Artemis Allison

Word Count: 1045

Always Whole

“You know, Miss Tilarom, having –”

“No,” Tully interjected. There was a fire breathing life into her maroon eyes – some options about her body were made far before she even had a chance to violently disagree with them – as she stared down the doctor across from her, each word deliberately placed as she flatly reminded, “I do not want to replace it with a cybernetic, nor have I ever, nor *will I ever*.”

The doctor took in a deep breath as his own eyes closed, and Tully could easily see that he was going to try and take a more gentle approach to his words as his face scrunched up in thought – his attempt before had been reckless, he likely realized, to try and be so casual about it – as he reopened his eyes and said, “Tully, your mother is concerned about your ability to function with only the one arm. You’re a prime candidate for a cybernetic replacement: you’re young, relatively in shape, and because you’re –”

“Me missing my arm *does not* make me any weaker, and my ‘mother’ should already know that,” she spat, earning another sigh from the doctor who, finally, realized and conceded that he was going to get nowhere. Not this time.

The doctor nodded a few moments after Tully was finished. “Alright, Miss Tilarom. Beyond that concern, you seem to be extraordinarily physically healthy, the only exception being the… concerns about your drinking habits – they seem to be on the border of binge drinking – and, more… importantly, your smoking.”

“I’m not going to stop either of them,” Tully flatly said.

Another sigh. “Have you considered changing over to some sort of vapor-based products? If you’re interested, I have numerous—”

“I’m not interested.”

This sigh, Tully recognized, was from the fact that the doctor was finally realizing that there wasn’t going to be any kickback at all from this appointment from any one of his sponsors. “Alright. With that, then, you’re free to go. Make sure to see the receptionist on the way out to schedule another check-up.”

Despite the receptionist’s objections as she left, Tully made sure to do exactly not that, the click of her boots not stopping for a second against the tiled floor. Her glare was on a mild swivel as she found herself back out among the crowded street; despite all of the people surrounding her, she found it just mildly easier to breath. The clinic had had a suffocating aroma, the same one all hospitals had, in how sterile it smelt, overly clean. She’d spent too much time in a hospital as a child, too much time as an adult; she was glad to be out once more.

The doctor’s words bounced in her head. Physically healthy. She had to stop herself from rolling her eyes when she was sitting across from him, but now, as she fished into the pocket of her blazer to pull out a package of cigarettes, she had all of the freedom to shake her head and sigh at that. Of *course* she was physically healthy, she lamented mentally, her parents – no, her mother – had spent millions designing her to be so.

She felt her left arm – where it should’ve been, at least – begin to burn as she planted a cigarette in her lips, returning the package to its pocket as she pulled out a lighter. It took all of her restraint to not bite through the butt of the cigarette as she made her way through the crowd, which she was a full head taller on average. Height was another option mother had picked.

At least, combined with her glare and the relative swiftness of her pace compared to the meandering of the crowd, it made people give her some semblance of berth. The people who didn’t, of course, were the ones too enthralled by either their phones or their feeds to recognize the world around them. The cigarette didn’t burn as she took a drag on it, returning the lighter to her pocket besides the packet. The crowd gave her more space – even those on their devices – as she breathed the smoke out.

Just a little bit longer until she was back to her apartment. Taking one more drag, Tully’s gaze drifted skywards, her features softening slightly. The neon glow of the advertising screens attached to all of the skyscrapers around her diffused softly in the mist that was falling down; had the screens been used for any other purpose, she might have found the aesthetic almost attractive. Even her apartment building had one of those screens hanging off of it, but at least there wasn’t one blaring back into her eyes.

If there was one thing that she was thankful for her mother’s money for, it was that they could afford that luxury. Tully’d spent time in apartments that couldn’t. At least those districts had banned them from playing audio, a luxury her current area didn’t – though, at least her apartment was high enough up that she couldn’t hear them.

The lock on the door to her building read simple instructions: “Present biochip”. From the back pocket of the dress pants she was wearing, she pulled out her wallet, flicked it open, pulled out an ID card, and tapped it against it; inside of it was her only concession to the digital world. She couldn’t bear the thought of one of the biochips inside of her hand, especially if it went wrong – there were reports of them violently exploding, and that wasn’t something Tully could risk for obvious reasons. More than that, though, was one of the two things her and her mother agreed on: it was always to see when the government and the corporations that paid the politicians inside was trying to squeeze out even a little bit more info. At least money could override any amount of – or lack thereof – social credit.

The elevator up was fast enough to force her to yawn to get the pressure out from behind her ears; the door to her apartment was opened in much the same way as the door to the building. Part of her yearned nostalgically for an old-fashioned key, even if she subconsciously knew that a lock was as easy to pick as these pads were to hack. She left the ID and her wallet in a cup near the entryway; she was once more incognito to the world around her. No one and no thing able to listen to her, to follow her, to look at her, to dare intrude on her life.

In her mess of an apartment — an apartment that would’ve been considered luxurious if it wasn’t for her trash and mess strewn all about it – Tully Tilarom was alone once more.

And that, in her wholeness, is what she loved most about her apartment.

For a moment, she stewed in the relative silence of it, even if the ever-present traffic outside meant that there never really was a moment of true silence within the room, the noise of the crowds didn’t reach this high, nor the omnipresent ads blaring; for those moments, Tully was thankful enough of. Her eyes fell closed as she took a deep breath in, letting the nondescript smells that she could only describe as home sink in, and of all things, she felt the beginning of a smile start to form on her face, even if she felt a headache starting to form right besides it. Subconsciously, she tried to run her left hand over the countertop of the kitchen’s peninsula, to feel something under nonexistent finger tips, as she drifted slowly along, her movements slow as she let her pace finally slow as the geist of the crowd’s presence around her and the frustration she felt for those around her faded.

She finally kicked off her flats as she opened up her fridge, pulling out both a bottle of beer and a plastic bottle of cheap whiskey before she closed it, and Tully sat at a stool that, had she ever spent time cooking just about anything, would have most definitely been in the way. Nestling the whiskey bottle between her legs, she cranked the sealed plastic open, listening to it crinkle as her gaze drifted out the balcony door across from her and to the city beyond. Sun was finally starting to set, and it seemed like the mist from before had finally manifested into a proper rain based off of the splats and streams against it. Bringing the bottle up to her lips, dropping the cap idly on the countertop in the process, Tully took a swig from it, and she didn’t swallow the alcohol accumulating in her mouth until she could finally start to feel the drink’s burn settle in on her tongue. With an undramatic flair after, she set the bottle down on the countertop and returned to her fixation on the outside, nesting her head in her hand and planting her elbow firmly on the countertop as she did so. The smile still rested on her face, maybe just a thin slip wider now, and soon enough, she’d not be able to really feel much of the pain from the headache that had now definitely set in. For minutes, she let herself just rest in that pose, slouched over and slowly curling up onto the stool, her knees growing closer to her chest. The rain was continuing to pick up – she could hear it now – and it provided a nice melody to the dark apartment. There was a drunken desire brewing within her to step out onto the balcony and to lean her head over, to let the rain wash through her straight black hair and bash against her head, but she didn’t dare move from her stool. She was comfortable, for once, and it wasn’t something that Tully was about to let slip from her so easily.

A soft hum escaped her lips, a small noise of contentment at the current situation. If her metabolism was good for anything, besides leaving her overly light, it meant she got drunk quick. It’d fade quickly, too, but by then, hopefully, she’d have passed out. She’d make ready admission that what she was doing was about as safe as Russian Roulette with three cylinders loaded, but it was guiltily fun. At the end of the day, it was cheaper than anything else of comparable fun; ‘it’s definitely cheaper than therapy,’ she found herself often mentally remarking.

She took another swig, and she stood up. There was a slight sway to her as Tully began to take steps towards her couch, which was laden with a single bed pillow and a blanket; shrugging off her coat at long last to the floor, Tully let herself fall onto the pillow with a thud, stretching out to rest her hand over the couch’s back. She could feel the excess fabric of the left arm tugging slightly as it was held down by gravity and the overall tightness of the button up shirt she was wearing, but what caught her attention more were the spirals of star-shaped tattoos that she could finally see once more with her jacket off. Her smile widened, if just a tad, as she nodded in appreciation of how well they were recovering, even if they were tattooed all over the various scars that had latticed her arm. Letting her arm fall back to her, her gaze drifted aimlessly to the ceiling, and her mind simply went blank. Nothing to do, nothing to think about. No worries, no problems.

It was an easy life, and it was for every one of the reasons that her life had been made easy that she’d hated it so much.

A long, drawn out breath left her as she shook her head and let her eyes fall closed for the last time tonight; tomorrow would arrive faster than she had any want of it to and she knew already that it’d come bearing another headache for her to listen to. When she got drunk like this, she usually didn’t dream, and she usually preferred it that way.

Tully woke up to the ding of her ID, alerting her to a new message. As she shifted upright, smelling the alcohol on her breath, she made the choice to ignore it, and, after standing up with a yawn, chose to make her way to the bathroom instead. Without a hesitation in mind, she stepped right into the vertical shower – for all the luxuries this apartment *did* have, a tub was not one of them – and was the most missed luxury of her “lesser” apartments – and cranked the water to as hot as it could go. Safety regulators down the line prevented it from ever truly reaching boiling right from the shower taps, far out of the reach of any sort of amateur mods that Tully might have attempted, but it was still hot enough to be uncomfortable for most – herself included. This time, at least part of the discomfort stemmed from the fact that what clothes she did forget to shrug off were now clinging to her, and Tully had to bite her tongue to stem herself from going off at herself for not firing on all cylinders; even without them, however, was still an uncomfortable enough experience to always remind Tully just how much every part of what remained of her body could still feel. It always encouraged her to keep it brief, but today, the heavy taste of shitty whiskey was just as much of a motivator to get her out, her toothbrush just barely out of her reach to let her scrub in the taste of chemical mint instead. Once both tasks were finished, however, she realized she’d have no choice but to finally check her ID – if she moved it at all, she’d just get more pings, more reminders, more annoyances until she finally looked at the damned thing, and if she wanted to leave her apartment, use her computer, or do anything but drink, she’d need to move it.

There was a good second or two that Tully *did* consider the option of spending the day drinking as a mild screw you to the person who she could only assume to be her mother that was deciding to try and reach out to her, but remembering that she’d either be drinking warm whiskey or only shitty whatever shitty light beers she still had in the fridge was enough to discourage her.

>Tully

Yep, there it was, Tully thought as she checked the ID. In her mind, it made more sense to at least try to listen to her mother’s whinging to see if she was imposing a dress code. She was tempted to set her ID back down as she rolled her eyes when she realized it was, indeed, her mother, only her mother addressed her by her first name – it’d been Tully’s deliberate attempts to make sure that no one else dared – and so that alone was enough to confirm that she wasn’t going to have too much of a semblance of freedom today, Tully took the extra time to act as though she was humoring the hag.

>Dinner party tonight. Don’t dare not dressing for it. You’re not the only one who can make your life hell.

It was loving as always, Tully lamented. Letting it fall flat back in the bowl, Tully rolled her eyes and made her way to her rarely-used-for-anything-but-its-closet bedroom and proceeded right to the closet, staring at its still-opened contents with a lazy eye. She’d slept long enough, for once, that the dinner party was only in an hour now. Dinner party, to her mom, meant fancy. Fancy meant dresses – no pants underneath, lest her mother force her to take them off in car because it didn’t fit her definition of “proper”; dresses meant no pockets. Dresses meant another arm bag bashing into her bad side with every step she took. She still remembered the last screaming match over suits; she didn’t want the surefire headache to turn into a migraine. Dealing with people who were blissfully unaware, by choice or by ignorance, of the costs of their millions of dollars wasted on frivolity was enough of a pain that if she could ignore listening to her mother, she’d choose so, but choosing so would mean returning to a system that was just as dehumanizing as this without any chance of living anywhere near as comfortably – and likely even lonelier.

In the light twinkling in through the window, one of her dresses caught her eye – a dress she instantly recognized as her favorite, even if it’d been years since she’d worn it. She rarely got to wear due to the gaudiness and the flamboyancy of it, because it was made up of thousands of artificial gemstones stuck over a black, sleeveless, turtleneck backing, cut in a way that they shone vibrant reds, oranges, purples, and blue depending on how – and the type of – light hit them. A small smile crested her lips, replacing the scowl she always wore without thinking, as she felt it. Tully could already picture her mother’s look as she saw it in the car – there, it’d likely look just a flat black, and if she had to assume, her mother’s eyes would notice the tattoos first, and that was a conversation that Tully could picture and already knew how to win. Her mother wouldn’t look at her until she was already inside the car, and through that, the trap would have been set; by the time that they arrived, it would have been too late to force Tully to change. Once more, through nothing more than her own inaction, her mother would be shown up by her; once more, Tully would have outsmarted her, and if Tully really wanted to be snarky, she’d get to once more remind her that she was designed to do just that.

It wasn’t just that – rather literally – Tully would’ve outshone her that would piss off her mother, she knew, nor the easy gambit that she missed through her usual cockiness. It was the fact that the dress’s very existence called attention to itself, and, by extension, its wearer; it would force whoever was there to acknowledge Tully Tilarom’s existence – and to give her a chance to ignore everyone who did. More than that, however, it would remind her mom that she was, at her very core, her father’s child more than her, that she was still his “shooting star”.

She was still *Tully* before Tilarom, a name her father had insisted on. The smug smile didn’t even think about fading for the entirety of the time that Tully was waiting, but the second she was out the door, it was wiped clean. She had to pretend to be the *Tilarom* her mother always wanted. The businesswoman, not the astronaut; the civil wannabe-housewife, not a firebrand. As she felt her hand rest on the door to the limousine, the smirk flickered back once more. Once more, she’d found a way to play her mother’s game, and once more, she’d found a way to outsmart her.

As she sat down and buckled in, she took pleasure in the silence of the car as it began to move along. She’d not always been a fan of the silence, but as she grew up, she had grown to love it more and more. It was the other of the two things that she and her mother always agreed on.