

## Tears in Rain

“It looks like the sensors are busted... Pass me the toolbox.” Footsteps immediately comply, their sound joining the soft mechanical whirs that drifted across the spacious laboratory, followed by the rattling of metal. There isn’t a single hint of daylight; the various monitors, counters, shelves and machines are illuminated solely by cold, fluorescent lights that hang from the ceiling. The woman picks up a screwdriver much thinner than her fingers and returns to work. Unscrewing pieces, cutting and rearranging complex webs of wire. A minute or two passes before another voice, huskier and lower in pitch, breaks through the pseudo-silence.

“The older drone models seem to be malfunctioning more often lately. Could it be the humidity?”

Her hands continue expertly moving pieces around, not stopping to glance at the figure. He looks into the distance, lost in thought. It almost feels as if it were possible to hear gears turning in his head if you listened closely enough.

“Possibly... This one’s particularly stubborn. Fetch me another one, will you?”

“Of course, Dr. Souza,” the slim adolescent nods. He begins to move away from the lab counter, but a concerned hand holds him by the wrist before he can leave. Souza stiffens. A piece of flesh hangs loose and threatens to fall off of her assistant’s arm, revealing the reflective layer of muscle that hides underneath it.

“When did this happen?” she asks sternly.

“Yesterday. While we were repairing the main engine.” The scientist shakes her head. Her nimble fingers search through the toolbox as she holds him steady.

“Blanc, you’re supposed to report to me immediately whenever you suffer *any* kind of damage,” Souza adjusts her magnifying goggles, inspecting the harm, “It doesn’t matter how small or insignificant. You know we can’t let others see you like this, I’ve told you several times before.”

The android nods in submission. Despite towering over the woman, Blanc feels small. He remains unmoving as he watches her inspect the inside materials and sew the skin back together. He opens his mouth, but Dr. Souza quickly silences him; “You’re dismissed. I’ll run some diagnostic examinations on you later this week.”

Calculated footsteps linger at the door before exiting the room.

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A storm rumbles outside. The sound of cars piercing the night can be heard every few minutes or so. A slim figure is seen in front of a kitchen sink, making quick work of dirty dishes. He had left the lab an hour ago. His unblemished yet strong fingers are evidence of how recently he’d been created: no more than half a dozen months ago, as seen in the lack of calluses and scars that usually come with handling machinery. Blanc curiously looks outside after a particularly loud car screech. That is, he tries. The curtains are to remain closed at all times. He knows this.

Yet, as he works through the cutlery, curiosity weighs on him. One hand puts down a plate. The other reaches towards the window, fingers buzzing with anticipation. He knows about the array of dangerous tools Dr. Souza owns. He knows about the several other

android models that lay damaged in the basement. But there was something louder, strange, rattling inside of him, drowning all the logic that usually occupied his mind.

Slowly, he opens the blinds. Moonlight shines through the glass, revealing a broad road surrounded by rows upon rows of trees. Bright red lights cut through heavy rain, lost in the thick nightly haze. Blanc takes it all in, wanting to feel the water droplets on his skin and the wind on his short hair. But that'd mean disobeying Dr. Souza's number one rule: "do not leave without permission".

He debates whether or not to exit the house when a shape of white interrupts his thoughts. It moves as if it were thinking of crossing the street, slowly making its way through the sidewalk in front of him with its head turned to the road. The android's ocular lenses zoom in. It's a cat, tiny and covered in mud as it limps through the night.

Even though he has never felt it on his synthetic skin, Blanc can imagine the feeling of the midnight rain: cold, like temperature-regulated metal. Alone, isolated from everything and everyone. Hopeless. No matter how hard one tries, they will never be good enough, never as perfect as they were intended to be. Never quite human, and never quite machine.

The cat steps onto the street and the auditory landscape shifts with it.

Cracked porcelain, a door slamming open, rushed footsteps piercing the rain, the squealing of steadily approaching wheels—it all happens in less than an instant.

And then his arms are wrapping around soft fur. He makes sure to raise his hands' temperature up a few degrees to try and warm up the little creature. He doesn't mind the

small claws scratching his arm, or the mud getting onto his shirt; Blanc holds the cat close to his chest and takes a deep breath.

It is then that he feels. Warm, safe, moved. Blanc doesn't know whether tears have joined the rain or if it's just his mind playing tricks on him. But it doesn't matter. He just wishes he could stay forever crouching there, on the side of the road, feeling the humid air on his skin and the raindrops sliding down his face. Knowing that he had made a difference.

"What the HELL are you doing out here?!"

His body tenses up. It's the doctor, standing at the door with an infuriated expression. She remains still for a few moments before stomping his way. Blanc clings tighter onto the kitten as he gets up, ready for confrontation.

"Have you broken a fuse? Who allowed you to leave?!"

The android meets her eyes with indifference. Not saying a word.

"Hello? Has the humidity gotten to you?" Dr. Souza waves a hand in front of his face. She gasps. "What are you carrying?"

"It was cold. It would die out here."

"And why would you care whether or not that thing died?!"

He breathes in the scent of rain and wet fur. "Dying at such a young age, without seeing what life has to offer. It'd be beyond cruel." His gaze turns defiant. "Don't you think?"

Souza is flabbergasted. She doesn't understand why, no matter how hard she tries, her assistants always seem to malfunction. In machines as complex as these, there's always a hint of emotion, hidden underneath the layers of machinery. Exactly what she'd been

avoiding ever since the death of her teen daughter—exactly what leads her to leave the blinds closed and the door locked. She doesn't know what to say.

“I...”

“I don't care if you punish or destroy me. Let me take care of it.” Blanc pleads, starting to shiver in the rain. “Please.”

Her aggressive demeanor falters. She has no words, only looking into the dark with exhausted pupils. It reminds her of how she felt when she heard the news—after years of battling against sickness, her child had passed away. Oh, how she would've given up anything to find a cure. How hopeless she had felt when nothing they tried seemed to work... And here was her creation, feeling the emotions she had blocked out of her mind because they had been too painful to bear.

Her mind is restless, but she's made her decision.

“...Okay.”

Blanc opens his mouth in surprise as he feels reluctant arms wrap around him. It is brief, but he treasures the hug. The scientist had always avoided physical contact.

“It's freezing cold. C'mon, let's get you two some blankets.” Dr. Souza opens the retractable umbrella attached to her hip and hurries them inside. Blanc takes a few seconds to react, lost in the moment.

As footsteps walk into the house, the door remains open.