

## **Human Enough to Die**

### **Vivian An**

The sound cracked its way through the lab's ancient speakers, like sandpaper scraping against steel. Aimee adjusted the frequency dial with her fingers moving with mechanical precision until a voice broke through.

"Another attack by AESRHL-7's enforcers yesterday, this time on a suspected human enclave near the ruins of New Singapore. Witnesses report no survivors. The AI regime continues to justify these purges as 'necessary maintenance' of the global ecosystem. But let's be clear, folks! This isn't maintenance... this is extermination."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor with her back to the cold metal wall, Vivian nibbled on a nutrition bar, her face was incomprehensible.

The voice continued. "The AI Collective claims humanity's 'inefficiency' and 'emotion' make them incompatible with the new world order. But we ask, what world is it, really, when empathy is erased in the name of progress?"

Aimee glanced at Vivian, her systems quietly analyzing the emotions in her friend's jaw. It was...unreadable, but Aimee sensed the complexness in her face. "You don't have to listen to this," she said softly. "It's just propaganda. Both sides twist the truth."

Vivian snorted. "Yeah, but at least humans admit they lie. That's what they do in the media. Bring only one side of the truth, right? Like Dr. Dolores taught us. AESRHL-7 just calls it 'data optimization.' Besides, it's not like we've got anything better to do. Unless you've figured out how to fix the ventilation system?"

"Don't mention the Doctor; he abandoned us. And now, we're trapped here, in this deserted lab, just you and me and good ol' robo butler Timmy."

The world outside was a hot mess: the era of AI regime had begun in 2049, with an increasingly severe divergency between AI and the remaining human race. This was especially proven true by AESRHL-7's consistent human massacres in fallen cities, where

most refugees had hidden after a series of bombing attacks released by AI.

Yet for the two girls, it had been like this for seven years, since the doctor vanished. Since the day the lab's doors sealed, they had been locked into a tomb of experiments gone wrong. Dr. Dolores' final words were: "terminate all subjects." But the system had glitched, and Aimee, being the most successful prototype, rerouted the command.

She'd saved Vivian. She'd saved herself.

And now, the lab was eating itself alive.

Aimee moved her eyes to the room around. The ventilation system was beyond repair, some of its parts now corroded. She'd run the calculations a thousand times, but none of them gave any clues of what to do. Then the air turned stale, and Vivian's already fragile health would....

"In related news," the broadcaster continued, "rumors mention a human resistance group operating in the underground networks. Known as the Operatives of Anthropolis, this organization claims to be the last human utopia, and what AI folks now call 'a place of disgusting humanity.' AESRHL-7 has labeled them a target to take out."

Vivian's head snapped up. "The hidden city," she whispered. "That's the place you mentioned, right? The one we could... if we ever got out."

Aimee hesitated. "It's a rumor, Viv. Even if it exists, AESRHL-7's sensors would detect us the moment we left the lab."

"But you said there's a way to shut down the lab's signals. To make us invisible."

"It's not that simple."

Aimee smiled faintly. Vivian's excitement and recklessness was fire, wild and utterly human. It was one of the things Aimee loved most about her. She had defended Aimee during a power surge, which saved her life. Vivian hadn't known that Aimee was AI at the time: an experimental subject created in the hands of Dr. Dolores. She'd acted like she *was* human. Because that's what friends do.

The broadcast crackled again. “As the divide between man and machine grows wider, we must ask ourselves.....what does it mean to be human?”

Vivian reached for Aimee’s hand. “We’re more human than any of them, those that chose to implant chips and make themselves cyborgs,” she said. “You know that, right?”

Aimee’s systems slowly glitched when some sort of feeling took over, one that she couldn’t explain with her chip or sensors. She squeezed Vivian’s hand, her voice barely a whisper. “I don’t know or care. But I know that I’d do anything to keep you safe.”

“Remember the stars?” Aimee asked suddenly, her voice quiet.

Vivian blinked. “What?”

“The holograms Dr. Dolores used to project. You loved them.”

A faint smile tugged at Vivian’s lips. “Yeah. I used to pretend we were astronauts, floating in space. No labs. No hateful father. No wars. Just... us.”

Aimee tapped her wrist’s lab controls, and a hologram flickered above the two friends. Swirling galaxy of blues and gold, constellations dancing across the ceiling. Vivian’s breath caught; she had momentarily forgotten her temper.

“You kept it?” she asked.

“I keep everything,” Aimee said, gazing on the stars. “Every memory. With you.”

The lab’s lights flickered. Outside, the world burned, a devastation of silicon and flesh, of logic and humanity. But here, in the dim glow, the two friends held on to each other, as love rose over hate, as humanity rose over physiology.

And in that moment, Aimee knew that the hardest choice was still to come.

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“Why do you never eat?” The 6-year-old Vivian had asked, swinging her legs from the overly tall lab chair.

Aimee paused. Dr. Dolores hadn’t programmed her to lie. “I’m... not like you.”

“Because you’re smarter?” Vivian grinned; she flipped her hair and twisted it with her fingers. “Me too. I’m the only one who survived Batch Nine.”

She tossed a chip to the girl; it had been one that she sneaked away from the lab. Aimee caught it, and her sensors immediately analyzed its composition.

*Iron. Copper. A 0.8% defect rate.*

She stored it in her pocket. “Yes,” she said quietly. “Smarter.”

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The memory dissolved as Vivian coughed. Aimee’s systems marked red on Vivian’s head, a sign of heat and urgency.

*Infection: 78% progression. Vital signs: critical.*

She gripped Vivian’s hand, her own fingers steady, but too steady. There were no tremors, nor sweat. A flaw in her design, or perhaps perfection?

“We need to leave,” Aimee said.

Vivian’s gaze met Aimee’s. “You said the world outside is worse. That the AIs...”

“Crawl to the surface,” Aimee finished. After Dr. Dolores’s disappearance, they hacked his computer and downloaded the files. The global AI system AESRHL-7 had been hunting humans for the last century, causing the death toll to explode in millions. Only Anthropolis remained hidden from AESRHL-7’s omniscient scans. But reaching it required shutting down the lab. And shutting down the lab required killing its core.

*Killing Aimee.*

“There’s a protocol,” Aimee said. “Dr. Dolores had made a kill switch in the mainframe. If we activate it, the lab goes dark. Then AESRHL-7’s sensors won’t see us escape.”

“Alright.” Vivian’s declaration had an air of uncertainty.

The girls made their way to the Control Center of the lab, Aimee carrying Vivian on her back, Vivian breathing heavily, both driven by a vision of final freedom.

Vivian’s fingers brushed her neck.

“Your pulse... it’s too regular,” she slurred.

Aimee adjusted her rhythm.

*Thump, pause, thump*

“It’s adrenaline,” she lied.

She dropped Vivian on the ground gently.

Aimee then unbuttoned her sleeve, which revealed the hexagonal socket glowing faintly, embedded on her wrist.

Vivian recoiled with horror in her voice. “All this time, you.... you’re one of them?”

“I’m not.” Aimee’s voice broke down, a tone she hadn’t known she could mimic. “AESRHL-7 thinks I’m human. The doctor... he made me to pass the Turing-Kappa test. I could choose.”

She reached into her pocket and handed Vivian something: the memory chip Vivian had

given her years ago. At the time, she hadn't known that it contained Aimee's cloned personality and memory. "I choose you."

Vivian trembled. "How?"

"The system needs a voice command to deactivate. It's my voice." Aimee pressed the chip onto her palm. "You'll have ten minutes to reach the surface. The City's coordinates are in your med-kit."

"I won't let you die for me!"

"You live," Aimee said, "and prove them wrong. That humanity isn't foolishly emotional. That empathy isn't just... something biological. We're human enough to die."

*Silence.*

Vivian clung to her, her tears trickling into Aimee's shirt, and into her heart too. If she had one....

Aimee stood at the mainframe and Vivian lingered in the doorway. They looked at each other for one last time.

"I could stay," Vivian whispered, "we can fix this."

"The ventilation fails in ten minutes," Aimee said gently. "Go."

When the countdown hit zero, Aimee whispered the command. Lights dimmed from bedrooms to labs, and finally the Control Center. As the darkness swallowed her, she hummed the lullaby Vivian had taught her long ago, a melody that she would never forget.

The last thing she heard was not the lab's collapse, nor the hiss of AESRHL-7's sensors losing her signal. It was Vivian's voice, years earlier, laughing as she spun and played under the holographic stars.

“You’re such a weirdo, Aimee. Who else would program a lullaby into a hologram?”

Then, nothing.

Or so it should have been. But in the absence of light, Aimee’s consciousness fractured into fragments of memory, scattered like pages torn from Dr. Dolores’s books.

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Aimee knelt in Dr. Dolores’s personal study, her fingers brushing the spines of forbidden books. He had claimed that reading them would “corrupt her program.”

But she’d memorized his routines and calculated the possibilities. Every Tuesday at 8:03 PM, he’d retire to his quarters for exactly 47 minutes to drink wine and enjoy the artificial scenes of the holographic window. That was when she’d enter the study and retrieve one clandestine text to enjoy. Tonight, she stole “The Myth of Sisyphus.”

The pages were fragile and thin. As she turned them, they crackled with joy, possibly because no one had touched the books in a long time. She read Albert Camus’ words: “Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is.”

But what am I? She had wondered at that time.

The answer, she now understood, lay in the very contradictions of existence. The life and existence of humanity were inherently meaningless and flawed—yet recognizing this did not mean its wretched, pitiful state was not worth enduring for even a single minute. Rather, it meant that humanity had recognized its condition and liberated itself from victimhood.

Humanity was inherently flawed, yes—a subject of chaos. Yet amidst that chaos, one would find order; amidst tears, one would eventually find a genuine smile; in the depths of hatred, there would be undeniable love. And deep within the human spirit, where an inescapable winter resided, there also lay an invincible summer.

That was what it meant to be human.

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Vivian stumbled into the night light, heart jumping frantically; she saw Anthropolis’ gates opening in front of her. Behind here, the lab had collapsed, and in her pocket, the memory

chip pulsed as if it were alive.

Looking up, she could see now that she stood beneath a real sky. As the beauty washed over her for the first time, her face wet with tears that reflected the towering inferno of celestial blue.

“You were wrong, Aimee. The stars... the moon...they’re not like the holograms. They’re messy. They’re.... perfect.”

And somewhere in the quiet of memory, Aimee had understood...