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MINORITIES OF ONE

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A Thesis Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

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The Faculty of Arts and Sciences

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“Perhaps a lunatic was simply a minority of one.”

—George Orwell, *1984*

Table of Contents

Funeral for a Crow	1
The Omega	23

Funeral for a Crow

As the sirens continued to scream and every bulb in sight cast rotating crimson spotlights, Lily watched the great doors of Facility MA-14 open. Though she was forced to observe behind the thick, reinforced windows of the control room, the sensation of natural light leaking through the opening doors was almost tangible. Lily had once read that sunlight, unlike the light of facility bulbs, could make a person feel warm while illuminating them. So warm, in fact, that prolonged exposure to sunlight could even burn a person's skin. This fact always conjured up the image of a person being set ablaze by the sunlight, even if such an event seemed unlikely when Lily really thought about it.

Her eyes gradually adjusted to the emerging presence of the sun and she saw the supply truck carefully making its way through the doors and into the unloading bay. The truck was bulky and windowless, but backed into the facility with precision and ease. Its rear opened into a ramp and three figures in faded yellow hazmat suits hopped out, jumping into their task of unloading the cargo without hesitation. The suits were perfectly in sync with one another, their movements so unified that they could have passed as a single organism. Tan packages were swiftly transferred from the truck to an unloading zone marked by a box drawn on the floor in white paint. But Lily did not dwell on the workers or their cargo, instead directing her attention to the world beyond the doors.

The sky was cloudless and blue, the higher part of it a shade darker than the pale line of the horizon. Directly behind the open doors was a barren lot comprised of cement and gravel that extended to a distant chain-link gate roughly a hundred yards out. Heat shimmered off the cement and made it hard to discern a fixed shape for the fence,

warping and wiggling in the distance. What was clear to Lily, however, was the vast green of the grass behind the fence, the color filling every hole of the chain-links. She wondered whether grass could be burned by the sunlight as well.

The girl's eyes flashed away from the green to a sudden movement in the blue above. A small silhouette with wings glided overhead momentarily before vanishing into the pale line between the sky and the landscape.

"Father!" Lily said, spinning her seated body away from the window. "Did you see that? There was a bird!"

The director, Lily's father, sat behind his desk facing her and the window. His body from the nose down was obscured by the three monitors in front of him, leaving only his baldness, his eyes, and his spectacles visible. His eyes flicked up from the left monitor to his daughter, then to the window before returning to the monitor.

"I missed it, sweetie," he said. "What species was it?"

Lily's brow furrowed. "Not sure, I'll have to do some research to find a match. It was between us and the fence when I first saw it, and its wingspan couldn't have been more than two or three feet, so I don't think it was something as big as an eagle—"

"Commence sterilization," the director said.

Lily whirled back to the window, but it was too late. The truck and workers had already departed and a dense sterilization mist clouded the window's view of the now closing doors. The only reason she was able to determine that the doors were closing through the thick veil was because of the steadily narrowing sunlight that shone through.

Eventually, the light was reduced to a thin line that retreated past the colliding doors and vanished with a *click*. The mist continued to stream down onto the cargo.

The director pressed a few buttons. The sirens silenced but the spinning red lights remained. With this, he slid back his rolling chair, gave a drawn-out yawn, and walked over to Lily. His hand fell on her shoulder. Her gaze remained fixed on the window.

“Let’s go grab some breakfast,” he said lightly.

Lily shook her head. Had she not been clean shaven, her hair would have whipped back and forth with the movement. Her father’s hand remained on her for a few seconds longer before he straightened and exited the room.

The flurries of mist in the unloading bay fluctuated between dark and light shades of red as warning lights passed through them, the outline of the doors just barely visible through the strobing crimson. Lily continued to stare at the great doors long after her father left, dreaming of them opening but knowing they would not.

Two days after the supply truck arrived at the MA-14, the director slumped down into his chair with a sigh of relief. He was thankful to have finally returned to his main office from that dreary control room. As usual, the thirty-six-hour unloading process had completely drained him of energy, what with him having to remain awake and alert for the entirety of it. But now he could finally rest.

MA-14 went to great lengths to prevent contamination, but no amount of seclusion and sanitation could circumvent the never-ending human necessities of food and water. Therefore, once every three months, the facility risked opening up its

otherwise sealed doors in order to resupply. First, the doors were opened and they received the supply truck sent by headquarters, a step that no one could witness unless secured behind the ostensibly impenetrable glass of the director's control office. This rule did not matter much, however, since most MA-14 citizens would not dare risk entering a room even remotely connected to the unloading bay, even when the doors were shut. The director, however, was required to oversee the supply drop in its entirety and only he could authorize the progression of the process into each phase. Should the unloading go smoothly, the cargo was then left in the bay under a constant mist of disinfecting chemicals for twelve hours. Once a half-day had passed, a small, efficient unit of hazmat unpackers was dispatched from MA-14 to unbox the cargo from their cardboard containers, the remains of which were left in the unloading bay for immediate incineration. The cargo and workers were then transferred to the sanitation dock, a room divided into two areas. The first area, designed for the cargo, was similar to the unloading bay, spacious and barren, and released a constant stream of disinfectant mist on the cargo and used hazmat suits for twenty-four hours. The workers were taken to a parallel room for the same duration of time, only this one had large monitoring pods for them to lie in. The pods tracked their heart rate, internal temperature, and overall physical appearance for the director to scrutinize over the course of their twenty-four hour wait. This last step might appear as a bit of an over precaution, since the symptoms of the EB virus only took around two hours to appear, but there was a reason Facility MA-14 had survived for almost two hundred years.

Every switch that was flipped and every door that was opened was done so by the director in the control room, a task that required unprecedented vigilance when compared to his other duties as facility head. The first twelve-hour gap was relatively leisurely, with the disinfecting of inanimate objects requiring little to no supervision. It was the second sterilization period that grated years off the director's life. While the workers stripped themselves of their hazmat suits and moved into their pods, the director strained to notice any potential signs of contamination. A few extra beads of sweat, a slight shiver, a quick cough. The smallest of possible symptoms could entail the imminent death of every resident in the facility. These were the conditions from which the director returned as he slid down his chair in an exhausted lump. He often joked that the unloading operation alone would have turned him bald regardless of the facility's hair-hygiene policy.

A few minutes of silence ensued before the door to his main office opened and Lily shuffled in, her eyes fixed on a large tablet in her hands. High-pitched chirping accompanied her arrival.

"All done?" she asked, flopping into a large sofa near the door.

It always disheartened the director to see his daughter choose the couch nearest to the exit. He knew that her favorite spot to sit was in the leather, reclining office chair, which he had moved closer to his desk in an effort to encourage Lily to follow suit. Lately, this was not enough to entice the twelve-year-old girl to sit near her father.

"All done," he confirmed.

Lily's tablet continued to fill the room with the incessant sound of chirping birds.

“What are you watching?” asked the director.

“Why is the smell so bad in here?” She asked, ignoring his question.

“What smell?” The director sniffed the air, finding nothing unusual.

“Chemicals.”

“Oh, I just took a sterilization shower. Maybe that's what you're smelling,” he said, though he himself still could not detect the odor.

“No,” Lily insisted, “that chemical smells different from this smell.”

The director pushed aside his daughter's nasal observations and again inquired as to the nature of what she was watching.

“I'm searching for the specific species of bird that I saw yesterday,” she said and paused before adding: “Not that you care.”

“Of course I care,” he said with a quickness that immediately shed doubt onto his words.

“You didn't care yesterday. You shut the doors while I was in the middle of telling you about it.”

The director was about to reject this accusation but realized he could not. When a supply drop was underway, nearly all of his mind focused on the operation, leaving scant room for a child's banter. The only reason he even allowed Lily into the control office at such times was for her training, something that bird sightings did little to further.

“I apologize. You know I need to focus during supply drops... as should you. Soon you'll be the one behind that desk and you'll realize how insignificant a lone bird is while MA-14 lies helpless and exposed to the outside.”

“Insignificant,” Lily said the word slowly, as if to analyze how each syllable blended into the next. “Insignificant. Are the truck drivers insignificant?”

“What? Of course not—”

“Then why are they sent to do such a dangerous job?”

The director cleared his throat. “The truck drivers are the most important part of the whole system. Without them we would have all died of starvation or EB ages ago, you know that.”

“Well, if they’re the most important people, then I want to be a truck driver, not a director,” Lily said conclusively.

“No—what are you talking about? Where did all of this come from?” the director sat up in his seat. He had been forced to deal with his daughter’s obstinate nature before (the pediatrician attributed it to the beginning stages of adolescence) but never had she spewed such defiance and heresy.

Lily sat up as well, her eyes leaving the tablet and looking at him for the first time since she had entered the office. She was glaring.

“I don’t want to be the director! If truck drivers are so important, why can’t I be one of them?”

Despite the facility being set at a stagnant sixty-three-degrees, the director felt the temperature rise with his anger. Lily was not just resisting her pre-determined job, but the teachings that she had been subject to since birth. She knew the answer to her question, which made him all the angrier for her asking it. Career fatalism was one of the great pillars of modern society, a sentinel of order and health. Could a machine run efficiently

if each of its cogs got to pick and choose how or when they wanted to turn? And given that the slightest malfunction in said machine meant its inexorable destruction, was it not only selfish but also homicidal for a cog to consider it any other way? The director knew that Lily knew this, for it was drilled into every facility resident from the moment they began absorbing information. He suspected she was saying these things in retaliation for him ignoring her during the drop, though that was not an acceptable excuse. Lily was no ordinary resident; she was to be the future director. She didn't have the luxury of throwing tantrums and spouting heresy. If she did not understand or comply with these principles, all nine-thousand-three-hundred-and-twenty-eight residents were dead. The director was too old and his daughter too far along for a new successor to be selected and trained, not that it was even an option. These were not questions to be gently answered; Lily's words were a plague that had to be utterly annihilated.

Without saying another word, the director stood up from his desk, walked over to the keypad next to the office's door, and furiously typed in the dreaded twelve-digit code. Lily, immediately grasping what was about to happen, leapt to her feet and dashed towards the door. But before she could reach it, a metal barricade came down over it, firmly blocking the only exit.

"Please, father! Not that!" Lily cried, running to the director and tugging his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Please, not that!"

The director gently, but firmly, detached his daughter's grip from his arm and walked back to his desk. The office lights were dimming now and a thin screen began to lower from the ceiling, positioned to block the view of the barricaded door. Lily—still

weeping—appeared to have given up on begging and lunged into the couch cushions faced down. She grabbed a nearby throw-pillow and wrapped it behind her head to cover her ears. The screen blinked to life but the director said “pause” before the video could begin.

His voice was grim, he took no pleasure in what he was about to do. “Sweetie, you know that I won’t open this room until you’ve watched the video in its entirety.” Indeed, both of them knew this all too well. Her first viewing of the twenty-minute video took over three hours. Each time she turned her head away or began crying into a pillow, the director would restart the video and give her the same command: “Lillith, watch the video.”

Sniffing and letting out a few weaker sobs, the girl sat up and looked towards the screen.

“Begin,” the director ordered.

Lily watched the video and the director watched Lily. He was able to visualize the video through audio cues alone, the sole reward for countless painful viewings. It began with a shot of an examination table surrounded by three white, vacant walls. On the table there lay a man, stripped of all clothing besides a white towel over his groin. His skin glimmered with sweat under the bright surgical light, but his body shivered as if he were lying naked in a deep freezer. Randomly, a limb or two would twitch, each movement lasting less than a second. The man breathed hard and slowly, his lungs struggling against the weight of the air they pulled in. His abdomen protruded roundly, pale and veiny like

the later stages of an albino pregnancy. A faint gurgling sound occasionally came from his throat as he desperately tried to suppress incoming coughs.

“Day one, hour six of the subject's contamination,” said an authoritative yet shaky voice from behind the camera. “Twenty minutes past the average recorded survival time. Subject has excreted blood from three of the eight—”

The man's ears began to leak a viscous, predominantly black substance with traces of red in it. A hazmat suit came into frame and wiped the liquid from the man's ears, tossing the towel to the far-right corner of the room afterwards.

“—Four of the eight male orifices. Subject's fever last recorded at 113.6 degrees-Fahrenheit, 45.3 degrees-Celsius, observably rising.”

The director was about to say: “Lillith, watch the video,” but his daughter's eyes lapsed from their prolonged closure just as he opened his mouth. Her hands were in tiny fists on her knees, her knuckles losing color from preemptive tension. The video carried on: the voice verbalizing the subject's deterioration, the subject's worsening condition speaking volumes more than the voice's jargon, and Lily's grimace growing fiercer with each passing second. Then came the moment, the climax—if such a word could be used in a medical context—that both those behind the camera and those watching the video knew to be inevitable. The director watched Lily with the same vigilance that he had watched the second sanitation phase of the supply drop with earlier that day.

The subject began to shake violently, all of his limbs now convulsing at once. His ears leaked black fluid again, along with his nose and eye-sockets. Dark veins throbbed under the man's pale skin, particularly visible in the abdomen, neck, and face. Then came

the coughing. Harsh, wet hacks that sounded like his lungs were being strangled with vice-grips. Slowly and surely, the coughs became accompanied by the liquid, a little at first, then in amounts comparable to vomit.

“Lillith, watch the video.”

Soon, a large portion of the man’s body was slick with black fluid, the remaining areas purple and knotted with veins straining against their prison of flesh. Black blood gargled out from the subject’s throat as it dragged the few remaining pockets of air from his lungs. With one final cough, a last powerful spurt of black fluid erupted from the subject’s mouth and the gargling stopped. The convulsions briefly subsided into minor twitches, then the man went still.

The voice in the video started to expound statistics similar to the ones he had said at the beginning, but the director ordered it to be turned off, having already shown his daughter what she’d needed to see. The lights returned to their usual neutral brightness and the screen rose back into the ceiling. Finally, the barricade retreated and once again made the door accessible to exit through.

Lily’s hands were still in bloodless fists, her face taking on a similar color. The borders of her eyes were red and damp. She did not have to ask for the director to know what she wanted next.

“You may be excused,” he said in a lowered voice.

The girl stood up from the couch and left the room with a dash. The sound of her sobbing could be heard echoing down the hallway as she ran away.

The director rose from his chair, stiff and exhausted. He made a few calls to the necessary station managers and then retired to his room in the resident halls for the evening. When he finally pulled the covers over himself and closed his eyes, he found that a small part of him was still resisting rest, despite him not having slept for almost two days. No matter how necessary it was, he could not help but feel a certain amount of self-hatred every time he showed his daughter that video. The first time she watched it was when she was six, and she spent the following month unable to be alone and furiously sanitizing herself every chance she got. At night, Lily would sneak into the director's room and complain of nightmares, visions of black goo and vomiting blood narrated by a disembodied voice speaking in medical tongues. But that was reality. In the two hundred years since the facilities were established, no one had come any closer to understanding the EB virus. Like any other virus, it mutated, replicating through different organisms, but at a much faster rate than any other ever observed. Just as scientists were just beginning to understand it, it mutated and further eluded them. Some variations of it were airborne, some were not. Sometimes it went dormant for a season or two, and just as people were beginning to feel safe, it came back even more contagious and deadly than before. The EB virus was completely unpredictable. The only consistency throughout all of its versions was that it was lethal to primates, as if the virus was specifically created to wipe out humans and their closest evolutionary relatives. No facility could cure it, only do its best to prevent it. The director had to teach Lily the horrors that underlie existence if existence was to be maintained.

So why did it hurt so much for him to protect her?

“The wingspan was no more than three feet, you say?” clarified Dr. Atley, the facility’s leading biologist and Lily’s unofficial instructor.

“That’s right,” Lily said with a nod. It was the evening after the director’s punishment and she was submerging herself in her tried and tested coping mechanism: ornithology. After several hours of failing to identify the mysterious bird through research alone, Lily sent a video-call to Dr. Atley for help. His face took up the entirety of her tablet, which she had leaned up against some books on her desk to free her hands for notes.

“Hmm,” the biologist stroked his shaven chin, “And this sighting was directly after the doors had opened?”

Lily confirmed his statement once again. Dr. Atley’s constant need for clarification used to annoy her, eventually to the point of bringing it up to him. “Clear information is the quickest route to the most accurate conclusions,” was his response.

“Then the bird was of a black coloration, leading me to conclude that it was a simple crow, common to these parts.” His manner of speaking always reminded Lily of the narration in the old nature documentaries.

“But how did you determine its color?”

“Well, the facility doors are pointing north, which means that if you saw the bird flying straight away from you, then the bird was also pointing north. Factoring in that MA-14 receives supply drops at approximately 9:00 AM and that the bird was above the lot before the gate, it could be that the blackness you saw was its actual color, not its

silhouette. Had you seen it around noon, I would be less certain since the sun would be directly overhead to shadow the bird. Therefore, the bird is probably black and, most likely, a common crow.”

Atley’s words made Lily’s head spin slightly but she thought she understood most of what he said.

“So then because the bird is black, it’s a crow?”

“Probably. Probably, my dear. In science, we can rarely be certain from brief glimpses alone. We must test and observe over and over again before we can even begin to draw confident conclusions.”

Lily internally scolded herself for even asking. She should have known that.

“I must say though, I’m jealous of you, young lady,” Dr. Atley continued. “To have seen a crow with your own two eyes, now that is a rare thing indeed.”

“Really? You’ve never seen one up close?” Lily marveled at the idea of her having seen something that the biologist had not.

“Certainly not!” Atley said with a laugh. “No, on the few occasions that I have witnessed the outside world through the control room, I did not have the pleasure of such a sight.” Despite the laugh, Lily sensed a hint of sadness in the doctor’s voice. A familiar sadness.

“Hey, Dr. Atley?” Lily said using her ‘innocent’ voice, the same one she used on the director when she asked to stay up past the children’s curfew. “Have you ever wanted to go outside?”

The biologist's face slackened for a moment, weakened into a day-dreaming stare. The look of someone reminiscing on a childhood crush that they had not had the courage to approach. But only for a moment. He quickly hardened it into a stern look not dissimilar from the one her father had earlier that day.

"Lily," Atley grimaced, "you know better than to think about things like that. I won't tell your father, but I'd better not hear you say such things again. If I do... well..."

"I'm sorry, doctor. It was just a stupid thought, I didn't mean anything by it. Thanks for the help," Lily said politely. Atley watched her carefully for a few seconds before he mumbled something and his face disappeared from the tablet. The girl grabbed the device, got up from her desk, and flung herself onto her bed.

Lily smiled. She'd seen it. That unguarded moment when Atley's face revealed his answer to her question, whether or not he had intended it to. Lily wasn't alone. Nor was she insane for dwelling on what lies beyond their lives of fluorescent lights and disinfectant spray. But why was she the only one who had the courage to admit it? It wasn't just that the adults were scolding her, it was the speed with which they dismissed her questions. Neither the director nor Atley nor any of the other residents even entertained the questions she was asking. To them, her words held no value beyond potential indicators of what they call "unorthodoxy and disobedience." As if they knew something that she was simply too young to understand.

Then there was the video.

Almost as much as she resented the video itself, Lily hated how her father could remain unaffected by it. While she was holding back tears, the director's face was stone,

as if he were watching uninteresting security footage. Her loss of composure divulged immaturity. That's why he showed her the video, to remind her that she was just a kid. A kid who shouldn't question the system. A kid who would eventually become the director because the all-knowing adults said she would.

Lily's eyes blurred with tears, which she hurriedly rubbed away with her arm. Taking initiative before the thoughts could return, she tapped the letters 'C-R-O-W-S' into her tablet and drowned herself in research.

Crows, like humans, are profoundly intelligent, Lily discovered. The species excels in the areas of recognition and communication. A flock is not called a 'flock,' but a 'murder' (Lily scrolled past this word before images of black blood returned to her head). Crows are omnivorous, eating anything from mice to seeds to humans scraps. Crows are also scavengers, often feeding on the corpses of other animals, including humans (she scrolled down some more). Crows have long been associated with disease and death (scroll, scroll).

In the blur of scrolling text, one word caught Lily's eye, a word so peculiar in the context of the information that her curiosity for its presence eliminated any negative images it may have otherwise produced. The word was 'funeral.'

It has been observed, Lily read, that murders surround the corpses of other dead crows in a ritual that could be poetically referred to as a funeral. The birds will flock around the corpse and observe it from some distance away in a sort of autopsy. They do this as a way of searching for the cause of death and whether or not that cause might be a present threat to the rest of them. It is also worth noting that through the birds' distance

from the corpse, they help prevent contamination of any disease that could have killed the crow they are observing.

Lily read the passage several more times. She had read about funerals before—human ones, that is—in societies before EB. The people of old would hold elaborate ceremonies for their dead, offering flowers to the corpses and laying them in lavish boxes to be buried. Then they would mark the burial site with a stone bearing the name of the dead, so their identity and life could be remembered long after they had passed.

A funeral of that nature had not been held for over two hundred years.

Now the funerals people held were more akin to those of the crow. Suspicious, tense events that held no purpose beyond a distant autopsy before the immediate cremation. She had only attended one—for an elderly woman who had died of old age—and her father had explained that the facilities who had practiced more intimate ceremonies had not lasted long. Lily thought back to the video and the man whose name was nothing more than ‘subject.’ The proceedings of that video were the only funeral that ‘subject’ ever got. His eulogy consisted of temperatures, orifices, time markers, and averages. The only embalming he received was that which his declining body could provide: a minor purging of the disease-ridden blood that killed him. He was buried in artificial light, his own fluids, and—had her father continued the video—flames that reduced all traces of his existence to ash.

Then Lily remembered the lone crow outside the facility, not observing any corpses or mulling over how to prevent its demise, but simply being. Flying through the early blue, basking in the newly awoken sun. It was alone and exposed to danger, sure,

but in that solitude, it had something unknown to those who spend their existence staring at the dead. The crow had life.

Screaming sirens and strobing red lights jerked the director back into consciousness. He had no trouble comprehending what was happening, it was the why of the event that was beyond him. Had the alarm system malfunctioned? Was someone outside trying to enter? Was there an external breach somewhere?

Or did someone on the inside open the doors?

Barefoot, in nothing but a t-shirt and his underwear, the director bolted out of his bedroom. The hallways were lit with crimson danger. Residents peered out their doors in fear, watching as the director sprinted past. He could have navigated through the facility blindfolded, and practically was considering his disorientation in the noise, lights, and confusion. Had the facility been in its early days, when residents were constantly trying to leave or outsiders break in, the appointed director would have been living in the control room, giving him or her instant access to situations reminiscent of the one presently underway. But after nearly a century and a half of peace, MA-14 had relaxed certain procedures and traditions. The director now lived with the other residents in the resident halls, which were built as far away from the doors as they could possibly be.

But the director was not running to the control room or the loading bay. He was running to the children's quarters. The director knew that before he could calmly and adequately assess the situation, he had to confirm Lily's safety. This was not protocol, this was not at all what he was trained to do in the case of an unexpected breach. Later,

he would tell himself—and others—that he went to Lily’s room because she was the future of the facility, that before anything else, her welfare meant the welfare of the facility as a whole. But the true reason was far simpler than that.

Lily’s room had always been well-organized and minimal, something the director admired about his daughter. Yet, when he threw open the door and scanned her room, it was beyond its usual neatness, it was barren. The desk was empty, clear of her notebooks and portable reading light. Her bed was stripped of its comforter, pillow, and sheets. Only her tablet remained, placed neatly in the center of her mattress.

The director remained in the doorway of the empty room a bit longer than he probably should have, given the urgency of the situation. But it was in that doorway that he was struck by a potential, horrific explanation for why the sirens were blaring, why the lights were strobing, and why his daughter was not in her room.

He ran, faster than before, to the loading bay.

It was the cold that hit him first. All of the doors between the sanitation dock, the loading bay, and beyond were wide open, releasing an icy night breeze that consumed the facility’s usual temperature. His skin rose in the cold air, a feeling that he nor any other facility resident was very accustomed to. Though the sanitation dock and its contents were already considered contaminated, the director hastily put on a hazmat suit before entering the loading bay, if nothing else, out of ritual alone. The suit too was frigid, sucking the warmth from his bare flesh. But the director persevered, wincing past the irregular discomfort that the facility’s consistent temperature usually protected him from.

The great doors between the loading bay and death itself were wide open, with little visible beyond them. Even the spinning warning lights were helpless in illuminating the thick void past the doors. But one thing could just barely be seen: a small figure that was slightly lighter than the surrounding night, retreating further into it.

The director began towards the open doors and stopped halfway across the room. He wanted to go further, to go out into the darkness and retrieve his daughter, but something blocked him from proceeding. Years of fear, years of routine, years of rules. A lifetime of conditioning and anxiety stood between the director and the open doors, between father and daughter.

“Lily!” the director called out, his voice cracking from the volume. “Come back, Lily! Come back before it’s too late!”

The night answered his call with a particularly strong gust of cold air.

“Lillith! Come back here this instant! If you don’t, we’ll have to close the doors and you’ll never be allowed back inside!”

This time the night answered with stillness. Somehow that felt colder than the wind.

“Lily—” the father choked on his scream, igniting a stream of incoherent sobs and coughs. “Lily...”

The director fell to his knees, refusing to take his eyes off of the blackness beyond the doors. No matter how long he stared, visibility did not increase. He stayed there, cold and afraid, until he eventually ran out of tears to shed and mustered up enough energy to return to his feet.

“Close the doors,” the director murmured at last; tired, contaminated, and alone.

By the time the sky had begun to awaken into indigo, Lily had barely made it a half mile away from MA-14. She had been too distracted by new information to make much progress. When she walked barefoot across the grass, she found that it was hard and brittle, with little droplets of ice on each blade that sparkled in the moonlight—the moon’s dull and soft light being yet another surprise. Moreover, if she stood in one spot for long enough, the ice would melt and the bottoms of her feet would become wet. Lily had always wondered what grass felt like, but had never seriously considered the role moisture would play in the sensation. Revelation after revelation made her pause her destinationless journey every few moments, each stop giving her unique information unavailable in the words and videos provided by MA-14. The clashing temperatures of her body, the air, and the earth. How the moonlight from above interacted with the world around her: reflecting, refracting, and shadowing the environment in ways that were impossible for man-made bulbs. The sounds the wind made as it rushed through the trees and carried with it distant noises otherwise unheard. The way the stars wavered in their shine, with slight nuances to their flicker that only the naked eye could discern. Everything around Lily was simultaneously familiar and new.

It was not the sky’s change in color that foretold the sun’s arrival to Lily, but the slow fading of the distant stars. Every time she looked up, there seemed to be fewer and fewer lights in the sky, all hiding from the greater brightness that had begun to manifest in the east. Lily took a seat in the frozen grass, her clothes growing damper the longer she

sat. But she didn't mind, the only thing that concerned her was the emergence of the sun. The sky bent to the will of the sun, gradually succumbing more and more to the brighter colors that the light imposed. Before long, the horizon was ablaze with oranges, reds, pinks, and purples. Lily also realized that the air had become warmer, even if only a little, and the earth beneath her was the only reminder of the prior night's chill. Warmth, comfort, tranquility. Somewhere off to her left, Lily heard the distant cawing of a waking crow. She was about to turn towards the bird's voice, but suddenly felt strange. A slight pressure had appeared within Lily's lungs.

She coughed.

The Omega

I popped out my reading eyes and put in ones with binocular vision, which I had designed to have layered eye-lid cones surrounding protruding pupils, like a chameleon. These gave me a better view of the fleshy protesters outside: the sweaty, vulgar little cretins huddled together, lifting signs into the air, screaming unflattering things about me. Looking down at them from my executive office on the top floor, I found myself wondering if dropping a penny off a skyscraper really could kill someone on the street below. Unfortunately, I hadn't owned a physical coin in years.

But it wasn't just the protesters. Everyone was talking about it. On the streets, the news, social media. Not that anyone had any concrete evidence beyond some anonymous source who leaked the story, but you know how people are. Nothing excites the public more than seeing the great fail, watching those far above them stumble. It was astonishing how quickly they all turned against me; how one day they were praising me as the artistic, innovative genius that I am and then the next they were calling for my arrest—even as some of them were still dressed in body modifications that I designed. Yet, it was not their fluctuation in opinion or hypocrisy that frustrated me, no, it was the sheer audacity of them to mock my failure. They, whose lives are nothing but a series of failures—abandoned dreams, alienated labor, shitty children, loveless marriages—had the gall to deem themselves worthy of criticizing me, Vevi DeLarose, the world's greatest body mod designer and only trillionaire. The worst part of it was, though they didn't know it for sure, they were right. I'd failed. And that was the most infuriating thing of all.

Unsurprisingly, the fleshies were first to join in my social crucifixion. I didn't even know there had been a leak until every anti-modding group in the nation was announcing my failed prototype and screaming for my arrest. Less than an hour later, the disgusting, anti-modding shits had begun protesting outside.

Eventually, the reputable media outlets caught wind that the leak was more than just another fleshy conspiracy theory and they too began to publicize the matter. I ordered the outlets that I had a majority share in to report the story only after the other news sources had fully attached themselves to it, and then to continuously emphasize that these were only rumors and speculation at the moment. Not the most inconspicuous approach, I know, but the journalistic integrity of my news outlets was the least of my concerns at the time.

As I sat there in my office, festering in my wrath, I could hear the sounds of my secretary, Janet, as she answered the endless stream of incoming calls and emails. She called my attention to a few important share-holders on the line before I made it clear to her that I did not want to speak or listen to anyone until Tom arrived. Still, about ten minutes after telling her this, I peered out to see how she was doing and found myself feeling a great amount of sympathy for the woman. Even in her normal work attire—four arms and a 360-degree visor that also functioned as a computer monitor—I could see her struggling against the workload. She repeated the same denial of my presence to callers while also answering emails on her laptop, and I was reminded of the multitasking ability that had impressed me enough to hire her. I made a mental note to give her a generous raise once the ordeal had passed.

My head lawyer, Tom Sores, arrived almost two hours after I had contacted him, heralding himself by phone rather than just coming straight to my office.

“Why are you calling me?” I started with an uncharacteristic lack of composure. “Get up here immediately. We’ll go over the situation and take a helicopter to go meet with Aleen at the hospital.”

“Sir, before I come up I must make you aware that there is a certain... visitor here with me.” His voice was different than how it usually was in our private conversations: it was far more reserved, deliberate, not unlike the voice he used in an open courtroom.

“Police?”

“Not quite,” Tom said. “attorney general Desmond Bradvick is here to see you.”

That did it, that name alone killed any composure I had left. “Well, send him away and tell him to come back with a warrant! What kind of defense attorney are you?”

Tom hadn’t just led the city’s AG into my building, but a fleshy as well. Bradvick belonged to the Church of Sampson, a group of self-proclaimed nazirites who denounced any and all body modification. Old-fashioned ink and needle tattoos, piercings, circumcision, tooth removal; the fleshy cult took even archaic forms of body modifications as an affront to their kinship with god, or some bullshit like that. And of course the idiot masses elected one of these nutjobs as attorney general only a year prior. I’d known it was only a matter of time before Bradvick tried to pick a fight with me, but, admittedly, I had been a bit too preoccupied with the leak to consider him taking advantage of it.

“Sir,” Tom said in a hushed tone, “I have allowed the AG to come with me here because he requested it. *And seeing as how we have nothing to hide*, I figured there would be no harm in both parties discussing the matter before either pursues legal action.”

I took a breath. So that’s our game plan, I thought: play ball with the AG while we cover our tracks. Maybe even give the fleshy fuck the delusional impression that we were afraid of him. The frustration of that day must have clouded my mind for me to think that Tom Sores, my most clever and trusted attorney, would lead a fleshy to my office without a plan.

“Fine. bring him to the conference room on the second floor: the one in the middle without any windows. Deal with him the best you can. I’ll make an appearance shortly.”

And with that, I hung up the phone.

I came down to the second floor about a half hour later. Since I had only been wearing a few simple attachments beforehand, I took the time to adorn myself with the latest—and most expensive—modifications to greet my visitor in. For the frame, I chose a traditional male torso—chiseled and without nipples; lanky arms and legs with rotating elbows and knees; and a X-series plated neck with a range of around four feet. The skin shader I wore had a weak gold tint to it, one that grew in vibrance around stronger lighting. The more miniscule mods I applied included obsidian eyes without visible pupils, a nano-nose with centimeter nostrils (the smell functionality turned off,

considering I was going to meet with a fleshy), and flat teeth that were similar in color to the eyes. I didn't bother with any hair, clothes, or genitals.

Now, you and I can appreciate the glamor of the attire that I have just described, how such a form transcends fashion and dwells more in the realm of the sublime. But to Bradvick, a man so brainwashed by the cult of Sampson that he lost all capability for artistic appreciation, my form was taken to be—I kid you not—appalling. I could see it in his eyes, the utter disgust that rose up within him the moment I stepped into the conference room, a discomfort at the very presence of my art. I was able to ascertain these opinions from his expression because his own appearance aroused a similar feeling within myself. The AG had an oily pink face, weighed down by gelatinous cheeks and protruding neck fat that was pushed upwards and choked under his tight shirt collar. He had a shiny bald-spot on the crown of his head that made him look like a medieval monk. His arms were short and his hands were small, and I wondered how he was able to type with such fat little fingers. I realize my description of such a vulgar physicality may trigger some nausea within you—and I'm sorry for that—but now you should be able to imagine the overwhelming disgust that I felt having to sit in the same room with that creature, in addition to the utter disrespect that such a presence represented.

Tom and Bradvick were at the far left corner of the long conference table when I entered. Because this was a lower level conference room—meant for the briefings of janitors, doormen, and the like—the lights were dim and the seats were simple, with only enough support for bipedal-mod frames. The AG was not worthy of venturing into the

more luxurious sections of my headquarters; it was already bad enough that he was soiling all the door handles with his oils and sweat.

I announced my name as I entered, as is the custom for those of us who have such extensive and various mod frames that our recognizability changes daily. The two men rose to greet me, the fleshy wearing a formal smile and extending his pudgy little hand towards me.

“Mr. DeLarose,” he said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

I accepted his hand-shake and noted that I should throw my right hand away as soon as the meeting was through.

“Attorney General,” I said as politely as I could, “Sorry for the delay. I have a lot on my plate, you must understand.”

“Naturally. I would just like to ask you a few questions.”

Tom’s voice cut in: “We never said that my client would answer any of the questions directly, only that he would listen to some of the discussion and concerns.”

The fleshy kept his gaze on me. “Do you agree with that, Mr. DeLarose? Are you content with just listening to us discussing the situation?”

His words were a bellow rekindling the flames of my suppressed anger. It was obvious that he was trying to provoke me into an interrogation, but that was not what irritated me. What pissed me off was that that ugly, uncivilized piece of shit thought he was going to trip me up or outwit me if I were to answer his questions. He and all those other sub-human fucks were acting like my failed prototype made me some sort of

moron, some gullible imbecile. He was forgetting who I was, what I had accomplished. I couldn't let him mock me so openly and come out unscathed.

“Sure, why not,” I said without a hint of the indignation blazing within me. “If answering a few questions will clear this whole thing up quicker, so be it.” I flashed my ebony grills in an open smile; Bradvick winced.

The attorney general rattled off some predictable questions about whether or not the rumors were true, what kind of mods I had in development, those sorts of things. I answered each question with standard PR vagueness, hiding behind my business's intellectual property rights as the reason why I could not give a more clear response. At first, Bradvick took these answers at face value, or at least appeared to. But as he asked more and more questions and my answers stayed the same, his squishy pink face began to grow scarlet with irritation. When he finally realized he was not going to get any information about the prototype's specs, he pivoted his approach.

“Do you know a man by the name of Rodney Turner?” There was a confident gleam in Bradvick's eye. The name of the test subject had not been included in the original leak, only that the prototype had failed and the anonymous subject was receiving medical treatment. The fleshy had more on me than I thought.

“Yes.”

“And are you aware that Mr. Turner has had a complete mental breakdown, leaving his entire mind and sense of reality in shambles? Or that he has recently been admitted into a private mental institution under the care of the world-renowned psychologist, Dr. Aleen Einren?”

Close but no cigar, I thought, relieved that he didn't know the full details of Turner's condition.

I could feel Tom's anxiety growing across the table. He was braced and ready to intervene at any moment.

"Of course I am," I said. "I'm the one who is paying for him to stay there."

The fleshy smiled arrogantly. "That's awfully generous of you, Vevi. Have you always been such an altruist?"

My anger was now a volcano on the brink of eruption. That fucking trash *dared* address me by my first name, as if we were equals, as if I respected him enough to allow such a thing. Tom recognized the fleshy's insult as well, "What my client does with his money is—"

"Not this time, no," I said over Tom's legalese. "Mr. Turner and I had a previous arrangement where I would cover any medical fees he might acquire."

"You mean a contract?" Bradvick said. "The same contract where he agreed to prototype this "Omega frame" without the approval of the government?"

"I don't have to say what kind of arrangement it was. That's between Mr. Turner and I, the government had no part in it."

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong, Vevi," the fleshy sneered. "In order to experiment on human beings, one must receive express approval from both the federal government and the state the experiment is to be conducted in."

Tom cut in again: "That is only assuming that the alleged experiment was conducted within the United States, which there is no—"

“May I ask you a question, Mr. Bradvick?” I asked.

“Be my guest,” said the AG, who was more than happy to have me speaking instead of my attorney.

I extended my neck about two feet in his direction. “When was the last time you fucked your wife?” I gave a small nod towards the wedding band jammed onto his sausage-like ring finger.

“What?” His face lit up scarlet again. “Watch your mouth, you cocky little—”

“Did you apply for a government permit before you fucked her? No, I would venture to guess that you didn’t. Because the act was—I hope—between two consenting adults. So to you, my dear attorney general, I ask what the difference is between two adults consenting to a business arrangement and two fleshies consenting to a grotesque imitation of what we normal-folk call intercourse,” And I couldn’t help but add: “I mean, besides the promise of both parties actually benefiting from the transaction in the former scenario.”

Seeing the fleshy’s head turn into a shiny, ripe tomato brought me so much joy that it actually eased my anger a bit. He stuttered and scrambled for a response, but before it came to him I retracted my neck and rose from my seat.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have more pressing matters to attend to. Tom here will answer any further questions you might have.” I gestured towards my lawyer, who was still recovering and trying to think of a way to spin my previous statement.

I listened to the fleshy scream insults and threats at me all the way up the corridor.

Rodney's face stretched and contorted and strained as Aleen carefully slid pictures of him across the table, pictures of how he used to look. The parts of his body that were within his sight were relatively unchanging, his face was what he struggled to keep consistent. I was watching from a security camera in a separate room, a few hours after my conversation with the AG. The nurse said Aleen would join me once she had finished her tests.

Even though I was no longer being harassed by Bradvick and the rest of his fleshy cohorts (in person, at least), my frustration had not subsided. In fact, seeing Turner's mind and body in such disarray only made the vexation even worse. At least when the fleshies were protesting outside my building or talking about me on the news I could blame my feelings on them, but now that I was alone and sheltered from the world's criticism, I had to face the truth head on. I had failed—spectacularly. I'd failed prototypes in the past, of course, but with those there was usually a clear reason for what backfired in the design, and after running the numbers again or changing a few other variables, I typically got more positive results on the second or third attempts. But the Omega frame was far more complicated than that. Granted, the sheer ambition of the project was inherently enough to cast doubt as to whether it was even possible or not. No one but me could have gotten this far into such an abstract idea, and that means that I was the only one capable of solving the mysterious issue. If I couldn't, then this problem would reveal the limit of my art and innovation. 'Limit,' the very word pissed me off.

I waited, brewing in my own thoughts and frustration, for another twenty minutes before Aleen came to meet me.

“Vevi,” she said, sitting down and lighting a cigarette, “You’re going to tell me exactly what you did to this guy. Right fucking now. No excuses, no bullshit.”

Aleen’s beauty was found not in a variety of eccentric mods, but in how well she could pull off even the most basic ones. Both her eyes and hair were purple, gradually shifting back and forth between the lightest and darkest shades of the color. Her torso and limbs were slim and covered in GIF tattoos; that day she was sporting a variety of flowers that moved and swayed as a turquoise, Chinese dragon swam through them in endless laps around her body. Her head was the main area of her skin not covered by flowers or the dragon, and for that she had on a simple bronze skin-shader without any metallic shine. The other mods that I knew for sure she had in were her bio-metal lungs and enhanced heart, both of which I designed specifically so that she could smoke the old-style cigarettes she loved so much. Aleen took off her lab coat as she sat down at the desk next to me, exposing her faded black t-shirt and worn jeans.

“I only installed a mod on the molecular level that directly linked his consciousness and imagination to his physical form. Simple as that.” Had I been in a better mood, I would have accompanied the sarcasm with my signature grin that irritates her so much.

The cigarette fell from Aleen’s fingers. “You *what?*”

“I just told you.” I said, taking the liberty of stomping out her cigarette with my bare foot.

“How did you... what kind of—”

“Let me explain. As you know, the project is called the ‘Omega frame.’ I named it that because it was supposed to be exactly that: the end, the final frame—and, indeed, mod—that a person would ever need. My plan was to install a unified mod into every cell of the user’s body, down to the molecule. The mod would link the subject’s physical form with their conscious existence using a techno-organic material I developed called ‘Omeucle.’ This material uses specific neural-transmissions of its host to inform its shape, so that a person's consciousness could influence their physical appearance to be whatever they want—within reason, of course. Omeucle works in tandem with the user’s genetic coding, not against it. Similar to how we have psychological barriers preventing us from, say, biting off our own fingers as easily as we could a carrot, so too does the Omeucle identify DNA structures and psychological patterns that are necessary for sustaining life and protects them.

I paused and waited a few moments for Aleen to take in the information. Even though she was one of the most brilliant people I had ever met—even more so than myself with regards to the human psyche—my explanation was a lot to decipher all at once. And seeing how I needed her feedback to determine what the potential error in my prototype was, I allotted her as much time as she needed to process the information. She spoke up after only a few minutes of silence, sooner than even I would have predicted.

“So the user is not capable of taking on a form that would kill them? Like growing or shrinking beyond their genetic limits?”

“Precisely.”

“Alright... Okay, this is starting to make sense,” she continued after a few more moments of thought. “You don’t usually move on to human prototypes until you have tested the mod on other species beforehand, which is why your prototypes don’t typically damage the subject too drastically if they fail. So the fact that Turner was in such bad shape was confusing me, but now I’m starting to get it. You could only test the Omega frame on a human because there are no other organisms that we are aware of with our specific form of conscious existence.”

That’s Dr. Aleen Einren for you.

“Is there any way to undo it?” she asked. “Is there any possibility of at least stabilizing Turner?”

It annoyed me that she was thinking about something as insignificant as one man’s future after learning about the most revolutionary invention ever conceived. “No,” I said curtly, “once the Omega frame is installed, it cannot be removed.”

Her face sunk in sorrow and she looked over to the security camera footage. Then she lit another cigarette and turned back towards me, the shadow of anguish still present, though subdued. “So what’s your best guess for what went wrong?”

I sighed. “I don’t know... Maybe the Omecule’s psychological limiters were too restricting, which is why Turner is only able to change his face.”

“But that doesn’t explain his mental breakdown. He’s borderline-line infantilized, completely incapable of making sense of his surroundings. Not even pictures of himself can stimulate his psyche. The only thing that does is—”

She broke off and closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them, she was staring at me warily.

“What?” I asked, irritated that she was withholding information from me. “What is it? What stimulates him?”

Caution radiated from her entire body. She glanced over to the security camera again, where Rodney was still sitting at the table, his face blurry and ever-changing. Then she looked back at me as if I were some wild animal that she needed to determine the danger of. I began to convert back into the indignation I had felt earlier with the fleshy.

“Tell me!” I said, albeit a little louder than intended.

“... Mirrors. He reacts violently to his own reflection.”

In a second—a single, solitary second—everything fell into place. Clarity came over me like a tsunami consuming the landscape. I imagine Issac Newton felt similarly, once he had gotten over the initial shock of the apple hitting him in the head. I was ecstatic, more excited than I had ever felt before. Everything was in order, I knew what went wrong with my prototype.

Aleen, however, seemed to be in quite the opposite mood. Her face was grave and sullen, like she had just received a terminal diagnosis.

“Don’t you see?” I exclaimed once I was calm enough to speak. “That’s it! That’s why the prototype failed! Turner can’t bear to look at himself in the mirror because his sense of self has been shattered. His consciousness is at odds with the Omecule—”

“Vevi...”

“—because his ego was already fully formed! His inconsistent appearance is the result of his adult consciousness clashing with the imagination that the Omecule is stimulating. Which means we only have to prototype it on—”

“Vevi!” Aleen shouted, rising to her feet. Her sudden change in tone startled me into a momentary silence. “Don’t you fucking dare finish that sentence! I know exactly what you’re thinking and I’ll be damned if I have any part in it.”

I held the silence between us, taking it as an opportunity to collect my thoughts.

Finally, I spoke, as lightly as I could, “It wouldn’t kill the infant. I’ve done the math; the procedure is not lethal to humans, no matter how young. Maybe it will experience a little pain but—”

“That’s not the point!” she said, not at all soothed by my delicate tone. “A baby can’t consent! To do something so all-encompassing, so final, to a person with no choice in the matter, that’s... that’s *evil*.”

“Aleen—”

“Just stop! Stop trying to defend your fucked up, selfish idea. If you are genuinely interested in pursuing this, then you’re a fucking lunatic.”

Even with her modded lungs, the psychologist’s chest heaved with anger. But I was not intimidated by her. On the contrary, I was absolutely seething, to the point that I couldn’t think of a proper rebuttal. She called me a lunatic. *Me. Me*. Even from Aleen Einren, such a notion was unacceptable. Unforgivable.

I don’t know how long we stared at each other, her standing over me as if she held some vague authority that she only now decided to exercise, but it was long enough for

me to weigh how much I actually needed her to complete the Omega frame. Everything seemed clear to me: what the issue was, how to remedy it in the next prototype. What else could the psychologist offer me, now that she had acted as the catalyst of my brilliance? No, I decided, Dr. Einren was no longer necessary.

I stood up, extending my neck upwards so that I could look down on her, reminding her of who I was. I held my glare against hers for a few seconds longer before I broke our joint gaze and began towards the door.

“You won’t get away with this,” she said. “There is nothing you can say to justify doing something so horrible! If you fail, it will ruin you.”

I stopped and looked back, wondering how I could have previously admired such a close-minded individual. Maybe she wasn’t as brilliant as I thought her to be, maybe I was just projecting that onto her to make myself feel less alone in my genius. No, I thought, she was indeed brilliant, but she was not an artist. She could come up with ideas, but lacked the constitution to execute them. And that was the difference between Aleen Einren and myself.

It was far easier for me to obtain an infant subject than you might imagine. You may even be wondering where one would begin such a search. The obvious thought would be an orphanage, though I must cordially remind you, my intelligent reader, that the search I was conducting was one that required extra-legal means, considering its extra-legal end. Orphanages were far too public for what I was looking to do, and a bit too slow considering the haste that Bradvick’s impending investigation necessitated.

Now before you preemptively accuse me of some heinous act of kidnapping or dealing with human-traffickers, I would like to assure you that the child's safety was my utmost priority, in addition to the reassurance and consent of the parents. While not entirely legal, I hope you'll come to see my actions as at least ethically informed.

I looked for the potential subject in one of the many slums of my city, which, believe it or not, I often visited. There is something so endearing about the struggles of the impoverished and the neglected, what with their addictions and bootlegged body mods. Indeed, the resourcefulness and ingenuity that those people exhibit far surpasses many of my socio-economic contemporaries. The poor wear limb mods built out of scrap metal and crude plastic, naked of any synthetic skin or furs to conceal the inner workings. Some of them have old-fashioned ink tattoos applied to the sclera of their organic eyes, giving off the illusion of artificial ones. I've seen DeLarose counterfeits in the slums that fooled even me at first-glance. Yes, there is much artistic value to be had in how the poor imitate the rich. I myself have quite an extensive collection of scrap metal bootlegs, which my outings into the slums provide me with opportunities to wear. As such, I was more than happy to go and explore the impoverished areas personally, fitted with mods designed in those very streets.

Anyway, I did not have to search long before I found a young couple who had recently had a baby and were struggling to make ends meet. Debbie and Ryan, the parents, were actually quite lovely people who were just a bit down on their luck. Debbie had recently been laid off from her factory job at some sub-par modding company; Ryan was a recovering addict whose criminal record prevented him from securing a decent job.

Both had simple eye mod frames installed and Ryan wore a boot-legged arm made out of worn plastic and parts from a car's engine. Their baby (who needs no introduction) was about three-months-old at the time.

I sat down with Debbie and Ryan in their modest living room and laid out my proposal: four billion dollars and a free, lifetime supply of every new Delarose mod that was released going forward. To convince them further, I had brought with me expensive, high-end translucent tongue mods that were not yet available on the market, though the couple would have to get the necessary frames surgically installed before they could wear them. While it looked as if they were hesitating at first, I quickly realized that they were not hesitant, but stunned. I confirmed my identity and that it was real life multiple times before they joyously agreed to the transaction.

Sadly, mere hours after they entrusted their child to me, someone broke into their apartment and stole the tongue mods I had gifted to them, killing both Debbie and Ryan in the process. It may seem hard to believe (I can hardly believe it myself), but it happened nonetheless. The cruel reality is that there are some individuals who will do anything to get what they want.

By the time I got my subject, made the necessary preparations, and dealt with the most pressing consequences of the failed prototype rumors, it was nearly a week after the initial leak. The operation was to be conducted in one of my private labs outside of the city, as to prevent interruptions from my fleshy friend, Bradvick. Even still, I made sure Tom was in the hallway of the lab to deal with any legal troubles that might arise, though

he was not told the specifics of what I would be doing at the lab that day. For the procedure, I deemed it too risky to have any assistants present and I equipped myself with necessary mods to compensate. Six arms on the torso and a bubble-optics visor with 720-degree vision and Omecule control—leaving no room for a nose or a physical mouth. Not the most lavish of attires, I know, but the task at hand required functionality, not beauty.

When everything was in place, only me and the infant remained in the operation room.

I stood over the surgical table, with the subject's vitals glowing and beeping on the monitors overhead. At the center of the table was the Omecule pod—a steel device with glass on the top for observation and a tank of Omecule attached to the back of it—in which the subject would be placed and contained while the mod was being installed. The Omecule itself was a liquid with the consistency of cream and an orange coloration, though it became colorless upon installation. A long, thick wire ran from the Omecule tank to the center of my visor—about where my forehead would usually be—so that I could directly control the techno-organic substance with my own neural transmissions until the operation was complete. To my left and right were keyboards that I controlled with four of my six arms to adjust the non-omecule aspects of the pod, such as the temperature and the subject's restraints.

The infant was wrapped in blankets and lay bundled up in a stroller directly left of the table. It was male, at the time, and though he had no previous body modifications, I could not think of him as a fleshy. For that matter, I don't think I could classify any baby as a fleshy. Babies lack the sweat and grime and overall abhorrence of the fleshy adult, as

well as the idiotic and backwards sense of self-righteousness. They are the embodiment of innocence, existing in a state of temporary moral virginity before inevitably being tainted by the world around them. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that babies have an aesthetic beauty to them that is impossible to recapture. Their beauty is fleeting, but it is precisely that brevity that makes them all the more sublime.

My subject in particular was quite peaceful: sleeping in his cocoon of blankets, oblivious even to me. His skin was smooth and pale. He had blonde hair that was barely visible: flat except at the border of his forehead, where the hairs peeked outwards in tiny curls. As I stared at him, unmodded and yet still so perfect, a thought popped into my head, followed by a steadily building sense of unease.

I was going to hurt this baby.

Even beyond the possibility of the prototype failing and repeating the catastrophe that was Rodney Turner, the procedure itself appeared to be incredibly painful. After just one injection of Omecule, Turner—an adult, mind you—was screaming in pain and repeating only one thing in between his incoherent wailings: “Fire, I’m on fire!” By the third injection, he could no longer articulate himself. And by the final, seventeenth injection, he was unconscious, though all of his vitals—besides a slightly quickened heartbeat—were normal. My calculations assured me that the infant would survive the operation, but the process would be far from comfortable for either of us. Even if the subject wouldn’t remember this agony later on in his life, I knew that I would.

And there was something else bothering me as well. A lingering thought that Aleen had implanted a week before that had been growing like a tumor ever since. Unlike

Turner, this child did not agree to having the Omega frame installed. His late parents may have given their consent, but would this infant agree with their decision later on in his life? How many times will he sit and wonder what it would've been like to have a natural body? Of course, he could always just use the Omega frame to give him the appearance of a fleshy, but such a form would always be an illusion, a mask only as secure as he pretends it to be. I was deciding his fate for him. To install the Omega frame into that infant was to impose my will upon him, to do to him what the fleshies and my detractors have always tried to do to me. And I knew that I would forever hate myself for doing so.

Recall what I mentioned earlier regarding why Aleen was a genius but not an artist. Moments like this, when creation is confronted by moral impasse, is what defines true art. Moments when one must shed a part of themselves in order to create something greater. I could have stopped, given up on developing the Omega frame, and let that infant grow up to make his own decisions. I could have refused to defile one of the few natural things I found sacred. I could have retained my humanity.

But then I wouldn't be an artist.

Afterwards I heard shouting from the corridor outside the operating room, though it sounded far more distant than that. Far away, near silent yelling, muffled by distance and lack of importance. Then the doors were violently forced open, which I witnessed from the back of my visor but did not process until later. I watched as someone came up and yanked me away from the surgical table, the force of which tore the Omecule wire from my head. It was Bradvick. He was yelling at me, his voice an incoherent echo,

difficult to understand. Behind him were a dozen fleshy soldiers from the National Guard. Bradvick must have specifically chosen those soldiers to raid my lab, as most US soldiers were specially equipped with military mods that I designed. But in that moment, I thought nothing of the soldiers or Bradvick or the three handcuffs that they put on me to restrain my six arms. They were all so... irrelevant.

When all of my arms were securely locked behind my back, one of the soldiers pulled me off to the side as Bradvick and the others went to inspect the surgical table. At first I was mortified at the thought of fleshies being the first to gaze upon the fruits of my labor, but those fears were soon quelled. The second the fleshies looked into the pod, all hell broke loose. A couple of them fell to the ground and vomited. Others dropped their guns and stood there paralyzed by what they saw. Some of them just turned away, shielding the pod from view with their palm as one blocks the naked light of the sun. Bradvick did not vomit, scream, or turn away, but stood frozen, his eyes locked on my creation.

A light was emanating from the pod as the first Omega being's undeveloped ego reflected in its physical form. The radiance was a whitish color, with wisps of other colors miscellaneously flashing from it for mere milliseconds at a time. The Omega being's form was chaos incarnate, dictated by the unstable mind of an infant as it struggled to make sense of things It was not yet capable of comprehending. It existed, as proven through Its later maturation and stabilization, but in that moment it would not have been inconceivable to argue that It didn't exist, given the being's abstract, near unfathomable form. Imagine something so unlike our understanding of reality, our

understanding of life, that you struggle to even accept that it exists. Materiality confronted by inarticulable chaos. It was impossible. It was uncanny.

It was perfect.

I didn't see Aleen Einren again for about a year and a half after the first Omega frame installation. Though I was very busy, that was not the reason why I didn't reach out to her. I knew that if I made the first move, it would look like I was going to flaunt my success and mock her disbelief in me. Prior to perfecting the Omega frame, that is exactly what I would have done, simply to reaffirm my intellectual superiority. But the Omega frame changed that. After completing the project, I was amazed and proud but also scarred and hollow. To this day, my dreams are plagued by the sounds that came from the pod as I proceeded with each injection. We have all heard a baby cry, but to hear a baby scream in agony, that is another sound entirely. Even though the project was a success, and the first Omega being has since stabilized and can maintain a static form if it chooses to, I can no longer endure looking at my creation. It is too painful.

That is not to say that I regret my decision. In fact, I repeatedly choose it again and again by allowing the production and installation of more and more Omega frames into infants. I was willing to bear the ramifications of my art, though now that I actually bear them, I cannot blame Aleen for deciding not to. I chose not to initiate any further interaction between us, as did she, for a year and a half. Then, one day, I found her waiting for me in the lobby of my headquarters as I was returning from a press conference.

Aleen no longer wore any body mods. She wore a turtleneck sweater to cover where her tattoos used to be, a simple wig instead of a hair mod, and sun-glasses that shielded me from seeing if her eyes were artificial or not. She was leaning up against the elevator that she knew was reserved for my usage alone, watching me as I approached.

“Aleen,” I said respectfully.

“Vevi.”

She held my gaze in silence for a few moments, waiting for me to say something. I had nothing to say.

Eventually she figured this out. “You must be thrilled right now. You ignored my warnings and did whatever you wanted. And look at that! It worked out so well for you! No one is even talking about where you got the baby or what you put it through when installing the mod. All they care about is the outcome, just like you.”

“How’s Rodney doing?” I asked, not out of curiosity but more because I could not think of anything else to say.

“Nothing’s changed,” she lit a cigarette and glared when the receptionist gave her a dirty look for it. “Nor will anything ever change. He is basically a vegetable now.”

“Oh.”

Aleen scoffed. “Yeah, I didn’t think you’d care much.”

We fell silent again and she took the time to enjoy her cigarette, momentarily paying no mind to my existence. This time I spoke first.

“You were the one who called Bradvick the day of the operation, weren’t you?”

She paused for a moment and then exhaled smoke in a steady, careful stream.

“Does it matter?”

Did it? Bradvick’s presence was a minor inconvenience, at best. While they were preoccupied with recovering from looking at the Omega being, Tom was hard at work calling every politician and every federal agent who owed me a favor. By the time the fleshies actually remembered they were there to arrest me, I was already being declared innocent by their superiors. The media and the public were too amazed by the Omega frame to worry themselves with what I did to Rodney or the fact that I experimented on an infant. Everyone knew about these things—it wasn’t hard to connect the dots—it’s just that no one seemed to care. Fleshy groups cried for my arrest but were written off as fanatics who were blind to the revolutionary breakthrough I had made. No one cared how I did it, all that mattered was that I had succeeded.

No, it didn’t matter if Aleen had tried to stop the Omega frame. Nothing changed, the outcome was the same. I still created perfection.

And I still hated myself for it.