

Not A Thing

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Adam Jensen is worried. It doesn't happen often anymore – not since Megan, not since the incident that turned his world upside down in a whirl of metal, blood and pain. Nothing seems meaningful enough if you can't hold onto the ones that you love, the ones that made you *care*.

Jensen worries for Malik now, though. Malik, whose job it was to save his ass time and time again, who he can count on when everything else goes to shit around him. Malik, who asked him for a favor in a situation that might've cost her life otherwise. Malik, maybe the only person he can call *a friend* in all of this mess that his life has become.

She's in over her head with this one, he thinks, and worries. So he helps, retrieves the autopsy report from Anonymous X – *isn't a deal with a complete amateur just peachy*, he grumbles to himself – and relays the bad news. Malik is notably upset, she wants proof and Jensen will be damned if he can't deliver it to her.

Thus he finds himself searching through Lee's apartment, picking out half a dozen leads easily. Hacking the computer is no problem (though keeping a straight face while hacking the account "mastaplaya69" does make a challenge of its own), as is handling the rest of the evidence. Jensen has seen these kinds of crime scenes often enough to know what happened to Carmichael.

He's listening to the message on the answering machine when goose-flesh starts spreading on his neck and back, covering his organic body parts instantly. Jensen tenses up, looking around to find the reason for this, whilst listening distractedly to the voice talking about a meeting in the Hive – his augmentations recording and analyzing every bit of information regardless of his fractured attention to it. As much as he may gripe about his unwanted augs, they do have their use now and then.

"The Hive?" says Malik's voice, projected directly into his head, sounding aggravated but also pleased with the gathered information. If he hadn't been on high alert, he would have startled – thus he only freezes in his half-crouched position beside the answering machine, apprehension growing like a virus in his gut. The rest of Malik's statement goes unheard and appears instead as a notification in the top right corner of his vision. He blinks his eyes to get rid of it, then frowns when it doesn't work – he doesn't have the clearance to disrupt a priority comm. line. It doesn't matter that it's his own mind that's being subjected to it.

Jensen tries to keep his voice from reflecting his current predicament, instead stating flatly: "You heard that?" He clenches his hands into fists, carbon fiber tissue and sleek machinery whirring silently into place. Malik sighs impatiently, then: "Sorry, Jensen." The sounds of typing transfers through the comm. link, the connection blinking with an update of his mission log. The pilot is distracted while she searches for the best entry point into the club. "I don't like invading your privacy like this, but it's important." It seems like an afterthought, a footnote in her attention barely worth mentioning.

Jensen suppresses the urge to crush something, the instinct to hurt before he can be hurt one he has honed to perfection. He opts to say nothing instead. *She's not Sarif*, he tells himself, breathing through it. *This is not Sarif*. He straightens up slowly, consciously unlocking his tensed posture muscle for muscle, augment for augment. *I have a choice. This is fine*.

I am not a thing.

He finishes his business in the apartment and disappears into the Youzhao backstreets, leaving no traces behind.

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Jensen is making his way to the Hive, weaving in and out of the crowd currently strolling through the streets of Hengsha. Augmented eyes check the mission log, adding bullet points and annotations in clinical, short sentences he barely needs to think about as he walks.

"Jensen?!" It comes like a gun shot through the comms. Malik sounds bewildered, worried, potentially annoyed or put off – his CASIE-aug displaying streams of data and statistics to predict her emotional state whilst also notifying him of the three failed attempts to get his attention prior to the current one. Jensen wipes it away with a shake of his head, grunting in acknowledgement.

"What- Adam, what's wrong?" Jensen walks on, picking out the flashing commercial screens that are the facade of the club in the distance. He hears her take a breath, but doesn't wait for her to speak. His gruff voice sounds absent even to his own ears when he updates her on his current position and intended course of action, only to fall silent again after that.

He's crawling through the air vent in the alley behind the Hive when Malik sighs dejectedly, letting the subject drop with a small "copy that". The call ends, the icon of her profile blinking out of his HUD.

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Getting Lee to confess isn't much of a challenge. The evidence is there, saved in his biochip in startling detail, ready to be accessed with a flick of his mind if he so chooses. Jensen used to pride himself of his skill to intimidate suspects, to get to the

information he wants with minimal psychical violence. Now, though, with every aspect of his being enhanced, doing well isn't an achievement anymore; it's a given, guaranteed by the quietly humming machinery built into his head and limbs. *Liberty in mind and body*, he echoes LIMBs slogan. *If only*.

Malik confirms the recording of the confession, satisfaction at Lee's distraught emotional state coloring her voice. "Listen, Jen- Adam. One last thing, then I'll leave you alone." She seems uncertain for a moment, then she chuckles, trying to cover it up. "I think you'll like it." Jensen huffs, going for an amused sound but it sounds slightly put-off instead.

He does have to admit a short while later that broadcasting the confession on the Hive's outer screens has a certain quality to it. "Nice work, Malik", he says in lieu of a greeting, nodding approvingly in her general direction when he joins her position.

The pilot looks up hopefully at him when she recognizes Jensen's usual dry tone, contrasting the distanced one he had been using for the majority of the mission. "Silent treatment over?" she asks cautiously, trying to look into his perpetually covered eyes.

He shifts his weight, then steps closer to her to carefully place his augmented hand on her shoulder. "I'll explain on the flight back", Jensen offers, flicking off his shades for a moment to show her he's being sincere.

"Alright, deal."

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Said flight doesn't have the expected destination, but is still long enough to warrant some time on their hands. After pointing the VTOL to Montreal, Malik enables autopilot and joins Jensen in the back of the aircraft.

Sarif Industries head of security feels exhausted beyond comprehension, staring out of the cargo window, seeing nothing in the endless waves of the Pacific Ocean. One daunting task chased the other in their rush in and out of Tai Yong Medical, culminating in the discovery of Megan's possible survival six months ago. He's not sure how to process that knowledge, enhanced mind or no.

Jensen flinches slightly when Malik drops into the seat in front of him, looking him over worriedly. "On a scale of one to ten, how fucked do you feel?" He needs a moment to focus on her, retracting the shades to rub his eyes. Even in his fatigued state it's a deliberate movement, signaling her that he trusts her with this vulnerability.

"A solid eight, maybe", he says eventually in a neutral tone, looking up to gauge the state of the pilot. "You?"

Malik shrugs, leaning back into her seat. "I'm fine." She pauses. Jensen's CASIE-aug displays a heightened pulse and sweaty hands – Malik's nervous. "Adam, what

happened?" She doesn't need to specify what she's referring to. Jensen nods once, signaling her that he accepts her request, then looks out the window. His yellow-grey eyes focus on the spray of water on the glass, his mind replaying the moment of unease in Lee's apartment.

I am not a thing.

Jensen considers his colleague, his *friend*, in front of him and decides to start from the beginning. "It was disorienting, to wake up. After... after the attack." Malik doesn't acknowledge his hesitancy, just shifts her position to be more comfortable, looking him in the eyes. He holds her gaze only for a brief moment, opting to inspect his sleek carbon fiber hands instead. "I spent so much time opposing the thought of being augmented that the moment I woke up to artificial limbs and the HUD in the corner of my vision— Let's just say I would have preferred not having survived at all, in that first moment."

Malik sat up at that confession, brow furrowed. Jensen holds up a finger, telling her to wait, to let him continue. "That was six months ago. I had time to heal, time to *think*. I adapted and came out stronger for it." He says it with certainty, with a confidence carefully built in the last few weeks of being on a continuous mission, overcoming boundaries with every step he went.

"It's not the augs, Faridah, not really", Jensen continues. "It's not... it's not the inability to feel the things I touch or the added weight I have to carry around." Synthetic eyes snap up to fix her with an unnaturally intense gaze. "It's the loss of control. I'm always online, always available. I'm hackable, for God's sake!" He raises his voice at that, unable to keep his calm exterior when he feels so damn *exposed* all the time. His augs flare up in correspondence to his agitated state, causing him to clench his teeth audibly to maintain control. Malik doesn't move a muscle, just tenses up, barely blinking in her position across from him.

Then the sudden energy just leaves him. Jensen slumps against his seat, closing his eyes and sighing heavily. "To Sarif I'm nothing more than an asset, a machine to point and set loose at the next target. I'm always a comm. call away, convenient because I have nothing left to lose." A pause follows, then Jensen feels a hand in his own, prosthetic one – the contact registering dimly through the sensor pads in the dermal layer of his hand.

He opens his eyes slowly, looking into soft brown eyes. Malik still doesn't utter a word, sensing that there's still a part in his story missing. Jensen applies soft pressure to her hand, his dark limb contrasting with Malik's olive skin. "When you made that comm. link without my knowledge, without my *consent*, it just... rubbed me the wrong way. I have nothing to hide during a mission, you know that, and yet—" He falls silent, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Minutes tick by after that, Jensen's prosthetic warming up to the touch slowly. The man himself is deep in thought, drained after verbalizing those toxic thoughts for the first time. Suddenly, Malik states in a firm voice: "Sarif had no right to decide over your body like that. He still doesn't - you know that, don't you, Adam?" Jensen isn't

sure about that, hasn't been sure about what's right and what's wrong ever since he regained consciousness on a lab table, losing what makes him *human* with every augment they wired into his body. "He doesn't. You are not an object to be used however he pleases. You are not a thing."

Jensen's eyes widen at that. Hearing those words out of her mouth settles something in him, suddenly able to think much clearer. Malik smiles, knowing him well enough to read his reaction, before turning serious again: "I didn't even think, back there in Lee's apartment. Adam, I'm sorry." She takes a breath, letting it out slowly. "I was so stressed because of Evelyn, but that doesn't excuse breaching your private space like that. It won't happen again."

He could feel himself relax at that. "I trust you", he says quietly. *Thank you* is left unsaid, but she understands anyways.

"And I you", Malik replies, smiling fully now. Jensen returns it, only a slight twitch of his lips, but it's there nonetheless. With a pat of his hand, she stands up, heading back to the cockpit and winking at him before stepping out of his eye sight.

Jensen rests his head against the window, finally letting his eyes droop, giving in to the exhaustion. He doesn't dream, for once – not of the LIMB labs, not of the attack or anything that has happened after that. It barely feels like any time has passed when he wakes up, blinking drowsily, automatically checking his surroundings. Jensen hears Malik softly typing something in the cockpit of the VLOT, feeling safer than he has ever since Sarif Industries burned around him.

In the distance, he can see Montreal lights flickering in the night sky.