A Circus of Orphans

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"I said, I'm walking here. Now get out of my way."

This would not be a fair fight, Maddie thought, as she stood outside her next class, watching the two boys square off in the middle of the hall.

Frankie towered over Josh with a smoldering look of hate on his face as he looked down at the smaller student in front of him. Josh stared back through his sunglasses. But his hands were casually in the pockets of his hoodie sweatshirt that said Ohio State. It was a retro sweatshirt since Ohio State closed it's doors almost 100 years ago. A lot of the students liked to wear clothes from colleges from back when there were colleges. Frankie would never wear something like that. It was pretentious. It was flashy. And it cost money. Money he didn't have. Frankie's clothes literally could have come out of a dumpster. Ripped and stained. Like the clothes he wore every day. Every day of his life. While Josh and all those like him showed off their money with their clothes and tech and the food they ate.

Josh said it again, "I said get out of my way, asshole."

Frankie who spends every afternoon lifting weights. Who does combat training at Talon's fighting school. Who's strength and power could have put him playing professional sports in a different time. Refused to move. Fury churning with no control rods. Meltdown imminent.

This would not be a fair fight.

Josh stretched up and whispered to Frankie, "I'll move you and you'll-"

Frankie did a lightning fast spin kick as fast as humanly possibly. It almost lifted Josh off the ground as he stumbled back.

Josh just coughed a second and stood up straight, looking around and literally shrugging it off. His reinforced metal ribs handled the kick easily. Josh took his sunglasses off to reveal one regular eye and one enhanced eye, a short cylindrical lens poking out. His link strip was a reinforced fiber optic strip running from the eyepiece to behind his ear where it interfaced with his main chip. Josh's enhancements were typical of a high school MECH. Non dominant arm removed and replaced with a robotic one. One eye replaced for full spectrum vision plus assorted displays and lens. Dominant arm, shoulders, legs, knees, ribs, spine and skull all enhanced with hydraulics and that weird metal.

The argatanium metal that runs through all Mechanically Enhanced Cybernetic Humans is a dense, inherently sterile and absolutely unbreakable alloy. But it is slowly pliable with the right

chemistry so it grows and stretches as bones grow. And it's heavy. Josh, at 5 foot 2 inches, weighs in around four hundred pounds. But with his joints reinforced, muscles augmented to super human strength and a body chip that regulates it in perfect symmetry with his human parts he is faster, stronger and more overpowering than any non-enhanced kid. Any "carbon." Josh fighting Frankie is akin to a cat playing with a mouse.

It isn't a fair fight.

The other MECHs all stood around waiting for Josh to snap Frankie in two. The Carbons . . . the kids who couldn't afford enhancements . . . with their simple, fragile bodies . . . . the kids that could barely afford to eat, could only watch and wait for something brutal to happen to Frankie. Again. The last time Frankie and Josh got into it, Frankie had a fractured arm, a broken nose and a concussion. And Josh had to print new sunglasses in the art room.

The only thing Maddie could think of is Frankie was willing to take another beating to get Josh suspended so he couldn't play in tonight's game. But maybe Josh knew it, too, because he didn't look like he was going to fight back. He just stood there and blocked with computer assisted reaction time the next couple of punches Frankie threw. Frankie roundhouse kicked his knee with no effect. Josh subtly reached with his right hand to his left robotic arm and popped off the palm plate.

Frankie jabbed at Josh's temple but Josh just dropped his head down making sure Frankie connected with the metal plating.

"I don't want to fight Frankie. Why are you starting trouble? I just want to get to class."

He was going to *livebite* him. Surely Frankie could see it coming. Why wouldn't he move?

Josh pulled out one of his core wires from under the plate and twisted off the coupling, so one end was bare and live with electricity. Mr. Derrango was standing watching, can't he see what Josh is doing? Surely he will stop it. But deep down Maddie knew, probably not. This could kill Frankie. She took a step forward, but that Junior MECH Jenny who was standing in front of her, just put up a hand without taking her eyes of the boys to stop Maddie. That goddam backview feed that Jenny had. Eyes in the back of her head. It barely poked out through her hair but it was there.

"Frankie, I don't want to hurt you, I'm just trying to get by and you're behaving erratically."

There, he said it. Recorded on everyone's feed. Behaving erratically. The catch all phrase at the heart of every excessive force and abuse of authority that has taken such an ugly foothold in this world. The riots in Jamesland started with erratic behavior. Maddie's dad was arrested last year for behaving erratically. Pop star and Carbon champion, Julie Mocklin was killed when she was behaving erratically, ironically, after releasing her song, Justice Weeps.

Josh just put his left hand slowly on Frankie's shoulder as if to calm him and there was a whipcrack in the air and a flash of blue light. Frankie snapped back and fell down hard, his shoulder smoldering.

Josh would later tell everyone how he didn't know how he had an exposed wire and he's really sorry. Total accident. The plate must have come loose as he kept defending against Frankie's repeated, unprovoked attacks.

Frankie didn't lose consciousness or need CPR like Jordan last year. They took him to the nurse's office as Josh went to the principal's office. The MECH kids went off to their classes and the Carb kids went off to theirs. And the day moved forward like any other day.

Until it didn't.

"Billy, come on, you need to see with better eyes," Mrs. Prentice said, exasperated.

Mrs. Prentice didn't like Billy. Well, she really didn't like any of the Carb kids. It was frustrating for her, like most of the teachers, to teach kids not hardwired into the InfoNet. The education system was overhauled a few decades back when it was decided that MECHs, with their constant access to all information, had no need to "learn" typical school things. Why learn math when you had a calculator with you all the time. Why study for science when you could access every answer. History tests became just a race to see who could look up the right answers fast enough. MECH classes were fun, interactive ways of finding information, solving problems, designing and building. They laughed at Carb kids studying about who the president was in 2055 or which corporations had CEOs that went to prison for leaving the sky the purple haze or what types of radiation are in a solar flare.

Maddie remembered in sixth grade how proud Billy was for learning the first 50 digits of Pi. He talked about it all week and on Friday was finally able to say them out loud to the class, struggled around 6433832 but didn't get any wrong and by time he got to 510, the 48th, 49th and 50th numbers, Haily who had just gotten her first interface enhancement, blurted out the next 50 digits, 5820974944 5923078164 0628620899 8628034825 3421170679, fast and casual.

Net interfaces started in 6th and 7th grade and physical augmentation usually happened in 9th or 10th grade. So it was in 7th grade schools split into MECH classes and Carb, well, "traditional", classes. In the interest of not splitting society, they kept school for all kids in the same buildings. The trouble was it was split inside the walls. Maddie thought that made it worse.

So in school there was simply two groups. There was the MECH kids who had the money to get enhanced and strolled around treating school like they were better than everyone else. Well, let's face it, Maddie thought, they were. They dominated all the sports.

They got amazing grades. They didn't get sick. They played the best music. The Carbons were just the regular kids. Poor made poorer over generations. Struggling to learn with enhanced teachers that didn't really care about them. They had their own sports designation that no one would go watch. The only level playing field for them was the arts. No circuitry would make Josh as good a saxophone player as Frankie. No chip could make Tito a good actor. And even though Jenny could use her enhanced NET interface to access the finest works of art and her modified arms to paint faster and more precise, it was still Maddie's hand drawn picture of a starving man with a toaster alone and unplugged in a forest that won first place in the school.

The best artists went on to Post-School learning, got money and then got enhanced.

For some years, they tried Carb teachers for the Carb kids, but MECH teachers could just do everything better. So all the teachers were MECH. And since they grew up MECH. They tend to treat the "traditional" kids now the same way they treated them in high school. Which is probably why she had Billy standing at the front of the class, wobbling a bit with his crutch to supplement his long ago shattered knee, in front of the giant screen wall with rich colors, charts, and the poem from some stupid MECH poet that Billy was trying to interpret wondering what Mrs. Prentice meant by "seeing with better eyes."

"What I mean, young man, is that the 'small, ratty and pungent' dog in the poem doesn't have a leash, a collar or even a GPS chip, while the second dog, with the lush and golden fur does have all those things. I'm asking what it says about each dog."

Billy thought about this and shifted on his crutch, looking down, "that maybe the ratty dog is free?"

"No, Billy, no. It means that the dog with the leash and the chip belongs somewhere. It has people that care about it. It has a family."

Maddie spoke up, and out of turn, "Maybe the ratty dog just didn't want to have those things but it still has a family?"

"Not your turn Maddie. But those things give it security, keep it safe. Why would it not want that?"

Billy added, "Because maybe it wants to be free."

"Free how Billy? To chase rainbows? To just run off and join the circus? This is the real world. Belonging and security and togetherness makes society one big happy family and keeps everything good and safe and productive. You all need to see with better eyes when we read things like this. To understand how the world works."

From her internal controls, Mrs. Prentice brightened and flipped the screen to a diagram of the governmental hierarchy laid out in reds and blues and yellows. So bright Maddie had to squint to look at it.

Billy started to sit back down when the lights went out and Mrs. Prentice staggered and fell awkwardly backward against the oversized screen which went from the vividly colored diagram to a dull black board.

As she fell she twisted and reached out with her augmented, human hand to clutch at something but only found the the screen which her fingernails just dragged down until she hit the tile floor with a metallic, hollow plop. Her human eye grew wide as she quickly realized her utter helplessness.

A few students shouted out asking if she was okay and saying they will call for help. A few students laughed out loud. Billy just turned and stared at her.

Sunlight punching through the hazy clouds radiated in from the side windows so Maddie and her class could see Mrs. Prentice struggling and twitching. Maddie's class was made up of all carbs, so Mrs Prentice was the only MECH in there.

"What did you do? What did you all do to me?"

Tablets. Watches. Nothing was working. All the power was off. All the power.

Maddie always liked Mr Gabel. He was her Science teacher in 10th grade. He had both eyes enhanced so he lay on the ground where he fell, twisted and blind. She sat on the floor next to him, since he, like all the MECHs, was too heavy for her to move alone. It was lucky he was in his small greenhouse that came off of his classroom. Lucky he wasn't teaching during the blackout. Maddie closed the door and waited with him. She told him the whole school was blacked out. All the MECHs were down.

"Just the school?"

"No, outside, too. And farther. We saw planes falling out of the sky miles away. "

"How long's it been?"

"An hour, I don't know."

"Why didn't you go home?"

"The doors-" she started

"-are powered," he finished, nodding, realizing, "and in case of emergency they go to the batteries. Which don't work. You can't get out of the school."

"We're trapped in here. And it's going bad."

"Tell me. And tell me all of it. Don't sugar coat anything."

And she did. She told him how Billy knelt down next to Mrs. Prentice with a stylus just in front of her unenhanced eye talking about how all of a sudden his eyes could see better than hers. But Beth and Val made him get away before he could do anything.

She told him how there was yelling in the hallway and they found Mr. Spika on the floor, suffocating.

"Yeah, he was a firefighter before he became a teacher. He got those pressurized lungs so he can hold his breath for 20 minutes at a time. If they stopped compressing the air, yeah, he would suffocate."

"Does that mean . . . ?"

"Yeah, probably all the firefighters are gone. Shit. Just like that."

She told him while the crowd was watching Mr. Spika die, they saw Frankie walking with a pair of pliers to find Josh. Someone told her later the screaming they heard was Josh. That Frankie pulled out one of his core wires through the palm.

"I heard the screaming. And if Frankie pulled hard enough, he would have popped the sulfur-lithium battery and all the chemicals would have leaked out and slowly liquefied his organs."

She told him how a lot of the kids raided the cafeteria to get Class A food. She heard the lunch ladies were killed.

"They were Carbs, though."

"I know. It's really crazy and I'm really scared. Do you know Kevin Mills? He was trying to stop them from kicking Nurse Quincy and they stabbed him to death. Some of us are just hiding."

"Maddie. You're a good kid. And smart. You need to leave me here right now. Do not get between me and those other kids. I don't know what happened and I don't want to die, but if they find you with me . . . "

"They're not killing everyone. Right now it seems like they are dragging all the MECHs to the gym. But I don't know what they will do then. Help should come soon, right? Wait, quiet."

The door to Mr. Gable's classroom opened and from the small window in the door, Maddie could see Billy hobble in on his crutch, with his other hand bright crimson, soaked in blood holding a bloody stylus. There was blood on the bottom part of his pants. He looked around and hobbled out.

Maddie looked around for something to cover Mr. Gable up.

“Maddie, police aren’t coming. They have the most enhancements. So they’re all stuck wherever they are. The firefighters are all probably dead. No one is coming. You have to figure out a way out and go now. You can break the greenhouse glass, it’s not reinforced glass like the rest of the school. Break it and run and don’t look back.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“I died the moment the power went off. It’s . . . it is what it is. But Maddie, the moment the power comes back on . . . they will slaughter all of you. They won’t care who stood up for who. They won’t care about what Beth and Val did, only what Frankie and Billy did. Get your friends you can trust and get as far away as you can. Don’t stay in one spot too long. Travel from town to town and try to recruit Carbs that are like you. “

“Like me? What? Alone? Misfits. Most Carbs don’t even like me.”

“Compassionate. Future thinking. Talented and smart. Travel together and always expect the power to go back on. Some MECHs might even figure out how to power themselves back up and they will be probably be killing machines at this point. Maddie, when this mess settles in a year or five years or however long it takes, the direction of humanity will come from who’s left. It can’t be MECHs like the cops that took your dad away. And it can’t be Josh or even Frankie. It has to be people like you. Get your friends, break the glass and don’t look back.”