

Human Nature

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CHAPTER ONE

June 27th, 9:54 PM.
Caladine Corporation, West Coast Division.

He slowly opened his eyes, looking through clouds of smoke and flame, at the carnage that remained hidden in the shadows. He stared at his hand, fingers splayed on cool, grey concrete. View tilted, he was lying on the ground, yes, left cheek slick with sweat and blood. And there was his hand, his arm, new strength pulsing in every muscle, a tide of new life roaring in every vein.

The flames crackled orange and red, coughing white sparks that were then engulfed by the clouds of smoke. He flexed his fingers, his palm. He pushed himself up from the floor, now able to move his left arm free from the weight of his own body. Deep in the recesses of his brain, he knew that his left forearm had been broken, as had two ribs, but that they were slowly mending. He took several deep breaths, wincing at the pain momentarily, and yet the dark, black smoke entering his lungs did not bother him at all.

His muscles coursed with strength as he pushed himself up from the floor—

Thrown off by his center of gravity, he realized that his face had been pressed against a cinder block wall, not the floor. He was ready to cartwheel his arms to regain his balance, instead became surprised that he twirled or somersaulted or *something*....he was still delirious from the pain in his neck and he knew that if he looked down, there it would be: the needle wobbling like an animated finger, its plunger still pressed tight to the muscle.

Fw-hhptt. Swollen skin moving as the needle tugged beneath his skin, an invisible finger pressing muscles numb with pain into jangling nerves running up his skull and into his brain.

The air rushed through his torn shirt and ripped pants as he touched the ground, landing on both feet, his right hand reaching forward to gently caress the concrete hallway as well. To touch the pool of blood closest to his crouched form, in this place he now remembered clearly, not like waking from a dream, more like having his heart brought from the brink of death by the world's most talented doctors, his lungs ignited with the pure and fresh air that every second chance brings.

But the doctors in this building, the types of operations....no, *experiments*...performed on...on...well, he hoped he'd remember that when the pain causing his head to split in half went away. It was enough just then to be amazed at his own agility.

Everything he saw was tinged in red like someone had tweaked the color level knobs of his eyesight the way someone would a tv screen; he could not tell the difference of whether he was bleeding internally or if it was light from outside the building. The last thing he remembered before losing consciousness was the explosion in the room where that lab assistant had...had...

He had trouble remembering.

There were doors in front of him, he knew that. If he could get out, he—

Suddenly, a cacophony of sound burst forth as a crashing sound came from past the locked down doorway, the entrance gave enough to allow a rapid influx of dissonance, the glare of spotlights, whirring of film cameras. Shouts...

(shouts from friends and strangers, turning to screams of terror and disbelief)

Spotlights in the sky. No, the whirring blades of a helicopter, light shining down. When the spotlight hit his eyes, the red changed and he saw blood vessels double in size, confusing him. He backed up, away from the light and the fresh air from outside the animal testing abattoir.

And stumbled over a broken piece of furniture, this time disoriented, unable to catch his balance. He sat up, holding the chair...leg, the veins in his eyes had shrunk to normal, he could see in the darkness again, see that he was holding a human arm, a girl's arm, light as a feather. Or was it? He could no longer tell, his strength seemed to be disproportionate. Everything was lighter now, even his footsteps. The fabric circling the torn limb was in tatters, he could not tell by the tattoo on the wrist or shape of the fingers whose arm it was...

(Whose arm? There was more than one, was that right?)

Back on his feet now, strong and steady, that was the way. He briefly thought about why he had been sniffing the arm before he had tossed it aside, maybe he could tell if it had belonged to a male or a female. Rolling his shoulders in a type of shrug, he looked back as the limb made a meaty plop as it landed behind him.

The sounds from outside intensified, he cocked his head as he heard a soft whisper, the *chuff chuff* whirring of a helicopter, a news helicopter, he...no, they had been here to make a statement. To make the news. Yet, he had a distant memory, a shared remembrance of anger and panic, those like him on a frigid landscape, loping through waist-high snow. Shiny helicopters in the blue sky, the pilots flying low, a mile apart. Passengers with rifles, shooting his friends.

He swept the odd retention away, like waking from a bad dream. Which is what this seemed to be. A crack in the glass from the front doors. Another memory, this was more recent and as clear as his reflection in the stream that ran behind the university. Stevenson Hall on lockdown, an early morning email sent to the student dorms about a suicidal biology student intending to "do a Columbine," starting with his own classmates who made him an outcast and the professors who simply did not care.

Hours later, no lives lost, the kid scared and hungry yet defiant, locked into a bio lab on the first floor....

The campus police had turned over the operation to the Arcadian Hills sheriff's substation, and the hostage and crisis unit had used a so-called 'bubba stick'—a phrase picked up from cops who made drug busts on an hourly basis in the big, bad collar suburbs of Los Angeles, to knock the door down and scare the self-destructive student into dropping his gun on the spot.

--where was he again? The cold winter landscape, the smell of pines? No....by the smell of the smoke in his now-massive lungs, he was in the hills near Lambert View.

Looking at that double door, in the here and now, he knew that the sheriff's deputies from the nearest substation were presently in the process of pounding it wide open.

Crouching to the side, his straw-colored hair sticking dark with blood to his pronounced cheekbones, he waited for his prey.

If he was going to go down....like his brethren from that bleached memory of blue skies and gray bullets, green pine trees and red blood on white snow....if this was how it would end, well..

He would take as many of them with him as he could.

And with that thought, Heath Weatherly stopped crouching and stood like a man again.

