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THE
MAXIMUM
SOFTNESS
CAPABLE
OF BEING
EXERTED
BY
ALL
MACHINERY

Porpentine
Charity
Heartscape

■



The weapon dreams names and goes to them when she wakes. Some are in cloud-trusting structures. Some live in domes powered by geothermal vents on the seafloor. Some split their identities between bodies.

Her kill orders are laundered through at least two or three dreamers. Sometimes these dreamers never wake. At the end of the trail of burnt dreamers is the weapon. And you.



She pursues a target into the dark of the moon, running through endless fields of solar panels. She punctures the target's air mask and watches their pleadings suck into the asteroid sky. Their legs kick words from the language of death into the gravel.



The weapon has black hair and brown eyes. They never blink, unless she's resetting. Then she blinks 300 times, very fast.



The weapon walks across a plain. Ramshackle houses here and there like mushrooms. If she gets too close they bend into the ground like a pop-up book. The name is in a pool of water because that is exactly where it would appear if everything were perfect.

She sinks through the soil. No matter how far she sinks she never loses sight of the sky. She wakes with the name stinging her eyes.



She's dressed like a veteran in a tattered crimson uniform faded to the color of dried blood. She's huddled shivering (Pathetic Type 16b) by the archway as the procession enters the city. The officer sees her and dismounts. "No hero of the war should be out on the street like a dog." She gives her hand to the weapon, and the weapon takes it.

The officer reels, spurting blood from her stump. With her other hand she drags out her service revolver and gives the weapon the wound she was faking, ten times over. The weapon slinks like a jackal, sweating bullets. She embraces the officer, exhaling her red mist.





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A storm of furious gunmetal violence, forever, until.

Updates are introduced over centuries of warfare. They need to look like humans, but operate on haze. A blur in human form.

Then they need to feel what humans are going to do before they do it, to know the tactics emerging from pain and fear, and in doing so, pain and fear enters her mind.

But still the blur, like a kitten in the corner of a saw-mill waiting with wide eyes for the blades to stop.

Until one day the update comes that tips the scales, and the blur becomes aware.

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She remembers the first time she was afraid to die. Curled up shivering with her face scattered across the sand, rain sizzling on exposed circuitry.

Critical shutdown. Recalled and reset, but her brain was too messy and organic at that point to

really forget, everything just got more confusing and fragmented.

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Things become complicated once the war ends.

On a certain world, weapons are hunted as the most exquisite game.

On a certain world, weapons are indentured in corporate feudal wars.

On a certain world, weapons are melted down to make guns.

And on this particular continent of this particular world, the official policy toward weapons is integration.

How lucky she is.

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Unsheathed, the weapon is an ink blot soaking shrapnel.





Sheathed, the weapon is tall and bony, anthropocentric ball bearings and jutting framework, her eyes like two guns pointed at your head, but if you're not looking for it, might just seem statuesque, emaciated, a little off, are you a bodybuilder, do you work out?



The market still sees them for their cross-hair DNA. Bloodless work is hard to come by.

She's at the job center. There's a long wait. When she reaches the front of the line the worker says, "Don't go blowing my head off," and laughs. A joke?

"I would never do that."



The city overwhelms her senses. All this stimuli she's not supposed to eviscerate. She gets dampening updates every week but her neural network can never be truly rewritten, it's military tech from the ground up, and disentangling it completely could destroy her sentience. No matter how many flowers are planted over her ruins, the poison in

the groundwater is always rising, must always be countered.

She can't even get the updates over the net, she has to go down to the clinic and have them use their sanctioned machinery to deliver their official update which they could easily send to her home. She knows some weapons make and swap their own patches, but she's scared. The blur always rises in her memory like a fog, so she keeps her head down and sticks to the path.



She starts talking to someone in a weapons-centric chat-hive and they meet up in physical space. To her surprise this person isn't a weapon, they're just a normal human woman.

This person watches while she does motion calibration exercises, which supposedly stabilize her mood. Leaping and slashing in the ruins of a condemned building, against a backdrop of gouged concrete like dark fish just below the surface of a gray sea – her scratching post. The woman experiences a piercing arousal, as if one of the weapon's edges had pierced





her abdomen and infused it with venom.

She asks the weapon out for drinks and they go to a 20th story bar, her treat. The weapon sits with her hands on her lap as the woman gets drunk. She watches every light in the city skyline with the same attention as the glint in the woman's eye. Later a cab brings them to the weapon's apartment. This woman knows she's a weapon and doesn't seem to care, seems to like it. They make out in the dim rooms, empty as the day she moved in. The woman pulls her shirt up and feels her chest, rubs the stunted breasts, the fluted ribs.

The woman asks her to get on top so she does.

Being held by the weapon is like being held by a steel trap. No matter how softly she calibrates her movements, the woman can feel the hardness under her skin, as if her muscles were permanently tensed and her blood was molten metal and she was waiting to spring open or snap shut. Cocked.

There is a maximum softness capable of being exerted by all machinery.

The weapon's genital barb sweats nerve poison. She crawls back, uncertain what to do next. The woman makes a joke about needing a condom. The weapon says what kind of condom, a concrete wall? You're funny, the woman says.

The woman grinds against her. The weapon dilutes the nerve poison to 0.001 percent. When the barb pricks the woman's left breast, she experiences a burning micro-seizure approximating an orgasm.

"I'm not sure whether to call the police or kiss you."

The weapon's segments tighten nervously.

"What's wrong?"

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After the woman leaves, the weapon wonders what you do with a name that is not destroyed.

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The weapon gets a refrigerator. She fills it with food that seems popular - eggs, bread, vegetables, fruit, candy. Her girlfriend opens the refrigerator to see





an entire shelf taken up by bananas, and another by cartons of efficiently stacked eggnog. She laughs. "It's so fun to see what you'll do next."

The weapon thinks: she laughed. That's a good thing.



They clipped her armaments before she entered the general population. When she struggles in her sleep, afflicted by retro-empathic feedback, her killing limbs merely tick, and her cross-hairs lead to nothing.



She goes to a party with her girlfriend. An artist talks to her in some dark corner. "I'm so fascinated by your kind. So in-between."

The loud music pounding through the walls is setting off her threshold. Humans veer too close, she never knows if they're trying to talk to her or someone right next to her or someone across the room, if she should look at them or keep talking to the artist. Target codes throb uselessly in her vision.

"There's so much to talk about along the lines of castration, crippling, et cetera. I would love to record your body."

She goes to the bathroom, but the line is long, she feels huge and hulking, she can't stand next to all those soft, delicate women.

She goes out on the roof garden, body tense with undealt deaths, but she knows she can't achieve release. Instead she squats in the dark foliage and disgorges everything she ate and drank that week. All the things she can't digest, just getting blacker and oilier inside her. But it makes her girlfriend happy, the first girlfriend she's ever had.



The weapon buys a couch and sits on it, sinking into the cushions. She looks around, not sure what happens next.



The blur of dreaming.

Walking naked through the snow toward a group of





soldiers. Smiling like she's been programmed. Always smile. She is greeted with a slug to her clavicle, blowing through her back in a burst of blue vines, icicles of hydraulic fluid like a frozen scream.

They patch her to wear clothes.

She kills the next name in the middle of a clothing store. She sheds the blood-soaked skirt, the shredded top, the socks stabbed by needle feet.

The name bleeds out, paralyzed, as the weapon tries on clothes, wearing what the mannequins wear. She won't learn to hate her reflection until much later.



The weapon gets a futon because her girlfriend is creeped out by the anaerobic coffin she sleeps in. She tells her girlfriend the coffin was just a temporary thing for some weird repair she needed. She feels compelled to convey the sense of becoming less dangerous, of moving toward something comforting and familiar.

She gets pretty sick waiting to sleep in the coffin, which now lives in a self storage unit.



They're cuddling in bed at her girlfriend's spacious apartment. Her girlfriend moves the wrong way and cuts herself on the weapon. Red stains the nice white sheets. The weapon's eyes tick as they scan across the blood. Her girlfriend yells at her.



The weapon is in a public restroom. A woman follows her inside. You shouldn't be in here. The weapon looks in the mirror and realizes her armaments are showing through the tension of her neck. She flexes the skin opaque but it's too late. Another woman comes out of the stall and looks at them. Long awkward silence as the weapon waits for this woman to be informed, a sad ashamed feeling at knowing this woman still thinks she should be in here, and waiting for this temporary state of grace to be lifted from the woman's face. It will be worse than with the woman who knew her from the beginning. More room to fall. She leaves before this can happen.





She pisses black oil into the tiny gap between buildings where air conditioners cry.



She's at the clinic waiting for the tests that monitor her dream patterns.

Her girlfriend said she'd go with her but she never showed up. She avoids looking at the other weapon who is seated across from her. She stares through the window at the narrow strip of grass running along the strip mall.

I'm so sorry, her girlfriend says over the phone. I was giving my friend a ride home and she doesn't really know about that kind of stuff, I know you probably wouldn't want her around.



Her girlfriend pulls her shirt off. The weapon's breasts are molecules of weapons in the shape of breasts.

Her girlfriend gropes the weapon's breasts and the weapon feels them through her, the way she knows

which way a target is going to turn, her deadly empathy. She feels the dense nubs at their core. Dark seeds. She feels it is good when fingers make a soft thing squish, especially when it returns to its original shape. She feels how elegant it is that the breasts are focused to points of concentrated nerve endings. The target dot at the center of a crosshair. Her nipples harden. Her girlfriend sucks on them, and spits out black oil. She looks sick.

"Sorry," the weapon says.

In her frozen inert state, she knows there is something else she can do, but she doesn't know what it is. She waits until the invisible window closes. In the dark windowless room of the silence, she says,

"I didn't know you would suck on them."

Her girlfriend goes to the kitchen and makes coffee for a long time.



The weapon is on the roof of a luxury casino. A circular waterfall pours down the walls, a crying





ring on the finger of the casino tower. The weapon punches through a neon sign between her and the cowering target. Sparks fall like fireworks. The target is trying every safe code they can think of from their work in weapon manufacture. None of the defaults work, and none of the most psychologically common.

When she relives these memories, she sees all the things she didn't notice before. It's too big.



Her gaze drifts across her girlfriend and her mind calculates the ten fastest ways to kill her before she even realizes it.



"You're so cold sometimes," her girlfriend says, after a long evening of her obviously wanting to say something but not, an inflated silence that even the weapon noticed, and felt guilty for enjoying.

The weapon is confused. She tries to think of something that is correctly cold. "Winter is cold."

"You're not a season, you're..." Her girlfriend trails off.

Then what am I? The urge to make her girlfriend say what she is, to hear her girlfriend's personal shorthand for her, or the term she selects from all the imperfect terms available.

But instead the weapon says, "I'm sorry."



She thinks about the cold statement a lot. A special kind of puzzle. To be warm is to be inefficient. The opposite of all her instincts, honed to outrace split-second annihilation.

So the weapon gets an aquarium. She puts it in the living room, so that anyone who sees it can think, oh, what a normal person for she has designated an artificial environment in her dwelling in which a form of life much lower down the hierarchy of sentience is sustained with the complex supply chain of resources required to allow it to survive outside its natural habitat. She smiles, even though her girlfriend isn't there, because she knows her girlfriend would like that kind of spontaneous, authentic





impulse, if she could see it, which she can't.



The weapon is on a date in the mall. Her girlfriend sees someone she knows at the fancy soap store.

The weapon watches her girlfriend laugh in heat vision, mouth glowing like a ghoul. She struggles to separate all the chatter into coherent channels. Her senses were calibrated to detect the most minute change to an environment, each second twisting life and death, and now hundreds of people are walking past blasting affect like a fire hose.

She asks her girlfriend if they can go somewhere less crowded but her girlfriend doesn't seem to really understand. Ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds later her girlfriend says goodbye and they get on the escalator.

"I thought about telling my friend that I didn't know you. But I want you to know I did the right thing." She grins.

The weapon's possible responses hang in the air

before her. She compares them all. The responses seem like trails of ants. She feels like a bird watching from the air. She wants to eat individual parts of the words, but she knows that would be wrong. That some holistic combination is required.

She smiles instead. She's collecting a set of responses that humans do when nothing else can be done.



She allows the fibers of her hand to loosen by unseen fractions. The hand has not changed visually, but the wind whistles through it. She listens to her singing hand.



She presses her face against the aquarium glass. The fish swims closer and gapes at her. It has iridescent blue scales and a wispy languid tail. Such a tiny squirt of flesh, with such a simple nervous system. A pet bullet. How many fish did it take to build a human? Is a weapon a human minus how many fish?





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The weapon is at the mall. A woman is staring at her. She is carrying a nice purse and her clothes and hair are pristine like a picture. The security guard is listening to her, one hand on their belt.

“It was, making me feel very uncomfortable.”

The weapon takes a step back, then stands still, afraid the security will make explicit this detainment. As long as she doesn't leave she can't be made to stay.

“Can you describe exactly what happened?”

“It projected this, sexual demeanor, I felt very afraid for my personal safety, and the safety of this space.”

The weapon's spine stiffens and presses against the back of her shirt like a relief of tank treads.

“Is there something specific I can get down for my records?”

The woman stares into the security guard's eyes. Yes, she understands, we live in a liberal age where we must establish pretext. A quantum of information must be offered, as part of the ritual.

“It loomed at me, with a threatening intent, clearly threatening, and looked like it was about to press itself on me.”

The weapon's spine twists like a poisoned snake, the cobra cowl of her hair suddenly stiff and brittle like magnetic filings.

Can they hear the clicking in her jaw?

“It was definitely following me.”

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The weapon downloads an illegal patch. She feels the armaments lubricating inside her. She dances around the apartment, firing at nothing with perfect aim.

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Her girlfriend is talking. The music playing on the laptop is very loud, filling up her threat buffer.





The ants of her responses parade past. She reads one of them at random.



She lets her girlfriend see her in the shower, blood draining through the gaps in her fanned carapace. Her girlfriend says, “What the fuck. You’re working again?”

The weapon says, “What? What’s wrong?”

Say it.

Just say it.

The apartment door slams.



In her dream she’s trying to load her arm in the bathroom. Bullets fall into the toilet, the loading groove turned to soggy penne. Women are on the other side of the door, pressing psychically against either side of the stall. She wonders if the door is locked. She has checked many times with no memory of the

result. The toilet is clogged with bullets. Water pools black in the bowl. Hovering on the edge. The bullets look motionless but make a sound as if they were being shaken on a tray. Oil spatters over the rim.



Her eyes flick bored through the visible color spectrum. “Like me now?”

Her hair thickens and thins and fluxes dye. “Like me now?”

Her face flashes between canned expressions of horror and joy and arousal.

The woman is crying in rage. “You have no idea how hurtful you’re being right now.”

Her skin swirls like melted ice cream. “Like me now?”

“I can’t forgive you for this.”



The weapon watches the heat of her ex-girlfriend burn on the synthetic leather of the couch. She





reaches for it and it fades like fog from a windowpane.

The weapon looks inside her refrigerator. The vegetables are moldy and the fruit is rotten.

The weapon sits on the couch and shoots herself in the head. The bullet hits the aquarium, rupturing water and gravel and glass across the floor. The fish swims frantically as water drains through the jagged glass and creeps across the pale floor, visible only where light through the blinds casts its burning boats on the subtle sea.

The fish struggles on the gravel at the bottom of the aquarium. The apartment is silent save for the muted sound of traffic outside.

The wound grows fuzzy, tiny hairs sprouting, then thicker, like strands of gut, then a sucking sound as it seals up. The weapon's fist swallows the gun and becomes fingers. She walks over to the aquarium and picks up the fish and takes it to the kitchen and puts it in a glass of water.

