

Arms

Arnold opened a single eye. He could still feel the cold surface of a table beneath him, holding him down with metal clamps which bit into his ankles but created no sensation in his wrists. In these oddly common situations, he tended to awake with little recollection of what he had intended to do to himself- and would often find himself forced to deal with the sudden discovery of a new limb or the absence of another. Luckily, once his machine had conducted a procedure, it was quite deft in reversing it's own work. Now, however, Arnold was privy to the results of this particular experiment.

He clenched his left fist. Then the right. Claws slightly grazed the palms- the pads- of his... hands? In an instant, he had torn himself from the constraints of the makeshift operating table with familiar brashness, and lept up, cackling to some invisible audience. He threw his head back, overtaken with a wave of prideful ecstasy.

“I've done it! I've finally done it! After all these years...”

Stopping before the body-length mirror just to the left of the great flashing gate separating his lab from the enclosure, he stared himself down with a wide grin. It felt surreal to him- and for a moment, he wondered if he was simply becoming too deeply involved in his fantasies again. But the absence of clapping, cheering, and awestruck gasps of others indicated otherwise. He finally rested his gaze on his own face in the mirror, illuminated by neon lights which pulsed from the screens and buttons of his many inventions.

“What better state for a man such as myself!? I have embodied my work, my strife, my blood, sweat, and tears... I have become the very thing *they* feared I would become... My magnum opus... is *me!*”

The procedure had gone exactly as planned. In place of his simple, unimpressive five-fingered hands and pale forearms, were sleeves of gloriously sleek brown fur, which gave way to a pair of large and versatile paws, each sporting a set of claws about the length of Arnold's own head. Though in his secluded lab, the passage of time was a vague and meaningless constant, he presumed that it had been about 12 years since he had been ejected from Yale's 'experimental science' program. The name of the program had been appealing to him- as a young, rambunctious scholar, he had taken the bait of a supposed hub of trial and knowledge, a place where he could share his greatness with likeminded individuals, and be lauded for his dedication and creativity. Yet he was greeted promptly with a rude awakening. As he would come to discover, 'experimental science' constituted only that which was deemed traditionally 'useful' and 'ethical' by some unseeable counsel of higher ups, as well as the court of public opinion. And, as he would also learn in no time at all, the court of public opinion had sentenced him to no less than exile.

“What use have we for such a lawless villain among our scholars?!” His thirty-first lab partner had roared during another routine research presentation conference, as had all the others (at least, those who were in stable enough mental states to attend the conferences after having witnessed Arnold's unbridled genius). That was the final straw, it seemed, because without so much as a goodbye, Arnold and his brilliant ideas were discarded like a faulty project. The next morning, he and his 26-armed lizard were thrown out onto the curb with innumerable suitcases, which strained at their zippers in a desperate attempt to contain thousands of messily-written hypotheses and observations, as well as a wealth of his home-made

technology- including the same automated self-surgery machine which he had used to conduct his arm transplant. Retreating into a small cabin in the woods and repurposing an old bunker for his lab, he realized that if he wanted the respect- adoration, even- of the masses, he would have to prove himself.

“They’ll see.... They’ll all see now! As soon as the CIA accepts me as their top director of scientific research, those fools will quiver at my mercy! What better punishment than to see the very one you shunned and ridiculed raised to such high honor? Achieving the dream you all strove for?”

Now the challenge would be to make his first phone call in years.

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It took less than half an hour for the black van to appear in the slight outcropping before his cabin. Arnold waited eagerly before the door, scratching at his neck again with a large claw and swinging the other one around to test out it's dexterity. The new arms were quite useful, he had discovered. Great for opening letters and cans, and even better for mass destruction. The broken pots and pans were barely used, anyways. Surely they wouldn't be much of a burden to get used to. He was already getting the hang of holding a pencil with the massive pads of his paws. When the agents had knocked on his door, he had struggled for a moment to turn the rusty knob. This proved to be a menial issue- less than a minute later, his door had come crashing down, just barely missing him and giving way to a legion of well-dressed men sporting sunglasses and black suits.

“Ah! I see you have discovered my abode, dearest gentlemen! Now, I'm sure you're all quite curious of my intent in inviting you here. My name is-”

He was interrupted as one man pushed brusquely past the others and through the decimated space in which a wooden door once resided, exhaling incredulously.

“Oh my... In my 14 years of duty, I haven't seen anything quite like this...”

The other agents, as if connected by some sort of collective conscience, stepped mechanically into the dusty, barely-used kitchen, heads high and faces unmoving. Their leader, however, was transfixed by the fur of Arnold's arms.

“May I touch them?”

“Certainly!”

He reached forward almost hesitantly, as if still in disbelief over the sight before him. He muttered something to himself, feeling up the forearm and closely examining the spot at which pelt connected with flesh. Prodding and pushing a little, he finally turned back to his cohorts.

“Yep. He's the real deal.”

Arnold grinned pridefully. For once, his ideas were being examined as something impressive, something worthy of awe and enthused interest rather than the grotesque bastardizations of science which they had so often been labelled as before.

“What sort of technology did you use to conduct this... transmutation?”

Seeing his opportunity, Arnold gestured inside, making his way toward the stairwell.

“Come with me, gentlemen! I will show you wonders beyond your wildest imagination- all contained and preserved within my laboratory!”

The men- four of them in total- lined up and began a mechanical march down the concrete steps. Arriving at the bottom, Arnold turned around.

“Excuse my questioning, but I don't seem to have gotten your-”

“You can call me Agent A. My cohorts are Agent B, C, and D respectively.”

Arnold nodded quickly and led them down the cold, barren hall toward the underground bunker. Before they reached the mouth of the lab, the agents were already overcome with awe. The chilling sounds emanating from within the room reverberated off the walls in a mix of crowing, growling, and something like barking. The agents could barely contain their shock and awe as they were greeted by the sight of the giant laboratory; and his creations. Oh, his creations, in all their glory! A cat on two legs with seemingly opposable thumbs jogged past a fish tank filled with aquatic pygmy elephants. Brightly-colored dogs the size of mice wrestled with a snake-hamster hybrid as a 26-legged lizard scuttled hurriedly across the wall. A bear with oddly human looking arms solved a rubicks cube in the corner.

“I release most of my creatures to the wild. These are those who I am still working on... Rehabilitating. Glorious, are they not?”

“Where... is the technology you used to create these?”

Agent A was still struggling to remain cold and composed in the face of such a sight.

“Of course! All of my materials are in the next room over.”

He deftly entered a long series of numbers into a keypad on the surface adjacent to a huge, elaborate gate with pipes slithering down either side. With a mechanical sigh, it slid open, revealing a panoramic view of Arnold’s technological prowess. The room was mostly dark, illuminated primarily by a series of purple-ish fluorescents and the LCD screens of numerous huge monitors. Shelves filled with microscopes, oddly-shaped tools and bizarre machines with dubious purpose hugged the wall, flanked by lines and lines of filing cabinets brimming with the written and illustrated documentation of Arnold’s ideas.

“This here, is my greatest invention!”

He patted the giant arm of the machine in the center of the room, which was fixed over the same hospital bed in which he had laid mere hours before.

“My self-surgery-inator 3000. This is only the second iteration- I just thought the 3000 sounded cooler.”

The suited men surrounded it, closely examining the complexity of its structure and running hands along the cold metal.

“I program its movements based on a digital map of my body and a series of pre-set coordinates. It can switch tools mid-procedure, so that awakening with an open incision to switch its head to a suture tip before going back under is no longer necessary.” He shuddered in memory of the first iteration of the machine.

Agent A looked over at him incredulously.

“This must be the technology you used to...”

He ran a hand over Arnold’s arm again, as if it were attached to nothing.

“Your work is... Astounding. This will all be of great merit to our program. Our deepest gratitude for your invitation. We would gladly transport this all back to our base for further analysis and federal use.”

Arnold beamed with complete and utter elation. A beautiful culmination of his labor, all spurred on by the experiment on himself which he had completed no earlier than that same morning. He had expected laudment exclusively for his self-conducted body modification, which he considered to be the most impressive of his results thus far. He had expected no more than a

few tepid nods of acknowledgement toward his other feats, perhaps an offhand comment or two; he was taken pleasantly off guard by the agents' admiration of all that laid before them.

"Of course! I am thrilled to be joining you, gentlemen! I promise to serve the CIA with my utmost effort and-"

"What do you mean?"

The man gave him an odd look from behind his shades. There was a brief and uncomfortable silence.

"Well, naturally, I will be joining the scientific corps of the CIA so that I may carry out similar such research and experimentation, correct?" Arnold looked eagerly at Agent A.

"Sir, you must understand what our job entails. It would be unlawful to simply induct an..." He trailed off for a moment and pursed his lips. "...ordinary citizen, into the research corps."

"Oh, I'm no ordinary citizen- I'm a *genius*! In fact, you should all feel honored to be in my prese-"

"All we need is your documents and some of your materials. Do you consent to this search and acquisition, sir?"

Arnold's mouth went dry, and for once, his head felt completely empty. The conditional nature of his goal was never something he had considered. Hadn't he already given up enough for this? Yet as the agents stared at him with unfeeling eyes, he felt a twinge of something deep in his chest- something which told him that this was what he had worked toward from the moment he crudely connected two halves of two different worms in his garden as a child, to the moment he was finally accepted into Yale, to now.

"...I consent."

He stared unseeingly forward, transfixed to the same spot and completely frozen except for the intermittent clawing at his collarbone. The agents shuffled around the room, taking samples, photos, and folders full of documents as if their owner was not there to witness. Shunned again. Discarded, again. He had what he wanted, didn't he? His ideas would be put into federal use and appreciated on such a high level. And yet he felt so incredibly empty. As he pondered these feelings, the agents moved toward the stairs with their now-full and seemingly infinite briefcases. They were done with him.

Agent A flashed some communicative look toward his cohorts, before clearing his throat. "Thank you for this service, sir. Your work will not go unappreciated, and it will live on far beyond yourself. You have done a great thing for your country."

A moment of silence passed through the room. Suddenly, the muzzle of a gun was pointed directly at Arnold's forehead.

"Unfortunately, because of your involvement with these events, you have acquired too much information on covert projects which must be kept secret to the public at all costs."

Heated silence filled the room. All he could do was stare forward blankly into the eyes of an impending fate. He swallowed down some air shakily.

"No..."

"Our deepest condolences. We must stay committed to our duties, regardless of what they entail. Surely you understand that more than anyone."

As if in slow motion, A placed his pointer finger on the trigger of the compact pistol. But by some miracle, the shot didn't come. Arnold opened his eyes again, which he realized had

been squeezed shut. Agent B had tapped on his leader's shoulder with an unreadable expression.

"Yes, Agent B?"

B cupped a hand over the side of his mouth and leaned toward A, mumbling some inaudible phrase. A's brow creased, and he slowly shook his head.

"Sure, we could use the mind-wiper, but isn't this more fun!? Plus, what are the chances that Jared actually brought it?"

Agent C looked away bashfully.

"Okay, well, who's the one who crashed the invisible-"

"Don't talk about the invisible van! The one outside works just fine!"

"Sure, it's functional, but is it invisible?"

As the men argued, something suddenly boiled up from deep inside of Arnold's chest. Perhaps it was rage- at the agents for taking his work, at the world for rejecting him, and at himself, for letting them get the best of him. For dedicating his whole life to creating and performing for an audience who refused to clap. And when they did, they weren't celebrating him- they were celebrating the products of his work, which they would eat up and tear apart without considering the blood, sweat, and tears he had shed in the wake of their inception. Or perhaps it was a new strength, which had been conjured within him by a sudden realization: Arnold had not been working toward his goals for the right reasons. He had passion, he had motivation, and he had skill- yet these had all been misdirected. But now, Arnold could start creating for the one person who really did care. Himself.

"I'm telling the boss that you replaced his tea with melted butter again!"

"Oh yeah!? I've got so much dirt on you, you'd be fired the m-"

He suddenly lept forward with a sonorous roar, knocking aside the five men with strength quite characteristic of his new limbs. They attempted to scramble to their feet as soon as they hit the floor in hopes that they could instantly capture their target. However, Arnold had already made a run for it. Now on all fours, he bolted through the mutation enclosure, pushing past a horned land-walking fish and a winged squirrel. Exhilaration shoved him back up the staircase and out the doorway, into the woods. He felt at one with the world in a new and exciting way. Even as the agents, shouting and pointing pistols, followed him out into the dense foliage, he felt invincible.

"Desist! Desist! Do not flee us! You have made yourself a federal target!"

"You can take my life if you can catch me!"

The wind rushing past his face compounded his animalistic adrenaline, his unbridled freedom. Arnold felt as if he had left a huge weight behind him. No longer weighed down by a will to please an unwelcoming world. No longer tethered to a worthless destiny. Living for himself, and indulging in his creations as a personal gift; this was greatness, he decided. Darting between trees, still on all fours, he used his clawed paws to tear new paths for himself. As an agent rounded the corner of a trunk and slid in front of him, he lept sideways and gripped to the bark of a massive oak. His claws dug into the wood, and without thinking, he ascended the tree with bearlike swiftness. Vibrant green leaves ticked his face as he scaled toward the top, through the branches and toward the sunlight, further and further away from the agents, the cold ground. Arnold took a deep breath of the fresh air. He supposed it was spring now. Isolated in his lab, working for hours on end, he had little opportunity to go outside. The seasons had

seemed meaningless in the face of his endless pursuit of greatness. Reaching the top of the tree, looking down from those great heights, it all felt like rebirth to him.

A shout sounded from below- then a mechanical whirring. Suddenly, Arnold felt the tree begin to tilt. In a split second, he was slammed to the ground in the middle of a dusty clearing among the lush greenery, drifting harshly away from the fallen oak. His head pounded, and his lungs felt as if they had been stomped on.

“Stand down, men. Time to finish this.”

Arnold stood up shakily. He was cornered. The agents surrounded him in the clearing, guns all pointed inward at their apprehensive target.

“We’ve got you now, sir. It’s best if you don’t run.”

At their leader’s signal, the others began to circle inward like a pack of hungry wolves. Arnold grinned and closed his eyes.

“Ah, so this is how it ends... Touche, gentlemen... You have won this fair and square. I surrender.”

He dropped to his knees in the dirt and lowered his head. The agents continued to approach.

“You have accepted defeat, then.”

Agent A smiled with some mix of tepid sympathy and cocky triumph- or perhaps a newfound exhilaration in the pursuit of a moving target, which he and Arnold now shared in.

“Any last utterances before your final breath?”

“I have but one grievance to express.”

As Arnold spoke, A lowered the mouth of his pistol to his forehead.

“You claim to work for the good of the country- yet you’ve deprived me of the most essential of my rights. I simply cannot accept this unconstitutional behavior.”

“The only right which we have suspended as an agency in this situation is your right to life. You have duly surrendered all else to us.”

The muzzle was cold against his forehead.

“Sure... But you seem to have forgotten just one thing...”

In a split second, Arnold had used a giant paw to knock the agents over in a centripetal motion from their legs, sending them flying in different directions with their guns flung into the trees and foliage. He sprung toward the horizon triumphantly.

“I have the right to bear arms!”