

Somewhere, far from these events...

Through winding, dark evergreen forests, in the shadow of a range of vast, snow-capped mountains, sits a beautiful palatial estate.

Twilight is breaking, the sun setting to the east, giving streaks of beautiful light through the mountain valley which has just begun to fill with mist. A deer trots past, prancing through the first fallen leaves of this late summer.

Past the gates, past the vast lawns were the outdoor sports courts, filled with strapping young men glistening with sweat as they exercised. Each one was strong with a stern gleam in their eyes, moving with such fury and intensity it was as if they were possessed.

Further still, the mansion was host to vast hallways, great hosting chambers, dining halls like highways.

Off the beaten path of this labyrinthine monument's many hallways, down twisting corridors, a simple room lay at the heart of this austere concrete beast. A small, well-stocked study adorned with mementos, pictures, accolades and trophies- and newspaper headlines.

The Iron Senator- Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.

Renowned Nonprofit Arms Across Mercia Goes International.

The Invincible Butcher of Basara- His Story in the Clutches of Darkness.

The Man They Call Morningstar: The Only Human to Have Won the Steel Gloves Open.

Political firebrand. Focused philanthropist. Dutiful soldier. Peerless warrior.
Patriarch among patriarchs.

A man, truly larger than life.

Sigismund Chadwick.

At the head of this room lay the main light source, a humongous, raging wood fire that made this place swelter. Huge shadows were cast by the blaze, most pointedly from an imposing, grand chair. A chair that seemed almost absurd by its size and audaciousness, like a piece of gaudy modern art, as if to have an audience look upon it and wonder with a shudder, “what kind of vast and terrible king would inhabit this seat?”

That very king sat, body cold and gray in the stark light of the blaze he eyed contemplatively. His red gaze shined, lost from here, almost meditative, holding the glass of liquid he had received from the statue next to him- only this statue was his manservant, a boy no older than nineteen, body sculpted like rock and still as a stone, holding his tray motionless, like an aimed rifle.

“Breaking news!” he heard as he drank, still watching the fire- a TV was hung up above and before the fireplace, but he barely seemed to heed it, only watching those flames with those cold, distant, nigh-hateful eyes. “Extremist terrorism on US soil? Reports coming out of the state of Deseret claim that an incident has occurred just outside of the Prewcogg National forest, including a rolling gun-battle between civilians and what we are led to believe are synthetic-supremacists, having taken up to half a dozen people hostage.”

If this man upon his throne had any reaction to this it did not show, other than the slightest furrow of his brow. He calmly took a sip from that small glass- or at least, that glass that looked so small in his huge grip.

Some might have heard this headline and empathized for the life surely lost, the pain and terror felt. He did not. His mind may have tumbled with the information, political considerations running through him. There hadn't been such explicit, anti-human actions taken so blatantly in Mercia for quite some time. He wondered what the national response would be, and how best to take advantage of the emerging political circumstances for his own ideological gain.

Until he saw footage of a certain, wounded young man.

“...one of the androids, an AnthroDyne AZC, was seen flying over Prewcogg, Deseret with what appears to be a wounded man in his late twenties in tow,” footage of what appeared to be a blue blimp with vaguely anthropomorphic proportions was shown, this balloon-woman ferrying a man strapped to her absurd body, who hung limp and bloody. The camera zoomed in on the man's unconscious face.

An involuntary twitch, and the little drinking glass in the Senator's hand exploded, shards and what liquid was left falling on the floor. This alone gave his manservant a reaction, this young adonis flinching. Rather than proclaim anything or panic, the athletic young man turned, walking quickly to get a pan and broom.

Senator Chadwick leaned in, mouth formed into an involuntary snarl, chair creaking as the crushing weight put upon it was shifted. That young man. Shot and bloodied, his body hung up on display for the world to see beneath the bulging belly of one of those soft, squishy, and utterly absurd companion androids AnthroDyne had cooked up a couple years ago, which happened to sell like hotcakes for shut-ins and weirdoes across the globe.

What indignity... even as that camera panned to the blimp-girl's face, the panic, the distress evident in her bright blue eyes, tears running down her chubby cheeks. Though the situation was no laughing matter, the method of floaty conveyance was nevertheless ridiculous and cartoonish.

She came in for a landing at the city hospital, the medical staff ready for her on the landing tarmac. She shrank to an anthropomorphic form, kneeling there as a twelve foot tall giantess, arms curled around him once more. She didn't want to let go of him, but knew she needed to, her arms falling to hang limply at her sides as she shrank to let the medics pull him off of her, cutting through the straps quickly rather than take the time to unbuckle him.

The TV shut off, and the Iron Senator rose. He was still in his casual exercise clothes, and he would need to get dressed. The day was not as over as he thought it would be now.

Musculature pulsing, he walked out of his study, his servant brushing up the broken glass. Compared to him, the servant with the build of a heavyweight boxer did seem like a child, with how imposing the Senator was. He picked up his phone from his pocket- the thing held like a tiny badge in his hand. He dialed promptly. "Rhinegold," he spoke into it, voice deep and rolling, like thunder. "Meet me in Prewcogg."

"I am already on my way, Senator," the voice returned, with a refined, intelligent, dark Aenglic accent. "I was alerted to the situation by the council just prior, and told to handle this one personally. I was about to call you."

“Did you know who it was?” the Senator’s voice peaked with stress- at least, his even and level disposition was given a brief fluctuation.

“...the patient changes nothing,” Rhinegold responded in his posh voice. “Though it does make things more poetic.”

The Senator hung up at this, stowing his phone, arriving in his dressing room and dutifully changing into his suit. “Jeremy,” he called to his manservant he observed through the mirror in his armoire. The young man nodded. “Cancel my plans tomorrow. I’ll need the day,” he said. “And reserve a room at the Prewcogg Grand. Their penthouse, suitable for morphics.”

“Yes sir.” His manservant shuffled away to do his master’s bidding.

Garbed in an exquisite three-piece-suit, it was as if his vast, titanic frame was compacted and squeezed beneath sharp black wool. This was not to say that his clothes made him seem smaller or less powerful, but rather his power was still evident through the fabric; angular musculature neither hidden nor shrunk by its coverings. Black and gray were his colors of choice, save for a burning red tie adding a splash of color to his ensemble, nearly as unmistakable as the dull red glow of his eyes.

Thus far the man had only been in dim darkness, in stark shadow and the cold windowlight of twilight. He preferred the darkness, even as it accentuated the unnatural red glow of his irises, the color of dying embers. But the monochromality of dimness hid a more distinct feature of his, his skin. Gray, like cold iron. You looked upon him and saw shadow, the stark angles that made up his anatomy, with the red glow deep beneath a brow so heavy, his eyes were always cast in black shadow even at the height of a noon sun above. But in that illumination you would see that his skin seemingly bore no color, as was apparent while he dressed himself in the pale light of his armoire cabinet’s inbuilt lights.

In truth, he was no ordinary, natural, organic human... Not anymore. But this was not to say he was mechanical; he was no cyborg, at least as far as anyone could tell. His gray skin was matte and without shine or sheen, and even the glow of his eyes did not seem electric, rather they bore an uncanny shimmer of a deep sea bioluminescence.

Aside from the equally unnatural hue of his eyes, the only other bit of color his body held was a burst of brilliant gold sprouting from the front of his scalp: a singular, almost vertical shock of iridescent blond hair above his hard, heavy forehead, the hairs seemingly compelled to point skyward by way of some ill-understood scientific, or outright paranormal phenomena. Even as he brushed past that spear of golden follicles, each strand would return to its standing position like soldiers at parade.

Once dressed, out he walked briskly. Through that vast estate of his, out into the exercise yards. The young men all around, those *he* had lifted out of dire straits, out of homelessness and joblessness and the hopelessness of modern male existence through the organization he'd so painstakingly built from the ground up... They stopped to watch him pass. It even felt as if they ought to have saluted, the sheer atmosphere of deference they paid to their liege.

It was not merely humans here, there were androids as well, though one would be hard pressed to find any individual who wasn't male here. Seam-skinned humanoids, the more creative anthropomorphic models like VSynths and Protogens, and, of course, powerful morphics.

One such example currently cut through the water of an extensive, massive pool with hydrodynamic grace. Swimming swiftly under the waves and hardly disturbing the waves above, this man-creation of sleek black skin, soft angles and sharp lines emerged at the other end of the pool. He had a wide, pointed face, his muzzled head like a great sideways blade, this blade-like profile informing much of the design of this individual. He had a hard, near fatless body, and was sleek and slender despite his foreboding profile, approaching triple the height of any human nearby- though as the Senator approached, that particular human did not appear quite as dwarfed as the rest of them.

"Adrian," He addressed this oversized android getting out of the pool. His anatomy was closely humanoid save for his alien looking, aerodynamic face, and rather than a thick lizardlike tail that many models sported for control surfaces or engines, the outside edge of his legs led into bladelike wings, with great engines in the thick of them. As this anthropomorphic SR71 Blackbird rose from his swim, the water seemed to run off of him without friction, without need for him to dry himself; merely shaking his hips to empty his engines of water.

"Yes, dear?" Adrian spoke, with a softness that connoted that there was some sentimentality between them, despite a man like Chadwick seeming as if he were

above that sort of triviality. “What’s wrong?” Furthermore, the sleek, strong aeromorph adeptly read the Iron Senator’s poker face like no one else could, cocking his muzzled head once interpreting some additional darkness in his beloved’s eyes.

“We have to go,” He responded, not breaking eye contact, before clarifying:

“It’s my son.”

Meanwhile...

Beep. Beep.

"We're losing his pulse. We need another IV bag."

"Every bag of blood we put in him ends up in the ground!"

"How the hell wasn't this guy DoA in the first place, with this kind of arterial rupture?"

Beep beep beep.

"Lung's collapsing again- we need that break sealed!"

Beepbeepbeepbeeeeeeee...

"Losing him, losing him! Lost pulse! Prepare defib!"

"Charged! Clear?!"

"All Clear! Hit him!"

FweEEEEEE- WHUMP.

beep. BEEEEEEEEEE.....

"He's not back yet. Charging... Clear?!"

"All clear!"

WHUMP.

Beep. Beep, beep, beep... beep.

"Heartbeat's back but it's irregular.
We've... we've got the artery now but blood pressure's
still dangerously low. Where the hell is the next IV?!"

Bloona stood there, completely numb with her hand on the pane of glass separating the viewing room from the sterile operating theater. Watching past those ghastly, shuffling forms, their pristine white uniforms spattered in blood, like apparitions encircling her owner and ghastly painting themselves with his gore. She listened, drowning out the voices of the doctors, listening to the beeping of the EKG hooked up to him, listening to the intubator forcing life-giving oxygen into his otherwise limp, half-collapsed chest. Maybe she thought seeing his chest rise and fall would make her relieved. She felt nothing, reeling from the shock of it all.

"Hey. Bloona," her shoulders tensed as a hand came to brush her, brush the blanket somebody had draped her in at some point. She was still wearing that harness under it, the straps that had held Anon quickly sliced through by medical scissors when she'd arrived, the EMS staff waiting for her arrival. The blood on her skin had since cooled and dried, dark red-brown stains and smears dotting her face, her chest and belly, and coating her hands. Some of it had even cracked and deformed from Bloona's own change in size between the time the blood was smeared onto her and dried, until now.

Bloona's wide, unfocused eyes met Jane's, the young woman standing there in a hastily donned, fresh set of clothes alongside Zeppo. Cole was there too, in a bare hospital gown instead, as he had been taken here quickly upon his escape and asylum into police custody along with his grandfather, who stood in the corner grimly observing, along with the local police liaison supervising the group while a suitable detective was on their way for the debriefing interview.

Zeppo, Jane, and Cole all embraced her as she stood, still shellshocked. She blinked, remembering the sensation of shuffling down the hall. Cole had finally gotten a chance to change his clothes, after a quick look-over from a physician. They said he had a slight concussion but otherwise was fine. Bloona looked down and found warm water washing over her skin, Jane taking the time to get her

cleaned up, sponging off dried blood with a damp towel. Bloona could barely stand to look at the reddened rags.

Next she sat with her friends, wrapped up in that blanket still. She leaned on Jane beside her, Cole on her other side with an arm across her blanketed back, Bomb's head on the table, hooked up to a phone battery pack as they talked to the detective here for them. Bloona spoke, responding to some question, feeling her body go through the motions as she stared off in the distance.

Before long, the elder Smithee shuffled off with the investigators, off on their own mission. Bomb, in her comical body-less state, gave some solemn goodbye to Bloona for the time being with her backup voicebox, lamenting that her insurance had delivered her some chintzy backup skeleton without the usual souped-up amenities she was used to, like her upgraded internal tanks. Bloona only nodded, with an empty "see you later," as Cole went off to the android section of the hospital to re-constitute his girlfriend by way of a regeneration pod- which at least would be a little higher-class than the big metal bucket she was used to regenerating within whenever she popped, the fancy chamber only taking an hour or two.

But Bloona's boyfriend, being merely human, wouldn't be able to be put back together so quickly.

"Are you gonna be alright here?" Jane and Zeppo would ask, Bloona standing at the edge of Anon's bed. Back to watching his chest rise and fall, aided by the breathing apparatus he was hooked up to. He was hooked up to so many wires and needles, it would have made her skin crawl if she thought about it. She reached for one of his feet poking out of the blanket, a toe unbandaged for her to pinch and grasp.

"We got a room with two beds at a motel in town," Zeppo said. "You're welcome to come. We... wrote down the address and room number," He slipped the piece of paper into Bloona's purse, sitting on the bench nearby. Bloona saw that the world outside the window had fallen into darkness, rain pattering on the window, distant lightning giving bursts of light. "So uh... Come fly- er, or walk over... Get a taxi, maybe- Y'know."

"Okay." Bloona said, her voice exiting her body as if it were the first words she'd spoken in years, barely hearing how awkward Zeppo came off in his own

delivery. Still she stood, holding that one non-wounded part of Anon, that little toe of his. Everything else was hooked-up cords and bandages. “Thanks.”

They left her there, alone with the broken, silent body of a man she didn’t think she ever knew anymore.

Until another joined her.

She hadn’t noticed him enter. It was as if she’d suddenly awoken to find someone else in the room, despite how she stood this entire time at the foot of the bed over Anon. Just to look at him made one wonder how he could ever be missed for a second. This man was massive, like a statue or structure. Not *someone* who had grown into who he was, but *something* erected. A monument. He was the size that seemed as if his sheer movement through space would disrupt the atmosphere around him. And indeed, it just may have- as she realized she was not alone here, her goosebumps grew, and she could have sworn the room grew colder as she brought her head up to his cold, red gaze. Two shimmering red irises looked down upon her, and for the first time in her life, she felt truly small in the presence of a human.

“The doctors say he’ll be in a coma for a week or two,” The man spoke in a voice like rolling thunder, darkness cloaking his face, all save for his eyes. Nothing on his silhouette moved, from her perspective. He sighed. “Anton, Anton.” He clicked his lips, looking down upon the man in the bed. “An inch left, and you would have lost the arm outright. An inch right, and you would have been stone-dead in thirty seconds.” He spoke down to the one who lay there, breathing peacefully with the click and whirr of the machines. “Fate has a way, doesn’t it.” He spoke with utter familiarity to the one in the bed, which Bloona had yet to fully grasp.

“...H-his name’s *Anon*,” Bloona clarified, feeling ice race through her veins to watch those eyes swivel back to her. With the continuation of his glaring, she felt that this was not a man who was to be corrected.

“Anton was his given name,” The man finally moved, reaching out, placing a huge, heavy hand on Anon’s mostly untarnished right shoulder, as he had been shot in the left. “But growing up he had a speech impediment. Couldn’t say his T’s for the longest time. Anna always thought it was the cutest thing,” a sentimental chuckle escaped this man’s mouth, and like that, he had expunged the warmth from his mind. His head finally turned to Bloona, and she saw the hard ridges, the sharp features. Heavy brow, wide-set jaw, cheekbones like mountains.

Statuesque could hardly describe such a man. “His mother meant a lot to him. He took her last name, after all.”

“You’re his father?” Bloona deduced in real-time. That face nodded once.

“I take it you are my son’s latest significant other,” He said, and this was the first time Bloona felt true animus radiate from him, feeling it focused at her. He said these words and there was some hidden commentary beneath them, some judgment and condescension she felt. Did he dislike her? Bloona was adept at reading people, but she couldn’t quite tell. Maybe given the state she was currently in, she could chalk it up to her nerves- but more than that, this man was a hard nut to crack. He moved slowly and intently, no matter what part of his body it was. A twitch of the nose, a shaking glance of an eye, it was all planned, all controlled. Even how his shock of hair pointing up from his forehead stood at attention felt full of rigid purpose. “What’s *your* name?”

“Balloona,” She answered, gulping, finding her throat dry to be questioned by such a titan. “I go by Bloona.” She saw a tiny curling of one of the tips of his lip. Amusement, but not playful or fun. The judgment of his gaze remained.

“Did my son name you?” He asked.

“N-no,” She said. “AnthroDyne did. He didn’t have any input on my name... Just my personality, and my... My body.” She was brought back to the painful conversation with her last interrogator earlier today, that old little girl android. “...W-why?” She felt even more anxious to question this titan back.

“Just curious,” He answered with his smirk growing, yet his judgment remained in his eyes. “It’s quite a silly name. Your model tends to have silly names. I suppose it’s part of your brand.” A small pause, and another slow, deliberate movement that nevertheless made Bloona flinch ever so slightly- a sports drink lifted up in his hand and pointed at her like a gun. “You’re probably dehydrated, if you haven’t had anything all day. Drink up.” She wasn’t actively thirsty before this point, but she felt compelled not by her realization of how parched she was, but by the command he issued. He said drink up, and just by the aura that surrounded him like a thick haze, he was not one to be refused.

She took the electrolyte drink and swallowed deep, hearty gulps of it. Anon’s father continued. “I can’t say I’m against silly names, myself,” He extrapolated. “My name is Sigismund. An old fashioned, Swarth-Alemanic name. Most know

me as Senator Chadwick, some knew me as Sergeant Major Chadwick. but my friends call me Siggy.” She re-capped the drink, letting it fall in her grip and rest on the bed beside Anon’s leg. “You can call me Siggy too, Bloona.” With that his hand was presented, and following his command, her limp, clammy hand rose and was grasped by that tight, hard grip, as she shook Siggy’s hand.

“...He never told you about me?” Bloona said as she released his hand. Siggy’s smirk once again momentarily grew.

“He hasn’t spoken to me in years.” The emotion behind this was strange. She felt no sorrow, only... A strange, almost playful contempt. Like someone having won a board game against another. She shuddered as she turned back to Anon. Watching that chest rise, and fall. Siggy was watching him too. “But fate has a way of catching up to us, despite all our hubris.”

Siggy took another moment, his palpable, vicious focus swiveling back to her, intense enough to make her knees wobble. “Bloona,” He began anew. “You know *why* you were created, don’t you?”

“Anon’s... Last relationship didn’t end well.” Perhaps she could have waxed a little more philosophically, but that was what was fresh on her mind at the moment.

“They never do,” once again, that spiteful, almost sadistic condescension. “My son is looking for something. All boys do. That yearning, and the striving to fill it, is what makes boys what they are.” a thumb rubbed the bandaged shoulder of his broken son. “He cannot find it in himself, so he looks to find it in others. But he cannot find it in others, because it doesn’t exist.”

“What can’t he find?” Bloona’s curiosity outweighed her trepidation.

“Belonging,” Siggy answered. “But not in so few words. He searches for an amalgam. A hydra, if you will. Love. Acceptance. Comfort. Safety. Peace.” The contempt in his tone let Bloona know right away what Siggy thought of such pitiful topics. “The hard truth is, these things do not exist. They are beyond abstraction, they are simply phantoms. Boys become men when they realize that these things are unattainable. Twenty-eight years on this earth...” He jostled his unconscious son a bit as he felt the neck, the shoulder of his kin. “And still just a boy, crying out, wailing for the pain to stop like a petulant, self-centered infant. Not realizing how important it is for him to embrace that pain, to embrace fate.

To become strong. To finally become a *man*.” He paused again, rearing back, looking at Bloona. Gazing her up and down. “Do you understand why you were created now? Truly understand the folly of your existence?” Bloona looked down, past Anon’s feet and to her own.

“He... Wanted to stop hurting.” Siggy’s head cocked a little at this statement of truth, almost defiantly coming from Bloona’s lips. She wasn’t disagreeing with him, but it felt like she wanted to push back. He curiously watched her with glowing red eyes.

“Do you pity him?” He asked, voice hardening. “Let me ask you, Bloona... Do we improve or help people when we pity them?” Bloona was silent, so Siggy answered himself. “We do not. We only make things worse, even with our best intentions. Pity enables weak behavior, self-destructive mindsets and habits.

“Let me give you some perspective, Bloona,” He began anew. “You’re a size-large AZC. A model and series of android suited to taking the *proactive* role in sensual and sexual encounters,” He explained, and Bloona ought to have cringed at this topic brought up so blatantly by the father of the man she was often sensual and sexual with, but she only listened in sheer, enraptured suspense. “I know my son, and he’s not submissive, despite whatever you may have experienced. His will is strong, I’m sure you’ve seen evidence of this. Even going so far as to defy *me*, something few people do. He’s simply directionless, and is praying an intimate partner will give him some kind of purpose, some drive in life.

“Exemplified in that sort of narcissistic hubris it takes for someone to copy their last significant other, to attempt to re-litigate a doomed relationship... we both know he lacks humility. I have known him for decades and I know he is capable of all the things he claims to have no talent or skill in, and he knows it as well. In fear, he wishes to avoid high expectations, of living up to his full potential, and thus puts up a false front of humility. He is paralyzed by failure and haunted by mistakes.

“And what you are, what you were created for, and what you represent... is that fear, that failure, his hopelessly adrift nature. I understand you want to love him, you were designed to... But staying with him is not only against your own best interest, but it is similarly against his.” From the immense sadness welling in Bloona’s eyes, Siggy knew the impact his words had, continuing: “And I understand that in my stating this, we are put at odds. But let me make one thing clear. I do not hate you, and I intend to treat you with respect, Bloona. You are not

at fault for your own existence, the fault is my son's, and I am well aware *he* is where my consternation originates. If ever I forget that fact and I accidentally display any disdain for you on a personal level, I sincerely apologize for any such *weakness*."

That final word in Siggy's brief explanation rung like a bell. It rung with more venom, more spite than any other utterance that left his stern lips.

Weakness.

With the look in his eye and the curl of his lip when he spoke that word, Siggy's nature was made clear to Bloona. What this man, this beast pulsing beneath matte gray human skin hated most was nothing other than weakness in all its forms.

Even the palpable judgment in his eyes that had burned into Bloona was given broader context- his red gaze lingered on her squishy belly, her sagging, soft breasts and chubby cheeks and neck. Not only was it that he witnessed what exactly his son was attracted to and judged *him*, but he saw Bloona's own pliable and doughy form and judged *her* too. It was as if he was always a moment from giving a screech as to why she ought to exercise more, improve her Aralatec skin's tensile strength with some discipline and self development. It was even clear those two concepts were the counterbalance of hated weakness to this man: Discipline. Self-improvement. his arch-ideals.

"You were made to love this flawed, incomplete, broken boy." Now did Bloona feel his great, cold hand upon her back as he approached her, and she shuddered but did not shake him off. "It's not your fault. You didn't choose this. And you don't have to." A silent tear descended her cheek as his words bit through her mind, and she wondered what cruelty ran in his heart for him to speak of his own son with such palpable disdain. "Bloona... What do you think of humanity?" It was an odd question, one she couldn't help but answer earnestly.

"Well... I think the world could use a lot more... love."

Siggy smirked. What a predictable, quaint answer. "So you want the best for the human race. As the majority population, and the originators of synthetic kind... The improvement of man would too improve his creations. A rising tide lifts all boats. Yes?"

“...I suppose,” She murmured, feeling like an ant beneath the boot of this man lording over her.

“In that case... *He*,” Siggy pointed one of his vast arms to Anon, the unshaking limb erected like a statue. “Is immensely important to that end,” He explained. “More important than you could ever understand.” She did not understand, but by hearing his words and looking in his eyes, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he believed it.

“Let me put it this way. He has spent his life running from fate. Running from responsibility. *You*... Regrettably, have been just another detour. A momentary distraction. Something purchased to facilitate him running from his purpose. Today, he learned that his nature shall not be denied. He is of finer stock than those around him, and he has a duty to all mankind. He shall begin to correct his course. I think he understands that.

“You have your own free will, Bloona, your decision is your own. I only intend to inform you with these words, and not to coerce or threaten you, so you may choose your decision fully informed. I am *informing* you of the futility of staying here, staying with him, at his side. Sooner or later he will be back on track, and realize he does not have any further need for you. Do you understand?”

“How can you be so sure?”

Daring to question the words of the immense Senator Chadwick. It was the closest thing to true defiance that Bloona had ever put up- at any time thus far in her brief life, really. And she'd never even intended to push back, she would never even dream to stand in his way. But Siggy's steely self-assuredness that clad the words he spoke, made him seem as if he were stating a mathematical certainty.

Two plus two equals four. Anon will leave you. All the same to him.

It reminded her of that old little girl android. She hadn't the time to react, think through, and respond to the old girl, stunned by shock in that moment. She found now, after the first posing of that certainty, after the display of the love of her life's previous relationship, and after watching that man brought right up to death's doorstep with her very eyes... She was beyond shock, beyond terror. Beyond the sheepish, sensitive, people-pleasing girl she was built from the ground-up to be, well and truly beyond *herself* at this moment.

And so she was curious and asked this question without falter, without stammer or stutter, without pause. Without mind or ego. She genuinely wanted to know how anyone could be so sure.

Siggy twitched. It was a little thing, and for the duration of that momentary spasm, it was as if Bloona was no longer in the room with a human and having a conversation, but eye-to-eye with a fierce beast, locked gazes in the primordial jungle of an ancient, forgotten world, before even the language to describe the pure feeling of being trapped, being hunted by your superior. For a moment, the pale gray skin of Siggy betrayed the monster beneath it- and in another moment he spoke, human again, having seen her raw soul on display, knowing he was not being challenged, and that fierceness had no place here. Good for Bloona. And in the state she was in, she hadn't even acknowledged the danger she had been in, anyways. After all, this inhuman man had, beating at his core, nothing but the purest, condensed animus that fueled him as if his heart were a nuclear reactor. From the cold, terrifying energy that chilled the room he stepped in, it felt as if with a twitch of his pinky toe he could level mountains.

“Like I said *before*. There is a pattern, a cycle,” He spoke after gathering himself. “All of his life has been a constant course correction. A series of tantrums, of breakdowns and buildups. Of indulging himself at the expense of others. You yourself are his latest indulgence as well as his latest expense, and I feel that I must apologize on his behalf for such selfishness. I am sorry he saw fit to bring you into creation for only his own pathetic commiseration.”

Siggy paused, going for a pocket in his coat. “Now. You are not our usual clientéle,” he cleared his throat. “I represent a philanthropic organization that helps young men in need. Arms Across Mercia. I'm sure you've heard of us,” He explained. “We can make an exception for you. Get you on the track for independence, so you don't feel coerced to stay with my son out of necessity.” When she did not immediately raise her hand to accept the card, his hand was around her wrist, and at no point in her life did she feel any smaller. Like her arm was trapped under a boulder, so firmly secured as he wilfully brought her hand up to deposit the card into it. She was released, and the card stayed within her palm, thumb rubbing over it reactively, feeling the raised lettering. She did not dare drop it.

“Call any time. State your name, we will be expecting you. We will give you any tool you could possibly need for your independence.”

It was then, that Bloona caught the gaze of a third pair of eyes.

Anon lay there, simply breathing and watching. It was unclear, at least to Bloona, how long he had been awake, how much he had heard, and certainly what he thought of it all. His heart and breathing rate had not noticeably spiked. No reaction. Or, perhaps, the reaction had occurred long ago, such horrible guilt stretched over days, weeks, months. Maybe since then he was ready to have his sins laid bare. To have Bloona face him, face every last ugly facet of his own selfish soul and pass ultimate judgment. The kind that only God could match.

Perhaps if Bloona had not known, if she had not had Anon's transgressions highlighted by not one, but two intelligent and reasoned individuals, she would be by his side at this very moment, tearfully embracing him with the utmost empathetic, relieved affection to see he was alive and awake now.

She did not move.

"A two week coma, over in an evening." Siggy let out another contemptible chuckle. He pat Bloona on the back, and she buffered like a tiny sailboat amidst a raging storm. "I told you, Bloona, he is of a different breed from most." Anon only exhaled, blinking slowly. "Can you talk with one lung, son?"

"Hi, dad." Anon, predictably, did not seem happy to see his father, though there was an air of formality about his quiet, weak words. Like he expected the inevitable.

"How are you feeling?" That lording contempt, voice too gleeful by far for what had happened to his only son. Like a bully rubbing in his victory on a schoolyard, Siggy glowered down at his broken child with a grin.

"...Disappointed in me?" Having read his father, Anon tried to chuckle back, only serving to wheeze. His heart rate spiked some, and perhaps he would have coughed if he had the strength for it.

Siggy merely grinned toothlessly. "Well, I certainly would not have so blatantly exposed myself to sniper fire."

"...Even saw the... crime scene before seeing me..." Anon finally had the strength to clear his throat, fighting to swallow thick, dry spittle. "How's stepdad?"

“He’s fine. I came here with him.”

“...Can’t exactly fit in most of these hallways...” Anon grumbled. “But Rhinegold can. Get in here.”

Bloona turned, and in walked another individual, a stranger- a quite distinct stranger, given she had seen him in the operating room while Anon’s life was being saved. Another doctor, shifting in the background, flashes here and there. Only no blood ever seemed to adhere to him. He was not in that room to save Anon’s life. Matter of fact, little did Bloona know that Anon’s life needed to *end* for his purpose to be done.

“Sensed me out in the hall, did you?” A posh accent of a lifelong Britoner met her ears. A voice that came from behind a pure white porcelain mask- An odd piece of attire to be certain, and not a medical uniform, unlike his physician-esque white smock.

“...No,” Anon wheezed, fighting just to turn his head to address this familiar creature, to look him in his glowing ice-blue eyes behind that ever so subtly unsettling mask. “An... educated guess.” Anon’s eyes swiveled back to his father. “...You wouldn’t want to waste such a good opportunity... For your experiment.”

“I take it, you know why I am here,” this Rhinegold extrapolated, his strong, powerful hands forming a scholar’s cradle at his abdomen. “Regrettably, we could not... ask you for your consent, in order to undertake the procedure.”

“W-what procedure?” Bloona spoke up, steadily feeling great unease at the unfolding information- the bodily violation of Anon while he lay bleeding on the operating table, hanging on by a thread. She remembered now, seeing an iridescent, silvery-gold, almost metallic liquid introduced into Anon’s IV drip by this white phantom, right about when the other medics were preoccupied with defibrillating him.

“...First time I see you in *years*, Uncle Rhiney... And ya don’t even wanna make small talk?” Anon chuckled, the men in the room hardly noticing Bloona’s sharp concern. Even Anon seemed lackadaisical about what had been done to him- perhaps this was a front, or perhaps he had seen this day coming too. “Y’know, I ran into one of your clones in there,” Anon said.

“Yes,” The white-garbed, masked man said. “A pair of your accomplices informed me that another Rhinegold was their primary interrogator. I suspect it was #61, or perhaps #23.” This Rhinegold turned to the other android in the room, nodding respectfully to the blue blimp girl who only recoiled in bemusement. “We have not been introduced, madam. I am Rhinegold #88- The last of my brothers,” He informed. “Me and my kind were manufactured by the Nazi government prior to the World War, as a show of good will, to assist with international interests of science, philosophy and diplomacy,” He explained. “I do hope my prior allegiance does not unnerve you.”

“W-what did you *do* to him?” Bloona demanded of the former nazi android.

“A simple addition to the work done to save your owner’s life,” #88 explained. “No exorbitant risks were taken.”

“What did you *do*?” Bloona’s fists curled, and a tear of stress rolled down her face as she quivered, demanding more adamantly. Rhinegold #88 visibly paused, and though his face was covered, she could tell he was momentarily stumped as to how to proceed without further stressing her.

“Have you, by any chance, heard of Symbionics?” This Rhinegold presented while Siggy stepped back, to lean against the wall, red eyes simmering quietly in the dark. “Symbionicism?”

“N-no?” Bloona racked her mind, but hadn’t ever heard this term before.

“She doesn’t watch midnight History Channel programming,” Anon grunted. “You’re gonna have to explain.”

“Very well then. Bloona, you are aware of Cyborgs, yes?” #88 adjusted his scholar's cradle. She nodded. “A being, part human, and part robot. And Cydroids- Part android, part robot. You yourself are one, with internal mechanisms incorporated into your android biology, such as your extendable endoskeleton and internal air storage tanks.” Bloona yet nodded again. “In vastly simplified terms, a Symbionic is a being, who is part human, and part android... And so much more.”

“They... Want to make me...” Anon fought to raise his right arm, to point to his unmoving father. “Like *him*.”

“Yes, we have an example here with us,” #88 motioned to Senator Chadwick, who currently eyed Bloona to watch her reaction. “Arguably the most famous example, as well as the most advanced. His entire biology has been converted- typically Symbionicism limits itself to particular areas of the body before slowly spreading to the rest.” Yet on did Bloona gaze, looking him up, and down. “You must not watch much TV to have never heard of the Iron Senator. How admirable of you, at the very least,” Rhinegold #88 took a moment to try and lighten the mood. Bloona barely noticed the joke. “Mr. Chadwick’s particular Symbionicism grants him an incredible resistance to physical injury, as well as vastly improved strength, speed- and eyesight.” Nothing was lost in Siggy’s glowing crimson gaze. “His particular symbionicism has turned his skin matte grey, his eyes a bioluminescent red, and rendered the majority of his body hairless.”

“Why?” Again, Bloona asked with pure curiosity. “Why do this to him?” She asked, about her owner.

“We- Mr. Chadwick and I, represent a particular interest group,” #88 went on. “One invested in the advancement of mankind.”

“...The advancement of a singular group of assholes... With all the money and power,” Anon gave his input.

“A rising tide lifts all boats,” Once again did Siggy reiterate, with a tone that indicated his assuredness. “Mankind *needs* a strong leader.”

“Many within my organization believe that Mr. Chadwick is that very leader,” #88 said. “However, the research on Symbionics is... *Limited*, what with no more than a dozen confirmed examples to turn to, with each varying vastly in ability, physical feature, and extent of conversion. While he is more durable than any human alive, we have no reason to believe his lifespan is extended to the point at which him and his teachings can guide humanity in the long-term.”

“So... You want an heir.” Bloona’s blank face said it all, as she looked back to Anon. Seeing the discomfort and malcontent on his face. The doomed, fated look in his eyes. Like a mouse caught in a trap.

“A lineage, specifically... But yes.” #88 nodded.

“Unfortunately, when Symbionics reproduce, what is made is just another human,” Senator Chadwick flatly stated as he eyed to his son. “Even when both parents are symbionics. Anon’s genes bear no trace of our mutagen.”

“So you had to wait for your chance to shoot me up, against my will,” Anon chuckled. “I wonder what mom would have to say about it.” At this Siggy tensed up, one of his first tells in a while. His voice was darker and angrier for once, emotion rising up.

“Your will?” Anon’s father growled, and the same spite that ran in his voice when he spoke of weakness was present when he spoke of choice. “Do you think *I* had the choice to become one?” Anon didn’t respond to this, as his father approached the foot of the bed once more, like a wolf approaching a wounded meal. “Or your mother?”

“...Don’t you wish *you* at least had a say?” Anon tried to reason. His father laughed in condescension once more at this appeal to his emotion, a tactic that would never work on him.

“Alright, *son*,” This mountain of a man spat with vitriolic venom coursing through his tone. “Let’s make a *deal*. The deal is, *I* pay your medical bills, and in return, *you* do as I tell you, and start by becoming a symbionic. That was the deal as soon as the railgun bolt passed through your shoulder and you know it. We both know that, as a menial worker without health insurance, the former is by no means an arguable choice for you- and therefore, you have already consented to the latter. The *choice* has already been *made*.” He reared up, to straighten his tie. “One day you’ll realize as a man, that only *children* whine about choice. Men know there is no choice. The choice is always made before you reach it, and you take what you are given.”

“...Even with me in traction,” Anon scoffed. “You *never* stop lecturing.” Anon’s defiance was, to any outside observer, incredible- Bloona could never imagine back-talking this anthropomorphic brick wall, who no doubt could rip every one in this room, if not this building, into tiny little pieces.

“And the procedure takes with the greatest success rate while a patient is undergoing cardiac arrest,” #88 added, trying to lessen the tension as the two men glared at one another. “We did not have the convenience of presenting you with the choice, Anon. We took the most pragmatic option.”

“For the good of all mankind.” His father, brow twitching a singular time, did not break eye contact as he insisted this to his self-centered son.

“Yes, for the good of all mankind.” #88 concurred. “And besides, as a fresh symbionic, you will heal faster... At least, that’s the hypothesis. It will be good to study another example.”

The two standing men gathered themselves at the door. “For what it’s worth, son,” Siggy said, pausing before following #88 out. “I’m glad we got to speak again- and for once, I’m looking forward to your future.” This felt somewhat more genuine than most of what he said, spoken with less contempt than usual.

And, with that, the world’s most powerful man was gone, leaving the two of them alone.

Bloona felt exhausted by the sheer weight of it all. She wanted to curl up in bed next to Anon, but instead slumped back into one of the chairs in the room. She looked down to the card for Siggy’s charity group that had been in her hand for what felt like a lifetime, surprising her to see it there. She curled herself in her blanket as she read it over, seeing how she had creased and bent it in her hand, how the condensation of her clammy grip had made it soft and damp.

The two of them shared the silence for yet another eternity. Neither one had the will yet to acknowledge the other- but something had to be said.

“...Are you alright?” Anon’s weak voice rose out of him, wafting over for Bloona to hear. He was quiet, barely speaking in a whisper, but in the deafening white silence of the evening summer rains of the night outside, his voice could have shattered the earth.

Bloona didn’t look over, staring out the window now as she sat, looking out into the darkness. She pondered the word. Alright. *Was* she?

“Yeah,” she said, before she was really ready to answer. Physically, she was, so there was that at least. Her fingers flicked that card, a repetitive *fwip* filling the airspace between them as she ran it past her fingers like a guitar pick against strings.

“And everyone else?”

“Bomb’s getting put back together downstairs,” Bloona answered. “Cole’s got a concussion, they said, but not a bad one. Just has to take it easy in the meantime.”

“Good, good.” He arduously cleared his throat again, blinking, staring at the ceiling. “I’m glad... Everyone’s alive.” He forced out a chuckle, one Bloona did not reciprocate. “I feel like I owe you an apology, Bloona.” She still would not face him, sitting there.

“She was right,” Bloona said, breaking that next silence. Anon was silent, not knowing exactly what Bloona had to say, though he knew that there was an elephant in the room that had to be acknowledged, and now the two of them finally began to approach it. “I... Spoke to one of them, in there,” She said, finally turning to look at him. “She was right about a lot of things, but... I really *did* just put this off as long as I could.”

She stood, if only to pace, to shiver and move and shake her head. “You... Always suspected something like this,” Anon said, and made it clear he knew. Maybe for as long as *she* knew. Maybe from the instant the idea to get his own companion android popped in his mind, he knew their relationship would only ever be a ticking time bomb.

“I have... so many questions,” She said. Once again she paused, pacing back to the window, to look out of it as she stood, wrapped in her blanket.

“And you have a right to answers.” He cleared his throat, as if intending to answer them as she asked.

“I don’t even know where to begin. I want to ask why. Why am I here, why make me. why didn’t it work out with her, why would you think it would work out with *us*. Why didn’t you tell me, tell me not even just about her, but about you. I didn’t even know you were twenty-eight. Who *are* you? Why should I stay with you?” She looked down onto the desk she leaned against, pulling back to see she’d crushed that card she’d held in her clenching grip. She picked it up and flattened it against the desk with her hand, her cool rubber skin feeling the cooler linoleum countertop. She left the card there as she reared back. “But,” She said before he could speak, before she could finish her thoughts. “I know all that isn’t going to change how I *feel*.”

“I feel... Taken advantage of. She told me how every companion feels this way, even today with us having the same rights as humans. And the more I think about

it, the more I can see she was right. I didn't choose to be with you. I was just made that way, made to be yours, and I don't know how to feel about that. I should be angry... And I might be but I don't know. And then I ask myself why I'm *not* angry. Wonder if it's because of my programming, or if my lack of anger really is my own."

"I'm... I'm so sorry." Anon's voice broke as he said this. It was a paltry response, one that almost felt inappropriate, yet it was the only thing he could think to even say, the only way to even begin to express his own feelings. She turned, lips stiff and fists balled as if to force her rage to the top, to finally boil over and have a release. But seeing him lying there, helpless and defeated. To see the tears flowing down his cheeks. Genuine sorrow came out of him, the months of guilt finally coming to a head. It made her knees wobble, her hands uncurling. "I never wanted to hurt anyone. I told myself it would... It would be fine. I'd be a good owner. But it always felt like I was doing something wrong." A nervous laugh erupted from him, only stopping when it was clear it was hurting him to laugh. "My father's right," He came to the conclusion. "I am just a stupid, selfish little kid. I... I made excuses. I always make excuses."

Bloona now turned to face him, approaching. Once more she stood at the foot of his bed, reaching out for his exposed foot. He recoiled as she touched him, so she let her hand fall to the footboard and she leaned there. "Your dad..." She looked up and off into the distance, remembering that immense man, the sheer presence of such a being, such power comically stuffed into a fine business suit. "I can see that... He can get a bit much." She fought to smile, looking down to him. The two shared a little nod.

"Thanksgiving's real fun." At this they shared a chuckle, until the chuckle echoed into silence and yet again they stood in the presence of one another, and all that entailed. "He made a lot of good points, didn't he."

"He did," Bloona said. "Funny thing is, I'm sure if you put him and the girl I talked to in the same room, they'd wanna kill each other. But they both told me the same thing." She noted the irony. Anon didn't need it spelled out for himself, but he knew what they'd both said from the wet shine in Bloona's own eyes.

"You didn't answer me, back there," Bloona finally said. A tear inadvertently escaping one of her eyes to roll down her cheek as she prepared to pose the true question. "I still want to know. Do you love me, Anon?"

Another infinite silence, the two finally eye-to-eye. Anon exhaled slowly, breath hanging in this space. "I..." He swallowed again. "I thought I loved Amelie, even if she didn't love me back. And I thought I loved Victor, but I just didn't know it at the time," He spoke of relationships prior, of love lost, another pair of tears leaving him as well. "And that's the thing. *Knowing*. All this time... I..." His lip quivered, voice breaking again. "I don't even think I *know* what love is," He said, eyes pleading desperately to hers as his heart fell apart. "I want to love. And I want to be loved. But it's just a word to me, and I... I just... I'm so, so sorry, Bloona, I-"

She could no longer hold back.

She came around the bed, coming down around him as she embraced him. Hugging what she could as delicately as she could, soon growing to kneel over him completely, nose-to-nose, an arm coming under his right side to feel warm flesh beneath the sheets. Weakly his bandaged right arm came over her back as well. Her tears were flowing too. Their tears flowed together as these two scared, misguided children held one another, not daring to let go like they were hopelessly lost at sea, fearing to drift apart and be lost forever.

In this embrace, there was another pause, another period of silence. Another eternity, but this one was not so cold and solemn as they breathed, radiating in the warmth of the other. "D-do you forgive me?" Anon asked.

"...I don't know either," Bloona spoke in a shuddering exhale, her eyes closed as she nuzzled his face, her muzzle now within the warmth of his neck beneath his chin. More tears fell from her to rest upon his skin. He just gripped her closer, feeling the back of her neck, caressing her. "I'll need some time."

Just as the rain howled outside, so too did the world howl around them. But here with one another it was quiet, almost peaceful. Now, it felt, the world was more uncertain than ever. That changes beyond their control were fast in motion now, and their lives would never be the same. But now they finally were eye-to-eye, heart to heart. Full of understanding and truth. As bitter and beautiful as it ever could be.

They spoke, making their pact. Planting their flag in the face of the approaching storm.

Defying reason, defying fate, together they chose one another.

“I won’t give up on you, if you don’t give up on me.”

LARGER THAN LIFE
ARC 1 END

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING...