



Soul of Theseus

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The rain fell in torrents. Athena stuck to the overhangs of the shops lining the street. The most recent fight had left a part of her circuitry exposed and she didn't want to risk letting any more water seep in. Her insides sloshed and hissed; the rainwater that had already leaked through her open wound was beginning to affect her electric signalling. It was all she could do to collapse outside the Mechanic's workshop. Killing machine - that's what they called me.

A deafening clang resounded. The impact of her body had left a dent in the corrugated sheet metal piled against the wall of the workshop. The Mechanic jumped back from his latest creation, accidentally flinging his soldering iron into a neighbouring mess of copper wire. "She must be back," he muttered under his breath, haphazardly stacking crates of prosthetic limbs. He climbed to the top of his newly constructed tower and poked his head outside of the window set high on the wall. "What do you want?" he shouted through the pounding rain.

Lying against the partially rusted metal, Athena turned her head upwards to face the Mechanic. A pained moan escaped her throat. She could only see the Mechanic's eyes roll in annoyance through his safety goggles before her perceptual sensors short-circuited. Her vision faded to black. Vicious killing machine.

Minerva swerved to avoid a small mass of litter on the street. The wheels of her bicycle cut an ephemeral path through a puddle of water. Perplexed, she skidded to a halt, dismounted the bicycle and walked back to the mass. It was not a piece of trash, as she had previously thought, but a small bird. Part of its wing had been mangled, perhaps by a vehicle. "Poor thing," Minerva murmured.

Light and sound came back to Athena all at once. It was the pain that came later, more slowly. She winced as she pulled herself up. She had been lying on another sheet of corrugated metal, placed on a worktable. Messy bits of wire and tools surrounded her body. What lovely hospitality, she thought.

Memory of last night's fight replayed through her mind. Her opponent had been much larger than she, with thick, sinewy muscles interlacing a nervous system of fibre-optic

tendons. She remembered scoffing at the fibre-optics: glass tubing that allowed light to reflect throughout it, carrying information. Glass is hard and brittle—foolish move on the part of his mechanic, she had thought.

He managed to land a right hook to her side, crumpling her steel ribcage with massive force. She recoiled by falling back against the ropes separating the fight from the audience, intending to roll across and face him from the north corner of the ring. He was already ready. He gripped her arm as she rebounded from the ropes and pulled. Sparks flew as her entire right side was detached, leaving exposed wires down to her oblique muscle. The audience was hollering from beyond the ring, eager for more damage to be inflicted.

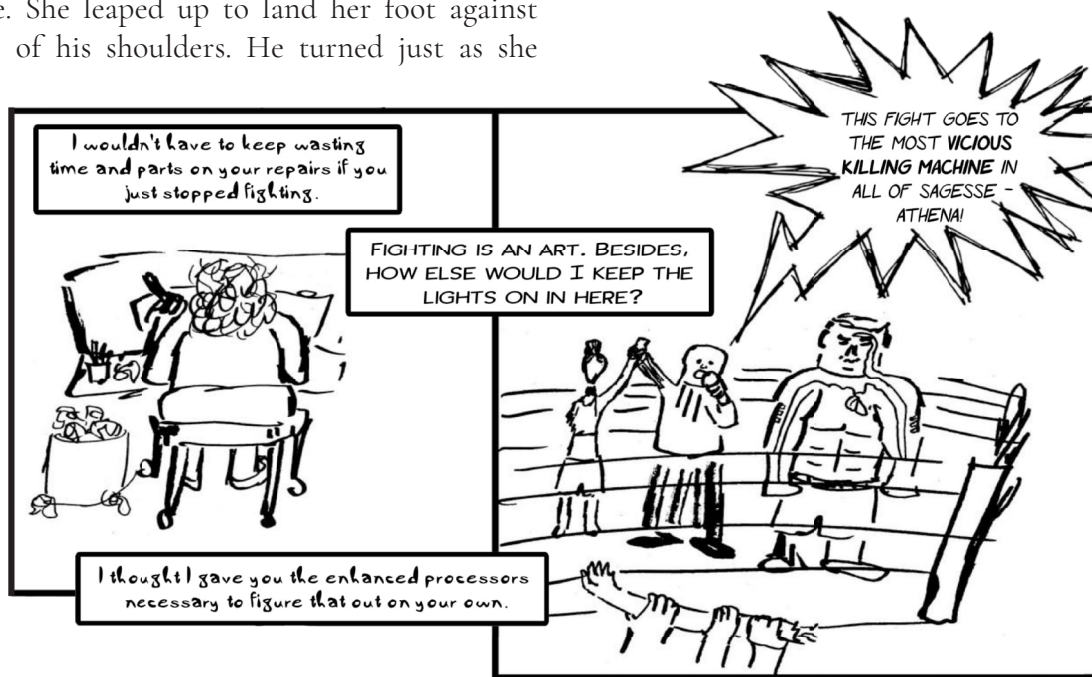
He tossed her severed arm out to his fans. A lucky group collectively lunged forward and lifted it up, quivering and shrieking in gruesome delight. Turning to wave to his fans left an opening. Athena could spot his battery supply, located between his shoulder blades. Sparks were still shooting from her side. She leaped up to land her foot against one of his shoulders. He turned just as she

kicked, propelling herself upwards and, after a graceful flip high above him, landed her entire right side against his upper back. The electric shoot-offs overheated his battery. His body began to convulse as his energy supply came in short, fleeting bursts. In his failed attempts to defend himself, he fell back against the ropes. Athena became a flurry of violence.

At the end of the match, as the orator stood holding hands between her and her opponent, he called, “This fight goes to the most vicious killing machine in all of Sageesse: Athena!” He then lifted her left arm high above their heads to the explosive uproar of the audience.

Sliding her bare feet onto the cement floor, Athena initially recoiled at the cold. She shook off this initial shock, stood and walked over to the Mechanic. He was back to his tinkering, hunched over pages of complex diagrams and messy scribbling. Occasional grunts of frustration and sounds of paper ripping punctuated the air.

“Thank you for healing me.”



The Mechanic never paused to look up from his drafting, "I wouldn't have to keep wasting time and parts on your repairs if you just stopped fighting."

Athena frowned. The Mechanic continued to scribble furiously. In agitation, he crumpled several other rolls of blueprints and tossed them towards a wastebasket already overflowing with ideas. Athena picked up a ball of paper and smoothed it out to examine the unintelligible chicken scratch that accompanied precisely drawn diagrams.

"Did you get a chance to watch the match last night?" she asked, attempting to sound unfazed and nonchalant.

"No. But judging from the injuries you sustained, it was a loss."

Athena scoffed. "That other bot had illegal fibre-optic wiring through his system!"

"Perhaps you're past the prime of your career in entertaining an idiotic fan base by bashing on other cyborgs."

"Fighting is an art. Besides, how else would I get the funding to keep the lights on in here?"

"I thought I gave you the enhanced processors necessary to figure that out on your own."

"My brain is still a human one. Your technical updates haven't changed that much."

"Is that so?" the Mechanic muttered as he scratched out several lines of notes. "But are you even really the same human?"

Athena stumbled, "What do you mean?"

"Each time you come in here for another healing, I give you new parts. I restart your programming, update your database with knowledge of new fighting strategies, manufacture different prosthetics to make you more agile in the ring—the list goes on."

"Will this conversation be turning into another nagging session about how you have to

waste your precious resources on my constant need of repairs?"

"It can. But think about it. Since you were cloned, the only original remnant of your past self is that brain. Everything else has been torn out by my pliers and replaced with a new, more enhanced version of itself. Last night, I fixed you with a new right arm that won't rip out as easily. Your limbs, internal organs, even the dead proteins that make up your hair are all different versions of the same thing."

Athena touched the end of her ponytail tenderly. "Well even as my physical body parts are different, I still have the same brain. Self-identity is contained in the mind, isn't it? This must mean I'm still the same person."

Finally, the Mechanic looked up from his work. He slid the thick goggles that had bound his head down to around his neck. His eyes bore into Athena. "Are you sure that hasn't changed either?"

Minerva woke to the sound of soft chirping. "Good morning Humphrey! Glad to hear you sounding so cheerful." She clambered out of bed to check the cardboard box inside where Humphrey settled on a nest of paper towels. The small bird fluttered, black eyes shining through the ventilation holes in the box. "The veterinarian said you could start flying free in a few days. Excited?"

Athena looked at the Mechanic inquisitively.

"Of course, I guess you could just consult your Counterpart."

"Hmm?" Athena paused her training exercise at the Mechanic's unexpected remark. "What Counterpart?"

"You were originally formed as a clone of another being, remember?" He was fidgeting with a system of pulleys in another area of

the workshop.

"Of course I remember being Rhea. She was my entire childhood."

"Rhea—that was the Original's name, huh? Well, when she underwent the procedure, she chose to have her brain split in two."

Athena immediately walked over to the Mechanic. The squeaking of the pulleys made her think she had misheard his words.

"Her brain was split in two?"

The Mechanic affirmed her thought. "Yeah, she asked for either part to be put into two separate clones of her body as well. Your Counterpart should have the same thoughts and memories of being Rhea."

Athena's eyes widened. "So there's another me out there? Where is she now?"

"Considering this surgery was performed about a decade ago, there's no telling if this Counterpart is even still active."

"Are you saying she might be dead?"

"That's a possibility."

Athena inhaled sharply. "How come I didn't know about this other clone before? I should have memory of making this decision as Rhea."

"Over your years of fighting, your system has been rebooted thousands of times. It's probable that some information may have gotten lost during updating."

"What was her name?"

The Mechanic shrugged dramatically in irritation. "How would I know? Use that big brain of Rhea's and go to the Sagesse Public Information Registrar to find out more."

Sitting behind the Sagesse Central Library Circulation Services desk, Minerva was surprised to find a younger version of herself walk into the building. The young woman looked almost exactly like herself, minus

the smile lines and wrinkles lining her own forehead now. She looked just like Rhea.

Minerva noticed how the young woman walked with an urgency to her step. She spotted Minerva behind the desk. They made eye contact as the young woman approached.

"My name is Athena. Ten years ago, a woman named Rhea underwent a surgery, where her brain was split into two and each half transplanted into two different clones of her body," the young woman twirled her umbrella nervously as she spoke.

"That's quite an origin story. It's nice to finally meet you, Athena. I'm Minerva."

Minerva's home was warm, just like her smile. Artwork lined the walls. Every piece of furniture was sleek and tasteful, a stark contrast to the Mechanic's indiscriminate messes.

"So, who are you?" Athena couldn't help herself from sounding blunt. They were sitting across from each other at a kitchen table, each holding mugs of warm tea.

Minerva laughed. "Well, I'm a librarian and an art enthusiast. My hobbies include reading, photography and baking. I'm currently caring for a small bird. His name is Humphrey and he's quite the gentleman. How about you?"

Athena was awestruck. "I – I'm a professional fighter. I don't know if you can tell, but I'm a cyborg, basically part-robot. I fight against other cyborgs in matches and - well I guess I was wondering, after all this time, how much of myself is still human. Like, how much of me is still Rhea, you know?"

"I understand. Questions of self-identity are common among Counterparts such as us. And all humans really. Were you curious about the ability of humans to change their

personalities?"

"More like our abilities to retain them." Athena clutched at her mug nervously. The warmth from the tea seeped into her hands.

"How interesting."

"I mean, based off of my—our memories, you seem so much like her. I remember, as a child, always curling up with a book in some obscure corner of the house. It was so obvious that she'd turn into a librarian!"

Minerva chuckled. "Well I also remember the recesses where we had to stay inside after picking fights with that brat Billy."

Athena burst out laughing. "Billy! That kid was always terrorizing the first graders on the jungle gym! Someone had to put him in his place." The pair smiled at each other as they recovered from their laughing. Athena hesitated before saying, "After all this time, my mechanic has been rebooting me, giving me digital updates. Honestly, I'm not sure how much of Rhea has been kept."

"I see," Minerva gestured across the table, "Athena, let's say I took that mug from your hands and broke it so that a little piece chipped off."

"Okay."

"And the piece that broke off was lost, fell to the ground and we'd never be able to find it again. What can we do to repair the mug so that it will be exactly the same as it was before?"

"I guess we could create an identical copy of the piece that was chipped off and glue it together."

"Exactly. And after this repair has been made, will the fixed mug still be the same as it was before it was broken?"

"It might look the same and have the same shape, but there would always be that little part that would be different."

"Yes, and let's say over time, I kept breaking bits and pieces off of the mug, and each time, the piece would be replaced by an exact replica of itself. After a while, no original material would remain."

"Like my cyborg parts being replaced with new prosthetics? But Minerva, you chose to remain an organic human. Doesn't that just further emphasize how similar you are to Rhea, and how different I am?"

"You could argue that as an 'organic human,' my cells have broken down and regenerated; proteins have been digested and reconstructed to create a whole new physical structure. My body at this point in time has no original cells of the clone body that was created ten years ago."

"So our physical bodies wouldn't be the same. But that doesn't address the mind. Our identities are contained in our thoughts and behaviours, which come from the brain."

"And of course, our brains are split from the same whole."

"But we're clearly not the same person."

Minerva's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "Why would you say that?"

"Well, it's obvious!" Athena exclaimed. "With your art and reading and library job—being surrounded by books. Meanwhile I get pummelled by heavy machinery for a living."

"So you're saying that we've each pursued different lives. Despite having the same upbringing—Rhea's memories—we're different people."

"Exactly. Our memories may be the same leading up to the surgery, but we've completely branched apart. We've become two entirely new people, just with the same roots. What about Rhea then?" Athena asked. "What's happened to her identity if it's not us?"

Minerva considered this for some time. She calmly sipped her tea. "Well, I would say that Rhea has been destroyed by the creation of our two identities."

Athena's eyes widened in shock. "That can't be true! Why would she ever choose to undergo such a procedure then, if it were actual suicide of the self-identity?" Her chest seemed to deflate as Minerva stated what she already knew.

"The car accident rendered that body useless. This was her best shot at continuing life," she murmured quietly. "Two separate clones for a better chance at survival, in case one body rejected the brain transplant."

Athena gazed into her mug. "If she's been destroyed, where did her soul go? Our existence still came from her brain."

"The soul is an intangible good. It's difficult to say if the very essence of a person can be physically contained, such as in the brain."

"Then am I just a machine now? How much of my humanity is left if I no longer have Rhea? Did her soul just disappear after death?"

Minerva pursed her lips. "Perhaps Rhea isn't entirely gone," she continued. "Our personal characters are shaped by a variety of factors, whether that be through physical growth or mental change. Ultimately, it was Rhea's identity that birthed both of ours. Her soul was successful in creating two distinct individuals; she lives as the very foundation of our beings."

"So the soul lives on in the people we've influenced? Does the soul make up the identity?"

"What is the identity?" Minerva replied. "What makes up a person? Aside from our skin and bones and electrical impulses?

We are a conglomerate of our thoughts and experiences, our passions and fears." She gazed intensely at Athena. "How much of you is Rhea? How much of me? I won't ever be able to give you an exact percentage. Perhaps your mechanic may be able to look into how much original brain matter physically remains and give you an exact decimal number. But that won't address the soul. The soul is immeasurable. It remains present in the things we touch." Minerva gestured to the works of art hanging from the walls. "What we create, the ideas that come alive as expressions of any kind: tangible objects, actions, words, anything that might leave an impact. We can shout out into the void and perhaps a part of our soul slips out as well, gets lost and wanders, crawls into some crevice or heart and attaches itself there to live on indefinitely, or to travel further."

"How is it possible for a soul to be split?"

"How is it possible for a soul to be contained as one whole? The soul is a living entity, capable of change and travel. Maybe by undergoing such a surgery, Rhea actually just enabled parts of her soul to travel in different directions, as these parts may have already wanted."

"How do you know? How are you sure of any of this?" Athena asked, wide-eyed.

Minerva shrugged. "I don't. These are just potentially accurate interpretations of life. Of course, this is all just speculation."

Athena leaned back in her chair. She inspected the wiring beneath her translucent skin. "Then how much of my humanity is left?" she repeated quietly to herself.

"That's up to you to decide. Many facets of life are ambiguous. It's the best I can do to use my Liberal Arts degree to give you possible interpretations. Who are you? What even

makes a person human? It is within human nature to be curious. Perhaps the mere asking of this question—the presence of this thought in your mind—makes you human."

Athena gawked at her. "This is all a lot to contemplate. I know exactly what my mechanic would say: 'I gave you the enhanced thought processors to figure it out!'" She glimpsed the clock as she spoke. "Which reminds me, I should be getting back to training soon."

"What a cheeky mechanic," Minerva chuckled. "You are definitely welcome to visit me anytime. It has been a pleasure learning about my 'other' self."

Athena shuffled out of her chair hesitantly. "Before I leave," she began, "may I please see Humphrey?"

Minerva was surprised, then she beamed at her Counterpart. "Well of course. His box is in my bedroom. In fact, he's actually due to be released soon. We can take him outside so that he can practice flying again." As she led Athena through the hallway, the fighter gawked at the works of art hanging from the walls.

"These are so beautiful. I can't wait to see a free bird up close."