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FAILURE

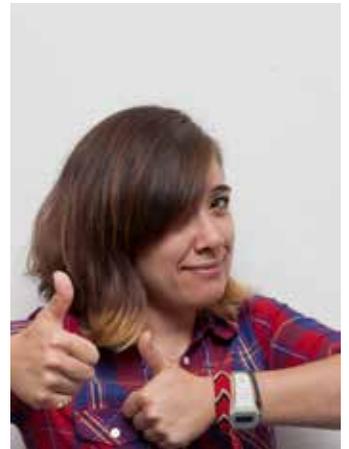
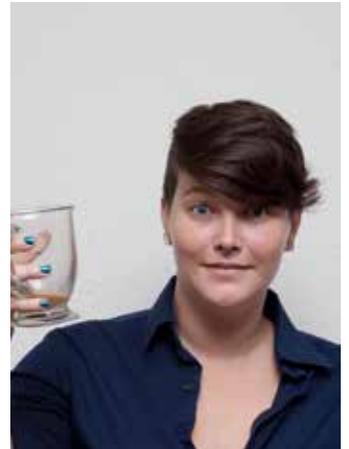
Editor-in-chief Sara Eileen Hames
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Art directors Jack Cavicchi
Lucia Reed
Photo editor Johanna Bobrow
Transmedia chain editor Casey Middaugh
Photographers Johanna Bobrow
Garnet Burke
Bettianne Flanders
Videographers Ben Cordes
Ian Danskin
Writers Jack Cavicchi
Kevin Clark
Ben Cordes
Ian Danskin
Bettianne Flanders
Casey Middaugh
Steven Padnick

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TOTAL SYSTEMIC FAILURE

A SHORT STORY
JACK CAVICCHI

Dr. Kwang was going into shock and I still wasn't due to be born for another five hours.

The stark white and gray of the room—the whole world, for all I knew—only had two real breaks in its smooth minimalist perfection: the puddle of muddy green and brown vomit in the corner, and the bright red splash of blood that bloomed at Dr. Kwang's mouth and pooled in a vivid circle on the ground in front of me.

The circle looked like a comic book dialogue bubble. I suspected it said he was going to die very soon.

I had been shown comic books early on. I think it was important to the doctor that I see them, since he believed that they were the mythology of his culture. He'd shown me the old mythologies too; the Bible, Hercules, all those strange stories of heroes and villains and gods.

Though I'd been programmed to think in several languages and understand math, and I'd begun to

comprehend humor, I hadn't been programmed to feel scared yet. I calmly floated in my tank and watched my father die.

He coughed again. The circle of blood grew a bit, forming a halo around his head.

I examined the clues at hand and concluded there was most likely a faulty filtration system in Dr. Kwang's hazchem suit. The processes that had gone into the construction of my womb and placenta would have been highly toxic and wildly dangerous under any circumstances, and doubly so given that Dr. Kwang had been working with undocumented and illegally obtained materials.

His suit had gone past the recommended timeframe between cleaning and maintenance cycles. An organism, or perhaps a variety of organisms, had most likely gotten past the faulty filters and started growing. From there it quickly got into his lungs and began to work on destroying his body.

Dr. Kwang was already a frail man. He'd been cured of cancer a few years before, but his body had never fully recovered. His system was teetering on the brink of failure. I calculated that he'd only last a few hours more.

As I watched his body convulse, the world suddenly started to go black. The computers were sending me to that other place again. It was a cycle of consciousness, semi-consciousness, and the crisp blackness of the information induction system. Soon the white room was gone and the world was only numbers and facts and new emotions.

When I came back, he was dead and I was very different. The various schema of education and personality construction had nearly finished, and I was almost a person. I was just real enough to weep for what I saw.

The thin man's skin looked jaundiced and wet. His eyes were open and almost completely red. The blood was taking on a brownish tinge around him. He was gone.

I wondered whether I would still be born. I wondered whether there were some last few operations he needed to perform on the computer banks around us. Was there some *Frankenstein*-like lever he had to pull before I could really live?

Around me was a supersaturation of nanobots and nutrients, protean proteins that formed a faux amniotic fluid that was building me and feeding me. In my head were long chemical names like poems I could reel off. Well, I could reel them off in my head; I wasn't sure whether I could speak yet. I opened my mouth and touched my throat.

Somewhere in the building, I felt an alarm go off. Minute vibrations were acute when one floated in liquid. A door opened somewhere. I realized I didn't know how large the building was. I imagined I was underground, but only because there were no windows.

Looking around, I saw computers all around my tank, a larger mainframe in the corner, a desk with half-eaten food on it, a door that was closed, a sink, and another door that was open to reveal a bathroom. Near the sink was a mirror, and I could just barely see the reflection of the large transparent tank I was in.

I realized that by human standards my eyesight was very good. I could see myself in the mirror, a vague floating shape. I watched my hand, palm out, rest on the wall of the tank.

Then the world flicked out again and there was the darkness and crackling electricity of the induction. I wondered briefly who I would be when I woke up.

When my eyes opened things were sharper. The fluid in the tank had cleared a bit and now was mostly saline. There were more vibrations and sounds; things were happening in the building. The doctor was still dead.

The vague sounds were focusing. Footsteps in a hallway nearby. Shouts. Deep voices, the chirps of

some communication devices, then silence.

The temperature of the liquid around me was so close to my own body temperature that I couldn't really tell where my body ended and the liquid began. Suddenly, though, I felt a chill. My skin prickled, goosebumps rose on my arms, and my nipples were almost painfully hard.

The first low thud against the door sent vibrations through the tank so forcefully that I heard the liquid at the top splash against the walls of thick glass. Then there was another thud, then silence.

I wondered whether feeling cold was part of the last stages. Was it something I was taught to feel in my last induction? Was it part of being scared? I thought I was scared, as well as very aware of being alone.

The doctor with his halo of brown congealed blood: did he give his life for mine? There was something like a mythological story there, perhaps. I'd sprung from his bloody head like Athena.

I thought another induction came, but it was too sudden, too brief. Everything went black and then I was against the back of the tank, my body feeling new sensations: pain, shock, anxiety, the urge to fight or flee.

The wall, where there had been a door, was a black mess. The room was full of smoke and some of the lights had gone out. There were people coming into the room from a hallway I could now see through the hole in the wall. The people wore all black, with lots of buckles and pockets.

They carried Heckler & Koch MP7s with gas vents and sound suppressors, grenades, shotguns, night vision goggles—a whole list of things I knew that most NATO military units carried. The facts were there in my head, like Latin and astrophysics, detailed labels and schematics.

They rushed the room in standard two-by-two formation, checking each other's' blind spots, opening any doors or cabinets, securing the perimeter and then standing guard. Most of them were pointing their guns at me.

I could see my reflection in the scopes of their guns and the visors of those who wore more elaborate helmets. With new knowledge, I catalogued my characteristics: female, Korean, 1.6 meters tall, dark brown eyes, unwrinkled skin, floating in a tank of clear fluid, hair a cloud of inky black around my head.

Some of the soldiers murmured briefly into their walkie-talkies. They spoke German with a Swiss accent.

"The room is clear. Send her in," said the one closest to the door.

The woman who walked in, carefully climbing over debris with the help of a soldier, had almost the same face as the one I saw in my reflection, with differences that I believed were attributable to age. Her eyes were rimmed with wrinkles and her mouth was a lightly painted red frown.

My heart raced. Fear was there, but vague; mostly I felt curiosity. I knew so much from my induced education, yet everything was new.

As I watched the woman walk closer, I felt the cold black of the induction cycle starting. I panicked as the room, the smoke, the men, and the woman with my face all disappeared, and then it was only the lightning of information—only something was wrong.

When I came to, everything was so cold, a cold that was huge and overwhelming. I was on the floor, two meters from Dr. Kwang's body. Around me was pinkish water. I was wrapped in a gray towel.

The woman was in front of me, kneeling next to me. Her frown was now tighter-lipped and her eyes were mournful. She was very beautiful and that made me happy because I thought I might be beautiful like her in time.

"Try not to move," she said in English.

I opened and closed my mouth, but although I knew how to speak I'd never done it before. The air stung my eyes and I realized that there was pain emanating from my chest.

"You made a sudden movement, I'm not sure why, and you banged on the glass," she said softly. "One of the men fired his weapon out of surprise, then another out of reaction. You were shot, three times."

I swallowed. I knew my lungs were filling with blood. I saw a soldier pull out a large medical kit. I knew I was going to die.

"I remember when I looked like you," she whispered. "I was so alive and the world was so new."

I understood many things all at once. Why Dr. Kwang made me. Why people made laws against it.

The last induction had been the penultimate one. How cruel that it was just in time to let me understand everything I was losing.

An alarm went off somewhere, a harsh klaxon, and a vaguely feminine digital voice repeated, "Total systemic failure."

There were shards of glass in my legs and hands. The cold was fighting against the warmth of the blood gushing out of my chest. It wasn't fair. It was just as she said: I was so alive and the world was so new. I wanted to tell her to take me out so I could see the sky, the sun, the world for just a minute.

I felt the cycle start again, though it was too soon. The black was coming to push information into my brain.

The world went dark.