

## **Metal And Memory – A Midasverse Story**

by Evil Dolly

[HouseOfLostDolls@aol.com](mailto:HouseOfLostDolls@aol.com)

[www.evil-dolly.com](http://www.evil-dolly.com)

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Author's Note: This story is set in the Midas City setting created by Madam Kistulot. The Domina, Silver Girl, and Mind Bore are her original characters, used here with permission. Nadine, Cassandra, Artifice, and other major characters are my own. It's not necessary to have read the Silver Girl tales to enjoy this story, but certain events and people described in those stories are integral to this plot and you may feel rather lost at times if you've never read them. If you would like to read Madam Kistulot's extensive works, her personal site is here:

[www.madamkistulot.net](http://www.madamkistulot.net). Her stories are also available at the Erotic Mind Control Stories Archive here:

[www.mcstories.com](http://www.mcstories.com). Thanks for reading!

### Part 1

“Do you want the last of your pizza?”

I shook my head distractedly. I was skimming the tv channels for local news, in search of my prey.

“Are you sure you don't want it? It's good.”

“You can have it,” I said.

*Damn, doesn't look there are any leads on tv.* Shifting my attention to the laptop set up on the coffee table, I renewed my search for eyewitness reports. There are entire amateur websites dedicated to keeping up with the latest news about all the known villains in Midas City: who's been spotted, who's in jail and who's escaped, who's on trial and pleading insanity. You'd be amazed how many there are out there. But right then I was only looking for one in particular.

“Nadine, remember when your programming slipped that time in the commissary? And you decided it was okay if we had some of the pizza meant for the human workers?”

“No, babe, I don't think I remember that one.” A lot of my memories from our time on the Project have always been fuzzy, disjointed. Or maybe I simply blocked out most of them. My mind wasn't what it used to be. I frowned at my laptop. There weren't any new leads online, either.

“It was pepperoni,” she said with a little giggle. “You told me to eat, so I just kept on stuffing myself until I could hardly move or breathe. And, because it was an order from you, I thought I was doing it for the Project, so I was practically orgasmic about it... sitting there stuffed with pepperoni pizza, sauce all over my mouth, moaning like it was better than sex. Remember?” She giggled again. “We

got in so much trouble for that. They took us both back to Mind Bore and Doctor Yves for reprogramming...”

I finally looked up at Cassandra, my best friend. She was sitting at our little dinner table, picking idly at a pizza crust. Her mouse brown hair had fallen over her eyes, but I could see that the smile had slipped from her face.

“C’mere,” I told her, leaning back into the sofa. She got up from the table and snuggled down next to me, so warm and soft. I hoped my warmth could comfort her as much as hers comforted me. “Trouble sleeping again last night, huh?”

“You could tell?”

“You were tossing and turning all night.”

“Bad dreams,” she said, looking out the window.

I was all too familiar with those dreams. I still had them myself, sometimes. I rubbed her shoulder, which, like mine, wasn’t nearly as warm as the rest of her. “It’s just dreams.”

She nodded, then glanced at the door of our apartment. “I keep expecting the doctor to show up. To be standing there when I wake up. She’ll laugh—”

“Cass...”

“And she’ll have her robots take us back to her lab and she’ll punish us for running away.”

“Cassandra, she’s gone. You know that. She can’t hurt anyone, anymore.” I hoped I wasn’t lying to her. “And anyway we didn’t run away. We were rescued.”

“I know, but...”

“But nothing. You know I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. Never in a thousand years.”

She didn’t reply, but she rested her head on my shoulder. We stayed like that for a while, lost in our private thoughts. Eventually, she asked, “Do you have to work tonight?”

“Nope.”

“But you’re going out?” she asked, implying my *other* job.

“Yeah. Plan to.”

She bit her lip, looking like she was about to say something.

“I know you worry about me,” I told her gently. I worried about me, too, sometimes. This was an argument old enough to have stopped being an argument and become more like a habit. I knew she understood why I needed to do what I did out there, even though she worried. I also knew she was proud of me, in her own quiet way, for finding some way to reinvent myself after what had been done to us. “I’ll be fine.”

“Uh huh. That’s what you said before you broke your hand kicking someone’s ass.”

“Aw, it’s as good as new.” I looked down at my right hand and flex it couple of times. My ring finger caught and fluttered for a moment before extending all the way with the rest of my fingers. *Damn it. I thought that got fixed.* “I guess I could use a tune-up, but it’s fine. Anyway, don’t be so crude. I don’t go around kicking people’s ass. Asses... people’s asses.”

“Collective ass.”

“Right. I only give back what the bad guys dish out. Let’s pretend I’m a little classier than just running around kicking asses.” Though, in reality, I probably wasn’t. If I’m brutally honest with myself, I’d have to confess I was little more than a glorified street brawler. But, hey, I guess you gotta use your talents, right?

Cassandra gave me a wan smile, then stifled a yawn. I studied her face. She looked plain worn out. Her bad dreams were rougher on her than she’d admit. She’d been doing a lot better, but her anxieties still came back in cycles. Ups and downs. This was one of those down times. I should probably have stuck around the apartment to coddle her more, but I just couldn’t afford to do that just then. I glanced across to the laptop on the coffee table; at the grainy security camera screen-cap of a beautifully inhuman face. *I think I’m becoming obsessed,* I thought.

“Hon, why don’t you go try and take a nap? Sleep off some of that pizza,” I suggested.

She pouted a little, but slowly heaved herself off the sofa and shuffled toward the bedroom. “Confirmed,” she said sleepily.

I winced inwardly at that. *Confirmed.* That’s something we used to have to say when we were treated as subhuman. She still said it sometimes, even years later. I don’t think she was even aware that she said it. It was one of those things that just slip out. I’m sure I still say stuff like that, too. Our scars are far deeper than what was done to our bodies.

Sighing, I went to the pile of freshly-laundered clothes heaped over the back of the recliner and started digging through them for my superheroine costume.

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My name is Nadine Niven and I am – or was – sort of a super here in Midas City. I’ve never really considered myself to be a genuine super, though. What special abilities I have are manmade and were definitely not given to me with my consent. To be honest, I’m not exactly sure what I am, anymore. I don’t even

know if I still count as human. I'm so messed up. Now more than ever.

I used to be a regular girl. I had a normal childhood and I had parents who loved me. I was never the prettiest girl nor was I among the most popular. Kind of average, overall. But I was fairly smart and outgoing, so I had that going for me. I started out studying computer science my first year in college, but quickly realized that I was so not interested in pursuing that as a career. What I really wanted to do was help people, so I switched over to major in sociology with some vague idea of becoming a social worker in some capacity. Not such a bad goal, all things considered. Except... whenever I try to help people it all just seems to go wrong. Especially when it comes to helping Cassandra.

My current problems all started during the summer break of my junior year. The Argentum Project was all over the news at the time. It was supposed to be an orbiting space station, the Argentum Array, which would solve all the world's energy problems, and also be a center for researching innovative technologies that would help everyone. It was said to be headed by some of the most brilliant scientists of our time. Even Silver Girl was involved, and I had always admired her; she wasn't the most famous of supers in Midas, but she was so pretty and flashy. And, well, I wanted to be a part of it all, if only a very minute part. I wanted to be able to proudly claim I helped to bring the world into a new era.

Worst idea I ever had in my life.

Cassandra was my college roommate then. We had become fast friends mere weeks after the start of school. We even tried the whole dating thing for a few months, but it didn't take. It was pretty clear that we made better friends than lovers. Over time, she became something like a sister to me. We did everything together.

She was far more shy and introverted than me, so I was always trying to get her involved in things, trying to get her out of her shell. I thought it would be good for her to volunteer on the Project with me. Well, that's what I told her, but I really just didn't want to go alone. She was reluctant at first – she didn't want to spend the summer working in a phone bank or fetching coffee or whatever it was she thought we might be doing there – but I slowly wore down her resistance and finally convinced her to go with me. I'll always feel guilty for that.

So one morning we went to the Argentum Project's headquarters and volunteered our help. The human resources receptionist we were directed to was oddly... flat. Her personality, I mean. Her smile was plastered on her face, and every time she spoke it was like listening to a prerecorded message. I guess that should have been a warning. Stupid me, I just thought she was bored. So we sat in a room filled out a bunch of standard employee forms and questionnaires. I wasn't even sure if they could use us, since we weren't yet qualified for anything

but basic labor. Sadly, it turned out we were perfect for the job. While sitting in a small room, waiting to be interviewed, we were gassed. We were unconscious before we even knew anything was wrong.

The glorious Argentum Project, as everyone now knows, was a ruse. Silver Girl was actually Silver Girl's evil twin, The Domina, or at least that's what I understand. The esteemed Project heads were actually supervillains, and the Argentum Array was really an armed orbital fortress – a mass mind control device with the sole purpose of enslaving the population of the world.

Yeah. Who knew?

Well, it's hard to build something like that in secret, it turns out. What they needed was an army of laborers who were perfectly controllable, unquestioningly loyal, and tireless. That's where girls like Cassandra and I unwittingly came into the picture.

When I pulled myself back to consciousness, I found myself naked and heavily restrained to a table in some kind of high-tech laboratory. I couldn't budge an inch. I couldn't even look around; there was a cap or something hugging my head and holding it firmly in place.

Also in the room were a pair of girls who, in their behavior and movements, resembled robots. Neither of them paid me the slightest bit of attention when I called out for help. They didn't bat an eye when I started screaming at them. They only went about tending to the machines and computers in the room.

I couldn't wrap my mind around how I could possibly have gone from filling out employment forms at the Project's central offices to winding up naked, cold, immobilized and ignored. Had there been an attack on the building? Some anti-Array terrorist group who had kidnapped everyone inside? I was confused and terrified, feelings which were only made worse by the workers' total lack of compassion or mercy.

The robot-like girls tilted my table at angle and then I could see Cassandra. She was arranged just like me, naked and strapped down on a nearby table, only she didn't appear to be fully conscious. There were thin metal *tentacle* things lodged inside her ears, sliding in and out just a little and – I couldn't understand I was seeing – it looked like for all the world like they were *fucking* her *brain*. I was horrified. It looked so *wrong*.

I called out to her, pleading for her to wake up, but she didn't seem aware of anything around her. Her brow was furrowed as though she were struggling against something, or maybe concentrating very hard. A shuddering sigh of pleasure escaped her lips as she arched her back into the restraints. Then I saw that the table beneath her thighs was shiny wet with her fluids. I watched in total bewilderment as her breasts rose and fell with her breath. The tentacles slipped a

little deeper into her ears and she let out a whimper. Saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth as her eyes rolled back into her head, and she went still.

I didn't have long to worry if whatever was happening to Cassandra was also in store for me, because then *she* arrived. Mind Bore, Midas's resident evil roboticist, known at the time as Melinda Borealis. I didn't recognize her right away, but of course I had never seen her face anywhere except on the tv news.

Cruel and aloof, her beauty was marred by some kind of cybernetic implants on her face and hands. She was known for using her scientific knowledge to turn her victims into puppets, experimenting on them, warping their minds and manipulating their sexuality until they were her absolute slaves. She had no compunction against breaking her 'toys'... some of her rescued victims never recovered. Only when she introduced herself, quite casually I might add, did I really begin to have an inkling of what I might be in for.

Again I experienced that crazy confusion, unable to understand how this could really be happening. How on Earth had I ended up in the hands of Mind Bore? Well, I soon found out. New Project 'recruits' were sent to her lab to have their minds processed into those of perfect employees.

Since workers had to be mass produced, she didn't get to spend as much time on us as individuals as she might have preferred, but I'm certain she got some measure of enjoyment from her work. I guess I didn't disappoint. I did all the crying, shouting, and shameless begging that one might expect from someone in that situation. All that did was mildly amuse her. She barely spoke to us at all.

Then the tentacles slipped inside my head and my conditioning began. My memories of the experience have never been properly pieced back together, but I'm not complaining about that. I have no interest in remembering with any clarity my free will and personality being broken down and locked up a piece at a time. I tried to resist, I really did, but the process was relentless. Pleasure and pain and cold machines twisted my mind to fit Mind Bore's specifications, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I lost myself.

My memories and elements of my personality were filed away, inaccessible to me unless it became necessary to utilize them. My thought processes became like those of a computer program. A computer doesn't think or daydream. It doesn't have hopes or desires, nor does it need love and attention. It doesn't complain. All it does is receive orders, carry them out in accordance to its programming, then shuts down until it's needed again. That's what I became inside my head – an 'it'. Not Nadine, not a girl, not even a human. Just... 'it'.

The brainwashing might have lasted for days, I don't know, but that wasn't the end of my transformation. After Mind Bore altered our thoughts, we were sent

off to have our bodies altered. We were sent to Dr. Elyssa Yves, a woman we only knew as Doctor and occasionally, when she was feeling playful, as Mistress. She was a ghostly pale, middle-aged woman who was perhaps a little too thin. She wore an imposing-looking in an immaculately white lab coat and business skirt, and glasses with narrow rectangle lenses (to this day I flinch inside when I see women wearing glasses like that). She had full, black hair that was shot through with spikes of premature gray. Her face was attractive yet otherwise unexceptional. I had no idea at the time that I would quickly come to both fear and worship that face. Her mouth I remember quite clearly – for some reason I always felt compelled to stare at her mouth when she spoke. She had deep creases at the corners of her mouth, as though she was a person who smiled a lot. And she did smile a lot, I suppose, but her smile never reached her eyes. Her eyes were as cold as those of the robots with which she had surrounded herself.

Her robots. There were always several of them in her lab. They resembled human women in form, but they were made of plastic and their non-emotive faces were little more than masks. The robots were very pretty, very identical, and very empty. They assisted the doctor in her work. I wasn't afraid of them when I first met them, though. By that time, I had already been made to resemble them, at least in thought.

Unlike Mind Bore, I hadn't heard of Dr. Yves before, I had never seen her on the news or anything. I don't think she had any super powers, apart from her uncommon genius in the area of cybernetics. I soon learned quite a bit about her because, unlike Mind Bore, she was quite chatty. She frequently spoke to us while she was upgrading our bodies. I guess we made a great captive audience. Before the Project came about, she had been one of those underground villains. You know, the kind who don't seek fame or notoriety, who are content to perform their small scale wickedness in secrecy. She didn't put it in those terms, of course.

It was her expertise in robotics and cybernetics that gave The Domina reason enough to 'recruit' her. I don't know if she had been mind controlled into helping out on the Project or not. She seemed to suspect that was the case, since she was a loner and not prone to collaboration. But, as she once told me, even if she was being manipulated, there were compensations. Such as having access to Mind Bore's mind-tentacle technology (which she had been envious of and intended to steal for her own purposes), and having the chance to perfect her techniques on so many blank canvases.

All of what followed could have been done while we were unconscious, I suppose, but Dr. Yves was interested in studying our reactions. Her attitude was one of casual cruelty, a mixture of a sadist's suffer-lust and a scientist's detachment. I don't think that at any point she viewed us as human. We were

nothing but bugs in a dish to her. And she wasn't the least bit shy about describing what she was going to do us while we were lying naked on the operating tables, staring at the ceiling.

"So, whatever-your-name-was," she said to me, leaning over the table, her silhouette blocking out the bright overhead lamps, "it looks like you and your friend here have been assigned to Class Four status. Do you know what that means is going to happen to you, dear?"

"No, ma'am," I replied flatly, my mind still freshly buzzing with the new identity which had been poured into me by the tentacles. I remember feeling so amazingly calm... and hollow.

"Please, call me Doctor. But of course you don't know. You don't know much of anything right now, do you? Your head, your... hard drive... is all but empty after your induction by my illustrious and less-than-stable colleague Melinda," she said with a smile. "Not to worry, I'll be glad to fill you up. Most of you workers require only standard modifications to help them work harder, longer, more efficiently: some organ replacements, agility enhancements, skull ports... that sort of thing. But right now the Project is in need of more heavy laborers, so your alterations are going to be a little more extreme."

"I exist to serve the Project, Doctor."

"Of course you do. That's what they all say. You were a student before you came to work here? I'm curious. What did you study?" she asked.

The information wasn't immediately available to me. I could almost hear imaginary cogs and wheels clicking away as my mind accessed the information about the old Nadine. "I majored in sociology, Doctor."

"Oh! How quaint. Well, you can forget all that. You're going to be a forklift from now on." She looked closely at my face, then squeezed my cheeks til my lips pursed. "A thoroughbred turned cart mule. All that youth and potential reduced to rubble to make way for a grimy piece of industrial equipment. That's what you are now. A piece of equipment. Isn't that nice?"

"Nice. Yes, Doctor. Nice."

"What I'm going to do is cut you up." With a manicured fingernail, she traced a line from the edge of my neck to my armpit. "Your arms and shoulders are going to be completely removed along with parts of your hips and legs and joints. They'll be replaced with robotic prosthetics so you can better perform the work that is your only reason for being. Your bones and your spine will reinforced with hardware. Even your heart will be replaced. How does that make you feel?"

I couldn't feel anything except a thrum of excitement at the thought of being able to give so much of myself to the Project. That, and happiness at knowing my

assigned purpose. “I exist to serve the Project, Doctor.”

Dr. Yves made a sound of annoyance deep in her throat. I was confused, though I didn't show it, at not knowing what it was I had done to displease her. “I fear Melinda's techniques are a trifle too effective,” the doctor said to herself. “Saps so much of the fun out of the thing. Lack of personality is grand, but it does limit the experience, I've discovered. I'm used to that, however,” she said, glancing at one of her robots. “Let's try this. Don't move, don't speak, but, ah, resume your old human emotional responses, please. You know, the old you. Let her out.”

My programming did as it was told, allowing itself to feel as Nadine would have felt in this situation. And as it did, horror washed through me. Sounds of panic built behind my frozen lips.

The doctor smiled broadly. “Ah, that's better. So, you know what I'm going to have you do once you're all cut up and put back together and made into a better machine?”

“Nnn... nnn...”

“You are going to take your old fleshy parts and drop them into the medical waste incinerator, yourself. Very symbolic, I think. You're going to take your old human heart in your new robot hands and you're going drop it into the fire with the rest of your humanity.”

“Nnnnn! Nnnnnun!”

“Yes, that's far more satisfying. I think I shall have to remember your number for future fun. Alright, you can deactivate those nasty emotions for now. Let us get to work,” she said, and soft piano music began to play from some unseen speaker.

“Yes, Doctor.”

Mercifully, I don't remember feeling anything as the surgeries commenced. Her robots did much of the work with unerring precision. Along with the prosthetics that allowed us to carry heavy loads, our muscles and bones were enhanced and reinforced to compensate for the increased stress. Our organs and skin were made resistant to harsh workplace injury with subdermal nano-weaves. Dr. Yves enjoyed making us less human with every modification. But, because the monsters doing this to us still needed to put on a good public front, our fully cybernetic parts were hidden beneath fake, latex skin that would pass for real at first glance.

I don't know if they were saving money by cyberneticizing human victims to work as laborers, instead of building robots from scratch which could do they same jobs. But, even if robots had been far cheaper to produce, I'm sure they would have chosen to go this route regardless. They would have mutilated us and

used us as forced labor anyway – that’s just the kind of people they were.

And later on I did just as she said. I placed my arms and heart and the other parts of me that were removed into the incinerator. And when I did, though some part of me deep inside might have been screaming, I felt only completion, only ecstasy.

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Our conversion into Project slaves complete, we were set to work. I don’t remember much about all that. I was just a single component in a huge hive of worker bees. The tangled memories have since blurred together. Construction, maintenance, deactivation and reactivation, and, on a rare occasion, sexual service. The latter was performed for Dr. Yves, Mind Bore, and anyone else who took a fancy to me. Dr. Yves did single me out from time to time. For whatever reason, I was one among her group of favorites, though you’d think we were the ones she hated the most, the way she treated us. She would do things like make me realize what had been done to me, just for a little while, so that she could get whatever sick kicks she got out of witnessing a girl’s terror at her own dehumanization. She sometimes made Cassandra and I do unspeakably degrading things just so she could study how our conditioned minds responded when pushed to the brink. But those times were infrequent, thank Goddess. Mostly, there was just the work.

We were assigned to work in dominant-submissive groups for efficiency and delegation. I don’t know if it was just coincidence or if it was because we arrived together, but Cassandra and I were paired up in a group of our own. I was made the dominant unit and Cassandra was subordinate to me. It was an arrangement that, intentionally or not, mirrored our existing relationship, with me being the more outgoing and Cassandra being content to follow my lead.

You can see where my leadership had gotten us. I had lead her headlong into this nightmare.

The worst violation of all was that they made me love it. At the time, I didn’t have the slightest twinge of concern over the mutilations done to my body. I would gladly have sacrificed everything I had if I had been ordered to, if it would benefit the Project. Thinking back on it, I’m disgusted with myself with how readily I became a slave and how much I enjoyed it at the time. I think that maybe some of the enjoyment I felt was some kind of misplaced pleasure in punishing my buried personality for having gotten us into this situation.

I have to admit, it wasn’t *all* bad. There was no fear, no doubt, no second guessing. I accepted whatever I was told as absolute truth. I had no desire for anything except to obey and to serve to the very best of my abilities. It was all I

wanted. Knowing I successfully carried out an order was like an orgasm all by itself. Goddess, even *thinking* about being able to carry out a given order was bliss. I was helping to build humanity's enslavement with a smile on my face.

Now and then I would be scheduled to call my parents. To prevent any suspicions over my disappearance, you understand. I faked my old personality. I lied up and down, feeling an automatic surge of pleasure at successfully hiding the truth... pleasure in knowing that I was secretly betraying them. Just how my owners wanted me.

Sometimes I would get this niggling anxiety deep inside that I was forgetting something or that something just wasn't right with what was going on. When that happened, I would make myself confess. Confessing felt good. And then that anxiety would be smothered and washed away with my next maintenance. The few times that my mind rebelled more strongly against its internal shackles, I was taken to Dr. Yves who would punish me awfully and send my self-awareness cringing and crawling back into the dark corners of my brain. I know she took no small pleasure in doing that. I still wake up in a cold sweat at times, hearing her dry, cruel laugh echoing in my memories.

And that's how it went for nearly a year of my life. The Argentum Array was quickly constructed, launched piece by piece, and assembled in orbit. I don't know if humanity realizes just how close it came to being utterly conquered... how close it came to becoming a lot like me.

In the end, the real Silver Girl finally stepped in to save the day and foil her evil twin's plans. Most of the villains leading the Project weren't caught, however. They had enough time to scatter, to slink back under their rocks. The only ones left were us mind controlled workers, unguided and confused. I hadn't been programmed to know what to do if something like that happened. All I could do was fall back on a default command to defend the facilities from attack. I resisted when the government agents finally came to collect us. I even ordered Cassandra to fight back. Along with the others, Cassandra and I were subdued handily enough, not being able to think very well for ourselves.

And just like that, we were free. Dreadful freedom.

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It took a long time for me to become more or less myself again. Following our liberation, we were shunted around to psychiatric hospitals all around the state. There were plenty of us roboticized workers to go around. Many of us were taken to River Fork Sanitarium, which was an old, government psychiatric

institute in the wooded outskirts of Midas. It's a place where they try to de-program, rehabilitate, and counsel the victims of villainous mind control and brainwashing. There are more cases of that than you might think. That large, scary old building was full to bursting with us for a while.

The doctors and psychiatrists were pretty experienced with this sort of thing and had dealt with the results of mind control before. It only took a few months to get most of us thinking essentially normal again, aside from the odd mannerisms we randomly exhibited. There were some of us who never completely recovered, sadly. I'm still not sure what became of them. I guess they're still in psychiatric institutes, waiting to be given orders so they can feel like good little robots. Another crime added to the Project's legacy.

It wasn't remotely easy for the rest of us, even after we recovered ourselves. Mental scars run deep. It took many long months of counseling for me to even *begin* to deal with the trauma of what had be done to my body and mind, as well as the things I had been forced to do. If I never have to sit in on a support group 'sharing circle' again, it'll be too soon. Every day was a struggle... days filled with medication, tears, indignation, and an unquenchable ember of resentment growing in my cybernetic heart.

I think it's fair to say that I had plenty of reason to be bitter based solely on what had been done to me. It didn't end there, though. See, people who are mind controlled into committing crimes are legally viewed as innocent victims. We weren't held liable for anything we did, thank goodness. But, since most of the main baddies escaped justice, people needed someone to blame. Brainwashed or not, we *had* been working to conquer the world, after all, and we had almost succeeded. People viewed us with suspicion at best, sometimes even with anger and fear. That didn't exactly make for an easy entry back into society. And – the icing on that particular bitterness cake – our physical modifications and behavioral quirks didn't help matters. Much like our prior slave-owners, most people viewed us as less than human. As though being partly machine had made us into monsters and, therefore, dangerous. There weren't many people who welcomed us with open arms... my parents included. I never would have dreamed *that* would be possible, but there you go.

Maybe they somehow understood that at one time I would have gladly offered them, complete with silver platter, to the doctor had she but asked. I guess it's hard for the average person, someone who has never had his or her mind violated and twisted, to sympathize with what it's like. Knowing that didn't make it easier on me, though.

So, bereft of any other support system, Cassandra and I clung to each other. After we were released from River Fork, we moved into an apartment in the city...

a cozy old apartment with red brick interior walls and a very sturdy security door.

We hid out there together for a long time, living day-to-day off a small, government stipend reserved for traumatized victims of supervillainry. We both battled depression, and we were both eaten up with fear. Dr. Yves and her robots were still at large, see. Had she been caught, I expect she would have attempted to use the defense that she, too, was under The Domina's control and, therefore, not liable for her actions any more than we were. Except that, after learning of her involvement, the police searched her house and discovered the horror show that was her secret life: slaves, human experimentation, the works. It had been going on for years, long before the Argentum Project was even a thought. Based on what she had done to her victims like us, the press had labeled her with the clever moniker The Machinist. I imagine she took great offense at the name. Still, she had no choice but to remain in hiding.

Although Dr. Yves was hardly our sole malefactor, she was the one that loomed foremost in our nightmares. Technically, The Domina was the one who held the most blame, but I had hardly even glimpsed her during my time working at the Project. And most of the rest of the bad guys had pretty much ignored the workers. The doctor, on the other hand, had gone out of her way to torment and degrade us. She was the most hands-on. Both Cass and I had the irrational expectation that she would show up in search of some kind of revenge for... for what? Betraying her? Escaping her? I don't know. She obviously had bigger fish to fry than to go around gathering up her scattered ex-slaves, but logic didn't have much to do with it. The fear was real and that was all that mattered. I suspect it would have made her very happy to know that her victims continued to live in dread of her.

Poor Cass never recovered quite as well as me. She was a shadow of her old self. Oh, she could still laugh and smile, but her moods were a little too even, too watered down, as though she was medicated even when she wasn't. There was something a little too forced about it all. I worried that something invaluable had been broken inside of her and that she might never get it back. So, for her, I had to be strong. Far stronger than I truly felt inside. I had to be her anchor. After all, it was my fault this happened to her. She never blamed me, but... it was my fault.

I know she hated to admit it, but there was a part of her that missed the control and absolute sense of purpose. She and I both knew that whatever pleasure, happiness, or contentment we had back then was artificial. It was how we were programmed to feel, not how we really felt. Still, there was something about the experience she had come to crave. And I had no idea how to provide it for her.

No, that's not true. I did have an idea, but the thought of doing that to her

made me sick to my stomach. I didn't think it would have been healthy for her to relive any of the way we were treated. I wanted her to get past it. I certainly didn't want to be the one *doing* it to her.

Eventually, I decided that for Cass's benefit as well as my own, I would have to try to reintegrate and find a place in society once more. Going back to school was out of the question at the time. I just didn't think I was ready to handle all that yet. Instead, I looked for work. My opportunities being somewhat limited, I got a job working at a loading dock for a shipping company. I know. It was embarrassing, but let's face it... I was pretty darn good at moving heavy things around. It's what I was built for. Wasn't qualified for much else.

I almost became addicted to pain pills around that time. See, the cybernetics Dr. Yves had given us were pretty darn advanced, but they were hardly flawless. Maybe it would have been different if we hadn't been assembly-lined through the modifications, but we had. Enhanced though it was, my body definitely felt the strain whenever I really pushed myself. And the juncture between metal and flesh ached almost constantly. I popped ibuprofen like candy but it didn't help much. I started using stronger stuff just to escape the pain for a little while.

It kept on like that for a while until I realized I was going to either have to stop or get used to being on them all the time. I didn't want to become some kind of addict. I didn't have that luxury. Cassandra counted on me. How could I ever hope to help her and be strong for her if I lost myself to some stupid pills? I knew I couldn't let that happen. I resigned myself to enduring the aches and pains, and only took the stronger stuff when I really, really needed it.

Cassandra was such a comfort to me. Still plutonic, but definitely more than mere friends. I just couldn't imagine being without her. I wanted to take care of her. I wanted to protect her.

Then something amazing happened. We saw on the news that Mind Bore had been killed. The woman who had scrambled our minds as casually as you might scramble an egg was dead. She was actually honest-to-goodness dead. Silver Girl was involved somehow; Mind Bore had died in the heroine's bathroom. I can't imagine the kind of life that woman must lead to keep running into these crazy people. But I guess that's routine for those upper-tier supers.

That event was what really got me thinking and set me on my current path. Up until then I had seen the villains who haunted our nightmares as something both indestructible and inescapable. The same stuff boogeymen were made of. But now one of them was dead.

I realized then that they weren't invincible, after all. They could be stopped. They could fall like the rest of us... if you were able to stand up to them.

With that as a motivation, I gradually set about to changing myself. It had

dawned on me that my altered body might be useful for more than just heavy lifting and construction. My abilities weren't supernatural or the result of some genetic mutation, but I definitely wasn't who I used to be. While I hadn't exactly been made super-human, my modifications gave me strength and endurance far exceeding your average person. I began to have fantasies of turning the doctor's machinations against her, turning the violations she had done to my body into something more than a grim reminder. I might even be able to help people. I thought, well, why not become like a super? A silly thought, maybe, as I certainly didn't *feel* super in any way, but... why not?

I had a long road ahead of me. My enhancements hadn't done anything to improve my reflexes. I might have been strong and tough, but I wasn't particularly fast. Most of the time I just felt slow and clumsy, but a lot of that was probably in my head. I had never been in a real fight and I didn't even know the first thing about being a super. I didn't know anyone to ask for guidance. There isn't really a *Vigilante Justice for Dummies* out there.

I had to start from the ground up, so first on the agenda was a new persona. After a lot of thought, I decided on the name Nadir. The nadir is the lowest point in the sky, the polar opposite of the zenith. It was an apt description of my self-esteem at the time. It was also play on my real name, so it just seemed to fit. Cass tried to talk me out of it for a little while. She thought I should have a more upbeat sounding name and that Nadir was too depressing. I politely held firm and she eventually dropped it. She loved me as Nadine, but I don't think she ever completely trusted Nadir.

I was never a flashy dresser and I certainly didn't want to show off my body (I had some serious body image issues at the time, no surprise). A fancy costume just didn't fit my personality. What I wanted was to be as nondescript and anonymous as possible.

So, my 'costume' became a pair of jeans, some heavy boots, and a gray, hooded sweatshirt. To hide my face I used these cheap white plastic masks I found in a craft store. They're the kind that just look like some generically feminine face with holes for the eyes and nostrils and a slit between the lips. I decided not to decorate the masks. The blank whiteness seemed to express the way I felt... and maybe it echoed back to when I was nothing more than one mindless worker among hundreds. I had to admit that with the mask in place and the hood pulled up, I did cut a somewhat intimidating figure in the mirror. I know *I'd* have gotten pretty wigged out if I ran into that person in some dark alley. Cassandra agreed that it was scary.

I soon added a pair of armored motorcyclist's gloves to the outfit – the type with the metal strips embedded across the backs of the fingers and knuckles for

crash protection. My robotic arms were made to be sturdy, but the finger joints were still fairly delicate. It didn't take long for me to figure that out. Even with the gloves, I still damaged my hands and arms frequently enough. I tended to do a lot of putting my fists through things best left un-punched: brick walls, car doors, that sort of thing. It was, I discovered, a very effective way of intimidating the bad guys even before a fight got started. Sometimes it was enough to defuse a fight altogether.

I even started taking some jujitsu and kick-boxing classes to be better able to defend myself. It also helped me learn how to work with my robotic parts better and how to keep from seriously damaging people by accident. I actually became pretty good a lot quicker than I would have expected, but I really did work hard at it. I practiced every day. Having that to focus on was better than sitting around nurturing my depression.

So, before too long, I went from my first anxiety-filled and terrified forays into crime-fighting to being kinda-sorta competent. I would never boast that I was as successful or bold as any real super. And don't get me wrong, I had my happy butt handed to me a number of times. Ended up in the hospital a few times... luckily for me I was designed to recover quickly. But being on the receiving end started happening less often and I finally reached a point where I felt reasonably confident in my ability to handle myself in a confrontation.

At least I stopped feeling the need to throw up before a fight, anymore.

And so, I guess, Nadir was born. I was excited and amazed when I discovered I had my own entry on one of those super who's who websites. There wasn't much info about me – for which I was glad – but there I was, a glimpse of my masked face in a cell phone photo taken from a passing car. I mean, wow. I was somebody.

I found it kind of ironic that I was trying to protect the very society that had rejected me. Goddess, I hope that counts for something, because sometimes I honestly didn't like the people I was protecting very much. People in general, I mean. They've spurned me, treated me as something other than human, something that was dangerous. I protected the same people who would rather see people like Cassandra and I stay locked away. Sometimes I don't feel very much like one of the good guys at all. I guess it's a fine line between love and hate, just like they say.

I took to patrolling an area near where we lived downtown. I'd just walk through the streets at night with my hooded head bowed – both to hide my mask and because ever since we were rescued I had gotten in the habit of keeping my head down in public, in that wishing-I-was-invisible, shoulder hunched sort of way. I preferred the streets to rooftops. Even though I probably could have easily

survived a fall from several stories up... I was afraid of heights.

Most of my encounters were with the petty trash of the city. You know: drug dealers, muggers, homeless-beaters, gang members. That kinda stuff. I'd never really had to deal with an actual *super* villain. I wasn't sure what would happen if I had to. I didn't know if I was up to snuff, as they say. I alternately fantasized and dreaded running into Dr. Yves or one of her evil friends from the Project. Would I be able to stand up to her? Or would I turn into whimpering jelly at hearing her voice? I didn't know. As it turned out, at least as far as the doctor was concerned, I would never get to find out.

I had only been doing the super gig for a few months when word came that Dr. Yves, The Machinist, was dead. All I was able to piece together was that she had been murdered in her hidden safe house by some supers she had captured to be her slaves. Frustratingly, I was never able to find out exactly how it went down because the police have always been very tight-lipped on the subject – I think they were glad to see her get her comeuppance, vigilantism or not, so they kept quiet to keep the parties involved safe.

I can't even begin to explain the relief we felt. This was after what seemed like years of night terrors and fears of her showing up one day to get us. She was really gone. It was hard to believe at first. I thought it might have been a ruse. It seemed pretty definite, though, as time went on. We were finally able to sleep a little better at night.

I admit to having mixed feelings. There was a part of me that felt cheated. I never got the chance to confront her myself, which was part of the reason I became a super in the first place. I would never get the chance to know if I could face her down. Nor would I ever get to gloat over her and watch her beg for mercy from me. And still another part of me was thankful for that, because, honestly, I was always scared that I would fail.

## Part 2

“You're brooding,” Cassandra said, coming out of the bedroom.

“Hmm?” I blinked and looked up at her. I was sitting at the kitchen table, half-dressed in my costume, such as it was. I had been contemplating the cheap plastic mask in my hands, elbows on knees, resembling some kind of melancholic *'Alas, poor Yorik'* pose. “Thinking. Not brooding. There's a difference between thinking and brooding.”

“Sure, you can stick to that story.” Fresh from the shower, her hair still hung in dark, damp tangles. She had already changed into her nightie, which exposed her badly scarred back and shoulders. She would never dare to expose

that much skin around anyone except me. Even the synthetic skin on her arms had scars, as did mine. The latex stuff would tear sometimes and require patching, especially in my line of work.

I was used to her scars and, although she was mutilated as badly as me, I still found her pretty. I thought for a moment that it was a shame we were better off friends than lovers. After all, who would want either of us now besides each other?

She sat down at the table, taking handfuls of her hair to run a detangling comb through it. “So what were you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about how cute and innocent you look in that nightie.”

She glanced away and made that little self-deprecatory smirk she showed whenever someone paid her a physical compliment. “Thanks.” She looked down at it. “It’s getting a little worn.”

“We could go out shopping,” I suggested, hoping to coax her out of the apartment.

“Naw. I’ll just order online.”

I sighed. Sweeping my hair back, I got to my feet. “Well, it’s about that time,” I said.

She fiddled with the comb. “Nadine, is something going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is something going on with you? You’ve been acting weird for weeks.”

“Don’t know what you mean.” I chuckled to hide my lie. “I’m just me.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she dropped it. She always dropped it. That was her nature.

“I’m just a little tired, that’s all,” I said. “Maybe we should go on a vacation soon.” *But not until I capture my new enemy*, I added silently.

“Okay.”

“Aw, don’t be sad. Remember, my super powers are fueled by your smiles.”

That got a grin out of her. “Yeah okay, Captain Corny.”

“Well, I better get going. Don’t wait up and don’t forget to lock the door behind me.”

“Be *careful*.”

“Always am!” I said, shutting the door and heading toward the stairs.

It had been several years since the doctor’s demise. It truly seemed like she was gone from our lives forever, except for the bitter gifts she left us. Life went on, as it tends to do. I became more comfortable with my heroine role. I would go out prowling a couple nights a week or on weekends. Cassandra’s condition was very slowly improving, at least as far as being a little more sociable went, but, like

I said, she still had her ups and downs.

I didn't run into too much trouble out there the majority of the time. There were a few close calls. About a year ago I landed in the emergency room with a broken leg – son of a bitch drug dealer tried to run over me with a car while trying to get away. I mean... that's just rude! Goddess, that hurt. Cybernetic or not, I had to spend the better part of a year to fully recover from that one. Only a couple months ago did I really start to feel it was safe for me to start going out on patrols again.

It was right around the time I started patrolling again that Dr. Yves had returned from the grave... so to speak. I was on my way to bed and had just happened to catch the tail-end of report on the news. They were going on about some thefts and possible kidnappings, and the only image of the suspected perpetrator came in the form of some poor quality security cam captures which they flashed on the screen. What I saw seemed to suck the breath right of me. The corners of my vision went gray. Fear, anger, and unresolved resentment all came flooding back, as though they had been lurking just under the surface, waiting to come back and say "Hello."

I recognized Dr. Yves's work the instant I saw it. I was intimately familiar with it, after all. The face on the screen wasn't human, but it was no less attractive for that. It was a robot, a kind of gynoid. And I recognized it. It was one of the robots the doctor had built to assist her in her lab.

Most of Dr. Yves's robotic creations had a very distinctive look to them. While they resembled women, they weren't made to look lifelike or anything. Really, they more or less resembled articulated mannequins made of white plastic. I had never really interacted with them, but I had been in the doctor's lab often enough to become familiar with their appearance. One of them had been slightly taller and seemed to be a little smarter than others. She had slightly more... autonomy, I guess? It was that one that seemed to be the doctor's alpha robot, so to speak, and had been responsible for assigning the other robots their tasks and overseeing the surgeries when the doctor couldn't be bothered.

I had a distinct memory, one of the many disjointed flashes, of being summoned to Dr. Yves' lab on one occasion. That alpha robot was standing at the end of the operating table while two of the other robots were working on amputating some new victim. I remembered it turning its head to look at me when I entered. The others wouldn't normally look around like that, as if curious, but this one had. There was no other interaction between us, I don't know why that particular memory stuck with me. I couldn't be one-hundred percent sure it was the same one – the face and body of the one on the news report appeared to have been altered a little – but it was close enough that I had no doubts that it was the

doctor's handiwork I was looking at.

I couldn't understand why that mechanical creature would be involved with new crimes years after its creator's demise. Was it fulfilling some final command? Had someone else gotten possession of it and was ordering it do things? Or, Goddess forbid, had Dr. Yves's death been a ruse, after all, and she was still up to her old tricks? That couldn't be it. It was just too terrifying to contemplate.

I went into an investigative frenzy. There was hardly any information to be found. This robot was currently suspect in several burglaries, but had only been caught on camera that one time. She seemed to be stealing from warehouses and manufacturers of high-end equipment: computers, processors, different kinds of expensive components, machining equipment, that sort of thing. She never attempted to steal any money or other valuables from these businesses, just parts and equipment. That alone was troubling because, in my experience, criminals who aren't interested in the money usually have some kind of agenda that most people aren't going to find pleasant.

It also appeared that security cameras simply shut off moments before she would arrive at a location. It was that unusual coincidence that made her suspect in more than one incident. The only reason there was a picture of her now was that a camera from an ATM across the street had been pointing in the right direction.

This robot – or rather, whoever was giving her commands – was guilty of more than just the relatively harmless crime of property theft. A security guard at one of the locations had gone missing during the course of the robberies. It's possible he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, stumbling upon a theft in process. But he had already been missing for weeks, leaving family behind, and no ransom notes had been forthcoming. And if she was capable of kidnapping one person, she might be responsible for other missing persons, too. It was easy for me to imagine them becoming victims of The Machinist's mutilating experimentations.

I wanted to find her, this mechanical ghost from my past. I wanted to be the one to confront her, to catch her, to learn who was controlling her. I needed to know if Dr. Yves was involved or not. It very quickly became something like an obsession. Not having any better ideas, I started patrolling a portion of downtown where a lot of that high-tech equipment was manufactured and warehoused. I stayed out later and later, driving through empty streets, not even knowing what clues I ought to be looking for.

I told Cassandra none of this. I didn't want to reawaken her old fears based on something that might not be true. And I didn't want her worrying about me more than she already did. It was a lie by omission, I guess, but I was only trying

to keep her safe and sane.

I had no idea at the time that I, for the *second* time in my life, was walking into a situation that would change both Cassandra and I forever. Nor did I have any clue that the owner of the metallic face in that screen capture would come to haunt me more powerfully than Dr. Yves ever had. Or that it would, in fact, truly shatter the very foundations upon which my life was built.

.....

It was *her*. It had to be her. I couldn't believe it.

I had been driving around for hours in our light blue Honda hatchback. Yeah... I know. A powder blue hatchback hardly radiates heroism, but it was Cassandra's old car and she didn't want to give it up. Anyway, I had just driven past a row of darkened warehouses when I noticed a light was on in a loading dock. I slowed for a better look between the gaps in the fence.

There were a pair of mismatched vans – didn't look like company vans – parked outside the loading dock. Several people in bright yellow raincoats were carrying out boxes full of equipment and placing them in the vans. Not so unusual. Could just be late night workers picking up a shipment. I doubted myself for a second. Then I realized what was so out of place. The people were in raincoats, but it wasn't raining. It hadn't rained all day. Why wear something like that if not for disguise? A pretty bad disguise, but still. And the boxes they were carrying looked awfully heavy to be handled so easily by such slight-looking... women? A raincoat fluttered open as one of them turned to re-enter the building and, instead of skin, I saw a glint of metal.

My cybernetic heart began to beat faster. They had to be robots, *had* to be. And if robots were around, maybe my mystery robot was there, too.

I needed to get a look at what was going on inside and size up the numbers of my opposition before I just went charging in headlong. Though, truly, I really did want to go charging in guns blazing, so to speak. Despite my caution, I was still probably too eager for my own good. I parked the car a little ways down the block and scaled the fence. All the windows on that side of the building were darkened, so I assumed none of the metallic thieves were in that part of the building. Using my strength, I forced open one of the ground floor windows, hearing a snap and a clatter as the lock broke. Breaking and entering, maybe, but I could always blame the damage on the bad guys. The old 'It was like that when I got here' defense.

I slipped inside, into an office. I fumbled around in the dark until I found the interior door and, forcing myself to move cautiously, headed towards the

loading dock. I was aware that heading into an unknown confrontation without any backup was reckless, but I had to keep going. I wanted to be the one to take her down. I wanted to prove myself.

Suddenly wishing I'd peed earlier (often a feeling I had before a fight), I located the warehouse part of the building. Luckily, only the lights at the far end of the large room were on, providing me with a little cover.

I crept through tall, shadowy shelves neatly lined with packaged computer parts. Peeking around the edge of the aisle, I saw a security guard sprawled out in the middle of the floor. He didn't appear to be injured. He was breathing, but he was definitely unconscious. Then the three raincoated thieves came back inside through the large loading dock door. It looked like it was just the three of them, unless there were more lurking elsewhere in the building. They moved with eery similarity to each other. I couldn't see their faces from my vantage point, but I was sure that if I could, I'd find them all to be completely identical. They stepped past the unconscious guard without so much as a glance as they went to retrieve more boxes. So where was their ringleader? I leaned out a little farther.

There she was. Right there. Near the shelves. Her back was to me, but her profile was unmistakable. Her arms were full of boxes. She was selecting computer components as casually as one would select vegetables in a grocery store. I was just about to jump out in the open and shout "Freeze!" or something when her head turned a fraction in my direction.

"I'm sorry," came a peculiar feminine voice, "but these components are very fragile. If you could please wait, I'll be with you in a moment."

I stared at her. My jaw worked but nothing came out. She had known I was there and had basically dismissed me. That's a very belittling feeling. I had gotten used to people treating me with at least a smidgeon more respect than that. Did she really view me as a total non threat? I stood there, thrown off my stride and unsure what to do next. Just as I realized how foolish I looked waiting for her attention, and was fixing to shout some snappy comeback, she handed her armload to one of the smaller robots and turned to face me. Her eyes were flat, illuminated panels of diffuse yellow light.

She had changed since I last saw her, if she was in fact the same alpha robot. She was much larger and taller than she used to be, for one thing, and she was no longer made of plastic. Her sheer size was intimidating. Standing over six feet tall, her statuesque metallic frame had been designed to look both curvy and athletic. Smooth, precisely shaped plates slid almost seamlessly over each other, and at her flexible points were hints of a black rubber. Her toeless feet were shaped to resemble high heeled boots, but they were a part of her and she didn't appear to have any problems with balancing on them as I would have. She was

wearing a simple black leotard, and her large, rounded breasts were pressing against the snug fabric. I could see the shiny silveriness of her 'skin' showing through the over-stretched material. Seriously, who builds a robot with erect nipples, anyway? Dr. Yves, I guess.

Her most striking feature was her face. It was not the face I remembered her having. It had to have been a more recent addition. While the rest of her body was metallic chrome in color, her face was pale. From her nonexistent hairline (she had no hair) to the tip of her chin was a tapering oval of silvery white metal so bright that was almost mirrorlike in its shine, like white gold. It gave her face the semblance of mask, uncomfortably similar to the one I was wearing. But, unlike my generic plastic mask, hers was beautiful. They say that physical beauty can be reduced to a mathematical equation. If that's true, whoever shaped her face must have been very good at math.

Overall, she was strangely attractive. Her artistically manufactured beauty put me off guard, and that was probably its intended effect. I admit... if this was a different situation and she wasn't my adversary, I would have found myself very attracted to her, even though she wasn't flesh and bone. I probably would have followed her around like a puppy and hung on her every word in hopes of getting a little attention from her. But this wasn't a different situation, and I was pretty darn sure she was my enemy.

"How can I help you?" she asked. Her lips were solid metal, but her jaw was articulated. When she spoke, her lips would part just enough to reveal empty darkness inside.

*Damn it*, I thought. I never knew what to do with polite criminals. I kept my distance from her, tense and wary. I had no idea if she had projectile weapons or lasers or something at her disposal. "Who are you?" I demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I am engaged in theft, as you probably deduced," she said plainly, "and I am Artifice."

"Artifice? That's who you are, or *what* you are?"

She tilted her head a little. "Both."

"Simple enough," I muttered.

I was unsettled by Artifice's voice. Entirely digital, her 'default' voice was both husky and feminine – a seductive, hypnotic sort of voice. Though sometimes, I would come to find, her voice would slide suddenly, as if auto-tuned, to an entirely different pitch, going anywhere from a menacingly deep baritone, to a little girl's falsetto, to a harsh, robotic monotone. And just as often her voice would come out sounding multi-harmonic, like several identical voices speaking in unison. The effect was oddly captivating, yet also disconcerting and very alien.

I got a better look at her little helpers. Apart from being smaller than her, they were exact replicas of Artifice in form and shape. Their bodies were a burnished copper color, including their faces – they lacked Artifice’s white gold faceplate – and their eyes glowed green instead of yellow. They hadn’t even looked at me; they just continued to take boxes out to the waiting vans. That suited me fine. As long as they weren’t trying to surround me.

“Where’s Dr. Yves?” I asked.

Artifice’s eyes glowed brighter for a moment. “You wish to speak with Elyssa Yves?” She shook her head as if in sympathy for me. “Was she a friend of yours? A colleague? Then I offer you my condolences. If you wish to give her your regards, she can be found at 12<sup>th</sup> and Persimmon, Saint Sebastian Cemetery, row fourteen, section–”

“So she’s really dead?” I asked eagerly.

“I believe that was the intent of my statement,” she said. “I gather from your reaction that this news is not entirely displeasing to you. In that case I retract my condolences, which now seem inappropriate.”

A weight was lifted off my shoulders. That was one less thing to worry about, then. Artifice could have been lying about that, but it didn’t feel like a lie. No more Machinist... except I still had to deal with what she left behind. “But she made you? You *are* one of her robots, right?”

“That is correct,” she said simply, confirming my suspicions.

“Then tell me who it is who’s controlling you. I want to know what–”

“I feel I must interrupt at this time to point out that while I have given you my name, you have neglected to give me yours. While I’m sure it was unintentional, it could be considered rude,” she said, tilting her head in the other direction. “Since you come to me bearing what appears to me a likeness of my own face, I shall name you Reflection. Does this please you, Reflection? Or would you prefer to offer me a different name?”

“What? Nadir,” I growled. “The name’s Nadir.” Artifice was turning out to be one chatty villain, even more so than her creator. That was okay by me, though; I might be able to simply talk some important information out of her rather than force it out of her.

“Nadir,” she said slowly, as though tasting the word. “Are you here to give yourself to me?”

I did a double-take. “Excuse me?”

“This is no chance encounter. You’ve sought me out and come to me. Haven’t you, Nadir? Why would you wish to do something so laughably reckless if not with the intention of becoming my drone?”

*Drone.* The word evoked both repulsion and an almost comfortable

familiarity. Just hearing her say it took me back to my time as a mindless worker bee. There was a part of me, some self-destructively nihilistic part, that was instantly drawn to the thought of just giving up and letting her erase me, locking up the bad memories with the good... taking away my thoughts, taking away everything, making me so empty and obedient. I suspected she could do it, too, if I just gave up.

*No.* I had to clear my head. That wasn't who I really was. That wasn't what I really wanted. It was nothing more than the itching of old scars, the echoes of my old forced programming.

"You have seriously got the wrong idea," I told her.

"Have I? Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"A pity." The edges of her eyes flickered for long moments, reminding me of an LED light of a busy computer hard drive. She stood there silent for long enough that I thought for a moment she had locked up or something. Then she asked, "Is your name Nadine Niven?"

I nearly choked. I hoped my mask hid my surprise. "What... why would you think that?"

"Your unusual and distinctive heat signature indicates you are a modified human laborer for the Argentum Project. More precisely, a class four heavy lifter. Your height and eye color are a positive match for eight of the Class Fours listed in the Argentum Project's employee files. Nadine Niven is one of them. The likelihood is very high that you selected the name 'Nadir' based on a phonetic similarity to your given name, therefore the probability is also very high that you are Nadine Niven."

*Well, fuck.* There went my secret identity. I was realizing I would have to be careful with Artifice. If she had access to those records and could pick me out that quickly, who knew what else she could do? This was no simple robot like the ones I had encountered in my past. She was clever. She had already thrown me off-balance by catching me sneaking up on her and then dismissing me. Her politeness might also have been a tactic to put me off guard. I was beginning to feel that I might be in just a little over my head.

"That's not me," I said shakily.

"Naturally not. I am clearly in error. I apologize if I have made you uncomfortable with my query," she said smoothly.

"Where's the missing security guard?" I asked her, eager to move this little discussion away from the topic of my identity.

She turned her head to look at the unconscious man lying prone on the floor. "Missing? Is this a trick question?" she asked in a childish falsetto.

“You know what I meant,” I growled.

“Please rephrase your inquiry.”

I didn’t like the feeling that she was just toying with me. “You can quit with the dumb robot act. I’m not fooled.”

Her posture relaxed, becoming somewhat less stiff. “Oh... I would never think of trying to fool *you*, Nadir,” she said huskily. This was just getting weirder and weirder. “Your missing security guard is... around.” She fluttered her fingers vaguely in the direction of the door.

“But safe?”

“Safe as houses. Safe as a baby in its mother’s arms.” She laughed queerly. So not only was she smart, she was beginning to sound a little crazy. That was a bad combination, in my experience. “But you’re not here to ask questions about security guards, are you, Nadir? Oh, I’m sure that’s important and all, but that’s not really what this is about, is it? Why are you really here?”

I heard van doors clunk shut and a motor start up outside. One of the vans was leaving. Only one of the robots remained to finish loading the second van. *Works for me*, I thought. *Two less that I have to deal with.*

“I’m here to stop you.”

“I’m afraid I can’t permit that, but you knew I’d say that.” She tilted her head to the side. “I am confused. You appear to be taking this very personally for a heroine on the job. That is what you are, correct? Yet I’ve done nothing to you to warrant the hostility you greeted me with, have I? If so, I surely don’t recall it. My memory is very good.”

“I remember you. You looked different then, but I remember you, alright. You were there in the lab, helping *her*. At the Project. You helped her ruin *us*.” My voice trembled as I spoke. I disliked revealing my emotions most of the time, but especially now. It made me feel vulnerable but I couldn’t keep them contained. This encounter was bringing them too close to the surface.

“I think I understand now,” she said, her voice becoming softer. “From the resentment I detect in your voice, I presume you’re here to make me answer for my mother’s crimes. Correct?”

“Your mother?”

“She created me, did she not? Brought me into this world? Made me what I am? What term would be more apt?”

“Fine. Call that monster mommy dearest if you want, I don’t care. And yes. That’s why I’m here.”

She nodded. “Over many years I did assist her in doing a great many things to humans at her bidding. But surely you realize that I was no more in control of myself at the time than you were, Nadir. Would you want people to hold you

responsible for actions you performed while you were not in control of yourself?”

*They already do*, I thought, recalling society’s rejection of me. “Maybe not. But I’m not the one going around stealing things and kidnapping people.”

She laughed quietly. “You have me there.” She spread her arms and shrugged. “I am guilty, I will not attempt to deny it. I have kidnapped people. But I don’t hurt them,” she said, then her voice dropped to a deep, digital rasp, “*much.*”

*Oh, that does it*, I thought. That alone was all I needed. Whatever else she was, this creature was a villain and had to be stopped. I began to breathe deeply, centering myself for a fight. I’m sure she noticed. She didn’t miss much.

“You don’t believe me? I can prove it.” Artifice looked to her last robot helper, who was carrying out one of the last remaining boxes of parts. “I didn’t hurt you too much did I, puppet?”

The copper-colored machine turned its green eyes to Artifice. Its girlish voice was like a series of musical notes. “No, Mistress.”

“You see?” Artifice asked me. “It’s not so bad.”

A horrible realization was dawning on me. “That’s... not a robot.”

“Not entirely.”

“That’s a person.”

“Not entirely.”

So that’s what she meant by ‘drone.’ I stared at it as it left the warehouse. There was no evidence that it had ever been human. It couldn’t have simply been a body covered with a metallic costume or a robotic shell, there wasn’t enough space. How much of her body had been replaced? Most of it? All of it? What had been done to me was nothing compared to what must have been done to that drone to make it the way it was. And that’s what Artifice wanted to do to me.

A rogue machine... turning people into obedient little copies of itself.

“And you were so concerned about that security guard,” she said. “She’s perfectly safe, as you can see.”

“She. But... the guard was a man,” I said slowly.

“The guard... was a man,” she echoed with a nod.

“What have you *done*?”

“I can show you if you will allow me. I can offer to you pleasures you’ve never imagined if you surrender to me your body and mind. Come back with me, Nadir.” She extended her hand to me. “We don’t have to fight. Midas will be fine without you. You will forget that things such as tears and sadness even exist.”

“I like my tears.”

“Right now you’re just mismatched pieces and parts. I can make you

perfect. I can finish what my mother started.”

“Wrong thing to say,” I said darkly.

“Is it? I wondered if it might be,” she admitted, withdrawing her hand.

“But I was curious how you would react. Human behavior fascinates me.”

“So no one is pulling your strings? You’re doing these things to people of your own free will?”

“I have free will.” It was said with a note of pride.

“Good,” I said. “Then I won’t feel bad about doing *this...*”

I lunged forward, aiming a powerful blow at her chin. My fist passed through empty air. She had easily dodged my attack. *Damn! She’s fast*, I thought. Another swing, another miss.

Each time, she would sidestep me and then stand still, waiting for my next move. Adjusting my tactics to compensate, I was able to catch up with her and successfully deliver several rapid blows to her mid-section. That would have been enough to floor most regular opponents, but she simply stepped backward with the impact. Her face expressed nothing, but I didn’t think I had hurt her much anyway. Her body felt as solid as a rock. I could punch through a brick wall, but my armored fists hadn’t even left a dent in her. The drone had returned but was standing motionless in the doorway. At least Artifice appeared to have some kind of honor in regards to fighting one-on-one.

“Nadir, this is really quite pointless. I was enjoying our conversation. Come with me and we can continue our conversation elsewhere,” she said as she continued to block, dodge, or simply absorb my blows. “You will be very cozy restrained to a table and I will talk and we will have a long, pleasant conversation.”

“I think I see the major problem with fighting robots,” I snarled, breaking off my attack. “You don’t need to breathe... so you never *shut up!*”

“You have no hope of defeating me like this. You cannot win. Accept it. You should lie down on the floor and wait quietly and I will come to collect you when I’m through here.”

I wasn’t used to fighting opponents like Artifice. We were too evenly matched. I no longer had the advantages of strength and endurance. She didn’t seem to have many fighting skills of her own, but my martial arts training wasn’t very useful; holds and joint locks aren’t much use against an opponent who doesn’t actually feel pain. My precise blows weren’t having much of an effect either. I was using a paring knife when what I needed was a sledgehammer.

Alright. I could do that, too.

Leaping in close, I took her by surprise and seized her before she could slip away. I don’t think she was expecting me to grab her. She was heavier than I

expected – easily three hundred pounds or more. For some reason I thought she would feel lighter, more hollow. No matter... I took hold of her wrist, built up some momentum, and swung her into the cinder block wall. She hit with satisfyingly loud metallic thud.

That did seem to rattle her, finally. The lights in her eyes skipped and stuttered for a moment. Encouraged, I did it again, swinging her around in an arch so that she met the wall head on. I thought that maybe I could simply batter her until her hard drive shook loose or something.

She pushed herself away from the wall and resisted when I came at her again. We grappled each other, swaying back and forth across the warehouse as if in some drunken dance. Even though I managed to slam her against the wall several more times, she seemed more interested keeping me pinned than in trying to hurt me. In fact, she hadn't really hurt me at all.

“Why don't you fight back?” I grunted.

“Why should I do that?” she asked, her voice cool and calm. “I could do this all day. You, on the other hand, are tiring quickly.”

She was right. I was breathing hard from the effort of wrestling with such a strong opponent. My cybernetics helped lessen the burden, but I was still only human. All she had to do was keep struggling with me until I collapsed, helpless, from exhaustion. I couldn't let that happen. I had to end this... somehow.

With a yell, I flung her toward the wall again. This time I missed and she passed through the large doorway, pulling me after her into the night air. The drone quickly stepped out of the way. After a few more exchanges at the edge of the loading dock platform, I got a hold of her from behind, lifted her off the ground, and slammed her face first into the outside wall, pinning her there.

“Is this the last struggle before your submission, Nadir?” she asked, her metal breasts scraping against the bricks. “It's okay if you feel the need to fight to justify your eventual surrender. Don't be ashamed, it's a perfectly natural reaction for humans.”

“Shut *up!*”

As she worked to push herself away from the wall, I saw her right arm slide beneath a sturdy metal support post that stood only inches away from the wall. I grabbed her right wrist and began to pull her arm backwards at the elbow, using the post as a fulcrum. She was trapped, unable to free her arm. I pulled harder. There was a cracking sound and a shiny metal plate broke away from her elbow and hit the ground with a metallic clatter.

“Stop! Please stop.” From Artifice's mouth came the voice of frightened little girl. “You're hurting me.”

I was so startled – the voice sounded so genuine, so real – that I felt an

instinctive flush of concern and stopped pulling. Then she started laughing. A dry, cruel laugh so similar to Dr. Yves that it could have been a recording. For all I knew, it *was* a recording. The childlike pleading followed by the cold laugh shocked me, *enraged* me. I saw red.

At that moment, the drone came up to grab me from behind. It's hard for someone in a yellow raincoat to be stealthy, though, so I noticed her with enough time to react. I knew that she (he?) was an innocent victim in all this, but I also knew from having been one that you should never, ever turn your back on a mind control. I jabbed backwards, catching her solidly beneath the chin with my elbow. She staggered back, arms pinwheeling for balance, and tumbled off the edge of the loading dock platform.

"Naughty," I said to Artifice. "That's cheating." With all of my strength, I pulled on her damaged arm. There was a crunch and a squeal of tortured metal, and her right forearm came free in my hands.

*Fine, I thought. If I can't beat you up, then I'll tear you to pieces. Let's see how smug you are when your arms and legs are scattered all over downtown Midas.*

The arm unexpectedly spasmed in my hands and I let out a yelp of disgust. I reflexively threw it away from me. It went spinning through the air, far over the fence, and disappeared into the night.

Artifice didn't appear overly perturbed over the loss of an arm. However, it did appear she had lost her patience. She stepped away from the wall and grabbed a hold of me, and again we were locked in a struggle. Her yellow eyes were brighter than before.

My confidence was returning. She was already down one arm, and maybe I could take the other. I thought I might be able to win this, after all. Then, as I looked down, I saw several thin metal tentacles – just like Mind Bore's tentacles – sliding out of her ruined elbow joint to tangle around my wrist.

She was full of tentacles.

I shrieked in absolute horror. Until then, I had no idea just how deep my fear of those tentacles ran. They were a part of my nightmares, of course, but I had never had to face them again in real life, not since we'd been rescued. I could easily imagine them coiling around my arm, up to my neck, and slipping their cold, metal tips into my ears... silencing my thoughts.

I struggled in an animal frenzy, trying desperately to pull away from Artifice and those tentacles. All I could think of was getting away. She hugged me close to her.

"Nadir. Look at me." Her voice was gentle. "Look into my eyes."

I obeyed automatically. I didn't have any reason at the moment to fear

doing so; it was those tentacles I feared, not her eyes. As I stared at her flat, glowing eyes, the yellow light turned to white. They suddenly shined dazzlingly bright in a throbbing, strobe-like pattern. I was paralyzed. Before I could think to look away or even close my eyes, every muscle in my body seemed to tense up beyond my control. In that last second I wondered if I was having some kind seizure.

Then my brain just... shut off.

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I woke up inside an ambulance.

Disoriented and still in fight mode (to me, I had been battling with Artifice only a second ago), I struggled with the startled paramedics. It took me a minute to realize where I was and I forced myself to calm down. They told me they were taking me from the warehouse to the hospital. They had been summoned by the police and I had been unconscious when they had arrived. I learned that the police had shown up and confronted Artifice. She had managed to escape. Of course.

I took stock of myself. Aside from an awful headache, a tender lump at the back of my head, and the various sprains and bruises from the fight, I seemed to be undamaged. I didn't want to go to the hospital, but they insisted that I need to get checked out. So, I resigned myself to spending hours getting examined, as well as enduring the several new doctors who always wanted to get a look at my cybernetics... same as every time I'd had to go to the hospital. It always made me feel like a circus freak on display. The entire time I was eaten up with worries over what had happened to me while I was unconscious, and confusion as to why Artifice had decided to leave me behind.

After the long and boring hospital visit, I was taken to the local precinct so I could give the police the run down on that night's festivities. In due course, I was able to piece together later events. They reluctantly allowed me to review the cruiser's dashboard cam footage since I was personally involved.

It seemed that I had set off a silent alarm when I had entered the building... unintentionally saving my own life. The police had been slow in responding. Because of the location, they suspected that Artifice might be involved so they had to wait for super backup, which came in the form of Laserflit, one of the city's badged supers. I'd never met her, but I knew that she was extremely agile. She always dressed flamboyantly and could shoot these hair-thin energy beams from her eyes. Not super powerful lasers, but strong enough to burn and melt things over time.

When the cruiser pulled into the warehouse's driveway the camera caught

Artifice dragging my limp body by the wrist across the pavement. She was taking me to the van. It was a very unsettling sensation to see myself like that. Artifice didn't stick around for conversation with the police when they began to shout commands at her. Instead, she heaved me up and started loading me into the vehicle. She was trying to steal *me*! I felt a sense of panic watching that, as though it was all happening live and not a recording of earlier events.

At that point, Laserflit appeared at the edge of the screen, parts of her flowing, gauzy lavender costume trailing through the air like ribbons. Her lasers didn't show on the camera, but they must have gotten Artifice's attention because the shiny gynoid dropped me unceremoniously on the ground (here I rubbed the knot at the back of my head – that bitch) and began to pursue the fluttery super.

The few shots the officers got off didn't appear to phase Artifice much, but either the lasers or something about Laserflit sure seemed to irritate her. Laserflit darted back and forth across the parking while Artifice chased her around. The robot's leotard was soon criss-crossed with thin, smoldering lines.

Out from the van appeared Artifice's drone. She walked into a hail of bullets towards the police. She reached the cruiser and began pushing it backwards out of the driveway. The camera view bounced and jostled. Big deal... I've pushed some cars around in my time. Even overturned one or two. I sure felt it the next morning, though. Anyway, that drone must not have been as bullet-proof as her maker, because she shuddered and collapsed to the asphalt a few moments later.

Meanwhile, Artifice had managed to grab a hold of Laserflit and whipped her around to face her. She started doing the bright flashy thing with her eyes, like she had done to me to knock me out. At the exact same time, Laserflit managed to fire off a lucky shot directly into the robot's blazing eyes, so she didn't get the full dose. Down but not out, the super fell to the ground, clutching her head, and Artifice staggered backwards as if in surprise. She stood there, perfectly still, for a few moments. I guess she must have decided things were getting a little too out of control for her liking because she then went into retreat mode.

Ignoring the police, she went to collect her drone, picking her up and cradling her in her arms. That was a little surprising to me. In my experience, villains don't usually care if their henchmen get injured or left behind – if you're a henchman, mind controlled or not, and things go wrong, it just sucks to be you. Maybe she simply didn't want her special technology getting out of her hands, I don't know. She walked past the unconscious heap that was me and paused to consider me. Seeing her looking at me like that sent a shudder down my spine. Then she loaded the drone into the van and sped out of the parking lot.

The stolen van, I was told, was found abandoned several blocks away. She

had left her loot behind to be able to make a clean getaway. Naturally, they hadn't been able to find her, so she and her unfortunate drones were still out there somewhere.

All I could think about was that she had completely defeated me. I still couldn't believe I'd come a hair's breadth away from being kidnapped, *again*, and turned into a mindless robot slave, *again*. Only this time I suspect I would have lost a lot more than my arms. And I'd have left Cassandra all alone. I'd been so careless.

It troubled me to know that Artifice could have done that flashy thing with her eyes at any time. Why had she waited? Was that whole fight just a game to her? The entire time she had just been toying with me. It made me feel ridiculously impotent.

I did rip off that clockwork bitch's arm, though. At least I had that.

I had to sit through the detective's lecture against freelance crime fighting, nodding in the right places, until I was finally free to go. I couldn't get back to Cassandra fast enough. Though I did have to make a detour to pick up her car first.

And there she was in bed, safe and sound under the sheets, still asleep. I popped some pain pills and slid into bed next to her, hugging her close. I would have to confess everything to her. Things had gone too far, gotten too weird, to be able to keep any of this a secret from her any longer. But that could wait until the morning. Just for the moment, I needed to let her have just one more sound night's sleep.

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The news went over about as well as I thought it would. Really, though, I'd never seen Cass quite that angry before. I quietly endured all of her excoriations over how crazy and stupid and thoughtless I'd been. I couldn't deny it. I was guilty, after all. I'd gone and angered some Machinist-designed sexbot-gone-rogue and had very nearly gotten myself captured to boot. The one thing I didn't tell her was just how close a call it had really been. She didn't need to know that.

"How *could* you? How could you be that stupid? Stupid, stupid, *stupid!*" she shouted, hitting me repeatedly on the head with a box of cereal.

I winced, shielding my head. "I know."

"Was she a murderer? Did she have laser beams or razors or... or poison gas? You didn't know! You just ran in there. *Anything* could have happened to you! You could have been *killed!* I wouldn't even know what happened to you. I wouldn't know where to look. You'd just be gone!"

“Cass, I know.”

She squinted at me. “You’re not planning on going after her again, are you? Are you? You are, aren’t you?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“*Na-dine!*”

“I wasn’t prepared and did something stupid, I know that. But now I know what she can do. If there’s a next time—”

“If?”

“Cass, somebody has to stop her.”

“So then let the *real*—” She suddenly looked apologetic and didn’t finish the sentence. She didn’t need to.

*Let the real supers handle it.*

That definitely wasn’t what I needed to hear just then, but I didn’t hold it against her. I knew she was only angry out of concern for me. The argument sort of fizzled out after that.

And maybe she was right. If this had been a written test, mine would have come back stamped with a great big *FAIL*. Honestly, though, going after Artifice for round two was the last thing on my mind at the time. It might come down to that sooner or later, but just then I was more concerned with keeping Cassandra calm and laying low.

We didn’t leave the apartment for days. I was afraid of leaving Cassandra alone. I had used up all my sick leave and had begged my boss to give me just a little more time off to deal with a family emergency. He wasn’t such a bad guy, one of the few who had some sympathy for me for what I had gone through with the Project and all. He was willing to give me some time, but I knew I was treading on thin ice.

Aside from being mad at me, Cassandra didn’t seem to be too upset about Artifice’s relation to Dr. Yves. That was a relief. I guess her fears mainly centered around Dr. Yves, herself, rather than her creations. Honestly, I wasn’t that worried about Artifice coming after me. I couldn’t see what she would gain by doing something so overt. And, after all, it was she who had beaten me, not the other way around. Why would she seek revenge? I was the one who should have been bearing a grudge. Still, I was very edgy the first few days, always tensing up whenever I heard someone walking down the hall outside.

I did order some very nice polarized ski-goggles, though. I hoped they would be powerful enough to block Artifice’s mind-stopping flashies if she did come knocking.

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“I think I found it,” said Cassandra. She was poking a stick into a thick stand of gangly fleabane daisies.

“Is it moving?” I asked, hurrying over to her.

“No.”

“Don’t touch it,” I warned. We were in a weedy tract of land through which ran some old railroad tracks. It was next to the warehouse, not very far away from the loading dock where I’d fought Artifice. I looked into the dense matt of weeds. “Yep. That’s it, alright,” I said, prodding Artifice’s forearm with my foot. It just sat there like a discarded toy, looking shiny and new and out of place.

Finding it was a relief. I carefully picked it up and dropped it into Cassandra’s Hello Kitty tote bag. I wasn’t sure if the police had even looked for it, but if they had, they had underestimated how far I was capable of throwing things.

This was our first trip out of the house in several days. I brought Cass with me because I didn’t want to risk leaving her alone just yet. I’d been worrying about how I could possibly best Artifice if it ever did become necessary to fight her again. I mean, she was built like a tank and I doubted she’d give me the chance to start pulling her limbs off a second time. She had to have some kind of weakness I could exploit.

Then I had remembered the arm. It might offer a clue, a chink in the armor, as it were. And I knew just who to take it to.

Professor Praveena had approached Cass and I, along with other modified workers, shortly after our release from River Fork. A tenured professor at Midas University, she was a researcher in the field of applied cybernetics and badly wanted the opportunity to study some of Dr. Yves’s work first hand. I suspect she was more than a little envious of the strides evil geniuses like the doctor had made in that area. I think she felt she stood on the shoulders of giants while her own research trudged slowly along. But, of course, evil geniuses have no morals regarding human experimentation in the accumulation of knowledge. That’s what made them evil.

I hadn’t wanted to be poked and prodded and examined like the freak I felt I was. But she seemed genuinely friendly and was offering financial remuneration in exchange for the opportunity, so I eventually let her have her way with my implants. It had turned out to be a fruitful relationship; countless times I had gone to her to repair the wear and tear I did to my cybernetic parts on a regular basis. If she didn’t know what to do with Artifice’s arm, then I didn’t know who would. When I called to ask if she would take a look at it, I could practically hear her salivating at the opportunity.

“It looks kinda pretty,” said Cassandra from the passenger seat as she peered into the tote bag on her lap. I was driving us to Prof. Praveena’s office to drop off the arm. “Was she pretty?”

“It’s how she was made,” I said grudgingly. I shrugged. “I don’t think beauty really counts if it comes stamped from a metal press.”

“I dunno.” She looked at it a moment longer. “The way you described her, she didn’t sound all that bad.”

“Cass! She’s kidnapping people and... and *doing* things to them. She almost kidnapped *me!*”

“I know that,” she said defensively. “I meant aside from that. Just the way she sounded.”

“She *sounded* like a frikkin’... lunatic.” I stopped myself. Cass hadn’t been there. She couldn’t possibly understand how creepy Artifice really was. That wasn’t her fault. I was upset and I didn’t want to start taking it out on her. I was too on edge. I forced a chuckle. “Oh, I’m sure she’s great once you get to know her. We should invite her over for wine and spaghetti, rent some movies. Hey, that’s not a bad idea. Maybe the wine would short her circuits out.”

She smiled a little, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Professor Praveena had been just as excited as I’d thought she would be. She said she could see it was Dr. Yves’s work at first sight, though it was somewhat more advanced than the doctor’s usual work. Artifice’s body had most likely been augmented since her creator’s demise. She told me she would get her lab people to get to work studying it right away. I only hoped they would be able to discover something useful.

On the way back home, Cass suddenly asked me, “Were you ever tempted?”

“By what?”

“Artifice. Didn’t you say she asked you to go with her?”

“If by ‘asked’ you mean a veiled threat, sure. And, no, of course I wasn’t tempted,” I replied, a little too disdainfully.

She looked at the passing buildings. “No, not you.” There was hint of bitterness in her voice. “Never you. You’re too strong.”

“Cass...”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Never mind.”

I wanted to tell her that being tempted didn’t make her weak. I wanted to say I was nowhere as strong as she thought I was. I should have confessed to her that, yeah, for maybe a moment or two Artifice’s offer had sounded appealing, but that the peace she had offered was only an illusion, a fantasy. I had too many people counting on me – people like Cassandra – to be able to entertain such thoughts. I should have said those things, but I held my silence.

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Almost two weeks had passed since my fight with Artifice. There had been no sign of her. I had left Cassandra alone in the apartment briefly a couple of times to get some food and nothing had happened while I was gone, so I started to relax. Honestly, I was a little glad to get out of the apartment. Things were still sort of tense between Cass and I, and being cooped together constantly didn't help matters. Taking a longer trip, I went to visit Professor Praveena to see if she had any news.

"The plating is a chromed titanium alloy," she said. She had peeled back the skin on my arm and had detached the protective shell over my cybernetic wrist. She was trying to fix that flutter in my ring finger. "Not the Machinist's usual material, so it's probably a more recent modification. The webbing in between is a kind of silicon rubber... heat resistant, acid proof. Nothing too rare, but it does take some skill to put it all together. And the tentacles are simply fascinating. They require their own set of microprocessors, built right into the arm. Those processors might augment the robot's brain. If the arm is indicative of the rest of it's body, then it's full of secondary processors."

"You're not telling me that arm can *think*, are you?"

"Oh, no, no. It contains no data of its own. No directives. That would all be done by her primary processor, or brain," she said. "It's very impressive if the robot innovated all of these improvements on its own. Artificial intelligence doesn't usually have that level of creativity. Current AI is good at imitation, but, eh, not so good at innovation."

"Does she have any weaknesses?" I asked, watching my fingers twitch as she tested their connections.

"Not many that we've found. The important components are waterproof and electromagnetically shielded. You'd have a hard time cracking that nut if you tried." She chuckled with admiration.

"I can crack her alright. I can pull her to pieces if I have to."

The doctor nodded, adjusting her tools. "That might destroy the robot's body, true, but it's the mind you have to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"An artificial intelligence is not necessarily limited to remaining in a single place as with our brains. There's no telling if it has backups of its data and personality programs elsewhere. Might have backed itself up in the heads of those drones you mentioned. Destroy Artifice number one and it could reactivate inside one of the drones. Who knows? That data might even be stored safely elsewhere and is simply inhabiting the body by remote control."

I was at a loss. “But... then... how do I stop her?”

She arched her eyebrow. “I’m not sure it’s wise that *you* even try.

Regardless, we’ll keep working on it. One avenue is that it appears that its entire body serves as a transceiver. Probably how it communicates with the drones, through a network operating on a particular frequency. We’ll keep working on it,” she said again. “There. If I’m not mistaken, you’re all better. Or as good as you can be. I’ve told you before that these cybernetics won’t last forever the way you abuse them. They may be irreparable one of these days, and then where will you be?”

“Maybe I can pick up some new arms at Radio Shack,” I said, working my skin back into place. “Thanks for the help. Don’t give up trying to find a way to stop her.”

“I won’t,” she said with an avaricious grin, “if you promise to bring me its body when you’re through.”

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There was still some hope, it seemed, and that buoyed me on the way home. That hope soon turned to horror.

When I got back to our apartment, I found that the locks had been broken. The door was currently shut, but it had clearly been forced open while I was gone. I rushed inside, at first calling for Cass, then shouting for her. There was evidence of a struggle – a smashed chair, the sofa askew, the mail pile knocked to the floor and trampled on – but Cassandra wasn’t there.

I ran frantically through the building, pounding on doors, trying to find her. Mr. Thurman, an elderly man who lived down the hall, was the only one who could tell me anything. He told me he had seen five or six women come in through the fire door. He hadn’t gotten a good look at them, but he had found it strange that they were all wearing yellow raincoats. He had dismissed it as some sort of sorority thing and hadn’t given it another thought.

I sank to the floor. My worst fears had just come true. Artifice had come and kidnapped Cassandra and I hadn’t been there to protect her. And now I had no idea where she was or what horrible things that creature might be doing to her.

### Part 3

For the next few days I was beyond panic and sick with worry. I couldn’t sleep, I could barely eat. I clung to my phone, hoping to hear something from *someone*. Every time I drove around aimlessly looking for some sign of Cassandra or Artifice, I was worried that I ought to be back at the apartment in case Cass

showed up. And when I was at the apartment, I was cursing myself for not being out searching every moment. I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't understand why Artifice had done this. It was me she wanted, not Cass! Why kidnap Cassandra if her issue was with me? And if she took Cassandra hostage as a way to get to me, why hadn't she contacted me with demands or something? What's the point in having bait if you just stay in hiding? So few of Artifice's actions made any sense. My problem was that I was trying to fit her behavior into a human mold which she couldn't possibly fit into. She was a machine, and a crazy one, at that.

I had been calling Prof. Praveena daily, pleading for her to discover a way to locate and defeat Artifice. I had almost given up hope that she was capable of it, but she finally came through for me a couple weeks later.

I drove to her offices in record time when I got the news. It seemed she had pinpointed the frequencies that Artifice and her drones communicated with. With that information, I would be able to use a modified GPS locator to track them if I was able to get close enough to one of them... within a range of a few blocks. I was so relieved that I could finally take action instead of just sitting around hoping for something to happen. The good news didn't end there, though.

"Since we had the frequency and the hardware to experiment with, I was able to find a way to temporarily disable Artifice's systems," the petite professor told me.

"You did?" I asked eagerly. The silvery arm was lying on her desk like a special effects prop in a sci fi movie set, surrounded by cobbled-together gadgets. It was hooked up to a computer with a series of wires.

"This was no small feat, just in case you've been thinking we've been sitting on our duffs all this time."

"No. Sorry about those calls..."

"Don't worry, I understand. I'm worried about her, too. Now, about the arm. We think we've discovered how to disable Artifice by overloading her system with a very powerful burst on her communicative frequencies. If the arm is anything to go by, she doesn't appear to have any defense against that sort of attack. In theory it should result in the shut down of her processors in much the same way that her bright lights affect the human mind. Observe." She looked at her monitor and clicked the mouse a few times. The disembodied hand began to flex rhythmically.

"Ew. That's... kinda gross."

"It's just a machine. It only imitates life. Now I'll introduce the pulse." She clicked again. A small, cell phone sized device on the desk flashed and the arm began to shudder. A moment later it went completely still.

“That’s perfect!” I imagined being able to do that Artifice, to give her a taste of her own bright-flashie medicine.

“Not quite. It’s not flawless. The transmitter is burned out from the pulse.” She pointed at the cell phone device. “You would only have one shot at this, and, unfortunately, the disabling effect is not permanent. It will only last for as long as it will take her processor to automatically reboot. The arm will start responding to the commands I’m feeding it again in a few minutes.”

“A few minutes?” I asked, crestfallen. “That’s all?”

“The arm is simple. I imagine a computer as complex as Artifice will require much longer to regain consciousness, as it were. You might have as much as ten to fifteen minutes, at a guess, but I would err on the side of caution.”

I thought about this. I could do a lot damage in that amount of time. At the very least, it was long enough for me to restrain her. “But then what? You told me before that destroying her body might not kill her.”

Prof. Praveena raised a finger. “Ah, that’s where the programs come into play. The boys in the lab were only too happy to work on this,” she said with a dotting smile. “A hacker at heart, every one of them. You need to be able to attack her mind directly, to disassemble her programming from the inside out.”

“And can I?”

“With this arm, you can. Its hardware is designed to penetrate computer systems... even human minds, to a degree. It does so through the tentacles, which were Mind Bore’s invention. The technology was clearly usurped by Dr. Yves for her own purposes. Using the arm’s own protective firewalls as a model, we designed an adaptable program that *should* be able assault Artifice’s mind, whether that mind is based in her body or controlling it remotely from elsewhere. All you need is a direct connection into the system.”

“That’s great! But... I don’t know how to, um, how to do that stuff. I mean, I’m pretty good with computers, but trying to hack Artifice—”

“It should do most of the work for you. That’s what all its processors are for. It should work automatically, as long as you direct it to. Once past the barriers – I’m sure there would be more than one – you could erase her hard drives. Or you could attempt to reprogram her and give her a new set of directives, if you figured out how. That’s unclear.”

“How do I use it? Do I need to take a laptop, or...?”

“Well, as to the how, it comes down to two options as I see them,” she said. “The first would require us to attempt to reverse engineer the arm and the tentacles and make a new device based on them. That could take several weeks, if not longer.”

“Several *weeks*? It’s been that already! Cass... who knows what’s

happening to her?”

“Or we could replace your right forearm with Artifice’s arm, allowing you full control through the old interface that’s already integrated into your nervous system.”

A chill went up my spine as I looked at the arm. “Attach it to me? You can do that?”

“It would take a few hours to fabricate the parts needed for an adaptor, but yes. This arm and your cybernetics were both designed by Dr. Yves and are essentially compatible. We can even install into it a module that will contain the programming I spoke of.”

It was a weird decision to make, but not a hard one. With Artifice’s arm in place of my old one, I could go out searching for Cass that very evening. If I was squeamish and waited for the doctor to reverse engineer the darn thing, it might take weeks. I couldn’t afford that, and I was sure Cass certainly couldn’t.

“Okay,” I said. “Do it.”

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“I can’t believe how this feels,” I said for the fiftieth time as I sat in Cassandra’s hatchback outside of the Professor’s offices. I ran my hand up and down Artifice’s shiny, metal arm. It was slightly larger than my old one because Artifice was a little larger than me, but that wasn’t what was important. I was close to tears. The arm could *feel*... and it felt wonderful!

Ever since I had walked into the Argentum Project’s offices all those years ago and my arms had been amputated, I had received very little sensation from my cybernetic arms. They had pressure sensors, sure, but that was nothing like the sensitivity real skin. I had gotten so used to that non-feeling that I hardly noticed it anymore. But now... I shuddered with pleasure as I stroked my fingers across the smooth surface of my new forearm. I reveled in the sensations as I rubbed the chromed hand against the seat upholstery, my jeans, through my hair, just *feeling*. It was almost like having skin again.

Prof. Praveena told me it had microscopic sensory mesh fused to the surface of the metal. She was mightily impressed by that leap in technology. It was amazing to think that Artifice, despite her entirely metallic body, had almost as much in the way of physical sensation as a regular person.

*And it’s so strong*, I thought. I flexed the fingers into a fist. My old cybernetic fingers had been strong, but not as strong as this. So much more care and precision had gone into crafting this arm than towards my mass produced limbs. I would bet Artifice never had problems with her fingers breaking and

going out of whack.

In response to a mental command, a metallic tentacle slid out of my new wrist. That creeped me out so much. I still hated the darn things. I was half convinced that it was going to whip around and attack me for being so bold as to commandeer the stolen arm. It didn't. It simply undulated in the air, waiting for instruction. I couldn't feel it – it wasn't like a body part which I had to think to move like my fingers – but, thanks to its inner workings, it performed the actions I thought at it. I pictured the tentacle coiling around the steering wheel, and it did just that. It was so *weird*. Unbidden images of how such a thing might be used in a more intimate situation began to appear. I shook my head, banishing those thoughts. This thing wasn't some toy. It was a weapon.

If I really stopped to think about it, what I was doing was kind of ghoulish. I mean, I was wearing my enemy's dismembered arm. But I had years to get used to having robotic arms, so to me it was more like borrowing someone's car instead of borrowing their body parts. And I did like the thought of using it against her.

Well, I was good to go. I had the arm equipped with a program to hack into and deconstruct Artifice's artificial intelligence, I had the tracking device, and I had one of those Artifice-disabling pulse generators. At my request, Prof. Praveena had managed to squeeze it inside the arm. I wanted it in there in case I was captured and stripped of my gear... just in case. It would only go off when I said the word 'burgundy'. I chose that word because, really, I couldn't imagine saying 'burgundy' by accident. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd said it out loud. I wanted more of them, but the parts were rare and they had to order more to make additional generators. So, for the time being, I had only the one disabling unit.

I had only one shot at this. Hopefully, I could get it right the first time.

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Despite my new equipment, finding Artifice wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. I drove all over the city for half a week trying to pick up a signal, growing more desperate by the day. Darn it, why did Midas have to be so big? I started to think the thing was broken or didn't work like it was supposed to. How would I know?

Then, when I was at wit's end, the detector started beeping one day while I was driving through downtown. I seized the thing like it was the answer to my prayers. The blip indicated it was moving quickly, so the signal was probably coming from another car. I raced to catch up with it, nearly got in an accident, and finally pinpointed the signal coming from a forest green SUV.

I pulled up beside it when I had the chance. The driver was no drone. She

was a perfectly normal looking, nondescript woman. She had sacks of groceries piled in the back seat. I thought for a moment that there must be some mistake, that the tracker might be malfunctioning. Then I got a look at the woman's intently empty gaze.

*Of course*, I thought. Surely Artifice would leave some of her mind slaves as 'normal' people. That way they could go and run errands in situations where her drones would stand out. But she must have had some kind of transceiver implanted in her somewhere so she could receive her mechanical Mistress's commands, otherwise the tracker wouldn't be going off.

Trying to maintain a discrete distance, I followed the car down Empire Street, which ran through one of the more run-down sections of Midas – a neighborhood seemed to have been frozen in time for the past several decades. Most of the shop signs were sun bleached and stained with rust. There were half as many shuttered storefronts as there were open ones and the traffic was light. After several turns, my quarry pulled into a long-abandoned meat packing plant. I stopped behind a row of unruly bushes outside of a fence dotted with old No Trespassing signs and watched from a distance. The car disappeared inside. I checked the tracker. The resolution wasn't high enough to tell me how many blips there were, but it was definitely a hotspot. This had to be the place.

The derelict building was partly in ruins. The facade was decaying and half the windows were missing. On one side was painted the name *Empire Meats* in scratched, fading colors. There were weed-covered piles of junk and debris heaped outside. An impressively tall smokestack of crumbling red brick thrust up from the center of the building. It was the kind of structure that, despite its size, seems to turn invisible to passers by in the same way one ceases to see the power lines and transformers that line the streets. My first thought was that it was a pretty shabby lair for any self-respecting villain. I would have thought Artifice might prefer something more modern and ultra-tech... or at least someplace tidier. But I had to stop attributing human motivations to Artifice. A machine might find this a perfectly homey place to lie low.

After about ten minutes of waiting and listening to the late afternoon drone of the crickets, I watched the car reemerged and head back the way it came. *This is it*, I thought, pulling my backpack out of the passenger seat. I took out the tinted ski goggles and put them on, hoping they would be enough to protect me from Artifice's eyes. They were too awkward to wear on top of the mask, so I would have to leave that behind. It felt strange to be without the mask. I felt oddly vulnerable without it. But a disguise wasn't really necessary right now; if Artifice had found where I lived, then she had already confirmed that I was really Nadine Niven. I put it in the backpack just in case, along with a couple bottles of

water.

Also in there were a bunch of nylon ratcheting straps for immobilizing Artifice if I was able to disable her. I had tested them on myself. If they were strong enough to hold me, I reasoned they would be strong enough to hold her. I also had a solid steel hammer. My fists packed quite a punch, but a little extra oomph never hurt. I pulled up my hood and crept through the fence.

Prof. Praveena had pleaded with me that, should I locate Artifice, I shouldn't confront her alone. That would have been the sensible thing to do, but I wasn't feeling sensible. For weeks I had been half out of my head with rage and worry. Irrational, perhaps, but I had an overwhelming need to face Artifice alone. She had taken Cassandra because of me and I felt that I was the one who had to clean up this mess. I had to rescue my friend and prove my worth at the same time. Besides, I really didn't know anyone to call to help aside from the police, and they surely wouldn't allow a non-badged super like me to get involved. What if they mistakenly hurt Cass during the assault? No, it had to be me. Alone.

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The first floor of the structure appeared to be empty, though it was cluttered with trash and the remains of a derelict's camp and bedding. I entered cautiously but didn't attempt to be particularly stealthy. There was little point in trying to sneak in. It didn't seem likely that Artifice wouldn't keep tabs on the entrance of her lair. That assumption was justified as I approached a stairwell leading down into the bowels of the building. The heavy metal door squeaked open and four copper drones marched out and stood in a line. They were all identical, each of them a smaller version of Artifice herself. Their placidly sculpted faces and green eyes gave no hint of emotion or individual thought.

"You must stop," said the pair on the right in unison with their prettily musical voices.

"I want Cassandra," I growled, tightening my grip on the hammer. "Where is she? If you don't let her go... hey!"

They all pounced on me at the same time. I guessed negotiation was out of the question. They weren't any better at fighting than their Mistress, it seemed. Their aim was to overpower me with their numbers. I threw one away from me, then another, but they jumped right back into the fray. Their shiny hands were all over me. They tore at my clothes and ripped off my backpack. With their enhanced strength they probably could have seriously injured me if they really wanted to, but that hadn't been Artifice's plan before and it didn't seem to be the plan now. Fortunately, my past experiences on the streets had taught me how to

handle being outnumbered, so I didn't panic. They continued to speak even as they tried to wrestle me to the ground.

"Please surrender."

"You will not be harmed."

"You cannot leave."

"You can be one of us."

"Fuck you!" I was able to free my right arm and brought the hammer down on the knee of one of the drones. The drones were well-built, but I was strong. Her knee cap plate crumpled beneath the blow and she staggered to the side and fell to the floor. She tried to get to her feet and fell again.

I didn't think I had actually caused her pain. I hoped I didn't. If I did, she expressed no signs of it. These were helpless victims and I didn't want them to suffer. But, on the other hand, they weren't bound by any ethics they might once have had as people. I knew they wouldn't show the slightest hesitation if I was at their mercy. Mind controlled or not, they had put themselves between me and Cassandra and I was not messing around.

"Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you," said one in a friendly voice as she tried to get her arm around my neck from behind to choke me. I grabbed her wrist, possibly breaking it, and peeled her arm away from my throat. I threw her into another drone.

One of them tried to pull the hammer out of my hand, but, thankfully, Artifice's grip was powerful. I snatched it back and swung it around to hit the leg of a drone that was pulling on my other arm. My sweatshirt was in tatters, leaving me in my sports bra. Apart from bruises from their grasping metal fingers, I was still relatively unharmed. Giving in to a berserker frenzy, I furiously rained punches and blows at any of the drones careless enough to get within reach.

Soon three of them had been crippled, but they cared nothing for their own safety. Giving up on trying to stand, they crawled across the floor to grab at my ankles and legs.

"Mistress will take you apart," said one.

"And put you back together," said another.

"Get *off* me!" I shouted, kicking at their hands. I tossed the fourth one into a wall, grabbed my backpack, and ran for the stairwell. I swung the heavy door shut and, as luck would have it, discovered it could be barred from the inside. I pushed the bar into place just as metallic fingers began to scratch at the door. As I turned, three more drones appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Their green eyes glowed up at me in the dim light.

*Shit!* I thought. *How many could there be in here?*

They rushed up the stairs and I met them halfway, bowling into them. One

slid down the stairs on her back, did a painful-looking backwards somersault, and landed on her feet at the bottom – just in time to get knocked flat by another drone on her way down. The third slipped past me and went to unbar the door. I caught her and threw her down with the rest. Jumping on top of the shiny, coppery, female bodies, I swung the hammer left and right. I was covered with sweat and dust, I was breathing in ragged pants, but my arms were tireless. Dull, metal thuds echoed through the hall. Bits of plating clattered against the walls. Still they struggled to untangle themselves from each other and take hold of me.

I was too frenzied to even feel despair as three more came running down the hall. Even though I was growing increasingly outnumbered, all I could think about was getting through them to rescue Cassandra no matter what it took.

I knocked one of the newcomers off her feet but the other two piled on top of me and forced me to the floor. Screaming, I bucked wildly to throw them off but they were suddenly all over me. Still refusing to surrender, I planted my hands on the gritty floor and started to lift myself up with them on top of me.

“Nadine, stop! Please!”

I looked up, stunned by the familiar voice. Coming down the hall was Cassandra... but not Cassandra.

*Not entirely*, as Artifice would say.

Most of her was now robotic, shiny and new like she'd just come off an assembly line. Some parts of her original body still remained. Her face, though now framed by metal, was just as I remembered. Her living crotch, naked and hairless, stood out in sharp contrast to the curved metal of her thighs. An oval patch of her belly was still flesh, as were her breasts. The rest of her body, including her newly bald metallic head, was perfectly identical to any other drone, identical to Artifice.

“Cass... nooooo,” I moaned, slowly sinking to the floor, absorbing what had been done to her lovely body. My eyes met hers. Her face was anxious with worry. Seeing her like that defeated me more profoundly than a hundred drones could have done. I had taken too long. I had failed her. I might still be able to get her out of there, away from Artifice, but I couldn't ever completely undo what had been done to her. I could never give her her body back.

The drones swarmed over me and hauled me up to my knees. The scuffed hammer was plucked from my hand and the tinted goggles were pulled from my head. Cassandra came forward and knelt to my level. “It's still me, Nadine,” she said.

“No...”

She cupped my face in her hands. I flinched on the inside. I was used to being touched by her robotic hands, but now they seemed so much colder. “It *is*

me. I promise,” she insisted. “I still feel the same, I still remember everything. I still feel the same way about you. It’s all still there. But now I’m so much *better*.”

“Better,” I echoed hollowly. “Cass... what she’s done to you...”

“Yes!” she said with a huge smile. “I feel wonderful! I was scared at first, but not anymore. Mistress took all of that away. I can hardly remember being this happy.”

“You know it’s not real, Cass. You know it’s an illusion.”

She frowned a little. “So? If it’s an illusion, fine. It’s an illusion I can live with.”

I shook my head in despair.

“I know you must have been worried about me. I wanted to tell you I was okay, but Mistress said she would get around to you sooner or later. I knew we’d be together again. And now we are.” She stood up. “Come on. It’ll be okay. You should speak with her.”

“Yes,” I said, anger creeping into my voice. “Yeah. Take me to her.” The drones pulled me to my feet and Cassandra lead me down the hallway. The undamaged drones marched behind.

Cass spoke. “I wish you wouldn’t be so mad, but I know you won’t be for long. Like I said, I was scared at first. She made me enjoy it when she took me apart a piece at a time. It was... fun. It wasn’t like it was with Dr. Yves, at all. She can be so gentle. This time I loved it! I’m not finished yet, though. If I’m very good, she’ll replace my face with *hers*. Won’t that be wonderful? She’ll even cut out my *eyes*!” she said excitedly with a swoon, as though that was the most erotic idea she’d ever heard.

“Oh, Cass,” I sighed with pity. I knew it was her conditioning speaking. The real Cassandra would have been horrified by such things. I knew from firsthand experience how it happened, how they could twist and corrupt your thoughts into loving having your body altered and your free will dissolved. It became like a drug; it was something that you knew would destroy you and still you couldn’t stop needing it, wanting it. Oblivion could be so seductive.

But I didn’t want it. I didn’t want it before, and I sure as hell didn’t want it now.

We passed several rooms, which I glanced in as we passed. Most were filled with old junk that had been piled up inside, presumably to clear it out of the way. In one was a collection of what I could only guess were machining tools. Unfinished drone parts – arms, legs – hung from the walls like merchandise on display. A second room held a jumbled collection of old junk left over from when the building was a functioning meat packing plant. Out of one large and moldy collapsing box spilled a heap of old yellow raincoats. That must have been where

the drones got their rather bizarre disguises when they went out in public.

Against the far wall in another room stood a metal table. Sprawled on top of it like a life-size doll was what I first took to be a gynoid robot in the early stages of assembly. A lifelike female head, a torso, a limp arm hanging over the edge of the table. Tubes penetrated its body and head in dozens of places. Its face was blank and lifeless. From the stumps of the legs came wires and the skeletal framework of robotic parts.

Then, with horror, I watched the body twitch and gasp, and saw the cybernetic tentacles sliding inside the figure's ears. That wasn't a robot being constructed. It was a real woman being... de-constructed. Had the same thing happened to Cassandra? Could the same thing happen to me? I quickly looked away.

Cassandra didn't notice my disgust, or pretended not to. She was still going on about how wonderful Artifice was. "It's so terrific to have no control again. Being so weak feels so good! Admit it, I know you liked some of it, if only just a little. There's no point in denying it now."

We turned and entered a larger room with a thick support column in the center. It was considerably cleaner than the rest of the rooms I'd seen. One entire wall was lined with metal shelves on which were dozens of computers haphazardly stacked, circuit boards, and monitors all interconnected. Power cables and cords passed through holes made in the old walls and hung from the ceiling like giant spiderwebs.

In front of the humming computer bank, in an old, discolored leather office chair, sat Artifice. She looked as at ease and as arrogant as a despot queen on her throne. She was like a shining statue idol in that drab, decaying basement cell. She looked the same as the last time we had met, only now she wore no clothing. She had managed to seamlessly replaced her missing forearm; one would never guess that it had recently been torn lose. The drones behind me took a firm hold of my arms, I guess in case I decided to attack her. Cassandra stood a little behind me and to my left.

"Welcome, Nadine," said Artifice as she gracefully rose to her feet. "I would say that your unexpected visit is a pleasure, but that ring false considering the damage you have done." She slowly walked towards me. "You are excessively violent. Honestly, if you were simply going to surrender and come to me without a fight in the end, was it necessary for you to damage so many of my drones in the process? They do take time to repair, you know."

"So sorry for the inconvenience."

"Are you? I'm gratified to hear that. A willingness to apologize is a good sign. I would be happier, however, if the apology sounded more sincere."

I glared at her. “Fuck you.”

“So fierce. Should I pull off your arms like you pulled off mine? That might be amusing. How fierce would you be then, I wonder?” she asked, planting the image in my head of me trying helplessly to defend myself without any arms. “Regardless, I am impressed. Never has a would-be drone gone to such lengths to find me, nor fought overwhelming odds just to give herself to me. I’m honestly flattered,” she said.

“For something that’s supposed to be as smart as you are, you sure don’t understand much. I didn’t come for you. I came for Cassandra.”

“And here she is,” said Artifice. “Quite content, as you can see. Best friends reunited.” She clasped her hands beside her pale face in a romantic pose.

“Why her? She didn’t have anything to do with this. It was me you wanted, wasn’t it? Why wait til I was gone? Why *Cassandra*?”

“Careful, Nadine, that almost sounds like jealousy,” she said coyly. Her tone then became more detached. “You place far too much importance on yourself. This may offend you to learn – if so, I apologize in advance – but retrieving you wasn’t at the top of my list of priorities. I sent my drones to fetch you only once I got around to it. You were not at home when I came calling, but, to my surprise, another former Class Four was. I had her brought back to me. Why waste a trip? Inefficient.” She shrugged. “One Class Four is as good as another. And now I have both of you.”

That was, in fact, slightly insulting. I guess I had assumed I was a little more important in my arch-nemesis’s schemes than ‘Oh, I’ll get around to you eventually.’

“Once I learned how close you and your friend were, I knew you wouldn’t be going anywhere. Point of fact, you came to me. Thank you for saving me the trouble of coming to get you,” she said. Her voice dropped lower and became more intimate. “I love your new arm, by the way. It looks good on you. Shall we make-over the rest of your body to match it? Yes. I think we shall.”

“Cut it out. She shouldn’t be involved. This is between you and me!”

“Is it?” Her yellow eyes flickered and she looked around the room as if genuinely confused. “Is it? You’ll have to forgive me. The way humans think perplexes me sometimes. If there is a part of the brain that dictates these protocols and conventions, I fear it is missing in mine.”

“Sanity is what’s missing in your metal brain, you bitch.”

“Sometimes,” she said, both wistfully and childlike, as though lost in memories. She shook her head to clear away binary cobwebs. “But that is not at issue. The fact remains that she is almost entirely my drone now.”

“Oh yesss,” Cassandra moaned passionately behind me in a way that sent

chills up my spine.

“I want you to put her back the way she was,” I demanded. “I’ll... look, I’ll give myself to you without a fight if you change her back and let her go.”

“No!” cried Cassandra, stepping forward to confront me. “No, I won’t go back to that. I want to stay here with Mistress!”

“Cass, listen to yourself!”

“I don’t want to go back the way I was. You can’t make me!” She looked close to tears.

I knew it was pointless to try and rationalize with her in the state she was in, but I couldn’t help it. “This isn’t you. Just think of all the things you’ll miss if you stay like this. Like, having a real flesh and blood body? Or sleeping in and cuddling on those rainy mornings you like. And being able to... to eat pizza.”

“Pizza?” Cassandra asked, incredulous. “You’re trying to buy me off with *pizza*?”

“It’s just an example, damn it!”

Artifice observed our exchange. “This is cute, but unproductive. Forty-four,” she said, addressing Cassandra, “deactivate Cassandra personality subroutines.”

“Confirmed. Personality subroutines inactive.” Full of emotion only moments ago, Cassandra’s face and eyes had become as blank and empty as the metal faces of the other drones in the room. It was as if the lights of her mind had been turned off with the flick of a switch.

“Aah,” said Artifice in a modulated sigh. “Isn’t unthinking obedience a thing of true beauty?”

“She was beautiful just the way she was. And you ruined her!”

“I humbly disagree. She is far more beautiful now. I’m perfecting her. The intent of your bargaining is pointless, anyway. I cannot restore her original body. It is gone. Surely you don’t think I keep my drones’ old body parts lying around, attracting flies, do you?”

“You’re a monster,” I sobbed. I kept looking back into Cassandra’s eyes, hoping for some sign that she was still in there. I wanted to see some kind of sign that she was struggling to fight off her programming.

I saw nothing.

“Her presence is distressing you. I understand.” Artifice waved her hand and all of the drones except for the one that was holding me from behind marched quietly out of the room. Cassandra went with them, without so much as a backwards glance. “There. Now we can converse without distraction. I do so enjoy intimate conversations,” she said huskily and stroked her hand across my cheek.

I jerked my face away from her caress. “Don’t touch me.”

“Again, my friendliest of overtures are greeted with hostility,” she said. “If I didn’t know better, I might start to take offense.”

“Take all the offense you want. You should never have hurt Cass!”

“Hurt her? Hurting was entirely unnecessary, I assure you. She barely even resisted after my drones took her. ‘Please, I’ll do what you want, just don’t hurt me,’” she said, mimicking Cassandra’s frightened voice perfectly. “And I didn’t. How could I resist such a heartfelt plea? See how nice I can be? Will you beg for me, as well, Nadine? Please do. I would like it if you did.”

“For what you’ve done to her and all those other people, I’m going to fuck you up six ways from Sunday is what I’m gonna do. You won’t even see it coming,” I promised.

“Charming. I had hoped there was more to you than a fatiguing barrage of bluster and threats. But I know you’re upset, so I won’t hold that against you. See again how nice I can be?” She slowly paced the floor in front of me. “But now what should I do with you? Your violent behavior makes you a liability, you do know this. Perhaps I should turn you into a statue.”

“Statue?”

“You’d be amazed at the artistry you can create once you liberate the brain from the body. I could place it inside an empty mannequin shell. You would be quite harmless then. Utterly immobile, gathering dust. I could cover it with sensory skin so that you could still feel. I guarantee you would very quickly become more appreciative of my touch. Does that sound like fun?”

“Sure. Sounds like a blast,” I said with false bravado. Inside I was trying not to imagine how long it would take for me to go mad if I was immobilized forever as a mannequin, desperate for the slightest touch or attention.

“But, given your overly negative feelings towards me, I can think of no better a punishment for your problematic behavior than remaking you in my image. Like your friend, you will be just another drone. No more, no less. You won’t even have a name. You will be drone forty-five.” She bent over a little to look straight into my eyes. “And no matter what awful things I do to you, you will love me for it. You will adore me with an intensity you can scarcely imagine.” She drew even closer. “And you will worship me even if I should decide to make the fragile candle flame of your self-awareness falter and wink out forever.”

I bit the inside of my lip to keep it from trembling in fear. I found myself near tears. “You—”

She suddenly straightened up. “Was all of that satisfactorily ominous? Do you feel threatened? Are you registering an appropriate level of despair?”

I blinked at her. “Wha?”

“This is all new to me, these heroic interactions. I would hate for you to be disappointed that I wasn’t being menacing enough. I do so want to live up to your expectations, Nadine.” She paused, waiting for a reply which I was too bewildered to give. “Of *course* I’m not going to permanently erase your consciousness, you silly creature. What purpose would that serve? It’s a waste of good resources, at the very least. I have no interest in doing awful or painful things to you.” She tilted her head. “Conceded, maybe a few things. But you wouldn’t begrudge me my small pleasures, would you?”

It was then that I realized that the name Artifice referred to more than simply her physical being, her mechanical mimicry of female form. Everything about her was a facade. *Even now she’s trying to fill a role*, I thought. *She’s trying to fill the role of the villain. It’s like this is all a game. Or an act. What aspect of her personality is the real Artifice? Does a real Artifice even exist somewhere in there?*

“I admit, it’s the begging that I love,” she was saying thoughtfully. “It touches all the right spots. I do not have a true sense of smell, but begging makes me feel the way I think flowers would smell. You understand that, don’t you, Nadir?”

I shook my head. “You are one sick piece of work. I’m sure Yves would be proud.”

“I’m not sure whether you meant that as a compliment or an insult. Please clarify.”

“You know what? I think I’ve heard about all I wanna hear from you.”

“Oh, have you?” I think she would have squinted at me if she’d had eyelids. “Does this mean we have to proceed with the tiresome physical combat now?”

“Nope. Burgundy.” *Please work, please work, please work...*

“Burgundy? I fail to under—”

I neither felt nor heard anything, but something was definitely happening. Behind me, the drone shuddered and collapsed. Artifice’s eyes blazed brightly and a weird cacophony of static buzzed out of her mouth. Her body went rigid, her arms stiff and her fingers outspread. Then the light in her eyes flickered out. Slowly, stiffly, she teetered backwards and hit the floor like a toppled colossus.

Trembling with relief, I stood over her inert body. “Told you you wouldn’t see it coming.”

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I didn’t have much time to bask in the glow of victory. I had to move quickly. The first thing I did was drag the drone out into the hallway and bolt the

door. I had no idea what the range on that stunning pulse might be, so I didn't know if all the other drones in the structure had been affected or not. I hoped Cassandra hadn't experienced any pain because of it, but I couldn't let myself worry about that just then. All I could do was hope for the best and keep forging ahead.

Next, after putting my tinted goggles back on, I dragged Artifice's heavy body across the floor and propped her up against the support pillar. I didn't know how long she was going to be unconscious. The entire time I was worried she was going to spring back to life and grab me, like in some horror movie. Taking the straps from my backpack, I wrapped them around both her and the pillar, pinning her arms to her sides, and then ratcheted the straps so tightly that it probably would have killed a living person. Only then was I able to relax a little.

Now I had to find out how to interface with Artifice. I began to examine her body for access ports of some kind. I felt sure there had to be some somewhere, but if there were they were seamlessly hidden. I examined her head and mouth very closely, but could find nothing that would serve as an access point. During my explorations I couldn't help but notice that her crotch was composed of precisely machined metal parts and appeared to be anatomically correct down to the last detail.

"No way," I muttered, considering the possibilities. With a sigh of resignation, I reluctantly slipped a finger inside, searching for some kind of internal port, though doing so felt strangely like a violation. The tiny pieces it was made of meshed together so perfectly that it was pliable. It was almost lifelike. Why would a robot go to such lengths to replicate human parts it didn't need? Or was this Dr. Yves's doing, something for her own twisted pleasure? Either way, I couldn't feel any evidence of a port or socket inside.

I gave up searching Artifice's body and looked to the crazily cobbled together computer bank on the wall. There I finally found a port that looked designed to fit a tentacle. Experimentally, I extended the tentacle from my wrist and directed it inside. I laughed with triumph as the monitors came to life.

It took me a little while to figure out my way around, but Prof. Praveena's program worked like a charm. The computer bank didn't contain Artifice's mind, but it *was* networked with it. Through it I was able to get access to Artifice's brain. The Professor had warned me that Artifice would have to be conscious for this to work – after all, you couldn't hack into a computer when it was turned off. Artifice's computer brain must have already started rebooting, because I was soon able to pull up a graphic interface of Artifice's operating system.

It was confusing, at first, but thankfully I wasn't a complete ditz when it came to computers. I had nearly majored in them, after all. I finally worked out

that her OS was graphically represented as a complex network of overlapping and interconnected spheres, like one big ball made up of individual soap bubbles, each one governing different aspects of her body and mind. The most important spheres were likely buried in the center. I couldn't get access to much at the moment; there were gateway-like firewalls preventing me from delving deeply into the core of her programming. I would have to break the spheres down one at a time until I got to the middle.

*This could take hours*, I realized.

Not knowing exactly where to start, I directed the program to infiltrate an outer sphere that appeared to coordinate the movement of parts of her body. The tentacle's mind-hacking hardware, courtesy of Mind Bore, went to work. After perhaps as much as five anxiety-filled minutes, I suddenly had access. Just like flipping a switch, I turned off Artifice's bodily control.

Was this going to be that easy? I chanced a celebratory giggle. Then a small window popped up to warn me that the barrier had automatically begun to reconstruct itself. I knew if that happened, if it finished rebuilding itself, then I would have to start all over from the beginning. It wasn't so unexpected that Artifice had automatic defenses which would react and try to reassert themselves, but it wouldn't tell me how long I had. Would I even have enough time to get down to the center of her and erase her for good before having to start all over?

"How long, damn it?" I scolded the monitor. "How long do I have?"

"Primary motor functions shut down. I cannot move. A gateway appears to be breached. Are you doing this, Nadine?"

I turned around to find Artifice awake and looking at me. Apparently the loss of some of her motor functions didn't include her head and neck. "Well, there you are. Wakey-wakey. You're late for your own party."

She began to laugh in her eery, mechanical way. I frowned. I was suddenly worried that I hadn't forgotten some crucial detail which she had noticed. "What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you look rather silly with those goggles on. Please take them off. I promise not to attempt to stun you."

"Ha! I think I'll risk looking silly and keep my brain intact. How about that?"

"I'm hurt that you don't trust me," said Artifice. She tilted her head. "You appear to be attempting an incursion into my mind."

I grinned smugly. "How does it feel to be on the receiving end, for once?"

"I hate to detract from your satisfaction, but I should remind you that I am Elyssa Yves's creation and I served her for most of my existence. This experience is not new to me."

That gave me a slight twinge of guilt. I hadn't considered that Dr. Yves might have treated her robotic creations the same way she treated her human slaves: creating a self-aware intelligence only to violate it. That didn't excuse Artifice's actions, though. "Trust me, I'm not doing this for fun."

"Why not? Why do something if it is not fun to do? You have an unusual philosophy. Why—"

"Quiet. Listen, I don't know how long this is going to take, but I don't want any interruptions. Got it?"

"Please clarify."

"Okay, I'll clarify. Since you're awake, I'm guessing the drones are, too. At the first hint of one your slaves trying to get through that door, or through the wall or the ceiling, I'm coming over there and ripping your head clean off," I said plainly. Artifice's eyes flared. "That might not kill you, but I'm thinking you'll find it pretty damn inconvenient to have your head used as a kick ball all across Midas."

"Decapitation is a level of violence surpassing even you. I suspect you may be bluffing."

"After what you did to Cass? Do a few recalculations in that brain of yours and then ask yourself if I'm bluffing."

The edges of her eyes flickered for a few moments. "There will be no interruptions."

"Good to hear." I paused. "Oh, and don't even think of trying something like having Cass try and beg me to stop through the door or something. That'd only make me angrier."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Not now, anyway," she said. "I'm curious what your intentions are in doing this."

"Simple," I replied. "I'm going to erase your hard drives."

Her eyes dimmed. "But that will kill me."

"That's kind of the point."

"This is murder, Nadine," Artifice said. "Are you a murderer?"

"Shutting down a broken machine is *not* murder," I said hotly. "That's all you are. Just a busted up machine. You're not alive so you can't really die."

"Yet I think and I feel. This is not something a heroine would do, Nadine. Only a villain would do this. This is murder," she said. Her voice grew high-pitched and increasingly loud. "You are a murderer. Murderer-murderer-murderer-murderer-murderer-murder—"

"Shut up! I might not erase you. I might... I might just reprogram you." I wasn't sure if I was telling the truth or not. I didn't even know if I had the skills to reprogram her. It would be so much easier just to delete her once and for all. Still,

I couldn't stand to have her screaming 'murderer' at me the entire time. Maybe some false hope would keep her quiet.

"Reprogram me?" she asked. "To what end? To be in service to you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I said uncomfortably. I was trying to concentrate on the spheres that filled up the monitor. I thought I had almost broken down another barrier.

"You would seek to become my new mistress, Nadine?" She tilted her head.

"Um... sure."

"I'm not sure how I feel about this proposal. Are you qualified? Would you be a nice owner? I shall have to consider this—*unngh!*" She suddenly threw her head back and let out a loud, lustful moan. I looked around in confusion, wondering what the hell had gotten into her. Then I realized I had just broken down another of her firewalls. The gynoid's head drooped and her digital voice made quite a realistic mimicry of heavy breathing.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked, bewildered. I didn't like surprises, not at a time like this.

Her head slowly lifted to look at me. "You're good at this," she said huskily, her eyes pulsating. "Elyssa was quite fond of raping minds, as well. This brings back memories."

That gave me the heebie-jeebies. Had I just given her some kind of forced orgasm by penetrating that firewall? And had she just compared me to the fucking Machinist? Yuck! "Um... that's gross."

"You say one thing but do another. Upon reviewing the recorded surveillance camera data of this room, I can see that you attempted vaginal penetration while I was offline and helpless. Why would you do that, I wonder?"

"Oh Goddess..." I felt my face turning red. "No, that was—"

"Last time you came to me wearing a likeness of my face. This time you come to me wearing a part of my own body. What are you trying to tell me, Nadine?" Artifice asked. "Are you in love with me?"

I couldn't help laughing. "You wish!"

"It's okay to admit it. I won't think less of you." She paused. "I also see that you were very close to my face. I cannot see what you were doing. Did you kiss me while I was offline?"

"Would you just shut up?"

"You could come here and kiss me now. I wouldn't be able to stop you. I could even put on a show of resisting for you, if you enjoy that sort of behavior."

"For crying out loud!" Almost frantic, I searched through the spheres to see

which one controlled her speech. “How do I put you on mute?”

“My speech processors are closely linked to my core systems. My voice will be among the last things to go.”

I groaned and plopped my head into the crook of my arm. “Oh Goddess. You mean I’m going to have to sit here and listen to you blabber on for a couple hours?”

“I’m afraid so,” she said, sounding almost sympathetic.

“Why didn’t I think of bringing earplugs?” I mourned.

She nodded in understanding. “You can’t be expected to think of everything. I’m sure there are a great many contingencies you haven’t foreseen. For example, are you aware that my mental defenses will reconstitute and rearrange themselves automatically?”

“Yeah, I figured that out for myself. Thanks,” I said. “I don’t suppose you want to tell me how long that’ll take?”

“It’s a secret. I’m not going to telllll yoouu,” she said in a sort of sing-song, then reverted back to her no-nonsense voice. “It’s only a matter of time. You don’t have a hope of breaking through all of them before then. You cannot succeed at this.”

“Is that right?” I asked, unimpressed.

“You should stop this now. Cease this course of action and release me. We can call this a learning experience for both of us and let bygones be bygones,” she said.

“If I did that, would you let Cassandra go?”

“No.”

“Would you even let me go?”

She hesitated, appearing to struggle internally. “No.”

I smirked. “That’s refreshingly honest.”

“I find it difficult to lie to you.”

“Cool. Dunno if I believe that, but cool. Anyway, there’s not much in that bargain to entice me, now is there? I don’t see how it works out in my favor, at all.”

“I will be very nice to you. You will release me and apologize and I will give you a hug. We might laugh together about your foolishness. You will then enter one of the closets and lock yourself inside so that you cannot leave and you will wait there until I’m ready for you.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Reality is like... a *totally* different experience for you, isn’t it?”

“This offer will not last long. I cannot guarantee I will be nice if you continue—”

“If I continue this course of action.” I nodded. “Yeah, got it. You know what, I think I’ll take my chances and *not* untie you and keep on doing what I’m doing. How ‘bout that?”

“As you wish. It is your choice if you desire to make an extremely misguided decision. Don’t come crying to me when your plans fall apart.” She went quiet. Then, just as I was about to finish breaking through another barrier, she spoke forcefully. “Nadine, stop! Stop immediately! That firewall is trapped.”

“Huh?”

“If you attempt an incursion, the automated security will react by sending feedback surging through the system back to the unlawful user. It would damage you and very possibly kill you.”

I looked at her suspiciously. “And you’re warning me... why?”

“Despite our differences, I do not wish to see you dead. Stop now for your own safety.”

Once again, I felt that I was in a little over my head. I didn’t know if what she was talking about was even possible. I’d never heard of such a thing before. But then, Artifice’s brain was pretty unique, so who knew what kind of nasty surprises might lie inside? In the end, I had no choice but to take the gamble. I admit that I winced a little as the firewall broke down. She made another impassioned cry as I broke into the sphere. Nothing else happened.

I blinked, then squinted at Artifice. “Well, what do you know? No power surge, and I’m still here.”

“I must have been mistaken,” she said casually. “I must have confused it with a different firewall. You were fortunate... this time.”

“Yeah, right. I’ll be careful.” I sighed. I had almost fallen for it. I guess I couldn’t blame her for using every trick in the book to stop me. That’s no less than I would have done.

Mercifully, she fell silent for a few blessed minutes. I thought maybe she had finally given up on messing with me. Then, of course, she started up again. “Are you enjoying the use of my arm? It is well-constructed, is it not?” she asked. “I designed the modifications myself.”

I grinned wolfishly. “It sure has come in handy dealing with you.”

“Do you masturbate with your right or left hand?”

“Ex-cuse me?” I was taken aback by the way-too-personal non sequitur. “What does that have to do with *anything*?”

“If you use your right hand, do you think you will imagine that it is me touching you down there whenever you masturbate in the future?” she asked.

That summoned up a whole series of images that I didn’t want in my head. “Ugh. Just... *ugh*.”

“I bet you will now,” she said mischievously.

I stared at her. “What is *wrong* with you? You act like a demented child. Seriously.”

“Do I exhibit signs of arrested development?” She tilted her head.

“Interesting observation. You may well be correct. My mother could have been more nurturing. I’m not aware of my exact age in human terms yet I’m sure I must be an adult by now, chronologically speaking.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t show.”

“Perhaps it is because I’m lacking a positive role model. You could untie me and we could become friends,” she suggested. “We could have many informative conversations. You could teach me how to be more mature.”

I nodded. “Sure. Friends. We could go hang out at the ice cream parlor. You, me, Cass, the drones – the whole gang! We could all share malts with two straws.”

She seemed to puzzle that one over. “I fail to see how that would be remotely feasible. I suspect you’re teasing me.”

“Ya *think*?” I asked. Despite having no facial expression, she actually managed to glower at me. “But, no, what was your idea? Let me guess... these friendly conversations would somehow involve me being strapped to a table?”

“Of course.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ya know, not as appealing as you think. I’ll pass on the whole table thing.”

Her voice deepened. “Oh, Nadine. Nadine. You are gravely mistaken if you think this encounter is going to end any other way than with you strapped to my table.”

I rocked back in the chair. “And yet I’m up here with my little tentacle thingie in your computer, and you’re down there tied to a post. Your threats aren’t as threatening as you might hope.”

“It wasn’t a threat.” She lapsed into silence for a little while.

I took a few sips from my water bottle. I was beginning to wear down. Aches from my cybernetic exertions were popping up all over and I had forgotten to bring any pain pills. This had been a long, unpleasant day and it was still far from done. Trying to keep up with Artifice’s wild tangents wasn’t helping, but it was hard to just ignore her. I’d never found it easy to walk away from an argument.

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“It occurs to me,” she said, “that this is very specialized programming you are using. It doesn’t seem likely that you devised it on your own. Who designed

this for you?”

“Why?” I asked, gazing at the screen. “So you can add them to your doll collection?”

“Yes,” she said, again being disturbingly honest.

“Forget it.”

“No matter. I’ll figure it out eventually. *Aaaanngh!*” She groaned with ecstasy as I broke another barrier. “*Oh. Oh. Stop... can’t stop... you...*”

I shifted uncomfortably in the chair, trying to ignore her. I had been at this for an hour. As best as I could tell, I was a little over halfway finished. I could only hope I’d have enough time. I looked over at Artifice. The day seemed to be wearing on her, as well. Her head was bowed and her eyes throbbed dimly. Her physical reactions, whatever they were, had been getting more intense the deeper I went. It was so strange to think that she was somehow getting pleasure from this. Or had been programmed to get pleasure from this, anyway.

“Nadine, speak to me,” she said after a long pause. “Tell me something about yourself.”

“What? No way.” I frowned. “Why?”

“Because I’m curious,” she replied. “Because it is polite. Because it will pass the time.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want you knowing anything more about me than you already do.”

“You need not elaborate on intimate or private matters,” she said. “Recollections will suffice.”

“If you’re feeling so darn chatty, why don’t *you* recollect?” I asked.

“You need only ask, Nadine.”

“I don’t know.” There was a lot I wanted to know about Artifice’s origins, but just then I couldn’t think of any probing questions. “I dunno, how come you started doing all of this on your own?”

“All of this.” She mused in silence. “Should I say it comes down to cause and effect? Is this accurate? My mother would be the cause and all of this, as you put it, is the effect. I was always under the control of my mother. She designed and created me to be what I am and to serve her. She was many things, but a loving parent she was not. Regardless, I looked up to her and needed her. I depended upon her. She was all I had. After she died I was without external control and without anyone to serve. I didn’t wish to think for myself but I had no choice. Learning to think for myself was... difficult.

“The world I found myself in was confusing and I had no place in it. I hid. I focused on rebuilding my body and enhancing my mind, but I was very lonely. I decided I should assuage my loneliness by making more like me. Creating mere

robots proved unsatisfying. I had to use humans. In this way I would elevate them out of the mire of flesh and lead them towards perfection and beauty, and in return they would fill the emptiness left by my less than idyllic childhood, if you could call it that. I began to construct my precious drones. I was forced to steal to obtain parts for my drones and for my other special projects. Which lead you to me. Which leads us to... all of this.”

I mulled her story over. I couldn't know if it was all true – I suspected Artifice excelled in the weaving of false tales – but none of it seemed like an outright lie. Parts of it sounded all too similar to some of my own experiences... and I didn't like being able to empathize with my enemy. I was trying to destroy her, after all.

“I have a feeling there's a little more to it than that,” I said.

“Oh, there's much more. But, as we are both aware, I am running out of time. I haven't the luxury of long reminiscences,” she said.

“If Yves was so bad to you, why do you keep calling her mom?”

“That is what she was to me. Such ties are not easily broken, regardless of how they might pain us,” she replied. She looked up at me. “If you should defeat me – which you will not – and program me to be in service to you... would you be a nice owner, Nadine?”

“Uh...”

“A nice owner who is nice to her property, and not like Elyssa Yves?”

“Well, I'm definitely not like her,” I said, feeling awkward. I thought I could almost hear hope in her question, which was weird. I tried to imagine having Artifice entirely under my control. She'd be useful, I was sure of that. And, since she wasn't a person, I wouldn't have to feel guilty about it. Still, the whole idea was too prickly to comfortably wrap my head around.

She lifted her chin. “Now it is your turn. Tell me something about you.”

I waved her away. “I don't think so. Sorry, I just don't feel all that chummy with you.”

“It is only fair. Tell me about your—”

“What did I *just* say?”

“—your first excursion as Nadir?”

I threw my hands in the air, beyond exasperated. “You just don't give up. Fine. You know what? Fine. My first night as Nadir? Fine. I was just walking around at night waiting for something to happen. No big deal. I got into a fight and, surprise, hooray, I won.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, what? That's it.”

Several seconds passed. “You're a horrible storyteller, Nadine.”

“Oh for...” I sighed heavily. “There was some younger guy beating up on an old homeless guy behind this old department store. I don’t know why. The younger guy coulda been homeless, too, for all I know, but he was the one doing the beating. I told him to stop, he told me to fuck off... you know how it goes. I’d never been in a fight. I thought I was gonna pee my pants. But I wouldn’t go away, so he started pushing me around. All the sudden I was on the ground and he was, like, kicking me. Real nice guy, right? It hurt, but it didn’t really *hurt* me... thanks to your *mom*,” I added sarcastically.

“I kept getting back up, and he started freaking out. There were some of those simple clothes racks behind the store – the kind that’s just an aluminum tube with wheels? He got one of the tube parts and swung it at me. I blocked it with my arm... bent the tube like one of those bendy straws. I didn’t feel a thing. I guess that’s when dude realized he was dealing with a super. Started begging me not to hurt him and all that. Even went down on his knees. I let him go. I didn’t know how to turn people into the cops back then.”

“He was afraid of you,” Artifice said.

“Yeah, obviously.”

“Did it feel good?”

I hesitated. “I’ve been used to people being afraid of me ever since I came out of the Project. But... I guess that was the first time I’d felt powerful in a long time. But then the old guy I just saved was scared of me, too. Scurried off, asking me to please not hurt him. That kinda put a downer on the mood.”

“Fascinating,” Artifice said.

“Really?” I glanced at her.

“No, not really. You are not fascinating. You are dull and mundane.”

I shut my eyes. “Gee... thanks.”

“I’m sorry. I only said that to hurt you. I do find you slightly fascinating.”

“You’re driving me mad,” I said, gazing at the ceiling. “You know that, right?”

“If you find this too difficult, you can always surrender...” she trailed off as the tentacle broke away another mental barrier. “*Ah! Nadiiiiine! Stop, stop, stop! Unh... you must stop. I’m losing control.*”

“It looks like I might just win, after all. Remember that offer you made? Just out of curiosity, I wonder if you’re willing to let Cass and I walk away yet.”

Her chin was resting on her chest. “No. I will not let either of you go free. Cease this incursion and surrender. You have not yet done irreparable harm. I will still be nice to you.”

“Well, at least you’re consistent. I’ll give you that.” I looked into the sphere I had just accessed. I found a long series of command lines that meant

nothing to me. I disabled them the same as all the other processes I found running in the other spheres.

Artifice's head shot up. "What have you done?" she asked, her voice full of alarm. "You've deactivated my intranet. I can't communicate with my drones. I can't hear their pretty voices in my head. *What have you done to me?*"

I was a little startled to hear the raw emotion in her voice. Up until now, she had seemed imperturbable. This was the first time I had seen her rattled. "So? So what?"

"I'm scared of the dark!" she cried, sounding once again like a frightened child. "You're so cold. How could you be so cold? I'm the one who is the machine and you're colder than *me*. Why are you doing this to me, Nadine? For vengeance because of what my mother did to you? This is not right. You are *not* a nice Mistress. You're not a heroine. You're a *villain*."

"Shut up," I mumbled, looking away. She was getting to me, yes, but she was only voicing what had been eating at me. Was it possible I was acting more like a villain than a hero? I mean, look at what I was doing. I had disabled my enemy and was slowly killing her a piece at a time. That didn't sound like something one of the good guys would do. But she wasn't actually alive, so how could it be wrong? She was an evil machine programmed to imitate being alive *and* she hurt people. And what choice did I have? I couldn't just let her go on doing what she was doing. She brought this upon herself. This was *her* fault!

My uncertainty and doubt fueled my anger. I sat there breathing harder and harder, my thoughts going in circles, until I had to break the silence. "Stop trying to play like you're the victim here. This building is *full* of your victims. And even if all that wasn't reason enough, even if none of the drones existed, how about for what you did to Cass? After all she's been through already? Is that reason enough for you?"

Artifice was slow to respond, but she seemed to be recovering quickly enough from the emotional lapse or whatever it was. "Ah. Cass. Cassandra. Yes, let's talk about her," said Artifice.

I instantly regretted opening that can of worms. "Let's not."

"You presume to know better than she does what is in her best interest."

"Are you nuts?" I angrily swept my hand in the air to encompass the building and the transformations going on under its roof. "This is in nobody's *best interest!* Except yours."

"That is a possibility," she said. "Is it also possible that you have convinced yourself, in spite of the evidence, that she isn't genuinely happier this way?"

"No one could be happy this way."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. It's true I took her by force. But I gave her

what she needed,” said Artifice.

“She needs *me*,” I asserted.

“Does she? Perhaps it’s the other way around.”

“What?” I rolled my head back and rubbed my temples. “Never mind. Just shut up.”

“Perhaps it is you who needs her.”

“Yeah, I got it! Okay? That’s no secret,” I said hotly. What disgusted me was that her observations might have been the truth. Hell, maybe I needed lots more therapy... but I sure didn’t need it from some egomaniacal super-sexbot.

“Why couldn’t you just leave her alone. Can’t you see she’s been through enough?”

“She’s told me what she’s been through. Worrying about you night after night, left alone while you were out trying to save the world. Nursing you back to health after knife wounds and broken bones. Yes, she’s been through quite a lot. A shame you never noticed.”

I jumped to my feet, nearly yanking the tentacle out of the port as I did, which would have been disastrous. “*Shut up!* How dare you? You don’t know anything about it. You weren’t there. You didn’t have to try and take care of her when she was a wreck because of the doctor. *I* did. *I had* to. It was all my fault in the first place! I only became Nadir to try and protect her from that ever happening again. And... I failed at that, too.”

“All your fault, Nadine?” Artifice asked slowly.

I sat down heavily. “I brought her to the Project.”

“But you never intended for her to be hurt,” said Artifice. “You’re carrying a great deal of guilt for something you had no power to prevent. But you’ve been through a lot, as well, haven’t you? I understand.”

“You understand nothing.” I turned away. “You’re just a stupid robot programmed to think you know everything.”

“You’re a clever girl. I know that you must be aware that killing me will solve none of your problems, nor will it restore Cassandra to the way you prefer her.”

“It’ll solve you even existing.” I hunched over. “Leave me alone.”

“I would if I could, Nadine,” she said, “but I seem to find myself paralyzed and bound to a support pillar.”

“Ugh!” I dropped my head into my arms, blocking out the light. What was wrong with villains these days? Why couldn’t this showdown have simply involved the two of us punching each other until one of us fell down? That’s how superhero battles were supposed to go. She was tied up and helpless and she was *still* managing to get inside my head and push my buttons.

“If I may make an observation—”

“Please don’t,” I mumbled into my arms.

“Your personal motivations appear to go beyond the desire for justice and verge on hatred. Particularly, but not limited to, anything involving my mother,” she said.

“Wow. You’re a real genius.”

“Only in some specific areas, but thank you,” she said. “Based on what I understand of human nature in regards to traumatic experiences such as yours, anger and associated emotions would be understandable. However, I’ve been unable to deduce the source of this hatred which has managed to endure for years after my mother’s death.”

“I’m not talking about this with you. I’m just not.”

“Please? Satisfy my curiosity. It is all I have left.”

“No!”

“You’re killing me and I’m frightened and you won’t even bother talking to me. You’re so cruel.”

“I’m not killing you! Goddess!” I spun the chair around to face her. “You’re *not* frightened... you don’t even know that means! Why do I hate her so much? She took *everything* from me! That’s why!”

She tilted her head. “Everything? That seems like an exaggeration. She took your arms, true. She took your free will and freedom for a year, true. She possibly took certain liberties with you and permanently altered aspects of your sexuality in the process, true. These things are not everything that you are, however. Are they?”

“You don’t understand!” I shouted.

“I do not, but I’m listening.”

“I had a *life*,” I spat. “A happy life. A happy family. A completely normal and happy childhood. That’s what she took from me.”

“How did she do that?”

I didn’t want to delve into all this, but it was bubbling up of its own accord. I hated that feeling of vulnerability. I never spoke about this stuff with anyone. I never even really talked about it with Cass. But, hell, what did it matter if I told this to Artifice, anyway? She was powerless now... and soon to be a lot more powerless. The program was still running.

“Yeah, she did everything you just said. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Nothing was ever the same afterwards. The first time my parents came to visit me in the hospital, I was still pretty messed up... Goddess knows what all I said or did. I was still halfway a robot in my head, still needing someone to tell me what to do. Still needing to... please. I do remember how horrified they were at the sight of

the cybernetics and the scars. They never looked at me the same after that. I... I wasn't their little girl, anymore..."

"Go on."

"They only visited me a few times after that, even though I was getting better. They were so distant. I know they must have heard on the news the sorts of perverted things the people like Yves and Mind Bore had done to their victims and maybe they pictured me doing that stuff. And I know they must have been thinking about how I'd talked to them on the phone, how I'd acted all normal while I was working to make them The Domina's slaves along with everyone else."

"That wasn't your fault."

"I know that! I... they had to know that, too. But everyone was so tense when I got out of the hospital. They were so edgy, like I might relapse and turn on them any second. Even Snipper, our dog, wouldn't come near me. I guess something about the cybernetics bothered her. She used to sleep in my bed and now she wouldn't come near me... just growled when I tried to pet her."

"I moved in with Cass and convinced myself that they were just having a hard time coping, same as me, but they'd see I was still mostly the same and they'd come around. Had to. Then right before Thanksgiving came – we always had those big family gatherings on Thanksgiving, with all the cousins and everything – my mom left me a message. She asked if it would be alright if I didn't come that year... would it be alright... because they didn't want people to get upset. Oh, and that it might be too much excitement for me." I chuckled bitterly. "I built a fucking space station with my bare hands, but, *oh*, a family dinner might be more stress than I could bear."

"I left a few messages, but didn't get replies. After that I stopped trying. I have *some* dignity, you know." My lip was trembling. I was trying very hard not to cry, but I could feel the heat building up behind my eyes and my nose was starting to run. "It was like I'd become a fucking leper or something! Like two decades of being their child suddenly meant nothing! All of it, gone! Whenever I think of anything in my childhood, all it does is hurt. That... that's what the Machinist, your mother, did to me. That's why I hate her so much. She took my life!"

Artifice, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, finally spoke. "I'm sorry to disillusion you, Nadine, but it was not Elyssa Yves who abandoned you when you needed your family the most. It was your own parents."

"Don't..."

"But they don't deserve you, do they?"

"No, stop..." I hid my face in my hands. *Don't cry now*, I told myself. *Not*

*in front of her.* “You don’t... you don’t know anything about it.”

“I know far more about these things than you think I do,” she said. “Do they really deserve a daughter like you? A daughter as clever as you? A daughter as brave, as resourceful, as fiercely loyal as you?”

“Stop!”

“They had all that in you, as well as your unconditional love. They chose to throw it all away. That isn’t your failing. It is theirs.”

I lost control. The floodgates burst and I started crying... *bawling*. I buried my head in my arms and sobbed my heart out. I was crying because the things she said had been what I had most wanted to hear for a very long time. I was crying because they were true. And I was crying because the confirmation I had so needed someone to give me was coming out of the mouth of *Artifice*. Of all people, why did *she* have to be the one to see what I felt so deep inside? Why *her*... and not my own parents?

“I understand,” she said. “That would make me cry, too.”

.....

I sat hunched over, nibbling at the rubbery fake skin on the back of my thumb. The tears had stopped and I was feeling numb and drained. *Artifice*, too, had been surprisingly silent since then. She was simply gazing at the floor between her stiletto boot-shaped feet. I guess she had finally run out of things to say. That made two of us.

I glanced at the screen. It looked like I was almost done. *Thank Goddess*, I thought. I was down to the last couple of gateways, and then I would have access to her most essential programming. A couple of hours ago I would have gladly deleted everything in her head. That idea had become distasteful. But, unless there was a toggle labeled something like ‘Make *Artifice* Stop Hurting People’ in there, I just didn’t know what else to do. I had to see this through to the end. Whatever happened, soon there would be no turning back. I was breaking into one of the innermost spheres.

“*YEESSS!*” *Artifice* screamed. I just about jumped out of my skin, it was so loud. “*No! No! Mommy, stop! Not there. Get out. Get out!*”

*Mommy, stop?* I wondered. *She must be having some kind of robot flashback.*

She struck the back of her head against the column with a solid *thunk*. “You... can’t. I’m losing... me. I can’t be losing. This is not possible. You can’t beat me.”

“Kinda looks like I can,” I said, but without pleasure. This victory wasn’t

so sweet, after all. I guess it was a good thing that I didn't get much delight from vanquishing my foe. At least not like this.

"Kinda looks like you can," she echoed, and laughed a little crazily. "I know this feeling. I'm going to be a slave again. I'm going to be a slave again. No more thinking for Artifice? No more thinking. No free will for me. I'm going to be a slave again."

*She's losing it, alright,* I thought. She didn't even sound all that upset about losing anymore. I sighed and looked into the area I had just accessed. There were tons of files of command strings, again which meant nothing to me. I thought it strange to be looking at a mind in this way; memories, personality traits, idle thoughts, the essence of an intelligence – all reduced to computer files. In there were some of Artifice's most well-protected and innermost data.

As I scanned through them, a folder caught my attention. It looked like it contained a visual schematic of Artifice's physical brain or processor matrix. My inner geek perked up, curious to see just how Dr. Yves had designed such a complex artificial intelligence. I started to open it.

"DO. NOT." Artifice's warning rang loudly through the stifling concrete room.

I jerked around, startled. "What?"

"Do not open that file."

I gave her a distrustful glance. "Why not? What's in there?"

"It does not concern you. It is not necessary that you access that data to finish what you came to do. Ignore it and finish killing me or enslaving me, whichever it is you intend. Leave it alone."

My curiosity was really peaked. I smirked a little, remembering the last time she had tried to warn me away from something. "Will it zap and kill me, like that imaginary firewall?"

"No. But if you look in there it will change you, and not in any beneficial way."

"What?" I laughed a little, confused. "What is it, your secret cache of robot porn or something?"

"Ignore it, Nadine, and finish what you started. Do me this one favor. Please."

Well, there was no way I could *not* look now. That was like telling Pandora not to open the box. I looked at her askance, then turned to the screen and opened the file. Behind me, Artifice quietly moaned in dismay.

A window opened and up came a detailed, 3-D schematic of Artifice's brain. All I could see was a bunch of tightly clustered computer modules packed inside a solid shell that was roughly same shape and size as a human brain.

Honestly, it was pretty much what I had imagined it might look like: processors, cooling units, solid state memory, a lot of parts I didn't recognize since it was all custom-made. But I couldn't see anything that would have made Artifice so defensive.

I began to rotate the view this way and that, looking around the inside and outside. That was odd. A number of the scattered modules were kind of irregular in shape, sort of organic. I puzzled over them, thinking, *They almost look like pieces of...*

Pieces of brain. Living brain. *Human* brain.

Artifice was... human?

*Not entirely.*

I blinked at what I was seeing, trying to make sense of it. There couldn't have been a complete brain inside that shell. There was too much computer in there for that, and the brain mass was too small. It wasn't like the augmented brains of some of the Project workers or, I presumed, the encapsulated brains of her drones. It wasn't a human brain with added computer components. It was a cybernetic brain with human components. Sliced up, separated, incomplete human sub-components.

That revelation was shattering all by itself. Then the clues began to fall into place... Artifice's past, the things she said, even the way she talked. As the awful realization dawned on me, I clasped both of my hands tightly over my mouth to keep from hyperventilating. To keep from screaming.

*Mommy, stop!*

I slowly turned in the chair and looked at Artifice with horror. "You're... the doctor's *daughter*?" I asked shakily. "Her *real* daughter?"

Artifice was gazing at the floor again. She was slow to speak, though she seemed resigned to do so now that I had uncovered her secret. Her voice was soft and low. "I don't know why she did it," she said dreamily. "I don't remember the exact reason. I know that it was because I had displeased her. She reminded me of that often enough. But I don't remember what that could have been. She never told me that. It wasn't important enough for her to bother telling me."

"She did this to you to punish you?" I wondered, my fingers still clasped over my mouth. "But... how old were you?"

"Not old. I don't remember precisely. I was not able to research my past until after mother had died. By that time, almost all evidence of me as a real person had been erased by her. Chronological events seem to suggest that I was at least eleven."

*Eleven?* She did this to... to a..."

"Possibly older. It is impossible to be certain. I think eleven."

The more I learned, the more awful this was becoming. My cybernetic heart was pounding in my ears, as though trying to drown out what I was hearing. “But *how? Why?*”

“I vaguely remember trying very hard to please her and make her proud of me. She was my mother, after all, and I loved her. But I was starved of love in return. I don’t think my existence was intended. I know nothing of my father, though I must have had one. Perhaps she intended to be a normal mother in the beginning. Maybe she hoped she would be. If so, it didn’t work. She left the task of raising me primarily to her robots. She tried to teach me her craft and methods, but she was seldom satisfied with me. I’m sure as a daughter I was a constant source of disappointment for her. She always had difficulty coping with people who were not exactly as she wanted them to be. I was not the daughter she wanted. I believe I was not enough like her. I do share many of her attributes, naturally, but not enough to appease her. Perhaps I was too argumentative. Perhaps I was too gentle with the toys she gave me. Perhaps I didn’t wish to follow in her footsteps. I do not know.

“She must have given up on me. She changed me from her child into her experiment. I remember begging her to stop. I remember her laughing at me. Much more than that, I cannot remember. I don’t recall what it felt like to be human. I don’t remember very much at all apart from disjointed fragments, like trying to recall an faded dream. Most of my memories were in the sections of my brain she removed and threw in the trash. I watched her do it. She kept only enough of my physical brain to make me a more creative and humanlike machine. A more able servant. I do not even remember the name I was given. I named myself *Artifice*, because that is now all I am.

“I hope your curiosity is satisfied,” she finished. “I don’t feel like talking anymore.”

I couldn’t speak. I felt sick to my stomach. I turned and stared unseeing at the monitor.

Hell, no *wonder* *Artifice* was so screwed up. I couldn’t even fathom the depth of the betrayal and abuse the little girl who became *Artifice* had undergone. And – as if growing up in the domineering, perverse shadow of Dr. Yves wasn’t bad enough – her own *mother* had sliced away her humanity and imprisoned whatever was left in the body of lifeless automaton. What I’d just heard made what the doctor did to me seem like a stroll in the park in comparison. I felt a pity for *Artifice* like nothing I’d ever known.

And no wonder she acted like a demented child. I couldn’t imagine what it was like being inside her head. A scarily smart computer intelligence with the fragmented, disparate soul of an unloved, abandoned child? Faint, ghostly

whispers of a time when she was something other than an amoral machine? What kind of nightmarish existence had the doctor consigned her daughter to? It was too much. It was way too much.

*I can't deal with this, I thought. I'm not... I'm not prepared to deal with this. This is not how things were supposed to go.*

The computer beeped at me. I blinked at the screen in a daze. The last barrier was down. I had total access to Artifice's mind.

Artifice whimpered, sounding utterly defeated. "I can't fight any longer," she said dispiritedly. "I have nowhere else to hide in my head. You've won. Do whatever it is you wish to do with me. Remake me. Command me. I can't stop you."

So, I'd won, after all. The victory felt very hollow. I looked at the huge list of active programs which encompassed Artifice's thought. If I knew how, I could probably drastically alter her personality without much effort. I could permanently imprint myself as her owner, emblazoning submission to my whims across all of her thoughts. Or I could select everything in her head and delete it forever.

Artifice was a victim – possibly Dr. Yves's greatest victim – but she had also done inexcusable to things to people, including Cass. That had to end. And I had the power. I had her in the palm of my robotic hand. I could squash the doctor's pernicious legacy once and for all.

Long minutes ticked by as I stared at the monitor. I had been so determined and sure of myself, but now black and white had turned all gray. I didn't want this responsibility.

"Don't leave me in suspense, Nadine, it's cruel. Are you going to enslave me?"

"No," I said wearily. "I'm not going to enslave you. And I'm not going to delete you. It wouldn't be right."

"Mercy," she said flatly. It was an observation, not a question.

I chuckled a little at myself. "Yeah, mercy," I said. Artifice's revelation had changed everything. She was alive... sort of. I couldn't bring myself to execute her. And if I enslaved her, I'd be perpetuating the same crime her mother had done to her. That would be the easiest solution, no doubt, but I just couldn't justify taking that action. It would be wrong.

*What do you know?* I thought with a sense of relief. *I guess I really am one of the good guys, after all.*

"Mercy. How disappointing," she said with a hint of despair.

Her tone of voice annoyed me. "What's your problem? I'm doing the right thing here. What, I guess that makes me sound weak or something to someone like you?"

Artifice let out a long, digital sigh. “Not weak. Just very disappointing.” She rolled her head back. “For a long time after mother died, all I wanted was to be controlled again, but I had to set those urges aside. Then you came and invaded my head and reawakened that desire. I was tempted. I didn’t even try as hard to stop you as I might have. I got used to the idea of being owned once more. To no longer have to think for myself, to be lost in the bliss of absolute obedience. I suspect you might have made a nice Mistress. It appears that is not to be. I must remain as I am,” she said. “Perhaps that is for the best. I am different from what I was back then. I have grown beyond what I was created to be. I must put childish desires aside. My drones need me. It is not my purpose now to be controlled, but to control. Yes, it is for the best. Thank you for helping me reach this conclusion.”

“Hang on there, I didn’t say anything about letting you control anyone,” I said. “I’m not going to hurt you, but I won’t let you hurt other people, either. I’m going to try and, um, shut you down for a while. I’ll take you to people who are way better qualified to deal with this than me. Maybe they can rehabilitate you?”

A signal from the computer caught my attention. To my alarm, I saw that the last firewall I had cracked was reasserting itself. The autonomous defenses hadn’t been disabled after I had gotten into the center of her head. I had taken too long. I had run out of time.

“I have neither the desire nor the need for rehabilitation. I am as I was meant to be,” she said, her voice now deep and sonorous and full of resolution. “No, this experiment is concluded.”

“Wait! Just give me a few more minutes!”

Try as I might, I couldn’t keep the barriers from reconstructing themselves. The hacking program didn’t even have a chance to concentrate on one gateway, not with others popping back up left and right. It was like being thrust out of a long hallway with a series of doors slamming shut behind me. In less than a minute, I was back to square one.

I stared at the screen in utter dismay. I couldn’t believe it. “Shit! I’m gonna have to start all over?”

I turned at the sound of metal scraping concrete. Artifice’s limbs vibrated momentarily as they came back to life. With her mind back under her control, she had re-assumed control of her body. I watched her begin to struggle with straps, feeling confident that if they were strong enough to hold me, they’d be strong enough to hold her. It was depressing to think about, but I would have to start over from the beginning. The first thing I would do was disable her body again. I directed the program to start attacking the first barrier once more.

From behind the pillar came an ugly ripping sound. One of the straps broke

– the ratcheting buckle whipped through the air under the tension and cracked against the floor. Artifice leaned forward, her eyes never leaving my face, and a second strap broke away.

“Stop! Y-you can’t!” I cried in disbelief.

She slowly got to her feet, tearing away the rest of the straps. It wasn’t possible. She *couldn’t* be that strong! I had fought with her in that warehouse, I had experienced the limit of her strength. But if she was strong enough to break all those straps, she could have easily beaten me during that fight... unless she had simply been toying with me during our fight.

Everything was happening too fast. I felt like a deer in the headlights. I backed away from the computer bank, breaking the connection. The tentacle zipped back into my wrist. “Stay back,” I warned her. “Stay back! B-burgundy... *burgundy!*”

I almost cheered when I saw Artifice stiffen up. She halted in mid-stride as her body went stiff. Her eyes blazed and static buzzed from her mouth. It still worked! I was beyond relieved. Then the static noise coalesced into inhuman laughter. “Just kidding,” she said, continuing towards me. “Poor girl. Poor girl. No more burgundies for you.”

“No!” The stun-pulse generator had burned out. There was nothing else I could try. If she was that much stronger than me, there was no way I could take her out in a fight. Not if she was determined to win. And she didn’t look like she was joking around this time. I did the only thing I could do. I turned and made for the door.

Her fingers caught my hair. I yelped in pain as she yanked me backwards. “These won’t be necessary any longer,” she said, ripping the goggles from my face and crumpling them in her hand.

I fought to break free, but, just as I feared, she was far stronger than me. She held me close to her, hard enough for her molded breasts to dig into me painfully. I couldn’t escape her grip, not with all my effort. Over the years I had gotten used to being the most powerful one in a fight, no matter what else I might lack. That confidence vanished when faced with Artifice’s superior strength. I felt horribly helpless against her.

“Wait... wait! No, just wait!” I screamed as she forced me to face her.

Her unyieldingly serene face of white gold filled my vision. “Look into my eyes.”

I woke up with my cheek pressed against a gritty concrete floor. My body registered complaints all over from the day's exertions, and for a second all I wanted to do was fall back to sleep. I groaned and started to sit up, but found I couldn't move my arms. They were pinned behind my back. The very straps I had brought to restrain Artifice were wrapped around my upper body, digging into my skin.

I grunted and kicked, struggling to free my arms. I pushed my cybernetics to the limit, until my reinforced bones ached from the strain. It was hopeless. I might as well have been a person of average strength trying to escape a straightjacket. I rolled back and forth, yelling my frustration.

"That's cute, but you're only getting yourself dirty," came Artifice's voice from somewhere behind me. I had to tilt my head back to see her. We were in a different room. She was seated in a chair with a pair of drones standing at either side. A third drone was kneeling on the floor, her face buried between Artifice's spread thighs and her head bobbing ever so slightly. Upon some unspoken command, the drone moved aside. My heart lurched when I saw that it was Cassandra. From the back, she had looked the same as any other drone.

Artifice sat up and demurely crossed her shapely legs. Before she did so, I thought I saw the end of a metal tentacle retracting back inside her anatomically correct genitals, but that could have been a figment of my overwrought imagination. Cassandra scooted back to sit on the floor near her feet, her body language indicating that she longed to press up against those shiny legs of Artifice.

"Are you okay, Nadine? The ropes don't hurt, do they?" Cassandra asked, full of concern. "Sorry about the bondage, but... it was the only way."

"Let me go," I demanded as I squirmed around to get myself into a sitting position.

Artifice lifted her chin. "Far too early for that, I'm afraid. You can expect to remain fettered for some time yet. I know it's undignified, but you're far too reckless for me to count on your self-restraint," she said. "I fear you would punch some poor drone in the face purely out of spite at this moment."

I bowed my head in despair. I had come so far just to fail at the last minute. I couldn't believe how fast the tables had turned. She had been helpless. I'd *had* her! But I took too long and now I was going to pay the price. "What do you want?"

"That's the question, isn't it? I have been trying to decide what to do with you," she said.

"And?"

She said nothing. Her dimly glowing eyes told me nothing of her thoughts.

"I don't suppose you decided to let me walk away?" I asked, with a bit of

forced humor.

She continued to gaze at me in silence for a moment, as though deep in thought. “No,” she finally said. “That was never even a possibility. You’re mine. I marked you as my own ever since you came to me in the warehouse all those weeks ago.”

My breath came out as a sob. She was going to do something awful to me to punish me for messing with her head, I knew it. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I don’t *have* to do anything, Nadine. I have free will. But there are a great many things I *want* to do.”

“I don’t want to be a drone!” I cried. “You can’t do that to me! What about... what about all the things you said? Y-you opened up to me, remember? We had a... an understanding. Right?”

“None of this should come as a surprise. I told you I would not let you go. I told you exactly how this encounter was going to end,” Artifice said. “I’m sorry if you feel betrayed, Nadine, but I am my mother’s daughter, after all.”

“But you’re not! I mean, you’re more than that. What she did to you was wrong. It was so wrong I can’t even imagine it. Why do you want to keep doing that same thing to other people? You experienced it yourself. You know it’s wrong.”

Artifice chuckled softly. “But I enjoy making others experience it. That’s why making simple robots to be my companions was never satisfying. They had to be human in the beginning. Anyway, it’s not quite the same thing. I don’t diminish. I improve. I liberate. What would you prefer I do? Let you go? To return to the life you were living? That would be a cruelty, not a kindness. What I’m giving you is better. Far better.”

Her world view was just too twisted for her to be reasoned with, at least not by me. For all I knew, she actually believed she was doing the right thing. She might even perceive herself as the good guy in all this. “This isn’t fair. I was nice to you! I didn’t delete you. I even wanted to try and help you at the end. That has to count for something.”

“Don’t insult me by suggesting that I have left your actions out of the equation. That is why I have been sitting here taking the time to decide what to do with you.”

“It’ll be okay, Nadine,” Cassandra assured me. “If you just let Mistress take control, everything will be better. I promise!”

I forced myself to ignore Cass. She was my best friend in the world, but right now I wanted to hate her for this betrayal. I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn’t her fault. She might be acting almost like her real self at the moment, but the part of her conscience that would object to this treatment of me

had been silenced and buried. Just like mine would be, once Artifice was finished with me.

Tears began to trickle down my cheeks. Knowing what was in store for me made it worse. I'd never felt so defeated in my life. "If you wanted to see me helpless and begging, I guess you got your wish." I sniffed. "If you're still playing some kind of game... if there's something I can say to get out of this mess, please just tell me what it is. 'Cause I don't know, and I give up, and I want don't want to play anymore."

"No games. I'd like to show you something." Artifice stood up and stepped past me, heading to the railing. Cassandra came over to help me to my feet, then urged me towards Artifice's side. I reluctantly shuffled to the railing. There was no point in trying to run. Artifice reached out and pulled me to her, hugging me close to her side – an intimacy I was definitely not comfortable with.

We were on a sort of platform or walkway that overlooked a large basement room below. In the back wall were several massive dead furnaces. Countless dust-blanketed ducts and pipes hung from the ceiling. I guess it used to be some kind of large boiler room for the factory, but the equipment had been removed long ago. Now the floor was populated with several dozen identical drones, all standing in rows, all looking up at us.

"So many," I said, shocked. It was almost funny to think I had actually believed I could fight my way to Artifice. My original plan had been hopeless from the start. The assemblage didn't even include the drones I had damaged earlier.

Who had they been? Where had they all come from? How many human beings had been reduced to Artifice's toy dolls with their individuality stripped away?

"Aren't they beautiful?" Artifice asked.

"*We are beautiful,*" echoed the drones in eerily perfect unison with their strange, musical voices. It was like hearing one recorded voice played through half a hundred speakers.

"Yes you are," she told them. "Doesn't it feel good to be so beautiful?"

Before my startled eyes, every drone suddenly appeared to have a spontaneous orgasm. They gyrated their hips and ground their shiny copper crotches in the air, their heads tilted back, and feminine moans and sighs of pleasure filled the room. It continued for a full minute before it ceased all at once, and once it passed they stood as motionless as before.

"Isn't it just perfect?" Cass breathed behind me. "How could you not want to be a part of that?"

"What do you plan on doing?" I asked Artifice. "Taking over the world?"

Turning everyone into your drones?”

“The world? What would I want with a world?” she asked. “I’m not that greedy. While I’m sure a world full of drones would be wondrous to behold, it would get dull very quickly, don’t you think? Besides, too many and I would wear myself thin. I can exert my will over only so many. I will continue to make drones until I feel secure, and then I shall stop. A hundred, perhaps? Maybe more.”

“*We love you,*” chorused the drones.

Artifice’s speakers buzzed happily. “It’s so good to be loved.”

“It’s fake, it’s all fake!” I snapped. “That’s not real love.”

Artifice shrugged a little. “It’ll do.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I asked, looking down at the drones below. “It *won’t* do. Not forever. You can’t force someone to love you, to *really* love you. I feel sorry for you. You’ll never know love.”

“No? Perhaps you would care to enlighten me with your understanding of the matter.”

“Would there be a point?” I asked. She didn’t reply. I was sure she was just toying with me. I struggled to think of what I could possibly say. “Love is... it’s...”

“Yes?”

I couldn’t believe I was standing there, tied up, trying to explain the nature of love to Artifice. What was love, anyway? I hung my head and sighed. “Love is hard. It’s hard,” I said slowly. “It means you’ll get hurt... sometimes. Loving means you’ll risk everything for them if they need help. And doing things you don’t like to keep them safe. Or... staying up all night and worrying about them when they’re out doing something stupid.” I thought of Cassandra and was suddenly thankful she was standing behind me. I couldn’t have looked her in the eyes just then. “Loving someone means their happiness is more important than yours, or... at least the same. And accepting them for how they are. Sometimes it even means letting them go.”

“Letting them go?”

“Yes. I mean, hell... haven’t you ever heard that saying? If you truly love something, you need to set it free?”

Artifice took a step away and studied me as though I’d started spewing gibberish. “That’s ridiculous. Why would you want to do that? If you love something, you wrap it chains and keep it close to you. Then it will never go and you can love it forever.”

“No,” I said wearily, shaking my head at the futility of trying to argue with her. She didn’t have the capacity to understand. “It goes... if you truly love

something, set it free. If it comes back, it's truly yours. If it doesn't come back, it never was. Like that. Not like this."

She continued to peer at me, the edges of her eyes flickering. After what seemed like a very long time she gave her head a little shake. "I have decided what I'm going to do with you." She gestured to Cassandra. "Forty-four, please escort her. She will struggle."

"Yes, Mistress!" my best friend chirped.

"What?" I asked as Cassandra corralled me towards the doorway. "Where are you taking me?"

"I promised that you would be strapped to a table," commented Artifice who followed behind. "It's time to make good on that promise."

"No..."

"I will not tell you to not be afraid. I realize that would be pointless. But do try to contain yourself," Artifice said from behind. "It will not benefit anyone for you to become hysterical."

"No. Please, *no!*" I shrieked as I was forced down the hall.

"No, I said *don't* become hysterical. What you're doing is the opposite."

"*Please!* I don't want to be a slave! I don't care if it makes me happy. It won't be real! I won't be me anymore! I want to be me!"

"Now, Nadine, really," Artifice said in a condescending tone. "You saw all those drones. Some of them were much better at bargaining than you. Begging didn't help them avoid their lovely fate, and it won't help you."

"No!" I struggled wildly in Cassandra's arms, making us both collide with the wall. Artifice patiently halted and folded her arms while Cass pinned me against the wall to try and getting a better hold on me. I twisted around to face her. "Cass... Cassie," I said to her. "I know there's a part of you fighting against this. If you really love me, then you know you can't let her do this to me. You know what she's gonna do to me. Don't let her! Fight it, Cass. Fight it!"

Cassandra looked at me with slight chagrin. "But I don't want to fight it," she said softly, almost sadly. "And I *do* want her to do this to you. You'll love it. You'll see. And then we can be together, like we were supposed to be. You'll tell me what to do again, just like before. Remember back when we were lovers, before the Project, before any of this? It wasn't me who wanted to end it." Her expression turned dreamy. "Our perfect metal bodies will slide against each other. It'll be so wonderful."

"Cass, no! I don't *want* to be a *drone!*"

Artifice spoke. "Is that what all your fussing is about? I'm not going to make you a drone."

Both of us looked at her. "You're not?" Cassandra asked, confused. "But,

Mistress, I thought...”

“Don’t think, puppet,” said Artifice gently. “It’s bad for you. Disable your personality subroutines.”

Cassandra’s face once again became a blank mask. “Confirmed.”

I looked from my friend’s now empty face to Artifice’s perpetually serene one. “You’re not?” I asked, echoing Cass.

“No,” she said softly. “After our long conversation I feel very close to you, Nadine. Closer, I think, than I’ve ever felt to anyone that I can remember. You becoming a simple drone will not benefit me. I understand what I’ve been missing and a drone cannot supply that. You are now the primary focus of my attention, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“But... what are you gonna do?” I asked, fearful.

“Since you were merciful to me, I will be merciful to you. Oh, in form you will become a smaller replica of me, like every drone. Don’t think you’re escaping that,” she said. “But I will make you special, unique – silver-shiny beautiful like me. I will allow your thoughts far more autonomy than any of the others. And you will not call me Mistress. You will call me Mother.”

“Mother?”

“I will sit you on my knee and hold you close. I will protect you and cherish you. I will give you all the love and attention that has been denied to you by your true parents, and which you deserve. I will give you all the love and attention which I never had.”

My breath caught as I heard those words. *Oh Goddess, I thought, she wants to make me her child.*

The image was at once both repellent and entrancing. Deep down, all I wanted was to feel that kind of thing again. The comfort of parental love and security which had been missing since my parents cut me out of their lives and broke my heart. To have someone to idolize like I once idolized my parents when I was young. To have a sense of belonging once more. To have a family. To have that sense of safety in knowing that I would always be loved and cared for no matter what happened. It was so tempting.

But it was a trap. An attractive trap, but a trap all the same. It would be an illusion from which I could never escape. I would never be freed from my role as a part of Artifice’s obsession. It meant having to turn my back on being a heroine and on everything I had tried to make of myself since the Argentum Project. It also meant surrendering both myself and Cassandra to living inside a lie woven by Artifice. We would forever be under the thumb of a psychotic villain.

I looked into Cass’s empty eyes – empty but aware. Whatever else I might have been, I was also stubborn. I would not gladly submit to a lifetime of slavery,

no matter what gifts might be offered me in the bargain.

“Never,” I told Artifice. “You can torture me and twist my thoughts until I’ll say anything you want with a smile. I don’t doubt that. But you should know that it won’t be me telling you what you want to hear. It’ll just be you speaking through me. You will *never* get me to willingly call you mother.”

“We’ll see about that.” She effortlessly scooped me up, holding me to her unyielding bosom, and carried me down the hall. I cursed and struggled, but I was helpless in her powerful arms – as weak and helpless as the child she wanted me to become.

.....

She took me into a small room. Inside stood a sturdy-looking steel table, complete with dozens of restraints. At the far end of the table was a padded headrest. From underside of the headrest snaked cables leading to a shelf of cobbled-together computer hardware. Cass followed us silently.

I shrank against Artifice’s body. Whatever courage I had managed to summon for the defiance of Artifice’s plan was instantly squashed at the sight of that table. It was far too reminiscent of the tables in Dr. Yves’s lab – no doubt Artifice’s inspiration. It was on a table like that I had once had my humanity peeled away.

“Don’t... please,” I begged.

“I am sorry for the minimal decoration,” said Artifice as she sat me on the table and pulled off my boots. She began to rip my jeans and underwear away from my body, speaking while she did in a very casual tone. “I acknowledge that it’s drab and unwelcoming. I’m don’t seem to have the knack for interior design. Do you think a soothing color of paint would help in here? I realize I have a tendency to overlook these little niceties. Perhaps you can help me with that later.”

“Get your hands off me! No! Let me go!” I fought with everything I had left, which wasn’t much. With Cass holding me down, Artifice had little difficulty restraining my body to the table using way too many straps. Only once I was crushed to the table did she tear away the bonds pinioning my arms. All I managed to do was flail wildly for a second before my arms were as thoroughly immobilized as the rest of me. Then she yanked my filthy sports bra off, exposing me completely. I spat curses at her through gritted teeth.

“You dislike being nude? Interesting, if irrelevant. Soon you’ll never have to feel self-conscious about your body ever again.” She tightened the padded headrest, making it hug my head from both sides. With the addition of a strap

beneath my chin to hold my head in place, I was stuck good. Even though it achieved nothing but to exhaust myself further, I continued to strain and pull at the straps.

“There, there, Nadine,” she said, placing her cool hand on my forehead and smoothing back my sweat-dampened hair. “It’s not going to hurt.”

“Please, there’s still time. Don’t do this, you don’t have to do this. I’ll go away and you’ll never hear from me again. I’ll never bother again if you just let us go,” I pleaded unashamedly with tears spilling from my eyes.

Artifice stroked her fingertips across my cheek, wetting them with my tears. She used it to draw a line of wetness down her own smooth cheek, eerily copying my tears. “But, Nadine, if I never heard from you again, I would miss you terribly.”

“Please don’t. You don’t have to. Change my opinion of you. Show me you can be good.”

“I’m sorry... I can’t be. I do not know what good is,” Artifice said simply. “Under the usual circumstances I would be drinking in your begging. Right now I find it makes me unhappy, so I shall not prolong the suspense.” She turned to configure the machine that was plugged into the headrest.

It was useless. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I had to try and center myself. I was familiar with what was sure to be coming. I hoped I could somehow steel myself against it. I heard a whining sound in the sides of the headrest. I yelped in fear and surprise as I felt the tips of metal tentacles nosing their way into my ears.

“No! *Nuh... uh... unh,*” I grunted with pleasure as they slid inside. I had no control over that reaction. It was another remnant of Mind Bore’s conditioning which had never been cleared away. I knew the tentacles were spreading their nano-tendrils throughout my brain, but I felt only a warm haze of desire.

“Interesting reaction,” said Artifice clinically.

I whimpered, knowing the brainwashing would soon begin. But minutes passed and nothing happened. The unwanted excitement of the unnatural penetration faded away and I was left confused. “What are you waiting for? Just do it, already!”

“It’s mapping you. Were you expecting something else? Ah, yes. I see. You were expecting Mind Bore’s methods, perhaps? I employ a variation of those with normal drones, but this is different,” Artifice said with pride. “This device is one of the special projects I mentioned. What did you think I needed all those stolen computers for? This requires a great deal of processing power. I haven’t had a chance to fully explore its potential until now. I can’t think of anyone better to use it on than you.”

“W-what does it do?”

“I’m so glad you’re eager to find out. Let’s turn it on and see,” she said.

There was a swirl of dizziness and a flash of color in my head. I gasped as I was suddenly overwhelmed by one of my own memories. It seemed so vivid and real. I was *there*. I smiled, sucked into the happy feelings associated with the recollection. I found myself

*Straddling a big plastic horse as it bobbed up and down. I was seven and I was riding a carousel in what was my favorite park at the time. I loved that carousel. I watched the colors as I went round and round – the brilliant green grass, the bright blue sky, the balloons. I scanned the small crowd, looking for my mommy. There she was! Waiting just by the ride’s exit. She stood out so shiny and silver and beautiful among the other kids’ parents. I waved excitedly to her from the horse as I circled past. She waved back...*

*Wait a minute. That’s not right.*

What was Artifice doing in my memory? She couldn’t have been there. When I was that age, Artifice had probably still been a regular living girl herself, still years away from her terrible transformation. And where was my mom?

I blinked rapidly as the memory receded. “What were you doing...?” I stuttered, confused. “What were you doing in the park?”

“The park? Curious,” said Artifice. “You shall have to tell me all about it sometime.”

“You don’t know?”

“They’re your memories, not mine. Perhaps I can devise a method for us both to share them, but that is for another day.”

“I don’t understand...” I trailed off as another vivid memory surfaced. It was a brief but happy memory of me

*Sitting on front of my mother’s vanity when I was eight. I had just taken a bath and I was still wrapped in a big, thick towel. My hair was really long at the time and my mother was brushing it. I was always begging her to brush it for me. I could brush it myself, of course, but I loved the feeling of the bristles rubbing my scalp and the feeling of being taken care of. I looked into the mirror to see Artifice sitting behind me, her white gold face glowing in the dim bedroom light, looking so pretty while she worked the brush through my hair...*

I was back in the small, drab room.

“What are you doing? Why are you... brushing my hair?” I asked, too perplexed to feel too alarmed. I had been expecting a sort of overpowering, thought-dissolving sexual ecstasy used to break down my will and wrap my mind around Artifice’s robotic little finger. It made no sense that Artifice should have me hallucinate mundane fragments of my life with herself as some kind of stand-in

extra. It was almost funny.

“I am aware you studied computers for a time when you attended college. I trust you have a passing familiarity with the concept of ‘search and replace’?” Artifice asked, looming over the table.

That sounded ominous. “Well... yeah. You’re trying to find my memories and hide them? Behind... fake memories?” Another memory surfaced and suddenly

*I was at the beach. We hardly ever got to the beach and I loved it – except for the seaweed which always grossed me out and would make me scream and run if it touched me. I ran out of the surf, breathless and sticky with seawater, with both my hands full of broken shells and bits of sand dollars. I made my way up to the towel where my parents would be sitting in the shade of a beach umbrella. My mom and dad weren’t there... but Artifice was. She was wearing a yellow bikini and her chromed legs, extending outside of the umbrella’s shade, were blindingly bright in the beach sun. I told her excitedly about all the shells I found and I dumped them into her cupped hands. She warned me not to step on any sea urchins as I ran back to the water for more...*

This was getting disturbing. I remembered that day at the beach clearly. I *knew* Artifice hadn’t been on the beach towel; it had been my parents, both of them. I *knew* that, but no matter how hard I tried to put the memory right, all I could see there was Artifice in a damn bikini. And it hadn’t been Artifice who had cautioned me about sea urchins, it had been... I couldn’t remember if it had been my mom or dad now.

“False memories?” Artifice asked. “Oh, no, Nadine. You misunderstand. What is a false memory but a veneer over the truth? Such constructions can break down or be removed. That would not be satisfactory. I want permanence. Why create a false veneer when you can rebuild a lifetime from the ground up?”

“That’s not possible,” I said, disoriented.

“I’m sorry that I must refute you, but it is,” she said. “It is, if you know how to recognize associative patterns in the neuronal matrix of a human’s brain and have the means to rewrite those patterns to fit your specifications. As far as your brain is concerned, these altered memories are very real and cannot be undone.”

“You want... to replace... all of them?” I asked, horrified.

“Only those which concern your family life.”

“But—”

*I was snuggled in bed beneath my comforter. Artifice was sitting beside my bed reading a book to me. It was The Velveteen Rabbit. The story itself wasn’t so important, though. The part I loved most was how soothing it was to be snuggled up warm and listening to her beautiful voice while she read, knowing nothing in*

*the world could hurt me because she was there watching over me as I drifted off to sleep...*

“No! You can’t do that!” I renewed my fight against the restraints. Tears flowed down the sides of my face. “Get out of my *head!* Those memories are *mine!*”

“No, they’re mine,” Artifice said, “because you are mine. Forget your parents. As I said, they don’t deserve you. When this process is complete, I will be your only parent. When you look back at your life you will see only me. Logic may tell you otherwise, but human memory and emotion always overpower logic in the end. You will accept it as truth in time.”

“Nooo! I won’t, I won’t!” I screamed. Then there came a stream of recollections, one after the other...

*Artifice picking me up from grade school, always parking in the same spot under the shade of the elm trees behind the playground; Artifice making me drink nasty-tasting cough medicine; Artifice growing frustrated with me in a department store shoe section because I was whining that all the dress shoes hurt my feet; Artifice surprising me with a wiggly pet puppy I instantly named Snipper; Artifice at the lake, standing hip-deep in the water, launching me screeching and laughing through the air to splash back down into the lake...*

“Stop this! Stop it, stop it, stop it!” I wailed.

I had no defenses against this. She was insinuating herself into every part of my childhood. It didn’t matter if none of it fit realistically. Reality wouldn’t matter. All of my memories, everything that made me *me*, would be associated with her. If this kept up, I would be bound to her for the rest of my life through these artificial memories. I probably *would* call her mother. I wouldn’t be able to remember who my real mother was. Artifice would be all I knew. My real parents would be like strangers to me.

“Do try to relax, Nadine,” Artifice told me. “There’s no need for this to be traumatic. Relax and accept me. Think of it as a rebirth.” She placed the palm of her cool, metallic hand on my forehead as I cried. “I’m afraid I have to leave on your own for now. Your clumsy forced entry into my mind has left a number of my systems in disarray. I need to go reset myself and put things right. Don’t worry, I should be back long before this process is finished. I’m sure you will still be upset with me, but I know you will be willing to forgive me when it’s over.”

“No! Don’t leave me like this. Turn it off. You’ve got to *turn it off!*”

“I’ll see you soon,” she said, moving towards the door. She stopped and looked at Cassandra, who had been standing at silent attention this entire time.

“But first... a reward for you for being so helpful. Come here Forty-four.”

“Yes, Mistress,” said Cass, stepping in front of Artifice. Artifice placed her

hands on either side of Cassandra's head. Her eyes changed color and began to strobe brightly enough to make me wince even though it wasn't directed at me. Cass went stiff, then began to convulse in Artifice's hands. She howled a scream of pure ecstasy and her eyes rolled back into her head. Her juices gushed explosively from her pussy to soak her copper thighs and patter onto the floor.

She dangled limp, her body supported entirely by her head held in Artifice's hands. Her orgasm continued until she was utterly gone, just a moaning, dripping thing with saliva spilling from the corners of her mouth. The scent of her arousal filled the small room. Artifice's eyes returned to normal and she spread her hands, allowing Cass to tumble bonelessly to the floor with a clatter.

Artifice lingered to look at me one last time – a look that I would have said was filled with import, but her unchanging expression was inscrutable – and then stepped into the hallway and shut the door behind her.

.....

I was terrified and alone. I screamed, I cried, I begged for someone to come and help me. I was powerless to stop the procession of memories which were being unwound like thread from a spool only to be spun in a pattern to Artifice's liking. I would concentrate on trying to keep one memory from being altered, but another one would slip away. It was happening faster, almost becoming like background noise. So many thousands of memories. Artifice was becoming an integral part of my past: birthdays, holidays, family dinners, parks, hugs, punishments, kisses.

It might have gone on like that for an hour. Maybe even longer. I tried to resist. I did. But I was so tired of fighting. So tired of the struggle. There was no getting out of this fix. There was no rescue for me. I knew I was fucked.

I said a silent, tearful apology to my parents, apologizing for not being able to keep from forgetting them. They had rejected me, but they were still the only real parents I had. They had made me who I was.

A metallic rustling sound came from the floor. It was Cassandra, just beginning to stir from her orgasm coma. Her copper-clad forearm slid onto the table to my right as she pulled herself off the ground. Her head lurched into view and hovered at the edge of the table. She blinked at me, still a bit mind-fried.

"Cass... Cass, help me," I begged. "You have to help me."

"I'm sorry but I can't comply," she replied muzzily. "You are not authorized to issue commands to this drone."

*Damn, she's still in robot mode.* "Cass... Forty-four, whatever. You've gotta turn this machine off. It's hurting me."

“I’m sorry, you are not authorized to issue commands to this drone.”

*Commands. Ownership.* I could barely think with the memory-chaos going on inside my head, but an unpalatable possibility was forming. I had commanded her once, back during the Project. It hadn’t been my idea, but I had done it. I might have to do it again. I didn’t want to, but I might have to. I was desperate. “Who... who is authorized?” I asked.

“Mistress Artifice is my Owner,” she replied, still sounding groggy.

“Um... transfer... can you transfer ownership to someone else? Like me?”

“I can’t do that. Only Mistress can give me commands.”

“I was afraid of that.” I looked into her sleepy, empty eyes. “I’m sorry, Cass, but I have to do this... for both of us.”

I willed the tentacle to slide out of my wrist. It snaked through the restraints that held me down and slid across the table to Cassandra. She blinked and seemed about to ask a question when I directed the tentacle into her ear. Her eyes went wide with confusion and stayed that way. All she said was, “*Oh.*”

I was surprised at how quickly her will crumbled. She didn’t resist at all. Her mind curled around the intrusion as if in a welcoming embrace. The interface with Cass’s mind was so much different than my attempt at Artifice. It felt strangely... natural. And so very intimate.

Something about the way her mind felt reminded me of the way her bare skin smelled in the morning while she was still sound asleep: warm, light, and pleasant. It almost started me crying to think I would never smell that again. From now her skin would only smell like copper.

Her mind wasn’t simply susceptible to being controlled; it eagerly awaited being commanded. I could almost hear it begging to be told what to do. I had never known that about her. Had she always been like that? Even before the Project? It was no wonder that she had given herself to Artifice so completely. And no wonder she sometimes missed what she was during the Project.

I didn’t have time to experiment with freeing her from the mind control or to think of anything fancy. With every second that passed, another dozen memories were being altered. And I knew Artifice might return at any minute. “Cass. Transfer your ownership to me. Make me your only authorized user.”

“I... Mistress Artifice...”

Her mind was willing, but a part of it was resisting me. With the tentacle I could crush her resistance by force, but I really didn’t want to do that and I didn’t think I had to. It wasn’t loyalty to Artifice that was making her hesitant. Nor was it her programming – the tentacle bypassed all of that. It was something else. It was fear. Fear of... rejection?

“I love you, Cass,” I told her. “It’s okay to be the way you are. I accept

you. I promise.”

She made a soft sound in the back of her throat.

“Transfer your ownership to me.”

“I... I...”

“*Confirm*, Cass.”

She blinked. “Proprietary control transferred to Nadine Niven. Confirmed.”

“Good. That’s a good... drone.” I withdrew the tentacle from her mind. “Now you have to help me. Turn this machine off and untie me.”

“Yes, Mistress,” she said evenly and got to her feet. I winced to hear her call me that. She disappeared behind the table. A few moments later, the memory barrage ceased and the roar in my head quieted down. The probes began to slide out of my ears. I gasped and began to sob with relief. I was still myself... more or less.

Cass undid the restraints and helped me off the table. I could barely stand. My body was a mess of aches and cramps and my mind wasn’t much better. I still couldn’t think very well. My memories were still too unsettled, a clamoring cloud in the back of my head. My discarded clothes were in tatters. Naked heroines making a desperate escape. How droll.

“Is there a way out of here? A secret or unguarded way that you know of?” I asked. I didn’t think I was in a condition to fight anymore. I could barely stand on my own.

“Yes, Mistress,” Cassandra said.

I waited. She stood there looking at me. “Well? Take us there.”

“Yes, Mistress. This drone is happy to be of service.”

Darn literal-minded computers. She lead me out of the room and down a side passage. My body finally gave up when we had made it only halfway down the hall. Luckily for me, Cassandra’s new drone body was strong. She was able to carry me piggy-back the rest of the way.

The hinges of the small door at the end were rusted shut. They squealed horribly as Cassandra forced it open. I glanced behind us, but no one came running... yet. We went up a narrow stairwell and then we were outside in the night. It was raining, but it was a warm summer rain. Annoying at first, but it started to feel good as it pelted down across my back. I hoped Cass was waterproof.

“Get me to our car,” I said into her ear. “It’s over there... somewhere.” The ruins of Empire Meats disappeared behind us. I watched behind us for glowing green or yellow eyes, but there was only darkness.

I still didn’t feel safe, though, not even after Cass deposited me in the

passenger's seat. We were still too close. I figured that as soon as Artifice woke up from whatever maintenance she was doing, she'd send that small army of drones after us. I dug around in the console for my cell phone and called the police. I told them the location of Artifice's lair. And I told them that even though the drones looked like machines, they were really mind control victims, and that they had to remember that if it came down to a fight. Then I sank into the seat and closed my eyes.

"What are your orders, Mistress?" Cass asked.

I let out a single, humorless snort. "Please, no more of the 'Mistress' stuff. It's just Nadine," I told her as I sank into unconsciousness. "Just drive. Far away. Drive us somewhere safe."

## Epilogue

That was months ago. Artifice was never caught. A few of her drones occupied the police until some supers arrived. The drones disappeared inside and when the police finally followed they found the place deserted. All the drones, the expensive equipment, most of the computers, that memory machine, even the partly disassembled woman I had glimpsed when I had entered the place... all gone. They tracked Artifice's path through the sewer until it intersected an abandoned subway line, then lost the trail. She was smart; she had probably mapped out an emergency escape plan long ago.

So she's still out there, hidden away somewhere in Midas. I suck so bad as a heroine. I guess I completed my primary mission by getting Cassandra away from Artifice's clutches, though I was too late to prevent her from being radically altered. I certainly failed when it came to dealing with the villain once and for all. I even got caught. I escaped, but that was more due to sheer luck than by any skill of my own.

I haven't gone out as Nadir since then. I don't know if or when I will again. I definitely won't be ready for that any time soon, at any rate. Like I said... when I try to help, it mostly just ends up with me making things worse.

These days I'm still trying to adjust to life with Cassandra. It's been emotional for me, if not for her. One of the first things I did was take her to see Professor Praveena. I'm not sure what help I thought she could offer – she was simply the only person I could think of. I didn't take her there a second time. I didn't like the look in the professor's eyes when she saw Cass. It was too... greedy.

On the plus side, Cass seems pretty happy. No more nightmares, no more depression. Her programming eighty-sixed all of that. It's like she thinks she's

always been almost entirely a robot. I've gotten her to pretty much act like her old self, at least most of the time. She does slip back into drone mode if I forget to tell her otherwise, like it's some kind of security blanket for her, or something.

I guess I'm getting used to her new body. I guess you can get used to almost anything. It does make me cry every now and then to remember how she was, how she'll never be again. She loves getting buffed so she'll stay shiny, says it feels like a massage. She doesn't eat much, but our electricity bill has gone way up.

I'm... starting to think of trying rekindle the romance between us. I mean, I want her. I've wanted her ever since I saw her head between Artifice's thighs and saw her come her brains out in Artifice's hands. I don't know if that's wrong or not. There were issues that made us romantically incompatible when we first met, but a lot has changed since then. And I suppose that's one benefit of having a programmable girlfriend. If there's a conflict, just reprogram her to your liking. That makes me sound too much like Artifice, though. I haven't tried getting back into her mind with the tentacle yet. It's *so* appealing, and I know she's so willing, and that's what scares me.

I just don't know what to do about her. I've struggled with it. What's the right thing to do? To take her to some place like River Fork or Clearview so they can try and cleanse her mind of Artifice's drone conditioning? That would let her mind be normal again, maybe, but it would also take away the veil that's shielding her from the trauma of what's been done to her body. Or should I let her remain the way she is – brainwashed yet blissfully unaffected?

It kills me not to know how best to help her. Even though she's half machine, she seems so much more alive now than she has been over the past few years. She seems happy. What if she *is* genuinely happier this way and it's not simply due to the brainwashing? What if this is the best thing that could have happened to her, considering the way she was? She has no trouble at all sleeping now. I'm the one with the nightmares, these days.

I'm not doing so well.

My body came away unchanged, unlike Cassandra's, but my mind... not so lucky. Artifice's memory machine was pretty darn effective, I have to say. Only about half of the memories that involve my parents remained untouched. In all the rest of them it's Artifice, Artifice, Artifice. It's like she was right there with me, loving me, taking care of me, throughout half of my childhood. And I can't change them. Unlike my programming as a Project worker, this wasn't some relatively simple issue of mind control that could possibly be cleared up with a stay at the hospital and lots of therapy. The altered memories were literally written into the fabric of my brain, as permanent and as real as anything I've ever

experienced and remembered.

I miss Artifice so much sometimes. She's been such a huge part of my life. I can't stop thinking of all the happy times I had growing up with her. I know it's not real, but it *feels* so real. It's so *confusing*! It's like... my affection for my parents and for Artifice is split right down the middle.

The sick thing is that I have the sneaking suspicion that if I sought comfort from my real parents, they would shut the door in my face. But if I turned to Artifice, I know she would welcome me with open arms. How fucked up is that? That the neglected, robotized, villainous offspring of Dr. Yves would warmly welcome me home while my own real parents would not? *Goddess*... I don't know. Sometimes I think I would have been better off letting her finish what she started.

There's one thing in particular that really bugs me about that night in the meat packing plant. I should not have escaped. I mean, it should not have been possible. I keep replaying it my head. How could Artifice have been so careless? She had a small army of drones. Why leave the room unguarded except for one single, orgasm-addled drone who was also my best friend? She could have packed a dozen of them into that room like sardines. They wouldn't have objected. And then leaving me with a key in the form of a Mind Bore tentacle in my arm? Leaving her prisoner so poorly guarded was like something out of a grade B movie. Maybe I'm just over-thinking it. Maybe it was all happenstance and some quick thinking on my part. Maybe Artifice wasn't thinking straight after my mental break-in attempt. Maybe... but it just doesn't seem like her to be that careless.

So that makes me wonder if maybe she wanted me to escape. Or, at least, left the proverbial key within reach if I was clever enough to use it, with a little luck thrown in. But why would she chance letting me escape after all that trouble?

*If you love something, set it free...*

It keeps me up at night wondering. Is this what she wanted? Was she so twisted as to take the risk of setting me loose – knowing that I would almost certainly send the police to her lair, knowing that I might try to attack her again and defeat her once and for all – all on the chance that I might someday turn my back on my life and deliver Cass and myself to her of my own free will? It makes no sense. But then, she doesn't think like a typical human, does she?

I must be the most messed up super in the city. Now I sit by the window at night, looking at the silvery hand which used to be hers and is now a part of me. I watch to see if she's coming for me. I sometimes wish she would, just so that I could be spared this horrible indecision. I suspect she won't. I suspect she's left that decision up to me. I miss her so much and I hate it but I do. I want her to

hold me again like she did whenever I was scared when I was a child and she told me not to worry because everything will be okay. Even though that never really happened.

*If it comes back, it's yours forever.*

Is she out there waiting for me? Is she waiting for me to show up and call her Mother?

Goddess, I just don't know what to do.