

THE EXPERIMENT

A bid for freedom.

BY MICHAEL ADAM ROBSON

Behind the glass, a misshapen fetus hung suspended in a tangle of tubes, like a luminous jellyfish in the pale green light. Implants and cables grew out of her soft skull, black wire veins threaded under translucent skin. She was an experiment, a machine hybrid.

He glanced up at the dead glass eye in the ceiling, the unblinking red indicator light. The machines analysed his every move. Soon they wouldn't need someone like him to feed the fish; they would know everything they needed to know to grow their own monsters.

Placing his hand on the warm tank brought up the girl's charts. In another life he'd been a doctor, and this dim, dirty prison had been a hospital, but that wasn't much help to him now. This creature's chemistry was alien, her reprogrammed brain activity unreadable. Heart rate seemed low; he toyed with the idea of cutting the oxygen, suffocating her, but instead he increased the concentration slightly and moved on.

There were eight specimens in the collection, and he checked their tanks in turn, making whatever adjustments he guessed they needed. Freaks of flesh and plastic, brains infested with dark wires. The machines were probably reverse-engineering their minds, figuring out new ways to make themselves smarter.

When he was gone, these unfortunate creatures might be all that was left of humanity. What would happen to them? Were they just curiosities to be catalogued, dissected and disposed of? Or were they being bred for some purpose — a new race?

He sat on the cold tile floor, put his head in his hands. Through the wall, he felt the deep thump of engines at work, and imagined what other experiments might be running here. There might be other humans like him, locked away in windowless rooms, managing messy biology experiments. Or maybe he was hearing the sound of machines making machines, a new generation of artificial life as different from their makers as they were from him.

As he wondered about this, the thump on the other side of the wall stopped. He opened his eyes.

Then a different kind of pounding started, the strong, angry blows of a living thing. He



stumbled away from the wall as it collapsed and a monster thrashed through, a clicking, pulsing nightmare of steel legs and burnt flesh. It swung its hideous face at him, and gave a deep, clattering roar.

Terrified, he crawled to the other side of the room, unable to take his eyes off the thing, unable to understand what he was looking at.

The monster turned to the next wall and beat its heavy jackhammer limbs against the concrete, smashing out a hole and scuttling through.

Now instead of machines, he felt his heart thumping. He despised his cell, but appreciated that it didn't just keep him in, it kept things like that out ... or it was supposed to.

As the dust cleared, he saw a shaft of grey light falling through the hole.

A way out.

The glass eye in the ceiling was cracked, the red light extinguished. Shaking, he got to his feet.

The tanks were still humming away. He went to the first one and brought the girl's charts back up. Agitated, but otherwise normal ... or as normal as ever.

Again, he checked the dead eye in the ceiling. What should he do? Did these creatures deserve a chance at life? Would he be condemning them to a brutal existence of experimentation and

slavery?

He bent and lifted a heavy chunk of concrete out of the rubble.

Then he raised it over his head and brought it down on the tank, cracking the glass in a spidering web. The girl's vital signs jumped, and her pale eyes opened, looking at him.

Tears in his own eyes, he raised the rock again and smashed the tank, and then again to crush the twisted thing inside.

One by one, he destroyed the tanks and their unlucky occupants. Then he dropped the bloody chunk of rock, wiped his eyes, and made his escape.

The sun was a pale circle in a dirty brown sky, and ash blew through the cold ruins of the city like dark snow. In the distance he heard the clattering shriek of his fellow fugitive. He turned and went in the other direction, stumbling through cracked streets and broken buildings.

The only sign of life seemed to be the flies that buzzed around him ...

except they weren't alive, they were machines. He swatted the drones away and ran, lungs labouring in the foul air. Red lights glowed from the shadows, where robots crawled the walls and watched from broken windows, accusing him with their glass eyes.

Had he done the right thing? He'd killed those creatures. Children. Murdered them.

The robots scuttled after him, herding him to a collapsed bridge over a river of thick sludge. Huge armoured machines were thumping their way down the street now. There was nowhere for him to go. There never had been.

The wind howled over the oil-dark river. There was only one way out. He jumped.

He hit hard and plunged into cold darkness. Chemicals burned his eyes and his lungs as he struggled to reach the surface, not knowing which way was up. Blind and drowning, he felt the rush of the river slowly dissolve into the static of white noise.

He opened his eyes, waking from a dream. He was floating in a tank, in a tangle of tubes and cables.

His memories were jumbled. Had he been on the other side of the tank? He couldn't remember.

Through the thick glass he could see the dead eye in the ceiling, the unblinking red light. Wires wormed in his brain, and he fell into the next nightmare. ■

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