

Caro Ex Machina - Dorothy, Year 12, QLD

It was unfortunate that they couldn't replace Adam's head.

After all, it took quite an effort to bring his body back.

The stench of mechanical lubricant clung to the air, sour and rotten. Around me, soldiers shuffled in line to service their bionics. My eyes scanned the same worn path: dirt, metal, and exhausted faces. They'd stuck me in a makeshift command post, a sagging canvas tent hammered into the frozen earth, close enough to the frontlines to taste gunpowder in the wind.

Kerosene lamps edged along the crowd, their amber glow slicking over the supplies and slumped soldiers. Outside, the setting sun smeared the world the colour of a fresh wound.

Our faces darkened at the sight of the approaching night. The frost of winter bared teeth – not like the swift snap of combat, but the slow grind of a bone saw. It was an uncontrollable contagion that chewed through the ranks. I shivered, hugging my bionic arms close, the cold steel bringing no comfort.

The war outgrew bullets and tanks – it hungered for more than what flesh could give. Our flesh and bones weren't enough to satisfy the faceless architects of this war, peeling back skin and sanity with equal diligence. It was clockwork for a wounded soldier to have their injuries replaced by metal counterparts. Whether I lost an arm or had my flesh torn apart, this clock would keep ticking till my blood ran silver with steel. I gazed at my hand; its metallic gleam was dulled by rust and grime. We were invincible on the frontlines – right till we weren't.

My heart still tightened over Adam's death. He was a decent kid, told me about his dreams and everything. I exhaled softly before pushing those memories back down. Like the line shuffling before me, there was no time to grieve. There never was.

A goliath-like figure emerged from the shadows of the tent; my gaze flickered to the looming mass. I almost hadn't recognised the lieutenant, their form scaled with a steel exterior from head to toe. The features of their face had been carved away, leaving only a set of artificial eyes, pulsing with a sanguine light that no shadow could swallow. Those eyes, being the last semblance of the human they once were, had always unsettled me. Full conversions were once rare, though these days it was less common to see someone with visible skin. I peered at the lieutenant as they walked past, their joints faintly twitching while they muttered to themselves.

They were more machine than human – a sin, some might say.

I'd expected the lieutenant to have succumbed to madness already, a common fate for soldiers with severe augmentations. The higher-ups write it off as a reaction to stress, an

excuse I could only scoff at. I often wondered if the madness was the price of our attempted immortality – perhaps an act of divine punishment for betraying our humanity.

My hands clenched. The exchange of flesh for steel was Faustian in nature, it would be naïve to think it came cheap. It was a cross I would bear eventually... But hell, I was scared of losing myself.

My fears were quiet, gnawing in the marrow of what remained of me, flaring with every click of my metal joints. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and forced myself to move along the line of soldiers.

When I reached the front, a deep voice sliced through my thoughts: “Next.”

The voice slithered from behind a set of curtains. I lifted them and stepped inside, immediately recoiling from the heavy reek of iron. I couldn't tell if the stench came from blood or the metalwork, and nor did I want to.

Before me stood a man they call Iscariot, his body a grotesque twin to the lieutenant's. If I – as Faust – was the human that bargained for unbreakable flesh, then would this man be the Devil? His unsettling red pupils stared at my own briefly before scanning my repair history. I was in for another routine replacement of my bionic arms and legs – just a reload to keep their weapon firing on the battlefield. It was nothing new, yet apprehension gripped me, for I knew it would not be painless.

As per usual procedure, I stripped myself of my uniform. The winter air lashed the flesh of my torso like an unrelenting whip. My sight flickered to my bare body – a ruin of purple-black bruising around metal graft sites, with protruding ribs and scars mapping every inch. A sense of revulsion overcame me before I choked down the feeling.

As Iscariot gathered his tools, I laid on the surgical bed, forehead lining with sweat despite the cold. I blinked – Iscariot and his scalpel filled my vision. It was as though his gaze itself, the glowing crimson, flayed away my flesh. With the next blink, my view of him disappeared as my eyes rolled back in agony.

I hadn't even realised my torso was strapped down to the bed as Iscariot operated on my arm. The bionics lacked external sensation, but the mechanisms relied on nerve endings being soldered to the metal. Without the exterior, even a featherlight touch unleashed pain so searing, that one would think they were burning in hellfire. No amount of anaesthesia would relieve me. My memories of the operation were fragmented; time itself blended as I convulsed against the restraints.

By the time I stood back on my feet, the tang of iron flooded my mouth — I'd bitten my lip raw without realising. The world broke around me like a wicked dream. In my periphery, a

mirror hung on the wall, and I saw, with sunken eyes, a stranger. An awful, wretched stranger. I clenched my fists in want of shattering the sight.

That creature in the reflection was not me.

I lifted the curtains in unspoken retreat as my footsteps pounded heavily against the ground. My body weaved past the endless weather of grey men and steel; their faces blurred with the shadows. The glint of the oil lamps refracted off their bionics into my view, like a cruel reminder of myself and my asunder body. A pang of grief erupted like an unsheathed blade coursing through my heart – for a self, I no longer recognised, for a warmth I no longer had.

It was so cold.

My eyes reflected the dreadful vermilion of the setting sun as my feet dragged outside. I halted abruptly as a guttural howl ripped through the air. I spun back in alert to its source in the tent.

Yelling erupted as I slowly made sense of the commotion. My body stood frozen as soldiers poured past me, their faces twisting in recognition.

I stared at the pandemonic scene, breath hitched as I saw the lieutenant frantically claw at their own body – as if they were driven insane by an insatiable itch. The soldiers around were helpless, narrowly avoiding being attacked by the mad lieutenant when they tried to intervene. The lieutenant's fingers dug into their own neck, peeling the metal back with a wet, tearing squelch. Their hand plunged into the blood-slicked cavity, pulling relentlessly – until with a sickening pop – their fist tore free, clutching a mass of tendons and arteries. Crimson flesh burst, blood splattering on the ground in hairline fractures.

I shut my eyes to escape the sight.

My knees struck the earth, hands clamped over my ears as if to mute the reality around me. *It was so cold.* The lieutenant's guttered body flashed behind my eyelids, bile rising in my throat. Was this my fate then? To turn mad and rip my body inside out? To never recognise my own face again? Or was it to get beheaded on the frontlines? I retched as the memory of Adam overtook.

There was no scream nor cry to be let out, only the raw horror of a soldier in silent cessation. *It was so very cold.*