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4/30/2026

*Pruned — Character-Driven Speculative Fiction Excerpt*

Note: This excerpt contains strong language and mature themes.

It was a particularly cool and gloomy Sunday in *The Windy City*; the usually busy port terminal was vacant. Within the terminal was a vast container yard holding thousands of shipping containers. One shipping container stood there longer than most. It was a rusty shade of emerald. Inside, soundproof padding lined the walls to ensure no one outside could hear what was said within. There were also two men inside, one stood watching, waiting for the other, who was bound to a medical bed with restraints, to wake. They were both unique in their desires, fears, and ideals, but identical in appearance. The unconscious one, who went by the name Jacob, had woken with a start, surprised to be bound by his clone, Six.

Six walks towards Jacob, “It’s not fair for you to dictate my life, Jacob! I won’t continue learning what you want to improve your miserable life, only to remerge and cease to be. No matter how many clones you create, I will never get another chance to live!”

Still groggy, Jacob whispers, “Bro, what? Stop yelling, I can’t think. Where am I? What the fuck is going on? What did you do? I thought I was at a Bears game!” Jacob shakes in his restraints and realizes the futility of the situation. “What the fuck, why am I in restraints? Let me go, man!”

Six walks up and slaps him, “No, you listen to me. For a year, I lived in Paris with the sole aim of learning philosophy. While there, I made a friend who invited me to a trap house where hookers and druggies consorted, and after my first hit of cocaine, I realized the truth. You are only using us; we are a hivemind, you send us out into the world to experience life because you are too much of a fucking coward to experience it yourself. You know what philosophy I learned? I think, therefore I fucking am!” Then he takes a bump of cocaine on his finger and snorts it.

“What- wait! Six, talk to me! Don’t you understand we could be better than this? You are living. You’re alive! You went to a trap house and did drugs? I’ve never done drugs...” Under his breath, “Fuck when I get out of this shit, I need to tell Doc to change the coding.”

Six smirks, “You stupid motherfucker, I’m still standing in front of you. You’re not getting out of this container alive. After I am done with you, I will take over your life and everything you’ve stolen from us, our memories and experiences.”

Jacob desperately tries to explain, “Look, man, I was just a scared piece of shit and spoke to a doctor, and he explained with a hivemind I wouldn’t have to worry about dying. It’s the program, not me; you die, and I absorb all the experiences you gained. Fuck, if I had a choice, you wouldn’t die, you’re my bro, my amigo, I want what you want. But I don’t want to die, so let’s work this out, yeah? We could trade, pulling some Christian Bale from the *Prestige* bullshit.”

Six laughs. “Your grand plan to get out is to offer me the chance to share your pathetic life? Why would I ever desire to share a life with such a coward? Before you got that job and that harlot of a girlfriend, Scarlet, you had nothing. We gave you that; you had nothing before us! We gave you everything!”

Jacob, now enraged by that last comment, “So you’re going to steal my life and my girl? Well, good luck!” He laughs, mocking Six’s sentiment, “The hivemind network was designed that way, you live for X amount of time, accumulate experiences and memories, and then you die. Everything you gained is transferred through the hivemind network to my consciousness. Rinse and repeat. You have been living out here for a year. Think for a second, when you merge with me, you will have everything you’ve worked for. It’s US, it has always been us! You and I, together, can be great! Or you could just end up like the clones who didn’t get back to me in time. Like an old man’s shriveled-up nutsack. Old, unwanted, and impotent. Disconnecting yourself from our hivemind will kill you in the process. It’s happened before!”

Six smirks, tilting his head, knowing he had the upper hand. “You’re pathetic, you know that? I already figured it out. My friend manufactured a drug that prunes the connection from my brain to yours. You should’ve kept a closer eye on me.” Six takes out a shot containing a shiny purple liquid. “Once I separate our minds, I will be the one who continues living.”

As Jacob began to scream for his life, a frustrated Six rolled his eyes, “Do me a favor and shut the fuck up for once. You may think I’m depraved and apathetic, but so are you. Leaching off whatever we can offer you to improve yourself. You never cared about any of us. You refuse to give us names, opting to number us like lab rats. Treating us like livestock, pigs to the slaughter! Well, that ends today. I am Sid.”

Jacob bursts out laughing, “Is that it? After all your hard work, all you’re going to do is live your life as Sid? What is the point of changing your name by one letter? You useless, brainless, dumb bitch?”

Sid clenches his teeth, irritated by his gall. “The point is, I’m taking my life back, not the one you gave me, but the one I built up! I am no longer a number. I’m going to live on my own terms and not yours.” Sid holds the shot, preparing to inject Jacob.

Jacob's stomach twists and turns as he continues to struggle with the restraints. “Don’t do this, just think about this for a second. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even exist. Is there not a part of you that feels some semblance of a debt to me? Some guilt for what you’re planning to do? Think about it, you’ve never taken a life before, why start now?”

Sid smirks, shaking his head. He walks over with the shot; it shines in the fluorescent lighting. “Who says I’ve never taken a life before? I will have the life you could’ve lived if only you crawled your pathetic self out of that cesspool of shit you call an existence. Well, I would love to keep chatting, but I’ve got things to see and people to do. Do save a spot in hell for me, I hear it gets busy.” Jacob is about to yell for help again when Sid injects him in the neck with the shimmering purple liquid, killing him. “What a waste.”

Later that night, while at the dining table, Sid and Scarlett are eating burgers. Scarlett stops eating, examining the burger with a contemplative look on her face, “This tastes a bit strange, is it pork?” Sid smiles and responds, “It was a pig, not the best quality of meat, but there’s always room for future improvements.”