

Scotomaphobia

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“You ready, sweetheart?” Nadia asks, brushing my hair away from the back of my neck. I offered to let her cut it to make all of this easier, but she’d said since it won’t grow back naturally it’d be a pain to replace, and she likes it long anyway.

I’m *not* ready. Androids don’t feel pain the same way humans do, but it’s not exactly pleasant having someone peel back your synthetic shell and tamper with your spinal cord. I’m sitting on the table in front of her, hands gripping the edge of Nadia’s workbench as I lean forward to give her a better view. Her workshop is cluttered, heaps of trinkets and scrap metal scattered across the cracked linoleum at my feet. I told her I would organize it for her one of these days, but she claims to know exactly where everything is. Organized chaos, I think she calls it.

I offer her a rigid nod.

“Alright,” she murmurs, pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck as she pulls on her goggles. “Alright love, I’ll be quick.”

Nadia pulls back my plastic skin, reaching for the small handheld buzz saw at her side. She cuts through the soldered edges of the metal panel between my shoulders, sparks shooting off and landing harmlessly on the table beneath me. I have to manually disable my motor functions to keep myself from flinching under her hands. She notices, of course she does.

“Baby,” she says, “It’s okay, honey, just relax.”

Just relax, she says. You try to relax when someone’s taking a scalpel to your neck.

Nadia’s trying. She doesn’t understand, but she’s trying. She goes in with her wire cutters, snapping nerves until my vision goes dark.

It's been a few weeks of this, her coming back from the scrapyards with some new trinket to fix me up. First it was my voicebox, shattered and only able to speak in garbled static, then my battery, sputtering out on its last legs and only able to keep me upright for a few hours at a time, and then my hands, too clunky for most fine motor functions. I never get used to the trust fall, letting her open me up and tinker with the most delicate parts of me.

As she slashes more wires and my senses blink out one by one, my system starts to buzz with anxiety. Like I said, it doesn't *hurt* exactly, but I'm hard coded to go on high alert when my diagnostics pick up that something is *wrong*, and that urgent maintenance is required if I'm meant to keep functioning like this and damnit, I'm *getting* maintenance already so why can't I just turn that *off*—

Nothing's wrong. Nadia's working on it. She's helping. I'm okay.

The thing about human brains is that they're fundamentally evolved to keep track of things like where predators live and what plants are poisonous and the fact that fire burns and stabbing hurts and walking off a very tall ledge is a quick way to a very bad time. Fear is an instinct made for survival— and humans think their fear is so special, as if it's any different from a limping prey animal hiding from wolves in the woods. If anything it's worse, actually. The wolves can kill you, but a dentist appointment won't. Human fear doesn't know the difference.

The thing about android brains is that they aren't worried about any of that. An android's arm can be replaced. An android's skin is purely decorative. An android never has to worry about blood loss, or disease, or heart failure. Even if you were to rip away every shred of their body, they could just as easily have their mind transferred into a new model, and the only cost would be monetary. Theoretically, the only damage an android brain has to fear is to the software.

The thing about humans is that they make things a little too similar to themselves. The thing about androids is that their fear

doesn't always know the difference either.

I can't see what Nadia's doing back there, and my head's too flooded with shrieking alarm bells for me to keep track of what exactly is wrong, multiplying faster and faster every second as she tampers with my circuitry and every corner of my mind screams in synthetic terror. She could do anything and I wouldn't even know, she could pack up and leave me blind, deaf and paralyzed, lost in a sea of meaningless noise until my battery gives out. Suddenly then idea of it feels all too real and I'm overwhelmed by the irrational instinct to *run*, leave, shove her away and stumble blindly out the door just to find some way to make it *stop*—

And then her hand closes around mine, tangible and solid. The noise doesn't stop, but there's something to focus on apart from the dark. I don't breathe, but I feel less like I'm drowning.

Nadia's helping. She won't hurt me. I'm okay.

When she pulls back my head is still spinning, my hands still twitching with the all too human need to chase the contact, but I don't. I stay still with the knowledge that it'll be over soon, I just need to let her work. I lose track of how long I've been out, my internal clock is scrambled. Just a little longer.

“--kay, there we go! Should be all done, sweetheart, there you are.”

My faculties come back in waves. First my hearing, then my limbs, then my eyes.

And the monochrome world bursts into vibrant color.

At first I frankly have to wonder what all the fuss was about. Black and white seemed perfectly serviceable before, with Nadia's workshop making the jump from a blur of greys to shades of rusting copper. The other times she's suggested something like this it seemed perfectly reasonable; a functional voice box makes for more efficient communication, prolonged battery life gives me more time for maintenance around the shop before I need to recharge,

and more precise control over my motor function opens up a wider variety of tasks I can get done without asking Nadia for assistance. In comparison this feels... frivolous. I can't help but feel just a little annoyed that I'd gone through all that trouble just for a slightly more varied arrangement of dullness as she folds everything back into place, wires neatly tucked away and sliding my protective plating back over it. She makes quick work of putting me back together, soldering the panel back into place with practiced ease.

And then she rounds the table and enters my field of vision, and all at once I understand. Her olive skin, her dark curls framing her face in tight coils. She pulls her goggles down to hang around her neck and I see her eyes, shimmering green with specks of liquid gold.

“Mel,” she says, taking my face in her hands, “Mel, baby, you okay?”

The world's a little brighter than before.

“Yeah,” I answer, “Yeah, I'm okay.”