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*"Pago, I Am Here"  
by Daniel C. Bartel*

The guard tightened his grip on the rifle held firm against his breastplate, his forearm packed full of muscle. Those black eyes beneath his battle helmet warned of pain and suffering.

I looked back at my desk. We were all told to keep our eyes down, the whole class. This wasn't a drill.

Black military boots strolled about the classroom, one boot that made a thunk, followed by the awful silence of the other, the boot cushioned with the blood of Jamison, the new student from Argentina.

Poor Jamison was now slumped against the floor with blood pouring out of him—so much for his skill in speech and debate.

"Now, if anyone else wants to give us back talk, you will most assuredly end up the same way," the squad commander said. "We are the H.A.R., and we're not here to play games."

The commander's face was about as warm and expressive as a lump of hard rock. He traversed the rank and file of desks, greedy for frightened lips that might crack and spill everything. Everyone in class knew of H.A.R, the Hybrid Arrest and Retrieval Squad, the steel enforcement arm of the Artificial Intelligence Agency.

But no one knew the true extent of H.A.R brutality. Not until now.

"We can make this easy or hard," he said, continuing. "We know there are hybrids at this school. If you are one, best to give yourself up now. Otherwise, if you want to turn someone in, raise your hand."

My half-heart was about to come through my chest. I sat and waited for fingers to point at me.

"I'll ask one last time and then we go the hard route," he said.

The whimper I thought was mine instead came from the other side of the room. It was Rose, my friend from down the street—from forever really. I hadn't heard that sound since the time she fell off her hover bike and skinned her knee when we were kids. She bit her tongue instead of crying. Tomboys don't like to show tears.

"What's wrong with you, girlie?" he said.

"I don't want to die."

"Give up a hybrid, and I let the whole class go. As simple as that."

"I don't know any. Please," she said.

"We look forward to looking inside you to know if that's true," he said, wiping her tears away with the dull side of his battle blade. "Deep inside."

I couldn't stand it. Ultimately, I was the reason for all this. I wanted to give myself up. Better to do so and spare everyone the torture of the thought machines that H.A.R. guards were setting up.

Before I met Pago, I would have.

"If you don't dry it up, you're next, missy" he said, words that slithered across his teeth.

Bite your tongue, Rose. Come on, that's a girl.

"Eyes on your desk," the guard shouted. I turned my head down again.

There was a weird smell coming from the back where Jamison's body lay, now destined to be prostrate in a grave instead of standing tall at the debate podium. I had interviewed him for the school paper on the upcoming election. He was your "atypical" high school student, I wrote, who "landed" here in the U.S., wearing sports jackets, taking issues in "with one breath" and "exhaling solutions" with another.

It was silly stuff, but we had fun with it, he and I. He even promised to appoint me to be his press secretary.

Jamison was always super-confident like that, almost as much as my other friend, Pago. The only time I remember Jamison being truly rattled was in Civics class. It was weeks ago. The discussion on communes, these internment places where hybrids-in-hiding-that being my parents and I-could surrender themselves to avoid getting caught and sent to Hiltzik Island. That's the place where, they say, hybrid dreams become nightmare.

Some communes advertised a country club life: palm trees, swimming pools, golfers, happy families-bright, smiling teeth. Media, however, really caught everyone off guard with their breaking news. Hidden cameras had captured startling images of the misery, the starvation, the corruption inside these places. Stick-figured hybrids laying their skeleton children to rest among the dead, guards using hybrids as target practice.

Everyone was horrified. There wasn't a human man or woman alive that wouldn't at least feel some pity for our kind.

Jamison pushed his golden hair back and shrugged. No comment.

"Nothing at all?" Mrs. Westin said.

"My fellow Americans and Argentineans," Hulen said, butting in. "If you elect me, I promise a hovercar in every port, a chicken in every micro-boiler and open season year round on all hybrids."

Laughter broke from around his circle-Hulen, the linebacker All-American for the Cedar Hill Panthers. He was bold, fierce, intelligent, a true child of the shoot-first-ask-questions-later H.A.R. era.

"You don't think what's happening is tragic?" Mrs. Westin asked.

"They're getting what they deserve," Hulen said.

Deserve. He was this tall, beast of a kid, who caught touchdowns, who girls flocked to, who adults and parents praised. To me, he was nothing more than a shaved gorilla in a letterman's jacket. People liked him all the same, always apt to support the winning side, the side that condoned the death of a hundred hybrids gunned down during a peace rally staged to ask that the witch hunts stop, that those starving in communes get their mono-glutamate rations.

Deserve? I'd tell you what the humans deserved, but I couldn't say it in class.

"See class, society tells us the hybrid is the enemy, but that doesn't make it so," Mrs. Westin said.

"They are the enemy, Mrs. Westin," Hulen said. "And anyone who supports them is a traitor."

"Hulen, I'm not interested in your politics. Not today, not about this," Mrs. Westin said, her chest heaving. She had these curly ringlets and ridiculous overbite but had gotten a lot more attractive to me lately. "Now, people I want someone to start a discussion. As long as hybrids can assimilate into society, should they be persecuted? Go-"

Nothing. General fear had stitched everyone's lips shut. You never knew who was listening, which classmate secretly had H.A.R. connections.

Hulen reared up for another attack: "It's like this, Mrs. Westin, no human would've started the massacre at MLK Square. No human would've killed thousands of other people like that. End of discussion," he said.

"According to media, all the group was asking for were rations to feed their wives, children," she said.

"Hybrids are all a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters. We have to get them before they get us," Hulen said.

"Thank you, Hulen," she said. "I guess you've proved the point: as long as we think H.A.R. has the power, they do have it."

Something lodged in my throat. I swallowed, but it gurgled up anyway: "That is, if you're able to think," I said.

It got a few chuckles from my side: the chess club, math club, audio/visual club side. It caught Hulen's fire: "You won't have anything to think about after I pound your head, chess nerd," he said.

"You two, knock it off," she said.

"I'll be watching you," Hulen uttered, staring a hole into my head.

Hulen didn't have the slightest idea what we were capable of, but he would soon learn.

My communicator whistled, luring the throaty barrels of three laser-guided H.A.R. rifles. Tiny red dots quivered against my chest, anxious to drill me with bullets. I cowered. Don't kill me.

The commander motioned the guards to lower their weapons. He strode over to me, and reached down for my communicator, unhooking it from my belt. The commander held the unit up and clicked the auto-repeat over to speakerphone. "Preston, are you okay?" My dad's voice. I could hear Mom sobbing in the background. If her voice patterns were loud enough to analyze, they would know what she was, who I was. I would be over and done with.

Dad never sounded so grieved: "Please call us. We're watching media. It's terrible what's happening. Oh son, I hope you can contact us. I swear, if they hurt one hair on your head, there'll be hell-"

The commander's thumb cut off dad's sentence. Reporters were no doubt swarming outside the school, broadcasting the lockdown. Six months ago, the nation watched on their media portals as H.A.R. stormed the halls of Kennedale High School, outside Bethesda, Md. This time, the nation was watching us.

The commander played the message again: "You hear that?" he said. "No doubt the rest of your parents are worried sick about you. If you hand over what we want, then the whole class can leave."

He played the message back again, tuning in to the sound of mom's sobs.

"Your mothers, this is their grief. Listen-" he said.

I fought hard to keep the tears back. My mom's pitiful moans might be the last time I ever heard her again, I thought.

If only I had listened to that damn voice inside my head tell me not to go to school today, do something, fake an illness, anything. At least I knew mom and dad really loved me, especially mom. She was practically human, in her worries, in her tendency to be overprotective. We were at dinner together as a family one night, a rarity with dad's ridiculous hours at the office.

I told them about Hulen's reaction to my bad joke, that I probably needed to be home schooled.

It didn't go over well.

"He told you what?" she said, seriously.

"I just made some wise crack in class. It wasn't even that funny, and he said 'I'll be watching you,'" I said.

"Has he threatened you before?" dad said, looking up from his media tablet. He was inseparable from his devices.

"No, first time," I said.

"It's only talk. You're fine," he said, turning back to the screen that made his face pale. Little red numbers scrolled across his forehead. "Looks like it's time to dump Martian Standard."

"John, this is serious," mom said.

"Not if Preston decides to keep his cool and not be intimidated by a bully," dad said.

Mom was insistent: "This isn't a game. It's Preston's life-our lives-we're talking about."

"Preston should stay in school unless he feels truly endangered," he said.

"What if he already is?" she said.

"Vivian-" he said.

"Seriously. How long can we keep walking around day-by-day as if everything is fine and dandy?"

"As long as we can."

"We can't, John. We're different. Why, our neighbors may be plotting against as we speak. The H.A.R. could be standing outside our door ready to storm in on us."

"Exactly the reason why we should keep doing what we've been doing."

"You know, you're just as reckless with us as your foolish stock tables."

"Vivian, I'm trying to keep this family together. I don't know what else to do."

Her glassy eyes fixed on him while her eyebrows turned up pleadingly.

"Don't even think about it," he said. "That is not an option."

They were always exchanging these little signals only they knew. But I knew this one. A few of dad's old war buddies had joined this secret clan of wandering hybrid nomads, who were disguised as trailer park people. The hybrids were learning survival skills. Dad had open invitation to quit his job and travel with them. Naturally, these ex-soldiers didn't have families. Even still, dad was so far removed from the Spartan ways of military life I think he'd lost interest in all that. Life on the run sounded exciting but dangerous. I'd do anything if it meant keeping my family from getting caught.

"You're right, John," mom said. "I mean who could stand to leave behind this wonderful life of Nicholetta suits, Cloud 9 cars...Martian Standard."

"You can be so cruel sometimes, you know that?"

"At least I'm not so clouded to the things that matter. Preston could really be in trouble."

"So we should pack up and head for the hills? You don't think that would create even more suspicion?"

"It's fine," I said, finally. "Sorry for bringing it up. I'll be fine."

I couldn't stand the fighting. It was getting worse between them. For the half-life of me, I couldn't understand why they thought it was worth the risk. Love at first sight, dad always said. No medtech had ever treated him so tender and lovingly. With chaos bombs exploding all around, mom patched his legs and arms where the shrapnel had gone in. The treatment soothed his anguished heart.

Planet Timmian was raked by war but on the blood-soaked battlefield they found each other. I've never been in love, and I'm not sure if I want to be. It makes people do weird things.

"Preston, tell us what you want to do," he said. "If you sincerely feel threatened, then we'll take you out. No questions asked."

"I want to stay."

"Think you'll be all right?"

I nodded.

"See, the boy should stay," he said. "How do you want to handle this Hulen kid? Want me to talk to your teachers?"

"No. I don't know."

"Want me to beat him up?"

Knowing dad, he'd probably show up dressed in his stretchy workout clothes. Hulen would hit the ground first, doubled over in a fit of laughter.

"No, I'll handle it," I said.

"Then have at it, Preston."

"-John," mom said.

"If he forces you, let him have it, okay?" dad said. I cracked a smile. The man who never let me compete in any sports was giving me license to rough up a kid that weighed three times as much as me.

Mom was fuming. Growing up, it never dawned on me how young she looked for her age. I thought all moms looked as young. But now I knew the truth, the family photos made more sense. Through the years, the smiles remained, although the faces changed. He aged while she stayed young, youthful faces though never innocent to the future.

Weird things go through your head when armed guards are pointing rifles at you. Bad stuff like someone capturing my queen in chess club or mom and dad sitting me down to tell me the facts of life-that I was half-robot: these were all comic highlights compared to this...

The guards called for me, and I knew the end was fast approaching.

Leather straps, bright lights, cleaning sponges, the stench of spoiled, uncooked chicken...

When they removed the blindfold, I was among the shelves of pickle jars and canisters of mayonnaise. The school's kitchen. H.A.R. guards stood attentive and ready to assist in thought technique.

"Let's see how you do, little one," this gurgled voice issued from a shriveled head. He looked like a vulture without a beak. Sunken eyes, concave cheeks, a white coat draped by his coat-hanger frame: the ghastly appearance of the chief interrogator.

"The human body is a miracle of divine engineering, able to withstand as much as 200 volts of electrocution," he said. "The puny hybrid body can only survive about 75 before it short circuits and goes into cardiac arrest. Many hybrids have tried to overcome our processes. Don't try and get any ideas."

My wrists were strapped down to metal armrests so that I palmed moist cleaning sponges. They aimed to electrocute me. I hoped the lessons dad had given on thought treatment would be enough.

The first wave hit, knocking my head hard against the headrest. Inside, my blood boiled, my organs flipped around like a bucket of eels. Billions of transistors in my head lit up like brilliant city lights.

A cybernetic hand opened to me...

My chin fell against my chest. My head pounded, a giant white spot marred my vision. It was done. They had milked thought from me. The sound of guards murmured in the next room, curious to see the thought analysis. Voices were too muffled to understand.

Then, something grabbed my face, digging in its badger-like claws.

"Where is this cybernetic arm? Whose is it?" the chief interrogator said. They'd seen a vision of Pago's arm, the one that saved my life. I didn't mean to think it. When the thought machine has you, it's hard to withhold anything.

The interrogator was in my face now. "Tell meeee," he said, his breath reeked. Teeth were missing. A scream came from elsewhere, either male or female, reverberating among bulk cans of food and condiments. It was terrifying, awful, all of it. Why were any of us born into such a cruel era?

Something pulled the interrogator off of me, his nails scratching my cheeks. He toppled on the floor, knocking cans loose from the kitchen shelves.

"You fool," a H.A.R. officer said. He had high-ranking bars, a commander, but different from the one in the classroom. "I thought I told you not to put the machine on this one."

"Idiot," the head interrogator said, rising to his feet. "He has visions of cybernetic prostheses. He has knowledge we need."

"You've already had two innocent kids, human kids, executed over such nonsense," the H.A.R officer said.



"I don't have to answer to you. I'm an independent contractor with the A.I.A. I work for them directly," he said.

"Then you understand it when I tell you that A.I.A is putting this subject under special H.A.R. directive. Doc number 3556781. Code name: Piss Off," he said, drawing his laser pistol. The chief interrogator slowly retreated back into the other room.

The commander loosened the leather straps: "Sorry about this. I told them you could help us in other ways," he said. The commander seemed softer than the others, battle worn but still humane-a little like dad. He had a shock of white hair and young face. "We're getting pressured by the media to make a statement. Having a high school reporter tell them everything is under control, everyone is safe and none of you are hurt, would help a lot."

They wanted me to lie for them.

"We need your assistance," he said. "I can arrange to have you released, full pardon, on the condition that you do this. Frankly, I don't care whether you're a hybrid or not. We can't have another Kennedale on our hands. Negative press is killing the department."

But, I didn't have to think about it. To quote Pago: Mano, mani hafe'tooney onay, which, in Samoan, literally means, 'You will get further sucking on the elbow of your dead grandfather.' I wondered how Pago was doing, strapped to a different chair somewhere else-another place, a different interrogator. Oh, that arm of his. That arm, that arm. That wonderful, lifesaving, biomechanical arm.

It all comes back to me now: Hulen, dangling inches from the floor, held up by the cybernetic arm of this pudgy, mocha-colored kid I'd never met. I was still wallowing on the dingy floor after Hulen had knocked me down, too amazed at what I was seeing to stand.

"Tell Preston you're sorry," Pago said.

The mechanical hand made a fist where it gripped Hulen's shirt and pressed him against the smooth cinderblock. Small lights blinked around the forearm and wrist. Pago would've been the only Pacific Islander on the football team, but his parents-like mine-didn't allow him to compete in sports. With such undeniable strength, it was plain to see why. "Let go of me, you friggin hybrids. Both of you are dead," Hulen said.

Pago said: "You're really starting to piss me off. Now, I'm gonna give you one more chance to-"

"Screw you," Hulen said. If only he'd stayed on the sideline during the game instead of roaming the bathrooms looking for trouble. That remark earned him a trip sailing through the air, courtesy of Pago's arm, knocking him solidly against the opposite wall. Pago rushed over to Hulen, now collapsed against to the floor, and reached down to touch the linebacker's temples between his thumb and middle finger.

"A small shock to his memory, and he won't remember a thing," Pago said. Hulen body jerked from the treatment. I sensed a new world of trouble opening up. Memory or not, I insisted we ditch the game and hide out somewhere.

Gosh, I was so frightened back then, so worried about bullies and exams, what people thought of me...

...And now this...

I laughed to myself. Those were the good times.

"What's so funny?" the commander said.

My teeth bit my lower lip, trying to hold it in.

"You'd better think hard about my offer. It's all that separates you from a harsh regime of thought treatment," he said.

It must have been the madness of it all or the hope that Pago somehow inspired. I don't know what it was. Laughter tumbled out of me like a sack of oranges, laughter that shook all over, squeezing out tears of panic and exhilaration. I was an absolute wreck, and the commander didn't look pleased.

"He's delirious. Send him back, give him some time to think about it," he said.



Pago lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the other side of town. We went up to his room to see his arm in detail. It was made of a bio-metallic alloy as strong as steel. As a disguise, he'd fashioned a flesh-colored foam rubber covering to make the arm look like a prosthetic limb. Shark attack, he told everyone. Later, the cybernetic arm would grow it's own layer of iridescent skin. Hybrid skin.

The loss of flesh and bone was all part of the transition, like loosing baby teeth or seeing hair sprout around your you-know-what. Only, the more you changed, the harder it was to cover up.

Wooden masks and pictures of home hung from his wall, most of it papered over with posters of surfers on giant blue waves. A map covering one wall showing the impossible distance between North America and the group of islands in the South Pacific where he was born. Cedar Hills was marked with a red dot labeled: "You are here."

Pago and his family had moved to our town a few months ago. His dad, another robot trying to pass as a human, had landed the assistant bank manager position at Wilcox Bank. That's what they told everyone. The real reason was to be closer to Dr. Jensen, one of the few known physicians who helped hybrids in secret at his private ranch in the

country. Jensen had told Pago about me. Apparently, I'd been under Pago's watchful eye for months and never knew it.

"Gosh, you guys were crazy to leave that place," I said, looking at the tiny islands on the map. "No one would find you there."

"A man shouldn't be imprisoned on an island."

"Are you kidding? We could be there, Pago, you and me. We could live on the beach. We could catch fish all day and make out with hot island women."

"There are no doctors there for us. We would die."

"Oh right, like it's so much safer here, between the H.A.R. hunting us and high school bullies trying to beat us up."

"I'm not so sure it would be much different."

"I get so sick of eating those awful tri'whatchamacallit tablets, living in sleep bubbles with zippers that won't open. I wish there was a magic pill we could take."

"You think that would solve everything?"

"It would at least make things easier."

"Easier for whom? Look at me," he said, holding up his masked arm. "At any moment, the rest of me might decide to change too. But does it stop me? I'm trying out for choir tomorrow. I have an exam on string theory in two weeks that I'm studying for now. I'm doing it all because that's what should be done," he said, smoothing out wrinkles in the foam rubber. "You live too much in fear."

"Yeah, it's called the H.A.R. Heard of them?"

"They have their job to do. I have mine," he said. "I have something that could help you."

"What?"

"I am here."

"I am, what?"

"I am here. If our kind is to survive, it's very important to think that way," he said. "You know those little pointers at information kiosks in shopping malls, those little dots that say 'You are here.' We don't have those in the village where I'm from. Anyway, it made me stop and think. I put one on my map and it cheers me up when I see it. Sometimes, I say it out loud, and it helps even more. You should try it," he said.

"Say what out loud?" I said.

"I am here," he said.

If I'd ever heard anything more ridiculous, I couldn't remember.

"Say it," he said.

"You're a weirdo, Pago," I said.

"Yes, it is weird. Most new things are," he said.

"I am here," I said under my breath.

"Good, say it again."

"I am here," I said.

"I'm a weirdo. I'm a freak. So what? Who else is like me? No one."

"Yeah, but it's easy when you have a cool mechanical arm that can break stuff and hurt people."

"This arm doesn't make me. My arm doesn't make my legs to walk, my eyes to see, my heart to feel. Come on, you have too much fear. Time to let go."

"I am here," I said.

"Again..."

"I am here."

"And again..."

"I am here." I said with force.

"Well now, young warrior-" he said, crouching down as if in some sort of tribal stance.

It was all pretty strange. But I had to give him credit. He was different.

Mirimam, his mom, called us to eat. As I frequented Pago's house later, I found it was always something involving fish, coconut or seaweed-the basic ingredients of a healthy Samoan, she said. I couldn't figure out how people could get so large from eating such simple things. She was round like him only shorter. Her long black hair nearly touched the floor.

His mom also made bread with the ethyl tri-glycerol supplements that Dr. Jensen had prescribed to Pago and I to help regulate our transition. See, there's a war going on inside new hybrids between their human and machine side. The supplements help keep the peace, snuffing out the headaches and nausea, but they, themselves, are terrible tasting. The bread she baked made it all go down a lot easier.

They seemed so at ease, his family-the eye of the hurricane. Pago was two years older than me, a junior, and further along in his transition than I. His arm was fully cybernetic, it was only a matter of time before his entire body would turn the same way: a hard biomechanical frame enveloped with bio-metallic flesh.

So, he had way more to be freaked out about but wasn't. We ate out of wooden bowls with our hands. We talked about girls. We played holograph games. Life was simple, the way it must've been on the island: in control and unafraid.

I am here. Hmm. When I was around Pago, I found I was.

The chilly voice of the guard told me to look at my desk after they removed the blindfold.

A few people remained in the class. The others had been carried off for interrogations. It seemed like a miracle I was still there and unsuspected. Pago had been right about Hulen forgetting. He was still at his desk when I returned and hadn't mentioned anything about Pago or I to the H.A.R.

Sitting there, those three little words churned over and over again in my head.

Mrs. Westin had been right: the H.A.R. didn't take power-we gave it to them, the hybrids and the humans. Both of us. We saw the destruction left by the H.A.R at Kennedale and MLK and did absolutely nothing about it. No retaliation, no organized revolt. Nothing. We'd allowed what they did.

It was easier that way, easier to moan the sadness of seeing bodies hauled off and dumped into mass graves, all the while rejoicing secretly in the fact that it had been somewhere else, someone else's parent or child. And life, or even half of one, suddenly felt good like a drug and everything around you was precious and wonderful. But if by chance, it was your school being raided, your friends in harm's way, you'd bemoan the sadness all over again.

We were cattle, every last one of us. I wanted to stand, to take up arms and risk everything. I wished I could, but I couldn't. Passivity kept me grounded.

And then, out of nowhere, a spark, an ember, a flame of a chance...

"It's not me, I'm not suppose to be here." It was Hulen. He was standing. He'd cracked.

"Sit down, shut up, eyes on your desk," the guard said.

"You've got to believe me," he said. "I'm not one of them. My uncle is a high-ranking A.I.A. official. Here's my ID. Look me up. I'm not a hybrid."

The muzzle of a gun was pressed into his chest now. The guard looked down the barrel at Hulen: "Number 105, you have 20 seconds to collect yourself and be seated before I'm forced to take action," he said.

"It's...not...me!" Hulen screamed.

The deafening roar of the guard's laser rifle...

I turned my head to see Hulen slumped to the floor, just like in the boy's bathroom, only dead this time. Behind me, the floor was blood-streaked from where they had dragged Jamison's body away. I was blinded by something, though not from the electrocution or bright interrogation lights. Something else. They wanted me to help cover up what they were doing. They wanted me help give this phony positive statement to media: "Everything is all right. H.A.R. is looking out for us." I was blinded by rage. I hated the H.A.R. I hated the A.I.A. Everything they touched turned to ash. Hulen had it wrong: they were the bloodthirsty monsters, not us.

Hulen was gone to me. In his place, I saw Pago, my friend, slumped over, his balloon lips drooping toward the floor, his tubby midsection, his legs, his hybrid arm peeking through tears in his prosthetic sheath. Dead. My blood boiled, my organs flipped around like a bucket of eels.

Suddenly, it wasn't Pago anymore at all. It was me, my face, my death, my end. And I hated that even more.

I am here.

"You stupid bastard," I said, standing. "That was my best friend you shot."

"Number 106, you have 20 seconds to collect yourself and be seated before I'm forced to take action," the guard said.

His rifle and scope were on me now.

Through Hulen's death, I saw a way out, a means to break free of the H.A.R. and their grip on our school.

"That kid you just shot," I said. "He was my only friend, you puss-sucking miserable bastard."

It was a long shot, but what the hell-I am here. I sprinted after him, the track star I never was allowed to be, the warrior in me screaming out. I ran up against his breastplate, beating it like mad, ready to spit back into those cursed black eyes.

The butt of his rifle got my cheek and nose, knocking me back. I fell hard. I thought my neck was broken.

"Hold your fire," the regular commander said, suddenly back on the scene. "What the devil is this?"

"He killed my only friend," I said, getting up to make another dash at the guard. A few tears had already made their way down my chin.

"Save your strength," the commander said, pushing me back.

He looked deep inside me. I felt my nose running with something warm. It ran past into my lips and my mouth. Thick and metallic. Only humans bled, right? It was enough for the commander.

He looked at me, sizing me up: "You're free to go," he said.

"What?" the guard said, his rifle dropping to his side.

"Go home, wash up and report for training, 0900 hours at H.A.R. central division."

"Sir?" the guard said.

The commander's eyes were glassy and emotional. I must've done something to him, way down deep.

"Don't force us to pick you up at your house," the commander said tenderly as if I were his son. "You don't want that."

"No sir," I said. He drew a line with his infrared pen against my bar code, clearing me to leave campus.

"But sir, he might be a hybrid," the guard said.

"No hybrid had such firepower and spirit. Why if you had even one sliver of what this young man has, we could've taken that bridge at Poog Bai at Timmian. Get out of my sight," he said, shoving the guard.

But I didn't get to see all of it. I was already out the door, walking as slowly and as calmly as I could for anyone that had just escaped annihilation.



The sun blinks as tree limbs pass over us. It's so cold outside that my breath on the passenger side of the hover car has frosted the window into an icy fog. I write my name in it.

Mom pulls me closer, holding an ice pack over my swollen eye. Through her coat, beneath her human flesh, I can feel the hardness of her robot endoskeleton, reminding me of what she is, what I am.

Dad is focused intently on the auto-way. He curses under his breath whenever it begins to curve and bend, forcing him to pull back on the throttle. Otherwise, his hand would keep it the red. His silly looking Cloud 9, the one that looks like a giant soap bubble, truly had some power to it. From my view, I'd never seen the world slide by so quickly. We shot across the countryside, hardly touching the ground.

At these speeds, we'd reach the northern frontier in no time and join up with dad's elusive trailer park group. I had a feeling the survival training he'd taken years to forget would come back to him in seconds.

In the back seat were boxes of food, water, whatever we could pile together in as little time as possible. The suitcases were stuffed tight with unfolded clothes. I don't know how we managed to shut some of them. Winter clothes are always harder to pack than summer ones.

The Cloud 9's phone system whistled. A number flashed on the dashboard HUD. I couldn't believe it.

"It's Pago's line," I said.

"I'm not answering it," dad said. "It could be a decoy signal." A text message appeared under the number: "A half-life is still one worth living and not in fear. See you at the frontier, young warrior."

We sat there as a family, basking in the tropical shine of Pago's words.

"I like this Pago," dad said, finally. "I'm sure you guys are destined for great things together."

Mom drew me in closer. How had he managed to get free? There was no telling. All things were possible with Pago. I would travel to the ends of the earth if he told me to. It could be months or even years, but I knew we would meet again, and the time past would be scattered like sand on a beach.

My ankle itched where a patch of bio-metal had begun to form. Those cursed fools with their thought machines-the H.A.R. had hastened my transition. No matter. It meant the preliminary stages were ending. No more nausea, no more headaches or paranoia. I was moving toward being fully hybrid, and I wasn't ashamed or afraid. I was finally free to live, to run and jump, to scream at the top of my lungs, "I am here."

And even without Pago around, I really was.



On the window of the Cloud 9, in frosted letters, the words...I am here...

Letters that do not fade...