Am I Still Human?

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I don't remember anything before they took me. All I've known is pain. I have to get out of here, escape. I have to save myself, and Micheal, the only other one who understands me.

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Am I Still Human?

Augmentations. Biologic technology, fused with a human host. Most are invisible. Dubbed Biotech, some are tiny chips in the cerebellum, meant to enhance brainpower or memory. Others are lodged in the spine, giving the user heightened physical abilities. Augmentations are the new tattoos, the new piercings. A whole new level of self-expressionism. Most are cosmetic, self-centered. A very select few are meant for another purpose altogether; war.

I wasnâ t about to let myself get caught, despite my current predicament. Two guards rattled the door handle. I inched my way across the ledge of the building until I was around the corner. Below my feet, seventy stories down, cars the size of ants crawled pass. I could hear the guards wondering if I jumped. One commented that the traffic would have stopped if there was a body.

I kept inching along, hoping Iâ d find an open window eventually. It was a warm summer day; someone was bound to be airing out his room. I heard the two guards arguing over who should go out on the ledge. I smiled, grateful the two were cowards.

Finally, my fingers wrapped around the open frame of a cracked window. Easing it open, I slipped into a ward I was all too familiar with. Four simple white beds were spaced out evenly. Ominous chains hung lifeless at the sides of the beds, and the faint smell of bleach still permeated the air.

At first I didnâ t notice the slight bump underneath one of the sheets. He was so pale and small he blended right into the stark-white bed. But, on my way past I heard a slight gasp. I spun around, hands up, ready to fight, imagining the worst. My eyes fell on the little boy. He stared at me, shocked, scared.

I lowered my hands. I tried to smile reassuringly, but Iâ m sure I looked like I was snarling.

â Hey, easy. Iâ m not going to hurt you,â I said calmly.

He looked skeptical, but gave me a brief, tired twitch of his mouth.

There was something about the little boy, something that made me stay and not move on. Maybe it was his eyes, a brilliant electric blue, reminding me of a long-lost memory. Maybe it was his innocence, so powerful I could nearly see it. Maybe it was the weak voice that drifted from the bed, murmuring only one word:

â Help.â

Whatever it was, it made me stop.

I noticed the chains, heavy looking on his skin-bone frame. I quietly moved to his side. He watched me with widened eyes, pulling away slightly as I drew near. I was no stranger to that effect. I loosely held the chain in one hand, and with the other I cut the links with one dagger-like finger. Two halves fell away, sliced apart like butter.

The boy weakly flexed his one free arm while I moved to the other chain. As gently as one could be with knives for fingers, I helped the boy out of his bed and to his feet. At first he wavered, no doubt having been chained to the bed for months. In a few moments though he was fine, albeit deathly pale and quivering with

exhaustion. He looked up at me then, and again I stared into those frosty blue eyes. Sighing, I held out my hand.

â Fine, Iâ ll get you out of here,â I said.

The kid blinked a few times, not registering my offer. Suddenly a true smile spread across his pale face, giving it a new light and new strength. I bent down and he climbed onto my back, out of breath by the time I straightened back up.

Together, with him watching my back and my knowledge of the building, we managed to navigate the halls with little effort. The main lobby, however, was another story. Guards swarmed the place, all armed with guns and protected with Kevlar-reinforced armor. I was flattered; all this to catch little old me.

I was considering making a run for it (after all, I had clocked sixty miles an hour on my last test), until I spotted someone who sent a chill down my spine.

There was only one man Iâ d ever feared. One man whoâ s ruthlessness even I could feel underneath all the augmentations and mechanical emotions.

Major Silas.

An innocent enough name, and one that hid a true monster.

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I first met him, exhilarated, fresh from my first test. I was six years old. The other biotechs stood with their hands on their knees, cuts lacing their arms, swollen bruises lining their bodies. But I stood, unflinching, untiring, flexing my robotic claws, confident I could take the world on. He strode into the room, congratulated us on our efforts. He looked at me in particular.

â What is your designation?â He said coolly.

â V-05,â I replied crisply.

He smiled. I should have suspected something then, because this was a smile made of ice, of cruelty. He smiled as though I were a new toy, faster, stronger than the rest. He smiled maliciously, coolly, with all intent and purpose of destroying me.

But I never suspected. I kept my head up, arrogant, gullible.

The next seven years of my life were living hell. I donâ t know if I could even call it living. Days blurred into weeks. I trained and trained until I couldnâ t feel anything, couldnâ t think anything. I was kept away from the others, isolated from any contact that might interrupt me and my training. And Silas was there, every step of the way. He was there every time I slashed a target into five pieces, every time I kicked the head off a dummy. Sometimes, he would smile. His cold, venomous lips stretching across deathly-white teeth. I came to admire him, and loathe him at the same time. He was my master, my guardian. My torturer, my executioner. He made me what I am, and destroyed everything I once was.

I never flinched from him though. I was a loyal dog. I followed orders without complaint. I would train until I blacked out, and when I awoke he would be standing over me, contempt etched into his face. He killed me four times. Twice, my heart failed, gave up on life, as he pushed me beyond my limits. Silas would have me

dragged back from death. Once, my blood refused an augmentation. Silas refused to have it removed, and when I was brought back not only had I gained three new augmentations, but now my blood was a new type. The last time I died, I went peacefully in my sleep. Silas made sure I never slept again.

And I killed. Scenario after scenario, session after session, I hunted, fought, and killed. Up until two days ago, none of my targets had mattered. They had all been lifeless husks, practice dummies. Blank-faced figurines statically placed throughout the chamber.

Until two days ago.––

I couldnâ t sleep, but I could be shut down. No dreams, just, off. Nothing. When my eyes opened, I could feel a change in me. Another augmentation. I waited, knowing Silas would want to test my new ability soon. I entered the testing chamber, obedient, complacent. The door sealed behind me with its usual hiss. I stood on the small, pulsing circle, expecting the targets to rise out of the ground, as always. Instead, the door opened again. I didnâ t turn to see why. Shuffled footsteps and muffled whispers slowly filed in behind my back. I flexed my claws, wondering what Silas was up to.

Finally, the door hissed shut. I counted five pairs of shambling feet behind me. I tried not to imagine what came next.

But what I fought to envision happened anyway. With a sharp command from Silas I turned and faced my new targets.

I did nothing. Not a halt of breath, not a blink of surprise. I was obedient.

Inside, my mind was turmoil. Of course I expected live targets eventually. Every indication led toward my claws sinking into the intestines of some poor human. But these were no ordinary humans. If they were, maybe, just maybe, I could have killed them.

In front of me now stood five others. Others I had not laid eyes upon for seven years. Others, who, despite their now mutated appearance, their grown forms, I still recognized as the same kids who I sat next to the first time they augmented us with enhanced speed, agility, and power. Their faces were tight, malnourished, defeated.

Yes, I recognized them.

Failures. And I was here to clean out the trash.

All this flashed through my mind in a matter of seconds. Silas was pacing now, slowly. I stared straight ahead while he quietly, maliciously, gave me instructions. They were simple, each word being said slowly, intently.

â You will hunt each target one by one. Each target must be killed differently. All targets must be eliminated.â

Silas stopped in front of me. I stared past his cold, black eyes. â You have a new weapon at your arsenal. Use it. Am I understood?â he said quietly.

I couldnâ t say yes. I wanted to. I wanted to look him in the eyes, show him his cruel trick had no affect on me. But I couldnâ t say yes. I couldnâ t just steal someoneâ s life like that, take it from him while the only thing he felt, smelled, and tasted was fear. I couldnâ t.

Silas waited. His lips slowly stretched across those deathly white teeth. He knew heâ d won.

â Why, V-05, are you disobeying a direct order?â He said icily.

This time, I managed to look at him. â I will not kill,â I whispered. I had wanted to shout it at him, make him reel back from me. I had wanted him to feel scared for once. Instead, I whispered a response laced with fear, and, impulsively, stepped back from Silas.

He knew I was beaten. His teeth gleamed dangerously, and his black eyes were lit with a fire Iâ d never seen before.

â You will, V-05. You will.â

I spent the next two days in terror, waiting for Silas. I tried to find this new ability Silas thought I had. I needed to show him I was in control, but my emotions were getting in the way. Fear coursed through my circuits, my veins. I could feel the augmentation, just out of my reach. Each time I would concentrate and feel a shiver run down my arm. A daggered finger would twitch, then nothing. My dark room, comforting once, now revealed its true meaning; a cage, inescapable. I clawed fruitlessly at the concrete walls, searched unsuccessfully for a crack, a seam, anything that I might use to escape this horror house. When my door was opened, I shrunk into the wall.

I was strapped to a familiar bed, chained down and given a sedative. I couldnâ t believe it. Another augmentation, like nothing had happened. I was left there, alone, while they prepared for surgery. The white walls pressed in on me, the faint smell of bleach seeped into my nostrils. I closed my eyes, wishing I could sleep.

My hearing had been augmented a long time ago. The silence in the room was terrifying. I strained for any noise, and my ears found the conversation of two guards outside my room.

â â ¦never been attempted before.â

â Jesus. The whole brain?â

â Naw, I heard itâ s like a remote. If the Major doesnâ t like something, he can just switch her higher functions off anâ take control. Pretty useful for handling that walking Swiss-Army-Knife, if you ask me.â

â Donâ t you feel bad for the kid?â

â That little freak? Trust me, that thing in there is no kid.â

â Stillâ â

â Shut up.â

â No, wait, hear me outâ â

â I said shut up! Did you hear that?â

I had one foot out the window of the room when the guard spoke up. I froze for a second. The window, rusty from little use, had squeaked slightly as I eased it open. The guards fumbled with the locked door. Quickly, I

pulled myself up through the window and out onto the ledge.

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Pushing the boy behind me with one arm, I quickly backed away from the lobby. We backtracked a few feet before ducking into an empty room. There was no way I was facing Silas and his legion of soldiers. But I didnâ t know the building. Up until now, I had been retracing my steps from when I first arrived here.

I was out of ideas. I didnâ t know what to do. I closed my eyes in vain. This had all been so stupid, pointless. Reckless. There was nowhere to go. I didnâ tâ ¦ couldnâ t thinkâ ¦

A slight tug on my shirt brought me back to reality. I looked at the boy.

â What now?â he whispered.

The boy stared at me, waiting to hear what to do next. I breathed deeply, shook off my doubts, and took a look around the room.

It looked unused, a storage closet for long-forgotten items tossed in with the rest of this junk. But toward the back, I spotted the dim light of a covered window.

I pointed. â Thereâ s our ticket out,â I whispered to him, smiling. He grinned weakly, nodding.

Feverishly, I pulled boxes away from the window. Every rustle pained me, and each time I stopped and listened for any sound of alarm.

To our immense luck, the window proved to be a simple flick of the lock. A dumpster in the alley outside of the window provided an easy way to climb down. I lifted the boy through first, then crawled over myself. I noted, as I slid through the foot-tall window, that had I been fed properly I would have never fit.

My first steps outside of the building in seven years were a mix of joy and fear. I breathed in the smell of unfiltered air, the feel of grit between my clawed toes. The boy couldnâ t stop grinning, and I found myself unable to either.

â Out of there,â the boy jabbered breathlessly. â Free!â

But we werenâ t safe yet. I knew guards would begin to search outside of the building in a matter of time. We needed a safe, secret way out of here.

My eyes first fell on the street in front of the building. Cars honked and people brushed past each other inches apart. Part of me shrunk away from all the noise, but another thought methodically about the street. It was an overcast day, breezy. People were wearing dark coats, rushing to their destinations, focused on their own goals. Maybe we could slip through, blend in with the crowd. I took a closer look at the people. One woman brushed her scarlet hair back with a metallic hand etched with rhinestones. Another man walked past with his arm held up, reading a display emanating from his arm.

Sure, none of them carried foot-long blades for fingers, but maybe with some creative hiding we could look like nothing more than a couple of augmented kids. I looked down at the boy. As far as I could see, he had nothing deadly sticking out of his arms. I bent down on one knee.

â Listen, weâ re going to walk with those people,â I told him.

The boyâ s eyes widened. â Butâ ¦â

â You hold onto my arm, okay, and weâ ll walk together.â

I rolled down my sleeves, grateful my legs werenâ t as deadly looking as my arms. The sleeves barely covered my wrists, but I clenched my bladed fingers and managed to tuck them away. As long as no one shook my hand, I was pretty satisfied with my appearance.

We scooted our way along the wall until the sidewalk was a few feet from us. Not a single person glanced our way. I looked at the boy again, only to find him squeezing my arm for dear life. I took a deep breath and stepped forward into the crowd.

The pace was brisk, but we found our stride in a few steps. No one even looked at us once.

I kept walking, my only thought being to put as much distance between us and the building as possible. Finally, I could feel the weight of the boy becoming too much. I glanced down at him. Sweat dripped from his face, despite the cold weather. He was gasping for breath, and stumbled here and there in an effort to keep up. I looked around, spotting a tunnel up ahead.

â Almost there,â I whispered back to the boy. I wasnâ t sure he heard me.

The tunnel proved to be a subway entrance. I just about carried the boy down the steps, he was so weak. To our luck, a train was boarding, and we half-walked half-stumbled between the doors and collapsed into a pair of seats.

â Are you okay?â I murmured to the boy. He nodded feebly, his eyelids fluttering in exhaustion.

I had only ridden the subway once when I was five, and the slight jostle of the train churned my stomach. I felt trapped in a tin can, surrounded by strangers. I was positive they were all staring at me, that they knew I was some escaped convict. I slouched down in my seat, tugging at my sleeves. My eyes darted from passenger to passenger, watching for any signs of attack.

I felt a nudge. The boy, now awake, pointed at a digital sign above our heads. â Whatâ s it say?â he said softly.

â Names,â I said crisply. Addresses of streets scrawled across, neon red against deep black. 57th Street, 76th street, 81st streetâ ¦

I sat up a little. 81st Street sounded familiar. Vague memories came to me. Skeletons, mummies, cavemen. There was a museum there. I hadnâ t been outside in seven years, and even then Iâ d read little and never needed to memorize the city. But I did remember the museum, and right next to it a giant park. Maybe, the boy and I could hide there for awhile, at least until I could think of something better.

â 81st Street,â I whispered to the boy. â Weâ ll get off on 81st Street.â

The wait was agonizing. I kept looking around the subway. My senses were overloaded; something just didnâ t feel right.

I suppose it was the years of training. Countless days spent honing lightning fast reactions. I reacted instinctively; ducking my head and dragging the boy down with me. I heard a scream as we rolled onto the ground. I glanced back our seats. Two darts sunk into the cushions, exactly where our heads used to be.

I picked the boy up, carefully maneuvering my claws around so as not to cut him. I looked around the train, spotting the gleam of a gun barrel amidst the panic of the crowd. I ran in the opposite direction, the boy trailing behind me.

The train screeched to a stop. The hoard in the train streamed out onto the platform. We spilled out with them, making a break for the stairs up and out of this death hole.

Again, I reacted instinctively. Stopping suddenly, I just missed another shot aimed for me. As we bolted again, I glanced behind and saw two men in suits from the building angrily jamming another dart into their guns.

We broke out from the subway onto a crowded sidewalk. Panicked people from the train were still fleeing, causing others to peer into the tunnel in bewilderment. I didnâ t bother with dodging the people; I shoved them aside as I dragged the boy behind me.

We ran and ran until the boy tripped and stumbled and refused to move.

â Come on, weâ ve got to keep moving!â I pleaded, attempting to pick him up with little success. These daggers were hardly meant for handling a doorknob, let alone an exhausted child.

â I, Iâ ¦â was all the boy could manage.

I looked around wildly. People flowed around us like a raging river, bumping and jostling me as I tried to help the boy to his feet. Between the shuffling feet and fluttering of trench coats, I could see the only color in the city just beyond the black clad people and gray towers.

My acute hearing picked up the sounds of a scuffle behind us. The guards were closing in.

â Please, just a few more steps,â I whispered urgently.

The boy stumbled to his feet, summoning the last of his reserves. His icy blue eyes locked with mine. Together, we pushed our way through the crowd. I shoved against indignant, unwavering trench coats, leaving cries of protest and grumbling adults. I could see a space only a few steps in front of us, and hurriedly pushed past the last few people.

But it was no clearing. In front of us, blocking our path to freedom, rushed five lanes of speeding machines. Cars honked, cyclists darted between the lanes. No one dared to attempt the crossing. But the boy and I had no time to wait for a cease in the traffic. I glanced back at the crowd. I could visibly see the crowd being shoved by the guards.

Looking down at the boy, I yelled to him, â Climb on my back!â

â Are you crazy?â

â Trust me!â

He climbed aboard, and without further hesitation, I jumped into the frenzy.

Cars wailed and tires screeched as I twisted and spun around the machines. Sliding across one hood, I stopped for just a second as another car sped past, then surged forward between the two foot gap between it and its follower. The boyâ s heart raced, and for the most part he held onto me with an iron grip. As I

flipped over the last lane, his grip wavered. I felt him leave my back, and as I came out of the flip I caught him in my arms, landing neatly and softly on the other side of what was now quite a pile-up.

I didnâ t turn to find the guards. Still holding the boy, I sprinted across the sidewalk, hopped a fence, and dropped into the hushed, engulfing folds of the park. Silently, I jogged deeper into its depths. Slowly, the insanity of the city quieted to nothing more than a distant hum. I jogged in one direction for a while, then another. I never left a mark, made a sound. Finally, I slowed to a stop. The sounds of the city were almost non-existent now. I looked down at the boy. He was fast asleep.

I shifted him to one arm, resting his head on a shoulder. The trees here were tall, shading the floor to near darkness. They were sturdy, no doubt hundreds of years old. Gently, I jumped up one, wrapping my hand around a branch. Swinging myself up, I found more branches, easily climbable. I practically walked up the rest of the tree, until I deemed the branches above too thin to support us. The boy hadnâ t stirred, not even a twitch. I set him tenderly against the trunk of the tree on a fairly thick branch, placing one arm underneath another, smaller one, propping him up safely. Stepping back, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was confident we were safe here, at least for the rest of the day. I wanted to drop back to the floor and cover my tracks more, but I didnâ t dare leave the boy here, asleep some fifty feet above the ground. I dropped down to a lower branch, directly below the boy, and rested my back against the trunk. I was content to sit in silence, reveling the time I now had to do anything I wanted. Patience had not been a word in Silasâ vocabulary.

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â Sliced clean through? Impressive.â

â Yes. She should not have been able toâ â

â But she did. Fascinating.â

â Yes, sir.â

Two scientists analyzed and inspected what little remained of V-05â s shackles. One, tall and narrow with sharp features, a silver goatee, and shimmering glasses lifted a severed chain with a gloved hand. He held the rough, bulky metal as though it were paper, and liable to fall apart with improper handling. With the other hand, he measured finger-lengths and palm-widths. All the dimensions were transmitted to his brain, rounded to ten decimal places for convenience. The augment patch flickered as it processed the data.

The other scientist stood by, hands folding and refolding nervously. V-05â s escape rested on his shoulders. She was his patient for the operation.

He glanced nervously from the tall scientist to a man near the window. The young scientistâ s eye zoomed and recalibrated with the sudden movement.

The man ran a finger across scratches in the sill. He didnâ t say a word, apparently oblivious to the conversation behind him. His cold black eyes seemed to stare at something beyond the window, beyond the room. He looked out the window.

â Most interesting,â the tall scientist murmured.

The young one nervously looked over the older scientistâ s shoulder. The tall one had a wrist in the cuff, wriggling it around. He paused when his thumb was nearly out.

He turned abruptly, surprising the young scientist. â Make a note, Grahams,â he said. â Remind me to redesign these.â He dropped the chain as if it were a discarded cigarette.

The two made their way to the window. The young scientist hurriedly made a note to his cerebral augmentation. As the tall scientist inspected the scratches, the young one furrowed his brows. Wasnâ t there a man here a moment ago?

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The boy was out for a long time. I sat on the branch beneath him the entire time. I had patience like that.

When he opened his eyes, I was there, ready to stop him from startling too much. Sure enough, at the sight of me, he jumped. I held a hand out, stopping him from sliding too far. By then, he was more concerned with the tree than me.

â Why am Iâ â

â â In a tree? Itâ s safe.â

â Safe?â he said skeptically.

I couldnâ t stop a smirk from flickering on my face. It was gone in an instant.

â Now, we need to keep moving. Those guards are no doubt sniffing around here somewhere.â

The boy nodded seriously. Cautiously, he stood up on the branch. Immediately I was there, and he climbed onto my back. I noticed his hand shake as he reached out for me.

I took my time back down the tree. The boy was constantly losing his hold, and each time I stopped to give him a chance to re-grip.

The last branch was some seven feet from the ground. I dropped to the floor, absorbing the impact with a slight hiss from the hydraulics on my legs. I felt the boy slip again, but this time he fell off my back. I turned to him, in time to see his arm collapse as he tried to get back up.

â â You okay?â I said.

â Iâ m fine,â he said, and again, his arm fell beneath him. I reached out my arm for him to grab, and as his hand went up it was so shaky I pulled away.

â Somethingâ s wrong,â I told him guardedly. â Tell me.â

â I, I think Iâ m just hungry.â

â Hungry?â

â Yes.â

â For what?â

â I donâ t know, anything. Iâ m starving.â

I started. Thatâ s right. Food. Iâ d forgotten about that process.

â Fine. Letâ s get you something to eat.â

â What about you?â

â What about me?â

â Youâ ve got to be hungry too.â

I stared at him. â Iâ m not hungry,â I said mechanically.

As I picked him up with my arms, carefully making sure my claws were out of the way, I thought about that concept. With everything Silas had put me through, I never noticed. I thought maybe my meals had been uneventful, too insignificant for me to remember. But now as I thought about it, I couldnâ t think of the last thing Iâ d put in my mouth. Seven years, and not a single bite.

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â Let me get this straight: you saw her, you followed her *onto a crowded train*, then *shot at her*, causing mass panic, in which you lost her.â

â Yes, sir.â

â Obviously, Iâ m disappointed.â

â Yes, sir.â

â Dismissed.â

The door closed, leaving a man with black, cold eyes alone. He stared at a wall, seeing past it, thinking only of his experiment. His toy.

â If you want something doneâ ¦â

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The trees eventually gave way to a concrete path. Sniffing the air, I could smell humans not far away, maybe half a mile down the path. I followed the scent cautiously, soundlessly.

Peering around a corner, I found a small clearing. A family ran after each other, laughing and hugging and doing all sorts of loving things. I set the boy down, noticing he had eyes for only one thing. I followed his gaze to a container on a wooden table.

The family was thoroughly distracted by each other. I sauntered out into the clearing. The family didnâ t even turn. I remembered my training; the subconscious would not even note something normal, as long as I remained that way. As I walked up to the container, the family cheered in unsuspecting bliss as the smallest child â tackledâ the father. I opened the container, grabbed a package of a particularly tasty smelling something, and walked back down the path. The boy didnâ t wait for me to hand him the package; ripping off the wrapping, he sunk his teeth into a sandwich. Even as he devoured the sandwich, as mayonnaise ran down the crisp leaves and dripped onto the concrete, not a pang of hunger hit me. Nothing.

The boy licked his fingers ravenously. I looked away, slightly disgusted. He clambered to his feet, dusting himself off. He smiled at me.

â Thank you,â he said.

I nodded.

â It was great,â he added.

I nodded again. â Letâ s get going now, shall we?â

His smile faded, and he nodded somberly.

We trudged back into the trees, the boy trailing behind me. We walked for a long time in silence. The sounds of the park surrounded us. The birds nearest to me were silent, but as I passed by they twittered to the boy. The smell of freshly fallen leaves and needles clogged my nostrils in a pleasant way. Something in me stirred, something I hadnâ t felt in a long time. Peace? Serenity? Happiness?

â Iâ m Edwin.â

I glanced back at the boy. â Youâ re what?â

â My name. Itâ s Edwin.â

I stopped and turned to â Edwinâ . I looked him up and down, and eyebrow raised. â No numbers?â

His brow furrowed. â Numbers? No. Just Edwin.â

I thought for second. â How long were you there?â

He knew immediately what I meant. â Not long. A few days, I think.â

â Did they do anything to you?â

â They gave me a bath. It hurt.â

Edwin was lucky. No augmentations, no alterations. Still just a little, normal boy. He could forget all of this, go home. If I could cry, I would right now.

â Whatâ s your name?â

I looked at the boy. â V-05,â I said crisply. The boy blinked a few times. An impulse, drilled into me to respond such a way. I turned around, and began to walk again.

We hadnâ t gone a few steps when he stopped again.

â Whatâ s your real name?â

I turned again. â Whatâ s wrong with V-05?â

â Nothing! Iâ ¦itsâ ¦I justâ ¦â

â Donâ t sweat it. Honestly, I donâ t remember my name. I had one once, butâ ¦â

In truth, whatever my name had been belonged to a different person. I was someone else now, and V-05 suited me just fine. I flexed my claws absently. I was an experiment, and a numerical sequence was just how I felt these days.

â How long were you there?â Edwin asked quietly.

I looked up distantly. â Seven years.â

â How old are you?â

â Thirteen.â

â Whenâ â

â Enough, Edwin.â I began walking again. Vague memories, and the realization that I spent more of my life in that building than with my own family swirled in my brain. I was over with digging in my mind for things that no longer mattered.

I stole another meal for Edwin a few hours later. We found an empty playground, and I allowed him to play while I thought of where to go next. Obviously, we couldnâ t stay in this park forever. We need somewhere permanent.

â You wanna swing too?â

I looked up from my musings. Edwin stood, holding the chain of one swing on the playground in his hand. He looked at me expectantly.

I decided to humor him. I grabbed the chain from his hand, wincing a little as my claws scraped uneasily on the metal. I sat down gingerly. I think I swung once, and I didnâ t have good memories of the event. Memories of dirt filled my brain.

I pushed off the ground, feeling my body impulsively lean back. The seat swung forward, and I leaned forward. Slowly, I swung higher and higher.

I felt something building in me. Skepticism was replaced by something unfamiliar to me. A smile begin to grow, my heart began to race. This was better than any hunt, any feat Iâ d ever accomplished in the building. A laugh escaped my lips, and at that moment, as my legs swung forward and I leaned back, watching the world spin behind me, I found a name for that feeling; happiness. Truly experienced, I think, for the first time in my life.

Slowly, the arcs became smaller and smaller, until I sat, grinning childishly, next to Edwin.

â Nothing like a good old swing to cheer you up,â he beamed. â My mama told me that one.â

I laughed again, even if there was no joke.

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Silas ran his fingers across the claw marks. Two perfect sets, like their maker had pushed off from the hood of the car.

A man stood nearby, proudly recounting his take of events. â I thought I was a goner,â he said heroically, â I tell ya, that machine jumped up, teeth bared, ready to kill me. If I hadnâ t stopped, well, youâ d have a murder on yer hands.â

Silas turned to the man. He looked down on the short, pudgy fellow with contempt. â Well, thank God you stopped,â he said sarcastically.

The man nodded, oblivious to Silasâ attempts to quiet him. â Yes sir, the thing was all white, with razor sharp claws. It was carrying something, probably itâ s victim, the poor thingâ â

â Yes, thank you,â Silas said coldly.

The man gave Silas a look for interrupting him. But Silas was past paying any attention to the pudgy little man. His cold, black eyes searched the trees beyond the sidewalk. He strode up to the low wall, and peered down the slight drop. His sharp, trained eyes picked out the bent grass, the slight indention of an impact. He followed the barely perceptible trail until trees blocked his vision. Cold, venomous lips stretched across deathly-white teeth. V-05 was good; after all, she learned from the best, but he was still the master, and she could not escape from him.

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We were on a deserted street, surrounded by tall, derelict buildings. The sounds of sirens wailing and cars screeching far off filled the uneasy silence. Windows were smashed, painted words were splattered onto half-collapsed brick walls. The streets were cracked and weeds sprouted between the fissures. Not a soul stirred. The street was like a graveyard, a sight were one might meet his end.

The park proved to be too small to hide us. Edwin and I decided to leave it, and find a safer place to hide. We wandered the city that night, dodging policemen and public alike, until we ended up here.

Edwin finished the last of his meal. Someone had thrown out a perfectly good, nicely sealed container of leftover Chinese food. Edwinâ s eyes sparkled at the treasure when I showed it to him. He found a water spicket nearby and rinsed down the salty meal.

Edwin and I started for the nearest building. We stepped over a few fallen bricks into a dimly lit warehouse. Giant, decommissioned machines, half-dismantled, created a maze of alleyways and dark corners. A rusty catwalk zig-zagged above our heads. Dirty, shattered windows lined the top of the walls.

Edwin sat down in a corner. He was fast asleep in no time, just as the sunâ s first rays glinted through what little glass remained in the windows. I stared at his peaceful expression, wondering what he was dreaming about. Perhaps he was back in the white bed, trapped once more beneath heavy chains. Or maybe he was back with his family. I envied him. To dream once more, or even a nightmare, anything to escape the long hours would be bliss.

I left the boy to his slumber. Finding a staircase to the catwalk, I climbed up until I stood high enough to see the boy and the door. I sat down, cross-legged, and watched. The silence engulfed me, wrapped around me like a blanket. I didnâ t move. My thoughts didnâ t wander, and neither did my eyes. I didnâ t pick at the rust. I didnâ t sigh out of boredom. It was trained into me. Distraction was no longer a word I could comprehend.

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The trail was scarce now. V-05 had left the wild antics behind. Any clues were subtle, and only an expert could find them.

Silas was such an expert.

He came upon a family, the youngest crying. Apparently, the family was short a sandwich, and the child was forced to share with his sister. The very idea horrified him.

Silas might have thought nothing of the incident, until he found slight drippings of mayonnaise behind a bend in the path.

Next, he followed the bent twigs and crushed leaves to a small playground. There, he found slight scratches on the swing, as well as fresh footprints in the sandy ground around the

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