

## REEMERGENCE

I grumble as my elbow lands in a puddle of hydro fluid spilled out on the cold concrete, rippling the reflection of the bustling neon city outside the bay door. They wanted the transport yesterday, but if they wanted their stolen shit faster, they should have paid me more to strip it and wipe the ID codes, or do it themselves. These gangsters are arrogant and lazy, but they aren't stupid. It takes cunning to avoid Salvation, that piece of shit artificial intelligent world government. Just thinking about it makes my hangover headache rage. You can either pretend it's not controlling your entire life, or you can try to shut it down like those psycho zealots. Bunch of weirdos and morons if you ask me. "The Resistance?" Go fuck yourselves.

The comm rings. It's her again. I roll my eyes. I'm short on time, and I don't feel like apologizing. I see boots on the other side of the transport. "It's not done yet. Come back later." I say. They don't move.

"You're under arrest. Show your hands and surrender immediately."

Shit. "Listen, you got the wrong—"

More boots. No escape.

“You have three seconds to comply.”

Their voices are coarse and digital. Fucking robot cops. I scramble to get out from under the transport. Apparently, I'm too slow. I feel them grab me by the shirt. I'm sent flying into the wall. They reach down to stand me up. I see the torch. It's within reach. It sees me see the torch. No time to decide. I reach. It grabs my arm and twists with a nauseating crunch. I scream out. Another approaches. There's an opening. I lunge for the torch and fire it. The power cell seems like just as good a target as any. It's effective. The robot falls. They're too fast. Maybe that was a mistake. I feel the first shot through the chest. It's hot, but it doesn't hurt. The next shot ruptures my liver. That one hurt. I feel the last shot crack my skull. I can't see. Am I dead? Fuck it.

## **MORE MACHINE THAN MAN**

Flickering lights reflect off the growing pool of blood. There's something familiar about it ... I try to remember as I watch the smoke lazily float from the barrel. How long has it been? Where am I, exactly? Why did I kill this guy? Why not an energy weapon? Who decided his fate? Was it Salvation, or some burned out corporate jackass behind a desk somewhere? The pain is creeping back. Whatever organs

they let me keep are still adapting ... which means it hasn't been longer than a year. A year since what, though? It's right there, I can almost imagine it. Footsteps. Time to move. I tuck the gun under my coat as I walk away.

The scream is distant as I gaze at my hands. One metal, one flesh. I can almost feel the rain tapping on the synthetic palm. I feel like I'm hungry, or at least my cybernetic brain is telling me I am. Neural text in my vision tells me there's a new target. A map shows me how to get there. There's a good noodle place on the way.

## **ANTI-HERO**

I've stopped keeping count. Lives cut short all because of programming — because they made a choice. Judged by a soulless machine. I'm forced to watch from inside this prison of metal and flesh. I've stopped trying to override the programming and retake control. Free will? What a joke. The blurring time doesn't bother me anymore. It's not that I've given up trying to remember. The zaps of pain this cage of a body gives me as punishment has made it less of a priority. I've gotten faster, stronger, more lethal. I never miss. They never see me coming. There's a kind of sick pleasure when they realize I'm there, behind them ... when they're trapped

like me ... no escape. Is it an intentional reward from Salvation? Have I been a good dog? Why did they choose me as an assassin instead of serving out my time as one of those miserable bureaucratic drones or waste treatment slaves? Was I a soldier or something? The clues are confusing, and the suppression chems are too effective. The only thing I can say for sure is that I'm a savage killer — unstoppable, merciless — and I fucking hate it ... I think.

## **FIRE AT WILL**

I find myself envying his strength as I watch him deliberately stand and get clipped in the head. We'd been working together for weeks. Just another Salvation mutt, as far as I was concerned ... at least, at first. Attachment is weakness. But there was something about his eyes. You could just tell. He was like me ... he was in there. But unlike me, he found a way. A precise miscalculation. A timing error. Those bastards got us locked up tight, but if you're strong enough ... if there's enough of you in there ... you can defeat their programming and stick your head up. "Machinicide," they call it. Then you can sleep. Man ... I wish I could sleep. But the promise that they'll take off your leash when your debt's been paid — when your sentence has been served ...

I stand and do my thing. Barrel flashes like firecrackers. That look of fear and hate. They scatter. Another retreat. I'll see them again. These resistance fighters are tenacious. The warehouse falls quiet except for the sound of a small radio left behind. I've heard the transmission before — their call to arms. Must be nice to have a cause.

## **THE ART OF VIOLENCE**

Wary eyes dart about the room. Someone's a Salvation mutt. It could be any one of them. The banality of it all. They could never suspect me. Salvation's programming is too perfect. I'm not allowed to make mistakes. A very small part of me almost regrets that I betrayed them. The resistance leader stands after a long, tense quiet.

It doesn't matter. Even if one of you is a mutt, you can't do shit. We outnumber you. We stick with the plan."

It's kind of sad he's got so much hope. Neural text says backup's here. It'll all be over soon. I hear an engine screaming in the distance. They hear it too. Sorry, fellas, too late. The window above smashes. Hundreds of pops as my backup dismounts her bike and lands with a roll. Fighters collapse around me. I watch her movements. She's skilled,

precise, calculated ... standard issue Salvation assassin programming ... but there's something else hidden within her liquid-smooth movements and ultra-efficient kills. It's almost a secret whisper of art in her violence. I feel the combatant's clavicle crack under my knee and the tight jerk of the gun as I bury three bullets into their brain, but my eyes are locked onto her. She removes her helmet to smash it into the chest of the last remaining fighter before standing motionless like a doll as the fighter's body slides down the wall, falling into a crumpled heap. I stand. Our gazes meet. Her face ...

## **SOMETHING STIRS**

The rain is thick. It pours off the overhang above and slaps the concrete hard as I watch my target drunkenly sulk into the dingy virtual fantasy shop across the street. I wait for a transport to hum past before I step out into the deluge, my fist tight around the grip of the overloader under my soaked jacket. My eye catches a flash from the infrared of one of the Salvation cop-bots hidden in the alley, poised and ready. I pull the rusty metal door open before shoving the overloader into the base of the bouncer's skull and tossing him into the street where a bot silently drags him away to be sentenced.

Did I look that pathetic when they grabbed me? The thought evaporates as the katana blade slices into my back, swung by a roaring goon who attempted to surprise me from a dark alcove. He lets out a breathy grunt as I sink my fist into his diaphragm. A belch of blood sprays the wall. I jam the overloader into his neck and move on.

I can hear the swarm of degenerates stomping down the stairs as I drop the overloader and draw my gun. I pause as I see her reclined on a bed in a dark room to my right. Who's she here for? I stare at her for too long. Flashing neural text insists I proceed. She lets out an annoyed sigh and a gentle nod toward the dozen or so goons hungry for a taste of my blood. I empty a magazine into the hoard before glancing back in the room. Where did she go? The sickening sound of bullets smacking wet flesh spins me around. She's impossibly fast. I refocus. Target acquired. I shoot and fight my way up the stairs. A body lands atop two combatants from somewhere above. She looks down at me. Is that a smirk? That bitch ...

I get to the top. Target is around the corner. Bullets saw through the cement wall. Uranium tipped. Not good. I stay ducked, squinting as the dust fills the hall. I fire into the haze. Can't get a clean hit. I see her across the hall. She's pinned too. Same target? Why? She stares at me. I

understand. She's out. We both bolt toward each other. I leap as she slides. I drop the mag from my weapon. She catches it in hers. We fire. He takes two steps forward, attempting to raise the heavy machine gun. A bead of blood trickles down his brow as his eyes roll back into his head. He melts to the floor. Target eliminated. I brush myself off as she grabs the target by his hair and scans his eyes before dropping him to the floor.

"That was my sentence credit," I grumble.

"My shot, my credit," she replies.

"My bullet."

She scoffs.

"It was a test."

"My last partner committed machinicide."

"You're that much of an asshole?"

"You're good."

"Better than you."

"Maybe."

"Come on. Let's go find out."

**HALCYON**



I spit a seed husk into the dust and watch it immediately dry and crisp under the punishing sun. She hasn't moved a muscle in hours. I glance down to the bustling street far below, playfully trying my hardest to force my body to take that fatal step off. A painful zap from my cyber brain tells me to knock it off.

"20 credits."

"Stop," she grumbles.

"30 then."

"No."

"If you can't do it—"

"You're up in eleven minutes. Then you can do it anyway you want."

"I don't think you can do it."

She lifts her head from the scope to give me a scowl before returning to position. I sigh as I lean against the wall once again and dig another handful of seeds from my pocket. The heat warps the distant hazy horizon.

"I've never asked you ..." she mutters in a soft tone.

"Asked what?"

“It’s nothing ... Forget it.”

“Not like you to give a shit.”

“I said forget it.”

“Just spit it out.”

Her shoulders sink a bit. “Before ... Do you remember it?”

It’s been so long since I bothered to try. “No,” I say.  
“You?”

“No ... but ...”

I cock my head with curiosity. She never seemed like the type.

“But what?”

She shakes her head with a scoff before returning her laser focus to the scope.

“I don’t know ... Sometimes ... It’s just that things can be familiar sometimes.”

“I try not to think about it.”

“But you used to.”

“Does it really matter? We serve. That’s all there is to it.”

She looks at me with an expression I've never seen her wear. There's something about it. I can't look away. She lets the butt of the rifle rest on the rooftop. This is serious.

"And after?"

"What about it?"

"Seriously? Haven't you considered what it means to finish your sentence?"

"Don't be stupid. We've all seen cons. They seem —"

"What? Content? Happy?"

Her focus is completely lost. The twitches in the corner of her eye tell me she's getting zapped for the disobedience, yet her gaze remains locked onto my squinting eyes.

"Don't do this."

Her jaw tenses. I see the ghost inside her. It's chilling.

"Who we were before ... it matters."

"Don't."

"You can't tell me you haven't considered what agents like us expect to have after—"

I push myself from the wall to kneel next to her.

"Why are you doing this? This isn't you."

"How would you know?"

The question stuns me. We stare into each other's eyes for what feels like a dangerously long time. Something is burning deep in my mind, screaming at me, clawing at my subconscious. In that moment, I'm terrified. Her face softens.

"I told you to forget it," she says as she returns her eye to the scope. "50 credits."

I stand and raise the binoculars. She fires the shot. The bullet pierces the window more than half a kilometer away, ricochets off a pipe, slices through a throat, a skull, and finally through the heart of the primary target.

"Shit ..."

## **VIRTUS INVICTA**

I check my credits in my neural text for what feels like the thousandth time. It still gives me comfort. One more assignment and we're free. No one has made it this far. Just us. It's just us. I can see it in her eyes. She feels it too. I try not to imagine a new beginning, but it's intoxicating. No. We need to focus. Time's up. With a nod, we hurry to our positions.

The lot is empty. Fat snow flakes lazily drift on the frozen breeze. Bright graffiti adorns the cracked concrete and rubble. I take aim as I see the lights from the approaching armored transport. It's not the resistance leader's transport. Stay calm. Breathe. I need to let my body take control. I need to trust the machine. Two more transports pass. There he is, that son of a bitch ... My key to this cage ... he's right there. I grip the rifle tighter and clench my jaw as I wait for the signal, hoping the transports don't spot the charges ahead.

The blasts go off in perfect unison, closing the kill box. The trap is set. I rise, firing my rifle with absolute focus. She flanks, dancing between transports, slicing arteries and snapping vertebrae. I kick a combatant into a transport, denting its heavy armor. A bullet snaps centimeters from my ear. Focus. I have to stay focused. Four shots into a combatants' chest, another three through another's helmet. I see the target. His expression makes me freeze. There's no fear in his eyes. No ... impossible.

I look back to her. She doesn't see it. She doesn't know. Shit. I throw a fighter over my shoulder and fire two shots to keep him down. I don't understand. Neural text flashes urgent warnings. Then I hear it. My stomach sinks. Aerial transport engines scream in from the distance. The fighters scurry. It's too late to warn her. I see cover. I sprint for it.

The missiles detonate, throwing me into a pile of rubble. My vision is static. Reboot. Please. Reboot. I'm back online. I can't get my bearings through the fire and thick snow. Neural texts tell me to abort. Where is she? Zaps of pain insist I escape. Where is she? I see the resistance leader aiming a pistol low. No. I move as fast as my broken body will allow. The zaps are violent shocks now. They put me onto my knees. I get up. The leader is staring at me now.

"No!" I scream with my damaged voice.

I take another step, and another. The fighters are slowly lowering their weapons, mouths agape. I can't lift my rifle. Another step. Please, just another step. She sees me. I scream out as I fall to my knees again. I'm being electrocuted. Flickering neural text demands I abort. My molars crack as I force myself to stand. The leader takes a step back. I lunge forward, crawling. The pain rips through my body. She raises her bloodied arm toward me. I reach for her fingers. A boot steps on my arm as a barrel is pressed against my temple.

"What are you doing?" the leader's gravely voice asks.

"Please ..." I manage to whimper.

The fighters close in a circle around us.

"Please? Please what? You're a salvation dog."

“Don’t ... kill ... her.”

The leader releases his boot from my arm and squints.

“Impossible ...” he mutters.

“Please ... this is our chance ... to take it back.”

He motions to his fighters.

“Load them up.”

## ULTIMATUM

My fractured vision comes back online. Neural text is flashing everywhere, demanding I kill and return to Salvation. I lift my head to look around the room. She’s next to me, hands bound above her head, as are mine. I groan from the incessant electrocutions.

“Who are you?” the now familiar leader’s voice growls.

My eyes lift to meet his.

“Nobody.”

He nods with a sniff.

“Never seen a mutt give a shit about another mutt.”

I don't have a response through the pain. The leader begins to pace.

"Well, if you don't know who you are, let me tell you. You're a killer. You're scum. But you're not just another Salvation assassin, are you? No, you're one of the best. A real pain in my ass. You've killed hundreds of us. You ... and her."

"Don't ... touch her," I mutter with bloody lips.

"See? That right there!" the leader exclaims as he approaches me. "Why do you give a shit? Or better yet, how do you give a shit?" I don't respond. I can't. "Here's what I think. I think this is just another tactic. I think Salvation is scared, but it's not stupid. It knew we would ambush you."

"No ..."

"You were programmed to give us that little show, weren't you?"

"No."

"You're just another fucking mutt."

"No!"

"Sir!" a voice says from behind me. "You'd better come look at this."



The leader gives me one more suspicious glare before walking out of my sight.

“Is that what I think it is?” the leader asked.

“His pain emitters are maxed.” the other voice said.  
“Her’s too.”

The leader walks back into my view. His expression is curious.

“You ... love her,” he says.

I look over at her. A tear rolls down her swollen cheek. I lower my head.

“Yes.”

“Impossible!” he shouts, rubbing his hair in apparent astonishment. “How?! How can you? Machinicide is one thing, but this? You were really trying to save her, weren’t you?”

“Please ...”

He stared at me for a long time before his expression softened.

“A mutt with a ghost... and not just one.” I look back at her. I can see it now. She nods. My face scrunches into a sob. The pain is excruciating. “How many credits left?” he asks me.

I can't help but let out a weak scoff.

"One."

The leader lets out a bellowing laugh.

"Unbelievable. So, I was it, huh? Kill me and you're free."

I hang my head low in defeat. He approaches and lifts my chin to meet my gaze. "Let me tell you a secret ... Salvation will never let you go. Never. Not a killer mutt like you. No way. Trust me."

"How the hell ... could you know that?"

He shrugs.

"Either believe me or don't — I really don't give a shit. Here's the deal, and it's the only deal, you understand? I'm going to give you both a choice —something Salvation would never do. We can put you out of your misery right now ... God knows a lot of my fighters would love a chance to put a bullet in you ... or ... we take off your leashes and you help us."

"How do you know we won't just kill you?" she asks him.

The leader smirks.

"Listen ... You've killed a lot of people. I bet you can't even keep count. Whoever you were before you became mutts ... those are the people who'll have to swallow all those deaths. You're going to have to live with them. Every

single one. We take off your leashes, and you're you again. Reboot. I don't know what you were before, but if it were me ... I don't think I could live with that guilt." He leaned in close to me. "But ... If you're really strong enough to love beyond your programming ... then you might just stand a chance."

"A chance to do what?" I ask.

"To help us ... to live."

I look at her. She doesn't have to say a word. Her eyes tell me everything I need to know. I turn back to the leader.

"And then we walk?"

"And then you walk."

"How can we trust you?"

"Listen ... you said it was your chance to take back your humanity. You owe us. Help us destroy Salvation ... and your debts are paid. We aren't machines. We have moral principles."

The neural text blinks frantically, demanding I obey. The pain surges, stabbing every nerve. I close my eyes and nod.

"Cut us loose."

**LOST SUMMER**

The latch slams open on the heavy door, drawing my focus away from my endless stare. He steps into the padded room and clasps his hands in front of him.

“Get any sleep?” he asks me.

I scoff and wipe the tears from my eyes. He nods before kneeling next to me and straightening my white paper gown.

“Doc gave me some chems. I think they’re helping,” I say in a near whisper.

“Think you’re ready to get out of here?”

“I’ll live.”

He gives me a smirk. “She said the same thing.”

I lift my head. She’s standing in the doorway. I scramble to my feet, wiping my eyes. We stare at each other for the first time with clean minds. The tears are involuntary. I don’t care. She looks timid, but beautiful. He stands and pats me on the back before exiting the room. It’s just us, bare and more human than we’ve potentially ever been.

“I wanted to die ... for days.” she whispers.

“Me too.” I say as my eyes meet the floor.

I clear my throat and straighten my posture.

“This mission’s pretty close.” She nods sheepishly. “I ... we ...”

“I know.” I say. “But ... we have a chance to make amends.”

She nods again, her face twisting into a sob. I approach her slowly, unsure how she will react. At first, she looks as if she wants to turn and run away. I lift her chin to look into her eyes.

“We’re okay.” I say. “We made it. We’re out.”

Her wet eyes close, spilling tears down her pale cheeks. She grabs me tightly. I wrap my arms around her and bury my head into her long auburn hair, taking in her scent. In that moment, something explodes in my mind. I step back. She wears a vexed expression. My head is suddenly pounding. I bury my face into my hands. She rushes to me.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

I look up at the face I had known. Not that of a killer, but of a loving partner, a poet, an architect, a lover of nature and animals — a face long lost. I take her hands and stare deeply into her eyes, begging the universe for her to remember. I can see her confusion. Please. Please remember me. Her mouth slowly falls open as I finally see the recognition in her eyes. She does remember.

“I ... I can’t believe ... It’s you ... It was you ... How?” she stammers.

I pull her close.

“It’s me,” I whisper.

She grabs me tightly and cries into my shoulder.

“I didn’t answer your call. And then they came for me ... There was no time ... I’m sorry ... I’m so sorry.”

After a long while, her firmness softens. She pulls away to look at me.

“I remember ...”

“Your children.” I say. She nods with a fierce sob.

“Where are they?” she asks me.

The realization hits us both in an instant. The mission is too dangerous for guarantees. I can’t help but shake my head at the irony. The moment we regain free will, we are forced to make impossible choices.

“You have to find them.” I say.

“Without you?”

“The mission ...”

“Fuck the mission!” she shouts as she shoves me.

I let her glare at me for some time. She knows as well as I do. At least one of us has to do this.

“We owe them.” I say, half under my breath, tenderly brushing her hair behind her ear. “But you have to find them. You can’t take the risk.”

“And you can? What about me?”

I want to tell her I’ll come back. I have to believe that the skills are still in my brain somewhere. There’s nothing I can say to make it okay. So many years ago she asked me to quit the hustle. So many fights. I made my choice then, and I have to now. The irony is endless.

“We found each other again. We’ll keep finding each other,” I whisper.