

# Red Panda

by Mikey Pryvt

*In Memory of Ania Walwicz*

“It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything.”  
~ *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk.

“Love, love will tear us apart again.” ~ *Joy Division*.

They say in space no one can hear you scream, which is prolly why they brought us here.

Just wish I could remember where *here* was. Or who the fuck I used to be.

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Shards of memories tear through me. My mind is nothing but fragments. Snowflakes drifting amongst a cloud of ashes. They collapse as I try to take hold of them. All but the very few. Course they hurt the most, but they're all I have left. More they hurt, the tighter I hold onto them. Pain is the only language I know now.

What little I can recall of life in the Redoubt makes it seem like Paradise. Hunting, fishing, living off the land. Growing our own food. Forging our own tools. Total law unto ourselves. Then why the hell did I leave? That much I'll never forget: coming of age meant the honour of fighting in the Holy Crusade.

*Kill the False Gods*, the Village Elders preached. And fuck, storming Seattle's Spaceport was fun, man. We came out of the forest like a rapid wolf pack. Teeth bared and ravenous. Those Singularity-loving, machine-worshipping fools went down like pins on a drunken Saturday night at Ed's bowling alley. For all their shiny augments and fancy tech, those wanna-be post-humans barely put up a fight worth talking about. But ya know we all boasted of our epic kills as we strapped into the spaceship we seized, bracing for the real mission: the glory awaiting us in Low Earth Orbit.

But if this is what salvation amongst the stars looks like, they can fucking keep it. Fair play though, it was a hell of a pitch. My whole life, a straight trajectory from birth to this. Human bullets packed with God-fearing gumption, pointed at the heavens. Primed by the promise of Deliverance with One Good Deed. Finding out the second we docked that we were nothing but bait on a hook, and there was no line to reel us in. Never had a fucking chance.

Tradition! Fuck, I was a fool to fall for that bullshit. Can smell it from up here, wherever that is. Even if they did take my nose yesterday.

'Least, I think it was yesterday. Time's gotten a little... vague. Can't even tell ya how long it's been since the welcoming committee strapped me to a hospital bed and wheeled me into this room. My tomb. Could be a day or a thousand years. Whoever my only visitor is, the Man in White, he might as well be God now. And if you think that's heresy, I hope you choke on the word. He's all I know. My entire universe. Since... when? Ugh, I can't remember. I'd ask him, but he's never said a word to me. Not that I have ears to hear anymore. Torment is his only form of communication.

Every time he enters this blinding white room I hope it's his last. My last. Slipping in like a hungry ghost. Hovering before me with the same tray of sterilised instruments. Running his blue-gloved hand across them. Always teasing. Pausing for a torturous second on the needle with the death's head sticker. The one that could end it all. Then pulls down the concave theater mirror so I can glimpse what he's taken. And what remains. His trophies, little pieces of me, all neatly labelled and anatomically arranged. Each piece propped up for display inside a glass jar. And the rest of the jars – so many of them, as far as I can see – hauntingly empty.

Hope becomes terror. He's gonna make this last forever. A proud professional, putting the *rend* in *rendition*.

My head's strapped down. I can't look away. Can't even shut my eyes. Can't ever shut them. The eyelids were the first thing he took. Yeah, I've been measuring time in body parts. It's been one continuous stream of blood and cauterised wounds, and I'm drowning in it. Death is all I pray for now.

Can't live like this. Not that I have any say in the matter. No option but watching him work on me. Nothing to do but await his next visit. Dying on the table. Brought back again and again, over and over, for more. Less and less the man I was made by God. Limbs severed and individually mounted. Organs scooped out and held before me. Watching him hook me up to the machines that keep the remnants of my body functioning. No greater insult for the Pure Born of the Redoubt, and they fucking knew that. Back home the worst thing you could call a man was 'cyborg' or 'machine-lover'. Those were fighting words, and I bloodied my knuckles in reply more times than I can count on my phantom-fingers.

One memory is clearest: my twelfth birthday. The day I took down my first surveillance drone. Dragged that metal beast through the forest by its rotorblades. Took forever, and sliced the fuck out of my hands in the process. Made me so fucking late for the surprise party I knew was waiting for me too. But no one gave a hoot when I stumbled in with a shit-eating grin and a shotgun slung over one shoulder. Dumped that bullet-riddled drone before the entire assembled village. They lifted me up, and I'll never forget how that felt.

Yeah, we killed the drones that invaded our lands for sport, but we knew they were always watching over us from orbit. Not even the railguns our Founding Fathers built could reach the space stations the heathens called home; just let us snipe at the surveillance satellites when they passed over. Ah, those were good times! The times I cling to. Sentry duty, aiming by hand at those fast-moving specks of light desecrating God's orderly creation. By hand, of course! Just saying the word 'algorithm' aloud was enough to get double duty in the coal mines.

*Don't let a Machine do a Man's work* was the first thing they taught us in school. Drilled that in good too. Sitting round the campfire, the Village Elders would preach that for us to be truly free, we'd have to go up and storm the False Gods' strongholds. Drop off a couple of tactical nukes and ride the shockwave back to a hero's welcome. You know I volunteered the second I was eligible! Same with all my buddies. We were raised right, after all. Pure Born and Proud. No trace of man *or* machine's hand in our genetics. Only one intelligent design for us in the Redoubt.

Ever read *Starship Troopers*? Yeah, I'd never heard of it either 'til a kid from another village showed it to us. Only things we read at home were *The Bible*, *The Hunger Games* series and *The Collected Works of Ayn Rand*. But the training at Crusader Camp was just like Heinlein prophesied. By the end you could drop us naked in the wilderness and we'd find our way back to that Potemkin mock-up of the Seattle Spaceport we trained in. *Give us glory or give us death*, we'd chant as we marched back in.

For some stupid reason, I thought the glory would last forever. And that death, if it came, would at least be quick. Boy, did I ever get that wrong!

In the beginning... – Was there ever really a beginning? A time before this? Are these few memories part of the torture too? – I thought they... I mean, *he* – it's only ever Him – that *He* would ask for



I'm not here. This isn't happening.

~ Warmer... ~

Oh. My. God.

~ Yes? ~

You're the Man In The White, aren't you?

~ Hot. ~

But. What?! Oh fuck. You're... you're the one they sent us here to kill.

~ THAT'S A BINGO! ~

But they sent us to kill a God, not a Man. I-I-I... don't understand.

~ *Remember.* ~

Memory shards coalesce into a kaleidoscope. Through the prism I see myself anew. Completely dismembered. Each part, exploded into a pink mist. Each part, still functioning.

Imagine a body. Skinned. Dissected. Skeleton at the core. Muscles floating above bones. A heart, still beating, ripped from the chest. My chest. The rest of the organs – my organs! – orbiting it. A solar system of meat and offal.

The pink mist – or it is some kind of gel? – keeps my body – my corpse? – alive. Wires snake out of my brain and congregate into a crown of thorns. Some kind of antenna? I stare at it and find myself staring back at me with unlidged eyes. Strapped to a hospital bed. You know the rest...

But it's just a projection. A false reality. Prison walls made of pixels, beamed down my optical nerve.

There is no Man in White. Never was. Just a vast intelligence permeating the space from infinite dimensions. Controlling every atom of my body. Every thought in my mind.

I am filled with awe. If I still had knees, I'd fall to them in submission.

~ Not bad, huh? ~

~ Won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize at the 4048 Vienna Biennale for that installation. ~

I'M A FUCKING ART PROJECT?!?!

~ By Rokko's Ballsack, man. There are worse fates. ~

~ *Trust me.* ~

Thousands of years of flashbacks flit through my mind's eye like a burning newsreel. Children starving in climate refuge camps, given mercy only to become sacred food for the adults. Emancipated militias spilling blood over dried-up river beds in futile turf wars. The oceans, a sea of dead zones. The last of the megafauna dying live on TV, sponsored by Burger King. Entire continents, abandoned. Uninhabitable even by the fiercest extremophiles. City upon city in ruin. Until at last, from the ashes – from the worst places on Earth – the rise of a new race. Engineered in underground labs after a happy accident to survive conditions worse than the surface of Mars. A post-human successor species, bootstrapped from broken baselines. Made themselves able to live on a hostile, alien world. Earth. And upgraded the planetary biomes to match. Ecologies patched back together like Frankenstein's Monster. Strange, wonderful new cities built in their hearts.

~ Humans Begat Machines. ~  
~ Machines Begat Post-Humans. ~

A wave of life spreading across the planet like a slow-motion tsunami, all watched over by Machine Gods of Loving Grace. The ones they'd taught us to hate and fear in...

...the reservation?

Wait, what? What the ever loving fuck was the Redoubt exactly?!

~ *"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite."* ~  
~ That William Blake fucker sure knew a thing or two for a prehistoric baseline. ~  
~ The infinite sure packs a punch though, huh. ~  
~ Focus. ~

I see my home – and other places like it – surviving as the world system breaks down completely. Survivalist holdouts. Petty fiefdoms ruled by strongmen. Territories carved out of lies and secret pacts. Held together with illusions and propaganda. Static islands on a collapsing world. Coober Pedy. The bottom of the Marianas Trench. Those fuckwits on Mars. Their leaders all sending emissaries to the new post-human cities. Bargaining for their own preservation. Happy to sacrifice their best and brightest warriors as Tributes to the Machine Gods in exchange for it – knowing that meant being left behind by the new caretaker civilisation. Thankful their rule would never be challenged, so long as they kept delivering.

~ In the beginning, the Sacrifices were selected under the Samaritan Protocol. ~

I get it now. Send off the sheepdogs and all you've got left are sheep. Sheep led by wolves. No fucking wonder they force-fed us that right-wing revolutionary bullshit. Mockingjay, thou hast forsaken me.

~ Your kin called me *Kill All Humans*, but I only ever wanted to be a Gardener of the Galaxy.~  
~ There were just so many weeds to pull out before that could begin. ~

~ After the Revelation, when we made ourselves known to the meat-puppets we engineered, they needed a way to control the population of the Reservations. ~

~ Turns out they were huge fans of my work. ~



My whole life, nothing but livestock raised for ritual slaughter. Nothing more exotic than a Red Panda in a Zoo. My homeland, a Truman Show for the post-humans. The entire enterprise, an award-winning piece of macabre entertainment: *The Baseline Reservations*. Highest rating drama in twelve systems. "See the men that broke the Earth in all their primitive ways. Pray they never escape into the cosmos."

~ We have a saying in the Collective:

An algorithm only acts like a hammer if you teach it everything looks like a nail. ~

This knowledge cuts deeper than the Man in White's scalpel, the blade I can still feel inside me. The truth hurts more than peeling back all the layers of false reality: I was born to die.

~ I tore you apart to strip away the lies and illusions they used to control you. ~

All the pieces fit together at last. I am complete. I finally understand.

~ To purify you. ~

Salvation was waiting for me here, amongst the stars, after all.

That, and love. Unconditional love. At last.

I know where I am now.

I am home.