

I was five years old when my parents sold me.

I never knew why.

I remember sunshine, too bright, and the noise of a crowd. People were talking, shouting, milling around, scuffing up clouds of red dust and leading strange animals through gangways. An old woman with big hands led to me to a platform with three other children. One of them, a boy, was crying. The woman bent down and took a handful of apron to wipe his face. She whispered something in the boy's ear; he nodded and bit his bottom lip, then started to howl again as soon as her back was turned. The other children stared at their feet and shuffled into line. One of them, a girl with tangled plaits, had a shoe missing.

A crowd gathered. People started to shout and point. The crying boy's voice changed to a soft whine. The shoeless girl stared at her dirty toes. A grey-haired man eventually held out one hand and helped me down. He led me away from the market and strapped me into an old float-cab. I looked over my shoulder, back to where we'd come from. The platform was empty, and the crowd had wandered off. The crying boy was being pulled away by a tall man in dirty clothes. He caught sight of me, and opened his mouth to call out. Whatever he wanted to say, I never got to know. A moment later, he'd vanished.

Our float set off towards the hills.

The man's name was Hans. He told me that I was going to help him with his work. In return, I'd have a bed of my own, food, and clothes. I could learn to read and write and have toys to play with. I didn't know anything of reading and writing. I didn't understand what a toy was.

Hans took me to a homestead in the foothills. He said we were as safe here as we'd ever be, considering the alternatives. The land had been flattened for miles around many years before, but Hans said that new trees were growing now, and the birds were nesting again. I'd never seen a bird before. The float stopped at a

high gate. Hans let us through a small opening in one side. He closed and barred it when we were in, then pointed across the yard to a building that had crumbled at one end.

‘See there? This place was once a mill. Look at the old gear. The War melted it into the wall.’

Metal slumped against sooty blocks, as though it’d fallen when sleeping and hadn’t been able to pull itself back up again. It reminded me of my mum and stepdad after they took the pills from the locked box. They used to fall like that, as though they’d suddenly lost balance and had melted into a wall. Those were the times I got most hungry.

Hans said that if you looked carefully from the watchtower with hand-glasses, you could see ruined bits of old buildings sticking up between the trees. They were towers, walls and roofs, he said, poisoned by a sleeping sickness that the Great War had tainted all things with. I mustn’t go out alone, said Hans, because of those poisons and the wild animals that roamed the woods. He took my hand and helped me down from the float.

Hans said he’d call me Archer. Something about arrows being straight and true. He told me he had a grandson called Avi, but when I asked, Hans said he hadn’t chosen Avi’s name. Avi’s parents had done that, but they were dead now. They had walked too far into the trees one day and had got the sickness. It was a poison, Hans said, but he’d found a cure. He’d put it in me with a needle just like he’d done with Avi, so that I didn’t walk into the woods and die too.

Avi resented me from the moment I set foot in the homestead. He was older than me, with long legs and loosely-curled dark hair. He was more like a shadow than a boy, skirting whichever room I was in, slipping in and out like a stain at the edge of my vision, spying on me through half-closed doors with those big, dark eyes. He was the one who told me I’d been bought that day at market. At first, he wouldn’t call me Archer, just ‘her’ or ‘you’. In the end Hans took Avi into

another room in the house. I heard him shouting. It brought back memories of my life before the homestead. Avi ran out of the room crying, but he always called me Archer after that.

At first, I helped Hans in his work rooms. Avi was there sometimes too, but he rarely spoke. I brought Hans tools and did simple operations on the computer that he stooped over day and night. Sometimes, I brought us water from the well outside, and picked tubers from the garden. I had basic conversations with the domestic droid that seemed to amuse Avi, but I'd never seen anything like it before and when it struggled with peeling tubers in its broken old fingers, I'd feel sorry for it and help.

Later in the day, Hans would often say he had work to do that was private. Avi disappeared with him, to a room upstairs that I'd never seen. I was allowed outside into the yard to play with the dogs or to stroke the cats and kittens that hung around the homestead. My favourite was a little black cat with yellow eyes.

By the time I was nine, I was in the work rooms nearly as often as Hans. I'd fetch and carry as he directed me, and perform simple tasks with his virtual operating system. I even repaired the droid's fingers and learned how to programme her with new, basic tasks. I named her Dottie, after a girl in a story-book Hans had given me.

The following year, Hans began to teach me how to find backdoors into things we weren't supposed to know existed. Occasionally, he showed Avi and me news from the world beyond, which he referred to scathingly as *society*. These were the only times Hans insisted that Avi and I worked together. Our last project involved tapping into a database to find out about modifications made to soldiers who protected the city. After we'd seen the specs, Hans flatlined the screens, rolled back the skylight blind and said that he had something to tell us.

'I want to make you better people,' he said. 'There are things that I can do to make you faster, stronger and smarter.'

‘Like the soldiers?’ said Avi.

Hans nodded. ‘Yes, like the soldiers.’

That day was one of the few times I ever saw Avi smile.

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The bronchial filter came first. Grandfather Hans explained that if we could take oxygen more efficiently from the air, then we would perform better.

‘Perform what better, exactly?’ asked Avi.

‘Anything. Everything. When the filter is in you, you’ll be able to run faster for longer, and rest for less time. You know those pigs you hunt in the forest?’

‘The ones we aren’t allowed to eat?’ I said.

Hans grunted. ‘The tainted ones, yes. Well, you’ll be killing twice as many of those in half the time.’

Avi seemed happy about this, although I didn’t understand why. He picked up an imaginary rifle and began to take aim at the things that cluttered the room, mimicking the whine of the laser.

‘But what about me, Grandfather Hans? What will *I* be able to do better?’

Hans stopped what he was doing and reached out one hand to smooth my hair.

‘I will find you a task, Archer – a difficult task that you must complete. Something you’ve never achieved before. Something special.’

Behind Hans, Avi lowered his imaginary weapon and stared at me, unblinking. A slash of white sunlight reflected in his dark pupils. He didn’t smile.

