

From the Rubble

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It was dark and cold when I woke up. I couldn't move. I heard voices and vehicles in the distance. Gunfire. Explosions. I tried to turn my head but the concrete slabs had me pinned too tightly. I thought about calling out for help but didn't know if whoever came might finish me off instead. If I was getting out, it was going to have to be on my own.

I took as deep a breath as I could manage given the weight on me and flexed all of my muscles in turn from my hands to my feet. I needed to assess the damage. There was an odd sensation in my right arm and my abdomen but everything felt like it was still working. I was trapped in a somewhat kneeling position. I pushed hard with my legs and back. The slab that was holding me down shifted and slid off.

The sun was on the horizon but there was enough light to see the rebar sticking through my blood-soaked sleeve. Another piece was sticking out of my gut. That was the odd sensation from before. It didn't hurt. I just felt it in there. The rebar was attached to more concrete on the ground. I took a couple of steps away to pull the rebar from my body. It still didn't hurt though I really thought it ought to.

Gunfire was getting closer fast, as was the sound of vehicles. I ducked down behind the pile of rubble just as a jeep with a mounted machine gun came around a corner down the block. One man drove while two more manned the gun. They were firing up at something in the air. Apparently, spaceships were a thing now.

The ship was made of dark gray metal. It had short articulating wings. Half a dozen on each side of various sizes that increased in size from front to back. A bright white flash later and the jeep was blown to bits. The ship scanned the area briefly then went back the way it came.

For a moment I wondered how I wound up under all that rubble. I didn't remember. I didn't remember anything.

Looking around I noticed all the buildings were in disrepair. Weeds filled all the cracks in the sidewalks and pavement. A handful of people came out from hiding to go through the wreckage of the jeep. I felt like I had to move. Further down the block the other way I found an abandoned gas station. I went in to find a bathroom. I wanted a place I might be able to undress and check my wounds.

The shelves were stripped bare. No supplies. Nothing that I might be able to use to treat myself. I found the bathroom. The glass of the grated window had been shattered. There was enough light from the fading sun to see myself in the filthy mirror. The face of the man I saw didn't seem to belong to me. His cheeks were hollow. His dark skin was wrinkled and weathered like an old hobo. His hair was a tangled mess of short dreadlocks. I reached up to touch my face. The man in the mirror mimicked me. I

saw his hands. They weren't the same color as his face. They weren't even the same color as each other. Both were filthy but one was a bit darker than the other.

I took off my coat. The man in the mirror was skinny. All bones. His skin was a mish-mash of different tones. I expected to see scars where the tones met but there were none. As unnatural as it seems, the skin grew together very naturally. I looked down at my arm and lifted my shirt. The places where the rebar had penetrated my flesh were healthy. No holes. No more blood.

There were screams. They were coming my way. There was also the sound of a machine of some sort. It was loud. There were vibrations in the ground. Not like you would expect from a rolling vehicle but more like what you would expect from a giant galloping animal.

The wall exploded and suddenly half the building was gone. What appeared to be a robotic bear the size of a house plowed through it. It wasn't a bear, exactly. It had the same general shape but the head had horns. It found people on the other side of the building and swatted them into the concrete. The screams ended. I ran the other way.

There were trees not far away. A forest. I thought if I could make it to the forest it might be easier to hide. I crossed the tree-line and kept running as fast as I could. Deeper into the woods I saw small groups of people trying to huddle and hide. I kept running. The sound of the giant robotic beast was getting closer. There was more screaming. It didn't last long. I kept running.

Further and further into the forest, I ran. No matter how far I ran, it kept coming. I could feel the vibrations of its huge metal feet pounding the ground as it ran. I heard trees crack and crash as it plowed past, over, and through them. The sun was down but the moon was up and full. There was still enough light to see to run. The sound of the robotic beast moved around to my right. I looked, still running, and it made eye contact with me.

Finally, I stopped running. I didn't know what I was doing. The beast stalked toward me. It didn't seem to regard me the same as the other's I'd seen. My right arm came up, fist toward the beast. My skin split and a chain-fed gun barrel popped out. Fully automatic fire erupted from my arm and I began to run a semi-circle around the thing.

The bullets hit. It hurt the thing but didn't debilitate it. In response, a panel on its back opened and its own chain-fed gun appeared to return fire.

The skin of my left arm split and unfolding machinery constructed a bullet-proof shield for me to hide behind. My right shoulder crunched and dislocated. The flesh split and opened wide for a rocket launcher to appear and fire on the beast.

The beast took the hit. The explosion knocked it off its feet and sent it into a small stand of trees, which it leveled. By the time it was back on its feet it had sprouted a new type of gun. It looked like the one from the spaceship that destroyed the jeep. The barrel swung around to my direction.

I dodged hard and small rocket engines sprouted from my back and the backs of my legs. They launched me forward fifty feet in an instant. The ground where I was standing before became a

smoldering crater. When I landed the chain gun on my arm retracted. A moment later a miniature version of the beast's new destruction gun replaced it.

The beast was charging me, trying to get the barrel of his weapon on target. I managed to hit his gun with my own and blew it off its back. It roared and attempted to gore me with one of its horns.

I leapt. I went so much higher than I thought I would. The ground seemed to fall away below me. At the apex of my trajectory, I flipped around to look back at the beast. This was the first moment I'd had to think since our battle began. I hadn't decided to take any of those actions. They all just seemed to happen. What was that thing? What was I?

Time allotted for thought was over. I landed and rolled. When I looked up again it was already coming. My body began to rip open all over. Weapons of all sorts, both ranged and melee, sprouted from everywhere. My legs and arms were growing in length. I was getting bigger. There was almost no flesh left on me when the beast pounced. By this time, though, we were equal in size. I twisted as it collided with me and I used its momentum to throw it.

Before it had a chance to recover I unleashed every weapon in my arsenal against it, shredding it to scraps. There was a central core that persisted. It looked like it was trying to regenerate. I blasted it with the destruction gun that destroyed the jeep. It was dead.

I turned and started back the way I came. As I walked, the various extras that had been generated from within me retracted. I couldn't determine where the parts were going. They seemed to simply fold in on themselves. There was no living flesh left on me when I finally reached human size and shape. I was essentially a pile of walking robotic bones.

What was I? Obviously not human. Not anymore, if I ever was. Was I? Could I have been?

I found what was left of a young man. Most of him was crushed to pulp. His head and right arm were mostly intact. There were a few small cuts and scratches but nothing serious. Nothing serious except that the rest of his body was completely destroyed. It was far too late to help him but somehow, I knew what to do with him.

By the time I reached the tree line again, I'd found enough human remains to completely refresh my body. The clothes I wore were entirely soaked in gore but it was that or go without. The town had gone quiet, save for the sound of small children crying. There were no more sounds of machines or fighting. The people were back in the streets. Some wandered aimlessly with heads down. Some wept over the bodies of friends and family they found on the ground. Some embraced, each relieved to find the other still among the living.

I was about to join them. I was about to try to find out what was going on. Then I realized I was wearing one of their faces. They knew this person whom I was pretending to be. I doubted they would be okay with it. I doubted they would understand. I didn't understand. I had to go and so I left. I'd have to find answers elsewhere.