

Chosen

The buzzer on John Lenox's clock radio woke him precisely at 6:45 am. He groaned and crawled out of his cot, but smiled as he remembered what day it was. February 26, 2007. The day he would make his mark on the world. Well, in a small scale, anyways. The most important marathon he'd ever run.

The light sleeping tents of the participants dotted the dirt road where they would begin their journey: just over 200 men and women running not only to better themselves, but to bring international attention to this part of the globe.

The Saharawi people had been repressed for far too long, living out their lives in refugee camps called *wilayasi*, named after the cities these strong people had been moved out of during many conflicts here in Africa. While the U.N. was focused elsewhere, these people suffered and died. The run was a way to unify the people, give them something to believe in and cherish. And he was part of it.

The young college student shrugged into his light running shorts and did a couple of warm-up laps around the small encampment. Children followed after him, cheering. They were still in awe of his flawless white skin and gentle demeanor, a curiosity that they had allowed to stay here with open arms. He smiled.

The elder sat with him and offered tea. Stumbling over each other's languages, the two had become fast friends in the weeks leading up to the Sahara Marathon. The first cup: bitter as life. The second: sweet as love. And the third cup: soft as death. It was tradition to have at least the three cups.

The sun crept blazing into the sky, coating the reddened sands with golden light. John thought how beautiful it was, but also realized the danger. Out there in the wilderness, hundreds of thousands of mines still waited patiently for an unsuspecting child or adult to release them into fiery glory. That's what John hoped to change. Sooner or later the U.N. would have to send in troops to help clear the mines and other symbols of death and carnage. His heart soared at the opportunity to do something good, something for someone else.

Soon it would be time.

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The men stood or jogged slowly in place, keeping legs limbered up for the race. John stood among them, a small part of a greater whole. The starting gun went off, sending the people forward in a torrent of arms, legs, and perspiration. The first kilometer was always the hardest, when the body tried to tell the brain that this was ridiculous, an unnecessary waste of precious energy. But soon John felt the rhythmic pounding of footfalls drown out any arguments. He relaxed into the beat of his heart and breath and felt himself grow lighter. The young men of this harsh land outpaced him and the older ones. Like that other generation, he let the young men go. They would tire themselves out eventually, and drop off the pace. It was too early to push yet. The sun crept farther up the sky.

In the back of his mind, he recognized the thrum of the jeeps behind him. The trailers would watch the runners and help those that couldn't take the heat back to the camp. John vowed not to be among them. Ahead, small children at the first checkpoint waited with cups of water for the runners. One looked to him and trotted out to hand it to him. John cupped it midstride and dumped it over his head, feeling the cool water running down his back. He felt so alive!

That was when the pitch of the jeep following them changed. It took a few minutes for his mind to pick up on, with his muscles just starting to complain again. The sound snapped him out of his trance. The child screamed. Looking back, he saw the tires of the jeep as they rolled over the boy's body and continue. What was going on?

The men in the jeep opened fire, slaughtering indiscriminately. John ran; the screams of the dead and dying all around him. How could this happen? Why, God, he screamed silently, pistoning his arms back and forth to propel him forward.

"Lenox!" a voice yelled in English, "stop now or I kill the rest of them!"

John halted, putting his hands in the air and slowly turning around. Where the hell was he supposed to go? The desert just waited for him out there. The elder had called the reddish dunes The Old Death, and John knew it to be true.

An Asian woman with yellow wraparound glasses smiled evilly and jumped off the jeep, sliding a blade with accurate precision over one of the runner's throat. She watched idly as he bled to death, her spiked hair waving ever so slightly in the breeze. The others in the jeep got out and approached him swiftly. An ugly brute with a gap where a tooth used to be laughed at him, pulling his hands behind his back and fastening them together with a zip tie. "I've got `im, Lash!"

Another woman standing next to the jeep crossed over and grabbed his jaw, tilting his head one way, then the other.

"What do you want with me? Why did you kill all those people?" John cried, two tear tracks running through the dust coating his face.

"Our boss is..." the woman said, thinking deeply, "well, sick. He believes in torture, death, and then more torture. You are the nephew of Janus O'Brien, yes?"

"What does my uncle have to do with this? He's in Mexico!"

Lash patted his cheek. "He was. He didn't know a good thing when he saw it, and tried to betray us. I hate to be the one to tell you this, John, but he died. Horribly. He shit himself in terror when he faced the thing he had created for us. The thing that took him apart methodically, piece by piece. The thing that you will become, to pay for his betrayal."

Lash pointed at the jeep. "Slapshot, escort our prisoner to his chariot. Char, enough torturing. We need to leave."

The other man waiting patiently smiled at John as they walked up to him. "I'm called Cypher, John. But from now on, you can call me father. While I had nothing to do with your previous birth, I'll be central to your new one. You look in perfect health, I'm impressed. That puts your odds of survival after the procedure very high."

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"What procedure?"

"Ah, that would be letting the cat out of the bag. Do you like surprises, John? I guarantee you'll be surprised."

The jeep rocketed off across the dunes, away from any prying eyes.



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When he came to, the first thing he remembered was the pain and terror that had mercifully plunged him into unconsciousness. His eyes blasted open as his arms tried to cover his chest where the machines had chewed and gouged his skin like animals. But nothing was there now but rubber tubing trailing away into the darkness. He realized with a start that he was suspended in liquid. The thing screamed in his mind, but his mouth refused to open. Feeling with his fingers, he traced the outline of the surgical sewing that kept his mouth locked around the ventilator tube. The touch of his fingertips on his face felt...rubbery.

Raising them higher, he blinked. A second lid clicked through his vision, then retracted. What the hell? Through the murk of the tank, his hand looked...greenish. Pulling it closer, he felt the needles jabbed into them pull taut, and stopped. Still, from about eight inches away, the skin of his hands glistened like a reptile. He had no doubt now that the greenish tinge didn't only come from the water.

Like an animal, John thrashed against the bindings keeping him suspended. A slime-encrusted foot ricocheted off the glass, sending a jolt of pain up his leg. Screaming, he tore stitches around his mouth and punched out at the glass in agony. Needles ripped out of soggy skin as the acrid solution poured down his throat. White fire lanced up his arteries as he fought.

Dimly, he recognized the strobing light of an emergency beacon, and the dull hum of the alarm hitting the glass and transferring through it to the liquid surrounding him. Hazy forms rushed to the tank, shouting garbled commands. Someone pushed a button next to the glass, and instantly John felt something being pumped into his spine. His "body" went dead, hanging limply by the few needles still stuck in his body. Sparkles ignited at the edge of his vision, moving resolutely to the center. After that, everything mercifully faded to black.

Outside the tank, Lash pushed through the swinging doors into the laboratory area, pulling a breather mask over her head in haste. The technicians said the atmosphere was contained, but she wasn't taking chances. "What the hell happened, Virostov?" she railed, "he wasn't supposed to wake up!"

"I...I don't know! That should have been enough to put him under for several days at least, Lash. His metabolism may have muta --urk!" Lash's hand whipped out, crushing the doctor's windpipe with a brutal chop. The white-clad man collapsed to the floor, his fingers feeling the divot in the hard cartilage of his breathing tube. Small trickles of air moved down his throat, but certainly not enough to keep him alive without an emergency tracheotomy. His educated mind was still grasping for a way to self-ventilate when the lack of oxygen overcame him.

Lash contemptuously stepped over his still-flopping form and looked through the glass at her subject. "Doctor Szavian, congratulations on your promotion to supervisor. Don't fail me like Virostov did, or I'll make his death look like a trip to Disneyland. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," the portly, bearded man nodded quickly, "I understand."

Tracing a leather-clad finger across the glass, Lash turned reluctantly away from her prize and locked gazes with him. "Stabilize Subject C and give me a status report. Monitor all mutations around the clock. Grab two more techs to take alternating shifts with you and Flores. I will arrange for someone to move you out of your civilian lodgings and into the barracks. Henceforth you, Flores, and the two techs you select will be restricted to the base. Compensation will be doubled for your time."

Looking at Lash's retreating back, Dr. Szavian piped up, "What about my wife? What do I tell her? She thinks I work at an emergency clinic in Robertsport."

"As long as you don't mention what you really do, who we are, or where you'll be staying, I don't care. You'll have one phone call, make it count." Lash turned her head idly to look over her shoulder. "And doctor, do remember that we'll be listening in."

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It stared out of the crystalline tube hungrily, dimly recalling hurting itself while trying to get free. But that seemed so long ago. The meatsacks on the other side of the glass were watching, always watching. They would press the red button and it would sleep. The creature knew they were taking things from it while it slept; part of its insides. A silvered tongue with raspy edges snaked out of its mouth, caressing the glass.

The two meatsacks would stay for a time, then go. Moments later two others would come in and stay for a while. And so the creature gauged the cycles of its life. The tube in the creature's stomach pumped some liquid into it, sustaining but not truly nourishing. Idly it lifted one slime-covered hand to the glass, testing the remarkable strength, and wondered what it would be like to rip into the soft flesh of the fat one's cheek. A bit of bright green drool wafted into the chemical water it now breathed, dissipating into nothingness as bases mixed with acids to obtain a neutral environment.

One of the meatsacks raced to the other one, gesturing wildly. The creature wished to rip the offending limbs from their sockets, perhaps use them as weapons against the rest of the body, just for a bit of sport.

Inside, the creature felt the Shift again, the warning that something was changing within to make it stronger. It felt what it dimly remembered as an elbow harden and poke through the skin. Rubbing idly, the creature pulled slimy skin loose to completely unveil the new bone spike. The tender area around the new formation pulsed with more of the greenish pus-like substance before stabilizing.

Within its tortured mind, a weak voice called out for mercy. The remembrance of a voice was harsh and grating in the otherwise silent pod. The creature crushed the voice, drowning out the nonsense about uncles and some dimly-remembered place called Mexico, willing its gills to slow their heavy breathing and return to patient waiting. Waiting for the moment to strike. Soon...

End