

Just as Death’s cloak was impossibly black, the blade of his scythe was polished to an impossible mirror sheen. 9S could see his own reflection in the blade’s flat surface and saw every detail of his
face, his nose, his lips, the orderly patterns of pores on his skin, in hyperreal clarity. It was as though the reflection in the blade was a window into the real world and everything outside it was its flat, two-dimensional mirror image.

The sensory overload tensed every muscle in 9S’s body and quieted every thought in his head.

“Let no one know about it,” Death repeated, more sternly this time, as he pulled the scythe away from 9S’s neck. “Speak not of this talisman, nor of my plan, nor of me.”

This wasn’t somebody’s avatar, 9S realized as he came to his senses. It wasn’t a puppet animated through technology, but rather a genuine supernatural entity. It really was Death.

“Dracula is the ultimate enemy of the natural order. His reach is long, his powers and influence vast. Tell a soul about me, and all will be for naught.”

9S nervously nodded, raising a hand to the thin, numb line the scythe’s edge had pressed into his skin. If Death had used just a little more force, he’d have easily lopped 9S’s head off. “Got it. Not a word. But,” he added, glancing at his pod, “what about—”

Pod 153 wasn’t moving.

9S looked up and spied a machine walking across one of the bridges stretching overhead frozen in mid-stride. It was as if the whole world had been on pause while he and Death met.

He blinked and in that instant Death vanished; when he reopened his eyes, he was alone and the world had begun to move again.

Suddenly disoriented, he looked around the clearing. Hadn’t he heard someone calling out for him?

“Pod,” he asked, “was someone calling my name just now?”


“Maybe later. Let’s go see how Anemone’s doing.”

9S headed out in the direction of 2B’s marker on his map and climbed up the ladder to one of the wooden platforms ringing the giant tree in the center of the village—

Wait. Hadn’t 2B’s marker been down here just a second ago?

He shook his head. Maybe he would get that self-assessment done, like Pod 153 had suggested.

While the other androids went about their repairs, the succubus slipped back into the repair facility’s backroom, holding in her hand a patch of artificial skin just large enough to cover up the brand on her hip.

She untied the belt around her skirt and let both it and the skirt slough off her and pool around her boots, then held the graft to her hip.

Now, this, unfortunately, would hurt.

She cast off her glamour, letting out a long and relieved sigh as her body shifted back into its natural state. Freeing her body from the bondage of her disguise was like undoing a corset or taking off her bra at the end of a long day. The feeling of her toes hardening into cloven hooves and horns
sprouting from her forehead was pure bliss, even though her hooves dug painfully into the toes of her boots.

She ran her fingers through her hair, raking her claws along her scalp; her whiplike tail swung back and forth like a pendulum, its tip flicking and twitching as it reveled in its freedom.

There was little time, though, for her to bask in her freedom.

She took her hand and folded inward every finger except one; from that one, she conjured a pale bluish-lavender flame that hovered just above the tip of her claw and burned with a hard, gemlike flame like an acetylene torch.

She pressed her burning finger against the border between her hip and the skin graft, clenching her jaw and squeezing her eyes shut; her teeth ground against each other as she fought back a scream and blindly dragged her finger across the patch’s edge, discerning by touch where to go, rounding one corner, then another, then another, and finally completing the circuit. It hurt less than being punched in the face and strangled by A4, but only barely, and it lasted much longer.

Her legs buckled and she collapsed onto her hands and knees, panting and gasping for air as sweat dripped down her brow and mingled with the tears stinging her eyes. Where her brand had once been was now a square patch of pristine, smooth skin bordered on all sides by an ugly, bumpy burn scar where the two skins had been welded together.

Her healing factor kicked in, smoothing out the scars until nothing remained but perfection. The brand throbbed underneath the false skin as though it was angry she’d covered it up. It would burn its way through the layer of fake flesh she’d placed over it in a matter of time, but by then, she’d have gotten Alucard off her back and spirited A2 away, and that would be the end of that.

She collected herself and caught her breath, then reapplied her glamour. Her head throbbed and ached as her curled horns unfurled and retracted back into her temples; likewise, her back ached as her tail retracted into her spine. The only thing that felt remotely good about the transformation was that her feet fit much less painfully into her boots, which was a shame—sleek black hooves were so much prettier than ugly, stumpy toes, even if no one could see them.

Collecting herself and wiping the sweat from her brow, the succubus put her skirt back on and tied it securely around her waist, then went out to greet the world in what was now an utterly perfect disguise.

There was still the smell, of course, but that was easily explained away. In her disguise, she’d replicated the scent of A4 as well, as Olrox had pulled that information from A2’s mind along with her memories of A4 and given them to her. On top of that, she had some of A2’s distinctly doglike odor clinging to her skin. The faint demonic musk bleeding through those scents was easily explained away as just something that had rubbed off from the real succubus, and of course, the cow and the fox were now lousy with that scent on top of having their very own demonic seals emblazoned on their skin.

Everything was working out perfectly.

She left the back room to rejoin 64B and 22B, only to find Alucard and A2 waiting for her.

She gulped. “O-Oh, hi, Two! What’s up? Are we leaving the village?”

“Not yet,” Alucard spoke up. His eyes were narrowed into slits as he cast a critical gaze across the room.
“I need to talk to the three of you,” A2 said. “You first, Four. Come here.”

The succubus figured Alucard had told her about the brand and what it meant—now the two of them were trying to root out the monster in their midst. How fortunate she’d taken the opportunity now to cover up her mark. She certainly had the devil’s own luck today!

“Is something the matter, Two?” the succubus asked, hurrying over to her ahead of the other two suspects. She had nothing to hide—not anymore, anyway—so she acted the part with gusto, feigning a look of bemused concern. “What’s wrong?”

A2’s icy blue eyes met hers for an instant before darting away. “I need you to—” She swallowed hard. The succubus could see the muscles in her throat undulating. “I need you to pull up your skirt and show me your left hip.”

It must have hurt so much for A2 to have to carry such suspicion for her. Imagine carrying such doubt in one’s mind, burdened with the sneaking suspicion that their one true love was a demon in disguise, feeling it eat away at one’s mind bit by bit until the paranoia reduced them to a nervous wreck…

Well, the succubus could certainly alleviate that pain. She gingerly hiked up her skirt to show off the bare, unmarred skin underneath. Under the grafted-on patch, her seal throbbed painfully—but it deigned not to show itself, much to her relief. “Like this?” she asked, sweetly, innocently. After all, she was sweet, and she was innocent. On the outside, anyway.

A2 seemed rooted to the spot, her mouth hanging agape just enough that a little trickle of spit could run out the corner and dribble down her chin. Well, well. Somebody was hungry for thigh meat.

Alucard was unfazed by the succubus’ perfect body. She expected as much. He had a good track record for not falling under their spells. The succubus wondered if he was asexual. It would explain a lot…

“Are you sure you’d seen it on the left hip?” he asked A2 in a hushed whisper. “A4, show us the other side.”

The succubus demurely acquiesced to his request, turning around to show him that she had nothing to hide. Alucard nodded, satisfied.

“I must’ve imagined it,” A2 admitted, regaining her composure and hastily wiping the drool from her chin. “I’m sorry, Four. I thought I’d—”

“What’s going on here?” 22B asked as 64B trailed at her side.

Alucard cleared his throat. “At least one of you three is not who she claims to be. Whoever it may be, we must root out the impostor.”

“Impostor?” 64B parroted, taking a worried and hasty step back. Not a smart move. She was heaping suspicion upon herself. On top of that, 22B was already under Alucard’s suspicions. “What do you m-mean?” She glanced at 22B. “Hey, you’d tell me if you weren’t the real 22B, right?”

22B crossed her arms. “Of course I wouldn’t. But I know for a fact that I’m no impostor. Neither is 64B.” She eyed the succubus. “But isn’t it suspicious that a prototype thought to be KIA for three years should suddenly reappear…?”

Rankled by the accusation on the succubus’ behalf, A2 grabbed her by the arm and pulled her
away from the other two fugitives. “Four has already proven her identity. It’s you two we’re suspicious of.”

64B gasped. “B-But A2, we’re…”

“There’s an easy solution to this,” Alucard said. His hand went to the gleaming saber sheathed at his side. “The impostor has a tattoo somewhere on her body, as definitive as a cattle brand, just like the one A2 has on her shoulder.”

Naturally, at the sound of the word tattoo, 64B’s bandaged hand flew to her shoulder; 22B reached behind her and laid her hand on the back of her neck. The succubus fought the urge to reach down to her hip where the hidden brand still throbbed so as to preserve her own innocence. Instead, she diverted the path of her hand and wrapped it around A2’s hand, squeezing it firmly.

A2 and Alucard shared a suspicious glance.

“64B, show me your right shoulder,” Alucard said. “22B, turn around and show me the back of your neck.”

64B held up her hands, panic driving the color from her face and widening her eyes. “T-Tattoo? We don’t have any tattoos!”

“A4 painted them on us,” 22B said, a nervous tremor bleeding through her normally-calm voice, “to match the one she had…”

“A4 doesn’t have a tattoo,” Alucard coolly replied. “But you two…”

“But… But she showed it to us!” 64B protested. “Right on her hip! Her left hip!”

“We checked there.” The dark look on Alucard’s face grew stronger.

To demonstrate, the succubus lifted her skirt yet again and showed off the perfectly blank patch of skin.

“No! I-It was right there!” 64B cried out. Her eyes met the succubus’.

The succubus allowed herself to smile, just barely. Enough to let the stupid cow know she’d been betrayed.

The sight of 64B’s face falling was delicious. The succubus could feast for a week on that alone.

“It’s just grease paint,” 22B insisted, pawing at the back of her neck. “It comes right off…”

She pulled her hand away and held it out to demonstrate the black paint smeared all over her fingers. Except, she realized, her eyes widening and jaw dropping, there wasn’t any.

The grease paint trick had worked perfectly. The black spots forming the two androids’ tattoos were inky stains on their skin that had seeped through the succubus’ fingertips from the dark well of her twisted soul. They’d fade in a few hours—but in a few hours, these two would be dead.

“A4 gave us these marks!” 64B insisted.

“Beside,” 22B added, conjuring a gleaming katana, “A2, you’re the only one here with that tattoo —”

Well, well. Wasn’t this interesting?
“Four, get back!” A2 shouted out, all but tossing the succubus aside as 22B lunged forward.

Alucard’s saber clashed with 22B’s katana, dazzling sparks of rainbow light dancing off the stained-glass pattern that ran up the flat of the curved blade; steel ground against silver.

“A4! How could you!” 64B bellowed, conjuring a wicked black gauntlet to her hand and charging at her. The sharp prongs sprouting from the gauntlet sparkled with arcs of blue lightning that swept in an arc through the air. “You dirty rat—!”

A2 barreled into her, a blur of silver hair and flashing claws, her armored midnight-blue dress billowing around her. As 64B reeled back, she summoned a sword of her own.

“Get away,” A2 growled, standing tall between 64B and the succubus, hackles raised and fur bristling, “from my Four!”

The succubus wished she’d brought popcorn.

2B had to admit that she was disappointed in Pascal for harboring not one, not two, not three, but **four** YoRHa fugitives in his village. Granted, this wasn’t the first time, and it was well within expectations for his behavior. He’d sheltered runaways from the Resistance and exiles here in the past. The fact that A2, 64B, and 22B were ex-YoRHa and that 2B had an obligation to exterminate them meant nothing to him and his staunch pacifist ideals. He didn’t see machine or android, YoRHa or Resistance, soldier or exile or fugitive; he gave sanctuary to all who sought it, unconditionally.

Unfortunately, 2B was loath to violate Pascal’s policy of nonviolence—starting a fight right here in the village would no doubt sour the relationship Pascal had to the android forces, and considering how many android production facilities had shut their doors over the past century, the village represented a crucial supply chain for Anemone’s camp.

On top of that, she had to contend with Alucard, who for some inscrutable reason, seemed to value A2’s life. His human genetic signature was no longer a problem for her, thanks to Commander White’s override on Pod 042’s failsafes, but 2B couldn’t deny that he was a formidable opponent in his own right and any fight against A2 would be a fight against **him**. He’d shown superhuman speed and strength, as well as mastery of strange and arcane powers, in the battle against 6E and her vampire thralls this morning; next to whatever A2 had become, 2B was at a disadvantage. She would have to separate those two somehow, or else risk fighting both head-on.

And if Alucard was involved, 2B would have to fight him alone, as 9S not only **liked** him (why, 2B wondered, did his faith have to be so earnest and genuine? Couldn’t he just have a conflicted sense of reverence and loathing toward humanity bottled up inside him like she did?) but also still had Pod 153’s failsafes tying his hands. And if he saw her fighting Alucard, he would—

He would see it as betrayal. Not just betrayal of humanity, of YoRHa’s sacred charge, but betrayal of **him**.

She knew all too well how 9S wore betrayal on his face. It wasn’t something she could bear to see, knowing that this time it would **linger**.

No, she couldn’t involve him. It was a stroke of luck, actually, that Alucard had separated him and 2B. As long as Pascal kept him busy, there was a brief window of opportunity in which 2B had a shot at killing A2.

It would have to be done quickly and cleanly. It was just a matter of separating her from Alucard.
Once 2B had made sure Anemone was safe, she had Pod 042 scan the village for A2’s location. Due to the foliage overhead, satellite scans couldn’t reliably pick up black box signals, but underneath the canopy and at such close range, a pod’s scanning capabilities were more than enough.

There she was.

2B steeled herself and moved to intercept. Alucard or no Alucard, she would complete her mission.

It wasn’t a fair fight.

64B was already injured, all but down an arm due to the acid that had eaten away at her servos, and in such distress that she could barely think straight. She wasn’t anything like the brawler who’d nearly pounded A2 to paste just yesterday.

A2 knew how to kill YoRHa units. One clean slice through the black box and that was it. Nothing could come back from that.

So she couldn’t fight against Olrox anymore. His minions would do just as well, then.

She weaved through 64B’s punches, hooked her leg around her ankle, and swept her feet out from under her, sending 64B crashing to the ground.

64B rolled over and righted herself, crashing into a workbench and dislodging its tools. As A2 bore down on her, she grabbed a welding torch that had fallen to the floor and turned it on; its tip lit up with a searing white-hot flash.

The welder and A2’s blade clashed; the blinding light at the tip of the welding stick burned her eyes. A2 squeezed her eyes shut to no avail; the light cut through her eyelids. Blotches of darkness flickered around her field of vision as the searing light damaged her sensors.

As the two of them grappled, 64B struggled for the upper hand, pushing both the welding torch’s long barrel and A2’s katana downward until the glowing tip of the torch was just barely—

It grazed A2’s thigh, showering her with sparks as her clothes caught fire. A2 howled as the torch set clothes, hair, and skin alike, burning down to her chassis. Her nerves screamed in agony; she dropped her sword.

64B pulled away the torch and slammed her boot into the fresh burn wound, knocking A2 to the floor. A2 writhed on the floor, struggling to overcome the pain flooding her body as 64B took off after A4.

A2 grabbed her sword off the floor and propped herself up against it. “Four!”

She forced herself to her feet, threw herself at 64B, and tackled her with all her strength. She raised her sword above her head, flipped it to a reversed icepick grip with the blade pointing downward, plunged it into 64B’s chest, sliding through armor plating and biting into flesh—

She knew exactly where to aim, yet something stayed her hand—she missed 64B’s black box altogether.

64B looked up at her with pain and fear in her eyes, gasping for breath, rasping as her lungs
brushed against the blade of the sword. The anguish and betrayal writ on her face was something A2 had never seen in an enemy before.

“If you decide to stick with us,” 8B had said to her, “you’ll be in charge. We’ll all look to you for guidance.”

Alucard fought back his foe with little trouble, parrying 22B’s blade with unparalleled swiftness. Darting around her, he finished her off with a strike to her unprotected back, the silver-edged blade of his saber ripping itself through her chest.

He sighed as the chaos settled and let his saber fall from his hand and clatter to the floor. 22B lay sprawled at his feet, wisps of smoke curling up from the fresh hole gouged in her chest as sparks flew from severed wires and shorted circuits.

64B, still conscious but only barely, struggled to raise her hand, her fingers trembling. “T-Two,” she gasped, coughing as she struggled to breathe. “We were set up. It wasn’t us. A4 tricked us. She tricked you. It’s her—”

Alucard’s saber swung down in a glittering arc and cleaved her head from her shoulders. But the one wielding the saber was not Alucard but A4, her chest heaving, her ponytail undone and her white tresses falling messily over her brow.

“A4!” Alucard barked, indignant. He ripped the saber from her grasp. “You killed her…”

“You killed 22B.”

“True,” Alucard said, “but that was in combat. It was fair. You slaughtered that one in cold blood.”

“Cold blood? They were using us,” A4 retorted, sweeping back her hair and struggling to tie it back, “and they were going to frame me for it! Besides, you can’t call that fair. The cow only had one arm and the fox had a hole through her gut!”

Rankled, Alucard turned away and averted his gaze. “Besides, we could have questioned her,” he mumbled.

A2 was at a loss for words as she stood over 64B’s inert body. Two of her friends—granted, she’d only met them yesterday, but still—lay dead at her feet, both of them at last joining their fallen captain. It was hard, no, impossible to think of them as the minions of that masked man who’d branded her as though she were chattel.

They had been good people, kind people, like the rest of her team had been all those years ago. And here they were, dead, yet again.

She reeled backward, sniffing and fighting back tears. Why? Why did everyone around her meet their end like this? What had cursed her to see the same fate play out again and again and again?

“A4?” A4 asked, taking her by the shoulder with one hand and clasping her hand with the other, threading their fingers together. “Two, are you all right? I know this must have been hard…”

A2 pulled her hand away. “Shut up! Get away from me!”

She limped out of the building and took off for the edge of the village, the wooden bridge under her feet groaning and creaking with every labored step as she put more and more distance between herself and the others. The inky black shadows of the trees ringing the village towered over her,
distant lights poking through the gaps between tree trunks flickering as they seemed to beckon her onward.

That forest was her home. A place where she could live, alone, free of the pain of growing close to people only to have them ripped away. She belonged in there, in those shadowy depths, scrounging and scavenging and fending for herself with no one for her to worry about and no one to worry for her. It was what she deserved. It was all she deserved.

She fell to her knees and broke down sobbing. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that everyone else had to suffer and die just so that the world could teach her a lesson. What value did their lives have? What value did anyone’s life have in the face of such cruelty?

A long white blade came to rest against the side of her neck, its edge pressing into her skin just forcefully enough to draw out a single droplet of blood.

A2 glanced up and caught sight of 2B’s face shimmering through a veil of tears. “I’m not in the mood right now,” she groaned.

“I don’t care,” 2B said.

“A2!” Alucard shouted out, running across the bridge. In the distance, under the shadows of the trees that circled the village, A2 knelt down, the faint edges of the village’s hanging lamps lighting up her silver hair and fur. Standing in front of her, sword in hand, was 2B.

Alucard gritted his teeth, drew his sword, and lunged forward. Exactly like keeping two cats apart.

With a flash of red light trailing in his wake, he sprinted past the two androids and skidded to a halt behind 2B, dropping into a combat stance as his boots dragged across the wooden slats of the bridge. 2B pulled her sword away from A2’s neck and whirled around to engage him, the ivory blade glittering in the night air as it clashed with Alucard’s saber.

Interesting. So her pod wasn’t stopping her from fighting back this time. He shouldn’t have expected the same trick to work twice, especially considering how much 2B’s boss hated him now.

As if on cue, 2B’s pod split open and opened fire on him, its bursts of gunfire casting flickering strobe lights across the bridge. Alucard held the saber in front of him, the wide flat of the blade facing forward, and spun it in a circle to form a shield; the bullets pinged off the sword and scattered.

2B used the distraction to turn her attention back to A2, who hadn’t even tried to fight or run away, let alone stand up. Alucard weaved through the gunfire and charged after her, forcing himself between the two androids, and kicked her off the bridge. She plummeted into the darkness below; a loud crack split the air like a thunderclap as the Vampire Killer wrapped around the rickety railing and went taut. 2B swung under the bridge and up over the other side, the Vampire Killer vanishing in a flurry of golden sparks as she reached her apex and drew her sword.

“Now,” Alucard hissed as he grabbed A2 by the waist, “would be a good time to stand your ground, A2!”

2B brought her blade down on Alucard as soon as she touched down, the force of the blow sending reverberations up his arm. She lashed out with her leg, her boot swinging through the air; Alucard hastily raised his forearm to block the kick and felt the impact rattle his bones. A2 was nothing but dead weight; frustrated, he jettisoned her and threw her off down the length of the bridge.
“Two!” A4 scrambled to A2’s side and helped her up. “What’s gotten into you? Why aren’t you fighting back?”

Distracted, 2B turned in A2’s direction; Alucard used the opportunity to sweep her legs out from under her and knock her down. “Have you ever considered talking through your problems instead of jumping straight to killing people?” he asked.

2B leaped to her feet; her blade clashed with Alucard’s yet again. “I have my orders,” she snarled.

“Ah, yes, ‘just following orders.’ I hear that worked very well,” he retorted, grabbing 2B’s pod by one of its arms and twisting it just before it could fire a searing laser blast at him, “for the last people to use that defense!” Pod 042’s shot went wide; its lance of white-hot energy cut through the inky black sky and vanished into a glittering pinprick high up in the atmosphere.

“You sanctimonious—” 2B twisted Alucard’s arm and pinned it behind his back, then shoved him to the side of the bridge.

Before he slipped off the edge of the bridge, Alucard planted his blade in the wooden slats, anchoring himself. 2B lunged at him, blade gleaming as her sword swung in a deadly arc; Alucard transformed into mist, slipped past her, solidified, and grabbed her from behind by the scruff of her neck. “I’ll admit I have a self-righteous streak.” He tightened his grip. “Believe it or not, I got it from my mother.”

2B pulled herself free, wrenched Alucard’s sword out of the wooden slats, and swung at him. He clapped his hands around the blade, stopping it in mid-swing.

“I’ll be taking that back, thank you.” Alucard wrenched it out of her hand, spun it in the air, and caught it by the hilt.

He’d re-armed himself in the nick of time. 2B’s sword came crashing down on his with enough force to push him backward. She pressed forward, stamping her foot on top of his and digging her sharp stiletto heel into his foot to pin him down; before Alucard could free himself, 2B drove her elbow into his chest and her knuckles into his trachea.

Stunned, Alucard reeled back and slipped off the side of the bridge, gagging and choking as he tried to breathe through his crushed windpipe. He barely managed to curl his fingers around one of the planks of wood lining the bridge, the wood splintering under the force of his grip.

With a bestial bellow, A2 (finally!) charge into battle, a whirling maelstrom of blade and claws engulfing her foe. 2B darted away, calling on her pod to lay down suppressing fire.

The bullets spattered the bridge, chewing through the wood; as Alucard hung on and struggled to catch his breath, he pulled up his legs to avoid the errant bullets zipping under him, a few of them just barely grazing his shins.

Alucard tried a few experimental swings, built up momentum, and flung himself upward, transforming into mist just in time to pass through the gaps between the bridge’s wooden slats, materializing as soon as he was clear and conjuring a ball of fire in his palm. He lobbed it at 2B’s pod to distract it and draw its fire; seizing the opportunity, A2 tackled 2B and pinned her to the ground.

“What’s it going to take,” A2 snarled, “for you to leave me alone?”

Pod 042 fired on the bridge’s rickety scaffolding, causing the wooden platform underneath the two androids to sag and buckle. A2 retreated to stable ground as the bridge collapsed under 2B; the pod
swooped down and caught her, lifting her up and depositing her back on the bridge. She stood on the opposite side of the gap to Alucard and A2, staring them both down. The fatigue from the morning’s battle was still grinding down on her psyche; Alucard could tell that as fit as her body was, she was struggling to keep up with her own pace.

“Welcome back,” Alucard muttered to A2.

“Just because I want to die,” A2 growled, “doesn’t mean I want her to do the honors.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about your friends.”

“It isn’t worth anything.”

Alucard nodded glumly. Well, he’d tried.

Shaking off her weariness, 2B summoned the Vampire Killer, leaped into the air, boosted herself off the top of her pod, and sailed across the gap, her whip unfurling behind her, its polished leather sheen catching the light from the village just as any sword would.

Alucard grabbed A2 and yanked her off her feet as he leaped backward; the whip crashed into the bridge, splintering the wood. The two of them were both creatures of darkness; though 2B surely couldn’t know it, the Vampire Killer would tear them both apart.

Why, Alucard wondered, did he always end up having to fight the Belmont clan?

He narrowly dodged another strike from the whip; the heat of the air in its wake alone was enough to make his skin feel singed. Another strike severed a lock of his hair, and another grazed him across the cheek, the tip of the whip pulling in its wake a thin arc of boiling blood and steam as it continued on its path.

A2 howled in pain and tumbled backward as the arc of the whip cracked against her arm; there was what could only be described as an explosion of blood where the whip had struck her.

Alucard had the strangest feeling that 2B was enjoying herself.

“2B! What’s going on?” 9S called out from the other end of the bridge.

Jarred by the sound of 9S’s painfully-familiar voice, Alucard turned his head—

And felt the Vampire Killer strike him across the chest.

He barely felt himself hit the ground—the diagonal gash across his chest, so deep it left his sternum and ribs exposed to the open air, hurt enough to numb every other nerve in his body from head to toe. Curling tendrils of steam rose from the blackened edges of the wound, writhing and dancing in the cool air. Alucard gritted his teeth so hard he felt his jaw crack; the pain was intolerable. He could focus on almost nothing else; the rest of the world seemed to be fading away, his head growing too heavy to lift…

He passed out.

A2 didn’t understand why her arm hurt so goddamn much where the whip had struck her. It was just leather! Yet when she pulled her hand away from the wound, she could see her chassis peeking out from underneath pulverized and charred skin and muscle.

At least she’d fared better than Alucard. She could see his… What did humans have under their
skin? Bones. Right. She could see his bones.

“You bitch!” she howled at 2B, lunging forward, wild bloodlust filling her head, spit and blood streaming down her muzzle. She ducked under one swing of the whip, leaped over another one, narrowly weaved through its undulating arc—

Then everything turned into static.

That damn Scanner—hacking her!

When she’d regained her sight, she felt something searing crack against her forearm; the whip all but burned its way through her chassis as though it were made of acid.

Damn them! 2B and 9S! She was going to bite the shit out of both of them! Then Jackass would have those test subjects she wanted…

She closed the distance between herself and 2B, bared her fangs, snarled—

A tall, muscular man with short white hair and a black tattoo spread across the left side of his body stepped between the both of them, grabbed them both, and smashed them into each other. A2 felt everything turn to static again as her skull cracked against 2B’s, her head throbbing; the two of them collapsed to the ground in unison, the world spinning around them as they both reeled from the impact.

The man stood over them with contempt in his red eyes. “I don’t even know why Pascal lets you androids in,” he spat, his voice oddly petulant and even a little whiny, “if all you do is fight.”

A2 tried to pull herself back up to her feet, but collapsed; static swallowed the world up.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter ends on a bit of a downer. But look! Werewolf tummy rubs!

Commission for @wmm_ebooks of Anemone giving a werewolfy A2 some scritches! pic.twitter.com/qeYVkktll7

— Hannah On Main! [COMMS OPEN] (@sympolite) August 31, 2019
Prelude to War

Chapter Summary

As the peace in Pascal's village begins to crumble, Dracula's forces start drawing their battle plans. 2B and A2 are forced to wear their get-along T-shirt.

Chapter Notes

This chapter took too long to write, so I hope the bombshells I drop in here will make up for the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Eve!”

9S bolted across the bridge, sword in hand, his pulse pounding and black box whirring madly; the bridge rattled with every step he took, the wooden slats shaking under his boots, the taxed scaffolding stretching up from the ground groaning in exertion.

Eve stood over 2B and A2’s limp bodies. Whatever sympathy 9S had felt for him when he’d found him lying unconscious in the woods the other night evaporated. He’d hurt 2B. He’d hurt 2B!

“Eve! I’m gonna kill you!” 9S snarled, his voice hoarse and ripping at his throat. He raised his sword above his head and swung at Eve, so furious he could hardly think straight. All he could picture in his mind’s eye was the sight of him plunging his sword into that machine’s chest over and over and over and over again, blood splattering against his face and stinging his eyes through a haze of red.

No one was going to get away with hurting 2B, not as long as he had anything to say about it! He was going to cut Eve to ribbons—

His sword bounced harmlessly off Eve’s arm as though it were a mere toy.

The next thing 9S knew, he was lying flat on his back, splintered wooden planks sagging underneath him, his head spinning and ears ringing as waves of pain ran coursed through his body from an epicenter squarely in his stomach. He couldn’t breathe.

“P-Pod,” he choked, trying to prop himself up by his elbows. “F-Fi…”

He tried to hold out his hand, but with the aftershocks of Eve’s sucker punch still running through his chassis (he might’ve cracked something), he couldn’t focus enough to throw himself into hacking space.

The high-pitched, whining drone of an engine stung 9S’s ears as Pascal drifted onto the bridge from above, the flight pack hastily bolted to his back glowing white-hot and casting off a shimmering heat-haze.
“Pascal,” 9S gasped, still struggling to catch his breath, “look out, that’s Eve, he’s—”

“Eve, thank goodness you came and broke up that fight. I was worried they’d set the village on fire if they’d carried on…”

9S’s mind turned to fuzz.

Pascal? Eve?

Eve? And Pascal? Working together?

Had this village been under the thumb of the machine network the whole time? Was it a trap set by the machines to lure in androids and dispose of them? Was Pascal’s whole pacifist spiel just a ruse to draw his so-called allies into a false sense of security? Was he actually on the machines’ side?

9S forced himself to his feet and staggered forward after Pascal, reaching out to grab him by the shoulder. His fingers hooked into a gap in Pascal’s metal hull, the edge of his torso plating digging into his skin. “Pascal, you—”

The toe of his boot caught against something soft and giving, forcing him to stumble, his knee bending and leg giving out beneath him. 9S glanced down and—

Alucard.

Alucard was lying on the bridge, spread-eagle, one arm and one leg dangling off the edge, his long and lustrous white-gold hair fanned out around his head like a halo, his eyes closed and jaw slack. There was a ragged gash torn across his torso stretching from the side of his waist nearly to his shoulder, ripping through the layers of his ornate uniform. The edges of the wound were charred black and smoking all the way down, clothes, skin, and muscle alike; a channel of livid red flesh encircled the depths of the deep chasm rent across his chest, and at the bottom, yellowed bone streaked with deep red blood and gray-black ash gleamed in the faint light—revealing traces of the living, organic, all-too-human skeleton of which 9S’s own chassis, for all its advanced technology, was merely a hollow facsimile.

The last thing 9S remembered was a sound that rent the air so loudly and resoundingly that he did not realize at first that it was coming from him.

He screamed.

2B couldn’t remember her systems coming back online, nor could she remember opening her eyes—not that there was much for her to see anyway. She could feel cold stone against her skin; when she stood up, she could hear the hollow click of her heels tapping against the floor fading away without even echoing.

How had she gotten here? Where was—what was this place? And what had happened to…

Where had she been again? Pascal’s village… Then where was here?

She shook her head. Memory corruption. Had she suffered severe physical trauma? Or was she in the early stages of a logic virus infection? Nothing felt broken—no pain or stiffness in her joints, no whining servos or frayed muscle fibers, no fractures in her chassis.

“Pod,” she called out, taking a few halting steps forward, “scan my systems for viral infection.”
Pod 042 did not respond.

“Pod,” she called out, more forcefully this time.

Nothing.

“9S?” 2B tried to recall who else she’d been with. “Alucard? Devola…”

Her voice trailed off as she realized she was alone in here—wherever here was.

Not knowing what else to do, 2B started walking. No sound but her own footsteps and her own breath followed her; with every step she paid careful attention to the way her body felt, hyperaware of any possible sign of infection. Failure of motor systems, visual and audio glitches, joint and muscle pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, overheating…

Nothing. She seemed to be in perfect health.

Her visual processor was beginning to adjust itself to the low light, pulling out of the darkness faint and distant contours of ragged, worn, crumbling stone structures. Though 2B couldn’t discern any details, what little she could make out called to mind the mossy ruins of the ancient castle buried in the forest. The silhouettes of gnarled, skeletal branches of enormous dead trees, shorn of all their leaves, twisted and jagged like lightning bolts hewn from wood, curled around the stone columns and crenelations.

What was this place? A purgatory? A wasteland for her to wander in, segregated from the rest of the world and everybody in it, peaceful in its deathly quiet? A place far from war and strife, one where she had nothing to do but think? A prison for her to ruminate on her mounting sins?

2B became aware of dull, distant footsteps falling on the stone floor just a fraction of a second out of sync with her own footfalls.

Wherever she was, however she’d gotten here, she wasn’t alone.

She drew her sword. The white blade of the Virtuous Contract, gleaming and pristine in spite of all the blood it had been soaked in, glittered under the ephemeral light of thousands of golden sparks.

A2. She’d been fighting A2 before she’d came to this place! That one, that fugitive, that traitor—she must have ended up here with her.

2B whirled around to face the direction of the phantom footfalls, blade bared, muscles coiled like springs under her skin, black box whirring, teeth gritted.

The sky lit up blood-red, casting every contour of the twisted, labyrinthine castle ruins in nightmarish chiaroscuro. The crumbling walls and columns, gargoyle-festooned eaves, slender bridges and aqueducts, and vine-choked towers loomed in all directions, stretching onward endlessly, bent and twisted in on themselves. The moon filled the sky from horizon to horizon, its pale face painted with a pale crimson sheen, its dark and smooth seas the color of old blood, every pockmark and scar cast in stark relief.

The crimson light illuminated 2B’s follower.

It wasn’t A2.

The other person in this hellish netherworld stood by with just a few meters between himself and 2B. He wore a tattered, shabby leather longcoat, its sharp lapels revealing an inner lining patterned
with leopardskin spots; the ends of a thin, ragged scarf wrapped around his neck fell over his chest. His face was lean and sharp with an elfin chin and jawline, its angular contours accentuated by a ragged and rusty beard; he looked oddly haggard in a way 2B couldn’t describe, as though someone had removed his skin and crumpled it up before reapplying it to his face. His rusted hair was long and disheveled, stray locks of it falling over his brow while the rest of it remained bound in a loose and short ponytail.

“Identify yourself,” 2B called out. “Who are you?”

As her voice rang out across the wasteland, her eyes fell to the coiled length of polished leather hanging from the man’s belt, barely hidden by his coat.

That whip…

The man took hold of the whip’s handle and pulled it free, unfurling it to its full length; the whip unspooled and slithered across the chessboard-patterned marble floor like a snake, its leather surface hissing against the stone.

“I,” he intoned, his voice raspy, rough, and scratchy, like straw scraping across a washboard, “am its custodian, its protector, and its memory.” He held up the whip, his arm outstretched as though he were offering it to 2B. “If you want it, come and claim it.”

That didn’t answer 2B’s question. “That doesn’t answer my question. Identify yourself.”

The man cocked his head. “The memory of the whip,” he repeated, sounding just as frustrated as 2B herself did. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

That, 2B supposed, would have to suffice. “How do I get out of here?” she asked.

The whip’s memory raised his arm just a little higher, hefting the whip. “Come and claim it.”

It was as straightforward an answer as 2B could expect. Without hesitation, she lunged at the whip’s memory, closing the gap between the two of them in the blink of an eye.

The whip’s memory slipped backward, the heels of his boots skidding against the stone floor, the razor edge of 2B’s blade barely nicking the fluttering end of his scarf. His whip unfurled and cracked across the floor, its tip arcing around her; she spun around and raised her sword just quickly enough to deflect it.

2B lashed out with her leg, primed to dig her heel into her foe’s stomach. The memory leaped backward, withdrawing from within his coat a pair of glowing blue projectiles as he sailed through the air. He hit the floor without breaking his stance and flung out his hand; the projectiles, whirling equal-armed crosses tipped with glittering blades, sailed in twisting arcs. 2B knocked one out of the air with her sword, sending it clattering to the floor, and narrowly sidestepped the other one. She felt the razor tip of the spinning blade nick her collar, cutting into the fabric and pulling a drop of blood from her neck.

She rushed forward once again to close the distance between herself and the memory, sliding under the arc traced by the whip as it cracked across the air and thrusting her sword at his unprotected chest—

The spinning cross blade she’d dodged came back around and struck her on the hand, cutting through her flesh and impaling itself in her servos; the machinery under her flesh squealed and groaned as the sharp edge of the blade cut through wires and hydraulics. Blood and sparks spurted from the wound.
Gritting her teeth and clenching her jaw to power through the pain, 2B rolled out of the path of her foe’s next strike and hastily retreated, putting some distance between herself and the whip’s memory as she yanked the cross-shaped blade from her hand and tossed it aside. Blood soaked the white part of her glove, dyeing it as scarlet as the oversize moon hovering overhead.

The whip’s memory did not wait for her to get her bearings. Once again the whip lashed out; 2B felt its tip coil across her forearm and yank her off her feet. She hit the marble floor, a shuddering jolt rattling her chassis as her forehead cracked against the stone—the forehead *again*, as if it didn’t hurt enough—and static fuzz crackled through her eyes and ears.

2B picked herself up as the whip’s memory drew a glass grenade from within his coat—where was he *keeping* all this stuff?—and threw it to the floor. The glass shattered at his feet and a row of pale blue flames loosed itself from the shrapnel, hungrily lapping at the stone as it skittered across the floor toward 2B with surprising speed. She hastily distanced herself from the encroaching waist-high wall of flames, only to find it arcing across the floor as though it were homing in on her.

She braced herself and ran toward the whip’s memory, the fire nipping at her heels, gripping the Virtuous Contract in her left hand as she clutched her damaged right hand to her chest. The whip’s memory drew a hand ax as she closed in on him. Their blades clashed with a keening ring and a shower of cold sparks. He caught the sword in the notch where the ax blade met the handle and ripped it from 2B’s hand, disarming her, then drew a second ax from within his coat. 2B dodged his swipe, feeling the ax just barely miss her as it swung overhead, and leaped out of the way in time for the pursuing flames to collide with him.

The flames passed through the whip’s memory as though they were nothing but thin air; as they passed through him, they dwindled and died into a flurry of pale blue sparks.

If 9S were here, he’d probably have whined about that ‘not being fair.’ 2B didn’t whine about anything.

She went on the offensive, striking at the whip’s memory with a flurry of blows, the Virtuous Contract’s ivory-white blade unsullied by the blood-red light bathing the netherworld. The song of the dancing blades rang out through the ruins of the castle. Her foe blocked the strikes with precision and speed that was the envy of any combat android; yet 2B could feel in the looseness and lightness of his footwork and the ease with which he shifted his momentum that he was far, far too light to be a mere android.

At last, she penetrated his defenses. The Virtuous Contract bit into his side and slid out, its gleaming white blade stained black with blood.

The whip’s memory let out a hoarse and ragged scream as he retreated, tossing aside the axes and clutching at his side, an anguished grimace wrenching his weathered face; a dark bloodstain spread across his coat. 2B pressed her advantage and kept up the pressure, driving him further and further back, dodging and deflecting whichever of his weapons he threw at her. His strength, 2B figured, was in long- and mid-range weaponry, while she herself only had close-range combat capabilities without the help of her pod. If she kept the distance between the two of them to a bare minimum…

He struck the floor with his whip so forcefully that the impact lifted him off his feet and flung him through the air; the whip dug a furrow in the chessboard-patterned marble tiles, kicking up a cloud of stone fragments.

As the whip’s memory touched down, 2B braced herself against the flurry of marble chips pelting her and prepared for whatever preposterous weapon he’d draw from that coat of his next.
He withdrew a pocketwatch and flipped it open.

Seeing her foe unarmed, 2B took the opportunity to charge him, blade held straight ahead and tracing an unerring path toward the whip’s memory—

Everything stopped. 2B felt every muscle, every servo, every motor in her body freeze up at once; save for the edge of her boot grazing the floor, she was suspended in midair, frozen in mid-leap. Even her eyes were immobile, forcing her to stare straight ahead unblinkingly.

The footsteps of the whip’s memory echoed hollowly as he slowly, deliberately, *casually* strode past 2B, a wry smirk twisting his face as his eyes met hers for a brief instant before he walked out of her field of vision.

“*And now, time resumes.*”

2B hit the floor, rolled onto her back, leaped to her feet, and threw her sword at the whip’s memory; with an almost instinctual flick of his wrist, he cast the arc of the whip into the air and batted the sword away.

“Not bad,” he said, a maddening smile lighting up his weary and haggard face as he stroked his beard with bloodstained fingers and once again held out the whip at arm’s length. “But not good enough. Care to try again?”

2B folded her hand over the deep, smarting gash running across the back of her injured hand. This thing was some kind of… combat training simulator. But how had she gotten here from Pascal’s village? She still didn’t understand. Why was there such a large gap in her memory?

“Well,” the whip’s memory said, as if responding to her silence, “whoever you are, you’re welcome back here anytime.”

He spooled the whip back into a tight coil and hooked it onto his belt.

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2B woke up, the moonlit castle fading from her mind like a passing dream as her systems flickered to life, buzzing static still winding through her eyes and ears. Her head throbbed. A heavy, rank, bloody odor stung at her nostrils, inflaming her sensors. It stank like a freshly-killed animal.

She lifted her head and tried to stand up, only to find sharp cables binding tightly into her waist, knees, and ankles. She’d been tied to a chair, her arms bound together behind the back of the seat by the wrists. As she tried to wriggle out of her bonds, her hands brushed against something soft and bristly.

It twitched.

“*Ugh…*” someone behind her moaned, “*my fucking head…*”

It was all coming back to her. She’d been trying to complete her mission… trying to kill A2.

A2, who was now right behind her and, evidently, having just as hard a time being awake as she was.

Her combat instincts flaring up, 2B tried to whirl around to face her foe. The restraints bit into her skin and refused to let her budge; she only managed to crane her neck and glance over her shoulder.

A2, who’d done the same, bared her teeth like a wild animal and snarled, “*What the fuck are you*
“doing here?”

The two of them were tied to two chairs with their backs to each other in a hollowed-out segment of the enormous tree that formed the center of Pascal’s village. This was the same chamber, 2B realized, as the one in which she’d encountered Flamel and learned of the existence of…

She shivered.

Vampires. Those horrible monsters that had thrown her already-hard life into unfathomable disarray in just under two weeks, the things that haunted her every nightmare, plagued her every waking fear, taunted her with her powerlessness—

A2’s question was a good one. What was she doing here?

“Ah, you’re both awake.”

That voice—that soft, high-pitched, calm voice…

Pascal?

2B tried to pull her hands free of the bindings wrapped around her wrists, sending a sharp jolt of pain up her shoulder. “Pascal,” she grunted, “let me go—”

“I’ve spent quite some time debating with myself over the merits of a carceral system,” Pascal said, his buggy optical sensors glowing in the gloom, “and while I find myself still against it, I do believe it would be in everyone’s best interests, yourselves included, to keep you two confined here.”

“What?” A2 growled.

2B cast a sideways glance across the dark chamber and spied Pod 042 locked up in a wire mesh cage sitting in the corner of the room, half-hidden in the shadows. “Pascal, you can’t keep us locked up in here.”

Pascal shrugged ambivalently. “It will only be for the rest of the day. Or however long it takes for you two to settle down.”

“I’m a soldier. You can’t imprison me.”

“Talk to A2? She would sooner talk to a machine! What could a fugitive, a deserter, a traitor possibly have of value to say to her? YoRHa won’t stand for this. You’re jeopardizing the safety of your village.”

“What are they gonna do?” A2 asked, the bitter edge to her voice growing stronger. “Swoop in, swords drawn, and murder everyone?”

“They might. Pascal, let me—”

“YoRHa’s solution to everything, isn’t it?” A2 retorted. “Don’t need it anymore? Kill it!”

2B inwardly seethed. How could this traitor act so high and mighty?
“I will give you two some space,” Pascal said, turning his back on the two androids and beating an all-too-hasty retreat out of the chamber. He closed the door behind him.

It was quiet for a while as 2B and A2 sat back-to-back, stewing in their shared hatred of each other.

“Hey, 2B,” A2 hissed.

2B didn’t answer her.

“Hey.”

She kept mute.

“Hey. Look at me.”

Relenting, she turned her head and glanced over her shoulder at A2.

“Bitch,” A2 said.

It took 9S a while to come to his senses. The whole world felt as though it had been turned upside down. 2B and A2 were gone. Alucard was hurt. Pascal was somehow in league with the machines. No one was behaving the way they should have been. And then there was the weird, heavy feeling in the back of his mind that he was forgetting something important…

“Laurel, I’m sorry to report that I’m too badly damaged to make the trip back to the camp,” Anemone was saying, her voice drifting over from the other side of the room. “I’ll have to stay behind until I’ve completed my repairs. I trust you can manage my camp for a day or two more?”

“Of course, Anemone,” the camp’s interim leader replied, his voice crackled and fuzzy through the receiver. “I’m just glad to hear you’re safe. And that A2 is…”

“Yes, we… won’t have to worry about her anymore.”

9S struggled to lift his head and crane his neck, as though it would help him hear the two Resistance leaders’ conversation better.

“Hey, lie down,” Jackass admonished him, none-too-gently trying to force him back down onto the cot. “Don’t move around while I’m poking around in here.” She had her tools out and was sifting through 9S’s chassis through a hole in his stomach. “Hey, there’s some organic matter in this sac here…”

“Breakfast,” 9S mumbled, dazed. Breakfast with Alucard. Alucard—

“Didn’t know YoRHa could eat. How does your body process it?”

9S forced himself up and felt one of Jackass’ tools slip into his chassis and stab something important. “Alucard! I-Is he…”

“Devola’s looking after him. Says the wound’s a lot worse than it looks. Now how about you sit down before I accidentally commit malpractice on you?”

Relieved, 9S sank back into the cot.

“You know,” Jackass said as she fished the rogue scalpel out of 9S’s chassis (9S felt a sickening
jolt and a wave of nausea rush through him as she pulled it free), “working on A2 has given me some pretty good insight into how you YoRHa types’ insides work. I just wish I’d been able to do more maintenance work on her.”

“Didn’t she threaten you and Anemone into helping her?” 9S asked, recalling what the Commander had reported to him and 2B while they’d stopped at the camp.

“Oh, yeah, that,” Jackass said, as though she’d forgotten. “Yeah that was… rough. But what a time for research! I learned more about you guys in one night than I have in like three years!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway, why’s she… like that?” 9S asked. While he knew he had more important questions to ask, for some reason, asking why A2 had a tail had jumped to the forefront of his mind. While he wouldn’t trade being a Scanner for anything, he had to admit that he and his ilk had skewed priorities sometimes.

“Like what?”

“You know, um… wolfy.”

“Oh, that.” Jackass jabbed something into 9S’s chassis; he felt everything below his waist turn ice-cold and wondered if she was just taking the opportunity to fuck around with his insides. “She’s a werewolf.”

“What?”

“A werewolf bit her and now she’s a werewolf.”

“What’s a werewolf?”

“It’s a thing that bites you and turns you into a werewolf.”

“That barely answers my question.”

“You turn into a wolf during the full moon. It’s more complicated than that and there are a bunch of intermediate stages based on the moon’s cycles, but that’s the gist of it. It’s pretty cool, actually.”

It was so ridiculous that if he hadn’t seen a million other impossible things in the past two weeks, 9S would have dismissed the idea out of hand. There was no scientifically plausible way an android could turn into a wild animal. “First vampires, now this,” he muttered.

Jackass pulled her hands out of his stomach and sealed up his chassis. “There you go. Good as new.”

9S gingerly stretched his legs as feeling returned to them in a flood of static rushing under his skin. “Thanks, Jackass.”

“Don’t go saying I never do anything for free.”

“Anyway, you and Anemone should get out of here as soon as possible,” 9S said, swinging his legs over the side of the cot and carefully rising to his feet. “Eve’s here. I think he and Pascal are in cahoots.”

Jackass furrowed her brow. “Eve? You mean one of those high-end machines?”
“That’s the one. I need to find what he’s done with 2B.”

“Can it wait?”

“Can it—” 9S gritted his teeth. “Can it wait? This is about one of our so-called allies consorting with the enemy!”

“Yeah, but I need your Scanner expertise. Two of the other fugitive androids have been killed and one of them I think might still be salvageable.”

“It’ll have to wait,” he insisted. “2B’s in danger. We’re all in danger. Just get out of here before things get worse, okay?”

Jackass shrugged. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“Don’t take it into consideration, do it—”

“Hey, who’s the officer here?”

“Fine, officer,” 9S spat, a little more venomously than he’d intended, as he rushed outside.

2B. He had to find 2B. But Alucard’s wound had looked horrific; he had to check in on him, too.

_How did the whip burn him so badly_, he wondered, _if it’s just a simple leather whip?_

And then there was Pascal’s strange partnership with Eve. What the hell was he supposed to do about that?

And what the hell was he supposed to deal with first? He couldn’t be in three places at once…

Pod 153 interrupted his reverie to inform him that 6O was trying to reach him.

9S cleared his throat, shook his head, and tried to clear his mind as 6O’s face popped up on a holographic panel hanging in the air in front of him.

“9S, this is Operator 6O.” 6O took a deep breath, one hand pressed worryingly against her forehead. “What’s going on? I haven’t been able to reach Alucard, and now 2B’s gone offline and I don’t know what to do…” She sounded like she was seconds away from falling apart into a blubbering mess.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, either,” 9S admitted. “2B went after A2 and Alucard stepped in—”

“But 2B can’t fight Alucard; he’s a human!”

“Yeah, I know, weird. And then Eve showed up—”

“One of those advanced machines, right?”

“Yeah, the ones that look like us. And he knocked 2B and A2 out. Alucard’s really badly hurt; 2B got him with the whip and I could see his bones—”

“How could 2B do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t—It’s all crazy, no one’s got their heads on straight and everyone’s freaking out and I think Pascal and Eve are working together and I don’t know what to do next—”
“Okay, I—I’ll forward our conversation to Commander White,” 6O stammered, “so just hold tight until then. She’ll know what to do!”

9S sighed and leaned against the tree, its rough bark pressing against his back through his coat. “Thanks, 6O.”

“What a day, huh? It’s just been one miserable thing after another…”

“Yeah. Hope it doesn’t get any worse.”

Pascal came strolling around the bend of the platform lining the tree’s circumference. “Oh, hello, 9S!” he called out, sounding distressingly chipper. “May I have a word with you?”

“Never mind,” 9S told 6O. “I know what I’m doing next. Over and out.”

“Take care, 9S.”

The transmission cut out. “Pascal,” 9S said, approaching the machine. “What’s going on here? Why are there machines here?”

“Of course there are machines here,” Pascal said, shrugging. “This is a village for outcast machines.”

“I mean, what are enemy machines doing here? Machines like Eve?” 9S clenched his fists. “You’d better explain everything, Pascal, because I just saw you consorting with the enemy! And where’s 2B? I want answers, and you’re going to give them to me, even if I have to hack them out of you!”

“There’s no need to be so hostile,” Pascal answered, holding up his upturned hands. “Now that you have recovered from your shock, I want to answer your questions. First off, 2B and A2 are in… custody. Until they come to their senses and stop trying to kill each other, that is.”

“A2’s a violent fugitive,” 9S said, “and we have orders to terminate fugitives on sight.”

“You do not have those orders here; nobody terminates anybody in this village.” Pascal sighed. “As for Eve… he is a machine just like any other machine here.”

“He’s one of the network’s command nodes,” 9S pointed out. He wondered if Pascal was truly ignorant of Eve’s nature or merely playing dumb. “You expect me to believe he’s defected and joined your pacifist commune?”

“I believe that anyone can set aside their warlike ways. Many machines here were quite eager soldiers before they grew up, as I was many centuries ago.” Pascal glanced away, shivering. “Eve was very severely injured when he was brought here, and I believe that by nursing him back to health, I’ve won him over to our cause. He enjoys it here, and the children love to play with him.”

“I’d like to believe that,” 9S said, unable to keep himself from scowling. “Anyway, where’s 2B?”

“As I’d said, I’ve had her and A2 both confined so they can work out their differences without fighting,” Pascal said. “Ancient humans would lock belligerent men in what they called ‘drunk tanks’ until they settled down, and while I am not fond of detaining people against their will, I believe this situation called for such measures.”

9S didn’t buy any of this. Pascal’s answers were too simple, too neat, too… nice. They conformed too neatly and hewed too closely to the way he looked at the world.
“I can see you still doubt me,” Pascal noted, “so I won’t hide anything from you. You’re welcome to hack into my memory banks and see for yourself.”

The machine held out his spindly arms and allowed 9S to plunge into his mind.

It didn’t take long for 9S to confirm everything Pascal had said to be true—from his point of view, at least. 9S couldn’t fully discount the possibility that Eve had some hidden intent for this village that Pascal, in his eternal optimism, was allowing himself to be blinded to.

9S made sure to voice his concerns. “I’m sorry for doubting you, Pascal,” he said once he’d withdrawn from hacking space. “But all the same, be careful around Eve. He’s…”

The scene he’d pulled from Eve’s unconscious mind the other night ran unbidden through his mind, interrupting his train of thought.

He realized for the first time what it meant for Eve’s so-called ‘brother,’ Adam, to be under the vampires’ thrall.

As he went, so did the network. Half of the machine forces, then, were currently slaved to the vampires’ master—Dracula.

The other half…

“Come to think of it,” he said, teasing the thought slowly and carefully out of his head, as though he were threading a needle, “we… might all have a common enemy.”

Maybe, 9S thought, though he struggled to believe it himself, if machines such as Pascal and his followers could work together with androids against the vampire scourge, even someone like Eve could be persuaded into a truce.

“But first,” he added, throwing Pascal as stern a glare as he could muster, “take me to 2B.”

The minutes passed in silence. 2B hardly bothered trying to count them all.

“I can’t believe this,” A2 muttered.

Neither could 2B. Here she was, tied up next to a murderous traitor who had the unmitigated gall to wear her face. That freakish, disheveled, odorous, filthy, half-feral, half-insane—

The back of A2’s head cracked against the back of 2B’s. 2B winced as static rolled across her field of vision, stinging her eyes.

“Or maybe it isn’t so bad,” A2 said, giving 2B’s head another whack.

2B gritted her teeth against the onslaught. “Stop it.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me?”

“When I get out of here, I will.”

A2 licked her lips. “I’d like to see you try,” she said, her lips peeled back in a feral grin, her icy blue eyes wide and wild.

“It won’t be long,” 2B assured herself. “9S will contact Command about this. Pascal will release me if he has any sense,” she said (and she knew that Pascal was, in fact, a sensible machine, albeit
quite naive), “and then I’ll kill you and complete my mission.”

“Oh, you’ll complete your mission?” A2 let out a sharp bark of laughter as bitter as wormwood. “And then what?”

“Then… I get another mission,” 2B said, not caring to mention to the beast tied up behind her that this assignment was nothing more than a momentary diversion from her true mission.

“Wrong.”

“What?”

“I said, wrong,” A2 repeated. “As in, full of shit. You know what’s gonna happen when you ‘complete your mission?’ Command’s gonna throw you away.”

2B steeled herself against anything A2 might say to her. A2 was a half-mad runaway; there was probably some sort of new strain of semi-benign logic virus infection stewing in her brain and turning all of her thoughts into incoherent mush. Something must have driven her to staple animal parts to her chassis or whatever grotesque thing she’d done to make herself look like that. She looked like the kind of mad science experiment the likes of which even Jackass could only dream of. Sensible androids with valuable things to say wouldn’t mutilate themselves like that.

“She’ll throw you away, just like she threw me away. Because that’s what she does to people who aren’t useful anymore.”

“You have no idea—”

“I have every idea,” A2 snapped. “You think she’ll keep you around when you’re done with me?”

2B bit her lip. “You are not my mission. My mission is—”

To accompany 9S and execute him whenever he accesses information above his clearance level—

She squeezed her eyes shut. “To destroy as many machines as possible and secure Earth for the human race—”

The same humans who order his execution over and over—

“Sure it is,” A2 scoffed at her, her voice dripping with contempt. “That’s what they told me, too. Then I escaped the hell of Pearl Harbor and made it back to the mainland… and ran into you.”

“You’re mistaken. I’ve never gone after you before.”

“No, you wouldn’t remember. I always killed you before you could send any data back to Command.” A2 shook her head. “They made you to kill me, gave you my face to twist in the knife, and you don’t even remember what you were built for!” She laughed. “Here I am, a prototype model. I’m not supposed to be as strong or as smart or as durable as you, and I haven’t had proper maintenance in three years and I still kick your ass every time! So why did they throw me away, eh? Why couldn’t I be useful?”

“If they threw you away, it was for a reason,” 2B insisted. Even when she had to kill 9S, it was always for a reason. It was purposeful, it was planned, it was necessary. She had no choice but to believe that.

“It’ll happen to you, too. Maybe they’ll send another Model Two to kill you…” A2 taunted her, her
voice dropping to a low, husky growl.

“No.”

“Humans didn’t make us to live. Not like the other androids. They made us to do one thing and die. We’re disposable tools. Don’t tell me you don’t hate them. Humans, YoRHa, White. Don’t tell me you don’t know, deep down, that you hate them as much as they hate you.”

2B gritted her teeth and refused to dignify A2’s blasphemy with a response. She didn’t hate humans. She couldn’t. Alucard was different. There was something inhuman about him. But normal humans, the ones who had created her—they deserved her respect, no matter what.

No matter how hard it was to give it.

Otherwise, none of it mattered. None of the pain, none of the sacrifice, none of her mounting sins —

2B clenched her fists. Emotions were prohibited. When they welled up inside her, when the pressure started building and building, when her head and heart were about to explode, she kept telling herself that over and over and over again, over and over and over and over, as long as she needed to, as long as it took to push it all down deeper and deeper and deeper until it was gone—

“Shut up,” she hissed through gritted teeth. She liked A2 better when she wasn’t so talkative. She was crowing as though the two of them being stuck here was some kind of victory she’d won. “You’re just jealous,” she spat.

“Huh? Jealous?”

“I have a purpose. You don’t. You resent me because my suffering has meaning and yours doesn’t.”

“Shut up.”

“You resent me because humanity still needs me. They don’t need you. Twisted, broken, defective.”

A2’s tail flicked angrily back and forth. “Fuck them.”

“You’d give anything to be in my place.” 2B leaned back. “You want to believe that they hurt you for no reason because if you justify your hatred, you don’t have to face the truth. If they threw you away, it was because there was something wrong with you—and you deserved it.”

“Do all your victims ‘deserve it,’ 2E?” A2 snarled back.

2B felt her fingernails bite through her gloves and into her palms, cutting crescents into her skin. Every muscle in her body tensed; her nerves were on fire. The only thought running through her head was about her sword penetrating A2’s chest, slicing through her chassis, bisecting her black box; watching the cold light in her blue eyes turn dull and her frosty scowl slacken into a blank death mask and blood gush from her chest and pool around her feet. She wanted to skin her like the animal she pretended to be and make a coat out of her pelt. She wanted to kill kill kill kill kill kill KILL.

“Shut up!” she screamed, her nerves frayed, her body and mind aching, desperate for anything, any kind of stimulus that could drown out the rising tide building up inside her, the screaming chorus of wicked, sinful thoughts, yes, yes, yes, I hate them, I hate them all!
No. Hatred was prohibited. Love, devotion, too, all prohibited. She didn’t do it out of love. It was duty. Cold, dispassionate duty, stony and stoic. That was what YoRHa permitted her. Emotions were prohibited. Emotions were prohibited. Emotions were prohibited. Emotions were prohibited. Emotions were emotions emotions emotions—

She couldn’t let A2 do this to her. She was a good soldier, a *faithful* soldier, as devoted to her cause as anyone could be, devoted enough that she would never, never, never, *never* let anything come between her and her duty, not even 9S—and *certainly* not the sick, perverse rhetoric of a runaway! It was the same thing 6E had done with her just this morning—reach into her her mind and pull out all of her thoughts that were *wrong*, everything sinful and disgusting…

She hung her head in shame over her own weakness, waiting as the pain wracking the damaged servos and strained muscles in her shoulders faded to a dull throbbing ache.

“You know, Pascal was right,” A2 said. “I feel a lot better now.”

The door to the prison cell swung open, its unoiled hinges creaking. 2B lifted her head, her muscles tensing with apprehension. “Who’s there?”

“2B? It’s me, 9S!”

2B was so worn out, physically as well as mentally, that she couldn’t stop herself from smiling like she normally would. “9S!”

9S hurried into the room, Pascal trailing behind him as he knelt at 2B’s side and set to work undoing the knotted cords holding her down. “2B, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Should’ve waited a few minutes,” A2 said. “I was *this* close to making her cry.”

“Shut up, A2,” 2B and 9S both said in perfect unison.

Pascal shook his head and muttered something under his breath.

2B felt the cables digging into her wrists loosen, then the ones binding her ankles, and finally the ones tying her by the waist to the back of the chair. Every length of metal cable that fell from her body into a heap on the floor felt like a great weight sloughing off her shoulders.

She pulled herself up to her feet, the stinging aches in her legs twinging and throbbing, grabbing the back of the chair to steady herself. “Thank you, 9S.”

“Don’t mention it.” 9S opened the cage holding her pod next and pulled it out. “What did you do to Pod 042?” he asked Pascal.

“To the pod?” Pascal’s optical sensors flickered bemusedly. “It was deactivated when I found it. I believe Eve may have generated an electromagnetic pulse to disable it when he broke up the fight.”

*Eve? One of the high-end machine models?*

A fuzzy, static-filled memory ran through 2B’s head. The man with short silver hair who’d knocked her and A2 unconscious—that had been *Eve!* “Eve’s here? What’s going on?” she asked 9S as he worked through Pod 042’s startup process.

“I’ll explain later,” 9S said.
“2B, I really do believe,” Pascal said, “you should take this opportunity to speak peacefully with your counterpart. I can see you have a lot of baggage to work out between the two of you.”

 Barely even listening to him, 2B conjured her sword and laid it across the side of A2’s neck. With a single twitch, a flick of her wrist, she could sever the rogue android’s head from her shoulders—

 Pascal grabbed her by the wrist. “No, 2B.”

 “I have my orders.”

 “Your orders do not apply here. To you, A2 may be a criminal and a fugitive, but to me, she is a member of this community. I will not brook any harm against those who live in this village.” There was a stern, commanding light in Pascal’s optical sensors, something that to 2B called to mind Commander White’s unshakable resolve.

 She set the sword aside. She would stay her hand for now, she decided, for Pascal’s sake and to preserve his village’s good relationship with the Resistance. Until Commander White told her what to do.

 She knew she would kill A2 eventually. Just not now.

 Pod 042 returned to life and hovered over to 2B’s side, announcing that it had just completed a data integrity check and had found no severe logical corruption. 2B patted its hull gently in response.

 “Let’s go check up on Alucard,” 9S said.

 As she and 9S left the prison cell and ascended the tiered village, 2B thought about the livid, charred wound the whip had given Alucard. That whip was nothing but ordinary leather to anything but a vampire, so why had it given him such a grievous injury?

 Could it be that the part of him that was not quite human, the part of him that slowed his heartbeat and cooled his skin, the part of him that gave him strength equal to and speed exceeding any android, the part that gave him mastery over fire and let him change his shape—that the part of him that granted him such powers was…

 A vampire?

 “I suppose,” Pascal said as he set to work untying A2, “there’s no point in detaining you if you and 2B are not together to work out your issues.”

 A2 felt the cables loosen from around her body one by one, but even after the pressure cutting into her skin had been pulled away, she remained seated. She could still feel the ghost of 2B’s blade resting against her neck. She had truly been helpless. If 2B hadn’t listened to Pascal and relented, she would have been slaughtered, bringing to an end her three-year war of defiance against her former masters at last.

 “You kept her from killing me,” she whispered at last, as astonished as she was bewildered.

 “Of course. I abhor violence; I will not condone the taking of a life within my home.”

 A2 thought about the way she’d ran her sword through 64B’s chest. The way she and Alucard had cut down her own friends, the same way the machines had mercilessly slaughtered her comrades all those years ago. “A little too late for that.”
“The vampires, those two androids who were killed this morning, you and 2B fighting…” Pascal let out a weary sigh. “I fear this village is slipping away from me. Two hundred years of work to create a haven for the war-weary souls of the world…”

Since Pascal didn’t seem to know who had killed the other two androids, A2 decided not to fill him in.

“All the same, I must stand firm against this rising evil,” Pascal resolved. “I will stay true to my principles come hell or high water, as the humans once said. This will be a place of peace.”

A2 bowed her head as a low, soft whine forced its way up her throat. It was because of that firm resolve that she was alive right now, whether or not she deserved it.

Maybe she could get used to living in a village full of fucking machines. She and Four. Safe in this pinprick of light nestled in the endless darkness.

“Where’s Four?” she asked, unsteadily rising to her feet, struggling to keep her balance as her aching and numb legs threatened to buckle under her weight.

Pascal reached out with his spindly arms and steadied her. “Four? Your other friend? I have not seen her…”

A2’s blood ran cold. 2B wouldn’t have been able to get to her—she’d been tied up here, after all—and yet she could still feel that Four was in grave danger.

Regaining her strength, she pushed her way past Pascal and stormed out of the prison.

The world was a blurry mess when Alucard opened his eyes next; slowly but surely, the blurs resolved into something red.

Devola was sitting by his side, her cheeks cupped in her hands, a look of crushing, despondent boredom on her face.

“Oh,” she said. “Thought you’d be out longer.”

Alucard licked his lips. “How long?” he croaked, his mouth dry.

“About six months,” Devola said, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

Alucard shuddered and pulled himself upright, ignoring the throbbing canyon rent across in his chest as exposed nerves, creeping anew over burned tissue as his body repaired itself, brushed against the bandages wrapped around his torso. “Six months?” His heart pounded and raced. “Is Popola—And A2, Anemone, 9S—What of the vampires—”

Devola snickered.

“It has not been six months, has it?”

“It’s been like an hour.”

As Alucard’s pulse steadied to its usual languid rate, he sighed. “That,” he told her, glaring daggers at her, “was quite cruel.”

Devola merely shrugged.
Alucard took stock of his surroundings. It looked to be the inside of a small wooden hut lit by a single bare lighbulb dangling from the ceiling, its copper wires stretched across the bare wood. He’d been placed in a ‘bed,’ so to speak, which was merely a very roughly bed-shaped object carved out of a hunk of wood; his shirt and waistcoat were draped over the headboard, both now featuring a ragged, charred gash running through them. On another hard and rough facsimile of a bed across from him, Popola lay wrapped in a worn blanket. Pascal’s accommodations clearly were not designed with human comfort in mind.

“Your tent,” he said, his back aching from sleeping on the bare wood, “was more comfortable.”

“You half-humans and your obsession with comfort.”

Alucard swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled himself up to his feet. “So, Popola is…”

“Out like a light.” Devola glanced at her sister, a wistful frown coloring her expression. “I wonder if she doesn’t want to wake up.”

Alucard knelt at her side and laid a hand on her forehead, brushing aside her hair. Her repose was peaceful, her expression serene; she didn’t have a care in the world. “I could see if a kiss may rouse Sleeping Beauty from her slumber,” he offered.

Devola wrinkled her nose. “Try it and you’re dead.”

“No harm in asking.”

“You can think that if you like.”

9S rushed into the room, battered and bruised, his silver hair a disheveled mop. “Alucard! Are you all right?”

“The boy still didn’t have his visor on (unlike 2B, when Alucard asked him to remove it, he listened), but the wideness and softness of his eyes, along with the concern etched into what few lines there were on his smooth and young face, filled Alucard with a melange of nostalgia and homesickness. His mussed, snowy hair made him look more than ever like Soma.

Alucard would never escape that face, that voice, that kindness.

“2B,” 9S asked as 2B came into the room behind him, “why’d you attack Alucard? We’re supposed to be on his side…”

The neutral expression on 2B’s face curled into a frown as she lightly pushed 9S to the side—not in a rude or contemptuous way, but more like a lioness keeping her cub out of harms’ way—and conjured the Vampire Killer, gripping it tightly in her gloved hands.

“This whip,” she said, stretching out her hands until the length of leather between them went taut, “burns vampires. It burned you. Tell me what you are.”

Alucard swallowed a lump in his throat. “I suppose,” he said, taking a wary step backward as the old burns on his right shoulder and the fresh burns across his chest ached anew, “I should explain everything to you.”

He did.
He told them of his father, of his mother, and of the Belmont clan.

When he had finished, 2B slowly lowered the whip and banished it to whatever nether space she stored her weapons in, though there was still a grim look on her face.

“You’ve fought Dracula for how long?” 9S gasped, awestruck.

“Ten thousand years,” Alucard answered.

“Eighty-six years,” Devola answered. When Alucard glared at her, she shrugged. “Yeah, that’s right. I overheard you and Sis the other night.” She gestured to 9S. “Don’t listen to this man, 9S. Yeah, he was born ten thousand years ago, but he’s spent nine thousand, nine hundred of those years in suspended animation. They don’t count.”

Alucard explained what had happened earlier today while 9S and Jackass busied themselves examining the two slain androids lying in one of the village’s repair facilities—Jackass examining the hardware for anything salvageable, 9S going through whatever software he could access for more information about what had happened.

It all seemed surreal. Shapeshifting demons masquerading as friends, a vampire lord who branded his servants like cattle and brainwashed them into servitude…

“Well, I don’t have your nose,” 9S admitted as he knelt over the silver-haired fugitive’s body, “but these two don’t look like demons to me.”

Alucard looked even paler than usual. “They can be… very good at hiding themselves,” he said, but he sounded not as though he was stating a fact but more like he was trying to convince himself.

“I mean, they’re mechanical all the way down,” Jackass said as she rummaged through the red-haired fugitive’s guts. “Can demons imitate that?”

“They had a demonic musk and bore Lord Olrox’s brand,” Alucard insisted.

9S plunged himself into hacking space. The silver-haired fugitive—64B—wasn’t anything more than barely functional at best. Maybe one half of a percent of her systems could be brought online; heavy masses of data corruption grew over the clean white architecture of her software like fuzzy black moss. Getting stabbed in the chest just next to the black box and getting one’s head chopped off tended to have that sort of effect on an android’s mind. Most androids never came back from this sort of trauma—the solution was ‘reload from the newest backup and try again’ and not ‘try to repair everything and hope it comes back to life knowing how to count without using its fingers.’

Still, he’d try to dredge up whatever recent memories he could find.

An android with white hair tied back into a wispy ponytail took a seat next to 64B and slyly hiked up her skirt, showing off the three-dot symbol on her hip. “Say… you’ve see right?”

“Uh… yeah, shoulder. You h”

“Youp. It’s a thing all of us did before the Pe cent operation. Marks us as a f y of sorts.”

She picked up a shall back grease paint f enches and dipped two fing to it.
64B grinned and pulled her fingers away. "Wow... Thanks, A4!"

"And $22$... hr... the other androids... wanted your tattoo..."

A4 pointed to the back of her neck, then gave her a firm hug and ran her fingers through her red hair.

"64B, you..." Alucard said. "There's... a third android... A4... had a... tattoo... on... her... neck."

"A4, watch tattoo on 22B's neck, then watching tattoo on 22B’s neck, then showed a patch of skin normally..."

"No! I... was..." 22B said. "They... there..."

She smiled and said, "how could... you... know... how... your... could... how... your... half-humans..."

9S pulled away, jolted out of hacking space as though he'd been thrown out of it, his head throbbing in time with the shuddering whirring of his black box. It felt as though he had been hit by a solid wall of white noise.

"Alert: Dangerous levels of system corruption detected in YoRHa Unit 64B," Pod 153 informed him, as though it was not obvious. "Hacking connection has been forcibly severed to mitigate cross-contamination. Proposal: Unit 9S should perform system maintenance to ensure data integrity."

"I'm fine," 9S gasped, catching his breath. "I've found what I needed."

"What did you find?" Alucard asked, taking him by the arm and helping him up to his feet. The half-human's fingers clamped around his forearm.

9S looked down at 64B's headless body, then let his gaze drift over to the bodiless head that lied on the floor just a meter or two away. On the fugitive's face was an expression of flash-frozen pain, shock, and fear.

"There was a third android," he said. "A4. She had a tattoo like theirs. She marked this android and the other one, then somehow covered up her own..."

He felt Alucard's grip on his arm slowly loosen, then fall away. Alucard took a step back from the corpse, then another, then another, his face whiter than it had ever been, his eyes wide, his mouth agape, lips slightly moving but no sound coming out. His left hand trembled, his fingers twitching; his right hand—the prosthetic—hung lifelessly at his side.
“Alucard?” 9S asked, turning his back on the body and reaching out to him.

Alucard shuddered, his hands slowly curling into fists and then uncurling again. He closed his mouth and swallowed a lump in his throat, his face hardening.

9S laid his hand on Alucard’s shoulder. “What is it?”

With a vehement shove, Alucard pushed him away, brushing his hand aside, and took to one of the tool-laden workbenches lining the room. He let out an enraged, frustrated roar, his pale face turning livid, and grabbed the bench by one end, lifted it off the floor, and threw it against the wall.

The bench slammed into the wall of the repair facility with an earsplitting bang, then landed on the floor with a second loud thud, the tools and spare parts it had carried flying through the air and clattering to the floor in a shrieking cacophony. 9S reflexively crouched down and raised his arms above his head to guard against any flying debris; 2B and Jackass did the same.

Trembling like a leaf, Alucard stormed out of the room, no longer carrying himself as gracefully or as elegantly as he once had.

Without thinking twice, 9S took off after him, heading down the winding stairs and ramps circling the village until he found Alucard kneeling and doubled over on the ground near the outskirts of the village. The half-human retched, his chest heaving and shoulders shaking, and spat out a long stream of thin, watery vomit onto the grass.

“Alucard!” 9S rushed to his side. “A-Are you alright?”

Alucard coughed and clutched at his stomach. His pale skin glistened with cold sweat in the light and tears dripped from his eyes. As he pulled himself upright with 9S’s help, he let out a piteous groan, his breath shallow and ragged.

“She played me…” he gasped. He drew back his right fist and drove it into the wooden support column of a bridge running overhead, splintering the beam and rattling the bridge’s inelegant network of scaffolding. “She played me like a damn fiddle!”

9S grabbed Alucard and wrenched him away, pulling out from under the bridge as though worried it would collapse and hurt him, but the half-vampire tore himself free of the Scanner’s grip.

“Where is she?” he spat through gritted teeth, his mouth drawn in a bloodthirsty scowl and his long fangs bared. His golden eyes gleamed with a hard, hateful light. “Where is A4?”

From the moment she had seen that silver-haired woman cut both A2 and Alucard down with her whip—that horrid, horrifying whip—the succubus had started running.

She’d run out of the village as though every demon in Hell were on her tail, vanishing past the boundary of the warm lanterns into the cold and dark forest. Roots and stones grasped at her feet, branches and twigs raked her hair; in her panic, she tossed away her glamour as one might toss away a coat, as though her disguise itself had been tangled up in the brush.

She was done with this. There was no way in hell Lord Olrox could expect her to contend with not only Alucard but a fucking Belmont on top of that! One hit from the Vampire Killer would reduce her to ash in an instant, regardless of how quickly her healing factor could kick in.

The succubus skidded to a halt at the lip of a chasm torn across the face of the forest, panting and gasping for breath as she stood over the black abyss looming beneath her. The crashing torrent of a waterfall pounded incessantly in the distance; with her keen eyes, she could discern from the
darkness the spray of mist blanketing the river down at the bottom of the ravine and the faint outlines of a crumbling castle in the distance.

Still short of breath, she sat down and pulled off her boots, relieving her poor hooves of the horrible pressure that had been bearing down on them, and tossed them down into the ravine. She hung her legs off the edge of the cliff, wiggling her hooves as she picked twigs and leaves out of her hair and waited for the stinging, shallow cuts on her arms and legs to heal up.

What, she wondered, would she do now?

Certainly not A2—not anymore, that was.

She squirmed and pressed her thighs together, listlessly raking her claws across her scalp and mopping up the sweat beading on her brow. Her insides felt as though they were coiled as tight as a wound-up corkscrew, crawling around inside her, lighting little flames under her skin and throbbing in concert with her heart; the tension, the fear, the… the…

Fuck, she was so pent-up! What had she been thinking, taking it slowly with A2? She could have taken care of her urges hours ago if she hadn’t been so concerned with taking it safe!

She had bigger things to worry about right now, imminent death and cowardice and hellfire and punishment, but she couldn’t even think straight with the thousand missed opportunities swirling around inside her and pulsing with a heady, lusty tempo. A2 may have been a smelly, flea-ridden bitch, but she was supposed to be her smelly, flea-ridden bitch, and oh, all the things they could have done to each other…

She lost sense of time, but when she finally came to her senses once again, she felt much better. She wiped her hand clean on the grass and licked the blood from her lip, took the first deep breath she’d taken in an hour, sighed, and kicked her legs listlessly on the edge of the ravine as she pondered what to do.

She had to tell Olrox that the Vampire Killer had a new wielder. If she could tell him that, maybe then he’d forgive her for abandoning her mission and leaving A2 behind.

Or maybe he’d burn her alive and make her wish she’d taken her chances with Alucard and the Belmont.

Knowing her master, the succubus concluded that he would likely kill her. After all, in Dracula’s castle, minions like her were a dime a dozen. Olrox could just make more if he needed to pad out Dracula’s ranks. In this world, there were special monsters he took an interest in acquiring and subduing—like A2—and there were trash mobs like her. A thousand disposable demons that could be molded from hellfire on a whim and snuffed out just as easily.

She held the end of her long, whiplike tail in her hand and anxiously ran her thumb over it as though she were a baby sucking its thumb, her long and sharp thumbnail just barely grazing the dancing, candlelike flame that burned with a pale blue glow at the tip of her tail.

She didn’t want to die. That was why she’d ran away in the first place. So what was the point of going somewhere else where she could get killed?

It was a good thing A4’s ghost couldn’t see her now. All that smug bravado she’d had when she’d taunted the phantom just last night had gone up in smoke.

She wouldn’t go back to Olrox, she decided. As long as she stayed away from him, she could do as she pleased. As long as she didn’t have to hear his voice…
As if on cue, a blossom of blue fire burst open in the thin air in front of her. The succubus felt her heart skip a beat as the tendrils of flame curled into a wreath and solidified into a floating silver hand mirror that hung in midair, its shining face reflecting the succubus’ own dismayed and forlorn face back at her.

She looked like a mess. But she didn’t have time to dwell on how awful she looked—her face was replaced with Olrox’s black glass helmet.

The succubus stiffened and sat up straight as though she’d been tied to a stake. “Hello, Master,” she said as confidently as she could muster. Why now of all times, here of all places?

Olrox’s helmet threw her reflection back at her, faint, and twisted on the smooth, shimmering black surface. “Well?” he asked. “Where is my werewolf?”

“In Pascal’s village,” the succubus answered at the exact instant Olrox had finished asking her. She couldn’t have thought of a lie or half-truth or nervous deflection even if her life had been dependent on it.

“And who is this ‘Pascal?’”

“A machine, but a peaceful one. He has a village in the forest. No defenses, no weapons—he’s an avowed pacifist.”

“And where,” Olrox asked, the mirror twisting on its axis as though he were looking around, “are you?”

“Not far from the village.” The succubus gave her answers on autopilot; she had no choice in the matter.

“Why aren’t you bringing A2 with you?”

“I—I got scared.”

“What?!”

The succubus flinched and reared back as though she were expecting Olrox to strike her. “Alucard was there! And—And a Belmont, too!”

“A Belmont?”

“She had the whip with her. The Vampire Killer.” The succubus felt a hot tear roll down her cheek, then another, then another. “I was scared for my life. I ran. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

An invisible hand shoved Olrox off to the side, pushing him out of frame. Lady Carmilla, mistress of the castle, slid in to replace him, her eyes wide. “Who was it? The whip-wielder, what did she look like?”

The succubus took a deep, nervous breath.

“Answer the question,” Olrox commanded her, his voice drifting from beyond the mirror’s borders.

“Black dress. Short white hair done in a bob,” she answered without a moment’s hesitation. “Black blindfold. Her face is shaped just like A2’s.”

Carmilla glanced off to the side. “Is that your friend?” she asked someone else.
“Yes, mistress. That’s 2E to a tee!”

“Thank you,” Carmilla said before drifting off to the side (with a less-than-gentle nudge from Olrox).

The succubus could feel Olrox glaring at her from behind the featureless, smooth orb of his glass helmet.

“Stand up,” he said.

The succubus stood up. The mirror hovered upward with her, keeping itself at eye level. “Sir,” she blurted out, fearful of what might come next, “I’m so sorry—”

“Throw yourself off the cliff,” he told her, his voice cold and steely.

She felt her hoof lift unbidden off the steady, stable rock lining the lip of the ravine and position itself over thin air, as though it had been yanked into position by a puppeteer’s invisible string. “Wait, please, Lord Olrox, I-I can go back,” she protested, her eyes burning, a cold lump in her throat throttling her, “and go get her. I can go back for her and then bring her to you…” She swayed, balancing precariously on one leg, the other upraised and hanging over empty space.

Olrox spoke in a stern, restrained snarl. “That is no longer necessary. I will collect her myself. You are no longer of use to me.”

“I can be useful,” the succubus choked out, the world swirling nauseously around her as she struggled to fight back the urge to take one more step forward, one step into the abyss… “I can still be useful, please let me do this for you, please, Master…”

“And I thought I was a control freak,” Carmilla drawled. “If you’re finished with your power trip, Olrox…”

“Throw yourself off the cliff,” Olrox repeated, “and kill yourself.”

Sweat and tears alike stung at the succubus’ eyes. “Please…”

“Walk forward one step,” he ordered, hissing the words as though through gritted teeth, the force of his will bludgeoning away any resistance the succubus could muster.

Her other hoof lifted off of the ground and she plunged into the misty depths of the ravine, the cold and bitter wind buffeting her blowing away her tears as she fell.

A2’s search for Four had been fruitless until she’d crossed paths with Alucard. Fortunately, Alucard had also been looking for her; unfortunately, his reasons were altogether different from A2’s.

A2 did not take what Alucard had to tell her about Four well.

She licked the blood off her knuckles as Alucard writhed on the ground in front of her, his hand clasped over four parallel scars left by her claws on his cheek.

He deserved it. How could he tell her something like that—that A4, Four, her only surviving friend from YoRHa, had been the demon all along, that she’d tricks the two of them into murdering the other androids as cover?

“A2,” 9S cautioned her as he hurried to Alucard’s side, “try to stay calm—”
How could he expect her to react upon telling her that Four’s kindness, her soft embrace, the feel of her lips pressed against hers, of her fingers stroking her fur, of those whispered words ringing in her ears and telling her that she was strong, that she was beautiful, that she was loved—

How could he expect her to remain calm upon hearing that everything Four had done had been to deceive and ensnare her?

She clenched her fists, her claws stinging her palms as they pierced her skin. “You’re lying. Four isn’t a monster, we proved it—I trusted you!”

Alucard sat up and pulled his bloodied hand away from his face as the crimson claw marks across his cheek faded and shrunk away. “I’m not happy about this either,” he muttered, gritting his teeth. “But it’s the truth. And neither of us have seen hide nor hair of her in this village, so it’s likely she ran away to inform her master.”

2B gripped her whip tighter, her lips parting just barely to show a sliver of gritted teeth. “Inform her about what?”

“All of it.” Alucard answered. “That whip. And a village full of defenseless, innocent souls ripe for the taking. If Dracula sends his elite forces here, he will be able to grow his legion of the damned and wipe out his only remaining enemies in one fell swoop.”

“Then let’s find her and kill her,” 9S suggested, “before she can make it back.”

A2 swallowed a lump in her throat. They were talking about killing A4. Killing Four. Killing the only other person in the world who understood her, who loved her…

No. Not Four. Four was already dead. The monster that had taken her face—deserved to die, and deserved to die screaming.

“I cannot detect a succubus by scent from such a long distance,” Alucard admitted. “It is a large forest, and there’s no telling—”

“Shut up,” A2 snapped. She sniffed the air, her nostrils flaring. She knew what Four smelled like. The air at sea, fresh and briny, and the woody scent of the forest. Those had been the scents that had rubbed off on her before the massacre at Pearl Harbor, the scents that—though they’d been erased quickly by oil and gunpowder and burnt ozone—had stuck in her memory, defining A4 as surely as her face and her smile did. The scents Olrox had pulled from her mind when creating the perfect weapon against her.

Where she smelled sea salt, that was where the demon was.

“I can track her,” she said. “Nothing here smells like the ocean except for her.”

A2 led the others around the village’s perimeter; when she caught the scent of sea spray, they were off.

The trail led them in a wandering, meandering path through the underbrush, over the rusted hulls of armor-clad machines whose corpses had long since become homes for rodents and insects.

A2 stopped. She’d lost the scent. The rest of the forest—the leaves overhead, fresh sap oozing from the trunks of the trees, the combined musks of a hundred different species of animal, the aromas of a dozen different flowers—overpowered it.
She drove her fist into a tree. “Dammit!”

“You’re tracking the scent of brine, are you not?” Alucard asked. “Let me try.”

“Your nose can’t be that good. I’m half wolf—”

Alucard’s coat swirled around him; his body lost its form, and a blink of an eye later, he was all wolf.

A2 gritted her teeth, struck with jealousy. Instantly, no pain, and all his clothes transformed with him—even his prosthetic arm turned into a cute mechanical foreleg! That lucky son of a bitch!

Alucard lowered his muzzle and sniffed at the ground, then lifted his head, his ears flicking forward and his silvery-gray fur bristling. “Found it.”

He bounded through the underbrush, and the other three followed.

“You could’ve done this all along?” A2 whined.

“I thought you had it. I didn’t wish to steal your thunder.”

A2 glanced back at 2B and 9S and noticed 2B glaring so angrily at Alucard that it was obvious even through her visor. Chalk up another thing the two of them had in common—neither wanted to put up with his bullshit.

Alucard came to a halt at the edge of a cliff, his paws scrabbling across the slick, mossy stones lining the ground (A2 almost wished he’d slip and fall off, though she supposed he’d probably have some other bullshit superpower to get out of that). “The trail stops here,” he announced.

“No shit,” A2 said.

A waterfall roared in the distance. A2 peered over the edge of the cliff, straining her eyes. She’d see better in the night when she was fully transformed, but even in her current state, her night vision was improved enough that she could discern the faint form of a river at the bottom of the ravine.

She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end and hurriedly backed away from the cliff’s edge, glancing over her shoulder. It would have been so easy for 2B to push her off right now. She could even say it was an accident and have plausible deniability.

And yet, 2B stood off in the back, her arms crossed, a surly frown on her face.

A2 flipped her off anyway. Her scowl tightened, but otherwise, she didn’t react.

9S crouched down beside Alucard, one hand gripping the arm of his pod in case he slipped, the other sinking into Alucard’s fur. “What do you think? Maybe she fell. Would that kill her?”

“I doubt it,” Alucard said. “Succubi have small wings. They can’t fly, but they can levitate and glide. And even if she did fall, there’s slim chance that her healing factor would preserve her life. They’re weak creatures, but shockingly resilient.”

“Is that it?” 2B asked. “The trail’s gone cold?”

“The river would make it almost impossible to track her by scent.” Alucard shook his fur and reformed into his humanoid body, standing tall and stepping away from the edge. He did it so casually and effortlessly that A2 wanted to rip his throat out. “Water and mud. What hasn’t been rinsed off by the river has surely been masked by the silt.”
"Pod," 9S said, tapping on Pod 153’s hull, “scan for any IFF or black box signals down there.”

“It won’t work,” Alucard said. “If she’s cast aside her glamour, she’ll no longer be broadcasting any false signals for you to pick up. We know she’s cunning—it would behoove us to assume she’s doing whatever she can to keep us off her tail.”

“Analysis: No IFF or YoRHa black box signals detected,” Pod 153 announced, concurring with Alucard’s reasoning.

“I don’t believe we’ve seen the last of her,” Alucard concluded with a bitter scowl, kicking a rock off the edge of the cliff and watching it fall out of reach of the pods’ floodlights and tumble into the darkness. “For now, though, we need to get back to Pascal’s village and see to it it’s well defended. Dracula’s forces could strike at any moment now.”

A2 looked down into the abyss and growled. Somewhere down there, or maybe long gone by now, was an evil creature that had found her at her most vulnerable and given her everything she had desired, soothing her, caressing her, embracing her, planting soft kisses where she hurt the most and…

And it had all been a lie. All those memories turned rancid in her mind.

She choked back a sob, pressing her hand against her mouth and clamping her teeth down on her tongue, but she couldn’t stop her tears from falling down into the river below.

Dracula had eyes on the inside of the Bunker, but Adam, too, had his own way of keeping tabs on YoRHa.

The black-haired little girl in the red dress standing before him, her small body faintly flickering, was N1 or Terminal Alpha, an avatar of the machine network. She and her counterpart (aptly named N2 or Terminal Beta) were the network’s ego, so to speak. Adam was not sure if that made himself and Eve the network’s superego or its id. Only N1 was under his command; although he couldn’t say for certain, N2, presumably, was connected to Eve.

The Terminals predated Adam and his brother by hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Perhaps they had come into being at the very beginning of the first war. And because some fool had (undoubtedly under their influence) created a backdoor into YoRHa’s servers which the Terminals could exploit at their convenience, every movement by the so-called vanguard of humanity could be read like an open book.

N1 gave Adam a mysterious smile as she told him what she knew of YoRHa (and of course, what she knew was everything).

Adam felt a pang of shock upon hearing this. Sadly, unlike the Terminals, he was far from omniscient, knowing only what they wanted him to know when they knew it; the news that the lunar colony was a fabrication and that the human race had gone extinct long before the machines’ alien creators had even entered Earth’s solar system genuinely caught him by surprise.

“That is… interesting,” he told the red girl, struggling to keep his composure. What would Dracula do upon discovering this? And the other vampires? Adam had all the food he could eat, but Dracula had promised Olrox and Carmilla a bounty of the only food they could stomach: Human blood. They would certainly not be happy to learn that they would have to subsist until the end of time on wildlife and machines—they might even raise their hands against Dracula out of revenge.

He stood up. “I must tell Lord Dracula of this news.”
N1 gave him another mysterious grin. “If he had asked us nicely, we would have told him earlier.”

Her demeanor disconcerted Adam. It made him wonder if the loyalty he felt toward Dracula had truly been passed onto the rest of his half of the network, as he’d assumed. Or did the network, divided as it was now between Alpha and Beta, have its own ulterior motives?

His suspicion cleared itself from his head, save for a few worrying dregs, when a loud bang rocked the inside of his quarters, rattling his door on its hinges.

Somebody knocked on his door.

Adam strode over and opened the door, finding himself face to face with Carmilla and two other vampires—Olrox, the man with the sharp violet armor and black glass helmet whom Adam had last seen in Dracula’s throne room, and a deathly pale android with long, curly whitish-lavender hair done up into extravagant pigtails.

Carmilla smiled. “Hello, Lord Adam of the Machines,” she said with a theatrical bow. “This is my fellow lieutenant of Dracula, Olrox, and my sweet little subordinate, 6E. Care to come out with us for a stroll and stretch your legs? There will be plenty of machines for you to munch on…”

“I’m sorry,” Adam said, “but I am afraid I have a prior obligation.” He glanced over at N1, who playfully stuck out her tongue at his guests and tugged on her lower eyelid. She was, thankfully, a projection within his mind, so the other vampires could not see her rude display.

“Oh, can you not reschedule?” Carmilla reached out and curled her long, pale fingers around his forearm, coquettishly batting her eyelashes at him as her cold fingertips chilled his skin beneath his sleeve. “We need to build up our army, and poor 6E can only bite so many machines on her own. Surely you yourself must be getting thirsty…”

“I’m afraid that when Dracula makes an appointment,” Adam said, brushing away her hand, “it behooves one not to ask for it to be ‘rescheduled.’ He is my master, and I must obey him.”

Carmilla frowned. “Oh, you’re no fun. Well,” she said, rolling her eyes and sighing, “there’s always next time. Good day, Lord Adam of the Machines.”

“Good day, Lady Carmilla,” Adam said, closing the door in her face.

He closed his eyes, mapped out the unfinished castle in his head, and in a flash of golden light he brought himself to Dracula’s throne room.

Dracula was casually lounging in his obsidian throne, his legs dangling over one armrest while he braced his lower back against the other, his pale fingers tapping on the seat of the throne in time with the ancient human music drifting through the musty air of the dark chamber. The song’s mechanical throbbing and wailing lyrics rattled the mummified remains of the aliens who sat in the alcoves lining the chamber’s central platform and silently listened.

“Welcome my son, welcome to the machine… What did you dream? It’s alright, we told you what to dream…”

Adam loudly cleared his throat. “Lord Dracula. I have an urgent matter to speak with you about.”

Dracula idly added his voice to the singers’. “You dreamed of a big star… He played a mean guitar…”

Adam cleared his throat more loudly this time. “Lord Dracula, sir.”
Dracula looked up, noticed him at last, and hastily sat up and positioned himself properly on his throne, silencing the music with a snap of his fingers. “Yes, my underling? What is it?”

“I’ve obtained intelligence from the network regarding the lunar colony.” Adam bent his knee and knelt down, bowing his head. He ran over the words again and again in his mind, wondering what the best way to broach the delicate subject would be.

“Yes?” His interest piqued, Dracula leaned forward and gripped the edges of his armrests. “What news do you bring?”

“The colony is a sham. It is a small structure with no life-support capabilities. It merely houses a server containing the sum total of human knowledge and culture.”

“Oh? Then where do the humans live?”

“They do not.” Adam closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “There are no refugees from the war. Humanity had long since gone extinct before we had even arrived on this planet.”

He waited with bated breath for Dracula’s reaction.

Dracula, to his surprise, began to laugh.

As the cold, cruel laughter echoed across the throne room, dancing across the walls, Adam bemusedly lifted his head. “Lord Dracula…?”

Dracula threw back his head, flung out his arms, and laughed even harder. His laughter was manic in its mirthfulness; Adam, not knowing what to expect and gripped by a fear he could not fully explain, stood up and took a halting step backward.

At last, the dark lord calmed down, slumping backward with a long, loud sigh. “I suspected as much,” he said, idly clenching and unclenching his fist. “I wonder if Alucard knows, or if this is another hope I can rip from his grasp…”

“What will you do about this?” Adam asked. “The others will be very upset to learn that humanity is extinct.”

“No, humanity is no longer of any concern to me,” Dracula explained, picking at his fingernails. “This is… simply a matter of tying up loose ends. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I’m so sorry for all the trouble we’ve caused, Pascal,” Anemone said as she looked down at the three mangled corpses Jackass had been working on. 64B and 22B, both brutally yet efficiently executed, their bodies ripped open in Jackass’ enthusiasm to strip them for parts; and A2’s old chassis, recovered from the ground where it had fallen after it had inexplicably returned to life and attacked A4. Its scuffed black endodermis and ragged patches of remaining skin were stained with blood, its torso torn apart, the ragged edges of its wounds scored with claw marks.

This wasn’t even the half of it. There had been the damage A2 and 2B had done to the village (and each other) as well, and now A4 had gone missing…
“I understand,” Pascal assured her, “that these are trying times.” He laid a rough metal hand on her shoulder. “I do not feel it is appropriate to blame you for the trouble which follows in your wake.”

“Thank you.”

“You would not happen to know who killed those two androids, though, would you?” Pascal asked.

Anemone shook her head, though she had her suspicions. She knew that 2B and 9S often received orders to hunt down deserters from YoRHa. Normally, she’d immediately dismiss the idea that 2B would break Pascal’s rule against violence in his village, but considering she had tried to kill A2…

The mangled, headless old YoRHa chassis that had once belonged to A2 twitched and convulsed, scaring Jackass away from it; Anemone felt her core burst into flames as she staggered backward in fear and shock, her breath catching in her throat and her lungs burning. Even Pascal was afraid.

A2’s old chassis pulled itself up onto unsteady feet, a bestial moan drifting from the hole in what little remained of its neck where its throat had once been. Blood gushed anew from severed coolant channels, coating the exposed machinery visible through the long gash in its chassis.

If Anemone had been carrying a pistol, she would have shot it; she wasn’t sure it would do anything, though. After all, this thing couldn’t possibly be alive. It had no power source, no seat of consciousness…

The chassis lumbered toward one of the other two corpses, panting heavily, its lung sacs rapidly inflating and deflating. It reached down, wrapped its fumbling fingers around 64B’s neck, and ripped out her vocal chords.

Anemone, Jackass, and Pascal could only look on in horror as the undead chassis shoved 64B’s voicebox into its own throat. The chassis’ next piteous moan was stronger, louder, with more shape to it—albeit laced with static.

“Aaaaaa... ooooooohhh...” it moaned, bursts of static stabbing through its long, low outcry. “Aaaeeeee... oooooooouuuuhhh...”

“Maybe we should run away,” Pascal said.

Jackass held up her hands. “Wait. If this thing wanted to hurt us, it would’ve done it already.”

The chassis picked up 64B’s severed head next, its hands trembling as it tore away the front of 64B’s head, skin, skull, and all, and shove it against the scooped-out remains of its own head. Sparks and wisps of steam curled from the seams; 64B’s mouth yawned open as an anguished, pained scream wrenched itself from her throat, her eyes still frozen in a death mask of fear and anguish.

“Aaaeeeee... oooooooaaaaahrrr...” the undead chimera called out, its voice still shot with white noise, struggling to move its new mouth. It bit its lip hard enough to draw blood. “Ffffffff... oooooohhhhh... rrrr...”

Anemone felt Jackass’ fingers thread themselves around her own. “It’s learning to speak,” she breathed, awestruck, her eyes wide and face pale under the omnipresent grease stains marring her skin.

The chimera’s undead eyes rolled to the side, gazing emptily and glassily directly at Anemone. Under the creature’s dead-eyed stare, Anemone felt her servos freeze and muscles tense even as Pascal struggled to pull her away.
It lifted up its hand and took a staggering step toward them. “Eeeeyeee... aaaaahhh... mmmm... Aaaaaaeeeee... Foooouuuur...”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed your little taste of Julius Belmont, the objectively best Belmont. Side note, because I've been bingeing Doctor Who audio dramas, my headcanon voice for Julius is now John Hurt. Unfortunately, as a result, somehow Alucard ended up with Paul McGann's voice. I'm sorry, Robert Belgrade. I can't control my brain sometimes.
Stygian Ensemble, Part I

Chapter Summary

A2 makes not one, but two new friends. Alucard helps 9S accessorize. Eve runs afoul of Jean-Paul. Popola and Devola meet a mischievous wizard. Happy Halloween!

Chapter Notes

This chapter's been a long time coming (you can blame my other fic for that) but I hope it was worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alucard was the first of the squadron to step over the threshold of the safehouse, his hand resting cautiously on the pistol holstered under his jacket. With his keen eye, he could make out the details of the disused foyer without turning on the light. No one had lived here for years, though it was kept clean and free of dust in case it came in handy.

As it turned out, at this moment, a safehouse under the auspices of his current employers out in rural Germany did come in handy, because Soma Cruz and Mina Hakuba had been visiting Berlin when the cult Alucard had been tracking for months had tried to abduct them.

Doomsday cults were becoming increasingly commonplace as the global pandemic known as ‘White Chlorination Syndrome’ spread and worsened. The one that had presented itself to Soma and Mina just the other day called itself ‘With Light’ and tasked itself with ‘liberating’ from Soma the dark inheritance he had claimed a year ago in Dracula’s castle so one of their own could anoint themselves master of darkness.

With Light believed that for God to truly be good, His opposite number must exist to oppose him with equal strength, which in itself was not that far off from what Alucard himself believed. Evidently, though, as far as this cult was concerned, WCS and the armies of shambling ghouls it left in its wake were insufficient. Alucard found their credo nothing but juvenile indulgence in a facsimile of Manichaeism—but after all, what was a cult but a miserable little pile of shallow esoterica?

Alucard stepped into the center of the foyer, eyeing the gloomy hallway and shadow-wreathed staircase. The house felt empty to him, but just to be careful, he raised a hand and motioned to the rest of his team to fan out and search the place. With Light had tendrils within his employer’s ranks: That was how they had discovered Soma’s true nature in the first place. His team was handpicked for its trustworthiness. This building, though, was not.

R. Dorothy, one of his cohorts, stepped forward and closed the door behind her, the arc of her flashlight’s beam providing the only light in the room. Her arm was wrapped securely around Mina’s waist. “Statement: No electronic surveillance devices detected,” she informed Alucard, servos audibly whirring as she turned her head to scan the area. “Addendum: No life signs, either.”
She was one of the early-model combat androids developed by the Hamelin Organization—human enough in her mannerisms, but with a flat, synthesized voice and plastic skin; even the nicest dogs universally growled when she was near them. Her name wasn’t originally Dorothy, but that was what Alucard had taken to calling her after he’d taken a look at her serial number and gone cross-eyed.

The newer models were almost indistinguishable from humans, but Alucard felt a sort of kinship with the older ones who stuck out like sore thumbs. He considered himself something of a collector of them; some of them, he trusted more than humans.

The men who’d ascended to the second floor and descended to the basement returned to the foyer and announced that their sweep had turned up nothing, as did the remaining member of the squad who’d inspected the first floor.

Alucard sighed in relief. “The house is yours, Miss Hakuba.”

Mina looked down at her phone, seemingly still a little dazed. She didn’t adjust to peril quite as well as Soma did. “I’m not getting any signal…” she mumbled.

“Response: You wouldn’t be. This building is a Faraday cage,” R. Olivaw said. “Proposal: If you need to send any message, this unit will transmit it on your behalf.”

Alucard and his team walked Mina through the house, making sure she was well-acquainted with it. Mina settled in well enough; though the safehouse was cut off from the outside world, it had a very well-stocked, if a bit out-of-date library. The rest of the team would stay here until the cult had been dealt with and the danger had passed; Alucard, though, was set to head out toward the cult’s base of operations, an abandoned village in central Europe, to rendezvous with Yoko and Julius.

And, unfortunately, Soma.

Much to Alucard’s displeasure, Soma Cruz bought into his own hype. As it turned out, cutting a swath of destruction through Dracula’s castle, making mincemeat of a megalomaniac, inheriting Dracula’s powers, fighting Julius Belmont to a standstill, and then beating Chaos itself into submission gave the brash young man an even stronger and unshakable sense of self-confidence. That, and the cult had tried to get between him and Mina.

Although Alucard had insisted he stay behind with Mina while the grown-ups took care of things, Soma had slipped out and hitched a ride to the cult’s base last night. Backpacking across Europe was a quintessential experience for affluent young men these days, Alucard had to admit, but most of the time it did not involve tracking down a bunch of people intent on crowning a new lord of darkness and quote-unquote ‘beating the goddamn shit out of them.’

Alucard spent several hours at the safehouse, taking as much time as he needed to make certain it was truly secure before heading out to take down the cult. As he made for the door, though, Mina rushed to his side and stopped him.

“You’ll take care of Soma, won’t you, Arikado?” Mina asked.

“Do not worry about us,” Alucard assured her. “I’ll bring him back to you with as many of his original limbs as possible.”

His wry sense of humor was a little lost on her, which was understandable given the circumstances. “Please do your best to make sure he has all of them, sir,” she said. There was an intense look in
her hazel eyes that could have cut through steel.

“All of his limbs,” Alucard promised. “Most of his fingers.”

Mina sighed, exasperated. If Soma had told that joke, she would have certainly laughed at it. “Just give him this, please,” she said, holding out a plain envelope she’d been gripping.

Alucard took it from her and slipped it into the pocket in the inner lining of his jacket. He knew better than to even think about reading it. He knew what kind of scandalous messages a nineteen-year-old boy and girl living on a dying planet sent to each other. He’d accidentally intercepted quite enough of their text messages and had learned quite a few new slang terms in both English and Japanese that he wished he hadn’t. Suffice to say, James Joyce would have been scandalized.

“And this, too.” Mina reached around her neck and pulled off an amethyst pendant, shaped into a perfect oval and set in silver, hanging from a glittering chain necklace. “Please make sure he has it.”

Alucard took the necklace. He could feel a great power resting within the polished violet gemstone, something pure and holy. In this form, it was benign; however, Alucard had a feeling that if its raw power were unleashed, it would be enough to burn even him.

“I’ve been working on that talisman for months; I’ve poured my heart and soul into it,” Mina said. It didn’t feel like a mere colloquial expression to Alucard. If he focused on the gemstone, he could almost feel the heartbeat within it. “If… well, if it comes to worst, I know it’ll help him keep the darkness at bay.”

Alucard pocketed the talisman, inwardly both amused and impressed that Mina had drawn on such potent magic. True, she was the keeper of her family’s shrine, but…

Well, to him, she was still just a little girl. Most likely, she always would be, no matter how mature she became or how masterful her control over holy magic became. But he couldn’t argue with the results.

What made the dark lord an evil man was his selfishness, his myopia, his hatred, his commitment to his vices. Within this talisman rested a vast surplus of love and compassion—more than enough to beat back those dark, cruel impulses should Soma find them difficult to resist. If he wore this, he would not fall to darkness. Alucard was as certain of that as Mina was.

Mina smiled. The warmth of her soft face reminded Alucard of his mother.

Wouldn’t it be funny, he mused, considering how Soma was the reincarnation of his father, if Mina was the reincarnation of his mother as well? What deity, he wondered, had he offended to deserve having to babysit his own parents?

The cult’s headquarters was a grotesque, twisted parody of Dracula’s castle. Considering how nightmarish Castlevania could be on its own, the word grotesque was doing quite a lot of work here. Through a cruel, brute-forced alchemy powered by the Hellmouth that sat beneath this place, the abandoned town had been molded into the shape of a Gothic castle, buildings reshaped as though they were made of soft clay to form the mazelike corridors and looming towers that exemplified Dracula’s architectural whims. Everything from humble wooden shacks to modest (and not so modest) cathedrals to long-abandoned Soviet-era apartment complexes had been caught up in the magical maelstrom that had created this place. Fragments of an ancient alchemy lab buried beneath the ground long ago had been strewn about the basement, along with natural caves
and long-abandoned mines.

Alucard could almost hear the old personalities of the castle’s building blocks crying out in anguish. Brutalist concrete pillars squeezed into elegant stone columns, old incandescent light fixtures that had blossomed into ornate chandeliers, sickly-colored, fading wallpaper flickering as it was forced to adopt the bright stylings of a romantic-era ballroom.

He found Soma in the ballroom tearing through the castle’s monstrous inhabitants with such panache that it was almost as though the boy enjoyed it. The skills he’d obtained by claiming so many souls a year ago had not left him; his hand gripped every kind of weapon with the steady confidence of a master. His white trench coat, the one thing he always wore regardless of the weather as though it were a security blanket, was already spattered with darkening bloodstains and a very ugly rainbow of other unmentionable fluids.

As one demon burst into flames and crumbled to ash, an orb of light flew out of it and swirled around Soma like a pebble caught into a whirlpool, drawn inexorably into his heart; there was a flash of scarlet light, a burst of fire, and half of the monsters in the room burst into flames. Alucard raised his arms over his face as a hot wind buffeted him, cinders lighting on his sleeves.

The crowd of skeletal creatures, leather-skinned demons, and ghostly apparitions surrounding Soma thinned out quickly enough that Alucard had scarcely had time to draw a weapon before the boy had dispatched all of them but one.

Alucard watched him bury a spear deep into the chest of a pale, ashen-faced ghoul; salt, not blood, trickled from the wound down the ghoul’s tattered, salt-encrusted clothes. Not just the typical hellspawn dwelt in this castle—people in the final, post-terminal stages of WCS had been caught up in the madness as well.

Those who died from WCS were the lucky ones. The ones who clung to life despite every organ in their body crystallizing and whose eyes turned a bright, searing red were condemned to wander the Earth as mindless, violent creatures devoid even of the faintest trace of humanity.

Soma thrust the spear in deeper, pinning the ghoul to the wall. The ghoul reached out, stretching its arms, and scrabbling for a handful of Soma’s coat, fingers curling around the lapels; flakes of salt sloughed off its cracked and desiccated hands. Soma wrenched himself free, the ghoul’s fingers crumbling as they broke off from its hands, and crouched down to pick up a bloodstained broadsword from the floor.

“Having fun, are we, Soma?” Alucard called out.

Soma nearly dropped the blade in shock and whirled around to face him. He looked almost guilty. Almost. “Arikado! What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same,” Alucard said in the best I’m-not-angry-just-disappointed voice he could muster. “I told you not to get involved, did I not?”

“I thought you were taking care of Mina.” Whatever complex emotions had been playing on Soma’s face soured; his grip on his sword tightened. “Where is she?”

“You need not worry,” Alucard assured him. “She’s in a safe location with some of my colleagues. Besides, keeping you under observation takes priority.”

His voice was dripping with disdain now. Alucard couldn’t blame him for being testy, considering the current circumstances. “I need you to understand. You’re still considered to be extremely dangerous…”

Soma scowled and looked away, his downcast gaze turning to the tip of his sword dragging on the not-so-luxuriously-carpeted floor. “I thought we were over that,” he muttered, his voice suddenly smaller, his tone less disdainful and more vulnerable, though still bitter as wormwood. It was as though the memories of the turmoil he’d felt one year ago had rushed to the forefront of his mind. “It’s not like I hear Dracula whispering in my head and telling me to go out and drink virgins’ blood or anything.”

“Whenever Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods to visit her grandmother, she must be lucky every time. But the wolf need only be lucky once, Soma.”

Soma scoffed at the words, but Alucard could tell in how he refused to look him in the eyes that his little aphorism had slipped through his stubborn attitude and at least made some impact.

“Anyway, since you’re already here,” Alucard said, “I suppose I cannot stop you from continuing. As long as you’re under my supervision, I’m prepared to overlook the use of…” He looked at the writhing ghoul Soma had skewered and noticed it was pulling itself determinedly down the length of the spear shaft; he quickly drew his gun and shot it between the eyes. Its head erupted into a cloud of glittering white powder. “…excessive force.”

Soma sighed and slumped his shoulders, teasing a lock of his snow-white hair as he spared a quick and nervous glance at the slumped-over, headless body of the ghoul Alucard had finished off. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Besides,” Alucard added, running his finger across a tattered and faded poster of ancient Soviet propaganda that was trying its best to be an ornate oil painting of one of Dracula’s more aristocratic underlings, “we cannot allow this cult to carry on this way.” This disgusting facsimile was an insult both to human dignity and to his childhood home. If Dracula were reborn here, even he would be incensed beyond words to have been presented with such an abomination.

He produced the envelope holding Mina’s letter and the talisman she had blessed. “On a lighter note, Miss Hakuba requested that I give you these.”

Soma snatched them both out of his hands with a ravenous hunger and ripped the envelope apart, fumbling to unfold the letter within. He turned his back on Alucard, hunched over the paper like a gremlin to better grant himself some privacy. Alucard could conclude that Soma was worried the letter was either extremely sappy or extremely lewd, and decided he didn’t want to wonder which it was.

With stolid grace and reverence, Soma straightened up, folded the letter back up, and slipped it surreptitiously into the pocket of his jeans. The silver chain of the necklace flowed through his fingers as he slipped it over his head and let it the amethyst amulet rest on his chest. In an instant, his stubborn and petulant sense of angst seemed to have vanished.

“Thanks, Arikado,” he said, his face calm and serene, his demeanor resolute. He was almost smiling, even. His fingers found the hilt of his sword and he lifted it up, resting the flat of the blade against his shoulder. “Let’s get this bread.”

Alucard sighed and shook his head. He decided not to ask what that was supposed to mean. Children today and their memes. He would never understand. “Yes,” he agreed. “Let’s.”
As soon as A2 had returned from her expedition with the other YoRHa units and Alucard, Jackass had found her and pulled her and Alucard both away—not that it was difficult for her to convince her to part ways with 2B and 9S—to the repair facility in which 64B and 22B had been killed.

Compounding on the hollow ache in her chest from what she’d found out about A4, the prospect of revisiting the scene of those other two androids’ wrongful deaths filled her with dread. Alucard looked just as grim, his jaw set and eyes hard so as not to give away his inner turmoil.

But what she found waiting for her in that little hut instead was worse than what she could imagine.

64B’s corpse had been mutilated and beheaded. It lay in a pool of slick, oily blood, and atop that corpse sat a horrific chimera cobbled together from A2’s old chassis and parts ripped from 64B’s body. A2 stood before the bloodsoaked chimera, flanked by Anemone and Pascal on her right and Jackass and Alucard on her left, and felt a gut-wrenching wave of nausea and disgust sweep through her as the oily, metallic stench stung her nostrils.

The chimera had 64B’s face—that angular, wide jawline, broad chin, grayish eyes, short bangs of close-cropped white hair plastered to her forehead—and A2’s own old body, bits of skin clinging to a scuffed and blood-soaked chassis. Its lung sacs were visible through the fissure running up its torso; they swelled and deflated with an irregular, halting rhythm. 64B’s glassy, doll-like eyes, pale slate gray-blue, stared out emptily and blankly, meeting A2’s gaze but offering no sign of life or intelligence. Blood trickled from its mouth down its chin, rolling down its ragged and mutilated neck.

“What the hell is that thing?” A2 growled at Anemone.

“It looks like a ghoul,” Alucard said, drawing his sword. The stained-glass pattern running up the flat of the blade glittered in the light. He clearly meant to slay the thing, but Jackass put her hand out in front of him.

“No, wait,” she said.

The chimera crawled away from the mangled pile of 64B’s headless remains, padding on its hands and knees like a parody of a beast and leaving a speckled trail of blood and coolant in its wake. Its jaw stayed slack, its glistening lips parted, as its tongue laboriously moved within its mouth and ran across its teeth.

“Tooooouuuhhhhh…” it moaned. “Mmmmm—me…”

“Can ghouls usually talk?” Jackass asked.

A2 felt her gorge rise, fighting back a sickly sensation of nausea. She was only just beginning to notice how oddly she felt now as a werewolf, even in a half-transformed state—like the entire inside of her body was wet.

The chimera curled its broken fingers over her boot. “It… mmmmmuh… me… Ffff…”

A2 reflexively kicked its hand away and staggered backward, only for Anemone to grab her and keep her steady.

“No, listen to it,” Anemone hissed into her ear.

The chimera pulled itself up to its knees and rapped its curled, clawed fingers—the servos in each joint long seized-up and frozen into wicked talons—on its chest so hard that they left dents on the skinless chassis. “Ssss… Tsss… me… Fffff… oooaaahhrrr…”
Four.

It curled its fingers into a tight fist, sparks flying from breaking servos, and hit itself in the chest again and again, pounding a crater into its chassis. "Fffooouuurr..." it moaned, mewling so pitifully it was sickening.

A2 balled her hands into fists. This was a new low for Olrox’s minions. First, that damn succubus… now this thing?

"Why would this thing say it’s A4?" Anemone asked. “A2, do you kn—"

With a hoarse, furious scream, A2 drew back her foot and drove her boot into the chimera’s face, snapping its nose like a twig. Blood spurted from its nostrils as the chimera went limp and rolled over.

A2 didn’t let up then. She threw herself at the chimera, stomping on its chassis again and again, putting her foot through the fissure running through its torso and smashing its exposed innards. The chimera writhed with halting, jerking spasms, the blank expression on its stolen face never changing, its glassy eyes unblinking.

How dare this thing call itself A4! How dare it let that name fall from its dead lips! How dare it—how dare it—how dare it!

A2 wanted to kill it. She wanted to smash it to pieces. She wanted to smash its pieces to pieces. She wanted to grind it into a powder so fine that the gentlest breeze would blow it all away. This thing that mocked her, once with her own mangled body, twice with the face of the woman that damn succubus had tricked her into killing, three times with the name it kept moaning! This walking insult—she wanted to obliterate it more than she’d ever wanted to obliterate any machine!

The machines, after all, had killed A4… but it was Olrox who had pulled out her corpse and violated her memory.

Olrox who had made that demon take her form and her name and whisper such sweet words into A2’s ear, cling to her through the night, envelop her with soft and warm flesh, press wet lips to her neck, dance her slender fingers across the contours of her body… Olrox who had made a mockery of the love A4 had had for her… How dare he pervert those moments of intimacy!

And now this!

“Damn you, damn you, damn you, damn you!” A2 screamed, the words clawing at her throat as they forced their way out of her like a torrent of bile. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you for what you did to me—to Four—”

Jackass grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her backward to the best of her ability. A2 barely slid a single centimeter and simply kept smashing the chimera’s lifeless body. That monster, that hideous creature… nothing was going to stop her from erasing it from this world and laying A4 to rest!

“A2!” Anemone snapped, her loud, clear, authoritative voice cutting through the haze of rage filling A2’s head. A2 became aware that the chimera had rolled over and started trying to crawl away from her; her boot had started to break its spine now.

Anemone rested a hand on her shoulder. “We need to figure out what this thing is and why it’s calling itself A4. Where’s A4? The real one?”
A2 felt her throat close and a pit form in her stomach. At once, she felt ravenously hungry and yet so horribly nauseous that she couldn’t even think about eating.

“Number Two…” Anemone gave her a gentle nudge, a concerned frown tightening her lips, her brows furrowing. “Where’s A4? What’s wrong?”

“Four’s dead,” A2 muttered, bowing her head.

Anemone’s eyes widened. Her jaw dropped and she let out a hushed gasp. “What?”

“She’s dead. She’s always been dead.”

“Looked pretty alive to me this morning,” Jackass said.

“It was a fake,” A2 spat, aiming another kick at the chimera for emphasis while it futilely tried to crawl away. “It was a damn fake! A fucking—fucking succubus!”

“A what?” Jackass asked, trying again (without success) to pull her away.

“Two, calm down,” Anemone said, slipping a hand into A2’s mane and scratching gently at the base of her ear. “Calm down. Tell us what’s happened.”

A2 felt the tension drain from her body, her tensed muscles slackening, the fire inside her guttering. She took a deep breath, then another, then another one.

She tried to speak, but every time she started, her voice failed her; she could only open and close her mouth like a beached fish gasping for water.

“It was a demon,” Alucard finally said, relieving her of her burden. “A succubus disguised as her. Succubi are given the shapes of their victims’ loved ones to seduce them and lead them to their deaths. This one was given A2’s memories, and thus could replicate A4 down to the smallest detail she could recall.”

“Its disguise was perfect…” A2 whispered with a cracked voice. “There was nothing I knew about Four that it didn’t. Nothing.”

She pulled herself away from Anemone, stalking the chimera as it curled up on the floor, and planted her boot on its throat.

“Two… ‘ts… me…” it moaned.

“Did Olrox make you, too?” A2 snarled, pressing down on its throat. The chimera gurgled. “Did he make you to torture me? Does he think you can break me? I’ve used up all my tears already… there’s nothing left in here but hatred.”

“Twooo…” it gurgled, wheezing. “P—pleeeeeeaaaaasssse…”

Jackass grabbed her. “Wait, A2. I’ve got an idea. You said that the… suck-demon or whatever knew everything you knew about A4, right?”

A2 shrugged Jackass’ hand away. “Shut up.” She pressed down harder on the chimera’s throat, reducing its pleas to a wordless hiss. She had to stop it—its weak, hideous, evil voice trying to tug on heartstrings she couldn’t allow it to reach. “Shut up…”

“What if this thing… knows something you don’t know about her?”
Anemone shot her a stern yet befuddled glare, wrinkling her nose. “Jackass, what are you suggesting?”

“I’m saying we’ve seen vampires, werewolves, demons… why not ghosts?” There was a wry gleam in Jackass’ eyes. “Maybe A4’s ghost is possessing that thing? Alucard, what do you think?”

“Oh, come on!” A2 stomped on the chimera’s neck and felt its throat squish under her boot, rewarded by the sickly wet crunch of its metal vertebrae crumpling. “It’s a monster and a fake like the last one! Don’t you dare fucking string me along like this, Jackass, don’t even try!”

“But what if it’s really her?” Anemone asked, crossing her arms.

“It’s possible,” Alucard said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve seen a specter with A4’s shape hewing close to you on occasion, A2. I cannot rule out the possibility that it has found a way to enter and control your old body. Whether or not the specter means ill… I cannot say just yet. But it was following you long before you encountered Olrox.”

A2 looked down at the chimera’s mangled body and felt even sicker than before. The idea that this hunk of dead metal that had somehow willed itself to life could really be her—No, it was ridiculous, it was absurd, she couldn’t make herself believe it for even just a second! She couldn’t let herself believe it!

“If there is a chance it could be your friend,” Pascal spoke up, “then we cannot destroy this creature. I want no more wanton destruction here.”

“How are you going to prove it?” A2 asked. “I told you, that thing knew everything I knew about A4, and I knew her best!” She planted her thumb on her chest. “No one else knew me like she did! No one else knew her like I did! Everyone else who comes close is dead, Anemone! And if you try to push this on me, I’ll—”

“Not everyone else,” Anemone said.

A2 suddenly felt as though she’d deflated. “What…?”

“Not everyone else,” Anemone repeated. “I knew her, too, A2.”

A2’s hands fell limply to her sides.

Of course.

“If there was something I knew about her that you didn’t,” Anemone pondered, “a moment we shared that you weren’t privy to… if this chimera knows about it, then…” She thought for a long while, then nodded. “I’ve got it.”

A2 lifted her foot. The chimera’s head lolled limply to the side. She stepped back, drawing away, but kept her eye on the creature’s lifeless body and steeled herself to draw her sword at the first sign of trouble.

Suppressing a shiver, Anemone approached the chimera and knelt beside it. “A4… if that’s who you are… Tell me, do you remember…”

She leaned in closer and whispered into its ear. A2 tightened her grip on her sword, tension flooding back into her body, her fur standing on end.

The chimera whispered something back.
Anemone shot to her feet and stiffened. She took a hasty, stumbling step backward, her eyes wide, her jaw slack, her mouth hanging open. “It’s her…”

It couldn’t be. A2 looked down at the chimera’s body, at the damage she’d inflicted, at the exposed machinery and circuitry, the flaps of tattered skin, the dented and crumpled metal molded into a pathetic mockery of an android. That hideous, twisted, mangled thing couldn’t be A4. If it was, then…

“Bullshit!”

“It’s her. It has to be. It’s A4…”

“It’s a trick!” A2 snarled, drawing her sword in a flash of silver. “You disgusting monster!”

“A2, no!” Anemone threw herself between the chimera and A2 and grabbed her by the wrists as she lifted her sword above her head. Despite being two hundred years less advanced than A2’s chassis, her grip was still firm, as steely as the glare in her teary eyes. “You can’t. If there’s even a one percent chance it’s the real her, then…”

A2 felt everything inside her twist inward, her body rebelling against itself as she looked past Anemone’s shoulder at the chimera—at…

No. It wasn’t her. It couldn’t possibly be her—A2 wouldn’t have, couldn’t have…

Sickened beyond words and with the eyes of everybody else in the room, Anemone especially, burning through her skin, she turned tail and ran, letting the door slam shut behind her.

Pascal’s village, a place of peace come hell or high water, had nothing that could be called a ‘war room’ of any sorts; Pascal, however, did have a study which would do the job just fine in a pinch.

There, at Pascal’s desk, Alucard, Anemone, 2B, and 9S pored over a holographic map of the village while Pascal loomed over their shoulders. Eve, the humanoid machine (it felt weird for Alucard to think in those terms with 2B and 9S standing right beside him—the distinction between android and machine felt so stupidly arbitrary), sat in the corner, glowering at the androids. Alucard, for one, was thankful that Eve seemed no longer interested in killing him.

“So, the whole thing about vampires only being let into a dwelling when they’re invited,” 9S asked him, “is that true?”

Alucard nodded. “Yes, that’s true. You have to offer an invitation. Like Jehova’s Witnesses.”

2B cocked her head. “Are these another faction of monsters we have to worry about?”

“Pardon me. That was how I was told to describe it to twentieth-century humans. I’m not so sure what it means, either.”

“So vampires need permission to enter your house…” 9S tapped on the map, his finger phasing through the trunk of the enormous tree that sprouted in the center of the village. “Pascal, what if we built a wall around the village with doors at the entry points? We can make the whole village one ‘dwelling’ and just not let the vampires in.”

Pascal didn’t have a chin he could thoughtfully stroke or a mouth that could curl into a frown, but Alucard could tell from the way he carried himself that he didn’t find it pleasant to consider that idea. The way the robot’s body hummed with distress reminded him of a walking, talking boiler
room. “I do despise the thought of building a wall,” he said. “It goes against so much of what we stand for…”

“It could help,” Alucard admitted, “but not as much as you might think.”

“At least we can tell the villagers to shut themselves up in their homes,” Anemone offered.

“That would work,” Alucard said, “if we only had vampires to worry about. Dracula commands legions of thralls for this very reason. Reanimated skeletons, demons, ghouls, zombies, werewolves, banshees—these have no qualms about entering one’s home uninvited.”

“Will the lights repel them?” Pascal asked, the hope that he would hear a heartening answer ringing in his soft voice.

“The weaker ones,” Alucard said, “but to stronger monsters, they may as well be candlelight. The stronger a creature of darkness is, the more its body knows how to discern true sunlight from a tanning bed.”

9S tapped one finger anxiously on the map, cupping his other hand around his mouth. His bright blue eyes took in every detail of the village. “What about garlic, holy water, salt, big sacks of tiny parts for them to count…”

“First off, if you know where to find any wild garlic around here, please let me know,” Alucard said, his stomach growling at the thought of a food with actual seasoning. “Ditto for salt. As for holy water, bring me a priest who didn’t die ten thousand years ago and I shall bring you some holy water.”

“Surely there must be some religious people on the lunar colony,” Anemone suggested.

“Yeah,” 9S chimed in. “We could contact the council and explain to them that we need a priest down here…”

Alucard’s heart sank. Of course, they didn’t know. “No,” he muttered, forcing the word around the lump in his throat. “That is to say, there would be no time to shuttle a priest down from the moon before the first wave arrives.”

“The… first wave?” Pascal asked, nervous.

“He will attack with his monsters first. A diverse army with very few weaknesses in common. They swarm the barricades, overthrow the defenses…” Alucard’s fingers flowed across the map of the village, tracing its bridges and pathways. “Drag the people from their homes, burn as much of the village to the ground as possible, and prepare for the vampires’ arrival. Next comes Dracula’s lieutenants. They seize on the defenseless and homeless people. Some they simply drain for sustenance, others they make into subservient vampires. No survivors.”

Unless, that is, a certain dhampyr and a certain wielder of a certain whip were able to mount a sufficient defense… still, though, there would be casualties.

“I suppose we would have to evacuate,” Anemone said. “Pascal, where could you send everyone where they’d be safe…”

“That would be your best chance for survival,” Alucard said, “but the forest is already beset with dark creatures. Evacuating would be dangerous as well.”

“On top of that,” Pascal said, “I’m afraid there are precious few places to evacuate to. The
machines in the forest kingdom are quite hostile. The amusement park or the abandoned factory would be our best options, but I’ve heard frightening stories from the park as of late…”

“And to reach the factory, you’d need to pass through the city ruins,” 2B pointed out.

“I’ll lead the evacuation,” Eve piped up from the back of the room, standing up from his chair and unfolding his arms from over his chest. “I have control over half of the local machine forces. I could bring out an army to guard the village, too.”

9S shot him a dirty look. “And overrun the village with hostile machines? Thanks, I feel safer already.”

Oh, god almighty, he sounded so much like Soma there that it almost hurt.

Eve made a face right back at him. “I don’t care if you feel safer,” he pouted.

“Now, now,” Pascal said, shifting to put himself directly between 9S and Eve, “there is no need to bicker. Eve, I am humbled you would go to such lengths to protect this place; 9S, perhaps you and 2B could speak with your leader about posting some of your troops here as well.”

“Machines and androids working together,” 2B muttered. “Can’t say I can imagine that going well.”

“You might be surprised what you can imagine,” Alucard told the androids, “when your survival depends on it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” 9S stood up. “2B, let’s talk to the commander about getting some units over here.”

Eve still had a sour, petulant expression on his face. “Fine. I’ll gather my own army.”

9S rolled his eyes. “This’ll go over like a lead balloon,” he said under his breath.

“My machines can kill more vampires than your androids,” Eve shot back; crossing his arms. “You’ll see! I won’t let anyone in this village get hurt.”

“Yeah, we’ll see, I guess,” 9S said as he and 2B walked out of Pascal’s study.

With one last huff, Eve vanished in a cloud of golden light.

“I can contact the camp and request reinforcements from them, as well,” Anemone said. “They may take a while to get here, but it’ll be better than nothing.”

“Of course.” Anemone nodded and headed for the door. “I understand. I’ll check up on A4 and Jackass and let them know what’s going on.”

“I will join you shortly,” Alucard promised, eager himself to investigate the matter of A4’s resurrection. He wasn’t certain that it was really A4 in there and not another trick, but either way, he was intrigued.

When there was no one else in the room save for Alucard and Pascal, the machine let out an aggrieved sigh.

Alucard had been about to head after 2B and 9S—he had quite a bone to pick with Commander
White, after all—but Pascal’s forlorn attitude bade him remain. “Is something wrong, sir?” he asked.

Pascal shook his head. “Oh, no, Alucard, everything is… I merely must hope that the casualties are small and the damage minimal.”

“Something else is bothering you.”

“Well, I suppose…” Pascal slid a metal hand under the holographic map of his village, as though he were cradling it in the palm of his hand. “It does wound my pride, I will admit, to beg for soldiers to come here and protect my people.”

“You’re worried that it’s a tacit abandonment of your pacifist ideas.”

Pascal nodded, dredging his hand through the hologram, causing the trees and simple wooden huts to flicker and ripple like the surface of a pond. “I and my villagers can commit ourselves to peace all we want, but what does it matter when our survival depends on others committing acts of violence on our behalf?” His green optical sensors fixed on Alucard. “I understand that you lived among humans during ancient times. I would like to ask you… is there any solution to this conundrum that cannot be found in my books?”

Alucard scanned Pascal’s study, noticed how overflowing his bookshelves were—how wonderful, to see such ancient relics of humanity so painstakingly preserved!—and decided that he most likely did not have anything to say that hadn’t been said by one of those hundreds of authors.

“I must warn you, I was not much of a philosopher,” Alucard admitted. “But I do know history. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there were many movements which sought peaceful means to liberate people from oppression and just as many which took to more violent means alongside them. Ultimately, both tactics were necessary in their own way to liberate their people; neither would have been sufficient on its own.”

“I see,” Pascal mumbled, evidently not convinced at all.

“To refuse to defend yourself will spell your doom. If you still cannot stomach the thought of harming even the most evil creatures, though, then accept without shame that your survival rests in the hands of those who can.” Alucard gave the machine a wry, sardonic smile. “Whether or not you must ask warriors such as us for help, I respect your ideals all the same. After all,” he added, “when wars end, the world needs pacifists like you to keep the peace; otherwise, we will all simply find new people to fight.”

“Well, that was a very roundabout path you took,” Pascal said, wringing his hands, “but thank you. Perhaps you are more of a philosopher than you credit yourself.”

“You flatter me, Pascal,” Alucard said. “Take care of yourself. I shall see to it that at the very least, your library will be intact when the danger has passed and you and your villagers return.”

He stepped outside and gazed into the cold, dark forest beyond the village’s bright, warm glow. There was no telling how soon Dracula’s forces would strike this place; but the battle would surely begin by the time the moon rose over the horizon of the perpetual night sky.

Pascal’s village was a place of peace come hell or high water. And hell was coming.

9S almost forgot to put his visor back on until 2B nudged him in the side at the last moment before Commander White picked up their transmission. He’d gotten so used to not wearing it around
Alucard, even though he’d felt almost naked without it at first, that he simply hadn’t noticed that he wasn’t wearing it.

Once he’d wrapped the black cloth around his eyes, the holographic panel his visor projected into 3D space in front of him appeared, the loading icon on its face giving way at that very moment to the prim, composed face of the commander.

Except it wasn’t quite so prim and composed. 9S was quick to pick up that Commander White seemed unusually haggard. A few wisps of her asymmetric tresses of platinum blonde hair were askew.

That was it, but it said a lot on its own.

“2B, 9S, report,” White said with her typical authoritative scowl, eyeing 9S as though she’d noticed how hastily he’d had to make himself presentable.

2B was quick to fill White in on the situation.

“So you have not yet terminated A2?” White asked her.

“Hold on,” 9S interjected before he could stop himself. “Don’t we have more important things to —”

White glared at him.

“I-I mean,” he sputtered, “there’s a vampire army about to attack the village... doesn’t that take precedence?”

“I expect you not to interrupt your commanding officer, 9S,” White coldly replied before turning her attention back to 2B. “Why has A2 not been terminated?”

“You permitted me to use nonlethal force against Alucard should he interfere, Commander,” 2B answered. “I was unable to terminate A2 without taking his life as well. I was then incapacitated and have not had an opportunity to terminate the fugitive since then.”

9S stifled a gasp. Commander White had permitted 2B to attack Alucard like that? But didn’t she believe he was a human? How could she be so callous toward a human being? Was it that important to kill A2?

“I see,” White said. “Now, moving onto the matter at hand... You said that Eve is gathering an army to defend Pascal’s village, correct?”

9S crossed his arms. “I don’t trust him, ma’am.”

White nodded. “Nor should you. I will direct an appropriate number of our forces to converge on the village. Do you have any idea when the vampire army will attack?”

9S looked up at the scraps of black sky poking through the gaps in the leafy canopy encroaching on the village. “Moonrise, I’d suspect. Most dark creatures are stronger in the moonlight, or so Alucard says.”

That last phrase came out as a bit more of a dig at White’s orders to 2B than he’d expected; he hoped she hadn’t picked up on the note of sharpness that had entered his voice. Sure, White was his commanding officer, but Alucard was practically a demigod, and he was a lot nicer than she was.
“That gives us some time,” White said, seemingly ignoring his barb (much to his relief). “A platoon of combat and support units will arrive by air long before then.”

“Thank you, Commander,” 2B said.

“Are you speaking to Commander White?” Alucard interjected, appearing between 9S and 2B so suddenly that 9S could have leaped a full meter into the air in shock.

9S gestured to the holographic panel, then remembered that without a visor, Alucard could neither see nor hear it.

“Put her on speaker. I have words for her.”

“Um… what?”

“Let me speak to her. If I may see her, and her me, the better.”

“9S, who are you talking to?” White asked. “Is someone else there?”

“Um…” 9S awkwardly cleared his throat. “Um, y-yes, ma’am. Alucard wants to talk to you.”

He might have been imagining it, but he could have sworn he’d seen a flash of frustration flicker across the Commander’s face. “Very well.”

The holographic panel flickered and then reappeared, now projected directly into the air by Pod 153.

“Alucard,” White spoke up tersely, focusing her gaze on him. “What do—”

“How dare you!”

Alucard’s voice rang out across the village; the leaves on the trees shook as though his outburst had disturbed them. Shocked, 9S staggered backward.

As impossible as it was, it seemed that Alucard had grown another meter taller; he loomed over the holographic image of Commander White, his black coat rippling, shadows seeming to slither around him and gather up into a roiling, living cloak of darkness that engulfed him. His amber eyes had taken a frightful scarlet cast, his skin as pale and flawless as alabaster, his mouth and brow fixed in a contemptuous snarl, glossy tendrils of his pale hair billowing around him as though untethered from gravity; he had become a truly godlike figure, a colossus as beautiful as he was terrifying.

“How dare you, Commander White,” he spoke, his voice no louder than usual but seeming to carry to the ends of the Earth, an impossibly-low bass rumble seeping through every word. “I made it clear to you that A2 was under my protection. Let me make things clearer, since you seem so uninterested in understanding—her life is entwined with my own, and she shall not die so long as I draw breath. Understand this, Commander—I have been polite with you thus far. But should you continue to cross me, mark my words, you will find that the universe can be a very cold, dark, lonely, and small place when you choose to make yourself my enemy.”

9S stared, slack-jawed, as Alucard diminished and returned to his normal level of gravitas, the shadows he had summoned creeping back into the forest. Though she tried not to show it, even 2B
seemed shocked.

“Are you done?” Commander White asked, seemingly unperturbed, though she seemed to be blinking more than usual.

“Yes,” Alucard growled sternly.

“Very well. 2B, 9S, R&D has completed its work on anti-vampire weaponry. Log into the Bunker’s server and download the digitized equipment immediately. This concludes our contact. Glory to Mankind!”

“Glory to Mankind,” 9S and 2B both repeated, saluting in unison.

White severed the connection and her holographic avatar immediately disappeared, as though she couldn’t wait to be rid of Alucard. 9S could tell that Alucard felt the same way.

“What was that?” 9S asked, still wary and feeling as though he shouldn’t stand too close to Alucard.

“A gift,” Alucard said, “from my father. He was known to be an extraordinarily persuasive orator.”

“What else did you inherit from him?” 2B spoke up, frosty as usual but with a sharper and terser tone of her voice than usual.

“His persistence,” Alucard replied, equally tersely.

“So,” 9S hastily interjected, feeling as though he should try to keep 2B and Alucard from speaking to each other, “2B, why don’t we find somewhere with a good signal and download those weapons the Commander was talking about?”

2B nodded. “Yes. Our connection will likely be strongest above the canopy.” She patted Pod 042 on its hull and leaped into the trees, leaves rustling as she touched down on one of the branches overhead.

“Er… ‘download weapons?’” Alucard asked 9S, cocking his head curiously. “Pray tell, how does one download a sword?”

“So, uh… it’s like how we digitize our weapons to store them.” 9S demonstrated by holding out his hand and summoning his sword, the Cruel Oath, to it in a flurry of golden sparks. “The data is stored in our memory, then manifested and dismissed on command. Obviously, if we can digitize physical objects, we can transmit them via radio waves. Of course, even with thin provisioning and metadata keeping the file size down so we don’t have to transcribe every single molecule, transmission of even a single knife takes a lot of bandwidth, so it’s not something we can do unless the environmental conditions are favorable…”

He could tell from the way Alucard’s pale eyebrows knitted together that the ten-thousand-year-old half-vampire’s fifteenth-century mind was struggling to keep up.

Alucard looked up in the general direction of where 2B had gone. “So she has reduced the Vampire Killer to mere code,” he muttered with the faintest trace of disgust. “Well, so long as it still works, I suppose I cannot be too offended…”

“Proposal: Unit 9S should download upgraded weaponry immediately,” Pod 153 chimed in, impassively chastising 9S.
“If you may convert weapons into data as you please,” Alucard asked, his tone suddenly sharpening—not with anger, but with a sense of alertness that suggested he actually had little trouble wrapping his head around 9S’s jargon—“then what is to stop you from duplicating any weapon in your possession ad infinitum?”

9S was so taken aback by the astuteness of Alucard’s observation that he had to take some time to gather his thoughts together. “Believe me, I’ve tried. But our software injects a copy-protect script into everything we digitize. There’s no way to strip it out or block the script’s execution.”

“Hmm. An odd limitation. Seems like it could come in handy, being able to conjure an armory at will.”

“Guess they don’t want us going mad with power,” he said.

“Proposal: Unit 9S should download upgraded weaponry immediately,” Pod 153 repeated.

“Yeah, yeah.” 9S dismissed the sword and headed for higher ground—the top of the tree in the center of the village ought to be high enough.

“Mind if I come with you?” Alucard asked, trailing behind him. “I wish to see what weaponry your R&D team has devised. I’m curious as to whether it will be the least bit effective.”

“Uh… sure, I guess.”

9S took off with Alucard in tow, soon passing through the leafy canopy and breaching the surface of the verdant ocean. Light bled through the trees from below, casting a soft and warm underglow; above, the sky was dark and glimmering with stars.

“Commencing weapons data download,” Pod 153 announced, an antenna rising from its black hull. “Projected time to completion: one thousand, seven hundred and thirty-eight seconds.”

“Thirty minutes, huh?” 9S asked, his grip on the bough he’d perched upon tightening. “Alucard, maybe you could turn into a bat and fly around… you know, to scout out the area, see how far away Dracula’s forces are. If waiting’s too boring, that is.”

Alucard chuckled as he rested against a lower branch. “Not a bad idea. You’re smarter than Soma was, I’ll give you that.” He let out a sigh, his tone taking a turn for the melancholy. “No, I suppose that’s not fair. He was quite smart himself… though he had a mind like a freight train. Powerful, but it could only go in one direction.”

9S wasn’t sure how to respond to that. He wondered what kind of a relationship Alucard had had with this ‘Soma’ guy. And why did he look so much like him, anyway? Had Soma been a template for Scanner models or something? He couldn’t figure out a way to put any of his questions into words without embarrassing himself, though.

“So why are you so hell-bent on protecting A2, anyway?” he asked instead. “She’s a deserter, you know. We’re supposed to kill deserters.”

“I hate to see precious life destroyed so callously,” Alucard replied.

“It’s fine, really. I mean, it’s not like any of us want to die, but if we have to, then we have to.” 9S shrugged. “A2 left YoRHa. It’d be dangerous to let the machines get their hands on YoRHa tech, so she has to be gotten rid of. Those are the rules.”

“I don’t care much for your rules,” Alucard muttered, which was obvious.
“I mean, at the end of the day, we’re tools. If we have to be thrown away, then I guess… well, I don’t feel like I’d put up much of a fight. It is what it is.”

“What if it was 2B?”

9S was dumbstruck. “I… I mean…”

He tried to imagine a world without 2B by his side. Without her to watch out for him and keep him on task. Without her somehow-validating non-reactions to every little thing he did to try and coax a smile out of her. Despite her frosty demeanor, the world was somehow warmer because she was in it. Less lonely, certainly—if not for her, 9S would work alone, just like every other Scanner, and be all the worse for it.

It wasn’t something he wanted to think about.

“I mean, she’d never desert. That’s—She’d never do that.” It was true: 2B was loyal to YoRHa to the ends of the Earth. She’d never go the way A2 had. There was no point trying to imagine it, because it was impossible.

“She and A2 are built on the same template.”

“So what?” 9S retorted, incensed. “She’s nothing like A2! 2B would never do the things A2 did; she’s better than that! She’s brave and strong… and loyal…”

“But imagine she did. Or imagine that any other little thing happened that might warrant her termination. Would you feel so callous about her prospects as you do regarding A2’s?”

9S was further enraged to hear Alucard so casually speculate about this absurd hypothetical. The idea that 2B would be gone, and gone forever—that the space she filled in the world, at his side, would be empty—“No, of course n—!”

He stopped himself mid-outburst.

“I mean,” he said, carefully modulating his feelings back to the baseline expected of all YoRHa soldiers, “if there was a valid reason for it, I guess it would be okay.”

“You do not truly believe that, do you?”

9S blinked. He supposed he didn’t. The words had just come out so naturally that it was like they’d been programmed into him, but the more he thought about them, the less sense they made. “I… I guess not.”

“You androids were made by humans,” Alucard said, “but you are all God’s children all the same. No life He creates is disposable, no matter what your commander says. Your lives must all have value—somehow.”

That made sense, 9S supposed, from Alucard’s perspective at least. A2 was lucky to have him on her side.

Alucard was a man who seemed to have no room for error in his beliefs and morals, so 9S decided not to press the issue with him anymore. If he insisted that A2 would live despite her transgressions, then she’d live. There wasn’t anything 9S could do about that, or anyone else, for that matter.

“I will take off and observe the area from above,” Alucard announced. “Take care, 9S.”
The trees rustled and a large black bat with one mechanical wing took to the sky, briefly blotting out the stars as it spread its wings and glided over the forest. 9S wondered where all of Alucard’s clothes and weapons went when he transformed. Maybe it was some sort of magical equivalent to the digital storage spaces YoRHa units had at their disposal.

Bored, 9S waited for the download to complete, his pod occasionally breaking the silence to announce the estimated time to completion. Every so often, he looked down through the gaps in the canopy to view the village from above. Machines were milling around on the wooden walkways, easy to distinguish from the villagers by their lack of adornments; it looked as though Eve’s forces were entering the village and beginning to escort its denizens out.

There was something odd about this whole thing, but 9S couldn’t put his finger on what.

Alucard returned sooner than 9S had expected—or maybe he’d just passed the time better than he’d expected. “Is it ready?” he asked upon returning to human form.

“Projected time to completion: fifty-three seconds,” Pod 153 announced.

9S passed the next minute with agonizing anxiety, restlessly tapping his foot against the bough. “So, find anything out there?” he asked Alucard.

Alucard shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Well, that’s good, right?” 9S asked. He had the strangest feeling, though, that Alucard’s answer would be ‘no.’

“I wish I could say it was. Something doesn’t feel right.”

9S nodded. “I feel that, too.”

“Download complete,” Pod 153 announced, chiming in a way that was almost happy. “Tactical support pod normal weaponry has been augmented with silver-tipped bullets.”

9S reached into his inventory and conjured the new sword he’d been given. It was a fairly basic katana—he hadn’t expected much more than that—but a surprisingly-elegant network of silver etching ran across the flat of the blade and a silver trim coated its sharp edge. The silver etching caught the light, sparkling on the darker back side of the blade.

“It is better than nothing,” Alucard pronounced, unimpressed.

“Gee, that makes me feel better,” 9S shot back as he dropped below the canopy and navigated the branches back down to the highest tier of the village. Machines and androids milled around beneath them, filtering through its haphazard network of bridges and platforms down to the ground.

9S shivered, wondering when to expect Eve’s little army to turn on him. Pascal’s villagers he’d learned to trust. Obviously, they weren’t faking self-awareness, at least as much as he wasn’t. He’d come around to seeing them as people of a sort, and the fact that they did silly things like paint clothes onto their bodies and draw faces on their heads helped. But the machines still slaved to the network weren’t people. They were unthinking, unfeeling tendrils of a hive mind. They were dangerous.

A few androids in blends of once-white robes and tattered fatigues passed through the crowd. Resistance androids—most notably, Laurel’s men, identifiable by the flowing layers of white robes and cloaks they wore. Had Anemone already called for reinforcements, and had they managed to arrive so quickly despite all being on foot? Even the squadron of YoRHa units White had promised
hadn’t arrived yet.

“By the way,” Alucard asked him, “I couldn’t help but notice—you digitize your belongings for easy storage, correct? So what is the use of that satchel on your back?”

“Huh? You mean this?” 9S undid the clasp on the buckle slung across his chest and pulled off the satchel. “It’s for things that can’t be digitized. Certain materials—complex or unstable molecular arrangements, exceptionally dense, mildly radioactive, living…” He reached inside to find something he could use to demonstrate and found his fingers closing around something that hadn’t been in there the last time he’d checked.

He pulled it out. It was a smoothly-polished amethyst stone set in silver, a silver chain trailing from it like a long tail.

Where, he wondered, had he picked this up? He could swear he’d never seen it before in his life—

The next thing he knew, Alucard had clasped his hands on his shoulders. “Where did you find that?” he hissed. There was a wild, almost mad look in his eyes.

“Um… I, uh…”

Alucard pinned him to the trunk of the tree, his fingers digging into his shoulders. The prosthetic arm had a much firmer—and more painful—grip on him. “Where did you find it?” he asked again, his voice low and urgent. “Did somebody give it to you?”

“I—I don’t know,” 9S insisted, worried that any second now Alucard might pull out that intimidation trick he’d used on White. He squirmed uncomfortably under the dhampyr’s grip. “I… I must’ve picked it up a long time ago; I don’t remember finding it…”

Alucard’s grip loosened; he seemed to come to his senses. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, pulling away and averting his gaze. “It is just… that thing looks so familiar.”

“You’ve seen it before?”

“Or something like it.” He held out his left hand, his palm face-up. “May I see it?”

Something rang in 9S’s mind, a vague sense that no one, not even Alucard, was supposed to see or know about this thing beside him. But he gave the necklace to Alucard anyway.

Alucard winced and recoiled as though he’d been shocked, his fingers snapping shut around the jewel to form a closed fist. His fingers then slowly uncurled, allowing the gemstone to rest undisturbed on his palm.

“What is it?” 9S asked.

Alucard looked away again, gazing into the distance at nothing in particular. “It is… I believe it is a holy talisman. You shouldn’t keep it in that satchel, 9S. It belongs around your neck.”

“Um… okay.” 9S took the talisman from him, hooked his thumbs in the chain and spread it wide, and lowered the necklace over his head, letting the cool chain settle on his neck and the surprisingly-warm gemstone settle heavily on his chest. He tucked it out of sight under his coat.

“Like this?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” Alucard said, without actually looking at him. “Whatever you do, no matter what happens, do not take it off.”
“Why? Is it some sort of protective thing?”

Alucard was silent for a second or two. “…Yes,” he said.

“Thanks,” 9S said, once again feeling the weight of the talisman, the feeling of the cold silver and oddly-warm stone resting against his bare skin. He had the sneaking suspicion from the way Alucard was pointedly avoiding eye contact with him that this piece of jewelry had belonged to Soma, but knew better than to say anything.

Alucard sniffed the air, his face hardening, his eyes narrowing. Every part of him suddenly tensed. “A foul stench descends upon this place,” he muttered darkly. “We must find 2B. I fear our battle may begin sooner than we thought.”

A2 ran through the forest. She didn’t know where she was going. She didn’t care. As long as it was away.

Branches clutched at her shoulders and made snarls in her hair, pulling her painfully backward, as though the forest itself was hell bent on dragging her back to Pascal’s village to face her sins. Roots caught her feet, stubbing her toes and forcing her to stumble; stray rocks and wooden detritus leaped out at her from within the shadows. From all directions, the entire forest was pushing her, pulling her—and no matter how far she ran in spite of it, it didn’t make her feel any better.

She couldn’t bear to face it. The thought, with A4’s loss so fresh in her mind, that she could have had her back—it was possible, even if only barely—but instead, she’d been so venomous and hateful in what she’d said, in what she’d done…

A stray root hooked onto her boot and sent her careening forward, dashing her against the cracked and crumbling flagstones of an ancient bridge spanning the ravine before her.

She’d already made it this far to the ruins of the ancient castle buried in these woods. Though she felt as though she’d been running for an eternity, the landscape also seemed to have flown by in the blink of an eye.

Her body aching, she pulled herself up to her hands and knees, panting as her lungs and black box burned. Her fingers clutched at the rocky fragments that had broken her fall and curled inward, burrowing into the crevices between the stones, her claws scoring the rock.

She hadn’t deserved A4. She hadn’t deserved Four or Sixteen or Twenty-One or anyone else who’d died three years ago when she alone had lived. She didn’t deserve Anemone. All she had earned in this wretched life was to die painfully and slowly.

Every muddled thought swirling through her mind hurt like barbed wire wrapped around the inside of her skull. A2 decided, as she knelt on the bridge with such a horrible ache running through her chassis that she felt it might tear her apart, that she should have remained at the village and waited for 2B to put her out of her misery.

Letting out a long-stifled sob, she lifted her tear-streaked face to the black sky and wished for something to come down from the heavens and kill her right now.

As if to answer her prayers, a gunshot rang out, its throaty roar splitting the quiet air. And as much as A2 had wished just a split second ago that something would end her life, her instincts kicked in (in spite of herself) and she leaped backward.

The path of the bullet traced a thin, bright gash through the air as it impacted the stone right
underneath where A2 had been kneeling. The light refracted, splitting apart; the next thing A2 knew, her shoulder was screaming in pain.

She landed at her feet, favoring her shoulder. An acidic burn throbbed deep under her skin where the bullet had penetrated her chassis. Her ears perked up and she sniffed the air, nostrils flaring, her senses tuned into overdrive.

Another three shots rang out in rapid succession, all tracing their own paths through the air with thin, threadlike beams of light. A2 nimbly sidestepped them, every movement she made on nothing but autopilot and instinct. Each bullet hit the ground behind her and veered off in their own direction; she could only see their new trajectories through the corner of her eye. One shot off into empty air, vanishing into the darkness over the ravine; one flew into the forest; the third honed in on her.

She drew her sword and cut it out of the air. The bullet’s fragments ricocheted off her blade, hit the stone columns lining the far side of the bridge, and zoomed over her head—one passing close enough to put a charred hole in the tip of her ear, its high-pitched whistle leaving a keening ringing in her ear.

A figure shrouded in shadows stood at the other end of the bridge, a long musket in one hand and a smoking revolver in the other. “You are Olrox’s stray beast, are you not?” she called out, her voice low and husky.

“What do you care?” A2 spat. “Who are you? One of his minions?”

The gunslinger laughed. “Heaven forbid! I serve no man save for those who approach me with the proper tribute. However, he did ask that, were I to run into you, I would deliver you to him.”

Before the last word had left her mouth, the gunslinger squeezed off two more shots. With a flash of her sword, A2 deflected them all. Each bullet ricocheted into the sky. Without missing a beat, the gunslinger dropped onto one knee, hefted her rifle, took aim, and fired upward in a single fluid motion, knocking the last of the skyward bullets awry and setting it on a new course.

A2 lunged at the gunslinger, her feet pounding against the bridge’s ancient stonework with enough force to leave cracks—only for the redirected bullet to bury itself in her unprotected back, embedding itself in her chassis. Under the haze of pain, her body went as limp as a ragdoll.

She hit the ground, jaw clenched in pain as the gunshot wound sent a jolt of burning anguish up and down her spine, and rolled back onto her feet, closing the distance between herself and the gunslinger as soon as the feeling returned to her limbs. The gunslinger raised her rifle over her chest and blocked the strike of A2’s sword; in the brief flash of sparks, A2 saw that the ancient rifle had not only a bayonet jutting out from the underside of its barrel, but a sharp blade running along the top.

The gunslinger knocked A2’s blade aside and thrust forward with her bayonet; A2 dodged the strike and grabbed the underside of the rifle, wrenching it out of her hands and throwing it aside. The gunslinger responded with a kick, her scaly, birdlike leg sweeping through the air. A2 felt talons rake the air just a hair’s-breadth from the tip of her nose.

Another shot rang out; the rifle that had been thrown out of the gunslinger’s hands abruptly reversed course and flew back into her waiting hands. Sword and bayonet clashed again, blades throwing sparks into the air as they ground against each other, illuminating the two combatants for the briefest fractions of a second. The gunslinger dodged one swing of A2’s sword and blocked another with her rifle, but was knocked off her feet by a third strike, the force of the impact
throwing her flat on her back; a splash of dark blood spewed through the air.

Despite the wound, the gunslinger leaped to her feet as readily as any combat android, stabbing her bayonet into the ground to steady herself. With a flourish of her wrist, she flicked open the chamber of her revolver, tossed a handful of bullets into the air, and caught each of them in the barrel of the gun, slamming it shut with another artful flick of her wrist.

“You’re quite skilled,” she spat through gritted teeth, casually ruffling the billowing, bloodstained cravat that had gotten untucked from her sleek, dark suit with the same hand that held her pistol. “I humbly congratulate you on your swiftness and strength. By what name do you call yourself? A2?”

A2 readied her blade to strike a killing blow. Enough talk. Every word this demonic gunslinger spoke was as irritating as rivets being hammered into her skull. The sooner she took care of this weirdo, the sooner she could wallow in peace.

Her strike cut through empty air, though; the gunslinger ripped her rifle free and leaped backward and well out of reach, landing atop one of the crumbling stone pillars flanking either side of the far end of the bridge. The long and wicked talons on her feet burrowed into the stone column, allowing her to hang suspended on the column’s side, high in the air.

“As for myself, I am Leraje, mighty Great Marquis of Hell, with thirty legions of demons under my power,” the gunslinger announced, righting herself and standing atop the column so that she could take a deep and formal bow. As though summoned by her words, a cold wind whistled across the bridge, carrying with it a scent that was smoky, yet sweet as honey. “I cause all great battles and disputes… and putrefy wounds which are made by arrows and bullets.”

A2 gasped and fell to her knees as the fire burning in her bullet wounds flared to double, triple the intensity. It was enough to knock the wind out of her and reduce her limbs to jelly. She clutched at her shoulder and felt the skin around the hole grow cold and hard and begin to crack. “I’d pay money for you to shut up,” she growled, hissing her words through gritted teeth.

Leraje ignored her. “Your blood is becoming toxic as we speak. It shall take an hour for the poison to spread through your entire body and render you immobile,” she said, her voice carrying across the length of the bridge. “If you can defeat me before then, though… Olrox need not know we ever crossed paths. You have my word as an honorable demon.”

The pain was great enough to make A2 retch, her stomach heaving. Static was already beginning to lace her vision. As anguishing as it felt to go on living, the prospect of being handed over to Olrox was orders of magnitude more hellish, though, so she forced herself back up to her feet, staggering but refusing to fall.

“Our arena shall be the forest,” Leraje called out, holstering her pistol and readying her rifle, “as befitting a battle between beast and hunter. Now, on my mark—run!”

Tensions were running high in the village as the evacuation proceeded. The machines Eve had summoned were struggling to deal with the colorful personalities of the village’s inhabitants, stymied by their strange behavior. While the village’s inhabitants irritated the regimented ranks of the networked machines, 2B could see Eve himself arguing with one particularly eccentric machine who called himself ‘Jean-Paul,’ insofar as one could argue with Jean-Paul.

“You have to come with us,” Eve insisted, his hands on his hips as he stared down the rogue machine.
“One does not have to do anything. All are free to do or not do as they please,” Jean-Paul retorted.

“You’re going to die if you don’t.”

“Then I have the freedom to do that, to.”

“What good will your freedom be if you’re dead?”

“In a sense, to choose with the knowledge that the consequence is death is the truest and boldest exercise of freedom once may pursue.”

Eve smacked his forehead.

2B watched the squabble play out with detached amusement. As she and 9S had learned soon after meeting him, one did not argue with Jean-Paul. One merely let him speak uninhibited and waited for him to talk himself into changing his mind. She could tell Eve that, but it was oddly fun to watch him grow more and more frustrated instead.

“It’s fun to watch them scurry about, isn’t it?”

A woman approached her from behind and stood at her side. A layered white robe, cloak, and cowl, like those Laurel’s troops wore, covered her from head to toe, its hem stained black and brown and worn to ragged tatters. Beneath the cowl, she had a thin, elfin face, with a black YoRHa visor covering her eyes; locks of long, glossy black hair flowed around her neck and draped themselves over her chest.

Her plump, cherry-red lips parted to reveal a sliver of teeth. “They look so scattered and immature, don’t they?” she asked 2B. She spoke as though she were telling a joke for an audience consisting solely of herself. “It’s hard to believe they were ever even a threat at all.”

“You’re from Anemone’s camp?” 2B eyed the intruder suspiciously. “I haven’t seen you before.”

“Oh, no, no, I’m a recent transfer from Laurel’s camp.”

“You got here quickly.”

The woman put a hand to her mouth and laughed. “Oh, we just happened to be in the neighborhood. Lucky for you. You’re… 2B, aren’t you? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Something about the woman’s voice set 2B’s teeth on edge. “Have you.”

“Oh, yes, yes, you’re quite famous. YoRHa’s finest, or so they say. Are you ready to give those nasty vampires what for…” The woman’s dimples deepened, her smile widened, and 2B caught a glimpse of fangs. “…Miss Belmont?”

2B summoned the Vampire Killer and grabbed a fistful of the mysterious woman’s collar, only for her hand to pass right through her body.

The woman vanished, leaving no trace she had ever been there in the first place.

“Pod,” 2B asked, shaken, “who was I talking to…?”

“Response: Unit 2B was not speaking to anyone,” Pod 042 said.

She clenched her jaw, her grip around the Vampire Killer tightening. “Pod, run a data integrity check on me.”
Pod 042 bobbed in the air. “Affirmative. Commencing scan.”

2B uneasily scanned the gaggle of machines and androids crowding the village’s network of bridges and walkways. She looked for anything that could clue her in that something was amiss, but the sight of machines and androids crossing paths with each other in such large numbers without either side turning to violence was so abnormal in itself that it overshadowed everything else.

“Hey, 2B!”

2B whirled around, primed to lash out with the whip, but was fortunate to stay her hand at the last minute—it was just the redheaded twins calling out to her.

Devola waded through the mass of machines with Popola trailing wearily behind her. “Good to see a familiar face at last. What’s going on here?”

2B explained the situation as briefly as she could.

Popola groggily rubbed her eyes. “We have to leave already?” she mumbled blearily. “But we just got here…”

Devola shot her a dark look, then wrapped her arm around her waist and reeled her in closer. “I kinda figured these machines weren’t here to kill us when they, uh, y’know… didn’t kill us,” she told 2B. “Weird, isn’t it?”

2B nodded. “Very.”

“Well, let’s not look a gift army in the mouth. C’mon, sis.”

“You two—I’ll escort you,” a man under Laurel’s colors told them as he and a near-identical cohort passed by. “This way.”

At the sight of the face under his white cowl, Devola immediately looked stricken; her sister didn’t look much better. “No, I—Popola and I are fine…”

“No, please, I insist,” he said, grabbing Devola roughly by the wrist.

Popola knocked his hand away, shooting him a venomous glare. “She said no,” she spat. “Get away from us.”

“Excuse me, sirs.” 2B put herself between the two sets of twins. It was clear to her there was some sort of bad blood between them. “I’ll be taking care of these two. I apologize for any confusion.”

The other man smiled pleasantly. “That won’t be necessary; my pal Hyacinth and I are good friends of these two.”

2B didn’t buy that for a second, considering that Popola and Devola both looked as though they would sooner rip him and his friend to shreds with their bare hands or run away from them as quickly as their legs could carry them than go with them. “Go on your way,” she told him. “I’m sure there are other evacuees for you to ‘help.’”

“You YoRHa sure are uptight,” Hyacinth muttered, tapping his friend on the shoulder. “C’mon, Hickory, let’s do as she says. Don’t wanna get on an elite combat unit’s bad side…”

The two of them snickered.
2B crossed her arms. “Your superior officers would be proud of you,” she told them, letting the barest hint of a sarcastic twinge seep into her voice.

Hickory and Hyacinth glowered at her. 2B studied their dirt- and grease-smeared faces. There was something wrong about them. Somehow, something very small in the back of her mind whispered that they didn’t look like…

“Scan complete,” Pod 042 announced, jarring 2B out of her thoughts. “No anomalies detected. Trace amounts of leftover metadata from an unauthorized Scanner intrusion detected.”

Before 2B could process that news, Hyacinth took advantage of the distraction to barrel past her and lunge for Devola, tackling her and throwing both her and himself off the edge of the bridge. “Gotcha!”

2B hurriedly unspooled and cracked the Vampire Killer, its leather length lashing through the air; the whip’s braided tip barely grazed the sole of Hyacinth’s boot as he plunged into the darkness.

“Devola!” Popola screamed as her sister let out a strangled cry and was swallowed up by the darkness lying beyond the village. Without a moment’s hesitation, and with Hickory’s fingers curling around the hem of her shawl, she leaped off the bridge in pursuit.

2B grabbed Hickory by the shoulder before he could rush off in pursuit and slammed him against the wooden slats of the bridge hard enough to splinter the wood. “What the hell are you doing?”

Hickory smiled, and at that instant, as her fingers dug into his cold shoulder, 2B realized what was wrong with his face.

Popola rushed through the forest, her weariness forgotten as adrenaline coursed through her circuits, her boots pounding against the uneven, rocky ground, her loosened shawl fluttering before an errant branch snagged it and ripped it away from her.

“Devola!” she screamed out, her sister’s name burning its way up her throat as a thousand fears flickered through her mind’s eye, given life in each of the shadows slithering around her.

Her outcry was answered by another, distant one. “Popola!”

Struggling to keep her pace and not stumble and dash her feet on the rocks, Popola unslung her pack from around her shoulder and rifled through it, past clothes and tools and supplies, until she found—

Her fingers brushed against the familiar rough, dusty cover of Charlotte Aulin’s grimoire.

She’d been looking for something she could use as a weapon—but this was better. She was so heartened she could cry. She would thank Devola with all of her heart. Devola could have put it in her own bag for safekeeping; she could have simply thrown it away—Popola knew she didn’t have any reverence for the old relic—but instead, by some miracle, she had chosen not only to keep it, but to keep it here.

Popola did her best to thumb through the book without slowing or stopping in her pursuit, clamping the book open with her hand on the outer spine and her thumb pressed against the inner spine to keep the pages open. She felt a rush of electric current flood her arm, as if she’d wired herself directly to a nuclear battery, banishing the last vestiges of her weariness as the rising sun banished the night. She looked down at the open pages.
There was nothing there.

In her excitement, she had forgotten that her second sight had stopped working.

She slowed to a halt as reality set in. The book was useless. She was useless. There was nothing she could do to save her sister. All because of how foolish she had been that morning. Rash, impulsive, ruinous. She had driven herself and Devola from their only home over a stupid outburst and blinded her second sight in the process, and now she would reap the whirlwind and stand by, unarmed and helpless, while her only sister and only friend suffered through whatever that brute wanted to do to her.

If he wanted revenge for what Popola had done to his friend, he had gotten it.

She lowered her head, eyes brimming with tears. The world felt so much colder now, and it would feel colder still—

She gasped, as out of the corner of her eye she saw faint black splotches, barely visible with only the dimmest remnants of the light from the village to light her way, blossom on the worn pages of the book and flower into intricate patterns—filling the pages margin-to-margin.

The words were back.

Her spirit soaring, she flung out her arm and projected a pattern of runes into the air as the book directed her.

“Ignis!”

On her command, a fireball barreled through the forest in front of her, igniting stubborn vines and branches in her path and casting flickering shadows across the gnarled and looming tree trunks flanking her. As the fireball exploded against a felled tree blocking her way up ahead, exploding it into charred chunks of wood and ash, Popola caught a glimpse of Hyacinth’s boot heel vanishing into the darkness up ahead.

“Dev! I’m coming for you!” she shouted out, bolting in his direction and gingerly dodging errant bits of flaming debris as she flipped through the book for another spell to use. It was there. It was all there—every spell she had learned thus far!

At last, she came to a clearing in the woods where Hyacinth had pinned Devola to the ground, his hands squeezing her arms, his knee digging into her stomach, hunched over her like an animal ready to rip into a fresh kill.

“Get away from my sister, you bastard!”

Hyacinth lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder at the sound of Popola’s voice, a hungry look in his eyes.

“Va Ischa!”

That look vanished, as did the rest of his face, as a spearhead carved from solid ice tore his head off his shoulders.

Popola rushed to Devola, tore the headless corpse off of her and threw it away, and knelt at her side, setting the book down on the ground. “Dev! Are you okay?”

Devola sat up, gingerly rubbing her arms and shivering. “I-I’m fine.” She glanced over her
shoulder at the rock the summoned icicle had shattered against. The spearhead had actually made a crater in the rock upon impact, littering it with bits of metal, circuitry, and blood-matted hair. “Sis,” she gasped, panting for breath. “Sis, I…”

Popola couldn’t contain herself any longer and threw her arms around her sister, squeezing her hard enough to feel as though nothing would ever separate them again. Her core still burned inside her chassis as the vestiges of adrenaline faded from her circuitry. “Oh, god, that was scary,” she whimpered, sniffling. “Dev, Dev, I’m so glad you’re okay…”

Devola buried her face in Popola’s shoulder and hugged her just as tightly. “I love you, Popola…”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I love you, too.” Popola patted her on the head, her fingers sifting through her tangled hair. “Thanks so much for putting the book in my bag… If you hadn’t, I—I wouldn’t…”

“What?” Devola pulled away, furrowing her brow.

“The book.” Popola picked it up. “It was in my bag. If you’d been carrying it instead, there wouldn’t have been anything I could do…”

Devola looked at the book with a dumb, slack expression on her face. “I didn’t put that in your bag. I put it in my bag.”

“Then how did—”

Devola took out her own bag, rifled through it, and pulled out a crumpled wad of underwear, eyeing it with a faint tinge of disapproval. She always neatly folded her clothes. Popola, on the other hand…

Popola gasped. “Oh my god.” The only reason she’d been able to come to Devola’s rescue was because they’d switched bags by mistake!

Devola almost looked angry at her, but instead she began to laugh. She laughed so hard that she began to cry and threw herself back into Popola’s embrace, muffling her voice and drying her tears on her shoulder.

She and Popola held each other close and laughed for what seemed like hours.

“Let’s get back to the village,” Popola said, helping Devola to her feet as she wiped the last of her mirthful tears from her eyes. “It probably won’t be safe here for much longer.”

“After those fine gentlemen went through so much trouble to bring you here to me? For shame!”

The voice that drifted through the air was cold, gravely, and strangely wet. Popola looked over her shoulder and caught sight of an old man in resplendent, ornate red and violet robes and a gilded black cloak, illuminated with a cold, sickly light by a glowing orb he held in the palm of his hand. His face was ashen, almost alabaster; gaunt, with sunken eyes and hollow cheekbones; pockmarks and pores riddled his wrinkled, leathery skin.

It had been so many thousands of years since Popola had seen an elderly man that she had forgotten what they looked like.

“I,” he said, flinging out his arms and curling his long, spindly fingers into purposeful signs, “am the dark priest called Shaft, come to cleanse the world in the forge of chaos.”

“Shaft?” Devola whispered, wrinkling her nose.
Shaft pointed to the grimoire lying on the ground with a bony, pale finger. “I smell a sorceress among you. You, the straight-haired one.”

Popola slowly nodded, dumbstruck. This man… he—he couldn’t be a human… but androids didn’t age like that—

“That book. Pick it up.”

She crouched down and scooped the book up off the ground.

With a wicked smile and a delighted gleam in his yellowed eyes, Shaft revealed a mouth full of teeth stained black and green from rot. “Never did I think I would meet another master of the mystic arts. Let us test our skills, girl, in a proper wizard’s duel!”

Devola piped up. “Um… S-Shaft, sir,” she said, clearly trying not to laugh, “now’s not the best—”

Wearing a scowl that reflected equal parts disgust, disdain, and boredom, Shaft flung out his hand. “Torpor.”

Devola gasped and futilely threw up her hands to protect herself as a pillar of amber crystal blossomed beneath her feet, freezing solid around her and entombing her.

“Dev! Dev!” Popola slammed her hands against the crystal wall, feeling the cool, sleek facet thrum with magical energy under her palms, and hurriedly started flipping through her book to find a counterspell. “What did you do to her?” she snarled at Shaft.

“A simple containment spell, nothing more,” Shaft replied, shrugging his bony shoulders. “Do not worry. She is unharmed and feels no pain or fear, or anything else for that matter.”

Popola stared into Devola’s eyes through the muddy, golden-brown tint of the solid crystal engulfing her. Although Shaft said she felt no pain or fear, the terror twisting her face told a different story. She looked anguished beyond words, her jaw slack and mouth agape in a silent scream, her eyes wide, her arms raised in front of her and outstretched hands frozen into grasping claws.

Her shoulders began to quiver; her hands trembled as she clenched her jaw and her breath hissed through gritted teeth. She gripped the book in one hand tight enough to bleach her knuckles white; her core burned white-hot within her chassis as she met Shaft’s jaundiced eyes with a furious glare.

Popola clenched her fist. Even if this man was human, it didn’t matter. She had no reverence for him—only a deep, burning hatred. “Let her go,” she spat.

Shaft lifted the luminous crystal ball in his hand, letting it cast its cold, pale light on his cold, pale face as his grin stretched from ear to ear and widened into a deathly rictus. “Whether I let your sister go or use her as a chandelier in my study is entirely up to you,” he said. “Dare to measure your talents against Shaft, master of the dark arts, servant of chaos, champion of Death, and I may consider releasing her.”

As soon as she’d sent a message to the nearest Resistance outpost and asked it to be relayed to the camp (there was some sort of interference that was preventing her from radioing them directly), Anemone returned to A4’s side.

Jackass had done what she could to repair at least some of the damage to the poor thing’s cobbled-together body. If this thing really was a corpse possessed by A4’s ghost—and Anemone was about
ninety percent sure that it was—she wasn’t sure it would make much of a difference, but there was no harm in trying.

A4 whimpered without crying. Her borrowed face betrayed no emotions; only the plaintive, wordless whines that leaked from her throat could do that. Anemone wanted to do more to comfort her, but couldn’t bring herself to lay hands on her mangled chimera of a body, even though she was well-accustomed to corpses. There was something almost profane about it.

“A2 didn’t mean what she said,” Anemone assured her, although considering what she’d learned about the other A4’s true identity, A2 probably had. “She just… has trust issues. I’m sure that… Jackass, what did Alucard call the other A4?”

“A suck demon?” Jackass asked as she withdrew her blood-soaked hands from the cavity opened up in A4’s torso.

“I’m sure that demon masquerading as you,” Anemone told A4, “hasn’t exactly helped. Don’t worry. She’ll come around.”

A4 let out a slightly less sad-sounding whimper.

“So,” Jackass asked as she moved on from adjusting the damaged internals of A2’s old chassis to sealing the chassis back up, “how’d you end up in this hunk of junk?”

A4 lifted her hand. “I… hhhh… aawwwnnn…”

“Haunted it?” Jackass filled in. “Not the best choice. 22B’s body is mostly intact; couldn’t you jump into that one?”

A4 shook her head. “Nnnn… ohhh… b-bonn…”

“Don’t push her to strain herself,” Anemone cautioned Jackass. It was clear to her that speaking wasn’t the easiest thing for A4 to do. Just like A2 when she’d transformed when the moon had been nearly full.

“Look, she’s getting better at talking,” Jackass said. “We just have to keep asking her questions while her vocal chords warm up.”

Anemone squinted skeptically at Jackass. That sounded like bullshit, but she didn’t know enough about android repair to contest it. “Alucard should be coming soon. I’m sure he’ll know what we can do.”

Jackass returned to her work and began stripping components out of 64B’s decapitated body to add to A4’s ruined chassis. Repairing some of the damaged joints and servos would, even if A4 couldn’t feel anything in this body, at least make it easier for her to control.

“As soon as you’ve got A4 in better condition, we’ll have to leave the village,” Anemone told Jackass. She quickly filled her in on what she had discussed in Pascal’s impromptu war room.

“So we’re taking protection from machines now, huh?” Jackass responded, nonplussed by the news that Eve would be escorting the evacuees. “Gotta say, this sounds like a bad idea. And trust me, Anemone, I know bad ideas.”

“I know,” Anemone said. Jackass typically had a dozen bad ideas per day, and those were the ones she didn’t keep to herself. “I’ll make sure the twins are ready to leave,” she added, rising to her feet.
Someone knocked on the door. Inwardly, Anemone hoped it would be Alucard, if only to make things easier. When she opened the door, though, she found herself looking down on the interim leader of her camp—Commander Laurel.

Laurel bowed. “Commander Anemone. A pleasure to see you again. May I come in?”

Anemone felt a vague sense of unease settle inside her. Laurel’s presence was unexpected, to say the least. “That’s fine by me,” she said, guiding him inside despite the gnawing dread. She hoped he wouldn’t ask about A2. Anemone knew he was expecting her to corroborate the horrible claims he and Jackass had made about A2 for the sake of clearing her name.

Laurel scratched at the mismatched patch of ruddy skin around his eye and sniffled, his nostrils flaring. “I thought I’d find you here. Are you alright?” he asked, offering her his hand.

Anemone shook it before she could realize that there was fresh blood from A4’s chassis staining her hand; it leaped over to the white glove Laurel wore without the slightest hesitation, leaving a crimson blotch on his palm.

“As I said in our last communication, yes, I’m fine,” Anemone said, a little more brusquely than she’d intended. “What are you doing here? I told you I’d return to the camp in a few days,” she added, laying a hand gingerly over a swath of gauze circling her abdomen under her tunic.

“Yes, well…” Laurel cleared his throat and coughed into his hand as he walked past her. “We’ve received reports of a massive enemy force converging on this location. Knowing you were here, I decided to mobilize a retrieval team to escort you to—Good lord, Anemone! What happened in here?”

He stumbled to a halt at the edge of the pool of blood soaking into the floor, gazing at the remains of 64B’s body and at A4’s borrowed chassis.

“That’s, uh…” Jackass began, wheels in her brain spinning as she floundered for a phony explanation.

“That’s not A2, is it?” Laurel gasped.

“It’s okay, Commander,” Jackass hurriedly assured him as A4 let out a wordless moan. “She’s dying.”

“Ah, that’s a relief,” Laurel sighed. “A fitting end to such a wretched beast. You must be so relieved to be rid of that tormentor.”

There was something suspicious about him, Anemone decided, though she couldn’t put her finger on what—something nebulous in the corner of her mind. For him and his men to travel so quickly from the camp to the village, he must have had to leave some time ago—immediately after he’d last spoken to her, at earliest. So he must have known about the army headed her way at that point. Why hadn’t he told her until now?

Laurel raised the bloodstained hand to his mouth again. Anemone heard him make a muffled sound as though he were sucking air through his teeth. “Well,” he said, “we should go. There are already more machines entering the village, although none of them have attacked anyone yet. Who knows when they’ll become hostile…”

Anemone wondered if Jackass, who was marginally better at lying than her, could think of an excuse to stay here quickly enough. Once Laurel could bring them into his custody, who knew how difficult it would be to slip away from him?
“I’m sure Pascal’s village is perfectly safe,” Anemone told Laurel. “He’s weathered attacks from hostile machines for centuries. If we leave, though, we run the risk of being ambushed in the woods.”

“So you’d like to stay here,” he mused, heading for the door and slowly closing it. “I see the reason in your decision. You’ve known this Pascal for a long time, obviously. I’m sure High Command will be interested to hear about that.”

Anemone found herself beginning to hate Laurel.

“Anyway,” he said, planting his weight against the door to make sure it was securely locked, “I defer to your expertise, Anemone. If we are safest staying here, then stay here we shall.” He held his bloody hand up to his mouth again and coughed loudly.

Jackass slowly sidled up to Anemone. “Is he creeping you out, too?” she hissed in her ear so suddenly that Anemone felt almost every servo in her chassis seize up.

Anemone pursed her lips thoughtfully and frowned. He did seem to be behaving rather erratically. And now they were locked in a room with him.

A faint, electronically-modulated scream, muffled by the building’s wooden walls, drifted through the air.

“Ah, it must be starting,” Laurel commented, stepping away from the door and quickly closing the distance between himself and Anemone. “And with the three of us safely tucked away in this room.” He chuckled. “Perfect, perfect. As easy as Mistress Carmilla had promised.”

Anemone felt Jackass’ hands clamp down on her arm as Laurel dragged his tongue across the palm of his hand and licked his lips. As his hand passed over his face, his eyes turned bright red and his skin, save for the stitched-on patch of ruddy skin around his eye, turned as white as snow; ivory fangs pricked his bottom lip.

“Nothing personal,” he said as Anemone felt her chassis turn to stone and her blood freeze, “but do you expect me not to get thirsty with such a large pool of blood right there… and two fresh meals standing in my way?”

Chapter End Notes

I hope that's enough cliffhangers for you! Next chapter's gonna be a tricky one to write, but I think I can pull it off. Lemme just queue up the Demon Slayer soundtrack here and get in the mood...

Fun Fact: Leraje, or Leraie, is one of the 77 demons catalogued in the Ars Goetica, whose pages have gifted us a lot of classic Castlevania enemies like Buer (you know, that lion head with five legs that rolls around everywhere). Although any reputable demonologist will tell you Leraje is male, the version which appears in Portrait of Ruin and Harmony of Despair (spelled Lerajie in the English version of the game) is a female demon. You know what that means!
Thank you Castlevania for giving us the gift of this sexy transgender gunslinger demon. She is my girlfriend now.
Far away from Pascal’s village, A2 faces off against the demon gunslinger Leraje while Popola duels the dark priest Shaft.

The first thing A2 did, of course, was turn her back on the forest and take off across the bridge to the castle. Fuck this stupid game—she was going to hole up somewhere in those crumbling ruins and wait for Leraje to get bored and give up. A2 was very good at hiding and the castle had plenty of nooks and crannies to hide in.

Leraje trailed behind her, her cloak billowing out behind her. Her face was split by a hungry grin, her gleaming fangs bared. “Not one for doing as you’re told, are you, A2?”

A2 kept her head down and sprinted through the castle’s moss-wreathed courtyard. Six shots rang out in quick succession. The bullets’ trails traced gossamer strands in the air as they passed overhead, colliding with the castle’s crumbling crenelations and bouncing off the stone parapets. All six bullets ricocheted perfectly and buried themselves in a row up A2’s left arm, punching through her skin like rivets through a metal sheet.

Racked with pain, A2 skidded to a halt, her left arm dangling limply as the bullet holes began to sizzle and burn and the flesh around the wounds began to turn black. She whirled around and threw her sword at Leraje, who narrowly avoided it by the skin of her teeth, a flicker of worry flashing across her eyes for an instant as the blade nicked the bridge of her nose.

A2 called the sword back and lunged at Leraje, catching the demon gunslinger off guard. Leraje hurriedly lifted her rifle to block her strike and fired at the ground. The recoil knocked her off her feet and threw her into the air; the edge of A2’s blade scraped against the blade running down the length of the barrel and kicked up a flurry of sparks.

Carried aloft by the recoil, Leraje righted herself and clung to the side of one of the pillars lining the courtyard. “I must warn you, I’ve mapped out the entire castle,” she boasted, a sly grin on her face. “I offered you the forest so that you’d have a fighting chance.” She fired off a single shot over the castle wall. There was a distant, echoing crack, and then another, and then another, and another…

A2 felt her hackles rise and a chill run up her spine. She dropped to the ground as hastily as she could, her knees and elbows throbbing from the impact. The bullet grazed her scalp, hit the base of the column Leraje had buried her talons in, bounced off, hit the far wall, bounced back, and came to an abrupt stop as the demon gunslinger snatched it out of the air and pinched it between her forefinger and thumb.

Leraje slid the bullet back into her revolver’s chamber. “Your choice, A2. Castle or forest. I’ll accept a home team advantage, so to speak, should it please you.”

“The last thing I’d ask for is your charity, asshole.” A2 pulled herself to her feet and brandished her sword, the curved, single-edged blade glinting in the flickering lights that hung from the inner walls of the courtyard. “Besides…”
Harsh, mechanical cries of “Intruders in the castle!” rang through the air. Other electronic shouts rose to answer them: “Destroy the intruders!” and “Honor the Forest King’s memory!” and “For the glory of the kingdom!”

A2 grinned. Even if Leraje knew this place inside and out, the crazy machines who lived here were beyond anybody’s predictions. “This,” she hissed, tensing every weary muscle in her body as she prepared to storm the castle, “is my turf.”

Leraje’s glowing scarlet eyes grew brighter. She let out a merry laugh. “Oh, I like you!”

A pair of machines clad in ragged medieval armor leaped off the castle’s parapets, optical sensors burning blood-red in the night. “For the kingdom! For the Forest Kingdom!” they cried out in unison as they hit the ground and drew their weapons.

Leraje tensed like a coiled spring and rocketed off the pillar over the castle wall. A2 bolted for the castle’s front door as the thudding staccato roar of machine gun fire filled the air.

The big double doors leading into the castle’s main hall were made of thick, solid planks of oak joined together with wrought iron. They looked as old and as firm as the rocks—but how tough was wood compared to a good sword?

The machine duo caught up to her, brandishing their weapons. A2 blocked a strike from one’s wicked halberd as the other darted in with a gleaming rapier. The machines here in the castle were tough—as tough as they were crazy—and their weapons weren’t the cobbled-together hunks of junk other machines carried, but well-crafted works of art. Someone in the so-called kingdom knew their shit.

The machine’s rapier buried itself into the door. A2 jammed her foot against the machine’s elbow joint as she parried another heavy strike from the other machine’s halberd, reverberations ringing dully through her injured forearm. She pressed her heel into the machine’s arm until the elbow joint snapped and sparks flew from its whining servos.

Two gunshots rang out; thinking fast, A2 pinned herself against the door, her back pressing against the slick, cold, damp coating of moss covering the wooden planks, and tried to hide herself behind the other machine. The bullets buried themselves in the machine’s back; the machine wailed and reeled back, arms flailing, its halberd’s axe blade sweeping wildly through the air.

Another shot rang out; A2 just barely saw, out of the corner of her eye, a gossamer strand streak across the sky. She cut down the axe-wielding machine, opening up a gash across its barrel-shaped torso and unleashing a spray of black oil, caught the second machine on the backswing as it fumbled for its sword, buried her claws into the machine’s head, and held it in front of her as a shield to block the next bullet. The bullet buried itself in the back of the machine’s spherical head; the machine’s optical sensors flickered and died as its body shuddered and went limp.

A2 buried her sword in the door, the blade sinking almost up to the hilt into the thick oaken wood. She started to draw the blade across the door to cut it open. It was slower going than she’d expected; she grasped the hilt tightly with both hands and put her weight into it. The bullet wounds studding her left arm and her shoulder throbbed and screamed.

“King-slayer! King-slayer!”

A2 glanced over her shoulder as two machines barreled down the courtyard toward her—one, a quadrupedal model galloping like a horse on its powerful legs, the other, a bipedal model mounted on its back, wielding a spiked shield in one hand and a lance in the other. “The Forest Kingdom
will have its vengeance!”

It was at that point, staring down the machine duo galloping at full tilt toward her, that A2 remembered that she’d skewered their ‘king’ or whatever a while ago.

Another two shots rang out. A2 couldn’t see their trajectories. She tensed up, gritting her teeth, and yanked her sword out of the door. She needed another way to get in. She had to get herself into the castle and out of the open—she was a sitting duck out here.

The horseback-riding machine’s mount didn’t slow down one bit. If anything, the closer it came, the faster it galloped. Just before it pinned her against the door and crushed her between the stone-hard wood and the mangled mass of machinery it would leave behind in the crash, she dove under the horselike machine and rolled under its legs, her shoulder and arm howling as they pressed against the cold ground. She reached up, grabbed the machine by its rudderlike tail, and flung herself onto its back behind its rider as the wood splintered under the impact from the machine duo.

As soon as the splinters and shrapnel from the impact cleared, A2 heard the telltale sound of bullets ricocheting in the distance, each sharp ping growing closer and louder. The machine rider swiveled its head one hundred eighty degrees, glaring with its hateful scarlet optical sensors as it raised its lance overhead to bludgeon her. A2 drove her sword into its head.

One bullet pinged off the machine’s shoulder pauldron, leaving a dent in the metal as it bounced off and changed course. Another bullet buried itself in A2’s breastplate, the deformed metal digging into her collarbone.

As the machine rider went limp and lost its grip on its mount, A2 grabbed it by the edge of its brass collar and held it aloft; stowing away her sword, she ripped the shield from its hand and held it behind her, shielding herself in front and behind. Another ricocheting bullet buried itself in the spiked shield.

The quadrupedal machine reared back and bucked forward, struggling to throw her off. A2 gritted her teeth and held on tight as it barreled through the castle’s narrow hallways, crashing into statues and pottery and throwing shattered bits of stone and ceramic into the air.

Exhilarated, A2 smiled through the pain, her fanged grin a deathly grimace as her bullet wounds throbbed. All of a sudden, she felt alive again.

The quadrupedal machine pitched sideways and rolled over as it ran up a length of a collapsed stone walkway leading from the ground floor of the castle to the floor above. A2 flung herself off just in time to avoid having her leg pinned between metal and stone and dug her claws into the shattered stone, her fingers aching and stinging as the rough rock scraped the skin from her fingertips. The machine fell after her, its four legs windmilling as its rudderlike tail split in two, both halves linked by a supple wire cable. The tail’s tip buried itself in the fallen bridge, suspending the machine; as it came to a halt, the wire going taut, it swung itself away and buried the sharp claws tipping each of its legs into the wall.

The quadrupedal machine glared at her. A battered steel grille visor wrapped over its optical sensors; the harsh light of its eyes shined through the slits. “Murderer!” it spat with a throaty gurgle.

A2 grinned. Ah, these were the machines it felt good to hate. She’d missed them.

Another gunshot rang out in the distance, followed by a cascade of cracks and pings as the bullet
began its zigzagging trajectory through the castle’s labyrinthine corridors. A2’s ears perked up. The bullet was approaching from…

She swung her leg up over the side of the collapsed bridge and looked ahead. “Come and get me, rust bucket!” she shouted at the machine.

It took the bait and pounced, leapng from the wall onto the bridge, its tail retracting and reeling it in toward her. A2 braced herself as the machine landed on top of her and its talons dug itself into the bridge, loosening clods of rock and leaving deep fractures in the crumbling stone.

The machine laughed. “Vengeance will be swi—"

The bullet shattered the lens of its eye and buried itself in its head, killing it. The machine lost its grip and collapsed, falling to the floor beneath the makeshift bridge. Its claw slipped as it fell, slamming into A2’s injured shoulder; she let out an anguished scream as the cracked and blackened flesh around the bullet hole split open, a blossom of white-hot pain blooming deep within her chassis and lighting up her nervous circuits. Her claws slipped from the rock and she fell with the machine, hitting the ground.

A2 propped up the wreckage of the dead quadrupedal machine against the wall and hid underneath it, breathing heavily as she took stock of her wounds and waited for the sound of Leraje’s next shot. Her whole body felt hot and prickly, her eyelids leaden, her fingertips and toes growing numb. Her tongue lollled from her mouth, doglike, as she panted for breath.

She clutched at the bullet wound on her shoulder and pulled her hand away. Her palm was wet, covered with a glob of thick, sticky black tar. It didn’t look like anything that could have come from her body—didn’t smell like it either. It reeked. It smelled like a week-old dead animal slathered in crude oil and doused in acid. It was cloying, too—it clogged her nostrils, as thick as cement. It was the olfactory equivalent to staring directly into the sun.

More black tar was leaking from the bullet wounds studding A2’s left arm. Presumably, the bullets buried in her side and back were oozing the disgusting goop, too.

Another gunshot rang out and began to zigzag through the castle, its collisions echoing through the air. A2 tensed up and darted from her hiding place to discard one of the two dead machines’ discarded shield; her fingers curled around the shield’s handle and she jerked it back, darting back into her makeshift shelter just before the bullet hit.

It didn’t take long for her to decide that, contrary to what she’d said earlier, she actually liked Leraje a lot better when she was talking. Once the demon gunslinger had stopped boasting about being the grand marshal of fucktown or whatever, she had vanished like a ghost. And Leraje hadn’t been kidding about memorizing the castle’s layout—it seemed like she just knew exactly how to ricochet her bullets to get her target.

A2 kept her shield close and darted through the castle, keeping as much of herself covered as possible, always waiting for the next gunshot. At least the shots telegraphed themselves—

A bullet whizzed just over her head with no warning but the shockingly-loud roar of gunfire. A2 whirled around and saw Leraje standing in the hall not too far behind her reloading her revolver.

“Over here!” the gunslinger called out, slamming the chamber shut and twirling the gun in her hand. She had a shit-eating, overconfident, give-me-your-best-shot grin plastered on her face.

A2 lobbed her sword at the air, brought her shield to bear in front of her, and charged.
Her bravado faltering, Leraje dodged the sword strike, letting it bury itself in the brick wall behind her, and fired six rounds rapid directly at her. The shots all bounced off A2’s shield and scattered, zigzagging across the walls, ceiling, and floor. A2 flung out her arm and swung the shield behind her, protecting herself as the bullets aimed for her unarmored back, and called her sword back. The katana materialized in her hand in a flurry of amber sparks, casting a flickering golden light that beat back the castle’s deep and cloying shadows for an instant.

A2’s sword clashed again with Leraje’s rifle; the flurry of sparks kicked up from the metal grinding against metal lit up the demon gunslinger’s sharp, scaly face. The force of the impact propelled Leraje backward, pinning her to the wall; triumphant, A2 dropped to the ground and let the reflected bullets fly overhead.

A flying machine sailed through the air around the corner of the hall, its rotary minigun swinging around the edge of the toroidal flight pack keeping it aloft and firing a spray of bullets. Leraje scurried out of the way, but one of her own bullets buried itself in her bicep, releasing a thick spray of dark blood. The other five magic bullets buried themselves in the wall, kicking up puffs of dust.

The flying machine kept firing, changing its angle to home in on A2. Bullets chewed through the castle’s crumbling masonry in a curling line across the wall and floor. A2 threw her shield at it, throwing off its aim, then leaped up and struck it, bisecting it with a single swing of her blade. Both halves of the flying machine fell to the floor, showers of sparks bleeding out from its exposed circuits and servos.

A2 looked around, her eyes darting across the hallway’s T-shaped junction. Leraje was gone again. At least she’d gotten one hit on her, although it would’ve been so much more satisfying if the other five bullets had ripped through her torso as well.

Dammit. How did that green hobgoblin know exactly where she was?

Something from her time in YoRHa flitted through A2’s mind. She didn’t often think about Pearl Harbor—at least, not when she could avoid it. Those memories, those pictures of the friends she’d lost, always made her sick.

Gunner Number Sixteen—G16—had been the only member of the first prototype YoRHa squadron to specialize in ranged weaponry. She’d said something once about snipers… something about them always having someone watching their back, someone keeping an eye on their target’s position, someone telling them the best place to go to line up the perfect shot…

A spotter. Leraje had to have a spotter. But who—or what—was it? Could she somehow see through her bullets?

Another shot rang out. A2 hurried down the hall, found a little machine loitering in the corridor with its back to her, and lunged for it, wrapping one arm around the seam between its head and its torso and using the other arm to pin down its arm.

The machine screamed. “Please don’t hurt me!”

A2 stiffened, but ignored the machine’s pleas. It wasn’t like these things could actually beg for their lives. Only Pascal’s machines were people to her, and she only really believed that begrudgingly.

“Please let me go,” the machine wailed. “I didn’t even like our king…”

The sound of the bullet ricocheting through the castle drew closer, closer…
One of the windows lining the hallway exploded in a shower of glittering glass. A2 swung her captive around—

The bullet tore a chunk out of her injured shoulder, splitting apart the growing patch of blackened skin and letting loose a torrent of pungent black tar that spilled down her arm, staining her ragged sleeve. Another three bullets in quick succession struck the captive machine, each shot causing it to jerk and spasm as though electrocuted. A fifth bullet zipped past its head, bounced off the far wall, and glanced off A2’s armored boot; a sixth and final bullet buried itself in between the machine’s already-darkened optical sensors.

A2 released her once-living shield and staggered backward, bowled over by the overwhelming stench of the tar seeping from her wounds. It was so strong, even someone who wasn’t half-wolf would probably be able to smell it from a kilometer away…

Something happened to A2 that hadn’t happened in a long, long time.

She had an idea.

Scent—Leraje could pinpoint her location through her scent! That was why her bullets caused the rot inside her body: it painted a target on her back! Leraje herself must have had a nose as keen as any werewolf to—

Another gunshot rang out, and A2 remembered that thanks to her rifle, Leraje had seven shots before needing to reload, not six.

She hurried down the hall as the bullet came closer, closer, its trajectory ever changing. It zipped past her, leaving a hot scar across her cheek as it grazed her skin, and collided with the far wall.

A2 leaped sideways and threw herself out the window, her shoulder throbbing as glass shards sliced through the necrotic black flesh surrounding the bullet wound, as the bullet bounced backward and shot past where she’d been just a second ago.

A gnarled, moss-covered tree wound itself up the corner of the overgrown little garden here in the center of the castle, its roots and branches digging into the walls and bursting through the floors like a parasite clamping to its host. A2 touched down on the surface of the twisting trunk and slid down, her claws rending furrows through the slick moss and the rough bark beneath. A linked-sphere type machine coiled on the ground lit up, electricity coursing around its segmented, millipede-like body, as A2’s descent disturbed its rest. The machine lifted itself aloft, its core shimmering as it slithered through the air and the laser turret that was its ‘face’ hummed with energy.

A2 slid to the ground and clung to the nearest wall, inching slowly toward a gaping hole in the wall that led to the castle’s library. The millipede machine writhed overhead as it searched for her.

She looked up and tried to see if she could spot Leraje. There had to be some way to find her without waiting for her to get cocky and try to take a shot close-up…

*Some way to find her.*

Leraje had a scent, too, A2 recalled—something like smoke mixed with honey. If only she wasn’t covered in this rank, putrefying goop, A2 would be able to sniff her out, just as she’d traced the succubus’ scent earlier today…

But dammit, how would she block out the scent from the tar leaking from her bullet wounds?
She glanced around the tiny garden flanked on all sides by the castle’s towering walls, squinting to try and make up as much detail as she could in the darkness—

There! In the corner of the little plot of land—a patch of rippling, shimmering water! If she could clean herself off, she could find Leraje and rip her to shreds!

A2 crept over to the pond, reached out, and laid a hand against the rippling surface. The cool water tickled the palm of her hand. All she had to do was go under and wash herself clean—

She couldn’t even put her hand any farther in. It hovered on the surface, kissed by the water’s frail surface tension, but that was all she could do with it. She could feel seawater lapping at her legs, the icy and relentless grip of the ocean wrapping around her ankles and pulling her away, the briny spray stinging her nose as her precarious perch pitched and bucked and tried to throw her off into oblivion—

Her ears pinned themselves back as her hackles rose and a low growl bubbled up from her throat. She couldn’t. She couldn’t do it. There was no way she could do it!

Her other hand dug into the wet, grassy dirt, fingers burrowing into the ground like roots. Dammit! How could she be scared of a fucking puddle at a time like this? Just get in, she told herself. Wash yourself off! It isn’t hard!

Frustrated with herself, she snarled and drew back her hand, then drove her fist into the water. The splash caught her in the face; her breath caught in her throat. Dammit!

The machine writhing overhead took notice of her and lunged forward, letting out an unearthly screech. Instinctively, A2 ran in the one direction she knew best how to run in: forward.

She dove into the water.

She dove into the water before she could think once about it, let alone twice, and instantly sank like a stone down to the bottom of the pond. It was dark—pitch black, darker than even the most starless sky. Even her keen, wolfish eyes couldn’t make out anything. There was about two meters of water above her, and its weight was crushing. She curled up at the bottom, the water rushing into her lungs and filling her chassis, her hands and feet digging into the slimy silt and mushy dead algae lining the ground. She wanted to scream, but all that came out were bubbles.

She was drowning.

She was going to die. She was going to die here, in the water, buried under the water, where the water would seep into every last centimeter of her chassis and rust it all the way through until she crumbled away and disintegrated.

She had to get out of here.

Going to die. Had to get out. Had to get out.

The water pressing down on her, its weight on her shoulders like the weight of the entire world, was going to be her tomb. It was pinning her down. Killing her. She had to get out. She was going to die—

She pulled herself out of the water more by instinct than by though, the desperate voice screaming at her to escape overwhelming the silent scream of fear welling up inside her. She vomited torrents of hot, brackish fluid from her lungs and shivered as the cold air set on her skin and chilled her soaked clothes and drenched hair. She could hear her black box screeching inside her chest,
muffled by her skin but still loud enough to run knives through her ears. Her hair hung from her
head and clung to her back, heavy as lead; her tail twirled sluggishly, its soaked fur slicked into
blunt spikes.

A2 gasped for breath and shuddered, her fingers burrowing themselves into the ground to anchor
her here, to the land, to the world of the living.

She would never do that again.

At least, though, the air was clear now. The scent of the cool night air, of grease and oil bleeding
from the corpses of machines, and of the sweet, smoky aura that surrounded the demon gunslinger
filled her nostrils.

The linked-sphere machine seized on her position again and readied the laser turret mounted on its
head. A2 bolted, rushing across the garden as the machine fired a searing red-white beam of hot
plasma. The beam cut a swath of scorched earth and atomized plant matter across the ground,
burning the air around it and filling the overgrown garden with the smell of burnt ozone. She ran
through the hole in the wall into the library and dove to the side as the millipede-like machine
slithered after her; as soon as its glowing core passed her by, she staked it with her sword, shoving
the blade in up to its hilt.

The machine screeched and screamed, whipping its tail against the walls frantically, knocking
aside the bookshelves lining the library’s walls by the dozen, tearing through the balconies lining
the massive chamber up to its high and vaulted ceiling. Books flew through the air, and errant
pages, too; bits of paper fluttered down like snowflakes.

The machine bore down on A2, its laser turret glowing again as it threw itself at her with its last bit
of strength—

And then it suddenly changed course and rocketed straight upward, smashing its head against the
ceiling and falling limply to the floor with an earsplitting crash and a thunderous thud. The whole
room shook.

It didn’t move.

A2 crept over the corpse of the monstrous machine and took stock of the library. It was a large
room, and tall—four stories tall, the balconies lining the walls on each level connected by a
network of stairs and ladders. It was a wide-open arena free of obstacles, save for the machine
corpse and the shelves that had been torn from the walls and the books that had been thrown to the
floor. Wind whistled through the tall, thin windows, the air currents fluttering around sparse shards
of broken glass protruding from the empty panes like jagged, rotting teeth.

No more gunshots. No more ricochets. No more bullets. A2 hoped that meant Leraje had lost her
scent. Now she had the advantage.

A2 gritted her teeth as her muscles burned and her wounds throbbed. At least, she had the
advantage until more of that noxious sludge started to spew from her bullet wounds. She had to
track that sniper down as quickly as possible.

Someone leaped down from the third-floor balcony to the second floor, their footfalls echoing
through the cavernous library, then slid down a ladder to the ground. At first, A2 thought it was
Leraje and readied her sword.

The interloper raised their hands. “Hey,” he said, his soft, quiet, and oddly familiar voice echoing
through the library. “It’s okay. I don’t mean you any harm.”

A2 squinted at him. He was a Scanner. The short black coat he wore was unmistakable. As if this couldn’t get any worse, now there were fucking YoRHa soldiers here!

“Get back,” she snarled, brandishing her sword. “Leave me alone and I probably won’t kill you.”

“Um… wh—” The Scanner blinked and cocked his head. He had a soft face, a very soft face, round as the moon, and short black hair that blended in perfectly with the visor wrapped over his eyes. “I mean… we’re both androids, aren’t we?”

A2 clenched her jaw and bared her fangs as the Scanner inched closer. The pod at his side perked up. “Analysis complete. Results: Black box belongs to YoRHa Unit A2.” it announced in a soft, childish voice. “Proposal: Unit 4S should subdue and terminate Unit A2.”

The Scanner looked to his pod, then back to A2, then back to his pod. “What?” He looked back to A2. “You’re A2?”

A2 couldn’t speak. She couldn’t move. She could feel her hands shaking. Her black box growing leaden in her chest. A churning in her gut. A telltale tremble in her lip she struggled to quell.

No wonder this guy sounded so familiar. He even had her face.

“Proposal: Unit 4S should subdue and terminate Unit A2,” the pod insisted, wringing its claws. “Standing by to engage FFCS.”

Pods, thankfully, were useless unless they were given orders by the YoRHa unit they supported; every second 4S hesitated was a second A2 didn’t have to worry about defending herself. As if she could. How could she fight back against that?

Did the entire universe have it out for her? Was every single star aligned to make sure that everything that happened today would rip out her heart and tear it to pieces?

“Hold up.” 4S waved his hand dismissively at the pod, his mouth twisting in a concerned frown. “You don’t look like a normal android…” he mused, reaching out to her. “What happened to you?”

A2 bristled and let out a feral growl, backing away and waving her sword. (It was an empty threat—How could she turn her blade on another Four?) “Get lost. There’s a crazy sniper after me—”

A2’s words caught in her mouth as fog rushed into her head. The three burn marks on her shoulder started throbbing, like someone was burying their fingers in her flesh all the way down to the metal of her chassis.

Leraje was the least of her worries.

Olrox was here.

Shaft tossed his crystal ball into the air, where it hovered in the center of the clearing like a full moon and cast its cold light down on the entire clearing, illuminating the area right up to the edge of the trees encircling it.

“The stage is set for our duel! Let us begin!” he cried out, flinging out his hands and summoning a stream of ghastly phantoms, their silvery bodies contorted into long eddy currents, that flowed through the air around him and zeroed in on Popola.
Popola leaped clear of the streams as they impacted against the ground where she’d been standing just a second ago; the spirits erupted into bursts of silver light and shot plumes of dirt and grass into the air.

“Va Ischa!” Popola cried out, returning Shaft’s volley with a spearhead of ice. A ghostly, translucent arm burst out of Shaft’s shoulder and swiftly snatched the icicle out of the air, flinging it to the ground.

“Va Schia!” The air froze above Shaft, contracting into a ball of ice and falling over him; with a casual flick of his wrist, he conjured a burst of flame which instantly vaporized it.

Popola’s grip on the book tightened, as though doing so could wring more magic from its reservoir. “Ignis!”

With a vainglorious sweep of his hand, Shaft swatted Popola’s fireball out of the air and dispelled it in a burst of golden sparks. “Fireballs? Magic missiles? Pah! You embarrass us both with these parlor tricks!” he spat. “Morbus!”

A stream of luminous scarlet spheres shot from his hands and drifted through the air like bubbles, wisps of blood-red steam rising from their surfaces and trailing through the air. They filled the clearing, gently bobbing in the air like little balloons. Popola brushed against one and felt as though someone had just rammed a welding stick into her elbow; she clenched her jaw and choked down a scream, her mouth filling with blood, as the sphere burned a blackened hole in her sleeve and created a rough, cracked, reddened patch of skin on her elbow.

She hurriedly backed away, struggling to keep her distance from the orbs Shaft had summoned and flipped through her book. All she had to do to master a spell was read its instructions and commit them to memory. If she had to, she could learn on the fly.

Shaft snapped his fingers, the crack of dry skin and bone against bone echoing through the clearing. “Globus!”

Twin orbs of crackling pink light shot from his hands, popping the scarlet bubbles in their paths as they ricocheted off the ground, sailed into the trees, bounced off their trunks, and continued to zig-zag through the clearing. The bubbles that popped in their paths exploded into bursts of red mist; Popola inhaled just a bit of it and instantly felt as though she’d drank a gallon of hydrochloric acid. She dropped to the ground, her eyes and mouth burning from the fumes, as hollow pangs racked her chassis. One of the two globus spells crashed into the ground just centimeters from her head and rebounded, flying over her head and colliding with its twin; the two orbs shattered in a burst of sparks and pink lightning.

“Pneuma!” she croaked, struggling not to gag on her own incantation. The burst of wind that flew from her outstretched hand pushed the poisoned mist aside and filled the clearing with sweet, clear air.

Popola coughed and filled her lungs, clearing out the last dregs of cursed mist that had settled inside her; she spat out a frothing wad of black tar onto the ground. It sizzled, smoked, and crackled as the grass surrounding it withered and turned white, and the bitter emptiness that had felt like fire burning in her core faded away.

“That ought to have turned you into a puddle,” Shaft commented, a flicker of amusement playing on his face. “Well? I await your return volley. Show me your strongest spell.”

Popola flipped to the last page she could read, watched the words appear on the next page, and
quickly committed them to memory. “Teps Salendra!” she intoned, flinging out her hand.

A flurry of lightning bolts shot from her hand through the air, glowing purple-blue and leaving a sharp smell of burnt ozone in their wake as the bolts zeroed in on Shaft. He caught the bolts in his spindly, spidery hands, his fingers curling around the writhing lightning as he molded it in his grip. His hands shook; his movements were halting and strained. He compressed the lightning into crackling orbs of searing light and flung up his hands, shooting the lightning out into the heavens. The jagged bolts shattered against the black clouds overhead and leaped across them in a ragged, ephemeral spiderweb patterns.

“Is this your best?” Shaft sneered. “If you cannot show me some real magic, child, then I will educate you!”

He fired a beam of sickly, acidic yellow-green light at Popola; she hurriedly scampered out of the way, but felt the beam graze against her forearm. She gasped as every joint in her left arm from her elbow up to each knuckle filled up with fire and froze in place, locking her fingers into wickedly-curved talons.

Resisting the urge to let go of her book and clutch her frozen arm, she looked down to see the patches of skin visible through the holes in her sleeve grow hard and cloudy, like ice, and then grow clearer and clearer until it was transparent as glass. Through the shimmering pane of glass that had once been her skin, Popola could clearly see the thin subdermal layer of synthetic muscle and wire wrapped around her chassis writhing in vain. The frozen internal mechanisms of her fingers strained themselves against the hard and inflexible glass casing surrounding them.

She kept her distance from Shaft, darting through the clearing to dodge the fiery blasts he shot from his palms while struggling to use her now-immobile hand to turn the pages of her book without dropping it. All the while, Shaft’s self-satisfied and sinister cackling filled the clearing.

“What the fuck?” Popola gasped, struggling to dodge even more beams of acidic light. There had to be some sort of ‘turn glass back into skin’ spell in this book…

The ground under her feet burst open and upended itself, sending her flying; the glass encasing her arm shattered against a rock, leaving muscle and nervous circuits exposed; hot, oily coolant seeped through the straining muscles from veins severed by jagged shards of glass.

The book slipped from her fingers, leaving her without any inflow of magic; the electric cloud of power that had been filling her up drained away entirely in a matter of seconds. She rolled onto her back, writhing, eyes squeezed shut and jaw clenched. Her circuits were aflame, her mind clouded and thoughts slow and sluggish.

Shaft let out a mischievous laugh as Popola felt her exposed muscles ache; she pressed her hand to her forearm, only to feel the exposed layer of synthetic flesh and circuitry writhing and crawling like a living creature. Moist, sticky slime oozed through her fingers. She clutched futilely at her arm as the striated muscle split apart and sloughed off her chassis, turning wet and sickeningly soft as her arm disintegrated into dozens, hundreds of wriggling worms slithering from her metal bones into the grass.

Her senses screamed at her, overwhelmed by nonsensical stimuli; all Popola could do herself was scream in return.

“This, child,” Shaft hissed smugly as he loomed over Popola, hovering half a meter above the ground so he would not have to tread on the worms he’d conjured, “is real magic. The power to make a mockery of reality, to spit in the very face of God! Do you even know any real spells?”
asked, his jaundiced eyes glittering with sinister mirth. “Is this the best you can do?”

It took all of Popola’s strength to say something instead of just screaming again. “I know one,” she snarled, grabbing the book with her good hand and feeling the rush of magic clear her head and dull her pain; she flung out her naked skeletal hand and imagined a sphere engulfing Shaft’s heart. “Melio Tempus!”

Shaft may have been a wizard, but he was also a human, and an ancient one at that. How many years did his hardened, feeble, cholesterol-choked heart have left? Ten years, twenty, fifty?

Fifty years. Maybe it would be overkill. Maybe it would—

Shaft gasped and clutched at his chest as the spell took effect, his eyes widening as his levitation spell failed and he collapsed onto his knees to his knees. “Guh—Y-you… ch-child… wh-what have you—o-oh, my—my heart—” he sputtered, hissing out his words as scarcely more than a hushed whisper, his eyes rolling up into his skull, his eyelids fluttering, his jaw slack and wrinkled face twisted in agony as he doubled over.

Popola backed away from him and pulled herself up to her feet, eager to stand tall over him for a change. “That’s right. Don’t fuck with me,” she spat, feeling her spirits lift and her ego swell at the sight of his pain. “Nothing lasts forever, especially not that black… heart of… yours…”

Popola’s taunts petered out at the sight of Shaft’s pained grimace shifting into a widening grin and a gleam lighting up his rheumy eyes.

“Did you not think immortality would be the first magic art I mastered?” he asked wryly. “Heaven forbid a wizard such as I die of natural causes, child!”

The heady feeling of triumph draining out of her, Popola backed away, frantically racking her brain for a new spell. So Shaft was functionally immortal. Was that only with regard to aging, or was he impervious to physical injury as well? Maybe she’d passed by some spells in the book that could be used to confine him…

A bolt of lightning shot the book out of her hand. It hit the ground, sprawled out, with a few loose pages coming dangerously close to tearing away from the spine. Popola dived at the book and swept it back up, taking care to treat its loose pages gently.

“Curious,” Shaft mused, scratching his chin. “You and that book are quite inseparable. Is your memory so bad? Or are you using the book as the conduit of your power? Or the source?”

Popola shot a fireball just past him, hoping to distract him, and flung out a spearhead of ice in quick succession. Shaft blocked both of them with ease.

“Can you even cast spells at all when you are not touching that thing?”

“I-I can,” Popola insisted. She didn’t need the book. Every page she’d read so far was committed to her memory. But casting a spell with the book in her hand, she’d realized, meant that the magic she needed came out of it more than it came out of her, increasing her stamina almost to infinity.

Shaft cocked his head. “Then why don’t you…”

He vanished and reappeared in front of her, his pale and pockmarked face mere centimeters from hers, and grabbed the book with both hands. “Show me!” he hissed, ripping it from her grasp and quickly backing away. He held the book tauntingly out of reach and began pelting her with fireballs. “And why don’t I show you,” he asked, “why novices such as yourself prefer to use
“Wands and staves instead of cumbersome old books?”

“Vol Scutum!” Popola called forth a defensive spell to block the dark priest’s salvo and within seconds felt her legs going numb, a fuzzy wave of radio static washing through her chassis. She stumbled and dispelled the shield, opting instead to dodge the barrage as best she could.

The more advanced spells in the book were something else compared to the simple things she’d started out on. She couldn’t hope to use them and keep up her stamina long enough against Shaft’s seemingly-boundless reserves of magic. If she drew too much magic out of her own dwindling reservoir, she’d crash again, like she had earlier today, and then she’d be out of commission for hours…

“Fancy yourself a student of…” Shaft flipped through the book absentmindedly. “Charlotte Aulin? Ah, that name I know. A brilliant spellcaster… but, it seems, a poor instructor indeed.”

He threw the book away; Popola caught it and held it close to her chest, at a loss for words. What else could she do? Shaft had easily dealt with everything she’d thrown at him; he completely outclassed her by orders of magnitude. From seeing how Alucard could use his magic powers in combat, she’d had a completely wrong notion of how real magicians did battle—and thus she’d been far more unprepared than she could have imagined.

“You have potential,” he told her, circling around her like a prowling lion, “but your technique is sloppy and your mind is unfocused. You won’t ever learn proper magic, true magic, just from reading the chicken scratch of a long-dead witch and making the rest up on your own, child.”

He was right. He could do things with magic that made the things in that grimoire look like parlor tricks.

“But if you were to join me…”

“Join you?”

“Yes!” Shaft’s rheumy eyes gleamed wetly. “I can make you a priestess of the dark arts, girl, with powers rivaling my own! Forsake your friends and their sanctimonious morality and embrace power and dominance for no sake but its own—and mark my words, you could be the greatest sorceress this wretched world has ever known!”


Shaft put a hand to his chest and shook his head sadly. “Oh, you break this poor old man’s heart. What magic could not do, your harsh words have done. Is this any way to treat one of your human masters? I was told you and your sister revered our species.”

“You work with Dracula. You’re not human, as far as I’m concerned.”

“But if I did not work for Dracula, you would consider my offer?” Shaft cocked his head. “Dracula is my master because I allow him to be my master. I could leave him and strike out on my own on a whim. The two of us could join together and fill the world with chaos. We don’t need him.” He offered Popola an outstretched, upturned hand.

Popola shook her head. “No. No, I wouldn’t join you.”

“Oh, come now. Think about it before rejecting my offer so reflexively.” Shaft spared a glance toward the crystal pillar holding Devola prisoner. “I would be more than happy to return your sister to you.”
Popola looked over her shoulder at her sister’s frozen body. The terror frozen on Devola’s face was gut-wrenching. And the more she fought Shaft, the more she realized that she couldn’t beat him. How else could she persuade him to release her?

No, no! There had to be another way, Popola insisted to herself. Alucard was counting on her to be on his side—on the side of good, of righteousness…

“Where else do you and your sister have to go?” Shaft asked. “Join me, my child!”

“After what you’ve done to me? The torture, the insults… are you insane?”

Shaft raised his eyebrows. “I had to draw attention to your weakness. How else could you learn how much farther you have in your journey than by such a practical demonstration?”

“Forget it.”

Shaft grinned. “The world hates you and your sister, doesn’t it?”

Popola felt her core temperature tick up a few degrees. “I…”

“I can see it in your eyes. I can see it in how easily your hatred comes to you. Thus is the fate of all witches. To be ostracized, despised, feared… You wish you could have your vengeance against them, don’t you? You could bathe in their blood! Drown them in their own fear! Subject them to torments unknown outside the deepest circles of Hell!” Shaft once more offered her his hand. “I can teach you to do all of that. People like those disgusting men I enthralled to draw you here will bow before you on pain of death! Think about it…”

Popola looked down at his hand. She could do it. She could change everything. No more androids beating and berating her and Devola. No more machines trying to kill them. No more doing dirty jobs to assuage their guilty consciences over something that had never been their fault in the first place.

“Take my hand,” Shaft hissed urgently. “Embrace the darkness. Learn of my ways! Join me, and together we will overthrow Dracula and take this miserable world for ourselves!”

She and Devola could be queens of the world, unassailable, beholden to no one, satisfied in their vengeance and able to live for the rest of eternity in bliss and peace. No one would ever hurt them again. And all Popola had to do was take Shaft’s hand and become his apprentice.

Popola spared another glance at Devola. Devola, the mature one, the responsible one. She wouldn’t approve of this. She would say, ‘No, Popola, we have work to do.’ She would say, ‘No, Popola, we don’t want revenge. That’s not for us.’ She would say, ‘No, Popola, let’s forget this and go home,’ no matter where home was or whether they even had one to go back to. She would say, ‘No, Popola, he’s a creep.’

Or maybe…

Shaft was a human, after all, wasn’t he? Humans trumped androids. Neither Popola nor Devola would have to concern themselves with the other androids if they went with him. Being with a human would give them purpose, wouldn’t it? It would cleanse their souls, wouldn’t it?

“She would thank you, you know,” Shaft said, as though he could tell what was running through Popola’s mind. “She would come around. You could protect her with your powers, and she would see that she was a fool to ever doubt you. And you would both be happy.” He smiled warmly. “Wouldn’t you like that?”
She would. She would love to show Devola that this magic was something that made her *stronger*, not more vulnerable, but…

“But Alucard…” she mumbled.

He waved his hand dismissively. “*Alucard?* Ah, forget about him. He is a moralistic, paternalistic old fool. You will tire of him soon enough anyway. Else, he will tire of *you*. You know how he is.”

She thought about the few other people in this world who treated her and Devola kindly. Anemone, Jackass, 2B and 9S… “And our friends…”

“You can keep your friends,” he insisted, his fingers twitching with anticipation. “As pets, if you must, but nevertheless…”

Popola looked Shaft in the eyes, brushed aside an errant lock of her hair that had fallen over her forehead, swallowed a lump in her throat, and reached out. She’d made her decision.

Shaft’s grin widened.

Still clutching her spellbook, Popola held out her stripped-bare, skeletal hand just above Shaft’s bony, ivory-pale hand. The glistening bare machinery of her fingers trembled as she spoke an incantation.

Nothing happened.

All the same, though, Shaft’s grin soured. “So be it,” he spat darkly, drawing back his hand and lifting himself off the ground. Of all things, he sounded truly *hurt*.

Popola leaped back and narrowly dodged a salvo of magical blasts, throwing out her own counterspells wherever she saw an opening. Shaft, of course, deflected, parried, and dodged her attacks with ease. It didn’t matter. She was only stalling for time—her plan to defeat him had already been set in motion. All she had to do now was hope for the best.

A burst of blue flame struck her in the waist, knocking her to the ground. The back of her head cracked against a rock embedded in the dirt; static flickered through her visual display. She reached down to appraise whatever injury she’d gotten—she couldn’t feel any pain, but magic was nothing if not unpredictable—and felt her belt slither away from her touch, unbuckling itself and transforming into a sleek black snake, its obsidian-colored scales gleaming wetly in the light from Shaft’s crystal ball.

She had to admit, Shaft *did* have a knack for the theatrical.

The snake reared back and opened its maw, revealing its pink mouth, cavernous gullet, and two wicked ivory fangs, then lunged at her. Popola grabbed it, her skeletal fingers tightening around the snake’s neck until its bones crumbled under her grip and its head went limp. Throwing the belt-snake aside, Popola scurried away as Shaft continued his assault.

*Come on… Any minute now…*

Another bolt of the same spell tangled itself in her hair; the next thing Popola knew, a scarlet snake was curling itself around her shoulder. She whacked its head with her book, then felt another snake wrap itself around her wrist, squeezing itself tighter and tighter, straining the delicate servos buried in her chassis. Her grip on the book began to weaken.

Popola dived for Devola’s bag, fighting with the snakes growing out of her hair, and rifled through
it until she found a utility knife. One of the two snakes hissed and yawned, revealing its fangs, as it reared back to stab at her; a third one wrapped itself around her neck and began to squeeze, pressing its smooth, cold, scaly skin against hers and crushing her throat.

Struggling against the snakes’ muscular bodies wrapped around her arms and neck, Popola took the knife, raised it behind her head, and with one clean stroke severed her hair at her neck; both snakes immediately loosened their grips on her and fell to the ground, writhing weakly as their bodies dissolved into flurries of blue sparks.

Shaft laughed. Popola threw her knife at him; he swatted it out of the air, though the blade managed to score a light cut across the back of his bony hand.

“Poor show,” he spat. A trickle of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth and dribbled down his chin. “I see. You’re no spellcaster at all, child… merely a common cretin playing pretend—”

He wiped his chin on his hand and looked at the bloody smear, bemused. Popola felt her spirits lift. It was working!

Shaft began to cough. Phlegm and spittle flew from his lips. “Poison, child? You knave!” he spat as blood speckled his pale knuckles. “Have you no dignity?”

“That spell wasn’t a dud.” Popola pulled herself to her feet, struggling to keep hold of the book. “That was the first spell I ever learned—how to conjure a single flower. So I conjured white snakeroot… inside your stomach.”

Shaft doubled over, clutching at his stomach as his robes pooled around him, gagging and retching. “You… vermin…” he croaked between dry heaves.

“Let my sister go.”

“Impudent ch-child! You are not—not worthy—” He spat out a wad of blood and pink-tinged froth, heaved, and vomited a mass of red and black onto the grass. Blood trickled from his nostrils and down his chin. “Subtle trickery… an insult to the art… How dare you—y-you use magic… like a thief… or an—assassin…”

Popola was unmoved by his suffering. “Let her go. Let her go, and I’ll remove the poison.”

Shaft pulled himself to his feet, swaying uneasily, one hand still clutching his gut. His blood- and bile-stained face was twisted grotesquely, anger and shame etched into every wrinkle lining his paper-like skin. He held out a gnarled, trembling claw. “If you wish to act like vermin,” he hissed, “then so be it!”

A2 felt an icy dagger plunge into her black box as hollow, ringing footfalls echoed through the library. The brand on her shoulder burned so painfully that it overwhelmed the bullet holes riddling her body. The pain was like a fog filling up her chassis, a red miasma clouding her eyes, a hollow emptiness filling her stomach.

“Stray dogs put their masters through so much trouble, don’t they, A2?”

Olrox’s voice filled her head like a bell tolling right in her ear. Low, smooth, sly, sonorous, echoing to fill the room. A2 looked over her shoulder and felt herself pivot, turning on her heel to face the man who would be her master.

Olrox wore the same sleek, spiny violet armor as last time, the ivory-gilded armor plating clinging
to his slender frame, the sharp and tall collarpiece framing a round glass helmet as black and lustrous as obsidian. The helmet still had a spiderweb of cracks, a lattice of white fractures radiating outward from where he’d been stabbed, and yet it still hid his face.

“I thought I’d catch up to you sooner,” he said, splaying out his hands. “But, better late than never, I suppose, isn’t it?”

A2 snarled and drew her sword, lunging at him. No matter what Alucard had said, a brand on her shoulder wasn’t going to stop her from running this bastard through! She just had to engage B-mode and she’d skewer him in an instant.

B-mode was a feature reserved only for prototype models—at least, as far as A2 knew (she’d never seen any of the newer YoRHa models use it). It boosted her speed, her strength, everything, at the cost of the insane strain it put on her body. It would leave her weak and vulnerable for hours afterward, so she used it as sparingly as she could.

But now, here, with that power, she could run Olrox through and finish him off for good—

Her joints seized, freezing her in place just in front of Olrox, the tip of her blade hovering just over the lattice of cracks running through the side of his helmet. Just one thrust and she could ki—

Just one thrust and she could ki—

She could—

She’d been holding her breath. She hadn’t even realized it until the tension in her muscles broke and she expelled the hot air filling her lungs. Her hand shook, her blade trembled. Her head throbbed. It felt as though her skull was shrinking. There was a pressure in her head that seemed to be throttling her circuits.

She had to—

She had—

…What did she have to do?

Olrox let out a ringing, sonorous chuckle and slowly wagged his finger at her. “Now, now, A2,” he said, pinching her sword between two armored fingers, “is that any way to behave?”

With a flick of his wrist, he snapped the blade of the sword in half. The shattered blade clattered to the floor, leaving A2 holding nothing but a hilt with a useless, stubby shard of metal sticking out of it.

“Now put that thing down,” he told her, “before you put someone’s eye out with it.”

Before she could think about doing it, A2 felt her fingers uncurl from around the hilt. The useless half of her sword fell to the floor to join its other, equally useless half.

“Good girl.” There was a smug swagger in Olrox’s loose, confident body language as his gauntleted hand slipped under her chin, his spiked fingertips raking with surprising gentleness against her skin.

A2’s skin crawled. The light dusting of fur on her skin stood on end and she sucked air through her clenched teeth. She glanced over her shoulder and spied a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye as 4S and his pod slipped into the shadows. Smart kid.
“Don’t fight it,” Olrox hissed sharply. “Come now, it’s not so bad, is it?”

The fog wrapped around A2’s circuits thickened; she felt her muscles and her chassis loosen. It wasn’t so bad. Actually, it felt good, sort of...

Olrox’s hand slipped upward, brushing across her cheek, and cupped itself around her ear. A2 felt like her insides were melting. There wasn’t any more tension in her body. There wasn’t even any more pain. “Dread it all you like, run from it all you like,” he said, “but deep down within every beast is a good dog who wants to please her master. Isn’t that right?”

A2 blinked. It was, wasn’t it? From the very beginning of her exile, she’d have gone back to White in a heartbeat if she’d been allowed to, after all. If White came down to her right now and offered to welcome her back into the fold, back into YoRHa, wouldn’t she say yes? Wasn’t Olrox right? Her tail was starting to wag. Wasn’t that proof that he was right? That she wanted this? That it wasn’t so frightening for him to be her m—

She took a halting step backward, biting her tongue to rid her mind of the fuzziness clogging her circuitry. Her head began to clear; as the world around her sharpened back into focus, she thought she heard 4S and his pod muttering among themselves in the shadows. The coppery, oily tang of bloody coolant filled her mouth and stung her nose. What was she thinking?

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Olrox pouted, disappointed.

A2 stopped being like that.

It was like a switch had been flipped. Alucard had been right—Olrox really did have total control over her, mind and body alike.

Even though she could feel the pressure in her mind strengthening, darkening every circuit that lit up with a spark of fear, she still felt a pang of terror. He really—

Don’t be like that, his voice echoed in her head, coiling in her brain, nestling in the circuitry.

She didn’t feel scared. Of course she wasn’t scared. Why would she be? Dogs longed for their masters, just as he said...

Olrox reached out for her again, cupping her cheek in his cold hand. “Enough of this, A2.” There was a soft, almost tender undercurrent to his voice. “Let’s go hom—"

A gunshot silenced him, the loud, ringing roar swallowing up his voice. A gossamer strand shot across the air; his hand spasmed and swung away in a wide arc.

“What?” he hissed, leaping back and crouching into a combat stance, blazing tongues of blue fire wreathing his curled, clawed fingers.

A2 looked up in the direction of the gunshot. There, standing in one of the windows, talons curled around the sill, framed by crumbling brick and lit with cold light by the flickering blue fire Olrox had called forth, was none other than the demon gunslinger Leraje. Wisps of smoke curled from the tip of her rifle’s barrel.

“Leraje!” Olrox barked. “What are you doing?”

“You’re spoiling my fun, Olrox,” Leraje said, slinging the rifle over her shoulder and leaping to the floor. “I promised that girl I’d give her an hour to match skills with me. You came too soon.” She sounded surprisingly petulant. “But then again,” she added, a wry grin spreading across her
“chiseled, elfin face, “you always did, didn’t you?”

“How dare you! I’m one of Lord Dracula’s lieutenants, you know!” Olrox jabbed a pointed finger at her.

“And I,” Leraje responded, “am—”

“Yes, yes, the Great Marquise of Hell with thirty legions of demons under your command, I know,” Olrox spat. “I summoned you here and asked you to deliver A2 to me. You have done so. Thank you; that will be all.” He grabbed A2 by the shoulder.

A2 didn’t resist, no matter how cold and hard Olrox’s metal talons were against her bare skin, no matter how much it hurt for that cold metal to press against cracked and burned skin. The thought didn’t even occur to her. It felt as though any small part of her mind that had wanted to go against his wishes had been driven down so deeply that it had left her body and sunk below the ground.

“Now, A2, you will—”

Another shot rang out. Leraje held her pistol aloft. “Ah-ah-ah! True, Olrox, you did summon me and ask me to deliver A2 to you,” she said as she closed the distance between herself and Olrox, “and as you can see, deliver her I did, but…”

Five more shots rang out. Olrox reeled backward. A2 felt her stomach lurch and her feet leave the ground, the world spinning around her.

“I never said I would let you keep her!” Leraje called out, laughing, as she bolted out of the library with A2 slung over her shoulder.

“How dare you!” Olrox roared. “Leraje, you traitor—!”

A burst of gunfire swallowed up his words—not from either of Leraje’s guns, but from 4S’s pod. Olrox collapsed and screamed as though a bucket of acid had just been upended over his head.

As soon as Olrox was out of sight, it was as though a spell had been broken. The fuzzy clouds and leaden weights filling A2’s head faded away; her senses sharpened, her pulse quickened, and her muscles tightened.

“What the fuck?” she growled, clutching at Leraje and burying her claws in her back. The demon’s arm was wrapped tightly around her waist, pinning her against her shoulder. “Let me go!”

“I would appreciate some gratitude from you,” Leraje huffed as she booked it across the castle, leaping up the walls and onto the rooftop. Shingles cracked under her talons. A2’s sodden hair fell over her eyes in thick, plastered-together strands and bounced with every move the demon made. “A simple ‘thank you’ will suffice at the very least!”

“Fuck off!”

Leraje made an exasperated gagging noise. “You don’t have a clue what I just saved you from, do you? Why, just earlier today I found a poor girl at the bottom of a cliff who was trying to kill herself because her master Olrox ordered her to! Is that the life you want?”

“All in good fun!” Leraje spat back, skidding to a halt as a cluster of machines sprang up around her. Torn-away shingles flew through the air. “Like I said, I would have let you go if you’d lasted
an hour!"

With a flourish of her hand, she reloaded her revolver and fired. Gunshot after gunshot rang out, bullets zipping through the air as they tore through the machines. As soon as she found an opening, she picked up the pace and kept running.

A quadrupedal machine adorned in moss-stained armor leaped in front of her. **STOP!** it growled in a booming electronic gurgle.

“A metal steed!” Leraje exclaimed. “Wonderful!”

A2 felt her stomach lurch again as Leraje leaped onto the machine’s back, one hand gripping the handle on its neck, her legs kicking against its sides.

“Giddyup! We must fly!” Leraje shouted, straddling the quadrupedal machine. “Death stalks us!”

The machine bucked and jerked, spasming wildly in a desperate attempt to throw its passengers off. A2 dangled helplessly from Leraje’s grip, struggling to regain feeling in her weakened limbs as they flopped limply in the air. **GET OFF ME!**

“Stop whining and do as you’re told!”

“I SERVE THE FOREST KING!”

“No! Horses say ‘neigh,’ you mechanical imbecile!” Leraje shouted back, digging her heels ineffectually into the machine’s sides. “Get it right, damn you!”

Hearing the demon and the unwilling mount bicker made A2 wish she could rip her ears off.

The machine finally threw the two of them off its back and off the roof, sending them tumbling through the air. Leraje righted herself and landed in the courtyard on her feet, the force of the impact rattling A2’s chassis. “So much for that,” she grumbled. “What a stupid horse.”

She hurried along on foot, A2 still dangling off her shoulder. “Not much farther,” she reassured her. “I doubt Olrox will be able to track us once we reach the woods. To be quite honest, he is such a pompous buffoon; it’s a wonder Dracula even bothered to resurrect him—”

A2 felt an icy throb in her chest and a chill run down her spine. She brushed the hair out of her eyes just in time to see a violet blur zooming toward her.

“Behind you—”

The world spun in a dizzying, blurry arc as static rolled across A2’s field of vision. She hit the ground hard. Her arm crumpled against the cracked flagstones of the castle’s courtyard, already severely weakened by the bullet holes studding it from shoulder to wrist. Leraje still clung to her with a death grip, pressing her tightly against her shoulder.

Olrox loomed over the two of them, half-hidden by the blurry cage of hair that had fallen over A2’s eyes. Fire wreathed his clenched fists and ran up his arms, casting flickering lights against his polished violet armor and black helmet.

“Pompous buffoon, am I?” he spat. “At least I don’t preside over an empty kingdom, Great Marquise.”
A2 felt a cold hunk of metal press itself against her ear. She shivered.

Olrox cocked her head. “Oh? What are you going to do, blow her brains out? What little of them she has?” He looked down at A2. In spite of his opaque helmet, A2 could feel his eyes meeting hers, and the pressure, the fogginess, the sense that her thoughts were wriggling through thick, viscous mud, all started to come back. “Now, A2, get up and—”

The gun went off, its barrel pressed against A2’s ear. The gunshot was a burst of heat against the side of her head, searing and agonizing, the blast loud enough to swallow up Olrox’s words—and everything else.

Well, at least that had shut Leraje up.

Still, she’d been issued a command, and the brand forced A2 to obey. She felt herself pull herself upright, her limbs moving as though they were tied to strings. However, whatever Olrox had commanded her to do next had fallen on deaf ears. Even now, she could hear nothing but a dull, throbbing ringing in both ears, not just the one Leraje had held the gun against.

Now, if she could just activate B-mode and punch Olrox in the face while he was powerless to order her around—

Her arms wouldn’t move. It was like someone had hacked into her and disabled all of her combat protocols.

Dammit! She couldn’t even fight him with her bare hands?

Olrox’s flame-wreathed gauntlet cracked soundlessly against her cheek; sending her reeling backward and throwing a shower of cobalt-blue sparks into the air. A2 mustered what little defenses she could as Olrox laid into her, venting his frustration into his fists. He was good, too good—maybe better than he’d been during their first fight, or maybe A2 was just that hampered from not being able to fight back.

What had he said before about fighting people in order to understand them? He moved like he knew what she was going to do before she did it now. Had he figured her out that quickly?

Leraje pulled her back and fired five rounds at him, her revolver kicking back and the muzzle flaring with little more sound than a mouse’s whisper. Olrox disappeared before the bullets hit him; a blink of an eye later, he was behind her, jabbing a spiked elbow into the small of her back and knocking her off her feet as the bullets she’d fired bounced back, cutting ragged furrows in her clothes and boring bloody gashes in her skin. Dark, hot blood sizzled on the spiny armor protruding from Olrox’s elbow as he yanked it out of her back.

A2 felt Olrox’s fingers curl around her throat, his spiny fingertips gouging holes in her neck as he lifted her off her feet. Static speckled the corners of her vision. And she couldn’t even fight back—Dammit! She should have stayed at the village! She should have stayed with Four…

She felt something hot and wet spill down her cheeks. Four. Poor Four. She could never be forgiven for what she’d done to her. She deserved to die. She deserved worse than that. Even being Olrox’s slave was too good for her.

“Kill me!” she screamed into Olrox’s featureless helmet. “Go ahead and kill me!” She screamed as loud as she could, but no sound reached her ears. She only knew she was screaming from the strained vibrations of her throat under Olrox’s crushing grip.

Sound began to creep back into the world—mostly low frequencies at first, dull thuds and muffled
booms, then gradually higher frequencies, like layers of thick cotton being peeled away from A2’s ears one by one. She gritted her teeth, gagging as Olrox’s palm pressed deeper into the hollow of her throat, the air in her lungs growing hot and stale.

“…as I say!” Olrox was barking at her. “Why won’t you do as I say?”

Of all the times for A2 to regain her hearing, this had to be the worst possible time. Any second now, Olrox would tell her to do something and she would be powerless to resist.

A sustained roar of gunfire split the air like a thousand thunderclaps in a row as a spray of silver flashes of light battered Olrox’s armor, covering it in scorched and blackened pockmarks. Olrox’s fingers jerked and spasmed, his clenched fist flying open and his grip around A2’s neck breaking.

A2 fell flat on her back. One of the bullets flying through the air grazed her arm, stinging so mind-numbingly painfully that if not for the tiny scar it left in its wake, she’d have thought the bullet had burrowed clear through her chassis. A patch of skin around the little scar turned red and scabrous.

A quadrupedal machine galloped across the courtyard, carrying 4S on its back. The wind whipped at his coat and the tails of his visor. His pod floated beside him, its hull split open to reveal the smoking machine gun turret within.

The machine’s optical sensors had shifted from red to a placid green. It bent its legs and lowered itself to the ground as 4S held out his hand to A2. “You two—get on!” he shouted.

Leraje leaped to her feet and threw herself and A2 onto the mechanical mount’s back. “Yes!” she cried out with joyous laughter as the machine took off, leaving Olrox in its dust as he struggled to his feet.

Hearing Shaft mutter a hateful oath under his breath and expecting an attack, Popola raised her book to defend herself and launch a counterattack, only for it to slip from her fingers like butter and fall to the ground spine-up.

Her head pounded and throbbed, the pulsing whir of her core ringing in her ears as she staggered backward, her feet slipping in her boots as something cold washed through her chassis. The shadow-wreathed clearing, illuminated only by the light from Shaft’s crystal ball, swirled around her.

Popola felt her breath grow short and clutched at her chest as a prickling sensation ran up her body from the tips of her toes to the tips of her ears. It was as though a forest of tiny needles were poking through her skin—needles that rustled in the cold air. There was a sharp pain at the base of her spine and another pressing against her sinuses, so strong she felt as though her spine were trying to rip itself out of her body and her head was about to explode.

Shaft rose to his full height, a bitterly triumphant, hateful grin stretching across his face even as he struggled to hold in the contents of his stomach. Popola hadn’t realized how tall he was. At least two meters… no, three… four?

She felt the cold air brush against her shoulders, looked down, and saw her empty sleeves dangling far past the tips of her fingers. The exposed chassis of her forearm and hand fell apart and slipped through her sleeve, falling to the grass in a heap of metal.

As her oversized clothes sloughed off her body and pooled around her feet, she fell to the ground on all fours, her feet slipping easily from her boots, and hit her head against something hard—it took her a second, once the stars had stopped dancing in front of her eyes, to realize it was the
cover of her spellbook. But—why was *it* getting bigger, too? It was bigger than *her*!

Her eyes watered and stung as though they’d been pricked with needles; as her vision cleared, every color she could see, washed out and sickly as they were from the cold light of Shaft’s crystal ball floating overhead, suddenly turned *strange*. She couldn’t explain how, but some hues were oddly desaturated, while others lit up oddly fluorescent; the red and purple of Shaft’s robes seemed to glow.

Her head aching, Popola reached up and gingerly rubbed her forehead, her forepaw gently brushing her fur—

*What?*

She wrinkled her nose, wriggled her whiskers, and let out a shocked squeak.

> “Such an ignominious end for such a promising sorceress-to-be,” Shaft boomed, looming over her, as tall as one of the crumbling skyscrapers towering over the city ruins. Even the slightest pained whisper hissing from his mouth stabbed at Popola’s ears as though he were shouting. And it wasn’t just that he was *louder*—booming, low-pitched rumbles and keening high-pitched screeches that had previously gone unheard weaved their way through his voice. “*But it is an end you have earned through your petty, low-minded blasphemy of the noblest of mystic arts!*”

As Shaft crouched down, his gnarled, sickly pale hand looming above her like the hand of God, Popola scurried as best she could under the propped-up spine of the book for shelter, the tall blades of grass surrounding her tickling her whiskers. It was slow going, though, since the arm Shaft had stripped of its flesh had crumbled away during her transformation, forcing her into an awkward three-legged gait. Just before she could hide herself, though she felt a sharp pinch at the tip of her tail and her stomach lurched as she was dragged away from the book and lifted high off the ground, the world spinning around her. She pawed desperately at the grass for purchase, and then futilely at thin air, as Shaft lifted her up higher and higher until the two of them were more or less at eye level and the grass lay at the bottom of a dizzying drop.

Popola hung upside down, legs windmilling, head pounding, as every detail of Shaft’s pale face filled her field of vision, every pore a crater, every wrinkle a fault line, every bump and mole a mountain; his yellowed eyes were tinged orange from broken blood vessels; his alabaster lips were cracked and chapped like salt flats.

> “Well? What spell will you cast *now*?” he asked, punctuating his question with a mocking laugh. His hot, stale, vomit-tasting breath buffeted her like a gust of wind and irritated her sensitive whiskers, not to mention her nose.

Popola struggled to picture a spell in her mind’s eye and recite an incantation, *any* incantation, but produced nothing but a dismayed squeak.

> “Of course, though,” Shaft added with a knowing, sardonic little sideways grin, “how can you cast a spell… when you are unable to speak?”

She struggled in vain against his grip, futilely pawing at the empty air as she dangled helplessly in front of him. The base of her tail ached from the strain Shaft’s grip and the weight of her body was putting on it.

> “Magic is an art which demands theatricality. One must be bombastic, *grandiose*, to do it justice.” Shaft laughed. “This tiny form suits you, you odious little pest. It is as meek, quiet, and small as your imagination.”
Popola glanced at the amber crystal holding Devola prisoner. She was not even five meters away and yet she had never felt so far away from her. Of course, to a mouse not much more than ten centimeters long from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail, five meters was so much greater of a distance. And, of course, trapped in Shaft’s clutches, it might as well have been infinity.

“Now,” he hissed at her, flecks of spit and blood and bile speckling her face, “what is to be done with you? Shall I leave you here so that an owl may swoop down and swallow you whole for dinner? Shall I take you to my study and lock you in a cage so that you may amuse me while I study the dark arts? Shall I feed you to my cat and let him toy with you to his heart’s content until he finally deigns to kill you? Shall I feed you to my snake and let him crush every bone in your body in his gullet as his stomach acids dissolve you alive?”

Of all the things Popola wished she could say, all that came out was a timid, mousy *eep*.

Shaft reached out and pinched one of her hind legs between his finger and thumb. “Oh, but whatever I decide to do with you… I can’t have you running around to do as you please, can I?”

Before Popola could realize what he was about to do to her, he pressed down with a hard, sudden jolt of force and snapped her leg like a dry twig. The rush of pain that ensued, flooding from her leg through the rest of her tiny body and clouding her mind, was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. Unlike pain sensors, her nerves didn’t *shut down* when they overloaded—they just screamed until they deafened the rest of her body.

Shaft laughed. “And what is to be done about your sister?” he hissed, snakelike. His yellowed eyes roved across the clearing to the amber crystal encasing Devola in suspended animation and lit up. “Perhaps we shall take our leave of this place and let her thaw out all by her lonesome…”

Popola could barely breathe. Her skin felt too small to fit all her innards, especially her lungs pressing against her ribs and her heart rattling in her chest. Every throb of her pulse, rapid as a hummingbird’s, made her feel as though she were about to explode.

“Or shall I transform her into a mouse as well, and let the two of you become part of the food chain together?” Shaft asked her.

“No!” she cried out, her tiny voice as loud as she could make it.

Shaft jolted as though he’d just received an electric shock and let go of her, letting her fall to the ground. “What?” he gasped, reeling backward like a lightweight who’d just taken a knockout punch. *You—How did you talk?*

Popola fell into the grass. Despite the soft grass breaking her fall, the impact hurt much more than she’d expected; she was small enough that falling from not even two meters in the air was akin to tumbling off the roof of a building. Ignoring the smarting pain in her shoulder, she hobbled toward the book and wriggled her way underneath it. Jolts of pain shot through her broken leg from even the slightest movement.

Propped up by its front and back cover into a sort of an A-shape, the spellbook offered just enough space for her to eke out a temporary shelter. The frail, musty pages looming over her brushed against her back, their rough texture like sandpaper. Like static electricity leaping off the paper and catching on her fur, Popola felt a heady rush of electricity run through her body, momentarily dulling the pain in her hind leg from a screaming burn to a dull throb.

She heard Shaft stomp around outside looking for her. Struggling to slow her racing pulse and calm herself, she huddled in the corner of the makeshift shelter so that one of its papery curtains draped
itself over her and kept pouring its energy into her body.

What did she have?

Small body. No thumbs. One missing foreleg and one severely-fractured hind leg. Whiskers. A tail. Hardly enough to take down a ten-thousand-year-old master of dark magic. But she still had her mind, and she still had her spellbook, and somehow, she still had her voice. If she could be clever, that could be enough.

She curled up and laid a paw against her injured leg, feeling bone jutting out under a thin layer of skin and choking down a sharp cry of pain. “Refectio,” she whispered, letting ripples of faint aquamarine light wash over the affected area. The pain dulled even more, fading to an even weaker throbbing as the bones set themselves back into place and glued themselves back together.

She wiggled her leg experimentally. It still hurt—the bones weren’t fully healed yet. She needed to cast the spell again, for just a few seconds longer…

Bloodstained, rank-smelling fingers curled under the book and ripped it away from her. Popola gasped as Shaft stared down at her with a cruel sneer on his face and lifted the book high above her.

“Doing some light reading, are we?” he spat. He ripped a page from the book and crumpled it in his fist. “Here. You may have this one. I shall keep the rest.”

The crumpled wad of paper fell to the ground. It didn’t have any words on it; it had been torn from the back of the book, which Popola wasn’t even close to reaching. She reached out for the page and placed a paw against its yellowed, brittle surface, digging her claws into it as a faint but extant current ran up her foreleg.

With all the magic she could pull from the page, she cast another spell to summon a plant inside Shaft’s stomach.

“That useless incantation again…” Shaft grinned. “What did you conjure this time? Deadly nightshade? Hemlock? Castor oil seeds? Ha! Useless! Useless, useless, useless!” He kicked her, the toe of his boot slamming into her side like a wrecking ball and throwing her across the grass. “Even the deadliest poison is nothing but an inconvenience to me. I have immunized myself against every single one, from arsenic to iocane powder!”

“I know,” Popola gasped, her head spinning from the pain as she lay sprawled out on the grass. “That’s why… I planted… kudzu vines…”

Shaft’s brow furrowed. “Kudzu? And what do you expect that to accomplish, you stupid little rodent?”

“This.” Popola curled up against the crumpled wad of paper, trying to absorb from it everything it had left. She raised her paw. “Melio Tempus!”

“Useless,” Shaft sneered, flipping through the book. “Ah, here’s a spell you should have learned a long time ago! Arma Fe—”

He choked and gagged on his words, a sickly pallor sweeping across his face and turning his alabaster skin a sickly ashen. His eyes bulged, a visible lump forming in his throat; he dropped the book to the ground and clutched his stomach with both hands, his fingers digging into his robes as though he was trying to reach inside himself.
Popola gasped, pouring everything she had, everything this fragment of the book could give her, into the spell. It was like a drain had opened up in the back of her head and everything inside was pouring out. The first of the vines ripped themselves free of Shaft’s lips, then more, then more—a waterfall of greenery, blossoming with leaves and purple flowers.

“Release my sister!” she ordered him. “Let her go! Now!”

“And why—sh-should I?” Shaft gurgled, gagging on the vines pouring like vomit from his mouth. “Think you I fear death? I am its champion! Strangle me—choke me—rip me to shreds—” The vines tore the corners of his mouth and cracked his lips, sending more rivulets of blood down his pale chin. His throat bulged and undulated. “I live—I die—I live again! Like my m-master—Lord D-Dracula… I exist… eternally…” His voice faded, overpowered by the slick slithering sounds of vines running through his trachea and his pained, quiet gagging.

Popola gritted her teeth. Damn this man—he really wasn’t afraid to die, no matter how painfully. She couldn’t threaten him into undoing the spell that had ensnared Devola, no matter how much she tortured him.

“Please,” she whispered.

“No…” Shaft let out a weak laugh that quickly turned into a death rattle. “No, I shan’t… the spell—will wear off on its own—eventually… But how long will you last out here in the woods, pest, too weak to run, too hurt to hide? Y-You… will make a f—fine meal… for a bird… or a fox… or a snake—long before—long before—the crystal sh-shatters… and your d-dear sister… emerges from… her… tomb…”

Popola realized that his spite was a wall she would never break no matter how hard she pressed him or how much she begged, and with that realization, the words she’d been planning to speak fled from her mind like cockroaches scurrying from light into darkness.

“Then die,” she snarled instead, pressing herself closer against the crumpled page as though it would channel more magic into her body, “and remember this pain! You wanted a flashy, grandiose spell? Take this! Abraca-fuck you!”

Shaft let out a muffled, strangled scream as his belly bulged and burst open, freeing a mass of growing vines that spewed out, stained with blood and bile, like slick entrails. The wrinkled wattle of his throat inflated, toadlike, its wrinkles unfolding and smoothing themselves out, before bursting in a shower of blood, bone, and plant matter. The vines ripped his nose open and poured from his nasal cavity, spilled from his eardrums, poured out from his sleeves and the layers of his voluminous robes, and tore through his jaw, breaking apart the bone like the wall of a crumbling dam and forming a widening bloody gash from his mouth down to his sternum. Vines choked his exposed lungs and curled around his heart like boa constrictors smothering their prey. The swelling mass of greenery overtook his body at last, engulfing his still-twitching limbs and ripping through his blood-soaked, ornate robes.

Soon, there was nothing left but scraps; exhausted, Popola let go of the page and collapsed. Every part of her ached; every part of her felt drained. She felt like too little lubricant spread over too much machinery.

Looking upon Shaft’s bloodstained remains, Popola felt guilty to feel such relief. He’d been human, after all…

No. He had been a monster.
The crystal ball overhead floated through the air and vanished into the trees, taking its sickly light with it and bathing the clearing in darkness once more. The amber pillar imprisoning Devola’s frozen body, though, glowed with a dim and dusky light, Devola’s form silhouetted within.

“Dev…”

Popola inched her way to the crystalline pillar, struggling against her own maimed and aching body. Every halting step she took seemed to bring her no closer to the pillar, as though Shaft in his dying act had cursed her by putting an infinite span of space between her and her sister. Or maybe she was just very small and very tired and very weak…

The forest was alive with sounds. Rustling leaves, chirping insects, the occasional snap of a dead branch or dry twig; in the distance, in the direction of Pascal’s village, faint and scattered shouts carried through the air. Every sound stinging Popola’s ears had her on edge as she thought of the predators lurking in these woods…and here she was, so vulnerable, such easy prey.

Eventually, everything began to go dark, and as the last of her strength drained from her body, Popola lay against the cold grass and gazed up at the crystal pillar looming over her, well out of reach.

4S rode the machine into the forest, keeping a brisk pace even through the tangled and twisted web of shadow-wreathed trees, expertly dashing through the tiniest gaps between trees and under fallen logs, leaping across glistening brooks. The scenery flashed only briefly through the light cast by his pod’s floodlights. A2 watched the forest pass by with dazed disinterest as the machine’s chassis shuddered underneath her, her black box still throbbing with adrenaline in her chest.

Leraje clapped him on the shoulder. “Young boy, how did you tame this obstinate beast?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s easy,” 4S replied. “I just hacked it. Nothing to it!”

“‘Nothing to it,’ he says,” she marveled. “Boy, should you die and go to Hell, I give you my promise as a Great Marquise that you shall not have red-hot pokers inserted in your various orifices!”

“Uh… thanks?”

“The pokers will instead be ice cold. It is quite refreshing!”

“Uh… thanks,” 4S repeated.

“You’re welcome!”

The pod bobbed in the air, struggling just a little to keep up with the machine. It brushed a little too closely against A2 for comfort; she winced as its hull grazed her shoulder, and not just because both shoulders, along with one arm and her legs and back, felt like they would crumble into dust at the slightest provocation. Even though pods couldn’t do anything on their own, they were stubborn as mules when it came to their thought patterns. It probably still wanted 4S to let it kill her.

The pod dug its claws into A2’s collar. “Statement: This support unit is struggling to maintain proper airspeed. This support unit requests Unit A2’s assistance.”

A2 squinted at it, averting her eyes from the blinding glare of its floodlight. “Oh? What happened to wanting me dead?”
“That’s on hold for now,” 4S told her. “YoRHa or fugitive, we’re all on the same side against the vampires, right?”

“I guess,” she muttered, grabbing onto the pod’s arm.

She shivered as the wind blew over her damp hair, sodden clothes, and soaked hair, and tightened her grip on the galloping machine. She’d give anything to have a thick, warm coat of fur right now. Moonrise couldn’t come soon enough. If the last time she’d transformed had been any indication, turning into a wolf would probably take care of all the bullet holes riddling her body, too.

4S glanced over his shoulder at her, looking over Leraje at her. “Hey, are you cold?”

A2 rolled her eyes. “As if you could do anything about it.”

“I could hack into you and disable your temperature sensors. Then you wouldn’t be cold.”

“Hmph.”

4S frowned. “Are you sure?”

A2 looked down at the ground as it sped past and wondered if it was too late to jump off and let the forest do with her as it wanted. Curious, she began to loosen her grip, allowing herself to slip ever closer to falling off the machine altogether…

Leraje caught her as she slipped, grabbing her with an iron grip around her least-injured arm. “Ah, be careful there. Should Olrox catch up with you, I won’t be able to hunt you properly!”

“Shame,” A2 retorted flatly.

“Kill the lights, pod,” 4S said. “I’ve stabilized my connection to the machine’s optical sensors.”

The pod shut off its floodlight, allowing darkness to flood the forest yet again. A2 could discern some detail as the forest rushed past her, shadow against shadow, but not much, and it all went by too quickly for her to focus on anything.

Except the pair of red lights in the distance. Red lights, just larger than pinpricks, too foggy and eerie to be the lights of machine optical sensors she was more accustomed to seeing in this place.

Her ears perked up and flicked forward. Her tail lashed angrily as an irritable, anxious chill ran up her spine and squeezed her aching muscles. Something was crashing through the underbrush toward her. She sniffed the air. Past the sweet, smoky perfume Leraje wore, past the odor of grease and engine oil that clung to the mechanical steed, past the scents of the forest was…

Leraje’s nostrils flared and her lips peeled back as she bared her teeth. Without a word, she whipped her revolver out from the holster on her hip and fired three shots into the woods. Leaves rustled and branches snapped in the distance as zigzagging strands of light traced the bullets’ paths through the woods.

“Did you get it?” 4S asked.

A strained, pinched yelp echoed through the forest.

“One hit.” Leraje sniffed the air. “All the better to track it…”

She was frowning, though; there was little enthusiasm or thrill writ on her face, a far cry from her attitude back at the castle. It seemed she wasn’t quite so confident when she was in unfamiliar
territory and couldn’t chart out her shots as easily. If A2 had chosen this forest as their arena, she could’ve kicked Leraje’s ass in a matter of minutes.

“Boy,” she said, tapping 4S on the shoulder urgently, “you may wish to ‘hack’ A2 and deactivate her ear… sensors.”

“Huh?” 4S’s mouth curled with bemusement. “Why?”

The underbrush exploded. A2 felt foggy tendrils wrap anew around her head. “Just do it, Four!” she barked.

Two monsters burst from the forest onto the winding path and galloped behind the mechanical steed. One was an enormous, shaggy wolfish creature, its furry head and long snout like a dart, its shoulder and chest broad, its legs lean and muscular. It stood nearly two meters tall, its head bobbing up and down as its long legs pushed it forward and the wind whipped through its long, thick coat of fur. The other monster was the man riding the beast—Olrox.

A2’s eyes met the giant wolf’s. There was no sign of intelligence there, or even consciousness. As different as the light in them was, they were like machine eyes in that respect. This creature had no thoughts or feelings of its own. Was that what Olrox wanted to use her for? Was that what he wanted her to become?

“Olrox howled, the sound of his voice wrapping around the sound of his mount’s wails. “I order you to—”

There was a pop in both her ears and the whole world went silent. A2 clung tighter to the machine as it weaved through the woods, struggling to shake off Olrox and his mount. She growled impotently at him. That stupid brand he’d burned into her skin—she couldn’t even think about fighting back! How dare he make her so useless?

Someday, she’d pay him back with int—

Dammit! Even that got smothered!

Leraje braced her arm against A2’s shoulder, lined up a shot, and fired. The muzzle flash was searing against A2’s eyes; the kickback from the rifle vibrated through her shoulder. A mist of blood erupted from the wolf’s shoulder, forcing it to falter and lose ground. Another two shots pinged off the sharp angles of Olrox’s armor, bounced off the trees with showers of pulverized bark, and struck the wolf’s hind legs, snapping its tendons. The wolf’s hind legs splayed out; the beast skidded across the ground, caught its front paws on an exposed root, and flipped over.

As the wolf and its rider crumpled to a heap and fell out of sight, Leraje reached into a satchel at her side and pulled out a handful of bullets, slamming them into her revolver’s chamber and flicking it shut.

4S kept driving the machine through the forest, navigating through the dark, vine-choked underbrush, forcing the machine through tighter and narrower gaps between trees and rocks. A flash of blue fire flickered behind the shadow-wreathed silhouettes of trees flying by. Olrox’s mount, restored, crested the top of a steep slope to their side and started to flank them.

Leraje fired another six shots at Olrox, but he conjured a ring of fiery skulls in the air to absorb each bullet before it could either strike him or his mount or ricochet through the forest. In return, he lobbed a ball of fire at the galloping machine and its passenger.

4S jerked the reins and forced the machine to veer away, clutching at the machine’s hull with a
white-knuckle grip to keep from being thrown off. The machine scrabbled across loose stones and scraped against a jagged stone column protruding at a skewed angle from the ground, sending up a flurry of sparks as metal kissed stone and ground against it.

The machine struggled to throw off its pursuer, but Olrox was dogged. Orbs of cobalt flame soared overhead, exploding in flashes of light against rocks and trees. Wooden and stone debris fell from the air like tiny hailstones.

While Leraje continued to reload her handgun—her hands were shaking, A2 noticed, and a growing trickle of blood was running from her back down onto the machine’s hull—A2 grabbed her rifle, slicing in half the strap with her claw. She slipped her finger through the trigger guard, squeezed her legs against the machine’s sides for purchase, pressed the stock of the rifle against her shoulder, and aimed at Olrox.

To hell with the damn brand. She was tired of being useless against this pompous prick—she’d get him even if it killed her!

Her hands shook as she trained the rifle on him, struggling to line up the sight with the spiderweb of cracks on his helmet. The tremors were so bad that she felt as though the gun would slip from her hands and fall to the ground.

Leraje finished reloading and took aim, firing off three shots and barely managing to deflect another salvo of fireballs, igniting them in midair long before they came near their targets. Blossoms of fire cast the forest in fleeting, luminous blue glows. A fourth fireball, though, slipped through her defenses and hit her squarely in the chest, knocking her off the galloping machine. She grabbed onto the machine’s tail as it passed her by; the tail split in half, its segments linked by a lengthening cable, and dragged her along behind the machine.

A2 struggled to line up her shot. She had no experience with this shit; guns weren’t part of her programming.

Even if she could aim, though, her trigger finger was frozen. Try as she might, she couldn’t move it. She couldn’t squeeze the trigger. She might as well have not picked up the rifle at all.

Olrox came closer, his mount’s furry shoulder brushing against the side of the machine. He leaned over and swiped at A2 with his gauntleted claws; A2 held the rifle over her chest and blocked the strike with the blade that ran across the rifle’s barrel.

4S shouted something to his pod; it opened up and fired a silent burst of machine gun fire at Olrox. Bullets studded his mount’s side; its fur burst into flames and its flesh liquefied where the bullets sank in, forcing the wolf to stumble in its stride and let loose what would have been, had A2’s ears been working, a bone-chilling howl of anguish. Watching its jaws gape open in a grotesque scream of pain, A2 felt a pang of pity for the beast.

As the beast’s exposed bones ripped free of bubbling muscle and it collapsed, Olrox leaped off his mount and onto the quadrupedal machine, his spiked boots digging into its hull. The machine pitched and yawed, but Olrox kept his balance, his arms spread wide, his stance firm and solid.

With a flame-wreathed hand, he swatted 4S’s pod out of the air, sending it flying into a tree. Bullets spiraled from its gun in wild arcs as it spun through the air, puncturing the machine’s hull and ripping through its circuits and servos. The machine began to falter, staggering and stumbling as its legs began to give out. Olrox grabbed 4S by the scruff of his neck—

Four.
She had to protect Four.

As the machine’s legs gave out and it skidded across the ground, its hull jolting against each protruding rock and stone, all three of its passengers were thrown clear of it. A2 tumbled and rolled across the ground, sharp rocks ripping through her clothes, denting her armor, and gouging her flesh; Olrox landed on his feet, his hand still curled around 4S’s neck as he dangled limply from his grip.

A2 pulled herself to her feet. She couldn’t let another Four get hurt. Something inside her, something primal, something deep in the corner of her mind, something so nebulous she couldn’t tell if it was android programming or wolf instinct, screamed at her louder than the pulsing throb of the brand on her shoulder.

“Olrox!” she screamed as sound flooded the world.

Olrox turned to face her, his grip tightening around 4S’s neck, his talons slicing through the collar of the sweater he wore under his coat and cutting into the flesh underneath, bloodstains blossoming on the thick fabric.

“A2,” he hissed, a chuckle bubbling up from his throat, “what do you think you’re doing?”

Warning lights flashed across her vision and klaxons blared in her ears as every system in her battered and broken body kicked into overdrive. In that instant, she felt light, airy… free.

A flurry of blows rattled Olrox’s frame, cratering his sleek violet armor, crumpling spikes and spines like tinfoil, smashing the bolts and rivets that kept one armor plate joined to its neighbor. Deformed pieces of armor went flying under the barrage; iron fists began to fall on soft flesh, breaking apart the tough striations of muscle and ligaments and fracturing bones. Violet smoke billowed from the gaps in Olrox’s armor, then from the widening fractures in his helmet—

And then, with one last punch, the glass shattered completely, smoke blossoming where Olrox’s head would be as the vampire lord went flying. The gnarled trunk of a tree broke his fall—or rather, the branch protruding from it, which jutted from the center of his chest like an Executioner unit’s sword, slicked with dark blood.

A2 felt the brand on her shoulder turn white-hot as the scarlet aura clinging to her body dissipated. It was as though it were melting a hole straight through her chassis; she let out a gurgling howl of agony as her legs gave out beneath her and she fell to her knees. Foam poured from her mouth, choking her; her black box whirred so loudly it was all but screaming.

With a savage swipe of his hand, Olrox snapped the branch impaling him and wrenched himself free, falling to the ground. Smoke still hid his face and seeped from the gaps in his battered and ruined armor. He might have been glaring at A2, though it was, as always, impossible to tell. With a frustrated snarl escaping his hidden lips, he angrily snapped his fingers and vanished in a blossom of fire.

The last thing Devola remembered was Shaft sneering some incantation at her and a rush of freezing cold running up her body from bottom to top, pouring up her legs and torso and into her head so quickly that she hadn’t even had time to scream before a wall of amber had sprung up around her and everything had stopped.

And suddenly, it started again. It was as though no time had passed at all. But as Devola’s long-delayed shocked and frightened shout rang out through the clearing, she saw that things had
changed since she’d been frozen.

The dark priest Shaft was gone without a trace, and there wasn’t any sign of Popola anywhere either. Devola strained her eyes against the darkness as she slowly stalked the clearing, bits of amber as fragile as sugar crystals crunching under her boots.

“Sis?” She looked around, shivering from the cold air and her own icy feeling of dread as she struggled to discern the shapes of her surroundings in the darkness. “Popola? Are you here?”

Her boot trod on something soft; she crouched down to feel it and found a familiar set of clothes and an empty pair of boots; next to the mound of fabric sat an old and weathered book she recognized all too easily from touch alone and a pile of metal scraps. “Popola!” she called out, her chassis hollowing itself out and filling itself with a vast, worried ache. What had caused her to vanish and not her clothes and belongings? Had that creepy old man spirited her away? What would he do to her?

“Dev!”

The voice was quiet, high-pitched, and scratchy, but something about it sounded familiar. Devola panned through the grass blindly with her hands outstretched, trying to follow the voice to its origin. “Who’s there?”

“Dev, it’s me!”

“Popola? Where are you?”

“Down here, in the grass!”

Devola pulled out her sister’s bag and rifled through it until she found a flashlight. She fumbled with its power switch, shot a beam of light into the woods, and swept the beam across the grass, throwing long and spiny shadows across the clearing, until she caught sight of—

Well, it certainly wasn’t her sister. Though it was just about as odd of a sight as she was. Devola had to admit that she’d never seen a mouse with fur that was such a vibrant shade of vermilion.

Then it spoke to her.

“Hi, Dev,” it said, lifting a trembling forepaw.

Devola stared at it, dumbfounded, as every circuit in her head misfired.

“I can explain,” it added sheepishly.

She blinked. Yes, this thing was her sister, all right. “Sis?” she asked, though, just to make sure.

The mouse limped through the grass toward her with one hind leg flopping behind it. It was less that it was limping, actually, Devola noticed, and more that it was dragging itself across the grass—it was missing one of its forelegs in addition to its injured hind leg. “Yeah, it’s me—”

Oh, god, that was her sister!

Devola didn’t wait for Popola to finish before dropping the flashlight, rushing over to her, and scooping her up in her palm. “Popola! Popola, what did you do? What did you do?”

Popola curled up, favoring her injured leg. Her fur was soft and warm in Devola’s hand; her whiskers and the tip of her tail tickled her skin. “For once, it wasn’t me. It was Shaft. Don’t
worry… he’s dead now.”

“Oh. Oh, good.” Devola looked around the clearing again and spied a tangled mass of vines that hadn’t been there before. A few tattered strips of cloth hung from the knotted coils as blood trickled from the verdant clot, giving her a very disturbingly clear picture of what had happened to Shaft. “Oh.”

“Are you okay, Dev?”

Devola closed her eyes and hissed through gritted teeth. How dare Popola ask if she was okay—Devola wasn’t down two limbs! Popola had gone through whatever the hell she had gone through and here she was, asking her sister if she was okay as if Devola had been the one who’d suffered!

“Yeah, I’m… I’m fine,” she said, choking down a lump in her throat. She reached out with one finger and ran it through Popola’s fur, tracing her spine down from her neck to the base of her tail and feeling her shiver under her touch. “And you… Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Your leg…” Devola gingerly prodded the oozing stump of Popola’s severed foreleg.

“Oh, that. Shaft turned the flesh on my arm to worms,” Popola said, surprisingly matter-of-factly, “and the exposed chassis just sort of… fell off when he turned the rest of me into a mouse.”

“Oh, that. Shaft turned the flesh on my arm to worms,” Popola said, surprisingly matter-of-factly, “and the exposed chassis just sort of… fell off when he turned the rest of me into a mouse.”

“Okay. And your other leg…” Devola set her fingertip as lightly and gently as she could against Popola’s splayed-out hind leg, and sharply recoiled as her sister let out a pained squeak. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry…”

“No, it’s… it’s okay…” Popola gasped, her chest rising and falling with each tiny breath. “I healed it, mostly, but not all the way, so…”

Devola brought her hand close to her chest and gently cupped her other hand over Popola’s body, enclosing her in a loose, yet firm embrace. She felt Popola’s whiskers tickle the tip of her thumb and felt hot tears spill down her cheeks. This was her sister, this small, weary, suffering little creature. “Oh, sis… you—you p-poor thing… oh, sis…” Her voice caught in her throat and stuck to the back of her mouth like honey.

“It’s okay,” Popola insisted, her tiny, mousy squeak of a voice muffled by Devola’s clasped hands. “I’m just glad you’re free, Dev. That’s all that matters… D-Did it hurt?”

Devola shook her head. “No, I—I didn’t feel anything. It was like I was asleep.”

“Good. I was so worried…”

“So… you’re not stuck like this, are you?”

Popola was silent for a while. “I hope not,” she admitted.

“Alright, well…” Devola packed away as much of Popola’s things as she could, including her spellbook. She neatly uncrumpled the torn-out page and slotted it back in before slipping the book into her bag. “Let’s get back to Alucard. If anyone can fix this, he can.” Alucard knew how to turn into a bat, after all, and weren’t bats just mice with wings? Besides, he was the only one of the good guys around here who knew a damn thing about magic; as much as she didn’t like the idea of going to him about this, Devola had to admit that she had no other options.
Devola carried Popola through the forest, her hand curled around her in a firm, yet gentle grip, until Popola asked her to let her down.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, kneeling down and gently depositing her on the grass.

“Nothing,” Popola said, sniffing the grass idly, her whiskers twitching. “Can you give me the book?”

“Uh… sure.” Against her better judgment, Devola unpacked the book and set it down.

Popola crawled on top of the book, placed a paw against her broken hind leg, and muttered an incantation; a faint, rippling aura of greenish-blue light bathed the wounded limb for a few seconds. She turned her attention to her missing forelimb next and cast the same spell. It took longer, but after what felt like a few minutes, she was healed. “There. Good as new. Thanks.”

“Ready to go?”

Popola nodded.

Devola scooped her up in her hand and slipped the spellbook back into her bag. For all the trouble it had caused, she supposed that battered old grimoire had its uses after all.

She let out a surprised yelp as Popola scurried up her sleeve, her tiny claws pricking her skin, and popped out of her collar, half-buried in the tangle of her wavy hair.

“Sis!” Devola gingerly rubbed her arm. “Warn me before you do that next time, okay?”

“Okay.” Popola wearily nuzzled the side of her neck. “Now we can go.”

Devola rolled her eyes and set off, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

“You know, this reminds me of an old, old story,” she told Popola, “that I used to tell to replicant kids when they were sick. You remember it, right? It was about these witches who hated children. And the witches were horribly ugly and completely vile and wanted to get rid of all the children in the world. So the witches invented a potion that turned kids into mice, but one of the children they transformed teamed up with his grandmother, who was a witch-hunter, to stop the witches.”

She thought for a moment.

“I think it was called, ‘The Children Who Got Turned into Mice,’” she concluded.

Popola squeaked irritably.

The two of them continued their slow, ambling journey back to the village through the twisting path running through the forest. It was longer than Devola had expected, and nothing looked familiar (although when that android had been dragging her through the woods, she hadn’t exactly been focused on the scenery). A part of her wondered if she was lost.

“You know… I really do hate magic,” she confessed to Popola. “I really do.”

Granted, that wasn’t much of a confession. She’d made it clear plenty of times how much she hated all this mystical nonsense that kept tossing her and her sister headlong into danger. How much she hated that damn book Popola was obsessed with, that damn Alucard and his damn magic powers and all the demons and monsters and enchanted weapons that were springing up all over the place in his wake. Magic had filled this land with evil. Magic had put Popola in a coma for four
days. Magic had forced the two of them to flee from the only safe place they had left. Magic had… just turned Popola into a mouse, which was without a doubt the *strangest* thought Devola had ever had to force herself to think.

But…

“But… if it wasn’t for that spellbook,” she added, “I’d… I’d be dead. Or worse.” She scratched Popola gently behind the ears and listened to her hum contentedly. “What I mean is… I guess I owe your stupid book my life. I guess I’m… well…”

She grabbed Popola by the scruff of her neck, set her back into her hand, and gave her a kiss on her furry forehead.

“Maybe it’s not so bad, you studying that stuff,” she said. “Just be careful, okay? Try not to get into any more wizard duels from now on.”

Popola looked up at her with beady little eyes that were just the right shade of pale seafoam green to be hers. “Sure,” she said. “Although if you get trapped in another giant crystal, I can’t say I’ll be able to keep that promise.”

Devola giggled. “Good enough,” she said, ruffling her fur and returning her to her perch on her shoulder. “Good enough.”
Chapter Summary

2B faces off against a bitter rival while Anemone finds herself locked in a room with a vampire.

Chapter Notes

Anemone had never found Laurel to be all that intimidating, as much as he tried to be sometimes. He was all bluster, all nerves, frequently high-strung and never quite able to hide it as well as he’d like to. His ambitions frequently exceeded his talents, though only by a hair, and he never aimed quite so high to begin with; he was a man who sought mediocrity and clung to it, defending it ferociously from any external threat.

She’d been shocked when he’d pulled a gun on her yesterday, but that hadn’t really been his doing so much as that of his superior officers. He’d been a threat because of the authority behind his actions and because of the dozen soldiers flanking him, not by any inherent quality of his demeanor —and it had been that authority, not him, that had driven a spike of ice into her heart the moment he’d read her the order for her arrest.

Laurel himself couldn’t scare a single person. He could shout, he could scream, he could speak to you in a curt, icy growl that suggested he was restraining an incredible and fearsome anger, but it usually just made him look buffoonish. He wore a commanding aura as though he were wearing a uniform one or two sizes too big for him and desperately trying to pretend he wasn’t.

The Laurel who stood before Anemone now, the Laurel whose skin was an icy, ashen pale with a roughly stapled-on ring of raw, livid flesh surrounding one of his wide, manic, sparkling ruby-red eyes, was not that man. Never mind that it was two sizes too big: the suit he wore was tailored to
him—perfectly.

Anemone couldn’t move. Her boots felt like solid lead weights encasing her feet. The cloak draped over her shoulders felt, too, like lead, and pushed down her shoulders. The mostly-healed wounds spiraling around her legs and torso throbbed freshly, wetly, under swaths of gauze, and she could imagine the blood leeching out from them and soaking into the bandages as though it was being magnetically drawn out from her body. Her mouth was dry, her eyelids heavy, her spine aching. Her core burned in her chest, struggling to keep blood through her systems; her lungs strained against her chest, knifelike stabs wrenching themselves into her chassis with every pained breath.

“Laurel,” Jackass said, her single visible eye under her red cowl glassy, her lip trembling, “uh… Commander Laurel, if this is a joke…”

“A joke?” Laurel lifted one eyebrow, the wrinkling and deformation of his brow tugging on the staples holding his face together. “Do you know me to be the kind of person who *jokes*, Officer Clover?”

“You’re a vampire,” Anemone mumbled dumbly. Laurel’s gaze transfixed her, rooting her to the spot. She wanted to run, and yet…

She’d never encountered a real vampire before, only known of YoRHa’s recent efforts to exterminate them. She only knew about their powers from what Alucard had told her. She knew of their mesmerizing, petrifying stare, their thirst for blood, their wholesale abandonment of everything that had had meaning to them in favor of their new masters.

It was still like nothing she’d expected.

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2B’s grip tightened on the android’s cold shoulder as she pinned him down, the wooden slats of the bridge buckling under the pressure of the weight of their bodies, the leather of her glove creaking as her fingertips curled into the fabric of his white robe and dug into his frigid skin. Occluded rays of lamplight danced in his eyes as the brown irises circling his pupils wavered and faded into glittering, glistening crimson rings and the last traces of warmth bled from his skin and turned his cheeks a sickly, moonlike ashen and his lips a pale purple-blue. A pair of ivory fangs sprouted from his mouth, poking out over his lower lips as cracked, glistening flesh split apart and his mouth opened in a wicked smile.

A puff of white ice crystals rose from his mouth. “Wwwwrrrrrryyyy…” he hissed, bloodlust glittering merrily in his wild, mad eyes.

Without the slightest hesitation, 2B buried the Virtuous Contract up to its hilt in his chest, right underneath the sternum where his fuel cells would be. Not that it made a difference *where* she stabbed him—as long as the sword pinned him to the surface of the bridge and left him powerless to do anything but writhe helplessly.

2B pulled herself up, her hand slipping from her sword’s hilt as the Vampire Killer materialized in its place. The vampire grabbed her by the leg, his fingernails puncturing her boot and digging into her flesh, as she raised her whip overhead and brought it crashing down.

“Pod!” she shouted. “Fire!”

For an instant, the vampire’s eyes widened, the glittering mania filling them turning briefly into fear, as the whip lashed across his abdomen and cut clean through it with a deafening, booming snap.
Pod 042 did the rest, unloading a spray of silver bullets into the vampire’s bifurcated body. Blood and sparks sprayed into the air as the severed halves of his body ignited, flames licking hungrily at exposed and mangled machinery and circuits as his body crumbled to dust from the middle outward. With the seconds he had to spare, he thrashed his limbs while they were still attached to him in any meaningful sense, his eyes rolling and red froth pouring from his mouth as he let out a keening, gurgling scream. His legs kicked at 2B and flew into the air as his waist crumbled to ash, flying apart like scattering leaves as they sailed through the air. His head crumpled in on itself as the decay wicked up his neck and reduced his skull to dust, jagged edges of crumpling circuitry stabbing through limp flesh before bursting into flames.

The last few motes of ash that had been his body trickled through the gaps in the bridge’s wooden slats as stray sparks and wisps of flame hung in the air and whittled away to nothing.


Vampires. 2B clenched her jaw and gritted her teeth. Alucard had been wrong, damn him—the first wave was vampires!

She glanced over the bridge’s bent and splintered railing, peering into the darkness beyond the village. The other man was long gone, and the twins with him; she had half a mind to leap down there and run after them—but she knew the danger here was far greater. Popola and Devola would have to fend for themselves if he, too, had been a vampire in disguise.

2B ran instead deeper into the village, pushing through throngs of machines and androids overseeing the evacuation. If that one vampire had managed to bite just one or two other androids or machines before she had slain him, there could already be a dozen of them hiding amid the chaos.

“Pod,” she said, “from hereon I’m directing you to act unilaterally. If you see a vampire, you shoot it. Don’t wait for my command.”

“Affirmative.”

All of the androids here save for Laurel’s men were from Anemone’s camp, so there were no shortage of familiar faces; 2B gravitated toward the first one she saw. The camp’s chief technician Oleander, who carried a high rank and had overseen nearly a dozen upgrades to 2B’s systems, stuck out from the others like a beacon, her neon pink quiff as bright as torchlight.

“Oleander! Where are Anemone and Pascal?” 2B asked as she closed the gap between herself and the technician. “We have to speed up the evacuation. There are vampires—”

Oleander knitted her eyebrows, her brow furrowing. “Vampires?” she parroted, confused.

“Yes, vampires—didn’t Anemone tell you?” 2B asked, her voice curt—her temper was short enough as it is.


“I just killed one.”

“Oh.”

2B’s grip on the Vampire Killer tightened. This wasn’t the time for idle chatter. “Anemone and Pascal. Where are they?”
“You didn’t get bitten, did you?” Oleander asked, squinting suspiciously at her.

“Of course not,” she hissed, grabbing her by the wrist to push her aside if need be—

Cold.

Oleander’s green eyes flashed red, her face turning white as bleached bone, her hand latching onto 2B’s wrist with all the strength of an industrial vise, wrenching aside her arm. “More for me, then!”

2B let go of Oleander and grabbed her by the chin, her fingers clamping down on her jaw and holding her at arm’s length as the vampire opened her mouth and bared her fangs, strings of drool snapping between her glistening teeth. She strained her arm, the servos in her joints whining in protest against Oleander’s strong grip. With this arm immobilized, the Vampire Killer clenched in her hand may as well have been on the other end of the village.

Her, too? Were all the androids here vampires?

Pod 042 spat a volley of silver bullets across 2B’s shoulder at Oleander; the spray of white-hot silver shredded the fabric of her blouse and singed her hair.

There was a black flicker and Oleander disappeared. 2B felt her arm wrench behind her back so quickly that she felt the joint nearly tear apart as the vampire reappeared behind her.

Pod 042 whirled around to get a bead on her as 2B lashed out and drove her heel into her stomach, throwing her back. As Oleander fell back, refusing to relinquish her cold death grip on 2B’s wrist, 2B heard—and felt—the joints in her shoulder and elbow both squeal as they came close to ripping themselves apart. Gritting her teeth, she dismissed the Vampire Killer and summoned it in her now-free hand, swinging it through the air. The whip’s length traced a crescent in the air and sliced Oleander into several neat pieces, all peppered by Pod 042’s bullets as they fell to the ground and crumbled to ash.

“Observation: The vampires have apparently learned to suppress vampiric traits,” the pod announced, “and pass as living androids for brief periods of time. This includes broadcasting false vital signs and IFF codes, as well as temporarily changing their appearance. Transferring this information to the pod network.”

“Great.” 2B ground her teeth against each other as she snapped the joints in her arm back into place. “Pod, where’s 9S—”

“2B! 2B!”

His voice was unmistakable. 2B looked up and saw him bounding toward her, sword in hand, the hem of his coat and the tails of his visor flapping in the air, barreling through crowds of panicked machines. “9S!” she called out in return, grateful that he was okay.

Pod 042 babbled something in her ear—probably an answer to her question, but 2B ignored it. It didn’t matter anymore. “9S, are you okay?” she breathed, rushing to him.

9S caught his breath. “Yeah, I’m fine—”

Pod 042 opened fire on him.

Without thinking, 2B dived over 9S, pinning him down and shielding him from the gunfire. A few of the bullets sank into her flesh, burning their way into her chassis; but the silver bullets designed
to destroy vampires did little to her a normal bullet wouldn’t do. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she leaped off the bridge, her and 9S’s bodies tearing through the wooden railing, and fell to the ground.

“Pod! Stop!” 2B shouted out as Pod 042 pursued the two of them, still spraying bullets. “It’s 9S!”

“There must be a virus infecting its system!” 9S hissed. He held out his hand. “Ugh—can’t get a bead on it; it’s too fast!”

2B lashed out with the Vampire Killer, her only ranged weapon. Its tip flicked against the side of Pod 042’s silvery hull with a booming crack, the force of the blow sending the pod spiraling into the bridge’s wooden support columns. Scaffolding shattered as the pod fell to the ground, disabled—at least, for the moment.

Relieved, 2B bounded over a massive root curling out of the ground and ducked behind it, laying 9S down on the soft grass. “Any damage?” she asked, giving him a cursory glance and seeing no bullet wounds, but just wanting to make sure.

9S prodded his side. “Well, you could’ve hugged me a little less hard…”

“I didn’t hug you,” 2B insisted. Still, she felt mortified that she’d gripped him tightly enough to make him feel sore—not just because she’d hurt him, but because she’d almost gone too far and done something too affectionate for him.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” A broad smile crossed his soft face as he pulled himself up to his knees and then, with 2B’s help, to his feet. “Boy, I sure am lucky to have a friend like you, aren’t I, Toobie?”

2B furrowed her brow. “Uh… ‘Toobie?’”

9S shrugged, still smiling.

“Don’t ever call me that again,” 2B snapped. What a horrid nickname. She’d prefer being called ma’am to being called Toobie. It sounded too much like 6E’s ugly little nickname for her, enough to make her skin crawl just hearing it.

“Start calling me Nines and I’ll stop… Toobie.”

“9S, I…” 2B shook her head. What had gotten into him? “This isn’t the time. There are vampires here and they know how to camouflage themselves. We need to find Anemone and Pascal and make sure they’re sa—”

9S threw his arms around her and grabbed her in a viciously tight embrace, his forearms crossing over her back and his hands locking themselves on her sides. “Oh, Toobie, I can’t hold it back anymore! I love you! I love you so much!”

“9S, what’s—” 2B tried to pry him off of her or wriggle free of his grip, but for a Scanner, he had a surprisingly tight grasp on her. “What’s gotten into you? This isn’t the time—”

“When is the time, 2B?” he sobbed into her chest, his voice muffled. “I’ve bottled it up too long! I love you, I adore you, I’d do anything for you!”

Stricken with something that almost felt like panic, 2B finally pushed him off and separated herself from him. She could feel all of her systems overheating; her cheeks were so hot and so flushed that she could imagine steam rising off them. “9S, c-calm down,” she stammered, struggling to regain her composure. Her hand flew to her chest as though to guard her breasts against another one of
9S’s amorous advances. There was something so unsettling about how he was parroting every single thing she wished she could say to him, mimicking everything she wished she could do to him. “We need level heads…”

“Oh, but Toogie…” 9S grabbed her by the shoulders, his grip more forceful than she’d ever thought him capable of. “Please! You love me! You want me, I know it! Admit it! You want to be with me forever, don’t you?”

2B shoved him back. “9S, what the hell is wrong with you?” she spat, equal parts shame and frustration burning inside her. “Take off your visor.”

9S drew back, his lip curling in reproach. “What?”

“Take off your visor. I want to see your eyes.” 2B forced down the tremor trying to creep into her voice. Though she hated to entertain the idea, a logic virus could account for his bizarre behavior, and it would be evident in his eyes if he were infected.

“Tooie, don’t you trust me?” 9S placed his hands over his chest. “It’s me, your best friend, Ninesie!”

2B felt all of her systems turn as cold as ice. She lifted her hand and conjured the Virtuous Contract, feeling for all the world like a puppet being guided by strings.

“2B, uh… wh-what are you doing?”

“Where’s Alucard?” she asked.

“Uh…” 9S furrowed his brow. “Alucard?”

“Who are you?” 2B shot back, leveling the white blade at him. There was an almost-imperceptible tremor in her hand, but she held the sword firmly, channeling her rising fury through the blade. The real 9S wouldn’t look like he had no idea who she was talking about. “And what,” she spat, “have you done with 9S?”

9S stood up straight, cocked his head playfully, and giggled. “Well… I’d have liked to keep this going, but…”

Off in the distance, on the other side of the village, 9S’s familiar voice rang out, faint but unmistakable. Screams began to echo, too, through the village—electronic screams, the screams of machines. 2B’s blood ran cold.

The false 9S grew taller, his shadow darkening, his skin turning as white as snow and lips as red as cherries, a tinge of pale violet seeping into his silver hair as a waterfall of glistening ringlets spilled over his back and shoulders. “Oh, Mistress!” he called out in a singsong falsetto, flinging out his arms.

2B found herself frozen, unable to do anything but look on in horror and disgust. 9S no longer stood before her. Even his clothes had changed now, morphing into an elegant black-and-white dress—something like YoRHa battle dress, if one were to take 2B’s uniform, add half a dozen layers to it, and gild it with an obscene amount of ruffles and lace—which clung to a body that was beyond the shadow of a doubt far too curvaceous to belong to him. And the long, curly whitish-lavender hair tied up in two neat pigtails and the ringlets framing a deceptively cherubic face were most certainly not his.

2B barely had time to process the sight of 9S’s ghoulish transformation into 6E before she felt an
ice-cold hand clamp around the back of her neck, the shock momentarily driving all thought from her mind as her sword slipped from her slackening grip and her feet lifted off the ground. An icy current ran through her chassis, her blood turning bitter cold, sensation draining from her fingers and toes as her arms fell limply to her sides.

“So, this *is* the little girl,” a woman’s voice rang in her ears, low and slow and oozing with contempt and mockery, “who fancies herself a vampire slayer?”

“I am a vampire,” Laurel affirmed, grinning as he closed the gap between himself and his prey with confident strides. “Very astute of you, Anemone. To be honest, I’d started expecting less of you when I’d learned that you’d decided to commit treason.”

“Treason?” Jackass repeated. Her grip on Anemone’s arm tightened. Anemone wondered if she was shaking off the effects of Laurel’s mesmerizing glare already and resolved to try harder at breaking the invisible bonds that had settled over her own body. “Then what do you call this? I don’t recall the Army of Humanity having a ‘Mistress Carmilla’ in their ranks.”

“Ah. Yes, well, the old Laurel was loyal to the ancien regime, of course,” Laurel said, the archaic words effortlessly gliding off his tongue, “but I prefer to think of myself as a new man. A new man, fresh off the assembly line, with new loyalties all his own.”

He sidestepped Anemone and Jackass, circling around their backs to kneel at the edge of the pool of blood surrounding A4’s puppeted corpse behind them. “So, this mangled hunk of machinery is what you threw everything away for, is it?”

Anemone couldn’t turn around or even look over her shoulder. A part of her didn’t want to. What grotesque, grisly things would he do to that body to sate his hunger and thirst?

“What are you gonna do to us, then?” Jackass asked, raising her voice so it wouldn’t shake as much. Though she was clearly trying to sound loud so she wouldn’t sound scared, what she accomplished was sounding both loud and scared. “Bite us? Gimme your best shot. See how far it gets you.”

“Bite you? Good heavens, no, Clover. Why on Earth would I want to add you to my thralls? You’ve troubled me enough as it is.”

She bristled. “What, so I’m not good enough to be a vampire?”

Anemone scanned the room for any ways out. This building was one of about three or four repair facilities located in the village. There wasn’t much to it; there wasn’t much to *any* of the buildings in the village (very few machines had any sort of architectural prowess). It had four walls and a roof, all made of thick planks of wood nailed solidly together. There weren’t any windows. Just a door to a small chamber in the back (which itself had no other exits) and a door to the outside. There were benches with tools that could be used for self-defense, or maybe to break through the door Laurel had locked on his way in…

“Well then, Anemone, we’re not so different, you and I,” Laurel went on, ignoring Jackass. “You saw this… ngh… woman, and were so bewitched that you abandoned your loyalty to the Resistance.”

“I didn’t abandon my loyalty,” Anemone insisted. “I—” She dared to sneak a glance over her shoulder and saw him crouched at the edge of the puddle, his hands cupped and filled with blood, and felt her insides twist into knots. Whatever she’d been planning on saying to him, she forgot it.
“Is that so… mmm… unlike me?” he asked. “Is… pardon… is that so different from the zealous love we… mnh, excuse me… the zealous love we vampires breed in our thralls’ hearts?” He paused every now and then. From the quiet, wet slurping noises that filled those gaps in his speech, Anemone could imagine that he was lapping up blood from the floor as it soaked into the wood like a dog drinking water. It would be comical if he wasn’t an immortal monster.

Jackass’ hand slipped from Anemone’s arm to her waist. Anemone turned her head to look at her. She wasn’t completely unfrozen, but without eye contact from Laurel, the pressure holding her in place had lessened considerably. He probably didn’t even notice that his mesmerizing glare wasn’t so useful when it wasn’t fixated squarely on his prey.

“Can you move?” she hissed, all but mouthing the words, her voice so low that Anemone could barely hear it over the slurping sound of Laurel’s feeding.

Anemone nodded.

“On three,” Jackass said, looking ahead and nodding at the door.

Anemone tried to shrug off the rest of the invisible chains binding her. She didn’t know if she could run. Her body still felt numb and sluggish, as though she’d come online while half of her systems were still booting up.

“The old Laurel would be so… disappointed,” Laurel continued, oblivious. “Yes, very… mm… very disappointed in you, Anemone. You had your head on straight. I respected that. Yes… mh… I really did. When I found out… you had done this… I was just about heartbroken. Terrified, too! I’d staked my life on your… reputation. Only to find out what you and this… beast of an android really were…”

Anemone, too, had been heartbroken. She’d thrown away her home, her family, just as A2 had warned her she would. She’d disappointed herself, too. The old Anemone wouldn’t have done that. The old her, the one who clung to normalcy, who did things by the book, who was fair yet unyielding. Every part of her that had been hidebound had just melted on the day that Alucard had dragged A2 back into her life.

Was she, in a way, A2’s thrall, as bound to her as Laurel was to his ‘mistress’?

Jackass gave her a rough shove, her palm digging forcefully into the small of her back. “Three!”

Spurred on, Anemone stumbled ahead, her unsteady legs wobbling and knees buckling as she struggled to force life into sluggish and sleepy muscles. Jackass grabbed her and yanked her forward. Laurel’s surprised shout rang in her ears. Although Jackass had to do the running for the two of them, the door came rushing forward to meet them shockingly quickly.

Jackass crouched down in mid-stride, swiped a stick welder gun off the floor, and powered it on, the tip of its long rod sizzling and glowing white-hot as she held it out in front of her like a lance. A red-on-white blur careened into her, ripping her away from Anemone and throwing her to the ground. Anemone sped forward on momentum alone, feeling her feet slip against the floor and lose traction, and felt a wave of pain and haze of static rush through her as she collided head-on with the door. The door shuddered, its frame splintering.

As the lights overhead flickered and spun around her, Anemone reached up and placed her hand gingerly to her throbbing forehead. She was lying atop her crumpled legs, her cloak pooled out around her. Static and pixelated blotches swirled across her eyes, fading as her visual processor refreshed.
She felt the door give way against her back, splinters digging into her shoulders and neck. One forceful blow could knock it off its hinges. She could run away if—

Laurel had Jackass pinned to the floor, his fangs glistening in his mouth, his eyes wide and wild, blood dribbling down his chin. One hand gripped her arm tightly enough to leave welts, the other resting on her stomach—no, no, Anemone realized as her eyesight grew clearer, not on her stomach, but in her stomach.

He had thrust his fist into her abdomen, piercing her chassis with nothing but sheer blunt force. Jackass weakly scrabbled at his shoulder, her fingers curling into fistfuls of his bloodstained cloak as she tried in vain to push him away, her legs spasming and jerking in a futile attempt to kick him away.

Anemone watched helplessly as Laurel pulled his fist out. Loops of cables and a slick coolant tube came out with it, bunched up in his fist and stretching taut as he teased them out. The cables broke first, sparks streaming from severed lengths of copper wire; the coolant tube ripped in two next, spewing blood like water from a hose from both severed ends, turning the already-crimson cloak pooled around her an even darker, almost black burgundy hue.

Though the coolant circulation system inside Jackass’ body would normally shut itself down around the damaged area, blood continued to spew from the intestinal tubing until Laurel pinched the two severed ends shut in his fist. Little trickles of blood spat up into the air, shooting out like miniature fountains and splattering against the lights overhead. Shafts of light bleeding through the bloodstains, themselves stained crimson, cut across Laurel’s pale face.

Jackass thrust the stick welder rod into the side of his neck, a fountain of sparks flying as the searing heat charred his skin jet-black and met his metal endoskeleton. He gritted his teeth and choked down an anguished, gurgling scream as acrid smoke billowed from the wound.

“Jack!” Anemone pushed herself up onto her hands and knees, her lungs aching, her chest burning with every heave. “Laurel, stop! Get away from her!”

Laurel paid her no heed as he leaned in closer to his prey, Jackass’ struggles growing feebler with every passing second, and greedily pushed the severed edges of the coolant tubes into his mouth, sealing his lips shut around them as though sucking through a straw. He loosened his grip, allowing blood to flow uninhibited from the tubes, and sucked up mouthful after mouthful, the muscles in his throat undulating and bobbing as he drank her dry. The stick welder gun fell from Jackass’ weakening grasp, the blinding light at the rod’s tip dying as soon as her finger slipped from the trigger.

With trembling fingers slipping against cold metal, Anemone pulled her sidearm from her holster. She couldn’t remember if the gun was loaded at all. She couldn’t remember if she had any spare munitions tucked away in any of the pockets on her fatigues. Her head was too cloudy. She could barely aim properly.

It was happening again. She was losing her comrades again. An image flickered through her mind’s eye, throwing her back in time. The image of Scanner Twenty-One in the elevator shaft, the black pupils of her icy blue eyes overtaken completely by the demonic red glow of a logic virus infection, kneeling before her.

It was as though she was there again. Anemone could feel herself pressing her gun to the soldier’s forehead, her finger squeezing against the trigger. She could feel the cold metal fighting against her, pushing back against the weight of her trigger finger, like never before. She could hear the deafening shot when it finally rang out. She could see, could never forget, the way Twenty-One
slumped over, chips of blood and metal and blonde hair splattered on the wall behind her, the light in her eyes—red and blue alike—dying.

Dying, dying, dying...

She jammed her finger on the trigger and shot Laurel, burying a bullet between his eyes. He reeled backward, the coolant tubes slipping out of his mouth and whipping around as they spewed blood across the room.

Anemone scuttled to Jackass’ side, keeping her gun trained on Laurel and desperately hoping she hadn’t only had one bullet in there. With her free hand, she grabbed the flailing tubes and gripped them tightly enough to staunch the blood flow. Blood spattered against her face, stinging her eyes, splashing against her lips, the oily, metallic taste revolting. The tubes were slick and slippery, with a texture almost like jelly, and wriggled as though they had a life of their own as cold blood throbbed through them. Anemone squeezed as hard as she could to keep the tubes’ severed ends closed.

Laurel sat up, blood oozing from the black hole nestled under his brow and trickling down his nose. Anemone shot him again. The next bullet struck him in the shoulder, the next in his throat, the next ripping through his cheek, tearing out bits of teeth and metal shrapnel from his jaw.

Anemone squeezed the trigger again. Nothing came out. Nothing but a hollow click.

Once he’d gotten over his shock, the bullet wounds hardly slowed Laurel down. He was on her in an instant, one hand clamping with a vise grip on her wrist to break the grip she had on Jackass’ intestines, the other pressing into her throat, stubby fingertips burying themselves in the sides of her neck. Anemone squeezed the trigger a few more times in vain, her head too foggy to realize until her third or fourth attempt that the gun’s magazine was empty.

She bashed him in the head with the gun’s grip, the hard edge splitting his forehead open. Blood gushed from the gash in his pale skin, streaming in a waterfall over his eye. He bared his fangs at her. His teeth were stained blood-red and glistening wetly in the light, his lips red, his chin red. Everything was red. Everything save for the throbbing gray tunnel pulsing in the corners of Anemone’s line of sight, darkening to a black tunnel that crept across her vision until nothing remained but Laurel’s demonic visage shining like a full lunar eclipse in a starless night sky.

The grip Laurel had on her wrist strengthened, crumpling the joint like tinfoil. Through the haze of pain, Anemone struggled to keep her fist clenched on the coolant tubes. The slick, rubbery casings fought against her weakening fingers as spurts of cold blood hissed out and trickled over her skin.

She brought the grip of her pistol down on Laurel’s face with all her might, keeping him at arm’s length, as his palm pressed tighter and tighter against her throat. She could feel her lungs straining even harder, the heat building up in her core, white-hot knives sinking into her chassis with every breath she couldn’t take. She smashed the pistol against his forehead and split the skin apart to reveal gunmetal-gray skull plating, struggling with every blow to muster even half as much force as she’d put into the last one.

Everything turned darker. Laurel’s crimson eyes burned holes through hers. His jaw gaped wider, the bullet hole in his cheek ripping open to reveal rows of shattered teeth. His fangs glistened as he leaned in closer, closer. Anemone drove the pistol into his face, his nose crumpling under the impact. She struggled to hold him back. She couldn’t relent. She couldn’t let Laurel—this thing that had replaced Laurel—bite her. She couldn’t let it do to her what the vampires had done to him.

“There’s no point in resisting,” he snarled at her, his voice a devilish hiss. “Did you think you
was the only vampire you invited into the village… do you?”

At the periphery of her hearing, Anemone strained her ears and heard more muffled electronic screams like before pierce the air. Her blood ran cold. “All your men…” she gasped, struggling to force even a whisper through her collapsing throat. She dropped the gun and grabbed his neck in turn, digging her fingers into the pliable, rough flesh of his throat, keeping her elbow locked, forcing him back.

“All my men. That’s right. And surely you realize—” He struggled to break her grip. “We couldn’t keep a gift this good all to ourselves. We enthralled the whole camp.”

Her next words died before they left her lips.

“That’s who we brought here. Every single person stationed at your camp. Every last one of them, every last one of your soldiers, enthralled to the will of our Mistress Carmilla. Now, wouldn’t you like to join your comrades? The bite really isn’t so painful. It’s just like getting drunk.”

“…Everyone?”

“And more soon. After all, there are so many machines here to feed on. We could easily triple or quadruple our ranks here.” Laurel chuckled. “The human-machine war in this sector may as well be over. The Resistance is no more. The machine forces will be ours. Can’t you see, Anemone? No more war, no more death, no more lost comrades! This is the only way to survive! To survive… forever!”

Anemone struggled to process what she was hearing. All of her soldiers… everyone stationed at her camp… the dozens of men and women she saw every day, who depended on her, who looked up to her, who charged into Hell itself on her command, who came to her for guidance, everyone she knew, everyone she respected, everyone she cared about…

Was Laurel telling the truth? Had they all become cackling, megalomaniacal egotistical monsters like him?

“Well, Anemone? What do you think of my offer?” he asked. “Does my little proposition to you sound… inviting? Wouldn’t you like to join me, and all your friends, all your dear, precious friends, in our mistress Lady Carmilla’s new kingdom of immortals?”

Her fingers spasmed and splayed open. The gun clattered to the floor. A rush of cold ran through her arm as Laurel’s fangs sank into the side of her hand. The last bit of strength drained from Anemone’s body; the coolant tubes slipped out of her other hand and fell into Jackass’ exposed abdominal cavity, drowning her chassis in spilled blood.

Frigid cold drifted through her skin down her forearm. It wasn’t the kind of cold that burned, but an uncomfortable, prickling sensation, something that felt fundamentally opposite of numbness—an odd, almost intoxicating hyperawareness of the air against her skin, the blood throbbing in her veins. Anemone watched her hand, still pinned between Laurel’s jaw, turn ashen, the hue of her skin shifting from a warm olive brown to a dull gray-brown.

He’d bitten her.

A pair of gunmetal-black hands clamped down on either side of Laurel’s head, dragged him back—his fangs ripped through Anemone’s hand, leaving oozing furrows in her graying skin—pulled him away, and with a savage twist and the keening, screeching crunch of metal grinding against metal, spun his head around nearly two full rotations. The flesh on his neck twisted, rippled, and
tore, blood spewing down his cloak and uniform, soaking it. The light in his eyes went out.

With overwhelming strength, A4 ripped his head off his shoulders, a trailing fragment of his metal spinal column twitching and jerking like a snake’s tail as his body went limp and his grip loosened.

Anemone felt cool air rush into her lungs and color flood her vision as the black tunnel receded. Spent, she fell flat on her back, greedily gulping down air in spite of the stinging needles burying themselves in her chest with every breath. Jackass stirred weakly at her side, her chest barely rising and falling in time with her short, ragged breaths.

A4 tossed the headless body aside, then grabbed Laurel’s severed head by the hair and slammed it down against the floor, splintering the wooden floorboards. She slammed it down, lifted it up, and slammed it down again, and again, and again, as precise and mechanical in her rhythm as a piston. Her dead face was twisted in a vicious snarl.

She slammed his head against the ground until the metal skull crumpled like tinfoil and bits of debris spewed through his eyes. Components broken beyond recognition littered the ground, all stained the same glistening shade of red.

A4 dropped the mangled remains of Laurel’s head to the ground and stomped on it a few more times for good measure until it was little more than a bloody smear.

“Thanks,” Anemone gasped. At her side, Jackass faintly gurgled something that might have sounded like, “Took you long enough.”

Well, at least she was clinging to life. Which wasn’t something Anemone could say so confidently about herself. She weakly lifted her arm, her head spinning from the exertion. The bloodstained lights beat down on her like the desert sun.

Her sleeve fell down to her elbow, revealing her naked forearm. The uncomfortable tingling anti-numbness and the grayish discoloration of her skin had spread nearly as far as her elbow, too. Bulging veins stood out black against her skin.

She was infected.

Her thoughts spiraled around the color leeching from her skin like water circling a drain. It was over. Her life was over. This was the end of her life, the end of her self, the end of her very being. Two hundred years of fighting, of scrabbling against the dirt, of love and loss and love again and loss again over and over again, and it all came to this. It all ended here.

The thing that woke up in her place after this wouldn’t think about that anymore. It wouldn’t mourn the heartbreaks of its past life. It wouldn’t find its heart stirred by its previous loyalties. It would feel nothing but smug self-satisfaction, egoism, and hunger. Everything else, everything that made her her, it would all fall away. It was a fate worse than any logic virus. A fate worse than anything she could imagine. A fate worse than anything that had claimed her past comrades.

This was the end.

The village had erupted into chaos far swifter than 9S could process.

One moment ago, it felt, he and Alucard had been rushing to rendezvous with 2B, spurred on by the dhampyr’s nebulous ‘bad feeling about this.’

The next moment, 9S found himself numbly ripping his new silver-etched sword out from the
chest of one of Anemone’s soldiers as the soldier writhed and thrashed, the edge of the blade charring his skin to blackened ash.

Alucard grabbed him by the shoulder and all but threw him back. “*Behind me!*” he shouted, readying his saber and shoving it into the soldier’s throat. Blood spewed onto his fatigue and sprayed into the air, a few flecks staining Alucard’s pale face, as the soldier hissed and spat and thrashed, his body burning away to motes of ash floating on the wind.

9S steeled himself as he watched the vampire die before his eyes. He could feel his hands shaking. *Vampires? Here? Already?* This wasn’t how Alucard had said things would happen. But he was supposed to be the expert here. If *he* didn’t know what was going on, then…

Pod 153 chimed. “Incoming transmission from Operator 6O.”

“9S,” Alucard asked, kicking aside the pile of ash that had once been a pretty friendly guy, all things considered, “are you okay?”

9S ground the hilt of his sword against his palms anxiously. “I—I’m, uh, fine.”

He remembered 21O. That android who’d just been burned to a crisp was just as dead, just as gone forever, except unlike YoRHa androids, androids from the Resistance didn’t tend to get replaced when they died. Even though he hadn’t known that man, 9S felt the same pang in his chest.

“Where there is one vampire, more are bound to follow.” Alucard sniffed the air, his mouth drawn taut in a grim frown. “We are all in grave danger.”

Pod 153 chimed again to remind 9S that his Operator was on hold. “Proposal: Unit 9S should make contact with Operator 6O to discuss the nature of the situation.”

“Yeah, yeah.” 9S waved the pod on. “Answer the call.” He kept the screen that popped up in his visor just in the corner of his eye as Alucard hurried forward, his coat and white-gold hair billowing behind him, and he followed close behind.

“9S, Operator 6O here. Is everything alright? I haven’t been able to reach 2B or Alucard. You three are—You’d tell me if something was wrong, right?”

“Uh—of course, yeah. Perfect timing.” 9S heard a dull boom in the distance and a chorus of mechanical screams. “S-Something’s happening here. Alucard’s with me, 2B’s, uh… somewhere…”

“What’s going on?”

“Vampires.” 9S followed Alucard into a throng of panicking machines. Children, probably, although 9S couldn’t really be sure. Pascal knew the difference between ‘adult’ machines and ‘child’ machines, but they all looked the same to 9S, and for the most part, they didn’t really act much differently either.

“Vampires?”

“Yeah. They’re already here! At least one of them snuck in with the rest of Anemone’s troops. We’re sure there’s more.”

“Oh, no!”

“Any chance you could hurry up with those reinforcements?”
“I-I…” Flustered, 6O tripped over her words. “We—I mean, you said the attack would be around nightfall, s-so I haven’t even started prepping the flight units yet—”

9S felt a pit open up in his stomach.

A machine grabbed at his leg. “M-Mister 9S,” it wailed, the fear in its voice unlike anything 9S had heard from a machine before. “I’m s-scared…”

“Uh… i-it’s okay,” 9S stammered, patting the machine gently on its head. How did this machine know him, anyway? Did it matter? “Um… go along with your parents, I guess.” Did it have parents? He didn’t know. He didn’t even have parents.

Was he thinking in circles to distract himself?

A red-eyed machine—one of Eve’s reinforcements—grabbed the bawling machine roughly and yanked it away. “This way,” it growled, its voice flat and lifeless. 9S was well aware that this was the kind of machine that in any other circumstance would be trying as hard as possible to kill him. Now it looked right through him as though he wasn’t even there.

A ‘truce’ with Eve and his half of the machine network, temporary as it was… 9S had to admit, it unnerved him. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The child’s metal claws tugged at the hem of 9S’s coat as the other machine lifted it aloft. “No! I wanna stay here! Mister 9S! I want my mommy!”

“Evacuation in progress,” the other machine impassively growled, deaf to the poor kid’s concerns, as it lumbered off toward wherever everyone was being evacuated to.

“—so sorry about this,” 6O went on, still babbling. “I’ll prep the flight units right away and send down a squadron ASAP! B-But it’ll take at least an hour for them to reach the surface… I’ll send out a priority transmission to all our deployed combat units and…”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s great, 6O,” 9S said, barely listening.

Another explosion rocked the village. He spied the telltale bright orange glow of flames out of the corner of his eye. Were the vampires bombing the village?

Alucard looked shaken. His eyes were darting back and forth, beads of cold sweat on his alabaster brow, his grip on his sword tightening so much that 9S could see blue veins standing out on his bare skin. Without a word, he lunged at the machine that had carried the child off, grabbed it with his alabaster prosthetic hand, and dragged it backward.

An android leaped up onto the bridge where the two machines had stood barely a second ago and lunged forward. Alucard’s saber speared him in the shoulder; undeterred, he grabbed the networked machine and clamped his mouth onto its hull like a leech.

There was a flash of bright steel. The vampire reeled backward, sparks flying from the severed, cauterized stumps of his arms and fell over the side of the bridge, falling from the light into the gloomy shadows below.

The bitten machine shook its head and pressed onward, but Alucard grabbed the child machine it was carrying and struggled to pull it free. “9S! Help me!”

9S hurried into action, hacked the machine, and disabled its motor systems for just long enough that Alucard could tear the child free, nearly collapsing under the weight of its body. The machine
regained control and charged at 9S, optical sensors flaring. Alucard jammed his saber into its hull.
“It’s been bitten! You know what we have to do!”

Feeling the heady thrill of a combat high wash away his anxiety, 9S grabbed his sword and threw it at the machine without hesitating. He didn’t have much upper body strength compared to a real combat model like 2B—he wasn’t even supposed to have any weapons with him; Scanners didn’t have the stamina for physical combat—but what he’d found was that manipulating magnetic fields around his weapons gave him a… unique style of fighting.

Grasped in an invisible hand, the sword shot forward and tore through the bitten machine with just as much force as any real combat model could provide, ripping its hull open. Gouts of oil and showers of sparks poured out of it.

The machine collapsed, the lights in its optical sensors flickering and fading. The child machine began to cry.

“Do not cry,” Alucard tried to console it, giving it a stiff, awkward pat on the head. “It is, er… in a better place now.”

Another dull thud rattled the bridge; 9S spied in the gaps between two branches another flicker of fire and a billowing cloud of oily black smoke blending into the night sky. The lamps lining the bridges flickered ominously, the half-second flashes of darkness filling 9S with a nebulous dread.

“Alucard,” he said, tapping him on the shoulder, “I think they’re trying to set the village on fire…”

Alucard gave the child machine a gentle push toward its peers. “Run along now,” he told it. “Stay with your friends.”

With that, he stood up, grabbed 9S by the arm, and rushed back toward the site of the fire, weaving through the panicked crowds.

9S recognized the building that was on fire right away by its location alone. Flames licked hungrily at its skeleton, waves of ambient heat rolling off it. It was unrecognizable as one of the village’s repair facilities. He wondered how it had lit up so quickly, considering how hard it had rained yesterday. Then again, fire was nothing if not tenacious—it always found a way.

“Any ideas?” Alucard asked him.

As far as 9S knew, he didn’t have anything on hand that could put out a fire. He’d sort of assumed that Alucard would have some sort of magic power he could use. He shook his head. “Pod, what can we do?”

“Response: Large-scale fire suppression is not within this unit’s capabilities.”

9S made a note to complain to R&D about that. “There has to be something,” he mused, mulling over a map of the village in his mind. “A reservoir, a water tower…”

“You!”

9S felt a clawed hand snag his collar and let out a surprised yelp as he was thrown into the air and pinned down, the wooden slats of the platform creaking beneath him, his head spinning, the world swirling around him and slowly coming to a stop as his eyes focused on the furious face staring down at him.

“What are you doing?” Eve snarled at him, spit flying from his mouth.
“Um, th-thinking about how to put out the—"

“You stabbed us in the back!”

“What?”

“You androids stabbed us—”

“What?”

9S felt the clawed tips of Eve’s glove press into his chest. “If you say ‘what,’” Eve growled, hissing through gritted teeth, “one more time…”

Alucard grabbed the humanoid machine by the shoulder. “Eve, calm yourself. You and 9S have no quarrel—”

Eve promptly socked him in the jaw.

9S pulled himself up, shaking the static out of his head. Androids attacking machines? Surely Anemone’s men had better self-control than that. Sure, it was nerve-wracking being around so many machines that weren’t trying to kill you, and sure, someone could lose their cool if they were particularly nervous, and sure, plenty of androids—well, okay, all of them—had an axe to grind against the machines, but…

“Pod,” he asked as Alucard and Eve traded blows, “how many androids are in this village right now? Scan for IFF codes and core resonance signatures.”

“Scanning.” Pod 153 bobbed up and down for a few agonizing seconds. It felt like minutes. “Inconclusive.”

9S recoiled as if he’d been struck. “Inconclusive?”

“Statement: This support unit has received an urgent message from support pod 042. Vampires have learned to broadcast false IFF and vital signs. Scans cannot determine how many androids remain within the village.”

9S felt something cold stir in his chest. Vampires that could pass for androids and hide among the living… how could you root out an enemy like that?

He leaped to his feet. “The androids are vampires!” he shouted at Alucard and Eve, hoping to interrupt their scuffle.

Alucard let go of Eve’s fist. Eve stepped back and lowered his hands. Both of them stared at 9S with worry in their eyes.

“They know how to broadcast false vital signs and change their appearance.” 9S summarized what he’d learned as hastily as he could, the words rushing headlong from his mouth. “There’s no way to tell a living android from an undead one anymore.”

Eve’s eyes narrowed. “Convenient.”

“How is that convenient?” 9S sputtered. “That means we have to—”

“You were caught in the act double crossing us!” Eve insisted, grabbing 9S by the shoulder and shaking him. “And now you want to say it’s vampires and not you?”
“Eve, why would we lie about that?” Alucard asked, ever the picture of perfect composure in the face of Eve’s leaping from conclusion to conclusion. “It is just as bad for us if we cannot tell the difference between the living and the dead. They could all be vampires, as far as we know.”

9S felt a pit open up in his stomach. That was right. If vampires were hiding here, and their disguises were perfect, then the only way to root them out would be indiscriminate slaughter…

Eve relented and let go of him. “Sure,” he spat, seemingly unconvinced, and vanished in a flare of golden light.

A grim, foreboding frown etched itself onto Alucard’s face. “We need to make sure Anemone and Pascal are safe.” Silhouetted by the flickering flames behind him, he hurried back the way he and 9S had come. “Follow me.”

“Anemone and Pascal?” 9S trailed behind him. Sure, they were the leaders, but… “What about 2B? You said we needed to find her!”

“The situation has changed,” Alucard replied coolly.

“Yeah? Doesn’t that mean she’s in more danger?” 9S shot back. After all, Pod 042 had sent Pod 153 that information about the vampire infiltration, which meant that it and 2B had found out about it first, which meant that 2B had already run afoul of one or more vampires…

“2B wields the Vampire Killer and has its full power at her disposal,” Alucard replied, a dismissive wave of his hand. “She will be fine.”

“We should be helping her,” 9S insisted, grabbing Alucard by the wrist. His prosthetic, a simple mechanical arm with no skin to cover its bare chassis, was hard and cold.

“She can take care of herself. Can you say the same of Pascal?”

9S let go of Alucard. “No,” he admitted. “I guess I can’t.”

As her wits flooded back to her, 2B realized that the voice purring in her ear was none other than the illusory vampire woman who had taunted her earlier.

6E nodded. “Yes, Mistress Carmilla. She’s the one who caused me so much trouble this morning. Did I do well?”

“Oh, most certainly,” Carmilla said. 2B felt her grip on her neck tighten, razor-sharp fingernails slipping through the high collar of her blouse and nicking her flesh; the needle-like pinpricks left cold, dull, throbbing patches on her skin. “You’ve done very well, 6E. I’m proud of you.”

6E smiled. It was an oddly simple, guileless smile, one that didn’t suit her vicious personality at all. Usually, when she smiled like that, there was a shark-toothed grin behind it, an almost cunning savagery lurking underneath that she made only a perfunctory attempt to keep hidden. There was none of that here, 2B noted. It was as though turning into a vampire had hollowed her out.

That was what vampires did to people. The conflict, the contradictions, the turmoil, the unseen depths of one’s conscience—they erased it all and left in their minions nothing but artifice.

Carmilla lifted her other hand to 2B’s chest and ghosted a pale finger up from the keyhole of her blouse to the tip of her chin, the arrowhead-shaped tip of her nail slicing easily through fabric and leaving a thin bloody line bisecting her throat. A burning, venomous numbness spread across 2B’s
skin and sank slowly into her flesh, as though the shallow incisions Carmilla was making were erasing her bit by bit. The vampire peeled aside the fabric she’d cut away, then pressed her palm forcefully against the underside of 2B’s jaw, lifting her head to expose her naked throat.

“Well, then, you’ve earned this,” she purred to 6E. “Come drink your fill, my dear.”

2B felt Carmilla push her head back until the side of her hand dug painfully into the back of her head, clamping her jaw shut. The vampire’s thumb crawled excitedly across her lips and her frigid breath kissed the back of her ear as she stared down her nose at 6E, her eyes wide. 6E crept toward her, first hesitantly and then with increasing boldness, an eager grin parting her lips.

2B’s eyes flitted from her ashen face to the gloom surrounding her, as though hoping something would leap out from the shadows to disrupt this ritual and save her. 9S, an uninfected Resistance android, or even a machine, or even Alucard…

6E placed her hands on the sides of 2B’s waist, anchoring herself, and leaned in, her mouth yawning open, puffs of airborne ice crystals rising from her mouth and nostrils and tingling against 2B’s neck. 2B struggled against the growing numbness spreading through her chassis to force sensation back into her body. The two vampires’ bodies were pressed against hers, their presence alone seemingly enough to drain the vitality from her body.

One hand. Just one hand, left or right, and she could summon the Vampire Killer and break herself free and kill these things…

As 6E tucked her mouth into the crook of her neck, her lips clamping against her bare skin like the mouth of a leech, 2B felt her shoulderblades pull themselves inward and an electric spark run down her arm, her slackened muscles tensing and quieted servos whirring to life. Her fingers jerked and spasmed, curling into a fist. 6E’s ice-cold fangs, as hard and sharp as the blade of a sword, pressed against her bare skin—barely more than half a second away from sliding into her flesh.

2B jammed her elbow into Carmilla’s waist with all the strength she could muster. A cough of frozen air spilled across her cheek as Carmilla let out a pained wheeze. The hands curled tightly around her neck and jaw loosened their grip; in turn, gravity’s grip tightened and 2B felt herself slip from the clutches of both vampires.

A thunderous roar of gunfire split the air. With a flurry of sparks, the Vampire Killer appeared in 2B’s hand. 2B drove her fist into 6E’s stomach, the whip’s leather loops pressing against her knuckles.

With an earsplitting scream, 6E pulled away and leaped backward, clutching at her navel, her chest heaving, her face locked into a terrified mask long after her voice had given out. Wisps of black smoke curled out from beneath the hands pressed to her stomach as she danced an ungainly dance out of the path of a stream of silver bullets burying themselves in the ground at her feet.

Rejoined by her pod, 2B unfurled the whip with a sharp snap and lunged at 6E, a snarl tearing itself from her throat as fiery rage burned away the cold fear coiled in her chest. 6E summoned a sword and parried the lash of the whip. The elation in her face was gone; only terror remained. The sight of that terror—the panic gleaming in her eyes, the fear-smile stretching her face into a frenzied, mirthless grin—sent a white-hot rush through 2B’s blood. Machines never showed so much fear on their blank, expressionless faces. This was the fear of something that knew in its heart that it deserved to die, and 2B drank it like wine.

6E’s sword—a short sword, one-handed, with a straight and gleaming blade, a far cry from the oversized odachi she typically wielded—clanged against the whip, narrowly diverting its course.
Still, the tip grazed her cheek, cutting a smoldering gash in her flesh. The skin around the wound blackened and curled up. 6E leaped backward, somersaulting over a forest of blazing spears of light that tore out of the ground at her feet.

2B pressed onward, Pod 042 whirling around to target Carmilla with another salvo of gunfire, gouts of smoke pouring from its turret as flashes of light danced off its scuffed chrome hull. 6E was going to pay for this. Carmilla was going to pay for this. She would make them both suffer for the crime of existing.

Both vampires gave 2B a wide berth as the Vampire Killer cut wide swaths through the air, its deadly arc leaving blurred afterimages swooping across the gusts of wind in its wake. 2B kept both her enemies in her sights. The second one, 6E’s so-called mistress Carmilla, was tall, lithe, and agile, her slender, willowy body twisting with grace and ease out of the path of the whip. Her jet-black hair, reaching down nearly to her ankles, billowed behind her like a sable cape.

Carmilla threw off the white cowl and robe she’d worn to disguise herself as one of Laurel’s soldiers, tearing it from her shoulders to reveal rippling waves of sheer, nearly-translucent scarlet silk dancing around her pale, clear skin—a far cry from the overwhelming mountain of frills and lace her servant wore. The cloak drifted through the air like a phantom, its whiteness blinding in the gloom, briefly obscuring the vampire’s form as she dashed behind it.

2B drew her silver sword, the silver etchings on the blade glittering in the light. Powerful as the whip was, it moved like it had a mind of its own; due to her relative inexperience with the weapon, 2B could never precisely predict its arcs as well as she liked. Swords, though, were far more familiar to her. They obeyed her perfectly. When she wanted a job done precisely, she used a sword.

She sliced through the cloak, piercing through it to cut through the vampire who’d fled behind it—Empty air. Where had Carmilla disappeared to?

A flicker of movement in the corner of her eye. She glanced in its direction to see Carmilla closing in on her and raised her sword. The vampire’s claws were outstretched, fingers curled into talons—did she fight bare-handed?

Pod 042 summoned an energy shield in front of 2B to block Carmilla’s attack; her sharp claws raked across the glistening dome of light without leaving so much as a scratch as 2B swung her blade through the shield.

Carmilla vanished into mist as the blade swung through her. Teleportation? Or an illusion? 2B pivoted to 6E, keen not to let either vampire slip into her blind spot.

There were three of them, all giggling and cackling in unison, their identical voices weaving around one another. 2B summoned the whip, dismissing the sword in a flurry of sparks which coalesced to form the whip’s looped leather length, and struck them all down in one blow. All three vanished like smoke.

“What’s wrong, 2E? Can’t you trust your own eyes?” 6E’s disembodied voice cackled.

Illusions. The same kind of tricks the vampire Scanner had been playing this morning. 2B scrutinized the area, studying the indistinct gloom on the outskirts of the village. If that Scanner was nearby, he could be wreaking all kinds of havoc on her eyesight and hearing. She’d have to eliminate him before anyone else, if only she could find him...
Another flash just at the periphery of her sight. 2B whirled around to engage the enemy, her whip at the ready—

Another trio of clones, this time of Carmilla, their silken clothes fluttering behind them like the banners of a medieval army. As 2B prepared to cut another arc through the air, they all scattered, one forging straight ahead, the other flanking her.

“2B! Behind you!” 6E called out.

Pod 042 ignored all of the three Carmillas but the one approaching from 2B’s right, peppering her with gunfire. Bullets ripped through her silken clothes and tore burning gashes through her skin, and with a ragged shout of pain, she beat a hasty retreat. The other Carmillas, undeterred, pressed forward. 2B had no time to deal with them—she’d already pivoted to deal with the threat at her back—

As her whip cracked against 6E’s sword and ripped it from her hand, the two Carmillas tackled her, only for their hands to pass through her like ghosts and their bodies to collapse into wispy clouds of mist.

Illusions. Of course. But only 2B was being hacked right now. Whatever she could see—or couldn’t see—didn’t matter to Pod 042. It saw with perfect clarity. It had even seen through 6E’s disguise when she’d fooled 2B’s eyes, ears, and even her hands.

Pod 042 would have to be her guiding light.

“Pod!” 2B closed her eyes and tightened her grip on her sword. Without her sight, a long and unwieldy weapon like the Vampire Killer would be too hard to use. She would have to stick with the weapon she was most familiar with—the weapon that had been by her side since the very moment she’d come into being. The weapon she had been born with.

The silver-etched katana hung from her hands, the leather of her gloves creaking against the sword’s simple, utilitarian hilt. Though it lacked ornamentation apart from the etchings on the blade, its weight was the same as the Virtuous Contract’s and it was just as perfectly balanced. This was a sword she already knew as intimately as she knew her own body.

Darkness engulfed her, the indescribably warm black-red of light bleeding against her eyelids filling her sight.

“Pod, guide me!”

Proximity warnings flashed against her HUD, changes in the air brushed past her ears and stung the tip of her nose. Pod 042 hung at her side, the intermittent blasts of gunfire from its machine gun turret pointing the way to 2B’s foes.

Her sword clashed against 6E’s, the shrill clanging of metal on metal ringing in her ears. The air swirled around her. Her ears turned themselves perfectly to the subtleties of Pod 042’s targeting.

She dodged a strike from 6E, retaliated, heard cloth rip, felt steel cut through tensely-coiled muscle fibers. She felt a clawed hand lock around her forearm, numbing poison spreading through her veins where Carmilla’s fingernails bit into her skin, tore her arm free, and drove Carmilla back with a flurry of blows.

Left. Right. Behind. Above. Blind, 2B fended off every attack. The vampires were growing bolder by the second, pressing her defenses, probing her weaknesses, slipping through. Stinging blades left aching wounds.
“You bloody talking box!” Carmilla howled. “I’ve had enough of you!”

2B’s eyes snapped open as Carmilla’s claws ripped through Pod 042’s hull, tearing gaping gashes in its chrome casing. Blood oozed from charred holes peppered the vampire’s bare arms and shoulders, the flowing ribbons of scarlet silk that clothed her fluttering, ragged and singed. Rage twisted her lean, elfin features into a bestial snarl, blood trickling from split-open cherry-red lips. Carmilla slammed the pod against the ground, burying its gun turret in the dirt, grinding her heel into its scuffed and scratched hull as its clawed arms flailed helplessly.

Without hesitation, 2B lashed out and struck at her, her sword cutting a burning gash through her side. The silver set her flesh alight, cauterizing shut the bloody gash from her waist to her exposed navel. Carmilla howled in pain, leaping backward and vanishing in a flash of fire as she beat a hasty retreat.

“One down,” 2B growled, her grip on her sword tightening, as she turned to face 6E. “Pod…”

Pod 042 rose from the ground, battered but still functional. “Statement: This support unit remains operational.”

2B nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Unauthorized system entry detected. Engaging counter-hacking measures.”

6E growled, readied her blade, and charged forward, blood streaming from her gaping mouth, her fangs gleaming. Pod 042 wasted no time in firing a searing bolt of white-hot plasma from its gun turret, aiming squarely at her chest. The beam ripped through her lacy bodice, setting alight her ostentatious dress, and burst out of her back with a shower of atomized metal and vaporized blood.

2B steeled herself. It wasn’t enough to kill a vampire. But enough to weaken one, to soften one up for the final blow.

As the laser beam grew weaker and the stream of plasma slowed to a trickle and stopped, 6E’s body disappeared altogether.

2B tensed up, raising her sword defensively. But how could—

6E was in front of her now, her hand already clamped on her throat, her sword pressed against 2B’s with enough force to pin her arm to her chest. A snarl split her bloodstained cherry-red lips, her scarlet eyes gleaming beneath a curtain of disheveled lavender ringlets filled with hate.

But this couldn’t have happened, 2B thought, her head spinning, unless Pod 042—

6E grinned devilishly and slowly faded away into nothing, growing more and more translucent until the last traces of the color of her hair and eyes and the contours of her body blended in with the deep shadows of the underside of the village. 2B felt the invisible hand release her and reflexively lashed out, a shout tearing its way up her throat as her blade cut a glittering arc through the air. Her head whipped back and forth as she scanned the area for any sign of her foe.

“Statement: Counter-hacking measures failed.” Even Pod 042 seemed oddly tense. “This unit’s sensory data has become compromised. Proposal—”

6E appeared out of thin air and grabbed it from behind. “Oh, give it a rest, tin man. I’ve got a proposal of my own for you!”
2B lunged at 6E, striking with her blade then swiftly switching to the whip and raking its long tendril through the air in a figure-eight.

6E laughed and dodged it, the arc of the whip just barely severing a few curly locks from one of her pigtails, and lobbed Pod 042 high into the air. The pod sailed into the night sky and vanished.

“There!” she crowed, leaping out of range of the whip and skidding to a halt. “No more distractions now!”

A pillar of flame blossomed up from the ground to 2B’s left and Carmilla stepped out, still ragged and wounded, but carrying herself with a proud air of confidence. “You’ve fought well for a whelp,” she said, lifting her head to look down her nose at 2B, “but you wield that whip like an amateur. And to think I was afraid when I heard that a new Belmont had arisen. But now that you’ve lost that stupid little lantern of yours… whose eyes are you going to trust?”

2B gritted her teeth, backed away from the two vampires, and summoned the silver-etched sword to her off hand. If she couldn’t trust her eyes, she would have to strike as rapidly and with as wide an area of effect as possible. She’d have to strike quickly, indiscriminately, blindly…

Quickly. She overclocked her systems and threw herself at them, heat blossoming in her chest and her head, muscles straining. To her, 6E and Carmilla might as well have been frozen. She could feel muscle fibers in her thighs and shoulders snapping like overstretched wires.

Indiscriminately. She struck wildly, pirouetting like a dancer, spinning on her heel, the blade of her sword and arc of her whip spinning a full 360 degrees around her. The movements of her weapons couldn’t keep up with her eyes. Ghostly afterimages burned themselves into the air in the wake of her weapons’ arcs.

Blindly. Never mind what she saw. Never mind where 6E and Carmilla were. Anything she saw was a distraction. The real enemy was unseen. Unseeable.

Blood spattered her face. Flesh sizzled and hissed as it blackened and charred. The illusions of her foes flickered and vanished as their real bodies pulled themselves out of the path of 2B’s swath of destruction.

There they were.

2B pressed onward, alert, purposeful, locked on. She was herself a weapon; the aim of her wielder was true and inerrant.

She had them in her sights now.

Her blade ripped through 6E’s arm, severing it. The Vampire Killer caught the limb in midair as blood spurted in a scarlet arc around it, shattering it into a blossom of ash and fire. With a flourish and a thrust, 2B jammed the sword up to its hilt in her gut and pinned her to one of the wooden pillars holding up the bridge overhead.

One down. One to…

Carmilla wrenched her arm upward, her cold hand crushing her wrist as she held the Vampire Killer aloft. Her claws curled into 2B’s side as she held her captive.

“Rank amateur,” she snarled, snapping 2B’s wrist and ripping four parallel gashes into her waist with her claws.
2B gasped and fell to her knees as she clutched at her stomach, blood gushing through the gaps in her fingers as she struggled to staunch the wounds. The gashes in her flesh were so cold that they burned, and beneath the unholy heat, she could feel numbness worm its way into her chassis.

Carmilla’s hand fell on her head next, her cold fingers pressing into her forehead. “Weakling. I have slain a thousand would-be vampire hunters like you without breaking a sweat.” Cold blood trickled from a bullet wound in her arm down to her wrist and dripped into 2B’s hair, forming a cold blotch on her scalp that sank into her skull. “You think that because you wield a holy weapon,” she said, spitting out the word holy as if it were obscene, “you have the right to defy your natural betters?”

Her fingertips pressed harder against 2B’s head, the pressure rising to unbearable levels. 2B struggled to think through the cold fog engulfing her head. A little more force and she swore her skull would crack open like an egg.

“Humans were meant to be slaves to vampires. You androids, you odd little mechanical dolls, were meant to be slaves in turn to humans. We are already your masters—and you dare raise a hand against us?” Carmilla snarled. “6E, darling, come have your dinner. I am sure you must be starving. We shall give this upstart a more agreeable demeanor soon enough.”

6E staggered out from the splintered wreckage of the bridge’s scaffolding, gingerly sliding the silver-edged blade out of her belly and tossing it aside. She moved wearily, haltingly, weakened from 2B’s attacks. The silver blade had left wounds that were slow to heal.

Carmilla gripped 2B’s head tighter, squeezing her skull in an unbearable vise grip. 2B clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, struggling to fend off the pain as she pulled her hand away from the gushing wounds across her stomach, lift it, and recall the sword to her hand.

She drove it straight into Carmilla’s forearm. The vampire howled in agony and tore herself away from her, all but running away as the blade slid out from her flesh, its tip grinding against her bones.

Baring both weapons, 2B rose to her feet. “Well?” she snapped. “What are you going to do about my demeanor now?”

Carmilla’s lips curled in a hateful snarl, her brow furrowing, eyebrows knitting themselves together, nose wrinkling. “You dare—!”

She lunged at 2B, claws out-thrust—

A blossom of gold light appeared in front of 2B, resolving into the shape of a man; his leg swung through the air, cracking against Carmilla’s neck and throwing her to the ground with such great force that she bounced.

Eve stood between android and vampire, blood and oil spattering his bare chest, his red eyes gleaming coldly as he looked down at Carmilla. The black tattoo covering one of his arms had grown yet again, spreading across his chest and back and creeping up his neck and jaw.

“Get out,” he growled, “of Pascal’s village.”

9S saw stars as something incredibly hard and traveling incredibly fast slammed into his head and knocked him off his feet.

He struggled to right himself, his head spinning, static snow dancing in his eyes, colors bleeding...
from the world as his skull throbbed from the impact. Alucard grabbed him and pulled him up to his knees as his dazed, wandering eyes caught sight of the thing that had hit him in the head and knocked him off his feet.

It was Pod 042.

The support pod was battered and beaten, its hull dented and scratched, with long, ragged furrows dug across the chrome surface to expose the mechanisms within. 9S got his wits about him and all but tackled it, inspecting it with a pang of worry.

“Pod 042?” he asked. “What’s going on?” He turned to his own pod. “Pod, initiate data transfer from Pod 042.”

Pod 042 weakly raised a claw. “Statement: All systems operative,” it said, as though it knew 9S was worried about it.

Even though he’d requested a data transfer, 9S didn’t need to look through the information Pod 153 was downloading and sharing to his visor to know what was going on. “2B’s in trouble, isn’t she?”

Without waiting for a response, he leaped to his feet, still cradling the damaged pod. “Show me the way to her!”

Alucard’s cold fingers dug into his arm, yanking him backward. “9S, 2B can take care of herself. Our priority needs to be the people who can’t!”

9S ripped his arm free. He could already feel bruises forming where Alucard’s fingertips had pressed into his bicep. “Look at this!” he retorted, brandishing Pod 042. He could have thrown it at Alucard, he was shaking so much. Why couldn’t Alucard understand how much 2B meant to him? He was her partner! “You call this taking care of herself?”

In a huff, worry rushing through his veins as a thousand images of 2B in dire straits, 2B with blood streaming down her face, 2B with fangs pricking her neck, filled his mind, 9S stormed off. Alucard traile behind him; he pumped his legs harder, his muscles burning, and ran faster.

“Just this once, listen to me—!” Alucard howled behind him, his voice trailing off into the distance as 9S pressed onward.

Alucard all but bit his tongue as he slowed to a stop and watched 9S vanish into the darkness. That boy had never reminded him as much of Soma as he did now. Headstrong, stubborn, hell bent on throwing all caution to the wind—and, of course, all for the sake of a girl. Heaven forbid he ever lose her.

He’d almost shouted, Just this once, listen to me, Soma!

He felt a chill run through him as the fluttering leaves overhead slowed to a halt, the flames flickering through the distant trees suspended themselves in midair, and the edges of 9S’s coattails froze before they followed him into the shadowy underbelly of the village.

“My, my. History does have a funny way of repeating itself, does it not, young master Alucard?”

Death floated to his side, the ragged edges of his darker-than-black cloak billowing in a nonexistent breeze. His scythe hung lazily from his bony hand, its blade polished to a perfect mirror sheen. The blade captured a slice of Alucard’s face and threw it back at him as perfectly as though he were looking at himself from the outside through it.
Alucard had never seen such a vulnerable look on his own face before. “What do you want, Death?” he asked, stiffening and composing himself. His mechanical fingers tightened around the hilt of his saber.

“Rest easy, young master. I am only here to observe.” The icy blue pinpricks of light within Death’s cavernous eye sockets twinkled. “My, that boy certainly does remind one of a certain Soma Cruz. A dead ringer, one might say.”

“If you or anybody else lays a finger on him—”

Death laughed. “Oh, we are all quite well aware of the consequences of drawing your ire! Do not mistake us for fools, Alucard.”

Alucard knew when he was being mocked. He brandished his saber. “Get out.”

“I was just leaving, actually,” Death said, resting his scythe gently across his shoulder. “I have seen enough.”

“Then go, and trouble this place no more.”

“No need to get snippy.” Death floated up into the air. “Until next time, young master. May your new young ward meet a better fate than your last one.”

The billowing black cloak faded into the shadows, and as it did, the leaves began to rustle and fire began to crackle.

Alucard relented and ran off in pursuit of 9S.

6E wasted no opportunity; she lunged at Eve, an eager grin spreading across her face, and 2B found herself doing the one thing she never thought she would do—she fought alongside a machine.

Eve lacked finesse, but made up for it with raw power; every blow he landed on either vampire sent them sprawling, blood streaming from cracked and shattered limbs. 2B had fought him before; he was wild, unfocused, undisciplined, and reckless—and that was what made him so formidable. He had no strategy but brute force applied with no precision whatsoever.

Strangely, the id-fueled spasms of an angry lunatic presented an ironclad defense and nigh-unbeatable offense. Attempts at strategy simply bounced off of him; 2B assumed that he was so stupid that the best-laid plans of any foe found themselves sucked into a sort of gravity well of intelligence. He fought on an absurdly simple level, dragged his foes down to that level, and beat them with experience.

At the very least, his presence here, like Pod 042’s, gave 2B an anchor. Following him, studying his movements, seeing where he aimed his attacks—even if where was less of an exact science and more of an uneducated guess—allowed her to fight no matter what illusions her foe threw at her.

Still, though, the vampires were relentless, and agile, too—the two of them in unison displaying a speed and grace 2B had never seen before. Pinning them down would be hard enough if her senses weren’t compromised; as it was, it was almost impossible to land a hit, merely to come infinitesimally close.

If only she and Eve could separate these two—engage them both one-on-one—they could win. But that would be a death sentence for Eve, who despite all his strength had no weapons capable of
substantially harming one of these things.

Floored by one of Eve’s attacks, Carmilla lifted her head up off the ground and propped herself up with her arms. A fragile smile lit up her blood-encrusted, mud-splattered face. “Y-You… that chiseled physique, that lustrous hair, that noble brow! You wouldn’t happen to be Adam’s brother, would you?”

Eve stiffened, his lips curling back, his teeth grinding against each other. “Brother…”

Carmilla pulled herself together, carrying herself haughtily despite her injuries and tattered clothes. “So you are. Adam has told me so much about you!”

“Where is he?”

Carmilla curled a long lock of her raven hair around her finger, beckoning him seductively. “Come with me, big boy, and I’ll tell you.”

Eve grabbed her by the shoulder. “No. You’re coming with me.”

“Wait! Eve!” 2B called out, setting aside her whip and reaching out to grab him before he did something stupid. After all, what the hell could he do to a vampire with his bare hands—and how dangerous would he be if Carmilla sank her fangs into him?

The two of them vanished in a flash of golden light.

6E pulled herself up. “Mistress!” she cried out, rushing over to the empty space where Carmilla and Eve had been just a few seconds ago.

At least, 2B told herself, now she only had one enemy to fight.

6E glared at her, gritted her teeth, gurgled as though in immense pain, and let out a sharp scream as a pristine arm burst out of the severed stump, ripping through the cauterized wound 2B’s sword had left behind in a shower of gore. Blood stained her pale skin, dripping onto the ground, as she cradled the new appendage.

“Well, 2E?” she sneered.

2B readied her sword. She’d sparred with 6E so many times in the old days; even as a vampire, she didn’t have that many new moves, just more brute strength and a newfound affinity for mindgames.

Their blades clashed in a flurry of sparks.

Carmilla found herself standing deep in the bowels of some unsightly mechanical abattoir. It was the most hideous place she’d ever seen—nothing but ugly pieces of scrap metal and big, skeletal machines as far as the eye could see—which, in the gloom, wasn’t very far, even for a vampire’s prodigious eyesight.

“There,” Eve said, taking a deep breath. He never broke eye contact with Carmilla. His eyes were just as red as any vampire’s, but the light had a hard, earthy gleam to them, not like the foggy and ethereal glow that lit up a vampire’s scarlet irises. “Now we can fight without hurting anybody.”

Carmilla laughed. She couldn’t help it. She’d heard this dumb hero-of-justice speech from so many would-be vampire slayers over the centuries that it was just comical. You couldn’t take platitudes
and machismo like that *seriously* unless it was coming from someone with the skill to back it up—like a Belmont.

And Eve was no Belmont. He didn’t even have any sort of weapons capable of putting down a vampire for good—what did he think he could do, beat her into a pile of mush faster than her healing factor could keep up? Besides, he was clearly a simpleton, good for nothing but punching indiscriminately, no tactics, no finesse…

She kept laughing. “Oh, *somebody* will get very hurt here, I assure you, Eve—”

He was gone.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder; she felt herself spin around on her heel.

Eve punched her hard enough to knock loose every tooth in her mouth.

6E vanished. 2B found herself straining to identify subtle shifts in the air that betrayed her lying senses, cutting through mirages, feeling her blade meet resistance amid empty air, narrowly dodging blows that came out of nowhere, *failing* to dodge blows that came out of nowhere, hitting the ground, tasting blood.

If she just kept pressing forward through the illusions, through the lies, striking at the empty spaces where 6E hid herself—

Her sword met empty air again and again, again and again, until she wondered if she was even *fighting* 6E anymore, or if she had simply perched atop the bridge overhead and was watching her swing her blade around at thin air looking like a fool.

“2B?”

2B whirled around at the sound of a familiar voice. 9S was standing right before her, crouched down as though he’d leaped from the bridge to the ground. *How?* How had he gotten here so quickly, so silently, so—

It was another trick. She readied her sword.

“2B, are you alright?” he asked, concern furrowing his brow. “Y-You can put the sword down, 2B…” He raised his hands, palms outward. “Um… 2B? It’s me, 9S…”

Keeping her sword bared, she crept forward, taking a hand and laying it with trepidation on his shoulder.

Warm. It was warm. And solid, too. It was real. *He* was real.

She sighed. “9S, it’s really you.”

“Yeah. What’s going on?” He glanced up. “I saw you from up there swinging your sword around at nothing.”

“I think someone’s messing with my visual processor.”

“Well, why don’t I hack into you and take a look?”

2B nodded. “The sooner this gets cleared up, the better. Quickly. The vampire I was fighting might still be around—”
She tried to take a step forward, but couldn’t budge. Something was holding her arm back. She glanced over her shoulder, seeing her arm hanging in the air straight and tensed. It was as though someone had grabbed her by the wrist, but there was no one there, and she couldn’t even feel any pressure on her hand or wrist. To be grabbed and held in place by, it seemed, nothing at all was supremely disorienting. It was like a part of her brain, just a tiny part, had gone blind.

“What’s the matter, Tooie?” 6E’s haunting, churlish voice drifted through the clearing. “Can’t you see me? Can’t you feel me?”

2B pivoted on her heel and swung her sword into the empty space that had somehow ensnared her arm. Immediately, the tension holding her in place broke, sending her staggering back into 9S.

6E’s voice filled the air, emanating from all around her. “You can’t see me. You can’t feel me. You can’t touch me, 2E.” Every phrase came from a different direction. Her left, right, behind her, in front of her…

2B gritted her teeth. “6E! Show yourself!”

9S grabbed her by the shoulder. “2B, what’s going on?”

“How do you know you’re even really hearing me right now, Tooie?” 6E laughed. Her laughter, the laughter of a dozen people, rang in 2B’s ears, cloying like a hot, thick fog.

2B felt something heavy sink in her stomach. Could the hacker have that much influence on her mind? Were all of her senses lying to her? Sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell?

6E’s pet Scanner could control what she saw, hear, felt. That was how she’d pretended to be 9S. She’d tricked 2B into seeing a false image, hearing a false voice, feeling what was not there and not feeling what was.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the laughter filling her ears and the murky, earthy smell of the nearby forest filling her nose. Her senses were deceiving her. But the one thing no hacker could influence, her instincts—what humans had called a “sixth sense”—

If your heart wavers…

Why does she call you that?” 9S asked her.

“Not now, 9S.” 2B struggled to focus. “Go looking for that rogue Scanner and take him out.”

“Rogue Scanner?” 6E parroted, giggling mockingly. “Oh, Tooie, you’re so adorably simple sometimes.”

“Why does she call you that?” 9S asked again. “Why does she call you that… Tooie… Too-Eee… 2E…”

Her concentration broken, 2B opened her eyes. “9S, please—”

“2E. She calls you 2E.” 9S’s lips curled in disgust. “It’s… it’s not…”

The color drained from his face. He took a step backward, then another.

“9S,” 2B insisted, reaching out to him. “It isn’t—”

“Oh, god, it’s true, isn’t it?” He clapped a gloved hand over his mouth as it widened in shock. “Oh, god, 2B, you—how could you…”
“Nines…”

9S swatted her hand aside. “How could you do that to me? To us!”

“Did you think he’d never figure it out?” 6E asked. “See, Tooie, that’s your problem… you think everyone else is just as stupid as you are…”

“And you think you’re better than the vampires? 2B, you’re… you’re a monster!” 9S cried out.

“Shut up!” 2B brandished her sword. “It’s a trick! It’s not like you’re real, anyway!”

He held out his hands. “Wait, 2B, no, no, I take it back, I—”

She drove her sword through his chest. How dare this impostor, this illusion—how dare it toy with her emotions!

His mouth gaped open with shock, a pitiful squeak falling from his lips. He laid his hands, warm hands, living hands, softly on the hand wrapped around the sword’s hilt, on 2B’s hand, just as he’d done so many times in the past.

It was as though 2B had ran the blade through her own chest. Warm hands. Living hands. How could that be an illusion?

It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be…

9S’s soft, beautiful face, frozen in shock and anguish, shimmered and blurred. 2B sniffled and realized that tears were welling up in her eyes, bleeding into the visor wrapped around her head. Were they really her tears? Or was 6E tricking her into thinking she was crying? The burning sensation, the watery film blurring everything in front of her, the ache stretching deep down her throat and into her chest—How could she know?

“2B, I… don’t—blame you…” 9S hissed as he slumped forward, his grip on her hands loosening. “We… don’t—We don’t blame… you… i-it’s—not your f-fault…”

“Nines…”

“It’s okay.” Tears rolled down his cheeks from under his visor. “I know you love me, 2B. I know. I love you too. I love you, 2B. I love you…”

It wasn’t real, 2B told herself. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be happening. Standing here with the real Nines and a real sword jammed up to its hilt in his real chest as his real voice, weakening as his life ebbed out, told her his real feelings…

It couldn’t be real. She couldn’t have done this to him. She wouldn’t—

“It’s… f-funny, isn’t it?” 9S whispered to her, a trickle of blood dripping down his chin. “If w-we were… I mean… It wouldn’t kill me, what you did… if we were vampires…”

Trembling as white-hot fury burned through her tears, 2B ripped the sword from his chest. “You’re not real,” she spat. “None of this is real.” She cast a furious glance around the clearing. “6E, show yourself!”

“You don’t have to yell, Tooie,” 6E whispered in her ear. “I’m right here.”

Invisible fingers caressed her cheek. An invisible hand clamped down on her wrist. An invisible pair of lips brushed against the side of her neck.
“I told you this morning,” 6E said, “I wanted you to want it.” Her fingers danced lightly across her cheek and combed through her hair, working into the knot holding her visor in place at the back of her head and swiftly untying it. The cloth fell from 2B’s eyes and drifted to the ground. “Well, Tooie? Have I made my case?”

2B looked down at 9S’s corpse—it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real—and watched it decay before her eyes, skin growing paler and pulling away from the seam lines in his chassis, muscle fibers loosening and poking frayed edges through gaps in the skin, his uniform rotting into decayed tatters, his sightless blue eyes turning a milky gray-white, turgid black tar spilling from his mouth and running from his eyes like tears. His hair grew wild and tangled, matted with blood and tar and dirt; his bare skin under the tattered remains of his coat thinned out and split open to reveal black-stained ribs guarding tar-clogged machinery.

“IT never has to happen again if you join us.” 6E’s fingers continued to ghost through 2B’s hair in a way that was gentle to a cloying, almost sickening extreme. “If you both join us… no more YoRHa… no more Executioners… no more poor Tooie sobbing over poor Nines…"

With an anguished roar, 2B wrenched herself free and whirled around, slashing with all her might, her sword cutting a glittering arc through thin air—

Suddenly visible, 6E staggered backward, bits of lace fluttering in her wake as blood spewed from the burning gash running across her chest.

No more illusions.

But how could she fight when she had no idea what was real and what was not? How could she know this was real? How could she trust anything, anyone—

If your heart wavers, seek guidance from those who came before you.

The voice rang in her ears. A whispery, scratchy voice, a voice like fragile reeds scraping across ancient pottery. Frail, yet oddly strong.

The voice of the man who had wielded the whip in her dream.

He appeared as a ghostly apparition before her, the colors of his skin and rusty hair and shabby leather coat cold and washed-out, his form hazy and translucent. But his eyes gleamed with a harsh, real light as he brandished his whip, glanced over his shoulder at 2B, and nodded.

His whip sliced uselessly through 6E without so much as a scratch on her left in its wake.

Useless ghost. Nothing but another distraction. 2B ignored it and pressed onward, despite the odds against her.

None of her hits landed. All of the 6Es she struck down were mirages, shimmering into oblivion as her sword cut through them. Every blade that struck her came out of nowhere, cutting into her without warning. Even the shifting of the air was difficult to discern; she could never tell for certain where an attack would come from. Half the blades that ripped into her muscles, she doubted were even real—how could she know 6E wasn’t tricking her pain sensors, too, just to pile on the misery?

In any combat scenario, one of the worst things to happen was to be hit once. Because to be hit once raised your odds to be hit a second time, and to be hit twice made it a virtual certainty that you would be hit three times, and past that, unless you happened to be adept at taking hits, you had little option but to retreat, assuming you still had enough limbs by that point.
That was what 6E had always told her, anyway.

*If your heart wavers…*

“*Shut up!***”

The ghost shook his head and shot her a frustrated glare.

2B closed her eyes and tightened her grip on her sword. Every part of her body hurt. Strained muscles burned. Nervous circuits screamed. Her knees were buckling, her legs weak, her knuckles aching as her fingers curled tighter around her sword. Blood-drenched hair was plastered to her forehead; the gashes and ragged furrows in her flesh cut all the way to her chassis, exposing metal.

If this was the end, this was the end. She wouldn’t give in. She would never *want* what any vampire had to give her. She would rather let herself be torn apart.

*If your heart wavers, seek guidance…*

Her eye cracked open. “*My heart,*” she growled, “*is not—***”

The ghost charged directly at her.

2B steeled herself and held her sword up defensively in front of her out of sheer reflex, even though she knew this was likely just as much a feint as the rest of 6E’s tricks.

The ghost passed right through her, its translucent form shimmering as it sank into her body. A wave of static rushed through her like millions of ice crystals blossoming inside her chassis. She whirled around to follow the ghost’s arc by instinct, knowing rationally that it didn’t matter. Her limp arm swung her blade aimlessly, purposelessly…

And the blade glittered, and a spray of blood ripped through the empty air, and a scream rang out.
It was a scream of pain, but also of frustration, of indignation, of *how did this happen,* of *it’s not fair.*

She understood now.

*Seek guidance.*

As the ghost pressed onward, 2B summoned the Vampire Killer and trailed behind him, hardly thinking, choosing instead for her body to move itself. She matched his movements perfectly, the arc of his whip, the motions of his arms as the whip sailed through the air, the subtle flick of his wrist to direct the whip’s subtle movements as it homed in on its target…

It was like magic. She ripped 6E out of the empty space of her illusions, breaking through the wall of mirages. With a deft flick of her wrist, she brought her foe crashing to the ground in a whirlwind of fire and blood.

The grizzled old man looked back at her, a bright gleam in his eyes, and smiled as he faded away.

Before 6E could recover, 2B lunged forward, with a single lash of the whip severing one of 6E’s arms at the elbow, the other at her bicep. Flames licked at the edges of the vampire’s ostentatious dress, wisps of smoke curling from her blackened flesh.

6E reeled back, throw off and disoriented, no longer capable of running and hiding, no longer capable of feints. It had not been a rogue Scanner causing the illusions, but *her,* and under an
unrelenting assault, there were no mirages she could sustain to hide behind.

2B cast aside the whip, summoned her sword, and drove the blade up to its hilt in 6E’s stomach, the force of her blow so strong that it lifted her feet off the ground, and threw 6E over her shoulder, pinning her to the ground, burying the rest of the blade in the dirt.

2B summoned the Vampire Killer again, gripping it in both hands and holding it out taut between them.

6E writhed pathetically, the stumps of her arms flailing as the flesh surrounding the sword lodged in her stomach continued to blacken. “Tooie… Tooie, please…” she moaned, gnashing her teeth.

2B loomed over her, whip readied, casting her shadow across the vampire’s panicked face. She was still shaking, her blood still boiling, her tears still wet. She’d never felt so full of fire, so ready to explode. She could scream. She could rip 6E to shreds like a wild animal. She could kill like she’d never killed before, not coldly and clinically, but full of heat and passion and a hatred so strong it almost overflowed into a kind of love.

“She—Tooie… she gasped between laughs, the tears rolling down her cheeks turning mirthful.

2B shot up to her feet, whip ready, glancing over her shoulder—an attack could come from any angle, and she wouldn’t even see or hear or feel it coming; she’d have to throw out the whip in as wide an arc as possible, cover as much ground as possible with a single strike, leave her with no place to hide—

“It is!”

A few trailing peals of mocking, haughty laughter echoed through the air as a bat with pale lavender fur fluttered away, stretching out its leathery wings to glide on the tailwind left in the wake of the Vampire Killer’s arc. The bat flew into the darkness and vanished.

Enraged, 2B threw the whip to the ground. “Dammit!” she screamed, the curse tearing at her
“Dammit! 6E!”

She stood there, impotent, her chest heaving and shoulders quivering, gulping down lungfuls of air. It felt like every molecule in her body was vibrating, the rage building up inside her shaking her apart.

Her eyes began to rove to where the rotting corpse of 9S had rested and before they could drift over his body, she squeezed them shut. 6E was gone. She wasn’t controlling what she could see anymore. If 9S’s body was still there (*but he couldn’t be there*) then she really would have killed him. It wouldn’t have been an illusion. If she kept her eyes closed, if she refused to see whether or not a body was there, she could pretend there was nothing there, even if there *was* nothing there. Because if she looked, and there was something…

“2B! 2B, are you alright? 2B!”

9S’s voice, ragged and panicked, cut through the air like a knife.

2B hurriedly dried her eyes and wiped the tear-stains from her cheeks. He couldn’t see her like this. If he was even real. It could be another trick. She wouldn’t know until it was too late.

She didn’t turn to look at him. She didn’t open his eyes.

A hand fell on her shoulder, warm and comforting. “2B, it’s me. Are you okay? You look hurt…”

She pulled away, smacking his hand away. It felt solid. It didn’t matter. What she felt, heard, saw, it could all be faked. He could be faked.

“2B, what’s wrong?”

She ran off, stumbled after only a few steps, and fell to her knees. She was shivering, her eyes watering—*don’t cry in front of him*, she ordered herself, *don’t show weakness, don’t show emotions*—her chest heaving as she struggled to breathe.

“Pod, prep a logic virus vaccine—there must be something wrong with her…”

Her tears flowing freely, she collapsed to the ground, her chest pressing against the churned and trampled soil beneath her with every ragged breath. Her fingers curled into the dirt, something solid, something *real*, and as her thoughts spiraled into blissful oblivion she cracked her eyes open and glanced sideways, her gaze spying through a veil of tears and a cage of eyelashes a blurred blotch of black and silver and flesh tones.

“Four,” Amemone breathed, struggling to move her other hand with the crushed wrist joint as she stared at the gray rot spreading down her forearm in horror. The slightest exertion sent shockwaves of white-hot pain through her nervous circuitry. “Four. My arm. We need to get rid of it…” She struggled to raise her voice. “Four!”

A4 crouched down at her side. The strained whirring of her servos grinding against each other was loud and sharp enough to set Anemone’s teeth on edge. “….‘Nem…”

“My arm,” Anemone repeated. She tried to gesture to the fuzzy partition between warm and cold flesh as it crawled up her forearm. “It’s spreading…”

A4 fixed her dead, glassy eyes on her arm, but then her gaze wandered over to Jackass. It was hard to read any expression onto her face given how much effort it took for her to change it; the hateful
snarl she’d had while pulverizing Laurel hadn’t yet faded from her face. “Jaaa… kass…”

“For, please,” Anemone hissed. “The infection’s spreading. We have to remove it.”

A4’s eyes swiveled in their sockets, her head turning toward the abandoned toolkit Jackass had been using.

“There’s no time.” Anemone watched the partition between living flesh and undead flesh vanish underneath the rolled-up cuff of her sleeve. Now there was no way to gauge how quickly it was spreading. “I don’t care how you do it, just do it!”

A4 looked down at her. Though it was impossible to tell, she seemed bemused.

“Rip off the whole thing if you have to,” she told her. “Just do it—now!”

With a solemn, dutiful nod to show she understood, A4 gripped Anemone by the wrist. Her hand was as dead and icy as any vampire’s, and her touch sent razor-sharp splinters through her sensitive skin. The vampire-flesh crawling up her arm did not take kindly to her touch—as if it knew what she was going to do.

Shivering as the tingling sensation spread further up her bicep, Anemone gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and steeled herself. It wouldn’t be the first limb she’d lost, but…

She felt something hard and blunt press against her armpit, then a flash of searing pain. She struggled to choke down the anguished scream fighting its way up her throat, hissing it out through gritted teeth until the dam burst. What was left of her shoulder joint burned as though it had been doused with napalm. She arched her back, her muscles coiling like springs as every nerve circuit running under her skin lit up at once, as her scream tore at her throat and faded to a hoarse croak.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain faded away, rolling back like fog in sunlight until it was contained in her shoulder, just next to the empty space where her left arm had been. The phantom impressions from nervous circuits that had been connected to her systems only a moment ago faded away last.

Anemone cracked open her eyes. A4 threw the infected arm aside; as it hit the floor, the arm’s skin turned completely gray, then black as soot, then crumbled away, leaving nothing but exposed chassis wrapped in coiled strands of muscle fiber and nervous circuitry.

She could feel blood soaking her clothes and struggled to roll herself onto her side to keep herself from bleeding out before the blood coagulated and the severed coolant tubes sealed themselves. God knows, she’d lost enough coolant already in these past two days. All Pascal’s hard work repairing her, down the drain.

“Four…” She struggled to catch her breath. Her throat felt like sandpaper, her voice barely a whisper. “Four, get Jack’s tools.”

A4 nodded and lumbered off to collect Jackass’ tools. Anemone spared a second to wonder if she knew how to perform field repairs. She couldn’t recall if she’d ever seen A4 do any medical work, whether on other members of her squadron or on any older Resistance models.

At the very least, whatever A4 could do would be better than nothing.

Jackass grimaced and opened her eyes, her hand weakly probing the gaping hole Laurel had opened in her chest. “Thanks, ’Nem,” she mumbled, her mouth curling weakly into a lopsided, sardonic grin. “Y’know, only my friends call me ‘Jack…’”
“You… you have friends?”

Her smile widened. “You’re all right. Thanks for… not letting Laurel drink me. God, I had him pegged as an asshole from the beginning…”

A4 came back with an armful of supplies and set to work. As a medic, she didn’t have much of a bedside manner, which wasn’t too surprising, considering she was a walking corpse. Her hands were surprisingly steady, but lacked dexterity. Good for anything that needed brute force, like ripping an arm off, for example; bad for anything requiring fine motor control, like repairing an android.

She didn’t need anyone to tell her to work on Jackass first; she was already getting to work before the words, “Four, work on Jack first” had left Anemone’s mouth. She pulled aside Jackass’ tattered, stained cloak and lifted her shirt to expose her bare stomach and the gaping fist-sized wound resting between her sternum and navel and pushed limp, sparking fistfuls of cables and coolant tubes hanging out of the wound back into her chest cavity, then reached over to her tools for a patch of plastic tarp just big enough to fit over the hole and the stick welder.

“Wait.” Jackass held up her hand. “Stick welder’s for metal. That’ll melt the plastic. You want the sealant bolt gun.”

A4 put away the stick welder and picked up the sealant gun.

“Wait. Don’t just seal me up. Tape up the coolant tubes first. No, use the ARC-52 tape… it’s the only thing that’ll adhere to the tubes.” Jackass lifted her head weakly, dribbling blood down her chin. “Th… the bright blue stuff.”

A4 found the bright blue stuff, took both severed ends of the coolant tube Laurel had been drinking from, and struggled to tape them together, the slippery tubes slithering around her fumbling hands.

“Just give ‘em to me, I’ll do it,” said Jackass, lifting her hands. She made it about halfway before her arms went limp and fell to her sides. The back of her head cracked against the floor.

Eventually, after an agonizing eternity of fumbling, A4 tied the tubes back together and shoved them back into Jackass’ chassis, then reached for the plastic tarp she’d picked out and the bolt gun.

“Wait.” Jackass held up her hand again. “Gotta drain the abdominal cavity first. Get that coolant back into circulation.”

With great, almost agonizing effort, A4 contorted her face into a look of utter confusion.

“There’s an internal coolant recycling port to handle leakage… installed it myself.” Jackass panted for breath, her cheeks flushed. Anemone wondered how long she could hold on. Overheating was one of the worst ways for an android to die, and one of the most common in cases of severe mutilation. Like logic viruses, it wasn’t a fast or merciful killer, and by the time your body stopped working entirely, your brain was a pile of burned-out mush.

A4 looked down at the pool of blood filling Jackass’ chest cavity, still at a loss.

“Bastard must’ve snapped the wiring when he fisted me,” Jackass muttered. “Okay. Find those severed wires. Gotta connect… green ones. I think. Might be aquamarine. I put that thing in there like fifty fucking years ago.”

A4 slid her hand into the cavity and fished around for the wires, eventually producing a handful of cables with sparking ends. Past the blood, Anemone could barely make out a hint of a green plastic
coating on one of them. A4 wiped them off as best as she could and set aside all but the two green wires.

“Now peel back some of the coating,” Jackass said, “and hold the copper together.”

A4 did as she was told, then held the two ends of the wire close together. A spark leaped from one end to the other as she brought them closer, and as she touched the two split lengths of copper together, the pool of blood filling Jackass’ chassis churned and bubbled, then whittled itself down to almost nothing. The teeth-rattling hum of the coolant recycling port filled the air until A4 separated the two wires.

“This is gonna take so much fucking work to fix,” Jackass muttered, wincing at the sound of the labored whirring. “Okay. Now seal me up.”

A4 placed the plastic patch against Jackass’ bare skin, took the sealant gun, and pressed the muzzle against the corner of the patch. The gun fired with an earsplitting whump that, though dull, was plenty loud enough to drown out the sharp bark of pain-laughter that spewed from Jackass’ mouth.

Anemone pulled her arm out from under her torso and set her hand on Jackass’ shoulder as best she could, the broken joints in her wrist still screaming from the slightest movement. “It’s alright. It’s almost over…” she consoled her. It was hard seeing her in so much pain from something that wasn’t her fault for once, but at least now it seemed like she’d pull through… although this was a stopgap solution at best.

A4 continued to shoot sealing bolts around the edges of the patch. With every shot, Jackass convulsed, her abdominal muscles throbbing, the severed cables under her skin around the wound peeling back and bunching up to form grotesque lumps circling the wound. When the last bolt had been set and the patch had an airtight seal against her skin, Jackass unclenched her teeth and let out a ragged, sputtering gasp.

“Everything hurts,” she moaned. At least she was alive.

It was Anemone’s turn next. She’d been lucky compared to Jackass; the most pressing concern was the severed coolant tubes in her shoulder. A4 did the same for her as she’d done for Jackass, placing a temporary chassis sealant patch against the ragged edge of her severed shoulder. Each shot of the sealant bolt gun hurt as much as Laurel biting her had. She toughed it out as best she could, and when it was over, fell flat on her back, her head spinning and her thoughts fighting through a thick, hot, cloudy haze of pain.

“Just when I thought our luck was turning around,” Jackass muttered. She struggled to sit up, her chest heaving from the exertion. “Thanks, A4… When this is over, I’ll get your body so patched up, you won’t even be able to tell you’re dead anymore.” She wrinkled her nose and furrowed her brow. “Wait a minute,” she added, her voice taking a dark turn. “Wh… what did you do with Laurel’s body?”

Anemone pulled herself upright, her head throbbing from the exertion. She scanned the room, fighting past the hot fog muffling her thoughts, and spied Laurel’s headless body lying in the middle of the pool of blood on the other side of the room.

“How’d he get over there?” she wondered aloud, so weary that she didn’t realize at first that she’d been talking out loud.

The headless body pulled itself to its feet, a trail of blood wicking through the air from the puddle staining the floor to the ragged edge of its severed neck. Metal filaments, glittering in the light,
sprouted from the stump of its spine like the stem of a plant, weaving around themselves and blossoming into the shape of a chrome-silver metal skull. Jelly poured from the eye sockets and congealed into two white eyeballs with ruby-red irises that rolled in their sockets.

“What the fuck…?” Jackass whispered.

The skull’s metal jaw opened, revealing a dripping blood-red tongue. It ran itself experimentally across its teeth, pricking itself on each of the two long fangs as if to make sure they were there.

“Please don’t do that again,” Laurel said, eyeing A4 with a permanent death’s-head grin affixed to his fleshless face. “That was very painful.”

Anemone suddenly felt twice as weary as before. Were these monsters really that immortal?

“On the other hand,” he added, taking a few halting steps toward Anemone, “you probably needed a practical demonstration.” He spread out his arms. “Immortality. Real immortality. Think about it, Anemone. I made sure none of your subordinates can ever die! Think about it! The people you’ve lost, the people we’ve lost. Everyone knows what it’s like. Trust me, I know. And now it will never happen again! World without end, Anemone. Life without end!”

If she were being honest, Anemone had to admit she’d never seen Laurel this passionate about anything before.

If she were being even more honest, she was starting to admit that immortality was starting to sound like a pretty good deal. Whether she was too tired and beaten down to think straight or genuinely coming around to the idea, she couldn’t tell.

But no. It wouldn’t bring back the people who’d already died.

“Think about your men. They’re mine now. If you don’t join me, they all might as well be dead. But if you do, you’ll never have anything to worry about.” Laurel stooped down and put a hand on her shoulder. “Well? What do you say to that?”

Anemone glanced at Jackass and A4. “I… thought you were crazy,” she told Laurel. “I was wrong.”

The expressionless death’s-head in lieu of Laurel’s face could not capture whatever emotion he was feeling, but the shifting light in his eyes denoted some sort of pleasant surprise. “Oh?”

She shook her head. “You’re not crazy.”

Laurel leaned closer, his icy breath on her neck. “I’m so glad you can see things my—”

“You’re batshit insane.”

He stiffened and recoiled in shock. “What?”

At that very moment, the long-suffering door to the repair facility burst open, its hinges shattering and splinters flying through the air. Something flew through the air and clattered on the ground; Anemone had two hundred years of experience under her belt that told her exactly what the hollow, ringing thud the projectile made as it hit the floor meant.

“Not now, you idiots!” Laurel roared. “I’m still in here!”

Jackass leaped to her feet and scooped up the grenade as it began to smoke and sputter, her skin
audibly sizzling against its superheated shell. “Anemone, run!”

Anemone felt A4’s dead hand grip around her remaining arm and yank her to her feet, pulling her toward the door. Jackass threw herself at Laurel, shoving the grenade against his mouth with enough force to knock his teeth loose and force his bare metal jaws open.

“Put this in your schedule, motherfucker!” she snarled as Laurel’s jaws reflexively clamped down on her hand and the grenade in his mouth erupted in a blossom of flames.

The next thing she knew, Anemone was lying on the ground, a hot wind scalding her skin and singeing her eyebrows. She squinted and covered her eyes with her hands, peeking through a slit in her fingers to see the blurred image of flames hungrily engulfing the building.

“Jack…” she gasped.

A4 rested a hand on her shoulder as softly as she could manage.

Acrid, stinging black smoke billowed into the sky, coiling and twisting around the canopy of foliage above.

So much for a world without end.

Carmilla had clearly deeply underestimated Eve. He wasn’t a tactical genius like his brother, he could make strategies that ran circles around people hundreds of times older than him, but what he lacked in brains, he made up for in brawn almost tenfold.

She had to congratulate him for something. Acknowledging his worth as a fighter took the sting out of the beatdown she’d been receiving for what had felt like the past hour.

“To think you’d do this to a lady,” she groused, though, teetering on her feet as she spat out a shattered fang.

“What’s a lady?” Eve asked. “Never heard of it.”

Aggravated, she lunged at him, her claws raking across his skin. If she could just break his skin, the poison in her nail polish could slow him down enough to turn the tide, just as it had been enough to briefly immobilize 2E…

No use. That damn black tattoo splashed across his skin again, her claws glancing off it as though it were as hard and resilient as pure diamond. This damnable Achilles and his impermeable skin! Surely he had some weak point, some part of his body his mother had held him by when she’d dipped him into the River Styx!

The next blow to her stomach knocked the wind out of her, and, it felt, everything else. It was then that she remembered, of course, that machines didn’t have mothers. Apparently, Eve and his older brother had popped out of an egg of sorts.

Carmilla reeled back, skidding to a halt across the grated floor, and steadied herself. She had to make this man hers somehow, if only she could find one weak spot on his body, one chink in his armor, a place she could slip her fangs into and make him forevermore a slave to her every whim—oh, what power she would have! The entire world would be hers for the taking with him and his legions of machines at her beck and call!

She had to—
A flash of golden light filled her eyes, searing them; Carmilla felt tears stream down her face.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on her back and every part of her body hurt, and as the dazzling galaxy of stars and speckles and spots faded from her eyes, she looked up at Eve.

“Well, well,” she mused, “it seems we have reached an impasse. Nothing you can do will kill me; as for you, I see you’re quite invulnerable. You might as well let me go…” She reached out and laid her hand gently on his cheek, the tips of her fingernails ghosting his skin. The black tattoo did not spread. A soft touch, it seemed, a gentle touch, did not trigger that blasted defense mechanism. Perhaps if she was swift enough…

Emboldened, she summoned all her strength and jammed her nails into his cheek as quickly as she could.

Her nails snapped in two.

“Then go,” he growled, his knee pressing into her abdomen hard enough to snap every single one of her ribs like twigs, “and tell Dracula that I’m going to take my brother back.”

He vanished in a flash of gold light.

Chapter End Notes

So I just commissioned some art of an old furry OC I came up with years ago and never did anything with, and then realized that when I'd come up with 6E way back in the Ghost in the Machine days, I totally self-plagiarized that old OC's design. The resemblance was really uncanny.

meet odette, an oc i came up with years ago in a dream! she's a witch whose hobbies include practicing her laugh and "correcting" other peoples' species

her friends call her stinkerbell, or at least, they would if she had any

(art by @FicusArt) pic.twitter.com/rZsC6noFLm

— Well Manicured Ma'am 💍 (@wmm_ebooks) December 5, 2019

See what I mean?

Well, at least you all know what 6E's fursona is now.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!