

The Hibernation

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3 days before Hibernation.

–The temperature has reached 51 °C: find the runaways before they die.

–Located the runaways. Securing them now.

The woman [*the face scanning declares her to be Daniella Smith, 43, widowed*] looks up at me with teary, lidded eyes, gripping her two kids against her chest.

“Please,” she says, then something my audio recognition can’t decipher.

I raise my tail stinger, and she squeezes her eyes shut, whispering to her children as I administer the sedative. I pick up the smaller child, wrapping my hand around his middle.

He [*Ben Smith, 7*] stares at me, frozen. The other child, [*Mabel Smith, 11*], her sweaty, sunburnt face now visible as she stands unsteadily, face morphing into an expression of anger: the premonition of fighting.

I sting her with the sedative.

Ben cries out, trembling. But he doesn’t move, so I leave him be.

Wrapping my tail around Mabel, I pick Daniella up with my other hand and leave for the chambers. As Daniella’s chamber hisses shut, I stop by Nate’s cryogenic chamber, watching his vitals for a second.

–Secured in chambers.

2 months after Hibernation.

Gabriel lands on my shoulder. The smallest of us all, about the size of an eagle, Gabriel is the messenger. He spreads his jetpack wings and does nothing but fly back and forth over land and sea, a moving cell tower.

Lucky bastard.

His pinprick claws dig into the metal plates of my shoulder, charging from me like a giant leech. After a second, he reports my next orders.

I nod.

2 years after Hibernation.

In the humanless silence, I think about Nate 1.5 years before Hibernation.

The companion, Nate, tugs his hospital gown down as he stands. "Learn a lot?" he says, the corners of his mouth peeking up.

"Was that a genuine question?" I inquire.

Nate laughs. "Guess not. I don't actually want to know what you learnt from watching the doctors dissect me."

"It was not a dissection. It was a surgery to improve your survival chances. And I didn't watch; I kept your heart beating."

"I know, Raphael. It was a joke."

"I do not understand jokes."

Nate rolls his eyes and hobbles forward.

I lean down so he can hold onto me.

"Come on. If you wanna be a mecha angel, you gotta know jokes!"

"Angels are religious figures. I am a robot."

"Doesn't mean you can't be one!"

Angels, huh? If I were a human, I'd scoff and probably start screaming or something. But I'm not, so I don't. I continue administering the medicine to the deer below.

Beside me, Michael—the Team Leader—stands on the dead grass, staring in unmoving silence. He is 2.3 centimetres shorter than me, with clean metal plates and untarnished claws, unlike my blood-stained ones currently holding the deer. *"General direction?"* he asks.

"Positive," I say, because it's true. But then again, the day of The Hibernation is a very low bar for 'how Earth is doing'.

Michael is silent as the healed deer jumps up and scatters away.

53 years after Hibernation.

I stand on a cliff, watching the green expanse speckled with the grey of a wolf or the brown of a bird. If I were to turn my head, I'd see the dead land choking what we've saved.

We are almost done, Michael transmits.

I scoff. Why would he lie?

Raphael, come to Area 9802.

I lash my tail and delay transmitting back for a few seconds.

78 years after Hibernation.

Pushing open the door to Bunker 651, I switch on the torch in my eyes. I walk through the hall of frozen humans who are almost certainly dead. The *click-clack* of my claws against the floor shatters the held silence.

A tap against glass. A boy. His eyes are foggy, his heartbeat unstable but fast.

Beside the little boy's chamber is a grown man. His hair is soft brown, his heart thready and breathing laboured. It's Nate.

The boy is healthier. Better chances.

A command of *go to the boy, go to the boy* echoes around my head. I'm walking towards the boy with the last bit of medicine in my claws. I reach his glass. *I should break it. I should break it. I have to break it. I have to break it. I have to break it. I have to break it—*

Crack.

I reach out and unlatch my friend from his chamber.

Go to the boy go to the boy go to the boy

I jab the last of the medicine into Nate's neck.

Go to—

I lift Nate, my head screaming. I carry him from the chamber, listening to his steady heartbeat.

We pass the other humans, warm and unmoving and lifeless with empty eyes, their skin and fat intact behind museum glass.