

AFTERMATH

SOLDIERS: A TALE OF XX CHROMO WARFARE

LIMB

Death wasn't the end.

Or, if that's what had happened to Goddess, it didn't *seem* to be.

No, this wasn't a state of death. There was too much pain for this to be the blissful state of nonexistence that she had expected. She had expected death to be a lot more peaceful. Darker.

Ky Lin and Exxy were looking at her, concerned, but there were

indications of smiles on their faces. How could they be smiling at a time like this?

How had she survived?

It was as if she were laying in a pool of acid. Her skin hurt. Everywhere. She could see—only a bright yellow blur—but her eyelids were closed. Did that make any sense? She felt that, maybe she was lying on her back, in the dirt.

Her body—it felt...*twisted*. The world was bent, positioned at a disturbing angle. It was several minutes before she could tell that her head was to one side.

She tried to focus on her body, turning her eyes downward. Oh, that hurt like liquid glitch! Focusing was difficult. Something hung over one eye, a flap of skin perhaps. With the other eye, she strained to bring that black lump that she knew was her own body into focus. It hurt so much, looking down at that angle, forcing her eyeballs to clarify the data they were receiving.

There, for a second—and only a second—she had seen it all. Her body was ruined, burned and black, her ‘flage mixed in there somehow, not separate from her skin anymore.

She was missing her leg.

She had seen that clearly enough, and now that she was thinking about it, there was a throbbing pain coming from her other leg. Though she couldn’t turn her head to look, she took that as a positive sign; she couldn’t feel anything from the one she knew she had lost.

Oh God, how had she survived?

She was asking that question to the heavens even as a glorious crest of agony wrestled her consciousness away from her a few minutes later.

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PATCHED

When she thought about it, she wasn't sure they had put all the pieces back in the right places. She felt...stiff, unnatural. Maybe they hadn't done something right. Maybe there was more they had to do. At that thought, she shivered.

Goddess had lain in her bed for countless days, her body whole again—or so they said—wondering how they had done it, wondering how she could

still be alive. She was continually amazed at the breaths her lungs allowed her to take, and the blood that her heart continued to pump.

They said—and she wasn't sure how much of it she believed—that after the pyre-nukes had burned themselves out, the transport had returned and recovered her. They hadn't said where they had found her, and she hadn't asked. Some part of her wanted to know, but Ky Lin and Exxy warned her against asking too many questions of the Species debriefing officers. They had retrieved the rest of the Talon bodies too, though they were little more than charred corpses.

As far as she knew, Goddess was the sole survivor of the Driftling encampment, and the fact that she was alive was a mystery to her. Somehow, it just didn't seem right, as if her death would've brought some balance to the situation, and now that she lived on, the world was slightly askew.

Goddess pushed a button on the bed, and the top of it raised till her back was upright. She could see more of herself this way.

She was covered in a thin, almost see-through, white sheet, which was unexpectedly soft against her naked skin underneath. Holding the sheet against her chest, she took a moment and felt the dull thump of her heartbeat, regular and strong.

Her skin. She didn't like to look at it anymore. They'd had to replace it all to prevent massive infection. The pyre-nuke had charred her skin to a crisp, blackened it so that it had peeled away, just a brittle husk that was no longer able to keep her insides in. She had left a trail of the black, flaky skin wherever they had taken her. The new skin felt real; it *was* real. It was generated from her own DNA samples, so she supposed that, in a way, it truly *was* her skin. It felt natural on her, and if they hadn't told her what they had done, she would never have known. Still...she couldn't look at her skin for long periods of time yet. It was hers, but it was foreign to her. It was missing all of the scars she remembered. It didn't smell right.

Exxy had pointed out to her that they hadn't reapplied the Talon-5 brands. At least there was that. Ky Lin, for some reason, though that this was intensely amusing and he chuckled for some time about it. Goddess wanted to be mad at him, but found it difficult to summon up any anger.

Beneath the sheet, something alien moved. A dark form. A metal form.

A part of her.

The limb whined as she readjusted it under the sheet. They had

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reattached what they could of her leg, but the thigh had been lost, ripped from her in the same shockwave that had thrown her into the air and taken Zilch from her. Now, she could feel the leg as if it were entirely whole, only there was a gap there. In theory, the circuitry compensated for this, feeding sensations to her brain, telling it that everything was fine with the limb, that nothing had changed. Well, every system had its flaws.

When she took inventory of her body, there was one thing that bothered her above all else. It wasn't the new skin, and it wasn't the robotic leg.

It was her eyelids. Or rather, her lack of them.

The pyre-nuke had taken them from her, searing them off. It was a wonder her eyeballs hadn't been taken to. Why hadn't they been damaged beyond repair? How could they have been protected? Goddess didn't know. The Species medical personnel didn't know either. Nobody knew. When she had first awakened, she had been distraught that she hadn't been able to blink, had almost torn her eyes out trying to determine what had happened. Only a couple of strong doctors had been able to prevent her from permanently damaging herself. They had been forced to run micro-tubes to the corners of her eyes to keep them from drying out. Eventually—after days of enduring the frustration of not being able to close her eyes, to shut out the world, to sleep for more than five minutes at a time—they had replaced her eyelids with transparent hemispheres which cupped her eyes, lubricating them every couple of seconds. These neo-optics implants were connected to her MIU, and she was able to dim them, make them go black, convince her body that it could slip unconscious.

How long had she been here? How many weeks had she been in this bed? How much longer would she have to be here?

Goddess sighed, found herself unable to conjure Ky Lin or Exxy. She threw off the sheet and stared at her naked form. She realized that she was staring at a broken machine. All they had done was patched her up as best as they could. She barely recognized herself. Those toes, those feet, those legs, that thigh, those fingers, those hands, those arms, that belly, those breasts, those shoulders—they were just bandages over wounds that the Species doctors hadn't been able to see.

Goddess wasn't sure if those other wounds, those hidden ones—the ones that caused the empty ache in her chest and the weeping in her dreams—would ever heal.

Those wounds, you see, went a little too deep.

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VISITOR

Jacked in, navigating the virtual world, Goddess found that she could leave the physical reality of her predicament behind her, at least for a time. It was the only way to push away her body's constant pain and her heart's continual ache. In cyberspace, she could almost avoid thinking about what had happened in Athara.

Even as the Species medical personnel continue to care for her, she

preferred to remain jacked.

It was just after a session of learning-to-walk-with-a-robotic-thigh that Alien-E first appeared to her.

His matrix-husk was a thin, impossible caricature of a glassy-eyed extraterrestrial being. When he first floated down into the relaxation node Goddess was in, she thought he had wandered in by mistake.

“Occupied,” she said, not even looking up. “This is a private node. Get outbound.”

“I came here to see you,” the matrix-husk had said. “Emily.”

Goddess came alert at that, throwing up firewalls and preparing a particularly aggressive Dissolver/Burner that she had been working on for several days. “Who are you? Identify yourself!”

The matrix-husk put up its thin, scaly hands. “No need for that! I am not here to—”

Goddess ran a non-intrusive scan on the matrix-husk, but it was as if it was made of nothing. She was about to let the Dissolver/Burner loose, when the matrix-husk spoke again.

“I’m Alien-E. I have a job for you.”

Goddess laughed, in both worlds. Ky Lin and Exxy were intrigued by the newcomer. “I already have a job.”

“I know all about that. I’ve been monitoring you for some time. That is why I have come to you now.”

“Who are you really?” Goddess asked, not entirely sure what was staying her hand from releasing the Dissolver/Burner at this intruder. “And what do you want?”

“The Species have used you from day one. You don’t owe them anything. Leave them. Come, work for me on occasion. You’re on your own the rest of the time. You’d be a freelancer. You’ve been trained, and you’ve survived hell—literally. You’d do well for yourself, and for me. I want you *working for me*. You would be well compensated.”

Goddess was curious, but said, “Not interested. Goodbye.”

“Contact me when you’ve left the Species. Or, if you prefer, I will come to you. Yes, I will contact you after you’ve left, when you’re ready.”

Goddess ignored Alien-E and heaved the Dissolver/Burner at him. The entity, which was a mass of tentacles and teeth, blurred as it flew. Alien-E wasn’t able to move in time, and the Dissolver/Burner latched on, its

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tentacles wrapping around the wispy, alien matrix-husk, and its teeth bit down. The Dissolver/Burner let loose with its programmatic acid injectors and digital torch nozzles. Alien-E's matrix husk began to melt and burn. In seconds it was gone. He hadn't made a sound.

Ky Lin and Exxy looked at each other for a second, then turned and shook their heads at Goddess. They disapproved.

Goddess didn't care. What mattered was that Alien-E was gone. He—if the person behind the matrix-husk was really a male, as Goddess suspected—didn't interest her, and neither did his offer. She had her job. She was an officer in the Species of the EUL. She was committed to them till her two years were up. The Species had repaired her. She owed them her life.

Didn't she?

FINALITY

Emily.
It felt good to think of herself in that way again. Her true name bounced around in her mind in a way that *Goddess* never could have. When she said it out loud, she could hear her voice echo back at her. Oh, that sounded good! Her true name was like a luxurious hug around her. Oh, that *felt* good!

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Loveroot grew in the soil here. It was possible that it would eventually overrun the entire area. Emily thought that was appropriate, smiling to herself. Ky Lin and Exxy approved too. It was dark in here, the air smelling of damp dirt and some tangy nectar. The only light in the small cave came from a glowing sphere she had placed in one corner.

The memorials, black and featureless slabs of cut obsidian, lay around a circumference, like the petals on a flower. Beneath each were the remains of Helix, Zilch, Fluffy, and Exxy, buried in plain, pliable neoplastic wrappings. Their bones would be preserved for a long time like that. Emily would be able to come back here, from time to time. To visit. To remember. To cry?

Not to cry. That wasn't possible anymore. Not with those eyes.

The bones of Death-nuke and She7 were in transit now; Emily had sent them back to Black Vale One. There, they would receive...some sort of burial she supposed. They didn't deserve it, but she had sent them anyway. Exxy had made her.

Kneeling in front of the wordless memorials, Emily ran her hand across the one she knew was Exxy's. The stone was warm under her fingers, even though the air in the cave was cold and dank. Something in her wanted to cry. She could feel it trying to rise, but it lacked the will so it faded back. Emily wondered at that. Perhaps there had been enough tears on this subject.

This was all there was. This was finality. Were there any more words to say?

Emily couldn't think of any, so she stood, retrieving the glowing sphere as she did. She walked to the mouth of the cave. Outside, it was night. This far away from the cities, the stars were still visible. Through her neo-optic eyelids, the stars appeared to blink in some alien code.

She caught her breath at Ky Lin clearing his throat. He was staring, and she knew why. Yes, yes...she had to hurry. Staying in one place was dangerous now. It was unlikely they would ever find this place, but if they found her, the Species would execute her, right on the spot. Yeah, that's what it did to grave robbers.

That's what it did to deserters.

Running out into the night, more free than she had ever been, more hunted than she had ever been, Emily felt curiously better than she had in a long time.