

(WARNING: FOLLOWING STORY IS INTENDED FOR MATURE AUDIENCES ONLY, AS IT DEALS WITH GRAPHIC SUBJECT MATTER THAT IS NOT SUITABLE FOR YOUNG OR SENSITIVE READERS.)

"Angelsnare"

I: Hello from the Year: 2189

At a crowded luncheonette deep within the flooded Long Beach Sprawl, Krueger sat alone. His gnarled hands scratch at his scraggly hair. The faux fur on his trench coat's collar does little to stop the cold from nipping at his nape. Smart glasses mask his icy gaze. On the back of his neck is a QR code. Most of his internal organs are bionic facsimiles of the real things.

His work pants detain his wallet, the ID of which reads: Yoseph Krueger. Two badges wait side by side. One for the understaffed LAPD he worked with, the other for his true master: Futurista. The moment his life-saving heart replacement was switched on, they came calling. His sole duty was to keep Futurista's dodgy side away from the public light, by any means necessary.

His wrist-bound PDA shivers as a call comes in. A single press on his earpiece and the line is live. "Talk to me," he purrs

out in his deep baritone voice. A firm woman's voice responds:

"Nice to hear you're awake, Agent Krueger." Krueger pushes up his glasses as he pays for his meal. "We've got a call

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about unregistered implants from the LAPD. Go to your Slider. Don't be late." The drizzle turned to a downpour.

II: Trespasser

The Slider drops me off at a Shanty built around the old skyscrapers. "Happy hunting, Krueger" is the last thing I hear from the earpiece before it hangs up the call. Ahead of me is a hive of travel trailers, mobile homes, and shacks atop old brick roofs of buildings entombed by floodwaters and damp brush. Formerly a refugee camp, currently a Red-Light District so violent and depraved that the police don't go.

My glasses' Way finder points toward a red shanty sitting alone atop a drenched roof. Whoever has the unregistered augments should be in there.

As I approach, a large man exits the hut, with a small shadow shutting the door behind him. The door wasn't locked. I wipe my feet at the dirty doormat and see myself in.

A wave of lavender and roses stormed my nose. A small television

plays an ancient superhero western, my kind of movie. A plaster counter to my right separates the living room from the kitchen.

An unlit hallway to my left holds three doors.

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Skulking my way to the first door, the telltale hiss of a shower slithers into my ears. The second door reveals a spartan bedroom. Further investigation reveals nothing inside except a cot with a blanket, so I move back to the hallway. The door at the end didn't have a lock. Took a gentle nudge to send it on its way.

For a moment, I suspect that I got bad intel. The smart glasses' lenses slowly change to a night-vision green. Ammunition crates litter the floor. A closet full of military-grade small arms built for on and off world combat. A small pile of baggies lay on a desk. "Venus's Kiss", a hardcore party drug. Next to the hill of narcotics is a necklace with thick dog tags. The Russian inscriptions "D.G. Haze." glow. I take the dog-tags and a bag of 'Venus's Kiss' with me as I situate myself in the living room. Whoever's here is still in the shower. Therefore, I pick a blind spot, pull up a chair by a desk, and wait. The torrential rain was pounding outside, muffling the nightlife outside.

III. Renegade Angel

Now, I'm no stranger to the bizarre.

It's my job to talk to, negotiate, and/or deal with things, and people, that are -well- unconventional.

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So, when I say that seeing what looks like a dyed-hair Afghan girl exit the shower instead of a burly ex-soldier to be strange, it's fucking strange.

I recompose myself. Could be some old man brain encased in a thin-skinned shell. Happened before, could happen again.

While she's drying herself off, I take the chance to scan her body for implants. Her face reads as 'NULL', so definitely not a citizen. Red squares frantically surface on my HUD. All shared one word: 'UNLICENSED'.

Zooming in, I see why: extra organs of mysterious function, some organs completely replaced with biomechanical equivalents, and a completely reinforced skeleton. How the orgy of implants was stuffed into such a small frame wasn't any secret: while her face may have been given that 'human' touch, everything below the neck screamed 'cyborg'. Her skin was less an organic sheet and more a series of interconnected geometric shapes in nude paint, apart from anything past her shoulders and thighs. No

toes, no belly button, no sexual orifices. Joints and contours of her body were betrayed by incised lines, and any soft curvatures of the flesh were entirely falsified.

Essentially, less of a person and more a doll stuffed with meat.

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Registering the augments in my PDA, I scan that cybernetic shell called her 'skin'. Tattoos laced with geometric patterns and imagery from Russian military camouflage or insignias spread across her neck and left arm. The inscriptions say the same thing in many ways: "any mission, any time, any place, the same damn way every time: fast and heavy."

Observing the figure in its totality left me queasy. Given the augment's start-of-service date, she should've been in a convalescent home. However, everything about her screamed that her place was in a middle school. Scars upon scars riddled her false body, bullet scars and scorch marks in places where any normal girl her size should've died twice over.

The decisiveness of her disfigurements gave witness to their purpose: whoever put Futurista's implants in her, wanted her that way *permanently*. It was as if Futurista had found a way to artificially make some poor fuck undergo controlled

hypopituitarism; eternal youth, but at the wrong age.

This job's gone past the FUBAR event horizon.

Taking notes in my PDA, I lean back into the seat.

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When the girl reemerges, her little sable head is topped by a bulky pair of wireless headphones which blast the latest and greatest club music. A knee-length high-collared jacket dyed in deep reds and whites flaunts a crudely painted peace-sign on its back. Her pants were form fitting white joggers. Each footfall caused by small feet encased in high-top sneakers.

The getup combination was all too familiar: she was planning on going clubbing in some dive, pick up some 'play pals', and get plastered. Something common in washed-up soldiers and rebellious teens. I can't let her get away just yet. Answers first.

"I hope you don't mind me taking the liberty of letting myself in. Made sure to not drag in any dirt."

She freezes in front of me. "I don't mind dirt." I'm overtaken by the thick Russian rasp in her voice, leaving me open to immediate hypnotization by her angelic face. Encased in the slender head were shimmering emeralds for eyes, both of

which were highlighted as deluxe implants on my glasses. "I mind uninvited guests." She takes me in, eyeing me up and down. "You police?"

"Are you Ms. Haze? "I hold up the dog tags, which give off a gentle rhythmic jingle.

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However subtle her furrowing brow was, it didn't escape my notice. "My dad's. He fought for Arctic Territory up North." She retorts.

No self-respecting father lets his daughter do any of this, and no slum-borne scumbag had the money for her augments. And no genitals meant no pimps to foot the bill. "Really now? So, what are you doing here, all by yourself? I'm sure your dad has told you that a girl like you has no place in the slums." My voice radiates anything but belief.

Frustration builds on her face as she snips at me, "Well, I'm just going out. To buy some groceries, and shit- I don't see how it's any of your business, cop or not." Cute. Seems the old LA attitude is hardcoded into everyone's DNA.

"It's my business, ma'am, because I've heard he's got something, or things, that don't belong to him. And I'd like to know if it's here." She shifts her feathery weight around, constantly searching me up and down with her eyes.

"O-oh, okay. I mean, he just has me sell things while he's out. Doesn't tell me where he gets it from." The rebellious angel parades an innocent smile.

Wearing a smile's my specialty, and so I proceed. "What do you sell?"

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"I sell unconventional goods and services." She smugly slithers.

"That's a very broad category, miss. Especially in these parts. Care to be more specific?" This leaves her blushing and visibly annoyed. A mixture of endearment and sardonicism bubbles in my chest, but I don't let it show.

"If you're asking whether I fuck for cash, that's a no. Sorry." With a small deft hand, she fishes a chiseled blaster from behind her jacket, leaving the holster exposed for a precious moment. 'Alpha Group' is inscribed on its labeling, a small insignia of a bear with a Dragunov rifle just below the words.

After showing it off, she puts it onto the kitchen counter. "I sell protection. People need to feel safe around these parts, especially since the cops don't come around anymore. Unless someone needs to die, anyway."

She inches towards me. "You don't trust the police, miss?" Since I'm technically a cop, it's worth getting an idea on whether she'd make retrieval *difficult*.

Her petite head shakes. "They... tend to be more trouble than they're worth. The people starting riots and smuggling drugs go free, but a shoplifting kid gets gunned down? Not all 'em are

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assholes, but around here?... No, I don't trust 'em, and they don't trust us. So, I'd say we're on the same page."

I pull the 'Venus's Kiss' I snuck from her stash. Seeing it, she recoils a bit and scratches at her nose. "M-my dad also has me dealing out chems. Pick-me-ups, let-me-downs, aphrodisiacs and mind-melters, that sorta thing. Says I can use some of the safer stuff if our profit's good enough."

"How old are you?" The lenses of my glasses flash white as I push up the bridge.

The blush returns and she stammers out, "I'm 19. Why- why would you want to know that?" She's fidgeting like I just punched her stomach.

"How long have you been '19'?" I let the incredulity in my voice slip. Her face becomes redder somehow. The words stumble out her mouth: "U-uhm. Sir, I'm not sure I know what- "

Time to go for the pinch. "That holster you have back there. It's Spetsnaz-issued, right? Same goes with your implants." I tap on my knuckles. Hers were uncovered, leaving the crude bludgeons of cybernetic bone naked.

She looks down at them, then raises her gaze back to me. Her face went from youthful innocence to a silent rage.

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If I wanted anything close to answers, I'd have to pinch her harder. "When'd you 'graduate', hm? Forty, maybe Fifty years ago?"

If she had long nails, her clenched fists would've drawn blood now. Pinching's not enough, so my verbal assault begins. "Does your government acknowledge you exist anymore? Did they ever?"

Emerald eyes narrow onto me. I press on every wound I can guess she'd have. "Parents have got to be gone by now, and given your gear and implants... you were counter-terror, weren't you? A poor, terminal girl who took a deal she couldn't refuse."

I could relate, up to an extent. But I continue, nonetheless. "But they didn't let you grow up, did they? Wasn't enough that they let your brain mature, they had to keep your little shell 'young'. 'Cute'. 'Pure'. Dangerous. "The daggers

she stares at me turned into swords. The aggressive staring contest lasts for a deadly minute.

Something about the silence twists a knot in my chest. Maybe it's the fact that I've dealt with 'peter-pans' like her, but none have served in any form of combat. Most live as pampered artists, maids, literal 'jailbait', or even the odd office worker like at Futurista.

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After a second, I refocus myself. The job's got to be done someday, better it to be me.

"You aren't *just* a cop, are you?" The realization hits her like a blaster's bullet. "You're worse..." I can almost see her small Futurista-branded heart jump in her chest. "Planning on taking me to Futurista? Cut me up to take what's mine?" Small, angry puppy-dog eyes lock with mine. A pang of guilt erupts from my chest. I suppress it, at least for the time being. "They want a corpse, not a woman, do they?"

"I won't hurt you if I don't have to, Miss Haze. Believe me. If taking you, *and* the stolen goods, in is an option-" My pistol leaves its holster and now rests on the table. "-I prefer that to the alternative. Better a small debt and a few *licensed* replacements than the big sleep." Turmoil is written all over her face. "I'm sure you knew we'd find you. Eventually. We

always do. Sorry it had to be me."

The angel keeps her eyes locked on me, making the guilt fester and grow. "Good as any." She growls. Her arm creeps to her side. A likely place for a knife.

I pull my Identifier. It's a small pen-shaped device that spews out pink and blue laser lights. The scanner rises with a pop and gives off an electric hum. "Now, if you would kindly, please look into the light."

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Blink of an eye. I barely deflect a switchblade aimed for my stomach.

Her tiny fingers dig into my chest. With the force of a bull, she sends me flying into the plaster counter, knocking everything down on me as I create a deep dent.

Searing pain erupts from my spine as I reach for her gun she'd left. Too slow. The air in my lungs escapes me as a small foot smashes me through the counter.

I'm seeing stars and tasting blood. When I try to level the pistol at her, she knocks it away. Small hands clamp on my throat and press into the floor.

Consciousness nearly leaves me until I feel my PDA whirring to life. I press it against her chest. With an electrical crack

and a bright flash, the girl yelps in pain. Her grip loosens just enough for me to slam my fist into the front of her elbow, sending her to the floor.

Snatching the Identifier from the rubble, I move to open her right eye by force. I feel a sharp, deep pain from my shoulder: A switchblade buried itself to the hilt in it.

I roll my eyes. My fist connects with her throat. Her hands are too busy clamoring over the injury for her to stop me again.

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I ready the scanner, the cacophonous snarl of flesh, bone, and nerve tissue reknitting itself spills from her throat. Only 30 seconds, maybe less, before she's back onto me.

I pin her skull under my palm with one hand. Force the eyelids open with the other. The identifier spews out a dump of information to my glasses. The ID confirmation is all I see: 'D.G. HAZE 2129'. Secret's out. She's not human, like me. Hasn't been for a very long time.

"Please don't get up." I motion to her before I walk towards the desk that holds my pistol. I can hear the girl gasp for air behind me. "How does it feel, huh? Punching children makes you feel big?" She growls under her breath. "You're no better than any of those fucking 'corpo' pigs."

"You're no kid. "I growl back. "You haven't been for a long time."

"You fucking butchers are only doing this because they'll get you too. 'Cuz without them, you're nothing but a little bag of meat. Aren't you?" Her words spill out with tears. "You have no idea how many times I tried to change bodies, to change who I am... But I can't. I don't even feel *normal* unless I'm like *this*... What they did to me, *Futurista* can't fix." It's easy to tell she's noticed my gray eyes by now. I wasn't born with them, anyone can see that. "I *know* you understand."

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I check my pistol. This thing can put down a polar bear, at least if they weren't extinct already. "No. No, I don't." My voice is kept to a low, tired rumble. "And I don't need to. That's the difference between you older cyborgs and me: I don't need to feel normal to function. Especially if '*feeling normal*' means living as some freak's wet dream for the rest of my life."

I take a mental map of Miss Haze, keeping the pistol at a low ready. Aim at or above the rib cage: certain death. Aim below the ribcage: she could survive if immediately stabilized, get brought in. Either way, she'll drop, maybe even faint, the moment the bolts tear into her, from the sheer shock of it.

"You'll never know what it's like. To feel... perfectly human."

Sorrow seeps from every word, hysteria brings out exasperated giggles. "To feel... like you belong. Welcomed as you are." The girl straightens her spine with a loud *crunch*.

"That isn't something worth dying for." My wit's at its end; Sincerity is all I can offer. "Please."

There's a moment where I think she'll back down. Every minute feels like two, maybe even three. Then she moves for me. I take aim. Two booming shots. She drops with a heavy thud.

IV: Change of Plans

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A faint pulse is all Ms. Haze has now. Leaving her hog-tied on the couch, I stock as much of the stolen gear I can into the Slider. If you can believe it, this is the nicest I've been to a target. The LAPD like getting stolen goods almost as much as they like using 'em. Easy way to get a pretty penny. I pocket 2 of the Mil-Stims, definitely gonna use one with how my back feels after that scuffle. The damp smell of gasoline-soaked floor fills my nostrils. Time to finish this up.

But first... I found something.

A small bundle of photos catches my gaze from my trunk of "evidence", stuck to a pistol with a rubber band in a tight

roll. In the first, Ms. Haze is holding a sniper rifle twice her size, surrounded by burly soldiers and operatives. She's dressed less like a militarized schoolgirl, the men around her don tactical gear. A surprisingly multicultural bunch. The second is of her and the gang eating together in some Swedish diner, jabbing and pinching at each other. They're clearly drunk, judging by the red in their faces and the scattered shot glasses. The third is of her hugging one of the operatives, a big guy with a big beard, in front of the Eiffel tower. Their smiles here are gentle, dare I say doting. The fourth is her and few of

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her fellow soldiers at a funeral, the man she was hugging is missing. Where her right arm should've been was a mere stump.

Damnit.

This is why higher-ups tell me not to look at any of the target's paraphernalia.

Walking over to the girl, I pocket the photos, and pull out a Mil-Stim. After injecting the solution into her chest, she gasps for air. The bullet and its shrapnel are pushed out of the two holes in her guts with a wet churning noise. The holes shrink, steam rising off them with a sharp hiss.

A single tap on my earpiece and the line's live. "Ma'am."

My superior barks. "Hello, Agent. Were you able to retrieve the augments?"

The girl's sleeping. Alive. Not something Futurista'd be happy about if they saw what I saw. "No, Ma'am. Guy who had it shook me up good and ran off. Would've been dead if not for... a cyborg, a 'doll'. She's right here, healing up." Obviously, a lie, but she's got no reason to doubt me. Not yet, anyway.

The woman pauses before, "I see. If you wish, you may take her augments into custody instea-

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"Ma'am. If I may call in my favor." There's a minute gasp on the other end. "I believe she has potential. I'd like to have her work as my On-Site Assistant."

The 10 minutes it takes for her to work out the deal feels like 10 hours. The bureaucracy and verbal paperwork of it all grates on me.

"You assent to be the sponsor for a... Miss Dolores Guzeva Haze, Yoseph? Futurista will *not* be responsible for any upkeep or damages. The cost for her augments *will* be added to your debt." Indeed, a solemn response, like a preacher chastising the sinning masses.

"Yes, Ma'am." Is what I say without delay. "I should be

ready for the next job within 24 hours."

"Understood. Have a nice day." Her canned response before the line goes dead.

While carrying 'Haze' in my arms, I see her small eyes dart under her lids. Must be nice to have dreams. I prop her up on the passenger seat, seatbelt fastened and cuffs on her wrists and ankles. Temporary, of course. Until I can explain the situation in a more secure space.

I pop a flare, throwing it to the shack. It slowly burns, sending my old lonely life up in smoke with it.