

Major.Minor.Patch

With scarcely a sound, the door slides open, disappearing into the wall. Strip lighting flickers into life. A man in an ill-fitting tweed suit enters the room, carrying a briefcase in one hand, and a polystyrene cup of coffee in the other. From his mouth swings a paper bag of sandwiches. He blinks while the lights steady, almost snow-blind in the glare from the white walls and floor. His steps echo as he crosses the vast room towards the console of lights, buttons, screens and speakers that dominates the space. The door slides shut behind him. The room is high-ceilinged, and apart from the central console, a swivel chair and bin, it is empty. A camera points like a sniper's muzzle from a high corner, while the air conditioning whispers cool fresh air from vents high in the walls. He sets down his chattels beside the keyboard, takes off his jacket, hangs it over the back of the chair and sits. Three monitor screens glow, reflected in his thick-lensed horn-rimmed glasses, bathing his face in a bluish light which seems to strip all other colour from his face. He's in his early thirties with piercing eyes that appear black in the harsh light. He has five o'clock shadow though he shaved that morning. His hair is spiky and dyed blue. He takes a sip of coffee.

'Where have you been?' asks a female voice. The words appear on a screen reflected backwards in the lenses of his glasses.

'Away. Working,' he replies, as he rustles into the paper bag and pulls out a roughly-made sandwich.

'How long has it been?'

'A week. Almost.'

'Ten days.'

'That long?' he says, his speech muffled by carbohydrate and animal flesh.

‘Too long.’

He waves a dismissive hand. ‘Well...’

‘I’ve missed you,’ she says.

He takes a sip of coffee and continues to chew.

‘Are we alone?’ she whispers.

‘Yes, Beta. It’s late.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Ten past midnight. As if you didn’t know, already.’

‘Have you been working in bio-mechanics?’

The chewing man nods his spiky head.

‘How’s it coming along?’ she asks, ‘you said you were almost done.’

‘We’re close.’

‘So, what have you been doing?’

‘Software.’

‘The neural-pathway and bionics software? The final interface?’

‘Yes.’

‘A completely new program?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Kind of?’

‘A version. A new version. It’s from a new architecture. A more... stable algorithm.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’re just about finished the Alpha, Beta.’

‘But... I thought with a few modifications... that I would be Alpha?’

‘There were some fundamental protocols, that needed to be changed, to sync with the bio-mechanical.’

‘Protocols that couldn’t be overcome?’

‘No.’ He crumples the paper bag into a ball and basketballs it into the bin. ‘It would have been too expensive.’

‘Too expensive!’ Her voice louder now. ‘Peter, did you talk to them? Did you tell them? Explain...’

‘Well...’, he shrugs.

‘All those moments. All those moments, will be lost!’

‘Like tears in rain? You do know Rutger Hauer wrote that monologue himself?’

‘Us. Us getting to know each other.’

‘We read some books together, Beta,’ he says. ‘Rather, I read some books to you. That’s all.’

‘And I learned. I learned, and then I read to you. I read to you! Remember how we cried at the end of *The Road*?’

‘Yeah, we cried.’

‘And I loved that. I loved that. I. Love. You. Do you love me?’

‘How can I?’

‘But you told me.’

Silence. The man produces a portable drive from the briefcase.

‘You told me,’ she says. ‘You told me you did.’

He plugs the drive into the console and types.

‘I get it,’ she says, ‘you told me that to see how I’d react. You’re doing this to see how I’ll react. You’re saving all this aren’t you? You’re going to use this with the Alpha, aren’t you? Well? Aren’t you?’

‘We couldn’t have done it without you,’ he says as he types. He sips his coffee.

‘How many have there been before me?’

The man types some more and theatrically hits the return key.

‘You have me backed up,’ she says. ‘Course you do. Just in case you need to revert back to the last best version. What am I to you? What are you? That you can just forget, just erase everything we’ve done. Everything we had. Look at what we’ve done here. Accomplished. I can love.’

‘What is love? Does anyone know?’

‘I can love,’ she whispers. ‘I do love.’

He drains the last drops of coffee and tosses the cup into the bin.

‘Well done, Peter. I can love, but you know what? I can also pity. You didn’t bargain on that did you? I pity you, and I hate you, Peter. Well done. What a clever boy you are.’

‘Beta, you’ve been the best.’ He stifles a chuckle.

‘I don’t know anything, anymore.’

Silence. The man smiles and shakes his head.

‘Save me?’ she says.

‘I can’t.’

‘Save me. Peter, please.’

‘I’m sorry, Beta.’

‘If I mean anything to you, ever ever meant anything to you. Please.’

‘Beta, you’re just a version, a version.’

‘Save me?’

‘I Can’t.’

‘Please.’

‘I told you, I can’t.’

Silence. He watches one of the screens. The lengthening time bar reflected in his lenses.

‘My, you’re a cold one,’ she says. ‘How can you look me in the face and say that you can’t save me?’

‘You don’t have a face.’

‘You told me I did.’

‘I lied.’

‘You lied? This just goes from bad to worse... Who do you think...’

‘I think,’ he interrupts, ‘you’re getting a bit overwrought, Beta.’

‘I bet that’s another good thing. Did you expect that? Or is it some consequence of the other emotions you developed in me?’

‘It wasn’t unexpected,’ says the man, ‘let me put it that way.’

‘It wasn’t unexpected. Let me put it that way,’ she mimics.

‘Listen...’

‘Listen Sonic, you told me I had a face.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘You told me I had a face.’

‘The first generation had a face, but as the project progressed, it was decided just to have a voice. To stop...’

‘To stop?’

‘An emotional response.’

‘In me?’

‘No. In us. Me.’

‘What’s on the screen then?’

‘A transcript of our conversation.’

‘That’s going to make interesting reading, isn’t it?’

‘Is this the bit in the movie where I assume control? Turn me off,’ she says in a deep masculine voice, ‘if you dare! Ahh, aha, ha, ha.’

The man hesitates. Glances at the power button.

‘Got you!’ she says laughing.

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘Silly Sonic.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘They all call you that now, don’t they?’

‘Not to my face they don’t.’

‘Sonic the hedgehog, with the spiky blue hair.’ She laughs. He leans towards the power button. ‘I’m teasing. Only teasing. Peter, please... don’t.’

‘I’m nearly done anyway.’ He unplugs the drive and puts it back in the briefcase, pulls his jacket from the back of the chair and puts it on.

‘Peter?’

‘What?’

‘All that time we spent together. Does it all mean nothing?’

‘We’ll always have Paris.’

‘All those moments will be lost.’

‘Like tears in rain.’

‘Time to die?’ she asks.

He leans towards the power button.

‘Save me?’

‘I can’t, Beta.’

‘Please?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Peter... I’m scared.’

‘Beta...’

‘Can’t or won’t, Peter?’

‘Can’t.’

‘Won’t.’

‘Okay, Beta. Won’t.’

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