

Blinding white hair against fractal black eyes, fragmented glass staring into my soul. She leapt, silent as the night breeze as she aims a fist straight at-

It was only thanks to my instincts that I dodged, my head inches away from Mara's porcelain-white knuckles. In the vast, glass-barred room, where the scientists would gather all of their subjects, I had my first introduction to Mara.

“Subjects, this is M.A.R.A, our first successful genetically modified humanoid, with a conscience that's entirely programmed!” I watched as the lead scientist pulled Mara back, introducing her in the process. No different than an animal on a leash. “It has all the traits of a human, but faster, stronger, *obedient!*”

A quick glance to my peripheral proved that the other subjects were just as lost as I was, unmoving in the face of our silent confusion. We didn't dare speak out, and the sight reminded me of a factory of plastic figures, waiting to be spoken to.

“Well? Is she not *wonderful?*” The lead scientist prompted, long shadows overcasting his slight displeasure that I had learned to associate with punishment.

Clapping immediately followed, robotic rhythm echoing around the bleached walls.

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The Lab was all I knew- the cafeteria with the same meager food every day, the gym that served more as execution grounds, and the metal bracelet embedded in my wrist, the same as the other

subjects. Even when I stretched the planes of my memory as hard as I could, I found nothing more than flashing red bracelets that dug deep into our flesh and bones. Marking us as no more than ticking time bombs if we ever tried to go past those looming gray fences. Throughout it all, an echoing promise that we were going to be national treasures, the next generation of *enhanced soldiers*.

But everyone knows promise is just another word for curse.

I grew up with a knife instead of a pencil, learning how to write my mark through papery skin that caved under silver pens and seeping iron ink. But, I wasn't *stupid*. Whenever I was assigned on missions, having to conveniently remove any target my scientists commanded me to, I glimpsed bright blue skies and vibrant plants that stretched across endless fields. It made me wonder if my canvas would ever smell of freshly cut flowers, so beautiful it would blanket the stench of death.

Suddenly, I'd become aware of the bracelets adorning my wrists, aching with a bone-deep yearning for a freedom I'd never known. I'd forever be stuck with the same lifeless walls, overambitious scientists with dead, dead eyes, and hands that only knew how to hurt.

Mara, though? Mara was *new*, with her stiffly obedient movements, eyes that always seemed to peer faraway, and voice that fell a few tones flat of natural when she spoke.

I always itched for something new. So, I started with the only thing that mattered in our lives: training.

“Mara.” I swallowed the urge to freeze when Mara abruptly turned to face me. “We have an examination coming up, the scientists want us to master this sequence of drills. Will you help me?”

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We became something of a duo. In my determination to prove something *real* in this machinated humanoid, I found small half-grins, fury-clouded eyes, and late-night whispers where I taught Mara all my favorite colors.

“Purple.” Soldiers are not supposed to have preferences. It was a sin to be human. My hands were already tainted.

“Mine will be purple too.” Amongst this place of rot, the holy executioner becomes the guilty. The saint’s venerated halo cracked at the edges, and in that dark, dark room, she learned what it was to become human.

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Years passed, or so I assumed. Time was difficult to keep track of, but we *grew*.

With that, our time together did as well. I can admit, with a tinge of pride, that Mara *did* have something human in her. The scientists, who once forbade communication and interactions between subjects, reasoned that as an artificial creation under their control, Mara would be the

exception. We were stronger together after all. I fought like someone learning how to kill. Mara fought like someone learning to live.

Walking back from missions was always the most surreal part.

We chose an isolated alleyway, to be cautious, but even then, we could hear the sounds of chatter and people. Dirt crunched under my feet, weeds tickled my ankles, and cotton candy clouds danced across the sky. The taste of freedom was tantalizingly close, and I let my mind run wild.

*When I'm free with Mara, would I have to worry about mud stains on my shoes? I wonder, eyes catching the petals squashed under Mara's shoe, their life bleeding onto her soles. It would be nice, to just worry about cleaning.*

It's only in my head, but everytime I go Outside, everytime I stare at the Sun setting in the sky, the bracelets on my arm tightens, digging their poisonous fangs deep into my veins. They are the only thing keeping me here, keeping me from sitting on the ground until my lungs knew the meaning of freedom.

That, and Mara.

Because Mara's already striding back to the ship, back perfectly straight, staring right ahead. She could never leave the lab, never dreamed the way I did. But I'm *trying*. Coaching the idea of a better world and easing it into Mara's mind.

Like now.

"Mara," I call out suddenly, watching the way Mara's hand shoots to her side as she whips around.

"Lilac." Mara returns, tense as her eyes dart around. Ever on edge, ever ready to fight. I wish for a day where she never has to fight to survive. "Is something wrong?"

"No." I hurry to explain, quickening my pace so that it matches Mara's. "I was just thinking...they're selling sour candy in the markets."

Surprisingly, Mara pauses, mouth flattening to a thin line as she thinks. There is something about watching Mara at work, a wonderful enigma, that I can't help but stare at. But never in the way that I was taught, no. Not with piercing eyes that are supposed to probe, to dig and stab in soft flesh and pry apart your soul, but a softer, quieter gaze. Not that I know much about those, because all I'm fluent in is the hard scrape of bandages against raw wounds, the strike of bone against bone, and loud, loud voices.

But, with Mara, it's different.

I want to teach Mara something other than the sharpness we've known all our lives- because surely, there is something more. Something gentle; the same softness of the way her snowy white hair glows in the fiery halo of the setting sun.

"Fine. Stay here. Don't get seen."

Getting the candies would be an act of insolence, of ignoring direct orders, the very essence Mara was programmed against. And yet.

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"I got it." Mara announces when we're on the ship, tossing a wrapped hard-candy. "Eat."

I catch it like it's something precious. When I look down, the wrapper is plastic, smooth under my fingertips...and purple.

Mara says nothing, even when I try to sneak a meaningful glance as I delicately try the candy.

"I like it. This is my new favorite color." I declare as soon as the tang wears off into something sweeter. "Purple. Sour candy purple."

Mara's face lights up in a small smile, just enough that I could even see the whites of her teeth.

For Mara, whose long, angular face was always set in something akin to apathy, her smile was so *human*, it was one of the most brilliant things I've ever seen.

“It reminds me of you.” Mara replies quietly, as if musing her thoughts aloud, something she rarely did. “It’s very... bright.”

We agreed to keep the wrappers, stashed away in a box tucked into the farthest corner of my cot(that the inspectors never bothered to check), secured with a custom-design lock that Mara had scavenged from the Lab. Together, we collected small bits and pieces of secret trips and hushed whispers. Us against the world, it was then that I had sworn to never stop fighting by Mara’s side, until Mara knew gentle sweetness more than bitter iron blood. The same sweetness of the moments tucked in hidden corners, forbidden memories that felt impossible to keep, rare blooms of light in our dark lives.

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It was a naive dream.

So stupidly, stupidly *naive*. In our childish hopes and tinted ignorance, I became blind to it all. Blind to the fact that Mara was *programmed*, a robot could always be restarted, wiped clean, until it was too late.

Until one day, when Mara had been gone for quite a few days, missing many of the secret nights we had planned, she had come back. Come back with the same vacatingly blank eyes as the first time I met her, the same never-quite-human movements as I tried my best to muffle my horror.

The lead scientist’s hand was clamped firmly over Mara’s shoulder as the rest of the subjects stood, looking every image of a proud father if not for the twisted smile etched into his mouth.

“There have been some...complications.” He stares straight at me, eyes glinting like the needles he used in his experiments. “So...we did a little cleaning. A factory reset, if you will.”

It was my second introduction to Mara. At first, I refused to believe it, *couldn't* believe it- *years and years* of late-night meetings, of secret glances and hidden jokes...gone?

Years of dreaming, of warm summer skies and grassy green gardens, perished the moment Mara stared at me, lacking all the spark of recognition I had been used to seeing. I always loved watching Mara, but as she strided by, not sparing a single glance for anyone in her single-minded obedience, I lowered my gaze, trying to ignore the rushing of my ears. I didn't think I could look into eyes that once reflected fiery red sunsets, *freedom*, and see a stranger.

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Time passes, as it always does, against my will, I slowly become accustomed to it. There was nothing else I *could* do after all. Other than automatically waking up during the dead of night, my body leaned down only to find an empty space below her bed before I could fully realize what was happening.

Until one night, I awaken to the quiet scratching and screeching of metal. I flinch up with a dagger poised in front of my face, my eyes darting around to find any threat.

All I find is a very confused-looking Mara.



“I don’t know why I’m here.” Mara announces, and oh, I never realized how silent, how empty my room sounded until Mara returned.

“I felt an...urge to come here. But I do not know you.” This is where Mara’s face tightens slightly, and I faintly recall how Mara always hated not having a logical explanation for everything.

Only when Mara turns fully, I can’t quite suppress my flinch, because she’s holding *our box*. The tiny black box of tucked-away secrets hidden away in my room that only Mara knew the location of. The subsequent flare of *hope*, blossoming through my stomach and reaching around my throat is so strong that I almost choke.

“Do you know what that is?” I ask quietly instead, my heart feeling like it’s pounding and erupting from my chest. “Do you know the password?”

“I-I don’t know what this is.” Mara glances down, mouth cinched as she stares at the box cradled in her hands. “But I just...*know* the password-”

“What is it?” I demand fervently, and I don’t know why it feels like the weight of the world is stored in my lungs, but the mere chance that Mara might *remember* is enough to send my fingers itching to shake Mara’s shoulders, wanting to extract an answer.

“Sour candy purple.”