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FAMILIAR FACES

Samantha Edwards

“Boot Facewall,” Sola said plainly, as she stepped into her room. The walls turned a deep black, of the kind that is impossible to penetrate, as the room’s system started up. Sola caught a glimpse of her small, animalistic face before the wall filled with brightly colored photos of herself and her friends, laughing and chatting. She smiled, which hurt her new plastic cheeks. Well, newer plastic cheeks; she got new ones all the time. She had never documented her surgeries, but she could remember them all clearly: a wide face with sad, brown eyes and a down-turned mouth, so that she would never accidentally look like she was having a good time; a pale, heart-shaped face with watery, light blue eyes, so that everyone would know she was feeling better, but still mourning; a grey complexion with black eyes, so that everyone knew she was angry that it had happened...the list went on. Her body had undergone countless modifications, fluctuating with her feelings. The people at the BodMod Lodge loved her and she loved them.

Her most recent surgery was a complete makeover. Her skin was tanned in a way one might consider sun-kissed, though uv rays could never color synthetic flesh. She had been stretched to six foot four, from her average height of five foot two, and loaded with a plastic structure. Her scrawny arms were now stuffed with hard muscle. The slant of her eyes had been turned up slightly and the skin pulled tight to accommodate their new oval shape. They had also been dyed a bright violet and her pupils were encircled with a ring of crystals in the shape of her engagement band. Tilted eyebrows hovered above, making her look eternally angry. When she smiled her expression was wicked, due to the fact that her teeth were sharpened to as much of a point as City Protocol allowed. Her nose was faintly upturned. Her cheeks, one marred by a faux scar that had been inspired by a hoverski accident when she was thirteen, jutted out under her eyes, and her chin went down in a deep, thin triangle. All in all, Sola loved her new body; her features were frightening in an attractive way. It looked much better than it had on the program she’d purchased it from, which had charged her nearly all of her saved up points. Yet, deep down, she knew the way she looked was not how she felt in her heart. That was one thing the BodMod Lodge couldn’t alter.

Withholding a sigh, she looked at the photos more closely, though she knew exactly how everyone was standing, how their faces were turned, if they were smiling or talking, where their eyes were focused...she had stared at these photos for more than was healthy for the last five years. The pictures had never changed, never been switched out for recent ones that held more fun times with her favorite people. She had never posted more stories than the ones that captioned these still shots of her life. She could hardly recognize herself among the people in the photos anymore.

“Welcome home, Miss Thanos,” the room said kindly with the rich voice of a

woman Sola had never met. That faceless voice had held her together for longer than she'd wanted to stay in one piece. "Congratulations, again, on your engagement. Have you set the date? Would you like me to log it in your Facecalendar?"

"No, thank you," Sola said without inflection, re-pinning her strawberry hair behind her ear.

The room was silent for a moment and Sola's unblinking eyes absorbed the photos before her. "Would you like to play again today?" the voice asked.

"Every day," the girl's answer was very quiet, but the room heard all. The Facewall flashed black again, but only for an instant this time. Again, her reflection made Sola smile.

"Uploading now."

Sola had already stripped down to her undershorts and tank top and attached the connectors. She felt the energy hum through them into her chest, her arms, her legs, and most thrillingly, her brain. She closed her eyes and was immediately transported to the time when everything was all right.

When she opened her eyes again, her room was as she had left it a moment ago, except that he was standing before her, near the door. "Hira," she whispered. Sola smiled, feeling a painful joy in her heart to see his lovely face as he stepped closer.

"You got a new face."

"I was tired of the old one."

Hira frowned, an action that always upset Sola. "This one is scary."

Sola grinned, her eyes roaming his plain, ivory face. "No, it isn't. It's exciting."

He stared at her for a long time, but she didn't mind. "I suppose it's a little exciting." His thin lipped smile reached his eyes and made her feel like she was shining just as brightly as his deep browns—the brown that was almost black until you looked at it with all of yourself. The smile exposed the dimple he refused to Surge away. He leaned down to kiss her. This was always where things went wrong; Sola thought of Keefe and Chloe and suddenly they were there.

"Sola!" Keefe entered the room with his largest smile. His skin was even whiter than Hira's, even though he got twice as much sun. Hira stepped aside so that the three could exchange hugs. Keefe took her newly sharpened chin in his large hand and turned her head from side to side. "Your Surge looks great. Mind if I clone?"

"Of course not." A comfortable second of silence passed, then she turned to her best girl friend, Chloe. She was just as Sola remembered her. Her beautiful blonde hair was in an intricate style, so that her soft face was completely exposed. Her skin was flawless and she hadn't even needed surgery to get it that way. She was Chloe, with each of her fingernails painted a different color. The hues swirled with her heartbeat, though the purple neck tattoos didn't move. "What's the plan?" she

asked them, before she could cry over their beauty.

Chloe smiled, her polycarbonate teeth shining brightly in the sunlight that was now streaming into the room. “No plans today, Bones.” The nickname made Sola’s heartache.

“You can’t call her that anymore,” Keefe joked, grasping her new muscles. “Check out these guns.” He laughed his obnoxious laugh that made the rest of them giggle over and over.

Sola turned to face Hira again, but her contentment promptly vanished when she saw Cain behind him. The others turned to where she was looking. Chloe smiled, more wickedly than the sweetness of her face suggested she was capable.

“Hey there, Reject.” She’d never called anyone by his or her real name. It was bound to get her into trouble one day.

“Why wasn’t I invited to party?” he asked, almost pouting. “Why don’t I ever get invited?” His eyes flashed dangerously and Sola knew it wasn’t any Surge he’d had that made them do it. She had a terrible feeling in her stomach and she thought she might throw up. Maybe that would stop this. She tried not to think about him anymore, but there was Cain Cariad’s face, branded into her mind. “Why don’t I have a fun nickname and a Facewall full of good times?”

“Because you’re pointless?” Keefe offered—always the joker. His laugh didn’t make Sola want to join him this time. “Get it? Pointless...point-less.” Sola wished he would take it back. Cain grimaced and if Sola’s skin could have produced goose bumps, it would have. She almost felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end as Cain lifted his head up. Her body began to tingle, as if it were trying to be numb.

“You think you’re so much better than me.” He raised his hand and in it he held an L-shaped piece of black metal. Sola had never seen one until Cain had brought it to them five years ago. But now, she knew exactly what it was and what it did. “But you can hurt too.” He squeezed a part of the metal and a very loud noise made Chloe jump. Sola didn’t jump anymore. She expected it now. But her friends, they never knew....

Hira fell to the ground and a brilliant liquid spilled out of his head. With a cry, Sola fell to the ground and pulled him into her lap, but he was already gone. She turned as another shot rang out and she saw Keefe hit the ground, his left cheek and jaw mutilated. Another shot fired. Then Chloe was beside Keefe. The noise sounded again.

Sola leaped off her bed, the connectors coming loose from her head. She looked down at her hands and could almost see the blood staining her hands again, threatening to taint the silver ring that lived on her left hand. The ring was still there, sterilized now. Still, the sight of it made her dizzy. She ripped the other connectors

off of her, not caring that some of her synthetic skin went with them. “Shut down Facewall!” she said through tears. The walls, filled with the happy photos again turned black, then gray. Sola got no comfort out of her wicked reflection this time.

She glanced at the door. He was standing there. She looked down, but all the connectors were still on the floor. She was not in the game.

“Hira,” her voice was a whisper, her tone disbelieving.

He smiled as he walked into the room and embraced her. His face was not as it was in the game. She had not remembered it correctly, even with the pictures on her Facewall.

“You got a new face,” he said when he’d stepped back.

“I was tired of the old one,” she knew she sounded breathy, and not in a cute way, but she couldn’t believe her game life had forced itself into reality.

“I like it.”

He’d never said that before.

“Really?”

“Really. It’s very...dangerous. Sexy.”

She shook her head. “You’re dead.”

“Not anymore.”

Sola didn’t know what to say.

“The others are on their way.”

“The others?”

“Chloe and Keefe.” He gave her a concerned look. “They hung back so I could see you first.”

She reached out and touched his forehead. It would have felt like his real, smooth skin if it wasn’t being wrinkled by his furrowed brow. “You’re real.”

“Of course I’m—”

“Kiss me,” she interrupted and tilted her face upward so that he could. He seemed surprised by the demand, but smiled and leaned in to touch his lips to hers. It was nothing like in the game. “You’re real,” she said again.

“Sola!” Keefe entered the room, trailed by Chloe. Her friends hugged her and it felt so real that fresh tears emerged. She’d had no idea that her imagination had been so fake. It hurt her to know that all those years had gone by and she hadn’t been doing it right. “Hey now,” Keefe said, patting her shoulder, “Don’t cry. We’re here, we’re back.”

“How?”

“Easy,” Keefe said, grinning. “The Docs just regenerated the portions of our brains that...” he paused, unsure how to phrase it in a way they could all accept.

“...that were damaged,” Chloe finished.

Keefe flashed an appreciative look. “The cells finally accepted each other and they planted our brains back into our bodies, along with what memories and abilities they could salvage.”

“You have new Mods,” Sola observed, not wanting to imagine the procedure.

“You too,” Keefe said, taking a closer look at her face. “Your Surge looks great. You mind if I clone?”

“Of course not.” At least she’d gotten some things right.

There was a beat of silence. “You don’t seem very happy to see us,” Hira frowned.

“Oh, Hira, I’m terrified that this is a dream. It’s been so long. I thought I’d lost you forever.”

“It takes time to re-grow your brain,” Keefe pointed out. He didn’t mention how many points it cost for The Docs to grant life back. She wondered how long it had taken their families to afford it. Why hadn’t she thought to help them, instead of using her points for all these BodyMods?

“I’m so glad you’re all here.” She turned to the wall, “boot Facewall.”

“That’s depressing,” Chloe said as the pictures popped up. “You never made any new friends?”

Sola didn’t answer. What could she say? She’d been too busy playing Life with the virtual versions of them? She had been afraid that someone would kill her new friends and leave her alone again? “Room,” she said finally, deciding not to answer her friend, “take a picture of us and post it.”

“Of course,” said the woman’s voice, “stand close together and smile.”

They moved toward each other, Keefe putting an arm around Chloe and resting his elbow on Sola’s shoulder, while Hira pulled her close against his side. After a moment the picture appeared in the middle of the wall. Sola went over to it and slid it across the wall until it was at the very top. She captioned it: “They came back to me!”

She turned to them with a large smile. It had finally sunk in that they were back. “What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to get married!” Chloe said excitedly. “We think you’ve been engaged long enough.” She grinned at Hira, who looked slightly embarrassed.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

“I would have waited forever,” she said softly. Then, his face began to fade away. At first, blackness hit the edges of her vision and all she could see was his face, but then the blackness swallowed that, too.

“You can fix her, right?” Hira asked The Doc that had come out to the lobby.

“Eventually, yes,” his voice was reassuring and the trio relaxed.

“The surgeries she underwent did a number of damages to her system. BodyModification is not meant to occur so frequently at such extremes. It will take years to fix the breakage.”

“Years?” Hira paled, “how many?”

“We estimate about five, once we consider how long it should take you to get us the points necessary for the procedure.”

Keefe put his head in his hands, Chloe teared up, and Hira fell back into his chair. “Five years?”

“About then we can replant the brain,” the Doc answered.

“Did she—did she die?” Hira forced himself to ask.

“No, she never died. But she is very sick. Her brain shut her body down in order to preserve the health she still had. We removed her brain from her body so that the sickness cannot reach and destroy it.” He gave an apologetic look as he returned to his other patients.

As the three were leaving the hospital, Chloe turned to the boys. “She waited five years for us, I’m sure we can wait five years for her.”

They parted ways after that, not wanting to celebrate their first day of being alive again anymore. It wouldn’t be the same without Sola. Hira returned to her room, where they hadn’t bothered to shut down the Facewall before calling for help.

“Greetings, Hira Able,” the room said, “you still have access to Sola Thanos’ Facewall. What would you like to do?”

“Just looking at the photos, thank you.”

The picture they’d taken only a couple hours ago held Hira’s attention for a long time. He couldn’t believe that it was the first picture, the first life, Sola had had since his death, since Chloe and Keefe’s death. He wondered if he would take pictures while she was gone. Would she be angry, if he and the others enjoyed each other’s company while she was away? She couldn’t begrudge them for staying together, right? She had been alone, but they didn’t have to be.

He opened a photo of himself and Sola from when they’d celebrated their first anniversary. It was of the four friends playing in leaf piles. He looked hard at the picture, roaming his gaze over Sola’s big-cheeked smile, her perfect teeth, her soft caramel brown hair, and her loving, sparkling emerald eyes. Her face was so open and friendly—pretty. Nothing like the face in the new picture, which was dangerous, sharp, and impassive. Had the death of the three of them really killed all her joy? He remembered her lack of enthusiasm when they’d come back to her. It could have been shock, after all those years of not having them, but Hira feared it was

more than that. Could it be she was incapable of happiness now? Had they taken too long to return? He tried to find the true Sola in the nearly lifeless purple eyes above him. He wondered if the woman he loved was still underneath that hard mask of plastic and synthetic.

