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#03 - "DEAD OR ALIVE"



** The use of "**sanguine**", which can suggest both blood and positivity, with "**cerise**", a cheerful color, could imply a duality—beauty and violence, joy and blood, or life and death.*

The group of vessels settled within the cracked basin of a forgotten valley, ringed by skeletal trees and pale grass that rustled without wind. Though exhaustion clawed at their bodies, none of them truly breathed—yet the weariness in their movements was unmistakable. The fox, Katherine, sat cross-legged with her back against a withered stump, her eyes half-lidded, distant. Beside her, the echidna rested with arms folded, gaze fixed on the shifting horizon, unmoving but alert.

The metallic one didn't sit.

She paced instead, slow but sharp-eyed, her joints clicking with quiet precision. Her polished frame shimmered under the weak light, scuffed in places, but sturdy. Her visor

scanned the perimeter with constant, twitching focus—never still, never safe. The doctor, hunched nearby beneath his tattered yellow cape, wiped sweat from his brow that didn't exist. He looked up at her, voice raspy.

** “You’ll wear your joints down at this rate. Sit a moment, would you?”*

The robot didn't answer. She merely shook her head once, firm and mechanical, and resumed her patrol. It wasn't defiance—just calculation. Sitting meant vulnerability, and they couldn't afford that. Not now. Not ever.

She didn't have the luxury of rest.

The echidna let out a sharp groan, dragging a hand down his face as his patience thinned. The constant pacing, the stubborn silence, the cold defiance in every step of that machine—it was grating. Ever since he and Katherine had crossed paths with the doctor and his creation, the tension hadn't let up for a second. He pushed himself to his feet, boots crunching against dry soil as he turned toward her, voice rising with frustration.

** “What is your problem? You think you're better than us? You think we want to sit here and wait to die while you play watchdog?!”*

The robot didn't respond. She merely paused in her stride, visor flickering briefly in his direction, then turned away again. A deliberate dismissal. A machine's indifference.

His fists clenched at his sides.

** “Tch—of course you won't answer. You never do.”*

Katherine stood up fast, stepping between them with a look of quiet urgency.

** “Stop it. Please. Keep your voice down—what if he's nearby?”*

The name didn't need to be said.

It hung in the air like smoke, thick and heavy. The echidna tensed, jaw clenched shut, the weight of her words hitting him harder than he expected. Slowly, he backed off, stepping away from the robot with a final huff. The robot didn't even look back.

Silence settled again, brittle and uneasy. They were still alive. But only in spirit.

Katherine turned to the doctor, brushing some dust from her gloves as she sat back down

beside him. Her gaze lingered on the robot, still rigid in stance, scanning the distant shadows with that same unreadable vigilance. Something about her presence made it hard to breathe. Not in fear—but in uncertainty.

*** “Mason, is there a reason she won’t speak at all?”**

The doctor adjusted his cracked goggles, letting out a long, weathered sigh. He seemed reluctant to answer, as if the truth was more difficult to face than to tell.

*** “Who, Shanae? I’m not even sure she can.”**

His words hung heavy in the air. Katherine glanced back at the robot—Shanae—and frowned softly.

The echidna raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms as he leaned against a jagged outcrop.

*** “How’d you guys meet, anyway?”**

Mason chuckled dryly, rubbing the back of his neck like he was brushing away the memory.

*** “I was messing with things I shouldn’t have been. Ripping into things I didn’t understand. Digging too deep, thinking I could rewrite the story. Thought I could bring something back.”**

He looked down at his gloved hands, the fingers trembling ever so slightly.

*** “And she.. she was just there. Not built. Not made. Just—waiting. Dead.”**

The silence that followed was chilling. No one knew what to say.

Shanae didn’t even flinch. She kept her vigil, expressionless, staring into the creeping fog ahead. Katherine tilted her head slightly, her voice soft but laced with curiosity.

*** “Why do you call her Shanae?”**

Mason didn’t look up, simply stared ahead as he answered with a weary shrug.

*** “She just seems to respond to it. Never corrected me. Never walked away when I said it. It stuck.”**

The echidna let out a low scoff, narrowing his eyes at the robot before tipping his worn hat forward to shade them. His jaw tightened, voice edged with bitter sarcasm.

**** "Well, I don't think she's very fond of me."***

Katherine rolled her eyes with a sigh, brushing a strand of fur from her face.

**** "Oh, calm down, Noah. Not everything's about you."***

Noah muttered something under his breath and leaned back, letting the silence settle in again. Shanae remained exactly where she was, statuesque, unmoved—neither confirming nor denying anything. Just watching. Always watching.

Katherine hesitated only for a moment before stepping forward, her expression soft and welcoming despite the tension in the air. She approached Shanae carefully, offering a small, polite smile as she extended a gloved hand.

**** "Hey.. I'm Katherine. I just thought we could, I don't know, talk a bit. Get to know each other."***

Her tone was friendly, disarming—but Shanae didn't even look at her. The robot's gaze remained locked ahead, unmoving, like a statue carved from iron and silence.

Katherine waited a beat longer, her hand still outstretched.

Then, with sudden and startling force, Shanae swatted it away. A sharp, mechanical snap rang out as metal struck her glove. Katherine flinched, instinctively stepping back, her expression shifting from surprise to something closer to hurt. The others looked over, tension crawling into the air like static. Noah sat up straighter, brows furrowed in irritation, while Mason simply exhaled through his nose, as if this was just another familiar disappointment.

Katherine shook off the sting in her arm, trying her best to keep her voice level.

**** "Right.. I guess she's not much of a talker after all."***

Noah narrowed his eyes, his posture shifting as he slowly stood. His gaze locked onto Shanae, scrutinizing every detail—her frame, the sharpness of her silhouette, the eerie silence in her demeanor. Something about her movements, her cold detachment... it struck too close to what they'd been running from. The thing that haunted them through every crack and shadow.

** “Wait a damn minute..”*

Katherine turned toward him with concern, but Noah was already stepping forward, eyes flicking from Shanae’s blank stare to the faint whirl of her exposed joints. His hand twitched at his side, unsure if it should clench into a fist or reach for something more.

** “She looks just like him. The build, the animal.. even the way she moves.”*

Shanae didn’t react. She stood perfectly still, the wind rustling the loose strands of fabric on her chassis while her eyes remained fixed on the horizon. Mason stood up at last, raising a hand to calm Noah down.

** “Don’t start. She’s not like him.”*

** “Are you sure about that?”*

Noah snapped, voice cutting through the air like a blade.

** “Because the only difference I see is she hasn’t tried to kill us yet.”*

Katherine stepped in between them, her tone firm but hushed.

** “Noah, stop. We don’t even know what she is. But we do know what he is. Don’t confuse the two. Not now.”*

Noah didn’t answer. He simply stared at Shanae for a long moment, distrust clouding his expression, before scoffing and turning away. Shanae remained still. Unbothered. Silent.

But something in the tilt of her head suggested she heard every word.

Shanae’s body moved like a bolt of silent lightning, her servos barely whirring as she lunged forward. In a blink, her hand was around Noah’s neck, lifting him effortlessly off the ground. Her grip was crushing—precise, cold, and merciless. Noah’s hat fell to the dirt below as his boots kicked slightly, struggling against the hold. His eyes widened in disbelief, fury mixing with the growing panic as the air was forced from his lungs.

Katherine gasped, immediately darting forward.

** “Shanae, STOP!”*

She shouted, slamming her fists against the robot's arm.

** “Put him down—he didn't mean it!”*

But Shanae didn't react, her glowing eyes locked onto Noah's—no rage, no glee, no emotion at all. Just mechanical precision. Her fingers tightened incrementally, causing Noah to wheeze, his breath growing thinner by the second.

Mason rushed in next, grabbing Shanae's shoulder.

** “THAT'S ENOUGH!”*

At that, her head twitched—just slightly. The glow in her eyes flickered. For a breathless moment, everything froze.

Then, with a sharp jerk, she released Noah, letting him fall hard to the ground, gasping for air and clutching his throat. Shanae stepped back without a word, expression unreadable. Her clenched fist slowly uncurled as she turned away again, as if nothing had happened.

Katherine dropped to her knees beside Noah, helping him sit up as he coughed violently.

** “.. There's more going on in that head of hers than she lets on.”*

And for the first time in a while, nobody said a word.

Katherine glanced between Shanae and Mason, her brows furrowed in confusion. She kept one arm steadying Noah, whose breathing was beginning to slow back to normal, though he still looked rattled.

** “Why.. why does she only listen to you?”*

** “Honestly.. I've wondered that myself.”*

He looked down for a moment, thinking.

** “Maybe it's because I didn't treat her like a machine when we met. Or maybe.. maybe she just remembers who held her hand when she woke up for the first time.”*

Katherine tilted her head, puzzled.

** “.. Woke up?”*

Mason nodded.

** “She wasn’t always like this. When I first arrived, I found her alone, in what looked like a base. Disconnected, damaged. Barely alive. I tried to fix what I could, but it was like she didn’t want to come back online. Until one day.. she just did.”*

He glanced again at Shanae.

** “Ever since then, she’s followed me. Protected me. Listened to me, and only me.”*

Katherine looked toward the robot, who remained still as stone, her eyes dimmer now, staring into the horizon.

** “She trusts you.”*

** “More than anyone else. And I don’t know whether that’s a blessing.. or a warning.”*

Suddenly, the world seemed to hold its breath, every sound fading into an unbearable stillness. Noah’s eyes darted around the empty landscape, searching for any sign of movement, but the silence was unnerving—thick and unnatural, like the calm before a storm of unimaginable horror. His skin crawled beneath his fur, every hair standing on end as if the air itself had turned to ice.

Then, far off in the distance, he saw it—a faint distortion, like a ripple in reality itself. At first, it was barely perceptible, a shadow among shadows, twisting and warping the very light around it. His heart hammered in his chest as his gaze locked onto the figure, unable to look away despite the dread pooling deep in his stomach. The shape began to solidify, emerging from the darkness with a slow, deliberate grace. It was the hedgehog. Not quite whole, as if stitched together from fragments of nightmares. The edges of his form flickered and glitched, as though reality struggled to hold him in place. His eyes glowed with an unnatural, swirling light—empty yet infinitely hungry.

Noah’s breath caught. A primal warning echoed in his mind, a voice screaming from somewhere deep within. He took a step forward, every instinct screaming to flee, but his voice broke through the silence anyway, sharp and urgent.

*** “GET DOWN!”**

Before the last syllable even left his mouth, the figure surged forward in a terrifying blur, a living nightmare unleashed. The world around them seemed to distort and stretch, the very air trembling with malevolent energy as The Phantom closed the distance with impossible speed. He crashed into Shanae like a force of nature, sending her sprawling, scraping raw against jagged rocks and dirt. The sickening sound of her body hitting the ground echoed in the group’s ears, a grotesque prelude to what came next.

*** “SHANAE!”**

Katherine’s shout was swallowed by the cold void as Shanae struggled to rise, her limbs trembling beneath the crushing weight of the moment. Her mechanical eyes, flickering with frantic light, locked onto The Phantom’s twisted form. His expressionless face was stained with shadows deeper than night, his eyes glowing with a merciless, spiraling madness.

No sound passed between them—only the sickening scrape of metal on stone as The Phantom advanced. The air seemed to warp around his presence, thickening with an unholy dread that clawed at their minds and hearts alike.

Then, as if through some final shred of defiance, Shanae raised a trembling hand and pointed—not at him, but behind, towards the others. An urgent, silent plea:

Run.

Mason grabbed Katherine’s arm, his grip tight, his voice barely more than a hiss:

*** “She’s holding him off.. but he won’t stop.”**

Noah’s eyes burned with raw terror and fury, his voice breaking like shattered glass:

*** “We don’t have a choice. We run. Now.”**

They fled—heartbeats pounding, lungs burning—as the sickening silence behind them stretched out like a death sentence. The last thing they heard was the slow, deliberate scrape of The Phantom’s footsteps closing in on Shanae, and the faint, chilling echo of a

monstrous breath exhaled into the void.

The Phantom lunged first.

No weaponry. No war cry. Just raw speed. A blur of fur and muscle crashing into Shanae's frame, slamming her into the jagged stone wall behind her with such force it sent cracks rippling through the rock. Her body buckled. Metal groaned. Sparks burst from her shoulder as a hinge twisted out of place. She barely managed to duck the next swing—a wild backhand that shattered the stone beside her head.

She didn't even understand how she moved. Her limbs jerked like they had minds of their own. A blind punch to his side. Another to his face. She didn't know if she was aiming or just flailing—but it was enough to send him reeling for a second.

Then he roared.

He launched into her again, teeth bared in a jagged snarl, and the two tumbled across the ground in a tangle of blood, gears, and fury. He was on top first. He bashed her head into the ground—once—twice—three times. Her skull cracked open with a metallic thunk, coolant leaking from her scalp like neon tears. She gasped, if you could call it that. Something was clicking inside her chest, struggling to hold form.

Her fingers found his throat. Not to choke him—she knew that wouldn't work. But to dig in. Tear. Rip. And she did. She jammed her thumb beneath his jaw and pulled. A stringy tendon snapped free, spraying dark, almost tar-like blood across her face.

He screamed, gurgling.

He retaliated with a headbutt so hard it bent her nose sideways. Her head rocked, vision splitting. Another punch from him—directly into her abdomen. Flesh tore. Wires snapped. Her torso folded inward slightly, systems sparking wildly.

She kicked out, breaking his kneecap with a horrible crunch. He collapsed sideways with a howl. She scrambled to her feet, limping, covered in gore. Her right arm hung uselessly—snapped at the elbow, muscle and metal exposed, wires trailing behind like nerves ripped from their home.

But she didn't stop.

She screamed—a broken, glitched wail—and dove onto him, fists raining down. Not clean hits. Not coordinated. Just pure, hateful, panicked fury. She struck his mouth until his teeth shattered. Until his jaw unhinged. Until his face was more pulp than structure. He flailed, punched her ribs—fractured three in the process—but she didn't stop.

She grabbed him by the throat and dragged him, inch by inch, across the stone, leaving a thick, dark trail behind him. His twitching hands tried to find her face—tried to dig into her eyes—but she wasn't allowing it.

She could feel herself shorting out. Everything ached. Everything screamed.

But he was worse.

He was dying. Shuddering. Trying to hold his guts in as they spilled through torn flesh and twisted fur. His spiraling pupils were starting to fade, the madness behind them dimming to something dull. Confused. Distant.

She didn't say a word.

She just leaned in close—nose to nose—and drove her thumb through his eye. Slowly. Cruelly.

His body jerked once. Then stilled.

Shanae stood, one eye flickering. Her hands dripped with a mess of blood, coolant, and something black and ancient that hissed in the air.

She stared at the body.

Then at her hands.

She didn't know what she was. But she knew what she had to be.

And so, she walked away. Not victorious.

Just alive.

Before she went any further, Shanae stopped. Her frame quivered—whether from pain or adrenaline, it was hard to tell. She turned around, eyes flickering with fractured light as they lingered on The Phantom's broken, blood-soaked body. He didn't move. Didn't breathe. Just a mangled heap of hate, finally silenced.

She didn't know how she did it. Her limbs barely worked. Her systems were in ruin. Something inside her sparked and fizzled like a dying star.

But somehow, she won.

A bitter grin curled across her blood-streaked face. She raised her middle finger, slow and deliberate, trembling but proud.

Then, with a voice that sounded more like a scar than speech—raw, rasped, yet defiantly alive—she spoke one word.

** “Asshole.”*

And with that, she turned her back on the monster, and kept walking.

The more steps she took, the heavier the world became. Her limbs, slick with synthetic blood and torn plating, barely held together. Each breath rattled like broken glass in her chest. The light in her eyes—those faint, white hues that hinted at some soul still lingering—began to fade. One blink slower than the last. Her vision blurred, swallowed in static and black.

Then, nothing.

Her legs buckled beneath her. She collapsed face-first into the dirt, a dull thud marking her fall. No twitch. No cry. No farewell. That was it. For Shanae, it was over. She'd won the fight, but not the war within herself.

Her body lay still as silence devoured the space around her. A final breath hissed from her core as her systems dimmed.. and finally, powered down.

Until..

Her eyes jolted open.

Not in the ruins. Not in the blood-soaked battlefield. But standing—upright—blinking in disbelief before familiar faces. Mason. Katherine. Noah.

The vessels.

They stared at her with wide eyes, unsure if they were looking at a miracle or a ghost.

And Shanae, still scarred and unsure if this was death or something crueler, just stared back.. silently alive.

For once in her life.. she was grateful.

Grateful not for survival, not for victory—but for them. The ones who stood before her now, eyes wide with relief, their bodies worn from the road but still standing. Mason, with a hint of concern etched into every wrinkle of his face. Katherine, whose kindness still lingered even after all they'd seen. And Noah, gruff and bristling, but never far from a protective word.

She didn't need to speak. They could see it in her eyes—what was left of them. That fragile shimmer of emotion beneath the broken frame. No wires or code could fabricate that warmth. Her fingers trembled as she reached forward, almost unsure they'd still be real. But they were. They didn't back away. They met her with open arms, with recognition, with quiet understanding.

This wasn't just a group. Not anymore.

They were her associates. Her companions.

Her new family.