

Cerebral

I was sick. The doctors said the cancer was almost certainly incurable. I had maybe 6 months left if I was lucky. I couldn't afford the treatment anyways. I had felt a weird pain in my side for months, but I was in-between jobs and didn't have health insurance. Finally, I collapsed in an elevator, on the way to an interview. The receptionist saw the doors open and my body was sprawled out on the ground. I woke up in the hospital the next day, IVs in my arms. My wife had apparently come when I was first brought in but left after I didn't wake up right away.

We'd been having a rough patch. I could tell she resented that I'd been unemployed for so long, while she worked late nights. I saw the texts with her coworker. She'd found a way to make those nights more tolerable. I never confronted her. I thought she would leave me if she found out I knew. The house was hers, she inherited it from her parents, and I wouldn't have anywhere to go. I wouldn't be able to see our daughter like I had.

She did come back to visit me. I was surprised to see her cry when she found out. She kissed me with a tenderness I hadn't seen from her in a long time. The next day she interrogated the doctors if they were sure it was terminal, regurgitating all these stories she found online of people who were told they had a few weeks to live and then made a full recovery. The day after that she was angry. Angry at me for not watching my health better, angry about the hospital bill we were going to get, that I never did the paperwork to switch to her insurance when I was fired.

I was in the hospital for a week. I had stabilized and they were going to discharge me. That last day a man approached me, told me that I had a certain gene that made me a good candidate for groundbreaking research he was conducting. It might save me, in a way, but either way he could make sure my family was well taken care of. He warned me it might also be painful, even torturous. But I agreed.

I never told my wife the whole truth. I said there was an experimental procedure I could do and the cost would be covered. The man promised he wouldn't tell her, just that someone would go and explain the procedure failed and I didn't make it, and that they would compensate her for the loss. It wasn't something he wanted to be public anyways. When I held my daughter for the last time, I sobbed. She was only 4, she didn't understand why I was so sad.

"It's okay daddy, the doctors will make you better."

I flew to DC, first class. They took me out for the best dinner I'd ever had, that cost more than I'd ever made in a month, and the next morning I was in their operating room. I was so scared, about to call it off, when they injected me with something. I felt better. This was what had to happen. The best I could make of the situation, for my family. They laid me down. I was sleepy. It went dark.

For a while I simply floated, barely thinking, barely feeling. I wasn't quite warm, not quite cold. It was dark, but the odd light interrupted me here and there. A star beckoning in the endless void before blinking away.

I felt myself come back to awareness. I stretched as I awoke, tried to crack my back. But I couldn't feel the stretch, the bones didn't pop. I opened my eyes, but couldn't see. I tried to rub my eyes, as if they were caked over with that morning gunk you have after a fitful sleep, but I touched nothing, felt nothing. I realized I wasn't breathing. I sucked in, but felt no air. Why couldn't I breathe? I needed to breathe. I grabbed at my face, my neck, clawing...at nothing. I started screaming, I knew I was screaming. Shrieking like an animal, like I was insane, but I couldn't make a sound.

At some point the panic became a deep and overwhelming despair. I sobbed, but of course I never felt the tears. I should have just died. Why didn't I just let myself die? When my anguish was at its crescendo, I felt a flood of warmth, and my consciousness started to slip. Did they decide to grant me death?

When I woke again, existence was more tolerable. I was still deeply uncomfortable. I could feel my arms, wiggle my toes, but they weren't there. There was no substance. Even though I wanted so badly to breathe, I found the moments passed just the same without it. Perhaps the worst was over.

The eternal darkness started to fade. Slowly it turned dark gray, shifted to silver, growing ever brighter until it became an all consuming whiteness. It was so intense, worse than staring into the sun. I tried to close my eyes, I didn't have any. It permeated me. Burned me. In an instant, back to the void. But the light echoed in my mind. Threatening to return.

Vision returned to me again. The light built, but this time it stopped at a bearable level, then returned to nearly jet black. Up and down it went, like a kid playing with one of those lights controlled by a knob. It settled on an off white, maybe eggshell.

Then color. Blue, then green, then yellow. Orange, red, mauve, cyan, umber. So many shades, ones I couldn't tell you the names of, then ones that had no names. Wonderful, beautiful, mesmerizing colors. Surely no mortal man could comprehend such beauty. I was something more, something greater. Was I God?

A dot appeared in the center of my vision. I turned my head, I had no head. It stayed dead center. It stared at me, unblinking. It grew. A solid black circle against an everchanging background. It loomed over me, overshadowed me. The circle became impossibly large, and I realized my field of view was equally expansive. There was no in-front or behind me. I could see all directions, but the concept of a direction lost all meaning. I was the size of the sun and the size of a speck, but this circle was always ever larger, oppressive. This must be God.

It spun into the third dimension, gaining depth as it did. It became a sphere. A coal black planet with a backdrop of impossible colors. I began to worship it, begging for it to show me greater truth, to expand my mind, but it refused to answer. It had rejected me. Perhaps this was my eternal punishment for wasting my life. Shown that there was something beyond the human experience, but that the true knowledge of it was out of my reach.

The sphere receded, the colors left, and I was alone again. I didn't know if I was dead or hallucinating. I was scared. I wanted to be back home, in my bed. I wanted to be held, and I couldn't even hug myself for comfort. I cried again, my non-chest attempting to heave, till I felt another surge of warmth and my awareness fading.

I think I slept, or something like it. I had a dream, or maybe a hallucination, if there was any difference. My wife was in front of me. I hugged her, I could feel her. I wept and told her I was sorry, that I

loved her. She didn't hug me back. She told me things were better now. She walked away. I tried to run after her, begged for her to come back. My feet were slow, heavy, and the air was thick and syrupy. I couldn't reach her.

The dream ended and I was back to nothingness. I'd never tried one of those sensory deprivation tanks, but I figured this must be close. But eventually you leave the tank. I was stuck here. I was helpless. I drifted for a while, thoughts scattered. I thought about my life as a person, wishing that I had cherished my life when I was in it. I wished that I had kept painting. I wished I had felt enough to fight for my wife when we grew distant. I wished I hadn't left my daughter without a father. Would she remember me?

I stayed like that for a while, then returned to my dreams. I alternated between the two states, always returning to the same dream. Always she left me, and I could never catch her. The more I reminisced, the more I missed the everyday things I took for granted. Waking up sore for no reason, but at least being able to walk and stretch and move about. Having to sit in traffic, but at least being able to drive and go somewhere. I would give anything to sit by the window and drink one more stale cup of coffee.

The more I looked back, I also hated myself more and more. For wasting my life. For being mediocre. For being too scared to do something about my wife's affair. But could I blame her? She was stuck with me after all. A dumb fucking piece of shit worthless heap of garbage. I always knew I was but now I had to accept it. It was for the best that I got sick, that she didn't have to deal with me anymore.

Time was hard to track, perhaps a few weeks in, I was interrupted by the tiniest prickle of sensation. It spread across me, feeling like 1000 ants scurrying on my skin. I was inclined to panic, but I was glad to actually be feeling something. It began to permeate me, as if they were crawling inside me. In my flesh, my lungs, my throat. I still didn't need to breathe, but now I felt like I was choking.

All the little points of sensation began to shift, and I felt heat spread throughout me. Different from the times before when I drifted off after. This felt happier. I felt happier. The biggest smile I've ever had creeped up my face, the sides of my mouth rising higher than my eyes. I started laughing, more and more till it was violent. The happiness shifted to ecstasy, all-encompassing. I writhed as pleasure washed over me in waves, an infinitely hedonistic orgasm. It slowly faded to a light glow, and I had some hope that this wasn't the hell I thought it was. I wanted it turned back up.

It started intensifying again, and I shuddered in anticipation of round two. But it wasn't the same happy, sexy wave as before. It turned sharp and cold, thousands of needles piercing every ounce of my incorporeal self. The needles grew into knives, ripping me into innumerable pieces. I had never felt pain like this before. It so completely overwhelmed me I couldn't finish a single thought. I couldn't even try to beg for death or scream in despair. They melded together into a single agonizing pulse. Every beat shattered me further and further. At some point it ended, and the surge of warmth came again, but failed to take me to unconsciousness.

For a long time I tried to babble and pull myself into the fetal position. My inability to do so just drove me deeper into my insanity. I was a broken man. No, not even a man anymore. Just a scared, weak creature who couldn't comprehend why this was happening to him. I couldn't try to run, or cry out for help, or even weep. All I could do was experience my turmoil and wait for the pain to return.

The wave of warmth tried several times to take me again, but it had lost its strength, or I was too damaged. I felt myself fading. Not towards sleep, but to something more final. I deeply hoped I would die, or if I was already in hell, to become nothing.

As I got close to escaping, little blobs of color took form in the void. They surrounded me, bobbed back and forth, and transformed into little squares and triangles and stars as they danced. It wasn't the intense battering of color like before, but like being inside of a kaleidoscope as it turned.

A figure materialized before me, a woman. She kind of looked like my wife, but also my mother, and perhaps my kindergarten teacher. She slipped her arms around me and held me tightly. I hugged her back and found I actually had arms to hold her with. I started to sob and actual tears ran down my face. She stroked my hair and consoled me. We just stood there while the lights danced around us.

Eventually I was able to eke out a few words through the tears. "Are you going to take me away from here?"

She pulled back a little ways to look me in the eye, "No, but I'm here to make it easier." She put her hand on my forehead, then pushed through and ran her fingers across the grooves in my brain. My mind had fractured, but the pieces seemed to realign themselves as she worked. My sadness softened, my despair abated. I felt like myself again, mostly. She cupped my face when she was done. "You can do more than you think, you're going to be okay."

I held her hand against my cheek. "Please don't leave me alone here," I asked softly. She kissed my forehead and wiped away the tears that lingered before dissipating into white smoke. The colors faded, and I was back in the void. I was still anxious, still sad. But I was sane again. I didn't want to die. And soon, I finally fell asleep.

The cycle of dreams and drifting continued. I still saw my wife. I would ask her questions, try to see what she wanted from me by being here. Each time she stayed silent, walking away. I could follow her now, but nothing I did caused her to entertain me. I always awoke empty-handed.

As one of them ended and I returned to the void, I felt a warm glow. I braced myself for however this experience would turn. It started off pleasant, like when the sun washes over you on a beautiful spring day. I think I may have even felt a moment of peace. It was short-lived. It grew hot, so hot. I was trapped in an oven with the temperature climbing. There was no escape, I could only suffer as my consciousness was engulfed by flame. There was no fire, no visual indication of the danger, but I was consumed by it. I prayed to return to the nothingness.

At a certain point the heat became so great, I believe I lost the ability to process it. Instead of pain, I felt power. I had been thrown into the sun and became it. I gave life and destroyed it. I fused new elements at my center.

The heat died, and I felt a chill for the first time in this eternity. I realized what would happen. I welcomed it. What could they do to me that I couldn't survive? I had no choice but to survive. I was already dead.

The cold tried to break me. I laughed, maniacally, silently. It seeped into the center of my mind. I observed the sensation. No fear, no judgement, no pain. Just curiosity. I knew that I should be begging for

relief, for death, as this new form of torture was brought upon my psyche. I could only accept it. The cold left, and I remained. I would always remain.

I saw my wife again. I didn't talk this time, didn't beg. Just studied her...she wasn't real. I still craved connection, wanted to hold her. I was so alone here. But even with her in front of me, one that I could touch, I was still alone. Trapped in my own mind. "I hope I did some good for you in the end," I said. "I hope our daughter is safe, and loved." I was saying what I wish I could tell her. "I hope you've forgiven me," I said to her, but really to me. She walked away, and I didn't try to follow her.

When I was awake, simply a consciousness in the void, I gave myself up to the nothingness. It was the first time in my life I knew peace. I didn't worry about what was to come, for there was nothing I could do to hasten or delay my future. I didn't mourn my past, for it was gone and could no longer serve me. I simply was.

My dreams were now visits into old memories. Movie nights with my mom, dad, and brother. The crash where dad hydroplaned, and my brother was thrown through the front window. Mom, leaving, after she tried but failed to forgive him. Dad, drinking in front of the TV, eyes glazed, never actually seeing what was on the screen.

I was in middle school, being poked in the back with a pencil by the kid in the desk behind me. I turned and snapped at him, told him to stop. The teacher barked at me for disrupting class, gave me detention. He went back to prodding me, and I just sat there, letting him.

I was in high school, at prom. I had built up the courage to ask my crush, and she said yes, though I think only because I evoked some sort of pity in her. We danced a few songs, my hands sweaty. I couldn't even look her in the eyes. Another guy asked to steal her for a dance. She said yes immediately. I never said a word. Just watched them go off, and she never came back.

I was in college, in art school, trying to paint. I admired how good artists could say so much, create connection, without needing to utter a single word. I was technically proficient, but I never felt like I could put soul or personality or whatever it was on the canvas that was supposed to make artists feel fulfilled. Maybe I was too scared to put something vulnerable into my work. Maybe I just never had anything worth saying.

I was at the bar, celebrating with some old college friends. I had gotten a job at a marketing firm. Not my dream job, but logos and graphics were a type of art, right? A girl bumped into me and spilled my drink. She was beautiful. She was so apologetic, so nice, she offered to buy me a new one. I couldn't get a word out, I just nodded. She grabbed my hand, walked me to the bar. We talked and it felt so natural. We weren't ready to stop when the bar closed, and we sat in my car till the sun rose, then got coffee, walked in the park, spent the whole Sunday together.

We had more dates, I met her parents, got a promotion at work. We went to Paris, and I proposed in front of the Eiffel Tower. Cheesy, cliché probably, but she loved it. We married in April, outdoors, at the beach. It started to rain during the ceremony, but we laughed, kissed, with the water drops assaulting us.

While I relived these moments, I didn't feel sad, or frustrated, or angry, or happy. I just observed, curious, the circumstances that formed me. The only time I lost myself in the moment, was holding my daughter again. My sweet smiling baby, cooing as I tickled her nose. My greatest love.

Every once in a while I was interrupted, always an isolated sensation, growing in intensity to its extreme. a soft buzzing became a deafening roar. I was falling. First, gently, as a feather. Then faster and faster, like being sucked into the gravity well of the sun. There were no visual indications, no wind against my face, but it seemed as if at any moment I would hit solid ground and be obliterated. I was jerked in all directions, then spun. Gut wrenching, dizzying. If I had my body I would have had my skin ripped from my flesh.

I was subjected to a grand spectrum of tastes and smells. Strangely these started off odd, foreign. I have no comparison, no baseline for what to relate them to. Then I had strange combinations - celery and soap, steak and strawberries, whiskey and wet dog. Finally they were familiar. Fresh cut grass, chocolate cake, sweat, gasoline, lemon, sex, shit.

Through all of this I had no terror. As I was stretched to the limits of human experience, I knew it would pass, and it did.

My meditation was interrupted again. Two circles appeared from the void, side by side. They drew closer to me, and I could see white light with shifting shadows from within them. They enlarged, becoming my entire field of view. The image in each was blurry, seemingly identical, and shifted slightly off from each other. The twin sights merged into a single image, and the shadows gained depth.

Then it sharpened, and I could see a white laboratory. The man who recruited me was standing with several strangers, all in scrubs. He was older, his hair had begun to gray. My vision sharpened further, too far. Edges were too well-defined, I could see every miniscule pore and wrinkle on his face, the individual hairs, a dead skin cell floated off his cheek and sailed through the air. So much information at once. The detail adjusted again, but this time slightly back, to a somewhat normal level.

The rest of the lab contained an array of desks, monitors, and scientific instruments I didn't know the purpose for. And then a brain, floating in a tank, with various wires and tubes dotting it like a pincushion.

One of the strangers pointed at his screen, where a picture of a brain was lighting up, a red glow shifting from one part to the next. They all nodded very seriously, and the man turned back to me, or at least, where I was seeing from.

A low whine began, which turned into indistinct voices, growing slowly clearer.

"baseline sound test 1, brain activity shows positive for auditory stimulation at levels within the normal range"

They then showed me a picture of an apple, and said the word apple. They pointed out how my brain lit up and discussed the measurements they recorded. Then they did the same with a dog, and murmured about the results, then a tree and so on. This went on for several hours before they disconnected my audio and video feeds and I returned to my void to sleep.

They brought me back on the next day and continued the process, and then the next day and the next after again. After a few weeks of this they were finally sated.

Having this reconnection to the physical world, I debated if I should regain some sense of wanting. But I still had no agency, no ability to act. Same as in my dreams, as in my void, I could only experience what

I was subjected to. The only thing I could control were my thoughts and feelings. So I would choose to retain my peace.

It seemed like I drifted a while again before they brought me back. Time was so hard to keep track of. None of the monitors in the lab ever showed the date either.

They had a speaker set up on a table right in front of where I saw from. The man asked me to try to speak. I could feel a new connection, waiting to receive my sound. It had been so long since I attempted to talk. I tried, and the speaker crackled a bit, but I couldn't get my voice through.

I hummed and tried to feel the connection better, ascertain what the speaker wanted from me. Some of the humming did make it through the speaker, though it sounded distorted, robotic. It felt like it wanted to pull the sound through the top of my chest, not my mouth. I focused on the word and tried to push it from my lungs.

The speaker made a moaning sound at first, not unlike a whale's call. Then I got a soft hissing sound out.

"hhhhh...hhhhheeeee...helllllllooooooo...heelloo...hello hello."

They began to clap, a few of them hugged each other. The man asked if I knew who he was, and I told him I remembered. I still didn't sound quite like myself. It was deeper, while also having this high pitched whine at the same time.

"How long?" I asked. "Since I came here."

He looked a bit uncomfortable. He hesitated, but he did answer. "six years."

Six years. My daughter would be 10. The world suddenly felt a bit more real. I could talk, I could see, I could hear. Perhaps I could be with my daughter again. But I was unsure if I would even want to subject her to what I now was. She probably barely remembered me.

They spent many days talking to me, curious about what my experience had been, recording everything I said. I explained everything, the torture, the dreams, the woman, the calm. It felt good to talk again. I felt like a person again.

They were surprised I seemed so sane. Eventually they admitted they thought I would be unusable after a certain point, that they would use my results as progress to try again with someone new. Apparently I wasn't even the first. They showed me videos of several other brains, that seemed to convulse before all brain activity simply stopped when they tried to simulate senses to it.

Before me, they hadn't known how much electrical signal to send to translate to an appropriate feeling. I was the only one that survived long enough to tune into the ideal level. At the beginning they would drug me to sleep when I was getting overloaded. At one point, when that stopped working, they gave me a cocktail of psychedelics to reset my brain chemistry. After that they didn't need to drug me the same way again. They told me to feel proud of the technological and medical breakthroughs I was now part of.

Now that they had mapped my brain connections, knew how to stimulate and provide input, read output; we were squarely in the second phase.

I felt myself reconnect to the speaker, heard the voices trickle in, but they didn't give me sight. Then an image started to form in my void. An apple. It was wrong. The wrong shade, the edges were blurry. It was 2 dimensional, but looked like it was trying to gain depth. The man asked me to describe it. The apple's

shade deepened in red until I told them it looked better. Back and forth I gave them feedback and they adjusted the image. Three days of this until finally the apple floated before me, all three dimensions in full strength, looking so incredibly real.

Then they replaced it with a dog, but again it was off. Again we worked to get the details corrected. That went a little slower than the first time, there were more details to get right, and then we spent more time as they animated the dog, made his tail wag, had it bark and jump.

We spent months on this, but they got quicker with each object as we continued. We would take breaks sometimes, and the researchers would talk to me.

Sometimes the man would stay late and we would have long conversations. During one of these I asked if he would show me my wife and daughter. He refused, said he couldn't show me anything he wasn't approved to show me, that for now I needed to focus on the work.

We moved into having me control various robotics. Simple tasks at first. I wiggled a metal finger, bent the joint on a limb. It was hard for me to tell when to stop a motion and I would over-rotate. They figured out how to give me feedback from the machines and I improved. It was strange, seeing the hand I was controlling far in front of me. It felt like a part of me, but it was still so easy to identify where I was as where I was seeing from. In reality I was in the tank in the back of the room.

They used the data to develop my void and senses. I appeared in a room, a table before me, and underneath me...a body. I closed and opened the hand, brought it up to my face. I could feel. It wasn't quite like being a person again. I couldn't quite feel my skin, it was more of just being able to tell I had made contact with another object. It didn't feel like being in a body again, there was no thump of the heart, no breathing. But I moved the leg forward and it listened.

I walked up to the table, and a cup appeared upon it. A brown liquid sleeping inside. I picked it up, took a sip. Coffee. I couldn't swirl it around in my mouth, didn't feel it trickle down my throat. But the taste was there, the sense of warmth, and I could feel the dopamine rush from the caffeine.

They explained in my ear how they were sending specific electrical signals to simulate the experience. They gave me a basketball, had me bounce it and throw it in a hoop. I did a simple obstacle course, even tripping a few times as I mastered my new limbs. Over time they were able to add more detail, make the sensations more specific. They made me a steak dinner and I could feel the texture of the meat, the juiciness as I bit into it, the way the fat melted in my mouth.

I had another night talking to the man. He was explaining all the ways our research could be used. Extending human life, advanced prosthetics, fully immersed VR. I interrupted him, asking again to see a picture of my wife and daughter. Again he refused.

So I told him I was done talking to them until he did it. He turned my video feed off to him and I came back to my void, which now was like a small apartment I could walk around in. I assumed he was going to leave for the night, but a screen popped up in front of me. A browser window, floating in the middle of the room. It went to a social media site I didn't recognize, a new one from when I had left the world.

My wife had pictures up, with our little girl, and the guy from her work, now her husband. They had moved to Philadelphia a few years ago. Our daughter was so much bigger. She was in softball, and into Legos. She looked happy. He scrolled through for a bit, and I saw her grow up, albeit in reverse.

I asked if I'd be able to talk to them again. He was quiet for a moment, then said he would do everything he could so that I could see my family again, even give my daughter a hug.

The work continued. The researchers connected me into a full-size robot. They had transferred my brain into a new tank, one they could move, and I was able to control the robot from a cable that connected them. The first time I was brought outside the lab I was in a large white room. Empty except for me, my robot body, and the researchers.

They had me try to walk. It felt surprisingly natural from the start. I could feel the pressure as my foot connected to the ground. They asked me to jump. My body had more power than I expected, and I went six or so feet in the air. I over-reacted as I came back down, missing my feet and landing on my back. But there was no pain, and the body was fine. I was able to stand myself back up without issue.

That day was mostly practicing basic movements, but we soon moved into more complex motions. They had me try to bowl, swing a golf club, ride a skateboard. I had to be very precise about how much strength I used. The first bowling ball they gave me wound up shattered next to a dent in the concrete wall, mere feet from my tank.

They kept running me through obstacle courses, timing me each time. I put together a puzzle, painted, shuffled cards. I even danced, which I was never very good at, but I actually felt more natural at in my new body.

I stopped seeing the man around. I asked about him. They said he took over another project, never told me anything more. A new man replaced him after a couple weeks. The new man was stern, serious. I never saw him smile. He cared much more about what I could accomplish in training.

They gave me a gun. It was a paintball one, but it looked real, like an assault rifle. I had never liked guns, they made me uncomfortable. Targets were set up across the room. The new man wanted me to shoot, test my accuracy. I figured it was just another test, might as well.

I finished the first set. The new man snarled, said it was dreadful. A few people walked up and started instructing me on how to do better. I hadn't seen them before, but they all had a similar vibe, military. I ignored them and asked the new man why I was doing this. He simply said to do as I was told.

I handed the gun to one of the new ones. I said I wouldn't do this. The new man pulled out some sort of remote and pressed a button. I collapsed to the ground, intense pain flooding me. It only lasted a few seconds.

"You will do as you're told." He repeated. I sat up, resting my arms on my knees, relaxed. Not that I needed to rest them. I told him no. He did it again, longer. I kept refusing, and he kept increasing the time. But I had already suffered. There was nothing he could do to me.

Finally they disconnected me from the robot, and I was in my apartment. I made some tea, warmed up a pastry. I enjoyed that I could do the ritual of preparing something, even if it wasn't necessary here. I was about to take a sip when everything started to dematerialize. My body left me here as well, and I was back to floating in the void.

He was trying to figure out how to break me, taking away the creature comforts I had been given. I drifted for a while, slept at some point. He was in my ear when I awoke, asking if I was ready to comply. I

didn't answer, he wasn't worth it. He started to torture me. I was electrocuted, burnt, frozen. He gave me a body again just to break it, rip it apart. After each round he asked if I was ready, and each time I stayed silent.

This went on for a few days I think, they didn't let me sleep. I found myself back in my robot body. A different man was there, sitting at a table, an empty chair across from him, my brain at his side. He motioned for me to sit, and I sat. He explained that the new man worked for him, and he had heard we were having a disagreement.

I said that I had no desire to fight, or do whatever it was that they were trying to use me for. He sighed. "Son, do you realize what an opportunity we have here. Imagine a soldier, who doesn't need to eat, or breathe, or even shit. One who's bulletproof, can't feel pain, and ten times stronger than a normal man."

I reminded him that I've felt plenty of pain, and I didn't sign up to be a weapon. He went on about how millions of dollars have been spent to keep me alive, to allow me to walk and feel again. The labcoats had their fun and got their data, but now it was time to make me useful.

All of his arguments went nowhere. Eventually he bowed his head into his hands and sighed. "I didn't want to do it this way. You don't care about yourself, you don't care about your country. But I know what you do care about." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a picture. My wife and daughter. "It wouldn't be that hard for them to have a little accident now would it?"

I couldn't believe he would threaten my family. "You wouldn't. What leverage would you have against me afterwards?"

"Well we don't have to kill them do we. Maybe Mom gets in an accident. Daughter gets slipped some toxin that takes away her eyesight. We can always escalate from there." He said it all so evenly, just matter of fact what would happen. I almost crushed his throat right then, but they had disabled my limbs. He stood up and grabbed the cable running from my tank to the robot "You'll resume training tomorrow, I won't hesitate to prove my point if you give us any trouble from here on out." He pulled the cable.

I jerked back into my void. Even with all I've experienced that was weirdly jarring. It was like someone took scissors to the nerves leading to my senses and snipped. My apartment materialized and the different man's voice echoed from above, weirdly sing-songy. "Get a good night's sleep, I want you at your best tomorrow."

I dreamed that night of my wife and daughter being kidnapped by strange men, tortured. The fear in my daughter's eyes, not knowing why this was happening to her. I woke up breathing heavy, crying. The first time I had cried in a while. If I had any power in the world, I would make sure she never felt anything near what I have.

I was back in the training room, but the room seemed off, and I was alone. I looked around, the door was gone. I looked down and I was in my virtual human body, not the robot. It was a simulation. The new man's voice came on. "Thought it would be more efficient to train your aim in here first. I trust you're singing a different tune now but not enough to give you a live weapon."

A rifle appeared in my hands, and targets popped up on the far side of the room. I sighed, and brought the butt up to my shoulder and fired several times. None of them were good, but it felt the same as shooting in the real room. They gave me instruction on what I was doing wrong and had me do another set.

Slightly better. More instructions, more sets. I improved quickly as I got used to it. I thought about dragging my feet, but didn't know how trigger-happy they were on realizing their threat.

We swapped between different weapons, moving targets, hand to hand combat. They put AIs in to fight back and moved into live combat scenarios. A very realistic video game that was going to have real-world consequences eventually.

This went on for weeks, 16-hour days. As soon as I woke up we were right back into it. At one point I joked I should at least get a morning coffee and the new man immediately said, "You will do what I say when I say it and nothing else, understood?"

What an asshole. I wondered if they could tell what I was thinking at all, it hadn't seemed like they could get that specific from when I was testing with the scientists. I concentrated really hard on imagining flipping him off just in case. No response. "Understood."

Eventually they put me back in my robot body. There was a pistol in front of me on a table, and the new man and his goons were behind a glass barrier, bulletproof I assumed. They didn't trust me yet. I eyed the pistol, should I test the glass? Not worth the risk. What about the tank? Put the experiment to end for good. I looked behind me, but it wasn't there, there were no wires coming out of me.

"Connected you wirelessly, not taking any chances. It won't be practical once you're in the field anyways." I went to pick up the gun, but I was sluggish. I probably looked like a drunk guy trying to pick up his keys.

One of the lackeys went to work on his keyboard, "bit of an input delay, switching communication protocol." Whatever he did I started being able to move as normal. I picked up the pistol, 15-round cartridge, one of the same models they simulated for me. I pointed it at the target, it felt exactly the same as in the training. I fired through all the rounds. Just a few were off-target, and only slightly. The team gave some subdued claps. The new man kept his arms crossed, but gave the slightest smile.

The training continued for several months. Most of it was still in the simulator, but they pulled me out for specific tests. How fast could I run in the robot body, how much could I lift, how high could I jump. They'd make adjustments, replace parts, see how much they could push those numbers.

They added night vision and infrared, radar and lidar. It was overwhelming processing 360 degrees of input, but as I acclimated it became more of a 6th sense instead of constantly seeing in all directions. They installed retractable knives, missiles, smoke generators, heavier armor, more energy dense batteries. Made me into their little discount Iron Man.

I was a perfect student. Never hinted a threat or talked back. I wanted them to think they had tamed me, although maybe they had. I told myself there would be a window, where the new man and the different man would be vulnerable at the same time. Maybe if I killed them both no one else would have the drive to make me a soldier, or follow through on their threats.

The day I feared finally came. They found a use for me. Some dictator they had installed stopped funneling rare earth metals to the billionaire who funded the president's campaign. I was to go in, robot body cloaked in black, and tear up his palace. A mysterious bulletproof man with no clear allegiance to send a message. Easy for the government to deny, but the dictator would know.

Only the new man was there during the briefing. I didn't see any way out. I hoped they would keep me in my body the whole time, I still had no idea where I was. Inside the Pentagon? Area 51? A hidden research lab under a field in North Dakota? But they sent me back to my apartment, and when they brought me back I was in the cargo area of a van, winding up a hill. The van had no driver. They could do that part remotely but needed me to personally pilot their murder machine.

The new man's voice told me that I was close to the dictator's palace. I'm to kill and destroy as much as possible, but make sure the dictator stays alive. I thought that the dictator might be the only one I could really justify killing. He's the one who sold out his country.

I curled and opened my fingers a few times. It felt natural. It seemed however they were transmitting me into my body was working fine all the way out here. Low orbit satellites maybe?

I looked over the loadout they gave me. A couple pistols holstered into my thighs. A grenade launcher built into my left arm. A flamethrower built into my right. Each arm had an extendable blade as well. A machine gun laid next to me on the floor.

A large gate with a guardhouse appeared ahead. The van came to a stop a few hundred feet away and four soldiers started to approach, two on each side. The new man told me to get out, kill them, then make the rest of the way on foot. I slung the machine gun onto my back and pushed open the back doors of the van. I pulled out one of the pistols and aimed as I stepped around the left side of the vehicle.

The two I could see pulled up their rifles and shouted at me in their language. I shot twice, dead center in both of their foreheads. The other two were already shooting by the time they came into my view but it didn't affect my aim. They couldn't hurt me, there was nothing to fear. Two more shots and they dropped as well.

One of the four was shaking on the ground, there was still awareness in his eyes. I crouched down and crushed in his skull with my palm, and he went limp. If I was to do this I was going to minimize their suffering. I would try not to pull out the machine gun, it was too messy.

My radar picked up an extra person on the floor of the guardhouse. I glanced away, hoping I could leave him alone, but a tuft of hair poking up from behind the glass gave him away first. The new man ordered me to kill him also, and I walked into the frame of the door. He had shrank himself into the corner, whispering into a radio while trying to hide. His other hand, shaking, clutched a combat knife. He sprung at me, driving the knife forward, only for it to bounce off my chest. I saw my robotic eye reflected in his own, and recognized his fear as he realized I was not even a man. I grasped his throat and quickly squeezed, making sure the spine broke, and walked back outside

The gate was 15 feet tall. I did a standing jump and easily cleared it, then took off down the road at a 30mph jog. In other circumstances, using the body this way would be exhilarating, but I felt only dread at what I was running towards.

Two humvees approached from up ahead, mounted machine guns firing at me. I raised my left hand and launched a grenade, landing right between the vehicles. The explosion blew them both off the road into the trees on either side. I ran up to one of them and found bloodied, screaming men. I quickly shot them, and the new man ordered me to continue forward as I went to do the same for the others.

"They're hurting." I said.

"Not your concern, keep moving."

"It will only take a second."

"Do I need to enforce consequences?"

I paused, looking over the other wreck, hearing the men cry out. "No Sir, continuing forward." And I ran toward the palace.

It was a grand mansion, with beautifully manicured gardens, and masterfully carved statues dotted the estate. I wondered what percentage of their GDP went into building it. I torched it all. Tore down the sculptures.

As I went inside I used my speed and blades to quickly behead soldiers as they came. Servants ran. The new man commanded me to kill them. Luckily more soldiers rounded the corner and shot at me, and I focused my attention on them.

I found my way to the dictator's safe room, blew down the door. He stood in the middle of the room with a soldier on either side. A second later it was only him as I lowered my pistol back down. "Please, I'm sorry. I'll do whatever you want," he pleaded, raising his arms. In the back of the room, a girl, probably 8 or 9, cowered in the corner, squeezing a stuffed animal.

"Kill the daughter." The new man commanded.

"She's just a girl, he's already gotten the message."

"It's his daughter or yours." I could hear his sick evil smirk through his words. He loved being able to control me.

I pulled up the pistol and aimed, she cried for her papa, tears streamed down her cheeks. I pulled the trigger. The dictator fell to the ground, clutching his knee. I turned and ran, his pained groans and her scared screams behind me.

The new man didn't speak till I got out of the palace, simply telling me to go back to the van. As I returned, fleeing soldiers and staff cried and fell to the ground as I raced past. I crawled back into the van and closed the doors, and the van started to drive itself back down. I was pulled back into my apartment.

I was expecting to immediately be chewed out, threatened, but I was left alone for a good while. Several days went by until I was spoken to again. They pulled me into the virtual training room, and a video appeared taking up one of the walls. It was aerial footage, a residential street in the early evening. A car pulled into a driveway, and a woman stepped out holding some groceries. My wife. A black SUV pulled up and masked men got out with batons. She turned, surprised, as one of the men grabbed her and pulled her to the ground. The others surrounded her and hit her legs, over and over as she screamed. They made sure the screams reverberated through the entire room.

The passenger door opened and a young girl, my daughter, ran out and into the neighbor's front yard. She was already being let in by the neighbor by the time one of the goons noticed. He went to go after her but the leader waved him off. My wife stopped screaming and they withdrew, leaving her bloody and mangled in the yard.

I collapsed to my knees. I took on this life to make my family's life better, and now my wife was beaten because I refused to kill a child. My daughter had to see it. And they would continue to hurt my family unless I did what these gross, twisted men wanted.

"We'll give you time to rethink where your place is. Your work will resume in a few days."

I felt hollow as I waited. I still had my agency, how could I use it now?

Training continued, and I returned to being the perfect soldier. My only vocabulary was, "Yes, sir." A few more weeks and they pulled me into my robot body for a new briefing.

The new man stood 20 feet from me next to a map of some Middle Eastern country, the remote he used to control me nestled in his hand. His lackeys were sitting around a long rectangular metal table, and I was at the far end.

I took a check of my body. I had use of all my limbs, weapon systems were disabled. As he started to talk about whatever dumb thing he had planned for me, I ripped off the corner of the table like tearing off a scrap of paper, and flung the sheet like a playing card, sailing through the air into the new man's wrist.

As the remote dropped, I flipped the table sideways, laptops and papers flying into the air. I lunged towards the new man. He was squeezing his wrist, trying to staunch the flow of blood, looking up at me as I reached him. He dove for the remote, but I grabbed him by the back of his collar, then smashed his face into the wall, dragging him across the concrete. It left a red smear.

I let him go, he didn't move, and I picked up the remote. I unlocked my weapon systems, then crushed the remote. The lackeys were now shooting at me and an alarm was going off. One was scrambling for his laptop, probably looking to shut me down from there. I kicked him out of the way, then snapped the computer in half. I swiped a pistol out of another's hands before leaping towards the door.

It was locked. I rammed my shoulder into it and it barely gave. It was steel, and reinforced remarkably well. I stepped back into the middle of the room, then launched a grenade. I ran into the smoke and crashed into the door, tearing it clean off this time and finding myself in a nondescript white hallway.

Three soldiers appeared from a side passage and began firing. I shot two in the heart and then the hand of the third, disarming him. "Where is my brain?" I yelled as I approached. He pointed down the hallway he came from, which ended in a single door. I sprinted down the length of the hallway and slammed through this door as well.

There was my tank. The different man knelt next to it, a panel open, and he was digging through some wires. He looked at me. "Killing me won't save your family, you think I'm the only one pulling the strings here?" But I wasn't here for him.

I shot at the tank. The glass cracked and the fluid I floated in started to dribble out. The different man yelled, and as I squeezed a second time he grasped a handful of wires and pulled. My world went dark.

Had it worked? Was I dead? I didn't jerk back into my consciousness. I didn't return to my apartment. I didn't really feel like I was thinking, just adrift in a dream of nothingness. I settled into my eternal slumber.

A voice pierced the veil. It was warm and kind. I felt so foggy, it was hard to pick up the actual words. I felt a jolt, a rush of energy permeated me, and I snapped back into awareness. The voice came again, clear and crisp. "Can you hear me, friend?" It was the man.

I affirmed I could, and he explained that I had succeeded in destroying my old tank. My brain was put in a special freezer they kept there for me, and the research team was called back in to revive me. I had

been in a coma for a few weeks now, but I seemed to have avoided long term brain injury. I'm remarkably resilient for a brain. I asked if the different man was there.

"It's just me and a few trusted colleagues." He answered.

"Did you mean what you said when you promised you'd help me see my family again?"

"I did, I just don't know what I can do for you."

I explained what they did to my wife, threatened against my daughter. What they made me do. He explained if they showed me the video in my simulation, he'd probably be able to extract the data and leak it, create public pressure to help me. They wouldn't be able to do anything else to my family at least under that scrutiny. It would take some time to dig through. He was going to put me back under and make it seem like I was still in the coma, give himself some time to find it.

"If we never speak again, I'm sorry for everything I've put you through." And then I drifted back to nothingness.

When I came to again, I was in my void. No stimulus, no body. I called out, but there was no response back. And so I waited. Sometimes I was dreaming. It was like it was at the beginning. I dreamt 30, 40 times maybe, before I felt myself pulled back out.

I wasn't back in a body, just plugged into a camera. It was dark, some weak fluorescent lighting cast an eerie glow over tall stacks of crates, and two figures stood in front of me. One had a horribly disfigured face, half of his nose was missing. But I recognized the eyes, the new man.

One of his lackeys was with him, laptop perched on the lip of a crate and a cord coming towards me. "All life support systems are functional, he's hooked into the power here, should be self-sufficient for a long time."

The new man grinned, the center of his lip completely gone, and he spoke with a lisp. "See what you've done to me. The monster you made me into." I didn't have a microphone, but I thought that the outside finally matched the inside. "But I still win. I'll get government funded plastic surgery, a different man will take the fall, but you... You will be here, rotting. The storage here is from the Vietnam War. Hasn't been touched since, probably never will be. Luckily Uncle Sam is a hoarder. Go to hell."

The feed cut off, and I was in the void. I was...happy. The man got the info out, my family would be safe. I didn't have to hurt anyone else. I could rest.

I stayed like that for a very long time, and then I continued to stay that way. The only time I had any substance was when I dreamt. Sometimes it felt like the dream would go on for a lifetime, and I'd play out whatever story I conjured for myself before it would inevitably dissolve around me. Sometimes the emptiness seemed to drag on indefinitely. I would wonder if I had finally died and this was eternity, but I always came back.

Why could I feel, hear, taste, smell in my dreams but not when I was awake? It was the same brain. The researchers had simulated this all for me, could I possibly do it myself? I had the time.

So this became my new goal, trying to conjure sensations and objects for myself from my own volition. There was no progress still for a long while, as I twisted my brain and tried every angle of how to think something into existence. But my wakefulness and sleep became more ordered again, more defined.

When I was asleep I tried to pull out what about my dreams allowed me to experience, and to have control. I became very good at lucid dreaming, but how could I translate that control?

In one of my dreams, I was walking in an orchard. I could feel the breeze, the smell of spring, and the warmth of the sun. I felt the familiar fading of it ending, and I picked one of the apples off the tree. I concentrated on the apple, the firmness of it in my hand, the deep red of it, the prick of moisture as my fingernail dug into the peel.

And it stayed. I stayed. The rest of the dream faded away, but I knew I was awake, and I had the apple. I had the apple. Something clicked, I had opened up some vital neural pathway, and I formed a world around me. The walls and floors of my apartment, the furniture, the textures, all came in layer by layer.

I walked into my kitchen, and I made myself a cup of coffee. Before this room never had a door leading out. I imagined a glass door appearing in the wall of my living room, and it appeared. I walked through, and stepped onto a balcony, a limitless white expanse before me. I sat down in a chair that formed in that moment, and I sipped on my coffee. And I painted.