

"How much for a dead robot?"

Sal took one look at the grubby specimen and shook his head. It was a late B459 male model. It was a good series, but this one was riddled with decay. Two of its fingers were missing, a few of its teeth were broken, and the eyes had burst - a sure sign the rest of the internal organs were unsalvageable. "Sorry kid."

"How about a kidney?" The teen, a bedraggled street urchin, dumped the robot's body into a chair in the empty waiting room. She had pink hair, the forward sloping features of a hawk, and full lips that pouted at Sal as she approached his desk window. "One of mine."

Sal scrolled down the day sheet, the list of needed parts throughout Amaca, and saw that four patients needed kidneys. Unfortunately, they were subsidized which meant he couldn't make a profit on the surgery. He snapped the screen shut and shook his head. "We're not buying."

The girl grabbed the counter. Brightly colored paints had stained her fingers every color of the rainbow. She glared at Sal through the nef-reinforced glass partition. "A lung?"

"Do you smoke?"

"Some."

He flipped a switch under his desk, and a moment later a dial light near his elbow turned green. The scan was ninety percent accurate - she wasn't a dream dust junkie.

She took a deep breath, pushing out her chest, and then exhaled slowly, eyeing him coyly. Her jacket was bulky, army-issue, and stained, not the most attractive apparel for a young woman, but she made it work. "I can run for clicks without getting winded."

Army flak jackets were hard to find, and this one was too big for the girl's frame. That meant she had found it in the dump, or, more likely; it was her boyfriends. Boyfriends tended to get upset when their girlfriends came home with scars. Sal would normally have passed on the lungs. But, Mrs. Sybil, a loyal customer of Sal's Used Parts, was in the market for a new pair - off the books. Sal's boss, Paradigm Labs, demanded that satellite clinics like his show a quarterly profit, and so performing "back-alley" surgeries were part of the business model. A bilateral pneumonectomy would put him in the black. "Both."

"Screw you." The girl crossed her arms, protectively. "One."

Sal's heart beat faster, and his fingers trembled as he shoved the consent pad through the window slot. His tongue felt pasty against the roof of his mouth. "Fill it out. If your form clears the cog reviewers, we'll pay five clovers for the right and six for the left."

She took the pad, her eyes lingering on his shaking fingers. "What's the difference?"

"The left lung has two lobes. The right has three." Attempting to appear calm, Sal leaned back in his chair. He wound his fingers together, steadying them. He hated it when clients noticed how nervous they made him. It was unprofessional. "You'll get a call in a week if everything checks out."

The girl pushed the pad back through the window slot without looking at it. "Why can't you do it today?"

Sal's heart rate increased. She really needed the money. Still, he was nothing if not cautious. "Who knows you're here?"

"I don't have anyone to tell." The girl's egg-shell blue eyes didn't waver. "Besides, it's no one's business but my own. It's my body, right?"

"Whose jacket?" Sal licked his lips, feeling the deal snapping into place.

"My brother's. He died." She looked away; her eyes settling on the robot sprawled naked across the plastic chairs. "Chill, okay? I won't rat you out, and no one's going to come looking if you screw up and kill me. Can we do this?"

Sal nodded and stood up. His legs felt weak under him, but he ignored them. Even during a full panic attack, he never fainted. Meticulously, he turned the gears and pulled the levers that unhinged the lock to the waiting room door and pulled it open. Running a body parts clinic on the wrong side of town was a stepping-stone - like paying dues. One day, when the administration finally looked at his statistics, they would assign him to a full body shop on the Elevated North Side. He just had to be patient. "Let me give you a tour."

The girl stepped inside and Sal relocked the door.

Alvin, the operating room's built in A.I., ran a medi-scan on the girl. The results were sent into a receiver in Sal's retina.

Age mapping put her at about nineteen. No tumors, viruses, or open wounds were detected. She had old healed fractures in both her forearms and one of her thoracic vertebra was compressed - likely the residual of a traumatic fall. Her lungs were free of fungal balls with vital capacities that exceeded the norm. Her jacket held several aerosol cans filled with paint and a set of odd wires stitched into the fabric.

"Smart girl." Alvin's digital voice echoed through an implant in Sal's auditory lobe so only he could hear it. "Booby trapped jacket?"

"Probably." Sal was impressed. He figured the girl rigged the spray cans to explode when she pressed a hidden trigger. The paint would splatter her attacker while the neofabric in the jacket's inner lining would protect her from the blast. She got away, and her assailant ended up looking ludicrous. "She's been around."

"So what's the plan, boss?"

"Bilateral pneumonectomy with specimen collection for Mrs. Sybil," Sal answered Alvin inside his head as he motioned for the girl to follow him into the operating room. "She thinks we're only doing one lung, so we'll need to take them both out through a single incision."

"Replacement grade?"

"Low-grade synthetics. Do we have any of the A459's left?"

"She's young. She'll notice. Maybe the F9's?"

"Okay. Narrow the spectrum on the sedatives to flatten the cost."