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Reboot

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Catherine Sushon

System compromised. System compromised. System compromised.

Tristan Ellis wakes to bright sunlight and the taste of dirt. The warning continues to flash red in the lower left corner of his vision as he sits up, spitting in a vain attempt to clear the grit from his mouth.

System compromised. Please reboot. System compromised. Please reboot.

He frowns and clears the warning, which blinks twice before disappearing. The rest of his visual interface--graphics displaying his vitals, the command scroll, the diagnostic tool--clear the perimeter of his vision as his system reboots. He always hates this part. Ellis can clear the interface from his sight, usually does when he's not actively using it, but a reboot is different. He can feel his senses narrow and go dull as their augments turn off. Small lights just under the skin of his arm shift to a slowly pulsing yellow, then click off.

He's alone.

Project Theseus has several outposts surrounding their base, stocked with food and equipped with some basic tech. Right now, Ellis notes, he is sandwiched between a crate of tuna cans and another filled with iodine tablets. He hauls himself to his feet just as the lights in his arm blink back on. They flicker back and forth, faster and faster, until they both settle on a soft green and his system rushes back online. It's when he reaches for a can of tuna that he realizes what's wrong: the crates are open. Someone has been here before him. He turns, and a neat pile of empty cans glint back at him from one corner. Ellis rips his own can open, angrily shovels tuna into his mouth, and opens his comm list. Norman is offline, the dot next to his name red for "unavailable." Five smiling cartoon fish mascots stare at him from the tuna cans. He scatters them with a kick and the cans clatter across an uneven floor.

The first time Ellis met Norman Brown is fuzzy in his mind, which he attributes to the industrial dose of painkillers in his body at the time. The memories exist in snippets. Brown walked into the room and extended a hand. He smiled as he introduced himself, but Ellis cannot remember exactly what he said. Ellis shook his hand unsteadily. All conversation after that has been lost to the drug fog. The next thing he remembers is catching the first glimpse of his left arm, a mess of stitches and disconnected wires that extended from the wounds, a pair of small lights glowing just under stretched and swollen skin, a cable feeding into the hollow between his thumb and forefinger. He retched over the side of the bed. Nothing came up and he dizzily remembered being told to fast before the surgery. Memories of the day end here, dry-heaving towards a stark linoleum floor.

Norman returned a couple days later. Ellis was lucid this time, though the memory is still wreathed in the dull pain that characterizes the weeks after surgery.

"Do you remember me?" Norman asked. His eyes scanned Ellis' left side with scientific curiosity, cataloguing the implants, the purple bruises that bloomed around them, and the incision that arced around the side of his shaved head.

"I think so," Ellis replied. He fidgeted, suddenly aware that the cable hooked into his hand kept him tethered to the room. "Remind me."

"My name is Norman Brown. I'll be working on Project Theseus starting next week." Barely hidden excitement rode under his words, and Ellis realized that Norman couldn't have

been more than a few years older than him. “As you know, this project hopes to create a new breed of augmented human combatants. But the cybernetic system will take some getting used to, and you’ll need help learning how it works. More importantly, we couldn’t make weapons of this magnitude without some kind of failsafe. That’s where handlers come in.”

“You’re my kill switch,” Ellis said.

“I suppose,” Norman replied, “If you want to think of me that way.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Each subject has a separate handler assigned to them.”

Ellis stared at him. Norman was all soft edges, bespectacled, nervously fiddling with his hands as he spoke. This man, who did not resemble a threat, was willing and able to kill him.

Ellis finishes his tuna and adds his can to the pile he re-stacks in the corner. The building is small, but he hasn’t checked the bathroom yet, and if someone’s found an outpost of Project Theseus it’s his job to dispose of them.

Most of the bathroom is covered in a thin layer of dust. The first aid supplies are untouched, the shower dry and empty of soap. The mirror is dusty too, but the light that reflects from it when he turns his head is uneven. There, written in the film of dust by a finger dragged across its surface, is a command:

“Find Norman”

There is no other evidence that anyone has been here. Behind the writing, Ellis can see his reflection. Short stubble covers his face and when he turns his head, his hair is long enough to conceal the external port above his ear. Adrenaline bolts through him, shooting cold into his extremities. He can’t remember how he got here. He can’t remember how long it’s been. The port has a cover, a circular piece of black silicone, and he rubs it nervously in a tic he hasn’t quite managed to eradicate. The date and time on his system seem to be off, but he can’t get them to resynchronize and he gives up after the fifth error message. His cognitive system keeps clips of his visual feed in what Norman called a “black box.” They’re deleted periodically and will only remain stored there if he dies, chronicling his final moments, but the most recent records should still be in storage.

They’re not.

Ellis can access the black box, but it’s almost empty. The only clip left shows one of his heavy boots scattering the pile of tuna cans. It’s useless. The box could’ve been wiped in the reboot, he supposes, but it’s never happened before, and even more concerning is the blank spot in his organic memory. He closes his eyes and tries to backtrack through what he can remember. Instead of answers, he gets a bolt of pain in his head that burns from temple to temple like an invisible railroad spike rammed through his skull. His brain and the Theseus system are meant to back each other up. Ellis can’t help feeling like they’ve both screwed him over this time.

He looks back at the mirror. “Find Norman” is still there, messy letters scrawled over his reflection. If things have gone so completely pear-shaped for Ellis, Norman could be in trouble too. Norman had always helped Ellis. Maybe it was time to return the favor.

The building is marked S4--the fourth of five southern outposts. Ellis’ navigation system is offline, probably fried by whatever caused the reboot, but he doesn’t need it anyway. The base for Project Theseus is within a couple days’ walking distance and Ellis already knows the way. He knows with a strange certainty that Norman will be there.

“I can’t cry.”

Ellis was sitting cross-legged on his bed. The surgical wounds had healed, leaving small, pale scars behind, and the exposed wires had been hidden under his skin when they were connected to the now-active Theseus system. The port between his thumb and forefinger remained, but it was disconnected from the cable and covered by a silicone cap. The implants were all covered in a flesh-like polymer, a process Project Theseus termed “bioproofing,” and Ellis’ own tissue had grown onto it, merging the cybernetics completely with his body. Norman looked up from his tablet.

“Pardon?”

“I can’t cry,” Ellis repeated, “I haven’t thought about it in a while, but I can’t. You were asking me yesterday about anything unusual I experienced and I figured it was relevant, I just didn’t think of it at the time”

“You can’t-” Norman’s brow wrinkled the way it had when Ellis watched him fill out a crossword puzzle. “Your tear ducts are still intact.”

Ellis shrugged.

“I was like this before the implants,” he said. Norman kept staring at him and he stared back. As long as he’d been in the Project, most of his life, Ellis couldn’t remember crying even once. He didn’t often smile, either. Weapons didn’t need feelings. Ellis worried now that his ability to feel had atrophied in the lifetime he’d spent wandering this concrete structure in the Nevada desert.

“Interesting,” Norman finally said. He put his tablet aside without typing anything into it, but it seemed to Ellis that he’d made a note of it, nonetheless.

Ellis’ distance from normal humanity strikes him at odd times. Right now, for example, he finds himself suddenly aware that his definition of two days’ walk is a world away from what Norman’s would be. He doesn’t tire as easily, and the microflora populating his gut increases his digestive system’s efficiency beyond his unaugmented counterparts. Norman would take twice as long to get this far if he were with Ellis. Longer, if he were by himself. The thought makes Ellis’ chest feel strange, as if a phantom hand has grabbed his ribs from the inside and twisted. He pushes it from his mind.

He keeps walking.

It’s after another hour of the same, staring straight ahead and trudging onward, boots crunching on the dessicated earth, that he finds the car. It’s unassuming and grey and he recognizes it instantly as one used by the research base. The front has crumpled around a stone jutting from the ground and shattered glass glitters around the tires. There’s blood splattered against the inside of the windshield. He opens the doors.

There are two bodies inside. They’ve started to putrefy and he wrinkles his nose at the smell. At least the doors had been closed, he muses, or scavengers would have picked them apart already. One is human, the other, slumped behind the steering wheel, less so. He recognizes the driver instantly. It’s T-E12, Tabitha Earnest, another Theseus subject who played checkers with him when they were kids and chess when they were older. He doesn’t need to check her vitals to know she’s dead. Besides the rot, there’s a bullet hole in the back of her head and a messy exit wound at the front, a tunnel plowed through her brain from end to end. He can only hope her black box is intact. The body next to her is less recognizable, its head crushed and bloody. The passenger must have hit the windshield in the crash, he thinks, and that’s to blame for the blood splatter and fractured glass. He touches the back of the corpse’s left hand, scanning the chip he finds there.

Alice Xu. Tabitha's handler. His system informs him that he's scanned her chip recently, though he can't recall when or why it happened. He finds her tablet, a carbon copy of the one Norman carries, near her feet with its screen shattered.

Ellis walks back to the driver's side and checks Tabitha's black box. The process is near-instantaneous. The scanner implanted in his left pointer finger is paper-thin and flexible under the skin. He closes his eyes.

Tabitha has her foot planted hard on the gas, accelerating south with a desperation that outstrips every other emotion she's ever felt. Her adrenaline levels and heart rate are rocketing and a warning flashes on her visual interface, but she ignores it. Alice Xu screams Go, go, they're gaining on us, go! and clutches the tablet in her hands with white knuckles. Then there's the crack of a gunshot, an impact at the back of Tabitha's head that jolts her forward, and the car is still screaming forward and Alice is screaming too and then there's shattered glass in the air and the car has stopped moving and so has Alice and there's blood on the dashboard and the windshield and Tabitha's vitals flatten out to nothing and the warnings on her visual interface disappear and everything is quiet.

Ellis opens his eyes. His gut twists and part of him wants to curl into a ball on the glass-covered ground and never get up, to sob openly into the dirt even though he knows he won't be able to.

Instead, he turns away and keeps walking north. He closes the doors behind him, trapping the corpses and their smell back inside the car. He saves the clip of Tabitha Earnest's last living moments to his system. He doesn't look back.

Ellis didn't want to get along with Norman Brown. His handler looked at him like he was a bug pinned behind a pane of glass. Ellis knew he was an oddity, but he didn't have to like it. Still, the ID chip planted in Norman's hand gave him access to Ellis' room, making him practically unavoidable.

So the cyborg and his handler reached an uneasy truce. They spoke, but not often, and it was almost always work related. Ellis had grown into his system both figuratively and, thanks to the bioproofing, literally, and he found its features second nature. This meant Norman no longer needed to coach him on using the implants. It meant Norman's sole purpose now was to kill Ellis if and when Project Theseus gave their order. It certainly put a damper on their relationship.

Ellis was back from a mission, some kind of political assassination about which he knew nothing. He didn't ask for details. Like Norman, he only existed to pull the trigger.

"What's your name?" Norman asked abruptly, looking over his tablet.

"It says T-E15 on your notes," he said. Norman pulled the tablet against his chest where even Ellis' visual zoom couldn't see it.

"Stop that," he said, frowning, "And you know that's not what I mean."

"Isn't that enough for you?" Ellis asked.

"I'm curious! Humor me."

"Fine," Ellis said, turning to face his handler across the small room, "I'll tell you my name if you'll let me ask you something first."

"Deal."

"Why is it called Project Theseus?"

Norman smiled at him. It was strange, having a smile directed at him. He wasn't sure whether he liked it or not.

“Have you ever heard of the Ship of Theseus?” Ellis shook his head. “It’s a thought experiment. Basically, it asks whether a ship that has had all of its pieces replaced through restoration or repair is still the same ship.”

Ellis pondered this for a moment.

“So I’m the ship?” he finally asked.

“I guess so,” Norman said, “But now you have to answer my question.”

Ellis took a breath and held it. The scientists who built him had given him two names. The first, the one on Norman’s notes, was purely functional. T-E15 was shorthand: T for Theseus, E for his generation, 15 for his number within that generation. Ellis and the rest of Gen-E were the fifth iteration of their kind. Neither Ellis nor any of his peers had bothered to ask what happened to A through D, and none of them wanted to know anyway.

The second name was a nickname. They all had them, first and last, based on the letters in their shorthand designation. T for Theseus became T for Tristan. E for Gen-E became E for Ellis. The names were chosen arbitrarily, handed out to them because it took too long to read the designation, but Ellis still felt a sense of attachment to it. Arbitrary or not, it was his. So he hesitated. But finally, heart thumping against his artificially bolstered rib cage, he spoke.

“My name is Tristan Ellis,” he said. Norman smiled again. Ellis decided he liked it after all.

“It’s nice to meet you, Tristan.”

One day into his march across the desert, Ellis thinks about his parents. He rarely thinks of them at all, and when he does it’s never in depth, but after twenty four hours of nothing but boots crunching on the ground, his mind starts to wander.

Ellis’ family has only ever been the other Theseus cyborgs. More recently, he’d count Norman as well. But a nuclear family with biological parents, a dog, and a white picket fence? Never.

He thinks about numbers. The year he turned five, Ellis was one of six hundred eighty-seven thousand children in the foster system. He was one of two hundred pulled by Project Theseus and one of one hundred they chose to use as subjects. At age ten, he was one of seventy-five chosen for full augmentation. At age nineteen, past the risk of the subjects outgrowing their implants, he was one of sixty-two to make it out of the operating room and one of fifty to survive his first year with the augments. He thinks of Tabitha and wonders how many of them there are now.

Pulling from the foster system was a numbers game too. Ellis’ memories of childhood are fuzzy and vague, and for a while he thought maybe the Project had grown him in a vat. He learned otherwise. Parentless children are cheaper by far than test-tube babies.

Ellis stops near a dilapidated shack. There are empty cans on its floor, which he kicks aside as he sits. He stares at the splintered wood floor between his knees. There’s no point of dwelling on something he can never know. He opens another can from his pack and leaves it with its older companions when he leaves.

Ellis tried not to like Norman, he really did. But Norman brought playing cards with him when he visited. Norman would hide candy bars in his lab coat’s pockets and carefully collect the wrappers for disposal on his way out. Most importantly, Norman would talk to him. Norman treated him like a person. He also seemed to like when Ellis returned the favor--he laughed at Ellis for calling him “sir” and eventually requested Ellis call him by his first name.

Norman dropped by late one night. Ellis woke when he heard the door unlock but kept his eyes closed when he heard a second set of footsteps approaching.

“Brown, a word?”

He opened one eye. From his vantage point, visual zoom or no, Ellis could only see the two men from the waist down. Norman had a thermos in one hand, a tea bag’s string hanging from under the lid, and a deck of cards in the other. Ellis didn’t recognize the second man, but it didn’t matter. He had bland, practical shoes and matching slacks, the uniform of a Theseus researcher.

“What’s up?” He heard Norman reply. He kept the door propped open with one toe.

“I wanted to touch base with you about our department’s conversation the other day,” said the mystery researcher, gesturing towards Ellis’ room, “About maintaining a healthy distance from your assigned subject?”

Norman didn’t respond. Ellis saw his hand tighten around the deck of cards, knuckles white.

“I understand that many handlers have fostered a friendly relationship with their subjects, and that’s great, but some of the administration is worried this might, ah,” the speaker paused, gestured vaguely with one hand, “Impede your ability to fulfill the duties you signed on for.”

“You mean if we have to kill them,” Norman said. His voice was quiet and shaky. Ellis realized he must be angry and marveled that this faceless administrator could force soft-edged Norman into a rage.

“You have to understand that the Theseus subjects aren’t like you and me. They haven’t grown up in our world. And they’ve been modified to such an extent that to project our own emotions and thought processes onto them is inaccurate and likely dangerous.”

“Are you accusing me of anthropomorphizing a person?” Norman’s voice rose. It cracked on the last word. “Don’t you realize how ridiculous you sound?”

“Just keep your duties in mind, Mr. Brown. You’re an asset to Project Theseus. We’d hate to lose you.” Norman stood in the doorway for several seconds while the sound of practical shoes on linoleum echoed down the hallway before he stepped into the room. He slammed the door behind him.

“Who was that?” Ellis asked, moving to sit on the floor.

“Doesn’t matter,” Norman mumbled, uncharacteristically curt. He took an angry swig of tea. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I’ve been manufactured as the perfect spy. Of course I wasn’t asleep.” The corner of Norman’s mouth twitched and Ellis heard him snort into his tea.

“Just don’t think about it too much,” Norman said, tossing the playing cards between them, “The administration is full of shit.”

Ellis raised an eyebrow. Profanity from Norman was unusual. They sat in silence while he shuffled the cards before Ellis summoned the courage to speak.

“Do you-” He cleared his throat and tried again, “Am I really a person to you?”

Norman dropped the cards, which scattered between them.

“Why would you even ask that?”

“Am I, though?” Ellis pushed up his sleeve and gestured to the blinking lights and visible implants, the black silicone behind his ear and in the space between his thumb and forefinger, the scars that sectioned the left side of his body into inorganic, geometric portions. “I mean, look! I don’t look like a person. That guy in the hallway doesn’t think I am, and I guarantee anyone you

picked off the street would agree with him. How far does this have to go before I'm not human anymore?"

"Tristan, please," Norman sighed. His hands fumbled to scrape the cards back off the floor. "You're as much a person as I am. I've spent hours with you, I think I'd know better about your humanity than some HR puppet who's never even spoken with you."

Ellis said nothing. He stared at the lights in his arm while they pulsed softly in the dim room.

Norman put the stack of cards aside, pulled Ellis' sleeve down, and held up one of his own hands. There was a tiny, almost imperceptible scar there on the back of his left hand and the faint outline of his ID chip planted under the skin nearby.

"If you're not a person, then neither am I."

Ellis can see the base, a hulking concrete beast on the horizon. The sky is dark and without light pollution, the stars are bright and crowded over the desert. As he approaches, he spots a security drone floating halfway to the base and waves at it. They detect motion, and if he can get its attention he may be able to send a message ahead despite his broken comms. The drone notices him. He waits for it to scan him and let out the cheery beep when it recognizes his chip.

Instead, it lets out a grating shriek and races towards him.

Ellis hears its turret before he sees it, clunking as it deploys from the drone's small body like an airplane's landing gear, and dives behind a rock. Lizards scurry back into the cracks in the boulder just as the drone fires. Dirt plumes where Ellis was standing just seconds before and he hears the drone whirr as it searches for his new location. There's another large stone to his left. He takes a deep breath, coils his legs under him, and sprints for it.

The drone fires twice, twin clouds of dust appearing on Ellis' heels where it hits the ground behind him, and he's safe behind the rocks. He's almost to the edge of this patrol zone. If he can make it to the next boulder, he should be outside this drone's area and he'll have a few seconds' lead on the next one before the first drone sends out an alert.

Again he takes a breath, braces, and sprints. It misses.

Ellis has a hunch, though he prays it's wrong. He pulls up the clip he saved from Tabitha's black box and plays it through twice. His stomach sinks. In the background, below the roar of the engine and Alice Xu's screams, is the whirr of another machine. He plays it back again, half speed, and watches her rearview mirror. There, staring back from the reflection, is a Theseus drone, its turret deployed.

Then it fires and there's the impact at the back of Tabitha's head and blood on the windshield and broken glass in the air. Ellis closes the clip.

A drone's shriek rings through the air again, this time right in front of him. Ellis curses. The second drone is staring right at him, probably having tracked him down while he was reviewing the clip of Tabitha's death. How ironic, he thinks, that investigating her death would cause his own. The turret drops down with a clunk and points itself at Ellis' forehead. He closes his eyes.

Ellis was playing a video game. It was a space invaders knockoff and it bored him, but it was late and he wanted to use up the excess energy buzzing through him before he tried going to sleep.

Norman interrupted him by throwing his door open and careening into the room.

“Game Over,” said the game.

“I need you to come with me right now,” said Norman. Ellis stared at him. “Right now, Tristan!”

“What’s going on?” Ellis asked. He was already lacing his boots.

Norman didn’t answer. He grabbed Ellis by the wrist and dragged him into the hallway, breaking into a full run towards the nearest exit. With the other hand, he held his tablet tight against his side. He only let go once they were outside. It was cold, as desert nights often were, and the sky was speckled with pinprick stars.

“I’ll explain everything when I can,” Norman said. His face was cast in cold light from the tablet’s screen. “I promise you. Just know that I’m doing this all to protect you.” Ellis didn’t respond. Deep in the pit of his stomach, he knew something was wrong. Norman pulled something up on the tablet before he looked back at him. In the screen’s light, his eyes shone bright with tears.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Norman said. He pressed the tablet one final time and everything after that is gone, lost to the black chasm torn in Ellis’ memory.

The shot doesn’t come. Ellis opens his eyes to see the drone fall to the ground with a muffled thud. Standing beyond it is Norman, tablet in hand.

“Welcome back,” he says, and there’s a sad, familiar ring to his words. There are dark circles under his eyes and his hair is unkempt.

“If I remember correctly, you owe me an explanation,” Ellis says. Norman laughs. It has the same sad ring his words did.

“You say that every time,” he responds, “Word for word.” Ellis’ head throbs. Everything about this feels familiar, but the memories are vague and muddy like he’s viewing them through six feet of water. He runs his fingers over the port behind his ear.

“Please,” he steps closer. Norman sighs.

“I did all of it to protect you. They shut down the project,” he says, “And they were going to make me kill you. I got lucky and overheard administration talking about it the day before and I knew I had to get you out of here.”

“But your job-”

“I couldn’t kill you,” Norman’s voice wavers and cracks, “I know it was my job but I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have time to plan a full escape, so I had to get you away from the base and buy myself some time.”

Ellis runs through the files on his system. Copy after copy of the clip from Tabitha’s black box is saved there. He can remember finding her body now, each time with more rotted away, and the memories play like a time lapse. His chest and throat feel tight.

“Electric shock can induce retrograde amnesia,” Norman continues, “And with the way the Theseus system is integrated, we can target the shock precisely to cause as little damage as possible. You can’t remote control a cyborg, but you can force simple tasks like picking something up or walking somewhere. It wasn’t too hard to plug in the coordinates for one of the southern outposts.”

Ellis feels his hands shaking. His breath feels too fast. His visual interface flashes warnings at him, alerting him that his adrenaline levels are too high and his body temperature is rising. He ignores it. He knows he could overpower Norman if he wanted to. He’s far stronger than Norman, even if his augments were deactivated, and fast enough that he could incapacitate Norman before he’d even have time to react.

But he knows he hasn't attacked Norman any of the other times they've met like this. He won't this time, either. His hands shake and his breath comes unsteady but he can't bring himself to move.

"I knew you'd come back. I hoped you wouldn't, but after the first couple times I started anticipating it. Retrograde amnesia is rarely permanent and it's never perfect." Norman keeps talking. Ellis just stares. "I set something up to alert me if you get within a certain radius of the base. I had to shut down some of your system so they wouldn't pick up your vitals or location, but I knew you'd still find your way back. So I waited for you."

"How many times have I been here?" Ellis' voice is almost a whisper. "How many times have you done this to me?"

"A lot," Norman says, "Too many. But I need more time."

Norman's eyes are wet in the screen's light. Ellis' own face feels hot and when he touches his cheek, his fingers come away wet. He's crying. He gapes at his fingers, incredulous, while tears continue to stream down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Tristan."

And Ellis is walking stone-faced back across the desert. His eyes are fixed forward and his feet move without his thinking. And like that, Ellis walks across the dusty expanse until he reaches the southern outpost and steps inside. And as he feels the grip on his mind begin to loosen, so does his own grip on consciousness. And before he closes his eyes, he manages to scrawl two words into the dust on the closest window.

System compromised. System compromised. System compromised.

Tristan Ellis wakes to bright sunlight and the taste of dirt. He sits up to find himself on the floor of a small building--an outpost, he realizes. He doesn't know how long he's been here. In fact, he has no idea how he got here in the first place.

System compromised. Please reboot. System compromised. Please reboot.

Ellis spits, trying to clear the grit from his mouth.

He reboots his system.

He tries again.

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